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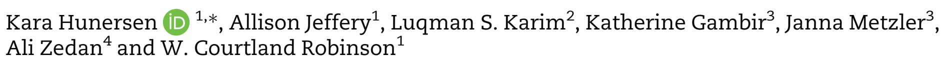
Child marriage and displacement: A qualitative study of displaced and host populations in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq



Kara Hunersen [1,*], Allison Jeffery[1], Luqman S. Karim[2], Katherine Gambir[3], Janna Metzler[3], Ali Zedan[4] and W. Courtland Robinson[1]

[1]Department of International Health, Johns Hopkins University Bloomberg School of Public Health, 615 N Wolfe St, Baltimore, MD 21205, USA
[2]University of Sulaimani, Sulaymaniyah, Sulaymaniyah Governorate, Iraq
[3]Women's Refugee Commission, 15 West 37th Street, 9th Floor, New York, NY 10018, USA
[4]United Nations Population Fund, UN Compound, Erbil, Erbil Governorate, Iraq

*Corresponding author. Department of Population and Family Health, Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, 615 N Wolfe St, E4610, Baltimore, MD, 21231, USA. E-mail: khuners1@jhu.edu

Abstract

Though displaced populations face exacerbated challenges that are associated with increased rates of child marriage, little research has elucidated the reasons behind such phenomena. The present study qualitatively explores the drivers and consequences of child marriage among Syrian refugee, Iraqi internally displaced, and host communities in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. Specifically, it explores how vulnerabilities in displaced groups impact child marriage decision-making and how the host communities respond to and interact with shifting child marriage customs. Qualitative results demonstrated how child marriage drivers intersect on socioecological levels with a prominent undercurrent of gender inequality that affects marriage expectations. Though participants discussed similar drivers and consequences of child marriage, there was discordance in how those drivers influence child marriage in displaced and host populations. Integration of humanitarian sectors around prevention of child marriage, along with support for married girls, is necessary considering the current context of protracted displacement in the region.

Keywords: child marriage, refugee, internally displaced persons, qualitative, Iraq

Introduction

Child marriage, defined by the UN as 'a marriage or union in which one or both spouses is under the age of 18', persists in cultures around the world despite being outlawed in the Convention on the Rights of the Child (OHCHR 2021). The Least Developed Countries have the highest prevalence of child marriage; 11 per cent of girls are married before age 15 and 37 per cent are married

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before 18 (UNICEF 2023). Humanitarian emergencies also increase the risk of child marriage. All of the 10 countries with the highest child marriage rates are considered fragile states (Girls Not Brides 2020). It is estimated that child marriage, especially of girls to adult men, increases during displacement in almost every context.

The conceptual framework introduced by Leigh (2020) demonstrates that the drivers of child marriage exist on multiple socioecological levels and interact with and inform each other (Leigh 2020). As such, drivers related to social norms about household roles might be exacerbated by economic challenges and ultimately lead to child marriage (Presler-Marshall *et al.* 2020). For example, some believe marriage of a girl to an adult man will increase the girl's family's economic standing when in reality it will likely limit her future economic opportunities and independence (Elnakib *et al.* 2022). This is especially true when marriage leads to school dropout due to pressure from husbands and families or increased responsibilities of motherhood.

Conflict has been known to exacerbate these drivers, as marriage can be seen as a source of stability, economic security, and protection (Presler-Marshall *et al.* 2020). Indeed, protection from sexual violence is often cited as a principal contributor to child marriage in humanitarian settings because women and girls face increased risk of sexual violence (Yasmine and Moughalian 2016; Cherri *et al.* 2017). However, early marriage can also lead to intimate partner violence (IPV), spousal rape, and other forms of domestic violence (Falb *et al.* 2016). Relatedly, forced child marriage during displacement has been associated with increased levels of post-traumatic stress and other mental health disorders (Jefee-bahloul *et al.* 2015). Early childbearing, which often results from child marriage, is also associated with higher risk of maternal mortality. All of these risks put child marriage on the forefront of the Sustainable Development Goal on gender equality (UN General Assembly 2015).

