POLICY BRIEF

CHILD MARRIAGE: UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES OF DEVELOPMENT AND HUMANITARIAN PROGRAMS

ACTION ON CHILD, EARLY
AND FORCED MARRIAGE
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Action on Child
Early and Forced Marriage

For the past 30 years,

global development efforts have strived to reduce child marriage using a combination of economic, social, and legal interventions. However, UNICEF and UNFPA report that

> 12 million girls are still married before the age of 18 each year;

> Child marriage is prevalent in 107 countries, predominately in South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa;

> Child marriage increases in humanitarian crises such as the war in Syria or floods in Bangladesh;

> It is predicted that almost one billion girls and women will have been married as children by 2050 if the practice continues at current rates;

> The current COVID-19 pandemic is set to result in as many as 13 million additional child marriages in the years following the crisis.

As many local, national, and international organisations continue to work to eliminate child marriage, all development and humanitarian actors must also strive to become more accountable to the populations they serve. An essential part of that accountability is the recognition of the potential harms of this work and the possibility of unintended consequences.

It is well known that programs designed to mitigate one development or humanitarian challenge can result in unexpected outcomes, some of which may even violate the ethical imperative of "Do No Harm." In a seminal 1936 paper entitled "The Unanticipated Consequences of Purposive Social Action," Robert K. Merton discusses the long-standing problem of unanticipated or unintended outcomes resulting from targeted social action. Merton argues that unintended consequences are more likely to occur when there is a lack of sufficient knowledge and time or simply a refusal or inability of the researcher to consider all relevant aspects of the problem.

Unintended consequences can be both positive and negative and can be directly related to the program or exist outside the original scope.

The sheer complexity of many development programs makes it almost inevitable that unintended consequences will occur (Hirschman, 1967). This is perhaps not surprising given that development and humanitarian contexts often involve complex social behaviours and rapidly-changing and unpredictable situations (Oxfam, 2013).

To minimise the risk of unexpected outcomes, especially those which are harmful, programs must be well-designed. This involves careful planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation, ensuring accountability and learning from practical experience in the field. In addition, unintended consequences must be anticipated and monitored from the outset, so they can be identified, mitigated, addressed and reported.

The evaluation process is critical as it allows the effects of a program to be measured against its stated objectives which can help improve the decision-making process and future program performance (Weiss, 1972). Any successful program requires a holistic and inclusive evaluation, embedded as part of a wider organisational culture of monitoring, evaluation, accountability and learning.

However, such evaluations are challenging, and research has found that there is often an under-reporting of unintended consequences even when evaluators are aware of their existence (Bamberger et al., 2016, Oliver et al., 2019). From discussions with evaluators, Oliver et al., identified three main challenges: flawed program design, difficulties in identifying unintended consequences when they occur and inadequate explanations for the observed outcomes.

Adding to these difficulties is the fact that the evaluation process itself is inherently political as it involves setting parameters, framing and limiting what is evaluated (Oliver et al., 2019).

As a result of this, only selected programs and outcomes may be evaluated, and program managers may refuse to acknowledge that unintended consequences have occurred. This makes it impossible for others in the same field to learn from past mistakes and experiences, harming overall outcomes. Most importantly, evaluations seldom reflect the perspectives of the communities served by these programs, whose views may contradict those of program staff or evaluators (Oliver et al., 2019).

Monitoring and evaluation can provide critical evidence for whether or not a particular development or humanitarian program has had the desired impact, but it can also highlight weaknesses, which may render programs vulnerable to challenge or even termination.

When programs do not progress according to plan, they can be difficult to manage on both personal and organizational levels, given the invest-ment both individuals and organisations make in development and humanitarian work.

Since 2015, Action on Child, Early and Forced Marriage has conducted research on child marriage prevention. Through an analysis of scientific and grey literature from PubMed, PsychInfo, Web of Science and Google Scholar, it found many child marriage prevention programs lacked high-quality evaluations and some were not evaluated at all. Others gave rise to harmful unintended consequences.

The following fifteen examples of unintended consequences are presented here to (1) illustrate the types of unintended consequences that have previously arisen in child marriage programs, (2) share learning to inform future monitoring and evaluation and (3) provide potential solutions to prevent and respond to unintended consequences related to child marriage and other programs.

