



# Ending Child Marriage is Integral to the Women, Peace and Security Agenda

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Each year, an estimated 12 million girls are married before their 18th birthdays.<sup>1</sup> Child or early marriage is defined as any formal or informal union that occurs when one or both parties are under 18 years of age. Forced marriage is a marriage or union at any age that occurs without the free and full consent of one or both parties and includes child and early marriage, as people under 18 are not able to give informed consent.<sup>2</sup> Although boys are also married before age 18, it is girls who are both more likely to marry early and who bear the greatest burdens on their health and well-being as a result of the practice. According to UNICEF, “Child marriage often compromises a girl’s development by resulting in early pregnancy and social isolation, interrupting her schooling, limiting her opportunities for career and vocational advancement and placing her at increased risk of domestic violence.”<sup>3</sup>

An internationally recognized human rights violation, child marriage occurs across all regions of the world, and can be exacerbated in times of crisis and conflict.<sup>4,5</sup> In fact, nine of the ten countries with the highest rates of child marriage are considered fragile states, demonstrating the impact insecurity has on decisions to induce children to marry.<sup>6</sup> Three of the ten countries leading the Fund for Peace’s Failed States Index had child marriage rates well above 50 percent, according to a 2013 analysis.<sup>7</sup> While there are many drivers of child marriage, the practice is deeply rooted in gender inequality and poverty, conditions which are also exacerbated by instability.<sup>8</sup>

Yet the practice has been largely overlooked in United States peace and security efforts. The Women, Peace, and Security Act (WPS) of 2017 is an opportunity to address this gap by including efforts to end child marriage within the mandated strategy to promote women’s protection and full participation in peace and security efforts. As the statement of policy within the Act notes, “It shall be the policy of the United States to promote the meaningful participation of women in all aspects of overseas conflict prevention, management, and resolution, and post-conflict relief and recovery efforts, reinforced through diplomatic efforts and programs that ... promote the physical safety, economic security, and dignity of women *and girls*.”<sup>9</sup>

## Impact On Girls’ Education and Health

One of the best ways to delay marriage and to promote the physical safety, economic security and dignity of girls is to ensure that girls have access to a safe, quality education.

When major conflicts and crises arise, children often do not go to school or even have a school to attend. At present, 62 million children and youth are out of school in 32 crisis-affected countries,<sup>10,11</sup> and girls are 2.5 times more likely to be out of school than boys.<sup>12</sup> For children who are further marginalized, such as those with disabilities, the numbers are worse: in developing countries, more than 90 percent of children with disabilities do not attend school.<sup>13</sup> These challenges are exacerbated as girls hit puberty.

Yet even in peacetime, girls between the ages of 10 and 19 are 23 times more likely than boys to be kept out of school.<sup>14</sup> There are 15 million girls of primary-school age who will never even enter a classroom, half of whom live in sub-Saharan Africa.<sup>15</sup> Not coincidentally, nearly 40 percent of girls in sub-Saharan Africa are married before the age of 18.<sup>16</sup>

Similarly, early marriage compounds girls' challenges: Girls who marry early are more likely than unmarried peers to drop out of school and to have increased health risks and lower socioeconomic outcomes. In fact, child marriage reduces girls' lifetime earnings by 9 percent.<sup>17</sup> The longer that girls can stay in school and receive a quality education, the more likely they are to delay marriage. And the longer girls are able to stay in school, the more likely they are to contribute to their own futures, those of their families and to their communities, too.

In addition, early marriage has long-lasting health consequences: A child bride's children are more likely to die before they turn five and to experience stunted growth than those born to mothers above 18. This impacts familial health but also health systems. If all child marriage had ended by 2015, countries would have seen tens of billions of dollars in benefits by 2030 due to a reduction in stunting and child mortality alone.<sup>18</sup> Thus, investment in girls' education is an investment in the health of a country's workforce, economic growth and lasting peace.

According to USAID, "During major conflicts and crises, children do not go to school—and the longer they're out, the less likely they are to ever go back. Not only is school necessary for their continued education, but it also provides them with emotional and physical protection while their worlds are in chaos."<sup>19</sup> Lack of access to quality education in such settings undermines the social and economic development that is necessary to promote gender equality, peace and prosperity—the intended outcomes of the WPS agenda.

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## Adolescent Girls in Conflict and Post-Conflict Settings

Adolescent girls face unique challenges in any crisis setting, as they are marginalized both as females and as youth. They are often responsible for greater degrees of unpaid family care work, such as fetching firewood or water or attending older and/or younger relatives. Consequently, they have less time to pursue education or income-generating activities, with long-term impact on their futures.<sup>20</sup> The threat and/or experience of violence in conflict, post-conflict, or displacement settings is exacerbated both inside and outside of the home. In times of crisis, families marry off girls to make them less vulnerable to gender-based violence by combatants. However, evidence

does not support the belief that husbands protect girls they marry. In fact, girls who are married early are more likely to experience intimate partner violence, contract HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases and remain poorer relative to their unmarried peers.

