



# YEMEN Country Brief

**UNICEF Regional Study on Child Marriage**  
In the Middle East and North Africa



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*The views expressed and information contained in the report are not necessarily those of, or endorsed by, UNICEF.*

#### **Acknowledgements**

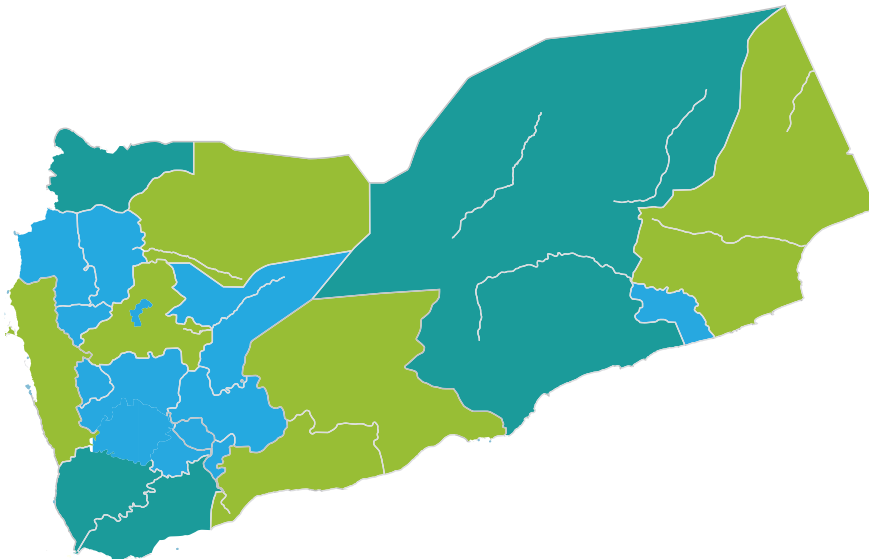
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# YEMEN

## Regional Study on Child Marriage



## Key Recommendations

### Girls' Voice & Agency

**Provide** financial incentives for sending girls to school through conditional cash transfers.

**Implement** literacy programmes for women and girls no longer in school.

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### Household and Community Attitudes and Behaviours

**Implement** holistic community programming to address social norms around child marriage using UNICEF Communication for Development approaches.

**Change** community perceptions of the appropriate age for girls to marry.

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### Service Delivery

**Incorporate** child marriage prevention and response efforts into GBV and health programming.

**Develop** the capacity of local organizations to provide multi-sectoral services to at-risk and already-married girls.

**Increase** long-term funding to NGOs for child marriage programming.

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### Legal Context

**Promote** legal awareness of girls' rights and child marriage laws.

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### Evidence Generation

**Strengthen** the coordination of research initiatives.

**Research** the impact of conflict on child marriage in Yemen.

**Strengthen** the Global Gender Based Violence Management Information System (GBVIMS) as a source for child marriage data.

## POLITICAL & ECONOMIC CONTEXT

In 2015, Yemen spiralled into civil and regional war between Houthi forces and President Abd Rabbu Mansur Hadi's government. This led to the overthrow of the government and a Saudi-led counter-offensive. The ongoing fighting, combined with a Saudi-imposed blockade that enforced an arms embargo, have created a humanitarian emergency, pushing Yemen to the brink of famine,<sup>1</sup> making it the world's worst humanitarian crisis.<sup>2</sup>

To date, the government is still facing serious security issues, further complicated by the resurgence of al-Qaeda (AQAP) and other radical Islamist groups, including the Islamic State, particularly in the south and the east of the country.<sup>3</sup> Prior to 2014, Yemen already had significant humanitarian challenges, including, according to the World Bank, "high population growth, severe urban-rural imbalances, food and water scarcity, female illiteracy, widespread poverty and economic stagnation."<sup>4</sup> The country's endemic humanitarian problems have been made worse by cross-border and regional conflict, with staggering numbers of civilian deaths, diseases, internal displacement, and the obliteration of infrastructure that has further exacerbated service delivery across all main sectors.<sup>5</sup>

The crisis has left 27.4 million people, approximately 70 per cent of the Yemeni population, in urgent need of humanitarian assistance.<sup>6</sup> So far, close to 4,000 civilians have died as a result of the conflict, 14.5 million people do not have access to safe water and sanitation, and 14.8 million have limited or no access to health services, exposing them to a severe cholera crisis.<sup>7</sup> The nutrition situation has deteriorated, with more than 3 million children and pregnant or lactating women suffering from acute to severe acute malnutrition.<sup>8</sup> An estimated 2 million children have been forced out of school and roughly 2.2 million people have been internally displaced.<sup>9</sup>



