



LEARNING AGENDA

ADDRESSING CHILD, EARLY, AND FORCED MARRIAGE AND UNIONS

Child, early, and forced marriage and unions (CEFMU) are a consequence of deeply rooted gender inequalities and intersecting oppressions that negatively and disproportionately affect girls. The practice is exacerbated by poverty, insecurity, conflict, inadequate educational and economic opportunities, and restrictions on girls' sexuality, among other factors. One in five girls — approximately 12 million each year — and one in 20 boys marry before the age of 18, and these numbers may grow because of the COVID-19 pandemic.¹ CEFMU threatens the futures of all children, particularly girls, by depriving them of their rights to make decisions about their relationships and lives; disrupting their education; increasing their vulnerability to violence, discrimination, abuse, and early pregnancy; and preventing their full participation in economic, political, and social spheres. This, in turn, undermines countries' capacities to develop fully and equitably.

This learning agenda builds on a theory of change that describes how USAID engagement in efforts to address CEFMU can contribute to a more gender-equal world in which girls and women are equitably valued and empowered. It offers a set of strategic questions for which USAID intends to produce evidence and findings. These will support the Agency and a broader global community of actors to work more effectively by informing the design and implementation of CEFMU-related strategies, programs, projects, and activities. The questions in this learning agenda, when answered, will help to address the

TERMINOLOGY

Child marriage (also called early marriage) is a formal or informal union where one or both parties are under the age of 18.^a Forced marriage is a marriage in which one or both spouses do not give full and free consent, regardless of age.^b Early unions are informal unions in which a girl or boy lives with a partner as if married before the age of 18.^c The acronyms “CEFM” — and increasingly, “CEFMU” — are often used to encompass all of these practices.

(a) [UNICEF 2021](#), (b) [UNFPA 2020](#), (c) [Girls Not Brides 2020](#)

¹ UNICEF. COVID-19: A threat to progress against child marriage. 2021 Mar. Available from: <https://data.unicef.org/resources/covid-19-a-threat-to-progress-against-child-marriage/>.

broader question of “What interventions do we invest in, and to what extent, to create transformational change?”

The CEFMU Learning Agenda will guide USAID’s continuous learning and expansion of the global evidence base by allowing for the systematic organization and sharing of new evidence. Developed through an iterative consultative process with stakeholders inside and outside of the U.S.

Government, the learning agenda consists of questions in key areas for which USAID intends to disseminate existing data, generate new evidence, and produce recommendations on how to improve the design and implementation of interventions. Guided by this learning agenda, USAID should draw data, information, and knowledge from an array of sources that include research, monitoring data, and performance and impact evaluations.

The implementation of this learning agenda will use and build on the evidence from other USAID investments and learning agendas, such as those for ending gender-based violence, advancing sexual and reproductive health, fostering women’s economic empowerment, expanding access to quality education, and promoting the rights and well-being of adolescent girls. It is thus intended to be multi-sectoral, cutting across USAID sectors and portfolios. At the same time, USAID recognizes that many other actors, including other funders, host country governments, academia, and, increasingly, civil society organizations, are generating evidence and knowledge that will move us as a community closer to answering the questions prioritized in this document. We will therefore seek to collaborate and coordinate with these global, regional, and local actors, including through joint research activities, so that our learning is informed by and informs their respective efforts. These cross-sectoral and interagency collaborations will strengthen and enhance this learning agenda.

The CEFMU Learning Agenda recommends the use of a variety of data sources and analysis methods to produce evidence and findings and allows for flexibility in how we address the questions herein. It reflects work currently being carried out by USAID and its partners and colleagues, the analytical outputs of which will contribute to the process of finding answers to the learning agenda questions. The outputs of the learning agenda will inform programs supported by USAID, as well as the broader global research agenda. At the same time, the learning agenda will guide potential questions to include in new research, impact and performance evaluations, and other analyses that are conducted under future USAID investments and programming.

Learning agenda questions were selected and developed by working with USAID technical experts, conducting a review of peer-reviewed publications and gray literature, reviewing questions and research gaps identified by other global actors, and discussing evidence gaps with external partners. Among the most helpful documents in understanding and prioritizing existing evidence gaps were a paper on research priorities and gaps that was developed following a consultation hosted by the World Health Organization, UNICEF, the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), and Girls Not Brides, in October

2019, as well as the research priorities identified for Phase 2 of the UNICEF-UNFPA Global Programme to End Child Marriage.^{2,3}

LEARNING AGENDA QUESTIONS

Global attention to the issue of CEFMU has increased significantly in the past decade, as have investments from governments, foundations, and others to address the practice. As a result, more interventions have been undertaken, and organizations from the grassroots to the international level have engaged in action and advocacy to stem the practice and to support girls and young women who were married as children. At the same time, we have seen significant new research projects and an accompanying growth in the global evidence base, with more than 1,000 articles that focused on child marriage or married adolescents published between 2000 and 2019.⁴ While we know more now about CEFMU than ever, including its drivers, its consequences, and how to prevent it, ending the practice remains a challenge. Additional nuanced, context-specific data, interventions, and advocacy are needed to end this harmful practice. We prioritize the following areas for this learning agenda.

WHAT CAN PREVENT CEFMU IN UNDER-STUDIED COUNTRIES AND CONTEXTS?

