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**Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA)**

**United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA)**

## REPORT

**EXPERT GROUP MEETING ON THE STUDY ENTITLED  
“CHILD MARRIAGE IN HUMANITARIAN SETTINGS IN THE ARAB  
REGION: DYNAMICS, CHALLENGES AND POLICY OPTIONS”  
BEIRUT, 4-5 DECEMBER 2014**

### Summary

This expert group meeting (EGM) was organized in support of a study being prepared by the Centre for Women of the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA), in partnership with the Arab States Regional Office of the United Nations Population Fund. The study focuses on child marriage in the Arab region, particularly in humanitarian settings. It aims to explore the socioeconomic causes, dynamics and implications of the problem, distinguishing between child marriage as a common—or not unusual—phenomenon in Arab societies and child marriage as a “survival” practice exacerbated by the pressures of conflict and displacement.

This consultative EGM brought together experts, researchers and representatives of international agencies, research institutions and civil society organizations to do the following:

- (a) Discuss and seek feedback on the preliminary findings of research for the study;
- (b) Present and review the background research papers completed in support of the study;
- (c) Exchange current and field-based knowledge on the prevalence, causes and consequences of child marriage in humanitarian settings;
- (d) Facilitate discussions on policy and programmatic options to prevent and respond to child marriage in the Arab region.

The results of the meeting will feed into the study and enrich its analytical and technical foundation. This report contains an overview of the meeting’s discussions and concluding recommendations.

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## **Introduction**

1. The Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) Centre for Women (ECW) held an expert group meeting (EGM) at the United Nations House in Beirut on 4 and 5 December 2014. It was organized in support of a study being prepared by ECW in partnership with the Arab States Regional Office of the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) on child marriage in the Arab region, particularly in humanitarian and conflict settings.
2. The aims of the meeting were the following:
  - (a) Discuss and seek feedback on the preliminary findings of research for the study;
  - (b) Present and review the background research papers completed in support of the study;
  - (c) Exchange current and field-based knowledge on the prevalence, causes and consequences of child marriage in humanitarian settings;
  - (d) Facilitate discussions on policy and programmatic options to prevent and respond to child marriage in the Arab region.

## **I. CONCLUSIONS AND PROPOSALS**

3. Experts presented papers and research findings relevant to the study. Ensuing discussions resulted in a set of recommendations, some providing feedback on the study and others proposing policy or programme options with regard to child marriage in humanitarian and conflict situations.

### **A. RESEARCH RECOMMENDATIONS**

4. The advantages and limitations of qualitative field research methodologies, as addressed in the outline of the study, were highlighted. Participants agreed that generalizations should be avoided, given that the causes and conditions of child marriage varied considerably. The conditions of Syrian refugees in Jordan and Lebanon were presented as examples of contextual differences.
5. Participants acknowledged the importance of defining the terms used in the study, particularly in the light of debates on the use of “child, early and forced marriage”. It was reiterated that United Nations studies must follow international legal standards, as set forth in the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which set the age of adulthood at 18.
6. There was a need to look not only at data on the prevalence of child marriage, but also data (where available) on age differences between spouses and other factors that significantly affected the living conditions of girls after marriage. Participants underscored the need to examine recourse to child marriage as a coping strategy for parents in humanitarian crisis contexts or as the only available means to protect their daughters.
7. Participants commended the study’s focus on the implications of child marriage and new approaches to the issue, and on divorce and how to empower girls who had been married as children. Lessons learned in and beyond the region should be disseminated widely. Participants encouraged ESCWA and UNFPA to make their study available to a wide audience, particularly academics and civil society representatives.

### **B. PROGRAMMATIC AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS**

8. Experts agreed that humanitarian organizations should adopt a comprehensive approach to displacement situations that took account of child marriage. Protecting girls and women should be a priority, given their increased vulnerability and the lack of access to redress for human rights violations. Child

marriage was a type of gender-based violence and its prevention should be an integral part of humanitarian responses.

