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CHILD, EARLY, AND FORCED MARRIAGE: A Political Economy Analysis of India

September 2020



Iris Group

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I. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 2020, Iris Group conducted a political economy analysis (PEA) of the issue of child, early, and forced marriage (CEFM) in India to contextualize the work of the Child Marriage Learning Partners Consortium and to offer a high-level view of the environment for CEFM programming in the country. This analysis primarily examines national-level characteristics and trends, while placing special emphasis on the states of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh. Through a desk review and key informant interviews, this analysis found the following:

ANALYSIS PILLAR	KEY FINDINGS	IMPLICATIONS
Foundational Factors <i>(e.g., embedded structures, such as geography, class, ethnicity)</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Poverty and gender inequality are the primary drivers for child marriage in India; gender inequality's impact manifests through low value placed on girls Caste/tribe membership influences cultural practices and related economic exclusion hinders opportunities in less privileged groups Large variations between and within states; rural vs. urban disparities Child marriage prevalence in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh is heavily concentrated in lowest economic tercile and in rural areas; differences between castes and religions are less significant 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Programs addressing poverty must include a gender focus that improves the perceived value of girls in order to transform gender norms Uttar Pradesh and Bihar require a strategy that focuses on poor, rural areas Anti-CEFM strategies should account for layers of inequality and cultural practices shaped by caste/tribal affiliation
Rules of the Game <i>(e.g. laws, international commitments, policies, social norms)</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Legal age of marriage is 18 for girls/women; 21 for boys/men Consent law classifies all sexual activity under 18 as sexual assault; requires reporting by health providers Laws around marriage and sexuality have grey areas; are poorly implemented and weaponized Gender norms link family honor to girls' sexual purity; limit school and career aspirations Couples' consent for marriage not widely expected or enforced 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Families' use of laws to deter or punish inter-caste marriages contributes to strict controls over teen sexuality Programs promoting enforcement of laws should emphasize the importance of consent to sex and marriage, as a way to challenge control of sexuality by parents/state Interventions focusing on norms change are critical to empowering girls May be able to substitute aspirations for girls' marriage with economic aspiration in right conditions
Here and Now <i>(e.g., current events and circumstances)</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> National government task force is considering raising age of marriage for girls to 21, despite broad civil society opposition National and state governments have had large child marriage schemes with some 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Government may forge ahead with raising age to 21; will require robust response from civil society to reduce harm; generate economic and social conditions to support increased age

ANALYSIS PILLAR	KEY FINDINGS	IMPLICATIONS
	<p>impact on issue; there is distrust of government methods and motives among civil society</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Civil society very active on the issue, including grassroots women’s groups • International non-governmental organizations (INGOs) are not as visible as Indian civil society organizations (CSOs) and government on this issue • Large-scale programs focus on cash transfer or schooling; small scale programs are multisectoral • COVID-19 lockdowns have suspended child marriage and related programs, created economic insecurity; likely to cause girls to drop out of school 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Opportunity for women’s rights groups, children’s rights groups to unite on common ground • Response to CEFM is India-owned, with rich, vibrant, and engaged civil society; external groups are at best operating in close relationship with Indian CSOs • Vertical responses are scalable, but are vulnerable to backsliding with economic crisis or natural disaster • Disruptions due to COVID-19 will mean CEFM and schooling programs have to rebuild and recalibrate their benchmarks
<p>Dynamics <i>(e.g., interplay among the other pillars)</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Progress: building coalitions to work across women/youth rights organizations; implementing large-scale schemes alongside smaller approaches addressing gender and empowerment; and collecting district-level data about where CEFM is still occurring • Obstacles: improving government responsiveness to civil society and easing its emphasis on legal age over agency; balancing scale with adaptability and integrating norms change; and learning more about high rates 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A robust, engaged civil society and government willing to work on CEFM provides important groundwork • Continued progress will require creative solutions to integrating norms changing approaches at scale • Potential policy change makes civil society voices, especially of youth, even more critical to ensure young women and adolescents are not harmed further.

The findings of this PEA support the following conclusions and recommendations:

Case for Investment

- **Success in India makes an impact on global prevalence.** Because India includes the highest burden, with 15,648,000 of the world’s child marriages, success here can have a tremendous impact.
- **COVID-19 and the potential increase in age of marriage create an urgency to build the social, educational, and economic infrastructure to support girls and young women with a gender and rights lens.**
- **Donors can build on existing investments in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar for an integrated approach to CEFM.** Experience and credibility in family planning, women’s economic empowerment, and nutrition can build a cohesive, integrated approach to CEFM within a gender equality framework.

Key Points of Leverage in India on CEFM

- **Civil society, including community-based organizations, provide authentically Indian response.** India's robust and active civil society is a tremendously important tool in addressing CEFM.
- **Political support for reducing CEFM in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh can contribute to scaled government programs with a gender lens.** Examining which state and local policies are and are not working for girls and young women, and what is needed to improve them, are the next steps.
- **Current synergy between women's groups and youth groups can be leveraged for ongoing coordination of advocacy strategies.** Girls' leadership and voices should be centered as these networks develop.

Turning Gaps into Opportunities

- **India should better coordinate and target research to understand communities where CEFM decreases are lagging behind economic development.** At both the state and national level, better coordination and indexing of existing and future data can help stakeholders develop a common understanding of what it takes to reduce child marriage.
- **Programs should test strategies to integrate gender norms change into anti-poverty approaches.** Investing in gender equality can insulate girls from the impacts that economic crises and natural disasters currently have on child marriage rates.
- **Building on the rich history of women's collectives can yield results for girls.** Girls' collectives can help empower them and position them to help India recover from COVID-19.

II. INTRODUCTION AND METHODOLOGY

In 2020, Iris Group conducted a political economy analysis (PEA) of the issue of child, early, and forced marriage (CEFM) in India to contextualize the work of the Child Marriage Learning Partners Consortium and to offer a high-level view of the environment for CEFM programming in the country. The ultimate purpose of this analysis is to provide macro-level context for the findings from learning consortium investments.

