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Fragile States, Fragile Lives

Child Marriage Amid Disaster and Conflict

Gayle Tzemach Lemmon

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Introduction

For decades, child marriage has been viewed as an unfortunate but inevitable social ill. Few policy-makers have considered its eradication feasible given how entrenched the practice is across the globe: one in three girls worldwide marry before the age of eighteen and one in nine girls marry before the age of fifteen.¹ The United Nations (UN) estimates that if current trends continue, in the next decade 142 million girls globally will become brides before they turn eighteen. The implications are dire: research shows that child marriage both reinforces poverty and makes it harder to escape. The practice has curtailed advancement on Millennium Development Goals Four and Five—which call for a two-thirds reduction in the under-five mortality rate and a three-fourths reduction in maternal deaths by 2015, respectively—and has undermined the goal of achieving universal primary education.²

The world's spotlight has recently turned to child marriage and campaigns to eradicate the practice have gained some momentum as the World Bank, UN, and other international organizations have embraced the centrality of women and girls to global development. Countries in which child marriage is most prevalent tend to be among the poorest and least stable. The practice is ubiquitous in communities where poverty is widespread; birth and death rates are high; and there are lower overall levels of education, health-care access, and employment.³

Curbing child marriage has become increasingly important to the global development discussion, but it is not yet central to the discussion about security and stability, especially when examining fragile states affected by conflict and/or natural disaster. Today, one-third of the world's poor live in fragile states, and the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) estimates that number could grow to one-half by 2018 and to nearly two-thirds by 2030.⁴ As defined by the OECD, a fragile region “has weak capacity to carry out basic governance functions, and lacks the ability to develop mutually constructive relations with society.”⁵ Similarly, the nongovernmental organization (NGO) World Vision describes fragile states as “those where a government cannot or will not act on its responsibility to protect and fulfill the rights of the majority of the population, particularly the most vulnerable,” as well as those where “communities are under greater stress caused by natural disasters, acute and slow onset emergencies, civil and political conflict and insecurity.”⁶ Natural disaster and armed conflict destroy property; interrupt or even halt economic activity; and divert resources away from health care, education, and infrastructure.

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 (see Table 1).⁷

Table 1: Low-Income and Lower-Middle-Income Fragile States as Defined by the OECD

Afghanistan
Bangladesh
Burundi
Cameroon
Central African Republic
Chad
Comoros
Republic of the Congo
Democratic Republic of the Congo
Côte d'Ivoire
Eritrea
Ethiopia
Georgia
Guinea
Guinea-Bissau
Haiti
Iraq
Kenya
Kiribati
Democratic Republic of Korea
Kosovo
Kyrgyz Republic
Liberia
Malawi
Marshall Islands
Federated States of Micronesia
Myanmar
Nepal
Niger
Nigeria
Pakistan
Rwanda
Sierra Leone
Solomon Islands
Somalia
South Sudan
Sri Lanka
Sudan
Timor-Leste
Togo
West Bank and Gaza
Uganda
Republic of Yemen
Zimbabwe

Source: OECD, *Fragile states 2013: Resource flows and trends in a shifting world*, 2013.

Three of the ten countries leading the Fund for Peace's Failed States Index have child marriage rates well above 50 percent.⁸ And of the bottom eleven countries on the United Nations Development Program's Human Development Index, nine have child marriage rates above 40 percent.⁹ Most countries with the highest prevalence rates of child marriage also rank high on global indexes of vulnerability to natural disasters.¹⁰

As the world grows more connected, poverty becomes more visible, and the issue of what happens to women and girls living in these fragile, sometimes ungoverned, spaces becomes central to questions of development that go beyond those countries' borders. Child marriage does not *cause* fragile states, but it does reinforce poverty, limit girls' education, stymie economic progress, and, as a result, contribute to regional instability. In addition, the onset of natural disasters and/or armed conflict limits economic opportunities, weakens social institutions, and increases the chance of sexual violence and assault targeting women and girls. In such circumstances, young unmarried girls face increased risks, and early marriage becomes a more palatable option for parents and families looking to protect their girls.