1. Delayed marriages lead to higher dowry payments

While programs to promote education have been successful at keeping girls in school, such efforts have had the unintended consequence of increasing the dowry payments families must pay to the groom's family when she does marry as a result of her older age (Brown, 2012). This is an added burden on poor families and has been documented as a result of the Kishori Abidjan program in Bangladesh (Amin, 2011, Malhotra, 2011).

2. Effects on fertility

Although eliminating child marriage is often believed to reduce fertility rates and therefore the economic and environmental burden of population growth, programs can also have the unintended consequence of reducing traditional means of birth spacing such as extended breastfeeding and post-natal sexual abstinence and therefore increasing fertility (Preparatory meeting for the International Conference on Population Development, 1994).

3. FGM prevention inadvertently increased rate of child marriage

In Somalia, efforts to end female genital mutilation (FGM) have led some communities to stop performing the most harmful form of the practice (infibulation, type three FGM) and instead conduct a less harmful version (clitoridectomies, type one form of FGM). However, because the new procedure is believed to be less effective at reducing the girl's sexual desire and hence likelihood of premarital sex, families were more likely to marry their daughters while still children. Some girls themselves chose to be married early to allay the doubts of their potential husband about their virginity (World Vision, 2014, Boyden et al., 2013, Hodgkinson et al., 2016).

4. Criminalizing child marriage drives it underground

Criminalizing child marriage has been shown to drive the practice underground where it cannot be regulated and often becomes even more dangerous for those involved (Greene, 2014). In India, police raids on child marriage ceremonies have prompted some families to carry out marriages in the middle of the night or travel to other states where the practice is still permitted (Nirantar 2015). Criminalization can also discourage local communities from cooperating in future reforms (Greene, 2014).

5. Early informal cohabitation

In countries where the legal age of marriage has been raised to 18, the practice of child marriage continues via the rise of informal cohabitation of underage spouses. In Uganda, this practice is locally referred to as "marriage through window" (kawundo kakubye edirisa) and was estimated to represent nearly 7 out of 10 new marriages in the communities researched. These informal unions are particularly dangerous as child brides and their children receive none of the legal or material protections of formal marriage (Bantebya et al., 2014).

6. Social isolation for girls whose marriages are stopped

When programs are successful at preventing an already arranged child marriage, girls whose marriages are stopped often experience social isolation, depression and anxiety about finding a future husband. Such unintended consequences have been documented in the Amhara region of Ethiopia where researchers suggested addressing this by establishing support groups to help girls with stopped marriages (Gage, 2009).

7. Economic empowerment may lead to domestic violence and greater gender inequality

While women's economic empowerment is often seen as a key solution to child marriage, it too can have unintended consequences by dramatically altering family structures. Greene suggests that it could increase domestic violence and lead to greater gender inequality with women taking on greater responsibilities both within and outside of the household (Greene, 2014).

8. STIs and HIV/AIDS prevention programs result in increase in child marriage

Seemingly unrelated programs can also increase the rate of child marriage as was the case in Uganda where the introduction of an STIs and HIV/AIDS prevention program led to an increase in child marriage as men believed that marrying virgins would reduce their risk of contracting an STI or HIV/AIDS (Forum on Marriage and Rights of Women and Girls, 2000).

9. Banning dowry and bride price removes safety net

Because dowry and bride prices often drive economic motivations for child marriage, many activists have called for bans on these financial exchanges. However, such a change could have unintended consequences as the bride price can be an essential means of survival for poor families, amounting to several times the family's annual income, thus any reforms must also consider alternative sources of income to replace this safety net such as social security.

10. Laws intended to prevent sexual exploitation reinforce patriarchal control

In Uganda, a new law raising the age of consent from 14 to 18 had the unintended effect of giving fathers more authority to demand compensation from their daughters' sexual partners. Evidence from court cases showed that instead of protecting young women, the law actually reinforced patriarchal privilege whilst simultaneously increasing the regulation of adolescent female sexuality and undermining their autonomy (Parikh, 2012).

