

Effective partnerships and action: Strengthening the generation and use of evidence to improve policy and programme outcomes



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PICTURED: Girls at the Urmul Trust's education centre in the Thar Desert, Rajasthan, India.
Photo: Girls Not Brides/Allison Joyce

Thematic brief covering day two 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.

The second day of the convening focused on the value of working in partnerships at all levels.

Speakers and participants in this session shared examples and reflections on:

- How diverse partnerships have strengthened child marriage policy and programme outcomes in different contexts.
- How working in partnerships can strengthen research and the uptake of evidence for greater impact.
- Best practice for strengthening work across multistakeholder partnerships.
- Gaps in partnership work.

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, key takeaways – from Day two of the CRANK's global research convening are available on the session [web page](#).

Key takeaways on effective partnerships and action:

- **Child marriage research should be holistic and seek input from diverse perspectives.** Child marriage is complex and responses to it need to be comprehensive. So, research design also needs to include multiple and diverse individual and institutional perspectives at every level, to ensure research answers questions that contribute to broader change.
- **Research and knowledge management is a system, with inequitable relationships of power.** To ensure research includes the perspectives of those most at risk and/or affected by child marriage, we need to understand and address these inequalities through an inclusive research process.
- **To ensure evidence uptake, research needs to be relevant, useful and accessible.** This means engaging key stakeholders, co-creating and sharing decision-making throughout the research process. This can be done through partnerships with trusted grassroots actors and networks; enhancing researcher capacities in inclusive, feminist, participatory and intersectional methodologies; and enhancing potential research user capacities in how to access, interpret and use evidence.
- **Macro-level actors need to be engaged in research design to drive change at scale.** We need to engage national governments as partners, persuading them that evaluation is not a fault-finding process, but a means to enhance quality and impact.
- **Research can help build local, regional and international partnerships and movements, with greater shared knowledge, skills and purpose.** Regional platforms can help connect, coordinate and bring a regional perspective to research for greater impact.

Setting the scene: Reflection on the value of research and advocacy partnerships

Girls Not Brides: The Global Partnership to End Child Marriage – Nerida Nthamburi

Speaker profile:

Nerida leads both the *Girls Not Brides* Africa Team and the development and implementation of *Girls Not Brides'* strategy in Africa. This includes managing collaboration with *Girls Not Brides* National Partnerships, coalitions, member organisations and relevant African institutions.

In her opening statement, Nerida reflected on how *Girls Not Brides* has been working collectively for over 10 years, bringing together stakeholders at the global, national and community levels to effectively address child marriage.

Over this time, *Girls Not Brides* and its allies have learned that there is not one single strategy to end child marriage and advance girls' rights. This work needs to start at the local level, with girls, and can then catalysed by national, regional and global efforts. The latter is possible if the links are acknowledged and different stakeholders work in a coordinated way across sectors and at different levels.

Bottlenecks in the uptake of research findings in child marriage programming and how the information is shared with civil society organisations working at the local and national level is important. Civil society organisations working in Africa need to:

- Develop sustainable, intersectional interventions to address child marriage. Such interventions must be linked and span immediate and longer-term approaches.
- Shift or rebalance power so that most support is channelled through community-based movements. Organisations and research institutions working at the national, regional or global level need to link to community-based or locally-led movements or organisations.
- Develop engaging platforms to share learning at the national, regional and global level.

The CRANK is an example of an engaging platform for child marriage research coordination and uptake of evidence. It encourages diverse stakeholders to share learning approaches and resources, and is also an opportunity to build partnership links and networks.

Each partner should bring something to the table through collaboration. In research and advocacy partnerships, for example, researchers offer their expertise in research and evidence generation, while gaining direct input from the communities where their research is based to ensure their research then leads to effective advocacy.

Partnerships are not easy; they take time and effort to build and maintain. But it is possible, and it is always worth it.

Expert panel on the value of partnerships

Girls' practitioner and researchers' collaboration

Her Choice Alliance – Desire Agusu

Speaker profile:

Desire is a researcher at the University of Groningen, The Netherlands. He participated in the Her Choice Alliance as a local researcher in Benin for the Amsterdam Institute for Social Science Research of the University of Amsterdam.

