

# BREAKING THE CHAIN

EMPOWERING GIRLS AND COMMUNITIES  
TO END CHILD MARRIAGES DURING COVID-19  
AND BEYOND

MAY 2021

World Vision

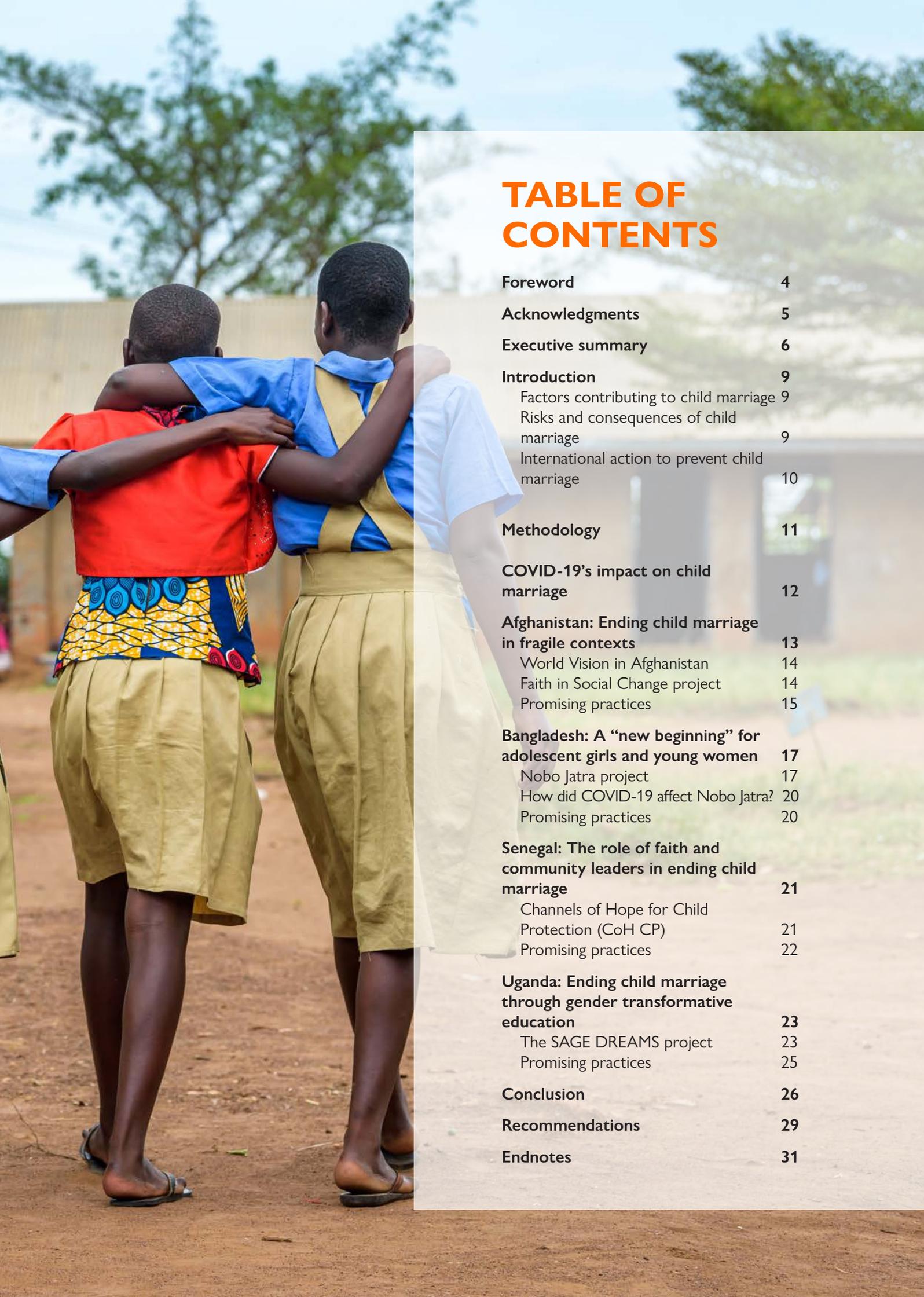


It takes a world  
to end violence against children



Cover photo: ©World Vision / 17-year-old Sarah is passionate about staying in school.

Photo: ©World Vision / Primary School girls in Hoima, Uganda.

The background image shows two young girls from behind, hugging each other on a dirt path. They are wearing school uniforms: blue shirts and yellow skirts. The girl on the left is also wearing a red vest and a colorful patterned sash. The scene is outdoors with trees and a building in the background.

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**Dola, 16**  
**Secretary of the National Child**  
**Forum, Bangladesh, and a World**  
**Vision Young Leader**

## FOREWORD

I am honoured to write the introduction to this report on child marriage. It is unfortunately a very common practice in my country, Bangladesh, where 59% of girls are married before they turn 18, very often to older men.

During the pandemic, the rate of child marriage has increased, and COVID-19 is impacting all our lives. Here in Bangladesh, people don't have food in their home and they are struggling financially. Financial problems are a big cause of child marriage. Parents think that if they give one of their daughters to child marriage then the 'burden' of taking care of their children will be reduced.

Parents are not educated on the costs of child marriage to their daughters. Another reason for child marriage is that they think that their children are not safe in society and that marriage is a solution to keep their children safe.

I'm proud to be Secretary of the National Child Forum. We are 88,000 children working to make our communities child-marriage free. Every child forum leader is a fighter. Child marriage is a war for us and we are warriors. One day we believe we will win. Between 2018 and 2019, we were able to stop 600 child marriages in Bangladesh. We can proudly say that we saved 600 futures for our country.

Every child can understand other children's pain. To stop child marriages, we are talking to families and children and trying to raise people's awareness through street dramas. We are doing research to find sustainable solutions to end child marriage. And in every school, we have run a campaign against it.

A few days ago, my team and I stopped a child marriage remotely. One of my friends who lives in a remote area had heard that a child marriage was going to happen. She called me and asked me how she can prevent it, so I connected her with the nearest police station. She went to the station and asked for the police's help, and then went with the officer to the venue. So, we stopped that child marriage, and we stopped a child marriage even though most of us had to stay at home because of COVID-19.

There are many things that need to be done to stop child marriage. We have to increase awareness in the family. We need to give focus on SDG goal 5, and work to empower girls, because one day empowered girls will change the world. And we have to think of some ideas of how to work digitally too. The government should play a more supportive role to those of us who are working to stop child marriage and the global organisations should increase the platform they give us to raise our voices. Our voice is for the voiceless people.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We present this report on the realities of child marriage and World Vision's work to eliminate it with great thanks to our National Office staff in Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Senegal and Uganda, and the many other colleagues working to ensure life in all its fullness for girls and their families around the world. Special thanks to Narges Ghafary, Joseph Carvalho and Saequah Kabir for supporting this project and providing content and expertise from the field. We would also like to thank Alex Bakunda, Emily Seaman, Kate Show, Brikena Zogaj and Teresa Wallace for their support. We are especially grateful to the girls and young women, as well as their families and communities in which World Vision works, who shared their stories with us.

This report was authored by Whitney Groves, Nate Lance and Matthew Stephens at World Vision US and was later updated and adapted for global use by Tamara Tutnjevic Gorman at World Vision International.

Our child safeguarding policy prevents us from showing the faces of any girls affected by child marriage. All images of adolescent girls were taken with permission and are not linked to the stories in this report.

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Right now, there are 650 million child brides living in every region of the world. Child marriage is a fundamental violation of human rights, which severely impacts the global economy, peace and security, as well as hampering the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals.

Poverty, fragility, unjust legal systems and harmful social norms and traditions are among the many factors that support its ongoing practice. Even in countries with laws intended to protect children from marrying before their 18th birthday, social and cultural norms supporting child marriage still exist and undermine any national laws.

Progress has been made over the last decade – an estimated 25 million child marriages were prevented – but there is still much more work to be done. Global projections of girls married by 2030 have shot up from 100 million to 110 million, based on the current estimates that an additional 10 million girls will now be married due to the COVID 19 outbreak. Last year alone (2020) saw the greatest surge in child marriage rates in 25 years.<sup>1</sup> According to anecdotal data from our programmes, between March–December 2020, child marriages more-than doubled in many

communities compared to 2019. The impacts of COVID-19 are severely hindering progress towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goals and targets related to eliminating child marriage and all forms of violence against children by 2030.<sup>2</sup>

The sustained wellbeing of children within families and communities is core to World Vision's mission – with a strategic focus on reaching the most vulnerable. Our global campaign *It takes a world to end violence against children* has been implemented in 65 countries, with national campaigns focused on ending child marriage in 21 of those countries.<sup>1</sup>

This report compiles research and data from four unique contexts – Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Senegal and Uganda – where World Vision has been working to address the issue of child marriage. In each of these countries, case studies were developed using first-hand accounts, a desk review of available data and evidence of promising practices towards eliminating child marriage. Wherever possible, we have also reflected the realities of project implementation in the context of COVID-19.<sup>ii</sup> From the collected stories, data and research, seven key themes emerged:



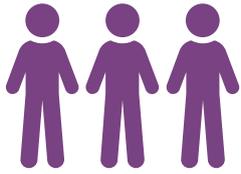
**1. Integrating specific actions to end child marriage from the outset of a humanitarian response is critical to sustaining global progress.** Designing or adapting existing intervention models to reduce crisis-induced risks and ensure service provision continues will strengthen the impact of response and ensures continuity of existing efforts.



**2. Empowering women and girls as key decision-makers and agents of change achieves long-lasting results.** Giving women and girls a voice in all aspects of project design and implementation is essential for the success of ending-child marriage programming.

<sup>i</sup> The countries prioritising the elimination of child marriage include Afghanistan, Chad, Ethiopia, Ghana, Iraq, Kenya, Jordan, Lesotho, Malawi, Mali, Mauritania, Mozambique, Nepal, Niger, Senegal, Somalia, Syria, Tanzania, Turkey, Uganda and Zambia.

