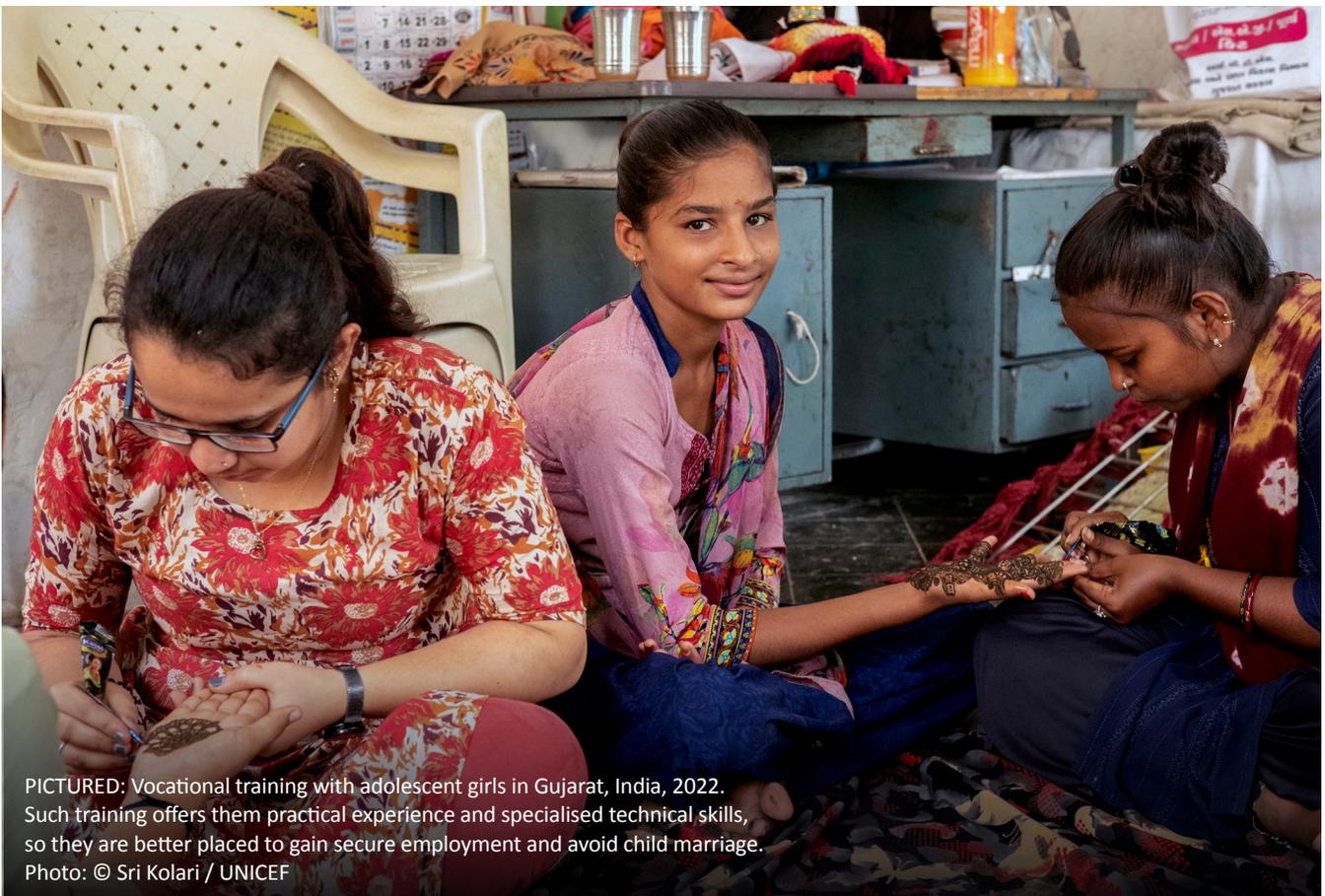


Evidence review: Child marriage interventions and research from 2020 to 2022

January 2023



PICTURED: Vocational training with adolescent girls in Gujarat, India, 2022. Such training offers them practical experience and specialised technical skills, so they are better placed to gain secure employment and avoid child marriage.
Photo: © Sri Kolari / UNICEF

Written for The Child Marriage Research to Action Network (the CRANK) by Amy Harrison, with support from the CRANK advisory team: Jean Casey, Arwyn Finnie, Jacky Repila from *Girls Not Brides: The Global Partnership to End Child Marriage*; Satvika Chalasani from the UNFPA-UNICEF Global Programme to End Child Marriage and Manahil Siddiqi from UNICEF-Innocenti, The Strategic Technical Assistance for Research (STAR) Initiative to End Harmful Practices.

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PICTURED: Payal Prajapati, 18, (centre) who was married at the age of nine, pictured with her team members in Rajasthan, India in 2022. Payal is the team leader and one of many girls who had to persuade her parents to allow her to play. Football is one way for girls to learn and gain confidence in advocating for their own rights. Photo: © UNICEF/UN0723910

1. Introduction

The evidence base on child marriage¹ has grown dramatically in recent years, yet significant gaps in our knowledge remain – particularly around what works to prevent and respond to child marriage, how to address it in conflict and crisis settings, and how best to respond to the specific risks to girls and adolescents facing intersecting forms of marginalisation.

This review looks at evidence gathered between 2020 and 2022 on proven and promising interventions to prevent child marriage and support girls who are – or have been – married, divorced, separated or widowed and/or are young mothers, and makes suggestions for future research, programming and policy.

Child marriage is a global issue that threatens the lives, well-being and futures of girls and adolescents² around the world. There are 650 million girls and women alive today who were married before age 18,³ and despite recent declines in child marriage – from 25% to 19% between 2008 and 2022⁴ – 12 million girls are still married before the age of 18 every year.⁵ While specific drivers vary by context, child marriage is consistently rooted in gender inequality and fuelled by poverty, harmful social norms, insecurity and barriers to education. Girls facing multiple intersecting forms of marginalisation and discrimination are often the most at risk of child marriage, and the least likely to access support once married.

The impact of child marriage can be devastating and lifelong. It places children and adolescents at high risk of violence and abuse. Girls who are married or in a union are often forced to drop out of school and typically struggle to resume their education due to increased domestic duties, stigma and legal exclusion. This has a knock-on effect on their ability to secure reliable work, make informed decisions, access health services, and live independent lives.⁶ It can also push girls and their children into cycles of inter-generational poverty. Adolescent pregnancy can have significant short- and longer-term health consequences for girls and their children, while delayed pregnancy can lead to additional stigma, ostracization and violence.⁷

Significant progress has been made to address child marriage in recent years. Globally, child marriage prevalence has declined by around 15% since 2010; this means that 25 million child marriages have been prevented in the last decade.⁸ Ending child

1. We use the term “child marriage” to refer to all forms of child, early and forced marriage and unions where at least one party is under the age of 18. In this, we include all girls and adolescents affected by the practice – whether in formal or informal unions – and acknowledge the culturally-specific understandings of childhood and development, and the complex relationship between age, consent and force.

2. We use the term “girls” to refer to girls in their diversity and life stages from childhood to adolescence.

3. UNICEF, 2020a, [Child marriage around the world: Infographic](#).

4. UNICEF, 2021a, [COVID-19: A threat to progress against child marriage](#), UNICEF: New York; p.10.

5. Plan International, n.d., [Our work: Ending child marriage](#), accessed November 2022.

6. UNICEF, n.d., [Child marriage](#), accessed November 2022.

7. World Health Organization (WHO), 2022, [Adolescent pregnancy](#), accessed November 2022.

8. UNICEF, 2020a, op. cit.

marriage is firmly established as a global priority: 93 governments have signed up to Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) Target 5.3 to end child, early and forced marriage, and 40 countries either have or are working on national action plans to end child marriage.⁹ Child marriage is now recognised as both a human rights violation and as having profoundly negative impacts at all societal levels through lost earnings and the intergenerational perpetuation of poverty.

We also have a well-established evidence base on the prevalence, causes and consequences of child marriage. In a systematic scoping review of global evidence from 2000 to 2019, Siddiqi and Greene highlight an exponential rise in child marriage publications from just six in 2000, to 96 in 2014, to 237 in 2019.¹⁰ The interconnectedness of child marriage – to gender inequality, education, livelihoods, health rights, social norms and beyond – is increasingly recognised and understood as a means of problem diagnosis and treatment, both in humanitarian and development settings.

Yet, even before COVID-19, progress on child marriage was uneven, and had struggled to reach the most marginalised girls and adolescents, or to keep pace with population growth.¹¹ COVID-19 has had a profound impact, putting an estimated additional 10 million girls at risk by 2030.¹² And, COVID-19 is not the only challenge: climate change, economic downturn, and emergent conflicts all threaten to undermine girls' right to decide if, when and whom to marry.

The evidence landscape on child marriage

Despite the increased attention to child marriage over the past two decades, very little has focused on what works to prevent and respond to it. The Siddiqi and Greene scoping review reveals critical evidence gaps on effective interventions. It finds literature on determinates, causes and consequences to be the most common amongst the 1,068 publications in their review, with rigorous peer reviewed journals far more common amongst papers focused on problem diagnosis than on problem solving.¹³ This lack of research on effective interventions to address child marriage is true even in geographies where there is ample contextual analysis on its causes and consequences, where one might therefore assume the problem has been sufficiently diagnosed.

This leaves us with a number of knowledge gaps with regards to programming. It is unclear, for example, whether and in what contexts single-focus interventions are more or less effective than multicomponent interventions. There are examples of multicomponent interventions successfully reducing child marriage prevalence – some of which will be discussed in this report – which hold promising lessons for future programming. However, there is also evidence suggesting multicomponent interventions overall typically have a low success rate, and are more difficult to take to scale than single-component interventions.¹⁴ A lack of quality evaluations, particularly of smaller-scale community or subnational interventions, is a barrier to understanding the extent to which investing in multicomponent interventions is worthwhile, given the urgency of the challenge.

There is also a disconnect between where there is greatest evidence on the prevalence and drivers of child marriage, and geographies where prevalence is highest. Numerous countries have featured very rarely in publications since 2000, despite having high child marriage prevalence; for example, Central African Republic, Chad, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Eritrea, Guinea, Madagascar, Sierra Leone, Somalia and South Sudan all have child marriage prevalence rates of between 37% and 68%, yet are underrepresented in published research exploring why and with what impact. In Latin America and the Caribbean, the diversity of terms used to refer to child marriage and unions, means the existence and prevalence of the issue is less well recognised.¹⁵

Finally, there are still significant gaps in our understanding of all elements of child marriage – diagnosis and treatment – in relation to certain groups and trends. Our understanding of the risks facing LGBTQIA+ children and adolescents, those with disabilities¹⁶ and those who are divorced, separated or widowed is weak, both in terms of their risk of being married and those they face once married.¹⁷ Our knowledge of how to support married girls of any profile is extremely limited –

9. *Girls Not Brides*, 2021a, [Decade of progress: Ten years of Girls Not Brides and the global Partnership to end child marriage](#).

10. Siddiqi, M., Greene, M., 2022, ["Mapping the field of child marriage: Evidence, gaps and future directions from a large-scale systematic scoping review, 2000-2019"](#), *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 70, p.S12.

11. *Girls Not Brides*, 2021a, op. cit., p.10.

12. UNICEF, 2021b, [10 million additional girls at risk of child marriage due to COVID-19](#).

13. Siddiqi, M., Greene, M., 2022, op. cit., p.S13.

14. Malhotra, A., Elnakib, S., 2021a, ["20 years of the evidence base on what works to prevent child marriage: A systematic review"](#), *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 68:5, p.860.

15. Siddiqi, M., Greene, M., 2022, op. cit., p.S14.

16. Meaney-Davis, J., Lee, H., Andrae, K., 2020, [Disability Inclusion Helpdesk 38: Disability and child marriage](#).

17. Howe, K., Stites, E., Moran, M. et al., 2022, [Circumscribed lives: Separated, divorced and widowed female youth in South Sudan and the Kurdistan region of Iraq](#), Tufts University; p.2.

as Siddiqi and Greene’s synthesis shows, only 10.6% of the publications they reviewed included a focus on married and adolescent girls.¹⁸ While our understanding around gender equality, gender-based violence (GBV) and adolescent girls programming has increased in recent years, due to such efforts as the UK-funded global research programme “What Works to Prevent Violence” programme¹⁹ and as highlighted in Stark, Seff and Reis’s 2021 evidence review of GBV against adolescent girls in humanitarian settings,²⁰ adolescent girls continue to fall through the cracks with regards to programming, funding and policy.²¹ Climate change also poses a severe threat to adolescent girls’ social, economic, physical and mental wellbeing;²² the evidence base is growing on the relationship between climate change and child marriage, but this area needs further work.

The Child Marriage Research to Action Network (the CRANK)

We are in a significant period in our work to end child marriage: despite the gains of the past 10 years, progress needs to happen 17 times faster to achieve SDG 5.3 and end child marriage by 2030.²³ In 2019, *Girls Not Brides: The Global Partnership to End Child Marriage*, the World Health Organisation, and the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA)-United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) Global Programme to End Child Marriage brought together researchers, policy makers and programmers to review the evidence on child marriage, in recognition of these continued evidence gaps and the common failure to use existing evidence to inform policy and programming. The meeting had three aims: to review progress made in addressing research priorities on ending child marriage and supporting married girls; to identify an updated set of research priorities for the next five years and the rationale for these priorities; and to identify how best to support the dissemination and uptake of research findings and execution of the new research agenda.²⁴

The Child Marriage Research to Action Network (the CRANK) was formed by *Girls Not Brides* and the UNFPA-UNICEF Global Programme following the 2019 meeting, with the objectives of strengthening coordination and harmonisation of an equitable global child marriage research agenda. The CRANK brings different child marriage actors together to share and discuss the latest evidence on priority learning topics,²⁵ encourage evidence uptake by policymakers and practitioners, and serves as a knowledge management mechanism for tracking ongoing and upcoming research.²⁶

2. Report scope, methodology and limitations

It is against this background and in support of the CRANK’s founding objectives that the CRANK commissioned this learning review in September 2022. It aims to provide a review of the evidence on what works to prevent child marriage and support married girls since 2020, including in humanitarian prevention and response efforts. It also reviews the latest evidence on different crises (including climate change) and their impact on child marriage, and details recent examples of promising responses. Detail on prevalence and impact are included to set the scene, and to highlight opportunities for future programming and research. It is intended to be useful to all stakeholders working on child marriage.

The research for this report was entirely desk-based, drawing on open-source literature available in English and published (with a few exceptions) between January 2020 and September 2022. Its scope included interventions ranging from large-scale, public systems and services-focused interventions, to medium-, smaller-scale and community-based programming, and included changes to child marriage legal ecosystems, in both development and humanitarian contexts. Interventions that had an impact on child marriage as a primary, secondary or unintended outcome were also included.