Desire's presentation focused on the community-led approach to end child marriage in line with his experiences with Her Choice Alliance. The Alliance was implemented with 27 local partner organisations to address child marriage in 10 countries from 2016 to 2020.

Reflections:

- **A holistic approach is needed to address the complex nature of child marriage.** Such approaches can be clustered around increasing girls' decision-making power and mobilising relevant communities.
- **Implementing partners need to enhance their capacity to effectively use research outputs in their programming,** translating them into action.
- **Partnerships are stronger when built around trust and knowledge of each other, working together to build legitimacy at different levels.** Community-based organisations – by being visible and active – often enjoy legitimacy with community members. Other organisations have legitimacy at the transitional or macro level. By bringing organisations together, partnerships can leverage greater legitimacy, skills and expertise at each level, and can mobilise actors from different sectors – teachers, for example.
- **Systems for knowledge exchange – like girl and boy peer educators and community volunteers – are needed to cascade information through a community,** supporting the uptake and appropriation of that information. Actors like peer educators can also monitor the change process.
- **Diverse partnerships allow organisations to maximise skills, expertise, knowledge and influence.** Such partnerships can strengthen policy development and research outcomes for greater impact. They can act at the micro or macro level: the national level must be reached through engagement with local actors, while engaging macro-level actors allows for the large-scale change needed to end child marriage. Engaging boys and men and other local actors is also crucial, as they are often respected in communities and can galvanize support for interventions and for social change.

Civil society and non-governmental organisation collaboration

Vikalp Sansthan – Usha Choudhary

Speaker profile:

Usha is a social activist with 25 years of experience in ending gender-based violence and child marriage in India. She is a co-founder and currently the Secretary and Executive Director of Vikalp Sansthan, a Rajasthan-based non-governmental organisation working to end gender inequality through youth engagement and empowerment.

Usha spoke on partnerships of civil society and non-governmental organisations and her experience working in Rajasthan, India. She also shared key findings from research conducted by Vikalp Sansthan to explore the marriage experiences of girls and women, and 50 married boys and men.

Reflections:

- **Collaborating with health service providers can help bring married girls into research.** Research efforts sometimes struggle to bring in the voices of married girls, as their activities outside the household are often constrained. Collaborating with health service providers is a potential entry point to overcome this.
- **Couples sessions increase awareness of sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR).** Such sessions support couples to learn about consent, rights – including SRHR – their joint dreams and their choices.
- **Sharing knowledge among partners can help shift common misconceptions.** It also creates space to address issues which might not previously have been reflected on (e.g., married girls not having access to services, schemes most often only targeting unmarried girls).
- **Partnerships and collaboration with civil society organisations strengthen advocacy initiatives.** Working in partnership helps to build networks and support systems among civil society organisations. It also enhances opportunities for joint advocacy and offers a platform to discuss learnings, challenges and innovations. By working in partnership, Vikalp discussed the issues affecting married girls with diverse stakeholders from the grassroots to the national and international level. Through this, they influenced the youth policy formulation process.

Women's rights organisations and feminist-centred partnership

Women's Refugee Commission – Dr Janna Metzler

Speaker profile:

Janna is the Associate Director for Research at the Women's Refugee Commission and an Adjunct Assistant Professor at the Columbia University Mailman School of Public Health. She has experience designing and leading mixed-methods research and evaluations in global health and humanitarian initiatives in Africa, Asia, the Americas and the Middle East.

Janna discussed the “[Integrating the Response to Child Marriage in Humanitarian Settings](#)” initiative launched by the Women's Refugee Commission (WRC), Rozaria Memorial Trust (RMT) and King's College London in 2021. The initiative is a movement of feminist and women's rights organisations in the region, focused on co-creating an agenda for action that positions place-based actors at the heart of disaster planning, management and response. The uniqueness of this initiative is in its grounding partnership principles, and an approach that harnesses evidence generation and collective action.