Source: World Bank 2014



Source: World Bank 2014

According to UNICEF:



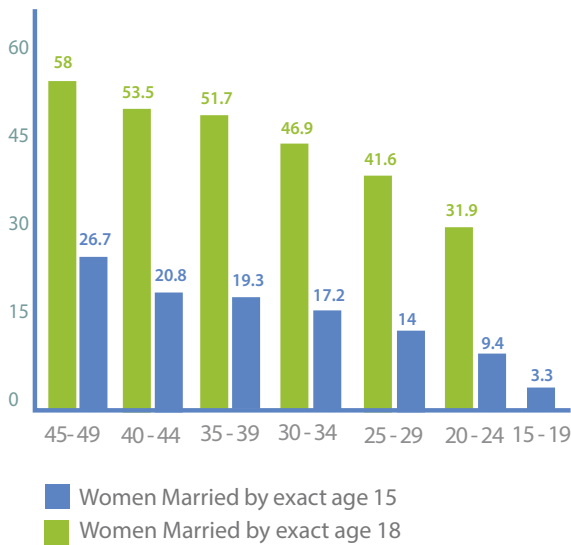
*"Ongoing conflict and the deteriorating economic situation have put essential public services such as health on the verge of collapse, leaving children and women at even higher risk."*<sup>10</sup>



## PREVALENCE OF CHILD MARRIAGE

According to Yemen's most recent DHS, conducted in 2013, 31.9 per cent of women aged 20-24 years were married before 18 years of age whilst 9.4 per cent were married before age 15.<sup>11</sup> Because the prior DHS in Yemen occurred 16 years before, it is not advisable to use it to estimate trends in child marriage over time. However, as shown in Figure 1, when comparing the percentage of women and girls married by exact age 15 or 18 by their age cohort in the most recent DHS, there is a clear decline in the percentage of women married before both age 15 and age 18 in younger age cohorts in Yemen, indicating that the prevalence of child marriage was decreasing up to 2013. It is important to note that conflict in Yemen may be reversing this trend, but nationally-representative data is not yet available to evaluate this possibility.

Figure 1: Percent married by exact age 15 and 18, by 5-year age cohort, Yemen, 2013



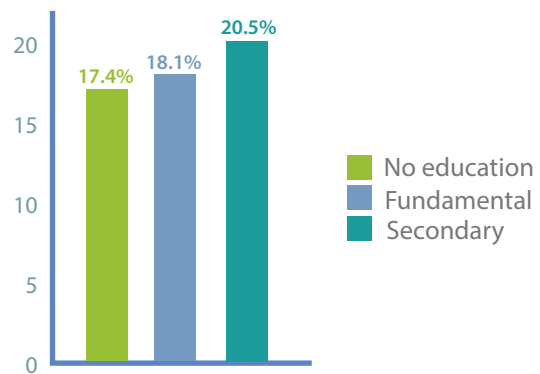
Source: DHS 2013 <sup>12</sup>

Note that the percent married by age 18 cannot be calculated for the youngest age cohort, since it includes girls who are not yet 18.

The median age at first marriage amongst women in Yemen ages 25 to 49 is 18.2 years, but this varies by several background characteristics. It is lower amongst women who live in rural areas (17.9 years versus 18.9 in urban areas) and lowest amongst those who live Al-Jawf (17.0 years) and Reimah (17.6). It does not vary widely amongst women in the lowest, second, and middle wealth quintiles (all between 17.7 and 17.9), but is higher amongst women in the fourth and highest quintiles (18.3 and 19.1, respectively). Figure 2, below, shows the positive association between educational attainment and median age at first marriage in Yemen. The median age at first marriage of women who completed secondary education is almost three years higher than those that completed none (20.5 versus 17.4). It is important to note that the causality of this association is not clear; low education may be both a cause and/or a consequence of child marriage.

Figure 2: Median age at first marriage by educational attainment amongst women 25-49, Yemen, 2013

Median age at first marriage:



Source: DHS 2013 <sup>13</sup>

## METHODOLOGY

The data presented here was collected via 8 key informant interviews with staff in two UN agencies and six non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Interviews were conducted during December 2016 and January 2017. All interviews were coded using NVivo 11 to distill key themes which were then organized through thematic content analysis. The findings were then organized according to the Global Programme’s five outcomes.

