MALE ENGAGEMENT IN ENDING CHILD MARRIAGE

Photo: Jane Mingay / *Girls Not Brides*

In recent years, there has been growing evidence and recognition of the importance of engaging men and boys to improve gender equality and empower women and girls. The evidence base on male engagement in ending child marriage, specifically, is relatively thin, with only a handful of studies assessing whether programmes shift the attitudes and behaviours of men and boys around child marriage. Those programmes that have been rigorously studied suggest that it is indeed possible to shift boys' attitudes toward child marriage including the appropriate age of marriage for girls. From these programmes, as well as those from other fields, we know that the positive and informed engagement of men and boys - including brothers, fathers, uncles, future husbands, future fathers-in-law, and community and religious leaders, among others - can help to advance more gender equitable relationships, norms and behaviours. It is particularly important to ground male engagement programmes and strategies in gender-equitable approaches that specifically aim to empower women and girls.

This brief provides a rationale for engaging men and boys in ending child marriage and synthesises some key lessons learned, guiding principles, recommendations and evidence gaps. It draws heavily on several of the resources listed on the last page.

Why engage men & boys?

Across the world, girls and women are rarely seen as having equal value in society. Attitudes and behaviours around gender roles are underpinned by harmful gender norms, which disadvantage women and girls by limiting their agency and ability to influence the key decisions that affect their lives. These gender norms, in turn, contribute to the fact that investments in education, and even food within the household, may be prioritised for boys, who are often seen by families as having more economic value and opportunity than girls. These norms also support the continuation of practices like dowry and bride price, where girls and women are treated as commodities in a marriage market. They enable gender-based violence and stoke parental fears about girls engaging in sexual activity before they are married.

It is important to understand that gender norms can negatively impact on men and boys as well. Traditional forms of masculinity worldwide are characterised by dominance and control over women. This includes being seen as the "bread winner" or financial contributor for a family, and by expectations of toughness, "macho" behaviours and a lack of domestic and child-caring responsibilities. In some cases, especially for adolescent boys, reckless and violent actions are accepted and even awarded. Boys who are

perceived to be emotional, sensitive, thoughtful or willing to share power and decision-making may be penalised for going against the norm. In some places, gender norms have been shown to contribute to low-self-esteem, work-related stress, inter-personal violence and alcohol abuse in males.

But while gender norms can affect boys and men, what is often described as "traditional" or "cultural" practices are almost always more discriminatory toward girls, and have worse impacts on girls' health and wellbeing than on that of boys. Child marriage is but one of those negative impacts.

At the same time, these same norms place men and boys in a unique position to be able to challenge and overcome inequitable norms. The fact that harmful masculinities are learned, socially constructed, and not innate, suggests that they can also be 'unlearned' and replaced with more positive attitudes, beliefs and behaviours. Even as we work to expand the evidence base around male engagement in ending child marriage, we can look to evidence from other fields, including public health, which suggests that the thoughtful engagement of men and boys - which is grounded in and responsive to local contexts - can improve their own wellbeing, as well as gender attitudes and norms and the specific treatment of women and girls.

Photo: Pippa Ranger / Department for International Development

Lessons learned: What does the evidence suggest works?

Evidence from programmes that address gender inequality, sexual and reproductive health, girls' education and the prevention of gender-based violence, as well as some that have incorporated attention to child marriage, suggest that gender-transformative programming - or programming which is deliberately designed to change inequitable gender norms and advance gender equality and women's empowerment - can help men and boys to become more supportive of women and girls' rights.

A review conducted by GreeneWorks and Promundo, **Engaging Men and Boys to End the Practice of Child Marriage**, synthesised programs and approaches that engaged men, boys and their communities to shift attitudes and behaviours toward greater gender equality and away from child marriage. Below, we combine findings and lessons learned from that review, USAID's **Working with Men and Boys to End Violence Against Women and Girls**, Voices for Change's **Engaging men and boys for gender equality programming in Nigeria**, and the **Gender and Adolescence: Global Evidence (GAGE)** programme's soon-to-be-published review of male engagement interventions, along with several other resources.

- **Understand the local context**

With any intervention aimed at shifting deeply entrenched practices, such as child marriage, it is critical to first understand the local context, including the roles that men and boys play at different levels in decision-making around marriage. Knowing whether and how fathers, uncles, brothers, religious or traditional leaders, boyfriends or others have distinct parts to play in the marriage process can help implementers design programmes that will most effectively target and engage the right males with the right messages. Also critical is understanding the language and terminology that will resonate most with the target audience. Where "gender equality" may be a powerful term in certain contexts, for example, "gender justice," "female empowerment" or other language may work better elsewhere. Messaging is important as well. Some men and boys may respond well to the idea of empowering women and girls, but others may only engage if they understand the benefits that such empowerment will bring to themselves. Understanding these factors is important, whether working at the

individual, group, community or district levels, and can help promote positive approaches to male engagement with the populations that are most receptive to them.

