

VOICES OF CHANGE

UNFPA-UNICEF
GLOBAL PROGRAMME
TO ACCELERATE ACTION
TO END CHILD
MARRIAGE



The Global Programme to Accelerate Action to End Child Marriage is generously funded by the Governments of Belgium, Canada, the Netherlands, Norway, the United Kingdom and the European Union, and Zonta International.

#ENDChildMarriage

© United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)

June 2019

This publication was produced by Eden Fekade, Kristin Andersson and Linnea Baksås Martinsson, based on stories from UNFPA and UNICEF country offices within the Global Programme.

Front cover: © UNICEF/UN0275125/Quarmyne

CONTENTS

Introduction.....	4
-------------------	---

1

EMPOWERING GIRLS..... 5

Girls' club rescues adolescents from marriage in rural Ethiopia.....	5
--	---

Adolescent girls claim right to family planning.....	8
--	---

Safe spaces support girls in Sierra Leone.....	10
--	----

Girls unite against child rights' violations.....	11
---	----

Ending child marriage and teenage pregnancy in Sierra Leone.....	14
--	----

2

ENGAGING COMMUNITIES..... 16

Women's networks talk Ethiopian girls out of child marriage.....	16
--	----

Indian girl chooses education over marriage.....	18
--	----

Hairdressing skill offers hope after child rape.....	19
--	----

Cricket against child marriage.....	22
-------------------------------------	----

3

STRENGTHENING EDUCATION, HEALTH AND PROTECTION SERVICES..... 23

In class again, after escape from an unwanted marriage.....	23
---	----

Primary school in the front line against child weddings.....	25
--	----

Shama – an adolescent champion for girls' education.....	26
--	----

Grace goes back home.....	27
---------------------------	----

Janaki defines her destiny.....	30
---------------------------------	----

The life-changing health impacts of teenage pregnancy.....	31
--	----

4

STRENGTHENING LEGAL AND POLICY FRAMEWORKS..... 33

Back at school after early marriage and early divorce.....	33
--	----

Roumanatou – a pioneer for girls' rights in Niger.....	35
--	----

Introduction

The United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) – United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) Global Programme to Accelerate Action to End Child Marriage is turning commitments into tangible action for children. It promotes the right of girls to delay marriage, addresses the conditions that keep the practice in place, and cares for girls already in union. The Global Programme is implemented in 12 countries with a high prevalence and/or high burden of child marriage: Bangladesh, Burkina Faso, Ethiopia, Ghana, India, Mozambique, Nepal, Niger, Sierra Leone, Uganda, Yemen and Zambia.

The Global Programme focuses on five strategies for increased impact:

- Empowering adolescent girls at risk of child marriage, or already married, to express their views and exercise their choices.
- Engaging families, communities and leaders to protect girls from child marriage and uphold their rights.
- Strengthening the availability, accessibility, quality and responsiveness of services for adolescent girls.
- Developing and implementing laws and policies that protect girls and boys from harmful practices.
- Generating and using robust data and evidence to inform programmes and policies to end child marriage.

This catalogue highlights stories of some of the girls, families and community members who have been reached by various interventions to end child marriage, supported by the Global Programme.

To learn more about the Global Programme, visit www.unicef.org/protection/unfpa-unicef-global-programme-accelerate-action-end-child-marriage or contact GPChildMarriage@unicef.org.

EMPOWERING GIRLS

Girls' club rescues adolescents from marriage in rural Ethiopia

Place: Ethiopia, Amhara, Zigem District
 Year: 2017
 Author: Martha Tadesse
 Photos: UNICEF Ethiopia/Tadesse

Students are more aware of their rights to reject any marriage proposal coming to them against their will.

– ABEBE ADAMU

"I went to the police station when my parents told me that I was getting married", says Mestawet Mekuria, 14, a seventh-grader at Ayti Primary School, in northern Ethiopia's Amhara region. Mestawet is one of 20 girl pupils at the school who have been rescued from marriage.

"I had learned about child marriage and its consequences in our school's girls' club. I told my parents that I did not want to get married. But they refused, and that is when I ran to the police station." Mestawet went to the police assuming that her parents would only receive a stern warning. But the consequences were to prove far more serious. Her mother and father were arrested, and imprisoned for two weeks for violating the law. "I was sad when they were arrested, but they refused to listen to me."

Child marriage – a formal marriage or informal union before the age of 18 – is common across all

regions of Ethiopia. Prevalence of the practice has declined significantly in the past decade, but still 40 per cent of all girls in the country are married before they turn 18.¹

Although Mestawet's parents were angry about what happened to them, they later made peace with their daughter through mediation led by village elders. "My parents now understand about child marriage and its consequences. They are no longer angry with me," says Mestawet.

Child marriage often perpetuates an intergenerational cycle of poverty. When girls are married at an early age, their prospects of a healthy and successful life are compromised. Evidence shows that girls who marry early are less likely to finish school and more likely to be victims of domestic violence and abuse. In addition, teenage girls are more likely to die due to complications during pregnancy and childbirth than women in their twenties.



Mestawet Mekuria, 14, is a seventh-grade pupil at Ayti Primary School, in northern Ethiopia's Amhara region.

¹ Ethiopia Demographic and Health Survey, 2016.

(Top): Adolescent girls gathering for a girls' club meeting.

(Bottom): "Because we belong to the girls' club, we rescued another girl from marrying this man her family knew." Left to right, Mekdes Degnew, Ayehush Abera and Tigist Seyoum, all 14.

An initiative to strengthen girls' clubs as part of accelerated efforts to end child marriage in Zigem District, Amhara, was launched in 2015 by the Bureau of Women and Children Affairs. Support was provided by the Global Programme, which focuses on enhancing the capacity of girls by offering training in life skills, information about their rights and available services, and improving the responsiveness of schools and legal services. The programme also targets families and communities, in an effort to change their attitudes towards child marriage and persuade them to support alternative life options for girls, especially through education.

Girls' clubs are established with the aim of preventing and mitigating school- and community-based barriers to girls' education. The clubs are making a real difference in reducing child marriage, by empowering girls through life skills training. There is a special focus on engaging with girls between Grades 5 and 8, since this is the age group most commonly affected by child marriage.

I had learned about child marriage and its consequences in our school's girls' club. I told my parents that I did not want to get married.

– MESTAWET MEKURIA

According to Abebe Adamu, one of the trainers from the Bureau of Women and Children Affairs, 106 girls were rescued from child marriage in 2016, and 55 girls in 2017. "The community is currently aware that child marriage is harmful," he says. "Students are also more aware of their rights to reject any marriage proposal coming to them against their will."

Wubayehu Tilahun, girls' club coordinator and a teacher at Ayti Primary School, is pleased with the club's performance. "Seeing my students continue their education gives me great pleasure. Here in Ayti, we have rescued 20 girls from marriage in the past two years, and we will continue to fight against this harmful practice."

Although girls' clubs are currently promoting change in schools where they are active, many challenges still remain. "Budget constraints hinder the effort to expand the exemplary role that the clubs are playing in schools and communities", says Adamu. "We have many primary schools that do not have such a functional structure as Ayti, and we need more support."

The Government of Ethiopia has made a commitment to end child marriage nationwide by 2025 through enhanced coordination, budget allocation, accountability mechanisms and availability of data. The setting up of a National Alliance to End Child Marriage and Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting is an additional significant move in the effort to end child marriage, as it has been key in coordinating interventions.

"Child marriage is a harmful practice, and I want girls to continue with their education like me," says Mestawet. "I have seen my classmates quit school because they are married. I always tell my friends in my village about child marriage, and I will continue to do so to others." Mestawet hopes to become either a doctor or a teacher. It may be years before she is able to fulfil her dreams, but in the meantime she is actively working to protect other girls in her village – including her own younger sister – from getting married too early. ■

When my daughter was going to school, I pressured her to get married. At that time, the club leader came to my daughter and asked her to join the Adolescent Club. Parents of club members cannot force their children to get married. Now my daughter regularly takes part in the club sessions and learns a lot. We do not talk marriage anymore.

– TASLIMA, 35, MOTHER OF A FEMALE MEMBER OF AN ADOLESCENT CLUB IN BHOLA, BANGLADESH.