18. Siddiqi, M., Greene, M., 2022, op. cit., p.S13.

19. What Works to Prevent Violence, first phase: <https://www.whatworks.co.za/>; What Works to Prevent Violence, second phase: <https://ww2preventvawg.org/>.

20. Stark, L. Seff, I., Reis, C., 2021, “*Gender-based violence against adolescent girls in humanitarian settings: A review of the evidence*”, *Lancet Child and Adolescent Health*, 5:3.

21. UNICEF, 2022a, *Building back equal with and for adolescent girls: A programme strategy for UNICEF 2022-2025*, UNICEF: New York, p.6.

22. Carrico, A., Donato, K. et al, 2020, “*Extreme weather and marriage among girls and women in Bangladesh*”, *Global Environmental Change*, 65.

23. UNICEF, 2020b, *Looking ahead towards 2030: Eliminating child marriage through a decade of action*, UNICEF: New York; p.2.

24. Finnie, A., Malhotra, E., Travers, M. et al, 2020, *Advancing the evidence base on strategies to end child marriage and support married girls: Meeting report, 30 September to 2 October 2019*.

25. For recordings of past CRANK research meetings: <https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/learning-resources/child-marriage-research-action-network/crank-quarterly-research-meetings/>.

26. The CRANK’s online Research Tracker brings together new and upcoming research by CRANK members: <https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/learning-resources/child-marriage-research-action-network/crank-research-tracker/>.



PICTURED: A Rohingya refugee girl enters a UNICEF learning centre in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh, 2022. Education offers girls stability and structure while coping with trauma, and protects them from child marriage. Photo: © UNICEF/UN0751764/Spiridono/

3. Evidence synthesis

This section looks at the latest evidence in key thematic areas relating to preventing and responding to child marriage: education; livelihoods and economic rights; sexual and reproductive health; voice, choice and agency; individual and collective social norms; women's rights organisations (WROs) and feminist movements; and legal reform and gender-responsive budgeting. It then considers two cross-cutting issues: groups who face intersecting risk factors, including girls and adolescents with disabilities and LGBTQIA+ children and adolescents; and climate and crises. Each section aims to provide an illustration of the current evidence landscape, using programming examples – primarily those that have been rigorously evaluated – to highlight strengths and weaknesses of different approaches. Evidence gaps and suggestions for further study are also highlighted.

Education

What we know:

- **Girls' education is a consistent protective factor against child marriage.**²⁷ Keeping girls in school has been shown to prevent child marriage: child marriage rates among girls who complete secondary school are two-thirds (66%) lower than girls with no education, while child marriage rates among girls with higher education are 80% lower.²⁸ Secondary education is particularly important in preventing child marriage²⁹ – the likelihood of a girl marrying before she is 18 reduces by six percentage points for every additional year she stays in secondary education.³⁰
- **Girls who drop out of school are significantly more likely to marry early**, and 87% of married adolescent girls are out of school.³¹ Poverty, unequal gender norms, risk of violence in/around schools, and period poverty and a lack of access to sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) all contribute to girls leaving school early.³² Child marriage is itself a significant barrier to girls' continued education, as girls who are married or in a union may be required to take on additional domestic responsibilities, be pregnant or providing childcare, face stigma on returning to school, or in some settings be legally barred from doing so.

27. Plesons, M., Travers, E., Malhotra, et al., 2021, "[Updated research gaps on ending child marriage and supporting married girls for 2020–2030](#)", *Reproductive Health*, 18:52, p. 3.

28. UNICEF, 2022b, [The power of education to end child marriage](#), p. 7.

29. UNICEF, 2021c, [Towards ending child marriage: Global trends and profiles of progress](#), p. 69.

30. Wodon, Q., et al., 2018, [Missed opportunities: The high cost of not educating girls](#), Washington DC: World Bank.

31. UNICEF, 2022b, op. cit., p. 9.

32. UNICEF, n.d., [Girls' education](#), accessed November 2022.

- **COVID-19 has increased school dropouts, thereby increasing the risk that girls who are out of school will not return.**³³ This has led to a dramatic rise in child marriage and early pregnancy in many contexts. In emergency settings, where schools are closed or inaccessible, girls face increased risk of early marriage, while disruption to their education can have significant knock-on impact on their risk of experiencing GBV, completion of secondary or tertiary education, or ability to find secure work.³⁴

Emerging evidence:

There is growing evidence that cash transfers can be an effective tool for keeping girls in school, particularly when the transfer is contingent on school attendance. An upcoming study of the Punjab government’s conditional cash transfer (CCT) assistance programme for girls’ education, launched in 2004, found that each potential year of exposure to the programme increases the probability of completing secondary school by 1.9% and decreased the probability of early marriage by 3.5%. The study also found intergenerational effects, with the children of women exposed to the programme less likely to be underweight (-1.7%) or stunted (-1.9%).³⁵ The effectiveness of CCTs tied to education appears to be consistent across all marriage contexts, whether they are large, state-run programmes or part of smaller-scale, multi-component programmes.³⁶ However, a 2021 evidence synthesis on cash transfers and education highlights how CCTs tied to education can risk excluding the girls who are most at risk of child marriage, while conditions on specific behaviours – such as keeping girls in school – can be hard for the poorest households to meet, and punitive sanctions (such as reductions in benefits) can have severe negative consequences.³⁷

This positive correlation between education-tied CCTs and delayed marriage is not seen so strongly with unconditional cash transfers (UCTs), which may not incentivise households to shift behaviour from marriage towards schooling if that preference does not already exist. A 2020 study of Nepal’s UCT-based Old Age Allowance (OAA) found the OAA supported households to fulfil existing preferences for adolescents, depending on their gender, age and circumstances.³⁸ The study found the OAA consistently increased mainstream school attendance for adolescents residing with an older woman. For older adolescents, however, the picture became more complex: in households with an older woman, the OAA supported older boys to migrate for work, while in households with an older man or couple, it was often used to hasten the marriage of older girls through making dowry payments more attainable.³⁹

This finding around the differing impact of male versus female asset holders is supported by a 2021 study of the link between parental economic resources and child marriage in Ethiopia, assessing data from 2011 to 2014 to show a one standard deviation increase in a mother’s assets was associated with 37-53% lower odds of their daughter’s child marriage whereas a one standard deviation increase in paternal asset holdings was associated with 0-37% higher odds of their daughter’s child marriage.⁴⁰ It is worth noting that there have been limited studies on CTs that differentiate findings by gender of recipient; more investigation is needed to better understand this link.⁴¹

Overall, the Nepal OAA study emphasised the importance of understanding how age, gender (of children and adults within the household), quality of and preferences around schooling (e.g., public versus private), interact in order to understand the potential for UCTs to promote girls’ education and protect against child marriage. This speaks to the broader need to pair CTs with gender transformative approaches that engage with the gendered norms underlying decision-making around child marriage, recognising that transfers in isolation will not shift mindsets around marriage in the short term,⁴² and may simply delay the inevitable once financial or in-kind support ends.⁴³

There is increasing evidence that a focus on girls’ education can play an important or even necessary role in the success of multicomponent interventions, given its central role in preventing early marriage and its connections with other sectors and aspects of girls’ and adolescents’ socio-ecological framework. In More Than Brides Alliance’s “Marriage: No Child’s Play” programme implemented in India, Mali, Malawi and Niger from 2016 to 2020, the greatest reduction in child marriage prevalence was seen in India – where child marriage declined by 69% in intervention areas – in part due to its success in increasing and sustaining girls’ enrolment in school.⁴⁴ This also has interesting implications for the potential of child marriage programmes in settings (like India) where child marriage prevalence is already declining.

33. UNESCO, 2020, *COVID-19 education response: How many students are at risk of not returning to school?*, p.1.

34. *Girls Not Brides*, 2022a, *Girls’ education and child marriage*, p. 1.

35. Musaddiq, T., Said, F., 2023, “*Educate the girls: Long run effects of secondary school for girls in Pakistan*”, *World Development*, 161:C.

36. Mathers, N., 2021, “*How cash transfers can contribute to ending child marriage: Review and synthesis of the evidence*”, *Girls Not Brides*; p. 37.

37. *Ibid.*, p.45.

38. Mathers, N., 2020, “*Poverty, cash transfers and adolescents’ lives: exploring the unintended consequences of Nepal’s social pension, a mixed methods study*”, *London School of Economics and Political Science*, p.250.

39. *Ibid.*, p.251.

40. Muchomba, F. M., 2021, “*Parents’ assets and child marriage: Are mother’s assets more protective than father’s assets?*”, *World Development*, 138:C.

41. Mathers, N., 2021, *op. cit.*, p.38.

42. *Ibid.*, p.43.

43. Aguilera, A., Green, S., Greene, M. et al, 2021, “*Multidimensional measures are key to understanding child, early, and forced marriages and unions*”, *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 70:2.

44. Melnikas, A., G. Saul, et al, 2021, “*More Than Brides Alliance: Endline evaluation report*”, *Population Council*, p.30.

A 2022 longitudinal study highlighted a similar trend in the Adolescent Girls Initiative-Kenya (AGI-K), a multisectoral intervention targeting 2,147 girls aged 11 to 14 in pastoralist Kenya from 2015 to 2017. The programme used a “violence prevention-plus” model, where villages were randomised into one of four intervention types: violence prevention only; violence prevention and education; violence prevention, education and health; or all four combined. The programme evaluation found the programme succeeded in reducing early marriage by 34% for out-of-school girls and pregnancy by 43%. Evidence of these gains being sustained was gathered in the 2019 post-completion survey. The evaluation noted, however, that interventions were only effective when inclusive of the education component – delivered as an education-tied CCT.⁴⁵

Interventions focused on girls’ education can also have a positive impact on other important pathways for change when delivered as part of a multicomponent approach. In Bangladesh, the “Keeping Girls in School” (KGIS) programme targeted girls aged 12 to 15 in three villages with high child marriage prevalence between 2018 and 2021, through a mixed-method approach of school support, girls’ groups, mentoring, skills building and community engagement. The programme targeted girls who had left formal education early or were at risk of leaving early. KGIS reduced child marriage from 19% to 17% (compared to an increase from 22% to 25% in control areas). Through engaging with multiple change pathways, it also increased the number of girls using contraceptives before first pregnancy from 60% to 67%, the health-seeking behaviour of giving birth at a facility from 40% to 55%, and the number of girls working for (higher) earnings, compared to control sites. All of these factors serve to reinforce the agency and wellbeing of girls alongside improved educational outcomes.⁴⁶

The supply-side of girls’ education can be as important as the demand-side, particularly for marginalised girls, and can act as a barrier even when the demand side for education is there. A 2021 evidence synthesis of shifts in the evidence base on child marriage from 2000 to 2019 highlights settings where an increasing number of parents are interested in breaking with tradition and keeping their girls in schools rather than have them marry, but this aspiration is dampened by the poor availability and quality of schooling, particularly at secondary level.⁴⁷ Without engaging with the structural barriers to education accessibility, opportunities presented by these shifts will be lost.

Research conducted in Malawi in 2021 examined why significant increases in levels of school attainment have not been accompanied by a corresponding decrease in child marriage prevalence. The research found that, amongst other factors, the poor quality of formal schooling means that even where girls stay in school, they are not always able to develop a strong foundation in the skills required to enter an already over-subscribed workplace.⁴⁸ This is particularly relevant for marginalised girls, who are least likely to develop the foundational and transferrable skills needed for future employment either in or outside of school.⁴⁹

The Nepal OAA study is novel in its consideration of the *quality* of schooling as part of its analysis; its findings shows that UCTs in settings with poor quality public schooling are unlikely to incentivise girls to remain in school if they are at risk of violence, under pressure to marry or work, or struggle academically.⁵⁰ Despite the demonstrated potential of CCTs tied to education, they are not recommended in settings where quality education services are not available.⁵¹

Gender-transformative approaches to education programming may have greater potential to meaningfully influence supply- and demand-side barriers to girls’ education and to prevent child marriage. A framework developed in 2020 by the Real Centre and University of Cambridge draws on a synthesis of global examples of impactful leadership around girls’ education over the past two decades to outline both what individual and collective leadership might look like for different government functions (ministries, parliamentary coalitions, civil servants, parliamentarians, heads of government, ministers) and how these different forms of leadership can combine to effect whole-system change around girls’ education. This includes highlighting the influence female leaders can play as role models and public advocates for girls’ and adolescents’ rights.⁵²

Large-scale state-run social protection programmes, whether they include a UCT or CCT component, have huge potential to influence girls’ education and child marriage, as demonstrated in Ethiopia’s Productive Safety Net Programme and India’s Pani Beti Apna Dhan programme, both of which are discussed in the section on sexual and reproductive health and rights on p. 12. However, their potential impact may be greater if they include a specific objective around child marriage reduction, a nuanced appreciation of the varied practices and drivers around child marriage, and the flexibility to respond and adapt to these drivers in different contexts.⁵³

45. Austrian, K., Soler-Hampejsek, E. et al., 2022, “*Impacts of multisectoral cash plus programs on marriage and fertility after 4 years in pastoralist Kenya: A randomized trial*”, *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 70, p.885.

46. Ainul, S., Noor, F., et al, 2021, “*Keeping girls in schools to reduce child marriage in rural Bangladesh: Endline assessment*”, *Population Council*, p.30.

47. Malhotra, A., Elnakib, S., 2021b, “*Evolution in the evidence base on child marriage 2000-2019*”, UNFPA; p.87.

48. Soler-Hampejsek, E., Kangwana, B., et al, 2021, “*Education, child marriage, and work outcomes among young people in rural Malawi*”, *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 69, p.S63.

49. Rose, P., 2021, “*Exploring the school to work transition for adolescent girls*”, *University of Cambridge*, p.11.

50. Mathers, N., 2020, op. cit., p.254.

51. *Girls Not Brides*, 2021b, *How cash transfers can contribute to ending child marriage*, p.5.

52. Rose, P., Gordon, R., et al., 2020, “*Transformative political leadership to promote 12 years of quality education for all girls*”, REAL Centre, *University of Cambridge*, p.18.

53. Mathers, N., 2021, op. cit., p.44.

Key takeaways:

- **Cash transfers have huge potential to improve girls' education and reduce child marriage, but are likely to only be effective in the long term if implemented in a gender-transformative way.** and paired with engagement around the different norms, drivers and wrap-around investments required to influence social and economic pressures to marry early. UCTs in particular, while potentially more inclusive, are more likely to mirror existing trends around education and child marriage, and may exacerbate or enable negative decision-making processes in some contexts. Further research into how the gender of the transfer recipient influences decision-making around child marriage is needed.
- **Education may be a non-negotiable component of successful multicomponent programming** to prevent child marriage, and may have the greatest potential to also influence positive change around other protective factors, including health-seeking behaviours. Evaluations that assess whether shifts in attitudes and behaviours are sustained after the programme's end would be helpful in adding to the evidence base around the effectiveness of these interventions.
- **Interventions promoting the demand-side of education are only one piece of the puzzle – supply-side factors including the quality and accessibility of education are critical,** and may block progress on demand-side interventions (and risk causing harm) if not also addressed. Recently developed tools and frameworks for engaging national leadership around gender-responsive and gender-transformative policymaking and budgeting may be helpful in supporting practical engagement with national decision-makers.

