Five Bangladeshi girls at Pohela Boishakh celebration. Photo by Moheen Reeyad.

Social Norms 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,[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]

Young girl on a street in Bangladesh.
Photo by Adam Jones, Flickr

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 Social Norms Enhance Efforts to End CEFM?

Social norms are the "perceived informal, mostly unwritten, rules that define acceptable, appropriate, and obligatory actions within a given group or community."[13] Social norms are highly context-specific and may differ slightly even in neighboring communities.[14] Different from attitudes, which are more a personal opinion or individual motivation, social norms are motivated by external forces. They are determined by what other people or groups of people (the reference group) do and what they approve or disapprove of, or what people *think* others do or will approve of.[15] Social norms can both encourage or discourage a behavior and may improve health outcomes, such as the norm of giving birth in a hospital, or reinforce harmful practices, such as child marriage. Social norms exist in every community around the globe and influence individuals' behaviors, whether that person is aware of them or not.

Many social norms contribute to child marriage. These include norms around puberty and when a girl is considered a woman, what happens when a teenage girl becomes pregnant, practices that force marriage after rape, and lack of decision-making power for women. For example, among the Mbororo in Cameroon, the norm is that "respectable" girls all marry soon after reaching puberty.[16] In Malawi, it is the norm that if a girl falls pregnant, she is forced to marry the man or boy who got her pregnant,[17] regardless of her age. In Bangladesh, where 51% of girls are married before they turn 18, social pressure and

the parents' fear of negative sanctions for not marrying their daughter off are large contributing factors.[18]

Teenage girls attend a nutrition training course in Moulvibazar, Bangladesh. Photo by Christophe Viseaux, Save the Children.

As noted in the Child, Early, and Forced Marriage Resource Guide, by working with the community to identify social norms that contribute to or drive CEFM, program implementers can design norms-shifting interventions that help address the root causes of the practice, not just the knowledge and attitudes of individuals. While individual knowledge and attitudes are important in CEFM, they can often be overridden by fear of negative social sanctions. For example, if a parent thinks that child marriage is wrong and doesn't want their child to be married before age 18, but if they believe that others may judge them for this choice or their daughter may become socially isolated for not marrying, they may still marry her off young, regardless of their own feelings. By addressing the community's social norms, rather than just the beliefs and practices of individuals, change can be influenced at a larger level that leads to collective action (See the **Collective Action Brief**) and more widespread and lasting change.

How to Address Social Norms in CEFM Programs

Before embarking on programs that aim to shift social norms related to CEFM, it is critical to fully understand the social norms that exist in the specific program context, how they interact with each other, and who some of the key influencers of these norms may be. Exploring the social norms of a community can help implementers better understand the interconnectedness of CEFM with other influences, such as religion, culture, traditions, or limited resources and can help ensure that any intervention is culturally appropriate and developed in partnership with the community to contribute to lasting change.

In designing norms-shifting interventions, it is important not to ignore the other aspects that influence people's behavior, such as attitudes and beliefs, economic and structural conditions, and policy. In some cases, if proper formative research is not carried out and the community is not involved from the start, it can lead to programs being implemented that do not address the root causes. For example, if a project's goal is to end child marriages in the community, the intervention is designed to assume that parents are marrying off their daughters due to social norms. Still, the reality is that parents did not want to marry off their daughters and instead felt it was the best option for them due to economic reasons, the activities being developed will most likely not change anything. It's important to remember that norms exist within the larger context, and communities and individuals are shaped by all these components (e.g., socioeconomic and other beliefs such as religion, along with community norms).

Shifting a norm may not lead to change if one of the other components, such as economic conditions or policy, more strongly influences the behavior. Below are points to consider when designing norms-shifting interventions and social norms research.

When Conducting Research

When designing formative research to understand the social norms influencing CEFM, consider and adapt the following questions as appropriate.[3,19,20]

Related to behavior and current norms:

- What behaviors that may influence CEFM are considered to be typical in the different groups? The wider community?

- What behaviors related to CEFM are approved in the different groups? The wider community?

- Are behaviors or norms related to CEFM linked (or perceived to be linked) to a religious mandate? Or a cultural mandate?

- What are the relevant norms on sexuality and sexual behavior? How do they influence CEFM practices?

- What cultural and traditional practices accompany CEFM (i.e., bride price, dowry, female genital mutilation/cutting, polygyny, bride abduction, and emphasizing female chastity)?

- How are girls valued in the community? Does their value differ from that of boys?

- If women and girls experience gender-based violence, such as abduction or rape, what are the expected actions of the families regarding marriage?

