



**THE CULTURAL CONTEXT OF CHILD MARRIAGE IN NEPAL AND BANGLADESH:**  
Findings from CARE's Tipping Point Project  
Community Participatory Analysis

**RESEARCH REPORT**

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## LETTER FROM OUR CEO

CARE is proud to present this in-depth study of the issue of child and early marriage in Nepal and Bangladesh. The report comes at an important time. Over the past year, the international community has marked a number of milestones in its efforts to promote greater equality for women and girls. We commemorated 20 years of implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, closed out the era of the Millennium Development Goals and saw 193 states reach consensus on the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development - which includes a target on eliminating child, early and forced marriage, among other important gender equality measures. More than ever before, gender discrimination and the denial of girls' rights have gained attention within global development discourse and more donors and governments are taking action, providing funding and developing policies to address issues such as child and early marriage, girls' education and gender based violence. All of this is encouraging and is the culmination of many years of research, programming and advocacy by activists and organizations around the world.

Yet, the situation for girls in many parts of the world remains dire. Worldwide, an estimated 14 million girls aged under 18 are married each year. The majority of these are in South Asia, including in Bangladesh and Nepal, the two countries which are the focus of this study. In both countries, CARE is implementing a project called Tipping Point aimed at identifying and addressing root causes of child marriage in regions that have particularly high rates of the practice. This study provides in depth analysis of the key social, economic and structural issues surrounding the practice and offers recommendations for action to address these issues by a range of stakeholders, including governments, donors, civil society, communities and adolescents themselves.

We hope that this study proves to be a useful contribution to a growing evidence base on what is needed to effectively address child marriage and empower girls globally.

**Michelle Nunn**, President and CEO



## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The human rights and international development fields have paid enormous attention to child marriage in recent years. 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.

### The Tipping Point Community Participatory Analysis Study

The Tipping Point Community Participatory Analysis Study was designed to deepen understanding of the contextual factors and root causes driving the prevalence of child marriage in particular regions of Nepal and Bangladesh, countries with some of the highest rates of child marriage in the world. The study focuses on distinctive regions within Nepal (the Terai) and Bangladesh (the *haor* areas) with particularly high rates of child marriage.

The three main areas of inquiry offer insights into the vulnerability to child marriage, the specific drivers of the practice, and the dreams and reactions of adolescents affected by child marriage. The intention was also to capture the views of young people, inform innovative and context-specific program design, contribute to the development of new measures for monitoring and evaluation, and build the skills of partner organizations and community-based project staff to engage in participatory research and analysis.

Village sampling in the *Terai* of Nepal reflected priority criteria associated with child marriage: caste and ethnicity, remoteness, availability of school, and presence of civil society organizations, with highest priority given to villages with Dalit caste members, close proximity to the Indian border, no schooling beyond primary, and the presence of non-governmental organization activity. In Bangladesh, village sampling in the economically marginalized and physically isolated *haor* areas focused on criteria associated with a high level of remoteness, proportional representation of Hindu and Muslim majority populations, and a mix of rankings for perceived levels of child marriage.

## RESEARCH FINDINGS

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, while in Nepal the practice appears to be concentrated specifically within particular caste groups – Dalits and other excluded castes – who are economically marginalized by their caste identities. 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. This is an important difference between the findings from the two countries.

**Diverse factors affect decisions by the prospective bride's family and the prospective groom's family regarding the timing of marriage. In Bangladesh and Nepal 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 both Nepal and 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, economic opportunities), lack of mobility (e.g., limited transportation in *haor* areas, lack of security for girls), and social exclusion (e.g., Dalits in the Terai). 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.** In Nepal, while Hindus consider certain months auspicious for marriage, Muslims marry all 12 months of the year. A few marriage landmarks in Nepal include exam result time, when marriage proposals are discussed or entertained, especially if the boy or girl does poorly; and festival periods, when relatives come together and proposals are discussed. The main seasonal landmark for marriage in Bangladesh is April to mid-August, the rainy season, when the *haors* are flooded and getting to school is more difficult. In both country sub-regions, male migration is common, with the young men in Nepal migrating mostly to India, and the men in Bangladesh migrating usually to the Middle East. In Bangladesh, parents prefer to see children married before migration. In Nepal, poor Hindu boys get married before migrating, while Muslim boys marry after returning home.

**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 pressured 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. In Bangladesh, families can save on marriage costs by marrying their daughters young. Our study documents exorbitant dowry demands in the Southern Terai plains of Nepal, as well as boys fearing that people will begin to speculate that the groom himself has mental or physical problems, or other shameful familial secrets, if he doesn't demand a dowry.

**Caste plays an important role in driving marriage in Hindu communities in Nepal.** Child marriage is anchored in a system of inequalities: the economic and social marginalization of specific castes severely limits their opportunities and prevents the realization of many of their basic human rights. Caste did not come up as much among Hindus in Bangladesh except for reference to the time it takes to find a spouse when they are intent on marrying within caste.

## **SOCIAL NORMS AND COMMUNITY PERCEPTIONS OF THE RISKS AND BENEFITS OF CHILD MARRIAGE**

**The perceived risks of delaying marriage/benefits of early marriage outweigh the perceived benefits of delaying marriage/risks of early marriage.** Responses regarding the perceived benefits of child 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 both Nepal and 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. In both countries, 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.** 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.

**Boys too face vulnerabilities to child marriage in Nepal.** In the research areas, both boys and girls are married underage in Nepal, whereas girls are typically married to adult men in Bangladesh. Boys in Nepal are also perceived as being at risk of an inter-caste marriage and unmarried boys not in school can face criticism. Despite these worries by parents, boys face none of the restrictions that girls experience.

## **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.

**Married girls aspire to delay marriage for their sons and daughters.** Married adolescent girls had much to say about their children's lives, for example, having a child's marriage and *gauna* together 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.

In Nepal, the age at which they hoped to marry was on average 20 and above (though they most often marry at age 14 or 15). 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 and Nepal, 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 across both Nepal and Bangladesh – 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 Nepal and Bangladesh, 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.

## Recommendations

### NATIONAL AND LOCAL GOVERNMENTS OF NEPAL AND BANGLADESH

- Expand and promote access to both formal and non-formal education, and training opportunities that promote holistic growth by supporting leadership competencies, civic engagement, and linkages to varied vocational and professional career paths and other income earning 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.
- Expand the choices available to young adults, especially girls, after secondary school by creating broader linkages through public-private partnerships to institutions and creating diverse ways to connect young people from remote and marginalized communities to vocational, livelihoods, and employment opportunities and markets.
- 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.
- Address ethnic and caste based inequities (Nepal).
- 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 take on and 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 are linked to 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

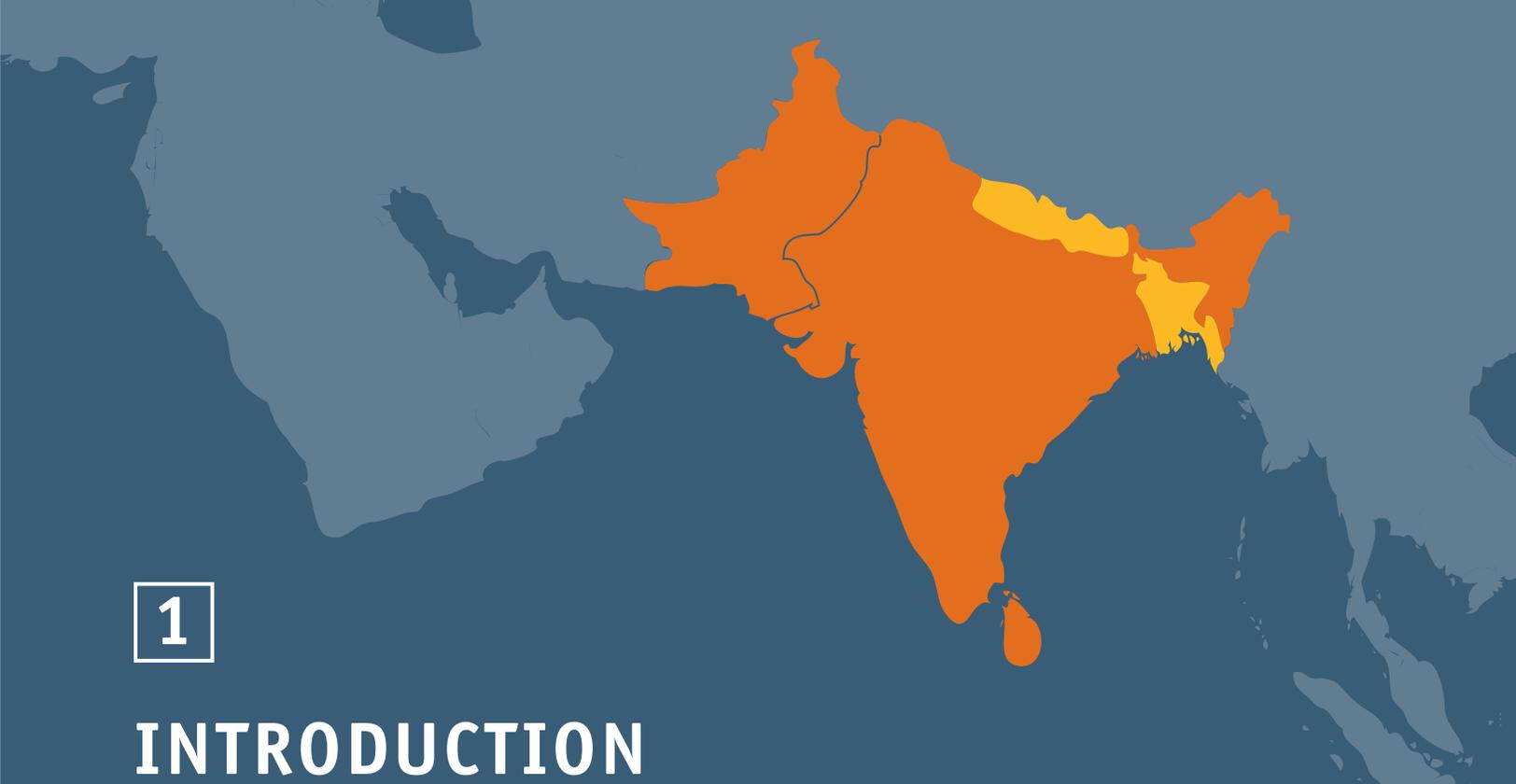
- Build their own solidarity and networks.
- Organize together and be a powerful voice regarding the concerns in their own lives.
- Learn from one another.

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**There is still much to learn about child marriage, its contributing factors and how to eliminate the practice. The findings of this study add to our understanding of the practice and can inform the design of responses to the problem.**



# 1

## 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.<sup>1</sup>

Worldwide, every year, an estimated 14 million girls aged under 18 are married with little or no say in the matter.<sup>2</sup> Compared with their unmarried peers or older women, girls who marry before the age of 18 are less likely to complete school, more likely to experience unwanted pregnancies, and are at greater risk of sexual and reproductive health morbidities and maternal mortality.<sup>3</sup> 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.<sup>4</sup>

Poverty, and norms that value girls and women primarily for their reproductive roles and expectations about girls' future roles that lead parents not to invest in their schooling, are among the major driving forces that make girls vulnerable to child marriage.<sup>5</sup> Closely correlated with these factors are an emphasis on subordination and control of the young woman, who is taught to obey her husband and in-laws from an early age, and a desire for high fertility,

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.

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 ICRW. 2013. *Child Marriage In South Asia: Realities, Responses And The Way Forward*; <http://www.girlsnotbrides.org/why-does-it-happen/>; International Women's Health Coalition, Nirantar Trust, CARE, American Jewish World Service, GreeneWorks. 2015. *Child, Early and Forced Marriage and the Control of Sexuality and Reproduction*; UNESCO. 2015. *Education For All Global Monitoring Report*. Paris: UNESCO; UNFPA. 2012. *Marrying Too Young*. New York: UNFPA.

so that adolescent girls start childbearing very young, with higher value placed on boy children.<sup>6</sup> Many families in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia, where child marriage is widely practiced, cite economic reasons for marrying daughters early, and view daughters as economic burdens.<sup>7</sup> This is especially true in South Asia where dowry is exchanged: the incentive for families lies in marrying their daughters early before they are obliged to pay a higher price.<sup>8</sup>

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.

For example, among those working on child marriage, the programmatic and research focus typically emphasizes preventing child marriage, with little focus on mitigating the impact of the practice; mitigation contributes to the discontinuation of the practice for future generations.<sup>9</sup> The field is also working to reveal more about the causal pathways between, and consequences of, education and child marriage for girls and boys, and whether conversations with parents and communities about the value of education lead to long-term norm change. Another area requiring further exploration is the role of vocational training and employment as deterrents and alternatives to early marriage. Gender, sexuality and rights require additional attention as they are positioned at the heart of child marriage. Working with men and boys is also essential, since males are typically key decision-makers in arranging child marriages, as well as the grooms who represent the “demand” side of child marriage. There is still much to learn about child marriage, its contributing factors and how to eliminate the practice. The findings of this study add to our understanding of the practice and can inform the design of responses to the problem.

**From a research perspective, the Tipping Point Community Participatory Analysis (CPA) Study is meant to deepen understanding of the contextual factors and root causes driving the prevalence of child marriage in particular regions of Nepal and Bangladesh.**

## Focus on South Asia

A number of distinctive features characterize marriage in South Asia: marriage is nearly universal, and occurs within religious, caste and ethnic groups.<sup>10</sup> Patrilocality, or the resettlement of the bride to the groom’s household at the time of marriage, is generally practiced.<sup>11</sup> Deeply entrenched gender inequalities position boys as highly valued and girls as burdens to their families, with dowry enhancing the “cost” of girls to their families of origin. Families feel a great responsibility to control girls’ sexuality, in order to ensure their virginity for marriage.<sup>12</sup>

6 Nirantar Trust. 2014. *Early and Child Marriage in India: A Landscape Analysis*; Greene, ME. 2014. *Ending Child Marriage in a Generation: What Research Will It Take?* New York: The Ford Foundation & GreeneWorks; Lee- Rife, S, Malhotra, A, Warner, A, and Glinski, AM. (2012). *What Works to Prevent Child Marriage: A Review of the Evidence. Studies in Family Planning, 42(4): 287- 303*; Nirantar Trust. 2014. *Early and Child Marriage in India: A Landscape Analysis*.

7 Greene, ME. 2014. New York: The Ford Foundation & GreeneWorks; Lee- Rife, S, Malhotra, A, Warner, A, and Glinski, AM. (2012). *What Works to Prevent Child Marriage: A Review of the Evidence. 42(4): 287- 303*; Nirantar Trust. 2014.

8 Geirbo, H and Nuzhat Imam. 2006. “The Motivations Behind Giving and Taking Dowry.” Research and Evaluation Division, BRAC. Dhaka, Bangladesh. Research Monograph Series No. 28. July 2006.

9 Greene, ME. 2014. *Ending Child Marriage in a Generation: What Research Will It Take?* New York: The Ford Foundation & GreeneWorks.

10 Nirantar Trust. 2014. *Early and Child Marriage in India: A Landscape Analysis*; ODI. 2014. *Change and continuity in social norms and practices around marriage and education in Nepal.* <http://www.odi.org/sites/odi.org.uk/files/odi-assets/publications-opinion-files/9181.pdf>; 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](http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/bangladesh0615_ForUpload_0_0.pdf); ODI. 2013. *Social Norms for Adolescent Girls in Nepal: Slow but Positive Progress.* <http://www.odi.org/sites/odi.org.uk/files/odi-assets/publications-opinion-files/8654.pdf>

11 UNICEF. 2015. *Progress Report.* <http://www.unicefrosaprogressreport.org/childmarriage.html>

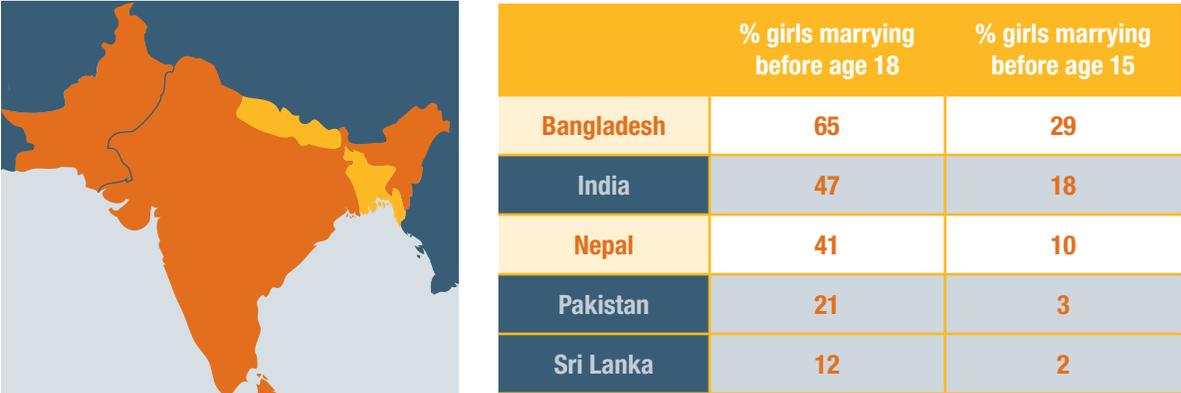
12 Plan Nepal, Save the Children, World Vision International Nepal. 2012. *Child Marriage in Nepal: Research Report.* Kathmandu.

Marrying girls at younger ages keeps dowry costs lower and increases the likelihood that the girls remain virgins, which is an important value in the eyes of their families and potential in-laws. The subordinate status of children and adolescents, in combination with concern about girls’ virginity and their limited economic roles, contribute to the tendency to pull them out of school. In general, girls and boys possess virtually no decision-making power regarding whom to marry and when.<sup>13</sup>

Child marriage has recently received a great deal of attention in the region. The South Asia Initiative to End Violence Against Children (SAIEVAC) is an initiative of the region’s key inter-governmental body, the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), whose membership includes eight countries in the region, including Nepal and Bangladesh. SAIEVAC issued a Regional Action Plan to End Child Marriage in South Asia,<sup>14</sup> which defines very specific activities, partners and indicators that include increasing the minimum legal age of marriage to 18 for boys and girls, promoting access to quality education and increasing mobilization of religious and community leaders.<sup>15</sup>

South Asia has lower rates of child marriage than Sub-Saharan Africa, but the large population numbers mean that the greatest numbers of girls marry here. Across the region, child marriage rates vary considerably; Table 1 shows the percentage of girls marrying before age 18 and before age 15.

