

# CHILD PROTECTION AND CHILD MARRIAGE

Every year, 12 million girls marry before the age of 18 around the world. Child marriage disproportionately affects girls, and denies their fundamental rights to health, safety and education. Girls who are married before 18 are more likely to experience intimate partner violence and sexual, physical, psychological and emotional violence at the hands of their partner's family.



PICTURED: Community members and children take part in activities to raise awareness of girls' rights and child marriage with the Yes I Do Alliance in Lombok, Indonesia. Photo: Girls Not Brides/Graham Crouch

Child protection interventions are a critical part of a multi-sectoral approach to preventing child marriage and responding to the needs of girls and boys who marry as children.

This brief focuses on the importance of investing in child protection systems to address child marriage at scale. It identifies emerging areas of good practice, most of which are delivered by civil society organisations working at the community level.

## Child protection contributions to ending child marriage

**Child protection promotes the rights of girls and boys of all ages:** Child protection is grounded in children's rights and the protection of all girls and boys from birth to adulthood. To protect the best interests of the child, approaches need to be age-appropriate and recognise children's evolving capacities. They must also be tailored to the specific child marriage risks experienced by children of different ages.

## A child protection system consists of inter-linking community-, district- and national-level components

organised around the common goal of preventing, mitigating and responding to neglect, exploitation and violence affecting children.<sup>1</sup> A child protection system operates within the framework of the law and a coherent regulatory framework of policies, procedures and guidelines. Typically, one ministry or department – such as a ministry of social welfare – interacts with all other sectors – including justice, education, health and security – to lead and coordinate effective child protection responses.<sup>2</sup> Child protection systems should be: rights-based, child-friendly and gender-responsive, in children's best interests and guided by the principle of do no harm.

Protection risks are greater in forced marriages, for girls married to older men, younger adolescent girls, pregnant adolescent girls, adolescent mothers<sup>a</sup> and for divorced adolescents. Boys also experience child marriage – though in lower numbers – and their needs and interests should be addressed in child protection interventions.<sup>3</sup> Child protection supports children's rights to information, expression and involvement in decisions that affect them, so they can better protect themselves.

**Child protection includes prevention and response**

**services:** Child protection goes beyond stand-alone sector-specific and issue-based approaches to child wellbeing. Child protection systems, services and approaches at community and district levels are designed to prevent and respond to all forms of violence, and exploitation of children. Response services can identify girls at risk and help prevent child marriage through child helplines, case management and civil registration systems. Child protection interventions also respond to girls who are married, pregnant or mothers by providing comprehensive services focused on safety and protection, health and psychosocial care, education, economic support and justice.

**Child protection systems coordinate services and providers at different levels** to ensure they work together to achieve the desired outcomes. This includes child and family welfare, education,

health, economic security and social protection, civil registration, children's access to justice and law enforcement. A child protection system links community-based child protection approaches, district-level services and national level decision-making regarding legislation, policies and budget allocations. Case management and referrals ensure effective connections between all elements of the continuum of care.

**Child protection system investments aim for scale and long-term sustainability:** Strengthening child protection systems means establishing structures and mechanisms at central, provincial, district and community levels to prevent and respond to all forms of violence and exploitation of children. Investments in child protection systems can address many forms of violence – including child marriage, female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C), child labour and trafficking – at the same time.

Governments and donors favour these interventions because they are often more cost-effective and sustainable than single-issue programmes. Child protection systems should aim to include a well-trained and supported workforce,<sup>4</sup> child protection information systems, and committed and dedicated community approaches to protect children. They should aim for national coverage, to ensure every child receives the care and support they need – and are entitled to – to guarantee their safety and protection.



PICTURED: Girls take part in a workshop about child marriage delivered by Solidarity of Refugee Women for Social Welfare (SOFRES) in Dzaleka Refugee Camp, Malawi. Photo: *Girls Not Brides*/Thom Pierce

<sup>2</sup> <sup>a</sup>Many adolescent pregnancies are involuntary and a result of sexual violence.

