



## Phase 2 | Baseline Executive Summary

# UNDERSTANDING THE ROOT CAUSES OF CHILD MARRIAGE:

## Baseline Findings from the Tipping Point Evaluation in Bangladesh and Nepal

### The Tipping Point Initiative and Child, Early and Forced Marriage

Since 2013, the Tipping Point Initiative has engaged in participatory research to identify the social norms and expectations that underpin child, early and forced marriage (CEFM) and community-led programming to transform harmful norms and build the agency and collective efficacy of girls to demand their rights. The Tipping Point model's root-cause approach to community-level programming relies on synchronized engagement of adolescents and community members to ensure that all stakeholders can be part of the transformational change that comes from challenging social expectations and repressive norms.

This summary presents the major findings from a mixed-methods baseline study conducted in [Bangladesh](#) and [Nepal](#)

from late 2018 to early 2019, prior to Tipping Point's Phase 2 community-based intervention in Rangpur District of Bangladesh and Rupandehi and Kapilvastu Districts of Nepal. This baseline study is part of an impact evaluation led by CARE with support from its research partners, International Centre for Diarrhoeal Disease Research, Bangladesh (icddr,b) in Bangladesh and Emory University & Interdisciplinary Analysts (IDA) in Nepal. This research aims to assess Tipping Point's contribution to increasing adolescent girls' agency, shifting relationships to be more supportive of girls' rights, weakening normative structures that restrict girls from taking decisions around marriage and ultimately reducing the incidence of CEFM in these settings.

## Study Design and Methods

[Tipping Point's impact evaluation](#) includes a three-armed cluster randomized control trial (C-RCT) to assess changes in the incidence of CEFM and secondary indicators alongside a qualitative exploration of social norms change. One arm will receive the core [Tipping Point Program](#) (TPP) model, a second arm will receive an enhanced model, TPP+, that includes an additional social norms programming component, while the third arm of the study serves as the control.

The study takes a multi-staged sampling<sup>1</sup> approach, randomly assigning clusters (villages in Bangladesh and wards in Nepal) to study arms. An enumeration<sup>2</sup> of households was conducted across study arms which provided data on sample eligibility. This sampling frame provided baseline samples for conducting surveys with adolescent girls (12 to 16 years old), and community members in both the countries, as well as with adolescent boys (12-16 years old) in Nepal. This survey is designed to assess rates of child marriage, adolescents' self-efficacy, mobility, knowledge and confidence in seeking sexual and reproductive health services, confidence in communicating, negotiating, and raising their demands to the power holders, gender attitudes, social norms and expectations. The existence and strength of norms related to CEFM were assessed quantitatively and qualitatively using [CARE's Social Norms Analysis Plot \(SNAP\) framework](#), focusing specifically on assessing the social norms at the root of child marriage practices that were identified by the Tipping Point Initiative . These include norms related to girls' participation in decision-making around marriage and girls' ability to move in and around the village, play sports, ride bicycles, talk to adolescent boys and engage in collective action. To qualitatively assess the constructs around these social norms, focus group discussions were conducted with a sub-sample of adolescents and adults and in-depth interviews were conducted with a sub-sample of adolescents and key community leaders.

## Results and Discussion

### Rates of child marriage and girls' aspirations

High rates of child marriage were reported in both Bangladesh and Nepal. Among women aged 20-24 years, about 25% were married before reaching the age of 15 years and 62% were married before reaching the age of 18 years in Bangladesh. Among 20-24-year-old women in Nepal, 28% of women were married before reaching the age of 15 years and 61% were married before reaching the age of 18 years. Median ages at first marriage in Bangladesh and Nepal and median age at *gauna*<sup>3</sup> in Nepal is earlier for women than men.