Livelihoods and economic rights

What we know:

- **Poverty is a key driver of child marriage.**⁵⁴ Interventions that reduce economic strain on households,⁵⁵ prepare and support adolescent girls to access reliable and dignified income generating activities,⁵⁶ and address the norms that restrict women's workplace access can have a huge impact on both early marriage prevention and the wellbeing of girls who are married or in a union.⁵⁷
- **Child marriage significantly restricts adolescent girls' economic agency and prospects,** due to curtailed education, increased domestic duties, impacts on their health and wellbeing, and common stigma and discrimination around married women and mothers in the workplace.⁵⁸ Recent debate has considered whether child marriage should be viewed as a form of child labour, either in itself or as a factor leading to child labour.⁵⁹
- **Programming that supports girls of all ages to develop life and entrepreneurial skills – alongside, instead of, and/ or after leaving secondary school – can be effective in supplementing their ability to use their skills either in existing roles or through self-employment.**⁶⁰
- **Building girls' life skills does not necessarily reduce their risk of child marriage, or of experiencing violence or economic insecurity.** Adolescent girls can struggle to access these opportunities due to restrictive gender norms, and may be exposed to risks of violence and exploitation in the low-paid insecure roles often dominated by women.⁶¹ Interventions focused only on the demand-side are likely to face challenges from these supply-side factors.

54. Psaki, S., Melnikas, A., Haque, E., Saul, G., Misunas, C., Patel, S., Ngo, T., Amin, S., 2021, "[What are the drivers of child marriage? A conceptual framework to guide policies and programs](#)", *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 69; p.513.

55. *Girls Not Brides*, 2021b, op. cit., p.1.

56. Rose, P., 2021, op. cit., p.22.

57. Ibid.

58. International Center for Research on Women, 2018, "[The economic impacts of child marriage: Key findings](#)", ICRS, p.3.

59. Boender, C., 2021, "[The relationship between child labour and child marriage: A discourse analysis](#)", UNICEF; p.2.

60. Rose, P., 2021, op. cit., p.25.

61. For example: ILO, 2020, [Gendered impacts of COVID-19 on the garment sector](#).

Emerging evidence:

There is evidence that large-scale programming aimed at reducing household insecurity can reduce child marriage prevalence – but that engagement with underlying social norms may be important to prevent unintended increases in child marriage where the practice is deeply entrenched, and may make programming more effective overall.

A 2022 UNICEF report on Ethiopia’s Productive Safety Net Programme (PSNP) highlights the impact of the inclusion of the Integrated Safety Net Programme Pilot (ISNP) in Amhara and Addis Ababa.⁶² ISNP was added to Ethiopia’s national social protection programme in 2018, following research that found the PSNP had caused a reduction in child marriage amongst girls aged 12 to 17 despite this not being one of its stated objectives when it launched in 2005.

Findings from the ISNP impact evaluation baseline (2020) recognise the potential and emerging impact of the ISNP in supplementing the PSNP to engage with harmful norms around gender inequality.⁶³ Initial findings highlight the central role of the ISNP’s behaviour change communications component on issues including early marriage, child discipline and feeding practices. Recommendations for the final two years of ISNP included increased engagement in PSNP livelihood groups, and greater engagement of health extension workers, social workers and community volunteers regarding case management and monitoring school enrolment.⁶⁴

One unintended consequence of the PSNP in some settings was the use of funds to cover wedding costs, and an increase in marriage proposals to now financially secure households. This highlighted the need to accompany generalised economic strategies with complementary efforts to transform deep-rooted social and gender norms that perpetuate child marriage.⁶⁵

This need was also revealed in a 2021 study of India’s Pani Beti Apna Dhan (ABAD) programme, which examined the long-term indirect impact of the programme on girls’ and women’s human capital outcomes. The ABAD programme ran from 1994 to 1998, providing families in Haryana state with a one-off financial grant and long-term savings bond when their daughters turned 18, conditional on them remaining unmarried. While ABAD achieved a reduction in marriage before 18 of 5.1%, the 2021 review also found it had prompted an 8.8% increase in the number of adolescent girls marrying aged 18 to 19, suggesting many families simply delayed their daughters’ marriage until they had received their transfer.

Recent evidence suggests that adolescent girls, like women, see real value in participating in livelihood and life skills training opportunities – however, they may struggle to access or apply these skills without accompanying shifts in norms around traditional gender roles. A 2021 review of safe space programming across the Arab States Region found that, while safe spaces were primarily designed to promote psychosocial wellbeing, girls and women were most interested in accessing vocational training and economic support.⁶⁶ Safe space or girls’ empowerment programming can offer girls the opportunity to build the three skills identified as necessary for securing secure and productive livelihoods – foundational, transferable, and technical and vocational – in settings where marginalisation, poor formal education, or instability or crisis restrict their opportunity to do so.⁶⁷

In research conducted in Jordan and Uganda in 2021, both girls and parents spoke of the need for alternatives to traditional education for girls excluded from educational systems during war, or for whom traditional education was not effective. They identified the need for vocational training in particular, in areas including tailoring, hairdressing, catering or carpentry, with a view to improving adolescent girls’ financial independence.⁶⁸ This is noteworthy given safe space programming often focuses on girls’ empowerment and links with sexual and reproductive health (SRH) services, with less emphasis on livelihood and skills development.

However, evidence from Syria and the West Bank shows how husbands and other male family members initially supportive of safe space programming begin to restrict adolescent participation when activities are at odds with traditional gender norms.⁶⁹ Similarly, the ABAD evaluators found that, even though the programme increased the likelihood of girls’ school completion, it did not have any longer-term effect on women’s labour force participation. This was noted as potentially because the programme did not prompt an increase in adolescent girls’ completion of higher (i.e., beyond secondary) education – or because the deeply entrenched gender norms that block women from working outside the home, regardless of their education levels, remained unchanged by the ABAD programme.⁷⁰

62. UNICEF, 2022c, [Leveraging large-scale sectoral programmes to prevent child marriage](#), p.29-38.

63. UNICEF, 2020c, [“Impact evaluation of the Integrated Safety Net Programme in the Amhara Region of Ethiopia: Baseline report”](#), UNICEF Office of Research – Innocenti, p.154.

64. UNICEF, 2022c, op. cit., p.35.

65. Ibid., p.24-27.

66. UNFPA, 2021, [Transcending norms: Gender-transformative approaches in women’s and girls’ safe spaces in humanitarian settings](#), p.11.

67. Rose, P., 2021, op. cit, p.5.

68. Freccero, J., Taylor, A., 2021, [Child marriage in humanitarian crises: Girls and parents speak out on risk and protective factors, decision-making, and solutions](#), UC Berkeley School of Law, Save the Children, Plan International, King Hussein Foundation Information and Research Center, p.37.

69. UNFPA, 2021, op. cit, p.24.

70. Biswas, S., Das, U., 2021, [“What’s the worth of a promise? Evaluating the longer-term indirect effects of a programme to reduce early marriage in India”](#), Global Development Institute Working Paper Series, Manchester, p.2.

Even where girls are able to access continued education and/or life skills training, girls and women are far more likely to find themselves in low-paid, vulnerable jobs that put them at physical and economic risk without adequate social protection.

This is true for married girls and adolescents who find themselves limited to work outside the formal economy due to increased responsibility for household work and child and elderly care. It is also true for adolescent mothers, as research conducted in 2020 shows that while women living with a partner have a lower labour force participation rate than women living alone, it is largely the presence of children – especially young or multiple children – that drives lower rates of female labour force participation, as childcare responsibilities typically fall disproportionately or entirely on women.⁷¹

A 2021 discourse analysis published by UNICEF outlines the arguments surrounding child marriage as a form of labour in and of itself, or at the very least as something likely to circumscribe adolescents' agency with regards to both work within and outside of the house.⁷²

There is evidence that the presence of a favourable job market alongside the provision of life skills training can delay marriage, with a 2020 synthesis of five studies on job markets and targeted life skills training showing consistently positive results.⁷³ The visibility of garment factories in Bangladesh, for example, is estimated to have had a bigger impact in encouraging girls to stay in school than the massive government-supported female secondary school stipend programme.⁷⁴ However, the widespread closure of garment factors in 2020 due to COVID-19, and the disproportionate impact this had on female employees (80% of the garment sector workforce) in terms of lost earnings, unfair dismissals, and discriminatory re-hiring practices, highlights how even a seemingly favourable job market can leave girls and women economically and socially vulnerable.⁷⁵

State-driven efforts to improve women's security and equality in the world of work are likely necessary to enable sustainable demand side-driven change. Ongoing advocacy around the provision of legislative and policy safeguards such as paid statutory and parental leave, to allow mothers to recover from childbirth and promote more equal approaches to parenting, and access to affordable child and elderly care, is critical to ensuring adolescent girls can apply their education and life skills within roles that do not put them at risk of harm.⁷⁶ This is in line with feminist macro-economic advocacy, which is centred on the importance of the state playing an active role in ensuring economic activity is connected with and leads to social goals.⁷⁷

An analysis of the school-to-work transition for adolescent girls published in 2021 highlights how in some settings, focusing on developing girls' and adolescents' entrepreneurial skills and opportunities for self-employment may be preferable to supporting them to enter existing jobs that do not provide stability and security – as long as the correct structures and legislation are in place.⁷⁸ Increased government and donor investments in green growth initiatives also present an opportunity to build both women's skills and inclusion in areas such as green entrepreneurship, waste management and circular economy interventions, green energy and infrastructure, and eco-tourism.⁷⁹

Key takeaways:

- **Interventions that increase household economic security may reduce rates of child marriage, but are unlikely to shift underlying social norms.** Such interventions may simply delay marriage, leave girls and women exposed to the harmful norms that perpetuate marriage in other settings – for example, in the world of work – or create or contribute to the so-called “triple burden” of reproductive, productive, and community management roles women are expected to shoulder.⁸⁰
- **Pairing social protection or cash transfer interventions with a component that aims to shift restrictive norms around traditional gender roles can have a transformative, longer-term effect** on perceptions around girls' and women's worth, and may improve adolescent girls' and women's access to life skills opportunities and employment.
- **Favourable job markets can have a positive impact on keeping girls in school, but the majority of girls and women are employed in insecure, low-paid roles** where they are vulnerable to external shocks, economic insecurity, violence and abuse. Supporting adolescent girls and women to become self-employed may help to mitigate these risks. State-owned, systems-based efforts to create safeguards for women in the workplace; a global recognition of how macro-economic policies have a disproportionately negative impact on girls and women; and a deeper understanding of the work carried out by married girls within their marriages, are necessary to push back against the “feminisation of poverty”⁸¹ at the household, national and global level.

71. Azcona, G., Bhatt, A., et al., 2020, “*Spotlight on Goal 8: The impact of marriage and children on labour market participation*”, UN Women, p.8.

72. Boender, C., 2021, op. Cit., p.40.

73. Malhotra, A., Elnakib, S., 2021^a, op. Cit., p.847.

74. Ibid., p.860.

75. ILO, 2020, op. cit., p.2.

76. Azcona, G., Bhatt, A. et al., 2020, op. cit., p.15.

77. FEMNET, 2020, *The audacity to disrupt: An introduction to feminist macro-level economics*, Gender and Development Network, The African Women's Development and Communication Network.

78. Rose, P., 2021, op. cit., p.6.

79. Ngum, S., Livingstone, D., 2021, *Green growth opportunities for women and youth in urban areas of Mozambique: Key green sectors and best practices*, WOW Helpdesk, p.5.

80. Ban, A., 2018, “*The triple burden of women: Conflicting gender norms*”, *The Himalayan*, accessed November 2022.

81. Malakar, K., 2020, “*Informality of work, poverty and feminization of workforce: Implications of neoliberalism*”, *EPRA International Journal of Research and Development*, 5:4, p.186.

Sexual and reproductive health and rights

What we know:

- **Adolescent pregnancy is a key driver of child marriage**, particularly in contexts where pre-marital sexuality is taboo and virginity is associated with purity and family honour, where contraception is not readily available, or where access to abortion services is restricted.⁸²
- **Period poverty, and a lack of knowledge around menstruation, can lead to early school leaving**,⁸³ which in turn increases girls' and adolescents' vulnerability to child marriage.
- **Child marriage is a key driver of adolescent pregnancy**. Complications arising from pregnancy and childbirth are the leading causes of death for 15- to 19-year-olds globally, and adolescent mothers can face even greater restrictions to their economic and social wellbeing. Children born to young mothers face increased health risks and rates of death, risking pushing mothers and their children into cycles of poverty and ill-health.⁸⁴
- **Delivering SRH services and education is challenging in certain contexts, particularly crisis settings or socially conservative contexts**; more than half of adolescent demand for modern contraception was unmet in regions with the highest prevalence of child marriage in 2020,⁸⁵ while restrictive social norms can reduce demand for services that do exist in places where accessing SRH services is considered unacceptable for unmarried girls or married girls without children.⁸⁶
- **Married girls and adolescents, and those who are pregnant or mothers, have unique needs that health care and social service systems are typically not well set up to meet**.⁸⁷ Research and programming around child marriage and SRHR has historically focused on prevention and maternal health, and not on the SRHR needs of married girls and women, or psychosocial needs of girls and adolescents who are or have been pregnant.

Emerging evidence:

Health-focused programmes that take a gender-transformative approach can reduce child marriage prevalence from multiple angles, including via non-health pathways for change. A 2022 evaluation of Ethiopia's Health Extension Programme between 2002 and 2013 – the first to evaluate the association between HEP household support and adolescent health and wellbeing – showed that adolescent girls' engagement with HEP was linked with lower risk of child marriage and adolescent pregnancy, higher education attendance, and better literacy and numeracy. That the majority of HEP Health Extension Workers (HEW) (over 34,000) were women, all of whom had completed general secondary education and undergone one year's-worth of training for the role, is likely to have supported their position as role models, thereby both increasing girls' willingness to access their support and acting as an incentive for girls to remain in school.⁸⁸ Indeed, mixed evidence on the effectiveness of previous community awareness programs for addressing child marriage and girls' education suggest the female HEWs may have played a central role in the HEP's overall success.

