Research Spotlight:
"Child marriage in humanitarian settings" and "Challenging gender norms to end child marriage"

GIRLS NOT BRIDES
The Global Partnership to End Child Marriage

end child marriage
A voice. A chance. A future.

January 2022

This research spotlight connects the themes of the **Child Marriage Research to Action Network's** (the CRANK) third and fourth research meetings in 2021. It covers evidence on girl-led and girl-centred research in humanitarian settings, and evidence on challenging gender norms to end child marriage.

It includes key takeaways from featured studies, highlighting formative research exploring the nuanced risk and protective factors associated with the practice of child marriage in humanitarian settings, the services and support needs of adolescent girls and their families, and community-driven solutions; and studies that outline the need for strategies and interventions that foster critical awareness of gender roles and norms in families and communities, alongside those that address the structural drivers of child marriage. It also includes recommendations for further reading on these topics, supporting evidence-based uptake amongst practitioners, policy makers, advocates, researchers and donors.

PICTURED: Sabirin, 18, is a Somali refugee in Ethiopia and student captain for the girl volleyball team at the primary school for host community and refugee children.
Photo: © UNICEF/UN0310256/Ayene

Key terms

Girl-centred research: participatory approaches designed with and for young people – in this case girls – are applied to ensure adolescent girls' voices are at the centre of research findings and recommendations. Research activities typically include participatory research workshops with adolescent girls and include creative methods such as mappings, drawings, collages and focus group-style activities.[a]

Social norms: are the perceived informal unwritten rules that determine acceptable and appropriate actions within a particular group or community and, as such, guide human behaviour. Social norms include behaviour, beliefs and expectations – they consist of what we do, what others do and what we believe others approve of and expect us to do. Gender norms are a subset of social norms that relate specifically to gender differences.[b,c]

Gender norms: relate to collective beliefs and expectations within a community or society, at a given point in time, about what behaviours are appropriate for women and men. They are the perceived rules and standards guiding how individuals should behave based on their biological sex. Although gender norms are socially constructed and mostly informal, they give expression to and reinforce the power dynamics that guide how societies value female and male gender roles.[b,c]

a. For more information, see this report on **child marriage in humanitarian crises** by the Human Rights Centre UC Berkley School of Law, Save the Children, Plan International and the King Hussein Foundation Information and Research Centre.
b. For more information, see this UNICEF brief on **defining social norms and related concepts**.
c. For a more in-depth discussion, see this article on **gender and social norms** by Beniamino Cislaghi and Lori Heise.

1. Child marriage in humanitarian crises: Girls and parents speak out on risk and protective factors, decision-making, and solutions

This 2021 **report** by the Human Rights Centre UC Berkley School of Law, Save the Children, Plan International and the King Hussein Foundation Information and Research Centre shares findings from girl-centred participatory research with displaced adolescents and parents in Jordan and Uganda. It focuses on risk and protective factors for child marriage, decision-making and the support needs of girls and their families, and community perspectives on preventing and responding to child marriage in humanitarian settings. It includes a special report on the impact of COVID-19 on child marriage.

Key takeaways

- **Addressing violence in the home is essential to preventing child marriage during crises.** Escaping violence and neglect at home is a key reason why many girls marry early. Child marriage programming should integrate work to address this violence in the home – including child mistreatment, neglect and abuse – and heavy domestic workloads by supporting caregivers to implement positive, engaged parenting, and husbands to pursue supportive partnerships.

- **Peers still have a strong influence in marriage decisions for girls in displacement settings.** Practitioners should counteract peer pressure that encourages child marriage, and promote opportunities for positive peer influence. For example, by facilitating peer-to-peer counselling or fostering social inclusion for married girls.

- **Financial support can be a crucial component of child marriage programming.** Adolescent girls and caregivers asked for cash assistance to relieve extreme financial hardship, offset financial incentives for child marriage, and enable them to provide for their children's basic needs – all major contributors to child marriage rates in displacement contexts.

- **Breaking down barriers to education for girls is critical in preventing and responding to child marriage.** Primary and secondary schools operate in many formalised displacement contexts, but girls often face financial and practical barriers to accessing them. These include school fees, lack of menstrual hygiene products and facilities, long distances to schools, and discrimination against married or pregnant girls. Practitioners should prioritise keeping girls in school for as long as possible.

