

Child Marriage in displaced populations analyzed through the Ecological Systems Model: Syrian

Refugees and internally displaced Cameroonians

Cassy Hite

University of Denver

PSYC 2701: Refugee Migration

May 15, 2020

Child Marriage in displaced populations analyzed through the Ecological Systems Model: Syrian Refugees and internally displaced Cameroonians

There are many different aspects that characterize the human experience. Children growing up as members of displaced populations are likely to encounter different situations and experiences based on their status as such. Child development and outcomes differ on an individual basis and are affected by many of these unique influences. While there are the direct influences on a child's development, such as parental warmth, home/neighborhood environment, and schooling, there are also external factors that play a role in the process of child development. These factors can include their country's political/economic climate, societal norms, and family relationship to the community.

A social theory and model that helps to define these rings of influential factors is Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Model. It is often used in the realm of child developmental psychology to look at the effects of the different developmental factors within each system on a child's development. The Ecological Systems Model includes four different environmental systems, or levels, which contain various influences on child development: microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem. There is also the overarching system of the chronosystem which accounts for time and place of life events. The influences found within each system can be considered when looking at developmental outcomes, as each level differently impacts the development of each person (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2013).

Refugee children are often made to face many unique developmental influences on the different levels of the Ecological Systems Model. The impacts of these unique influences can lead to a variety of different outcomes. One such outcome found in refugee populations, is a high prevalence of child marriage. There are many different aspects within the Ecological Systems

Model that may play a role in this particular outcome in terms of displaced populations. One population in which there is a great deal of literature regarding the presence of child marriage is Syrian refugees, specifically those in Lebanon and Jordan. It is also present within internally displaced populations in Cameroon and Nigeria (Girls Not Brides, 2017). This paper will look at the characteristics that impact the outcome of child marriage in the displaced populations through the lens of the Ecological Systems Model.

Ecological Systems Theory

First, it is necessary to break down the systems of the Ecological Systems Model in order to use it as a lens through which to discuss the influences on the outcome of child marriage. As previously mentioned, each of the four environmental systems contained different developmental influences. These systems are broken down in a Onwuegbuzie et al. (2013) article, which will be used to frame this whole section, according to Bronfenbrenner's descriptions of each system. According to this article, the microsystem, which makes up the first level of the model, involves anything within the immediate environment which a child closely interacts with. It contains aspects such as school, home, neighborhood, church, recreation facilities, family, peers, etc. This system can best be defined as the inner activities and interpersonal relationships a developing child experiences. The microsystem is often bi-directional with individual characteristics, such as gender, stage of development (age), temperament, and health.

On the second level is the mesosystem, which refers to the connections between the direct settings a child is a part of, i.e. the ways that the settings in the microsystem interact with each other. For example, the family relationship with the community or relations between family experiences, school experiences, and experiences with neighborhood peers. This can be summed up as the connections and interactions between the influences found in the microsystem. Next on

the third level is the exosystem. This refers to social settings that do not directly involve the child, but the events of which can impact the settings that do contain the developing child and those in which they have an active role. For example, a child's home and family experiences may be influenced by their parents' experiences with work, or if parents have to care for a new sibling it may affect parental interactions with the child. This level can be summed up as the indirect environments of the individual. Finally, the fourth level in the Ecological Systems Model is the macrosystem. The macrosystem takes a larger look at the sociocultural contexts in which a person is developing. It considers the social and cultural values, such as social norms, religion, language, beliefs, etc., in the specific time and place in which someone is developing. More recent use of the Ecological Systems Model includes a fifth stage, the chronosystem, which considers this specific timing, place, and historical contexts in which development is occurring. These aspects of time and contexts can greatly influence the rest of the levels in the model.

Child Marriage in Displaced Populations

The definition of child marriage is somewhat self-explanatory, as it occurs when an individual under the age of 18 is married. The act of child marriage is a common occurrence in many countries who find themselves to be resource-constrained and is often discussed as a form of human rights violation for the young women involved due to threats of health and autonomy (Yaya et al., 2019). A major reason that child marriage is considered a humanitarian crisis is due to research which has looked at the effects of child marriage on female health and development. Nour (2006) describes child marriage as a human rights violation because it "prevents girls from obtaining an education, enjoying optimal health, bonding with others their own age, maturing, and ultimately choosing their own life partners" (p. 1644). They go on to discuss the health risks associated with child marriage, which include cervical cancer, death during childbirth, and

transmitted diseases, among others. Relating to the prevention of peer bonding and maturing in females who experience child marriage, Efevbera et al. (2017) looked at child marriage as a risk factor for developmental stunting. They found that there are intergenerational consequences of child marriage, including the presence of early childbearing which in many cases can lead to the cycle of teen pregnancy. Other long-term effects that can result from child marriage relate to the lack of education and general autonomy available to young girls who are wed, and in turn the effects of prolonged poverty and isolation on mental health and development. Many of these findings were exacerbated by geographic location and primary education.