**Table 1. Percent of girls in South Asia marrying before age 18 and age 15**



Source: www.girlsnotbrides.org

**THE TIPPING POINT INITIATIVE AND THE FOCUS ON BANGLADESH AND NEPAL**

The Tipping Point project was established with the intention of innovating strategies for tackling root causes of child marriage in 2 of the 10 countries with the highest rates of child marriage, Nepal and Bangladesh, while also engaging in advocacy on the issue across global platforms of funders, researchers and key decision makers. Within Nepal and Bangladesh, 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 this project focuses on distinctive regions within Nepal and Bangladesh with particularly high rates.

13 Caldwell, BK. 2005. “Factors affecting female age at marriage in South Asia: Contrasts between Sri Lanka and Bangladesh.” *Asian Population Studies* 1(3).  
 14 2015-2018  
 15 <http://www.girlsnotbrides.org/south-asian-governments-commit-end-child-marriage/>

## Background on Bangladesh

Bangladesh has the highest rate of marriage involving girls under age 15, at 29 percent, while 65 percent are married by age 18.<sup>16</sup> 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.<sup>17</sup>

**The CPA study was designed to build capacity of the project field staff as knowledge workers, amplify their skills to engage with participatory data collection tools, analysis and sense-making, and use findings from their research to inform the program design.**

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;<sup>18</sup> 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.<sup>19</sup>

## Background on Nepal

In Nepal, 41 percent of women aged 20-24 were married before age 18, and 29 percent of girls aged 15-19 were married, even though the legal age of marriage for men and women is 20 (18 with consent of a guardian).<sup>20</sup> Child marriage is highly prevalent in the Terai region bordering India and in the Far and Mid-Western regions. There is generally low awareness of the legal age of marriage and child marriage is widely accepted as a consequence of social norms and values. Child marriage occurs here for reasons such as gender inequality, economic constraints, lack of education, poverty, and strict religious, traditional and social norms and discriminatory social hierarchies, particularly caste.<sup>21</sup>

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

17 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](http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/bangladesh0615_ForUpload_0_0.pdf)

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

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

20 <http://www.girlsnotbrides.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/Fact-sheet-Nepal-national-strategy-May-2015.pdf>; <http://www.girlsnotbrides.org/child-marriage/nepal/>

21 Ghimire, Anita and Fiona Samuels. 2015. *Change and continuity in social norms and practices around marriage and education in Nepal*. London: Overseas Development Institute. <http://www.odi.org/sites/odi.org.uk/files/odi-assets/publications-opinion-files/9181.pdf>; <http://www.girlsnotbrides.org/child-marriage/nepal/>

Nepal has recently drafted a national child marriage strategy, whose special features include multi-sectoral engagement, empowering the girl child and increasing her value in society. The Strategy's Theory of Change includes six key components: **1)** empowering girls (including economic empowerment); **2)** providing quality education; **3)** engaging men and boys; **4)** mobilizing families and communities; **5)** providing and strengthening services; and **6)** implementing laws and policies.<sup>22</sup>

### **OBJECTIVES OF THE TIPPING POINT COMMUNITY ANALYSIS (CPA) STUDY**

- **From a research perspective, the Tipping Point Community Participatory Analysis (CPA) Study is meant to deepen understanding of the contextual factors and root causes driving the prevalence of child marriage in particular regions of Nepal and Bangladesh.**
- **The findings are also intended to inform innovative and context-specific program design.**
- **For monitoring and evaluation, the study's purpose was to provide clarity on outcomes and measures to focus on, and to provide baseline data for some indicators of change.** 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 core 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 to build capacity of the project field staff as knowledge workers, amplify their skills to engage with participatory data collection tools, analysis and sense-making, and use findings from their research to inform the program design.

<sup>22</sup> <http://www.girlsnotbrides.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/Fact-sheet-Nepal-national-strategy-May-2015.pdf>



**The study sought to understand vulnerability to child marriage, the specific drivers of the practice, and the dreams and reactions of adolescents affected by the practice.**

# ANALYTIC APPROACH AND METHODOLOGY

## Analytic Approach

The analysis focused on three major strands of inquiry (see Table 2). These three main areas of inquiry offer the opportunity to understand vulnerability to child marriage, the specific drivers of the practice, and the dreams and reactions of adolescents affected by the practice. Taken together, they shed light on the varied aspects that are necessary to both understand and address, in order to end child marriage in these particularly vulnerable regions in Bangladesh and Nepal.

**Table 2. Areas of Inquiry**

Areas of Inquiry	Detail
<b>A. The marriage process and who is marrying early</b>	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What does child marriage look like and how does it take place?</li> <li>• How common is child marriage and amongst whom (disaggregation by caste [in Nepal], class, religion, ethnicity, gender)?</li> <li>• Who is involved in decisions for children's marriages and at what age are they expected to marry?</li> </ul>
<b>B. Drivers of child marriage</b>	
<b>Structural drivers</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How do geography and environmental conditions, economic conditions and dowry influence child marriage?</li> <li>• What roles do caste and class play in determining marriage in Nepal?</li> <li>• How do harsh economic conditions support the practice of child marriage?</li> <li>• How are these structural factors interrelated?</li> </ul>
<b>Family and community norms and concerns</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How aware and what are the perceptions of mothers, fathers, and community members regarding child marriage?</li> <li>• What are their perceptions of girls or boys who fall outside the norms, i.e., delay marriage, engage in love marriage, divorce, etc.?</li> <li>• What are parents' greatest fears – and greatest satisfactions – regarding child marriage, and delaying marriage?</li> </ul>
<b>C. Aspirations and experiences of adolescents</b>	
<b>Adolescent aspirations</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What are adolescent girls' and boys' desires and aspirations for their lives, including for marriage?</li> <li>• How adolescents' aspirations for their own lives compare to the aspirations their parents have for them?</li> </ul>
<b>Adolescent experiences within marriage</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What are the experiences of adolescent girls and boys within marriage?</li> <li>• How does marrying young influence the conditions within marriage for girls and boys?</li> </ul>

## Methodology: How the study was conducted in the two settings

### PARTICIPATORY DESIGN WITH PARTNER ORGANIZATIONS

Tipping Point established as a style of work, from the very beginning in January 2014, an ongoing collaboration between different teams in the realization of a set of outputs. Project team members included CARE USA, CARE Bangladesh, and CARE Nepal staff, partner organization staff, field facilitators and social mobilizers, and the WayFair consultant team.

Tipping Point has four implementing partners, two in Nepal and two in Bangladesh. For this project CARE has partnered with local organizations that had already been working with vulnerable populations - particularly women and the poor - to improve the status of those populations within their communities. In Nepal, Siddartha Samuyadayik Samaj's mission is to create social and economic and health empowerment for women to improve their standing in society; the Dalit Social Development Center's mission is to mobilize Dalits in a participatory way and to facilitate their access to and control over local resources. In Bangladesh, the Association for Slum Dwellers works to ensure poor peoples' participation in development; Jaintia Shinnomul Songstha is a non-profit organization that values providing everyone with an opportunity to participate in the planning process and have a role in decision-making. To ensure a proper situational analysis of child marriage practices in Nepal and Bangladesh, the WayFair consultant team in partnership with the CARE USA team provided their support in the design and implementation of the CPA study.

The teams participated in an ongoing series of workshops to draw out what each group knew about child marriage and related practices in these regions of Nepal and Bangladesh. Through several meetings and monitoring, evaluation and learning workshops, teams drafted theories of action, identified key stakeholders, helped set up the CPA, brainstormed data collection methods, and built capacity of staff and facilitators. By the time data collection began in August 2014, solid groundwork had been laid for the CPA. (See Figure 1).

FIGURE 1. COMMUNITY PARTICIPATORY ANALYSIS (CPA) PROCESS

#### 1 MEL WORKSHOP

- Capacity building on Monitoring Evaluation & Learning (MEL)
- Development of Theories of Action
- Identification of what we need to find out and from whom

#### 2 DESIGN OF CPA PROCESS AND TOOLS

- Remotely designed with consultants
- Input from MEL colleagues

#### 3 PILOTING AND TRAINING

- Piloting and training to change tools and questions as needed
- Capacity building for use of participatory data collection tools, analysis, and sensemaking

#### 4 DATA COLLECTION

- Accompaniment in collection of data
- Facilitation of reflection after each cycle

#### 5 ANALYSIS AND SENSEMAKING

- Group sensemaking and planning workshop
- Macro analysis and report by research consultant



## VILLAGE SAMPLING FOR INCLUSION IN THE STUDY

### Nepal

The selection of Village Development Committees (VDCs)<sup>23</sup> for programming for the Tipping Point project was based on four priority criteria associated with child marriage: caste and ethnicity, remoteness, availability of school, and presence of civil society organizations. Highest priority was given to VDCs with the following traits: Dalit caste, close proximity to the Indian border, no schooling beyond primary, and the presence of Non Governmental Organization (NGO) activity.<sup>24</sup> Before selecting VDCs, meetings were held with district stakeholders and other relevant organizations and, based on secondary data, 16 VDCs within the Rupandehi and Kapilvastu Districts were selected to be included in the project for programming. The CPA study sampled 8 out of the 16 VDCs (4 from each districts) for data collection. The number of households in the selected villages ranged from 38 to 162, an average of 90 households per village for the Nepal component of the study.

### Bangladesh

In Bangladesh, the *haor*<sup>25</sup> areas in Sunamganj are particularly economically marginalized and physically isolated. The Tipping Point project is working in 90 villages there. Of the 90 total villages for Tipping Point (40 from the partner organization ASD and 50 from the partner organization JASHISH), 13 were sampled (6 from ASD and 7 from JASHISH). Three selection criteria were used to complete the sampling: high level of remoteness; a mix of rankings for perceived levels of child marriage (and within those rankings, the highest vulnerability for child marriage scores) with a proportional distribution for the villages; and proportional representation of Hindu and Muslim majority populations. The final set of villages varied along these dimensions and ranged considerably in population size. The number of households in the selected villages ranged from 49 to 556, an average of 159 households per village for the Bangladesh component of the research<sup>26</sup>.

## DATA COLLECTION TOOLS

In both countries, with support from project teams, community-based social mobilizers in Nepal and field facilitators in Bangladesh used several participatory exercises with different respondent groups in each village to collect data.

<sup>23</sup> Subunits of the district, comprised of wards, which are further broken down into villages.

<sup>24</sup> CARE's projects include UDAAN (alternative schooling for marginalized girls who have never been to school or dropped out), Chunauti, and Sakcham. Other NGOs include, for example, the work of ABC Nepal or Save the Children.

<sup>25</sup> In a country where one-third of all area can be termed as wetlands, the haor basin is a wetland ecosystem extends in Sunamganj, Habiganj, and Moulvibazar districts and Sylhet Sadar Upazila. Source: Wikipedia.

<sup>26</sup> See Annex I for details on number of households per village/VDC

## Figure 2. Tools and Corresponding Respondent Groups<sup>27</sup>

### Participatory data collection tool

#### Social Mapping

Participants worked in groups to map each village. Maps included descriptive information on boundaries, landmarks, schools, services, NGOs, households with adolescents, and important village decision-makers.

#### Timeline

Participants constructed timelines of a typical adolescent girl and boy in their communities. A qualitative form recorded the major events participants shared that happen during childhood and adolescence with focus on puberty and marriage.

#### Seasonal calendar

Work through a year long calendar to look at how specific seasons are linked to migration, marriage, school drop-out, and livelihood options

#### Visioning exercise

This exercise was conducted to explore the dreams and aspirations of adolescents, paying particular attention to the barriers and facilitators to those dreams. Demographic information on sex, religion, age, education, marriage, and *gauna* (Nepal only) status was recorded.

#### Key informant interviews

This exercise was conducted to understand the experiences of young married girls/women who were currently between 14-22 years of age and had marriages before age 18. Individual interviews were conducted with participants with a semi-structured interview protocol.

#### Risks & benefits

This exercise sought to understand the communities' perceptions of the risks and benefits of child marriage on adolescents, with special focus on girls. Four lists were created to record the groups' perceptions about marriage for boys and for girls: (a) the benefit of getting married before age 18, (b) the benefits of getting married after age 18, (c) the risks of getting married before age 18, and (d) the risks of getting married after age 18.

<sup>27</sup> See Annex II for actual demographics of respondent groups

Bangladesh	Nepal
<p>Community members in the village with representation from all the paras (hamlets); and men and women</p>	<p>Community members in the village including adult men and women, adolescent boys and girls, and daughters-in-law</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 8-10 adult men (fathers)</li> <li>• 8-10 adult women (mothers)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 8 adult women (mothers)</li> <li>• 8 adult men (fathers)</li> </ul>
<p>Community members in the village with representation from all the paras (hamlets); and men, women, adolescents</p>	<p>Not conducted in Nepal</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 8-10 unmarried adolescent girls (aged 10-17)</li> <li>• 8-10 unmarried adolescent boys (aged 10-17)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 8 married adolescent boys (aged 10-20)</li> <li>• 8 unmarried adolescent boys (aged 10-20)</li> <li>• 8 married adolescent girls (aged 10-20) - those still at home with parents</li> <li>• 8 unmarried adolescent girls (aged 10-20)</li> <li>• 8 daughters-in-law (age 10-24) who have had <i>gauna</i> and are staying with in-laws</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 1 young woman married before age 18, now age 14-22 who came to village from elsewhere</li> <li>• 1 young woman same characteristics as above, but from the village where they currently live</li> <li>• One Hindu and one Muslim, if village has both groups (Sarongpasa)</li> </ul>	<p>Not conducted in Nepal</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 8-10 adult men (fathers)</li> <li>• 8-10 adult women (mothers)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 8 adult women (mothers)</li> <li>• 8 adult men and important male community figures like teachers and influential leaders/village</li> </ul>



**In both countries, with support from project teams, community-based social mobilizers in Nepal and field facilitators in Bangladesh used several participatory exercises with different respondent groups in each village to collect data.**

### **PROCESS OF ANALYSIS**

After each cycle of data collection was completed in a village cluster, review and documentation meetings were conducted within a day or two. The purpose of these meetings was to apply the Village Level Analysis (VLA), covering about 30 questions, as a guide for reflecting on the raw data. A trained facilitator conducted the meetings with the social mobilizers in Nepal and the field facilitators in Bangladesh to make sense of the data and to generate the VLA information for each village in a participatory fashion. Finally, at the end of the entire data collection phase, with each country team, four-day sense-making workshops were held with guidance from the WayFair consultants and CARE staff.

The collective sense-making was followed by transcription and translation of the VLA and other selected data into English, so that it could be imported into Dedoose, a qualitative data analysis software, coded, and processed for synthesis and analysis. The coding was used mostly to categorize the large amounts of information by VLA question. Descriptors were also included so that data could be disaggregated by village, country, or majority ethnicity of the village.

### **LIMITATIONS**

The findings of this study are valid for the particular region in each country in which they were collected, and do not refer to Nepal or Bangladesh as a whole. The Sunamganj region in Bangladesh has a unique geography and cultural history. Similarly, villages near the border with India and the Terai in Nepal have unique characteristics. The

specificity of caste, class and religion in these regions offer explanations for the prevalence and practice of child marriage that may differ from other parts of these countries.

Some limitations in the research are also attributable to the choice and application of methods in the field. Our intent in selecting research methods was to enable community-based program implementers to take the lead in the collection of data and to start to build rapport with community members through the inquiry process. For this, the methods needed to be participatory, give voice to community members and create opportunities for them to reflect. Facilitators observed that many mothers and fathers had never thought about the risks and benefits of child marriage before. Similarly, adolescent girls had never been asked what their dreams were. The exercises provided an opportunity for raising consciousness amongst community members. At the same time, comparing results for Nepal and Bangladesh would have required systematic data, not only qualitative but quantitative frequency data as well. For example, it would have been useful to know from the visioning exercise with adolescent boys their spousal preferences disaggregated by age, economic class, and education level. But this information did not emerge consistently in every visioning exercise. The reliability and/or validity of the data was also uncertain in some cases and suggests that at times more probing would have been useful or that the quality of the facilitation or note-taking could have been improved. In those cases we were unable to use the data to draw conclusions. Nonetheless, accepting that facilitators were not experienced researchers, they performed exceedingly well and accomplished a great deal. While on the one hand, the research generated a great deal of meaningful evidence, some conclusions expected at the outset of the analysis could not be made.

A last mention of limitations relates to the translation of data from the local language to English. As is typically the case, translation introduces a small margin of error, which the WayFair team sought to address through the feedback and review with the country teams and CARE-USA.

**At the end of the entire data collection phase, with each country team, four-day sense-making workshops were held.**





**Child marriage is one facet of a broader story of oppression** along geographic, class, caste and gender lines. Diverse factors affect decisions by the prospective bride's family and the prospective groom's family regarding the timing of marriage.



## STUDY FINDINGS

The findings from this multi-method qualitative study of Hindu and Muslim populations in two countries are vast in scope. This report organizes the findings of this study around statements relating to major areas of interest with regard to the practice of child marriage, the attitudes that support it and the potential opportunities for change.

### 3.1 The Marriage Process is Complex and Excludes the Voice of Girls

Marriage involves a complex set of steps and exchanges involving families, neighbors, business interests and government people – each with a specific interest and influence in the process. Throughout these steps, the voices and decision-making power of adolescents themselves is largely absent. When adolescents, especially girls, try to assert their choices around if, who, and when to marry, they are often stigmatized by their families and communities and seen as standing against the authority of fathers and brothers.

#### MARRIAGE IN THE TERAI IN NEPAL

In Nepal, marriage is a public affair and, as such, no legal requirement exists for any prospective marriage to be registered with municipal or VDC authorities and underage marriages are not likely to be reported. The Marriage Registration Act exists, but its practice is limited. Among Hindus in the Terai region of Nepal, the initial discussions about marriage often begin among the male relatives. The dowry asked for by the groom's family is resolved between the families early on. This dowry amount is publicized to relatives, friends and neighbors so that a suitable match can be found. Once the details are sorted out, the Hindu priest will consult an astrological chart in seeking a propitious wedding date. Love marriages and inter-caste marriages are uncommon.

