

## Life after Marriage: An Analysis of the Experience of Conflict-affected Female Youth Who Married under Age 18 in South Sudan and the Kurdistan Region of Iraq

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### Overview

Globally, one in five girls marry under the age of 18.<sup>2</sup> However, rates of early marriage are believed to *increase* during conflict and humanitarian crises.<sup>3</sup> Early marriage may have devastating consequences for the child bride, including higher rates of child and maternal mortality, poor physical and mental health outcomes, loss of access to education, and increased exposure to violence and poverty.<sup>4</sup> While the problem is clear, the solution is less so. One barrier is the lack of empirical knowledge on early marriage in conflict settings. Research conducted to date is very limited; what does exist arises mostly from development settings, is anecdotal, or is based on one-time assessments.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, girls who are already married, married as children and then divorced or were widowed, or are living with disabilities are rarely included in studies on early marriage. To address some of these gaps, Save the Children Denmark and the Feinstein International Center (FIC) of the Friedman School of Nutrition Science and Policy at Tufts University created the Leave No One Behind (LNOB) research project in 2019 to study female youth and early marriage in displacement and conflict settings.

The LNOB project is currently conducting research in South Sudan and the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI). South Sudan has experienced multiple decades of conflict, ongoing political insecurity, extreme environmental events, and regular economic crises, which has left more than two-thirds of the

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<sup>2</sup> UNICEF, "Child Marriage," October 2021, <https://data.unicef.org/topic/child-protection/child-marriage/>.

<sup>3</sup> UNICEF, "A Study on Early Marriage in Jordan 2014" (UNICEF Jordan Country Office, 2014); Jennifer Schlecht, Elizabeth Rowley, and Juliet Babirye, "Early Relationships and Marriage in Conflict and Post-Conflict Settings: Vulnerability of Youth in Uganda," *Reproductive Health Matters* 21, no. 41 (2013): 234–42; UNICEF, "Falling through the Cracks; The Children of Yemen," 2016; Girls Not Brides, "Child Marriage in Humanitarian Contexts," Thematic Brief, August 2020.

<sup>4</sup> UNFPA and UNICEF, "Addressing Child Marriage in Humanitarian Settings," February 2021; E El Arab and M. Sagbakken, "Child Marriage of Female Syrian Refugees in Jordan and Lebanon: A Literature Review," *Global Health Action* 12 (2019): 1–12; Yvette Efevbera et al., "Girl Child Marriage, Socioeconomic Status, and Undernutrition: Evidence from 35 Countries in Sub-Saharan Africa," *BMC Medicine* 17, no. 55 (2019); Save the Children, "Too Young to Wed: The Growing Problem of Child Marriage among Syrian Girls in Jordan," 2014; World Bank Group, "Voice and Agency: Empowering Women and Girls for Shared Prosperity," 2014.

<sup>5</sup> Dyan Mazurana and Anastasia Marshak, "Addressing Data Gaps on Child, Early and Forced Marriage in Humanitarian Settings" (Save the Children and Tufts University, December 2019).

population in need of humanitarian assistance.<sup>6</sup> Approximately 2.3 million South Sudanese have become refugees in neighboring countries. An estimated 2 million more South Sudanese are internally displaced persons (IDPs), with humanitarian conditions reportedly worsening as of early 2022.<sup>7</sup> As of 2020, South Sudan's rate of child marriage was higher than the Sub-Saharan Africa average, with 52% of girls estimated to be married before the age of 18.<sup>8</sup>

The KRI has hosted Syrian refugees since the Syrian civil war began in 2011, with approximately 253,000 Syrian refugees and asylum seekers in the territory by early 2022.<sup>9</sup> The KRI also hosts about 600,000 IDPs, predominantly those from the Yazidi minority group, seeking refuge from internal conflicts, including the 2014 ISIS occupation of Sinjar and Mosul and subsequent military interventions.<sup>10</sup> Many of IDPs these populations live in substandard housing, are unable to access social safety nets, and have little opportunity to achieve durable solutions.<sup>11</sup> Rates of early marriage are lower within the KRI than in South Sudan, but these averages mask differences in early marriage rates among refugees, hosts, and IDPs. In a representative study conducted by the Women's Refugee Commission, IDPs showed the highest rate of early marriage among the three groups, with 13% of those currently aged 20–24 having married as minors.<sup>12</sup> This study also showed a potential increase in the rates of early marriage for refugees after displacement.<sup>13</sup>

## The Project

This briefing paper is one in a series of outputs arising from the LNOB research.<sup>14</sup> LNOB relies on longitudinal, participatory research methodologies to understand the wide range of experiences, difficulties, opportunities, and constraints faced by female youth who have been displaced by or have experienced conflict. While the project's focus is holistic and multisectoral, particular attention is paid to the practice and experience of early marriage. The project examines multiple displaced and conflict-affected populations. These include internally displaced South Sudanese living in formal and informal camps, and Syrian refugees and displaced Yazidi and Arab Iraqis located in camp and non-camp settings

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<sup>6</sup> United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), "South Sudan: Humanitarian Snapshot," February 2022, [https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/south\\_sudan\\_humanitarian\\_snapshot\\_february\\_0.pdf](https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/south_sudan_humanitarian_snapshot_february_0.pdf).

<sup>7</sup> United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA).

<sup>8</sup> UNICEF, "Some Things Are Not Fit for Children-- Marriage Is One of Them," Press Release, October 2020, <https://www.unicef.org/southsudan/press-releases/some-things-are-not-fit-for-children>.

<sup>9</sup> UNHCR, "UNHCR Syria and Iraq Situations: 2022 Response Overview," 2022, <https://reporting.unhcr.org/document/1799>.

<sup>10</sup> United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OHCA), "Iraq: Humanitarian Dashboard for KRI (January to December 2019)," 2020, [https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/iraq\\_humanitarian\\_dashboard\\_2019\\_summary\\_for\\_kri.pdf](https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/iraq_humanitarian_dashboard_2019_summary_for_kri.pdf).

<sup>11</sup> United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OHCA).

