

# Research Spotlight:

## Education interventions to address child marriage and support married girls



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To prevent child marriage and support married girls, the World Health Organisation (WHO) strongly recommends implementing interventions to remove gender-based barriers to education and ensure girls' completion of 12 years of quality education. In this brief, we look at the evidence behind this recommendation, and the implications for policy and programmatic work and research. We also offer additional evidence, insights and practical tools to support implementation of such interventions.

### The evidence: Where it is from and how we can use it



In 2011, the WHO published a set of [guidelines](#) on preventing early pregnancy and poor reproductive outcomes in adolescents. In 2023, they commissioned a review of the evidence to update these guidelines, including a focus on effective interventions, promising practice and recommendations to prevent child marriage and support married girls. The guidelines are organised around seven core themes: cash transfers, economic empowerment, education, girls' empowerment, the law, meaningful youth engagement and social norms.

In this brief, we look at the evidence drawn from **17 studies** focused on educational interventions to expand access and quality, and their impact on child marriage prevalence. We then outline the implications of this evidence, identify gaps, and suggest other areas for investigation and resources to support programme and policy work.

The study selection criteria was rigorous, so some valuable sources of evidence – like context-specific work at the national level – were not rated high enough for inclusion. We draw on a broader evidence base to inform the discussion section. We draw on a broader evidence base to inform the discussion section. The full list of studies and criteria for selection are in the Population Council brief (forthcoming).

### Seventeen studies on education interventions

#### Most focused on:

- National-scale interventions for school-age girls.
- West, Central, East and Southern Africa, and South Asia.
- The impact of programmes to remove financial barriers to education, including tuition fee elimination policies in primary and secondary school, vouchers/stipends for secondary school costs, school supplies/uniforms, incentives for school attendance (e.g. school feeding or food-for-education programmes).

#### Some focused on:

- Targeted interventions based on risk factors like poverty, orphan status and rurality.
- School construction to increase access and quality of school infrastructure.
- Policy changes to expand access.
- Life skills/HIV curricula in schools.

#### Few or none focused on:

- Quality of education.
- Supporting girls who are – or have been – married or in a union (ever-married girls).
- Latin America and the Caribbean.
- Education in conflict- and/or crisis-affected settings.
- Education beyond school.



### Why focus on education and child marriage?

In almost every context, education is a protective factor against child marriage: the longer a girl stays in school, the less likely she is to marry before age 18.<sup>1</sup> So, educational interventions support girls' access to quality education as an alternative to marriage.<sup>2</sup> There is growing evidence that access to schooling can delay marriage for girls through multiple pathways, including:

**1.** In contexts where marriage and education are mutually exclusive, just being in school can be enough to prevent child marriage.

**2.** In school, girls acquire skills, confidence, connections and new opportunities outside the home, expanding their aspirations beyond marriage.

**3.** A critical mass of girls going to school can transform social norms in families and communities to expand opportunities for girls.



## Key findings: The impact of education on child marriage

**Most educational interventions contribute to reduced child marriage**, with 11 of the 17 studies showing a statistically significant impact.



**Successful educational interventions often include tuition fee elimination policies for primary and secondary school.** Removing financial barriers – beyond fees – can also have broad impacts on schooling and child marriage outcomes, particularly for the girls who have been most marginalised. In Bangladesh, a national secondary school scholarship scheme for adolescent girls – conditional on them not marrying before age 18 – led to more girls staying in school and delaying marriage: the percentage of girls aged 11 to 19 who were ever married decreased from 35.6% in 1992 to 31.7% in 1995.<sup>3</sup>



**Increased access to secondary school can lower child marriage prevalence**, with consistent evidence from Bangladesh,<sup>4</sup> Colombia,<sup>5</sup> Liberia, Tanzania, Uganda<sup>6</sup> and Turkey.<sup>7</sup> Fee-free secondary school may be more effective at reducing child marriage and childbearing than free primary education alone. Evidence from Liberia, Tanzania and Uganda found the probability of marriage before age 18 was three percentage points less with fee-free secondary education, compared to free primary only.<sup>8</sup>



**In addition to national-level policies for all school-age girls, programmes that target those most at risk can also be effective in closing opportunity gaps and reducing child marriage.** This includes removing financial barriers beyond school fees. In Zimbabwe, adolescent girls without parents were 63% less likely to marry after two years of support for school fees, uniforms, supplies and a programme monitor, compared to the control group.<sup>9</sup>



## What this means for policy and programming



**National-level policy interventions to remove school fees may be a promising approach to improve educational outcomes and child marriage prevention at scale, but other financial barriers also need to be addressed.** Additional costs to education – like uniforms, books, exams and transport – may lead families to prioritise boys' education when struggling to pay. These financial barriers should be removed for all children, alongside targeted interventions that take account of context and focus on the girls most at risk of child marriage and/or who face the greatest barriers to education, including ever-married girls.



