

Webinar

WHAT COUNTS AS SUCCESS IN CHILD MARRIAGE INTERVENTIONS?



A discussion on age, agency and measuring change that matters

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Moderated by: **Margaret E. Greene**, *GreeneWorks*

In September 2021, members of the Child, Early & Forced Marriage and Unions (CEFMU) and Sexuality Working Group published a [letter to the editor in the *Journal of Adolescent Health*](#). The letter calls for: 1) an approach to defining and measuring success in CEFMU interventions that goes beyond age of marriage as a standalone indicator; 2) greater support for gender-transformative interventions that foster girls' agency and shift norms related to gender and sexuality; and 3) increased investment in research and evaluation to better capture sustainable change in these areas.

On February 2, 2022, the Working Group convened a webinar to discuss these issues. Panelists included members of the Working Group, as well a funder, researchers, advocates and program implementers from around the world who work with and for adolescent girls. They shared their perspectives on 1) why age of marriage as standalone vision and measure of success is limiting and potentially harmful; 2) what alternative programming approaches and measurements can better lead to and capture progress in transforming the root causes of CEFMU; and 3) what the field needs—from funders and from researchers—to advance work for adolescent girls that leads to their greater freedom and life opportunities.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

What's wrong with using age of marriage as the main marker of success in CEFMU interventions?

Success in efforts to prevent child marriage and uplift girls has often been defined and measured by the age at which girls marry. Age of marriage is an appealing indicator because it's straightforward, quantifiable and aggregable across programs and geographies. It serves as a snapshot of global progress on this issue (i.e., Sustainable Development Goal 5.3).

But as a sole means of evaluating programs and policies at national and local levels, the implementers, researchers and the funder on this webinar agreed that age, on its own, can be a limiting—and potentially problematic—marker of success. Here are some of the reasons they shared:

- First and foremost, age fixes our attention on delaying marriages and obscures the root causes of CEFMU — gender inequality. Patriarchal social norms and structures limit girls' abilities to make their own choices about their sexuality, bodies and relationships. These norms don't just disappear when a girl turns 18. Girls who get married at

19 still often lack control over who they marry, whether or when they have children or if they can pursue careers. A vulnerable 20-year-old is equally susceptible to domestic violence.

“Sexuality is fundamentally at the core of this discussion on CEFMU.” — **ANA AGUILERA**

- The age at which girls marry only tells part of the story, and not always the most important part. Initiatives that do not address social norms and the barriers to girls’ life opportunities may succeed in increasing girls’ age of marriage and thus be considered successful, without solving the real problem. For instance, conditional cash transfers have been shown to be effective in delaying marriages until the age of 18. But that doesn’t mean they increase access to education or other opportunities for girls. Hence, in some instances, girls simply end up waiting to reach 18 and then get married, without enjoying expanded life options.

“If we reduce the perspective of programs and policies to age of marriage, we’re assuming that being 18 years old is the element that determines girls’ and adolescents’ autonomy. Or that that’s what guarantees a marriage is desired and free of violence.... It’s very important that our work returns to placing girls’ autonomy as the priority element in program design.” — **EUGENIA LOPEZ URIBE**

- Efforts focused on age at marriage tend to involve legal responses that center punishing men and boys rather than the supporting the needs and desires of girls. Girls are often unable to access the legal system to their own benefit. Laws are often inaccessible to girls, and they may cause harm by driving behaviors underground or by penalizing girls who choose marriage of their own volition.

“We need to look at why the legislative agenda ...is always punitive. We go in with these punitive kind of measures which ultimately we know, when it comes to issues of sexual rights, just drive behaviors underground if social norms are not changed.” — **SHEENA HADI**

- A focus on age of marriage can render invisible the needs and realities of underage girls already married or in unions. These girls actually stand to benefit from many of the same types of interventions as unmarried girls.

If not (just) age of marriage, what should count as success in our efforts to prevent child marriage and support girls?

- Child marriage practices vary based on context, and visions of success must be based in the realities of the place and the needs and desires of girls. Success in conflict-ridden contexts with high rates of forced marriages, for instance, will naturally look different from success in environments where girls choose unions as their only pillar of support upon becoming pregnant.

“The issue [of child marriage] is in fact entangled with gender-based inequality and violence. It will not be solved just by focusing on age ... Long-term interventions are needed, so that girls can build decision-making authority and agency.” — **YOGESH VAISHNAV**

- Regardless of the context, speakers agreed that success involves bringing meaningful change for girls that enhances their rights and opportunities. It means transforming the social norms and structures that lead to undesired relationships and marriage and increasing the empowerment and agency of girls to make their own choices about if, when and whom to marry, as well as other decisions about their bodies and lives. Ultimately, success means working towards more gender-equitable societies.