- **Identify and promote "positive masculinities" as alternatives to harmful ones**

Once a solid understanding of the specific roles of men and boys in a community is established, implementers can begin to identify more positive and gender-equitable alternative roles that reflect culturally-specific and compelling models of masculinity. Connecting these alternatives to some of the material benefits they may bring, such as improved household finances and economic security, and associated benefits in terms of improved social status, has been a successful strategy in some places. Also proven effective in some communities is demonstrating how increased engagement by men in care-giving, both within the family and in the community, can benefit men, women and families. In other words, it is often important to focus not only on the benefits of positive masculinities for women, but also for men themselves. Finally, thinking about and explicitly referring to boys and men as "allies" or "agents of change," rather than "perpetrators" or "abusers" can help create a shift toward more positive approaches to masculinity.

- **Be concrete about building the skills of men and boys to effect change**

The evidence suggests that building the skills of men and boys to be able to act to reduce gender inequalities can be as important as changing their attitudes. Male allies need specific tools and techniques to be able to counter pressure from peers to conform to harmful masculine norms, and to negotiate and maintain more equitable relationships with the women and girls in their lives. They also need the capacity to act when faced with situations that may be harmful to women and girls, for example, a forced marriage. Programmes that teach men these skills through participatory, experiential learning and group work methodologies have been shown to be effective.

- **Synchronise male engagement programming with work focused on women and girls**

While working with men and boys is important, experience shows that "gender-synchronised" efforts (those that align work focused on men and boys with programming focused on women and girls) can

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be critical as well. These efforts should always take into account local contexts and understandings, to ensure the appropriate engagement of both males and females. Done well, gender synchronisation can help ensure a complementarity of efforts and a supportive enabling environment for change, and can underscore the importance of collaboration between women and men working together to advance the empowerment of women and girls.

- **Start early on to help shift norms regarding gender and sexuality**

Gender norms, or expectations about how men and boys and women and girls are expected to act, including in relation to sexuality and sexual relationships, start in childhood and reinforced in adolescence. For example, norms may lead men to be more forceful and coercive in sexual relationships than they might otherwise be, because this is socially-expected. In some settings, men may prefer relationships with younger female partners who are more docile and subservient, and girls may engage in relationships with older men, as they are seen as better able to provide financially for them. Engaging with boys at an early age can help them to not only become aware of, but also to question traditional gender

roles and gender-based discrimination, including in regard to sexuality. Programmes that provide boys with education, information and support to learn about and challenge harmful gender norms and practices – including child marriage – can be useful in shifting their attitudes and practices around gender inequalities. In turn, these shifts can influence those of others around them, including peers, families, teachers and other adults.

- **Don't forget that boys may also marry as children**

While the majority of those affected by child marriage are girls, according to UNICEF (2018), an estimated four percent of boys globally marry before the age of 18. The limited evidence available indicates these marriages may be driven by traditions proscribed by culture, financial reasons, or, to repress boys' non-conforming gender identity (i.e., gay or transgender). Like girls, boys who marry early often face the prospect of school dropout, lower educational attainment and poorer employment options, as they are forced to become providers for their new families. Helping boys, their families and their communities recognise the benefits (including economic ones) of remaining unmarried and in school may help to end the practice.

- **Fathers can help advance gender equality within their families and societies**

Gender equality interventions that engage the fathers of adolescent boys and girls have helped these men to reflect upon the cultural and gender norms that devalue girls, to shift how they behave as fathers, and to transfer more gender-equitable views to their children. Such programmes have helped fathers move beyond culturally-expected roles of provider and decision-maker, and toward ones that involve more equitable sharing of household and caregiving responsibilities, and that are more supportive of their daughters' rights to education and empowerment.

- **Engage professionals, as they, too, have roles to play**

In many patriarchal societies where child marriage is prevalent, men dominate in the professional realm. Men working in government, including the health, education and justice sectors, for example, may have important roles to play in shifting gender norms and ending child marriage. Training these men to understand and implement laws and policies banning child marriage where they exist, and to advocate for them where they don't; to monitor and report on cases of child marriage; to educate families about the benefits of delaying marriage; and to develop curricula, train teachers and implement programmes that promote more equitable gender norms and discourage child marriage are among the many strategies such professionals can use. However, it is important not to work exclusively with male hierarchies, as doing so may reinforce the status quo. Identifying ways to ensure gender-equitable approaches as well as opportunities to promote female leadership can be similarly important in shifting gender norms.

- **Ally with religious, spiritual and traditional leaders**

Religious, spiritual and traditional leaders, who are often men, have the potential to influence their congregations and communities, and can also be powerful voices for change from the individual on up. Engaging these leaders to understand the negative impacts of and to counter harmful gender norms may help individuals and families, and in some cases, broader societies, to reject child marriage.

