



HER
CHOICE

building child
marriage-free
communities



Content

Meet Mamata

The facts

How we work

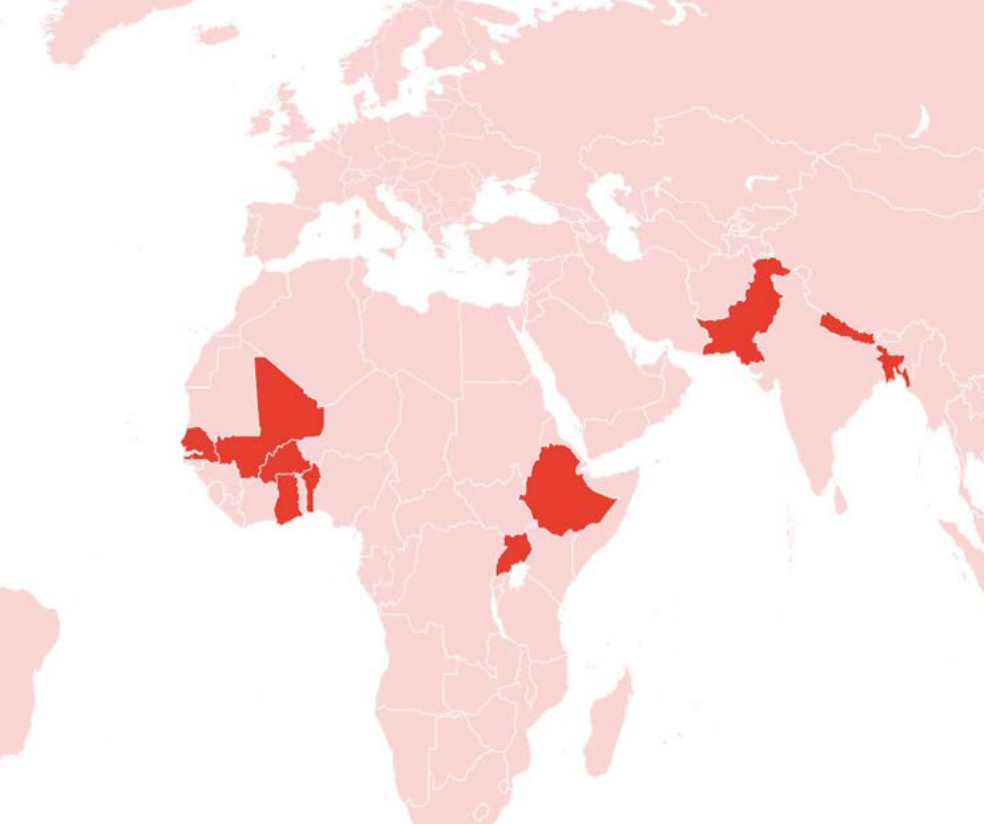
Strategies

Successes &

Challenges

Meet 15-year-old Mamata from Bangladesh. Her dream was to become a school teacher, but suddenly things were decided differently for her. Hoping that it would solve their financial problems, Mamata's parents wanted their teenage daughter to marry soon.





Worldwide there are millions of girls like Mamata. Girls who have dreams about becoming teachers, doctors, lawyers. Dreams that cannot be fulfilled if they marry too early and become mothers too soon. Apart from creating a serious health risk for themselves and their baby, they will most likely quit school, which increases the chance that they will not be able to support their families. Her Choice aims to build child marriage-free communities where each girl is free to decide if, when and whom she marries. Where this will be Her Choice.

The Her Choice programme improves the position, rights and future perspectives of girls in ten countries in Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia. The community itself plays a fundamental role. They form an integral part of our grassroots approach.

After three years of programme implementation, recent independent research shows that we're making progress. There are fewer 17-year-old girls who are married in the Her Choice working areas. Research also shows that girls have more comprehensive knowledge about sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR): girls have been educated on SRHR related issues, including on negative effects of child marriage and female genital mutilation, and speak out more about those subjects in community meetings.



The programme improves **the position, rights and future perspectives** of girls

With the support of Her Choice, Mamata regained her freedom. The marriage was called off, with the support of the headmaster of Mamata's school, her teachers, local authorities and the support of a local girls' club that was trained by one of Her Choice's 27 local partners in the field. Mamata could go back to school again and finish her studies. Her dream of becoming a school teacher suddenly became more real.



