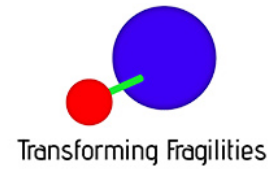




EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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)



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ABOUT THIS EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:

The report was jointly written by Co-Principal Investigator Ahmed Harris Pangcoga of Transforming Fragilities and Co-Principal Investigator Katherine Gambir of the Women's Refugee Commission (WRC). Contributors to the report are Jovar Pantao, Lolymer Jacinto-Reyes, and Judy Ann Lubiano of Transforming Fragilities; Cirez de Leon and Rabia Mustapha of Plan International Philippines; Clare Lofthouse of Plan International Global Hub; Eleanor Snowden and Anna Panagiotou of The Cynefin Company; and Janna Metzler of WRC.

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This study is part of a multi-country research series under Plan International's Child Marriage in Humanitarian Settings Initiative, a phased approach to delivering evidence-based programming to prevent and respond to child marriage in humanitarian settings. Phase 1 was made possible through the support of Plan International Netherlands and WRC.

Disclaimer: Use of photos in this report is only meant to represent children and girls in the Philippines. It is not intended to indicate experience of subjects with Child Marriage.



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The Women's Refugee Commission (WRC) improves the lives and protects the rights of women, children, and youth displaced by conflict and crisis. We research their needs, identify solutions, and advocate for programs and policies to strengthen their resilience and drive change in humanitarian practice.

Transforming Fragilities Inc. (TF) is a Filipino NGO that focuses on research, Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E), capability building, and organizational development. It is composed of technical and management specialists and experts in peace and development, as well as cadres of provincial field researchers experienced in qualitative and quantitative data collection. They have come together to provide high quality monitoring and evaluation, research and learning, capability development, and organizational development support to local and international development agencies and to programs that help transform fragile communities and situations in Mindanao and select provinces in Luzon and Viasayas.

The Cynefin Company is an action research and development hub working at the limits of applied complexity science. We are an interdisciplinary team working with a distributed network of practitioners across the world. The Cynefin Company (formerly known as Cognitive Edge) was founded in 2005 by Dave Snowden. We believe in praxis and focus on building methods, tools, and capability that apply the wisdom from Complex Adaptive Systems theory and other scientific disciplines in social system.



BACKGROUND



GLOBALLY, APPROXIMATELY ONE IN FIVE ADOLESCENT GIRLS IS MARRIED BEFORE THEY TURN 18. THIS MEANS THAT 12 MILLION ADOLESCENT GIRLS ENTER INTO CHILD MARRIAGES EACH YEAR.ⁱ

Despite progress being made globally to tackle child marriage, child marriage rates are still increasing in some parts of the world, in large part due to crises and displacement.^{ii,iii} Moreover, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) predicts that due to the impact of COVID-19 on girls' physical and mental health, access to education, and household and community economic instability, 10 million more adolescent girls face the risk of child marriage by 2030, bringing the global total to more than 100 million girls entering into marriage by 2030.^{iv}

Child marriage is a human rights violation that intersects with other rights violations that disproportionately affect girls throughout their lives. These include, but are not limited to, the right to a life free of violence, the right to the highest attainable standard of health, and the right to education.^v It also has implications for a broader economic, social, and political development, as it curtails girls' freedom and decreases their likelihood of contributing to these spheres.^{vi} A growing body of evidence also shows that the risk of child marriage increases as a result of conflict and displacement.^{vii,viii,ix,x,xi}

This study, which is part of Plan International and the Women's Refugee Commission's (WRC's) multi-country Child Marriage in Humanitarian Settings Initiative, is an effort to investigate the needs and priorities of adolescents in diverse humanitarian settings to inform evidence-based and practice-informed programming to prevent and respond to girls at risk of child marriage, and meet the needs of girls who are already married. The research also investigated the extent to which the existing ecosystem of support, care, and protection for adolescent girls (e.g., family, social workers, teachers and institutions and services) protects girls from child marriage, and meets the needs of married girls.

THE BANGSAMORO AUTONOMOUS REGION IN MUSLIM MINDANAO'S (BARMM'S) POPULATION IS PREDOMINANTLY MUSLIM, AND DUE TO THEIR AUTONOMOUS GOVERNING SYSTEM, ITS POPULATION FOLLOWS A SEPARATE SET OF RULES STRONGLY INFLUENCED BY ISLAM. IN THE PHILIPPINES, THE MINIMUM AGE TO CONTRACT MARRIAGE IS 18.



HOWEVER, IN BARMM, MARRIAGE OFTEN FALLS UNDER PRESIDENTIAL DECREE 1083 OR THE CODE OF MUSLIM PERSONAL LAWS (PD 1083), WHICH CREATES A LOOPHOLE RESULTING IN ADOLESCENT GIRLS AS YOUNG AS 12 HAVING LEGAL GROUNDS TO MARRY. UNDER THESE LAWS, AN ADOLESCENT GIRL MAY MARRY IF SHE HAS STARTED MENSTRUATION, AND THE MARRIAGE HAS BEEN PETITIONED BY A WALI (GUARDIAN) THROUGH THE SHARI'A DISTRICT COURT.

disproportionately affect girls by making them more vulnerable to sexual harassment and assault,^{xiv} and increases the risks of child marriage.

This study, undertaken by Plan International and WRC, and implemented in-country by Transforming Fragilities, sought to understand the risks, drivers, and consequences of child marriage among adolescent girls in four provinces in BARMM, whose communities have long been affected by environmental hazards, conflict, and related displacement. These provinces are: Maguindanao, Lanao del Sur, Basilan, and Sulu.