	Percentage of women (20-24 years) married by age 15	Percentage of women (20-24 years) married by age 18
Nepal	25	62
Bangladesh	28	61

In both settings, girls' aspirations around timing of marriage were misaligned with the high rates of early marriage reported in the study sites. In Bangladesh, less than 0.5% of the girls surveyed wanted to marry before the age of 18. Most girls surveyed in Nepal wanted to marry between the age of 20 to 24 years (74.6%). Perhaps linked to the desire to delay marriage, girls commonly reported wanting to continue their education, with 86% aspiring to study beyond higher secondary in Bangladesh and 58% in Nepal wanted to finish secondary and higher secondary school.





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In both contexts, girls' high aspirations regarding receiving education rather than get married early were complemented by high self-efficacy or confidence that they could achieve these desired goals even in the face of potential challenges. Parents often expressed support for the educational goals of their children but this support quickly, and almost universally, dissipated if continuing school was perceived to present a threat to the girls' "virginity" or to the family's reputation - both of which would be met by strong, negative reactions from others in the community. Thus, the mismatch between girls' aspirations to complete their education and the actual rate of marriage requires a deeper look at the perceived social expectations from girl and parents.

### Gender attitudes leading to early marriage among adolescents

Even though girls were confident that they could achieve their desired level of education, gender inequitable attitudes were apparent among girls. Almost half of the girls in Bangladesh had inequitable gender attitudes<sup>4</sup> (39-47%): a majority of the girls accepted control by family regarding moving around the village alone (80%), dress code (72%) and who she can talk to (65%). In Nepal, adult women believed that adolescent girls should be controlled, more than surveyed men.<sup>5</sup> Education emerged as an exception to the traditional gender inequalities as the majority of adult women and men in both countries agreed that girls should be provided with the same education opportunities as boys. However, perceived threats to a girls' sexual "purity" act as push factor leading to early marriage even if parents believe in the value of education for daughters. Findings from this study further establish that there are strong anticipated consequences for going against norms that control girls' sexuality, as doing so is perceived to affect a family's honor.

### Social norm around participation of a girl in decision making regarding own marriage

Girls, boys and adults in both countries believed that girls are expected to have minimal say in decisions regarding their marriage and that even if and when their opinions are sought or provided, fathers have the ultimate say about when and who his daughter will marry. In Nepal, 91.9% of girls had never expressed their choice in selecting a spouse and 89.2% had never expressed to their parents the age at which they would prefer to marry. Respondents indicated that girls who try to negotiate the timing of their marriage can expect sanctions from the community, like being perceived as "shameless" and "impudent". When it came to norms around refusing a wedding proposal, parents' views varied based on a girls' educational situation, her age, and whether her reputation was in question. For instance, there seemed to be more perceived flexibility for a girl to refuse a marriage if she was considered a promising student or smart. If she was considered to be deviating from norms put in place to control her mobility and sexuality, however, refusing a proposal was considered less acceptable. Thus, even though educational aspirations appear to be weakening the norms around early marriage, threats to girls' sexual "purity" continue to act as push factors facilitating early marriage.

### Mobility of girls

Adolescent girls were assessed as having low, medium or high mobility based on the responses to questions asking if adolescent girls can visit certain locations and if they needed permission to visit these places in Nepal and Bangladesh. Responses suggest that 97% of girls in Bangladesh were scored to have low mobility as compared to 35% in Nepal. 48% girls in Nepal have medium mobility as compared to 3% in Bangladesh. No adolescent girl in Bangladesh had high mobility but in Nepal 17% girls were high on the mobility scale.

In Nepal, 32% of the girls could not go to a health facility/provider at all and 65% said that they could access a health facility, but with permission. Only 3% of the girls said that they could go to a health facility without permission. In Bangladesh, 64% of the girls said that they could visit a health facility/provider, but 51% of those who could go needed permission in their last visit.

To visit a friend or a relative outside the village in Nepal, only 3% of girls could go without permission, whereas 28.5% were not able to go at all. In Bangladesh, however, 70% of the girls said that they could visit a friend or relative outside the village but 83% of those who could go, needed a chaperone to exercise this mobility.