<sup>ii</sup> In Afghanistan and Uganda project implementation finished before the crisis.



**3. Engaging men and boys provides greater support structures for girls to say “no” to child marriage.** Widespread global gender inequality means that men and boys hold greater social power and are often the ones who decide whether a child should be married. It is important to work with men and boys, alongside women and girls, to effectively end the practice of child marriage.



**4. Involving faith leaders is critical for long-term cultural and social norm change.** Faith leaders are respected messengers in their communities who uniquely influence social norms. By engaging local community and faith leaders, programming to end child marriage can have a broader and lasting impact.



**5. Child marriage is driven by varied and complex factors that require multisectoral solutions, delivered through strong child protection systems.** The seven evidence-based INSPIRE strategies provide a set of guidelines to holistically address factors leading to violence against children, including child marriage.<sup>3</sup> When integrated and contextualised, these strategies effectively contribute towards reducing and ending child marriage.



**6. Education provides alternative pathways and increased opportunities for girls at risk of child marriage.** Interventions to end child marriage should be coupled with the strengthening of education programmes and capacity-building of local schools.



**7. Community-led social accountability mechanisms are vital to ending child marriage.** Providing avenues for advocacy is key to transformation and service delivery. National- and local-level advocacy are effective in a variety of contexts and can help state-society accountability and development coordination to end child marriage.

In 2015, United Nations member states adopted the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs): a set of 17 global goals to end poverty, reduce violence, create more equal societies and promote human flourishing. Goal 5 focuses on gender equality and includes a specific target to “eliminate all harmful practices, such as child, early and forced marriage and female genital mutilation” (target 5.3). SDG 16 also focuses on ending all forms of violence against children (target 16.2). Governments play a fundamental role in bringing an end to all forms of violence against girls and boys; we therefore ask all governments and donors to accelerate their actions towards ending child marriage and other forms of violence against children. The following 10 measures will strengthen efforts at a state level:

- 1** Prohibit child marriage for all children; set 18 years as the legal age for marriage and ensure these laws and policies are implemented.
- 2** Urgently facilitate the safe return to school and ensure that every girl has access to inclusive, safe and child-friendly primary and secondary education.
- 3** Design, implement and scale up national awareness-raising and behavioural change initiatives; and partner with faith and community leaders to change the harmful attitudes, behaviours, traditions and practices that cause child marriage.
- 4** Increase investment in programmes and services to end child marriage, especially comprehensive community-led and evidence-based prevention and response services for girls.
- 5** Increase investment in social protection and economic-strengthening interventions such as cash transfers, microfinance, or group loans and savings, combined with gender and child protection training.
- 6** Empower girls and boys with information, skills and support networks to prevent child marriage, as well as support their civic and political capacity, knowledge and skills.
- 7** Increase and prioritise efforts to safely and meaningfully consult with adolescent girls and boys about their needs, priorities and solutions and amplify their identified needs and solutions to shape norms, policies and activities related ending to child marriage.
- 8** Ensure free, simple, accessible and late birth registration – particularly in rural areas – as part of the overall civil registration and vital statistics system.
- 9** Recognise the heightened risk of child marriage in fragile contexts and emergencies; this now includes public health emergencies, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Dedicate resources and funding to prevent and respond to these risks from the outset of the humanitarian response.
- 10** Champion the prevention of and response to violence against children and help elevate this issue as a global development priority, beginning with registering commitments to ending child marriage during the 2021 Generation Equality Forum<sup>iii</sup>.

<sup>iii</sup> <https://forum.generationequality.org/>

# INTRODUCTION

Each year, 12 million girls are married before they turn 18; that's **22 girls every minute** whose childhood, dreams and education are cut short.<sup>4</sup> The practice of child marriage – defined as a formal or informal union where one or both parties are under the age of 18 – impacts girls across countries, cultures and religions.<sup>5</sup> In some contexts, girls may be married as early as seven years old, but child marriages occur most commonly during adolescence and to an older man.<sup>iv</sup>

Statistics show that 21% of young women (ages 20-24) globally were married as children.<sup>6</sup> This represents a 4% decrease from 10 years ago, driven predominantly by progress in India, which has the highest number of child brides in the world. Sadly, the COVID-19 pandemic, with its movement restrictions and economic devastation, is threatening to reverse this progress, as families struggle to make ends meet, children are out of school and protection services become less accessible.

Multiple projections have been made by UN agencies and other members of the international community: all predict a surge in child marriages, with an additional 10 million girls at risk of being forced into unions over the next 10 years.<sup>7</sup> Unfortunately, we are already seeing this surge. From March to December 2020, reports on child marriage in communities where we work more than doubled compared to the same period in 2019.

## Factors contributing to child marriage

The main drivers of child marriage during the global pandemic seem to be increasing poverty levels, closure of schools, growing insecurity and lack of access to services. We already know that fragility, poverty and displacement are some of the driving factors of child marriage across geographic and cultural contexts and that rates increase in times of conflict and humanitarian crisis. Almost two-thirds (60%) of girls in countries with high levels of fragility such as Niger, Bangladesh and the Central African Republic are married before their 18th birthday.<sup>v</sup> In South Sudan, a country that has experienced civil war and violent conflict for over a decade, World Vision found that most women (85%) were married as teenagers.<sup>8</sup>

Of the 25 countries with the highest rates of child marriage, almost all are affected by conflict, protracted crisis or natural disasters. When standard systems of child

protection break down (e.g. when schools are bombed, rule of law is disrupted, or families are separated or displaced), the rates of child marriage increase.

The coronavirus pandemic has thrown every country in the world into an extended crisis. Girls from poor families are three-times more likely to marry before the age of 18 than girls from wealthier families.<sup>9</sup> Families who are struggling economically often see the short-term 'value' of their daughter's marriage as a way of lifting their own financial burden. In some cultures, a bride price could be a means to provide for other children. The COVID-19 pandemic has seen many families face food shortages and decreases in household income and resources; the threat of child marriage has become even more imminent.

Protracted crises and conflict often leave girls with limited opportunities for education and parents with few livelihood options. In Bangladesh, displaced Rohingyas living in Cox's Bazaar do not have legal refugee status, meaning carers are not allowed to work. Families are unable to move outside the camps and formal education is not permitted for the 540,000 children and youth living in the camps. Almost all (97%) of the adolescents and youth aged 15-24 do not have access to any kind of education (formal or informal), leaving girls highly vulnerable to child marriage.<sup>10</sup>

Additionally, parents sometimes see marriage as a way of 'protecting' their daughters from the high rates of physical and sexual violence in times of conflict or crisis. Before the start of the Syrian conflict, child marriage was not a common cultural or traditional practice. In 2017, a survey of Syrian refugees living in Lebanon showed that roughly 24% of girls were married before they turned 18. Estimates vary, but some show these child marriage rates to be four times higher among Syrian refugees today than they were before the war.<sup>11</sup>

## Risks and consequences of child marriage

When parents and caregivers are faced with situations of extreme poverty or financial crisis, child marriage may seem like the best option for their daughters; in the long-term, research shows that child marriage perpetuates cycles of poverty and violence.

<sup>iv</sup> While the practice of child marriage disproportionately affects girls, according to UNICEF, an estimated 115 million men around the world today were also married as children.

<sup>v</sup> Contexts in which the government is unable or unwilling to provide adequate protection for all citizens.

Child marriage takes place in the context of harmful gender norms and unequal power dynamics between young brides and their older husbands. As a result, child brides experience high rates of intimate partner violence (IPV) and have a difficult time advocating for better treatment. A comparative study of 34 countries with high levels of child marriage showed that IPV was substantially higher among women who married as children compared with those who married as adults.<sup>12</sup> Globally, girls who marry before the age of 15 are almost 50% more likely to have experienced physical or sexual violence from a partner than women who married after the age of 18. One study even showed that girls who were married before the age of 18 were more likely to believe that it was 'acceptable' for a man to beat his wife.<sup>13</sup>

Child marriage is a symptom of a greater global problem: gender inequality. When women and girls do not experience equal rights or have equal access to opportunities, their potential as social and economic change-agents remains untapped.<sup>14</sup> Gender inequality is a major barrier to human development and progress toward more democratic societies. This has intergenerational consequences for girls, who face discrimination that begins even before they are born and continues throughout their lifetime; even when they are in the womb, many societies attempt gender-biased sex selection because of a 'preference' for sons.<sup>15</sup> Globally, women have less political representation, less access to education and greater safety risks. They earn lower wages, do more unpaid care work with children or elderly relatives and have limited access to financial opportunities.<sup>16</sup>

As another manifestation of global gender inequality, child marriage has serious consequences for young girls. For all children, the period of adolescence (ages 10-19) is filled with significant changes in physical and emotional maturity as well as sexuality and cognitive development.<sup>17,18</sup> Taking girls out of their schools and home environments to marry older men is socially isolating and harmful to their overall growth. Marriage often requires the bride to move away from school, friends and family to live in a new community or village with her husband. As a wife, she is often expected to carry the load of housework, including cooking, cleaning, fetching water and raising children, leaving little time for social connection, studies or leisure. The separation from family and friends can be traumatic and impede healthy cognitive development.

In addition to these challenges, child brides often lack the decision-making power to negotiate safer sex practices, making girls vulnerable to sexually transmitted infections or early pregnancy. Child marriage commonly results in motherhood before girls are physically or emotionally ready. More than 90% of births to adolescent mothers (ages 15-19) occur within marriage.<sup>19</sup> Sadly, pregnancy and childbirth complications are the number one cause of death for adolescent girls.<sup>20</sup> In many contexts, social and cultural norms pressure young brides to "prove their fertility" soon after they marry, to avoid shame and stigma from family members or communities. Adolescent pregnancies are dangerous for both young mothers and their babies. Girls (10-19) face higher risks of eclampsia, puerperal endometritis and systemic infections than women (20-24). For adolescent girls, there are greater risks of preterm delivery, low birthweight and infant mortality.<sup>21</sup>

## International action to prevent child marriage

For all these reasons, the practice of child marriage is a serious violation of child protection and human rights. Child marriage is specifically targeted in the SDGs (SDG 5.3), but the eradication of this practice has implications for the achievement of many other global goals as well. Ending child marriage would contribute to the alleviation of poverty (SDG 1), allow more girls to access quality education (SDG 4), prevent and protect children from violence (SDG 16) and contribute to child and adolescent health and wellbeing (SDG 3).