For example, since the start of the Syrian civil war, rates of child and forced marriage among Syrian refugees tripled in Jordan.<sup>21</sup> A 2014 Council on Foreign Relations paper found that nine of the eleven least developed countries on UNDP's Human Development Index have child marriage rates above 40 percent and most of the countries with a high prevalence of the practice have also experienced natural disasters, which compound the perils the girls face.<sup>22</sup> Girls in conflict settings are at risk for early, child and forced marriage, whether with good intentions by their family or through nefarious ones at the hands of the militants. The horrifying accounts of abduction, sexual enslavement and forced marriage of girls by the so-called Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, Boko Haram in Nigeria and the Taliban in Pakistan attest to the urgent need for interventions tailored to the needs of girls in these settings.

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## Policies and Strategies to Protect Girls

Given the direct links between girls' experience of conflict and crisis — including but not limited to child, early and forced marriage — and the women, peace and security agenda, U.S. policy on peace and security should not exclude girls. An immediate opportunity to address this comes in the form of the forthcoming strategy mandated by the Women, Peace and Security Act, which was passed and signed into law by President Trump in October 2017. The Act commits the United States to "promote meaningful participation of women in all aspects of conflict prevention, management and resolution, and post-conflict relief and recovery efforts."<sup>23</sup> While the legislation does mention girls twice, these references are cursory and do not include specific objectives relevant to girls' experience of conflict and crisis—nor does it explicitly mention child marriage or girls' education. Its focus, rightfully, is on women's participation in preventing and resolving conflict. Yet girls also have a powerful role to play in preventing and responding to conflict, and are too often the victim of targeted violence.

Therefore, the forthcoming Strategy can and should address the unique needs of girls as well as women, with a specific focus on child marriage given its prevalence in conflict and crisis. Building on the 2016 National Action Plan on Women, Peace, and Security, the Strategy should include a specific objective to protect and empower girls in conflict and crisis settings, with an explicit commitment to prevent child, early and forced marriage.<sup>24</sup>

The United States does not have to start from scratch when integrating the WPS Strategy into issues like child marriage and girls' education. Indeed, the U.S. Department of State and USAID's implementation plans for other legislative efforts already focus on these very topics. Furthermore, the recently passed Reinforcing Education Accountability in Development Act of 2017, or READ Act, promotes education and includes language on overcoming barriers to girls' education. The corresponding U.S. Global Strategy to Empower Adolescent Girls is forthcoming and requires reports to Congress.<sup>25</sup> The strategy includes implementation plans from USAID, the U.S. Department of State, Peace Corps and the Millennium Challenge Corporation, including coordination with one another in crisis and conflict settings. Through this strategy, the United States has pledged to work toward ending child marriage, keeping girls in school and eliminating violence against girls around the world.<sup>26</sup> The WPS Strategy presents a new opportunity to unify the two agendas and address the common problem of child marriage and violence against girls.

The recently updated U.S. Strategy to Prevent and Respond to Gender-based Violence Globally also makes explicit linkages between education, violence prevention and response broadly and child marriage specifically.<sup>27</sup> USAID has a Vision for Action on Child Marriage<sup>28</sup> and a related Child, Early and Forced Marriage Resource Guide.<sup>29</sup> Both contain relevant guidance and sector-specific recommendations, indicators and programmatic recommendations for conflict, post-conflict and other work closely aligned with the WPS agenda.

## Recommendations for Action

As the United States develops its WPS Strategy, it must intentionally include girls — particularly efforts to prevent child, early and forced marriage and to keep girls in school. Specifically, the U.S. government should do the following:

- increase peacebuilding efforts that take into account the needs and voices of girls at risk for child marriage;
- ensure that new and increasing efforts to provide girls with education in conflict and crisis settings includes efforts to prevent child, early and forced marriage;
- link increasing attention to girls' education in conflict and crisis settings and ending child marriage to the WPS agenda by including a specific objective to end child marriage and empower adolescent girls in the forthcoming strategy on WPS, building on the limited provision in the National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security;
- fully implement the U.S. Global Strategy to Empower Adolescent Girls;
- train relevant personnel in the Department of Defense, Department of State, USAID and elsewhere on the issue of child marriage and support regular consultation with civil society organizations and women experts on this issue in areas most affected by conflict and instability, as well as in Washington, DC; and
- increase funding for the WPS agenda, linking with efforts to end gender-based violence, child marriage and other relevant funded priorities. Current U.S. funding and programming have failed to address the barriers that are keeping girls out of school. The forthcoming READ Act strategy from USAID should include robust guidance on how to overcome these barriers and measure efforts to do so, particularly in conflict and crisis settings. It should also include these metrics in the required annual report to Congress.

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The U.S. Civil Society Working Group on Women, Peace, and Security (U.S. CSWG) is a nonpartisan network of 39 civil society organizations with expertise on issues involving women, war, and peace. Established in 2010, the working group acts in its capacity as an engaged, voluntary coalition to support the U.S. government’s efforts to implement national strategies, plans, and policies related to Women, Peace, and Security (WPS).