11. Self-initiated child marriages due to mixed education

In Nepal, India and Bangladesh, a new phenomenon of self-initiated child marriage has arisen due to greater coeducation between girls and boys. Because prevention efforts do not address the broader culture that still endorses an early age of marriage, they have proved less effective at preventing child marriage. Instead of helping prevent child marriage, girls' continued education has become a new way that the practice is perpetuated with or without parental consent (Plan Asia, 2013).

12. Risks of pre-marital sex: unintended pregnancies, unsafe abortions, and STIs and HIV/AIDS

Eliminating child marriage may unintentionally expose adolescents to the risks of pre-marital sex for longer periods of time and increase their risks of unintended pregnancy, unsafe abortions and STIs and HIV/AIDS, especially when sex education, birth control and contraceptives are absent or inaccessible (Sagade, 2005). It is therefore essential that adolescents are given sexual and reproductive health education in schools as well as access to adolescent-friendly services.

13. Legal reforms in Egypt cause an increase in early marriage

Historically, there has been a pattern of wealthy men from the Gulf States traveling to impoverished areas of Egypt to marry young brides. To deter this practice, legislative reforms were enacted which imposed a payment of 6,000 USD to be made to the family of the bride if the age difference was more than 25 years. However, this cost has led to an increase in early marriages between Egyptian girls and older men from the Gulf States as the 6,000 USD payment represents a significant incentive for Egyptian families to perpetuate the practice, thus failing to achieve the intent of the reforms (Dieudonne and Scherbel-Ball, 2016).

15. The promotion of education that excludes married or pregnant girls

When education is promoted as the way to curb early marriage, it can have the unintended effect of sending the message that education and marriage are mutually exclusive. These binary choices reinforce the idea that pregnant or married girls cannot pursue or continue their education, and this may discourage girls who know they will marry early from pursuing any academic study at all (Wyss). Therefore school policies must be changed to accept married and pregnant girls.

14. Public awareness campaigns increase stigma against Syrian refugees in host countries

Humanitarian organizations working with Syrian refugee populations in Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey have reported that the media focus on child marriage among refugees has led to increased stigma within host communities. Additionally, they suggest that this stigma may have increased sexual harassment of Syrian girls by other communities living in Jordan (Spencer, 2015).

RECOMMENDATIONS

Many development programs such as those to prevent child marriage involve complex social changes across many different parts of society.

As the previous examples demonstrate, any program may lead to unintended consequences which can harm the very communities the program was intended to support.

Since these child marriage programs took place, there have been many reforms and improvements within the international development and humanitarian community, and some of the programs and methodologies described above are no longer used, such as the campaign against only some forms of FGM in Somalia. Today, it is understood that all forms of FGM should be banned regardless of the type, degree, or severity as it is a human rights violation and infringement upon girls' bodily integrity. On July 17, 2020, the 44th session of the United Nations Human Rights Council approved a landmark resolution banning FGM (OHCHR, 2020).

However, unintended consequences remain a largely neglected topic, and development and humanitarian actors must do their utmost to prevent negative unintended consequences wherever possible and conduct robust evaluations which set out to identify, explain and report on both intended and unintended consequences.

Given the dearth of literature on unintended consequences, the following section discusses some of the practical measures which can be used to prevent, detect and address unintended consequences related to child marriage and other challenges.

1. Thoroughly understand the local context.

Before embarking on a development program, a thorough search of the existing literature must be conducted, and an assessment made of the local social and political contexts. This should include interviewing key informants to learn from their experiences and identifying in advance any possible unintended outcomes based on this knowledge.

It is crucial that adequate time is invested in examining the basic problem being addressed by the program, the social phenomena which perpetuate the harmful practice or development challenge and its relationship to other social conditions and processes, such as patriarchy and the low value accorded girls in society in the case of child marriage or the loss of rule of law in humanitarian settings. Development and humanitarian actors must avoid assuming that a strategy which has worked well in one setting will have the same outcome in different contexts (Harper et al., 2014, Merton, 1936).

2. Take a holistic and long-term approach to program design.

In designing any program whether development-driven or humanitarian, it is important to focus not only on the short-term intended and unintended outcomes but also the longer term impact the program may have, including any unintended consequences which may not become evident during or immediately following program completion.