<sup>12</sup> K Hunnerson et al., "Child Marriage in Humanitarian Settings in the Arab States Region: Study Results from Djibouti, Egypt, Kurdistan Region of Iraq and Yemen" (Women's Refugee Commission, 2020). For this same age group the rates of early marriage were 3.4% for Syrian refugees and 4% for the host community. However, for girls aged 10-19 at the time of the study, 1 in 8 IDPs were married and 1 in 10 host and refugee communities were married.

<sup>13</sup> Hunnerson et al.

<sup>14</sup> See additional briefing papers on the project website: <https://fic.tufts.edu/research-item/child-marriage-in-humanitarian-settings/>

in the KRI. Four local researchers from affected communities (two from each case country) were central to the design of the study, participant interviews, and analysis of data.

LNOB’s main source of data comes from a cohort of female youth, predominantly between the ages of 14 and 23,<sup>15</sup> who were regularly interviewed in 2020 and 2021 using surveys, semi-structured interviews, and participatory methods that include drawings and photographs. Members of the cohort are unmarried, married as minors, divorced, or widowed. The cohort also includes female youth who became pregnant under the age 18, and female youth living with physical, emotional, or intellectual disabilities, regardless of marital status. Family members of participants were interviewed when possible. LNOB also interviewed key informants, which included representatives from government entities, the United Nations, international and local non-governmental organizations (NGOs), camp managers, teachers, health workers, and community and religious leaders. At the time of this brief (April 2022), 600 interviews have been conducted. One hundred and thirty-nine female youth have been interviewed as part of the cohort. Each participant was interviewed an average of four times (range: 1–13 interviews). In addition, 87 key informants were interviewed, as well as 17 family members of female youth. LNOB is currently seeking funding to continue following the cohort into the future and to expand the number of country cases, methodologies, and sample size.

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**Introduction**

This briefing paper examines the experiences of life after marriage for female youth in South Sudan and the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) who married under age 18. While a number of studies look at the problem of early and forced marriage, relatively few focus on the reality of life after marriage for this population of young women. In this analysis, we intentionally center the voices and perspectives of the female youth respondents themselves. Discussion of the reasons why they married and the extent of personal agency in the decision-making around marriage are discussed elsewhere; this paper focuses on the range of experiences once girls are married.<sup>16</sup> The main themes emerging from the data analysis and discussed here include: personal experiences of marriage; the intersection between education and marriage; and family dynamics. An additional section delves more deeply into the experiences of girls who married at the youngest end of our sample, i.e., between ages 12 and 14. Our data show patterns of experience in the marriages of these girls that we felt deserved more in-depth discussion.

The female youth in this study had an extremely wide range of experiences after becoming married. The marriage of girls under age 18 is generally assumed to lead to negative mental, physical, and economic outcomes. Our data include numerous such experiences, many of which are discussed in this set of briefing papers. However, the sample also includes girls and young women who either married for love or found love in their marriages, girls and young women who found freedom of expression and felt more true to themselves in marriage, and girls and young women who found security and stability in marriage

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<sup>15</sup> The sample also includes a subset of participants over the age of 23 because they represented an interesting set of characteristics such as: widows with teenage daughters who married as children; unmarried women above the “typical marriage age.”

<sup>16</sup> Our sample included female youth with disabilities. Only one of these respondents was married. Hence this briefing paper does not include a specific discussion on life after marriage for female youth with disabilities.

that they had not had with their natal families. These positive and fulfilling experiences should not be discounted or ignored based on the girls' and young women's age at marriage.

The data analysis showed that while some of the respondents' experiences corresponded to what might be expected based on the nature of their marriage—i.e., those female youth forced into marriage were often unhappy in their marriages—this was not always the case. Some respondents married for love and yet were unhappy or abused; some entered into arranged marriages with strangers and yet experienced happiness.<sup>17</sup> This briefing paper examines some of the themes that arose in our analysis of the study population's personal experiences with marriage.

### *Changes brought by marriage*

**Some respondents experienced extreme changes in their lives after marrying, including around personal freedoms and domestic and reproductive duties. For others, changes following marriage were only minimal.**

The extent to which a respondent's life changed upon marriage is based on the nature of her life prior to marriage, her expectations for marriage, and her relationship with her husband and (usually) her in-laws. The diversity of our sample population means that there is also extreme diversity in experiences prior to marriage. This diversity includes—to name a few—the extent of exposure to the opposite sex (ranging from almost no contact except for relatives to being in a sexual relationship), the extent of responsibilities (from school girls with few responsibilities to those with extensive domestic and economic duties), to freedoms outside their homes (freedom of movement, decorum, activities), to knowledge about life after marriage (the extent to which respondents understood sexual relations and other marital expectations). Not surprisingly, for some respondents the changes brought by marriage were in extreme contrast to their prior experiences. Some of these changes entailed expected aspects of transitioning to a new life stage, such as greater responsibilities and loss of freedoms. Other changes were more negative, as discussed in more detail below. However, many of the respondents, especially those living in the KRI, discussed the positive changes in their lives following marriage. A Syrian refugee who married at age 14 or 15 describes what she considers to be major improvements in her life after she married:

“There is a big change in my clothes style and my life and going out before and after the marriage. As you know, after a woman marries, she should change her clothing (to be more conservative). But for me, it was the opposite. I was wearing hijab [religious head covering] and long clothes—almost the abaya [full length covering]. Even inside. In my husband's family, I took off the hijab, my husband wasn't liking that. But in my family, I didn't have a choice. My father said, 'As long as my daughters are in my house, they will dress this way.' So now, my clothes style is very different. Previously, I wasn't even going out at all. In our community, you know that girls can face harassment. So I couldn't leave the house. Now I go out and do whatever I want. My life is better now...My life is very, very different now. Before, I was eating alone, I was spending all the time in

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<sup>17</sup> One pattern that by and large did hold true and was in line with what might be expected had to do with marriages that were violently forced or from which the girl attempted to escape. Respondents in these situations almost always reported being unhappy, and many experienced abuse. Rates of divorce in these instances were very high.

