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CHILD, EARLY AND FORCED MARRIAGE IN INDIA

WHAT WE KNOW AND WHAT WE NEED TO KNOW

Children Believe

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to recognize and express our deep gratitude to all those involved in the production of this report.

A sincere thank you to Dr. Madhumita Das for undertaking this highly commendable research study for Children Believe.

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We are also grateful to Dr. Belinda Bennet, chief international programs officer of Children Believe, for her guidance and support of this report, as well as the communications team at Children Believe for editing and designing this document.

This research study would not have been possible without the contributions of Children Believe's India team who planted the seed for this research initiative and anchored and owned this project.

Children Believe, 2021

Front cover image: Children Believe is dedicated to working closely with government offices, local partners, communities, families and children to end the practice of child marriage in India.

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KEY TERMS

Agency of Children	As children develop a sense of agency, they realize that they have the ability to make their own decisions and to control their own lives. A sense of agency is an important part of a strong sense of identity and has been identified as a foundation to learning and well-being.[1]
Child	The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) defines a child as a person under18 years of age.
Child, early and forced marriage (CEFM)	Child marriage, or early marriage, is any marriage where at least one of the parties is under 18 years of age. Forced marriages are marriages in which one and/or both parties have not personally expressed their full and free consent to the union.
Child marriage	Child marriage in India, according to the Indian law, is a marriage where either the female is below the age of 18 or the male is below 21. Most child marriages involve underage girls, many of whom are in poor socioeconomic conditions.
Conditional Cash Transfer (CCT) Programs	Conditional Cash Transfer (CCT) programs provide cash directly to poor households in response to the household/individual fulfilling specific conditions, such as minimum attendance of children in school and/or visits to health clinics, participation in immunization, etc. To address the persistent problem of child marriage, the government of Haryana introduced the 'Apna Beti Apni Dhan' (ABAD) program as early as 1994.
Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW)	The Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) is an international treaty adopted in 1979 by the United Nations General Assembly. Described as an international bill of rights for women, it was instituted on September 3, 1981 and has been ratified by 189 states.
Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)	The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (commonly abbreviated as the CRC or UNCRC) is a human rights treaty which sets out the civil, political, economic, social, health and cultural rights of children.
Desk Research	Desk research is a type of research that can be performed at a desk. In this type of research, a researcher finds, collects and reviews publicly available data about the research topic.
IBM STEM	STEM is a curriculum based on the idea of educating students in the specific disciplines of science, technology, engineering and mathematics, and utilizes an interdisciplinary and applied approach. Recently, the Department of Science and Technology (DST) and International Business Machines Corporation (IBM) India announced collaborations to scale up the initiatives.

[1] One Child. "4 key areas to document child agency: An Educator's Guide". https://one-child.com/423/4-key-areas-to-document-child-agency/.

KEY TERMS cont.

Integrated Child Protection Scheme (ICPS)	The Integrated Child Protection Scheme (ICPS) is a governmental program implemented by the Government of India to help secure the safety of children. It places a special emphasis on children in need of care and protection, juveniles in conflict or contact with the law, and other vulnerable children.
Marriage Restraint Act	To eradicate child marriage, the Child Marriage Restraint Act was passed in 1929. The objective is to eliminate this particular human rights violation, which has the potential of endangering the life and health of a female child who cannot withstand the stress and strains of married life, and to avoid early deaths of such minor mothers.
National Family Health Survey (NFHS)	The National Family Health Survey (NFHS) is a large-scale, multi-round survey conducted in a representative sample of households throughout India.
South Asian Initiative to End Violence Against Children (SAIEVAC)	The South Asian Initiative to End Violence Against Children is a SAARC Apex body, which is an intergovernmental body, with a vision that all children, girls and boys, throughout South Asia have the right to enjoy an environment free from all forms of violence, abuse, exploitation, neglect and discrimination.
Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)	The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) or Global Goals are a collection of 17 interlinked goals designed to be a "blueprint to achieve a better and more sustainable future for all." The SDGs, set in 2015 by the United Nations General Assembly and intended to be achieved by the year 2030, are part of a UN Resolution called the "2030 Agenda".
The Prohibition of Child Marriage Act 2006	The objective of the Act is to prohibit the solemnization of child marriage as well as connected and incidental matters. To ensure that child marriage is eradicated from within the society, the Government of India enacted the Prevention of Child Marriage Act 2006 by replacing the earlier legislation of Child Marriage Restraint Act 1929. This new Act is armed with enabling provisions to prohibit child marriage, protect and provide relief to victims, and enhance punishment for those who abet, promote or solemnize such marriages. This Act also calls the appointment of a Child Marriage Prohibition Officer for the whole or part of a state by the state government.
The Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act (POCSO Act) 2012	The POCSO Act was established to protect children against offences like sexual abuse, sexual harassment and pornography. It was formed to provide a child-friendly system for trial underneath which the perpetrators could be punished.
The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC)	SAARC is the regional intergovernmental organization and geopolitical union of states in South Asia. Its member states are Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, the Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka.

ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

ABAD	Apni Beti Apna Dhan
AJWS	American Jewish World Service
AKSHA	AKSHA Centre for Equity and Wellbeing
BMGF	Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation
CBOs	Community-Based Organizations
CCT	Conditional Cash Transfer
CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women
CEFM	Child, Early and Forced Marriage
COVID-19	Coronavirus Disease 2019
CRC	Convention on the Rights of the Child
CREA	Creating Resources for Empowerment in Action
DISHA	District Development Coordination and Monitoring Committee
Dr.	Doctor
ed.	Education
et al.	"et alia" means "and others"
etc.	Et cetera
FIR	First Information Report
GNB	Girls Not Brides
HAQ	HAQ Centre for Child Rights
i.e.	"id est" means "that is"
IBM	International Business Machines Corporation
ICF	International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health
ICPS	Integrated Child Protection Schemes
ICRW	International Center for Research on Women
IFA	Iron and Folic Acid
IFS	Institute for Fiscal Studies
IIPS	International Institute for Population Sciences
INGOs	International Non-Governmental Organizations
IVRS	Interactive Voice Response Systems
JStor	Journal Storage – an electronic archive of leading journals
M&E	Monitoring & Evaluation
MEDLINE	Medical Literature Analysis and Retrieval System Online
NFHS	National Family Health Survey
NGOs	Non-Governmental Organizations
ODI	Overseas Development Institute
PAGE	Planning Ahead for Girls' Empowerment program

ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS cont.

PAnKH	Promoting Adolescents' Engagement, Knowledge and Health
PCMA	Prohibition of Child Marriage Act (PCMA 2006)
POCSO	Prevention of Children from Sexual Offences Act
POPLINE	Population Information Online
PRACHAR	Promoting Change in Reproductive Behaviour
PubMed	Public/Publisher MEDLINE – free search engine accessing literature primarily from the MEDLINE database
RCH	Reproductive and Child Health
SAIEVAC	South Asian Initiative to End Violence Against Children
SDG	Sustainable Development Goals
SHG	Self-Help Group
SRHR	Sexual And Reproductive Health And Rights
STEM	Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics
ToC	Theory of Change
UN	United Nations
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund
UNHRC	United Nations Human Rights Council
UNICEF	United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund
vs.	Versus

FOREWORD

Children Believe works globally to empower children to dream fearlessly, stand up for what they believe in – and be heard. For more than 60 years, we've supported children and young people to overcome barriers to education in pursuit of their dreams and to realize their full potential.

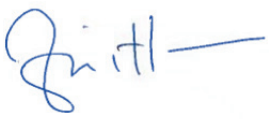
In India, child marriage denies millions of girls the right to choose their own future. Children Believe India aspires to become a Centre of Excellence (CoE) on Gender and Social Inclusion, and addressing the issue of child marriage is a key priority. To address this, we employ campaigns to build a critical mass for change and the Child Friendly Accountability Mechanism (CFAM).[1] With our local partners, we endeavor to contribute to policy discourses at the national and state levels to bring about lasting change to benefit children.

Towards this agenda, a national-level consultation was organized jointly with Girls Not Brides in New Delhi in February 2020. The consultation strengthened Children Believe's research goal to conduct a study on child marriage and identify existing research gaps. We value and extend our thanks to Girls Not Brides and all the experts and participants for affirming the need for such a study.

The central question is, despite progressive policies and programs from government and civil society, why is 'zero' child marriage so elusive in India? This study attempts to tackle this question and aims to understand the existing research gaps and challenges in successfully implementing diverse efforts besides best practices. It recommends ways to bring coherence and convergence among different government departments and civil society organizations to strengthen child protection mechanisms from a gender lens.

For Children Believe, these findings and recommendations will help us deepen our program efforts and impact. We also pass on this knowledge and new perspectives to researchers, policy makers, implementing agencies, formal and informal child protection actors and civil society organizations.

Child marriage is a significant issue, and we believe that through joint efforts, collaboration and the sharing of information, we will soon see an end to this practice in India.



Fred Witteveen
Chief Executive Officer, Children Believe

[1] A child-led methodology developed by ChildFund Alliance which aligns with the World Health Organization's seven strategy framework, INSPIRE, to end violence against children: https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/inspire-seven-strategies-for-ending-violence-against-children

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We would like to take this opportunity to express special gratitude to Girls Not Brides (GNB), particularly Ms. Shipra Jha, head of South Asia, and her team for their contributions and support in undertaking this research.

Children Believe would once again like to express how grateful we are to Prof. Shantha Sinha, former chairperson of National Commission for Protection of Child Rights (NCPCR) and founder secretary trustee and chief program advisor of M. V. Foundation; Ms. Ranjani K. Murthy, a well-known gender expert and researcher; Ms. Enakshi Ganguly, a recognized child rights activist and co-founder of HAQ for Child Rights; and Ms. Shipra Jha, head of South Asia, Girls Not Brides. Your support as peer reviewers, in intensively reviewing the report and giving constructive feedback and suggestions for further improvement, was invaluable.

We would also like to sincerely thank Dr. Belinda Bennet, chief international programs officer of Children Believe, for her guidance and support in the production of this research report, as well as the communications team at Children Believe for editing and designing this document. This research study was made possible by the contributions of Children Believe's India team who completed it on time and anchored and owned it.

Children Believe, 2021

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Child, early and forced marriage (CEFM) is a human rights violation and a harmful practice that disproportionately affects women and girls globally, preventing them from living their lives free from all forms of violence (UNHRC). Approximately 12-million girls are married each year before they reach the age of 18, according to UNICEF data from 2018. That is one in five girls globally whose childhoods end abruptly and future prospects are compromised. 2017 was a crucial year for research on child marriage, states Girls Not Brides, a leading global organization working to address this issue. It shed new light on drivers and decision-making about child marriage across contexts, the impact of child marriage and what we know about what works to address it.

Globally, many practitioners, researchers and activists consider and believe in the use of the comprehensive definition of child, early and forced marriage (CEFM). The terms of discussion affect our understanding of child marriage. Particularly over the past decade, narratives have commonly favoured "child marriage" over "early and forced marriage" to underscore the fact that girls often agree to early marriage because they lack education, resources or other options for their lives. Many organizations working on programs to delay marriage are using the term "child marriage," but one school of thought raises that the term conflates the problem of age and the problem of consent.

The purpose of this study is to identify the gaps in existing research on child marriage in India. By mapping out current knowledge and highlighting unanswered questions, we can generate discussions in the field and clarify what we need to learn to put an end to this deeply harmful practice.

The gaps by themselves should not drive investments in CEFM research. This mandate must be driven by programmatic and advocacy needs. This study highlights recommended areas for future research; it does not intend to give prescriptive guidelines or provide a definitive framework, but rather, it describes the general contours of what we already know and what we need to understand better.

The methodology followed for the study consists of: (i) a review of existing literature; (ii) mapping of organizations and programs; (iii) interviews with experts; and (iv) data from a two-day national consultation held in February 2020 organized by Children Believe and Girls Not Brides.

Based on the existing literature and review of research on CEFM, we propose to use a seven-pillar framework, laying out some specific questions we need to be able to answer at each level. The narratives for each part of the framework are structured similarly: emerging issues in each thematic area; defining key indicators for success that are being highlighted; what are the missing areas of research; and providing specific recommendations for future research investments. The framework proposed for the study highlights the need for additional research into seven interrelated categories:

1. Girls' access to school and quality education;
2. Building agency, creating safe spaces and support networks;
3. Economic support and incentives for girls;
4. Social norm change (which is the most unresearched and inadequately addressed area in actual implementation, though it is commonly found in the conceptualization of the programs);
5. Advocacy for legal and policy change on child marriage;
6. Engaging stakeholders (parents, community stakeholders and men and boys); and
7. Digital access for adolescent girls.

Learnings from the review of existing research and evaluation

Two important milestones identified in the report govern the work on CEFM and influence the design and development of the existing Theory of Change. These are:

1. Specifying the age of 18 years as a cut-off point to focus efforts to address and reduce vulnerability and risk, as highlighted in the framework above; and
2. Identifying the need to look through larger predictors, such as education, poverty, social norms, legal and policy frameworks, to see how they can shape the value of girls, rather than focusing solely on age, specifically 18 years.

When there is a law prohibiting the marriage of girls under the age of 18, and when there are multiple preventative programs at the national, regional and state levels, two questions remain: "Why is India still practicing CEFM?" and "Are we looking at child marriage as a problem or a symptom?"

Our study found that programs in India emphasize the age of girls as a central outcome, rather than the value and rights of girls. The available literature proves that the current programs contribute to delaying marriage among specific populations, but that they are also insufficient for ending the practice of CEFM – certainly not in one generation.

The evidence suggests that the emphasis used to address delaying marriage is the age of the girl. The issues of "early" and "forced" marriage – which are directly associated with consent, choice and the decision-making rights of girls – are missing or overlooked. Thus, in this report, we use child marriage in most cases, rather than CEFM.

We have confidence that keeping girls in secondary school contributes to delaying marriage among individual girls, but we also know that this does not necessarily change the underlying norms or increase the value of girls as a whole.

Existing studies and program evaluations established the fact that not only is girls' education a powerful tool for women's empowerment, it also has a multiplier effect on the condition and position of girls, their families as well as the community.

The report highlights the need to address obstacles to the education of girls, including the availability and accessibility of schools, the quality of teaching, the societal norms which prevent families from seeing value in sending girls to school and incentivizing families for girls' education.

Studies have established that keeping girls in school helps reduce child, early and forced marriage to an extent, but they have also shown that this is not a way to address forced marriage. In order to achieve significant results in addressing forced marriage, it is necessary to understand the processes through which marriages and other vital events in the lives of girls are being decided and fixed.

Programs have demonstrated that building agency for girls, creating safe spaces and peer support networks are ensuring the delay of marriage among girls. However, existing research and evaluation does not necessarily capture the bearing of the effect clearly. The discussion with experts highlights that when girls negotiate together in collectives, it is easier for them to convince their parents, especially if it is related to education or going out to play with other girls.

Our investigation did not find any studies that used social norm theory as a framework or a social norm diagnostic process to capture and measure the impact of norms on child marriage (Bicchieri et al., 2014). The existing research and evaluation included in this study did find that social norm aspects have been explored by most authors and experts to bring the discussion around agency, sexuality and rights aspects.

Many interventions followed the ecological model, which mentions engaging parents and other stakeholders. But it seems hardly anyone has evaluated the direct impact of community engagement as well as parental engagement in addressing child marriage.

The emphasis on the legal age of marriage has been integrated well in programs as well as research and evaluation. However, there is a huge gap in research around how legal reforms, as well as the current legal system, are positively or negatively impacting adolescent girls' and boys' lives or the lives of young people in general. There is not enough existing research to show how the implementation of laws forces families to marry their

girls at the age of 18 and, at the same time, devalues and criminalizes young people, pushing them to the margins of society.

Growing recognition of the impact of child marriage has shown increased efforts to address the same by introducing legal-, policy- and program-level efforts, but knowledge gaps still exist. More evidence is needed to ensure the effectiveness of approaches to end the practice.

Key research areas which need deeper analysis

1. What key school-related factors contribute to some girls' successful transitions from primary to secondary school in communities? Does investing in education work for all girls? What is the strategic impact of vocational training/livelihood options as a way to prevent child marriage?

2. What is the impact on girls/young women from programs designed for men and boys? How does working with boys and young men translate in marriage relationships?

3. Is economic investment a possible solution to delaying marriage among girls? What do we know about the quality of marriages in India? How can the quality be influenced by investing in girls?

4. Do Conditional Cash Transfer (CCT) programs have greater impact when they reach girls only or whole families? Do they contribute to changing norms about the value and roles of girls or do they simply alter the economic calculus regarding specific behaviours of the individual girls who participate in them?