- **Girls often play a role in marriage decision-making.** Many girls have little say in marriage decision-making, but do have a significant say – even autonomy – in the final decision over whom and when to marry. Practitioners should gain a clear understanding of the range of girls' agency in their communities and design interventions that support girls in these decisions, engage others involved in marriage decisions, and create an enabling environment for girls to delay marriage.

Spotlight resource: A practitioner's guide to the ethical conduct of research on child marriage in humanitarian settings

This 2021 **guide** by UNFPA, UNICEF, Women's Refugee Commission and Johns Hopkins University offers practitioners a framework for making decisions around whether and how to conduct research on child marriage in humanitarian settings. It focuses on the ethical conduct of research among adolescents and young people (aged 10 to 24) living in challenging, low-resource and insecure environments who are at risk of – or have experienced – child marriage. The approaches and real-life examples support the examination of local contexts and informed and ethical decision-making in the research process.

2. The power of a story: Girl-centred child marriage action research in two humanitarian settings[d]

This forthcoming girl-centred, community-based research by Plan International, Women's Refugee Commission, Transforming Fragilities and Abel Matsika was conducted in communities affected by conflict and displacement in Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM), the Philippines; and communities experiencing extreme food insecurity in Chiredzi, Zimbabwe. It was designed to support the development of an evidence-based tailored girl-centred, community-based approach to child marriage prevention and response to transform the role of girls, with community support. Participatory methods – including SenseMaker – were used to support adolescents, caregivers and other adults who are influential in girls' lives to define what it means to be "well" and "resilient", and to identify the potential pathways to prevent or delay child marriage.

Key takeaways

- **Underlying drivers of child marriage – like gender discrimination and gender inequality – were consistent across both humanitarian settings.** When adolescent girls deviate from the rules of interaction, relationships and gender roles ascribed to them – including by dating or having pre-marital sex – they are often forced into marriage by their parents. In the BARMM, due to the gender norms shaping power relationships within the family unit and society girls often felt a sense of duty to their parents, family and wider community to comply with marriage, resulting in a sense of ownership of the decision.

- **Poverty and economic inequality – while manifesting differently in each research setting – are both an underlying driver and a consequence of child marriage.** Some parents and girls see child marriage as a way to alleviate poverty and unlock opportunities for girls. However, girls and future husbands may not be financially stable before marriage, and married girls may return to their paternal homes because they cannot meet their basic needs, or those of their children. Alternatives to child marriage should be further explored to ensure effective programming to prevent and delay marriage.

- **Multi-level, gender-transformative and community-grounded programming are needed to address the gendered impact and experience of conflict, displacement and economic inequality.** All interventions should be developed together with community members – including adolescent girls – and supported by tailored messaging to increase ownership, acceptability and impact. Community-led programming should be embedded within structural socio-economic interventions and policies that address the underlying drivers of child marriage – including gender discrimination and economic inequality – across contexts.

- **Humanitarian and development practitioners must collaborate across sectors and across organisations and government at all levels to mitigate child marriage and respond to the needs of married girls.** Collaboration is also needed to strengthen existing ecosystems of protection for adolescents, including the adaptive capacities[e] of adolescent girls, their families and communities.
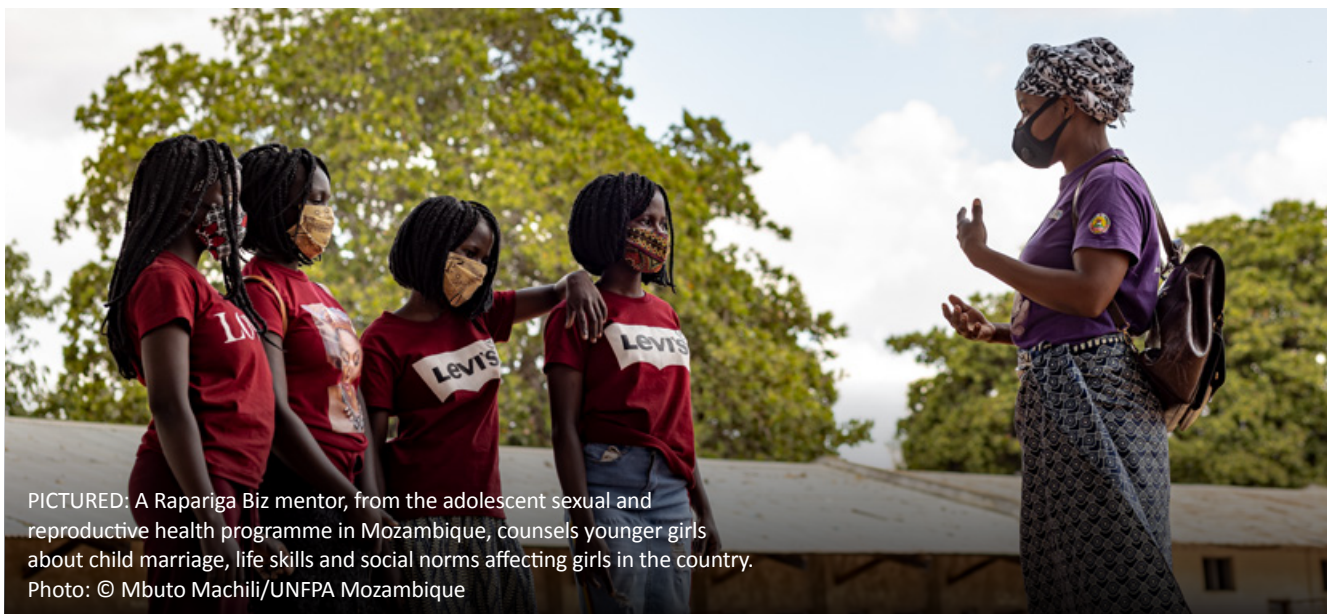
Working together to prevent and respond to child marriage in humanitarian settings