Hindu stages of the marriage or *kanyadaan* ('gift of a virgin') vary by caste.<sup>28</sup> In Nepali Hindu communities, among all castes, the elders of the family make the decisions and girls and boys have no opportunity to exercise any sort of choice or consent.

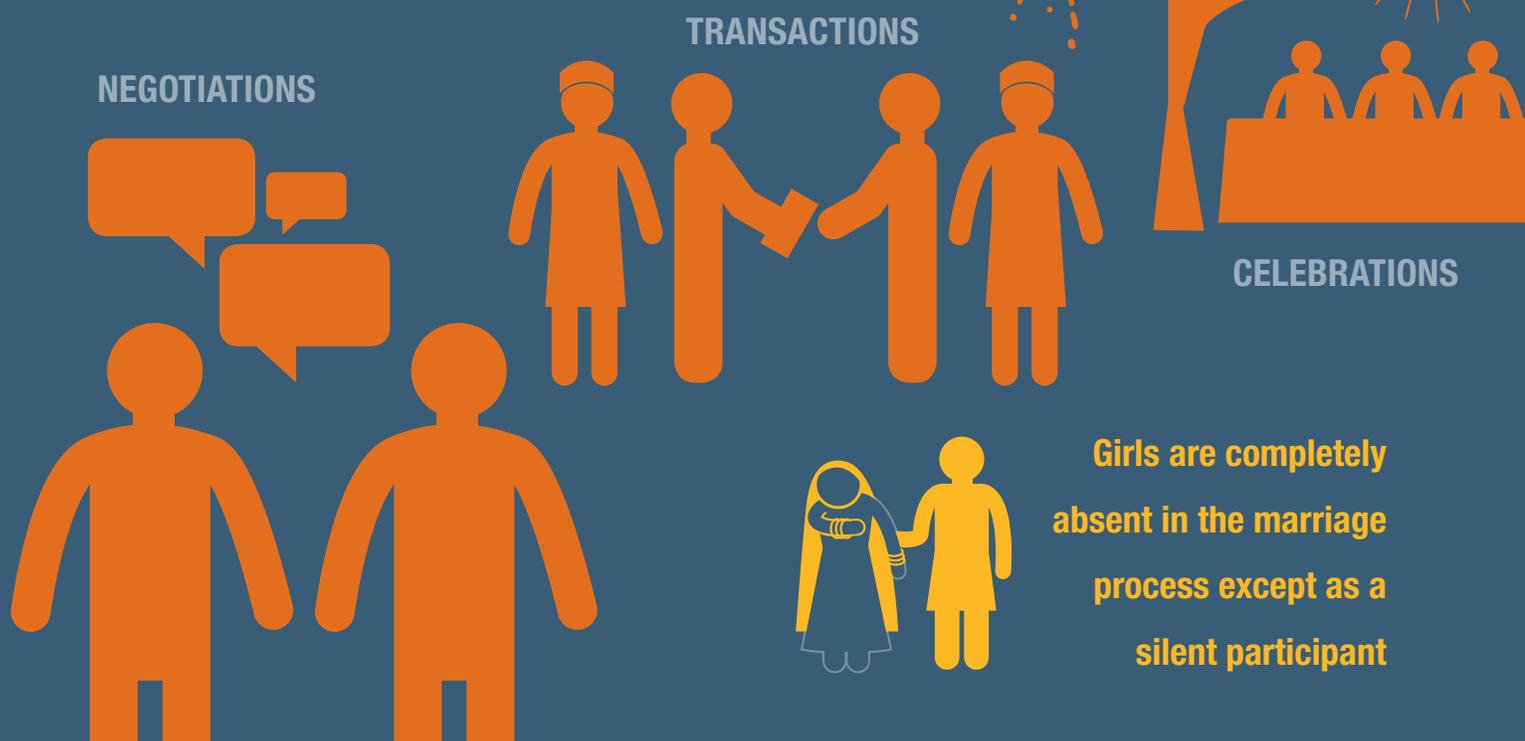
The Hindu practice of *gauna*<sup>29</sup> is fairly common in the Terai region of Nepal, especially among specific castes. When the girl goes to her husband's home (timing and stages vary according to caste), her family can choose to give things that are intended to make her life easier: furniture, kitchen materials, rice, spices and so on. Within a year or so, the practice of *donga* permits the bride to return to her parents' home and stay there for six months.<sup>30</sup> Hindu families in Nepal find marriage and *gauna*, which Muslims do not practice, to be a costly affair. For most Hindu families, marriage is the final investment that the girl's family makes in their daughter's life, since her marriage is regarded as a transfer of property or of responsibility for her from one family to the other.

28 Gellner, David N. 1991. "Hinduism, Tribalism, and the Position of Women: The Problem of Newar Identity." *Man*. *Kanyadaan* is the religious, sin-purifying practice of "gifting of a virgin" by parents of daughters.

29 *Gauna* is associated with the consummation of marriage within the Hindu religion and is a custom typically associated with child marriage. After a young girl is officially married, she stays at her parents' home until the day of her *gauna*, which marks the start of her conjugal life following menarche. The gap between marriage and *gauna* varies (between one and several year) and depends on the age at which the girl is married. An important breakdown in the data on married adolescents is both the age of marriage and the age of *gauna*, for both girls and boys.

30 Ekala VLA and Harnampur VLA, Nepal

## THE MARRIAGE PROCESS



Marriages are a costly affair for Muslim families as well, but less so to some extent because they do not practice *gauna*.<sup>31</sup> Among Muslims, the relatives begin the discussions about marriage, and a girl's maternal aunts, maternal uncles and paternal uncles tend to initiate the proposal.<sup>32</sup> The dowry asked for by the groom's family is also resolved between the families early on. None of the findings indicate that girls or boys in Nepal's Muslim communities are in any way consulted on decisions relating to their marriage. Among Nepali Muslims, the bride leaves her parents' home on the day of the wedding ceremony and joins the groom and his family. After the boy's family takes the bride home, they will organize a feast and invite the girl's family and other guests.<sup>33</sup>

### MARRIAGE IN THE HAOR AREAS OF BANGLADESH

As in Nepal, girls and boys in Bangladesh play no active role in their own marriage arrangements. Among both Muslim and Hindu communities in Bangladesh, if the marriage proposal is initiated from the groom's side, the prospective groom's family first visits the prospective bride's family and vice versa, accompanied by the matchmaker, to meet and see if they "like him." In both Muslim and Hindu communities in Bangladesh, the girl generally goes to live with the groom's family, and is expected to obey her mother-in-law and fulfill all domestic duties required of her. In both Muslim and Hindu communities in Bangladesh, marriage proposals for a young girl may be brought forward by a relative from the girl's or boy's side of the family, or a matchmaker.

31 Exceptions to *gauna* as a strictly Hindu practice were found in the research; Muslims will adopt the practice of *gauna* when a few families live in a majority-Hindu community.

32 Ekala and Chokti Ramnagar VLA, Nepal.

33 Purusuttampur VLA, Nepal.

Among Muslims, the father of the girl has primary authority; in his absence, authority defaults to an elder brother, then to any other male member in the household, and lastly to the mother. Respondents reported that girls have no decision-making power and are informed of the marriage decision after it is made. Boys generally do not have a say, but are slightly more likely to be heard, particularly if they are the main breadwinners in their families or are working abroad.

**In both Bangladesh and Nepal, it is abundantly clear that girls and boys simply do not have much choice about if, whom or when to marry, whether they are 13 or 18.**

The government of Bangladesh requires Muslim marriages to be registered. This is the moment at which all terms and conditions of the marriage contract are agreed upon by the elder members of both families, including the amount of *mahr*, the property or money bestowed upon the bride by the groom's family for her personal welfare and use in the event of divorce.<sup>34</sup> Before the marriage can be registered, a birth certificate proving the girl is 18, and therefore of legal age to marry, must be produced. However it is common for falsified birth certificates to be acquired from the Union Parishad<sup>35</sup> for a bribe or favor. Muslim religious leaders sometimes officiate the marriages of underage children behind closed doors and then register the marriages when the children attain legal age. The wedding takes place at the bride's home, where the *kazi* reads out the marriage contract, which the bride and groom sign before two adult witnesses. Everybody prays for their happy marriage, and after a celebratory meal, the bride is handed over to the father of the groom and bids her family farewell. The couple then goes to the house of the groom for an initial welcome ceremony and the bride's first night in her in-laws' house; the next day she cooks a meal for the entire family.

The marriage process for Hindus in Bangladesh is more complex and ceremonial than for Muslims, generally involving the exchange of expensive gifts. Hindu families try to match by caste, which often means having to source a spouse from outside the village, sometimes from far away.<sup>36</sup> Once both parties agree on the match and on the dowry, they fix an auspicious marriage date by consulting the astrological charts of the groom and the bride.

Hindus marry under religious custom and do not traditionally register their marriages, in contrast with Bangladesh's Muslim communities. The Hindu marriage registration law, passed in September 2012, declared registration optional for Hindus, though the government must appoint Hindu Marriage Registrars for every *upazila* who abide by the legal age of 18 for girls and 21 for boys.<sup>37</sup> In the sample villages, there was no case of Hindus registering marriages. Hindus in Bangladesh, like Muslims, exclude girls and boys from the decision-making process. The father is the primary decision-maker for a boy or girl's marriage. Respondents offered examples of exceptional instances, for example, when the father was deceased and the mother decides.

34 A *mahr* typically consists of two parts, the first of which the wife must receive at or immediately after the marriage ceremony, and a second given to her as a pledge, payable only in the event of divorce or the husband's death. The latter deferred amount is often the larger portion. It is intended to provide the wife a means of support, were she suddenly to lose her husband. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mahr>, accessed 28 January 2015. Another name for *mahr* in common use in Bangladesh is *denmohor*.

35 A Union Parishad is the smallest administrative unit of government in Bangladesh.

36 Hazi Nagor Menda village data, Bangladesh

37 <http://www.thehindu.com/todays-paper/tp-international/hindu-marriage-act-in-bangladesh/article3916457.ece>, accessed 29 Jan. 2015

## SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES

Families and communities make marriage decisions for adolescents, not with them. Many of the most active and influential individuals in determining the practice of child marriage are the same in Bangladesh and Nepal, but a few divergences are worth pointing out: First, at the household level, fathers are important in both settings, but male elders and a girl's mother-in-law predominate in Bangladesh, while brothers are very important in Nepal. Second, neighbors and village political leaders are important in both settings at the community/village level, but religious leaders and the matchmaker are especially important in Bangladesh, while teachers and local groups fighting child marriage are especially important in Nepal.

In both Bangladesh and Nepal, it is abundantly clear that girls and boys simply do not have much choice about if, whom or when to marry, whether they are 13 or 18. Girls and boys lack input into the marriage process. Respondents report that daughters and sons have never had and still do not have a role in the decision to marry.<sup>38</sup> Girls are completely absent, except as silent participants. However, boys face slightly better circumstances than girls. While marrying a bit older does not give boys more choice in marriage, it can allow them to finish their schooling and attain a certain physical and mental maturity. With their greater opportunities,<sup>39</sup> especially if they have more education, earn an income, or work overseas, they may be permitted to express an opinion about the choice of a spouse.<sup>40</sup> Many of the events around child marriage happen to girls and don't involve their active participation; their voice is absent from the entire marriage process.

## WHO IS PRACTICING CHILD MARRIAGE IN BANGLADESH AND NEPAL?

The broad range of qualitative data collected in Bangladesh provides clear evidence that child marriage is practiced across all villages, religious groups, Hindu castes and socio-economic groupings. Research participants report that the average age at marriage appears to be rising, particularly among boys. The average age for girls, however, remains below 18. The age ranges for Hindu and Muslim girls and boys by village appear quite similar, and some cases of girls marrying as young as 13 were reported in both communities.

In seven of the ten Muslim-majority villages in the Bangladesh sample, government measures are reportedly making child marriage more difficult to achieve, because girls are required to provide their birth certificates and to be of legal age. However, while Hindus are not subject to the requirement to register their marriages, the Hindu Marriage Registration Bill 2012 aims to provide legal and social protection to members of the Hindu community, and requires each ward to have an appointed marriage registrar.

The qualitative data from Nepal showed that child marriage is widespread in all the villages, and is more common among Hindus than Muslims. The most significant difference appears to be between the Hindu Dalit and other excluded castes, rather than between Hindus in general and Muslims. In short, the prevalence of child marriage in the sample villages is more a caste issue than a religious issue.

- Child marriage for both girls and boys is evident amongst Dalits and other excluded castes.
- Child marriage is not present amongst Janajatis and Brahmins/Chhetris for boys or girls.
- Child marriage is not present for all boys, except in the case of Dalits and other excluded castes.

38 Aminpur, Dholkutub, Hazi Nagor Menda, Bangladesh

39 VLA data from Masum Pur, Bangladesh, illustrate boys' advantage: they are free to leave the village to earn a living but girls' are confined to the village, rendering them less valuable to the family and community.

40 An example of this is found in the Sarongpasa VLA, Bangladesh, in which it is said that an educated groom-to-be may be asked his opinion and is more the case in educated families. This also applies to Uttar Suriarpur.

- Child marriage amongst girls occurs inconsistently across Muslim populations, i.e., in three of the seven villages (Ekala, Bashkhor, and Harnampur), while for boys in the three villages, marriage occurs starting at age 17.
- Boys marry later than girls in all instances but the age difference is smaller for Dalits and other excluded castes.

Though not part of the caste system, Muslims experience discrimination for belonging to a religious minority in a Hindu state. They are ranked above Dalits but below other groups.

What can be drawn from this overview of who marries as children in these distinct areas of Bangladesh and Nepal? In Bangladesh the practice of child marriage crosses religious and socio-economic boundaries, while 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. The isolation and lack of opportunities for specific communities make it more difficult for them to move away from practices such as child marriage, even as others begin to make this shift. This is an important difference between the findings from the two countries.

### 3.2 The drivers of child marriage are diverse and interrelated.

Child marriage is one facet of a broader story of oppression along geographic, class, caste and gender lines. Diverse factors affect decisions by the prospective bride’s family and the prospective groom’s family regarding the timing of marriage. In Bangladesh and Nepal, geographic and environmental conditions, 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. These drivers interact with each other as parents make decisions; which factor takes precedence depends on the circumstances the family is facing at a particular time, and whether the decision concerns a son or a daughter.

Overall, the drivers of child marriage and 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. Religious and cultural beliefs differ between the communities in Nepal and Bangladesh that are included in this study, but are similar in reinforcing early marriage. Dowry incentivizes child marriage amongst the poor and very poor. At the root of the beliefs and social pressures that drive parents’ decisions is an ingrained worldview that gives a low value to girls in their roles as mothers and wives, while giving a greater value to boys for their productive and income generating abilities as well as their voice in community and public spaces.

This section clusters structural factors on the one hand, and family, community and social concerns on the other in a discussion of the findings on drivers of child marriage in the regions of Bangladesh and Nepal where the study was conducted.

## I. STRUCTURAL FACTORS – ECONOMIC, GEOGRAPHIC AND ENVIRONMENTAL

### Geographic and environmental conditions

**Geographical, seasonal and environmental factors play an important role in driving child marriage.** In both Nepal and 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, economic opportunities), lack of mobility (e.g., limited transportation in *haor* areas, lack of security for girls), and social exclusion (e.g., Dalits in the Terai).

## 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.

The geography of the haor areas of Bangladesh indirectly perpetuates child marriage. The haor areas are subject to prolonged annual floods that last for months. The villages sampled in this study are known for their high levels of poverty, remoteness and isolation, and limited livelihood options. In a number of the sample villages, people earn a living by fishing or farming. Some also migrate for work. Most households are landless sharecroppers and are indebted. Because of its remoteness and difficult accessibility, the region and its inhabitants do not have good access to information relating to many healthy practices and basic services (e.g., hygiene and sanitation, and sexual and reproductive health). Some villages do not have a primary school and most do not have a secondary school within the village. Some of the villages are a two-hour drive to the Union Parishad and, during the dry season, these trips require several modes of transport, which speaks to the relative isolation of some of these villages. The isolation, lack of services and the distances, taken together with concerns about security, sharply limit girls' mobility.

The literature documents the negative impact that child marriage has on a girl's education, and the vulnerability of girls who lack schooling to being married young.<sup>41</sup> In both countries the access to school surfaced as a significant factor that interacts with the options available to both adolescent girls and boys. Three of the 13 sample villages in Bangladesh lack a government-run primary school, and none of them has a *madrassa*<sup>42</sup> or a secondary school, though one village has an NGO school.<sup>43</sup> The alternative is to attend school in a neighboring village, and secondary schools usually serve several villages. For example, a river divides Chanpur. The school is on the other bank for many students, but there is no bridge and boats run the danger of capsizing. Both boys and girls tend to drop out during the rainy season because of difficulties in reaching the school. The problem affects girls more than boys because of gender inequalities, and regardless of the season, girls often drop out because of "eve-teasing" on the way to school. Boys and girls also miss school to assist their families with productive activities, including fishing or household chores.

Geography plays an important role in marginalizing many communities in Nepal as well. Based on the most recent UNDP report for Nepal (2014),<sup>44</sup> the two districts of Kapilvastu and Rupandehi, along with the district of

41 Malhotra, Anju, Ann Warner, Allison McGonagle, and Susan Lee-Rife. *Solutions to End Child Marriage: What the Evidence Shows*. Washington, DC: International Center for Research on Women, 2011.

42 Madrasas focus on religious education, teaching all the basics of education in a religious environment. Religious studies are taught in Arabic and the students in some areas also serve the local area mosques. Students also study courses from the General Education System.

43 Islamapur, Bangladesh, also has a boat school operated by BRAC.

44 United Nations Development Programme. *Nepal Human Development Report 2014: Beyond Geography, Unlocking Human Potential*. Kathmandu, Nepal: Government of Nepal National Planning Commission and United Nations Development Programme, 2014.