one room, I wasn't mixing with people...When I came to my husband's family, I started to see other people, I started to eat with other people. I started to go out."<sup>18</sup>

Similarly, an Iraqi Arab widow explained that her husband's family was "more open" than her family, and reported that "after marriage, I was so much comfortable: we were visiting parks, open spaces, going to picnics."<sup>19</sup> These two respondents enjoyed increased social freedoms after marrying, but a number of others discussed a narrowing of their lives and opportunities. For many, these changes related to the abrupt shift from being an adolescent to being a married woman with a different set of norms and expectations. A young widow from Bentiu who married at 14 described how her life changed upon marriage:

"As a married woman...you have to have more respect for yourself and listen to what your husband tells you. You also have very many responsibilities to take care of your house and the people living with you. Sometimes if you don't do this well, you get in problems with your husband and you may even end up getting divorced, which is a bad thing. Your mother and other older women advise you that if you get married you have to do this and this, but if you are not married you don't worry about this thing a lot."<sup>20</sup>

Using self-selected photographs and images to illustrate and discuss their experiences,<sup>21</sup> numerous female youth in the Iraqi Kurdistan cohort described a similarly stark contrast in both expectations and responsibilities before and after marriage. A Syrian respondent who described her marriage as loving shared a photo of herself wearing the hijab, and explained:

"Once you marry you have to follow the values of the family...When I was a young girl, I had the right to do and dress as I wanted. But now that I am married, I am under the hands of the person I married according to the norms of the community. All of these things [I must do] to please his family."<sup>22</sup>

The theme of loss of freedom and decrease in time to look after yourself was a common theme in the Photovoice entries of female youth describing the changes after marriage. Indeed, it was those respondents who were already carrying heavy domestic or economic loads who reported the fewest changes upon marriage, even when marrying at a young age. When asked how her life changed after marriage, a young disabled woman from Bentiu who was the oldest child of a widowed mother replied: "My life has not changed. It is the same way it used to be when I was at home with my mother, but I have a daughter now, and I have to take care of her all the time."<sup>23</sup> Another young woman in Juba replied, "[My life] is not different. Now I have a child, and I have to make food for him and my husband to eat."<sup>24</sup>

### *Fluidity of experiences*

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<sup>18</sup> Interview with participant # KRI\_CO\_26\_F\_M\_21, Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

<sup>19</sup> Interview with participant # KRI\_CO\_31\_F\_W\_22, Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

<sup>20</sup> Interview with participant # SSB\_CO\_23\_W\_18, Bentiu, South Sudan.

<sup>21</sup> Participants use images of their choosing (photos they take or images they select) to tell specific parts of their narrative. This is based on the participatory PhotoVoice method, and more information can be found at [photovoice.org](http://photovoice.org)

<sup>22</sup> Interview with participant # KRI\_CO\_102\_F\_M\_18, Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

<sup>23</sup> Interview with participant # SSB\_CO\_2\_DIS\_20, Bentiu, South Sudan.

<sup>24</sup> Interview with participant # SS\_CO\_35\_F\_M\_20, Juba, South Sudan.

**A number of respondents in South Sudan described fluid and ambiguous relationship states. Dynamics around bridewealth payments, cohabitation, and cultural expectations influenced these uncertainties, which existed in reference to marriage, widowhood, and divorce.**

One of the themes emerging from the South Sudan data is the fluidity and ambiguity of experience of girls and young women in their relationships or marriages. The methodology of speaking regularly to the study participants means that we were able to analyze how their perception of their situation changed over the course of the study. The regular contact also meant that the respondents became more comfortable with the research team and were increasingly forthcoming about some of the ways in which their experiences might deviate from “normative” expectations. The norms around marriage and relationships for females are stricter in Iraqi Kurdistan, and hence while we see less fluidity of experience, there is still movement in some of the girls’ experiences.

Two aspects of the data appear to drive the fluidity of relationships and experiences of female youth in the South Sudan sample. The first is a relatively open social approach to premarital sexual relations, as detailed in the accompanying briefing paper on early pregnancy. This approach means that adolescent girls often have boyfriends with whom they are physically intimate, though normally without the knowledge of their parents or other family members. Given limited knowledge on or use of contraception, these liaisons often lead to unplanned pregnancies, which in turn normally prompt a discussion of marriage. The second contributor to the fluidity of experiences is the practice of payments from the family of the boy to the family of the girl, including both bridewealth transfers and the so-called pregnancy price. Families negotiate the amount of bridewealth, and the marriage is only considered official once the full amount has been transferred.<sup>25</sup> However, many men are unable to pay the full amount at one time, and hence payments often extend over years.<sup>26</sup> The woman will often move in with the man during this time and may or may not consider herself to be married. If the marriage dissolves before the full payment is transferred, the young woman may or may not consider herself divorced. The pregnancy price (or paternity payment), normally of three cows or the equivalent, is also paid by the boy’s family to the girl’s family. The payment serves as an acknowledgement of paternity, a financial contribution towards the expenses of the birth and the baby, and, importantly, establishes eventual and full rights of custody of the father’s family over that child (normally at about 7 years of age).<sup>27</sup> Technically speaking, the pregnancy payment is separate from the payment of bridewealth and does not count towards fulfilment of this amount. However, in the event of early pregnancy, the likelihood of marriage is often discussed simultaneously with the negotiations over the pregnancy price. It is at this point that the young couple learns if their parents are going to encourage or reject marriage.

While the payment of bridewealth and pregnancy price may seem relatively straightforward—i.e., yes or no, how much or how little, paid in cash or cattle, etc.—our data from South Sudan indicate that the perception of whether or not a female is “married” is both dynamic and ambiguous. We interviewed one respondent in Juba who entered into an arranged marriage at age 15 to a soldier whom she had never

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<sup>25</sup> S. Hutchinson, “The Cattle of Money and the Cattle of Girls among the Nuer, 1930-83,” *American Ethnologist* 19, no. 2 (1992): 294–316.

<sup>26</sup> E. Thomas, “Moving Towards Markets: Cash, Commodification and Conflict in South Sudan” (The Rift Valley Institute, Nairobi, 2019).

