**OVERVIEW** The human rights and international development fields have paid enormous attention to child marriage in recent years. The practice reflects and reinforces fundamental social patterns of gender and age discrimination, predominantly against girls. This discrimination includes: a lack of commitment to girls’ schooling; the appropriation of their unpaid labor in the household; the imposition of constraints on their opportunities for paid employment; the acceptance of their lack of agency to make critical decisions about their own lives and health; the refusal to permit them control over their sexuality and reproduction; and a tolerance of their vulnerability to gender-based violence.
The Tipping Point Community Participatory Analysis Study

The Tipping Point Community Participatory Analysis Study was designed to deepen understanding of the contextual factors and root causes driving the prevalence of child marriage in particular regions of Nepal and Bangladesh, countries with some of the highest rates of child marriage in the world. The study focuses on distinctive regions within Nepal (the Terai) and Bangladesh (the haor areas) with particularly high rates of child marriage.

The three main areas of inquiry offer insights into the vulnerability to child marriage, the specific drivers of the practice, and the dreams and reactions of adolescents affected by child marriage. The intention was also to capture the views of young people, inform innovative and context-specific program design, contribute to the development of new measures for monitoring and evaluation, and build the skills of partner organizations and community-based project staff to engage in participatory research and analysis.

Village sampling in the Terai of Nepal reflected priority criteria associated with child marriage: caste and ethnicity, remoteness, availability of school, and presence of civil society organizations, with highest priority given to villages with Dalit caste members, close proximity to the Indian border, no schooling beyond primary, and the presence of non-governmental organization activity. In Bangladesh, village sampling in the economically marginalized and physically isolated haor areas focused on criteria associated with a high level of remoteness, proportional representation of Hindu and Muslim majority populations, and a mix of rankings for perceived levels of child marriage.

Research findings

The research found that the complex marriage process systematically excludes the voice of girls. When adolescents, especially girls, try to assert their choices around if, whom, and when to marry, they are often stigmatized by their families and communities and seen as standing against the authority of fathers and brothers. Families and communities make marriage decisions for adolescents, not with them. Only boys with more education, income or experience working overseas may sometimes be permitted to express opinions about the choice of a spouse.

In Bangladesh the practice of child marriage crosses religious and socio-economic boundaries, while in Nepal the practice appears to be concentrated specifically within particular caste groups – Dalits and other excluded castes – who are economically marginalized by their caste identities. The isolation and lack of opportunities for specific communities makes it more difficult for them to move away from practices such as child marriage, even as others begin to make this shift. This is an important difference between the findings from the two countries.

Diverse factors affect decisions by the prospective bride’s family and the prospective groom’s family regarding the timing of marriage. In Bangladesh and Nepal geographic, environmental and economic conditions, socio-cultural and religious characteristics, concerns about the regulation of girls’ sexuality, gender inequality and social norms all influence marriage decisions. Economic factors do not exist independently of the social, cultural or religious drivers of child marriage. Remote geographies accentuate hardship, isolation, poverty, and access to services and information.

KEY STRUCTURAL FACTORS

Geographical, seasonal and environmental factors play an important role in driving child marriage. In both Nepal and Bangladesh the specific geographic contexts included in the research are characterized by economic and social marginalization and isolation as a consequence of structural factors (lack of schools, economic opportunities), lack of mobility (e.g., limited transportation in haor areas, lack of security for girls), and social exclusion (e.g., Dalits in the Terai). Remote geography and poor access to information contribute to parental limits on girls’ mobility and the maintenance of conservative gender norms that put girls at risk of verbal or physical abuse.
The seasonal cycle raises and drops girls’ vulnerability to child marriage at any given time. In Nepal, while Hindus consider certain months auspicious for marriage, Muslims marry all 12 months of the year. A few marriage landmarks in Nepal include exam result time, when marriage proposals are discussed or entertained, especially if the boy or girl does poorly; and festival periods, when relatives come together and proposals are discussed. The main seasonal landmark for marriage in Bangladesh is April to mid-August, the rainy season, when the *haors* are flooded and getting to school is more difficult. In both country sub-regions, male migration is common, with the young men in Nepal migrating mostly to India, and the men in Bangladesh migrating usually to the Middle East. In Bangladesh, parents prefer to see children married before migration. In Nepal, poor Hindu boys get married before migrating, while Muslim boys marry after returning home.

The economics of dowry are key in determining the nature and timing of marriage. Dowry is a common practice, symbolic of the bride's value and reflective of the groom's family's honor. Many parents shared that they would like to give up the practice of dowry but feel socially pressured to engage in the practice. Research in Bangladesh highlights the distinction between traditional dowry, gifts from the bride’s family to the bride, and the new groom payments referred to as *demand*, which can impoverish the family of the bride. In Bangladesh, families can save on marriage costs by marrying their daughters young. Our study documents exorbitant dowry demands in the Southern Terai plains of Nepal, as well as boys fearing that people will begin to speculate that the groom himself has mental or physical problems, or other shameful familial secrets, if he doesn’t demand a dowry.

