

# Gender Synchronizaton and 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,<sup>1</sup> affects an estimated 15 million girls each year.<sup>2</sup> CEFM is perpetuated by many factors, including but not limited to poverty, conflict, gender inequality, social and cultural norms, religious beliefs, and economic incentives.<sup>3,4</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup>

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



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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),<sup>6</sup> as well as lower educational attainment and reduced earning potential.<sup>1</sup> Governments and communities with high levels of CEFM experience economic burdens due to the health costs, welfare needs, and population growth associated with CEFM.<sup>9</sup> 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.<sup>6</sup>

Evidence increasingly shows that successful interventions to reduce CEFM and improve girls' lives are possible.<sup>10-12</sup> [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.



*Young Indian girl sits on concrete columns.  
Photo by Sharath G, Pexels.*

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## How Can Gender Synchronization Enhance Efforts to End CEFM?

Gender synchronization recognizes that people of all genders shape and perpetuate gender norms in society. Therefore, true positive social change will come from working with people of all genders using gender-synchronized approaches.

Gender-synchronized approaches are the intentional intersection of gender-transformative efforts reaching both men and boys and women and girls of all sexual orientations and gender identities. They engage people in challenging harmful and restrictive constructions of masculinity and femininity that drive gender-related vulnerabilities and inequalities and hinder health and well-being.<sup>13</sup> Such approaches can occur simultaneously or sequentially, under the same “programmatically umbrella” or in coordination with other organizations. Gender-synchronized approaches seek to equalize the balance of power between people of all genders to ensure gender equality and transform social norms that lead to gender-related vulnerabilities. Their distinctive contribution is that they work to increase an understanding of how everyone is influenced and shaped by social constructions of gender and the unequal opportunities they create. These programs view all actors in society in relation to each other across the

range of roles they play (e.g., mothers-in-law, fathers, wives, brothers, caregivers) and seek to identify or create shared values among women and men—values that promote human rights and mutual support for health, nonviolence, equality, and gender justice.<sup>13,14</sup>

As a holistic approach to ending CEFM, gender synchronization acknowledges power imbalances and the fact that at-risk youth often have less decision-making power over the timing and conditions of marriage than their parents, other relatives, and influential adults in their community. By also involving youth **[see the Youth Engagement Brief]** and these interconnected stakeholders, intentionally and in mutually reinforcing ways, in reflection on gender roles, norms, and power dynamics, gender synchronization efforts reinforce messages of change within interactions, address the underlying gendered power inequities, and foster the long-term sustainability of normative change.<sup>14</sup>

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## How to Incorporate Gender Synchronization in CEFM Programming

In 2020, Breakthrough ACTION conducted a literature review and key informant interviews to provide [concrete recommendations](#) on how to implement gender-synchronized interventions in family planning. The recommendations were then reviewed and adapted for CEFM through expert interviews.

## Key Recommendations for Donors and Policy Makers

Donors and policymakers play an important role in reinforcing or shifting specific approaches. The core recommendations regarding gender synchronization and CEFM programming for these stakeholders are to:

- Prioritize investments towards gender synchronized interventions.
- Support a Theory of Change for gender-synchronized interventions that depicts the benefits of this approach instead of non-gender-synchronized approaches.
- Invest in evaluating gender-synchronized interventions to build evidence on what works and the cost-effectiveness of doing so.
- Align on indicators for monitoring gender-synchronized interventions, with specific attention to early detection of possible unintended consequences.

## Key Recommendations for Program Designers and Implementers

Guidance for program designers and implementers must necessarily provide detail to inform the structure and focus of programs. The table below lays out key design principles, content, and practical considerations for applying a gender-synchronized approach to preventing and addressing CEFM. (Appendix I provides a basic checklist of the elements of a gender-synchronized approach to programming.)

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### Design Principles

- Inform the program with formative research to understand gender and power dynamics within a household and differences in attitudes toward CEFM, as well as power dynamics within newly forming sexual/intimate relationships among adolescents, including those not married and newly married.
- Include outreach and engage with communities at the inception of any program to create an enabling environment.
- Recognize the importance of skilled facilitators in the success of gender-synchronized programs and employ them accordingly.

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### Content and Approaches

- Ensure the content of your program fosters a mutual understanding of the consequences of CEFM among the different target audiences.
- Combine group, couple, and individual approaches to account for women and men's individual preferences and mitigate potential harmful consequences of programming.
- Adapt messaging to different sub-groups and consider doing an audience segmentation (see Brief on Segmentation in this series)

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### Practicalities

- Understand and recognize the contextual practicalities and sensitivities of working with men and women together, especially if bringing unmarried girls and boys together in a space within conservative environments. Be aware of intergenerational sensitivities when working with adolescents and adults together.

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## Examples of Gender-Synchronized Programs for CEFM

### **Choices, Voices, Promises<sup>15</sup>**

**Implementing Organization:** Save the Children

**Overview:** Choices, Voices, Promises empowers young adolescents to form gender-equitable attitudes by engaging everyone in a community to shift gender and social norms, including on child marriage.

