



# POLICY BRIEF

Child Marriage and  
Gender-Based Violence  
**in Uganda**



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**This Policy Brief** is drawn from qualitative research carried out in 2018 in Uganda, by the None in Three Research Centre Uganda ([www.noneinthree.org/uganda/](http://www.noneinthree.org/uganda/)). The research involved in-depth interviews with 45 survivors of child marriage and gender-based violence and focus groups with men and youth (including convicted perpetrators of violence) as well as members of the community.

Executive Summary and full research report are available here:

[www.noneinthree.org/uganda/uganda-resources/](http://www.noneinthree.org/uganda/uganda-resources/)

Information about the broader policy context is available here:

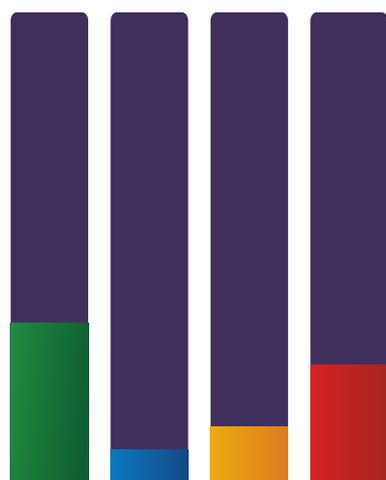
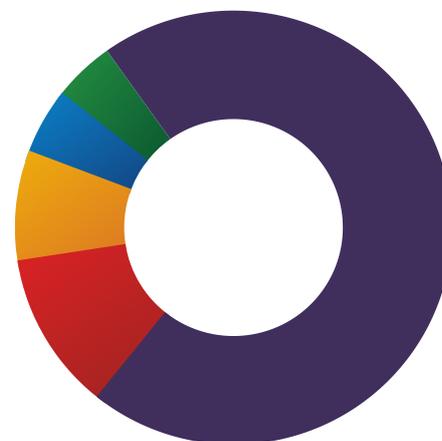
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UGANDA

# THE POLICY CHALLENGE

**Child marriage** is a severe problem within Ugandan society. Indeed, the None in Three Uganda survey of 11,606 school children aged 9-17 years conducted in 2018-19 found that:

- **4.5%** (n = 516) of children were already married or had been married or living with someone as though married,
- **4.9%** (n = 564) were engaged,
- **8.2%** (n = 950) had heard they are promised in marriage,
- **11.8%** (n = 1,338) reported being worried about the pressure to get married.



It must be noted that the survey findings represent an **underestimation of the prevalence of child marriage** due to the sample being drawn from children attending schools; those who have entered marriages are less likely to be engaged in the education system. Findings from **UNICEF** reports indicate that:

- **34%** of 20-49 year-old women are married before the age of 18<sup>1</sup>
- **7%** are married by the age of 15<sup>1</sup>
- **12%** of 10-19 year-old girls are married<sup>2</sup>
- **1 in 4** 15-19 year-old girls have begun child-bearing<sup>2</sup>

Despite legislation **prohibiting child marriage**, the practice continues due to social and cultural factors that encourage and normalise it within communities and society at large. Therefore, a multifaceted approach is needed to reduce the prevalence of early marriage and provide support to

enable young people who enter such arrangements, by force or through their own volition, to re-engage with education and be accepted by their families and communities.

**The policy recommendations in this document aim to support the Government in achieving these objectives.**

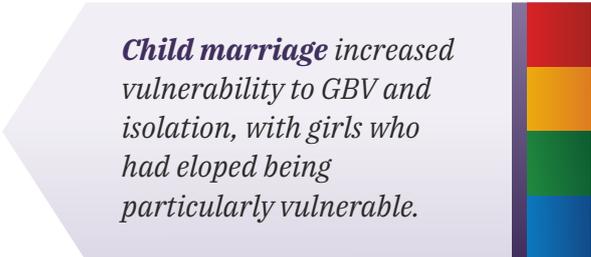
<sup>1</sup>[https://data.unicef.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/Child-marriage-database\\_Mar2021.xlsx](https://data.unicef.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/Child-marriage-database_Mar2021.xlsx)

<sup>2</sup><https://www.unicef.org/uganda/reports/situation-analysis-children-uganda-2019> (p10)

# HIGHLIGHTS FROM OUR FINDINGS

## Understanding Gender-based Violence

- **Gender-based violence (GBV)** was variously understood as meaning human rights abuses, domestic violence, or misunderstandings between couples in the home, violence meted out to women by their husbands, violations of rights based on gender, or violence against children or other vulnerable groups, or a combination of these.
- GBV was said to be **much more common than is indicated** in official statistics of cases reported to the authorities. Underreporting was thought to be due to the widespread culture of silence, among both men and women, and a tendency to resolve issues (even those of a capital nature) at family and community levels.
- GBV was manifest in all the major recognised forms of **physical, sexual, emotional and economic abuse**.
- Other forms of GBV related to **cultural practices and gender bias** in the distribution of work and execution of formal and informal justice processes.
- GBV affected both genders, however women and girls were reported to be its major victims; **perpetrators were mostly intimate partners**.

