

Plan Asia Regional Office

# Asia Child Marriage Initiative: Summary of Research in Bangladesh, India and Nepal



Plan / Bernice Wong



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# List of acronyms

ACPR	Associates for Community and Population Research
ACMI	Asia Child Marriage Initiative
BIAAG	Because I am a Girl
BLOP	Better Life Options Programme
CCCD	Child-Centred Community Development
CMHP	Community Managed Health Programme
CBO	Community Based Organisation
COs	Country Offices (Plan)
DHS	Demographic and Health Survey
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
GEMS	Gender Equity Movement in Schools
ICDDR,B	International Centre for Diarrhoeal Disease Research, Bangladesh
ICRW	International Center for Research on Women
KII	Key Informant Interview
LGI	Local Government Institutions
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
UN	United Nations
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
VDC	Village Development Committee
WHO	World Health Organization

# Foreword

Child marriage is one of the most prevalent and serious violations of human rights. The issue needs urgent attention in South Asia, where 46 per cent of children are married formally or in informal union before they are 18. Girls are significantly more likely than boys to be married as children – 30 per cent of girls aged 15-19 years are currently married or in union in South Asia, compared to just 5 per cent of boys in the same age bracket<sup>1</sup>.

So why does child marriage happen when we know that the social, economic and human costs are so high? The answer lies in how deeply rooted child marriage is in the social norms of many societies, fuelled by tradition, religion and poverty. Awareness of the legalities of child marriage – it's outlawed in most countries around the world – has little bearing on behaviour because customary laws, social norms and poverty-driven economic needs often trump national policies and legislation.

Child marriage is a far-reaching issue that impacts not only the lives of the children who are married, but also the lives of those around them. When girls marry young, before their minds and bodies are fully developed, they often become pregnant long before they are ready. Pregnancy is the number one cause of death among girls aged 15-19 worldwide. Child marriage also reinforces the gendered nature of poverty, with limited education and skills bringing down the potential of the girl, her family, her community and her country. These impacts extend throughout a girl's adult life and into the next generation.

Plan International's global Because I am a Girl (BIAAG) campaign focuses on child marriage as a key barrier to progress in child rights. Child Marriage and Girls' Education – Plan's first global report on this issue – focuses on the links between these two critical areas of child development. In Asia, Plan has designed the Asia Child Marriage Initiative (ACMI) to help prevent child marriage and mitigate its negative consequences on children, families and communities. Plan has worked closely with the International Center for Research on Women (ICRW) on the qualitative study presented here to give child marriage the attention it deserves and help us better understand where we're at with the issue in India, Nepal and Bangladesh. The study brings out the influence of gender norms and their interplay with the aspirations of girls and their families. The probe into the role of village-based institutions and children's organisations has given valuable insight into how communities can be engaged to be part of the solution. Some emerging trends, like child-initiated marriages, have also been unearthed by the study, and these will require further investigation.

This study would not have been possible without the valuable collaborative and collective role played by ICRW and Plan's Country Offices in India, Nepal and Bangladesh, as well as the regional team. I believe this study provides excellent material for anyone committed to stopping child marriage.



MARK PIERCE  
REGIONAL DIRECTOR  
PLAN ASIA REGIONAL OFFICE

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<sup>1</sup> UNICEF global databases, 2011. Based on DHS, MICS and other national surveys, 2000-2010

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This study contributes to the growing understanding of the causes and consequences of child marriage and the factors that contribute to its reduction. The Plan Asia Regional Office invited the International Center for Research on Women (ICRW) to carry out this three-country study in Bangladesh, India and Nepal. At the ICRW, the study was led by Ravi Verma and supported by Tara Sinha and Tina Khanna.

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Ravi Verma  
Tara Sinha  
Tina Khanna

New Delhi  
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# Executive summary

This study on child marriage in Bangladesh, India and Nepal explores the perceptions of different stakeholders about the causes and consequences of child marriage and the efficacy of Plan's programming in addressing these factors. The International Center for Research on Women (ICRW) carried out the study for Plan's Asia Regional Office.

## Background

Child marriage rates in South Asia are the second-highest in the world, behind only West Africa. In terms of numbers, one-half of all girls affected by child marriage reside in South Asia. Plan's Asia Child Marriage Initiative (ACMI) is a multi-country initiative started in 2010. This initiative aims to prevent child marriage and mitigate its negative consequences by understanding the practices of child marriage and exploring pathways for addressing the issue. Marriage of children less than 18 years has been legally prohibited in all three countries, yet prevalence remains high. Plan's programmes in Bangladesh, India and Nepal address the problem of child marriage in different ways. Plan Bangladesh aims to increase the mean age of marriage from 15-18 years and works with the national government to strengthen online birth registration and enforcement of the Child Marriage Restraint Act of 1929. Plan India's goal is to improve knowledge, attitudes and practices in regard to child marriage and track the percentage of child marriages in its working areas. Plan Nepal sees child marriage as an aspect of gender-based violence and aims to build the capacity and commitment of children, their families and communities to eliminate the practice.

## Methodology

The current study is based on primary qualitative data gathered from in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with girls and boys, parents, community leaders, and government officials. In Bangladesh, interviews were conducted in Nilphamari, Rangpur and Gazipur districts; in Nepal, they were carried out in Banke, Makwanpur and Sunsari districts, and in India, in Bikaner district of Rajasthan. The themes discussed in the interviews and focus group discussions covered a range of issues and their effect on age at marriage. These included education patterns and changing trends among girls and boys, the aspirations of young persons and parents, perceptions on the importance of marriage, decision-making and child rights, the causes and consequences of child marriage, and knowledge about and adherence to marriage laws. The focus of this study is on child marriage among girls, who are affected by this practice more than boys in both prevalence and severity of consequences.

## Key findings

- **Causes of child marriage**

Child marriage occurs due to various normative and structural factors such as tradition, familial economic situation, and opportunities available to women. The traditional causes of child marriage in all three countries are fairly similar and are rooted in social values and norms. Marriage is considered necessary and inevitable by children and adults. It is the parent's responsibility to marry their daughters and protect their chastity until they are married. Fear of sexual violence on the one hand and girls choosing to begin sexual activity on the other hand lead to child marriage of daughters. The primary role for women is seen as that of wife and mother. Parents therefore see little merit in delaying a girl's marriage once she reaches puberty.



*Geeta (left) from Nepal is 15 years old and has an 8-month-old baby. She was married in May 2011 while studying in grade 5. These days, Geeta is unable to go to school because she must take care of her child, but she still takes part in social activities in her community.*



Girls in poorer families are more vulnerable to child marriage due to multiple factors. For one, girls in poorer families tend to end their studies earlier because of the costs associated with education. The limited resources in poor families are more likely to be spent on a boy's education than a girl's. If a girl is not in school, parents are more likely to get her married. In some contexts, parents need to give a smaller dowry for younger girls, and poor parents take this route due to financial constraints. Also, poor parents sometimes marry a younger daughter along with an older sibling to avoid the costs of a separate marriage later.

There is a clear association between education and age at marriage, and women with more years of education marry later. In all three contexts, children and parents voiced the value of education, while completion of primary education is increasingly common. Access to education, and particularly secondary education, varies in the three study countries. In Bikaner district in Rajasthan, girls often have to travel to neighbouring villages for middle and higher classes, and the insecurity of travel routes acts as a deterrent. The poor quality of schools further dissuades parents. Respondents in Bangladesh and Nepal reported relative ease of access to middle and high school, but being enrolled in school was not enough to delay marriage of girls. On the other hand, girls who were not enrolled were very likely to have their marriages arranged. In some cases, the young girls themselves expressed a lack of interest in continuing with their education.

The extent to which a girl studies is a function of her family's economic circumstances, ease of access to education, and the aspirations that the girl and her parents have for her. Despite poverty often being a reason for dropping out of school early, even girls from poor families continue with their education if there is determination and a desire to study. The aspirations of the family are often a function of the exposure to possibilities for women. There are a few cases where child brides are able to continue with their education even after getting married and having a child, but usually only if the girl herself is desirous of continuing her education and has the support of her marital family.

A relatively less understood reason for child marriage that emerged was self-initiated marriages by young girls (and boys). Such marriages occur with and without parental consent. Two factors that contribute to the increase in self-initiated marriages are the increased intermingling of girls and boys in schools and access to mobile phones.

There was no clear consensus on whether engagement in paid work led to a delay in a girl's marriage. More than engagement in paid work per se, it seems to be the nature of her work and the level of education that is more likely to prevent child marriage.

- **Prevention of child marriage**

Almost all the girls, boys and parents interviewed for the study said that they were against child marriage and recommended various methods for preventing the practice, such as raising awareness, strict implementation of the law, eradication of dowry and promoting girls' education. Community leaders and government officials felt that there had been a positive change in the situation regarding child marriage. They credited the work of the government and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) that had increased awareness about the issue. To eliminate child marriage, they felt that even greater awareness about the negative consequences of child marriage and better law implementation were needed. Regarding actual cases of child marriages prevented, respondents from the community and government admitted that there were few cases where planned child marriages had been prevented. Stopping a marriage once arranged results in financial loss to the family and also hurts the family's honour. The few cases successfully prevented fell into two categories: In some cases, the girl concerned opposed her parent's decision, sometimes with the help of a children's organisation; broader community action was instrumental in preventing a child marriage.



