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Literature Review on Child, Early and Forced Marriage (CEFM) in Asia

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Introduction

Child and early forced marriage (CEFM) is a human rights violation that endangers health and growth, disrupts education, limits opportunities for empowerment and social development, and increases the risk of exposure to violence and abuse. It has both short- and long-term negative consequences on the social and economic development of children, as well as on their health, including physical, psychological, emotional, and sexual and reproductive health.¹

While CEFM is a global issue affecting most regions, according to household surveys conducted between 2000-2010 by UNFPA, the practice is most common in South Asia and in West and Central Africa, where two out of five girls married or entered into union before age of 18 – 46 percent and 41 percent, respectively, versus a total of 34 percent on average for all developing nations.² The highest prevalence of CEFM in South Asia is in Bangladesh (66 percent of girls married before the age of 18, and 32 percent before the age of 15).³ However, in terms of absolute numbers, India surpasses other countries by a wide margin: about 40 percent of all child marriages take place there. Fewer instances of CEFM were observed in Eastern Europe and Central Asia (11 percent), the Arab States and East Asia and the Pacific (18 percent). Looking ahead, the number of child brides in South Asia, according to UNFPA, is likely to increase from 24.4 million (4.9 million per year) girls in 2010 to 27.9 million (5.6 million per year) in 2030.⁴

While different definitions are used in the literature to describe CEFM, the most common is marriage that takes place under the age of 18—the upper age limit for protection under the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). Such relationships may be recognized in statutory or customary law as marriages, or may constitute informal unions. Forced marriage is generally viewed as encompassing child and early marriage because minors are deemed incapable of giving informed consent.⁵

Factors that increase risk of CEFM

Throughout the world, factors that lead to increased risk of CEFM are viewed as complex, interrelated and tightly interwoven with a country's and/or region's social and economic circumstances and cultural context. It is driven by the lack of value placed on girls in society, and perpetuates a cycle of gender discrimination and women's marginalization.⁶

- According to World Bank Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS) data, across countries, girls from wealthier families tend to marry at later ages, supporting the hypothesis that poverty and economic survival are drivers of early marriage.⁷ Nour (2009) highlights economic protection as a major driver, in which CEFM is used to ensure a daughter's financial security, as well as to reduce the economic burden she has on her family. This is because, in general, marriage brings a dowry to the bride's family.⁸
- Gender discrimination as a result of patriarchal societies also increases the risk of CEFM, because females often are limited to domestic duties.⁹ In Pakistan, Naveed and Butt write that the push to preserve of male-centric traditions leads to child marriage being accepted as a customary, routine practice.¹⁰

^a UNFPA's estimate is based on trends in the population dynamics from the past 15 years and assumes no change in the prevalence of child marriage estimated for 2010 through to 2030.

- Traditional causes of CEFM are rooted in social values and norms, as noted by Plan Asia (2013). Marriage is considered necessary and inevitable by children and adults. It is seen as a parent's responsibility to marry their daughters and protect their chastity until they are married. Fear of sexual violence vs. girls choosing to begin sexual activity leads to child marriage of daughters.¹¹
 - Naveed and Butt (2015) note the use of CEFM as parents' way of preventing sexual behavior among young people, especially girls, and lessening the risk of dishonor attached to sex without marriage. In Pakistan, the authors note, parents use marriage as a way to off the burden of protection and responsibility of preserving the family's honor.¹²
 - Children are also married early to support the networking of families and communities.¹³
- CEFM also is correlated with illiteracy or lower levels of education, particularly for girls. Illiteracy or lack of education among parents also perpetuates CEFM and can be accentuated by a family's level of poverty and limited economic opportunity, as well as lack of awareness about the consequences of child marriage on teen-aged girls.¹⁴
- Changes in circumstances, such as conflicts, natural disasters and other emergencies, can lead to an increase in CEFM. Gender inequality, poverty and insecurity in the face of war and conflict are identified as drivers.¹⁵
- Weak law enforcement also contributes to CEFM, even where strong legal frameworks exist – this is especially true in rural areas with few resources to implement the law.¹⁶
- Additional causes of the incidence of child marriage include: lack of awareness, less access to media, no or low knowledge level of government policy, and the belief that investing in girls is a waste of resources.