In recent years, there has been more research into child marriage, especially in South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa (Malhotra and Elnakib 2021). Research in the Middle East North Africa region has also increased, largely due to the focus on humanitarian settings (Mazurana and Marshak 2019; Malhotra and Elnakib 2021). The past decade has included two major conflicts in the region, the Syrian Civil War and the Islamic State occupation of Iraq, both of which have led to high levels of displacement into the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI). KRI is an autonomous region administered by the Kurdistan Regional Government in Erbil. It is considered more secure than other regions of Iraq and many surrounding countries, as its borders are protected by the Peshmerga military forces (BBC 2018). In 2022, the three KRI governorates of Erbil, Duhok, and Sulaymaniyah hosted over a quarter million Syrian refugees and almost 1.2 million Iraqi internally displaced persons (IDPs), with different national origins, religions, and cultural norms that can influence their perceptions and practices of child marriage (UNHCR 2022).

Despite this effect, most child marriage research in humanitarian settings has been focused elsewhere in the region and has not delved into the effects of difference aspects of displacement, particularly regarding the type of displacement (internally displaced or refugee) and setting (camp or urban). As such, a mixed methods research study was undertaken by the Women's Refugee Commission (WRC), United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), and Johns Hopkins University (JHU), to investigate child marriage prevalence and drivers in humanitarian settings in four countries in the Middle East North Africa region and two countries in Southeast Asia region. In KRI, the in-country research was led in partnership with the University of Sulaimani to understand the prevalence, drivers, and consequences of child marriage among refugee and internally displaced populations.

The quantitative findings from this larger study show a complex dynamic of child marriage practices in the region. In KRI, IDPs had the highest rates of child marriage at 14 per cent, which was followed by Iraqi non-displaced hosts, at 10 per cent, and then Syrian refugees at 8 per cent (Goers *et al.* 2022). The most cited reasons for child marriage were tradition, family honour, and money or resources; over a third of respondents said these reasons were different than before displacement (Goers *et al.* 2022). However, a meta-analysis of quantitative results from all six countries indicated no conclusive evidence that child marriage rates increase after displacement

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(Elnakib *et al.* 2023). The authors suggested that local context and community norms are more relevant drivers and better areas for future interventions.

These results introduced additional questions about child marriage, warranting a qualitative exploration of what these trends mean in KRI and how local context and displacement intertwine to influence child marriage trends. As such, this study seeks to understand the drivers and consequences of child marriage among displaced populations, and how displacement has affected vulnerabilities that impact child marriage. This article presents the qualitative findings on child marriage drivers and consequences among Syrian refugee, Iraqi IDP, and host communities in the KRI.

Methods

Data collection and sampling

Qualitative data collection included 36 in-depth interviews (IDIs), 6 focus group discussions (FGDs), and 9 key informant interviews (KIIs) (Table 1). IDIs consisted of interviews with adolescents aged 15–19, all who married before age 18, divided equally by sex, governorate, and population. FGDs were divided into humanitarian actors representing international and national aid groups (about 85 per cent female and 15 per cent male) and community leaders (about 85 per cent male, 15 per cent female) with 6–10 participants in each. KIIs were conducted with various officials from government ministries, with five men and four women.

As the partner responsible for in-country fieldwork, UNFPA staff met with community leaders in camp and non-camp settings to recruit participants who met the age and subgroup criteria of the IDIs and FGDs. Once participants were identified, researchers used snowball sampling to identify other community members to recruit until the sample size to achieve saturation for each subgroup was reached. Key informants and focus group participants were contacted through purposive sampling by UNFPA staff to ensure a diversity of representatives from multiple sectors and organizations working in this space.

Data collection took place between August and October of 2019. Interviews were carried out by data collectors from the Syrian, Iraqi, and Iraqi Kurdish communities fluent in the languages and dialects of the included populations. Data collectors were recruited from the University of Sulaimani and were trained in qualitative methods prior to data collection. Data collectors were matched with participants based on gender and language to help mitigate potential discomfort from sensitive questions. Discussion guides were developed by the study team, which was comprised of members from all partner organizations engaged in the research process. Questions included key areas of interest identified by local research leads such as marriage perceptions, experiences of displacement, access to services, and the effects of child marriage. All guides were reviewed and piloted by local researchers to ensure cultural sensitivity and local relevance.

Table 1. Number of IDIs, FGDs, and KIIs per group.