Adolescent girls claim right to family planning

Place:	Mozambique, Nampula City
Year:	2018
Author:	UNFPA Eastern and Southern Africa Regional Office/ Helene Christensen
Photos:	UNFPA Mozambique

"I had not heard of contraceptives before I met the mentor in my community and became part of *Rapariga Biz*," says Marcia, 19. She was 17 years old at the time, out of school and in the fourth month of her pregnancy. "Now I am an empowered young woman. I know how to protect myself and to stand up for my rights – rights I did not know I had before."

Marcia was forced into marriage, by her mother amongst others. She was often forced to have sex with her husband against her will. She felt alone, with no one to turn to. Then two years ago, life took a turn for the better. Marcia joined the ranks of about 100,000 girls and young women who have been reached by *Rapariga Biz*, a government-led sexual and reproductive health and rights initiative, since its launch in May 2016.

Many adolescent girls in Mozambique lack information about contraceptives and the right to exercise full control over their bodies. This is reflected in the low contraceptive usage rate of 14 per cent among adolescents aged 15–19, and in the high rate of teenage pregnancy, which currently stands at 46 per cent among 15–19-year-olds.²

Entrenched social and gender norms influence adolescents' and young people's sexual and reproductive health and

Now I am an empowered young woman. I know how to protect myself and to stand up for my rights – rights I did not know I had before.

– MARCIA



Marcia (left) with her mentor Jorgina.

rights, as well as their level of empowerment. They also lead to discrimination against girls and young women, and their marginalization. Through a holistic and integrated human rights-based approach, *Rapariga Biz* aims to reverse this situation and restore reproductive justice to girls and young women.³ "We believe that the empowerment of adolescent girls and young women begins with having control over, and agency of, their body," says Andrea Wojnar, UNFPA Representative in Mozambique.

Evidence from the first two years of implementation of *Rapariga Biz* has shown that the supportive presence of a mentor is transformative in ensuring empowerment and personal development for the target group. "My mentor is my everything. She was there for me during difficult situations. She accompanied me to the youth-friendly services to consult a nurse on the use of contraceptives. She also encouraged me to return to school and to go after my

² Mozambique Inquérito de Indicadores de Imunização, Malária e HIV/SIDA, 2015.

³ An explanation of the term 'reproductive justice' is available here: <http://www.protectchoice.org/section.php?id=28>



Mentor Jorgina with girls from the *Rapariga Biz* programme, in a safe space in Nampula City.

dreams,” says Marcia. Her goal now is to work in a bank, so that she can provide for herself and her daughter.

Rapariga Biz targets girls and young women aged 10–24 in 20 districts in two provinces of Mozambique. Technical assistance is provided by UNFPA, UNICEF, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women).

Mentorship lies at the heart of its human rights-based approach. By July 2018, *Rapariga Biz* had mobilized and trained 3,000 young women as mentors, each of whom work with 30 girls and young women in community ‘safe spaces’ on a weekly basis for a duration of four months – making a total of 90 sessions per year. For the

weekly sessions, the mentors are trained to address and discuss issues such as sexual and reproductive health and rights, citizenship, participation and life skills, including communication, negotiation, decision-making and confidence-building.

“My mentor taught us to stand up for ourselves and to make healthy decisions. Now I know how to say no, and that using contraceptives is my right,” says Marcia. Her mentor, Jorgina, is proud to see her transformation, from a teenager suffering in her marriage to an empowered young woman attending school: “Marcia is an inspiration for other adolescent girls in her community,” she observes.

Rapariga Biz contributes directly to implementation of Mozambique’s Family Planning 2020 Commitment, which aims to increase the use of modern contraceptive methods for adolescents aged 15–19, from 14 per cent in 2011 to 19 per cent in 2020, and from 27 per cent to 50 per cent for unmarried sexually active adolescents aged 15–19.⁴ “With the ambitious goal of reaching 1 million girls and young women, *Rapariga Biz* is quickly turning into a movement towards realizing the potential of girls and young women, and accelerating the development of Mozambique,” says UNFPA Representative Andrea Wojnar. ■

My mentor taught us to stand up for ourselves and to make healthy decisions. Now I know how to say no, and that using contraceptives is my right.

– MARCIA

4 Mozambique Demographic and Health Survey, 2011.

Gladys Nnabuihe Umaoma, 11, sits in a meeting of a girls' club at a safe space in Koidu, Sierra Leone. "I am working harder in school now, because I know it is important for me to be educated to be able to improve my life and my family in the future. There is an appropriate time for everything, including sex," she says. "I want to be a journalist after I finish school, because I like to know and talk about issues around me."



Safe spaces support girls in Sierra Leone



Kadiatu Conteh,⁵ 17, and mother of a 14 month old boy, reads her notes outside her home in the town of Mile 91, Tonkolili District, Sierra Leone. "I heard about the safe space from my teacher in school", she says. "She has been counselling us to not make the same mistake again. She advises those of us who are sexually active to use contraceptives, and those who are not sexually active to abstain."

⁵ Name changed to protect identity.

Girls unite against child rights' violations

Place:	India, Purulia
Year:	2019
Author:	Demissew Bizuwerk
Photos:	UNICEF/Boro

Twelfth-grader Kiran Bauri woke up early on the National Day of the Girl Child, hopeful and excited. Later that day, she joined 500,000 other girls and women pouring into the streets, joining hands to form a human chain that stretched for 348 kilometres. The chain started at the centre of the district's main town and extended beyond the outskirts as more and more young women joined. They were sending out a strong message that girls belong in school and not in a marriage. But one girl was not there – Kiran's best friend, Karuna.⁶ Last year, when Kiran discovered that Karuna had been forced into marriage, she took a risk and reported the case to the police.

I do not understand why girls are considered as burdens to their families. This is not right, it must change.

– KIRAN BAURI

When she first found out that Karuna was going to be married, Kiran alerted other members of the adolescent empowerment Kanyashree Club, of which she is a member. Called *Swapnadisha* (Path of Dreams), the club aims to prevent child marriage and ensure that girls stay in school. Together, the girls went to see Karuna at home. The next day Kiran and her friends, along with their teacher, informed the *Panchayat* (village council), who tried to convince Karuna's parents to stop the marriage. They refused. "Karuna was dejected because her parents had already paid the dowry. They also have two younger daughters to marry," recalls Kiran. "But with my friends from the *Swapnadisha* club, I was determined to stop this marriage at any cost."

Kiran became restless as the wedding day drew closer. "I do not understand why girls are considered as burdens to

their families. This is not right, it must change," she says. While Karuna was feeling helpless and sad on the morning of her wedding day, Kiran decided to go ahead and report the marriage to the police. Soon afterwards, local police officers and government authorities arrived at Karuna's home, and her parents had no choice but to cancel the wedding. "We were so happy to stop the marriage," says Kiran. "I was a little nervous to go to the police, but I had to do it to save my friend."

Karuna went on to complete her education and is currently studying in college. That is why she was not able to join the human chain. Her best friend Kiran continues to advocate against child marriage, and for girls' education. At Hutmura Harimati Girls' High School, Kiran actively engages on issues that affect girls, with support from her teachers. "The school has a critical role to play. We work closely with our students as well as the community members



Every afternoon before the sun kisses the horizon, Kiran goes to a balcony, her favourite place in the house, to collect her thoughts and reflect on what she has been studying. In the future, when she is settled and has a family, she knows what she will do if she has a daughter.

⁶ Name changed to protect identity.



on a range of issues that affect our girls,” says School Principal Chaitali Mukherjee. “We make sure that priority is given to the girls’ education, and that they are given equal opportunities to stand on their own feet. We are very happy to see our girls doing so well and representing our school and Purulia at state and national levels.”

India has the largest number of child brides in the world – one-third of the global total. Recent national data indicate that in the last decade there has been a significant decline in the prevalence of child marriage, from 47 per cent of women aged 20–24 who were married before 18 in 2006 to the current figure of 27 per cent.⁷ In many rural communities, child marriage is more of a social norm than an aberration in the eyes of parents, who see little value in investing in their daughters’ education. However, despite the steady decline in child marriage rates, there is still a long way to go.

