



THE TIPPING POINT PROJECT

Community Participatory Analysis Study:
Summary Findings on Child Marriage in Bangladesh

REPORT SUMMARY



Worldwide, every year, an estimated 15 million girls aged under 18 are married with little or no say in the matter.² Compared with their unmarried peers or older women, girls who marry before the age of 18 are less likely to complete primary school, more likely to experience unwanted pregnancies, and are at greater risk of sexual and reproductive health morbidities and maternal mortality.³ Child marriage prevents girls and boys from leading healthy and productive lives, as it imposes parental and domestic responsibilities in adolescence before they are physically, emotionally and psychologically prepared.⁴

Although the body of evidence on how to prevent child marriage is growing, there is still much room for gaining a greater understanding of what must change in order to lead to a sustainable decline in the practice.

The Tipping Point Initiative and the Focus on Bangladesh

The Tipping Point project was established with the intention of innovating strategies for tackling root causes of child marriage in 2 countries with some of the highest rates of child marriage globally, Bangladesh and Nepal, while also engaging in advocacy on the issue across global platforms of funders, researchers and key decision makers. The project is based on multi-country research that was carried out in Bangladesh and Nepal, by CARE and its partners. The project aspires to identify “tipping points” for shifting the communities’ social norms that restrict the lives and roles of girls (and boys) and uphold the practice of child marriage and dowry. Child marriage rates in Nepal and Bangladesh are some of the highest in the world and the Tipping Point project study focuses on distinctive regions within Nepal and Bangladesh with particularly high rates. This summary report, however, is limited to the study’s findings on child marriage in Bangladesh, and specifically, the *haor* areas (wetlands) of Sunamganj District that were the focus of the study.

BACKGROUND ON BANGLADESH

Bangladesh has the highest rate of marriage globally involving girls under age 15, at 29 percent, while 65 percent are married by age 18.⁵ As elsewhere, the drivers include deeply entrenched cultural and religious beliefs, worries about family reputation and the opinion of others, dowry, poverty, parents’ desires to secure economic well-being for their daughters and a perceived need to protect girls from harm, like sexual harassment and abuse. Pervasive fears of natural disasters also deepen communities’ poverty and render them more vulnerable to practicing child marriage.⁶

As in many other countries, the legal age of marriage in Bangladesh is 18 for women and 21 for men, but enforcement is weak. Indeed, legal age at marriage is at the heart of a lively discussion in Bangladesh;⁷ the debate has lasted for over a year, and the government’s rationale and position have been hard to pin down. Under the drafted new law that is currently being considered, the minimum age of marriage would apparently remain 18, with an exception for marriage with parental and court consent under certain circumstances. What those circumstances are exactly is unclear, but according to recent government statements in the media, they seem to reflect the view that premarital pregnancy and elopement require certain allowances.⁸

² <http://www.girlsnotbrides.org/about-child-marriage>

³ UNFPA. (2009). *Fact Sheet: Young People and Times of Change*. New York: United Nations Population Fund.

⁴ UNFPA. 2012. *Marrying Too Young*. New York: UNFPA.

⁵ <http://www.girlsnotbrides.org/child-marriage/bangladesh/>

⁶ Human Rights Watch. 2015. *Marry Before Your House is Swept Away: Child Marriage in Bangladesh*. http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/bangladesh0615_ForUpload_0_0.pdf

⁷ <http://www.girlsnotbrides.org/child-marriage/bangladesh/>; <http://www.girlsnotbrides.org/lowering-marriage-age-step-wrong-direction-kofi-annan-warns-bangladesh/>

⁸ <http://www.thedailystar.net/city/ambiguity-dogs-proposed-child-marriage-restraint-act-180601>

Objectives of the Tipping Point Community Analyses (CPA) Study

This brief provides a summary of key findings from an in-depth study conducted by CARE into the issue of child marriage in Bangladesh. The Tipping Point Community Participatory Analyses (CPA) Study was designed to deepen understanding of the contextual factors and root causes driving the prevalence of child marriage in a particular region of Bangladesh which has high rates of the practice. The findings are also intended to inform innovative and context-specific program design. With regard to monitoring and evaluation, the Tipping Point study’s purpose is to provide clarity on outcomes and measures to focus on the project’s overall monitoring, evaluation, and learning activities, and to provide baseline data for some indicators of change for use in the future. Of particular note, these include girls’ visions for themselves, the visions of parents for their daughters, and the prevailing knowledge and perceptions of the risks and benefits of early marriage versus waiting.

