



DOUBLE DISASTERS

The effect of cyclones Idai and Kenneth on child marriage in Mozambique

On the occasion of the International Day of the Girl Child, the 30th anniversary of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, and with one step left to set the legal age for marriage in Mozambique at 18 years without exception, we urge government, UN-agencies, donors, stakeholders and practitioners to adopt the recommendations against child marriage in this policy brief.

Introduction:

An increasing body of research from disaster-affected contexts across the world points to a marked increase in early marriages during and after disasters. This policy brief explores the situation in Mozambique following the devastating cyclones Idai and Kenneth in Mozambique during the first half of 2019. It analyzes pre-existing drivers for child marriage and how these interacted with the post-cyclone emergency context. Solid data regarding the rates of child marriage after the cyclones is unfortunately not (yet) available.¹ The paper therefore builds on existing research and literature, as well as field-based input from humanitarian workers and child right organizations in the most affected areas: Sofala, Manica and Cabo Delgado provinces. During the course of research for this paper, several cases of child marriage involving girls as young as 13 and 14 years old were found.

Summary: Specific recommendations for the government of Mozambique

1. Sign the Child Marriage bill into law as soon as possible.
2. Invest in the socialization, implementation and enforcement of the new law.

Recommendations for practitioners across government, UN-Agencies, (I)NGOs and donors

1. Invest in the education and empowerment of girls while engaging men, boys and women
2. Enable girls to return to school as quickly as possible following an acute crisis by investing in Education in Emergencies
3. Develop pro-active mitigation strategies against child marriage following a disaster.
4. Identify and engage champions against child marriage in communities for prevention and response.
5. Explore the impact of climate change-related disasters on early marriage
6. Establish an international database on child marriage in humanitarian contexts, with country-specific chapters for high-risk contexts such as Mozambique.

Girls at risk

In Mozambique today, **48%** of girls marry before they turn 18 years old. **14%** of girls are married before the age of 15.² With these numbers, Mozambique ranks **9th** on the list of countries with the highest prevalence of child marriage worldwide. The combination of a high prevalence of child marriage with extreme vulnerability to natural disasters and climate change makes Mozambique a high-risk country for girls. In the aftermath of cyclone Idai, the organization Girl Child Rights flagged that:

'Our Activists are reporting increased school drop out of many girls due to early and forced child marriage. The

cases of early marriage are especially dire in the more remote communities. In 12 villages of Mossurize district more than 124 girls have been forced in marriage since the aftermath of Cyclone Idai.³ This is just the tip of an iceberg⁴

The devastating consequences for these young girls cannot be overstated: Still reeling from the loss of their home, belongings and sometimes even family members, they are forced to drop out of school and marry an often much older man. This effectively constitutes a double disaster with lifelong consequences.

¹ See last section of this policy brief for specific recommendations on how to address the need for solid data.

² <https://www.unicef.org/mozambique/en/child-protection>

³ This is an average of more than 10 early marriages per village. The total population size is 153.163 people

⁴ Statement by the director of Girl Child Rights, Chimoio, September 2019



A step in the struggle against child marriage:

The legal age for marriage in Mozambique is still not set at 18 years old without exceptions. Yet some progress is being made. After intensive lobbying by a coalition of Civil Society Organizations, the Mozambican Parliament passed a new Child Marriage bill in July 2019. At the time of writing (October 2019), this bill is waiting to be signed into law by the President of Mozambique.

The year 2019 marks the 30th anniversary of the UN Convention on Child Rights (UNCRC), which lays down the right of every child to protection from violence, abuse, exploitation and neglect – including child marriage. It also establishes children's right to an education enabling them to reach their full potential. The situation in Mozambique puts a very large number of girls at risk. 44.7% of the population is 14 years or younger. Based on national averages prior to Cyclone Idai, this group includes more than 6 million girls, nearly half of whom are likely to be married before they turn 18. This situation is a major impediment to achieve SDG 5 on gender equality and empowerment of girls. Even after the child marriage bill becomes law, urgent action will still be required to protect each and every one of these girls from child marriage through effective and rights-based implementation of the law in practice.

