



Learning series session: Child marriage programming and advocacy in conflict- and crisis-affected settings

Notes and related resources, August 2023

Key takeaways

- **In humanitarian contexts – as elsewhere – work to support girls should be holistic, multisectoral and multi-dimensional.** This means working in partnership with trained team members to:
 - Provide safe spaces for girls to come together, learn and develop their individual and collective power and potential.
 - Engage caregivers and communities around gender equality, gender-based violence (GBV) and child marriage, to build support for girls' decision-making and access to services, including education.
 - Ensure all girls can access education and other opportunities, adolescent-friendly sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR), mental health support, and child protection and GBV services. This includes establishing swift response and referral mechanisms, and considering financial and material support for girls and their families.
- **Internally-displaced and refugee girls face additional barriers to education**, as emergency education policies fail to match demand, and insecurity leads to school closures, more protectionist attitudes towards girls and the prioritisation of boys' education. Governments need to include official and non-official reception sites in their policies, strengthen registration systems and provide long-term funding for girls' access to quality education. Governments and civil society organisations should also consider the additional barriers and risks faced by girls who are married, parenting, have disabilities and/or come from minority religions, ethnicities or LGBTQIA+ groups.
- **Collective civil society advocacy needs to be evidence-based and include young people.** Young researchers – and especially young women – have a powerful role to play in generating evidence and ensuring it is used to inform child marriage advocacy. Civil society needs to hold governments – including transitional governments – accountable through all stages of a crisis. Advocacy can be catalysed by working through existing networks, including education and child marriage coalitions, and youth networks.

Introduction

Fatou Gueye Ndir, *Girls Not Brides*

- Global prevalence of child marriage^a declining, but progress is uneven:^b
 - Increase among poorest households in some regions.
 - Progress in West and Central Africa – the region with the highest child marriage prevalence – has been slow over the last 25 years.
 - Many countries in the Sahel are experiencing ongoing crises that exacerbate child marriage drivers.
- Confirmed impact of conflict: for each tenfold increase in conflict-related fatalities, child marriage increases 7% – it is essential to support those working in these settings with tools and learnings.

Girl Shine: Preventing and responding to early marriage, designed for girls 10-17yrs, girls’ safety in humanitarian settings

Mehreen Jaswal, Senior Adolescent Girls Specialist at the International Rescue Committee

- Programme model and resource package to support adolescent girls in humanitarian settings:
 - Safe space – Life skills curriculum – Mentors and facilitators – Female/male caregiver engagement – Community outreach
 - Facilitates a safe space for girls to come together, be conscious of and actively challenge patriarchal norms; let girls know they are not to blame for violence inflicted on them; foster girls’ power and potential; encourage them to think about how to shape their own futures.
 - Engages with caregivers and broader community around adolescent girls’ sexual and reproductive rights (SRHR), gender norms, girls’ safety, other issues prioritised by girls.
- Girl Shine suitable in emergency and post-conflict settings; where primary needs are met, gender-based violence (GBV) response services are in place, and adolescent girls can regularly attend life skills groups.
- GBV caseworkers must be trained in case management and caring for child survivors of sexual abuse; team and young women mentors must be trained in GBV core concepts.
- Implemented in 34 countries globally through Women’s Protection and Empowerment teams, including host, internally displaced persons (IDP) and refugee communities across semi-urban, rural and camp settings.
- Formative study in Lebanon and Uganda 2018 to update programme model and develop tools. Found common drivers:

^a The term “child marriage” refers to all child, early or forced marriage or unions where at least one party is under the age of 18.

