



# Policy Brief

## Tipping Point: Insights from CARE's research on child marriage in Nepal and Bangladesh

**OVERVIEW** The issue of child, early and forced marriage (CEFM) has a growing spotlight within current global development and human rights agendas. The global scope and impact of the problem is staggering. An estimated 700 million women alive today were married as children<sup>1</sup> and every year over 14 million girls marry before they turn 18.<sup>2</sup> Compared with their unmarried peers or older women, girls who marry before the age of 18 are less likely to complete their education or pursue work outside of the home, and face limited opportunities for personal growth, social mobility and economic advancement. They are exposed to health risks associated with early pregnancy and child bearing and often have limited ability to exercise power and autonomy in relation to their husbands and in-laws once married, which increases exposure to domestic abuse, HIV/AIDS and other risks. Ultimately child marriage prevents girls from leading healthy and productive lives and deprives families, communities and societies of their full economic and social potential.

### Child marriage in Nepal and Bangladesh

While child marriage is not limited to any culture, religion and region, it is most common in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia.

In Bangladesh and Nepal, 2 countries with some of the highest rates of child marriage globally, (65% and 41% respectively)<sup>3</sup> CARE conducted a research study with communities to deepen understanding of the contextual factors and drivers of child marriage in distinctive regions which have a high prevalence of the practice.<sup>4</sup> This research is part of a project CARE is implementing called Tipping Point, which is focused on identifying and addressing the root causes of child marriage in particularly marginalized communities in both countries. A core objective of the research was to promote learning and build capacity at a local level. Hence, the study used participatory approaches, and was designed to strengthen the capacity of field staff as knowledge workers, amplify their skills to engage with data collection tools and analysis, and use findings from the research to inform the program design.

The findings from the research show the drivers of child marriage, in their inter-relatedness, to be remarkably similar across both Nepal and Bangladesh - **social norms that undervalue girls and women, interact with poverty and limited livelihood options to generate a powerful formula for the inter-generational perpetuation of child marriage.** In both countries, religious and cultural beliefs differ between communities, and among identity groups, but are similar in reinforcing early marriage. Families face social pressures and concerns associated with preserving girls' virginity and sexual purity for marriage, which is strongly linked to family honor. Controlling girls' agency, mobility, opportunities, and sexuality through early marriage is perceived as an achievable and appealing option for parents to maintain family honor. The practice of dowry, which is an expected exchange within the marriage process, also encourages child marriage

1 Marrying too Young. End Child Marriage. UNFPA, New York, 2012

2 Ending Child Marriage: Progress and Prospects, UNICEF New York, 2014.

3 UNICEF Global Database on child marriage <http://data.unicef.org/child-protection/child-marriage.html>

4 The cultural context of child marriage in Nepal and Bangladesh: Findings from CARE's Tipping Point Project Community Participatory Analysis. CARE Research Report, 2016. <http://www.care.org/work/womens-empowerment/child-marriage/tipping-point>

## DRIVERS OF CHILD MARRIAGE

### GEOGRAPHIC AND ENVIRONMENTAL CONTEXT • CASTE-DISCRIMINATION • HARSH ECONOMIC AND LIVELIHOOD CONDITIONS • DOWRY • SOCIAL NORMS • FEAR AND CONTROL OF ADOLESCENT SEXUALITY

Their inter-relatedness are remarkably similar across Nepal and Bangladesh – the social norms interacting with poverty and limited livelihood options – and are a powerful formula for the inter-generational perpetuation of child marriage.

amongst the poor and very poor, due to perceptions of girls as economic burdens and since dowry prices are generally lower for younger girls. At the root of the beliefs and pressures that drive parents' decisions is a deeply engrained worldview that gives a low value to girls in their potential reproductive and domestic roles while valuing boys for their perceived productive and income generating abilities. At the same time, the regions that are the focus of this research in Nepal and Bangladesh face harsh geographic and environmental conditions and social marginalization which heightens poverty and economic hardship and helps perpetuate child marriage.<sup>5</sup>

### IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR US GOVERNMENT ACTION

The causes and consequences of child marriage have gained attention worldwide as advocates, organizations and governments raise awareness of, and work to end, this practice and to create broader opportunities for adolescent girls and women. In the context of US government foreign policy, child marriage has gained prominence alongside a broader focus on gender issues within US global development policies and discourse. For example, over the past few years, the State Department and USAID have adopted a range of agency-wide policies and strategies on issues such as gender equality and gender-based violence. The Administration has also launched initiatives such as Let Girls Learn and DREAMS to promote girls' education and health globally, as well as announcing the development of an inter-agency Adolescent Girl Strategy to guide US global efforts to empower girls and address issues such as child marriage.

As such initiatives and strategies roll out, CARE's research findings in Nepal and Bangladesh have a number of implications for the type of US government action needed to support the availability of options and choices beyond child marriage for highly marginalized communities in each of these countries. Specifically, the US government should:

- 1. Promote and fund multi-sectoral strategies that focus on changing social norms and supporting adolescents' sexual and reproductive health and rights.** Child marriage is rooted in a diversity of structural, economic and social factors, and comprehensive, multi-sectoral strategies are needed to address the problem. These strategies should include a focus on adolescents' sexual and reproductive health and rights, shifting social norms that undervalue girls, and supporting economic empowerment, quality education (including comprehensive sexuality education) and safe spaces in schools, homes and public areas. Critically, programs should also target already married adolescents to

<sup>5</sup> More detail on these research findings can be found in the CARE report: The cultural context of child marriage in Nepal and Bangladesh. CARE, 2016