5. Programs have demonstrated the importance of creating safe spaces, support networks and agency building in ensuring the delay of marriage among girls. But research and evaluation do not necessarily capture this. Do we not have adequate tools, indicators and methodologies to capture the impact of agency, peer networks and safe spaces in reducing child marriage?

6. At the girl, family, community and gatekeeper levels, what do we know about those who resist early marriage compared to those who do not? How does each stakeholder or gatekeeper impact the reduction of child marriage?

7. How do legal mechanisms work towards preventing child marriage? (Personal Laws vs. Child Marriage Restraint Act: At the Legal Realm vs. Implementation of legal aspects in reality). What is the relationship between the legal age of consent to sex and the legal age of marriage? How does the existing legal/policy framework ensure inclusion of 'early' and 'forced' marriage under the larger umbrella of CEFM?

INTRODUCTION

CHILD, EARLY AND FORCED MARRIAGE IN INDIA
What we know and what we need to know

Approximately 12-million girls are married each year before they reach the age of 18, according to UNICEF (UNICEF, 2018). Globally, the childhoods of one in five girls end abruptly, and their futures are compromised.

According to Girls Not Brides, a leading global organization working extensively to address child marriage, 2017 was a crucial year for research on child marriage. The study by GNB (Travers, 2017) shed new light on drivers and decision-making about child marriage across contexts, the impact of child marriage and evidence of what works to address it. A few key takeaways were: (i) child marriage increases in humanitarian contexts; (ii) child marriage is a global issue; (iii) girls' choice and agency is limited when it comes to deciding about marriage; and (iv) child marriage is costing countries a fortune.

There has been a tremendous amount of work done so far on finding solutions to end child marriage, if not early and forced marriage. Two milestones that govern the work on CEFM, which also influence the design and development of Theory of Change, are:

1. The United Nations (UN) Convention on the Rights of the Child, defines child marriage as marriage under the age of 18. Marriage before age 18 is a fundamental human rights violation and it disproportionately affects young girls, who are much more likely to be married as children than young boys (UNICEF and UNFPA, 2018; Mathur et al., 2003). Thus, the majority of the programs are developed with a foundational idea of addressing any marriages below the age of 18. The second most important aim of the programs is to explore the causes and find solutions.

2. With several research studies trying to examine the causes and consequences of child marriage in the late '90s and early 2000s (from 2001 to 2011), the International Centre for Research on Women (ICRW) conducted a comprehensive study of the existing programs in 2007 and 2008 (Malhotra et al., 2011) which uncovered important insights to address the problem. The study identified five programmatic strategies to delay or prevent child marriage (ICRW and Girls Not Brides, 2016). They include:

    1. Empower girls with information, skills and support networks;
    2. Educate and rally parents and community members;
    3. Enhance girls' access to high-quality education;
    4. Provide economic support and incentives to girls and their families; and
    5. Encourage supportive laws and policies.

While there has been substantial progress in expanding child marriage research, we believe that the existing research is deficient for three reasons.

One, there are too many explanations of child marriage and it is not clear how the different determinants identified by these explanations are supposed to fit together. Marriage in general means bringing families together, but it also means having fewer mouths to feed. Child marriages specifically ensure a reduced dowry and they also ensure the chastity of girls, which upholds the honour of the family.

Two, explanations of child marriage often lack theoretical rigor. Child marriage is referred to as "culture," a "practice," an "institution," a "custom," a "convention," a "social norm" or a "moral" imperative, but there is no theory behind it. All these are partial explanations rather than strong theoretical explanations, which means that only some features apply to a particular context.

Three, there are many measurement tools available for the Monitoring & Evaluation (M&E) of progress in ending child marriage, but these instruments also lack rigorous theoretical backing (Bicchieri et al., 2014).

There is also variation in the use of terminology. While

international human rights conventions and international entities stress the need to take measures to address child, early and forced marriage (CEFM), many countries still prefer to focus on only one or the other aspect in their national agenda and programs. Many practitioners, researchers and activists believe in the use of the comprehensive definition of child, early and forced marriage, while others believe that, within the existing legal parameters, addressing child marriage takes care of both early and forced marriage aspects.

> The global definition of child marriage includes, "any marriage in which at least one of the parties is a child"; i.e. a person below the age of 18. It also "refers to marriages involving a person aged below 18 in countries where the age of majority is attained earlier or upon marriage."

Early marriage can also refer to marriages where "both spouses are 18 or older but other factors make them unready to consent to marriage, such as their level of physical, emotional, sexual, and psychosocial development, or a lack of information regarding the person's life options." Additionally, "any marriage which occurs without the full and free consent of one or both of the parties and/or where one or both of the parties is/are unable to end or leave the marriage, including as a result of duress or intense social or family pressure," falls within the definition of CEFM.

In the context of India, the majority of government as well as civil society programs focus only on child marriage. This is reflected in their program strategies and design as well as documentation and research and evaluation. For this research study, we use "child marriage" more often in the review section while highlighting the missing links of addressing early and forced marriage in our recommendation and research gaps
.
When there is a law prohibiting the marriage of girls under the age of 18, and when there are multiple preventative programs at the national, regional and state levels, two questions remain: "Why is India still practicing CEFM?" and "Are we looking at child marriage as a problem or a symptom?"

India's commitment to prevent child marriage so far

India is committed to eliminating child marriage by 2030 in line with Goal 5.3 of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. India assented to the Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1992, which sets a minimum age of 18 for marriage, and ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in 1993, which obligates states to ensure full consent to marriage. India is also a signatory to the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), and child marriage violates a range of CRC provisions, including the right of children not to be separated from their parents against their will and the right of children to freely express their views on matters that affect them. Further, under the CRC, the state is obligated to take measures to abolish traditional practices prejudicial to the health of children, including marriage (Kolisetty, 2015).

India is also a member of the South Asian Initiative to End Violence Against Children (SAIEVAC), which adopted a regional action plan to end child marriage from 2015 to 2018.[1]

The Ministry of Women and Child Development drafted a National Action Plan to prevent child marriages in 2013. The key elements of the plan include law enforcement, changing mindsets and social norms, empowering adolescents, continuing education and knowledge sharing. However, due to its decentralised governance structure, there has been greater action at the state level in terms of the development of action plans.

According to the National Family Health Survey (NFHS) – 4 (2015-16), around 27 percent of women in India aged 20-24 years were reported to be married before the age of 18 (IIPS and ICF, 2017). India contributes a substantial number to the global total, as over one-fourth of all marriages in the country are child marriages; 50 percent of these are in eight major states. Recently, there was some positive news when a UNICEF report claimed that globally, over 25-million child marriages were prevented in the last decade, and that India

[1] https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/child-marriage/india/#:~:text=India%20acceded%20to%20the%20Convention,and%20full%20consent%20to%20marriage.

had taken the lead in this regard. Still, despite having a law against child marriage since 1929, which was replaced by the new Provision of Child Marriage Act (PCMA, 2006), a large proportion of girls in India have consistently been married before the legal age.

One thing is very clear: it is not easy to disrupt the deep-seated idea of marriage being the end goal. Ideas of consent, resistance, demand for rights can be well understood, accepted, and practiced, but the idea and institution of marriage are "unbreakable," "untouchable" and "inevitable." The legitimacy and power given to a married relationship in society are complex and extremely supreme, and it is hard to transform and shift this power with two to three year-long "projects," "programs" and "interventions."

On the other hand, the emphasis of these programs is more to do with the "age" of girls as a central outcome and not "the value and rights" of girls. This research study looks through the available literature and tries to explore and build clearer evidence of how the current programs are contributing more to delaying marriage among specific populations, but are insufficient for ending the practice. Also, we look at how addressing the issue of delaying marriage is completely missing/overlooking the issue of "early" and "forced" marriage, which is directly associated with consent, choice and the decision-making rights of girls.

Rationale of the study

The purpose of this study is to identify gaps in the existing research on child, early and forced marriage (CEFM) in India, going beyond what is already known and evident. By mapping out current knowledge of CEFM and highlighting questions to which we do not yet know the answers, the study is intended to generate discussions in the field and to clarify what we need to know to put an end to this deeply harmful practice.

Research gaps on their own should not drive investments in CEFM. A worthy research mandate must also be driven by programmatic and advocacy needs.

This study highlights the recommended areas for future research; it does not intend to give prescriptive guidelines or provide a definitive framework. Rather, we intend to describe the general contours of what we know and what we need to understand better.

In a recent study based on UNICEF-UNFPA's Theory of Change (ToC) to end child marriage, the author argues, using available evidence, for the need for changes at the drivers, strategies and outcome levels to address the existing system that still supports CEFM. The study proposed a new ToC, but stated the problem of no authentic evidence and research available in the Indian context as one of the major issues (Jejeebhoy, 2019).

Based on the existing literature and review of work on CEFM, we decided to use a seven-pillar research framework, laying out some specific questions we needed to be able to answer at each level. The narratives for each part of the framework would be similarly structured, defining issues in each thematic area, key indicators for success that are being highlighted, what are the missing areas of research and providing specific recommendations for future research investments.

Framework:
Our framework highlights the need for additional research into seven interrelated categories:

1. Girls' access to school and quality education;
2. Building agency, creating safe spaces and support networks;
3. Economic support and incentives for girls;
4. Social norm change (which is the most insufficiently researched and inadequately addressed area in actual implementation, though it is commonly found in the conceptualization of the programs);
5. Advocacy for legal and policy changes on child marriage;
6. Engaging stakeholders (parents and community stakeholders, including men and boys); and
7. Digital access for adolescent girls.

Although this framework represents each of these levels as distinct from the others, each layer does intersect and influence the other iteratively and is important in more ways than one. Facilitating girls' schooling, for example, contributes to changing norms and expectations regarding girls' education and marriage. Engaging with parents and religious leaders in delaying marriage can contribute to creating a favourable advocacy environment for legal and policy change. A favourable policy environment can lead to improved investments in favour of girls and in the implementation of laws that protect their rights. What is most important is to recognize that working at every level is needed and crucial for empowering girls.

The "child marriage" terminology has been used consistently in this report as the majority of the research evidence and experts use the same. However, in some instances, we have used CEFM mainly while referring to the global scenario and/or cases where the authors/experts have mentioned the same.

Methodology

Our research consists of four components:

1. **A review of the existing literature on child, early and forced marriage (key studies, academic articles, reports and policy documents):** The initial phase of the study involved a review of existing resources on child, early and forced marriage-related literature, including evaluative and formative research studies as well as other research studies.

   We particularly reviewed available literature on programs that study linkages between child marriage along with sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR), education of girls, livelihoods and/or economic empowerment of girls, cash transfer programs, shifting laws and policies, and social norm change interventions.

   To synthesize the available evidence, the desk-based research drew very selective global evidence, but mostly focused on India-centred publications and data, including national surveys and independent research work. In conducting this review, various sources of information have been explored, including search terms such as 'child marriage,' 'early marriage,' 'forced marriage,' 'arranged marriage,' 'age at marriage' as well as 'empowerment,' 'agency,' 'girls' education,' 'gender attitudes,' 'patriarchal attitudes,' 'adolescent sexuality,' 'marriage and union' and 'adolescent-friendly services.' Searches of peer reviewed literature relied on JStor, PubMed, POPLINE, MEDLINE and Google Scholar, and studies published in the last five years (approximately 2015 to 2020) have been the focus to gather and develop the literature catalogue.

   A search of reports and other studies through Google Scholar, websites of key international organizations (UNICEF, UNFPA, UN Women) and Non-Governmental Organizations (INGOs and NGOs), has been considered an additional step beside the previous two. All the available review synthesis reports have been examined in two layers to ensure that our desk review also captures the historical perspectives (i.e. all work completed before 2015).

   The review enables us to understand how the area of CEFM has been conceptualized in various programs and the gaps in comprehensive programming for adolescent girls in the past decade. It asks, what has been evaluated and demonstrated as a proof of concept, and what are the questions and narratives that are unanswered? Finally, it looks at the recommendations for future enquiry.

2. **Mapping of organizations and programs:** Alongside the review of literature and documents, an additional exercise of mapping organizations and programs in India that combine one or more elements of a CEFM-focused intervention has been undertaken. The list includes International Non-Governmental Organizations (INGOs) and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) as well as Community-Based Organizations (CBOs) working with adolescent girls with a focus on CEFM. After preparing a comprehensive list, their websites were reviewed and important data related to their work was captured. This activity helped us in setting up interviews with subject experts; our second most important process.

3. **Interviews with experts:** The information gathered from the experts (academics, practitioners and researchers) has strengthened our key findings from the review of literature and helped us go deep into the nuances around key drivers of CEFM that have been identified by many authors in the recent past. For the first stage, a survey was designed and shared with 15 key researchers and practitioners to include representations from NGOs, INGOs and grassroots organizations. Ten responses

were received. The tool was shared as a Google form (https://docs.google.com/forms/d/1e2lKjp_4_h2Gv-qwXFOOJhXEB49IHTBdCIoXN-FmwnA/edit) with the selected individuals.

Following this, we reached out to 15 key experts for a virtual interview and completed a total of 12 interviews. This activity was limited to a few experts because of two reasons: one, to engage more deeply in such conversations, especially to get into a sense-making exercise with them; and two, a lack of time to reach more than 30 as the research duration was short (three months).

Experts who have contributed to this research are part of organizations that are working pan-India, but have a huge and deep focus on CEFM across Rajasthan, Jharkhand, Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, West Bengal, Maharashtra and New Delhi. All the interviews were done virtually and due to the COVID-19 pandemic, no field visits were possible.

4. **Data from a two-day national consultation, "Accelerating Efforts to End Child Marriage in India":** This involved more than 90 participants, including leaders from 60 organizations across 13 different states. This consultation provided organizations with space for honest conversations around their experiences and challenges working on the issue, learning and the evidence, and their needs moving forward.

CURRENT SCENARIO OF CHILD MARRIAGE IN INDIA

Child marriage, which is often non-consensual or forced, is a symptom of a deeply fractured and unequal society. Research and documentation reveal why people decide to have their children marry early.

> Causes like "dowry," "poverty" and "fear of sexual violence" stand out as major reasons sustaining the practice. While these may be the factors that influence decision-making around marriage, they are not the root causes. The root causes are structural inequalities and direct decision-making factors. These underlying structures are an interplay of patriarchy, class, caste, ethnicity, religion and sexuality, which lead to complex realities that then influence decision-making.

The global efforts towards addressing child, early and forced marriage (CEFM) aim to ensure that all children, particularly girls and the excluded:

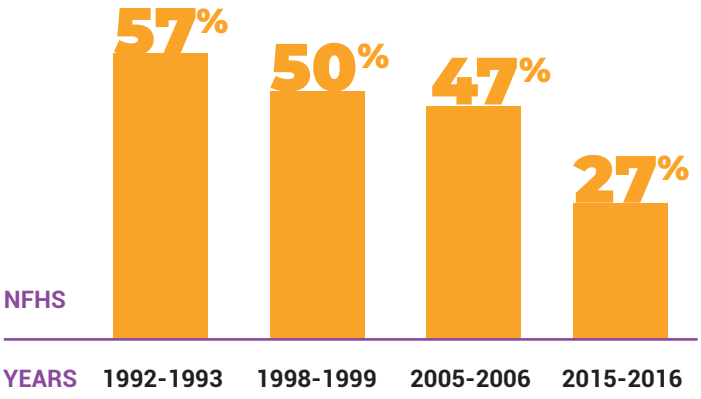
- Enjoy the right to live free from CEFM;
- Are safe, more resilient and are thriving; and
- Are empowered and have a more effective voice.

The evidence across the globe shows that there has been an overall decline in CEFM in many countries. Most of the countries have been trying to enforce stricter laws that penalize the families for such incidences. In India, child marriage has been declining slowly over time, but the number of girls and boys getting married before their respective legal ages still remains quite high. According to National Family Health Survey (NFHS) data, Chart 1, the prevalence of child marriage has seen a decline in the past decades from 57 percent in 1992-93 to 27 percent in 2015-16. The prevalence of child marriage in rural and urban India is 14 percent and seven percent, respectively, and it affects 32 percent of those in the 15-19 age group and 18 percent of those in the 20-24 age group.

The data also indicates that the economic status of households is negatively associated with the prevalence of child marriage across ages. It is observed that child marriage is more prevalent amongst women from bottom-wealth tercile households for both age groups (16.6 percent and 41.5 percent, respectively) and least prevalent amongst women from the top tercile households (5.4 percent and 13.4 percent, respectively). Women's educational level is also found to be negatively associated with the prevalence of child marriage for both 15-19 and 20-24 age groups. The higher the level of education, the lower the chance of child marriage (IIPS and IFC, 2017).

