*Indian girl in nature. Photo by Herbert Santos, Pexels.*

# Collective Action in Child, Early, and Forced Marriage Programming

## Introduction

Child, early, and forced marriage (CEFM), defined as marriage before age 18 or marriage that occurs without the consent of those in the marriage,[1] affects an estimated 15 million girls each year.[2] CEFM is perpetuated by many factors, including but not limited to poverty, conflict, gender inequality, social and cultural norms, religious beliefs, and economic incentives.[3,4] Looking forward, efforts to reduce the number of girls at risk for CEFM will increasingly struggle to keep pace with population growth, leading to virtually the same number of girls at risk for CEFM within the next few decades if actions to end CEFM are not accelerated.[2]

CEFM impacts many aspects of a girl's life, including her self-esteem, education, income, nutrition, social development, and health.[5] Girls who marry young tend to have more children and at a younger age.[4] In a study of 25 countries, three out of four early childbirths came from child marriages.[6] Early pregnancies and childbirth can cause health complications for girls due to biological immaturity, inadequate access to care, and financial insecurity, among other factors.[7] Globally, pregnancy and childbirth complications are the leading cause of death for girls age 15–19.[8]

Along with harming girls, CEFM also places a burden on the societies where it is prevalent. Children born to young mothers are more likely to suffer from health complications (e.g., low birth weight, malnutrition, and late development),[6] as well as lower educational attainment and reduced earning potential.[1] Governments and communities with high levels of CEFM experience economic burdens due to the health costs, welfare needs, and population growth associated with CEFM.[9] Because of these costs, it is estimated that governments could save 5% or more on their annual budgets if they were to invest in efforts to eliminate CEFM.[6]



*Maasai tribe student at the Shompole school in Kenya. Photo by Jonathan Torgovnik/Getty Images/Images of Empowerment.*

Evidence increasingly shows that successful interventions to reduce CEFM and improve girls' lives are possible.[10–12] The Child, Early, and Forced Marriage Resource Guide, produced for the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), provides guidance to program designers and implementers on how to integrate CEFM prevention activities and messages into other programs, accompanied by examples of successful programs and tools.

This series of briefs has been created to complement and add additional content to the Resource Guide and propose social and behavior change (SBC) approaches to strengthen the collective effort to reduce CEFM. There are seven topical briefs in the series: Advanced Audience Segmentation; Collective Action; Gender Synchronization; Human-Centered Design; Social Norms Programming; Theories; and Youth Engagement. Breakthrough ACTION developed each brief for an intended audience of program designers and implementers by analyzing successful interventions conducted in many regions of the world. The briefs serve as an "SBC Addendum" to the Resource Guide, providing guidance and examples of how to use SBC to reduce CEFM. Creative, multi-faceted, and innovative interventions and programs that utilize the methods in these briefs are required to address the factors contributing to the prevalence and impact of CEFM.

# How Can Collective Action Enhance Efforts to End CEFM?

Collective action brings people together around a common issue to drive change. Many different definitions exist for collective action, such as "action taken by a group (either directly or on its behalf through an organization) in pursuit of members' perceived shared interests"[13] or "actions to achieve a common objective, when the outcomes depend on the interdependence of members."[14] At its core, collective action is the coordinated action of a group of people working towards a common goal, leading the change they will benefit from. Many projects have shown that collective action is effective for tackling many different issues, such as market performance in farming,[15] malaria control,[16] natural resource management,[17] and reducing gender-based violence.[18]

Programs often focus on individual behavior change, but when behavior change is an outcome of collective action, an individual's change can happen within the context of a supportive environment, which increases the likelihood that the change will become permanent and result in a larger, more sustainable shift at a larger scale.

In most areas where CEFM is practiced, it is a social norm, not an individual preference. Therefore, while change at the individual level is possible, it is slow and difficult to achieve as the pressures of the community, the perceived value of girls, and norms weigh in. While one family can—and some do—ensure their daughter will not marry until after she turns 18, they may feel pressure or face social sanctions in their community if they refuse a marriage offer for their daughter. Additionally, a girl may feel pressured to be married or want to be married early to fit in with her peers or to meet her basic needs for food and shelter. To overcome these social sanctions or feelings of peer pressure and acute stressors, a community can work together, holding dialogue and debate on the impacts of child marriage in their communities and the actions they may want to take to better support girls and their families. Once they have come to an agreement that child marriage is harmful and that a girl should be protected and cared for, and once the new norm is to wait until adolescent girls are older before marriage, the fear of negative social sanctions and peer pressure diminish. Communities are then able to find ways of providing a more supportive, enabling environment for these girls and their families.

