

The Child Marriage Research to Action Network (the CRANK) What has girls' sexuality got to do with child marriage?

CRANK research meeting 30 March 2022 – **Key takeaways**

Eugenia Lopez Uribe: introduction

- Child Early Forced Marriages and Unions (CEFMU) are complex situations, embedded in patriarchal system that restrict the bodily and sexual autonomy of women and people who do not meet with heterosexual rules and guidelines.
- Some norms with regards to purity, virginity and marital relationships are reinforced by cultures and a very defined moral code.
- Girls and adolescents face major constraints when exercising their full bodily autonomy and sexuality because of their age and from the restriction that parents place on them.
- Marriage is often seen as the only legitimate scenario for engaging in sexual activities, communities are motivated to manage this and make sure that girls get married to exercise this right to have sex (within marriage which is socially accepted), irrespective of girls' own aspirations and dreams – for more on this please see the case studies in the Tackling the Taboo report in the resources section.
- The practice of sexuality under these marital conditions places girls and adolescents at risk of violence, further minimises their autonomy over when and how many children to have, economic resources and other key factors that restrict their independence.
- Norms that control sexuality are reinforced at several levels of the socioecological environment – communities, schools, families and other institutions.
- Responses to CEFMU need to be multisectoral and include approaches that consider gender and work with communities and girls and adolescents.
- An intersectional approach that considers, for example, the control of sexuality and how this forces non heterosexual people to get married to become part of the community, is very important when working on CEFMU.
- The links between CEFMU and sexual identity has received little attention, and there is therefore little literature available on this topic.
- Bodily autonomy is a key element to keep at the centre of approaches to addressing CEFMU.
- Practitioners implementing programmes need to have an integrated and intersectional approach to respond to the structural causes and roots of these issues.

Presentation of evidence on girls' sexuality, child marriage and gender inequality

Diana Pacheco-Montoya, University of Berkley – [Gender norms, control over girls' sexuality and child marriage: A Honduran case study](#)

- In Honduras 34% of girls marry before 18 years and most of these are informal unions – not legal or no religious ceremony. Girls elope with their partners who are usually much older than they are.

- This article explores how gender norms and the regulation of female sexuality influences girls' decision-making process to enter CEFMU in rural areas of Honduras.
- Girls who scored higher on a scale of traditional gender norms were more likely to marry early.
- Girls experienced control over their mobility and sexuality because of rigid gender norms prevalent in their communities.
- This control clashes with adolescents' increased desire for autonomy and intimacy, and increased awareness of their sexuality.
- In some cases, girls believed marriage was better than staying in their restrictive households and viewed marriage as the only way to have a romantic relationship.
- Gender norms and the regulation of female sexuality influence girls' decision-making processes to enter CEFMU in rural areas of Honduras.
- Educational initiatives that challenge sexist gender norms and explain and normalise attraction and intimacy during adolescence should be a central component of child marriage prevention programming for adolescents, parents, and community members. For an example of this in practice please refer to the HEY programme further down.

Priya Das, Oxford Policy Management – [Education, sexuality, and marriageability: Overlapping tropes in the lives of adolescent girls in Haryana, India](#)

- This study provides nuanced insights on the value of girls' education and overlapping domains of marriage.
- It draws on qualitative analysis from an impact evaluation of a Conditional Cash Transfer (CCT) scheme, Apni Beti Apna Dhan (implemented between 1994 and 1998), designed to enhance girls' value and delay early marriage in Haryana, India.
- Findings suggest that marriage is the ultimate marker for a girl's transition to adulthood and education is considered key to enhance girls' prospects for marriage.
- The intrinsic benefits of education may enable some girls to chart better life trajectories, though its value is largely understood within a bounded space of girls' marriageability.
- The persistent focus on marriage structures girls' daily school routines, bounded by strict restrictions and scrutiny around their mobility, sexuality and conduct.
- Despite improved educational attainment at school, most girls in the study were not pursuing higher studies even though they were unmarried. They are a cohort of girls waiting for marriage, unable to leverage the economic potential of the education they had achieved so far.
- Girls' capabilities and opportunities through education are curtailed by unyielding gendered restrictions. Without challenging norms around girls' sexuality and marriage, we are likely to see fewer gains from schooling for girls' empowerment.