CHART 1:

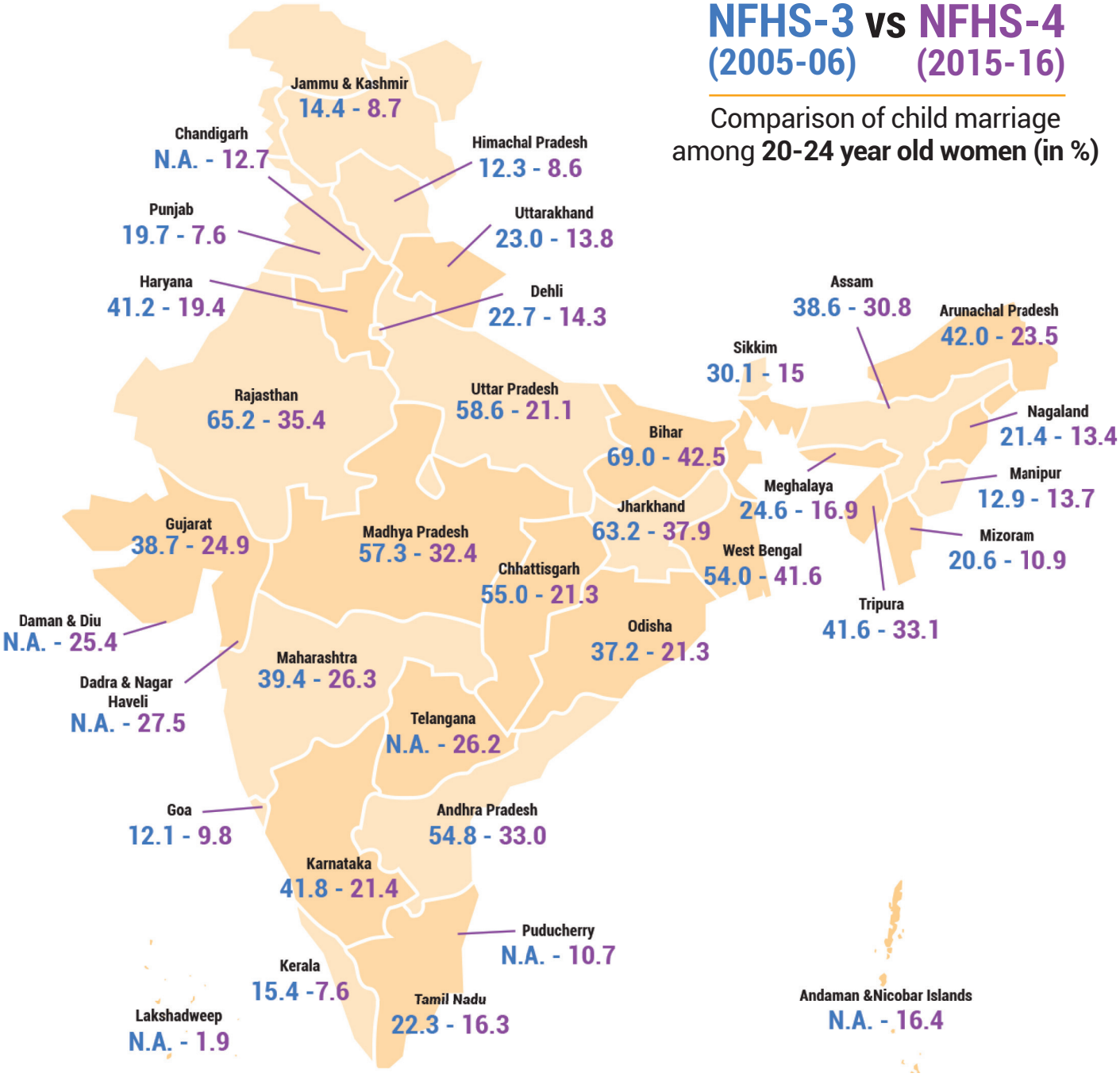
TRENDS IN CHILD MARRIAGE IN INDIA AND SELECTED STATES, 1992-2016



(Source: National Family Health Survey, India)

State-wise, variation is large and almost every state in India shows a declining trend in the data recently captured in NFHS-4 (2015-16), as can be seen in Diagram 1. Eight states in India (Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh, Haryana, Madhya Pradesh, Bihar, Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh and Andhra Pradesh) showed a decline of more than 20 percentage points from NFHS-3 (2005-06). The decline in West Bengal and Assam are modest with less than a 12 percentage-point decline being recorded (Malhotra et al. 2011).

DIARGRAM 1:
DECLINING TREND OF CHILD MARRIAGE IN INDIA



WHAT WORKS IN REDUCING CHILD MARRIAGE?

Access and importance of girls' education

We know with some confidence that keeping girls in secondary school contributes to delaying marriage among individual girls, but it does not necessarily change the underlying norms or increase the value of girls overall.

The Global evidence suggests that investing in girls' education is critical to ending child marriage and is also instrumental in reducing the gender gap in education in many countries. While in India there has been significant progress over the years in the domain of educational attainment, the recent education data shows disparity when it comes to regular attendance in school (including in primary school), secondary education enrolment and higher aspirations toward college education or technical education among girls.

According to Girls Not Brides (GNB), girls' education is one of the strongest associated predictors for episodes of child marriage. According to them:

- Girls tend to drop out of school during the preparatory time before the marriage or shortly after;
- When they are out of school, they are more vulnerable to get married; and
- Once girls are married early, returning to school is impossible for them. However, addressing schooling alone is not enough; addressing the root causes that contribute to gender inequality is even more important.

Our study further highlights that addressing obstacles to girls' education, such as improving availability and accessibility to schools, improving quality teaching, shifting social norms around the value of girls and providing incentives to support families to send girls to school, need more emphasis to make the educational initiatives work (Girls Not Brides, 2018).

The World Bank report on Educating Girls and Ending Child Marriage (2018a) highlights how limited access to quality education, son preference and limited job opportunities contribute to the practice of child marriage globally.

Another report by the World Bank (2018b) emphasizes three dimensions of a learning crisis, including poor learning outcomes, management and governance, and individual motivation in regards to learning, as well as deeper systematic causes. Many countries have shown tremendous progress in getting children and youth to school, but the shift toward accelerating learning is the next crucial step forward.

What is emerging?

Global research studies and evaluations of programs clearly establish the fact that girls' education is not only a powerful tool for women's empowerment but has a multiplier effect on the condition and position of girls, their families as well as the community. Many studies have identified and proposed recommendations to promote girls' education as a key means of reducing early marriage in many contexts (Kalamar et al., 2016).

The association between child marriage and low levels of schooling has been consistently validated, showing a strong impact across all regions of the developing world. Women with three or fewer years of schooling are significantly more likely to have married early than those with eight or more years of schooling (Mensch, 2005). Interestingly, across generations of research studies, the relationship between a woman's education and the timing of marriage has been one of the pivotal findings. For example, a study in Bangladesh finds that high levels of

maternal education are associated with later marriage among daughters (Bates et al., 2007).

The longitudinal study by Young Lives in Andhra Pradesh and Telengana has demonstrated the powerful role that girls' education contributes to delaying marriage and specifically when girls continue to be in school at and after the age of 15. The study highlights that even after controlling all the other key predictors (like poverty, parents' education, case, residence and so on), the impact of education decreases the likelihood of girls getting married before age 18 by 32 percent (Roest, 2016; Singh and Revollo, 2016).

Some studies have also explored other causes for school dropouts; findings reveal that access to safe, affordable and quality secondary education are some of the key factors that determine schooling for girls. A study by the Population Council in four states of India (Jharkhand, Odissa, Rajasthan and Bihar) finds that among the most common reasons for school dropouts among girls were household responsibilities, negative perceptions about education for girls, poverty and the distance to school (Basu et al., 2017).

"...the primary reason for most of the girls who drop out, especially after primary school, is not marriage, although this could be one of the many reasons...it's the multiple other reasons that they actually face in their life, such as the burden of household chores and the care support towards younger siblings and elders that they need to provide...Or their poor school performance...The roles of these reasons embedded in gender norms remain under-addressed when we assess the direct impact of education on marriage," says Ravi Verma, ICRW.

Some studies state that the pressure to prove fertility soon after marriage also leads to early childbirth and subsequent child-care responsibilities, which further acts as a barrier to post-marriage school participation (Llyod and Mensch, 2008; Omoeva et al., 2014; Mathur et al., 2003). The multiple layers of getting approval or permission for married girls are quite commonly prevalent and widely recognized. Girls, after marriage, have to get permission from their natal family members as well as their husband and in-laws. This decision-making circle remains limited to the natal family until the point a girl gets married (Raj et al., 2019).

Any work around child marriage can be seen pivoting around education. The idea is this: keeping girls in school prevents them from getting married. A bulk of the work in this area seeks to establish the strong correlation between girls' retention in school and child marriage; it is based on the premise that education will empower girls, reduce poverty and also influence social norms. All of these shifts could eventually change the attitudes and behaviours of people towards child marriage.

"...the combination of keeping girls in school, giving them life skills education, giving them information around SRHR helps girls in taking decisions about their lives...and a combination of these different strategies result in better outcomes. So, ensuring employability, SRHR, education, life skills, work around the age of marriage, everything works together and results in better outcomes," says Vinita Sahasranaman, Quilt.AI.

To understand how education positively impacts the delay of marriage for girls, it is important to identify nuances around the anticipated and expected role of girls defined by their family and community. Not many researchers have tried to introspect this deeper connection, as the majority of the studies are purely based on quantifiable measurements of looking at this interaction.

Looking deeply at the core benefits of keeping girls in school and the costs associated (financial as well as otherwise) for the family are some of the factors that are missing from several analyses. Moreover, the factors relating to social norms have not been fully explored for their impact on girls' education as well as marriage (Raj, 2010). As a result, there has been a failure to understand the backlash and social isolation families and girls face when they try to delay marriage (i.e. going against the norm).

A recent qualitative study by Raj, A. et al. (2019) explores the obstacles and resilience related to the relationship between girls' education and early marriage in three countries, including Jharkhand, India. The study mentions that the participants held primarily positive views regarding girls' educational attainment and reported direct benefits for girls and their families as well as benefits for the larger community and society. Participants also reported several disadvantages caused by the lack of girls' education, including reduced marital perspectives and no economic benefits (girls are not employable).

Researchers and practitioners have validated how educating girls has multiple benefits beyond just reducing child marriage. In study interviews, it was quite strongly emphasized by experts that the explanations showing marriage as a reason for girls dropping out of school are not adequate. The majority of the girls in Jharkhand, according to Ravi Verma from ICRW, dropped out of school mainly in their secondary level due to poor school performance. He further argues that girls' performance is not a result of their lack of intellectual ability. Rather, a majority of them are overburdened with household and caregiving responsibilities at home which impacts their educational performance. The repeated failure to perform in school then becomes an excuse for parents to withdraw their daughters or forces girls themselves to drop out.

"If we provide some kind input to these girls to perform well in school through our interventions or state-led schemes and programs, that would also strengthen the support system at the family level to lessen the caregiving burden of girls; the situation with regard to continuity in schools and child marriages would completely change," says Ravi Verma, ICRW.

Some studies show that dropping out of school early limits the opportunities of economic empowerment for girls and young women, specifically the ability to earn an independent income, which is further constrained within the context of child marriage. On the other hand, educational attainment increases economic self-sufficiency among women and girls, allowing them to be less reliant on male partners, and self-efficacy as well (Kalamar et al., 2016; Klasen and Lamanna, 2009).

Additionally, girls' withdrawal from school resulting in child marriage has also been closely linked to reduced access to sexual and reproductive health education and services, social isolation from peers and mentors, and decreased social mobility underscored by economic vulnerability (Llyod and Mensch, 2008).

The IBM STEM for Girls program, in collaboration with the Department of Education in Rajasthan, is one such effort. The program is being implemented over three years (November 2019 to May 2022) and in phases across 306 secondary/Sr. secondary schools to advance the skills and careers of girls and boys in the Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) fields. This initiative primarily aims to improve education-to-work and career pathways for girls who are studying in government schools.

Mounting evidence suggests that keeping girls in secondary school contributes to delaying marriage. However, these programs do not necessarily shift/change the underlying norms. There are several barriers/gaps that intersect with the causal pathways to show the direct influence between educational attainment and the reduction of child marriage. Similarly, there exist gaps in current research that do not capture the interconnectedness of the issues and factors exacerbating the inequalities which contribute to child and forced marriage.

Where are the gaps in current research?

This study identified research gaps after reviewing existing literature and conducting interviews with subject experts. Some of the key points are included below:

a. **The role of education in empowering girls to challenge gender-discriminatory norms, especially early and forced marriage.** Studies have established that keeping girls in school helps reduce child, early and forced marriage to a certain

extent, but it is not a way to address forced marriage. In order to work with significant results on addressing forced marriage, it is necessary to understand the processes through which marriage and other vital events in the lives of girls are being decided and fixed. The existing research needs to look at how education plays a positive role in enhancing girls' self-confidence and self-esteem, and builds their courage to challenge forced marriage. In short, education gives girls an opportunity to have a say in crucial decisions relating to their lives. This needs to be captured through research and evidence building.

b. **Influence of girls' aspirations on the community.** Many interventions are based on the premise that by fostering a critical mass of successful girls and imparting adult literacy with a questioning attitude can help communities address simple norms that impact their livelihoods and result in positive change. However, there is no evidence on how the girls who aspire for higher education are influencing other girls in their community. The desired positive impact of girls' higher aspiration and achievement on the community is not being documented or studied.

c. **Parental aspirations, especially the aspirations of mothers.** This directly influences girls' own aspirations for both beneficiary and non-beneficiary girls. But it is not clearly spelled out if there are connections between the aspirations of mothers and the early marriage of young girls. Also, families might be educating girls due to a demand for educated girls in the marriage sector. The question is, do increased aspirations lead to a higher decision-making ability and negotiation skills among girls, and in turn, help delay marriage?

d. **Linkages between vocational training and economic empowerment.** The role of vocational training combined with secondary education and contributions to family income is another identifiable gap, especially when we look at situations where poverty results in school dropouts. This aspect needs to be explored in future studies.

e. **Factors contributing to high school dropout rates.** The majority of programs target girls who are likely to go to secondary school. In contexts where primary to secondary school dropout is high, it is imperative to investigate the reason for not continuing schooling, thereby increasing the susceptibility of child marriage.

f. **Significance of life skills in building girls' agency and self-efficacy.** As long as education continues to be a mere outcome variable enamoured with the affiliations (primary, secondary, higher ed., etc.), there will never be systemic change in questioning, critical thinking or in the disproportionate, disparate and deeply subjugating social norms. The highly recommended qualitative understanding and expressions of "processes" that highlight life skills and life education are currently unanswered and unaddressed.

g. **Lack of economic opportunities and unpaid labour of girls causing discontinuation of education.** Reasons for girls not continuing education remain confined to the broader issues like poverty, marriage and inadequate infrastructure. These studies have not been able to test the girls' choices or interests. The lack of economic opportunities combined with the way girls' invisible labour contributes to sub-economies is also a reason for not continuing education, but there is no documented evidence to substantiate this reality.

h. **Limited focus or push on tertiary education.** It is a well-accepted fact that only college education leads to an exposure to political education and to the politicisation of ideas, which helps build agency. So essentially, the target should not be secondary school but college education for girls. However,

there is not much documented evidence around this fact, as the push by the government and other stakeholders is only for secondary education for girls. This could be because of the overemphasis of "age" as the factor to address in regards to child marriage. Research which tries to validate the impact of education should bring to the forefront how higher education not only reduces the chances of girls getting married early but also increases their agency and confidence to fulfil their aspirations.

i. **Lack of access to entitlements and opportunities.** Schools are not just for education. Not going to school also means girls are cut off from connecting with many other resources, entitlements and incentives, like free bicycles and technological support in certain states like Bihar and Tamil Nadu, or cash incentives in some other states. How this affects delaying marriage is not well understood due to a lack of research and evidence in this area.

j. **Further research is needed to understand the relationship between education and age at marriage.** Most program-implementation organizations work on education even when they are attempting to shift other developmental indicators. This is simply due to the fact that the impact of education on addressing child marriage has been documented and validated very strongly. The important question that we should ask is, "what is it about education that helps girls push their age of marriage?" In all the work that exists, this relationship of education and age at marriage hasn't been very well tested. The questions remain:

   I. Does education create more opportunity to build social capital?
   II. Does education create more space to work on social ideas?
   III. How does education help increase girls' aspirations and agency?

