



**Adapting
child marriage
programmes in times of
COVID-19**

*Revisiting a webinar hosted by
GNB Global Learning Working Group &
Share-Net Netherlands*

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ADAPTING CHILD MARRIAGE PROGRAMMES IN TIMES OF COVID-19

REVISITING A WEBINAR HOSTED BY GNB GLOBAL LEARNING WORKING GROUP AND SHARE-NET NETHERLANDS ON 3RD JUNE 2020

The current pandemic is posing a big challenge on organisations committed to ending child marriage who are trying to continue reaching and impacting young girls. Therefore, on June 3rd, the Girls not Brides (GNB) [Global Learning Working Group](#) and [Share-Net Netherlands](#) hosted their first virtual episode of the Child Marriage Lecture Series with the aim of creating a space for exchange and learning around experiences with child marriage programmes pivoting. The necessary move to a digital space has allowed us to bring together five experts from Nepal, Pakistan, India and the UK and to reach 143 professionals from 19 different countries. Faith Mwangi-Powell, CEO of Girls not Brides, led the diverse group of participants through the presentations and moderated a thought-provoking question & answer session in the end.

INTRODUCING THE STATE OF EVIDENCE AND KEY CONSIDERATIONS FOR THE COVID-19 RESPONSE

Speaker: Rachel Yates

Rachel Yates is the Director of Learning and Regional Implementation with Girls Not Brides, the global partnership of more than 1400 civil society organisations. In her presentation, she discussed the GNB [brief](#) on insights, recommendations and resources for responding to the needs of adolescent girls during and after this crisis, including those at risk of early marriage, married girls, and those in informal unions.

According to an [UNFPA](#) modelling analysis, it can be expected that this pandemic results in additional 13 million child marriages, due to:

- Reduced access to education
- Heightened risk of child protection abuses
- Economic downturn – impact at micro and macro level

GNB has administered a survey to all 1400 members which shows profound impact on girls across all domains: First of all, COVID-19 impacts girls' education as it means a disruption of learning processes. Rachel Yates put a spotlight on the digital gender divide, highlighting that especially poorer girls are disproportionately affected due to inaccessibility of online learning methods. At the same time, many girls will probably not be able to return to education post-lockdown because it will be too costly.

Second, with the restrictions on abortion and contraceptive methods, there is a likely increase of early pregnancies which is often seen to be a catalyst towards more child marriages. The lack of access to menstrual hygiene

products and psychosocial support further aggravate the situation of many girls. Not to forget the fact that closed doors in times of COVID-19 causes greater risk environments and a rise of domestic gender-based violence, while at the same time there is a lack of capacity to respond to these tendencies. While Indian member organisations see a short-term reduction in child marriages due to the pandemic, other countries observe increased child marriages as a coping strategy by desperate families.

Third, with the lockdown many households have lost all income. The economic impact caused by COVID-19 profoundly affects day wage labourers and migrant workers, and already vulnerable groups often living in rural, isolated or slum-dwelling contexts. Especially countries with weak social protection systems and safety nets will see a significant effect on economic well-being.

Rachel Yates emphasised the vital need for comprehensive measures, and calls governments and practitioners to not only focus on access to education but also to provide psychological support as well as economic and SRH services – regardless of girls’ marital status. We have to think along what can advocacy do now, in an acute phase, and how can we make sure girls are returning to school in case they become pregnant during the recovery phase. Furthermore, there is a need to collect more sex-segregated data and gain more understanding about how gender inequalities and harmful gender norms affect the adaptations of child marriage programmes. And from a more high-level perspective we must ask ourselves: What needs to change so that we can ensure organisations are empowered to do the vital bottom up approaches?

Rachel Yates concludes with recognising that this pandemic could go on for many more months, or even years. This challenge demands collective learning and adaptation of approaches across countries and regions, a process that should happen in consultation with girls and women and will need constant reflection and reconsideration based on new knowledge.

WOMEN AND GIRLS FIGHTING TWO PANDEMICS AT A TIME: DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AND COVID-19 IN PAKISTAN

Speaker: Anbreen Ajaib

Anbreen Ajaib is a human rights activist and Executive Director at Bedari based in Pakistan. In her presentation, she shared some insights about how Bedari is currently adapting their work on short-term and reflects on more long-term considerations.

The presentation kicks off with a depiction of the current situation in the context of Pakistan. Studies show that more than 90% of women experience gender-based violence in some form – but only 10% of cases are eventually reported. Furthermore, girls and women have limited access to health and hygiene during the pandemic because health providers are dealing with COVID and SRH needs are neglected. With the lockdown, domestic violence survivors face no other option but to live under the same roof as their abuser. This situation is further worsened by services being suspended e.g. police and shelters. In Pakistan, many schools were turned into quarantine centres which poses questions on hygiene standards and disinfection methods when girls can go back to school.