Increasing adolescent girls' SRHR knowledge and ability to exercise their rights is only achievable by combining demand- and supply-side interventions. For example, the availability and accessibility of youth-friendly contraception is an important component of efforts to increase girls' SRH knowledge and uptake. The Yes I Do Alliance programme was implemented from 2016 to 2020 in seven countries, aiming to increase girls' agency over if, when and who to marry, and to reduce rates of female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C). As part of this, the programme supported adolescents to claim their SRHR and take informed action on their sexual health. YIDA achieved substantial reductions in child marriage and FGM/C prevalence, reduced early school leaving and increased access to SRH care. However, it did not achieve strong reductions in adolescent pregnancy, and one of its key learnings was that providing SRHR information to adolescent girls is only effective if contraception is easily available to them.⁸⁹

SRH interventions that overly focus on individual and community-level norms may be limited in their impact by the systemic, structural barriers that restrict girls from realising their SRHR.⁹⁰ Despite the YIDA programme's successes, it faced a number of challenges: in contexts where communities were struggling to meet basic needs around food, water and

82. Billowitz, M., Karim, N., Watson, K., 2022, *Girls' sexuality and child, early and forced marriages and unions: A conceptual framework*, Torchlight Collective with the Child, Early and Forced Marriage and Unions and Sexuality Working Group, p.14.

83. See for example, <https://www.freeperiods.org/periodpoverty>, accessed November 2022.

84. *Girls Not Brides*, 2019, *Child marriage and sexual and reproductive health and rights*, p.2.

85. UNICEF, 2021c, op. cit., p.26.

86. Kolundzija, A., Marcus, R. (2019) "Gender norms and youth-friendly sexual and reproductive health services: Annotated bibliography", *Advancing Learning and Innovation on Gender Norms*, p.9.

87. *Girls Not Brides*, 2021c, *Supporting married girls and adolescent mothers and girls who are pregnant*, p.1.

88. Rudgard, W., Dzumbunu, S., et al, 2022, "Multiple impacts of Ethiopia's Health Extension Program on adolescent health and wellbeing: A quasi-experimental study 2002-2013", *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 71, p.313.

89. *Girls Not Brides*, 2022b, *Research Spotlight: Successful multisectoral and multilevel approaches*, p.4.

90. Melnikas, A., Saul, G., et al, 2021, op. cit., p.51.

sanitation, engagement with social norms was not a priority, the use of transactional sex to meet basic needs undermined reductions in adolescent pregnancy, and overall impact was limited.⁹¹ This may be exacerbated in humanitarian contexts – in a 2021 survey of South Sudanese refugees in Uganda, for example, adolescent girls consistently cited basic needs, including food, personal hygiene supplies, clean water and clothing, as their highest priority needs.⁹²

In multi-component programmes that include child marriage and SRH components, norms around SRH appear to be harder to shift than those around child marriage, with adultism, stigma and social taboos often playing a critical role in restricting girls’ and adolescents’ access to and uptake of SRH services on otherwise successful interventions. Her Choice, a 5-year multicomponent programme that worked to delay marriage and expand girls’ choice from 2016 to 2020, was successful in reducing the proportion of 12- to 17-year-old girls married between baseline and endline in the majority of its 10 focus countries, and significantly increased the number of girls who felt they had a say in if, when and whom to marry in a number of contexts (from 9% to 87% of girls in focus communities in Mali, for example).⁹³ However, despite some gains in SRHR knowledge and service uptake – including impressive gains around contraception use and knowledge on SRH services – impact was restricted by ongoing discomfort around girls’ sexuality; following training, teachers continued to feel uncomfortable discussing SRHR with students.⁹⁴

The AGI-Kenya programme similarly attributed the limited impact of its health-focused activities in part to the discomfort mentors felt teaching the SRH curriculum⁹⁵, while a key learning from the HEP evaluation was on the limited success of the programme’s efforts to educate households on SRHR and the need to explore different communication strategies to overcome communities’ discomfort with the topic.⁹⁶ Further discussion on interventions to shift restrictive norms and stigma around girls’ sexuality is included in the section on shifting individual and collective norms on p. 16.

Engaging with restrictive gendered norms and power dynamics as part of the delivery of comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) to girls and boys can help to address the stigma and shame that exists around adolescent girls’ sexuality and improve access to SRHR.⁹⁷ Indeed, there is longstanding evidence that sustained CSE that includes a focus on gender and power is five times more likely to improve gender equality and sexual health-related outcomes for young people.⁹⁸ While it has not been rigorously evaluated, recent work by organisations such as *Movimento de Mulheres das Ilhas de Belém* in Brazil, *Na’leb’ak* in Guatemala, and *Núcleo de apoyo a la Mujer* in Dominican Republic has demonstrated the potential for CSE to provide young people with the tools to question harmful gender norms, reimagine masculinities and build girls’ agency – in addition to providing information on sex, sexuality and sexual health.⁹⁹

Efforts to build girls’ and boys’ knowledge and confidence around SRHR are likely to be more effective when a holistic approach to CSE is reflected in national policy and curricula. The Women’s Integrated Sexual Health (WISH) programme, a large-scale integrated programme operating in 27 countries in Africa and Asia that delivers supply- and demand-side initiatives to promote SRHR access to underserved women and adolescent girls, has achieved impressive results in integrating CSE into national-level education programming. For example, WISH has worked with the Sierra Leone Ministry of Education to integrate CSE modules into six subjects in the national school curriculum, including modules on gender-based violence and gender norms and roles. It has also successfully advocated for the specific inclusion of adolescents and individuals (as opposed to married couples) in the 2021-2025 Budgeted National Family Planning Action Plan for Niger, which was validated by the Minister of Health in December 2021.¹⁰⁰

The needs of married girls, and of young mothers or girls who are – or have been – pregnant, are not widely understood or easily responded to by mainstream health or social support services.¹⁰¹ This is despite their specific and often exacerbated risks in terms of their health (overall, SRH, psychosocial), economic wellbeing, access to education and social support services, and GBV. The “Start Free, Stay Free, AIDS Free” framework worked in nine countries across East and Southern Africa from 2015 to 2020 to meet the complex needs of adolescent and young mothers living with and free from HIV. The programme generated useful learning for multi-sector, multi-level approaches to SRHR programming for young mothers, including on the importance of: creating a policy environment that centres young mothers’ needs in national, subnational and local planning processes (and draws the links between those processes without removing room for local adaptation); promotes accountability and buy-in from service providers; provides strong social support structures for

91. *Girls Not Brides*, 2022b, op. cit., p.8.

92. Freccero, J., Taylor, A. (2021); p.50.

93. Koster, W., Miedema, E. et al, 2021, *Impact evaluation report: On 5-years of “Her Choice: Building child marriage-free communities”*, University of Amsterdam.

94. *Girls Not Brides*, 2022b, op. cit., p.3.

95. Austrian, K., Soler-Hampejsek, E., et al, 2022, op. cit., p.891.

96. Rudgard, W., Dzumbunu, S., et al, 2022, op. cit., p.315.

97. Billowitz, M., Karim, N., Watson, K., 2022, op. cit., p.23.

98. Haberland, N., Rogow, D., 2014, *“Sexuality education: Emerging trends in evidence and practice”*, *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 56.

99. Kendall, T., 2022, *Tackling the taboo in Latin America and the Caribbean: Sexuality and gender-transformative programmes to address child, early and forced marriage and unions*, The Child, Early and Forced Marriage and Sexuality Working Group, p.26-36.

100. *Girls Not Brides*, 2022b, op. cit., p.8.

101. *Girls Not Brides*, 2021c, op. cit., p.1.

young mothers; and meaningfully engages adolescents and young women throughout policy development, programming and research processes.¹⁰²

The Evidence to Action (E2A) Project was implemented from 2014 to 2020, focusing specifically on responding to the needs of first-time parents in Burkina Faso, Nigeria and Tanzania. E2A applied life-stage and socio-ecological lenses to design community- and facility-based interventions with mothers, fathers, their key influencers, and their communities and health providers. The programme achieved significant increases in voluntary use of modern contraception, improvements in gender-equitable attitudes, increased birth spacing timelines, improved couple's communication and greater health-seeking behaviour for both parents and their children.¹⁰³ While E2A focused on young mothers – defined as 25 or younger – as opposed to adolescent girls specifically, it nevertheless generated learning that could be applied to supporting adolescent mothers.

Key takeaways from E2A included: the need to be strategic and realistic about which outcomes to prioritise; to address non-health needs of parents, including education, income generation and livelihoods; to consider how best to engage male partners/fathers and household/family members; to include community-based interventions that link mothers to key individuals and resources; and to address underlying gender norms and power dynamics by integrating gender-transformative approaches into programming.¹⁰⁴

SRHR programmes for adolescent mothers are likely to benefit from linking girls' and adolescents' sexual and reproductive health with their psychological wellbeing, as demonstrated in the E2A programme. Girls who have given birth may require access to psychosocial support – they may not have chosen to become pregnant, have suffered a traumatic pregnancy or birth as a result of their age, or not understood what was happening to them as a result of poor access to SRH education.¹⁰⁵ In settings where divorce is not common or socially accepted, marriages that end in divorce are often characterised by severe domestic abuse, and divorced girls may lose access to their children in contexts where men are automatically granted guardianship.¹⁰⁶ In these cases, the provision of SRH services may be paired with psychosocial support, and mechanisms that offer girls and adolescents a safe space to process their experiences without risk of harm or reputational damage. Both Start Free and E2A also demonstrate the potential impact of engaging with sympathetic community and religious leaders to promote an enabling environment and challenge stigma around holistic healthcare access.

Key takeaways:

- **Female health workers can increase trust in and uptake of services, and act as role models** in a way that may have a positive impact on girls' and adolescents' broader wellbeing and development.
- **SRHR demand-side interventions focused on awareness raising and education should be paired with supply-side interventions** that include youth-friendly provision of services and contraception, to support girls to exercise their SRHR.
- **SRHR interventions should recognise girls' and families' broader basic needs**, as SRHR-focused interventions may have limited impact where communities are food insecure.
- **Addressing discomfort about SRHR is essential.** Discomfort may be felt by girls, adolescents and community members, and also by programming teams and local healthcare or other professionals, impeding their ability to accurately share information and offer appropriate care.
- **The SRHR needs of married girls and young mothers may be most effectively addressed through multi-component programmes that also address the psychosocial, economic and norms-based barriers they may face in accessing healthcare.**

102. UNICEF, 2020d, *Addressing the needs of adolescent and young mothers affected by HIV in Eastern and Southern Africa*, p.3, p.15.

103. Kanesathasan, A., 2021, "Key insights for first-time parent programs: lessons from implementing first-time parent interventions to improve health and gender outcomes in three countries", *Evidence to Action*, p.3.

104. *Ibid.*, p.10.

105. Hamad, B., Elmassie, S., Oakley, E., et al., 2021, "*No one should be terrified like I was! Exploring drivers and impacts of child marriage in protracted crises among Palestinian and Syrian refugees*", *The European Journal of Development Research*, 33.

106. Howe, K., Stites, E., Moran, M., et al., 2022, *op. cit.*, p.23.

Voice, choice and agency

What we know:

- **Designated safe spaces can be girls' and adolescents' only opportunity to feel secure, able to make choices that affect their lives, and connect with a range of support services and activities**, particularly in contexts where adolescent girls have limited agency and control, or where social and legal structures and support networks and services have been disrupted in humanitarian or emergency settings.¹⁰⁷
- **Girls' empowerment programmes can provide an opportunity to better understand girls' and adolescents' own decision-making process and rationale in relation to child marriage**, something that is particularly critical in settings where girls may choose to marry as adolescents for a variety of reasons.¹⁰⁸

Emerging evidence:

The potential for girls' empowerment programmes to have a sustained impact on girls' and adolescents' wellbeing appears to be highly dependent on their background and the constraints and enablers they face. The Adolescent Girls Empowerment Program (AGEP) was a 2-year intervention implemented in Zambia that aimed to build girls' social, health and economic assets in the short term and improve sexual behaviour, early marriage, pregnancy and education in the longer term. Activities included weekly mentor-led girls' group meetings, health vouchers for wellness and reproductive health services, and an adolescent-friendly savings account. A 2020 longitudinal study of AGEP found the intervention had modest positive impacts on SRH knowledge, savings behaviour and transactional sex after two and four years. However, it had no effect on primary education, fertility outcomes or norms around gender equality, acceptability of intimate partner violence (IPV) or HIV knowledge.¹⁰⁹

Suspected reasons for this included overall low participation in programme sessions, due to social and economic barriers at individual, household and community levels, particularly for girls from the most marginalised households. It is also likely that high levels of acceptability and experiences of violence – 60% of girls agreeing IPV is acceptable, two-thirds having experienced sexual violence – meant an intervention focused solely on empowerment was unlikely to have an impact without a parallel engagement around attitudes and gender norms. Suggestions for future programming included building in a norms-focused workstream, and providing households with cash transfers to alleviate economic barriers to participation.¹¹⁰

Where girls' empowerment interventions promote group solidarity among adolescent girls and also link into community structures and traditions, there is potential to shift harmful practices around child marriage in a way that is both scalable and sustainable. A 2022 peer-reviewed article on the 2018 study of CARE's TESFA¹¹¹ programme highlights this potential. The TESFA programme in Ethiopia targeted 5,000 married adolescent girls from 2010 to 2013 via a combination of reproductive health and financial savings-focused interventions. At endline, participants reported improvements across health and empowerment outcomes. Four years post-*TESFA*, 88% of groups continued to meet without assistance from CARE, with new groups formed including by girls not involved in the original programme.¹¹²

Success factors included the strength of solidarity and safety created within the peer groups – based on peer-facilitated reflective dialogues rather than peer-based learning as is more common; a culturally relevant curriculum, developed in consultation with Ethiopian female health workers; the transition of *TESFA*'s Village Savings and Loan Association (TSLA) model to the traditional Ethiopian *equb* model for saving and borrowing; and the holistic approach to community engagement, through the formation of "Social Analysis and Action" groups involving village elders, religious leaders, community health workers, mothers-in-law, and – critically – husbands.¹¹³

Involving girls in the design, running and monitoring of empowerment or safe spaces is recommended as a means of ensuring spaces best meet their needs and do not mirror the restrictive norms they face in everyday life. Promising practices include establishing safe space committees, conducting regular focus group discussions and formal/informal consultations, and using a range of monitoring and evaluation tools appropriate to girls' circumstances, including in-person, Facebook and Whatsapp.¹¹⁴

107. UNFPA, 2021, op. cit., p.8.

108. Saul, G., Diarra, A., et al., 2021, "[Voice without choice? Investigating adolescent girls' agency in marital decision-making in Niger](#)", *Progress in Development Studies*, 20:4, p.10.

109. Austrian, K., Soler-Hampejsek, E. et al., 2020 "[The impact of the Adolescent Girls Empowerment Program \(AGEP\) on short and long term social, economic, education and fertility outcomes: A cluster randomized controlled trial in Zambia](#)", *BMC Public Health*, 20:349, p.2.

