

## The Child Marriage Research to Action Network (the CRANK)

### Research meeting: Strengthening evidence-based policy responses to child marriage – Considering context, scale and sustainability

18 October 2023

#### Key takeaways

- **Co-creating research with government, and using existing evidence and local and government structures are key to research uptake, scaling and sustainability.** This approach builds on existing local solutions to produce stronger, contextualised research that can be integrated into government plans and budgets for long-term implementation and sustained impact.
- **Researchers can play an important role in demonstrating impact and advocating with decision-makers in government and donor bodies to scale up and fund interventions that are proven to work.** Advocacy with donors may include adapting projects and timelines to be demand-driven and account for co-creation; advocacy with governments should be targeted to “policy windows” when laws and policies are already up for debate.
- **Multisectoral, multilevel approaches show positive long-term impacts on girls’ education, child marriage and early childbearing, but can face demand- and supply-side constraints.**
  - It is important to work with girls, families and communities to raise awareness of child marriage and girls’ education (demand), and to consider what existing systems offer (supply). Advocacy and interventions need to be carefully sequenced to ensure education, health and social protection systems can respond to increased demand.
  - Removing fees for secondary education has greater impact on child marriage and childbearing than only removing fees at primary level, but this may be limited by other costs – like uniforms, books and transport – or, critically, where education does not translate into better economic opportunities. Having female teachers and head teachers, and better latrines and menstrual hygiene changing rooms and products were also associated with higher promotion for girls, but more research is needed to understand why.

#### Presentations

**Dr Rachel Yates**, Strategic Advocacy Lead at the University of Cape Town, and Associate Fellow at the Department of Social, Policy and Intervention, University of Oxford

- To reach the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), we need to think about how to integrate our work into national responses with regards scale and sustainability.

**Pragya Bhuwania**, Fielding School of Public Health, University of California, Los Angeles

- Presenting on the [Impact of tuition-free education policy on child marriage and early childbearing: Does secondary matter more?](#)
- Inverse relationship between education and child marriage is well documented, but the evidence does not show a causal link – we do not know if girls leave school to get married, or get married because they are out of school.

- Small-scale randomised controlled trials can show this causal link, but they are often multi-pronged, making it difficult to identify the role of education alone.
- This study used longitudinal and comparative data to look at national legislation for free education to see whether abolishing tuition fees at secondary level has an impact on child marriage and early childbearing, and whether this is greater than the impact of only abolishing fees at primary level.
- Method:
  - Compare group of countries with sequential free primary and free secondary policies, with a long enough gap in implementation, so you have some girls who did not have any free education, another group that only had free primary, and a third which had free primary and secondary.
  - Used data and policies from:
    - 3 treatment countries (Liberia, Tanzania, Uganda) that abolished tuition fees in secondary education long after abolishing it in primary education, so they can be examined separately.
    - 2 comparison countries (Burkina Faso and Democratic Republic of the Congo) that recently abolished tuition fees, so no free education during the study period.
  - Difference-in-difference (DD) identification strategy, with cut-off at 15 and 18 years:
    - Compare the differences in outcomes before and after an intervention in the treatment group to the difference in outcome in the control group over the same time period.
    - Captures changes within and across countries.
- Results:
  - Tuition-free secondary education reduced child marriage and childbearing, and is more effective than free primary education alone:
    - Probability of marriage before 18 was 3 percentage points less compared to free primary only.
    - Probability of childbearing before 18 was 4.9 percentage points less compared to free primary only.
  - Tuition-free secondary education led to additional years of schooling; many studies show significant increases in enrolment, attendance and attainment among girls.
- Implications:
  - All countries committed to free equitable education and gender equality in the SDGs – need to accelerate progress on these to achieve the goals by 2030.
  - This study underscores the importance of investing in secondary education to reduce child marriage in the long term, and to advance gender equality and other health and developmental goals.
  - Free primary is near universal, but few countries have fully abolished fees at secondary level – this study shows this would have greater benefits.
- Considerations/reflections:

- Plausible pathways of change: many reasons why free secondary is more effective than primary:
  - Girls are more likely to marry during the years they are supposed to be at secondary school, rather than primary.
  - Secondary is more likely to improve labour market prospects.
- Context matters (social capital, dowry/bride price, social norms), even after controlling for individual-level socioeconomic disadvantage.
- Costs and returns to education (other costs include uniforms, supplies, books):
  - For the poorest 40% of households across 9 African countries, tuition fees only made up 36% of total education expenditure.
  - Impact of education policies may be limited in settings where education does not translate into better economic opportunities.
- Minimum age-of-marriage laws: upcoming study on how these interact with education, showing that only countries with both policies have the greatest impact – need to ensure a viable alternative for girls and their families.

