



Case study on delaying adolescent pregnancy and child marriage in the Kingdom of Lesotho

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Purpose of the case study

The purpose of this case study is to highlight a promising programme that has been identified by UNICEF as contributing to the delay of adolescent pregnancy and child marriage in Lesotho.*

It provides an outline of the work that is being done, and an analysis of its successes and challenges. The information presented is based on a documentary review and interviews with those involved and available. Its intended audience includes those working in the areas of research, programmes, and policy to end child marriage in Lesotho, in the region, and elsewhere, such as UNICEF, UNFPA, the Government of Lesotho, donors, civil society organisations and academics.

The context of adolescent pregnancy and child marriage in Lesotho

Child marriage is defined as a formal marriage or informal union that takes place before the age of 18. In many contexts, the practice has been shown to have profound physical, intellectual, psychological, and emotional impacts, especially for girls. Children who are poor, live in rural areas and/or are out of school are disproportionately at risk of marrying young. Globally, the prevalence of child marriage has declined over the last decade, with the most progress seen in South Asia, especially among girls below 15 years of age. Nevertheless, in 2020 the total number of girls married before the age of 18 remained at approximately 12 million per year.¹ Progress must be substantially accelerated to meet the

* UNICEF Lesotho Country Office supports efforts to address child marriage using its own resources. It is not one of the twelve countries involved in the UNFPA-UNICEF Global Programme to End Child Marriage.

Sustainable Development Goal 5.3 of ending child marriage by 2030. Moreover, recent and growing evidence from the COVID-19 pandemic suggests that some of these gains have been lost over the past year and thus an even greater investment is needed than earlier predicted.²

Getting married as an adolescent is a longstanding practice in Lesotho,³ as it is in many societies across the Southern Africa region and globally. The drivers of the practice have varied over time and across contexts. Traditionally, these unions were a means of formalising reciprocal relationships between families and solidifying social networks. The social and cultural norms underlying marriage-related decisions still inform the choices that girls, boys, and their families make. Today, these norms work in concert with two main drivers: poverty and pregnancy. These two issues are intertwined and their relationship to child marriage is bi- and tri-directional. Girls who live in poverty – either with their parents, other caregivers, or family members, or as heads of household in which parents have died or have migrated for work – are in need of food, clothing, transport and other necessities. Many must engage in risky behaviours to meet these needs; often this means engaging in transactional sex with older men who promise to provide them with material and/or financial support. Many girls lack information and access to contraceptive methods and sexual and reproductive health more generally. Even among those who are informed, differentials in age, gender and wealth mean those in these relationships typically do not have a say in whether a condom is used or not. In these and other similar circumstances, girls may get pregnant. The recent Violence Against Children and Youth Survey (2018 data) found that among 18-24 year old females, 11 percent had their sexual debut before age 15, and 18 percent of

girls' first experience of sexual intercourse was physically forced or coerced.⁴ Less than half of these girls told someone about this violence when they experienced it, and only 8 percent received health and other services.⁵ A further 13.5 percent reported having become pregnant before age 18.⁶ Earlier data (the 2014 Lesotho Demographic and Health Survey) found that among sexually active females 15-19 years old, 79.9 percent were not using any contraception.⁷

Pregnancy is considered an undesirable condition for an unmarried girl in most communities in Lesotho.⁸ Many pregnant girls leave school, either because familial investment in school fees is no longer considered a priority or affordable, because school authorities required them to drop out, or because stigma, discrimination and condemnation from peers and staff make going to school intolerable.⁹ The personal and social consequences are also felt within families, who may ill-treat a girl in these circumstances because they feel a sense of shame, disgrace and loss of honour; community members may also insult and verbally abuse pregnant unmarried girls, or treat them in other demeaning or damaging ways. The economic penalties may include exacerbated levels of poverty and lower levels of employment and income-earning opportunities. The impacts on girls' mental health and wellbeing can be significant; across the country girls in these circumstances have described feelings of helplessness, anger, rejection and self-recrimination.¹⁰ These struggles may be worsened by the potential health outcomes that poor, marginalized girls who are pregnant may encounter, such as contracting HIV: although adolescent girls and young women represent only 11 percent of the national population, they account for 25 percent of new infections.¹¹ Pregnancy also puts them at risk of anaemia, post-partum haemorrhage



