Learning from the latest evidence:

Efforts to address child marriage and support married girls

GIRLS NOT BRIDES
The Global Partnership to End Child Marriage

UNFPA

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PICTURED: Young women participate in a roadshow in Ouahigouya, Burkina Faso in 2021. The road show brought together young people, adolescents, media, artists, influencers and authorities to increase engagement, participation and skills development. Photo: ©UNICEF/UN0569346/Dejongh

Thematic brief covering day one of the CRANK global research convening

The Child Marriage Research to Action Network (the CRANK) held its first online global research convening in December 2022. We brought together researchers, practitioners, advocates and funders from around the world to strengthen coordination and action to end child marriage.

On this day, speakers and participants shared:

- Reflections on the existing evidence and direction of child marriage research since 2020.

- Key takeaways from the latest evidence base across different thematic areas, including girls, families and communities; services and systems; advocacy and accountability; and conflict and crisis.

- Evidence and programmatic experiences, informing reflections on what works and what does not work.

- Priority areas to accelerate work to end child marriage.

This brief includes the key takeaways from the day, followed by more details on the content covered by each speaker, summarised by the CRANK. All the resources – recordings, presentations, notes and key takeaways – from Day one of the CRANK's global research convening are available on the **web page**.

Key takeaways:

- **The field is moving quickly, and there is a lot of evidence to inform practice.** For a like the CRANK help share information on useful studies, but more support for practitioners to translate evidence into practice is needed.

- **Laws have an important role to play but need to be gender-transformative and implemented alongside broader work to transform social norms.** Laws establish an aspiration for society, and create a platform for accountability, resource flows and national discussion that can advance girls' rights. However, legal advocacy, implementation and enforcement needs to be context-specific, address gender inequality and transform social norms. Without this broader work, legal reform leads to the informalisation of child marriage and fails to address the systems that reinforce norms that discriminate against girls and adolescents.

- **We need to continue work on transforming discriminatory social norms, particularly for underserved populations, informed by better contextual understanding of privilege and power.** This includes support for married, separated, widowed and divorced girls, and more work with boys and men, traditional and religious leaders, and youth networks.

- **Solutions need to be holistic, working across sectors and at scale, because everything is interconnected.** Education, livelihoods, sexual and reproductive health and rights, and employment are important areas of focus in building the economic and political agency of girls and catalysing norms change at scale.

- **There is a lack of evidence in humanitarian settings,** but the blurring between humanitarian, development and peacebuilding contexts could be a starting point for a more holistic response.

Setting the scene: The CRANK, reflections on direction of research and research since the Geneva meeting

World Health Organization (WHO) – Dr. Venkatraman Chandra-Mouli

Speaker profile:

Chandra leads the work on adolescent sexual and reproductive health (ASRH) in the Department of Reproductive Health and Research at the WHO. He is tasked with building the epidemiological and evidence base for ASRH, and with helping countries translate this data and evidence into action through well-designed and well-managed policies and programmes. Chandra's experience in this field is global in scope and spans 30 years.

Chandra spoke about the evolution of the child marriage research field three years after the meeting arranged by *Girls Not Brides: The Global Partnership to End Child Marriage*, United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the World Health Organisation (WHO) in Geneva in 2019.[1]

Reflections:

- **The worst-case scenario predictions around the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic have not come true,** but there have been negative effects which need to be addressed.

- **More and better data is needed to serve the regions and populations who have been overlooked in existing research.** There is greater awareness that progress is uneven between and within regions, countries and communities, and of the importance of context. Research needs to pay greater attention to the most marginalised populations, including married adolescents and young women in humanitarian and emergency situations. Prospective studies on effective prevention and mitigation are needed, as are rigorous research and programme evaluations that can influence implementation.

- **Research and evaluations need to employ both qualitative and quantitative methods.** Approved methods for rigorous research need to be broadened, especially in humanitarian contexts. Research and evaluations should also include learnings from case studies from different countries and contexts to better inform evidence and learnings.

- **Stronger commitments to evidence synthesis and sharing are needed.** The CRANK global research convening is a good example of this commitment.