“Many parents marry their daughters at an early age because they feel it is in their best interest,” says UNICEF Child Protection Officer Swapnodipa Biswas. “In addition, the dowry system is still very common in most parts of the country.” Under this system, the bride’s family is expected to give cash or an in-kind gift to the groom and his family, as a condition for the marriage. The amount of the dowry increases with the age of the girl and her level of education, perpetuating the vicious circle of child marriage as a result. Together with the Government of India, UNICEF is working to end child marriage in West Bengal, and ultimately throughout



the nation. Support offered includes capacity-building of law enforcement and government officials, as well as engagement with influential community leaders and the media.

Through the Adolescent Empowerment Programme, UNICEF encourages adolescent girls like Kiran to mobilize other girls in their schools and communities to become more informed and support each other through Kanyashree Clubs. Creating a social network empowers girls to raise their voices against child rights’ violations, including child marriage. Kiran is currently studying hard for her board exam, and is already planning for the future. “I want to become a lawyer”, she says. “I love solving problems. Lawyers solve problems and there are many problems which need to be solved in our community.” ■

⁷ India National Family Health Survey (NFHS-4), 2015–2016.

Voices of adolescent girls who are mentors in the girl empowerment programme *Rapariga Biz* in Mozambique

Before training, my life's dream was to marry and have my husband support me. But I saw it is not necessary to marry now – I can study and marry later.

I can make a decision on what I want to do in life, and fight for my dreams.

Before, I thought it was normal for a girl to get pregnant at age 13–15, but I learned that early pregnancy has health risks, such as fistula or death.

The programme helped me to see what I want to be as a woman. I learned how to dream bigger.

I learned about my body and sexual and reproductive health, and how to access family planning services.

I know how to protect myself from sexual harassment and violence. I know what to do and how to report abuse.

I know my rights as a girl. I can say no to early marriage and early pregnancy.

Ending child marriage and teenage pregnancy in Sierra Leone

Place: Sierra Leone, Koidu

Year: 2017

Author: Harriet Mason

Photos: UNICEF Sierra Leone

Last year, the course of 16 year old Alice Ngaujah's⁸ life changed forever when she discovered that she was pregnant. Disowned by her parents, she was quickly catapulted into adulthood. "When my family found out that I was pregnant, they sent me to live with the family of the boy who got me pregnant. There was no meeting or arrangement, I was just sent off. I lived with them until I gave birth," says Alice.

While staying with her child's father, she was expected to do all sorts of chores – from sweeping, cooking and laundry to working on the farm and gathering firewood. This was all in addition to looking after her baby, usually by herself. Alice was forced to drop out of school, and she began to lose hope for her future.

In Sierra Leone, teenage pregnancy and child marriage are common. Some 13 per cent of all girls are married by their 15th birthday, as are 39 per cent of girls before they reach 18.⁹ Teenage pregnancy reduces a girl's chances in life, often interfering with schooling, limiting opportunities and placing girls at increased risk of child marriage, HIV infections and domestic violence.

"I had a lot of problems when I was pregnant," says Alice. "I was admitted for over a month and even had to be given blood. Giving birth to this child was hard, but I thank God that we both survived."

UNICEF is supporting partners to address the issue of teenage pregnancy in Sierra Leone by helping to provide safe spaces for adolescent girls, so that they can find out more about the choices they face. UNICEF partner the Council of Churches in Sierra Leone set up 100 safe spaces in 2017,



Alice Ngaujah, 16, stands with her baby outside a girls' centre, in the town of Koidu, eastern Sierra Leone. Last year her parents threw her out of their home when they found out that she was pregnant.

serving 3,000 adolescent girls in communities with a high prevalence of child marriage and teenage pregnancy.

Each safe space serves about 30 girls aged 10–19, offering them an opportunity to improve their skills and self-esteem, meet friends and mentors, learn about the services they can access in their communities, and seek help with any issue related to sexual and gender-based or domestic violence that they or their friends might face.

Alice recently joined a girls' group at a safe space based at the local church centre in the town of Koidu. She regularly

⁸ Name changed to protect identity.

⁹ Sierra Leone Demographic Health Survey, 2012–2013.



A group of girls, including Alice, attends a session at a safe space in the town of Koidu. They are members of a girls' club, which works to end child marriage and reduce teenage pregnancy.

meets girls her age to discuss the pitfalls that can undermine their young lives – teenage pregnancy, child marriage, sexual and gender-based violence and dropping out of school, among others. “I joined the club because I want to change the present story of my life and get educated, so that I can have a better future,” says Alice.

In addition to the psychosocial support provided through the initiative, UNICEF also helps girls who have difficulties in meeting their educational expenses. Assistance is offered through the Girls' Access to Education project, funded by the United Kingdom. The support includes help with school fees and supplies such as books and uniforms. “Adolescent girls should be in school, working towards their dreams for the future, not married and raising families,” says Dr Hamid El-Bashir, UNICEF Representative in Sierra Leone. “This is why we are working closely with partners and communities to ensure that girls get every opportunity to stay in school and complete their education.”

Engaging with men, women, girls and boys, as well as with religious congregations and Christian, Muslim and traditional leaders, has made a critical contribution to UNICEF efforts to end child marriage. The leaders play an important role in

I joined the club because I want to change the present story of my life and get educated, so that I can have a better future.

– ALICE NGAUJAH

speaking out against the harmful practice, and in changing community attitudes to encourage people to embrace positive social norms.

Indeed, it was through the efforts of community leaders that Alice was able to get her life back on track. With the help of local authorities, including paramount chiefs and the pastor at a local church, the mentors of the safe space intervened in her situation. Together, they talked to the family of the boy and arranged for her to leave that house and move to the care of an aunt. They are also working to make sure that Alice returns to school in the next academic year.

Alice now has renewed hope for the future: “I feel comfortable among my peers,” she says. “Now I have a new zeal to go back to school and achieve my dream of becoming a nurse.” ■

ENGAGING COMMUNITIES

Women's networks talk Ethiopian girls out of child marriage

Place:	Ethiopia, Kola Tembien
Year:	2018
Author:	UNFPA Ethiopia/Abraham Gelaw
Photos:	UNFPA Ethiopia/Abraham Gelaw

"Not long ago, the sight of a 10 year old bride was a common occurrence in Kola Tembien District in Ethiopia," says District Chief Administrator Daniel Hagos. "But the women and girls of the community are mobilizing to change things – and they are seeing enormous success."

"We are getting remarkable results in the fight against child marriage," says Atsede Girmay, one of the volunteers in this effort.

In Kola Tembien, the practice of child marriage is deep-rooted, with many people believing that girls should marry while they are young and 'pure'. However, in 2015 community groups began working with UNFPA to raise awareness about the potential negative impact for girls. Through the Global Programme, efforts were focused on three district localities where child marriage is most prevalent. Central to this approach is empowering women and girls to stand up and take action themselves.

We teach how child marriage isolates a girl, how it will force her to drop out of school, and how it will end in serious health hazards, such as obstetric fistula.

– ATSEDE GIRMAY

The Global Programme works with volunteer networks called Women's Development Groups. The volunteers receive information about the consequences of child marriage, as well as related issues, such as gender equality, the importance of ending female genital mutilation, and the benefits of maternal health care.

A number of volunteers, among them Atsede Girmay, were selected to become facilitators for the broader community, receiving a teaching manual and training to engage with people on the issue of ending child marriage. Now, every



Atsede Girmay says women's groups have had great success in ending child marriage.

A Women's Development Group meets in the shade of a tree. These groups are helping to reduce child marriage rates dramatically, say local leaders.



Sunday, she meets with 35 adolescent girls and their families to discuss the practice.

"We teach how child marriage isolates a girl, how it will force her to drop out of school, and how it will end in serious health hazards, such as obstetric fistula," explains Girmay.

Since girls who leave school are more likely to be married off by their families, and because many child brides are forced to drop out of education, the Women's Development Groups also work closely with local schools. If a girl leaves school, the volunteers speak with her family to convince relatives of the importance of education over child marriage. If necessary, they refer cases of child marriage to the local authorities.

