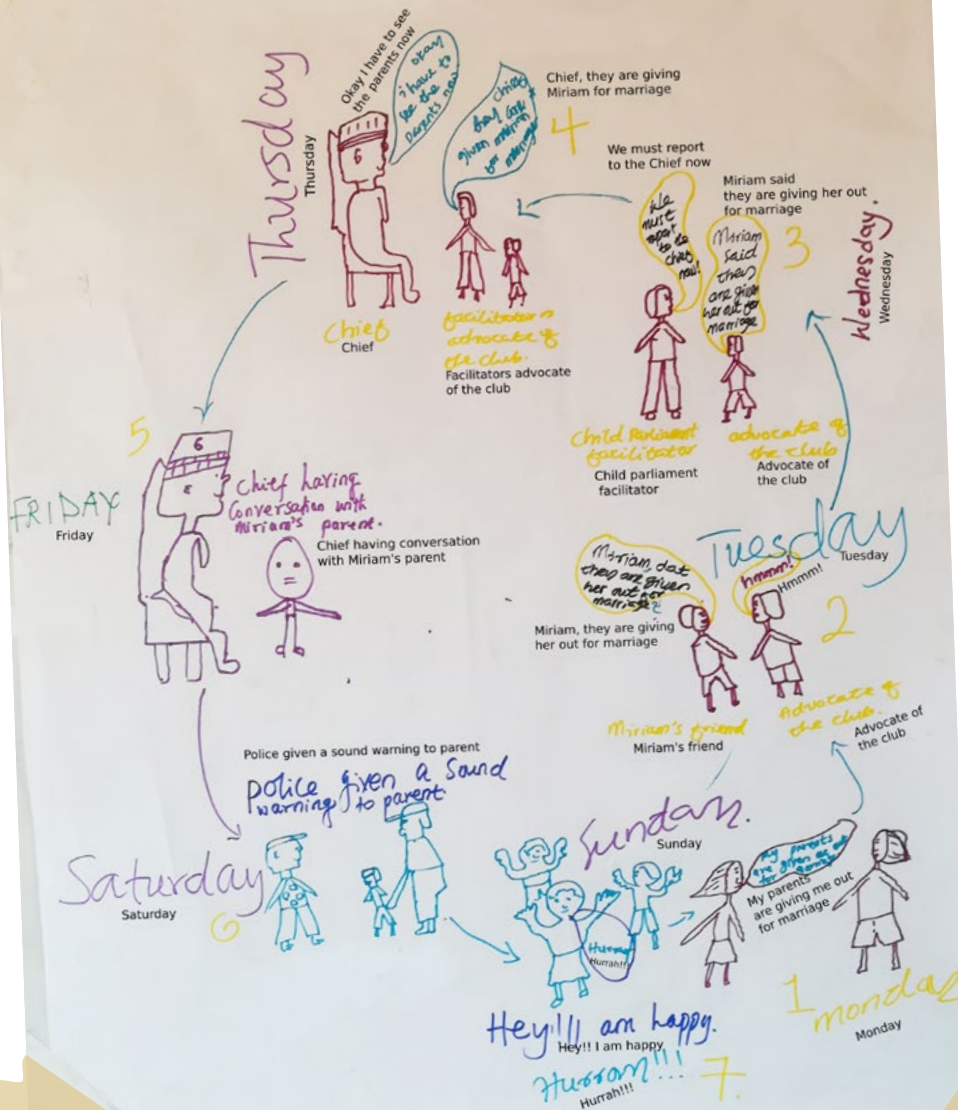
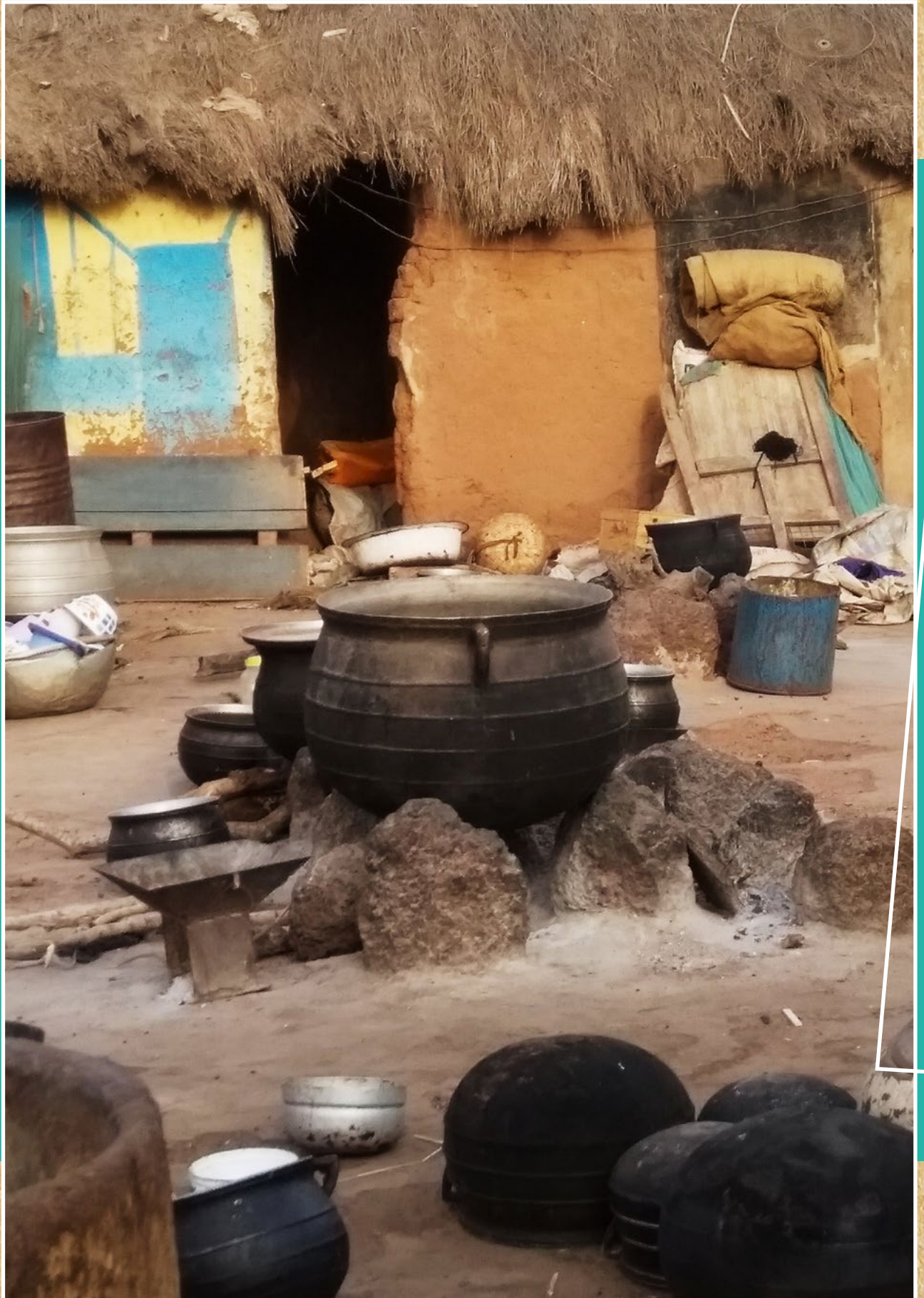


LEARNING FROM CHILD ACTIVISM

STOPPING CHILD MARRIAGES IN BANGLADESH & GHANA





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Authors

E. Kay M. Tisdall

Professor of Childhood Policy, Childhood & Youth Studies, Moray House School of Education and Sport, University of Edinburgh

Patricio Cuevas-Parra

Director, Child Participation and Rights, Advocacy and External Engagement, World Vision International

Field research support team

Mario Stephano

Strala Rupa Mollick

Patrick Brobbey

Design & layout

Carol Homsí



Kay Tisdall

is Professor of Childhood Policy at the University of Edinburgh. Part of Childhood and Youth Studies, she works across policy, research and teaching on children's human rights. This includes collaborative projects on topics such as family law and domestic abuse, mental health and children and young people's participation.



Patricio Cuevas-Parra

is the Director for Child Participation and Rights with World Vision International. He leads strategies to ensure that children and young people are at the centre of the global policy debate. His research interests are around children's participation in public policy and decision-making, child activism, child-led research, methodologies, and impact.

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World Vision ensured safe and ethical participation of children when they shared their stories, adhering to World Vision's safeguarding protocols. Names of children and staff have been anonymised and changed and staff roles presented in a simplified way to ensure confidentiality. All photos were taken and are used with informed consent.

Cover photo © World Vision

Poster by Children's Parliament members from Ghana describing the timeline of their actions to stop child marriage.

EXECUTIVE
SUMMARY



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In recent years, a new wave of child¹ activists have emerged globally: from Malala Yousafzai's equitable education advocacy, to the climate strikes inspired by Greta Thunberg, to the protests of school children in Dhaka, Bangladesh for improved road safety. Children and young people are standing up to make a change. World Vision recognises the need to empower children and seeks to provide children with the platform to speak out against child marriage and demand change.

Child marriage is defined by the international development community as a formal or informal union between two people in which one or both parties are younger than 18 years. Engaging children in marriage before the age of 18 is a severe breach of human rights, as enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women.

Each year, 12 million girls married before the age of 18- that's 22 girls every minute. In addition to these already-high incidence rates, UNICEF is predicting 10 million more girls will be married over the next decade due to the secondary impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and related containment measures, including school closures, limited livelihood opportunities, food insecurity, restrictions on mobility, and disruptions to essential protection and health services for girls. In some context, child marriage rates have doubled during the pandemic. In humanitarian settings, including conflict-affected or forced displacement contexts, girls were already at increased risk of child marriage and the COVID-19 crisis has magnified these existing vulnerabilities.