Photo: Thom Pierce / *Girls Not Brides*

- **Support male peer groups and collective action to create an enabling environment for change**

Pressure by peers to conform to harmful norms of masculinity can be a barrier to change - and to the sustainability of change. Fostering peer groups that support positive masculinities and gender equality is a promising way to develop support networks and accountability mechanisms to sustain change. While the evidence regarding "safe spaces approaches" for boys is thin, providing opportunities for groups of men and boys to engage safely in critical reflection on gender roles and discrimination has proven successful in shifting attitudes (and some health-related behaviours). Similarly, men who organise and engage in collective action can help demonstrate that those who support gender equity are not alone, creating an environment for sustainable change.

Photo: Jane Mingay / *Girls Not Brides*

- **Identify and celebrate the "positive deviants," and turn them into champions for change**

In most communities that experience child marriage, there are men and boys whose beliefs and behaviours around the practice run counter to the expected norm. These "positive deviants" may, for example, be fathers or brothers who refuse to allow their daughter or sister to marry as a child, because they want her to be educated and empowered. They may be village elders, spiritual leaders or government officials who refuse to endorse child marriages because they know the harms the practice will bring to girls, their families and the wider community. Identifying who these positive deviants are, celebrating their efforts, and helping them recruit others to their cause can be an important strategy to shift long-held norms.

- **Recognise that social norm change is complex and takes time**

Norms and expectations about gender and gender roles do not develop overnight – they are socialised over many years. Changing or "unlearning" these norms will similarly take time and dedicated work at different levels. The evidence suggests that programming that is multi-layered, or that combines efforts at the individual and group levels with those that use social marketing, media engagement, policy advocacy and related work to target broader social influences that promote harmful gender norms, can be more effective than single-stream interventions. Further, although some shorter-term programmes have been shown to have positive effects, engaging men in supporting gender equality requires long-term commitments and action by many actors across different sectors.

Gaps in the evidence

The strategies presented here should help to advance more equitable gender norms and contribute toward ending child marriage. At the same time, new evidence is essential to understanding how male engagement programmes can shift not only knowledge and attitudes, but behaviours as well. Well-conceptualised monitoring, evaluation and learning systems, as well as the development of appropriate indicators of behaviour change for men and boys, can inform programming decisions and strengthen strategies, while at the same time expanding the base of evidence to support the scaling up and replicability of programs. More evidence is needed on the impacts of implementing programmes with different age groups (including younger and older adolescent boys), about safe spaces approaches for boys, about the effectiveness of working with religious leaders, and about the long-term effectiveness and sustainability of male engagement programmes. Another gap pertains to understanding how programmes impact those beyond the immediate target group, such as the wives, mothers, or sisters of boys and men participating in different interventions. Finally, the evidence base about the cost-effectiveness of programmes is also very limited. New research in these areas is greatly encouraged.

Conclusion

The positive engagement of men and boys is increasingly seen as an essential element of shifting social norms and expectations around gender roles, which is, in turn, an important contribution toward ending child marriage. Some of the lessons learned and recommendations presented in this brief can help programme designers and implementers target their male engagement efforts toward this goal. But it is important to understand that challenging traditional notions of masculinity is not easy, and those who take on this task must recognise that doing so will require sustained efforts at multiple levels, and with various target populations, to ensure success. They must also recognise that placing women's and girls' rights at the centre of programme design is essential to avoid backlash and ensure that male engagement interventions do no harm. If programmes are designed with these rights at the core, with a locally-grounded understanding of opportunities and challenges, and with solid plans for capturing and disseminating learnings, they can do much to help expand the base of evidence and support for ending child marriage.

Additional Resources

Engaging Men and Boys to Address the Practice of Child Marriage. GreeneWorks and Promundo.

A Gender Lens on the Health and Well-being of Young Males. Patton, George C., Darmstadt, G., Petroni, S. and Sawyer, S. Journal of Adolescent Health, Volume 62, Issue 3, S6 - S8.

A More Equal Future: A MenCare Manual to Engage Fathers to Prevent Child Marriage in India. Promundo.

Program P: A Manual for Engaging Men in Fatherhood, Caregiving, and Maternal and Child Health. REDMAS, Promundo, EME.

PROMISES: A Communication Approach Targeting Parents and Community Members in Nepal. Save the Children.

Stepping Stones: Community of practice, training programme and related materials on gender, generation, HIV, communication and relationship skills.

Voices for Change Legacy Paper: Engaging men for gender equality. Palladium International, Social Development Direct, Women's Rights Advancement and Protection Alternatives and ITAD.

Working with Men and Boys to End Violence against Women and Girls: Approaches, Challenges and Lessons. U.S. Agency for International Development.
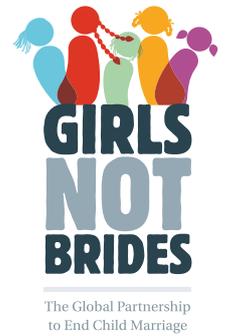
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The Global Partnership
to End Child Marriage

Girls Not Brides **is global partnership made up of more than 1000 civil society organisations from over 95 countries, committed to ending child marriage and enabling girls to fulfil their full potential.**