^b UNICEF, 2023, [Is an end to child marriage within reach? Latest trends and future prospects.](#)

- Gender inequality and strong social norms on when a girl should marry
- Caregivers influential in decision-making around marriage
- Economic stress, uncertainty, cramped living conditions – caregivers can't provide for girl, girl as a source of income (dowry)
- Breakdown of relationships with caregivers
- GBV very common, girls' access to services and information very limited
- Girl Shine tools include:
 - Curriculum on early marriage for married and unmarried adolescent girls (15-19) – to delay marriage *and* improve girls' skills and knowledge around risks, SRHR information, decision-making, support girls and caregivers to find alternatives, encourage solidarity among girls.
 - Curriculum for caregivers – support to find alternatives to marriage and strengthen relationship between girls and caregivers, engage with married girls and mothers (pre-marital and in-law).
 - For both curricula require trained team, but can be used to strengthen existing work – Assessment tools adapted into easy-to-read format for girls with disabilities, key messages guidance.
 - Community conversation session guide – to reach broader community with information about adolescent girls.
 - Outreach strategy to support intentional outreach to the girls who might benefit most from programming – those most at risk of violence, with disabilities, at risk, not reached by other programmes.
 - Kaya online training courses for service providers and on Girl Shine – understand barriers to care for adolescent girls; strengthen communication techniques for working with girls, learn girls' right to SRH information and services, understand GBV case management
- Use tools within framework for addressing early marriage through Girl Shine, inspired by *Girls Not Brides*.
 - Empowering girls with information, skills and support networks – key to prevention and response for married girls; raise girls' awareness of their right to be free from early marriage, how to seek help if forced to marry, how to navigate relationships and SRHR when married, strengthen support networks and access to services.
 - Mobilise families and community – not involving them leads to tension because girls don't have the same decision-making power as those around them, if they learn and then can't act they may become disheartened.

- Support girls' access to services and opportunities – as humanitarian actors we can support this, including GBV; provide a holistic approach (beyond GBV) – advocating for this (beyond Girl Shine scope).
- Leverage supportive laws and policies:
 - Need good understanding of national legal framework, customary laws in country of operation – draw on this for rights-based approach, use this in discussions with caregivers, identify gaps (especially services for married girls and/or where marriage is legal).
 - Understand and advocate for strengthened birth, marriage and divorce registration systems.
 - Advocate for gender-equitable laws and policies.
 - Coordinate across organisations to catalyse change.
- Advocating for a holistic approach (beyond Girl Shine scope):
 - Spaces for girls to meet separately from boys.
 - Close collaboration between child protection and GBV actors on response – response services for girls who experience violence; because of age, girls fall between these actors.
 - Health providers – training in adolescent SRHR, gender equality.
 - Safe reporting/referral mechanisms in school.
 - Education – including secondary and alternative education – life skills in schools, livelihoods training, income generating opportunities.
- Learnings in humanitarian settings:
 - Need GBV services that are accessible to girls (considering barriers for those with disabilities) – sensitive issue, when girls disclose experience of GBV, they need to be linked quickly to services.
 - Strong referral pathways for whole community (not only girls).
 - Terminology – early marriage, CEFM, delay marriage (rather than prevent) – when talk about preventing early marriage, this was not well-received by communities, who understood it as preventing all marriage; child marriage didn't work as married girls were considered as being adults – think about how to make it clear we're talking about girls who are under 18 years.
 - Comprehensive outreach strategy from the outset to avoid problems down the road.
 - Find ways to deliver adolescent SRH information – important to girls, how to do this in a sensitive way.
 - How to work sensitively with girls with disabilities, LGBTQIA+ people, those from ethnic or religious minorities to remove barriers and mitigate risks – work with partner organisations.

- Learnings on working directly with girls:
 - Think about grouping – married with not married girls together can lead to stigmatisation, or discomfort depending on information shared.
 - Offer childcare and other resources to encourage girls’ participation.
 - How we respond to girls expressing interest in or positive feelings towards being married – no shame, judgement, punishment for expressing.
 - How the content and its delivery may impact girls’ sense of safety – scenario-based content, not asking girls to share personal experience.
 - Engage caregivers.
- Pre- and post-test completed with adolescent girls on early marriage curriculum.
 - Norms and attitudes (equality, opportunities, input on marriage and marriage roles): 37% increase.
 - Knowledge of support: Increase 15% to all girls knowing at least one place they can go for support.
 - Relationships (decisions and opinions in relationships, feeling valued): 33% increase
- Caregivers testing – all categories increased.
- Lessons learned from testing:
 - Found it hard to get male caregivers involved initially, but once involved they were active.
 - Challenge identifying right caregiver.
 - Must engage broader community, not only girls.
 - Invest in team and mentor training (especially facilitation).
 - One programme won’t be enough to address early marriage.

