

# **‘There should be some freedom in our lives’**

Exploring adolescent girls’  
experiences of child marriage

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## Abbreviations

A360	Adolescents 360
DHS	Demographic and Health Survey
EH	East Hararghe
FCDO	the United Kingdom's Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office
FGM	Female Genital Mutilation
FGM/C	female genital mutilation/cutting
GAD	Generalised Anxiety Disorder
GAGE	Gender and Adolescence: Global Evidence
GHQ	General Health Questionnaire
ICT	information and communications technology
IMAGINE	Inspiring Married Adolescent Girls to Imagine New Empowered
IPV	Intimate Partner Violence
IRC	International Rescue Committee
LMICs	low- and middle-income countries
MENA	Middle East and North Africa
NGO	non-governmental organisation
PHQ	Patient Health Questionnaire
PRACHAR	Promoting Change in Reproductive Behavior of Adolescents
PSNP	Productive Safety Net Programme
RHMACP	Reproductive Health for Married Adolescent Couples Project
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
SG	South Gondar
SRH	Sexual and reproductive health
STI	sexually transmitted infection
TESFA	Towards economic and sexual reproductive health outcomes for adolescent girls
TPLF	Tigray People's Liberation Front
TVET	technical and vocational education and training
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNRWA	United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East
VSLA	Village Savings and Loan Association
WFP	World Food Programme
Z5	Zone 5

# Executive Summary

## Introduction

Each year, 12 million girls marry before they become adults. Despite progress on reducing rates of child marriage, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) estimates that one-fifth of the world's girls will marry in childhood. Although the evidence base on the correlates, drivers and consequences of child marriage is growing exponentially, very limited research is aimed at understanding how best to support the girls married in childhood. This report aims to address this lacuna by drawing on data collected as part of the Gender and Adolescence: Global Evidence (GAGE) longitudinal research programme and explores the myriad and intersecting ways in which child marriage truncates girls' trajectories and denies them agency over their own lives.

## Research methodology

The GAGE research programme, funded by the United Kingdom's Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO), is generating evidence about the diverse experiences of adolescents (aged 10–19 years at baseline) in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs). While the broader GAGE sample includes approximately 20,000 young people, this report draws on mixed-methods data collected between 2017 and 2022 in Bangladesh, Ethiopia, Jordan and Lebanon and focuses on girls who are married or have been married. In Bangladesh, our sample includes Rohingya refugee and Bangladeshi girls. In Ethiopia, our sample includes girls from three diverse rural regions – as well as urban areas. In Jordan, our sample includes Syrian and Palestinian refugees, as well as Jordanian girls. In Lebanon, our sample includes girls who are Syrian and Palestinian refugees.

## Key findings

After setting the stage with a brief overview of what we have learned about girls' marriages and marital families, we present our findings by capability domain as laid out in the GAGE conceptual framework. These include psychosocial well-being, physical health, education and learning, bodily integrity, economic empowerment, and voice and agency.

## What do we know about girls' marriages and marital households?

- Most girls marry in mid-adolescence to young men in their early twenties – but some girls marry even before puberty; some marry boys only a few years older than they are, or men who are many years older.
- Most child marriages are rushed, with girls knowing their husbands only briefly before marriage.
- It is not uncommon for girls to feel they had some choice regarding marriage timing and choice of partner – though those choices are almost always extremely constrained.
- Many child marriages are quickly followed by divorce, often initiated by girls.
- Most child brides live in very poor households.

## Psychosocial well-being

- Many married girls are emotionally distressed because they are unprepared for and overwhelmed by the physical and emotional work that marriage entails.
- Girls' distress is amplified when they experience violence, when they have children, by poverty, and by the fear of divorce, which is (in most contexts) highly stigmatised.
- Married girls are often physically and socially isolated, with little access to emotional support from family and friends, due to restrictions placed on them by their husband and in-laws. Where girls do have access to support, they are often loathe to ask for it due to taboos about what can and cannot be discussed outside of the household.
- Girls are rarely emotionally connected to their husband and often have a difficult relationship with their mother-in-law.
- It is extremely uncommon for girls to have access to formal psychosocial support services.

## Education and learning

- It is rare for ever-married girls to be enrolled in school. Married girls have too little time to study, because they shoulder heavy domestic and care burdens, and their mobility is limited by their husband and family.

- Most girls who marry in adolescence leave school well before marriage, which means they have relatively fewer 'educational assets' on which to draw.
- In order for girls to combine marriage and education, it takes personal fortitude and supportive family (both marital and natal). When a married girl becomes a mother, the challenges of staying in education are almost insurmountable.
- In Ethiopia in particular, ever-married girls' access to education improves after divorce.

## Nutrition, physical health, and sexual and reproductive health

- Many ever-married girls experience hunger, due to household poverty and gender norms; girls' nutrition is deprioritised by household decision-makers – even if the girl is pregnant.
- Some married girls, disproportionately the youngest, are unaware prior to marriage that marriage entails a sexual relationship. Few married girls can refuse sex with their husband, because to do so is taboo and risks conflict.
- Married girls have limited knowledge about contraception; some girls are entirely unaware of it, while others do not understand how different methods work or what side effects they may have.
- Married girls' demand for and use of contraception is limited, largely because of community and family pressure to produce children soon after marriage (which is often shaped by religion). In most cases, it is the husband who decides on contraceptive use.
- Married girls' access to health care is limited by mobility restrictions placed on them by their husband and marital family.
- Health care providers are often insensitive as to how social norms leave girls unable to make decisions about their own bodies.

## Bodily integrity

- Intimate partner violence is a regular, expected and accepted part of marriage.
- Husbands are singled out as the most common perpetrators of emotional, physical and sexual violence, which in some cases begins on the wedding night. Husbands see violent discipline as their 'right'.
- Marital families also perpetrate violence against girls, with common reports across contexts of emotional violence perpetrated by mothers-in-law.

- Due to taboos about discussing violence outside of the marital household, and the stigma that surrounds divorce, few girls seek support for intimate partner violence.
- Where girls do have access to support, it is generally from natal or marital families.
- Formal survivor support services for violence are very limited – especially for violence experienced inside marriage, not well known to girls, and often felt to be ineffective because they take too little account of girls' place in the family and community.
- Traditional justice mechanisms are primarily aimed at preventing divorce and maintaining families' social status – not at protecting girls from marital violence.
- Formal justice mechanisms are rarely called into play and even more rarely prioritise girls' needs and rights – but do offer girls escape, via divorce.

## Economic empowerment

- Married girls have limited access to paid work due to gender norms that preclude females from working, heavy demands on their time because of domestic and care work, and restrictions placed on them by their husband.
- In rural contexts in Ethiopia, Jordan and Lebanon, married girls are expected to provide agricultural labour but rarely receive payment for doing so.
- Married girls' ability to spend, save and access credit is shaped by household poverty and is further limited by gender norms that leave men in charge of financial decision-making.
- Social protection is helping young families to meet their survival needs, but includes too few households and provides too little support.

## Voice and Agency

- Married girls have limited input into the decisions that shape their lives, including whether and when they become mothers and whether they go to school or do paid work. Limits on girls' decision-making are shaped by both their gender and their age, and are backed by threats of violence.
- Many married girls also have limited input into smaller daily choices, such as what they wear and how they allocate their time. Girls are often especially troubled by these limits because they expected relatively more freedom once they left their natal homes.





A 10-year-old adolescent girl who takes care of her younger siblings after attending Koranic school, Oromia, Ethiopia © Nathalie Bertrams/GAGE 2023

- Married girls' mobility is restricted by husbands and marital families. This costs girls access to friends and family and also limits their access to essential services.
- Although married girls are often more likely to have access to information and communications technology (ICT) than their unmarried peers, use of phones and devices is controlled by their husband.
- Few married girls participate in community activities, including religious affairs, because of their gender, their age, and restrictions on their mobility.

## Conclusions and implications for programming and policy

GAGE research finds that across contexts, married girls are facing myriad, intersecting disadvantages. Many are deeply unhappy in their marriage because they are exhausted by the physical and emotional demands they must juggle and because they are isolated – by restrictions on their mobility and voice – from the family and friends who might lend them support. Few girls reported feeling emotionally connected to and supported by their husband.

Indeed, qualitative evidence suggests that intimate partner violence is likely more common than emotional intimacy, and that husbands' control over their wives' lives – from what they wear to whether and when they become pregnant – is absolute. Many girls participating in GAGE research also report hostility and violence from their mother-in-law. While access to their own incomes might afford married girls some measure of independence, heavy demands on their time (which are amplified once they begin childbearing) as well as gender norms reinforced by husbands and in-laws tend to preclude this for most. Where they do not, it is generally because girls' work is considered necessary to survival and girls' earnings are appropriated for household use. Regardless of their unhappiness, or even their experiences with violence, most girls do not easily countenance divorce. Because divorcées (and their parents) are blamed for having failed at the role seen as central to girls' value, girls tend to endure intolerable situations rather than risk community censure.

Across contexts, married girls are largely being left to face these intersecting disadvantages and intolerable

situations without adult support. With some exceptions, girls' parents are abrogating their responsibilities to their daughters – not only in terms of protecting them from entering child marriage, but in terms of preparing them for it or protecting them during it. Girls' parents-in-law, with whom most young couples live for at least several years after marriage, also typically provide inadequate levels of support. Few even attempt to stop their sons from engaging in controlling and violent behaviour. Married girls are also being failed by the state and non-state actors whose role is to serve and protect them. Only a few married girls in the GAGE sample reported having been encouraged by educators to stay in or return to school and only girls in one region of Ethiopia (Amhara) reported that health care workers are willing to gainsay local norms and lobby for girls to delay their first pregnancy or space their second. Married girls' access to social protection is limited by policies, procedures and budget shortfalls, while their access to psychosocial support is minimal because programming largely targets adult women, whereas girls' programming largely targets unmarried girls. Only the rarest married girls have access to effective legal redress for violence and many are forced to abandon their rights to marital property (and children) in order to keep themselves safe.

Our findings suggest an array of priority actions for programming and policy to help address married girls' multiple disadvantages. With the caveat that the disadvantages facing girls are overlapping and interwoven, meaning that programming needs to take account of girls' holistic needs but can be expected to have benefits that cascade across girls' lives, priority recommendations are organised by capability domain:

1. **Programming that aims to improve the lives of married girls should start before they are married** – and, borrowing from tactics known to help prevent child marriage, should empower girls with education, life skills, and knowledge about how their bodies work.
2. **To improve girls' psychosocial well-being and voice and agency:**
  - Married and divorced girls need opportunities to spend time with peers and friends in safe spaces that also afford them access to caring adults.
  - Married girls need better communication and a stronger relationship with their husband.
  - Married girls need more support from their mother-in-law.

- Programming should develop and disseminate tailored messaging, working closely with religious and traditional leaders, to reduce the stigma that surrounds divorce.
3. **To support married and divorced girls' right to continued learning, there is an urgent need to invest in varied pathways**, including the provision of childcare and bridging programmes that facilitate access back into part-time or full-time education.
  4. **To improve girls' health:**
    - There is a need to build support from within the community – and from gatekeepers – to improve girls' health.
    - There is a need for immediate and scaled-up efforts to decouple child marriage and adolescent motherhood and to build support for better-spaced pregnancies.
    - Health care providers need to be sensitised about how age and gender norms shape married girls' access to – and experiences of – health services.
  5. **To reduce girls' exposure to violence, and support survivors of violence:**
    - Husbands should be supported to explore alternative masculinities that do not revolve around control and violence.
    - Married and divorced girls who are experiencing (or have experienced) violence need stepped-up support from myriad sources.
    - Programming should work to reduce the stigma that surrounds divorce in order to ensure that girls do not feel trapped in violent marriages.
  6. **To give girls more opportunities for economic empowerment:**
    - Married and divorced girls need access to programming that provides basic numeracy and financial literacy, work skills, and age-appropriate opportunities to generate income, and to save and borrow.
    - Social protection should be expanded to be more inclusive of newly married adult couples.
  7. **To build the evidence base** about what works to support married girls, it is important that governments, donors and NGOs invest in disaggregated data, pilot programmes and robust long-term evaluations.



# Introduction

Each year, 12 million girls marry before they become adults (Girls Not Brides, 2022a). Despite progress on reducing rates of child marriage, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) estimates that one-fifth of the world's girls will marry in childhood – and that rates are likely to climb over the coming decade due to disruptions caused by the Covid-19 pandemic (UNICEF, 2022). Driven by Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5, which calls for the elimination of child marriage (United Nations (UN), 2022), as well as the global economic cost of child marriage (estimated to be hundreds of billions of dollars) (Wodon et al., 2017), there is an ever-growing body of evidence that explores the drivers and correlates of child marriage (Harrison, 2023; Siddiqi and Greene, 2022; Malhotra and Elnakib, 2021; Psaki et al., 2021). There is also research that documents the impacts of child marriage on married girls (Harrison, 2023; Siddiqi and Greene, 2022; Malhotra and Elnakib, 2021). It finds that child marriage can have devastating health consequences for girls, sometimes even resulting in their death (Fan and Koski, 2022; Girls Not Brides, 2022b); it disrupts girls' education (Girls Not Brides, 2022d; McCleary-Sills et al., 2015); it leads to an increased risk of violence (Girls Not Brides, 2022c; Kidman, 2017); and limits girls' access to decision-making and to support from friends (Al Kloub et al., 2019; John et al., 2019). Although the evidence base on child marriage is growing exponentially (Siddiqi and Greene, 2022), Plesons et al. (2021) note that there is much to be done if the international community is to deliver on the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Far too little research is aimed at understanding how best to support the girls married in childhood, despite evidence that their broader needs are not being well met by mainstream services (Harrison, 2023; Siddiqi and Greene, 2022; Plesons et al., 2021).

This report aims to address this lacuna by drawing on data collected between 2017 and 2022 as part of the GAGE longitudinal research programme. Using mixed-methods data from Bangladesh, Ethiopia and Jordan, as well as qualitative data from Lebanon, it explores the myriad and

intersecting ways in which child marriage truncates girls' trajectories and denies them agency over their own lives. We begin by introducing the GAGE study and its sample and methods, before briefly describing the contexts in which GAGE works. We then present our findings, organised according to the six capability domains that GAGE focuses on: psychosocial well-being; education and learning; physical health (including sexual and reproductive health); bodily integrity; economic empowerment; and voice and agency. We conclude with the implications of our findings for policy and programming.

## Background to GAGE research and methodology

The GAGE research programme, funded by the United Kingdom's FCDO, is generating evidence about the diverse experiences of adolescents (aged 10–19 years at baseline) in LMICs. It explores the challenges facing adolescents at this crucial life stage and identifies what works to support them to develop their full capabilities as they transition to adulthood. The broader GAGE sample includes approximately 20,000 young people.

This report draws on mixed-methods data collected between 2017 and 2022 in Bangladesh, Ethiopia, Jordan and Lebanon<sup>1</sup> and focuses on girls who are married or have been married (see Table 1). In Bangladesh, our quantitative sample includes 118 girls, most of whom (84) are Rohingya and are living in refugee camps run by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in the city of Cox's Bazar. The remainder are Bangladeshi girls living in nearby host communities. The qualitative sample in Bangladesh, which was drawn from the quantitative sample, comprises 12 girls. In Ethiopia, our quantitative sample includes 880 girls. They live in rural areas of Zone 5, Afar (145 girls); South Gondar, Amhara (276 girls); East Hararghe, Oromia (268 girls); or one of three urban areas<sup>2</sup> (191 girls). The qualitative sample is comprised of 71 girls.<sup>3</sup> In Jordan, our quantitative sample includes 181 girls, most of whom (154) are Syrian refugees living in host communities,

<sup>1</sup> For Lebanon we have qualitative data only.

<sup>2</sup> These include Dire Dawa City Administration, Debre Tabor (in Amhara) and Batu (in Oromia).

<sup>3</sup> Alongside the main longitudinal research programme, GAGE is conducting a separate mixed-methods study focused on child marriage and female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C) in Afar and Somali regions. Baseline data for that study was collected in 2021 (see Endale et al., 2022).

**Table 1: GAGE mixed-methods research sample for married girls\***

	Ethiopia					Jordan			Bangladesh			Lebanon
	Urban	Rural			Total	Jordanian	Syrian	Total	Camp	Host	Total	Total#
		Zone 5, Afar (Z5)	South Gondar, Amhara (SG)	East Hararghe, Oromia (EH)								
Quantitative Survey <sup>*</sup> (2018-2020)	191	145	276	268	880	27	154	181	84	34	118	--
Qualitative In-Depth Interviews (2018-2020)	5	12	23	33	71 <sup>±</sup>	1	22	27 <sup>^</sup>	10	2	12	15
Phone-Based Covid-19 Qualitative Interviews (2020-2021)	5	7	15	35	62	2	12	14	6	0	6	--
Phone-Based Covid-19 Quantitative Survey (2020-2021) <sup>§</sup>	133	--	95	42	270	16	167	183	42	41	83	--

\* The quantitative sample is limited to girls 15 or older. The qualitative sample includes a few girls under the age of 15.

<sup>†</sup> The quantitative samples presented in this table represent married girls interviewed at the midline survey in Ethiopia (2019-2020), and the baseline survey in Jordan (2018-2019) and Bangladesh (2019).

# Note that the Lebanon qualitative interviews of married girls are comprised of Syrian and Palestinian refugees living in Lebanon.

<sup>±</sup> Also includes 9 married girls from Somali region who are not part of the GAGE longitudinal study (Endale et al., 2022).

<sup>^</sup> Our Jordan qualitative sample also includes 4 married Palestinian girls.

<sup>§</sup> Note that the sample size presented here is drawn from the Covid-R2 survey conducted in November 2020 to January 2021 in Jordan; November 2020 to February 2021 in Ethiopia; and March to April 2021 in Bangladesh. The Covid-19 phone survey was not conducted in Zone 5, Afar.

formal refugee camps, or informal tented settlements. Our qualitative sample includes 27 girls. In Lebanon, GAGE's ongoing participatory research groups include 15 married Syrian and Palestinian girls. For added context, we present a demographic table of the full quantitative sample of married and unmarried adolescent girls aged 15 and older from each setting in Appendix 1.

The Covid-19 pandemic interrupted scheduled data collection. For Bangladesh (2019) and Jordan (2018-2019), we have baseline data. For Ethiopia, we have both baseline (2017-2018) and midline (2019-2020) data. In all countries barring Lebanon, we completed two rounds of phone surveys and two rounds of qualitative interviews during the pandemic (2020 and 2021) to explore its impacts on adolescents' lives. We draw on findings from these additional rounds of data collection where specified.

As already noted, the GAGE programme uses mixed-methods research. Our tools, which were developed around the GAGE conceptual framework (see Box 1), include surveys, which were completed by adolescents and their primary caregivers, as well as individual and group interviews with adolescents, their caregivers, and key informants (the GAGE toolkits can be accessed here).

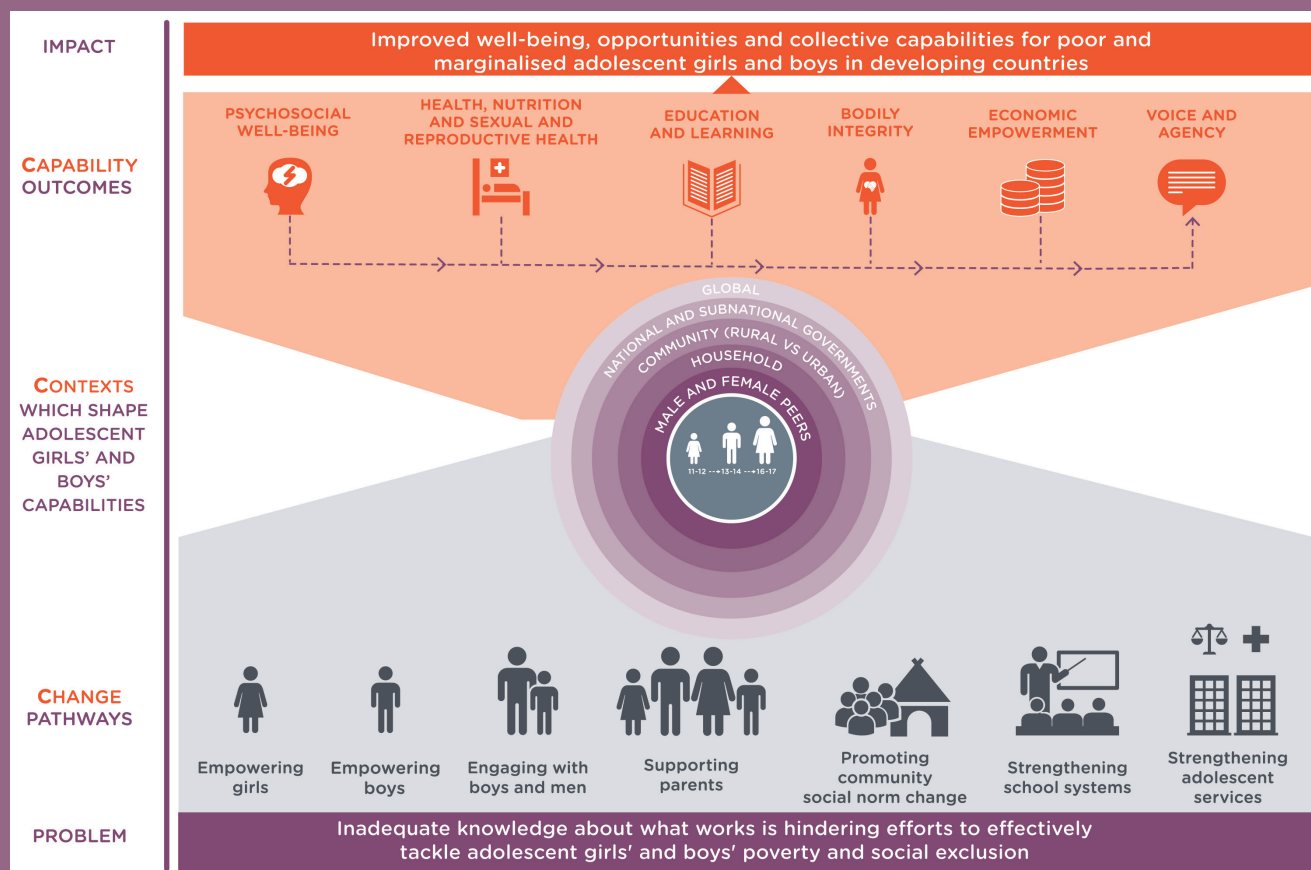
Survey data was collected in face-to-face interviews by enumerators who were trained to communicate with adolescents and spoke the local language. Statistical analysis was conducted using Stata 16. Qualitative tools, also administered by researchers carefully trained to communicate sensitively with adolescents, consisted of interactive activities such as timelines, body mappings and vignettes. Preliminary data analysis took place during daily and site-wide debriefings. Interviews were transcribed and translated by native speakers and then coded thematically using the qualitative software analysis package MAXQDA. Participatory research groups primarily use PhotoVoice.