The COVID-19 response by Bedari began with an observation about rural women and girls not having enough valid information about the virus so they started to introduce innovative methods for awareness raising on protection from infection but also to address domestic violence. They use FM radio, Whatsapp messages and other social

media channels to offer reliable sources of information. Furthermore, the organisation works closely with donors and philanthropists to distribute hygiene kits among women and girls. Strategically, it is intended to identify households in program districts with priority to victims of child marriage/girls at risk and pregnant women/girls. Bedari has set up a psychological counselling service by means of a 24/7 helpline encouraging anyone to call for support if they feel stressed. Based on these calls, Bedari finds that child marriages in Pakistan are increasing in times of the lockdown.

With a more long-term perspective, Anbreen Ajaib highlights that new policies which account for these circumstances will be necessary to deal successfully with this - and future – crises. While Pakistan has a strong disaster management policies, the element of GBV is missing from the political agenda. Moreover, authorities seem to be so absorbed with COVID-19, that even survivors who come forward are not helped sufficiently at the moment. Consequently, Bedari is engaging in advocacy work through letters, meeting and social media campaigns. Through their FM channels, they have been quite effective in reaching women and girls, tackling topics like self-growth and teaching about stress-management. Aiming for sustainable adoption of these approaches, women are encouraged to take the lead themselves and local female leaders together create awareness of GBV within COVID-19 scenario. Anbreen Ajaib adds that input from NGOs might be perceived like imposing ‘the western agenda’, while interventions coming from local women in their own language become more powerful.

In her concluding remarks, the speaker stresses the importance to keep connected. The main challenge that remains is how to reach all people at risk due to low access to mobile phones and dependencies on the partner. Bedari tries to improve their reach through targeted messaging via SMS, Whatsapp and Radio in local languages. Other attempts have been organised field visits by women-led groups and village counsellors, as well as engaging health workers who are already doing door to door visits in the counselling program. Lastly, Anbreen Ajaib advocates to improve the dialogue between the people who are facing above-discussed problems and the policy-makers and calls to form alliances of NGOs and activists so that GBV will be put on the agenda in different forums.

APARAJITA – MARRIAGE: NO CHILD’S PLAY PROGRAMME IN INDIA

Speaker: Nancepreet Kaur

Nancepreet Kaur is a Senior Program Officer at the Voluntary Health Association of India (VHAI). In her presentation, she explained the key interventions and achievements of VHAI’s “Aparjita – Marriage: No Child’s Play”, a program in collaboration with the More Than Brides Alliance (MTBA), and what they are doing to adapt to COVID-19.

She began by outlining the current state of child marriage in India. Despite positive developments, India still accounts for 19% of all global maternal deaths and nearly 20% of global child deaths. It has the highest number of child brides in the world and, despite legislation against child marriage coming into force 85 years ago, 47.4% of young girls are still married before the age of 18.

The impact of COVID-19 on these issues in India has been profound: only a week after lockdown was implemented, Aparajita’s helpline received 23,000 calls, nearly three times higher than their usual rate. Echoing Anbreen Ajaib’s “tale of two pandemics”, Nancepreet Kaur described knock on effect of COVID-19 on child marriage as a “shadow pandemic”, which is at risk of being eclipsed by the virus.

Under usual circumstances, the program facilitates the meeting of around 500 adolescent girls and boys at village centres, where they learn about SRHR issues and receive life skills training. Now that in-person meet-ups are no longer possible, VHA is connecting to the young people via WhatsApp and video conferencing, to share experiences, maintain child protection and quickly respond to their queries about SRHR and COVID-19. Although this is a good interim solution, Nancepreet Kaur highlights that digital outreach is limited because not all young people have internet access, demonstrated by the fact that there are approximately 30,000 girls in their network, but they have only been able to connect with 300-400 of them.

Loss of income due to the pandemic is another key reason families may be tempted by child marriage, because of the economic stability it promises. It is therefore crucial that women and adolescent girls are able to find alternative and safe methods of income generation, which is why Aparjita have been supporting an adolescent girls' mask-making initiative, supporting both incomes *and* COVID-19 prevention efforts.

As the pandemic becomes the government's number one priority, many of India's key services have been disrupted or abandoned. The 24/7 Child & Adolescent helpline for reporting child marriage cases is no longer functional, while the shift in focus from SRH services to COVID-19 management has left over 7,000 adolescent girls without access to safe menstrual products. Young Aparjita leaders have responded to this by creating an emergency helpline number, which has already received over 900 calls. The program has also taken action to distribute menstrual napkins among 4,000 adolescent girls living in remote villages, and is working with the government to restore the supply chain as soon as possible.

