



INTEGRATING THE RESPONSE
TO CHILD MARRIAGE IN
HUMANITARIAN SETTINGS

Key Learnings from a Systematic Scoping Review on Child Marriage Programmes

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In 2021, the Women's Refugee Commission (WRC), Rozaria Memorial Trust (RMT), and King's College London (King's) began conducting research to learn about both the critical aspects of successful programmes for addressing child marriage in humanitarian and development settings and the key gaps within less effective programmes for addressing this harmful practice.

It is through this enhanced understanding that the "Integrating the Response to Child Marriage in Humanitarian Settings" initiative (January 2021–December 2022) aims to coordinate the engagement of humanitarian actors and feminist and women-led civil society organisations, experts, and practitioners working to address child marriage across East Africa. The initiative also aims to support their prioritisation of and collaboration on effective strategies to prevent and respond to child marriage and meet the needs of married adolescent girls impacted by conflict and displacement in the region.

This brief provides an overview of the initiative's first component, a systematic scoping review on the impact of programmes on key child marriage outcomes, which was used to inform the development of the initiative's participatory action research with grassroots feminist actors in East Africa.

OUR SYSTEMATIC SCOPING REVIEW

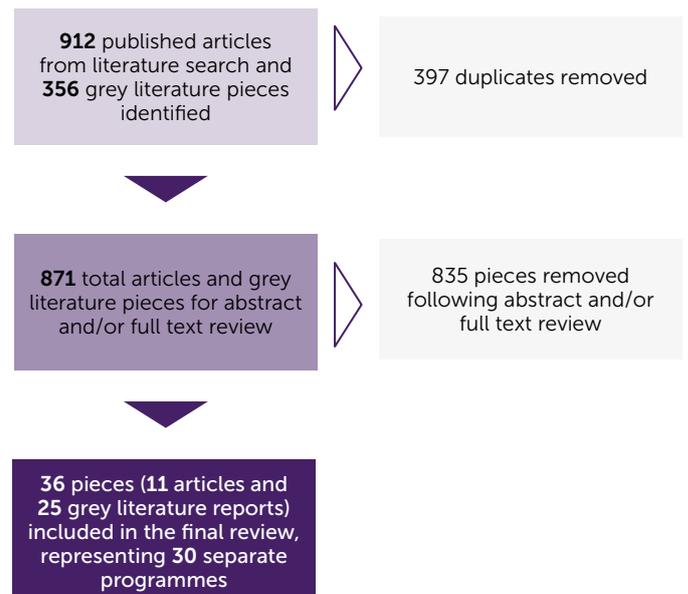
Conducted in March–July 2021 and updated in April 2022, our systematic scoping review builds on several other systematic reviews which have been undertaken in the last decade and aims to gather the latest evidence on the aspects of successful programmes that work to prevent girl child marriage in both humanitarian and development settings across the globe. Alongside outcome data, it pays particular attention to the dimensionality of programmes (i.e., those that include multi-level and multi-sector programming) and the qualitative factors identified as contributing to intervention success or failure.

METHODS

This review sought to systemically identify studies on interventions that had documented measurement of changes in behaviour, knowledge, or attitudes on child marriage among girls at risk of child marriage, parents, and religious or community leaders and that were published in the last decade.

Our search identified 912 published articles and 356 grey literature reports (1268 total publications) as potentially relevant, of which 1232 were removed following identification of duplicates and review of abstracts and full text. The final 36 pieces represent 30 separate child marriage prevention programmes. (Figure 1).

FIGURE 1. Systematic scoping review flow diagram



The 30 programmes were reviewed and categorised by level of success, based on the reported outcomes in relation to child marriage indicators. 10 programmes were successful at preventing child marriage in every part of the intervention at every level measured. 13 programmes reported mixed success (i.e. they were successful through some parts or for some subpopulations were categorised but not all). 7 programmes were not at all successful at preventing child marriage.

We then analysed the relationship between the intervention's characteristics and outcomes, supported with a narrative analysis that described the approaches and components that were critical for success.

KEY FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Several different approaches are shown to have an impact on child marriage, and different combinations of approaches can be successful.

Evidence from the systematic scoping review supports that there is not one approach or combination of approaches that effectively prevents child marriage. Across the 30 programmes cited in this review, there was a diverse range of approaches, combinations of approaches, and activities enacted under each approach that positively impacted child marriage. It is thus imperative that programmes and interventions be designed in consultation with local governments and communities and in consideration of the localised and dominant drivers of child marriage within the particular context and the specific aims and objectives of the intervention, as is argued through the localisation agenda.

2. Multi-component child marriage programmes have greater success than single-component programmes.

While several systematic reviews of child marriage interventions have raised concerns about the challenges of coordinating and implementing multi-component programmes, we found that multi-component programmes – which recognise the wide range of drivers underpinning child marriage and the multiple changes required at

multiple levels to protect girls – had greater success than single-component programmes. Given this finding, it is critical that more attention be given to enhance coordination and collaboration that enable different agencies, sectors, and humanitarian, development, and peacebuilding actors to work alongside each other to facilitate effective multi-component child marriage programmes at the local, sub-national, and national levels.

3. Gender-transformative approaches may be key to addressing the unequal and harmful power relationships that underpin child marriage.

While gender equality and empowering girls are often critical objectives of child marriage programmes, further attention must be given to the development of multi-component programmes that seek to transform the unequal and harmful power relationships that underpin child marriage.

4. While the evidence base on the effectiveness of child marriage programming continues to grow, further evidence is still needed.

As the evidence base on the effectiveness of programmes that contain child marriage indicators continues to grow, this scoping review shows that we need evaluators and programme implementors to be more explicit about the mechanisms that facilitate the desired changes on child marriage (such as community engagement, safe spaces, peer educators, use of technology), as well as the measurements of that change, to further help us to understand the localised and dominant drivers of child marriage and better facilitate the process of programme contextualisation. The evidence base for effective approaches to prevent child marriage in humanitarian settings remains poor.

NEXT STEPS

This systematic scoping review was used to inform the development of the initiative's Delphi study, a key component of the participatory action research that supported reflection among grassroots feminist actors on the enablers and barriers of engaging across the humanitarian-development-peace nexus and across sectors to implement effective child marriage programming in East Africa.