



## **Mi Small Wef” No More (“My Little Wife” No More)**

CAUSE Canada and CAUSE Canada Sierra Leone Partnership

With support from the Fund for Innovation and Transformation,  
the Inter-Council Network, and the Government of Canada

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Child marriage is a human rights violation and manifestation of gender inequality. It disrupts girls' education; increases their vulnerability to violence, discrimination, abuse, and death; and prevents their decision-making about their lives and their full participation in economic, political and social spheres. Although child marriage is prohibited under the Sierra Leone's 2007 Child Rights Act, which states that the minimum age of marriage is eighteen years old, this harmful practice is perpetuated by deeply rooted social norms and practices. In 2015, UNICEF classified Sierra Leone among the 12 most high-prevalence or high-burden countries in the world.

In November 2020, CAUSE Canada and CAUSE Canada Sierra Leone Partnership (CCSLP), with support from the Fund for Innovation and Transformation (FIT), the Inter-Council Network, and the Government of Canada, began testing an innovative approach to eradicate child marriage in rural communities of the Koinadugu and Falaba Districts of Sierra Leone. The innovation was tested in 20 rural communities for 11 months, achieving a reduction of 92-95% in the rates of child marriage. According to interviews with key informants conducted a year after the intervention was completed, including project intermediaries, community leaders and relatives of girls whose marriages were cancelled during the innovation testing, the incidence of child marriage continued to be considerably lower than the innovation baseline.

The following sections will describe the testing and present the main findings and recommendations.

### ***The origin***

A discussion held with local girls and Mother's Clubs<sup>1</sup> women participating in CAUSE Canada's educational programs in the Koinadugu District of Sierra Leone, identified child marriage as an important impediment to community girls' education, health, and prosperity. Mother's Clubs also reported that men seeking child brides were left out of the efforts to eradicate child marriage and did not perceive it as detrimental due to its social acceptability. Mothers' Clubs suggested targeting men rather than girls' families, as the latter were often seduced by bride price even when they realised the risks of child marriage and were begged by their daughters not to be married off. Therefore, Mothers' Clubs suggested eliminating the demand for child marriage by empowering respected community leaders to educate men on how their decision to take child brides negatively impacts girls, their families of origin and of marriage and entire communities.

CCSLP was established in 1988 and has continuously worked in Sierra Leone since its establishment including working throughout the civil war (1991-2002) and the Ebola crisis (2014-2016). CCSLP is comprised of national Sierra Leonean staff with frontline staff frequently from the communities (or at least, people group) where the projects are located. Thus, when the CCSLP team confirmed the Mothers' Clubs analysis of the causes of child marriage and agreed with the idea suggested by the Mothers' Clubs, CAUSE Canada and CCSLP decided to design and test this innovation.

### ***The testing***

The intervention was aimed at testing the effectiveness of eliminating the demand for child marriage by empowering respected community leaders to educate men seeking child brides about the risks of child marriage for girls, their families of origin and marriage and communities. With this aim, the test compared two intervention types with a control group, covering three intervention groups of ten communities to identify the most effective and efficient bundle. In intervention group one, men seeking/at-risk of seeking child brides and girls' families were engaged through home visits; in intervention group two, home visits were supplemented with community engagement events, such as a film screening, community focus discussions, expert panels and street theatre performances. The control group did not receive any additional intervention.

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<sup>1</sup> Community-based female groups that promote and support children's health and access, retention, and completion of school.

After identifying the communities and presenting the innovation, the project team completed the selection of intermediaries, targeting influential people among their communities to build and strengthen their capacities to act as advocates against child marriage and for gender equality. A total of 340 female and male community leaders, including Chiefs, Imams, Mammy Queens, and Mothers' Club members were engaged and trained on gender equality, women's and girls' rights and the negative consequences of child marriage, as well as on presentation and negotiation skills, and non-confrontational communication.

These intermediaries then delivered targeted social messages about the negative consequences of child marriage via home visits to over 1,200 men (approximately 60 per community) and 1,000 girls' families (50 per community) in interventions groups one and two.

