

# Research Spotlight:



## Girls' empowerment

# 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) conditionally recommends implementing interventions to empower girls by building their knowledge, skills, assets and social networks. The appropriateness of this recommendation is conditional on context (conditions) and the individual involved (circumstances). In this Research Spotlight, 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, UNFPA and the WHO 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: [economic empowerment](#), [education](#), girls' empowerment, incentive schemes, the law, meaningful youth engagement and social norms.

In this Research Spotlight, we look at the evidence drawn from 17 studies focused on **girls' empowerment interventions** 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 were 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. The full list of studies and selection criteria are in the upcoming Population Council brief.

## What is covered by the 17 studies

### All or most focused on:

- Multicomponent programmes facilitated through girls' groups/safe spaces, adult female mentors and/or peer education, and including a combination of:
  - Skills-building (livelihood, financial, vocational).
  - Access to information (sexual and reproductive health and rights – SRHR – and gender rights).
  - Resources (micro-credit, cash transfers).
  - Social support (networks, relationships).
- South Asia, and East and Southern Africa.

### Some focused on:

- West and Central Africa, and the Middle East and North Africa.

### Few or none focused on:

- Latin America and the Caribbean.
- Supporting girls who are – or have been – married or in a union (ever-married girls).
- Supporting girls in conflict- and/or crisis-affected settings, including through safe space programming.



## Why focus on girls' empowerment and child marriage?

Empowerment interventions aim to increase girls' agency – that is, their ability to make and act on their decisions – and ensure they have the resources, knowledge and skills to avoid child marriage.<sup>1</sup> These girl-focused interventions can influence child marriage outcomes through three pathways:

### 1. Internal transformation:

Participation in the intervention can build girls' awareness of their rights, opportunities and alternatives to child marriage.<sup>2</sup>

### 2. Reducing risks and expanding opportunities:

Building girls' protective assets – like resources, knowledge, skills and social support – can reduce girls' risks and expand opportunities.<sup>3</sup>

### 3. Building solidarity and influencing others:

Increasing girls' mobility, visibility and voice at home and in the community can promote wider change.<sup>4</sup>



## Key findings: The impact of girls' empowerment on child marriage



**Some girls' empowerment interventions contribute to reduced child marriage**, with six of the 17 studies showing a statistically significant impact in Bangladesh,<sup>5</sup> Ethiopia,<sup>6</sup> India,<sup>7</sup> Liberia,<sup>8</sup> Malawi, Mali, Niger<sup>9</sup> and Uganda.<sup>10</sup>



**Successful empowerment interventions often include girls' groups, life-skills/livelihoods training, non-formal education and gender rights/empowerment training**, but it can be difficult to isolate the relative impact of different intervention components or identify which component was effective in reducing child marriage. Layering microfinance services onto an adolescent development programme can increase inclusion of youth in financial services.<sup>11</sup>



**There is stronger evidence to support girl-centred asset or skill-building interventions than movement-building approaches.** The BALIKA programme in Bangladesh found that enhancing girls' skills – of any type – significantly reduced the risk of child marriage. Key components for success included skills training, safe spaces, access to trusted mentors and community engagement around building adolescents' skills.<sup>12</sup>



**The success of girls' empowerment programming depends on context and investment (of time and resources).** The Empowerment and Livelihoods for Adolescents (ELA) programme was effective in reducing child marriage in Bangladesh and Uganda,<sup>13</sup> but had no effect on child marriage in Tanzania. This was likely due to financial and time constraints to implementation in Tanzania, leading to a lack of secure private spaces for hosting girls' clubs, limited mentor training and supervision, and a lack of in-kind support – like seeds or tools – for livelihood training.<sup>14</sup>



## What this means for policy and programming



**The barriers, needs and resources in different contexts need to be assessed before implementation begins**, even when replicating or scaling up successful programmes.<sup>15</sup>



**Additional components to an existing, effective intervention can be layered and evaluated as "add-ons" to isolate and assess their effects**, while still delivering an impactful programme.



