

A Brief on Key Findings from the Human-Centered Design (HCD) Approach to Reduce Child, Early, and Forced Marriage in Madhesh Province, Nepal

Background

Breakthrough ACTION, the United States Agency for International Development's global flagship social and behavior change (SBC) project, designed its Reducing Child, Early, and Forced Marriage (R-CEFM) project to strengthen the institutional and technical capacity of the Government of Nepal in Madhesh Province to design, implement, monitor, evaluate, and coordinate effective SBC and child protection system-strengthening activities to reduce child, early, and forced marriage (CEFM). The project aims to address barriers related to CEFM through a community-based, multi-sectoral, and data-driven lens.

Although age at marriage has increased in recent decades, CEFM remains an important issue in Nepal. The legal age of marriage in Nepal is 20 years. However, according to the local CEFM census of 2022 and 2023 conducted in six municipalities in Madhesh Province, the prevalence of child and early marriages among girls ranged between 35% and 59%, depending on the municipality.

The Madhesh Province government has the political will and commitment to address CEFM. However, local funding and decision-making authority lies with municipalities and wards. At the project outset, the municipalities in Madhesh Province did not prioritize addressing CEFM owing to not having the data to see the extent of it and because they did not perceive it as a problem as it was local custom. After six municipalities funded their own census in 2022 and 2023 that revealed the situation, they began to take the issue more seriously but were not sure of the best way forward.

In conjunction with local government stakeholders the R-CEFM project facilitated a human-centered design (HCD) process in six focal municipalities to understand reasons for child marriage and identify and refine potential SBC activities to address CEFM that would be locally relevant.

The HCD process emphasizes the importance of keeping the intended audience at the center and, in doing so, enables the development of innovative solutions that directly meet the needs and desires of that audience. The HCD process was especially relevant for the R-CEFM program because it provided municipal leadership the opportunity to interact with community members face to face, such that they gained empathy for those affected by CEFM. This closeness inspired leadership to invest municipality resources, including funds to develop, prototype, and monitor potential activities.



Figure 1: Parents for focus group discussion



Figure 2: Key Informant interview with adolescent

Design Challenge

The main design challenge guiding the HCD process was the following question:

How might we strengthen the municipality-level systems' capacity to support local structures to reduce CEFM?

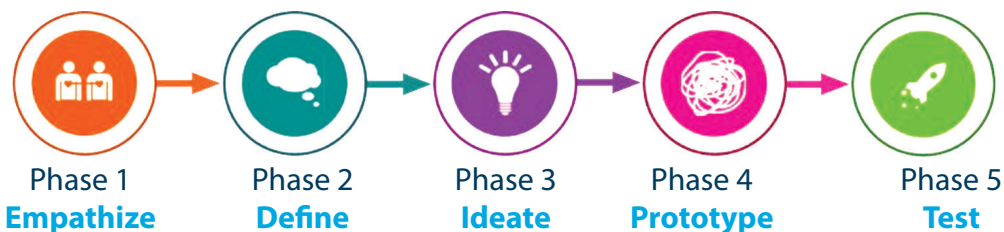


Figure 3. The HCD process cycles through five phases: empathize, define, ideate, prototype, and test

At the beginning phase of the HCD process, dedicated design teams in each municipality were formed to support the independent decision-making power of each municipality and to foster buy-in. Design teams were formed with an emphasis on ensuring meaningful gender, equity, and social inclusion (GESI).

Empathize Phase

During this phase, the design teams focused on understanding experiences of religious/social leaders, married and unmarried adolescents, their parents, municipalities, and wedding planners and police, through immersive fieldwork and in-depth conversations.

I want to get married only after I start earning on my own, but my parents will not wait till then.

—Unmarried adolescent girl, Loharpatti

Child marriage takes place because of the societal pressure that their daughter won't get an appropriate partner if [the girl gets] older.