## KEY FINDINGS

CARE's research with communities in the haor areas of Bangladesh and the Terai region in Nepal shows that a combination of social, structural and economic factors influence decisions around early marriage. The following are some key findings from the research:

- **In Bangladesh the practice of child marriage crosses religious and socio-economic boundaries.** In Nepal the practice appears to be concentrated specifically within particular caste groups -Dalits and other excluded castes -who are economically and socially marginalized by their caste identities. In both countries however, remote geographies accentuate hardship, isolation, poverty, and lack of access to services and information. This makes it more difficult for affected communities to move away from practices such as child marriage, even as others begin to make this shift.
- **The complex marriage process systematically excludes the voice of girls.** When adolescents, especially girls, try to assert their choices around if, whom, and when to marry, they are often stigmatized by their families and communities, and are seen as standing against the authority of fathers and brothers.
- **Dowry compels economically constrained parents to decide between investing in education or a dowry for their daughters.** From a community perspective, worries over dowry and views toward girls as economic burdens can lead to decisions for earlier marriage. This is especially applicable for poorer families, since dowry prices are lower for younger girls.
- **Social pressures around girls' sexual purity and family honor drive early marriage.** Families want to secure their daughters' future and fear threats to her character and the family's honor from love affairs or love marriages if she remains unmarried for too long after reaching puberty. There is an overall fear of any intermingling between adolescent girls and boys
- **For parents the perceived risks of marrying a girl young are outweighed by the perceived benefits in terms of lower dowry, family respect, avoiding risk of love affairs, finding an acceptable match, and reducing the family's economic burdens.**



**At the root of the beliefs and pressures that drive parents' decisions is a deeply engrained worldview that gives a low value to girls in their potential reproductive and domestic roles while valuing boys for their perceived productive and income generating abilities.**

promote their access to education, health and livelihood opportunities. The US government's forthcoming Adolescent Girl Strategy offers a great opportunity to promote holistic approaches and strengthen whole of government, multi-sectoral action to empower girls and address child marriage.

- 2. Support and resource early marriage prevention programs that are integrated into other broader programs.** Given the complex and inter-related drivers for child marriage, it is important to develop an integrated approach to funding and designing child marriage programming. The US government has major investments in health, education, economic growth, food security and other sector-based programs that can both have an impact on and are impacted by child marriage. These sector-specific programs could benefit from early analysis of the effects of child marriage on program outcomes and integrate interventions and indicators in response, especially in high prevalence and marginalized communities. In Bangladesh for example, CARE's experience with implementing a large USAID funded food security program called *Shouhardo* has highlighted the importance of integrating a strong gender analysis and focus on women's empowerment in order to achieve the program's broader food security and nutrition objectives.<sup>6</sup>
- 3. Invest in girls' and youth engagement, empowerment and leadership globally.** As those most affected by child and early marriage, adolescents and young people represent a core constituency and can be key leaders in supporting social change around this issue. The US government should promote the engagement and leadership of young people, particularly girls, throughout its foreign policy and funding, including providing support for young people's organizing and mobilizing on gender equality and rights issues and investing in economic and social opportunities and resources aimed at young people, particularly marginalized girls.
- 4. Support media strategies and technologies that can reach isolated communities and marginalized individuals within them.** Media narratives and information can share diverse people's stories around marriage, gender, sexuality and choice. This is critical to portraying alternative options for girls and fostering debate around social norms and gender inequality. However, media reach and form are often limited – particularly in remote areas. There is deep potential to break this divide through investment and innovation by donors, government and other actors.
- 5. Champion girls' rights and a focus on root causes of child marriage in multilateral and bilateral dialogues.** The US government has increasingly voiced support for gender equality and girls' rights in global policy discussions and processes, including in the recently adopted Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which include a target on eliminating child and early marriage. US government leadership and support on girls' rights should extend to engagement with national governments and civil society actors in high prevalence countries such as Nepal and Bangladesh. Notably, as these and other governments globally take steps to strengthen their child marriage-related laws, policies, programs and indicators, the US should support efforts that go beyond a focus on simply tracking and enforcing age at marriage. There is need for a broader focus on policies and interventions to monitor and address underlying issues such as sexual and reproductive choice, girls' livelihood options, secondary school completion, socio-cultural norms and aspirations for girls.

---

<sup>6</sup> SHOUHARDO, which stands for Strengthening Household Ability to Respond to Development Opportunities is a large USAID-funded program implemented by CARE in Bangladesh aimed at reducing food insecurity among poor and vulnerable rural households. The program, which has gone through several phases since inception in 2004, uses a range of strategies and interventions, but includes a strong focus on women's empowerment, including activities such as self-help groups where women and adolescent girls address issues such as early marriage and violence against women. An external evaluation of the program in 2011 found extraordinary impacts on child stunting, and identified women's empowerment activities as having had the most impact on this outcome. More on these findings can be found in the CARE report: Reaching New Heights: the case for measuring women's empowerment. 2012 [http://www.care.org/sites/default/files/documents/CARE\\_IWD\\_2012.pdf](http://www.care.org/sites/default/files/documents/CARE_IWD_2012.pdf)

---

#### CARE USA

[tippingpoint@care.org](mailto:tippingpoint@care.org)

151 Ellis Street NE, Atlanta, GA 30303-2440

T: 404.979.9191

[www.care.org/our-work/womens-empowerment/  
child-marriage/tipping-point](http://www.care.org/our-work/womens-empowerment/child-marriage/tipping-point)

THIS INITIATIVE IS FUNDED BY