Increasingly, donor countries are beginning to recognise the need to empower women and girls for sustainable development, stronger economies, more peaceful nations and more equitable systems. Still, much more needs to be done to address child marriage during and following the pandemic to protect and accelerate the progress made before COVID-19 struck.

My child's future is valuable so I say No to Child Marriage

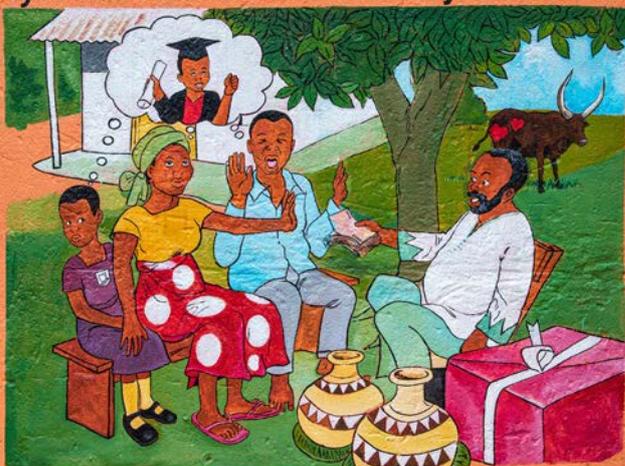


Photo: ©World Vision / Billboard warning about child marriage in Nakasongola, Uganda.



## METHODOLOGY

This report is a compilation of a large body of research based on World Vision's global work to end child, early and forced marriage. The four countries featured in this report – Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Senegal and Uganda – were chosen based on their varied geography, consistently high prevalence of child marriage and diverse religious and cultural practices. A desk review collated relevant data on child marriage globally and then in each of the four countries. World Vision staff in each country office were consulted on successful strategies and interventions to end child marriage. Case studies were then developed with the quantitative and qualitative data provided. The emerging themes and recommendations were identified by the authors of this report, in consultation with internal technical experts across the World Vision partnership.

Photo: ©World Vision / Janet, 16, at primary school in Uganda.



# COVID-19'S IMPACT ON CHILD MARRIAGE

The COVID-19 pandemic has changed lives of girls and boys in many ways and created a perfect storm for an increase in child marriage. When children are unable to continue their education, families struggle to make ends meet and access to basic services like reproductive health are reduced, the risk of child marriage significantly increases. Some girls are married by their carers to alleviate their 'burden' on household finances, or to protect them from increased threats of violence; others get married as a result of teenage pregnancy, the death of primary caregivers and other causes.

Over the past 18 months, millions of adolescent girls have been out of school for prolonged periods and with limited access to online and other learning programmes. The Malala Fund currently estimates that 20 million more secondary school-age girls may be lost from school systems.<sup>22</sup> In the absence of education as a pathway, girls are increasingly being pushed into marriage. The pandemic's widespread economic destruction has affected many families, driving them to marry their underage daughters for whatever short-term financial 'relief' it may bring.

Efforts to curtail the pandemic also disrupted many services deemed to be "non-essential". These limitations extended to the provision of reproductive health

services, which have a direct impact on teenage pregnancy and subsequent marriage. The digital gender divide and lack of connectivity in many homes also meant girls from poorer families, in rural areas and other marginalised groups were far less likely to be able to continue their education remotely. Community-based programmes aimed to raise awareness, challenge traditional gender norms and empower girls also struggled during the pandemic, leaving space for child marriage to continue.

Staff are responding to increased risks of child marriage in many communities where World Vision works. According to initial anecdotal reports, in 2020 our staff responded to more-than double the number of child marriages, compared with the same period last year.

Full data on the increase in child marriage due to the COVID-19 pandemic is not available. However, several predictions were made based on evidence from past pandemics. Most recently, UNICEF has predicted 10 million more child marriages over the next 10 years. Adding these numbers to existing projections that 100 million girls will be at risk of child marriage by 2030 presents a bleak future for many girls around the world, with COVID-19 threatening to reverse 20 years of progress.



Photo: ©World Vision / Rita, 14, receives psychosocial support with World Vision's social worker Christine

## AFGHANISTAN: Ending child marriage in fragile contexts

Fragile states are some of the most dangerous places in the world to be a child. In fragile states, the social contract between state and society is broken because “people don’t see their government as accountable or responsive to their needs or treating citizens fairly”.<sup>23</sup> Fragile states lack resilient systems, which means they cannot easily bounce back from disasters or crises. Fragile contexts are areas within or outside fragile states where weak government systems make societies highly vulnerable to conflict and protracted crisis due to a combination of political, environmental, security, economic and social pressures.

Fragile contexts can cover one state, many states, or only a few neighbourhoods and can change rapidly. In these contexts, children, especially girls, face extreme levels of abuse, exploitation, violence and neglect. The systems that would normally provide protection to children are fractured in fragile contexts.

Ravaged by decades of war and natural disasters, Afghanistan is ranked among the top-ten, most fragile states in the world.<sup>24</sup> According to government figures, only 26% of Afghanistan’s population is literate, which drops to just 12% among females.<sup>25</sup> Afghanistan ranks 168 out of 189 countries on the Gender Inequality Index, reflecting an especially low quality of life for women and girls.<sup>26</sup> According to a 2010 mortality survey by the Afghanistan Ministry of Public Health, “An estimated 2,000 Afghan women and girls attempt suicide by setting themselves on fire each year, which is linked to domestic violence and early or forced marriages.”<sup>27</sup>

While Afghan law prohibits marriage before the age of 16, girls can be legally married at 15 with parental consent.<sup>28</sup> A combination of poverty, social and cultural norms, ongoing conflict and weak enforcement of child marriage laws may also push girls into marriage even earlier. Between 60-80% of marriages in Afghanistan are forced or underage and more than a third of Afghan girls are married before the age of 18.<sup>29,30</sup> Once married, they are at high risk of experiencing IPV or becoming pregnant as children.

The COVID-19 pandemic further increased the risks of child marriage, as many families struggled financially. Almost half (48%) of Afghan families surveyed by World Vision lost their source of income during the pandemic, with over 50% unable to access food.<sup>31</sup> Disruptions to education have also put even more girls out of school; before the pandemic, girls made up 60% of the estimated 3.7 million Afghani children not in school.<sup>32</sup>



### Khatema’s Story

Khatema, 9, was playing with her friends in the village when her younger brother told her about her father’s decision to marry her to an older man.

At first, Khatema thought he was joking. “When I got home, my father wasn’t there. My mother’s eyes were red. My siblings were silent and just looked at me... I asked my mother if they wanted to marry me off. She hugged me and started crying.”

“I wanted to scream and cry, but I [couldn’t]. I went to the stable. It was dark there and I started to cry.”

Poor families in Afghanistan face a broad range of challenges. Ghafoor, Khatema’s father, was finding it increasingly difficult to provide for his six children. With the money he could gain from Khatema’s dowry, he could settle all his loans and provide for the rest of his family.

Khatema had always dreamed of being a teacher; if she was married (like her older sister) she might never be able to realise her dream.

“I told my father not to marry me off. I told him that I wanted to be a teacher in the village school. [He] was silent and left the house.”

Khatema’s mother, Fatima, never wanted her daughters to live through what she had. She confided in a neighbour and a local leader who had attended World Vision’s training and could support her in approaching her husband.

Convincing her husband wasn’t easy; it took a week of discussions with the neighbour and the village imam before Ghafoor finally changed his mind. He would look for work elsewhere to pay off his debts.

Today, Khatema is studying and working hard. She says, “I am studying even harder than before to reach my dream of becoming a teacher. I am so happy. I feel relieved ... like something heavy has been lifted from my shoulders.”

Afghanistan has one of the highest maternal mortality rates in the world – 400 out of 100,000 live births – as a consequence of child marriage and early pregnancy.<sup>33</sup> By way of comparison, this rate is 56-times higher than in Canada (7/100,000) and 66-times higher than in the EU (6/100,000).<sup>34</sup> Of the 468 Afghan women who participated in a reproductive health knowledge, attitudes and practices (KAP) survey, two-thirds said they delivered their first child between the age of 13 and 19 and most (93%) of the women needed authorisation from their husband or a male relative before seeking professional healthcare.<sup>35</sup>

## World Vision in Afghanistan

World Vision began working in Afghanistan in 2001, providing emergency relief to people affected by a devastating drought. Since 2011, World Vision has focused its community development and emergency response in the Herat, Ghor and Badghis provinces in the western region of the country.

To meet the needs of Afghan women and girls, World Vision works with men and boys, faith and community leaders and other stakeholders in a girl's life to change harmful norms and attitudes about gender, giving girls greater agency and decision-making capabilities. Access to quality education is also at the centre of World Vision's efforts to empower women and girls. World Vision's work in Afghanistan aims to ensure that girls and boys are educated, healthy, empowered and protected and that parents are economically supported with the tools they need to create safe and protective environments. Our focus is placed on supporting structures that create a child marriage-free community, where children can reach their full development potential.

## Faith in Social Change Project

In fragile contexts, faith leaders are well-suited as agents of change because they remain trusted and respected despite the breakdown of government systems and weak rule of law. Faith leaders are key to bringing about transformational change for women and girls because of their ability to raise awareness, advocate for the strengthening of law enforcement and even shift social norms in their communities. Although formal institutions and governance may be unreliable in fragile contexts, local leadership and informal systems of governance (namely the role and function of faith leaders and faith communities) remain consistent and can be supported and influenced to protect children and end harmful practices such as child marriage.