The GAGE research design and tools were approved by ethics committees at the Overseas Development Institute, George Washington University, and country-level bodies. Consent (written or verbal as appropriate) was obtained from caregivers, adolescents age 18 and older, and emancipated minors (including adolescents who live independently or are married); written or verbal assent was obtained for all unmarried adolescents under the age of 18. There was also a robust protocol for referral to services, tailored to the different realities of the diverse research sites.

## Box 1: The GAGE capabilities framework

Informed by the emerging evidence base on adolescent well-being and development, GAGE's conceptual framework takes a holistic approach that pays careful attention to the interconnectedness of what we call the '3 Cs' – capabilities, change strategies and contexts – to understand what works to support adolescent girls' development and empowerment, both now and in the future (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: The GAGE conceptual framework



The first building block of our '3 Cs' conceptual framework is capability outcomes. Championed originally by Amartya Sen (1984, 2004) and nuanced to better capture complex gender dynamics at intra-household and societal levels by Martha Nussbaum (2011) and Naila Kabeer (2003), the capabilities approach focuses on individuals' capacity to do and be what and who they wish. As Figure 1 shows, GAGE's framework is built around six capabilities: psychosocial well-being; health, nutrition, and sexual and reproductive health; education and learning; bodily integrity; economic empowerment; and voice and agency. The second building block is context dependency. Our '3 Cs' framework situates girls socio-ecologically and recognises not only that adolescent girls at different stages of the life course have different needs and constraints, but that these are also highly dependent on girls' contexts at the family/household, community, state and global levels. The third and final building block of our conceptual framework – change strategies – acknowledges that girls' contextual realities will not only shape the pathways through which they develop capabilities but also determine the change strategies open to them to improve their outcomes.



## Research contexts

### Bangladesh

One of the world's poorest countries when it declared independence 50 years ago, Bangladesh has recently achieved middle-income status, with impressive gains across an array of development indicators – including girls' education. Child marriage, however, remains the norm and Bangladesh is ranked third in the world in terms of prevalence. Almost two-thirds (59%) of Bangladeshi girls marry before age 18 and more than a fifth (22%) marry before the age of 15 (Girls Not Brides, 2022e), nearly all by parental arrangement (HRW, 2015). Child marriage is also common among the Rohingya refugees who fled to Bangladesh in 2017 to escape ethnic violence in Myanmar. One study found that nearly a quarter (22%) of displaced girls between the ages of 15 and 19 had already been married (Gordon et al., 2018). Among the Rohingya, marriages are almost always arranged (Melnikas et al., 2020).

### Ethiopia

Despite halving its poverty rate since 2000, Ethiopia remains one of the world's poorest countries (Sachs et al., 2021). It also remains one of the countries with the highest prevalence of child marriage. The 2016 Ethiopia Demographic and Health Survey (DHS) found that 40% of young women aged 20–24 had married before the age of 18 (Central Statistical Agency (CSA) and ICF, 2017). It also found that marriage before age 15 is becoming less common, with only 5.7% of girls aged 15–19 having married before the age of 15 (down from 14.1% for women aged 20–24) (ibid.). However, national-level child marriage figures obscure significant differences between Ethiopia's regions (Erulkar, 2022; Presler Marshall et al., 2016). Marriage type also varies by region. In Amhara and Afar, for example, girls' marriages are arranged, whereas in Oromia and Somali, they are increasingly adolescent-driven (Endale et al., 2022; Presler-Marshall et al., 2020a).

### Jordan

Situated at the crossroads of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, Jordan is an upper middle-income country that is hosting millions of Palestinian and Syrian refugees (Department of Statistics and ICF, 2019). Rates of child marriage vary by nationality. The 2017–2018 Jordan Population and Family Health Survey found that 8% of Jordanian women aged 20–24 had married prior to the age of 18, while less than 1% had married before the age of 15 (ibid.). Rates for Syrian women are far higher. Of those aged 20–24, more than a third (37%) had married before the age of 18 and more than a fifth (12%) had married before the age of 15. Figures for Palestinian females are lower, albeit not directly comparable because they use a different metric.<sup>4</sup> A UNICEF study found that in 2013, nearly 18% of marriages to Palestinian refugees involved girls under the age of 18 (UNICEF Jordan Country Office, 2014). Child marriages in Jordan – particularly those taking place between refugees – are generally arranged by adult family members. Girls, however, usually have some right (albeit highly constrained) to refuse the choice of spouse and to delay marriage (Presler-Marshall et al., 2020b).

### Lebanon

Lebanon – which, per capita, hosts more refugees than any other country (Operational Data Portal, 2020) – has been reeling from economic collapse since 2019 and in 2022 had an inflation rate of nearly 200% (Krayem et al., 2022). Although data is less recent and often unreliable because the government leaves non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to make their own estimates, rates of child marriage vary by nationality (as they do in Jordan). Girls Not Brides (2022f) reports that in 2009, 6% of Lebanese girls were married before the age of 18. Among women aged 20–24, 41% of Syrians, 25% of Palestinian refugees from Syria, and 12% of Palestinian refugees from Lebanon were married before the age of 18 (UNICEF and ICRW, 2017). Arranged marriage is common among Lebanon's refugee communities (Bartels et al., 2020; Presler-Marshall et al., 2020b).

<sup>4</sup> For Jordanians and Syrians, there are two commonly reported metrics: the proportion of girls aged 15–19 who were married by age 15 and the proportion of women aged 20–24 who were married by age 18. For Palestinians, the metric is the proportion of all marriages in a given year that included a girl under the age of 18.

# Findings

We turn now to our findings. After setting the stage with a brief overview of what we have learned about girls' marriages and marital families, we present our findings by capability domain as laid out in the GAGE conceptual framework (Figure 1). These include psychosocial well-being; nutrition, physical health, and sexual and reproductive health; education and learning; bodily integrity; and economic empowerment. Child marriage, and its role in influencing girls' voice and agency, are at the core of ever-married girls' intersecting disadvantage. Because of this, findings on voice and agency are woven through each section as well as presented in their own discrete section.

It should be noted that our findings reflect the fact that we have two rounds of in-person data collection from Ethiopia, including a cohort of girls aged 15-17 from urban areas initially interviewed in 2017-2018 and a newly recruited cohort of girls from rural areas mainly aged 15-17 when first interviewed at midline in 2019-2020. In

contrast, we present baseline data from Bangladesh and Jordan (due to delays caused by the Covid-19 pandemic). Therefore, the sample of girls in the Ethiopian sample is slightly older, on average, than those in Bangladesh and Jordan. At midline, Ethiopian girls were aged 15-19 years, and 43% had already been married. At baseline, girls in Bangladesh and Jordan were aged 15-18 years, and only 21% and 18% respectively had been married.

It should also be noted that this report explores ever-married girls' lives and, as such, the bulk of the evidence on which it draws is focused on those girls. Its primary purpose is not to compare the lives of ever-married and unmarried girls – or to suggest that child marriage is the only limiter of girls' lives (see Box 2). In the rare instances in which we do make comparisons with unmarried girls, it is to help contextualise married girls' disadvantage. As previously noted, demographic details of ever and never married girls who participated in the quantitative survey in each setting are provided in Appendix 1.

## Box 2: The limits on girls' lives

Although child marriage limits girls' capabilities in myriad and intersecting ways, it is not the only limiter of girls' lives. They are also limited by poverty, conflict and displacement – and simply because they are girls. For example, in Ethiopia and Jordan, our surveys found that married and unmarried girls are equally likely to have been hungry in the past month. In Ethiopia and Bangladesh, our surveys found that married and unmarried girls are equally (un)likely to have their own savings. Across all contexts, our qualitative research highlights that regardless of their marital status, girls have less input than boys into decisions that affect their lives – whether those are day-to-day decisions such as how to spend their time, or life-changing decisions such as whether to pursue secondary and tertiary-level education. As a 20-year-old Syrian mother living in Lebanon summed it up: *'Women do not have any control over their life in our community. Men control their lives. They take the decisions on everything in their [women's] lives. When the girl is single, the father and the brother control her life, and when she gets married, the husband does.'*

## What do we know about the marriages and marital households of the child brides in the GAGE sample?

### Key messages

- Most girls marry in mid-adolescence to young men in their early twenties – but some girls marry even before puberty; some marry boys only a few years older than they are, or men who are many years older.
- Most child marriages are rushed, with girls knowing their husbands only briefly before marriage.
- It is not uncommon for girls to feel they had some choice regarding marriage timing and choice of partner – though those choices are almost always extremely constrained.
- Many child marriages are quickly followed by divorce, often by girls.
- Most child brides live in very poor households.

### Girls' marriages

Across contexts, and with the caveat that many girls do not know how old they are because they do not have a birth certificate, girls reported that they married during mid-adolescence. The average age at marriage was between 15 and 15.5 years (see Table 2). However, averages obscure the fact that some girls married at a very young age. In Bangladesh, Ethiopia and Jordan, there are girls in the GAGE sample who married at age 10.

With some exceptions (primarily in Ethiopia, where our sample is much larger), girls' husbands are young adults. The average age gap between girls and their husband is six years. The gap is smallest (3.8 years) in Ethiopia's East Hararghe, where child marriages are increasingly adolescent-driven (albeit often facilitated by brokers), and largest (7.5 years) in Zone 5, Afar region, where girls must marry a maternal cousin (*absuma*) to ensure clan continuity. A Syrian father living in Jordan explained that it is important that the husband is always older than their wife because they must be mature providers. He said, '*It is always our nature that the difference in age between a husband and his wife ranges from 5 to 10 years... One of them must be aware and know how he runs the house.*'

A 22-year-old mother from Ethiopia's Somali region, who eloped with a 17-year-old boy when she was 15, added that girls themselves often prefer older men. She said:

*I wanted him to be much older than me... I wanted a man who could take responsibility for me. The older man will take care of you and he will understand you better. It is not the same as marrying a young boy. The young boys will not understand you and they don't think about others but only themselves.*

Also across contexts, girls' marriages were rushed – with girls knowing their husband for less than a year (on average), even though communities are generally quite small (see Table 3). In Bangladesh, where Rohingya girls' marriages were more rushed than those of their Bangladeshi peers, 39% of girls in the sample had known their husband for less than a month before marriage. Indeed, 24% had known their husband for less than a week. In Jordan, where Syrian marriages are generally more rushed than Jordanian marriages, 24% of girls in the sample had known their husband for less than a month, and 9% for less than a week. In Ethiopia, aggregate figures

**Table 2: Age-related survey findings**

	Ethiopia					Jordan			Bangladesh		
	Urban	Rural			Total	Jordanian	Syrian	Total	Camp	Host	Total
Girls' mean age at time of survey	18.1	17.9	17.6	16.7	17.5	16.8	16.8	16.8	16.6	16.6	16.6
Girls' mean age at time of marriage	15.7	15.9	14.7	14.8	15.1	16.0	15.4	15.5	15.2	14.7	15.0
Mean age gap between girls and their husband (years)	6.2	7.5	6.3	3.8	5.8	6.7	5.8	5.9	5.8	7.4	6.3

§ Note that the sample size presented here is drawn from the Covid-R2 survey conducted in November 2020 to January 2021 in Jordan; November 2020 to February 2021 in Ethiopia; and March to April 2021 in Bangladesh. The Covid-19 phone survey was not conducted in Zone 5, Afar.

**Table 3: How long did girls know their husband before marriage?**

	Ethiopia					Jordan			Bangladesh		
	Urban	Rural			Total	Jordanian	Syrian	Total	Camp	Host	Total
		Z5	SG	EH							
Less than a year	51%	55%	58%	47%	52%	44%	76%	71%	69%	69%	69%
Less than a month	24%	53%	51%	21%	36%	7%	27%	24%	45%	25%	39%
Less than a week	21%	52%	46%	15%	31%	0%	11%	9%	28%	16%	24%

hide regional differences borne of how marriages are transacted. In Zone 5 (Afar) and in South Gondar (Amhara), where marriages are arranged, around half of girls (52% and 46% respectively) had known their husband for less than a week before marriage. Indeed, in Zone 5 (Afar), girls often reported that they had not met their husband until the day of the marriage ceremony. An 18-year-old recalled, *'It was on the day of my marriage. They locked me in a room and they set a guard. Then I realised that I am going to marry.'* Girls in East Hararghe (where child marriages are increasingly adolescent-driven) and girls in urban areas were far less likely to have a rushed marriage. Fewer than a quarter had known their husband for less than a month (21% and 24% respectively). That said, a 19-year-old Somali girl, who eloped at age 13 with a 15-year-old boy, clarified that *'knowing'* one's husband does not necessarily mean having a personal relationship with him. When asked how well she had known her husband before marriage, she said *'We knew each other only from a distance.'*

Although most married girls have significant regrets about having become child brides (which we discuss in more detail later), and *'dream to go back in time'* (17-year-old Syrian girl in Lebanon), girls acknowledged that they were not necessarily unhappy with the timing of their marriage at the time it took place (see Table 4). Girls' preferences for marriage timing reflect whether they were allowed any input into timing or choice of partner, and whether they saw marriage as the only option open to them. For example, only a fifth (22%) of married girls in

Bangladesh would have preferred to delay their marriage. For some girls, this is because marriage is central to their identity. A 15-year-old divorced Rohingya girl reported that she would only be happy when she can marry again:

*If I had a husband, half of my problems would be solved. The respect and honour of a girl can be controlled by her husband. A girl can't be okay without a husband. If I have a husband, I won't look at anyone with bad intentions. My mind would be controlled. I want to marry again. Then I will be happy.*

For others, it is because marriage is key to food security. In Jordan, approximately one-third (35%) of married girls reported at baseline that they would have preferred to have waited until they were older to marry. This was more common among Syrian (37%) than Jordanian (19%) girls and was particularly the case when girls had married a cousin, because girls are unwilling to foment family discord by rejecting such marriage matches. In interviews, most married girls living in Jordan (and Lebanon) recalled having been enthusiastic to marry – usually because that enthusiasm had been carefully cultivated by the adults around them (see Figure 2). An 18-year-old Syrian girl reported that her mother had talked her into marriage at age 14: *'My mother said that we will not find anyone like him because he is a good man... Also, his family is good.'* In Ethiopia, girls' feelings about the timing of marriage reflect regional differences in how marriages are transacted. In Amhara and Afar, where nearly all marriages are arranged,

**Table 4: Proportion of girls who would have preferred to wait and marry when they were older**

Ethiopia					Jordan			Bangladesh		
Urban	Rural			Total	Jordanian	Syrian	Total	Camp	Host	Total
	Z5	SG	EH							
55%	66%	69%	29%	53%	19%	37%	35%	22%	22%	22%



**Figure 2: Why many girls are enthusiastic to marry (photo story)**

*'In eastern societies, girls are captive to many beliefs and limitations. These include the idea that if they leave it too late to marry, they will be spinsters for life.'*

(17-year-old Syrian girl in Jordan)

two-thirds of girls would have preferred to marry later than they did. Girls admitted that they acquiesced to marriage only because they felt they had no choice. A 17-year-old from Zone 5 (Afar) explained, *'I cannot refuse. If I refuse the man who was going to marry me, he would be given permission to take me by force.'* In East Hararghe, where

child marriages are increasingly adolescent-driven, because girls are afraid that if they do not marry before mid-adolescence then they will be *'left on the shelf'* and considered too old for marriage, fewer than a third of married girls were unhappy with the timing of their marriage. Girls in Somali region, all of whom had eloped – largely against their parents' wishes – also reported being happy with the timing of their marriage.

Noting again that girls are slightly older, on average in the Ethiopian sample compared to Bangladesh and Jordan, which affects our findings, a common thread across contexts is that many child marriages quickly end in divorce (see Table 5). In Ethiopia, more than a fifth (22%) of 15–19-year-old girls who had been married were already separated or divorced. Rates were especially high in Amhara (35%) and urban areas (27%), where divorce is more socially acceptable. In Afar, where, by contrast, divorce is highly stigmatised – and where girls who want out of their marriage often have no option but to flee the country (and are therefore lost to the study sample) – only 2% of the girls in our midline sample reported being separated or divorced. In Bangladesh, 17% of ever-married 15–18-year-old girls were already separated or divorced. In Jordan, the analogous figure is 9%.

### Married girls' households

With two exceptions – South Gondar, where girls from better-off households have long been at elevated risk of child marriage because they bring assets (usually land) to their marital families, and Zone 5 (Afar), where married and

**Table 5: Proportion of ever-married girls who were already separated or divorced**

Ethiopia					Jordan			Bangladesh		
Urban	Rural			Total	Jordanian	Syrian	Total	Camp	Host	Total
	Z5	SG	EH							
27%	2%	35%	15%	22%	4%	10%	9%	18%	16%	17%

**Table 6: Proportion of married girls' households that fall into the top 50% of asset ownership**

Ethiopia					Jordan			Bangladesh		
Urban	Rural			Total	Jordanian	Syrian	Total	Camp	Host	Total
	Z5	SG	EH							
18%	50%	63%	32%	42%	41%	27%	29%	38%	29%	36%



unmarried girls live in households with similar asset profiles (see Appendix 1) – our surveys found that ever-married girls are disproportionately likely to be living in poorer households (see Table 6). In Bangladesh and Jordan, 36% and 29% of ever-married girls respectively were living in households whose assets placed them in the top half of the asset index (e.g. household items, furniture, and vehicles).<sup>5</sup> Married girls living in urban areas of Ethiopia were especially likely to be living in less endowed households, primarily because their unmarried urban peers tend to live in the country's wealthiest households.<sup>6</sup>

During qualitative interviews, and with only rare exceptions, girls and their natal and marital families highlighted that most young couples are poor and still dependent – at least in part – on their families. While financial support can be provided by either natal or marital families (depending on family circumstances and context), most marriages are patrilocal, meaning that young couples live with or near the husband's family. The drivers of poverty are more context-dependent. In Bangladesh, the Bangladeshi girls in our sample live in remote, rural communities in what is one of the country's poorest districts. Most local work is in the agricultural sector. Rohingya girls in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh, live in camps that were permeable at baseline (2019) but by 2022 had been walled off from the surrounding community by barbed wire. The Rohingya are not allowed to work, though some are able to find occasional day labour. An 18-year-old Rohingya girl explained that her husband '*...Does day labour sometimes. He doesn't even get that job regularly. He has to bribe to get the job.*' In Ethiopia, household poverty is shaped by the seasonal nature of farming (especially in South Gondar), a labour market that is not growing as quickly as the population (especially in urban areas), and climate change (especially in East Hararghe in Oromia region, Zone 5 in Afar region, and in Somali region). A 14-year-old girl from East Hararghe explained that because she and her husband do not have their own land, and must do agricultural work for others, '*We work and buy food. Our life is from hand to mouth.*' A 21-year-old from Somali added that she and her family are now deeply in debt, after recent drought wiped out their livestock: '*We had animals*

*that died during the famine, our 13 oxen and 4 cows died because of famine.*' In Jordan, and particularly in Lebanon, the largest driver of household poverty is unemployment due to legal restrictions on refugees working. Where refugees have legal access to employment, it is most often only to a narrow group of occupations, and pursuing this can require expensive work permits. This leaves most refugees either unemployed or trapped in informal, low-paid and unregulated work. Palestinian refugees in Jordan, who, like their peers in Lebanon, are confined to jobs in a small number of sectors and are explicitly prohibited from professional work, highlighted that the influx of Syrian refugees has further destabilised what was already a bleak situation for them. The father of a married 17-year-old girl from Jordan explained that, '*Before Syrians came, the workers could work and the wages for a worker could be 20–25 JD [Jordanian dinars] a day, but now Jordanians prefer to hire Syrian workers as they only charge 10 JD.*'

Married girls who took part in our virtual qualitative research during the first year of the pandemic, or who are involved in the participatory research groups that GAGE is running in Ethiopia, Jordan and Lebanon, reported that economic crisis, Covid-19 and conflict have pushed more young families deeper into poverty and further jeopardised food security. A 19-year-old Syrian mother living in Lebanon stated that the economic crisis has left her family hungry: '*Our situation has changed a lot, the crisis has affected us greatly. We are not able to buy food.*' An 18-year-old Syrian mother living in Jordan added that Covid-19 lockdowns, which cost her husband his job, had up-ended household priorities. She said, '*Now, there are priorities... my children's diapers and the milk, it became more important than other things.*' Ethiopian girls in South Gondar (Amhara) and Zone 5 (Afar) reported that recent conflict has also impacted food security in their communities. A 17-year-old from Zone 5 explained that, '*We have finished the food we have. There is no way to get food since the roads were closed.*'

Having laid out what we have learned about girls' marriages and marital families, we turn now to the effects of child marriage on girls' broader lives – organised by capability domain.

<sup>5</sup> Mathematically, half of married girls should fall in the top half of the asset index and half of married girls should fall in the bottom half of the index.

<sup>6</sup> Income distribution across Ethiopia's rural regions is relatively flat. However, there is a large and growing gap between rural and urban areas (see World Bank, 2020).

## Psychosocial well-being

### Key messages

- Many married girls are emotionally distressed because they are unprepared for and overwhelmed by the physical and emotional work that marriage entails.
- Girls' distress is amplified when they experience violence, when they have children, by poverty, and by the fear of divorce, which is (in most contexts) highly stigmatized.
- Married girls are often physically and socially isolated, with little access to emotional support from family and friends, due to restrictions placed on them by their husband and in-laws. Where girls do have access to support, they are often loathe to ask for it due to taboos about what can and cannot be discussed outside of the household.
- Girls are rarely emotionally connected to their husband and often have a difficult relationship with their mother-in-law.
- It is extremely uncommon for girls to have access to formal psychosocial support services.

### Many ever-married girls are emotionally distressed

GAGE surveys include the General Health Questionnaire (GHQ) 12 – a 12-question screening tool used to identify minor psychiatric disorders. Across contexts, survey results suggest that a significant minority of ever-married girls are experiencing emotional distress (see Table 7). Rates were highest at baseline among Syrian girls living in Jordan (39%), and were lowest at midline among girls living in Zone 5 (Afar, Ethiopia) (1%). However, our qualitative research suggests that survey results do not capture the likelihood or depth of girls' distress. During qualitative interviews, which benefit from more flexibility in questioning and more time to develop trust, it was common for married girls in all research locations to admit that they were extremely unhappy. A 19-year-old young woman in Zone 5 (Afar) stated that, *'I was happy before marriage. Now everything is stressful.'* A 19-year-old Syrian young woman living in Jordan explained the depth of her feelings about marriage, reporting that, *'I feel like my life stopped, like I don't have anything to live for... My psychological state was completely destroyed by marriage.'*

Suicide ideation is not uncommon among ever-married girls in the GAGE sample – especially for those who were married against their will, those experiencing violence, or

those struggling with the aftermath of divorce (see Box 3). A 14-year-old girl from South Gondar (Amhara region, Ethiopia) explained that married life is so difficult that *'I wanted to kill myself.'* An 18-year-old Palestinian young woman from Jordan stated, *'I used to be proud of myself, but now I am not. All I need is to go back to being single, or to go out to a place where there is no one, or to die.'* Interestingly, while girls living in Zone 5 (Afar region) were least likely to answer survey questions in a way that suggests emotional distress, they were the most likely to admit during interviews that they have attempted suicide. This is presumably because they are much less likely to be literate – and exposed to the outside world – and struggled to understand the survey.