But there is a wide gap in data that assesses the degree to which fragile contexts perpetuate child marriage; as a result, there is also a gap in informed intervention. Part of the reason for the data gap is simple: relief initiatives and humanitarian responses often overlook girls' susceptibility to the practice during vulnerable times for their families. Providing urgent aid overrides conversations about which populations might be most vulnerable to child marriage and what that means to the larger quest for regional stability.¹¹

Until now, most of the research on child marriage in fragile states has been collected by international NGOs—such as World Vision, Human Rights Watch, and Mercy Corps—and local organizations, UN agencies, and individual researchers on the frontlines of disaster and conflict. This is a start, but more work remains. Governments, multilateral organizations, and relief agencies should prioritize research during and immediately after natural disasters and conflicts to provide hard evidence about the relationship between child marriage and fragility. This data will help produce more effective and targeted interventions to assist the youngest and most at-risk members of communities in crisis, and improve the future prospects of all members of the next generation in some of the most challenging corners of the world. Armed with such data, those responsible for providing humanitarian and emergency aid can begin to tackle the complex web of safety risks, educational disruption, and limits to economic opportunity that combine to make child marriage a viable option for families struggling to survive.¹²

The Status of Women and Girls in Fragile States

During periods of instability caused by natural disaster and conflict, the poorest and most vulnerable in society, particularly women and children, find themselves in even more precarious situations as livelihoods, homes, and social norms are upended.¹³ A 2003 article in the *American Political Science Review* found that women and children bear a disproportionate brunt of the long-term effects of civil war.¹⁴ For example, in the Democratic Republic of the Congo alone, 1.5 million children have been displaced by one of Africa's longest conflicts.¹⁵ Natural disasters also disproportionately endanger women and girls, who account for a stunning 70 percent of the world's internally displaced population and more than half of the two hundred million affected each year by natural disasters.¹⁶ An Oxfam Report on the impact of the 2004 Asia tsunami noted that women were the majority of those killed and were least able to recover from the disaster. In the Aceh Besar district of Indonesia, for example, 75 percent of those who died were women; this left a male-female ratio of 3:1 among the survivors. Some of the women who did survive found themselves in internally displaced persons (IDP) camps, facing heavy risks of violence and trafficking.¹⁷ Results of a study conducted by the London School of Economics showed that in 141 countries analyzed, gender differences in loss of lives due to natural disasters were directly correlated with the economic and social rights of women in the countries before disaster struck; in places where gender rights were equal, the losses were far less lopsided.¹⁸

Women and girls in fragile states lag far behind their counterparts in more stable regions across a slew of human development indicators—from nutrition and access to health services to educational attainment and economic opportunities.¹⁹ Recurring natural disasters, short- and long-term conflict, forced migration and displacement, and eroding economic stability leave women and girls further vulnerable to exploitation. And during times of increased resource scarcity, including during periods of crisis or conflict, girls tend to lose out in favor of investing limited resources in boys.

Drivers of Child Marriage in Fragile States: Poverty, Lack of Education, and Insecurity

Social upheaval and gender-based violence increase in times of disaster and conflict. In response, families often resort to child marriage as a way to protect the most vulnerable members of communities from threats—real or perceived. In its research examining child marriage in fragile states, World Vision found that “fear of rape and sexual violence, of unwanted premarital pregnancies, of family shame and dishonor, of homelessness and hunger or starvation were all reported by parents and children as legitimate reasons for early marriage.”²⁰ Though more research is needed to determine the extent to which this vulnerability drives child marriage, existing research shows that many of the twenty-five countries home to the highest rates of early marriage—including Niger, Chad, Bangladesh, Guinea, and Central African Republic—are also frequently among those considered most vulnerable to natural disasters and most frequently found on indexes of failed states.

