

MARCH 2024

LEARNING BRIEF #11



Tackling child marriage through education

Girls' Education Challenge



The **Girls' Education Challenge (GEC)** is the UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office's 12-year, £855 million Global Fund which aims to improve the educational opportunities of the world's most marginalised girls. The GEC is comprised of two types of project: 1) GEC-Transition (GEC-T) projects, which work within schools and support girls most at risk of dropping out; and 2) Leave No Girl Behind (LNGB) projects, which target highly marginalised girls who have already dropped out or who have never been able to enrol in school.

Over the last decade, there has been a steady decline in the harmful practice of child marriage – defined as any formal marriage or informal union between a child under the age of 18 and an adult or another child.¹ Today, one in five young women aged 20 to 24 were married as children versus nearly one in four 10 years ago.² However, despite this progress, reductions are not enough to meet the sustainable development goal 5.3 of eliminating the practice.

Girls not Brides estimate that 160 million girls will marry as children by 2030. In addition, progress has been uneven, and poverty, climate shocks and humanitarian crises threaten to leave the most vulnerable girls susceptible. An estimated 640 million girls and women alive today were married in childhood, with 45% of child brides in South Asia and 20% in Sub-Saharan Africa.³ The 10 countries with the highest child marriage prevalence rates are either fragile or extremely fragile.⁴

While child marriage does occur among both boys and girls, the prevalence is about six times higher among girls.⁵ Child marriage is deeply rooted in gender inequality and societal values that place less worth on girls than boys, deprive girls of their agency, and perpetuate systems in which women and girls have little power or voice. Child marriage reinforces gender inequalities by denying girls their freedom and rights, limiting their access to education, health and economic participation, and limiting their control over their bodies, including who and when to marry and when to have children. It is closely linked to social and cultural beliefs that once a girl reaches puberty, her value lies in her role as a wife, mother and homemaker.

A lack of access to quality education is also rooted in gender inequality, and child marriage and education are closely interlinked. A girl who is not in school is more susceptible to early marriage. Conversely, keeping girls in school is one of the best ways to delay marriage.⁶ In many cultures, the onset of menstruation marks her transition into adulthood and her readiness for marriage. Once married, her education is no

longer deemed important, as her value is linked to her household and familial responsibilities. Education is not considered necessary for these responsibilities.

Poverty is also a factor. For low-income families, early marriage can be seen as a way to alleviate a ‘financial burden’, as well as a way to gain income. Families may decide to sacrifice the long-term investment in a girls’ education for immediate economic needs. Also, if girls have few economic opportunities once they graduate, this further devalues their education in the eyes of their husbands or in-laws. Thus, girls are stuck in a vicious cycle of limited education, limited opportunities for financial independence, and limited agency and decision-making power. Girls who marry before 18 are more likely to become pregnant during adolescence, with mental health and physical risks and complications more likely. They are more likely to experience domestic violence, and they also have worse economic prospects and worse mental and physical health outcomes, which are passed down to their children.⁷

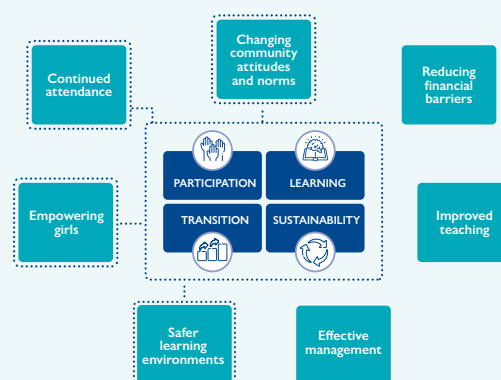
Underpinning all of this, and the most influential factor contributing to the ongoing prevalence of child marriage is the deep-rooted cultural beliefs and norms held at the community level.

This Learning Brief explores these issues and outlines the approaches and activities that GEC projects took to address them. It concludes with recommendations intended to support governments, donors and implementing partners.

¹ Child marriage | UNICEF
² UNICEF (2023) *Is an end to child marriage within reach?*
³ *Ibid*
⁴ Girls not brides: Child marriage and humanitarian contexts
⁵ *Ibid*
⁶ Wodon, Q, et al., 2018, *Missed Opportunities: The High Cost of Not Educating Girls*, Washington, DC: The World Bank.
⁷ Child marriage | UNICEF.

The Girls’ Education Challenge Learning Brief series:

To capitalise on its vast portfolio of 41 projects, operating across 17 countries, the Girls’ Education Challenge (GEC) has compiled a wealth of project learning regarding key interventions related to girls’ education. While these Learning Briefs are rooted in both quantitative and qualitative evidence, they are not research papers or evidence reports. Rather, they provide a synthesis of learning from GEC intervention designs and implementation approaches that have been paramount for supporting improvements in girls’ learning. The GEC projects take a holistic approach to improve the educational environment and conditions that support improved learning, participation, transition and sustainability outcomes. This Learning Brief is focused on what activities were implemented to reduce, avert and delay child marriage. In doing this GEC projects contributed to achieving the highlighted outcomes:



Shifting cultural norms takes time – and education’s protective role is key

A key learning across the GEC is that cultural and social norms are often deeply embedded, particularly in the most conservative communities, and shifting those norms takes time and long-term investments. These norms place less value on adolescent girls’ education and more on their role in the home. When a girl marries, she is often forced out of school and into the narrow sphere of domestic duties in her marital home, where she has limited mobility, agency and freedom.

GEC research in Pakistan and Nepal⁸ found that tribal customs, prevailing socio-cultural norms and gender inequality were the main factors underpinning the prevalence of child marriage. In communities where the research was conducted, belief systems view marriage as a vessel of cultural values, a way to control girls’ sexuality and a way to ‘preserve girls’ honour’. Community members talked about the great pressures on them from their elders to adhere to customs.

