

“My child marriage free community challenge”

Organisation

Regional Network of the Children and Young People Trust (RNCYPT)

Country

Zimbabwe, Manicaland and Mashonaland West Provinces

Length of project

January 2016– December 2019

Supported by

Implementing partners: Raffingora Child Led Group, Katiyo Child Led Organization

Technical and financial partners: members affiliated to RNCYPT, African Movement of Working Children and Youth

Project summary

As part of its Girls and Young Women Empowerment programme, the youth-led organisation Regional Network of the Children and Young People Trust (RNCYPT) is running a project called “*my child marriage free community challenge*”. The initiative is implemented in rural agricultural communities in two provinces of Zimbabwe where child marriage is highly prevalent, including in Mashonaland West, which has the highest rate of child marriage before age 15 in the country (7.1%). The project aims to challenge traditional and religious leaders to address child marriage and promote girls’ empowerment in their communities.

What are the anticipated outcomes, as identified in the *Girls Not Brides* Theory of Change?

- Men prefer not to marry girls who are still children
- Families and communities prefer not to marry girls as children
- Families, communities and young people are increasingly aware of the harmful impact of child marriage and alternatives available
- Girls are increasingly aware of their rights
- Increased access of married and unmarried girls to health, education, economic and legal support

What are the key steps of the project?

Identifying the issue and who to work with

In their early days, RNCYPT realised that many girls who got married and/or dropped out from school belonged to some Apostolic sects. In response to this, the organisation discussed with youth-led groups and teachers to help them identify how they could approach influential leaders in the Apostolic communities, and encourage them to act for the wellbeing of girls in their community. Traditional and religious leaders play a key role in many aspects of a community's life and they thus have the ability to influence attitudes and behaviours. Therefore, RNCYPT saw a great potential in engaging them in their efforts to address deeply entrenched practices such as child marriage. Throughout this project, RNCYPT has noticed that once religious and traditional leaders take a stand against child marriage and share information about girls' rights within their communities, it creates an environment in which girls are supported by the community, and can effectively participate in empowerment activities. The organisation also plans to work with communities professing other religions in these provinces.

Involving traditional and religious leaders from the beginning

As a first step, RNCYPT meets with traditional and religious leaders and, one by one, provides them with information on child marriage. As such, they inform them about existing research in their country (including the high incidence of child marriage in the Apostolic communities), share insights from their conversations with other members of the communities, and explain the harmful consequences of child marriage for girls. When traditional and religious leaders recognise that this is an issue that needs to be addressed, RNCYPT then organises regular training sessions to provide them with information on many issues including child and women's rights, the laws in place in the country and the benefits of keeping girls in schools. These sessions also build the capacity of traditional and religious leaders to raise awareness, build resilience, mobilise community members and develop child protection mechanisms within their own communities. In order for this project to be successful, another important step is to develop and sign memorandums of understanding with traditional leaders and local and rural councils, to define all the activities that will take place during and after the project as well as the working modalities.

Organising a challenge between leaders

The next step in the project consists in organising a community challenge. Once leaders have completed their training, RNCYPT organises a competition between religious and traditional leaders from different communities. For RNCYPT, this step is fundamental as child marriage is so deeply rooted in traditions and beliefs that only a collective effort can be successful in addressing it. By taking part in these challenges, community members know that other communities are taking action, which encourage them not just to do the same but to do it in a better way. For example, some traditional leaders – who usually are in charge of running traditional courts - have started reporting cases of child marriage and publicly supported education for girls. Religious leaders have used various ways to address child marriage in their communities. For example, they have raised awareness in their churches, created girls' clubs to allow girls to gather in safe places and have brought different groups of people together to discuss the issue (e.g. women's groups, youth groups etc.). Small grants of USD 1,000 will be awarded at the end of the project in December 2019 to the most excelling and innovative leaders in terms of championing and supporting girls' rights in their communities; half of which should be used to invest in girls' education and income generating projects, aiming to empower communities.

Empowering girls and their communities

Encouraging traditional and religious leaders to act as champions in efforts to address child marriage is not a stand-alone approach. RNCYPT believes that mobilising traditional and religious leaders to lead a movement for change in their community can only be successful if girls are empowered and if their families and communities are able to support them. Therefore "my child marriage free community challenge" is part of RNCYPT's broader programme "Girls and Young Women Empowerment." Through this programme, RNCYPT provides girls with

knowledge about their rights and empower them by building their life skills and providing them with economic opportunities. In parallel, the programme involves communication campaigns, which are developed in partnership with the community leaders and girls, and aim to make communities aware of the benefits of ending child marriage and empowering girls. Moreover, they have trained local council on budgeting for girls' education to ensure that they allocate sufficient resources to address the needs of girls and young women.

Has the project been evaluated?

The “*my child marriage free community challenge*” project will be evaluated in December 2019. Meanwhile, RNCYPT undertakes routine monitoring twice a year to assess qualitative and quantitative indicators that measure the impact of their project. Through the support of traditional and religious leaders who acted against harmful practices, 181 cases of child marriage were either prevented or annulled in three communities where RNCYPT is working. The organisation also regularly share stories on their social media platforms and in annual reports.

What were the challenges in implementing the project and how were they overcome?

- RNCYPT works mostly with the apostolic communities. However, their staff does not belong to these communities, which has been a challenge in their work. As a response to this, RNCYPT built relationships with a few key influential individuals in the churches and thus reinforced their capacity to lead awareness raising activities with other church members.
 - Working with traditional and religious leaders who are often the most influential guardians of tradition and community values can be very challenging. Traditional and religious leaders are not a homogeneous group: they often have different views and beliefs. On the one hand, some leaders hold very conservative views and tend to oppose changes related to their church doctrines or traditional customs. Yet on the other hand, some leaders have been very receptive to RNCYPT's work and are now calling for change in customs and beliefs that perpetuate abuse and girls' rights violation in the communities.
 - There is no dedicated funding for this project so RNCYPT runs it with limited resources. The resources come entirely from the membership fees of the members of the organisation as well as donations from board members. To overcome this challenge, the organisation has decided to remove a few activities (e.g. disbursement of educational packs and scholarships for girls have not been implemented yet) and focus on providing them with knowledge, life skills and economic opportunities. Finally, the organisation also encouraged community leaders and local councils to prioritise girls' issues in their development of policies and budgets.
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What factors were important to the success of the project?

The project has helped increase awareness on the benefits of ending child marriage among families and communities including girls, men and boys. It has also infused a collective effort to identify, prevent and respond to child marriage. The success of the project depends greatly on the active participation of the child and youth-led groups, the girls' clubs in schools and in communities, and on the support of moderate and progressive religious and traditional leaders. These actors have been very effective in reaching out to and mobilising community members and other traditional and religious leaders and have been essential in advocating for change and prevent child marriage.

What pieces of advice would you give other civil society organisations considering implementing a similar project?

1. Work with local authorities to make girls' protection a priority, and work with community members to get community buy-in for the initiative. This will help ensure sustainability when the project ends.
2. Engage religious groups; appreciate their beliefs and influence attitudes and behaviours through a culturally-sensitive approach in order to avoid any rejection of the programme.
3. Use local resources and encourage communities to support your actions.

For more information about the “My child marriage free community” challenge visit RNCYPT's [Facebook page](#), [YouTube channel](#), follow them on [Twitter](#), or by email at info@rncyptorg or rncypt@rncyptorg