

Taking action to address child marriage: the role of different sectors



Gender-based violence

Gender-based violence is defined as violence directed at an individual based on his or her biological sex, gender identity, or perceived adherence to socially defined norms of masculinity and femininity. It can include physical, sexual, or psychological abuse; threats; coercion; arbitrary deprivation of liberty; and economic deprivation, whether in public or private life. Gender-based violence takes many forms and can occur throughout the life cycle. Child marriage is, in itself, recognised as a form of gender-based violence by the United Nations and many governments, and the practice can also perpetuate other forms of gender-based violence. Gender norms that devalue girls and contribute to child marriage also increase the likelihood that child brides will experience violence within those marriages: girls who marry before the age of 18 are more likely to experience physical, sexual, and emotional abuse than those who marry later. Married girls may be at risk of violence not only from their husbands, but also their in-laws and other family members. Married girls are often at greater risk of forced sexual initiation and forced marital sex, which can lead to unintended pregnancies, more complicated pregnancies, and greater risk of sexually-transmitted infections, including HIV. Gender-based violence can have intergenerational impacts by not only affecting girls' well-being, but can have a ripple effect and harm children's mental and physical health, and increase the perception of violence as acceptable. Children who witness violence are also twice as likely to perpetuate violence as adults.

Security concerns, real or perceived, are often drivers of child marriage. Once girls enter adolescence, girls' sexuality is often seen as a vulnerability and an invitation to violence. A girl may be pulled out from school even during times of

relative stability because her walk there may leave her vulnerable to harassment or violence. During disaster and conflict, these risks—real or perceived—become greater as the threat of violence and instability is exacerbated. (For more information please see the *Conflict and humanitarian crisis* brief).

Key child marriage stakeholders

- Legal and police officers
- Judicial officers, including judges, magistrates, lawyers, and paralegals
- Healthcare workers
- School administrators and teachers
- Families, including parents and in-laws
- Community, traditional, and religious leaders
- Community members
- Women, girls, men, and boys

Parents may feel helpless to protect their daughters and see marriage as a way of securing her safety, ensuring financial security, and in some cases her "sexual purity." This view is often stronger in times of conflict or crisis, when alternatives to marriage are not as readily available. Because child marriage is both a form of and contributor to gender-based violence, ending the practice can, in itself, reduce many instances of violence. Ending child marriage and ending gender-based violence require addressing the root causes of violence, which include discriminatory gender norms that devalue girls and women. Investments in ending gender-based violence can thus be leveraged to achieve goals in ending child marriage and vice versa.



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Integrating child marriage prevention and response into gender-based violence programmes

Prevention strategies

In terms of prevention, programmes can mobilise and sensitise communities and individuals about the harmful effects of child marriage. This can both create positive change at the individual and community levels around attitudes towards the value of girls in society, as well as create an enabling legal environment for ending the practice. Such programmes can also provide girls and their families with viable alternatives to child marriage, including economic support and opportunities, as well as an education, particularly tied to the development of marketable skills. These efforts should be designed to shift harmful beliefs around the acceptability of child marriage and other forms of violence, as well as promote positive role models for men and women, contributing to positive relationship dynamics.

Response strategies

On the response side, screening and response programmes, community mobilisation campaigns, and services such as legal aid, counselling, and shelters for at-risk girls, can protect married girls and mitigate additional violence faced by child brides. Gender-based violence programming should also consider including men and boys in prevention and response efforts. Sensitisation and mobilisation programmes that educate men and boys about gender-based violence should also include attention to the harms of child marriage, encourage them to champion women's and girls' rights, and teach them couple communication skills and peaceful disagreement resolution techniques.

Strategies for integrating child marriage

- Life skills and empowerment programmes for women and girls
- Community mobilisation, including education on child marriage and the value of girls
- Strengthening of birth and marriage registration
- Training healthcare providers on the special needs of married girls
- Provision of legal aid services
- Advocacy for gender-equitable laws and policies
- Counselling and other health services targeted at women and girls who have experienced GBV
- Using health, law enforcement, and legal service providers to screen for and identify clients who might be at risk for child marriage, and then target services to their needs

Elimination of structural barriers

Where appropriate, programmes may also address structural barriers to girls' safety, such as marriage-related legal structures, laws, and policies. Improving birth and marriage registration processes, which are vital for civic access to services, enacting or enforcing minimum age of marriage laws, and closing legal loopholes around parental consent and customary laws can all work together to decrease impunity related to child marriage. It is important to note that laws which criminalise underage marriage are not the only legal structures which can prevent and respond to child marriage-related violence. Countries can promote more equitable societies that are safer for women and girls through laws and policies related to inheritance, asset ownership, economic entitlement, and family law. When and where laws exist and are violated, girls need access to justice through legal-aid and paralegal professionals who are educated on the issue of child marriage and the needs of married adolescents.