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[1]*Girls Not Brides,* UNFPA, UNICEF and WHO, 2020, *Advancing the evidence base on strategies to end child marriage and support married girls: Meeting report.*

- **Research and evidence need to be applied to large-scale, multi-level programming, and quality in child marriage programming needs to be assured.** There are more links being made with – for example – the provision of comprehensive sexuality education, contraception and social protection.

Presentation of key learnings from the CRANK Evidence Review 2020 to 2022

Girls Not Brides – Jean Casey, Research and Humanitarian Manager, and Arwyn Finnie, Senior Data, Evidence and Policy Officer

In September 2022, the CRANK commissioned an evidence review looking at child marriage interventions and research from 2020 to 2022.[2] It covers proven and promising interventions to prevent child marriage and support girls who are married, divorced, separated or widowed, and/or are young mothers. It presents emerging evidence across thematic areas, highlighting the strengths and weaknesses of different approaches, and outlining evidence gaps.

Reflections:

Education

- **Education is a consistent protective factor against child marriage.** Girls who leave school early are significantly more likely to marry early. The pandemic has increased early school leaving, putting more girls at risk of marriage.

- **There is increasing evidence that girls' education plays a key role in the success of multicomponent interventions.** More than Brides Alliance's programme reduced child marriage by 69% in India, in part due to its success in increasing girls' education.[3] Girls' education can also have a positive impact on other pathways for change when part of a multicomponent approach – it may even be a non-negotiable factor in successful programming. For example, it can increase health-seeking behaviour and contraceptive use.[4]

Livelihoods

- **Interventions that reduce economic strain on households can delay marriage,** as poverty is a key driver of child marriage. Marrying early significantly reduces a woman's access to paid employment and average earnings over her lifetime.

- **Large-scale social protection programmes can be effective in delaying marriage, but may be more effective if they engage with underlying social norms.**[5] Pairing social protection with efforts to shift restrictive norms around gender roles can have a transformative, long-term effect.

- **Favourable job markets alongside provision of life skills, training and education can be effective in delaying child marriage.**

Sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR)

- **Married girls, and girls who are pregnant or mothers, have unique needs that health care and social service systems are typically not well set up to meet.**

- **Efforts to improve adolescents' SRHR must combine demand- and supply-side interventions.**

- **Programmes that apply a life-stage and socio-ecological lens to SRH programmes for young first-time mothers can have outcomes that go beyond health,** such as improving couple communication, gender equitable attitudes and wellbeing.

Laws and policies

- **Loopholes, traditional alternatives and dispensations such as marriage with parental consent all continue to allow girls to marry below the legal age,** estimated to account for around 7.5 million girls marrying before the age of 18 each year.[6]

- **Countries that consistently set 18 as the legal minimum age of marriage, for marriage with parental consent, and for age of sexual consent, have child marriage prevelance 40% lower than countries where these laws contradict one another.**[7] More could be done to build girls' and their allies' understanding of how to use the law to prevent and respond to child marriage.

[2]*Girls Not Brides,* UNFPA-UNICEF Global Programme to End Child Marriage, 2023, *Evidence review: Child marriage interventiions and research from 2020 to 2022.*
[3]Melnikas, A., G., Saul, et al., 2021, "More Than Brides Alliance: Endline evaluation report", Population Council.
[4]Ainul, S., Noor, F., et al, 2021, "Keeping girls in schools to reduce child marriage in rural Bangladesh: Endline assessment", *Population Council.*
[5]UNICEF, 2020, *Impact evaluation of the Integrated Safety Net Programme in the Amhara Region of Ethiopia: Baseline report*, UNICEF Office of Research – Innocenti: Florence.
[6]UNICEF, 2021, *Towards ending child marriage: Global trends and profiles of progress.*
[7]Ibid.