The home visits to men seeking/at-risk of seeking child brides were aimed at influencing the decision-making of men, and decreasing the demand for child brides, by improving men's knowledge on the negative consequences of child marriage. With this end, during the home visits, intermediaries talked about child marriage in a non-confrontational manner, framing it as a problem rather than a neutral traditional practice. Intermediaries presented convincing evidence to men on the detrimental impact of child marriage not only for girls, but also on the men, their potential families and their entire community, outlining the social and economic costs of child marriage for men as well as its dangers for girls, their children and community prosperity.

An example of the message delivered to the men is: "Although child brides require lower bride prices and make fewer financial demands on their husbands, they often experience severe health complications related to early pregnancy, which requires costly medical attention and often results in girls' deaths".

The home visits to girls' families were aimed at improving families' decision-making to avoid child marriage. With this end, intermediaries delivered targeted messages about the long-term impact of child marriage on their daughters and family as well as about the ways of addressing the immediate short-term needs driven by poverty. An example of the messages delivered is: "While girls' families may benefit financially through bride price, child brides can be easily divorced and returned to their families, forcing the girls' parents to assume financial costs for their daughters and her children and to deal with the social stigma".

In parallel, an average of four community engagement events per community were held in intervention group two. Different methodologies including theatre performances, parades, special guests including experts on different topics and community members willing to share their personal story, among others, were used to raise awareness, reinforce the messages delivered during the home visits and to involve all the community into child marriage eradication.

Throughout the testing, the intermediaries registered the child marriages that were being prevented or taking place in the targeted communities. In addition, to better understand the behavioural changes among the main decision-makers, intermediaries registered the number of bride price offers made by men, and men's willingness to refrain from making bride price offers in the future or to rescind bride price offers. They also registered the number of bride price offers accepted by girls' families and the number of girls' families that decided not to accept bride price offers in the future.

In parallel, changes in the beliefs and knowledge regarding child marriage and its negative consequences for girls, their families of origin were assessed through baseline, midterm and endline surveys conducted by the project team. The surveys were implemented in all 30 target communities, resulting in 477 interviews: 140 with community leaders; 128 with girls' parents; 128 with community men; and 81 with community residents.

Achievements in the two interventions groups were compared to identify the best practices for the elimination of child marriage. Progress towards a reduced vulnerability to child marriage of adolescent

girls was observed in the practices, behaviour, awareness and knowledge among the targeted community members as presented below followed by the results of the intervention one year after completion.

### ***Immediate Results of the Intervention***

#### Incidence of child marriages

After only seven months of conducting activities in the field, remarkable changes were observed in both intervention groups. The average number of child marriages before 15 decreased 95.5% (9 to 0.4 girls per community) in intervention group one, and 92.2% (9 to 0.7 girls per community) in intervention group two. The same tendency was reported for the girls between 15 and 18 years of age with a 95% reduction (10 to 0.5 girls in average per community) observed in both intervention groups. These numbers were sustained until the end of the intervention as no further marriages were reported during the remaining four months of the testing. By the end of the intervention, 33 child marriages before 15 (3.3 per community) and 120 (12 per community) marriages between 15 and 18 were reported in the control communities (intervention group three), confirming the innovation's effectiveness in intervention groups one and two.

#### Planned and prevented child marriages

Another important indicator of the reduced vulnerability to child marriage is that fewer planned child marriages were identified and prevented during the last months of the testing, especially in intervention group two. While considerably more child marriages were prevented in intervention group two than in intervention group one (92 vs 21) during the first seven months, the number of prevented marriages dropped substantially in intervention group two, where only three marriages were prevented during the last four months. In intervention group one, 11 additional marriages were prevented, maintaining an average of three marriages prevented per month.