The GEC works in regions with tribal systems, which means joint family systems. Within these systems, not adhering to early marriage customs is seen as disrespectful to their customs and culture. If a girl’s marriage is delayed, there is a reputational risk in these close-knit communities.

“We are scared when we think that our daughters will elope if not married at an early age, and this will have a negative impact on our family prestige.”
Mother, Nepal

“They [our children] elope and do self-marriage. Hence, we have no choice but to arrange their marriage as early as possible to avoid this.”
In-laws, Nepal

GEC projects have found that in the short term, interventions to keep girls in school can delay marriage. Thus, projects have taken the twin-track approach of aiming to shift negative cultural norms associated with child marriage in the long term while in the short term keeping girls in school. This can offer a girl valuable time to finish her education and gain self-efficacy.

Formal school was no longer viable for many of the most marginalised girls, so projects have engaged them in skills training and livelihood activities. As a result, many families have delayed the marriage of girls when they are attending learning spaces or generating income. For example, project staff on the [Marginalised No More](#) project (in Nepal) found that parents are less likely to rush to marry their daughters off when girls are involved in income-generating work or studying. Thus, while improving girls’ access to education is the central tenant of the GEC, it is vital to also work on long-term, sustainable approaches around shifting negative socio-cultural norms.

GEC projects support the most marginalised⁹ girls, and it is these girls who are the most vulnerable to educational marginalisation and child marriage. Girls’ universal characteristics (such as age and gender) and contextual characteristics (such as poverty or language) can intersect with barriers to education at the family, community, learning space and system level to marginalise girls from education and make them more susceptible to early marriage. For example, poor adolescent girls who are in contexts of crisis and conflict, who are orphans or girls from single-parent households, are all more susceptible to being out of school, and being out of school makes them more susceptible to early marriage.

“When a girl marries, she is often forced out of school and into the narrow sphere of domestic duties in her marital home, where she has limited mobility, agency and freedom.”



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⁸ This Learning Brief has been informed by detailed data collection and research by the Fund Manager with projects in Nepal and Pakistan, the results of which are included here. Henceforth any reference to this research is called the: Child Marriage Internal Research Report. Research in Nepal was conducted in Siraha and Mahottari with Mushar girls, and in Para, Sarlahi, bara and Rautahat strictrds. In Pakistan, research was conducted in Kashmir in the Sindh province and Chagi, Kharan, Killa Abdullah, Noshki and Pishin districts in Balochistan province.

⁹ Please see the ‘Educating girls: Making sure you reach the most marginalised’ Learning Brief to understand how the GEC worked to support the most marginalised.

The GEC approach

The GEC is an education programme tackling the barriers to education for marginalised girls. GEC projects' theories of change take a holistic approach to ensuring girls' access to quality education, and this includes examining and tackling all the barriers to access for the most marginalised. Because child marriage is a significant barrier to education, GEC projects have focused their attention on this issue.

The majority of GEC projects had interventions related to child marriage, and *Figure 1* outlines some of the key strategies, which can be categorised into four main areas:

1. Working with communities, men and boys to shift social norms. These are interventions which engage families, communities, young people and leaders to transform norms, attitudes and behaviours related to gender inequality and child marriage. Many projects focus on working with men, boys, husbands and fathers. The aim is heightened awareness of the negative impacts of child marriage and greater support for girls' education and girls' rights to participate in decisions that affect them. The ultimate aim is a shift in social norms away from child marriage towards gender equality.

2. Improving access to quality education. Improving access to quality formal or non-formal education for the most marginalised girls is the main objective of the GEC. Each project has its context-specific theory of change and set of interventions aimed at removing the barriers to education at the community, school or education space, and systemic levels.

3. Advancing girls' knowledge and skills: These interventions seek to increase girls' knowledge of their rights. Projects also worked with girls to improve life skills such as decision-making, self-efficacy, self-confidence, and skills related to sexual and reproductive health and rights. The aim is to better position girls to challenge gender norms and child marriage, participate in decisions that affect them, stand up for their rights and avoid unwanted pregnancies.

4. Improving access to protection and sexual reproductive health and rights (SRHR) services: These interventions include activities to increase access to SRHR services and improved access to protection services. Many projects worked on strengthening protection reporting and referral mechanisms and working with response services.

“Because child marriage is a significant barrier to education, GEC projects have focused their attention on this issue.”