Due to lack of reporting and registration of child marriages, the child marriage prevalence rate in BARMM is uncertain. According to the 2017 National Demographic and Health Survey, the median age for first marriage is 22.5 years in the Philippines, and somewhat lower at 20.8 years in BARMM. While it is reported that 2% of women in BARMM are first married by age 15, and 15% are first married by age 18,^{xii} systematic data collection on child marriage prevalence has not been conducted.^{xiii} Girls are most affected by child marriage practices in the region, suffering from physical and psychological violence, which is exacerbated by conflict and displacement. Similarly, displacement creates unique challenges and risks that

METHODS

THIS STUDY USED A MIXED-METHOD PARTICIPATORY DESIGN AND A GIRL-CENTRED, COMMUNITY-BASED APPROACH.

A girl-centred, community-based approach means that adolescent girls and adult community members were involved in tool design, data collection activities, data analysis, and translation of findings to actionable community-driven solutions. Research methods included a desk review, participant-led storytelling via SenseMaker® (an innovative software platform designed by The Cynefin Company), participatory group activities, and key informant interviews (KIs) with relevant institutional stakeholders.



From November 2019 to January 2020, a desk review of published articles; grey literature; and publicly available statistical data on child marriage prevalence, practices, and prevention and response programming in BARMM and within the Philippines was conducted. The desk review also included an assessment of the humanitarian situation in Mindanao, including recurring displacement due to both armed conflict and disasters. A total of 87 resources were reviewed. The desk review was used to help contextualize the research questions, methods, and study parameters.

KIs were conducted from January to April 2020 to provide insights on the needs and priorities of adolescents, child marriage practices, and barriers and facilitators to accessing existing services and programming in conflict-affected and displaced communities in Lanao del Sur, Maguindanao, Sulu, and Basilan. KIs were conducted with representatives from community-based organizations (CBOs), national nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), international NGOs (INGOs), civil society organizations (CSOs), service providers, United Nations (UN) actors, and government officials working in target communities.

SenseMaker® data collection was conducted from 14 February to 6 March 2020. SenseMaker® is a mixed-method research and analysis tool that enables respondents, or storytellers, to share micro-narratives (short, open-ended stories) about their lived experiences. SenseMaker® was used to gather information and capture stories to better understand the needs and priorities of adolescent girls, the drivers of child marriage, and the adaptive capacities of adolescents, their families, and communities to care for and protect adolescent girls.

Participatory group activities with adolescents aged 12-19, their parents or guardians, and other community gatekeepers (e.g., religious leaders, community leaders, teachers) were conducted from 6 March to 30 April 2020 to understand the strengths and limitations of the existing child protection system that cares for, supports, and protects adolescent girls in each setting.

Study methods were designed to enable adolescents and caregivers to collaborate in defining the existing family and community support structures and resources that care for, support, and protect adolescent girls in the community; identify critical linkages within this ecosystem of support that exist to support them (and that can be further strengthened); and propose adolescent-driven solutions to fill the gaps.

Given that unequal gender norms and power dynamics underpin child marriage, study data was analyzed using an adapted Social Norms Framework. The adapted framework was used to understand how programming can disrupt risk and drivers of child marriage. It also explores how the existing resources and assets of adolescent girls, their families, and broader ecosystems support healthy trajectories for adolescent girls across the socio-ecological model, including social and structural factors inherent to humanitarian settings.

Primary data were collected from January to April 2020. Methods were adapted to reduce the risk of transmission of COVID-19 and in accordance with local government health guidance and the Inter-Agency Task Force for the Management of Emerging Infectious Diseases (IATF).

FINDINGS

PARTICIPANT CHARACTERISTICS

OVERALL, 2,203 COMMUNITY MEMBERS, INCLUDING ADOLESCENTS, ADULTS, AND KEY STAKEHOLDERS, PARTICIPATED IN DATA COLLECTION ACTIVITIES.

Slightly over half (n=1,151) of all participants were female, compared to 1,046 who were male. A total of 1,049 participants were married, while 1,112 were unmarried. Participants included 890 adults and 1,312 adolescents who were 12–19 years old.



KEY CONCERNS FACING ADOLESCENTS

Findings indicate that most of the key concerns of adolescents, such as discrimination and stigma, lack of quality education, and early pregnancy, can be both drivers and consequences of child marriage. Indeed, child marriage emerged among these key concerns in the data. The lived experiences of adolescents in BARMM are partially shaped by their contexts of extensive economic inequality, gender discrimination against girls and women, displacement, and conflict that impede adolescent girls from navigating to and negotiating for resources. Additional concerns facing adolescent girls and boys, include child labor such as child trafficking and illicit work; lack of community support structures; lack of supportive relationships and networks; and high-risk behaviors, particularly illicit drug use.

Child marriage was identified as a key concern facing adolescents, particularly girls. All key informants (KIs) affirmed that child marriage was prevalent in the communities where they worked. Despite not asking directly about child marriage, roughly one-third (n=543) of the total stories generated through SenseMaker highlighted some aspects of “marriage,” and almost all of these stories were specifically about child marriage.

Conflict-related displacement was a common experience among community member participants, with nearly half (48%) of SenseMaker participants either being displaced (n=608) or living with others who were displaced (n=429). Although not cited by participants as frequently as economic factors as a risk for child marriage, the impact of displacement emerged as a strong driver. Displacement was discussed by participants in association with less parental guidance and greater chances of adolescent social interactions and sexual relationships that are usually strictly restricted. Data across methods indicated that displacement and its accompanying insecurity make child marriage more likely by interrupting education and limiting livelihood opportunities. Data also indicated that displacement

increased girls' risk of child marriage due to parents making the decision to marry off their daughters in a climate of increasing insecurity to either protect family honor, consolidate political power and resources, or in gratitude for receiving shelter.

KEY CONCERNS OF MARRIED GIRLS

Findings suggest that child marriage has devastating consequences for girls, such as early pregnancy, cyclical poverty, school dropout, intimate partner violence and familial violence, stigma and social isolation, and other adverse health and well-being outcomes for the girls as well as their children.

