



Rohingya refugees rest on the shore after crossing the Naf River to Bangladesh on makeshift rafts.

# CHILD MARRIAGE IN HUMANITARIAN SETTINGS IN SOUTH ASIA

**I**n both development and humanitarian contexts, child marriage is rooted in gender inequality and sustained by cultural and social norms, poverty and lack of opportunities. **However, crises may amplify or alter pre-existing drivers, or introduce new drivers or even new moderators.** Crises are often associated with internal and international displacement, decreased economic and physical security, increased sexual violence, the breakdown in the rule of law, as well as disruption of social structures, all of which have been shown to have impacts on child marriage in various contexts.

Comparing natural disaster and conflict-affected settings provides the opportunity **to assess how humanitarian crises impact the prevalence of child marriage, as well as the forms it takes, and to further understand the drivers of child marriage in emergencies.** Understanding the linkages within and between drivers as well as identifying

context-specific moderators of these will inform programming and policy recommendations to support adolescents and young people in all their diversity.

This policy brief summarizes key elements of a new report, *Child Marriage in Humanitarian Settings in South Asia: Study Results from Bangladesh and Nepal*. **This report combines the findings from research with Rohingya refugees from Myanmar residing in Bangladesh, and earthquake-affected communities in Nepal.** While the report covers a wider range of aspects of child marriage within and across both settings, this brief will focus on the approach, methods, and limitations of the study, the drivers and moderators of child marriage across the two settings, and recommendations for research, policy and programming to reduce child marriage in humanitarian settings. Readers are encouraged to consult the two accompanying briefs focusing on the Nepal and Bangladesh settings respectively.

Child marriage is defined as the marriage of a girl or boy under the age of 18.

There are an estimated **285 million** child brides in South Asia.

**Nine of the top 10 countries** with the highest rates of child marriage are affected by conflict or fragility.

# ABOUT THE STUDY

## METHODS

The study incorporated **three main approaches**:

- **A desk review** of relevant existing literature
- **Quantitative household surveys** of a stratified sample of Rohingya refugee households in Bangladesh and earthquake-affected households in Sindhupalchowk and Dolakha Districts in Nepal
- **Qualitative interviews** incorporating key informant interviews, focus group discussions, and in-depth interviews of married and unmarried adolescents, as well as parents, community leaders, religious leaders, local police and service providers, in both settings.

## ETHICAL AND CONTEXTUAL CONSIDERATIONS

**In both contexts, the study team engaged with local research partners to aid in implementation and ensure local perspectives were incorporated into the study:**

- In Bangladesh, the local partner was Community Partners International, which had years of experience working in the Rohingya camps, including with an extensive network of Rohingya community health volunteers
- In Nepal, the local partner was the Center for Research on Environment Health and Population Activities, which had considerable experience conducting research throughout Nepal.

This study was informed by:

- 484 articles reviewed, of which 142 documents were included for full review
- Quantitative surveys of 1,165 households in Bangladesh: 397 registered refugee and 768 Forcibly Displaced Myanmar National (FDMN) households
- Quantitative surveys of 1,207 households in Nepal: 607 in Sindhupalchowk and 600 in Dolakha
- Quantitative surveys of 1,978 adolescents in Bangladesh: 573 registered refugees and 1,405 FDMNs
- Quantitative surveys of 1,431 adolescents in Nepal: 715 in Sindhupalchowk and 716 in Dolakha
- Key informant interviews with 21 leaders and service providers in Bangladesh, and 25 in Nepal
- 43 in-depth interviews with adolescents and their parents or in-laws in Bangladesh, and 49 in Nepal
- 16 focus group discussions in Bangladesh and 22 in Nepal, including all of the above groups.

**In order to ensure protection of human subjects**, the study was reviewed by three Institutional Review Boards in the United States, Bangladesh and Nepal. To more fully incorporate the views of Rohingya refugees, the study also engaged in a community consultation process with them: informing the community of the research goals, discussing with them their thoughts and priorities, and obtaining their consent to proceed with the research. Rohingya facilitators led conversations with groups of men and women community leaders (separately). Both groups supported the research, suggesting that it was an important topic for their community, and offering their assistance in its implementation. **In both Nepal and Bangladesh, the study team conducted extensive consultations with community members and other stakeholders** to review the study goals and objectives, target populations, and both quantitative and qualitative research methods and instruments.

