



Case study on ending child marriage in the Republic of Madagascar



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Acknowledgements

The UNICEF Eastern and Southern African Regional Office (ESARO) commissioned Child Frontiers to develop a compendium of promising practices on ending harmful practices and violence against children across the region. This documentation was written by Emma de Vise-Lewis and Gillian Mann of Child Frontiers with essential contributions from UNICEF Madagascar Country Office staff, and government, NGOs and other partners. Thanks also go to Jean Francois Basse and Mona Aika of UNICEF ESARO for their leadership and support throughout the process of developing the brief. The publication was designed by hopeworks.

April 2021



Purpose of the case study

The purpose of this case study is to highlight a promising programme, service or approach that is supported by UNICEF at the country level and that contributes to delaying the age of marriage in Madagascar. 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 Madagascar, in the region, and elsewhere, such as UNICEF, other UN agencies, the Government of Madagascar, donors, civil society organisations and academics.¹

The context of child marriage in Madagascar

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 child marriage. 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.² Progress must be accelerated in order to meet the

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.

In Madagascar, the Law on Marriage and Matrimonial Regimes 2007 sets the minimum age of marriage at 18 years for girls and boys. The law also states that marriage can be allowed by the President of the Court of the First Instance before the age of 18 if parents request it,³ and when the tribunal receives the formal consent of the child to be married.⁴ Prior to 2007, girls could be married at age 14 and boys at age 17.

Madagascar has one of the highest rates of child marriage in the world; many of these unions are informal. Girls are disproportionately affected. However, compared to other countries in the region, there is also a relatively high rate of marriage among boys. According to the 2018 Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey for Madagascar, 40% of women and 12% of men aged 20-24 years were married or in a union before the age of 18, and 12% of women and 2% of men aged 20-24 years were married before the age of 15.⁵ The median age at first marriage among women aged 25-49 years is higher in urban areas compared to rural areas, and among those women who have achieved higher levels of schooling and come from wealthier households. A comparison across generations shows a slight upward trend in child marriage among the younger cohort, unlike in most countries where this trend is typically declining.⁶ Five regions have particularly high rates of child marriage: Atsimo Atsinanana (60%), Atsimo Andrefana (66%), Melaky (54%), Androy (51%) and So a (54%).⁷

As seen elsewhere in the world, the drivers of child marriage in Madagascar include high levels of poverty; limited access to quality education, particularly beyond primary level; limited life choices; and a lack of access to sexual and reproductive health services, among other factors.



Madagascar has committed to eliminate child marriage by 2030 in line with the target laid out in Sustainable Development Goal 5.3. In 2018, Madagascar adopted a National Strategy to combat Child Marriage (2018-2024),⁸ developed with the support of UNICEF and UNFPA. The overall aim of the strategy is to reduce the rate of child marriage from 41.2% to 31% over a seven-year period and ensure that increasingly villages are declared free of child marriage.⁹ Guidelines and tools have been developed with UNICEF to support local level implementation of the national strategy. These are focused on orienting actors at the local level on their respective roles in the response to child marriage, and guiding local authorities in developing and implementing local action plans to eliminate the practice.¹⁰ In collaboration with the Ministry of Population and USAID, these guidelines have been rolled out in three regions since 2020/2021, and will be be



implemented in three additional high prevalence regions in 2021 with UNICEF funding.

In response to high levels of violence and exploitation against children, including child marriage, the Government of Madagascar, through the Ministry of Youth and Sport, established a national Life Skills programme in 2010 that focused inter alia on adolescent sexual and reproductive health and preparation for parenting. In 2016, with financial and technical support from UNICEF, the Life Skills programme was updated by the Ministry of Youth and Sports in collaboration with the Ministries of Education, Health, Population, and Communication and

relevant CSOs. A greater emphasis was placed on prevention of child marriage, violence and exploitation and on developing young people's self-esteem and self-confidence. Efforts were made to adapt the programme to the local contexts where it is being implemented. The Life Skills programme aims to reinforce the capacity of children and adolescents to manage risks and challenges, and in turn to reduce rates of child marriage, adolescent pregnancy, and violence.¹¹ This case study takes a closer look at the Life Skills programme as a promising practice that has been in place in Madagascar for more than a decade.