- **Successful strategies adopted by Plan**

Some of the strategies adopted by Plan in the country programmes have had a positive impact on reducing the practice of child marriage. Plan promotes children's organisations and participation in creating awareness about social issues including child marriage. Children reported increased knowledge and confidence as a result of participation in these forums; participation has also taught them about their rights and how to negotiate with adults in this regard.

Partnerships with the state have yielded positive results. The scale of government programmes combined with the community outreach of civil society organisations makes optimal use of the respective strengths of the two sectors. Plan engages community leaders to bring about a change in norms around age at marriage; this approach holds much potential for fostering social change. An important contribution of Plan has been spreading awareness about the problem of child marriage and its negative consequences, as well as linking the issue to the violation of child rights. In the case of India, Plan supports a bridge programme to facilitate girls' transition to the formal education system. Expanding opportunities and roles for women makes it meaningful for parents to invest in their daughter's education. Plan employs young women as teachers in their child development centres and thus supports new avenues and aspirations for women.

## Recommendations for programmes

**Strengthen community based organisations (CBOs) to develop systems for regular engagement with parents, including home visits:** Programmes operating at local level need to target families most at risk of marrying their daughters as children. These families might include the poorest, those with several daughters, or those with daughters who have already dropped out of school.

**Engage with male members of the family:** It is critical to engage with adult and younger males in the family. Many respondents said that parents are more likely to listen to sons than to daughters. There are examples of programmes that have successfully helped men and boys challenge traditional gender roles and notions of manhood that support child marriage.

**Use mass media to spread the campaign in the community:** Community education must emphasise the need to respect the decisions of boys and girls to remain unmarried as long as they wish, rather than stigmatising the unmarried ones.

**Strengthen capacities and empower girls and boys:** Parents are persuaded and influenced by young women and men who articulate their views on marriage and education with clarity. Building the capacities of young women and men to negotiate in a non-confrontational manner will enable them to take a firm position without endangering family relationships. Programmes also need to deal with adolescence and sexuality in a supportive manner, in order to build capacity for responsible decision-making.

**Leverage rising aspirations:** Parents and young girls are increasingly recognising the value of education and the better quality of life it can enable. Exposing young girls and their families to potential opportunities and roles for women outside the house expands their worldview of possibilities.

**Develop specific programmes for children married early:** Few public and civil society programmes exist to meet the needs of this group. In order to safeguard married adolescent girls, it is imperative to provide measures specifically designed and targeted towards them. At a minimum, outreach services must be available in sexual and reproductive health, as well as other life skills. The value of completing secondary education even for married girls should also be stressed in community education and public education campaigns.





Plan

*School girls in Nepal dance and sing about the importance of education.*

### **Promote livelihood programmes for women and girls:**

Promotion of vocational and skills-based training for women is certain to have a positive impact for both unmarried and married women. Engagement in income-generating activities increases a girl's wellbeing in her marital household and may play a role in delaying girls' marriage.

### **Make greater efforts with poorer and excluded families:**

The multiple vulnerabilities of poorer families not only lead to a higher incidence of child marriage among them, but also make it harder for programmatic inputs to reach them. Special efforts need to be made to include these families.

### **Make elimination of child marriage a primary objective:**

For the issue of child marriage to get resources, energy and organisational focus, it is critical that child marriage prevention be among the primary objectives, as

opposed to a secondary or tertiary objective subsumed under educational or health initiatives.

**Promote safety of girls:** Promoting safety for girls has two dimensions: first, it requires building their self-esteem and confidence; and second, it requires building community awareness and responsiveness about the issue. Children's organisations and CBOs should include sexual violence and harassment in discussions, particularly in work with boys and men.

**Implement demonstration projects:** Given the multiple drivers of child marriage and limited understanding of successful interventions, demonstration programmes to mitigate and end child marriage in circumscribed geographical locations could yield important lessons about what works. This approach would enable focussed introduction of initiatives and monitoring of child marriage cases.

**Find champions among religious leaders:** Religious leaders provide moral and spiritual guidance for parents and children. Champions among them can be powerful voices for putting the interests of the child first.

## **Policy recommendations**

**Promote girls' access to quality secondary education:** Girls need easier and safer access to quality secondary schools. Financial support for secondary education of girls should be universalised so that poverty ceases to be a cause of dropping out school. Simultaneously, parents need to be motivated to support secondary education for girls.

**Develop stronger coordination among stakeholders:** Several players are putting in efforts to eliminate child marriage: government bodies, law enforcement officials, civil society organisations and community leaders. There is a need for better coordination and cooperation among these groups to create a social force that will change the norms around child marriage.

**Strengthen law enforcement:** It is critical to identify and prosecute parties involved in child marriage so that the law becomes a deterrent. Penalties need to be enhanced in countries where they are currently low. There needs to be greater capacity building of law enforcement officers, registrars, judiciary officials and religious leaders about the negative impacts of child marriage. The public also needs greater awareness about the content of child marriage laws and penalties.

**Support economic empowerment initiatives:** Addressing poverty, one of the key precipitating causes of child marriage, can reduce the practice. Policymakers should support interventions at the national and local levels that economically empower girls and women, specifically in locations of high prevalence of child marriage and in marginalised communities.

## **Recommendations for future research**

1. Understand the links between girls' engagement in paid work and age at marriage.
2. Understand the factors that support the continued education of girls after marriage.
3. Explore the factors and circumstances leading to self-initiated child marriages.

# Introduction



Plan / Bernice Wong

*Shefali from Bangladesh was married at 12 and had her first daughter when she was 14 years old. The child survived for only three days. Her next two children suffered the same fate. Now, at 22 years old, she has given birth to her first surviving child.*

The right to free and full consent to a marriage is recognised in the United Nations (UN) Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UN 1948) with the recognition that consent cannot be “free and full” when one of the parties involved is not sufficiently mature to make an informed decision about a life partner. The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (UN 1979) states that the betrothal and marriage of a child shall have no legal effect and all necessary action, including legislation, shall be taken to specify a minimum age for marriage. The Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women recommends this age to be 18. Based on the Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN 1989), child marriage refers to marriage in which one party is under the age of 18 years. National and international communities are increasingly recognising child marriage as a serious challenge, both as a violation of children’s human rights and as a barrier to key development outcomes.

Child marriage disproportionately affects young girls, who are much more likely to be married as children than young boys (Mathur, Greene & Malhotra 2003). Child marriage rates in South Asia are the second highest in the world, behind only West Africa. In terms of numbers, one-half of all girls affected by child marriage reside in South Asia (ICRW 2011b). A recent quantitative analysis (Raj, McDougal & Rusch 2012) of changes in the age of children at marriage in four South Asian countries – Bangladesh, Nepal, Pakistan and India – reveals that over the past two decades significant relative reductions have occurred in the marriage of girls under the age of 14. No relative change has been recorded in the marriage of girls aged 14-17.

This report presents the findings from a research study on child marriage in Bangladesh, India and Nepal. The research was carried out under the aegis of the Asia Child Marriage Initiative (ACMI), which is part of Plan International’s Because I am a Girl (BIAAG) campaign. Plan sees child marriage as a serious violation of child rights and a barrier to the development of children. Plan also believes that gender equality is central to achieving its vision for change: a world in which all children, both girls and boys, realise their full potential in societies that respect people’s rights and dignity. Child marriage among girls perpetuates unequal community and family decision-making power, gender gaps in educational achievement and economic independence, and poor reproductive and sexual health. The International Center for Research on Women (ICRW) carried out this study in 2012 in partnership with Plan’s Country Offices (COs) in Bangladesh, India and Nepal.

# Asia Child Marriage Initiative

Plan/Suzanne Lee



The Asia Child Marriage Initiative (ACMI) is a multi-country initiative in the Asia region, started in 2010, aimed at preventing child marriage and mitigating its negative consequences on children, families and communities. The aim of this initiative is to understand the practice of child marriage in Plan's selected programme locations in South Asia and also to explore various pathways through which Plan has addressed the challenges of child marriage.

Plan follows a Child-Centred Community Development (CCCD) approach for all its programmes and in 2010 adopted a rights-based approach to the implementation of CCCD. ACMI recognises the various influences on a child's life from national and international structures to the community, household, and the individual child's desires and

aspirations. The ACMI framework addresses child marriage across all dimensions of a child's life: at the family, community and national levels through to the dominant social, economic and cultural factors that shape the lives of children. Plan's programmes engage not only with children but also with families, the wider communities, civil society organisations, and state and local governments.

The theory of change behind ACMI recognises the deep-rooted and multi-causal nature of child marriage. The elimination of child marriage requires multi-pronged interventions to alter the social norms and legal frameworks around the practice.

## Status of child marriage in Bangladesh, India and Nepal

Plan/Suzanne Lee



### Bangladesh

According to UNICEF's State of the World's Children (2011), one-third of women aged 20-24 in Bangladesh are married by the age of 15 and about two-thirds by the age of 18. A recent study by the International Centre for Diarrhoeal Disease Research in Bangladesh (ICDDR,B & Plan Bangladesh 2012) shows an improving trend, with 64 per cent of women in the 20-24 age group married before 18 years of age. A higher proportion of women (71 per cent) in rural areas are married before 18 years of age, compared to 54 per cent of women in urban areas. The study also shows strong associations among child marriage, education and economic status, with higher rates of child marriage among women with low or no education and for those from families living in poverty. There has been only a very slight increase in the average girl's age for marriage, from 16 years in 2004 to 16.4 in 2007.