Early pregnancy emerged in the data as a key concern for adolescent girls, as both a precursor and consequence of child marriage. Data found that if a girl was not already pregnant prior to marriage, pregnancy often followed soon afterwards. KIs indicated that early pregnancy particularly affected older adolescents aged 15–19 years, for whom there is a lack of access to comprehensive sexuality education and sexual and reproductive health services. Data specifically from Sulu and Basilan provinces revealed that early pregnancy was a driver of school dropout among adolescent girls.

Cyclical poverty affected many married couples since married girls and their husbands were often not financially stable prior to marriage, and often have children before they can achieve financial stability. Most stories indicated that most parents and some girls see marriage as a means to alleviate and escape poverty and unlock opportunities for girls. The consequences of poverty have been documented in some stories and corroborated by participatory group data that describe married girls returning to their parental homes because they are unable to provide for themselves and their families. Some data found that married girls can be recruited for illicit domestic work outside of their communities or abroad. A few KIs reported that adolescent girls who are trafficked for illicit domestic work may face emotional, physical, and sexual violence in the homes of their employers.

Data confirms that **school dropout** is an issue that affects all adolescents regardless of sex. SenseMaker® stories revealed that most girls desire to complete their education after marriage in order to improve their lives and provide for their families; for some girls, marriage makes this possible through the support of husbands or in-laws. However, data suggests that most married girls are forced to discontinue their studies because of feelings of embarrassment and shame (especially among those whose child marriages were not self-initiated), or because of their new responsibilities as wives and mothers, and because of a lack of financial resources overall. Some SenseMaker® stories show that the same reasons cause school dropout among married boys, lowering adolescent-led families' earning potential and keeping them in cyclical poverty.

Study findings illuminate the **adverse health and well-being outcomes including gender-based violence** for married girls and their children. These include maternal, neonatal, and child morbidity, as well as miscarriage, which may stem from the pressure to bear children immediately after marriage. Additional adverse outcomes for married girls include emotional and economic abuse and neglect by their husbands and, at times, by the girls' in-laws and other family members.

Findings across methods indicate that **stigma and social isolation of girls** increase after child marriage or pregnancy. SenseMaker® stories and participatory community analysis discussions imply that since child marriage and pregnancy are not necessarily valued highly societally, especially as marriage is often used to mitigate shame engendered by rumors of adolescent sexuality, some girls face double discrimination and stigma from their family and their peers. For example, girls may be married by their parents at a younger age in order to end rumors in the community, after which they face bullying and harassment for their predicament by their peers. Study findings also suggest that married girls endure social isolation as a consequence of living with their husband and assuming primary caretaking and domestic responsibilities, which limits their interaction and engagement with their support networks which include their peers, parental family, school, community activities.

DRIVERS OF CHILD MARRIAGE

Study findings indicate that child marriage is predicated on 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 parents' desire to control adolescent girls' sexuality. This study identified the following key drivers of child marriage:

01 CONFLICT OR DISASTER-RELATED DISPLACEMENT

Study findings suggest existing drivers of child marriage, such as poverty and lack of income-generating activities, lack of access to quality education, and controlling the threat to family honor posed by adolescent girls' sexuality, were amplified in displacement and humanitarian contexts. Data also revealed drivers of child marriage unique to displacement contexts where child marriages took place as compensation or appreciation for shelter from host families (Lanao del Sur), or to claim humanitarian assistance distributed to families by national and international aid agencies given that each separate family unit receives its own aid package (Lanao del Sur and Maguindanao). There are also drivers unique to some provinces where child marriages were used to consolidate and expand political and resource power (Lanao del Sur).

02 LIMITED DECISION-MAKING POWER AMONG ADOLESCENT GIRLS

Findings indicated that many adolescent girls were deprived of decision-making power and control over their life decisions such as when and whom to marry. Decision-making pathways are complex, and although girls can and do act or set events in motion, girls are pressured by others, mainly their parents, to marry. Data suggests that gender norms around girls' bodies, behavior, sexuality, socio-emotional health, and access to resources and opportunities are controlled by their parents and subsequently by their husbands.

03 SELF-SACRIFICE AND SENSE OF DUTY

The study found that adolescent girls possess a sense of self-sacrifice and duty towards their parents and family that makes them rationalize fear or hesitation they might have towards the

marriage. Stories showed that daughters were inclined to accept child marriage to relieve financial burden on their parents or to help support or regain family honor. In BARRM, it was found to be a cultural norm for parents to arrange the marriage, including its terms, without consulting their daughter.

04 CONTROLLING ADOLESCENT SEXUALITY TO PROTECT FAMILY HONOR

KIs revealed that parents and community leaders used child marriage to control girls' sexual behavior, seen as socially deviant, as well as to respond to teenage dating, pregnancy, elopement, and even rape, and to save girls' families from shame. For example, girls who are sexual violence survivors were found to be forced to marry their perpetrators. In their stories, many girls expressed discontent regarding their marriages but ultimately rationalized them as a fair punishment, or as a means to regain family honor.

05 POVERTY AND LACK OF ACCESS TO STABLE INCOME-GENERATING ACTIVITIES

Data confirmed the intrinsic link between poverty and education that leads to child marriage. Poverty alone does not cause child marriage, but rather a lack of resources to fulfill educational needs that is caused by a lack of income-generating options leads to school dropouts, because caregivers cannot afford to pay school fees and/or other educational materials. Without an education, girls are left with few alternatives except child marriage for financial security.

06 LACK OF ACCESS TO QUALITY EDUCATION

Findings revealed that the presence of school buildings in conflict-affected rural communities did not necessarily equate to the presence of educational resources, especially teachers. In areas where quality education was available, girls lacked the financial resources to go to school. As many as 719 SenseMaker® respondents, or one-third of the total, responded that this was the reason why they were not in school. Findings indicate that the alternative to school dropout is parent-arranged child marriage, with girls agreeing to it because they believed it was better than the alternative—living in poverty while performing household work or illicit work outside of the home.

