

A fresh lens on the child marriage research funding landscape:

Conversations with the funding community on strategies, priorities, synergies and opportunities



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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

Thematic brief covering day three 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 third day of the convening brought practitioners and funders together to reflect on the priorities, gaps and opportunities in child marriage research and funding.

Speakers and participants on this day shared examples and reflections on:

- The current evidence and practitioner-based research priorities and gaps.
- The child marriage funding landscape, focusing on:
 - Insights into funding strategies, how research agendas are shaped, and funding priorities and opportunities.
 - How funders see priorities evolving, and factors that may shape this and influence new funding.
 - Panellist ambitions for funding child marriage research.
- Opportunities for funders and practitioners to work together.

This brief includes the key takeaways from the day, followed by more details on the content covered by each speaker and discussion, summarised by the CRANK. All the resources – recordings, presentations, notes, key takeaways – from Day three of the CRANK’s global research convening are available on the session [web page](#).

Key takeaways on funding for child marriage research:

- **Funding for research stimulates funding for programmes.** Research and learning need to be integrated into every intervention from the beginning, rather than implemented as a standalone effort requiring separate funding.
- **There is appetite to fund solutions rather than diagnoses.** Investment cases are strengthened by positive messaging around solutions – showing that change is possible – rather than a focus on the scale of the problem, including prevalence, drivers and consequences.
- **Funding should be channelled towards learning.** This includes learning on what works and what could be improved. Addressing child marriage requires a holistic approach, which is reflected in the diversity of approaches taken by community-based organisations (CBOs). Given their contextualised understanding, CBOs – and the girls and adolescents they work with – need to be included in defining what success looks like, and in the design and implementation of efforts to document impact and improve programme effectiveness.
- **Funding inclusive research plays a part in reaching the most marginalised groups.** Investments around child marriage are opportunities to support those who have been most marginalised. Evidence-based research around key populations – like LGBTQIA+ people and girls who are married, pregnant or mothers – is also crucial to raising funding for such initiatives.
- **There is a new funding landscape, and a need to diversity the sources and recipients of funds.** With global attention on climate, food security and social protection, we need to better integrate child marriage into these sectors to support the child marriage learning agenda. There is already some useful knowledge and learning around food security and how it can successfully be integrated into work on harmful practices.
- **Creating spaces and fora to connect funders, practitioners, academics, activists and researchers is important.** Such spaces help strengthen the links between sectors and thematic areas, agree joint agendas and accelerate progress.

Panel discussion with funders on the current and future child marriage research funding landscape

Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands in Benin – Mieke Vogels

Speaker profile:

Mieke, presently Senior Policy Advisor on on sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) at the Netherlands Embassy in Benin, has worked in development cooperation for the past 40 years. She worked in the education sector in Cape Verde Islands, Ethiopia, Mozambique, South Africa and Tanzania, and is a passionate advocate for the promotion of girls’ education.

Mieke has been a member of the Steering Committee of the UNFPA-UNICEF Global Programme to End Child Marriage since the onset of the programme in 2016. She has worked closely with *Girls Not Brides: The Global Partnership to End Child Marriage* since 2016.

Mieke Vogels shared reflections on funding priorities for child marriage research, based on her experience at the Embassy of the Netherlands in Benin, and Dutch priorities more broadly.

Reflections:

- **Generating quality evidence is instrumental in making the case at the national level for domestic investment in ending child marriage.** It is critical to invest in research that clearly demonstrates what works and what does not across different contexts. Knowledge, insights and evidence-based data needs to be generated to inform and influence political leaders – and importantly ministers of finance – to increase investment in addressing child marriage.
- **Funding quality research as a programme component is a strategic way to generate robust evidence to support advocacy work.** Leveraging this evidence and liaising with influential stakeholders – like the Netherlands Ambassador and UNICEF representatives – can open lines of communication with ministers and presidents, promoting domestic funding and advocacy engagement.

For example, the Embassy supports a large-scale social protection programme carried out by UNICEF and the Beninese Ministry of Social Affairs and Microfinance. The Cash Plus Care component – funded by the Embassy – provides unconditional cash transfers to mothers of adolescent girls and girls who do not go to school, who leave or are at risk of leaving before secondary school.