Interview type	Participant	IDP	Refugee	Host	Total
IDIs (36)	Married girls aged 15–19	6	6	6	18
	Married boys aged 15–19	6	6	6	18
FGDs (12)	Community leaders	3	3	3	9
	Humanitarian actors		3		3
KIIs (9)	Ministry of Education (MoE)		2		2
	Ministry of Health (MoH)		2		2
	Ministry of Justice (MoJ)		2		2
	Ministry of Religious Affairs (MER)		1		1
	Ministry of Women		1		1
	Ministry of the Interior		1		1

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Ethics

The study team provided in-depth training for data collectors on the ethical conduct of research and informed consent procedures according to international standards (Robinson *et al.* 2021). After recruitment, data collectors contacted participants to obtain verbal consent prior to the interview sessions. Local status laws indicate that married adolescents under 18 years old are considered emancipated minors, so parental consent was not required for any participants. However, parents and spouses were provided with a copy of the consent form in cases where they indicated that a participant needed their permission. Study protocols and question guides were reviewed by the University of Sulaimani ethical review board (ref # 5012), as well as the JHU Institutional Review Board (ref # 9265). The local research team also obtained approval from the Ministry of the Interior, which is required for any research in humanitarian settings in KRI.

Analysis

All interviews were recorded and transcribed into Kurdish or Arabic. Throughout data collection, the local research lead checked each transcript upon completion against its recording for accuracy and data quality, which allowed any issues to be addressed quickly. A subset of 1 FGD and 11 IDI transcripts were translated into English during data collection so the primary coder could provide additional quality review. The study team developed a codebook *a priori*, focused on the key areas of interest, and thematically organized the key areas according to the socioecological model of development (17). The primary and secondary coders applied this codebook to the 12 translated transcripts, coupled with an open coding process that allowed for the emergence of new codes from the data. After the completion of data collection, an analysis workshop in KRI with the original data collectors was held to apply and refine the codebook using 10 additional transcripts. The remaining 35 transcripts were then translated into English and coded by the primary and secondary coders using Dedoose v. 8.3.35, a qualitative software that facilitates collaborative analysis processes (SocioCultural Research Consultants, LLC 2019). A subset of transcripts was also reviewed by a tertiary coder to ensure inter-coder reliability.

Results

The themes discussed in this section are presented according to the strength of their emphasis from participants, starting with the strongest. Emphasis was determined according to the frequency of codes assigned within and across all transcripts, not within an individual interview.

Drivers of child marriage

Participants most cited economic insecurity, tradition, patriarchal gender norms, child agency, and stopping education as drivers of child marriage. However, aspects of these drivers appeared to differ within and across groups. Each is examined in the following sections.

Economic insecurity

All groups believed that economic insecurity among displaced populations was a main driver of child marriage. IDPs and refugees discussed the financial difficulties of the camp setting, including poor living conditions and lack of employment prospects. Marrying off a child was seen as a means of both relieving the burden on the family and giving the child a chance for a better life. Displaced participants often cited frustration with their current situation, believing that child marriage rates had been decreasing in their places of origin, but displacement and economic insecurity have caused a new rise. As one refugee described:

> 'Marriage of below 18 years old is not part of our habits and traditions, unless something wrong happens such as being displaced and refugees, … Due to the current situation, the family has 6-7 daughters and they could not provide them their necessities, so they are obliged to let her get married early and decrease their heavy burden on their shoulders'.—Community Leader, Refugee, Dohuk

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Participants also linked financial insecurity to marriage patterns between displaced and host populations. While hosts agreed that poverty among displaced populations was a key driver of child marriage, some also mentioned refugee poverty as justification for marrying displaced girls.

> 'Our neighbor who is a Kurdish man, he is very rich, he got married with a Syrian girl, she accepts it whether this is because of his beauty or her poverty status … So, she was good for him as the Kurdish girl has many requests and this requires much money'.—Married girl, Host, Erbil

Some hosts also believed that marrying a displaced girl was a form of charity, because the marriage would provide an opportunity for these adolescent girls to leave the harsh conditions in the camps. Contrarily, refugees viewed host men as taking advantage of their financial situation to conduct transactional marriages and treat their young wives as servants.

Adolescents viewed financial security as prerequisite to marriage, especially regarding a boy's responsibility to have a secure job and financial resources before marrying. Families of adolescent boys perceived daughters-in-law as means of relieving the mother-in-law's domestic burden of household duties.