Child marriage is a cause and consequence of gender inequality, a violation of children's rights and jeopardises their health, education, right to live free from violence, and future opportunities. Families may arrange or support child marriages because they believe such marriages offer girls protection or economic security. However, evidence shows that child marriage has negative consequences, including placing girls at higher risk of violence, abuse and exploitation, making it less likely for them to complete formal schooling and to take up economic opportunities, increasing their social isolation and damaging their mental health, and posing risks to their health as a result of early pregnancy and motherhood.

Child marriage affects both girls and boys but, statistically, girls are far more likely than boys to be forced into child marriage and married girls are also at higher risk of physical, sexual and emotional violence than married boys. This reflects longstanding and widespread discrimination, oppression and gender inequalities.

With the global spread of COVID-19, World Vision has already seen increases in child marriage and early pregnancy due to the secondary impacts of the pandemic and related containment measures, including school closures, limited livelihood opportunities, food insecurity, restrictions on movement, and disruptions to essential protection and health services for girls.

¹ We define a child as someone under the age of 18, following Article 1 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. World Vision's research with child activists has also emphasised the importance of being named as children in their activism.

World Vision's Child Protection and Advocacy (CPA) Framework to End Child Marriage explicitly focuses on the empowerment of girls as critical decision-makers and agents of change. The Framework aims to achieve long-lasting results by giving girls the space and skills to express their views and participate in combatting the practice of child marriage.

Empowering children to act against child marriage entails increasing girls' awareness of their rights, developing peer-to-peer and collective efforts to strengthen girls' positive social roles, and supporting them to become powerful role models in their communities, inspiring other children to stand up for their rights. The role of child advocacy in ending child marriage is critical to truly change social norms and reach girls in the places where child marriage is most prevalent.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research project explored the processes and outcomes of children's activism to stop child marriages, in Bangladesh and Ghana, from the perspectives of the child activists, (potential) child brides and community members. The project had three research questions:

- How did children become child activists?
- What were the longitudinal trajectories of and impacts for those involved in the activism?
- What were the necessary factors and context for

the child activism to be successful in stopping child marriages?

The project involved 75 child activists (44 who identified as girls and 31 who identified as boys): 36 (21 girls and 15 boys) between the ages of 12 and 17, in Bangladesh; and 39 (23 girls and 16 boys) between the ages of 10 and 17, in Ghana. These activists were recruited through their Child Forums and Parliaments, with the support of their local World Vision facilitators.

RESEARCH KEY FINDINGS

1. THE POWER OF COLLABORATION

In our research project, child activism was highly relational. Child activists relied on their fellow child activists to act as a group. Both girls and boys were involved in these groups. Rather than acting alone, they tapped into and mobilised local power-holders to take action. The child activists were connected to those in power by facilitating adults, who brokered these relationships. These facilitating adults were teachers, school principals and non-governmental organisation workers, who were familiar to and supportive of the children and their actions. These elements were key to the child activists' success – and their increasing reputation – in stopping child marriages.

2. CHILDREN'S ACTIVISM LED TO THEIR OWN AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

Children's activism was inspired by their wish to end child marriage, through their direct actions to stop individual marriages and other activities to encourage community and societal change. Their activism was for themselves and their peers: some children came to activism because their own marriages had been stopped, while others were motivated to avoid child marriage in their futures. As they invested their time in their activism, child activists used and developed their individual abilities to organise themselves, mobilise their peers, engage with powerful adults in their communities and to advocate for ending child marriage. This did involve some costs, in terms of their time and energies, and they faced some negative reactions from their parents, parents of potential brides, and community leaders. But these negative reactions became less common over time and community respect and recognition grew for their actions.

3. CHILD ACTIVISM HELPED STOP CHILD MARRIAGES

Our research suggests that child activism did help to stop child marriages. The research team was told of examples, corroborated by others, where children worked together to stop a particular child marriage. Not all of their actions were successful in stopping a marriage, but their success rate increased over time. Communities and families were more persuaded against child marriage, the children became better networked with key influencers in communities, and

were more able to mobilise the enforcers. There were at least three elements to this success: 1) Families of a potential child bride were often persuaded not to go forward with the marriage, because of the potential for the girl to have further education and because child marriage was illegal; 2) Children were information conduits in very important ways to stop child marriages; 3) Child activism was frequently successful because the children were passionate, committed and – literally – active.

U.S. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Review and update the USAID Vision for Action on ending child marriage and scale up investments in adolescent girls globally.

As we approach 10 years since the release of USAID's "*Ending Child Marriage and Meeting the Needs of Married Children: The USAID Vision for Action*," it is critical the U.S. Government update and renew its commitment to addressing child marriage, ensuring that children are recognised as key stakeholders and leaders at the forefront of change in their own communities. The U.S. Government should also seek to elevate the needs and rights of girls within and across other existing humanitarian and development strategies, policies, and initiatives.

Ensure the meaningful participation of children.

Hearing from child participants in U.S. foreign assistance programs and supporting a platform for their activism not only allows for better design for programmatic impact, but also empowers children to be the future leaders of their communities. Specifically, we recommend the U.S. government:

- Develop guidance for U.S. Missions and Embassies around the world to prioritise the safe and meaningful participation and engagement of children, including child-led groups and networks; and
- Set up children's advisory councils regionally to support the design, monitoring, and evaluation of programming at the mission level.

Appoint high-level leadership to oversee implementation of a whole child approach.

A position complementing the Special Advisor for Children in Adversity—to prioritise child well-being throughout the U.S. foreign aid structure and coordinate across all U.S. government agencies implementing foreign assistance programming for children and young people — would enhance collaboration, effectiveness, and outcomes for girls at risk of child marriage and already married children.

Increase funding for child-focused programs.

Increased, flexible funding and an encouragement to use this funding to address holistic child well-being in both development and humanitarian contexts, including support for child activism against harmful practices, would allow relevant agencies to fund special projects such as research and innovative pilot programs, as well as commingle funding where appropriate to improve programme impact and outcomes for children.

Host a White House Global Children's Summit.

A high-level summit will raise awareness of the challenges facing vulnerable children and families around the globe, as it signals the prioritisation of this issue for other nations and serves as a catalyst for making progress quickly in foreign policy and creating increased capacity for addressing challenges. A Global Summit would also allow for global participation of children and facilitate greater opportunities for children to influence the U.S. foreign policy agenda.

INTRODUCTION



INTRODUCTION

Child marriage sits at the cross-road of intergenerational vulnerability. When a child is married, she or he faces a lifetime of poorer health and educational outcomes and all that this means for their life-long welfare, including increased inter-generational poverty for them and their own children. Above all, they lose the chance to be a child, missing out on all the joy as well as development opportunities that come with that.

Forced to agree to marry because of their family status, for economic reasons, insecurity, or community tradition and social norms, children see the potential risks. The gender disparity is obvious – while boys are also affected, the percentage of girls in child marriage is significantly higher. Children forced into early marriage risk being subject to countless forms of abuse – emotional, physical, sexual, for the rest of their lives. And while they may not be sharing this with an adult, they are often more likely to open up to a peer about their fears or wounds. The 12 million children married each year have peers who know their pain.

In the middle of this grim story I am inspired by the courage, eloquence and commitment of children and youth to end child marriage in their community, to mobilize together to ask for national legislative changes and adequate funding that could change the paradigm – making child marriage illegal and socially unacceptable.

This generation of children and young people is teaching us an important lesson, if we are wise and humble enough to listen. In Bangladesh and Ghana, children are showing courage to face entrenched community taboos and sometimes to be rebuked by parents, elders or other figures of authority. I was inspired by their ability to connect and to develop deep relationships with those in power, to speak their truth in authentic ways and thus to gain respect and grow in the process.

Children have a startling ability to look into the future, into the consequences of our current acts (or lack of action). From fighting against child marriage to standing up to climate change, child activists tell us that adults' poor decisions have long-term costs that they are no longer willing to foot the bill for. They will not be silenced because they will pay the long-term costs.

As adults we shouldn't be tempted to come up with all the answers, but rather to engage with children, across generations, to find the solutions. In this report, you will find countless examples of how child activists are here to help design realistic and applicable plans.

