



Advocacy for Girls' Rights and Against Child, Early & Forced Marriage

After nine years of programming, learning, evidence generation and evidence, CARE's Tipping Point Initiative gathered adolescent girl activists, technical advisors from diverse fields, activists fighting for girls' rights, government officials, and staff to discuss not just what the last decade has taught us but importantly where we want the girls' rights field to evolve. This brief discusses where advocacy gains are being made, why, and what role each of us has in promoting transformative policy that centers girls' rights and lived experiences.

If you are interested in seeing how this reflection fits into the larger story, see our Tipping Point Global Learning Overview found [here](#).

What we have seen, experienced, learned, and evaluated

CARE recognizes that policy can be a gateway to girls exercising their rights, but advocacy that does not center girls' agency and experiences while ignoring the norms that act as barriers can do more harm than good. For instance, minimum age of marriage laws have long been a staple of national strategies to end child marriage. However, "laws regulating normative behaviors such as child marriage run the risk of punishing young people or driving the practice underground (or both)"¹.

When we focus on opening doors instead of closing them, such as a focus on women and girls' access to resources and services, we experience transformative change. In Nepal, the Hausala project works with the Ministry of Education to provide accelerated education for out-of-school adolescents, particularly girls, enabling them to acquire key academic and life skills. In addition to building their capacity to read and do math, the curriculum includes leadership skills development, financial literacy, and adolescent sexual & reproductive health information. This comprehensive approach to education structures and services led to the proportion of girls able to read increasing from 4% to 76%.

Going further than centering girls' needs is centering young people's voice and priorities. CARE's partnership with the [Youth Coalition for Sexual and Reproductive Health & Rights](#) within the [PROJEUNE](#) project invested in youth-led advocacy in Benin and contributed to a decrease in child marriage from 57% at baseline to 23% at endline.

Making girls an integral part of accountability systems pays off. In Malawi, CARE used an electronic version of our [Community Score Card](#) as part of the implementation of the World Bank's Global Partnership for Social Accountability. A customized system for reporting teacher absenteeism empowered students, head teachers and school management committee members to submit reports on teacher attendance via text message.¹⁵⁷ The data was elevated to service providers as evidence of service delivery failures that needed to be addressed. The mechanism also brought to light some corrupt practices in the school system. CARE then adapted and expanded the education-oriented electronic score card to cover multiple sectors, giving local policymakers, service providers and community members the information they needed to track progress in improving service provision.

¹ Santelli JS, Spindler E, Moore E, McGovern T. Criminalising sexuality or preventing child marriage: legal interventions and girls' empowerment. *Lancet Child Adolesc Health*. 2019 Apr;3(4):206-208. doi: 10.1016/S2352-4642(18)30370-5. Epub 2018 Dec 6. PMID: 30528683; PMCID: PMC6614741.

Where we go from here to center accountability to girls and their rights

CARE, our partners and allies in the fight for girls' rights focus on these principles when calling for action in policy, practice and funding:

Gender at the Center

The dominant strategies and approaches employed by both governments² and donors to address CEFM have largely ignored the need for gender equality approaches that address the root causes of the practice as evidenced by the near-silence on issues such as the control of adolescent girls' sexuality that has only recently been broken³. By centering issues of gender inequality and girls' rights, policy, investment and legislative remedies for CEFM can strengthen girls' agency and self-determination and provide long-term solutions to the root-causes of CEFM. This requires actors – from government ministries to community-based organizations – to ensure comprehensive sexuality education within the quality education systems and youth-friendly sexual and reproductive health services.

Holistic and Inclusive

We know that poverty is one of multiple drivers of child marriage, and we know that cash components of safety net programs can mitigate those financial incentives for families. However, a comprehensive approach to poverty alleviation that addresses the gender and social norms that act as barriers to adolescent empowerment and facilitators of child marriage are necessary for sustainable change. Multiple studies have found that the “strongest, most consistent results are evident in a subset of programs fostering information, skills and networks for girls in combination with community mobilization”⁴. Even large-scale programs, such as Ethiopia's PSNP, can implement complementary gender norms-focused components that “have been found to play an important role in shifting parental and girls' attitudes and beliefs around child marriage.”⁵

2 Child Marriage Restraint Act. S.R.O. No. 344-Law/2017S.R.O. No. 344-Law (Bangladesh 2017)

3 CEFM Sexuality Programs Working Group (2019) Tackling the Taboo: Sexuality and gender-transformative programmes to end child, early and forced marriage and unions.

4 ICRW. “Solutions to End Child Marriage: What the evidence shows”. <https://www.icrw.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/Solutions-to-End-Child-Marriage.pdf>

5 Child Marriage and Ethiopia's Productive Safety Net Program: Analysis of protective pathways in the Amhara region: Final Report, UNICEF Office of Research – Innocenti, Florence, 2020.

CASE STUDY IN YOUTH-LED ADVOCACY

During the 2021 Province 5 Girls Summit, organized by the adolescent-led Girls Rights Forum for Rupandehi District on the International Girls' Child Day, presented their revised strategic plan to their mayor to continue to engage the government and communities to better support girls and re-envision harmful social and gender norms. The Mayor shared that his municipal budget contained 500,000 NPR (about \$4,000 USD) for girls empowerment more broadly – specifically for girls' education, girls' menstrual hygiene, reproductive health awareness, and girls' empowerment, which was granted for full implementation by GRF.

Movement-founded

Those driving policy, practice and investment are not those most affected – girls themselves, the civil society organizations (CSOs) that seek to further their cause, and marginalized communities, such as internally displaced persons in MENA or Dalit communities in Nepal. These groups are often systematically excluded from these spaces – creating a vacuum for accountability⁶.

Girls themselves have reflected that wide community buy-in is needed for transformational change that supports their rights, and they are not able to take this on alone.⁷ Intergenerational dialogue for community-level advocacy presents an opportunity for girls and women-led civil society actors for mentorship, more equitable partnership, and a broader alignment on girls' and women's rights issues at multiple levels.

The meaning of youth-led must evolve:

Even when youth-led advocacy is a central component of a project intervention, adults remain in the driver seat. Interventions must shift the power – to decide on methods, what capacity is needed, and where funding goes – to girls and young people, or at the very least work to provide them the opportunity for their voice to be heard on these issues. By shifting just a single component of leadership in these areas, the field can start to invest in process of collective adolescent empowerment and not just outputs.

Want more information? Email tippingpoint@care.org

6 Halloran, B. & Flores, W. (2017). Mobilizing Accountability: Citizens, Movements, and the State. Transparency Initiative. Accessed at <https://www.transparency-initiative.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/movements-and-accountability-final.pdf>

7 Naved et al. (2022). Impact of Tipping Point Initiative, a social norms intervention, in addressing child marriage and other adolescent health and behavioral outcomes in a northern district of Bangladesh.