—Religious leader, Matihani

Define Phase

During the Define phase, the team identified themes, generated insights, and created design challenges based on the insights. Audience insights resulted in the following five major themes:

- **Society values prestige (both family and individual):** Parents fear that if they allow their children to wait until they are 20 years old to marry, their children may elope. They also worry that the community may say negative things about their family and the children.
- **Community members are indifferent to CEFM:** Community members, especially the educated and the influential, think that the CEFM issue is not their problem; rather, they believe it is the problem of members of the Dalit, Janajati, and disadvantaged groups.
- **The community does not acknowledge the prevalence of CEFM:** Affluent and influential people, political leaders, and social leaders believe that even if CEFM exists, it happens only because of poverty and among lower caste people.



Figure 4: Key Informant Interview with community leader

- **Society does not value girls:** Audience members perceive that male members of a family remain in the family forever, but daughters leave the family when they marry. Therefore, parents do not invest in their daughters compared with their sons. They think they fulfill their responsibility to a daughter by investing in her marriage instead of her education.
- **Parents see girls as a burden:** Parents feel that keeping girls in the family or waiting till she is older to marry increases the burden of a dowry and the likelihood that relatives will gossip.

Facilitators used insights prompted by these key themes as a foundation for developing design challenges to generate ideas for solutions. After documenting the emerging insights, each municipality's design team examined the insights to create five design challenges.

Insight 1: Stakeholders do not acknowledge or internalize the presence of CEFM in all groups regardless of religion, class, education, or place of residence.

Design Challenge 1: How might we meaningfully engage the local leadership in formulating effective programs to reduce CEFM?

Insight 2: People who are willing to work against CEFM have not been able to come together.

Design Challenge 2: How might local and ward child rights committees (LCRCs and WCRCs) and informal child rights structures reduce CEFM?

Insight 3: Parents who marry off their daughters at an early age are concerned about the threat to the reputation of the family if the daughter faces any allegations related to her character.

Design Challenge 3: How might we increase the social prestige of parents who marry their daughters only after 20 years of age and, in doing so, help make their daughters be more self-sustained?

Insight 4: Affluent and influential leaders in society are not proactive in reducing CEFM.

Design Challenge 4: How might we help affluent and influential people understand the power they have and encourage them to take concrete steps to reduce CEFM?

Insight 5: Parents do not give priority to their daughters' education. Daughters then falter in their studies, leading them to lose interest in education. They are then married off by the parents to fulfill their responsibility and save money.

Design Challenge 5: How might we convince parents to value girls as able to contribute to a family, especially if they marry later?



Ideate Phase

In this phase, participants generated many ideas in response to the "how might we" statements, challenging assumptions and going beyond the obvious for determining possible solutions. In total, they generated **177 ideas**. Participants then prioritized 14 ideas based on relevance, potential impact, delivery channels, cultural acceptability, potential for sustainability, GESI, and feasibility of implementation.



Prototype Phase

In this phase, design teams identified 14 solutions (ideas) and developed detailed activity and implementation plans with associated monitoring indicators. With support from R-CEFM staff, municipalities further prioritized seven activity prototypes as the most innovative prototypes to move forward for intensive monitoring and prototyping/testing. Table 1 describes the seven innovative ideas identified from the HCD process

Table 1: The seven innovative activities prototypes: The prototypes marked with an asterisk are innovative activities, meaning they are completely novel and have never been used for reducing CEFM in Nepal.

Prototype	Description
1. Mobilizing religious leaders to transform CEFM social norms*	Religious leaders and other individuals who perform marriage rituals will be enlisted by the local government, which will legislate that marriage rituals may only performed by them. The government will mobilize religious leaders and other individuals who perform marriage ceremonies to discourage child, early and forced marriage and transform existing social norms.
2. Mobilize an all-political party committee*	Form ward- and municipality-level all-political party committees and mobilize them to gain political support for reducing child marriage gaining political support.
3. Award ward chairs and ward secretaries*	Municipality honors and publicly acknowledges the chairperson and secretary of the ward with the best R-CEFM progress within the municipality in each fiscal year.
4. Award parents*	Organize an award program annually to honor parents who marry off their daughters after the age of 20.
5. Form and mobilize a committee of the influential civil society members for R- CEFM*	Form and mobilize a committee of influential civil society members at the municipality and ward levels to work together to support activities that reduce CEFM.
6. Provide subsidies	Provide subsidies on services and facilities such as electricity and drinking water, as well as provide special priority for services from public agencies, to families who wait to marry off their children until they are at least 20 years old.
7. Involve families in local committees	Engage families, who wait to marry off their children when they are at least 20 years old, as members in local committees formed by the municipalities and wards, as a sign of respect and recognition.

