



LESSONS LEARNED

**National Society Actions
Against Child Marriage**

Australia, Mali and Nepal

ifrc.org

The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) is the world's largest volunteer-based humanitarian network. With our 192-member National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies worldwide, we are in every community reaching 160.7 million people annually through long-term services and development programmes, as well as 110 million people through disaster response and early recovery programmes. We act before, during and after disasters and health emergencies to meet the needs and improve the lives of vulnerable people. We do so with impartiality as to nationality, ethnicity, gender, religious beliefs, class and political opinions.

Guided by *Strategy 2030* – our collective plan of action to tackle the major humanitarian and development challenges of this decade – we are committed to saving lives and changing minds.

Our strength lies in our volunteer network, our community-based expertise and our independence and neutrality. We work to improve humanitarian standards, as partners in development, and in response to disasters. We persuade decision-makers to act at all times in the interests of vulnerable people. The result: we enable healthy and safe communities, reduce vulnerabilities, strengthen resilience and foster a culture of peace around the world.

© **International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, Geneva, 2022**

Copies of all or part of this report may be made for non-commercial use, providing the source is acknowledged. The IFRC would appreciate receiving details of its use. Requests for commercial reproduction should be directed to the IFRC at secretariat@ifrc.org. All photos used in this report are copyright of the IFRC unless otherwise indicated.

Cover photo: Mali

Authors: Dr. Sinha Wickremesekera and Gurvinder Singh

Design: Michelle Soo

Contact us

Requests for commercial reproduction should be directed to the IFRC Secretariat:

Address: Chemin des Crêts 17 Petit-Saconnex, 1209 Geneva, Switzerland

Postal address: P.O. Box 303, 1211 Geneva 19, Switzerland

T +41 (0)22 730 42 22 | **F** +41 (0)22 730 42 00 | **E** secretariat@ifrc.org | **W** [ifrc.org](https://www.ifrc.org)

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Definitions	4
Overview of this case study report	5
Background on the problem of child marriage	6
Methodology	7
Australia lessons	8
Mali lessons	14
Nepal lessons	18
Fundamental principles	23

Definitions

Child is a human being below the age of 18 years.^{1,2}

Child marriage is a marriage of a girl or boy before the age of 18 years and refers to both formal marriages and informal unions in which one or both parties are under 18 years.³ Child marriage is sometimes called early marriage. It is a human rights violation for children to be married.

Forced marriages are marriages which one or both parties have not personally expressed their full and free consent to the union. A child marriage is considered to be a form of forced marriage, given that one or both parties have not expressed full, free and informed consent.⁴

Sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) refers to categories that include, but are not limited to, sexual violence, intimate partner violence, trafficking, forced/early marriage, sexual harassment, forced prostitution, femicide, female genital mutation, sexual exploitation and abuse, and denial of resources, opportunities and services.⁵

1 OHCHR (No date). *Convention on the rights of the child*.

2 IFRC (2013). *Child protection policy*.

3 OHCHR. (2019). *Child, Early and Forced Marriage, Including in Humanitarian Settings*. <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/Issues/Women/WRGS/Pages/ChildMarriage.aspx>

4 IFRC. (2019). *Disaster Risk Management Policy: From Prevention to Response and Recovery*.

5 IFRC. (2020). *Gender and Diversity Policy*. <https://media.ifrc.org/ifrc/wp-content/uploads/sites/5/2020/04/GD-Policy-v4.pdf>

Overview of this case study report

This case study report examines lessons learned through programming by Australian Red Cross, Mali Red Cross, and Nepal Red Cross.

The lessons learned from the experiences of these National Societies can be utilized by other National Societies to enhance their own work against child marriage.

Australian Red Cross (ARC) has developed a partnership with their Federal Government to implement the *Support for Trafficked People Program* (STPP and commonly referred to as the Support Program). This has led to supporting many girls and women at risk of marriage avoiding or leaving a forced marriage. Australian Red Cross efforts to partially delink girls and women at risk of forced marriage from the criminal justice system and extend the period of support they receive from 45 or 90 days to 200 days were positive advances in contributing to greater security and emotional support of clients. The community-based Peer Support projects – *Free to Choose and Empowered to Respond* in Victoria and *Empowered to Respond* in New South Wales – enabled participating girls and women to identify strategies to avoid forced marriage, keep families together, and contribute to long-term social change. The need for safe, appropriate and effective support outside the family such as through teachers, counsellors and other professionals, including the police as a last resort, and creating a process that supports families to come back together were also some of the key findings from the Peer Support projects.

One of the key activities of the **Mali Red Cross (MRC)** Maternal Newborn and Child Health (MNCH) project (2016–2022) is the inclusion of awareness raising among various community groups and regular advocacy meetings with Muslim leaders/village chiefs to prevent child marriage in the project areas. The strategy to focus primarily on outreach workers conducting awareness-raising sessions from house to house, especially in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, was very effective because of the outreach worker's understanding of the local context. One of the key lessons was that the partnerships established with Government Ministries, local organizations/committees at village level and the INGO World Vision, enabled Mali Red Cross to maximize the use of resources rather than work separately on its own. The other key lessons of the project were: capacity-building activities that targeted Muslim religious leaders, especially on positive masculinities, gender, and SGBV, resulted in some of the leaders becoming outreach workers themselves; the inclusion of men as volunteers in SGBV and prevention of child marriage training workshops transformed some of them into gender champions; and tailoring of awareness sessions and messages to suit different audiences was more effective than a uniform message to all groups.