3. Explicate a sound theory of change, including negative programme theory.

A robust theory of change should underpin all programs to maximise the likelihood of achieving the desired outcomes.

Careful attention must be paid to the theorized mechanism of change as well as to the assumptions which underpin it (Grantcraft, 2006, Stein and Valters, 2012). Given the importance of unintended consequences, a program's theory of change should be constantly reviewed and also be informed by a separate negative programme theory to help focus attention on identifying and addressing any unintended consequences.

Negative program theory is similar to the theory of change but with an emphasis on how program activities might result in negative outcomes rather than focussing only on the program's intended and desired positive impact (Bonell et al., 2015).

4. Conduct a risk assessment.

Conduct a risk assessment with relevant stakeholders, including community members, during the design phase of any program to identify the likelihood of negative outcomes and strategies to avoid them. These should be documented in a risk register to help program developers better understand what is happening on the ground. The risk assessment should include a "get out" clause so the program can be halted if necessary. It should also have adaptive methodologies which can respond to unexpected changes throughout the program (BetterEvaluation, 2020).

5. Utilise creative thinking techniques.

There are many creative thinking techniques to help development and humanitarian actors think differently about how to solve problems such as identifying and addressing unintended consequences. Some commonly used creative thinking techniques include brainstorming, idea association, the discontinuity technique, mental maps, and de Bono's "Six Hats Thinking."

Brainstorming—the most common technique used to stimulate creative thinking—encourages the free flow of any ideas that come to mind. Inapplicable ideas are then systematically eliminated until a solution is reached. In the association of ideas technique, creativity is stimulated by combining objects, words and concepts which helps optimize memory.

The discontinuity technique is used to force a change of habit by causing the mind to see the world differently, while mental maps can help eliminate mental blocks and free up the mind by connecting different ideas. Mental maps help visualize one's thought process by writing the topic or problem in the centre of a sheet of paper and drawing several lines from it which connect to different keywords from which further ideas can be generated (HEFLO, 2020).

Another technique, de Bono's "Six Hats Thinking," is a useful decision-making tool to increase creativity, improve lateral thinking and group decision-making. It encourages decision-makers to view the problem from multiple perspectives, such as considering factual information and strengths and weaknesses as well as the emotional aspects of decision making, all of which are used to encourage creativity and innovation (Obront, 2020).

6. Include questions about unintended consequences in all evaluations.

Create a culture of identifying, addressing and reporting unintended consequences, including explaining all unusual results.

This means including specific evaluation questions on unintended consequences which are written in collaboration with key stakeholders. This helps create the expectation that unintended outcomes are likely to occur and should be recorded.

All unforeseen events, incidents or outcomes must be noted and recorded in the evaluation report to share with relevant stakeholders. Evaluators should not be discouraged from investigating unintended consequences and must not be pressured to omit them from the evaluation as this prevents others from learning from past mistakes and unexpected outcomes.

7. Use a mixed-method approach to better capture unintended outcomes.

Most evaluations are designed to provide credible evidence that programs have achieved their intended objectives. Even rigorous evaluation methods can fail to identify outcomes that were not specified in the program design simply because the data collection method focuses on predetermined outcomes.

Many widely-used impact evaluation designs, which often include randomised controlled trials (RCTs), do not detect even serious unintended consequences of development programs because they are too narrow in scope.

Research has shown that a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods (i.e. a mixed-method approach) can better capture both positive

All of these recommendations require that development and humanitarian actors address unintended consequences (UCs) at every stage. The following eight step evaluation process developed by BetterEvaluation has been adapted by the author to demonstrate its practical application to address unintended consequences at each stage.