Recognising the advocacy impact of the World Bank's 2018 [Missed opportunities: The high cost of not educating girls](#), the Embassy and UNICEF incorporated a research component into the programme, engaging the same team from the World Bank to conduct a Benin-specific study: [Economic and social benefits of girls' education and elimination of child marriage](#). This evidence has been taken up by decision-makers at the highest level, leading to the organisation of a National Forum for girls' education and further engagement from the Ministry of Finance. So, this case illustrates how research is a tool in promoting domestic funding.

- **It is critical to include a research or a learning component in every programme covering thematic and sectoral areas that intersect with child marriage prevention.** Learning from evidence on how to contribute to sustainable changes is critical. However, funding research is not always appealing to bilateral donors and non-governmental organisations, because impact is only seen in the longer-term. Including research and learning components in programmes associated with preventing child marriage is a smart way to mobilise funding for research on child marriage.

“If there is a programme on the eradication of child marriage, make sure that there is a budget line for doing research rather than having one specific project to only do research because very often that doesn't get funded.” Mieke Vogels, Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands, Benin

Girls First Fund – Lakshmi Moore

Speaker profile:

Lakshmi is the Program Director of Girls' First Fund (GFF), providing leadership on their programmatic work across six focus countries, including the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the Dominican Republic, India, Nepal, Niger and Uganda, and expansion into Guatemala and Guinea.

Lakshmi is a Liberian feminist with over a decade of experience in international humanitarian and development work promoting women's rights, girls' access to education and youth development.

Lakshmi Moore unpacked how the GFF is the first funding partnership of its size focused on ending child marriage with grant-making directed to traditionally underfunded community-based and locally-focused national organisations.

Reflections:

- **Long-term and flexible funding for CBOs is critical for learning and effective implementation.** CBOs work closely with communities and know the issues relating to child marriage in their context; they can leverage existing relationships to advance community-based and responsive strategies. With core, flexible and longer-term (three to five years) funding, they can:
 - **Define what impact looks like in their context, plan and work strategically, and document what strategies are effective and share learnings.** They can then keep donors informed of the challenges and solutions they encounter, and the comprehensive approach needed to address child marriage.
 - **Respond to multiple issues and adapt to changing situations to ensure interventions are timely, effective and contextual.** This is demonstrated by CBO responses to the COVID-19 pandemic, humanitarian disasters and climate crisis, where they have adapted their strategies to deliver comprehensive and timely interventions that respond to girls' changing needs. In this, they have highlighted the importance of other components – like girls' education, economic empowerment, and SRHR – which should be integrated into child marriage strategies.
 - **Define their own learning agenda,** including learning on adaptation and monitoring of programmes that are closely tied with communities.
- **Research on the impact of funding civil society organisations and commitment to internal learning are key priorities.** GFF have commissioned research to look at the type and extent of impact funding CBOs can have. They are also developing a learning agenda to better understand how to facilitate CBOs' work. During this process, their partners highlighted the need for support in facilitating in-country peer-to-peer learning exchanges, identifying best practices, coordinating advocacy and connecting with other opportunities. This may include technical support in monitoring and evaluation, documenting impact or developing effective communications strategies.
- **CBOs should be at the centre of research design and funding, and should participate fully in the whole process, including learning.** Girls should also be engaged in and inform evidence – only they can articulate what contextual change looks like for them. Then research can support and inform the improvement of programmes to better respond to girls' needs.

Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (Norad) – Hilde Røren

Speaker profile:

Hilda is Norad's Senior Advisor and Team Lead on harmful practices, including child marriage and female genital mutilation. She represents Norad on the UNFPA-UNICEF Global Programme to End Child Marriage Steering Committee, where she contributes to work on SRHR and is responsible for responses concerning LGBTQIA+ persons. She represents Norad at the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Development Assistance Committee Network on Gender Equality. She has extensive experience in gender-transformative work and addressing masculinities.

Reflections:

- **Financial support to respond to harmful practices should be strengthened, particularly for civil society organisations acting at the local level.** Norway's review of their funding for work on harmful practices confirmed that funding support to local organisations should increase, either through existing partners or with more direct support to civil society organisations.
- **It is important to reflect on how to integrate child marriage into larger sectors like food security, climate change and cash transfers.** In Norway, a lot of money is invested into these sectors, so thought is needed to see how to leverage those bigger funds to address child marriage in these settings. It is also important and interesting for funders to learn from including different sector perspectives into work on child marriage. Learning will be significant for donors – and should be shared more broadly – because initiatives in these sectors are on a larger scale to many child marriage programmes.