**Girls' transition and access to secondary school is a key area for investment.** Most countries now provide fee-free primary education, which is essential for girls to progress to secondary level. Fee-free secondary education may be effective because it serves adolescent girls at an age when they are at increased risk of child marriage, and/or because this level of schooling is more likely to improve their labour market prospects.<sup>10</sup>



**The impact of education on child marriage may be limited in settings where adolescent girls and women cannot translate this into longer-term economic opportunities**, as shown in Malawi,<sup>11</sup> and/or where social norms discourage women's employment.<sup>12</sup>



## Let's discuss! Further insights and priorities to fill the gaps

Due to the rigorous selection criteria, gaps and limitations exist in the high-certainty evidence above, from the individual to the relational and systems/services levels. There is also limited evidence on the role of education in multicomponent programmatic approaches to child marriage. Below we offer additional evidence and insights on these themes, drawn from the broader evidence base. You can use the themes and areas for consideration as prompts for further discussion and research, and to ensure your work is informed by the existing evidence.

### 1. Girls' access to education is influenced by the quality, accessibility and safety of school facilities, transport and interventions beyond school. Areas to consider include:

- The need for safe, gender-sensitive and accessible boarding and sanitation facilities for girls – in all their diversity – to manage their menstrual hygiene, and how inadequate facilities can increase the risk of gender-based violence (GBV), affect girls' sense of safety, and their retention and performance in school.<sup>13</sup>
- The potential of safe spaces to support the girls who have been most marginalised – including ever-married girls and girls in conflict- and crisis-affected settings – to build peer networks and access vocational training and economic support. They also offer an entry point to access key services – like GBV prevention and response – and introduce comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) and dialogue around child marriage.<sup>14</sup>

### 2. The impact of education quality on child marriage prevalence and girls' rights is understudied, but 12 years of quality education is widely thought to be essential to girls' retention and performance in school, and transition to safe, secure, paid work. Areas to consider include:

- The impact of a gender-transformative school environment, curriculum and teaching that challenge discriminatory social norms and GBV, contribute to safer school environments<sup>15</sup> and increase opportunities for girls and women.<sup>16</sup> Such approaches also promote stereotype-defying role models for girls and boys, and encourage girls to study science, engineering, technology and maths subjects.<sup>17</sup>
- The impact of linking age-appropriate CSE to broader discussions of power, information on sexual behaviour, prevention of early pregnancy and where and how to access sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) services.<sup>18</sup>
- The role of education quality in girls' transition to safe, secure, paid work. This is influenced by social norms around what subjects and vocational training girls can do, so requires broad systemic change to challenge gender discrimination and policy interventions to increase economic opportunities for girls and women and support their transition to secure and productive livelihoods. A blended response – with formal and informal educational elements – may be most effective at building girls' foundational (numeracy, literacy), transferable (critical thinking, communication) and technical skills.<sup>19</sup>
- The negative impact of school-related GBV on girls' – and particularly adolescent girls' – access to and performance in education, as they try to avoid unwanted attention from teachers and peers.<sup>20</sup>

### 3. Gender and social norms define girls' value and expected roles; the impact can be most acute for adolescent girls who are married, pregnant and/or parenting. Areas to consider include:

- The role of feminist participatory approaches to education and the effectiveness of engaging students, families, community members and teachers in creating, piloting and implementing education models and materials that critically address gender norms and child marriage.<sup>21</sup>
- The gendered division of unpaid domestic and care work, how this changes after marriage and/or childbirth, its impacts on girls' access to and retention in education, and how girls' role as caregivers is recognised in care systems and intersects with the legal right to care.<sup>22</sup> Unpaid work may also increase for girls during health emergencies and/or when health systems are inadequate. Girls aged 10 to 14 spend 50% more time on unpaid domestic and care work than boys;<sup>23</sup> and girls who are married or in a union spend more than twice as much time on unpaid work as their unmarried peers, impacting on their education and aspirations.<sup>24</sup>
- The impact of stigma and judgement from families, peers and teachers for ever-married, pregnant and/or parenting girls returning to school.<sup>25</sup> In addition to linking with social norms interventions, educational interventions should consider the psychological, justice, legal, SRHR, financial and childcare support needs of these girls.<sup>26</sup>
- The taboo around menstruation and how this affects girls' attendance and enjoyment of education,<sup>27</sup> and how this can be addressed through gender-transformative educational curricula.
- The specific risks faced by LGBTQIA+ adolescents and people with disabilities, and tailored support for them to continue their education and enter the workplace.<sup>28</sup>

#### **4. Education interventions should protect against shocks and support girls in conflict- and crisis-affected settings, where they face additional financial, legal and structural barriers to access.**

Areas to consider include:

- The legal and structural barriers to displaced and refugee girls' access to education, including educational policies that exclude them, lack of civil registration systems, language in host schools, lack of vocational opportunities.<sup>29</sup>
- The potential of cash support,<sup>30</sup> school feeding programmes, non-formal programming, skills training, online modules, group sessions and radio edutainment to ensure girls' access to education during and after crisis.<sup>31</sup> Evening classes may increase access for married girls, but only if they can get there and back safely.
- The role of environmental crises in disrupting education and how this drives child marriage, particularly for girls from rural populations reliant on the local environment for their livelihood. Responses need to address this at the local, national and global levels before, during and after crisis.<sup>32</sup>

#### **5. There is increasing evidence that girls' education plays a key role in the success of multicomponent interventions, including around child marriage. Areas to consider include:**

- Successful examples from India<sup>33</sup> and Bangladesh,<sup>34</sup> which combined SRHR, education and economic empowerment/livelihood components to reduce child marriage prevalence and advance girls' rights.
- Gender-transformative, whole-system approaches may be most effective at addressing the multi-dimensional drivers of child marriage and barriers to girls' education. Such approaches bring political leaders together with diverse stakeholders, and embed gender equality in national plans, policies and budgets to promote sustainable change.<sup>35</sup>
- Economic opportunities and the transition to decent paid work for adolescent girls and young women. Education and safe space programming needs to link with social norms and economic livelihood programming to promote girls' access; assess the risks of new, different or non-traditional vocational training; provide small grants and tailored start-up kits, and promote referrals and partnerships with livelihood economic empowerment programmes.<sup>36</sup> Thought should also be given to workplace discrimination faced by LGBTQIA+ people and people with disabilities.
- Combined unconditional cash transfers and conditional or labelled transfers for education may be most effective at reducing the risk of child marriage and early sexual debut, but complementary investment in education and other social services is also needed.<sup>37</sup>
- The influence of social media and peer networks in girls' attendance and acceptance of programme content, and decision-making around education and child marriage. Safe spaces and peer networks are essential elements of interventions working with displaced and refugee girls, whose support networks may have been disrupted.<sup>38</sup>
- Emerging evidence shows that minimum age of marriage laws are more impactful when implemented alongside policies that increase educational opportunities for girls.<sup>39</sup>

#### **6. The way research is done and valued shapes what evidence is available and used.**

Areas to consider include:

- The impact of a knowledge system that privileges research and researchers based in academic institutions in the Global North. This may exclude context-specific, girl-centred, youth-led work<sup>40</sup> and evidence from locations facing infrastructural and/or security constraints.
- The potential for learning from smaller-scale pilots in areas where there is promising but nascent evidence of impact; adaptations of promising programmes and frameworks in different contexts; efforts to scale up promising interventions; and larger-scale or state-run interventions.
- The need to pilot and evaluate new approaches to child marriage programming, allowing for the testing of different approaches and with room for a degree of failure.



## Practical tools to support policy and programmatic work on child marriage and girls' education

- Plan International, Transform Education, UNGEI and UNICEF, 2021, [Gender-transformative education: Reimagining education for a more just and inclusive world](#).
- More Than Brides, 2022, [Visualisation tool: Assessing the girl friendliness of schools](#)
- IICRD, 2021, [Shifting norms around violence in schools: A guide for trainers and facilitators working with children and young people](#).
- Plan International, 2020, [Gender responsive pedagogy teacher training: The case for holistic investment in girls](#).
- UNGEI, Global Partnership for Education, 2023, [Guidance for developing gender-responsive education sector plans](#).
- UNFPA, 2018, [International technical guidance on sexuality education](#), UNESCO, UNAID, UNFPA, UNICEF, UNWomen, WHO.
- UNFPA, 2020, [International technical guidance and programmatic guidance on out-of-school comprehensive sexuality education \(CSE\)](#).
- UNFPA and UNICEF, 2019, [Technical note on life skills programmes for empowering adolescent girls: Notes for practitioners on what works](#)
- Global campaign for Education, Education International and ActionAid, 2016, [Financing matters: A toolkit on domestic financing for education](#).
- Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack:
  - [Resource bank](#) of tools to support the implementation of the Safe Schools Declaration.
  - [Toolkit](#) for collecting and analysing data on attacks on education.

### Spaces for learning:

- [ALIGN platform](#): A digital platform focusing on resources for gender justice and equality, with resources on child marriage, education, GBV, social norms and more.
- [UNGEI knowledge hub](#): A digital library with learning content relating to gender in education, including collections around [school-related GBV](#) and [education in emergencies](#).
- [UNGEI learning series](#): Designed to build evidence, promote good practice and facilitate intergenerational knowledge sharing on gender equality and education.



## Help us build a more inclusive evidence base

We are committed to building a more diverse, inclusive evidence base on what works to address child marriage and advance girls' rights. To be a part of it, you can:

- Submit your research to the Child Marriage Research to Action Network (the CRANK) for inclusion in an online research tracker.
- [Sign up](#) to the CRANK for resources and opportunities to participate in quarterly research meetings.

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