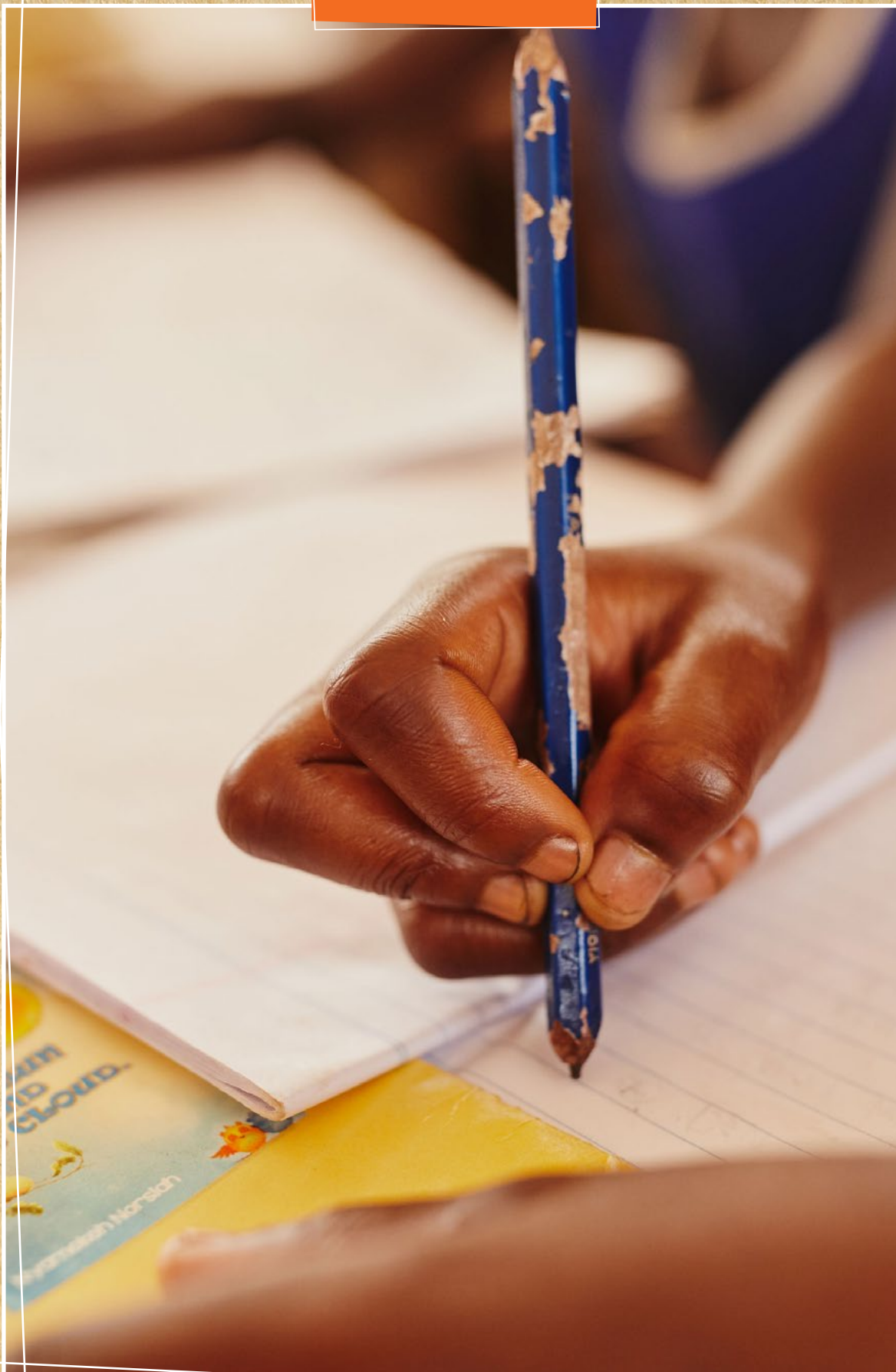
I'm committing to working with children as agents of change – my question is, are you?



Dana Buzducea

Vice-president, Advocacy and External Engagement
World Vision International

FOREWORD



FOREWORD

I am Mary, 17 years of age, from the Children's Parliament in the Northern Region of Ghana. I am delighted to introduce this very important report that seeks to provide opportunities for children, like me, to contribute meaningfully on issues that affect children.

Indeed, child marriage is very common in Ghana, especially in rural communities in the Northern Region where I hail from. Tragically, one in five girls in Ghana marries before their 18th birthday. This cuts short the educational goals of the girl-child.

As an active member of the Children's Parliament, I have learned about the damaging effects of child marriage on girls and, more importantly, how to advocate - as children and young people - to ending this long problem that has done more harm than good to children in my community and the nation at large.

In my school, I formed a child-led advocacy group for children called the Children's Parliament, where we are empowered to lead campaigns against all forms of violence against us. At the Children's Parliament, we engage our parents and other adults responsible for ensuring our rights, and we discuss how we can put an end to violence against children in our communities. The club's leadership team and members identify the emerging issues in our communities and deliberate on these issues, and then engage with key people to help us find lasting solutions to these problems. For example, we have been able to bring back to school young girls who were forced into marriage by involving the Chiefs and other leaders in the community. Fortunately, we have been able to get a lot of support from community leaders, like our Chiefs, queen mothers, faith leaders, as well as the political leaders in the district.

In the club, we also focus on teenage pregnancy, which is one of the leading causes of child marriage in our communities. We raise awareness so children can learn about how to care for themselves during the period of transition into adulthood. As part of our culture, adults - especially our parents - do not educate children about sex. We have identified this, at the club, as one of the causes of teenage pregnancies and ultimately child marriage in our communities in the Ghanaian society.

As part of our action, we petitioned the Municipal Chief Executive of our community, on behalf of all children, to register our displeasure at the increasing number of child marriage cases. We requested him to take necessary actions to end child marriage. We also organised girls' soccer clinics for girls in rural communities and we, as child ambassadors, use these games as a means of getting in contact with other children to educate them on the role they can play to help end child marriage. Through drama, we have able to educate parents and children on the negative effects of child marriage and, more importantly, who to report cases of child marriage to at the school and community level.



This report is another important channel to make known children's activism to end child marriage, to promote more actions to eradicate it, and to empower more children to make a change in their communities.

Mary

Young Leader, Children's Parliament, Ghana

BACKGROUND



BACKGROUND

In recent years, a new wave of child activists² has emerged globally and locally: from the Fridays for Future climate strikes inspired by Greta Thunberg, to school children's protests in Dhaka, Bangladesh for improved road safety. Children and young people are standing up to make a change. They are not waiting to be invited by adults to participate in policy debate, but are making and claiming these spaces (McMellon and Tisdall, 2020).

For the purposes of this report, activism is defined as "action on behalf of a cause, action that goes beyond what is conventional or routine" (Martin, 2007, p. 19). A striking commonality across children who participated in this research project was their commitment to take direct action to stop child marriage. They chose to confront the underlying social norms and other causes that lead to child marriages and violence against children generally.

Globally, physical, sexual and emotional violence affects about a billion children. International and national legislation, implementation and financial commitments have not adequately addressed the attitudes, values and practices that perpetuate and justify violence (World Health Organization, 2020). In order to respond to this, the international community agreed to include ambitious targets to eliminate violence against children in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. These include targets to "significantly reduce all forms of violence and related death rates everywhere" (Target 16.1) and "eliminate all forms of violence against all women and girls in public and private spheres, including trafficking and sexual and other types of exploitation" (Target 5.2) (UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2015).

Ending child marriage is part of this agenda to eliminate violence against children and women. Child marriage is defined by the international development community as a formal or informal union between two people in which one or both parties are younger than 18 years (Wodon et al., 2017). Engaging children in marriage before the age of 18 is a severe breach of human rights, as enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (UNICEF, 2018). Most of the UN Member States have established legal measures criminalising child marriage, primarily by setting a minimum age. However, in 2018 there were 23 countries with competing legal pluralist structures that allowed children to be married before the age of 18 without requiring any special permissions or concessions, breaching several international human rights standards (Arthur et al., 2018). In 2021, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, there are concerns that child marriage has increased as a result of the pandemic's repercussions.

The regions with the highest prevalence of child marriage are sub-Saharan Africa, where 40 percent of children are married before the age of 18, and South Asia, where 30 percent are married. In their 2020 publication, UNICEF (2020a) reports that, in Bangladesh, 51 percent of girls were married by the age of 18 years and 18 percent by the age of 15 years. This equates to 38 million girls being married before the age of 18 years. In Ghana, UNICEF (2020b) reported 19 percent of girls married as children, with

² For the purposes of this report, a child refers to people under the age of 18, following Article 1 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. The activists who participated in this research emphasised the importance of being children in their activism and adults' responses to it and hence the use of 'child activists' in this report.

2.3 million married before the age of 18 years. Of those, 600,000 were married before the age of 15 years. In both countries, child marriage is not legal, although there is a controversial exception in Bangladeshi law, where a court can approve the marriage based on the best interests of the child under the age of 18.

Child marriage is associated with gender inequality, poverty, lack of access to educational opportunities and patriarchal beliefs that undermine girls' perceived value within society (Groves et al., 2021; Girls Not Brides, 2020; Ahonsi et al., 2019). Families may arrange child marriages because they perceive such marriages as offering girls protection and economic security. Girls themselves can have various degrees of autonomy and choice in marriage decisions. But evidence shows that child marriage tends to have negative consequences, including placing girls at higher risk of violence, abuse and exploitation, making it less likely for them to complete formal schooling and to take up economic opportunities, increasing their social isolation and damaging their mental health, and posing risks to their health as a result of early sexual relations, pregnancy and motherhood (Girls Not Brides, 2020; Ahonsi et al., 2019; Efevbera et al., 2017; Islam and Gagnon, 2014). Even though child marriage affects both girls and boys, evidence shows that girls are far more

likely than boys to be forced into child marriage, reflecting longstanding and widespread patriarchal discrimination, oppression and gender inequalities (Ahonsi et al., 2019; Efevbera et al., 2017). Furthermore, child marriage places girls at higher risk of physical, sexual and emotional violence within marriage than married boys (Girls Not Brides, 2020; Arthur et al., 2018).

In order to address these problems, states, civil society organisations and multilateral organisations have developed long-term strategies, implemented on both the local and global levels. Common features of these strategies include: establishing and implementing laws and policies that prohibit child marriage; providing holistic support to families and children affected by child marriage; mobilising communities to change attitudes and behaviours towards child marriage; strengthening education programmes and raising awareness about the negative consequences of child marriage; and empowering children to take action against this practice and make a change (Girls Not Brides, 2014).

Empowerment is a popularised term amongst child-focused agencies and institutions seeking to end child marriage. For this report, the following working definition is used:

Empowerment is when children and young people have the ability and the power to take action. Empowerment happens when all aspects of the ecology (in the community) support children and young people to grow - focusing on their capacities and strengths - and provide opportunities for children and young people to serve and contribute in meaningful ways to their communities.

(World Vision International, 2014, p. 3).



For instance, World Vision's Child Protection and Advocacy Framework to End Child Marriage explicitly focuses on the empowerment of girls as critical decision-makers and agents of change. The Framework aims to achieve long-lasting results by giving girls the space and skills to express their views in all aspects of strategies to combat the practice of child marriage. Girls are supported through enhanced educational opportunities, self-reliance, transformation, autonomy and empowerment through leadership training and practical experiences, which identify and address gender inequality. This support recognises that children can produce positive outcomes; they need to be provided with information to know their rights and be equipped with tools and knowledge.