Building agency, safe spaces and peer networks

Programs have demonstrated that building the agency of girls, creating safe spaces and peer support networks are ensuring the delay of marriage among girls. However, existing research and evaluation does not necessarily capture the bearing of the effect clearly.

The research so far has established that when it comes to the empowerment of girls, their voice and agency matters. It has also been observed that the increased decision-making ability of girls, access to public spaces and ability to participate in peer-based networks often lead to a reduction in gender disparities and enhances equal opportunities. The question is, how much does such a hypothesis and do these assumptions impact the reduction of child marriage or enhance the well-being of girls?

Looking at the agency framework outlined in Akshara's report Girls Map Change, which is a girls-led experiment to measure program impact, the agency of girls operates in three interactive spaces. These are: individual (self-confidence, understanding gender discrimination, personal vision), relational/family (negotiating ability, challenging social-cultural aspects, access to social media, peer networking) and collective agencies (ability to take social action, increased mobility, access to social networks) (AJWS, 2019a).

Many interventions and associated research studies and evaluations based on the gender-transformative approach uphold the importance of increasing girls' agency through building skills around self-efficacy, self-esteem and confidence, creating safe spaces (both physical and emotional) as well as building peer networks to support each other as a critical means to reduce child marriage in India.

While looking at these transformative programs, it is interesting to understand whether the ability of girls to make key decisions in their own lives and act on those decisions is based on their choice or whether we are defining agency in our own terms. The most common indicators which have been explored and have demonstrated statistically significant results are: getting

permission to go to school or the market, or to play and visit friends, exposure to mass media (television, radio) and negotiating with parents to continue schooling. But many such studies fail to understand how these permissions are sought and what may be taken away from girls when seeking these permissions. A few qualitative studies did emphasize that permission to go outside to the market or for play comes with a condition that they would need to be accompanied by their brother (younger in many instances). This has mainly been found in sports-based interventions, and the most preferred space to play for the girls is the school ground.

Though life skills as a proxy for "agency" has been captured through some research in the Indian context, the landmark shifts happened with Nirantar Trust's landscape analysis in 2015. This analysis proved to be path-breaking research, which laid a solid foundation for social dialogue, inclusion and equity, and especially in relation to rights, resources, benefits, social and political power, and participation as the core of the research investigation (Nirantar Trust, 2015).

What is emerging?

Building girls' agency

During the discussions, many researchers and practitioners highlighted that agency has become quite a "free-flowing" term and is used extensively without a deeper understanding. Agency is critical at the individual level as well as at the level of collective action; it includes making choices, the ability to make decisions, having aspirations and the confidence to achieve them, challenging discriminatory norms and having access to opportunities.

Agency of girls has been reported differently in various research and evaluation studies. A few highlight the ability to make decisions for their own life events, while others reported an increased knowledge about the legal age to marry, the right to mobility and the ability to negotiate continuing education.

Girls who are exposed to gender-transformative interventions are found to report higher knowledge about the legal age of marriage as well as their right to choose when to get married after the age of 18 (Achyut et.al., 2011); they seem to have better ability to negotiate decisions. Another study by ICRW (Kanesathasan et al., 2008) highlighted the impact of an intervention with adolescent girls (DISHA), after which unmarried girls were more than twice as likely to talk to their parents about their marriage (54 percent vs. 21 percent).

In another intervention with adolescent girls (Better Life Options, India), over 70 percent of all participating girls and around 90 percent of those who most consistently engaged reported they had become more confident, were better able to speak without hesitation or fear and were more likely to speak out if they disagreed with another's viewpoint. A significant increase in communication between participant girls and parents on SRHR issues was also reported (Acharya et al., 2009).

However, the Population Council study assessing the level of choice and consent of girls regarding their marriage brings up a conclusion contrary to what has been documented from intervention-based research and evaluations. The study reports some girls and young women having been consulted by their families about the timing of their marriage or choice of husband (Santhya et al., 2010). But even among those who reported being consulted, consent was not informed as many were not given a chance to interact with their husband prior to their marriage.

Similar findings were captured through Young Lives' longitudinal study in rural Andhra Pradesh and Telengana; among girls who were married before the age of 18, 45 percent had no say in choosing their husband. Even when some girls had been asked about their preferences by their parents, it did not necessarily mean they were able to express their preferences or provide meaningful, informed consent (Crivello et al., 2018).

Negotiating power among girls has also been found to be age-specific as older adolescents (15 – 17 years of age) are more confident about speaking to their parents regarding major aspects of their life. An interesting finding in a study by ICRW finds that older girls were able to articulate their concerns and relate gender challenges to their everyday realities in a concrete manner. Talking to fathers has been found challenging, however, as girls grow older and try to navigate that space more effectively (Nanda et al., 2017).

In terms of enhanced mobility, studies have shown how exposure to gender-transformative programs increases girls' access to public spaces (Raj et al., 2019) as well as their ability to negotiate going out with friends (Das et al., 2018). The discussion with experts highlighted that

when girls negotiate together in collectives, it is easier for them to convince their parents, especially if it is related to education or going out to play with the other girls.

Much anecdotal evidence from intervention documents suggests that the most difficult space for girls to negotiate is in the area of relationships and specifically exercising their own choice. A girl's decision is not accepted in communities across socioeconomic strata as well as region and residence types. The caste and religious differentials lead to more complex and challenging scenarios, which in many instances can lead to honour killings or racial violence.

There is a debate on the neutrality of agency and how to engage with 'misogynist agency.' Many suggest that there is a need to find alternatives to age as a marker of agency.

"...capabilities and opportunities as markers of agency are important. But what I understand is that focusing on agency doesn't mean that age as a domain for analysis is not required. It means going beyond delayed age at marriage as the primary goal. Several of our partners are instead looking at age as a lens and find it as a powerful lens to understand the needs of different age groups," says Manjima Bhattacharjya, AJWS.

While "NOT AGE BUT AGENCY" was a nice tagline, we have moved beyond agency now. What is important and needed is to amplify measures that promote girls' leadership to make their presence known in society and ensure that their voices count.

Creating "safe spaces"

Fear of girls' safety has been a major concern in many communities and is often associated with protecting their chastity. There is an overwhelming emphasis on keeping girls away from boys and preventing them from forming any relationships before marriage. Parents often confirm this protectionist approach by expressing that they are worried about their daughter's safety in public spaces and that they must protect them from rape/harassment (Khanna et al., 2013; Bankar et al., 2018).

A study in 10 Indian states by G.B. Pant Institute (2013) reports that the concern for the safety of girls is one of the key predictors of child marriage. Another study explains a similar concern, where in Rajasthan, parents describe the unsafe situation in their villages and justify child marriage as a way to prevent girls from becoming trafficked, abducted or raped (Santhya, 2019).

In response to these protectionist approaches, which curtail the right of girls to access public spaces and their freedom of mobility, an important concept of creating "safe spaces" for girls emerged as a pillar of their program.

The concept of safe spaces came out of the recognition that girls often lack the space to socialize and engage with peers, learn new skills, obtain critical health information, develop relationships (ICRW, 2011) and access public spaces.

The majority of the safe space programs often include other larger outcomes as part of the curriculum, including life skills (including sports initiatives), health (mainly SRHR), education and economic empowerment, all of which have often proven to be successful in delaying the age at marriage.

Sports in particular has been found to be a very effective way of expanding the right to public spaces for girls. Sports is a means to build collective strength by creating safe spaces for reflecting, sharing and building solidarity to take collective action for social change. Many organizations[2] in India have used sports as a means of engaging and empowering girls at the programmatic level.

An evaluation of a recent intervention by ICRW-PAnKH suggests that sport sessions allow the participating girls to

[2] ICRW, Pro-Sports Development, Naz Foundation, Jabala, Magic Bus, CREA, Dream-a-Dream are few to mention.

challenge the unwritten norms relating to girls occupying public spaces, help them expand their social networks and give them confidence (ICRW, IFS, Manjuri Foundation, 2019).

Peer networks

Women's movements have been key in informing the importance of collectives and collective actions to challenge the power relations that exclude and perpetuate discrimination, especially for marginalized groups such as the Dalit and Adivasi. Based on a similar principle, having peer networks or support groups of girls has been a very effective strategy for the well-being of girls and for preventing them from getting married early without their consent and choice.

Most research on social networks or peer influence on adolescents globally has focused on health risk behaviours, such as the influence of peers on smoking behaviour (Liu et al., 2017). Few studies have examined whether and how such networks may support girls in impeding child marriage. Also, for the interventions that have conceptually included peer support networks as an integrated strategy for adolescent programs, not many have evaluated its impact on reducing child marriage or even building agency or well-being.

Many programs rely on informal communication between peers or in families, but there is a glaring silence in the studies on the extent of informal peer communications, the groups most likely to communicate new norms in this manner and whether there are issues that people in different contexts see as taboo for discussing, even among those they trust. There is a specific lack of analysis in these programs of adolescent girls as peer communicators.

According to Manjima Bhattarcharjya, AJWS, "Collectivizing women has been done different (more with a feminist approach) from collectivizing girls in the development sector (more with a service delivery approach). What does it mean to collectivize girls in a feminist way, the way it was once done with women? We are trying to understand what a politicized girls collective will look like. How is it different from a safe space, is an important question to be answered."

When girls negotiate together in collectives, it is easier for them to convince their parents, especially if it is related to education. In communities where work is necessary, this strategy works differently in cognizance with the nature, place and type of work.

The most difficult space for girls to negotiate is when it comes to relationships, as mentioned earlier. Exercising their own choice and decision-making is not often accepted in most of the communities across socio-economic strata as well as region and residence types.

The ICRW Rajasthan-based program (PAnKH interventions) suggests that layering the intervention for engaging adolescent girls in existing community institutions, such as the self-help group (SHG) networks in Dholpur, has been found to be beneficial. Leveraging SHGs provided a greater impetus for community mobilization and helped build an early acceptance of the program, particularly in the backdrop of rigid patriarchal social norms (AJWS, 2019).

The review of existing literature together with cross verification by experts doesn't reveal much about how the available evaluation validates social networks as providing a safe and inclusive space for adolescent girls. It has been cited in some reviews that data on social networks is difficult and expensive to capture. In India, the existing caste structure also imposes multiple restrictions around the forming of networks and even their ability to function (Kandpal and Baylis, 2012).

Where are the gaps in current research?

The existing literature on the importance of building agency and creating safe spaces and peer networks has revealed a mixed understanding. On one hand, the conceptual design or Theory of Change of many interventions highlight the importance of such components, while the research and the evaluation of those interventions either provide no evidence or very limited mention of the impact.

With the inputs extracted from discussions with subject experts and from reviews of documents, the study identified some key research gaps:

a. **Agency is difficult to capture in its entirety.** Due to the subjectivity of the responses from respondents as well as the biases of the researchers, it is often difficult to capture the exact narratives around change. It was also found that there are not many indicators to capture agency in terms of girls' ability to exercise their choice and decisions, the improvement in their mobility to access safe spaces and peer networks, etc.

b. **Context-specific research, taking into account the perception of agency for different communities, is essentially missing.** The starting point for such research would be to contextually define the term and then find the impact of such agency on decision-making among girls.

c. **Expression, rather than actual perception and ability, to exercise agency.** The most common ways to measure agency is to use data on what people say they do in different domains of their life. This approach has the advantage of being more comparable and more objective than the data on personal perceptions of agency, which is considered to be much more abstract. Many studies avoid the perceptions of agency as they could be distorted by social norms and may not be comparable across individuals. Another explanation is mainly that individuals – especially young people, such as adolescent girls – are unaware of their rights. They are mostly being restricted and told what is expected of them, rather than being connected to a world of possibilities from which they may choose. Thus, perceiving what is truly available for them becomes even more difficult. The argument here is that there is a lack of testing, thus all of these arguments are mostly assumptions, rather than facts.

d. **Not all girls with agency want to delay marriage.** This begged the question of which adolescents are setting their goals and whether they are able to achieve these self-defined targets. Thus, the research calls for the need to help adolescents realize their own aspirations – however they are defined. But most of the evaluations overemphasised the relationship between girls' increased negotiating abilities and confidence, and their ability to delay marriage.

e. **There are no reliable measures to capture the impact of safe spaces and peer networks in a girl's life overall and also in negotiating her marriage (mainly choice and consent).**

> Shireen Jejeebhoy states, "Although there are a lot of safe-space programs in India, there is not much rigorous evidence on their effect, for example, in expanding peer networks or empowering girls more generally, and we don't know about the fidelity with which programs are implemented."

Many subject experts mention that safe spaces and having a peer support network can be examined, but a rigorous and articulated definition is important to be able to achieve this. For example, peer-network impact should consider if the network of girls is in the school, at the community level or even in the more informal friendship networks (which would have a huge value). Unfortunately, the literature in India hasn't been able to establish that impact.

f. **What happens to girls who do not marry and what are the effects of delaying marriage?** There is complete silence around programs, as well as in research and evaluation, related to what happens to girls and their families who challenge existing social norms and delay marriage. This question is important to explore as most of the programs that use the gender lens bring in

the aspect of agency, which is not only about delaying marriage, but also emphasizes the importance of higher education and livelihood/ employability.

g. **Do girls who marry later really experience better marriage outcomes?** The preliminary analysis of NFHS-4 data (Das and Kumar, 2020) shows that access to health care (permission to address personal health and money needed towards the services) is reported slightly higher by married women aged 20-24 compared to those who were married before the age of 18. Additionally, the right to mobility and access to mobile phones is higher among those who are married after the age of 18. The authors summed up by saying, as NFHS doesn't have a focused emphasis on capturing data retrospectively, drawing conclusions from these findings would have to be done carefully. The review did not find any other data on outcome similarities.

h. **The long-term impact of gender-transformative programs on girls' agency.** The core focus of most transformative programs is on strengthening the girls' agency during the intervention. What happens later is often ignored.

Shalini Singh from CREA states, "we work on building girls' agency and then leave them in an environment where not much has changed. Because of this, they are left to fight their own battles." What is important here is to capture how girls are negotiating beyond the project period in those difficult spaces. This evidence would help practitioners in strengthening their program strategies. Ms. Singh further emphasizes that "we must identify what are the enabling and disabling factors that impact the negotiation abilities of young women."

The idea is to develop tools to study the impact of the intervention from the perspective of the stakeholder.

i. **The review, as mentioned earlier, has also looked at several sports-based programs and has found that this is an effective strategy to address child marriage.** But those interventions have not been evaluated to determine whether stand-alone community-based sports sessions for adolescent girls are a feasible and effective model for national policy, and for their specific value. This is one such area that needs attention and evidence as sports programs are found to be enjoyed by girls and are also cost-effective.

j. **The majority of the interventions are sources of information targeting girls (sometimes boys) during their adolescence; the underlying expectation is that girls would use their newfound knowledge to make important decisions in their lives.**

"The question is, if a girl is not able to use such knowledge in the decision-making process or in a particular life event, will we not consider them empowered?" asks Prabhleen Tuteja, The YP Foundation.

The social fabric of life is complex. Thus, in the long run, life events can't be completely dependent on those few hours of exposure to the intervention. Most of the time, the success of an intervention is determined by a very short and quick evaluation process, so it becomes impossible to make conclusions about what long-term success would look like.

k. **With regards to agency and negotiation, existing or past interventions are focused on girls; we don't know how boys are exercising their agency and negotiating to delay marriage.** In short, not much is known about what is happening on the

demand side of marriage, which may be a huge push towards the early marriage of girls.

I. **In India, in particular, the hierarchical structures imposed by the caste system mean that peer networks are often restricted by caste.** These constraints can potentially limit girls' interactions to a small subset of the community. This has been anecdotally captured by many program interventions, but space in research and evaluations has not been dedicated to examining what the constraints truly bring and what kind of impact they have.

Impact of economic incentive programs

Do economic incentive programs contribute to changing norms about the value and role of girls or do they simply alter the economic calculus regarding specific behaviours of the individual girls who participate in them?

There has been no dearth of evidence to confirm the link between poverty and child marriage. Among the key drivers of child marriage highlighted in studies done by ICRW and Girls Not Brides, being born in a poorer household has been a key predictor for girls to get married early. It has also been captured in several studies that girls who enter marriage early are likely to remain in poverty for most of their lives. Over the years, several strategies have been formed to tackle this issue, including:

- Financial incentives to keep girls in school and not marry before age 18
- Exposure to financial literacy programs for girls in late adolescence (above age 15)
- Skills related to livelihood and employment
- Courses for girls to develop vocational skills
- Employability – building girls' confidence, skills and capabilities to identify, plan and realize personal and professional goals

What is emerging?