07 DIFFERING INTERPRETATIONS OF ISLAMIC BELIEFS AROUND CHILD MARRIAGE

KIs and SenseMaker® stories indicated that community members interpret Islam and the Qur'an, particularly passages regarding the acceptable age of marriage, in a way that encourages and condones child marriages. To note, Islamic law permits marriage by maturity rather than age. KIs and community participatory analysis sessions clarified that these were misinterpretations and that Islam and the Qur'an do not promote child marriage. KIs expounded that there are many interpretations of what is in the Qur'an, especially regarding the age of marriage, and there are different schools of religious thought about the right age of marriage. Data showed contradictory community perceptions; among some community members child marriage was desired, while among others it was stigmatized.

08 ENABLING LEGAL ENVIRONMENT

The study found that barriers to mitigating child marriage included conflicting laws relating to child marriage and lack of one clear law addressing child marriage that is nationally applicable. KIs shared that such a law was necessary so that the implementation of child marriage prevention and response programs could be supported by legal grounds. The BARRM is the only area in the Philippines where child marriage remains legal, which makes preventing child marriage and responding to the needs of married adolescents in the BARRM challenging. Data suggests that married and unmarried girls and women participants were not familiar with existing national laws or guidelines that discourage the practice and thus saw child marriage as a common and acceptable legal practice.

ECOSYSTEM OF SUPPORT, CARE, AND PROTECTION FOR ADOLESCENT GIRLS

Study findings indicate that adolescent girls, their families, and communities have remained resilient despite having to face harmful gender norms, patriarchal power dynamics, and contextual factors such as conflict, extreme hazards, and displacement. This is partly due to an ecosystem of support, care, and protection for adolescent girls that is composed of resource persons (e.g., family, social workers, teachers) and institutions that operate at intersecting levels to understand and address adolescent girls' needs and priorities. This ecosystem includes: parents, community leaders (e.g., Barangay officials), law enforcement and military peacekeeping actors, Muslim religious institutions, schools and teachers, government health and social service institutions (e.g., Social Welfare and Development Reform Project), international nongovernmental organizations (INGOs) and NGOs, and social media and technology. At the same time; however, some of these resources and supports also act as facilitators of child marriage. For example, the study found that although cell phones are a prized commodity that can support schoolwork, adolescents' technology and social media use may lead to either forced marriages by their parents as a result of online adolescent interaction, or adolescents choosing to marry partners they have found via social media.

Although an ecosystem of support exists for some girls, there are serious gaps and deficits that need to be addressed in order to better meet the needs of adolescent girls (married and unmarried), their families, and communities to mitigate the risk of child marriage. The study found a lack of adolescent-centered services and tailored humanitarian programming, targeted child marriage programming, or effective strategies to reach adolescent girls with either information or services. The study found a lack of community safe spaces accessible to adolescents to play, learn, and build their peer network and receive services tailored to their needs. Many existing services in the region that could serve girls' needs better were not adolescent-friendly, and were compounded by lack of coordination across institutions, lack of sustainable funding, and insecurity across the region.

RECOMMENDATIONS

This study illuminates adolescent girls' potential to overcome challenges and lead change in their communities with support from the existing ecosystem that supports adolescents. However, gaps and weaknesses in this support system remain and external support from feminist organizations, CSOs, NGOs, government agencies, INGOs, and other key actors is required to: 1) fill the gaps and strengthen the existing ecosystem of support for adolescents; and 2) create an enabling socio-economic and legal environment that dismantles the patriarchal systems that uphold existing power relations and prevents the perpetuation of harmful gender norms against women and girls, such as child marriage.

THEREFORE, COMMUNITY-LED PROGRAMMING COMPLEMENTED BY INTERVENTIONS TO STRENGTHEN AND FILL THE GAPS IN THE EXISTING SUPPORT SYSTEM, AND POLICIES THAT PROMOTE GENDER AND SOCIO-ECONOMIC EQUITY ARE NEEDED TO MITIGATE THE DRIVERS AND IMPACTS OF CHILD MARRIAGE IN BARMM.

Community-led programming builds on existing community strengths and provides an opportunity for girls and boys to participate in decision-making through community-driven solutions. A community-led approach would better ensure that prevention and response services are tailored to meet the specific needs and realities of adolescent girls and address child marriage drivers that manifest differently in each community. Study findings clearly demonstrate that a deep contextual knowledge of and expertise in addressing the norms and behaviours that underpin and drive child marriage (i.e., gender and socioeconomic inequality) at every level (i.e., individual, social, institutional, resource) are necessary to address the practice. Therefore, feminist organisations, and those working to address gender equality, could play a key role to guide and participate in child marriage prevention and response initiatives.

Child marriage awareness-raising programs and girl empowerment programs are not sufficient to prevent and respond to child marriage alone. Child marriage programming must be community-led and complemented by tailored interventions that fill programming and service gaps for adolescents, their families, and communities. Given that economic inequality and gender inequality underpin child marriage, interventions and policies must not only target the individual and social levels, but also advance socio-economic equality and gender equality in BARMM.

PROGRAM RECOMMENDATIONS

This study documented factors at the individual, social, institutional, and resource levels that drive child marriage in BARMM and the adaptive capacities of girls, their families, and communities to mitigate those risks. Therefore, multi-sector humanitarian and development actors should better involve and coordinate with communities to help them prioritize which types of approaches—social (social and peer networks, family configuration, social capital and support, positive deviants), institutional (policies and laws, education system, government structures, economic policy, religious institution), and resource (livelihood, income)—they will implement. Feminist organizations, CSOs, NGOs, government agencies, INGOs, and other relevant actors should coordinate with communities to: 1) ensure communities affected by displacement and disasters have the capacity, human and financial resources, tools, and coordination skills necessary to meet their community-led program goals; 2) ensure programming is designed to achieve gender-transformative change; and 3) strengthen and fill gaps in the existing ecosystem of support for adolescents (e.g., comprehensive sexuality education, MHPSS services, formal and informal education).