**Locations:** Nepal, Bolivia, Bangladesh, Egypt, Ethiopia, El Salvador, Malawi, Zambia

#### **Program Description:**

Developed by Save the Children, the program Choices, Voices, Promises is a community-based, gender-synchronized intervention targeting three different populations through three complementary approaches:

- Choices to improve boys' and girls' access to activities that challenge restrictive gender norms and promote gender equity. The intervention was initially designed to focus solely on boys; however, formative research conducted early on to identify boys' interests, beliefs, and values suggested that a relational approach—involving both girls and boys—was more likely to be effective. The curriculum was designed to stimulate discussions between boys and girls to reflect on topics relating to power and gender.
- Voices to increase dialogue between parents and children that improves equity in the household. Intended for parents of children going through the Choices curriculum, the Voices intervention uses short videos to encourage a facilitated conversation on topics such as equity in the household and encourages parents to reflect on actions families can take to improve gender equity in their households.
- Promises to help shift community norms related to girls leaving school due to marriage and high rates of domestic violence. Intended for the broader community, the objective of Promises was to create an enabling environment for which individual changes inspired through the Choices curriculum, and household changes inspired through Voices, would have a greater likelihood to be sustained. The Promises approach involves displaying a series of six large posters in the community. As each poster is unveiled, a small group of identified community influencers discuss the poster and are asked to talk about it with their social network. Each poster is displayed for two weeks to catalyze dialogue and reflection at the community level.

## Key Learnings:

- A statistically significant difference in gender-equitable attitudes and behaviors was measured between groups that did or did not participate in the **Choices** curriculum.
- Children’s perceptions of gender roles were altered, resulting in greater acceptance of non-traditional gender roles. Boys especially recognized unfair gender norms and helped with housework.
- Girls felt empowered to speak to their parents about continuing education and avoiding early marriage; their brothers advocated with parents for delaying their sisters’ marriage.
- Fathers believed more in their daughters’ ability to contribute to the community in the future and expressed increased understanding of the need for their daughters to be physically mature before marriage.

**Source:** Save the Children. (2015). Choices, voices, promises: [Empowering very young adolescents to form pro-social gender norms as a route to decrease gender based violence and increased girls’ empowerment](#). Save the Children.



Adolescents from the 'I also have Something to Say' organization in Peru, let their voices be heard about generating safe environments in physical and digital spaces and closing the gaps that women and teenage girls face to exercise their rights. Photo by Federico Obregon/Save the Children.

## Tipping Point<sup>16</sup>

**Implementing Organization:** CARE

**Overview:** The Tipping Point initiative addresses the root causes of CEFM, specifically the control of adolescent sexuality, and emphasizes girl-led collective action to empower girls to assert their rights with the help of allies and supportive relationships around them.

**Locations:** Nepal, Bangladesh, Mali, Niger, Lebanon, Jordan

### Program Design

Tipping Point is a three-phase project that uses complementary approaches with girls, boys, parents, allies, government, and civil society to steer the global discourse about CEFM beyond short-term solutions.



### Key Outcomes

- Key social norms that restrict girls' opportunities and autonomy loosened slightly.
- Girls demonstrated growth in their communication and negotiation skills, personal aspirations, and practical knowledge.
- Parents demonstrated a greater commitment to their daughters' education, defended girls' rights to be active citizens, and were less concerned with family honor.
- Evaluation results from a randomized control trial in Bangladesh and Nepal (in settings where the proportion of women married by age 18 is >60%) will be available in 2020.

Source: CARE. (2020). [Tipping Point](#).

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## Conclusion

Gender-synchronized approaches are useful to challenge restrictive gender norms underpinning child marriage and can be used to design interventions to delay the age of first marriage or mitigate the consequences of early and forced marriage.

Several examples can be used as best practices, but more evaluation is needed to better understand the potential impact of such interventions for young girls.

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## Useful Resources

- [Synchronizing Gender Strategies: A Cooperative Model for Improving Reproductive Health and Transforming Gender Relations](#)
- [Improving Family Planning Programming in Niger Through Gender Synchronized Approaches](#)

## Appendix I:

### Checklist for Gender-Synchronized Program Design<sup>13</sup>

Does your program...	✗ No	? Some- what	✓ Fully	If not fully, how could you consider integrating this element into your program?
<b>Minimum considerations for gender-synchronized programming</b>				
1. Work with men and women, boys and girls in an intentional and mutually reinforcing way, to challenge restrictive gender norms?				
2. Provide opportunities for men and women to engage in constructive dialogue? Does the program help explore the gender-related vulnerabilities of men and women related to CEFM?				
3. Address gender imbalances and power dynamics between those with more or less power in the community?				
4. Challenge restrictive gender norms and/or catalyze the achievement of gender equality?				
<b>Additional considerations for gender-synchronized programming</b>				
5. Provide opportunities for men and women to develop and collaborate for a common cause?				
6. Address social constructions of masculinity and femininity?				
7. Develop strategies that engage both men and women in preventing and responding to CEFM?				
8. Promote the rights of both men and women?				
9. Measure outcomes related to health and gender equity with both sexes? Measure gender equality as a measure of program success?				

Table adapted from Greene, M. E., & Levack, A. (2010). [Synchronizing gender strategies: A cooperative model for improving reproductive health and transforming gender relations](#). Population Reference Bureau.

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