A less conventional objective of the study was to promote learning and build capacity at the local level. With the Tipping Point project, CARE has structured a project that incorporates a focus on learning by proactively creating space for review and reflection at every level. Hence, the CPA study was designed in a manner that would build the capacity of the project field staff as knowledge workers, build their skills to engage with participatory data collection tools, analyses and sense-making, and use findings from their research to inform the program design. The project endeavored to instill in field facilitators and social mobilizers, and partner organizations and staff, the sense that they all contribute in important ways to research and learning by reflecting, in real time, on their work with community members and by being a core part of the study.

Introduction

In recent years, child marriage has received enormous attention in the human rights and international development fields. The practice reflects and reinforces fundamental social patterns of gender and age discrimination, predominantly against girls. This discrimination includes: a lack of commitment to girls’ schooling; the appropriation of their unpaid labor in the household; the imposition of constraints on their opportunities for paid employment; the acceptance of their lack of agency to make critical decisions about their own lives and health; the refusal to permit them control over their sexuality and reproduction; and a tolerance of their vulnerability to gender-based violence.¹

¹ UNFPA. 2012. *Marrying Too Young*. New York: UNFPA; Greene, ME. 2014. *Ending Child Marriage in a Generation: What Research Will It Take?* New York: Ford Foundation and GreeneWorks.

Methodology: How the study was conducted

Tipping Point has two implementing partners in Bangladesh. These partner organizations had already been working with vulnerable populations - particularly women and the poor - to improve the status of those populations within their communities. The Association for Slum Dwellers works to ensure poor peoples' participation in development; Jaintia Shinnomul Songstha or Jashish is a non-profit organization that values providing everyone with an opportunity to participate in planning processes and have a role in decision-making.