World Vision's Faith in Social Change (FiSC) project in Afghanistan was a five-year programme that began in 2014 and has reached 2,668 people across multiple communities within the Herat, Ghor, Badghis and Bamyan provinces of Afghanistan. The FiSC project is a family-strengthening initiative that trains faith leaders on child wellbeing and protection, with a focus on increasing unity to combat household violence and end harmful practices, such as child marriage. With key community leaders as messengers, the FiSC project prioritises rebuilding broken or damaged relationships that affect family responses to protecting their children. Faith leaders are key to the model because they can effectively transfer sensitive messages about the protection and wellbeing of children in regular gatherings. Their role is also significant as they perform marriages and have unique access to male audiences, who are often the decision-makers on child marriage.

The FiSC project aims for holistic change in families and local leaders over time and defines success as changed attitudes and behaviours towards gender equity within the family and through sustainability in the ongoing actions of faith leaders. It uses a two-pronged approach to achieve these goals.

First, to transform harmful gender norms at the household level, FiSC uses a model called Celebrating Families (CF). The model works through a cascading system of information sharing: faith leaders identify barriers and issues affecting children's protection and nurture, then facilitate group parenting sessions that build knowledge and skills for positive family interactions. Originally designed for Christian congregations, CF has proven successful when contextualised for Islamic faith communities. In Afghanistan, 99.7% of the population is Muslim and religion plays a central role in social and political life.<sup>36</sup> In close consultation with Islamic religious scholars,



### Community Change

Implemented in 41 countries in 2018, Community Change is a process of sustained, facilitated dialogue which enables communities to identify beliefs and cultural practices that support or challenge children's wellbeing. Community members then agree on ways forward to protect children from harmful practices.

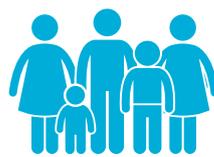
a version of CF with principles from the Qur'an was launched in 2014. The objectives, format, and key content of the curriculum remain the same.

The CF approach to behaviour-change communication has been effective for addressing child marriage and other forms of gender-based violence. For example, during the Friday prayers, imams raise awareness on gender equity, human rights, violence against women, protection within families and community, as well as the rights of girls to education. So far, **85%** of trained imams have spoken publicly on behalf of women's political and social empowerment and rights. Imams are also sharing these topics at small meetings in communities, schools and institutions (including with members of the military and police). Participants have reported a reduction in the use of violent discipline within their homes and greater willingness to act on issues of child protection.

The second component of the FiSC project is change within communities. The Community Change model targets the transformation of harmful social norms and practices, including child marriage. It assumes that, given the right leadership and information, community groups will be eager to resolve endemic social challenges affecting cohesion and progress. Community Change arranges for dialogue about complex issues to take place over the course of a year (at least 20 sessions are held). At times, the conversation is challenging for participants, but the safe space provided through trusted, skilled facilitation helps them work through social issues and jointly generate solutions. Community Change creates space to discuss and address gender discrimination and intergenerational patterns of violence.

As part of Community Change, World Vision also trains imams, as respected leaders in the community, to lead productive dialogue around issues such as violence against women and child marriage, linking these teachings back to core teachings of the Qur'an. As a result, imams facilitate discourse between male and female shuras (elder groups) regarding social issues that affect women and girls and intervene in their communities on the issues of domestic violence and child marriage.

Since October 2017, Community Change has supported **636 faith leaders and 350 other community leaders, school teachers, female shuras and Child Protection Action Network (CPAN) members** to identify beliefs and cultural practices that challenge children's wellbeing and facilitate sustained dialogue about solutions within communities. So far, seven communities have launched campaigns countering child marriage. These campaigns have been so effective that in one community a local imam built a facility next to the mosque so that women and girls, who were previously excluded from participating in



### **Celebrating Families**

Implemented in almost thirty countries around the world, World Vision's Celebrating Families (CF) model seeks to strengthen positive, loving relationships in families, remove harmful attitudes and practices and encourage innate qualities of family culture in raising children. Guided by spiritual teaching and facilitated by faith leaders, the CF model encourages all members of the family to redefine their roles according to core values and beliefs. The goal of CF is that the family becomes a safe and supportive haven for children, where their physical, social, and spiritual needs are met. The CF modules highlight gender discrimination, including child marriage, intergenerational patterns of violence, violent punishment within households and explain why these patterns conflict with the teachings of religious texts.

these meetings, can listen to the Friday prayer services and discussions.

### **Promising practices**

Engaging and empowering local actors to identify challenges and take action in their own communities is a powerful mechanism for addressing child marriage and other forms of violence against children. Community Change has proved especially impactful in fragile contexts, where the social contract between governments and citizens is broken. An engaged community can also contribute to a decrease in child neglect, improved nutrition and greater child participation in household and community decisions.

In fragile contexts like Afghanistan, World Vision's work with faith and community leaders has seen tremendous success. Faith leaders are well-suited to address child marriage and violence against children because they remain trusted and respected, despite weak rule of law and broken government systems. The role of faith leaders involves regularly bringing together groups to discuss community business, which can be an effective forum for learning and dialogue

around the wellbeing of children. For the same reason, local councils, or shuras, are also important partners for facilitating such dialogue. These local leaders understand and care deeply for the communities they serve and are key partners in World Vision's work to end child marriage. Although the Faith in Social Change project concluded in 2019, World Vision has continued to build on its success in Afghanistan with a follow-on, Faith and Development Project that also uses the Community Change model. Using the model, faith leaders were engaged throughout the pandemic and supported to conduct awareness sessions on the rights of the child (including information related to the harmful impacts of child marriage). The model provides interactive sessions to enable the community to interact meaningfully on local issues and challenges that affect the wellbeing of children. The guide also includes different sections highlighting conceptual definitions, with Quranic verses on how to help children to thrive better in their communities.

Religious institutions have also been engaged directly through partnerships with 50 madrassas in Ghor province, where many boys and girls are facing a multitude of protection concerns. Faith leaders and CPAN members are selected from each community to receive ongoing capacity support to raise awareness

on positive coping mechanisms during the COVID-19 pandemic. Home-to-home sessions are conducted jointly with religious leaders and project staff to caregivers (as a COVID-adapted modality), sharing positive parenting messages and information focused on the rights of the child. The community-based approach focuses on religious leaders as agents of change, while working with local structures to reach the most vulnerable children.

The foundations laid by projects such as FiSC were critical throughout the response to COVID-19; partnerships with faith leaders were especially important in the prevention of child marriages beyond project areas. In response to increased risks of child marriage during the pandemic, World Vision supported the Department of Religious Affairs and Hajj to form a Provincial-Level Faith Leader Forum in three provinces – Herat, Badghis and Ghor. The 23 members – 13 male, 10 female – acted as conduits and agents of change. Together, they mobilised other key community members to end violence against all vulnerable Afghan children and promote child rights and protection in their respective communities. Through faith leaders and community change groups, 32 early and forced marriage cases were prevented in 2020.<sup>37</sup>

## **BANGLADESH:** New Beginnings for adolescent girls and young women

Child marriage is a major societal challenge in Bangladesh. Many compounding factors – including poverty, climate change, limited educational opportunities, stigma around menstrual hygiene and gender inequality – lead to high rates of child marriage, high rates of IPV and early pregnancy. Despite Bangladeshi law that girls under 18 may not marry, Bangladesh still holds the world’s fourth-highest child marriage rate: a testament to both weak law enforcement and strong cultural acceptance of child marriage. In Bangladesh, nearly 60% of girls are married before the age of 18.<sup>38</sup>

Child marriage perpetuates the cycle of poverty and robs girls of their chance to grow, learn and fully realise their potential. Poverty drives many children to leave school for work, often in unsafe or exploitative sectors. Poverty also pushes many parents to marry off their children at young ages. Often, the families of younger brides pay a lower dowry, eliminating some of the financial ‘burden’ and giving the family “one less mouth to feed”.

However, research shows that delaying marriage and keeping girls in school is important for their healthy development and future economic opportunities. When girls get married before reaching puberty, they have less knowledge about their own health and lower bargaining power in the household. They also give birth to more children. Women who get married later have more decision-making powers, higher education levels and better health. Their children are more likely to complete their required vaccinations, have a higher weight-for-height ratio, enrol in school, attain better grades and get married later in life.<sup>39</sup> Ending the practice and the cultural acceptance of child marriage in Bangladesh is important for the wellbeing of girls and for furthering the development of the country in terms of education, economic growth and self-reliance.

World Vision has been present in Bangladesh since independence and works to reach the most vulnerable populations in both urban and rural communities. Today, World Vision works with roughly five million children and three million adults to improve health and nutrition, education, livelihoods and child protection, as well as water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) projects in 51 community development programmes throughout the country.<sup>40</sup> In each community development programme, World Vision works to provide educational and

economic opportunities for families, equip local partners to strengthen the protective environment for the most vulnerable children and mobilise communities to end harmful practices, including child marriage.

### **Nobo Jatra project**

The Nobo Jatra (“New Beginning”) project takes a multisectoral response that improves access to quality education and life-skills for girls. The project also engages men and boys, helping families to build resilience and raises awareness about the health consequences of child marriage, in order to effectively address the multiple driving factors of child marriage in Bangladesh. The project is a seven-year (2015-2022), USAID-funded endeavour that seeks to reach over 200,000 households and 856,116 direct beneficiaries with improved gender-equitable food security, nutrition, maternal health and resilience in southwest Bangladesh. Implemented by World Vision in partnership with Winrock International, the World Food Program and Government of Bangladesh under the Ministry



Photo: ©World Vision / Thirteen-year-old Shyamoli shows what a strong girl looks like.