Iris Group adapted an existing framework for applied political economy analysis from the 2018 USAID PEA Guide for Practitioners (Menocal et al., 2018) to identify the underlying context for CEFM. The team performed a desk review of grey and peer-reviewed literature, and conducted 14 semi-structured interviews with 17 key informants on the topic. This PEA was gender-intentional, examining how Indian society understands and enforces male and female roles and responsibilities, and how Indian political dynamics have shaped the narrative around the equal rights of women and girls. This gender intentional focus was incorporated into our interview guide for key informants and our analysis of the findings.

Iris Group assessed the findings using four angles of analysis:

- **Foundational Factors:** Embedded structures that are difficult or impossible to change, such as geography, class, ethnicity, gender inequality
- **Rules of the Game:** Laws, international commitments, policies, and social norms
- **Here and Now:** Current events and circumstances
- **Dynamics:** Interplay among the other pillars

This report presents the CEFM context in India, summarizes the findings within each pillar of analysis from the desk review and interviews, and provides recommendations based on these findings for potential responses to CEFM in India. This analysis primarily examines national-level characteristics and trends, while placing special emphasis on the states of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh.

III. CONTEXT

The Government of India has been led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi since 2014. He is a member of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), India's current ruling political party that leans towards right-wing ideologies and Hindu nationalism (Malik & Singh, 1992). India has been one of the fastest growing G20 economies since 2014 (*OECD Economic Surveys: India*, 2019). To improve income and wellbeing, significant reforms have been passed around taxation, domestic trade barriers, digitalization, public infrastructure, and more. However, some reforms around service taxation and demonetization have negatively impacted economic performance and India's unemployment rate reached a 45 year high in 2017-18 (Frayar, 2020; Patel, 2019). The central government has steadily launched social protection and welfare policies to address social challenges like open defecation, labor regulation, women's empowerment, access to education, and income support schemes (*OECD Economic Surveys: India*, 2019). However, despite improved access to public services, their quality, enforcement, and implementation remains inadequate. India's economy has been extraordinarily impacted by the global COVID-19 pandemic, experiencing a sharp 23.9% contraction in GDP compared to the first quarter of 2019-20 (Ministry of Statistics & Programme Implementation, 2020).

Bihar and Uttar Pradesh are adjoining states in northern and northeastern India. Uttar Pradesh is the most populous state in India, and Bihar is the third most populous; they make up 16.51% and 8.6% of the national population respectively, over 80% of which is rural (*Census 2011 (PCA - Final Data)*, 2014). Both states have educational attainment, literacy, and school transition outcomes that are lower than the national average (Balani, 2017). A majority (60.7%) of Bihar's rural families are landless and 21 of its districts have been designated for special benefits due to extreme poverty (UNICEF, 2017). Lack of financial resources from the central government, low human capital, weak public institutions, inadequate infrastructure, political instability and social conflict rooted in caste, class, and ethnicity have contributed to low human development in both states (Rasul & Sharma, 2014).

According to India's National Family Health Survey (NFHS), child marriage among girls has declined dramatically within a decade, falling from 47 percent of women age 20-24 married before the age of 18 to 27 percent (Mukherjee, 2018). The literature attributes much of this decline to increased access to education and decreased poverty (Zavier, A.J.F. et al., 2019). Marriage before age 15 has declined even more significantly, from 18 to 7 percent (Mukherjee, 2018). Among South Asian countries, India's progress on child marriage has been outpaced only by Maldives (UNICEF, 2019). However, India still has the highest global burden of married girls because of its large population. Several informants doubt the accuracy of rates captured by NFHS, asserting that there may be underreporting due to social desirability bias (Interview 9/2).

Bihar's child marriage prevalence rate according to the most recent NFHS was the highest among Indian states at 42.5 percent, with Uttar Pradesh at 20 percent (Mukherjee, 2018). Uttar Pradesh and Bihar are among the five states that share over half of India's girls and women married as children. Uttar Pradesh has a higher burden of child marriage than any other state at

36 million (UNICEF, 2019). Both states reported significant reductions over 10 years, achieving an over 30 percent decline in Uttar Pradesh between 2005-2006 and 2015-2016, and a 69 percent to 42.5 percent drop in Bihar (UNICEF, 2019). However, to eliminate child marriage by 2030, India needs to speed its rate of reduction four-fold nationally. Bihar must increase from 3.7 percent annual reduction rate to 25 percent, and Uttar Pradesh from 9.3 percent to 20.4 percent (UNICEF, 2019).

IV. FINDINGS

A. Foundational Factors

This section explores embedded or fixed structures that affect CEFM. Embedded structures are those that do not quickly change and should be considered as constants in any CEFM strategy. The table below summarizes the key findings that are explored in this section, and implications of these findings for CEFM strategy.

KEY FINDINGS	IMPLICATIONS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Poverty and gender inequality are the primary drivers for child marriage in India; gender inequality’s impact manifests through low value placed on girls • Caste/tribe membership influences cultural practices and related economic exclusion hinders opportunities for girls from less privileged groups • Large variations between and within states; rural vs. urban disparities • Child marriage prevalence in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh is heavily concentrated in lowest economic tercile, rural areas; differences between castes and religions are far less significant 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Programs addressing poverty must include a gender focus that improves the perceived value of girls in order to transform gender norms • Uttar Pradesh and Bihar require a strategy that focuses on poor, rural areas • CEFM strategies should account for layers of inequality and cultural practices shaped by caste/tribal affiliation

Geographical differences have a significant bearing on child marriage prevalence and age at first marriage as data shows “huge inter- and intra-state variations in the prevalence of child marriage in India” (Zavier, A.J.F. et al., 2019). State level rates range from 8 percent in Kerala to Bihar’s 42 percent; and districts range from 0 percent to 68 percent (Zavier, A.J.F. et al., 2019). Girls in rural areas are more likely to marry young, with a prevalence of 31.5 percent, as opposed to 17.5 percent in urban areas (NFHS 4, 2016). As a result of these regional variances, many informants caution against “one size fits all” approaches (Interview, 9/1)

The foundational factors of class, caste, tribe, and gender as important drivers of CEFM. Child marriage prevalence rates are similar across religions, at 28 percent among Hindus, 27 percent among Muslims, and 21 percent among Buddhists (UNICEF, 2019). Prevalence in the lowest economic quintile is 46 percent, 37 percent in the second lowest, and 10 percent in the highest

“When you’re programming and making policies, even one policy for Bihar won’t be enough. You have to go into each district where 50% of marriages are below age 18. We need to identify these pockets. Cookie cutter approaches don’t work in India.”