Promising Practice to combat child marriage

The Life Skills programme is currently being implemented in several communes across seven regions where rates of child marriage are at or above the national average, and where implementation can be supported and monitored. These are: Analamanga, Atsimo-Andrefana, Analanjirifo, Anôsy, Androy, Boeny and Vatovavy Fitovinany.



The programme was developed using a peer-to-peer facilitation model. Youth facilitators are selected by their community leaders from among young men and women between the ages of 18 and 24 who have studied to at least grade 10. They follow a 9-day training that includes theory and practical sessions, organised by a pool of national trainers from different ministries under the leadership of the Ministry of Youth and Sport. The facilitators work in male-female pairs on a voluntary basis and conduct life skills training sessions with adolescent girls and boys between the ages of 10 and 18, who

are either in or out of school. Efforts are made to prioritise the inclusion of vulnerable children such as adolescent mothers and children who are at risk of or have been victims of abuse, exploitation or child marriage. Mixed groups of 25 girls and boys participate together, separated by age. Individual participants attend one to two sessions per week over a two-month period (a total of 32 hours over 16 sessions).

A manual has been developed to guide the sessions and is available in French and Malagasy. It was updated in 2017 to include some additional basic skills in self-awareness and community living. The programme currently includes seven thematic areas:

1. Basic skills in self-awareness;
2. Basic skills regarding community living and awareness of one's own surroundings/environment;
3. Understanding young people's health, including sexual and reproductive health and risks of early pregnancy;
4. Preparing for parenthood, including understanding the risks of child marriage and challenges of parenting too young;
5. Protecting oneself against violence and exploitation, including understanding the rights of the child and the fact that child marriage is a form of violence and is illegal;
6. Understanding the importance of environmental protection, and;
7. Basic skills in new technologies and communication techniques, including prevention of online abuse and exploitation.

As one Life Skills facilitator explains:

“We deal with several themes during the Life Skills sessions, such as early pregnancy, the fight against child marriage or the environment. Through these sessions, adolescent girls can better understand behaviours and good practices to succeed in life.”¹²

A theme on positive masculinity has also recently been introduced in parallel with the Life Skills programme in communities where social roles and structures are largely dominated by men to the detriment of women and girls. In collaboration with MenEngage, groups of fathers attend sessions on positive masculinity. Participants are encouraged to work towards a more equitable division of power between men and boys and women and girls in their communities.¹³



The life skills sessions are designed to be as participatory and interactive as possible, and to encourage discussion and individual reflection in a supportive and enjoyable learning environment. The choice to use young facilitators is a deliberate effort to encourage participants to relate to them and to feel comfortable discussing sometimes sensitive issues. The aim is to create a positive environment where young people are able to share the challenges that they face and to find solutions together within the group.¹⁴

Programme Achievements

Between 2019 and 2020, the numbers of facilitators and ‘encadreurs’¹⁵ (supervisors) trained in life skills across six regions were 335 (148 boys and 187 girls) and 72 (28 male and 44 female) respectively. The total number of children that were reached as part of the Life Skills programme between January 2020 and February 2021 was 9,579, of which 5,629 were girls and 3,950 were boys.¹⁶

To date, there are no published data about the impact of the Life Skills programme on child marriage prevalence rates. However, anecdotally, staff from UNICEF and the Ministry of Youth and Sport report evidence of impact from communities where the programme is operational. Those involved assert that fewer children are marrying because participating girls and boys have a better understanding of what constitutes violence, and what the legal provisions related to child marriage. Feedback from adolescents who take part in the Life Skills programme is very positive. They report increased levels of self-esteem and confidence to speak to their parents and peers about their needs and aspirations. Learning related to Themes 3, 4 and 5 in particular, on sexual and reproductive health and the risks and challenges associated with marrying young, is said to be helping adolescent girls and boys to make more informed decisions about when they would like to marry. UNICEF staff report that for young people who sometimes feel helpless and frustrated, such programmes can help girls and boys to recognise that there are other options than marriage and that they do not have to accept the status quo.



