



A qualitative study of displacement-related changes in child and forced marriage among Somali refugees in Dollo Ado, Ethiopia

SVRI Forum, Oct 23 2019

Vandana Sharma, MD, MPH

Co-Authors: Adaugo Amobi, Samuel Tewelde, Negussie Deyessa, Jennifer Scott



Unite for
a Better Life

Introduction

- Child marriage - formal or informal union before 18 years of age
- Somalia - 45% of women aged 20-24 married before 18 years of age
 - (8% before 15 years)
- Adverse sexual and reproductive health consequences
- Increased risk of intimate partner violence
- War and humanitarian crises affect decisions around marriage



BOKOLMAYO REFUGEE CAMP (DOLLO ADO)

- 220,000 Somali refugees in 5 camps
- ~40,000 in Bokolmayo camp
- Conducted formative research in 2016 to inform adaption of **the Unite for a Better Life** IPV prevention program to humanitarian context

Methodology



Qualitative data on

- Gender, social, cultural and religious norms contributing to IPV
- Effect of displacement on norms, risk and protective factors
- Marital practices before and after displacement
 - 30 IDIs
 - 10 FGDs

Data collection & Analysis

- Trained male and female interviewers conducted interviews / discussion in pairs in Somali, Amharic or the local dialect
- Verbal consent was obtained, interviews were conducted in a private setting, audio recorded
- Data transcribed, translated to English, coded independently by 2 researchers

Participant Characteristics - IDIs

	Men (n=17)	Women (n=13)	Total
Nationality			
Ethiopian	2	4	6
Somali	15	9	24
Age (mean, range)	42.7 (17-70 yrs)	29.1 (16-46 yrs)	36.8 (16-70)
Marital Status			
Single	1	4	5
Married	14	8	22
Separated	0	1	1
Other/Not Available	2	0	2
Length of time in Camp (Mean, range)	7.8 years (<1-20 yrs)	6.8 years (<1-8 yrs)	7.3 years (<1-20 yrs)
Number of children (Mean, range)	5.8 (0-11)	5.3 (0-10)	5.6 (0-11)

Marital practices in Somalia prior to displacement

Participants described several types of marital practices prior to displacement:

- Arranged marriage (with or without consultation of a woman / girl)
- Elopement
- Forced marriage initiated by man/boy (using rape or physical violence)
- Practices that overlap with the above (polygamy, child marriage, dowry)

Child marriage, & polygamy were reportedly very common prior to displacement

“They are forced because in our tradition when a girl reaches puberty age, she must be engaged. A Somali proverb says ‘girls must be married or buried’ and that’s our tradition.” (Male, 24 years, IDI)

“Allah allowed men to have four [wives], but when they marry, they treat all the same.” (Woman, 18 years, IDI)

Dowry (where wealth is transferred to bride’s family to confer a union and serve as contract) was reported as universal tradition in Somalia

Displacement-related changes in marital practices

Arranged marriage, child marriage, & forced marriage were reportedly occurring less frequently in the camp

“Her father used to force her without her consent... And now she comes with the man she loves, that is what changed.” (Female, 19y, IDI).

“We are in democratic country, there are NGOs and security, no one can force the girls to do things they don’t want, there is a government and rule of law here, girls are not forced to marry.” (Male, 24 years, IDI).

“Girls that used to be married in childhood are married as adults now.” (Male, >46y, IDI).

Displacement-related changes in marital practices (continued)

Dowry is still an important cultural practice, but has changed due to economic hardship

- While traditionally dowry may have totaled 1,000 USD or multiple livestock, in the camp the amount may be as low as 18 USD or even nothing
- This change may affect power and relationship dynamics in marriages:

“[Somalis] do believe that if the wealth is not taken from the man, he will not treat the woman well.” (Male Religious Leader, 62 years, IDI)

Polygamy was reported to have decreased since displacement primarily because of inability to afford more than one wife

- There were mixed views on polygamy, with some reporting that it leads to breakdown of families, while others support the practice

Factors underlying changes

Access to education

- Increased access to education for girls in the camp compared to prior to displacement

Poverty

- Poverty was universally stated as being a major concern of refugees in the camp, and exacerbated by displacement
- Lack of employment and income generating activities → reduced polygamy
- There were no reported financial gains for parents who marry girls at a young age in the camp except under rare circumstances

Factors underlying changes (continued)

Protection

- High risk of non-partner sexual violence (eg. collecting firewood, water)
- No participants reported child marriage as a strategy to protect girls from the increased risk of sexual violence

Security in the camp and NGO programming

- The camp was described as peaceful and safe compared to Somalia
- There is increased mixing of girls and boys at school which reportedly contributes to the increase in love marriages
- NGO programming has changed some attitudes towards early marriage

Laws prohibiting child marriage

- Laws in Ethiopia on minimum age of marriage have instilled fear among refugees

Marital practices and IPV

Physical IPV

- Physical IPV is common
- Polygamy was the marital practice most often linked to IPV, particularly when the man does not treat all wives equally as mandated by customary law
- Forced marriage was also described as being linked to physical IPV
- No respondents suggested that declines in forced marriages & polygamy have contributed to reduced IPV

Sexual IPV

- Forced sex was described as commonly occurring in all types of marriages

“Her duties are ... whenever he needs sexual intercourse she must be ready if it’s day or night.” (FGD, 26-45 years)

Discussion

Findings reveal displacement-related reductions in child & forced marriages among Somali refugees in Bokolmayo camp.

- Displacement → economic hardship, risks of non-partner violence, increased access to education & NGO programming

Findings differ from other studies on child marriage in conflict or post-conflict settings

- In other settings, child marriage is a financial coping mechanism, and in some cases a strategy to protect against sexual violence and unintended pregnancy
- In other settings, interruption of girls' education contributes to child marriage, in Dollo Ado access to education for girls increased

Implications for programming

1. This study provides evidence of the benefit of education to girls in humanitarian and refugee contexts, even within the context of financial hardship and high perceived risk of sexual violence. **Increasing access to education should be a priority in such settings.**
1. Marital practices such as forced marriage and polygamy are associated with increased risk of IPV. **IPV prevention programs should incorporate specialized content for these groups.**
2. **Services for married adolescents should be made available** with the recognition of this population as a group with unique needs that place them at increased risk of poor health and other outcomes.



Thank You

Vandana Sharma, MD, MPH
vsharma@hsph.harvard.edu



Unite for
a Better Life