– Interview, 9/1

(UNICEF, 2019). The expense of weddings plays a role, as dowry – though illegal – is higher for older girls and high-cost weddings are a social norm (Jejeebhoy, 2019). One informant connected economic to physical insecurity, saying, “In the ultra-poor category, there’s a huge social security issue. There’s rape and violence in pockets” (Interview 9/2). While some tribes and castes have cultural practices that drive child marriage, the literature and interviews indicate that economic exclusion and lack of education also drive up child

marriage among these socially vulnerable groups (Mehra et al., 2018) (Interview 8/28). Child marriage is highest among scheduled tribes at 34 percent, followed by scheduled castes at 30 percent, with no caste/tribe at 31 percent (UNICEF, 2019).

Historical and institutionalized patriarchy in India affects women throughout the lifespan and drives down the perceived value of girl children. According to UNICEF, gender norms and inequality – along with poverty – are the main drivers of child marriage in India, with household poverty, the structure of patriarchy, and humanitarian crises as factors that condition the strength of these drivers (Jejeebhoy, 2019). One informant said, “Girls are unwanted from birth itself. They are viewed as an expenditure” (Interview 8/26). Another said, “the historical lack of women’s empowerment...leads to early marriages and high fertility” (Interview 9/1). The strength of gender inequality as a driver of child marriage varies regionally. Anti-child marriage efforts have been more effective in the south because of less rigid patriarchy than the north (Srinivasan et al., 2015). Speaking of how this affects his group’s programming, an informant said, “Gender disparity is built on the pillars of poverty and patriarchy, so we need to use a rights-based approach” (Interview, 9/2).

Differences in foundational factors and their impact on CEFM in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh include:

Bihar:

- Highest prevalence of child marriage in India ((Mukherjee, 2018)
- The vast majority of child marriages are in rural areas, with only 8.6% of state’s 15-19 year old married girls in urban areas (Mukherjee, 2018)
- Prone to “floods, earthquakes, drought, cyclonic storms, fire, hailstorms, lightning, heat wave and cold wave,” affecting child marriage (Zavier, A.J.F. et al., 2019)
- Climate-related stress is affecting child trafficking and early marriage due to extreme poverty (UNICEF, 2017)
- 5th highest state in crime rate against women (Centre for Catalyzing Change, n.d.)
- Lowest women’s labor participation rate in India at 9% (Centre for Catalyzing Change, n.d.)
- Districts that perform poorly on child marriage have high concentration of marginalized caste groups (UNICEF, 2017)
- 79% of child marriage cases are in bottom economic tercile

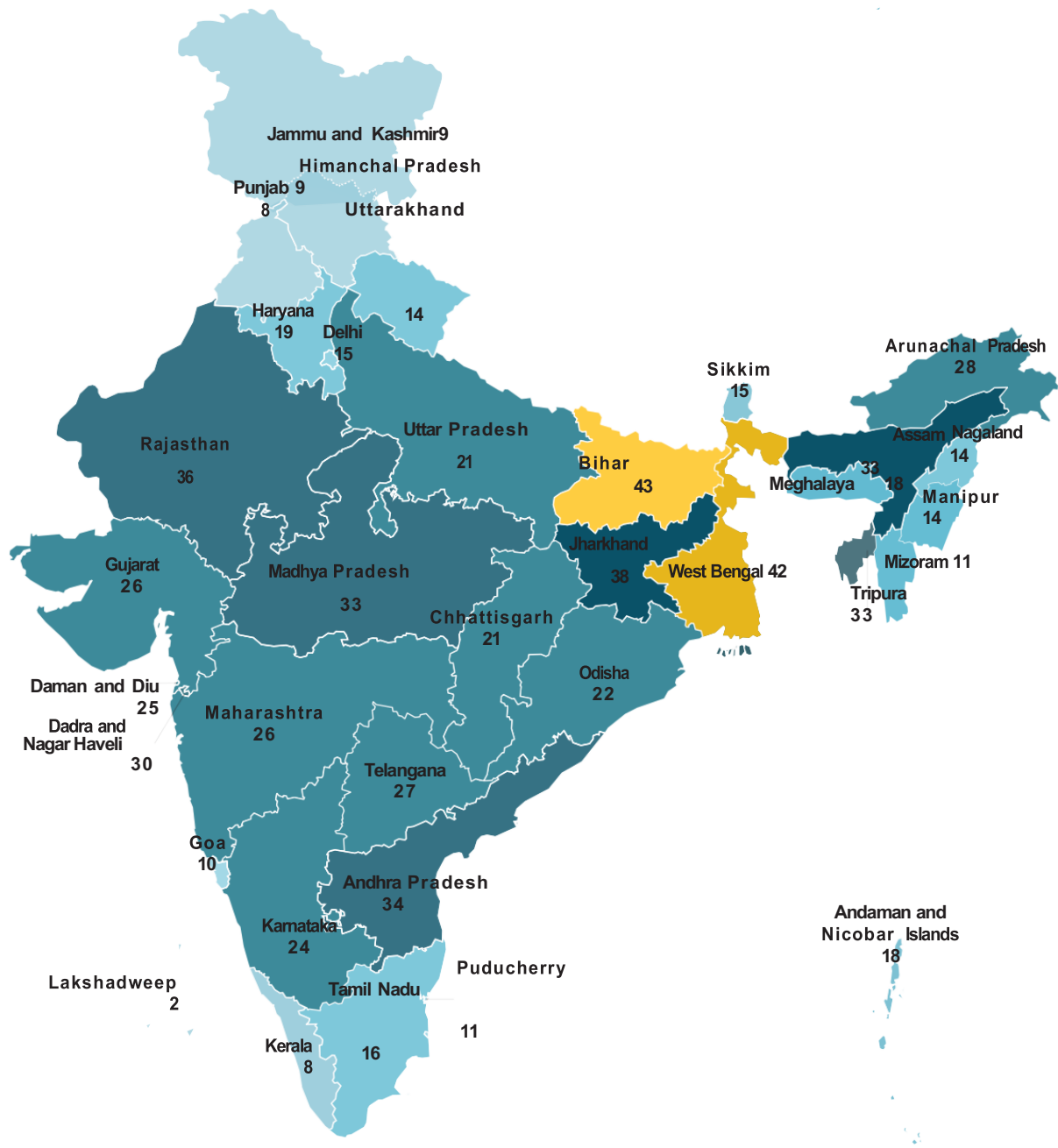


Figure 1: Percent of women aged 20-24 married before 18 by state. Source: UNICEF India 2019

