



A Theory of Change on Child Marriage – By *Girls Not Brides*

Every year 14 million girls are married before the age of 18. There is unprecedented recognition that child marriage infringes their rights and is a major setback to development.

There is no single solution to ending this global problem, but thanks to the work of *Girls Not Brides* members, partners, governments and others, we are able to build an understanding of all that is necessary to achieve our ultimate vision: A world without child marriage where girls and women enjoy equal status with boys and men and are able to achieve their full potential in all aspects of their lives.

As part of this effort, *Girls Not Brides* has developed a ‘Theory of Change on Child Marriage’, a visual diagram that demonstrates the range of approaches needed to address child marriage and how they intersect. This brief outlines how the Theory of Change was developed and the insights that inform its structure and content.

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1. Why develop a common theory of change?

Every year 14 million girls are married before the age of 18. There is unprecedented recognition that child marriage infringes their rights and is a major setback to development. There is no single solution to ending this global problem, but thanks to the work of *Girls Not Brides* members, partners, governments and others, we are able to build an understanding of all that is necessary to achieve our ultimate vision: A world without child marriage where girls and women enjoy equal status with boys and men and are able to achieve their full potential in all aspects of their lives.

Girls Not Brides has developed a 'Theory of Change on Child Marriage' to articulate what an effective response to child marriage entails. The Theory of Change outlines the range of approaches needed, demonstrates how they intersect, and aims to provide a basis for identifying common indicators that could be used by diverse practitioners to monitor progress.

The Theory of Change has been developed to facilitate greater partnership and collaboration among and across organisations, sectors and levels. It serves as a foundation to build consensus about actions needed to address child marriage and support married girls, in both the long and short-term. In addition, it provides a basis to understand where programming efforts are currently focused, in particular among *Girls Not Brides* members, and to highlight where further work is needed. In this sense, the Theory of Change offers both a mirror *and* a target.

Crucially, the Theory of Change demonstrates that there is no single solution to ending child marriage and that everyone has a role to play. Ultimately efforts to address child marriage must respond to local contexts and accordingly programmes and investments may take different forms. We hope that this Theory of Change will be a useful framework and tool for both governmental and non-governmental actors to draw from as they develop their own theories of change to respond to child marriage in their countries. It is intended both for those who are new to the issue, as well as those who work on it through one specific approach to see how their work forms part of a broader effort.

The Theory of Change will remain an evolving document; feedback, updates and changes will be welcomed as the field evolves and we gain a better understanding of the effectiveness and inter-relationship between different approaches. This brief outlines how the Theory of Change was developed and the insights that inform its structure and content.

2. What are the guiding principles reflected in this Theory of Change?

While we seek to end child marriage, we should not neglect married girls

An important decision in the development of this Theory of Change was to include the *prevention* of child marriage as well as its *mitigation*, or the provision of support to girls who are already married. The decision to include both aspects has two rationales: first, support for girls should not disappear once they are married. The factors that make them vulnerable to child marriage make them vulnerable within marriage as well. Second, there is emerging research suggesting that working to address these two goals simultaneously can have a mutually reinforcing impact, especially to improve the status of girls more broadly.

Girls are disproportionately affected by child marriage

The decision to reference girls rather than children throughout the Theory of Change is not intended to disregard the impact of child marriage on boys. Rather, it reflects the underlying rationale for the creation of the *Girls Not Brides* partnership: the disproportionate scale and devastating impact of child marriage on girls'

rights, education, health, development and personal relationships. Focusing on “children” seemed to diminish the importance of gender inequality in shaping patterns of child marriage and the importance of addressing this in efforts to tackle child marriage. The intention for this model is to reference girls for the most part, but to be relevant to the needs of boys as well.

We understand child marriage to include both formal and informal unions

The Theory of Change covers both formal and informal unions, recognising that in some regions where child marriage occurs, the union may not have been formalised but the circumstances are similar to a child marriage. For example, in Latin America, child marriage exists, but there is also “union formation” and early pregnancy outside of or before marriage. These are both expressions of the same problem: a low value given to girls and inequality in sexual relationships (as well as poverty, lack of education, among others).