Vulnerable populations

Throughout the world, girls who live in poor, rural or conflict- or disaster-affected areas, with limited access to health care and education are considered to be the most vulnerable to CEFM.¹⁷ According to ICRW (2012), for instance, “evidence shows that the more education a girl receives, the less likely she is to marry as a child.”¹⁸ Specific to Asia, UNFPA notes that girls under age 18 in South Asia's poorest quintile are four times more likely to marry than those in the richest (72 percent vs. 18 percent).¹⁹

CEFM disproportionately and negatively affects girls, who are more likely than boys to be married before age 18. However, there are instances of CEFM relative to boys; in rural areas of Southern Punjab Pakistan, for instance, high rates of early marriage of boys are thought to be the result of *watta satta* (simultaneous exchange of a brother-sister, uncle-niece, or cousin pairs from separate households).²⁰ For boys, marriage brings increased financial responsibility early on.²¹ They are often forced to drop out of school and take menial jobs to support their new family, which perpetuates a cycle of poverty.²²

Urban vs. rural vulnerabilities

In general, CEFM is especially prevalent in rural communities, as a result of poverty, illiteracy, unemployment, a high population of girls,²³ and more traditional attitudes and behaviors. In addition, obtaining accurate data on the true extent of CEFM is difficult, primarily because most of these marriages are not officially registered. Some parents resort to falsifying girls' ages, which is easier to do in rural areas where birth certificates may be non-existent or not properly

recorded.²⁴ According to UNFPA, 54 percent of child marriages in the South Asia region are girls in rural areas, vs. 29 percent of girls in urban areas.²⁵

- In Bangladesh, the prevalence of CEFM is significantly high – in rural areas, 70 percent of girls are married early, vs. 53 percent in urban areas. The largest portion of child brides are located in the western and southern parts of Bangladesh which border India.
- In India, despite a decrease in the overall rate of child marriage (down to 46 percent in 2009), child marriage prevalence in some states still exceeds 50 percent, and the rural-urban split is still substantial - 56 percent vs. 29 percent. A joint study from National Commission for the Protection of Child Rights and the research project Young Lives (2017) reports that the number of child marriages in the country's urban areas is on the rise by 0.3 percent since 2001.²⁶ A possible cause is migration, which “could be one reason for the increase in urban areas, especially those around metropolitan cities,” says Renu Singh, Young Lives' country director. “The other reason [for an increase in urban CEFM] could be concerns about the safety of children. Parents living in slums worry about their daughters' safety.” In support of this, a 2016 study on the lives of girls aged 15 to 19 in Telangana state by the MV Foundation found that “the mobility of girls is highly restricted in urban areas” and the pretext of safety is frequently used to impose control.²⁷
- In Pakistan, where CEFM remains one of the most pressing development challenges, girls living in rural areas are hardest hit by child marriage – 37 percent vs. 21 percent for girls from urban areas.²⁸

Successful programming strategies

Inherently, CEFM is linked to deep-rooted gender inequalities, norms, stereotypes and harmful practices. As such, there is a need to develop and implement programming strategies that focus on strengthening child protection systems, protective mechanisms such as safe shelters, access to justice, and promoting education and access to health care, including sexual and reproductive health.²⁹ In addition, there is a need for effective policies and programs to eliminate child marriage. According to Khanna et al. (2013), donor programs should:³⁰

Laws and Enforcement:

- Assist beneficiary governments in addressing gaps and inconsistencies in existing laws and, in accordance with international laws, promote the establishment of a uniform minimum legal age of at least 18 for girls. Also, work with local counterparts to ensure stringent punishment for violators of the law.
- Create awareness among government and law enforcement officials on girls' legal rights to be free from child marriage and protected from violations of their reproductive rights and sexual violence resulting from the practice. In addition, help to create/raise awareness among girls on possible legal options for avoiding or leaving a child marriage.
- Conduct training programs to inform law enforcement officials, registrars, judiciary officials and religious leaders about the negative impacts of and their role in preventing child marriage, especially in high-risk and poverty-stricken areas where CEFM is rampant.
- Mount public campaigns to increase awareness of the laws and punishments associated with the practice.
- Work with governments to improve birth and marriage registration systems in order to better prove a girl's age at marriage.
- Develop and strengthen effective child protection mechanisms, including community-based child protection systems.