Much of the rigorous evidence to date on effective responses to CEFMU comes from geographically localized programs — largely in South Asia and East Africa — and points to the following strategies, which tend to be most effective when implemented in combination.^{5,6,7}

- Advancing girls' **empowerment**, rights, leadership, and assets
- Mobilizing families, communities, and influencers to **change attitudes, behaviors, and norms**
- Providing **direct services** — including health, mental health and psychosocial support, education, justice, and legal services — to at-risk, married, and formerly married girls
- Providing **economic opportunities**, such as livelihood training and workforce development skills, to girls and their families to keep girls in school
- Advocating for the establishment and implementation of effective **laws and policies**

² Plesons M, Travers E, Malhotra A, Finnie A, Maksud N, Chalasani S, et al. Updated research gaps on ending child marriage and supporting married girls for 2020–2030. *Reprod Health* (2021) 18:152. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12978-021-01176-x>.

³ UNICEF. Research strategy for phase II: The UNFPA–UNICEF Global Programme To End Child Marriage. 2021. Available from: <https://www.unicef.org/documents/child-marriage-research-strategy>.

⁴ Greene M, Siddiqi M, Abularrage T. Interventions to prevent and respond to child marriage across Africa: progress, gaps and priorities. In prep. 2021. Available from: mgreene@greenetworks.com.

⁵ Lee-Rife S, Malhotra A, Warner A, Glinski AM. What works to prevent child marriage: a review of the evidence. *Studies in Family Planning*. 2012 Dec;43(4):287-303.

⁶ Kalamar AM, Lee-Rife S, Hindin MJ. Interventions to prevent child marriage among young people in low- and middle-income countries: a systematic review of the published and gray literature. *J of Adolesc Health*. 2016 Sep;59(3 Suppl):S16-21.

⁷ Chae S, Ngo TD. The global state of evidence on interventions to prevent child marriage. New York; 2017: Population Council. GIRL Center Research Brief No. 1.

It is important to note that these strategies are aggregated from learning across diverse programs implemented in many contexts. Their design and the effects they have in one context may differ from those in another setting. Not enough is known about which combination of strategies may work best in each context. For example, the Overseas Development Institute found that stressing the economic benefits of delaying marriage motivated some young people in Hmong communities in Vietnam to postpone marriage until their early twenties. However, in Ethiopia, focusing on negative outcomes associated with CEFMU, such as obstetric fistula and other health problems, appeared to be a better approach to shift norms related to the age of marriage.⁸ A special supplement of the *Journal of Adolescent Health* focused on this diversity and the complexity of CEFMU and affirmed that effective strategies vary by context.⁹

South Asia has long had the largest number of the world's child brides. Even as CEFMU prevalence has declined significantly in recent years — and the region is expected to see this current rate decline by half by 2030 — South Asia still has more than 40 percent of the global burden of CEFMU. India and Bangladesh, together, have more women who married as children than the next 15 countries combined.

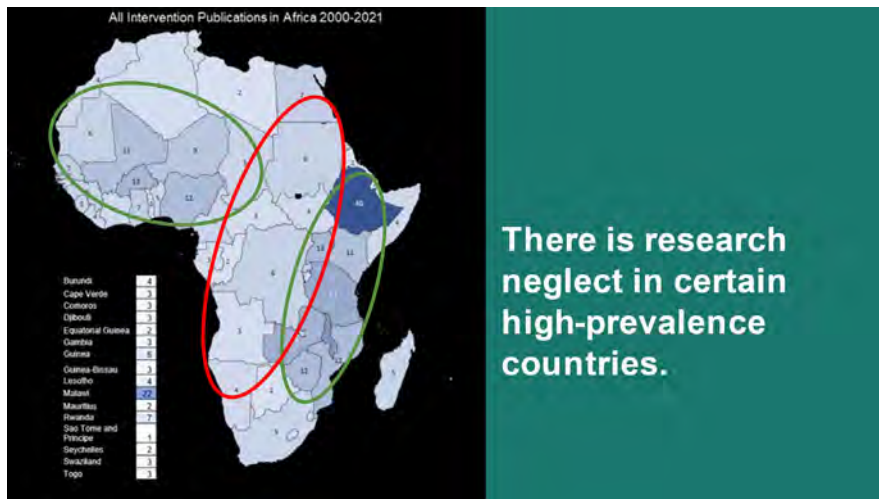
In the first phase of CEFMU research, the predominant evidence focused on South Asia, particularly India and Bangladesh, and to a far lesser extent, parts of East and West Africa.¹⁰ In the past decade, sub-Saharan Africa has increasingly been the focus of research and programming to prevent and mitigate CEFMU. There has been a significant uptick in political will to address CEFMU in Africa, as shown by commitments from the African Union and governments, including Ethiopia, Senegal, and Zambia. Important progress has been made at the national level; for example, in Ethiopia, prevalence has declined by one-third since 2007. However, change has been stagnant or slow in certain regions within countries and at the national level in some countries across the continent.

Eighteen of the 20 countries in the world with the highest prevalence of CEFMU are in sub-Saharan Africa, and it is anticipated that, without significant change, the total number of child brides here will increase because of population growth, even as the prevalence does not. Six of the 10 countries with the highest prevalence in the world are in West and Central Africa, where progress has stalled, and the Central African countries have scant research and programming taking place, despite the tremendous need.

⁸ Harper C, Jones N, Presler-Marshall E, Walker D. Unhappily ever after - slow and uneven progress in the fight against early marriage. Overseas Development Institute. ODI: 2014.

⁹ Olum R, Muthengi E, Chandra-Mouli V. The diversity and complexity of child marriage. *J Adolesc Health*. 2021 Dec; 69 (6S Suppl): S1-S80.