Table 1: Key Informant Interviews

### UN

UNICEF	UNFPA
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### NGOs

INTERSOS
Youth Leadership Development Foundation (YLDF)
Charity Society for Social Welfare
Care
International Rescue Committee (IRC)
Yemen Women’s Union

## LIMITATIONS

Due to the ongoing conflict in Yemen, interviews were conducted via Skype and phone. Thus, this report presents the main findings strictly based on those eight interviews and is therefore limited to those categories of respondents, which included experts from UN agencies and NGO/Service Providers. In addition, given the political instability of the country as well as the timing of the study, not all key informants were available at the time that the data collection occurred, despite several attempts to reach out to government officials and other stakeholders working on child marriage. Considering the study's goals and focus on scaling up promising programmatic approaches, the study focused on service providers, government officials, multi-lateral agencies and donors — all of whom would be able to identify best practices to end child marriage. As a result, the findings are only representative of these respondents' views of promising approaches to end child marriage in Yemen.

## KEY FINDINGS

The key findings are outlined within the framework of the UNFPA-UNICEF Global Programme's five outcomes:<sup>14</sup>

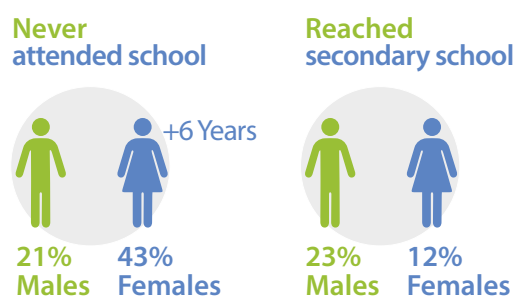
- Adolescent girls at risk of and affected by child marriage are better able to express and exercise their choices.
- Households demonstrate positive attitudes and behaviours regarding gender equality and equity.
- Relevant sectoral systems deliver quality and cost-effective services to meet the needs of adolescent girls.
- National laws, policy framework and mechanisms to protect and promote adolescent girls' rights are in line with international standards and properly resourced.

- Governments support and promote the generation and use of robust data and evidence to inform programme design, track progress and document lessons.

### 1 Girls' Voice and Agency

- **Poverty and gender inequity restricts girls' access to education and drives child marriage**

Access to school and particularly secondary education is an important deterrent to child marriage around the world as demonstrated in several studies.<sup>15</sup> However, key informants reported, and the DHS 2013 data confirms, that a substantial gender gap in educational attainment exists in Yemen. DHS data shows that 43 per cent of females aged 6 and above have never attended school, compared to only 21 per cent of males. Only 12 per cent of females reached secondary school or higher, compared with 23 per cent of males.<sup>16</sup> Female literacy rates in Yemen are also low – only 53 per cent of women ages 15-49 are literate.<sup>17</sup> Notably, women in urban areas have higher literacy rates (76 per cent) compared to rural women (41 per cent).<sup>18</sup>



Source: DHS 2013

### women in urban areas have higher literacy rates



Source: DHS 2013

Key informants noted that for families with limited resources, opportunity costs can often justify not sending their daughters to school.

One UNICEF official noted that:



*"In Yemen, there is a low level of education and high illiteracy rates, which makes it difficult because it has important implications for accessing health services and also for engaging with families about the importance of education... Education programmes are hard to implement because many people don't understand how it is effective."*



When school is not seen as an avenue to future social and economic stability, girls are instead forced to marry due to prevailing gender inequalities, where girls are seen as an economic burden, and families privilege a son's education over a daughter's. As one key informant stated:



*"School dropout is often because of economic issues. Families are aware of education but because of economic pressures and social norms, they usually prefer sending boys."*



To address this issue, the Charitable Society for Social Welfare (CSSW) reported that:



*"We are implementing a return to school campaign in three governorates. We target boys and girls and we use community awareness campaigns to encourage parents to enroll their children in school. Lack of awareness [of education] is a major issue."*



Beyond the perceived ineffectiveness of educating a daughter, key informants also identified geographic distance, mobility restrictions, and lack of transportation as obstacles for girls to attend school. A key informant from the Youth Leadership Development Foundation (YLDF) found in a recent programme assessment that "schools are too far away and girls are not allowed to walk alone all the way to school." This restriction is further exacerbated in times of insecurity, creating a significant barrier to girls' obtaining an education, as noted by CSSW:



*"In some communities, girls are not allowed to walk to school alone because of traditional [mobility] restrictions and with the security situation deterioration now...it's more challenging."*



To address these issues, the International Rescue Committee (IRC) implemented a project that "in communities where women and girls are not allowed to walk outside of their home, we go door-to-door to do our awareness programme."

