



**Save the Children**

**HUMAN  
RIGHTS  
CENTER**  
UC Berkeley School of Law

KING HUSSEIN FOUNDATION  
مركز المعلومات والبحوث  
**INFORMATION AND RESEARCH CENTER**



# **CHILD MARRIAGE IN CRISES**



**GIRLS AND PARENTS  
SPEAK OUT!**

**BIDI BIDI &  
PALORINYA, UGANDA**

# INTRODUCTION

Many South Sudanese girls in Uganda get married when they are less than 18 years old. This is called child marriage. Child marriage hurts girls in many ways. Some girls may drop out of school. Some may struggle to earn money to care for themselves and their families. Some may be abused by their husbands. And some girls may have difficulty when they get pregnant or deliver.

Because of this, Save the Children and Plan International wanted to know more about how they (and other NGOs) could support girls and their parents and help them to delay marriage. So in 2020, the Human Rights Center came to Uganda to talk to girls and their parents. We wanted to learn 4 things:

1. Why do some girls get married young, while others wait until they're older?
2. How do girls and their parents make decisions about marriage?
3. What do girls and their families need to help them wait until they're older to get married?
4. What do girls and their parents think NGOs should do to help girls wait to marry? What can they do to help support girls who are already married?

In total, we talked to more than 180 girls ages 10-17 in Palorinya and Bidi Bidi refugee settlements. We did fun activities together, like drawing, making paper flowers, and dancing. We also talked to 36 parents of adolescent girls. Here's what we learned together!

# WHAT PUTS GIRLS AT RISK OF MARRYING EARLY?

## POSITIVE FEELINGS ABOUT CHILD MARRIAGE

For example, some girls think that marriage will make them happy and get them things they need, like food or money.

## BELIEFS

For example, sometimes girls, parents, or community members think it's okay for a girl to marry if she can handle housework or has started her period, even if she is not yet 18 years old.

## NOT BEING IN SCHOOL

This was true for any reason, like not being enrolled in school or failing a grade level.

## BEHAVIORS

Some girls feel pressured to get married because of something they did or because they got pregnant. For example, if they go to the discos, drink alcohol, move alone or at night, or spend time with boys. Or if they were convinced to have sex to get things they need, like clothes or school fees.

## POVERTY & BASIC NEEDS

Some girls marry early to have their basic needs – like food, clothing, or school fees and supplies – met by a man. Or they may want to relieve their family of the burden of caring for them. Their families may also want the dowry money.

## CHILD ABUSE & NEGLECT

Child abuse or mistreatment at home, neglect by parents, too much housework, or fighting with parents puts girls at risk.

## GENDER NORMS & BELIEFS

For example, some families and communities believe that girls are a burden on the family. Others may believe it's not as important for girls to go to school.

## PEER PRESSURE

Some friends are a poor influence because they marry young or pressure other girls to marry young.

## COMMUNITY

Some community members and leaders encourage child marriage or treat girls badly if they refuse a marriage proposal or forced marriage.

## UNRELIABLE POLICE

For example, some police can't be trusted to help or enforce the laws about child marriage.

## FOOD DISTRIBUTION METHODS

Sometimes the way the UN gives out food makes some girls want to marry early so that they can get more food for themselves or their families.

# WHAT PROTECTS GIRLS FROM MARRYING EARLY?

## BELIEFS

For example, some girls and their parents believe a girl should wait until at least age 18 to get married.

## NEGATIVE FEELINGS ABOUT CHILD MARRIAGE

For example, some girls think that child marriage will make them sad and stressed. Others think that they will suffer because of too much housework, or that they will be abused, be lonely, or get pregnant too young.

## SCHOOL ENROLLMENT

Being enrolled in school protects girls from early marriage.

## DREAMS & AMBITIONS

Some girls have dreams and ambitions for their future outside of marriage, like finishing school or getting a job.

## BEHAVIORS

Some girls respect their parents' wishes for them to wait to get married. Some avoid other behaviors that might put them at risk of getting pregnant or married early, like going to the disco, traveling alone or at night, and spending time with boys.

## POSITIVE PEER PRESSURE

Some friends are a good influence and encourage a girl to stay in school and not marry too early.

## BASIC NEEDS

Parents who are able to provide for their daughters' needs help to protect them from early marriage.

## SUPPORTIVE PARENTS

Some parents encourage their daughters to stay in school and delay marriage, communicate well with them, treat them well, and allow them to have some free time to play.

## COMMUNITY MEMBERS

Some community members support girls to delay marriage. Others may help a girl if her parents try to force her to marry young by talking to them or by taking the girl into their own homes so she can continue her studies.

## STRONG LAWS & POLICIES

Strong laws and policies against child marriage protect girls. Police who help to enforce the law and help girls who are being forced to marry young also help protect girls.

# HOW DO GIRLS AND THEIR PARENTS MAKE DECISIONS ABOUT MARRIAGE?

**Girls** – Many girls can choose for themselves when and whom to marry. But many other girls have little or no say in the decision. They may feel pressured or forced by their parents to marry. Many girls fall somewhere in the middle where they have some say, but make the decision together with parents or others.