Programs are increasingly considering poverty, education and the lack of economic opportunities as drivers of child marriage, and there is clear evidence that keeping girls in school and economic incentives are working positively to delay the marriage of girls before the age of 18.

Programs for adolescent girls often use strategies to create opportunities that will inspire girls and their families to seek alternatives to early marriage. Many programs try to provide a safe space for girls to meet, offer life skills lessons and, in some cases, provide access to livelihood training, savings and credit options as well.

While many programs showed promising results of delaying marriage, they could not stop the practice of a dowry being paid at the time of marriage. "Kishori Abhijan", a study in Bangladesh, reported success in delaying marriage among the youngest and poorest girls after two years of intervention. However, payment of a dowry could not be negotiated and for older girls, families had to pay higher amounts. Program leaders concluded that efforts to delay marriage are most beneficial when they expand economic opportunities for girls who see these new opportunities as meaningful alternatives to early marriage. These opportunities also help to defray the increasing costs of a dowry that later marriages entail (Amin and Luciana, 2005).

Similar evidence is also found in the Indian context, mainly around the "Conditional Cash Transfer" (CCT) programs which the national and state governments have initiated to reduce child marriage. Many are of the opinion that economic incentive programs simply alter the economic calculus regarding the behaviours of the girls who participate in them, while the community remains static and unengaged. For norm change to happen, the community needs to be part of the change process.

Overall, the literature suggests that there is more evidence from conditional cash transfers (CCTs) than unconditional ones. Of them, few CCT programs directly address the child marriage issue with intermediate outcomes, such as the completion of secondary school. The Apni Beti Apna Dhan (ABAD)[3] program evaluation shows that the conditional cash program (on both completing education and not being married at 18) did not affect the probability of ever being married or being married before the age of 18, but it did impact the number of girls completing secondary school (Nanda et al., 2014). The mapping study conducted by UNICEF and UNFPA in South Asia found that the cash transfer programs implemented in India are inconclusive in demonstrating that they increase the age of marriage. They also do not show any significant effect in shifting parental attitudes towards marriage (UNFPA, 2016). Parents are found to use the money to arrange marriages for their daughters, almost as soon as they reach the age of 18, and for the dowry.

The larger evidence, looking through the benefits of CCTs, shows that while economic incentives can be a short-term mechanism to address some structural issues – possibly using the money to continue a girl's education – it would hardly change the power equations in the long term or make any substantial and sustainable improvement in the scenario. In many instances, these initiatives do end up reinforcing the existing social norms and practices which curtail the rights of girls' choice and decisions. Take, for example, Chief Minister's Samoohik Vivah (group wedding) scheme in Uttar Pradesh.

One of the issues brought up by the experts is the fact that economic incentives through CCTs might not be able to change norms, mindsets and attitudes, but they can impact behaviour and practices. It is an instrumentalist approach so it is limited, time-bound and narrow. Thus, to address the discriminatory attitudes and perspectives towards girls and women, which are deep rooted in Indian society, a lot of other efforts, along with economic incentives, need to be taken into consideration. Simply accepting economic incentive programs as a stand-alone initiative is not an appropriate approach; they are needed, but not as a stand-alone strategy to address child marriage.

"…in my view, CCT programs or any kind of economic incentives would work with the right targeting and the right messaging. The program needs to identify who is the most vulnerable and strategize and design the CCTs (unconditional or conditional) as a step forward for them (girls), at least for those girls who would otherwise not have had an opportunity to go to school. Through these programs we are creating an environment of the school that enables that agency for them to make decisions, strategic life decisions, for themselves. It's only that the CCTs are designed to be very instrumentalist," says Priya Nanda, Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation (BMGF).

The analysis of the data gathered through the interviews highlights that most of the economic incentive programs are designed for girls ages 18 and under. The research and evaluation studies of these programs also highlight that whatever money is accumulated through these schemes, families utilize it for the girls' marriage expenses after they turn 18. Moreover, the cash is also being used to pay the dowry. Thus, what the programs didn't alter are the norms around marriage expenses and dowries.

Shifting from economic incentives to introducing employability and livelihood programs opens up many opportunities. In India, the lack of agency (decision-making ability), social isolation and interrupted education among girls reduces their opportunity to engage in the formal economy. Evidence links an increased employability among girls with improved developmental outcomes, including smaller family sizes, more decision-making responsibility and higher levels of income. **Enhancing a girl's employability reduces vulnerability, increases**

[3] Apni Beti Apna Dhan or "Our Daughter, Our Wealth" was developed by the Government of Haryana in 1994 and operated between 1994 to 1998. It is one of the first CCTs targeting girls and implemented systematically by an Indian state.

opportunity and strengthens their ability to exercise choice, improving overall outcomes for them. Employability is thus an asset—a means to an end—that marks a successful transition from adolescence to adulthood.

An ICRW initiative (The PAGE program) aims to build the confidence, skills and capabilities of girls to identify, plan and realize their personal and professional aspirations. The empowerment component of PAGE focuses on building girls' understanding of gender and power, and developing their self-efficacy as well as negotiation and thinking skills. The employability aspect of the program provides concrete ideas around future work, developing skills connected with purpose and preparing their bio sheets or curriculum vitae (Nanda et al., 2017).

The employability approach cuts across the age-restrictive parameters, which were the focus in most of the livelihood programs (for older adolescents). Experts interviewed through this study noted that economic empowerment isn't only about earning an income or preparing girls to join the job market, but it is also to ensure that they have employment-related skill sets that are considered essential for employment and entrepreneurship, including financial literacy.

Change in gender-role attitudes and gender-egalitarian work-related attitudes is found to be significantly greater among girls who are exposed to interventions focused on aspects of employability. A study shows, that for the participating girls, about 44 percent of the change in gender-role attitudes and all of the change in gender-egalitarian work-related attitudes can be attributed to such programs (Acharya et al., 2009).

At the girls' level, one also needs to look through the transition from education to employment. There is mounting evidence that shows the importance of secondary education in delaying marriage as well as being employable. But not every adolescent girl gets the opportunity to complete her school education.

Where are the gaps in current research?

a. **When girls are employed, is it the experience of work or the money that makes a difference in their lives?** It is important to understand how expectations are being set by themselves (girls) as well as their families. There is underlying evidence that says girls and women from marginalized socioeconomic contexts work harder to contribute to their family income. If this is true (and it may be), do we have any evidence to find how restrictive norms around their mobility affects them?

b. **The effects of the "second shift" – girls engaging in income generation activities as well as fulfilling domestic responsibilities at home.** This scenario is quite common and girls are often expected to perform both roles effectively. However, in the long run, this might have an impact on their overall health and well-being. The question we may not have asked is: how do these dual responsibilities add to the increased workload/burden in their lives?

c. **The analysis of data gathered through the interviews highlights that most of the economic incentive programs are designed for girls ages 18 and under.** What happens after a girl turns 18 is often left unanswered. Some research explores how the economic benefit from CCT schemes has helped families, whether girls complete their school education and so on. But information on what happens to these girls beyond the age of 18 is missing from our evidence building process.

d. **More evidence is required to understand how restrictive gatekeepers, curtailed mobility and limited social networks increase the vulnerability of girls who wish to work outside their home**. Parents, relatives, community members and other key decision-makers in a girl's life often act as gatekeepers and limit the impact of employability programs. Even when

girls explore these opportunities through school or within school by civil society engagement, the question that needs to be answered is: how much of these skills can they use after completing school? ICRW's PAGE program did provide some evidence, but we would need more time and effort to capture the long-term impact of employability or livelihood programs on their lives.

e. **Vocational opportunities tend to reinforce gender-specific norms and how they impact a girl's agency/ability to negotiate is still a dark area.** Additionally, while some vocational opportunities expose girls to non-conventional skills, girls are often unable to continue in that line of work after marriage. How that impacts the lives of girls with respect to the decision to marry is not clear.

f. **Despite a strong national, policy-level focus on developing the skills of youth in India, very few government-run programs reflect an understanding of the specific challenges related to working with adolescent girls.** Government skills-development programs show very little evidence in terms of tangible outcomes and no evidence on what is and isn't working. The questions are: "How are these skills-building trainings helping girls attain new expertise? Are we connecting girls to relevant markets? Are we helping them maintain employment?" Existing programs will lead to long-term solutions only if the government recognizes the specific challenges of working with adolescent girls and addresses these barriers while devising policies for them.

g. **How each kind of economic empowerment strategy is working to ensure a smooth transition of girls from school to work.** A comparative analysis is completely missing from the current literature, and thus, leaves us to pick and choose what suits the project proposal rather than the context. It is important for the researcher and practitioners to know which model better equips girls to deal with and/or handle work situations in their lives.

Social norms

The collective practice of child marriage is ultimately an outcome of individual behaviours. Therefore, if we want to understand it, we have to understand why individuals behave in a certain way. When behaviours are influenced in that manner, they are called a social norm (Bicchieri, C. 2006, 2014).

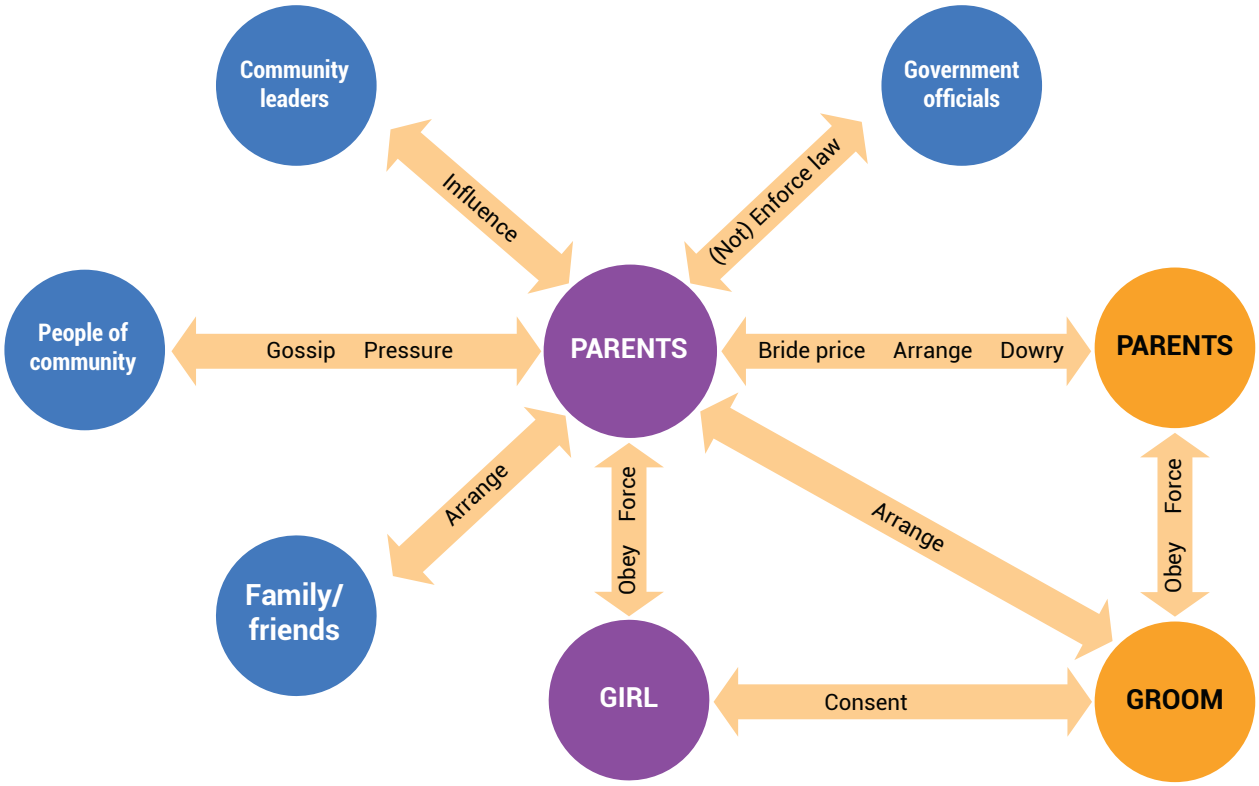
Bicchieri (2012) defines a social norm as "a rule of behavior such that individuals prefer to conform to it on conditions that they believe that most people in their relevant network conform to it (empirical expectations) and/or most people in their relevant network believe they ought to conform to it (normative expectations)."

Girls Not Brides, in their work addressing child marriage, says, "social norms are the informal rules and beliefs that groups of people hold and tacitly enforce around how people should behave. Individual behaviors are clearly influenced by how people believe they are expected to behave by others."

Some researchers and practitioners describe child marriage itself as a social norm, while others are investigating the deep constructs around women's bodies and sexuality.

The question we raised earlier remains: if the law is in existence and we have a clear understanding around the predictors of child marriage, then why do girls still get married before the legal age and why do we not have any strategy to address forced married (no choice or consent)? Bicchieri mentions that there are many actors and behaviours that sustain child marriage and that understanding the actors and complexities around those behaviours are important (Diagram 2).

DIAGRAM 2: IMPACT OF DIFFERENT ACTORS AND BEHAVIOURS ON CHILD MARRIAGE BY BICCHIERI.



In many instances, the literature uses the terms "gender norm" and "social norm" interchangeably, and both these definitions have been quite clearly laid out by the researchers. Gender norms, as defined by ODI (2015), "are social norms that relate specifically to gender differences. The term 'gender norms' is used to refer to informal rules and shared social expectations that distinguish expected behaviours on the basis of gender."

What is emerging?

There are multiple ways in which social norms have been defined in literature. They are also enumerated by the subject experts working closely on child marriage issues. In most of the research studies and interventions related to child marriage, social norms are not evaluated as a direct outcome. Instead, they are looked at in relation to a girl's agency – their ability to negotiate and their decision-making power – within a patriarchal set-up that restricts their mobility, controls the money, prefers sons and neglects a girl's health, nutrition, education and so on. The review did not find any studies which were done using social norm theory as the framework or a social norm diagnostic process to capture and measure the impact of norms on child marriage.

UNICEF, which has a huge focus on ending child marriage in India, globally defines child marriage as a deeply-rooted social norm and provides glaring evidence of widespread gender inequality and discrimination. They further describe how, in communities where the practice is prevalent, marrying a girl as a child is part of the social norms and attitudes that reflect the low value accorded to the human rights of girls.[4]

[4] UNICEF. End Child Marriage. https://www.unicef.org/india/what-we-do/end-child-marriage#:~:text=In percent20communities percent20where percent20the percent20practice,an percent20intergenerational percent20cycle percent20of percent20poverty.

A landscape study (Nirantar Trust, 2015) approached the issue of early and child marriage from a feminist perspective and focused on the way sociocultural norms of gender and sexuality shape the incidence and impact of the practice. Among many outcomes, the study highlights gender norms and masculinity as well as the centrality of marriage as important root causes for child marriage in India.

Several anecdotal inputs suggest that there is a nexus of family, community and a local level of governance which hides cases of child marriage due to the fear of backlash. This behaviour is due to the existence of social norms which act as the invisible power pushing families to conform in a sustained fashion. The existing literature does not have evidence about the visible power at the family level that sanctions the practice of child marriage.

There is also an argument about the lack of alternative options for adolescent girls as being partially responsible for child marriage. Thus, the presence of prudential reasons for child marriage and the weak evidence of normative expectations and sanctions indicate that child marriage may not be a social norm in these communities; though it may indirectly be perpetuated by other norms related to adolescent sexuality, pregnancy and access to contraception.

Pressure to scale programs indicates a demand for quantitative outcomes which are more tangible to showcase. Change in social norms is a slow process. It is also hard to record in the big numbers and percentages demanded by the majority of donors.

"...I think the challenge is that project-driven work does not provide you with the time and patience needed to complete and continue with a process or a journey. In-depth work is considered good for the "pilot" stage and then scale is expected for everything else."

– mentioned by an expert.

A study by Population Council (Santhya et al., 2019) in two districts in Rajasthan shows that while Bundi had a greater decline in marriages below the age of 18 than Chittaurgarh, the situation was levelled in both districts at age 20. The study findings show that girls' emerging sexuality was viewed as a threat in both locations.

The interviews revealed that even if girls are not getting married before 18, by 20, all the girls should get married. This is the expectation. Conformation to such norms is rewarded. Unfortunately, the false sense of rewards sometimes subjugates families and also young women to make those decisions, especially if they sense that their choices might invite punishment.

"Norms are not formed by a single family or a single institution. There are various institutions, formal and informal structures which strengthen or weaken norms. So, we need to build our understanding of norms to design our program strategies, which will give us better results," says Shalini Singh, CREA.