and obstetric fistula, among other problems.¹²

In Lesotho, this reality is borne out in statistics. The LDHS (2014) indicates that adolescent pregnancy is most common among girls and young women who live in rural areas, have low levels of formal education and are living in poverty.¹³ More than half of adolescent pregnancies and childbearing happen to girls before they reach 18 years of age. Girls and/or their families may try to mitigate these overwhelmingly negative repercussions by getting married. Situating adolescent pregnancy within the context of marriage diminishes the social stigma and other costs associated with it. Importantly, it also establishes a formal

connection between the pregnant girl and the boy or man involved that brings with it a set of rights and responsibilities, social supports, and a cemented bond between families. For the most vulnerable girls, these hoped-for benefits provide them and their families with a sense of security, at least in theory, that a child will be raised in the best possible (or least harmful or problematic) conditions, with a sense of belonging and all of the benefits that come with membership in an extended social group.

In Lesotho, nearly one in five girls marries before the age of 18 (19.4%, 2018).¹⁴ As with unintended adolescent pregnancy, rates of marriage are higher among girls in rural areas (24.9% vs 13.8% urban),¹⁵ and among those who are the poorest and have the lowest levels of schooling.¹⁶ Low rates of birth registration across the country suggest that these figures are underestimates of the actual numbers of child marriages.¹⁷ Although marriage is often pursued as a means of mitigating the financial, social and other difficulties that girls and families face, it nevertheless poses serious threats to their development and wellbeing.¹⁸ This fact was emphasized in 2017, when World Vision identified child marriage as the top national child protection issue.¹⁹ For those girls who are not pregnant when they marry, pregnancy typically happens soon thereafter. In addition to the health, social, economic and other risks outlined above, girls in this situation face an even greater likelihood that they will not resume schooling and will have few opportunities to pursue vocational training or other means of skill enhancement and social engagement.²⁰ Moreover, pregnancy and pregnancy-related deaths are a leading cause of mortality for married and unmarried girls between the ages of 15-19 in Lesotho.²¹ The interconnectedness of adolescent pregnancy and child marriage in Lesotho requires that the two issues be tackled in tandem.

The Government of the Kingdom of Lesotho and UNICEF's efforts to reduce adolescent pregnancy and child marriage

Lesotho has a plural legal system in which laws related to child marriage co-exist and contradict each other. This lack of harmonization is evident in the Marriage Act (1974), which stipulates that a girl may marry at the age of 16 (and a boy at 18) provided there is parental consent, while the Children's Protection and Welfare Act (2011) states that marriage before the age of 18 is unlawful, and that a child who is being forced to marry is in need of urgent protection.²² International and regional conventions to which Lesotho is a signatory also fix 18 years as the minimum age of marriage.²³ Customary law (Laws of Lerotholi), which governs family and community life in many parts of the country, allows a girl or boy to marry, as long as they have reached puberty. Although technically illegal, many marriages are negotiated according to custom and not reported to the authorities. Impunity means that traditional practices like elopement (chobeliso), in which a girl is abducted for marriage, are prevalent in some regions.²⁴ These contradictions in legislation also enable practices like the marrying of girls who have been victims of sexual abuse to their perpetrator.²⁵

In line with SDG Target 5.3, the Government of Lesotho has committed to the elimination of child, early and forced marriage by 2030. The country began its efforts in 2015, after the African Union declared child marriage to be a harmful practice and a major barrier to social, human, and economic development on the continent. Later that year, and in recognition of the challenges posed by child marriage and adolescent pregnancy (both as cause and effect),



