

IMPACT EVALUATION

Social Norms Finding Brief



This brief presents the combined findings from impact evaluation of the [Tipping Point Initiative](#) in Nepal and Bangladesh on the priority social and gender norms Tipping Point identified during its [formative research](#). The impetus for the Phase 2 cluster randomized control trial (RCT) in both countries was to explore the additive impact of a social norms heavy approach (known here as TPP+) on the risk of child marriage among at risk girls. The findings presented in this brief use both qualitative and quantitative data to present changes in norms as well as the pathways for impact on child marriage as well as the risk and protective factors associated with the practice.

The mixed-method impact evaluation was coordinated by CARE and led by International Centre for Diarrhoeal Disease Research, Bangladesh, and Emory University with Interdisciplinary Analysts in Nepal. For the full mixed-method impact reports from both countries, see [here](#).

What did the baseline tell us?

The findings from the baseline social norms' data suggest that as soon as girls hit puberty, they experience more restrictive norms and their own sensitivity to sanctions from families and community members leads to girls upholding these norms in their behavior. There are some signs of flexibility in repressive norms restricting girls' lives and options, especially when it comes to exceptions to the norm in girls' interactions with boys, mobility and delaying marriage for girls in school settings or in order to pursue education. However, perceived threats to a girls' virginity or reputation as "chaste", which both affect family honor and girls' marriageability, act as a push factor towards child marriage. For norms related to collective action for girls' rights – a strong focus of Tipping Point – girls expressed confidence to come together for a common purpose.

How does CARE measure norms?

The [Social Norms Analysis Plot \(SNAP\) Framework](#) gave researchers the basis to ask survey questions and formulate focus group discussions to understand the 5 components of a norm and how these are changing:

EMPIRICAL EXPECTATIONS:

What I think others do.

NORMATIVE EXPECTATIONS:

What I think others expect me to do.

EXCEPTIONS:

Under what situations is it acceptable to break the norm.

SANCTIONS:

Anticipated reactions of others whose opinions matter to me when I break a norm.

SENSITIVITY TO SANCTIONS:

How much sanctions matter for me.

How did Tipping Point support shifts in norms?

The Tipping Point Initiative sought to expand girls' confidence to engage in movement building to demand their rights while facilitating a supportive environment of increasingly positive norms and a network of allies to shift harmful and restrictive norms. The [Phase 2](#) program summary, implementation [overview](#) and [program materials](#) lay out the multiple strategies to shift norms in addition to individual behaviors and attitudes. Tipping Point integrated norms dialogues into every weekly session for girls and boys and monthly sessions for mothers and fathers and then added additional strategies following [CARE's Social Norms Design Checklist](#) for a more comprehensive norms strategy including:

1. [Learning Communities on the Move](#) – a model for girl-led activism and norms shifting, aiming to have girls' expertise and dynamic contributions be central (respected, included) to decision making spaces that affect their lives and rights. Core activities include a mentors' training, a girl activist training, and four girl activist-led norms shifting activities over the course of 12 months;
2. [Intergroup dialogues](#) for gender and social norms change: to facilitate critical reflective dialogue on girls' rights by bringing together girls, boys and parents to share reflections in a way that links to the sessions each group is doing separately;
3. Quarterly dialogue with leaders: targeting groups like [religious leaders](#) with dialogue and reflection instead of messaging enhanced allyship and understanding that centers girls' leadership.

Mixed Method Findings

In Bangladesh, researchers used the community survey of adults, regardless of participation, to measure changes in social norms at a community level, and this was triangulated with qualitative data. In Nepal, findings were drawn from qualitative data from adolescent and adult participants and non-participants on their perceptions of the components of each norm.

Girls' Mobility

In Bangladesh, the survey found that girls' mobility was increasing in all areas – even in control areas. The mean score of girls' mobility¹ increased significantly among the girls who received 36-40 sessions in TPP+ arm and this matched findings

from the community survey showing that there was a positive change in social norms around girls' mobility in and around the village. For instance, girls reported more exceptions to norms related to riding a bike – it is now permissible to ride a bike more places than before Tipping Point. Similarly, girls in Bangladesh who participated in Tipping Point did find some more freedom in their mobility – attending sessions became an exception to mobility norms, providing more experience that demonstrating a new norm can push the existing boundaries. So, both the norm and girls' reported behavior improved, but it remains to be seen if these program-motivated changes will be sustained.

However, the qualitative data shows that sanctions are still strong enough to drive behavior in both countries: most parents were still sensitive to rumors and blaming, and as a response, pursued both positive and negative disciplining for transgressing mobility norms with a view to upholding family honor and avoiding social humiliation. These sanctions are still effective: girls from a participating village reported that parents usually ask their daughters to stop riding bicycles when they start receiving marriage proposals fearing that it may compromise the marriage prospect.

Marriage norms

The emphasized social norms component (TPP+) contributed significantly to positive changes in social norms around decision making regarding girls' marriage compared to the control in both Nepal and Bangladesh. In Nepal, empirical and normative expectations – both what people expect others to do and what they perceive as expected of them – have also shifted substantially toward girls having more say in their marriage decision and in marrying after age 20. Parents of participants and non-participants, key informants, and adolescents recognized a girls' ability to have a say in a marriage proposal, influence the choice of her groom, and marry after age 20. In Bangladesh, in contrast to the baseline, families at endline were more open to seek girls' opinion regarding the choice of groom and in practice more girls expressed their opinion regarding timing of marriage.

SANCTIONS REMAIN STRONG

At both time points across the intervention villages, most girls did not dare to discuss their own marriage with their parents' fearing angst and criticism from the villagers.