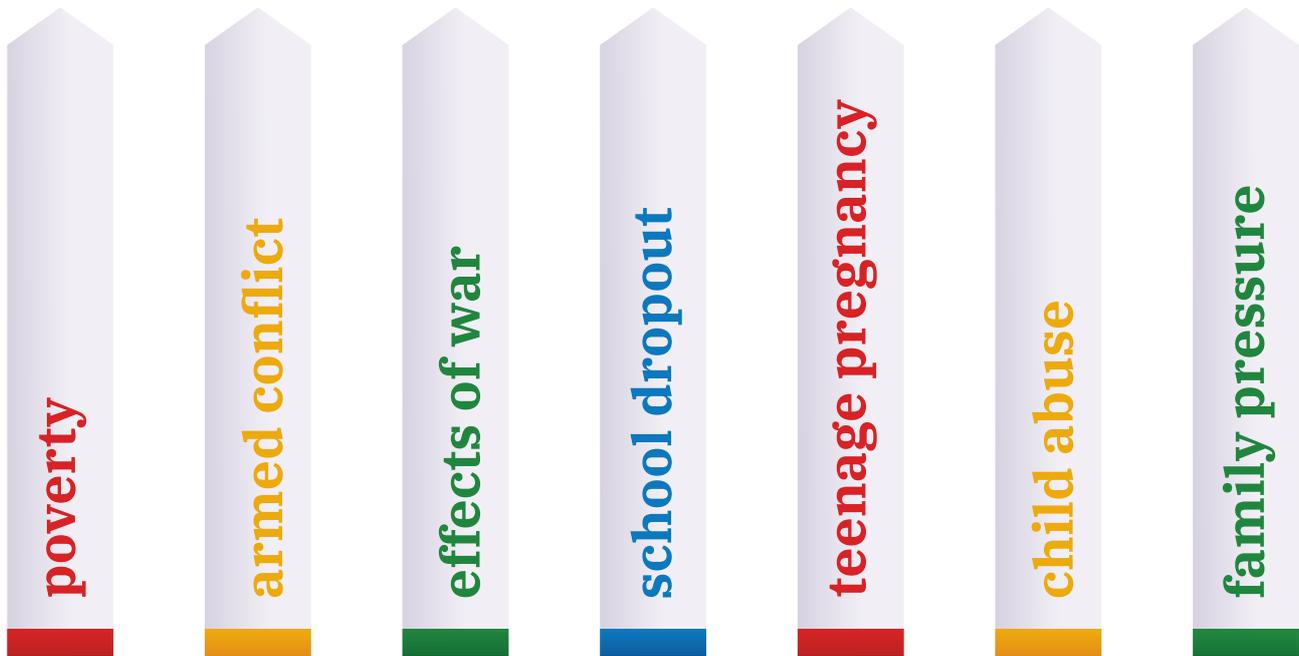


*Child marriage increased vulnerability to GBV and isolation, with girls who had eloped being particularly vulnerable.*

- Women experienced all forms of GBV but **mainly battering**; men particularly complained about emotional abuse.
- **The weakening power and control of men over women** and having to assume roles such as childcare traditionally considered for women, left some men feeling as if they were victims of GBV.
- **The primary reasons for GBV** were thought to be poverty, drug and alcohol abuse, rigid cultural and gendered norms, values and practices, women's lack of social and economic empowerment, religious beliefs and weak social care institutions.

GBV is perpetuated by an interplay of behavioural and structural factors at individual, relationship, community and society levels.

The various forms of GBV are rooted in stereotypes about masculinity and femininity and social norms that promote male dominance and female subordination, as well as normative role expectations. **These stereotypes and expectations remain very strong.**



## Drivers of Child Marriage

- **Poverty** contributed to child marriage through increasing the risk of girls dropping out of school, pushing parents to 'marry off' their daughters for economic gain and rendering some girls vulnerable to advances of men offering gifts and promises (often false) of a better life.
- **Armed conflict** led to abduction and forced marriage of girls.
- Additionally, the **effects of war**, including insecurity, extreme poverty, orphanhood, and breakdown in formal and informal institutions, pushed girls and families to resort to child marriage for social and economic security and protection.
- **School dropout** created inactivity that made marriage attractive in the absence of pressure from school. Both girls and parents commonly viewed marriage as a better alternative to formal education.
- **Teenage pregnancy** contributed to child marriage through evoking fear and shame rooted in social norms that stigmatised premarital sex and pregnancy, limited girls' opportunities to continue in school and created tensions that pushed girls to elope.
- **Child abuse** pushed several girls to opt for marriage to escape the violence and suffering they were subjected to; this was more common in stepparent families and in families raising orphans.
- While parents often pushed girls into **marriage**, in other cases, the decision was made by the girl herself.