### Why are girls distressed?

#### Married life is hard, physically and emotionally

During interviews, married girls were clear about the primary driver of their emotional distress: even when marriages are not violent (see section on bodily integrity), married life is hard, especially for those who are still children. An 18-year-old Palestinian young woman from Jordan said,

**Table 7: Proportion of girls with GHQ-12 scores suggestive of emotional distress**

Ethiopia					Jordan			Bangladesh		
Urban	Rural			Total	Jordanian	Syrian	Total	Camp	Host	Total
	Z5	SG	EH							
25%	1%	8%	14%	13%	22%	39%	36%	27%	29%	28%

### Box 3: The stigma of divorce – ‘If I stay like this I will die’

Adara is a 19-year-old Syrian young woman living in Jordan who recently divorced the man she married when she was only 14. While she described her marriage as a nightmare from which she is glad to have awoken, divorce is extracting a much larger toll on her than she expected.

Adara began to fall apart in the first year of her marriage. *‘I felt like there is someone standing behind me. I felt that a lot. I got angry so fast. I was nervous all the time,’* she explained. All this she kept to herself. *‘I did not even share my thoughts with my sister, nor my mother... She was already stressed, why would I add more stress to her?’*

Last year, Adara’s husband divorced her – via Instagram. At first, Adara was delighted: *‘I was happy and thinking about my future plans, saying I want to study and do this and that.’* However, seeing how crushed her mother and sisters were, on her behalf, she gradually *‘became weaker when I saw how sad they were’*.

Adara is now in the throes of a major depressive episode: *‘If I stay like this, I will die before one year passes... I eat nothing... As for water, I do not drink too much... I have a headache most of the time and I feel like my sight is getting worse. I also get cold so easily... Whatever happens to me, I do not care anymore so I do not go to doctors.’*

Adara’s pain is driven by the stigma that surrounds her – as a divorcee – and her lack of any form of emotional support. *‘If I wear long clothes, people will talk. If I wear shorter clothes, stay at home, or go out, they will talk. They never stop. For example, if you are staying home, they will say you are mentally ill, and if you go out, they ask where are you going... They accuse you of things you have never done,’* she explained.

*‘You feel you got kidnapped, this is how I feel.’* A 21-year-old Ethiopian mother from the Somali region (where marriage is increasingly adolescent-driven), who had married at age 14, noted that *‘The greatest mistake I made was to get married.’* Girls noted that the physical demands of marriage can be overwhelming. A 17-year-old Syrian living in Lebanon explained that she does all the work for her household and feels detached from her own life:

*I take care of all the housework and the cooking... We are a family of 13. My mother-in-law makes me take care of her young children and my husband’s children from his first wife as well. I am always exhausted, and I do not feel I have a life. I do not feel anything, I am not even sad anymore. I am just doing the work as a machine.*

A 16-year-old girl from South Gondar (Amhara, Ethiopia) noted that she is so busy with household chores that she does not have time to eat and is losing weight. She said, *‘Since I got married I am often busy with different household jobs, which is very tiresome... I am now getting skinny because of the work burden at home.’*

Married girls’ physical exhaustion, however, generally pales in comparison to their emotional exhaustion. Juggling the demands of marital family members, and confined by gender norms that leave them with little voice and a terror of divorce, most girls reported feeling completely overwhelmed by married life. An 18-year-old Syrian young woman living in Jordan, who married at age 14, recalled the early days of her marriage: *‘I was shocked. There were*

*many things that changed... I was unable to deal with the problems, to deal with my husband or to deal with my mother-in-law.’* Girls often singled out their relationship with their mother-in-law as the most fraught. A 15-year-old from South Gondar reported that she lives in constant fear of upsetting her mother-in-law:

*My mother-in-law gets upset at minor mistakes, as I find it difficult to manage all the household jobs and that makes me sad. I am not on good terms with her... I am afraid of her... She would tell my [natal] family and I am afraid to get on bad terms with my family. It is disgraceful not to respect a mother-in-law.*

A 17-year-old Rohingya girl added that her relationship with her mother-in-law is complicated by her sister-in-law, who is jockeying for status in the household. She explained, *‘My sister-in-law complains to my mother-in-law even if I don’t do anything bad. She makes me look bad in front of my in-laws. She always lies... I have to suffer much for this.’*

Girls noted that having children (which, across contexts, rapidly follows marriage because early fertility is seen as desirable, see section on health) amplifies the stresses of married life. While girls love their children, and most echoed one respondent’s sentiment that *‘to be with my children by itself makes me happy’* (20-year-old Ethiopian mother from the Somali region), many married mothers admit that their children’s constant demands are overwhelming – especially since fathers are rarely involved in caregiving (see Figure 3). An 18-year-old mother of three from East



**Figure 3: The demands of motherhood (photo story)**

*'My life was difficult before the pandemic, but now it has become a black hole. I have a newborn who cries all the time. I do not know how to comfort him. My mother, who should be here teaching me how to care for him, cannot come. My husband has lost his job and is angry at me all the time because he is stressed about our financial situation. I am constantly worried about running out of milk and diapers for my son. I am so tired of life.'*

(17-year-old Palestinian girl, Lebanon)

Hararghe reported that motherhood had worn her down: *'Now I have given birth to children and I am raising them. My morale has been broken by them.'* A 17-year-old Syrian girl living in Lebanon, who noted that her husband screams at her when the children cry, confessed that she finds her children so overwhelming that she resorts to physical violence. She said, *'I am always nervous, shouting at the children... I am not able to handle all of this and sometimes when I get nervous I lash out at my children, hitting them to relieve my anger.'* A 19-year-old Palestinian mother from Jordan, who also admitted to hitting her children, added that perpetrating violence is not only a symptom of distress but a cause, which drives feelings of guilt. She explained: *'I keep looking at them while they are sleeping thinking, how could I do this to them? You feel you are a failing mother.'* Married girls who are not yet mothers also reported that motherhood is stressful – because of expectations surrounding fertility. A 19-year-old Syrian young woman living in Lebanon noted that *'the pressure on girls to get pregnant makes them stressed all the time.'*

Across contexts, girls reported that poverty amplifies the stresses of marriage and motherhood. It increases household tensions, amplifies competition for resources

(in intergenerational households), and results in extra physical labour for which girls are primarily responsible. An 18-year-old Syrian young woman from Lebanon – where the collapse of the economy has pushed most households into poverty and refugee households even deeper into poverty – explained that poverty is the root of problems in her household. She said, *'Our problems are due to lack of money, we are no longer the same as before... My husband also feels upset... Because he works all the time and cannot provide everything we and his parents need, so he creates problems inside the house for trivial reasons.'* Married girls added that although poverty is difficult to cope with before they become mothers, it becomes a source of all-consuming anxiety once they have children. A 17-year-old Rohingya girl explained that she cannot stop worrying about her children's future: *'I have three children... I have no assets, no money... I worry about that.'* Married girls in Ethiopia noted that recent ethnic and regional conflict has added further to their worries, because services have been difficult to access and they are terrified for their children's safety (see Box 4).

### Emotional isolation

Married girls are also distressed because they are lonely. Although some have close friends – often their sisters-in-law – or are able to maintain close relationships with their parents and siblings, many married girls reported having no one with whom they could share their worries. Indeed, it was not uncommon for girls to say they did not even have someone they could share good news with. In most cases, this also includes their husband. A 15-year-old Palestinian girl from Jordan explained that she keeps everything to herself: *'I hold my pillow and scream in it while crying... I never let anyone hear me, I keep everything in my heart. I like to keep my problems to myself and not talk to anyone about them.'*

Across contexts, and prior to the Covid-19 pandemic (see Box 5), approximately two-fifths of married girls did not have a trusted friend (see Table 8). Rates were lowest in Ethiopia's Zone 5 (Afar), where our midline survey found that only 40% of married girls reported having a trusted friend; and highest in the host communities of Cox's Bazar, where 79% of girls reported at baseline that they had a friend they could trust. Also across contexts, married girls are much less likely to have a trusted friend than their unmarried peers – largely because ever-married girls are unlikely to be enrolled in school (see section on education). The gap is 16 percentage points in Bangladesh (60% vs.



#### Box 4: The impact of the conflict in northern Ethiopia on child brides

Young mothers in Ethiopia reported that the recent outbreak of conflict in northern Ethiopia has disrupted public services, including health care and social protection. An 18-year-old young woman from Zone 5 (Afar region) explained that health infrastructure in her community had been destroyed, leaving her child unvaccinated: *'The health centre has been destroyed and looted during the conflict.'* A 23-year-old from Debre Tabor (Amhara region) added that the Productive Safety Net Programme, Ethiopia's flagship social protection scheme, is not operational in conflict-affected areas, leaving families without access to food. She said, *'After the conflict the safety net aid stopped completely and currently there is no safety net food assistance.'*

Other girls said that the conflict has left them terrified for their children's safety. A 17-year-old from Zone 5 (Afar) explained that, *'I used to wake up early in the morning and carry my baby on my back ready to move from this locality.'* A 20-year-old from rural South Gondar (Amhara), who was forced to flee her community when her daughter was only two months old, was so fearful for her baby that she wished she had not had her: *'I was worried for my child. I wish I had never given birth to her. I hear they kill children.'* Young mothers' fears are apparently grounded in reality. An 18-year-old from rural South Gondar reported that a pregnant member of the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) was captured and killed, along with her infant: *'They killed her with the newborn.'*

#### Box 5: Impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic on the psychosocial well-being of married girls in Jordan

Research conducted following the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic found that married girls living in Jordan were struggling emotionally (Abu Hamad et al., 2021). In our survey, 13% of married girls had scores on the Patient Health Questionnaire (PHQ-8) suggestive of moderate or severe depression; and 15% had scores on the Generalised Anxiety Disorder (GAD-7) scale suggestive of moderate or severe anxiety. Girls' distress was driven in part by their social isolation. At the time of the survey, 40% of married girls had not left their homes for at least 7 days and 41% had had no contact – either in person or online – with a friend in the past week. Nearly half (45%) of married girls surveyed reported that they did not have a trusted friend. An 18-year-old Syrian explained, *'I don't go out at all, I only stay at home, all the time.'* Girls also reported increased violence in the household, primarily due to increased tension around finances. With the caveat that the survey was phone-based, and so girls did not have privacy, a quarter (25%) of married girls reported increased yelling in the household. In individual interviews, a few respondents were more forthcoming. A 20-year-old Syrian mother of five, who married at age 12, reported that her husband has begun beating her with an electrical wire. When she is beaten in front of her children, and they begin crying, the children are beaten as well.

**Table 8: Proportion of married girls with a trusted friend**

Ethiopia					Jordan			Bangladesh		
Urban	Rural			Total	Jordanian	Syrian	Total	Camp	Host	Total
	Z5	SG	EH							
61%	40%	51%	73%	58%	56%	62%	61%	52%	79%	60%

76%), 14 percentage points in Jordan (61% vs. 75%), and 10 percentage points in Ethiopia (58% vs. 68%).

During interviews, married girls overwhelmingly attributed their lack of close friends directly to marriage. Girls mentioned their workloads, which leave them with no time to socialise, as well as restrictions placed on them by their husband and in-laws. An 11-year-old from East

Hararghe reported, *'I used to spend time with my village friends before I got married... I now have little time with them because I get busy these days.'* An 18-year-old Syrian young woman living in Jordan explained that:

*When a girl is living in her family's house, she has friends and she can receive them whenever she wants, and she can go to visit her friends, she goes with her mother*



*anywhere. But at the husband's house, he prevents her from going to visit her friends, he also prevents her from receiving her friends at home.*

In South Gondar and East Hararghe (Ethiopia), and in Jordan and Lebanon, girls were often openly scathing of the gender norms that prevent them from spending time with friends. Girls who had been forced to drop out of school for marriage were often the most eloquent, in part because they were the ones who experienced most acutely the transition from social embeddedness to social isolation. As a 15-year-old Palestinian girl from Jordan exclaimed, *'To them it's wrong for a girl to have her friends over or talk to them after marriage, but we don't think it's wrong at all... It's the worst thing that could happen to a girl, losing the freedom to talk to her friends after marriage.'* In Bangladesh and in Ethiopia's Afar region, on the other hand, most girls expressed only sadness that the time for friends had passed. An 18-year-old Rohingya young woman stated, *'I used to have a friend. We haven't met for so long. These [memories] are about our past. Now she has got married and I also have got married. Friendship is over.'*

Across contexts, married girls who did report having friends universally agreed that there was one topic never to be discussed with them: what happens in the marital home. A 20-year-old Syrian young woman living in Jordan explained the impact of marriage on friendships: *'We were a close group of friends, but after marriage this changed... I do not tell them about home secrets and private life... It is true that they are my friends, but marriage changes things.'* An 18-year-old Syrian young woman living in Lebanon commented that she never talks openly when asked about her relationship with her husband: *'Friends will ask, "How is your husband?" I will say, "It's OK." Like that.'* Girls in Ethiopia reported similar customs. A 13-year-old girl from South Gondar (Amhara) reported spending regular time with friends but then added, *'We talk about farming... We do not talk about anything else.'* A 14-year-old girl from East Hararghe (Oromia), when asked why she has never discussed her difficult marriage with the friend she sees every day, replied, *'It is culture.'*

In Ethiopia, Jordan and Lebanon, many married girls also have very little interaction with their own natal families. Sometimes this is due to the physical distances involved. A 19-year-old Syrian young woman living in an informal tented settlement in Lebanon said, *'My mother is in Syria and I did not see her in years.'* More often, however, girls'

access to their natal families is reduced by the restrictions that their husband and in-laws place on girls' mobility and behaviour. An 18-year-old Palestinian young woman from Jordan explained how, *'He [her husband] banned me from going out, even to my parents' house.'* An 18-year-old Syrian mother of four living in Jordan added that her husband would not even allow her to call her parents. Instead, she can only send them non-interactive voice recordings of which her husband has approved. *'He does not give me the phone to use it. He would turn on the recording for a voice call and then send it to them.'* Although married girls are sometimes frank about the difficult relationships they had with their parents – especially their mother – prior to marriage, most admitted that they miss them very much now that contact is reduced. A 20-year-old young woman from Zone 5 (Afar), who married at age 17, stated, *'I miss my family very much.'*

Girls who do have regular interactions with their own families often report that those interactions do not leave them feeling supported. In some cases, this is because interactions are purely practical. A 17-year-old girl from South Gondar (Amhara) explained that while she sees her mother often, they discuss only topics such as *'household matters like cooking and getting ready by storing enough flour before getting empty'*. In other cases, it is because girls censor what they share with their natal family, for fear that their concerns will get back to their marital family and ultimately make matters worse. This is particularly the case when girls are experiencing violence. An 18-year-old Palestinian young woman from Jordan explained that, *'I started to tell my family, this caused more and more problems to happen, so I decided to keep silent.'* More often, however, it is because girls' relatives reinforce the notion that girls are on their own now that they are married. A 17-year-old Rohingya girl reported that, *'When I feel sad, I tell my mother. She tells me that I have to eat my husband's food. I can't leave that house.'* A 19-year-old girl from Zone 5 (Afar) noted that she receives similar advice from her mother: *'She tells me to love my husband and not hate or resent him in any way.'* The mothers of married girls often agreed with girls' assessment of maternal support. A Syrian mother living in Jordan reported that she had told her 15-year-old daughter, *'You should obey your husband, you should obey all your brothers-in-law, you should obey your mother-in-law and you shouldn't tell me anything that happens at your house.'*

## Girls' access to support

Many ever-married girls do report some access to psychosocial support, which is mostly informal and provided by family and friends. Across contexts, mothers, sisters and sisters-in-law were mentioned most often as sources of support. A 15-year-old Syrian girl living in Jordan said: *'I mostly tell my mother about my problems... My mother supports me mostly, she supports me more than my husband.'* An 18-year-old Rohingya young woman explained that because girls spend their days isolated at home, sisters-in-law often provide one another with some level of support: *'We three stay at home the whole day. So we talk to each other. My sister-in-law helps me with my household chores. We chit chat and comb each other's hair.'* A 13-year-old girl from South Gondar (Amhara) added that her sister-in-law, who is the same age, even tries to temper her own brother's behaviour and encourage him to treat her better. She explained, *'If he makes me sad, she will insult him. She will advise him... She tells him why he is speaking to me in bad ways.'*

Less regularly, girls reported receiving emotional support from their father. Girls' narratives about fathers primarily revolve around the things that fathers do for girls to make them feel loved, rather than open communication about girls' distress, which is felt to be inappropriate as it contravenes age and gender norms. For example, a 16-year-old Syrian girl living in Jordan reported that when her mother-in-law called her father – expecting him to beat the girl for refusing to take a relatively public pregnancy

test – he instead responded by *'treating me as a child... He bought ice cream for me.'*

Although some ever-married girls reported spending time with friends, noting that this time makes them happy, girls were unlikely to report discussing sensitive matters with their friends, due to taboos about what can and cannot be divulged outside of the household and fears that over-sharing may result in gossip, which would damage the girl's family (natal and marital). One of the few married girls to discuss having meaningful conversations with a friend, citing the reason as *'to have some kind of relief, to release life pressure,'* later added that her friend was 53 and therefore able to *'never tell anyone about my issues'* (17-year-old Palestinian girl in Jordan).

A small minority of married girls – primarily those who married in late adolescence to a partner of their own choice – reported being emotionally close to their husband. Even these narratives, however, speak primarily to girls' expectations and the need to design programmes that improve young couples' relationships (see boxes 6, 7 and 8 for examples of promising practice programming). A 19-year-old young woman from Zone 5 (Afar), married by arrangement at age 15 to a much older cousin and now divorced and happily remarried to an age mate, explained that she loves her husband because *'he doesn't try to control me or beat me at all'*.

Across contexts, married girls' access to formal psychosocial support services is extremely rare. Indeed,

### Box 6: Meseret Hiwot and Addis Birhan

The Meseret Hiwot (Base of Life) programme was launched in 2008, by the international NGO, Population Council, in Ethiopia's Amhara region. It was designed to support married girls' sexual and reproductive health and broader well-being. Female mentors, recruited from local communities, went door-to-door to enrol girls and young women between the age of 10 and 24. Girls met in groups, three times a week, and covered a curriculum that included communication and self-esteem, gender dynamics, financial literacy, menstrual health management, family planning, and sexually transmitted infections (STIs). When men in project areas requested their own programming, an add-on intervention – Addis Birhan (New Light) – was developed. Groups were also led by local mentors and the curriculum was focused on partner communication, non-violent and respectful relationships, caring for wives and children, substance use, family planning, and STIs. By 2013, more than 200,000 married girls and young women and 130,000 husbands had taken part in programming.

An evaluation compared the outcomes of three groups of married girls: those taking part in Meseret Hiwot; those taking part in Meseret Hiwot whose husband had taken part in Addis Birhan; and a control group. Girls' participation was associated with improvements in family planning, accompaniment to clinic, STI testing, and husbands' engagement with domestic work. Husbands' simultaneous participation resulted in larger improvements across outcomes (Erulkar and Tamrat, 2014).



### Box 7: Inspiring Married Adolescent Girls to Imagine New Empowered Futures (IMAGINE)



IMAGINE was launched by the international NGO, CARE, in 2017, to improve the lives of married girls in Niger and Bangladesh. In both countries, married girls are organised into groups and receive a wide- ranging curriculum that includes sexual and reproductive health and financial literacy, as well as communication and decision-making skills, and gender norms. Girls are also supported to earn their own incomes. In Bangladesh, young couples receive counselling and support to develop healthy communication patterns. In Niger, husbands are reached through existent informal men's social clubs. The programme has not yet been evaluated (CARE, 2020).

### Box 8: Matasa Matan Arewa



Adolescents 360 (A360) was a four-year programme implemented in Ethiopia, Nigeria and Tanzania to increase adolescent girls' uptake of modern contraceptives. The first phase of the project, which is now in phase two (A360, 2023), was spearheaded by the international NGO, Population Services International, and launched in 2016. In Nigeria, the tailored intervention, known as Matasa Matan Arewa, used male interpersonal communicators to work with girls' husbands to encourage them to protect the health of their wives and children by supporting girls to work with mentors to develop life and vocational skills. The programme also worked with religious leaders to encourage contraceptive uptake for healthy pregnancy spacing. Evaluation found that among couples directly exposed to programming, contraceptive uptake improved, though researchers also noted that taking vocational training to scale was difficult and led to some ethical concerns given girls' expectations for subsequent employment (Newport et al., 2019).

only girls living in Jordan reported having any access at all, and even those girls were quick to note that service availability cannot be equated with service uptake, as few families will allow their daughters or daughters-in-law to use services that imply mental illness, due to widespread stigma. Girls who reported accessing services noted that they were provided by gender-focused NGOs (see Box 9). One young woman, an 18-year-old Syrian, reported having taken a class on how to relate to her husband. While she felt the class was useful, she explained that the content put the

onus of communication on her shoulders, rather than her husband's: *'When I had a small problem with my husband, I didn't keep silent... I used to exaggerate the problem... Now, I wait and I keep silent until he calms down and we can talk.'* Another young woman, a 19-year-old Syrian, took a class on how to cope with divorce. She reported that it was immensely helpful: *'I would like to see him in the street mostly. At first it used to worry me, but now I want him to be upset on purpose... I am more powerful.'*

### Box 9: The International Rescue Committee's (IRC) Life Skills Package for Early Marriage



In Lebanon, the IRC has implemented a pilot programme targeting married and engaged Syrian and Lebanese girls with activities designed to improve girls' psychosocial well-being and resilience to gender-based violence. Girls are brought together into a safe space on a weekly basis and taught about gender norms, sexual and reproductive health, budgeting and financial planning, and healthy relationships. Childcare is provided and girls are referred to educational, health and legal services as needed. While the programme does not appear to have been formally evaluated, participants report improved self-confidence, better negotiation skills and less isolation (IRC, 2017).

## Education and learning

### Key messages

- It is rare for ever-married girls to be enrolled in school. Married girls have too little time to study, because they shoulder heavy domestic and care burdens, and their mobility is limited by their husband and family.
- Most girls who marry in adolescence leave school well before marriage, which means they have relatively fewer 'educational assets' on which to draw.
- In order for girls to combine marriage and education, it takes personal fortitude and supportive family (both marital and natal). When a married girl becomes a mother, the challenges of staying in education are almost insurmountable.
- In Ethiopia in particular, ever-married girls' access to education improves after divorce.

### Married girls' access to education

The relationship between education and child marriage is complex. On the one hand, girls who lack access to education are at greater risk of child marriage; and on the other, girls who are married lack access to education. Both relationships are visible in the GAGE data – albeit in different ways that reflect the different educational opportunities available in different contexts (see Table 9).

Across contexts, ever-married girls are very unlikely to be enrolled in school. In Ethiopia, our midline survey found that 17% of older cohort married girls (compared to 75% of their unmarried peers) were enrolled in school in the current term. In Jordan and Bangladesh, where girls were, on average, one year younger when most recently surveyed, enrolment rates were even lower: 9% in Jordan and 2% in Bangladesh (vs. 64% and 37% respectively for older cohort unmarried girls). Although informal education has the potential to support married girls to continue to

learn, even when they do not have access to school, we found no evidence that programming is reaching ever-married girls at scale in any of the four contexts, though there are promising practices that might be emulated (see Box 10).