By bringing together religious and traditional leaders, school leaders, parents, and youth to discuss these issues and envision a different future for their community, progress can be made at a larger scale and with a greater chance of lasting change. Collective action provides time and space for dialogue, debate, problem-solving, and negotiation in order to reach a consensus for local solutions and change.

# How to Incorporate Collective Action into CEFM Programming

It's important to consider that collective action is not a short-term process and must be allowed to play out on the community's timeline: identifying the root causes of the issues; allowing for dialogue, debate, and consensus for action; and finally, working as one body to take action that benefits the welfare of both the community and its individual members.

One successful strategy that projects have used to inspire collective action and galvanize a community for change is the Community Action Cycle (CAC).[19] Used for multiple health and development issues across the globe, it puts the power in the hands of the community and walks them through a process to address and identify issues together, using the power of the community to garner change.

The table below is based on the CAC and provides guided stages to consider when fostering collective action in a community:[20]

| Stage | Key Considerations |
| --- | --- |
| **Catalyst** | As Figueroa et al.[21] noted in the Integrated Model of Communication for Social Change, for collective action to begin, there must be some type of catalyst, whether internal to the community—such as an event that takes place or new information that comes to light—or external such as a program being implemented or a new policy. Collective action is unlikely to spontaneously begin without some type of catalyst. |
| **Mobilization** | When working with the community to put together a team that can spearhead the process, it is important to include a variety of people. Ensure that youth have a voice (see the **Youth Engagement Brief** for more information) and other key stakeholders that play a role in child marriage, such as community leaders, community-based organizations (CBOs), and health workers are included. This team should gather information about the community, what resources are already available, what challenges they may face, and skills they may need to develop further to lead the process and put together a plan for community mobilization. |
| **Organize for Action** | It is important to build trust with the community and for them to be the leaders of the process, taking ownership over each step. After the initial mobilization team has been formed, they should reach out to invite the participation of the wider community and form a group (in case one does not already exist to build on) that will lead the change from within. Credibility is key and must be in place for success to follow. |

| Stage | Key Considerations |
|---|---|

## Explore the issue and set priorities

Before communities can take action against child marriage, they must first view it as a problem and something they *want* to change. Take the time to hold discussions with the community, exploring their feelings around child marriage. If the community does not view child marriage as a problem, the dialogue and debate must remain there before moving forward. Once the community has reached a consensus, it is time to dive deeper and explore the root causes, some of the long-term effects of child marriage, and how prevalent a problem it is in the community. Part of this exploration should also include looking at current laws or policies in place and their role. In some cases, laws may be in place banning CEFM, yet they are not enforced. This information should be analyzed and presented to the wider community so they can then work together to select priorities for change.

## Plan

Once the community has identified their priorities for change, whether it is ensuring all girls finish secondary school, imposing fines for men who marry adolescents, working with local government and authorities to enforce laws, or some other way to tackle child marriage in that community, they will develop a community action plan with details on roles and responsibilities for each activity and the steps to complete them.

## Act

Carry out the planned activities. These may include community dialogues, sharing of testimonials, advocacy for policy change, discussions, and debates with community leaders and/or initiators that may play a role in child marriage, or mobilizing local and external resources to address certain determinants or drivers. The community should lead this process as much as possible with targeted capacity strengthening provided as appropriate, based on assessed needs. This stage should also include the use of a simple monitoring mechanism through which community groups and leaders can generate information and data from their actions to document the change they are making and inform potential adaptation of their strategies along the way to increase efficiency.

## Evaluate

Form a smaller team of interested community members to evaluate the different activities as well as the overall process. Work with the community to determine what they would like to learn from the evaluation and develop tools to measure that. Carry out the evaluation and present the findings back to the larger community.

## Encourage Diffusion

What lessons learned can be shared with other communities to enable them to undergo this same process of action and change on a wider scale? Work with the community to assess what worked and what did not or where more action is needed and discuss a plan for sustainability. Discuss with the community how they can share these lessons learned with communities around them and discuss the changes they made to help end child marriage in their community.

## Questions to ask yourselves as implementers:

- How cohesive is the community? Communities that are less connected will be harder to mobilize towards collective action.

- Is the community leading the process? Social change is more sustainable if the individuals and communities who are affected by CEFM own the process.

- Has the wider community been given an opportunity to participate? The more community members who participate or feel they have been given the opportunity to participate, the higher the likelihood of lasting change.

- Was special consideration taken to reach out to populations that historically may not have had a voice or been part of broader discussions around child marriage (e.g., girls in the community who experienced early and forced marriages)? It is important to include all populations, even those that may not have been included in decision-making or change in the past. By ensuring all voices are heard, change is more likely to be sustainable over time.

