**Submission to the the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights - Child, Early and Forced Marriage in Humanitarian Settings**

**Plan International, Inc.**

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Plan International has developed this submission to inform the forthcoming UN report on child, early and forced marriage in humanitarian settings.

[Plan International](https://plan-international.org/) is an independent non-governmental organisation and is in Special Consultative Status with ECOSOC. Founded in 1937, Plan International is one of the oldest and largest children’s rights organisations in the world. We strive to advance children’s rights and equality for girls and young women in both development and humanitarian contexts. Working with children and young people in more than 70 countries around the world, we tackle the root causes of inequality faced by children, especially girls and young women. The elimination of harmful practices, including child, early and forced marriage (CEFM), is one of Plan International’s priorities as outlined in our new Global Strategy 2017-2022 - “[*100 million reasons*](https://plan-international.org/100-million-girls)*”* - which aims to transform the lives of 100 million girls so they can learn, lead, decide and thrive.

Throughout this document, reference is made to a previous submission that Plan International sent to the OHCHR in February of this year to inform the Oral Update of the High Commissioner on child, early and forced marriage in humanitarian settings.

**Data and evidence on the prevalence and drivers of CEFM in humanitarian settings**

Child, early and forced marriage (CEFM) is one of the most prevalent harmful practices and forms of sexual and gender-based violence and exploitation of women and girls. The harmful practice is a deeply concerning human rights violation that is also a powerful driver of adolescent pregnancy and maternal mortality, in addition to its interlinkages with the violation of a host of other fundamental human rights. In humanitarian settings, risks and drivers of CEFM are exacerbated, and contributing factors are often complex and interrelated, giving rise to urgently needed cross-sectoral prevention and response interventions.

Disaggregated data and evidence on CEFM, particularly in humanitarian settings remains severely limited. Despite the limitations, UNICEF offers some figures on the prevalence of CEFM from which we can draw some conclusions. For example, high rates of girls married before their 18th birthday in Niger (76%), CAR (68%), Chad (67%), Bangladesh (59%), and Mali (52%)[[1]](#footnote-1) highlight the correlation of humanitarian contexts and CEFM, as each of these experiences frequent natural disasters or cycles of conflict, which are compounded by high poverty rates. In fact, most of the 25 countries with the highest rates of child marriage are considered fragile states, or at high risk of natural disasters.

Plan International’s research and experience, including research and assessments undertaken with partners,[[2]](#footnote-2) has found the driving factors in humanitarian settings of CEFM specifically, and sexual exploitation and abuse more broadly include: increased violence and protection-related concerns; disruptions in access to education; economic insecurity and poverty; food insecurity; and adolescent pregnancy. Protracted humanitarian contexts in particular, reduce families’ coping strategies and simultaneously reduce education, employment and support opportunities, meaning that for many families, CEFM is seen as a favourable option.[[3]](#footnote-3) Please find below some data and evidence from recent research and assessments conducted by Plan International on the prevalence and drivers of CEFM in specific humanitarian contexts.

**South Sudan**

Plan International’s rapid needs assessment in South Sudan in spring of 2017 found that as families struggled to survive, with extreme challenges related to food insecurity compounded by the ongoing conflict and insecurity and extreme poverty, they were increasingly turning to negative coping mechanisms like CEFM.[[4]](#footnote-4) Bride dowries, in the form of cash or livestock, already seen as a common means to increase economic resources for families, have led desperate families to marry their underage girls off in order to, in their view, improve both the girl’s and her family’s chances of survival.[[5]](#footnote-5) Furthermore, in Plan International’s report released in May 2018, CEFM was reported as the most common form of gender-based violence (GBV).[[6]](#footnote-6)

**Lake Chad**

Plan International’s recent assessment in North East Nigeria emphasized the relationship between economic insecurity, food insecurity and CEFM. Girls surveyed in the assessment reported that they were forced into child marriage because they could not afford school fees, food, shelter or other basic necessities.[[7]](#footnote-7) Furthermore, recent research collated by Plan International found that community leaders further supported the view that the related food and economic crises were driving rates of CEFM, with the practice of bride price providing a space for CEFM to be deployed as a negative coping mechanism by families struggling to access food. Plan International found early or unwanted pregnancy was also linked to the practice of CEFM, with adolescent boys in certain areas describing how fathers married their daughters early as a protective mechanism for fear of early pregnancy and the stigma of being pregnant outside of wedlock.[[8]](#footnote-8)

