

# POLICY BRIEF ON

## EVIDENCE OF PRIORITIES, NATURE, AND SIZE OF GOVERNMENT AND DONORS' INVESTMENT IN GIRLS' PRIORITIES AND SDG-5

CARE's Tipping Point Initiative addresses the root causes of Child Early and Forced Marriage (CEFM) by centering girls' experiences and evidence-based strategies to facilitate transformative changes within the movements, donors, and government that seek to expand the voices, choices, agency, and rights of adolescent girls. The present phase is the culmination of six years of multi-level programming and advocacy to critically engage the discourse on CEFM.

### OBJECTIVES

CARE has conducted a study to analyze the evidence on girls' priorities and investments focusing on eliminating CEFM, including, but not limited to SDG-5.



To identify existing and available evidence of the nature and size of Government and donors' investment in girls' priorities



To identify the gaps between girls' priorities and the investments; and provide specific recommendations to those gaps



# CHILD, EARLY, AND FORCED MARRIAGE IN BANGLADESH

Bangladesh has the highest prevalence of child marriage in South Asia, and is among the 10 countries worldwide with the highest levels. The country is home to 38 million child brides, including currently married girls and women who were first married in childhood. Of these, 13 million married before age 15. 51% of young women aged 20-24 years who were first married before reaching their 18th birthday.<sup>1</sup>

Consequences of child marriage for young girls causes, lower education levels and lower lifetime earnings, higher rates of domestic violence, greater risk of pregnancy related complications, and increased mortality rates for the children of these young brides. CEFM costs at least 1.7 percent of the total GDP of the country. It increases the total fertility of women by 17 percent, which hurts developing countries battling with high population growth.

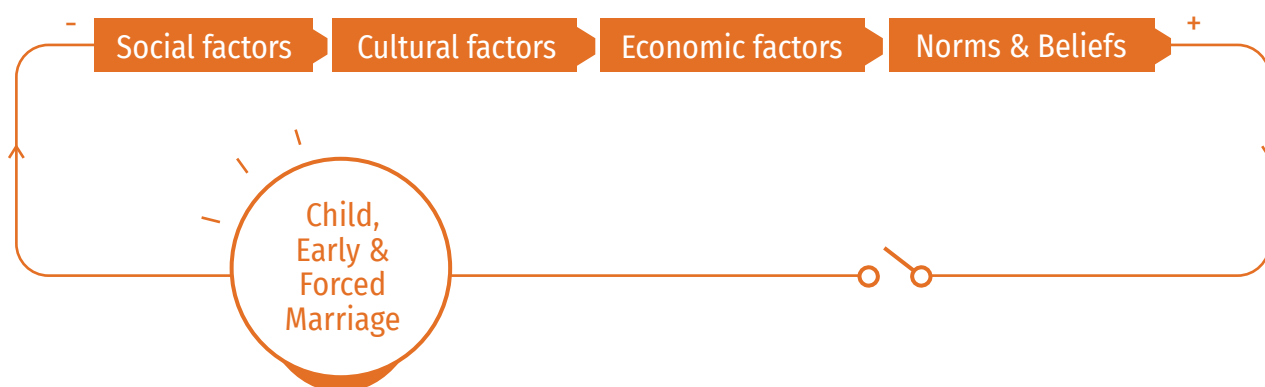
The prevalence of child marriage has reduced in the past forty years in Bangladesh. However, efforts to end child marriage have been disrupted by the COVID-19 Pandemic. Increased job losses and poverty; growing food insecurity; school closures etc., contributed to increased child marriages.



## DRIVERS OF CHILD, EARLY, AND FORCED MARRIAGE

The prevalence of child marriage in Bangladesh can be attributed to a range of social, cultural, and economic factors. The most critical determinants identified by the study include stereotypical social norms & traditional beliefs, including, but not limited to gender disparity in educational opportunities, poverty, threat of violence, vulnerabilities due to disasters, and economic shocks.