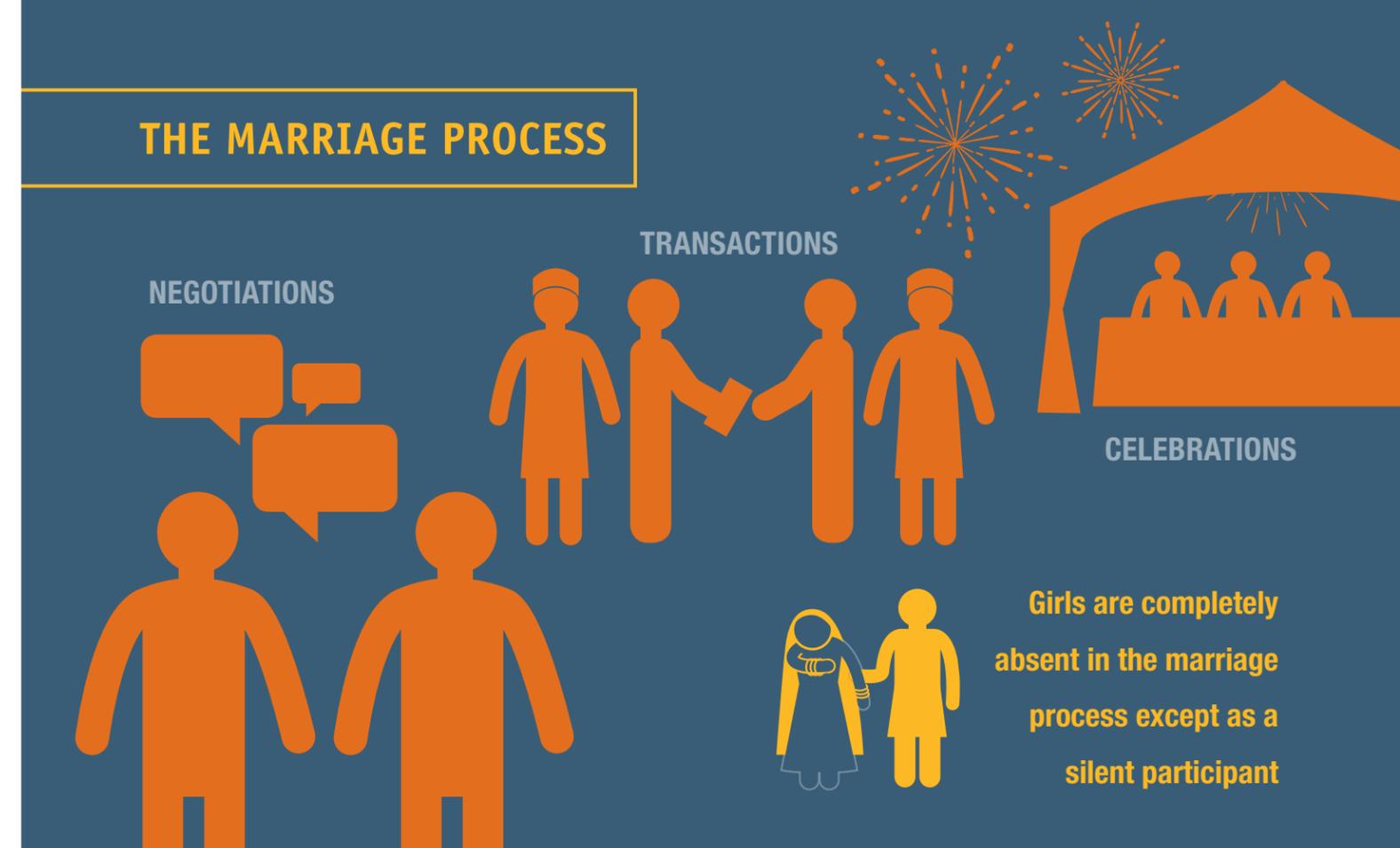
The team participated in an ongoing series of workshops to draw out what each group knew about child marriage and related practices in these regions of Bangladesh. The launch meetings and monitoring, evaluation and learning workshops drafted theories of action, identified key stakeholders, helped set up the CPA, brainstormed data collection methods, and built capacity of staff and facilitators at each stage of the process. (See Figure 1 to the right).

CPA Study- Summary Findings⁹

The research found that 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 seen as standing against the authority of fathers and brothers. Families and communities make marriage decisions for adolescents, not with them. Only boys with more education, income or experience working overseas may sometimes be permitted to express opinions about the choice of a spouse.

In Bangladesh the practice of child marriage crosses religious and socio-economic boundaries. The *haors* areas in Sunamganj are particularly economically marginalized and physically isolated. The isolation and lack of opportunities for specific communities makes it more difficult for them to move away from practices such as child marriage, even as others begin to make this shift.

FIGURE 1. CPA PROCESS



Diverse factors affect decisions by the prospective bride's family and the prospective groom's family regarding the timing of marriage. Geographic, environmental and economic conditions, socio-cultural and religious characteristics, concerns about the regulation of girls' sexuality, gender inequality and social norms all influence marriage decisions. Economic factors do not exist independently of the social, cultural or religious drivers of child marriage. Remote geographies accentuate hardship, isolation, poverty, and access to services and information.

Key Structural factors

Geographical, seasonal and environmental factors play an important role in driving child marriage. In Bangladesh the specific geographic contexts included in the research are characterized by economic and social marginalization and isolation as a consequence of structural factors (lack of schools and economic opportunities), lack of mobility (e.g., limited transportation in the *haors*, lack of security for girls). Remote geography and poor access to information contribute to parental limits on girls' mobility and the maintenance of conservative gender norms that put girls at risk of verbal or physical abuse.