The study recommends the following urgent, coordinated, multi-sector humanitarian-development program efforts:



01 SUPPORT COMMUNITIES TO DESIGN, IMPLEMENT, AND EVALUATE COMMUNITY-LED PROGRAMMING IN DISPLACEMENT AND HUMANITARIAN SETTINGS THROUGH THE FOLLOWING ACTIONS:

- 1.1 Local government units, national and community-based feminist organizations, and INGOs should strengthen communities' capacity to design, monitor, and evaluate their community-led program through participatory, strengths-based, capacity-building approaches.
- 1.2 Humanitarian-development practitioners, including NGOs and feminist organizations, should collaborate with communities to ensure that **community-led programming is gender transformative** and advances gender and socio-economic equality. According to community participatory analysis groups, programming should break down harmful social practices, specifically to dismantle the power of gossip and rumour, and address bullying and discrimination.
- 1.3 Donors and the BARMM government should invest in community-led programming that not only builds girls' assets, including their aspirations to pursue education, civic, and economic opportunities, but also addresses their social and economic situation.
xvii
- 1.4 Findings illuminate the diversity among adolescents needs and priorities; therefore, all actors—feminist, national, governmental, non-governmental, community-based—working to prevent and respond to child marriage in the BARMM must ensure that programming is based on up-to-date and accurate adolescent-led needs and capacity assessments to inform programme design, including establishing safe and ethical mechanisms to obtain this information. Adolescent-led needs and capacity assessments will provide an opportunity for adolescents to elevate their needs and capacities to drive child marriage programming. *See more in [Plan International's \(2020\) Adolescents in Crisis Programming Toolkit](#).*
- 1.5 Experienced practitioners who facilitate community-led programming design should ensure that boys and men are engaged as key allies in ensuring all adolescents live free from violence and the risk of violence. For example, KIs and participatory community analysis groups recommended that community champions such as Muslim Religious Leaders (MRLs), community leaders such as Barangay officials and traditional leaders, are engaged as facilitators to convene discussions with boys and men to promote positive masculinities that engender gender equality and economic equality. Key religious councils, including the Bangsamoro Darul-Ifta, Committee on Dawa'h and Masajid Affairs, and Hayatul Ulama of the Philippines should collaborate with government agencies and

feminist organizations to facilitate discussions around child marriage among religious and traditional leaders and to develop key messaging on child marriage that reflects children's rights in Islamic households.

02 STRENGTHEN AND FILL GAPS IN ADOLESCENT GIRLS' CAPACITIES TO MITIGATE RISK AND ADVERSE CONSEQUENCES OF CHILD MARRIAGE THROUGH THE FOLLOWING ACTIONS:

Note: Humanitarian, development, and government actors working with communities to co-design adolescent girl asset-building programming should use the latest evidence on intervention effectiveness to inform programme design.

- 2.1 Government actors, such as BARMM's Ministry of Basic, Higher, and Technical Education, Ministry of Health, and Ministry of Social Services and Development (MSSD) should fill gaps in programs and services for married and pregnant adolescent girls. For example, these actors should provide direct assistance and support services to facilitate married and pregnant girls' continued access to education, livelihoods, and health care that includes sexual reproductive health and rights (SRHR) and mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) services.
- 2.2 Humanitarian, development, and governmental programming should consider increasing adolescent girls' access to safe spaces in their communities; where they can safely interact, play, and build their peer network; learn; and access information and services that are tailored to their needs.^{xvii} Given limited evidence on the effectiveness of adolescent safe spaces to mitigate gender-based violence, including child marriage, in humanitarian settings,^{xix,xx} additional research is needed prior to scale up.
- 2.3 Bangsamoro Youth Commission and the Provincial, City, Municipal, and Barangay Sanggunian Kabataan (Youth Councils) should include child marriage as an urgent concern in the Bangsamoro's Youth Development agenda. In collaboration with LGUs, INGOs, NGOs, and CSOs, communities may consider adolescent-led, peer-to-peer interventions such as mentorship or peer networks to build trust among adolescents and mitigate the high level of discrimination and bullying.^{xxi,xxii,xxiii} A budget should be allocated for the implementation of an information campaign and youth peer education to increase children and young people's awareness and support their adaptive capacities to address the risks and prevent child marriage. *See [Raising Voices SASA! community mobilization approach for preventing violence against women and associated tips for contextualising in humanitarian settings](#).*

2.4 Humanitarian, development, and governmental programming should consider co-designing life skills sessions for married and unmarried adolescents to counter the perceived idealism of marriage, intimate partner, and familial violence associated with driving child marriage, as well as to combat the high risks that adolescent girls face of intimate partner violence (IPV) in marriages. Content should be gender-transformative and unpack gendered roles and responsibilities, financial readiness for child rearing, healthy relationship development and communication for joint decision-making, improve SRH knowledge and access, and teach how to seek support and help when needed. Life skill sessions could be linked to specialized services that seek to strengthen and support young married couples to create healthy relationships and reduce the risks of abuse and neglect of married girls. The available evidence on the effectiveness of life skills programming to prevent child marriage is mixed;^{xxiv,xxv,xxvi} therefore, additional research on the effectiveness of life skills programming to prevent and respond to child marriage in humanitarian settings is needed prior to scale up.^{xxvii}

2.5 The Ministry of Basic, Higher, and Technical Education (MBHTE) should fulfill its government mandate to ensure adolescents receive comprehensive sexuality education (CSE)^{xxviii} including on topics such as: sexuality, power dynamics in relationships, safe sex and pregnancy, maternal healthcare, and contraceptives and family planning; in addition to strengthening self-care, mental health awareness, and how to mitigate, identify, and seek support for all forms of violence. The expanded CSE programming to parents and caregivers should be co-designed with adolescents, their parents, and caregivers, as well as influential community members, MSSD, MBHTE, Ministry of Health and its Commission on Population and Development (POPCOM-BARMM), and Bangsamoro Darul-Ifta to be context appropriate to ensure uptake. Support for developing the curricula can also be found in *Plan International's Comprehensive Sexuality Education Programme Standards, Conversations That Matter, and the Adolescent and Parenting Life Skills Package*.