<sup>27</sup> See S. McKinnon, “Domestic Exceptions: Evans-Pritchard and the Creation of Nuer Patrilineality and Equality,” *Cultural Anthropology* 15, no. 1 (2000): 35–83.

met. They had one child before he disappeared; she had no contact with him for several years. She still considered herself married, although she gave birth to two more children with a different man during this time. Her husband contacted the respondent during the study; she was distressed and seeking to avoid reunification or for him to learn of the additional children.<sup>28</sup> Subjectivity was at times also apparent when we were able to interview a family member of a respondent. A young woman in Juba who had participated in five interviews had described being pushed into marriage at age 14 or 15 by her mother, who needed the bridewealth to support the family. However, when we interviewed the girl's mother (at the suggestion of the girl), she reported that the girl had fallen pregnant out of wedlock and had gone to live with the boyfriend, who had paid the pregnancy price but never paid any bridewealth. The girl considered herself married (and widowed), while the mother considered her to have never married.<sup>29</sup> This example and similar ones highlight the ambiguity and subjectivity in perceptions and experiences of marriage among the study population.

There is less fluidity of experience around marriage in the KRI as compared to South Sudan among the study respondents, most likely due to stricter social mores around female sexuality and the parameters of marriage in the KRI. However, there is fluidity in the legality of marriage, as Iraqi law prohibits marriage under age 18 but allows marriage as young as 15 in some cases.<sup>30</sup> To circumvent regulations, families ask Islamic mullahs to officiate marriages involving minors. According to respondents and key informants, a couple married by a mullah can seek official validation of their marriage in court after one year. Prior to official recognition, the girl—and any children she bears—are in a fluid legal space, even though the union is socially recognized within the community. One young Syrian refugee who married at age 15 faced numerous legal hurdles while in this fluid state, ultimately jeopardizing her right to asylum in Germany, custody of her infant son, and her marriage, as the man she considered her husband moved to Hungary to be with his “official” wife.<sup>31</sup>

This fluidity in experience and perception also extends to whether a respondent is divorced or widowed; this was the case among respondents in both South Sudan and Iraqi Kurdistan. While family separation and uncertainty over the fate of loved ones is a common experience for children in settings of conflict and displacement,<sup>32</sup> such uncertainty can further compound the trauma experienced by girls married as minors, especially if the marriage itself involved force or trauma. One Syrian respondent explained, “My husband has been missing. I don’t know if he is arrested or killed or imprisoned by the Syrian regime. It has been nine years.”<sup>33</sup> A respondent in Juba explained that she had been looking for her missing husband for two years and didn’t know if he had abandoned her or if he had been killed: “I don’t know if I am divorced or widowed.”<sup>34</sup> The loss of a husband may be particularly difficult when considering that most of these respondents married as adolescents, before they had developed the emotional and psychological resilience possessed by an adult. Many became mothers not long after marriage, and hence find themselves trying to raise and support children as young mothers without a partner. As discussed in the

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<sup>28</sup> Interview with participant # SS\_CO\_21\_F\_M\_23, Juba, South Sudan.

<sup>29</sup> Interview with participant # SS\_CO\_31\_F\_W\_18, Juba, South Sudan.

<sup>30</sup> UNFPA, “Child Marriage in Kurdistan Region – Iraq” (United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), Iraq, 2016).

<sup>31</sup> Interview with participant # KRI\_CO\_111\_F\_M\_21, Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

<sup>32</sup> R. V. Reed, M. Fazel, L. Jones, C. Panter-Brick, and A. Stein, “Mental Health of Displaced and Refugee Children Resettled in Low-income and Middle-income Countries: Risk and Protective Factors,” *The Lancet* 379, no. 9812 (2012): 250–265.

<sup>33</sup> Interview with participant # KRI\_CO\_38\_F\_M\_35, Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

<sup>34</sup> Interview with participant # SS\_CO\_42\_DIV\_20, Juba, South Sudan.

accompanying briefing paper on experiences of divorce and widowhood,<sup>35</sup> these conditions create specific vulnerabilities for female youth.

### *Life in abusive marriages*

**The experience of physical abuse within marriage was relatively common among study participants and occurred both in marriages that had been forced and within love marriages. Some respondents were able to leave such marriages, often with the help of their natal family, but many others were unable to leave abusive situations.**

Many of the respondents interviewed for this study reported experiencing domestic violence and abuse from their husband and/or in-laws.<sup>36</sup> Some of these respondents had been able to leave their marriages, others were hoping to, and still others saw no possibility of leaving. In both case study countries, the girls and young women we spoke to felt they had few official avenues of recourse for help in their situation.

As discussed in detail in the briefing paper on divorce and widowhood,<sup>37</sup> it can be extremely difficult for a woman in either Iraqi Kurdistan or South Sudan to initiate a divorce or separation. Women rarely retain custody of children when a marriage ends—regardless of the reason or who initiates the separation. This means that many women remain in abusive situations to retain rights to their children. In addition, a woman who wishes to divorce often requires the support of her natal family; particularly in South Sudan if bridewealth was paid, as the woman’s family must be able (and willing) to return the bridewealth to the husband’s family. For example, a female respondent in Bentiu was forced at age 16 to marry the man who kidnapped and raped her. He had paid bridewealth of United States dollar (USD) 400, and her family was unwilling or unable to repay this amount to allow her to leave her husband. She described her situation:

“My life is bad, my husband is very violent. He beats me for no reason at all; my body is full of wounds because of him. I decided to run away from his house because he was threatening to kill me...The people who live near our shelter always come to help me, and I spend most nights in their homes.”<sup>38</sup>

At the time of our interviews, this respondent was attempting to raise USD 400 on her own to repay her husband’s family and free her from the union. She reported: “I have not been able to find that money, but if I do, I will really be happy because I will pay him back and I will be free from him.”<sup>39</sup>

Respondents in both countries who were successful in leaving abusive marriages often described the assistance they received from their natal families. One respondent in Juba who married at 17 explained that her father initiated the divorce upon learning of her situation:

“My marriage was in 2015, and it was a very sad moment in my life. I regret that I ever got married, because he used to beat me a lot, and I was not able to conceive, and this made the situation

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<sup>35</sup> For more explanation on the situation of divorced and widowed female youth, see additional briefing papers on the project website: <https://fic.tufts.edu/research-item/child-marriage-in-humanitarian-settings/>.