The seasonal cycle raises and drops girls' vulnerability to child marriage at any given time. The main seasonal landmark for marriage in the focus communities in Bangladesh is April to mid-August, the rainy season, when the *haors* are flooded and getting to school is more difficult. Male migration to the Middle East is common. Parents prefer to see children married before migration.

⁹ For the more detailed report see: *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/sites/default/files/documents/CARE_Tipping_Point_External%20Report_Web.pdf

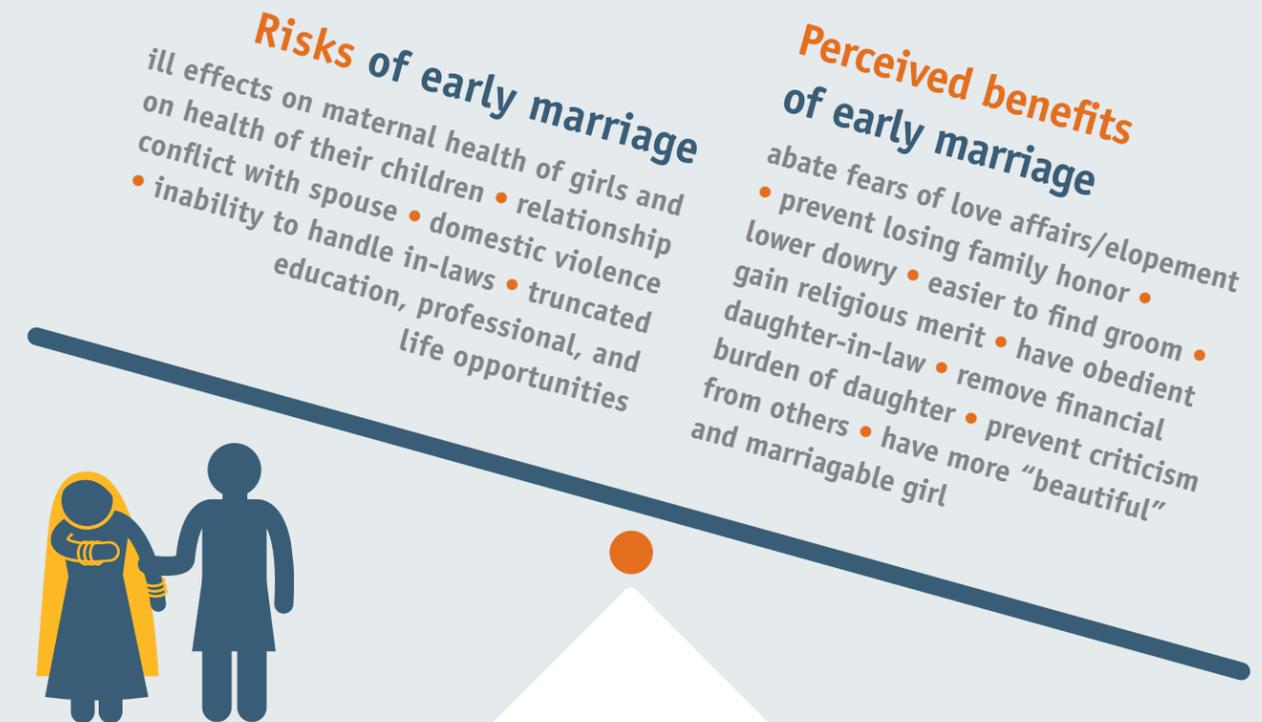
The economics of dowry are key in determining the nature and timing of marriage. Dowry is a common practice, symbolic of the bride's value and reflective of the groom's family's honor. Many parents shared that they would like to give up the practice of dowry but feel socially pressures to engage in the practice. Research in Bangladesh highlights the distinction between traditional dowry, gifts from the bride's family to the bride, and the new groom payments referred to as demand, which can impoverish the family of the bride. Families can save on marriage costs by marrying their daughters young.