Preserving traditional marriage practices and gender roles

All groups perceived tradition as foundational to their community and thus important to preserve. This was especially true among displaced populations; many participants explained they had lost everything from their former lives except their traditions, making their preservation paramount. As one refugee community leader explained:

> 'Before, there was respect … for the person in charge of the family. There was also respect for traditions and customs. But mixing [of cultures] … has caused changes in people's lives and caused marriages from one city to another. This mixing also changed the old customs and traditions that were followed at that time'.—Community Leader, Refugee, Sulaimaniyah

Most displaced participants cited a strong desire to marry within their larger family or ethnic group because it would ensure the betrothed share the same morals and values. This concern was strongest between hosts and IDPs. Hosts often looked down upon the traditions of the IDP population, citing disused religious beliefs. As one female host community member describes:

> 'Sometimes the norms, habits and traditions of the society can decide the marriage. In this aspect, we are different from the Turks and Arabs, as the Arabs can get married sooner than [us]'.—Community Leader, Host, Sulaimaniyah

Participants across all groups described numerous examples of traditions that facilitate child marriage, though two were most common and centred around normative gendered household roles. First was the belief that girls should get married early to avoid becoming 'spinsters' and fulfil their domestic tasks meant to serve husbands and mothers-in-law. Second was the belief that childbearing was the most important part of marriage; early marriage increased the opportunity to have more children and for parents to have grandchildren. Consequently, girls' readiness for marriage was often discussed in terms of physical maturity and ability to raise children. Key informants from the Ministry of Health also discussed instances of families requesting confirmation that girls had reached puberty, and of their virginity.

Key informants from the religious and legal ministries described current laws in KRI working in coordination with a modern interpretation of Islam to prevent child marriage, despite the strong traditions and norms described above. Kurdish populations believed that IDPs who cited religious traditions as justification for child marriage were following archaic rules that no longer applied in KRI. However, religion was not often identified as a direct driver of child marriage and instead was mainly discussed in the context of religious clerics facilitating child marriages outside of the legal system.

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Marriage decision-making and child agency

All groups discussed a patriarchal system in which men were the primary decision-makers in the household and community. While a man might seek input from his wife or other family members, final decisions were his. When describing their own experiences, most adolescents said they wanted to marry because they believed it was preordained (referred to as 'destiny'), provided a sense of security, and facilitated the transition into adulthood. However, in situations where the adolescents did not want to get married, levels of perceived agency differed by gender: boys could reason with their fathers to change their decision, while girls would be coerced or beaten if they questioned the decision.

> 'There were problems between my family and my husband, because I refused to get married to him. After that, I got married to him, forced, to avoid problems with my family and with him. My mother and brother used to hurt me and they wronged me a lot'.—Married girl, Refugee, Sulaimaniyah

Participants expressed varying degrees of self-efficacy regarding marriage. Adult participants often said that children's consent was required for marriage, though they also expressed that there was no real alternative to agreement. Participants described children taking extreme measures to be self-efficacious. Specifically, boys would flee abroad while girls threatened or completed suicide, either to prevent a forced marriage or insist on an early love marriage. This gendered difference in self-efficacy mechanisms was cited multiple times among displaced adults and adolescents.

Hosts expressed the greatest concern with child agency in reference to love affairs. Indeed, most host adolescents described choosing their marriages and the need to convince their parents to support their relationships. However, adults viewed these relationships as inappropriate and at a greater risk of divorce, since the adolescents were seen as immature and unaware of the true characters of their partners. As one host community leader described:

> 'All of my sisters have gotten married around Zakho area. Three of them got married based on their love and preference, still they have some problems with their husbands, and some others got married based on habits and traditions and their life is better than the others'.—Male community leader, Host, Dohuk

Family honour and GBV

Participants thought that displacement increased girls' risk of experiencing gender-based violence, including rape and sexual assault. Displaced populations expressed deep concern about being surrounded by unfamiliar people who might force themselves on their daughters. Regardless of consent, any sexual act before marriage was viewed as a threat to family honour. Among displaced participants, marriage was considered a way to ensure that girls were protected by their husbands from sexual or physical violence. As one refugee articulated:

> 'I think only for the girl it is necessary for them to get married early because it is possible for the others to attack her. It is common in our Yazidi community to kidnap girls and take her away, as ISIS did, and marry her'.—Married boy, IDP, Dohuk

Host populations also expressed fear that their daughters could threaten family honour in the form of improper consensual premarital relationships. Girls who showed interest in boys at a young age were thus encouraged or forced into marriage to prevent their 'deviation' from societal expectations. While there was some concern expressed that boys would engage in improper behaviour before marriage, this was described as the innate nature of men and boys rather than a threat to family honour.

