

## **The Child Marriage Research to Action Network (the CRANK) Supporting the most marginalized girls: What can we learn from the evidence on child marriage?**

CRANK research meeting 28 September 2022 – **Key takeaways**

### **Key takeaways**

- **Cross-sectoral interventions that act at multiple levels of a girl’s eco-system are more effective than single-issue interventions that do not engage communities.** Cash transfers could be effective in addressing household poverty (a driver of child marriage), if coupled with empowerment programmes and skills building for girls.
- Evidence from girls displaced by conflict in South Sudan and the Kurdistan area of Iraq shows:
  - **Strong links between being divorced, widowed or married and poor mental health outcomes.** This is closely related to exclusion from education and social networks, lack of decision-making power, exploitation and abuse.
  - **Displaced girls living with disabilities have difficulties accessing education,** are often harassed, may feel they are a burden to their families and have fewer quality marriage prospects.
- Evidence from the Dominican Republic shows the link between **gender non-conforming individuals experiencing violence and exclusion, and marrying before 18.** Reasons for marriage were economic and to escape violence and abuse in their natal home, including sexual violence meant to “correct” their sexual orientation. Forced marriage was driven by religious and traditional norms around gender.

### **Karen Austrian, Director, GIRL Center and Senior Associate, Population Council, Kenya**

- Programme and evaluation run in two different sites in Kenya, one urban and one rural (on the border to Somalia, with high poverty compared to the country overall, and with higher prevalence of child marriage).
- The study aimed not to look at each intervention in a silo, but to look at the impact of different packages of interventions (based on the hypothesis that there is no single solution to end child marriage and to account for girls not living in a vacuum).
- Randomised controlled trial, with a baseline in 2015 and midline in 2017 (programme run 2015-2017), but they also went back 2019 and 2021 to look at whether there were any longer-term effects of the programme.
- In the rural setting, there were sustained increases in school enrolment and a decrease in early marriage and pregnancy according to the results in 2019 and 2021 (eg, girls who had been enrolled in the programme were five times more likely to still be in school in 2021).
- Another programme in Ethiopia for comparison, with only stand-alone interventions and not working with the broader community, showed only impact in terms of eg, girls’ financial skills and practices but no impact on schooling or marriage.

- Programme implications from this evaluation include the necessity to work across sectors and at multiple levels of a girl's eco-system; that we need to address underlying household poverty which might drive child marriage (eg, through cash transfers); but that we also need to couple cash transfers with empowerment programmes and skills building for girls.
- Future studies linked to the evaluation will be conducted, to see the longer-term effects on the girls as they transition into adulthood – linked to work and parenting.

**Kimberly Howe, Assistant Research Professor and Research Director of Conflict and Governance and Elizabeth Stites, Research Director and Associate Professor at Tufts University**

- Study looking at married, widowed or divorced girls, adolescent mothers and girls living with disabilities in South Sudan and in the Kurdistan region of Iraq, trying to explore the holistic experiences, needs, challenges and opportunities of these girls who have been displaced due to conflict.
- The study predicts wellbeing outcomes within the sample size: divorced youth had the worst mental health outcomes, closely followed by widowed and married girls.
  - Reasons for this include that divorcees are often excluded from education and social networks, they often have to give up their children to their in-laws (the same with widows), and many have experienced abuse in their marriage.
  - Widowed girls often experience being "inherited" by their brother-in-law, and many reported being exploited by government officials and aid workers.
  - The mental health of married girls depends to a large extent on the relationships between the girls and their partners and in-laws.
- Displaced girls living with disabilities have difficulties accessing education, are often harassed by peers, community members and government officials; many feel they are a burden to their families (not seeing prospects for future work) and are often socially excluded.
  - There are few quality marriage prospects, and many think they will have to stay with their natal family their whole life, or they know they might have to marry a much older man and potentially be a wife out of many.