**An important change in this study from prior work was the inclusion of boys.** Prior studies had only included adolescent girls; however, because Nepal has a notable prevalence of child grooms and because of anecdotal information from the Rohingya camps that boys were also marrying young, adolescent boys were included in both settings.

**As with each study, for Bangladesh and Nepal the tools were adapted to ensure their appropriateness for the context**, such as modifying answer options for major marriage decision-making influences. For example, “natural disaster” was included as such an influencing factor for Nepal.

## LIMITATIONS

Limitations of this study include the following:

- The sample size, too small to allow extensive disaggregation and subgroup comparisons
- The challenge of determining the exact ages of participants in both settings
- The difficulty of finding surveyors with both high levels of training and local community membership
- The scarcity of privacy in the Rohingya camps
- Timing issues and male migration in Nepal.

# FACTORS AFFECTING CHILD MARRIAGE RATES ACROSS BOTH HUMANITARIAN SETTINGS

**FIGURE 1**  
Key drivers and moderators of child marriage across both humanitarian settings

*Drivers are indicated by right arrows; factors that can either drive or moderate are indicated by bidirectional arrows*

Overall, **increased rates of child marriages after disasters were confirmed** for both girls and boys. In order to delve deeper, **the study focused on two disparate humanitarian contexts in South Asia, facilitating comparisons** between a protracted displacement fleeing violence and oppression in the home country, versus a natural disaster with temporary and mostly local displacement.

The findings show that **known primary drivers of child marriage do not fundamentally change during disasters, but may shift in importance or impact**. Any new drivers that appear, such as the impact of food distribution on child marriage, are not as deep seated and are more circumstantial in nature, and may therefore be easier to address.



# RECOMMENDATIONS

## RESEARCH

- Since the deep drivers of child marriage in South Asia do not vary significantly across different humanitarian contexts, it is recommended that **future studies focus instead on implementation research**, and what works to effectively programme to end child marriage.
- However, four drivers that would be helpful to study further are migration and displacement, social media, natural disasters, and change in social norms.
- The effects of **COVID-19** on child marriage warrant additional study.
- In any research effort, it is imperative that great care be taken to **ensure that respondent communities are treated ethically, and that they have a voice in consenting to and learning from the research** to which they are party.

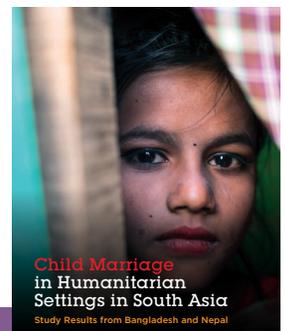
## PROGRAMMING

- **Economic and physical insecurity** become much more important in humanitarian crises as determinants for decision-making around marriage. Interventions to bolster them should be quickly scaled up to reduce the likelihood that these drivers will increase in impact, leading to more and/or earlier child marriage.
- **Social norms** can change quickly and unexpectedly in emergency settings, and programming will need to be able to adapt nimbly. Identifying the shifting trajectories of social norms and responding to the new needs they create is crucial.

- **Adolescent boys** must be included in programming, for their own sakes as well as for the sakes of gender equality and empowerment of women and girls. In surveys, boys were often more likely to see marriage as beneficial to them, and/or as a source of comfort after a disaster or crisis.

## POLICY

- **Legislation** must be monitored for its impact on child marriage in humanitarian settings. How and to what extent the laws are made known and enforced, and how they interface with social norms and religious practices, must be examined for efficacy as well as unintended consequences.
- **Multiple types of child marriage** exist and must be addressed by policy: e.g., polygamy; marriages between children, marriages between adults and children; arranged marriages, sanctioned love marriages, and elopements; and marriages between members of different communities.
- **Civil registration access** is indispensable for meeting needs and realizing rights, especially in humanitarian settings, and it must be expanded. It is needed for enforcing child marriage laws, accurately monitoring rates, and obtaining birth registration. It also impacts access to education, health services, and social protection benefits. Continuity of access must be ensured.



Read the full report, Child Marriage in Humanitarian Settings in South Asia: Study Results from Bangladesh and Nepal, at <https://www.unicef.org/rosa/reports/child-marriage-humanitarian-settings-south-asia> or <https://asiapacific.unfpa.org/en/publications/child-marriage-humanitarian-settings-south-asia>

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