**Karen Austrian**, Director, GIRL Center and Senior Associate, Population Council, Kenya

- Presenting on the [Adolescent Girls Initiative-Kenya](#).
- AGI-K has been through 3 phases:
  - 2014-2020 – multisectoral programme for adolescent girls to test short- and medium-term effects; Wajir county along Somali border, high rates of girls out of school.
  - 2021-20 – extension phase to assess the long-term effects – follow up with girls 4 years after programme ended.
  - 2022-23 – testing for scale phase to identify the most cost-effective version of AGI-K to be sustainable scaled up by Wajir County Government.
- 2 years of interventions combining girl-, household- and community-level interventions from different sectors, intended to:
  - See what component packages of multi-sectoral, multi-level interventions has impact for adolescent girls (see details below).
  - Look at whether early interventions improve longer-term outcomes.
- Testing different packages, layered together: Community engagement, education cash transfer (household level), health/lifeskills (girl-level, safe spaces, girls empowerment, curricula), wealth (individual level – financial literacy and savings activities).
- Results 2 years after end of programme:
  - Sustained school enrolment (16% vs 45%), improved literacy and numeracy for girls participating in the three intervention arms.
  - Greatest impact for girls who were out of school – conditional cash transfer delayed marriage at 50% vs 30%, and pregnancy at 34% vs 17%.
- Similar trend 4 years after end of programme, when girls in the programme were:

- 5 times more likely to still be enrolled in school.
- 20 percentage points less likely to be married.
- Much less likely to have children.
- Scaling up – transitioning to county government, integrating implementation into county structures; principles included looking for a model that could be effectively scaled up, implemented via government/community structures and systems, cost:
  - Discussions with county-level ministers, governor and donors.
  - To be housed within the Wajir County Ministry of Health (because education is managed centrally), in close collaboration with Ministries of Education and Gender.
  - Using 3 packages, layered: community conversation groups (all), girls empowerment groups (all), community-level incentive (85% enrolment leads to a funded infrastructure project, plus one-time enrolment cash transfer); household-level cash transfer over all terms (more for out-of-school girls).
  - Community conversations delivered through Community Health Units through existing monthly community dialogue days (with Assistants on the government payroll).
  - Girls’ empowerment and safe spaces facilitated by Community Health Volunteers (CHV) making household visits; they already lead on other health conversations; not on payroll but do receive incentives.
  - Policy support – develop Community Health Services Bill for funding of CHVs; county and annual development integrated plans (5 years), which now has AGI-K components integrated for funding.
- Results:
  - Cash incentives more impactful – after 1 year, half of out-of-school girls in packages with cash incentives returned to school, and were still enrolled after the programme ended.

**Mohamed Abdille**, WASH and AGI-K Coordinator for the Wajir County Department of Health, Kenya

- When Population Council shared the results and outcomes of the first phase with the county government (increased enrolment and decreased child marriage and adolescent pregnancies) – it was very motivating for the government, along with financing.
- Structures and workforce were in place at the local level, but this was a new idea for the county government (education is not fully devolved, so the county government was not doing much work on it).
- County government worked closely with Population Council in the second phase, and has already integrated the AGI-K into their plans, to ensure it is sustained even when Population Council is not there.
- Government undertook household listing/screen of households of adolescent girls (in and out of school) in phase 2, then engaged with them through community workforce – initial results showed in one area 62% of girls were out of school; in follow up, this reduced to 15% – positive impact on gender and social norms, and economic empowerment.

- Phase 3 coming to an end – now planning with county government, all have shown good will and committed to financing another phase.

#### **Karen Austrian**

- County government representatives pushed to invest in this programme, which has shown impact.

