

SBC Theory 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



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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),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

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.



Young girl with glasses and a beige headscarf looks into the distance. Photo by Destiawan Nur Agustra, Pexels.

How Can SBC Theory Enhance Efforts to End CEFM?

Changing child marriage-related behaviors—which are steeped in long-standing traditions and deep-rooted sociocultural norms—can be challenging. No “silver bullet” or universal solution exists when effecting behavior change in this domain. However, one constant is the recognition that using behavior change theories can help lead to successful program design and implementation. Theoretical models are evidence-based frameworks for understanding human behaviors and are, thus, very useful for developing CEFM programs where behavior change is needed.

SBC programs for CEFM are more effective when they are based on [social and behavioral science theories](#). A [theory](#) “a set of interrelated concepts, definitions, and propositions that explains or predicts events or situations by specifying relations among variables.” Theories can provide a map for looking at the problem and shaping the activities to address it. They can help programmers shape interventions that address identified gaps needed for change and provide a framework for evaluation. One caveat is that most common behavioral theories have Western origins, which may limit their applicability or relevance in non-Western settings. On the other hand, since theories are generalizations, programs can potentially adapt them to a particular setting; this process is sometimes called “cultural tailoring.”¹³ SBC practitioners most often use social and behavioral science theories which have been widely validated in non-Western settings, but they still need

to tailor any approaches to the local context, especially when dealing with an issue like CEFM, which is often entrenched into social norms based on long-standing cultural beliefs and practices. For example, Social Learning Theory highlights self-efficacy (an individual’s belief in one’s capacity to act to achieve goals) as necessary to achieve behavior change, but what produces or constrains self-efficacy and how it is expressed must be understood in the local context. Norms, too, are highly contextual: the norms that matter to people about child marriage will be situation- and time-specific and must be understood in that place.¹⁴

Theories can help answer key questions such as:

- Why a problem exists
- Whom to select
- What you need to know about the intended audience
- How to reach people and make an impact
- Which strategies are most likely to effect change

Example Theories to Help with CEFM

Many SBC theories can inform programs, and most effective programs use more than one theory depending on whether they impact the individual, community, network, or societal levels. This brief introduces two fundamental theories: the Social Learning Theory and the theory of Bounded Normative Influence. Social Learning Theory contributes to the understanding of how individuals decide to change. In contrast, Bounded Normative Influence Theory contributes

to understanding how social relationships and interpersonal networks can impede or foster change at the community level. Both individual- and network-level changes are needed to influence the social norms that will reduce CEFM.

Social Learning Theory

Albert Bandura's Social Learning Theory posits that people are active and self-reflecting agents. His theory proposed that learning can occur by simply observing and evaluating the actions of others (role models) and then adopting or copying those behaviors if they seem doable and beneficial. Communication programs can present role models to encourage this learning process.¹⁵

Key components

People learn and decide how to act by doing the following:

- Observing the actions of others
- Observing what happens to people when they take a particular action
- Evaluating the action and its consequences for their own lives
- Rehearsing and then attempting to reproduce the action

How might CEFM programs use Social Learning Theory?

CEFM is such a complex problem that individuals or groups can have difficulty visualizing possible solutions in their community. CEFM programs might apply Social Learning Theory by providing models, both in person and through media (e.g., radio dramas, video clips, storytelling), to illustrate how people can change and demonstrate potential solutions that work

in the local context. This modeling can also depict challenges people face in changing their behavior and overcoming those challenges. Such programs can also depict secondary audience members (people who are influential in the lives of the primary audience) as role models who provide advice and support to the people a program is trying to serve and encourage others to play a similar role for people in their own lives.

How can programs model change?

Many programs use [positive deviants](#) (i.e., people who do something atypical to the norm that is successful) as champions who model how change is possible and the results of that change. Some CEFM-based examples of positive deviants include the following:

- Successful fathers who delay the marriages of girls in their family and are accepted in society
- Young women who complete school, have delayed marriage, and are helping to provide for their family in a way that the community accepts
- Religious leaders who urge their community to delay marriage, and maternal mortality has since declined in their community

Social Learning Theory helps SBC practitioners understand individuals may convey or can learn of these successes through either direct personal experience or vicariously via interaction, storytelling, or mass media. At the same time, SBC programs need to remember that people often need time to practice or rehearse a behavior before they feel ready to either try it themselves or commit to it.

