care® TIPPING POINT

Phase 2 | Baseline Brief

UNDERSTANDING THE ROOT CAUSES
OF CHILD MARRIAGE IN NEPAL:

Baseline Findings from the Nepal Tipping Point Evaluation[1]

Introduction

Each year, child marriage[2] affects more than 10 million girls globally, and about half of such marriages occur in South Asia. The practice is associated with adverse maternal and child health outcomes as well as with diminished long-term economic empowerment and violates the rights and bodily autonomy of girls. In Nepal and Bangladesh, CARE's Tipping Point Initiative is addressing the gender and social norms that are at the root of child, early, and forced marriage (CEFM) and promoting the rights of adolescent girls through community-level programming and evidence generation. This fact sheet presents baseline findings from the Tipping Point Phase 2 program's impact evaluation, currently underway in the Kapilvastu and Rupandehi districts in the Terai region of Nepal.

The Tipping Point Approach

The Tipping Point Program facilitates shifts in inequitable gender and social norms, enabling adolescent girls to build and practice skills, enhance the supportive relationships around them, and challenge the underlying causes of CEFM in their communities. Core participant groups— adolescent girls, adolescent boys, parents—are engaged in dialogues around four programmatic pillars: increasing sexual and reproductive health (SRH) knowledge and access, facilitating social norms change, supporting girl-led movement building, and expanding access to alternatives to marriage. Additionally, Tipping Point supports the creation of public spaces for all community members to engage in dialogue.

Study Design and Methods

Emory University, in collaboration with Care USA, Care Nepal, and Interdisciplinary Analysts, is leading an impact evaluation of this approach. The evaluation includes a cluster-randomized controlled trial with three arms, where participants in Arm 1 receive the Tipping Point Program with an emphasized social norms change component (TPP+); participants in Arm 2 receive the Tipping Point Program without the emphasized social norms change component (TPP); and participants in Arm 3 are the control group. Across arms, adolescent and adult participants completed a baseline survey with modules measuring five constructs: intrinsic agency (or 'power within'), instrumental agency (or 'power to'), collective agency (or 'power with'), social networks and social norms, and discrimination and violence. In addition to the survey, semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions were conducted with adolescent girls and boys, parents of adolescents, and community leaders, generating rich qualitative data about decision-making around marriage and changes in the prevalence of child marriage; adolescents' educational and employment aspirations; perceptions, practices, and experiences of gender roles and responsibilities; and social norms surrounding adolescent girls' mobility, gender roles, education, interactions with boys, and decision-making around marriage.[3]

Key Findings

### Trends in age at first marriage

▶ **Rates of child marriage have decreased, but median age at marriage remains below the legal limit.**

Women had a median age at first marriage of 15 years in Kapilvastu and 14 years in Rupandehi; men had higher median ages at first marriage in both districts (18 years in Kapilvastu; 17 years in Rupandehi). Though age at first marriage generally has been increasing **(Figure 1)**, the majority of women 20-24 years in both districts were married by age 18 (57% in Kapilvastu; 65% in Rupandehi), and the mean age at marriage was in this group was 17.4 years.

In the qualitative data, most participants perceived that while CEFM had declined in recent years due to changing norms related to the ideal age at marriage, as well as legal enforcement of the marriage age at 20[4], it had not entirely disappeared. Participants associated delayed marriage with higher education level.

FIGURE 1.

Percentage married by ages 15 and 18, by age group, gender, and district (N = 30,478)