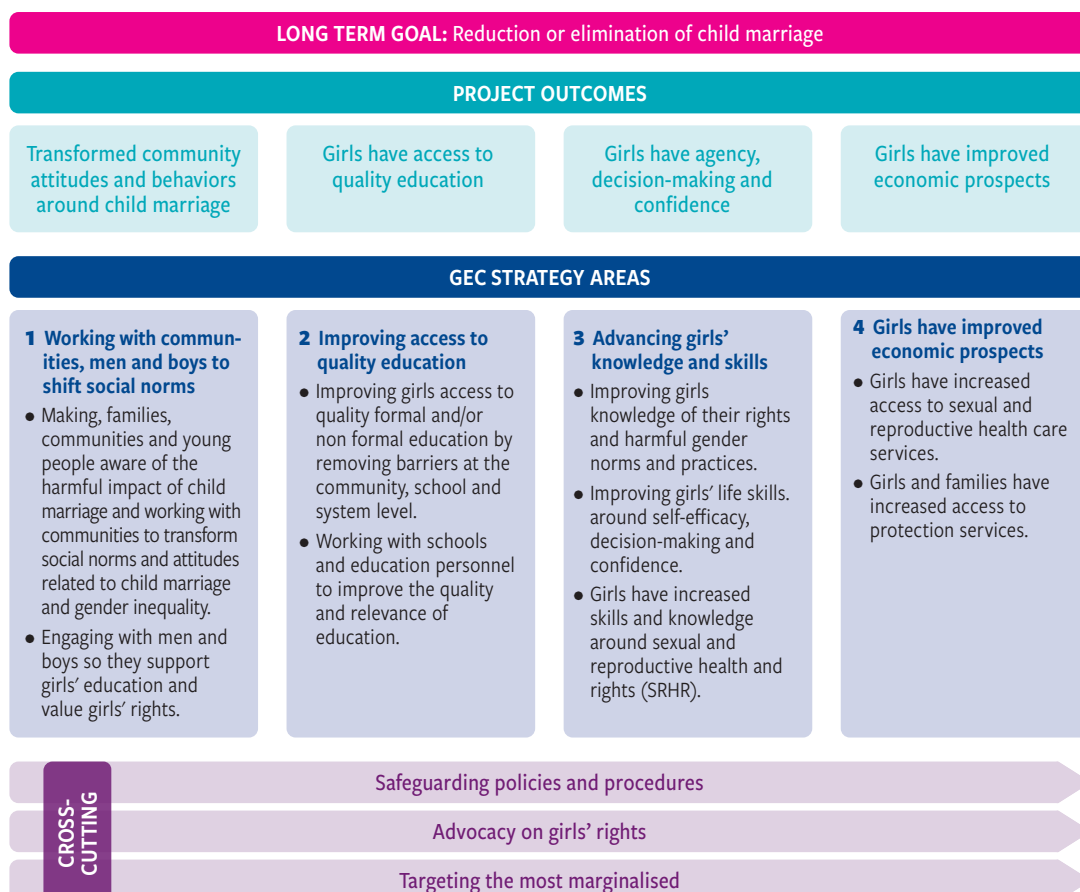


Figure 1: GEC Approach to averting, reducing or delaying child marriage

Underpinning these interventions are the project's safeguarding policies and procedures. GEC's overarching Safeguarding Policy prohibits child marriage and requires all project teams to comply fully with the guidance and protocols. Compulsory safeguarding training for project and partner staff helps ensure girls are protected. Cases must be reported, concerned personnel investigated, and appropriate actions taken. Project partnerships and collaborations with relevant local agencies and child protection bureaus have been vital to ensuring cases are followed up appropriately and resolved.

'Do no harm' must be a consideration throughout all interventions

When projects work to shift harmful norms, they will often work with girls to expand their horizons beyond traditional roles and to challenge the status quo in their homes and communities. Projects help girls think critically about their goals and how to go beyond the restrictions and stereotypes. Projects have learned that it is important to understand these norms and manage the process. When girls display attitudes that go against prevailing norms, they can experience negative backlash from community members. Building girls' capabilities and agency is an important part of challenging child marriage, but this should be done through a 'do no harm' lens and alongside work with communities, parents and husbands to ensure girls do not experience backlash when they do challenge the status quo.



GEC project activities

This section examines some of the activities that projects conducted in each area that were successful in averting, reducing or delaying child marriage. It is important to note that a combination of these is needed.

1. Working with communities, men and boys to shift social norms

Gender norms are powerful, pervasive values and attitudes about gender-based social roles and behaviours that are deeply embedded in social structures. Gender norms manifest at various levels within households and families, communities, neighbourhoods, and wider society. They ensure the maintenance of social order, punishing or sanctioning deviance from those norms, interacting to produce outcomes which are frequently inequitable and dynamics that are often risky for women and girls.¹⁰

To ensure sustained positive change around gender equality and child marriage, projects have had to work on the drivers of change, such as promoting social norm change, and this requires working closely with communities, families, men and boys. This also requires a deep understanding by project staff of the communities and the operational context in which they work.

Activities with community members aim to transform harmful attitudes and gender norms. They aim to promote attitudes and behaviours that encourage girls' inclusion in education, promote girls' rights, and remove barriers to education, such as child marriage. Engaging with communities through community dialogues and awareness is one main approach to instigating attitudinal and behavioural change. Projects have used visual aids, storytelling, drama, and girls' voices to foster collective reflection and action planning by community leaders.

Once awareness was raised on child marriage, communities were mobilised to protect girls' rights, and this often involved the establishment of community-based protection mechanisms and advocacy groups which were tasked with advocating for change in their communities and working on individual cases of child marriage with the families involved, and government authorities when necessary.

The [Aarambha](#) project in Nepal formed Community Learning Centre Management Committees among the parents actively involved in preventing child marriage.

"If they learned that child marriage was taking place, they contacted the local authorities immediately and asked them to deal with such cases."

Project Team member, Aarambha¹¹

CASE STUDY: TEAM Girl Malawi – Radio programming targeting the reduction of child marriage

In Malawi, [Theatre for a Change](#) (TfaC) worked on the [Team Girl Malawi](#) project to develop scenario-based interactive radio programming that addressed the causes of child marriage. Their success in averting and delaying child marriage was down to developing storylines that ran for extended periods with characters that communities could relate to and identify themselves. 57 radio clubs, with an average of 30 people across Malawi, came together to actively listen and interact with, stories on the radio. TfaC used phone calls into the show, a platform that collected 1,200 SMSs per broadcast, a Facebook page and polls to collect community responses and determine the storyline. Communities provided solutions to the problems the characters faced and practical actions to avert and delay child marriage.

Village chiefs, parents and children all called in to share their experiences of reducing, averting and delaying child marriage. The use of 'real and live' cases was instrumental in the programme's success. Community surveys and safeguarding referrals routinely state the radio programme's influence in supporting decision-making.