9. Participants noted that national laws in Arab States regarding the age of maturity were contradictory and should be made consistent. States should ratify relevant international and regional instruments combating child marriage and ensure their effective implementation. Personal status laws should be reviewed, *inter alia*, to set the legal age of marriage at 18 for boys and girls. There were numerous loopholes in national laws regarding age and marriage registration. Laws should be made more regulatory, clear and implementable, in order to limit *ad hoc* decisions on child marriage. Strict disciplinary mechanisms were needed to hold perpetrators, including judges and family members, accountable for facilitating child marriages.

10. Participants expressed alarm about the significant number of marriages apparently conducted outside official systems in situations of displacement. Disciplinary measures were needed to enforce registration of births and marriages among refugee populations.

11. It was agreed that the involvement of men and boys was fundamental to ending child marriage. Public advocacy was vital to raising awareness of the devastating consequences of child marriage and changing deep-seated cultural attitudes towards the value of women and girls. Participants suggested that making judges and legal experts more aware of relevant international and regional legal frameworks and the consequences of child marriage could be particularly valuable. They supported the recommendation to increase public awareness of and access to reproductive health services, particularly in unstable situations, when such services were most needed but most limited.

12. Experts stressed the need to build the capacity of and cooperate with local non-governmental organizations (NGOs) dealing with child marriage, given their access and grassroots expertise. While preventing child marriage should be the priority of policymakers, participants agreed that it was essential to support girls who were already married and provide them with health, educational and psychosocial services and information.

## **II. TOPICS OF DISCUSSION**

### **A. SESSION I: FRAMING THE ISSUE OF CHILD MARRIAGE**

13. Ms. Atallah, Director, ECW, presenting the study being prepared on child marriage in humanitarian settings in the Arab region, highlighted cultural, social and economic drivers of child marriage, and unique drivers generated by conflict and displacement. She said that available data on the subject could be misleading because many marriages were unregistered.

14. The speaker then presented the outline of the study, as follows: chapters one and two would examine the socioeconomic and political contexts of child marriage in the Arab region. Preliminary data suggested that the rates of child marriage were high, especially in conflict and displacement settings. Over half of Syrian refugee girls in Jordan reported being married under the age of 18. Chapter three would provide an overview of child marriage in humanitarian settings, particularly in Iraq, Somalia, the Sudan, the Syrian Arab Republic and Yemen, distinguishing between long-standing sociocultural conditions encouraging child marriage and new factors induced by violence, instability and displacement. Chapter four would discuss national, regional and international frameworks regulating child marriage. Chapter five would include the findings of research conducted among Syrian refugees in Lebanon, highlighting the primary causes of families' decisions to marry off their young daughters, and girls' living conditions and access to essential services after they married. The final chapter would contain policy and programme recommendations and encourage stakeholders to make the issue a matter of priority.

15. Mr. Farah, Moderator, said that, although 158 countries had enacted laws over the previous 20 years to increase the legal age of marriage, an estimated 60 million girls under the age of 18 had married in that time.

Child marriage was a form of gender-based violence, a violation of human rights and a threat to human development. The practice had severe social, economic and health consequences.

16. Participants proposed that comparative intraregional data should be collected on the prevalence of child marriage. It was noted that, during the first Intifada in Palestine, girls aged 14 and 15 had been married off because of a sense of insecurity among families resulting from Israeli military occupation. It was also highlighted that child marriage was a global phenomenon. Humanitarian crises exacerbated already deeply entrenched cultural practices and poverty created a situation similar to displacement.

B. SESSION II: HOW SERIOUS IS THE PROBLEM OF CHILD MARRIAGE  
IN THE ARAB REGION?

17. Mr. Monem, Manager, Pan Arab Project for Family Health (PAPFAM), said that child marriage occurred most frequently in rural areas in all Arab countries except the Syrian Arab Republic. According to figures collected by PAPFAM, 15.7 per cent of women aged between 15 and 49 in Yemen had been married before the age of 15 as of 2013. In the Syrian Arab Republic, the figure was 4.9 per cent as of 2009, while in Morocco the figure was 2.6 per cent as of 2011. The figures for women aged 20 and 49 who had been married before the age of 18 were, respectively, 43.7 per cent in Yemen in 2013; 23.5 per cent in the Syrian Arab Republic in 2009; and 18.5 per cent in Morocco in 2011. Available data showed a correlation between education and income levels and the prevalence of child marriage. Factors contributing to divorce included age differences and educational disparities between spouses.