Percentage married by age 15 / Percentage married by age 18. Legend: WOMEN, KAPILVASTU; WOMEN, RUPANDEHI; MEN, KAPILVASTU; MEN, RUPANDEHI
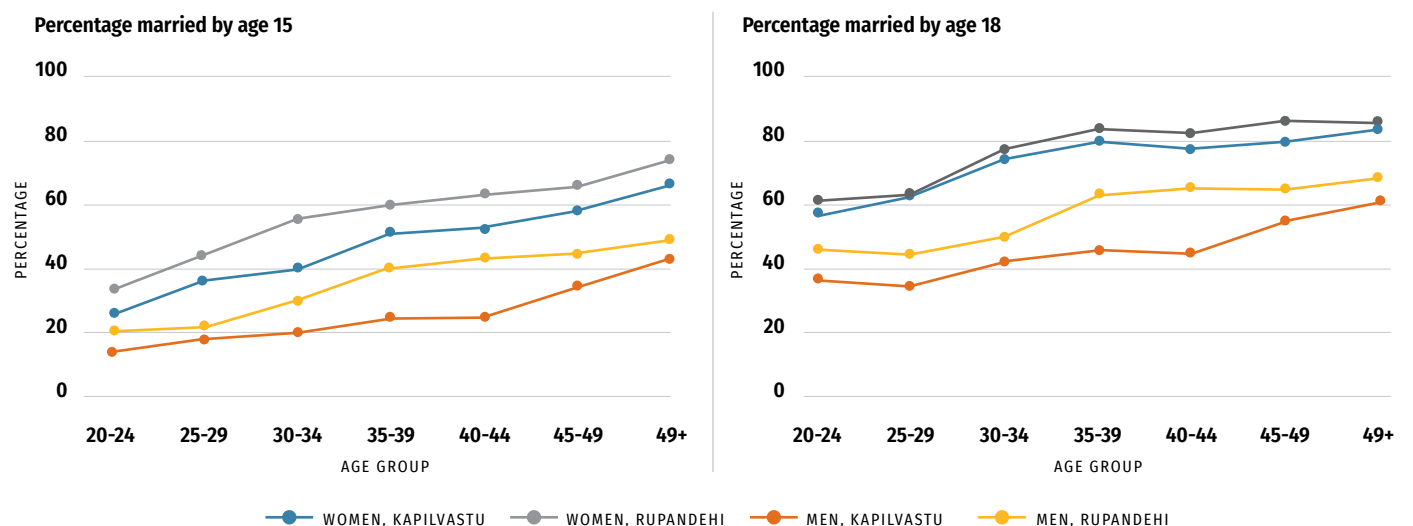
Schooling attainment and overall self-efficacy for adolescent girls

▶ **Girls and boys had similarly high levels of self-efficacy, with almost 9 in 10 girls at least somewhat confident that they could achieve their desired level of education.**

Significant increases in girls' educational attainment have run parallel to, and outpaced, the trend of later marriage. Of the adolescent girls who had attended school (94%), the great majority are still attending school (85%) and aspire to complete at least secondary school (93%). Measured self-efficacy, or confidence in their abilities to achieve desired goals (e.g. level of education, marriage age, mobility, access to SRH services), was the same for surveyed girls and boys, and about 87% of girls were at least somewhat confident that they could achieve their

desired level of education. Girls also had a high degree of self-efficacy regarding their ability to access health and SRH services, to negotiate with their parents, to move freely, and to speak on girls' issues in their community. Girls more often than boys had ever discussed with their parents how much education they wanted (32% vs 28%). However, compared to boys, girls more often felt that their parents were unwilling to listen to their opinions (6% vs. 2%) and less often fully agreed that they were comfortable talking with their parents (58% vs 74%).

Education as an acceptable but insufficient reason to delay marriage

▶ **School-going girls had more agency to reject marriage proposals than out-of-school girls.**

▶ **However, even girls in school were at risk of being married early if perceived to be disobedient, for example by roaming or interacting with boys.**

Participants identified completing education as a primary negotiating point by which girls might be permitted to delay marriage and refuse proposals; however, girls who were currently studying might still be at risk for CEFM, particularly if they were older or were perceived to be disobedient (e.g. by 'roaming' or interacting with boys). While most parents aspired for daughters and sons to be educated, girls' ability to negotiate their education was somewhat compromised in the most conservative communities, where girls as young as 15

were considered of marriageable age. The ability to negotiate continuing education hinged on parental and community perceptions of girls' appropriate behavior, the availability of an upper secondary school in the village (as inter-village travel was considered less appropriate and safe for girls), and, ultimately, the girls' ability to voice their aspirations in households where adult men were the ultimate and undisputed decision makers.