<sup>40</sup> Distinct geographical areas where World Vision partners with local stakeholders to improve the wellbeing of children, through multiple sector projects aimed at the root causes of issues that negatively impact children, such as child marriage.



## The Das Family

For the Das family, putting food on the table for their children was a struggle. Arobindo, the father, made very little money as a van driver. When his wife, Shabitiri, got appendicitis and his daughter, Modhumala, was diagnosed with a tumour in her leg, the family became dependent on the generosity of friends and neighbours.

“The money my husband earned wasn’t enough. There was not a single day that we didn’t quarrel. We weren’t able to buy enough food. I was not able to feed my children. I thought throughout my life I would struggle with poverty and we would be unhappy forever,” said Shabitiri.

However, as part of the Nobo Jatra entrepreneurial training programme, Shabitiri received start-up money to open a bamboo-weaving business and a small grocery store. This allowed her family to graduate out of the ‘ultra-poor’ categorisation. Shabitiri was then able to help others in her community do the same.

Along with the economic support and training she received, Shabitiri was told about the dangers of child marriage and how to protect her daughters. Shabitiri remembered her own marriage to her husband at just 11 years old: “Child marriage was common, but from Nobo Jatra, I know the downsides. Girls must be married at 18. The difficulties I faced in my life came from child marriage.”

She and Arobindo have agreed to keep their children—Modhumala (15), Ratna (12), and Nayan (6)—in school: “My children are doing good in their [exam] results. I [believe] they have a good future.”

of Disaster Management and Relief, Nobo Jatra seeks to address the driving factors of child marriage by improving food security, life-skills education for adolescent girls and boys, local-level advocacy and economic opportunities for parents.

The project’s primary focus is to increase gender-equitable food security and household incomes, thereby ensuring that both boys and girls can thrive. As part of the Nobo Jatra project, World Vision provides life skills-based education (LSBE) training that helps adolescent girls understand their rights, build confidence

and practice self-expression. It also helps parents understand the consequences of child marriage. During the LSBE training sessions, 20 students – 10 boys and 10 girls – are taught leadership and communication skills and educated on their right not to be married before they turn 18. The class facilitators also teach emotional expression and control and work to correct gender biases between boys and girls. In partnership with child protection committees, these young leaders participate in community action to stop child marriages when they hear of them being planned.

Nobo Jatra’s life-skills education – which includes leadership training and practical experience identifying and addressing manifestations of gender inequality – has led students to set some remarkable goals for themselves. One adolescent shared with World Vision staff that she wants to become a lawyer who specialises in stopping child marriage.<sup>40</sup> Another shared her desire to become a journalist who tells true stories about the dangers of child marriage and gender-based violence. Several girls and boys want to be doctors, engineers and police officers.

Nobo Jatra’s life-skills education course currently takes place in 142 schools and reaches 16,600 adolescents – all with their own incredible stories of transformation and empowerment. To ensure children and adolescents benefit from this programme long after Nobo Jatra has ended, World Vision is working with the Department of Education in Bangladesh to incorporate the sessions into the standard school curriculum.

Nobo Jatra also facilitates small-group discussions where couples discuss the practicalities of marriage and family life, including shared responsibilities in parenting and financial management. These trainings encourage men to ask tough questions about masculinity and human dignity. To date, 10,076 couples have ‘graduated’ from the Male Engagement module. Data have shown the proportion of participants who think men and women should share household responsibilities has increased **45%** from the baseline and the number of men who think women should be consulted about household budgeting and purchases has increased by **36%**.<sup>41</sup> As part of Male Engagement, fathers are encouraged to support their daughters’ education and wait until their daughters are at least 18 to consider a consensual marriage with a man who will respect and value her.

In addition to encouraging girls to stay in school and fathers to prioritise the education of their daughters, Nobo Jatra works to provide economic opportunities for parents, further disincentivising them from marrying off their. In some parts of southwest Bangladesh, roughly a quarter of households live below the poverty line (US\$1.90 a day).<sup>42</sup> At this level of poverty, day-

to-day necessities like food and shelter are difficult to afford. Natural disasters or medical emergencies can be devastating for families. To alleviate some of these financial pressures, the Nobo Jatra project provides entrepreneurial training for women to increase their income and supports establishment of village savings and loan associations, making it possible for them to provide nutritious food for their families.

The Nobo Jatra project has so far trained 21,000 women living in ultra-poverty in basic entrepreneurial literacy skills; over 14,000 women have received start-up capital of US\$188 to help them launch small businesses. On average, women who participate in this training have **almost-doubled their income** (to 42% higher than baseline incomes). Research shows women usually invest a higher portion of their earnings in their families than men and that greater bargaining power for women results in greater investment in children's education, health and nutrition.<sup>43</sup> Powerful social change is spurred as some women acknowledge the pain they endured as child brides and see the link between their own experience of child marriage and the cycle of poverty that they, their husbands and their children now face.

Since Nobo Jatra began in 2015, 46 child protection committees have rallied together to enforce child marriage laws and policies, leading to a decrease in child marriages. For the first two years of implementation, World Vision and community partners including faith leaders, have directly intervened to stop **192 child marriages** in Bangladesh and have indirectly aided in the prevention of many more.<sup>vii</sup>

In addition to enacting measures that prevent child marriage, Nobo Jatra works to address the unique needs of already-married adolescent girls through local-level advocacy. The Bangladesh Constitution emphasises a commitment to protect the fundamental human rights of freedom, equality and justice, as well as political, economic and social rights for all citizens.<sup>44</sup> However, weak accountability, inefficient administration systems and corruption remain major challenges for the country and culminate in poor governance.

To encourage the government to uphold its commitment to human rights, World Vision uses an evidence-based model for social accountability called Citizen Voice and Action (CVA). CVA employs targeted civic engagement and participatory community service "scorecards" to compare the government standards with the reality of public services. CVA then empowers citizens to communicate this disparity to local leaders. The Nobo Jatra project has mobilised over 40,000



### **Citizen Voice and Action**

World Vision's Citizen Voice and Action (CVA) social accountability tool helps communities understand their legal rights and mobilises advocacy groups that aim to hold the government accountable. CVA has led to improved services, amplified community voice, and advocacy in more than 48 countries. This methodology provides a tested approach for shaping national advocacy through citizen education, building their capacity to engage in local and national policy issues.

community members to advocate for improved access and quality of public services.

In Chunkuri village, citizens were equipped with tools and training to advocate for improved reproductive and maternal health resources and counselling at their local community clinic. As a result, Chunkuri mothers now receive pre- and postnatal care in a clean, modernised government facility, rather than having to travel to a private clinic many kilometres away in a neighbouring town. The clinic also provides culturally appropriate family planning services that educate mothers and fathers on the healthy timing and spacing of pregnancies (HTSP). It is estimated that HTSP counselling could prevent as many as one-third of maternal deaths by enabling women to delay their first pregnancy to at least the age of 18, space their pregnancies by two to five years, avoid unplanned pregnancy and limit childbearing to their healthiest years.<sup>45</sup> Overall, Nobo Jatra's capacity building for social accountability and action has been successful and resulted in improved service delivery.

The project also supported the national Bride Not Before 18 campaign (2013-2017), initiated by the National Human Rights Commission and World Vision Bangladesh. The purpose of this campaign was to raise awareness, facilitate local-level advocacy and strengthen child forums and community-based organisations to influence local leaders (e.g. chairmen, council members, local administration, teachers and local police/law enforcement agencies) and reduce the prevalence of child marriage in targeted areas. A study by World Vision Bangladesh showed that harmful beliefs about child marriage decreased by 15.2% in the intervention areas.<sup>46</sup>

<sup>vii</sup> <https://www.wvb-nobojatra.org/2017/01/23/gender/>

## How did COVID-19 affect Nobo Jatra?

Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the closure of schools, limited abilities to work and movement restrictions have resulted in entire families staying at home in Bangladesh. In 2020, World Vision Bangladesh conducted an impact assessment in the Nobo Jatra project area, to get a better picture of how the pandemic was affecting children and their families. Almost one-third (**28%**) of households reported that risks of child marriage and other forms of gender-based violence have increased during the pandemic and 4% of families reported that they had already had to marry off one of their children since the start of the crisis. The impact assessment also found that 60% of respondents felt that the safety and security of women and girls was a concern in the context of the pandemic, which as stated earlier is a factor driving families to consider child marriage.

Data from the COVID-19 pandemic impact assessment was then used to by Nobo Jatra staff to inform and pivot implementation to respond to the challenges families were facing. In response to economic insecurity, 12,869 participants received one-time cash transfers of US\$36 to meet immediate household needs; 10,000 households were also provided with sanitation kits to uphold critical health and hygiene behaviours.

The awareness-raising activities did not stop either. Sharing messages about risks, prevention and support available to address gender-based violence and child marriage were a key part of the COVID-19 response. The messages were sent twice a week through mobile phones and reached 48,068 pregnant and young mothers and other participants in the programme.

Social behaviour change sessions were also increased and delivered through digital means – laptops, tablets or smart phones and portable speakers. As of publishing, 14,792 sessions have taken place, reaching 117,070 participants. Given the heightened risk of child marriage and sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) in the context of a pandemic, the project is planning to work with 40 'village courts' and their members to

raise awareness and mitigate the risks. Members will be sensitised on government legislation and will be directed to use and encourage use of a hotline to report incidents of SGBV – particularly child marriage and violence against children. Members will also be told how to respond in cases of SGBV – particularly to maintain confidentiality, respect, safety and the non-discrimination of victims.

## Promising practices

Nobo Jatra's cross-cutting approach addresses the divergent and driving factors that contribute to the cultural acceptance of child marriage. Its holistic approach paves the way for sustainable cultural change, supporting the empowerment of young women and girls and the betterment of their families and communities.