Education:

- Increase educational opportunities for girls, including making school more affordable, safer and accessible; ensuring better quality education for girls; and promoting re-enrollment of girls who have dropped out.
- Provide direct cash assistance to families on the condition that they invest in their daughters' educations or delay their marriage age to eighteen.
- Focus on life skills, sexual and reproductive health and rights in school curricula, as well as promote adolescent girls' access to sexual and reproductive health information and services through government and NGO initiatives.

Livelihood and income generation:

- Implement programs that build girls' financial literacy and income generating skills – in Nepal, a program providing livelihood and income-generating skills to girls has been found to be effective in preventing child marriage.

Engaging men and boys:

- Engage with men and boys (especially fathers and brothers) in local communities to be advocates against CEFM, and to challenge traditional gender norms and roles and address gender inequity.

Women and girls as change agents (USAID, 2012):

- Leverage the role of women and girls as change agents within their societies. Women and girls must be recognized as more than victims or people at risk. Because they are closest to the problem of CEFM, they will have particular insights helpful in finding solutions. They must have a voice in decision-making and be allowed to become leaders in national-, regional-, and community-level decision processes, enabled to speak out to advance their own rights.³¹

Address the needs of married girls:

- Address the needs of married girls, including support to return to school after marriage and/or child bearing, creating community awareness and education campaigns to stress the value of completing secondary education for married girls, and including married girls in other activities that build life, financial literacy and income generating skills, and that offer sexual and reproductive (and maternal) health information and services.
- Support public campaigns, and engage with parents, local leaders, and government officials to discuss and promote positive girl role models from the community and society.

Country-specific information

TBD

Knowledge Gaps

While evidence suggests “what works” based on small-scale and time-limited CEFM research studies and project evaluations, Svanemyr et al. (2015) note that knowledge gaps remain on which programmatic approaches are effective in addressing child marriage at scale.³²

Another gap is how to support the needs of married girls. This includes how to provide them with information, services and programs, given their social isolation and limited power within the

household or community. Targeted programming that engages them and the influential people around them (i.e., husbands and mothers-in-law) are necessary, but there is a dearth of evidence about how best to. There is also a need for further evidence on how to support the needs of girls who have escaped an unwanted marriage or have become widowed who often face abandonment and stigmatization.³³

In addition, there is little empirical data on how an early marriage affects boys, and later as they grow into young men. According to Strohlic (2014), experts from leading international organizations that work to end CEFM, such as UNICEF, Girls Not Brides, the Population Council, and the International Center for Research on Women (ICRW), emphasize a gap in knowledge about the issue of underage grooms.³⁴

According to Adwoa Kufuor, a Human Rights Officer with the United Nations' Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), the biggest gap within CEFM research lies at the sub-national level. As cited in Pelayo (2015, "This is where the data gaps widen as national data falls short of rates, burden, and implications of the practice among inhabitants of different ethnicities, religions, castes, geographic location, cultures, and citizenship status. The consequences of child marriage are similar, but the reasons are so varied that such stratified data collection is crucial to eradicating it completely."³⁵

Overview of USAID activities

USAID doubled its total CEFM investment in FY2015 to \$10 million to focus on prevention and to meet the needs of married children worldwide who have limited access to education, health services and economic opportunities. In 2012, the U.S. Government policy was published [Ending Child Marriage & Meeting the Needs of Married Children: The USAID Vision for Action](#).

USAID's CEFM interventions include promoting girls' education, supporting married children, strengthening the enactment and enforcement of laws and policies that delay marriage, and building community outreach efforts to shift attitudes that perpetuate the practice. Listed below are several examples of Agency CEFM interventions:

- **Bangladesh:** the goal of the *Protecting Human Rights program* is to reduce the high prevalence of domestic violence and related human rights violations (including child marriage and dowry) in six districts. It does this through a range of activities designed to encourage legal reform, enhance local capacities, provide direct legal and other services, and change public attitudes and behaviors.³⁶ As part of its strategy, PHR aims to reach more than 10,000 students in seventh and eighth grade at 70 schools by enhancing advocacy initiatives for child marriage legislation and enforcement, and increasing public awareness and civil participation in shaping policy.³⁷ [PHR Midterm Evaluation \(2014\)](#)
- **Bangladesh:** the *NGO Health Service Delivery project* (2012 -) uses behavior change and community mobilization strategies to address norms around early marriage and child-bearing, as well as gender-based violence. [Mid-term Evaluation \(2017\)](#)
- **Bangladesh:** in 2012, UNICEF partnered with *Health Finance and Governance (HFG)*, USAID's flagship health systems strengthening project, and other key stakeholders, to design and implement a monitoring framework for assessing implementation of tracer interventions to delay child marriage and measuring social norms.³⁸