Even in countries where legal frameworks to protect women and children already exist, institutional breakdowns exacerbate the challenge of ending child marriage. In many of the areas where child marriage is most entrenched, customary law can trump formal law, particularly when a state’s reach and influence collapse. In fragile states, justice systems often falter and lose legitimacy, resulting in a widened gap between formal laws, including those that set a minimum age of marriage, and customary laws or practices followed at the community level. For example, in Nigeria, a country increasingly destabilized by radical groups, even lawmakers have been recorded participating in child marriage: in 2010, Al Jazeera reported that Nigerian senator Sani Ahmed Yerima allegedly married a thirteen-year-old Egyptian girl.²¹ The Nigerian Marriage Act sets the legal age of marriage without parental consent at twenty-one, but with parental consent, children can be married at any age.²²

In another example, many refugees of the ongoing Syrian conflict have been unable to acquire the means or documents to officially register their marriages and instead look to religious leaders, elders, or sheikhs to conduct marriage ceremonies. The resulting marriage contracts are not recognized by any state authority and therefore leave women and their children vulnerable, especially in times of divorce or separation.²³ Somalia, another conflict-ridden country, has set a legal minimum age of marriage at eighteen for girls. Yet weak enforcement by the government, entrenched tradition, and the forced marriage of girls by insurgency groups has left the country with one of the highest child marriage prevalence rates in the world.²⁴

Communities may look to customary laws and traditions to use child marriage as a way to protect young girls, ignoring laws against the practice that may be viewed as irrelevant in times of instability.²⁵ Weak penalties and lax or nonexistent enforcement also allow communities to disregard formal laws.

RISE IN POVERTY AND LOSS OF ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITIES

Studies show that countries with the lowest gross domestic product (GDP) per capita are among those with the highest child marriage prevalence rates.²⁶ Of the ten countries with the lowest GDP in 2013, six—Malawi, Niger, Madagascar, Ethiopia, Central African Republic, and Guinea—fall among the top twenty countries with the highest rates of child marriage in the world.²⁷ Of the twenty-five countries with the lowest GDP, twelve have child marriage rates above 40 percent.²⁸ Household wealth is also thought to affect child marriage rates: an analysis by the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) found that more than half of girls in the poorest quintile of households assessed were child brides, more than three times the number in the wealthiest quintile of households.²⁹

Fragile states buffeted by war and natural disaster find themselves struggling against the subsequent poverty that accompanies such upheavals. A comprehensive report on fragile states from the African Development Bank noted that “for every three years a country is affected by major violence, poverty reduction lags behind by 2.7 percentage points.” Conflict can move previously comfortable families into lower income percentiles and make child marriage look like a promising option for their daughters’ futures.

Parents and families turn to child marriage as a means of alleviating the economic burden of the girl, a burden that is increased during times of social instability and economic uncertainty. For example, in parts of rural Niger, United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) officials report that families use child marriage as a survival strategy during times of drought, accepting offers from men of wealth requesting to marry their daughters in the hopes that doing so will allow them to better care for other children. In countries facing high food insecurity and/or drought, such as Bangladesh and Somalia, girls and women are discharged from the household, while male children are seen as more valuable household assets.³⁰ Similarly in Uganda, food crises associated with climate change have forced young girls into “famine marriages” as they are exchanged for dowry or bride price.³¹ UNICEF reports that in Liberia and Sierra Leone, parents have coerced their daughters into marriages due to economic destitution and violence in refugee camps.³²