- What power inequities reinforce or encourage CEFM in the community? Whose power is threatened by changing the norm?

Related to reference groups and influencers:

- Who are the reference groups? How do norms shift based on who the reference group is?

- Who might the different reference groups be for adolescent girls? Parents and caregivers? Men or boys who may be wanting to marry young girls?

- Who in the community is most likely to challenge social norms that contribute to CEFM or deviate from the norm? What barriers might each group face in making the challenge?

- Do role models and opinion leaders promote a different norm or the status quo?

Related to policy and structural conditions:

- Do policies favor certain social classes or ethnic groups above others and, thereby, render change more difficult for some?

- Are programs or policies to shift norms underway? What is working well with these programs? What are their challenges?

- Do changes in social structures (e.g., economy, politics, other) provide opportunities for different practices? Is this an environment resistant to change?

- How does access to resources—such as income, jobs, education, loans, housing—affect the social norms?

- Do people have the resources to adopt new norms or behaviors?

Related to consequences of change:

- What negative social sanctions are anticipated if someone deviates from the norm? What are the benefits of following the norm?

  » What influence do the anticipated negative social sanctions have on CEFM?

  » What influence do the benefits have on CEFM?

- Are there circumstances when it is more acceptable to deviate from what is considered typical and appropriate?

- Are people able to safely try new behaviors without unintended consequences?

- Is change viewed as an opportunity or experienced as a loss of power or tradition?

- Is change happening in the wider society, or is this change isolated?

When Conducting Program Implementation and Monitoring

Consider the following points when approaching the different stages of a norms-shifting intervention for CEFM.[20]

Before starting an intervention:

- Involve the community from the start—no intervention will be successful in changing norms if the community is not actively involved in all stages of the process, from exploring and defining the norms, identifying what to focus on and designing a program, and evaluating its impact.

- Find community members already committed to not marrying off their daughters or speaking out against CEFM and that communities respect and have identified as important. These individuals can be positive role models and help facilitate change.

As part of an intervention:

- Use vision setting, helping those involved in the programs to imagine change before it happens and the secondary changes it can lead to once they have achieved their vision.

- Facilitate change at a group level, provide support to those making an effort to change, and connect them with others who are driving change to provide a support structure and foster collective action.

- Provide space and time for dialogue and debate. Not everyone will be on board, and it's important to recognize, listen to, and consider their opinions and feelings. Shifting norms happens at a community level and it is important to understand all views, including those of the detractors. Find ways to work with this group rather than ignoring them.

- Build responsibility and accountability. What will the community do if a child is married early? What may some of the new/positive social sanctions be as norms shift?

At the end of an intervention:

- Publicize the changes. When a norm has shifted, such as ending CEFM in a community, or individuals have begun to make changes, share it widely. The more visibility a new norm has, the more likely others are to also adopt it. It also can help to further normalize the change.

- Find supporters and bring them in. Identify resources and networks available to help end CEFM and ask them for support.

Examples of CEFM Programs Changing Social Norms

TIPPING POINT[21,22]

Implementing Organization: CARE
Overview: CARE's Tipping Point Initiative aims to promote positive alternatives to CEFM through social norms research and working in partnership with communities to address some of the root causes of child marriage.
Locations: Nepal and Bangladesh

Project Description

The project is being conducted in three phases: Phase 1 is the formative research and development of the theory of change and innovative approaches; Phase 2 is the development and implementation of different approaches linked to the theory of change; and Phase 3 supports the dissemination of approaches that were found to be effective.

As part of phase 1, project staff conducted a Community Participatory Analysis that identified five of the strongest underlying social norms that contributed to child marriage:

1. Girls' mobility is heavily restricted, and assumptions are made of girls who freely move about.

2. Girls who ride bicycles and play sports face negative social sanctions in communities.

3. Girls have little input into decisions about their marriage, with the father wielding all decision-making power.

4. Girls' interactions with adolescent boys are only seen as acceptable if it's related to schoolwork. Parents fear their daughter's reputation being damaged.

5. Girls do not participate in collective action for girls' rights even though they view it positively and believe it would be beneficial.

Based on the findings from phase 1, the project designed and implemented interventions to empower adolescent girls and begin to shift social norms. Interventions included group-based discussion, access to financial literacy and village savings and loans associations, sexual and reproductive health services, and leadership and civic participation opportunities. Adolescent boys and girls participate in group discussions every week; mothers and fathers attend monthly sessions; other stakeholders, such as religious leaders, government officials, and school staff, are brought together each quarter for topic-based dialogue. In addition, there are community-wide events and discussions held to involve the broader community in helping shift norms and to ensure an enabling environment over the 18-month intervention period. While most sessions are held with each population separately, six facilitated dialogues are held between different groups, such as adolescent girls with mothers or adolescent boys and mothers with fathers.