“Having participated in life skills sessions, I can no longer be one of the girls who does not respect her body. My parents cannot try to convince me to marry now as happens to many girls at home. The sessions are very pleasant, we learned to express ourselves respectfully to each other within an atmosphere that is both fun and educational. I always felt very comfortable to be part of it. The thing I regret is that the programme time was too short; I still want to continue.”¹⁷ (16 year-old girl from Anôsy, 2018)

“When my parents learned that we were talking about adolescent reproductive health, they were worried and thought that the facilitators would teach us how to have sex, but the notes in the notebook allowed them to understand that this was not the case, that it was rather learning about my own body and its development, respect for my body, the effects of early pregnancy on life and the effects of communicable diseases. My social relationships have improved since my participation in life skills sessions. I now know better how to avoid fights and arguments with my peers, and I have a lot more friends.”¹⁸ (14 year-old girl from Anôsy, 2018)

According to UNICEF staff, a significant success of the programme is the participation of children and adolescents in discussions about issues that affect them in a systematic, sustained way, as opposed to more common one-off events centred around the International Day of the African Child, for example.

During a 2020 inter-sectoral monitoring mission to one of the implementation regions, parents of those involved in the Life Skills programme described it as a positive force in their children's lives, and said that it provided skills that parents also wanted to benefit from. Previously, adults in the community had eyed the programme with suspicion. In 2020, parents began to be included and plans are afoot to expand their engagement further in future programmes. A parental education component was added to the Life Skills programme in two regions (Anosy and Androy), covering topics such as child marriage, teenage pregnancy and keeping children in school. Programme approaches were adapted to include focus group discussions and door-to-door sessions that were conducted by youth peer educators and para social workers. In all, 382 parents were reached, 60% of whom were women. A formalised curriculum will soon be developed based on these experiences.

Challenges faced and future directions

A concern raised during interviews about the Life Skills programme was the fact that its continued implementation may not be sustainable: an injection of funds from UNICEF re-invigorated the programme in 2016 but currently none of its costs are budgeted for by the government, for which commitment to prioritising child protection remains a challenge. This lack of government investment threatens the longer-term viability of the programme as well as options for scaling up nationally. For now, the Life Skills programme is limited to regions where UNICEF supports government activities.

After more than ten years, there is still no formal monitoring and evaluation system in place to track progress and measure the impact of the Life Skills programme. Although anecdotal feedback is positive, it remains difficult to gauge how successful

the programme outcomes are on the lives of those who benefit from it, including whether it does indeed contribute to a reduction in the numbers of girls and boys who marry before the age of 18. Similarly, while some follow up by the supervisors does take place after each Life Skills programme cycle to monitor how the participants are integrating their learning, it appears that current efforts are insufficient. There are no formal data to examine participants' understanding and appreciation of the modules included in the programme nor how they may internalise and act on new skills acquired. There are plans to conduct an evaluation of the programme; for funding reasons, this may not happen until 2022.

Covid-19 disrupted the Life Skills programme considerably between March and August 2020 when tight restrictions on movement and gatherings were in place. However, since then the programme has re-started without issue.



Key learning

The value of the Life Skills programme for those who participate appears to be significant. However, **clear monitoring and evaluation tools need to be developed**, standardised and implemented so that the government and UNICEF can effectively measure change and assess programme impact in general and, in particular, on child marriage. Facilitators and supervisors need to be further technical support and capacity building and resources need to be made available to ensure that follow up can take place after each programme cycle has ended.

Funding is urgently required to evaluate the success of the Life Skills programme thus far, and to secure its continuation and expansion beyond 2021. Equally, funds need to be secured to implement the National Strategy to Combat Child Marriage (2018-2024). Interventions envisaged under the national strategy are intended to target specific drivers of child marriage, complementing work initiated under the Life Skills programme and furthering its impact.