Emmily Naphambo, University of Cape Town – [A vexing relationship between chiefship and girls' sexuality: Insights from rural Malawi](#)

- Practitioners have been working with chiefs as agents of change, but what is missing is the interrogation of how chiefs' power to transform harmful cultural practices collides with the interests of the institutions of traditional authority itself for its survival.

- This paper examines how the exercise of powers vested in chieftaincies is fundamental in shaping girls' sexuality. It critically examines present-day chiefly powers to demand payment around three sexuality-related moments – menstruation, marriage and premarital pregnancy.
- Research findings showed that without transition points that clearly revolve around girls' sexuality, chiefs cannot demand payments or payments cannot be made. This underscores the importance of girls' sexuality in maintaining the institution of traditional authority.
- The relationship between traditional authority and sexuality is problematic. On the one hand, the power embedded within the chieftaincies is perceived as fundamental in promoting positive sexual behaviours. On the other hand, the same power – though less recognised – simultaneously regulates girls' sexualities.
- Chiefly powers define, shape and sometimes control girls' sexualities while sustaining positions of power and the hierarchy of traditional authority.
- Engaging chiefs to end CEFMU may mean dismantling the structures that support their power as chiefs, and which perpetuate CEFMU. In-depth research is needed to further understanding of these agents of change.
- Girls' sexuality is at the centre of chiefly legitimation, and we must critically interrogate chiefs' potential roles in promoting child marriages.

Sarah Green and Anne Sprinkle: Sexuality Working Group on the forthcoming CEFMU and girls' sexuality conceptual framework

- Sexuality is often absent from programmes and advocacy on CEFMU.
- The conceptual framework provides a clearer articulation on how sexuality drives child marriage and is based on evidence and consultations with adolescents in Niger, India and Guatemala, with bilateral foundations and donors, etc.
- Core aspects of the conceptual framework are:
 - Envisioned change: girls in all their diversity feel supported to express their sexuality inside and outside of marriage and to freely develop life intentions and aspirations, including in relation to marriage and children.
 - Persistent root causes of CEFMU: continuing norms that are rooted in adultism, patriarchy and social hierarchy.
 - Deconstructing and transforming: how programming and advocacy can disrupt those social norms/root causes – gender-transformative approaches (GTA), core programming principles, changemakers at all levels of the socioecological framework.
 - Recommendations for researchers, practitioners, advocates and funders include:
 - Research: Advance understanding and measurement of change in root causes in a way that centres girls' voices and perspectives.
 - Practice: Invest in capacity enhancement in GTAs.
 - Advocacy: Re-evaluate and expand CEFMU approaches to go beyond age-of-marriage laws to advocate for law and policies which support girls' rights.
 - Funding: Partner with and invest in girl-led and feminist movements and organisations that are already embedded in social change work, fund for long-term change.
- The conceptual framework is available in the *Girls Not Brides* [Resource Centre](#). Register now for the official [launch webinar](#), which will take place on **4 May 2022**, in English, French and Spanish.

Q&A: The study considers the societal and family norms that impact girls' decisions, what about the experience of married boys and the role of grandparents and extended families in supporting these norms and influencing adolescent decisions to marry?