Reflections:

- **Feminist participatory action research is a tool to address child marriage.** The initiative used feminist participatory action research and embedded a consensus-building approach to reach and engage over 80 practitioners and experts. This led to the co-creation of a roadmap to accelerate progress to end child marriage across East Africa, with a view to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals. This roadmap centres the leadership of place-based feminist and women's rights organisations in all aspects of humanitarian action. Engagement and re-engagement through research with this group, and an iterative process of consensus-building strengthened momentum among this dedicated consortium of activists.
- **Ensuring an inclusive approach to partnering with place-based actors requires a significant upfront and ongoing investment.** The iterative process of building consensus and momentum required a process of engagement and reengagement with practitioners. A systems approach to partnership was used, where partners work across multiple and intersecting systems that shape the implementation of child marriage prevention and risk mitigation programming within and then across the humanitarian system. A critical component of this partnership was communication and the adoption of clear accountability structures and processes that describe how decisions are made within the partnership.
- **The research process should be responsive to opportunities and leverage existing evidence to influence policies in real time at the national, regional and global level.** Research can be used to build and sustain movements and partnerships from local to global level. Donors, funders and foundations need to more consistently fund research on child marriage undertaken by feminist grassroots organisations.

- **Active community participation in research is essential, but community-based participatory research models are still very prescriptive.** Such models make assumptions about researchers – for example, that they know which questions need answering – which guide the whole research process, from what questions are asked, to research design and methodology, and the researcher’s ability to measure the long-term effects of programming. Participatory research needs clear communication and accountability structures and processes that describe how decisions are made within the partnership.
- **Research can be used as a tool to build and sustain collective movements at local, national, regional and even global levels.** Donors, funders, foundations and UN Member States should begin to fund and resource collective movements of civil society organisations more consistently. This will ensure work advances and that decision-makers are also dedicated to financial accountability. While funding for partnerships is increasing, it is insufficient and often comes with restrictions that prohibit grassroots participation. There is limited accountability for expenditures to enforce existing policy commitments.
- **Time and funding limitations limit opportunities for smaller organisations to engage in longer-term efforts –** like preparedness planning – that better position feminist and women’s rights organisations as first responders. Smaller organisations need support to strengthen their administrative and financial systems and capacities so they can hold larger grants. Advocacy with donors around flexible long-term grant structures, fees and funding approaches that support this work is needed.

Regional partnership

Terre des hommes – Marta Gil

Speaker profile:

Marta is the Deputy Head of Programme Access to Justice for Children and Youth at Terre des hommes Lausanne Foundation (Tdh). She has more than 15 years of experience and has worked on child justice and gender, with a particular focus on child marriage across East and West Africa, Europe, the Middle East, Latin America and Southeast Asia.

Marta explained what regional partnerships look like from a research and practitioner point of view, and shared experiences and recommendations around multistakeholder partnerships with government, the UN and other multi-sectoral bodies.

This large, multi-method piece of [research](#) on child marriage amongst Syrian refugee communities in Jordan and Lebanon was undertaken in partnership with the University of Bedfordshire (United Kingdom) and Tdh. It shows how child marriage is understood, explained, considered and justified by girls and their families. It addresses policy and programme responses, and the views and processes followed by different governments, organisations and community stakeholders such as faith-based actors. It details the challenges faced by married girls and their reflections on marriage and future life, and describes lived experiences of the Syrian refugee community more than nine years after displacement.

Reflections:

- **The research process matters and it takes time for things to change.** Co-creation and joint decision-making – which centres the voices of girls and young females throughout the process – help to shape better research, policy and programming. Two-way dialogue is very important.
- **Key considerations and key messages from the research should be developed in partnership with girls to ensure the research responds to their needs and reality.** As organisations engage different actors, the largest space needs to be reserved for the girls and young females affected by child marriage.
- **There is a two-way influence in research.** Research should influence policymaking and programming, and learnings and implementation should influence research. The pathway for impact comprises of evidence that allows for awareness and understanding, then the digestion of that evidence to be used or integrated into programming.
- **Further policy and advocacy work with governments is needed to ensure relevance and uptake.** In this case, the research and findings were shared with government officials, who were engaged to create policy briefs that respond to national policies in Jordan and Lebanon.

- **The Child Marriage Model of Action is a tool to inform programming.** The research findings were used to create a Model of Action (MoA) to guide Tdh and its partners' operations in the design, implementation and monitoring of interventions addressing child marriage. The MoA is intended to provide technical direction in how to prevent and respond to child marriage, and promote the protection, empowerment and resilience of adolescent girls and young women, while also working on masculine roles and identities. It provides a regional Theory of Change and an Intervention Matrix to orient and harmonise the impact of child marriage interventions in the Middle East and North Africa region.