Humanitarian crises and child marriage: growing evidence from across the globe

There is growing and increasingly indisputable evidence from humanitarian settings (across conflicts and natural disasters) pointing to an increase in the prevalence of child marriages following disasters. Save the Children has been conducting [programming](#) to address child

marriage in humanitarian contexts since at least 2013. The organization has conducted programs to address child marriage with refugees, internally displaced persons (IDPs), and conflict-affected adolescents in Egypt, Ethiopia, Iraq, Jordan, Kenya, Lebanon, Nepal, Rwanda, Syria, and Somalia.⁵ Even though further proof is available,⁶ there are still large gaps in our understanding of drivers and other dynamics contributing to child marriage in humanitarian crises.

When it comes to Mozambique, some evidence already exists linking disasters and child marriage in Mozambique. For example, a [study](#) by CARE concluded that during the El Niño induced drought of 2016 in Mozambique in the context of food scarcity, poverty and economic insecurity 'many families have used child marriage as a coping mechanism to raise income (through payment of a bride price) or to reduce the number of dependents per household'.⁷

Drivers and enablers for child marriage during the crisis:

Drivers for child marriage are varied and will often converge when a girl marries before becoming an adult. Field staff from Girl Child Rights and [Save the Children](#) that work in Sofala, Manica and Cabo Delgado provinces⁸ have identified the following dynamics that contributed to child marriage in the post-disaster context:

Extreme poverty: In families strongly affected by disasters, girls sometimes represented the only potential 'source of income' left to alleviate urgent economic necessities. The poorest families are most vulnerable, as they are the least able to provide for daughters and the most dependent on any price or livestock her marriage might bring. Examples given of these post-disaster dynamics were:

'A family that lost its house and belongings and where subsequently offered 'help' from another person in less desperate conditions. In return, the benefactor required the (under-aged) daughter to be married to him.'

'A family member needed medical attention. A local 'curandeiro' (healer) attended to the sick person, but asked a very large sum as payment in return. The family was unable to pay, and the curandeiro then proceeded to demand the under-aged daughter to be married to him in payment'

One less mouth to feed: Apart from representing an economic asset, marrying off a daughter also reduces the number of people that depend on the family budget for survival. This reason was cited several times as a driver of child marriage in the post-disaster context.

⁵ Save the Children and Human Rights Center UC Berkely School of Law (2018) TOWARD AN END TO CHILD MARRIAGE. Lessons from Research and Practice in Development and Humanitarian Sectors.

⁶ See for instance Girls Not Brides (2018): Child marriage in humanitarian settings and Plan UK (2011) Breaking Vows, Early and Forced Marriage and Girls' Education.

⁷ CARE (2019) Hope dries up? Women and Girls coping with Drought and Climate Change in Mozambique, P6

⁸ According to UNICEF, 'The median ages of marriage are lowest in Cabo Delgado and Manica'

Access to secondary schools: In the emergency context, some schools were forced to close down temporarily. In other cases, families did not have sufficient resources to pay for school materials or (safe) transport to the nearest school. In such situations girls are the first to drop out of school, which increases the risk of early marriage. Both the cost and distance between home and school is a factor that influences the ability of girls to continue studying. Particularly in remote communities, many girls struggle to finish primary school and the amount of girls in secondary school is low. A small sample across seven schools in Cabo Delgado supported by Save the Children underlined this observation: In six of the schools there were less girls than boys in 7th grade, with two schools were only half as many girls as boys attended.⁹

Negative coping mechanisms: In the most desperate situations and in absence of any other resources, some girls find themselves forced to engage in transactional sex as a last recourse to raise an income. In these cases, families may prefer to marry their daughter off to avoid the stigma against sex outside of marriage.

Save the Children and Girl Child Rights (GCR) operate Child-Friendly Spaces (CFS) and support Temporarily Learning Centers (TLC) and schools in areas most affected by cyclones Idai and Kenneth. Both organizations also provide case-management services for children that require urgent protection. In collaboration with Save the Children, GCR operates a network of field-based volunteers and paralegals that promote sexual and reproductive health-awareness, identify cases of early marriage and refer cases to the relevant authorities. It is through these activities that the organizations are well placed to observe the dynamics of child-marriage following cyclones Idai and Kenneth.