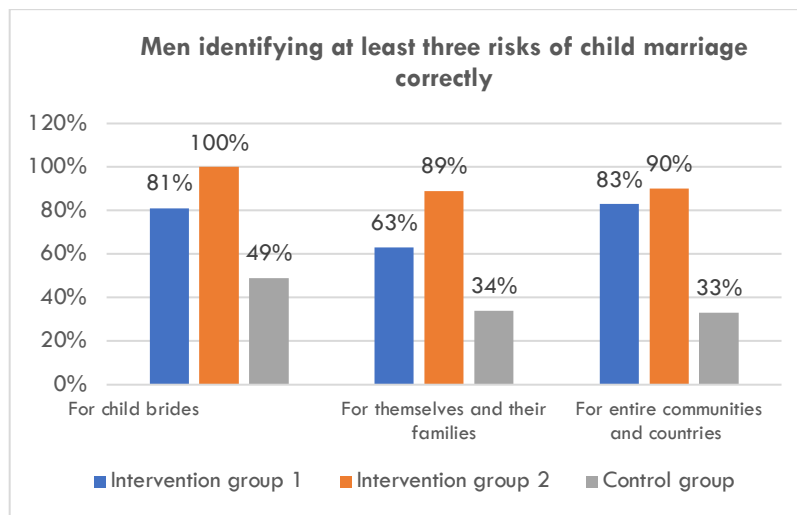
Even though the cumulative number of prevented child marriages in intervention group two is significantly higher than intervention group one, this outcome reflects different dynamics. While in the first seven months, the higher effectiveness in preventing marriages in intervention group two was linked to an increased possibility of uncovering and reporting upcoming marriages due to the communities' increased awareness and engagement, by the end of the intervention, and considering that the number of reports of upcoming marriages in intervention group two dropped from 99 to three (average of 14 per month to less than 1 per month), this tendency was reflecting that fewer marriages were being planned in intervention group two, possibly also due to the effectiveness of engaging the entire community. In other words, during the first seven months of the testing, community awareness was instrumental to identifying and reporting upcoming child marriages while in the last four months, it seemed to have an impact on the actual number of planned marriages. In intervention group one, where no community engagement events were organized, the average number of upcoming marriages being reported was maintained. It is important to highlight, however, that the percentage of prevented upcoming marriages increased from 84 to 91%, presumably as a result of the advocates' continued intervention.

#### Changes among men seeking/at-risk of seeking child brides

Men's behavioural change was measured by the average number of bride price offers made by men and the number/percent of men who decided not to make/rescinded bride price offers. In intervention group one, the average number of bride price offers decreased by 95% (24 to 1.3 offers per community) and 81% of men participating in the intervention decided not to make/rescinded bride price offers. In intervention group two, the average number of bride price offers decreased by 93% (24 to 1.6 offers per community) and 99.9% of men participating in the intervention decided not to make/rescinded bride price offers. In the control group, an average of 15.3 bride price offers per community were reported by key informants.

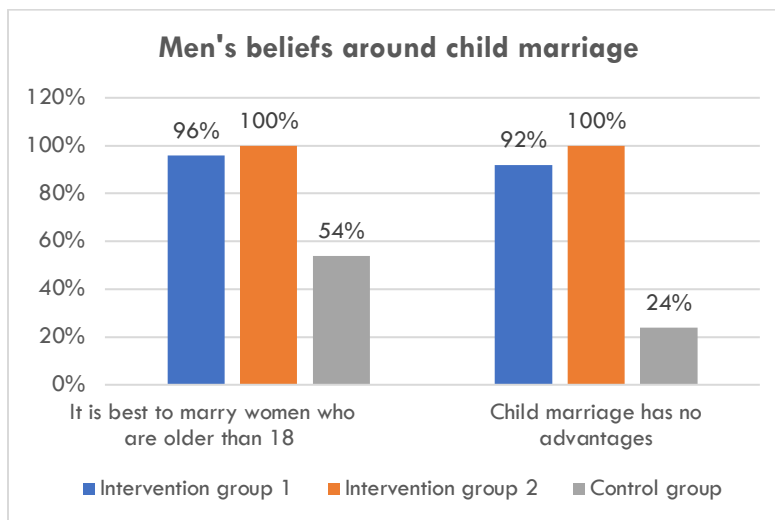
While in practice the number of bride price offers decreased significantly in both intervention groups, changes in men’s decision-making were remarkable in the second intervention group where the entire community was sensitized on the negative consequences of child marriage. Although men decided to not to make/rescinded bride price offers as a result of the intermediaries’ visits in both intervention groups, either men’s increased knowledge and awareness due to their participation in the community engagement events or the social pressure made by more aware communities, made a difference in men’s decision-making in intervention group two.

According to the surveys’ findings, more men from intervention groups one and two were able to identify at least three risks of child marriage for child brides, for themselves and their families and for entire communities and countries, when compared to men from the control group. The correct identification of risks was slightly higher in intervention group two than in intervention group one, confirming that knowledge was reinforced through the community engagement events, as presented in the chart below.