Nepal Red Cross Society (NRCS) in partnership with UNFPA Nepal implemented a project titled, *Ending Child Marriage* as part of the UNFPA and UNICEF initiative, *Global Program on Ending Child Marriage* in four districts from November 2017–September 2021. The target population was adolescent girls aged 10–19 years and their parents. The Social and Financial Skills Package (SFSP) was a major contributor to the success of the program, as these trainings empowered the participants to take responsibility for change. Using trained and empowered adolescents as peer facilitators was another reason for the success of the project. This methodology also ensured that when the project ends, a pool of trained facilitators are available in each village who have the potential to sustain the program beyond the project. The importance of engaging men, especially the fathers of the adolescent girls, was reinforced many times as in most contexts they make the decision, often considered final, about their daughter's marriage. The radio programs, developed to overcome the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, provided an opportunity to reach a larger audience beyond the project areas. Active involvement of multiple stakeholders – municipal and village council authorities, police, schools, radio stations and other media organizations, UNFPA, and NGOs – contributed immensely towards the effective implementation of the project.

Background on the problem of child marriage

Child marriage is a human rights violation. It is defined as any formal or informal union where one or both parties are under 18 years.⁶

Sustainable Development Goal 5.3 calls for elimination of all harmful practices such as child, early and forced marriages and female genital mutilation. Globally there is said to be a decline in child marriages by 15% from 1 in 4 to 1 in 5. But the current trend will not be enough to meet SDG 5.3 on ending child marriage by 2030.⁷

The total number of girls and women alive today that were married as children is 650 million.⁸ This is equivalent to 1 in 5 girls being married as children compared to 1 in 30 boys.⁹

Countries with the highest maternal and child mortality rates are the same countries where child marriage is prevalent. In fact, a 10% reduction in child marriage could be associated with a 70% reduction in a country's maternal mortality rate.¹⁰

According to the United Nations, COVID-19 will disrupt planned efforts to end child marriage and cause wide-reaching economic consequences. The UN estimates that COVID-19 will result in an additional 13 million child marriages taking place that otherwise would not have occurred between 2020 and 2030.¹¹

Find here the IFRC *Technical Guidelines for National Society Programming against Child Marriage*:

Technical Guidelines for National Society Programming Against Child Marriage | IFRC

Find here case studies by Red Cross and Red Crescent National Societies to prevent and respond to child marriage: **Child-Marriage-Case-Studies-LR.pdf (ifrc.org)**

6 Child marriage is defined as "any legal or customary union between two people where at least one of the parties is below the age of 18. A child marriage is interpreted by the CEDAW and CRC Committees as a form of forced marriage, since children – given their age – inherently lack the ability to give their full, free and informed consent to their marriage or its timing" (*IASC Guidelines for Gender-based Violence Interventions in Humanitarian Settings*, Annex 3).

7 Ibid pg. 6

8 UNFPA and UNICEF. (2017). *Annual Report Global Program to Accelerate Action to End Child Marriage*. https://www.unicef.org/protection/files/Global_Programme_Child_Marriage_Annual_Report_2017.pdf.

9 UNICEF. (2019). *115 Million Boys and Men Married as Children*. <https://www.unicef.org/rosa/press-releases/115-million-boys-and-men-around-world-married-children-unicef>.

10 University of California, San Diego. (May 2013). *Higher Child Marriage Rates Associated with Higher Maternal and Infant Mortality*. http://ucsdnews.ucsd.edu/pressrelease/higher_child_marriage_rates_associated_with_higher_maternal_and_infant_mort.

11 UNFPA. (2020, April 27). *Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Family Planning and Ending Gender-Based Violence, Female Genital Mutilation and Child Marriage*. <https://www.unfpa.org/resources/impact-covid-19-pandemic-family-planning-and-ending-gender-based-violence-female-genital#:~:text=These%20are%3A%20Ending%20unmet%20need,made%20towards%20achieving%20these%20goals>.

Methodology

The lessons learned review has consisted of several approaches.

- 1) Reviewing existing data on the National Society interventions through evaluations, case studies, annual project reports, etc.
- 2) Using a standardized interview tool to interview relevant personnel in the National Society. The standardized tool included questions examining what has worked, what has not worked, and next steps around interventions to protect children from child marriage.
- 3) Using a standardized tool to interview relevant personnel from partner agencies.
- 4) Conducting focus group discussions with select groups of women, adolescent girls, men, and adolescent boys in communities to understand their perspectives on lessons learned through Red Cross and Red Crescent projects that include actions against child marriage.

Australia lessons

Introduction

In the 2019–2020 financial year in Australia, there were 223 cases relating to human trafficking and slavery offences reported to the Australian Federal Police (AFP). Of these, 92 were for forced marriage. Of those forced marriage reports, 51% involved children.¹²

In Australia, forced marriage is an offence under the Commonwealth Criminal Code Act of 1995, along with trafficking and slavery offences, hence the response to forced marriage is included within the trafficking response, which is unique to Australian domestic law. Although in 2013 the Australian government criminalized forced marriage under this Code,¹³ law enforcement authorities in Australia believe that forced marriage is underreported and it is difficult to accurately estimate the number of cases.¹⁴ However recent research estimated that for every person identified as being affected by modern slavery in Australia, there are four additional people that are not identified and go undetected.¹⁵

Australian Red Cross' (ARC) work in preventing and responding to modern slavery in Australia largely sits within Migration Support Programs. ARC has worked in this area for over 25 years providing assistance and protection to migrants according to their humanitarian needs. This includes people seeking asylum, refugees, people in immigration detention, people who are stateless, people who are trafficked or subject to forced marriage, and separated family members.¹⁶ ARC has been implementing a number of programs in response to the issue of forced marriage, including providing much-needed support to survivors to help them recover and rebuild their lives, implementing a community-based prevention program, and providing a peer support program.