No single strategy will end child marriage

Child marriage is an entrenched practice in many families, communities and societies; ending it will require action by multiple actors at many levels. Empowering girls with information about their rights and the skills to exercise them will be crucial. In addition, we need to address the broader context in which girls are married as children. This includes encouraging families and communities to question child marriage and to envision other options for their daughters. Services such as schools, health centres and others must be tailored to the needs of adolescent girls and be supported by strong laws and policies demonstrating government commitment to addressing child marriage. The particular combination of activities that works to end long-held child marriage patterns will differ across cultural settings.

Change happens locally but can be catalysed by national, regional and global action

Ultimately, change will happen locally, when individuals, families, and communities understand the benefits of ending child marriage. For this to happen, it will be necessary to create an environment that offers girls opportunities beyond the traditional roles envisaged for them. National, regional and global action, by a broad range of stakeholders, is crucial to create a supportive environment that enables and promotes this change.

Marriage should only take place with the free and full consent of both parties; this is rarely the case where one of the spouses is under the age of 18.

The nature of child marriage varies from context to context. In many situations, girls are married to much older men and have little choice in the matter, be it in law or in practice. Yet, there are other contexts where older adolescents express a desire to marry before the age of 18.

There is much debate as to whether adolescents have the capacity to ‘consent’ or ‘choose’ to marry, in particular in contexts of family or community pressure or a lack of other options. There is also debate about how to verify this consent. The unfortunate reality is that, in the majority of cases, the support structures do not exist to ensure that there is free and full consent upon marriage or to provide girls with realistic alternatives. Regardless of this ongoing debate, working with girls to develop life plans in line with their own wishes is an important element of this Theory of Change.

3. How to read this Theory of Change

The Theory of Change has seven levels, from the problem statement at the bottom, to the vision statement at the top. It is important to recognise that the relationships between different levels are not causal or linear but represent a broader view of how change will occur.

- *Vision*: The world we want to see as a result of our efforts to end child marriage.
- *Impact*: The long-term change we want to achieve.
- *Results*: Changes in the behaviour of individual girls, families, communities, and others, which will be necessary to achieve the desired impact.
- *Outcomes*: Conditions and attitudes that need to change before changes in behaviour can be seen. The outcomes are organised in coloured boxes that correspond to each of the strategies.
- *Strategies*: Overarching approaches in which efforts to address child marriage and support married girls are situated.
- *Catalysing strategy*: Overarching approach for how change can be accelerated globally. It should guide all efforts so that change can take place on a wide scale and in a sustainable manner.
- *Problem*: The current situation that our efforts are trying to address.

4. Moving through the Theory of Change

This section explains the Theory of Change and the decisions and choices it reflects, level by level. Much of the language used throughout the Theory of Change reflects the built-in intention to measure progress. For the most part, however, the language is deliberately active and engaging (rather than technical for measurement) to make the Theory of Change more accessible and easier to read.

i. The problem

The problem statement encapsulates the urgent need to address child marriage, by highlighting its scale and depth, its drivers, as well as its impact on girls, families, communities and nations. It recognises the diversity of settings in which child marriage takes place and highlights the many structural and societal drivers such as poverty, gender inequality, age inequality, conflict and insecurity.

ii. Catalysing strategy

To achieve the vision of a world where girls and women enjoy equal status with boys and men and are able to achieve their full potential, the catalysing strategy recognises that child marriage should not be addressed in isolation, but within a broader framework of development and human rights. Ending child marriage will require long-term, coordinated efforts that support and reinforce local activities with national, regional and international work.

The catalysing strategy identifies opportunities to coordinate efforts, including bringing attention to the issue, aligning partners, sharing findings and mobilising resources. Implicit within the catalysing strategy is

the need to monitor progress, which requires increased investment in collecting data relevant to the broad range of outcomes and results.

