

Risks of child trafficking and forced child marriage in aftermath of earthquake: Morocco 2023

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Introduction

On September 8th, 2023, an earthquake of the magnitude 6.8 devastated parts of Morocco (Rafferty, 2024). More than 2,900 people got killed and at least 5,500 people were injured. Buildings were damaged and collapsed, roads were blocked by debris and boulders, and people lost family members (ibid). This number includes children, who lost their family members or whose parents got killed in the earthquake. These so-called ‘earthquake-orphans’ (Terzi & Dundar, 2023, p. 1) are particularly vulnerable to becoming victims of “violence, organized crime, organ trafficking, drug addiction, sexual exploitation, or human trafficking” as has been the case in other post-earthquake contexts such as Turkey in February 2023 (ibid). In the case of the Moroccan earthquake rumors quickly spread about potential child trafficking going on at disaster sights, including the advertisement of forced marriage of ‘earthquake-orphans’ as an act of ‘help’.

It is difficult to trace to what extent the alleged child trafficking and forced marriages have been taking place as these claims are largely based on a limited number of anecdotal evidence (Jamal & Makhoulf, 2023). Unfortunately, finding original sources of media posts has proven very difficult as many involved social media accounts have deleted their posts, as well as due to my limited language skills. Nevertheless, in the following, those facts that are available have been gathered to support future research into this topic and to draw attention to the heightened risk of human trafficking in post-earthquake contexts.

Background information

Worldwide, the International Labor Organization (ILO) estimates that 50 million people were living in modern slavery in 2021 with numbers rising rapidly (ILO, n.d.). Of these, about 3.3 million were children, mostly working in forced labor, including forced domestic work, and sexual exploitation (ILO, 2022, p. 46). According to UNODC statistics, one in three detected victims of trafficking worldwide are children and “[m]ost, but not all, of these children are trafficked for the purpose of forced labour” (ILO, 2022, p. 49). It is noteworthy that it is difficult to include and relate these numbers to the number of cases of child marriage, as these are currently not adequately

measured (ILO, 2022, p. 59). This is due to a large number of states' legal codes allowing minors to be married if judicial or parental consent is given (ibid).

In Morocco, UNICEF estimates that between 2015 and 2021 14% of 20–24-year-old Moroccan women were married or in union before they turned 18 years old (El Mouhtadi, 2023). This is possible due to loopholes in the Moroccan family code, also known as 'Moudawana'. For instance, article 21 of the Moroccan family code states that “a parent or guardian must give approval for a minor’s marriage and both the minor and the parent must sign a marriage authorization request” (El Mouhtadi, 2023). Morocco’s Economic, Social and Environmental Council has advised to recognize child marriage as a form of human trafficking and to abolish the articles that create the loopholes described above from the family code. Nonetheless, Moroccan judges approved over 13,000 marriage authorization requests involving at least one minor in 2020 alone (Faouzi, 2024).

What is known

According to UNICEF estimates, up to 100,000 children were affected by the 2023 earthquake (UNICEF, 2023). In the aftermath of the disaster, what has been described as a “social media campaign” (Zouiten, 2023) started. This was encouraging Moroccan men to marry young girls that had been affected by the disaster in order to ‘protect’ and ‘save’ them (ibid) as a ‘good’, religious deed (El Bouchtaoui, 2023), as well as to escape high ‘bride prices’ in the cities (El Atti, 2023).

This campaign was predominantly carried out on Facebook, with photos of girls as young as seven years old being posted alongside adult men that claimed to have proposed marriage to them (Zouiten, 2023). Additionally, part of this ‘campaign’ was also extremely selective adoption attempts of very young girls (El Bouchtaoui, 2023). Though there have been many reports about these activities, evidence of human trafficking taking place is extremely limited. Nevertheless, evidence for a campaign towards forced child marriage is present, though limited as many users have since taken down their posts (El Atti, 2023).

For instance, it is possible to find one X (formerly Twitter) encouraging such action as well as a Facebook post which has been deleted by now (El Atti, 2023). This information overlaps with other accounts stating that men were advertising to marry these girls who “wouldn’t ask for anything” as compared to ‘spoiled’ city girls (Jamal & Makhoulouf, 2023). Furthermore, posts were also taken down after a 20-year-old college student was arrested by the Moroccan police on September 14th under charges of promoting child abuse and preying on minor girls online following the earthquake (Al-Mansoori, 2023; El Atti, 2023).

Additionally, a ‘green number’ was launched by the Moroccan authorities following the earthquake for citizens to be able to report any suspicious actions regarding child endangerment or human trafficking (Zouiten, 2023). Thus, while the extent of child trafficking that has de facto taken place is next to impossible to estimate, it is clear that Moroccan authorities saw an existing

threat of potential human trafficking and child abuse in the immediate aftermath of the earthquake, as they got involved in arresting a man and setting up a reporting hotline.

Nonetheless, according to the National Council for Human Rights, though many calls were received regarding concerns of human trafficking, no “actual complaints with proper information regarding the people involved” were made (El Bouchtaoui, 2023). Evidence thus remains predominantly anecdotal (Jamal & Makhlouf, 2023).

What to do with this/ Where to go from here

Despite uncertainty about the extent to which human trafficking and forced child marriage took place post-earthquake, it can be said with certainty that there were social media campaigns going on advertising for adult men to adopt or marry young girls. This can be done thanks to triangulation of a variety of media articles reporting similar findings in the aftermath of the earthquake. It is supported by evidence of pictures and social media posts online, as well as by the fact that a man was arrested by the police for such behavior. Furthermore, the ‘green hotline’ established by Moroccan authorities does support the existence of, at a minimum, a very real threat of an increase of such action. These findings underline that pre-existing vulnerabilities and risks of child trafficking, including forced child marriage, are likely to be exacerbated in post-disaster contexts.

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