SOCIAL NORMS AND FAMILY AND COMMUNITY PERCEPTIONS

Social norms and peer pressure make it harder for families to translate any resistance to child marriage into actions. Some girls' parents say they would want to delay marriage, but the fear of social stigma and dishonor prevents them from acting on their wishes, and makes them susceptible to pressure from potential grooms' families, neighbors, relatives and the community. In the end, both mothers and fathers seem to be acting more in response to prevailing social norms than to their own wishes. Social norms influence individual decision-making, overriding other considerations and tilting the balance in favor of child marriage.



THE WEIGHING OF RISKS AND PERCEIVED BENEFITS



The perceived risks of delaying marriage/benefits of early marriage outweigh the perceived benefits of delaying marriage/risks of early marriage. Responses regarding the benefits of early marriage from both countries overlap, with parents citing lower dowry, alleviating a burden, more prestige and respect, less risk of the girl eloping, and children (or specifically daughters-in-law) more apt to obey the parents/in-laws.

The control of girls' sexuality and concern about its proper regulation is of central importance to any decisions concerning the timing of marriage. In Bangladesh, the weight given to girls' sexual lives is greater than for other aspects of their lives, with resulting limitations on girls' agency, mobility and opportunities. Parents fear their adolescent daughters and sons will get involved in love affairs that will stigmatize the girl and bring dishonor to the girl's family. If girls express agency over their bodies, their decisions and behavior are stigmatized. Any association with boys is taboo, and associated with an overall concern for the "security" of girls. Girls' sexuality is the concern of others but girls themselves are given no information about their own bodies, puberty, sex and reproduction in order to prepare and protect themselves.

Girls' "youth" and related appearance figures prominently in judgments about their marriage prospects. Girls are typically married to adult men in Bangladesh and future brides are seen as desirable based largely on their physical appearance. As a consequence, older girls are seen as losing their "glamour." The preference is determined by norms, and reflects the way the demand side drives the marriage market.



Married girls aspire to delay marriage for their sons and daughters. Daughters-in-law had much to say about their children's lives, for example, having a child's marriage at 20 years old (for both sons and daughters), letting children choose their own partners for marriage, and building a school in the community so daughters can continue their studies.

Boys' aspirations also feature marriage, but later. In Bangladesh, most boys wanted to marry later than boys usually do in their villages, similar to girls who identified a higher age than what is typical for them. Unmarried boys almost universally expressed a desire to continue their schooling to at least grade 10 and to marry girls of their choice. When discussing their future spouses, unmarried boys in some villages hoped to marry educated girls; others hoped their wives would have fair complexions. Like girls, boys mentioned wanting harmony in the family.

BOYS' PROFESSIONAL ASPIRATIONS ARE BROAD BUT OFTEN STAND IN CONTRADICTION TO THE REALITIES OF THEIR LIVES.

Parents' aspirations and those of their sons regarding marriage are not in alignment. Across Bangladesh, young people, both married and unmarried, tended to have different, less traditional expectations for their lives than what their parents wanted for them. But boys, like girls, do not have much agency in their lives and feel obliged to go along with their parents' and families' wishes for them.

Conclusions

The analysis captured the reality that social identities, values and practices often align with economic, geographic and infrastructural constraints. The drivers of child marriage, in their inter-relatedness, are remarkably similar – social norms interacting with geographic isolation, poverty and poor livelihood options – and taken together, generate a powerful formula for the inter-generational perpetuation of child marriage. Religious and cultural beliefs differ between and among identity groups, but are similar in reinforcing early marriage. Dowry, above all, is a practice that encourages child marriage amongst the poor and very poor. The deeply engrained worldview that girls are of lesser value than boys is only too apparent at the root of the beliefs and social pressures driving parents' decisions.

Recommendations¹⁰

NATIONAL AND LOCAL GOVERNMENTS OF BANGLADESH

- Expand and promote access to both formal and non-formal education and training opportunities.
- Develop content, curricula, and training of teachers and health workers on comprehensive sexuality education.
- Promote interventions and policies that are more holistic in addressing multiple barriers to education.