Child marriage the facts

- worldwide, every year 12 million girls marry under the age of 18: every day 33,000 girls get married
- when a girl marries young, the chance that she will also become pregnant young is high; 90% of teenage pregnancies take place within marriage
- with an immature body, there is a risk of complications during pregnancy and during delivery; complications during pregnancy and delivery are the second leading cause of death among 15 to 19-year-olds
- this also entails a risk for the baby: pregnancy at a very young age often leads to malnourished babies with retarded growth
- girls who marry later, attain higher levels of education, fare better economically and raise healthier families
- thanks to the efforts of initiatives such as Her Choice, child marriage rates are falling worldwide. Nowadays 1 in 5 young women are married before they turn 18 years old. This was 1 in 3 in the 1980s, so we're on the right track: change is possible!



Her Choice the facts

- 10 countries: Bangladesh, Benin, Burkina Faso, Ghana, Ethiopia, Mali, Nepal, Pakistan, Senegal and Uganda
- 27 local implementing partners, working mainly in rural areas
- 6 strategies
- 4 Dutch alliance members: Stichting Kinderpostzegels Nederland (lead), The Hunger Project, International Child Development Initiatives (ICDI) and the Amsterdam Institute for Social Science Research (AISSR) of the University of Amsterdam
- independent researchers measure both progress and impact
- in partnership with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands
- programme runs from January 2016 to December 2020
- recent independent research shows that progress is being made: there is a decreasing trend in child marriage in the Her Choice working areas

Her Choice **empowers** girls and their communities

There is no single solution for ending child marriages. With an integrated approach, we work on multiple aspects of child marriage at the same time. From reducing thresholds for girls to access health care to keeping them in school, from lobbying policy makers to the creation of social safety nets for vulnerable girls: all these efforts are interrelated. Her Choice tackles child marriage not only by empowering girls and strengthening their knowledge, but also by creating more conducive environments. Given girls do not exist in a vacuum, we aim for behavioral change in communities by raising awareness of boys, teachers, health care workers, traditional leaders and other relevant community members on girls' rights and the detrimental effects of child marriage. Therefore, these stakeholders form an integral part of our grassroots approach and ultimately

become the driving force in stopping child marriage. In addition, sustainable improvement of the economic position of girls and their families is also a key area of attention.

Her Choice programme activities mainly take place in rural and often remote areas

Her Choice programme activities mainly take place in rural and often remote areas, where few other organisations are present, and focus on marginalized groups. Her Choice also works in fragile states, such as Mali, Burkina Faso and Bangladesh.





Her Choice works within a strong **network**

The relationships between partners in the field and the alliance members in the Netherlands are strong and communication flows are quick and efficient. The alliance members and partners collaborate in a complementary manner, sharing expertise, experience and good practices. Both those who implement the Her Choice programme activities in the field, as well as the alliance members in the Netherlands have particular expertise in education, economic empowerment, sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR), child and youth development, youth participation and research.

Her Choice supports communities to take full responsibility for ending child marriage. Local ownership is the key factor to achieve sustainable results. Local organisations and authorities, community networks, women's groups, schools and SRHR- services are the driving forces who ensure that strategies are locally embedded.

Local ownership is the key factor to achieve sustainable results

International and local partners work side by side to generate knowledge and good practice, to support networks and to build on local assets.



Tackling child marriage with theatre in **Benin**

According to UNICEF, 26% of girls in Benin are married before their 18th birthday and 7% are married before the age of 15

Her Choice partner organisation The Hunger Project Benin uses the six intervention strategies of Her Choice in their activities. These strategies are based on evidence, which shows that the most consistent results of targeting child marriages are achieved by fostering information, skills and networks for girls in combination with community mobilisation. Therefore, strategies focus on both areas.

Since poverty is known to be one of the main drivers of child marriage, Her Choice alliance member The Hunger Project Benin also aims at improving the economic security of households. The Hunger Project supports families, and especially women, to take self-reliant actions so they can meet their own basic needs and build better futures for themselves and their children.

Theater performances also prove to be an enormously powerful way to increase knowledge about child marriages. That's why The Hunger Project Benin works with the professional theater group Baobab to make the community aware of issues such as early pregnancies and child marriages. Baobab works together with young people and animators (community members who are trained by Her Choice and volunteer for their own village) to put together appealing performances.