Projects have also worked with men and boys, sensitising them on the issue, particularly the negative consequences of early and forced marriage. In any patriarchal society, given that girls' fathers and husbands are largely the decision-makers for them, little will change without changing their attitudes and behaviour. As outlined in the [GEC Learning Brief, *Ending violence in schools*](#), Boys' Clubs provided an important forum for the interrogation of gender norms and exploring positive masculinity, how to build healthy relationships and how to advocate for girls' rights.

Another key strategy to raise awareness amongst the wider community was the use of media – including radio or poster campaigns – to highlight the issue of child marriage. Radio sessions tend to engage more when they are interactive and use methods such as role plays or question and answer sessions that platform adolescent girls' views. For example, the BBC radio programmes created in Sierra Leone presented issues through girls' eyes and demonstrated and modelled what supportive attitudes and practices towards adolescent girls look like.

"To ensure sustained positive change around gender equality and child marriage, projects have had to work on the drivers of change, such as promoting social norm change, and this requires working closely with communities, families, men and boys."

¹⁰Keleher, H., & Franklin, L. (2008) [Changing gendered norms about women and girls at the level of household and community: a review of the evidence](#)

¹¹Child Marriage Internal Research Report

2: Improving access to quality education

When girls are engaged in education, vocational training or income generation, their marriage is more likely to be delayed. Educating girls opens up alternatives to early marriage. As outlined in a recent [LNGB report](#), girls participating in GEC projects are more ambitious in their aspirations.

“Being part of the project allowed them to nurture higher aspirations for the future that they previously did not have.”¹²

“When there is no vocational training, education or income marriage makes sense.”

Rural mother, Pakistan

The mainstay of the GEC is to increase marginalised girls’ access either to formal education where possible or alternative education in cases where formal schools do not exist or are not a feasible or desired option for girls. In projects, this has included community-based education located in girls’ communities, accelerated education programs designed for out-of-school girls to accelerate their formal education, and alternative education or non-formal education, which generally focus on the more practical skills that girls need for their everyday lives and income generation.¹³ Creating education opportunities in girls’ communities has helped delay marriage and open up opportunities to girls beyond a role in the domestic sphere.

CASE STUDY: Afghanistan: Community-based education

In Afghanistan, projects found that the main barriers to girls attending school were the long distances to schools, safety concerns for girls travelling these distances, and a lack of girls’ mobility outside of their community due to cultural beliefs and norms. Thus, projects set up community-based education centres in rural communities close to girls’ homes making it more culturally acceptable for girls to attend. Projects ran primary and lower secondary programmes in these communities and trained and hired female teachers from these communities who were aware of the challenges girls faced. The project worked closely with school management committees who were able to follow up with girls in the community who were having difficulties attending.

3: Advancing girls’ knowledge and skills

GEC projects take a rights-based approach to programming, embedded in their life skills programmes and curricula that empower girls to fulfil their capabilities and realise their rights. Life skills are important for highly marginalised girls as they transition into adulthood, particularly in contexts where girls have little access to appropriate information, guidance and role models.

Life skills programmes have helped build girls’ awareness of issues around child marriage, her rights around marriage, and any relevant and related laws or policies. They have also helped girls understand how social norms can affect their lives and provided girls with the skills to challenge these norms. Programmes give girls a voice and empower them to become influencers on issues that affect them in their communities. Projects have focused on skills related to leadership, self-efficacy, self-esteem, managing emotions, assertiveness, negotiation and problem-solving. All skills which help a girl assert herself and claim her rights, report cases of child marriage and postpone her marriage.

Life skills programmes needed to be gender transformative in that they addressed gender norms and how they impact girls’ lives, gender power imbalances and negative cultural practices. Ideally, life skills would go further and girls with the critical skills and attitudes to challenge social norms and advocate for change in their homes and communities around child marriage.¹⁴

As outlined in a recent [GEC Learning Brief: Supporting girls to secure their sexual and reproductive health and rights](#), many projects have incorporated comprehensive sexuality education into their life skills curricula, which helps girls develop age-appropriate knowledge, attitudes and skills contributing to healthy and safe relationships. They also help them to critically reflect on cultural norms, traditional practices and beliefs, and improve girls’ agency in family planning.

However, while life skills can help ensure that girls lead more empowered lives, projects have found that the impact of life skills programmes can be limited when social norms in communities remain the same.

“Life skills programmes have helped build girls’ awareness of issues around child marriage, her rights around marriage, and any relevant and related laws or policies.”

¹² <https://girlseducationchallenge.org/media/yibiknvp/gec-ii-study-5-brief-final.pdf>

¹³ Please see the [GEC Lessons from the Field: Alternatives to formal education for marginalised girls for more on alternative education](#)

¹⁴ [Ending child marriage: what works? A look at the evidence – Girls Not Brides](#)



Mentorship

Another key strategy projects have used to build girls' self-esteem and provide them with guidance and support is mentorship. This can be via girls' peers or female role models in their communities. Not only do mentors help girls deal with everyday challenges and navigate difficult conversations with their parents around child marriage, but in many cases, they have also played an important role in preventing child marriage through their advocacy with parents and community members.

The projects in Nepal used a Big Sister/ Little Sister approach where younger girls are supported by older girls who are often a few years older. Projects have reported that these 'Big Sisters' have played a vital role in preventing child marriage by working with parents and families, raising awareness and informing the concerned authority when relevant. Projects also exposed girls to female role models – many who served as mentors – to expose them to successful women and motivate them to think beyond life for themselves beyond the domestic sphere.



CASE STUDY: EAGER, Sierra Leone – Expanding girls' horizons

The EAGER programme is aimed at adolescent girls aged 10 to 19 with little or no formal education. Its Learning Programme has four components: literacy, numeracy, financial literacy and life skills. The life skills curriculum includes sessions on social and emotional learning, sexual and reproductive health and rights, gender-based violence and goal setting.