## 2

### Household and Community Attitudes and Behaviours

#### Conflict and instability exacerbate child marriage

Findings suggest that child marriage is a coping mechanism for families, serving multiple functions. One key informant from the IRC noted that:



*"Before the start of 2015, early marriage was not high, but after the conflict started, people were forced to move out from their areas - with families in bad economic situations, child marriage rose dramatically."*



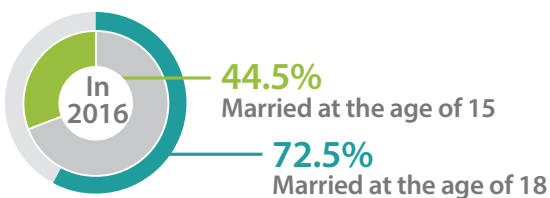


According to all key informants, the war and its subsequent displacement of populations have resulted in extreme socioeconomic insecurity amongst many Yemenis. Key informants hypothesized that these conditions, combined with social norms around traditional gender roles, make child marriage seem like a sensible option, as illustrated by a quote from a UNICEF key informant:

*“Family size, depending on which governorate, combined with economic hardship is a driver of child marriage. When you marry off a girl, it is less of an economic burden to the family. Especially with massive displacement, families deal with distress and life survival. So, child marriage becomes a coping mechanism for them.”*

In 2016, a KAP assessment was concluded in 30 communities covering six governorates (Sana’a, Hudaydah, Dhamar, Hajjah, Ibb and Aden) to identify the attitudes of local communities towards child/early marriage and assess knowledge level of the impact of early marriage on adolescents, as well as available services and response mechanisms. The total number of completed questionnaires reached 1,054 whilst FGDs involved 227 women and 229 men. The KAP’s results show a widespread incidence of child marriage practices in target communities: 72.5 per cent of respondents indicated that they married before they reached 18 years of age, whilst the percentage of those who married at the age of 15 or younger accounted for 44.5 per cent.

**KAP assessment results of child marriage practices:**



**Box 1: Quote from NGO Expert**



*“In our latest assessment, we asked communities if they had observed an increase and overall, they said that whilst prior to the conflict, child marriage had decreased, war and displacement had increased the practice.”*



**Economic hardship reinforces Economic hardship reinforces the importance of bride prices**

As in the other MENA countries included in this study, economic hardship, together with increasing cost of life and unemployment, leads families to resort to child marriage as a form of economic gain by receiving a bride price (mahr) for their daughter. The practice is seen as offering physical and financial security to a daughter, whilst allowing her family to reduce their expenses by having fewer children to support. One official from UNFPA stated that:



*“Since the crisis, families have become very poor, and they see girls as an economic burden, so they give them in marriage.”*



This is also confirmed in INTERSOS’ latest assessment on child marriage which states that:



*“Poverty, economic hardship, unemployment and increasing cost of living were all raised as reasons for families to resort to child marriage as a coping mechanism to permit them to alleviate poverty or the burdens of a large family with many daughters. Girls from poor families are more likely to marry before 18.”<sup>19</sup>*



Moreover, key informants reported that acute pover-

ty can force poor Yemeni families to resort to what is known as ‘tourist marriages’, defined by the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) as “as a temporary, formal union between a Yemeni female and a man from an Arabian Gulf country.”<sup>20</sup> According to several key informants, conflict has created avenues for tourist marriages and trafficking to occur with wealthy men from the Gulf Arab region. Families are led to believe that these marriages will provide financial stability to the girl and an opportunity for her to escape the dire conditions of Yemen and acquire citizenship in a more stable country. This is a particularly attractive option when faced with bride price inflation, rendering Yemeni men unable to afford marriage.<sup>21</sup> As one key informant reported:



*“In the study we did with IOM, this was particularly the case where families saw it as a good opportunity to preserve their family honour especially for displaced people. Plus they think it will provide new citizenship for their girls.”*



### ■ Parents lack awareness of the negative consequences of child marriage

Across all interviews, general lack of awareness on child protection came out as one of the main factors driving child marriage. One UNICEF key informant pointed to a different understanding of childhood in Yemen:



*“A boy and a girl can be considered adults, and so it makes it difficult for them to understand that they are marrying children. We actually managed to include it in the national dialogue and we succeeded. But unfortunately, it is now on hold due to conflict.”*



Another key informant from the Yemen Women’s Union also referred to the “lack of

awareness amongst parents who expose their girls to early marriage. They don’t know the negative consequences on them and this is where we need to intervene.”

