

**June 2017 – Solutions**

NATIONAL INITIATIVES TO ADDRESS CHILD MARRIAGE

In this brief, we look at national initiatives – either strategies or action-plans – to end child marriage and explain what they are, their added value, and what lessons we have learned about their potential for impact. Information included is based on the insights of *Girls Not Brides* members and partners in countries where these have been developed.

Introduction

Every year 15 million girls are married before the age of 18. Child marriage cuts across countries, cultures, religions and ethnicities. It exists in every region of the world, from Africa to Asia, the Middle East to Latin America, and in some communities in Europe and North America. Child marriage denies girls their rights and their childhood. It often means the end to a girl's formal schooling and the start of her life as a wife and mother – with profound physical, psychological and emotional consequences.

In our Theory of Change, *Girls Not Brides* explains how ending child marriage requires long-term sustainable efforts by a variety of actors across sectors. Key interlinked strategies include: empowering girls with information and skills to able to exercise their rights, working with families and communities to understand the risks of child marriage and envisage alternatives for girls, ensuring school, health and child protection services are available for girls, and creating a supportive legal and policy environment.¹

The fourth strategy of creating a supportive policy environment for addressing child marriage is where national initiatives are so important. National initiatives can help set the agenda for a holistic response to child marriage. And they can help different actors and organisations work together better. But where is that happening and what does success look like?

What are national initiatives to end child marriage and why develop them to address child marriage?

In 2012, addressing child marriage was not considered a priority by any government. No government had specific national strategies or plans to end child marriage, or had paid systematic, cross-governmental attention to the issue. Five years later, in 2017, there have been encouraging moves towards the development of comprehensive national strategies which involve different ministries across government – recognition that one ministry working alone cannot be successful. As of mid-2017, over 25 governments have either developed or are in the process of developing a targeted national strategy or action plan to address child marriage, primarily in Africa and South Asia.²

National initiatives are large-scale initiatives led by governments to prevent child marriage and support married girls in their country. They involve several ministries and seek to coordinate efforts across a range of different actors. They involve either a national strategy (i.e. the strategic framework that defines the broad vision and strategic direction for ending child marriage within the country in a certain time-frame) and/or a national action plan (i.e. the roles and responsibilities of different actors and specific time-frames).

The added value of national strategies or action plans is their potential to:

¹ See *Girls Not Brides* [Theory of Change](#), developed with input from over 150 members and partners.

² *Girls Not Brides* database, May 2017

- **Create change at scale:** due to the scale and complexity of child marriage, it cannot be addressed through a project-based approach. National governments have a crucial role in addressing the practice and have the ability to go to scale through investments in strong education, health and social protection systems. By adopting the Global Goals for Sustainable Development, all UN Member States have made a commitment to end child marriage by 2030 (target 5.3). National initiatives can provide a roadmap towards achieving this goal.
 - **Mobilise collective action.** Initiatives which have government champions can help to mobilise support across government, as well as putting the issue on the public agenda. They can change the narrative that child marriage is a norm to be accepted and create a space for talking about alternative visions for girls. Through participatory consultation processes they can mobilise a movement of individuals and organisations to come together to take collective action.
 - **Create alignment of efforts and avoid duplication.** Where there is fragmentation of different efforts to address child marriage in a country, a national initiative can help alignment towards a common goal, and a platform for building on what has been done already, and learning from what works and what doesn't.
1. **An inclusive and participatory process.** The process of developing a national strategy can help catalyse a national movement to end child marriage. It can also help alignment between different actors. But only if it is inclusive and involves relevant actors. These might include girls and boys, decision makers in families and communities, civil society organisations, religious institutions, etc.
 2. **Research to understand the context.** Because child marriage is so complex and can vary from one community to the other, we must understand why and how it happens where a national initiative is being developed, to understand where the 'hot spots' to target are and what the priority solutions should be.
 3. **Sustained government leadership.** Success ultimately hinges on the leadership, political will and commitment of the government. This is crucial both for sending a signal of the importance of addressing child marriage for the government and for seeing a national initiative through to implementation.
 4. **Cross-sectoral action.** Solutions to end child marriage require action across sectors, so national initiatives will be most successful if child marriage is seen as a cross-governmental issue and all ministries include this issue in their work. The best strategies recognise the diverse influences on girls' lives and complex inter-related factors to tackle to ensure that they thrive. They link to related national strategies on education, youth, sexual and reproductive health, early pregnancy etc. and others which seek to end other harmful practices affecting girls to avoid multiplying coordination structures.
 5. **Collaboration, coordination and open communication.** This helps align efforts across sectors and stakeholders. Collaboration takes time, energy and patience, but is ultimately necessary to avoid duplication, competition, fragmentation of efforts and confusion. Coordinating bodies play an important role to help mobilise action across sectors.

“In 2013, we realised that there were a lot of interventions to tackle child marriage in Zambia. The problem is that they were isolated. We had to act as one... The national strategy is an opportunity to harmonise these policies to the benefit of the child.”

-Peter Mucheleka, then Ministry of Chiefs and Traditional Affairs, Zambia

What makes a strong national initiative?

Most national initiatives are still in their early stages: recently developed and moving towards implementation or still being developed. So it is still too early to fully understand their impact. However, important lessons have emerged across countries about what it will take to move from development to implementation. These are explored in *Girls Not Brides* reports [Lessons learned from selected national initiatives to end child marriage, 2015](#) and [Reflecting on national initiatives to end child marriage: lessons from 11 countries, 2016](#):

“The added value of us working as a coalition is that we can combine expertise. We can't rely on one individual, but by working collectively we can reach many places”.

- Moses Ntenga, National Coordinator
Girls Not Brides Uganda on the
added value of the national
partnership for implementation of
the strategy

6. Involvement of civil society in all stages.

Because they truly understand the context they work in, civil society organisations and activists, especially youth, can ensure initiatives are grounded in reality. Whether it is in the development, implementation, or monitoring and evaluation phase of a national initiative, or by holding governments accountable for their action, civil society is a key actor.

7. Costing of and budgeting for national strategies.

This requires investing time and resources in multi-year interventions and investing technical resources and building capacity, especially at sub-national level. Funding remains a critical gap in moving towards implementation of national initiatives.

2. **Becoming a ‘paper exercise’:** One of the biggest risks with national strategies is that they become a ‘tick-box’ exercise. While they may be ambitious and comprehensive, without sustained leadership and costed implementation plans and coordination structures, they risk being seen as the end goal rather than the start of concerted action.
3. **Not targeting those most in need:** In order to make progress on a large scale, governments need to strengthen systems to reach much larger numbers of girls. However, they risk missing the girls most at risk of child marriage – girls who are already married – and those who are hardest to reach and most vulnerable. Civil society play a critical role in finding out how best to reach these girls when the government cannot.

To find out more about lessons learned from existing national initiatives to end child marriage, [see our website](#). Or for guidance on key steps for developing a national strategy, what to include, and how to ensure it gets implemented, see our [check-list for national strategies on child marriage and its user guide for civil society](#).

What are the risks of national strategies?

1. **Isolating issues:** National strategies that focus only on child marriage are not the only policy option. In a number of other countries, child marriage has been integrated into related governmental strategies. For example, in Tanzania, the strategy to end violence against children includes a focus on child marriage. In Malawi there are moves to develop an inter-ministerial task-force to increase integration and improve delivery of initiatives to address the needs of on adolescent girls and young women involving health, education, and gender ministries, including to prevent child marriage.³

³ *Girls Not Brides* and International Centre for Research on Women (ICRW), briefing series: [taking action to address child marriage: the role of different sectors](#), March 2016