*Tamanna, 13, speaks during a monthly meeting of a children's group in Bangladesh. "We have an organised system; we have a list of girls who are potential child brides and we check on them. Another initiative is making sure that there is birth registration for babies so that there will be proof of their age," she explains.*

Under the Child Marriage Restraint Act (1929), the legal marriage age in Bangladesh is 18 years for a girl and 21 years for a boy. Penalties for child marriage according to the Child Marriage Restraint Act are imprisonment for one month or a fine up to 1,000 taka (€9.4) or both. Any adult or guardian arranging or permitting child marriage can be convicted under the law. Women cannot be sentenced to imprisonment. The case has to be registered with a court of law within one year of the marriage. If an impending child marriage is brought to



*“In addition to rolling beedis and doing household chores, I also have to look after three very young children,” says Ghazala, 17, from India.*

a court’s notice, it can be legally prohibited. However, once completed, a child’s marriage is not considered invalid (Emory Law School n.d.). In 2004, the Birth and Death Registration Act was amended to make it mandatory for the bride and groom to have a birth certificate before a marriage can be registered.

## India

According to the Indian National Family Health Survey (NFHS-3) 2005-2006 (International Institute for Population Sciences and Macro International 2007), 47 per cent of women aged 20 to 24 were married before they were 18 years of age. Between 1992-93 and 2005-06, the decline in the incidence of child marriage in India was approximately 7 per cent. However, in some states, the prevalence of child marriage still exceeds 60 per cent with the highest rates found in Bihar, Jharkhand, Rajasthan and Andhra Pradesh. The practice is more prevalent in rural areas compared to urban areas, with rates of 56 and 29 per cent respectively (UNICEF 2011). There is a clear association between child marriage and education. The incidence of child marriage is 77 per cent among girls with no education, 62 per cent among girls with a primary education and 27 per cent among girls with a secondary education or higher (Gupta et al. 2008).

Under the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act (2006), the legal age of marriage is 18 years for girls and 21 years for boys. It mandates punitive measures against all who perform, permit or promote child marriage.

## Nepal

According to Nepal’s Demographic and Health Survey (Ministry of Health and Population Nepal, New ERA and ICF International Inc. 2011), 41 per cent of Nepalese women aged 20 to 24 were married before they turned 18. A recent study (SOLID Nepal 2012) on child marriage found that 52 per cent of women and 34 per cent of men aged 20 to 24 were married before the legal marriageable age. Child marriage was most prevalent among non-literate, *Janajati* and *Dalit* castes of Nepal (especially among the women in these groups). This study also found that child marriage rates were higher among women with less education. However, the situation varies widely according to geographical regions and ethnic groups. Girls who were born into the highest wealth quintile marry about two years later than those from lower quintiles. In Nepal, there are indications of strong son preferences and sporadic studies (Aryal 2007; Thapa 1996) have shown that even educated boys demand high dowry and prefer early marriage.

The Eleventh Amendment to the Nepalese Country Code states that individuals can marry at age 18 with parental consent and at age 20 without consent. The punishment for child marriage is imprisonment for up to three years and a fine of up to 10,000 rupees (€87). While progressive legislation is a positive step against child marriage, high numbers of girls continue to be married before the age of 18 (ICRW 2012).

# Plan's programmes in Bangladesh, India and Nepal: linkages to child marriage



Dina Torrains

ACMI seeks to build on existing country programmes and pull together new activities under a single framework on child marriage. Consequently, each of the three countries has developed programmes based on CCCD principles and strategies. However, the actual programmes in each country have different designs and objectives based on realities prevailing in each country.<sup>i</sup> In this section, we briefly describe the country programmes that have a direct or indirect effect on child marriage.

## Plan Bangladesh

Under its Protection of Vulnerable Children Programme, Plan Bangladesh lists reduction of child marriage in rural areas as one of its programme objectives. At the programme unit level, the objectives are to: increase the

mean age of girls at marriage from 15 to 18 years by 2015 and to strengthen government mechanisms by supporting the online birth registration system and enforcement of the Child Marriage Restraint Act (1929). The programme includes awareness-raising activities among stakeholders, life skills training for adolescents, promotion of peer leaders and advocacy efforts with duty bearers. Child marriage is also addressed through the Community Managed Health Programme (CMHP) for adolescent girls. The indicators for measuring outcomes are: the mean age of marriage; the number of districts that have established online birth registration information systems; and the number of police stations that have established a system for reporting child marriages.

To provide inputs for strengthening its work on child marriage, Plan Bangladesh commissioned a national-level study on child marriage (ACPR, ICDDR,B & Plan Bangladesh 2012). The objective of the study was to understand the present situation of child marriage in the country and identify causes of, and factors associated with, the practice.

## Plan India

Plan India addresses child marriage under its programme for promoting children's right to protection from abuse and exploitation. Plan India's objective is to promote knowledge, attitudes and practices with regard to child marriage and children's rights. The programme indicator is the percentage of girls married before the legal age of 18 years. As part of the BIAAG campaign, Plan India has been conducting a series of research studies since 2009. The latest study (Plan India 2012) is on adolescent girls in educationally deprived areas of India. This study presents some recent findings on child marriage in India, which are referred to in this report.

## Plan Nepal

Under the objective of protecting women and girls from gender-based violence, Plan Nepal aims to build the capacity and commitment of children, their families and communities to eliminate child marriage through: building awareness about its negative effects; mobilising child and youth clubs and protection groups; using peer and community pressure; and providing life skills education. Plan Nepal has been working on the issue of child marriage for more than a decade. In 2012, Plan Nepal, together with Save the Children and World Vision, commissioned a national level study to examine recent trends in child marriage, its causes and its consequences (Plan Nepal *et al* 2012). The results from this study are referred to in this report.

# Current study

Prior research has shown that various socio-economic factors (education, urbanisation, standard of living, work participation of women, etc.) are associated with child marriage, along with certain cultural and social norms (Gupta *et al* 2008). Recent research conducted jointly by the ICRW & UNICEF (2011) in India demonstrates key structural drivers for the marriage of girls under the age of 18. These include: a) gender norms and expectations (notions of a girl's familial role, significance of chastity, fear of stigma and security concerns); b) economic factors (dowry, poverty and cost of marriage); c) cultural and religious practices; and d) the poor state of public education (limited infrastructure, distance from schools and lack of vocational training).

The ICRW is spearheading efforts to find solutions that can prevent child marriage in Asia. The ICRW's previous research provides a deeper understanding of the scope, causes and consequences of child marriage. Based on years of involvement with the issue of child marriage, the ICRW carried out this study to provide additional insights to the Plan Asia Regional Office and to highlight the implications for advocacy. The evidence obtained from this research contributes to the understanding of child marriage practices in Plan's programming areas in these three countries and provides recommendations for strengthening programme and advocacy efforts to eliminate child marriage.

## Objectives and research questions

The current study explores the perceptions of different stakeholders regarding the causes and consequences of child marriage and the efficacy of Plan's programming in addressing these factors. It also seeks to understand the issue primarily from the perspective of children who were exposed to Plan's programmes.

The main research question the study seeks to answer is: How effectively have Plan's child-centred approaches in Bangladesh, India, and Nepal addressed the causes and consequences of child marriage? To answer this question, the research examined how Plan's interventions in each of the three countries worked at the individual, family and community levels.

More specifically, the study sought to explore a series of sub-questions relating to the main research question:

Have Plan's interventions in these three countries:

- i. Increased awareness regarding child marriage laws and the consequences of child marriage among individuals, families and the community?
- ii. Increased negotiation skills among children and empowered them to prevent child marriage?
- iii. Succeeded in increased awareness and action by local and national state institutions to prevent child marriage?
- iv. Succeeded in creating enabling environments for the reduction of child marriage as a result of its partnership with the state and advocacy efforts?
- v. Successfully transitioned from a service delivery to a rights-based approach?



Paolo Black for the Young Health Programme

Furthermore, the study sought to discover what can be learnt from specific cases of child marriage prevention and find examples of best practice within Plan's programming and advocacy efforts.

## Methodology

The current study is based on qualitative data collected from Bangladesh, India and Nepal and secondary data from reports and studies on child marriage in these countries. Primary data was gathered through in-depth interviews and focus group discussions (FGD) with a range of stakeholders including children, parents, community leaders and government officers. In each country, two to four role models were also identified and interviewed. The criterion for selection of role models was persons who had successfully prevented a child marriage in the face of adverse circumstances.

A total of 47 to 55 interviews and 10 FGDs were conducted in each country, with about three-quarters of the interviews conducted in areas where Plan is active. The remainder were conducted in non-Plan areas. The objective of doing the latter was to obtain responses from persons not exposed to Plan's programmes.

In Bangladesh, the study was conducted in Nilphamari and Rangpur districts of Ranpur and Gazipur district of Dhaka. In Nepal, the study was conducted in Banke district in Bheri Zone, Makwanpur district in Narayani Zone and Sunsari district in Koshi Zone. In India, the study was conducted in Bikaner district of Rajasthan. While the broad sampling strategy was the same across the three countries, there were a few context-specific variations in the final sample selection in each country. These are detailed in separate individual country reports on the study.

