

Note to donors

Girls' sexuality and child, early, and forced marriages and unions:

A conceptual framework





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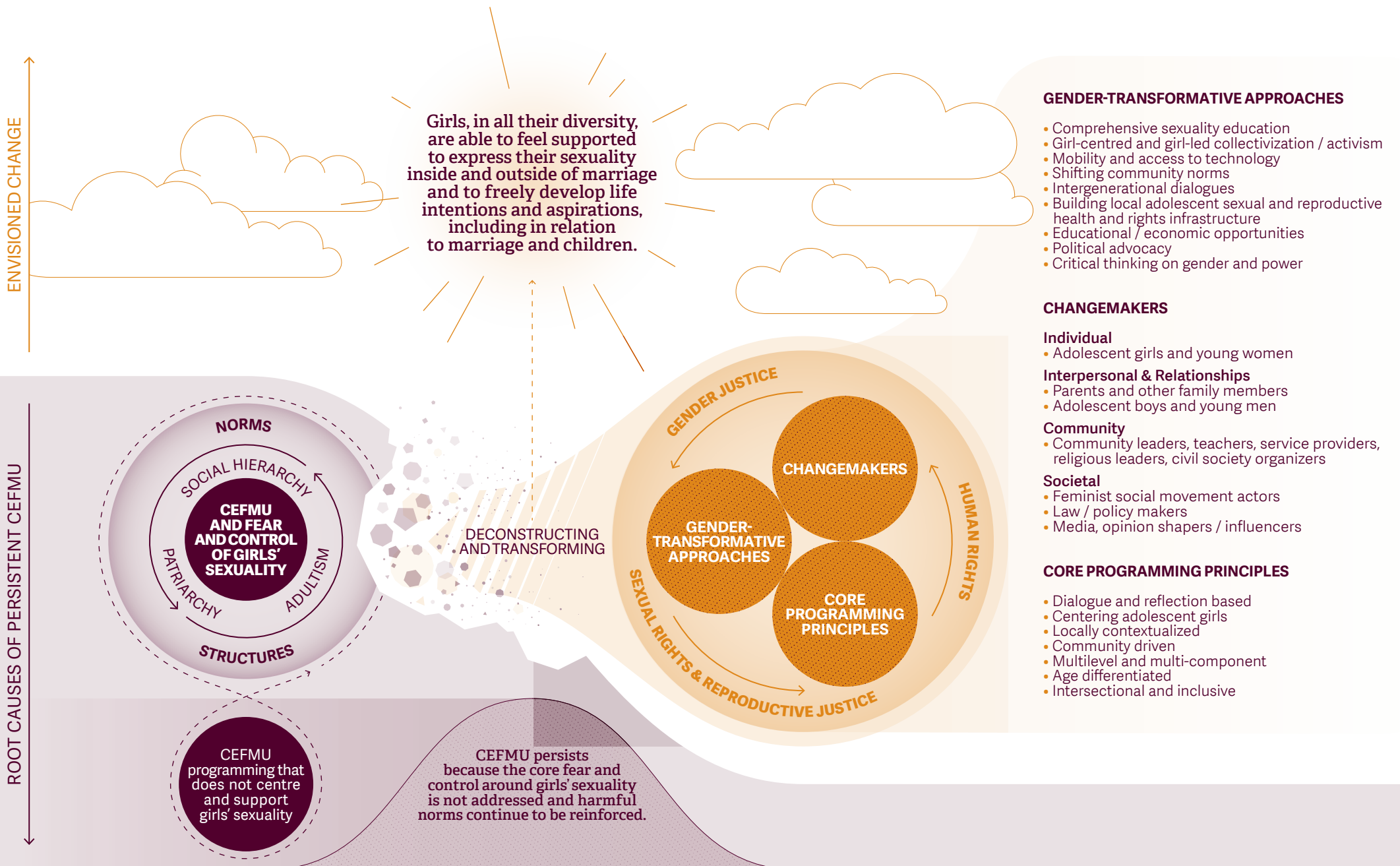
The Child, Early and Forced Marriages and Unions (CEFMU) and Sexuality Working Group is made up of national and international organisations working to advance adolescent girls' rights and opportunities.¹ Since its founding in 2016, the group has included a diversity of stakeholders from civil society organisations, international non-governmental organisations, and funders. Together, we develop resources and engage in advocacy to draw attention to how patriarchal control of adolescent girls' and young women's sexuality acts as a driver of CEFMU. Our objective is to direct more resources toward gender-transformative approaches (GTAs) that address this driver and expand girls' agency and opportunities (See an explanation of GTAs on page 5).