**The main seasonal landmark for marriage in the *haors* is April to mid-August, the rainy season. During this time boat transport facilitates communication between villages and makes them more easily accessible, but it also makes getting to school more difficult and, as a result, many girls discontinue school at this time.**

Nawalparasi, fall into the Western Terai region in the UNDP categorization for eco-development regions. Out of nine eco-development regions, the Western Terai has a Human Poverty Index (HPI) of 29.69, which is lower than the national average (31.12) (p. 23). The mean well-being household index for this region fell from a ranking of 2nd across the 9 regions in 2003 to 8th place in 2011 (p. 35). Similarly, inequality of access to facilities doubled from 1995 to 2011 in the Western Terai Region (schools, health facilities, markets, roads, etc.) (p. 30).

In the sample villages from both study districts in Nepal, remoteness leads to poor access to information and services, including schooling. In most of the working VDCs in both sample districts, schools only reach primary level and health services are very limited or nonexistent.<sup>45</sup> For secondary level education, children have to leave and go to another village or VDC or district. This is one of the major causes for discontinuing education after primary school. In locations where distances are great – especially to school – and transport is not readily available throughout the year, parents tend to restrict girls’ mobility, making it difficult for girls to attend school. Remote geography and poor access to information contribute to the maintenance of conservative gender norms that put girls at risk of verbal or physical abuse and further limit their mobility.

**The seasonal cycle raises and drops girls’ vulnerability to child marriage at any given time.** In Nepal and Bangladesh a strong seasonality shapes people’s livelihoods and life cycles, and the seasons partially govern when it is a good time to marry, as per long-held beliefs. In Nepal, while Hindus consider certain months auspicious for marriage, Muslims marry all 12 months of the year. A few marriage landmarks throughout the year in Nepal include: Exam result time when

<sup>45</sup> For details on specific economic and social marginalization data by caste and region see Bennett, Lynn, Dilli Ram Dahal and Pav Govindasamy, 2008. Caste, Ethnic and Regional Identity in Nepal: Further Analysis of the 2006 Nepal Demographic and Health Survey. Calverton, Maryland, USA: Macro International Inc.

marriage proposals are discussed or entertained, especially if the boy or girl fails the exams. Girls who do not do well in their exams are vulnerable to marriage, and Dalit girls from single-parent households are most vulnerable; festival periods when relatives come together and proposals are discussed; the busy work seasons of harvest and planting lead to a dwindling of marriage talk, when everyone is in the fields. Social repercussions for boys arise only if they are not earning money; the boys' families worry about those who have left school, remain unmarried, and cannot manage household expenses or use their free time for activities like cricket, roaming around town, or gambling.<sup>46</sup>

The main seasonal landmark for marriage in Bangladesh is April to mid-August, the rainy season, when the *haors* are flooded. Although during this time boat transport facilitates communication between villages and makes them more easily accessible,<sup>47</sup> it also makes getting to school more difficult and, as a result, many girls discontinue school at this time. Girls who are perceived as sitting idle at home are vulnerable to early marriage. Girls who drop out of school and engage in some sort of income generating activity are not seen as "idle." However, even girls who are perceived as "idle" at home are in most cases very active in household chores, care for children and the elderly, and so on. Boys are similarly more susceptible to getting married during this season. Marriage proposals are more plentiful during this time.

## Economic conditions

Geography and seasonality have important interactions with economic opportunity and the impetus to look for jobs elsewhere. This is the case in both of the settings that were the focus of this research. In both countries in these particular regions, male migration is quite common, with the young men in Nepal migrating mostly to India, and the men in Bangladesh migrating usually to the Middle East.

**Migration has an important influence on the timing of marriage.** Geographic remoteness increases the likelihood that family members will migrate for work. In Bangladesh, poor families, in which adult males have to migrate for work, do not want to leave their adolescent girls unattended out of fear for their security. These parents prefer to see girls married before the men leave the village.<sup>48</sup>

Migration is an important factor in family livelihoods in Nepal and also affects early marriage. The Nepali villages in the Terai border India and have high unemployment, which pushes young men in particular to migrate to India and elsewhere for work. The general rule is that poor, uneducated and unskilled adolescents boys and men, regardless of caste or religion, migrate to India (mostly Delhi or Mumbai) to earn money through manual labor. Later on, once they are experienced and can pay for a passport, they may go to the Gulf countries. Poor Hindu boys usually get married before migrating, while Muslim boys tend to marry after returning home.

Young wives do not usually travel with their husbands or migrate with them (except for some from the hilly districts in Nepal), and the custom is for boys to send money home to their families. Parents may ensure that a son feels a duty to send remittances home by making sure he takes a wife before he leaves. There are cases of girls moving back to their parents' house, remarrying, or taking other sexual partners, especially when husbands are gone for long periods. Wives, left alone with their children and in-laws, have little support and little help with household chores. Sometimes their husbands do not return home, take up sexual partners abroad, or marry additional wives.<sup>49</sup>

The absence of fathers or older brothers places a burden on adolescent boys who are left in charge; this may burden them with too many household responsibilities to be able to stay in school.<sup>50</sup> A boy who is earning money abroad has

46 Ekala VLA, Nepal

47 Reported for Aminpur, Dholkutub, Gajipur, Hazi Nagor Menda, Nachni, Sarongpasa, Bangladesh

48 Aminpur, Chanpur, Dholkutub, Harar Kandi, Hazi Nagor Menda, Inatnagar, Islamapur, Bangladesh

49 For details on the migration between Nepal and India see the following Background Note from CARE's EMPHASIS project: Vulnerabilities of movement: cross-border mobility between India, Nepal and Bangladesh. [http://www.care-emphasis.org.np/Emphais\\_NeW/fckimagefile/vulnerabilities%20of%20movement%20HIV%20AIDS%20india%20nepal%20bangladesh-%20Briefing%20paper.pdf](http://www.care-emphasis.org.np/Emphais_NeW/fckimagefile/vulnerabilities%20of%20movement%20HIV%20AIDS%20india%20nepal%20bangladesh-%20Briefing%20paper.pdf)

50 Harnampur VLA, Nepal

clout in the family and in one instance related in Harnampur, the boy pressured his family to marry off his younger sister who was 14 years old at the time, presumably to alleviate financial pressure on the household.

**Family demographics factor into the economic welfare and decision making at the household level.** The number of children, especially daughters and their marital status, and the presence and health of the mother or father, contribute to a calculation of need to marry a daughter at an early age. These internal household factors are characteristic of poorer families who are confronted with the decision of whether or not to marry their daughters. Among Hindus in Nepal, poverty drives child marriage and households view marrying daughters off as a solution to economic stress. Girls are often viewed as a dependent and a burden in the household. Harsh economic conditions pose obstacles to delaying marriage and reinforce gender inequalities. The economic factors shaping child marriage emerge strongly across all villages in Bangladesh among both Hindus and Muslims:

- A family will marry their daughter to alleviate the economic burden, regardless of the girl's age.
- Families that have more than one girl are stressed: As the girls mature physically, the parents feel the need to marry them off before the onset of social pressures to do so.<sup>51</sup>
- Food insecurity is a problem for many families and a girl represents another mouth to feed.<sup>52</sup>
- Girls, unlike boys, are perceived to have no income-earning value, and clothes and food for girls is perceived to cost more: "Raising a girl is same as rearing an elephant," complained a 35-year old mother in Masumpur.<sup>53</sup>
- If the prospective groom is earning an income (or has the possibility to go work overseas), this is an important incentive to the girl's father.

**Marriage and dowry are "givens" – it is widely expected that a girl must marry at some point and the marriage will involve some form of dowry; these two social expectations together have a huge influence on decisions parents are compelled to make about their daughters.**

### The economics of dowry

Considerable research has been conducted on dowry, and this research builds on previous research in its exploration of the impact of dowry on child marriage. Dowry in South Asia can be clustered into three forms:<sup>54</sup> 1) gifts including furniture, household goods, jewelry etc., which are meant to remain in the bride's possession; 2) a large present or investment meant to demonstrate the wealth and status of the bride's family; and 3) an amount and types of gifts decided by the husband that will either be demanded as a condition for the marriage or demanded at a later point. Research in Bangladesh highlights the distinction between traditional dowry/*joutuk*, gifts from the bride's family to

51 Harar Kandi VLA, Bangladesh

52 Islamapur VLA, Brammongaun Risks Benefits exercise, Chanpur VLA, Masum Pur VLA, Bangladesh

53 Masum Pur VLA, Bangladesh

54 Qudder, Fhameda. 2014. "Dowry System in Bangladesh: A Socio-Legal Perspective." *International Journal of Innovative Research Development*. Vol. 3(7): p. 133-139.

the bride; and the new groom payments referred to as *demand*, which emerged post-Independence in the 1970s.<sup>55</sup> These demand payments can impoverish the family of the bride in South Asia, and they transform unmarried women into “burdensome economic liabilities.”<sup>56</sup> The increase in “bride-burning” and dowry-related deaths reflects this demand from the groom’s family and their extortion of money from the bride’s family.

Dowry expenses in South Asia can total several times the total annual household income.<sup>57</sup> This study documents exorbitant dowry demands in the Southern Terai plains of Nepal. These circumstances give rise to a number of responses: Elopement becomes a strategy for avoiding having to pay *demand*. Families can save on marriage costs by marrying their daughters young, since a strong association exists between age at marriage and level of dowry paid in Bangladesh, for example.<sup>58</sup> In Bangladesh, dowry can also play a role as insurance against divorce for Muslim couples, since dowry must be repaid if divorce occurs.<sup>59</sup>

**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. During the CPA exercises with parents, they shared that they would like to give up the practice of dowry, but feel socially expected to engage in the practice. Marriage and dowry are “givens” – it is widely expected that a girl must marry at some point and the marriage will involve some form of dowry; these two social expectations together have a huge influence on decisions parents are compelled to make about their daughters. Both are linked to the notion that girls must have someone to take care of them as they are not capable of caring for themselves. The girl’s handover from father to husband is connected to dowry, which is meant to guarantee her safety and a good life at her husband’s home. Dowry is also viewed as maintaining and promoting a family’s social status in the community.

Dowry has been primarily a Hindu practice in Nepal; however, because it garners respect and prestige, it is increasingly being adopted by some Muslims. The affordability of dowry has a significant effect upon the practice of child marriage in Nepal. One way to reduce the expense of dowry is to marry your daughter at a younger age, which makes early marriage more prevalent amongst poorer families. While the outlay from the marginalized castes who also tend to be the poorer castes includes less expensive goods and lower cash amounts, it is very substantial relative to what they are able to pay. Non-marginalized caste and Janajati Hindus in Nepal also practice dowry, but because they do not face the economic pressures that the Dalits and other excluded castes do, their exchange of dowry is not associated with marrying their children young.

Dowry continues to be a well-anchored practice in all the sample villages, and claims made by respondent groups for different VDCs in Nepal seem to show an upward trend, depending on caste and religion. On the other hand, young adolescents who have some level of education have positive attitudes and are willing to do away with dowry. But the prevailing traditional mindset among parents and older generations by and large accept and uphold current dowry practices.

Nepali boys are experiencing pressure to demand or accept dowry for reasons of personal or familial reputation. In the sense-making workshop, adolescent boys commented that if their families do not take a dowry, they will be seen as not in a position to *demand* dowry, and therefore as communicating their poverty or low status. Additionally, boys fear that people will begin to speculate that the groom himself has mental or physical problems or other shameful familial secrets.

Poor Muslim households in Nepal experience less pressure to offer dowry or to spend lavishly on a daughter’s wedding, and they do not experience the same social pressures as Hindu Dalits and other excluded castes to marry young. Due to

55 Amin, Sajeda, and Mead T. Cain (1995), *The Rise of Dowry in Bangladesh*, in *The Continuing Demographic Transition*, ed. by Jones, Gavin. W., John C. Caldwell, Robert M. Douglas, and Rennie M. D.Souza, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

56 Anderson, Siwan. 2007. “The Economics of Dowry and Brideprice.” *Journal of Economic Perspectives*. Vol. 21(4): p. 151-174

57 Amin, S. and Bajracharya A. 2011. “Costs of marriage—Marriage transactions in the developing world”. *Transitions to Adulthood*. Brief no. 35. March 2011.

58 Geirbo, H and Nuzhat Imam. 2006. “The Motivations Behind Giving and Taking Dowry.” Research and Evaluation Division, BRAC. Dhaka, Bangladesh. Research Monograph Series No. 28. July 2006.

59 Esteve-Volart, B. 2004. “Dowry in Rural Bangladesh: Participation as Insurance Against Divorce”. London School of Economics. April 2004.



**Remote geography and poor access to information contribute to the maintenance of conservative gender norms that put girls at risk of verbal or physical abuse and further limit their mobility.**

their social and economic marginalization, the excluded castes face more economic hardships; thus, the economic drivers are especially relevant to their circumstances and, not surprisingly, they are more likely to practice child marriage than families from non-marginalized castes.

In Bangladesh, dowry is not legal and yet it is still widely practiced. Both Muslim and Hindu families perceive the gift-giving (e.g., furniture, cash, clothes, cookery, motorbike, fridge, TV, mobile, according to a family's ability) as a guarantee of the girl's happiness and a symbol of honor in the home of the groom's family.<sup>60</sup> Among Hindus, a gold ring and chain is given by the bride's family, while the groom's family also offers ornaments to the bride. The girl can face problems if her family has difficulties paying the dowry according to a schedule agreed upon by both parties and extending over the period of her marriage.<sup>61</sup> It is not clear whether the amount of dowry being requested is increasing or decreasing. However, there is good evidence that both Hindu and Muslim families now have a preference for going through professional matchmakers or marriage brokers to arrange a marriage and to negotiate the dowry between the bride and groom's sides.

"Gift-giving" is becoming a euphemism for dowry in both Hindu and Muslim communities in Bangladesh; it may be requested by the groom's side or voluntarily offered on the bride's side. The phenomenon of voluntary gift-giving

<sup>60</sup> It is very important to the girl's parents to furnish gifts: in one documented case the father, who was considered to be very poor, borrowed money to provide the dowry, even though the groom's family made no request (Harar Kandi, Bangladesh).

<sup>61</sup> As in the case cited in Islampur, Bangladesh. The girl was returned to her parents due to failure to pay.

by the bride's family is thought to generate respect among the in-laws and to guarantee the girl's happiness and welfare. Presumably, gifts such as beds, racks, chairs, tables, showcases, dressing tables, quilts, and bicycles are for use by the married couple so that the benefits accrue to the girl and her spouse. However, cash may be given just to the groom or to the in-laws.

Other factors also command lower dowry amounts or even a waiver in Bangladesh. If a girl is very young (a "tender" age) and particularly beautiful, this reduces the dowry amount and, in some cases, the groom's family will even provide financial support to cover the costs of the marriage ceremony.<sup>62</sup> The younger the prospective bride, the lower the dowry expected from her parents.<sup>63</sup> In Bangladesh, this is a strong incentive for poorer households to marry their daughters young. Conversely, the older the girl, the higher the dowry. The groom's situation may also form the basis for a lower or higher dowry, with a boy with no parents or living relatives, or a sick family member commanding a lower dowry. Better educated boys who are, or seem on their way to becoming, engineers, doctors, lawyers, civil servants and so on, command higher dowries, as they are perceived as coming from stable families that have invested in the boys' education and will be able to provide greater affluence and a better future for girls who marry them.

In Bangladesh, if a Muslim girl's family is very poor, sometimes, upon request from the family, village elites and leaders may help financially to provide the dowry.<sup>64</sup> If a suitable dowry cannot be negotiated, the bride's family may refuse the marriage proposal. The groom's family will also do so if their expectations are not met.

Our research in Bangladesh finds that the groom's family may still feel some entitlement to payment of some kind, even when a dowry was not negotiated in the marriage contract. Young brides may be pressured to demand money from their fathers, which may escalate into domestic violence if she does not follow through. The data revealed other instances in which young girls may be abused by the in-laws and sent back home, if their families are not able to meet the groom's side's demands for more money.<sup>65</sup>

In the Muslim tradition, an additional economic transaction is referred to as *mahr* or *denmohor* and consists of cash or gifts given by the husband to his wife at the time of marriage and agreed to in the marriage contract. The *mahr* was originally mandatory, giving the bride her own money, goods or property as a form of insurance for the girl, in the event of her husband's death or divorce. Although *mahr* is specified in the Muslim marriage contract, in practice, the bride often waives it or does not claim when it is owed to her. In practice, it is dowry that is binding and paid out, while the *mahr* exists primarily on paper.

In both countries, dowry makes poorer girls vulnerable to harassment by in-laws once they are married. One strategy of poor families in Nepal is to pay dowry in installments after the bride has experienced *gauna* and is taken to her in-laws' home. As a consequence, the in-laws harass the bride to put pressure on her parents to pay the rest of the dowry. In fact, in the visioning exercise in Nepal, girls reported that they hoped that they would not be taken to their future spouses' homes until the dowry was already paid. In Bangladesh, the same phenomenon prevails, and even when a dowry was not negotiated in the marriage contract, the groom's family may still feel some entitlement after the marriage.

## The role of caste in child marriage among Hindu communities

**Caste plays an important role in driving marriage in Hindu communities in Nepal.** Poor families may not want to marry their daughters off very young but are incentivized to do so by lower dowry. But caste differences and

62 Harar Kandi VLA, Bangladesh

63 An example from Bangladesh: A case in Sarongpasa exemplifies the value placed on a girl's beauty. The groom's family paid the dowry for the girl's father to bear all the wedding expenses so that they could take the daughter away.

64 Hazi Nagor Menda VLA, Bangladesh

65 Dholkutub VLA, Bangladesh

power relations also prevail over other drivers. The privileged position of non-marginalized castes who are referred to as “high” castes allows them to delay marriage and educate their daughters, without being subject to economic hardship or social criticism. Moreover, the set of inter-related factors that condition the lives of Dalits and other excluded castes – poverty, low levels of awareness and literacy, and limited opportunity – do not exist for “high caste” families. Moreover, Dalits and other excluded castes strongly believe in their religious leaders who are Brahmins and seek their counsel over matters of marriage or to acquire loans for their children’s education or marriage. It is actually the priests who encourage early marriage amongst other castes, even if they themselves do not marry their own children so young. Even more to the point, child marriage is anchored in a system of inequalities: the economic and social marginalization of specific castes severely limits their opportunities and prevents the realization of many of their basic human rights. The issue of caste did not come up often in discussions with Hindus in Bangladesh except for reference to the time it takes to find a spouse when they are intent on marrying within caste.