# Social and Economic Effects of Child Marriage

- **Limited economic participation**, as the girls were controlled and denied an opportunity to work by their husbands.
- **Limited decision-making power** over household matters like income expenditure.
- **Increased likelihood of teenage pregnancy**; married girls were not viewed as having reproductive rights over their own bodies and were pressurised to conceive by the husband and his relatives.
- **Limited educational outcomes** and reduced access to both formal and informal economic opportunities.
- High incidence of **family breakdown** and single parenthood.
- **Increased risk of abuse and neglect** of children born during the union.
- **Stigma and rejection** from the original family and community.
- **Increased violence**, especially if the girls were unable to execute domestic chores to the satisfaction of their husband and in-laws.

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Child marriage is driven by **mutually reinforcing social, economic and political factors** at multiple levels. Parents/ guardians contributed to child marriage through acts of omission and commission, such as

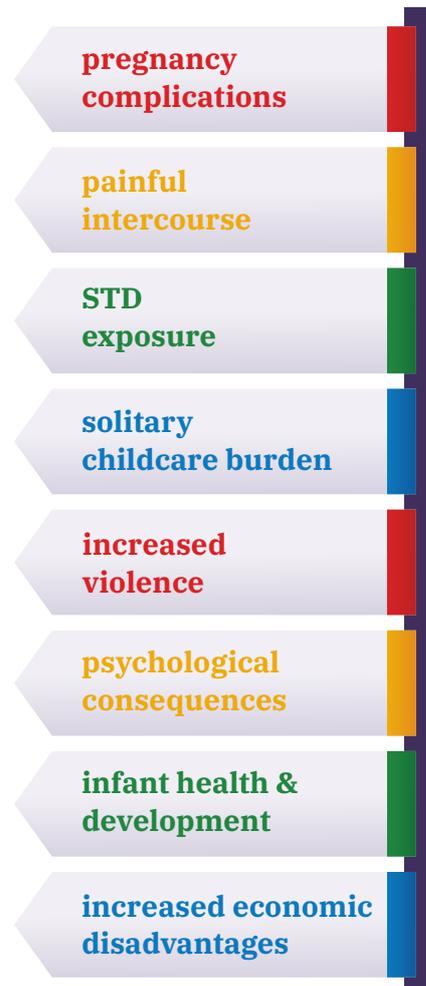
abuse and neglect of children and marrying off girls for economic gain. However, some parents did not wish to see their children married at a young age, which **signifies a positive change in attitudes towards child marriage** among communities in Uganda.

Child marriage has **far reaching and in some cases lifelong adverse consequences on the development and wellbeing** of not only the survivors and their immediate families but also the community and society at large.



## Physical and Mental Health Effects of Child Marriage

- **Painful sexual intercourse** and **pregnancy related complications** such as bleeding, obstructed labour and still births, directly associated with the survivors' immature bodies.
- Women who reported no complications during pregnancy **attributed this variously to the support** of significant others, use of traditional herbs, or God protecting them.
- Exposure to **sexually transmitted diseases** including HIV.
- **Adverse effects on infant health** and development such as malnutrition, stunting and death.
- **Psychological consequences** included feelings of regret, sadness and suicidal thoughts associated with lost dreams, lost childhood, and lost opportunities.
- Women faced a **heavy burden of childcare** following the dissolution of the marriage.
- Pregnancy and childbirth **increased the risk of violence** for women married as children.
- Children born from child bride marriages appeared to be at **greater risk of economic and social disadvantage**, neglect and abuse.



# POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

## 1. Increase Awareness Of Gender-Based Violence In Society

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Government, through the district community department should:

- **Provide more specific and targeted training** to increase people's understanding of gender-based violence (GBV)
- **Liase with relevant civil society organisations** (CSOs) to mobilise and engage communities in dialogue on the meaning of GBV, its forms, causes and consequences, and its relationship with other human rights violations such as domestic violence
- **Ensure that communities and women especially**, are fully aware of support services available to them



**train**



**liaise**



**support**

## 2. Address Factors That Perpetuate GBV

Eliminating or reducing GBV requires a multipronged approach to address the multilevel factors that perpetuate it.