Uttar Pradesh

- Includes district with 68% prevalence - highest recorded prevalence in India (Zavier, A.J.F. et al., 2019)
- The vast majority of child marriages are in rural areas, with just 8.9% of state's married 15-19-year-old girls in cities (Mukherjee, 2018)

- 59% of child marriage cases are in bottom economic tercile (Mukherjee, 2018)

B. Rules of the Game

This section explores India’s formal and informal rules regulating individual, community, and government actions related to CEFM, which include national laws and policies, international commitments, and social norms. Key findings explored in this section and their implications for CEFM strategy are:

KEY FINDINGS	IMPLICATIONS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Legal age of marriage is 18 for girls/women; 21 for boys/men • Consent law classifies all sexual activity under 18 as sexual assault; requires reporting by health providers • Laws around marriage and sexuality have grey areas; are poorly implemented and weaponized • Gender norms link family honor to girls’ sexual purity; limit school and career aspirations • Couples’ consent for marriage not widely expected or enforced 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Families’ use of laws to deter or punish inter-caste marriages contributes to strict controls over teen sexuality • Programs promoting enforcement of laws should emphasize the importance of consent to sex and marriage, as a way to challenge control of sexuality by parents/state • Interventions focusing on norms change are critical to empowering girls • May be able to substitute aspirations for girls’ marriage with economic aspiration in right conditions

Marriage is illegal in India under the age of 18 for girls and 21 for boys, and has been since the Hindu Marriage Act of 1955. The Prohibition of Child Marriage Act (PCMA) (2006) makes marriages voidable if one of the participants wishes ((Krishna, 2019) (PLD, 2020). All marriages are legally supposed to be registered, as of 2013. Dowry has been illegal since 1961. The 2012 Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act (POCSO) increased the age of sexual consent from 16 to 18, and criminalizes all sexual activity below that age (PLD, 2020). An informant noted that this law requires medical practitioners to report underage clients seeking services as “sexually assaulted” (Interview 9/4). In 2009, the Right to Education Act passed, guaranteeing schooling through grade 8 (John, 2020).

“Laws must be in sync with reform happening on the ground.”
 – Interview, 9/2

Implementation of these laws has been uneven at best and used punitively against adolescents at worst. While studies have found that there is not a high level of awareness about PCMA, most Indians know the minimum age of marriage for girls -- although not the age for boys (Jejeebhoy, 2019). The National Crime Records Bureau, which tracks implementation of laws, found that there were just 326 violations registered in 2016 (Jejeebhoy, 2019). An assessment of these cases found that 7 in 10 cases were initiated by parents of girls who had eloped, and informants agreed that this was common usage of the law (PLD, 2020) (Interviews 8/21, 8/27, 9/1). Girls who want to nullify their marriage must go to court several times, and if the husband or his family do not show up, the case may be postponed (PLD, 2020). Politicians have thwarted attempts to arrest child marriage participants, and frontline government workers who

report child marriage cases “risk huge backlash” and “the community will ostracize and disbar them” (Jejeebhoy, 2019) (Interviews, 8/27, 8/28). The dowry law is also regularly flaunted and only enforced “when boys’ families asked for too much” (Pandey et al., 2019).

One informant noted that India has not sought global or regional leadership status for its child marriage rate reductions, saying “They’re very inwards about their success,” and adding that “we struggle to get them to own it, step up to it, and go through international platforms” to promote their successes (Interview, 8/26). India has committed to end child marriage by 2030 as part of the Sustainable Development Goals and is a signatory on the major child rights agreements (Girls Not Brides, 2020)

Social and gender norms sustain CEFM practices despite the country’s laws. One study found that the differential progress in districts was due to “cultural influences” that outweighed modernization (Srinivasan et al., 2015). While there is variation by community and religion, widely held norms include:

- Investments in girls bear little to no return for parents; girls are an economic burden and have little value (Jejeebhoy, 2019)
- Daughters are expected to provide household labor, both as children and adults, which can affect the extent of their schooling (Pandey et al., 2019)
- Family honor is closely connected to girls’ sexual purity and marriage (Pandey et al., 2019)
- Marriage is the “ultimate goal” for girls (Interview, 9/2)
- Younger girls require lower dowry (Interview, 9/1)
- Consent to marriage is not highly valued and girls risk backlash from families (including honor killings) for consensual relationships prior to marriage (Interviews, 8/26, 8/27)
- Marriage within caste, religious group, or community is optimal, in large part to preserve clear group membership of any offspring (Interview, 9/1)

Some social norms are regionally based. For example, in some Hindu communities, especially in Rajasthan, girls may be married very young, but not live with their husbands until they are 18 (Interview, 8/28). Elopement is not encouraged, but accepted in certain communities (Interview, 9/1). In some communities, after a death in the family, the funeral feast must be followed by a marriage “to make it more sacred” (Interview, 9/1). The literature and informants did not note any social norms particular to Bihar and Uttar Pradesh.

