



Youth Engagement 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



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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.



A group of Youth in Action graduates from Egypt making a recycled bag at the recycling workshop implemented by the program. Photo by Joseph Raouf, Save the Children.

How Can Youth Engagement Enhance Efforts to End CEFM?

Youth participation is essential for all development programming but even more so when the intended impact is directly related to the lives of youth and their well-being. Traditionally, the inclusion of youth in CEFM programming was primarily of participants in

peer-based activities or awareness-raising in communities. These kinds of activities tend to be lower on Hart’s Ladder of Participation (see Figure 1)¹³, which can be informative and beneficial but does not provide many opportunities for meaningful two-way communication, partnership, or youth-led decision-making. However, a more intentional and meaningful youth engagement approach at the higher rungs of participation means that youth can act as stakeholders, advocates, and leaders throughout the project cycle.

Roger Hart’s Ladder of Young People’s Participation



Adapted from Hart, R. (1992). *Children’s Participation from Tokenism to Citizenship*. Florence: UNICEF Innocent Research Centre.

Youth engagement is a holistic approach where multiple domains of positive youth development (PYD)¹⁴— improved assets, agency, contribution, and enabling environment— can drive well-being and create leaders for change. Youth engagement in SBC programming to address CEFM can lead to greater buy-in for behavior change, increased relevance of the tested solutions, and a better likelihood of sustainability. Youth engagement is an umbrella term that can include different roles for youth (boys and girls). This brief focuses on youth advocacy and youth partnerships in the context of SBC programming to address CEFM.

Youth advocacy

Recent research indicates that programs aimed at reducing CEFM can be effective when girls and boys are actively engaged in the process from start to finish. Youth advocacy can be broader than just policy change; youth advocates can also target their advocacy towards direct change within their families and communities. Youth advocates have access to others in their age group that adults simply do not have. This positions them to act as behavior change influencers with references, language, and incentives that only they would know are most relevant to their peers. Successful advocacy campaigns have included technology and social media platforms, youth-led mass media campaigns, advocacy towards parents and community leaders, the use of public forums, and networks of change-makers.¹⁵ Overall, taking an empowerment approach where girls and boys advocate for themselves, activating social change from the individual through to the governmental level has shown to be effective in reducing CEFM.

Youth partnerships

In addition to advocacy efforts, building strong partnerships at local, national, and international levels has been important for youth advocates seeking to enable behavior change, obtain resources, and impact policy. Child rights coalitions and a multitude of youth leadership groups have directly influenced change as well as developed important partnerships to execute their work through speaking about CEFM in community forums, door-to-door campaigns, street plays and educational entertainment, public rallies, and in speaking to village-level authorities.¹⁵ Effective youth partnerships are often multi-sectoral, involving coordination with parents and family members, local traditional and religious leaders, different levels and sectors of government, and international policymakers. Youth partnerships are often strengthened by a robust SBC strategy, increased visibility in public forums, regular advocacy events inclusive of adults, and by formalizing youth groups as active partners to adult structures that have the power to influence change. To drive social change through such partnerships, youth groups require partners that are willing to resource youth empowerment projects. They also need to work with partners to enlist family and community members to support behavior change, increase the capacity of local governments, and gather buy-in from national and international policymakers. Through strong multi-sectoral partnerships, youth leaders have successfully encouraged adults to look at their own ideas and experiences pertaining to gender and power to create context-specific solutions to CEFM.



*Girl teaching a community literacy class that she started to support girls and women learn how to read and write.
Photo by CJ Clarke/Save the Children.*

How to Incorporate Youth Engagement into CEFM Programs

The Community Action Cycle (CAC)¹⁶ is an approach [see the Collective Action brief] that engages communities in a process to identify social development issues and their root causes; set priorities; and spearhead the development, testing, implementation, and monitoring of SBC interventions aimed at shifting harmful norms and behaviors and improving social development outcomes at the community level.