**Philippines**

A recent needs assessment on the Marawi displacement crisis in the Philippines found that in 24% of sites assessed, girls were allegedly joining armed groups as a coping mechanism linked to early marriage. In particular, anecdotal evidence suggested that girls may join armed groups and marry early due to the need for economic stability in the wake of the crisis. Reasons for girls’ “voluntary” recruitment into armed groups from evacuation centres highlighted this similar linkage to financial needs. The needs assessment also stated that 12% of sites surveyed reported incidents of survivors of sexual violence marrying their perpetrators in order to avoid risks of stigmatization and rejection.[[9]](#footnote-9)

**Specific challenges and gaps in the prevention and elimination of CEFM in humanitarian settings**

Below is a list of some challenges and gaps identified by Plan International in its work.

1. As aforementioned one of the challenges in reducing and eliminating CEFM in humanitarian settings is the lack of evidence and data on the scale and nature of the problem and how the different crisis (conflicts, natural disasters) affect the practice. Rather than dividing negative coping mechanisms and exploitation, data gathering should be conducted safely and correctly, and importantly must take into account different causes of CEFM. In addition to addressing the broad root causes of CEFM – gender inequality, discrimination and harmful social norms – interventions must carefully analyse and respond to interrelated, intersecting, and at times overlapping driving factors that compound the issue. Although some general knowledge as to the types of factors that have the potential to drive higher prevalence rates of CEFM in humanitarian contexts is available, more careful periodic in-depth researches and analysis is required based on each specific context, as a factor that may serve as a driver in one context, may not in another.

Another challenge is knowing how to tailor programming specifically to the identified drivers of CEFM. At present, there is a lack of tailored guidance and tools for preventing and responding to CEFM in humanitarian settings.

1. In the field, CEFM cases can be addressed from different angles, including from a gender-based violence (GBV) and child protection angle. These cases can be managed differently depending on who responds, i.e. a GBV caseworker or a child protection caseworker. Furthermore, these two sectors do not always communicate well which can often lead to overlap in case work, lack of data, and variance in how a case is responded to. Better coordination between child protection and GBV actors is therefore required to address this complex issue.
2. As is the case in development contexts, there is a lack of comprehensive support systems for girls who are currently married or have been rescued from marriage.

**Examples of good practices**

**Champions of Change Initiative**

Plan International’s *Champions of Change* programme first piloted in 2012 continues to be implemented globally and is an innovative strategy to work towards ending CEFM by addressing the root causes of gender discrimination and inequality.[[10]](#footnote-10) Champions of Change is a community-wide strategy to engage boys and empower girls to challenge harmful social norms and promote gender equality. It uses a gender-synchronised approach, which supports children and young people to actively examine and reflect how rigid gender norms and power imbalances are present in their own lives. The programme has developed a comprehensive set of curricula for both girls and boys. It has proved effective because: 1) it uses a peer-to-peer model, helping young people feel invested and take ownership of the subject; 2) it explicitly fosters a youth-led social movement that challenges social norms and gains society-wide support for gender equality and girls’ rights; 3) it also promotes inter-generational dialogue and community-level advocacy on gender equality.

The Champions of Change strategy has also been used in protracted crisis. For example in South Sudan, Champions of Change includes a separate module aimed at promoting youth as agents of change in gender equality and peacebuilding. Contextualized to the conflict and deeply rooted gender discriminatory norms prevalent in South Sudan, the peace module aims to empower young people as actors of peace and reconciliation and to transform the harmful patriarchal gender norms, fuelled by the conflict.

**The Right to Choose Project**

Another initiative launched by Plan International in South Sudan called *The Right to Choose*, has proved successful. The project involved the establishment of girls clubs in schools. In these safe spaces, girls shared knowledge and discussed their experiences relating to child marriage and early pregnancy. The project saw the number of dropout rates reduce significantly, and the retention rate of girls attending schools increased. The stories shared by girls whom had experienced child marriage or early pregnancy served as an inspiration to those girls who were not attending school.