110. Austrian, K., Soler-Hampejsek, E. et al., 2020, op. cit., p.13.

111. *TESFA* means "hope" in Amharic.

112. Chowdhary, P., Mekuria, F. et al., 2022, "Building sustainable and scalable peer-based programming: promising approaches from *TESFA* in Ethiopia", *Reproductive Health*, 19:1, p.2.

113. Chowdhary, P., Mekuria, F. et al., 2022, p.9.

114. UNFPA, 2021, op. cit., p.37.

As discussed, girls commonly prioritise opportunities to develop life skills and engage in livelihoods training, however these kinds of activities are often not prioritised by programmers. Choices for activities might include non-traditional vocational training, providing small grants and tailored start-up kits, and referrals and partnerships with external livelihood empowerment programmes.¹¹⁵

A 2020 report on child marriage across the Arab States Region highlights the importance of girl-centred programming in humanitarian settings, and of engaging married girls in all aspects of programme design and implementation – particularly with regards to SRH services, as complications from pregnancy, incorrect knowledge or taboos around contraception use, and disrupted support networks can all leave married girls and young mothers particularly vulnerable.¹¹⁶

While human rights advocates have historically defined all child and early marriages as “forced marriages”,¹¹⁷ the reality is that in many settings, girls willingly consent or even choose to marry, based on a range of practical, cultural and emotional reasons. In Niger, girls may not view delaying marriage as a desirable option, due to norms around pressure to marry and women’s economic reliance on men.¹¹⁸ Marriage may also be associated with increased status or viewed as an opportunity to escape violence in the family home. It is therefore important to base empowerment programmes on a realistic assessment of these factors, of whether and what acceptable, alternative pathways already exist, and what opportunities there are to create alternatives to marriage that offer genuine choice.¹¹⁹

Interventions that expand married girls’ and adolescent girls’ rights and agency may have spill-over effects on the acceptability of marriage for future generations in a way that is driven by girls themselves. For example, through building the collective power of married girls and adolescents, the TESFA model created a critical mass of women who were able to challenge harmful norms – including the acceptability of child marriage – with greater community acceptance and less individual risk.¹²⁰

Key takeaways:

- **Girls’ empowerment programmes have the potential to be both scalable and sustainable, if girls can engage and feel individually and collectively empowered by the process.** This is particularly important in contexts where girls have limited or reduced agency in everyday life, including humanitarian and highly socially conservative settings.
- **Grounding activities in local systems and context, and supporting girls to access programme activities – including through financial support for girls and their caregivers, and through engagement with husbands, male family members, and community members – are likely necessary ingredients for programme success.** These needs may be higher in contexts where child marriage prevalence is high, where target households are highly insecure or in communities with high levels of acceptability and experiences of violence.
- **Girls may be supportive of child marriage due to many and complex social and economic factors;** failure to recognise and respond to this may limit a programme’s success. Expanding married girls’ rights and agency, and engaging married girls and women in the design of empowerment interventions, may be one entry point into shifting girls’ own perceptions around child marriage and gender roles more broadly.

Shifting individual and collective norms

What we know:

- **For adolescent girls to exercise voice and choice, they not only need economic and political agency but also freedom from the powerful yet invisible norms that erode their potential.** As noted throughout this evidence review, deeply entrenched norms around the role of girls and women in society can limit girls’ access to education, healthcare and livelihood opportunities, and place them at risk when they step outside of these roles.
- **Meaningful engagement with boys and men, and with community decision-makers and gatekeepers, can be critical** in both reducing the risk of backlash against girls and women and in supporting those individuals to act as agents for change.¹²¹ It is important that these efforts do not decentre girls’ and adolescents’ needs and agency, however.¹²²

115. Ibid., p.10.

116. Hunersen, K., Robinson, W., Krishnapalan, N. et al., 2020, *Child marriage in humanitarian settings in the Arab States Region: Study results from Djibouti, Egypt, Kurdistan Region of Iraq and Yemen*, UNFPA, UNICEF, Women’s Refugee Commission, Johns Hopkins University, p.15.

117. Horii, H., 2020, “*Child marriage as a ‘solution’ to modern youth in Bali*”, *Progress in Development Studies*, 20:4.

118. Saul, G., Diarra, A., et al., 2021, op. cit., p.10.

119. Ibid.

120. Chowdhary, P., Mekuria, F., et al., 2022, op. cit., p.8.

121. Taken from the *Girls Not Brides* Theory of Change, section on *mobilising families and communities*.

122. UNFPA-UNICEF Global Programme to End Child Marriage, 2020a, *Technical note on partnering with men and boys to end child marriage in the Global Programme to End Child Marriage*, p.2.

- **Efforts to shift harmful and restrictive norms are likely to be limited if corresponding supply-side interventions do not allow for behaviour change in practice** – for example, around use of contraception without accompanying availability of contraception, or of acceptability of women working without the availability of secure employment opportunities.

Emerging evidence:

Programmes that take a multi-level approach to shifting individual and collective attitudes and norms can have a significant impact on both child marriage rates and the harmful underlying gender norms that surround the practice.

A 2017 Government of Bangladesh-UNICEF trans-media entertainment-education initiative approached shifting social norms from a number of angles: trans-media (mass, folk and social media); community engagement and social mobilisation (fathers' groups, community dialogue, mobilisation of elected officials); and advocacy and capacity building (local and national).

A 2020 evaluation of the programme found a 3% increase in people reporting having taken action to prevent child marriage, with numbers increasing in line with people's degree of exposure to the programme.¹²³ The evaluation also noted increased awareness amongst fathers regarding the risks of early marriage and pregnancy; overall increases in personal and family disapproval of child marriage; a decrease in the belief that girls are responsible for sexual harassment; and an increase in positive attitudes around investments in girls' education. The programme did not appear to have an impact on community-level attitudes around marriage, suggesting a disconnect between self-reported approval and perceived approval at community level and the potentially greater challenge of shifting collective attitudes as compared to individual ones, and an opportunity to explore how to bridge this gap in future programming.¹²⁴

Safe space programming may be more effective when paired with transformative interventions outside of the space, at the family and community level. A summary of UNFPA and UNICEF programming amongst Rohingya communities in Bangladesh published in 2020 found that engaging community stakeholders (particularly religious leaders) from the start of programme design and throughout implementation was critical. Key stakeholders were engaged on a range of issues, including GBV prevention, risk mitigation to end child marriage, and gender roles.¹²⁵

The Sibling Support for Adolescents in Emergencies (SSAGE) programme implemented in Maiduguri state, Northeast Nigeria, in 2020 demonstrates the potential of taking a whole-family approach to shifting attitudes around adolescent girls' agency and the acceptability of violence at the household level. Through addressing whole family units in synchronised gender-transformative curricula, SSAGE reported shifts towards more egalitarian familial relationships, decreased violence perpetration, decreased acceptability of violence and reduced stigmatisation of girls who had experienced violence.¹²⁶

Engaging families and communities outside of safe space interventions means programmes are more likely to attract and sustain girls' and adolescents' participation in the spaces, to reduce backlash from husbands and family members, and to ensure girls are able to apply their learning and skills in their everyday lives.

There are risks associated with continually excluding boys and men from empowerment programming. In-depth analysis of Save the Children's programming on child marriage and FGM/C in Ethiopia, published in 2020, led to a number of broad recommendations for how to engage men – as husbands and family members and community stakeholders – in child marriage prevention. These include supporting fathers and brothers to understand how they can help create more time for girls to study; working to decouple men's status from daughters' sexual purity and "successful" marriage; raising awareness with boys and men about the practical advantages of an adult wife; and encouraging more equitable household decision-making and approaches to raising sons.¹²⁷

Efforts to engage boys and men must be careful not to exclude girls' and women's voices, opinions or leadership.¹²⁸ The ALIGN Platform's 2021 conceptual framework for norms change sets out the pathway through which norms can shift, including the specific "patriarchal brakes" that can block efforts to create change. This framework may be helpful in visualising when and at what stages to engage boys and men as part of girl-centred programming.¹²⁹

ALIGN makes a number of recommendations around how to approach shifting social norms, based on extensive analysis of global programming efforts. These include: work at speed and scale, recognising there is increased appetite amongst changemakers to understand and transform norms, and opportunities presented by large-scale sectoral programmes

123. Sengupta, A., Sood, S., et al., 2020, "[Enabling gender norm change through communication: A case study of a trans-media entertainment-education initiative in Bangladesh](#)", *Journal of Development Communications*, 31:2, p.41.

124. Sengupta, A., Sood, S., et al., 2020, op. cit., p.42.

125. UNFPA-UNICEF Global Programme to End Child Marriage, 2020b, [Preventing and responding to child marriage in humanitarian settings: The Global Programme approach](#), p.3.

126. Koris, A., Steven, S., et al., 2022, "[Opportunities and challenges in preventing violence against adolescent girls through gender transformative, whole-family support programming in Northeast Nigeria](#)", *Conflict and Health*, 16:26, p.12.

127. Endale, K., Jones, N., et al., 2022, [Exploring the patterning and drivers of FGM/C and child marriage in pastoralist Ethiopia: Baseline report from the Afar and Somali regions](#), GAGE ODI, p.70.

128. UNFPA-UNICEF Global Programme to End Child Marriage, 2020a, op. cit., p.2.

129. Harper, C., Marcus, R., et al., 2021, [Gender, power and progress: How norms change](#), ALIGN: ODI; p.21.

such as pushing for inclusive whole-school approaches to education; ensure inclusion, including in data collection; ensure depth, moving beyond shifts in attitude to sustained shifts in behaviour; and continue to build the evidence base, including collecting long-term, intersectional data that captures how norms change.¹³⁰

Control and regulation of sexuality – particularly adolescent girls’ sexuality – is one of the most powerful drivers of child marriage.¹³¹ The 2022 “Tackling the Taboo” report identified six common elements for successful gender-transformative programming on child marriage and sexuality, based on five programme case studies in Latin America and the Caribbean: increase critical awareness of gender roles and norms; use girl-centred, participatory approaches; create public platforms for girls’ and adolescents’ leadership and voices in communities; offer rights-based, context-specific developmentally and age-appropriate comprehensive sexuality education; work with communities to address child marriage and sexuality; and advocate for improved availability, accessibility, acceptability and quality of health and SRHR services and education.¹³²

One of the case studies showcased Bayan Association’s Holistic Education for Youth (HEY!) programme in Honduras, which piloted a school-based participatory education approach that engaged students, parents, community members and teachers in creating, pilot testing and implementing an education model and materials. The curriculum was designed to be culturally grounded and feminist in its approach and delivery, with an emphasis on critical thinking and reflection. It included teaching by 16- and 17-year-old students to younger students, and the development of two educational guides for students and a “parents’ schools” curriculum, all of which critically addressed gender norms, child marriage and informal unions, biological and psychosocial changes during adolescence, sexual development, romantic relationships, and decision-making around sex. The programme reported a 38% reduction in cases of child marriage and a 13% reduction in cases of adolescent pregnancy from 2017 to 2019, and interest has since been expressed by the local government to have Bayan deliver the HEY! curriculum in urban secondary schools in the Department of Atlántida.¹³³

In engaging with the topic of adolescent girls’ sexuality, the interaction between traditional and emergent social norms and legislation is worth considering as part of programme design. A 2020 study of child marriage in Bali highlighted how *zinah* – extra- and pre-marital sexual activity – is hugely stigmatised, and early marriage (below the legal age of 16 for girls, 19 for boys) is often allowed by Islamic courts as a “solution” to *zinah*. As young people in Indonesia negotiate more liberated ideas around sexuality, child marriage is often used by young couples managing the disconnect between cultural traditions and modern reality.¹³⁴

Key takeaways:

- **Communication-based norm change interventions can have a positive impact in shifting attitudes and behaviour around child marriage, but likely need to engage at multiple levels using a variety of mediums.** Further work is needed to understand how success in influencing individual and household norms can be scaled up to also have influence at community level.
- **Engaging boys and men as potential allies for change, as a key focus within a whole-household or whole-community approach, is likely important for shifting harmful norms** or sustaining behaviour change over the longer term.
- **Fear, stigma and the desire to control adolescent girls’ sexuality is a key driver of child marriage, yet is often not included in child marriage programming.** There are multiple recent examples of promising practice that involve sustained community engagement, comprehensive sexuality education, and critical reflection on harmful gendered norms, to create significant change in attitudes and behaviours. These have generated useful lessons for programming focused on sexuality that may be replicable and scalable in multiple contexts.

130. Harper, C., Marcus, R. et al., 2021, op. cit., pp.140-141.

131. Kendall, T., 2022, op. cit., p.6.

132. Ibid., p.11.

133. Ibid., p.24.

134. Horii, H., 2020, op. cit.

Women's rights organisations and feminist movements

What we know:

- **A strong, autonomous feminist movement is both substantively and statistically significant as a predictor of government action to redress violence against women and girls (VAWG), although it is less clear if this is consistently the case for child marriage specifically.** Countries with strong feminist movements often have more comprehensive policies on VAWG than those with weaker or non-existent movements.¹³⁵
- **Women's rights organisations (WROs), women-led organisations and feminist movements are critically and consistently underfunded.** 99% of development aid and foundation grants do not directly reach women's rights and feminist organisations. Despite new funding commitments, WROs receive only 0.13% of total Official Development Assistance and 0.4% of all gender-related aid.¹³⁶
- **There has been limited study of the link between WROs, feminist movements, and efforts to prevent and respond to child marriage.**

Emerging evidence:

There is longstanding evidence of the positive impact the presence of strong feminist movements can have on a country's safeguards against gender-based violence. A 2021 report by the ALIGN Platform highlights how women's participation in social movements can and has promoted gender norms change through two main pathways: legal or policy reform, and the renegotiation of gender roles and relations.¹³⁷ The report outlines multiple examples of where feminist movements have influenced legal reform in areas ranging from abortion, menstruation and labour rights to domestic violence and gender-based violence;¹³⁸ and shifted social norms around issues such as gendered social expectations, gendered divisions of labour and women's own self-confidence.¹³⁹

A 20-year study published in 2020 documented the decline in rates of IPV in León, Nicaragua, between 1995 and 2016, citing the influence of a broad-based women's movement as contributing to the recorded decrease in violence. The study found a 63% drop in the lifetime prevalence of physical IPV over two decades, and a 71% decrease in 12-month prevalence of physical IPV, with similar decreases in emotional IPV.