- A collaborative partnership between Plan International, Save the Children, the Women's Refugee Commission and the UC Berkeley Human Rights Center was formed in 2021 to respond to the lack of rigorous evidence on what works to prevent and respond to child marriage in humanitarian settings, the higher prevalence of child marriage in humanitarian settings and the urgent need for evidence-based programmatic interventions.

- Drawing on the two studies featured above, this partnership will leverage findings and recommendations from four humanitarian contexts to develop and evaluate a holistic model to prevent and respond to child marriage in humanitarian settings. Once piloted and evaluated, this evidence-based model will be refined and shared with the wider sector to inform the scaling up of girl-centred approaches to preventing and responding to child marriage in humanitarian settings.

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d. This title refers to two research studies (citations to be finalised):
- Plan International, Women's Refugee Commission and Transforming Fragilities, forthcoming February 2022, *Our voices, our Future: Understanding risks and adaptive capacities to prevent and respond to child marriage in the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao, Philippines. Research Report.*
- Plan International, Women's Refugee Commission and Abel Matsika, forthcoming March 2022, *Understanding the drivers of child marriage in food insecure areas in Chiredzi District, Zimbabwe: An action-driven and girl-centred mixed-method research study.*

e. Adaptive capacities are the resources and assets within girls, families, their communities, and broader ecosystems of support – including institutions like government and the legal environment – that protect, support and care for adolescent girls, promoting their health and wellbeing, including delaying and preventing child marriage.

PICTURED: A Rapariga Biz mentor, from the adolescent sexual and reproductive health programme in Mozambique, counsels younger girls about child marriage, life skills and social norms affecting girls in the country.
Photo: © Mbuto Machili/UNFPA Mozambique

3. Governing choice and child marriage: Young women, marriage and development aid programmes

This 2020 Progress in Development Studies **special issue** demonstrates the complexity of child marriage drivers, contributing to emic[f] understandings of the circumstances in which families and young women may consider an early marriage to be the most secure course of action. It calls for practitioners to move beyond girls and families as sites of intervention, and beyond programmatic emphasis on individual choice and tradition and aims to shed light on the complex structural factors and processes driving individual and household decisions on child marriage and initiate debate on alternative options for young women and families.

Key takeaways

- **Taking choice seriously: Emic understandings of decision-making about child marriage by Esther Miedema, Winny Koster and Nicky Pouw.** This **introductory article** highlights the consequences of only focusing on the negative impact of child marriage. They argue that this (a) hides the complexity of the structural issues driving child marriage, (b) limits understanding of (perceived) positive outcomes of child marriage, including (short-term) physical and economic security, and (c) limits efforts to identify alternatives to child marriage which could produce similarly positive – and more long-term – results. Rather than judging choices, they call for research and interventions to understand and respond to the broader context in which choices are made.

- **Voice without choice? Investigating adolescent girls' agency in marital decision-making in Niger by Saul, G., Diarra, A. and Melnikas, A.** This article examines the context in which young women's understandings of their own agency evolves. In contexts where girls' obedience and parental and community approval are emphasised, and where there are limited economic opportunities – particularly for women – the authors ask what it means to have a "choice".