Programme examples

A Safer Zambia (ASAZA) was a USAID-funded programme implemented by CARE International from 2008 to 2011 that aimed to decrease gender-based violence through increasing knowledge of and changing attitudes toward gender inequities and by improving gender-based violence survivors' access to medical, psychological, and legal services. Child marriage was included as a form of gender-based violence, and child marriage-related outcomes were core elements of ASAZA's monitoring and evaluation systems. Furthermore, because Zambia's formal and informal legal systems failed to recognise sexual and physical assault within a marriage as a crime, ASAZA could build upon community conversations to work with advocates and lawmakers to create a more comprehensive legal framework for the protection of women and girls from violence within marriage.

Mobilising religious communities to respond to GBV and HIV: a training manual was designed by USAID's Health Policy Initiative to prevent and reduce gender-based violence and HIV among women and girls. The programme equipped religious communities with tools to strengthen their capacity and networks to respond to gender-based violence as it relates to HIV, deepen their awareness and understanding of gender-based violence, and to enhance faith-based activities regarding gender-based violence. The Manual includes child marriage as a form of gender-based violence.



Monitoring and evaluation: illustrative examples

An initial and powerful way to integrate child marriage prevention and response into programming is by measuring changes related to child marriage, learning how these changes impact other programme areas, and then adjusting programming accordingly. The following are sample indicators that can be used in gender-based violence programmes to understand child marriage-related impacts. For a more complete list of indicators, please refer to the [USAID Child, Early, and Forced Marriage Resource Guide](#) or [Girls Not Brides' Measuring Progress: recommended indicators](#).

Monitoring and evaluation: illustrative indicators

Indicator	Data source and notes
Percentage of women (married and unmarried) aged 15-49 subjected to physical or sexual violence in the last 12 months/at some time in their lifetime by an intimate partner/persons other than an intimate partner	Data are collected and made publically available by UNICEF and DHS. Country-specific sources may provide relevant data for 15-18 year olds. More localised data could be collected via community- or programme-level surveys.
Total and age-specific rate of women (married and unmarried) subjected to psychological violence in the last 12 months/at some time in their lifetime by an intimate partner	Data are collected and made publically available by DHS. Country-specific sources may provide relevant data for 15-18 year olds. More localised data could be collected via community- or programme-level surveys.
Percentage of adolescent girls (married and unmarried) who feel confident in their ability to report and seek help with violence	A survey of individuals in the target population.
Number of child marriages that were investigated by the police/prosecuted by the law/resulted in a conviction.	A confidential review of police and court records.
Existence of a national strategy and plan of action to address gender-based violence that includes provisions for prevention of child marriage and other harmful traditional practices.	Review national legislation and legislative debates, where available. Review statements by cognisant ministers or other responsible national ministers.
Consultations with the target population on accessing services for child survivors of gender-based violence	Qualitative: # of services for child gender-based violence survivors conducting consultations with the target population to accessing the service x100 Quantitative: A survey of individuals in the target population, including information on the types of barriers children experience in accessing services for gender-based violence. Results should be disaggregated by sex and age.



Suggested further reading

The briefs in this series are based on the Child, Early, and Forced Marriage Resource Guide (2015), written for USAID by Allie Glinski, Magnolia Sexton and Lis Meyers on behalf of ICRW and Banyan Global. References, programme examples, and further information can be found in that guide, located here:

<https://www.usaid.gov/documents/1865/child-early-and-forced-marriage-resource-guide>.

For additional information, see:

Alexander-Scott, M., Bell, E., and Holden, J. (2016). **DFID guidance note: shifting social norms to tackle violence against women and girls (VAWG)**. London, UK: VAWG Helpdesk. Available at:

https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/498922/Shifting-Social-Norms-tackle-Violence-against-Women-Girls2.pdf

Malhotra, A., Warner, A., McGonagle, A., & Lee-Rife, S. (2011). **Solutions to end child marriage: what the evidence shows**. Washington, DC: ICRW. Available at: <http://www.icrw.org/files/publications/Solutions-to-End-Child-Marriage.pdf>

Raj, A. (2010) **When the mother is a child: the impact of child marriage on the health and human rights of girls**. Archives of Disease in Childhood, 95(11), 931–5.

UNFPA. (2013a). **Marrying too young: end child marriage**. New York, NY: UNFPA. Available at:

<http://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/MarryingTooYoung.pdf>

United Nations. (1979). **Convention on the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women**. New York, NY: United Nations General Assembly. Available at:

<http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw/text/econvention.htm>