In schools, girls' clubs are also helping to end child marriage. The clubs meet every two weeks with a specially trained mentor, who explains the drawbacks of marrying too early. The girls also receive information about sexual and reproductive health, and how to prevent sexually transmitted infections. In addition, they gain life skills, such as financial literacy. The idea is to empower the girls, so that not only do they reject child marriage, they also reduce their vulnerability by improving their prospects for the future.

Merhawit Mezgebe, 18, is in Grade 10, and has been attending the girls' club for the past two years. Like other girls in the club, she has opened a savings account and is eager to plan for her future.

"I want to use my savings to finance my college studies without bothering my parents," she says, smiling. She adds that the girls are helping to eliminate child marriage in their communities. When club members hear about a possible child marriage taking place, they report it to their mentor, who works with the authorities to take action.

In 2014, Ethiopia committed to end child marriage by 2025. But according to District Chief Administrator Daniel Hagos, Kola Tembien is on track to meet this goal even earlier: "My

My district will attain the commitment the country has made to end child marriage before the set target date.

– DANIEL HAGOS

district will attain the commitment the country has made to end child marriage before the set target date," he says.

In the high-risk localities where the Global Programme is being implemented, unmarried girls are reached through school programmes such as the girls' clubs, and community outreach efforts have engaged girls who were already married. As a result of such efforts, there have been no cases of child marriage reported in those localities in the last three years, and the school-dropout rate among female students has fallen to almost zero. ■



Merhawit
Mezgebe.

Indian girl chooses education over marriage

Place:	India, Rajasthan
Year:	2018
Author:	Sharmila Ray, UNICEF India Rajasthan (with inputs from Pink City Cycle Rickshaw Chalak Sansthan and Sona Bhairwa)
Pictures:	UNICEF/Soumi Das

Sona Bhairwa is a dynamic young volunteer who works with communities on the issue of child marriage and adolescent empowerment. Currently affiliated with the non-governmental organization Pink City Cycle Rickshaw Chalak Sansthan (PCCRCS), she works in some 75 villages in Tonk District, counselling adolescents and their parents, and emphasizing the need for adolescent girls to be educated and financially independent, rather than marrying early.

Aged 24, she also engages with adolescent girls and boys directly, speaking to them on a regular basis in an effort to understand their challenges, concerns and victories in fighting against patriarchal norms. She listens to their sometimes confused views regarding options for the future. Sona visits households on a regular basis, especially those whose younger members are vulnerable to dropping out of school and/or getting married at an early age.

The focus of her visits is to understand the issues faced by these households, in terms of decision-making in the face of Rajasthan's deeply rooted sociocultural norms linked to the 'value of the girl child', and the way women are largely viewed in society. Other important topics include access to education, health services and social protection schemes. Sona systematically makes a note of vulnerable children and adolescents who are at risk of dropping out of school, and counsels families on options for higher education, as well as offering support in obtaining and completing forms. Last but not least, she connects them with relevant schemes to reduce the financial burden.

To tackle sociocultural norms around child marriage and widely held perceptions on the role of women, Sona often cites examples of the achievements of other women from neighbouring villages and districts who have successfully pursued education and careers, and the strong position that this has



Sona (to the left) engages with adolescent girls in her community.

accorded them. She herself broke free of the restrictive role defined for her by the elders of her family, after being married at the age of six. Fighting social pressure to go and live with her in-laws, she chose instead to pursue her education, living in a hostel, with support from her school principal. After she completed her schooling, her parents-in-law insisted she move in with them, as is customary. But by then Sona had made up her mind that she wanted to study further. Her husband's family outrightly rejected such an idea, but, determined not to bow to pressure, Sona refused to go and live with them.

The consequences of her decision were to prove severe. Sona was harassed, and physically abused by her husband, who tried to pressure her to join his parents. Then, during the *Ladli Samman* door-to-door campaign launched in Tonk District with support from UNICEF, Sona came to the notice of PCCRCS, and things began to improve.

Fighting social pressure to go and live with her in-laws, she chose instead to pursue her education.

The *Ladli Samman* campaign involves volunteers mapping social and economic vulnerabilities, and linking them to social protection schemes and counselling support. Adolescent champions and change-makers are honoured with the *Ladli Samman* award during the *Vikas Mela* – the concluding event of the campaign.

During the door-to-door campaign, Sona told her story to PCCRCS, which helped her to enroll in college. She also expressed her wish to separate from her husband, and cut all ties with her parents-in-law, though she was unsure if this was possible. The PCCRCS team made Sona aware of her rights, and the legal route to separation. She was later given the *Ladli Samman* award, casting her in the role of an adolescent champion, as opposed to someone to be ostracized, because of her choices.

Today, Sona holds a Bachelor of Education degree and is not only acknowledged by many as a voice of change in Rajasthan, but has also been honoured by the state government with the *Garima Samman* award for her efforts and her courage. ■

Hairdressing skill offers hope after child rape

Place:	Uganda, Arua
Year:	2018
Author:	Proscovia Nakibuuka Mbonye
Photos:	UNICEF/Adriko

It is a few days before Christmas 2018, and 15 year old Irene Asibazuyo is in a salon plaiting hair with a few other colleagues, several of whom are as young as she is. This is one of their busiest times of the year, as many clients want to look good for the festive season. Irene is excited, since this means she will make a little more money than usual.

Unlike other children her age, Irene is currently not attending school. She lives in the small town of Odramacaku in Arua District, Uganda, bordering South Sudan. She was previously enrolled in primary school and enjoyed studying mathematics, social studies and English. However, Irene's childhood ended abruptly after an incident in 2017. "During a visit to my uncle in South Sudan, I was raped by a man who disappeared afterwards. In my culture, when a man rapes you, they must take you as their wife," explains Irene. "Otherwise, your family risks being cursed or struck by a bad omen."

Irene now found herself at a crossroads: "I could not go back home because I knew I would be ridiculed by my peers and my own relatives. Instead, I went to the man's home. I explained the incident to his parents, who advised me to stay. Since he had raped me, I knew that no man would ever take me as his wife."

Stranded, scared, confused and abused, Irene stayed at the man's home for a week, but he never returned. However, according to her culture, her marriage had already begun. "While I was living in that home, I thought about my friends. All I did was cry, and I could not eat. I used to fetch water among other chores, and I worried about my future."

Irene's village in Arua is one of the areas targeted by the End Child Marriage campaign, which was implemented by World Vision in Arua, Yumbe and Ajumani Districts, with support from UNICEF through the Global Programme. Through the campaign, Irene's parents and many other

community members were educated on the dangers of child marriage, and empowered to identify and report cases of violence against children. Through dialogue and radio campaigns, communities have been taking responsibility to protect children and adolescents from marrying at a young age. As a result of these efforts, Irene's parents and a UNICEF-trained para-social worker crossed over the border with South Sudan to rescue her. In doing so, her mother and father were defying their culture by supporting their daughter. Meanwhile, the man who raped her was still on the run.

Irene still lives with the traumatic memories of the attack. On returning home, she dropped out of formal education. "As I feared being called names like 'married woman' or

I feel better that I have a skill which has provided me with a job and a platform to support other girls.

— IRENE ASIBAZUYO



Irene Asibazuyo plaiting hair with other colleagues.

Clock-wise from top:
 Irene Asibazuyo with her siblings.
 Irene Asibazuyo in her village in Arua.
 Irene Asibazuyo fetching water.



Through dialogue and radio campaigns, communities have been taking responsibility to protect children and adolescents from marrying at a young age.

‘raped girl’, I chose to pursue hairdressing instead,” recalls Irene. She describes her hairdressing skill as ‘magic’, because it has enabled her to overcome the trauma and earn a living. With assistance from the para-social workers, Irene now attends UNICEF-supported community dialogues and sensitization campaigns against child marriage, and is seen as a role model in her community. She mentors young girls who were once married and have since been abandoned with their children, and she teaches them how to plait hair. “I share the knowledge I have and what I know,” reflects Irene. “I am happy that they will be able to earn some money to look after their children. I encourage them to work and not stay at home.”