Seven activities were not scheduled for prototype testing and rigorous monitoring because they were existing programs adapted to address CEFM. These activities were also implemented based on guidelines, and the municipalities determined which would be suitable to have along with the more innovative ideas.

Test Phase

Breakthrough ACTION provided technical support to the six R-CEFM project municipalities to test the seven innovative activities. Collaborative monitoring, key informant interviews, rapid reaction surveys, and/or pre- and post-intervention intercept surveys were used to evaluate these activities for effectiveness, feasibility, relevance, and sustainability of these activities, to ultimately determine their effectiveness in reducing CEFM.

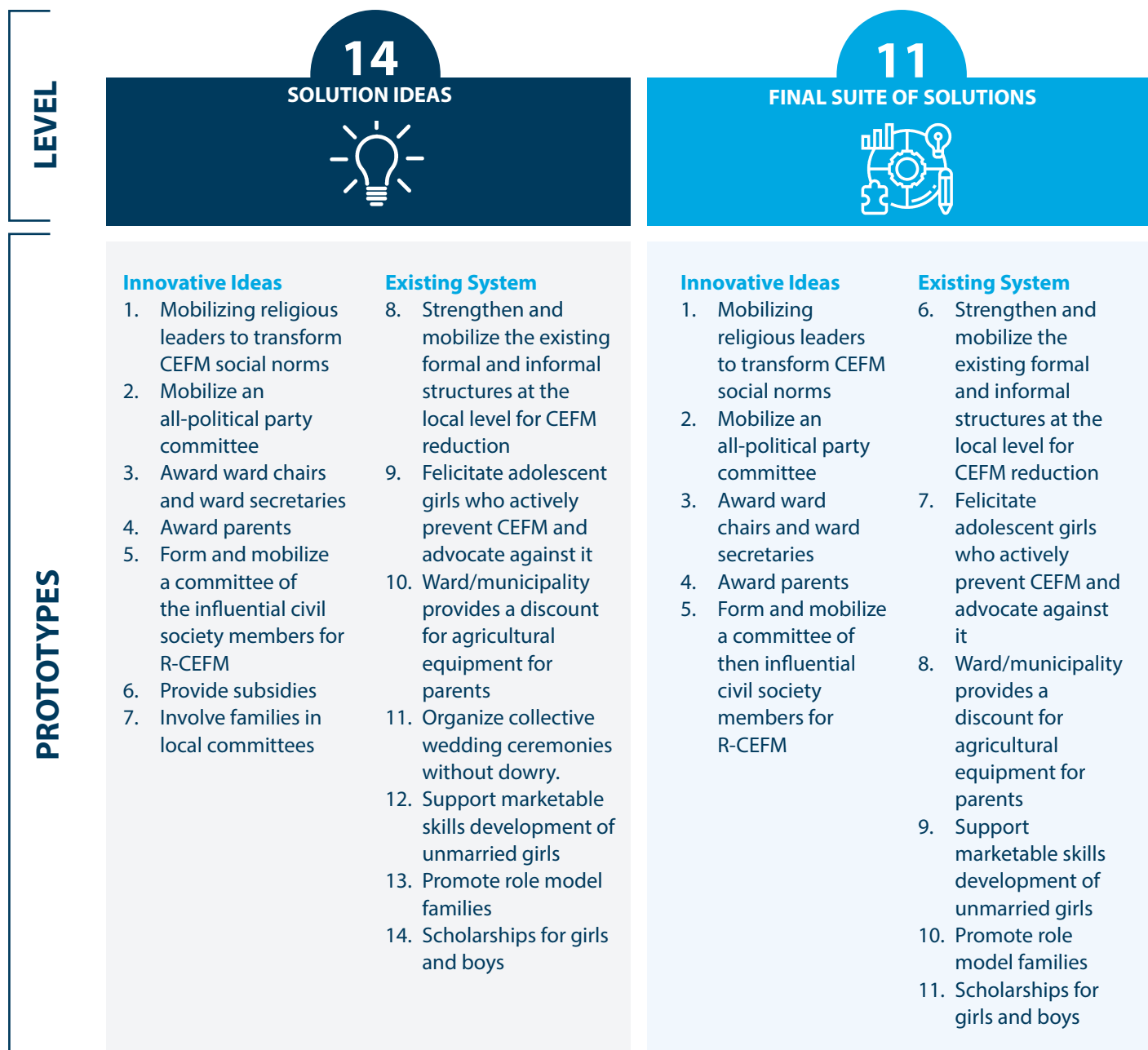


Figure 5: Final suite of 11 solutions, including both innovative and adapted activities for reducing CEFM

The final suite of 11 solutions were implemented in 2024 by the municipalities and wards with plans to implement even beyond 2024 as they pursue their goals of reducing CEFM locally and being able to declare their local areas free of CEFM.

Successes of the HCD Process

- Invaluable insights were gained, which helped to prioritize and design possible solutions.
- Identified the “quest for prestige” as a tipping point to change existing CEFM-related behaviors of the parents, religious leaders, influential civil society members, and political parties.
- Municipalities participated in the co-design process to design interventions with community inputs, collaboratively monitor activities and interventions with the help of co-developed indicators and conduct quarterly review meetings with WCRCs and LCRCs.

- Wards and municipalities (ward chairs, ward secretaries, mayor/chairperson, deputy mayor/vice-chairperson, etc.) learned the importance of collaborative work, and engaged diverse community stakeholders, including local civil society, religious leaders, youth, and political party leaders.
- Wards' and municipalities' capacity was enhanced to collect and analyze qualitative data to be used for R-CEFM program design.
- Wards and municipalities are now able to test the effectiveness of SBC activities for reducing CEFM by themselves.
- Municipalities own the activities identified from the HCD process. The municipalities now have a deeper connection with their community and want to address the issue, leading to resource allocation to reduce CEFM.