Youth engagement in the CAC can be powerful when addressing issues such as CEFM that directly affect youth (girls and boys). Aligning the CAC with USAID-funded YouthPower Learning's [Six Tips for Increasing Meaningful Youth Engagement](#)¹⁷ can assist program implementers in maximizing opportunities for youth to own the change process and bolster their capacity, motivation, and self-efficacy to act as lead stakeholders in driving change in their communities around CEFM.

Program implementers should ask themselves the following questions when designing a CEFM program:

- How will youth be engaged in every step of the program cycle? How will the program make sure girls are active/have a voice? How will gender-based barriers to engagement be addressed?
- What roles will youth play in the design and implementation of the program?
- How will the program prompt youth (individual youth, teams of youth, and

youth-led institutions), their families, and their communities to define and envision meaningful youth engagement?

- How will girls and boys be encouraged, recognized, and positioned to be involved in and lead through various channels as a source of change for their own and their communities' positive development?
- How will the program work with the community to identify physically and emotionally safe spaces for youth, particularly girls, to practice, engage, and learn?
- How will the program position youth to set their own goals, gain access to resources, and strengthen their capacity (within individual, family, peer, and community settings) to achieve desired outcomes?
- How will the program foster a positive sense of belonging and cultivate linkages between youth and positive adult role models such as teachers, community/faith leaders, mentors, and service providers to plan, implement, and monitor community-level interventions?
- How will the program provide stipends, seed grants, or other resources for youth to implement their own action plans or projects that benefit the organization and/or community and can help transform skills development into leadership action?
- How will the program position girls and boys, their families, and communities to measure results?

When thinking about whether a program has been successful in engaging youth, there is no single indicator or method that can comprehensively measure these outcomes. Using PYD domains can enable programs

to measure changes in assets, agency, and contribution at the youth level, which collectively can be analyzed to demonstrate the benefits of youth engagement.

Designing and administering the survey questions together with youth can be an additional method for youth engagement in the project cycle.

Additional opportunities to measure youth engagement exist in the CAC process, which is monitored from community entry to developing and implementing community action plans and monitoring them through specific tools. The development of community action plans, and the activities outlined in those plans, serve as benchmarks to be closely monitored. In addition to these standard indicators and data monitoring for CAC, effective youth partnership includes youth engagement in monitoring and evaluating the program activities. This can range from training youth as enumerators to supporting youth-led research.

Addressing common challenges in youth engagement

Lack of youth engagement after initial activities. There can be many external reasons for girls and boys to drop out of programming or become disengaged in activities, such as scheduling conflicts with school or work, transportation challenges, or pressure from family responsibilities. This requires programmers to identify creative solutions with other stakeholders to help ease those burdens. Another way to better support the continued engagement of youth is to create opportunities for meaningful buy-in at each stage of the program cycle, including the design stage. Too often, a results framework is designed by adults, and

only afterward are youth included during a kick-off workshop or activity adaptations. When consultations with youth are conducted for a project design, they may only be brought in to provide their thoughts and inputs without being meaningfully involved in the design and ongoing implementation. As such youth may not fully understand how their inputs will be used. By involving girls and boys in CEFM programming much earlier and providing a participatory space where they can see their experiences and recommendations incorporated into the project design and expected results, there is greater likelihood youth will see themselves in the project and remain engaged throughout implementation.

Lack of support from family or community members. Practitioners and youth often report opposition to activities that address CEFM. This challenge can be a double burden on youth who are perceived as disrespectful if they speak up to adults. Youth partnerships with trusted adults in the community, such as teachers or local leaders, can mitigate this risk. These partnerships can be achieved through joint activities or mentorship, which can also provide opportunities for girls and boys to continue building their skills in advocacy and community mobilization.

Reinforcing power dynamics or marginalization within youth. Capacity strengthening increases youth skills, but in many places, especially if several development actors are implementing activities, this can unintentionally reinforce power dynamics and inequitable structures. The same youth or youth groups are selected to be part of multiple projects or to be representative leaders. Because they receive the capacity strengthening and financial resources, it

can create an environment where only their voices are heard. As CEFM is made worse by poverty, lack of education, harmful social norms and practices, and insecurity, the risk for CEFM can greatly vary for different individuals within the same community.