Irene also encourages her younger siblings to go to school and provides the necessary support. “I want my siblings to complete school, so that they can live a better life than me,” she says. “I sometimes feel disappointed that I did not return to school. However, I feel better that I have a skill which has provided me with a job and a platform to support other girls.”

One day Irene wishes to return to school, but not in her village in Odramacaku. “I do not want my peers to laugh at me because of what happened. I will go to another district for my education, and learn how to write and speak English.” ■

“These
community
changes will continue
because they are good
for us. Now that we
know they are good,
we can continue
in this way.”

– THE VIEW OF A MAN IN A
COMMUNITY IN NIGER.

Cricket against child marriage

Place: Nepal, Kapilvastu, Taulihawa
 Year: 2017
 Author: Santosh Chhetri
 Photos: UNFPA Nepal/Santosh Chhetri



"I often watch boys playing cricket on this ground. But today I caught a glimpse of girl cricketers in action. I really enjoyed their match," says Irfan Darji. He had been watching the final match between two girls' teams at the district headquarters of Kapilvastu, Tuliha, in Nepal. This 13-year-old

has previously seen girls jumping ropes and playing football. "This was the first time I watched girls' cricket," he says, cheering for the Fewa team, as he listened intently to the ball-by-ball commentary from famous regional cricket commentator, Nischal Shrivastav. "Oh, a cricket match about child marriage! It is new to me. But I like this idea," says Irfan. For this is a cricket commentary with a difference, and the progress of the match itself is regularly interspersed with a strong message, delivered repeatedly over the loudspeaker: "Dear audience, the theme of this match is bowling out child marriage and violence against women and girls."

One of the players, among the 56 girls from 10 villages with a high prevalence of child marriage, Gudiya Chaudhary is sitting close to the commentary box. She has been closely following the final match between Tilaurakot and Fewa. Her own team, Buddha, lost to Tilaurakot in the semi-finals. "I had not played cricket before," says Gudiya who travelled 35 kilometres from her village of Bimiawa to take part in the tournament. "Using cricket as a tool to campaign against child marriage – a practice that many girls in Nepal sadly experience – attracted me to be part of this tournament."

The Cricket Association of Kapilvastu (CAK) made the arrangements to provide all 56 girls with an opportunity to practise for one week before travelling to Taulihawa, to play in the tournament. Many of the players are members of girls' groups, supported by the Government of Nepal's Women and Children Office (WCO) and UNFPA. Organized by

Girls in Kapilvastu face gender discrimination, high rates of adolescent pregnancy, and harmful practices such as child marriage.



CAK, the girls' sporting event was held in partnership with the District Coordination Committee, WCO, UNFPA and the Kapilvastu chapter of the Family Planning Association of Nepal. Hailing this event as the first of its kind in the district, CAK Chairperson Prakash Gaire observes: "For the first time, we have partnered with UNFPA for such a key event, representing our collective efforts to encourage all stakeholders, including adolescent girls, to continue their fight against child marriage and violence against women and girls through several mediums, including cricket."

Dear audience, the theme of this match is bowling out child marriage and violence against women and girls.

– NISCHAL SHRIVASTAV

In the finals, the Fewa Girls' Group emerged as the winner, with Tilaurakot the runner-up. The other two teams participating were Buddha and Laliguras. "I hit eight fours during the entire tournament," says Khatri, 14, who was awarded the title 'player of the series'. "Sadly, I could not hit a six. Every boundary I scored is against child marriage."

Members of the winning teams received medals and cash prizes, and all participants were given certificates. Around 1,500 people watched the tournament. Girls in Kapilvastu persistently face gender discrimination, high rates of adolescent pregnancy, and harmful practices, such as child marriage. According to the Nepal Census 2011, 62 per cent of girls aged 10–19 in the district get married early. The national average is 41 per cent. Statistics show that girls who marry early are likely to be forced to drop out of school, bear children before they are ready, and are often subjected to violence and abuse. Programmes that engage the community and opinion leaders, and empower young girls to realize their full potential, are gradually changing cultural norms, and addressing harmful practices in Nepal. ■

STRENGTHENING EDUCATION, HEALTH AND PROTECTION SERVICES

In class again, after escape from an unwanted marriage

Place:	Uganda
Year:	2019
Author:	Proscovia Nakibuuka Mbonye and Nami Nakatani
Photos:	UNICEF/Adriko

...incorporating para-social structures has ensured that communities take charge of protecting children and adolescents in their communities.

— PHILIAM ADRIKO

In Faida Harriet's village, not many girls transition from primary to secondary education. Faida, 17, did not want to be among those who failed to do so. Foreseeing the financial challenges that lay ahead when she joined secondary school,

Faida opted to grow cassava for sale. She was optimistic that the money she earned would be enough to pay for her school fees and materials when the time came. She was keen to forestall any barriers to her education.



Faida Harriet working in the field.

Then, one fateful evening as Faida returned from the market, a 27 year old man, helped by three others, wrestled her to the ground, dragged her to his home and locked her up. She was not aware that the man had planned the attack, but she was all too aware of the implications, which would inevitably result in child marriage. With no one to rescue her that day, Faida spent the night at the man's home. In her culture, when a girl spends the night in a man's home, she is considered to be married. As such, she had been forced into a marriage at the age of just 14. Faida worried desperately about her future and thought about her dreams, while the man's family rejoiced that they had received a new bride. Trapped into a marriage that she did not want, the young girl bitterly regretted having gone to the market that day.

Faida spent four days in the man's home as her family negotiated her rescue, but the impact of the incident is still evident in her eyes as she tells her story: "Life was very difficult. I was lucky if I ate food once a day." She lacked necessities, such as soap, and was made to do most of



Faida Harriet back at school.

the housework. Insults flowed if she served food late, a common occurrence in child marriages. “For all those days, I bathed with no soap and had one dress. Today, when I hear the word marriage, I get scared and it brings back the bad memories of the four days I spent in the man’s home”, says Faida.

Long negotiations followed between the two families, for Faida’s release. Her mother was especially anxious for the girl to return home, so that she could continue her studies. In the end, as required by culture, Faida’s family paid two goats, a cow and 70,000 Uganda shillings (about US\$19) in exchange for their daughter’s freedom. Had they not done so, they risked being struck by a bad omen.

The rescue process was led by Pastor Henry Ayikoba, who is also a para-social worker trained by World Vision, with UNICEF support. When Faida was finally freed from the forced marriage, the pastor helped her healing process by visiting her occasionally for counselling sessions, before encouraging her parents to take her back to school.

In recent years, several girls like Faida have been rescued from child marriage and saved from its many negative consequences. The engagement and strengthening of community structures to support child protection has led to cases involving violence against children being reported to the authorities. This was previously not always the case. On the contrary, such issues, including criminal offences involving children, went unreported and were settled within families.

According to Philiam Adriko, Programme Manager for World Vision and Coordinator of the UNICEF-supported End Child Marriage project, incorporating para-social structures

has ensured that communities take charge of protecting children and adolescents in their communities. The para-social workers have been trained, and are now able to identify, prevent, respond to and report cases of violence against children in their communities to the relevant authorities. “Culture is very important to us, but it also has negative aspects, which results in children suffering,” says Adriko. “To address this, cultural and religious leaders are involved in the campaign, and they speak to their constituents in the communities and disseminate messages through their sermons and preaching. Many of them have become our ambassadors.”

When her Primary Seven results were released – the final exams for primary education in Uganda – Faida emerged with a high score. With support from Pastor Ayikoba, she joined secondary school and was promoted to the third year in 2019. She is performing well, enjoys science, including physics and biology, and hopes to become a nurse one day, so that she can help sick people. Faida is happy to be back in school where she says she belongs, and, despite her anxiety, she was warmly welcomed by her classmates when she returned.

Following her experience, Faida is more determined than ever to complete her education. With this goal in mind, she helps her father with farming, especially during the holidays. They grow cassava and beans for sale to pay for school fees and other necessities. When they lack income from the market, they trade their harvest for school fees at her school.