Many noteworthy sources have published articles with first-hand accounts from young girls who have experienced child marriage. These individuals are often women and are identified as survivors. The rhetorical situation surrounding these stories fits with the discussion of child marriage as a breach of human rights, especially for young girls, and is focused on the “survival” of these women despite facing such a negative experience. A similar story of survival and overcoming adversity is present in the discussion of many refugee populations. This conversation is yet another aspect that may connect child marriage in general populations to child marriage in displaced populations

As previously discussed, the presence of resource constraint in the countries where child marriage in common is found to be similarly amplified within displaced refugee populations. The Syrian war has resulted in the loss of many resources for those who are displaced due to the conflict. It has also led to the existence of many human rights issues, risks particularly high among female children due to additional gender risks, including the rise in prevalence of child marriage (Arab & Sagbakken, 2019). There are many factors that drive the high prevalence rates of child marriage among Syrian refugees in Jordan and Lebanon. In the literature review

conducted by Arab & Sagbakken (2019) they find that there are a handful of key factors that drive the rates of child marriage in refugee populations within these countries. These driving factors are tradition, honor, economics, fear, and protection. In another study, Okafor & Oyakhiromen (2014) describe many of the commonly found driving factors for child marriage:

Child marriage is often deployed as a response to crisis, considered by families and communities to be the best possible means of protecting children. Fear of rape and sexual violence, of unwanted pregnancies outside marriage, of family shame and dishonour, of homelessness and hunger or starvation were all reported by parents and children as legitimate reasons for child marriage in some localities. Poverty, weak legislative frameworks and enforcement, harmful traditional practices, gender discrimination and lack of alternative opportunities for girls (especially education) are all major drivers of child marriage. (p. 120)

It makes sense that the use of child marriage as a “response to crisis” would be particularly exaggerated due to the status as a displaced person. This concept of an added risk factor due to status as a refugee is especially salient when one considers that many driving factors for child marriage that Okafor & Oyakhiromen (2014) outlined are often present within refugee populations. For example, conflict that causes fear of rape or sexual violence, family dishonor, homelessness or hunger, and poverty can all be related to leaving one’s home country or region due to the prolonged threat of physical violence and persecution. This burden of a familial lack of autonomy is created by a distinct lack of choice concerning leaving one’s home. The lack of autonomy, specifically experienced on part of the child as mentioned previously, leads to the inability to provide consent to the marriage and is exasperated by the presence of prolonged violence and displacement, as discussed by Arab & Sagbakken (2019).

When it comes specifically to individuals internally displaced in Cameroon and Nigeria an explanation of the instances of child marriage occurring within these displaced populations may stem from the already high prevalence of child marriage in this region. According to Cislaghi et al. (2019) individuals in rural Cameroon viewed child marriage as tolerated, appropriate, and obligatory due to societal social norms. In a study conducted by Gastón et al. (2019) they looked at the prevalence rates of child marriage in different regions around the world. They found that 40.7% of females in their sample, 20-24 years old who had been first married before the age of 18, were located in the region of West and Central Africa. The issue of child marriage may stand more on its own within these countries than within specifically displaced populations. Though an increased risk would apply to this group.

Applying Ecological Systems Theory

Microsystem

A good place to begin when applying the Ecological Systems Model is in the middle with the factors that are closest to the child, within the first level of the microsystem. The microsystem interacts heavily with the individual characteristics of the child in this first level. Based on the information discussed so far, it is clear that child marriage is a gendered issue, affecting far more young women than men. Gastón et al. (2019) highlights these gender differences in their study, with the prevalence of child marriage being higher in populations of young women rather than young men. This trend is seen in across regions globally, but is especially high in West and Central Africa, where the prevalence is 10 times higher for females. Therefore, gender can pose as a risk factor for child marriage in populations of young refugee women. Beyond the impact of individual characteristics, the microsystem includes a child's family, school, peers, teachers, and community. In the case of children in a displaced population,

one of these aspects stands out from the others, and that is family. In many cases a refugee child is displaced with other members of their immediate family and rely on them for support.