The Support for Trafficked People Program (Support Program)

The **Support for Trafficked People Program (Support Program)** is a key component of Australia's anti-human trafficking strategy and the National Action Plan to Combat Modern Slavery 2020–25.¹⁷ The Support Program is funded by the Department of Social Services (DSS) and delivered by ARC.

The Support Program provides assistance to individuals, including children, who have experienced human trafficking, slavery and slavery-like practices, including forced marriage and forced labour, as identified by the Australian Federal Police (AFP). In particular, it aims to assist clients in meeting their safety, security, health and well-being needs, and to develop options for life after they exit support. Some of the services include but are not limited to: short-term case management support, access to suitable accommodation, medical treatment, counselling and referrals to legal and migration advice, skills development training and English-language classes, as well as longer-term support for those who choose to participate in a criminal justice process.

The Support Program was originally developed in 2004 to respond to the needs of survivors of trafficking and slavery offences. In 2009, the ARC started delivering the Support Program more actively, and later, in 2014, began to receive referrals for people in or at risk of forced marriage after forced marriage was criminalized in Australia. Under the original Support Program model, initially clients could receive only 45 or

12 <https://lens.monash.edu/@politics-society/2020/10/26/1381571/rethinking-australias-response-to-forced-marriage>

13 <https://www.dss.gov.au/women-programs-services-reducing-violence-human-trafficking-and-slavery/forced-marriage-stream-trial-final-evaluation-report-summary>

14 <https://www.homeaffairs.gov.au/criminal-justice/files/forced-marriage-fact-sheet-media.pdf>

15 Australian Institute of Criminology, 2019, *Estimating the dark figure of human trafficking and slavery victimization in Australia* cited in <https://www.redcross.org.au/getmedia/8076f148-89db-4d43-9b68-65c1811fc134/ARC-ModernSlavery-A4-46pp-final310321.pdf.aspx>

16 <https://www.redcross.org.au/getmedia/8076f148-89db-4d43-9b68-65c1811fc134/ARC-ModernSlavery-A4-46pp-final310321.pdf.aspx>

17 <https://www.dss.gov.au/women-programs-services-reducing-violence/anti-people-trafficking-strategy/support-for-trafficked-people-program>

90 days of support, with further periods of support contingent on participating in a criminal justice process. In practical terms, this meant engaging with the AFP to provide a statement against the person arranging the forced marriage, often a family or community member. In 2018, the Australian Government announced a one-year trial of a new Support Program stream to allow those in or at risk of forced marriage to access a longer period of assistance (up to 200 days) without having to contribute to a criminal justice process through the Forced Marriage Support Stream (FMSS).

ARC commissioned a developmental evaluation¹⁸ of the FMSS Trial to explore whether the adaptations made to the STPP (Support Program) resulted in the outcomes expected. The evaluation occurred over October 2018 to June 2019 and involved three short cycles of evaluation. The participants included: clients, ARC STPP staff, AFP personnel, family and community members, external community organization and service provider staff who participate in national and/or jurisdictional FM Networks and/or refer to or receive referrals from the STPP, and government department senior staff (Australian and State Government). One of the recommendations of the evaluation was that the program be continued. Hence, in 2019, this stream was made a permanent part of the Support Program.

The ARC is currently monitoring the program and client outcomes through a project where clients that exited the program are contacted and provide feedback on their experiences whilst on the program. The project aims to understand and measure the Support Program's effectiveness, relevance and impact on clients beyond their support period with the aim of improving outcomes for individuals supported. One of the initial findings from this project is that fractured relationships with families take considerable time to mend. This then continues to be a source of stress for individuals who are willing to be reconciled with families however are fearful of the potential to be forcibly married. In addition, case workers have a sit-down meeting with their clients from time to time to receive verbal feedback which is then documented and helps with continual adaptations to the program approach.

Free to Choose, Empowered to Respond (FCER)

Complementing the Support Program since 2017 is the "Free to Choose, Empowered to Respond" (FCER) project in the state of Australia. The project draws upon the success of the ARC *Forced Marriage: Community Voices, Stories and Strategies Report*,¹⁹ which highlights the important role that communities and families themselves play in finding solutions to forced marriage. The FCER is a community-based forced marriage prevention program that shifts the focus from what makes people susceptible to forced marriage, to what keeps people safe, healthy and able to prevent or escape forced marriage.

The project engages with communities through various empowerment workshops to provide opportunities to develop social capital; build self-confidence; foster stronger, more respectful relationships; and increase capacity to access appropriate support. During empowerment sessions, ARC also reaches out to women and girls who have already avoided forced marriages to share their strategies with those at risk of forced marriage.

The workshops were facilitated by ARC staff, volunteers and external organization personnel.

