



photo: Jerry de Mars

Empowering girls to choose their own future

Ending Child Marriage

Despite the fact that child marriage is illegal in most countries, one in nine girls in developing countries is forced into marriage before the age of 15. In the next 10 years, it is estimated that 14 million child marriages will occur every year in developing countries.

Child marriage is a human rights violation that has serious implications for young girls' health and development. Girls forced into child marriage often become pregnant while still adolescents, increasing the risk of complications in pregnancy or childbirth. Moreover, girls under the age of fifteen are five times more likely to die during pregnancy. Complications aren't confined to the mother - even when children born to adolescent mothers survive, they face an increased risk of low birth weight, under-nutrition, and developmental delays.

Child marriage also hinders the capacity of girls to develop emotionally and physically. They are not only denied their childhood but are often socially isolated with limited opportunities for education and employment. Girls are frequently unable to effectively negotiate safe sex within marriage, leaving them at risk of contracting sexual transmitted infections and HIV.

Tackling child marriage is critical to reducing maternal and child mortality. Simavi wants to empower girls on an individual level by fighting the practice of child marriage at national (and international) level. If young girls can stay healthy, avoid unwanted pregnancy and realise their sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR), they are able to lead productive lives and access economic opportunities. As we say: health is the first step out of poverty.

How to fight the practice of child marriage

Simavi's approach

Together with the SRHR Alliance (Simavi, Amref, Choice, dance4life, Rutgers), Edukans and local partners, Simavi implemented the Unite Against Child Marriage (UACM) programme in India and Malawi. Simavi also teams up as the 'More than Brides' Alliance with Save the Children, Oxfam and Population Council to combat child marriage.

We use five strategies to empower girls and fight the practice of child marriage

- 1 Empowering girls:** We invest in at-risk and already married adolescents – girls in particular – to empower them to make informed decisions on their SRHR and maintain a healthy wellbeing. By increasing knowledge on topics like body changes during puberty and contraception, and providing classes on how to build negotiation skills, we enable girls to make safe and informed decisions.
- 2 Involving local communities:** In order to increase the ability of girls and women to exercise their SRHR and choose when, whom and if they marry, it is important to change community attitudes that normalise the practice of child marriage and devalue the voice of girls. Therefore we seek to build an enabling environment where girls' rights are fully respected. We encourage parents, traditional and religious leaders to be active role models and take action to prevent child marriages in their communities. To reach the wider community, we also conduct community-based awareness raising activities by using plays, videos, radio and social media campaigns. We also engage with journalists to spread our message to a wider audience.
- 3 Development and improvement of legislation and policies:** We work to build a policy and legal environment that can and will protect the rights of young people and prevent child marriage. We work with local policymakers to ensure both local bylaws and national legislation enforce the minimum age of marriage. In most countries, we facilitate the functioning of child protection committees, starting at local level and rolling out to national levels. In this way, we enhance the improvement of policies to prevent child marriage and put the issue firmly on the agenda.
- 4 Improved access to health services that specifically address the needs of young people:** Young people face multiple barriers in accessing sexual health services, therefore we work to improve the youth-friendliness of current services, for example by training health workers and staff and sensitising



them to the needs of young people. It's important to involve young people in this process so that we can define their needs accurately and bring them into dialogue with health workers to discuss their requirements. Our partner organisations also provide direct services (like helplines) that young people can use for advice, and work on strengthening referral services for issues such as gender-based violence, safe abortion, and HIV testing and counselling.

- 5 Access to formal education:** Increasing access to education is crucial to delaying child marriage. We work with parents, school management and Parent-Teacher Associations to ensure that girls' education is prioritised. We also work to reintegrate girls who were forced to drop out of school early due to marriage or economic reasons.

Results of our work in India and Malawi

The Unite Against Child Marriage (UACM) programme ran for only one year, but its success was built on our existing work with local partners. Thanks to these strategies, we empowered 250,000 girls and community members in the twelve months we worked together. These people are now equipped with tools and knowledge to stop early and forced marriages and give girls a better start in life. Young people, both boys and girls, are encouraged to take leadership in their communities on SRHR issues and child marriage prevention. In one year, we activated 132 civil society organisations and 1844 youth clubs to take action against child marriage. In Malawi, our partners contributed to a change in law regarding the age of marriage.

In terms of our work with communities, we have enhanced access to acceptable and appropriate SRHR services for young people – as a result more than 200,000 young people have used services, such as contraceptives, treatment of sexual diseases and HIV testing.

In 2016, we expect to scale up our work in India and Malawi.



Case Study: **Advocacy and Implementation of Child Marriage Laws, India, 2014-2015**

In India, Simavi implemented the Unite Against Child Marriage (UACM) programme with its local partners VHAI, CINI and BVHA. National legislation on the minimum age of marriage exists in India, but is neither recognised nor known by local authorities or community members. Therefore one of the programme's key strategies was to raise awareness of this legislation and facilitate its adoption by initiating child protection committees to assume responsibility for monitoring and preventing child marriages.

In three Indian states, Bihar, Jharkhand and Orissa, we started by training more than 20,000 girls to raise their voices for better implementation of the law. We involved local communities and organised state-level events to influence policymakers. This was done through campaigning, meetings and advocacy events, involving civil society groups, government departments, parliamentarians and youth in particular.

Our intervention resulted in the agreement of Jharkhand's state legal service authority to partner with the UACM programme to combat child marriage. All 24 district level counterparts were instructed to support the civil society network for child rights, including combating child marriage. In Bihar, parliamentarians of different political parties promised the youth advocates to include combating child marriage in their manifesto. At local level, partners were able to initiate at least 264 village child protection committees in 2015; in addition, many community groups and caste societies declared that they 'will become child marriage free'. At least 158 planned child marriages were averted, and at least 341 girls re-enrolled in school.

We are working towards basic health for all

Health is the first step out of poverty



About Simavi

Simavi is an international non-profit organisation working towards a world in which basic health is accessible to all. Our goal is to structurally improve the basic health of 10 million people in marginalised communities in Africa and Asia by 2020. By doing so, we enable them to build a better existence and break the cycle of poverty.

Our experience over the past ninety years has shown us that investing in water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) and in sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) is vital for people to be able to lead a healthy life. Therefore we concentrate our efforts in these two areas.

Theory of Change

All our programmes are based on three integrated pillars:

- 1 Empower communities to demand quality services and to practice healthy behaviour;
- 2 Create a supportive, enabling environment in which all stakeholders are aware of their roles and responsibilities, work together and can be held accountable;
- 3 Ensure that people use affordable, suitable and sustainable WASH and SRHR services. This is the core of our Theory of Change – it's designed to ensure that everyone involved, from community to governmental level, works together towards realising sustainable improvement of basic health..

In the many years Simavi has been active, we've built up an extensive network of reliable and capable local partners and gathered a deep understanding of the religious, ethical and cultural sensitivities within every community we work with. This is crucial to realise sustainable change.

We know how to build the capacity of local partners to make sure that the community's demands are voiced to regional, national and international influential stakeholders, according the law, legislation and regulation of the countries we work in.

We've established extensive local and (inter) national networks in WASH, SHRH and beyond. We believe that the interaction between these different stakeholders is crucial to learn from each other and to make sure that expertise and experience of our local partners are shared at international WASH and SRHR conferences, as this enables the southern voice in the international debate. In this way we create new synergies and partnerships within our networks, bringing together partners whose expertise complements each other with one goal: to facilitate more people enjoying basic health.