In the interviews and FGDs, the following themes were discussed:

- i. Education patterns among girls and boys and the effect of this on delaying marriage.
- ii. The aspirations of young persons and their parents.
- iii. People in the community who are perceived as role models.
- iv. Perceptions of the importance of marriage; factors determining at what age young people are married; decision-making regarding marriage; and the role of children in marriage decisions.
- v. The causes and consequences of child marriage.
- vi. Knowledge about marriage laws and the effectiveness of these laws in preventing child marriage; factors responsible for the current status of law implementation.
- vii. Child rights in the family and the roles of girls and boys in household decision-making.
- viii. The role of civil society organisations, specifically the role of Plan in preventing child marriage.

## Limitations

The focus of this study is on the perceptions of different stakeholders regarding the causes of child marriage and the efficacy of Plan's programming in addressing these causal factors. It reflects not only the supply of Plan's interventions, but also the response to these interventions from the communities and the state. This study does not have a quantitative component and therefore does not aim to measure any changes in the incidence of child marriage. The aim is to understand the changes in attitudes and behaviour in the families and communities that Plan works with and to examine how its interventions are addressing factors relating to child marriage in these contexts. In this report, we let the voices of young girls and boys, parents, local leaders, and government officers tell the story.

The next section presents and discusses the key findings from the study. This is followed by the conclusions and recommendations for Plan's programming and government policy. Finally, we highlight areas for further research.



# Discussion of the key findings



Plan

*Nargis, 19, used to dream of becoming a teacher. Now a mother of two, she has had to rethink her life. “I was studying in grade 8 when child marriage shattered all my dreams,” she says. She was 16 when her parents arranged her marriage to an older man from the same district in central Bangladesh. “My first son died. Now I have another son, but he is malnourished,” Nargis says.*

## The causes of child marriage

In this section, we present the research findings and highlight the similarities and differences among the three case study countries. First, we present the respondents’ views on the causes of child marriage and what can be done to prevent it. Second, we discuss Plan’s interventions in these three contexts and highlight some strategies that are working well in addressing the challenges of child marriage.

Respondents in all three countries reported that there has been an upward shift in the age at which children are married from 11-13 years to 15-17 years and that the legal age for marriage is not observed. The causes of child marriage include normative and structural factors, such as social norms, economic status and opportunities available to women.

The traditional causes of child marriage in the three countries are fairly similar, as all three share many social values and norms. In addition, there are circumstantial and context-specific factors that influence household decision-making, such as the loss of a parent or the availability of education and opportunities for women. These have a smaller effect on the age at which children marry. Respondents also report that, in recent times, there has been an increase in self-initiated child marriages. These various drivers of child marriage are discussed below in more detail.

### Tradition and the role of the family in child marriage

All three countries share a tradition of child marriage, and cultural norms persist today. Across the three countries, parents and their children consider marriage necessary and inevitable. Furthermore, it is the parent’s responsibility to marry their daughters and protect their chastity until they are married. Early marriage ensures an honourable discharge from this duty. Parents who delay the marriage of their daughters are seen as failing in their parental responsibilities and have to face adverse comments from the community.

The safety and security of young girls worries parents and they feel that an unmarried girl is vulnerable to sexual exploitation and abuse. Marriage is seen as a preventative measure to protect young girls from potential danger.

***“The reason behind this is eve-teasing. When a girl starts becoming mature in our area, then the bad guys start following her or teasing her. Parents are very scared about that and don’t want their daughters to continue studying, so they get them married.”***

(Religious leader, Bangladesh)

Since the primary roles for women are those of wives and mothers, parents see little merit in delaying a girl’s marriage once she is old enough to take on these roles. Generally, getting an education is linked to getting a job, and if a woman will only be engaged in household jobs, parents see little reason to educate her beyond a minimal level.

Some male respondents in Nepal echoed the norm of women's primary roles as home-makers in the rationale given for girls' early marriage. The respondents felt that parents want to marry their children early in order to hand over domestic responsibilities, which are clearly gendered, to the younger generation.

***“Parents always want to give responsibility to their children. After marriage a son has to earn for the family, which was being done by his father, and a mother wants to handover her responsibility to her daughters-in-law. Every parent wants to take food from the hands of their daughters-in-law.”***

(Married boy under 18, Nepal)



*In Nepal, the red powder on this girl's forehead is a symbol that she is married.*

## Poverty and child marriage

Girls from families in lower wealth quintiles are more vulnerable to child marriage and there are multiple factors that aggravate this vulnerability. The first factor has to do with fewer years in school. Girls from these families are excluded from attending school because of the costs associated with education.<sup>ii</sup>

The respective governments in all three countries have set up scholarship programmes for girls and there is some indication that this is enabling girls to stay in school longer. However, there is also evidence to show that the availability of scholarships is far from universal. In addition, the indirect costs of education, such as transportation and extra tuition, make it harder for some families to keep their girls in school. The cost of education continues to be a deterrent for girls from the poorest families.

As a father of three daughters in Nepal told us:

***“Regarding my younger daughter, I want to have her education up to SLC [School Leaving Certificate] passed, but I don't know what will happen. Maybe I will arrange her marriage. I have tried to support them. My elder daughter stopped her education due to money problems. I am earning doing labour work. I should support all expenses like clothes, food and medicine, from my single earning. School provides only two books for my daughter. If we receive support of school fees and other materials then I will educate my daughters so they can study. We did not get the facilities that we should get from the dalit quota. I asked for support but nobody hears...”***

(Father of unmarried girl, Nepal)

The limited resources in these families are more likely to be spent on a boy's education than a girl's. The expenditure on a son's education is seen as an investment by parents, unlike the expenditure on a daughter who will eventually move to her marital family. It was also commonly reported that if a girl is not in school, parents are more likely to arrange her marriage sooner.

Respondents said that girls from lower wealth quintiles are more likely to experience sexual harassment than those from higher wealth quintiles and this can be a factor in child marriage. Given the importance of female chastity, early marriage is seen as a solution.

A school teacher in Bangladesh shared his impressions:

***“Sometimes the girls face eve-teasing when they walk on the roads; a boy constantly follows a beautiful girl of a poor family. They do not disturb girls of influential families, but the poor families marry off the girl because of security [concerns].”***

(School teacher, Bangladesh)



*A 15-year-old girl from Nepal feeds her 8-month-old baby.*

In the context of Rajasthan, India, parents concerned about the expenses associated with marriage are likely to marry a very young girl at the same time as an older sibling or cousin.

In Bangladesh and Nepal, respondents said that parents are able to give a smaller dowry for younger girls, raising the chances that parents marry their daughters at a young age.

***“I have three daughters aged 17, 15 and 13. We’ll marry them off together. The expenses have increased so much! We want to marry three girls and the boy together. But these girls say that they do not want to get married. How do we explain to them that it is an expensive affair? Now, if someone is doing a job, they can afford many marriage functions. If we do one function then we save money.”***

(Mother of unmarried girl, India)

## Education and child marriage

There is clearly an association between education and delaying marriage. On average, women with more years of education marry at a later age. In this study, we explore this issue to understand the link between education and delaying marriage. In all three countries, parents and children spoke of the value of education and the growing importance of education for girls. Respondents in all three countries also observed that completion of primary education among girls is becoming much more common.

However, the situation regarding secondary and higher education varies across the three countries. In Rajasthan, India, many villages have primary schools, but access to middle and high school is relatively difficult, as fewer villages have secondary schools. Girls have to travel to neighbouring villages if they want to study beyond primary school. Parents are concerned about the safety of their girls and are therefore reluctant to send them.<sup>iii</sup>

Respondents in Bangladesh and Nepal reported relative ease of access to middle and high school, while most girls in these countries enter middle school. However, it is uncommon for a girl to complete middle school and given the social preference for girls’ early marriage, school enrolment in and of itself is insufficient to prevent marriage. In Bangladesh, girls aged 15-17 were usually married and had to discontinue schooling.

In all three countries, there were a few cases where girls themselves reported they had dropped out of school because they were uninterested in their studies. A recent study by Plan India (2012) found that between 14-28 per cent of girl respondents in three different locations in India cited lack of interest as a reason for discontinuing their education.

While being in school is not enough to prevent marriage, being out of school certainly accelerates the likelihood of it. Several respondents said that if a girl is not studying and just “sitting at home”, her parents will certainly want to get her married.

***“But in other cases it is observed that if a girl doesn’t study and is sitting idle at home, then she is married off quickly, and if she studies and does well in her exams, then she is married off later.”***

(Unmarried girl, above 18, Bangladesh)



*Afroza from Bangladesh is 17 years old. After delivering her first child, she lost consciousness, only to wake up to more labour pains – the birth of twins. Afroza is struggling to adapt to the demands of motherhood.*

The length of a girl's studies is a function of the family's economic circumstances, ease of access to schools and the aspirations that she and her family have. While poverty is generally a factor associated with early school dropout, parents and children indicated that if a girl and her family were determined, she would continue with her studies despite strained financial circumstances.<sup>iv</sup>

Aspirations in turn are often a function of the exposure to possibilities and alternative roles for women. There are a few cases where child brides are able to continue with their education after getting married and sometimes even after having a child. This is possible if the girl herself has a strong desire to continue her education and also has the support of her parents-in-law for doing so. Bangladesh seems to have a higher prevalence of married girls and young mothers continuing with their education than the other two countries. According to a recent study commissioned by Plan Bangladesh (ACPR *et al* 2012), 38 per cent of women in urban areas and 20 per cent of women in rural areas continued their studies after getting married. There was no evidence in the data to explain this difference and further research is required to understand the issue.