Base: men seeking/at-risk of seeking child brides

In addition, men’s willingness to abstain from child marriage was assessed by asking the best age for women to marry and about the advantages of marrying under 18, finding similar tendencies that confirm the effectiveness of educating men about the negative consequences of child marriages via home visits and reinforcing these messages through community engagement events.



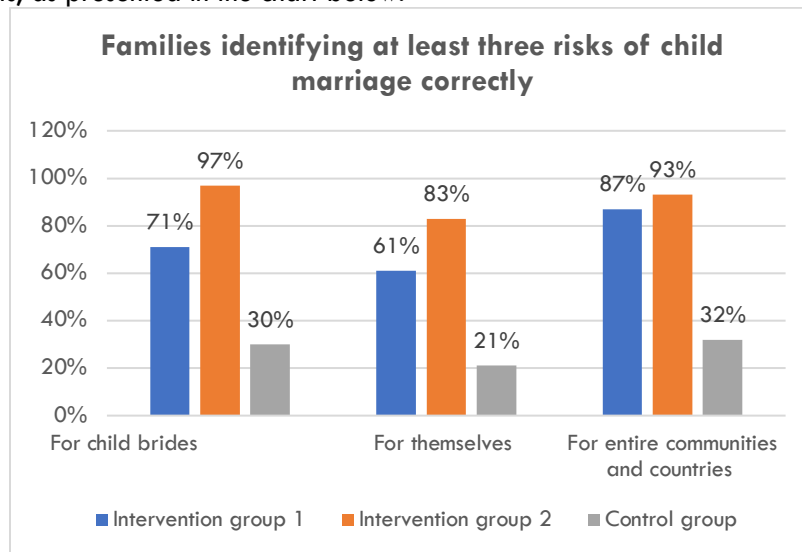
Base: men seeking/at-risk of seeking child brides

### Changes among girls' families

Changes in behaviour among girls' families benefiting from the intervention were measured by the average number of bride price offers accepted by girls' families and the number/percentage of girls' families that decided not to accept bride price offers. The average number of child bride offers accepted decreased by 97% (24 to 0.7 offers per community) in intervention group one, and 94.2% (24 to 1.4 offers per community) in intervention group two during the first seven months of the intervention. No bride price offers were accepted by girls' families during the last four months.

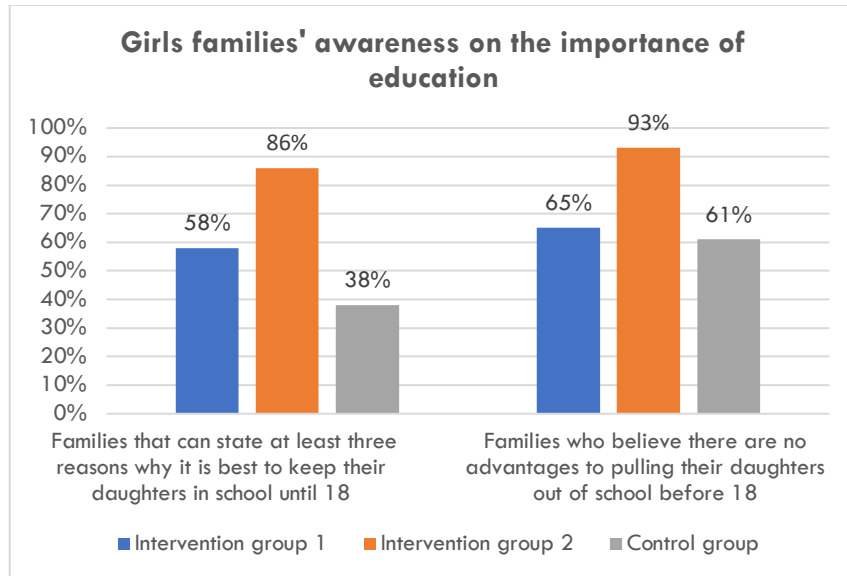
In addition to the decisions made by girls' families approached with bride price offers, girls' families' willingness to accept bride price offers was assessed during home visits, advocacy meetings and community engagements. Findings also showed a remarkable effect on the families' decision-making regarding child marriage. 87% of the girls' families in intervention group one and 99% of the families in intervention group two expressed their intention to reject any upcoming or existing bride price offer.