Youth-led research on the links between displacement in crisis contexts, child marriage and girls’ education in West and Central Africa

Aícha Awa Ba, Gender advocate and independent researcher

- Project financed by Education Out Loud, implemented with *Girls Not Brides* – bring child marriage and education coalitions together to enhance shared learnings, collective advocacy for implementation of laws, policies and programmes to improve girls’ access to quality education and end child marriage at the national, regional and international levels.
- West Africa context:

- 7 of 10 countries with highest prevalence are in West Africa.
- 4 in 10 girls married before age 18; that is 60 million married girls.
- 28 million girls don't have access to education
- The Sahel is affected by various crises (polycrisis)
- Burkina Faso – deepening conflict, with armed groups controlling 40% of country, 1.9 million IDP, especially from rural areas. Conflict and climate change have disrupted access to basic services.
- Niger – armed conflicts, complex and prolonged humanitarian crisis with almost 377000 IDPs. Natural disasters intensifying and diversifying, disrupting livelihoods and subsistence. Coup in July 2023, ousting elected president.
- Security crisis in The Sahel – closed 11,100 schools, strengthened protective treatment of girls. Increased military and security investment affecting financing of social sectors, especially child protection, emergency education and health. Girls in crisis leaving school, leading to increases in child marriage in areas affected by armed conflict.
- Youth-led research – to position young people as agents of change; young activists have an opportunity to act and gain skills; create a culture of evidence-based advocacy; rethink who has the power to produce and share knowledge.
- 9 young people (6 women and 3 men) from Burkina Faso and Niger, with support from LASDEL research institute based in Niamey.
- Video review of recommendations from all researchers:
 1. Prioritise girls' education in crisis situations.
 2. Coordinate humanitarian response, beyond enrolling girls in school – think about mental health, financial support.
 3. Support girls to succeed – they can be role models for their community, leading them to value girls' education and enrol them in schools.
 4. Work with communities to establish consensus and make decisions together.
 5. Support youth-led research, particularly research about young women led by young women.

Ousseini Teoma Mamadou, youth researcher and volunteer at AJEP, Niger

- Link between security crisis, child marriage and girls' education
- Massive displacement and school closures, particularly in the middle of the school year – many girls leaving school.

- Parents often don't feel strategies to support continued education through displacement (host family and family regrouping) are appropriate or safe for girls.
- Trauma related to violence, displacement and resulting hardship – need for psychological support, which is not met by school programmes/untrained teachers, even when girls return to school.
- Overprotective attitude – insecurity affecting decision-making, parents being selective around education of their children.
 - Lack of alternatives for supporting displaced girls – families aren't confident of host families, especially during puberty.
 - Idea that girls shouldn't suffer material needs to continue studies, but because of the crisis, parents don't have a way to meet these needs.
 - Strengthened norm to prioritise boys' education during crisis. In context of school closures, saturation of school capacity and lack of financial means, girls are the first to leave school; belief that boys can manage even when far from their parents.

Flora Koné, youth researcher and active member of JAPAME, Burkina Faso

- Promising practice and gaps in government response in Niger:
 - Creation of school assembly centres and reception schools have increased enrolment; but lack of holistic support (for food and school supplies).
 - Displaced girls who re-enrol have lower school attainment.
 - Insufficient and poorly distributed material support, limited to primary schools.
- Promising practice and gaps in government response in Burkina Faso:
 - Government overlooking non-official IDP reception sites has a negative effect on girls' ability to continue their education.
 - Limited application of emergency education policy – mostly focused on school feeding, with limited school grants in official sites.
 - Sustainability of funding for education is in question, as it's mostly provided by non-governmental organisation and charities.
- IDP girls – mental health, psychological trauma, feeling of insecurity and restricted freedoms, separation from families.
- Frustration around lack of resources – girls adopt other strategies to access resources, and this affects education, like paid domestic work and transactional sex.
- Security crisis has increased risk of child marriage.