Once girls have completed the 'learning' component of the programme, they work on their Empowerment Plans with their mentors. These plans focus on four key areas of empowerment: learning, household, community and financial. The mentors work with girls on creating Empowerment Plans that challenge gender norms and encourage them to think critically about whether they can safely step beyond the restrictions and assumptions about the activities that girls can and should do in their homes and communities. The project then provides grants to all girls to make their own financial decisions about how to spend the funds based on what they had defined in their Empowerment Plan.

Through this approach, girls have increased self-efficacy. Girls interviewed had more positive views of the future, and their general horizons have been expanded. Whereas many had previously seen their future revolving around farming, motherhood and home management, this has changed as pathways such as business ownership have opened up and they learn about sexual and reproductive health and rights.

However, it should be noted that while the project does in-depth work with communities to shift norms, these are slow to change, and the majority of girls are still managing their lives against the backdrop of restrictive gender norms:

'... for many beneficiaries, these outcomes primarily enable them to more effectively manage their lives within inequitable gender roles, without transforming culturally entrenched gender norms.' (EAGER Midline).

4: Improving access to protection and SRHR services

Tackling early marriage requires strong, adolescent-friendly reporting, referral and response systems in schools and communities, with focal points that girls feel safe reporting to. Training and sensitisation for staff, learners, community members and district officials is also important. Projects that successfully curbed child marriage collaborated closely with the relevant government agencies, developed good working relationships with service providers and provided additional training when needed to ensure cases were responded to effectively.

CASE STUDY: STAGES, Ethiopia – Working together to respond to cases of child marriage

During COVID-19, there was an increase in child marriages when schools closed in Ethiopia, and GEC projects had to work closely with communities and schools, sensitising them on the issue. Importantly, they also worked closely with government agencies, referring cases to local officials and service providers and working alongside social workers and health workers to provide psychosocial and sexual and reproductive health (SRH) support for girls who had escaped early marriages.

The STAGES project provided safeguarding training at the teacher, head teacher, cluster supervisor and woreda expert levels. They set up reporting mechanisms in schools. Working groups were established with representatives from the police, courts, local militia military and schools. As one official reported, *“These stakeholders have created a common understanding through which they can prevent and respond to gender-based violence.”*

There is evidence from the project’s midline report that there is less tolerance for GBV and early marriage in communities. Based on multiple anecdotes from woreda (district) officials and other respondents, authorities have been actively pursuing leads and saving girls from abduction, trafficking and other acts of violence and abuse.



CASE STUDY: Excelling against the odds, Ethiopia – Reporting mechanisms in schools

The Excelling Against the Odds project increased the direct participation of girls, which helped to understand and address the challenges girls faced. They set up Girls’ Clubs in project schools and developed school-based safeguarding reporting mechanisms called Letter-Link Boxes. These are two small boxes kept at every school so that girls and boys can anonymously report any safeguarding concerns or threats of traditional harmful practices. In the clubs, girls built their life skills and self-esteem, and were an opportunity to discuss the challenges of inequitable gender norms, how they affect them, and how to challenge them. They could also discuss protection issues and how to report them.¹⁵



Projects were particularly successful when they worked or partnered with existing health service providers, as this opened up communication channels. Across projects, these networks have not only benefitted projects during COVID-19 closures they have continued to be embedded into schools and communities. Partnering with health services in Kenya has led to a greater understanding of girls’ lives, better access to communities on a household level and the increased ability of projects to make informed decisions around individuals, their needs and learning. Successful projects’ integrated their activities with action already being taken by existing community-based health structures. This leveraged local health expertise in logistics, salaries and remit, and built on the existing relationships with communities. Projects reported that this was key in achieving success as it built on health community-based structures’ operations rather than imposing new ones. This added dimension meant that they could support girls in many ways.

“Projects that successfully curbed child marriage collaborated closely with the relevant government agencies, developed good working relationships with service providers and provided additional training when needed to ensure cases were responded to effectively.”

¹⁵ Please see: https://girlseducationchallenge.org/media/fppevury/practice-and-impact-brief_childhope_girl-led-community-dialogue.pdf for more information on the project’s girl-led dialogues



Advocacy

Many projects were heavily involved in advocating for girls' rights, including eliminating child marriage, and strengthened advocacy networks and collaboration. All three projects in Nepal were involved in the Girls Inclusive Education Network, which is instrumental in giving girls a voice. This network brings girls, mentors and other key stakeholders together and there are networks at the school, community and municipality level. The network aims to raise the voices of marginalised girls and mainstream gender policies in close coordination with the local authorities. This has included work on child marriage.

¹⁶ Please see: [Maintaining learning continuity during school closure: Community Health Volunteer support for marginalised girls in Kenya](#) – Donovan Ameyia, Rachael Fitzpatrick, Ella Page, Ruth Naylor, Charlotte Jones and Tony McAleavy



CASE STUDY: Let Our Girls Succeed, Kenya – Ensuring girls' safety and ability to continue learning and reducing dropout

Community Health Volunteers (CHVs) supported the [Let Our Girls Succeed](#) project by collecting data on the psychosocial security of girls, dropouts, GBV, Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) and child marriage/pregnancy issues. They could access learners at a household level and signpost to referral services.

Their role became even more critical during COVID school closures as they were the only people allowed into households and communities. They engaged with communities to promote the importance of home learning. They monitored girls' engagement with learning activities, talked to parents about their concerns, ensured girls' psychosocial wellbeing and referred learners to local counselling networks if needed.

The CHV role in education was successful¹⁶ because the volunteers had a clear structure and deep trust with communities. The project benefitted from knowing what local leaders and local government think, and with this information and access to homes, they could pre-empt problems like dropout.