Lesotho began its efforts to harmonize all relevant laws and policies. It tabled the Motion to Eradicate Child Marriages in Lesotho on July 4, 2016. Shortly thereafter, Parliament adopted the SADC Model Law on Eradication of Child Marriages. Government also began consultations with Chiefs, community councillors, religious leaders, parliamentarians, and other decision-makers. In 2017, a mass-media advocacy campaign was launched to raise awareness of the harms of the practice among a broad spectrum of audiences at the grassroots and national level. This work was done in conjunction with the African Union campaign to end child marriage in Africa, also launched that year. It was led by the Ministry of Social Development, in collaboration with the Ministries of Health, Police, Education, UNICEF, and several civil society organisations and is still ongoing. In April 2018, Princess Senate Seeiso (born in 2001) was engaged as a figurehead of the movement.



Promising practice to delay the age of marriage and first pregnancy

As part of efforts to reach people of all ages across the country, a number of activities were carried out on the ground in villages. A spinoff of these initiatives is one led by Help Lesotho, called GIRL4ce*. A youth-led movement to end child marriage and sexual and gender-based violence, GIRL4ce uses drama, dialogue, speeches, songs and interactive activities to engage, educate and mobilize people of all ages to better protect and empower girls and women in Lesotho.

In the five years since it began, the movement has grown and its efforts have become more targeted. Initially, activities were undertaken in Leribe and Butha Buthe districts only. Now, Girl4ce works in 3 additional districts, including Berea, Outhing and Thaba Tseka. Adolescent

girls and boys from across these districts are recruited as volunteers, to act as 'Champions' to enrich and grow the movement. All are provided with information about laws relating to gender-based violence and child marriage, practical training on how to present these issues through creative means and to organise events, and support to build their skills to facilitate conversations in communities, at schools, churches, workplaces, and in other social settings. Young people work in teams to carry out activities and then debrief and discuss them with people of all ages. In practice, the model works like a snowball – individuals watch or listen to Girl4ce plays and songs, participate in discussions with others, become interested in being involved themselves, receive training and support to further spread the word, and so on.

* More information about Girl4ce and Help Lesotho can be found at www.helplesotho.org.

Programme achievements

GIRL4ce is one part of a broader effort across Lesotho to delay adolescent pregnancy and child marriage. Its efforts are understood to complement and strengthen the efforts of civil society and government; awareness raising is one part of a suite of interventions, services and approaches that are being implemented across the country.

The GIRL4ce movement has proven an effective means of sharing information in creative ways about sensitive topics with a wide range of people. Because Champions are themselves members of nearby communities, their messages are understood to be less judgemental and threatening than those that come from outsiders. Using drama and song and other means of sharing has enabled people to connect to the stories of imaginary others, stories that resonate locally in meaningful and lasting ways. In so doing, communities have been able to critically reflect on the drivers of adolescent pregnancy, child marriage and gender-based violence (GBV) and to begin to challenge the myths and assumptions that contribute to keeping these practices in place. Champions and participants connect to each other and describe feeling a shared sense of ownership and responsibility to make change and to bring others on board to join the movement.

“I had always known that violence is real, however I never personalised it or tried to understand the pain it causes for the victims.” (A new Champion, after witnessing a drama performance)

Another achievement of the GIRL4ce movement is its success in involving boys and young men as educators and facilitators.

In Lesotho, amplifying the voices of those affected by pregnancy, marriage and GBV means recognising that boys and young men also have experience and insights to share. Their engagement in the work of GIRL4ce has not only provided the movement with supportive allies, but it has also raised important issues related to young males’ experience of exploitation, abuse, and violence. It is this team-based approach that makes the messages more interesting and, potentially, more acceptable to families and communities, including those without daughters.