## Child protection support can complement gender-transformative approaches

Child marriage occurs in all parts of the world, and is rooted in harmful gender norms and discrimination against girls and women. Child marriage covers a wide range of relationships, each with its own drivers, risks and preventive factors that vary with setting and circumstance. Child marriage is a manifestation of violence against children, sexual and gender-based violence, child trafficking and sexual slavery, among other exploitative practices.

Child protection and children's rights agencies initially focused on the prevention of child marriage and not on the broader context in which it happens. In doing this, they overlooked the different ways violence affects girls and boys, the power imbalances between girls and boys and women and men, and the underlying discriminatory gender norms and practices that shape the everyday lives of children and their families and communities.

**Child protection and gender.**<sup>5</sup> Child protection approaches overlap with work on gender equality and the promotion of girls' and women's rights. The two perspectives complement each other in mutually reinforcing ways and should be combined to accelerate progress to end child marriage.

**Gender-transformative approaches**<sup>6</sup> actively examine, question and change harmful gender norms and imbalances of power that advantage boys and men over girls and women. These gender norms also harm boys and men by creating stereotypes around masculinity and how boys and men should behave.

In recent years, child protection agencies have broadened their approach to include gender transformation and adolescent girls' empowerment. This shift responds to the evolving evidence<sup>7</sup> and programmatic collaboration with agencies working for adolescent sexual and reproductive health, girls' empowerment and women's rights.

Progress towards gender-transformative and adolescent girls' empowerment approaches has been made in the child marriage work supported by child protection agencies like UNICEF, Save the Children, World Vision and Plan International. However, a gender equality perspective has not yet been incorporated – or mainstreamed – across the whole child protection sector and systems.



PICTURED: Yohanna, together with her friends at the Mariposa Centre in Cabarete, Dominican Republic. Photo: Girls Not Brides/Fran Afonso

## Civil society can contribute to child protection approaches that prevent and respond to child marriage<sup>8</sup>

Civil society organisations (CSOs) working on issues related to child marriage are well-placed to strengthen the child protection system, including with targeted interventions to identify and reach the most vulnerable girls, promoting gender and social norms change, and mobilising key community gatekeepers and decision-makers to end the practice and other forms of violence against children. In many countries, CSOs have roles in child protection structures like statutory committees or boards, link interventions at community and district level, and provide services like shelters, safe houses and child helplines. CSOs also help build the capacities of the child protection workforce through technical support for government departments. In addition, they play a key role in legislative and budget advocacy, and in holding governments to account for their commitments to investing in child protection systems and work to end child marriage.

Below, we highlight specific child protection strategies linked to the *Girls Not Brides* **Theory of Change** and an ecological approach to addressing child marriage. Girls are at the centre of this approach, which also recognises the need to dismantle the structures and power relations that limit girls' agency.

## Adolescent empowerment and children's participation

**Girls Not Brides strategy:** Empower girls. A wide range of programmes invest in girls, their participation and their well-being.

Child protection organisations support a wide range of activities related to adolescent empowerment and children's participation in their work to prevent and respond to violence and the exploitation of children.

**Programmes, services and interventions** can focus on:

- Skills and knowledge to empower children and adolescents
- Children's and adolescents' participation in child protection systems
- Children's and adolescents' involvement in research and programming
- Activism and advocacy by children and young people
- Safeguarding of children and adolescents who exercise their agency

### Case study: BALIKA – empowering adolescent girls to delay marriage<sup>9</sup>

#### What they did

The Bangladeshi Association for Life Skills, Income, and Knowledge for Adolescents (BALIKA) – supported by the Population Council – works with over 9,000 girls in 72 communities to prevent child marriage through:

- Education: Tutoring in mathematics and English (in-school girls), and computing or financial training (out-of-school girls).
- Gender-rights awareness training: Life skills training on gender rights and negotiation, critical thinking, and decision making with girls.
- Livelihoods skills training: Training in computers, entrepreneurship, mobile phone servicing, photography and basic first aid with girls.