## 3 Service Delivery

### ■ Lack of technical and operational capacity are barriers to service provision

Overall, findings indicate that NGOs working on gender-related issues in Yemen suffer from a severe deficiency in staff capacity and material resources, which dramatically weaken service delivery.

Several key informants noted that there are many structural obstacles to case management and case referrals related to gender-based violence. For example, INTERSOS noted that:



*“There is a general lack of understanding of how the referral mechanism works. Also, the staff often doesn’t have the capacity to address case management and referral adequately.”*



To address this, a UNICEF official explained that they are currently working with the Ministry of Social Affairs to establish a system of case management in seven governorates as part of an effort to strengthen institutional capacity. Additionally, informants cited that they had difficulty finding staff with relevant skills for efficient service delivery. YLDF explained that:



*“It’s difficult to find the right person with the right qualifications to address the issue at hand. For example, it is very hard to find women who have the right skills. And this with the difficulty of finding facilities to work in, finding the right information... it makes it very challenging for us to deliver our services.”*



### ■ Service providers lack knowledge of what other organizations are doing to address child marriage

The need for greater communication and coordination amongst services providers was voiced by several key informants. As noted by YDLF:



*“Often we don’t know who is doing what. For example, we know that UNFPA is doing something but it’s not clear what. We don’t know that other NGOs are working on early marriage. We need more info and it needs to be published even across other MENA countries.”*



Strong linkages and partnerships need to be built between civil society and donors to ensure that at-risk and already married girls can access needed services. Coordination is key – if the work is coordinated with other efforts, programmes can complement rather than duplicate each other’s work.

#### Box 2: Quote from NGO expert



*“We need to cross the info with more communication and collaboration, not just in our own country but in others in the MENA region that suffer similar problems.”*



### ■ Gendered social norms limit access to at-risk and already married girls

Accessing at-risk and already married girls is a frequently cited challenge by service providers. Girls face restraints on their mobility, which limits their ability to access services, and for service providers to reach this population of girls.

For example, one key informant from the Yemen Women’s Union lamented the failure to account for transportation costs, saying that:



*“The issue is also that women and girls can’t afford transportation to access services.”*



Stigma was also cited as an obstacle for girls and women in seeking help. A representative from the Yemen Women’s Union stated that:



*“Culture and tradition with the fear of being exposed to the community if you seek help seriously affect women and girls to access any kind of services.”*



Additionally, lack of knowledge of the type of services available were expressed many times by key informants as a major impediment to effective service delivery. One key informant explained that:



*“Often you deal with populations who don’t know what services there are, so it’s simply lack of awareness.”*



## 4

### Legal Context

#### ■ Currently, religious law determines the minimum age of marriage

Most laws “contain provisions that discriminate against women, including the personal status law, the penal code, the citizenship law and the evidence law.”<sup>22</sup> Yemen’s Personal Status Law does not set a minimum age for marriage despite multiple legislative efforts. These attempts were largely unsuccessful due to a combination of opposition from the Sharia Committee, and the ongoing conflict in Yemen.

Yemen's Personal Status Law violates the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) by not allowing women to marry without the permission of their male guardians. Moreover, women and girls do not have equal rights to divorces, inheritance, child custody, or legal protection, exposing them to domestic and sexual violence.<sup>23</sup> For a woman or girl to marry, she must have the permission and signature of a male guardian or a court judge (should her male guardian be absent), whilst her presence is not required to seal a marriage.<sup>24</sup> A woman or girl may legally include stipulations in the marriage contracts but most often, girls either are not aware of this possibility, or they are coerced into refraining from doing so.<sup>25</sup> Without contractual stipulations, the law requires a wife's obedience to her husband and his consent to leave the home or travel abroad.<sup>26</sup>

■ **Child marriage is NOT a government priority due to ongoing conflict and instability**

Key informants indicated that ongoing political instability is making it challenging for any legislative effort to take place, particularly in addressing child marriage. Against the backdrop of the severe humanitarian crisis, Yemen is facing competing human development priorities including civilian deaths, diseases, internal displacement, and the destruction of infrastructure. Child marriage is not seen as a life-saving issue, and has therefore been largely set aside, as the government deals with more immediate humanitarian issues.