**Rosalba Karina Crisostomo, Executive Director, Colesdom - Comunidad de Lesbianas Inclusivas Dominicanas, Dominican Republic**

- Research from the Dominican Republic aimed at filling a knowledge gap around what happens with girls who push gender roles and norms and who are at risk of being excluded by their families and their communities. The study also aimed to get more evidence on child marriage and early unions in non-heterosexual couples (which the usual data looks at).
- The study interviewed LGBTQ people above age 18 on their experiences from adolescence (retrospective), due to legal issues and challenges with reaching LGBTQ girls (risk for backlash from anti-rights groups).
- 89% of the girls who challenge traditional gender roles experience exclusion from their society, they also report experiencing violence (66 %). Many of them reported that they had married before age 18, and that they had married a sex not matching their sexual preference

- The results show the importance to explore the needs and experiences of these marginalised groups, and ensure that their rights are protected.

## Q&A

Karen:

- **Did you find that engaging with men and boys had a significant impact on the long-term wellbeing and empowerment of girls?**

The impact of engagement of men and boys cannot be looked at separately, because community engagement was part of all intervention arms. The community engagement included men and boys but did not interact with them specifically, but more in their roles as, for example, community leaders, etc.

- **Can you explain how you were able to mobilise the same participants four years after the project finished?**

Very detailed contact information was taken from the girls, and this was updated annually, which allowed to track them better over time. The data collectors were from the area, which supported the contact – however this was indeed a challenging undertaking.

- **Can you share more details of the cash transfer incentive (eg, cash or in-kind, method of delivery, recipient and frequency); what were additional impacts of Conditional Cash Transfers to households in the programme?**

Cash transfers were conditional on girls' education, and the funds were transferred to a bank account chosen by the household. The programme leveraged an existing humanitarian cash transfer programme, using their systems for payments.

Household wealth was improved in urban informal settings as a result of the cash transfers, but not in the rural settings. Funds were mostly used for education fees, transportation and food.

Elizabeth/Kimberly:

- **Who collected the data and how did you manage the power relations in the field?**

All data collection was done by young women from the affected communities, who had had previous training/experience. Due to COVID-19 regulations, in the Kurdish regions of Iraq all interviews were done via phone, in South Sudan the interviews were conducted in person. Each interviewee was seen multiple times, and this allowed the data collectors to build trust and get more accurate information.

- **Do we know anything about the factors that led to the marriage (of now divorced girls) in the first place?**

Research looked at the reasons for marriage, from fully consensual to fully forced, and compared with the marriages which ended in divorce: these were present across the full spectrum (despite reasons for entering into the marriage).

- **Are there any safe spaces for women to share their traumatic experiences of marriage and seek redressal? How can governments and humanitarian agencies be made accountable for these?**

The availability of safe spaces is very limited. In the Kurdish regions of Iraq, girls' mobility is particularly restricted, meaning they have even less access.

Trauma around war-related events, family violence and community harassments – girls in the different communities had in general experienced multiple traumas and traumas related to all three different factors

Rosalba:

- **What did your research show about the drivers for lesbian/trans/gender non-conforming people to enter into unions? Are they largely driven by their own decision or did you see pressure from family/care-givers, others as well? How can education be a protective factor in securing the rights of LGBTQI persons?**

The main factors for LGBTQI persons to marry were economic and to escape violence and abuse in their natal home, including sexual violence meant to “correct” their sexual orientation.

Two key reasons in the cases where the marriage was forced on them by their families was religious and traditional norms – parents hope that the marriage will set the girls on “the right path” and stop them from feeling what they are feeling (which the families consider is wrong).

Importance of education that goes beyond traditional gender roles and does not perpetuate harmful norms. The topic needs to be included across subjects, and it should be talked about as a human issue – not as a sexual issue alone.

**Resources shared by CRANK members:**

- [The power of education to end child marriage UNICEF](#)
- [Girls-Education-and-child-marriage GNB](#)
- [I am all those girls who got kicked out of their house](#)