¹⁰ Malhotra M, Warner A, McGonagle A, Lee-Rife S. Solutions to end child marriage: what the evidence shows. International Center for Research on Women. ICRW; 2011. Available from: <https://www.icrw.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/Solutions-to-End-Child-Marriage.pdf>.



(FROM: Greene et al. 2021)¹¹

Latin America and the Caribbean is the only region of the world where the prevalence of CEFMU has not decreased in the past decade, and while funders and advocates are increasingly turning their attention and funding to this region, these efforts are insufficient to address the scope of the challenge.¹² Similarly, East Asia and the Pacific region, and the Middle East and North Africa, comprise about 17 percent of the global burden of CEFMU combined, yet little is known about how to address the challenge in these regions.

USAID’s presence in more than 60 countries, including several high prevalence but comparatively understudied settings, provide the Agency with a unique opportunity to support research and programming to better understand CEFMU in these contexts, including what may work to end the practice.

Question: What can prevent CEFMU at scale in different contexts in Latin America and the Caribbean, West and Central Africa, and the Middle East and North Africa?

MEASURING SUCCESS DIFFERENTLY — HOW CAN CEFMU INTERVENTIONS PROMOTE GIRLS’ AGENCY AND OPPORTUNITIES?

While a critically important target, delaying marriage to age 18 does little on its own to address the broader inequalities girls face worldwide. A USAID-funded study in Haryana, India, showed that girls who received a bond conditioned on not marrying before age 18 remained in school and increased their sense of self-worth.¹³ However, within months of turning 18, nearly all the girls in the program were married and forced into the role of wife and mother because social norms dictated that this was the primary function of women in society. In many cases, the bond was used as a dowry payment. Qualitative research demonstrated that the aspirations of these girls were dashed, leaving many of them

¹¹ Greene M, Siddiqi M, Abularrage T. Interventions to prevent and respond to child marriage across Africa: progress, gaps and priorities. In prep. 2021. Available from: mgreene@greeneworks.com.

¹² UNICEF. Latin America and the Caribbean: a decade lost in ending child marriage. New York: UNICEF; 2018 Apr 18. Available from: <https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/latin-america-and-caribbean-decade-lost-ending-child-marriage>.

¹³ Nanda P, Datta N, Pradhan E, Das P, Lamba S. Making change with cash? Impact of a conditional cash transfer program on age of marriage in India. International Center for Research on Women. ICRW:2016. Available from: https://www.icrw.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/IMPACT_Marriage_Webready.pdf.

worse off emotionally, perhaps, than if they had not gained an education and built their hopes in the first place.¹⁴

Similarly, research in Zambia found that an unconditional cash transfer helped girls delay marriage, but as soon as the program ended, there was an almost immediate marriage and “baby boom” among these girls. Further, participating girls reported lower levels of empowerment and more dissatisfaction with the quality of their marriages because the “good husbands” had already married younger girls.¹⁵

Finally, a study by Population Council researchers presented a conceptual framework for understanding the diverse drivers of child marriage in different settings. The study noted the importance of tackling social norms and attitudes toward child marriage, and roles for women and girls broadly, as an underlying and interlinked factor in many situations. The study posited the following as predominant drivers of CEFM in different contexts: poverty and economic factors, lack of agency among girls to decide when and whom to marry, lack of opportunity for girls and women in education and livelihood alternatives to marriage, and fear of girls’ sexuality and pregnancy.¹⁶

These and other studies demonstrate that in a context of both poor economic development and entrenched gender inequalities, girls find themselves with few alternatives to marriage before or at age 18. Thus, there is a tremendous need for gender-transformative approaches that “address the underlying, structural inequalities that drive girls’ vulnerability,” and “invest in multisectoral, rights-based, gender-transformative policies and programming that respond to the holistic and multifaceted nature of girls’ lives.”¹⁷

In supporting the implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of such programs, USAID’s measurements of success should go beyond tracking the age of marriage to also test and use measures of:

- Changes in attitudes and perceptions of girls and members of the community
- Girls’ agency
- Girls’ outlooks on the future and opportunities they envision beyond marriage
- Changes in the distribution of power and resources

¹⁴ Nanda P, Datta N, Pradhan E, Das P. Impact of conditional cash transfers on girls’ education. International Center for Research on Women. ICRW:2014.

¹⁵ Baird SJ, McIntosh C, Ozler B. When the money runs out: do cash transfers have sustained effects on human capital accumulation? J Dev Econ. 2019;140: 169-185.

¹⁶ Psaki S, Melnikas AJ, Haque E, Saul G, Misunas C, Patel SK, et al. Conceptual framework of the drivers of child marriage: a tool to guide programs and policies. New York: Population Council; 2021 Oct 10. GIRL Center Research Brief No. 7.

¹⁷ Baird SJ, McIntosh C, Ozler B. When the money runs out: do cash transfers have sustained effects on human capital accumulation? J Dev Econ. 2019;140: 169-185.

- Number of girls and boys who transition from primary to secondary school, and who complete secondary education
- Other indicators of social transformation and empowerment^{18,19}

Measuring the effectiveness of gender-transformative approaches, synthesizing evidence on changing social norms to end CEFMU, and using new indicators to measure success could all contribute to creating more gender-responsive understandings of success. Building on past investments, such as the [Social Norms Learning Collaborative](#), would be an excellent start to advancing such novel measures, and even more could be done to define, study, employ, and socialize new measures of change.

WHAT CAN PREVENT CHILD AND FORCED MARRIAGE IN CRISIS AND CONFLICT SETTINGS?