It is positive that parents have been included in the programme in two regions and that this expanded engagement will take place in the other regions. Parents, especially fathers, play an important role in the decisions taken regarding their children, including marriage, so it is helpful for them to share the same understanding and learning as their children. Similarly, further consideration should be given to the inclusion of the numerous traditional and religious leaders across Madagascar given the influence they have in their communities.

Other initiatives are taking place in Madagascar, such as those that relate to positive parenting skills (implemented by SOS Villages). Programmes such as these are often implemented in different communities to the Life Skills programme. For greater impact and complementarity, **it is important to ensure that linkages are created across programmes**, regardless of provider, and that, where possible, staff and volunteers work in concert with each other in the same communities. In this way, stronger referral mechanisms could also be established, enabling youth facilitators to link Life Skills participants to para social workers who can refer them on to appropriate support services, as needed.

Poverty and food insecurity as a consequence of drought are a reality for many families in the South of Madagascar, and marriage is a survival mechanism for many girls and boys and young people. Marrying into another family creates links and solidarity in the community, which community members need to ensure families can support one another. Alongside any initiative that seeks to raise awareness about the risks and challenges of early marriage and early parenthood, **there need to be opportunities that can help generate income to better support families and parents** economically.

Sources

[1] UNICEF Madagascar 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.

[2] <https://data.unicef.org/topic/child-protection/child-marriage/>; UNICEF (2016) Child marriage in Eastern and Southern Africa: Determinants, consequences and the way forward.

[3] Article 3 of the marriage law stipulates that marriage is allowed for 'serious reasons' (motifs graves), although these are not defined and are left to the judgement of the Court President.

[4] <https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/child-marriage/madagascar>

[5] INSTAT et UNICEF (2019) Enquête par grappes à indicateurs multiples MICS Madagascar, 2018, Rapport national. Antananarivo, Madagascar : INSTAT et UNICEF.

[6] INSTAT et UNICEF (2019) Enquête par grappes à indicateurs multiples MICS Madagascar, 2018, Rapport national. Antananarivo, Madagascar : INSTAT et UNICEF.

[7] INSTAT et UNICEF (2019) Enquête par grappes à indicateurs multiples MICS Madagascar, 2018, Rapport national. Antananarivo, Madagascar : INSTAT et UNICEF.

[8] Government of Madagascar (2018) Stratégie Nationale de Lutte contre le Mariage d'enfants – Madagascar. Antananarive: Government of Madagascar

[9] Government of Madagascar (2018) Stratégie Nationale de Lutte contre le Mariage d'enfants – Madagascar. Antananarive: Government of Madagascar

[10] Government of Madagascar (2020) Guide Pratique Mise en Oeuvre de la Stratégie Nationale de Lutte contre le Mariage d'enfants (draft version)

[11] Information presented in this paragraph was provided during interviews with UNICEF Madagascar staff and the Technical Assistant and National Trainer at the Department for Reproductive Health and Youth Protection within the Ministry of Youth and Sport.

[12] Quote provided by the Technical Assistant and National Trainer at the Department for Reproductive Health and Youth Protection within the Ministry of Youth and Sport.

[13] Information obtained during an interview with UNICEF Madagascar staff.

[14] Information obtained during an interview with the Technical Assistant and National Trainer at the Department for Reproductive Health and Youth Protection within the Ministry of Youth and Sport.

[15] The 'encadreur' are civil servants from the Regional Directorate of Youth and Sport who follow up and monitor the life skills sessions and assist with the movement/travel of the facilitators.

[16] Source: Directions Régionales de la Jeunesse et des Sports des 6 régions as provided by the Technical Assistant and National Trainer at the Department for Reproductive Health and Youth Protection within the Ministry of Youth and Sport.

[17] This testimony is one of many collected by UNICEF Madagascar in 2018. See also a YouTube link in which an adolescent girl discusses the benefits of attending the Life Skills programme in Anôsy: [Life skills program in Anosy - YouTube](#)

[18] This testimony is one of many collected by UNICEF Madagascar in 2018. See also a YouTube link in which an adolescent girl discusses the benefits of attending the Life Skills programme in Anôsy: [Life skills program in Anosy - YouTube](#)

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