Government, UN agency, multistakeholder partnership

UNICEF India (Bihar Field Office) – Prasann Ash

Speaker profile:

Prasann is a development professional with progressive work experience spanning more than two decades. He is a Postgraduate in Economics from Calcutta University and did his MBA in Finance. He has served in various capacities in government, non-governmental organisations and UN agencies. Planning, monitoring, research and evaluation are his key areas of expertise. He has served as the Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation Specialist at UNICEF Bihar Field Office since 2020.

Prasann presented from a perspective of multistakeholder partnerships between government, UN agency and other stakeholders. He shared his experiences from Bihar, one of the poorest States in India where almost two-fifths of the population are below the poverty line – a socioeconomic condition in which child marriage is common.

Reflections:

- **The way communities value girl children impacts on the prevalence of child marriage.** The root cause of elevated child marriage prevalence (almost 42.5%) in Bihar is attributed to the low value placed on girls, based on the secondary evidence from the 2015-16 National Survey.
- **Governments might not always be comfortable with evaluations perceived to find challenges, setbacks and negative results, but these are critical.** Evaluations should not be viewed as fault-finding mechanisms, but as learning processes to improve programming. This can help ensure government support.
- **Male engagement programmes are needed to improve the perception of girls' and women's value, and reduce child marriage.** The UNICEF Bihar Field Office is committed to working with boys and men.
- **The UN (and other actors) can work as a key knowledge partner to governments.** They can, for example, support ongoing monitoring to identify implementation bottlenecks and find solutions, and the synthesis of global knowledge to advocate for changes and scale-up – to make sure evidence is used and not shelved. Evidence generation should not be seen as a standalone activity; learning loops should be integrated into programming.
- **Research and evaluation should be an integral part of programming,** and not conceived as an ad hoc and standalone activity. Further investment in doing proper research and evaluations is needed; this is dynamic and evolves over time. Research needs to be nuanced and focused on what works, what does not work, and why.

Strengthening the use and uptake of evidence

UNICEF Office of Research – Innocenti – Manahil Siddiqi

Speaker profile:

Manahil specialises in the generation and use of rigorous evidence to end harmful practices at UNICEF Innocenti – Global Office of Research and Foresight. She currently leads technical support and coordination for the Strategic Technical Assistance for Research (STAR) Initiative to end harmful practices, working directly with UNICEF and UNFPA country offices around the world to strengthen the quality and uptake of research on child marriage and female genital mutilation.

Manahil spoke about strengthening the uptake and use of evidence, and strategies to do it. She asked questions around how to ensure evidence on child marriage is used by policymakers and practitioners, and how to bridge the gap between evidence and action, and between knowledge and real change for girls.

Reflections:

- **Communicating research does not guarantee evidence uptake.** Evidence uptake is all of the activities that facilitate and contribute to the adoption and utilisation of evidence by researchers, practitioners and policymakers. Demand for and interest in using evidence is critical; to increase evidence use, stakeholders need to be engaged from the start of the research process – at planning and conceptualisation.
- **Research is most likely to be used when practitioners are involved in identifying the issues to be researched, to ensure it meets local needs.** Lack of skills and capacities to access, use and interpret evidence hinders research processes. Equally, evidence producers also need to be able to develop strong research questions and recommendations that are tailored to intended stakeholders, to ensure evidence uptake.
- **Evidence uptake and impact needs to be monitored and measured.** This begins with defining the type of impact the evidence is intended to have – a conceptual impact would try to shift the conceptualisation or language we use around an issue. Research and advocacy around sexual violence transformed how society talks about survivors of violence, moving away from victim-blaming language.
- **Experiences of evidence use need to be documented and shared.** For example, [The International Initiative for Impact Evaluation](#) have produced evidence impact summaries that describe how the evidence is being used, how programmes are being informed by evidence, and how policies are changing and influencing decision-makers.
- **Always remember the bigger picture.** We are a collective system of evidence producers, brokers and users, and we must commit to strengthening our roles and improving our processes, working with a shared vision to end child marriage and advance girls' rights.
- **Engagement with governments needs to be contextual and appropriate for the particular stakeholder being engaged.** It is important to share the examples and stories of use of evidence and best practices to promote shared learning. We have come a long way in strengthening the quality of research and closing evidence gaps, but these are next steps in strengthening our collective research and evidence generation.