Diana Pacheco:

- In the communities where we undertook the research, sex is only acceptable within marriage, and adolescents understand the only way to engage in acceptable sexual intercourse is through getting married or into a union. We see a similar push for boys in terms of sexuality as well, but it's to a lower degree than for girls.
- Boys are also affected, but only 5% of male adolescents get married before 18 years, and this rate is much higher for girls in these communities. The pressure is much more for girls which has a lot to do with gender roles. Boys have the expectation to get a job and to be breadwinners, whereas the expectation for girls is to become wives and mothers.
- In the community, grandparents, fathers, uncles do not actively promote early marriage or directly force girls to get married; but they do it indirectly by the social controls, excessive protectiveness, and control of their sexuality. While they are not directly promoting it, they repeat the patterns across generations and we see the repetition of cultural patterns, which is intergenerational.
- Similar to the Indian study, while we see expanding access to education in Latin America, this has not reversed the CEFMU indexes. We need to include content which addresses the root causes of CEFMU in school curricula: gender inequality and what adolescent girls can and should do.
- With regards to conceptual frameworks – they help us to simplify and explain more clearly how those relationships play out in the real world and how we can understand them. What is important is to include this knowledge when we conduct our interventions.

Q&A: How can we rethink aspects of sexuality in communities?

Diana Pacheco:

- The HEY! experience has helped us understand the discussion in the curriculum regarding puberty and attraction. It has been powerful for parents to understand that it is normal for girls to feel attracted to boys, that relationships between girls and boys are ok, they don't have to get married and for adolescents to understand that relationships do not have to lead to elopement.
- We have also addressed hormonal changes and psychosocial changes that occur naturally in adolescence, which is something that really makes sense to students and helps them understand they do not have to enter marriage at age 15 or 18 just because they feel a certain way.
- We do not need to restrict the topics of sexuality that used to be taboo in the school environment. [This article on HEY!](#) explores how our curriculum promotes critical thinking skills to address and challenge CEFMU and gender inequality.

Q&A: What can we imagine in terms of engagement [interactions] between girls and boys aside from marriage?

Priya Das:

- Looking at rural contexts in India it is difficult to say what is possible as girls really aren't allowed to be seen interacting with boys outside of marriage.
- Control of girls' sexuality is paramount in all of this. The highest responsibility of the parents is to ensure the girl is married well, while still pure and chaste. Anything outside marriage is not culturally accepted.
- In response to comments on how to shift towards gender transformative education – the answer lies in girls paving their own path, and pushing boundaries is at the core of this. Generally, interventions on child marriage focus on age without looking at the whole adolescent phase in an integrated way. For example, looking at sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) and education in an integrated way, and the transition from secondary education into employment is critical, and needs to be included in programme design. It is also critical to look at transitional pathways for girls – like the move from secondary education into employment – and to build girls' aspirations.
- It is important for interventions like education to interact with other interventions in terms of the transformative pathways for girls themselves.
- In India, in the case of CCTs where we have a focus on one point (access to education for example) without realising it needs to interact with other aspects. In Haryana there is education for girls, but not investment in improving the *quality* of the education. We see strong taboos around gender and sexuality and we also see a complete absence of gender-responsive employment opportunities for girls. The gendered norm change has to be incremental – we need investment in employment opportunities.
- As we saw in the Sexuality Working Group framework – gender transformative approaches need to go beyond gender, and need to be cross-sectoral from an adolescent girls' perspective. They need to look at education, SRHR, employability, the relationships and power dynamics in the ecological framework, etc. There needs to be a multi-pronged, multi-level and multi-sectoral approach that would really change things, then the transformation can happen where we can really re-imagine engagement and interactions between girls and boys in Haryana beyond marriage.

Q&A: Your interventions engage with religious and traditional leaders. Contextual analysis is critical. Are they allies or blockers for girls? Are they advocates for girls or only some of them?

Emmily Naphambo:

- The purpose of the paper is not to undermine traditional authority, there are examples from Malawi where chiefs have been important allies in preventing child marriages from different angles.
- Traditional leaders and chiefs can be allies in protecting girls from child marriages ([Chief Kachindamoto in Malawi](#) is a great example of this work) but they can also be blockers if we do not understand how the powers they have are sustained.
- It is very important to understand the links between this traditional authority and power and girls' sexuality when considering this question. For example, you could look at:
 - Girls' sexuality and how chiefs use it to promote other cultural practices.
 - How chiefs use girls' sexuality to control important aspects of their communities.