Stereotypical social norms around family honor, dowry, and love affairs create an invisible pressure on parents which ended up in child marriage. Girls with primary education are more as likely as those with secondary higher education to be married off before the age of 18. Girls not Brides 2020 report shows, potential threats of being sexually harassed, raped and kidnapping leads to child marriage. Besides, child marriage becomes a more likely option for parents to safeguard the girl's future, as well as, protect her from the impact of climate emergencies and risks.



1. United Nations Children's Fund, Ending Child Marriage: A profile of progress in Bangladesh, UNICEF, New York, 2020

# ADOLESCENT GIRLS' PRIORITIES

Initiatives taken by the govt. and donors in eliminating CEFM has made a significant progress. However, a vast majority of adolescent girls still finds their lives constrained by CEFM due to several unmet priorities. The priorities identified by the adolescent girls are;

## Increased opportunities for need-based capacity building and skill development opportunities

Contributing to family income could be a potential way to negotiate and avoid CEFM. Girls have expressed their need to be engaged into skill development and livelihood opportunities.



## Strengthening community mobilization

While poverty and prioritizing boys' education are significant drivers of dropout among girls, which is, directly and indirectly, resulting in CEFM. Findings show that sociocultural norms and attitudes prevent girls from engaging in income-generating activities. To fight these norms, strong community mobilization among girls is required from the grassroots level.



## Strengthening the social networks

Girls have a minimal level of autonomy and decision-making power at the household level and beyond. A high degree of gendered norms around mobility decreases their access to existing social services and unmet priorities. Therefore, adolescent girls desire to be a part of different social networks, which will expand their voice and leadership skills and also aware them of the available social services.



## Creating a supportive legal and policy environment

Child marriages often take place secretly, keeping the relevant officials unnoticed. Girls are well aware of the child marriage restraint act (CMRA), the dowry prohibition act, associated punishment, and the national toll-free helpline 109. However, when it comes to reporting any episodes, girls mostly remain submissive. Strong presence of supportive legal and policy environment ensure prompt reporting.



## Ensure access to mental health and psychosocial support for the girls

Limited or no space for ventilating sad feelings and social stigma around psychosocial issues are highlighted by the participants, requiring special attention to ensure mental health and psychosocial support for adolescent girls when it feels needed.




## Ensure girls' access to digital platforms as an avenue to make their voices heard

Information and technology is still inaccessible for many adolescent girls in rural areas. They have limited access to information around rights, education, health, skill and other services. Thus, they feel the urge for access to the relevant service and avenue to make their voice heard within and beyond their community.



# RESPONSE TO ELIMINATING CEFM AND SDG-5

**5 GENDER EQUALITY**



**Broad Goal of SDG 5**  
Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls

**Indicator 5.3.1:**  
Proportion of women aged 20-24 years who were married or in a union before age 15 and before age 18.

In all of the 17 SDG goals, SDG 5 is known as the stand-alone gender goal, which is dedicated to achieving specific targets/indicators. The indicator 5.3.1 specifically targets to eliminate harmful practices of child, early and forced marriage.

The main strategy of Bangladesh in eliminating CEFM has been creating awareness among the policymakers, planners, and programmers. Over the years, Bangladesh has made significant progress on SDG-5 (Gender Equality and Women Empowerment). Some of the notable achievements are:

- Bangladesh has been placed 50th out of 150 countries in the global Gender Gap index 2020 (General Economics Division, 2020).
- Bangladesh ranked 71st out of 146 countries on the Global Gender Gap Index 2022 with a score of 0.714 (World Economic Forum, 2022)
- The Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey 2019 (MICS, BBS/UNICEF, 2019) shows that 15.5% of women aged 20-24 years were married or in a union before age 15, and 51.4% were married before age 18. This indicator has improved since 2015 (which was 23.8% before the age of 15 and 58.6% before the age of 18 according to MICS, 2012-2013) (MICS, 2019)

## GOVERNMENT AND DONORS' COMMITMENT IN COMBATING CEFM IN BANGLADESH

Bangladesh has ratified the major international laws, declarations and policies relevant to the problem of child marriage