**Comprehensive humanitarian response for the needs of adolescent girls in North East Nigeria**

Plan International is providing protection, education and livelihoods support services to children, working in partnership with the local government and local community based organisations in Borno and Adamawa State. Plan International implements age and gender sensitive programs that works across sectors. These aim to identify children at particular risk of SGBV, including CEFM, and respond to the needs of survivors. Interventions include: case management, non-formal education and income-generating activities, psychological support through peer mentoring, cash transfers and mobile units, which address psychosocial wellbeing, sexual and gender based violence and reintegration of children and young women formerly affiliated with Boko Haram.[[11]](#footnote-11)

**SHIELD - A protective environment for adolescent growth in Lebanon**

Plan International and War Child Lebanon have joined forces with local organisations to launch a new initiative in Lebanon in spring 2018 financed by ECHO. The programme is aimed at addressing the protection needs of at risk adolescent girls and boys through an integrated education in emergencies, psychosocial and protection response, including a referral to appropriate services in other projects. The programme targets refugee and vulnerable host communities, particularly adolescents living in Lebanon who are at-risk of or have dropped out of school due to issues such as CEFM. The project adopts an integrated model including child protection, GBV and education components, and a community-based approach to build acceptance and engagement by refugee and host communities.

The response strategy builds upon the positive inter-relation between protection and education: engaging at risk adolescents in education and psychosocial support activities to give a sense of normalcy and routine, while enhancing knowledge, coping skills and protective behaviours; mainstreaming protection within education services by training community teachers on child safeguarding, positive discipline, and providing psychological first aid.[[12]](#footnote-12)

**New app launched in Bangladesh to help stop CEFM[[13]](#footnote-13)**

An innovative new app developed by the Government of Bangladesh and Plan International is being rolled out across the country after stopping over 3,700 child marriages in only 6 months (pilot period). The app has been created for use by the matchmakers, marriage registrars and solemnisers who conduct marriages across the country.

The app tackles the issue of scale head on, taking advantage of the fact that almost 80% of the country’s 160 million people now own a mobile phone. Although only 20% of the population have access to the internet, there is both an online and offline version of the app available, which means that even the hard-to-reach rural areas will be able to use the technology.

The app works by making it possible for marriage registrars, solemnisers or matchmakers to establish the true age of a bride and groom. In the past, a physical copy of a birth certificate, school leaving certificate or national ID card was all that was required as proof of age. However, these documents could easily be forged. With the new app, this is no longer a possibility, as the marriage registrar and solemniser can digitally verify the document, thereby significantly reducing chances of fraud. 13,000 marriage registrars have already been trained on this application, as well as on youth counselling and child marriage. Plan International Bangladesh is working in partnership with the government to scale-up the initiative to 59 districts in Bangladesh within the next 2 years. Other countries, including Ethiopia, are looking at following this example.[[14]](#footnote-14)

**Recommendations**

* **Promote and protect the human rights of girls and young women throughout all humanitarian response interventions**, specifically tailoring interventions to address their age- and gender-related needs, including in the context of education and health, particularly sexual and reproductive health.
* **Undertake data collection and** **disaggregated analysis, including gender and age, of risks and potential drivers of CEFM in a specific context** immediately following the sudden onset of a crisis, and prior to any prevention or resilience building interventions in fragile states and states vulnerable to disaster. This analysis should be conducted in collaboration with child protection and GBV actors.
* **Promote and facilitate integrated cross-sectoral CEFM prevention and response strategies** in order to fully address the root factors and multiple potential contributing factors to CEFM in humanitarian settings.
* A **global resource for assessing, designing, and implementing CEFM programming in emergencies** should be developed and tested in multiple contexts.
* All humanitarian actors must ensure that **funding for education, child protection, gender-based violence and SRHR in emergencies is prioritised** alongside food, water, shelter and health, as essential to long-term sustainable development, gender equality, sustainable peace, and in recognition of the rights of the child.
* **Comprehensive, effective and rights-based civil registration and vital statistics systems, including birth and marriage registration processes** should be available and accessible at the community level to women and girls, men and boys, and free of charge with no fines for late registration, in all humanitarian situations. Civil registration helps build a protective environment against abuse, exploitation and violence. In cases of child, early and forced marriage or the worst forms of child labour, proof of age can help prosecute perpetrators. [[15]](#footnote-15)
* Ensure **needs assessments and humanitarian response plans include gender- and age-related analyses**, and take into account the **views of young women and girls.**
* Ensure that **young women and girls, especially adolescent girls, are consulted** **and included in all relevant processes that affect them** throughout every stage of the response and recovery.
* **Identify, challenge, and address gender-based discriminatory attitudes and social norms** at all levels that accept and excuse harmful practices and violence against girls and women through developing, investing in, and implementing targeted and context tailored programming.
* **Take all necessary and available measures, including the enactment, implementation, harmonisation, and enforcement of all laws, policies and practices to prevent harmful practices, sexual and gender-based violence and all violence against children, including child, early and forced marriage**, as required under International Humanitarian Law[[16]](#footnote-16), International Criminal Law[[17]](#footnote-17), and International Human Rights Law[[18]](#footnote-18), and reinforced and emphasised by Security Council Resolutions 1325 (2000), 1825 (2008), 1888 (2009), 1960 (2010), 2106 (2013), and 2122 (2013).
* Develop **appropriate policies, strategies and programmes to support girls who are or have been victims of CEFM**, including the creation of safe spaces.
* Existing **regional and international human rights mechanisms**, including the Human Rights Council and its Universal Periodic Review, as well as **relevant Treaty Bodies should give due consideration to the issue of child, early and forced marriage, including in humanitarian settings**, during the exercise of their mandates.