The work implemented by The YP Foundation puts forward the concept of "finding alternatives and opportunities" as a way to challenge existing social norms in Dholpur, Rajasthan. This formative investigation finds that there is a huge restriction on girls from entering public spaces typically claimed by boys due to a strong norm around co-gendered spaces. The program created an alternative in the form of an intervention activity with the idea of attaching some legitimacy to bringing both girls and boys together in shared spaces.

According to Prabhleen Tutreja from The YP Foundation, "...any shift in leadership, you do need to ensure that there should be enough platforms for young people to access. Thus, to understand existing social norms, we should know which community context we are talking about. By adding co-gendered activities, we provided a reason for families to give permission to their girls to come to a space where boys were also present."

Norm change is not a one-time process. The community and its members have to be reminded about the change benefits with sustainable efforts, interactions and interventions along with mitigation strategies for backlash.

The existing research and evaluation included in this report also found that social norms have been explored by most authors and experts in order to focus the discussion on aspects of agency, sexuality and rights.

Addressing sexuality challenges societal power structures. Sexuality is related to many fundamental aspects of identity and social position. Beliefs about it inform deeply held values and interests, all of which are shaken when one questions the control of sexuality. Looking critically at the framing of sexuality and sexual activity by the state is vital.

There is a huge discomfort with the topic of sexuality in India. This is evidenced by the way society, at the family level, reinforces a distinct silence rather than talking about it. Thus, due to ignorance, lack of clarity around what sexuality means or fear of community, and even more of state, many interventions fail to take a relational approach when talking about sexuality and (child) marriage. International development, meanwhile, has taken an instrumentalist approach to sexuality and reproduction. This is evident in the majority of intervention curriculums where the limit is demarcated very sharply.

The CEFM and Sexuality Programs Working Group (2019), constituted by 12 global partner organizations,[5] undertook a review study focusing on the need to address patriarchal control of adolescent girls' sexuality in the fight against child, early and forced marriage and unions. It highlights the vital role played by gender-transformative programs. The findings position the importance of gender-transformative approaches in addressing the backlash around adolescent sexuality and CEFM work. It also demonstrates the importance of a comprehensive education on sexuality to address intersectionality, understand the complexities of gender and identity, and also to reach the most vulnerable youth.

While discussing the issue of adolescent sexuality and child marriage, Ravi Verma with ICRW clearly mentions, "we need to seriously address the issue of adolescents' sexuality and its links with the issue of marriage."

According to him, child marriage or even CEFM is always seen within a marriage framework and not within a sexuality framework. Thus, a lot of our findings remain a little hazy. There is no clarity around how to link two program outcomes where one is child marriage prevention and the other addresses the issue of sexuality.

The narrative of Dr. Verma matches the findings from our document review, where existing links between child marriage and adolescent sexuality are completely missing in the literature. The findings only talk to us about girls' attitudes towards marriage, their desire not to marry and restrictions and linkages with schooling and overall education for girls. There is very little exploration of the idea of sex, sexuality, relationships and exploring the 'self,' which is so critical for personal development. The dominance of marriage as an institution in many of the existing programs with adolescent girls is quite evident; the idea that marriage is a pivotal event that happens in every girl's life and isn't the choice of an individual is a foregone conclusion. Even policy responses are determined by the marriage framework and don't address or take into consideration the concept of sexuality.

Other than facts and functions of anatomy, what "growing up" really means is missing from sexuality discourses discussed with growing girls. There is also a push towards the criminalization of consensual sex before the age of 18 with the amendment of the existing law, which pushes many adolescents to marry early in order to legitimize any sexual relationship. Getting married is the only solution because that's how girls (as well as boys in some cases) will be accepted in their communities. The question that we

[5] CARE, GreeneWorks, Plan International, Girls Not Brides, International Center for Research on Women (ICRW), International Women's Health Coalition, Nirantar Trust, Population Council, Promundo-US, American Jewish World Service, Global Fund for Women, CREA.

need to answer is: "Are we pushing hard to prove that the only way to legitimize a relationship is through marriage?"

> For adolescent girls to start negotiating for themselves, we need a starting point where their demands are considered legitimate by the family. Immediate negotiations that are tangible, that challenge family norms, are seen as something not just affecting one family but also exhibiting a social and community impact. Thus, strict actions against any girl going against the existing social norms are widely accepted by families who want to avoid social ostracization by the community.

Many believe that to address such social sanctions and reinforcement, the emphasis should be on social action projects as they give young people an opportunity to do something which might bring about change while living in the community. Social action projects are a symbolic way through which adolescents challenge something in the community. They can demonstrate to a community that change is possible and they can influence other young people and their families to join in. Role models are necessary to shift norms around marriage. Norm change needs to be acknowledged, appreciated and should engage with different stakeholders and institutions.

Where are the gaps in current research?

a. **Girls are getting married, not because they're children, but because they're seen as women.** Existing research has not explored the moment when families think their daughters are ready for marriage. What is mostly being emphasized is age. The question is: how do we know marriage is not a means towards protecting her body, chastity and honour?

b. **There are no adequate measurements and indicators to capture social norms.** There has been some effort to create them based on existing social norm theories, but this study could not find a single document which provided clarity specifically in relation to child marriage. Some efforts which have shown very interesting findings are available globally (Beniamino et. al, 2019). These could be contextualized and adapted in India to test this relationship.

c. **Capturing the impact of social-norm-change activities.** Unless research and evaluations are grounded within a sound theoretical understanding of the varying influence of social norms, we will always lack in demonstrating and capturing these norms. To-date, many of our efforts have been invested in proving how changing social norms is the most sustainable way to prevent child marriage. However, we don't actually know for sure, as studies have not specifically articulated what norms the programs have been able to shift. We need to build evidence of the potential impact on social norms, rather than only demonstrating those outcomes which could be shifted within a short period when an intervention is active. As Greene and Stiefvater (2019) explain, "the struggle is methodological: documentation of norm change is more difficult than capturing changes in attitudes or behaviours. It requires capturing change among multiple population groups and a longer timeframe."

d. **Identifying social norms that relate to child marriage is complex and vague.** The studies and interviews have not provided a very clear picture about what we identify as norms. Many experts did bring up social-norm change as a game changer, but they also consistently talked about existing social norms without much description of what they are and what change would look like.

e. **How can the digital world be used to bring about change in norms around child marriage?** The influencers and communicators among young people today are very different than in the past. Social media may be the largest influencer, if not to all, then to many. With this development, we have been observing many norm shifts or alternatives. But much of our observations and assumptions are anecdotal and thus require rigorous evaluation.

f. **The existing research tools and guidelines on norms are less reflective than other diagnostics.** We have not yet developed a narrative around existing norms. Using existing monitoring and survey tools thus seems abrupt because they are used to derive evidence from more well-established information.

g. **The basis of the narrative around child marriage relies on the assumption that everyone is heterosexual and attraction and exploration of sexuality and union/marriage happens only between boys and girls.** This assumption also proves how the understanding of child marriage is based on age rather than sexuality because mention of same-sex relationships and aspects of power, oppression and violence in such relationships, does not come up when heterosexual-marriage relationships are discussed.

Legal and policy frameworks

When laws go against community norms and values, their implementation becomes weak and challenging.

The Convention on Consent to Marriage, Minimum Age for Marriage and Registration for Marriages came into force in December 1964 and has been signed by many countries. Though, the law prescribing the minimum age at marriage, known as the Sarda Act, came into force in 1929,[6] long before the UN convention. However, to-date, India is not a signatory to the convention. Why? One school of thought says India has customary laws representing each religious community instead, which do mention consent. For example, The Hindu Marriage Act, 1955, says the parties to a marriage must have the capacity to consent and a marriage where consent is obtained through force is voidable and can be annulled by a decree of nullity (HAQ, 2014).

What is emerging?

Through document reviews and expert interviews, we found two big domains for how legal and policy development related to child marriage is being addressed in India. One domain documented the benefits as well as discrepancies and lacunae related to child marriage, along with relevant laws and policies. The other focused primarily on how the legal framework completely shadowed the perspective of adolescent and young people's sexuality.

The analysis by HAQ (2014) of child marriage laws and policies in India points toward many discrepancies that currently exist around defining a child. The author brings this fact into view and reports that different programs, departments and legal systems diverge in their definition. And while there exists a PCMA Act, personal laws define children and age of marriage differently. HAQ's report also points towards the Prevention of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act, which criminalizes any sexual activity between young people even when it is consensual. The report highlights this contradiction and urges that laws and legal structures define children without criminalizing young people.

[4] The Sarda Act, 1929, later renamed the Child Marriage Restraint Act (CMRA), 1929, prohibited marriage of girls under the age of 15 years and boys under the age of 18. In 1978, the law was amended to raise the minimum age of marriage to 18 years for girls and 21 years for boys. This position remains the same even in the new law called the Prohibition of Child Marriages Act (PCMA), 2006, which replaced the CMRA.

Another report by HAQ (2015) raises a question around the lack of proper implementation of laws such as PCMA. According to one report, there is confusion and ambiguity within the PCMA, which leads to practical difficulties in the implementation and enforcement of the law. The PCMA does not declare a child marriage null and void, but has a provision for making child marriage voidable if a petition of nullity is filed. According to the report, the law does not appear to recognize child marriage as a violation of child rights or human rights. It does not provide a clear message that can make implementation in the field easier. Lastly, there is a probationary period for girls who file a petition for a decree of nullity within two years of attaining the age of majority (20 years of age), but it completely evades the reality of girls' agency, access to court and the level of support from their families.

Ganguly writes that the Supreme Court of India, while trying to resolve the issue of age of consent, has opened up a huge question pertaining to whether it would become mandatory to report acts of sexual intercourse in child marriage (2017). Ganguly also highlights that on one hand, the Indian Penal Code sets the age of consent at 18 years, while the law on child marriage (the Child Marriage Prohibition Act 2006) confirms that any under-age marriage that has already occurred remains valid and voidable. By this order, does it mean that while the persons concerned remain legally married, they must not have sexual intercourse? Which would create the message that "child marriage is legal if you can escape the law, but sex in it is not!"

There are many loopholes in the existing Act where few girls get an opportunity to give their consent and exercise their choice. The Act puts the entire burden on the girl/boy (who, if younger than 18, is considered as child) to challenge the validity of their marriage. Because of this, and as mobility among this group is very restricted, a negligible proportion of adolescents are placed in a position to approach the Prohibition Office to file a report. They also risk facing brutality and violence from both families (in-laws as well as natal) for taking such a step.

Existing laws also fail to consider the complex situations of married girls. A study of 72 girls (46 married and 26 girls whose marriages were stopped), ages 16-20 years, in select districts of Telangana found that girls receive no state support in claiming the entitlements that are their legal rights. There is an assumption that once married, the girl is not a child anymore and no longer needs her rights to education, health, protection and a life of dignity (M.V. Foundation, 2018).

A follow-up study (ICCW, 2018) of 1,636 cases, which were stopped by the Tamil Nadu Government between January and December 2017, explored the reason and determinants of such situations. These cases formed the cohort of this review and found that a lack of cooperation and coordination among the rescue teams, low level of clarity around the roles and responsibilities among stakeholders, and under-reporting of cases are the key challenges leading to an inappropriate follow-up of the rescued children.

Parents in India are conditioned by societal norms and prejudices surrounding the issue of child marriage; in many scenarios, children are being forced into marriage by them. Thus, convincing parents to annul these marriages is quite unlikely.

Beyond the family, discriminatory practices targeting victims of child marriage persist in many states. For instance, some states have policies that bar adult candidates from taking state civil service exams if they were married as children (Aphana, 2009). Another discriminatory government rule limits nutrition programs for pregnant mothers to women ages 19 and older (Johanna, 2011).

The legal framing of the child marriage act, which prohibits marriage under the age of 18, doesn't take root in a vulnerability and risk-assessment perspective. Thus, the implementers solely consider the age of girls reported by a party or individual and not what circumstances are being reported. Practitioners working on the legal aspects of child marriage believe that the Act was constructed because girls and women are becoming more vulnerable. They prefer to uphold the core intention, rather than ensuring girls have access to opportunities in life to achieve what they dream and aspire to do. The problem with this limited approach is that it doesn't consider the rights of the girls.

As pointed out by Renu Mishra from AALI, "…he (Officer from the Child Welfare Committee) was not ready to understand that if the girl would have been 17 years, 11 months and 29 days then there is a difference of only 1 day after which she turns 18. And nothing changes drastically in that one day. So, yes, it is important to understand the legal and technical point of view, but it is also important to understand who is vulnerable in that situation."

The lack of acknowledgement from the state on the right to consent has also been a huge concern. Though the Hindu Marriage Act recognizes the importance of consent from both the girl and boy irrespective of their age, the implementation of these laws has put aside the consent aspect and only lobbies around the age. The approach through which the legal framework is being implemented and the nature of training that officers from different legal departments receive, reflect not just purely protectionist steps, but also authoritative and patriarchal roots.

Both the document review process and expert interviews raised another aspect of ambiguity in the legal system. The legal framework in India completely shadows the perspective of adolescent and young people's sexuality. The Lancet article (Petroni et al., 2018) makes a compelling case that the impact of decisions to marry and to have sex are different, and therefore, the minimum age does not need to be aligned.

The age of marriage and the age pertaining to sexual consent has been the same in India since 2016, which takes a protectionist approach rather than a rights-based approach. For example, under the POCSO Act, if an adult engages in sex with a person who is under 18 years of age, a FIR should be lodged and the person can be arrested immediately. This is irrespective of whether the boy and girl consented to engage in the sexual act. As the entire structure and system is patriarchal, and families uphold the honour of girls until marriage, a FIR is lodged against the boy and his family in these cases.

Experts also raised the issue that poor implementation, as well as the mindset of those who carry out these laws, impact adolescents' or young people's rights. "Even when there are progressive laws, gaps in implementation and procedural requirements render services inaccessible for many in India."

It is often so complicated to access legal rights that sometimes implementers, practitioners and researchers have denied authorities in questioning them. It has been found in a majority of the programs, legal terms are conveyed to girls as restrictions imposed on them, rather than as a way for them to exercise their rights. A Population Council study explores the level of awareness of the PCMA among girls as well as how the enforcement is carried out. The study found that knowledge and awareness of the law is mixed, but among those who were aware of the laws against child marriage, perceptions were that punishment for violating the law would be severe (Pandey et al., 2019).

"…[we] do not just get caught in the whole debate around law and policy, because that is going to take a long time to resolve. How we [Girls Not Brides] are seeing it in India is as a coalition of many organizations at different levels representing mostly grassroots organizations coming together to change the discourse on child, early and forced marriage, and promote empowerment and the agency of girls," says Shipra Jha, Girls Not Brides.

There is a proposal to increase the age of marriage for girls to 21 years. But the fear is that by introducing such provisions, there could be a strong move to increase control over young women's bodies as well. If the age of marriage is increased, we could increase the control over relationships that the girls get into, but we are also

concerned that this could result in complications for unmarried girls who may need to access contraception or abortion services. This would then strengthen the existing norms that control the lives of young women. We need more evidence to push advocacy in this area.

Where are the gaps in current research?

There is a huge gap in research around how legal reforms and the current legal system are positively or negatively impacting adolescent girls' and boys' lives or young people's lives generally. There is not enough existing research to explain how the implementation of laws forces families to have their girls marry at the age of 18 but, on the other hand, devalues and criminalizes young people, pushing them to the margins of society. There are also ways that people get around the legal system, such as creating false birth certificates, to counter the PCMA.

a. **Research must tell us how to strengthen the three "P's" – prevention, protection and punishment – under the PCMA.** Gaps within the Integrated Child Protection schemes (ICPS) must be identified.

b. **A critique of laws from a feminist perspective needs to be undertaken and documented.** There is also a need to compile the child marriage rules of all states, and research studies should be commissioned to capture their strengths and shortcomings. A similar compilation and critique of court judgements will also help strengthen the legal system.

c. **Child marriage is yet to be acknowledged as a violation of the human rights of children.** Most often, the issue is dealt with under the umbrella of women's welfare and is addressed as a health issue, which comes under the larger umbrella of RCH. But it should be seen as a violation of the rights of a child primarily, separate from the long-term health implications that result because of it.

d. **Child marriage must be understood in the light of power, patriarchy, sociocultural structures, class, religion and customary practices that are prevalent.** There is a blanket way of implementing programs especially when it comes to prevention. Analysis of how laws are understood and how they are impacting marginalized communities has to be undertaken as part of a research agenda.

e The majority of political leaders, members of parliament as well as other officers from legal and administrative systems do not take a position or put out a statement on child marriage beyond just advocating for the age requirement of 18. **Political commitment is important when it comes to requiring consent of both individuals entering into marriage.** Some in positions of authority are exceptionally vocal and committed towards girls and young women's rights of choice and consent. We need evidence of that commitment and their impact at the community level to advance meaningful change across the country.

f. **When it comes to the implementation of the legal system, engaging and working with religious leaders and communities on the issue are equally important.**

Engaging the community

Engaging with the community, particularly parents, men and boys, is crucial for addressing child marriage.