- Have young boys and girls been actively engaged in every step of the process? It is important to hear the voices of youth who are directly impacted and are witnessing CEFM happen around them. Space should be given so these voices can be heard by all involved.

- Are the activities relying on people from outside the community to provide information and persuade them, or is support being given for the community to have dialogue and debate around the issue? For collective action to be successful, it must be driven by the community and at their own pace. Taking the time to dialogue and

engage with all perspectives leads to better ownership and lasting change.

- Is the focus on individual behavior change or on shifting wider community norms, supports, and policies? When working on community-level changes, the impact will be larger and more sustainable by creating an enabling environment.

- Have you engaged different levels of leadership for support in the process? Support by local leaders and government officials at multiple levels can help to ensure sustainability. If they include supporting the community for further change as part of their duties, they will be more likely to follow up and work with those communities in the future to sustain the change.



*A mother holds her newborn twins, who were delivered under the supervision of trained health professionals at Sri Krishna Medical College and Hospital, a public health facility. Photo by Paula Bronstein/Getty Images/Images of Empowerment.*

# Examples of Collective Action in CEFM Programs

## ONE COMMUNITY

**Implementing Organizations:** Johns Hopkins Center for Communication Programs; Plan International; Project Hope; Global Interfaith AIDS Alliance (GAIA) Malawi
**Overview:** One Community was a five-year project funded by PEPFAR through USAID and implemented by Johns Hopkins Center for Communication Programs, Plan International, Project Hope, and GAIA. Its primary goal was to reduce the impact of HIV and prevent new infections among Malawian priority populations. The project's primary focus was on providing direct services and support to orphans and vulnerable children and their caregivers in communities.
**Location:** Malawi—Blantyre, Chikwawa, Machinga, Mangochi, Mulanje, Phalombe, and Zomba districts

### Project Description

In Malawi, 42% of girls marry before they are 18 years old.[22] Social norms and practices, along with poverty, are key drivers leading girls to marry at such a young age. While the law in Malawi prohibits marriage before the age of 18, many rural communities are unaware of this, or if they are aware, choose to ignore a law that is rarely enforced. The One Community project partnered with local CBOs to lead the community to address different issues they identified and work to provide a more supportive environment for adolescent girls and young women using a modified version of the CAC called Community Action Sessions. Through these sessions, the CBOs worked with community members to identify and rank social and health issues they were facing. After ranking the issues, further discussion took place around the root causes of each issue and the possible solutions. Once solutions were discussed, the community developed action plans to initiate change. Along with the CBO and community members who were participating, traditional community leaders were keys to success as they have great influence, and their support was critical for the sustainability of change. Other stakeholders involved in the process included faith leaders, district officials, community policing forums, and other public institutions.

### Key Outcomes and Learnings

- 386 community action sessions held involving 29,925 community members and leaders
- Communities identified child marriage as a top priority to address, given the harm it caused the adolescent girls in their communities.
- Communities developed action plans to include supporting girls to remain in school, taking steps to ensure the community valued boys in the same way, and ensuring the rights of children were respected by all in the community.

- Task forces were formed by the communities to annul child marriages already in place and prevent new ones.
- The task forces worked to successfully annull 119 child marriages, with individuals as young as 12 years old returned to their families.

**Source:** Ofem, T., Matinhure, N., Girma, A., Loll, D., & Mwapasa, T. (2020). *Malawi One Community technical brief.* Johns Hopkins Center for Communication Programs.

## Comprehensive Programming to Address and Respond to Gender-based Violence

**Implementing Organization:** Save the Children
**Overview:** The project, led by Save the Children, worked with communities in Laos to review and change customary laws that led to harmful practices.
**Locations:** Laos

### Project Description

In Laos, customary laws are customs that are accepted as legal requirements or obligatory rules of conduct; they are a vital and intrinsic part of the social and economic system and are treated as if they were laws. Many of the customary laws in place disadvantage women and minimize individual rights and power, resulting in permitting and reinforcing CEFM. In Laos, 57% of the Hmong-Mien ethnic group engage in early marriage, along with 47% of the Mon-Khmer and 32% of the Lao-Tai. To review and change the customary laws, Save the Children brought together local communities, including those who held power in the communities, community members, youth aged 15–24, district officials, and provincial officials. The project encouraged open dialogue among the groups and held public debates between community members. Participants in workshops reviewed each of the customary laws that may reinforce harmful practices and discussed what changes could be made to end the harmful practices in their communities. By also including district and provincial officials, villages and communities were able to enlist their support as the changes were rolled out.

### Key Outcomes and Learnings

- The Hmong-Mien ethnic group changed a customary law that had previously allowed young boys and girls to elope and marry without parental consent. After reviewing the law, leaders and community representatives agreed that those who wish to elope would be required to wait until they are 18.

