

# A Brief on Human-Centered Design Implementation to Reduce Child, Early and Forced Marriage in Madhesh Province, Nepal

## BACKGROUND

Breakthrough ACTION, USAID's global flagship social and behavior change (SBC) project, designed its Reducing Child, Early, and Forced Marriage (R-CEFM) Project to strengthen the institutional and technical capacity of the Government of Nepal in Madhesh Province to design, implement, monitor, evaluate, and coordinate effective SBC and child protection system-strengthening activities to reduce child, early, and forced marriage (CEFM). The project aims to address barriers related to CEFM through a community-based, multi-sectoral, and data-driven lens.



Municipality Research Team interviewing an Adolescent girl during Field Research

While the legal age of marriage for men and women in Nepal is 20 years old, CEFM remains a common practice. According to the 2021 national population and housing census (NPHC), 35% of women and 16% of men aged 20–24 were married before the age of 18. While other provinces in Nepal have reduced child marriage in recent years, such change in Madhesh Province has been less pronounced where 42% of women and 17% of men aged 20–24 were married before the age of 18.<sup>1</sup>



Interview with Community Leader

The Madhesh Province government has political will and commitment to address CEFM. However, the local funding and decision-making authority lies with municipalities and wards. The municipalities in Madhesh Province often do not prioritize addressing CEFM due to CEFM being normative and endemic.

The R-CEFM Project facilitated a human-centered design (HCD) process in six focal municipalities, in conjunction with local stakeholders, to understand reasons for child marriage and identify and refine potential SBC activities to address CEFM in Madhesh Province.

The HCD process emphasizes the importance of keeping the intended beneficiaries in the center and, in doing so, leads to the development of innovative solutions that directly meet the needs and desires of the intended audience. The HCD process is especially relevant for the R-CEFM program because it provides municipal leadership the opportunity to interact with community members at a deep level, such that they gain empathy for those impacted by CEFM. The leadership and community are then able to jointly develop, test, and monitor programs by investing municipality resources including funds.

<sup>1</sup> Government of Nepal, Central Bureau of Statistics. (2021). Married population aged 10 years and above by 5 years age group and age at first marriage, NPHC 2021. Retrieved from <https://censusnepal.cbs.gov.np/results/downloads/provincial/1>



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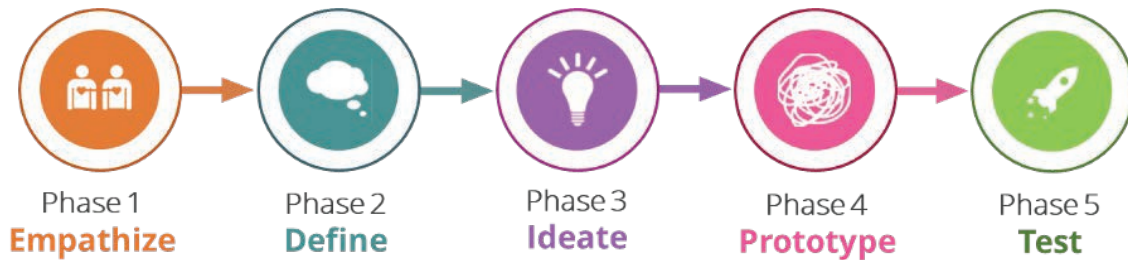


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## DESIGN CHALLENGE

The main design challenge guiding the process was the following question: How might we strengthen the municipality-level systems' capacity to support local structures to reduce CEFM?

**Figure 1.** The HCD process cycled through five main phases: empathize, define, ideate, prototype, and test.



At the beginning phase of the HCD process, dedicated design teams in each municipality were formed to support the independent decision-making power of each municipality and to foster buy-in. Implementers took care to ensure gender, equity, and social inclusion (GESI) as the phases unfolded.

### EMPATHIZE PHASE

During this phase, project implementers focused on understanding experiences of religious/social leaders, married and unmarried adolescents, their parents, municipalities, and community workers, and police, through immersive fieldwork and in-depth conversations, identifying their behavior, motivations, and challenges related to CEFM.

### DEFINE PHASE

During the Define Phase, the team identified themes, generated insights, and created design challenges based on the insights.