Steps to using Social Learning

Theory principles

1. Identify compelling message/modeling characteristics

- Who are the people or characters that others will want to emulate? For example, a program seeks to change the behaviors of fathers, it might either find a father who already encourages delayed marriage in his household or create a character of a father who has delayed his children's marriage but is still respected by others.
- Who will the desired audience either relate to closely or admire and look up to? Often the most appealing characters are those slightly higher in status or achievement than the audience, in other words, a kind of person an audience member can realistically aspire to become.
- How can you tie CEFM messaging to local aspirations? For example, if supporting family is a local aspiration, programs might consider positioning reducing child marriage in terms of how it will help parents support a family. Or, if religious values are important, then they can show how reducing child marriage is in line with religious texts or values.
- What is an attractive and accessible medium/channel for entertainment that can present the content, encourage discussion and reflection, and motivate emulation? For example, are TV or radio programs accessible and enjoyed by many, or would community theatre or mobile video work best for the community?



Youth ages 15 to 19 attend a Pathfinder International training about adolescent sexual and reproductive health in Bihar, India. Photo by Paula Bronstein/Getty Images/Images of Empowerment

2. Consider how a desired behavior, such as ensuring girls finish school, can be represented

- What part of the behavior needs to be demonstrated? All of it or just the harder parts?
- How can programs demonstrate overcoming local barriers and inspiring change in a way that an audience member might also realistically achieve?

3. How can SBC practitioners stimulate/reinforce the practice of the behavior?

- How can a program develop and present stories that encourage the intended audience to imagine themselves taking action and ensuring their daughters do not marry young?
- How can a program provide opportunities for people to talk to others about the role models they have seen/heard about? For example, consider building in time for self-reflection, group discussions or community forums, or re-enactment of scenes from a drama that show how families have handled situations where someone asks to marry their daughter.

The case study at the end of this brief shows how a radio drama can be developed utilizing Social Learning Theory (among other theories) to model how change can happen.

Bounded Normative Influence¹⁶

The practice of CEFM is present in many cultures, learned collectively, and passed from one generation to the next. This social norm endures through social pressure to conform and may prevent individuals from expressing divergent opinions or actions. In many communities, a “[spiral of silence](#)” occurs, where individuals fear that talking about or taking action to reduce CEFM will cause their neighbors and peers to turn against them; therefore, they remain silent even though they may privately wish for change to happen. The fewer people see or hear about a behavior in their society, the less likely they are to talk about it or do it. This prevents [positive deviant](#) voices from being heard.¹⁷

How can a new social norm emerge?

A new idea or belief held by a minority of people can become a social norm through Bounded Normative Influence (BNI). This theory states that as long as a group of people who support the new idea or belief (such as those who want to reduce CEFM) sustain their beliefs and convictions among themselves, then the locally bounded norm can survive. The small network of supporters can then slowly recruit others on the edges of their network (e.g., friends or neighbors who also have their own networks and have denounced child marriage) to the same belief and/or action. Over time, the network of supporters grows as people near it adopt and share the behavior within their own networks. Eventually, the behavior may become the norm for the interconnected communities. The process accelerates when the linked group of supporters practicing the behavior become connected to other networks where the idea can spread among those members, forming a network of networks. Finally, the theory posits that the more frequently and persuasively supporters of the behavior communicate about it with others, the faster the idea will spread to those who are not currently supporting the new behavior.¹⁶

In other words, change does not happen everywhere at once; it spreads slowly over time through interpersonal channels and is sometimes reinforced by media messages. Smaller pockets of change can exist within a larger network or community if people are linked through information exchange and common opinions. Networks can be formal or informal, such as women’s associations, youth groups, or connected groups of parents. Within those networks, dialogue and change can happen on a small scale;

groups can then expand their networks by adding others around them, who, through frequent and positive communication about a desired behavior, also adopt the behavior and contribute to establishing its position as a social norm.

Steps to using Bounded Normative Influence principles

1. In a community, identify individuals or small groups that hold similar opinions or practice desired behaviors, such as not allowing their daughters to marry until after 18.

- Pay particular attention to the important opinion leaders within those small networks. Who do people turn to for advice? Who is respected? Who is already an active communicator about social issues?

2. Create opportunities for those small groups to interact with each other.

- Encourage frequent and positive information sharing among members of those small groups.
- Consider the use of communication venues (e.g., community meetings, clubs, schools, faith group meetings) and digital tools (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp) to support linkages within and among those small groups to bring them closer together and reinforce the existing positive norm.

3. Encourage people in the small, supportive groups to share their ideas with other acquaintances who are not members of the bounded normative group.

- Expand the use of communication venues and digital tools to engage with people outside of the core group.
- As more individuals receive frequent and positive information and begin to express interest in or support for reducing child marriage, make sure they are connected to a supportive network.



