

WORKING WITH PARENTS



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RETHINKING PROGRAMMATIC INTERVENTIONS

"They [my parents] were getting me married so that I can have a better life - a marriage blessed with money instead of love; so that I can attain an honourable status; so that they can see a grandchild; and because he [the potential groom] was rich."

Young woman, Ethiopia

"My experience of getting married was not good at all for me. I was too young when I got married. I lost my confidence completely, and still, things got worse. I feel that if my parents hadn't gotten me married and had waited for a few years, I would have been in a better position to handle my marriage."

Young woman, Pakistan

"Parents think that a boy will study and work and take care of them when they are old. The girl belongs to another household; she has to marry and go to another home - so why not get her married early? That way, the money [to be spent] on her education can be saved."

Young woman, India

"The main reason that pushes parents into early marriage is the fear of dishonour. When you contract a pregnancy outside of marriage, it is humiliation."

Young woman, Mali

These are a few of the many similar thoughts and assertions made by young women during youth-led research undertaken in five countries – Ethiopia, India, Mali, Nepal and Pakistan - as part of the More than Brides Alliance learning project *"Making Most of What We Know"*. The broad research focus of the learning project was to understand the linkages between female adolescent sexuality and child marriage.

Exploring how and why they continue to practice child marriage, this paper focuses on the most critical actors who influence marriage decision-making, parents. This exploration begins by highlighting the 'voices from the ground' through findings from youth-led research in five countries (Ethiopia, India, Mali, Nepal, and Pakistan) and Learning Spark Fund learning exchanges in nine countries (the same countries as the youth-led research and Bangladesh, Malawi, Niger, and Uganda). These perspectives show that as key and primary decision-makers in adolescent girls' lives, parents continue to be influenced by several factors at the level of the household, the community, and the broader socio-economic environment when making decisions about their daughters' future (for more details about girls' agency and the situational aspects that contribute to control of girls' sexuality, see knowledge products on this topic, available in the More Than Brides Alliance resource library). The voices indicate that parents have access to information about and are, indeed, aware of the adverse impacts of child marriage on young girls. However, the socio-economic well-being of young women and their families seems to be prioritised over the physical and mental well-being of individual young women.

Parents should not be framed as barriers to child marriage interventions, but as stakeholders who can also benefit from programmatic outreach and support.

The exploration then offers an overview of programme and practitioner perspectives on engaging with parents obtained from a review of existing (grey) literature and 'implementation experience' interviews conducted with project staff members in the nine participating countries. These perspectives highlight the complexities of working with parents on the issue of child marriage. While parents are the most influential actors, they are also often one of the most significant barriers in programmatic interventions. However, programmes seem to have an insufficient focus on them as a target group; they instead focus on other groups that seem more amenable to interventions aiming to prevent child marriage.

Based on what the voices say and the challenges that practitioners face, the exploration concludes by considering the need to recalibrate current programmatic interventions to focus more on parents. This section also highlights ways to improve parents' engagement on the links between child marriage and sexuality.



Voices from the ground

From young women and men to parents, community elders and religious leaders, all stakeholders as part of the research trajectories and learning exchanges demonstrated sufficient awareness of the adverse impacts of early marriage on young women. In most cases, respondents could list the various health, psychological, and socio-economic impacts on individuals, families, communities, and the nation. It became clear that lack of information or awareness may not be the reason behind why in some communities, child marriage practices continue to exist and remain pervasively accepted. Young people and other stakeholders seem to suggest the importance of other factors too, such as:

- **Commitment to age-old norms, traditions, and beliefs:**

In Ethiopia, there's a diversity of widely-used sayings and proverbs conveying that marriage is the ultimate goal for a girl. Common messages are that a girl who does not get married by a certain age is considered 'idle' and "a girl does not reach anywhere with an education" [a common saying, according to youth-led research participants]. In Mali, early marriage is an age-old tradition that serves many purposes, such as strengthening kinships and familial bonds, preventing sexual misdemeanours, and enhancing a family's status in the community. In India, the belief that girls do not belong to their natal household, compounded by economic factors and the custom of dowry, leads parents to marry off their daughters early. Therefore, adherence to community rules and commitment to accepted customs contribute to the continued prevalence of child marriage.