<sup>36</sup> We assume that incidents of domestic violence and abuse are higher than reported in our sample due to respondents’ fear of husbands or relatives learning that they were discussing such issues with outsiders.

<sup>37</sup> For more explanation on the situation of divorced and widowed female youth, see additional briefing papers on the project website: <https://fic.tufts.edu/research-item/child-marriage-in-humanitarian-settings/>.

<sup>38</sup> Interview with participant # SSB\_CO\_15\_M\_19, Bentiu, South Sudan.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.



worse. He was very angry because of that...In 2018, my father became very angry when he heard of how my husband was treating me, and he called me and told me that he was going to divorce me from him. I accepted, and my father went and talked about the divorce to my husband and his family. He [my father] gave them their cows back and I went back home...I felt very happy because I had finally divorced. I was not happy in that marriage.”<sup>40</sup>

In South Sudan, families were more likely to support a divorce in an abusive relationship if bridewealth had never been exchanged, as was the case for a young woman in Juba who married at age 15. Bridewealth was promised but never paid, despite the passing of three years and the birth of two children. Her husband became physically and emotionally abusive and accused her family of pushing for divorce:

“He told me if my family wants to divorce me from him, they will do so [only] after he has done something bad to me, like removing all my teeth or all my eyes, so that no other man will marry me.”

*When you did go back home to your family, what was their reaction?* “My family accepted me because the man was hurting me, and he did not pay any bridewealth. They said that I should stay at home because my life is in danger. Even now when my ex-husband meets me walking around the POC [Protection of Civilians site] he attacks me.”<sup>41</sup>

The respondent had managed to take her children with her to her parents’ home, but her ex-husband kidnapped the younger child over the course of our field work. The woman was unsuccessful in getting help from the police, United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS), or child protection actors within the POC because the child had been taken outside of the camp. The child was returned to her mother after more than three weeks and only because the ex-husband’s cousin intervened. This example is indicative of the relative powerlessness experienced by young women in our sample.

At the same time that we acknowledge this powerlessness, our study population includes a number of young women who overcame incredible odds to secure a better life for themselves by leaving abusive situations. Some were able to also secure better lives for their children, but, as mentioned above, custody norms and laws often made doing so extremely difficult and pushed mothers into a nearly impossible choice. A young Syrian woman was forced by her parents at age 17 to marry a cousin twice her age. She experienced repeated physical abuse at the hands of her husband and in-laws. She sought help from her family but was rebuffed:

“[My parents] were even blaming me, even my mother was blaming me. She was saying, ‘You should accept that, he is your husband.’ Even my mother-in-law was beating me. I told my parents, ‘If you love them that much, you can come here and live with them so I can leave.’”<sup>42</sup>

This young woman, who was living in Syria at the time, decided to leave her husband on her own after the birth of their third child. She explained, “I left the boys because my daughter had just been born. She was breastfeeding. I knew if I stayed there, I would kill myself. I just left with the girl and left the boys behind.” She walked for three hours before connecting with smugglers to bring her into Iraq, carrying her newborn and still in pain from the delivery. “I wished I could just die right then. It was so, so hard.” In the end, her

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<sup>40</sup> Interview with participant # SS\_CO\_34\_F\_EP\_23, Juba, South Sudan.

<sup>41</sup> Interview with participant # SS\_CO\_43\_F\_DIV\_21, Juba, South Sudan.

<sup>42</sup> Interview with participant # KRI\_CO\_16\_F\_D\_23, Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

mother paid for the smuggler and was supportive once she arrived in the KRI. Her mother even went back into Syria to try to secure custody of the older boys but was unsuccessful. However, the divorce between cousins caused a rupture in the family. Some relatives do not speak to her or her mother, and an uncle attacked her with a gun and threatened to kill her. She hopes to move to Germany and does not expect to see her sons again.

### *Mental health and psychosocial well-being*

#### **Respondents displayed a wide range of mental health outcomes after early marriage, ranging from depression and regret to experiences of great happiness and well-being in their new lives.**

We know from the literature that some females who marry as children have negative mental health experiences;<sup>43</sup> this pattern was certainly evident in the data for this study and particularly for those who were forced to marry or married very young.<sup>44</sup> In addition, experiences of trauma associated with conflict and displacement may have exacerbated the poor mental health of the respondents. For instance, a young Yazidi woman expressed extreme sadness and low self-worth when describing her married life: “I was 13 years old [when I married]. I hate myself when I remember my marriage. How did I get married when I was a child? I didn’t know anything. I am sad for my life with my husband.”<sup>45</sup> ISIS swept into her community one year after she married and kidnapped nearly everyone in her natal family; only she and her parents were able to escape with her husband and his family. Six of her siblings were eventually released but three sisters and one brother remained in captivity at the time of our interviews, include one sister who is only 12 years of age. The respondent’s description of her own mental state is particularly concerning when she talks about her siblings who remain with ISIS: “We are hurt by their suffering, and my mother is crying for my sisters and brothers. Sometimes I think a lot about suicide.”<sup>46</sup> This example of multilayered trauma is unfortunately not unique within the study population.

At the other extreme, a number of girls expressed happiness and fulfilment in their marital relationships. The multitude of negative experiences of child marriage often crowd out such narratives; we feel it is important to highlight such experiences if we are to fully understand child marriage from the perspectives of those most affected. For instance, a Syrian refugee who married at age 17 explained, “I am happy because I am married to the person that I love, and now I have a beautiful daughter. I was afraid [of marriage], but my love was greater than my fear.”<sup>47</sup> A young Yazidi woman who married her cousin at age 14 described her happiness and love for her husband, and her relief when they both escaped the ISIS attack on Sinjar a year after they married.<sup>48</sup>

### *Education and life after marriage*

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<sup>43</sup> N. A. John, J. Edmeades, and L. Murithi, “Child Marriage and Psychological Well-being in Niger and Ethiopia,” *BMC Public Health* 19, no. 1 (2019): 1029.