- **Constrained choices: Exploring the complexities of adolescent girls' voice and agency in child marriage decisions in Ethiopia by Jones, N., Presler-Marshall, E., Kassahun, G, and Kebede Hateu, M.** This **article** examines the drivers, forms and impacts of child marriage in urban and rural settings in three regions in Ethiopia. It highlights the complex interplay of social norms, economic factors and young women's capacity to exercise choice, and collective support for this by leaders and service providers at all levels.

- The papers in this special issue show that reproduction and sexuality are sites of political struggle regarding governance, gender roles and generational relations. Meaningful analyses and interventions related to young women's choices must consider structural inequalities and violence at all levels, as these determine the range of choices available to young women and their families.

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f. An emic perspective is the insider's view of reality and is crucial to understanding how people perceive the world around them (SAGE Research Methods, 2012).

4. Enabling gender norm change through communication

In 2017, the Government of Bangladesh, UNICEF and partners in the Global Programme to End Child Marriage launched a multi-phase, trans-media campaign to end child marriage. It centred round a social norm-driven entertainment-education-based television series called *Icchedana* – "On the wings of wishes" – which focused on adolescent empowerment and gender equality. This 2020 **article** by Sengupta, A., Sood, S. Kapil, H. and Sultana, T. presents a case study of this multi-layered social and behavioural change communication (SBCC) initiative.

Key takeaways

- **The SBCC initiative used a gender-transformative approach** that moved beyond individual-level change to address the social norms, attitudes, systems and power structures that produce gender inequities and enable practices like child marriage to persist. While the focus of the initiative was on ending child marriage, the approach was holistic and aimed to promote gender equality and adolescent empowerment.

- **There was an increase in positive attitudes towards investment in girls' education** and a decline in beliefs that sons' education should be prioritised over that of girls. These markers of how girls are valued in families and societies should be tracked over time, and constructs such as decision-making, employment, political participation and access to resources should be evaluated.

- **Boys involved in the adolescent radio listeners' groups demonstrated better understanding of girls' rights and equality issues** in society and greater respect towards women. The focus should be on boys as brothers, future grooms, fathers, community members and elders to systematically challenge gender inequality.

- **A key feature of this strategy was the strong partnership among global and national partners** that build on their respective strengths and expertise, including high-level support from the Government, fostering inter-ministerial collaboration. Ongoing collaboration with partners strengthened ownership and required advocacy, engagement and commitment.

We also recommend the following resources:

- Guglielmi, S., Mitu, K., Seager, J., 2021, **"'I just keep quiet': Addressing the challenges of married Rohingya girls and creating opportunities for change"**, *GAGE*.

- Abu Hamad, B., Elamassie, S., Oakley, E., Alheiwidi, S. and Baird, S., 2021, **"'No one should be terrified like I was!' Exploring drivers and impacts of child marriage in protracted crises among Palestinian and Syrian refugees"**, *GAGE*.

- Mathers, N., 2001, **"How cash transfers can contribute to ending child marriage"**, *Girls Not Brides*

- Stark, L., Self, I. and Reis C., 2021, **"Gendered violence against adolescent girls in humanitarian settings: a review of the evidence"**, *The Lancet Child & Adolescent Health*, Vol. 5 (13).

- Koster, W., Miedema, E., Albena, S. and Pouw, N., 2021, **AISSR-UvA Her choice impact evaluation report**.

- Cislaghi, B., Mackie, G., Nkwi, P., and Shakya, H., 2019, **"Social norms and child marriage in Cameroon: A qualitative study"**, *Global Public Health*, Vol. 14 (10).

- Cislaghi B. and Heise, L., 2019, **"Using social norms theory for health promotion in low-income countries"**, *Health Promotion International*, Vol. 13 (3).

- Raj, A., Johns, N. E., Bhan, N., Silverman, J. G. and Lundgren, R., 2021, **"Effects of gender role beliefs on social connectivity and marital safety: Findings from a cross-sectional study among married adolescent girls in India"**, *Journal of Adolescent Health*, Vol. 69 (6).

- Steinhaus, M., Hinson, L., Teodore Rizzo, A. and Gregowski, A., 2019, **"Measuring social norms related to child marriage among adult decision-makers of young girls in Phalombe and Thyolo, Malawi"**, *Journal of Adolescent Health*, Vol. 46 (4S)

If you are working on child marriage research, we would love to hear more about it – please submit a brief summary of your research to be included in our **tracker** and sign up to the **CRANK mailing list**.