EDITORIAL

Seeking to bring you research from across the organisation, this edition of OPENPlan has a strong focus on gender, particularly covering the complex, interrelated issues of gender discrimination in both education and child marriage.

The first article summarises a research report looking at gendered experiences and perceptions of students, teachers and school leadership in primary schools in Siem Reap, Cambodia. The research provides qualitative evidence that children at this critical age are undergoing gender socialisation which perpetuates boys’ aggression, stereotypical gender roles and gender-based violence.

The second article looks at a baseline study aiming to provide the Government of Pakistan with knowledge of the factors hindering girls’ access to quality education at the primary level in union council Kotla Gamoon, Muzaffargarh.

The third report is an investigative and explorative study into the experiences of children in Nepal with disabilities, and their conversance with forced and self-initiated child marriage. An extensive study comprised of two main research phases, it creates both a broad yet detailed overview of previous research, professional attitudes and the lives of children with disabilities in Nepal.

In conclusion, this edition provides a critical look at the factors influencing Youth Economic Empowerment schemes, specifically Plan International’s “Youth Building the Future” intervention in Latin-America and the role of public and private sectors.

We hope you enjoy this edition of OPENPlan. If you have any exciting research reports that you would like featured in future editions of OPENPlan, please do let us know!

ASSESSMENT OF GENDER SOCIALISATION IN PRIMARY SCHOOL CLASSROOMS IN CAMBODIA

By Andrew Hill (Deputy Country Director, Plan International Cambodia), Thy Sambath (Monitoring, Evaluation and Research Manager) and Kelly Grace (Consultant)

Cambodia has made large advances in girls’ education. With the nation reaching nearly equal numbers of girls and boys in primary school, the focus is now turning from gender parity to issues of equality, particularly attitudes towards girls’ capabilities, futures and expectations. Evidence shows that inequitable attitudes can be strongly linked to gender-based violence, highlighting the urgent need to address issues where social norms and school environments perpetuate and reinforce negative gender stereotypes. Plan International Cambodia aims to ensure that primary education protects equal opportunities whilst transforming traditional and harmful gender norms.
BACKGROUND: GENDER IN CAMBODIA

Traditionally in Cambodia, girls and boys are assigned different roles and given different values. For example, there are codes of conduct for girls’ and boys’ behaviour used in schools and wider society: ‘Chbab Srey’ or ‘rules for girls’, and ‘Chbab Boys’ or ‘rules for boys’. Such values perpetuate a gender hierarchy and reinforce harmful gender norms in the school and society. This study revealed the existence of gender bias and harmful stereotypes from an early age, which continue to be reinforced as children grow up.

Contributing factors to gender norms in schools

- Teacher dynamics
- Formal curriculum
- School environments
- Peer interactions

PURPOSE AND OBJECTIVES

This study sought to assess gendered roles, experiences and perceptions amongst students, teachers and school leadership. Specifically, the study aimed to assess how roles and stereotypes are formed and experienced by primary school students, teachers and school leadership, and better understand the gender socialisation processes in schools. The results of this study will inform the development of an annual assessment and teachers’ toolkit for gender transformative teaching methods.

Core research questions

1. What negative gender stereotypes and roles do students experience in a typical school day?

2. How are these negative gender norms transmitted (gender socialisation) at the primary school level?

3. What policies, protocols and school culture are in place for preventing and addressing school-related gender-based violence?

“THIS STUDY SOUGHT TO ASSESS GENDERED ROLES, EXPERIENCES AND PERCEPTIONS AMONGST STUDENTS, TEACHERS AND SCHOOL LEADERSHIP”

METHODS

The study included four primary schools in the city of Siem Reap, assessing gendered roles and experiences, and evaluating the gender norms of principals, teachers and students. Using qualitative methodology, the study adapted existing participatory research tools including child-led tours, in which students lead data collectors on a tour of the school, followed by discussion using map-making and probing questions to navigate the students’ daily experiences of gender socialisation and GBV. The study included a document assessment of curriculum, policy and procedures to assess representation of gender norms and socialisation processes in textbooks, classroom print and posters. Other research methods included classroom and outdoor observations in each school, semi-structured focus group interviews for teachers and students, and individual interviews with principals. Data was triangulated and analysed by the Consultant and a team of research assistants.

The selection of four primary schools was based on school size, location, and representativeness. Students within each school were randomly selected to participate in focus group interviews. In each school, five focus groups containing a balance of male and female students were held, and one observation for each grade was conducted. A total of 48 activities and 19 interviews were conducted with 172 participants.
Finding

Despite over 70% of teachers stating that they had received some training regarding gender equity, and principals expressing support for gender equality, negative perceptions of gender were apparent in all four schools. This concerning finding implies that gender issues remain invisible to teachers and school managers, demonstrating the wider issue of deeply-ingrained, negative socio-cultural gender stereotypes.