### THE IMPLICATIONS OF CASTE IN NEPAL

An understanding of the profound social and economic marginalization of Dalit and other excluded castes in Nepal is imperative to grasp the prevalence of child marriage within these caste communities. Although provisions were made not to discriminate based on caste in a 1963 law, it is still highly prevalent and accounts for much of the social exclusion today.<sup>66</sup> Most villages in our study were majority Hindu populations of Dalit and other excluded castes, with some representation of Muslims. Nepalese society continues to be structured according to a caste system based on one’s birth and includes these broad categories:

- **Service castes or “untouchables,”** consisting of peasants and manual laborers. Members of this caste, Dalits, are treated inhumanely by others and live under many social restrictions. Dalit girls and women experience multiple layers of discrimination at the intersection of caste, class and gender.
- **So-called “pure” castes,** based on trade, and also referred to as the merchant or “middle” caste.
- **Upper castes that include Brahmins and Kshatriyas or Chhetris** from the Hill area, both of whom continue to form the local elite. They are frequently major landowners and the most influential people in the community.
- **Indigenous people, called Janajatis,** do not belong to the Hindu caste system but were incorporated into it by the Rana regime. They have been historically ranked between the highest and lowest castes, above Dalits and below other groups.

**Religion and caste influence the size of the local marriage market, and the availability of “eligible” spouses locally influences the timing of marriage.** Hindu families in the research areas in both countries shared a strong preference to marry not only within caste but often within their own sub-caste. Among Hindus in Nepal, a Hindu majority country, the impact of this restriction is slightly less intense than in Bangladesh. Marriages entered through choice or love are more likely to violate caste boundaries, increasing the pressures on families to marry girls and boys early, and to respond to offers and opportunities that arise, even when the daughter or son is very young.

<sup>66</sup> For more details on the intricacies and social implications of the caste system in Nepal see: Bista, Dor Bahadur. 1991. Fatalism and Development: Nepal’s Struggle for Modernization. Orient Black Swan, Nepal. Kisan, Yam, & Vasily, Lauri. 2005. The Dalit Nepali Social Movement. Legal Rights Protection Society, Lalitpur, Nepal.

Hindu communities in Bangladesh (a Muslim majority country) must draw from a more extensive geographic area, going beyond their own villages, and making it more difficult to source spouses locally. In contrast, the fact that Muslims in Bangladesh are free to marry their cousins – preferably parallel cousins, i.e., fathers’ brothers’ children, and mothers’ sisters’ children – expands the marriage market for them. For example, in Uttar Suriarpar, a comparatively large village estimated at 2,000 people (double or even triple the size of the other sample villages) and a Muslim community, there exists a large enough pool of potential matches for Muslim households to marry within the community. Families in small villages, regardless of the religious composition of those villages, are compelled to cast their nets wider.

## II. SOCIAL NORMS AND FAMILY AND COMMUNITY PERCEPTIONS OF THE RISKS AND BENEFITS OF CHILD MARRIAGE

### The control of girls’ sexuality and concern about its proper regulation.

Not unlike many other parts of the world, people in Bangladesh and Nepal place a high value on girls’ virginity and their “purity”; it is so important in some cases that it is tied up with maintaining family and community honor. Around the world, it factors into a girl’s appeal as a potential bride, increasing her value if she is still a virgin, and either decreasing it or calling off the potential relationship if not.<sup>67</sup> Therefore, this precious commodity must be protected, which is perceived as accomplishable by controlling girls’ agency, mobility, opportunities and sexuality. An early marriage, then, appears to parents to be the best available option to ensure she/her virginity is protected along with the family honor, as the findings below demonstrate.

If girls express agency over their bodies, their decisions and behavior are stigmatized. Any association with boys is taboo and associated with the 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 protect themselves. Boys are permitted somewhat more freedom in expressing their sexuality, and early marriage can be seen as a means to legitimize sexual activity, which is a male privilege.<sup>68</sup> Because any discussion of sexuality is feared and taboo, adolescents are not informed about or prepared for puberty, nor do they receive any initiation into their sexual and reproductive lives. As a consequence, in the study communities in both Nepal and Bangladesh, generally speaking, girls and boys know little to nothing about sex, even when they become sexually active at a very young age. Parents or teachers do not teach them what they need to know to enter a conjugal relationship.

Control over adolescent sexuality in the sample villages of Bangladesh is anchored in gendered social norms, according to which a girl’s sexual purity must be protected. The start of a girl’s menstruation is one reason she may drop out of school: parents become deeply worried about girls’ security and mobility, and schools in the community are not always supportive, as there is a general view of menstruation as a measure of a girl’s readiness for marriage and childbearing. Teachers hesitate teaching about sexual and reproductive health in school. In addition, menstruation and the lack of proper hygiene facilities for girls were stated as one reason girls drop out.

In the Nepali context, marriage transfers control of the girl’s sexuality from the parents to the husband. However, it is noteworthy that within such patriarchal norms, the object of the control is ultimately over the girl’s sexuality. Many people from the sample region are fearful of sex and yet they over-sexualize most interactions. It is assumed that a girl and a boy cannot just be friends. Even the most educated families view relationships between girls and boys in a sexual way.

67 Sanjakdar, F. (2011). Living West, Facing East: The (De)Construction of Muslim Youth Sexual Identities. In *Cultural Constructions of Sexuality and Gender* (Vol. 364, pp. 105-130). Peter Lang AG; Parikh, S. 2012. “They arrested me for loving a schoolgirl”: *Ethnography, HIV, and a feminist assessment of the age of consent law as a gender-based structural intervention in Uganda*. *Social Science & Medicine*, 74: 1774- 1782: 1779;

68 In the Rayapur VDC (Nepal) data on the perceptions of the harmful effects of early marriage, boys showed little awareness of the health risks for the spouse, the newborn children, and their own life; they were more aware of the negative effects on their own opportunities and life, due to the added burden of responsibilities.

Hindus in Nepal expect to marry off their children, both *boys* and girls, by the time they reach puberty, which religious leaders in Nepal estimate at about 16, out of a need to manage their sexual needs and desires.<sup>69</sup> Muslim religious leaders from the same community (Ekala) said that, according to the Koran, *girls* should marry as soon as they start looking physically mature. The social norms that dictate the “right time” for a girl to marry are reinforced by religious beliefs about the piety of marrying a girl before menstruation begins. “Piety” is linked with girls’ sexual “purity,” and thus marrying earlier is the primary way to control girls’ sexuality.

**Concerns about girls’ sexuality and menstruation are closely linked.** A consequence of the discomfort regarding girls’ sexuality is awkwardness in discussing physical maturity, menstruation, and reproduction. Girls make the transition to adolescence without the crucial knowledge to empower them in this new life stage. Parents, i.e. mothers, are not accustomed to *preparing* their daughters for puberty and menstruation, so girls are not taught about personal hygiene and menstruation.<sup>70</sup> In Hindu communities, an unmarried menstruating girl is often not permitted to go out of the house or go to school for a week. For Muslim girls, the same notion of being considered “dirty” during menstruation exists. A girl is not allowed to pray, fast, or touch the religious books. After menstruation, the girl is required to take a special bath before she can begin to pray or fast again. As they are not prepared for puberty, girls are profoundly unprepared for marriage, deprived of basic education regarding their sexual and reproductive health and expected to submit to their spouses’ sexual needs.

**In both Nepal and 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.** In the study areas, most Nepali girls need the permission of their father or another male family member to leave the house, and when she does leave, usually a male family member must accompany her. A five-year-old brother can be granted the role of ensuring the “security” of his twenty-year-old sister, a clear indication of the dominance of gender over age in Nepal. Once they reach puberty, or are married, adolescent girls may not even be allowed to visit the homes of female friends, for fear they may fall in love with their friends’ older brothers. Hindu girls in Nepal are allowed to play and go to school, but when girls from Dalit and other excluded castes reach age ten, they are not permitted to move freely outside of their homes or have any contact with boys. Muslim girls in Nepal are simply not allowed to leave their homes. There was less discussion of girls’ mobility in Bangladesh, but marriage starts to take place later for both Muslims and Hindus in Bangladesh than among girls from Dalit and other excluded castes in Nepal. Girls are allowed to play and go to school, but the same parental fears around girls’ sexuality prevail in both sample regions.

## **The perceived risks of delaying marriage/benefits of early marriage outweigh the perceived benefits of delaying marriage/risks of early marriage**

### **Benefits of delaying marriage/Risks of early marriage**

Villagers in Bangladesh are increasingly aware of the risks associated with the practice, along with the benefits of delaying marriage either through their own experiences, their children’s, or the efforts of NGOs and external actors. Indeed, more parents affirmed the benefits of delaying marriage than highlighted the risks of delaying, including husbands losing interest, quarreling more and abusing girls. Nine mothers’ groups and six fathers’ groups affirmed the view that the girl’s relationship with her spouse is better and there are fewer quarrels in the family when the girl marries a bit later. Both mothers and fathers know well that the health of young mothers and their children is much better when girls marry later. They also cited girls’ greater capacity to manage the household, take care of the family and manage their new family relations when they enter marriage a bit older. Even their education and income-earning potential, and potential family planning use are viewed positively in this context.

69 Ekala VLA, Nepal

70 Masum Pur VLA, Bangladesh

The data from Nepal also found that all respondents from both Muslim and Hindu religions, including teachers, could identify the benefits of delaying marriage as well as the harmful effects of early marriage on health, opportunities, and the lives of adolescents.

### **Risks of delaying marriage/Benefits of early marriage**

While in both countries most parents responded knowledgeably about the risks of child marriage and the benefits of delaying marriage, this awareness is not sufficient to stop the practice, as there are many perceived benefits of child marriage/perceived risks of delaying marriage. In Bangladesh, one respondent in Dholkutub felt that awareness was not sufficient for changing behavior: “Despite observing the bad effects of child marriage in their own village [the villagers] are not taking any steps to stop child marriage.” Respondents in Chanpur, Bangladesh, pointed to the discrepancy between perception and reality and stated that socio-economic conditions compel people to continue the practice. They said that in some cases, villagers do not believe they are practicing “child marriage” because what they are doing is so normatively acceptable. Other respondents in Bangladesh noted that better-off Muslim families, who could afford to wait for the right eligible groom to come along, still prefer to marry daughters at a young age because they believe it brings them more respect or dignity.<sup>71</sup> And some others shared that though logically, the young bride must be mature in order to handle her in-laws, practice goes against this.<sup>72</sup>

**While in both countries most parents responded knowledgeably about the risks of child marriage and the benefits of delaying marriage, this awareness is not sufficient to stop the practice, as there are many perceived benefits of child marriage/perceived risks of delaying marriage.**

In Nepal too, it appears that in many cases, the perceived benefits of child marriage outweigh the perceived risks for the daughter and the family. Fathers, in particular, believe that there are more benefits to child marriage than there are risks. Village leaders acknowledged both the risks and the benefits of child marriage, but social norms prevent them from speaking out. According to some leaders in one VDC, they would lose votes if they openly spoke against child marriage, so they cannot say child marriage is wrong.<sup>73</sup> In Nepal, benefits related to religious beliefs were also cited. Parents cited as a benefit of marrying girls early the adherence to tradition and the Hindu belief in religious merit associated with marrying a girl pre-pubescence.

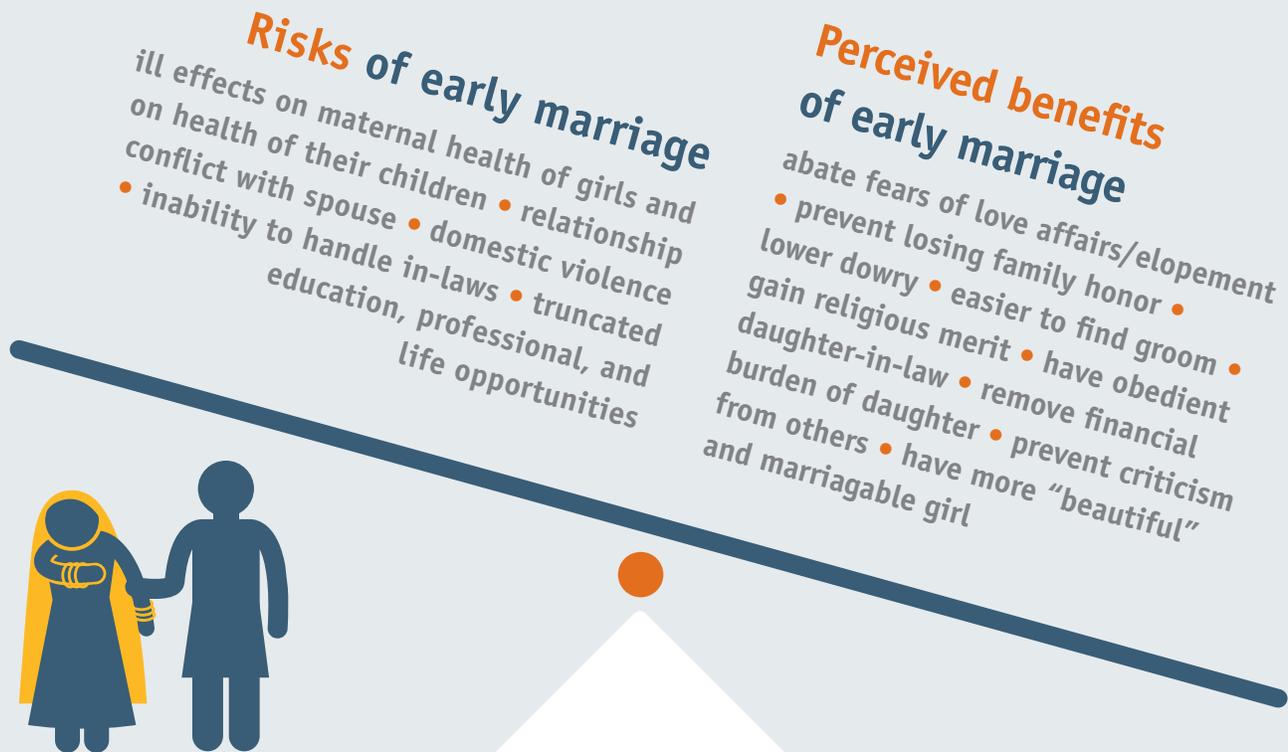
Fear is an important theme as well. In Bangladesh, when discussing the risks of delaying marriage, fear of stigma, of being ostracized, of how the community will react, of what they will say if a family doesn't get their daughter married early, and of what they will say about the girl is a strong motivation for marrying girls early. These fears are strongly related to descriptive social norms [See box on Social Norms for details]

71 Reported for Aminpur, Dholkutub, Hazi Nagor Mendi, Islamapur in Bangladesh. In Harar Kandi, Bangladesh, rich Muslim families prefer to wait till their girls are more mature, according to the findings.

72 Hazi Nagor Menda VLA, Bangladesh

73 Chokti Ramnagar VLA, Nepal

## THE WEIGHING OF RISKS AND PERCEIVED BENEFITS



In both countries, parents also fear their adolescent daughters and sons will get involved in love affairs that would stigmatize the girl and her family, and elopement will bring social dishonor to the girl’s family. In Nepal, parents fear that sons or daughters will get involved in inter-caste marriage, as do Hindus in Bangladesh. [See box on Love Affairs for more details].

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.

Parents in Bangladesh cited four major risks of delaying marriage for girls: **1)** it requires a higher dowry; **2)** a girl’s “glamour” wears off, which the husbands do not like; **3)** people start making negative remarks about the girl and the family (older girls become the subject of ridicule by neighbors and villagers);<sup>74</sup> and **4)** it is harder to get a girl married. Parents in Nepal were clear about their fear that only young and pretty girls will find suitable husbands, making it necessary to marry them very young; the more beautiful the girl is, the less dowry has to be paid.<sup>75</sup> They also highlighted that love affairs and elopement bring social dishonor to the girl’s family.

<sup>74</sup> Mention in Uttar Suriarpar village data, risks/benefits exercise of delaying marriage

<sup>75</sup> A case in Sarongpasa exemplifies the value placed on a girl’s beauty. The groom’s family paid the dowry for the girl’s father to bear all the wedding expenses so that they could take the daughter away.

## SOCIAL NORMS

**Social norms and peer pressure make it harder for families to translate any resistance to child marriage into action.** 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.

Fear of shame, dishonor, or loss of respect within their communities plays a significant role in shaping behaviors and the decisions Bangladeshi parents – rich and poor alike – make about their daughters and sons. Even turning down too many marriage proposals can bring shame on the family or raise suspicions about the girl.<sup>76</sup> Similarly, in all of the Nepali villages included in our study, parents of certain caste groups fear that they will lose social prestige if they do not marry their daughters off at a young age. Parents are equally afraid of what their neighbors will say and the accusations they will make behind their backs, if they fail to get their daughters married.

The risks and benefits exercise from Bangladesh sheds some light on the potential for more positive social norms to emerge. The literature on social norms highlights how *normative* expectations, the perceptions of the community regarding what they *should* do, correspond to a set of externally defined desirable behaviors and attitudes in which individuals are rewarded (e.g. higher social status) when they follow these norms. Similarly, parents' decisions and public behavior are governed by *empirical* expectations, what an individual observes of their community, and accordingly conforms to it.<sup>77</sup> So if parents are consistently observing other families marry their daughters young, that pressures them to conform and do the same, despite their personally discordant view. Delaying marriage is known to result in better health outcomes for the mother and child and better relationship outcomes in the marriage and with the in-laws; while parents understand this and may privately prefer to delay their daughters' marriages to 17 or 18 years of age, parents feel the weight of social norms from their communities to marry the girls young.

The existence of these normative expectations is evidenced by the stigma that exists for girls who delay their marriage, as comments from Nepal revealed. In some cases, when asked about their aspirations for their children, parents responded that the sooner their daughter marries, the better.<sup>78</sup> Those who remain unmarried tend to be from High Caste families who have greater access to secondary schooling and are relatively immune to judgment from others because of their social status or wealth. In other castes, families would be criticized for opting to delay their daughters' marriage in order to educate them. In other cases, unmarried girls are kept under strict surveillance and are forbidden to leave their homes.<sup>79</sup>

The challenges for older girls who marry around the age of 18 or remain unmarried also speak to the normative expectations. While they tend to be more educated, they are often the subject of ridicule by their in-laws. Those who have delayed marriage or remain unmarried are looked down upon as being unable to obtain husbands, without character, or physically or mentally unfit. Because marriage is the norm for girls in Bangladesh, if parents fail to marry their daughters by age 18, the unmarried girl will be the subject of mockery and mistreatment from all sides: the community, her relatives and her own family. Communities identified very few unmarried women during the field research. The few that existed had experienced difficulty in getting married, possibly because they were perceived as "not beautiful," or were physically or mentally challenged. The research team did not observe a single case of a girl remaining unmarried past 18, as a result of her choice or resistance to her parents' choice. Hence, delaying marriage appears to bring ridicule and stigma to both the girl and her family, and brings to question a girl's overall marriageability.