■ **Conflict is decreasing birth registrations**

A challenge noted by several key informants was the lack of a standardized mechanism to register births for children, further complicated by conflict and human displacement.

This further exacerbates the problem of child marriage, as girls' ages are unclear. Thus, if legal age of marriage is ever established in Yemen, the inability to determine girls' ages could become a barrier to effective implementation of the law. As a UNICEF official remarked:

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*"In Yemen, one of the problems to addressing early marriage is that there is no registration for children to record their age. So we don't know their exact age when they marry. Only 17 per cent of children under 5 are registered meaning that 83 per cent are not registered."*

”

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## Evidence Generation

■ **Lack of communication, coordination, and collaboration**

Several key informants urged for better communication and coordination amongst research activities and programmes on child marriage. Although there are clear actions from civil society organizations to address child marriage through research, assessments, and programmes, findings indicate a lack of concerted effort amongst all stakeholders working on child marriage to coordinate and communicate evidence.

■ **More robust evidence on the links between child marriage and conflict**

There is a need for more evidence on the links between child marriage and conflict. Conflict affects social norms and traditions differently depending on the regional location in Yemen. Families have different motivations that compel them to marry off their daughters at an early age. Key informants noted that more robust evidence is necessary to understand not only the reasons why families have recourse to child marriage, but also the ways in which conflict affects decisions regarding child marriage. One key informant noted that there needs to be more research done on communities where child marriage is low to

understand why some families, under the same conditions of poverty and conflict, do not resort to child marriage.

### ■ More robust evidence on effectiveness of programming

Due to the conflict, conducting research and evaluations remains challenging. All key informants pointed to the general lack of resources – human, material, and financial—which impedes the evidence base needed to understand what works and what does not work. For example, one key informant noted that whilst the NGOs believe in the effectiveness of engaging religious leaders in combatting issues of child marriage, her own experience proved the opposite. She explained that,



*“When we tried to work with community and religious leaders, it ended up being a headache because there was so much opposition. ...Imagine, in every corner, you have a mosque with say 30 people who attend it. So, when you have a religious leader who opposes it, then it’s everyone else who attends the mosque who oppose it. Then it was used for political reasons against each other... Everyone keeps talking about how we need to engage religious leaders. But no, for us, it was a waste of time. The most effective message was by far the health message and the negative consequences that marrying a young girl has on her health and her children. That totally changed their knowledge and attitude.”*



## PROMISING APPROACHES IDENTIFIED BY KEY INFORMANTS

### ■ Health programming as an entry point to addressing child marriage

Whilst there are several promising advocacy initiatives to combat issues related to

child marriage in Yemen, key informants were not aware of any programmes specifically addressing child marriage. However, there are several existing entry points for addressing child marriage, including gender-based violence (GBV), sexual and reproductive health, school enrolment, and child protection programming. For example, IRC addresses child marriage through its initiatives that address reproductive health (family planning, safe delivery, maternal health, etc.). This health-based approach can allow organizations to address child marriage in a pragmatic way that won’t aggravate political and religious sensitivities. As one IRC respondent explained:



*“Sometimes, it is very difficult to introduce the topic of early marriage in communities. So, we do it through our reproductive health and family planning programme, where we do group discussions with communities and engage with midwives. But sometimes, we don’t have enough capacity to work in all areas because Yemen has so many conflicts including religious conflicts. That is why we are afraid to start addressing early marriage widely in some areas. There are some other communities where it is a bit easier.”*



A UNICEF official said that:



*“Using health as entry point to discuss early marriage is most effective. We discuss the negative consequences about marrying girls too early and people can relate to it.”*



Key informants agreed that stressing the negative health consequences of child marriage appears to be the most effective means to currently address the practice with communities in Yemen.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The recommendations emerging from this study are grouped under the UNFPA-UNICEF Global Programme's five outcomes. It is important to note that the feasibility and success of these recommendations will be dependent on the extent to which they can be implemented amid Yemen's ongoing conflict. The authors do not presume to know what solutions may or may not be feasible at this time; the situation may also change rapidly. Therefore, all recommended solutions to end child marriage in Yemen are presented.