International Commitments			
Universal Declaration of Human Rights 1948 (UDHR)	Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) 1979	International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR)	Convention on the Rights of the Child 1989 (CRC)
Convention on the Consent to Marriage, Minimum Age for Marriage, and Registration of Marriages		Kathmandu Call for Action to End Child Marriage in South Asia 2014	Sustainable Development Goals (2015-2030)

### Acts, Rules and Plans for Preventing Child Marriage

Aligning with SDG-5 target 5.3.1, Bangladesh has committed to eliminate child, early and forced marriage by 2041. The country's Child Marriage Restraint Act (2017) as well as the National Plan of Action to End Child Marriage (2018-2019) laid out the steps to reach these goals.

Acts and Policies				
Child Marriage Restraint Act (2017)	National Plan of Action to End Child Marriage (2018-2019)	Child Marriage Restraint Rule (2018)	National Adolescent Health Strategy (2017-2030)	Dowry Prohibition Act (2018)

Bangladesh has enacted a law to address child marriage which called Child Marriage Restraint Act, was passed in February 2017 and replaced the previous law 1929. Bangladesh has enacted a law to address child marriage which called Child Marriage Restraint Act, was passed in February 2017 and replaced the previous law 1929.

Numerous gaps and weaknesses identified in the law which includes:

- ⊗ Restrictive procedural requirements to bring claims
- ⊗ Failed to create obligations of government officials to report child marriages
- ⊗ Unclear process of filing injunctions to stop such marriages
- ⊗ Inconsistencies with other laws.
- ⊗ Poor implementation including weak penalties

Despite many constructive aspects of the new law, experts fear that some these positive measures will be overshadowed by the provision included in the act under section 19. The Section 19 provides exemptions, allowing marriage with parental and judicial consent before the minimum age prescribed by the act under "Special circumstances" when it is in the best interest of child. The section doesn't even define the "special circumstances" when it is in the best interest of the child. The particular provision even contradicts other national and international legal instruments.

### SPECIAL PROVISION OF CMRA-2017

"If a marriage is solemnized in such manner and under such special circumstances as may be prescribed by rules in the best interests of the minor, at the directions of the court and with consent of the parents or the guardian of the minor, as the case may be, it shall not deemed to be an offence under this Act"

Later, "Child Marriage Restraint Rule" came in October 2018, which provides further explanation and implementation mechanism of "Child Marriage Restraint Act 2017". Furthermore, Bangladesh support the effective implementation of the Dowry Prohibition Act 2018.

In August 2018, the much-awaited National Plan of Action to Eliminate Child Marriage 2018-2030 (NAP) was launched under the leadership of the Ministry of Women and Children Affairs (MoWCA) with the support of UNICEF despite multiple backlashes against regressive legal proposal. A National Adolescent Health Strategy (2017-2030) had been adopted which specifically sets strategic objectives to end child marriage, mitigate its consequences and raise awareness.

Unfortunately, in Bangladesh, legal efforts to protect women and girls by criminalizing aspects of child marriage face significant obstacles, due to the prevailing political culture, the accommodation of religious extremists, and the persistence of gender biases. Some of the weakness in the legal framework related to eliminate CEFM in Bangladesh are given below:

#### Initiatives undertaken by Government of Bangladesh for the Prevention of the Child

- ⊗ London Girl Summit 2014
- ⊗ Bangladesh Girl Summit 2014
- ⊗ Child Marriage Prevention Day, September 29
- ⊗ Female Secondary School Stipend Program
- ⊗ Governance Innovation Unit
- ⊗ 109 National Helpline Centre for Violence Against Women and Children
- ⊗ Adolescent Clubs

- The "special" clause legalizing child marriage without any minimum age
- Inconsistencies in defining the minimum legal age of marriage
- Marriages in violation of the 2017 CMRA are valid unless voided under applicable personal laws
- Inconsistent definitions of "child"
- Free and full consent is not defined in the law
- Inadequate punishment and compensation
- Inadequate enforcement of laws

# INVESTMENT OF GOVERNMENT AND DONORS ON ELIMINATING CEFM AND EMPOWERING ADOLESCENT GIRLS

A wide variety of development projects are in place in eliminating child, early and forced marriage in Bangladesh, involving multiple ministries, department, and donor agencies. CEFM is not always a direct focus of the government or donors' interventions rather it is seen as a part of the broader gender equity and equality goal in programming efforts. Only a few projects are directly addressing the CEFM.

