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Statement by RELI Africa on the International Day of the Girl 2026: End Child Marriage and Invest more to protect the rights of Girls.

Child marriage remains one of the most consequential violations of girls' rights. It can interrupt education, constrain economic opportunity, expose girls to gender-based violence and early pregnancy and other reproductive health related challenges, and narrow the life choices available to them. Yet ending child marriage requires more than preventing the moment of marriage. It requires changing the conditions that make child marriage appear necessary, acceptable or inevitable.

Education is central to that effort. It expands a girl's options, strengthens her agency and creates numerous pathways to a better future. But education can only fulfil that promise when the systems around a girl enable her to access school, remain, learn, transition across the levels, and exercise her rights. This is why, on the International Day of the Girl 2026, RELI Africa joins the global call to end child marriage and increase investments in girls' rights.

As a regional membership network, RELI Africa mobilises collective expertise and action to advance equitable, inclusive and quality education for all children. Achieving this ambition requires addressing the barriers that prevent some children, particularly girls, from accessing and benefiting from education. Child marriage is one such barrier, with consequences extending beyond schooling to girls' health, safety and life opportunities. Ending child marriage therefore demands coordinated action across education, protection, health, justice and social protection to address its intersecting drivers, safeguard girls' rights and ensure that policy commitments translate into meaningful change in their lives.

Across Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania, important progress has been made. Governments have strengthened legal and policy commitments relating to child marriage, girls' education, protection, re-entry, gender-based violence and other barriers to girls' rights. Civil society organisations, communities and girls themselves have also contributed to changing practices, expanding opportunities and holding institutions to account. But progress in policy and public commitments must ultimately be judged by what changes in a girl's life.

The true test of an end-child-marriage policy is not simply whether it exists. It is whether girls experience its effect. A girl may have a legal right to education and protection from child marriage, yet still leave school because marriage is presented as necessary, expected or inevitable, or obligatory from a cultural norms perspective. A law may prohibit child marriage, but its effect depends on whether families understand it, whether institutions can enforce it, whether communities support it, and whether girls have meaningful avenues to exercise their rights.

The same is true of education. A policy guaranteeing school re-entry is important. But its effect depends on whether schools implement it, whether teachers are equipped to support returning girls, whether stigma is addressed, and whether families and communities can support a girl's continued education. The challenge, therefore, is not simply to develop better policies. It is to close the distance between what rights promise and what girls experience.

RELI Africa's mapping of the girls' education ecosystem¹ across Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania points to this broader implementation challenge. The three countries have considerable policy convergence around girls' retention, transition, re-entry, safe learning environments and protection from harmful practices. Yet implementation is encumbered by challenges of coordination, accountability, consistent evidence on impact, and the constraints and wider social and economic conditions in which girls live.

Our proposition for implementation is **One girl, many realities. One system that responds**. Girls share a right to grow up free from child marriage, but their risks, needs and opportunities differ. Age, disability, poverty, location, education status and exposure to violence intersect to shape each girl's experience. Ending child marriage therefore requires interventions tailored to the distinct realities of different groups of girls, rather than a one-size-fits-all approach. Yet no girl experiences these realities in isolation: her ability to remain in school may depend on household income, safety, parental attitudes, access to health services and the responsiveness of teachers and protection mechanisms. Education, child protection, justice, health, social protection, gender and economic policy must therefore work together to deliver coordinated, differentiated support that responds to each girl's circumstances and enables her to exercise her rights and realise her potential.

Across RELI Africa's membership, this systems perspective is already visible in practice. In Uganda, Trailblazers Mentoring Foundation works across schools, families and communities, combining education, economic empowerment, mentorship and sexual and reproductive health; its programmes have supported more than 41,600 adolescent girls through a network of 2,080 grandmothers across 13 districts, while 5,785 girls returned to school through its COVID-era response. In northern Tanzania, Pastoral Women's Council works at the intersection of education, parental engagement, economic empowerment and women's rights, including support for more than 2,500 Maasai girls through scholarships. In Kenya, Kakenya's Dream combines girls' education with engagement around the social norms that shape girls' lives, while SHOFCO works across education, livelihoods, health, gender protection and community organising in Kenya's informal settlements, with 2,000 girls supported to remain in school in 2024 and a community network reaching approximately 2 million people. Other RELI Africa members, including Msichana Initiative, Akili Dada and PEAS Uganda, among others, contribute through rights advocacy, leadership, safeguarding and girls' support.

These organisations do not use the same model, nor should they. What their work demonstrates is that preventing child marriage requires more than intervention at the point of marriage. It requires girls to have credible alternatives, families and communities to support those alternatives, institutions to protect them, and systems to make those choices possible.

There is a third question that deserves greater attention in policy, programming and research. This is the **transition from individual conviction to collective behaviour**. Changing attitudes and behavior matters, but it is also difficult. An individual can oppose child marriage without feeling able to act differently from those around them. A parent may believe that her daughter should remain in school but fear that other families do not share that expectation. A community leader may oppose child marriage but hesitate to challenge it publicly for fear of social exclusion or being ostracised. A girl may have strong aspirations but limited influence over the decisions that determine whether those aspirations become reality. Ending child marriage therefore requires us to understand not only what people believe, but what enables them to act on those beliefs. What enables communities to make child marriage socially unacceptable? What allows families to choose differently when economic or social pressures are significant? And what makes new norms durable? These questions matter

¹ Regional Education Learning Initiative (RELI) Africa. (2025). [Mapping the Girls' Education Ecosystem in East Africa: A Regional Landscape Mapping Report](#)

because sustainable change is not achieved simply when an individual changes their mind. It occurs when new expectations become possible, visible and collectively reinforced.

This also points to the importance of how we engage parents and communities. Practitioners need approaches that move beyond information-sharing to create space for dialogue, reflection and collective problem-solving around the expectations and pressures that shape decisions about girls' lives. RELI Africa's Parental Engagement Toolkit² supports practitioners working with parents and communities to strengthen meaningful engagement around education. We offer it as a practical contribution to the wider effort to translate individual commitment into collective action.

These realities also require us to rethink how we define progress in ending child marriage. It is important to track how many girls are reached, remain in school, or return after interruption. But these measures alone do not tell us whether the conditions that make child marriage possible are changing. We should also ask: Are families better able to support girls to delay marriage? Are communities changing what they expect and accept? Are institutions responding when girls are at risk? Do girls have greater voice in decisions affecting their lives? And are these changes sustained when families face economic or social pressure? This has direct implications for investment. Ending child marriage is a long-term systems challenge. It requires sustained investment not only in direct services, but in community leadership, institutional capacity, coordination, evidence and the conditions that enable families and girls to make different choices.

For funders and development partners, this means creating space for longer-term learning and adaptation alongside programme delivery. We need to understand not only what reduces child marriage, but how change takes hold, where it is sustained, and what enables it to endure.

On this International Day of the Girl 2026, RELI Africa therefore calls for approaches to ending child marriage that move:

- from rights in theory to rights experienced;
- from sectoral responses to systems-wide approaches that reflect girls' lived realities; and
- from changing individual attitudes & behavior, to enabling collective action.

Education is central to each of these shifts. A girl who remains in school, learns, develops agency and can exercise meaningful choices is not simply experiencing an education outcome. She is experiencing the effect of a wider system working to protect her rights and expand her future.

The measure of progress is not simply whether we have declared child marriage unacceptable. It is whether girls are actually able to live free from it, and whether the systems around them make that freedom possible.



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² RELI Africa's Parental Engagement Toolkit provides practical approaches for engaging parents and caregivers as partners in creating environments in which learners can achieve meaningful outcomes.