***“My father is educating me with hardship. My mother is sick; in the midst of such a situation they need to give me 50 taka every day [for transportation]. My father is fulfilling my dreams; I will also meet their needs after getting established.”***

(Unmarried girl above 18, Bangladesh)

***“The eldest son of my eldest uncle is a marketing officer; one of my brothers is in the army. One of my sisters-in-law (the wife of my brother) has studied a lot, she is also a teacher. Each and every one of my father's family is very much educated. Only we are illiterate. All of the relatives of my father's house always come and visit my family. They always tell us not to get my daughter married soon; rather they tell us to continue the education of my daughter. They tell us that will be a mistake if I get my daughter married at an early age.”***

(Mother of role model, Bangladesh)

### **Role of children in child marriage**

A relatively less discussed and understood reason for child marriage that emerged is self-initiated marriages by young girls (and boys).<sup>v</sup> According to one girl in Nepal, and her opinion was endorsed by many others, the effect of education on marriage is nullified because girls in schools initiate their own marriages due to “love” and “self-initiation”. There were reports from all three countries of girls under 18 choosing to get married, with or without parental consent. Two factors that were seen as contributing to the increase in self-initiated marriages were the increased inter-mingling of girls and boys in schools and the availability of mobile phones. These developments in recent years have increased the ease of communication between girls and boys and facilitated self-initiated marriages.

The concern among parents seems to be more about the damage to family prestige and honour, rather than the young age at which they are marrying. Their reactions appear to be more about the young girls' self-assertion and defiance of family control than about the marriage. Nevertheless, this phenomenon of children choosing to marry creates fear among parents that if a young girl is not married, she may choose to run away with someone of her choice, which will damage family pride. This fear can contribute to the parent's decision to marry their girls early.<sup>vi</sup>

## Engagement in paid work and child marriage

There was no clear consensus on whether engagement in paid work led to delaying a girl's marriage. It was felt that if a family is poor and depends on the girl's financial contribution, then they might delay her marriage. However, even in such cases, if the family finds a good husband, they will arrange the marriage.

Rather than the engagement in paid work, it was the nature of work and the level of education that is more likely to prevent an early marriage.<sup>vii</sup>

As some boys said:

*“Yes, girls' education affects the age at which she is married. If a daughter is studying well, parents don't hurry or force marriage. But children are doing love marriages mostly because boys and girls meet in the school and fall into affairs and run away.”*

(Unmarried girl under 18, Nepal)

*“It [child marriage] is happening but parents are not responsible for this in most of the cases. Most of the girls get married by themselves at their early ages without the consent of their parents. They escape from their house and families to get married; therefore parents are bound to get them married early.”*

(Unmarried girl under 18, Bangladesh)

*“If a girl is working and gets married late, it is seen as positive, but not if she marries late due to poverty.”*

(FGD with boys in a children's organisation, Bangladesh)

*“For instance, one of my cousin's sisters is doing a job. She now gets a handsome salary and got married one year ago. She can be a role model. She got married after becoming [financially] independent.”*

(FGD with boys in a children's organisation, Bangladesh)

## Context-specific factors: demographic shifts

While social norms favouring early marriage are common across the three countries, there are certain context-specific factors that play an important role. In the case of Rajasthan, the declining sex ratio (decline in the proportion of girls to boys) has promoted the practice of *Atta Satta*, which involves the exchange of a daughter for a daughter-in-law in marriage. Parents who want a bride for their son give their daughter as a bride in exchange, even if she is very young.

*“If there are less girls, then they also say you give us your daughter, we will give you ours, then they have to give it forcefully; whichever daughter is there, she is ready to get married. No, I don't agree, it is wrong, but there is no other alternative.”*

(Father of unmarried girl under 18, India)

## Prevention of child marriage

### Perception of girls, boys and parents

Almost all the young girls, boys and parents interviewed for the study were against child marriage and recommended a variety of methods for preventing it, such as raising awareness, strict implementation of laws, eradication of the dowry and promoting girls' education.

In Nepal, boys and girls also suggested collective initiatives coming from children and communities, including religious leaders.

***“If children in a village become united and start to oppose child marriage collectively, parents stop marrying their children. Last year we tried to stop the child marriage of a 12-year-old girl. She has no father and her mother wanted to send her daughter to the husband’s home. We protested against the marriage, but the bride’s mother was not ready to stop the marriage; she, however, promised that she will send her daughter [to her husband’s home] after a few years.”***

(Married boy under 18, Nepal)



*Shanti (left) is a 14-year-old girl from Bihar, India. Shanti’s parents planned for her to get married at the age of just 13. However, Shanti attended a child rights group and learnt about girls’ participation, girls’ education, early marriage and pregnancy. The youth group helped to convince her parents that marriage was not the best thing for her at such a young age. Since Shanti escaped marriage, she has continued to attend school.*

## Perception of community leaders and government officials

Community leaders and government officers felt that there has been positive change in the situation regarding child marriage, and that there are fewer child marriages. They credited the work of the government and NGOs in increasing awareness about the issue. They also mentioned the availability of education, which makes it easier for girls to stay in school longer. Some also mentioned the need to eradicate poverty as a means of eliminating child marriage. However, they felt that there was a need for greater awareness about the negative consequences of child marriage and better implementation of legislation. They also mentioned the need for cooperation between the government and NGOs and the critical role of parents and families.

For example, in Nepal, a majority of the government officers interviewed believed that even if the government already has legislation and strict monitoring in place, real change will come only if families and parents believed in the value of girl children rather than treating them as burdens.

***“Families don’t know the consequences of child marriage. They are willing to arrange the marriage of a daughter as early as possible because they are taking a girl as a burden, and if a girl chooses any boy it would be a big issue; that’s why they don’t want to take the risk. They are always worried for their girls; when and where to marry. They also do not have a good residence to keep their daughter safe at night.”***

(Local Development Officer, Nepal)

Others called for improved coordination among the different stakeholders and the need for long-term and strategic plans by the government.

***“Well, I will again say that different government, non-government and social organisations have to make a joint initiative. Advocacy is a big issue, to make the people aware that with child marriage there is a possibility of risk and how it is beneficial if it is not done. All these issues have to be promoted; this is the big thing. Many people do not know what child marriage is and at what age a girl can be married off; the problems are if a girl aged 14 or 15 years is married off. Actually, they do not know all these [issues].”***

(Officer-in-Charge, Bangladesh)

Community leaders in Bangladesh are appreciative of the child marriage prevention efforts of organisations like Plan and state that the house-to-house outreach done by Plan in the community has been effective.

## **Cases of child marriages prevented**

The study also explored child marriage prevention and asked respondents about cases of child marriage that were successfully prevented. In all three countries, there are efforts by Plan, other NGOs and government to identify and prevent child marriage through community action and legal recourse. For instance, Plan supports community-based organisations (CBOs) for children and adults to prevent families from marrying children and motivate local leaders to use their influence. The prohibition against marriage registrars and government officers registering marriages of persons below the legal age is another mechanism of prevention.

Respondents from the community and government were frank in admitting that there were few cases where child marriage had been prevented. Both community members and government officers felt that preventing child marriage is difficult for two reasons. First, people had become aware about child marriage laws and conducted such marriages clandestinely to avoid being caught. For instance, they would conduct the marriage away from their homes or not disclose the date of the ceremony. Second, in most cases the issue comes to light only after all the arrangements have been made and the concerned parties have spent significant sums of money. The stopping of a marriage at this stage would not only hurt a family’s honour, but also cause severe financial loss.

The cases of child marriage that were prevented fall into two categories. First, a girl whose marriage was being arranged resisted and opposed her parents’ decision. These were mostly cases of girls who were identified as role models in the study and where young girls have taken the decisive step of challenging established norms. In some of these cases, the girls sought the support of a children’s organisation.

***M: “Did you stop the marriage according to her argument?”***

***P: “No, she cried a lot but we did not agree then to stop her marriage. Then she told an organisation and [a Plan Bangladesh worker] from her organisation came to make us understand. Then we decided to stop her marriage.”***

(Mother of role model under 18, Bangladesh)

The second category of cases includes those where community action was instrumental in preventing a child marriage.

***“We succeeded in stopping a child marriage in Puraina VDC, where a girl of 10 years and a boy of 12 years were getting married. We informed and activated the child marriage network. We also informed police, the women’s network and a journalist. We convinced the parents of the girl, informing them about the disadvantages of child marriage and the child marriage law, and succeeded [in stopping the marriage].”***

(Role model who is unmarried and above 18, Nepal)

These few cases of child marriage prevention involved community members, police officers and local leaders cooperating to prevent the marriage. This illustrates the importance of coordination between the different stakeholders and the need to involve both the formal structures of the state and the community for a strong social movement against child marriage.