Empowered To Respond – Peer Support (ERPS)

Based on the experience gained from the FCER project in Victoria, ARC launched the Empowered to Respond – Peer Support Group project in New South Wales in 2020. The focus of this project is on individual peer support for those in or at risk of forced marriage.

¹⁸ <https://www.dss.gov.au/women-programs-services-reducing-violence-human-trafficking-and-slavery/forced-marriage-stream-trial-final-evaluation-report-summary>

¹⁹ <https://ade.redcross.org.au/globalassets/cms-migration/documents/migration-services/forced-marriage-community-voices-stories-and-strategies-australian-red-cross.pdf>



The project provides safe and welcoming spaces to girls and women impacted by or at risk of experiencing forced marriage who may also be isolated. Overall, the project aims to provide an opportunity for women and girls to share strategies to avoid, delay or leave forced marriages while providing them an opportunity to build connections and capacity to connect with relevant local support systems. The project empowers participants around their rights in order to decrease their risk of exploitation and family violence. Moreover, it aims to promote independence and decision making. Subject matter experts are engaged to facilitate some sessions according to needs identified by women and girls participating in the project. In addition to ongoing evaluation, a get-together is planned at the end of the project to provide an opportunity for the participants to openly share their experiences with one another.

From the beginning of the FCER and ERPS projects, ARC has undertaken extensive consultations with the community as to how the projects should be run, workshop topics, activities, and defining the general approach.

Impact of COVID-19

The impact of COVID-19 on these programs was quite significant. The Support Program primarily operates through face-to-face contact with clients. This interaction is very important to developing strong and trusting relationships between ARC staff and clients, especially when someone has left their family/ community because of the increased risk of forced marriage. Although service delivery was severely impacted at the beginning of the pandemic by lockdowns and the closure of ARC offices and other community services, ARC soon adapted their casework practice to respond to these challenges. Face-to-face meetings were replaced by phone calls and video conferencing, and the number of times clients were contacted increased.

Prior to the pandemic, contact with some of the young at-risk persons was primarily made via schools. Due to school closures as part of lockdown measures, it was difficult to make contact with them, even via digital

means such as phone. This was primarily due to young people being required to stay home where they were with the alleged perpetrators of forced marriage (mostly family members). However, young people developed creative strategies to stay in contact with ARC staff/volunteers by creating opportunities for time alone; for example, going out for a walk so that they could call their service provider in privacy. Also, defining the most suitable contact time was determined by each client so that they were able to arrange a safe time to call ARC.

Peer support and empowerment workshops run through the FCER and ERPS programs were also affected due to COVID-19 lockdowns. All these activities were moved online. However, this was not always accessible because at the beginning of the pandemic many participants lacked digital literacy skills. And yet, with time, gradually they adapted to the situation so that the activities could be conducted online.

For the staff, working from home during the pandemic was a huge challenge as they were used to meeting clients during working hours and engaging with them face-to-face. However, support from ARC management helped to adapt to the new norm and team meetings and debriefing with supervisors moved online to ensure ongoing support for staff.

Gaps identified during service delivery

Funding constraints. The Support Program is designed to offer individualised case management support and in practice this translates to only working with individuals directly referred to the program, and not the whole family unit or dependents. Often, some Support Program clients had dependents and especially when they had to leave their families and community because of FM, these dependents too required material and financial support. However, clients were not able to access this assistance through the Support Program. ARC have addressed this issue with the government via advocacy and humanitarian diplomacy, recently undertaking a research project to highlight the needs of dependents and challenges with the Support Program framework structure that prevent them from being met, and have also linked up such dependents with other agencies for financial and material needs.

Design constraints. The Support Program's focus is to provide support to survivors directly referred to the Support Program. It is common for most forced marriage clients to have family relationships that have broken down and to be managing some degree of risk, however this risk differs in form for those living in the family home and those living independently. Within the Support Program framework, there is no provision to facilitate any discussion or negotiations between the survivor and the alleged perpetrators, where it is safe to do so. One of the primary needs of the clients, as identified in the Forced Marriage Support Stream Evaluation,²⁰ is their wish or need to reunite with their families. Not addressing this aspect often results in the risk of forced marriage remaining at the time the client exits the program. ARC is limited in what supports they can provide to assist the client in managing these relationships, due to only having a formal support role with the client and no other family members, especially when family mediation and/or conflict resolution is required, where safe to do so. In addition, gaps can exist in locally available and suitable external services that could play this role.

Lack of awareness. A lack of awareness of several key issues are a barrier. In particular, there is a common lack of understanding in both the wider community and services sector of what forced marriage is, how it is treated under Australian law, and the existence of, and how to access, the Support Program as an assistance option. Furthermore, there is often a lack of awareness of ways to overcome stigma and judgment about seeking support.

Sustainability issues linked to funding community-based forced marriage prevention projects.

One of the main gaps identified in the two community-based projects was limited funding. Specifically, funds are not sufficient to conduct the projects to a point where the community itself is able to sustain

²⁰ *Forced Marriage Stream Trial – Final Evaluation Report (Summary)*, 2019, Recommendation 3 (page 22)
<https://www.dss.gov.au/women-programs-services-reducing-violence-human-trafficking-and-slavery/forced-marriage-stream-trial-final-evaluation-report-summary>

them on their own. ARC is currently engaged in consultations with the communities involved to explore how project activities can be sustained beyond the period of the projects.