Principals exhibited varying levels of understanding of, and support for, gender equity. Some expressed positive progression, such as requesting further counselling programmes for girls from Plan International. Despite these supportive attitudes towards gender and education, many male principals stated that they had no gender issues in their school, yet referred to girls as weak or raised concerns about boys' aggression. There was a low understanding on gender-based violence, though there was a high level of interest in learning more through training.

Gender Stereotypes

Many teachers held the view that boys were lazy and did not participate in school, and that girls were better students. Both teachers and students referred to girls as weak and vulnerable, and boys as brave, strong and powerful. They also stated that girls had to work hard to get ahead, and so possibly explaining why girls were perceived to be harder workers and more intelligent. However, principals and teachers were also entrenched in the system (notably 3 out of 4 principals in the assessment were male), and issues such as male dominance and aggression were often overlooked and unaddressed.

Developing stereotypes

- Children of lower-primary ages held more flexible notions for ‘girls’ jobs’ and ‘boys’ jobs’.
- Equitable attitudes would begin to change as students progressed through grades, mirroring gender-biased teaching attitudes - students became less flexible.
- All children agreed to varying extents that boys were strong and girls were weak.

Staff practices reinforced negative gender stereotypes and roles

- School jobs given to students reinforced girls in domestic roles and boys in manual labour.
- Different roles for boys and girls led to them being labelled as being ‘good’ at jobs assigned to them, leading to the view that boys and girls are inherently good at particular tasks.

Safe Space

Generally, students felt happy and safe at school. However some factors made girls feel uncomfortable, including the curriculum and printed materials which presented negative or mixed messages about their roles and their futures. Girls were more inclined to feel unsafe than boys, but boys also expressed pressure to conform to gender roles, at times reporting vulnerability. Also noteworthy were parents’ concerns about the safety of girls, stating they “are worried about rape and sexual assault”.

Gendered spaces

- Lessons based around ‘Chbab Srey’ (rules for girls) and ‘Chbab Bros’ (rules for boys) contributed to negative gender socialisation.
- Peers used aggression and verbal abuse when others crossed a ‘gender boundary’. Girls are left with no counter to boys being aggressive towards them, as doing so means they step out of their imposed gender roles.
- Girls’ uniforms, such as skirts, restricted their access to play spaces.
- Boys had more freedom and space at play and within classrooms. Unchecked male freedom and aggression on campus caused significant issues for girls; in one school boys would lock girls in the toilets, and in all schools aggression towards girls such as hitting was evident. This was blamed on girls, with girls being chastised for reacting to violence.
- Boys felt safe on campus in almost all areas, whereas girls felt safest in the classroom during school break times, referencing the presence of teachers as protectors.
CLASSROOM PRACTICES

Three out of the four schools had gender imbalances in the classroom and ten out of 24 classrooms had at least one quarter more boys or more girls. This affected the behaviour and power dynamics in the classroom.

Classroom observations showed that boys and girls participated equally within the classroom, with the important exception of classes with male teachers and male students, where participation levels for boys could triple. Where there was a male teacher, boys showed higher levels of participation; boys were also more likely to participate when there were more girls than boys, as they were competing for attention. Male teachers held particular power in mostly female classes. Boys were more likely to ask for and receive help, resulting in more individual attention. Importantly, classes with poor classroom management (i.e. students were off task, students shouted for attention excessively, or teachers raised their voices frequently) were often classrooms with more gender-biased practices.

Mixed seating was a rarity within all classes. Gender divide across tables meant that boys and girls could not interact, missing the opportunity to learn together. Participation rates were generally equal, yet lower grade teachers were more likely to chastise girls for being off-task than boys. Meanwhile, teachers would often make statements which reinforced the idea that boys care little about schoolwork.

At times, teachers cited the role of the parent in reinforcing negative gender stereotypes. Whilst outside the scope of the study, this could infer that teachers were overlooking their own gender bias, and instead viewing students’ adherence to norms to be more closely linked with home and family. A lack of awareness in the role of the school in developing gender identity could be damaging, halting the potential for gender transformative progress within the classroom and causing school actors to underestimate the importance of their own role in gender socialisation.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In the four schools, there was evidence of cycles of socialisation which perpetrate boys’ aggression, stereotypical gender roles, and gender-based violence. Reinforced by teachers, peers, principals and the environment, these issues went unresolved. Actions were often seen as ‘play’ and not addressed as gender issues, leading to acceptance of male dominance and female subordination in other spheres of life. Breaking down entrenched gender attitudes and biases requires deconstructing these cycles by bringing them to the attention of all actors in the school, and addressing them from the outset. Gender identity and attitudes evolve from an early age, meaning positive ideas of gender must be incorporated into primary school practices and continued throughout the educational career, allowing for a more equitable and opportunistic future for girls, within and beyond communities across the globe.