Based on the primary analysis of different ministries, we have categorized the investment of the government on eliminating child marriage and empowering girls in Bangladesh into three broad themes.

## Category 1

Investments for interventions directly targeting the girl child; including improving education and health outcomes, skills building, employability, reducing violence, and enhancing girls' meaningful participation in the development process of their communities.

### Protecting adolescent girls from physical, sexual, and psychological violence

Annual budget allocation (2021-2022) of the MoWCA has increased special emphasis on social security for girls, prevention of child marriage, and ensuring adolescent girls return to school.

The government of Bangladesh in partnership with Danish government has established "One stop crisis centers" since 2000 all around Bangladesh. (In 8 medical college hospitals, 40 district Sadar hospitals and 20 Upazilla health complexes)

The GoB has launched toll-free helpline service 109 available for 24 hours a day under National Helpline Center for Violence against Women and Children.

### Strategies to ensure Adolescent-friendly health care

The Government's annual budgetary allocation for community-based health support, school-based health, maternal, neonatal and adolescent health has been increased in the FY 2021-2022.

The National Plan of Action for Adolescent Health Strategy has been undertaken by the GoB under the Ministry of Health and Family Planning which works on four priority thematic areas of intervention: adolescent sexual and reproductive health, violence against adolescents, adolescent nutrition and mental health of adolescents.

### Increasing girls' access to formal secondary and upper secondary schooling

The GoB under the Ministry of Education (MoE) is providing educational stipends to poor students from the Prime Minister's education support trust.

The Female Secondary Stipend and Assistance Program (FSSAP) has shown a positive outcome in delaying child marriage. Female targeted conditional in-kind support program, tuition subsidy program, school-based health education program also contributed in this regard.

The GoB has adopted a strategy for gender mainstreaming in technical and vocational education and training programs that could improve the employability of women and girls which will indirectly contribute to eliminating child marriage.

## Category 2

Investments that support families and other agents in preventing girls from being married early; Include those geared to shifting attitudes and social norms, reducing economic/nutritional vulnerability of households and increasing awareness about the negative consequences of CEFM.

### In-kind support program

Bangladesh's Vulnerable Group Development (VGD) programme is one of the largest social safety net programs in the country assisted by the World Food Program, providing in-kind transfers to selected women-headed poor families.

The government has increased 10% budget allocation for food and financial support under the Vulnerable Group Development in the annual budget.

*Also, several positive interventions have been undertaken by the ministry in collaboration with donor agencies to ensure access to social services of women and girls in Bangladesh reported by the Ministry official in the primary interviews. Such as:*

UNICEF has joined hands with the Department of Social Services (DSS), under the Ministry of Social Welfare to launch a year-long campaign calling for greater investment in the social service workforce to promote the important role of social workers in protecting children and women.

The rural social service programme is one of the continuing programmes of the ministry of social welfare which is running nationwide in Bangladesh since 1974.

### Community-led efforts

Government under the Ministry of Women and Children Affairs (MoWCA) has established Kishore-Kishori Clubs (around 4883 active clubs) in different regions of Bangladesh

USAID's Ujjiban Social Behavior Change Communication project, implemented by Johns Hopkins University, is leading the public awareness campaign highlighting the health risks of early pregnancy and the high returns of investing in girls' education.