Understanding the burden of CEFMU in humanitarian, crisis, and conflict settings is challenging for a range of methodological, safety, and ethical reasons; however emerging research indicates that conflict and displacement are contributing to significant increases in child and forced marriage, including among Syrian and Rohingya refugees.²⁰ Despite increasing attention and broader political statements encouraging action, CEFMU remains inadequately addressed and little understood in crisis and conflict situations.^{21,22}

The Agency is well positioned to lead the global community in learning more about what works to end CEFMU in conflict settings and complex crises. Collaborating with other actors to undertake implementation research in these settings would be particularly helpful in generating a broader evidence base.

Questions:

- What are the solutions to CEFMU in conflict and post-conflict settings?
- How can programs most effectively support children and their families to prevent the practice in the context of crisis and conflict?

¹⁸ Adapted from Tackling the taboo: sexuality and gender-transformative programmes to end child, early and forced marriage and unions, June 2019, CEFMU and Sexuality Programs Working Group.

¹⁹ UNICEF-UNFPA. Research strategy for phase II: the UNFPA–UNICEF global programme to end child marriage. New York: UNICEF; 2021. 24. Available from: <https://www.unicef.org/media/104126/file/Child-marriage-research-strategy-2021.pdf>.

²⁰ Syed S. Child marriage in humanitarian settings: looking at Rohingya and Syrian refugee communities, MJIL 2018; 39.

²¹ UNICEF-UNFPA. Addressing Child Marriage in Humanitarian Settings: Technical guide for staff and partners of the UNFPA–UNICEF Global Programme to End Child Marriage. UNICEF-UNFPA; 2021 Feb. Available from: <https://www.unicef.org/media/92821/file/Child-marriage-humanitarian-settings-technical-guide-2021.pdf>.

²² Girls Not Brides: The Global Partnership to End Child Marriage. Child marriage in humanitarian settings. Girls Not Brides; 2018 Aug.

HOW CAN INTERVENTIONS TACKLE THE TABOO OF SEXUALITY AS A KEY DRIVER OF CEFMU?

Research from diverse communities around the world demonstrates that parents and communities frequently perceive CEFMU as a way to prevent girls' sexual activity, pregnancy, and childbirth outside of marriage. The customs of bride price and dowry, in which a girl's (but not a boy's) virginity represents her value in the marital transaction, are evidence of a clear link between the control of female sexuality and CEFMU. Those who study CEFMU have increasingly noted that control of girls' sexuality — rooted in the broader gender norms that subordinate girls in society — may be an important and under-addressed driver of CEFMU.²³

A CEFM and Sexuality Programs Working Group, originally comprised of 12 nongovernmental organizations, funders, and national civil society organizations, published a review of gender-transformative programs that promote bodily integrity and girls' rights and that contribute to normative change to end CEFMU.²⁴ The report provides an overview of the complex relationships between sexuality and CEFMU; discusses promising programmatic approaches to “tackle the taboo” related to girls' sexuality; and introduces exemplar programs carried out in Kenya, Nigeria, and India. The report also provides recommendations for a new, comprehensive conceptual framework and common measures of success, as well as specific recommendations for program implementers, researchers, funders, advocates, and young activists. The report argues that programs that only address “related dimensions and other symptoms related to CEFMU (i.e., poverty, girls' education) will ignore the ‘elephant in the room,’ thereby perpetuating the gender norms that limit the agency and options of women and girls. It recommends research approaches that USAID can build on and implement, including:

- Monitoring and evaluating gender-transformative programming that addresses the root causes of CEFMU, including patriarchal control of adolescent girls' sexuality. For example:
 - In settings where “love marriages” and marriage “by choice” are common — rather than those where the parents or others are the driving force behind marriages — it would be useful to measure how girls' “desire” to marry is influenced by restrictions on their mobility, sexuality, and basic interactions with boys.
 - How does gender-based violence experienced by girls in their households drive their desire to enter a union or marriage?
- Exploring the growing evidence that the stigma related to adolescents engaging in sexual activity before marriage may contribute to CEFMU.
- Sharing existing metrics and developing new metrics for assessing social norm change and the impacts of CEFMU programming in the short- and long-term, including, for example, in the form of shifts in attitudes and beliefs related to sexuality, gender equality, and CEFMU. (See section #3 above.)

²³ See, for example: Tackling the taboo: sexuality and gender-transformative programmes to end child, early and forced marriage and unions, June 2019, CEFMU and Sexuality Programs Working Group.

²⁴ The group added “unions” to the CEFM acronym to account for these informal “marriages.”

Beyond these recommendations, it would be helpful to better understand:

- Does investing in comprehensive, adolescent-responsive sexuality education and the provision of adolescent-responsive sexual and reproductive health information and services affect CEFMU outcomes and the agency that girls have in relationships?
- What are key elements of interventions that are needed to shift social norms related to girls' sexuality at and beyond the community level?
- How can community resistance to girls' use of contraception be addressed?
- How can costing studies of social norms programming include social costs and benefits, in addition to economic ones?

WHAT ROLE CAN CIVIL SOCIETY — INCLUDING YOUTH-LED, WOMEN'S RIGHTS, AND GRASSROOTS ORGANIZATIONS — PLAY IN SUPPORTING THE MOST MARGINALIZED AND UNDER-SERVED GIRLS, ENDING CEFMU, AND HOLDING GOVERNMENTS ACCOUNTABLE?