**A. Alcohol and Drug Abuse** - the Government and the Ministry of Health (MOH) in liaison with voluntary and private actors should:

- **Increase public awareness** about the dangers of alcohol and drug abuse to health, relationships and socio-economic development of individuals, families, and society as a whole.
- **Intensify campaigns using mass media such as radio, television and newspapers** to inform people about the dangers of alcohol and substance abuse to their physical, emotional, economic and social wellbeing.
- **Strengthen and improve institutional capacity** to enforce existing laws and policies regulating access to and use of alcohol and substances.
- Ensure the **Police Force is fully equipped and trained** to enforce laws and policies on alcohol and substance use.
- Consider introducing **bylaws regulating the time for alcohol consumption** and prohibiting the sale and use of dangerous substances.
- **Develop and/or increase the accessibility of support services** to assist those who are trying to overcome alcohol or drug dependency.

**B. Change Deeply Ingrained Cultural Norms, Practices and Beliefs** - the Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development (MGLSD), and particularly its Department of Family and Culture, along with CSOs should:

- **Initiate community dialogues to challenge norms** that promote male dominance, gender stereotypes and harmful traditional practices, while advocating for attitude change and adoption of more positive cultural practices.
- **Partner with cultural and religious institutions** to spearhead the process of learning new social norms.
- **Provide training to religious and clan leaders, and elders**, to enable them to impart values of mutual respect, support and understanding among intimate partners.
- **Provide training on preventing GBV and changing harmful norms** to civil society organisation (CSOs), local councils (LCs), police, probation and social welfare officers

### 3. Address Child Marriage

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This requires a multipronged, multisectoral approach led by the Government and which deals with drivers at individual, household and community levels. In collaboration with stakeholders Government should:

#### A. Address the Impact of Poverty and Abuse

- **Scale up economic household strengthening programmes** so parents can meet the basic needs of their children, including keeping them in school.
- **Develop interventions** to improve parenting skills and child protection practices at household and community levels.
- **Foster sustainability** of these efforts through training of grass roots child protection structures such as Para Social Workers and Child Protection Committees.
- **Ensure adequate services and responses** are provided to children who disclose abuse.

#### B. Promote School Enrolment and Completion

- strategies that promote school enrolment, retention and completion are critical in preventing child marriage. The Ministry of Education and Sports (MOES), in partnership with development partners and CSOs should:
- **Institute a centralised system** for tracking school enrolment, retention and completion, providing timely support to children on the verge of dropping out.
  - **Initiate community dialogues** to change negative attitudes towards the education of girls.
  - **Introduce and train school-based social workers** to facilitate the continuous process of identifying, linking and coordinating support to minimise the risk of dropping out.
  - **Improve the school learning environment and urgently address factors** that push girls out of school such as child abuse, poor sanitation, and lack of sanitary pads.
  - **Vigorously enforce the policy** on allowing pregnant girls and young mothers to remain in and return to school.
  - **Provide services to girls** who wish to return to school after having children, including psychosocial counselling and child day care services.

**C. Empower Young People through Education and Training** - strategies to empower girls to say no to child marriage are critical. The Ministry of Education and Sports should:

- **Educate children** about the illegitimacy of marriages below the age of 18 years, the negative consequences of child marriage, its drivers and how to prevent them, and where to seek support when constrained or forced into marriage.
- **Encourage schools to ensure the curriculum addresses** issues of child rights, abuse, child marriage and coercive sexual exploitation.
- **Encourage schools** to set up debates and child rights clubs for children as a forum for discussing and equipping them with information on the dangers of child marriage, how to prevent it and where to seek support. Similar interventions can be organised for out-of-school children.
- **Encourage schools to adopt creative interventions** (such as the prosocial video game developed by the Ni3 Centre, specifically to prevent child marriage in Uganda).
- **Provide life skills training** to equip children and young people with the necessary competences to improve their problem-solving capacity and ability to make constructive decisions.
- **Provide children with information** about alternatives to mainstream education such as vocational training, other than resorting to marriage. Information on alternative government educational programmes such as Business Technical Vocational Education and Training (BTJET) should be incorporated in the school curriculum and shared with parents/guardians.
- **Address hindrances** to accessing vocational education, including issues of availability, acceptance and affordability.

**D. Improve Access to Sexual and Reproductive Health Education for Children** - critical in preventing teenage pregnancy

- **Incorporate age-appropriate** sexuality education in school curricula.
- **Integrate** adolescent and youth friendly reproductive health services in the health care system.



None in Three is a global research centre which develops and evaluates prosocial games to prevent gender-based violence.

It is based at the University of Huddersfield; the project which produced this work was funded by the UK Government's Global Challenges Research Fund through UK Research and Innovation, in an international partnership including Makerere University, Kampala, Uganda

The Centre takes name from the fact that, according to the World Health Organisation, one in three women and girls are subject to physical or sexual violence in their lifetime. We aim to make this none in three.



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