BARRIERS TO GIRLS’ EDUCATION

In its 2012 report “Marrying Too Young,” the UNFPA noted that girls with no education are three times more likely to marry or enter into a union before their eighteenth birthday than those who graduate from secondary school or higher. Girls who only complete primary school are two times more likely to marry or enter into a union than their peers who obtain a secondary or higher degree.³³ According to a UNICEF study, 36 percent of women in Senegal who did not attend primary school were married by the age of eighteen. In Tanzania, women who completed secondary school were 92 percent less likely to be married by eighteen than their peers who had attended only primary school. In Bangladesh, delaying marriage by one year increased the likelihood of literacy by almost six percentage points and kept a girl in school for longer. Moreover, research in several West African countries reveals that child marriage in Nigeria accounts for 15 to 20 percent of school dropouts.³⁴ In the Borno region of Nigeria, for example, the stronghold for the radical group Boko Haram, 37 percent of girls are married by age fifteen and the median age at first marriage is fourteen—the youngest in the country.³⁵ Likely due to regional instability, cultural traditions, and high rates of child marriage, less than 20 percent of girls aged fifteen to nineteen in Borno are literate.

Though education systems typically suffer overall during times of social instability, crises tend to impair girls' educational opportunities more than boys'. Girls enrolled in schools in fragile states are often forced to drop out and those who were already excluded may face even smaller chances of ever entering a classroom. For example, in Tajikistan, girls of school age who live in conflict-affected regions are less likely to complete their studies than girls in more stable areas; data shows that "exposure to violent conflict had a large and statistically significant negative effect on the enrollment of girls."³⁶ The same is observed after natural disasters. For instance, according to data gathered in Bangladesh—which has one of the highest child marriage rates in the world—following Cyclone Sidr in 2007, 62 percent of the total number of children under eighteen who were married in the five years before the study were married within the first year following the disaster.³⁷ The government of Bangladesh found that it was common for those adolescent girls who had lost an academic year of school due to the cyclone's wreckage to be forced into marriages.³⁸ In Kenya, gender, education, and global poverty-reduction initiatives found that increased poverty due to drought reduced school attendance and girls were more likely to be withdrawn from school than boys.³⁹

Anecdotal evidence and interviews with NGO leaders running programs on the ground suggest that even in fragile times, education can be used to help mitigate the risk of child marriage. Schooling in emergency programs can be a strong protection strategy, especially when children are at risk of being trafficked or coerced into an armed group, prostitution, or marriage. Additionally, relief agencies have emphasized that schools should only be used as emergency shelters if all other options have been exhausted, in order to minimize disruption to education and further protect children. When using schools is unavoidable, alternative locations should be found as soon as possible.⁴⁰

Conflict can also make girls' trips to and from school more dangerous, so parents and families keep them home from school to ensure their security. These girls may end up in marriages earlier than they would have if they could have safely attended school because parents see marriage as an additional safeguard against violence. However, though marriage protects the girl from attack on her way to school, it also limits her educational and economic opportunity. The Group of Eight (G8) highlighted this risk in April 2013 in its Declaration on Preventing Sexual Violence in Conflict.⁴¹

INSECURITY AND VIOLENCE

The World Bank has noted that "rates of early marriage and teen pregnancy tend to be particularly high in insecure environments," which may be a manifestation of high levels of gender-based violence and/or parents' and guardians' desires to protect girls and help ensure their economic survival.⁴² In a submission to the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner on Human Rights (UNHCR), the network Women Living Under Muslim Law noted that countries home to ongoing civil conflict show symptoms of child-related social stress, including "rising numbers of children on the streets, very young laborers, increasing child slavery and trafficking (including sexual slavery and trafficking), and high levels of child neglect and abandonment."⁴³ Experts estimate that in 2013, nearly thirty million children in conflict-affected nations were subjected to such violence or abuse by the time they reached age eighteen.⁴⁴

In hopes of protecting their children from such harm, some parents and guardians turn to child marriage. A Save the Children study cites "increasing reports of early marriage as parents take desperate measures to 'protect' their daughters from sexual violence."⁴⁵ In Afghanistan, representatives of the organization Women for Afghan Women, which runs a series of shelters across the country,

report: “We see families marrying off children when insecurity is increasing. People are afraid of what might happen to unmarried girls in the family. They are afraid of rape or kidnappings. Most people prefer for the girls to be married so that they are safe in their husband’s house.”⁴⁶ In Sri Lanka, another conflict-affected country, children have reportedly been forced into marriages to avoid being abducted and/or recruited by terrorist groups.⁴⁷