Audience insights resulted in the following five major themes:

- **Society values prestige (both family and individual):** Parents fear that if they expect their children to wait until they are 20 years old to marry, their children may elope. They also worry the community may start saying negative things about their family and the children.
- **Community members are indifferent to CEFM:** Community members, especially the educated and the influential think that the CEFM issue is not their problem; rather, they believe it is the problem of members of the dalit, janajati, and other, lower castes.
- **The community does not acknowledge the prevalence of CEFM:** Some affluent and influential persons, political leaders, and social leaders believe that even if CEFM exists, it happens only because of poverty and among lower caste people.
- **Society does not value girls:** Audience members perceive that male members of a family remain in the family forever, but daughters leave the family and earn for the family they marry into. Parents, therefore, do not invest in their daughters compared to their sons. They think they fulfill their responsibility to their daughter by investing into her marriage instead of her education.

- **Parents see girls as a burden:** Parents feel that keeping girls in the family or waiting till she is older to marry increases the burden of expenses and the likelihood that relatives will gossip.

Facilitators used these key themes to develop insights within the themes. The insights then became a foundation for developing design challenges to be used to generate ideas for solutions. After documenting the emerging insights, each municipality’s design team examined the insights and generated five design challenges.

**Insight #1:** Stakeholders do not acknowledge or internalize the presence of CEFM in all groups regardless of religion, class, education, or place of residence.

**Design Challenge #1:** How might we meaningfully engage the local leadership in formulating effective programs to reduce child marriage?

**Insight #2:** People who are willing to work against child marriage have not been able to come together.

**Design challenge #2:** How might Local and Ward Child Rights Committees (LCRCs/WCRCs) and informal child rights structures reduce child marriage?

**Insight #3:** Parents marry their daughters at an early age because they are concerned about both damage to family reputation and their daughter facing allegations related to her character.

**Design Challenge #3:** How might we increase the social prestige of parents who marry their daughters only after 20 years of age and, in doing so, help make their daughters more self-sustained?

**Insight #4:** Affluent and influential leaders in society are not proactive in reducing CEFM.

**Design Challenge #4:** How might we help affluent and influential people understand the power they have and encourage them to take concrete steps to reduce child marriage?

**Insight #5:** Parents do not prioritize their daughter’s education. Daughters then perform poorly in their studies, leading to them losing interest. Parents then marry off their daughters to fulfill their responsibility and save money.

**Design Challenge #5:** How might we convince parents to value girls as able to contribute to a family, especially if they marry later?



## IDEATE PHASE

In this phase, participants generated as many ideas as possible for potential solutions that respond to the design challenges. In total, those assembled generated 177 ideas.

Participants then prioritized 14 ideas based on relevance, impact, available delivery channels, cultural acceptability, innovation, GESI, and feasibility.



## PROTOTYPE PHASE

In this phase, municipality participants fleshed out the **14 prioritized activities** ideas into comprehensive activities, and decided to prototype seven activities this year.

## The Seven Activity Prototypes

1. **Transform CEFM social norms:** The local government will enlist and mobilize religious leaders and other individuals who perform marriage ceremonies to discourage child marriage and transform existing social norms.
2. **Mobilize an all-party committee:** Municipalities will form ward-level all-party committees and mobilize them for reducing child marriage.
3. **Award ward chairs:** Every fiscal year, each municipality will offer an appreciation award to the ward chairpersons for wards with the lowest CEFM rate.
4. **Award parents:** Municipalities will organize an award event once at the end of the year for the families who marry their daughters only after they reach 20 years of age Challenge #3.
5. **Provide subsidies:** The municipalities will provide the families who wait to marry off their children until they are at least 20 years old with certain subsidies on services and facilities like electricity and drinking water and prioritize them while providing services from public agencies.
6. **Involve families in local committees:** Various committees at the local level or ward level will include members of the families who wait to have their children marry until they are at least 20 years old.
7. **Form and mobilize R-CEFM committees of affluent and influential people:** Municipalities will form a committee comprising influential individuals and well-to-do people of the ward, provide legal recognition to the committee, and mobilize it for reducing child marriage Challenge #4.



### TEST PHASE

Breakthrough ACTION is now providing technical support to the six R-CEFM Project municipalities as they implement the seven prototypes selected for testing using their locally allocated budget. Municipalities will then further refine the prototypes based on field experiences and monitoring data.

## RESULTS

The strength of the HCD process intentionally and purposefully involves municipality stakeholders from the beginning of the process and all the way through analysis and decision making. An initial outcome of the HCD process is unprecedented municipality and ward level buy-in and commitment to R-CEFM.

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