## Role model girls and parents: cases of positive deviance

The study also identified cases of young girls and parents who could be seen as cases of positive deviance and role models in their communities because of their position against child marriage. These role models were found both in Plan's programme and non-programme areas.

Plan / Bernice Wong



*Rujina from Bangladesh is 16 years old. She was married at 12 and had a baby at 14. She loved attending school and speaks fondly of those days. After her marriage, she had to give up her education to be a mother and homemaker.*

Parents who delayed their daughter's marriage in the face of social pressures did so because they did not want a marriage before the girl had completed at least high school or university. Clearly, these role model parents have internalised the value of education. In addition, many of them felt that marrying a girl early was detrimental to her physical and psychological health.

Young girls identified as role models often had to resist parental pressure for an early marriage. These girls held the conviction that they did not want an early marriage and their response to pressure from their parents ranged from confrontation to negotiation. In all these cases, the girls were finally able to bring their parents around to share their point of view. Girls in this category did not subscribe to traditional gender roles and aspired to higher education, employment and economic independence.

Most of the role model girls had to face significant parental and social pressure. Other girls in the community look up to these girls, and they are cited as examples by younger girls who want to follow suit.

***"I want to marry only after I get a job. If I get a good job then I will earn money and I can improve my life and then marry. After marriage it's not possible to get a job; some people don't allow [you to get a job] and say do housework only. My family told me to get married now, but I told them that I want to first get a good job and then marry. So, now they have agreed."***

(Unmarried girl above 18, India)



# Plan's Child-Centred Community Development interventions and their effectiveness

Plan's programmes in the three countries share common Child-Centred Community Development (CCCD) approaches and children are key programme participants. However, the inputs provided to the children vary in each context, as does the engagement with key stakeholders, such as parents, community leaders and government officers. The manner in which each of the country programmes addresses the issue of child marriage also varies. For instance, Plan Bangladesh has a more explicit focus on the prevention of child marriage and strong engagement with the government on the issue. Plan India and Plan Nepal, on the other hand, do not have a specific programme focus on child marriage, but include it under broader child protection programmes.



In this section, we discuss the findings with regard to Plan's programmes that have a bearing on child marriage, directly or indirectly.<sup>viii</sup>

## Plan Bangladesh

Plan Bangladesh has a strong focus on child marriage. Plan Bangladesh works in various ways with children, adults, local leaders and government officers to raise awareness in communities. Even children who were not members of the children's organisations in these areas were aware of Plan's child rights messages.

Plan Bangladesh has also worked to raise awareness of the negative consequences of child marriage. The most commonly reported consequences of child marriage were the danger to young girls' health and the difficulty faced by young women in adjusting to new relationships. Awareness of child marriage as a violation of child rights was less commonly reported. There is widespread awareness about the legal age for marriage, but negligible knowledge about the penalties. This may be in part due to weak implementation of the legislation.

Plan Bangladesh works in partnership with local government institutions (LGIs), to identify and celebrate child marriage-free villages and unions. Such efforts give visibility to the issue of child marriage and demonstrate publicly the importance of changing norms. Plan Bangladesh also supports the government of Bangladesh in its efforts to institute online universal birth registration to enable implementation of legislation against child marriage. Online registration makes it extremely difficult to falsify a child's age once it has been entered in the records at birth and thus prevents false birth certificates.

Plan's CCCD approach promotes linkages with teachers, religious leaders and other community leaders. Plan Bangladesh's presence in the community is recognised by local leaders, who are appreciative of the outreach made possible with the organisation's support. In addition, the children's organisations facilitated by Plan Bangladesh appear to be important channels for building the confidence and negotiation skills of children to assert themselves.

## Plan Nepal

In the case of Nepal, child marriage is addressed under its Child Protection Programme and considered a facet of gender-based violence. According to the Country Strategic Plan 2010-2015 (Plan Nepal 2010), Plan aims to build the capacity and commitment of children, their families and communities to eliminate child marriage through building awareness about its negative effects, mobilising child and youth clubs and protection groups, using peer and community pressure, and providing life skills education.

The key programme of Plan Nepal related to child marriage is the Better Life Option Program (BLOP) training for members of the children's clubs. The programme provides life skills education to adolescent girls and boys and covers: a) family life education, reproductive health education and services to them; b) non-formal education; and c) skills and vocational training. The issue of child marriage is discussed in the course of this training programme.

Findings indicate that children who participated in BLOP or children's club activities had many positive experiences to relate and emphasised that the exposure helped them to better express themselves and enhanced their self-confidence.

## Plan India

In Rajasthan, a programme supported by Plan organises residential education camps for girls who drop out of school or have never enrolled. These camps are bridging programmes that help participants enrol in school after the completion of the programme. The specific impact of the camps on child marriage was difficult to isolate since the central focus of the programme was directed towards promoting education and raising awareness of its benefits. However, the experiences of some girls who had attended the residential camps do support the evidence that increased education of girls results in delaying the age at marriage by a few years, if not ending the practice of child marriage.

# Successful strategies adopted by Plan

This section discusses the successful strategies adopted by Plan in the three COs to delay the marriage of children and prevent early marriages of girls. Six strategies are discussed here.

## Children's organisations

Promoting and providing sustained support to children's organisations is a successful strategy for ensuring children's participation and ownership in platforms for creating awareness about the negative consequences of child marriage. Plan programmes in the three countries are already doing this with different degrees of intensity. Participation in these organisations has built children's capacities and expanded their worldviews.

There is evidence that participation in these organisations has provided children with the knowledge and skills to negotiate with adults and prevent their own early marriage. Strengthening these organisations can enhance their potential as pressure groups in the community to support change in social norms regarding the age at which marriage is arranged or entered into.

## Partnering with government and civil society

Partnerships between civil society organisations and government for the prevention of child marriage seem to yield positive results. The scale of government programmes, combined with community outreach of civil society organisations, ensures that the respective strengths of the two sectors are synergised for positive results. For example, Plan Bangladesh's work with the *Union Parishads* (local governments) to declare child-marriage-free *Unions* is effective in giving visibility to the issue and raising awareness.

## Engaging with community leaders

Ending child marriage requires a change in social norms and influential persons in the community such as religious leaders and teachers play strong roles in upholding or challenging the *status quo*. Plan engages with these persons and invites their participation in community events. Messages coming from these leaders around the value of girls' education or the need to stop dowry practices can be very effective in influencing public opinion. Plan's CCCD approach recognises the value of this engagement with community leaders. Further expanding this approach will strengthen progress towards the end of child marriage.

## Raising awareness about child marriage as a violation of child rights

All country programmes and national governments are actively raising awareness about the negative consequences of child marriage and there is fairly widespread awareness about the illegality of marriage before the age of 18. Plan's unique contribution is the linkage of child marriage to the violation of child rights. Parents, children and government officers who had been exposed to Plan's programmes had increased awareness about child rights and identified child marriage as a rights violation.



## Facilitating secondary education

If girls complete secondary education before getting married, they are more likely to avoid being married before age 18 (Singh & Samara 1996; Murphy & Carr 2007). Plan India's partner in Rajasthan, Urmul-SETU, organises residential educational camps for girls to help them complete middle secondary and higher secondary school. These camps not only provide a safe space where parents are willing to send their daughters, they also are an opportunity for broad-based capacity building and life skills education. Plan's programmes in all three countries also support keeping girls in secondary school through various avenues.

## Employing girls in paid work outside the house

To reduce the incidence of child marriage, socially valued roles for women must expand beyond those of being a wife and mother. Broadening opportunities for women makes it meaningful for parents to invest in a girl's education. Plan Bangladesh appoints young women in the community as teachers in their child development centres and Plan-supported schools, thus creating new pathways for women to develop and achieve their aspirations.

# Conclusion

The study findings confirm that the early marriage of girls is socially valued and still a widespread practice in Bangladesh, India and Nepal. It remains common because it is rooted in underlying patriarchal values and gender norms (see Figure 1). Marriage for girls is seen as necessary and inevitable; protecting a daughter's chastity until she is married and arranging that marriage are essential parental responsibilities as stewards of her reproductive potential and sexuality. Parents' fears of failing to meet those responsibilities and facing stigma are aggravated by the threat of sexual violence against women and girls and the apparent rise in adolescents choosing their spouses and eloping independent of parental consent.

Men's relative power in decision-making also means that girls are rarely encouraged to express their opinions to adult males in the household, particularly with regard to major life choices like the timing of marriage and choice of spouse. Sons are more likely to be heard. In some contexts, a daughter is treated as a commodity and exchanged in marriage in return for a bride for the son of the house, irrespective of her age; this may be becoming more common in parts of India where sex-selective abortion has led to a scarcity of marriageable females. Finally, the rationale that only young girls are sexually attractive to men highlights the importance given to men's desires.

## Patriarchal values as factors in child marriage

- Emphasis on virginity – fear of sexual violence, compounded by insecure public spaces.
- Fear of elopement – damage to family honour.
- Poor communication between parents and girls -inexperience of girls in articulating dissent and negotiation.
- Women and girls as commodities for exchange between families.
- Belief that men are only attracted to young girls.

Figure 1



At the household level, deep-seated patriarchal values interact with family economics. Urban, better educated and economically secure families are more likely to accept the risks associated with delaying marriage and continuing the education of a daughter. Even if women are not expected to work outside the home after marriage, completion of secondary school is becoming the norm among families of higher economic status.