- **We need to think creatively and strategically about how to integrate harmful practices work with other sector programming, and access funding.** This will become increasingly important as funding for gender equality stagnates or is rolled back. We need to maximise on the value of each dollar and be strategic in our investments.
- **Donors can learn from each other – and practitioners – on ways to diversify partners and strengthen funding streams that go directly to civil society organisations.** It can be the small things that stop change within bigger funding organisations, especially governments. For example, Norad’s system is quite rigid, so introducing a new partner is a lot of work. Shared learning on funding priorities and how to bring in new partners can support them to go beyond policy and channel more funds to civil society organisations. More detailed conversations, where evidence is synthesised – as facilitated through the CRANK – are helpful where funders also have limited capacity.

Gender and Equalities Department, United Kingdom Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office – Ali Hendy

Speaker profile:

Ali is the Child Marriage and Child Protection Lead at the UK’s Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO), based in the Ending Violence Team. She has five years’ experience working in international development, with a particular technical focus on gender equality and the empowerment of girls, women and other marginalised groups. She has also worked in the UK charity sector, including front-line service delivery for looked-after children and adolescent girls.

Reflections:

- **The research and evidence agenda should be emphasised as a critical part of work to address child marriage and advance girls’ and women’s rights.** Girls and women continue to be a priority for the FCDO, whose new strategy will be framed under the “three Es”: educating girls, empowering women and ending violence. Addressing child marriage is a key part of this.
- **To support this agenda the FCDO have made several investments, including in:**
 - **The UNFPA-UNICEF Global Programme to End Child Marriage.** The FCDO sees the Global Programme’s global research **strategy** – and now their partnership with *Girls Not Brides* in the CRANK – as a priority to guide and support research uptake.
 - The **What Works to Prevent Violence programme**, which tests new innovations, conducts rigorous evaluations, and uses evidence to influence a more effective global response to gender-based violence (GBV).
 - **The Gender and Adolescence: Global Evidence programme (GAGE)**, the largest global evidence study following 20,000 girls and boys in low-income countries to understand what works to enhance adolescent capabilities and empowerment.
 - A range of other sectoral investments that are generating relevant learning, including the **Girls’ Education Challenge**.
- **Evidence on what works can shift the conversation and unlock further funding.** The **What Works to Prevent Violence** programme, launched in 2012, has produced evidence demonstrating that GBV is preventable within programme timeframes. Being able to advocate based on positive evidence has been more powerful than advocating based on, for example, the scale of this violence. The transformative power of this evidence has also supported stronger advocacy for investing in evidence itself, including unlocking further funding.
- **The FCDO is shifting their funding approaches to be more locally-led.** The first call for grant applications for **phase two** of the What Works programme prioritised women’s rights organisations based in the Global South and had 530 applications. This demonstrates the demand by locally-led organisations for funding to address multi-layered and multi-sectoral issues like child marriage.
- **Working across sectors is essential.** Operating in the current fiscally constrained environment, it is critical to strengthen multisectoral work supporting increased coordination between those working on child marriage and other sectors, including drawing on the learnings from the GBV, SRHR and girls’ education sectors. GAGE has again demonstrated the ways in which child marriage, GBV, adolescent pregnancy, psychosocial wellbeing and other issues play out across the lifecycle, and that the issues are interconnected, interrelated, reinforcing and driven by an environment of gender inequality.

- **Evidence-based research around marginalised populations is crucial to raising funds.** To date, investment in addressing child marriage has least benefitted those who have been most marginalised – girls with disabilities, LGBTQIA+ youth, already married girls and girls from the poorest households. The newly-launched report on preventing violence against LGBTQIA+ people includes a global evidence review, complemented by practice-based insights drawn from consultations with LGBTQIA+ organisations who are pioneering solutions in different settings. It is an important element in building the evidence base in this area, and the FCDO is keen to see and support more work here under child marriage. This will be a key focus in 2023, building on the momentum of the [CRANK's quarterly session](#) focussing on the most marginalised and the [UN Resolution](#) on child, early and forced marriage, which secured new progressive language on this theme.
- **Donors have an active role to play in supporting research coordination and uptake.** Many donors represent large organisations around funding and on the world stage. They can continue to play an active role to support the CRANK.
- **The decolonisation of aid is critical for the sustainability of child marriage work.** This will result in child marriage work becoming locally-led, with power shifting to community-based organisations so they can design and deliver solutions that make sense in their context.