#### **Michele Boujikian**, Education Researcher, Data Must Speak, Innocenti, UNICEF

- Presenting Data Must Speak (DMS) findings from [Cote d'Ivoire](#), [Madagascar](#) and [Togo](#).
- DMS is education research looking at positive deviance approaches to learning – today looking at links with child marriage.
- DMS research studies positive deviance schools (schools that perform better than others, despite them being in similar contexts with similar resources).
  - Objective to identify behaviours/practices that allow these schools to perform better, and try to scale them up.
  - Draw on quantitative research, positive deviance, behavioural science, implementation research and scaling science.
- Stage 1 of a DMS research study – look at existing country/ministry data – identify context factors associated with school performance.
- Stage 2 – identify positive deviance schools.
- Stage 3 – go into these schools to investigate their practices and behaviours.
- Stage 4 – identify the levers that will help scale these practices and behaviours to other regions, and encourage learnings.
- Stage 5 – disseminate knowledge.
- Co-creation and co-implementation of research:
  - Work with government, and especially ministry of education to design and implement the research – ministries are active partners, involved in every stage.
  - Begin with an advisory council, including ministers and other stakeholders to advise research.
  - (Stage 2) Analysis of education ecosystem – done with the appropriate ministry, merged with existing administrative datasets over multiple years (e.g. exam results).
  - (Stage 3) Design strategy and instruments to use in schools with the ministry and partners (including teachers), aligning with country systems, plans and processes.
  - Results shared with partners for feedback before publishing.
- Previous research shows association between education and child marriage:
  - Education is a protective factor.
  - Education and child marriage are inversely correlated (the longer a girl stays in school, the less likely she is to enter an early marriage).
  - Important to work on demand (girl and family approach to education) and supply side (what the education system offers).

- Stage 1 findings:
  - Having a female teacher is associated with higher promotion and graduation, and lower drop-out rate for girls in primary and secondary.
  - Having a female head teacher is associated with better promotion rates and exam results for girls.
  - More research needed to understand why – assumption is that they are a role model, may have different engagement or pedagogical practices that make a difference for girls.
  - Schools with better latrines and menstrual hygiene changing rooms and products were associated with higher promotion rates, largely because of reduced probability of drop out.
- Stage 3 findings:
  - Not many findings related to girls’ education and child marriage yet – still a lot to work through.
  - In Mali:
    - Positive deviant schools found to be more likely to have school committees working on raising awareness on girls’ education and the prevention of child marriage – these are made up of parents, who go and speak with girls and their families to encourage girls to stay in school, and equality between women and men.
    - Found these committees targeting mothers as they had the greatest impact on the decision to keep girls in school (rather than work at home or earn money for the family).
- From evidence to action:
  - Principle of co-creation helped in enacting transition – ministry is really involved in research, so research findings picked up by ministry and integrated into policy debates to identify priority reforms.
  - Continue work with ministry to find levers to scale-up practices with other schools across the country.
- Reflections/lessons:
  - Make use of the “existing” (but under-utilised) local solutions, rather than creating “new” evidence/data.
  - Co-creation increases governments’ engagement, buy-in and transition from evidence to action.
  - Co-creation takes commitment and patience – will find discrepancies (priority, technical capacity, availability); need to be solutions-oriented.
  - Important to understand the context and adapt tools and approach to this in a demand-driven way.

## **Q&A and discussion**

**Co-creation – how do we bring together policymakers and researchers to pose questions, methodologies, share results? What should researchers do if they want to get governments on board?**

- **Mohamed:** Researchers are important in ensuring we are working from an informed place; important in institutional triggering – can support high-level advocacy to executives (with departmental partners) for the same issue, especially where large amounts of money are involved.
- **Pragya:** Have researchers creating evidence, and an outreach group that takes this to decision-makers (policymakers, parliamentarians, etc.). Look for policy windows, when we know people are actively contemplating a law or policy – create evidence briefs from other, similar countries, to make a stronger case for something that’s already up for debate.
- **Rachel:** We are talking about the strength of the evidence and also the moment.
- **Michele:** Important to work in alignment with the ministry, and within their framework (e.g. their sector plans). Work with data already collected by the ministry. Talk to the ministry before beginning research – to hear from them the knowledge they have, and the inputs they can make to the research. Their knowledge of context will help design better tools and research.