Voice, choice and agency

- **Girls' empowerment programmes can provide an opportunity to better understand girls' own decision-making process and rationale in relation to child marriage.**

- **The effectiveness of empowerment programming may be dependent on context and constraints of girls' backgrounds.** For example, the Adolescent Girls Empowerment Program in Zambia had limited impact in key areas – social and economic barriers and high acceptability of gender-based violence – which an empowerment programme alone could not overcome.[8]

- **Girls' empowerment programmes have the potential to be scalable and sustainable.** Grounding activities in local context, recognising social and economic barriers and supporting girls to access activities is essential.

Shifting norms

- **Deeply-engrained social norms restrict girls' agency and often hinder their access to education, health care and earning opportunities.**

- **Multi-level approaches to shifting individual and collective attitudes and norms can have a significant impact on child marriage prevalence and harmful underlying gender norms.**[9] Engaging boys and men within a whole household or whole community approach is likely important for shifting harmful norms.

Conflict, climate change and crises

- **Child marriage prevalence in contexts that are considered fragile is double the global average and yet rigorous evaluations of child marriage programming in conflict and humanitarian settings are limited.** There is growing evidence on promising practice for delivering flexible, context-based SRH services for adolescent girls in humanitarian settings.[10]

- **Efforts to support girls to enrol and remain in school are critical in crisis settings.** Providing cash support to girls and their caregivers to overcome the barriers to accessing education may be an important protector against the risk of child marriage.

- **More evidence is needed on the relationship between climate change and child marriage.** The countries and contexts that face the greatest threats should be prioritised.

Inclusion and intersectionality

- **Child marriage is most prevalent among girls from the poorest backgrounds, rural areas, with limited access to education and (in some contexts) from minority groups.** It is still unclear whether interventions are reaching the girls who are most at risk.

- **More evidence is needed to understand how certain marginalised and minority groups experience (the risk of) child marriage**, but there are also lessons from other relevant programming in terms of how to ensure their safe and meaningful inclusion in programming. For example, drawing on learning from the violence against women and girls' education or health sectors.

Recommendations:

For funders, programmers and researchers:

- Invest in longer-term (four to five years) programming to prevent child marriage and support married girls.

- Build evaluation into programme design from the beginning.

For researchers:

- Future research should explore areas where the evidence base is most limited, not continue to focus on areas that are already well documented.

- More research is needed on the how the humanitarian-development nexus can best be leveraged to effectively address child marriage.

[8]Austrian, K., Soler-Hampejsek, E., Behrman, J., Digitale, J., Hackonda, N., Bweupe, M., Hewett, P., 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.

[9]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.

[10]MSI Reproductive Choices, 2022, *Evidence and insights: Version 2*.

- Include both demand- and supply-side components as core elements of programming.

- Support pilots that test promising interventions, allowing room for a degree of failure.

- Advocate for the inclusion of child marriage into all humanitarian assessments and strategies.

- Advocate for national governments to integrate child marriage components into large-scale interventions.

Learnings from the evidence base: Girls, families and communities
Population Council – Sajeda Amin

Speaker profile:

Sajeda leads the Population Council's work on livelihoods for adolescent girls and women, where she is a Senior Associate and Girl Center affiliate. Her research focuses on learning about structures and processes that advance the power of girls and women living in the most marginalised communities.

Sajeda highlighted some characteristics that are important in programming, research and evidence across the domains of girls, families and communities. She brought the perspective of Population Council programmes from Bangladesh, Latin America and South Asia.

Reflections:

- **Successful programmes applied a two-pronged approach to child marriage:**

  1. **Engaging with and paying specific attention to the nature of the community.** This considers the way the programme is seen by the community and the way the programme itself – from design to operation – engages with the community.

  2. **Emphasising empowerment as a strategy to expand girls' opportunities.** This is about girls' empowerment that is visible through family and community structures. The focus is on expanding opportunities in ways that transform girls' position within society, and particularly within their household. This can have some immediate outcomes in terms of girls' decision-making power, aspirations and negotiation skills, and also increased community awareness of the negative impacts of child marriage.

- **Engaging with community gatekeepers is key, as is the establishment of safe spaces for girls to meet frequently.** It is important to be aware of the balance of power and the impacts of investing in girls versus in communities, while ensuring girls' engagement and empowerment in addressing child marriage. Targeting cash transfers towards girls is a way to make government commitments to girls' opportunities visible within their communities, which can help to drive change.