<sup>44</sup> For a discussion of mental health among female youth in the cohort, see additional briefing papers on the project website: <https://fic.tufts.edu/research-item/child-marriage-in-humanitarian-settings/>.

<sup>45</sup> Interview with participant # KRI\_CO\_112\_F\_M\_22, Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Interview with participant # KRI\_CO\_109\_F\_M\_20, Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

<sup>48</sup> Interview with participant # KRI\_CO\_119\_F\_M\_20, Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

**Many respondents did not or were not able to continue education upon becoming pregnant or marrying, despite many expressing a strong desire to finish school. Those who did continue usually had strong support from their natal or marital families.**

Respondents within the study population had a wide range of education attainment and experience, ranging from zero schooling to receiving a university degree or certificate. (Education more broadly is discussed in an accompanying briefing paper.<sup>49</sup>) The majority of respondents in the study who were in school when they became pregnant, became engaged, or got married reported that they dropped out of school when this life transition occurred. Some explained that they had not enjoyed or excelled in school and were more than happy to quit upon becoming pregnant or married. Many others, however, expressed a desire to continue their education but explained that they were prevented from attending classes once pregnant or married.

Explanations varied as to why pregnant or married girls had to quit school. In some instances, it was reported to be an official policy, whereas in other cases this prohibition appeared to be unofficial and driven by local customs and norms. For some respondents in all locations, school simply stopped being a priority when they married. One respondent in Juba who quit school upon marrying at age 16 explained, “I just did not think about school anymore. I was just concerned with my marriage.”<sup>50</sup>

While most respondents left school upon becoming pregnant or marrying, there were notable exceptions, which indicates that continuing school *is* possible in some situations. An important commonality in these instances was strong emotional and material support from the husband or natal family (for young mothers who were not married). In some cases, the ability for a girl to continue with her education was part of the terms of the marriage negotiation. One respondent in Juba was married off by her parents without her consent, but under the condition that she be allowed to finish secondary school.<sup>51</sup> A Syrian refugee explained that one of the conditions of her marriage at age 17 was that she be supported to continue her studies. Having two children in quick succession seemed likely to derail her hopes, but her husband remained highly supportive, helping with childcare and housework, and she managed to receive her university degree in basic education.<sup>52</sup>

#### *Family dynamics after marriage*

**Family dynamics after marriage varied greatly among respondents. Sharing crowded and poor accommodation with in-laws was often difficult, but some respondents cited the support they received as young wives and mothers from female in-laws. Attempts at immigration and resettlement and shifting family expectations also influenced family dynamics after marriage.**

We turn next to the experiences of study respondents in their relationships with their natal families and in-laws after marriage. These relationships naturally vary for each respondent and are influenced by several factors, including individual and family dynamics, the role of a girl’s parents in her marriage decision, and geographic location. Understanding that these factors are ones that are likely to influence

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<sup>49</sup> For more information on experiences and perspectives on education within the sample population, see additional briefing papers on the project website: <https://fic.tufts.edu/research-item/child-marriage-in-humanitarian-settings/>.

<sup>50</sup> Interview with participant # SS\_CO\_48\_F\_W\_22, Juba, South Sudan.

<sup>51</sup> Interview with participant # SS\_CO\_26\_F\_M\_18, Juba, South Sudan.

<sup>52</sup> Interview with participant # KRI\_CO\_101\_F\_M\_21, Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

family dynamics in most marriages, here we focus on the ways in which early marriage and conflict appear to *specifically* affect family dynamics after marriage.

Upon marriage, most of the respondents in the sample moved in with their in-laws or other relatives of their husbands. For nearly all, this meant cohabitation in sub-standard and crowded conditions in refugee or internally displaced people (IDP) settlements or cramped rental apartments (in some locations in Iraqi Kurdistan). While these conditions were often similar to those experienced prior to marriage, once married the female respondents were living with new and strange people. A Syrian refugee who married at age 14 described living in a tent with her husband and children, two brothers-in-law, and one of the brother-in-law's wife and children: "We are a lot of people living in two rooms. It is overcrowded, and it is affecting our moods, and we argue sometimes. The person that feels the stress most is me."<sup>53</sup> At the same time, however, the presence of extended family can have benefits for those who marry at a young age. This same respondent described some of the emotional difficulties she faced when first married and expressed her gratitude at having an older sister-in-law in the same household:

"When you are young, your brain and your thinking is not fully developed. When you are older, you will know how to manage yourself and manage your life better...Marriage is a big responsibility for that age. And all the responsibility that comes with it...I didn't have a lot of responsibility because I had my sister-in-law, she was older—she was managing all the responsibilities inside the house...she is like a sister to me. When I gave birth to my [first] child, I was so worried and scared, 'How can I take care of this baby?' She helped to raise my child, even now with my daughter she is helping me."<sup>54</sup>

While there were many similar positive accounts of relations with in-laws, a number of respondents did have more negative experiences with their husbands' relatives, including physical and emotional abuse. A Syrian refugee who had been forced by her father to marry when she was 17 described her situation: "[My husband's] family was very bad with me, and he didn't protect me. Even his brother was beating me."<sup>55</sup> For a respondent in Juba who was married at 15 after being kidnapped and raped, the abuse extended into her married life:

"My husband's wife did not like me at all. As soon as my husband left, she made me do all the domestic work at home. I missed a lot of my school days, even exams, so I stopped going to school at all. My husband had instructed his cousins and other male relatives living in the camp to keep an eye on me when he is not around...So, his relatives were beating me even if they saw me going to the market or fetching water, saying that I am looking for boyfriends. Whenever I called my husband and talked to him about it, he did not do anything about it but encouraged them."<sup>56</sup>

Relations with families often overlapped with hopes and plans for migration. The study population includes a number of Syrian respondents whose marriages are closely intertwined with plans to emigrate onward to Europe. The ways in which these intersections were navigated by the girls and their families had implications for their lives after marriage. In one case, a girl's family planned to smuggle her from Syria to Germany so that she could then bring the rest of the family to Europe via the reunification