Recommendations

• Develop a gender Professional Learning Community (PLC) led by female members of staff, to aid the development of a teacher’s toolkit, support girls’ voices, critically inform of gender identity and encourage a gender transformative system.
• Support Kindergarten classrooms and their teachers to incorporate gender awareness from a young age.
• Support teachers and school leadership to develop new school policies and protocols to recognise and eradicate gender-based violence.

The full research report can be accessed in the programme library here. For more information on the research, please contact:

MR. THAP KYHEU
Monitoring and Evaluation Officer, Plan International Cambodia
Email: Kyheu.Thap@plan-international.org
INTRODUCTION

Whilst progress has been made to expand and improve education systems in Pakistan, and there is a legal guarantee of free and compulsory education until sixteen, there remains large numbers of children not attending school. UNESCO estimates 5.6 million children are out of school, whereas the Government of Pakistan has reported that nearly 24 million children are not receiving education. Poorer communities are far more likely to be missing out on education, with girls from the poorest quartile being 20% less likely to attend school than boys. Drop-out rates are high, in part due to poor quality of education: there are high levels of teacher absence and lack of teacher training, and poor school facilities. Girls face further barriers: reasons for non-attendance range from distance and availability of schools to negative attitudes towards girls/women being educated. Child marriage is common practice, sometimes occurring as young as 10, which results in girls being removed from and dropping out of school.

The Girls’ Right to Education Programme (GREP) seeks to address this issue. Established in 2015 by UNESCO, the programme supports the government in delivering quality education for girls’ in the most remote areas of Pakistan. With particular focus on gender equity and discrimination, GREP aims to enrol 50,000 more girls in primary education over the next three years. Plan International Pakistan, as a programme partner, is driven to mobilising communities, by advocating and improving schools across 31 districts, with support already being delivered to over 5 million children. Aligning with UNESCO, the organisations intend to provide quality education that focuses on children realising and achieving their potential, emphasising the value of an education for all, and combatting gender discrimination and exclusion.

PURPOSE AND OBJECTIVES

This baseline study aimed to provide the Government of Pakistan with knowledge of factors impeding girls’ access to quality education.
METHODS

The study generated both qualitative and quantitative data to provide rounded evidence of root causes, and help inform future project design and implementation. The research included eight primary schools, three of which were girls’ schools and five of which were mixed. The research study used the following tools:

- Focus group discussions with the SMC or PTA for each school, and with neighbouring communities;
- Village profile of the school catchment area, completed through consultation with informed community;
- School profile for each school, completed with consultation with school staff, and through a school observation.

Ethical standards were adhered to throughout the study, including enumerator training, informed consent, data validity and checking, and confidentiality and anonymity. Surveys were analysed using quantitative descriptive analysis, and qualitative data through thematic analysis. There were some limitations: time constraints meant that the data collection was only conducted in one district (as opposed to the two originally planned), and only government primary schools were included, excluding information from private schools, madrassas and boys’ schools. According to enumerator feedback, school managers and teachers were often tempted to misreport or alter normal school settings, due to fears that the data may be shared with education authorities. Such limitations were considered during analysis and reporting.

FINDINGS

Enrolment and attendance

School enrolment had increased by 27% since 2015, yet only 36% of this was made up of girls. There was an extremely low number of students with disabilities enrolled, and those that were attending reported difficulty in communicating, concentrating and remembering things.

3,492 children were of primary school-going age, of which 21% of children were out of school. From the out of school population, 82% of 5-9 year olds had never attended school, and 47% of 10-14 year olds had never attended. Girls were more likely to have never attended school in both age groups.

Teacher quality

Most teachers (82%) had at least three years’ experience, over half the teachers held a master’s degree and 27% were graduates. A high number of teachers had received some form of training during their career, with 94% reporting pre-service training before being hired, and 88% reported receiving in-service training since being hired. Teachers expressed interest in further training on subject knowledge, pedagogy, time management, leadership skills, classroom management, student assessments and positive discipline.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School Staff</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>% of Total Staff</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Teaching Staff</td>
<td>28.01%</td>
<td>71.09%</td>
<td>61.54%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Managers</td>
<td>27.03%</td>
<td>72.07%</td>
<td>21.15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support Staff</td>
<td>88.09%</td>
<td>11.01%</td>
<td>17.31%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Staff</td>
<td>38.05%</td>
<td>61.05%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A majority (82%) of the surveyed teachers said they practice multi-grade teaching, but only 52% have been trained on the approach. Multi-grade teaching was generally viewed positively by teachers and principals, saving time and space with limited resources and increasing interaction amongst students. However, due to the lack of training and support, classroom management and student performance and feedback are more challenging.