CEFMU interventions have historically avoided engaging with the topic of sexuality, as it is often considered a taboo issue. Yet we know that societies across the globe fear and aim to control girls' sexuality, and that this is one of the fundamental drivers of CEFMU. Therefore, attempts to advance girls' rights and address CEFMU must understand and acknowledge societal control of girls' sexuality. Otherwise, the practice will persist.² This is the subject of the Working Group's flagship report [*Tackling the Taboo: Sexuality and Gender-Transformative Programmes to End CEFMU*](#).

To support more effective programming – including advocacy – to prevent CEFMU and advance adolescent girls' rights, the Working Group and collaborators commissioned a conceptual framework on girls' sexuality and CEFMU. The framework includes a visual [Figure 1] and narrative articulating the relationship between CEFMU and girls' sexuality, and the programming needed to address this as a root cause of CEFMU. As part of the development of the framework, the Working Group held consultations with girls in Guatemala, India and Niger. We also consulted with practitioners working with girls, and with foundation and bilateral donors.

This brief provides an overview of the conceptual framework, tailored to support funders' understanding of the issue and what their role can be in addressing it. We provide specific recommendations for funders to encourage greater investment in initiatives, systems, and services that support girls' agency and autonomy, and address control of adolescent girls' sexuality. To fully understand the framework, and to hear the voices of adolescent girls themselves, we encourage funders to read and engage with their partners around the full framework narrative, available [here](#).

Figure 1 Girls' sexuality and child, early, and forced marriage and unions (CEFMU): How gender-transformative approaches can tackle the root causes of CEFMU



The envisioned change

The conceptual framework starts with the world envisioned by the adolescent girls we consulted and affirmed by the organisations in the Working Group: a world where *“girls, in all their diversity, are able to express their sexuality, inside and outside of marriage, and freely develop life intentions and aspirations, including in relation to marriage and children.”*

Root causes of persistent CEFMU

As the left side of the visual in Figure 1 depicts, social and gender norms based in **patriarchy, adultism** and **social hierarchy** are at the root of control of girls' sexuality, which in turn drives CEFMU. These norms are related to **purity and family honour, protection and responsibility, motherhood and adulthood, heteronormativity and the desire to marry, and sexual harassment and violence**. For example, girls are expected to remain “pure” – i.e., refrain from sex outside of marriage – or else they are perceived as bringing disgrace to themselves and their families; this motivates parents to marry girls early to avoid this scenario. Marriage may be viewed as a way to keep girls safe from violence and provide economic security, so parents feel obliged to arrange marriage or encourage their daughters to marry early. In many societies, girls are viewed solely as eventual wives and mothers, with marriage and family as their only possible life path. The full conceptual framework provides additional examples of the norms that underpin CEFMU.

Norms manifest through individual and community beliefs and actions, and are also embedded in social structures such as **legal, education, health and labour/economic systems**. The conceptual framework details how these structures can operate to reinforce and perpetuate harmful norms. For example, laws that regulate sexuality – including laws related to age of consent, sexual and gender identities, (marital) rape, mandatory reporting of sexual activity by medical and other professionals, and even child marriage laws – can limit girls' choices and bodily autonomy, and prevent their ability to decide whether, when, and whom to marry. Adolescents and unmarried girls and women often cannot freely access health services, especially sexual and reproductive health services and information, because health system policies demand spousal or parental consent, and discriminatory beliefs and attitudes of providers may act as barriers even where policies do not. Education can be a critical contributor to girls' empowerment, but if curricula and teachers reinforce gender stereotypes about marriage and motherhood as girls' only life options, schools may in fact not be a supportive factor in helping girls avoid CEFMU.

When CEFMU programmes do not address the norms that drive control of girls' sexuality, CEFMU persists! If we want to end this manifestation of gender inequality, we must invest in interventions that address these norms.

It is critical to note that fear and control of adolescent girls' sexuality drives other manifestations of gender inequality in addition to CEFMU, including adolescent pregnancy, female genital mutilation and cutting (FGM/C), gaps in girls' school completion and gender-based violence. While funding and programming often target these issues separately, more impactful and sustainable progress can be made towards equality, freedom, and opportunity for girls and women by addressing their shared underlying drivers.