The catalysing strategy assumes that, given the complex nature and wide-ranging impact of child marriage, and the range of actions necessary to address it, strategic collaboration will be crucial to achieve maximum impact. The *Girls Not Brides* partnership plays an important role in facilitating such catalytic and collaborative action.

iii. Strategies

The majority of strategies to address child marriage fall within four categories: empowering girls; mobilising families and communities; providing services; and establishing and implementing laws and policies. The four strategies are interlinked and mutually reinforcing; addressing child marriage will require a combination of actions related to all four. The specific combinations will be context-specific, and depend on the drivers of child marriage in a given region.

1. **Empower girls:** activities are needed to empower girls and enable them to exercise their rights, for example through programmes which equip girls with training, skills, information, as well as the provision of safe spaces and support networks.
2. **Mobilise families and communities:** recognising that girls are rarely the decision makers when it comes to child marriage, and that child marriage is often a deeply rooted practice in many communities, work is needed with families and communities to create awareness of the harmful impact of child marriage, and of alternative roles for girls and women, so that families and communities prefer not to marry their daughters as children and so that they themselves engage in efforts to end the practice.
3. **Provide services:** addressing child marriage and supporting the needs of married girls requires a thorough review of the services available to girls at risk of child marriage and girls who have already been married, and how these services reinforce one another. Depending on the context, activities under this strategy will relate to a number of sectors, including education, health, and justice. They can range from the provision of adolescent friendly health services, to ensuring that schools are accessible and child friendly, to ensuring that married girls have the support services to help them leave the marriage if they choose.
4. **Establish and implement laws and policies:** an enabling legal and policy framework should be at the cornerstone of government efforts to address child marriage and must be backed by adequately resourced institutional support structures to ensure effective implementation.

iv. Outcomes

The outcomes reflect the changes we hope to see as a consequence of our strategic activities. They reflect changes needed in the attitudes and conditions of girls, families and communities, services and laws and policies. There is currently a variety and richness of approaches being used in different contexts to achieve these outcomes, from service-provision to research, policy, advocacy or capacity-building. The specific set of activities or interventions needed to achieve the outcomes in a given setting will depend on the context. How these activities are carried out – whether in discrete pieces by disparate actors, or through integrated programmes – will depend on local opportunities and constraints.

Girls

The Theory of Change emphasises several key outcomes related to how girls view themselves, how they are viewed by those around them and the practical support they can access. Girls' increased ability to refuse marriage requires girls to be aware of their rights, to see themselves as rights-bearers, to develop skills to support their own life plans and to have opportunities to connect with their peers and support one another. At the same time, alternative, respectable economic and social roles must exist for unmarried girls and must be valued by both girls and their families to enable them to choose an alternative life course.

Families and communities

Norms around child marriage and the values and practices that support it must shift for child marriage to end and for married girls to be supported. This set of outcomes reflects key areas of change needed in the commitments and behaviours of families and communities: greater *awareness* of the harmful impact of child marriage; a change in *attitudes* about alternative options to child marriage, including attitudes that compel girls to marry if they engage in early sexual activity or pregnancy; the reduced *acceptance* of child marriage by those who influence girls' lives, including the men that choose to marry girls as children. There is an important role for media in supporting greater awareness and attitude change on a wide scale.

There is still a lack of consensus about how social norms change, but there is recognition that the timeframes necessary for these changes to take place can vary dramatically. Activities needed to achieve this set of outcomes therefore need to reflect this and be resourced accordingly.

Services

A broad range of services and programmes are needed to remove the structural barriers that push girls into child marriage and prevent them from accessing support within marriage. Barriers in the education sector for example include: safety risks on the way to school and in school, a lack of clean sex-segregated toilets at school, particularly for girls who have begun to menstruate, a lack of relevance of what girls are learning to their everyday lives, or a lack of child support facilities for girls who are already mothers. Girls (both married and unmarried) must be able to access safe, quality education, which goes beyond the basic availability of schools and considers the conditions which stop families sending girls to school. In some contexts, the barrier may be the inability to access formal education itself, in which case the provision of non-formal educational options is necessary.

Programme implementers and service providers need to recognise their own responsibility in preventing child marriage and mitigating its impact within their own spheres of influence. In practice, this may mean the establishment of systems or protocols to identify the warning signs and address the risks of child marriage. It means ensuring that health services are adolescent-friendly, and tailored to the needs to both unmarried and married girls. It also means providing married girls with the support they need to leave the marriage and pursue an alternative life course.