For this reason, it is important to meaningfully engage and amplify the voices of a variety of girls and boys from diverse ethnic, religious, cultural, and socioeconomic backgrounds and age groups, including those

most at risk and affected by child marriage and related issues. Projects with a sole focus on capacity strengthening for youth advocates to influence adults or stakeholders will miss a key opportunity to cultivate change between youth that is intersectional and rooted in equality. Including youth activities that prioritize feminist leadership principles¹⁸ can be transformative for girls and boys and lead to more sustainable change on issues like CEFM.

Examples of Youth Engagement in CEFM Programs

Girls Advocacy Alliance Project¹⁹

Implementing Organization: Trailblazers Mentoring Foundation with support from PLAN International Uganda

Overview: The main goal of the Girls Advocacy Alliance Project is to eliminate gender-based violence and economic exclusion for girls and young women in 10 countries in Asia and Africa.

Location: Bangladesh, India, Nepal, the Philippines, Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya, Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Uganda.

Project Description

From 2016 to 2020, Trailblazers Mentoring Foundation, with support from PLAN International Uganda, implemented the Girls Advocacy Alliance (GAA) project across six districts in northern Uganda. To initiate sustainable changes, the GAA trained girls and young women and their respective organizations to stand up for their rights and aimed to influence key stakeholders in national governments and intergovernmental agencies, the private sector, Civil Society Organizations (CSOs), and local communities. The GAA focused on: ending gender-based violence in the forms of the commercial sexual exploitation of children, sexual violence and abuse, female genital cutting, child trafficking, and child marriage; and eliminating economic exclusion by promoting access to post-primary education, technical vocational education and training, decent work, and female entrepreneurship. The alliance applied an advocacy and lobby strategy, shifting between different policy-influencing instruments and approaches (advising, advocacy, lobbying, activism) to push for existing legislation and policies on girls' and young women's rights by national and local governments.

- As a strategy to reduce child marriage, one of the project components focused on strengthening the capacity of boys and young men to identify, report, and follow up on cases of child abuse and teen pregnancy.
- Boys and young men were provided training on gender concepts, human rights, lobbying and advocacy, life skills, and child protection to champion change around CEFM and to value and promote the rights of girls and young women.
- The male champions worked with their communities and local stakeholders to develop action plans to guide their work towards ending child marriage.
- Boys and young men carried out community events and conducted visits to potential hotspots, including local video shacks, marketplaces, football playgrounds, trading centers, and bars to engage their peers on the need to end CEFM.

Key Outcomes and Learnings

- Increased involvement of boys/men in taking action to protect girls from child marriage by reporting and following up on cases of child marriage and actively participating in community awareness-raising events. Two cases of defilement were reported to the police and the perpetrators were arrested and have appeared before a criminal court.
- The work of male champions and youth groups, community/faith leaders through case reporting, and advocacy/community campaigns has resulted in an increase in school reentry and lower numbers of child marriages.
- Youth reported that their attitudes have changed and local leaders support them to share key messaging around CEFM and their perspectives on the matter with peers and other community members.
- Engaging young boys to understand their role and work with young female advocates is a best practice.
- Male youth champions are regarded as credible agents of change and have sustained engagement with community and district structures to support child marriage case management.

Source: Trailblazers Mentoring Foundation. [Girls Advocacy Alliance Project](#). Trailblazers Mentoring Foundation Uganda; Interview with TMF Uganda Founder, Joyce Antimango

Breakthrough ACTION Malawi²⁰

Implementing Organizations: Johns Hopkins Center for Communication Programs; Save the Children; Girl’s Empowerment Network; Creative Center for Community Mobilization

Overview: Breakthrough ACTION Malawi – Child Early Forced Marriage (CEFM) is a USAID-funded activity to spark a social movement that prevents and stops child marriage.

