The Child Marriage Research to Action Network (the CRANK)
Challenging gender norms to end child marriage

CRANK research meeting 2 December 2021 – **Key takeaways**

Ben Cislaghi, introduction

- The field of international development can be very reactive. It is important to slow down and create space between stimulus and reaction: to understand what people – particularly girls – really want, and not only focus on the intended outcomes of a programme/an intervention.

- We must consider the norms and ideas we bring to the countries and communities where we work: in some cases, we might bring more harmful norms that then override existing local ones.

- Social norms regulate what behavior is considered "normal" – gender norms are a subset of social norms like class norms or race norms. For more information see Gender norms and social norms: Differences, similarities and why they matter for prevention science (Cislaghi, B. and Heise, L., 2019).

- Sex is based on biological attributes that we classify as male, female or intersex. Gender is a system – or order – that attributes different access to resources or freedoms, according to whether someone identifies as a woman, man or a minority gender. Gender norms are part of this system.

- Gender norms are social norms that define acceptable and appropriate actions from women and men in a group or society. Gender norms are embedded in formal and informal institutions, nested in the mind, and produced and reproduced through social interactions. Gender norms play a role in shaping women's and men's (often unequal) access to resources and freedoms, so affecting their voice, power and sense of self.

- The Social norms and child marriage in Cameroon: A qualitative study (Cislaghi, B. et al, 2019) paper found the norm sustaining child marriage was that respectable women marry early and that those subject to the norms were adolescent girls who reach puberty. If adolescent girls and young women do not abide by the norm (getting married early), their future prospects are assumed to become more limited than those of the reference group or those who hold in place the expectation or norm – including community members, future in-laws and husbands. This was the norm in Cameroon, but there is enormous variation across ethnic groups.

- Norms intersect with many factors. The flower framework invites us to reflect on how norms intersect with material, institutional, individual and social factors. Norms do not act in isolation, so must be addressed together with the other factors in the ecological or dynamic framework.

- There are also norms in the industry of public health of international development. The issue here is who controls the norms of the intellectual hegemony,[1] who controls the norms of how things should be done, when things should be done etc. We can all engage in meaningful child marriage

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[1] Hegemony is the dominance of one group over another, often supported by legitimating norms and ideas.

interventions if we are self-reflective and fully aware of the norms and the biases that we bring into the conversation.

Taking choice seriously: Emic understandings of decision-making about child marriage and Her choice impact evaluation report

Esther Miedema and Nicky Pouw

- The Her Choice impact evaluation looks at the idea of choice with regards child marriage in contexts where opportunities might be limited, and individual choices might be restricted. It includes a baseline, midline and end line, with two years between each phase. It compares treatment and comparison locations in several countries with high child marriage prevalence: Bangladesh, Benin, Burkina Faso, Ethiopia, Ghana, Mali, Nepal, Pakistan, Senegal and Uganda.

- This evaluation highlighted questions which then drove the subsequent special issue. These include whether girls' and women's individual choice is enough to indicate feminist gains and female empowerment, and who really benefits from women's empowerment: women here and now, future generations, or the labor market?

- The special issue Governing choice and child marriage: Young women, marriage and development aid programs (Miedema, E., Koster, W., and Pouw, N., 2020) contributes to debates on child marriage by offering emic[2] understandings of the decision-making processes and choices of various sets of actors.

- The contributors to the special issue are from different affiliations and the studies covered were informed by varied research designs, although many of them took place within larger interventions. All the research was conducted in settings where there was high child marriage prevalence in Bangladesh, Benin, Burkina Faso, Ethiopia, Ghana, Mali, Nepal, Pakistan, Senegal and Uganda.

- The studies showed varied reasons behind child marriage and question the notion of free choice: in contexts where limited economic opportunities and pathways exist beyond marriage, what does it really mean to have a choice?

  o For example, in contexts where there is a strong emphasis on girls' obedience, social standing depends on parental or community approval, and there are limited economic opportunities, what does having a choice actually mean for girls and women, and what does saying no to a marriage mean for them?

  o There appears to be more complexity than just focusing on choice: there is an interplay between social norms, economic factors and family and community characteristics. In some contexts, child marriage is not seen as problematic per se, but rather something that solves other issues – like pregnancy outside of marriage – and as a response to current precarities.

- When child marriage is understood as being primarily due to lack of education, lack of individual rights and harmful traditions, and when girls and women are understood as victims, approaches to addressing the issue can often focus on awareness raising rather than broader structural factors.

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[2] An emic perspective is the insider's view of reality and is crucial to understanding how people perceive the world around them. (SAGE Research Methods, 2012)

- An important question is: given the constraints and possibilities of a particular social, economic and political context and existing gender orders, what purpose does child marriage potentially serve and for whom? What function does child marriage serve for particular women, men and families and communities?