## Let's discuss! Key considerations for programming

Due to the rigorous selection criteria, gaps and limitations exist in the evidence above, from the individual to the relational and systems/services levels. 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. Safe spaces may be an effective way to engage and support girls to build their knowledge, skills, social support – through mentors and peer networks – and access to services, so reducing the risk of child marriage and expanding their opportunities.** Some demand-side areas to consider include:

- **Designated safe spaces – delivered by trained mentors and facilitators – can be girls' and adolescents' only opportunity to feel secure, able to make choices that affect their lives and connect with support services and activities.** This is particularly true where adolescent girls have limited agency and control, or where social and legal structures and support networks and services are disrupted – as during COVID-19,<sup>16</sup> conflict<sup>17</sup> or environmental crisis.<sup>18</sup>
- **Safe spaces for girls' empowerment programming can offer girls the opportunity to build their foundational, transferable, technical and vocational skills** in settings where their opportunities are restricted by marginalisation, poor formal education, or instability or crisis.<sup>19</sup>
- **Existing girl-only spaces – established through other development programming, at schools, community or health centres – may provide entry points** for introducing comprehensive sexuality education and conversations around the risks of and alternatives to child marriage, particularly in humanitarian settings where rapid intervention is both challenging and critical.<sup>20</sup>

- **Ever-married girls and young mothers may benefit from having their own, separate groups and tailored activities and curricula – to ensure they know how and where to access vital services, support and information that meets their needs** – in addition to the involvement of mothers-in-law within these spaces where girls feel this would be helpful.<sup>21</sup>
- **Girls and parents in conflict- and crisis-affected settings – or where traditional education is not effective – may prioritise livelihood, skills development and economic support over girls’ empowerment.**<sup>22</sup> Girls’ perceptions of future employability can also impact other decisions that can be protective of child marriage, like contraception use.<sup>23</sup> This has implications for safe space programming, which often focuses on girls’ empowerment and links with SRHR rather than alternative education or economic empowerment.<sup>24</sup> Choices for activities might include non-traditional vocational training, providing small grants and tailored start-up kits, and referrals and partnerships with external livelihood empowerment programmes.<sup>25</sup> See consideration areas 3 and 5 for more on systemic change.
- **Girls’ access to safe spaces may be restricted by partners and other male family members when activities do not align with traditional gender norms.**<sup>26</sup> Such programmes need to link with support for girls to complete higher education, work with families and communities to address the gender norms that limit girls’ opportunities, and greater, more equitable female labour force participation.<sup>27</sup>
- **Peer support-focused activities may be more effective in improving the health and empowerment of (ever-married) girls, and more likely to be sustained if implemented as part of a multisectoral, rights-based, contextually grounded programme,** including norms-based interventions and economic support.<sup>28</sup>
- **Investing in training and coaching safe space female mentors and facilitators from the community** can help strengthen women’s leadership, as role models and advocates for girls over the long term.

## 2. **Where girls’ empowerment interventions promote group solidarity among adolescent girls and also link with community structures and traditions, shifts in child marriage-related practices can be scaled and sustained.**<sup>29</sup>

With expanded rights and agency, girls can themselves promote greater community acceptance with less individual risk.<sup>30</sup> Areas to consider include:

- **The strength of solidarity and safety within peer groups,** based on peer-facilitated reflective dialogues rather than (the more common) peer-based learning.<sup>31</sup>
- **The support families and communities can offer to adolescent girls** – including married girls – and the role they can play in shifting norms and sustaining behaviour change over the longer term.<sup>32</sup> Access to familial, community and peer support networks also impacts girls’ resilience in conflict- and crisis-affected contexts.<sup>33</sup> Success factors include:
  - **A culturally relevant curriculum** developed in consultation with girls and community members.<sup>34</sup>
  - **Anchoring social norms change interventions in existing women’s collectives** – like self-help groups – to build girls’ and women’s individual and collective agency to resist social norms, and improve intergenerational dialogue and relationships, including between mothers and daughters.<sup>35</sup>
  - **A holistic approach to community engagement,** which includes community and religious leaders – who can make powerful agents of change, with influence over parent and community norms<sup>36</sup> – community service providers, parents, mothers-in-law and husbands/partners.<sup>37</sup>
  - **A critical mass of community/place-based women** who could challenge norms without putting individuals at risk.<sup>38</sup> See more on working with women’s rights organisations under consideration area 3 below.
- **Engaging boys and men – and other leaders and gatekeepers – can be critical in reducing backlash.**<sup>39</sup> It is important that these efforts do not decentre girls’ and adolescents’ needs, voices or leadership.<sup>40</sup> Engagement could include:
  - Supporting brothers and fathers to understand how they can **help create more time for girls to study.**
  - Working to **decouple men’s status from daughter’s sexual purity** and “successful” marriage.
  - Raising awareness about the **practical advantages of an adult wife.**
  - Encouraging **more equitable household decision-making** and approaches to raising sons.<sup>41</sup>
- **Engaging with family-level norms around marriage and gender equality more broadly is likely even more critical in conflict- and crisis-affected settings,** where stress and insecurity can exacerbate harmful behaviours. Violence within the natal home is as powerful a driver of child marriage as violence caused by conflict and displacement, though the latter has received more focus in research.<sup>42</sup>