Low prioritization of education

Participants described two functions of education that influenced their level of prioritization: the education required for a career and the education needed to understand and fulfil marriage

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responsibilities. Boys more often believed education was necessary for finding a job. However, displaced participants expressed frustration with the limited employment opportunities for displaced populations and believed education would not increase their chances of finding good jobs. This was especially true of girls and boys who struggled in school and were thus deemed disinclined to formal education by teachers and parents. For these students, quitting school, getting married, and 'starting life' were viewed as better uses of their time.

Girls also described education as a lower priority than gaining the security of marriage. In the instances when adult participants encouraged girls' education, it was usually to learn how to be a good wife and raise children. Though participants implied that this knowledge came from the school system, they also believed mothers or relatives could teach their daughters the necessary skills of domestic life. As one community leader described:

> 'There should be a school where they can get knowledge and awareness regarding marriage … In case they get married at this age, this [education] will be a great support for them to be acquainted with certain topics essential for their married life'.—Community Leader, Refugee, Dohuk

Most participants believed that girls should not get married without a proper understanding of marriage responsibilities, but not all believed that this required formal education. Thus, girls' attending school was prioritized by those who believed it necessary for marriage readiness.

Consequences of child marriage

All participants, regardless of population group, described similar consequences of child marriage. These consequences can be categorized into three main themes: school dropout, poor health, and gender-based violence.

School dropout

Though school dropout was described as a driver of child marriage in previous sections, it shared a dual role as a consequence. Girls expressed that continuation of education after marriage was difficult because of the increased pressure of domestic tasks, especially child-rearing. Multiple girls reported that they agreed to marriage under the condition that their husbands would allow them to continue schooling. However, after marriage, most of these girls said their husbands reneged on their promises and forced them to drop out. In some instances, girls were forced to leave school by their husbands' families, who did not approve of such arrangements. One IDP community leader explained:

> Marriage and study together for the girls is a failure. Because when early marriage takes place, the girl here will have many responsibilities. The girl will have children to take care of. In addition, mother-in-law will not allow her daughter-in-law to go to school whist she will do all the household activities'.—Male community leader, IDP, Sulaimaniyah

Adolescent boys reported continuing their education after marriage more often than girls, though most said they later dropped out to find jobs to support their families. Key informants from the Ministry of Education also cited that some adolescents attempted to continue education after they married, but their grades suffered, and they eventually opted not to continue. In summary, participants shared that boys often left school of their own volition while girls were forced to drop out by their husbands or in-laws.

Maternal health complications and psychological pressure

Participants identified mental health and pregnancy complications as the two primary health consequences of child marriage. Girls were often encouraged to have children soon after marriage to fulfil the expectation that wives should become mothers, even at the expense of their physical health. A key informant from the Ministry of Health stated that there is a contrast between medical advice and childbearing practices.

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> ‘Some families see the girls as a machine to produce [a] baby, so, if she does not be[come] pregnant after passing two or three months, they bring [her] to you and ask why she does not get pregnant. Then, you, as a doctor, could not help her a lot to be pregnant, as it may create many problems for her later. Moreover, they do not know how to put spacing between [having] one baby with the other’.—Key informant, Ministry of Health

Other participants noted instances of pregnancy complications like post-partum haemorrhage, low birthweight children, and poor infant health.

In addition to maternal and reproductive health, participants cited mental health issues as resulting from child marriage. Many adolescents described psychological pressure due to increased responsibilities. This caused many adolescents to regret their decisions and resent their partners, leading to low life satisfaction and depressed feelings.

> ‘Since I got married early, my emotional and psychological aspects are disordered. I have told myself for a while what has happened? Why did I get married? I did not know that. So, it affects me emotionally and psychologically and it was a bad feeling for me’.—Married girl, Host, Sulaimaniyah

Participants associated these mental health issues and animosity among young spouses with higher rates of divorce.

Increased risk of IPV

Though girls expected that marriage would provide them more freedom and decision-making power, most did not believe this happened. Participants reported suffering IPV in addition to the mental health consequences of contentious marital relationships. Girls who did not perform domestic marriage duties, as demanded by husbands or mothers-in-law, disclosed being beaten or verbally abused.