The impact of GEC interventions

GEC projects did not have one specific indicator around child marriage on which to report change. However, projects saw changes in qualitative and anecdotal evidence confirming shifts in knowledge, changing attitudes (for example, parents said they agreed with the legal age of marriage) and potential for behavioural change, though early marriage was still prevalent in communities. In the Nepal/ Pakistan research report, while many interviewees agreed with the legal age for marriage in theory, they still practised early marriage in their communities. While this is evidence that lasting behavioural change is complex and takes time, there are five main areas of impact:

1: Delaying marriage due to girls' engagement in education

Many girls reported that they could continue their education because projects created learning opportunities within their community. Being in education meant their marriage was more likely to be delayed until they completed their course/ schooling level. In Nepal, parents were more likely to start planning their daughter's marriage if she was not studying.

Project staff shared that parents do not rush to marry their daughters off if girls are involved in income-generating work or studying.¹⁷

It should be noted, though, that in conservative communities, acceptable education or livelihood opportunities had to be situated within their communities. In Pakistan and Nepal, appropriate livelihood options, such as tailoring or embroidery, allowed girls to remain at home. Once girls were married, they were often withdrawn from education, though there are cases of girls being allowed to continue if their husbands and in-laws agreed. In Nepal, married girls were allowed to continue in learning centres 'as they were waiting for Gauna'.¹⁸ Meaning it was acceptable for girls to continue in education until their marriage was consummated.

Voices in favour of delaying marriage are getting stronger

Some local governments in Nepal are introducing incentives to delay marriage. They are offering between 20,000 and 40,000 NPR to encourage girls to stay in education. If girls reach grade 11 or 12 they receive a laptop and all girls from grade 8 onwards receive free sanitary pads. These local governments work with religious leaders, headteachers and communities to ensure they know the ages of girls and encourage everyone to stick to the legal age of 20 for marriage. The Girls' Inclusive Education Network plays an important role in delaying marriage and May the 1st has been officially designated as 'Delay Early Marriage Day.'

2: Attitudinal and behaviour change amongst girls

Girls themselves have learned more about their rights and the negative impacts of child marriage and have learned to think more critically about what it means for them and their children. Many girls built life skills around assertiveness and self-efficacy, and many examples of them advocating successfully with their parents to delay their marriage.

Married girls in Nepal shared that they now know more about the legal age of child marriage, their rights, and the consequences of child marriage. Girls interviewed said that had this information before, they would have tried to delay their marriages.

- **TEAM Girl Malawi** – 19% increase in girls reporting improved knowledge of SRHR.
- **The Virtuous Cycle of Girls' Education** (CAMFED, Tanzania, Zambia, Zimbabwe) – 99% of girls were 'more confident about making safe reproductive choices'.
- **Excelling Against the Odds** (Ethiopia) – 78% of girls said they had access to someone to ask questions to about their sexual and reproductive health.
- **Marginalised No More** (Street Child, Nepal) – 20% increase in girls reporting positive attitudes towards SRH.

There was evidence across project reports that projects had successfully increased girls' life skills, particularly improving self-esteem (10% increase from baseline to endline) and self-efficacy (9% increase from baseline to endline). For example, the Excelling Against the Odds report identified increased self-efficacy amongst girls since baseline. The EAGER Endline Evaluation identified increased girls' ability to participate in household decisions. As illustrated in Figure 2, there were also positive trends in girls' skills and knowledge around sexual and reproductive health and rights.

¹⁷ Child Marriage Internal Research Report
¹⁸ Ibid

CASE STUDY: SOMGEP, Somalia – Six years on

The **SOMGEP programme** was often located in girls' communities, which mitigated travel and cost barriers. The SOMGEP report found that six years after the project, girls who participated in the project were much more likely to have finished their secondary education, and their early marriage rates (under 15 years) were lower. GEC girls tended to marry at an older age than the comparison group (18.3 years versus 16.9 years on average).



3: Breaking intergenerational cycles

For girls who are married and have children, there are many examples of them vowing not to marry their children early, thus breaking the intergenerational cycle of poverty, a lack of education and child marriage.

“The perception of child marriage was found to be changing and becoming questionable among the youths particularly due to the project interventions.”¹⁹

“The evidence showed that since the girls started to attend the learning centres, they are very much aware of the legal age and the consequences of early/child marriage. Their perceptions have entirely changed towards child marriage. All the girls and even the parents said that from now onwards they would not force their children to get married before the age of 20.”²⁰

4: Attitudinal change amongst communities – with some evidence of behavioural change

There has been increased awareness amongst community members, including men and boys, around the negative impacts of child marriage and girls’ rights. There is evidence of increased knowledge amongst community members on the negative consequences of child marriage and early pregnancy, with many parents vowing they would not force their children to get married before they finish their education in the future.

“All the parents shared that they are now aware of the negative consequences of early pregnancy and the associated risks with this.”²¹

While there is strong evidence of attitudinal change, subsequent behaviour change is more difficult to quantify. However, there is anecdotal evidence across projects of communities working with government agencies and families to stop incidences of child marriage.

In Pakistan, traditionally, mothers would ask fathers to arrange their daughters’ marriage once they reached puberty. The research found that now a high percentage of mothers (about 30-40%) hide their daughter’s menstruation from their husbands to delay their marriage. This is an interesting example of mothers delaying their marriage but still operating within existing gender norms (rather than having to challenge norms). The research also found that one of the concerns that Pakistani mothers had with early marriage was that girls might not be prepared to manage their households and children, and so they would be critiqued by their in-laws. This is a reason for delaying marriage based on the existing gender and cultural norms rather than being based on a critique of gender imbalances and inequalities. This highlights the complexity of shifting prevailing norms, an involved and long-term process.