03

STRENGTHEN THE EXISTING CAPACITIES OF ADOLESCENT GIRLS' FAMILIES AND COMMUNITIES TO SUPPORT AND CARE FOR ADOLESCENTS, INCLUDING THROUGH THE FOLLOWING ACTIONS:

3.1 The government-run conditional cash transfer and social protection program, Social Welfare and Development Reform Project, or "4Ps",^{xxix} should be expanded to include targeted outreach to adolescent mothers and young caregivers, and offer income-generating opportunities, such as women's savings groups and small business loans,^{xxx,xxxi} for the most vulnerable households.

3.2 Parenting interventions should include evidence-based curriculum tailored to the context of and based on communities' needs.^{xxxii,xxxiii} Therefore, curriculum topics may include child protection, positive parenting, children's rights, the rights of girls and women, and parenting in Islamic households; discussion groups on positive parental roles in child marriage decision-making; skills building to support parents in disseminating positive SRHR messaging and information at home; addressing the role of adults in perpetuating rumors that lead to child marriage; and strengthening parent-child relationships to increase trust. See [Plan International's guidance Adolescent and Parenting Lifeskills in Crises, and also Champions of Change Programme Modules on Inter-Generational Dialogues](#).

3.3 The technical support of the Ministry of the Interior and Local Government through LGUs should strengthen the link of formal and informal community structures that respond to protection concerns across development and humanitarian sectors, such as child marriage, intimate partner violence, and bullying cases in communities that are exposed to recurring emergencies, ensuring that the rights and best interests of the child are adhered to.

3.4 To address insecurity and threat of violence, women-led CSOs and humanitarian and development NGOs should implement peace building programs that strengthen community-based peacekeeping structures, so health and social service providers and program staff, as well as adolescents and their families feel safe to work and participate in services and programs, respectively.

04

STRENGTHEN INSTITUTIONAL STRUCTURES OF SUPPORT FOR ADOLESCENTS THROUGH THE FOLLOWING ACTIONS:

4.1 The Regional Sub-Committee for the Welfare of Children (RSCWC) should act as the coordinating body for communities, feminist organizations, CSOs, NGOs, government agencies, INGOs, and other key actors to oversee program and policy initiatives that promote adolescent well-being and coordinate the planning, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of policies and programs for adolescents in displacement settings across the region.

4.2 The Regional Sub-Committee for the Welfare of Children should strengthen coordination between national and INGO service providers (both development and humanitarian sectors) and government agencies with regard to adolescent programs in order to increase investments to, integration of, and learning from child marriage programming.

- 4.3 The child protection and gender-based violence working group (CPGBV WG) should support coordination between child protection and gender-based violence humanitarian agencies with BARMM policy and programmatic actors to ensure that reinforcing or integrated programming meets the needs of girls, families, and the community during and after crisis and displacement.
- 4.4 The Ministry of Basic, Higher and Technical Education should leverage existing tools and INGO partnerships to improve student and teacher retention and education outcomes for adolescents in BARMM. Further, the Ministry of Basic, Higher, and Technical Education should increase investment in both education, and economic engagement for adolescents to ensure that learning and life skills opportunities are inclusive and accessible for adolescents, particularly those most marginalized, such as married adolescent girls.
- 4.5 The Ministry of Social Service and Development through the Child, Early, and Forced Marriage (CEFM) Task Team of the CPGBV WG and LGUs, should ensure that preparedness plans are in place ready for future large-scale humanitarian disasters or renewed conflict-related displacement to ensure that a functioning child protection and referral system can be quickly reinforced, and that child marriage prevention is prioritized within the wider humanitarian response.
- 4.6 The Ministry of Social Services and Development should collaborate with feminist organizations, NGOs, and INGOs to strengthen the capacities of service providers to address specific CPGBV risks such as child marriage. This may include activities such as values and attitudes clarification training for direct service providers to ensure adolescent-friendly health and social services.
- 4.7 Humanitarian actors should increase economic opportunities in tandem with support services to improve access to temporary shelter and transitioning to permanent residences, so displaced families are not inclined to rely on host families for shelter.
- 4.8 Humanitarian actors should augment the current mechanism for humanitarian assistance that incentivizes parents to marry their daughters to form a separate family unit that receives its own aid package. Registration processes of households where one spouse is under 18 years, should be reviewed and revised to deter such occurrences.
- 4.9 Humanitarian actors should strengthen GBV risk mitigation and prevention programming in evacuation centers and transitory sites to prevent sexual harassment against displaced girls and women to improve the overall safety of these sites.

05

STRENGTHEN THE ENABLING SOCIO-ECONOMIC ENVIRONMENT THROUGH APPROACHES THAT CAN HELP DISMANTLE PATRIARCHAL SYSTEMS THAT PERPETUATE HARMFUL GENDER NORMS AGAINST WOMEN AND GIRLS THROUGH THE FOLLOWING ACTIONS:

- 5.1 Donors, BARMM policymakers, service providers, NGOs, INGOs, CSOs, and other organizations should invest long-term funding and human capital to implement programming that dismantles patriarchal systems and structures, promotes economic equality, and addresses gender discrimination. This programming should be coordinated by the Ministry of Social Services and Development (MSSD) and Bangsamoro Women Commission (BWC). Donors and BARMM government budgets should increase funding and investment for long-term child marriage prevention and response programming including for robust program evaluations. This includes community-led programming and cross-sectoral actions to better coordinate strategies to prevent, delay, and respond to child marriage, which may include the use of conditional cash transfers in conjunction with other services, such as education, health, livelihoods, and MHPSS services.
- 5.2 The BARMM Rapid Emergency Action on Disaster Incidence (READi), the Ministry of the Interior and Local Government Review should enhance disaster risk reduction and contingency plans to include the sharing of pre-positioned assistance and distribution plans to ensure equitable access to resources among displaced and host communities.
- 5.3 The Ministry of Social Services and Development and the Regional Sub-Committee for the Welfare of Children should coordinate across sectors to establish and monitor a database on the incidence of child marriage in BARMM. Actions should be coordinated together with the Local Council for the Protection of Children (LCPC), the Local Committee Against Trafficking in Person and Violence Against Women and Children, and specifically in BARMM with the CPGBV WG.