¹⁰ For more detailed recommendations, please refer to the full report: *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/sites/default/files/documents/CARE_Tipping_Point_External%20Report_Web.pdf

THE ASPIRATIONS AND EXPERIENCES OF ADOLESCENT BOYS AND GIRLS

Girls' life aspirations prominently feature marriage, but not child marriage. The data on girls' dreams for their own lives revealed that girls' idea of a good life for themselves includes having their own livelihood; being married to someone of their choice or having the characteristics of their choice; having a nice house; bringing up their children properly, to be healthy, educated and good human beings. Implicitly, girls want education for themselves.

Parents' aspirations often do not align with their daughters'. For girls, the expression of their dreams – of working in various professions and earning an income – was invariably followed up by descriptions of their parents' wishes, which circumscribe their own aspirations; most of these descriptions entailed stopping their daughters' schooling and arranging their marriages.

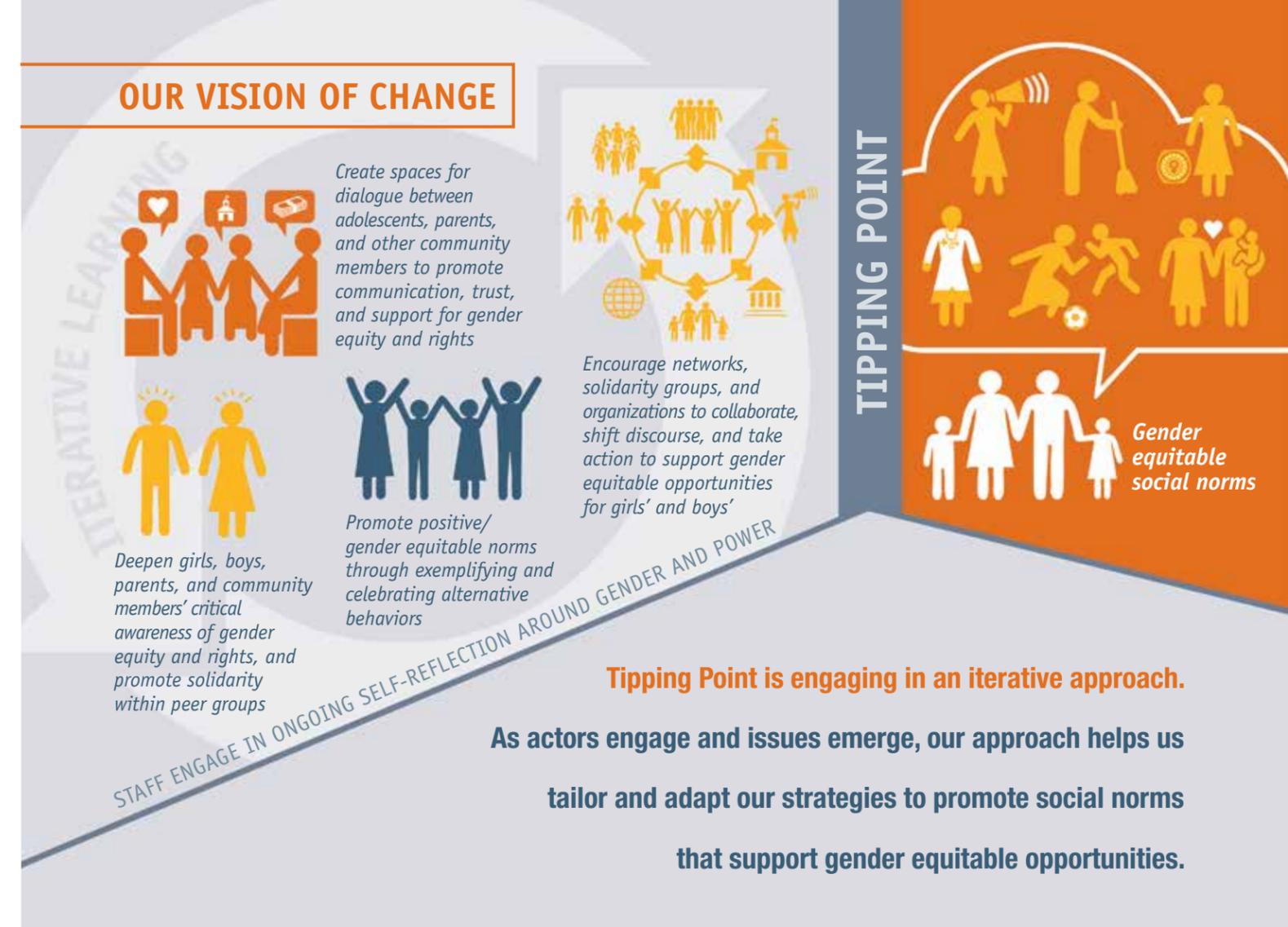
- Expand the choices available to young adults, especially girls, after secondary school.
- Focus on and strengthen citizenship, birth and marriage registration systems, with a special focus on equitable access for girls.
- Ensure the rights of already married adolescent girls by promoting access to education, health services, livelihood opportunities and financial tools and resources.
- Fund and support the training of community-based government workers in specific marginalized communities.
- Invest in infrastructure that improves mobility and access for adolescents, especially girls, in isolated communities.
- Give strong support and funding to civil society and NGOs to scale up community-based campaigns to shift norms.