Maasai tribe elders and women gather for a forum organized by AMREF, and geared at sensitizing the elders and women towards an alternative rights of passage for young girls. Photo by Jonathan Torgovnik/Getty Images/Images of Empowerment

How to Incorporate Theory in CEFM Programming

When choosing a theory to help guide a program, SBC programs should always start with what they know about the audience, then pick a theory that fits the program's intention. Practitioners need to ensure they do not choose a theory and then try to make it fit the audience.

Steps to incorporating theory in CEFM programming:

1. Consider the type of change the program is promoting and what some of the barriers are to change.

- Are these types of changes more on an individual level or societal? Are the barriers to change more individual or social/structural? Narrow the list of possible theories by the type of change the program will promote. This can help develop a **theory of change**. Look for causality and

consider the program objective and current context. Then map out *why* the current context leads to the current outcomes and how the program will implement activities to guide communities toward a different outcome. Use this mapping process to string together if/then statements that illustrate how the program’s objective may be achieved.

- The [Girls Not Brides Theory of Change](#) is a good example of a theory of change for CEFM. It covers four pillars: (1) empower girls, (2) mobilize families and communities, (3) provide services, and (4) establish and implement laws and practices. The Tostan case study that follows also includes an example of a localized theory of change.

2. Conduct a [situation analysis](#), which also includes performing a [root cause analysis](#), which can help programs recognize and identify the complex factors, such as education, social structure, youth and parent aspirations, and gender and power dynamics, that contribute to CEFM. Through the analyses, programs can consider which factors to prioritize.

3. Conduct a “deep dive” analysis of the audience. The more granular the analysis of the audience’s barriers and facilitators, the more likely a program will select an appropriate theory or theories, build a programmatic theory of change, and design programs to address the audience’s needs (Refer to the **Advanced Audience Segmentation brief** in this series). There are many approaches for [deep audience analysis](#), including [human-centered design](#) (see the **Human-centered Design brief** in this series). The appendix at the end of this brief also includes one potential audience analysis tool.

4. After examining the results of the situation and root cause analyses and determining which factors to focus on, consider which theoretical approach which may best fit your goals. Programs might use multiple theories within one project, depending on its aims. The [TheoryPicker](#) by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention offers a series of questions to help an SBC practitioner determine what may work best for a program.

5. Shape programming using both the information gathered and the theory (or theories) selected.

A child reading a book in her local Wolof language, developed and printed by TOSTAN to help preserve the local languages rural in Senegal. Photo by Jonathan Torgovnik/Getty Images/ Images of Empowerment



Examples of the Use of Theory in CEFM Programming

“Mai Sari Sunakhari” and “Hilkor”¹⁸

Overview: A multimedia storytelling program that aired between 2016 and 2020 focused on child marriage and other issues.

Location: Nepal

Implemented by: Population Media Center

Project Description

The project devised two radio serial dramas featuring a Nepali film star: “Mai Sari Sunakhari” and “Hilkor.” 40 radio stations across the country broadcast the drama, along with a related radio talk show. Promotional spots aired on radio, TV, and across social media. The project also disseminated promotions in print.

Prior to developing the serial dramas, extensive formative research determined existing social norms that influence child marriage. The project considered these when creating the characters and their stories so that characters modeled behaviors of those in the community, in line with Social Learning Theory.

The project developed the serial dramas using Population Media Center’s theory of change and considered local social norm constructs. Characters in the drama evolved as they learned about the negative consequences of child marriage—for the character of the girl, her family, and her community—and began to adopt practices and change their behavior to find alternatives and fight against child marriage in their communities. An example of one such behavior was increased parent/child communication.

Key Outcomes and Lessons Learned

- Listeners of “Mai Sari Sunakhari” were
 - 2.1 times more likely than non-listeners to take action against child marriage
 - 3 times more likely to believe that girls should be encouraged to continue their education
 - 2.7 times more likely to believe that women and men have equal leadership capabilities
- Listeners of “Hilkor” were
 - 2.1 times more likely than non-listeners to take action against child marriage
 - 2.9 times more likely to discuss child marriage with others

Source: Riley, A. H., Barker, K., & Lundgren, R. (2021). From theory to practice: what global health practitioners need to know about social norms and narrative interventions. *Journal of Communication in Healthcare*, 14(2), 102–104.

Tostan¹⁹

Overview: Tostan's three-year Community Empowerment Program, takes a rights-based approach, working in partnership with communities to support community self-efficacy and collective action to increase the well-being and dignity of all community members, including by reducing child marriage.