C. Here and Now

This section examines the current state of affairs surrounding CEFM in India, describing stakeholders, assessing strategic links to related issues, and gauging the impact of COVID-19. The most relevant factors in the *here and now*, and their implications for CEFM strategy, are:

KEY FINDINGS	IMPLICATIONS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • National government task force is considering raising age of marriage for girls to 21, despite broad civil society opposition • National and state governments have had large child marriage schemes with some impact on issue; there is distrust of government methods and motives among civil society • Civil society very active on the issue, including grassroots women’s groups; much work is explicitly feminist • International non-governmental organizations (INGOs) are not as visible as Indian civil society organizations (CSOs) and government on this issue • Large-scale programs focus on cash transfer or schooling; small scale programs are multisectoral • COVID-19 lockdowns have suspended programs, created economic insecurity; likely to cause girls to drop out of school 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Government may forge ahead with raising age to 21; will require robust response from civil society to reduce harm; generate economic and social conditions to support increased age • Opportunity for women’s rights groups, children’s rights groups to unite on common ground • Response to CEFM is India-owned, with rich, vibrant, and engaged civil society; external groups are at best operating in close relationship with Indian CSOs • Vertical responses are scalable, but are vulnerable to backsliding with economic crisis or natural disaster • Disruptions due to COVID-19 will mean programs have to rebuild and recalibrate their benchmarks

In the Finance Minister’s budget speech in February 2020, the national government announced that it would form a task force to examine raising the age of marriage for girls to 21 (Ohri, 2020). The Ministry of Women and Child Development has couched this potential change in the context of lowering maternal mortality and improving nutrition, and Prime Minister Modi connected the same issues in his Independence Day speech in August 2020 (Ministry of Women and Child Development, 2020). While the task force was slowed by COVID-19 lockdowns and has not issued its recommendations as of this writing, informants expect this change to move forward through parliament soon, because the government has portrayed this as an issue critical to women’s and girls’ wellbeing (Interviews, 8/24, 9/1).

Women’s and children’s rights advocates see this potential policy change as unhelpful, with many warning that it could be very harmful to the wellbeing and rights of young women. An opinion piece by a women’s rights advocate suggested the government’s motives were cynical, saying “When you can’t do the things that desperately need to be done, do something else that you can do easily, even if it does not need doing” (John, 2020). One informant classified it as “a political move more than something based on evidence or a clear understanding of what’s happening on the ground” (Interview, 8/25). Another sees it as part of a “population control agenda” disguised to look progressive (Interview, 8/27). One news article reported that the Ministry of Health may be quietly opposed to a change because it will create confusion and decrease access to sexual and reproductive health services for young women under 21 (Dhingra, 2020). Many informants agreed that this could lower access to social services for married girls and young women under 21, such as widow’s benefits, because their marriages will not be recognized. They also argue the proposal would not address the actual causes of maternal mortality and malnutrition, because childbearing after 18 is not correlated (Interviews,

8/25, 8/26, 9/1). Modi’s speech referred to having girls “married off” at the “right age,” betraying a patriarchal approach (Singh, 2020). By applying a protectionist lens to young adult women, advocates say the reform would undermine women’s agency and discussions about consent. “Once you are an adult,” said one informant, “you should be able to make free choices” (Interview, 8/26).

CEFM Stakeholders

Because CEFM has so many stakeholders in India, the following list is a broad and illustrative overview.

STAKEHOLDERS	ROLE/POSITION ON CEFM
Federal Government	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prime Minister Modi has shown external commitment to girls’ and women’s empowerment; launched current controversy with Task Force that promotes later marriage as a solution to malnutrition and maternal mortality • The Women and Child Development Agency and Ministry of Health originate most national-level action on child marriage; may be split on proposed legal reform • “Nothing happens without the government” due to population size (Interview, 8/26)
State Governments	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Some states use cash transfer schemes to address child marriage, varied impact (Interview 8/26) • Bihar and Uttar Pradesh state governments are both run by ruling political party; likely to support any policies coming from national government (Interview, 8/21) • Bihar program provided funding for bicycles to every girl in 9th grade who applied; was cost effective and increased enrollment, especially in villages far from secondary school (Muralidharan & Prakash, 2017) • Frontline workers, including those in child protection committees, are often involved in negotiating with parents, identifying child marriage cases; Tend to be women working in health care, child development; lack safety, capacity to deal with push back (Interview 8/28)
Private, Bilateral and Multilateral Donors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Global Programme Country; UNICEF approaches from child protection angle; UNFPA from sexual/reproductive health angle; UN Women has a limited presence (Interview 7/28) • Private foundations are vulnerable to attack by government; Ford Foundation in 2015 was prohibited from funding local organizations after grantee criticized government; “international NGO and donor community has not engaged on the issue of raising the age and I understand why” (Interview, 9/1) • Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation has presence in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh; addresses CEFM from economic empowerment angle, adolescent skills and school-to-work, malnutrition
International Non-Governmental Organizations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • INGOs “are under immense pressure to endorse and implement the administration’s laws,” offices of human rights organizations have been sealed (Interview, 9/1) • INGOs like Save the Children, CARE, Pathfinder work on issue, but majority of NGOs are Indian, have more freedom to speak out (Interview, 9/1)

STAKEHOLDERS	ROLE/POSITION ON CEFM
Civil Society Organizations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Women’s rights organizations and child protection organizations have not always been aligned; alliance formed during debate against the age increase (Interview, 8/27) • Coalition of 19 civil society groups issued a letter to urge the government to consider impact of law on adolescents (National Coalition for Advocating Adolescent Concerns, 2019) • Women’s peer groups operate in 5 states including Bihar, 2,800 rural women and girls organized against CEFM (<i>In India, Women Boycott Weddings with Child Brides</i>, 2018) • Community-based organizations “play a critical role in helping girls prevent and exit forced marriage;” use law to pressure (PLD, 2020)
Religious Groups	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Religious groups are not seen as critical gatekeepers on this issue
Media	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • While media framing of CEFM is negative, it does not promote anti-CEFM efforts from an adolescent or women’s rights perspective; “If I had money, I wouldn’t put it into the media (Interview, 9/1)
Individual Actors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work with boys on gender equality is limited but necessary (Interview, 8/28)

Strategic Links with Other Issues

Informants and the literature point to two types of programs in India to combat child marriage: large-scale schemes run through state governments, which primarily focus on education and economic incentives; and small-scale multi-sectoral initiatives run by CSOs with varying levels of emphasis on empowerment and adolescent rights. According to Jha et al. (2016), high burden child marriage contexts should focus on social norms programs, medium-prevalence states should include financial incentives, and low-prevalence states should focus on legal enforcement.