There is also evidence from some projects that work to mitigate the impact of early marriage can result in young mothers returning to school.

“There has been increased awareness amongst community members, including men and boys, around the negative impacts of child marriage and girls’ rights.”

¹⁹ Child Marriage Internal Research Report

²⁰ Ibid

²¹ Ibid



CASE STUDY: Excelling Against the Odds, Ethiopia – Mobilising communities

A key strategy of the Excelling Against the Odds project was for girls themselves to conduct community dialogues and school outreach to sensitise others on their rights. As outlined in this [Project Brief](#), girls used: ‘...education methodologies including schoolwide discussion forums that challenge social norms of significant importance to the girls, such as early marriage.’ Girls also contacted influential people in their communities and shared their views with the Parent Teachers and Students Associations to reach the wider community.

During COVID-19, the project’s monitoring found that 72 girls under 18 were being married when schools closed. The project team immediately facilitated visits to the households of the 72 girls by members of Mother Groups connected to the school, joined by Gender Officers from the woreda, Kebele chairpersons/Kebele Education and Training Boards and Mother and Father Groups. These visits aimed to learn more about the factors that caused the marriage, the girls’ circumstances and wellbeing, and thoughts on the possibility of returning to school despite being married (and even perhaps pregnant). The visiting team encouraged the girls and spoke with their new husbands, families and the nearby mother and father group to encourage a return to school to finish their education, arguing for the value of the girl’s education to her family and the community. Project follow up found that 65 out of the 72 girls did return to school.

5: Improving the lives of married girls

Many GEC projects have explicitly targeted and included married girls, increasing their access to flexible education opportunities relevant to their needs. Projects promoted dialogue at the family, community, and government levels about the unique needs of married girls. They have also worked with girls, their communities, families, husbands and in-laws to ensure they could engage with wider education and employment opportunities.

In Ethiopia, when there was a spike in early marriage during COVID-19, the project successfully negotiated with girls' families to allow them to continue with education. GEC projects often had to work closely with husbands and in-laws to ensure permission to access education and with families and communities to develop solutions to aid girls' learning, such as childcare support and sharing domestic responsibilities. In Kenya, projects successfully worked with families and husbands to reduce girls' domestic duties so they had time to study once they returned to school.

Helping married girls become financially literate and economically empowered ensured they were not solely financially dependent on their husbands and restricted to domestic duties. Life skills around decision-making, family planning and safe, healthy relationships have also benefited married girls.

Access to education has meant that girls can retain social links with their friends and other girls in their community. These networks are very beneficial for girls' social lives and wellbeing. Some girls stated attending learning centres is the only chance to socialise outside their marital home.

“The learners also especially appreciated the opportunity to participate in physical activities and the life skills. Considering the restrictions on girls, unmarried and especially married, these activities provide a positive outlet for them from their mundane daily lives and allow them to enjoy activities otherwise girls their age enjoy.”²²



Factors for success

1: Education programmes that focus on the most marginalised and meet their needs

The most marginalised girls are the most likely to be excluded from formal education and thus more at risk of child marriage. Holistic education programmes that meet the needs of marginalised girls and help remove the barriers they face can help delay girls' marriage. Placing marginalised girls and their needs at the centre of all implementation prompts more critical thinking about the community, school and system barriers preventing marginalised children from succeeding in education. Successful projects consider and respond to the unique needs of girls in their communities and the barriers they face.

While some projects have worked with out-of-school girls to support their transition back to formal schools, formal education is not always a viable or desirable option. Many are over age for their grade and do not want to be in classes with younger learners. For many, other pathways, such as vocational or accelerated education, are often more relevant. Successful projects have carefully analysed the needs of the most disadvantaged marginalised girls and created flexible and relevant education opportunities that meet their specific needs, often in girls' communities.

2: Taking multiple approaches when working on social norm change.

Changing attitudes and behaviours and uprooting traditions in place for generations is a challenge. Norms around child marriage can be held in place by several factors which may operate across different levels. No one intervention will end child marriage. It is necessary to take a multi-pronged approach to shift norms and take action at multiple levels, such as the household, community, education and government. Interventions should complement and reinforce each other. Life skills interventions at the school level can complement dialogues at the community level. At the same time, other complementary activities could be increasing girls' life skills around agency and voice.

3: Implement life skills programmes that are gender transformative and include comprehensive sexuality education

Successful life skills programmes are gender transformative and get girls to think critically about gender norms and roles, power imbalances and negative cultural practices, and about how they play out in their communities and result in continued child marriage. They provide girls with the knowledge, skills and attitudes to challenge social norms and to advocate for change in their homes and communities around child marriage.

Comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) is also important. [UNESCO's guidance](#)²³ outlines the criteria for CSE. When GEC projects aligned with UNESCO's technical guidance and sought to provide the full suite of information, CSE outcomes were better. Content on gender and equality was most successful when it was woven throughout and coherently linked with sexuality to help girls understand how gender norms and roles impact upon ideas about accepted sexuality and the power within relationships.

Successful projects also built the skills of life skills mentors, particularly around more culturally sensitive areas. Creating a safe, learner-centred and participatory environment ensured that girls felt comfortable voicing opinions and asking questions. Facilitators with learner-centred pedagogy skills could better create a space in which girls could and did ask questions. Also, having repeated and frequent engagement with the same group of peers helps girls build relationships and feel comfortable and safe.

What does not work: Treating all girls the same with regard to their education and life skills needs

Not all marginalised girls have the same needs, and it was important that projects analysed girls' needs by subgroups and responded to specific needs. In life skills programmes, urban and rural girls often have very different exposure to sources of information on sexual and reproductive health and rights and older and younger girls have different needs. There is also a need to tailor life skills content to the needs of married girls and young mothers, including by age and context, to reduce the risk of dropout.