This change in the families' actions and decision-making was attributed to their increased knowledge of the risks of child marriage for girls themselves, and entire communities including girls' families as assessed through surveys. As with the men, the correct identification of risks was slightly higher in intervention group two than in intervention group one, confirming that knowledge was reinforced through the community engagement events, as presented in the chart below.



Base: Family members of girls under 18

Families' willingness to keep girls in school was assessed by asking them to name three advantages of keeping girls in school and advantages of taking girls out of school. Respondents from intervention group two showed being more aware of the reasons for keeping girls in school and the disadvantages of pulling them out before 18, demonstrating that addressing the importance of education during the community engagement reinforced the messages received during the home visits. Also, the fact that the respondents from the control group showed more awareness of the importance of education than on the negative consequences of child marriage for girls, reflects a progress made on this topic in the country.



Base: Family members of girls under 18

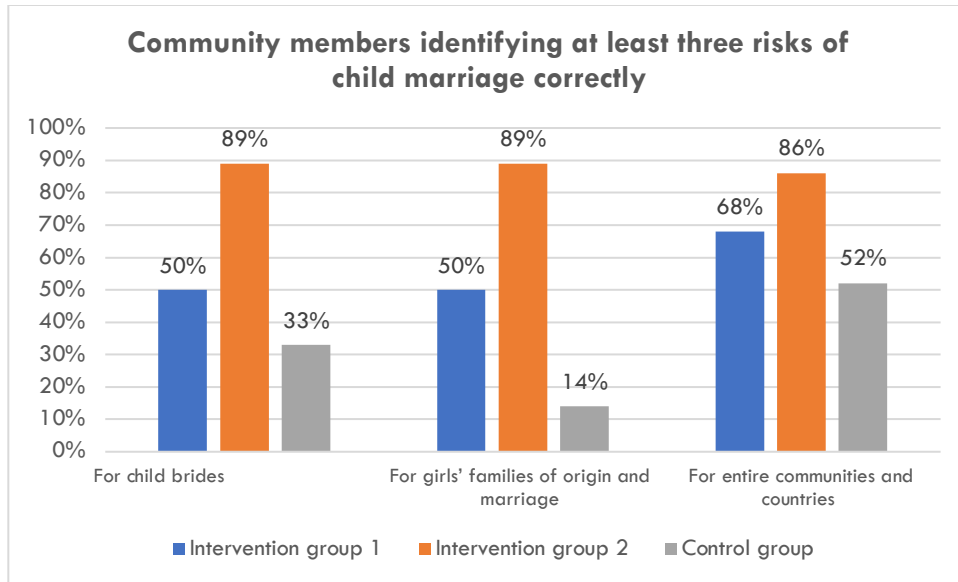
### Changes among community members

Participation in social action against child marriage was expected as one of the intervention's outcomes. Communities' participation was measured by the number of leaders acknowledging the presence of advocates against child marriage in their communities and the number of reports of child marriage submitted by community leaders and members.

While the presence of advocates against child marriage was clearly acknowledged in both intervention groups, by 98% of community leaders in intervention group two and 90% of community leaders in intervention group one, it seems that advocates' actions were more evident in the communities where engagement events were being organized.

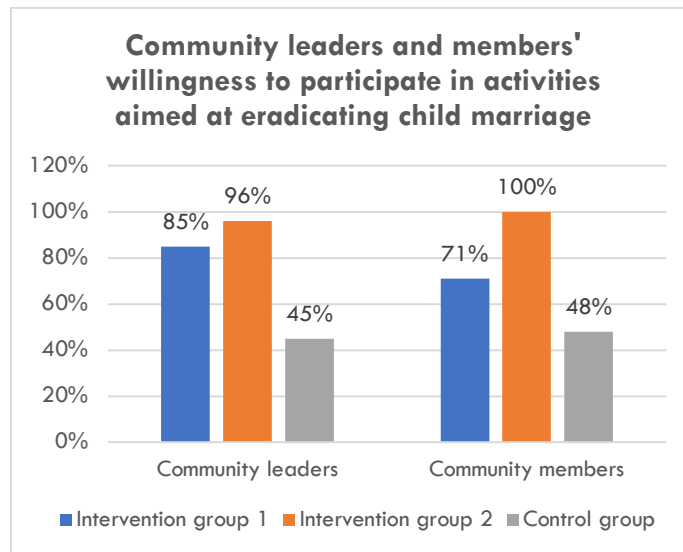
With a stronger tendency towards the same direction, community mobilization was evident during the first seven months of the intervention when a total of 99 reports of upcoming child marriages made by community leaders and members in intervention group 1, while only 25 reports were recorded in intervention group one. As explained above, the number of reports of upcoming marriages in intervention group two dropped from 99 to three (average of 14 per month to less than one per month), while the reports in intervention group one kept an average of three upcoming marriages reported per month. This tendency is not necessarily reflecting a reduced community participation in social action against child marriage but rather the decrease of upcoming child marriages in intervention group two.