Variation within countries is as marked as variations between countries. In Ethiopia, married girls' enrolment is most common in South Gondar (29%), where girls' and parents' commitment to education is relatively strong; many marriage agreements require the marital family to support the girl's continued enrolment, and divorced girls are not discouraged from re-joining education even if they are years too old for grade. A married 15-year-old girl from South Gondar confirmed that *'I was told that I could attend school alongside my married life.'* Ever-married girls' enrolment is also higher in urban areas of Ethiopia (21%), because many girls – unmarried and married – move

**Table 9: Education-related survey findings for ever-married girls**

	Ethiopia					Jordan			Bangladesh		
	Urban	Rural			Total	Jordanian	Syrian	Total	Camp	Host	Total
Enrolled in the most recent term	21%	7%	29%	6%	17%	9%	9%	9%	0%*	6%	2%
NEVER enrolled in formal education	8%	63%	17%	21%	24%	0%	<1%	<1%	48%	12%	37%
Last grade completed (among dropouts)	6.8	4.9	5.9	5	5.7	8.2	6.6	6.9	95% have not completed primary level	44% have not completed primary level	80% have not completed primary level
Age at dropout	14.2	14.5	14.3	12.9	13.8	14.4	13.3	13.5	9.8	12.6	10.9

\* Note: Formal schooling is not offered in Rohingya refugee camps in Bangladesh, and so enrolment rates are 0% for all adolescents who reside in camps.





### Box 10: Education for married girls

A recent report on the role of education in preventing and responding to child marriage observed that there are extremely few examples of programmes that seek to support married girls to access education.

Two programmes – Marriage: No Child's Play, which ran in Mali and Niger from 2016 to 2020, and Right to be a Girl, which ran in Sierra Leone from 2017 to 2021 – were identified as having served married girls alongside unmarried girls. The first provided married girls with literacy education and vocational skills, alongside awareness raising on sexual and reproductive health and children's rights. The second provided girls with safe spaces, vocational and life skills training, information on sexual and reproductive health, and support to return to formal education. Participant girls, and their husbands, spoke highly about girls' improved income-generating capacities, which not only helped with household finances but also improved girls' self-confidence, access to decision-making, and relationships with their husband and in-laws. That said, there is little evidence that programming has resulted in fundamental shifts in gender norms (Versluys, 2019).

to urban areas specifically to access secondary education. Ever-married girls living in East Hararghe (6%) (where girls ostensibly 'choose' to marry and are therefore poorly positioned to ask to stay on in education) and in Zone 5 (Afar) (7%) are unlikely to be enrolled, even if they are divorced. A 14-year-old married girl from Zone 5 explained that, *'In this area, it is not allowed to get back to school after one has got married.'* Where married girls are enrolled, it is most often due to their own insistence (see Box 11). In Bangladesh, while it is possible albeit uncommon for ever-married Bangladeshi girls to be enrolled (6%), Rohingya girls, regardless of their marital status, have no access to education at all due to gender norms that require girls to be physically isolated at home after puberty. This is

reinforced by the Bangladesh government's policy that has, until recently, denied Rohingya adolescents access to even informal education. A 15-year-old Rohingya girl explained, *'I cannot study. I always stay at home.'*

Ever-married girls who are out of school are out of school for one of two reasons: either they never enrolled at all, which is common in Bangladesh and Ethiopia; or they have already dropped out. In Bangladesh, our baseline survey found that more than a third of married girls (37%) had been totally deprived of their right to an education. Rates of never-enrolment were particularly high among Rohingya girls (48%), though they were still substantial for Bangladeshi girls (12%). With the caveat that our sample of married girls was purposively selected – and so not



Syrian refugee girl who faced issues with her ex-husband, Al-Mafraq, Jordan © Nathalie Bertrams/GAGE 2023



### Box 11: Staying in school – ‘I said I would not be a fool’

Fatima is a 19-year-old divorcee from Ethiopia's Zone 5 (Afar). She is in 12<sup>th</sup> grade and hopes to attend university and study medicine. While her community and her family were initially opposed to her education, her determination has not only changed her own life, but is starting to change theirs.

*‘My mother did not raise me,’ explained Fatima. ‘When I stopped taking my mother’s breast, my mother gave me to my grandmother. My grandmother became weak, and she gave me to my aunt.’*

Her aunt and uncle, she explained, were opposed to formal education, because they saw it as irrelevant compared to wealth: *‘My family are rich... They say that education is not as good as wealth... My family were telling me repeatedly that learning was not good... They say they don’t know about education... It is only goats that we know... Poor people might be better. Rich people remain in the field.’*

When Fatima began to try to sneak away to school, her aunt and uncle first resorted to hiding her schoolbooks. When that failed to dampen her interest, her uncle sought to use physical violence to keep her from going to school. *‘He was tying and beating me... not allowing me to go.’*

Fatima remained undaunted. She had cousins attending university and was determined to follow in their footsteps. *‘When I saw them learning, I said I would not be a fool... I was telling them that I was not any less than others who were learning.’* Her aunt and uncle gave in and Fatima was allowed to attend school full-time.

When she married her absuma (cousin, reflecting local tradition) at age 15, Fatima's aunt and uncle again tried to force her to drop out of school. *‘He [her uncle] said when they got me married I would stop going to school.’* Fatima was adamant that they could not make her drop out: *‘I told him that I would not sit down and wait for my husband in the house. I told my uncle that if my husband has work, he can go to his work and I will go to my school. I told them that I did not want a husband that would not allow me to go to school. I told them that I don’t want a husband who expects me to look after the goats for him.’*

Fatima again won – and was allowed to divorce and continue on to secondary school, emphasising that *‘It was with my own decision that I reached here... I was the one who pushed hard to reach this level.’*

Fatima is delighted that the past few years have finally seen her family and her community begin to embrace education. *‘Recently, people are getting better. Things are advancing... They have understood the value of education... Now they are happy because a school is constructed for them... My father and my uncle came to understand. My younger brother was not attending school. Now he has started to attend school.’*

necessarily representative of the larger population – interviews with key informants suggest that married girls' low rate of school uptake is related to poverty among natal families and girls marrying at a very early age. In Ethiopia, where access to even primary education is a relatively recent phenomenon (especially in pastoralist Afar and Somali regions), our midline survey found that 24% of married girls in the GAGE sample had never been enrolled in school. Of their age mates who were unmarried, only 8% had never enrolled (see Appendix 1). The gap between married and unmarried girls was largest in Afar, where 63% of married girls compared to 24% of unmarried girls had never enrolled. A 15-year-old married girl explained that she had never been to school because schooling was a new phenomenon: *‘There was no school at that time. The school is opened recently.’* The enrolment gap was still large, however, even in locations with a longer history of formal

education. In South Gondar (Amhara), for example, 17% of married girls had never enrolled, compared to 11% of their unmarried peers. A 13-year-old married girl noted that for her family, girls' education was not seen as important. She said, *‘Our mothers and fathers did not send us to school... We were looking after goats. What else would we know?’*

In Jordan, nearly all (99%) ever-married girls who were out of school had been enrolled in school at some point in the past. Indeed, even in Ethiopia (76%) and Bangladesh (63%), most married girls had attended school when they were younger. Across contexts, however, married girls dropped out when they were quite young. The average age at which ever-married girls left school was 13.8 years in Ethiopia (after completing 5.7 grades), 13.5 years in Jordan (after completing 6.9 grades), and only 10.9 years in Bangladesh (with 80% of dropout girls not having completed even primary certification). The age of dropout was youngest



An unmarried school-girl helping with housework, Afar, Ethiopia © Nathalie Bertrams/GAGE 2023

for married Rohingya girls (9.8 years old), likely influenced by displacement to Bangladesh and the absence of formal schools in the refugee camps. Our findings underscore that most married girls had dropped out of school well before their marriage. As a 17-year-old Syrian girl who had married at age 14 and was living in Jordan explained: *'In my family*

*girls don't complete their education. They only study until grade 7 or 8. A girl is meant only for her husband's house. These are our customs and traditions.'*

Our qualitative research found that school-leaving and marriage are often closely linked. This is because once a girl is engaged to marry, her fiancé is sometimes given





**Figure 4: The impacts of Covid-19 on a married girl's education (photo story)**

*'I am in 10<sup>th</sup> grade and I find it difficult to study because classes are online. It is hard to be motivated and I cannot ask about things I do not understand.'*

*(18-year-old young woman, Jordan)*

control over her life. For example, a 19-year-old Syrian young woman living in a Jordanian host community explained that she had been a very good student, but that her fiancé had made her drop out of 11<sup>th</sup> grade:

*I dropped out from school when I got engaged... I wanted to complete my study to obtain the Tawjihi certificate [General Secondary Education Certificate examination]... My husband told me that I should not go to school.*

A 19-year-old Palestinian young woman living in Lebanon reported similar customs in that country. She said,

*My fiancé had full control over my life. My parents stopped making decisions on anything related to me, it was up to him to decide anything about my life and so he made me leave school when I was 16.*

## What keeps married girls out of school?

During qualitative interviews, we explored with married girls, their caregivers and their husbands the intersecting barriers that prevent married girls from accessing education. Participants emphasised that marriage restricts girls' access to education through several different pathways. First, in most communities, marriage and education represent two divergent pathways, making enrolment all but unimaginable, even for girls themselves. The father of a married girl from Zone 5 (Ethiopia's Afar region) noted, *'It is not possible. There is no one who returned to school after getting married.'* An 18-year-old Syrian young woman living in Lebanon explained that: *'Once a girl gets married, she is for the husband's family. They [the girls] don't go to school.'*

Second, even if married girls (and their parents) can imagine girls attending school, the husband generally refuses permission. A 19-year-old young woman living in the town of Batu, Ethiopia, reported that she dropped out of technical and vocational college because *'My husband was not happy after I started... He started to get jealous of me... He snapped at me.'* A 17-year-old Rohingya girl noted that while she would love to attend informal education classes, *'My husband wouldn't let me study. He would say, "Why do you need to study at this old age after so long?"'* An 18-year-old Syrian young woman living in Jordan who married at age 14 added that husbands have the right to refuse their wives – even when they have promised otherwise – because in their culture, men have complete authority over women. She explained:

*There was an agreement to complete my education... I wanted to be a lawyer... I love justice and I like to behave fairly among people... He refused to let me go to school... I made a fight, but in the end I knew that he had the right.*

Finally, girls added that even if they had permission from their husband or marital family, they do not have the time to attend school – especially once they start childbearing. A 20-year-old young woman from East Hararghe (Oromia), who married at age 17, explained that: *'We have lots of chores to do at home. We also have children and it is difficult to attend school because we do not have someone who looks after our children.'* A 19-year-old Syrian young woman living in Lebanon agreed: *'You have to be at home all the time and prepare your husband's food and his bath and everything.'* Married mothers in Jordan noted that even home-schooling, which the government of Jordan provided during Covid-19-related school closures, requires more time than they can commit (see Figure 4). An 18-year-

old Syrian mother reported that she abandoned distance education after her daughter was born: *'I didn't complete [my education] because I am busy with my daughter and my husband.'*

### How do some girls find a pathway back into education after marriage?

A minority of ever-married girls do manage to combine marriage and education. With few exceptions, these girls fall into one of three categories. Some married girls without children seamlessly maintain their status as students before and after marriage. This was most common in Ethiopia, in South Gondar (Amhara region) and in urban areas, where education is seen by young people, their families and the broader community as key to a more economically stable future. A young husband from South Gondar reported that he had to fight the authorities to secure his 12-year-old wife's access to education and that she is now excelling:

*I also told my wife to pursue her education... She had had an interest to attend school but she was forced to marry through the family arrangement... The school director refused to register her... I challenged him, it is one's right to get education even after getting married, which has to be decided by couples... She then began her education... I also got her a tutor [after school] when she had difficulty in understanding the lessons... She then improved her education and is ranked 4<sup>th</sup> in her classroom.*

A few married Syrian girls in Jordan and Lebanon also reported continuing their education in the first months and years of marriage. These girls tended to study at home and to do so only because girls' continued enrolment was written into their marriage contract, rather than having the active support of their husband. The mother of a married Syrian girl in Jordan noted that she had had to take her daughter's marital family to court to ensure the girl's continued access to education. She recalled:

*My requirement was that she completes her university. Because it is the important thing to her... They agreed to let her complete her education... They were surprised when we went to the court and forced them to include this as a requirement in the contract.*

In extremely rare cases, some of the married girls in the GAGE sample continued learning after becoming mothers. In Jordan and Lebanon, all girls in this category in the qualitative sample have daily practical support from their own mother – who provides the childcare needed so that the girl can study. A young Syrian woman living in Lebanon, currently studying nursing at a technical and vocational education and training (TVET) college, explained: *'My mother was the one who insisted... My mother was taking care of my daughter... It was really hard because my daughter was little... When I got back home, I would be tired.'* In Ethiopia, some young mothers reported relying on their own mother or in some cases their mother-in-law. A 17-year-old girl from South Gondar noted that *'My mother-in-law assists me in caring for my child.'*

In Ethiopia, where it is not unusual for students to be several years over-age for grade level – and, to a much lesser extent, Jordan and Lebanon – ever-married girls' access to education can improve after divorce. In South Gondar, for example, our midline survey found that 48% of divorced girls were enrolled in the current term – which is 15 percentage points higher than the figure for those who were still married. A 15-year-old-divorced girl from South Gondar explained that, *'After I got divorced, I became free to go [to school]'*. In Jordan, where divorce is more stigmatised and where it is unacceptable for girls who have been married to interact with those who have not, divorced girls who are back in school have two things in common: personal determination and a supportive mother. The mother of a Syrian girl from Jordan's Azraq refugee camp reported that she is providing childcare for her granddaughter, so that her daughter – who married at age 15 – can pursue tertiary education. She said:

*My daughter has a strong personality and she was able to overcome divorce. She insisted to complete her education and she succeeded, she got a scholarship in Amman... to study one of these specialties: pharmacy, dentistry or laboratory. I took care of the baby, I have raised her. She calls me Mama, she calls my husband Baba.*



# Nutrition, physical health, and sexual and reproductive health

## Key messages

- Many ever-married girls experience hunger, due to household poverty and gender norms; girls' nutrition is deprioritised by household decision-makers – even if the girl is pregnant.
- Some married girls, disproportionately the youngest, are unaware that marriage entails a sexual relationship. Few married girls can refuse sex with their husband, because to do so is taboo and risks conflict.
- Married girls have limited knowledge about contraception; some girls are entirely unaware of it, while others do not understand how different methods work or what side effects they may have.
- Married girls' demand for and use of contraception is limited, largely because of community and family pressure to produce children soon after marriage (which is often shaped by religion). In most cases, it is the husband who decides on contraceptive use.
- Married girls' access to health care is limited by mobility restrictions placed on them by their husband and marital family.
- Health care providers are often insensitive to how social norms leave girls unable to make decisions about their own bodies.

## Nutrition and physical health

Hunger is part of daily life for many married girls. This is especially the case for girls who live in Lebanon, where the economic crisis has resulted in severe food insecurity (see Figure 5); and in Bangladesh, where our baseline survey found that over half (54%) of married girls had been hungry in the past month because there was not enough food (see Table 10). A 15-year-old Rohingya girl explained that,

*We have to manage food every day with a lot of hardship... WFP [World Food Programme] gives us 30kg rice in a month. Is it enough for 8 people to eat one in month? There are shortages.*

In Ethiopia, married girls' experiences of hunger vary according to where they live. The midline survey found that girls living in South Gondar (Amhara) were least likely to have been hungry in the past month (9%), whereas those living in urban areas were most likely to have been hungry (38%). Qualitative evidence suggests that this is because South Gondar has been less impacted by recent climate

change-driven drought than both East Hararghe (Oromia) and Zone 5 (Afar), and because expenses (including food) are higher in urban areas. However, contextual differences do not appear to be the sole explanation for married girls' greater risk of hunger. In South Gondar and Zone 5, married girls were more likely to report recent hunger than their unmarried peers. Rates were nearly double in South Gondar (9% compared to 5%) and more than triple in Zone 5 (17% compared to 5%). During interviews, male community key informants explained that this is because married girls are so busy that they do not have time to eat, are sometimes embarrassed to eat in front of their in-laws, and because *'the husband always eats first as he is head of the house... Females eat the remaining food, mostly less quality food.'*

Girls in Jordan, where approximately a fifth (18%) reported being hungry in the month prior to the baseline survey, noted that gender norms also shape their access to food. In some cases, this is due to the husband's spending patterns. A 17-year-old Syrian girl exclaimed: *'Two liras for a pack of cigarettes and 2 left... What can you do with*

**Table 10: Proportion of girls who reported going hungry at least once in the past month because there was not enough food in the household**

Ethiopia					Jordan			Bangladesh		
Urban	Rural			Total	Jordanian	Syrian	Total	Camp	Host	Total
	Z5	SG	EH							
38%	17%	9%	28%	22%	11%	19%	18%	54%	53%	54%

*2 liras? Bread? What will we eat with the bread? I have nothing at home!* In other cases, girls' hunger is due to their being deprioritised within the household – something that does not change even if they are pregnant. A 19-year-old Syrian girl living in Jordan recalled, *'They prevented me [eating] food and fruits. I was pregnant at the sixth month and there was no food.'* An 18-year-old Palestinian young woman (now separated), also from Jordan, added that her in-laws told her that too much food was bad for her baby: *'I used to suffer from malnutrition. They didn't give me enough. They said it wasn't good for me because it negatively affects the baby.'*

In line with their age, most married girls who were surveyed reported being in good health overall. Girls in Ethiopia (86%) were most likely to consider themselves healthy, while girls in Bangladesh were least likely to (66%) (see Table 11). Qualitative evidence suggests that the lower rates in Bangladesh are primarily the result of girls' greater levels of food insecurity – which our Covid-19 research found was exacerbated by the pandemic, especially in camps.

## Experiences with marital sex

Many ever-married girls reported that sexual debut was frightening and painful – even when their husband was trying to be gentle. Some girls, especially in Jordan and Lebanon, were unaware that marriage entails a sexual

relationship and were unprepared for their wedding night. An 18-year-old Syrian young woman living in Lebanon, who married at age 15, recalled: *'My husband came after me to the bedroom and we sat for some time. He asked me if I knew what was going to happen. I told him no. Then he explained slowly to me... I was shocked and I started crying.'* A 16-year-old Syrian girl living in Jordan explained that parents actively try to keep girls ignorant about sex *'because if the girl knows about what happens beforehand, she would be afraid of getting married'*. In Ethiopia, where girls' ignorance is not deliberate, the youngest girls sometimes also recalled having been unaware of sex. A 13-year-old married girl from South Gondar (Amhara) said, *'I used to listen when they say they were sleeping together... I used to think that it was just laying side by side and sleeping... I did not know. I never heard of it [sex]. No one spoke with me about it.'*

The girls who were least prepared for marriage, even those who described their husband as 'kind' and 'slow', used words like 'terrifying' and 'painful' to describe their sexual debut. For girls in Zone 5 (Afar) and Somali region, most of whom had undergone Type 3 FGM (infibulation), sexual debut was not only reported to be painful, but excruciatingly so. An 18-year-old young woman from Somali region, who was married at age 15, reported that

**Table 11: Proportion of girls who reported being in good health**

Ethiopia					Jordan			Bangladesh		
Urban	Rural			Total	Jordanian	Syrian	Total	Camp	Host	Total
	Z5	SG	EH							
83%	92%	81%	91%	86%	96%	81%	83%	64%	71%	66%



**Figure 5: The impacts of Lebanon's economic crisis on food security (photo story)**

*'We worry about food all the time now. We work longer and longer hours in the fields, but it is not enough to buy what we need. We adults can go hungry, but the children cannot. I do not know how we will survive the winter, without fuel.'*

(Basmala, 20-year-old Syrian mother, Lebanon)

she was expected to have sex only hours after having been defibulated: *'There was an old woman that opened the FGM [scar tissue that has formed over and sealed the vagina] with a knife... He came [to the house] and we had intercourse 3 hours later.'* A 19-year-old young woman from Afar, who was also married at age 15, noted that girls in that region are 'de-infibulated' by their husband, and recalled pain so severe that she did not allow her husband near her for days. She said: *'It was very painful for me the first time... He didn't touch me for another five days... It is the circumcision which led to severe pain while having sexual intercourse.'*

Across contexts, married girls reported that they are rarely able to refuse sex, even if they are tired or ill or – in Ethiopia – are aware that their husband has other sexual partners. An 18-year-old Syrian young woman living in Lebanon explained that, *'A man is always thinking about himself. Only himself. His wife will be dying but he wants to have sex with her and it doesn't matter as to what she is going through.'* Another Syrian young woman the same age but living in Jordan noted that because sex is seen as a wife's duty, if she refuses, her husband *'would complain to my mom and make it a scandal'*. In Ethiopia, where several girls reported at first that they could say no to sex (at least after the wedding night), all eventually admitted that their husband's demands take precedence – and can be enforced with violence. A 15-year-old girl from East Hararghe explained, *'He can enforce me.'*

## Contraception

Across contexts, married girls have only limited knowledge of contraceptives (see Table 12). In Bangladesh, our baseline survey found that approximately two-thirds (64%) of married girls could name a modern method of contraception. Bangladeshi girls (77%) were better informed than Rohingya girls (59%), due (according to

a key informant) to reproductive health care in camps being focused on healthy pregnancy outcomes rather than pregnancy prevention. Awareness was even more limited in Jordan; only 43% of married girls – and only 30% of married Jordanian girls – were able to name a contraceptive method at the time of the baseline survey. During interviews, young mothers often noted that they had only learned about contraception after they had delivered their first child. Indeed, it was not uncommon for girls in Jordan and Lebanon to report having not known, prior to pregnancy, how pregnancy occurs. A 19-year-old Syrian mother of three living in Jordan, whose husband teaches sexual and reproductive health education to other men (see Box 12), stated, *'I got pregnant during the second month of marriage... I didn't know anything when I got pregnant the first time... even though my husband is very aware and he gives sessions about these things.'* A 20-year-old Syrian mother of two living in Lebanon laughed at her own ignorance: *'I used to think that one gets pregnant by kissing... I just know that one gets married and she gets kids and so. That's all!'*

In Ethiopia, where we have midline data (with girls who were on average, slightly older), nearly three-quarters (72%) of married girls could name a modern contraceptive method. However, Ethiopian girls' knowledge is highly dependent on where they live. Girls in South Gondar (Amhara) (93%) and in urban areas (89%) were far more likely to be able to name a modern method than girls in East Hararghe (Oromia) (44%) and Zone 5 (Afar) (58%). Qualitative research participants emphasised that this is because health extension workers in South Gondar and urban areas have worked hard to raise awareness about the risks of early pregnancy. A 15-year-old from South Gondar explained, *'The health extension worker advises us to avoid giving birth at an early age... She advised us to give birth after we become 20 years old.'* Unsurprisingly,

**Table 12: Girls' knowledge about and use of contraception**

	Ethiopia					Jordan			Bangladesh		
	Urban	Rural			Total	Jordanian	Syrian	Total	Camp	Host	Total
Can name a modern method of contraception	89%	58%	93%	44%	72%	30%	46%	43%	59%	77%	64%
Has ever used a modern method of contraception	64%	9%	79%	7%	42%	Not available*					

\* Due to permission issues, the baseline survey instruments did not ask girls in Jordan or Bangladesh if they had ever use contraception.