Restrictive gender norms controlling adolescents' sexuality, mobility, and free time

▶ **Restrictive norms around girls' mobility, interacting with boys, and participating in leisure activities outside the home intensify during adolescence to guard against' reputational damage.**

▶ **Norms are somewhat in flux, especially among educated families, but girls who violate them are at risk of being married off early.**

The transition to adolescence marked a period of reduced freedom and greater surveillance to protect girls' virginity, which was closely linked with family honor **(Figure 2)**. The expansion of time between the onset of adolescence and marriage extends the period over which family members and community feel their reputation must be guarded, particularly in light of expanding opportunities, such as the proliferation
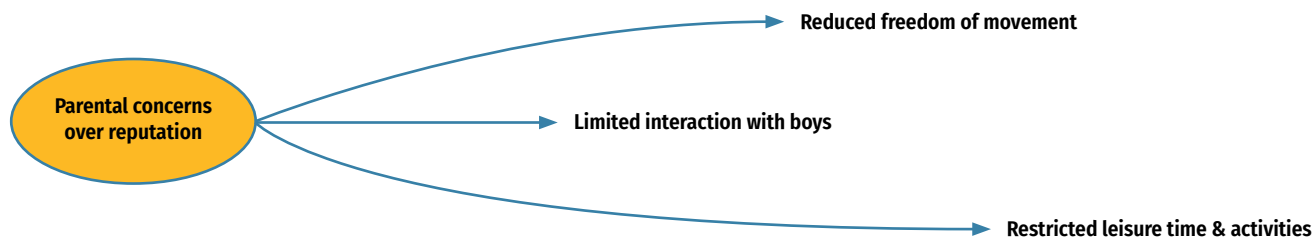
of mobile phones, to interact with boys. Expectations remained that adolescent boys and girls will have limited interaction outside of school to minimize safety risks to girls and the possibility of elopement. There also are strong beliefs that "good girls" do not move about the village unnecessarily or participate in leisure activities, such as sports, outside of home or school, and instead kept themselves busy with

homework and household chores. Community members, and their perceived ability to spread rumours that could damage the family's reputation, encouraged parents to place restrictions on daughters. Participants identified educated families and specific communities, such as Hilly (region) and Tharu (caste), as allowing girls greater freedom with less concern for possible reputational damage.

FIGURE 2.

Reputation Risk and Girls' Rights

Parental concerns over reputation → Reduced freedom of movement

Parental concerns over reputation → Limited interaction with boys

Parental concerns over reputation → Restricted leisure time & activities
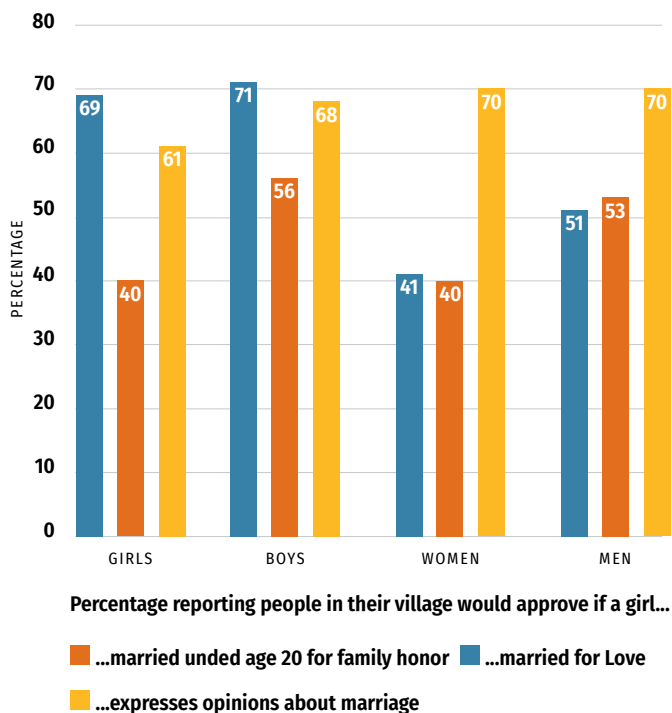

Restrictive gender norms and girls' desire to delay marriage

▶ **Norms around marriage decision-making are shifting, especially for girls in educated families.**