Child marriage is rooted in gender inequality and discriminatory norms along with poverty, lack of infrastructure and poor implementation of laws. Within the context of sustainable development, it is critical to raise awareness among communities that child marriage has wide-ranging negative consequences for development, and that allowing girls to have access to education and training can add enormous value to society as well as to personal and family lives.

Little existing literature speaks to the role of parents in the early marriage of girls. The Population Council study reports that parents put a greater emphasis on economic and school-related reasons for discontinuing a girl's education. Sexual harassment by boys is another key factor leading girls to drop out of school along with the arrangement of marriages. The study further highlights that parents are often concerned about their daughters' value in the marriage market (Greene and Stiefvater, 2019).

What is emerging?

The contribution of the community in leading to the early marriage of girls is found to be quite significant. Among other reasons, fear of neighbours gossiping about who is not adhering to existing norms of early marriage does exert a huge amount of pressure on parents.

The justification given by parents and the community is that of having to pay a lesser dowry (a lower bride price) when the bride and the groom are young. Safety of the girl child from sexual violence and the inability of parents to guarantee such safety is another justification for child marriage. There is a belief that child marriage protects girls from unwanted male attention and promiscuity.

Breakthrough's formative research study (2013) specified some key evidence related to parents and community, which includes: families are often motivated by the belief that early marriage will protect a girl's safety and security, and households and communities are stigmatized if girls (and sometimes boys) are unmarried.

Parents also see early marriage as a way to secure the girl's social and economic future. Lack of education and awareness about the consequences of child marriage is another reason for the continuation of child marriages (the belief that educating a child will lead to 'difficulty' in finding a suitable partner or that they may become too 'independent' in making their own decisions).

> The confluence of multiple factors, such as dowry, the perception that girls belong to their marital homes (or sasural), the premium on young brides and the values and norms related to chastity, not only lead to child marriage but are also deeply interconnected to the inherent value of girls and the manifestation of their unwantedness in the form of sex selection (Singh, 2013).

The role of community engagement to ensure equitable participation and access to learning opportunities for girls is important, but it is often seen that community leaders are less concerned about the barriers to girls' education.

"It is more the proactive involvement of the community which is required. Community-level solutions are more sustainable than trying to push for an effective solution through Child Marriage Prohibition Officers [appointed by government]. It all boils down to working with the community," says Shipra Jha, Girls Not Brides.

GIRLS INSPIRE interventions have brought about significant change, specifically in engaging positively with the community. Through these interventions, community leaders became more concerned about girls' education and aware of employment opportunities for girls within their communities, leading to increased employment (Ferreira and Kamal, 2016).

In India, a majority of marriages that take place are still arranged marriages within the same caste and religion. The consent of the girl to marry is not an important issue. Therefore, more often than not, child marriages are forced marriages where the question of consent is irrelevant, particularly when they are below a certain age (Singh, 2013).

Considering the magnitude of the problem and its impact on the health and social conditions of the younger demographic in the country, a comprehensive community-based multi-country intervention with a strong evidence building design is important to unlock many factors which are missing from our current literature.

"…as long as we're not really connecting with the parents or connecting with the leaders of the community, we are not going to be able to provide the environment in which the girls can flourish…we have looked at parents as a kind of gatekeeper rather than a central figure. And I think it's time for us, at least in India, to acknowledge that if we can't reach the parents and if we can't convince parents or address their fears about this, then we are not going to really make a dent in child marriage," states Shireen Jejeebhoy, AKSHA.

In many countries, including India, the key decision-maker in the household is the father. While the focus of our work is to ensure girls continue their education in secondary school as well as beyond, not having a strategic focus to work with parents could prevent sustainable success. As long as programs are not really connecting with the parent and household decision-makers in the family or community, we are not going to be able to provide an environment in which girls can flourish. Strategies that make role models visible – examples of girls who have benefited from continuing their education and delaying marriage – would help girls navigate the alternatives that challenge existing norms.

Besides parents, the other key stakeholders are men and boys at the community level. Focusing on men and boys as stakeholders and leaders of change is critical in addressing gender inequality. A study conducted by Breakthrough (2013) suggests that the negative impact of early marriage, felt most directly and acutely by girls and women, ripples through families, communities and beyond. It is important to train men, and especially young men, to act as leaders in challenging early marriage not just "on behalf of women," but for change that will support human rights and well-being for all.

There are some interventions with men and boys which have a small focus on marriage, including delaying the age of marriage. In an ICRW study (Disha), intervention results highlighted that male youth participating in life skills education are almost twice as likely as those exposed only to mass IEC materials to consider the age of 18 or older as the ideal age for marriage. Female youth with similar exposure, however, are almost four times as likely to believe the age of 18 or older is the ideal age for marriage (Kanesathasan, et al. 2008). A similar impact was seen in the GEMS intervention evaluation by ICRW, where students (both boys and girls) have been reported to believe in delaying the age of marriage (Achyut, et al. 2011).

A longitudinal study by Pathfinder International India (PRACHAR) shows that young men exposed to interventions designed to address child marriage were found to be less willing to marry before the legal age of marriage, and young women were more likely to talk with parents about their desired marriage age. The intervention led to an increased mean age of marriage among participants (21.3 for females and 24.1 for males) than among controls (19.4 and 22, respectively). Working with boys on gender equality and equal educational opportunities for both girls and boys also had a positive impact. Boys are found to be instrumental in encouraging their parents to let their sisters go to school (qualitative finding) and are also found to be staying in school longer (Pathfinder International, 2011).

Though these results are encouraging, what is clear from the review of literature is that the focus of the intervention with men and boys talks about marriage very little, whereas it's central with girls and young women.

"…I don't think there is enough work on engaging with men and boys in addressing CEFM. I have, in fact, not seen enough programs where men and boys have been engaged in meaningful ways to address the issue of CEFM, as that would require a very different kind of an approach. The idea of gender equality with men and boys will take root only if the masculinity notions of power and entitlement will change. Aspirations of boys must also change with respect to what they expect in a marital relationship. ICRW's programs in Rajasthan and Jharkhand are engaging men and boys with these ideas. In these programs, however, we have to carefully link different interventions with men and boys with that of women and girls in a strategic and focused manner so that we can assess the impact," says Ravi Verma, ICRW.

The YP Foundation's program 'Mardon Waali Baat,' a research project on men, masculinities and sexual health and rights (Sekharan , 2019), focused on how men and boys view the agency of girls. The study clarifies that men always viewed the idea of women's agency in relation to them. Thus, girls with higher social capital or more mobility were seen to elevate men's perceived masculinity.

The focus on relationships and marriage is an important aspect which interventions with men and boys should consider. This shift would surely call into focus the need to reimagine structures in ways that would dismantle patriarchy. However, until this is achieved, how can positive elements of existing structures be leveraged? All actions within the context of the relationship are seen as investments that benefit men, raise their status amongst peers and eventually lead to sex.

The YP Foundation study further highlights that refusal to have sex is seen as a betrayal which could lead to acts of violence. However, the dynamic of increased agency for girls (in terms of mobility or sexual initiation), which enables an increased status in terms of masculinity, was perceived to apply only to girlfriends and not to wives. Men do not appreciate the same agency in their wives and do not think consent to be relevant at all within marriage. The YP Foundation devised a four-step model that focused on breaking down the power dynamics between men and women. The model articulated power dynamics by showing inequality and privilege, correlating aggression with masculinity, helping men to handle rejection with alternative response mechanisms and focusing on real-life understandings of consent.

Where are the gaps in current research?

a Though many interventions are designed following the ecological model, hardly any have evaluated the impact of community engagement as well as the engagement of parents in addressing child marriage. **There is a gap in adequate outcomes and indicators in the existing research and evaluation, so it is difficult to articulate the impact of community-level engagement.**

b. **There is no evidence as to how and why families and communities marginalize girls and young women who, by challenging the existing norms, have achieved milestones in their lives.** Though one finds a large number of anecdotes from program teams that demonstrate this, evidence and research have not yet focused on this aspect.

c. **How can parents be influenced to keep girls in school?** Just creating awareness that education is important is not enough to convince parents. Also, education is not just about being in school until the age of 18. Parents' motivation to allow their daughters to live out their aspirations and dreams is important. We do not have much understanding around this, as there is no research to understand the aspirations that parents have for their children in situations where they are not challenged by marginalization.

d. **Strengthen the role of community-based organizations, especially women's and young**

people's organizations. Women's rights and feminist rights movements have solid evidence that demonstrate how grassroots organizations and women within them have spearheaded the movement to stand strong against discrimination and oppression. Child, early and forced marriage is a manifestation of such oppression, thus, the role of grassroots organizations would be important to document.

e. **Most national- and state-level programs and schemes are articulated, designed and implemented without much contextual integration of how the issue of child marriage is being perceived and practiced at the community level.** One size fits all is not a great strategy when the normative perspective and influence, along with the influence of religion and ethnicity, is so strongly related to women's and girls' sexuality and marriage.

Digital access

Girls are beating all odds to go online. They see the internet as a source of information and an alternative space where they can exert their autonomy and freely express themselves on their own terms.

India is home to 20 percent of the world's adolescent girls. Digital literacy is empowering them to achieve their potential in both their personal and professional lives, and has become all the more important in light of the COVID-19 pandemic. The digital space provides sources of information, possibilities of new experiences and learnings, new avenues for outreach and opportunities to build solidarity and engage within different mediums of expression. It opens windows to a world and an imagination beyond the immediate neighbourhood.

Through exposure to narratives and stories different from their own, using various platforms to access employment options and gain inspiration for future goals, digital access among adolescent girls has become one of the factors that helps reduce child marriage.

What is emerging?

In spite of the increasing penetration of the internet over the last decade, only 29 percent of internet users in India are female (UNICEF, 2017). Boys are 1.5 times more likely to own a mobile phone than girls (Girl Effect, 2019). This puts girls at risk of being left behind and on the losing end of a widening digital gender gap.

Episodes of cyber violence, gender trolling, hate speech, cyber surveillance, cyber bullying, cyber flashing, doxing and other harmful activities are some of the ways in which patriarchy has found its voice on social media. Prima facie, the advent of social media did contribute to a long-awaited stage for women and marginalized communities to connect and realize their collective power. However, when we scratch beneath the surface we can witness the digital mutation of the physical patriarchal society that we inhabit as well as a digital mutilation of the feminist agenda. Cell phones, laptops and social media accounts also add tools that can be used to police girls and curb their freedoms under the garb of protection.

Beating all odds, girls are coming online to access information and explore an alternative space where they can exert their autonomy and express themselves on their own terms. Around 23 percent of girls from rural areas and 69 percent from urban areas are active internet users (Quilt.AI).[7] **The content consumed and created by girls online is broadly classified into two categories: entertainment and information.** 'Entertainment' ranges from personal stories to mass entertainment, which constitutes the majority of content consumed and created in the digital space. 'Information' refers to factual content that pertains to employment, education, self-improvement and knowledge. In the context of adolescent girls, this information ranges from exposure to the images and stories of women

[7] Quilt.AI studied the digital footprint of adolescent girls across 100 villages and 33 cities in India.

excelling in their fields, access to possible options to achieve economic independence and tools to teach themselves and learn new skills. Platforms like Facebook and Instagram are popular amongst girls for projecting their identity and seeking validation. Private sources like YouTube are used to access information and pick up skills, while Google is the go-to platform for self-discovery and answers to questions.

Digital access among adolescent girls in urban spaces has increased the number of girls who are unhindered in their self-expression, portraying a bold and confident self that is not marred by others. This has opened a space for unabashed campaigning and sharing of stories for various causes like Menstrual Health Management, sexual harassment, etc. Many of these campaigns have led to policy changes.

Furthermore, the current digital economy and the current e-commerce regime has been, to some extent, successful in providing platforms for women to achieve economic independence. Across several states, there are increased searches for girls' private schools in urban areas which indicates a high demand for these institutions along with employment programs for upskilling. The Lend-A-Hand India initiative is working with 36-million youth (24 million from rural areas) at the intersection of education and livelihood.[8]

The Girl Effect report[2] highlights how girls are navigating access to the digital space even when they do not possess a mobile phone themselves or are not allowed to use their family's phone.

"I don't have a phone because my parents cannot afford to buy me one. And as my parents do not allow me to have a phone or to use internet, I take my friend's phone if I have to fill forms or for any other purpose. Many people have a phone but don't know how to use it. Some people who do know how to use a phone borrow someone else's. I think everyone should have a phone regardless of their financial status. In today's time everyone should have a phone."

- Girl, 17, India. Cited in Girl Effect report, 2019.

Quilt.AI's research suggests that girls in rural and urban areas are accessing information on a mobile device and points to the relative influence of their context in determining what they look for in their searches. What are girls in rural areas searching for? They face a different kind of uncertainty, shaped by deeply-seeded norms which limits mobility and exposure to the world. Search trends show a growing interest in 'girls schools' and 'women's colleges,' and this interest is adopted in NGO and government initiatives, like Educate Girls and Beti Bachao, Beti Padao, to enrol and keep girls in schools.

Girls in urban areas are often able to discover paths to opportunities; they are also more likely to interact with boys, enter relationships, face workplace biases and become aware of discrimination and safety issues. The results from an urban cohort tend to indicate a skewed representation from middle to higher economic strata.

An ICRW study (unpublished) captured data from more than 400 girls from 100 villages in North India. This data indicates that a quarter of these girls are online on a regular basis. A study by ICRW in Rajasthan (a GEMS program intervention) indicates that around 25 percent of the girls recruited for the intervention own a smartphone.

[8] Lend- A-Hand India. https://www.lend-a-hand-india.org/

During a discussion, Ravi Verma mentioned, "ICRW is trying to explore, in Rajasthan and in Jharkhand, an offline-online kind of intervention strategy, given the extensive use of mobile phones, social media platforms and internet by girls and boys these days. Offline interventions in terms of group education and community campaigns/engagements are supplemented by online interventions focused on girls and boys. While in Jharkhand, we are assessing the impact in terms of child marriage prevention and school retentions/ reinstatement. In Rajasthan, it is violence prevention, but child marriage will become an important aspect of the multiple outcomes to be assessed."

This study opens up a lot of opportunities for other researchers and practitioners to understand more about this new age strategy to address child marriage.

Where are the gaps in current research?

a. **A study of intergenerational differences in the approach towards girls' education, due to the introduction of technology in rural as well as urban areas, would help establish a causal relationship between digital access and delaying child marriage.**

b. **An absence of research on the impact of increased access to digital mediums on girls' education makes it difficult to establish direct linkages between the two.**

c. **Ethnographic case stories of girls who have used the digital medium to alter their realities should be developed.** They should be used as entry points for research on technology and change in gender norms.

d. **There is no research capturing the number of girls who have explored online employment options.**

e. **There is very little evidence on how young girls are using digital spaces to build their politics and take part in processes of social change.**

f. **A detailed study on the impact of online interventions designed to address issues of child marriage is required.** This will help shed light on the successes and failures of the models and design a system of balance between online and offline activities.

g. **Especially in a world battling a pandemic (Girls Not Brides, 2018), it becomes pertinent to study the impact of the availability of technology as a tool to help delay marriages for girls.**

CONCLUSION

The commitment of the Indian government to eliminate child marriage by 2030 follows Goal 5.3 of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. Along with the initiative at the national level, states are making the elimination of child marriage a higher priority. For example, Rajasthan launched a Strategy and Action Plan for the Prevention of Child Marriage in March 2017.

While there has been growing recognition of the impact of child marriage – which has resulted in greater efforts to address it by introducing legal-, policy- and program-level efforts – knowledge gaps persist which require more evidence to ensure the effectiveness of approaches designed to end the practice.

To address the knowledge gaps, as well as identify areas for further research and evaluation, this study took a deeper dive into the existing literature to find the missing links where information and evidence are lacking. Based on the preliminary findings of the research gaps, an attempt has been made to speak to the subject and issue experts to explore the identified gaps in detail. The key objective of the expert interviews was not to gather information about the existing programs, but to question the key findings from the existing research and evidence so that we can better understand what we are missing in our work.