Further Details

- There was a proactive approach to activity-based learning.
- Many believe that schools should encourage academic interests outside the classroom.
- A majority of teachers (82%) delivered lessons through Urdu, and the remainder used local language (18%)

Interestingly, homework was not only used for reiteration, but also as a connection between parents and teachers; around 70% of teachers remain in contact with parents, discussing attendance, behaviour and homework. Parents and other related community members expressed concerns about the carelessness and absences of teachers, citing it as a major contributor as to why daughters are not sent to school, alongside concerns of violence perpetrator by teachers.

“Negligence of teachers is one of the main reasons for girls to drop out of schools. [Another reason is that] children are lynched [hit] by teachers without any reason.”

- Mother

Further setbacks to providing education as defined by teachers

- Poverty in the surrounding areas.
- A lack of scholarships.
- Disinterested parents.

Facilities

Secondary data revealed that within the surveyed villages, there were a total of 26 schools: ten government owned, 14 privately owned and one religious school. Four of the 26 schools catered for girls only, and one solely for boys. Health facilities were extremely limited, with community members travelling for 23 minutes on average to reach the nearest facility. Over 60% of villages did not have a health facility.

It was found that out of the eight schools surveyed in UC Kotla Gamooh, on average each school had five classrooms, higher than the average of three classrooms per school in the wider Muzaffargarh district. Seven of the eight schools apply multi-grade teaching as routine practice. Surveyed schools had an average of four teachers in total, contradicting
statistics from the Ministry of Federal Education and Professional Training (MFDPT), which reports an average of 14 teachers per school. The student to teacher ratio was 45, similar to MFDPT’s figure of 55.

The conditions of the classrooms in the eight surveyed schools were generally good, with repairs only necessary for the floors, yet classrooms were often locked forcing students to sit outside classrooms and in corridors whilst studying, apparently because of a lack of teachers or shortage of classrooms. Despite demands from over half the schools for financial assistance and repairs, there remained electricity cut-outs and poor teaching environments. Two out of the eight schools did not have playgrounds, however all schools had access to drinking water. On average each school had three toilets, however one school had just a single toilet reserved for teachers. In this case, students had to go home or defecate in nearby fields. Half of the total number of toilets were allocated to girls only, one was for boys only and the remainder were mixed. Around half the toilets required minor or major repairs. Community members expressed general satisfaction with facilities, but were concerned with security and hygiene standards.

School management committees

All SMCs were active and functioning, according to members, though some members (particularly women) had difficulty in finding time to fulfil SMC responsibilities due to other engagements. Most members (68%) were fully aware of their responsibilities, 17% somewhat aware, and 5% completely unaware, though this figure may be underreported. Only three out of eight SMCs had received training since their formation. Funds were spent on infrastructure and supplies and salaries. Female members of SMCs faced difficulties in getting funds released from banks without men present.

“We surveyed the SMC/PTC funds and got to know that there is no utilization of funds in school. They (SMC) did not even take out money from the bank because none of the men were present over there for the help of female teachers. That’s why all the work related to school has been stopped.”

- Enumerator

Community support for girls’ education

There was generally community-wide acceptance and encouragement of girls’ education. The majority of participants agreed that girls’ education was equally as important as boys, and that sending girls to school was necessary. However, the reasons for educating a girl were often based on negative gender norms; educated girls and women were seen as better equipped to fulfill their domestic roles, and they were expected to receive higher status marriage proposals and be more respectful to their parents, resulting in honour to the family. More encouragingly, some respondents said that educating a girl would mean future generations could also become educated, and others talked about how educated women could provide financial contributions to the household.

Further barriers to education, as defined by community members:

- Poverty means parents are unable to cover education costs.
- The costs of educating girls outweigh the benefits.
- Beliefs that girls should remain domesticated and provide for the family.
- Beliefs that sending girls to school leads them to develop bad habits.
- Parents’ fear of kidnapping and harassment of girls during their journey to school.

The view held about the role of religious institutions in educating girls differed by gender. Male participants claimed religious institutions and leaders preaching in support of girls’ education was imperative. However, women countered this, saying that religious institutions are rigid and ‘prohibit girls from going to school’. Fewer than half of respondents thought that the media could play a role in advocating for girls’ education. Respondents were most likely to suggest that TV would be an effective medium for advocating for girls’ education, followed by newspapers, mobiles and the internet. Newspapers were considered the least appropriate option.

Whilst many participants stated that they would be willing to donate spaces for non-formal education to take place, in general it was felt there was no need for this. Parents were more concerned about the quality and availability of secondary schools.
CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings, the researchers recommend prioritising the following extremely urgent, high impact areas:

- **Capacity building of teachers**: training, support and resources on multi-grade teaching, activity based learning, inclusive education, identification of self-motivated individuals during the hiring process.

- **Revising SMCs**: support for re-identifying and refining their roles and training on their responsibilities, training on inclusive education and supporting families to send their girls to school.

- **Community mobilisation**: sensitisation on non-monetary advantages of education for children, especially girls; profiling of local educated girls as role models; consultation of religious leaders to encourage them to promote education for girls and boys.