Caste plays an important role in driving marriage in Hindu communities in Nepal. Child marriage is anchored in a system of inequalities: the economic and social marginalization of specific castes severely limits their opportunities and prevents the realization of many of their basic human rights. Caste did not come up as much among Hindus in Bangladesh except for reference to the time it takes to find a spouse when they are intent on marrying within caste.

**SOCIAL NORMS AND COMMUNITY PERCEPTIONS OF THE RISKS AND BENEFITS OF CHILD MARRIAGE**

The perceived risks of delaying marriage/benefits of early marriage outweigh the perceived benefits of delaying marriage/risks of early marriage. Responses regarding the perceived benefits of child marriage from both countries overlap, with parents citing lower dowry, alleviating a burden, more prestige and respect, less risk of the girl eloping, and children (or specifically daughters-in-law) more apt to obey the parents/in-laws.
The control of girls’ sexuality and concern about its proper regulation is of central importance to any decisions concerning the timing of marriage. In both Nepal and Bangladesh, the weight given to girls’ sexual lives is greater than for other aspects of their lives, with resulting limitations on girls’ agency, mobility and opportunities. In both countries, parents fear their adolescent daughters and sons will get involved in love affairs that will stigmatize the girl and bring dishonor to the girl’s family. If girls express agency over their bodies, their decisions and behavior are stigmatized. Any association with boys is taboo, and associated with an overall concern for the “security” of girls. Girls’ sexuality is the concern of others but girls themselves are given no information about their own bodies, puberty, sex, and reproduction in order to prepare and protect themselves.

Girls’ “youth” and related appearance figures prominently in judgments about their marriage prospects. Future brides are seen as desirable based largely on their physical appearance. As a consequence, older girls are seen as losing their “glamour.” The preference is determined by norms, and reflects the way the demand side drives the marriage market.

Boys too face vulnerabilities to child marriage in Nepal. In the research areas, both boys and girls are married underage in Nepal, whereas girls are typically married to adult men in Bangladesh. Boys in Nepal are also perceived as being at risk of an inter-caste marriage and unmarried boys not in school can face criticism. Despite these worries by parents, boys face none of the restrictions that girls experience.

**THE WEIGHING OF RISKS AND PERCEIVED BENEFITS**

**Risks of early marriage**
- ill effects on maternal health of girls and on health of their children
- relationship conflict with spouse
- domestic violence
- inability to handle in-laws
- truncated education, professional, and life opportunities

**Perceived benefits of early marriage**
- abate fears of love affairs/elopement
- prevent losing family honor
- lower dowry
- easier to find groom
- gain religious merit
- have obedient daughter-in-law
- remove financial burden of daughter
- prevent criticism from others
- have more “beautiful” and marriagable girl
Girls’ life aspirations prominently feature marriage, but not child marriage. The data on girls’ dreams for their own lives revealed that girls’ idea of a good life for themselves includes having their own livelihood; being married to someone of their choice or having the characteristics of their choice; having a nice house; bringing up their children properly, to be healthy, educated and good human beings. Implicitly, girls want education for themselves.

Parents’ aspirations often do not align with their daughters’. For girls, the expression of their dreams – of working in various professions and earning an income – was invariably followed up by descriptions of their parents’ wishes, which circumscribe their own aspirations; most of these descriptions entailed stopping their daughters’ schooling and arranging their marriages.

Married girls aspire to delay marriage for their sons and daughters. Married adolescent girls had much to say about their children’s lives, for example, having a child’s marriage and gauna together at 20 years old (for both sons and daughters), letting children choose their own partners for marriage, and building a school in the community so daughters can continue their studies.

Boys’ aspirations also feature marriage, but later. In Bangladesh, most boys wanted to marry later than boys usually do in their villages, similar to girls who identified a higher age than what is typical for them.

Across Bangladesh and Nepal, young people, both married and unmarried, tended to have different, less traditional expectations for their lives than what their parents wanted for them.
In Nepal, the age at which they hoped to marry was on average 20 and above (though they most often marry at age 14 or 15). Unmarried boys almost universally expressed a desire to continue their schooling to at least grade 10 and to marry girls of their choice. When discussing their future spouses, unmarried boys in some villages hoped to marry educated girls; others hoped their wives would have fair complexions. Like girls, boys mentioned wanting harmony in the family.