Staff further identified the following **set of context-specific cultural beliefs and practices that enable and reinforce the practice of child marriage in a humanitarian context**. Even though there are significant differences in context across the cyclone-affected provinces Sofala, Manica and Cabo Delgado, the general tendencies are very similar when it comes to child marriage:

The definition of a girl: In many communities, physical characteristics are believed to determine whether a girl is ready for marriage, instead of age and mental capacity. The development of female physical attributes and first menstruation are interpreted as strong signs of readiness: Field staff stated that ‘People in communities see a girl as a woman when she is older than 12’. In Cabo Delgado, an initiation rite takes place where girls are taught ‘how to become a woman’. This rite can last up to a month and reaffirms the existing gender inequalities between men and women.

The economic value that girls represent, often in the form of some sort of dowry. ‘A rapariga e riqueza da casa’ (‘A girl is the wealth of the house’). Virgins are especially valued for marriage in many communities, and payment to the family will be higher if their child marries as a virgin.¹⁰

The higher price attributed to virgins incentivizes very early marriages, to avoid girls becoming sexually active before marriage. In some cases, proof of virginity is required, for which a number of people may act as witnesses and vouch for the girl’s virginity – this is also recognized as a form of sexual and gender-based violence. Failure to marry as a virgin may lead girls to be stigmatized and abused by other community members.

Some girls are claimed from a very young age as future wives of a specific man, long before they become adults. There are different ways of publically signaling this claim, for instance by dropping a large log in front of a girl’s house (Kubatira), or forcefully carrying a girl to her home.

Polygamy prevails in many communities and interlinks with child marriage. In some cases, girls younger than 18 are married to a wealthy man with one or several wives. The amount of women and children a man can claim is considered a status symbol and a contributor to economic wealth, since more family members are available to work on the machamba’s (agricultural plots).

The absence of a legal framework that penalizes marriage under 18 years without exception. Across the affected provinces, the father is identified as the key-decision maker with the final say when it comes his daughter’s marriage. The new Child Marriage bill could help to deter fathers from seeking to marry their daughters before the age of 18.

⁹ Based on small education survey by Save the Children in Cabo Delgado, September 2019.

¹⁰ Commonly known as –‘Masungiro or Musana wa mai’ in Manica and Sofala provinces.



Consequences of early marriage for girls

A recent [report](#) by the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights states that 'Child, early and forced marriage is a human rights violation, a harmful practice and a form of gender-based violence. It has a higher incidence in humanitarian contexts, with terrible consequences for the human rights of victims, in particular women and girls.'¹¹ The negative consequences of child marriage for girls are well documented. Child marriage:¹²

- is an act of child abuse and sexual and gender-based violence that forces girls into a relationship that exposes them to the threat of ongoing violence
- increases girls' risk of death and disability through sexually transmitted infections including HIV/AIDS, obstetric fistula, and maternal and infant mortality
- leads to girls dropping out of school early, cutting short their education and affecting their future political and economic independence – globally 87% of married girls are [out of school](#).¹³

The global economic costs associated with the impacts of child marriage and early childbirths are very large and particularly significant for countries with high rates of child marriage. According to the [World Bank](#), gains in earnings and productivity that would have been observed today if women had not married early for a core set of 15 countries (including Mozambique) are estimated at \$26 billion.¹⁴ A study by GCR in Sussundenga confirms that 'there is little or no understanding of the dangers that child marriages expose to victims as a result of infringing their Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR)' among communities.¹⁵ Whereas most people manage to recover within a short to medium period after a disaster, girls who are married off in an emergency context are likely to suffer the consequences for the rest of their lives.

¹¹ United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (2019) Child, early and forced marriage in humanitarian settings

¹² <https://www.unicef.org/mozambique/en/child-protection>

¹³ Save the Children (2018) "Working Together to end child marriage":

¹⁴ World Bank (2017): Economic Impacts of Child Marriage: Global Synthesis Report

¹⁵ GCR (2019): "An HIV free future and enjoyment of full potential" Project, Comprehensive Baseline study.