Likely reasons for these declines are cited as including the multisectoral efforts of the government, international donors and civil society, spurred by the women's movement, to increase women's knowledge of their rights, as well as for access to justice and services for survivors of IPV.¹⁴⁰ Indeed, a 2022 report commissioned by the UN Trust Fund to End Violence Against Women on feminist movement building highlights how, in many cases, the focus of mainstream development actors on issues such as power, community mobilisation and shifting social norms were historically rooted in social movements.¹⁴¹

There is also increasing guidance available on how donors can provide funding to WROs and feminist organisations in a way that overcomes traditional barriers to funding delivery. A 2022 report by AWID, Mama Cash and Count Me In! identifies the key stumbling blocks that typically restrict funding to feminist organisations and movements, and examines nine funding programmes that have successfully overcome these barriers. This includes an analysis of four elements of their funding modalities – political commitment, eligibility criteria, programme design and funding mechanisms, and governance and management – that facilitate the effective funding of feminist organisations. Examples of recognised good practice include UN Women's Fund for Gender Equality's allocation of 30% of grant costs to programme management and 7% to administrative costs;¹⁴² Amplify Change's specific targeting of marginalised groups and more controversial services, including safe abortion and discrimination against LGBTQIA+ people; FRIDA's participatory feminist grant-making module supporting the resourcing of young women, girls, trans and intersex youth to create lasting transformative change; and the Equality Fund's consultation with over 1,000 activists from 45 countries as part of its initial "design and build" phase.¹⁴³

135. Karim, N., 2022, *Feminist and women's movements in the context of ending violence against women and girls – Implications for funders and grant makers*, UN Trust Fund to End Violence Against Women, p.19.

136. Dolker, T., 2021, *Where is the money for feminist organising?*, AWID, p.3.

137. Staszewska, K., Miller, K., Lever, E., 2020, *Moving more money to the drivers of change: How bilateral and multilateral funders can resource feminist movements*, AWID, Mama Cash, Count Me In!, p.8.

138. *Ibid.*, p.26.

139. *Ibid.*, p.43.

140. Ellsberg, M, Ugarte, W. et al., 2020 "*Long-term change in the prevalence of intimate partner violence: A 20-year follow-up study in León, Nicaragua, 1995-2016*", *BMJ Global Health*, 5:4, p.9.

141. Karim, N., 2022, *op. cit.*, p.20.

142. Staszewska, K., Miller, K., Lever, E., 2022, *op. cit.*, p.30.

143. *Ibid.*, p.32.

Key takeaways:

- **There is an ever-growing evidence base showing the influential role WROs and feminist movements can play in pushing for and achieving tangible progress towards gender equality**, adding increasing weight to the argument for them to receive adequate funding.
- **Feminist organisations themselves have outlined what effective funding and partnership with institutional and multilateral donors should look like.** This includes the flexible, long-term delivery of funding, including core funding; encouraging the meaningful inclusion of WROs in civil society programming; funding activists' holistic security, safety, wellbeing and collective care needs, in light of the specific risks they face; and positioning women's rights activists in core governance and decision-making positions. Multiple examples now exist to prove that such an approach to funding feminist movements and WROs is possible, and could be replicated by other donors and on other programmes.

Legal frameworks and gender-responsive budgeting

What we know:

- **The core elements of legislation around child marriage are the minimum age of marriage, and free individual and informed consent.**¹⁴⁴ National legal ecosystems around child marriage establish a more detailed framework, typically relating to the age of marriage, of sexual consent and of parental consent; regulation of sexual and gender identities; (marital) rape and sexual assault; medical consent; and mandatory reporting on these areas by professionals.¹⁴⁵
- **Considerable loopholes, traditional alternatives and options for dispensation (for example, exceptions for parental consent under certain circumstances) all continue to allow girls to marry below the legal age**, with around 7.5 million girls marrying illegally each year.¹⁴⁶
- The majority of studies on the nature and impact of legislative frameworks on child marriage view minimum age legislation as an essential foundation, but not enough to reduce or end child marriage in isolation.¹⁴⁷

Emerging evidence:

Legislation, when enforced, can have a tangible impact on child marriage prevalence. Countries that consistently protect girls' and adolescents' rights through establishing a legal minimum age for marriage, for marriage with parental consent and for the minimum age of sexual consent at 18 years or older have child marriage 40% lower than countries where these laws contradict one another.¹⁴⁸ However, there is also evidence that legislation can have both a positive and a negative impact on child marriage depending on the context and how the laws interact with existing norms and behaviours.

A 2020 study on displaced Rohingya populations found that rates of child marriage and polygamy initially increased when refugees arrived in Bangladesh, as they were no longer subject to the laws that had prohibited these practices in Rakhine State. Marriages were conducted in informal camp settings by religious authorities, without interference from camp authorities. Once legal jurisdiction was established and laws enforced by camp authorities, however, rates of child marriage declined.¹⁴⁹

Conversely, the same study examined the decision to raise the age of marriage to 20 for girls following the 2015 Nepal earthquake, showing this led to a decline in arranged marriages but an increase in self-initiated marriages and elopement amongst adolescent couples due to the disconnect it created between social norms, adolescent sexual behaviour and the law.¹⁵⁰ Both examples indicate the potential of legislation to differently influence behaviours around child marriage where those laws are widely known.

There is evidence that legally raising the age of marriage may simply informalise the process rather than reducing it, especially in settings where non-legal unions are accepted or commonplace. A 2020 study of the impact of raising the age of marriage to 18 in Mexico – a shift that occurred across the majority of states between 2008 and 2018 – found that this policy shift reduced the number of marriages of adolescent girls aged 16 to 17 by 49%. However, further investigation found a proportionate increase in informal unions, and no impact on school attendance or early motherhood (as might be expected alongside a reduction in early marriages).¹⁵¹

144. UNICEF, 2020e, *Child marriage and the law: Technical note for the global programme to end child marriage*, p.1.

145. Billowitz, M., Karim, N., Watson, K., 2022, op. cit., p.19.

146. UNICEF, 2021c, op. cit., p.28.

147. Malhotra, A., Elnakib, S., 2021b, op. Cit., p.46.

148. UNICEF, 2021c, op. cit., p.26.

149. Leigh, J., et al., 2020, *Child marriage in humanitarian settings in South Asia: Study results from Bangladesh and Nepal*, UNFPA APRO and UNICEF ROSA, p.12.

150. Ibid., p.156.

151. Bellés-Obrero, C., Lombardi, M., 2020, "Will you marry me, later? Age-of-marriage laws and child marriage in Mexico", *Journal of Human Resources*; p.3.

Indeed, earlier research (conducted in 2017) found formally married girls in Mexico were more likely to be in school than those in informal unions, with only 8% of 12- to 17-year-old-girls in informal unions attending school compared to 17% of their legally married peers.¹⁵² The 2020 study found there to be minimal social sanctions for informal unions in Mexico, and that these potentially increase the vulnerability of girls in a union – and their children – if they do not have the same legal protections as in a formal marriage. Overall, the study suggested that in places where cohabitation is seen as acceptable, raising the legal age of marriage is unlikely to mitigate the negative consequences of early unions.¹⁵³

There is scope to promote the enforcement of laws that do exist, particularly in contexts where there is limited awareness, understanding or application of those laws in a way that promotes girls' legal agency and rights. Indeed, a 2020 review by Htun and Jensionsius notes that in many contexts, laws today are far more progressive than their surrounding social norms and attitudes, suggesting a need to align behaviour with the laws that already exist.¹⁵⁴ A 2022 guide from India provides a helpful example of how civil society can use existing laws to push back against child marriage while also advocating and campaigning for legal reform. It provides guidance on mapping existing legislation in different contexts, and on engaging different stakeholders, including tips for legal counselling for children, parents and guardians and for reporting to the police looking to map legislation.¹⁵⁵

This focus on ensuring girls, adolescents and potential allies are empowered within their communities to better understand and use the legal ecosystem in their context may be an important piece of the puzzle in ensuring that, at the very least, laws that do exist are more effectively utilised. For example, a 2021 study of child marriage prosecutions in India between 2008 and 2017 found that, despite the 2006 Prohibition of Child Marriage Act, only 3.5% of cases to nullify or seek legal action against underage marriages were initiated by girls, with over 64% of cases instead being initiated by parents or relatives, most often to seek custody over girls who had eloped.¹⁵⁶

Advocacy and campaigning around legal reform in support of addressing child marriage may also have greater impact when focused on the drivers of child marriage, rather than on child marriage itself. For example, 8% of states worldwide still explicitly restrict pregnant and parenting adolescent girls from accessing formal schooling; recent legal successes in Sierra Leone (2020)¹⁵⁷ and Tanzania (2022)¹⁵⁸ that improve access to education for pregnant girls and adolescent mothers have huge potential to contribute to reduced child marriage prevalence. In some settings, focusing efforts and resources on these targets may be more worthwhile, particularly in settings where focusing on child marriage-related law enforcement risks leading to negative consequences for married girls, such as stigma for reporting or punishment for failure to report.¹⁵⁹

Civil society actors can play a key role in pushing for gender-responsive budgeting (GRB) through both budget analysis and strategic advocacy, even with relatively small implementation budgets. The Linda Mtoto (“Protect a Child”) programme in Kilifi County, Kenya, implemented by the Kenya Muslim Youth Development Organisation (KMYDO), used \$7,500 to increase the County Government of Kilifi’s 2020-21 budget and secure tangible costed budget lines to address child marriage in the County annual work plan. KMYDO’s success was in part due to its ongoing engagement with key stakeholders that shone a light on the impact of child marriage and its links to broader issues.¹⁶⁰

In Punjab Province, Pakistan, the Formation, Awareness and Community Empowerment Society (FACES) used \$7,831 to push for GRB to address child marriage, including through budget analysis, advocacy and the development of a set of commitments from key government actors. FACES was successful in securing these commitments, and in prompting the formation of a multi-agency taskforce for the 2019-20 budget to increase interdepartmental coordination. One of the key findings of the programme was the scope for making existing budgets more gender responsive, without the allocation of additional funds.¹⁶¹

In Enugu State, Nigeria, the Society for the Improvement of Rural People successfully advocated for the inclusion of a \$6.8 million budget allocation in the 2020 State budget, specifically allocated to support for adolescent girls across a number of different sectors.¹⁶² These pilot programmes all demonstrate the potential for GRB engagement as an entry point for strengthening the overall policy environment around ending child marriage.

152. Rivero, E., Palma, J., 2017, *Informe sobre uniones tempranas en México: Resumen ejecutivo*, INSAD: Mexico City, p.6.

153. Bellés-Obrero, C., Lombardi, M., 2020, op. cit., p.3.

154. Htun, M., Jensionsius, F., 2020, “*Fighting violence against women: Laws, norms and challenges ahead*”, *Daedalus*, 149:1; p.152.

155. Women Power Connect and the Socio-Legal Information Centre, 2022, *The status of child marriage in India: A guide for NGOs and CSOs on using the law to end child marriage in India*, *Girls Not Brides*.

156. Mehra, M., Maheshwari, S., 2021, “*Child marriage prosecutions in India: Case law analysis of actors, motives and outcomes 2008-2017*”, *Partners for Law in Development*, 3, p.57.

157. Equality Now, 2020, *Press Release: Victory for girls in Sierra Leone as the government lifts the ban that prohibits pregnant schoolgirls from attending school*.

158. Hall, T., 2022, “*Tanzania allows teenage mothers to be back in school*”, *Human Rights Watch*.

159. UNICEF, 2020e, op. cit., p.2.

160. *Girls Not Brides*, 2020, *Civil society and budget advocacy to end child marriage: Lessons learned from six pilot projects*, p.27.

161. *Girls Not Brides*, 2020, op. cit., p.22.

162. *Ibid.*, p.18.

There are approaches and tools for GRB that may hold potential for adaptation and simple application in different contexts. The Observatorio de Mortalidad Materna en Mexico (OMM)'s Public Policy Monitoring Model, for example, is a simple, low-cost, replicable methodology based around the steps of defining and documenting the policy or programme, gathering and analysing relevant data, and engaging in public policy advocacy.¹⁶³

A 2022 UN Women Toolkit for GRB provides practical guidance on engaging political actors in a GRB process, noting the following institutional factors as being critical: a national gender equality strategy; gender budget statements; government-wide GRB support; strong commitments to public financial management; and a culture of partnership and collaboration across key political and non-political actors.¹⁶⁴ A 2022 toolkit for disability-inclusive education budgeting, developed by ActionAid, Light for the World, and the Global Campaign for Education, is discussed in the section on intersectionality and inclusion on p. 23.

Key takeaways:

- **While there is a link between minimum age of marriage laws and reduced prevalence, laws should only be considered as one part of a holistic response that includes other thematic, awareness-raising or norms-based elements.** Without this, legislation-focused interventions may risk pushing the practice underground in contexts where the acceptability of cohabitation is high or enforcement is limited or inconsistent.
- **Where laws do exist, girls are often unaware of or unable to make use of them.** More could be done to build girls' and adolescents' and their allies' understanding of how to use the law to prevent and respond to child marriage (in a way that does not put girls at risk), both in terms of responding to individual instances or threats of child marriage, and advocating for greater enforcement overall.
- **Directly engaging on child marriage laws may not be the most effective way to protect and promote girls' and adolescents' rights;** engagement on issues such as girls' rights to education may have a greater indirect impact, and come with less risk of causing harm to girls.
- **Civil society actors can play an influential role in gender-responsive budgeting processes,** using easily adapted tools and relatively small levels of funding. Often this may involve identifying "quick wins", including finding opportunities to improve GRB without any additional funding.

163. Ibid., p.33.

164. Deveaux, K., Dubrow, G., 2022, *Action Kit: Engaging parliaments in gender-responsive budgeting*, UN Women, pp.6-7.



PICTURED: A child poses near a graffiti at the secondary school in Monapo district, Mozambique, 2022. The artwork was created to raise awareness of the impacts of child marriage and how to report cases (Child Helpline 116). Photo: ©UNICEF/UN0765148/Pedro

4. Cross-cutting and contextual themes

Intersectionality and inclusion

What we know:

- **Commitment to “leaving no one behind” is central to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and SDGs**, yet there are gaps in our knowledge around the risk factors, situations of vulnerability and marginalisation, and needs of certain children and adolescents.
- **It is unclear whether interventions are reaching the most marginalised;**¹⁶⁵ filling these gaps in our collective knowledge is therefore absolutely critical if we are to achieve SDG 5.3.
- **We lack data and evidence to know whether children and adolescents with disabilities are more or less at risk of child marriage compared to children without disabilities.**¹⁶⁶ While research suggests the drivers of child marriage are similar for both, we also know children with disabilities typically experience those drivers more acutely due to negative attitudes and stigma.
- **Our understanding of the risk factors facing LGBTQIA+ children and adolescents is virtually non-existent.**

Emerging evidence:

A 2020 evidence review of child marriage and disability found only cursory mentions of disability in programme evaluations. Available datasets on child marriage do not disaggregate data by disability, and data on forced marriage of people with disabilities does not always differentiate data by age.¹⁶⁷ What data we do have is typically several years old. While we lack information on the experiences of married girls and adolescents with disabilities, they are almost certainly at particular risk of violence and coercion once married.

165. *Girls Not Brides*, 2021a, op. cit., p.10.