“If we truly want to make aid inclusive, local voices need to be at the center of everything we do. We’ve got to tap into the knowledge of local communities, and their lived experiences. Otherwise, we risk reinforcing the systemic inequities that are already in place.”

USAID Administrator Samantha Power, November 2021²⁵

The poorest girls and those living in rural settings are almost universally more likely to marry as children compared to those in higher wealth categories and those living in cities. It is critically important to identify, understand, and respond to the needs of these marginalized girls. Those closest to these girls within their communities, including grassroots groups and youth networks, may be best positioned to help identify and address these individuals and their needs. Previous research and programming has shown that CEFMU hot spots can be identified within countries and that it is possible to effect change, even in these challenging contexts.^{26,27,28} While interventions designed and implemented by international and large national nongovernmental organizations can certainly be effective, they may not be as effective, or sustainable as those implemented by grassroots, youth-led, and community-based organizations (CBOs). There is a growing understanding that sustainable, structural change requires local leadership

²⁵ USAID. Administrator Samantha Power on a new vision for global development [video]. Washington, DC: USAID; 2021 Nov 4. Available from: <https://www.usaid.gov/news-information/speeches/nov-4-2021-administrator-samantha-power-new-vision-global-development>.

²⁶ Population Council. Building an evidence base to delay marriage in Sub-Saharan Africa. Population Council: 2022. Available from: <https://www.popcouncil.org/research/building-an-evidence-base-to-delay-marriage-in-sub-saharan-africa>.

²⁷ USAID. Mapping CEFM and FGM/C: an interactive tool to inform child, early, and forced marriage (CEFM) and female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C) programming. 2021. Available from: <https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/136ba46df2fb458fa0eff4bd0ae5fb14>.

²⁸ Fraym. Analyzing girl child marriage: Kenya deep dive. Prepared for the Child Marriage Learning Partners Consortium. Arlington, VA: Fraym; 2021 Mar 22. 89. Available from: https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/documents/1606/Analyzing_Girl_Child_Marriage_-_Kenya_Deep_Dive_22_March_2021.pdf.

and accountability. At the same time, little is known about the impact, cost effectiveness, and sustainability of work led by these local organizations.

The Girls First Fund, launched in 2018, is providing at least \$50 million over five years to CBOs to support them to end CEFMU in their own ways. The fund is fielding an innovative evaluation and learning process that will help to generate new and useful knowledge about the role CBOs play in advancing girls' rights and CEFMU. USAID can support organizations at the local level — including those led by young people — partner with organizations like the Girls First Fund, and test innovative methods and models of evaluation that capture and prioritize the voices and experiences of girls, to help countries and CBOs expand their capacity, establish self-sufficiency, and set their own priorities for what works in their specific context.

Questions:

- How effective are grassroots organizations in reaching the most marginalized girls?
- What impact do youth-led and women's rights organizations and movements have in changing social norms related to marriage, sexuality, and rights of girls?
- What elements of the work of youth-led and women's rights organizations and movements are most effective in advocating for policy change and changing social norms in communities?
- How have community and faith-based actors and organizations been engaged to prevent CEFMU and protect and advance the rights of girls in their communities?
- In what geographic and political contexts have youth-led and women's rights organizations and other civil society groups been successful in changing policy and holding governments accountable to their commitments? What lessons can be applied to advocate and mobilize for societal change elsewhere to end CEFMU and support the rights and well-being of married adolescents?

WHAT ARE THE NEEDS OF CURRENTLY MARRIED GIRLS, AND HOW CAN THEY BEST BE MET?

While programs increasingly include married girls as a cohort, more investment is needed to meet the needs of the 12 million girls who marry each year. More research is needed to understand the needs of married girls in different contexts. For example, when married adolescent girls become pregnant, they are typically grouped with pregnant women older than 18. There is little consideration of how their relatively younger age may affect their maternal health risk and other aspects of their lives.²⁹ Girls' education programs often focus on retention of girls in school, with less attention to helping married girls return to school. Economic empowerment programs sometimes focus on married girls, but there is an opportunity to do more and to document what works in different settings.

To better understand the needs of married girls, research can consider girls' experiences in marriage, including household roles and responsibilities and equitable decision-making in finances, health care, and contraceptive use. For pregnant and parenting married girls, it could be useful for future programming

²⁹ Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. Gender and MNCH: A Review of the Evidence. 2020 Feb. Available from: https://www.gatesgenderequalitytoolbox.org/wp-content/uploads/BMGF_Gender-MNCH-Report_Hi-Res.pdf.

to learn more about their experience of pregnancy and childbearing in regard to health care, as well as the effect on education and economic opportunities.

Questions:

- What interventions work to improve married girls' agency and equity in the marital relationship?
- What barriers do married adolescents face in seeking adolescent-responsive sexual and reproductive health and maternal, newborn, and child health services? For example, what is known about married girls' contraceptive knowledge, decision-making, and use? Do they experience violence if they express the desire to use contraception?
- What is the relationship between marriage and schooling, and what works best to help all married girls, including those who may be pregnant or parenting, remain in, return to, and complete school?
- What alternatives to traditional schooling are effective in reaching married girls, especially in settings where they face restricted levels of movement?

WHAT ARE THE NEEDS OF GIRLS WHOSE MARRIAGES HAVE ENDED, AND HOW CAN THEY BEST BE MET?