Nobo Jatra's focus on providing life-skills education and entrepreneurial opportunities addresses the critical underlying drivers of child marriage, including poverty and food insecurity. At a national level, the public messaging campaign is working to shift social and cultural beliefs about child marriage. Empowering young women and girls with the skills and opportunity to advocate for themselves is an essential part of this campaign. In addition, the meaningful engagement of men and boys can help to create lasting and sustainable change to eradicate this practice. This engagement creates a lasting change in norms over time, decreasing harmful attitudes and supporting behaviours that will eliminate child marriage.

Response to the spread of COVID-19 embedded the new initiatives and digital means to reduce the risks of child marriage in situations when delivery of regular activities has been jeopardised. In this case, the adaptation was not only made to project delivery, but the pandemic response was designed in a way to support the achievement of project objectives. Focus on sustaining livelihoods with continued awareness-raising and strengthening the capacity of duty-bearers to respond is expected to help sustain the gains made by Nobo Jatra.

## **SENEGAL:** The role of faith and community leaders in ending child marriage

Some of the highest rates of child marriage in the world are found in West Africa and specifically in Senegal. Out of Senegal's eight million children, 31% are married before the age of 18.<sup>47</sup> Violence against children is also high. Around 29% of adolescent girls (ages 15-19) experience physical or sexual violence.<sup>48</sup> According to UNICEF, it will take over 100 years to end child marriage in West and Central Africa, with severe consequences for millions of child brides. If increased interventions are not prioritised, this could have a "crippling impact on the region's prosperity".<sup>49</sup> Female genital mutilation and cutting (FGM/C) is also still common in Senegal, despite a ban on the practice since 1999.

Senegal has gained international recognition for its efforts to increase the political participation of women through the adoption of the Gender Parity Law (2010). As of 2019, 43% of parliamentarians are female.<sup>50</sup> Senegal has also achieved gender equality in access to primary education with an enrolment rate for girls of 98%.<sup>51</sup> However, significant disparities still exist when girls enter secondary school. Many traditional norms related to the value, role and treatment of women and girls, including the practice of child marriage, keep girls from finishing their education.

Since 1989, World Vision Senegal has partnered with local communities to address the needs of the most vulnerable populations through long-term development programmes. World Vision is implementing 24 programmes in the Fatick, Diourbel, Kafrine, Tambacounda, Kédougou and Kolda regions that will benefit more than eight million children by 2021. In 2017, a World Vision evaluation in Senegal showed that child marriage and early pregnancy are the two most urgent issues for community actors. World Vision Senegal has prioritised ending child marriage through national advocacy, community-based interventions and partnerships with faith leaders and faith communities to address the root causes.

In highly religious contexts like Senegal, research shows that faith leaders are trusted and can be important allies for social norm change. A study from Gallup showed that across Africa, religion is the greatest way people choose to identify themselves, even over national identity. Faith leaders are the most trusted group in Africa, with recorded rates 41% higher than the global average.<sup>52</sup> World Vision recognises the unique and strategic opportunity faith partners hold, to influence and improve the wellbeing for children in families

and communities. Building on World Vision's global expertise in building relationships and trust amongst diverse faith groups and creating partnerships that support our common objectives for child wellbeing, World Vision Senegal has developed a five-year plan to integrate faith and development into Senegal's broader national development strategy.

### **Channels of Hope for Child Protection (CoH CP)**

In 2008, World Vision began engaging Muslim and Christian faith leaders in Senegal on HIV/AIDS prevention and response. When this partnership proved successful, the model (Channels of Hope) was expanded to engage faith leaders on child-protection issues in Senegal. With support from trained facilitators, faith leaders worked together to identify doctrinal similarities in their respective faith traditions regarding the care and protection of children. Following this process, leaders participated in the Channels of Hope for Child Protection (CoH CP) training, which equipped them with the theological and scientific evidence required to mobilise their faith communities to address violence against children. Since 2015, World Vision has been using the CoH CP methodology to address issues like child marriage and FGM/C across Senegal.

While many religious texts (including the Bible and the Qur'an) teach that God cares about the wellbeing of children and condemns practices of violence towards children, religious teachings are sometimes intermixed with longstanding cultural practices. Theological misinterpretations of religious texts can fuel damaging attitudes and practices towards children. In Senegal, more than 95% of the population identifies as Muslim and hosts a large variety of tribal and cultural groups. These groups uniquely influence the population's beliefs and attitudes about the roles of men, women and children. Through interfaith partnerships across the country, World Vision has been able to leverage the strong influence that Muslim and Christian faith leaders have on the wider community.

In 2016, World Vision initiated a global study on faith communities' contributions to ending violence against children in Senegal, in collaboration with the Institute for Global Health and Development of Queen Margaret's University in Edinburgh. In 2019, the final report showed that the CoH CP training had transformed the faith leaders' beliefs about child protection, which led them to take individual action



## Channels of Hope for Child Protection

Channels of Hope for Child Protection (CoH CP) is World Vision's global model for transforming and mobilising faith communities to address harmful traditional practices toward children, to support and advocate for children's rights, to become better child protectors and to ultimately strengthen the local child protection system. CoH CP combines guiding principles from religious texts, interactive activities, and scientific evidence and information on the negative effects of violence on children.

and mobilise other community members to bring about positive change. More specifically, faith leaders made positive contributions supporting government initiatives on child marriage, school retention and birth registration.<sup>53</sup>

Participating faith leaders' attitudes on corporal punishment, early marriage and birth registration changed significantly after the initial workshop. After one year of participation in the CoH CP programme, **26%** of faith leaders in Senegal vowed to stop performing child marriages. Over the course of the programme, the percentage of faith leaders who viewed child marriage as a means of preventing girls from experiencing early pregnancy almost halved (**48%** reduction). After receiving training, one Senegalese imam told World Vision staff, "The training session allowed me to understand that girls must be kept in school and avoid early marriage. It is also necessary ... to come closer to children to establish a sincere dialogue, so that they are not afraid of you."<sup>54</sup>

The study provided evidence that faith leaders and their spouses who participated in CoH workshops also changed their religious views on child rights. The spouse of one imam shared, "We learned from this training workshop how to take care of our children, to monitor their studies, to register them at birth for a birth certificate. We also learned not to beat children, but to be attentive to their opinions. We have been told that our daughters' early marriages can bring complications. Finally, we have been told to avoid forced marriages, since girls have rights."

CoH CP has significantly changed attitudes and behaviours of faith leaders and their spouses on the issues of child marriage, birth registration, violent

discipline and child labour. This has led to mosque and church communities engaging more with parents and caregivers on child protection issues than they were before the training. Almost all (**93%**) participants reported being engaged in community child protection activities within the last 12 months. In the end-line study, 30% of congregation members thought that child marriage had been abandoned by their community<sup>55</sup>. While most of the faith community's child protection work focuses on sensitisation of community members, activities also include making birth registration obligatory and intervening to stop the practice of child marriage.

World Vision also works with faith leaders in Senegal using the CVA model. In 2017, a group of faith leaders and 100 children visited the Presidential Palace in Dakar to present the president with a memorandum expressing their concerns about the prevalence of child marriage across the country and advocate for a stronger national response. Senegal's President Macky Sall was so moved by their advocacy and the cause that he publicly endorsed World Vision's campaign to end child marriages in the country and elevated the issue within the Ministry of Children and Women.<sup>56</sup>

## Promising practices

Engaging faith leaders is critical for sustainable social norm change. Since a vast majority of the global population identifies as religious, there is a great need for interfaith engagement and dialogue to ensure all faith leaders are represented and mobilised around shared understandings of the importance of ending harmful practices like child marriage. The CoH CP model has the potential to change attitudes and behaviours toward child marriage and other forms of violence against children and could be scaled up to benefit more children in Senegal and around the world.

With the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, World Vision drew on its existing relationships with faith leaders in Senegal to reach over 100,000 families in 2020. The CoH CP model was used to train faith leaders on the virus, how to protect themselves and their congregations and how to provide psychosocial support to children, families and communities. The Community Hope and Action Teams (CHAT) working with each faith leader mobilised communities to raise awareness of increased risks to children, including child marriage, physical and non-verbal violence. Faith leaders were shown how to support prevention of COVID-19 transmission, as well as how to address the increased risks of violence against children. This mobilisation reached 107,400 households and 751,800 children.

## UGANDA: Ending child marriage through gender-transformative education

In many low-income countries, parents and caregivers cannot afford to send any of their children to school. When they have enough resources to send just one child, they commonly choose to educate their boys, which is considered a more 'sound investment'.<sup>57</sup> As such, girls often bear a greater duty to contribute to domestic work and provide support in childrearing. A report from UNICEF showed that girls on average spend 40% more time on domestic work, such as cooking, cleaning, or collecting water and firewood, compared to boys their age.<sup>58</sup> The combination of extreme poverty and gender inequality is particularly disempowering for girls.

The unfair expectations placed on girls and the disparity in opportunities available to them only intensify as they get older. Significant progress has been made towards achieving gender parity in primary school, but a gap exists as girls enter secondary school, when the cost of continuing their education begins to outweigh the perceptible 'benefits' of traditional practices, such as child marriage. In Uganda, **only one in four girls makes it past grade 10**.<sup>59</sup> When girls hit adolescence, the pressures to work, marry and bear children increase exponentially. According to UNICEF, Uganda has the sixteenth-highest rate of child marriage in the world and the tenth-highest absolute number of child brides globally. Almost half (40%) of girls are married by age 18 and 10% are married by age 15.<sup>60</sup>

Across the country, SGBV presents a serious problem for the healthy development of children and adolescents. The recent Uganda Violence Against Children Survey (VACS) showed that young boys and girls are exposed to high amounts of violence and trauma in their early years.<sup>viii</sup> Of the Ugandan youth (ages 18-24) surveyed, one in six boys and **one in three girls** reported experiencing sexual violence during their childhoods, including 11% of girls who experienced pressured or forced sex.<sup>61</sup> Such high rates of violence toward girls and young women are a driving factor in the decisions of parents and caregivers to marry off their girls early. Many parents and caregivers believe that child marriage may provide both financial security and protection for their girls from physical or sexual violence outside of marriage. However, early marriage often results in girls dropping out of school and places them at a higher risk of HIV infection and sexual violence.<sup>62</sup>

World Vision Uganda began relief operations in central Uganda in 1986, following the civil war. Later development work began with the initiation of community development projects in central, southern, western and West Nile regions between 1987 and 1995. World Vision Uganda currently operates in more than 50 districts, with 53 long-term development programmes.

