



Impact of WASH interventions on Child Marriages in Lesotho

A Case Study of Ha Ralithebe, Mosifaneng and Postola

Project Background

The Lesotho Red Cross Society (LRCS) project *Water, Sanitation and Hygiene Promotion Interventions for Rural Communities in Lesotho* aimed to deliver sustainable access to water and sanitation as well as improved hygienic practices. LRCS worked with small rural villages in the districts of Mohale's Hoek and Mokhotlong in the Lesotho Highlands where the terrain is mountainous, with limited road access and a number of small scattered villages. This four-year project finished on 30 June 2018, funded by Australia's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) through the Civil Society Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (CS WASH) Fund.

At the start of the project, target communities had no or low sanitation coverage with seasonal springs, which when dried required one to two-hour walks to perennial sources. Traditional practices, including child marriages, remain common in these villages. A 2015 UN report indicates one out of five girls in Lesotho are married before the age of 18. There are reported incidences of girls being abducted and forced into early marriage¹, occurring when they were fetching water from distant or hidden sources, or relieving themselves in the bushes.

In line with the National WASH Policy (2007), the project applied an integrated approach to water and sanitation. Improved access to clean water was established in 31 villages with water generally within 150m of houses and hygienic latrines within the same communities constructed.

The project intended that this improved access to WASH facilities would improve the safety of women and girls. By bringing water supply closer to homes, it was expected girls would have less distance to travel, reducing the instances where they were alone and therefore

vulnerable to abduction. Supporting households to build latrines within their yards would also enable girls to use latrines in secure places. The project also used advocacy campaigns to promote gender rights and raised awareness of child abduction and child marriage. Girls are often considered ready for marriage once they started menstruating. Through WASH clubs, established by the project in schools, teachers are raising awareness with students and parents about the risks of early marriage and encouraging students to remain in education. Similar discussions took place at Women's gatherings, initially facilitated by the project team, and continued through the WASH Committees and hygiene groups established in the target communities.

Methodology

A literature review was conducted, along with focus group discussions (FGDs) and key informant interviews (KIIs) with key stakeholder in Ha Ralithebe, Mosifaneng and Postola villages in Mokhotlong district. This included Village Chiefs, teenage girls, women (including newlyweds), teachers, WASH committee members, herd boys and the Mokhotlong Police.

Research Findings

While it was expected that the WASH interventions would help address issues of child abduction and early marriage, the research showed mixed views. Each village interviewed had different experiences and therefore reported different results, however, FGD and KIIs respondents agreed that the provision of safe water and especially toilets contributed

Photo: 2015 Day of the African child –theme focused on ending child marriages.

1. "Chobeliso" was the Basotho traditional way of getting married whereby a boy or a man or a group of them abducted a girl and forced her into marriage

significantly to reducing the chances of young girls being raped and/or abducted and forced into marriage. This has boosted their sense of safety and dignity, as well as increasing household harmony: many couples previously quarrelled about their spouse cheating or neglecting other household duties while in the bushes or collecting water.

However these interventions have not been adequate in stopping child marriage. While rates of child marriage remain high in these villages, the research highlighted this was often not the result of abduction.

The practice of arranging marriages continues to be passed down through the generations, but more recently boyfriends and girlfriends are committing to marriage themselves, without consent of their parents. Where early marriages are happening, respondents described they are mainly a result of teenage pregnancies, boys wanting to marry at an early age following initiation², and the fact that girls in these communities are groomed to be housewives with no other role models except for married women.

It appears that in some situations the couple stage an 'abduction' as a way of forcing families to agree to the marriage. Women interviewed who have recently got married confessed that prior to the project interventions they were using visits to the old wells and bush latrines as a cover to meeting their boyfriend. With the improved accessibility of WASH infrastructure, girls have found other means, such as collecting firewood or going shopping at distant places. The other avenue raised by respondents is increased access to cell phones; their use making it easier for young people to meet up, and ultimately arrange marriages.

The research did indicate that there is under reporting on abductions and child marriage. While instances appear to have significantly reduced over recent times, where they occurred they were not generally reported to the relevant authorities such as Police and or Social Workers, or when police did intervene to return girls to their families, interviews indicated that the girls went back to the marriage.

The project sought to raise awareness about laws related to abduction and forced marriage, as well as child marriage along with the broader detrimental effects of early marriage on girls related to health and denying their right to education. The project team worked closely with community leaders and influencers as in the target locations people generally respect and follow the directions of their leaders. Village Chiefs were made aware that abducting a child and forcing them into marriage is a crime and they were supported to implement strategies to prevent this, such as speaking at community events and directly with boys and introducing punishments, including enforcing customary laws. Respondents indicated that eliminating abductions is now a priority of Village Crime Protection Committees.

However, a number of parents continue to believe that there is nothing wrong with child marriage as long as both the boy and the girl agreed. Some women help young girls to get married without the parents knowing, or mothers have arranged marriages without the fathers consent. While the Village Chief of Ha Ralithebe indicated in his village this is declining, other villages believe this is still an issue.

Key Impacts

While the project may not have reduced early marriage as expected, it is making girls feel protected and providing them with a safer environment. The interventions have helped to significantly reduce the probability of a girl being abducted or girls/women being injured or raped as they fetch water and or relieve themselves. Interview with teenage girls carried out in 2017 revealed that 95% of girls now feel safe and secure while accessing WASH services provided by the project.

What the research does show is that the greatest impact was made by the advocacy and awareness campaigns. As a result communities now realized that abducting a child and forcing them into marriage is a crime, and have devised strategies to stop this.

Learnings and Recommendations

The lessons from the Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene Promotion Interventions for Rural Communities highlight that while WASH interventions can significantly improve the safety and dignity of women and girls and provide a pathway to promote and advocate issues related to forced and child marriage, change needs to be reinforced through tailored non-WASH strategies.

As such, the following recommendation are provided for future projects:

- Detailed research and analysis into the incidence rates and key factors of abduction and early marriage in target areas would allow for better planning of interventions
- Strategies to fight child marriages should include differentiated advocacy campaigns to separately raise awareness of the legality and issues associated with: abduction and forced marriage; and child marriage, specifically targeting the remoter and more isolated communities
- Broader advocacy to promote roles for women beyond being a wife and mother may be required to discourage married women and mothers from assisting young girls to get married
- Work with initiation leaders to discourage boys from seeing marriage as marking their entry into manhood is needed
- School retention campaigns that focuses both on girls and boys needs to be developed
 - Messages need to help empower girls and target both schools and students families and the broader community
 - This should include work to reduce teenage pregnancies, as this is one of the contributing factors to early child marriage, and to address the belief that once girls are menstruating they are ready for marriage
 - Campaigns need to incorporate return to school opportunities for boys post initiation and also for girls post pregnancy/marriage

The Water, Sanitation and Hygiene Promotion Interventions for Rural Communities in Lesotho is supported by the Australian Government through the Australian Red Cross and implemented by Lesotho Red Cross Society (LRCS) and British Red Cross.



2. When they return from initiation school they want to get married to prove their manhood. Since they are under/around 18 years old they tend to target girls under 18.