Families living in poverty, and those less exposed to the benefits of formal education, tend to continue with child marriage for a variety of reasons (see Figure 2). For these families, a daughter's secondary education brings real costs and opportunity costs with little in return. The daughter will leave the natal family and most likely be a home-maker and mother whose labour and skills benefit her marital family. If a daughter is not studying, there is a higher chance that she will be married early. Younger girls can be married with a smaller dowry in some contexts,

and this encourages parents to arrange child marriages. Furthermore, the greater vulnerability of families living in poverty, and the perceived burden of marrying a daughter, make circumstantial factors of greater importance. For example, if an older sister is getting married, the younger sister may also be married at the same time to save costs. Likewise, a period of relative financial success (such as a good harvest) may bring parents to decide to marry a daughter before the dowry needed disappears into other household costs.

## Links between poverty and child marriage

- Costs of education too high - dropouts more likely to be married.
- Group or exchanged marriages reduce ceremony costs.
- Less dowry for younger girls.
- Financial insecurity - marry a daughter when the dowry is available.

Figure 2

The good news is that aspirations and new possibilities for women's roles are rising. A family's or girl's exposure to role models – girls who are able to continue their education and/or delay their marriage with support from their parents, and women entering paid work – broadens their perceived options. In recent years, the social understanding of early marriage seems to be changing from 11-12 years to 15-17 years.

What actions can be taken to continue progress in this direction? Although there was a high level of awareness regarding the legal marrying age among the study participants, the implementation of legislation is still weak as laws are extensively flouted and prosecution is rarely pursued. There are a few instances where girls have successfully rebelled against child marriages, some with the support of child-rights organisations. However, such cases are rare, and girls are generally unable to resist family and social pressures.

The study findings clearly demonstrate an immediate need to adopt a multi-pronged approach that systematically addresses the early marriage of girls and boys. Some strategies and programmes are working well, and will benefit from further strengthening. Programmes need to focus further on additional factors in the enabling environment to make a meaningful difference to the intersecting challenges of child marriage.

Finally, there are policy-level initiatives that need to supplement organisational programmes to engender change at a macro level. These programmes and policies, if implemented in an effective and timely manner, will go a long way in delaying the marriage of girls and achieving the larger goal of reducing the prevalence of child marriage. Some of the specific recommendations emerging from the study findings are discussed below.

# Recommendations

## For programming

The recommendations discussed in the next two sections are based on the findings of this study and previous work on child marriage completed by the ICRW. Some of the recommendations are mirrored in the ACMI framework developed by Plan.

### 1. Develop systems for regular engagement with parents

Strengthen CBOs and develop systems for them to engage regularly with the families in their community.

The family as an institution plays a significant role in the perpetuation of child marriage. Furthermore, the continuation of a girl's education and a delay in her marriage depends greatly on family support. Plan's CCCD approach recognises the importance of engaging with families to bring about social change. Programmes operating at local levels need to target families most at risk of marrying their daughters as children. These families might include the poorest, those with several daughters or those with daughters that have already dropped out of school. CBO members working on preventing child marriage in their communities also need the opportunity to develop skills in communicating with their neighbours about child marriage and child rights. For example, each member of a CBO could select a set of families with whom she/he interacts on a regular basis through home visits, almost like a mentor, to ensure that they do not marry their daughters before age 18.

### 2. Engage with male members of the family

- a) Engage with adult males. In all three countries of this study, the father was the main decision maker regarding the daughter's marriage. Fathers are also the ones who are more likely to be reluctant to allow children's participation in children's organisations. Ensure that the club venues and meeting times are safe for children and provide reassurances to parents.
- b) Work with young men and boys in the family. Many respondents said that parents are more likely to listen to sons than to daughters.

There are examples of programmes embedding a gender-transformative approach to successfully facilitate young men in challenging the dominant understanding of manhood and their own inequitable attitudes. A review of programmes aimed at involving males found that those interventions that included a gender-transformative approach where men question and modify their gendered attitudes were more effective than those without a gender component (Temin & Levine 2009).

An ICRW study found that boys who were trained as peer educators for advocacy of later marriage were strong supporters of delaying marriage for the sake of girls' own preferences and wellbeing (Gupta et al. 2008). One example project, The Gender Equity Movement in Schools (GEMS) programme, works with municipal bodies, district authorities and local NGOs in a bid to reach thousands of students and teachers in schools and the wider community. The aim of GEMS is



*In India, Aisha (right) was 13 when she became a child bride and dropped out of school. Now, at the age of 16, she is four months pregnant. She has been rolling beedis ever since she came to live with her husband's family.*

to promote gender equitable norms, attitudes and behaviours in a school setting with a view to reducing negative sexual and reproductive health outcomes among boys and girls aged 12-18. In addition, the Family Violence Prevention Fund and the ICRW are implementing a programme titled Coaching Boys into Men for use with cricket players, their coaches and peers in Maharashtra, India (ICRW 2011a).

### **3. Use mass media to spread the campaign in the community**

Television is becoming increasingly common even in rural areas, and several respondents mentioned that television shows had increased their awareness about the negative consequences of child marriage. Programmes can harness mass media for campaigns against child marriage as a way to influence public opinion. Emphasise respect for the decisions of boys and girls to remain unmarried as long as they wish, rather than stigmatising the unmarried ones.

### **4. Strengthen capacities to empower girls and boys**

- a) Build the capacities of young women and men to negotiate in a non-confrontational manner. This will enable them to take a firm position without endangering family relationships. Parents are persuaded and influenced by young women and men who articulate their views on marriage and education with clarity. To do this, children and young people need to have access to information and the confidence to express themselves to family, and especially to adult males. Children who participate in children's organisations develop these skills and abilities only through sustained inputs over a long duration. It is important that children's organisations receive continued support to maintain momentum after the first few meetings.
- b) Address the phenomenon of self-initiated child marriages. Why, and under what circumstances, do boys and girls at very young ages choose to marry on their own without consent from their respective families? Girls and boys may be eager to assert their independence, escape from abusive situations or financial hardships, or simply to fall in love and begin sexual activity. The needs and desires of adolescents, including sexuality topics, should be addressed head on in children's organisations in an open and non-judgmental manner meant to build capacities for responsible decision-making that furthers children's long-term interests.

### **5. Leverage rising aspirations**

- a) Identify, nurture and promote role models. Parents and young girls are increasingly recognising the value of education and the better quality of life that this can enable. At the same time, they continue to believe in social norms for early marriage and the traditional role for women as home-makers. It is seen that if the parents and the girls have alternative aspirations about their future, they are more likely to invest in education and delay marriage. Aspirations in turn are a function of the family's exposure to possibilities. Exposing young girls and their families to potential opportunities and roles for women outside the house expands their worldview. Role models in communities need to be identified, nurtured and promoted in ways that do not put them in danger in their particular social and political context. Plan Bangladesh is already doing this on a small scale and has developed films and other promotional material on young women who have challenged traditional roles and social norms. Films and music that celebrate these women will inspire other families to take alternate paths.

### **6. Develop specific programmes and mitigation efforts for married children**

- a) Design and provide protective measures for girls who are married early. Few public and civil society programmes exist to meet the needs of this group. There is a general feeling that once a marriage takes place, not much can be done.

Child marriage negatively impacts the social, educational, economic, physical and personal development of girls. It results in low education, psycho-social challenges and poor decision-making skills. Most child brides drop out of school, because of the expectation that daughters-in-law carry out household chores and begin reproduction. One of the common consequences of child marriage is early pregnancy, which puts a girl at risk of life-threatening complications.

In order to safeguard married adolescent girls, it is imperative to provide protective measures specifically designed and targeted towards them. At a minimum, outreach services must be available in sexual and reproductive health, and additionally, life skills and vocational training programmes and support groups for young brides and mothers can help mitigate the results of child marriage.

- b) Emphasise the value of completing secondary education, even for married girls, through community, public, and family education campaigns. This study indicates that education is valued not only for getting a job; both parents and young women mentioned that being an educated person helps to be a better mother and home-maker. This sentiment should be leveraged and used to encourage all girls to at least complete secondary school. Scholarship programmes should be equally available for the education of married girls, but this is not always the case. For example, in Bangladesh, stipends and scholarships are available only for the education of unmarried girls. This needs to be reversed.

## **7. Promote livelihood programmes for women and girls**

- a) Promote vocational and skill-based training. The evidence in this study on the relationship between engagement in income generating activities and delaying early marriage is mixed. However, the empowering effect on women of engagement in paid work is well documented in several studies (Kabeer 2008). Engagement in income generating activities can also increase a girl's well-being in her marital household. Promotion of vocational and skill-based training for women is likely to have a positive impact for both unmarried and married women. For the unmarried, it may delay marriage; for the married, it can act to mitigate some of the negative effects of child marriage. If a woman who was married too young is able to have an independent income source, she will be in a stronger position in a marital home, and is less likely to be a victim of violence and abuse.

## **8. Make greater efforts to reach the poorest and most excluded families**

Identify and include families from the most marginalised groups in addressing the challenges of child marriage. The multiple vulnerabilities of families living in poverty, from particular ethnic groups or castes, with disabled members or other disadvantages, or in very remote locations not only lead to a higher incidence of child marriage, but also make it harder for programmatic inputs to reach them. Efforts at creating awareness and building capacities among adults and children tend to exclude these families.