When asked where girls experiencing violence could seek help, participants responded that they most often did not disclose their experiences. Adolescent boys believed that girls chose not to come forward because of shy or meek personalities. Additionally, community leaders and adolescent boys stated that girls are usually unable to disclose abuse because it would bring shame upon their families. According to most participants, matters of violence should be handled within the family and speaking out about abuse could make a girl’s situation worse by creating stigma or prompting further abuse.

Members of the Ministry of Justice articulated that women have fewer rights than men in the court system. Participants spoke of men’s ability to divorce for any reason and remarry without difficulty, often with new child brides. In contrast, women who wanted divorces or to file criminal charges because of IPV had to prove they had been good wives. If they were granted divorces, they would then find it difficult to remarry because they are considered tainted. As one married woman described:

> ‘A woman is faced [with] violation, but she doesn’t complain in order not to divorce. In our society, if there is a divorced woman or a spinster, or doesn’t have a family, the people have a different view for her. I mean people don’t help her when she needs something. People make trouble with her because she has no one to protect her’.—Married girl, Host, Dohuk

Discussion

This study examined child marriage in refugee, IDP, and host populations in KRI, allowing an exploration of what factors affecting drivers and consequences of child marriage are unique to displaced populations and how displaced and non-displaced groups interact to inform child marriage practices. The findings showed that child marriage drivers exist at overlapping socioecological levels with a prominent undercurrent of gender inequality that affects marriage

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expectations. Though the same factors affected child marriage drivers in displaced and host populations, there were some differences according to varied sociocultural environments.

Economic status played an important role in child marriage decision-making across all communities, though its mechanism of influence differed between IDPs, refugees, and host populations. Male participants explained that the dearth of opportunities for economic advancement in camp settings led parents to marry off their daughters to alleviate perceived financial burden. This finding is consistent with studies of Syrian refugee populations throughout the Arab States region, which cited economic insecurity as a main factor in decision-making (Mourtada *et al.* 2017; El Arab and Sagbakken 2019). Host participants agreed that displaced populations experienced increased financial difficulties, and some host men described using this situation to capitalize on the lower dowries of refugee girls. This practice was negatively viewed by displaced populations, who believe host men take advantage of young, displaced girls they consider desperate or poor.

These phenomena stem from the complex political history of KRI and the growth of displaced populations throughout the region, which have led to tumultuous relationships between Kurds and Arabs (BBC 2018). IDP and refugee respondents described the difficulties with leaving a place where they had resources, community, and social status and entering an unfamiliar community with people from different cultures and traditions. They believed marrying their children to others within their culture was a way to preserve their traditions when they lost everything else. Host participants also raised concerns about displaced Arab populations re-popularizing practices like child marriage that the Kurdish community believed were antiquated. However, all participants from all groups alluded to pervasive gender norms that promote marriage at an early age (Al-Ali and Pratt 2011; Mlodoch 2012; Abu-Assab 2017). Though most adolescents believed that marriage would grant them more freedom, more adolescent girls than boys reported unmet expectations and oppression in marriage.

It is important to note, however, that many adolescent respondents felt positively towards marriage. Most adolescents, especially girls, believed that marriage would grant them more freedom and relieve burden on their families, especially for girls. As such, many of the adolescents across displaced and host study groups were active participants in marriage decision-making. This finding is in line with results from Stites *et al.* (2022), who conducted similar qualitative research among married girls in KRI and found that marriage genuinely helped to improve some girls' lives. However, they also confirmed some of the challenges married girls face, namely intra-familial and interpersonal violence.

In this study, gender disparities manifested in interpersonal abuse both pre- and post-marriage, specifically violence against girls. Adults saw marriage as assurance that their children, especially girls, did not engage in, or be perceived to have engaged in, premarital sex. There was little distinction drawn between consensual sex and rape when considering girls' virginity and family honour. This supported a broader consensus that girls should follow more rules, and be punished more harshly for violating them, than boys.

Gender norms can be effectively shifted through long-term social behaviour change programmes that work within communities and institutions (Conrad and Lapsansky 2020). As such, changing cultural or religious norms to prevent child marriage is challenging in humanitarian contexts where community and structure are unstable, and acute needs are the focus of both families and aid actors. However, as the conflicts in and around Iraq have become protracted, prevention programmes have become more tenable. In KRI, drivers caused or exacerbated by an emergency are opportunities for prevention interventions, because relevant activities like cash transfers and child protection interventions can reduce or eliminate the drivers and risks.