- **Pressure from within the community:**

Ingrained social norms, traditions and beliefs form the basis of social relationships and contracts, and deviating from these could mean exclusion, explicit or perceived. For example, parents in Ethiopia stated that they face immense pressure from village elders and religious leaders to have their daughters married. *"Because the elders come repeatedly, the parents would be bothered. Priests are also sent. Therefore, even if they reject it [marriage for their daughter] the first time, the elders would repeatedly come until they get their consent,"* said one parent in Ethiopia. In India, parents report their subjection to pressure from the community. *"Our community generally thinks 'how long are girls going to study? At this age, they should be married,'"* stated a young woman in India. Practitioners observed that parents in India, Nepal, Bangladesh and Pakistan were influenced by the preconception – fueled by community members – that girls who do not get married early and continue their education will "go out of control," "interact with outsiders", or "get spoilt" and thereby "bring shame to the family and the community." In Pakistan, girls who have reached puberty are considered adults and ready to marry and start a family. Girls' physical changes during puberty prompt questions and remarks from family members and neighbours, leading to pressure on the parents to marry off their daughters.

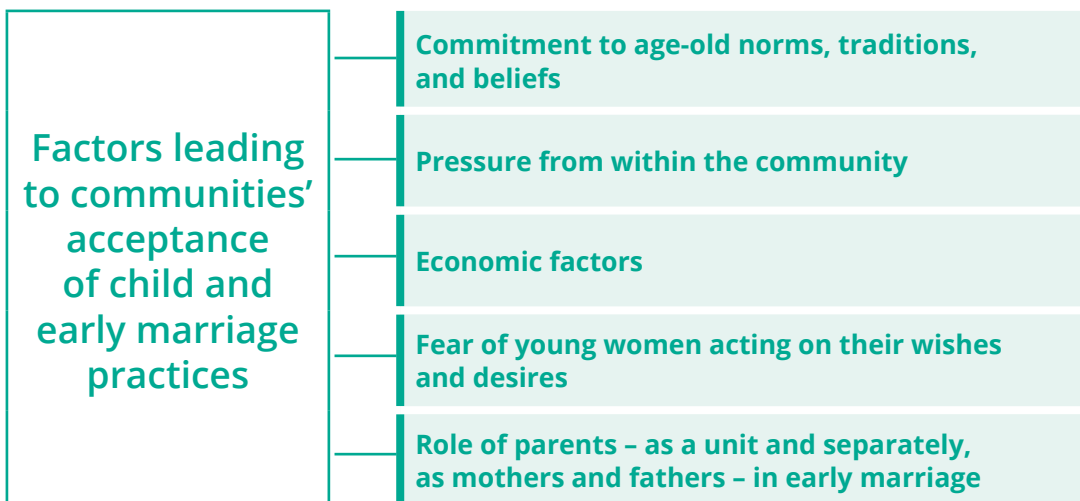
- **Economic factors:**

The practices of bride price and dowry – financial transactions that accompany marriage decisions – are significant contributory factors to early marriages, especially for lower-income families. In most participating communities in India, Nepal, Bangladesh and Pakistan, a dowry is given by the bride's family to the groom's family. Paired with the belief that girls do not belong to their natal household, the dowry system prompts parents to marry their daughters off early because a) the dowry is lower for girls who marry early and b) money set aside for education can pay the dowry instead. With bride prices, the financial transaction goes the other way. The bride's family receive the bride price from the groom. This might mean girls' families seek elevated status and material benefits in return for the marriage of their daughters into a wealthy family. In contexts where bride price is practised, such as in Mali or Malawi, a low-income family might readily accept a marriage proposal for their adolescent daughter from a wealthy family as it could secure a better socio-economic position (for more details on this topic, see our knowledge products about marriageability, available in the [More Than Brides Alliance resource library](#)). Although economic factors play out differently between contexts, in most contexts where child marriage is prevalent, dowry and bride price practices and household financial needs are important factors that shape parents' attitudes towards and acceptance of marriage practices.

- Fear of young women acting on their wishes and desires:**

The findings on this aspect include both the act and the possibility (seen as a threat or danger) of young women having sex. Girls having sex, or the perceived possibility that they might, help determine when it is considered appropriate for girls to marry. Furthermore, the desire to have girls married before they have sex or become pregnant often legitimises child marriage. For example, in Nepal, elopement or self-initiated early marriage is becoming more common, which, in turn, legitimises arranged child marriages. In India and Bangladesh, the possibility of young women having sex or being subjected to sexual violence prompts parents to worry about the possibility of their name and image being tarnished. Moreover, fear for young girls' safety leads parents to withdraw their daughters from school, as more often than not, schools are located far away from where they live. Early marriage is often considered the best possible solution to prevent girls from 'going wayward' and protect them from sexual violence ([read more about how pregnancies influence child marriage on this page of our website](#)).
- Role of parents – as a unit and separately, as mothers and fathers – in early marriage:**