Deconstructing and transforming norms and structures

Addressing the root causes of the fear and control of girls' sexuality that drive CEFMU requires applying **gender-transformative approaches** (GTAs) that support girls' sexual and reproductive health and rights and challenge norms and institutions that perpetuate CEFMU. GTAs aim to achieve gender equality by encouraging a critical awareness of gender norms and roles, and by addressing the unequal power relationships and distribution of resources between women and girls and others in the community. All programming inherently involves some approach to gender, whether reinforcing harmful norms or seeking to transform them. With regard to sexuality, GTAs seek to redistribute power and decision-making over all matters of sexuality. This includes girls' sexual and romantic relationships, agency for girls and women to enjoy freedom, choice, autonomy, and pleasure in the exercise of their sexuality and reproductive rights, and how they experience their sense of self and gender identity. For example, a GTA would aim to increase girls' agency in relationship choices, while a "non-GTA" (one that reinforces harmful gender norms) might advocate for delaying the age of marriage without recognizing the evolving capacities of adolescent girls or aiming to transform discriminatory norms. Consequently, this non-GTA would not change the status quo or structural drivers that deny girls and women choices.

To make these gender-transformative approaches effective, it is also important to follow particular **programming principles** and engage critically with **changemakers** including parents, community leaders, service providers, religious leaders, and lawmakers **across all levels of the socio-ecological framework** (i.e., at the individual level, as well as in relationships, and at community and societal levels). The specific approaches, principles, and changemakers are listed on the right side of Figure 1 and are detailed in the conceptual framework.

There is no magic formula, no perfect programming that will address the fear and control of girls' sexuality that fuels the practice of CEFMU. Yet progress is possible. The root causes – discriminatory norms and structures – can be transformed by recognizing, contextualizing, and applying these core programming principles and gender-transformative approaches, together with personal experience and knowledge, while actively involving changemakers and allies. Always putting the rights and voices of girls – in all their diversity – front and centre is paramount.

Funders' roles in addressing control of girls' sexuality as a driver of CEFMU


In order to see progress on CEFMU, it is fundamental that donor organisations examine control of girls' sexuality as a driver of CEFMU, even if it means questioning long-standing programmes and approaches. Many currently funded CEFMU initiatives are **not gender-transformative** but provide "quick solutions" that do not result in expanding girls' choices and options in life and, in many contexts, create new forms of oppression. Changing entrenched gender and social norms takes time and the involvement of many types of stakeholders. Funders play a critical role in ensuring that organisations and groups have the types of resources and support needed to implement programmes that are gender-transformative and address the control of girls' sexuality.

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We call on funders to invest in ways that will resource the long-term social change that is needed to address CEFMU at its roots.


The following are specific actions funders can take to resource long-term social change:

- **Build your understanding of the key ingredients of GTAs.** Our framework outlines some of the programming principles and critical components of GTAs, which include promoting **critical thinking on gender and power through safe spaces for dialogue and reflection**; supporting **girl-centred and girl-led collectivism and activism** by bringing girls together in ways that enable them to articulate their oppression and strategize for individual and social change as well as building social networks; and **facilitating public spaces for challenging norms**. By investing in understanding the conceptual framework in its entirety, funders can better identify what types of approaches and programming are going to lead to the long-term social change that is needed to truly address CEFMU.
- **Move away from funding siloed CEFMU programming and invest in programmes and groups that are collectively addressing the shared underlying drivers of all of the manifestations of gender inequality in girls' lives.** Despite evidence illustrating the ineffectiveness of siloed programming, many funders and programmes continue to separately target the many manifestations of gender inequality (including CEFMU, adolescent pregnancy, FGM/C, gaps in girls' school completion, and gender-based violence). By instead supporting programmes addressing the



shared underlying drivers, funders can make greater and more sustainable progress towards equality, freedom, and opportunity for girls and women. Since a comprehensive approach covering all of the elements outlined in the conceptual framework is often not possible through a single implementing organization, funders can be more effective by resourcing multiple complementary organisations and collaborations among them within specific geographical contexts.