Similarly, as one of its core strategies to prevent child marriage, the UN Global Partnership to End Violence recommends empowering girls with information, skills and support networks for them to engage in community-based mobilisation efforts (World Health Organization, 2016). Girls Not Brides (2014) also considers involving children in community mobilisation critical for ending child marriage; they need to be listened to and their views should inform strategies and actions. This entails increasing girls' awareness of their rights, developing peer-to-peer and collective efforts to strengthen girls' positive social roles, and supporting them to become powerful role models in their communities, inspiring other children to stand up for their rights.

This report explores what happens when some of these recommendations are put into practice. Evidence from Bangladesh and Ghana is consistently showing the power of girls, as well as boys, to stop child marriages for themselves and their peers. Research was undertaken with child activists, which had grown out of longstanding participation groups, Child Forums in Bangladesh and Children's Parliament in Ghana, supported by World Vision local offices. When starting the researching, child activists reported that they had stopped 72 marriages and, in Ghana, child activists there said they had stopped five marriages. The research did not seek to verify these numbers but are provided here for a sense of scale; the research did verify that the children were perceived by themselves and others as having taking (often successful) action to stop child marriages.

Below, the report outlines the research methodology undertaken on child activism to stop child marriage, with these groups of child activists in Bangladesh and Ghana. The report then outlines common components of child actions to stop child marriage found in this research. It discusses the research project's findings under three themes: the power of collaboration; the child activists' individual development and community development; and considering why child activism was so successful at stopping child marriages. The report then concludes and makes recommendations for policy and practice.

METHODOLOGY



METHODOLOGY

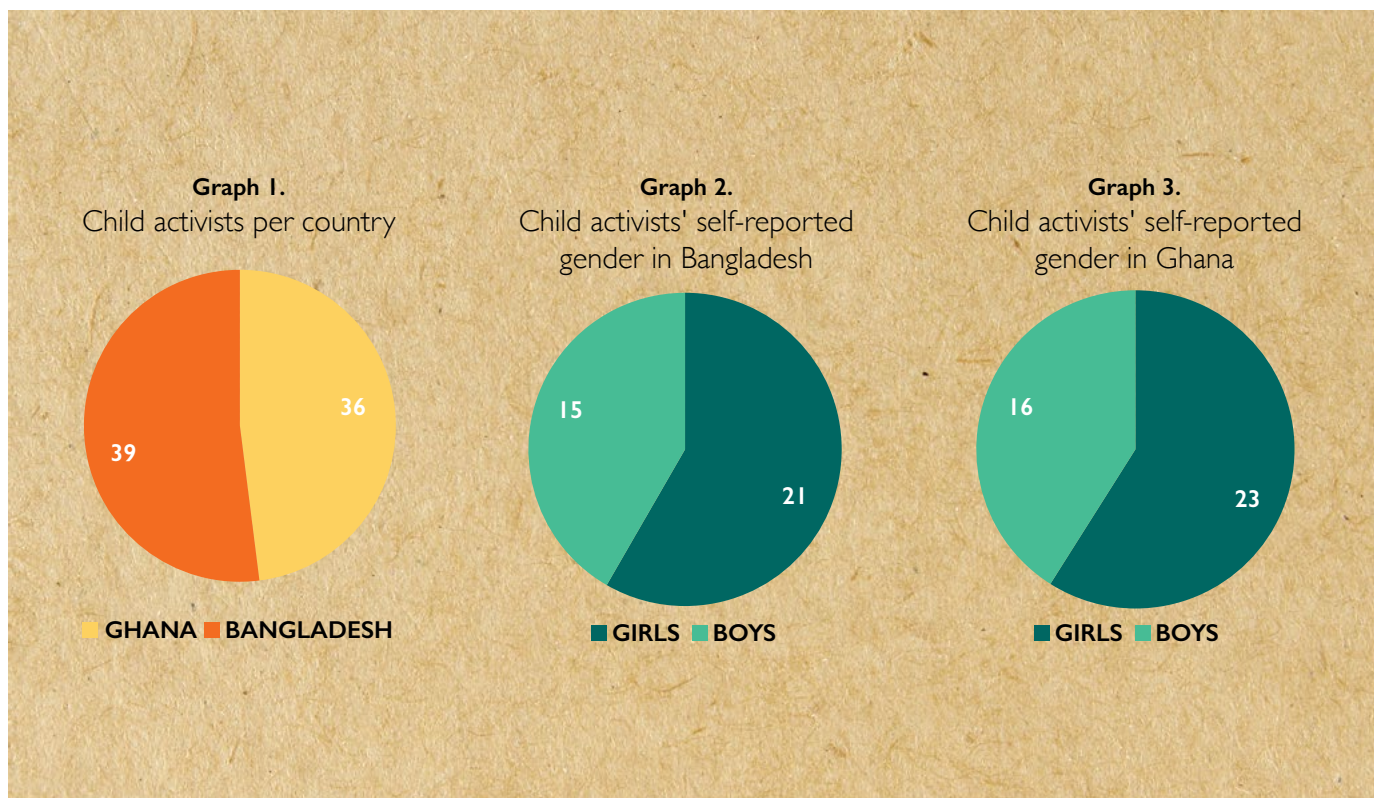
The research project explored the processes and outcomes of children's activism to stop child marriages, in Bangladesh and Ghana, from the perspectives of the child activists, (potential) child brides and community members. The project had three research questions:



We worked with groups of child activists in Bangladesh and Ghana, supported by World Vision. The child activists were involved in long standing arrangements where children come together locally to learn about and act on children's human rights, known as Child Forums in Bangladesh, and as Children's Parliaments in Ghana. The team approached these groups to participate because the children had taken action to stop potential child brides being married in the 12 months before the research.

Groups were selected as being 'critical cases': following Flyvbjerg's (2010) suggestion for case study selection, the researchers looked for groups that would illuminate why and how such child activism could be successful. In Bangladesh two locations were selected. We anticipated there would be potential differences between rural and urban locations, due to factors such as digital access (e.g. Wi-Fi reach, mobile/smart phone coverage) and how easy it was to travel locally. However, it was found that potential differences between rural and urban locations were not significant for the findings. In Ghana, the research team worked with groups in two locations near Tamale, a rural area in north Ghana. Between the Child Forums in Bangladesh and the Children's Parliaments in Ghana, there were certain similarities in their ways of working, objectives and organisational settings, but they also had contrasts in terms of their social, cultural and legal contexts. With this combination of similarities and differences, the research anticipated rich and diverse views on and experiences of child activism (Bennett and Elman, 2006).

In total, the project involved 75 child activists (44 who identified as girls and 31 who identified as boys): 36 (21 girls and 15 boys) between the ages of 12 and 17, in Bangladesh; and 39 (23 girls and 16 boys) between the ages of 10 and 17, in Ghana.



These activists were recruited through their Child Forums and Parliaments, with the support of their local WorldVision facilitators. This resulted in very widespread research participation by child activists who are currently involved in these groups, but not from children who had discontinued their involvement. The child activists typically meet together in groups, with both girls and boys, and so the researchers brought together children in their familiar groups for group discussions. In Bangladesh, a few girls (and particularly those who were both activists and had risked being married) asked to have girls-only groups, which were organised for them. The research was undertaken before the COVID-19 pandemic, so face to face research was possible.

After introductions and ice-breakers, the child activists were invited to fill in eight questions on a self-report questionnaire. This method sought individualised information on the child activists' own participation trajectory and the benefits and challenges of their activism for themselves and for their communities. The subsequent focus group discussions concentrated on the actions taken to prevent child marriages, with a series of activities and prompts. A core activity was detailing the sequences of events collectively on large pieces of paper and then discussing the timing, who was involved,

and what facilitated or made it difficult to stop a child marriage. The focus groups lasted approximately two hours, but could have gone on much longer given the enthusiastic contributions of the child activists. As anticipated from the research methods literature (e.g. Morgan, 2012), the mutual exchange between child activists provided rich insights as they raised a range of viewpoints, conversing with each other as well as with the facilitating researcher(s).

Interviews were undertaken with potential child brides and parents/ family members of children whose marriages had been stopped by the child actions. These interviews were face-to-face and semi-structured, to learn sensitively from these participants' views and experiences (Potter and Hepburn, 2012; Holstein and Gubrium, 2011). Ten girls (six in Bangladesh and four in Ghana), whose child marriages had been stopped, were interviewed. Separately, research team members interviewed two parents in Bangladesh and two families (adult members only) in Ghana. These interviews were very illuminating but the numbers were lower than originally anticipated. Other methods and access routes would likely be needed in order to gain a broader range of participants who were potential child brides and their parents/ family members.

A further 22 adults were interviewed who were identified by the child activists as important for their activism (13 in Ghana and nine in Bangladesh). These adults included local politicians, civil service officers, police officers, and adult facilitators of the Child Forums and Children's Parliaments. (A further six interviews were held with professionals in Ghana, but these were not adults identified by the child activists, and thus provided background information for the project only.) Related media reports and documents were collected.

The fieldwork was undertaken in the participants' preferred language. Most interactions involved one of the research team and a local translator. These interactions were recorded and the audio-recordings transcribed and then translated into English. In both Bangladesh and Ghana, research support was provided by people with local knowledge and who were bilingual in the respective languages (see Acknowledgements section). This allowed for findings and conclusions to be checked for translation and interpretation. The quantitative data was analysed through descriptive statistics, to provide basic information about the child activists and their trajectories. Qualitative data was analysed thematically, looking to themes and patterns associated with the research questions (Guest et al., 2012). A coding framework was developed, starting with individual coding of the same data by at least two research members, followed by discussion across the research team, before finalising the framework. We

looked across the data, as well as within participant types and where participants were connected (e.g. a girl whose marriage had been stopped and her parent, or a group of child activists and the adults they identified as important for their activism). Data was considered by gender, and this is referred to when relevant in discussing the findings. The diagrammes of child actions when stopping a marriage were photographed, considered on their own and together with the associated discussions within the focus groups where they were created.

