



Child marriage and youth voices: findings of *Girls Not Brides* survey

In the run-up to the *Girls Not Brides* 2015 Member Meeting in Casablanca, the *Girls Not Brides* secretariat developed an online survey targeted at youth activists across the world who are working to address child marriage. We asked them three concise questions:

- a) What are the unique contributions that young people can make to building a child marriage-free world? What assets do young people have that make a difference?
- b) What are the biggest challenges young people campaigning against child marriage face?
- c) How can civil society organisations gathering together at the *Girls Not Brides* Global Member Meeting work in a more meaningful way with young people.

Over 100 young people aged 15 – 30 years responded to our survey. We received eloquent, articulate submissions from young people from Ghana to the Gambia, Tonga to Tunisia, Palestine to Pakistan and Bangladesh to Burkina Faso. So what did young people have to say?

What are the unique contributions that young people offer in the fight to end child marriage?

- Young people were resolute that their potent influence as peer educators and agents capable of catalyzing behaviour change among their peers should not be underestimated. One respondent from India said: ‘Do not underestimate the power of young people speaking out against early marriage – we are strong role models for their peers and are living evidence of what your life can be like if you are allowed to stay in school or continue with another form of education. We can – and we do - encourage solidarity actions by our peers and are capable of mobilizing powerful movements. We generate strength in numbers.’ Many young respondents mentioned the diverse skills youth have not just in mobilizing their peers, but also in engaging a variety of groups – from the clergy, media to community leaders and officials.
- Youth also gave examples of how they had achieved impact by leading advocacy initiatives and engaging directly with duty bearers at multiple levels – community, national and international. One young woman from Ghana told us ‘Child Marriage is OUR issue. We can articulate this issue like no-one else can. If we do this well, people listen and respond. When we speak, it is more powerful.’
- Young people’s knowledge and insights were also cited as being essential to programme effectiveness. ‘Youth provide an insight that adults simply do not possess,’ mentioned one youth advocate from Bangladesh. ‘My insights have helped programme designers understand what strategies girls in my community use to self-protect and avoid early marriage. I have told them what it takes to make myself and my friends feel safe.’
- Youth also mentioned they can play a key role in monitoring and responding to/reporting child marriage cases. One Ugandan advocate said: ‘We know who is at risk of child marriage; we hear the conversations that adults do not. Let us be the eyes and ears and the actors demanding that young people are allowed to fulfill their potential.’

What are some of the biggest challenges faced by youth campaigning against child marriage?

Youth cited the general challenges of trying to transform entrenched social and gender norms as a key challenge – and this is something faced by most of us working to end the practice. One advocate said: ‘There are entire cultures of oppression to be dismantled and it feels like a mountain to climb.’ In addition to this, youth faced challenges that were specific to them as a discrete group:

- Inability to convince adult decision-makers, donors as well as some civil society stakeholders that they are credible actors with valuable assets that they can bring to the table. ‘There is a lot of skepticism about what we can and can’t do as youths and this directly impacts upon our ability to secure funding for our work. And when we are included – we still see a huge amount of tokenism and manipulation. We are used as mouthpieces and not engaged meaningfully in the work,’ said one Zimbabwean respondent.
- Many youth respondents mentioned they faced security threats and a ‘backlash’ as a result of their work as young advocates. Some south Asian activists reported knowing cases of young people who had chosen to speak out being chased out of home and discriminated against in their local communities
- Access to duty bearers, influential stakeholders and decision-making platforms was consistently mentioned as a major challenge to youth engaging.

How can civil society organisations engage more meaningfully with young people to end child marriage?

- Young people were not adamant they should be given immediate leadership responsibilities – instead, they cited the need for more genuine partnerships between adults working for NGOs and young people themselves in the form of ‘youth-adult partnerships’. Respondents consistently mentioned the need for technical support that is delivered in a way that will enable them to take the lead in the future. ‘We need preparation and support to enable us to lead an anti-child marriage campaign. Sometimes I feel we are set up to fail.’
- And the best way of achieving these youth-adult partnerships is by ‘working in partnership with youth by putting them at the heart of planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation. Things done for us should first be done WITH us and eventually BY us. For example, I would love to be on the steering committee for the campaign I am part of, but it hasn’t happened yet.’
- Linked to this issue of partnership, is the sense that non-youth-led NGOs should carefully reflect upon the ways they engage with youth. They should critically reflect upon are they really to facilitate rather than **lead** the youth they work with? Do they really know the difference between the two different approaches and what can be done to improve?
- Young people cited the need for more creative capacity building delivered by NGOs if young people are to be supported to become effective advocates against child marriage. Young people wanted to see less of a focus on one-off training workshops, and more on sustainable learning exchanges with other organisations, and ongoing mentorship schemes. ‘Continuity must be central to capacity building,’ said a youth advocate from Kenya.
- Continue to give us access to spaces where we can influence – but try to give more of a focus upon amplifying the voices of those youth who work at the grassroots and of those marginalized youth by supporting them to start taking a lead at higher levels.