“I take pride in respecting women and girls and treating them with love. It is doable. Maybe you should try it sometime.” (Motebang

Mosola, GIRL4ce Champion)

With time and experience, a critical mass of engaged young people and adult allies has developed, and the movement is now furthering discussion through social media sites such as WhatsApp and Facebook, and via local meet-up groups. GIRL4ce Champions regularly visit local radio stations to share information and answer call-in questions about GBV and child marriage to a wider audience. To further extend the reach of the GIRL4ce movement, television stations have recently run pre-recorded dramas in Sesotho.

“I am very lucky to be part of the GIRL4ce Core, because I can ask for my rights and I am able to advocate for others who can’t fight for themselves. Before I was part of this I was not aware of so many issues. Now I am a different person from before I was part of the Core.” (Maseleke, GIRL4ce Champion)

Challenges faced and future directions

The COVID-19 pandemic, in particular the restrictions related to group gatherings, has meant that community-based performances have been paused since March 2020. The inability to use its traditional means of information sharing and discussions has required the movement to re-think how it can best share its resources under the current circumstances. Efforts are now underway to strengthen GIRL4ce's social media presence and to develop more interactive drama presentations via radio, using post-production call-in shows, using a question-and-answer format. The use of other non-formal and distance-based mechanisms are also being explored. Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic GIRL4ce has continued to communicate with rural communities in ways that did not require person-to-person contact, including newspaper advertisements, billboards, print brochures and an essay and poetry competition. GIRL4ce has adopted the slogan 'Do the Right Thing' to highlight the responsibility that all members of the community have in stopping GBV.

Other challenges include:

Champion turnover – youth are rarely able to commit for long periods of time (they start school, find jobs, move to try to find jobs, etc.). This reality means that training new members is a constant imperative. Doing so, however, provides an important opportunity to keep the delivery mechanisms and content fresh with new perspectives and ideas.

Behaviour change is a long-term effort that requires patience and commitment. GIRL4ce Champions work to build

trusting relationships slowly and support change through ongoing interaction and repeated messaging.

Contradictory customary and statutory laws related to GBV and child marriage makes clear messaging difficult. GIRL4ce Champions try to respond to these challenges with facts, in an effort to demystify harmful beliefs.

Getting influential local leaders and village chiefs onside is challenging at times. Addressing GBV and child marriage requires a redistribution of power and acceptance of responsibility; these changes are sometimes slow in the making.

The dramas include humour as a tool for audience engagement. **Moving from humour to the serious issues being addressed takes skillful acting and genuine conveyance of emotions** which can be challenging for beginner-level Champions.

For some audience members, the content of GIRL4ce performances triggers difficult memories. GIRL4ce does its best to make events and performances safe spaces for all community members, but the content is too close to reality for many women who see themselves in the characters portrayed. GIRL4ce Champions are trained in psychosocial support so that they can help people process their emotions in these instances, and connect them to other supports, as needed.



Key learning

Delaying adolescent pregnancy and child marriage is a pressing priority for those working to support children's protection and wellbeing in Lesotho. The efforts of UNICEF, UNFPA, the Government of Lesotho and numerous civil society organisations have been directed towards the harmonization of laws and awareness raising at the community level of the risks and potential consequences of marrying, giving birth, and becoming a parent at an early age. GIRL4ce, an initiative of Help Lesotho, has developed a creative means of exploring these issues with community members in diverse settings. The resourcefulness and commitment of young people to share information and promote dialogue has enabled public discussions of what have traditionally been private issues.

In terms of future strategies, it will be important to ensure that efforts to tackle pregnancy and marriage are incorporated into the soon-to-be-draft violence against children National Action Plan. Having one plan of action will help to avoid the fragmentation of child protection interventions; a consolidated strategy will promote integrated, multi-sectoral programmes to tackle the shared structural risk factors for VAC, child marriage and adolescent pregnancy to ensure a holistic response to addressing girls' and boys' needs. Moreover, the significance of these issues requires that government and development partners invest in this area of work. Finally, it is important that investments are made to address gaps in data and understanding so that effective responses can be developed and implemented at scale.

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