The project's ethical approval was given by the Research Ethics Committee of the School of Social and Political Science, University of Edinburgh. The project considered a substantial range of ethical issues, from information and consent, to safeguarding and child protection. The research team followed the key principles of ethical research involving children (ERIC), to ensure the dignity, well-being and rights of the participants (Graham et al., 2013). Of particular note for this project was that participants provided written consent, alongside recognising that consent is an ongoing process that can be reviewed at any fieldwork stage (Kustatscher, 2017). Confidentiality and anonymity for the participants were important principles, with the exception should the researcher(s) be concerned that someone was at risk of significant harm. If there were concerns, referral pathways were in place through the local World Vision offices.

SETTING THE RESEARCH CONTEXT

Child participants in this research were members of the Child Forums in Bangladesh and Children's Parliaments in Ghana, both supported by World Vision. These structures have been established as part of the Children's Participation and Advocacy strategies in these two country's offices. They both aim to build meaningful children's participation and provide children with the space to come together and look for social change at the community and national level. Children self-nominate themselves to participate in these groups, and then they elect their child representatives. Children attend workshops and capacity-building events to learn about children's

rights, leadership skills, advocacy, and campaigning. Finally, child members decide the topics in which they want to engage and advocate for change. In Ghana, members of the Children's Parliament wanted to campaign for ending child marriage and supporting girls' empowerment. In Bangladesh, the Child Forum opted for advocating ending child labour and child marriage. Most of the children's initiatives are connected to the World Vision global campaign entitled 'It takes a World to End Violence against Children'.

AN OVERVIEW



AN OVERVIEW: CHILD ACTIVISM TO STOP CHILD MARRIAGE IN BANGLADESH AND GHANA

This section provides an overview of the child actions to stop child marriage, in both Bangladesh and Ghana. Subsequent sections of the report then discuss key aspects of these processes.

In every focus group, child activists outlined the key steps. A number of similarities emerged, in terms of processes, timelines and the players involved.

The actions tended to have five key stages:

1. receiving or collecting information about a potential child marriage,
2. meeting with members of the Child Forum (Bangladesh) or Children's Parliament (Ghana) to develop a strategy for their activism,
3. mobilising their connections with adults who could help them stop a child marriage,
4. visiting the potential bride's family, and
5. celebrating stopping a potential child marriage or learning from failures.

Stage 3 and 4 were sometimes reversed in their order. These stages are exemplified by the Figures below, one from Bangladesh and one from Ghana.

Figure 1: Poster by Child Forum members from Bangladesh laying out the steps they used to prevent child marriage in their community. English translations were inserted by the researchers later.

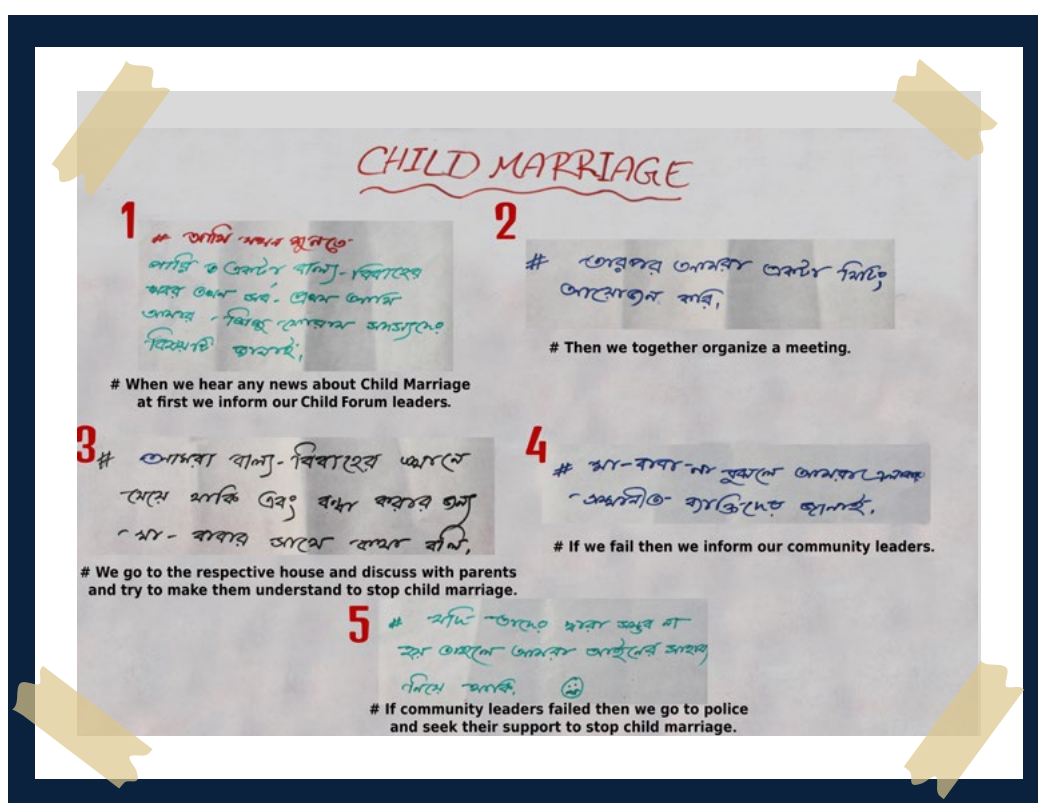
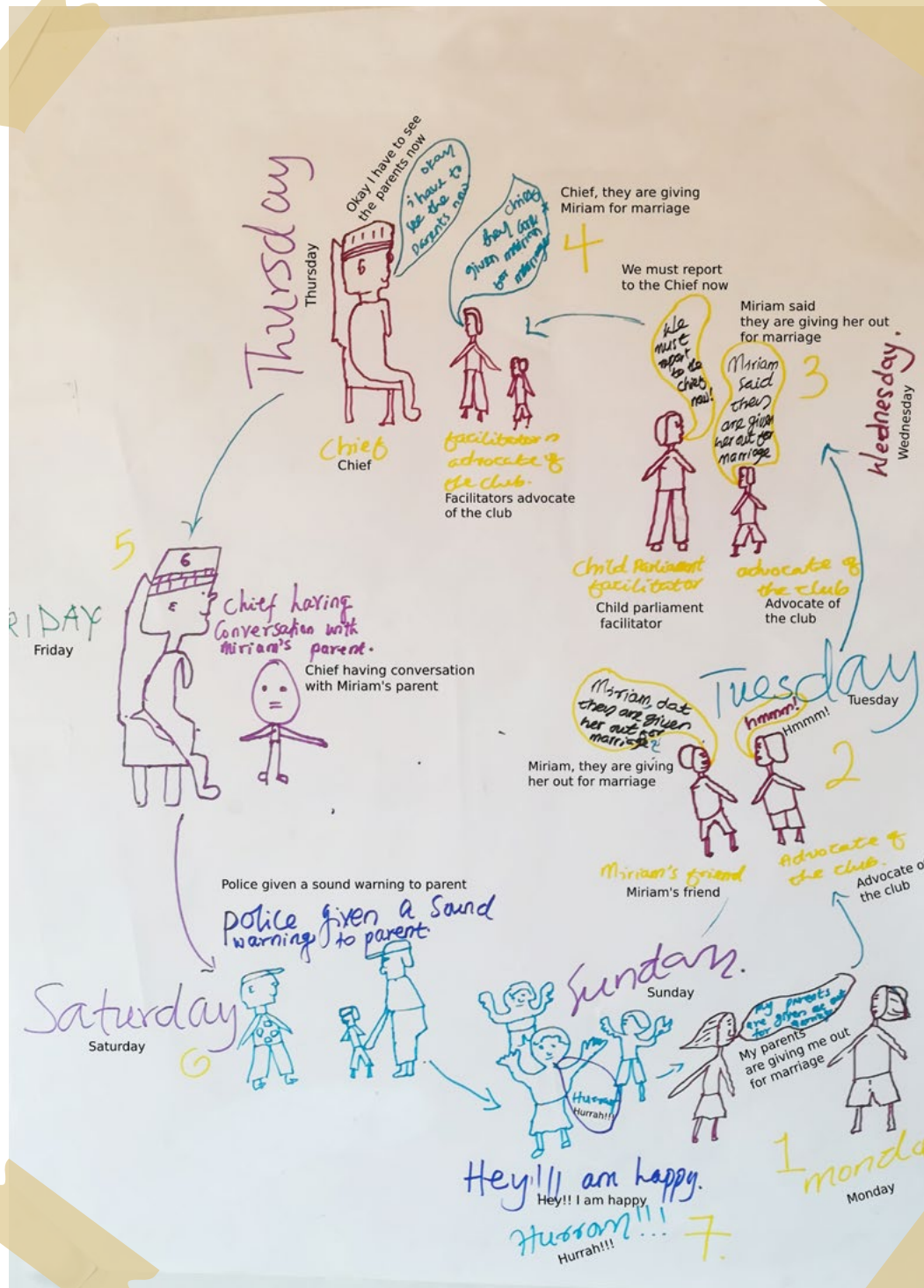


Figure 2: Poster by Children's Parliament members from Ghana describing the timeline of their actions to stop child marriage.