- **Advocacy campaigns**: advocacy on girls’ education through the media, particularly TV and the internet.

- **Developing schools not buildings**: Developing outside spaces such as playgrounds, and sports and recreational facilities; improving safety through boundary walls; and improving WASH facilities.

The full research report can be accessed in the programme library here.

For more information on the research, please contact:

**MS SHAHNAZ KAUSAR**  
Research Coordinator  
Plan International Pakistan  
**Email**: Shahnaz.Kausar@plan-international.org

For more information on education issues in Pakistan, contact:

**MR. IMTIAZ ALAM**  
Education Advisor  
Plan International Pakistan  
**Email**: Imtiaz.Alam@plan-international.org
EXPLORING EXPERIENCES OF CHILD MARRIAGE AMONG CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES

INTRODUCTION

Child marriage violates human rights as enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Convention on the Rights of the Child, and the Convention on Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women. A staggering 720 million women alive today have been married as children, with around 150 million girls married before the age of 16 every year. Additionally, 156 million men alive today were married before their 18th birthday. Whilst boys are clearly subject to violation of their rights, it remains that girls are affected in larger numbers and are more likely to be married before 18. This study focussed on Nepal due to its high prevalence of child marriage; 37% of girls marry before the age of 18, despite laws setting the minimum age of marriage at 20.

Extensive research has shown that child, early and forced marriage has significant implications for a child’s life and development, resulting in issues such as domestic slavery, violence, sexual abuse, school dropout, early pregnancies and poor knowledge and access to reproductive health services. Due to negative social attitudes, persons with disabilities are faced with further challenges, as discrimination based on disability intersects with discrimination based on gender and age, and girls and women with disabilities are more susceptible to violence. There is a need for countries to prioritise interventions that address these problems.

The Sustainable Development Goals commit all countries to end child marriage through appropriate measures and ensure accountability to their citizens and children, and to tackle marginalisation of disadvantaged groups, achieve global gender equality and empower women and girls. Inclusion of marginalized and excluded groups including persons with disabilities is being increasingly prioritized in the development discourse, yet there remains a huge gap in the evidence base on vulnerable and marginalised children and girls, including children with disabilities. Child marriage among children with disabilities is relatively unexplored area with limited existing evidence. This study sought to fill that gap.
Ethical approval was granted by the National Health Research Council and from the Research Unit in IH of Plan International. Informed consent was ensured, including voluntary participation, and notice of study objectives.

FINDINGS

Perspectives of professionals

Focus group discussions were held with professionals who work with issues related to child rights and protection and/or disability. These discussions revealed that none had come across the converging issues of child marriage and disability within their professional workspace, with some even stating the issue had ‘never occurred to them’. Some respondents doubted the existence of the issue, claiming it would have already been identified in research or they would have witnessed it in their own professional experiences; participants from Disabled People’s Organisations questioned, ‘Who would want to marry a disabled child?’ However, many did recognise it as an area worth exploring. The responses suggested the existence of a stigma towards disability in the professional community.

‘Usually people’s mindset is that if disabled people cannot take care of themselves, how can they look after other person or the partner?’
- Professional from a Disabled People’s Organisation.

Representatives from Disabled People’s Organisations highlighted the specific challenges faced by girls/women with disabilities - social stigma and norms around female ‘body perfection’, limited access to public spaces, and treatment as a liability.

Community and family perspectives

During focus group discussions with communities, activists and local stakeholders, respondents acknowledged that the practice of child marriage in general was both prevalent and an increasing trend. This increase was perhaps related to social media facilitating self-initiated marriages among young adolescents.

Contributing factors to child marriage

- Economic conditions.
- Dowry practices.
- Lack of access to education.
- Social pressure.
- Gender discriminatory beliefs.

BACKGROUND: CHILD MARRIAGE IN NEPAL

Nepal was selected for this study due to its high prevalence of child marriage. According to a 2011 national census, 48.9% of the married population were married between the age of 15 and 19, however, the diverse socio-cultural makeup of the country means the commonality of child marriage varies widely. Studies have uncovered detailed social, cultural, religious affiliation, geographical location and economic status are all linked to child marriages rates.

- 83% of girls belonging to ethnic minority groups marry before they are 15 years old.
- The Government of Nepal recognises the issue of child marriage, and in 2016 renewed its pledge to end the practice by 2030.
- Often communities deem it inappropriate for girls to initiate their own marriage or express opinions on partners - this is often seen as girls/women challenging male figureheads.

PURPOSE AND OBJECTIVES

The study explored how children’s dependence on others and vulnerability to coercion puts them at greater risk of child marriage in the context of Nepal.

Research questions

- What are the factors contributing to child marriage amongst children with disabilities?
- What are the impacts of child marriage on children with disabilities?