▶ **Despite these shifts, girls still face limitations in their ability to participate in decisions about the timing of marriage and choice of spouse.**

Parents described major shifts in children's agency in marriage negotiation; while previous generations of adolescents were married without being consulted or even meeting their proposed spouse, adolescents were now typically permitted to meet before any agreement was made and to reject proposals. These changes were reflected in survey data **(Figure 3)**, with a majority of participants stating that people in their village would approve of a girl expressing her opinions about marriage (65%). Some parents and adolescents stated that love marriages were becoming acceptable among Hilly and Tharu communities, and men and boys reported more community approval of these types of marriages (53-56%) than women and girls (40%). Despite these changes, adolescent girls almost universally cited fathers as the main decision makers about choice of husband and timing of marriage, and key informants stated that few girls would defy parents' wishes. This contradiction underscores the discrepancy between girls' reported high self-efficacy and the relatively low proportion who reported discussing marriage decisions with parents.

FIGURE 3.

Norms around marriage, girls (N = 1,134), boys (N = 1,154), women (N = 540), and men (N = 540)

Percentage reporting people in their village would approve if a girl...

- ...married under age 20 for family honor
- ...married for Love
- ...expresses opinions about marriage

Gaps in leadership competence and group membership

> ▶ Group membership and leadership competence among girls are significantly lower than among boys, and group leadership is very low among adolescents generally.
>
> ▶ Collective action among adolescents is in a nascent stage, but there are key stakeholders who are committed to supporting such activity

Membership in any group – such as youth groups or sports clubs – was more common among boys (42%) than girls (23%). Also, group leadership generally was rare, with only 4.5% of boys and 3.5% of girls reporting at least one leadership role. In measures of self-reported leadership competence, girls scored lower than boys. Collective action, especially girl-led activism, remains generally nascent. However, infrastructure is present in most communities, and key stakeholders in local government are committed to support collective action by adolescents.

Implications and Change Strategies

While adolescent girls in Nepal today increasingly are able to access schooling, gaps persist in their ability to negotiate the amount of education that they receive, their mobility, their timing of marriage, and their choice of spouse. Therefore, expanding access to schooling alone is unlikely to lead to the abandonment of CEFM. Addressing its underlying causes, including restrictive gender norms, necessitates affirming the rights of girls regardless of education and supporting their ability to advocate for change. Despite high self-efficacy reported by adolescent girls, fostering social environments that enable girls to communicate openly and to realize their aspirations remains crucial. Continued efforts are needed to support healthy communication among adolescent girls and their parents so the voices and opinions of girls feel heard and respected. Community buy-in will play a critical role in such efforts. Programming also is needed to sensitize boys and men about girls' experiences and to ensure that girls and women can openly share their perceptions of the gendered expectations and restrictions they experience. Given universally low levels of collective action among adolescents, but high collective efficacy, efforts to reduce gender gaps in group membership and leadership competence among adolescents will be important steps toward girl-led movement building.

Policy Recommendations

Programming that engages men and boys in transforming restrictive gender norms may facilitate girls' ability to negotiate important life decisions, including marriage and education.

Expanding opportunities for vocational training and increasing exposure to professional role models for girls may support girls' agency to pursue educational and career goals and expand community expectations for girls and young women beyond marriage and motherhood.

Expanding girls' freedom of movement will be a necessary step toward building girl-led activism.

Local government officials and community members can be engaged to support norms change and girls' collective action.

Next Steps: Monitoring of Tipping Point activities will provide important insights into the program's effectiveness on the ground leading up to endline data collection in 2022.

ENDNOTES

1 Findings based on the Nepal Tipping Point Program Baseline Report (https://caretippingpoint.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/TP-Phase-2-Baseline_Nepal-1.pdf).
2 Child marriage refers to any formal marriage or informal union between a child under the age of 18 and an adult or another child (UNICEF, https://www.unicef.org/protection/child-marriage).
3 The Emory Institutional Review Board and the Nepal Health Research Council approved the study.
4 UNFPA and UNICEF, Ending Child Marriage in Nepal. UNFPA and UNICEF: Nepal.