### Box 12: Improving girls' sexual and reproductive health by working with their husbands

In Bihar, India, the Promoting Change in Reproductive Behavior of Adolescents (PRACHAR) programme ran between 2001 and 2012, and evolved considerably during that time. Run by the international NGO, Pathfinder, PRACHAR targeted unmarried and married young people aged 12–24 and aimed to prevent child marriage, delay first pregnancies, and encourage longer spacing between pregnancies by providing adolescents with sexual and reproductive health and life-skills education through a variety of modalities. These included group education sessions, home visits, and 'edutainment' newlywed ceremonies for recently married couples. Programming for adolescents was accompanied by outreach to mothers-in-law (which was not assessed for impact), community outreach that included street theatre, and health care system strengthening. A synthesis of multiple evaluations found that the programme had contributed to sustained improvements in uptake of contraception to delay first pregnancies, as well as longer spacing between subsequent pregnancies, and that the programme's gender-synchronised approach and home visits were important to achieving the impacts (Subramanian et al., 2018).

The Reproductive Health for Married Adolescent Couples Project (RHMACP), which was launched in Nepal in 2005 and was implemented by the international NGO, EngenderHeath, was among the first programmes that explicitly aimed to reach married girls and their husbands with sexual and reproductive health education and services. It targeted married couples where the wife was under the age of 20 and provided education about family planning and maternal health through paired female and male peer educators. It also worked to strengthen local services and worked with girls' marital family, including their mother-in-law, to build support for contraceptive uptake. An evaluation found increased knowledge of contraception (though not improved use prior to the first pregnancy) and improved support for delayed marriage and marital consummation, wives' ability to refuse sex, and wives' mobility. It also found decreased support for intimate partner violence (The ACQUIRE Project, 2008).

girls' uptake of contraception also differed by location. Most married girls in South Gondar (79%) and urban areas (64%) reported having used modern contraception, but this was not the case in East Hararghe (7%) and Zone 5 (Afar) (9%). A 14-year-old girl from South Gondar, who married before beginning puberty, reported that girls make sure their friends understand the risk of pregnancy and how to prevent it:

*I began using a contraceptive since I started sexual interaction and I am using in an injection form... I was told to use a contraceptive otherwise I would get pregnant. Friends told me the possibility of pregnancy by seeing the enlargement of my breasts.*

During interviews, a minority of girls who had used modern contraception explained why. Some girls reported using contraceptives to delay their first pregnancy. While this was rare outside of South Gondar and urban areas of Ethiopia, girls' narratives were similar across country contexts. Most explained their contraceptive use by focusing on health risks, and their wish to delay pregnancy until their bodies were mature; or because of the expense of having children, and the need to wait until household finances were more secure. A 17-year-old Syrian girl living in Jordan stated, 'I told my husband that I want contraception and we went

*and bought it [pills] together.'* A 16-year-old girl from Zone 5 (Afar) reported that she and her husband had agreed 'We will have children when we have enough assets.' A small minority of girls spoke of the psychosocial toll of motherhood and wanting to feel more grown up before assuming the responsibilities motherhood entails. A 16-year-old Syrian girl living in Jordan, asked when she wanted to have her first child, replied: 'I am still young. How a baby can take care of another baby?' Notably, while most girls who reported using contraception to delay their first pregnancy seemingly did so with their husband's knowledge – if not active support – this was not always the case. Especially in Ethiopia, but also occasionally in Jordan, some girls reported that they used contraception secretly, despite the risk of violence if they were to be found out. A 14-year-old girl from South Gondar explained, 'He [her husband] is not willing to use contraceptives and I was told to stop it. But I am still using it in a hidden way... What can he do since I can get the injection in his absence?'

Very few married girls reported using contraception – sometimes modern and sometimes 'natural' forms (see Box 13) – to space their pregnancies. A 19-year-old Syrian young woman living in Lebanon noted that her husband had asked for a delay in order to reduce tension in their household. She said, 'After the first child, he told me to



### Box 13: Natural family planning

In Jordan, Lebanon and Ethiopia, it was not uncommon for married girls to report using 'natural' family planning or fertility awareness methods to delay pregnancy. In Jordan and Lebanon, couples primarily use the withdrawal method or rely on breastfeeding as a way to prevent pregnancy. A young Syrian man living in Jordan and married to a 15-year-old girl explained, *'You need to control yourself... not more than this.'* An 18-year-old Syrian mother living in Lebanon stated, *'I am breastfeeding my daughter and as long as you do that you won't conceive.'* In Ethiopia, girls reported relying on breastfeeding – and often long periods of sexual abstinence. A 20-year-old mother from South Gondar, whose daughter was 2 years old, reported: *'The church does not permit using family planning. We have to abstain for 3 years, with the help of God. We are abstaining till now. I want to give birth after my child becomes 3 years old. Giving birth when she is young is difficult.'*

*stop as the boy used to cry a lot.'* An 18-year-old girl in East Hararghe explained that she was using contraception to ensure her children were able to breastfeed long enough:

*I have three children. I gave birth to the first two children within a year of spacing. Then I decided not to give birth within a year and started to use family planning, I used an injection... When I stopped family planning, I gave birth to the third child... I used injection again... Now this one is becoming stronger, so I will (stop the injection and) give birth again.*

Some girls (even fewer in number than either of the other two categories just mentioned) reported using contraception to prevent becoming pregnant again at all. A 17-year-old Rohingya girl exclaimed, *'By the grace of Allah I have three children now. How would I take care of them! I have taken Depo [-Provera, a contraceptive that is injected]'*

It was far more common for girls to explain why they were *not* using modern contraception. Across contexts, explanations revolved around the belief that the main purpose of marriage is to produce children. An 18-year-old Syrian young woman living in Lebanon explained that, *'Bearing children is considered the main role of girls and the aim of marriage.'* A key informant working for a humanitarian organisation in Bangladesh agreed: *'They [Rohingya women and girls] are rewarded when a new baby is born here... We provide condoms, pills, but only 10% of people take them and [only] take it for a few days.'* Sometimes girls themselves, steeped in community expectations, believe motherhood is their purpose. A 17-year-old girl from East Hararghe explained that, *'Since I have a husband, I want to have a child.'* A 19-year-old Jordanian girl admitted, *'I've been married for 5 months... I do not think of anything else!'* Although most girls have at least some awareness of the health risks of early and

repeated pregnancy – risks to themselves as well as their children – they reported two primary concerns about using contraception.

First, girls were concerned that use of modern contraceptives prior to motherhood causes permanent infertility. This terrifies them because they understand that they – and not their husband – will be blamed for failing to produce children. An 18-year-old Syrian mother living in Jordan, where contraceptive uptake after two children is allowed, explained that, *'If you take them from the beginning of your married life before you have a child, you may not be able to get pregnant forever, you have infertility.'* A 15-year-old from East Hararghe (Ethiopia's Oromia region), where contraceptives are almost exclusively used after families are considered complete, noted that, *'Girls fear it will make them infertile and they say we will use it after having some children. After they give birth to five or six children they use it.'*

Girls' second main concern about contraception was that it contravenes God's command to be fruitful. A 22-year-old mother from Somali region (Ethiopia) reported that, *'The greatest gift of God is a child... I will have all the children God gives me.'* A 19-year-old mother from Zone 5 (Afar) stated, *'It is not good to change the ways of Allah so I want to have kids.'* An 18-year-old Palestinian from Lebanon opined, *'It is something that God wants. Praise be to Him. He wants her to conceive.'* A 17-year-old Syrian girl living in Jordan recalled that she had argued with her husband over his use of condoms – even going so far as to report him to his own parents. She recalled, *'I told my husband that what he was doing was haram [forbidden]... He refused... So I said to my father-in-law that his son did not want to have children from me... His father answered that this is not permissible.'*

With some exceptions – overwhelmingly in the Ethiopian contexts where modern contraceptive use is

supported by the community – married girls observed that even should they wish to use contraception, others' beliefs about the purpose of marriage prevent them from doing so. *'I can't decide when I can be pregnant,'* explained an 18-year-old Palestinian young woman from Jordan. Across contexts, girls most often singled out their husband as the decision-maker about contraception. A 17-year-old Syrian girl living in Jordan, where young couples were more likely to report using fertility enhancers than contraceptives (see Box 14), noted that *'All men want to have boys and girls!'* A 13-year-old from East Hararghe added that men prevent their wives from using contraceptives through violence: *'They fear their husbands... wives cannot use contraceptives because their husbands expect that they*

*will give birth.'* An 18-year-old Syrian mother of two living in Lebanon reported that her husband had threatened to *'marry again and change instantly'* if she was not able to conceive two children within a year.

Girls, especially in Jordan and Lebanon, noted that husbands' demands for children are often shaped by the demands of their own mother (see Box 15). An 18-year-old Syrian young woman living in Jordan explained that, *'Our girls, when they get married, they do not only marry the husband, but they also marry the whole family... The mother-in-law is the most interfering one... She wants to see her grandson.'* A 17-year-old Syrian girl living in Lebanon underscored the importance of son preference in driving early and high fertility. She reported:

#### Box 14: Fertility enhancers

In Jordan and Lebanon, our qualitative research finds that young couples are more likely to use fertility enhancers than contraceptives (see Figure 6). Alongside Viagra, which appears to be widely used, young husbands reported using *'sexual tonics to increase the desire'*, *'masculinity hormones'* to *'raise the sperm'*, and creams to make themselves *'more virile'*. One young Syrian husband had gone so far as to have his sperm count verified. Girls reported similar machinations. Quite a few mentioned using special tea, honey and even massages to help their uteruses *'go back to its place'* after a previous birth to improve their odds of conception. Others described approaches that were *'painful beyond expectation'*, such as having heated boxes placed on their stomach.

Several girls (who had become mothers) reported that they had been forced by their husband and mother-in-law to use fertility drugs to stimulate their too-young bodies into ovulating. An 18-year-old Syrian young woman living in Lebanon explained, *'Many girls do not get pregnant when they get married because they are young and their bodies and womb would not be fully developed. The husband, in-laws and sometimes the girl's family... keep taking her to doctors and giving her medicine to get pregnant, although doctors tell them it is normal for young girls not to get pregnant until they are older.'* Several girls in Jordan noted that their marital family was so determined they should produce children that they were willing to risk her health and life. For example, a 16-year-old Syrian girl explained that she conceived her first child after her husband had gotten fertility drugs from a friend who was a pharmacist, despite knowing that the drugs might kill her: *'The doctor said if you took the needle your womb might blow and you could die. He said "it's fine, I want her to take it". The doctor kicked him out. He told him "you just give me the prescription, and I'll inject her with it. It won't be your responsibility." And he did get the prescription.'* A young man in a participatory research group, who works at a pharmacy, acknowledged that these injections are readily available and in *'high demand'*, at a price of 168 JD (equivalent of \$236).



**Figure 6: Fertility treatments (photo story)**

*'After four years of treatment, I finally got pregnant. I suffered a lot because everyone blamed me for not getting pregnant and I had to take hormones for years.'*

(20-year-old Syrian mother, Jordan)



### Box 15: Engaging with mothers-in-law to improve the lives of married girls

Although there is a wealth of evidence about the important role of mothers-in-law in married girls' sexual and reproductive health (e.g. Dixit et al., 2022; Al-Sheyab et al., 2021), there appear to be very few programmatic efforts to engage with mothers-in-law. Indeed, even when this type of engagement is referenced, it is often to say that it was merely 'opportunistic' (e.g. India's First-time Parents Project, Santhya et al., 2008) or that the importance of including mothers-in-law was not assessed (e.g. India's PRACHAR, see Box 12). Of the programmes that GAGE was able to locate that included any focus on mothers-in-law, most were from India and only one was currently operational (see also Box 21 on Ethiopia's TESFA and Box 12 on the Reproductive Health for Married Adolescent Couples Project in Nepal):

In Maharashtra, India, an intervention implemented between 2001 and 2005 provided married girls and young women and their mother-in-law (and husband) with joint community-based health education sessions. Evaluation found that the sessions improved communication about sexual and reproductive health issues, and increased the support provided to girls and young women by their mother-in-law (ICRW, 2006).

In Burkina Faso, the NGO Pathfinder International piloted a one-year programme modelled on India's PRACHAR (see Box 12) in 2012, designed to build support for delayed and spaced pregnancy through better uptake of contraception. Because girls' mobility is limited, home visits conducted by community health workers were the primary modality. Workers went door-to-door to provide girls, their husband and mother-in-law with information about sexual and reproductive health. Group sessions were also provided to girls and their husband, and community theatre was used to spread awareness of the importance of contraception. Evaluation found that the programme led to large improvements in contraceptive use. Health workers identified early outreach to mothers-in-law as vital to programme impacts, as workers were often not able to meet with girls until the mother-in-law felt properly respected (Pathfinder International, 2015).

Saas Bahu Sammelans is an intervention currently being provided by the Government of India. It consists of community events targeting expectant and new mothers and their mother-in-law. It aims to improve the sexual and reproductive health outcomes of young mothers and the health and well-being of girl children (vikaspedia, 2022; Government of India, 2021).

*Right now I have a very big responsibility. My mother-in-law told me: "You will keep getting pregnant until you have a boy". I am forced to keep getting pregnant every year until I give them a boy.*

Although pressure from mothers-in-law is less common in Ethiopia, a 19-year-old young woman from South Gondar (Amhara), who admitted to using contraceptives since her marriage at age 13, explained that her husband is now coming under pressure from his mother: *'His mother urges him to have a child like other couples.'*

### Childbearing

Unsurprisingly, given contraceptive uptake, it is common across contexts for child marriage to quickly result in adolescent motherhood. Our baseline surveys found that 68% of 15–17-year-old married girls in Bangladesh and 42% of their peers in Jordan were either pregnant or already had a child (see Table 13). In Jordan, Syrian girls (45%) were nearly twice as likely as Jordanian girls (26%) to have begun childbearing. In Ethiopia, rates of adolescent motherhood reflect the findings on girls' use of contraception. Only 34% of girls in South Gondar but 55% of girls in East Hararghe

**Table 13: Proportion of girls who were pregnant or had a child**

Ethiopia					Jordan			Bangladesh		
Urban	Rural			Total	Jordanian	Syrian	Total	Camp	Host	Total
	Z5	SG	EH							
58%	46%	34%	55%	48%	26%	45%	42%	67%	71%	68%

were pregnant or mothering. Although urban girls were the most likely to be young mothers (58%), this should be interpreted in the light of the fact that urban girls were nearly a year older than rural girls at the time of the midline survey (18.1 vs. 17.3 years).

## Access to health care

Married girls' access to health care services in large part depended on where they live. Girls in Bangladesh, Jordan and Lebanon reported decent – if not always affordable (especially for those living in Lebanon due to the country's economic collapse) – modern medical services, provided by the government (in Jordan and for Bangladeshis) and by donors and NGOs (in Jordan and Lebanon for refugees, and for Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh). Services available include not only basic preventive and curative care, but also maternity care, with regular antenatal visits and ultrasound scans, facility deliveries that involve caesarean sections for the youngest girls with the least mature bodies, and postnatal health checks for mothers and babies.

Girls in Ethiopia tended to report less access and more basic levels of care, with rural residents dependent on community health workers. Those in the most remote communities, especially in pastoralist Afar and Somali regions, were often entirely deprived of services, especially since the onset of the recent conflict (see Box 4). Ethiopian girls' maternity care is especially sensitive to location. An 18-year-old young woman from South Gondar (Amhara) reported that regional efforts to reduce maternal and child mortality have resulted in a sea change,

with young mothers receiving monthly check-ups from health extension workers, and nearly all babies now born in a health facility. She explained, *'Women mostly give birth at health centres... In fact, they have assigned an ambulance currently... Traditional birth attendants are fined 500–600 birr and they can also be imprisoned.'* In stark contrast, a 19-year-old young woman from Zone 5 (Afar) reported that *'there is no tendency of going to the health centre... unless she is seriously ill or her labour is strong.'* Participants were quick to point out that while home births managed by traditional birth attendants can have tragic results, bad roads and bad weather leave those in remote communities cut off from any labour or maternity services. A 17-year-old husband from East Hararghe explained that, *'If there is problem of transport, she will deliver at home.'* Interviews with married girls in East Hararghe revealed that improved access to hospital deliveries is reducing uptake of contraception (see Box 16).

Across contexts, young mothers noted that it is not uncommon for health care providers to blame girls for outcomes beyond girls' control. In Ethiopia, girls who have undergone Type 3 FGM (infibulation) are sometimes treated badly by health service providers, who blame girls for being unable to give birth without medical intervention. A 19-year-old young woman from Zone 5 (Afar) explained that:

*Doctors are insulting girls during childbirth... They say that because we are circumcised, we are unable to labour... When we tell them there was nothing we could do about it, they reply, saying that we know nothing about giving birth because we are circumcised.*

### Box 16: Unanticipated effects of improved delivery services

Ayantu is a 17-year-old married girl living in rural East Hararghe with her husband and his family. She observes that while contraception has not *'caught on'* in her community, even for the youngest girls, access to better maternity care has effectively undermined efforts to end child marriage.

Ayantu has been married for two years and is yet to become pregnant – but not because she is using contraception. Indeed, as she wants six children as quickly as possible, she was all but incredulous when asked whether she has used any form of family planning to delay her first pregnancy. *'Why should I use it?... She asked. 'I didn't have a baby yet!'* Besides, she added, her husband would not approve: *'He will be angry and talk at me. He will say, "why don't you deliver children?"'*

Ayantu observed that as caesarean births have become more common in her community, efforts to prevent the youngest girls from marrying have fallen by the wayside. She explained: *'In the past they used to say early marriage causes problems. But now there is no problem... girls who get married early are delivering now, with no problems. You go to a health facility. You can deliver through an operation, for instance. You can also deliver normally there. Now you deliver at a health facility, not at home.'*



In Jordan and Lebanon, several young mothers who had three or four children reported that they had been treated badly by doctors who blamed them for their fecundity. <sup>7</sup>

*cannot control when I am pregnant!... Between you and me, I get happy when I get my period,'* noted an 18-year-old Syrian mother of four living in Jordan.



## Bodily integrity and freedom from violence

### Key messages

- Intimate partner violence is a regular, expected and accepted part of marriage.
- Husbands are singled out as the most common perpetrators of emotional, physical and sexual violence, which in some cases begins on the wedding night. Husbands see violence as their 'right'.
- Marital families also perpetrate violence against girls, with common reports across contexts of emotional violence perpetrated by mothers-in-law.
- Due to taboos about discussing violence outside of the marital household, and the stigma that surrounds divorce, few girls seek support for violence.
- Where girls do have access to support, it is generally from natal or marital families.
- Formal survivor support services for violence are very limited – especially for violence experienced inside marriage, not well known to girls, and often felt to be ineffective because they take too little account of girls' place in the family and community.
- Traditional justice mechanisms are primarily aimed at preventing divorce and maintaining families' social status – not at protecting girls from marital violence.
- Formal justice mechanisms are rarely called into play and even more rarely prioritise girls' needs and rights – but do offer girls escape, via divorce.

## Intimate partner violence

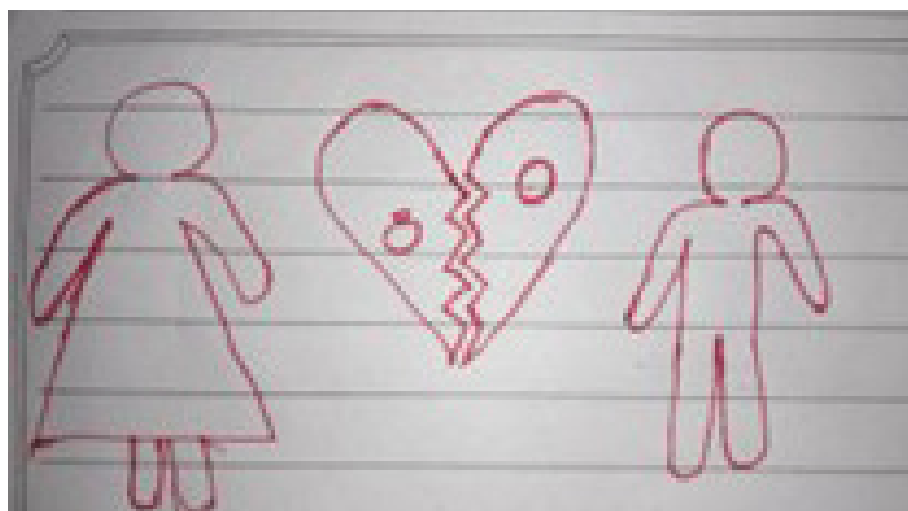
Due to concerns about girls' safety, our surveys did not ask direct questions about their experiences of intimate partner violence. Instead, girls were asked whether they agreed or disagreed with several statements about intimate partner violence. Across contexts and nationalities, nearly all married girls agreed with the statement 'A wife should obey her husband in all things' (see Table 14 and section on voice and agency). Rates were highest in Bangladesh (99%) and among girls living in East Hararghe (Oromia region of Ethiopia) (95%). A 17-year-old Rohingya girl explained, 'I always have to listen to him.' A girl the same age from East Hararghe commented: 'It is difficult to marry a husband. I am under his control once I marry.' Girls had more mixed views as to whether husbands are justified in using violence to control their wife. In East Hararghe (75%), among the Rohingya living in Cox's Bazar (75%), and in Zone 5 (Afar) (71%), approximately three-quarters of married girls surveyed reported that intimate partner violence by a husband is acceptable. Rates were lowest in Jordan, where only 7% of Syrian girls and no Jordanian girls reported believing that marital violence is OK, despite an 18-year-old Syrian girl noting that girls are blamed for

experiencing violence: 'half the community says she's the bad one'.