The actors show the public what parents can do to prevent young girls becoming pregnant, and that boys also play an important role. After the performance, group discussions are organized to further debate the themes from the play. These are supervised by 80 animators and by local experts who are now able to create their own plays. Animator Françoise (31) is impressed by the impact these performances have on the public: 'It is a good tool to discuss sensitive issues with young people and their parents. Surrounding communities have also asked us to play in their villages, because it is a really good sensitization activity.'

Her Choice uses **6 intervention strategies** that are based on evidence which shows that the most consistent results of targeting child marriages are achieved by fostering information, skills and networks for girls in combination with community mobilization.



Did you know that...more often girls marry someone of their own age or a few year older? Marrying much older men is the exception.

Increasing girls' control in decision-making

1

Investing in girls, their knowledge, SRHR and participation in society: enhancing their comprehension of the negative effects of child marriage and of alternative options.

2

Keeping girls in school: improving access to formal education for girls by supporting girl-friendly schools and building knowledge through schooling in general, and on SRHR in particular.

3

Improving access to youth-friendly SRHR services for girls: improving health services and by actively referring girls to health workers.

Mobilising relevant community actors

4

Strengthening the economic security of girls and their families: creating and supporting women's self-help groups with training and access to (financial) resources.

5

Transforming social norms and traditional practices: mobilising and supporting communities, including boys, men, women, leaders to promote girls' rights and gender equity, to achieve gender equity in education, decision making, and access to services.

6

Creating an enabling legal and policy environment on preventing child marriage: supporting traditional leaders and (local) authorities to enforce national policies on preventing child marriage.

His Choice

The negative effects of child marriage for girls are well known for most people. Few people are aware of the consequences for boys. In its recent in-depth analysis of child marriages UNICEF estimated that 115 million boys and men around the world were married as children. Of these, 1 in 5 children, or 23 million, were married before the age of 15. Using data from 82 countries, the study reveals that child marriage among boys is prevalent across a range of countries around the world, spanning sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean, South Asia, and East Asia and the Pacific.

An increasing number of boys and men are becoming true allies and role models.

All partners are conscious of the fact that boys and men are key players in changing social norms in favour of girls' and women's rights and gender equality, which is also the reason why in all Her Choice countries, boys and men are engaged in most programme activities. An increasing number of boys and men are becoming true allies and role models in this process. Furthermore, they are slowly turning into partners who have a shared responsibility with girls and women.

Nepalese teenagers raising awareness to stop child marriage. They hold signs with the text 'mero jivan mero rojai' (my life my choice), referring to a video the teenagers made of the project with the support of Her Choice.



Akash' Choice

'It's the boys who also need to step up and act'

There is a special list hanging in the village communal hut of Basan, a little Nepalese village in the Terai region. Only two years ago, child marriage was still highly practiced in Basan. Reasons for parents to marry off their young daughters and sons had everything to do with traditional customs and social norms, some of them practiced for centuries. The belief for example that if you marry before menstruation, you will go to heaven, or the mind-set that girls are not meant to stay in their parents' house. And then there is the tradition of paying dowry, a major issue for the poor households in Basan: the older the girl, the more dowry they have to pay.

But let's go back to the list. This starts with an agreement: to not have your children married before they become at least 20. Underneath we see a lot of names and signatures. These turn out to be the names of the inhabitants of Basan. Note: from all residents.

The list -so proudly hanging in the village communal hut- wasn't there two years ago. So what happened here? We have to go back to the summer of 2017 for that, when a group of boys and girls in 2 villages in the Terai region decided to

make their communities child-marriage free. With the support of CWIN – Her Choice partner in Nepal – these teenagers held workshops in their village to convey their key messages to all inhabitants: child marriage and child pregnancies must end, boys and men must be more involved in addressing early marriages and: it is possible to end child marriage.

17-year-old Akash was one of the teenagers: he worked with other boys and teachers at his school to raise awareness about stopping child marriage. Akash campaigned especially among the men who are the leaders and decision makers, but also among boys: 'It's the boys who also need to step up and act. The boy needs to say: 'Father, please don't do this to me. My education is at stake, I want to study. It is very hard for the boys after marriage. Before marriage they can go places, play and have fun. After marriage he has to grow up.' Akash' work has been a success: together with his peers he made sure that all inhabitants of Basan put their signature, committing themselves not to have their children marry too young.

Successes & Challenges

We are more than halfway through the Her Choice programme and although behavioral change takes time, we already see results of programme activities.

