

Tailored intervention to empower married girls

Organisation

International Rescue Committee

Country

Bekaa Valley, Lebanon

Project start date

May 2016 - ongoing

Supported by

Women's Refugee Commission

Project summary

In Lebanon, the International Rescue Committee (IRC) works to empower married and engaged adolescent girls in the Bekaa Valley, a region that hosts a large number of refugees from Syria and where child marriage is widespread. As part of their pilot project to respond to child marriage in the region, our *Life Skills Package for Early Marriage* provides vital information and life skills to Syrian and Lebanese girls who are married or engaged. The programme aims to increase their physical and psychosocial wellbeing and their resilience to gender-based violence (GBV). We have also developed a *Rapid Response* intervention, which is a shortened version of the *Life Skills Package* that allows girls who cannot participate in the whole programme, to take part in shorter individual sessions. The programme focuses on meeting the needs of married girls and therefore does not include a prevention component. However, when engaged girls wish to break the engagement and ask for our support to do so, we connect them with other programme teams and experts that focus on case management and can better support the girls in this process.

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

- Girls have the opportunity to develop solidarity with one another through peer groups and collective action
- Alternative economic, social roles for girls and women exist and are valued
- Increased access of married and unmarried girls to health, education, economic, and legal support

What are the key activities of the project?

Using evidence to identify and reach the most vulnerable girls, and tailor the programme to their needs

In 2015, we reviewed our adolescent girls programming and identified a gap in reaching and engaging married adolescent girls in refugee and Lebanese communities in the Beeka region. To fill this gap, we conducted a research study to explore why and how early marriage happened, and the better understand the needs, interests, and challenges faced by married and engaged adolescent. After exploring the perspectives of participating girls, their husbands, parents and in-laws, we identified many barriers faced by married girls to access programmes and services available to them in the region (e.g. limited mobility, time restrictions, safety concerns etc.). Based on this analysis, we developed a strategy to overcome these challenges and better reach married adolescent girls who are often “invisible girls” in the region. We then developed a new psychosocial curricula including twenty life skills sessions tailored to the local context and to the needs of married and engaged girls in Lebanon.

Bringing adolescent girls together in a safe space

Once the girls are identified and agree to take part in the programme, the Life Skills Package provides them with the time and space they need to build trust and strong support networks among their peers. By attending weekly sessions and spending continuous time together over a 3-4 month period, they have the opportunity to develop solidarity with one another, especially as they share similar backgrounds, experiences and vulnerabilities. Having that safe space allows them to build self-confidence and increase their self-esteem.

Informing girls about gender inequality and building their capacity to challenge it

Marriage often ends girls’ opportunities for education, better paid work outside the home, and potential decision making roles in their communities. Throughout the project, girls are encouraged to address these challenges by exploring alternative economic and social roles for themselves in their households and communities. The curriculum includes sessions on gender roles, gender-based violence, financial literacy, decision making in the household, power balance and healthy relationships.

Empowering married girls to lead a more healthy and fulfilling life

Throughout the sessions, married and engaged adolescent girls gain knowledge and information on sexual and reproductive health, pregnancy care, family planning, legal registration of births and marriages, and develop skills in budgeting and managing money. Our programme also helps them to increase their access to services that they ask for - such as health, education, economic and legal support - by referring them to service providers in the region. The sessions are intentionally flexible to leave room for girls to reflect on their own reality. For example, Syrian refugee girls can thus reflect on their own experience of child marriage in the context of displacement, whether they live in settlements or in urban settings.

What impact has the programme had so far?

Girls who participated in the programmes have shared very encouraging insights with us. Many have reported feeling more confident, less isolated, and more able to negotiate with their husbands about decisions that affect them.

We are collaborating with *Girls Not Brides* member the Women’s Refugee Commission to conduct an evaluation of the programme with the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, Center for Humanitarian Health. We will be able to share more information on the results of this evaluation by June 2018.

What are the challenges in implementing the project and how are you working to overcome them?

Engaging the husbands of married girls

In the early stages of the outreach, we faced challenges in engaging the husbands of married adolescent girls. In some locations, the men showed resistance and scepticism towards the goal and impact of the project. To tackle this issue, the outreach strategy for this project now includes a component on engaging men who are key decision makers in the lives of the adolescent girls that the programme is trying to reach. The men are approached by a male community mobiliser from our team who introduces the project and builds trust with the men and the community at large. It is important to note that men are actively engaged in the programme only after the adolescent girls consent to this step.

Adapting the programme to allow young mothers to participate

Many of the married girls in the project are mothers and need to bring along their children to the safe space to be able to attend the sessions. To make sure that the adolescent mothers are able to fully engage in the activities and that children are in a safe comfortable environment, a child care volunteer is always present in a nearby space to take care of the children while their mothers are in the sessions. This has ensured that both the adolescent mothers and their children are feeling safe and comfortable. Through our Rapid Response intervention, we also provide an opportunity for girls who can't take part in the whole programme, to still benefit from a shorter version of the Life Skills Package.

What factors are important to the success of the project?

Using evidence to design the intervention

Without the research that was conducted at the beginning of the project, the needs and interests of married adolescent girls would not have been effectively captured in the outreach strategy or in the content of the sessions. More importantly, continuous feedback from the girls is taken into account to adapt the content as we go and make sure it is responding to their realities and contexts.

Setting up safe spaces close to the homes of married girls

Free time and mobility is usually limited for married girls and even more so for refugee girls. So we decided to deliver the sessions in mobile settings close to their homes, which was very important in increasing their ability to benefit from the programme.

Sustainability of funding

Sustainability of funding is a major factor for success of the programme as it ensures programming for adolescent girls and more specifically for engaged and married girls are implemented over the long term.

Technical support for frontline staff who directly work with adolescent girls

This is essential for maintaining the quality of the intervention and make sure no harm is being done to girls. For example, the sessions are continuously shadowed and monitored by adolescent girls programming officers and specialists; and frontline workers are trained to strengthen their facilitation skills and their knowledge of adolescent girls friendly approaches and how to deal with sensitive topics that might come up in the sessions.

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

- It is very important to understand the vulnerabilities, needs and interests of the target community and to design a tailored intervention accordingly. A participatory approach increases the population's commitment and heightens the impact of the project.
- Early marriage is a harmful practice and it is very important to focus on early prevention. Yet it is as important to respond to the needs of married adolescent girls as they are one of the most stigmatised groups among girls.
- When a programme targets girls from both refugee and host communities, it is also important to allow flexibility in the programme sessions, to allow girls to bring in their different backgrounds and perspectives on the issue, and discuss specific issues linked to displacement for example if they want to.
- It is important to engage husbands, parents and in-laws of married adolescent girls involved in a project. This builds trusts with the community and helps create supportive allies in the lives of married adolescent girls.

To access the results of IRC's study on early marriage in the Beeka Valley, please see this [info-visualisation tool](#).