Large Scale	Opportunities	Challenges
Education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • An intervention in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar found out-of-school girls were 10 times likelier to marry (Mehra et al., 2018) • Child marriage prevalence disparities are largest in Bihar and UP by education level; more than wealth or residence (UNICEF, 2019) • Middle school is the most critical age to reach girls (Srinivasan et al., 2015) • State bicycle program in Bihar successfully addressed safety and transportation concerns, increased enrollment in secondary (Muralidharan & Prakash, 2017) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Distance to school and poor quality of schools remains a challenge (Jeejeebhoy, 2019) • Lack of interest in studies was the leading reason for school discontinuation in Bihar (Santhya, K.G., 2020) • Girls often are responsible for majority of household chores, adding to their burden in school (Interview, 8/26) • Families fear girls will “get involved with” boys on way to secondary school (Interview, 8/26); concerns about gender-based violence (GBV) to, from and at school (Nanda et al., 2016)

Large Scale	Opportunities	Challenges
Economic Approaches	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Poverty is a key driver of child marriage • “Livelihood opportunities are an important alternative to marriage (Pandey et al., 2019) • Both household and community poverty seem to affect child marriage, as richer families in poor communities are affected by local practices (Srinivasan et al., 2015) • “Young women have a more difficult school-to-work transition than young men” (Jeejeebhoy, 2019) • Potential for economic aspirations to replace marriage aspirations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Evaluation of cash transfer program in Haryana found that families used cash for dowries, married daughters off at age 18 (Nanda et al., 2016) • Conditional cash transfer programs have not affected social norms that underpin child marriage; seen as “bribing parents to marry girls off later” Interview, 8/26) • Other than cash transfer programs, difficult to scale economic approaches • Vertical approaches focused on child marriage are seen as ineffective (Interview, 8/26)
Small Scale	Opportunities	Challenges
Gender Norms and Empowerment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gender norms are a major driver; “child marriage will not end until we address gender equality” (Interview, 8/21) • Promotes consent and agency; counters both state and parental control of adolescent girls • Centers the rights of adolescent girls and develops lifelong skills (Interview, 8/26) • More effective when working with parents and boys as well (Interview, 8/28) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • CSOs have implemented effective programs, but not at scale • Governments do not have capacity for or interest in norms changing approaches; “They are interested in girls and women only as a population growth issue” (Interview, 8/25) • Getting parents and boys invested may be difficult
Sexual and reproductive health (SRH)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Access to SRH services is low for adolescent girls, including married girls • Can address concerns about maternal mortality 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Heavy stigma around premarital sex for girls (Interview, 8/26) • Legal challenges to access given criminalization of under-18 sex
Nutrition	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Attractive to policymakers (Interview, 8/24) • Government’s national nutrition mission launched in 2018 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Has contributed to “easy answer” of increasing age at marriage (Interview, 8/24) • On its own, is not enough to change CEFM practices
Legal Approaches and Policy Advocacy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Training of community-based organization (CBO) staff and frontline workers can help girls use existing laws to postpone or annul marriages (Interview, 8/26) • Includes working with local officials to improve their understanding of gender 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Risks divisions within families, communities • In absence of norms change, girls bear brunt of not being married early (Interview, 8/27)

Large Scale	Opportunities	Challenges
	norms; creating child marriage free communities (“How Villages in India Are Going ‘Child Marriage Free,’” 2018)	

Effects of COVID-19 on CEFM

While evidence is still emerging surrounding the impact of COVID-19 on CEFM on India, informants believe that, as with past crises, there will be an increase in child marriage. Many anti-CEFM programs have halted, families are suffering economically, women may be leaving the workforce permanently, and girls may not return to school (Interviews 7/28, 8/25, 9/1). One positive outcome was that group weddings that traditionally take place in May on a day considered auspicious for marriage (Akshaya Tritiya) were unable to happen due to lockdown (Interview, 8/25). One informant had conducted surveys to better understand what girls are experiencing, and they found that half of the low-income girls said they were unlikely to return to schools when they reopen (Interview, 9/1). Girls have limited access to the Internet or cell phones – over 60 percent don’t own a phone – making online education difficult or impossible (Interview, 9/1). The informant said, “The most tragic losers of COVID-19 are the girls” (Interview, 9/1). Another pointed out that how they are measuring success has been complicated by the pandemic, because the gains they have made since project onset have been undone by external conditions (Interview, 9/3).

One informant discussed how they are trying to find opportunity in the situation by positioning girls “as a force to be reckoned with” and equipping them with mobile tools to report violence and other legal violations (Interview, 8/25).

D. Dynamics

This section analyzes the interactions among the previous three pillars of PEA analysis (Foundational Factors, Rules of the Game, and Here and Now). In the areas of advocacy, research, and programming, we assess where and how progress on CEFM in India has evolved, and where the literature and informants identified threats and obstacles to progress.

KEY FINDINGS	IMPLICATIONS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Progress has been made in building coalitions to work across women/youth rights organizations; implementing large-scale schemes alongside smaller approaches addressing gender and empowerment; and collecting district-level data about where child marriage is still occurring • Obstacles include improving government responsiveness to civil society and easing its emphasis on legal age over agency; balancing scale with adaptability and integrating norms change; and learning more about why some communities’ norms have persisted in the face of economic improvements. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A robust, engaged civil society and government willing to work on CEFM provides important groundwork • Continued progress will require creative solutions to integrating norms changing approaches at scale • Potential policy change makes civil society voices, especially of youth, even more critical to ensure young women and adolescents are not harmed further.

Areas of Progress

Observers attribute India's documented progress on CEFM to improvements in economic development, schooling rates, and awareness of legal age of marriage. In Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, progress has been bolstered by governments willing to implement large scale schemes, a vibrant civil society, and robust research about where and why CEFM continues.