“Placing marginalised girls and their needs at the centre of all implementation prompts more critical thinking about the community, school and system barriers preventing marginalised children from succeeding in education.”

²³ International technical guidance on sexuality education: an evidence informed approach

4: Engage influential community members, women's groups, and women in the community from the outset

A key reflection from project staff was on the importance of engaging influential and respected community leaders and women's groups from the outset, as they are often the change makers in their communities. Closing the Gap project staff in Pakistan highlighted the importance of engaging with faith groups and religious leaders who are often responsible for registering marriages. These leaders can be hugely influential in shifting norms and practices. Identifying these change makers who are influential within their community and can take forward advocacy work on child marriage to ensure that this work continues once projects finish.

Women from girls' communities can also be key in guiding and mentoring. In many cases, projects working with mentors were better able to engage girls around more sensitive issues, as open conversations with mentors or young women from the community were more socially acceptable than with project staff or even their teachers. It is also important for girls to have exposure to role models – women who were able to delay their marriage, who are economically independent and who have carved out alternative paths beyond the domestic sphere.

5: Build the capacity of project staff to engage communities on culturally sensitive issues

Child marriage is still a very sensitive and challenging topic to advocate around in many contexts. It is important that project staff working on the issue of child marriage are trusted and respected by communities and ideally already known to community members. Getting the messaging on child marriage right requires in-depth knowledge of community norms, culture, potential drivers and agents of change. It is also important to recognise that project staff may have internalised negative gender norms. Thus, intensive capacity building and training from the outset is critical in areas such as gender equality, negative norms and gender empowerment, and capacity building on constructive messaging around child marriage and holding community dialogues. Support to project staff should be continuous as they build the capacity to instigate meaningful change in communities.

What does not work: Ignoring project staff's internalised biases and negative gender norms

There were some instances where project staff were found to be perpetuating negative gender stereotypes in their work with communities. This is because they may hold beliefs not fully aligned with the GEC's gender transformative approach. As outlined, this requires intensive training from the outset and continuous support to project staff on gender transformative approaches, but also careful monitoring to ensure 'do no harm'.

6: Work closely with government authorities and those responsible for implementing child marriage policies

Some projects have provided opportunities and platforms for girls and girls' networks to voice their concerns on child marriage and advocate for change with government partners and policymakers. Some have created spaces for girls and government stakeholders to come together to discuss girls' rights and child marriage. Other projects have worked alongside community groups and government agencies to stop individual cases of child marriage. GEC projects have recognised that holistic approaches are about engaging a wide array of key stakeholders – adolescent boys and girls, education staff, parents, community members and government stakeholders at the national and sub-national level, and getting them to recognise and interrogate harmful gender norms that disadvantage girls and ultimately communities.

“Getting the messaging on child marriage right requires in-depth knowledge of community norms, culture, potential drivers and agents of change. It is also important to recognise that project staff may have internalised negative gender norms.”

Recommendations

Education programming can delay and avert child marriage by widening opportunities for girls, including those who are already married. This section outlines key recommendations for programme designers and implementers on reducing child marriage when implementing education programmes. It is not exhaustive and only highlights some of the top recommendations.

Ensure the project has a robust approach to reaching the most marginalised. Projects should have an approach to analysing the most marginalised people, reaching them, addressing their barriers to education, and responding to their educational needs.

Ensure that life skill programmes are pushing boundaries and are progressive, while respecting the views of education and community stakeholders. Quality life skills programmes equip girls with skills to interrogate gender norms and power imbalances and ensure girls (and boys) have access to comprehensive sexuality education. [UNESCO's guidance](#)²⁴ outlines eight key topics which need to be covered if the curriculum is to be deemed comprehensive. Quality life skills programmes ensure that safe spaces are created where girls can critically reflect on the information with their peers and mentors, and where girls feel comfortable to share their experiences and ask questions.

Transforming the negative gender norms that control adolescent girls' mobility, choice, and sexuality requires work across various levels. Challenging and changing discriminatory norms simultaneously requires actions across multiple levels. Education programmes must consider this at all levels in their work – with communities, teachers and school staff, government staff and partners, and with girls. Bear in mind that the first step to changing harmful norms is by interrogating the attitudes and behaviours of project staff on gender and doing work on shifting their negative views if they exist.

Have robust safeguarding policies and procedures and clear, safe, confidential reporting systems and referral pathways. Learners, teachers and community members should be familiar with the reporting systems and referral pathways. Where they do not exist, projects should work with key stakeholders to develop them from scratch. It is important to include relevant ministry, district actors and government protection officers to build capacity and influence.

Work with youth and women's organisations and female leaders. It is important to work with organisations and leaders representing marginalised girls' views, know the barriers they face and know the levers of change within communities and government agencies. Projects should work with these groups to design solutions for meaningful change for marginalised girls.

Engage men and boys. There is unlikely to be meaningful change around child marriage without the buy-in from men and boys. It is important to recognise that adolescent boys are also affected by gender norms, which pressure them to behave in ways that are detrimental to girls. Working with boys and men on positive masculinities can benefit both girls and women, as well as for men and boys.

Engage traditional and religious leaders and other key influential stakeholders. Traditional and religious leaders can have enormous sway and influence in communities and can be very important and powerful allies in efforts to end child marriage. Not only do they influence the community level, but they can also have important powers at the legislative level. Thus, these leaders and groups must be meaningfully engaged in projects from the outset. Working with ['change champions' such as religious leaders and village heads](#) and providing training to groups such as school management committees and mothers' groups can ensure the benefits of projects in changing harmful practices around child marriage are sustained.

²⁴ International technical guidance on sexuality education: an evidence informed approach

Girls'
Education
Challenge



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