Research methods

Researchers from the University of Amsterdam in collaboration with researchers from the 10 programme countries measure both progress and impact at three moments during the programme: before the start in 2016 (in the baseline study), half way in 2018 (in the midline study) and in the end in 2020 (in the endline study). As part of the recent midline study we did in 2018, we made an interim balance of the programme activities' outputs and outcomes. The midline study involved 5204 girls, 3621 households, 79 village leaders, 68 health centers, 99 health staff personnel, 87 school principals, 145 teachers and 42 district officials took part in the study. For further details please refer to the midline report at

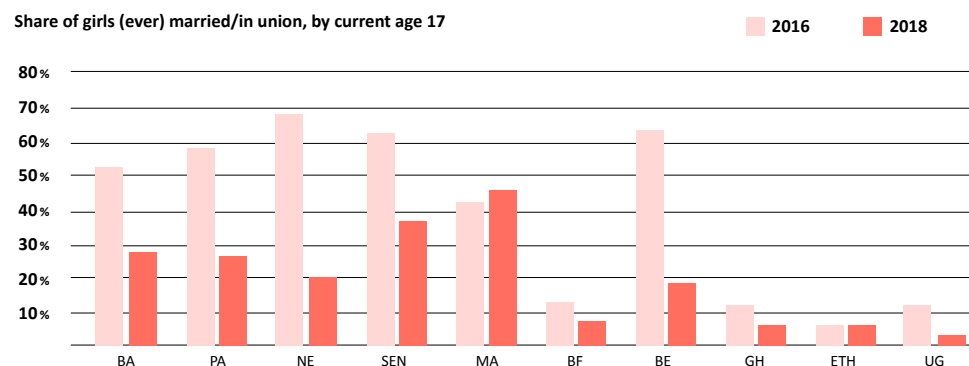
www.her-choice.org.



Did you know that...some girls and boys also see benefits of child marriages? Reasons vary from relieving their parents economically and safeguarding the family honor (especially in the case of teenage pregnancy) to escaping difficult parental home situations and being able to be sexually intimate.

Success

There are fewer child brides



*Ba=Bangladesh, Pa=Pakistan, Ne=Nepal, Sen=Senegal, Ma=Mal, BF=Burkina Faso, Be=Benin, Gh=Ghana, Eth=Ethiopia, Ug=Uganda

Child marriage prevalence rates are going down. At midline, there were fewer married 17-year-old girls in the Her Choice working areas. Reductions are greatest in South Asian countries as well as in Senegal and Benin.

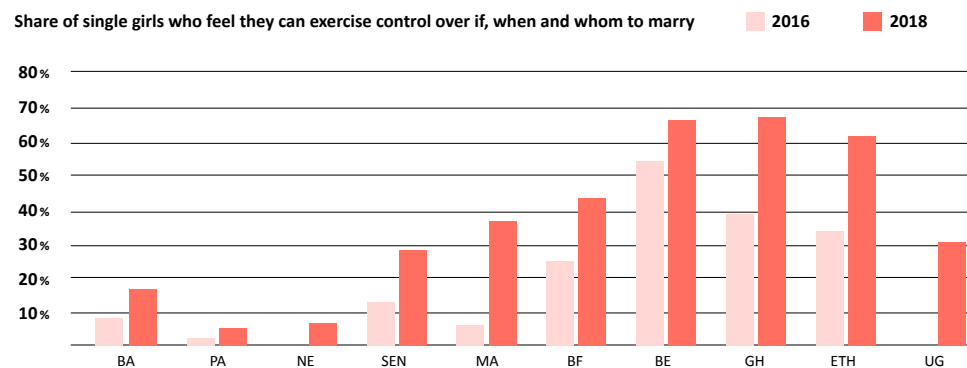
Challenge

Girls and boys see also advantages of early marriage

Although child marriage has been considered mainly as a source of numerous negative effects for girls as well as boys, young people also see being married at an early age as having certain advantages, such as (some) economic security. In most cases, these advantages reflect the limited range of pathways young people can choose between.

Success

More girls feel in control of marriage decisions



*Ba=Bangladesh, Pa=Pakistan, Ne=Nepal, Sen=Senegal, Ma=Mail, BF=Burkina Faso, Be=Benin, Gh=Ghana, Eth=Ethiopia, Ug=Uganda

An increased share of single girls report feeling in control of marriage decisions – who and when to marry. We see substantial progress in particular in the Her Choice countries in Africa. In contrast, in Asia the feeling of control is still low.