76 Nachni VLA

77 Social norms theory refers to two types of norms: (a) descriptive norms which pertain to the perception of where the social group actually is and the typical behaviors and attitudes with which they identify, (b) the injunctive social norms which represent the group's perception of where they ought to be. A 'descriptive' pattern of behavior is that men beat their wives and an 'injunctive' behavior is that beating your wife is not acceptable. See Paluck and Bell (2010).

78 Girls' aspirations and parents' aspirations exercises

79 Baskhor, Harnampur, and Purusuttampur VLAs



## Girls’ “youth” and related appearance figures prominently in judgments about their marriage prospects.

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 looks in the marriage market. Most negative comments about unmarried girls are said about the girl’s character and her physical appearance. In Nepal, in several instances, girls with dark complexions were rejected by their soon-to-be husbands because they were not considered sufficiently fair-skinned or beautiful.<sup>80, 81</sup> Almost all boys in the Nepal sample, with the exception of a few in Purusuttampur,<sup>82</sup> wanted to choose the girls that they would be marrying on the basis of their appearance, particularly desiring “good-looking girls” and “girls of fair complexion.”<sup>83</sup> There were instances of husbands rejecting their wives if they did not meet these criteria. Also, parents in Nepal were clear about their fear that only young and pretty girls will find suitable husbands, making it necessary to marry them very young. In Bangladesh, it was found that the more beautiful the girl is, the less dowry has to be paid and, in some instances, for a girl who is perceived to be exceptionally attractive, the groom’s family will even pay for the dowry.<sup>84</sup>

## Boys too face vulnerabilities to child marriage in Nepal

In the research areas, both boys and girls are married underage in Nepal, whereas girls are typically married to adult men in Bangladesh. Like girls, boys in Nepal are expected to act according to their parents’ wishes; boys also say that fathers have more control over them when sons marry as children.<sup>85</sup> Boys are also perceived as being at risk of an inter-caste marriage and unmarried boys not in school can face criticism. Despite these worries by parents, boys face none of the restrictions that girls experience. Boys are under pressure to earn money, as well as shoulder the responsibilities of work around the home and marriage, and care for their spouse. Often, boys from poor families of Dalit and other excluded castes are forced to work as wage earners.<sup>86</sup>

80 “A boy who had been married at 10 refused to have *gauna* with his wife because she had a dark complexion.” Rayapur VLA

81 “A girl had been married into India when she was 8 years old. Her husband had not seen her before she had her *gauna* at the age of 15. When he saw her during *gauna*, he realized that she had a dark complexion and the husband left the girl because of her complexion.” Maryadpur VLA

82 Purusuttampur VLA – unmarried boys aged 10 to 13 reported wanting to marry a girl that their parents choose

83 Baskhor VLA and Ekala VLA respectively

84 A case in Sarongpasa exemplifies the value placed on a girl’s beauty. The groom’s family paid the dowry for the girl’s father to bear all the wedding expenses so that they could take the daughter away.

85 Harnampur VLA

86 Baskhor VLA

87 Aminpur, Brammongaun, Chanpur, Inatnagar, Islampur, Masum Pur, Nachni, Sarongpasa, Uttar Suriarpar, Bangladesh

## THE FEAR OF LOVE AFFAIRS

**Parents worry about girls and boys having “love affairs,” but their responses vary depending on other circumstances.** One of the few instances of girls exerting their own agency is when they elope, enter into a taboo “love marriage,” or have an affair before they marry. In Bangladesh, a “love affair” is a catch all term for various forms of contact between a girl and boy on a fairly wide scale – from communicating with each other by mobile phone, developing a liking for each other, and perhaps meeting – to actually becoming sexually involved with one another. Essentially, anything that contrasts with an arranged marriage and its set of practices is taboo. There is zero tolerance for girls making their own decisions about their bodies and their lives.

Love affairs have more harmful consequences for girls than for boys, since girls must live with their in-laws. In Harnampur, Nepal, mothers say, *“A son is forgiven no matter how many mistakes he makes, but if a daughter makes the same mistakes she is accused of ruining the family’s reputation.”* The parents of the prospective bride have more to lose and are forced to make compromises more than the groom’s family. Saving family honor may mean marrying a girl if she is suspected of having engaged in pre-marital sex. Evidence from Bangladesh shows that in-laws can make life a living hell for young brides whose marriages were arranged to save family honor.<sup>88</sup> A boy’s happiness may be compromised, but he is more likely to survive the situation relatively unscathed.

Love affairs are shameful for girls and their families, and tarnish the families’ prestige. In Nepal, parents fear that sons or daughters will get involved in inter-caste marriage, as do Hindus in Bangladesh.

Community members heap criticism upon girls who engage in love affairs. In Bangladesh, the tendency is to marry off the girls who fall in love straight away in order to minimize the dishonor to their families. But often, the shame follows them into their marriages.

In the findings from Bangladesh, the occurrence of a girl falling in love with a boy or vice versa was given mention in all villages.<sup>89</sup> When it is revealed that the girl is involved with a boy, the parents make a decision immediately; in no instance is the girl allowed to remain unmarried. The cases documented in the research all concluded in the girl marrying the boy in question. However, if the girl’s parents find a reason to oppose her choice, they are more likely to arrange her marriage with someone else than to expose the family to the risk of the girl continuing what they consider to be illicit behavior.

In Nepal, these “love affairs” are not uncommon in the sample region. The stories are told mainly about people who were married early and met someone new once they had matured or gone abroad for work. People report that these cases usually end in conflict among family members. The fear, in particular, that children will elope and bring shame to the family was often mentioned in the visioning exercise with parents on the risks of delaying marriage. However, few people in Nepal made reference to actual cases of this happening.

<sup>88</sup> Nachni (Bangladesh) case story.

<sup>89</sup> Aminpur, Brammongaun, Chanpur, Inatnagar, Islampur, Masum Pur, Nachni, Sarongpasa, Uttar Suriarpar, Bangladesh

## 3.3 The aspirations and experiences of adolescent girls and boys

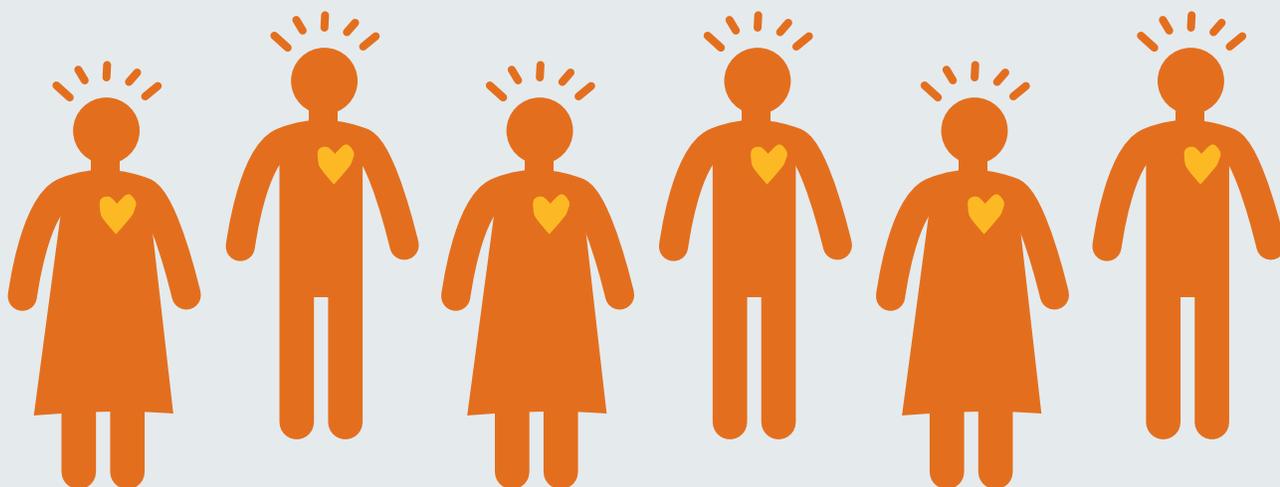
### I. GIRLS' ASPIRATIONS

#### Girls' life aspirations prominently feature marriage, but not child marriage

The data on girls' dreams for their own lives revealed: 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, they want an education, although to what age or grade, is not possible to discern. In their future marriages, they express a desire to marry "handsome, educated men" with specific vocations. Men/boys who migrate abroad for work are also high on the list of desirable husbands.

In Harar Kandi, Bangladesh, six girls not in school expressed concern with having enough food and hoped for spouses who would be able to provide the basic necessities of life. Outside of Hazi Nagor Menda, all the other girls stated that they wanted to marry at 18 or over, and as late as age 30. But the reality is that their parents, i.e. their fathers, decide on their marriages, and they are fully cognizant of the fact that regardless of their own dreams or aspirations, they have no decision-making power. In Gajipur, Bangladesh, girls who have dropped-out dream of marrying, since they know their parents will be looking for marriage proposals. But their preference is to marry later, at age 18-22. Whereas those who are in school want to marry even later, at age 20-25. The study found no instances of girls who were living in these communities who completed secondary school before marrying.

In Nepal, while girls generally expressed a wish to continue in school and to marry later in life, they also know their parents want them to be married. In all eight Nepali villages, unmarried girls said they would prefer to marry and have on average around age 20 – much later than the median average age of marriage among respondents who were already married (13 years) – highlighting the contrast between what the girls wished for and what the current realities are. The average age gap between marriage and within the respondents who had already married was 3 years. In describing who they wanted to marry, many of the girls wished for a husband who is good and supportive and with whom they could have good relations. Many also mentioned wanting small families, and husbands who are job holders.





### Girls aspire for a variety of roles as adults

In Nepal, overall, girls (across married and unmarried groups) expressed some similar aspirations and hopes regarding their wish for a job or skills, like tailoring, or working as a teacher or nurse. However, in a few of the villages none of the girls mentioned any job aspirations.<sup>90</sup> In general, unmarried girls shared more aspirations than those who were already married, and their goals involved personal development (school, work, skills) more than those of married girls whose goals were more marriage related (having to do with husbands, in-laws, children). Overall, the aspirations shared were within the realms of roles that are traditionally seen as women's, both in the domestic and professional sphere.

In Bangladesh, unmarried girls mentioned aspiring to a variety of professional jobs including police, teacher, doctor, lawyer, tailor, artist, and poultry-raising. Across the board, girls shared their desires to be productive, earn a living, and contribute to a greater good. Overall, girls in the Bangladesh sample shared aspirations that were a little bit broader than those of the girls in the Nepal sample.

### 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 that would circumscribe their own aspirations; most of these descriptions entailed stopping their daughters' schooling and arranging their marriages.

Mothers' aspirations for girls varied across the villages studied in Bangladesh, with most wanting a future of more than marriage for their daughters. Around half to three-quarters of the mothers want an education for their daughters, want them to marry later, and have a job. A minority valued marriage more than having a profession, and mothers from half of the villages did identify wanting their daughter to marry into a wealthy family to provide for them. Exceptionally, in one village, Inatnagar, the mothers say they would seek their daughters' opinion about marriage. Mothers also expressed wanting daughters-in-law (brides for their sons) who can help in the house, while simultaneously wanting different for their own daughters.

<sup>90</sup> Harnampur, Maryadpur, and Shihokhor

However, fathers in Bangladesh were more conservative than mothers in their hopes for their daughters. Fathers from about half of the villages said they want to educate their daughters, but the importance of a job was rarely mentioned. A third of the fathers said they wanted to marry their daughters off out of fear of love affairs and social pressures. A quarter of fathers hoped for wealthy spouses and said they did not want to educate their daughters.

In most of the Nepali respondent groups, mothers were aligned with the fathers, but tended to express more conservative views than their girls. Most mothers hope that their daughters marry young to reduce the amount of dowry required and to “relieve the burden” of the girl on the family.<sup>91</sup> Some want them to have three, four, or “many” children.<sup>92</sup> More progressive views related to different areas of a girl’s life. Only in Chokti Ramnagar did some mothers say their daughters should get a job, “but with permission.” Some, in Baskhor and Shihokhor, want their daughters to lead better lives than they themselves have lead.

### Married girls aspire to delay marriage for their sons and daughters

Only a few unmarried girls from Nepal noted aspirations for their children (both sons and daughters) when discussing their own life hopes and aspirations. However, daughters-in-law (as a separate respondent group) had more to say about their children’s lives, like having a child’s marriage and *gauna* together at 20 years old (for both sons and daughters), letting children choose own partners for marriage, and building a school in the community so daughters can continue their studies.

In Bangladesh, girls who were married young (as adolescents) expressed different expectations for their children’s lives, different from their own and from their parents.<sup>93</sup> They desire a better future for their children, and didn’t discriminate between boys and girls in terms of education and employment opportunities. They do not want their children to suffer as they have. While unmarried girls spoke directly about their own aspirations, the married girls spoke instead about their own children and how their children’s lives will be different, reflecting the sense that their own dreams have been abandoned. This is notable across all case stories from Bangladesh, and further reinforces the girl’s lack of agency and choice.

**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 that would circumscribe their own aspirations**



91 This was in the villages Ekala, Harnampur, Maryadpur, Purusuttampur, Rayapur, and Shihokhor, Nepal.

92 Chokti Ramnagar, Ekala, Harnampur, and Maryadpur, Nepal.

93 There was one exception in one village, where the respondent shared that they planned to educate their daughters till grade 5 and marry them off in an arranged marriage.



**Like girls, boys hope to have a good relationship with their wives and, importantly, married boys in a few villages discussed wanting to help their wives with housework and a few mentioned wanting a small family.**

## II. BOYS' ASPIRATIONS

### Boys aspirations also feature marriage

In Nepal, the age at which they hoped to marry was on average 20 and above, the reason being they want to have time to earn enough savings to obtain their own home or invest in a business. The evidence is mixed on boys wanting or not wanting to take dowry. Unmarried boys almost universally express a desire to continue their education to at least grade 10 and to marry a girl of their choice.<sup>94</sup> However, not unlike girls, the reality of marriage age for boys in the study area in Nepal, stood in contrast to their aspirations. Most boys are married earlier, at 14 or 15, with the age of *guna* varying a bit more. There tends to be, according to the data for the 45 married boys, a lapse of two-to-three years between marriage and *guna*, especially if the boy is married much younger (e.g., 11 or 12). Some are having marriage and together if married slightly older, but all under the age of 18, with a couple of exceptions.<sup>95</sup>

When discussing their future spouses, unmarried boys in some villages hope to marry an educated girl.<sup>96</sup> Others are more interested in physical characteristics, hoping that their wives will have fair complexions.<sup>97</sup> Like girls, boys hope to have a good relationship with their wives and, importantly, married boys in a few villages discussed wanting to help their wives with housework and a few mentioned wanting a small family. Like girls, boys also mentioned wanting harmony in the family.

In Bangladesh, most boys wanted to marry older than boys usually do in their villages, similar to girls who identified a higher age than what is typical for them. But boys' expected age for themselves were on average higher than the girls. Other similarities with girls include beauty as a desirable characteristic in a spouse and, in some cases, education, while in others, wealth. They too wanted to become self-reliant and emphasized marrying later in order to have time to earn money – this emerges as a strong thread in their discussions across all villages. They also sought independence from their families. Those who wanted to go abroad to work felt they could command more choice in their lives, especially regarding a spouse. A few boys, despite the age at which they hoped to marry, conceded that they would marry at their parents' will. This contrasts with the unanimity of girls in the visioning exercise who identified that they were beholden to their parents' decision regarding their marriage.

94 Baskhor, Ekala and Shihokhor VLAs, Nepal

95 Shihokhor and Chokti Ramnagar. For CARE's multimedia report on child grooms in Nepal see: <http://childgrooms.care.org>

96 Baskhor, Harnampur, Purusuttampur, Shihokhor

97 Ekala and Maryadpur VLAs

In three villages in Bangladesh - Aminpur, Dholkutub and Hazi Nagor Menda - some boys articulated why marrying older girls was so important to them. This included the mother's health, the children's welfare, the harmony in the marriage, and an ability of the wife to manage the household. However, as boys in Aminpur stated, they still expect wives to listen to their husbands and take care of their parents, regardless of age.

### **Boys professional aspirations are broad but often stand in contradiction to the realities of their lives**

Most Nepali boys who were able to articulate their aspirations and hopes for their lives were still in school; boys who were not in school had trouble articulating their dreams. Their dreams were mainly centered on their expectations of marriage, earning a livelihood and having a career (even going abroad), and being financially independent. Very few boys mentioned aspirations for their own education, and those who did were part of the younger respondent groups. Boys in six of the eight villages hope to go abroad to earn money.<sup>98</sup> Younger boys had more ambitious dreams, including working in government, becoming a village leader, doing social work, becoming a doctor, a teacher, or a sculptor, and owning a business. Older boys, and those who are married, had more modest livelihood goals that were reflective of their current realities. They included working for labor wages, working in a scrap business, making boxes, and working in the fields. A couple of boys expressed an interest in learning computer or electrical skills.

98 Baskhor, Chotki Ramnagar, Ekala, Harnampur, Purusuttampur, Rayapur



In Bangladesh, boys had varied aspirations including becoming a doctor, lawyer, driver of compressed natural gas three wheelers (CNGs), carpenter, primary school teacher, soldier, police, farmer or fishermen. Several also mentioned aspiring to migrate abroad for work. For many of the boys in our study, there appeared to be a mismatch between aspirations, educational experience and the realities of their lives. For example, the professions many of them aspired require school completion, however many of them had dropped out of school. Additionally for many of the others, the shared aspirations were predicated on earning a reasonable income and less so on completing their education. For example, an 11 year-old boy from Aminpur village, due to his family's financial circumstances, aspired to drop out of school after 4<sup>th</sup> grade and become a carpenter.