How do we achieve this success through our programming, advocacy and funding?

- Child marriage is complex, and success requires multicomponent approaches that respond to girls’ social contexts. Traditional approaches of poverty alleviation and education are important, but they alone are not enough to address the underlying issues of gender inequality. In fact, we’ve seen in Latin America that while rates of secondary school participation have expanded over time, there has been little reduction in early unions and early pregnancy.

- Speakers emphasized the need for long-term, localized programming that has design inputs from girls. Some examples of programs that can lay the groundwork for shifts in gender norms include:
 - ◇ Girls' collectives that build their sense of self-worth, leadership skills and support networks that can help them negotiate with their parents and community about marriage and other life choices;
 - ◇ Comprehensive sexuality education that addresses gender norms, imparts knowledge about sex and sexuality, and teaches critical thinking skills;
 - ◇ Girls' sports programs that challenge stereotypical social norms by involving girls in activities traditionally viewed as off limits to them;
 - ◇ Programs that support girls who are married and in unions, including to further their education, negotiate childbearing and employment opportunities and be free of violence at home;
 - ◇ Programs that engage men and boys around issues of sexuality, masculinity, nonviolence and respect.

“We have often been asked if we promote sexuality among adolescents. The reality is that sexuality does not need ‘promoters’— it exists. It is there and living it in a pleasurable and healthy way is a right.”

— CINTHYA AMANECER VELASCO BOTELLO

- Advocacy agendas also need to center the perspectives of girls. Examples of advocacy priorities include:
 - ◇ Demanding laws and policies that promote girls' opportunities and uphold their rights to health – including contraceptives and all sexual and reproductive health care, as well as quality education, decent jobs and freedom from violence.

“Advocacy work is needed, with parents, religious leaders and all other members of the community... We have laws against child marriage, but it is in the culture and in the confusion between religion, habits and customs that the real problem lies, and so we need to change those norms.”

— AISSA DOUMARA NGATANSOU

- Funders have an important role in these efforts. Recommendations include:
 - ◇ Listen to and learn from grantees to understand what success looks like in their context;
 - ◇ Fund long-term, holistic programming, as well as more research into what success looks like and how to measure it in different contexts;
 - ◇ When the time horizon of grant cycles is short, be realistic about what interim markers of success can be expected on the road to long-term change.

“Donors have the checkbook but don't have all the answers.” — KATHY HALL

How do we measure this success?

“If we think of child marriage as a symptom or manifestation of the underlying problems of gender inequality, violence against girls and women, harmful gender norms and poverty—it shifts our gaze in terms of what we might look at in evaluating interventions and policies.” Erin Murphy-Graham

- Age of marriage may still be one measure by which to assess child marriage interventions, but it can't be the only or most important indicator. Moreover, funders should not misconstrue the value of supporting types of interventions solely based on whether girls marry before or after 18. We need to shift away from external, global notions of success and focus instead on measuring what girls say they need and value to ensure they have expanded life options.
- Examples of way to measure success of programs and policies include: examining increases in gender-equitable attitudes, girls' participation in public spaces, availability of contraceptives, reductions in risk behaviors, delays in marriage even if not till age 18, participation in marital decision-making and sources of support and strength for girls. Organizations have already been experimenting with alternative indicators such as these.

“Putting all our resources...into just delaying age at which people marry is both problematic and unreasonable. It is also ineffective and potentially harmful. It defeats the purpose of all the efforts...to ensure the empowerment of with skills for life-long development.” — CHIMA IZUGBARA

RELATED RESOURCES:

[Webinar recording](#)

[Multidimensional Measures Are Key to Understanding Child, Early, and Forced Marriages and Unions](#), Ana Aguilera, Sarah Green, Margaret E. Greene, Chimaraoke Izugbara, Erin Murphy-Graham, in the *Journal of Adolescent Health* (2021)

[Shared Roots, Different Branches: Understanding Child, Early and Forced Marriage in Diverse Global Settings](#), multiple authors, a supplement issue in the *Journal of Adolescent Health* (2022)

[A groundbreaking systematic review, but that alone is not enough to change the course of programming on child marriage prevention](#). Chandra-Mouli V., Plesons M. in the *Journal of Adolescent Health* (2021)

[What About Us? A Study on the Situation of Young Married Girls](#), Vikalp Sansthan and Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS) (2019)

For more information, please contact Sarah Green at: SGreen@ajws.org.



The CEFMU and Sexuality Working Group comprises several international and national organizations working with and for adolescent girls to advance their rights and opportunities. We develop resources and engage in advocacy to draw attention to the under-addressed issue of how patriarchal control of adolescent girls' and young women's sexuality acts as a driver of child, early and forced marriage and unions.