18. Ms. Khalife, Independent Women's Rights Researcher, said that, although many Arab States had ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, only four, namely Jordan, Libya, Tunisia and Yemen, had ratified the Convention on Consent to Marriage, Minimum Age for Marriage and Registration of Marriages. The Fourth Geneva Convention relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War included provisions on the protection of women that were binding on State armed forces and non-governmental armed groups. International human rights treaties and humanitarian laws were applicable in times of armed conflict and could be considered mutually reinforcing instruments. Some international tribunals and special courts had issued rulings regarding child marriage. The Special Court for Sierra Leone had recognized it as a crime against humanity. Various personal status laws applying to citizens according to their confession in Lebanon and the Syrian Arab Republic created multiple legal regimes with different minimum ages for marriage, often below 18.

19. Participants said that the minimum legal age of marriage could be harmonized with the minimum voting age or age for obtaining a driver's license. They agreed that key State institutions responsible for the prevention of child marriage included national women's machineries, child protection agencies and the judiciary. Experts endorsed a series of policy recommendations by ECW, calling on States:

(a) To ratify and accede to relevant international and regional instruments and ensure their effective implementation;

(b) To review personal status laws, *inter alia*, in order to set the minimum legal marrying age for girls and boys at 18;

(c) To establish penalties (fines or imprisonment) for persons facilitating the marriage of children and ensuring strictly limited use of legal exceptions allowing child marriage;

(d) To raise awareness of, and train judges and other legal experts on, the relevant international and regional legal frameworks and the consequences of child marriage;

(e) To adopt and enforce laws and strategies to combat gender-based violence;

- (f) To enforce legal obligations on persons to register all births and marriages;
- (g) To increase awareness and access to reproductive health services;
- (h) To collect and disseminate best practices.

C. SESSION III: QUALITATIVE MONOGRAPHS AND FIELD RESEARCH  
ON CHILD MARRIAGE AMONG SYRIAN REFUGEES

20. Ms. Shuayb, Director, Centre for Lebanese Studies, presenting the results of field research conducted among Syrian refugees in Lebanon in support of the study under preparation, said that the research employed qualitative methodological approaches. The findings were not representative of all Syrian refugee populations in Lebanon, but indicated that displacement had generated new factors encouraging child marriage, including heightened insecurity, lack of access to education and worsening economic conditions. Although most girls interviewed had said that the ideal age of marriage was 18 to 20, they had married much younger as a result of their displacement in Lebanon. Dowries paid in those cases had been similar to those customarily paid in the Syrian Arab Republic. Most Syrian marriages in Lebanon went unregistered. Most interviewees had expressed a preference for marrying other Syrians, particularly family members, as they were perceived as less threatening than Lebanese spouses.

21. Ms. Al-Amaireh, Regional Research and Monitoring Manager, International Rescue Committee, said that field research conducted as part of a UN Women project on child marriage and gender-based violence among Syrian refugees in Jordan had been aimed at obtaining a better understanding of the risks facing Syrian refugee families, especially women and girls, in Jordan and of the attitudes of urban refugees to gender-based violence and child marriage. It had been found that 51.3 per cent of surveyed women had married before the age of 18, in most cases after the beginning of hostilities in the Syrian Arab Republic but prior to their arrival in Jordan. The majority did not see child marriage in a negative light. They had shown a preference for marrying Jordanians in order to obtain full legal protection in Jordan. Girls who married after displacement tended to marry much older men than if they had married in the Syrian Arab Republic. There was a need to build the capacity of local NGOs working on women's empowerment issues in order to change attitudes to child marriage.

