Girls increasingly at risk of Child Marriage in Afghanistan.

Statement by UNICEF Executive Director Henrietta Fore

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I am deeply concerned by reports that child marriage in Afghanistan is rapidly on the rise.

There are credible reports of families offering daughters as young as 20 days old for future marriage in return for a dowry.

Even before the latest political instability, UNICEFs partners registered 183 child marriages and 10 cases of child selling over the 2018 – 2019 period in Herat and Bagndis provinces alone.

The children were 6 months to 17 years old. UNICEF estimates that 28% of Afghan women were married before the age of 18.

The present Covid-19 pandemic, the ongoing food shortage and onset of winter have further exacerbated the situations for families. In 2020 over 50% of the Afghanistan population were so poor they lacked necessities such as basic nutrition or clean water.

The existing dire economic situation in Afghanistan is pushing more and more families deeper into poverty and therefore forcing them to make desperate choices such as sending children to work or into child marriages.

As most teenage girls are not allowed to return to school or college, the risk of child marriage is even higher. Education is the best protection against using negative coping mechanisms such as child marriage and child labour.

UNICEF is working with partners to increase community awareness of the risks for girls if they marry early. Child marriage can lead to a lifetime of suffering. Girls who marry before 18 are less likely to enrol or remain in school and are more likely to experience domestic violence, discrimination, abuse and poor mental health. They are also much more vulnerable to complications in pregnancy and childbirth.

We have started a cash assistance programme to help offset the risk of hunger, child labour and child marriage among the most vulnerable families and will be scaling this work up.

UNCEF will work with religious leaders to ensure that they are NOT involved in the “NEKAH” (the marriage contract) for young girls.

BUT, this is not enough; we call on central, provincial and local authorities to take concrete measures to safeguard and support the most vulnerable families and girls. We urge the De Facto leadership to prioritise the reopening of schools for ALL secondary age girls and allow ALL female teachers to return to the classroom without delay.

The future of an entire generation is now at stake.

(Approx. 3 mins)