“I should marry now”

“I should wait”

- I could escape from my difficult home life
- I might get things I need, like food or clothes
- It would make my parents happy
- It would keep people from talking badly about me
- I could have more children

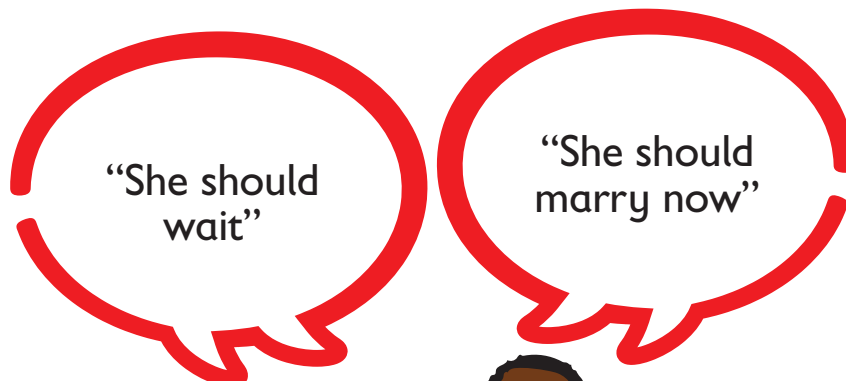
- I might be abused by my husband
- I can't handle heavy housework or children yet
- I'll have difficulties if I get pregnant and give birth
- I might feel sad, lonely, or stressed
- I want to finish school and earn some money first



# HOW DO GIRLS AND THEIR PARENTS MAKE DECISIONS ABOUT MARRIAGE?

**Parents** – Fathers and mothers are often involved in marriage decisions for their daughters in some way. If a girl is not with her parents, other caregivers are involved.

**Others** – Other relatives or neighbors are often involved in marriage decisions for girls. They may give girls advice about marriage or help to make marriage plans.



- It will help us financially
- It will relieve the burden of caring for her
- She will give us grandchildren
- She will be safer from harm

- She should finish school and earn some money first
- She will have poor health and difficulty having babies
- She might be abused by her husband
- She won't be able to manage heavy housework and childcare
- She might have problems in her marriage and get a divorce

# WHAT DO GIRLS AND PARENTS THINK NGOS CAN DO TO HELP?



## EDUCATION

- Support education for all girls, married and unmarried. Advise married and divorced girls to return to school.
- Give all girls money for school fees, uniforms, supplies, and sanitary pads.
- Build more primary and secondary schools and send more girls to boarding school.
- Make school safer by hiring more female teachers. Teach girls how to report sexual harassment or abuse in schools.
- Educate parents or male relatives who don't think girls need to go to school and girls who are stubborn and don't want to go to school.
- Offer other options besides traditional schools for married and unmarried girls, including alternative basic education programs, vocational training, and schools for married girls.
- Help with things that keep married and divorced girls out of school. For example, 1) husbands, parents, or in-laws who don't want them to go to school, 2) schools that don't allow married or pregnant girls in classes, and 3) heavy home and childcare duties.



## SUPPORT FOR CHILDREN

- Provide childcare for parenting girls who want to finish school or find jobs.
- Help girls meet the basic needs of their children.
- Teach girls how to raise and care for children.



## ECONOMIC / BASIC NEEDS

- Give girls and their parents financial help, such as cash to parents if they keep their daughters in school, cash to married girls to care for their children, and spending money to girls.
- Give married, divorced, and unmarried girls basic items, like clothing and shoes, things for the house and kitchen, like utensils and bedding, or personal hygiene supplies, like soap and sanitary pads. Increase food rations. Make sure they have good housing and clean water.
- Help married, divorced, and unmarried girls and parents find good, safe work.
- Provide cash for work programs and loans for women and girls to start small businesses.
- Help with things that prevent girls from working, like parents, husbands, or in-laws who don't want them to work or heavy home and childcare duties.



## LAW AND POLICY

- Ban children from going to discos, or don't allow discos in the community.
- Make sure there are strong child protection policies in the communities.
- Make sure there are good education policies, like providing all girls in the settlements with school fees and supplies.

# WHAT DO GIRLS AND PARENTS THINK NGOS CAN DO TO HELP



## SENSITIZATION AND AWARENESS-RAISING

- Offer programs for girls, parents, and community leaders about why child marriage and early pregnancy hurt girls.
- Offer training, lectures, and activities for married girls. Make sure they know about them.
- Hold programs during community events, meetings, campaigns, or lectures at centers. Add sensitization to programs and activities for girls, like drama.
- Talk about how girls and their parents should make decisions about marriage and what resources they have.
- Sensitize community leaders and help them to educate their communities on why girls should delay marriage.



## HEALTH

- Give older and younger girls adolescent-friendly sexual and reproductive health services, like family planning. Teach them how to stay safe from sexual infections and delay pregnancy. Help community leaders and parents to teach their girls about these things too.
- Teach girls about health and hygiene and how to get health care for themselves or their children when they need it.
- Help with things that prevent girls from getting sexual and reproductive healthcare or education, like costs for care, long distances to travel, long waits at the health centers, and heavy home or childcare duties. Help with misinformation about family planning being dangerous, shyness about asking for these services, or parents, husbands, or neighbors who don't want girls to get care.



## PSYCHOSOCIAL SUPPORT

- Offer all girls, including married girls who are being abused, counseling and support groups to teach them how to cope with stress and trauma.
- Train girls how to counsel each other.
- Help girls, including married girls, have healthy friendships through activities they enjoy, like games, sports, art classes, and sewing.
- Counsel married girls on issues in their marriages, how to get a divorce if they need one, and where to get support.



## PROTECTION

- Make girl-only safe spaces. Use them to hold sensitization activities. Teach girls they can go there if they are being abused or forced to marry.
- Talk to girls and caregivers about safety risks in the community. Teach them how girls can stay safe.
- Teach parents how to care for their daughters' needs and to raise them without abuse. Help them protect their daughters from harmful traditions, norms, and pressure to marry young.
- Have community leaders and NGO staff help find married girls who are being abused or mistreated. Offer them advice and support services.
- Help girls and parents build good-quality shelter so that girls don't get hurt when they gather housing materials.



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