POLICY AND ADVOCACY RECOMMENDATIONS

Research findings show that child marriage is generally an accepted practice in BARMM, despite the high level of stigma and bullying towards married adolescent girls. Findings also suggest that BARMM's existing legal framework at the time of data collection created an enabling environment for the perpetuation of gender inequality as girls, women, communities, and institutions lacked the legal support to reject harmful gender norms, which exacerbate the risk and incidence of child marriage.

On July 6, 1987, the Office of the President signed into law The Family Code of the Philippines, setting the legal age of marriage at 18, with the exemption of Muslim Filipinos and indigenous groups, which were able to practice customary marital laws that permit child marriage.

On December 10, 2021, the Office of the President passed Republic Act No. 115961 (R.A. 115961), which prohibits marriage for persons under 18 years, and imposes penalties for violations of the law. The law also includes specific measures to facilitate the implementation of programs to prevent child marriage. This law was enacted by the Senate and House of Representatives after data collection and analysis activities were completed; however, evidence generated from the study can be used to inform how the law should be implemented to ensure it creates a supportive environment for girls, families, and communities that advances gender equality and mitigates adolescent girls' risk to child marriage, while ensuring already married girls are not further harmed.

The following policy recommendations aim to ensure that the new bill and overall policy environment support evidence-based approaches to mitigate and respond to child marriage in BARMM. All policies should be supported by long-term and sufficient economic, human, and structural resources to ensure effective implementation and widespread awareness.

06

ACCOUNTABILITY MECHANISMS FOR THE REPUBLIC ACT NO. 115961 SHOULD BE IMPLEMENTED THROUGH THE FOLLOWING ACTIONS:

- 6.1 BARMM Parliament, regional government agencies, LGUs, and donors should allocate budget and other necessary resources for accountability mechanisms and the socialization of the R.A. 11596 to increase awareness and knowledge of applicable laws and policies among local actors and across communities in the BARMM.
- 6.2 Local Government Units at the provincial, city, municipal and barangay levels should pass an ordinance adopting and localising the implementation of R.A. 115961. The ordinance should include awareness raising campaigns on the R.A. 11596 to increase knowledge on the updated child marriage legal framework. The ordinance should also include programming to prevent child marriage and respond to girls at-risk of child marriage or girls who are already married, including those in displacement settings. Further, it should outline strategies to strengthen the existing community child protection mechanisms including case management processes to better support girls.
- 6.3 BARMM regional government agencies such as the Parliament; Ministry of Social Services and Development; Ministry of Basic, Higher, and Technical Education; and Ministry of Interior and Local Government should coordinate to make sure that the Republic Act No. 115961 does not further harm girls who are already married or who have ever been married. Proposed changes to the law should be informed by the lived experiences of married girls to ensure that their needs and priorities are addressed, and that they do not further stigmatize, isolate, and limit the rights of married girls. In collaboration with feminist organizations, NGOs, communities, and with girls directly, they should identify possible unintended consequences of the application of the Republic Act and strategies to protect girls who are already married.
- 6.4 Women-led and feminist CSOs, youth organizations, UN organizations, and humanitarian actors should advocate for restorative justice practices that protect adolescent girls throughout the legal process. Restorative justice includes a range of informal strategies to increase the involvement of families and communities in responses to crime.^{xxxiv} These actors should engage adolescent girls to ensure that mechanisms are in place to prevent married adolescent girls and adolescent mothers from further stigmatization and isolation.

- 6.5 Married girls, their families, and community, traditional, and Muslim religious leaders should be engaged to lead the design, implementation, and monitoring of such mechanisms to ensure they are context specific and relevant to the needs and priorities of married girls.

07

ADVOCATE FOR AND IMPLEMENT STRUCTURAL ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL CHANGE POLICIES THAT PROMOTE GENDER EQUALITY AND SOCIO-ECONOMIC EQUALITY, SUCH AS UNIVERSAL CHILD CARE, THROUGH THE FOLLOWING ACTIONS:

- 7.1 The BARMM government, Plan International Philippines, UN agencies, and donors should invest in training, programs, and flexible funding that engages adolescent girls and women, with boys and men as allies, to enhance their civil and advocacy skills so that they can meaningfully contribute to the design and implementation of policies relevant to them. Women-led and feminist CSOs, youth organizations, and other national humanitarian actors should use participatory, strength-based training approaches to build the capacity of adolescents and communities to drive child marriage advocacy. This should be done in tandem with multi-disciplinary government agencies at the provincial and regional levels to develop and implement economic and social change policies. The BARMM government should also strengthen the role and engagement of adolescents in community-based and regional monitoring and enforcement mechanisms to help promote their own protection.
- 7.2 Any policy aiming to address child marriage in BARMM should address the economic systems and structures that perpetuate persistent gender and socio-economic inequality. Such policies may include structural economic policy interventions that promote gender equality, such as those which increase girls' and women's access to formal and informal education and learning opportunities and entry points to equitable workforce participation and compensation.