Boys’ professional aspirations are broad but often stand in contradiction to the realities of their lives. Parents’ aspirations and those of their sons regarding marriage are not in alignment. Across Bangladesh and Nepal, young people, both married and unmarried, tended to have different, less traditional expectations for their lives than what their parents wanted for them. But boys, like girls, do not have much agency in their lives and feel obliged to go along with their parents’ and families’ wishes for them.

**Conclusions**

The analysis captured the reality that social identities, values and practices often align with economic, geographic and infrastructural constraints. The drivers of child marriage, in their inter-relatedness, are remarkably similar across both Nepal and Bangladesh – social norms interacting with geographic isolation, poverty and poor livelihood options – and taken together, generate a powerful formula for the inter-generational perpetuation of child marriage. Religious and cultural beliefs differ between Nepal and Bangladesh, and among identity groups, but are similar in reinforcing early marriage. Dowry, above all, is a practice that encourages child marriage amongst the poor and very poor. The deeply engrained worldview that girls are of lesser value than boys is only too apparent at the root of the beliefs and social pressures driving parents’ decisions.

**Recommendations**

**NATIONAL AND LOCAL GOVERNMENTS OF NEPAL AND BANGLADESH**

- Expand and promote access to both formal and non-formal education, and training opportunities that promote holistic growth by supporting leadership competencies, civic engagement, and linkages to varied vocational and professional career paths and other income earning opportunities.
- Develop content, curricula, and training of teachers and health workers on comprehensive sexuality education.
- Promote interventions and policies that are more holistic in addressing multiple barriers to education.
- Expand the choices available to young adults, especially girls, after secondary school by creating broader linkages through public-private partnerships to institutions and creating diverse ways to connect young people from remote and marginalized communities to vocational, livelihoods, and employment opportunities and markets.
- Focus on and strengthen citizenship, birth, and marriage registration systems, with a special focus on equitable access for girls.
- Ensure the rights of already married adolescent girls by promoting access to education, health services, livelihood opportunities, and financial tools and resources.
- Address ethnic and caste based inequities (Nepal).
- Fund and support the training of community-based government workers in specific marginalized communities.
- Invest in infrastructure that improves mobility and access for adolescents, especially girls, in isolated communities.
- Give strong support and funding to civil society and NGOs to take on and scale up community-based campaigns to shift norms.
GOVERNMENT AND PRIVATE FOUNDATION DONORS

- Support and resource early marriage prevention programs that are integrated into other broader programs.
- Promote and fund multi-sectoral strategies that include a focus on adolescents’ sexual and reproductive health and rights, and changing discriminatory cultural practices and social norms that undervalue girls.
- Support development of media strategies and technologies that can reach isolated communities and marginalized individuals within them.
- Invest in youth-led organizing efforts.
- Advocate for measures that promote girls’ empowerment and tackle root causes of child marriage in policy dialogues at a global and national level.

**OUR VISION OF CHANGE**

- Deepen girls, boys, parents, and community members’ critical awareness of gender equity and rights, and promote solidarity within peer groups.
- Create spaces for dialogue between adolescents, parents, and other community members to promote communication, trust, and support for gender equity and rights.
- Encourage networks, solidarity groups, and organizations to collaborate, shift discourse, and take action to support gender equitable opportunities for girls’ and boys’
- Promote positive/gender equitable norms through exemplifying and celebrating alternative behaviors.

**Tipping Point is engaging in an iterative approach.**

As actors engage and issues emerge, our approach helps us tailor and adapt our strategies to promote social norms that support gender equitable opportunities.
The analysis captured the reality that social identities, values and practices often align with economic, geographic and infrastructural constraints.

CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS AND NGOS

- Create spaces for dialogue between adolescents, parents and other community members to promote communication, trust, and support for gender equality and rights.
- Provide spaces and opportunities for girls, boys, parents and community members to promote critical awareness of gender equality and rights, and solidarity within peer groups.
- Promote gender equitable norms by exemplifying and celebrating model behaviors and individuals.
- Support networks to analyze and take action on social injustices they face as a group.
- Facilitate networks, solidarity groups and organizations that collaborate to shift discourse and take action for gender equitable opportunities for girls and boys.
- Support and fund spaces for NGO staff to engage in self-reflection about their own beliefs and values regarding gender and social norms that are linked to the practice of child marriage.

COMMUNITIES

- Actively participate in village and district level government planning mechanisms to set targets for ending child marriage and promote alternative opportunities for girls.
- Stand together to promote norms that support the positive development of adolescents, and reject the acceptability of gender-based harassment or violence.
- Engage in transformative justice approaches to addressing gender-based violence.
- Hold duty bearers accountable.
- Lead by example.

ADOLESCENT GIRLS AND BOYS

- Build their own solidarity and networks.
- Organize together and be a powerful voice regarding the concerns in their own lives.
- Learn from one another.