As a result of their efforts over the past years, Aparjita program has been able to declare a number of villages "child marriage free" (meaning there have been no reported cases of child marriage for at least one year), as well as identifying several "drop out free schools". To sustain this progress, Nancepreet Kaur highlighted the importance of changing ideas and behaviours at both the government and community levels, and by mobilising activists and the media. To conclude, she reminded participants that "there are no paths, paths are made by walking", encapsulating the unprecedented nature of the challenges this pandemic is posing and the need for constant learning and knowledge sharing in the response.

ADAPTIVE PROGRAMMING IN TIMES OF COVID-19 IN CHILD MARRIAGE PROGRAMMES IN NEPAL

Speaker: Sumnima Tuladhar

Trigger warning: rape

Our final speaker, Sumnima Tuladhar spoke on behalf of CWIN, a pioneering children's rights organisation based in Nepal. She has 32 years' experience working with children and young people, and in her presentation gave insights into the adaptations being made to their child marriage program since the onset of the pandemic.

Sumnima Tuladhar began by re-articulating the link between increasing child marriage rates and COVID-19. As the pandemic disrupts livelihoods, vulnerabilities are rising among the urban poor, so child marriage becomes a way to escape for families living in poverty. Not only is the prospect of one less mouth to feed tempting, the government is preoccupied with controlling the virus, so its focus is diverted away from child protection issues, which means usual checks and legal hurdles are no longer in place. In addition, school closures and child club cancellation means families feel less of the social pressure which acts as a deterrent for child marriage. Without

school, young people are sitting idle and, even if lessons are delivered digitally, not all kids can access them. This combination of circumstances creates the perfect climate for child marriages to take place.

During the lockdown in Nepal, there have been a number of deeply concerning cases associated with child marriage, including the rape and subsequent death of a 10-year-old girl who was forcibly married to her attacker, and the murder of four boys who were accused of attempting to “kidnap” and marry a 17-year-old girl. Child Helpline Nepal, run by CWIN, has received reports of at least six cases of child marriage during the lockdown.

In response to the increased lockdown-induced pressures, CWIN Nepal are channelling their efforts into a number of key interventions: First, to overcome not being able to have in-person interactions, CWIN are using all available channels including TV, radio public service announcements and social media platforms, to disseminate information. Echoing earlier speaker Anbreen Ajaib from Bedari Pakistan, Sumnima Tuladhar highlighted the effectiveness in particular of FM radio stations in reaching a wide audience. CWIN are also operating interactively using SLIO to facilitate online focus group discussions with young people from different areas, while online channels are being used by child psychiatrists and clinical psychologists to deliver counselling sessions.

Second, despite the lockdown, CWIN are constantly in the field to monitor the situation, file cases and carry out rescue operations for children facing marriage, as well as to deliver emergency relief packages to strengthen vulnerable families. They are also mobilising peer support by providing young people with mobile phones to collect information about their peers.

Already, the pandemic is exacerbating existing inequalities and worsening the situation faced by women and girls due to negative public attitudes, discriminatory laws and policies. Looking ahead, Sumnima Tuladhar stressed the importance of addressing longstanding structural issues to recognise the disproportionate impact of the pandemic on the most marginalised communities.

Education for girls remains a priority because it is their perceived lack of value which encourages families to marry their daughters. It's therefore vital that education has a skills based focus, to enable girls to make money for themselves.

Yet it is not only families forcing their children to marry young – in many cases young people are initiating it themselves. This means there is an urgent need to understand what motivates their choices, which can only be done by meaningfully involving young people in research and prevention efforts.

Funding helpline services is also crucial for those in greatest need. Children at risk of marriage tend to have very few options, and in many cases the only available means to reach out is by phone call, so this is an essential service which must be supported by government.

Addressing and challenging social norms is another key strategy for prevention. In Nepal, social pressure to form a family contributes to the need for marriage among young people, so diversifying what family means is important. This also requires the norms around masculinity to be challenged, and for this it's essential to create space for men and boys to share their feelings, as well as boost the visibility of positive male role models.

Ultimately, Sumnima Tuladhar argues that change will come from the meaningful participation of children and young people themselves – meaning their agency and capacity needs strengthened if their voices are to be heard.

INTERACTIVE Q&A

Moderator: Faith Mwangi-Powell

How can we better involve men and boys in preventing child marriage?