- Child marriage cannot simply be seen as harmful. Spaces for community members to share their perspectives are needed if we are to understand the issue and respond to it. Just approaching child marriage as a negative issue may be counter-productive. It may:

  o Push the practice underground.

  o Prevent us from considering the short-term positive outcomes of child marriage – like social, physical or economic security – and limit our work on alternative arrangements that may also produce the securities that families and women may seek, while also mitigating the negative longer-term consequences.

  o Prevent us from fully addressing the complex structural processes and drivers of child marriage.

The role of educational entertainment in transforming gender roles and addressing child marriage

Arvind Singhal

- Fictional stories can influence the behavior of communities, and stories can gather people and bring them together around a common issue. Because social networks are crucial in change, this can accelerate impact.

- Social norms change often links to broader change: it is rarely just one issue that is changing. For example, if you change the ideas around celebrating a girl's birthday, she may then want to learn how to ride a bike, and then want to go to school, etc.

- Stories can take people to places they have never been, creating new realities. Formative research should help understand what storytelling levers allow a story to be taken to a different place, and when to partner with local organisations to ensure people can watch or listen. It should also embed the provision of service delivery and look at the mechanisms through which the stories create conversations and allow people to take decisions they may not have considered before.

- Formative research can focus on examples of positive deviance, where families or community members have resisted pressure or current social norms and showed more gender equal behaviors – like sending their daughters to school. These positive examples can be captured and shared via storytelling for further social norms change.

[Enabling gender norm change through communication](#)

Ami Sengupta and Tania Sultana

- In Bangladesh, the social and behavior change strategy is part of the broader programme to end child marriage and part of the government's commitment to end the practice, with the holistic approach drawing on social norms and gender-transformative approaches.

- Entertainment-education focuses on child marriage within a broader spectrum of gender equality, girls' empowerment, etc., that will foster norms change.

- The 360-degree approach includes several components that come together and work in the same direction. For example, social media, community sessions and partnerships with religious leaders.
  - The "Dhol" campaign was initially planned for television but has had over 160 million viewers on social media. The campaign aims to promote a new norm where child marriage is not acceptable, and neither is silence on the issue.
  - "Icchedana" is a soap opera promoting broader gender-transformative results, including on child marriage.
- To ensure acceptance of the campaigns – as there was a risk that they would be rejected given very firm norms in the country – the activities were complemented with community-level interventions to ensure greater understanding. This required collaboration across partners and actors, with the setting up of a working group/committee on communication for development.
- The research shows that with greater exposure to the campaigns, comes greater knowledge of the legal minimum age of marriage. People also tended to disapprove of child marriage, but still considered their communities to accept the practice, showing that the social norms still have not changed. However, positive attitude changes were shown in other aspects, such as related to girls' participation in sports and gender roles.
- Recommendations coming out of the research include:
  - Sustain the momentum, with young people pushing the agenda on how this can be taken forward.
  - Continue to invest in cross-sectoral convergence to ensure the approach is holistic.
  - Continue to strengthen the synergy between communication campaigns and community-level interventions.
  - Explore innovative approaches to increase exposures.
  - Generate evidence through strengthened monitoring systems.
  - Enhance youth and male participation.

Q&A – Connection to laws

- *Tania Sultana*: The research did not look at the impact of legal reform, but even without this the evidence shows that where laws have loopholes that allow child marriage, it is difficult to enforce them at the community level. For example, some people have changed birth certificates to get around the law; as the practice is accepted there is "no need" to try to hide it.
- *Ami Sengupta:* The study showed that knowledge of the law is not enough: even when people were aware of the law, they were more concerned about the fine than the illegality in itself.
- *Nicky Pouw:* There is often a lack of knowledge of laws, and where there is knowledge of the law this might come with negative side effects, such as elopements or marriages going underground.

- *Esther Miedema:* An Amnesty study looking at sexual violence in the Nordic countries shows that the issue of sexual violence does not go away even with a legal framework and progressive environment for gender equality – we need to go beyond laws and policies.

Q&A – Issue-based versus holistic approaches

- *Arvind Singhal:* The web of storytelling allows us to look at all levels: both zooming in on specific issues and zooming out to see the bigger picture. Norms are interlinked in different and complex ways, and zooming out can also let us focus on how gaps and barriers can be overcome.

- *Ami Sengupta:* Change is not only linked to a specific issue but to the broader horizon – related to power/decision-making/equality – so all issues should be looked at and responded to together.

