

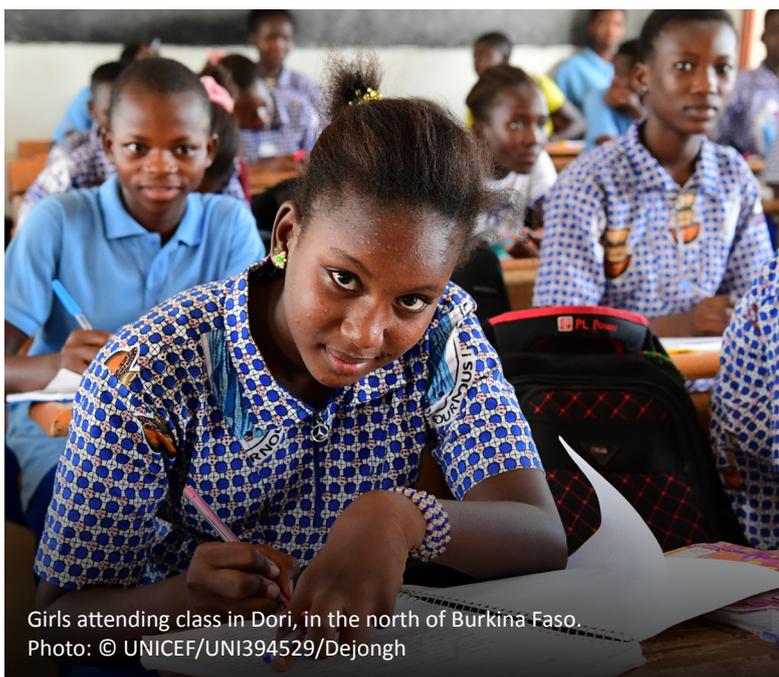
Research Spotlight: Gender-transformative and systems approaches to ending child marriage and promoting girls' rights



August 2021

This Research Spotlight connects the themes of the [Child Marriage Research to Action Network's](#) (the CRANK) first two global research meetings in 2021. It covers evidence on gender-transformative approaches to ending child marriage, and systems approaches to upholding girls' rights and delaying age of marriage.

It includes key takeaways from featured studies, highlighting the nuanced drivers of child marriage – including gendered social norms that limit agency, and barriers to paid work – and solutions like building skills and working through systems that can deliver at scale and also account for context. It also includes recommendations for further reading on these topics, supporting evidence-based uptake amongst practitioners, policy makers, advocates, researchers and donors.



Girls attending class in Dori, in the north of Burkina Faso.
Photo: © UNICEF/UNI394529/Dejongh

Key terms

Gender-transformative approaches address the root causes of gender inequality and promote gender equality. They critically examine gender inequalities, roles, norms and dynamics; strengthen norms that support equality; promote the relative position of girls, women and groups that have been marginalised; and transform the underlying social structures, policies and social norms that reinforce gendered inequalities.¹

Systems-based approaches address gender inequality at a structural and institutional level. They ensure that the relevant sectoral systems and institutions can effectively respond to the needs of adolescent girls and their families. For example, ensuring that education, health, child protection and social protection systems and services respond to age, gender and socioeconomic status is an effective way of preventing and mitigating the impacts of child marriage² in all its forms. A systems-based approach offers pathways to scale and sustainability.³

1. For more information on gender-transformative approaches, see UNFPA and UNICEF, 2020, [Technical note on gender-transformative approaches: A summary for practitioners](#).

2. Child marriage refers to any formal marriage or informal union between a child under the age of 18 and an adult or another child. Also referred to in this document as CEFMU; child, early and forced marriage and unions, inclusive of married girls. We use child marriage and CEFMU interchangeably depending on how it is presented in the studies highlighted in this spotlight.

3. For more information on systems-based approaches see UNFPA and UNICEF, 2020, [Technical note on adolescent girl-responsive systems](#).

1. Understanding the root causes of child marriage: Baseline findings from the Tipping Point evaluation in Bangladesh and Nepal

CARE's multi-country Tipping Point Initiative uses gender-transformative approaches to reduce child marriage prevalence in Bangladesh and Nepal through an 18-month intervention. [This baseline evaluation](#) finds strong factors pushing girls towards child marriage, despite their educational aspirations and those of their parents.