During qualitative interviews, which due to their interactive nature allow for increased trust between interviewer and interviewee, most married girls, including those living in Jordan, reported experiencing some form of intimate partner violence (see Figure 7). Some girls, particularly those who were married in early adolescence and did not know that marriage entails a sexual relationship (see section on health), reported that their marriage began with rape. A 13-year-old girl from South Gondar (Amhara region of Ethiopia), where marital rape is explicitly exempted under national law, recalled of her wedding night: 'I tried to oppose him, but it must happen, so he forced me. I did not cry or shout.' Several Syrian girls living in Jordan (where marital rape was only criminalised in 2017) and in Lebanon (where marital rape is not yet recognised by law) noted that not only were they forced to have sex against their will on their wedding night, but that their marital family stood by to ensure that it happened. An 18-year-old Syrian mother of four, married at age 12 to a 20-year-old cousin and living in an informal tented settlement in Jordan, explained:

**Table 14: Proportion of married girls who agreed – at least in part – with statements about intimate partner violence**

	Ethiopia					Jordan			Bangladesh		
	Urban	Rural			Total	Jordanian	Syrian	Total	Camp	Host	Total
		Z5	SG	EH							
A wife should obey her husband at all times	84%	89%	85%	95%	87%	85%	86%	86%	100%	99%	99%
It is acceptable for a husband to use violence to control his wife	44%	71%	46%	75%	58%	0%	7%	6%	75%	68%	73%



**Figure 7: Intimate partner violence (photo story)**

*'I got married at age 15. Immediately problems started. I was exposed to insults, beatings and psychological harm every day. I was patient and endured it for the sake of my children. Eventually my energy ran down and I decided to divorce.'*

(19-year-old Syrian young woman, Jordan)

*I did not know anything before this night. On our wedding night, people waited for the groom to get out of our room. So, he put the bed sheet over my face to prevent me from crying and he had sexual relations with me. Then, he went out and I started crying.*

Beyond the wedding night, few girls report experiencing sexual violence – for the simple reason that few girls refuse sex. Indeed, most married girls do not appear to understand that they can refuse sex. A 15-year-old from Zone 5 (Afar) stated that, *'I didn't refuse because I hadn't had any option then after.'*

During qualitative interviews, a majority of married girls report being hit or kicked – at least occasionally and often daily – by their husband. Common reasons cited for this abuse included: not responding to the husband's demands fast enough; cooking the wrong food or cooking the right food poorly; not performing housework adequately; dressing inappropriately; leaving the house without permission; and speaking without first being told to speak. A 13-year-old girl from South Gondar explained, *'He gets angry sometimes, because I do not do everything as he says. But this is bound to happen, I want him not to get angry and beat me.'* A 16-year-old Rohingya girl reported that she was beaten for being insufficiently gracious to her sister-in-law. *'One of my sisters-in-law came here during Eid and brought many things. My husband beat me up with a stick for not eating the foods she brought.'*

Some girls reported that violence does not stop – and can even escalate – when they are pregnant and unable to move as quickly, work as hard, or have sex as often. *'Even when I was pregnant, he hit me,'* reported an 18-year-

old Palestinian girl from Jordan. In Bangladesh, Rohingya women observed that violence linked to motherhood does not stop at birth. For example, one young mother explained that husbands resent their wives for highlighting their children's needs, but explained that mothers have no choice, as sometimes it is the only way to bring children's needs – even for basics such as food – to the father's attention. *'Mothers have to be beaten for their children. It hurts,'* she stated. Girls in Lebanon, who in 2019 reported that intimate partner violence had moderated since their parents' generation, noted in 2022 that it was resurgent due to stressors linked to the country's economic collapse. A 17-year-old married girl explained, *'I cannot take it anymore. My husband is angry all the time and we are constantly fighting. It is becoming really intolerable and we cannot stand each other.'*

Husbands who were interviewed – none of whom reported taking part in programming designed to encourage healthy masculinities (see Box 17) – did not gainsay girls' reports of sexual and physical violence. Indeed, several admitted to raping their wife, and many admitted to beating her. A 19-year-old young man from Zone 5 (Afar region of Ethiopia), where girls' infibulation makes sexual debut painful for men and excruciating for girls, stated that,

*I forced her to have sex. When we had the first sexual intercourse, she bled. I washed her body. The next day, she refused to sleep with me again. Her father beat her for her refusal.*

In Jordan and Lebanon, where our participatory research explored the boundaries of consent with girls and their

### Box 17: Program H and masculinities interventions

Program H, which was developed in 2002 in Brazil by the NGO Equipundo (formerly Promundo), targets young men aged 15–24 and uses group education sessions and youth-led campaigns to transform the norms surrounding masculinity. It has been replicated in dozens of other countries, including Bangladesh, Ethiopia and Lebanon. A recent review of impacts in 12 countries found that the programme usually results in improved gender attitudes. Impacts on gender-based violence and sexual and reproductive health were, however, more mixed (Doyle and Kato-Wallace, 2021). In Ethiopia, where most participants were unmarried, there were substantial improvements in the gender attitudes of young men who were exposed to both group education and community campaigns, as well as increased discussion about sex and contraception between boys and their partners and decreased self-reported intimate partner violence (Pulerwitz et al., 2010, 2015).

Interestingly, despite evidence of clear links between child marriage and intimate partner violence (Hayes and Protas, 2022; Kidman, 2017), there appear to be relatively few efforts to reach the boys and young men who are married to child brides. Most programmes targeting boys and young men are aimed at those who are unmarried; programmes targeting husbands and fathers do not appear to target those who are married to adolescent girls.





husbands (in single-sex groups), young men were disdainful of the idea of marital rape, which is not recognised by law. A 19-year-old Syrian young man living in Jordan noted that, *'Raping is for the foreign countries.'* Young husbands not only admit to hitting and kicking their wives, but regularly add that they see this violence as their right. A 19-year-old young man from East Hararghe (Oromia region) reported, *'I have a right to beat my wife. I have control over her... I don't beat her with something that hurts. I beat her with electric wire. I don't beat her with a stick.'* A young man living in Jordan and married to a 15-year-old Syrian girl agreed with this rights-based framing: *'Wrong is wrong. I used to correct her when she did something wrong.'*

Nearly all the married girls in our qualitative sample reported experiencing emotional abuse by husbands – though only girls in Jordan and Lebanon framed that abuse as a form of violence. This is primarily because those girls entered marriage believing that marriage was meant to include a supportive emotional relationship (see section on psychosocial well-being). A 16-year-old Syrian girl living in Jordan reported that from her perspective, being shouted at and insulted *'hurts more than being beaten for the whole day'*. An 18-year-old Syrian young woman living in an informal tented settlement in Lebanon said that what makes her sad every day is that her husband is working to turn their older son against her – which affects her and their younger son too:

*My husband would tell my older son to hit and not listen to what I say. He loves him more than our youngest son and spoils him a lot and incites him to disobey me and disrespect me because I do not agree on how he differentiates between our sons.*

## Violence at the hands of in-laws

Married girls also reported that their in-laws perpetrate violence against them. Across contexts, emotional violence perpetrated by a girl's mother-in-law was particularly common, reflecting the fact that most married girls, at least for a few years after marriage, live with their in-laws and spend most of their daily lives working alongside of (or in place of) their mother-in-law. Some girls reported that their mother-in-law expects them to take over all household labour. *'His mother used to tell me "your family sold you and we bought you"',* recalled a now divorced 17-year-old Syrian living in a Jordanian host community, describing how she was never allowed to rest. Other girls reported that they are insulted by their mother-in-law for not being able to effortlessly manage household tasks. A 21-year-

old Somali mother who was married as a child explained: *'When you do not know how to cook food, that is shameful.'* The father of a married Rohingya girl noted that girls who bring only small dowries may be at greatest risk of violence: *'A bride gets less respect in her in-laws' house if she fails to give money to her husband's family.'* Because of the emotional weight placed on the relationship between a married girl and her mother-in-law, girls often noted that what they find most difficult to bear is the small, hurtful comments that make them feel unloved. For example, a 17-year-old Palestinian girl from Jordan stated that she was devastated when her mother-in-law *'said she didn't want me'*. Although none of the girls in the GAGE sample reported experiencing physical violence at the hands of their mother-in-law, it was not uncommon for them to report that their husbands beat them for any perceived infraction towards their mother-in-law. A 15-year-old girl from East Hararghe (Oromia region) explained that, *'Some husbands beat their wives by explaining that their wife shouldn't have fought with their [husband's] mother. They tell them that they should have respected their mother-in-law for they are much older than them.'*

In Jordan and Lebanon, the married girls taking part in participatory research groups also reported violence perpetrated by their father-in-law, brothers-in-law and sometimes sisters-in-law. Girls reported that their father-in-law and brothers-in-law, like their husband, sometimes exercised their masculine 'right' to physical violence. A 16-year-old Palestinian girl living in Jordan, married to a cousin, stated, *'I had a fight with my uncle. He hit me.'* Several girls also reported experiencing sexual violence from male in-laws. A 17-year-old Syrian girl living in a host community in Jordan recounted that her brother-in-law used to come into her room while she was sleeping and stand next to her bed, staring at her. Because she knew that her husband and mother-in-law would not believe her – and that she would be blamed if she reported his actions – she told her mother-in-law that she was afraid to sleep alone and would sleep between her mother-in-law and sister-in-law every time her husband was out of the house. Although married girls reported that sisters-in-law can sometimes be their best (and only) friends, it was not uncommon for girls to report that their sisters-in-law tried to incite suspicion and violence as they jockey for position in the household. A 16-year-old now divorced Palestinian girl from Jordan exclaimed that her sister-in-law had told the family that she had a Facebook account, when *'I don't even have a phone!'*



## Support for survivors of violence

Survey findings highlight that girls' access to support for violence is limited in part by social norms that prevent girls from disclosing marital violence (see Table 15). These norms are especially rigid in Bangladesh, where 98% of married girls – including 100% of married Rohingya girls – at baseline agreed with the statement that 'a husband's use of violence towards his wife is private and should not be discussed outside of the household'. Similar norms are still prominent even in South Gondar (Amhara region) (46%) and in urban areas of Ethiopia (43%), where divorce is less stigmatised and the government has worked hard to raise women's awareness of violence.

During interviews, married girls often noted that they had never previously spoken about the violence they had experienced within the confines of the marital home. Indeed, many girls observed that they did not even bother to protest to their husband about the violence he perpetrates. As an 18-year-old Rohingya young woman asked, *'What will we say? Can we bad mouth men or beat them up? They beat us. Why will I say anything? When I say anything to my husband he beats me. So I keep quiet.'*

Other girls reported that while they might speak up to their husband, after tempers had cooled, they could never consider speaking against him to anyone else. Sometimes this is because the topic is forbidden. A 15-year-old girl from East Hararghe (Oromia region of Ethiopia) noted that, *'It is a taboo... for me to talk about him... We don't talk about our husbands.'* Other times, girls' silence is borne of fear, both of bringing on more violence and of divorce (see Box 18) and – for the girls married to a cousin – fear of sowing family discord. A 15-year-old Syrian girl living in Jordan stated, *'I tell nobody. Because I know things will get worse then.'*

For girls who are able to disclose violence to their parents (or other relatives), a minority – often those who have visible signs of injury such as missing teeth or broken bones – reported receiving good support. A 17-year-old Rohingya girl explained that her family had taken her back after only three days: *'They save me from my in-laws' family... My father emphasised that "It is not even three days and you beat her up" and said that they would take me back... They helped me to get a divorce from him.'* Girls in Zone 5 (Afar) have their own escape route, with many

**Table 15: Proportion of married girls who agreed – at least in part – with the statement 'Husbands' violence towards wives is private and should not be discussed outside the household'**

Ethiopia					Jordan			Bangladesh		
Urban	Rural			Total	Jordanian	Syrian	Total	Camp	Host	Total
	Z5	SG	EH							
43%	67%	46%	68%	55%	52%	58%	57%	100%	94%	98%

### Box 18: Fear of divorce

In Bangladesh, Jordan and Lebanon, married girls often said that they were willing to tolerate near constant violence because they were terrified of divorce. For Rohingya girls, fear of divorce is rooted primarily in fear of food insecurity – although girls are also afraid that if they were to divorce they would be more vulnerable to sexual harassment. A young mother explained that, *'Due to poverty, I decided to stay with my husband. I didn't take any action against him. I tolerated all those beatings in silence.'* In Jordan and Lebanon, on the other hand, girls' fear of divorce is rooted in legal codes that give custody of children to the father, and in the stigma that surrounds divorced girls, who are seen as solely to blame for their failed marriage. A 17-year-old Palestinian girl from Jordan explained that she had to give up custody of her infant son to be free of her violent husband. She is only allowed to see the baby once a month. An 18-year-old now divorced Syrian young woman living in Lebanon reported that girls (and women) never complain about violence because the costs are simply too high, including the risk of being falsely accused for having sullied their family honour. She said, *'... there isn't one woman who dares to say "my husband beats me". Like I, when I was married, he beat me so much and cursed me out... He beat me with pliers... and he once threatened to slaughter me... I couldn't tell my own family. Why? Because we only have the one thought: if the girl goes back divorced to her family's house, after she's been married for one or two months, they say "God knows what he found out about her!" This is our belief and the family's beliefs and the beliefs of the community we're in.'*

reportedly fleeing the country – primarily to Djibouti and the Middle East, where many have older female relatives willing to provide support. Most girls, however, reported that their parents do not help if they are experiencing violence from their in-laws. Sometimes, parents do not even try to rescue their daughter from violence. A 17-year-old divorced Palestinian girl from Jordan recalled that her mother had told her to just try and sit things out: *'My mother convinced me that he would become better after he became a father.'* A girl the same age from South Gondar (Amhara region) noted that her parents refused to even hear her complaints. She said, *'My parents gave me a deaf ear. They told me that it is your business. They don't want to "interfere" in my issues after marriage.'* Other girls reported that family members were sympathetic, but powerless to do anything. A 17-year-old divorced Syrian girl living in a host community in Jordan recalled that when her father had tried to prevent her ex-husband from beating her – by begging him to stop – her ex-husband responded, *'I am her husband, and I will beat her whenever I want, whether you like it or not.'*

Largely because so many young couples live with or nearby the husband's family, girls often noted that their in-laws are first responders for violence. A 14-year-old from East Hararghe (Oromia region), for example, reported that, *'His father, mother and brother have been intervening when we would have a fight with my husband. They would witness and rebuke him when they see him abusing me.'* Despite their proximity, however, most girls reported that in-laws are no more successful than parents in terms of ending violence, even when they do try. A 19-year-old Palestinian young woman from Jordan reported that, *'Sometimes my uncles make a gathering and make him promise not to hit me again, but as soon as we go back home, he hits me again like nothing happened.'*

Support from outside the family for girls experiencing violence is rare. In Bangladesh, a 17-year-old Rohingya girl explained that when she went to the local *majhi* (community leader) to complain that her husband was beating her, *'He only says that my husband will be good and drives us away. [I only complained] once. I understood that there will be no benefit.'* In Jordan, girls noted that telephone helplines are rarely used, because they are stigmatising; that NGO survivor services are 'silly stuffs' that are not culturally sensitive (17-year-old Palestinian girl); and that family protection services are not worth using. A now divorced Syrian 18-year-old living in Jordan, who experienced such

extreme violence for years that she now shakes when she is approached, reported, *'I don't have 1% faith in the family protection [services].'* Although Ethiopia, like Jordan, has mechanisms<sup>7</sup> for girls to report and receive support for violence, many girls (especially the youngest) are unaware of those mechanisms – and that they can be used for marital violence. A 13-year-old from South Gondar, when asked if she had sought help for violence, responded, *'Where shall I go? I just keep quiet.'* Girls who are aware that they can report marital violence often added that doing so accomplishes little – as cases are frequently turned over to community elders, who eschew formal justice and instead use traditional mechanisms that compensate girls' families for violence but send girls back to the husband who was perpetrating the violence. A 17-year-old from East Hararghe explained, *'They can fine him if the issue goes to elders... They can punish him up to 500 birr [\$9.3].'*

In Bangladesh, Jordan and Lebanon, girls reported that they are afraid to use the formal justice mechanisms that can end violence by ending marriage – because husbands can be just as vicious about divorce as they were violent in marriage. A young Rohingya mother explained that despite there being not one *'spot on my body where I didn't get beaten by my husband... when they [humanitarian response workers] asked me to put him in jail... I didn't... I thought putting him in jail would worsen his situation.'* Syrian and Palestinian girls reported that husbands sometimes refuse to grant a divorce until they are first reimbursed by their wife's family for *'the money he spent on feeding her'* (17-year-old Syrian girl) and that men often blackmail girls into signing away their legal rights to alimony and child support by threatening to spread rumours that *'she was in love with somebody else while she was married'* (18-year-old Palestinian young woman). Many girls also added that there is no point in pursuing formal justice, as it so rarely delivers. A 19-year-old Syrian young woman living in Jordan explained that the judge in her case demanded that she bring witnesses to testify to the abuse she had experienced, which even family members were unwilling to do because of tribal loyalty: *'It's the tribes thing,'* she said. In Jordan, as is the case with access to maternity care (see section on health), the girls with the least access to justice are often those who need it most. As the mother of a Syrian girl who married at age 14 explained: *'Because the girl was a minor, we didn't have their marriage at court. So she doesn't have rights legally.'*

<sup>7</sup> In larger towns there are 'one stop centres' that provide survivors with medical, legal and psychosocial services.

## Economic empowerment

### Key messages

- Married girls have limited access to paid work due to gender norms that preclude females from working, heavy demands on their time because of domestic and care work, and restrictions placed on them by their husband.
- In rural contexts in Ethiopia, Jordan and Lebanon, married girls are expected to provide agricultural labour but rarely receive payment for doing so.
- Married girls' ability to spend, save and access credit is shaped by household poverty and is further limited by gender norms that leave men in charge of financial decision-making.
- Social protection is helping young families to meet their survival needs, but includes too few households and provides too little support.

### Girls' engagement in paid work

Across contexts, only a minority of married girls reported having worked for pay in the past year: 10% in Bangladesh, 11% in Jordan and 25% in Ethiopia (see Table 16). The size of that minority primarily reflects the prevailing gender norms of the communities in which girls live. Qualitative evidence suggests that most married girls' access to paid work consists of selling produce, though a few do part-time domestic work for better-off local households. Although a few Rohingya girls reported having a small home-based business (sewing and jewellery-making), most were incredulous at the very idea that a girl might work. A 16-year-old exclaimed, 'In our Burma, women can't go to jobs if you even give 50,000 taka as salary, yet they won't go to jobs as they aren't allowed to show their face to anyone!' In Jordan, which has one of the world's lowest rates of female labour force participation, 13% of married girls reported having had paid work in the year prior to the baseline survey. Paid work was particularly common among the Syrian girls who live in informal tented settlements and work as agricultural labourers alongside family members who can vouchsafe girls' honour (see Figure 8). Although married girls emphasised that they are too busy doing household work and caring for children to take on paid work, the mother of a married Syrian girl

living in Jordan explained that girls' lack of access to paid work is primarily because it is considered inappropriate for females to work. She said,

*The husband is obliged to go to work, because he is responsible for his wife and his children. The husband is obliged to work whatever the circumstances in order to provide his family with their needs, but the wife does not go to work.'*

Married girls in informal tented settlements also added that even when they do work for pay, they remain responsible for household work and childcare. 'We have a lot of responsibilities. We need to work at home and take care of the children, as well as go to our work,' explained a 19-year-old Syrian young woman living in Lebanon.

In Ethiopia, where subsistence agriculture continues to provide the bulk of livelihoods but where the cash economy is growing, a quarter (25%) of married girls reported having worked for pay in the year prior to the midline survey. Rates were highest in urban areas (42%), which have more developed labour markets, and were lower but similar in South Gondar (Amhara) (23%) and East Hararghe (Oromia) (24%), where married girls frequently sell agricultural products they have produced with their

**Table 16: Proportion of married girls who had worked for pay in the past year**

Ethiopia					Jordan			Bangladesh		
Urban	Rural			Total	Jordanian	Syrian	Total	Camp	Host	Total
	Z5	SG	EH							
42%	4%	23%	24%	25%	13%	11%	11%	5%	24%	10%



**Figure 8: Girls and paid work (photo story)**

*'Women in our community must work to help their family. A girl can only stop going to the fields when she gets pregnant and when breastfeeding.'*  
(19-year-old Syrian young woman, Lebanon)

husband; rates were lowest in pastoralist Zone 5 (Afar) (4%), where the cash economy is nascent.

Across research sites, girls observed that boys and men have better access to paid work than girls and women for several reasons. First, there are more jobs that are considered 'acceptable' for males. A 19-year-old young woman from South Gondar explained, *'They [men] have better access... They have a lot of income-generating sources.'* A 17-year-old girl from the town of Debre Tabor noted that, *'Females are not seen to participate in daily labour.'* Second, and perhaps more importantly, married girls do not have time for paid work because their hours and days are entirely occupied by domestic work – which, in rural Ethiopia, includes collecting water and fuel, and herding the ruminants that provide the bulk of the household's protein intake. Girls' household work is also limited to daylight hours because few have electrical lights, and the workload is considerably larger when girls become mothers. An 18-year-old young woman from East Hararghe reported that:

*The workload is more here in my home... In the morning I prepare food, fetch water, clean the home... In the lunchtime I prepare lunch for my husband and take the food to him to the farm... I separate the sorghum from*

*its by-products and grind it and prepare food for the family... It is my livelihood that enforces me to work. No one will work for me. Only I am responsible for those household chores.*

A 21-year-old mother of three from Somali region, where married women often engage in trading, noted that because her husband chews *khat*<sup>8</sup> and does not work, she would be happy if he simply agreed to watch the children so that she could work. She said: *'I can't go anywhere leaving my children... I would be happy if he looked after the children and I went to jobs, but... he chews khat here and he doesn't give attention to them.'*

Across contexts, married girls reported that although paid work would improve their sense of self-worth, access to work is controlled by their husband. An 18-year-old Syrian young woman living in Lebanon explained that if she had been living in Syria, maybe she would have been allowed to work:

*There should be some freedom in our lives whereby we can work outside, to do things that we like... If we would have been in Syria, and I had a degree, I could do any work that I like. I would feel I could achieve for myself, that I could do what I love. I would come home and that I have benefited from something... there are no such opportunities here.*

A 15-year-old Syrian girl living in Jordan explained that while she would love to have a job, to get out of the house, her husband refuses to consider the idea because he is concerned about his own reputation. She said, *'If I think to work, my husband will not agree... He will say that it is illegal. He will also say: "What will my uncles say about me?"'* An 18-year-old Rohingya young woman noted that her husband refuses to allow her to work, even though they regularly go hungry: *'I want to do a job. He won't let me.'*

In Ethiopia, the story is more mixed. Some girls reported that their husband prefers them not to work, or to work only at certain jobs. A 19-year-old young woman from the town of Batu explained that she runs her own small shop, because she was depressed not working and her husband did not want her to work for other people. She explained, *He believes that the income he gets is enough for our livelihood... He only wants me to work in our own businesses like the shop... He doesn't want me to work*

<sup>8</sup> *Khat* is a plant that is grown in the Horn of Africa. Its leaves, when chewed, are mildly psychoactive.