Key Outcomes and Learnings

- Using Community Participatory Analysis provides good insight into prevalent norms and allows the community to identify contributing social norms they may want to address.

- By identifying the root causes in partnership with the community, interventions can be more thoughtfully designed to address those issues, rather than more obvious but surface-level contributors.

- Engaging both adolescents and adult community members from the start ensures transformation happens among all impacted groups.

Source: CARE. (2020). CARE Tipping Point: Phase 2. Program summary.
CARE. (2020). CARE Tipping Point: Baseline evaluation. Social norms findings.

TEA STALL DISCUSSIONS – TIPPING POINT[20]

Implementing Organization: CARE
Overview: To reach men and provide comfortable spaces for them, facilitators led discussions in tea stalls where men frequently gather with friends to socialize.
Locations: Bangladesh

Project Description

In Bangladesh, fathers and brothers hold a great deal of power over the lives of the adolescent girls in their families and were seen as being key to shifting social norms that contribute to child marriage in the Sunamganj district. Wanting to reach men where they already congregate, Tipping Point facilitators held discussions at different tea stalls monthly, focusing on topics such as child marriage, girls' education, decision-making, and other topics related to gender transformation. The discussions were structured to help men begin to visualize different futures for the women in their lives where they had more freedom and opportunity and challenged some of the assumptions that had been in place. The consistency and frequency of these conversations allowed men to begin to feel more comfortable talking about issues that had previously been avoided. As the discussions became more normalized, men began to share the steps they were taking to support the women and girls in their daily lives.

Staff used CARE's Social Norms Analysis Plot framework to monitor if any shift in norms was taking place through the tea stall conversations and randomly selected men to interview. Using the framework, the intervention was identified as promising for shifting social norms, where men felt comfortable and enjoyed being part of the conversations. It provided the men a platform for them to be open and speak about their personal thoughts and beliefs and allowed for those who had already changed some of their beliefs and practices to share and be role models for change.

Key Outcomes and Learnings

- Men overwhelmingly reported the conversations as a positive experience.
- Topics discussed were reported by men as topics they had not previously discussed with other men.
- Some men reported learning from the discussions in which they engaged.
- Men reported behavior change by their peers such as:
  - Re-enrolling a daughter in school after previously pulling her out as he did not see the need for her to go to school past primary level.
  - Giving their daughters more opportunities outside of their homes in both sports and education.

Source: CARE. (2016). Tipping point social norms innovations series.

Conclusion

Working with communities to identify, explore, and shift social norms to support and protect girls is a key component to ending CEFM. While norms-shifting interventions may require a longer investment in terms of design and implementation duration to result in meaningful changes, once transformation has occurred, it is likely to last long after the life of the project.

Useful Resources

Tool	Description	When to use
Social Norms Exploration Tool (SNET)	This tool offers a guide through conducting social norms research in a community, walking the user through five phases: Plan & Prepare, Identify Reference Groups, Explore Social Norms, Analyze Findings, and Apply Findings.	As part of formative research and social norms exploration in communities
CARE's Social Norms Analysis Plot Framework	The framework enables identifying and understanding key components of a social norm that can then be addressed through interventions and programs. It can also be used to analyze potential signs that norms might be changing, or if not, why they seem to be staying in place.	As part of formative research to gain a deeper understanding of the social norms that exist in a community and also part of monitoring to assess how norms are changing
Participatory Research Toolkit for Social Norms Measurement	This toolkit provides a number of participatory activities that can be conducted with communities to better understand their social norms.	As part of formative research, monitoring of a program, or during evaluation
Getting Practical: Integrating Social Norms into Social and Behavior Change Programs	This tool was developed for program teams as a way to synthesize formative social norms research for use in working with communities to design or adapt a program and come up with a monitoring plan.	At the start of program design, after formative research has been completed

Tool	Description	When to use
Resources for Measuring Social Norms: A Practical Guide for Program Implementers	This guide provides examples and insights into how to measure changes in social norms in programs. Specifically, it looks at how to approach measuring social norms, when certain approaches may be useful, how to collect data for measuring social norms, and how to use the information collected to inform programming.	When planning how to measure change in a program and when evaluating a program
Social Norms Lexicon	This lexicon provides simple, clear definitions of terms often used in social norms, theory, research, and practice. Examples for each term are also provided to assist with understanding.	When wanting to understand and define key social norm terms

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