Flora & Teoma

- Recommendations:
 - Strengthen mechanisms for supporting IDP girls, ensuring registration of those living in official and non official sites
 - Strengthen the establishment and financing of emergency education policies, with an emphasis on integrated and gender-transformative approaches for IDP girls.
 - Systematically include girls' voices (especially IDP girls) in policies and programmes, for sustainable development.
 - Strengthen support for education sector actors to better support IDP girls.
 - Integrate mental health into IDP girls' return to school.

Aicha

Conclusions:

- Need education budget and implementation to match demand.
- Need to engage in how to improve the quantity *and* quality of policies and budgets for emergency education, especially for resilience of IDP girls.
- Advocacy must continue during and after crises. Civil society must continue to insist the government – whether transitional or not – meets commitments to girls' right to education.

Q&A

Masculinities and working with boys and men – how to do this with husbands/partners

- Mehreen – don't have any curriculum directed at husbands; how to equip team to assess what an "offending" or "non-offending" husband looks like. Important to work with men in general – community outreach includes husbands. Community Communication Guide touches on adolescent girls' safety etc.

Changing social norms – adolescent girls' sexuality

- Mehreen – through piloting found significant and quick shift in redistribution of domestic chores. Also found:
 - Changed behaviour to support girls during menstruation – girls who were married getting more support from mother-in-law
 - Not forcing girls to get pregnant so quickly, and acknowledging that they were still young and needed time to mature before having children

- Because of girls' (lack of) freedom of movement – especially for married girls who were really restricted to the home – it was very difficult to engage them, through work with in-laws, girls could participate in Girl Shine and access more opportunities, services and connect with friends and support networks
- Girls able to influence decision-making around marriage – feeling equipped and empowered to negotiate with caregivers around timing of marriage.

How to support girls' mental health and be sensitive to sexual violence

- Teoma – more integrated approach; think about educational structure, identify cases and then put in place a support mechanism; raise awareness of girls and teachers for wrap-around support.

Impact of youth-led research

- Aicha – the evidence generated through the research was designed to influence advocacy at the community and national levels – social norms, financial/technical information; research/project report will be published in September in French and English.
- Flora – report should support change in behaviour; work with the Burkina Faso coalition and JAPAM at all levels, even though the research report hasn't been published yet, they've started taking action. Young people are responsible for stability and wellbeing of future generations, so they've organised workshops for young researchers to present findings, and think through strategy for the network to put into action (advocacy); as young researchers, they have a network to take responsibility for action to end child marriage.

Working with religious and traditional leaders

- Mehreen: Girl Shine outreach strategy addresses working with religious and community leaders, from initial outreach to ongoing trust and relationship building, supporting practitioners to identify which leaders will be most supportive of the work, and strengthening those relationships.

Related resources

- [Girl Shine](#) tools and resources, and [online training](#).
- *Girls Not Brides*, 2020, [Child marriage in humanitarian contexts](#).
- *Girls Not Brides*, 2023, [Preventing conflict-related sexual violence is possible and requires urgent action](#).
- *Girls Not Brides*, 2023, [8 ways to address child marriage in conflict- and crisis-affected settings](#).
- The CRANK, 2022, [CRANK research spotlight, Child marriage in humanitarian settings and challenging gender norms to end child marriage](#).

- The CRANK, 2023, [Evidence review: Child marriage interventions and research from 2020 to 2022](#), *Girls Not Brides* and the UNFPA-UNICEF Global Programme to End Child Marriage.
- The CRANK, 2023, [CRANK research spotlight: Addressing child marriage and supporting married girls in conflict- and crisis-affected settings](#), *Girls Not Brides* and the UNFPA-UNICEF Global Programme to End Child Marriage.
- The CRANK, 2023, [CRANK research meeting: Child marriage in conflict- and crisis-affected settings – Learning from the latest evidence](#), *Girls Not Brides* and the UNFPA-UNICEF Global Programme to End Child Marriage.
- The CRANK, 2023, [CRANK research spotlight: How to ensure efforts to address child marriage reach the most marginalised girls](#), *Girls Not Brides* and the UNFPA-UNICEF Global Programme to End Child Marriage.