Very little attention has been given to the fact that some girls married as children face widowhood, abandonment, separation, and divorce. While little is known about the prevalence of girls whose marriages have ended, one researcher estimates there are at least 1.36 million child widows globally.³⁰ There are no known estimates of how many girls are divorced or separated. These girls are highly marginalized, facing multiple disadvantages because of their gender, marital status, and age. Girls who become widows or are divorced or separated may suffer the trauma of loss while being forced to be the sole provider for children and households, even as they themselves are still children.³¹ Understanding the needs of these girls and how to address them would contribute to the field.

Questions:

- Among girls who married as children, how many are widowed, abandoned, separated, or divorced?
- What is the lived experience of these girls? What unique challenges do they face? What are their mental health and psychosocial support needs? How do poverty, conflict, and gender norms exacerbate the challenges of girls whose marriages have ended?
- What is the effect of widowhood, separation, and divorce on education and employment opportunities for girls? How do they earn their livelihood when their marriages end? Do they have skills, access to financial resources, or family financial support? How can social protection programs affect the agency of girls who are widowed, abandoned, separated, or divorced?

³⁰ Watson M. Millions of child widows forgotten, invisible and vulnerable. Geneva: Action On Child, Early and Forced Marriage; 2018 Jul 9.

³¹ Watson M. A research study: child widows' needs and how to support them. Geneva: Action on Child, Early and Forced Marriage; 2019 Jun 23. 47.

WHAT IS THE EXPERIENCE OF MARRIED BOYS AND OF CHILDREN OF DIVERSE SEXUAL ORIENTATIONS, GENDER IDENTITIES, GENDER EXPRESSIONS, AND SEX CHARACTERISTICS (SOGIESC)?

CEFM overwhelmingly affects girls, both in scale and in regard to negative outcomes related to domestic violence, health, economics, mobility, and decision-making, among other outcomes. Boys, too, experience the practice, yet research on the number of married boys and their experiences is limited. A study by UNICEF found that many countries do not have sufficient data to understand the full scope of the challenge of married boys.³² In the 82 countries for which data exist, less than one percent to nearly 30 percent of men ages 20–24 years were married before 18, with an average of 4.5 percent across countries. UNICEF reports that the countries with the highest CEFMU prevalence for boys “are geographically diverse and differ from the countries where the practice is most common among girls.” Evidence from qualitative studies indicates that in some communities, adolescent pregnancy may be driving boys, as well as girls, to marry. Given norms related to boys serving as family breadwinners, if an adolescent boy gets a girl pregnant, he is expected to marry her and care for her and the child.³³

Additionally, there is very little evidence on the marriage experiences of children and adolescents whose diverse sexual orientations, gender identities, gender expressions, and sex characteristics (SOGIESC) do not conform to social norms. Individuals of diverse SOGIESC face taboos or even criminal penalties in many cultures and countries. The little anecdotal evidence that exists suggests that some children of diverse SOGIESC are forced into marriages by parents or community members, and some enter into marriages or unions to appease others or conform to norms.³⁴ Recognizing that CEFMU is a human rights violation for all children, additional research on the drivers and consequences of child grooms and married children of diverse SOGIESC may contribute to ending the practice and increasing opportunities for all.

Questions:

- What is the lived experience of boys who marry? What unique challenges do they face? What are their mental health and psychosocial support needs?
- What social pressure do boys experience to get married and support a family?
- How do poverty, conflict, early pregnancy, and gender norms, including norms related to adolescent sexuality, interact with CEFMU for boys?
- What is the experience of children and adolescents of diverse SOGIESC in regard to CEFMU, including in contexts where this status is considered taboo or illegal?

³² Gastón M, Misunas C, Cappa C. Child marriage among boys: a global overview of available data. *Vulnerable Child. Youth Stud.* 2019;14(3).

³³ See, for example: Murithi L, Santillan D, Dhillon P, Sebany M, et al. Understanding couple communication and family planning in Zambia. International Center for Research on Women. ICRW:2016.

³⁴ Taylor L. Young, gay and married—Britons wed to avoid abuse. Reuters: 2018 Aug 23. Available from <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-britain-lgbt-marriage-iduskcn11824j>.

HOW DO CHANGES IN SOCIETIES, INCLUDING LAWS AND POLICIES, AFFECT CEFMU AND BROADER ISSUES RELATED TO ADOLESCENT SEXUALITY?

CEFMU has long been against the law in some countries that still have a high prevalence, raising the question of what effect laws and policies themselves have. It is not fully understood how laws and policies that dictate the age at which someone can legally marry may change the median age at marriage at a country or regional level. A greater body of evidence is needed to understand how these laws affect related outcomes, such as rates of girls' education completion and adolescent pregnancy.

Advocates and policymakers are increasingly focused not only on passing laws against CEFMU but also on implementing them. Anecdotal evidence suggests that strict enforcement of CEFMU bans, particularly those that include fines or imprisonment for perpetrators (including parents), may drive the practice underground, making it more difficult to reach married girls. Furthermore, in some countries, advocates and policymakers are using campaigns aimed at raising the age of marriage to 18 to argue for raising the age of consent to sex to 18. This attempted convergence of two distinct issues challenges efforts to reduce stigma related to adolescent sexuality and makes the provision of adolescent-responsive sexual and reproductive health and rights information and services difficult.³⁵ Advocating for girls' rights and broader gender equality can help prevent laws and policies from unnecessarily and harmfully constraining adolescents' agency.

Questions:

- What is the effect of CEFMU laws and policies on CEFMU outcomes? What are the unintended consequences of CEFMU laws?
- What specific language in laws and policies works to end CEFMU, while not diminishing adolescents' agency and rights?
- What methods can USAID and others use to most effectively track and evaluate the implementation and effects of laws and policies that aim to reduce CEFMU?