08

ENHANCE FEMINIST-LED ADVOCACY AND REVIEW ALL OTHER REGIONAL POLICIES AND REGULATIONS THAT WILL PROHIBIT CHILD MARRIAGE AND ADDRESS INEQUITABLE GENDER NORMS THROUGH THE FOLLOWING ACTIONS:

- 8.1 Key BARMM ministries, government leaders, youth-led organizations, and CSOs should coordinate with feminist organizations to ensure child marriage policy and advocacy drives equitable economic and social change. Advocacy should be inclusive of married and out-of-school adolescents as well as Muslim and Indigenous Peoples, and displaced communities.

- 8.2 BARMM ministries should support community-led advocacy whereby child marriage advocates and women-led and feminist CSOs collaborate with MRLs, traditional and community leaders, and adolescents themselves to advocate for programming that strengthens children's rights and feminist approaches to child marriage legal frameworks.
- 8.3 BARMM parliament should review the Gender and Development Code and other policies related to prohibition of child marriage, promotion of sexual and reproductive health and rights, adolescent pregnancy prevention and implementation of Republic Act 11313 (the Safe Spaces Act), and elimination of gender-based sexual harassment and ensure that these are aligned with the implementation of RA 115961. Based on the review, parliament could propose recommendations to amend Presidential Decree 1083 that would introduce safeguards to ensure that best interest and welfare of children and adolescents are maintained in the implementation of RA 115961.

RESEARCH RECOMMENDATIONS

This study helped fill the evidence gap on the complex and intersecting drivers of child marriage among diverse humanitarian contexts in BARMM, and uncovered the adaptive capacities of adolescent girls, their families, communities, and wider systems that are protective against child marriage risks. The study also illuminated the importance of dismantling socio-economic inequality and gender inequality. However, research gaps still remain. The study proposes the following research recommendations based on evidence gaps uncovered in this study:

01

Researchers should use findings from formative studies to work together with communities, including adolescents, to implement rigorous evaluations of community-led child marriage programs to build an evidence base on what works and what does not work to end child marriage and respond to the needs of married girls in crises. Evaluations should be designed to assess which intervention components are effective and evaluate longer-term impacts of the intervention on health, well-being, economic, and civic outcomes for girls and their families.

02

Additional research is needed to determine a causal pathway between adolescent social media use and child marriage. Additionally, there is a need to further understand the decision-making process of adolescents and their families in initiating, exploring, rejecting, or accepting child marriage.

03

Additional formative research is needed to better understand the lived experiences of these adolescent girls once they reach their place of work, so practitioners can deliver targeted programs and services to meet their needs and implement preventive measures and alternative opportunities.

04

A key consequence of child marriage is school dropout, which has detrimental intergenerational impacts on earning and health outcomes for girls and their families. However, there is a dearth of evidence on effective strategies to facilitate married girls' access to education in humanitarian contexts. Formative, action-research is needed to understand sustainable solutions to keep displaced, married girls in school.

05

A prevalence study on child marriage in BARMM should be conducted by the Philippine Statistics Authority in partnership with the Council for the Welfare of Children at the provincial levels to inform the design of targeted, gender transformative programming for the most at-risk communities (e.g., displaced, low-income, and out-of-school adolescents). Study findings should be leveraged to increase resources to communities with the highest levels of need and risk through evidence-based recommendations for policy and program reforms.

06

The study uncovered a clear deficit of community spaces where adolescent girls (and boys) can safely play, interact, build their social capital, learn, and receive tailored programming and services based on their needs; however, additional research is needed to determine whether adolescent girl safe spaces is an effective approach to prevent and respond to child marriage in humanitarian settings^{xxxv,xxxvi,xxxvii}. Evaluations of adolescent girl safe spaces should also investigate the extent to which safe spaces can foster peer-to-peer relationships by building trust across diverse adolescent subgroups and serve as a platform to counteract the high level of bullying, discrimination, and stigma within the community.



CONCLUSION

This study contributes to a growing evidence base that existing risks of child marriage are exacerbated in displacement and conflict-affected contexts. While new risks unique to displacement that predispose girls in particular to marriage may also exist, this study helped to fill the evidence gap in terms of understanding the needs and priorities of adolescent girls affected by conflict and related displacement by working with adolescent girls and community members. It discovered eight key drivers of child marriage in BARMM, including key drivers unique to only some parts of the region: 1) conflict- or disaster-related displacement; 2) limited decision-making power among adolescent girls; 3) self-sacrifice and sense of duty; 4) controlling adolescent sexuality to protect family honor; 5) poverty and lack of access to stable income-generating activities; 6) lack of access to quality education; 7) differing interpretations of Islamic beliefs around child marriage; and 8) enabling legal environment. The study also demonstrated that conflict-related displacement and other humanitarian crises exacerbated these risks to child marriage.

Study findings confirm that child marriage is underpinned by gender and socio-economic inequality, which limit adolescent girls' voices in their own life decisions. They are forced to agree to child marriage due to parental, peer, and environmental pressures, sacrificing their own aspirations out of a sense of duty to their parents and family. Most adolescent girls have a sense of ownership towards their decisions around child marriage, with some initiating their own child marriages, perceiving it as an alternative to facing poverty, child labor, or stigma, and believing that it is a common and acceptable practice within Islam.

Notably, findings also indicate that adolescent girls are resilient and possess potential to overcome challenges and lead changes in their communities. From the SenseMaker® data, they show a higher likelihood to act against harmful socio-cultural norms than adolescent boys, who were more likely to be inclined to “keeping tradition.” This also reflects that boys and men are the power holders within a patriarchal society. A gender-transformative, community-led approach to preventing and responding to child marriage in BARMM could help tap into this potential. In order to do so, governments, feminist organizations, CSOs, NGOs, INGOs, and other key actors must coordinate to implement interventions and policies that strengthen the system of support for adolescents and advance gender and socio-economic equality in BARMM.

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OUR VOICES, OUR FUTURE:

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