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<sup>53</sup> Interview with participant # KRI\_CO\_26\_F\_M\_21, Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Interview with participant # KRI\_CO\_38\_F\_M\_35, Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

<sup>56</sup> Interview with participant # SS\_CO\_38\_F\_DIV\_20, Juba, South Sudan.

process.<sup>57</sup> However, she fell in love with a cousin during a stopover in Iraqi Kurdistan; they married, with only partial support from her family. This respondent carries the weight of upending her family's hopes for a new start in Europe while also dealing with life as a young wife and mother in a refugee settlement. Her parents were still in Syria at the time of our interviews. Luckily, she has strong support from her mother-in-law, who described their relationship in a family member interview:

"I deal with [the primary respondent] as if she were my own daughter—it is not as though she is my daughter-in-law...We are very close and we speak openly. [The couple] are still very young, and she needs care and support. When they decided to marry it was my son's decision, but they were both very young. I said that they were to live with us so that we could care for them and help them."<sup>58</sup>

In several other cases, families had hoped to be legally resettled in western Europe with their adolescent children. However, many families are hesitant to seek resettlement or asylum in Europe if their family unit includes children close to 18 years of age because they fear that adult children will be treated separately in these claims.<sup>59</sup> Such families may face the decision of leaving these adolescent children behind, but cultural norms prevent families from leaving daughters on their own. Within our sample, these factors pushed several girls into early marriage. One such respondent explained that she did love her prospective husband and knew that she could not stay in Iraqi Kurdistan alone, so opted to marry him. At the time of our interviews, she described the deep sadness of not seeing her mother in two years or her father in six. Her in-laws are in Syria. She sometimes wished she could talk to someone about "how much we are alone," but does not want to make her family members sad.<sup>60</sup> Another respondent's family was planning to be reunified with her brother who had made it from Syria to Germany. The girl was 16 when her prospective husband first proposed. Her family felt she was too young to marry, but after one year they agreed, because "I would not be able to go to Germany because I was going to be over age 18."<sup>61</sup> Although she feels very supported by her husband, she is acutely aware of how alone they are without a network of family members.

**TEXT BOX: *Experiences of life after marriage for study respondents who married at 12 to 14 years***

Overall, a diversity of experiences exists among respondents regarding their lives after marriage. However, when we examine the narratives of only those female youth who married for a variety of reasons at ages 12–14, we find many more accounts of abuse or divorce than within the rest of the study population. We emphasize that these data are not representative and hence we cannot draw conclusions about marital outcomes based on age. At the same time, the commonalities among these stories are striking. Here we use the words of the respondents to highlight these patterns.

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<sup>57</sup> Interview with participant # KRI\_CO\_102\_F\_M\_18, Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

<sup>58</sup> Interview with family member of participant # KRI\_CO\_102\_FAM\_F\_M\_18, Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

<sup>59</sup> The European Union (EU) rules on family reunification and family resettlement do allow for adult children to be considered part of a family unit, but the regulations are confusing. Families may not be receiving consistent messaging from in-country organizations working to process their asylum and/or resettlement applications. See <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/content/news/unaccompanied-minors-family-reunification-asylum-date-application.html> and J. Bastaki, "'Not without My Daughter': EU Asylum Law, Gender, and the Separation of Refugee Families," *Refugee Survey Quarterly* 38 (2019): 266–289.

<sup>60</sup> Interview with participant # KRI\_CO\_113\_F\_M\_20, Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

<sup>61</sup> Interview with participant # KRI\_CO\_101\_F\_M\_21, Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

A girl in Juba, South Sudan, was forced into marriage at age 13 by her older sister. The man was in his 40s and already had two wives. She explained: *“My oldest sister told my mother that there is a man she knew who had a lot of money and it would be good if I got married to him. My mother refused. She said I was too young for marriage because I was 13 years old. My sister then lied to me that our older brother had come from Khartoum and was requesting to speak to me to give me money to go to school. She took me to a hotel room where I found a man there. She had already made plans with him to make me his wife. I kept crying the whole night, and the following morning the man took me home, saying I’m still a child and I should be home for a couple more years. After one year, my brother forced me back to the man’s house...I would refuse to sleep with him, and he would beat me. I kept going running back home but my brother would return me to his home. The man beat me almost every day because I did not sleep with him. Sometimes I would sleep under the bed to hide from him. I became so ill; my body was full of wounds because of his beating. When I was hospitalized, my mother came and took me home saying she would rather pay back the bridewealth the man paid than see me dead. I never went back to his home again.”*<sup>62</sup>

The girl above eventually found an ally in her mother. This was not the case for a respondent in Bentiu, South Sudan, who explained the brutality behind her marriage at age 14: *“I used to see [this man] every day when I went to get water. He was asking me questions about who I am and who my parents are...One day he was with four men and, as I was getting my water, they carried me by force. I was screaming and calling for help but they kept telling people that I am their spoiled sister who has slept out of home for three days and that they were going to discipline me. They took me to [the man’s] uncle’s home, and I spent three days there. Then they went to see my mother and my uncles, and they paid 15 cows [as bridewealth].”* (What did your mother say when she heard that you were taken by force?) *“She was concerned about my safety, but she said that it’s a normal practice among Nuer people for a woman to be ‘carried’ to a man’s house.”* (How was your life when they took you to your in-laws’ home?) *“Everybody was treating me with kindness and telling I am a wife in the home, but after three months his aunties and everyone else started treating me badly. They would refuse to give me food even when I was pregnant... My husband always drinks a lot of alcohol, and he comes and beats me up together with my son...I went home last month trying to escape from my husband, but I did not find [my mother]. People told me that my mother has gotten married again and went to live outside of the POC. She did not even tell me about it. Now that I don’t have a family to protect me, I don’t even know where to go or what to do.”*<sup>63</sup>

A Syrian refugee in Iraqi Kurdistan was forced to marry at age 14, in part to help her family cope with the dire financial situation they were facing after fleeing Syria. She explained: *“When we were children, my father had a friend, they agreed that one of his [my father’s] daughters would marry the friend’s son. We came to Kurdistan, and the situation wasn’t very good. The man called and my sister [age 19 at the time] refused to marry because she was studying. So, she put me in front of the gun...I couldn’t understand the situation. I was a child. I was married only one month. But it took us eight months to get divorced from him. There were lies and abuse and beating and all of those kinds of experiences. He was aggressive with me. He wasn’t treating me well in the bedroom.”*<sup>64</sup> This young woman persevered and went back to school despite being treated poorly by the community for having divorced. She continued: *“I had a lot of difficulties in the school and with my friends when I came back from being married. They were trying to talk about me all the time. I lost all the trust from everyone surrounding me because the whole community*

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<sup>62</sup> Interview with participant # SS\_CO\_36\_F\_DIV\_22, Juba, South Sudan.