In Bangladesh, a girl moving in and around the village without a purpose was perceived to be “bad” and assumed to be either involved in a romantic relationship or seeking to become involved in one. This would lead to explicit name-calling and gossip from the community. In Nepal, girls and parents believe that their community associates girls “roaming around” with the risk of harassment, teasing or assault by “roaming” boys. Beliefs restricting girls’ mobility were connected with disapproval of girls’ interaction with boys, either intentional or unwanted, and hinted at society’s perception of threat to a girl’s “virginity” and thus the need to control girls’ sexuality via restricting their freedom of movement. Neighbors and villagers were widely recognized as powerful sources or transmitters of rumors of girls’ deviance of this norm. Both girls and their parents (especially fathers) expected strong consequences, like damage to the perception of their family’s honor, if girls were moving around in and around the village for reasons other than strictly educational purposes.

### Girls riding bicycle and playing sports

In Nepal, approval of girls riding bicycles for educational activities was more common among both female (71%) and male (89.6%) community members than approval for girls moving in and around the village for recreational purposes. However, in Bangladesh, 86% of the female community members and 61% male community members would disapprove of parents who would allow their daughters to ride a bicycle for anything other than education related purposes, with similar results in Nepal. The percentage of those expecting community disapproval of girls playing sports like football was considerably more compared to riding bicycles. Restrictive norms exist in both Nepal and Bangladesh around adolescent girls playing sports. As expressed by both girls and parents, this restriction becomes especially strong once a girl enters puberty. These norms restrict her from playing “boys” sports like football, cricket, and riding



bicycles, but boys do not experience this restriction. Girls are however “allowed” to play games that are part of the school curriculum or those that are played inside the confines of the household. Parents and brothers of girls who engage in sports face sanctions from villagers and the community, and in response or anticipation of these sanctions, they prohibit girls from engaging in these activities. Girls also perceive negative reactions from the villagers. Perceived consequences for playing outside include verbal abuse like labelling of the girl as “bad” or “shameless”, questioning girls’ gender identity (for playing “boy” games), and labelling the family of the girl as “bad,” etc. These sanctions drive restrictive behavior as they inhibit parents and brothers from supporting their daughters and sisters to play, especially after they have reached puberty. The biggest threat comes via gossiping by villagers, resulting in the perceived loss of family honor.

### Girls’ interaction with boys

In both countries, girls rarely socialized with boys unless in a school setting; relatedly, they reported that it would only be considered acceptable to talk with male classmates, peers, and relatives if conversation is educational, is not frequent, not long, and not in private. Parents in Nepal recognized that there were increasing interactions with the opposite sex, not only in person but also over the phone, and this raised tensions.

Girls’ parents reinforce these norms by not providing approval for conversations with boys and restricting girls’ mobility due



to fear of loss of reputation in the community and because interaction with boys is seen as a threat to girls' "virginity". Norm enforcers are the community members and, in Bangladesh, peers as well, who emphasize that girls should be disciplined by their parents if they interact with boys outside of school, so they do not continue to be perceived to disgrace their family and the entire community.

Girls and parents expect strong sanctions for unapproved interactions between girls and boys. Girls expect verbal abuse, gossip and name-calling by neighbors and/or parents, while parents, especially fathers are perceived as incapable of controlling their daughters and protecting their honor and thus feel pressure to arrange a marriage for their daughter. An inability to deal with this increased pressure also often leads to violence against the mother and/or daughter.

### Girls as change agents

Tipping Point's change pathway for reducing child marriage rests heavily on supporting girls to build their individual and collective agency to stand up for their rights. Girl-led movement building is a unique component of the TP model. To assess the impact of this intervention, collective efficacy among girls, their leadership competence and social norms related to movement building were also measured at baseline. On collective efficacy, meaning confidence in engaging in collective action to achieve a common goal or objective, adolescent girls and boys in Nepal had similar mean scores (11.0 out of 15), and scores tended