- The Khmu ethnic group changed a customary law forcing boys and girls to be married if they had been dating for a certain time, regardless of their age. Due to the change, this will no longer be allowed.
- By engaging multiple communities within the same ethnic group along with local government officials, change became not only possible but sustainable, as all actors played a role in agreeing to the change and making it happen.

**Source:** Save the Children. (2020, February 26–27). *Customary law review to address gender based violence* [Meeting presentation]. Bangkok, Thailand.

## TOSTAN

**Implementing Organization:** Tostan
**Overview:** Tostan implements a three-year Community Empowerment Program using a rights-based approach and working in partnership with communities to support community self-efficacy and collective action to increase the well-being and dignity of all community members.
**Locations:** Senegal, Mali, Guinea, Guinea Bissau, The Gambia

### Project Description

Through the Community Empowerment Program, community members are encouraged to engage in dialogue and debate about certain beliefs and practices and how those practices may impact individual or community rights and health. Community members work together to create a vision board for the community that illustrates the change and actions they want to take to make it a better place to live. The sessions build on each one that comes before it and provide community members with the skills and motivation to define a problem they see in their community, design and work towards a solution, and then sustain it, all with the cooperation and input of youth and adults in the community.

- It is recognized that to create large and lasting change within the community, the larger social network must be engaged. Tostan does this through their process of organized diffusion, where participants that attend the sessions adopt a learning partner—someone who is not participating in the sessions but with whom they share the information they have learned. In addition to sharing at the individual level, organized diffusion also takes place at the community level, where neighboring villages are invited to inter-village dialogues by those participating in the Tostan program. Otherwise, members of a social mobilization team travel to villages that frequently intermarry with their village and share their vision for their

village and the information they have learned from the empowerment program. At the end of the three-year program, many villages elect to hold public declarations to share the harmful practices they have chosen to end in their communities, thereby inspiring neighboring communities to also take steps forward to end harmful practices such as child marriage.

### Key Outcomes and Learnings

- Public declarations have been made by 7,717 communities against the practice of child marriage and committed to no longer practicing it.
- In Guinea-Bissau, joint decision-making between parents about whether a child should be married increased from 5% to 60%.
- In Mali, 90% of program participants could name at least two harmful consequences of child marriage, compared to only 37% in villages without the Tostan program.

**Source:** Tostan. (n.d.) Resources: ***Evaluations and research***.

# Conclusion

Collective action has been successfully used by many different projects to drive change across multiple disciplines and countries. By working hand in hand with the community—ensuring that they lead the process, identifying the issues contributing to child marriage, and developing localized solutions to those challenges—collective action can lead to widespread, lasting positive change for young girls, their families, and their communities.

# Useful Resources

- Communication for Social Change: An Integrated Model for Measuring the Process and Its Outcomes

- Collective Action Toolkit

- Gender Roles, Equality and Transformations (GREAT) Project Community Action Cycle (CAC) Implementation Guide

- Méthodologie du Cycle d'Action Communautaire (CAC) - French

- Mobilising Communities for Action on Health and Social Change - Community Mobilisation Strategy

# Appendix I:
## Sample Questions to Evaluate Collective Action

| Evaluating Collective Action *From the Communication for Social Change Integrated Model*[21] | ✗ No | | ? Some-what | | ✓ Yes |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. Is there any committee or community organization/group dedicated to addressing the issue of child marriage?<br>• How many of these committees or community groups exist? | | | | | |
| 2. Do these committee(s) or community organization(s) offer and encourage opportunities for other people related to ending child marriage in the community to actively participate?<br>• What are the mechanisms used for encouraging participation? | | | | | |
| 3. Whenever our leaders ask us to work on projects together, almost everyone is willing to join in and do their share of the work. | | | | | |
| 4. People in this community are always able to discuss problems that affect everyone. | | | | | |
| 5. If a problem arises that people cannot solve by them-selves, the community as a whole will be able to solve it. | | | | | |
| 6. People in this community usually have trouble dealing with conflict. | | | | | |
| 7. Whenever our community undertakes a project together, we know that we will all work hard until it is accomplished. | | | | | |
| 8. Whenever our leaders ask us to work on projects together, almost everyone is willing to join in and do their share of the work. | | | | | |
| 9. I have very little confidence that we will be able to solve child marriage as a community. | | | | | |
| 10. I am confident that we as community members can develop and carry out different initiatives in a coopera-tive manner even when difficulties arise to protect girls and prevent child marriage. | | | | | |
| 11. Our community as a group can influence the practice of child marriage because we are a cohesive and competent community. | | | | | |
| 12. We can deal effectively with even the most critical events because we are able to draw upon the social networks that exist within our community. | | | | | |

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