

WAIT FOR THE MATOKE TO RIPEN: ENCOURAGING COMMUNITIES TO DELAY EARLY MARRIAGE IN UGANDA

BY MOSES NTENGA



Adolescent girl with her baby | Photo credit: Rebecca Vassie | Girls Not Brides

I've been working to defend children's rights since way back. Growing up in rural Uganda I was always aware that many of my friends were denied the chance to fulfil their potential.

Eventually you find that very few friends you started school with complete it with you, and when you look back and think why, you realise it is often because their rights weren't fulfilled – or protected.

Perhaps they had parents who weren't concerned about their education, or perhaps they had to leave school to help at home, to carry food to market, or to look after younger siblings. Perhaps violence had forced them to flee their town or village or perhaps early marriage forced girls to abandon schoolwork for housework.

VIOLENCE, POVERTY AND DISPLACEMENT: WHAT CAUSES EARLY MARRIAGE IN UGANDA?

Early marriage is a widespread problem in Uganda. UNICEF estimates that 46 percent of women aged 20-24 years old were married before they were 18. That is much higher than the African average of 34 percent.

Poverty, of course, perpetuates the practice. Families often choose to marry off their daughter off in exchange for goats or cows. One Frisian cow is worth about 2 million

Ugandan shillings – around 800 US dollars – so families of few means make a financial calculation about their daughter and their family's security.

But in Uganda we also face particular circumstances that contribute to high rates of early marriage. Years of conflict in the north of the country saw the region's entire social system dismantled and tens of thousands of people forced to flee their homes and seek refuge in camps for internally displaced persons (IDPs).

Life in the camps can be dangerous, particularly for young women. Many parents choose to marry off their daughters believing that a husband will keep their daughters safe. There is little schooling in the camps too, which leaves girls with few options but marriage.

Conditions in the camps are difficult, with whole families forced to live in temporary shelters often with no more than one room. Sharing a room with adults means that little is private and girls are exposed to sexual activity from an early age and it is not uncommon to see girls fall pregnant at 13, 14 or 15 years old.

In Uganda we have a saying that "If the matoke (banana) is not mature enough, it will not ripen". It is often said that a girl would not fall pregnant if her body was not ready. If she is pregnant, we are told, her body is ready for childbearing and she is ready for marriage too.

This attitude helps to explain why the practice of child marriage is so prevalent not only in the camps, but throughout Uganda. Girls are seen principally as child bearers or marriage material.

ASKING COMMUNITIES WHAT IS, AND WHAT OUGHT TO BE

At Joy for Children, we're working closely with communities – both within the IDP camps and beyond – to try to change these attitudes. It's not a matter of finger-pointing, but of winning hearts and minds first.

We start by trying to raise awareness of the impact that early marriage and early pregnancy can have on girls by, for example, painting community murals or working with the local media to air radio programmes about the issue. We don't go into communities to cause friction but to have a constructive engagement with people to understand what is good or right for their children. I am convinced that very few parents would give away their young daughters in marriage if they knew of the side effects.

We then work closely with community leaders or role models to inform them of the impact of the practice. We work out what the community already knows, we add to their knowledge and we ask them what they think needs to be done, to define the difference between what is, and what ought to be.

Bringing together small groups of five or six people, we ask them some pretty tough questions: do you want to see your children married at an early age and their health damaged forever? Do you want to have girls who, because they dropped out of school so young, are unable to contribute to her family's security and prosperity? It helps to point to our own and international laws to show them how the international community looks at the child; we find that it increases their own sense of responsibility towards the children in their community.

Our work is changing attitudes, and it is having a chain effect. The community role models that we train are encouraged to identify ten respected people in their community with a good track record of caring for children. They meet regularly to discuss issues relating to children in their community and are able to provide guidance and counselling to child victims of harmful practices, including early marriage. We're continually asked to provide more training and more information and it is inspiring to see each participant become committed to the cause of children's rights.

ADOPTING A 'GOOD SCHOOL' MODEL

We're also keen to make school a more appealing option for girls and their families. All too-often girls drop out of school because the education they receive is poor and their parents see little benefit to continuing their schooling.

We want to keep children in school and to broaden their perspective. An education will enable children to read posters, understand murals and listen to the radio in English. We believe that good schooling will help girls to look at other factors surrounding marriage: "beyond cooking for my husband and bearing children, how will I better raise my children?"

That's why we've launched a participation programme to create schools that parents want to see, that children are proud of and where teachers want to teach. We ask all involved at a school to tell us what a good school should be like. Few talk to us about the buildings or the beauty of the uniforms. Instead they tell us that a good school should be one where the teachers respect children, where administrators respond to children and where parents are encouraged to engage with teachers – and where teachers understand them.

We work closely with schools to implement the findings and organise a regular 'Day of Child Participation' where children sing songs, perform plays or recite poems about their schools and what needs to be done. We encourage the parents to join their children in making posters, painting murals and planting flowers within the school. If children don't have a sense of ownership over their school, they won't attend, even if their parents insist.

Good schooling will help us to show girls and their parents that there are alternatives to early marriage. Perhaps over time, too, it will also help girls to see that they have potential and will provide them with the skills to fulfil it. Perhaps one day our saying about the matoke will come to have a different meaning: that only when children have completed their education are they mature enough or ready for a fruitful life, let alone marriage.