Key takeaways

- Around half of the girls interviewed in Bangladesh (55.8%) and Nepal (47.6%), said they could refuse marriage if they did not desire it. More than half the girls in Bangladesh (53%) and Nepal (57.7%) were very confident that they could achieve their desired life goals despite challenges. But in-depth interviews and focus group discussions in both countries showed that **girls have little decision-making power regarding their marriage, and that fathers have the ultimate say.**
- Although girls feel confident of achieving their desired goals, norms – particularly those designed to mitigate perceived threats to girls' sexuality and family honour – are a barrier to them and their families doing so.
- [CARE's Social Norms Analysis Plot \(SNAP\) framework](#) applied in the Tipping Point intervention and evaluation provides **practical guidelines to understand, evaluate and assess the existence and strength of the social norms that perpetuate child marriage**, and identify programmatic pathways to weaken them.

2. Multiple impacts of Ethiopia's Health Extension Programme on adolescent health and wellbeing: A quasi-experimental study 2002-2013

The Ethiopian Health Extension Programme (HEP) was implemented in 2003 to strengthen primary health components; by 2010, they had constructed more than 6,000 health posts, and trained over 34,000 community female Health Extension Workers (HEWs) to deliver primary healthcare and community outreach, with a specific focus on outreach to girls in rural areas. [This study](#) by Rudgard, W. and Dzumbunu, S., et al. finds a significant impact in six major areas: child marriage, literacy, numeracy, knowledge of fertility, early pregnancy and education enrolment.

Key takeaways

- In the domain of child marriage, 92% of girls involved in the programme did *not* marry as children, compared to 73% of girls not included in the programme
- **Household visits from community female HEWs are associated with positive change in multiple dimensions of adolescent wellbeing**, including secondary school enrolment, child marriage and early pregnancy. This impact could be linked to HEWs providing information on harmful practices, and/or acting as a referral pathway for reporting child marriage. The community presence of female HEWs – who are required to complete lower secondary education to be employed – may also incentivise girls' enrolment and attendance at school. Further research should quantify the positive impacts of employing female HEWs on child marriage and girls' secondary school enrolment, considering both the effects on community social norms and adolescents' own aspirations.
- **Household visits from HEWs did not produce significant change in self-reported general health, nutrition and sexual and reproductive health (SRH) knowledge.** Offering more effective and comprehensive gender-responsive and youth-friendly health and SRH awareness and services should be a key priority within Ethiopia's new health education strategy, employing a systems approach that allows for scale and sustainability and that supports girls' and families' access and secures their rights.

3. Exploring the school to work transition for adolescent girls

This report by Rose, P. at the REAL Centre, University of Cambridge, highlights key barriers and policy interventions to support adolescent girls in their transition to secure and productive livelihoods. Accessing a livelihood tends to prevent early marriage and offers girls and young women more control over their life choices, including if, when and whom to marry, and family planning.

Key takeaways

- **Low education levels are a significant barrier to girls accessing livelihoods, preventing them from developing the foundational and transferable skills required for work.** Addressing the needs of marginalised adolescent girls in the long term means putting in place transformative education systems that promote their access to rights and agency, and that support them in developing the skills they need for secure and productive work. Governments should prioritise education sector planning that responds to girls' needs, supported by gender-sensitive budgeting and accountability.
- **Multifaceted programmes that target multiple barriers – like early or unintended pregnancy – are likely to boost girls' access to secure and productive livelihoods.** For example, the government of Sierra Leone partnered with the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC) to implement the Empowerment and Livelihoods for Adolescents programme. The programme had three components: health education – including sexual and reproductive health – vocational training and microcredit. Adolescent girls in the programme were more likely to be in school and have improved levels of numeracy and literacy. Girls in communities outside of the programme were twice as likely to be pregnant out of marriage than those who were included in it.
- **For adolescent girls who have been marginalised to access fair opportunities, policy interventions that are effective in the short-term need to be implemented alongside ones that promote long-term structural change to systems and social norms.** Having female champions within political leadership is critical to foster change at this level and to sustain political will and commitment to dismantling discriminatory legislation that denies girls' access to secure and productive livelihoods, and to promoting gender-sensitive and transformative approaches.