In addition, an increase was found in most countries in the share of village leaders who reported having condemned child marriage in village meetings. Also there were more villages with community members who had organised activities on the negative effects of child marriage and more parents who considered child marriage to have negative effects for the girls.

Challenge

There are strong community norms

Despite the increased control over marriage decisions of girls and changes in mindsets of village leaders, community members and parents, girls' sexuality and sexual activity in most communities are still major taboos and use of contraceptives is limited. As a result, teenage pregnancies are fairly common occurrences which in turn can lead to marriage in order to prevent shame for girls and their parents.

Awa's choice

'My mother told me I'm just a girl and don't have anything to say'

It happened when her parents and siblings went out to the market and the 12-year-old Awa stayed alone in the house in Korodougou, Mali. Awa was raped at home by a cousin who had let himself in. When she told her parents, her father got very upset, Awa recalls: 'He started running behind me and wanted to beat me. He threw his boots at my back and shouted at me, calling me all bad words he could imagine, as if I was not the victim but the perpetrator of this case.'

After that, Awa's cousin was called by Awa's father and his father: 'They simply told him not to do such an act again. Nothing more.' Furthermore, the two fathers decided to marry Awa off to her cousin. Her mother advised her not to protest against the decision of her father and her uncle: 'Because I'm just a girl and don't have anything to say. This situation has taken away all my joy for life.'

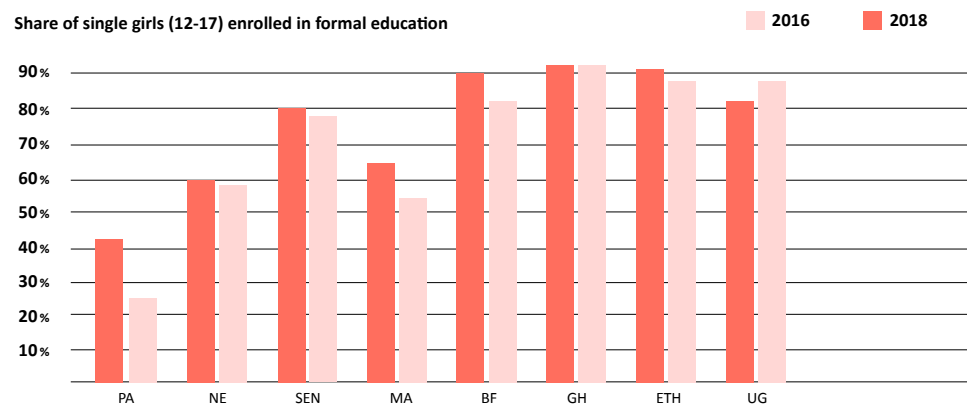
Awa could have kept the story for herself, but she didn't. She told her experiences to members of the NGO APEFD, one of Her Choice's local partners, and asked

them to help her. And they did. With the support of the school director – Awa was in 5th year of primary school- and the school management committee, the project team succeeded in persuading the girl's parents to cancel the wedding and leave Awa to continue her studies. Awa is now happy that she is still in school and able to continue her education.



Success

More girls attend school



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More girls stay in school and girls and parents are increasingly aware of the importance of education. Moreover, an increased number of schools have taken measures to become more girl-friendly: this varies from installing separate toilet facilities for girls and boys, involving girls in decision-making processes, and offering girls

menstrual pads. In most countries, the share of schools with teachers trained to give education on SRHR has increased.



Did you know that... almost all girls quit school after they're married?

Challenge

Keeping married girls in school

The vast majority of married girls in the Her Choice working areas stopped going to school when they got married. There is no legislation prohibiting married young women from continuing their schooling. However, available data suggests that married young women may feel ashamed to go back to school and/or may be teased by their peers and teachers when they do. Moreover, many of them are now occupied with household tasks and have no time.

Linking & learning worldwide

Regularly organized 'linking & learning meetings' form an important element of the Her Choice programme in order to share knowledge, experience and lessons learnt and to widen support networks. Each member of the Her Choice alliance has their own field of expertise in which they complement each other. In May 2019 the 3th linking & learning meeting was organised in Nepal, attended by members from Bangladesh, Ethiopia, the Netherlands, Nepal and Pakistan. Badiul Alam Majumdar, Country Director of The Hunger Project Bangladesh, followed the workshop about preventing and responding to child abuse in NGOs, facilitated by ICDI: 'The workshop was a wake-up call for us. We need to develop a comprehensive child protection policy as soon as possible.'