Faida’s advice to both boys and girls could not be clearer. They should continue with their education and only think about marriage when they are old enough, she says. ■

Primary school in the front line against child weddings

Place:	Ethiopia, Amhara
Year:	2015
Author:	Elisabeth Wilmott-Harrop
Photos:	UNICEF Ethiopia/Elisabeth Wilmott-Harrop

"In this community, the parents do not value education and we need to push for them to send both boys and girls to school," explains Adamu Yeneew, Principal of Wondafay Primary School in Wondafay Kabele, Dangla District, in Ethiopia's Amhara region. "Schooling is also interrupted in May, when children are pulled out of school to help with agricultural work."

The district's Women, Children and Youth Affairs office is supported by UNICEF in running a comprehensive programme against child marriage, involving multiple stakeholders at community level. Wondafay Primary School has 500 pupils, and successfully intervened to prevent six out of eight planned child marriages from taking place among its pupils in 2014. Adamu explains: "In the beginning of last year, we intervened to prevent six cases involving female pupils aged 12–16 and boys aged 16–18. All are still in school. In two cases the parents resisted, so we wrote to the police and gave the parents a copy of the letter."

Occasionally, girls and boys who marry will continue with their schooling, but they inevitably drop out in the end. Adamu continues: "Child marriage is common, and happens without the child's consent. I was just discussing this issue with a girl aged 13, who I have heard is due to marry. But she is too ashamed to say what is happening."

Teacher Selamawit Yigezau, 24, is Chair of the school's Girl's Advisory Committee. The committee discusses all issues affecting girls' education, including child marriage. "As a child, I was lucky," explains Selamawit. "I was due to marry at age 7, but my uncle, who is educated and a government official, decided I had to continue my education. I was supposed to live with my husband, who was 12, and his

parents, but my uncle insisted I should live in a separate house. It was only two years later, when I was 9, that I had to go to my husband – he was then 14 – but it did not last long. I was only there a month before my uncle removed me and took me to his house. I did not know what was going on."

"Child marriage really hurts a girl's life. Getting pregnant so young, and having the responsibility of running a house. It is too hard for a girl child to administer a home and it leads to quarrels with her husband, and violence against her," continues Selamawit. "The girl has such a high workload, she cannot possibly manage, and the mother-in-law joins in and criticizes the girl. If my uncle had not intervened I would now have children and be vulnerable. But I am now productive, and leading my life without needing anything."

I was due to marry at age 7, but my uncle, who is educated and a government official, decided I had to continue my education.

– SELAMAWIT YIGEZAU

Students approach Selamawit and the Girl's Advisory Committee to report cases of planned child marriages involving girls at the school. "At that point, we intervene by discussing the situation with the child, the parents and the leadership system of the village," explains Selamawit. "We discuss issues freely with the girls. We build a relationship with the family – most are farmers, so we go to their home so that we can discuss issues of child marriage. We have long discussions in which we try to get them to understand the implications of child marriage, and that it is illegal. If they resist, we go to the police."

Tigist, a 14 year old girl, who is a member of the Girl's Advisory Committee, has strong views on child marriage. "Child marriage harms our life. One of the marriages that we successfully had cancelled was that of my friend," she says. "We are so happy for her." ■

Teacher Selamawit Yigezau, 24, discusses child marriage with four girls aged 12–15.



Shama – an adolescent champion for girls' education

Place:	India, Rajasthan, Tonk District
Year:	2018
Author:	Sharmila Ray, UNICEF India Rajasthan (with inputs from Pink City Cycle Rickshaw Chalak Sansthan and Sona Bhairwa)
Pictures:	UNICEF/Soumi Das

Sona linked Shama to the Palanhar scheme, which offered financial support, enabling her to convince her aunt to delay the marriage and allow her to complete her schooling.

Shama Parveen lost her parents at an early age and was brought up by her aunt, Jameela bi. Following the family tradition, and hoping to reduce the financial burden of caring for Shama as well as providing for her own family, the girl's aunt decided marry her off, although she was still a child. However, Shama had no wish to be married, and asked her aunt to give her some time to investigate possible ways of obtaining sponsorship for her education. During a household survey, Sona Bhairwa (*see Indian girl chooses education over marriage*) found out about Shama and informed her of the *Palanhar* scheme. This is Rajasthan's state sponsored and supported kinship care initiative, which provides financial support to families so as to promote community-based kinship/foster care and sponsorship. The scheme covers children with different kinds of vulnerabilities, including those who are orphaned, have single parents, parents in jail, or suffer from AIDS, leprosy, or other serious illnesses. Sona linked Shama to the *Palanhar* scheme, which offered financial support, enabling her to convince her aunt to delay the marriage and allow her to complete her schooling.

The state further supports adolescents pursuing higher education/vocational education through the *Hunar Vikas Yojana* scheme, up until age 21. Shama has now applied for *Hunar Vikas Yojana* support, to finance an information technology (IT) course in engineering.

Now 19, Shama is the only girl in her village and the community who is pursuing an IT course, traditionally considered to be the domain of boys. She firmly believes that her choice will have a multiplier effect in Tonk District, and adolescents and their families are increasingly approaching her to understand options for higher education and the application procedure for these courses and support schemes. Shama has also been reaching out to adolescents in her village, to persuade them of the benefits of higher education, especially in non-traditional sectors. In her words, Shama hopes to "be the support that Sona was for her".

Shama has not yet married, and firmly believes that she has a right to make her own choices. In recognition of her work in convincing other girls to pursue education and delay marriage, she has been nominated as an adolescent champion by UNICEF. ■



Shama sits outside her home. She has been awarded as an adolescent champion by UNICEF.

The *Palanhar* scheme supports children until they reach 18.

When we see these women in cars and on bikes, we want our daughters educated. Before we pushed for marriage, and now we push for education.

– MOTHERS IN NIGER HIGHLIGHT THE IMPORTANCE OF FEMALE ROLE MODELS IN THE FORM OF PROGRAMME STAFF, TEACHERS AND HEALTH WORKERS

Grace goes back home

Place:	Ghana, Kissi
Year:	2018
Author:	UNFPA/UNICEF Ghana
Photos:	UNFPA/UNICEF Ghana

"I was 16 years old when I got pregnant."

Grace used to live with her mother, stepfather and 11 step-siblings in Kisi, a small town in southern Ghana. But as time went on, she began to experience maltreatment from her stepfather, who, she says, would be kind to her stepbrothers and stepsisters, but not to her, with Grace's mother unable to intervene. "He would not provide my basic needs even if I asked," says Grace.

In her community, Grace met a boy who was in senior high school, and she found him to be kind to her. "He listened to me and gave me money when I needed to buy some basic items for myself, so we started a relationship," she recalls. "Soon after, I got pregnant and dropped out of school. When my parents found out I was pregnant, I was sent to live with my baby's father and his grandmother."

Grace's boyfriend needed to leave for boarding school when it reopened, and Grace then lived alone with his grandmother in the same community as her mother and stepfather. The parents of her boyfriend live in Accra, and used to send back money to him. The boy passed some of it on to Grace, to enable her to start a business selling boiled eggs in the community. However, she soon had to give this up. "I do not have the strength to keep walking around carrying a tray of eggs on my head while pregnant. I cannot sell anymore," she explains.

A team from local non-governmental organization International Needs Ghana (INGH) identified Grace during a community auditing session with the community participation officer from the Ghana Education Service, as part of the Girls – Participatory Approaches to Students Success project, funded by the United Kingdom. After Grace had been engaged by the project, she started to feel more at peace living in her boyfriend's home. With support from



Grace (in the middle) together with the Queen Mother of Kissi and a community participation officer.

Once she gives birth, Grace is determined go back to school to take her Basic Education Certificate Examination.

the Queen Mother of Kissi,¹⁰ Grace's mother was counselled on parenting, and the consequences of sending Grace to live with the father of her child. As a result, she promised to bring her daughter back home.

Not long afterwards, Grace suffered a pregnancy complication, and was rushed to hospital. Her case was referred to the Department of Social Welfare, and working together with INGH, officials helped Grace to move back home. She says she is now receiving better care than before, and has high hopes for the future. Once she gives birth, Grace is determined go back to school to take her Basic Education Certificate Examination. ■

¹⁰ Queen mothers are powerful women in local communities in Ghana, and usually play an important role in local governments.