1. UNICEF, Child marriage data, available at <https://data.unicef.org/topic/child-protection/child-marriage/> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Plan International, *Because I am a Girl: The* *State of the World’s Girls 2013, In Double Jeopardy: Adolescent Girls and Disasters*, 2013; World Humanitarian Summit Advisory Group on Children, *Putting Children at the Heart of the World Humanitarian Summit*; Plan International, ChildFund Alliance, Save the Children, SOS Children’s Villages International, UNICEF, World Vision International, War Child Netherlands, War Child UK, 2016, available at <https://plan-international.org/publications/putting-children-heart-world-humanitarian-summit>; Plan International, *A Child Protection and Education Needs Assessment in Select Communities of Borno and Adamawa State*, September 2017; Child Protection Working Group and GBV Working Group: Philippines, *Child Protection Rapid Assessment Report: Marawi Displacement*, October 2017, available at <https://reliefweb.int/report/philippines/child-protection-rapid-assessment-report-marawi-displacement-october-2017>; Plan International, *Weathering the Storm: Adolescent Girls and Climate Change*, 2011; Plan International, *A Time of Transition: Adolescents in Humanitarian Settings*, 2016; ; Plan International, *Study on Gender-Based Violence in Central African Republic*, Fall 2017 (unpublished); Plan International, *The Journey of Adolescent Girls during and after Armed Conflict in South Sudan*, December 2017. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Plan International, *Because I am a Girl: The* *State of the World’s Girls 2013, In Double Jeopardy: Adolescent Girls and Disasters*, 2013, available at <https://plan-international.org/double-jeopardy-adolescent-girls-and-disasters>; Plan International, *Weathering the Storm: Adolescent Girls and Climate Change*, 2011, available at <https://plan-international.org/publications/weathering-storm>; Plan International, *A Time of Transition: Adolescents in Humanitarian Settings*, 2016, available at <https://plan-international.org/publications/time-transition-adolescents-humanitarian-settings> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Plan International, *Rapid Needs Assessment for South Sudan*, May 2017 (unpublished). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Marc Sommers and Stephanie Schwartz and USIP, *Dowry and Division: Youth and State Building in South Sudan*, November 2011, available at <https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/SR_295.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Plan International, *Adolescent Girls In Crisis: Voices From South Sudan*, May 2018 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Plan International, *Rapid Needs Assessment for South Sudan*, May 2017 (unpublished). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Plan International, *Adolescent Girls in Protracted Crisis: Lake Chad Crisis*, September 2018 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Plan International, Child Protection Working Group and GBV Working Group: Philippines, *Child Protection Rapid Assessment Report: Marawi Displacement*, October 2017. <https://plan-international.org/publications/child-protection-rapid-assessment-marawi-displacement> [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. See: <https://plan-international.org/youth-activism/men-champions-of-change>. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Plan International, *Oral Update of the High Commissioner to the Human Rights Council on Child, Early and Forced Marriage in Humanitarian Settings,* February 2018 [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. More information can be provided upon request. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. This project has not taken place in a humanitarian context per se but responds to question #9 of the Note Verbale. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. See: <https://plan-international.org/news/2018-05-07-mobile-app-stops-3700-child-marriages> [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Plan International, *Birth Registration in Emergencies: A Review of Best Practices in Humanitarian Action*, 2014. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Including the Geneva Conventions of 1949 and its additional protocols, and customary international humanitarian law. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Including the Rome Statute and body of international criminal law statutes and case law. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Including the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, the Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women, the Protocol to the African Charter on Human Peoples’ Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa, the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the Convention against Torture. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)