Location: Malawi – Chikwawa and Machinga Districts

Project Description

To address CEFM, Breakthrough ACTION Malawi adapted the CAC with elements from the Tostan Community Empowerment Program, including organized diffusion,¹ setting community values and vision, human rights, and public declarations.

- The project facilitated the establishment of community action groups (CAGs) in each zone of intervention that included a set number of positions that youth must fill. The inclusion of youth in each zone of intervention provided adolescent girls and boys the opportunity to lead entry meetings with a wide range of stakeholders and prompt other youth and their communities to articulate a vision around meaningful youth action and engagement for dismantling CEFM.
- During the exploration and prioritization of CEFM determinants, youth-led participatory exploration meetings on their own with youth stakeholders and organizations to deepen understanding of youth concerns and ensure that youth perspectives and opportunities for action were prioritized in action plan development.
- Youth CAGs guided their communities by developing community-owned SBC solutions across USAID Malawi’s seven-pronged framework for addressing child marriage. The framework, also the project’s Theory of Change, stated that to prevent and end child marriage, a comprehensive and multi-pronged strategy is required: (1) changing social norms that affect social change; (2) protecting children—especially girls—in the home, at school, and in-between; (3) preventing adolescent pregnancy; (4) establishing a culture of keeping girls in school; (5) fostering economic empowerment of communities; (6) enacting and effectively enforcing appropriate laws; and (7) providing financial, material, psychosocial, and spiritual support to girls and young women removed from child marriages.
- Examples of SBC interventions in community action plans included: 1) youth-led advocacy meetings and events with traditional and faith leaders around CEFM

1 Organized diffusion is the approach Tostan uses to spread their messages to other communities and those who are not part of the formal sessions, helping to spark a social movement. Organized diffusion is critical when establishing new social norms. It is not enough for a few people to decide to adopt a new social norm; all interconnected groups should be consulted, and decisions determined together collectively to ensure change and end certain practices. Without consulting with others before starting new social norms (such as not allowing CEFM), social sanctions may be too harsh to overcome and gains can quickly slide backwards.

and related issues; 2) establishment of Village Savings Clubs to provide economic support to families affected by CEFM; 3) intergenerational community dialogues around the effects of child abuse, CEFM, and its health impacts on young girls; 4) dialogues targeting youth around decision-making and vision-setting; and, 5) community meetings with youth, parents and traditional/faith leaders for the establishment and enforcement of by-laws around CEFM.

Key Outcomes and Learnings

- Youth and adult CAGs worked with their communities to collaboratively develop 20 community action plans to specifically address the determinants of CEFM identified through community exploratory meetings.
- Involving youth as lead stakeholders in all phases of the CAC approach ensures meaningful buy-in and more sustained youth engagement in community-driven change processes to shift harmful norms and practices around CEFM.
- Creation of youth CAGs to work alongside adult CAGs and ongoing capacity strengthening around human rights, referral systems, reporting mechanisms, and channels to support the dissemination of CEFM messaging afforded youth the skills and knowledge to lead community mobilization activities and identify, report, and follow up on CEFM cases with relevant government agencies.
- Five early marriages have been dissolved due to the efforts of the CAGs and all girls have returned to school.

Source: [Breakthrough ACTION Malawi](#)

Conclusion

Strengthening the assets and agency of youth to actively address CEFM and related issues is essential for young people to be healthy, productive, and engaged. Given the diversity of the youth experience and the distinct age-specific and context-specific needs of youth around the world, program implementers must consider how to work effectively with communities and local structures to create conditions for all youth, including the most underserved, to realize their full potential as leaders for change in CEFM programming.

Useful Resources

- [When It Comes to Ending Child Marriage, Involve Young People!](#)
- [Youth and Democracy, Human Rights, and Governance Toolkit. Module 2: Human Rights](#)
- [Youth Engagement Measurement and Indicators](#)

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