Case study: A community and systems-based programming approach in Mexico

Yo quiero, Yo puedo – formally the Mexican Research Institute on Family and Population, IMIFAP – is a national non-governmental organisation based in Mexico City, founded in 1985. Yo quiero, Yo puedo takes a gender transformative community and systems-based approach, working with girls, boys, families, communities and authorities at the community, municipal and state levels, including governments and civil society. In 2019, they implemented a national communications campaign – **“Help them avoid the altar”** – and strategies to improve the provision of health, education and other public services, and to promote the rights of girls, adolescents, and women.

As a result, organisations have signed commitments to end child marriage in their communities, and there is greater acceptance of the concept of gender transformation. Robust alliances created with community and traditional leaders have provided the necessary space for girls' engagement.

Key features of the approach

- **Employing a rights-based approach to gender and sexuality education through a tailored curriculum.** In addition to community workshops – where messages about sexuality, gender and child, early and forced marriage and unions (CEFMU) were integrated to support behaviour change for adolescent girls and boys and adult women and men – the programme delivered comprehensive rights-based, gender-transformative sexuality and violence prevention education in schools.

- **Advocating for improved health, education, and other public services.** Strong, trusting relationships with traditional community leaders was critical to the acceptance and delivery of this curriculum in schools. Building on early successes, Yo quiero, Yo puedo is now strengthening relationships with the municipal and state education sector with the aim of scaling up, engaging with other civil society organisations working in the area and advocating for improved delivery of health, education and other public services with municipal, state and federal governments.
- **Using mass media to raise awareness of CEFMU through a national communications campaign.** This campaign – launched in 2019 – included a [short film](#) screened at a national film festival, billboards in Mexico City and appearances on national media to talk about CEFMU. The issue was picked up by national media outlets and raised the profile of the issue in Mexico.

4. Context matters: Exploring differential effects of the More Than Brides Alliance interventions to reduce child marriage

The More Than Brides Alliance’s “Marriage: No Child’s Play” (MNCP) programme captures the results of a similar multisectoral model implemented in India, Mali, Malawi and Niger, in contexts with either a high prevalence or burden (total number) of child marriage. [This report](#) by Melnikas, A. J., et al. for the Population Council explores behavioural outcomes related to child marriage, schooling, work and pregnancy.

Key takeaways:

- **The four countries included in the MNCP evaluation varied widely** in terms of past investments and achievements in child marriage prevention: child marriage prevalence has declined in India over the last decade, while it remains high in Niger. The drivers of child marriage also differ across these contexts, with a particular example being differences in premarital sex and pregnancy in Malawi and Mali.
- **The MNCP programme showed some success in opening alternatives to child marriage**, including increased education and livelihood opportunities for girls. It had some significant effects on school enrolment, grade attainment and whether girls had ever worked, but there was no clear pattern across countries.
- **This evaluation challenges the assumption that it is easier for programmes to demonstrate effectiveness on reducing child marriage in areas where child marriage is highest:** MNCP also had an impact in lower prevalence areas in India. These promising results should encourage continued investments in positive change for adolescent girls living in these challenging environments.

We also recommend the following resources:

- [Constrained choices: Exploring the complexities of adolescent girls’ voice and agency in child marriage decisions in Ethiopia](#), Jones, N., et al., GAGE.
- [Enabling gender norm change through communication](#), Sengupta, A., et al.
- [A signal to end child marriage: Theory and experimental evidence from Bangladesh](#), Buchmann, N., et al.
- [Ending child marriage in West Africa: Enhancing policy implications and budgeting](#), Aicha Awa Ba, Save the Children.
- [Tackling the taboo: Sexuality and gender-transformative programmes to end child early and forced marriage and unions](#), CEFM and Sexuality Programs Working Group
- [Child protection and child marriage brief](#), *Girls Not Brides*.



An adolescent girl shows her mother how to call “109”, the number of the “Prevention of child marriage line” in Bangladesh, which offers advice on child marriage and intervenes when cases are reported. Photo: © UNICEF/UNI333976/Mawa

If you are working on child marriage research, we would love to hear more about it – please submit a brief summary of your research to be included in our [tracker](#) and sign up to the [CRANK mailing list](#).