

OUR VOICES, OUR FUTURE

Understanding Risks and Adaptive Capacities to Prevent and Respond to Child Marriage in the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM)



Displaced girls from the conflict-affected areas of BARMM are vulnerable to child marriage; which can severely affect their **physical, mental, and psychosocial health;** as well as make them prone to **stigma, isolation, school dropouts, and extreme poverty.**

KEY MESSAGE

Child marriage in the Philippines' BARMM region is **underpinned by gender and socio-economic inequality, which limits adolescent girls' agency when it comes to making their own life decisions.** They marry due to family, community, and environmental pressures, sacrificing their own aspirations out of a sense of duty to their parents and family.

However, adolescent **girls are resilient and possess potential to overcome challenges** and lead changes in their communities when **the protective factors and systems surrounding them are reinforced and expanded.**

BACKGROUND

Globally, **approximately one in five adolescent girls is married before they turn 18.** Child marriage rates are increasing in parts of the world, in large part due to crises and displacement. The COVID-19 pandemic is predicted to increase the numbers of child marriages around the world due to prolonged school closures, rising global poverty and loss of livelihoods affecting household income as well as other intersecting factors which compound pre-existing drivers of child marriage.

Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao's (BARMM) population is predominantly Muslim and due to their autonomous governing system, its population follows a separate set of rules strongly influenced by Islam. At the time of this study, it was legal for Muslim girls as young as 12 to marry in (BARMM), Philippines. Systematic data on the prevalence of child marriage in the region is unavailable, but it is estimated that at least 2 percent of girls are first married by age 15, and 15 percent are first married by age 18.

HOW THE RESEARCH WAS CONDUCTED

In 2020, Plan International and WRC, in partnership with Transforming Fragilities launched a multi-year study, which ended in 2022. A girl-centered and community-based research design was used to understand the risks, drivers, and consequences of child marriage in the Philippines' BARMM region. Adolescent girls and adult community members were involved in designing the research tools and collecting and analyzing data to identify solutions that would help in preventing child marriage, and meeting the needs of already married adolescent girls and their families.

Overall, 2,203 community members, including married and unmarried adolescents (12–19 years old), adults, and influential stakeholders, participated in data collection activities. Over 50 percent of participants were female; 1,049 participants (48%) were married, engaged, or ever married, while 1,112 (51%) were unmarried. Participants included 890 (40%) adults and 1,312 (61%) adolescents.

STUDY FINDINGS

WHAT ARE THE KEY DRIVERS OF CHILD MARRIAGE?

Child marriage in BARMM is a result of gender and socio-economic inequality, which is created and perpetuated by a patriarchal system that promotes harmful gender norms. These include community expectations that girls and women fulfill domestic and caretaking responsibilities, laws that permit child marriage, and patriarchal power dynamics toward girls and women, such as community pressure on parents to control of adolescent girls' sexuality.

The most commonly reported drivers of child marriage in BARMM include: poverty and lack of alternative opportunities for girls; adolescent girls' limited power in decision-making; reducing possible shame on the family's reputation from rumors around girl's sexual activity; adolescent girls' strong sense of duty to the family; interpretations of Islamic religious text that condone child marriage; and an enabling legal environment.

HOW DO DISPLACEMENT AND CONFLICT AFFECT CHILD MARRIAGE?

Displacement and its accompanying insecurity make child marriage more likely by interrupting education, limiting livelihood opportunities, and dismantling protective community and social structures. In the BARMM, displacement further increased girls' risk of child marriage as the climate of increasing insecurity pushed parents to marrying their daughters to either protect family honor from the potential shame of sexual violence; or to consolidate political power and resources; or to receive additional humanitarian assistance; or in gratitude for receiving shelter.

WHAT ARE THE CONSEQUENCES OF CHILD MARRIAGE?

Child marriage has devastating consequences for girls, such as early pregnancy, cyclical poverty, school dropout, intimate partner violence, and other adverse health and well-being outcomes. The study also found married and pregnant girls faced stigma from peers and the broader community, which contributed to feelings of social isolation.

It is also important to note that most of the **key concerns of adolescents** such as discrimination and stigma, lack of quality education, and adolescent pregnancy, can be both drivers and consequences of child marriage.

HOW HAVE COMMUNITIES RESPONDED TO CHILD MARRIAGE SO FAR?

Some adolescent girls, their families, and communities have remained resilient despite these challenges. This is partly due to an ecosystem of support, care, and protection for adolescent girls. This ecosystem includes parents, community leaders, law enforcement and military peacekeeping actors, Muslim religious institutions, schools and teachers, government health and social service institutions, international and national nongovernmental organizations, and social media and technology.

RECOMMENDATIONS

HOW CAN WE PREVENT CHILD MARRIAGE?

Adolescent girls in displacement and conflict settings deserve to have their hopes, dreams, and voices to be uplifted. This requires communities, government agencies, and international and development organizations to work together to dismantle the systems that harm and infringe upon their rights, such as child marriage.

Community support

Displaced and conflict-affected communities should be empowered to design, implement, and evaluate their own gender-transformative and socio-economic programs to help address gender inequality and child marriage among their adolescent population.

Increase socio-economic capacities of adolescent girls

Addressing the key drivers of child marriage by providing adolescent girls with educational support, such as comprehensive sexuality education and scholarships; economic support, such as income-generating opportunities and loans; healthcare programs that address their physical and mental needs; and safe spaces where they can play, learn, and build their peer network, can help lessen its prevalence within displaced communities.

Strengthening existing institutional and community-based structures

Key actors within the governmental and organizational sectors should work together in establishing programs and mechanisms that promote adolescent well-being, strengthen risk mitigation in displacement and conflict settings, and increase capacities of service providers to address possible child protection and gender-based violence risks such as child marriage.

Effective implementation of already existing laws

On December 10, 2021, Republic Act No. 115961, which prohibits marriage for persons under 18 years and imposes penalties for violations of the law, was passed. The BARMM's government sectors, regional government agencies and LGU's should allocate resources to strengthen the accountability mechanisms for RA No. 115961, as well as ensure its proper dissemination and implementation within their communities.

Advocating and lobbying for policies and structural changes

There is still ample progress to be made when it comes to legislation concerning child marriage and gender-based violence. The BARMM government and key organizations and agencies should work with feminist organizations and girls themselves to look into passing new legislation and amending existing legislation that ensures policies related to gender equity and child marriage are protective for girls and do not cause further harm to already married girls.

The full report and an executive summary are available at <https://bit.ly/OurVoices-OurFuture>



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