Nepal has formulated a national strategy for men's engagement, which is being taken to local and provincial levels. Sumnima Tuladhar further recommended sensitising local bodies and politicians on the role of men to end GBV and she considers it necessary to educate young boys as early as possible on different perspectives of gender. There needs to be a dialogue about how to be a supportive boyfriend and to move away from a narrative of "prohibiting the girls everything". We need to enable discussions about girls' and boys' sexual and reproductive health and rights! Anbreen Ajaib added that also in Pakistan there is a need to engage boys and men more, to highlight the causes and effects regarding domestic violence on both parties involved. While we might not quickly change the cultural understanding that men are in charge of decision-making, let's at least influence the kind of decisions they are making! COVID-19 might even be a good chance to illustrate to men and boys how overburdened women get and that both partners can share the responsibilities at home to play that role. In this sense, gender norms are starting to be shattered as we see men are starting to do domestic work and child/eldercare. From Nancepreet Kaur's experience in India, she shared the recommendation to "better catch them young". One successful method has been to organise boys groups to empower them on SRH knowledge.

How can we ensure social protection of all girls?

Rachel Yates referred to a growing body of evidence that shows how cash transfers keep girls in school. How can we think ahead and design more macro level policy changes to protect girls' school-drop out? And how can we make cash transfers conditioned on better outcomes for girls (touching upon the example of families using cash transfers for marriage dowries)? In July, social protection funders will be coming together and hopefully bring these discussions forward.

What's your experience with conducting focus group discussions virtually?

VHAI in India had planned an interview process with 20,000 adolescent girls in their area. When the lockdown began, the team did a mapping of girls, especially identifying those with access to smartphones. After having tested different platforms, they chose Zoom and organised calls centred around weekly themes. Usually they manage to have around 20 girls and boys participate in one discussion.

How do you monitor your radio programmes?

According to the experience of Bedari, radio is perceived more empowering than TV programming. They monitor radio programmes by taking live calls and responding to them and introducing listenership certificates which would allow for better overview of number of listeners. However, indeed more men and boys have access to radio related to their mobile access, which is why Bedari is trying to get couples or groups of people to listen to programmes together. During programme meeting, the community members are asked for feedback about the radio interventions as well which helps to strengthen the project. Local language is considered an important factor, so that listeners feel closer to the issues and it makes it easier to follow.

How do we convince parents to let their daughters use smartphones?

Sumnima Tuladhar shared that in Nepal, there is little restriction on smartphone use. As Nepal has a very diverse population, there are indigenous groups where a sort of “matriarchy” is practiced, so generally this challenge is not very prevalent in Nepal. On the contrary, Nancepreet Kaur elaborated on restrictions in India which go beyond the use of smartphones, but further parents are often apprehensive about hearing about “sexuality” and do not allow their children to participate in respective programmes. Therefore, it has become very important to involve caretakers in the whole process of an intervention and to also share relevant SRHR info with them. This can be started through less sensitive topic, e.g. immunity boosting tips, mental health tips, stress, how to care for parents during lockdown etc. As a consequence, also parents benefit and allow for children to participate.

What are some adaptive strategies to undergo a gender-transformative approach?

Rachel Yates stressed the importance of increasing girls voices in emergency situations because particularly in more challenging times, existing problems of girls might get overlooked and they themselves are often not consulted. GNB received good examples from Lebanon, where an actual consultation with girls in refugee contexts has taken place to understand what are their needs. We need to get smarter at finding out what girls real needs are to amplify them. In other countries, GNB hosts child protection committees where they invite girls for open dialogues and discuss with them to what extent their needs are being met and/or heard. Through such methods, we can create resilience of girls which is the building block of a good humanitarian response exist. This ties in with a commitment to localisation that was made at the World Humanitarian Summit – where stakeholders agreed to prioritise bottom up approaches.

FINAL OBSERVATIONS

All speakers agreed that despite the global lockdown, we can – and must – stay connected. This pandemic poses new and unprecedented challenges to the work of all organisations, especially those tackling child marriage, so the process of adapting is a constant learning process. As highlighted by Anbreen Ajaib, there are many shared cultural norms and values between each of the speakers’ countries (India, Pakistan, Nepal), so learning from each other via online discussion is important to strengthen adaptive responses. This recognition further motivates the GNB Global Learning Working Group and Share-Net Netherlands to carry this lecture series forward and soon again bring together the community committed to end child marriage.

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and become part of the knowledge platform on SRHR as either a member or a sponsor. When joining Share-Net, you will not only be contributing to our mission and vision, but you will also be able to enjoy specific member benefits:

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- Be elected in one of our governing bodies, the Steering Committee of the Netherlands or the Board of Share-Net International. All members are invited to our annual business meeting.
- Be eligible for our yearly call for proposals for the Share-Net International Small Grants facility.

For more information about our work and how to get involved. Please contact Nicole Moran at n.moran@kit.nl