At the end of 2017 Her Choice colleagues from Nepal, Pakistan, Bangladesh, The Netherlands and Ethiopia attended a

five day linking and learning meeting in Thailand. Emebet Mulugeta, Project Officer at ESD Ethiopia: 'This is a wonderful event in my life. It is the first time I have travelled outside Ethiopia and my first time to meet people from Bangladesh, Pakistan and Nepal.'

Saima Toor from local partner Bedari: 'Linking and learning has been a very important component in terms of providing opportunity to share experiences, learnings and having interaction with people from different countries with different backgrounds and cultures. It is the best tool for enhancing skills, boosting confidence and motivating us for the best performance and implementation of Her Choice in Punjab, Pakistan.'

Success Her Choice is a strong partnership

The partnership model works well. The partnerships between the Her Choice alliance members, local implementing partners and research partners in all countries are pragmatic, committed, show mutual respect, and practice mutual learning.





Farida from Bangladesh, was married at 12:

‘Now, being 35 years old, I’m a grandmother. Like myself, my daughter was too young to become a mother. She had a complicated pregnancy and gave birth to a disabled boy. This experience, combined with the Her Choice trainings, make me determined to stop child marriage. I’m spreading this message in courtyard meetings in my village, and I fiercely confront men who want to marry their daughters off young.’

Adele (22) is the head of a girls’ club in Benin and participated in a training on SRHR:

‘The best method is to sensitize the community so that we can be informed about the use of contraceptives and of course also improve the accessibility of contraceptives. Now there are still too many people that believe that the use of contraceptives leads to infertility.’



Beena's choice

'I am sure that child marriages will become a thing of the past'

Daughters are considered a burden, and the sooner you get rid of the burden, the better. This mindset is the most important reason for child marriages in our communities. Mine was no exception.' Beena from Pakistan was only 14 years old when her parents decided to arrange her marriage with a 5 years older boy. Beena felt lucky compared with most of her friends: they were married to much older men. Just like her married friends, Beena soon got pregnant.

One day, Beena and her friends heard of representatives of an NGO talking to the village elders about child marriages and its negative consequences. Beena learned that it was Bedari, Her Choice's implementing partner in Pakistan. The people from Bedari decided to form a group of girls who were already married and inform them about their rights as a girl.

After talking to her husband, Beena was allowed to join this group, something she's still happy about: 'Bedari provided us with lots of valuable information, and encouraged us to speak about the problems we faced due to early marriage. They advised us not to have any more pregnancies before becoming at least 20.

We were convinced. I was lucky, as my husband was quite supportive. I talked to him, and although my mother in law was against it, he agreed that we should not have any more children for the time being.'

Bedari referred Beena to a health centre, where she learned about family planning methods. She is now volunteering for Bedari: 'I'm happier now and talk to other teenage mothers about these issues, and where possible I try to talk to the elders as well. Slowly, we are improving our community. I am sure that in a few years child marriages will become a thing of the past here.



Success

Girls make more informed decisions

Girls and boys have better knowledge about SRHR; knowledge about this subject almost doubled. They also have more knowledge about adverse effects of early marriage and child marriage law and policies. They are able to make more informed decisions with respect for example to contraception and marriage. As a result we see an increase in contraceptive use in most countries: approximately half to three-quarters of young women who reported being sexually active used a contraceptive method – mainly condoms – leading to a reduction in the rates of unplanned pregnancy among adolescents.

Challenge

Behavioral change takes time

Albeit training and increased knowledge about SRHR, girls' knowledge is still low, especially on their sexuality and ways to prevent pregnancy. And although more teachers have been trained on giving SRHR education, many teachers (also those trained) report to feel uncomfortable to address some SRHR related issues, including sexuality, contraception and intimate relationships. Overall, Her Choice is on the way to create an environment in which SRHR can be talked about safely and openly, but lesson materials and training tools have to be further developed.

Changing norms takes time

To make a lasting impact, Her Choice needs more time to execute its programme. Or, as Mabel van Oranje, Board Chair of the global partnership Girls Not Brides, put it during the presentation of the Midline study: 'Changing norms takes time. We have invested so much. We need longer to take it to scale!'



foto: Freek van den Bergh



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For more information about the Her Choice programme,
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Disclaimer: not all the names of the boys and
girls match the pictures shown.

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