#### What they achieved

BALIKA programmes reduced the likelihood of child marriage by 1/3 and produced better health, educational and social outcomes for girls. In addition to delaying child marriage, girls participating in the project were:

- 18% more likely to attend school.
- 20% more likely to have improved mathematical skills if they accessed education support and gender rights awareness training.
- 1/3 more likely to earn an income if they accessed gender rights awareness or livelihoods skills training.

## Community-based protection, mobilisation, and social and behaviour change

**Working with boys and men** is a critical part of a gendered approach to child protection. We can reduce the demand for younger brides and violence within marriages by:<sup>10</sup>

- Working with fathers, grooms and partners, brothers, and male leaders and opinion-formers
- Addressing harmful masculinities and the various understandings of what it means to be a man in a specific setting

**Girls Not Brides strategy:** Mobilise families and communities. Families, communities and young people are engaged to change attitudes and behaviours related to child marriage.

Communities and families are key to the creation of an enabling and protective environment in which adolescent girls and boys can thrive. Community-level actors link adolescents with more specialised services at the district level through referral and case management mechanisms.

**Programmes, services and interventions** can include:

- Community-based child protection mechanisms (i.e. local committees)
- Social and behaviour change promotion
- Community mobilisation

### Child protection system

**Girls Not Brides strategy:** Provide services. Services across sectors reinforce one another and are tailored to the specific needs of girls at risk of child marriage/unions and married girls.

Interventions at the child, family and community level are often not enough to protect girls and boys from violence and exploitation. A comprehensive child protection system must also be supported by essential services to prevent and respond to violence against children.

When coordinated well, a rights-based national child protection system strengthens the protective environment around each child and their family. Child protection structures may include child helplines, mandatory reporting mechanisms, and boards to review each child protection case to decide what steps would ensure the safety and protection of the child, according to their best interests.<sup>11</sup>

**Programmes, services and interventions.** Core child protection systems are strengthened by allied systems and services.

Core child protection systems include:

- Complaints and reporting mechanisms
- Child protection services (eg, shelters)
- Coordination between service providers and between community, district, province and national levels
- Child protection information systems

Allied systems and services include:

- Access to quality **education** – including sex education – and safe learning environments that guarantee free education for all girls and boys, including married and pregnant girls and adolescent mothers
- Access to sexual and reproductive **health** and rights (SRHR), and to mental health services
- **Economic security** through social protection, income and livelihood support, and youth employment
- **Civil registration** of births, marriages, deaths
- Access to child-friendly and gender-sensitive **justice** for children

## Case study: Childline India – using the child protection system to prevent child marriage<sup>12</sup>

Aadita,<sup>b</sup> a 16-year-old girl from Mandya district in Karnataka, south western India, called the Childline team. She told the counsellor her family was making her marry against her wishes. The Childline team visited her home with staff from the District Child Protection Unit (DCPU) and the police. They spoke with her family about the negative effects of child marriage, and about the law which sets the minimum age of marriage – for girls and boys – at 18 years. Aadita's parents agreed to postpone the marriage.

The Childline team then presented the family to the Child Welfare Committee (CWC), where Aadita's parents signed a statement saying they would not make her marry before she turned 18. Aadita did not want to stay with her parents, so she was given shelter at a government home for girls.

Timely intervention by the Childline team – supported by the police, DPCU and CWC – stopped Aadita being married as a child.

<sup>b</sup>Name changed to protect her identity

## Legislative, policy and budget advocacy

**Girls Not Brides strategy:** Establish and implement laws and policies. A robust legal and policy framework for preventing child marriage/unions and supporting married girls is in place and effectively enforced.