Fear of violence also increases early marriage in the wake of natural disasters. For example, Oxfam noted a rise in child marriage following the 2004 Asia tsunami.⁴⁸ Although some of these marriages had been arranged before the tsunami, Oxfam noted that girls who lost both their parents were being married off by members of the extended family or the community to other young men and that the marriages “seem[ed] to be contracted in desperation and without involving the girls’ consent.”⁴⁹ As one young girl in Bangladesh told interviewers from Plan International, “After cyclones, families think their condition is worse and send their daughters to get married. Almost 50 percent of girls drop out of education because of early marriage. In very remote villages, it is probably more [like] 70 to 75 percent.”⁵⁰ Similarly, Plan International found that early marriage increased following the 2010 floods in Pakistan and the earthquake in Haiti. In both locations, fear of sexual violence was thought to cause the increase.⁵¹

More data is needed to offer a true picture of the scope and drivers of child marriage in all fragile states. In a recent report by the International Displacement Monitoring Center, which examined the effects of violence and conflict in displacing young girls from their homes, the center argues: “Reliable and comprehensive data should be collected, disaggregated by sex and age, and [cover] IDPs both in camps and those living with host families and communities. This is essential in establishing a clear picture of boys’ and girls’ needs in terms of protection, education, shelter and basic and social services. Data on separated and unaccompanied children is needed to identify those most likely to suffer abuse and neglect.”⁵²

COUNTRY EXAMPLE: SYRIA

Syria is an example of how armed conflict can harm the lives of family members and young women. The number of children suffering from violence, displacement, and disease has soared and continues to rise in the ongoing conflict. Current approximations suggest that more than half of the estimated 2.8 million Syrian refugees are under the age of eighteen, and three-quarters of those are under the age of twelve.⁵³ Prior to the conflict, more than 95 percent of Syrian children were enrolled in primary school. But as refugees, only a small proportion of Syrian children have returned to the classroom. In Jordan, only about half of Syrian refugee children are in school and in Lebanon that figure is estimated at less than 20 percent.⁵⁴

Sexual violence in Syria has been documented as a weapon of war used “to intimidate parties to the conflict destroying identity, dignity and the social fabrics of families and communities.”⁵⁵ As detailed in accounts from refugees, women and girls cite the fear of rape as one of the main reasons for fleeing Syria.⁵⁶ But sexual violence has gone largely undocumented given social stigma and barriers to appropriate psychosocial and medical resources.⁵⁷ It is also the reason cited for many child marriages. In the case of Syria, interviews with refugees point to marriages that may have been arranged to “save the honor” of girls who have survived rape or who may be perceived to have been raped.⁵⁸

There is strong indication that child marriage is increasing due to the conflict as well. A report from the United Nations noted that though early marriage occurred in Syria’s rural communities pri-

or to the 2011 start of the war, the lack of employment opportunities and family resources has led even more families to turn to early marriage for their girls.⁵⁹ The charity Mercy Corps reports anecdotal stories among refugee families with few resources about the rising the pressure on children to marry given the continuing instability and families' diminished prospects. Twenty percent of registered marriages of Syrian refugee women in Jordan involve a bride less than eighteen years of age. Though child marriage rates are difficult to document in the ongoing conflict, such estimates point to an increase from Syria's 11 percent child marriage figure provided by the Population Reference Bureau in 2001.⁶⁰

Reports from refugee camps in Jordan also highlight the increased likelihood of young girls marrying much older men, believing that these men can provide financial "protection and stability."⁶¹ A growing number of Syrian girls are reportedly married off in order to generate income for their poor refugee families.⁶²

Recommendations

During periods of conflict and natural disaster recovery, girls and women face an especially complicated web of challenges. A breakdown in infrastructure and governance leaves girls vulnerable to social norms that, even when designed to protect them, in practice deprive girls of educational and economic opportunities and threaten their health and safety. Furthermore, U.S. foreign policy and development goals are undermined by child marriage; research consistently shows that progress toward educational attainment, improved health, and increased security are all hindered in communities where child marriage occurs.