GOVERNMENT AND PRIVATE FOUNDATION DONORS

- Support and resource early marriage prevention programs that are integrated into other broader programs.
- Promote and fund multi-sectoral strategies that include a focus on adolescents' sexual and reproductive health and rights, and changing discriminatory cultural practices and social norms that undervalue girls.
- Support development of media strategies and technologies that can reach isolated communities and marginalized individuals within them.
- Invest in youth-led organizing efforts.
- Advocate for measures that promote girls' empowerment and tackle root causes of child marriage in policy dialogues at a global and national level.

CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS AND NGOS

- Create spaces for dialogue between adolescents, parents and other community members to promote communication, trust, and support for gender equality and rights.
- Provide spaces and opportunities for girls, boys, parents and community members to promote critical awareness of gender equality and rights, and solidarity within peer groups.
- Promote gender equitable norms by exemplifying and celebrating model behaviors and individuals.
- Support networks to analyze and take action on social injustices they face as a group.
- Facilitate networks, solidarity groups and organizations that collaborate to shift discourse and take action for gender equitable opportunities for girls and boys.
- Support and fund spaces for NGO staff to engage in self-reflection about their own beliefs and values regarding gender and social norms that support the practice of child marriage.



COMMUNITIES

- Actively participate in village and district level government planning mechanisms to set targets for ending child marriage and promote alternative opportunities for girls.
- Stand together to promote norms that support the positive development of adolescents, and reject the acceptability of gender-based harassment or violence.
- Engage in transformative justice approaches to addressing gender-based violence.
- Hold duty bearers accountable.
- Lead by example.

ADOLESCENT GIRLS AND BOYS

- Build their own solidarity and networks.
- Organize together and be a powerful voice regarding the concerns in their lives.
- Learn from one another.



www.care.org

Headquarters

CARE International
7-9 chemin de Balexert
1219 Châtelaine, Geneva
Switzerland
www.care-international.org

Coordinating Offices

CARE USA
151 Ellis Street NE
Atlanta, GA 30303
USA
www.care.org
caretippingpoint.org

CARE Bangladesh
G.P.O. Box 226
Dhaka 1000
Bangladesh
www.carebangladesh.org

CARE Nepal
P.O. Box: 1661
Kathmandu
Nepal
www.carenepal.org

Founded in 1945 with the creation of the CARE Package, CARE is a leading humanitarian organization fighting global poverty. CARE places special focus on working alongside poor girls and women because, equipped with the proper resources, they have the power to lift whole families and entire communities out of poverty. Last year CARE worked in 87 countries and reached 82 million people around the world. To learn more, visit www.care.org.