

GROWING UP IN KARAMOJA, UGANDA

Understanding child marriage and child labour

Background

Children in Uganda's Karamoja sub-region face some of the country's most severe and persistent socio-economic challenges. Widespread poverty, recurrent climate shocks, food insecurity and limited access to social protection have created an environment in which many households struggle to meet their basic subsistence needs. In response, many families resort to harmful coping strategies, including child marriage and child labour, which put children into situations of exploitation, violence and long-term harm.

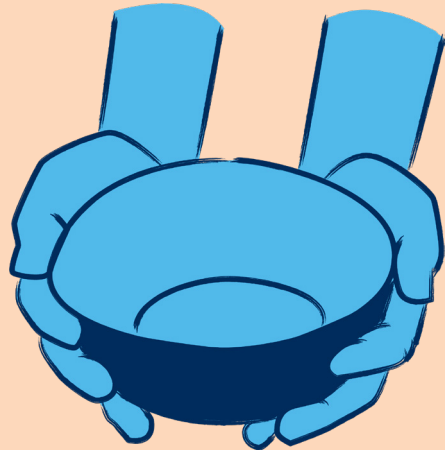
Child marriage remains prevalent in Karamoja, where social norms such as bride capture, female genital mutilation, as well as gender inequality and the practice of bride price can reinforce the economic incentives for marrying off girls. At the same time, many children engage in labour to support household survival, including working in mines, quarries, markets, agriculture, pastoralism and domestic work. Some children also migrate in search of work, exposing them to hazardous conditions, violence and exploitation that can amount to modern slavery. While these practices may provide short-term economic relief for households, they undermine children's rights, education, health and future opportunities.

To strengthen the evidence base for programming in Karamoja, the Freedom Fund commissioned AfriChild, along with local NGOs and youth advisors, to undertake a study in Moroto and Napak districts to better understand the drivers, dynamics and impacts of child marriage and child labour, identify the protective factors that reduce children's vulnerability, and examine the effectiveness of formal and informal child protection systems. Now, the Freedom Fund and its local partners are using this evidence to implement long-term strategies alongside communities and government.

Read the
report



Key findings



Poverty and hunger are the primary drivers of child marriage and child labour. Caregivers and children alike described these practices as survival strategies, when there was no safety net to fall back on. Poverty, recurrent drought, crop failure and livestock loss were described as the trigger points at which families ran out of options. In this context, marrying off a daughter for bride price or sending a child to work was frequently framed as a necessary, if harmful, economic strategy even as children themselves described the negative impact it had on their safety, health and education.

Our family is very poor and no one has ever gone to school and even my brother... who went to school, died. When we plant crops in the garden, the animals always destroy our crops from the garden. Even... our father died, and again our mother also became too sickly.

Boy, 12, Napak

A rich [man] finds a young child and he books [her] for his child or himself. He will make a child wear... those things that they tie on hands. The child grows while parents keep on teaching her... 'do not allow any man to engage you, you already have yours.' They wait for the child to grow, give the animals to the parents and they marry her off whether the girl accepts or not. It happens when the child has grown breasts at 10 or 15 years.

Boy, 14, Napak



Child marriage remains widely normalised, particularly for girls. It is shaped by entrenched gender norms that reinforce bride price, where cattle and other assets are transferred from the groom to the bride's family. Marrying off a daughter was often described as necessary for impoverished families, though some caregivers were also said to seek personal status or wealth out of it. Children consistently described child marriage as profoundly harmful, exposing girls to intimate partner violence, early pregnancy, psychological distress and lost education. Several also said they or someone they knew had resisted arranged marriages, pushing for the right to choose their own partner or prioritise school – a sign of subtle but real normative shifts, even where that resistance did not succeed.



Six in ten children were engaged in child labour, including arduous work in mines, quarries, markets, domestic work, and agricultural or pastoralist work.

Under pressure to meet household needs, children also described migrating to urban centres for work, at times under deceptive conditions encountering excessive working hours, hazardous conditions, withheld wages, physical abuse and lost access to education. Reflecting the extent to which working conditions such as these can impact children's physical and psychological well-being, almost two-thirds of child survey participants reported frequent headaches, stomach-aches or sickness, and over half said they felt too tired to pay attention at work. Yet over half (57.9%) also said they felt proud of their work, and many showed real resilience – providing for their families, starting microenterprises or using their earnings to fund their own return to school.

The bad thing with gold mining is you have to dig deep down. Sometimes stones and sand falls on you and you get hurt. That's why some people have even died.

Boy, 17, Moroto

Some NGOs come... lie [to] you. Like, 'we want to take you back to school to study.' And when you go to school, [they] will maybe pay one term only and you will be surprised to be chased away from school... There will be no way of telling the mother also to bring the money... she is very poor. There is nowhere she will get [the money as] she has to feed those other people at home.

Girl, 17, Napak



Help-seeking remains limited, in part because both child marriage and child labour are normalised. Child protection systems were described as hindered by under-resourcing, limited service coverage, constrained institutional capacity and reliance on customary justice mechanisms that often prioritised reconciliation between families over a child's best interests. As a result, children's trust in the system was inconsistent at best. Still, there were early signs that some community members, including children themselves, were activating protective systems when children were at risk and beginning to challenge this system.

Methodology of the study

The study used a mixed-methods participatory intervention development research design, which combined qualitative and quantitative methods to capture the perspectives of children, caregivers and a wide range of formal and informal child protection actors. The qualitative component included 92 children's life stories, 12 focus group discussions with caregivers, 12 participatory workshops with children, five stakeholder workshops and 35 key informant interviews. These findings were complemented by a household survey of 266 households, in which a randomly selected child aged 10–17 years and a caregiver were interviewed. Reflecting the Freedom Fund's commitment to child participation and survivor inclusion, the study placed children's voices at the centre of the research to better understand their lived experiences, identify protective factors and inform evidence-based programming in Karamoja.



Recommendations to government, NGOs and community groups

- 1 Address the structural drivers of child marriage and child labour in Karamoja.** Promote at-risk children's access to education through government's Universal Access to Education Plan, improved feeding programs and re-entry programs for out of school children, while addressing cultural barriers to girls' education. Strengthen at-risk households' livelihoods and food security, especially female-headed households, through income-generating initiatives, social protection, climate-resilient agriculture and livestock restocking. Expand vocational training, apprenticeships, start-up support and savings groups for young people.
- 2 Work closely with children and community influencers to address harmful norms that sustain child marriage and child labour.** Document and scale positive cultural practices (such as songs or storytelling) and integrate child protection messages into cultural gatherings, engaging religious and cultural leaders as change agents, to reshape community norms. Establish caregiver support groups within existing community platforms and facilitate structured community dialogue, alongside training and mentorship for child and youth-led (including survivor-led) advocacy to promote positive parenting practices. Use school and community settings to educate children on their rights, trauma-healing and safeguarding.
- 3 Strengthen the child protection system's ability to prevent and respond to child exploitation in Karamoja.** Increase resourcing through expanded national, district and sub-county budget allocations, outreach to donors and private sector engagement, alongside greater training and operational support for community-level and statutory responders. Strengthen coordination between statutory and customary actors for timely referrals and joint case planning and enhance community-based monitoring and cross-border coordination with Kenya to prevent trafficking and support safe return.

Full report authored by Helen Shipman, Clare Ahabwe Bangirana, Stella Acen, Janette Abalo, Priyanka Chand, Ginny Baumann and Varsha Gyawali.