

WHAT IF GIRLS DECIDE THAT THEIR MARRIAGE IS A GOOD CHOICE?



5 TIPS FOR PRACTITIONERS IN ADDRESSING GIRLS' AGENCY IN CHILD MARRIAGE PROGRAMMES

The prevailing idea is that marriage is a negative force to reject. In response, programmes target girls at risk of marriage, seeking to 'empower' them to make the 'right decision' and not marry at a young age. However, new research and practitioner insights illustrate that some girls do choose marriage. For some, marriage is an aspiration; for others, a source of security and protection or an inevitable fate that is not worth resisting. Marriage can also offer a platform or opportunity to negotiate a 'better deal' aimed at gender equality and the gratification of girls' needs and desires from within a union.

These multiple realities informing the decisions taken by girls and/or their parents call for the refreshment of thinking and practices around girls' empowerment. Below are five tips that can be seeds of transformation for child marriage programming:

1

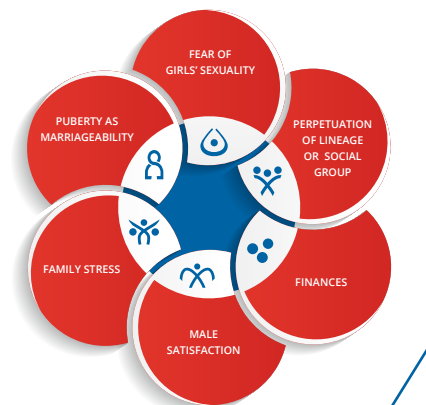
Continue to look for that fine line between child protection and child rights.

As a practitioner, move away from assuming her 'best interests' towards taking her viewpoints and desires seriously, trusting her calculation or 'weighing up' of her situation and the power dynamics around her. Her decision to marry or not is complicated and context-specific. This reality invites practitioners to dive deeper into understanding her position and perspectives by relying on local or bottom-up knowledge. It reminds practitioners that a 'one size fits all approach' is not likely to be effective.

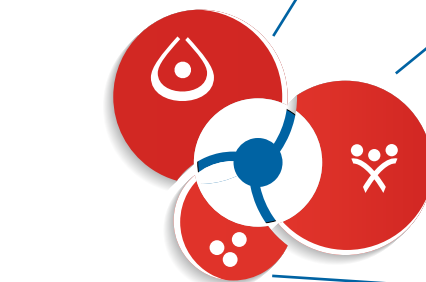
2

Give priority to talking to girls and those around her, allowing them to map out the six key situational factors that influence the child marriage decision to build effective program responses.

A helpful exercise is to support girls and other local actors to visually map out the situational aspects that influence the decision whether or not to marry and add others they consider important. Using different sizes of circles to show their importance, organising them in a way that shows their relationships to one another, can give practitioners a better handle on the pressures and considerations that inform decisions. Understanding this will allow the customisation of interventions to individual contexts.



Situational aspects informing the control of girls' sexuality



Example from India mapping why girls' sexuality is controlled

FEAR FACTORS

Violence against women is a huge concern as the environment is not 'good for females.'
"Girls and boys are vulnerable at this age. Several incidents happened in and around the community. Such incidents create fear in the minds of parents, which leads them to settle for early marriage" – BVHA, India

CASTE ENDOGENY

"Control over girls' choice of marriage is mainly to maintain caste purity. If a girl marries an upper caste boy, then parents do not have a problem. Girls' parents cannot accept their daughter's marriage if she marries a boy from a lower caste. It can create violence in the family which might even lead to murder." – RJVS, India

ECONOMIC CONSIDERATIONS

Girls do not belong to the natal house – so money is not invested in them. A good way to save money in poor contexts is to marry her early as this saves on the dowry that has to be paid to the groom's family.
Also, "early marriage might lead to a more docile wife. Hence, mostly girls are forced to drop out of school. And poverty is cited as a reason for it."
– ASHA, India

3

Appreciate that girls' sexuality can be controlled in several ways and that understanding the norms and nuances around 'control' is key to targeted programmes and responses.

CONSULTING

- Actions value girls' needs, wishes, and desires, taking them into account through consultation and conversation.
- There is concern for what she wants. Advancing her best interests as she frames them.
- The parent/daughter relationship is one of trust.

GUIDING

- Actions meant to guide a girl's behaviour.
- The action is often to 'keep a watchful eye' on her and the behaviour of those around her.
- For example, being watchful of her engagements with boys and men to guard against pregnancy.

PROTECTING

- Practices, measures, even documents and laws that preserve her bodily integrity or rights.
- Practices and measures that preserve the girl and her family's honour.

RESTRICTING

- Regulations and constraints that are highly restrictive of girls' movements and choices. Girls' mobility (leaving home, going to school or work) and engagement with others (real and virtual) are strictly limited.
- No or very limited choice is given to her; decisions are taken for her with relative disregard for her needs, interests, or wishes. Her 'best interests' (avoiding harm or danger, e.g., sexual harassment) defined by others and upholding family name constitute the core objectives.
- Expectations are directive and 'non-negotiable,' presided by the needs and beliefs of others, particularly parents.

Sexuality is a fundamental factor underpinning child marriage. Placing the control of girls' sexuality on a spectrum, breaking it down into different degrees, is a versatile tool for practitioners to use to engage girls and parents in conversation. It offers the potential to explore power dynamics and pressures and understand how they translate into different ways of managing her sexuality. Understanding the varying degrees of control, practitioners can tailor their responses more effectively to each situation. Also, the spectrum offers a gauge and baseline to track an intervention's impact or effectiveness.

4

Recognize that girls' agency can be expressed in different ways.

Agency can be oppositional, accommodating, or transformative. The forms it takes reflects each context, including control exercised 'over her' and the situational aspects that influence what a 'good decision' is regarding marriage. Appreciating agency in these broadening terms opens up new possibilities for child marriage programmes that have traditionally approached agency quite narrowly: she rejects marriage, or she accepts it, that is, takes the 'right' or 'wrong' decision.



Oppositional agency

Girls deny or resist the restrictions placed upon them.



Accommodating agency

Girls see marriage as inevitable and enter into this practice accepting the social norms and inequalities that it brings.



Transformative agency

Girls enter into marriage and, from within, seek to improve their situation by negotiating the terms in a way that challenges social norms and the inequality between women and men.

5

Expand your role as a practitioner from solely implementing programmes to being an agenda-setter!

Robust policy depends on solid evidence. Your efforts in designing and implementing programmes with girls and communities put you in the ideal place to play a critical role in bringing those unheard voices to the decision-making table. By bringing evidence and insights to policymakers as a practitioner, you can strive to place child marriage higher up the policy agenda and influence national and global child marriage policies. How can you do this in practice?

- Raise your voice and the voices of those you work for through blogs, webinars, or other information-sharing platforms.
- Strengthen your network to include local policymakers and community leaders.
- Emphasise and trust your specialist knowledge to publicly weigh in on the 'child protection versus child rights' debates and bring girls' voices into the dialogue.
- Work together with other practitioners to build stronger movements that call for policies that take girls seriously, build on the body of evidence surrounding agency and decision-making, and ultimately shift the power.
- Develop your knowledge and understanding by reading more about girls agency and decision-making aspects in the [More Than Brides Alliance resource library](#).