¹ Tipping Point's Adolescent Empowerment Index includes a six-item scale for mobility and can be found here: <https://www.care.org/news-and-stories/resources/tipping-point-adolescent-empowerment-index/>



However, in Bangladesh, the qualitative data tells us barriers remain. Adolescent girls and parents at the endline in all the intervention villages indicated that most of the girls aged 12-16 were still not expected to take part in the decision-making regarding their marriage timing; a girl is not even expected to talk about her own marriage unless she has been asked to. Therefore, in Bangladesh, the perception of the norm may be shifting at a community level, but that does not mean that girls are experiencing anything different in their homes. Fathers remain the norm holder in both contexts and girls are expected to follow his decision without question.

Exceptions may be increasing, though, marking opportunity for further norms change: a meritorious or even an average student would be subject to less harsh sanctions if they rejected a marriage proposal, whereas this exception was only reserved for high-achieving girls in the Bangladesh baseline. Similarly, parents' sensitivity to sanctions seems to be decreasing:

“Parents, who have a dream to educate their daughter to a certain level, educate them to that level and don't marry off them.... Villagers can mind. But these parents and the daughter don't heed their opinion”

(Adolescent girl, Bangladesh, TPP+ participant).

Some mothers, based on their own experience with child marriage, also became less sensitive to sanctions when delaying their daughter's marriage.

Girls' rights and family honor

In both contexts, girls' education remained a core aspiration of participants, their parents, and non-participants alike. While education did not prove to protect girls from early marriage, all adolescent groups in Nepal believed the ideal woman should be educated, which has changed from baseline. The most frequently mentioned driver of social norms change in Nepal was improvements in the educational status of the community and the increasing enrollment of girls in school. Similarly, the qualitative data found that the very few girls who got married lived in families that did not value education for girls - a feature that was noted as being against the norms among the participants in that area. So, girls' right to education has become increasingly recognized among many families, norms are shifting in support of it, and more girls are attending school for longer - pushing a new norm into the light. However, threats to girls' sexuality and family honor constrict this pathway for change and continue to be a facilitator of child marriage.

In Bangladesh, although girls at endline were still largely expected to interact with boys exclusively for study related purposes as at baseline, an openness regarding interaction with boys at NGO meetings and activities was observed at endline. That said, parents were still sensitive to these sanctions at endline in both countries and it motivated punitive behavior as reported in Bangladesh: study participants reported it is normal to take mild measures such as imposing restrictions on the girls' movement, keeping them under continuous surveillance, scolding them, and prohibiting them to talk with males. Sometimes girls were tortured physically for an alleged or real romantic relationship, and often, the girl's education was stopped, and her marriage was arranged to protect family honor.

SPOTLIGHT ON ALLIES' COLLECTIVE ACTION

In one neighborhood of a TPP+ village, a number of parents, regardless of their socioeconomic status, possessed higher aspirations for a girl's education compared to the other neighborhoods [whereas at baseline, this type of behavior was only for wealthier parents]. They took a collective decision not to marry off their daughters early and they were less sensitive to sanctions from other neighborhoods. Some girls in this neighborhood were attending higher secondary and tertiary level education without being married.

Comparison of endline data with baseline revealed that girls' collective action for achieving rights was met with greater acceptability – but in Bangladesh, this was only if it concerned sexual harassment. Community-level norms shifting events were found effective: influential community members helped in raising awareness [against sexual harassment] and Tipping Point boys participants talked to their peers and perpetrators in the community – research participants reported this event and collective action helped in reducing sexual harassment in the village.

Collective action continued to be rare in Nepal, but it was reported as successful in those rare cases. This success was mirrored in Bangladesh; several cases of collective action to stop child marriage were reported at endline and two of those initiatives were successful. This was an improvement over the baseline, which did not report any such initiatives. Collective action by girls against child marriage did meet strong resistance from the community for girls' being vocal about their marriage and raising the issue of transgressing the existing norms of age hierarchy. Therefore, even with evidence of progress, more allies are needed; girls and mothers pointed out that unity among all villagers is the most important factor in preventing child marriage. According to them, the ground is not yet ready for the girls to bring about this unity all by themselves.



Discussion of results

Quantitatively and qualitatively, this study has shown that gender and social norms that drive child marriage are shifting. Tipping Point helped expedite these shifts in numerous ways by providing opportunity for publicly displaying exceptions to the norms, providing space for parents and allies to discuss these norms, and providing space for new norms to become visible.

Investing in multiple norms shifting strategies pays off

In Bangladesh, the risk of child marriage dropped by 63% in the social norms heavy (TPP+) arm for girls who participated heavily in the project – an unprecedented result for girls aged 14 and older. In both countries, Tipping Point proved effective in shifting norms and related behaviors that are known protective factors for girls and their families against CEFM.

Risk factors were not overcome in this short implementation window and restrictive gender norms continued to drive child marriage. Sanctions are still plentiful and effective in driving discrimination and violence towards girls – and keeping girls silent. For instance, according to the adolescent girls, most girls still do not seek help from the broader community in addressing sexual harassment out of fear of getting blamed for what happened to them. Family honor is still directly tied to girls' real or perceived behavior which can threaten honor, quickly leading to marriage.

Shifting discriminatory norms may be a vital part of the solution, but the Nepal study reminds us it does not stand alone: all girls with “fixed” marriages described restrictive gender norms, but also having extensive household duties, limited mobility, and facing structural problems such as poverty and other adverse experiences, for example parental death. Most of the girls had poor social relationships with their parents and generally do not share their aspirations, discuss desires, or seem to communicate much with their parents. Therefore, investing in norms shifting as a part of comprehensive, gender-transformative adolescent empowerment programming was found core to girls' success and decreasing child marriage in these contexts.

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