Much of the gender-transformative programming has incorporated the empowerment and agency approach, rather than a focus on age. This study tries to push the narrative further to focus the discussion on how consent, decision-making, autonomy, having an opinion and the ability to voice that opinion are crucial when working with women and girls. This autonomy and power not only helps them resist early marriage, it creates personal strength that they bring to everything in their lives – education, work, employment, relationships, desire, rights, health, etc. We have to understand that it is not enough to simply know that child marriage is harmful, it is equally important to recognize that:

i. Adolescent girls cannot be tasked with stopping marriage on their own ("empowering girls" to stop their marriage without other comprehensive and holistic strategies may have unintended consequences that could result in them facing dangerous situations);

ii. It is not enough to focus on age, specifically working with the magic number of "18", and then leave everything up to the destiny of the girls; and

iii. Our push for policy change is not just to shift or increase the age at marriage or to create more schemes and programs, but to push the state to recognize the importance of consent from girls and boys in entering marriage and to take action if that is violated.

Recommendations

In the following section, we are recommending a few overarching research areas which are cross-cutting and missing from the existing research and evaluations:

1. **The issue of forced marriage is completely missing from the discussion. Additionally, the terms 'early' and 'child' have been used interchangeably to describe any marriage that occurs before the age of 18.**

2. **We don't know what happens in the lives of girls post-marriage, especially those who have been exposed to interventions that focus on their rights and introduce conversations about their bodies and sexuality.**

3. **Our own understanding around backlash is quite limited and is relative to what we would like to address. There have been recent attempts to explore the types of and reasons for backlash at the community level (Dasra, 2019).[9] The backlash at the systemic and institutional level, which is invisible but very powerful, remains to be identified.**

4. **Links between sexuality and child marriage, as well as its manifestations, have not been sufficiently explored in research and evaluation, although some interventions have included the gender and sexuality lens in their approach and content. Even though there are some anecdotal inputs established around the impact of such relationships, no genuine research and evaluation has tried to capture this.**

More inclusive and cross-sectional analysis:

1. **Rural and urban differences.**
   Anecdotal stories reflect a stark difference between girls in urban and rural areas. Across different aspects, dissimilarity by geo-location is visible, and this has been captured by research and evaluation. To-date, we used this predictor instrumentally and never went deeper to understand other narratives. For example, asking questions like: Even if new schools are established in every rural area, will it just increase the number of girls enrolled in them? Or is there added value in terms of accessing opportunities, shifting mindsets and increasing aspirations not just among girls, but also parents and the community? Will they see the value of empowering girls?

2. **The identity-based influence of caste, ethnicity and religious diversity on girls' roles, responsibilities, expectations and sanctions.**
   Reasons based on religion or caste were often quoted to advocate for child marriage. For example, in Rajasthan most marriages take place during Aksha Teej, as it is considered an auspicious day in the Hindu calendar. In Hindu religion, it is believed that a person who gets their daughter as well as their son married will get Moksha (being free). The practice of community marriage has been taking place on that day since ancient times. It is important to know how this practice is interfacing with new developments happening side by side. What happens if someone does not conform to this norm? Does it have any relationship with being poor or from a marginalized caste or other factors which benefit families in terms of costs? State machineries do engage themselves in this process and utilize it for political leverage. So how are they communicating regarding ending child marriage?

3. **Regional/state/district-level differentials.**
   Some southern states in India, particularly a few districts, have high rates of child marriage. But what we find in current literature and interventions is that the entire focus is on a few northern parts of India, like Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Jharkhand and to some extent Madhya Pradesh, West Bengal and Assam. To ensure an effective strategy towards child marriage prevention, we need to focus more

[9] https://www.dasra.org/news-and-events/a-new-exploratory-study-highlights-the-gap-in-understanding-backlash-against-girls-expression-of-agency-in-india

specifically on the smallest geographical units to understand the context properly before coming up with intervention plans and welfare schemes.

The practice of Gauna, which delays the time of sending the bride to the house of her husband, was specific to Rajasthan, Bihar and Uttar Pradesh only.

Regional/geographical differences exist in relation to sociocultural norms. These norms influence the reasons for the high prevalence of child marriage. While in some regions it is usually the girl who is married at an early age, in others, both boys and girls are married at an early age.

4. **Impact of COVID-19 on adolescent girls.**
There has been some research happening around the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on child marriage and on adolescents and young people overall. The studies reveal how the loss of household income is pushing girls out of school; increasing the risk of facing violence; diminishing access to SRH services, including abortion services; and indicating less control of adolescents over their bodies and lives (Girls Not Brides, 2020; Dasra, 2020; IDR, 2020). Some research studies also indicate an increase in child marriage across states. Our study also recommends the following:

- There is an urgent need to commission studies to capture the voices of adolescents in order to clearly assess how different aspects of their lives are being impacted by the pandemic.
- There is an urgent need to understand how involving the parents of adolescents could minimize the consequences of the pandemic on them.
- There is an urgent need to address fear and ensure the safety and security of adolescents and their families
- It's important to find ways to integrate the current situation with existing implementation mechanisms to ensure that government schemes (nutrition/food, sanitary napkins, IFA tablets, etc.) are reaching girls
- Develop a way for pandemic information on the digital/IVRS platform to reach adolescents.

There is a huge need and an increasing amount of interest and effort to share lessons from research and programs to understand the complexity of norms, beliefs and practices. However, we need to make headway in breaking the boundaries of what we have been exploring in order to go beyond what we already know.

Through this study we have identified child marriage interventions that have worked, as well as those that have not, and the existing research gaps on the issue. We have explored some ideas around these untapped areas for future research with the intention that it will serve as an important resource for those who pursue this study further.

This research has also supported the efforts of Children Believe in the designing of programs that work towards eliminating child marriage. As well, Children Believe will use this research as a tool to engage in policy discourses in the states of Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu, and further strengthen discussions and actions for the same goal of eliminating child marriage.

Research needs to be well-coordinated to strengthen collective learning, and a systematic research uptake strategy needs to be in place. We all have both responsibilities and opportunities to step up our efforts to build evidence for future initiatives. We hope that by sharing this study, it supports the motion towards this advancement.

Limitations of the study

- **Timeline of the study.** The timeline of the study was three months. This duration caused the researchers to limit their literature review process as well as the number of experts involved.
- **Limited Access.** One of the key limitations of this study was the access to subject experts, organizations, data and documents due to the closure of organizations owing to the

pandemic. We acknowledge this difficult and unusual time; several organizations have physically been closed and staff (including senior team members and leader(s)) are occupied almost beyond their limits. Getting time from them within the timeline of the study was difficult. Also, the physical closure of the organizations limited our reach to staff. This impacted our ability to collect information through survey tools and review documents that are not in the public domain.

- **Studies with negative findings are often not published.** When programs and evaluations capture or experience the negative consequences of different predictors, which are considered to be the pillars for shifting the age at marriage (like schooling, challenging social norms and so on), these are rarely reported in published documents. We still tried to capture many of these aspects in the research gap sub-sections, but the evidence we needed was hard to find.

- **Unpublished documents and grey literature are missing from this analysis.** With the limited time and access to organizations, this study could not incorporate any key findings from the process documentations or from program review documents, which are often not in the public domain.

- **One of the crucial limitations is the lack of research and evidence from the southern states of India.** In this review we could only find a very small number of studies. These included a longitudinal study by Young Lives, a small qualitative study by M.V. Foundation and a follow-up on the 1,636 child marriage cases that were stopped between January and December 2017 by the Indian Council for Child Welfare, Tamil Nadu, with support from UNICEF, and the Tamil Nadu government. This research study could not include any other evidence documents based on states in the southern parts of India in its analysis.

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ANNEX

Annex I - List of organizations

Name of the Organization/Network	Website
Association For Advocacy and Legal Initiatives (Uttar Pradesh)	www.aalilegal.org
American Jewish World Service (AJWS)	www.ajws.org
AMIED (Rajasthan)	www.amiedmewat.org
Asia Forum of Parliamentarians on Population and Development	www.afppd.org
Azad Foundation	www.azadfoundation.com
Bal Umang Drishya Sanstha (BUDS)	
Breakthrough	www.inbreakthrough.org
CARE	www.careindia.org
Centre for Catalizing Changes (C3)	www.c3india.org
Child Rights Education and Action Movement (Karnataka)	www.dbbangalore.org
CINI (West Bengal)	www.cini-india.org
CORO (Maharashtra)	www.coroindia.org
CREA	www.creaworld.org
dance4life (Delhi)	https://www.facebook.com/dance4lifeindia/
Dasra	www.dasra.org
David and Lucile Packard Foundation	www.packard.org
Doosra Dashak (Rajasthan)	www.doosradashak.in
ECPAT	www.ecpat.org
Girls Not Brides	www.girlsnotbrides.org
HAQ - Centre for Child Rights	www.haqcrc.org
ICRW	www.icrw.org
Jabala Action Research Organization (West Bengal)	www.jabala.org
Jan Jagran Sansthan (Bihar)	www.jjsindia.in
Kranti (Maharashtra)	www.kranti-india.org
Lok Prerna (Jharkhand)	www.lokprerna.org
MacArthur Foundation	www.macfound.org

Name of the Organization/Network	Website
Magic Bus Foundation	www.magicbus.org
Mahila Kalpana Shakti Trust (Delhi)	
Mahila Samakhya	www.mhrd.gov.in
Mahila Samatha Society (Andhra Pradesh)	
MAMTA Health Institute for Mother and Child	www.mamta-himc.org
Ministry of Women and Child Development	www.wcd.nic.in
Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports	www.yas.nic.in
MV Foundation (Andhra Pradesh)	www.mvfindia.in
Nari-o-Shishu Kalyan Kendra (West Bengal)	www.noskk.in
Nishtha (West Bengal)	www.nishtha.org.in
Nirantar	www.nirantar.net
Pathfinder International	www.pathfinder.org
Plan India	www.planindia.org
Rajsamand Jan Vikas Sansthan (Rajasthan)	www.rjvs.in
Restless Development	www.restlessdevelopment.org
Saarthi Trust	www.saarthitrust.com
Samadhan	www.samadhanindia.org
Sangram (Maharashtra)	www.sangram.org
Shaheen Women's Resource and Welfare Association	www.saheencollective.org
SRF Foundation	www.srf-foundation.org
Srijan Foundation (Jharkhand)	www.srijanjhk.org
The YP Foundation	www.theypfoundation.org
Thoughtshop Foundation (West Bengal)	www.thoughtshopfoundation.org
UNFPA	www.unfpa.org
UNICEF	www.unicef.org
URMUL Trust (Rajasthan)	www.urmul.org
Veshya Anyay Mukti Parishad (Maharashtra)	
Vikalp Sansthan (Rajasthan)	www.vikalpindia.org
Young Lives	www.younglives-india.org

Annex II - Expert interview guide

Consent: Intro and Informed Consent
[introduces self] Thank you for agreeing to this interview today.

We are part of an external consultancy team that is doing research work for Children Believe, looking at the future research needs and gaps in existing research around Child, Early and Forced Marriage in India. This interview was set up to learn more about your work, and also to ask for your reflections and recommendations.

We are gathering information from a number of people besides yourself. We are reaching out to practitioners doing research, evaluation, programmatic or advocacy and policy work around Child, Early and Forced Marriage in India. We would also be reaching out to the program team/ individual of the organizations. No information you share will be attributed to you, and will be grouped with other similar responses in the feedback to Children Believe. We will keep individual inputs anonymous. With your permission, I will be recording this conversation. If you prefer not to be recorded, I will be taking written notes. Do I have your permission to record this interview? Do I have the permission to take notes from our conversation?

Thank you for agreeing to the interview today. We recognize that, with all that's going on with the coronavirus pandemic, it's a hard time for everyone. Many people are focusing on family, on their community, or on other things. There is less bandwidth than usual. If you are finding it hard to continue the interview, you can decide to opt out at any time. We have about an hour set aside, but we can make it shorter if you wish. Given what today is like for you, how much time and space do you have for this today? (wait for answer). OK, let's set aside that time for this. Do you have any questions at this point which I could answer?

Purpose:
The purpose of this study is to go beyond what is already known and evident and identify gaps in the existing research on child, early and forced marriage (CEFM) in India which could catalyze change. By mapping out current knowledge of CEFM and the programs designed to address it, and by highlighting questions to which we do not yet know the answers, the study is intended to generate discussion in the field and clarify what we need to know to bring an end to this deeply harmful practice.

Key objectives:
This study would highlight the recommended areas for research but it is not meant to provide a definitive menu, but rather to describe the general contours of what we know and what we need to understand better.

The research would also explore how the terminology of Child, Early and Forced marriage is influencing strategies developed by different organizations and the work that they are spearheading on the ground.

The Origin of working on CEFM

- There has been quite a lot of discussion and debate around the terminology - I mean many individuals/organizations prefer to use only "Child Marriage" whereas some/a few use "CEFM." I would like to know from you about your and/or your organization's position on this.
    - In an Indian context How do you see organizations addressing early and forced marriage concept in program and research?
- What's your assessment of the current state of Child Marriage/CEFM in India?

About the research studies

- What has been/was your most important research finding related to Child Marriage/ CEFM? And your most surprising finding?

Specific strategy: Education

- We know with some confidence that keeping girls in secondary school contributes to delaying marriage among individual girls. But these programs do not necessarily -change the underlying norms. What is your opinion and how are you addressing this in your work?

Specific strategy: Agency, safe space and networking

- Programs have demonstrated the importance of creating a safe space, support network, agency building in ensuring the delay of marriage among girls. But research and evaluation do not necessarily capture this. What is your opinion and how do you think it's been addressed in your work or others?
- One of the major assumptions about delaying the age of marriage is that it leads to more egalitarian relationships. Can you share your thoughts around this? Do we have evidence?

Specific strategy: Legal and policy

- How do legal mechanisms work towards preventing child marriage? (Personal Laws Vs. Child Marriage Restraint Act: At the Legal realm Vs. Implementation of legal aspects in reality)
- Relationship between legal age of consent to sex and legal age at marriage.
- POCSO Vs. Child Marriage Restraint Act Vs. The current discussion on raising the age at marriage of girls to 21 yrs. (Discussion/ Assessment of the impact of change in legal aspect on the work around CEFM)

Specific strategy: Economic investment

- Does economic investment offer a possible solution to delay marriage among girls?
    - What do we know about the quality of marriage and how it can be influenced by investing in girls?
- What did you find was the impact of cash transfer programs, with and without conditions, on delaying child marriage?

Specific strategy: Social norms

- Did your work focus around addressing social norms?
    - Which are the norms that your research/ eval/program have tried to address?
    - I would like to understand in detail how you measured social norm change in your research/evaluation.
    - Do economic incentive programs contribute to changing norms about the value and roles of girls, or do they simply alter the economic calculus regarding specific behaviours of the individual girls who participate in them?

- Would you like to share any challenges in addressing social norm outcome in your research and evaluation?

What's missing

- From all the work that you/your organization have done so far, what do you think are the missing areas that need to be explored? And why?
- If you are asked to suggest a few immediate examples of potential research work around CEFM, what would be your suggestion?

We would like to request you to please share any content of your/your organization's work that you think would be important to include in our document review.

Thank you so much for your time and I really appreciate all the information that you have shared with me and my colleague during the discussion.

Annex III - List of subject/issue experts interviewed

Name of the Organization/Network	Website
Aprajita Gogoi	Center for Catalyzing Changes (C3)
Alka Barua	Independent Consultant
K.G.Santhya	Population Council
Manjima Bhattacharjya	AJWS
Prabhleen Tutreja	The YP Foundation
Priya Nanda	BMGF
Ravi Verma	ICRW
Shalini Singh	CREA
Shipra Jha	Girls Not Brides
Shireen Jeejeebhoy	Aksha Centre for Equity and Wellbeing
Renu Mishra	AALI
Vanita Sahasranaman	Quilt.AI

Children Believe

Children Believe works globally to empower children to dream fearlessly, stand up for what they believe in — and be heard. For more than 60 years, we've brought together brave young dreamers, caring supporters and partners, and unabashed idealists. Together, we're driven by a common belief: creating access to education — inside and outside of classrooms — is the most powerful tool children can use to change their world.

A member of ChildFund Alliance, Children Believe is part of a global network of 12 child-focused development organizations working to create opportunities for children and youth, their families and communities. ChildFund helps nearly 23-million children and their families in more than 70 countries overcome poverty and underlying conditions that prevent children from achieving their full potential. We work to end violence against children; provide expertise in emergencies and disasters to ease the harmful impact on children and their communities; and engage children and youth to create lasting change and elevate their voices in decisions that affect their lives.

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