Recognising that poverty and economic insecurity are major drivers of child marriage in many regions, the model also highlights the need for services that provide girls with skills and opportunities necessary to increase their economic security and reduce their financial dependence on those around them.

Laws and policies

Laws and policies provide an important backdrop for improvements in services, changes in social norms, and girls' empowerment. Systems to monitor the implementation of laws and policies are important, so that

expectations on the part of girls, families and communities as to the relevance of these laws to their lives are raised, and so they can actually use them.

The Theory of Change lists critical steps that form part of a comprehensive response to child marriage. Legislation that sets 18 as the minimum age for marriage is not enough; loopholes – related to parental consent or customary laws – must be removed, and related laws must be in place which protect women and girls’ rights, including property rights, access to remedies, support for those wishing to leave a marriage, protection from violence, access to health services, etc. Strengthened civil registration systems which record births and marriages are also important.

Government policy frameworks must define roles and dedicate resources across ministries – including justice, women and children, education, health, social protection, and security – to expand opportunities for girls at risk and to support married girls. This is closely linked to the achievement of many of the outcomes listed under “Services”.

v. Results

The results (or intermediate impacts) reflect the demonstrated changes in behaviour on the part of individuals, families and communities, programme implementers, and law enforcement officials as a consequence of surrounding changes in attitudes and conditions. The results are deliberately framed in an active manner, to emphasise *whose* behaviour has changed.

We have assumed that any changes in the behaviour of policy-makers does not constitute a “result” within this framework, but rather creates the conditions necessary to change the behaviours of actors who have a more direct impact on the lives of girls. Depending on the context, different combinations of the results will be necessary to prevent child marriage and support married girls.

vi. Impact

If we are to have a lasting impact on child marriage, girls need to be able to achieve their aspirations. It is when girls can choose *whether* to marry as well as when and whom, that marriage-related decisions will reflect a true choice, a shift in decision-making power to girls and new social norms. Similarly, if married girls lead healthy, empowered lives, this will reflect our success in separating the harmful conditions associated with child marriage from the practice itself.

vii. Vision

Our vision articulates what we believe can be made possible by ending child marriage. Our ultimate objective is not only to prevent children from marrying before the age of 18, but also to ensure that they acquire the skills, connections and capacities that child marriage impedes, and have the opportunity and freedom to thrive. Since child marriage determines the fate of so many women around the world, the vision includes explicit reference to the achievement of gender equality. This is fundamental for the realisation of girls’ rights and to the transformation of communities and nations.

5. How has the Girls Not Brides Theory of Change been developed?

Girls Not Brides is a global partnership of more than 350 civil society organisations that are based in over 60 countries. The Theory of Change was developed in consultation with *Girls Not Brides* members and other experts on child marriage. It endeavours to incorporate the opinions and feedback from a wide range of stakeholders. The process adhered to several important principles:

- The Theory of Change was open to interested parties both within the *Girls Not Brides* membership (through the *Girls Not Brides* newsletter and targeted outreach), as well as to a range of other stakeholders engaged in efforts to end child marriage;
- To ensure the Theory of Change reflected the diversity of approaches among *Girls Not Brides* members and the broader movement to end child marriage, it consciously and proactively engaged with individuals and organisations from different regions and working on diverse approaches.

Over 150 individuals and organisations contributed to this Theory of Change. They included civil society organisations engaged in advocacy, research and programmes, United Nations agencies, donors and government representatives. A total of 94 member organisations, and key experts from other partner organisations, participated in three webinars in English and French and gave their feedback. Others reviewed the documents presented and shared comments via email and telephone. The constructive nature of input received throughout the process was invaluable.

Find out more

The Theory of Change and accompanying guide are available to download via the *Girls Not Brides* website www.GirlsNotBrides.org.

To request a print copy of the Theory of Change or this accompanying guide, or to send comments or feedback on the Theory of Change, contact info@GirlsNotBrides.org