Key outcomes and learnings

Support Program

- Partial delinking of support to those in forced marriages or at risk of forced marriage from the criminal justice process was a positive step which occurred in 2018. This reduced client stress and fear of engaging with police. However, full delinking is needed as it is still a requirement to engage with police in order to be referred to the Support Program.
- Extending the period of support available to those in or at risk of forced marriage from 45 or 90 days to 200 days was a positive step in contributing to greater security and emotional support. This allowed ARC Support Program staff a better opportunity to help clients set a stable base for their future.
- Clients who have exited the Support Program reported that the program had a meaningful and welcome impact on their lives. For example, clients report: a) increased confidence, b) improved mental health and wellbeing, c) greater knowledge of options around their rights, and d) improved awareness of how to access and navigate support during and beyond the program.
- On the whole, services provided to forced marriage clients through ARC were considered to be culturally acceptable. The client's experience of engaging with the Australian Federal Police was also positive.

Community-based projects: FCER and ERPS

- Through the projects, four common strategies used by women and girls to avoid a forced marriage, keep families together and contribute to long-term social change were identified. The strategies are:
 - Strategy 1:** "Standing for myself": Build "self-strength" and self-trust, develop a sense of who they are and what their dreams are and be able to recognize and negotiate the multiple pressures that come from parents and family who try to pressure them to marry.
 - Strategy 2:** Maintain close family relationships, especially with mothers and extended family. To achieve this, develop respectful communication and negotiation skills.
 - Strategy 3:** Negotiate marriage with parents and set expectations around if and whom they marry, *before* marriage.
 - Strategy 4:** Promote social change (Promote attitudinal and behavior change in others).
- Pressure on families drives forced marriage ("Forced marriage is a family issue"). Families encounter community pressure to maintain cultural practices, to maintain "reputation" and to marry their children to control their sexuality.
- Inter-generational conflict is causing relationship breakdown. Inter-generational differences between parents and their children, if unaddressed, can lead to family and relationship breakdown. The values of those who grew up in countries of origin – typically parents and extended family members – and those who have or are growing up in Australia – young people and children – are increasingly distinct. Younger women who have grown up in Australia easily named methods they use to negotiate space with their parents, or husbands if already married.
- The need for safe, appropriate and effective support outside the family – teachers, counsellors and other professionals, including the police as a last resort – is often necessary.
- Creating a process that supports families to come back together is very important for the participants. Engaging with families in a respectful and culturally-appropriate manner that is both discreet and confidential, can reduce feelings of shame and open space for honest dialogue. In this way, the whole family can be supported with tools to reduce conflict and find resolution.

Australian Red Cross

- ARC has a deep sense of pride, knowing that their programs/projects have supported individuals at risk to avoid or leave forced marriage as evidenced by many client testimonials.

“Thank you Red Cross for being with me during my most difficult and hardest times.”

- A woman who was trapped in a forced marriage. She was divorced a year ago and is now studying and learning self-defense. She is also re-united with her brother who was one of the perpetrators of her forced marriage.
- Having the forced marriage stream of work within the Support Program itself is viewed by ARC as a great achievement. It is the demonstration of the recognition that those who have experienced forced marriage, or are at risk of it, require different types of support – short-term and long-term – and that they do not necessarily need to be participating in a criminal justice investigation to receive support.
- Recognition by the government of the auxiliary support of ARC has been an achievement and this has been further complemented by the flexibility of the government to accommodate and respond to the needs of clients.
- The trust placed in ARC by the government has led to ARC taking on key roles. For example, in the Support Program, at the end of the period of support provided to a client, there is an exit discussion. The Department of Social Services (program funder) usually relies on the ARC recommendation whether or not to extend the transition time/services.

Recommendations

ARC is currently engaging in humanitarian diplomacy with the Australian government to advocate for the following:

- 1) Support Program – expand referral pathway options so the AFP are not the sole pathway of clients to enter the program. Consider the viability of including education, child protection, community organizations working with cultural communities in which forced marriage is practiced as endorsed referrers.
- 2) Support Program – Re-design the program model; the complexity and extent of needs for forced marriage clients warrant a more flexible program model based on needs rather than pre-set periods of time.
- 3) Reduce stigmatization of communities by making allowance for self-identification. For instance, give opportunities to communities to self-identify that forced marriage is an issue in their own community rather than ARC or any other external agency identifying it as an issue that affects them.
- 4) Engage families in a culturally safe and respectful manner to avoid stigmatization and shame being brought upon families.
- 5) Provide educational opportunities for religious leaders around Australian marriage law and consent.
- 6) Have a community engagement strategy that actively involves men and adolescent boys.
- 7) Co-design principles as opposed to tokenism. Truly believe that the communities do have their own strategies to deal with the issues, learn what those are and let the community lead.
- 8) Include both the individual and their families in the intervention with linkages to family mediation/ conflict resolution services.
- 9) Include community empowerment classes, such as community meetings to openly discuss issues around parenting, communication and forced marriage, in order to create deep and lasting change.