22. Participants welcomed qualitative monographs from the field as a means of understanding child marriage in displaced communities, especially in the absence of quantitative data. However, researchers should not draw too many general conclusions from limited qualitative research. Several participants proposed that the study should examine the differences between the results of the two sets of field research. Efforts to contextualize the distinct conditions for Syrian refugee populations in the study were commended. Participants highlighted the value of field research in exploring the psychological implications for married girls and the legal implications of unregistered marriages.

D. SESSION IV: COUNTRY-LEVEL PERSPECTIVES ON CHILD  
MARRIAGE IN THE ARAB REGION AND BEYOND

23. Ms. Mohamed, Baghdad Women's Association, said that the root causes of child marriage in Iraq included customs, conflict, poverty and a lack of protective legislation. Religious personal status laws were widely considered to allow child marriage and numerous marriages took place outside the legal system, in the presence only of a religious leader and the bride's guardian. Many child marriages ended in divorce. Contradictory legislation permitting the marriage of young girls needed to be countered by information campaigns. Social workers providing essential services to victims of child marriage needed support.

24. Ms. Abdul Aziz, Women's Economic Association, said that child marriage in Yemen was linked to tribal practices. Poor living conditions and high illiteracy rates had fuelled a rise in the phenomenon.

25. Ms. Ahmed, President, ZENAB for Women Development, also linked the practice in the Sudan to traditions and customs. Legislation criminalizing child marriage was not implemented.

26. Mr. Alhashemi, Child Protection Officer, Horn Youth Development Association, said that child marriage was common in Somalia, particularly as a result of displacement and natural disasters. Parents often agreed to marry their daughters to older men, whom they believed could offer a better life outside the country. Child marriage, as well as violence against women and girls, was more common in rural areas than in cities.

27. Ms. Jelassi, Gender Advisor, United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), said that the incidence of child marriage among Palestinian refugees had risen by 5 per cent over the previous 10 years, driven by significant school dropout rates. UNRWA was working with schools, students and educational staff on the issue.

28. Ms. Das, International Centre for Research on Women, said that child marriage in India, which accounted for 40 per cent of child marriage cases globally, cost the country 7.7 billion United States dollars in lost productivity and that 61 per cent of women in India had married under the age of 18. A multisectoral strategy was employed to educate girls and their parents, provide girls who had left school with vocational skills and enact legislation criminalizing child marriage. Noting the practice of sex-selective abortion in India, she said that, since girls could not carry on the family lineage in Indian culture, daughters were often considered a financial burden. Early marriages for girls were favoured because they limited threats to the girls' honour before their wedding day. There was a need to improve the access of girls to education.

29. Participants agreed that traditions and customs played a significant part in the prevalence of child marriage in the Arab region. A multisectoral strategy along the lines of that employed in India was needed to combat the phenomenon. Legislation criminalizing child marriage and incorporating the internationally recognized concept of adolescence in national legislation should be enacted. Girls must have access to quality and compulsory public education. Engaging with religious leaders and making them aware of gender issues was a key to addressing child marriage in the Arab region.

#### E. SESSION V: IMPLICATIONS AND CONSEQUENCES OF CHILD MARRIAGE

30. Ms. Deitch, Social Affairs Officer, ECW, said that girls living in poor conditions tended to marry young and raise daughters in similar conditions, who likewise were driven to marry young, perpetuating a vicious cycle and preventing future generations of girls from realizing their potential. School dropout rates were a major predictor of early marriages. Information on the psychological effects of child marriage was limited. The participation rate of women in the economic life of Arab countries was among the lowest in the world, and the lack of employment opportunities for young women was a consequence of and contributing factor to child marriage. Among the economic and health consequences of child marriage was the fact that an infant was 60 per cent more likely to die during childbirth if the mother was under 20.