- **Placing locally-recruited mentors and trusted adults in the community promotes community support.** This is perhaps the most important component of successful programming.

- **A multi-dimensional approach is more effective in addressing child marriage than single-issue interventions.** Such an approach uses different initiatives – like education and livelihoods – together. Effective programming should elevate girls' status and empowerment, bringing simultaneous effects on their school retention and performance, critical thinking, aspirations, negotiation skills, livelihood skills, income and earning power, and knowledge of child marriage and their rights.

- **An evidence base on empowering approaches that expand opportunities is needed**, as is evidence and awareness of what community and global factors limit girls' options.

- **Focusing on girls while engaging with the community is a key programmatic strategy**. National-level norms change interventions may not translate into community-level change, so the impact on girls should be critically considered throughout.

- **Insecurity – physical and sexual – as a driver of child marriage needs more attention.** This includes understanding how programmes address insecurity and how they can better support community structures. For example, working with mentors to support change for girls' and the community.

Learnings from the evidence base: Services and systems
UNICEF Office of Research and Foresight – Innocenti – Ramya Subrahmanian

Speaker profile:

Ramya is Chief of Child Rights and Protection at UNICEF Innocenti, where she oversees a portfolio of research that includes violence against children and women, gender and adolescent rights, migration and displacement, child labour and harmful practices.

Ramya discussed the increased need for services and systems that meet the unique needs of girls and women, particularly in contexts like conflict situations. She underscored the need for a gender-transformative approach, with examples from Ethiopia.

Reflections:

- **Targeted, gender-transformative interventions are needed to address the failure of services and systems to meet the unique needs of girls and women, including those who are already married and/or in conflict settings.** Challenging the behaviours and norms that maintain systems and services that do not serve girls and women requires time and includes work at the individual and systems level:

  - **Engaging with bureaucrats, implementers and decision-makers who are members of the community**, and whose thinking and behaviour are also influenced by social norms. Capacities are not just limited to training; people need to be engaged in what their capacity needs are, within the services and systems where they work.

  - **Considering the conditions in which individuals work.** This means examining the decision-making processes, normative structures and frameworks and bureaucratic systems that are internal and external to institutions.

- **The power dynamics and normative frameworks that influence child marriage need urgently to be unpacked to understand what contributes to programme success.**

- **More analysis of leaders' political commitment to addressing chid marriage and of how local decision-making influences the governance of services and systems is needed.** This should be done at all levels, from local to national.

- **Children and women's rights advocates need to be engaged in decision- and policymaking around services.** This should improve accountability and access for those who face barriers, including poor treatment by service providers. In addition to service efficiency, service responsiveness and respectful delivery is important.

- **Platforms for sharing research and learnings need to be continuously strengthened.** Beyond practice and research specifically concerned with child marriage, sectors like social protection and violence against children also have relevant learnings.

Accelerate Hub, Universities of Cape Town and Oxford – Dr. Rachel Yates

Speaker profile:

Rachel is the Strategic Advocacy Lead at Accelerate Hub, working to generate evidence that can best support adolescents in Africa in attaining the Sustainable Development Goals. She brings extensive policy and programming expertise in poverty reduction, gender equality and social inclusion, including sector work on HIV prevention and care, with a focus on supporting the evidence and learning agenda on child marriage.

Rachel outlined the importance of effectively investing in programmes that can be delivered at scale if we are to make progress on ending child marriage and shared examples of compelling evidence across education, health and social protection sectors.

Reflections:

- **Young female health workers at community level can have a modelling effect in shifting social norms around opportunities for girls' employment.** The Ethiopia Health Extension Programme had significant spillover effects on child marriage, and working with such health workers is thought to have contributed to this.

- **Positive gender norms are an important factor in improving child marriage and HIV outcomes**, as shown by multiple indicator cluster surveys and children's surveys.