Legislative reform, child protection policies and the allocation of public resources for child protection systems, services and interventions are key for the effective protection of children from violence and exploitation. CSOs play an important role in advocating and holding governments to account for legislative change and implementation.

The aim of budget advocacy is to influence the mobilisation, allocation and utilisation of domestic public financial resources for children's and women's health, education and protection.<sup>13</sup> Civil society participation in public budgeting can impact on budget processes, policies and outcomes.<sup>14</sup> *Girls Not Brides* member organisations have a key role to play.<sup>15</sup>

**Programmes, services and interventions** can include:

- Legislative reform
- Evidence-based policy advocacy
- Budget analysis and advocacy

PICTURED: Monika stands on the roof of her home in Rajasthan, India. Like Aadita, she stopped her marriage at age 12 by calling Childline on the day of her wedding. Photo: *Girls Not Brides*/Allison Joyce



# Key recommendations for strengthening child protection responses to end child marriage

## Recommendations for civil society organisations

### Budget advocacy:

- **Influence the allocation of public financial resources** (budget processes, policies and outcomes)<sup>16</sup> for services and initiatives to end child marriage by combining budget analysis<sup>c</sup> and strategic advocacy.<sup>d</sup>
- **Influence domestic and donor funding to strengthen multi-sectoral child protection systems and services** that prevent and respond to child marriage and other forms of violence against children. This includes funding and enhancing the capacity of the core child protection workforce, providing education and SRHR services for adolescent girls, and offering social assistance – including cash transfers – to ensure the economic security of families whose daughters are at particular risk of child marriage.

### Child protection systems:

- **Use existing child protection systems** and align with and enhance the capacities of its social service workforce.
- **Promote a “do no harm” approach across the child protection continuum of care** – for example, by intervening in child marriages, or protecting adolescent advocates and activists – and avoid secondary victimisation within the child protection system, including by safeguarding children in safe houses and other institutions.<sup>17</sup>
- **Work with child protection actors and service providers** to ensure child protection mechanisms are more gender-responsive and child-friendly. This includes interventions to address harmful gender norms that drive child marriage and exploitation; and community dialogues with parents, religious and traditional leaders and interventions to promote girls’ voice and agency.
- **Promote children’s rights in community-level justice and protection approaches** that are based on customary and religious law.
- **In humanitarian contexts, ensure child protection and gender-based violence areas of responsibility address child marriage.** Identify opportunities to integrate child marriage into disaster risk reduction and response plans by, for example, providing

protection for separated girls during emergencies and access to youth-friendly SRHR services.

### Evidence and research:

- **Compile evidence on what works in different contexts** to encourage child protection investments that prevent and respond to child marriage, particularly in humanitarian contexts.
- **Research how to better integrate child protection with other services**, including education and sexual and reproductive health services.
- **Include adolescent girls’ views**, perspectives and solutions in data collection related to child marriage.
- **Strengthen national statistical offices** to gather data on child marriage as part of their regular data collection processes.
- **Invest in robust and accessible civil registration and vital statistics (CRVS) systems** to improve registration of births and marriages to provide better proof of age and deter child marriages, and improve marriage and divorce data.

## Recommendations for national governments

### Legislation and policies:

- **Promote children’s rights and gender equality in national legislation and policies**, and in community-level customary and religious justice and protection approaches. Legislative reforms should be aligned with international standards and best practice in child protection.
- **Ensure national responses to end child marriage include comprehensive approaches to child protection** which put in place strong legal frameworks and include interventions at the individual, family and community level to prevent and mitigate child marriage.

### Child protection systems and services:

- **Strengthen the social service workforce to protect children** through a comprehensive human resources development approach, including planning, developing and supporting the social service workforce.<sup>18</sup>
- **Classify the social service workforce as essential workers** during humanitarian crises to ensure the continued provision of child protective services.