to be higher for older adolescents in comparison to younger adolescents, suggesting that collective efficacy increases with age. Despite these high scores, experience in actually taking collective action, as assessed through the qualitative data, appeared minimal. Joining others to address a community issue, speaking in public about a social problem, speaking with local authorities about community problems and attending a demonstration about a community problem were generally rare. For example, in Bangladesh, 89% of girls reported high collective efficacy; however, only 10% had ever participated in a collective event on education, dowry, child marriage, girls' rights or violence against girls. Parents did not report any expectations for girls' collective action, neither supportive nor restrictive as there was not much collective action for them to react to based on experience of that action. However, adolescent girls reported that they anticipate that the community may express positive reactions, specifically if collective efforts are focused on addressing sexual harassment. Adolescent boys, however, hypothesized that if a girl is not willing to get married early and friends support her, then the people will belittle these friends and their opinion will not be taken into account. Thus, across both countries, the few collective action activities that had been initiated were efforts made by adults on behalf of adolescents and children and around issues such as sexual harassment and early marriage rather than adolescent-led initiatives.

## Recommendations for policy and practices

Given universally low levels of collective action among adolescents, but relatively high collective-efficacy, there is an opportunity to cultivate girl-centered collective action that involves supportive engagement among boys and parents. It is important to sensitize the community, parents and adolescent boys regarding girls' rights and agency and get boys involved. Adults can play a significant role in positively supporting girl-led movements since in the past they have been leaders in starting collective action to address sexual harassment and early marriage.

Despite contradictory aspirations and goals, child marriage remains widespread among adolescent girls in the communities that participated in this research. Sustained efforts addressing the root causes of this practice are needed to reduce the high rates of child marriage throughout these districts.





## Conclusion

The Tipping Point Baseline findings stress that education cannot be solely relied upon for addressing CEFM as weakening the norms perpetuating the practice are core to its continuation. To target the strong factors pushing girls towards early marriage, in spite of educational aspirations that they and their parents support, efforts need to be made to support girls to increase their agency to stand up for their rights as a community and resist the normative push factors that perpetuate norms sustaining early marriage. Along with this, there is a need to ensure increased confidence among boys and parents to be not only positive deviants but allies in challenging restrictive norms that limit girls' aspirations, achievements, and rights.

## Acknowledgements

This summary was written by Dr. Sadhvi Kalra, Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning Specialist for the Tipping Point Initiative of CARE International.

All findings presented in this summary are obtained from the following reports:

- Bergenfeld, I., Clark, C.J., Kalra, S., Khan, Z., Laterra, A., Morrow, G., Sharma, S., Sprinkel, A., Stefanik, L., & Yount, K.M. (2020) [Tipping Point Program Impact Evaluation: Baseline Study in Nepal](#). CARE USA and Emory University.
- Pravin, K., Nunna, T.T., Mamun, M.A., Talukdar, A., Antu, J.F., Siddique, A.A., Kalra, S., Laterra, A., Sprinkel, A., Stefanik, L., & Naved, R.T. (2020). [Tipping Point Project: Report of the Baseline Study Findings from Bangladesh](#). CARE USA and icddr.

For more information about Tipping Point or this research, please visit [www.caretippingpoint.org](http://www.caretippingpoint.org) or contact [tippingpoint@care.org](mailto:tippingpoint@care.org)

## ENDNOTES

- 1 Multi-stage sampling is the process of identifying sample in stages, by selecting smaller and smaller units at each stage.
- 2 A 'census' was conducted of households in the selected districts, to achieve a broader sampling frame from which, eligible participants for data collection were selected.
- 3 *gauna* refers to the time when a married couple begins to live together and/or consummates their marriage.
- 4 Gender attitudes among adolescent girls were measured through scales administered to assess gender roles, control of girls by family members and perceived gender discrimination in the family. The items were used to construct a summative scale separately for both contexts. Refer to the TP evaluation reports for details.
- 5 A *Controlling behavior* scale was used where lower score represented higher agreement in controlling girls' behavior. While most men (80%) had medium or high scores on this scale, 57% of women had low scores.