Q&A – Measuring shifts in social norms

- *Ami Sengupta:* The Bangladesh research was a quantitative survey on knowledge, attitudes and practices which went back to the same people three times: with questions related to social norms. One recommendation was to ensure inclusion of different measures to better capture potential norms change, with more participative measures, such as storytelling approaches with girls and boys, that would complement the quantitative surveys.

- *Tania Sultana*: The research was intended to be quasi-experimental, trying out innovative methodologies. Exposure and recognising that social norms change is not a short-term endeavour are important. It is not possible to really shift norms if whole countries/regions are not engaged, because, for example, a child marriage-free village might just mean people going to the neighbouring village to carry out the marriage.

- *Arvind Singhal:* We need to introduce new language in what we do, standing for new, positive norms, to build possibility for change.

- *Esther Miedema:* It is important not to speak of norms in isolation (see the flower framework) but to also look at the broader sets of norms: eg, young people interviewed in the Her Choice study reported never questioning the norm of getting married in general, but that they could question when and with whom. We should consider how to reflect on broader norms that can create a bigger shift in communities.

Q&A – Focus on opportunities and positive norms

- *Arvind Singhal:* It is important to focus on the positive, focusing on we are looking for and not on what we are against, and creating new realities to show alternatives to child marriage/options for more positive futures.

- *Esther Miedema:* We need to focus on alternatives to child marriage and consider the actual choices and opportunities that girls have. For example, in the case of early childbearing.

Satvika Chalasani, closing

- We need to understand norms in a broad sense, in relation to other informal structures. We also need to address our own assumptions, to constantly interrogate our theory of change. These studies – and others – help us do this.

Webinar resources

All webinar resources are available on the CRANK [meeting page](). These include the meeting agenda, recordings, presentations, research reports and key takeaways.

Resources shared by presenters:

- Cislaghi, B. and Heise, L., 2019, "[Gender norms and social norms: Differences, similarities and why they matter for prevention science]()", *Sociology of Health and Illness,* Vol. 42(2), pp.407-422.

- Cislaghi, B., Mackie, G., Nkiwi, Pl, and Shakya, H., 2019, "[Social norms and child marriage in Cameroon: a qualitative study]()", Global Public Health, Vol. 14(10), pp. 1479-1494.

- Cislaghi B. and Heise L., 2018, "[Using social norms for health promotion in low-income countries]()", *Health Promotion International*, Vol. 34(3), pp. 616-623.

- Koster, W., Miedema, E., Sotirova, A. and Pouw, N., 2021, [AISSR-UvA Her Choice impact evaluation report Jan 2021]().

- Miedema, E., Koster, W. and Pouw, N., 2020, "[Special issue. Governing choice and child marriage: Young women, marriage and development aid programes]()", *Progress in Development Studies*, Vol. 20(4), pp. 261-269.

- Sengupta, A., Sood, S., Kapil, N. and Sultana, T., 2020, "[Enabling gender norm change through Communication]()", *The Journal of Development Communication*, Vol. 31(2), pp. 34-45.

Resources shared by CRANK members:

- Steinhaus, M., Hinson, L., Teodore Rizzo, A. and Gregowski, A, 2019, "[Measuring social norms related to child marriage among adult decision-makers of young girls in Phalombe and Thyolo, Malawi]()", *Journal of Adolescent Health*, Vol. 46(4S).

- Guglielmi, S., Mitu, K., Seager, J., 2021, "'[I just keep quiet': Addressing the challenges of married Rohingya girls and creating opportunities for change]()", *GAGE*.

- Abu Hamad, B., Elamassie, S., Oakley, E., Alheiwidi, S. and Baird, S., 2021, "'[No one should be terrified like I was!' Exploring drivers and impacts of child marriage in protracted crises among Palestinian and Syrian refugees]()", *GAGE*.

- Emirie, G., Jones, N. and Kebede, M., 2021, "'[The school was closed, so when they brought me a husband I couldn't say no': Exploring the gendered experiences of child marriage amongst adolescent girls and boys in Ethiopia]()", *GAGE*.

- Presler-Marshall et al., 2020, "[Through their eyes: Exploring the complex drivers of child marriage in humanitarian contexts]()", *GAGE*.

- Raj, A., Johns, N. E., Bhan, N., Silverman, J. G. and Lundgren, R., 2021, "[Effects of gender role beliefs on social connectivity and marital safety: Findings from a cross-sectional study among married adolescent girls in India]()", *Journal of Adolescent Health*, Vol 69(6).

Stoebenau, K., Madhavan, S., Smith-Greenaway, E. and Jackson, H., 2021, "[Economic inequality and divergence in family formation in sub-Saharan Africa]()", *Population and Development Review*.