166. Meaney-Davis, J., Lee, H., Andrae, K., 2020, op. cit., p.1.

167. *Ibid.*, p.4.

Women with disabilities are two- to four-times more likely to experience intimate partner violence (IPV) than women without disabilities, with the severity of the violence increasing with the severity of the disability;¹⁶⁸ meanwhile, girls who marry before age 15 are nearly 50% more likely to experience IPV.¹⁶⁹ Indeed, girls and women with disabilities are at such heightened risk of IPV that a 2020 pooled analysis of seven IPV prevention studies across Africa and Asia concluded that any disability programming should actively seek to address their risk of IPV, regardless of the programme's primary focus area.¹⁷⁰

While more evidence is needed on the links between disability and child marriage, lessons can be learnt from disability programming in relation to other relevant issues and sectors. A 2020 analysis of four IPV prevention programmes in Ghana, Rwanda, Tajikistan and South Africa – all implemented and evaluated as part of the What Works to Prevent Violence against Women and Girls Global Programme – explored the perspectives of women and men with disabilities who were involved in these programmes. Often these participants found the programmes mirrored the barriers they faced in everyday life, including overt and internalised stigma, discrimination and inaccessibility.

A positive example of inclusion was found on the Rwandan *Indashyirwa* programme, where the team partnered with the National Council of Persons with Disabilities (NCPD) to train all programme staff on disability inclusion; an adapted version of this training was then delivered by the Rwanda Women's Network to all programme community activists, women's safe space facilitators, and 280 community members with disabilities. The team also developed inclusive communication materials illustrating the intersections of gender, disability and violence, in collaboration with the NCPD, and used these to facilitate community activism and challenge stigma.

The evaluation overall found, more than focusing on functional impairments, programmes need to challenge the ableist gender norms and context-specific manifestations of disability-related stigma. Collaboration with local people with disabilities and their organisations at every level was found to be critical, as was the recruitment of people with disabilities into implementing roles – particularly high-profile ones.¹⁷¹

Useful lessons and tools exist to support advocacy and programming efforts to build disability inclusion into national policy, budgeting and planning processes. The Gender, Inclusion, Power and Politics toolkit, published in 2021 as part of the "Evidence and Collaboration for Inclusive Development Programme", can be used in development and humanitarian settings to support the design and implementation of intersectional, transformational programmes, through combining gender equality and social inclusion analysis with traditional political economy analysis.¹⁷²

ActionAid's "4S Education Financing Framework" offers a guide to gender-responsive education budget analysis, tracking and advocacy based on four key principles: share (of budget spent on inclusive education); size (of budget, raised through progressive tax policies); sensitivity (of budget, with a focus on equity in public expenditure; and public scrutiny (to ensure timely, as-promised delivery of funds).¹⁷³

Useful insights were generated through ActionAid, Education International and Light for the World's 2019-20 assessment of government capacity to deliver disability-inclusive education in Ethiopia, Malawi, Mozambique, Nigeria and Tanzania. These included the recognition that inclusive education policies that are seen as donor driven tend to be aspirational and vague, often missing costing or adequate resourcing;¹⁷⁴ in-service, consistent, pedagogical teacher recruitment, training and follow-up is critical, yet was not included in any country's inclusive education budgeting;¹⁷⁵ all countries struggled to gather robust data on children with disabilities; and, when commitments to inclusive education are mirrored in national education sector plans – as in Ethiopia and Tanzania – there seems to be greater purchase and traction in the sector.¹⁷⁶

ActionAid, Light for the World, and the Global Campaign for Education released a toolkit for gender-responsive and disability-inclusive education budgeting in 2022, which builds on learning from the 2020 programme to provide a detail guide for how to conceptualise and operationalise disability-inclusive budgeting.¹⁷⁷

What very limited evidence we have around the relationship between LGBTQIA+ adolescents and child marriage suggests marriage may be used as a means of escaping violence and exclusion at home in some contexts. A 2022 small-scale study by the Colesdom-Comunidad de Lesbianas Inclusivas Dominicanas, in the Dominican Republic, looked at the

168. Dunkle, K., Ven der Heijden, et al., 2018, *Disability and violence against women and girls: Emerging evidence from the What Works to Prevent Violence Against Women and Girls Global Programme*, What Works, p.1.

169. *Girls Not Brides*, n.d., *Gender-based violence and child marriage*, accessed November 2022.

170. Chirwa, E., Jewkes, R. et al., 2020, "*Intimate partner violence among women with and without disabilities: a pooled analysis of baseline data from seven violence-prevention programmes*", *BMJ Global Health*, 5:11, p.1.

171. Stern, E., Van der Heijden, I., Dunkle, K., 2020, "*How people with disabilities experience programs to prevent intimate partner violence across found countries*", *Evaluation and Program Planning*, 79; pp.7-8.

172. Christian Aid and Social Development Direct, 2021, *Gender, inclusion, power and politics (GIPP) analysis toolkit*.

173. Cameron, C., Chiya, C. et al, 2021, *The bedrock of inclusion: Why investing in the education workforce is critical to the delivery of SDG4*, ActionAid, p.13.

174. *Ibid.*, p.16.

175. *Ibid.*, p.24.

176. *Ibid.*, p.16.

177. Van der Hor, C., Herrier, K., Ferris, D., 2022, *Gender-responsive and disability-inclusive education budgeting*, ActionAid, Global Campaign for Education, Light for the World, pp.77-107.

motivating factors behind gender non-conforming individuals marrying under the age of 18. The study revealed a link between these individuals' experiences of violence and exclusion, and the desire to gain economic independence and escape violence and abuse in their natal home – including violence to “correct” their sexual orientation.¹⁷⁸

The study recommended investment in promoting, supporting and accompanying LGBTQIA+ adolescents to continue their education, alongside the provision of culturally appropriate education sessions to address and shift conscious and unconscious stigma around LGBTQIA+ individuals. Tools for addressing deeply-held stigma around gender- and sexuality-non-conformity include the Looking In, Looking Out, approach, which can be used with programme teams, community members and national decision-makers.¹⁷⁹ As with disability inclusion, working with and supporting the work of by-and-for LGBTQIA+ organisations may be an effective means of building meaningful inclusion.

Key takeaways:

- **While more evidence is needed to understand how certain marginalised and minoritized groups experience (the risk of) child marriage, there are also lessons that can be learnt from other relevant programming** in terms of how to ensure their safe and meaningful inclusion in programming.
- **Working alongside and learning from disabled people's organisations and other by-and-for organisations is an important and effective way of ensuring activities are designed and implemented in a genuinely inclusive manner.**
- **Stigma, discrimination and bias can exist within implementing teams, as well as communities,** and this needs to be addressed to ensure marginalised groups are not faced with the same stigma they experience in everyday life.

Climate change, conflict and crises

What we know:

- **Available evidence demonstrates a positive association between extreme weather patterns and early marriage.**
- **The relationship between climate change and child marriage is still in the early days of exploration;** we know very little about most geographies, how climate emergencies will differ or be similar to conflict-driven emergencies, or about how best to address child marriage in the context of climate change.
- **Nine out of ten countries with the highest rates of child marriage are considered fragile, but the link between fragility and child marriage is not fully understood.**¹⁸⁰

Emerging evidence:

There is a small but growing evidence base showing that climate change may be linked to increases in child marriage.

A 2022 study of evidence on the impact of extreme weather events and their impact on GBV in Bangladesh highlights how girls and women from ages 11 to 23 are at an increased risk of marrying either the year of or year after moderate to severe heat waves, where the heat wave lasted 15 days or more. The increase at 15 days is severe: nearly one in four girls and women would marry in years with extreme heatwaves, compared to 13% in years with moderate or no heatwaves.¹⁸¹ In years with extreme heat waves approaching 30 days, girls aged 11 to 14 were shown to be twice as likely to marry, while adolescent girls aged 15 to 17 were over 30% more likely to marry.¹⁸²

Separate research from Bangladesh, published in 2020 and drawing on data from 1989 to 2013, shows a similar correlation in instances of cyclones and flooding, with marriage mentioned as a coping strategy to minimise economic strain and the risk to girls of sexual assault (and related reputational damage to girls and families).¹⁸³ There is also evidence of climate change contributing to increases in child marriage as a result of reduced school attendance. The 2022 drought in the Horn of Africa tripled the number of children at risk of dropping out of school across Ethiopia, Kenya and Somalia in a period of just three months;¹⁸⁴ this has already led to a rapid increase in the number of girls being forced into marriage and to undergo FGM/C.¹⁸⁵

178. Colesdom-Comunidad de Lesbianas Inclusivas Dominicanas, 2022, “I am all of those girls who got kicked out of their house: relation among early departures of children and adolescents and the disrespect of their caregivers in the face of transgressions of traditional gender roles in the Dominican Republic”; accessed via: <https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/learning-resources/child-marriage-research-action-network/crank-quarterly-research-meetings/crank-research-meeting-supporting-marginalised-girls/>.

179. Positive Vibes, n.d., *Looking in, looking out*.

180. Hunersen, K., Robinson, W., Krishnapalan, N. et al., 2020, *Child marriage in humanitarian settings in the Arab States Region: Study results from Djibouti, Egypt, Kurdistan Region of Iraq and Yemen*, UNFPA, UNICEF, Women's Refugee Commission, Johns Hopkins University, p.1.

181. Carrico, A., Donato, K., et al., 2020, op. cit., p. 8.

182. Ibid., p.10.

183. Leigh, J., et al., 2020, op. cit., p.148.

184. *Girls Not Brides*, 2022a, op. cit., p.6.

185. UNICEF, 2022, *Marriage on the rise in Horn of Africa as drought crisis intensifies*.

Climate change is also likely to negatively impact the physical, emotional and economic wellbeing of married girls and adolescents. In Bangladesh, women who marry in years with an extended dry spell typically marry husbands who had less education and were more supportive of domestic violence, potentially because families are looking for faster or less expensive marriages.¹⁸⁶ For girls who are already married, shifts in weather patterns in some contexts have disrupted the means and spaces through which wives could previously negotiate a degree of economic power. A qualitative study of Maasai communities in Kenya conducted in 2021 highlighted how, while women have historically enjoyed a degree of economic autonomy and agency through being assigned an allotment of the family's cow herd, shifts in weather patterns have forced many Maasai communities to sell their livestock, thereby removing a key source of Maasai wives' authority and influence.¹⁸⁷

There is a growing body of evidence on promising practice for delivering flexible, context-based SRH services for adolescent girls in humanitarian settings. A 2021 evidence review highlights examples of promising practice for SRH delivery, including the use of mobile SRH clinics and camps, which typically remain in communities for up to four days and so are able to make contact with more marginalised adolescents. It discusses the provision of free transport to clinics for severe cases following the 2015 Nepal earthquake, and of adolescent-friendly service corners in SRH camps and out-of-hours service provision by healthcare workers targeting out-of-school girls and girls engaged in sex work in Uganda.¹⁸⁸

Preliminary studies also highlight the feasibility of working with community health workers and traditional birth attendants to deliver services in areas with limited access to facility-based post-rape care.¹⁸⁹ Médecins Sans Frontières'S (MSI) "La Famille Ideale" programme was piloted across eight mobile outreach teams in Burkino Faso in 2019-20, using a human-centred design to work with young women and key influencers (including husbands and in-laws) to improve SRH access for adolescent girls. MSI's community-based mobilisers used a suite of participatory tools to encourage support for adolescent rural mothers to access family planning, facilitate community dialogue around issues like girls' education and financial security, and build male support for girls' access to services. MSI teams then delivered a full range of free contraceptive methods at a nearby site. The programme saw a 24% increase in adolescent reach at outreach sites during the pilot.¹⁹⁰

The degree to which displaced communities are (or are not) integrated into existing legal, health and other national systems can have a significant impact on child marriage, and on girls' overall risk factors or wellbeing. In contexts involving high rates of migration and displacement, the relationship between the law and child marriage can become particularly opaque. A 2020 report on child marriage across several Arab Region countries highlights how in Egypt, refugees from Syria have faced long and complex processes for renewing their residency, during which time their children have been unable to enrol in school.

This has placed children and adolescents at greater risk of child marriage which, while illegal in Egypt, often takes place through informal religious ceremonies. This in turn has knock-on effects for children born under these circumstances, who face difficulties obtaining birth certificates and therefore likely challenges in accessing education in the future.¹⁹¹ Interventions that improve access to civil registration, including birth and marriage registration, can be both protective against marriage and supportive to married girls and adolescents, young mothers and their children.¹⁹²

Safe spaces play a key role in girls' protection and empowerment across the Arab States region, with girls and women describing safe spaces as the only place where they feel safe and where they can access the care they need.¹⁹³ In research published in 2021 into the impact of COVID-19 on programming in the region, girls and women unanimously agreed that, second to impacts on case management services, the loss of access to physical safe spaces and related activities was the most negative aspect of the pandemic.¹⁹⁴

Safe spaces played a similarly important role in response to Cyclone Idai in Mozambique, Zimbabwe and Malawi in 2019, where girls and women felt physically and emotionally secure to discuss SRHR and GBV and receive SRH services and supplies.¹⁹⁵ Existing girl-only spaces, established either through other development programming or at schools, community or health centres, may provide existing entry points for introducing CSE and conversations around the risks of and alternatives to child marriage, particularly in humanitarian settings where rapid intervention is both challenging and critical.¹⁹⁶

186. Carrico, A., Donato, K., et al., 2020, op. cit., p.9

187. Esho, T., Komba, E., et al., 2021, "[Intersections between climate change and female genital mutilation among the Maasai of Kajiado County, Kenya](#)", *Journal of Global Health*, 11, p.7.

188. Stark, L. Seff, I., Reis, C., 2021, op. cit., p.215.

189. Ibid.

190. MSI Reproductive Choices, 2022, [Evidence and insights: Version 2](#), p.6.

191. Hunersen, K., Robinson, W., Krishnapalan, N., et al., 2020, op. cit., p.9.

192. Ibid., p.27.

193. UNFPA, 2021, op. cit., p.8.

194. Ibid., p.13.

195. UNFPA-UNICEF Global Programme to End Child Marriage, 2020b, op. cit., p.3.

196. Ibid., p.6.

It is worth noting that no evaluations of humanitarian safe spaces show evidence that they are effective in reducing girls' and women's experience of violence,¹⁹⁷ and that rigorous evaluations of safe space and empowerment programmes in humanitarian settings are limited overall.

In addition to girls-only empowerment programming, evidence gathered by Plan from the Philippines in 2022 highlights how wider communities have the potential to serve as a support to adolescent girls, including married girls. Both adolescent and adult community members who engaged in the research process expressed the desire for increased understanding of and empathy for the realities of married life. Participants suggested holding workshops with religious and community leaders, to promote a common understanding of the negative aspects of child marriage.¹⁹⁸ Given the huge capacity of community and religious leaders to influence parents' and community norms in this setting, such interventions have potential to enlist such figures as agents of change – something several individual leaders expressed an interest in taking on within their communities.