- **Invest in child-friendly and gender-sensitive services** such as child helplines and alternative care, including safe houses and shelters.
- **Provide basic child protection training** – including on child marriage – for all those working with children, including teachers and health workers.
- **Involve children and adolescents** in the design and development of child protection policies and services.
- **Educate and mobilise the public** about the risks of child marriage.

### Education:

- **Refine education policies to support adolescent girls** to have full access to 12 years of quality education, including for adolescents who are married, pregnant and mothers.
- **Provide support and resources to ensure schools are safe learning environments**, for example through anti-violence measures; water, sanitation and menstrual hygiene facilities; and safe transport to and from schools.
- **Provide life skills and comprehensive sexuality education in schools** to ensure that adolescent girls and boys have the knowledge and skills to protect themselves from violence and to guarantee their sexual and reproductive health and rights.

### Social protection:

- **Identify and invest in opportunities to scale up gender-responsive and child-sensitive social protection** including interventions which combine cash transfers and child welfare support to reduce adolescent risk of early marriage and sexual exploitation.<sup>19</sup>

## Recommendations for donors, regional institutions, United Nations (UN) agencies and international non-governmental organisations

### Evidence:

- **Invest in context-specific data collection** and evidence of what works to end child marriage and adolescent pregnancy in different contexts, and what can be effectively scaled.
- **Include the views, perspectives and suggestions of adolescent girls** in data collection related to child marriage.

### Financing:

- **Donors must provide long-term, flexible funding** to strengthen child protection systems, including case management systems that can support girls at risk of harmful practices, trafficking, and gender-based violence.
- **Ensure that humanitarian funding appeals include programmes to protect girls and boys** from violence and exploitation.

We would like to acknowledge the inputs from *Girls Not Brides* member organisations who fed into the longer working paper which underpins this brief and many of whose resources we have referenced.

PICTURED: Girls play after participating in activities organised by GoJoven in Livingston, Guatemala. Photo: *Girls Not Brides*/Colectivo Nómada/Priscilla Mora Flores



## References and resources

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<sup>6</sup>UNFPA and UNICEF, *Technical note on gender-transformative approaches in the Global Programme to End Child Marriage Phase II: A summary for practitioners*. New York, 2019.

<sup>7</sup>For more information on child marriage evidence see websites of: [ICRW](#), [Population Council](#), [ALIGN](#), and [GAGE](#).

<sup>8</sup>*Girls Not Brides, Theory of Change*; UNICEF, *Preventing and responding to violence against children and adolescents Theory of Change*, New York, 2017; WHO, 2018, op. cit.; WHO, *School-based violence prevention. A practical handbook*, 2019; and World Vision *A systems approach to child protection. A World Vision discussion paper*, 2011.

<sup>9</sup>Population Council, *BALIKA empowering girls to delay child marriage in Bangladesh*. 2016.

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<sup>11</sup>Save the Children, 2019, op. cit.; WHO, 2018, op. cit.

<sup>12</sup>[Childline India webpage on child marriage](#).

<sup>13</sup>UNICEF, *UNICEF's engagements in influencing domestic public finance for children (PF4C) a Global Programme framework*, 2017.

<sup>14</sup>For more information see the [International Budget Partnership website](#).

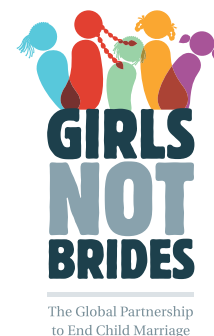
<sup>15</sup>*Girls Not Brides, Civil society and budget advocacy to end child marriage: Lessons learned from six pilot projects*, 2020.

<sup>16</sup>For an orientation to budget advocacy see the [International Budget Partnership website](#).

<sup>17</sup>*Girls Not Brides, Safeguarding standards for Girls Not Brides members*, 2020.

<sup>18</sup>Global Social Service Workforce Alliance, *Framework for strengthening the social service workforce*. n.d.

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