A 17-year-old mother who works in the field to help her husband, Baalbeck, Lebanon © Marcel Saleh/GAGE 2023

*as a janitor or secretary... But it is depressing for me to stay at home.'*

Other girls report actively collaborating with their husband to maximise household income. For example, an 18-year-old from South Gondar reported that, *'I spend time buying food items from farmers that I then sell. My husband calls the buyer and connects me to them... He helps me with ideas and by connecting me with the buyer.'*

Only in Ethiopia do separation and divorce tend to improve girls' access to paid employment. Some girls, take on paid work in the local community – albeit with the caveat that many are confined to stigmatised, low-paid and informal work such as in bars. Others, tired of community gossip about their failed marriage, migrate to other areas to find a new job and a new life. A 19-year-old divorced young woman living in the town of Debre Tabor reported that she *'came to the city for work'*. A 15-year-old from East Hararghe, when asked which girls are most likely to migrate abroad to work, replied, *'Mostly the divorced girls...'*

In Jordan, although a few girls have the support of their parents to pursue training and employment, most continue to face mobility restrictions that preclude participation in the labour force. An 18-year-old Palestinian young woman who had separated from her husband explained that,

*I'd like to learn make-up. I started learning. It was good... But after two weeks, some people told my father misleading information about me going there, and he banned me from going. They just don't like it when a woman goes out alone.*

In Bangladesh, where restrictions on girls' mobility are even tighter, a 17-year-old divorced Rohingya girl with no male relatives observed that the only way she could eat was to risk her community's ire:

*I am grown... I can't go out. I can't move easily. I can't eat properly. These are the problems. If I can go out, I can do a job. I can't sit in the home because they will say bad things about me. I have to eat. So, I can't stay in the home.*

## Access to and control of assets

Our survey found that a minority of married girls in Jordan and Ethiopia reported having some control over spending in the past year (see Table 17), but our qualitative research highlights different interpretations of what this phrase means in practice. In Jordan, 20% of 15–18-year-old married girls reported having controlled spending. During interviews, these girls primarily mentioned spending for their children. A 17-year-old Syrian girl explained, *'You know, we have children and [we are] spending on the children.'* However, married girls were far more likely to mention their lack of control over spending. Girls who were working in the fields reported turning their wages over to their in-laws. *'Since marriage, [it is] my mother-in-law [that] receives my money,'* explained a 16-year-old Syrian girl living in an informal tented settlement. In addition, girls reported that it is men rather than women who hold responsibility for spending, due to restrictions on girls' mobility. An 18-year-old Syrian young woman said, *'It's not that I buy things, he takes money and he buys them.'* A 19-year-old Syrian mother living in Lebanon reported similar customs, and added that this can have knock-on impacts for girls' and children's food security:

*Yesterday my husband went out to work at 6 in the morning and came home at 12 at night. My daughter and I were left all day without food... I did not have money to buy anything for us... This is a habit of his, my husband does not like to leave money with me... He ate at his parents' house and forgot about us.*

In Ethiopia, where our survey found that 27% of 15–19-year-old married females reported having controlled spending in the year prior to midline, our qualitative research found that girls really do spend. Rates of spending were highest in urban areas (38%) and East Hararghe (33%), where the cash economy is more developed, and were much lower in Zone 5 (Afar), where cash is less common. Our qualitative work suggests that married girls' control of cash is driven by their having taken on a more adult role, in that they

are often responsible for household spending. A 17-year-old girl from Zone 5 (Afar) noted, *'I buy home supplies'* while a 15-year-old from East Hararghe said *'I bought household essentials and utensils that we needed'*. Even girls who reported spending household cash observed that their input into financial decision-making was extremely bounded. A 16-year-old from East Hararghe noted that while she and her husband would discuss what to buy, the final decision was his and his alone: *'We discuss to buy clothes, food, utensils... But the decision is up to him. He is the one that decides.'* Girls added that transgressing limits on household spending risks an episode of violence. A 16-year-old from South Gondar explained that, *'He [her husband] beats me when I make a mistake. For instance, when I spend money.'*

In Bangladesh, the fact that WFP vouchers are issued in the name of Rohingya female recipients influences our survey findings on spending. Although 52% of married 15–18-year-old girls surveyed reported having controlled spending, during qualitative interviews it was rare for married girls to mention that their households had any access to cash. Bangladeshi policy prohibits the Rohingya from working and requires humanitarian actors to provide refugees with food vouchers rather than cash transfers, and no girl reported either input into purchases or having made purchases themselves. A 17-year-old Rohingya girl explained, *'We have got some money by selling things that we got from an NGO.'* An 18-year-old Rohingya young woman added that even when households have cash, girls' lack of education prevents them from using it: *'I don't even know how to calculate money.'*

Only in Ethiopia, which has a long history of informal rotating saving and credit groups (*equbs*) and a strong network of NGO-supported savings groups, do married girls have meaningful opportunities to save and borrow (see Table 18). Our midline survey found that 52% of married girls – including two-thirds of those in urban areas (66%) and in East Hararghe (69%) – have their own

**Table 17: Proportion of girls who have controlled spending in the past year**

Ethiopia					Jordan			Bangladesh		
Urban	Rural				Jordanian	Syrian	Total	Camp	Host	Total
	Z5	SG	EH	Total						
38%	7%	25%	33%	27%	15%	21%	20%	48%	62%	52%

**Table 18: Proportion of married girls with savings and credit**

	Ethiopia					Jordan			Bangladesh		
	Urban	Rural			Total	Jordanian	Syrian	Total	Camp	Host	Total
		Z5	SG	EH							
Has own savings	66%	33%	37%	69%	52%	7%	16%	15%	1%	21%	7%
Has access to informal credit	40%	7%	44%	36%	34%	19%	23%	23%	32%	53%	38%

savings. Although girls noted that their ability to save is dependent on household finances, they agreed that girls *want* to save (see Box 19). As a divorced 15-year-old girl from South Gondar explained, *'Boys, if they work and earn money, they drink with it. Due to this, they cannot save money... But girls want to save and become like others.'* Indeed, a 15-year-old girl from East Hararghe reported that she closely guards her savings, and has never told her husband about the 10,000 birr she saved from doing paid work (picking *khat*) prior to marriage, *'because he will ask me when he needs money.'*

Our midline survey also found that one-third (34%) of Ethiopian girls have access to informal credit (primarily from family). Access was best in South Gondar (44%) and worst in Zone 5 (Afar) (7%). A few married girls reported using formal banks (and micro financial institutions) to save and borrow; they were almost exclusively living in South Gondar and urban areas, where most banks and institutions are located and where officials have prioritised women's financial inclusion. Most girls save and borrow through *equbs*. A 20-year-old young woman from Zone 5 (Afar) explained how these schemes work: *'We contribute 20 birr every month and the money will be given to a randomly selected member. The process continues till every member gets their share.'* In Somali region, several

young married women reported belonging to self-help groups that jointly raise and sell livestock. A 21-year-old mother of three said, *'I am in a self-help group. We save 50,000 [birr] in a month. [The NGO] adds some money for us and we buy animals in a group. We are 30 in our group...'*

In Jordan and Bangladesh, married girls' access to savings and credit was more limited. In Jordan, our baseline survey found that 15% of married girls had their own savings and 23% had access to informal credit. Qualitative research nuances these findings, and suggests that girls' access to assets is less impactful for girls in both those countries than it is for girls in Ethiopia. In Jordan and Bangladesh, girls reported that their savings are primarily in the form of gold jewellery given to them as marriage gifts. An 18-year-old Syrian young woman recalled, *'My family gave me 2 rings and a necklace.'* While this gold is meant to be a kind of safety net for girls should a need arise in future, it is regularly appropriated by husbands – to pay off loans taken out for marriage celebrations. A 19-year-old Syrian young woman explained that, *'Every period lacks something, he sells something... The wedding ring flew... The sum of the gold we sold was 1,700 dinars... He had many debts.'* In Bangladesh, where one married girl identified a cooking pot as her favourite possession because it represented food security, our baseline survey

### Box 19: Smart Start – combining financial planning with contraceptive counselling in Ethiopia



A360 was a four-year programme implemented in Ethiopia, Nigeria and Tanzania (as discussed in Box 8 also) to increase adolescent girls' uptake of modern contraceptives. In Ethiopia, the tailored intervention, known as Smart Start, paired financial planning with contraceptive counselling and leveraged the country's large network of health extension workers to encourage newly married couples to use family planning to help them reach their life goals. Evaluation found that the programme had improved girls' uptake of contraception, and that while it was difficult to get husbands involved, their involvement amplified the programme impacts – in part because when husbands were on board, mothers-in-law were more supportive (Wilson et al., 2022). Though not without its own problems, capacity-building with health extension workers was identified as key to the programme's success. Prior to A360 trainings, most health workers had not regarded married girls without children as a target group for contraception (Newport et al., 2019).



found that only 7% of married girls had their own savings. However, none of the girls interviewed discussed their savings. Although our survey found that 38% of married girls in Bangladesh had access to informal credit, during interviews, girls only mentioned borrowing food.

Divorced girls' access to assets is better, on average, in Ethiopia than in Bangladesh, Jordan and Lebanon – primarily because of Ethiopian laws and policies designed to foster gender equality. A 17-year-old girl from South Gondar, referring to the house she currently shares with her husband, was very clear:

*My father bought the house in my name from the beginning and he gave it to me... Let God forbid the evil, if I am going to get divorced the house belongs to me, we can't share.*

Adolescents were especially adamant about the legal obligation for former husbands to provide child support, as a married 17-year-old boy from East Hararghe commented, *'It is the law... Her parents will follow the case.'* A divorced 17-year-old girl from Zone 5 (Afar), who reported that her ex-husband was regularly sending grain for their child, added that if he skipped a payment, *'I will take him to the kebele [village] office... I swear to Allah.'* In Bangladesh, none of our respondents reported divorced girls having access to marital assets, and the only girl who mentioned child support and alimony stated that, *'He doesn't look after me and my son... He doesn't provide my alimony.'* In Jordan and Lebanon, men are supposed to provide for their children and ex-wives but the law is rarely enforced, leaving girls dependent on their natal family for support – and vulnerable to a second marriage. A divorced 18-year-old Syrian young woman living in a Jordanian host community reported of her ex-husband that, *'He is supposed to pay us 30 liras, but he told me he'd rather drink with this money than give it to me and my child.'*

## Social protection

Across contexts, married girls – and their families – reported that social protection support can be vital to making ends meet. In Bangladesh, where UNHCR provides refugees with vouchers that can only be spent on food and in particular shops, Rohingya girls most often mentioned impacts on food security. As a 17-year-old girl said, *'Everything is given to us. They provide us with eggs, oil, onion, garlic and salt... and potatoes... and dal. We are thankful for that.'* In Jordan, Syrian parents were more likely than their daughters to mention social protection, in part

because UNHCR has attempted to disincentivise child marriage by not adding married girls to the household registration of their husband until they are a legal adult. The mother of a married Syrian girl explained that, *'If there is no eyeprint [cash requires a retina scan], I swear you will be broken totally.'* Syrian girls in Lebanon, where UNHCR provides vouchers for food to Syrian refugees, also reported that support from the UN is critical. A 19-year-old young woman asked, *'If one doesn't have a UN card, how can he live?'*

In Ethiopia, where the government's Productive Safety Net Programme (PSNP) supports food-insecure communities, only a few married girls reported receiving cash or food support. Key informants explained that this is because community registers of eligible beneficiaries are not regularly updated. A 17-year-old from East Hararghe stated that her family had just begun receiving cash support: *'They registered my husband, my baby and I three months ago. I received the money last week... I got 650 birr.'* Another 17-year-old girl also from East Hararghe reported that, *'The kebele officials were registering people two years ago and at that time I was not married.'*

Across contexts, married girls and their families were clear that existent social protection programming is far from sufficient. In Bangladesh, some Rohingya girls reported that they receive only rice; others noted that while food vouchers were helping to mitigate food insecurity, they did not allow households to purchase vital non-food items. Syrians in Jordan and Lebanon also reported needing more help with basic needs. The youngest married girls in Jordan noted that they do not have access to social protection at all. A pregnant 15-year-old explained, *'We don't have coupons because my husband and I are not living alone because I am still young, I am under the legal age for marriage.'* Girls in Lebanon noted that stepped-up aid has not kept pace with crisis-induced inflation. A 19-year-old young woman reported that, *'We are barely managing and barely affording food.'* Palestinians in Jordan and Lebanon said only that they were being left out as Syrians were now receiving more aid, as the father of a divorced girl who was now living back at home in Jordan described:

*UNRWA [the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East] gave us one time and then they stopped giving us. Syrians receive cash assistance as a salary. They received also, kind assistance of food from the mall. Also, they don't pay for their rented houses. So, the rights of Syrians now is more than Palestinians.*



## Voice and agency

### Key messages

- Married girls have limited input into the decisions that shape their lives, including whether and when they become mothers and whether they go to school or do paid work. Limits on girls' decision-making are shaped by both their gender and their age, and are backed by threats of violence.
- Many married girls also have limited input into smaller daily choices, such as what they wear and how they allocate their time. Girls are often especially troubled by these limits because they expected relatively more freedom once they left their natal homes.
- Married girls' mobility is restricted by husbands and marital families. This costs girls access to friends and family and also limits their access to essential services.
- Although married girls are often more likely to have access to ICT than their unmarried peers, use of phones and devices is controlled by their husband.
- Few married girls participate in community activities, including religious affairs, because of their gender, their age, and restrictions on their mobility.

### Decision-making

Married girls' input into decision-making about some of the most fundamental aspects of life – including how their time is allocated, whether they attend school or take on paid work, whether and when to become a mother, and how household resources should be allocated – is limited by myriad, intersecting factors. First, married girls' input is limited by dint of the fact that they are girls. Indeed, a 15-year-old now divorced Palestinian girl from Jordan explained that girls' obedience and silence is what demonstrates that they are 'good' girls. *'When I'm polite and do not interfere with anything, they say I'm good and well-raised.'* An 18-year-old married young woman from South Gondar (Amhara region of Ethiopia) agreed. She said, *'If a girl is not obeying her parents, she will be insulted and she will be labelled as someone born of a bad person.'*

Married girls' input into decision-making is also limited by child marriage. Across contexts, girls explained that while they might argue with parents, it is not possible to argue with their husband. A 19-year-old Rohingya young woman, when asked if she must always do as her husband tells her, replied, *'Why won't I listen to him? I must listen to him if I have to stay with him.'* Finally, married girls' input into decision-making is limited by age hierarchies – that is, the fact that they are married *girls* and not married women. A 17-year-old girl from South Gondar noted that she will express her opinion to her husband when she is an adult: *'I am a teenager and I will tell him in the future when I get mature... when I reach the age of 20.'*

Across contexts, and with some exceptions (see Box 20), married girls often expressed surprise at how little agency they have over their own lives (see Figure 9). While

nearly all were strictly controlled by their parents before marriage, and most understood in advance of marriage that the husband would be the final arbiter of decisions whether small or big, few girls anticipated that marriage would leave them genuinely voiceless. An 18-year-old Syrian young woman living in Lebanon explained, *'I didn't expect that someone will control me and I'll live according to his will and taste.'* Another young woman the same age from East Hararghe (Oromia region, Ethiopia) agreed: *'I don't make any decision at all.'* Married girls were the most surprised, and often the most upset, that their husband assumed control over the daily decisions that previously made them feel like they had agency. In Jordan and Lebanon, and to a lesser extent Bangladesh, many married girls were shocked to discover that they may no longer choose their own clothing. A 17-year-old Syrian girl living in Jordan explained: *'When I was in my family's house, I used to wear a dress when I went out of the house, but now I should wear an abaya and a veil.'* A 17-year-old Rohingya girl reported, *'My husband says, "When you go out, wear a burka".'* In Ethiopia, where girls have fewer clothing choices because they have fewer clothes, girls are instead saddened to give up the ability to manage their own time. A 14-year-old girl from South Gondar first reported that she structures her own time:

*I decide on what to cook and when to cook. I also clean my house and sit after finishing my work. These things I decide myself. I say that I have to wash clothes today. I have to fetch water or collect firewood. These things I know and I decide on my own.'*

### Box 20: The power of voice – *'I am still young and I will wear whatever I want'*

Miriam is a 16-year-old Syrian mother from Jordan's Azraq camp who knows what she wants and is not afraid to make sure that she gets it. Fashionable clothing is at the top of her list, though it is just one of many things she wants.

Miriam was engaged at age 14, to a man aged 22. Three times, he and his family came to propose to her. Twice she sent them away, even telling her now mother-in-law, *'If you need one to cook for you, go away!'* The third time, after a thorough investigation of his family, she said yes.

As soon as the engagement was official, Miriam's mother-in-law began trying to make choices for her. She tried to choose her wedding dress and tried to tell her what she should and should not wear every day. Miriam pushed back, hard: *'I do not accept anyone to decide instead of me,'* she explained. She told her future mother-in-law *'not to interfere in my own business... I am still young and I will wear whatever I want.'*

Miriam's story highlights how marriage can be a partnership, rather than a prison, if girls are supported to develop self-awareness and self-confidence before marriage and to speak up for themselves – and if marital families are encouraged to see girls as valued individuals in their own right and not for the children they produce or the household they are required to do.

Although Miriam was only 14 when she agreed to an unofficial marriage – even working with her natal and marital families to hide it so that her husband would not be arrested for violating Jordanian law – she came into her marriage with advantages that most girls do not have. She not only had her family's full support, which included being in *'a good financial position when we came from Syria'*, but she is from urban Homs, was first in her class at school, and had taken part in youth empowerment programming for years. These sessions prepared her to negotiate with her husband – during their engagement, when most girls do not yet even know about sex – for a three-year gap between children. *'We decided this from the beginning,'* she explained.

Miriam's husband is also highly unusual. He is not violent, even when she shouts at him, and will also give Miriam space when they argue. Miriam explained, *'Sometimes I ask him to leave the house when we have a fight... He goes either to his family or friends. I do not care where he goes, I only care that I do not leave... When I am angry I do not like to talk.'*

The boundaries that Miriam established with her in-laws early during her engagement have also paid off. Her mother-in-law has agreed to take care of the baby, so that Miriam can return to school.



**Figure 9: Girls' access to voice (photo story)**

*'Our society is like a closed vortex to women within which they are trapped, and they do not have the power or capability to express their opinions.'*

(15-year-old Palestinian girl, Lebanon)

She then added that if her husband gainsays her choice, *'There is nothing that I can do. I will have to keep my thoughts to myself. I will say to myself that I wanted to do something but I was unable to do that and I will leave it.'*

Despite promising approaches to improving married girls' input (see Box 21 and Box 22), married girls' input into household decision-making is even more limited than their input into personal decision-making. Although many girls across contexts reported contributing to decisions about how to maximise and allocate household income, girls were universal in reporting that should there be a disagreement between themselves and their husband (or in-laws), their own opinions are silenced. A 17-year-old Rohingya girl, when asked if her husband consults her about decisions for their family, replied, *'Everything happens as my husband wants.'* A 15-year-old girl from East Hararghe (Oromia region) explained that she would



### Box 21: Towards economic and sexual reproductive health outcomes for adolescent girls (TESFA)

TESFA was launched by the NGO CARE in Ethiopia's Amhara region with the explicit aim of improving the lives of married adolescent girls. Between 2010 and 2013, the programme directly engaged with 5,000 girls between the ages of 10 and 19 as well as with community members. Girls were organised into groups that met weekly and received life-skills and communications training alongside one of four curricula: sexual and reproductive health; economic empowerment based on an adapted Village Savings and Loan Association (VSLA) model; combined training; and a control group that received delayed training. Peer educators (some of whom were local religious leaders recruited for the purpose) guided community members, including girls' husbands and mothers-in-law, through a curriculum that included gender norms.

An evaluation found large gains in communication between girls and their husbands, decreased levels of gender-based violence, increased use of contraception, improved investment in economic assets, increased social capital and support, and improved mental health (Edmeades et al., 2016a,b). There was, however, little evidence of synergies between the sexual and reproductive health and the economic empowerment curricula.

Five years after TESFA ended, researchers returned to programme communities. They found that nearly 90% of girls' groups were still meeting and that groups had replicated to include newly married girls. They also found sustained impacts on girls' reproductive decision-making, contraceptive uptake, and institutional delivery – as well as on the prevalence of child marriage. Study participants attributed impacts to the girls' improved social connections with one another, girls' improved incomes, and better household relations between girls and their husband and mother-in-law (Chowdhary et al., 2022).

### Box 22: First-time Parents Project



The First-time Parents Project was implemented in rural India in 2003 and 2004. It was designed to provide young married girls and women and their husbands with information and services to improve pregnancy outcomes and increase girls' access to decision-making. Young mothers were organised into groups that met for several hours each month and provided a curriculum on sexual and reproductive health as well as nutrition, communication, gender dynamics, and legal and financial literacy. Husbands were provided with similar information through home visits and community meetings. Mothers-in-law and other senior women in girls' families were engaged 'opportunistically'. An evaluation found that the programme improved girls' autonomy and role in household decision-making. It also led to improved use of contraception and maternity services (Santhya et al., 2008).

never deign to try to contribute to household decisions – even relatively minor ones such as what to cook – because those are for her mother-in-law to make. She said, '*The homestead belongs to my mother-in-law and it is she that has the power to make decisions. I cannot make decisions, I join them from another household.*' Girls in Jordan and Lebanon sometimes noted that their preferences for naming their own children were ignored by their marital family. An 18-year-old Syrian mother living in Jordan said, '*I asked them to name him Ali but they didn't agree.*'

Husbands, who in most contexts are more than five years older than their wife, are not only aware of – but often cherish – their wife's lack of agency. When asked if he quarrels with his wife, a 17-year-old boy from East Hararghe, married to a girl five years younger, replied, '*Why would*

*we quarrel? She is very obedient and doleful.*' A 25-year-old Syrian man living in a Jordanian host community and married to a 15-year-old girl was even more forthcoming: '*It is like the doll, you can move it as you like... It's better than getting a mature girl who already has other things.*'

## Mobility

As highlighted in previous sections of this report, married girls have extremely limited mobility. In Bangladesh and Jordan, baseline surveys found that 70% and 28% respectively of ever-married girls had left home each day in the past week (see Table 19). In Bangladesh, where Rohingya girls are strictly confined to home from the onset of puberty, girls interpreted the question to mean stepping outside for any reason – including to visit a communal

**Table 19: Proportion of girls who have left the community in the past week<sup>^</sup> or have left home daily for the last week<sup>+</sup>**

Ethiopia					Jordan			Bangladesh		
Urban	Rural			Total	Jordanian	Syrian	Total	Camp	Host	Total
	Z5	SG	EH							
9%	7%	7%	11%	9%	30%	28%	28%	70%	68%	70%

<sup>^</sup> Ethiopia

<sup>+</sup> Bangladesh and Jordan

toilet. A 16-year-old responded by explaining that, *'The latrine is far from our house.'* In Jordan, where married girls' mobility is significantly more restricted than that of their unmarried peers, girls interpreted the question as it was intended, with less than a third reporting that they left their home on a daily basis. An 18-year-old Palestinian young woman explained that while before marriage she had to tell her mother where she was going, now she must seek her husband's permission instead. She stated, *'When I used to go outside, I could go by myself, but after I tell my mother. But, here, I have to take my husband's permission. Husband's permission is a must.'* A 16-year-old Syrian girl added that her mother-in-law is behind her husband's refusal to allow her to go out: *'It is because of my mother-in-law really. She tells him that if I go out, she will be mad at him.'* In Ethiopia, where most girls leave their home every day because they have to collect water and fuel wood and tend to livestock, it is rare for married girls to have left the community in the past week. A 17-year-old girl from Zone 5 (Afar) observed that: *'I am under his [her husband's] control once I marry... He only wants me to go where he likes... He prohibits me to visit my friends and my relatives... I do not go anywhere.'* A 20-year-old mother from Somali region commented, *'Before I got married, I was free to go anywhere but now it is difficult since there are many responsibilities.'*

## Access to ICT

Although access to mobile phones can connect married girls to people and information, even when their physical mobility is limited, many married girls in the GAGE sample reported that they did not have access to a mobile phone (see Table 20). At country level, rates of mobile phone access were highest in Jordan (62%), where many girls are gifted a mobile phone upon engagement; and lowest in Bangladesh (29%), where extreme poverty is a barrier to ownership. In both countries, baseline surveys found that married girls have better access to mobile phones than their unmarried peers. In Jordan, girls are rarely allowed to have their own phone until marriage – and after marriage, some girls only have a phone so that their husband can monitor their activities. A divorced 18-year-old Syrian young woman living in Jordan explained that her husband *'Forced me to keep the phone on all the time, so he could listen to everything I was saying... He wants to ensure I don't call anyone while he was outside the house. One time I put the phone in silent mode as there were women with me, he got so angry.'*

In Bangladesh, qualitative evidence suggests that married girls surveyed were primarily reporting access to their husband's phone. An 18-year-old young woman, when asked if she had a mobile, replied: *'My husband has one.'*

**Table 20: Proportion of married girls with access to a phone and the internet**

	Ethiopia					Jordan			Bangladesh		
	Urban	Rural			Total	Jordanian	Syrian	Total	Camp	Host	Total
		Z5	SG	EH							
Has a phone for personal use	58	21	28	36	36%	56	64	62%	23	41	29%
Personal phone can connect to internet	20%	3%	3%	3%	7%	48%	49%	49%	7%	9%	8%



*I don't have any.*' In Ethiopia, where girls are far less likely to own a phone than boys the same age, girls in urban areas (58%) were much more likely to have a phone than their peers in pastoralist Zone 5 (Afar) (21%). Differences – especially in terms of whether phones are connected to the internet (20% in urban areas vs. 3% in rural areas) – are accounted for by the availability of mobile infrastructure, but also gender norms. The mother of a married 16-year-old girl from Zone 5 (Afar), where many marriages are not only arranged but forced, explained that, *'If women have phones, they will get information and run away.'* Married girls from Somali region noted that there is some validity to this concern, albeit from a different perspective; in Somali region, girls' improved access to mobile phones is contributing to child marriage as adolescents communicate with one another via mobile and elope against their parents' wishes. A 19-year-old young woman who had been married for six years explained that, *'Girls and boys communicate marriage over the phone and get married.'*

Relatively few of the married girls in the GAGE sample reported having access to a phone that connects to the internet (see Table 20). In Jordan, where half (49%) of girls who had a phone reported that it was an internet-capable phone, girls' lack of connectivity was generally due to husbands' jealousy. When asked why her phone does not connect to the internet, a 15-year-old Syrian girl living in Jordan replied, *'my husband is complicated, he doesn't like the phones.'* Indeed, during interviews, girls commented that even when their phones are connected, they do not have unfettered access to the internet. Many are not allowed to use social media because husbands do not want girls to post pictures or disclose family 'secrets'. In Ethiopia and Bangladesh, married girls' access to the internet is limited by gender norms, but is primarily shaped by availability of mobile infrastructure and by costs.