Engaging with family-level norms around marriage and gender equality more broadly is likely even more critical in humanitarian settings, where stress and insecurity can exacerbate harmful behaviours – as research conducted with displaced communities in Uganda and Jordan in 2021 highlights, violence within the home is as real a threat to increased child marriage as violence caused by conflict and displacement, even though the latter has received more focus in previous research.¹⁹⁹

Research conducted in the Philippines highlights how, on the one hand, some underlying risks of child marriage are heightened for displaced girls and adolescents, while on the other, new drivers are likely to emerge as a result of instability. In such settings, addressing “new” drivers such as food insecurity is unlikely to shift deeply rooted social norms – however, straightforward actions such as modifying humanitarian assistance to disincentivize families from seeking to marry their daughters may reduce child marriage risks.²⁰⁰

This highlights the need to build understanding and awareness of the risks of child marriage across all aspects of humanitarian response.²⁰¹ Indeed, there is evidence that failure to understand potential drivers of child marriage in humanitarian settings may lead to responses increasing marriage rates. Evidence from Cox's Bazar in Bangladesh in 2020 found that the camp policy of distributing aid according to an average household size of five people led some families to use child marriage as a strategy for seeking additional food aid.²⁰²

Research conducted in refugee settlements in Uganda and Jordan in 2021 highlights how addressing barriers to education for girls in humanitarian settings is both a priority for displaced girls and adolescents and a likely critical protector against the heightened risk of child marriage in these settings. Across the 280 married and unmarried girls aged 10-17 and 67 caregivers who were involved in the study, education was cited as the highest priority solution to prevent and respond to child marriage in their communities. Practical barriers to enrolling and keeping girls in school included the cost of school fees, uniforms and material; distance to schools; and protection concerns. Providing girls and their caregivers with cash assistance to overcome some of these barriers was cited as a possible solution for promoting girls' continued education in these settings.²⁰³

Increasing use of social media and the proliferation of mobile phones amongst adolescents presents both a threat and an opportunity with regards to child marriage. Research conducted by Plan in Zimbabwe highlights how both adolescents and parents cited increased use of mobile phones – particularly during COVID-19 – as driving rates of child marriage, as adolescents were able to freely communicate without parental oversight.²⁰⁴ Research conducted in the Philippines highlighted a similar suspicion of mobile phones amongst parents.²⁰⁵

Despite these concerns, however, the role of mobile phones in facilitating child marriage did not come up in adolescent girls' stories in the Zimbabwe research, and phones were also noted as being an asset in the Philippines – particularly as a means of accessing information for schoolwork and SRHR information during COVID-19 lockdowns. In a survey of *Girls Not Brides* member organisations conducted in April 2020, respondents also highlighted the use of mobile phones – and particularly messaging applications like WhatsApp – to share information and raise alerts of GBV and child marriage.²⁰⁶

197. Stark, L. Seff, I., Reis, C., 2021, op. cit., p.215.

198. Harris, A., Gambir, K., 2022, [Our Voices, our future: Understanding risks and adaptive capacities to prevent and respond to child marriage in the Bansamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao \(BARMM\)](#), Plan International, Women's Refugee Commission, Transforming Fragilities, p.60.

199. Freccero, J., Taylor, A., 2021, op. cit., p.48.

200. Harris, A., Gambir, K., 2022, op. cit., p.59.

201. UNFPA-UNICEF Global Programme to End Child Marriage, 2020b, op. cit., p.1.

202. Leigh, J. et al., 2020, op. cit., p.149.

203. Freccero, J., Taylor, A., 2021, op. cit., p.50.

204. Gambir, K., Blessing, M., Lofthouse, C., 2022, [Our voices, our future: Understanding child marriage in food-insecure communities in Chiredzi District, Zimbabwe](#), Plan International, Women's Refugee Commission, The Cynefin Co, p.45.

205. Harris, A., Gambir, K., 2022, op. cit., p.61.

206. *Girls Not Brides*, 2021, [COVID-19 and child marriage: A year on](#).

Further research is likely needed to understand this gap between perceived and actual risk. Given the ubiquity of mobile phones, there is an opportunity to deliver information and resources via mobile in humanitarian settings where information sharing may otherwise be challenging. There is also an opportunity to incorporate sessions on online and social media safety and respectful engagement in other education or safe space programming interventions.

Key takeaways:

- **More evidence is needed on the relationship between climate change and child marriage**, prioritising countries that face the greatest threats from or are the most vulnerable to climate change. This includes the need to understand if and how different forms and durations of extreme weather differ in their impact and required response. There may also be benefit in investigating what lessons we can learn from other humanitarian settings for addressing gender unequal norms and practices and supporting adolescent girls, and into how climate-driven crises differ from conflict-related crises.
- **There is a growing body of positive evidence on flexible, creative approaches to providing SRH services to adolescent girls in humanitarian settings.** Understanding girls' constraints is critical to designing effective interventions – ideally girls, and married girls in particular – would be involved in the design of such interventions.
- **Interventions that clarify local legal, health and other registration systems, and that provide accompaniment in navigating those processes, may help to both prevent child marriage and support married girls and their children.**
- **Humanitarian actors may not be able to shift deeply-held social norms through immediate response efforts, but they can still play a critical role in preventing child marriage.** Supporting humanitarian teams across different response areas to understand, identify and respond to the risks around child marriage (including both prevention and the risks facing married girls) is critical to ensuring a Do No Harm approach is followed.
- **Specific attention should be paid to efforts to support girls to enrol and remain in school**, recognising that providing cash support to girls and their caregivers to overcome financial barriers to accessing education may be important protections against the risk of child marriage.



PICTURED: Fatouma, 15, in Tahoua, Niger, where she lives with her mother and grandmother, 2022. Her father wanted her to marry when she was 12, and burnt her birth certificate when her mother resisted. “I do want to get married one day, but after school and with a boy I choose myself. My dream is to become a doctor,” she says. Photo: © UNICEF/UN0688743/Dejongh

5. Recommendations

Research

- **Increase focus on assessing the effectiveness of interventions in development and humanitarian settings.** Collaborate with donors and researchers to support the design, monitoring and evaluation (including after programme closure) of child marriage interventions. This could include a focus on smaller-scale pilots in areas where there is promising but nascent evidence of impact; on adaptations of promising programmes and frameworks in different contexts; on efforts to scale up promising interventions; and of larger-scale or state-run interventions.
- **Situate all research and evaluations alongside what we already know, so it is clear how the evidence base is being advanced,** drawing on the questions for implementation research set out in the UNFPA-UNICEF Global Programme Phase II Research Strategy.²⁰⁷
- **Ensure research builds on the UNFPA-UNICEF Global Programme Research Strategy methodological priorities,** including use of longer evaluation frameworks, cohort analysis and a wider range of quantitative and qualitative data sources; investment in participatory action research to engage adolescents; development of specific definitions of target population groups; clearer definitions of scale; and consideration for how to address research challenges in humanitarian settings.²⁰⁸

Specific gaps in our knowledge that would benefit from further research (and programming) include:

- **Climate change,** and how this influences likelihood, risks and trends around child marriage in the short and medium term; how climate-driven emergencies and the needs of (married) girls and adolescents are similar/different to and in conflict-driven crises.
- **Evaluations of child marriage prevention and response interventions in humanitarian contexts,** including the potential for education-linked cash transfers, safe space and empowerment programming, and flexible SRH service delivery.

207. UNFPA-UNICEF Global Programme to End Child Marriage, 2021, [Research strategy for Phase II: UNFPA-UNICEF Global Programme to End Child Marriage](#), p.5.
208. Ibid., p.6

- **The relationship between individual and collective norms and how and why interventions effective at shifting norms on one level may not be effective on another**, drawing on learning from other research programmes on taking social norms programming to scale, including the Community for Understanding Scale (CUSP),²⁰⁹ What Works II programme, Spotlight Initiative,²¹⁰ and the Social Norms Learning Collaborative.²¹¹
- **The opportunities and potential challenges around equitably engaging women in green growth**, eco-tourism, or other climate-driven or related industries.
- **Technology, including mobile phones and social media, as a facilitator of and protector against child marriage**, including in humanitarian settings.
- **How child marriage impacts children and adolescents with disabilities and LGBTQIA+ individuals**, and what we can learn from other sectors (e.g., VAWG prevention and response) in relation to the specific risks these groups may face and to their safe and meaningful inclusion in programming.
- Whether the inclusion of an **education component should be considered a necessary part of multicomponent programming**; and, whether **empowerment programmes should necessarily be paired with a cash transfer or economic support** component of some kind.
- The **merits or challenges of implementing programmes in high prevalence areas versus areas where child marriage prevalence is already declining**.²¹²
- The **significance of cash transfer recipients with regards to age, gender, and the age and gender of children** in the household, particularly focusing on whether female-headed households are more or less likely to be supportive of delaying marriage in different contexts.

Programming

- **Include demand- and supply-side components as core elements in child marriage programming**, recognising the limitations of delivering one without the other across all thematic areas.
- **Include community engagement (including with boys and men, and traditional and religious leaders) and consultation with adolescent girls as a core element of programming**. Where possible, work with and through existing systems and structures, including school management committees, parent-teacher associations and healthcare clinics, and support individuals within these systems to engage with efforts to reduce the risks facing girls.
- **Engage women as programme staff and service providers, including in leadership roles and roles where their presence may increase girls' engagement** – for example, community health workers – recognising the potential transformative benefits of female role models for adolescent girls. Identify opportunities to employ older or married girls in these roles where possible.
- **Develop communication strategies for community members to demonstrate positive attitudes towards adolescent girls, building in complexity and sensitivity over time** – for example, from concepts of power, to dialogue on girls' sexuality. Discomfort with sensitive topics may exist amongst programme teams, implementing partners, community members and girls themselves, and must be addressed to facilitate effective and transformative programming.
- **Build inclusivity and accessibility into the fabric of programming** – including around information sharing, physical/virtual activities, team composition and training – to ensure safe participation for all and that programmes do not mirror everyday stigma and discrimination faced by marginalised groups. Take opportunities to meaningfully collaborate with and amplify the expertise of by-and-for organisations to support inclusive design and implementation, and collect appropriately disaggregated data, for example using the Washington Group Questions.
- **Engage boys and men as key stakeholders and potential allies or blockers in the movement end child marriage, but do not decentre girls' safety or voice**. Contextual analysis and existing norms change frameworks can help to identify where the exclusion of boys and men may negatively impact their own wellbeing or that of girls and women.
- **Build risk assessments around child marriage into standard humanitarian assessments and strategies**, to support Do No Harm commitments and mitigate “surface level” drivers of child marriage. Identify opportunities to embed these into existing tools as a strategy for building understanding and accountability across humanitarian clusters.

209. Raising Voices, n.d., *Community understanding scaling processes (CUSP)*.

210. *Spotlight Initiative* website, accessed November 2022.

211. *Align Platform* website, accessed November 2022.

212. Melnikas, A., Saul, G. et al., 2021, op. cit, p.50.

- **View programmes as an opportunity to build the evidence base on what interventions work to prevent and respond to child marriage.** Work with donors and research institutes to ensure programmes are based on available evidence (contextual and intervention-based) and contribute to the evidence base through rigorous learning and evaluation. Programmes would ideally include a post-completion evaluation, to assess sustainability.

Funding

- **Fund high quality monitoring, evaluation and learning components within child marriage programmes, and independent research, evaluations and syntheses to build the evidence base on what interventions work in what settings,** including post-closure evaluations, long-term studies, and the inclusive dissemination of research findings.
- **Support pilots that test or adapt promising interventions** around child marriage, allowing for the testing of different approaches and with room for a degree of failure. These might include:
 - Testing approaches to shifting norms around girls' sexuality
 - Supporting civil society organisations to engage in gender-responsive budgeting processes
 - Piloting flexible approaches to SRH and other service delivery in humanitarian settings
 - Safe space programming plus economic rights programming for married girls
- **Fund research to help fill key knowledge gaps around issues such as child marriage and climate change, and girls with disabilities, and LGBTQIA+ children and adolescents.**
- **Fund large-scale, multi-year interventions testing different approaches to scale-up and achieving transformative change** – for example, scaled-up approaches to social norms change, or investigating the role of education within multicomponent programmes. Transformative programming takes time and evidence of progress is not always immediately obvious.
- **Increase funding allocations to WROs and feminist movements, based on recent guidance on appropriate funding modalities** – ensure funding is reliable, flexible, long-term, allows for core and administrative expenditure, respects and elevates the expertise and agency of recipient organisations, and moves away from solely tying funds to specific activities and projects.
- **Require potential funding recipients to demonstrate commitment to centring girls' voices and to gender equitable attitudes as part of a transformative approach to funding allocation.** Assess capacity to reflect this commitment in programming and organisational culture.
- **Fund humanitarian programming with a specific focus on preventing and responding to child marriage and broader targets around gender-transformative programming,** recognising the scale and therefore potential of humanitarian funding to reduce child marriage. Draw on girl-centred design principles to respond to girls' and carers' self-identified needs, including around financial and logistical barriers to school attendance.

Policy and advocacy

- **Advocate for the inclusion of child marriage risk and response awareness across all humanitarian assessments and strategies,** including core Inter-Agency Standing Committee and cluster guidance documents, to support humanitarian actors to Do No Harm and capitalise on "quick wins" opportunities to prevent marriage and respond to married girls' needs that are likely to be present in humanitarian settings.
- **Advocate for national governments to implement child marriage components within large-scale interventions** – for example, a norms-focused component within a broader social protection programme. Prioritise governments that have demonstrated appetite for engaging in child marriage programming, and where existing frameworks or legislation support change.
- **Advocate for the reform of national and global systems that perpetuate women and girls' economic precarity,** and particularly around the macroeconomic policies that push women into insecure, low-paid jobs.
- **Test and adapt advocacy and campaigning frameworks that encourage government leadership on promoting gender equality** – through gender-sensitive budgeting, or gender-transformative policymaking. Learn from and amplify the expertise of local WROs and feminist movements in pushing for more inclusive legislation budgeting, particularly on drawing connections between girls' education, livelihood opportunities and protections for women in the world of work.
- **Look for opportunities to embed adolescent girls' and women's empowerment and gender-transformative approaches into emerging priority/work areas,** particularly around green growth, eco-tourism or renewable energies, when engaging with national governments and donors.

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January 2023

“This review looks at evidence gathered between 2020 and 2022 on proven and promising interventions to prevent child marriage and support girls who are – or have been – married, and makes suggestions for further research, programming and policy.”

The Child Marriage Research to Action Network (the CRANK) is a joint initiative of *Girls Not Brides: The Global Partnership to End Child Marriage* and the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) - United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) Global Programme to End Child Marriage.