### **Parents' aspirations and those of their sons regarding marriage are not in alignment**

In the Nepal study area, fathers want their sons to marry at considerably younger ages than the boys do. All fathers want their sons to marry before the age of twenty; some even want their sons to marry "as early as possible."<sup>99</sup> The youngest age mentioned by fathers was in Maryadpur, where they hope their sons will marry between the ages of 10-12 or 12-14, with *gauna* at 16. In five of the eight villages fathers mention that they want their sons to take a dowry.

In Bangladesh as well, boys want to marry considerably older than their fathers expect. Also, most boys want to marry at their own will, while parents want them to marry at their will, as has always been the case. Boys who want to go abroad do so partly because they expect it will earn them more decision-making power over their own marriage. Parents also shared that sons are supposed to serve their parents, and many parents across the sample villages showed some consternation over their sons separating from the family, with their wives, once they are married and established.<sup>100</sup> This is in contrast to boys' wishing to become independent from their parents. The area where parents and boys appear to have some alignment is around the focus on expectations of earning money and becoming responsible.

Across Bangladesh and Nepal, young people, both married and unmarried, tended to have different, less traditional expectations for their lives than what their parents wanted for them, such as staying in school longer and delaying marriage. But like many young people, especially girls, they do not have much, if any, agency in their lives and, due to social pressures, feel compelled and obliged to go along with their parents' and families' wishes for them.

It is common for parents and their children to hold different opinions about what the children's futures should entail. As these findings from Bangladesh and Nepal indicate, marriage is one of the milestones in which parents often have great influence—if not total control—over their children's, especially girls', life course. Only a few boys conceded that they would marry at their parents' will despite the age at which they wanted to marry, in contrast with the virtual unanimity of girls' deference to their parents' decision for their marriages, indicating their lack of agency. Although girls have preferences about their lives and their future husbands, they are silent and often resigned in the arranging of their own marriages. Boys have somewhat more leeway to express their own preferences, particularly if they have had work experience. There is no discernible, significant difference between mothers' and fathers' perspectives on their sons' lives. In fact, in comparing them among each village, they are remarkably similar.

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99 Harnampur VLA

100 Applicable to Dholkutub, Hazi Nagor Menda, Harar Kandi, Masum Pur, Nachni, Sarongpasa and Uttar Suriarpar. Uttar Suriarpar VLA

## EDUCATION AND EARLY MARRIAGE SELDOM GO HAND IN HAND

Both girls' and boys' ability to build stable futures and potential families for themselves is hampered by an early departure from school and an early marriage, as an important set of tools and resources necessary for life are taken from them.

In Nepal, the highest grade girls reached before dropping out of school is around 8th grade. All girls who have had *gauna* are not in school, regardless of age. It is important to note that 21% of girls among the study respondents had never been to school. For boys of the Dalit and other excluded castes, the situation is not considerably better than for girls. Some boys (Rayapur, Shihokhor) reported wanting to become doctors, lawyers, business owners, and village leaders when they grew up but this is not realistic for most of them in light of their current schooling status.

In Bangladesh, approximately 60% of the unmarried girls were still in school and of those who had dropped out, the highest grade reached before dropping out ranged from 1st to 8th grade. For boys, approximately 64% were in schools and the highest grade before dropping out ranged from 4th-7th grade.

While there are instances where girls drop out due to marriage, in other instances the act of dropping out increases their chances of being married off. Girls often drop out of school for financial reasons, to help their mothers with domestic chores, during peak agricultural seasons, heavy work periods at home, or for security reasons. This is especially the case where the school is far away and parents fear their daughters will be subject to eve-teasing or sexual harassment on the way to school.<sup>101</sup>

In Nepal, when married Hindu girls, who have not gone through *gauna*, attend school, they are embarrassed for standing out in the classroom with their vermilion and bangles that show they are married and they are often teased by fellow students. Boys, too, are mocked by classmates for being married, even when they have not yet begun living with their young wives. Married boys also typically drop out of school.

### III. ADOLESCENTS' EXPERIENCES AFTER MARRIAGE

#### Marrying as children is disadvantageous for girls

Having an *arranged marriage* means that the girl is invisible until the day of marriage. Throughout the process, from the initiation of a marriage proposal to the conclusion of her wedding, she has no right to participate in the discussion. Girls expressed disappointment, even trauma, at having been married off by their parents without being asked for their opinion and from having married so young. In Sarongpasa, Bangladesh, a 13-year-old despaired when she was told by her mother that she was to be married, knowing she would not be able to continue her education.<sup>102</sup> In most cases heard, the young girl's response to a marriage proposal conveys acquiescence to her parents' decision. Sometimes girls' sentiment reflects trust in their parents' judgment, while at other times it reflects resignation.

<sup>101</sup> Harar Kandi, Hazi Nagor Menda, Bangladesh

<sup>102</sup> Sarongpasa, Bangladesh key informant interview with young married woman.

The evidence from the Bangladesh study area shows that the experience of conjugal life for young girls between ages 12 to 17 is filled with hardship and strife: their schooling has ended, they quickly bear children, they may lose a child during childbirth, they may be evicted by their in-laws or husbands, they may experience chronic health problems, they may suffer abuse by their spouse or in-laws, and they may experience difficulty getting pregnant the first or subsequent times.

After marriage and then after *gauna*, Nepali girls begin to live with more restrictions, forfeiting their freedom in the public sphere, submitting to wearing a certain style of dress identifying them as married with *gauna*, and being groomed for domestic duties. The young bride's own identity is so de-emphasized that she is not even called by her first name but by the name of the village from which she comes. Young brides are expected to enter into a sexual relationship with their husbands and to submit to their sexual desires and family expectations regarding reproduction.<sup>103</sup> They often want to limit the number of children they have, but this is a difficult subject to discuss with their spouses.

**The young bride's own identity is so de-emphasized that she is not even called by her first name but by the name of the village from which she comes.**

### **After the wedding, girls' lives become sharply constrained**

In Bangladesh, among both Hindus and Muslims, the bride goes to live in her husband's home and village. Generally, if the bride's family of origin lives not far from her husband's family (e.g. in an adjacent village), the newlywed couple, or just the bride, will visit her natal home more frequently (three-four times a year). After giving birth, the young bride will also go to visit her home. Girls who marry into households far from their natal villages face a sharp disadvantage: Unless they have relatives in their husbands' villages, they will not have access to family support if they become sick, have a falling-out with their husbands or in-laws, or need to escape a violent situation. Many young married women need to return home to be taken care of.

In Nepal, brides are often not allowed to have their citizenship and marriage registration until they have two children. Their in-laws do not trust them and are fearful that the bride will elope with another or that the wife will stand up for her property rights.

Expectations regarding girls' subordination help shape conditions within marriage. In both Nepal and Bangladesh, married girls find themselves isolated, with no one to turn to for help. Young brides are not encouraged to interact or meet with their own family members, relatives and neighbors because of the strict rules around their domestic roles inside the household. The marriage of very young girls to much older men is an accepted social norm, as the data shows. Even "older" girls who marry around the age of 18 face difficulties: while they tend to be more educated, they may be subject to ridicule by their in-laws and villagers for marrying late and having "lost their glamour."

103 If the girl gives birth within a year of *gauna*, it is viewed with suspicion but she should have given birth by the end of year two. Moreover, she is expected to give birth to at least one son



Across both sample regions in Nepal, girls, especially younger ones, are initiated into marital life with no prior knowledge of sexual and reproductive health matters. Sometimes they do not know how they became pregnant and will come to accept marital rape as normal.<sup>104</sup> While girls may have some awareness of family planning, it is practiced less among Muslim girls than Hindus in Nepal. They are subordinated to their mothers-in-law for whom they are obliged to perform domestic duties.<sup>105</sup>

### **Some girls are especially vulnerable in their marital households**

Marriage in Bangladesh entrusts the girl to her husband's family, transferring control over her life, her future, and her bodily integrity to her husband and her in-laws. The only leverage the girl's family has to ensure her welfare is paying the dowry (or "giving gifts"), and a hope for the best. Her age at marriage, the boy's character, and the needs/motivations of her in-laws' household will largely determine the quality of her life.

<sup>104</sup> In Uttar Suriarpur, the story was told of the 11-year old girl who married a 32-year old man.

<sup>105</sup> From the probing exercise with Nepal's mobilization teams came the remark that "... mothers-in-law decide what to cook, and the daughter-in-law (who cooks it), is the last to eat."

As we learned in the discussion of dowry, dowry makes poorer girls particularly vulnerable to harassment by their in-laws. In the stories told in the sample villages in Bangladesh, girls who marry young are more vulnerable or exposed to forms of abuse by in-laws or the spouse,<sup>106</sup> as well as to sexual and reproductive health problems from having children at a very young age. Domestic violence is commonplace across all villages.

The research above represents the knowledge and understanding of adult women and men in this region of Bangladesh which suggests that they are quite aware of the harmful effects of child marriage on the young girl, her family life, and her children. These views are substantiated in the data by examples of young brides who end up becoming a burden to their in-laws due to reproductive health problems, an inability to contribute their labor, or medical expenses, and are sent back to their families.

**In both Nepal and Bangladesh, married girls find themselves isolated, with no one to turn to for help. Young brides are not encouraged to interact or meet with their own family members, relatives and neighbors because of the strict rules around their domestic roles inside the household.**

### **Boys' lives also change a lot after marriage in Nepal**

The responsibilities placed on boys in Nepal before they are mature enough, similar to girls, has significant consequences for their and their family's health and welfare. They lack the skills and education necessary for meaningful employment since they left school early and are not emotionally (or financially) ready for the obligations that being a husband and father bring. While they are not as restricted as girls in this context, boys' personal and livelihood opportunities are significantly hindered, which, combined with extreme gender inequalities, affects their young wives and children.

Across the eight participating villages in Nepal, boys' freedoms and free time drops off significantly, first with marriage and then after *gauna*.<sup>107</sup> After marriage it becomes increasingly difficult for them to stay in school, even though some do, partly because other students tease them. Some may be forced to go abroad since they start to worry about finding a job and have to devote more time to household work and support their parents in the fields. Boys who marry early are more inclined to illness, alcoholism, marital problems and the possibility of divorce,<sup>108</sup> due mostly to physical and mental stress.

These negative consequences exacerbate the detrimental effects of gender norms on the lives of girls. Adolescent boys are socialized to regard their wives as their responsibility and also as their property. In the cultural understanding of masculinity, boys are stronger than and superior to girls, which often results in domestic or sexual violence.

<sup>106</sup> Information from the Islamapur, Bangladesh risks/benefits exercise with adult women

<sup>107</sup> Although the data are not disaggregated by caste, most of the mothers and fathers in the timeline exercise are from the Dalit and other excluded caste (92 percent) among whom child marriage of boys is prevalent.

<sup>108</sup> Even though divorce is taboo, all acknowledge this is a reality.

## No matter how justified, divorce remains highly stigmatized for girls, locking them into difficult marital circumstances

In Bangladesh, Hindu marriages offer no provision for divorce. It is understood that regardless of how much a girl might suffer, she cannot return to her father's home. Among Muslim families, all the losses of divorce are felt on the bride's side, by her family, community, and her children's future. Her own community will add to her social dishonor through ridicule or rumors. The groom and his family are not typically stigmatized in cases of divorce or separation, unless it involves the courts. In two instances of divorce that involved the authorities (the police and the *salishkar*), compensation to the bride was mandated.

Interestingly, the research in Bangladesh unveiled more stories of divorced than unmarried women. Respondents cited divorce as a possible negative outcome of early marriage, the most common reason for which is violence, inflicted by the husband or other members of his family. At the community level, any sympathy for a girl who has survived abuse by her in-laws or husband is overpowered by a sense of shame that divorce or a failed marriage brings upon her, the family and the community.

The Nepal research documented that the topic of divorce arose during the risks and benefits exercise with adult men and women as a risk of early marriage. Based on what staff and field facilitators know about the region, most cases are handled by the community and local police who settle the divorce by returning to the bride's family the cost of marriage and the dowry. The consequences for the girl's reputation are not good.





**The drivers of child marriage, in their inter-relatedness, are remarkably similar across both Nepal and Bangladesh – social norms interacting with geographic isolation, poverty and limited livelihood options – and taken together, generate a powerful formula for the inter-generational perpetuation of child marriage.**

# CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The Tipping Point project focused on research in support of future actions in Nepal and Bangladesh. Child marriage rates in these two countries are some of the highest in the world, and the Tipping Point CPA study focused on regions within Nepal and Bangladesh with particularly high rates. Within these settings, the project is working to identify “tipping points” for shifting the community’s social norms that restrict the lives and roles of girls and boys, and are linked to the practice of child marriage and dowry.

From the outset, the Tipping Point CPA study had research, programmatic, advocacy and capacity building objectives. In its effort to obtain a deep understanding of the context and causes of child marriage in specific regions of Nepal and Bangladesh, the process and the findings contribute to these objectives. Among its primary goals was to identify and highlight insights that would inform and expand existing interventions and inspire new ones. Given the complexity of child marriage, and the diverse beliefs, conditions and values that drive and uphold the practice of child marriage, it is impossible to identify a single action that will reduce it. The findings that emerge from this study in Nepal and Bangladesh point to a range of factors that must be jointly addressed in order to achieve the tipping point that will bring child marriage to an end.

In analyzing these findings, the researchers separated structural and social factors, which do not always separate neatly. Social factors are tightly interwoven with the geographic and economic constraints that shape child marriage. Social and economic factors are so closely linked that some of them can only be understood in relation to each other. That makes this field study less tidy than one would ideally like at times. But the analysis reflects the underlying realities of life: **that social identities, values and practices often align along dimensions of economic, geographic and infrastructural constraint.**

**The drivers of child marriage, in their inter-relatedness, are remarkably similar across both Nepal and Bangladesh – social norms interacting with geographic isolation, poverty and limited livelihood options – and taken together, generate a powerful formula for the inter-generational perpetuation of child marriage.** While religious or cultural beliefs may differ between Nepal and Bangladesh and their identity groups, the beliefs similarly reinforce early marriage. Dowry, above all, is a practice that encourages child marriage amongst the poor and very poor. Finally, the deeply ingrained worldview that values girls less than boys is only too apparent at the root of the beliefs and social pressures that drive parents’ decisions.

The conclusions and recommendations below are organized by the key actors and stakeholders who can play a role in ending child marriage in the study communities in Nepal and Bangladesh.

## OUR VISION OF CHANGE

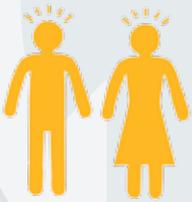
Create spaces for dialogue between adolescents, parents, and other community members to promote communication, trust, and support for gender equity and rights



Encourage networks, solidarity groups, and organizations to collaborate, shift discourse, and take action to support gender equitable opportunities for girls' and boys'



Promote positive/gender equitable norms through exemplifying and celebrating alternative behaviors



Deepen girls, boys, parents, and community members' critical awareness of gender equity and rights, and promote solidarity within peer groups

TIPPING POINT



Gender equitable social norms

**Tipping Point is engaging in an iterative approach.**

**As actors engage and issues emerge, our approach helps us tailor and adapt our strategies to promote social norms that support gender equitable opportunities.**

## National and Local Governments of Nepal and Bangladesh

Given the particularities of the Terai in Nepal, especially the marginalization faced by Dalit and other excluded caste communities there, and the *hoar* communities in the Sunamganj region of Bangladesh, the existing government efforts do not appear to be positively impacting the lives of adolescent girls in these communities to the extent necessary.

While Nepal has a draft National Strategy to End Child Marriage, the regional body South Asia Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) issued the **Kathmandu Call to Action** to End Child Marriage, and Bangladesh has had major national discussions regarding minimum age at marriage, no one at the community level referenced any of these initiatives. Nepal has yet to launch its national strategy, but the law on minimum age of marriage has been in existence since 2002.<sup>109</sup> It is also worth noting that both the Bangladeshi and Nepali governments have taken some steps to promote gender equality in education through scholarship and stipend programs for girls. However, such incentive programs have clearly not been sufficient to overcome the combination of geographic, climactic,

<sup>109</sup> The main law regulating age of marriage in Nepal is the Eleventh Amendment of the National code (known as the *Muluki Ain*) amended in 2002.

socio-economic and cultural issues that contribute to drop-out and early marriage in the areas of Sunamganj in Bangladesh, and the Dalit and other excluded caste communities in the Terai in Nepal. Overall, there is a need for the government to ensure that reform and strengthening of implementation of minimum age of marriage laws and policies is not solely focused on punitive measures, but includes strengthening of policy interventions aimed at shifting gender norms and empowering adolescents to access social, economic and educational services and opportunities, especially in the remote and marginalized communities such as the ones that were part of this study.

Some actions that the national and local government institutions can take to better address the issue of child marriage in these locations are:

- **Expand and promote access to both formal and non-formal education and training opportunities** that promotes holistic growth by supporting leadership competencies, civic engagement, and linkages to varied vocational and professional career paths and other income earning opportunities. Specific government departments for youth, social services and children's affairs can help strengthen services and linkages amongst themselves in especially remote and marginalized communities such as the ones in this study. The lack of easy access, especially to secondary schools, in most of the study communities in both countries highlights the need for government institutions to improve education infrastructure in these areas.
- **Develop and ensure educational content, curricula, and training of teachers and health workers on comprehensive sexuality education.** Our study findings show that most adolescent girls and boys have negligible knowledge about their changing bodies, and very little understanding of gender, sexuality, and rights issues. Based on a 2012 UNESCO report,<sup>110</sup> Bangladesh has national sexuality education curricula for both primary and secondary education, along with actions for informal/out of school education on sexual and reproductive health (SRH), and teacher training for the curricula. Nepal in that same review was reported to have national sexuality education curricula for secondary education only along with teacher training for the curricula. However, based on our findings it is clear that in our study areas these curricula are not being effectively delivered. The government can play a significant role in the delivery of said curricula through schools and informal/out of school settings so that adolescents can be educated about gender, sexuality, and their rights, and be equipped to make informed decisions.
- **Promote education interventions and policies that are more holistic in addressing multiple barriers to education.** Beyond addressing direct costs of schooling through measures such as fee elimination and scholarships, increased efforts are needed to tackle indirect barriers, e.g. by developing strategies to promote safety in communities and schools, and supporting community and school-based efforts to shift gender expectations in collaboration with civil society organizations, and linkages across different government sectors such as health, education, and public safety.
- **Expand the choices available to young adults (especially girls) after secondary school** by creating broader linkages through public-private partnerships to institutions and creating diverse ways to connect young people from remote and marginalized communities to vocational, livelihoods, and employment opportunities and markets. This includes supporting infrastructure, strategies and access to services that can transform the geographic isolation of communities with viable livelihood options, services and information.
- **Focus on and strengthen the citizenship, birth, and marriage registration systems, especially with regards to equitable access for girls.** While both Nepal and Bangladesh have seen concerted efforts in recent years, through partnerships between the government and NGOs, in the study areas these are still easily circumvented

110 Sexuality Education in Asia and Pacific. 2012. UNESCO. <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0021/002150/215091e.pdf>



through bribery and prevailing norms. Our findings show that there is considerable fraud in birth and marriage registration, with respondents specifically referencing parents' efforts to imply that daughters were older than they were for the purposes of marriage. Also in Nepal, it was found that adolescent girls' access to citizenship papers and marriage registration documents is often used by both natal and marital families as a way to control them. The government can play an important role in mobilizing local community-based organizations to increase awareness amongst parents and adolescent girls themselves about their rights to birth registration and citizenship, and create avenues for girls to access these systems easily. CARE has seen initial success in this through the Tipping Point project where adolescent girls in Nepal have succeeded in getting their citizenship papers through the support of project staff who raise policy awareness and facilitate mobilization of local village development committee members.