### The SAGE DREAMS project

In October 2016, World Vision was awarded a DREAMS Innovation Challenge grant, administered by the U.S. Department of State and the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR) to implement the Strengthening School-Community Accountability for Girl's Education (SAGE) project.<sup>ix</sup> The baseline



Photo: ©World Vision / 16-year-old Janet in school.

<sup>viii</sup> The VACS provide nationally representative data to inform policies and programming aiming to end violence against children in Uganda.

<sup>ix</sup> DREAMS is an acronym for Determined, Resilient, Empowered, AIDS-free, Mentored, and Safe.



### Veronica's Story

Veronica, 18, is a student at Mityana Secondary School. When World Vision began implementing the SAGE project, Veronica stood out as one of the brightest students in her grade. In her first term of Senior Five, Veronica scored high on her exams, impressing her teachers and showing the promise of a very bright future.

In her second term, however, things changed. Veronica began dating an older man who owned a boutique store in the village and her grades started to slip.

One evening after Veronica came home from a day of working in the store, her mother began to ask where she had been. Veronica denied her mother's accusations of promiscuity, but her mother was infuriated and beat her. Veronica's mother took her phone, refused to continue paying for her education, and ultimately sent her away to live with her boyfriend, asserting that it was now his responsibility to marry her.

For the next several weeks, Veronica remained out of school. She and her mother had both lost hope in the opportunities that a quality education could provide for a smart girl like Veronica.

After noticing a trend in Veronica's poor grades and absences from school, a teacher informed the local Stay in School Committee (SISC). Members of the SISC visited Veronica's home and spoke with her mother. As a result, Veronica's mother forgave her and began to pay her tuition again.

Veronica is now working hard to stay diligent in school. She told World Vision staff, "The DREAMS project has mentored me and empowered me to stay in school. If they [the SISC] were not there, I would have been married right now."

As part of the project, the head teacher at Veronica's school meets with her individually once a week to mentor her. Veronica has also been tested for HIV and knows her status. Additionally, she has learned how to make reusable sanitary pads and has transferred this knowledge to her 12-year-old sister and friends in the community so they can make pads for themselves and for income.

Veronica hopes to attend University and study civil engineering. Veronica's story and her continued determination has inspired younger students in her school, who now see her as a role model.

survey of 38,750 adolescent girls (ages 13-19) across 10 districts in Uganda revealed that 70% of girls had experienced school-related sexual and gender-based violence within the previous six months. In partnership with JSI Research & Training Institute, the SAGE project was designed as a school-based HIV prevention programme for adolescent girls, which used an Early Warning System (EWS) to track school attendance and a set of supporting social and behavioural interventions to change social norms around girls' education.

The project aimed to reduce violence and improve positive gender norms at home, in school and in the community, as well as empower adolescent girls with the agency and social support necessary to stay in school, remain safe from violence and avoid contracting HIV. The project used a two-pronged strategy with the EWS and Stay in School Committees (SISC) to transform social norms and practices; reduce risks of child marriage, pregnancy, SGBV and HIV infection; and to enable girls to stay in school.

The EWS intervention was an adolescent-led, adult-supported, evidence-based monitoring and accountability mechanism. It involved adolescents, their schools, families and communities in monitoring students' attendance and taking practical actions to support at-risk students to remain in school. Three key functions of the EWS package were to predict dropout (using the school's register), to prevent dropout (by creating an environment where girls are safe and encouraged to learn) and to return vulnerable girls to school through home visits and mentoring.

The SISC was the primary accountability body and most of their actions and decisions were adolescent-led. Each school's SISC consisted of 12 to 15 people: a mother, a father, a faith leader, one teacher, one head teacher, one school administrator, one adolescent boy and six adolescent girls. The SISCs are elected as "peer educators" by their classmates to counsel, educate and monitor the attendance and behaviour of fellow students for signs of dropout. If a girl was flagged by a classmate, friend, or teacher, her case was referred to the SISC, which decided on next steps to ensure the girl was supported. The types of support girls received included mentorship by peer educators or teachers, tutoring, fundraising support for school fees and donated school supplies or other items that the girls may lack (e.g. sanitary pads, money for meals or textbooks). In many of the schools where SAGE was implemented, girls cited lack of school fees as the catalyst that forced them into exploitative work or early marriages. In some cases, if a girl had dropped out, the SISC would conduct a home visit to intervene in situations of SGBV or child marriage. Home visits usually consisted of a meeting with the girl, a family member and an elder or community leader. SISC members discussed the importance of girls' education,

the consequences of child marriage and solutions to financial hardship and then advocated for the girl to return to school.

Of the 44,000 adolescent girls reached by the project, **99.7% were retained in school** (compared to the national retention rate of less than 70% for girls). Because of the SAGE project, girls were able to see a new world of opportunity through education, supported by their peers and teachers.

## Promising practices

Education can have a tremendous impact on the course of a girl's life. It opens doors for future economic opportunities and education also gives adolescent girls the chance to develop life skills and social connections in a critical time of cognitive development. Leaving school can be both a cause and a consequence of early marriage. Programmes with the primary goal of keeping girls in school have proven to be an effective way to also address child marriage. Schools are an important source of information about rights, health services and safety.

Educated women have more skills, self-confidence and are likely to marry at a later age and have fewer children. Each year of secondary education reduces the likelihood of marrying before the age of 18 by five percentage points or more, making it a necessary component of all global efforts to end child marriage.<sup>63</sup>

Another important factor in the success of the SAGE project was its intentional effort to include adolescents in programme design, implementation and evaluation. Adolescent girls were consulted at each stage and seen as thought leaders. SAGE sought to give peer educators an opportunity to grow through life-skills programming, including leadership, communication, sexual and reproductive health, HIV prevention and treatment and menstrual hygiene management. In turn, adolescent girls led other aspects of the project, such as mentorship, designing health messages for their peers and conducting trainings for fellow students. By giving the girls leadership opportunities as peer educators, they were able to build confidence in their capacity to speak on equal footing with adults and to meaningfully contribute to community-led transformation.

Following the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, a countrywide lockdown was imposed to contain the spread of the disease. This move saw 15 million students in Uganda affected by the closures of schools. The SAGE DREAMS project was completed before the pandemic began, but World Vision continued to respond to child marriage in Uganda, using many of the most effective approaches. To ensure children continue education and prevent an increase in child marriage and gender-based

violence, World Vision has teamed up with religious leaders, Ministry of Education and communities.

Faith leaders equipped through Channels of Hope Gender in Uganda and other programmes built capacity in faith leaders and faith communities to explore gender identities, norms and values to promote healthier relationships and reduce SGBV in families and communities. Faith leaders provide psychosocial support, counselling and support families to prevent child marriage and violence. They also identified the most vulnerable children in their communities and supported child-headed households, girls at risk of early/forced marriage and pregnancy, children with disabilities and unaccompanied and separated children. In some communities, World Vision Uganda helped distribute learning materials provided by the Ministry of Education and organised volunteers to support and teach children in their homes or in small groups. A tracking register was also developed to monitor at-home attendance of girls and boys and ensure that they stay in school.<sup>64</sup>

World Vision continued its work in empowering adolescents to advocate for children's rights, ranging from protection from violence to child marriage. This was achieved through 21 Peace Clubs, established in the Adjumani district of northern Uganda. The Peace Club activities have enabled children to become champions of behavioural change in the community and help reduce cases of SGBV and early marriage, which are significantly reducing despite the pandemic. As the lockdown ended and schools reopened, faith leaders organised and supported mass 'back to school' campaigns through community messaging, awareness-raising, door-to-door visits and radio appearances.



# CONCLUSION

At World Vision, we believe that every child deserves the chance to experience life in all its fullness, to dream big dreams and to realise their God-given potential. Child marriage is a serious violation of a girl's rights and deserves a robust global response. While programmatic interventions should be tailored to fit specific contexts, several cross-cutting themes emerged from this analysis of World Vision's global work to end child marriage. These themes reflect many of the best practices identified at the end of each case study and offer guidance for successful approaches to ending child marriage across cultural and geographic contexts:



### 1. Empowering women and girls as key decision-makers and agents of change achieves long-lasting results.

At every stage of programme design, implementation and evaluation,

it is critical to elevate the voices of women and girls. In the Uganda DREAMS project, girls were empowered as peer educators to speak up for themselves and educate their peers. They were given specific leadership roles and opportunities to engage with adults and other members of the SISC, building their leadership skills and self-confidence. This structure proved sustainable beyond the life of the project.

In Bangladesh's Nobo Jatra project, the Life Skills-Based Education (LSBE) taught adolescent girls and boys about the harmful effects of child marriage, educated them on the right to marry when they choose and encouraged them to speak out when they saw child marriage taking place in their villages. Many girls who received LSBE training advocated for themselves by telling their parents they had rights and did not want to be married early. In addition, empowering mothers with livelihood opportunities and life skills training helped them secure additional income for their households and increased their agency, which had positive implications for their children. Giving women and girls a voice in all aspects of project design and implementation and empowering them to advocate for themselves and their peers is essential for the success of child marriage programming.



### 2. Involving local community and faith leaders is critical for long-term cultural and social norm change.

Faith leaders are respected messengers in their communities who can set

and shift social norms; religious services and prayer gatherings are important community hubs where faith leaders can disseminate critical information. Through its longstanding, community partnerships built on trust, World Vision has been able to engage faith leaders from different faith traditions to leverage their cultural authority and transform harmful attitudes and practices that impact child wellbeing. In Senegal, where 31% of girls are married before the age of 18, almost half of all faith leaders who participated in World Vision's CoH CP training changed their views and begin to oppose child marriage, instead of seeing it as an alternative to early pregnancy. Many took actions to stop the practice in their communities. Engagement with faith leaders also allows for peer-to-peer dialogue about beliefs and practices that can achieve results with broader reach.