Mali lessons

Introduction

Mali has the fifth highest prevalence rate of child marriage globally.²¹ Fifty-four (54) percent of girls are married before the age of 18 and 16% are married before their 15th birthday.²² In 2018, UN Women identified several hotspots for child marriage in Mali: Kayes (70.9%), Sikasso (63.7%) and Mopti (64.5%). While nearly all the other regions have at least 60% prevalence of child marriage, it is mainly concentrated in the southwestern part of the country, which is rural and has high rates of poverty.²³

According to Mali's Persons and Family Code ("Family Code") the minimum age for contracting marriage is 18 for men and 16 for women. However, it allows children to marry from age 15 with the consent of the mother and father of the boy child, but through only the father's consent for the girl child.²⁴

In Mali, the most common reasons for child marriage include prevention of pregnancy outside marriage, which is also linked to preserving perceived family honour and maximizing fertility. For families living in poverty, giving a daughter away in marriage is often a way of gaining economic support from in-laws.²⁵

Mali Red Cross child marriage prevention initiatives

Mali Red Cross (MRC), supported by Canadian Red Cross (CRC) is in the process of implementing a Maternal, Newborn and Child Health (MNCH) project (2016–2022). The project is implemented in close collaboration with the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Family Promotion. As a project activity, a gender barriers survey was conducted and based on the findings MRC has developed a gender strategy to address the most common barriers in the six project districts and 758 communities. Some of the project activities are as follows:

- A group of master trainers from the Ministry of Health, Ministry of Family Promotion and MRC trained as Trainers of Trainers. These Trainers then train local MRC and community volunteers, community members and leaders on the impact of child marriage and other related issues (e.g., Female Genital Mutilation);
- Training of MRC volunteers and community members to conduct regular social and behavioral change communication activities;
- Support communities to identify their own gender champions and equip them to conduct regular discussions with their communities on gender issues and to negotiate with parents to prevent child marriage; and
- Conduct regular advocacy meetings with local Muslim leaders in the community and village chiefs on how they can contribute to the reduction and elimination of child marriage and other related issues.

As part of its child marriage prevention activities, awareness-raising activities among diverse community members (older men and women, adolescent girls and boys, leaders and other decision makers) were carried out. The messages focused on the negative health and psychological consequences of child marriage for girls and the loss of educational opportunities for girls as they have to drop out of school. These messages were tailored to suit the different audiences. For example, for men, since they often give girls away in marriage without consulting women, the goal was to make them feel responsible for the negative impacts on their daughters as a result of their child marriage. In Malian culture, women are responsible for teaching girls how to have a healthy and dignified sexual and reproductive life. One of the

21 Child marriage around the world: Mali, *Girls Not Brides*. <https://atlas.girlsnotbrides.org/map/mali/>

22 Ibid

23 *Multi Country Analytical Study of Legislation, Policies, Interventions and Cultural Practices on Child Marriage in Africa*. UN Women 2019. <https://africa.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2018/multicountry-fgm>

24 *African court finds Mali's family law violates human rights obligations*. International Justice Resource Centre.

25 Base line studies on child marriage in Mali, Niger and Togo. *Girls Not Brides*, 2018. <https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/learning-resources/resource-centre/baseline-studies-on-child-marriage-in-mali-niger-and-togo/>



concerns of heads of households is that delaying a young girl's marriage will lead to pregnancy outside marriage, hence the awareness-raising messages for women focused on educating the mothers to provide their daughters with accurate information on sexual and reproductive health.

Care was also taken to address the Malian custom and tradition of encouraging girls to marry as soon as they have their first period. Awareness activities targeting all groups focused on the benefits of waiting until girls turn 18 years old before they are married, with an emphasis on health and psychological consequences of child marriage for girls. All the awareness-raising activities were interactive community sessions where participants had the freedom to ask questions and engage in discussions on the topic.

In addition to the above, a key feature of the project was radio programs that gave an opportunity for listeners to call in with their questions and concerns and have experts address them. The call-in facility converted the program into an interactive one as opposed to a simple broadcast of awareness messages.

Impact of COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic affected community awareness sessions. The Ministry of Health guidelines on meetings and social distancing were strictly adhered to. During the pandemic, the focus shifted to home visits where the outreach workers educated the community on many topics including the prevention of child marriage. In addition, radio programs were continued as prior to the pandemic.

In the district of Banamba, an area with very high levels of migration, community members including village health committees (VHCs) reported a link between child marriage and COVID-19. According to the VHCs many marriages that were planned for 2020 were postponed due to border closures and economic slowdown due to lockdowns. These factors prevented migrants from traveling for marriages or having the funds to plan a wedding. However, in the districts of Kolokani and Diola, there was no reported impact on the rates of child marriage as a result of the pandemic,²⁶ although this has been made less clear as other data has come to light. For example, in May 2020 PLAN International conducted a COVID-19 assessment across their working areas (the regions of Kayes, Koulikoro, Sikaso and Segou) which revealed that the rates of child marriage have increased since the start of the outbreak.²⁷

Gaps identified during service delivery

Planning issues. Communication plans were found to be poorly aligned at different levels – Community Health Workers, Volunteers, VHCs, gender champions and radio – in some of the project locations.

Coverage issues. Some of the partner radio stations had limited coverage. This prevented the messages from reaching a wider audience. They also lacked a system to collect data to determine the reach of the radio messages. This posed a big challenge to the project team in determining the effectiveness of the radio programs and the radio spots that were broadcast.