HOW TO ANSWER THE LEARNING QUESTIONS

ANALYSIS AND USE OF EXISTING DATASETS

The evidence base is increasingly powerful in demonstrating the complexity of CEFMU and the fact that the experience of this practice — and how to address it — varies significantly within and between countries. Through the USAID Demographic and Health Survey (DHS) and UNICEF Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys (MICS), the global community has for decades collected data from most low-income and many middle-income countries on young women ages 20–24 who were married before age 15 and age 18. In many cases, their exact age at marriage is also collected. These data, as well as those found in other large datasets, can typically be disaggregated sub-nationally (i.e., at the district or county level) and

³⁵ Petroni S, Das M, Sawyer S. Protection versus rights: age of marriage versus age of sexual consent. *Lancet Child Adolesc. Health.* 2019 Apr 4;3(4):274-280.

by wealth quintile, among other factors. However, more nuanced segregation is necessary to reach subgroups of interest and design appropriate interventions.

Understanding these differences, as well as differences in CEFMU prevalence and trends by religion, ethnicity, education level, socioeconomic status, and other household and community characteristics, for example, may assist in targeting interventions toward those most at risk of CEFMU and related negative outcomes. Existing datasets can be better mined to produce vulnerability profiles that identify subnational regions with the greatest need, based on some of these characteristics. Some implementers and researchers develop such profiles before designing programs. However, some may respond to funders' desires for interventions in settings that do not necessarily include those most at-risk or may propose locations and interventions in response to requests for proposals, without having had the time or funding to design the most suitable interventions for the contexts with greatest need.

Appropriate analysis of existing datasets can further explain the relationships between shifts in age of marriage and other factors, such as education levels, employment opportunities, other experiences of gender-based violence, health outcomes, and mobility. There is now a fairly solid understanding of the impact of CEFMU and early childbearing on fertility, maternal health, infant mortality, and childhood stunting.³⁶ We also understand quite a bit about the associations between CEFMU and education, labor force participation, women's earnings, fertility, and economic development, among other factors, though much more could be learned and disseminated from existing and new data.³⁷ Far less is known about how CEFMU may contribute to other health and development outcomes, such as those related to sexual health, mental health and well-being, and nutritional status, although new evidence is beginning to shed light on these connections.^{38,39}

A better understanding of these effects, as well as the determinants and drivers that are contributing to CEFMU and other negative outcomes for girls in specific contexts, could be helpful in designing powerful, locally relevant advocacy campaigns to prevent CEFMU, as well as appropriate interventions to meet the needs of those already affected by the practice. In the short-term, "there are numerous opportunities to better use existing datasets related to adolescent girls; to add questions [...] to already-planned and newly designed surveys and evaluations; (and) to make better use of existing programmatic and administrative data."⁴⁰

³⁷ Wodon Q, Male C, Nayihouba A, Onagoruwa A, Savadogo A, Yedan A, et al. Economic impacts of child marriage: global synthesis report. Washington, DC: The World Bank and ICRW; 2017. Available from: <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/530891498511398503/pdf/116829-WP-PI51842-PUBLIC-EICM-Global-Conference-Edition-June-27.pdf>.

³⁸ See, for example: Petroni S, Yates R, Siddiqi M, Luo C, Finnie A, Walker D, et al. Understanding the relationships between HIV and child marriage: conclusions from an expert consultation. *Journal of Adolesc. Health.* 2019 Jun;64 (6): 694–696.

³⁹ See, for example: John NA, Edmeades J, Murithi L. Child marriage and psychological well-being in Niger and Ethiopia. *BMC Public Health.* 2019;19(1029). Available from <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-019-7314-z>.

⁴⁰ Petroni S, Yates R, Siddiqi M, Luo C, Finnie A, Walker D, et al. Understanding the relationships between HIV and child marriage: conclusions from an expert consultation. *Journal of Adolesc. Health.* 2019 Jun;64 (6): 694–696.

LONGITUDINAL STUDIES

While the types of analyses described above may provide important context-specific information, they will not help us understand causality or directionality. In other words, they do not allow us to determine whether CEFMU causes low education and poor health outcomes, or vice versa. Some recent studies have attempted to disentangle the temporality between CEFMU, school dropout, and adolescent pregnancy, for example, but have faced significant methodological challenges.⁴¹ To better determine causality, carefully designed longitudinal studies are needed that follow the attitudes and practices of girls and women over time, as well as the perspectives and behaviors of boys and men.

The *Young Lives* program at Oxford University, the *Global Early Adolescent Study (GEAS)* at Johns Hopkins University, and the *Gender and Adolescence: Global Evidence (GAGE)* program at the Overseas Development Institute have all engaged large cohorts of adolescents in diverse country settings in studies that touch on a range of factors, including CEFMU. These studies have yielded useful information and will, over time, document far more about associations between key development factors and CEFMU.

Longitudinal studies could be used to answer learning agenda questions such as:

- What is the relationship between marriage and schooling, and what works best to help all married girls, including those who may be pregnant or parenting, remain in, return to, and complete school?
- How do poverty, conflict, early pregnancy, and gender norms, including norms related to adolescent sexuality, interact with CEFM for boys?

QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

A significant amount of qualitative research in the past decade has helped to build a greater understanding of girls' and women's experiences related to CEFMU in many regions of the world. Such research is critical in grounding high-level statistics in local context. For example, a recent qualitative study in Guinea-Conakry showed that women who married as children perceived both disadvantages and advantages of their early marriages, providing important context as to why one in two girls in Guinea continues to marry before age 18.⁴²

Qualitative research in Kenya and Zambia found school dropout and adolescent pregnancy to be direct precursors to CEFMU. These qualitative data explain better than statistics ever could that each of these drivers is rooted in deeply entrenched gender inequality and economic security, both of which drive adolescent sexual activity. Further, the research found tensions at the familial and community levels regarding the rights and expectations of adolescents, particularly adolescent girls.⁴³ Qualitative work in Zambia, Nepal, Brazil, Guatemala, and Honduras, among others, is increasingly revealing that stigma and control of adolescent girls' mobility and sexuality is likely contributing to marriages for girls, and often

⁴¹ See, for example: Stoebenau K, Warner A, Edmeades JD, Sexton M. Girls are like leaves on the wind: How gender expectations impact girls' education. Washington, DC: ICRW;2015. 13.

⁴² Efevbera Y. 'It is this which is normal': a qualitative study on women's experiences with child marriage and health in Conakry, Guinea. *Journal of Adolescent Health*. 2019 Feb 1;64(2):S14-S15. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jadohealth.2018.10.041>.

⁴³ Steinhaus M, Gregowski A, Stevanovic Fenn N, Petroni S. She cannot just sit around waiting to turn twenty: understanding why child marriage persists in Kenya and Zambia. Washington (DC): ICRW; 2016. 18.

boys, younger than 18, who may feel marriage is the only acceptable way to engage with each other.^{44,45,46} And increasing research into social norms has helped to shed light on where societal expectations primarily drive CEFMU for girls.^{47,48}

Qualitative research, including efforts led by young people and survivors, can provide compelling examples useful for advocates and policymakers alike. Girls' and women's own stories demonstrating the impacts of CEFM could be particularly powerful.

Qualitative research can be used to answer learning agenda questions such as:

- What is the experience of children and adolescents of diverse SOGIESC in regard to CEFMU, including in contexts where this status is considered taboo or illegal?
- How does gender-based violence experienced by girls in their households drive their desire to enter a union or marriage?
- What barriers do married adolescents face in seeking adolescent-responsive sexual and reproductive health and maternal, newborn, and child health services?

EXPERIMENTAL AND QUASI-EXPERIMENTAL STUDIES

Rigorous testing using experimental and quasi-experimental designs can provide valuable data on what interventions — or combination of interventions — are effective at preventing CEFMU and improving related outcomes. Investment in rigorous evaluations of interventions in various geographies and settings could help identify promising and evidence-based approaches to be scaled up. Rigorous evaluations should be preceded by formative qualitative research to contextualize and adapt interventions to the setting and population and should include qualitative research in the evaluation component to help explain the quantitative evaluation results.

This approach can be used to answer learning agenda questions such as:

- What are key elements of interventions that are needed to shift social norms related to girls' sexuality at and beyond the community level?
- How do parents and family members, communities, and influencers help bring about social change and norm transformation?
- What interventions work to improve married girls' agency and equity in the marital relationship?

⁴⁴ Murithi L, Santillan D, Dhillon P, Sebany M, et al. Understanding couple communication and family planning in Zambia. International Center for Research on Women. ICRW:2016.

⁴⁵ Child marriage in Nepal, Plan Nepal. Save the Children and World Vision International Nepal; 2012.

⁴⁶ Taylor A, Murphy-Graham E, Van Horn J, Vaitla B, Del Valle A, Cislighi B. Child marriages and unions in Latin America: understanding the roles of agency and social norms. *J of Adolesc Health*. 2019 Apr;64(4S):S45-S51.

⁴⁷ Steinhilber, Mara et al. (2019) Measuring social norms related to child marriage among adult decision-makers of young girls in Phalombe and Thyolo, Malawi. *J of Adolesc Health*. 2019 Apr;64(4S):S37-S44.

⁴⁸ See, for example: Greene ME, Stiefvater E. Social and gender norms and child marriage: a reflection on issues, evidence and areas of inquiry in the field. London: ALIGN; 2019 Apr 25.

CLOSING

There is more attention to, funding for, and engagement in the response to CEFMU than ever, though much more is needed to end the practice. This document is a first step toward determining how best to fill gaps in the evidence base. However, it will be important to learn from, collaborate with, and otherwise engage with other funders, advocates, policymakers, implementers, researchers, and survivors so that USAID is investing in answering the questions that are most important to them — and that are not otherwise being addressed.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This document was written by Suzanne Petroni and Jennifer Parsons, with support from Michele Lanham and other members of the CARE-GBV team, including Diane Gardsbane, Sarah Muthler, and Jill Vitick. Thank you to the USAID staff who provided review and input, including Chaitra Shenoy, Mieka Polanco, Ritika Chopra, Hilary Taft, and Mariela Pena.

Suggested citation: CARE-GBV. Learning Agenda: Addressing Child, Early, and Forced Marriage and Unions. Washington (DC): USAID; 2022.

The goal of the Collective Action to Reduce Gender-Based Violence (CARE-GBV) activity is to strengthen USAID’s collective prevention and response, or “collective action” in gender-based violence (GBV) development programming across USAID. For more information about CARE-GBV, click [here](#).

To learn more, please contact:

Chaitra Shenoy
Contracting Officer’s Representative
Gender Equality and Women’s Empowerment Hub
cshenoy@usaid.gov

Diane Gardsbane, PhD
Chief of Party
CARE-GBV
diane@makingcents.com