Locations: Senegal, Mali, Guinea, Guinea Bissau, the Gambia

Implemented by: Tostan

Project Description

Tostan's Community Empowerment Program (CEP) is based on Demba Diawara's theory of social change (1997), which states that practices such as child marriage cannot be discontinued by one person, family, or village alone. Everyone in the interconnected groups need to be part of the process and decide together to end certain practices; if not, individuals or small groups within larger interconnected ones find changing too difficult since the social costs are high.

Tostan has been very effective in utilizing Diawara's theory of social change through its Community Empowerment Program (CEP) to reduce child marriage. In Senegal, many villages have social connections with other villages, usually from the same ethnic group, in which they often intermarry and maintain common customs. When one village participates in the CEP, they share with these other communities what they have learned and discuss why they think it is beneficial to change some of their customs. Community members also begin to model the new behavior (e.g., waiting until their daughter is older before allowing her to marry) and, working together through the network, slowly begin to change.

Diawara's theory incorporates aspects of Bounded Normative Influence theory by bringing new and compelling ideas for discussion into a specific closed network of families and village representatives to convince them to take action together. They then later expanded outside that initial network.

Neighboring communities outside of the social networks benefited from the work of Tostan when they observed the benefits the program brought and the changes community members made. They can watch and observe the impact of the change before adopting it themselves, as is described in Social Learning Theory.

Key Outcomes and Lessons Learned

- By focusing on a small group or community to begin with, change can be effected on a much wider scale as they then share with others in their social network.
- Over 8,000 communities have made public declarations abandoning the practice of child marriage and/or female genital cutting across multiple countries.
- Communities that have been evaluated were found to have established new social norms, and child marriage, which was once accepted, is now seen to be unacceptable. For example, in the Gambia, approval of child marriage decreased from 53% to only 12%. In Guinea and Guinea-Bissau, an even more dramatic change occurred, with child marriage approval rates of 88% and 78% before the Tostan program dropping to 3% and 6%, respectively.

Source: Tostan. (2020). [Resources: evaluation and research](#).

Conclusion

Incorporating theoretical approaches like Social Learning Theory or Bounded Normative Influence in the design and formation of an SBC program can help create greater impact in changing behavior at both the individual and societal levels. Such theories can be especially useful when addressing behaviors embedded in existing social norms and practices like CEFM, as implementing these theories in program design can lead to the engagement of community champions and social networks who can model acceptance of new, healthier norms. In the case of CEFM, these effective approaches can, over time, help lead to reducing morbidity and mortality for girls and young women in particular and easing societal burden as a whole.

Useful Resources

- [How to Conduct a Root Cause Analysis](#)
- [CDC TheoryPicker](#)
- Further information on specific theories:
 - [Diffusion of Innovation](#)
 - [Extended Parallel Processing Model](#)
 - [Health Belief Model](#)
 - [Theory of Planned Behavior](#)
 - [Social Learning Theory](#)
 - [Transtheoretical Model](#)
 - [Bounded Normative Influence](#)

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Appendix

Audience Analysis Tool for Delaying Early Marriage

For your selected audience, check the box that represents what you know about its levels of knowledge, attitudes, social support, efficacy to respond, and use of protective practices regarding CEFM. The categories of low, medium, and high can be based on agreed-upon context and discussions, as well as on literature or primary or secondary research. Evidence may be varied; note this if needed. The notes column is the most important for contextualizing these questions to the local context and program.

	Low/ Negative	Medium/ Neutral	High/ Positive	Notes
Personal/cultural values related to the issue <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Does the audience perceive that the community supports delayed marriage? 				
Perceptions of recommended solutions <ul style="list-style-type: none"> What does the audience think about the idea of delaying marriage? 				
Knowledge of issue <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Are they aware of the negative health, development, and economic consequences surrounding child marriage? What is their understanding of the challenges girls face surrounding marriage decision-making? 				
Knowledge of solutions <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Does the audience know of ways to delay marriage? Are there any local programs that the audience knows about where child marriages have been delayed? 				
Perceived efficacy to respond as an individual <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Does the audience believe they could take action to delay marriage even if others are not in support? 				

<p>Perceived risk/threat associated with the issue</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are there risks for a girl associated with marrying early or delaying? 				
<p>Sources of social influence related to the issue</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Who influences marriage decisions within a family or community? 				
<p>Perceived social support available</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Will other family members or community members support decisions to delay marriage? • Do they think that others also want to take action to delay marriage? • Can the audience take action alone or only if others are in support? 				