METHODS

Conducted in two phases, the study utilised qualitative, exploratory research. The first phase was a desk review of previous studies regarding child marriage among children with disabilities, followed by key informant interviews with child protection, disability and gender experts. This provided the background and framework for the second phase of the research, primary data collection. Data collection included 16 focus group discussions to gain community-level insight with community representatives, professionals working in relevant sectors and persons with disabilities. In-depth interviews were conducted with adults with disabilities who had experienced child marriage, using narrative techniques to encourage open discussions. Thirdly, interviews with adolescents with disabilities between 15-18 years old allowed insight into the personal lives of participants and their subjective understandings of marriage.

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Other explanations that emerged from discussions mirrored quite closely the opinions of professionals. Some suggested that a disability decreased one’s capacity to fulfill marriage obligations. For women specifically, this was in regards to traditional female roles such as domestic chores and child-bearing. Women were also expected to be ‘attractive’ and regarded as an ‘ornament’, so persons with disabilities with physical disfigurements often faced difficulty in finding a partner. Participants suggested that women with disabilities were less likely to get married overall, but that boys/men with disabilities had a greater chance of marriage if they had a higher socio-economic status. It was also expressed that due to their disabilities, boys/men had limitations in terms of choice of spouse, implying they would have to ‘settle’ for a wife of lower socio-economic status or another with a disability.

Sexual abuse appeared as a major issue that children with disabilities faced. One of the respondents was quoted:

‘When men in the community could get what they want forcefully, why would they want to commit to marrying a girl with disability?’

Participants also noted that parents of girls with intellectual disabilities would provide contraceptive injections to their girls as soon as they reached puberty in order to prevent pregnancy. Some parents of children with disabilities stated that marriage had not occurred to them as a possibility for their children, or expressed fear that their child would be mistreated as a result of their disability if they married, as they would not have the protection of their family.

Adolescents’ perspectives

Interviews with male and female adolescents with disabilities revealed that they were all familiar with the social practice of marriage. Opinions on their prospects of marriage were mixed; five of the 13 did see themselves getting married, whilst six did not express an interest in marriage, hoping instead to live alone or with friends in the future. One girl stated that whilst her boyfriend wanted them to get married, she was afraid she would not be able to fulfill the domestic and social responsibilities expected of her. One boy expressed concerns with societal attitudes towards disabled and able-bodied persons marrying each other. Whilst not possible to generalise these findings, it is clear that perceptions of marriage are very much shaped by personal circumstance, and that disabilities do cause significant social restrictions.

Drivers of child marriage

According to data from adults with disabilities who were married as children, most marriages involving persons with disabilities were community-initiated, contradicting assumptions from professionals that communities believed persons with disabilities cannot or should not get married. It appeared that a child’s disability was, rather than a defining factor, taken into consideration when assessing a partner’s potential to fulfill their marital roles. The social structures and circumstantial factors driving child marriage apply to both disabled and able-bodied children.

Characteristics of child marriages, according to adults with disabilities who had been married as children:

- 10 out of 18 marriages were arranged through relatives or community members.
- Whilst five cases were self-initiated, family and community attitudes would still have played an influencing role.

Marriage proposals for children with disabilities were often of a lower status than those that parents would have considered for other children, but proposals were accepted anyway according to the nature of a child’s disability, vulnerability and likelihood of further proposals. This could result in significant age gaps, with older men married to girls with disabilities. Gaps as wide as 30 years were noted. Only in marriages which were self-initiated by boys or arranged by parents were the bride and groom of similar age. Eight out of ten community-arranged and forced marriages were between children with disabilities, often of similar type or severity.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nature of Marriages in the Study</th>
<th>Number of cases</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Arranged marriage with disclosure of disability</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arranged marriage without disclosure of disability</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-initiated</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community-forced settlement following rape</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forced marriage by deception</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This indicates that discriminatory perspectives are prevalent when finding marriage partners, and in assessments of who is suitable for whom. Other factors such as gender and caste seemed to contribute towards these attitudes, whereby marginalised individuals were seen as ‘less worthy’ for marriage. Notably, girls with disabilities were seen as greater liabilities than boys with disabilities. Girls with disabilities were perceived to be of ‘less worth’, and therefore more likely to be matched with a groom who has limited possibilities for finding the socially ‘ideal bride’, such as widowers or those with physical impairments - this way they were believed to be able to conduct their ‘duties’ without their disabilities compromising.

Marriage as Social Security and Protection

Early ‘opportunities’ for marriage were taken by parents for their children with disabilities, as marriage was seen as providing safety and financial security – as is often the case with any forced child marriages. For parents, the prospect of their son/daughter with disabilities having their own children could add further security, with the hope that they would able to take on the role of caring in the future, ultimately removing responsibilities from the parents.