Left to right:

Students performing a drama on child marriage and its consequences in a school in Rautahat.

Drawing on the adverse effects of child marriage on the children, made as part of an art competition by a student from a school in Dhanusha District.



Janaki defines her destiny

Place:	Nepal, Rautahat
Year:	2018
Author:	UNFPA/UNICEF Nepal
Photos:	UNICEF Nepal and UNFPA-UNICEF Nepal/K Pandey

Several months ago, Janaki Sah¹¹ took a step that would change her life. The 14 year old is currently in Grade 8 at secondary school in her home village in Rautahat District, which is located in Nepal's southern plains. In class, she has long been known as a bright student, who gets good marks and always has something to contribute to discussions. For some time, however, teachers and friends had noticed a difference in Janaki. She appeared depressed, was not interested in interacting with people the way she used to, and had suddenly stopped smiling. Friends say they would often find her crying.

The truth emerged when the school management found a note that Janaki had written and dropped in the school's suggestion box. The girl was deeply troubled by her impending marriage, which had been set up by her family. Such arrangements are a common occurrence in the village, as in so many others across Nepal, where schoolgirls are pressured by their families to drop out and get married. However, Janaki was not ready to give in. For this reason, she had decided to use the suggestion box as a way of reaching out to the school and asking for its support in stopping the marriage before it was too late.

"It was easier and not as scary to write down my problems rather than going up to talk directly to a teacher or the principal," Janaki says. This is precisely the purpose of the suggestion box, a school-based reporting mechanism that has been set up in selected schools in 10 districts, with UNICEF support. The box is intended to allow students to raise their concerns, file complaints and offer recommendations without having to communicate openly with adults, which can be intimidating. The sense of confidentiality it provides encourages children to speak out on matters that they might not feel comfortable discussing in person.

**Because I was brave enough,
I am able to do what I love
the most – study.**

— JANAKI SAH

After seeing Janaki's note, the school sent a social worker to intervene on the girl's behalf. She visited Janaki at the school, before going to her home to talk to her parents. With her were members of the school management, the ward chairperson and other community leaders, all anxious to convince the family not to marry off their daughter.

The strategy worked: Janaki's parents relented and agreed to let her return to school. Now back in class with her friends, Janaki recalls with immense relief the day she decided to drop that note in the suggestion box. She does not know where she would have been today if she had not found the nerve to do it. Says Janaki: "Because I was brave enough, I am able to do what I love the most – study." ■

¹¹ Name changed to protect identity.

The life-changing health impacts of teenage pregnancy

Place:	Niger, Tahoua
Year:	2018
Author:	Chehou Azizou
Photos:	UNFPA/UNICEF Niger

Each year between 50,000 and 100,000 women worldwide are affected by obstetric fistula, a hole in the birth canal caused by obstructed labour. This debilitating condition, often neglected in communities, is one of a range of serious health problems that are directly linked to child marriage and early pregnancy.¹²

In Niger, Dr Salifou Issa, regional director of the Mother-Child Centre of Tahoua, is all too used to seeing girls and young women affected by conditions linked to teenage pregnancy and childbirth. Aside from obstetric fistula, these include a ruptured uterus, hemorrhage, hematoma and a retained placenta, often resulting in death, both for the child and the mother.

“The effects for the affected girls are many and severe,” says Dr Issa. “Before age 18, a girl’s pelvis is not mature enough for giving birth to a child. This exposes the mother and her child to increased risks.”

As a result of his experience treating girls with such conditions, Dr Issa is now making an urgent appeal to parents and the community to reconsider the practice of child marriage.

The Mother-Child Centre where he is regional director was established in 2014. Its mission is to take care of obstetric conditions and emergencies during childbirth, and provide free care for children aged 0–5. General practitioners,

specialists – gynaecologists and pediatricians – midwives, social workers and nurses work 24 hours a day to provide free care to girls, women and children. Cases that exceed the capacity of the centre are sent to the capital of Niamey.

The centre’s staff provide care for women of all ages, referred by the region’s health centres. However, 60 per cent of all patients are under 18, and 1 in 3 suffers from eclampsia. The health problems faced by these women are related to the non-maturity of their pelvis, protracted labour (ranging from 48–72 hours), poor knowledge of their bodies, and lack of follow-up care before, during and after pregnancy.

Before age 18, a girl’s pelvis is not mature enough for giving birth to a child.

— DR SALIFOU ISSA

Between January and July 2018, more than 50 per cent of the girls admitted to the centre were victims of obstetric fistula, a condition that can cause lifelong incontinence.

The following stories illustrate the often painful health consequences of adolescent girls involved in child marriage.



Dr Salifou Issa is the regional director of the Mother-Child Centre of Tahoua.

The story of Yacine Abdoula

“I am a resident of the village of Chimazazarine in the department of Abalak in the Tahoua region, and I am 15 years old. I am a victim of child marriage, and I was admitted to the Mother-Child Centre for health reasons, accompanied by my mother. Child marriage has harmful consequences, but with the help of the gynaecologist, my life was

¹² World Health Organization, 2018: www.who.int/features/factfiles/obstetric_fistula/en.

saved, although the child I was carrying was born lifeless. My mother is 30 years old herself. Like me, she suffers in her soul. That is why I am reaching out to my friends and relatives, and ask them to pay attention before making a marriage decision that involves a child."

The story of Oumou Yacouba

"I am from the village of Sabon Guida (Saléwa) in the department of Malbaza. I am 18 years old and have been married for four years. I did not go to school. I got married at the age of 13 with a spouse I did not know. The marriage was arranged without my knowledge. We did not have any affection for each other, so the divorce took place about two months after the wedding. I remarried my current husband shortly after, because I felt empty and lonely. His first two wives had died, and he takes care of me in terms of clothing, food and economic matters. He lives in exodus

in Guinea. We have not seen each other since the beginning of my second pregnancy, more than 13 months ago. I have had two pregnancies with him, both with stillborn children.

But the worst happened during my second pregnancy. Because of the protracted labour I endured, I found myself in this centre, where I was operated on to extract my dead child. From this, I have suffered subsequent injuries.

I know that fistula, this condition that I suffer from, has several causes: excision, early marriage, excessive consumption of decoctions during pregnancy, and prolonged labour before delivery. Personally, I will never give away my own daughter to marriage after all the bad experiences that I have lived, and continue to live through.

Sadly, because I am the victim, only I can know what I lived through." ■



Oumou Yacouba.

Child marriage has harmful consequences, but with the help of the gynaecologist, my life was saved, although the child I was carrying was born lifeless.

— YACINE ABDOULA



Yacine (centre) and her mother (left) listen to the advice of the midwife, Abarchi Mariama Moussa.

STRENGTHENING LEGAL AND POLICY FRAMEWORKS

Back at school after child marriage and divorce

Place:	Zambia, Katete
Year:	2018
Author:	UNICEF Zambia
Photos:	UNICEF Zambia/Siakachoma

When I decided to leave the marriage, my parents supported me, and they did the same when I later decided to go back to school.

— VESTER MWALE

When Vester Mwale fell pregnant in Grade 8, she dropped out of school and got married. She was just 13 years old.

"My parents were against the idea, but many people told me it was difficult to carry through a pregnancy on your own, and so I took their advice and got married," she says. "I did not want to do it, but I was scared of being alone while pregnant. My boyfriend at the time accepted responsibility, and said we would keep the pregnancy and live together. He wanted marriage." Believing she would be better off this way, Vester went ahead and married against her family's wish, but soon realized her mistake.

"I was married for four years and it was very difficult. We could barely support ourselves and our child, and my husband used to drink and beat me," she recalls. "I know now from experience that getting married as a child is a bad thing. You have to wait until you are an

adult before getting pregnant or considering marriage." Now 19, Vester is divorced and has returned to school.

"When I decided to leave the marriage, my parents supported me, and they did the same when I later decided to go back to school. My father pays my school fees whenever he can, and my mother remains with my child while I go for my weekly boarding."



Vester Mwale in France village, in Zambia's Katete District.

Vester lives in France village in eastern Zambia's Katete District, and has to walk about 35 kilometres each way to her school. It is common practice to lodge closer to school, and only return home at weekends, though Vester consistently struggles to do this due to lack of funds.