STAGE 1: Receiving or collecting information about a potential child marriage

Children found out about a possible child marriage through several means, including: (a) girls self-reporting their own situations to members of the Child Forum or Children's Parliament; (b) children receiving information from classmates when a girl failed to attend school or stopped other social interactions with her peers; (c) children reporting cases of female relatives who had been offered in marriage by their family; and (d) potential child brides reporting their concerns to an NGO staff member or educational personnel.

Child activists then had to take immediate action since marriages often occurred in a few days. In Bangladesh and Ghana, the child activists frequently knew of an impending marriage before the authorities due to their peer networks and community contacts, and from their own family situations. As they repeatedly succeeded in stopping marriages, their success rate and awareness raising activities helped to generate further reports of child marriages, and so helped them to stop more child marriages.

STAGE 2: Meeting together to develop a strategy for their activism

Once the child activists received a report or heard about a potential marriage, they discussed, deliberated and prepared an action strategy within their Child Forum or Children's Parliament. They usually assigned the task to a small group of three to five child activists. The activities were carried out by girls' groups or by groups of girls and boys. The girls were sometimes accompanied by male peers for safety and to adhere to gender norms of girls travelling through and being in public spaces. In developing their strategy, child activists in both Bangladesh and Ghana often enlisted the engagement and support

of adult advisers in their communities at this stage.

In Bangladesh, this stage also frequently included investigation into the girl's age and access to official documentation, such as a birth certificates or school enrolment data. The age criterion was key to dismantling the wedding plan, as generally girls under the age of 18 years should not legally be married in Bangladesh. Parents sometimes did not tell the truth about the girl's age, so a key strategy of the child activists was to locate the girl's birth certificate in order to ascertain her exact age.

STAGE 3: Mobilising their connections with adults who could help them stop a child marriage

In Bangladesh and Ghana, child activists had made long-term efforts to connect with influential adults in their communities (e.g. local Chiefs, school principals, NGO staff and police officers) in order to draw on their support, when needed. Child activists used their connections with influential adults. Families who were reluctant to listen to the child activists due to their age and position in society, were more likely to listen when community leaders and local authorities were also involved.

The local authorities had come to appreciate the benefits of collaborating with child activists. For example, Bangladeshi local authorities relied on child activists' investigations to track down other official records showing the girl's age and providing the evidence needed. In Ghana child activists contacted influential adults on days three and four in order to request support for their actions as can be seen in Figure 2.

STAGE 4: Visiting the potential bride's family

The strategies used to reach the potential bride's family varied between Bangladesh and Ghana.

In Bangladesh, the child activists often visited the family to speak with the father or both parents of the potential child bride. They presented their case, demanding the family cancel the wedding because it was illegal under national law. Furthermore, they sought to persuade families about the harms of child marriage and the benefits of keeping girls in school.

If these conversations were not effective, the child activists asked police officers or local government administrative staff to accompany them and negotiate with the family again.

In Ghana, Figure 2 illustrates how children and young people frequently requested the local Chief and then sometimes the police to visit the family to stop the marriage in Ghana.

STAGE 5: Celebrating stopping a potential child marriage or learning from failures

Child activists described most of their actions as successful and they celebrated these victories. Success was framed as the girl returning to school shortly after the intervention and, to the best of the child activists' knowledge, remaining unmarried, at least for the time being.

There were examples in both countries where child actions were unsuccessful, and the girls were married despite the child activists' efforts. Children acknowledged their frustration, in such cases, but they continued to work to ensure that other child marriages were stopped.

COMMUNITY INFLUENCE

The child activism did not stop at direct actions to stop individual child marriages. The children were also motivated to change attitudes in their communities. In Ghana, child activists engaged in large-scale community events where they gave presentations, showed videos to and enacted dramas for their parents, invited dignitaries and the public more generally. The child activists organised activities for their peers, including football (soccer) clinics where girls were invited to play and informally

the child activists would take the opportunity to inform their peers about the negative impacts of child marriage. In Bangladesh, child activists similarly used World Vision's community-based activities and opportunities to discuss with their peers. Further, child marriage was particularly addressed within groups focusing on girls' life skills.

RESULTS

The research results told us three main things about the empowerment of the child activists. One, that child activists were successful because of their collaboration between themselves and with adults. Two, child activists invested their commitment, time and energy, resulting in their own development and community change. Three, these elements came together so that the children were increasingly successful in stopping child marriages, both in their direct actions and in changing community attitudes.

THE POWER OF COLLABORATION

In our research project, child activism was highly relational. Child activists relied on their fellow child activists to act as a group. Rather than acting alone, they tapped into and mobilised local power-holders to take action. The child activists were connected to those in power by facilitating adults, who brokered these relationships. These facilitating adults were teachers, school principals and NGO workers, who were familiar to and supportive of the children and their actions. These elements were key to the child activists' success – and their increasing reputation – in stopping child marriages.

Child activists individually expressed their commitment, their willingness to act, and their passion for stopping child marriages. But their actions invariably involved networking amongst themselves and frequently acting as a group. As seen in Figures 1 and 2 in the previous section, child activists rallied together once they heard of a potential child marriage. This is exemplified by these two quotations from each context:

Whenever we get any information about a child marriage, we committee members sit together to discuss about it. Then we discuss our course of action to stop that marriage. (Bangladesh, Focus Group 1)

When it is about our colleague being given out to marry, you first gather in the Children's Parliament to discuss like how to engage her parents first – to inform her parents about the dangers involved, if they also should allow the child to go through the process. So after the discussion, we organise some of our teachers to walk us to the parents of these children to inform and sensitise them. (Ghana, Focus Group A)

This coming together was regularly noted in their activism stories. The Children's Parliament or the Child Forum provided them with a familiar space to gather, where they were used to coming together and had already established relationships. In these spaces, they could share their concerns about a potential child marriage and plan what to do next. Several child activists expressed the strong relational bonds they have formed with others in their group. A particularly fervent example is provided by a Child Forum member in Bangladesh:

Over the years we have developed such a bond among ourselves that I cannot live without them. I cannot leave them even if I want to. This is a bond developed with them. (Focus Group 3)

Child activists valued these connections and these relational bonds added to their commitment and their willingness to act, even if it were at times difficult. The group gave them strength individually and collectively.

We asked in both Bangladesh and Ghana about the mix of boys and girls in child activism. There were gendered norms in both contexts about how boys and girls should be and act. Further, most (but not all) examples told to us involved potential girl brides rather than underage grooms. With some pride, girls told us that the boys were involved in the activism too, thought ending child marriage was important, and made distinct contributions. A female Child Forum member explained:

We enjoy the support we get from our male colleagues. One cannot accomplish anything alone. Unity is required. When we girls cannot do a thing on our own it is the male colleagues who extend their help to us. They give us information. We like their support very much. (Bangladesh, Focus Group 3)

Given the importance of the collective space, the child activists were already familiar with working in mixed gender groups, as that was the part of how the Child Forums and Children's Parliaments functioned generally. Further, boys' involvement was noted as an essential ingredient in Bangladesh, to assist the girls to act. As one female Child Forum member explained to us:

When we make visits to families, our male colleagues accompany us. When they go with us we girls feel supported. This gives us more power. (Bangladesh, Focus Group 3)

Thus the presence of boys, and going as a group, assisted girls' physical mobility in their communities. As quickly travelling to people was a key ingredient to stopping a child marriage, the collaboration between both boys and girls helped girls to act.

Collaboration was also important between child activists and the key influencers and enforcers in their communities. In Ghana, children brought the information of a potential child marriage to local power-holders, with the intention to get these adults to act. This is exemplified by an exchange between Children's Parliament members:

Children's Parliament member A: First of all, we have to go to the Chief, who is the highest among them. So if you go to tell them [Chief] anything, they will act on it and, maybe, call the parents or any meeting concerning child marriage. If he doesn't, like, understand, then we have to come back and decide again.

Kay (one of the research team): So you come back?

Children's Parliament member A: Yeah, we come back then go to see him again. If he doesn't understand, we go and report to the police.

...

Children's Parliament member B: Some of the police respect children more than grown-ups, so we as children if we move to the police they will respect us and they may listen to us and solve the problem.

Children's Parliament member A: We also always go with our facilitators. So our facilitators always do the talking, but not we the children ... as well. (Ghana, Focus Group B)

The children thus often had to be tenacious and persistent, in going to additional people who they could persuade to act. The children's actions were sometimes not appreciated by adults, who considered it inappropriate for children to take on such responsibilities, and were not always willing to act upon the information. At other times, children's information might be more influential on adults – as with the police referred to above – than other grown-ups, because children were sharing information based on their own experience and from their peers. Further, in Ghana, the children were described as apolitical and thus better able to mobilise the local Chiefs. The children could have some advantages as children, in galvanising adults to act.

In Bangladesh, children were able to be more visible in their activism, acting directly to stop a child marriage. But their activism also drew on inter-generational relations, in order to mobilise those with the power to act. This was demonstrated by examples when children's activism was **not** successful. Sometimes children's initial direct action with families was not sufficient and they needed to call on other adults to help. As a Child Forum member described:

Then, we tried to convince the family. But they did not listen to us, rather they yelled at us and passed some bad comments. We did not have any cell phones with us. Using the cell phone of the rickshaw puller, we contacted the UNO³, who immediately informed the police. We stopped her marriage. (Bangladesh, Focus Group 1)

3 UNO is the abbreviation of Upazila Nirbahi Officer who is a mid-level officer of the Bangladesh Administrative Service.

As the incident unfolded subsequently, the children went to the police and then travelled with the police back to the family. Backed by the police's power, the children's intervention was ultimately successful and the marriage was stopped.

