

Forced Marriage by Non-state Armed Groups: Frequency, Forms, and Impact



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Many non-state armed groups use forced marriage during armed conflict. Forced marriage tends to increase during armed conflict both because economic and physical insecurity makes girls and women more vulnerable to the practice and because non-state armed groups perpetrate forced marriage as part of their wartime strategies and operations. This practice has been documented across all geographic regions, in every decade since the 1940s, and across non-state armed groups with many different ideologies.

Conflict-related forced marriages can be understood as relationships that (1) are facilitated or enforced by armed actors; (2) are referred to as “marriages,” involve a marital ceremony, or result in the parties being called spouses; and (3) are conducted without the complete and free consent of one or both parties.

Conflict-related forced marriages can also be divided into three types, each of which can have distinct impacts on survivors:

- Member–member forced marriage involves non-state armed group leaders forcing lower-ranking members into marriages with one another.

These marriages often appear to be a strategy to build internal cohesion within an armed group and prevent members from leaving by creating familial bonds. By cutting off survivors from their families and other social ties, they can complicate demobilization and reintegration after conflict.

- Member–civilian forced marriage involves civilians (overwhelmingly women) being compelled to marry non-state armed group members. It is by far the most common type of forced marriage perpetrated by non-state armed groups and is often linked to abduction. It can have deep economic, social, and health impacts on survivors, including by stigmatizing them and interrupting their education, as well as on their families and entire communities.
- Civilian–civilian forced marriage involves non-state armed groups dictating that civilians living under their control must marry one another. It is often part of a strategy to tighten social control over civilian populations and even to engineer a certain type of population.

Forced marriage by non-state armed groups also varies in mode of coercion and institutionalization. Non-state armed groups

might force marriage through violence and abduction or more “indirect” coercion like economic extortion or extreme social pressure. Some non-state armed groups enforce a policy of forced marriage, while for other armed groups, forced marriage is a practice but not a formalized policy. While policymakers, scholars, and practitioners recognize forced marriage as an important form of conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV), there are no frameworks for conceptualizing the frequency and range of forms of forced marriage that occur in conflict.

Forced marriage, whether it occurs inside or outside of the context of conflict, can have devastating impacts on survivors’ lives. Individuals who are forced into marriage (predominantly women and girls) are more likely to experience domestic violence and less likely to stay in school. Forced marriage

negatively impacts physical health, particularly when girls become pregnant as children. It also takes a toll on mental health; women and girls forced into marriage frequently become isolated from their communities and social networks. Survivors of forced marriage also have worse economic outcomes

than their peers. The impact of forced marriage on men has been understudied, but there may be distinct negative consequences for men in forced marriages in conflict.

International organizations, national governments, and civil society organizations have made major strides in highlighting, preventing, and addressing forced marriage, including forced marriage in armed conflict, often as part of broader efforts to address CRSV. These have included efforts to ban forced marriage, including through international human rights conventions and national laws; collect and report data on forced marriage; sanction perpetrators of CRSV under UN sanctions regimes; prosecute perpetrators of forced marriage under international criminal law; and make special provisions for the reintegration of survivors.

Yet further research, policy, and programming is needed, and existing efforts should account for the different types of forced marriage and their distinct impact on survivors.

“The original dataset introduced in this report can be a tool for policymakers and practitioners to understand the impacts of forced marriage in armed conflict and better design prevention strategies and survivor-centered responses.”

To read the full policy paper visit: <https://bit.ly/3Cx80Bn>



1. Ensure that data collection on CRSV is specific about forced marriage and addresses survivors' needs and safety.

The guidance note for the Monitoring, Analysis and Reporting Arrangements (MARA) does not list forced marriage as a specific form of CRSV. However, the secretary-general's annual report on CRSV includes information on the perpetration of forced marriage in specific contexts. Researchers and others gathering data on CRSV should ensure that this data is disaggregated by the form of violence being recorded (when possible) and avoid linking sexual slavery and forced marriage. Researchers should also gather more data on the unique needs of survivors of forced marriage and whether these differ based on the type of forced marriage. In doing so, it is critical that they prioritize the safety of survivors of forced marriage at every stage of data collection and data sharing, including by protecting their identities, while still facilitating learning among stakeholders.

2. Promote criminal accountability for perpetrators of forced marriage.

Within international criminal law, forced marriage has been included in the category of crimes against humanity under "other inhumane acts." However, forced marriage as a crime against humanity is still being contested in international law. As modeled in the Appeals Chamber of the Special Court for Sierra Leone and the ICC in the Ongwen case, prosecutors should continue to prosecute forced marriage as a distinct crime against humanity. In addition, member states engaged in the negotiations on the treaty on crimes against humanity at the UN General Assembly should support the inclusion of forced marriage as a distinct crime against humanity.

3. Include specific language about forced marriage in sanctions regimes regarding CRSV.

UN Security Council sanctions regimes are a tool that could be used to prevent and monitor forced marriage in armed conflict. There do not appear to have been sanctions issued against individuals or organizations for forced marriage specifically, though not all listings have descriptions of the reason for the listing. The panels of experts for UN sanctions committees should continue to include information on CRSV in their reports and provide as much detail as possible on different forms of CRSV, including forced marriage. There is a risk that if sanctions regimes do not specifically highlight forced marriage as a form of CRSV, actors in armed conflict could use marriage as a cover for other forms of sexual violence such as rape. UN Security Council sanctions committees should also continue to include CRSV in sanctions listing criteria and ensure that the listing criteria are applied against perpetrators of forced marriage. Finally, every panel of experts should include at least one member with expertise on gender issues or CRSV.

4. Support the reintegration of individuals exiting forced marriage.

Researchers suggest that services for women exiting non-state armed groups should be tailored based on women's risk levels, as determined by their role in the group and level of radicalization. Survivors of forced marriage may also need specific support that differs from other survivors of CRSV, and children born out of forced marriages face specific challenges. Those designing and implementing disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) or rehabilitation programs should factor in the different types of forced marriage occurring in the context and use this knowledge to tailor screening processes and support for those exiting non-state armed groups. This support should consider the unique needs of individuals exiting forced marriage, including legal assistance, services for children, and health and psychosocial support.