According to the 2013–2014 Zambia Demographic and Health Survey, 31 per cent of women aged 20–24 were married before the age of 18. It was within this context

that the Government decided to launch a nationwide campaign to end child marriage and teenage pregnancy in 2013. In addition, a national End Child Marriage Strategy was launched in 2016, followed by the development of a National Plan of Action on Ending Child Marriage in 2017. UNFPA and UNICEF support the Ministry of Gender in the government-led campaign, which involves a consortium of 15 line ministries.



UNICEF is also piloting implementation of a multisectoral approach in the districts of Senanga and Katete, with the aim of addressing the root causes of child marriage. The work involves supporting schools to prevent children from dropping out, promoting menstrual hygiene management, strengthening the role of health centres in improving sexual and reproductive health, and working together with radio stations and theatre groups to create space for local dialogue on supporting youth. There is also a strong focus on developing a response from social workers, to address cases of child marriage when they do take place, prioritizing the safety, well-being, empowerment and learning of the children involved.

George Zulu, headman for Katema Village and member of the Chimtende Area Coordinating Committee, says poverty and cultural practices are some of the main drivers of child marriage in Katete District.

“Some families find child marriage beneficial because they receive a bride price (*lobola*), for example a cow or a goat, and they like that. They also enjoy the extra food that a married daughter is able to give them,” he says. “Initiation is another cultural practice that contributes to child marriage, because once girls are taught how to have sex, they want to experiment right away. There is also a lot of peer pressure among the children.”

According to Zulu, attitudes have been improving in recent years, and cases of child marriage are declining as a result of

various interventions. “There has been a lot of sensitization, and most families now appreciate the dangers of child marriage, including maternal death and greater risk of contracting sexually transmitted infections like HIV,” he says. “They also appreciate that their children can take better care of them if they get an education.”

Traditional leaders are also active in efforts to combat child marriage. “Many chiefs and *indunas* (advisors) are taking an active role in preventing child marriage.

Sometimes the girls themselves report their parents for forcing them into marriage,” explains Zulu. “We have received such reports from the members of the Community Welfare Assistant Committees, and have conducted a lot of counselling and sensitization.”

UNICEF is also piloting implementation of a multisectoral approach in the districts of Senanga and Katete, with the aim of addressing the root causes of child marriage.

The causes of child marriage in Zambia are deep-rooted, and closely linked to issues such as poverty and lack of opportunities. Keeping children in school, raising awareness among teenagers entering relationships, and ensuring that young people have information on sexual and reproductive health – these are just some of the strategies being tried in Zambia.

Despite missing several years of schooling, Vester is now glad to be in the classroom again, and has new hope for her future: “I am happy to be back at school and although my classmates are younger, they are understanding and treat me as they do everyone else,” she says. “I would like to be a teacher, and I believe I now have another opportunity to reach that goal.” ■

Roumanatou – a pioneer for girls’ rights in Niger¹³

Place:	Niger
Year:	2018
Author:	Eva Gilliam
Pictures	UNICEF Niger

“I just knew I could not leave my studies,” says Roumanatou, “it was a devastating time for me.” At 16 years old, Roumanatou was betrothed to a much older man, who worked in Niger’s capital Niamey as a driver for one of the ministries. “He paid a dowry of 50,000 West African CFA francs (about US\$85) to my parents, with the promise that he would come for me soon,” she explains. Until that moment, Roumanatou had been an excellent student, achieving some of the highest marks in her class. However, on realizing she was about to be married, her grades started to fall, and she became depressed with the knowledge that she would soon have to leave school and her classmates.

The social pressure for Roumanatou to marry was considerable. In Niger, unmarried girls are considered to be problematic. First, they cost their household money in terms of food, clothing and education. Second, they pose a potential risk to the family, if they behave in any way seen as inappropriate, since this can bring shame on everyone else. The community sees unmarried girls as potentially promiscuous, with a strong likelihood of having children out of wedlock, and becoming a burden on the family, since they will be unable to marry in the future as a result.

“Once a girl is married, it is rare that she can continue her education,” says Salmey Bebert, Child Protection Specialist at UNICEF, who was herself born and raised in Niger. “She then has a household to manage, and soon children are on the way.” Child marriage in Niger can be organized when girls are as young as 13. Family income plays a role, since wealthier families might wait till their daughters are 16 or 17 before marrying them, while poorer families are more likely to do so earlier.

“It is in the culture of Niger – influenced by the religion,” explains Bebert. “The common saying is that girls can be



Roumanatou with two school girls.

With strong engagement by the President of the Republic, the Government, and with the support of UNICEF and other partners, a decree was signed to promote girls’ education and protect them in school.

— SALMEY BEBERT

married as soon as they have their first or second menstrual period. And more often than not, it is to a much older man, with one, two or three other wives.”

Roumanatou says she received little backing from her own parents. “My father saw me as an expensive problem. Something else to pay for, so when I started to refuse to get married, to say I wanted to continue studying, he did not support me at all. Rather the opposite,” she explains.

¹³ Roumanatou’s story is also available on YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=le4wvS7jkmA&feature=youtu.be>

"Even my mother did not support me. She said 'good luck', but gave no other support than that. I have no idea where I got the strength from to keep fighting, but I did it."

At first, Roumanatou did not know where to turn for help. Despite long-term efforts by UNICEF, there is still no law in Niger that forbids child marriage, though some progress has been made. "With strong engagement by the President of the Republic, the Government, and with the support of UNICEF and other partners, a decree was signed to promote girls' education and protect them in school," says Bebert. "The decree says that girls must be encouraged to attend school, and that legally they must go until they are 16 years old. Implementation of the decree will contribute toward reducing child marriage."

Figures show that despite hold-ups in introducing a law to ban child marriage, significant behaviour change is taking place in the country. In 1998, the national prevalence of child marriage was 84 per cent, with 47 per cent of girls marrying before the age of 15. In 2012, when a survey was last conducted, the child marriage rate was 76 per cent, with 24 per cent of girls marrying before 15.¹⁴

You can be a 'good woman' and be educated and make a difference in the community, even though you are different from the rest.

— ROUMANATOU

Roumanatou is a pioneer in her region, fighting for girls' rights to an education. "I went to my family, and only one of my brothers supported me. I then went to the local military police and explained the situation," she says. "They told me it went beyond them, and that I had to take it to the courts, so I did, and I won." The judge ruled in Roumanatou's favour but obliged her to personally repay the dowry and all other expenses her fiancé had incurred during their engagement. In the end, the man forgave her, and released her from her debt.



Roumanatou shares her story at a community dialogue.

Bebert sees an opportunity in educating girls. Her view incorporates her religion and culture. "Often people realize school is not what they think," she says. "They do not have to lose their culture, their headscarf, their values and ethics. Roumanatou and myself, we are the proof: You can be a 'good woman' and be educated and make a difference in the community, even though you are different from the rest."

Bebert herself married in the late 1980s at age 24 – once she finished her master's degree in economics. Those were different times, but she was fortunate in receiving support from her school. "My father only had one boy and six girls, so he saw an opportunity to make money through the girls," she recalls. "I was very excited by school and was not interested in boys so early, since I focused on my education. My teachers gave me lots of encouragement and I ended up going to Togo to study economics. Unfortunately, I think many families are scared of educating girls. They have heard it is not good for girls to have too many ideas. This is all about control."

In June, Roumanatou gave her first speech in a nearby community. She spoke about her experience, her continued education and her life now as a teacher, a wife and a mother. "My dowry was 50,000 West African CFA francs, but today, my monthly salary is the same as this," she reflects. "Monthly! And with that I can help my brothers, my parents, and my own children." After the session, she was happy. "It was exhilarating! I cannot believe how much they listened, how interested and concerned they were", she says. "Now I want to do this much more often, because I feel passionately about the rights of girls. I am happy to be a role model." ■

¹⁴ Niger Demographic and Health Survey, 2012.

VOICES OF CHANGE

UNFPA-UNICEF
GLOBAL PROGRAMME
TO ACCELERATE ACTION
TO END CHILD
MARRIAGE