Displacement can be an especially trying time for parents who are required to take care of themselves as well as their children. Many of the problems faced by parents during this time of difficult transition may be experienced by their offspring as well. For example, this could look like a child adjusting to a new family status or norm. As previously discussed, the Arab & Sagbakken (2019) article brings up family honor as a motivating factor for child marriage in Syrian refugee populations. During the process of displacement, a certain sense of decreased family honor and worth, either based on literal loss of wealth or more of a perceived family status, may be connected to a parents' increased likelihood to marry off a child. Family shame and dishonor are also mentioned in the Okafor & Oyakhiromen (2014) article discussing child marriage in Central Africa (i.e. Cameroon and Nigeria).

Parents in these situations could also determine a need to marry off their child for other purposes including fear, poverty, and protection. Arab & Sagbakken (2019) describe that in some cases, marrying a girl at a young age may be due to the perception that it can increase the security of the girl and/or her family. This conclusion can come from the parental motivators of fear and potential protection, which are often influenced by other outside sources related to status as refugees. The feelings of fear could be influenced by previous trauma, exposure to violence or sexual assault, mental illness, or other past experiences. Parents may perceive the marriage as an important tool to reduce fear and create protection for the individual child, as well as potentially the whole family unit. In other cases, a parent might marry off a child if they are experiencing extreme economic turmoil or poverty, and they perceive that the union will help increase their chances economically. This is specifically an influence that is more family, rather than

individually, driven. Many of these factors could also be connected with the indirect environment of the child, since they come from a circle in which the child may not be directly involved, however they are affecting the child's well-being. Therefore, they will be discussed more in depth in the discussion of the exosystem.

Mesosystem

Continuing into the mesosystem we must consider the interactions between the factors presented in the microsystem. A main interaction that may occur here is that between the family and the community. This can look differently based on if the family is becoming integrated into a new host country or living within a refugee camp. Specifically, this paper will focus on displaced persons living within refugee camps or other similar refugee communities, as child marriage is more likely to occur in those contexts, where as Arab & Sagbakken (2019) note, "a rise in child marriages may be linked to the fragility characterizing there refugees' life situation" (p. 1). The way that a family may interact with each other as well as whatever community system they find themselves within may potentially influence the outcome of child marriage. Family honor as an influence on child marriage can be connected to the relationship between the family unit and the community system. This is seen where family honor is connected to the status that a family holds within a larger community unit. In some cases, the family as well as the community may consider the use of child marriage for the protection of child to be the best solution, as highlighted by Okafor & Oyakhiromen (2014). These effects may differ based on community inclusion and involvement. This relationship can be determined by social norms that are present within the refugee community (i.e. whether child marriage is seen as a norm or not may determine the inclusion or exile of a family who chooses to marry a child).

Exosystem

The exosystem considers the indirect environments of the individual. Typically, as provided in the example above, parental occupation and work life is considered a portion of the exosystem. In the case of refugee children this may work in a reversed way, where the lack of parental work is influential on the child's experiences. This comes back to the discussion of economics and poverty as risk factors for child marriage. Specifically, this idea may showcase a sort of domino effect that can occur within refugee population experiences. If a parent loses a job, money, possessions, a home, etc. during displacement it is experienced by the whole family unit. If the experiences of the loss are so exponential and deeply negative, this is when it may become a motivating factor for marrying off a child. Another influence that sits within this same system is the need for protection, which may stem from fear or mental well-being of a parent. However, more deeply rooted than that is the need for safety on a very basic human level (i.e. that within the hierarchy of needs). This parental hierarchy of needs, though not directly encompassing the child, extends to the child and family unit. Creating a perception that the basic human need of safety, for the parent, child, and family, is important to gain through any means necessary. Additionally, the way that the parent may be interacting with their environment due to this increased fear and need for protection can in turn affect the way the parent is interacting with the child on an interpersonal level. In a very broad sense, the conflict which is leading to displacement is another domino effect-like example of an influence on a refugee child. Though the conflict itself may not directly reach the child, their lives are drastically changed due to its presence. It is also another factor that leads to the presence of fear and need for protection, in the mind of a parent and potentially child as well.

Also, within the exosystem is the consideration of the traditions that may be present within a community in which displaced persons are accumulating. Though community engagement may be a more direct influence on the child, these sorts of underlying effects may be more indirect. The engrained traditions of other individuals may influence the way they feel about gender discrimination, poverty, shame, etc. Being exposed to these harmful traditional practices could have a profound affect on the parents or family unit and therefore on the child as well. These effects may potentially motivate the outcome of child marriage. Further, these engrained traditions relate to cultural and social norms which are covered within the level of the macrosystem.