1. **Decide on decision-making process.** *Support local communities' agency in decision-making processes and include appropriate "get out" clauses.*

2. **Set the scope for the evaluation.** *Include specific questions about UCs.*

3. **Develop the terms of reference.** *Explicitly define the scope of the evaluation to include UCs.*

4. **Engage with the evaluation team.** *Ensure that the importance of UCs is fully understood.*

5. **Develop an appropriate methodology.** *Utilize a mixed-method approach to help identify UCs.*

6. **Manage implementation of program.** *Monitor and address any unexpected outcomes.*

7. **Produce a high-quality evaluation report.** *Document and explain all UCs.*

8. **Disseminate and use information.** *Share UCs to improve future outcomes.*

and negative unintended consequences of development programs (Bamberger et al., 2016). One such example is the 'RCT+' design. This method maintains the rigour associated with RCTs but also provides enough flexibility to identify and address unanticipated and unintended outcomes within a monitoring, evaluation, accountability, and learning framework (Bamberger et al., 2016).

8. Adopt a participatory evaluation approach which prioritizes shared leadership and privileges the views of affected communities.

Use a participatory, inclusive approach involving all stakeholders to help prevent unintended consequences. By putting affected populations at the center of program planning, implementation and evaluation, the co-production of development programs at all stages increases the likelihood of success and helps support productive partnerships, promote capacity building and develop local leadership. Gaining stakeholder consensus over a long period also helps create a genuinely collaborative program involving shared power and decision making instead of a one-way flow of information.

9. Acknowledge the inherent complexity of development work and incorporate flexibility.

Effecting social change is complex and fraught with practical difficulties. In the case of child mar-

riage, successful programs require a comprehensive understanding of the cultural, social, political, judicial, demographic, religious and economic factors which encourage and sustain the practice in different contexts. Any solutions must also address the socio-cultural background of communities which practice child marriage and consider how to overcome resistance to changing norms surrounding virginity, premarital sex and family honour which have existed for millennia.

Given such inherent complexities, it is incumbent on donors to establish reasonable expectations for program success. They must appreciate that each initiative represents a new learning experience with no guarantees of success. Failed programs must also be viewed as learning opportunities, which may prove to be even more useful than successful programs for learning and improvement (Weiss, 1993).

Flexibility must also be built into development and humanitarian initiatives so that they can adapt to emerging challenges throughout the program's timeline. This enables decision-makers to respond to emerging concerns that necessarily arise due to the complexity of social change.

10. Respect the ethical principle of "Do No Harm."

For any program, the safety of affected populations is paramount, and the guiding principle of

"Do No Harm" must be upheld to ensure communities are not harmed as a result of unintended consequences. Any development or humanitarian program must adopt a human rights-based approach which does not aggravate grievances, tensions or vulnerabilities either directly or indirectly (Oxfam, 2013).

In the digital era, it is also essential that the principle of "Do No Harm" encompasses data collection and the use of technology. This must include participation, privacy, self-identification, accountability and transparency (OHCHR, 2018).

DISCUSSION

There is widespread recognition of the need for careful design, continuous monitoring, rigorous evaluations, and accountability to affected populations, donors and other stakeholders in development and humanitarian initiatives (Herrero, 2012, Elahi, 2020). As every program is a new learning experience presenting new challenges, it is vital that all results are recorded, shared and used to inform future program design.

For an evaluation to be truly holistic, it must address any unintended consequences as the literature clearly shows that unintended consequences are a common occurrence in development and humanitarian programs. Yet addressing unintended consequences will require grappling with many practical, methodological, political and ethical issues (Weiss, 1993, Oliver et al., 2019).

First, while there is ample literature on the evaluation of intended outcomes based on a system of program monitoring, evaluation, accountability and learning, much less is known about how to identify, mitigate, address and explain unintended outcomes. Through greater awareness and understanding, unintended consequences can be anticipated, mitigated, adequately explained and reported in evaluations, rather than being ignored as though they were some kind of exception or anomaly. Moreover, as Hirschman and others contend, unintended consequences can be positive as well as negative, and if overlooked can be a missed opportunity to capitalize on serendipitous results (Hirschman, 1967).

Next, the political nature of program evaluations exacerbates the problem of dealing with any unintended consequences as programs are often funded by external agencies or governments who have high expectations that the originally agreed objectives will be met (Weiss, 1993).

Evaluators themselves may recognise the challenges managers face in explaining unintended consequences and may therefore downplay them in their evaluation reports out of personal interest to ensure future work (Oliver et al., 2019).

This expectation encourages development actors to portray a positive narrative of the program and discourages them from drawing attention to any unintended consequences which may jeopardise future funding opportunities (Wongtschowski et al., 2016).