## 3. **Girls are also in dynamic relationship with the systems around them; ensuring these systems support girls’ rights and agency means working in partnership across levels and sectors.** Areas to consider include:

- **Exploring partnerships to integrate or link girls’ empowerment with SRHR, norms-based or economic support-focused interventions** that build girls’ and women’s access to services and opportunities, sharing information and building support through community engagement and outreach activities.<sup>43</sup> This could include working with safe space intervention teams and service providers to enhance their knowledge and capacities in gender-transformative approaches, so they can better respond to adolescent girls’ needs.<sup>44</sup>

- **Working with women's rights organisations (WRO), women-led organisations (WLO) and feminist movements** to shift social norms around gendered social expectations, divisions of labour and women's self-confidence. These organisations should be meaningfully included in programming, governance and decision-making alongside the girls and women affected.<sup>45</sup>
- **Advocating for predictable, long-term, flexible funding to respond to girls' and women's evolving needs and changing contexts**, recognising safe spaces as core protection, empowerment and gender-transformative interventions. Such funds should also be intentionally directed to frontline responders – including WROs and WLOs – and those who have been most marginalised, including ever-married, pregnant and parenting girls, LGBTQIA+ individuals, girls with disabilities and those affected by conflict and crisis.<sup>46</sup>
- When engaging with national governments and donors, **looking for opportunities to embed adolescent girls' and women's empowerment and gender-transformative approaches into emerging priority/work areas**, particularly around (climate) crisis, green growth, eco-tourism or renewable energies.<sup>47</sup> See the CRANK Research Spotlight on [economic empowerment](#) for more on state-led efforts to improve adolescent girls' and women's economic security, independence and equality.

#### 4. **Girls may be supportive of child marriage due to many and complex practical, cultural and emotional factors; failure to recognise and respond to this may limit a programme's success.** Areas to consider include:

- **Girls' empowerment programmes can provide an opportunity to better understand girls' and adolescents' agency, and decision-making processes around child marriage.** Girls' decision-making may be influenced by gendered social norms and factors like their economic dependence on men, a perceived increase in their status as wives and mothers, or as a means of escaping violence in their natal home. Social norms often become more pronounced and rigid in conflict- and crisis-affected settings, putting girls who transgress them at increased risk of violence.<sup>48</sup> Empowerment programmes must be based on an assessment of these factors, of girls' power to influence them, whether and what acceptable alternative pathways already exist, and what opportunities there are to create genuine alternatives, like educational or employment opportunities.<sup>49</sup>
- **Involving girls – including ever-married girls – in the design, delivery and monitoring of empowerment or safe spaces can help ensure their needs are met and restrictive norms are not replicated.** Promising practices include establishing safe space committees with girls and community members, conducting regular focus group discussions and formal/informal consultations, using girl-friendly evaluation tools – including in-person, Facebook and WhatsApp – and adapting activities to girls' changing priorities.<sup>50</sup>
- **Interactive, girl-centred life skills sessions can support girls to build relationships of trust with their female mentors, peers and caregivers.** They can also be an entry point for girls to learn about gender, power and their rights, to shift their own perceptions around child marriage and gender roles more broadly, and to practice different social and emotional skills, including how to influence decisions.<sup>51</sup>

#### 5. **The ability of girls' empowerment programmes to have a sustained impact on girls' and adolescents' wellbeing may depend on their situation, and the constraints and enablers they face.** Areas to consider include:

- **The social and economic barriers – at individual, family and community levels – to girls' participation, and gender norms that normalise child marriage.** Grounding activities in local context, systems and services, and supporting girls to access programme activities are likely necessary ingredients for programme success, particularly where prevalence is high, households are insecure or in communities with high levels of acceptability and experience of violence.<sup>53</sup> Solutions include:
  - Working with community/place-based actors to **contextualise and adapt** proven and promising methodologies, recognising how power and agency are negotiated and considering risks like conflict-related sexual violence, and domestic and intimate partner violence.<sup>54</sup>
  - Household-level **cash transfers/financial support** for girls and their caregivers,<sup>55</sup> potentially combined with gender-transformative mentoring to promote adolescent wellbeing.<sup>56</sup>
  - **Childcare** or – as a minimum – infant/child-friendly meeting spaces to support participation by young mothers.<sup>57</sup>
  - Integrating or linking with **complementary interventions** around attitudes and gender norms. See consideration area 4 for more on gender norms.
  - Engaging **husbands, male family and community members.**<sup>58</sup> See consideration area 2 for more on male engagement.
  - Addressing the **SRHR needs of married girls and young mothers** through empowerment and multicomponent programmes that also address the psychosocial, economic and norms-based barriers to health care.
- **The opportunities and risks involved in girls' widespread use of social media and mobile technology to build and maintain peer support networks, and to access information around security and service provision.**<sup>59</sup> Solutions include enhancing girls' digital literacy, critical thinking skills and safe online behaviours to support them to use social media safely, while avoiding situations that may lead to child marriage and other harmful outcomes.<sup>60</sup>

## 6. The way research on girls' empowerment is designed and carried out 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>61</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.
- **More research – including evaluations of existing interventions – is needed,** including:
  - Working with girls (where possible) to **develop girl-led research,** and/or to engage girls in research methodology development, data gathering and evaluation processes, especially in conflict- and crisis-affected settings.<sup>62</sup>
  - **Co-produced research with intervention communities,** and deeper engagement with those who have direct experience of child marriage.<sup>63</sup>
  - On the role of **facilitating girls' peer networks** as a way to support their mental health, and the benefits of pairing this with household-level norms-based interventions. Particular attention should be paid to displacement settings and the heightened needs of ever-married, pregnant and parenting girls.
  - On **what makes safe space interventions most effective at reducing or responding to child marriage in humanitarian settings.** This is important, given their potential to offer access to a wide range of social, health, and economic information and services, and the value placed on safe spaces by girls.<sup>64</sup>
  - **Solutions-oriented research** designed to generate practical learning and evidence on what works to address child marriage.<sup>65</sup>
  - See “Lets fill the research gaps” box on p. 1!



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

- She's the First has a [hub for girl-centred programmes](#), a [Just for girls](#) area, and many [girl-centred tools and resources](#), including:
  - the [What would you do?](#) game to inspire healthy relationships,
  - a [Feminist mentorship manual](#),
  - a [Listening to girls toolkit](#).
- EMpower [Learning together toolkit](#) for individuals and organisations planning girl-centred programmes.
- [Launch Girls](#) for girl-centred entrepreneurship programming.
- International Rescue Committee and International Medical Corps [women and girls' safe spaces toolkit](#) for advancing women's and girls' empowerment in humanitarian settings.
- International Rescue Committee's [Girl Shine](#) resources to support work on gender-based violence with adolescent girls – including married girls – in humanitarian settings, including a self-paced [training](#).
- Norwegian Church Aid's [ENGAGE](#) lifeskills and group curriculum for girls, boys, parents, teachers, religious and community leaders in humanitarian settings.
- Plan International's [adolescent programming toolkit](#) and [parenting and adolescent life skills programme](#) for teams supporting adolescents and their caregivers in emergency and protracted crises.
- Save the Children's [Girls Decide lifeskills curriculum](#) for work with girls in migration and/or displacement settings.
- The [SenseMaker](#) storytelling tool to allow the narrator to analyse their own story in real time to give it deeper meaning.
- CARE Tipping Point [intervention package](#) for synchronised engagement with girls and their families and communities, including a [structured allyship manual](#).
- *Girls Not Brides* [Stand Up, Speak Out!](#) youth activism training guides.
- International Rescue Committee's [Why wait?](#) report on how the humanitarian system can better fund women-led and women's rights organisations.



## 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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