Sexual Violence as a Cause

Controlling or protecting a girl’s sexuality is related to forced child marriage. Respondents frequently noted the fear of sexual assault for their girls with disabilities (aligning with global figures from Human Rights Watch, which state that children with disability are 4-5 times for likely to experience sexual violence). Survivors of rape are often forced to marry the perpetrator, a common community mediated ‘solution’ to sexual violence in Nepal. A lack of accessibility to legal services means girls and women are left vulnerable and powerless in such situations, especially those with a disability.
Consequences of marriage on children with disabilities

Despite children often being married for what is perceived as their 'best interests', this study highlighted the many harmful consequences of early marriage, specifically affecting children and girls with disabilities, which led to poor development and transition into adulthood. Gendered expectations within the household forced girls to fulfil domestic duties, which is worsened for children with disabilities as they risk ‘falling short’ of these expectations. Such failure often resulted in emotional abuse and harassment from community and family. Disability coupled with poverty meant children were easily exploited and mocked. Boys faced pressure in regard to financial obligations, as they were expected to provide for and support the family, yet finding employment was hard. It was reported that disability allowance helped, but was not enough for one person, let alone a family.

Ten out of 12 female participants experienced early pregnancies, two of which were reportedly from rape. Sexual initiation immediately after marriage was experienced by almost all participants (including marriage as a result of rape). Pregnancies led to multiple miscarriages and stillbirths, some as a result of violence and forced abortions. There was a lack of sexual and reproductive health services and support in general, which had long term health impacts for the married girls. One mother was quoted:

‘Our daughter told us later by signalling how her sister-in-law beat her in the stomach, and a dead baby came out. She also says in another instance she was taken to a clinic and forced to drink something to abort the baby. We were never informed of her pregnancy, so we do not know for sure if the incidences are true.’

- Mother of a deaf girl who married to a 45 year-old man with intellectual disabilities when she was 15 years old.

As inclusive education was not available in villages, students had to relocate to access education, employment or training, though this option was only open to men. As girls/women with disabilities had domestic and caring responsibilities, access to education opportunities are severely limited or not available at all.

Of those respondents still married, female participants reported challenges in their relationships: husbands planning to marry other women, neglecting their responsibilities to care for their children, and showing minimal compassion towards them. One participant reported that her husband had abandoned them. Girls with disabilities entered into a marriage contract unaware of the consequences and socially-imposed expectations they would face. At such an early age, the skills required to deal with the demands of marriage were not yet developed, making it a struggle to communicate and negotiate their already compromised positions.

Other Implications:

- Marriage forced girls from school, though most girls who entered child marriages had never been to school or had dropped out early
- Girls and women had limited access to independent resources, due to lack of education and opportunity, resulting in dependence on their husbands or families for financial support
- Child marriage in convergence with disability significantly affected access to support networks, and girls with disabilities relied primarily on their family for social support. When they married they often relocated, making it a struggle to establish and continue friendships.

Conclusions and Recommendations

This study has shown that important issues facing persons with disabilities in relation to child marriage (arranged, forced and self-initiated) were disregarded by professionals. Whilst under-researched and largely hidden, child marriages amongst those with disabilities certainly exist, highlighting an immediate need for more varied and detailed research in this area in order to distinguish and address relevant issues. This would allow for broader professional awareness, a measure of prevalence and between understanding of drivers and consequences. In the past, child marriage studies may have disregarded issues specific to those with disability as statistical abnormalities and/or rare exceptions.
• Young people in communities saw getting married as an opportunity for acceptance in society, rather than a violation of rights.
• Strict, binary and harmful gender norms regulated and upheld by marriage traditions were only loosely recognised (if at all) by community members.

Contrary to earlier professional beliefs, child marriage amongst those with disabilities, and particularly girls, is negatively affecting children’s development, dignity, opportunity and quality of life. Children with disabilities often experience life as a liability to their families and friends, the absence of dedicated support, and limited agency during the process of marriage. Girls are placed in the most vulnerable of situations, evidenced by their lack of influence over marriage partners, and limitations on their education and financial opportunities. Overall, drivers and consequences of marriage for mainstream children were similar, and often exacerbated, for children with disabilities.

• Disability is not a cause of the prevalence of child marriages amongst those with disabilities, but instead exclusionary societal attitudes and vulnerabilities shape the marriage conditions.
• Disability becomes a ‘compromising’ factor for acceptance into dangerous and unfavourable marriages.
• Male children with disabilities have greater power in defining the purpose of marriage.

The full research report can be accessed in the programme library here.

For more information on the research, please contact:

ANNE MAY ANDERSON
Technical Advisor, Plan International Norway
Email: annemay.andersen@plan-norge.no

For more information on child marriage issues in Nepal, contact:

MS MADHUWANTI TULADHAR
Child Rights Coordinator, Plan International Nepal
Email: Madhuwanti.Tuladhar@plan-international.org

“CHILD MARRIAGE AMONGST THOSE WITH DISABILITIES, AND PARTICULARLY GIRLS, IS NEGATIVELY AFFECTING CHILDREN’S DEVELOPMENT, DIGNITY, OPPORTUNITY AND QUALITY OF LIFE”

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The ‘Youth Building the Future’ Programme

The programme is comprised of three main components:

1. Private sector engagement and youth enabler networks.
2. Training, placement and start-ups.
3. Research and evidence gathering.