Given the inherent complexity and challenges of interventions for social change and rapid emergency responses, it is vital that careful efforts are made during the planning stage to ensure that any likely unintended consequences are anticipated and adequate time is allocated to determine how to identify, mitigate, and effectively address them.

Evaluation literature suggests that successful outcomes are more likely when there is an organizational culture which understands the importance of monitoring and evaluation rigorously practiced by well-trained management and program staff (Weiss, 1993, Save the Children n.d.). This includes ensuring that programs are underpinned by a robust theory of change which sets out the empirical basis underlying any social intervention and makes explicit all assumptions in the chain of events that are expected to result in the intended change (Weiss, 1993, Brest, 2010).

In all programs, the evaluation process should make accountability to all stakeholders a priority, particularly to the communities the program is designed to help whose views must be made central in all stages of the program. There must also be accountability to donors regarding how resources were managed and what outcomes were achieved.

Additionally, it is important for development and humanitarian actors to admit and value failures as these are important opportunities for learning, which can improve program effectiveness and help truly deliver the planned benefits for local communities (Weiss, 1993, Herrero, 2012). Donors must shift away from the culture of expecting ideal and perfect results and recognise the realities of this field which often involves changing complex human behaviours across a range of social, economic, and political contexts.

> **If there is good evidence that a particular theory of change does not work, then this in itself can be a public good (Brest, 2010).**

The findings from rigorous evaluations can measure the scale and scope of the impact, assess the cost effectiveness of a program, inform and help improve future programs and ensure accountability to relevant stakeholders. Such evaluations can also provide justification for abandoning a failed approach and may even help others to build and innovate based on this information and thus improve overall outcomes for development initiatives.

In early reviews of child marriage prevention programs, many evaluations were either considered to be not of a high quality or had not been carried out at all. This lack of high-quality evaluations likely hampered early efforts to build evidence for best practices for preventing child marriage. However, the field of child marriage prevention has learned much from its past failures, and ini-

tiatives and evaluations have improved considerably over time although there is ample scope for further improvement.

COVID-19

Evaluations have always been an important undertaking, but they have become even more critical during the COVID-19 pandemic when rigorous evaluations can provide evidence of whether or not the recovery efforts are working, for whom and under what circumstances (UNFPA, 2020).

The pandemic has exacerbated pre-existing gender inequalities, and the hardest hit have been vulnerable populations such as girls at risk of child marriage. According to World Vision, four million more girls are at risk of child marriage over the next two years as a result of the economic hardships of COVID-19. The closure of schools and health care facilities compounds girls' vulnerability as the pandemic limits or prevents their access to sexual and reproductive health services, potentially leading to an increase in teenage pregnancies and pressure to marry.

In an April 2020 press release, UNFPA stated that the disruption and delays in implementing child marriage prevention programs due to the pandemic could potentially result in an additional 13 million more child marriages by 2030.

As the world begins to emerge from lockdown, it is essential that adaptive evaluations are undertaken to ensure that marginalised groups such as girls at risk of child marriage continue to receive effective and targeted programs during the pandemic and economic recovery.

CONCLUSION

While it is almost impossible for any actor to anticipate every possible permutation of unintended consequences in child marriage prevention or other development and humanitarian programs, the first step is to openly acknowledge that unintended consequences can and do occur and can have significant harmful effects for affected communities.

Bamberger et al. 2016 provide five compelling reasons to address unintended consequences. They suggest that overlooking unintended consequences may result in less effective and efficient programs as well as less equitable access to certain groups; funding agencies may continue to fund programs that are not achieving their objectives or are doing so less than optimally; program staff may miss out on important learning opportunities, programs may fail their equity objectives as unintended consequences disproportionately affect the poorest and most vulnerable groups, and unintended consequences can result in serious harm to some groups, who are often the poorest and most vulnerable.

Thus to minimise unintended consequences, programs must be holistic, underpinned by theory, use scientifically-rigorous and appropriate methods capable of capturing unexpected outcomes, fully engage with local communities, and understand how programs and policies will affect individuals, families, and communities in their day-to-day lives.

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