Macrosystem

The macrosystem encompasses the cultural and social aspects of the society in which these life events are taking place. As discussed, child marriage is considered an issue of human rights by many people for a number of reasons. However, child marriage is a social norm in some cultures across the world. Cultural norms should be considered especially in the context of internally displaced refugees in Cameroon and Nigeria. As previously discussed, the region in which these countries are located has a very high prevalence of child marriage, even outside of refugee populations.

As previously noted by Cislighi et al. (2019), the practice of child marriage is considered by Cameroon locals to be a social norm which is tolerated, possible, appropriate, and obligatory. The word obligatory comes back to this idea of a lack of autonomy on the part of the child being married. This lack of autonomy may be created both by the fragile living situations produced by displacement, as well as more deeply seeded social and cultural norms. Again, this can be especially said for beliefs and opinions surrounding gender roles, and specifically concerning the

autonomy of women. As mentioned by Okafor & Oyakhiromen (2014) gender discrimination as well as lack of alternative opportunities for girls, particularly that of education, are both considered to be risk factors for child marriage. It is important to consider the affects that would exist coming into or from a society in which these opinions are held or this practice is a norm. For something to be normative or traditional it must be deeply engrained within a society, and these trends may often be difficult to break, even in the cases of human rights violations.

Chronosystem

The chronosystem is the overarching concept of the time and place in which the events of a person's life are occurring. This is especially important to think about when considering the outcome of child marriage in displaced populations. These factors both have such key and important influences on the conflicts which cause displacement as well as the resources available for those populations. This can also be applied to the destinations of displaced individuals, whether that be a refugee community or host country, and the differences in resources available in these contexts. As time and societies progress, we may see the availability of more resources and the decrease of child marriage in refugee populations, as there have already been declines in child marriage in populations globally up to this point in time. Though this system is very generally overarching, the time and place in which life events are occurring could make a difference in the lives of many refugee children and the outcomes they may face.

Conclusion

In conclusion, there are many different potential risk factors that should be considered when looking at the outcome of child marriage in displaced populations. Though many often think of child marriage to be universally viewed as an infringement on human rights there are places in the world where the practice of child marriage is viewed as an acceptable, if not obligatory,

social norm. This should be considered when looking at child marriage as an outcome within any population. From the interactions between individual characteristics and a child's direct environment to larger indirect environments which affect a child, sociocultural factors, and external influences of time and place, the Ecological Systems Theory can be used to look at the influences effecting the outcome of child marriage. It can also be used to help theorize and explore possible specific and general risk factors for this outcome in displaced populations.

References

- Arab, R.E., & Sagbakken, M. (2019). Child marriage of female Syrian refugees in Jordan and Lebanon: a literature review. *Global Health Action*, 12(1), 1-12.
- Cislaghi, B., Mackie, G., Nkwi, P., & Shakya, H. (2019). Social norms and child marriage in Cameroon: An application of the theory of normative spectrum. *Global Public Health*, 14(10), 1479-1494.
- Efevbera, Y.M., Bhabha, J.J.D., Farmer, P.E., & Fink, G. (2017). Girl child marriage as a risk factor for early childhood development and stunting. *Social Science and Medicine*, 185, 91-101.
- Gastón, C.M., Misunas, C., & Cappa, C. (2019). Child marriage among boys: A global overview of available data. *Vulnerable Children and Youth Studies*, 14(3), 219-228.
- Girls Not Brides. (2017). Child Marriage in Humanitarian Settings. *The Global Partnership to End Child Marriage*, 1-4.
- Nour, N.M. (2006). Health Consequences of Child Marriage in Africa. *Emerging Infectious Disease*, 12(11), 1644-1649.
- Okafor, N.C., & Oyakhiromen, H. (2014). Nigeria and Child Marriage: Legal Issues, Complications, Implications, Prospects and Solutions. *Journal of Law, Policy and Globalization*, 29, 121-126.
- Onwuegbuzie, A.J., Collins, K.M.T., & Frels, R.K. (2013). Foreword: Using Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory to frame quantitative, qualitative, and mixed research. *International Journal of Multiple Research Approaches*, 7(1), 2-8.
- Yaya, S., Odusina, E.K., & Bishwajit, G. (2019). Prevalence of child marriage and its impact on

fertility outcomes in 34 sub-Saharan African countries. *BMC International Health and Human Rights*, 19(33), 1-11.