- **Ensure the rights of already married adolescent girls by promoting access to education, and health services, and livelihood opportunities, and finance.** Our findings show that as married adolescents, young girls in their marital homes have negligible access to education, limited access to sexual and reproductive health services, and are usually restricted to domestic work. The government can play an important role by funding and supporting programs and policies tailored to the needs of already married adolescents, particularly efforts to promote their continued access to education, sexual and reproductive health services, and vocational and livelihood opportunities. An existing example of such an effort is the Adolescent Sexual and Reproductive

Health National Program<sup>111</sup> in Nepal that is being pursued by the government but, as we can see, needs to reach the especially marginalized communities in the Terai where our study was conducted.

- **Address ethnic and caste based inequities (Nepal).** While caste-based discrimination in Nepal was outlawed in 1963, Caste-Based Discrimination and Untouchability (Crime and Offences) Act prohibiting discriminatory practices against Dalits was passed in the Constituent Assembly in May 2011. Whereas the earlier law banned untouchability in public spaces, the new law bans untouchability in both public and private spheres. It mandates a harsher punishment for public officials who breach this law, and requires perpetrators to provide compensation to victims. Despite the laws, caste-based discrimination is still highly prevalent and accounts for much of the social exclusion in the study communities. The government should take measures to enforce this Act by implementing a campaign to disseminate the provisions of this Act. As a mostly Madhesi region, the study communities need government support for Madhesi people's rights to self-determination and equality in terms of political representation, and access to services/resources from the national level.
- **Fund and support the training of community-based government workers in specific marginalized communities.** Village-based government workers such as community health volunteers, teachers, and social mobilizers, are often members of the same communities in which they work. It is important to target them, particularly in the marginalized communities that were part of this study, for training and sensitization efforts in order to promote change in their own value system, so that they can value girls, invest in them, and can serve as role models for the community.
- **Invest in infrastructure that improves mobility and access for adolescents (especially girls) in isolated communities.** Develop interventions that address the increased isolation and vulnerability of adolescents, especially girls, during certain seasons. This can include expanding infrastructure that is tailored to the needs of marginalized areas and communities, providing safe and accessible transport options, and funding safe spaces for girls within communities and schools, such as youth groups, clubs, sports teams, and community spaces. This can also include infrastructure that creates access to information for communities through mechanisms such as community radio.
- **Give space, strong support, and funding to civil society and NGOs to take on and scale-up community-based campaigning efforts to shift norms.** Civil society and NGOs are often plugged into communities and are well placed to develop and carry out community mobilization, messaging, and campaigning efforts aimed at shifting norms, and possibly scaling up such approaches and campaigns to expand community perceptions of the potential roles and contributions of girls to their communities beyond the domestic sphere. Government, including local authorities, can also ensure girls' safety from harassment and violence, by developing and taking measures to address eve-teasing, working with school officials and community leaders to promote gender sensitivity, and supporting public campaigns on zero tolerance for such behavior.

## Government and Private Foundation Donors

Donor governments play an important role through the foreign investment policies they adopt, their influence with the governments of Nepal and Bangladesh, and their programmatic investments. In addition, donors (both governments and private foundations) are in a position to support the work of civil society organizations in advocating with national governments, developing accountability at the local level, raising awareness, and providing supports for individuals. In recent years, a few key donor governments such as the United States and the United Kingdom have increasingly prioritized and focused on girls' education in particular, including highlighting it as a way of addressing early and child marriage. Some key actions that donors can take are:

<sup>111</sup> <http://nhsp.org.np/Document/asrh-national-program-implementation-guide/>

- **Supporting and resourcing early marriage prevention programs that are integrated into other broader programs.** Given the complex and inter-related drivers for child marriage, it is important for donors to consider taking an integrated approach to funding child marriage programming. This means, supporting programs that take multi-sectoral approaches to situate child marriage prevention amidst gender rights, education, health, livelihoods, economic empowerment, gender-based violence and other programming. This is particularly critical as child marriage makes girls vulnerable to a cycle of poverty, discrimination, domestic violence and abuse, which diminishes their capacities to seek better options in life.
- **Promoting and funding 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.** Effectively addressing child marriage requires donors to support and fund comprehensive multi-sectoral strategies that include promoting adolescents' sexual and reproductive health and rights, supporting efforts to change social norms that undervalue girls, supporting girls economic empowerment and scholarships for education across the life-span, promoting safe spaces in schools, homes and public areas, and protecting girls' rights.
- **Supporting development of 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 can portray alternative choices and foster debate for social norms change. However, its reach and form are often limited – particularly in remote areas. There is deep potential to break this divide through investment and innovation.
- **Investing in youth-led organizing efforts.** As those most affected by early and child marriage, adolescents represent key leaders in supporting social norms change around this issue. To enable their potential, donors should support and fund youth organizing and linkages that a) support youth organizing and networking; b) invest in their development and opportunities (as discussed earlier); and c) integrate risk monitoring and mitigation work to provide safety nets and support for young people whose activism and actions may expose them to risk of backlash.
- **Advocating for measures that promote girls empowerment and tackle root causes of child marriage in policy dialogues at a global and national level.** The past few years have seen issues related to girls rights and gender equality gain increased prominence in global policy discussions and frameworks, such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). As these discussions move towards the question of implementation and how to measure progress at global and national levels, donors have a key role in supporting countries with the development of indicators and data gathering efforts that go beyond simply tracking age at marriage, to measure progress on underlying issues, including sexual and reproductive choice, livelihood options, completion of secondary school, socio-cultural norms and aspirations for girls.

## Civil Society Organizations and NGOs

An important contribution of civil society organizations (CSOs) and NGOs is in the space between community members and government. They can support good governance by making institutions and processes more transparent to community members, and by supporting community members in voicing their concerns. They also play an important role as the entities through which funding flows in both Nepal and Bangladesh for the implementation of social programs. As such CSOs and NGOs, by being the implementers of community-based programming and the conveners of multi-stakeholder groups, can take the following actions to help prevent child marriage:

- **Create spaces for dialogue between adolescents, parents, and other community members to promote communication, trust, and support for gender equity and rights.** Our study findings highlight discrepancies between what adolescents want for themselves in contrast to what parents want for them, along with who gets to make decisions about if, when, and whom someone marries. Community dialogue, where parents and adolescents are present, can be started as a way to address this issue. Meeting with parents' committees and mothers' groups, plus the interactions between opinion leaders and adolescent boys and girls in the same platform, will not only bring to the surface pertinent issues, like negative effects of child marriage and the practice of dowry, but also generate community-based solutions that are relevant and practical as per the local context.
- **Provide spaces and opportunities for girls, boys, parents, and community members to promote critical awareness of gender equity and rights, and solidarity within peer groups.** Bringing together peer groups of boys, girls, parents, and community members to promote networking and build solidarity can act as powerful mechanisms for adolescents to share dreams and aspirations, practice skills, and support each other when it comes to their personal learning and growth. Adolescents can develop leadership skills such as voice, negotiation, articulation, confidence and power to influence others through these peer group gatherings. Parents and other adult community members can build their skills to be open and responsive to the voices and aspirations of adolescents, and also have a space to discuss issues such as the practice of dowry, which our findings clearly show place a burden on most parents and contributes to the practice of child marriage.
- **Promote positive/gender equitable norms through exemplifying and celebrating model behaviors.** NGOs can engage in programming that promotes alternatives, focuses on positive messaging, and engages in public celebrations of positive role models. For example, instead of disseminating messages about the harmful effects of child marriage on the health of girls, which our study findings show most parents are well aware of, messages can focus on the positive effects of delaying marriage, and the portrayal of gender equitable narratives where girls and boys both have roles and opportunities inside and outside the home and have egalitarian relationships that can promote behavior change. For example, working with adolescent boys and men to change gender stereotypes related to sharing household chores and responsibilities, and challenging the harmful effects of hegemonic masculinities in the creation of role models. To support change-makers within communities, this work should be strengthened by identifying and networking positive role models for adolescent boys and men, and taking steps together to assess, monitor, mitigate and respond to threats they may face.
- **Support networks to analyze and also take actions around other pertinent issues of social injustice they face as a group.** As noted in the analysis, those most affected by early and child marriage are also often exposed to other forms of injustice as a group – based on caste, class, ethnicity, etc. It may be strategic for these groups to engage not only on issues of gender equity, but also organize around other important issues that are intertwined as drivers of child marriage. This includes economic isolation/exploitation, caste/class discrimination and landless rights. The issues to prioritize and organize around can be determined with local groups and networks.
- **Facilitate networks, solidarity groups, and organizations to collaborate to shift discourse and take action for supportive gender equitable opportunities for girls and boys.** This can include creating links between adolescent groups in the community and existing vocational training and employment centers; supporting solidarity groups of parents and adolescents to connect to income earning programs or savings and loans programs; and facilitating networking between government, NGO, CSO, and community groups to hold duty bearers accountable for the delivery of resources and services in an equitable manner.

- **Proactively support and resource spaces for NGO staff themselves to engage in self-reflection about their own beliefs and values regarding gender norms and social norms that support the practice of child marriage.** NGO workers too belong to the same communities and are prisoners to the same social norms that promote child marriage and limit a girl child's possibilities to grow. Investment in addressing the personal biases amongst the NGO workers would cascade and reflect in their facilitation of their community's thinking towards a girl child's rights, aspirations, opportunities, and her future.

## Communities

Communities themselves can and do play an important role in supporting shifts that can expand opportunities for girls and reduce child marriage. Our findings show how for marginalized communities such as the ones in our study, even if some parents do not want to continue the practice of child marriage they often feel that they do not have any other options due to a lack of alternatives and/or social pressure. In the context of such scenarios, some actions that community members themselves can take are:

- **Actively participate in village and district level government planning mechanism to set targets for ending child marriage and promote alternative opportunities for girls.** Communities can mobilize to actively participate in local government planning processes to access resources and set targets for ending child marriage and promoting access to resources for girls. This includes awareness raising and training on various laws dealing with child rights, and existing provisions by the government for safe and equal access to educational institutions, vocational trainings, and livelihood opportunities for poor parents in the community.
- **Stand together to promote norms that support the positive development of adolescents, and reject the acceptability of gender based harassment or violence.** Parents and community members can come together in solidarity with their daughters, and model to boys and men in the community the expectations of how girls should be treated with respect, and hold accountable those who harass girls or threaten their safety.
- **Engage toward more transformative justice approaches to addressing gender-based violence.** This involves working with community members to be responsive and accountable to issues of gender-based violence themselves. Transformative justice approaches support survivors to articulate harms done and express their needs, and works with those who committed violence to identify the harms they committed and be accountable for their actions. This process includes working with communities affected by violence to exercise agency, strengthen accountabilities and ensure responsiveness to one another in order to build communities beyond violence
- **Hold duty bearers accountable.** Community members can come together and advocate for the services and resources that are rightfully due to them. This includes safe access to educational institutions, vocational trainings, and livelihood opportunities for girls and boys in the community. In general when schools are far away and girls are not engaged in any other productive work, the pressure of her getting married surmounts. Having girls engaged in groups, doing creative activities, learning skills, and preparing themselves for livelihood opportunities gives options to them other than marriage.
- **Lead by example.** Community leaders can also champion a positive vision for the girls in the community and lead by example by not marrying off their own daughters at an early age. Honoring such leaders will act as added incentives to community members to shine as model families and thereby advance the agenda of women's empowerment and gender equality as today's girls are tomorrow's women.

## Adolescent Girls and Boys

The findings from our study clearly illustrate how young people's aspirations resonate with the desires of young people in much of the rest of the world: they want to study, work and yes, eventually marry, but not as children. Sadly, their aspirations are sometimes not in sync with their surrounding reality, given the limited educational, employment and even marital options available to them in their villages. In addition, they often find their parents' aspirations for them are not aligned with their own; and given their limited decision-making power, they are obliged to accept their parents' decisions regarding the timing of marriage and the choice of their marriage partners. In the context of these circumstances, adolescents can take the following actions to support each other and enable both boys and girls to progress towards their aspirations:

- **Build their own solidarity and networks.** When girls and boys come together and learn about each other's aspirations and dreams and have opportunities to interact and relate to each other as fellow students, friends, acquaintances, athletes, and civic citizens, and not only as sexual partners, together in solidarity they can identify ways to support each other's dreams. One specific existing traditional practice used by the Tipping Point project in Nepal that demonstrated some promise in this arena is the use of *Raksha Bandhan* or *Rakhi*, the celebration of love and duty between brothers and sisters as an occasion to promote this message of solidarity, and create space for discussions about supporting each other's dreams and aspirations and standing up for each other's choices, in contrast to the usual narrative of brothers protecting sisters. In Nepal, CARE has found promotion of platonic friendships between boys and girls, through games and exercises that give opportunity to discuss gender roles, have helped them to share with and influence their peers, engaging themselves in creative activities, while also challenging social norms. In Bangladesh, CARE, along with other NGOs, have seen promising results from engaging adolescent girls in sports that are typically only accessible to boys, such as football, by seeing how boys over time supported girls in this activity.
- **Organize together and be the voice.** Girls and boys in the community can look for ways to creatively communicate their aspirations to their families and to the broader community in order to spark dialogue. This can be through the formation of groups/networking among the girls and boys, where they can share ideas, discuss problems and find solution through their efforts. As those most affected by early and child marriage, adolescents are best positioned to represent their needs and interests in broader organizing efforts. This may include direct communications campaigns and actions specifically related to gender equitable opportunities for boys and girls. As noted earlier, they can also identify other issues affecting their lives and link with/play a leadership role in organizing with other community groups in a common effort to raise concerns and assert their rights. This offers adolescents important opportunities to lead, not only on adolescent issues, but also around issues they face as part of broader groups affected by marginalization and discrimination based on caste, class and ethnicity.
- **Learn from one another.** One opportunity to start dismantling hierarchies facing adolescents is to recognize and support co-learning amongst them. Diverse adolescents have insights, talents and experiences that can drive and guide their groups. This can be facilitated through a strong adolescent participation approach that centers adolescent priorities and insights to give direction to this work.

## Annex 1 – Number of Households by Sample Village/VDC and Country

Nepal - VDC	No. of households	Bangladesh - Village	No. of households
Bakshor	38	Nachni	326
Harnampur	44	Uttar Suriarpar	556
Pursottampur	47	Dholkutub	183
Sihokhor	135	Sarongpasa	88
Maryapur	75	Aminpur	72
Chokti Ramnagar	92	Hazi Nagor Menda	168
Ekala	129	Masum Pur	49
Rayapur	162	Inatnagar	98
Average number of households per village	90	Brammongaun	34
		Chanpur	188
		Gajipur	51
		Harar Kandi	49
		Islampur	208
		Average number of households per village	159

## Annex 2 – Demographics of Respondents by Data Collection Tool and Country

### VISIONING EXERCISE

NEPAL	Girls (Married)	Girls (Unmarried)	Daughters-in-law*	Boys (Married)	Boys (Unmarried)
Participants (n)	56	63	44	45	74
Mean Age (range)	16 (12 – 19)	13.5 (10 – 17)	21 (16-29)	18.6 (12 – 25)	13.6 (10 - 17)

20% of married girls and 40% of married boys reported being in school • 65% of unmarried girls and 76% of unmarried boys reported being in school • 35% of unmarried girls and 24% of unmarried boys reported NOT being in school • 92% of participants are Hindu, with the Dalit and other excluded castes making up the majority • About 8% of the participants are Muslim  
\* who have had *gauna* and are staying with in-laws

BANGLADESH	Girls (Unmarried)	Boys (Unmarried)	
Participants (n)	130	118	62% of girls and 64% of boys reported being in school, respectively; 38% of girls and 36% of boys reported NOT being in school, respectively.
Mean Age (range)	13 (10 – 17)	13 (10 – 17)	
Hindu (n)	34	26	
Muslim (n)	96	92	

## Annex 2 – Continued

### TIMELINE EXERCISE

	NEPAL		BANGLADESH	
	Mothers	Fathers	Mothers	Fathers
Participants (n)	71	62	156	116
Mean Age (range)	41 (26 – 50)	47 (24 – 81)	39 (25 – 65)	47 (24 – 81)
Hindu (n)	62	62	36	27
Muslim (n)	8	8	120	89

### RISK BENEFITS BY COUNTRY

	NEPAL		BANGLADESH	
	Mothers	Fathers	Mothers	Fathers
Participants (n)	71	71	149	120
Mean Age (range)	43 (27 – 65)	45 (22 – 81)	Not reported	Not reported
Hindu (n)	61	64	33	27
Muslim (n)	10	7	116	93

### KEY INFORMANT INTERVIEWS WITH MARRIED GIRLS [BANGLADESH ONLY]

Participants (n)	24
Mean Age (range)	17 (14 – 22)
Mean Age at marriage (range)	14 (11 – 17)
Hindu	5
Muslim	5



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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](http://www.care.org).

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