Recommendations:

On the occasion of the International Day of the Girl Child, the 30th anniversary of the UNCRC, and with only one final step pending to establish the legal age for marriage in Mozambique at 18 years without exception, we urge government, donors, practitioners and other stakeholders in Mozambique to do the following:

Specific recommendations for the government of Mozambique

1. **Sign the Child Marriage bill into law as soon as possible.** A binding legal framework that sets the minimum age for marriage at 18 without exception will help to protect girls at risk of early marriage and allow perpetrators to be held to account in court. Mozambican Parliament took an important step by approving this legislation, which now needs to be converted into law.
2. **Invest in the implementation, socialization and enforcement of the new law.** Experience shows that the successful implementation and enforcement of laws depends on several factors, including;
 - a) Promotion and awareness raising at community level in ways appropriate to the local context (e.g. translation in local languages, oral explanations of the law and its implications)
 - b) Active enforcement of the new law across the country in a way that ensures girls and their rights are protected

Recommendations for practitioners across government, UN-Agencies, (I)NGOs, as well as donors:

1. **Invest in the education and empowerment of girls:** several examples of cases where child marriage was successfully warded off involved empowered girls standing up to their parents/guardians refusing to be married before finishing school and/or reaching the legal age for marriage. Investing in education, empowerment and awareness of girls when it comes to their SRHR is undoubtedly a strong tool to prevent and reduce child marriage. Engagement with men, women, boys and girls is also needed to shift the norms, beliefs and societal expectations that perpetuate early marriage. [Analysis by Save the Children](#) suggests that enabling all girls to complete secondary schooling could prevent more than 51 million child marriages globally, bringing an end to the practice within reach.¹⁶



2. **Enable girls to return to school as quickly as possible following an acute crisis.** Education in Emergencies provides a crucial piece of the puzzle to mitigate the increase of child marriage following disasters. Conversations with teachers in the affected areas confirmed that timely school rehabilitation, distribution of education materials and TLC's had a positive effect on assistance and retention of students. The availability and accessibility of secondary schools is vital for these purposes. Moreover, [a recent study](#) by Save the Children shows that education is by far the top priority for children across the globe in emergencies: 'Children in crisis want education more than money, food or water'.¹⁷ To this end, the "[Education Cannot Wait](#)" initiative is of vital importance.
3. **Develop pro-active mitigation strategies against child marriage following a disaster.** The identification of key entry points for mainstreaming child marriage prevention into existing humanitarian response efforts is important in this respect, for instance through CFS's, TLC's and distributions of educational materials. Strategies may include specific targeting of at-risk girls and their families. This work needs to be funded: Gender-based violence prevention and response currently receives [less than 0.12% of funding](#) in emergency contexts.¹⁸
4. **Identify and engage key decision-makers and/or people of influence within communities to serve as champions for child marriage prevention and response.** Swift identification of child marriages at community level may enable the authorities and organizations like Save the Children and GCR to prevent marriages, and work with (un)married girls to ensure that they can realize their rights.
5. **Explore the impact of climate change-related**

¹⁶ Save the Children (2018) "Working Together to end child marriage"

¹⁷ Save the Children (2019): Education against the odds

¹⁸ IRC (2019) Where is the money? How the humanitarian system is failing in its commitment to end violence against women and girls: <https://www.rescue.org/sites/default/files/document/3854/whereisthemoneyfinal.pdf>

disasters on early marriage. Unpredictable weather patterns, erratic rainfall and high-intensity cyclones make Mozambique an increasingly disaster-prone country. The threats that climate change poses in such a highly-vulnerable context need to be addressed urgently. If we fail to do so, scores of young girls risk getting married before their time each time a disaster strikes.

6. Establish an international database on child marriage in humanitarian contexts with country-specific chapters for high-risk countries such as Mozambique. UN agencies, with the

support of governments and local stakeholders, should fill this critical data gap and support the establishment of a robust, international database on child marriage in humanitarian contexts addressing:¹⁹

- a) why child marriage increases in some contexts
- b) decision-making factors of parents
- c) pre-existing and crisis-specific drivers of child marriage
- d) support needs of girls and their families,
- e) what interventions work to address child marriage.

¹⁷ These recommendations are taken from: Save the Children and Human Rights Center UC Berkely School of Law (2018) TOWARD AN END TO CHILD MARRIAGE. Lessons from Research and Practice in Development and Humanitarian Sectors, Save the Children and Human Rights Center UC Berkely School of Law.