To better understand communities' awareness of the negative consequences of child marriages, community members' knowledge of the risks of child marriage for child brides, girls' families of origin and marriage and communities and countries was assessed. As community members were not specifically targeted through home visits in intervention group one, knowledge was clearly higher in intervention group two, as a result of the community engagement events.



Base: Community members

Separately, willingness to participate in activities aimed at eradicating child marriage in their community was assessed among community leaders and residents confirming that community engagement and mobilization were achieved in both intervention groups, especially in intervention group two.



Base: Community members

### Changes among girls

As the initiative focused shifting the burden from girls and the need for self-advocacy for their rights to a focus on the primary decision-makers of child marriage, during the first months of the intervention little emphasis was placed on helping women and girls to know their human rights except when intermediaries discussed human rights during home visits and community events. However, women and girls started to express they did not know they have rights and wanted to know more. As a result of this feedback, community engagement was added to invite specifically women and girls' participation to learn more about their rights.



Teachers informed that high school girls were spontaneously starting to advocate against child marriage among their peers. These girls were then invited to participate in the drama performances held during the community engagement events.

### ***One year later***

After the impressive reduction in the rates of child marriage observed by the end of the innovation, CAUSE Canada and CCSLP wanted to better understand the innovation's long-term impact. Short interviews were conducted between December 2022 and July 2023 in the 20 communities where the innovation was tested resulting in 140 interviews: 51 with project intermediaries; 24 with community leaders; 22 with community members; 25 with relatives of girls whose marriages were cancelled and 18 with girls whose marriages was cancelled.

The main findings are presented below.

#### Incidence of child marriage

The incidence of child marriages continued to be low in all the targeted communities. 37% of the respondents said that no marriages had taken place in their community during the past year, 13% of the respondents said that they had knowledge of one child marriage, 38% about two child marriages, and 12% were aware of three child marriages taking place over the last year.

In addition to the low number of child marriages taking place, just a few more were planned and prevented. In fact, 17% of the respondents said that they had knowledge of one child marriage being prevented, 28% had knowledge of two child marriages being prevented, 25% of three child marriages and only 2% were aware four child marriages being prevented over the last year.

#### Reasons for the decrease of child marriages

Respondents were asked what had changed in their communities to explain the decrease and almost elimination of child marriages in their communities. The main reasons and most common reasons included:

- Increased knowledge about the negative consequences of early marriage, especially regarding the health risks and economic implications.
- Improved awareness of the importance of girls' education among their families and the entire community.
- Establishment of community bylaws and enforcement of existing legislation against child marriage.
- The role of intermediaries as advocates against child marriage and supporters of education.

#### Sustained change and the role of intermediaries

Intermediaries continue to advocate against child marriage, intervene when a marriage is being planned and support families financially to enroll girls back to school. According to their answers and the opinion from other community members, intermediaries continue to advocate against child marriage for the following reasons:

- Intermediaries are aware of the harmful physical, emotional, and social consequences of child marriage. They oppose it to prevent these negative outcomes for the entire community.
- Intermediaries believe in the importance of education. They advocate against child marriage to ensure that girls can access education and achieve their potential.
- Advocates understand the health risks and potential maternal deaths associated with early pregnancies. They oppose child marriage to prevent these health problems.

- Intermediaries are committed to protecting girls' rights and well-being. They advocate against child marriage due to their dedication to creating a better future for girls and for the community.