- **Large-scale social protection programmes can generate positive outcomes for girls.** Livelihoods programmes should not compete with gender norms programmes. Instead, work on gender and harmful norms should be integrated into these programmes. Economic drivers and the fact that girls' education can be gender transformative should also be considered.

- **Targeting within sector investments improves child marriage outcomes.** Poverty is a key driver of child marriage. New evidence in Zimbabwe shows that where social protection reaches the poorest families, the impact on reducing child marriage is grater.

Johns Hopkins University, the Bloomberg School of Public Health – Shatha Elnakib

Speaker profile:

Shatha is an Assistant Scientist who has led several multi-country studies on child marriage and female genital mutilation, including a cross-country study of child marriage incidence and drivers in six humanitarian settings. She is currently leading studies on child marriage and early childbearing among displaced populations in Bangladesh and Yemen.

Shatha shared the key findings from a new systematic scoping review of interventions that address the health and social needs of girls who are married.

Reflections:

- **The evidence base for interventions that address the previously overlooked health needs of children and adolescents – like mental health – should be strengthened.** This means testing interventions that fall outside the traditionally stronger programmes addressing sexual and reproductive health and rights. For example, the mental health of children and adolescents – a group with a heightened need for mental and psychological support, especially for girls who have experienced early pregnancy and childbirth – is rarely addressed in existing interventions.

- **Health interventions mainly focus on health outcomes, so social outcomes like decision-making, self-confidence and efficacy are often overlooked.** Health and social interventions similarly rarely address economic empowerment and provision of legal services. Few interventions target girls and adolescents who are divorced, separated or abandoned. These clear evidence gaps need to be addressed.

- **There are very few promising media- and technology-based interventions addressing child rights.** Most interventions are either community-based, faith-based, facility-based or peer-led. There is no critical mass of media-based interventions, but there is evidence that they may be effective at improving a range of child rights outcomes. Given that adolescents are increasingly immersed in the digital world, these opportunities need to be investigated further.

- **There is increased male engagement in girl-centred child marriage programming.** This is a positive development which should be expanded.

- **More evaluations with rigorous designs, large sample sizes and longer-term follow up are needed.** This includes further use of techniques like allocation, concealment, blinding and masking.

Learning from the evidence base: Crisis and humanitarian contexts

King's College London – Dr Aisha Hutchinson

Speaker profile:

Aisha is a lecturer in Social Sciences at King's College London, and teaches child protection on the Master's on International Child Rights and Development. Aisha trained as a social worker and has been doing research on child marriage in crisis-affected populations for over 10 years, with a recent focus on child marriage amongst Syrian refugees, and also on crisis affected populations across East Africa.

Reflections:

- **A lack of robust evaluation studies means there is limited evidence from interventions in crisis and humanitarian contexts, particularly for girls affected by child marriage.** Recent systematic reviews have included rigorous child marriage interventions but have not included evaluations for conflict-affected populations. This is despite child marriage prevalence being recognised to be highest in fragile conditions, and related increased attention to child marriage and humanitarian crisis.

- **There is unequal attention to child marriage research between countries and crisis-affected populations.** For example, there is little published research from high-prevalence countries like the Central African Republic and Chad.

- **High-quality robust evidence takes time, especially when looking at longer-term impacts.** This is particularly problematic in fast-moving humanitarian crises with short-term funding cycles, and where life-saving interventions are prioritised.

- **There is increased blurring of humanitarian-development peacebuilding contexts due to the impacts of climate change, prolonged displacement and changes to the humanitarian system.** This blurring can be challenging, but is also an opportunity to find entry-points to build evidence with local actors.

- **Learning from less robust forms of evidence from a broader range of voices needs to be recognised.** This requires methodological innovation, flexibility and collaboration. It means forming local partnerships (with groups of civil society organisations, local academic institutions, etc.) and enhancing local research capacity, including monitoring and evaluation systems. Evidence sharing and systems can also be enhanced with those focusing on crisis, so context-specific data can be analysed, shared and published. More attention should also be paid to the humanitarian cycle and response, and to the process of using research to inform practice.