The child activists' ability to mobilise local enforcers and powerful community leaders grew over time. It was fostered by the Children's Parliaments and Child Forums, where adult staff helped forge the connections between children and adults in authority. Once the connections were made, these then typically grew stronger with mutual respect from both children and these power-holders. For example, a Child Forum member explained:

I would like to inform you that the World Vision Bangladesh arranged a meeting between the police and the Child Forum members. In that meeting they gave us a contact number - 199. We use this number whenever we need their help. The number has also been printed in the back page of our booklet. With this number any one of us can get in touch. (Bangladesh, Focus Group 2)

The children spoke with considerable pride about their ability to mobilise adults to act to end child marriages. This suggests that these relations were not typical for them, and so were ones that they appreciated.

The power of inter-generational connections was further demonstrated by examples where children wanted to act – but were unable to mobilise the collaborations in order to stop child marriages. One girl, whose marriage had been stopped, wanted to assist others:

Girl: I have gone to my friend who is involved in child marriage to advise her to leave child marriage and

come back to school.

Kay: Are you able to tell us more on how that worked for your friend?

Girl: Yeah, she tried but she couldn't.

Kay: So the marriage went ahead?

Girl: Yes, I was alone and the people wouldn't listen to me, if I alone go there. (Ghana, Interview)

In this example, the girl was not a member of a Children's Parliament. She was motivated to act and sought to advise her friend. While that solidarity and information sharing in itself may have been meaningful, the young woman was unable to stop her friend's marriage. Similarly, another young woman whose marriage had been stopped spoke of communicating with her friends about the problems of child marriage but her friendship group was unable to take their concerns further. She and her friends lacked the space of a Children's Parliament, the relational support of peers and adults, and the networked connections, to turn their concerns and communications into activism.

Thus, child activism in our study required collaboration. While they were individually motivated, children were activists as a group. They were able to act because they had the familiar spaces of the Child Forums and Children's Parliaments to gather and then leap into action. The adult facilitators of the Forums and Parliaments had established connections between the child activists and powerful adults. The children were then able to draw on those connections, so that together they could stop child marriages.

CHILDREN'S ACTIVISM LEADING TO THEIR OWN AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

Children's activism was inspired by their wish to end child marriage, through their direct actions to stop individual marriages and other activities to encourage community and societal change. As they invested their time in their activism, child activists used and developed their individual abilities to organise themselves, mobilise their peers, engage with powerful adults in their communities and to advocate for ending child marriage. This did involve some costs, in terms of their time and energies, and they faced

some negative reactions from their parents, parents of potential brides, and community leaders. These negative reactions became less common over time and community respect and recognition grew for their actions. These findings are further elaborated below.

Child activists told us of the considerable impact on them personally, of their involvement in child activism. As a typical example across child activists, a Children's

Parliament member from Ghana reflected:

It makes us identify our potential. Once we speak and find you're somebody who can speak in public, it makes you develop this skill. Also, it widens our scope of knowledge by educating each other on issues, such as child marriage. (Focus Group A)

Often, children spoke of their personal development from activism, which they could then apply to other spheres. For instance, a Children's Parliament member noted:

To me, [activism] gives me the confidence to handle other situations well, like speaking in public and in class. (Ghana, Focus Group A)

In Bangladesh, child activists shared the same sense of pride in their attainments as their Ghanaian peers. Involvement in child activism was reported to give the activists additional confidence and skills, of which they were proud. The self-report questionnaires consistently and emphatically reported such personal development.

Child activists from both Bangladesh and Ghana cited positive impacts as a result of acquiring new knowledge, skills and the necessary tools to take action to protect their peers from child marriage-related issues. For instance, all the child activists stated a belief that child marriage was a damaging practice that needs to be eradicated, despite being born in a society that was mostly unaware of its adverse consequences. Child activists frequently reported that many of their parents had accepted child marriage as something normal and thus not to be questioned. Child activists pointed out that many adults had questioned the children's knowledge and ability to understand the problems around child marriage, although the child activists felt that they learned how to deal with and overcome those challenges. As a Children's Parliament member explained:

It also challenges us to do research, because we can't go and talk about things [that] when asked we can't answer. We have to know what we go and talk to people [about]. (Ghana, Focus Group 4)

Children thus were challenged by adults' scepticism to enhance their information and research skills further, in order to have persuasive evidence.

While individually children felt they had benefitted from being involved in activism, they predominantly discussed activism as a collective activity. For example, a Child Forum member explained:

There is a good understanding among us – and we have power. Whenever an issue comes, we sit together

and keep in contact with each other. We discuss and debate over issues before making any final decision. (Bangladesh, Focus Group 3).

According to participants, this collective work was also recognised by their communities, amplifying their self-worth. For instance, a Child Forum member asserted:

Community people value us and honour them. That means we feel proud. We feel honoured. We are doing good work. (Bangladesh, Focus Group 1).

Most participants agreed that they were motivated to act due to a sense of personal and collective responsibility to challenge unfairness and inequalities. A recurrent answer across participating child activists was that they were inspired by others to be involved in activism and derived a growing sense of solidarity with others, built on recognition that child marriage can affect everyone, including the child activist. Very similar findings were found in both Bangladesh and Ghana, as exemplified by these quotations below:

Some of us we do it because it is an opportunity for us to help our colleagues to get saved. Even though we were not the ones going through it, one day it might affect us, we have to start it, to save other children in order to save ourselves. (Ghana, Children's Parliament member, Focus Group A)

I have some perceptions generated at that time that maybe these children are coming to my house to stop my child marriage, why am I not? Maybe I can also be motivated to stop some other marriages in my community. So, I was just inspired and motivated. (Bangladesh, Child Forum member, Interview)

Children's activism could thus be seeking to save themselves, by lessening their own future risk of child marriage. The research team had under-recognised, before undertaking the project, that a number of child activists had been potential child brides, and that experience has inspired them to become activists to help others in similar situations to themselves. Children's activism was for themselves and their peers, as well as for their families and the community.

Adults similarly expressed how children developed skills and confidence through their activist activities. For instance, a local government official in Bangladesh said: "They are kids, but educated. They speak convincingly." Similarly, in Ghana, a school teacher reflected on this and how it motivated other parents:

So when they see these young children in gatherings,

sensitising them, articulating themselves and confident, some of the parents get motivated – they would be like ‘Wow! What if that was my child?’ So, they always want to support the children ... Some of the parents get motivated, and feel like ‘my child should be part of this education; my child should be part of those making change in the community’. (Ghana, Interview)

In both these quotations, the adults are appreciative of the child activists’ ability to frame their ideas articulately – perhaps through adult language and modes. This gives the children a certain authority to speak and for adults to listen. Information and education was thus a form of power, which children could use to influence adults.

WHY DID CHILD ACTIVISM HELP STOP CHILD MARRIAGES?

Our research suggests that child activism did help to stop child marriages. The research team was told of examples, corroborated by others, where children worked together to stop a particular child marriage. Not all of their actions were successful in stopping a marriage, but their success rate increased over time. As time went on, the communities and families were more persuaded against child marriage, the children became better networked with key influencers in communities, and were more able to mobilise the enforcers. There were at least four elements to this success.

First, the research suggests that families of a potential child bride were often persuaded not to go forward with the marriage, because of the potential for the girl to have further education and because child marriage was illegal. The ‘pull’ of girls’ education was an unexpected finding for our research, particularly as it was so consistently stated by all participant types – child activists, potential brides and their families, and key stakeholders. The perception that a particular girl’s continued education was worthwhile, that the girl might learn a useful trade, that it would improve the girl’s and family’s future life by education, were frequently noted as persuasive reasons not to go forward with a marriage. Child activists often concluded their narrative of an action to stop a child marriage, by saying that the girl was back in school. For example, in Focus Group 3 in Bangladesh, the example ended with two related outcomes:

Child Forum member A: Then the parents realised that they were about to do a big harm to their daughter.

Child Forum member B: She is with us now, studying.

While the power of education was strong, children and family members often cited different ways in which girl’s access to education had been restricted. As known from other research (Ahonsi et al., 2019; Kamal et al., 2015) families were often arranging marriages to address their family poverty. Family members and potential brides

both looked for practical assistance, to be able to avoid a child marriage, in the girls learning a trade or having some financial assistance. Family members also were often concerned about protecting girls’ reputation and the problems of sexual harassment (called ‘eve teasing’ in Bangladesh), sexual or romantic relations that led them to thinking marriage was the solution. There were numerous examples from adult participants, of family members wanting officials to take responsibility for keeping their child safe if she were not to marry. These issues were presented as individual problems but have structural and societal solutions.

The research was undertaken in two countries where child marriage was illegal (with some exceptions allowed in Bangladesh). While this report thus cannot comment on the power of child activism in contexts that did not have the legal backing, this legal structure was a ‘push’ against child marriage. The law was a lever for attitudinal change, with community members increasingly becoming aware that child marriage was no longer allowed. The law was also a lever for the children to use to mobilise local power-holders. In the research, local enforcers expressed at times certain frustrations about how the courts worked or their capacity to intervene. All noted that the law went only so far: when asked about cases where child activism was not successful, the researchers were frequently told it was because the families had moved out of the area and the marriage had taken place elsewhere, out of the purview of the local law enforcement. But if the marriage was taking place locally, the children were able to call on the police, the chiefs in Ghana and the local government officials in Bangladesh, for them to honour their responsibilities to enforce the law.

Second, children were information conduits in very important ways to stop child marriages. Child activists were frequently the first to hear about their peers being married. They could thus be the first to pass this information onto others. Particularly in Bangladesh,



children became skilled detectives in locating key evidence. This is exemplified by this description:

We went there. Although the UNO was very busy, he listened to us. We informed him that we have heard that a child marriage is going to take place. He advised us to be sure about the girl. Then we gave him the name of the school where the girl was studying. We called the Headmaster of that school who gave us the name, age, parents' names and the class in which she was in to us. We gathered all information about her. (Bangladesh, Child Forum member, Focus Group 1).