 - The activities developed during the HCD process were incorporated into the six municipalities' fiscal plans, with the required annual budget from \$65,000 to \$152,000 allocated for implementation from 2021 to 2023. Before the project began, there was no specific budget allocation for R-CEFM activities.
 - Municipalities selected, prototyped, and tested the activities, and ultimately incorporated them into their ward and municipality annual plans and budgets.
 - Municipalities learned how to design innovative and effective R-CEFM activities by keeping key intended audiences at the center.
- Municipalities are improving implementation quality, and a shift has occurred in the program implementation culture. The detailed activities implementation plan helped the section chiefs to advocate within the municipality for activities to be implemented starting from the second quarter, rather than waiting until the last quarter of the fiscal year.

Scale-Up and Sustainability of HCD Solutions

- The co-design, testing, and implementation process proved to be effective and sustainable as ideas were vetted prior to implementation by the key stakeholders and then implemented through government-funded activities.
 - In 2024, the municipalities have developed three- to four-year strategic plans to ultimately declare their municipalities CEFM-free, and activities identified through the HCD process are included. The municipalities will continue to implement the activities in the coming years until they reach their goal.
 - The five selected innovative activities developed through the HCD process have been adapted by six non-project municipalities in Rautahat district. Each of these municipalities sought support from the project municipality to incorporate findings and activities recommended by the HCD process into their local CEFM-free strategic plans.
 - The activities designed through the HCD process are incorporated in the Sahayogi Pustika (SBC Capacity Strengthening Guide to Reduce CEFM at Local Level), a job aid for the municipality-level Women, Children, and Senior Citizen Section and the child welfare officer and the ward secretary at the ward level in how to develop, implement, and monitor local CEFM programs within the government system. Endorsed by the Madhesh Province government, 130 non-project municipalities have already been oriented. All 136 municipalities in the province will benefit from the job aid.
 - All of Nepal's six remaining provinces have been oriented on the Sahayogi Pustika job aid, enabling them to refer to it during the government's annual planning and implementation processes, thereby strengthening the government system.

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