Across contexts, girls reported using mobile phones to connect to family and keep up with family news – which is important, since many married girls no longer live near their parents and extended family – and for listening to



Women with their children in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh  
© Allison Joyce/UN Women 2019

music. An 18-year-old Rohingya young woman explained that, *'We can talk to our relatives and we can have any news through it. So, we need mobile.'* A 15-year-old girl from East Hararghe (Oromia region of Ethiopia) stated that, *'I use it to call people. I call my father and my brother that live in Saudi Arabia.'* Girls in Jordan, Lebanon, and urban areas of Ethiopia also reported using their phones to access information. In Lebanon, a 19-year-old Syrian young woman noted that she uses the internet to access information on parenting: *'I use the internet to learn everything, especially caring for my children and what should I do when they are sick, for example, and have high fever.'* In Ethiopia, a 15-year-old girl from South Gondar (Amhara region) explained that she uses her mobile to stay abreast of information about the conflict, and to run her own business. She said, *'Information is good for doing business or leading life. We get information about conflicts and security of areas if there are information sources... If I have the information about the cost of food items in another town, I may argue if there is a big profit difference.'* Primarily in Jordan and Lebanon, married girls also reported using their phone to stay connected to friends they were no longer allowed to see in person. A 15-year-old Syrian girl living in Jordan explained that, *'I spend my time also playing on the phone and talking to my friends... I contact my friend on Snapchat.'*

## Participation in the community

Reflecting limits on their mobility, few married girls reported participating in community activities, let alone community decision-making. An 18-year-old Rohingya young woman exclaimed, *'Women in our country don't give their opinion for anything!'* In Bangladesh, during interviews, none of the married girls discussed taking part in any group activities, outside of chatting with their neighbours on the doorstep. In Jordan and Lebanon, a few married Syrian and Palestinian girls reported attending classes provided by NGOs. These were almost exclusively aimed at bolstering girls' domestic and parenting skills. A 17-year-old Syrian girl living in Jordan explained how, *'Sometimes I attend*

*meetings for the women's council... There's a wise woman, who's chosen to teach all the young women lessons about cleanliness of our bodies, our children and our houses. It teaches us about raising children and not to hit them.'* In Ethiopia, where law and policy have long worked towards gender equality – albeit from a low base and against strong headwinds – married girls reported that their community participation is limited not only by mobility constraints and lack of time, but by their being seen as too young to join in women's activities. An 18-year-old young woman from South Gondar (Ethiopia's Amhara region) reported that she had attended a meeting only once and that she had explicitly pointed out girls' exclusion from programming to no avail. She recalled:

*I went to a kebele meeting once... it was a meeting to discuss work opportunities for women. They were asking us what opportunities there were for women in our kebele... We told them that they were not serving us girls... It was only adults that they were serving well... Sometimes, married girls like me want to go and attend such meetings even when we are not called. We say, "why not listen to new ideas and refresh our minds"... But nothing has been done up til now... They only call the adults [to meetings].*

Across contexts, most married girls are devoutly religious. An 18-year-old Palestinian girl from Jordan, when asked what she does to calm herself when she is distressed, replied: *'I feel comfortable when I read the Qur'an.'* However, although it was common for married girls to report attending religious education before they were married, only in South Gondar (Ethiopia's Amhara region) did any significant number of married girls report attending religious services after marriage. A 17-year-old Rohingya girl reported that girls are prohibited from attending religious meetings: *'They don't let us go... There will be punishment.'* An 18-year-old Syrian young woman living in Jordan, when asked whether she prays at the mosque, replied, *'My friends used to attend religious lectures... but here it is not allowed that a woman goes to the mosque.'*

# Conclusions and implications for policy and programming

GAGE research finds that across contexts, married girls are facing myriad, intersecting disadvantages. Many are deeply unhappy in their marriage because they are exhausted by the physical and emotional demands they must juggle and because they are isolated – by restrictions on their mobility and voice – from the family and friends who might lend them support. Few girls – even those who ostensibly married for ‘love’ – reported feeling emotionally connected to and supported by their husband. Indeed, qualitative evidence – from girls who are or have been married as well as from husbands and caregivers – suggests that intimate partner violence, much of which is extreme, is likely more common than emotional intimacy, and that husbands’ control over their wives’ lives – from what they wear to whether and when they become pregnant – is absolute. Many married girls participating in GAGE research also report hostility and violence from their mother-in-law, which they find deeply troubling given that the relationship between the mother-in-law and daughter-in-law is widely believed to be as important as the relationship between the husband and wife. Girls reported feeling sad that they cannot work long enough, hard enough or well enough to please their mother-in-law and were afraid that they would not be able to produce the grandchildren demanded of them in a timely fashion. While access to their own incomes might afford married girls some measure of independence, heavy demands on their time (which are amplified once they begin childbearing) as well as gender norms reinforced by husbands and in-laws tend to preclude this for most. Where they do not, it is generally because girls’ work is considered necessary to survival and girls’ earnings are appropriated for household use. Regardless of their unhappiness, or even their experiences with violence, most girls do not easily countenance divorce. Because divorcées (and their parents) are blamed for having failed at the role seen as central to girls’ value, girls tend to endure intolerable situations rather than risk community censure.

Across contexts, married girls are largely being left to face these intersecting disadvantages and intolerable situations without adult support. With some exceptions, girls’ parents are abrogating their responsibilities to their daughters – not only in terms of protecting them from

entering child marriage, but in terms of preparing them for it or protecting them during it. Most of the married girls in the GAGE sample were denied their right to an education even before marriage, limiting the human capital available to girls to bring into their married life. Similarly, especially in the Middle East and North Africa region, and among the youngest girls, GAGE is finding that child brides often do not learn that marriage involves a sexual relationship until their wedding day, and do not learn about conception and contraception until they are already pregnant. It is also not uncommon for girls’ parents to ignore signs of violence – or even girls’ accounts of it or their pleas for help – until girls have visible signs of physical violence.

Girls’ parents-in-law, with whom most young couples live for at least several years after marriage, also typically provide inadequate levels of support. Not only do many expect girls to shoulder adult levels of responsibility, despite the impacts on girls’ physical and mental health, but most – even when their own relationships with girls are not exploitative or violent – fail to stop their sons from engaging in controlling and violent behaviour. In addition, very few parents-in-law supported their daughter-in-law to continue her education.

Married girls are also being failed by the state and non-state actors whose role is to serve and protect them. Only a few married girls in the GAGE sample reported having been encouraged by educators to stay in or return to school. Not one girl reported that an educator made contact with her husband or in-laws to lobby on her behalf. It was also uncommon, outside of South Gondar (Amhara) and urban areas of Ethiopia, for health care workers to gainsay local norms and lobby for girls to delay their first pregnancy or space their second. Indeed, it was not unusual for married girls to report being blamed and shamed for having caused their own early, repeat, and high-risk pregnancies.

Married girls’ needs for protection are similarly being ignored. With traditional justice mechanisms that do not prioritise girls’ needs and rights generally favoured over formal mechanisms, few girls have access to effective legal redress for violence and many are forced to abandon their rights to marital property (and children) in order to keep themselves safe. Married girls’ access to social protection



is also extremely limited – because of policies designed to prevent child marriage, because beneficiary registers for social protection programmes are irregularly updated, and because of budget shortfalls.

Married girls' access to psychosocial support is perhaps the most glaring gap. With formal services exceedingly limited in LMIC contexts and women's programming largely targeting adult women, whereas girls' programming largely targets unmarried girls, married girls usually fall into a gap and are served not at all.

GAGE research suggests an array of priority actions for programming and policy to help address married girls' multiple disadvantages and ensure that they are no longer left behind. With the caveat that the disadvantages facing girls are overlapping and interwoven, meaning that programming needs to take account of girls' holistic needs but can be expected to have benefits that cascade across girls' lives, we have organised these (largely) by capability domain:



#### **To ensure that girls are prepared for marriage**

- **Programming that aims to improve the lives of married girls should start before they are married – and, borrowing from tactics known to help prevent child marriage, should empower girls with education, life skills, and knowledge about how their bodies work.** Efforts should begin with keeping girls in school as long as possible, using labelled or conditional cash transfers and school feeding as needed (García and Saavedra, 2017; Baird et al., 2014). Working through classroom content, girls' clubs, and community-based venues (to reach out-of-school girls), girls should also be provided with a curriculum that can support them to develop the confidence and communication skills they need to make their needs known and ensure that they understand the full nature of marital relationships, how reproductive biology works, what options they have for delaying pregnancy, and where to get help if they need it. We point the reader to [GAGE's rigorous review of girls' clubs and life-skills programmes](#) for examples of this type of programming (Marcus et al., 2017).



#### **To improve girls' psychosocial well-being and voice and agency**

- **Married and divorced girls need opportunities to spend time with peers and friends in safe spaces that also afford them access to caring adults.** As well as

providing girls with social support, programming should educate girls about their rights and where and how to break taboos and report violence; there should also be hands-on activities that support decision-making, self-confidence and communication. Supporting girls to access these opportunities will require engaging with their gatekeepers (principally husbands and mothers-in-law but also girls' own parents after divorce) and thinking through the practical support (such as childcare or transportation) that might facilitate girls' participation. In the most conservative contexts, programming may be better accepted if it is offered by faith-based organisations. TESFA (see Box 21), Meseret Hiwot (see Box 6), and the First-time Parents Project (see Box 22) could all serve as models for such programming.

- **Married girls need better communication and a stronger relationship with their husband.** Programming should be delivered to couples in both individual and group settings during engagement or soon after marriage. It should include topics such as: active listening; gender norms and how they shape beliefs (e.g. about girls' mobility), actions (e.g. violence) and communication styles (e.g. girls' silence); and human development, to make husbands more sensitive to the fact that girls are still children. Programming must be participatory to be effective and would ideally be iterative, with refresher courses offered annually, and delivered by pairs of facilitators, one female and one male. With the caveat that it has not yet been evaluated, IMAGINE (see Box 7) might serve as a model.
- **Married girls need more support from their mother-in-law.** These efforts must begin in the community, involve religious and traditional leaders as needed, and focus on restrictive gender norms and how women help perpetuate these across generations. Broader parenting education courses, targeting the parents of adolescents, could be used to build knowledge of adolescent development among mothers (and mothers-in-law) – and to help women think through how they want their own daughters to be treated after marriage, and how this might affect how they themselves treat their daughters-in-law (e.g. ensuring that they have adequate nutrition or intervening if the son is perpetrating intimate partner violence). To gain permission for married girls to attend group programming, and to shift the dynamics between mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law, it will be important to work directly with mothers-in-law, either



going door-to-door (to work with women [or daughter-in-law mother-in-law dyads] individually) or engaging with women through existent group programming (e.g. local women's associations or self-help groups). Although several programmes designed to improve girls' sexual and reproductive health have engaged with mothers-in-law (see Box 15), only TESFA (see Box 21) is reported to have impacted girls' broader relationships with their mother-in-law.

- **Programming should develop and disseminate tailored messaging, working closely with religious and traditional leaders, to reduce the stigma that surrounds divorce.** As well as working with communities, programmes should target divorced girls and their natal families, providing them with support and talking points to effectively manage stigma.



#### **To ensure that marriage does not preclude education**

- **Married and divorced girls need pathways that support continued learning.** Depending on context, this might be access to school, alongside age-mates or in special classes provided in the evenings (e.g. as are available in urban centres in Ethiopia) or online (e.g. as in Jordan); or it might be informal programming or skills-training opportunities that target married girls and young women. Supporting girls to access these pathways will require an array of carefully tailored ancillary measures, including practical add-ons (e.g. childcare or transport tokens), awareness-raising with communities about the value of married girls' education, and intensive engagement with husbands and in-laws (or girls' own parents) about gender norms and how girls' education has wide-ranging and cascading benefits. Given evidence that conditional cash transfers can keep girls in school and delay marriage, it is possible that they may also incentivise both marital and natal families to allow and encourage ever-married girls to study. Two programmes – Marriage: No Child's Play and Right to be a Girl (see Box 10) – may serve as useful models for designing such interventions.



#### **To improve girls' health**

- **There is a need to build support from within the community – and from gatekeepers – to improve girls' health.** Messages should be tailored to context, delivered jointly by government, NGO and religious

actors, and advocate for married girls and young women to have better access to nutritious food, healthy exercise, health care services, and sufficient time to rest given their heavy domestic workload.

- **There is a need for immediate and scaled-up efforts to decouple child marriage and adolescent motherhood and to build support for better-spaced pregnancies.** Efforts must include intensive engagement with married girls, their husbands and mothers-in-law to educate them about why better-timed pregnancies are important, and to address misconceptions about how contraceptives impact girls' bodies given the dearth of accurate information available. Programming should also raise awareness among communities about the role of delayed and spaced pregnancies in improving maternal and child outcomes. Given strong cross-context cultural preferences for immediate childbearing upon marriage, and widespread belief that contraceptives contravene religious mandates, it will be vital to collaborate with traditional and religious leaders. Despite the risks, one strategy may be to emulate policies in Jordan, which prevent girls under the legal age for marriage (16 years) from receiving free maternity care and which exclude married couples under the age of 18 from receiving social protection support. PRACHAR and RHMACP (see Box 12) might serve as models for such programming.
- **Health care providers need to be sensitised about how age and gender norms shape married girls' access to – and experiences of – health services.** This might include: raising awareness about the limits girls face on their mobility, access to information, and decision-making about their own bodies; refresher courses on how adolescents process information; and communications training that focuses on how to engage girls who are shy, embarrassed, or are accompanied at all times. Providers also need training on how to manage husbands and mothers-in-law so that they are able to address demands for married girls' immediate pregnancy and refuse to provide medication and services that are not in girls' own best interests. Given that health care providers are often among the most progressive and respected members of the community, donor support for capacity-building may result in relatively larger and faster impacts. While it is common for programmes designed to improve adolescent girls' sexual and reproductive health to engage in health systems strengthening, A360's

Smart Start (see Box 19) stands out for having shifted providers' understanding of married girls' needs.



#### **To reduce girls' exposure to violence, and support survivors of violence**

- **Husbands should be supported to explore alternative masculinities that do not revolve around control and violence.** Programming should be delivered in age-disaggregated group settings, with boys and young men separated from older men. It should address consent and wives' right to refuse sex, and include practical steps that men can take to support their wife, including contributing to domestic and care work and taking special care to protect her body if she has undergone FGM. Ideally, this work would build on masculinities programming provided to younger boys, would use peer mentors/role models, and would work closely with traditional and religious leaders to incorporate learning into boys' and men's cultural and religious identities. Program H (see Box 17) and Addis Birhan (see Box 6) might serve as models for this kind of programming.
- **Married and divorced girls who are experiencing (or have experienced) violence need stepped-up support from myriad sources.** This includes informal sources, such as their in-laws, with whom many are living; and their own parents, who need to be encouraged to see that their obligations to their daughters do not end when the girl marries. Girls also need access to formal services, including health care for those who are badly injured, psychological and legal services (which in urban areas could be provided online), and formal justice. Proactive outreach services, including using primary health care visits for screening and going door-to-door, will be required to reach the most vulnerable married girls. With the caveat that it does not appear to have been formally evaluated, the IRC has been working in Lebanon to build married girls' resistance to gender-based violence (see Box 9). This programme might be used as a model.

- **To reduce the number of girls who feel trapped in violent marriages, programming should develop and disseminate tailored messaging, working closely with religious and traditional leaders, to reduce the stigma that surrounds divorce.**



#### **To give girls more opportunities for economic empowerment**

- **Married and divorced girls need access to programming that provides basic numeracy and financial literacy, work skills, and age-appropriate opportunities to generate income, and to save and borrow.** Interventions should be tailored to context and reflect local labour market realities. Supporting girls to access these opportunities will require engaging with those whom girls identify as their gatekeepers (mainly husbands and mothers-in-law, but also parents after divorce) and thinking through the practical supports (such as childcare or transportation) that might be needed to facilitate girls' participation. TESFA (Box 21) and IMAGINE (Box 7) both include economic strengthening components that could be used as models for developing programming.
- **Social protection should be expanded to be more inclusive of newly married adult couples,** aiming to incentivize adult marriage, to reduce the household tensions that fuel violence, to mitigate young mothers' anxiety about providing for their children, and to open options for young couples to live in independent households. Actors should consider providing social protection in the wife's name, to promote financial inclusion.



#### **To build the evidence base about what works to support married girls**

- **It is important that governments, donors and NGOs invest in disaggregated data, pilot programmes and robust long-term evaluations.** These investments will allow for disentangling the disadvantages facing ever-married girls and ascertain which types of programming optimise outcomes for married and divorced girls and their children.

# Appendix 1: Demographic characteristics for quantitative sample of adolescent girls age 15 and older by marital status

**Table A.1: GAGE quantitative research sample – adolescent girls age 15 and older – Ethiopia**

	Ethiopia									
	Urban		Rural						Total	
			Zone 5, Afar (z5)		South Gondar, Amhara (SG)		East Hararghe, Oromia (EH)			
	Ever Married	Not married	Ever Married	Not married	Ever Married	Not married	Ever Married	Not married	Ever Married	Not married
Total Sample Size	191	603	145	117	276	152	268	191	880	1,063
Mean age at survey	18.11	17.63	17.92	16.60	17.62	16.26	16.72	15.68	17.50	16.97
% Never enrolled in school	8.4%	2.6%	62.5%	23.9%	16.8%	10.7%	20.8%	12.1%	23.8%	7.9%
% Currently enrolled in school	20.6%	87.9%	7.0%	50.4%	28.8%	75.2%	6.4%	50.5%	16.7%	75.1%
Lives in a household with above-median assets (standardized to urban and rural samples)	17.8%	54.8%	50.3%	48.2%	62.9%	57.9%	32.3%	26.7%	41.7%	49.5%

Notes: data presented in this table represent ever-married and never-married girls age 15 and older interviewed at the midline survey in Ethiopia (2019-2020).

**Table A.2: GAGE quantitative research sample – adolescent girls age 15 and older – Jordan**

	Jordan					
	Jordanian		Syrian		Total	
	Ever Married	Not married	Ever Married	Not married	Ever Married	Not married
Total Sample Size	27	164	154	577	181	741
Mean age at survey	16.67	16.05	16.76	16.12	16.11	16.75
% Never enrolled in school	0.0%	1.2%	0.6%	3.3%	0.6%	2.8%
% Currently enrolled in school	7.4%	83.5%	9.1%	58.9%	8.8%	64.4%
Lives in a household with above-median assets (standardized to urban and rural samples)	40.7%	78.0%	27.3%	38.5%	29.3%	47.2%

Notes: data presented in this table represent ever-married and never-married Jordanian and Syrian refugee girls age 15 and older interviewed the baseline survey in Jordan (2018-2019).

**Table A.3: GAGE quantitative research sample – adolescent girls age 15 and older – Bangladesh**

	Bangladesh					
	Camp		Host		Total	
	Ever Married	Not married	Ever Married	Not married	Ever Married	Not married
Total Sample Size	84	173	34	258	118	431
Mean age at survey	16.57	16.09	16.59	16.09	16.58	16.09
% Never enrolled in school	47.6%	64.2%	11.8%	4.3%	37.3%	28.3%
% Currently enrolled in school	0.0%	0.0%	5.9%	62.0%	1.7%	37.1%
Lives in a household with above-median assets (standardized to urban and rural samples)	38.3%	47.3%	29.4%	51.8%	50.0%	35.7%

Notes: data presented in this table represent ever-married and never-married girls age 15 and older interviewed at the baseline survey in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh (2019). Adolescents living in camps are Rohingya refugees, while adolescents living in host communities are drawn from the local Bangladeshi households situated near camp locations.

\*Note that no formal schools are available in Rohingya refugee camps in Cox's Bazar, and thus the formal school enrolment rate for the most recent term is 0%.



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## **About GAGE**

Gender and Adolescence: Global Evidence (GAGE) is a nine-year longitudinal research programme generating evidence on what works to transform the lives of adolescent girls in the Global South. Visit [www.gage.odi.org.uk](http://www.gage.odi.org.uk) for more information.

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