- The economic contribution of girls' sexuality to sustaining traditional authority and its impact in communities.
- Most payments are made from local headman level to the very local level, they affect every aspect of the community. It is important to understand the nature of these payments and the role they play in promoting harmful practices, chiefs may not say this explicitly, but it becomes clear when you study how they construct their power base and consider how girls' sexuality is important for them.
- For example, in the case of Malawi, most local chiefs are not linked into government. They need to find ways to sustain themselves as institutions, so payments are one way to sustain their power base.

Nankali: closing remarks:

- **The Honduras case study makes an excellent case for age-appropriate interventions.** The unique developmental stage of adolescence and the need to respect evolving capacities of young women and girls with respect to their agency and autonomy.
- **Bodily autonomy needs to be a priority when designing programmes addressing child marriage.** We need to invest in education programmes that challenge gender norms and normalise ideas of intimacy and attraction amongst adolescents, this should be a fundamental component in CEFMU programming. And we need to address structural factors as well as gender norms to ensure this.
- **The Haryana study really points to the need to question and address underlying norms otherwise education can become “currency” for a better marriage and rather than a “right” it is a concession and conditional on stereotypical behaviours.** So far from living its true gender transformative potential, education can be used in a gender blind or even discriminatory manner. Interventions on child marriage need to look at the whole adolescent phase in an integrated way – **gender transformative approaches need to go beyond gender, be cross-sectoral and based on adolescent girls' perspectives; they need to look at education, SRHR, employability, etc.** It is also critical to look at transitional pathways for girls and to build girls' aspirations.
- **In the Malawi study we heard that girls' sexuality is at the centre of chiefs' power.** To respond, we need critical reflection and questioning around the authority of traditional leaders, inclusive of the community and wider power structures that maintain this status quo. **We need to look at the positive and negative of this power to see how we can best prevent CEFMU in these contexts.**
- **The Sexuality Working Group Conceptual Framework is the result of continued work to advance and strengthen the work on sexuality and child marriage,** for more detailed discussion on this [join the webinar](#) on 5 May.

Webinar resources: All webinar resources are available on the [CRANK meeting page](#). These include the meeting agenda, recordings, presentations, research reports and key messages.

Resources shared by CRANK members:

[Shared roots, different branches: Expanding understanding of child marriage in diverse settings](#)

[Shared roots, different branches advocacy summary](#)

[Girls' sexuality and child, early, and forced marriages and unions: A conceptual framework \(available in English, Spanish and French\)](#)

[Building interventions on existing gender and sexuality information sharing in communities](#)

[Tackling the taboo: Sexuality and gender-transformative programmes to end child, early and forced marriage and unions](#)

[Fostering critical thinking as a life skill to prevent child marriage in Honduras: The case of Holistic Education for Youth \(HEY!\)](#)

[A case for differentiated legal responses to child, early and forced marriage and unions EN](#)

[A case for differentiated legal responses to child, early and forced marriage and unions Spanish](#)

Forthcoming research and practitioner toolkits:

Kimberly Howe:

- Launching a study (Save the Children Denmark and Tufts University) that has been following cohorts of adolescent girls and female youth in displacement settings in South Sudan and northern Iraq.
- Six briefs forthcoming and webinars for humanitarian practitioners.

Elizabeth Bartolomucci-Hughes:

- Revisions of the Girl Shine curriculum with specific sessions for adolescent girls on early marriage and for caregivers, including mothers-in-law.
- New aspects of the curriculum: key messages, revised outreach strategies, M&E tools, and trainings for service providers who work with adolescent girls.
- The revised curriculum will be available shortly on gender-based violence responders in English, French and Arabic.