In addition to highlighting the importance of preventing child marriage, these results demonstrate the urgency of supporting already-married adolescents, especially girls. Young married girls faced heightened risk of IPV and abuse from their husbands and in-laws. Girls were also expected to bear children soon after marriage, leading to increased risk of childbirth complications and mortality. Health actors can reduce the compounding effects of early childbearing

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through access to sexual and reproductive health services, and support for community health actors to promote delayed childbearing and safe birth spacing. However, some groundwork must be laid to ensure married girls are supported in accessing these services. Most adults in this study acknowledged the risks of childbirth at a young age and expressed concern for young women in their communities who had serious complications. This concern presents an opportunity to use tools like social behaviour change to shift normative beliefs around expectations of married girls and alleviate some of the opposition to delayed childbearing.

Limited access to education was both a driver and a consequence of child marriage. Displaced adolescent boys faced a lack of job opportunities and girls were expected to fill domestic household roles, both of which made education a low priority. Some adolescents, including in host populations, were happy to leave school after marriage and welcomed the opportunity to focus on supporting their families, a result similar to the Stites study. Of the girls who wanted to continue their education after marriage, many were forced to drop out by their husbands or because their marriage responsibilities caused their academic performance to suffer. Integrating child protection, livelihoods, education, and other humanitarian sectors can help mitigate some of the negative effects of early marriage by providing married adolescents with protection services, educational opportunities, life skills, and income. As economic insecurity was the main driver for child marriage in this context, providing married adolescent girls with opportunities to build income can increase their household decision-making power, agency, and ability to leave the relationship if their partner is abusive.

Policy changes, though necessary to institutionalize change, are often not sufficient in humanitarian contexts. Though the law in KRI stipulates a marriage age of 18, marriage starting at 15 is permitted with parental consent or when the marriage is 'absolutely necessary' (Government of Iraq 1959). However, necessity is defined at the judge's discretion and contingent on proof of 'legal puberty and physical ability' (Government of Iraq 1959). Despite this, displaced participants in this study reported that some people returned to their places of origin to legally register child marriages, which allowed them access to child and family services for married couples in KRI. Additionally, the host population cited marriages being granted by parents, sometimes at the request of their children. Access to services also varied widely depending on if displaced persons were living in camps or not. As the humanitarian emergency becomes protracted, displaced people may live in camp and non-camp locations, further limiting child marriage prevention programming and legal enforcement. The government, supported by humanitarian actors, should continue to address inconsistent law enforcement by advocating for further changes to child marriage laws that protect girls' rights and do not stigmatize already-married girls and boys. Creating avenues for adolescents to access services for themselves and their children without mandating permission from a male family member can promote agency in marriage decision-making and care-seeking.

Limitations

Some religious and cultural norms can keep marriage informal and insular to certain communities, which introduces the possibility of social desirability bias. Displaced families may also have concerns about the legality of child marriage in the host community, causing them to fear legal repercussions, including deportation, if they report early marriage to researchers (Falb *et al.* 2016). Additionally, the study methodology did not include interviews with the parents of adolescents. Though most community leaders were also parents and provided some perspective, targeted interviews focused on the parent perspective could have shed more light on household-level marriage decision-making. Lastly, additional planned analysis workshops were cancelled due to unforeseen constraints from coronavirus disease 2019 pandemic restrictions, and the data analysis workshop with original data collectors included only 10 transcripts, none of which were translated or coded by the study team. However, local researchers provided detailed analysis and reporting of results from those 10 transcripts and the study team incorporated those findings into the results presented in this article.

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Conclusion

This study provides a nuanced understanding of child marriage drivers and consequences between Iraqi Kurdish host, Iraqi IDP, and Syrian refugee communities in the KRI. Participants across all groups discussed drivers and consequences of child marriage at multiple socioecological levels, as well as underlying gender inequality that disadvantages girls. However, there were differences in how those drivers influenced displaced and host populations. The findings from this study provide necessary context to inform child marriage interventions in humanitarian settings, especially within KRI and in settings with protracted displacement. Multiple humanitarian sectors should integrate prevention mechanisms that address the drivers of child marriage that are exacerbated by emergencies, such as economic insecurity and gender-based violence. These, along with effective support for married girls to access multi-sectoral services, delay childbearing, and continue their education, can help mitigate the harmful effects of child marriage.

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