In Colombia YBF supports around 2,200 potential entrepreneurs and provides training for a further 1,050. In Brazil YBF supports a total of 1,600 young people, focused mainly around employment. In El Salvador, the programme works with 150 young people with a focus on entrepreneurship.
**METHODS**

This research comprised a literature review, followed by qualitative data collection with stakeholders to identify issues with the success and sustainability of YBF. The research focused primarily on enhancing youth employment through 'soft' skills building in developing countries. The evidence provides a basis for guidelines to be developed for practitioners to improve implementation.

**FINDINGS**

The following critical factors for the success of YBF were identified:

**STAGE 1**

**Exploration and Engagement:** Discuss and define youth, inclusiveness, labour market analysis, map youth interest, build commitments, establish partnerships, and engage with the private sector.

It is vital to be inclusive of a wide, diverse, intersectional demographic. This should take into account factors ranging from gender and age, to level of education and independent financial responsibility. It is important that girls are adequately represented within this group, due to the additional obstacles they face when finding employment. Labour market analysis (LMA) helps to map the local economy, identifying and matching 'supply and demand'. This eventually leads to a constantly evolving programme, adjusting to live needs, based on macro and localised economic data. Previously established partnerships are able to grant valuable insight into the success and participation of YBF.

**STAGE 2**

**Implementation:** Ensure demand-driven training, make employability skills mandatory, prioritise financial access for entrepreneurs, adapt mentoring models, reduce dropout rates and increase youth engagement through support services.

Achieving these aims requires multiple components. Job-focused programmes must prioritise placing young people in the labour market and enhance their practical experience through internships and apprenticeships. Teachers should be chosen wisely based on relatable backgrounds and must proactively interact with their students. Support services should be operating specific to programme focus, i.e. access to finance such as commercial and saving facilities or life skills and literacy courses.

**STAGE 3**

**Sustainability:** Campaign for public sector support, create and monitor a database, maintain communications, continually look to improve services.

Enhancing sustainability and longevity of the programme requires recognising systematic change, establishing a digitised M&E system, constantly looking to improve training practices, and transferring existing training activities to other institutes to be continued (rather than establishing parallel programmes). An understanding of the context of private and public sectors is crucial in developing partnerships to continue work initiated by Plan and other NGOs. Company representatives mostly viewed unemployment as an issue for government intervention. Whilst true to an extent, further investigation is needed in order to fully understand the benefits of cross-sector collaboration, and address the responsibilities and expectations of public and private sectors.

**CONCLUSION**

The report outlined the critical factors required for creating and sustaining youth development and employment programmes. Whilst these are not solutions, this research can aid in the formation and implementation of further schemes to open opportunities and showcase the potential of the world’s youth population. It is clear that the success of such programmes is heavily reliant on public and private sector collaboration, however more needs to be done to increase companies’ and governments’ involvement in devising sustainable employment interventions. The lives of young people should not be jeopardised by insufficient employability opportunities, and the talents of future generations should be allowed to flourish and realise their potential.

This research is summarised from Sharon Goulds’ edit of the full research report, which can be accessed in the programme library here.

For more information on the research, please contact:

**PAUL KESTER**
Regional Youth Economic Empowerment Program Specialist,
Plan International Regional Office of the Americas (ROA)

Email: paul.kestner@plan-international.org

**ANA MARIA PEÑA**
YES-medewerker,
Plan International Netherlands

Email: ana.maria pena@plannederland.nl
Plan International’s work has been published in well-respected and peer-reviewed journals!

“Turning the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework into Reality”

Plan International’s work with refugees in East Africa has been highlighted in the latest issue of the journal Forced Migration Review. The article seeks to address the question of how those involved in the implementation of the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework can achieve a collective approach to large movement of refugees. Written by Manisha Thomas, a consultant working for Plan International, this article draws on the work that Plan International Tanzania and Plan International Uganda has been doing with refugees.

Read the full article here!

“‘If he could speak, he would be able to point out who does those things to him”: Experiences of violence and access to child protection among children with disabilities in Uganda and Malawi”

Plan International-funded research in Malawi and Uganda has been published in PLoS ONE. The research aims to provide a better understanding of children with disabilities’ experiences of violence and their access to available child protection mechanisms in low resource settings. The study finds that children with disabilities face both high levels of violence and serious barriers to accessing available child protection mechanisms, and highlights the urgent need to ensure that all efforts to prevent and respond to violence against children are more disability-inclusive.

To find out more, read the full article here.