### Girls' Voice & Agency

#### ■ Provide financial incentives for sending girls to school

A 2016 systematic review of interventions to prevent child marriage in low and middle-income countries found that cash-transfer programmes and programmes to decrease school-associated costs "had a significant impact on decreasing the rate of child marriage or increasing age at marriage in the intervention group."<sup>27</sup>

International donors should increase funding to NGOs and the Yemeni government to provide these incentives, and/or provide public social transfers for school attendance. Incentives can range from covering transportation costs, to covering school fees, to giving cash transfers for attendance, to providing hot meals. It should be noted that although cash incentives are a promising stop-gap measure to keep girls in school and delay age of marriage, these programmes may be unsustainable in terms of cost, and should be coupled with community norm changing interventions.<sup>28</sup>

Girls' continued school attendance and education is a key factor in preventing child marriage, and should be incentivized appropriately. As one key informant said:



*"If we focus on education we will achieve further results on ending child marriage."*



#### ■ Implement literacy programmes for women & girls no longer in school

With low rates of literacy amongst women and girls in Yemen, literacy and education programmes need to be offered outside of traditional school settings. Women's literacy has been shown to "impact infant and maternal mortality rates, improve nutrition, promote health, reduce the likelihood of HIV/AIDS, and contribute to improved education for the next generation."<sup>29</sup> Literacy programmes can thus act as both a way to prevent child marriage, as children (especially daughters) with literate mothers are more likely to be enrolled in school,<sup>30</sup> and as a way to respond to child marriage, offering married girls a way to continue their education, thus increasing their agency and household decision-making power.<sup>31</sup>

The Literacy through Poetry Project (LTPP) was a World Bank and Social Fund for Development (Yemen) project which was piloted in several rural communities in Yemen in 2002 and 2003.<sup>32</sup> The project offered women who had limited access to education the opportunity to gain literacy skills based on their cultural heritage, utilizing local poetry, stories and proverbs as teaching materials. The pilots reported success with 74 per cent of participants acquiring fundamental literacy skills, and another 12 per cent exhibiting the ability to sound out new words.<sup>33</sup> Additionally, the success of the programme changed public perceptions – community members who were initially hesitant were impressed with the reading and writing skills that women acquired, and community demand for adult women's education increased. LTPP's model of literacy teaching, which combines "content drawn from local culture with the Freirean emphasis on learning through dialogue" is evidenced to work in the Yemen context, and should be used as a model for designing future women-focused literacy programmes in Yemen.<sup>34</sup>

## Household and Community Attitudes and Behaviours

### ■ Implement holistic community programming to address social norms around child marriage

Whether it takes the form of an awareness campaign, health services, or dialogue workshops, child marriage programming is more likely to be successful when it engages a variety of community actors. Because girls have limited voice and agency, only engaging with girls on child marriage issues will have limited efficacy – it is imperative to engage their families and community leaders if norms around child marriage are to change. Any behaviour change strategy intended to address the norms around child marriage needs to mobilize the entire community. Programmes should use UNICEF's Communication for Development (C4D) strategies to work with both adults and children in the community to identify problems, propose solutions and act upon them.

As discussed earlier, key informants reported that child marriage practice is perpetuated by the perception of child marriage as protecting the girl and her family. To address this, C4D strategies should be used to support public education programmes that raise awareness of the negative consequences of child marriage on a girl's health and that of her children, in order to reinforce the perceived duties of parents and communities to protect at-risk girls.

### ■ Change community perceptions of the appropriate age for girls to marry

As noted above, respondents felt that one factor perpetuating child marriage was parents' and communities' lack of awareness of the negative consequences of child marriage.

The 'Safe Age of Marriage' project, a programme piloted in 2009 that covered communities in Al-Sawd and Al-Soodeh districts

of Yemen, showed promise in changing perceptions related to child marriage. The intervention was aimed to foster change in social norms and communities' attitudes to early marriage, promote girls' education, and advance the rights of the girl child.<sup>35</sup> The programme trained community educators to conduct education outreach through monthly awareness-raising sessions and health fairs with mobile clinics. It also highlighted the achievements of individual families whose daughters delayed their marriages and completed secondary education. According to a case study published about the programme, within one year, community awareness of the benefits of delaying marriage increased 18 per cent and agreement that there is a relationship between early marriage, early pregnancy, and child-bearing increased 16 per cent.<sup>36</sup>

## Service Delivery

### ■ Incorporate child marriage prevention and response efforts into health programming

Children who suffer violence, exploitation and abuse require assistance from across all sectors to strengthen child protection. Addressing child marriage through health programming is a proven strategy to increase the age of marriage for at-risk girls, and to decrease the number of pregnancies for child brides.<sup>37</sup> Integrating child marriage efforts into health programmes can be especially useful in contexts like Yemen, where conflict and instability may prohibit the implementation of more expansive child marriage specific interventions.

