



BRIEF

A feminist vision on economic empowerment and livelihoods for preventing child marriage

PARTNERS

The Women's Refugee Commission
Rozaria Memorial Trust
King's College London



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Participatory action research using consensus-building methods was conducted from 2021-22 with feminist and women-led civil society organisations, experts, and practitioners to learn how best to end child marriage and support already married girls in forcibly displaced and crisis-affected communities in East Africa. This brief summarises findings on economic empowerment and livelihoods that study participants identified as priorities for **preventing child marriage**. Direct quotes from participants are included in italics throughout the brief. For additional details about the study, this brief can be read in conjunction with a separate brief outlining the research process.

CONSENSUS DATA FROM GRASSROOTS FEMINIST ACTORS IN EAST AFRICA



Agree that collaboration across sectors and the humanitarian-development-peace nexus is essential for reducing poverty.



Agree that poverty acts as a barrier to addressing child marriage and transforming gender norms.



Agree that programming must address the root causes of child marriage, such as poverty.



Agree that widespread economic insecurity hinders the effectiveness of child marriage programmes.

WHY IS ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT ESSENTIAL FOR CHILD MARRIAGE PREVENTION AND TRANSFORMING GENDER NORMS?

- Economic and livelihood opportunities enable girls and youth to contribute financially to their households through work rather than marriage, increasing their value in households and their autonomy.
- Cash and asset transfers can offer incentives for behaviour change, such as families prioritising girls' education over marriage.
- Empowering girls economically and socially increases their autonomy, their influence and their voice in households and communities.
- Reducing household poverty enables girls from families below the poverty line to meet basic needs instead of getting married to acquire food, clothing, medicines etc
- Reducing household-level poverty can contribute to parents no longer viewing girls as a *'source of income through bride price'* or as a financial burden.



RECOMMENDED PRACTICE

Household poverty manifests itself as a driver of child marriage in different ways; through an inability to care for, feed, clothe, house, and school girls sufficiently; through being unable to meet the extra needs that adolescent girls have (e.g., provision of menstrual products); through the opportunity to receive extra financial gain through a bride price; through arranging several child marriages at the same time to reduce the burden of high ceremony costs; and the potential of saving of money when a girl marries and moves away.

Cash and asset transfers (conditional/unconditional) can be used as an additional option or approach to delay marriage or keep girls in school; they are often small and regular sums of money, oil, or livestock, sometimes accompanied by the payment of school fees.

Economic empowerment programmes targeting young girls often include economic education, life skills, vocational training, setting up bank accounts and facilitating work opportunities. Providing girls with entrepreneurship skills and available loan opportunities can help girls run their own business.

There are also many livelihoods programmes that target households, but many of these do not have indicators in line with gender-transformative change goals.

CRITICAL ISSUES

Poverty, and lacking basic needs such as food, clothes, shelter, health care, and education is a very powerful driver of child marriage. Short-term financial benefits that come from marriage are very influential, especially to people living in a humanitarian crisis. This increases the risk of child marriage as a form of sexual exploitation and trafficking where perpetrators use bribery or the promise of financial reward to expedite marriage or prevent justice for survivors.

Families may view child marriage as the only option to escape poverty or to ensure the security of their daughters' futures. Preventing child marriage requires specific programming but also a focus on addressing poverty as a cross-cutting issue that impacts individual, household, and community levels. Thus, for widespread change, economic programming needs to be substantial, multi-level, and long-lasting.

Only 64% of our Delphi participants agreed that conditional cash transfers should be part of essential programming to prevent child marriage, prioritising other types of programming above cash transfers. Although there is a reasonable evidence base that conditional cash transfers can be successful in preventing child marriage, there have also been concerns raised about their sustainability, and whether they facilitate long-term transformative change rather than short-term behavioural change. While providing financial transfers is often a key part of the solution to prevent child marriage, it is often not the only solution, and is most impactful when paired with other multi-level and multi-sectoral approaches.

LEARNINGS FOR ACTION

- Coordinated responses to the impact of poverty on women and girls are critical, across different organisations, sectors, and the humanitarian-development-peace nexus, which might include national systems of social protection for low-income households and pro-poor social policies, community-based economic and livelihoods programmes for households, and also programmes targeted at young women.
- Education and economic empowerment programmes can break the cycle of poverty. These programmes need to be underpinned by a gender-transformative approach that takes into account the girls themselves, their families, their communities, and structural influences; and maps out how these activities will ultimately change the long-term power relations between men and women in society.