## GAPS IN RESPONSE TO GIRLS' PRIORITIES

- ⦿ Adolescent girls' scepticism and lack of trust in the existing legal framework that protects against CEFM and gender-based violence (GBV) at the local level is yet to receive special consideration.
- ⦿ Lack of accessible support services for girls' psychological health issues at the rural and urban level.
- ⦿ Special consideration and alternative delivery mechanisms are not in place to ensure access of the rural adolescent girls to digital platforms and to increase their awareness about available social services.
- ⦿ Inadequate efforts from the government and other actors for decentralized interventions and also lack of attention on the sustainability and resilience of the programs
- ⦿ Inadequate attention to livelihood or skill development possibilities for adolescent girls and strategies of the government and donor organizations
- ⦿ Limited emphasis on assessing parents' interest in supporting girls' education and addressing their concerns about the safety and security of girls
- ⦿ Limited focus is placed on strengthening social networks to increase the voice, leadership, mobility, and power of decision-making among adolescent girls.
- ⦿ Limited attention to ensure social security of girls in government and donor interventions
- ⦿ Limited number of long term and community-based interventions focused on social norms and behavioural change
- ⦿ Gap in coverage of interventions/programmes to address to gender discrimination at all spheres of girl's life
- ⦿ Coordination gaps among different stakeholders to eliminate CEFM and promoting girl's empowerment

# RECOMMENDATIONS

For meeting the SDG target to end child marriage by 2030, or the national target to end child marriage by 2041, it will require more action-oriented programs by the government and other donors and UN agencies. The recommendations in this chapter focus broadly on strengthening the existing interventions and investing in undertaking new initiatives that would be helpful for the government and donors in combating CEFM and empowering girls in Bangladesh.

## Interventions to be strengthened

- 1. Strengthen spaces** for girls to meaningfully participate in dialogues.
- 2. Stigmatization** of Women/Girls survivors should be stopped.
- Govt. and donors' interventions should eliminate the perceptions around **marriage can solve all "problems"**.
- 4. Girls' priorities/choices should be heard** before designing any programs for girls empowerment. Proper implementation of existing legislation at all level.
- 5. Control over sexuality** should be addressed and create safe space for girls to discuss the relevant issues.
- Strengthen the **institutional frameworks** for addressing child marriage through proper reporting and enforcement mechanisms **during emergencies**.
- 7. Marriage registration and digitalization** should be made **compulsory**.
- Strategic advocacy for **strengthening** and supporting **civil registration systems** for birth and marriage.
- 9. Reactivating** the **national committee** under the CMRA. NAP could be brought under its mandate, to act as an accountability mechanism.
- Advocate for establishing/re-constituting **Community-based Child Protection Committee** (CBCPCs), where defunct, to act on child protection issues.
- Strengthen the institutions capacity to **provide protection** to adolescent girls to **report CEFM** or any other form of violence.

- Strengthen social safety nets for **ensuring social security** of girls.
- Strengthen community mobilization to **connect girls** with **different committees** that are committed to work at the grassroots level to address CEFM.
- 14. Revitalize** the **local NGOs** for essential health, education, awareness raising and safety and security interventions for the empowerment of girls.

## New initiatives for eliminating CEFM

- Long-term and community-based interventions focusing on **changing social norms** should be undertaken.
- 2. Positive gender norms and key behavioural issues** need to be introduced through communication at multi-level, social mobilization and conversations with parents.
- 3. Evidence-based** gender transformative approaches needs to be introduced for ensuring lasting change at all levels.
- 4. Decentralized interventions** should be designed by the government and relevant actors to ensure coverage of adolescent girls in their programs from all the vulnerable groups.
- 5. Economic interventions** must be integrated to address girls' educational attainment and child marriage.

## EPILOGUE

Child marriage is a deep-rooted and harmful practice supported by strong social norms. While the prevalence of child, early, and forced marriage has decreased in the last forty years in Bangladesh, it still remains a problem as the impact of child marriage goes beyond generations. However, empowering girls through increased knowledge, awareness of their rights and better abilities to negotiate and communicate can make a significant dent in child marriage situation. Also, mitigating the gaps in the government and donors' nature of prioritization of girls' issues and subsequent investment to attain the broad goal of SDG-5.