### **What is the challenge of scaling up the AGI-K in Wajir – financial or institutional constraints?**

- **Karen:** For cash transfers, have used existing structures for delivery, and also M-PESA (a mobile phone-based money transfer service) – talking to World Bank about incorporating this as a cash plus initiative.

Challenge – have to work to the timeline of the government, not donors and it’s challenging to align these timelines; getting external funding is difficult for phases of scale – donors want to fund their own, new initiatives.

- **Mohamed:** Demand-creation versus supply: talking about increasing student enrolment, working with local leaders to do this – a lot more girls enrolled, but once you have created demand, you have to increase the supply to meet it (teachers, buildings, furniture, menstrual hygiene products, etc.). County government is now talking to central government to come up with local-based solutions.

Targeted girls for school enrolment age 11-14 years, bringing them to school with no background in education – they have to join the younger children, but they have their own way of doing things and expect to achieve things fast. Now discussing whether they can have additional spaces for these girls.

Nomadic livelihood – inter-county movement of people, head of household plans according to need to look after livestock, how many children will go to school, and for how long – talking with parents, thinking about the lives of girls and not only family livelihood.

- **Rachel:** Important to note the package of support or needs may be beyond what is included in a particular intervention.

### **Did removing tuition fees have similar impacts for all children?**

- **Pragya:** National-level study, had stronger results for child marriage and childbearing before age 18, but not as strong before 15 years – may be that for under 15s these are rarer events, or there may be something happening at age 15 that puts girls at greater risk – this may go beyond access to education, and they may need further support to access education.

### **Further reflections**

**Venkatraman Chandra-Mouli:** Positive deviant approach is great – looking at what has been done and what works, while also acknowledging the challenges. We have more money for adolescent girls’ sexual and reproductive health and rights than ever before. What works is government prioritisation, funding, and a group in the country that has pushed for these things to happen. Outside actors (like the UN) can play a small role, but really those who are in-country are most important.

### **Moderator’s reflections**

- Demand and supply-side constraints – need to think about what services also need reinforcing (health, education, social protection), and how we sequence advocacy and interventions to ensure systems can respond.
- Timing of interventions – need to focus on early adolescence and intervening in time to prevent child marriage.
- Costing data – need to think about what information is needed to scale up interventions, and how to make the (financial) case that these interventions are good for child marriage *and* other issues.

### **Research updates**

#### **See session recording for full details**

**Jacky Repila and Emma Sadd,** *Girls Not Brides* – Child, early and forced marriage and unions (CEFMU) and the law

- Planned publications (January 2024):
  1. Synthesis report summarising the findings of the literature review
  2. Global brief presenting key findings & implications from the literature review, alongside insights from member organisations
  3. Latin America and the Caribbean brief presenting key regional findings, alongside insights from member organisations based in LAC

**Dr. Olubukola Omobowale,** University of Ibadan – [Ending child marriage through community-led media series \(ENCASE Project\)](#)

**Shannon Thompson,** Orchid Project – The FGM/C Research Initiative

- Recently launched opportunity to facilitate the dissemination of accurate and comprehensive information ([www.fgmcricri.org](http://www.fgmcricri.org))

### **Resources shared**

Akwara, E., and Chandra-Mouli, V., 2022, [Looking back with satisfaction at the progress made in adolescent pregnancy and child bearing globally, and looking ahead at the enormous amount that yet needs to be done.](#)

Amo-Adjei, J., Caffee, S., Simpson, Z., Harris, M., and Chandra-Mouli, V., 2022, [“Second Chances” for adolescent mothers: Four decades of insights and lessons on effectiveness and scale-up of Jamaica’s PAM.](#)



The CRANK, 2021, [Research Spotlight: Gender-transformative and systems approaches to ending child marriage and promoting girls' rights](#), *Girls Not Brides* and UNFPA-UNICEF Global Programme to End Child Marriage.

The CRANK, 2022, [Research Spotlight: Successful multisectoral and multilevel approaches to address child marriage](#), *Girls Not Brides* and UNFPA-UNICEF Global Programme to End Child Marriage.

## **Platforms for collaboration and learning**

[The FGM/C Research Initiative](#)

[The CRANK Online Research Tracker](#)