- **Partner with and invest in girl-led and feminist movements and organisations.** These groups are intrinsically poised to take on this work with a more transformative lens. Funders can strategically resource them and make space for their leadership in guiding and building the capacity of civil society and grassroots organisations “from and for” the communities where CEFMU is happening. This is critical because, in some contexts, the CSOs and grassroots organisations might have a learning curve in applying GTAs. With control of girls’ sexuality embedded in norms and institutional structures, resourcing girl-led and feminist movements in ways that support their ongoing, long-term activism also plays a critical role in creating the types of large-scale norm and structural changes needed to address CEFMU at its roots.
- **Invest in experimentation so movements and organisations can develop, document, learn from, and build evidence for approaches that centre girls’ voices and girl-led activism.** There is a need for investments in feminist and liberatory approaches to monitoring and evaluation that centre girls’ voices, and in processes and organisations committed to not only supporting but better understanding *how* to support girl-led activism, and measuring success from the perspective of girls themselves. By resourcing these, funders can contribute to the broader field of girl-led social change and to a better understanding of both existing transformative approaches and the development of new strategies to address CEFMU at its roots.
- **Embody the values and engage in the practices of trust-based philanthropy.** Addressing the control of girls’ sexuality as a key root cause of CEFMU is long-term social change work that must be driven by most-affected communities including girls themselves. This work must be led by or in partnership with locally-based movements for women and girls’ rights and autonomy. Further, it must be locally contextualized and include an awareness of the origins of particular practices and fears often rooted in colonialism and persistent geo-political inequalities. To resource this type of work, funders must understand and embrace a trust-based philanthropy (TBP) approach. Some practices from TBP include giving **multi-year unrestricted and core funding** that gives grantees **flexibility** to determine where funds are most needed, and allows for innovation, emergent actions, and sustainability. It goes beyond funding by offering non-monetary, responsive, **adaptive support to bolster leadership, capacity, and organizational health**, which is especially critical for groups and organisations that have historically gone without access to networks or these kinds of assets. Some of the values to embody include being a partner and collaborator instead of dictating how the funds are used, which requires funding with trust, respect, and humility. This approach also means **being accountable to the girls funders seek to support**, and embracing opportunities for learning as you go.



Short-term grants do not align with the needs of long-term social change goals. Metrics of success should take into account the non-linear trajectory of lasting social change.

- **Expand advocacy goals to include more rights-affirming laws, policies, and investments.** Supporting advocacy that centres only on age of marriage laws can criminalize adolescent sexuality, reinforcing control of girls' sexuality rather than building their agency. Funders can play a role in resourcing research on the unintended effects of such laws and invest in learning from alternative justice practices used to address other gender justice challenges. More expansive advocacy can also direct resources toward gender-equitable services and opportunities for girls.

The CEFMU and Sexuality Working Group invites funders to join us in investing and stretching in the direction of conscious and conscientious action to transform the norms that control girls' sexuality and perpetuate CEFMU. This is a collective endeavour that requires resources, time, political will and a strong commitment to girl-centred approaches and partnership. Funders have a unique and crucial role to play in changing how the field of CEFMU operates by committing to the principles and practices above.

We look forward to continuing to learn and work together to contribute to the change and world girls deserve.

Endnotes

- 1 CEFMU and Sexuality Working Group and collaborators: Aahung, American Jewish World Service, CARE, CREA, Empower, EngenderHealth, Girls First Fund, Girls Not Brides: The Global Partnership to End Child Marriage, Global Fund for Women, GreeneWorks, International Center for Research on Women (ICRW), Fòs Feminista, International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF), MADRE, Nirantar Trust, Plan International, Population Council, Equipundo: Center for Masculinities and Social Justice (formerly Promundo-US), The Summit Foundation, The YP Foundation, UNFPA, UNICEF. The Working Group commissioned the Torchlight Collective team of Marissa Billowitz, Nidal Karim, and Kat Watson to lead the development of the conceptual framework, and Enrico Gianfranchi to design the framework visual. The Working Group is responsible for the final edit of the framework and this brief.
- 2 Greene M.E., Perlson S.M., Hart J. and Mullinax M. (2018). *The centrality of sexuality for understanding child, early and forced marriage*. GreeneWorks: Washington, DC and American Jewish World Service: New York. ajws.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/centrality_of_sex_final.pdf; Nirantar Trust. (2015). *Early and Child Marriage in India: A Landscape Analysis*. www.nirantar.net/uploads/files/EM%20Report%20-%20English%20%5BSummary%5D.pdf



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