### 3. Engaging men and boys provides community and household-level support structures for girls to say "no" to child marriage.

Acknowledging and addressing the attitudes and opinions of men and boys, who hold significant social power in traditional cultures, is crucial for preventing child marriage – a practice deeply rooted in gender inequality. The education of fathers is especially important, since they often decide whether to marry their daughters at an early age. In Afghanistan, engaging the village imam to speak with Khatema's father helped to keep her in school instead of being married at the age of nine to settle the family's debt (*full story above*). Using life-skills classes to teach boys about risks and child rights also helps to create a safe environment for all children in a community. Boys who engage in life-skills education classes also learn how to create a child marriage-free community. In Bangladesh, parenting classes where fathers were taught about the infinite value of their daughters helped girls to access greater opportunities. It is important to work with men and boys, alongside women and girls, to end this practice.



### 4. Child marriage has many varied and complex driving factors, which require multisectoral solutions delivered through strong child protection systems.

This means strengthening the health, education, social and child protection sectors' capacity to prevent and respond to the risk of child marriage. Strong national, regional and global coordination mechanisms are also needed. No

### INSPIRE Framework for Ending Child Marriage

- **Implementation and enforcement of laws:** Create or strengthen existing laws that ban child marriage and build capacity for improved implementation.
- **Norms and values:** Shift harmful social and cultural norms and values about child marriage by mobilising communities to prevent the practice and intervene when they see it taking place.
- **Safe environments:** Provide safe environments for young women and girls to live free from violence.
- **Parent and caregiver support:** Provide education and support for caregivers on the harmful ramifications of child marriage in community settings and through home visits.
- **Income and economic strengthening:** Increase incomes and livelihood opportunities for parents and caregivers through cash transfers, microfinance or group loans and savings, combined with gender and child protection training.
- **Response and support services:** Provide physical and mental health services (including counselling and therapy) to adolescent girls and young women who have been married or experienced violence.
- **Education and life skills:** Empower girls with information and access to safe and empowering education, in an environment where both boys and girls receive quality education and life skills training along with critical information about their safety and rights.

single, national sector can deliver the full package of interventions and no government alone can tackle the growing threats of child marriage alone. As our research confirms, there are many evidence-based strategies that have proved effective in ending child marriage. Some of these are included in the INSPIRE package of interventions, which bring together evidence-based models for addressing violence against children. INSPIRE is an acronym for seven multi-sectoral strategies for ending violence against children, including child marriage. The figure below shows how the INSPIRE strategies can help end child marriage.

To effectively end or reduce child marriage, these strategies should be integrated and contextualised but also must be employed simultaneously. For example, the primary objective of the Bangladesh Nobo Jatra project was to create gender-equitable food security and shift harmful cultural norms that keep families from thriving.

Social norms related to gender inequality cannot change without empowering caregivers with resources and training to raise their household income. As such, the project employed income and economic strengthening approaches alongside interventions focused on behaviour change. The project also used CVA and the Bride Not Before 18 campaign to encourage the strengthening of laws and service delivery. Employing multiple strategies simultaneously is the most tactical way to address the complex driving factors of child marriage.



#### **5. Education provides alternative pathways and increased opportunities for girls at risk of child marriage.**

The education of young women and girls is an essential part of ending child

marriage, including breaking the cycle of poverty that drives it. In Uganda, holistic interventions – initiated in the school setting, but inclusive of girls' needs at home and in their communities – resulted in high (99%) retention rates and allowed girls to delay marriage and have more decision-making power in their own lives.

Across all four contexts, adolescent girls saw child marriage as an immediate threat to their education and it was clear that they desired to stay in school. When empowered with an understanding of their rights to education, girls can be powerful advocates for themselves and their peers.

Educating girls also has important implications for families and communities. When a girl in the developing world receives seven years of education, she marries four years later and has fewer children.<sup>65</sup> Research shows that educated women have more skills, self-confidence and earn higher wages.<sup>66</sup> Ending child marriage has enormous potential benefits for girls, their families and the global economy. Interventions to end child marriage should be coupled with strengthening gender-transformative education programmes and building the capacity of local schools.



**6. Community-led social accountability mechanisms are vital to effectively end the practice of child marriage.** Social accountability empowers all people to share

their experiences and voice their concerns about the harmful impacts of child marriage. Providing avenues for advocacy is key to sustainable transformation and service delivery.

In Senegal, local campaigns about ending child marriage were so effective, they won the approval of the country's president. Local and national-level advocacy can help government leaders justify greater action, partnerships and budget to address the needs of adolescent girls and spur their own economic growth.

In Bangladesh, CVA has helped hundreds of communities to access government health clinics and other public services. CVA is effective in a variety of contexts. It can help state-society accountability and development coordination to end child marriage and support girls who are already married.



**7. Integrating specific actions to end child marriage from the beginning of a humanitarian response is critical to sustaining global progress.**

Designing or adapting existing intervention models to reduce crisis-induced risks and ensure service provision continues, strengthens the impact of response and ensures continuity of existing efforts. For example, in Bangladesh, the COVID-19 response included activities aimed to prevent child marriage through livelihoods support, continued awareness-raising and ensuring access to services. The activities were adapted to the context of the pandemic by using digital means of communication and capacity building. In Afghanistan and Uganda faith and community leaders integrated efforts to prevent child marriage in their activities to prevent the spread of the COVID-19 virus and to assist vulnerable children. In all cases, this approach was critical to ensure continuity of interventions to end child marriage and preserve achieved results.



Photo: ©World Vision / "Pay attention to your dreams for bright future" sign on tree at school.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Child marriage is an unjust form of violence against children; it puts young girls in danger and keeps them from reaching their full potential. In recent years, it has been encouraging to see that ending child marriage has gained increasing prominence on national and international development agendas. There is a growing consensus among governments, policymakers, practitioners and donors that ending child marriage is essential to achieving several development outcomes, including reducing maternal and child mortality, universal access to education, ending violence against women and children, as well as ensuring women's economic empowerment. However, the surge in child marriages over the past 18 months clearly indicate that more needs to be done. Significant gaps in laws, policies and programmes remain, with dire consequences for

children and communities. Donors and governments must act quickly and decisively to respond to the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and other humanitarian crises. Unless we accelerate action, 110 million more girls will become child brides by 2030 and progress made in the past twenty years will be lost.

This report recognises the gaps in prevention and response, but also showcases successful examples of intervention and programmes that make a difference and demonstrate positive results. As national and global policymakers engage in discussions on how to build back better post-COVID-19, World Vision calls on all governments and donors to demonstrate stronger leadership to end child marriage by undertaking the following 10 essential actions:

1

Align national laws and policies with international law, ensuring 18 years as the legal age for marriage for all children and ensure these laws and policies are implemented and resourced.

2

Urgently facilitate safe returns to school, including measures to support girls who dropped out during the pandemic. Ensure that every girl has access to inclusive, safe and child-friendly primary and secondary education.

3

Design, implement and scale up national awareness-raising and social behavioural change initiatives and partner with faith and community leaders to change the harmful attitudes, behaviours traditions and practices that contribute to child marriage.

4

Increase investment in interventions to end child marriage, especially in comprehensive community-led and evidence-based prevention and response services for girls, such as scholarships, access to sexual and reproductive health, vocational training and livelihood activities for children and their families.

5

Increase investment in social protection and economic strengthening interventions, such as cash transfers, microfinance, or group loans and savings, combined with gender and child protection training to prevent child marriage.

6

Empower girls and boys with information, skills and support networks to prevent child marriage, as well as support their civic and political capacity, knowledge and skills to engage in decision-making processes.

7

Increase and prioritise efforts to safely and meaningfully consult with adolescent girls and boys about their needs, priorities and solutions and amplify their identified needs and solutions to shape norms, policies and activities related to ending child marriage.

8

Ensure free, simple, accessible and late birth registration, particularly in rural areas, as a part of the overall civil registration and vital statistics system.

9

Recognise the heightened risk of child marriage in fragile contexts and emergencies, including public health emergencies such as the COVID-19 pandemic and dedicate resources and funding to prevent and respond to these risks from the outset of the humanitarian response.

10

Champion prevention of violence against children and help elevate this issue as a global development priority by committing to specific actions on ending child marriage alongside partners and governments during the 2021 Generation Equality Forum and by pushing for provisions against child marriage in bilateral and multilateral forums, such as the Human Rights Council, the United Nations General Assembly and the UN Decade of Action and Delivery for Sustainable Development.

World Vision believes that a world without all forms of violence against children – including the elimination of child marriage – is possible. Investment in ending child marriage has a ripple effect, empowering girls and women, as well as building stronger communities, societies and economies.

We have made significant and undeniable progress towards ending child marriage over the past two decades, but many gaps remain in regions of the world

with high rates of gender inequality and in fragile and humanitarian contexts. The COVID-19 outbreak is proving to be one of the biggest challenges across all contexts. Whilst the international community can play a catalytic and supporting role, it is critical to centre the voices of children and youth and to mobilise donor and government support for social change. Together, we can turn our promises and commitments into a reality by 2030 and improve the lives of the world's most vulnerable for generations to come.

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World Vision is a Christian relief, development and advocacy organisation dedicated to working with children, families and communities to overcome poverty and injustice. Inspired by our Christian values, we are dedicated to working with the world's most vulnerable people. We serve all people regardless of religion, race, ethnicity or gender.

We believe a world without violence against children is possible, and World Vision's global campaign It takes a world to end violence against children is igniting movements of people committed to making this happen. No one person, group or organisation can solve this problem alone, it will take the world to end violence against children.