The children told us how they learnt to contact administrators for birth certificates or to confirm with head teachers when age-specific examinations had been taken. Children often had to take the initiative themselves to find out this information, which they then brought to the adults who had a duty to enforce the law.

In both Bangladesh and Ghana, the children's willingness to carry information to the authorities, to insist that powerful people heard the information and did something about it, was notable. This often required persistence as not all powerful people did take up their responsibilities. Sometimes child activists would have to go back multiple times or try to influence other people. For example, a Child Forum member explained:

Also, certain times, when the, like, the Chief doesn't want to take any measures we also report to the religious leaders to also take some advice to the parents. (Ghana, Focus Group B).

Child activists thus had a key role in connecting adults to information, and had to be persistent enough to persuade these adults to act on that information.

In Ghana, children were less directly active in individual actions to stop a particular child marriage than in Bangladesh (although there were examples). All participants told us of the importance of the child activists as information conduits to change attitudes through persuasive evidence. This was targeted to their audiences. The researchers were told of numerous examples – and shown videos – where children were part of public rallies, debated and put on dramas. In Focus Group A, this exchange gives an insightful description of why the latter was successful in engaging families and changing their views:

Children's Parliament member A: And we do not use the usual people in our plays. And mostly too, the drama, we don't use the ordinary people to dramatise. We involve their children so that the parents would listen to them.

Kay: Ok. So you find it quite effective for children to do the drama. And why does that make the parents listen?

Children's Parliament member B: Because we're children, they listen because they know it affects us. That's why they listen to us when we're doing our drama.



The teacher who supported this Children's Parliament expressed a similar view, in a separate interview:

They [adults] think that these are the victims of the violence that we are talking about, and if the children themselves come in and tell them how they feel about themselves and about their peers, it is like they get to understand. Because if it is an adult [informing them], you might probably have not had the experience compared to the children who are victims themselves. And so, if the children tell you about how they feel, you have to really listen.

These public events created an obligation for families and others to be an attentive audience, which in due course helped change their attitudes. In addition, the Children's Parliaments took another approach to gain the attention of their peers. The child activists told us enthusiastically about their football clinics, which attracted peers to come play. Afterwards, child activists took the opportunity to provide information to their peers about the problems with child marriage. They were thus able to reach other children that they might not otherwise have been able to do so, through organising these sports activities.

Third, child activism was frequently successful because the children were passionate, committed and – literally – active. The children invested considerable time. They were willing to overcome negative attitudes, failures to stop certain marriages, and obstacles. They had to mobilise themselves quickly and to act quickly. When asked throughout the study what was the timeframe to stop child marriages and, in both Bangladesh and Ghana, the participants said that it was often a very short time

between finding out a child was going to be married and when the marriage was due to happen: the longest time informed was ten days, and the shortest was three, with most being about seven days. As demonstrated above, children had to go through several steps to decide what to do, to gather information, to travel to people and places, and to mobilise others. Children invested a lot and did so intensely.

Fourth, as discussed in more depth above, child activism was successful because it largely was a collective endeavour and because they were able to call on inter-generational networks. These components were facilitated by the Children's Parliaments and Child Forums themselves, as spaces, and the adults involved. It was notable in the research how the child activism arose out of longer-standing educational and participation initiatives – for example, child activists in Bangladesh had previously run an impactful investigation and campaign on birth certificates – and their activism was increasingly successful over time in both individual cases and community change.

The research thus suggests key components that led to the successes of children's activism. The structural and social contexts were important, with the 'pull' of education as an incentive for girls and their parents and the 'push' of the law, with child marriage being illegal. Children were successful activists because they were key to information being uncovered and travelling to those who needed to hear it, they were willing to invest their time and energy to do so, and to mobilise themselves collectively and across networks. Child activism was an ongoing and substantial commitment.

CONCLUSION



CONCLUSIONS

Our research project found an ecology of activism (see Martin, 2007), that supported children and helped their actions be successful. Child activism was very frequently a collective activity. It involved scaffolding behind the scenes, where adults shared their networks and connections with the children. The child activists were able to 'tug' on these connections with local power-holders, to galvanise these adults into action. The Child Forums and Children's Parliaments had been developing over time and these spaces facilitated connections and provided opportunities for children to rally together, to work out strategies, and to take action. Children's activism was not without risks and costs to them, and they appreciated the support given by facilitating adults to help them navigate these. This underlying ecology was evident in the examples where child activists were successful in stopping a child marriage. Its importance was further underlined, in exploring examples where children wanted to stop a marriage but were unsuccessful in doing so. In these cases, children did not have the spaces to gather together nor the connections to draw on powerful adults. The ecology of activism was important, particularly in supporting the direct actions of children to be successful.

Part of this ecology was the power of the law and the perceived potential of girls' schooling. Our research was only undertaken in contexts where child marriage was (largely) illegal. This was a lever for child activists, to persuade local power holders to act and parents not to go ahead with a child marriage. An unexpected finding was how consistently girls' continued schooling was identified as a persuasive factor to parents, to not go ahead with a child marriage. Further issues around poverty, future livelihood opportunities and sexual relations were raised by families. These social and structural issues need to be addressed, in systemic change.

Child activism was only possible because of the time, commitment and energy children put into their activism. All sources for this research underlined how child activists appreciated their growing confidence, their recognition by their families and the community, and the information and skills they had gathered, as a result of their activism. Equally, all sources emphasised that this was furthered because children felt they were making important contributions to positive social change. Such investment by children was not always easy, as they sometimes had to overcome negative adult attitudes. How adults then value children as activists, which can be challenging for both adult norms and established systems and institutions, needs to be addressed. For these actions, child activism was inter-generational. It suggests the benefits of fostering such inter-generational connections, in ways that allow for children to claim their own spaces and take forward their own initiatives.

With these elements, children were empowered and empowered themselves. Taking the definition on page 16, they demonstrated the ability and power to take action. They grew in their capacities and strengths and contributed in meaningful ways to their communities. In these ways, they made a substantial contribution to stopping child marriage.

RECOMMENDATIONS



RECOMMENDATIONS

Decision-makers and donor agencies should:

Ensure child activists – as with all children - are recognised as rights-holders and social actors capable of influencing policy locally and globally.

Invest in community-based child leadership programs and skill building as a key component of programmes to address child marriage.

Design long-term programmes to provide child activists with information, skills, tools, and technical support to take action and advocate for themselves and others to end child marriage.

Support child activists to plan and implement child-led solutions to address child marriage in their contexts.

Maintain and advocate for strong laws against child marriage and develop better options for children and families than child marriage, which address its underlying causes.

Ensure adult facilitators and child activists are aware of the necessary safeguarding and ethical considerations that must be undertaken for themselves and their actions.

Develop strategies and programmes to foster inter-generational relationships that support children in their activism, especially with key community stakeholders with whom children can engage and mobilise.

Equip staff members with the knowledge and skills to support child activism and partner with children in a sensitive, appropriate, and empowering manner. This requires a change in adults' roles from being adult-centred to facilitating and supporting child activists in their initiatives.

Generate and disseminate evidence and learning on child activism in ending child marriage in order to scale up and improve these initiatives, and develop a better understanding of children's potential contributions.

Ensure the use of research evidence to broaden discussions about child activism, empowerment, and self-reliance within the international development community, academia, policy and international donor community.

U.S. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Review and update the USAID Vision for Action on ending child marriage and scale up investments in adolescent girls globally.

As we approach 10 years since the release of USAID's "*Ending Child Marriage and Meeting the Needs of Married Children: The USAID Vision for Action*," it is critical the U.S. Government update and renew its commitment to addressing child marriage, ensuring that children are recognised as key stakeholders and leaders at the forefront of change in their own communities. The U.S. Government should also seek to elevate the needs and rights of girls within and across other existing humanitarian and development strategies, policies, and initiatives.

Ensure the meaningful participation of children.

Hearing from child participants in U.S. foreign assistance programs and supporting a platform for their activism not only allows for better design for programmatic impact, but also empowers children to be the future leaders of their communities. Specifically, we recommend the U.S. government:

Develop guidance for U.S. Missions and Embassies around the world to prioritise the safe and meaningful participation and engagement of children, including child-led groups and networks; and

Set up children advisory councils regionally to support the design, monitoring, and evaluation of programming at the mission level.

Appoint high-level leadership to oversee implementation of a whole child approach.

A position complementing the Special Advisor for Children in Adversity—to prioritise child well-being throughout the U.S. foreign aid structure and coordinate across all U.S. government agencies implementing foreign assistance programming for children and young people — would enhance collaboration, effectiveness, and outcomes for girls at risk of child marriage and already married children.

Increase funding for child-focused programs.

Increased, flexible funding and an encouragement to use this funding to address holistic child well-being in both development and humanitarian contexts, including support for child activism against harmful practices, would allow relevant agencies to fund special projects such as research and innovative pilot programs, as well as commingle funding where appropriate to improve programme impact and outcomes for children.

Host a White House Global Children's Summit.

A high-level summit will raise awareness of the challenges facing vulnerable children and families around the globe, as it signals the prioritisation of this issue for other nations and serves as a catalyst for making progress quickly in foreign policy and creating increased capacity for addressing challenges. A Global Summit would also allow for global participation of children and facilitate greater opportunities for children to influence the U.S. foreign policy agenda.

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THE UNIVERSITY
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INTERNATIONAL OFFICES

Executive Office

1 Roundwood Avenue
Stockley Park
Uxbridge
Middlesex UB11 1FG
UK
+44.207.758.2900

New York and United Nations Liaison Office

919 2nd Avenue 2nd Floor
New York, NY 10017
USA
+1.212.355.1779

Geneva and United Nations Liaison Office

Geneva Nations 6th floor,
Rue du Pré-de-la-Bichette 1, 1202
Geneva,
Switzerland
+41.79.433.7605

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Childhood & Youth Studies, MHSES University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh

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