- India: the ***Vistaar project's*** (2006-2012) purpose was to assist the Government of India and State Governments of Uttar Pradesh and Jharkhand in taking knowledge to practice for improved maternal, newborn, and child health and nutritional status. One of the project's key technical areas was "delaying age of marriage."
- India: ***Apni Beti Apni Dhan (ABAD)***, or "Our Daughters, Our Wealth," Conditional Cash Transfer program (1994-98) was among the first of the long-term CCTs in India that sought to enhance the value of girls. In 2012-13, the first cohort of girls enrolled in ABAD turned 18, and were eligible to receive a payout. USAID evaluated the program's impact and found that ABAD did not affect the likelihood of marrying before age 18, but it did have a positive impact on girls' educational attainment up until 8th grade and aspirations for higher education.³⁹ Since a girl's marriage is given the utmost importance, including over aspirations for higher education, the evaluation team found that ABAD was insufficient to change prevailing gender roles and expectations. In fact, ABAD may have reinforced notions that girls are a burden, as the money was often seen as intended to offset the costs of getting them married.⁴⁰
- Nepal: the ***Reproductive Health for Married Adolescent Couples Project (RHMACP)*** (2005-2007) sought to improve health outcomes for married adolescents in target districts. The project encouraged debate on social and gender norms that impact adolescent health and personal development, including early marriage and the dowry system. Child marriage eradication committees were established by youth in 33 villages of Dhanusha, and a peer-led, district-level conference in Dhanusha was organized by the RHMACP to advocate for the abolition of these long-standing practices and to support compulsory education for all children. The project was associated with an increased age at first marriage in the two districts, from 14 to 16 years among females.⁴¹
- Nepal: USAID's ***Chunauti project*** (which means "challenge" in Nepali) (2008-2011) utilized behavior change campaigns, peer educators, engagement of formal and informal leaders, child marriage eradication committees, children's clubs, and schools to educate communities about the harms of CEFM, and motivate them to advocate for the establishment and enforcement of laws that address CEFM and related forms of gender-based violence (GBV).
- Nepal: the ***Nepal Family Health Program II (NFHP II)*** (2007-2012) was designed as a health systems strengthening program, and included an activity working with Female Community Health Volunteers on family planning, which includes spreading the message to adolescents and youth of delaying marriage until 20 years. [Evaluation \(2011\)](#)
- Pakistan: the ***Gender Equity Program*** (2010-2017) is designed to positively affect behavior and attitudes towards women and contribute to greater gender equity, specifically expanding women's access to justice and human rights, increasing women's empowerment, combating gender-based violence (GBV), and strengthening the capacity of Pakistani organizations that advocate for gender equity. In collaboration with other civil society organizations (CSOs), GEP contributed to passage of the Sindh Child Marriages Restraint bill, as well as preparing domestic violence bills in Sindh and Punjab, and drafting the Sexual Harassment Act in Balochistan. [Final Evaluation \(2016\)](#)
- Timor-Leste: the ***Youth Engagement to Promote Stability (YEPS) project's*** goal was to continue and expand USG assistance in implementing conflict mitigation and peacebuilding activities targeting at-risk and disaffected youth in all 13 districts of Timor-Leste. Youth groups were given the opportunity to gain knowledge from comic books on domestic violence, early marriage, women's independence, and avoiding negative political influence.

Similarly, youth book clubs discussed topics such as early marriage, and how it limits young people to be involved in constructive life activities. As well, a radio drama series entitled “*Karau Dikur ba Dame*” was created, which covered the issue of early marriage. [Final Report \(2015\)](#)

- Multiple countries: The **MEASURE DHS III program** runs the Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS), which since 1984 has provided nationally representative demographic and health data, including data on prevalence of early marriage and its associated health outcomes, in over 90 countries. These data are used for in-country awareness raising, policy and program development, and further research and analysis.⁴²

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