<sup>63</sup> Interview with participant # SSB\_CO\_4\_M\_18, Bentiu, South Sudan.

<sup>64</sup> Interview with participant # KRI\_CO\_17\_F\_D\_19, Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

*was against me. They were trying to break me. I tried to change the place I was living. I even told my parents that I prefer to go back to Syria than go on like this.”* She managed to continue with school but was struggling with psychological and emotional issues at the time of our interviews.

#### **END TEXT BOX**

#### ***Conclusions and Recommendations***

The experiences of the study population in South Sudan and the KRI illustrate the multifaceted and dynamic experiences of female youth following underage marriage. The complexity and nuance of this narrative is often missing in research on child marriage, thereby excluding the voices and experiences of those young women most affected by this phenomenon. When these voices are centered within the analysis, we see that some female youth find freedom, love, and fulfillment in marriage, even when it takes place before age 18. Others have extremely negative, abusive, and violent experiences. Similarly, for some female youth, getting married was an expression of individual agency, while others married entirely against their will and still others married due to a range of social and economic pressures.<sup>65</sup> Our data are not representative and cannot be extrapolated beyond the sample, but within our data we see particularly negative outcomes and experiences for many of those girls who married very early in adolescence.

Conflict and displacement create high levels of stress for individuals, households, and communities: these are the contexts in which the female youth respondents in our study cohort live, marry, give birth, and raise families. These processes of conflict and displacement shaped the narratives of the girls and young women in this study who married under age 18. For many, these factors drove their marriage process and selection of spouse, their economic conditions, their connections (or lack thereof) with their families, and their aspirations. None of the respondents in our sample was experiencing a “normal” marriage in which she was able to pursue her hopes and dreams separate from larger contexts defined by economic and social upheaval, uncertainty, family separation, and inadequate living conditions and limited access to services.

The study data illustrate the diversity of experiences after marriage. Yet commonalities exist, even across the very different country contexts of South Sudan and the KRI. Many of these similarities have important takeaway messages with relevance for national and international programmers and policy makers. These include the following:

- Programmers and policy makers should recognize that not all early marriages are forced marriages. Many of the female youth participants in this study found happiness, fulfillment, and love in their marriages, even though these marriages took place under age 18. Programs need to be careful not to stigmatize early marriage or those who engage in it when seeking to work with communities, families, and female youth;
- Female youth respondents in both countries described a lack of opportunities and programs available to them after marriage, including social and economic support programs aimed at unmarried, displaced adolescents. We were not able to triangulate this information to know if this perception is due to an actual dearth of programs open to married female youth or

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<sup>65</sup> For more information on the perspectives of female youth and the role of agency, see additional briefing papers on the project website: <https://fic.tufts.edu/research-item/child-marriage-in-humanitarian-settings/>.

restrictions on the ability of a married female youth to access these opportunities (due, for instance, to domestic duties, social or cultural norms, lack of knowledge, or other constraints). Regardless, there is clearly a need to ensure that programs for female youth in settings of conflict and displacement intentionally and actively seek to include those who are married and/or have children. Such programs will also require an outreach component to work with communities and families to promote knowledge and acceptance of such programs and to bolster access to them for this demographic group;

- Female youth have limited access to or knowledge of contraception; this is true even for those who have children. This finding was particularly pronounced among the South Sudan cohort, where rates of premarital pregnancy were high. There is a great deal of space and opportunity for national and international actors to expand evidence-based programs to increase knowledge of, access to, and acceptability of use of modern evidence-based forms of contraception;
- Many of the female youth respondents had little ability to continue their education after becoming engaged, becoming pregnant, giving birth, and/or marrying. Those respondents who were able to do so often had explicit support from family members, including parents, boyfriends, husbands, and in-laws. National and international actors should work closely with communities, schools, and local governments to ensure access to education for females, regardless of the life stage of the student. Such support could include advocacy efforts targeting local governments and school administrators as well as financial support such as conditional cash grants to families of young mothers or young brides to encourage schooling to continue;
- Many of the female youth respondents who married under age 18 felt heavily burdened by the extent of their domestic responsibilities, especially after becoming mothers. Many said they were not emotionally prepared for the burdens associated with marriage and motherhood. Programs that seek to delay marriage for adolescent girls should incorporate the narratives and experiences of girls into advocacy and education efforts aimed at girls, parents, the families of potential spouses, and local leaders;
- Given the pattern of pronounced negative outcomes for the respondents in the sample who married in early adolescence (ages 12–14 years), specific programming should be aimed at this group. This programming should include mental health support, targeted reproductive health programs, targeted access to education programs, and efforts to connect these female youth to others in their age bracket to reduce isolation. Efforts at preventing or delaying early marriage should specifically and intentionally target families with girls in or approaching the early adolescent years;
- Specific protection efforts should be tailored towards young women who find themselves in abusive or violent partnerships; such female youth may be hesitant or unable to reach out to their natal family (particularly when the marriage took place against a girl's parents' wishes or was due to early pregnancy) and may benefit from access to and increased awareness of additional services. Making adolescent-friendly safe spaces explicitly open to young women who are also mothers, pregnant, or married may help in this regard;
- Community-based classes that bring these women together as a group, such as offerings on parenting or child development, could serve a dual function of transferring knowledge and building social ties among young women who expressed that they often experienced isolation.



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