Wealth ranking and other community participatory approaches can identify the most marginalised families. Reaching them may require programmatic adjustments and flexibility in outreach mechanisms to raise awareness about the value of education and the negative consequences of child marriage.

## **9. Make elimination of child marriage a primary objective**

Include indicators on child marriage in programme planning and design. For the issue of child marriage to get resources, energy and organisational focus, it is critical that child marriage prevention be among the primary objectives, and not a secondary or tertiary objective subsumed under education, economic, or health initiatives. Indicators on child marriage should be included in programme planning and design, with data used to assess programme effectiveness and adapt strategies as needed over the course of the programme. At the same time, multi-pronged integrated programmes hold the greatest potential for reducing child marriage, without losing an explicit focus on that primary objective.

## **10. Promote the safety of girls**

- a) Build community and school awareness around gender-based violence and facilitate community and school-led solutions to the threat of violence against girls. It is not uncommon for a girl's education to be stopped if going to school means travelling some distance and parents are uncertain about commuting safety. Parents are more likely to marry a daughter if they have concerns about her real or perceived chastity.

Children and adults need to understand that "eve-teasing" is actually sexual violence and a change in terminology is a necessary and important first step to recognise the gravity of the problem. Inclusion of sexual violence in discussions in children's organisations and CBOs will help open public dialogue about the issue. Boys and men especially should be targeted to build their awareness and commitment to issues of girls' and women's safety and encourage them to be active forces in the community to ensure a safe environment.

Plan India has made a beginning with the *Kishori Prerna Manch*, where adolescent girls come together to discuss issues of common concern. Similarly, children's club respondents in Bangladesh indicated that they discuss "eve-teasing" and the fear it causes.

- b) Engage police administration and local government bodies to raise their understanding of the impact of violence against girls on their education and their future. Discuss the actions that should be taken to create safe spaces free from violence and harassment for girls.

## 11. Implement demonstration projects

- a) Child marriage is a persistent challenge and its elimination faces a host of social, cultural and economic barriers. Given the multiple dimensions of any preventative programme, demonstration programmes in a circumscribed geographical location would provide valuable lessons for all stakeholders. This would enable a focused introduction of related initiatives and easier monitoring of child marriage cases. Lessons learnt can be shared widely for scaling up and replication.

## 12. Find champions among religious leaders.

Religious leaders provide moral and spiritual guidance for parents and children. Champions among them can be powerful voices for putting the interests of the child first.

## For policy

In addition to programmatic interventions, organisations like Plan can advocate for interventions that require policy initiatives. A combination of programmatic and advocacy efforts will go a long way in eliminating child marriage.

## 13. Promote girls' access to quality secondary education and increase financial incentives for education

- a) Provide increased and safe access to secondary education. The increasing value and investment given to formal education and improved school infrastructure has ensured that a large number of girls now finish primary school. However, high quality secondary schools must be accessible and girl-friendly in order to significantly lower the rates of child marriage. Girls need easier and safer access to secondary schools, financial support to stay in school, and incentives such as cash transfers to ensure they complete secondary school. Simultaneously, parents need to be motivated to support secondary education for girls.
- b) Universalise financial support for education. The financial burden of education often prompts girls from families living in poverty to drop out of school. In all three countries, the government has created scholarships for girls in schools and universities. Several respondents indicated that they were receiving this support. However, there were many others who were denied this support because of the criteria used for awarding scholarships. It is important to universalise financial support for the education of girls so that lack of funds ceases to be the causal factor for discontinuation. Performance and attendance based incentives can form part of the support offered.
- c) Promote the use of residential schools. The *Balika Shivirs* organised by Urmul-SETU in India play an important role in helping girls transition into the formal education system. They are designed to encourage former dropouts to come back into the school system. In areas where the daily commute to school is difficult due to the terrain or distance, residential schools for girls with sufficient amenities, physical security and supervision are a recommended option. An example of an initiative that fosters such trust are the *Bal Melas*, organised at residential schools in Rajasthan that bring together parents, teachers and students and are an effective channel of motivating parents to continue the education of their daughters (ICRW 2011a).

## 14. Develop stronger coordination among different stakeholders

Several stakeholders are working towards the elimination of child marriage. These include government bodies, law enforcement officers, civil society organisations and community leaders. There is a need for better coordination and cooperation among these persons to create a social force that will change the norms around child marriage.

## 15. Strengthen law enforcement

- a) Identify and prosecute parties involved in child marriage. Each of these countries exhibits weak law enforcement of child marriage legislation. It is critical to identify and prosecute parties involved in child marriage so that the law becomes a deterrent. The penalties in Bangladesh for abetting child marriages need to be increased to become true deterrents. Furthermore, successful



implementation of legislation requires the cooperation of community members and leaders, local law enforcement officers, marriage registrars, religious leaders and state officials.

- b) Conduct special training for police and other law enforcement officers. These capacity building programmes should be regularly organised to orient and sensitise these officers regarding the negative consequences of early marriage and the importance of enforcing child protection legislation. It is important to highlight instances of the delayed marriage of girls and their positive experiences—that is, the educational, social and health outcomes of delayed marriage.
- c) Launch public education campaigns to raise awareness about the importance of child marriage legislation, the details of legislation and the punishments for breaking laws. Local media can play a very critical role in raising awareness, and media and civil society can act as watchdogs, reporting cases of non-compliance to exert pressure on the government and law enforcement agencies to act in accordance with legislation.

## 16. Support economic empowerment initiatives

- a) Support interventions that economically empower girls and women. Addressing poverty, one of the key precipitating causes of child marriage, can reduce the practice. Policymakers should support interventions at the national and local levels that economically empower girls and women, focused in marginalised communities with high incidences of child marriage.
- b) Support, design and implement programmes in partnership with local and international NGOs that provide economic incentives for families to keep their daughters in school.

# Areas for future research

## Links between girls' engagement in paid work and delaying marriage

The findings of this study indicate clear trends in certain areas, such as the causes of early marriage and people's perceptions about how child marriage can be eliminated. However, there are other subjects that emerged as needing further research. One relates to the link between engagement in paid work and delayed marriage. The evidence seems to suggest that in some cases girls will be married early despite being employed or self-employed.

In other cases, it was reported that if the girl was engaged in paid work, her family might not be in a hurry to marry her, either because they relied on her income or because they were willing to wait until they found a husband who was “worthy” of their daughter. Given that more girls are accessing secondary education and have aspirations to study and be employed, it is important to understand whether this can be an effective strategy for preventing child marriage. Research on this issue will also give direction to programmes of the government and civil society organisations that are aimed at eliminating child marriage.

## Factors that support continuation of girls' education after marriage

The findings suggest that some married women continue to study after getting married and sometimes even after having a child. There were more such instances among women in Bangladesh than in the other two countries. It would be useful to understand this phenomenon and examine the role of different persons involved, such as the parents-in-law, the husband and the young woman herself. Other factors that may influence this decision could include education levels within the marital family, ease of access to education and the aspirations of the young couple.

## Self-initiated child marriages

The study shows that self-initiated child marriage is not an uncommon phenomenon. Parents and young girls and boys cited this as one of the reasons that parents are reluctant to delay their daughter's marriage. It is important that this issue be researched further to understand the factors and circumstances that lead children to initiate their own marriage. Evidence from this research will be useful to develop programmes and policies that address the causal factors for such marriages.

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# Endnotes

- i The country goals, objectives and indicators have been taken from the Country Strategic Plans shared by the three COs with the ICRW.
- ii A recent study by ACPR, ICDDR,B and Plan Bangladesh (2012) in Bangladesh showed that 60 per cent of girls were not receiving any scholarship at the time of marriage.
- iii A recent study (ICRW & UNICEF 2011) in Rajasthan found that two additional factors leading to adolescent girls dropping out is the absence of female teachers and poor school infrastructure. Parents are reluctant to send girls to school staffed with male teachers once they have reached puberty. Poor school infrastructure contributes to the perception of low quality education. Combined with distance and fear for a girl's safety, adolescent girls are particularly more likely to discontinue their schooling.
- iv The above study also cites family support as a key factor in determining if a child continues her or his education.
- v The prevalence of self-initiated marriages is difficult to ascertain from the current qualitative study.
- vi A recent study on child marriage in Nepal (Plan Nepal *et al* 2012) reports that while parents are moving towards later marriages for their children, there are cases of children themselves initiating their own marriages before they are 18.
- vii A recent study by ACPR, ICDDR,B and Plan Bangladesh (2012) found that employment at time of marriage was associated with lower rates of child marriage. The same study finds an association between later marriage and more years of education. It is possible that there is an association between higher education and employment and both are in turn associated with later marriage.
- viii There are also other civil society organisations and the government that are working on the issue of raising awareness and preventing the occurrence of child marriage. In this section we report findings where respondents specifically mentioned Plan's activities or inputs.



*“I want to marry only after I get a job. If I get a good job then I will earn money and I can improve my life and then marry. After marriage it’s not possible to get a job; some people don’t allow [you to get a job] and say do housework only. My family told me to get married now, but I told them that I want to first get a good job and then marry. So, now they have agreed.”*

(Unmarried girl, India)



Plan/Suzanne Lee



Plan



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**BECAUSE I am a Girl**

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