Key outcomes and learnings

- The strategy to focus primarily on outreach workers conducting awareness-raising sessions from house to house, especially in response to the pandemic, was very effective because of the outreach worker's understanding of the local context and the opportunities to communicate one-to-one to clarify the issues facing the community during these visits.
- Directly targeting decision makers in the community via advocacy efforts are likely to have a greater impact in reducing child marriage than awareness raising among community members.
- Capacity-building activities that targeted local Muslim religious leaders, especially on positive masculinities, gender, SGBV, and roles and responsibilities of health workers, resulted in some of them becoming outreach workers themselves.
- The inclusion of men as volunteers and exposing them to training on gender, SGBV and child marriage transformed some of them into gender champions.
- The tailoring of awareness sessions and messages to suit different audiences – men, village and religious leaders, women and adolescent boys and girls – was more effective than a uniform message to all groups.
- The project provided opportunities to coordinate efforts to reduce child marriage, both at institutional and community level. For example, at community level, the project staff and volunteers actively collaborated with the child monitoring and protection committees set up by the local Advancement of Women, Children and Families department (SLPEEF). At Institutional level, in Kolokani, partnership with World Vision enabled the successful implementation of MNCH forum theatre activities. These partnerships enabled MRC to maximize the use of resources rather than go it alone.

²⁶ Based on focus group discussion carried out by Mali RC project staff

²⁷ <https://plan-international.org/case-studies/how-covid-19-impacting-girls-and-women-mali>

- The perception of the community that the radio programs and radio spots are originating outside of their own communities from people who are not familiar with their own context, was something that was not foreseen in advance. This reduced the perceived trustworthiness of the messages.
- This work has provided the basis for a new multi-year MRC project, in partnership with the Canadian Red Cross and funded by the Government of Canada, focusing on adolescent health. A primary focus is on addressing child marriage using locally-led solutions and detailed participation from adolescents and local communities. The new project begins in 2022.

Recommendations

- To prevent child marriage, awareness-raising activities must primarily focus on engaging parents during home visits. This provides an opportunity to influence the decisions of the parents as they are the ones who make the initial decision to marry their daughters, before religious leaders step in to finalize the marriage.
- Advocacy efforts must target community and religious leaders to make a formal commitment to end child marriage.
- MRC together with the health and women empowerment partners, community, and religious leaders, should proactively engage policy makers and advocate to raise the legal age for marriage to 18 years for girls.
- Establish a framework for stakeholders involved in child marriage reduction efforts to share information and lessons learned on a regular basis.

Nepal lessons

Introduction

Nepal has one of the highest rates of child marriage in Asia – for both girls and boys. Although the legal age of marriage for females and males is 20, more than a third of young women aged 20–24 report that they were married by the age of 18, and just over one in ten by 15. Nepali boys are among the most likely in the world to be child grooms. More than one in ten are married before they reach 18 years.

The causes for child marriage in Nepal are complex. Poverty, the low value attached to daughters, and lack of access to education are contributory factors, while the caste system and patriarchal cultural norms similarly play a role. Increasingly, adolescents are choosing their own partners which goes against the wishes of their parents and results in them sometimes eloping. In some situations, parents encourage adolescents to initiate their own marriage to avoid the high costs associated with dowry or wedding ceremonies. Adolescents may also choose to elope to avoid a forced or arranged marriage or to escape difficulties at home.

Nepal Red Cross child marriage prevention project

Nepal Red Cross Society (NRCS) in partnership with UNFPA Nepal implemented a project titled, “Ending Child Marriage.” This was part of the UNFPA and UNICEF initiative, “Global Program to End Child Marriage.” The project was implemented in the districts of Routahat, Rolpa, Bajhang, and Baitadi from November 2017–September 2021. The target population was adolescent girls aged 10–19 years and their parents. It primarily focused on the following:

- Formation of adolescent girls’ circles (AGCs) in every ward and conducting weekly meetings.
- Provide fight back (self-defense) training to adolescent girls in order to support building critical mental, vocal, and physical skills to prevent, mitigate, and manage the risk of sexual violence.
- Formation of parent support groups to facilitate a dialogue on gender equitable norms including delaying child marriage.



- Provide financial support in the form of a scholarship to adolescent girls to enroll and remain in formal and non-formal education including the transition from primary to secondary education.
- Formation of adolescent-friendly information corners in schools and supporting these centers by providing information and educational materials.
- Create mass awareness about preventing child marriage, SGBV, adolescent sexual and reproductive health, and other discriminatory practices through street drama conducted by a professional group.
- Conduct door-to-door awareness programs on preventing child marriage with the involvement of schools and adolescent girls.
- Provide Comprehensive Sexual Education (CSE) training to adolescent girls' group circles.

One of the key activities of the project was the delivery of the Social and Financial Skills Package (SFSP) that was delivered through trained NRCS facilitators and social mobilizers. The SFSP package contains 15 modules and a total of 52 sessions on different topics. It aims at empowering adolescent girls through weekly sessions that are conducted by social mobilizers and facilitators over a period of nine months. The training is locally known by the name "Rupantaran" (transformation).

SFSP provides girls with practical skills and knowledge on gender equality and human rights (including child marriage-related information), reproductive health, SGBV, nutrition, communication, decision making, and negotiation skills.

Girl participants were also linked to local health centers that provide adolescent sexual and reproductive health services. The package not only helps expand networks among adolescent girls, it also capacitates them to be a change agent in their community.

