

COVID-19 AND CHILD MARRIAGE

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COVID-19 AND CHILD, EARLY AND FORCED MARRIAGE: AN AGENDA FOR ACTION

Governments and communities around the world are struggling to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic. This brief provides insights, recommendations and resources for responding to the needs of adolescent girls, including those at risk of child marriage, during and after the crisis.



Young participants in Youth Voices against Child Marriage, Jakarta, Indonesia
Photo: Graham Crouch/Girls Not Brides

Overview

The Director General of the World Health Organisation declared COVID-19 a global pandemic on 11 March 2020. Governments and communities around the world are struggling to contain and respond to this challenge, which threatens to undo decades of progress, including towards ending child, early and forced marriage.

This brief is intended for development partners, including government and civil society actors. It provides recommendations and resources for responding to the needs of adolescent girls during the COVID-19 crisis and recovery period, including those at risk of early marriage and those who are already married and in informal unions.

Our member organisations and partners have contributed to this document. Their feedback will be included in future versions as we learn how the pandemic is progressing, and its impact on child marriage in different contexts.

Background

The COVID-19 pandemic is already having a devastating effect on families, communities and economies, and we are still to see the full impact on the poorest countries and those with fragile health, social welfare, communications and governance systems. The virus, and government measures to contain its spread, will be most devastating for those working in the informal sector who cannot isolate themselves, including slum-dwellers and those living in refugee and internally displaced persons (IDPs) camps.

Whilst it is too early to tell how COVID-19 is affecting the incidence of child marriage, experience from the Ebola crisis and other acute emergencies strongly suggests that girls and women will be disproportionately affected, particularly amongst the poorest and socially marginalised groups.¹ Many girls, women, boys and men will be affected by the crisis. This brief focuses on how adolescent girls, particularly those at risk of marriage or already married girls will be affected in the short- and longer-term.

Many of the complex factors that drive child marriage in stable environments are exacerbated in emergency settings, as family and community structures break down during crisis and displacement. A pandemic of this nature will also present unique challenges that can increase child marriage both in the acute and recovery phases. Challenges include the loss of household income, higher risk of violence in the household and lack of access to schooling. Plan International research shows that, in crisis settings, girls live in fear of violence and are not only concerned about the constant presence of armed men, but also about gender-based violence (GBV) within families.

¹ Menéndez, C. et al. "Ebola crisis the unequal impact on women and children's health," 2015, The Lancet: Global Health, Vol. 3, Issue 3.

COVID-19 and child marriage

State of the evidence

- Early days – yet to see full impact of COVID-19 on countries with highest prevalence
- UNFPA modelling suggests pandemic may result in additional 13 million child marriages before 2030
- UNICEF working with Tulane University to develop projections on child marriage based on Ebola data from West Africa
- Qualitative feedback from *Girls Not Brides* member organisations shows impacts of lockdown on education, SRHR, mental health, GBV and economic distress

Pathways through which COVID-19 is impacting on child marriage

Education

- Lockdowns and school closures disrupt learning
- School closures disproportionately impact on poor
- Limited access to online learning, cost of data is a barrier
- Cost of education may become unaffordable
- Concern that many girls will not return to education

Health

- Difficult access to sexual and reproductive health services during lockdown (lack of access to safe abortion and contraception)
- Member organisations predict increase in unplanned pregnancies and STIs
- Lack of access to menstrual hygiene management products
- Unable to access psychosocial support services

Increase in violence against girls and women

- Increase in rates of sexual and gender-based violence in lockdown
- Lack of services: shelters, emergency hotlines, police protection services mostly shut
- Indian member organisations report that lockdown may reduce child marriage in short term
- Other contexts: increased marriages as a coping strategy for desperate families

Economic impacts

- Many households have lost income in lockdown
- Girls face unequal burden of unpaid care and domestic work
- Already vulnerable groups worse off (eg, rural, isolated or slum-dwelling communities)
- Increasing reports of survival sex as household incomes shrink

Adaptations

- Increased **coordination** of civil society actors at community level
- Development of **community surveillance** programmes and hotlines to report GBV, including child marriage
- Development of **communications materials** into local languages and distribution via WhatsApp, flyers, radio/TV programmes, loudspeakers
- Development of **online-based learning**
- **Data support** for girls to revise for exams and continue online learning
- Organisations planning community awareness campaigns and **follow-up with out-of-school girls** to help them return
- **Income generation:** community groups making masks and sanitary pads

Innovations in programming:

Mesa de la Niña in Guatemala

- High levels of violence against children and adolescents are increasing during pandemic and confinement
- Girls and adolescents – including those married and living in unions – confined with their sexual assailants
- Digital gap – not everyone can access online education
- Reduced access to sexual and reproductive health, shortage of contraceptive methods

Response

- The Mesa have formed a subcommittee and are planning a campaign to prevent unwanted pregnancies and report cases of violence
- They are mapping opportunities for alliances and joint work with government agencies to respond to this new context

Child marriage and the COVID-19 response:

Key considerations

- **Ensure comprehensive measures** to prevent and respond to child marriage – access to education, psychosocial support, economic and SRH services – regardless of marital status
- Need to consider responses during **acute** (lockdown) and **recovery phases**, including advocacy for girls' return to school after pregnancy
- **Ensure an understanding of gender inequalities** and harmful norms, and gender- and sex-disaggregated data inform the design, implementation and monitoring of interventions
- Travel restrictions increase burden of response on local actors – need **longer-term and flexible funding** to support localisation of response from acute phase of crisis (relief) to recovery
- **Ensure girls and women are consulted**
- **Ensure learning and adaptation** of approaches across countries and agencies

THANK YOU