#### Sustained change in girls' families' decision making in the midst of ongoing risks

Respondents acknowledged that it is not completely uncommon for families to receive bride price offers. In fact, approximately 30% of the respondents said that they have knowledge of families that have rejected an offer. Respondents explained that families are rejecting offers as they have learned that child marriage is detrimental to their girls' future and are aware of the negative consequences and risks of child marriage, one of them being an increased risk of maternal and infant mortality. In addition, families are deciding not to give their girls into marriage as they recognize the importance of education in shaping a better future.

This awareness on the importance of education was also confirmed when all the relatives of girls whose marriages were cancelled and the girls themselves informed that they are currently attending school. This reflects a clear shift on families' decision-making, however, respondents explained that in most of the cases the families do not have the economic resources to send their girls to school. Mainly intermediaries and schoolteachers have been helping to pay for the girls' education expenses. Although this also reflects an increased and sustained social action, it is also reflecting the ongoing need to support girls' access to education.

#### Ongoing risks

Neither child marriages nor the risk of child marriages have disappeared completely. As mentioned in the previous sections, some families continued to receive bride price offers for their girls and a few marriages did take place in some of the communities.

According to the data collected, these child bride offers are made mostly by men from other communities or from men from Guinea who transit through these communities because of different businesses such as trade, mining or farming and who have not been sensitized to the risks of child marriage. In fact, 29% of the respondents said that child marriages continued to be planned in the neighbouring communities. However, when there is knowledge of a child marriage being planned, and the intermediaries are informed, the intermediaries continue to be active in trying to have it cancelled usually by traveling to the community to intervene and reporting it to the police.

As for the few marriages that took place despite the innovation's positive impacts, respondents explained that some men continue to look for child brides mainly because:

- Of traditional and religious practices and beliefs.
- They believe younger women are more fertile and can be expected to have more children.
- Of the belief that younger girls and eventually their children can assist them in farming activities.

Respondents also explained that families decide to marry young girls mainly because of:

- Economic limitations reflected both in their limitations to support the girls and the need to receive the bride price.
- Religious practices and beliefs.

#### **Recommendations**

1. Focusing on the primary decision-makers of child marriage liberated girls from the burden of self-advocating for their rights and proved to be more effective in reducing the incidence of child marriages.

2. The most innovative component which was targeting men seeking/at-risk of seeking child brides to educate them on the negative consequences of child marriage proved to be highly effective in reducing the demand for child marriage.
3. Educating families receiving/subject to receiving bride price offers reinforced the innovations' effectiveness considering they are a primary decision-maker around child marriage.
4. Positing and empowering respected community leaders as advocates against child marriage was the basis and engine of this transformation and proved to be an effective, efficient, and sustainable approach to eliminating child marriage.
5. Engaging the entire community through community engagement events contributed to changing social norms and to finding allies in identifying possible child marriages. This was confirmed by the differences observed in intervention group two.
6. Although decisions regarding child marriage are mainly made by adults, findings reconfirmed the crucial role of girls in knowing and advocating for their rights.
7. Comprehensive methodologies including home visits and community engagement events including theatre performances, parades, special guests including experts on different topics and community members willing to share their personal story, among others, contributed to raise awareness and change social norms among the targeted communities. Particularly, inviting authorities to talk about the legal consequences of child marriage proved to be highly effective with men.
8. Considering that child marriage is a sensitive topic and a well-rooted practice, presenting convincing and context-appropriate arguments is paramount. It was effective to raise the knowledge and reflect upon the physical/health implications for girls, economic implications for all, legal consequences, and religious misconceptions around child marriage. Topics can change however they should be broad enough to resonate with the different actors involved.
9. Having a localized approach is a key component for sustainability. As the innovation was not only locally designed but also encouraged local ownership, intermediaries trained during the intervention continued to advocate against child marriage regularly.
10. CCSLP's expertise and deep understanding of local social and cultural norms was reflected in the appropriateness and effectiveness of the key messages delivered to raise awareness and change the mindset around child marriage in the targeted communities.

### **Next Steps**

Considering that 30% of girls in Sierra Leone continue to marry before 18 and 9% marry before 15 and that child marriage rates are considerably higher in more rural and traditional regions particularly Koinadugu, Falaba, Tonkolili, and Kambia (GirlsNotBrides), CAUSE Canada and CCSLP are looking for funds to replicate this innovation in other districts of Sierra Leone.