At the national level, advocacy efforts have succeeded in building political commitment around the importance of the girl child in recent years, from the Prime Minister down, but these commitments are insufficient to effect lasting change, and are often framed within a patriarchal lens. Many women's rights and adolescent/child rights groups are currently working together and using feminist framing to bring the government's attention to the potential harm of raising the age of marriage for girls. These groups have competed in the past, with child groups seeking greater legal protections and women's groups emphasizing the rights of adolescent girls and young women (Interview, 8/27). The reframing of child marriage "from age to agency," as two informants put it, has created new allies, allowing these groups to show a united front in the face of a dissonant government narrative (Interviews, 8/26, 9/2, 9/3). While the policy change may ultimately move forward, advocates are raising up youth voices and focusing attention on what needs to change in terms of the ecosystem around child marriage – such as access to education, health services, and employment (Interview, 9/3).

Advocacy efforts have been fruitful at the local level, building understanding and support of relevant laws among local government officials – such as the More than Brides Alliance program – and working to apply those laws when violated – such as the Gender Alliance women's rights advocates supported by UNFPA (Khan, 2017). Other forms of advocacy are less direct, but may bolster support among officials. For example, one informant spoke about working with the government by inviting officials to events like a girls' soccer tournament that promotes girls' rights and empowerment (Interview, 9/2). This group also seeks to "make sure that government programs are accountable to girls and qualitatively good" (Interview, 9/2).

As described above, anti-CEFM **programs** are plentiful and varied, with government taking the leadership role on scaled programming, including in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh. While most of these programs focus on cash or in-kind transfer (such as Bihar's successful bicycle program), Bihar also has an anti-dowry program that works through civil society groups on community-based social and behavior change. Pathfinder has implemented a successful large-scale SRH program in Bihar. At a smaller scale, multi-sectoral programs use education, livelihoods and community education to shift attitudes on child marriage (Interview, 8/28). Others empower girls through sports and theater programs, rights education, and male engagement (Interview, 9/2). In Uttar Pradesh, the Girls Icon program includes a residential week-long program for 200 girls, each of whom then works with 20 girls in their communities on an issue-based project to reach at least 100 people. They have tracked 8,000 girls in the program, finding just 1 percent got married before 18 (Interview, 9/2).

Research has allowed for greater understanding of where and why CEFM is happening most, and what approaches may be most effective. For example, in 2019, the Global Programme

used evidence to build on and adapt its global theory of change specifically to India (Jeejeebhoy, 2019). India has plentiful research institutions with experience in studying child marriage, and the government's National Family Health Survey provides regular, detailed data collection on child marriage and related indicators. Longitudinal studies by Population Council (Bihar and Uttar Pradesh) and Young Lives India (Andhra Pradesh and Telangana) provide critical information about the impact of child marriage and how it might be delayed (Interview, 8/28; (Young Lives India, n.d.)

Obstacles to Progress

Notwithstanding India's tremendous progress and its commitment to end child marriage by 2030, informants are for the most part skeptical that progress will continue in a linear fashion, particularly given the current crisis. There is also a danger that a focus on age at marriage will prevent a bigger picture approach to girls' and women's empowerment. One informant captured this sentiment, saying, "If girls are being married between 18 and 19, then it's still not good, even though it's technically not child marriage. We are stuck at the age of marriage but not girls' empowerment. If we are so downstream in our sense of achievement, it's not good for girls" (Interview, 8/25).

While national and state governments show outward concern about child marriage, **advocacy** efforts have not been able to shift the government's focus on age over agency, and legal approaches over social change. The current task force has invited civil society comments, but informants did not think the government was receptive. One interviewee said she was asked to present to the task force, but wasn't invited back after she told them she didn't support the proposal (Interview, 9/1). Another said that government officials need norms change themselves, saying "If you talk to officials, they agree that girls shouldn't get married before 18 years old, but they definitely should get married. It requires deeper conversations to undo" (Interview, 9/2). This extends to women leaders at the community level, who also may "have no clue about gender equality" (Interview, 9/2). "We need to move the entire agenda beyond age to address gender equality per Sustainable Development Goal 5," said another informant. "We need to seriously introspect at national and state levels about how gender equality objectives are truly integrated and working across all streams" (Interview, 8/25). Women's groups should ensure that youth voices are centered in their advocacy efforts.

Anti-CEFM **programs** struggle with the tradeoffs on scale versus adaptability. Most informants said that working with the government was the only way to get to scale. One informant said, "Given the size of the country and its diversity, the government is the biggest scaled provider...There are nonprofits working on the same issues, but they're seeing limited success due to their inability to build large networks" (Interview, 9/3). Yet the stratified response according to local child marriage rates requires a sophisticated and multi-sectoral approach – work that is currently being done most effectively through smaller efforts. Many informants noted the evaluation of one large-scale conditional cash transfer program in Haryana that paid families upon birth of a daughter and paid the young woman upon turning 18 if she was unmarried. The evaluation found that the program did not shift the perceived value of girls nor the norms around marriage (Nanda et al., 2016) (Interviews, 8/21, 8/26). Norms around girls'

purity, often enforced through violence and abuse of the law, have not been dealt with in large-scale efforts (Interviews, 7/28, 9/1). One informant rejected the idea of working at scale with the government, saying “This is the time to work directly with vulnerable communities and create good pilot programs. Forget the government, they’re just trying to maintain power” (Interview, 8/25). Programs are likely to face even greater challenges post-COVID-19 due to economic crisis and increased difficulty reaching girls who do not return to school.

Research efforts around child marriage have been extensive, but informants pointed to existing gaps. One said, “We need more experimental studies – natural experiments – to see what has been successful in some contexts vs. others” (Interview, 8/26). This is particularly urgent in districts where child marriage prevalence is not declining. Another informant pointed to the successes in Uttar Pradesh that have not been duplicated in Bihar, suggesting that much more could be learned about how to duplicate success (Interview, 8/26). Bihar’s high crime rate was mentioned by an informant as a potential contributing factor to CEFM, but no one has examined the data to check this theory (Interview, 8/24). More research and disaggregated data on communities with a low age of marriage, across caste and economic status, would help build understand on districts where cultural norms may be sustaining the practice (Interview, 8/24). Another informant pointed to the need for coordinated data, saying “You can’t go to a fixed place for the latest” on CEFM in India (Interview, 8/26).

V. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings of this PEA support the following conclusions and recommendations:

A. What is the case for investment in CEFM in India?

- **Success in India makes an impact on global prevalence.** Because India includes the highest burden, with 15,648,000 of the world's child marriages, success here can have a tremendous impact. Conversely, the COVID-19 crisis and failure to address gender norms at the root of CEFM in India threaten to set progress back significantly if not stemmed with a meaningful investment.
- **COVID-19 and the potential increase in age of marriage create an urgency to build the social, educational, and economic infrastructure to support girls and young women with a gender and rights lens.** Rural girls living in poverty will be incredibly vulnerable in the coming months and years, as their return to school may not make economic sense to their families, and their access to sexual and reproductive health and social services before age 21 may decline. The Indian government will need encouragement to approach CEFM based in girls' agency, and to expand and protect the right to education, change policy to protect access to services, and make investments to improve young women's employment opportunities at scale.
- **Donors can build on investments in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar for an integrated approach to CEFM.** Donors have a track record in these states in family planning, women's economic empowerment (including girls' transition from school to work), and nutrition. Informants argued that CEFM in India can best be addressed with a multi-sectoral approach, and these sectors in particular will need strong focus if the legal age of marriage increases. Donor experience and credibility in these spaces can build a cohesive, integrated approach to CEFM within a gender equality framework.

B. Where are the key points of leverage on CEFM in India?

- **Civil society, including CBOs, provide authentically Indian response.** India's robust and active civil society is a tremendously important tool in addressing CEFM. Both Bihar and Uttar Pradesh have women's self-help groups and other community-based organizations able to reach girls in remote areas, yet they are underfunded. Many of them already operate within a feminist framework and have the local credibility to help their communities address harmful gender norms and increase economic opportunities and empowerment for girls.
- **Political support for reducing CEFM in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh can contribute to scaled government programs with a gender lens.** To complement and support targeted grassroots programming through CSOs and CBOs, state government programming at scale can be shaped to better support schooling, health services access, and economic opportunity. Examining what state and local policies are and are not working for girls and young women (such as conditional cash transfers without a norms-changing component), and what is needed to improve them, are the next steps. State and local governments should also seek

out new solutions, such as promoting government demand for products made by girls' and women's collectives.

- **Current synergy between women's groups and youth groups can be leveraged for ongoing coordination of advocacy strategies.** Coordinated advocacy is critical in this moment to shift the narrative away from protection of 18–21-year-old young women and toward an advancement of their rights, agency, and access to services. International conferences and events could be leveraged to ensure that this coordination lasts beyond the current political debate to support an intergenerational movement that promotes girls' and women's rights throughout the lifespan. Girls' leadership and voices should be centered as these networks develop.

C. Where can investment/influence turn gaps into opportunities?

- **India should better coordinate and target research to understand communities where child marriage decreases are lagging behind economic development.** Several informants pointed to gaps in research on what has driven success at scale in places like Uttar Pradesh, and what has prevented hotspot communities from making more progress. At both the state and national level, better coordination and indexing of existing and future data can help stakeholders develop a common understanding of what it takes to reduce child marriage.
- **Programs should test strategies to integrate gender norms change into anti-poverty approaches.** The perceived value of girls within the family is a critical factor in driving CEFM, particularly in high poverty communities, yet scaled programs have not meaningfully addressed gender norms. Investing in gender equality would need to be long-term, but such changes can insulate girls from the impacts that economic crises and natural disasters currently have on CEFM rates.
- **Building on the rich history of women's collectives can yield results for girls.** Girls' collectives can help empower them and position them to help India recover from COVID-19. Successful models such as Girl Icon could be explored for further scale up, as these kinds of programs respond to local contexts while allowing for rapid expansion.

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APPENDIX A. KEY INFORMANT INTERVIEW GUIDE

KII Interview Guide – India

Introduction: *Thank you so much for taking the time to speak with me. Iris Group is conducting Political Economy Analyses on Child, Early and Forced Marriage. Our purpose is to develop a high-level analysis of the CEFM context in each of eight countries. You have been recommended as an expert in India on this issue, and we greatly appreciate your input in this process. Your responses will help shape a contextual understanding of CEFM in India, which in turn will contribute to recommended responses. Your specific responses will not be attributed to you without your consent. We are very grateful for your honest responses.*

First, can you give me a brief summary of your work in India related to CEFM?

Foundational Factors

From what you know based on your work or experiences, what are the most important factors driving **regional differences** in CEFM in India? (probe for geographical, environmental differences)

In what ways, if any, does **economic class** influence CEFM rates and practices in India?

How have **ethnic differences** shaped CM and other gender issues in India? Do different regions track to different cultural values and/or ethnicities?

How has historical gender inequality affected CEFM?

Rules of the Game

How does India law affect CEFM?

How do international commitments affect laws or policy in India on CEFM?

What are the most common social norms related to CEFM? How much do these differ among different ethnic groups?

Have there been **any recent norms changes** related to gender, fertility desires, familial responsibility and sexual debut? Have these been reflected in CM rates?

Here and Now

Who are the **key stakeholders and actors on CEFM**? (probe for donors, CSOs, policymakers, advocates)? Are there any outstanding champions on this?

What role do Indian women's rights and youth groups play on the issue?

What influence do **international NGOs, institutions and donors** have on CEFM in India? What are the limitations of their influence?

Is CEFM progress **driven mainly by actors outside India or inside India**? Is there tension between external and internal actors? Do communities see it as a domestically-driven issue?

What role does **media** in India play in CEFM?

Is CEFM linked with other issues at the national level (e.g. education, economics, sexual rights and reproductive health, HIV, HTP etc.) or addressed as a separate issue? What are the advantages and disadvantages of working on CEFM through these lenses?

How do you think **COVID-19** affects CEFM and efforts to combat it?

What **global, regional or national events** have been important to CEFM in India in the past couple years?

Dynamics

Where are the gaps (in programming, research, advocacy)? Where can these gaps be converted into opportunities?

What **progress** has been made on CEFM in India? (*probe for programmatic, research, advocacy*)

What and who are the **biggest obstacles** for current CEFM efforts in India? (*probe for programmatic, research and advocacy challenges*) Have these changed over time?

Is there anyone else you think it's important for me to speak to about this issue? Are there any materials you can share that might help us understand these contextual issues better?