The project also established Adolescent Girls Circles (AGCs). These have proved to be an effective way of creating a cohesive and supportive platform in which girls create positive peer pressure to stay in school, help each other advocate with parents against child marriage, and build networks.

Impact of COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic posed many challenges to implement the project. However, community sessions with adolescents were conducted in keeping with the health guidelines provided by the government. A maximum of 25 participants (while maintaining physical distance, mandatory mask wearing, and frequent use of hand sanitizers) were allowed during these sessions.

Since the Rupantaran sessions could not be conducted due to restrictions imposed during lockdown, NRCS circumvented this challenge by producing 31 radio programs using local FM stations. Technical guidance to develop these programs was provided by both UNFPA and UNICEF. It is estimated that approximately 30,000 people were reached (including 2,096 adolescent girls from project areas) through this medium which included people outside the project area due to the reach of the FM stations. Similarly, a parent package consisting of 10 radio sessions was also developed and aired. Both adolescents and parents were encouraged to listen to the radio programs in small groups, maintaining physical distancing and other personal safety measures. In many instances, both parents and adolescent girls were able to listen together when their programs were aired.

Gaps identified during service delivery

One of the key limitations of this strategy was the inability to monitor whether a particular individual listened to all episodes of a given package (adolescent girls/parents). Also, people living in extreme poverty had no access to a radio or a smart phone and group activities; therefore, sharing of ideas and information among all participants was not possible.

Another gap identified by the project team was the inability to include adolescent girls from some areas due to the geographical terrain. These hard-to-reach areas had adolescent girls who were more at risk of child marriage compared to other areas.

Some parents were unable to participate in parental sessions where payment was required. There were budgetary constraints to meet this demand.

Key outcomes and learnings

- SFSP (Rupantaran) sessions were a major contributor to the success of the program. Rather than limiting the sessions to information sharing and awareness raising, building social skills of the participants also through these trainings have empowered the participants to take responsibility for change.
- Using trained and empowered adolescents as peer facilitators was a key reason for the success of the project. This methodology also ensured that when the project ends, a pool of trained facilitators is available in each village who have potential to sustain the program beyond the project.
- The importance of engaging men, especially the fathers of adolescent girls, was reinforced many times as this was a challenge. Specifically, many fathers were away from their villages (either abroad or out of the district) for employment purposes. In most contexts they make the decision about their daughter's child marriage which is considered final.
- Formation of adolescent-friendly information corners in schools and provision of information and education materials were very useful in engaging students in schools about the issue of child marriage.
- The active involvement of multiple stakeholders – municipal and village council authorities, Nepal Police, schools, radio stations and other media organizations, UNFPA, NRCS – enabled smooth and effective implementation of the project.
- Effective communication strategies enabled the project team to overcome resistance from Dalit families to take part in the project and to build trust.
- The COVID-19 pandemic, although it restricted most of the activities, also provided an opportunity to reach a larger audience beyond the project areas. The radio programs targeting adolescent girls and their parents were accessible in a very wide area.



- For NRCS, this was a first opportunity to exclusively address the issue of child marriage. The project provided much-needed experience and in-house expertise to develop similar programs to prevent child marriage in the future.

Recommendations

- An innovative strategy to engage men and adolescent boys should be designed from the very beginning of the project. This should be done in consultation with the community as adult men are unlikely to be available for activities during “traditional” project implementation times of a given day.
- Consider potential opposition and mistrust from certain segments of the population (e.g., Dalit community) and develop a communication strategy to address them. Another strategy could be to allocate a quota of peer facilitators for such communities.
- Document success stories from the beginning as they are more useful than numbers during advocacy and are living examples of the effectiveness of the project.
- Consider a long-term ongoing partnership with local/regional radio stations to continue to deliver radio sessions developed during the pandemic.

THE FUNDAMENTAL PRINCIPLES OF THE INTERNATIONAL RED CROSS AND RED CRESCENT MOVEMENT

Humanity

The International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, born of a desire to bring assistance without discrimination to the wounded on the battlefield, endeavours, in its international and national capacity, to prevent and alleviate human suffering wherever it may be found. Its purpose is to protect life and health and to ensure respect for the human being. It promotes mutual understanding, friendship, cooperation and lasting peace amongst all peoples.

Impartiality

It makes no discrimination as to nationality, race, religious beliefs, class or political opinions. It endeavours to relieve the suffering of individuals, being guided solely by their needs, and to give priority to the most urgent cases of distress.

Neutrality

In order to enjoy the confidence of all, the Movement may not take sides in hostilities or engage at any time in controversies of a political, racial, religious or ideological nature.

Independence

The Movement is independent. The National Societies, while auxiliaries in the humanitarian services of their governments and subject to the laws of their respective countries, must always maintain their autonomy so that they may be able at all times to act in accordance with the principles of the Movement.

Voluntary service

It is a voluntary relief movement not prompted in any manner by desire for gain.

Unity

There can be only one Red Cross or Red Crescent Society in any one country. It must be open to all. It must carry on its humanitarian work throughout its territory.

Universality

The International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, in which all societies have equal status and share equal responsibilities and duties in helping each other, is worldwide.



The vision of the IFRC is to inspire, encourage, facilitate and promote at all times all forms of humanitarian activities by National Societies, with a view to preventing and alleviating human suffering, and thereby contributing to the maintenance and promotion of human dignity and peace in the world.