Issues surrounding child marriage prevention and response can be directly addressed through typical health sector programmes, but should, according to Girls Not Brides:



*“...target the unique needs of adolescents—married and unmarried—to ensure they have the information and resources to make informed decisions about their sexual and reproductive health and rights.”<sup>38</sup>*



Integrating child marriage concerns into health programming can range from offering sexual and reproductive health (SRH) education to married adolescents, to sensitizing service providers to the needs of at-risk and already married girls, to educating adolescent girls about proper infant care, breastfeeding and birth spacing, to training adolescents on negotiation skills related to SRH.<sup>39</sup>

Health behaviour change campaigns have also proven effective at addressing child marriage. The PRACHAR (meaning 'promote' in Hindi) programme in India developed a reproductive health communication model that was successful in:



*"...delaying age at marriage and onset of childbearing, increasing contraceptive use for spacing of pregnancies, and generating positive impact on contraceptive use amongst the socioeconomically least advantaged."*<sup>40</sup>



The PRACHAR programme offers a proven model for integrating child marriage issues into health programming, and should be used as blueprint for future health behaviour change campaigns in Yemen.

#### ■ **Develop the capacity of local organizations to provide services to at-risk and already married girls**

As discussed above, informants pointed to the need to build the capacity of local organizations to address child marriage through increasing financial and human resources, strengthening referral systems, improving case management systems for prevention and response, and increasing knowledge of child marriage laws amongst service providers. The Ministry of Social Affairs has been working with UNICEF to establish case management for social workers addressing child

marriage. Once a system is in place, service provider staff should receive training on identifying, managing, and referring cases of girls at risk of and affected by child marriage.

#### ■ **Increase long-term funding to NGOs for child marriage programming**

Key informants cited limited funding, specifically long-term funding, as a key barrier to effectively addressing child marriage in Yemen. Several key informants cited that programmes and results were not sustainable due to short-term funding that quickly ran out. They also cited that donors need to understand that programmes in Yemen take time to be implemented, because of the current conflict and instability in the country. To provide effective prevention and response services to at-risk and already married girls, donors need to be willing to invest over multiple year periods, taking into account the current operating environment in Yemen.

### Legal Context

#### ■ **Promote legal awareness of girls' rights and child marriage laws**

Due to the current conflict in Yemen, the majority of key informants agreed that legal action on child marriage issues is unlikely for the foreseeable future. The government is too concerned with the ongoing humanitarian crises to focus on reforms to Personal Status Laws.

However, the findings show that women and girls suffer from significant discrimination in Yemen's legal system, and conflict is likely exacerbating these inequalities. Therefore, in the absence of the ability to enact new legal reforms, there remains a need to ensure that women and girls understand and can take advantage of the protections that the legal system currently affords them. This could be done through awareness campaigns in schools, communities, and amongst parents and guardians to ensure that adolescent girls and boys have access to correct information about their legal rights. One programme that appears to be addressing this need is Equal Access' RIGHTS initiative, which uses



youth-produced radio programming and youth leadership training to both empower youth and raise awareness of the legal rights of youth in Yemen.<sup>41</sup> However, the project has limited publicly-available documentation and its duration and impact are unclear.

## Evidence Generation

### ■ Strengthen the coordination of research initiatives

As articulated by respondents, there is a need for better coordination of child marriage research activities across organizations at all levels in order to avoid duplication of existing research and perpetuation of research gaps.

### ■ Research the impact of conflict on child marriage in Yemen

Many stakeholders expressed the need to understand how Yemen's conflict is affecting child marriage. This desire reflects a global call for more research into the relationship between child marriage and conflict, most notably profiled in the Council on Foreign Relations' working paper 'Fragile States, Fragile Lives: Child Marriage Amid Disaster and Conflict' published in 2014.<sup>42</sup> As noted in that paper, "Although the conversation about child marriage in fragile contexts has yet to capture policy-makers' attention, evidence suggests the relationship between the two merits further and close study: all but one of the top ten countries with the highest child marriage prevalence rates is on the OECD list of fragile states."<sup>43</sup>

In Yemen, both quantitative and qualitative studies are needed. Quantitative studies will shed light on the current prevalence of child marriage and its association with conflict. Qualitative studies will help illuminate how the conflict interacts with social norms and other socioeconomic factors that drive child marriage.

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