31. Ms. Nasser, Lawyer and Human Rights Activist, raised the issue of child divorce, citing four cases in Yemen involving girls from diverse family backgrounds. The girls had all been aged under 10 when they had begun the stressful process of seeking divorce. She said that she had been able to support the divorce claim of one of the girls, against the will of the girl's father, in court. Another of the girls had had to give up her dowry in order to be divorced. Girl divorcees in such cases were stigmatized, as were their adult counterparts, and almost always prevented from returning to school. In Yemen, an initiative to establish a legal minimum age for marriage, despite resistance from political parties and religious groups, had been debated in the framework of dialogue on a new constitution.

32. Participants agreed that programmes should be developed to reintegrate divorced children into the education system and society. There were examples of such programmes in Jordan and the Sudan. Complicated divorce procedures for women in Arab States and gaps in the law regarding the status of

children made it nearly impossible for married girls to file for divorce. Participants called for the inclusion in school curricula of programmes to educate girls (and their parents) about their legal rights. Most participants concurred that child marriage was not necessarily an Islamic practice, but rather a product of cultural beliefs and gender discrimination.

#### F. SESSION VI: OPEN FORUM: POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS AND RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

33. Participants pointed out that, in some humanitarian crisis settings in the region, the male spouse was also very young and was expected to fulfill adult marital roles. It was proposed that the study should, where data were available, also look at boys in child marriage. Empowering vocabulary regarding children that had experienced child marriage, such the term “survivors” rather than “victims”, should be used in the study.

34. Experts agreed that policy recommendations should focus on how to integrate child marriage as a priority issue in humanitarian response programmes, while acknowledging that policies and programmes would differ in specific situations. Given the lack of data on child marriage in the Arab region, a unified methodology for examining experiences in different countries was needed. Syrian NGOs might be best placed to assess the needs of and provide vital services to their compatriots.

35. Some experts suggested that more extensive research should be conducted to ensure that policy recommendations were streamlined. Research capacities in humanitarian crisis settings should therefore be boosted. Until a regional definition of what constituted child marriage had been agreed upon, research should be context-specific. Focusing on countries with similar socioeconomic conditions would enable the development of a single programme to target child marriage in, for instance, the Sudan, Somalia and Yemen. The media could be used to raise awareness of the issue. It should also be addressed in national curricula.

36. High rates of child marriage among rural people and the illiterate in Morocco showed that the problem of child marriage was not limited to conflict and displacement situations. Literacy and vocational education programmes were important, especially for women in rural areas, to address gaps in health knowledge and in the availability of information about services to young married women.

37. It was proposed that participants should make a commitment to prioritize the issue of child marriage in research and programmes in their home countries. They were briefed on the next steps towards completion of the draft study, which would be a starting point for activities geared towards ending child marriage in the Arab region.

### III. ORGANIZATION OF WORK

#### A. DATE AND VENUE OF THE MEETING

38. The meeting was held in the United Nations House in Beirut, on 4 and 5 December 2014.

#### B. ATTENDANCE

39. The meeting brought together international and regional experts in the fields of child protection, education, humanitarian service provision and gender-based violence, and the research team preparing the study. The annex to the present report provides a list of participants.

#### C. OPENING

40. Ms. Atallah, opening the meeting, said that the study came at a time where girls in some conflict settings in the Arab region were being sold into slavery, experiencing alarming levels of domestic and



societal violence and being forcibly displaced. Conflict and displacement affected all members of society, but posed particular risks for women and girls, whether they were caught up in fighting, internally displaced, or cross-border refugees. Female refugees faced hardship as they tried to adapt to new and disempowering environments, especially in the absence of male and community support. More than ever, research on gender-based violence and child marriage was critical.

41. Around the world, more than 720 million women (roughly one third of the world's female population) had married before their eighteenth birthday. Child marriage rates in the Arab region had fallen from 35 per cent in 1985 to less than 20 per cent. Increased conflict and insecurity, however, threatened to undo the progress made. The study built on other studies under preparation at ESCWA, particularly on violence against women and the situation of girls and women in conflict settings.

42. Ms. Ahmed (President, ZENAB for Women's Development Organization) said that research on child marriage was a critical component of UNFPA's programme in Arab region.

Annex\*

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