Child marriage is more than a violation of human rights. It is a practice that undermines global development goals and U.S. foreign policy priorities. By exacerbating poverty, cutting short education, and limiting the economic possibilities for girls and women, the practice hinders the opportunity to increase global prosperity and stability.

Existing data and an abundance of qualitative evidence point to intensified risks of child marriage in fragile states affected by natural disaster, conflict, and other causes of social instability. A better understanding of the drivers of child marriage in such areas could lead to strong and effective intervention strategies that could curb and eventually eliminate the practice, helping to improve girls' futures and bring stability to their communities.

Given the educational, health, economic, and security benefits of combatting child marriage, more research is needed to bridge the existing data gaps, as well as smarter investments and heightened attention. Therefore, at critical times of disaster, conflict, and upheaval, the impetus to keep children in school and girls out of marriage when possible should be prioritized. Host governments, UN agencies, multilateral organizations, and domestic and international NGOs employing programs and strategies to keep girls in school, increase employment opportunities, and promote legislative frameworks should continue to uphold and implement such initiatives to the extent possible in response to natural disasters or conflicts. Working closely with such institutions, the U.S. government can spearhead and support efforts to curb child marriage in fragile societies affected by natural disaster and conflict by taking the following steps:

- *Collect reliable, consistent, and comprehensive data, disaggregated by gender and age, to provide a detailed understanding of the needs and risks of those affected by disaster and conflict, including refugees and internally displaced people.* Better data will allow for better development and implementation of solutions that address the drivers of child marriage more broadly.
- *Elevate the issue of child marriage in U.S. diplomacy and interactions with multilateral organizations and international NGOs to ensure that the health, educational, and economic needs of girls are not forgotten during periods of disaster and conflict.* This includes keeping the issue of child marriage at the policy fore during post-disaster and conflict aid and relief efforts, and also addressing tendencies for increased sexual violence against girls and women during times of fragility.
- *Immediately integrate the unique needs of girls into post-disaster and post-conflict planning.* This step includes making education a top priority and facilitating the creation of girls' schools and facili-

ties near camps and other areas to which girls' families have fled. One such opportunity could involve investigating and implementing innovative programs that are thought to help keep girls in school and/or reduce child marriage in non-fragile states—such as unconditional or conditional cash transfers targeted specifically at girl children, as well as programs that give families some of the income they might have received if the girl were working or married.

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About the Author

Gayle Tzemach Lemmon is the *New York Times* best-selling author of *The Dressmaker of Khair Khana* and a senior fellow with the Women and Foreign Policy program at the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR). Prior to joining CFR, Lemmon covered public policy and emerging markets for the global investment firm PIMCO, after working for nearly a decade as a journalist with the ABC News political unit and *This Week with George Stephanopoulos*. Lemmon has reported on entrepreneurs in conflict and post-conflict regions for the *Financial Times*, *New York Times*, *International Herald Tribune*, *Daily Beast*, *Fast Company*, *Politico*, *Huffington Post*, and Bloomberg. She is also the author of the *Newsweek* March 2011 cover story “The Hillary Doctrine” on former secretary of state Hillary Clinton’s push to put women at the center of U.S. foreign policy. She has written regularly for the *Atlantic*, *Foreign Policy*, and *Foreign Affairs*. Lemmon appears frequently on news outlets including NBC News, National Public Radio, MSNBC, and CNN. Lemmon earned a BA in journalism summa cum laude from the University of Missouri School of Journalism and an MBA from Harvard Business School, where she received the 2006 Dean’s Award for her work on women’s entrepreneurship.