The responses of parents, as a unit, and separately, as mothers and fathers, on early marriage were also highlighted in the research trajectories and learning exchanges. At times, participants did not differentiate between the roles of mothers and fathers, referring to parents as a unit. However, in some cases, the differentiation was quite prominent. For instance, in some communities in Mali, mothers are threatened with divorce or ex-communication - from the family and the community - if the daughter refuses to get married. This tactic ensures young women agree to a marriage they might not otherwise accept. Furthermore, poverty and the lack of alternatives for adolescent girls push mothers to consider marriage a financial solution and a way to protect their daughters. Learning exchanges in Malawi and Uganda involved heated discussions between mothers and fathers about who was responsible for providing their adolescent children appropriate information on sex and sexuality and who was to be blamed in case of pre-marital pregnancy. In Pakistan, and to a lesser extent in Bangladesh, mothers were considered responsible for the well-being of their children, whereas fathers were considered providers and authority figures. In many cases, mothers do not have a say in their daughters' education and marriage. Mothers and young women in Pakistan and Bangladesh reported that as soon as a father becomes aware of his daughter reaching puberty, she is made to leave school and soon afterwards, her marriage is fixed.



Programme and practitioner perspectives on working with parents

The research evidence on the links between adolescent sexuality and child marriage is relatively limited. A preliminary review of existing (grey) literature to understand the general landscape of child marriage programmes - primarily representing programmes implemented in South Asia and Africa - served as the starting point to understand the programmatic emphasis on working with parents. Subsequently, the findings, reflections, and lessons from practical implementation experience offered the following key insights:

- **Bundling of parents with other stakeholders:**

Among the 62 implementation experience-gathering interviews with practitioners across the nine participating countries, parents were specifically mentioned as one of the target stakeholder groups by only around half of the respondents. Otherwise, the broader term 'community' was used.

A global analysis of child marriage programmes undertaken in 2007 (Jain & Kurz, 2007)¹ highlighted several broad categories and sub-categories among programmes. Because many of these programmes are multi-faceted, assigning a definite categorisation is difficult. This multiplicity meant that most programmes focus on multiple themes and target multiple stakeholder groups. For instance, the global analysis found that 42% of programmes focused on educating girls and 58% on educating family and community members. Bundling family and community members (or other stakeholders) was observed as common in many programme reviews and documents. Often, parents were not represented as a standalone category of stakeholders. Therefore, working with parents is usually categorised under a community approach or as part of creating an enabling environment. This makes it difficult to determine whether and to what degree interventions can be tailor-made for parents and, in turn, evaluate the effectiveness of working with parents as a strategy.

- **Questions on the effectiveness of working with parents as a strategy:**

In a survey of 144 programme implementers across 14 countries², 'empowering girls' was quoted as the most effective strategy to address early marriage (more frequently cited than mobilising and families and communities). Mobilising families and communities (for example, community awareness-raising campaigns on girls' rights; engaging families to value alternatives to early marriage) was perceived by fewer implementers as the most important strategy. A review of the literature suggests a lack of conclusive information on the effectiveness of working with parents. Even when interventions have yielded the desired results, it is difficult to establish whether and how those interventions can be successfully replicated in other contexts. For example, Gage (2013)³ in Ethiopia found that high social pressure was positively associated with the parents endorsing their daughters' rights to choose their marriage age. Essentially, greater exposure to early marriage-prevention messages led to attitudes among parents supportive of delaying marriages of adolescent girls. On the other hand, a study testing parental engagement to improve girls' educational attainment in India found that while girls and parents reported improved knowledge and attitudes towards girls' education, there was no evidence of any effect on their agency in matters related to schooling or utilising of education-related entitlements (Santhya et al., 2016)⁴.

Some studies highlight the effectiveness of taking an economic approach to working with parents (for example, conditional and unconditional cash transfers). But there are questions about the long-term sustainability of such interventions⁵. For example, an evidence review of child marriage programming suggests that economic approaches, such as cash transfers, might be the least effective strategy to prevent child marriage.⁶ Economic approaches relying on the assumption that poverty is the main driver of child marriage may fail to consider the role of social and gender norms and long-term behavioural and attitudinal shifts.

- **Challenges relating to engaging with parents in addressing dimensions of girls' sexuality linked to early marriage:**

The control of sex and sexuality is at the heart of early marriage. However, as results from our child marriage programme scan survey suggest, most child marriage programmes find it difficult to talk directly about sexuality. Many survey respondents (about 35% of 144 programme implementers across 14 countries) noted that parents “would not consider these topics appropriate for programming involving their adolescent children.”⁷ In many contexts, unmarried girls must have parental permission to participate in programmes or activities addressing early marriage. If parents are not comfortable with the content being shared, which in many contexts is the case for sexuality-related topics, programmes are often reportedly compelled to remove the topic from its curriculum so that the programme as a whole will be well-received.

Practitioners also stated that sexuality is understood differently by different stakeholders in different contexts. In especially conservative communities, talking about sexuality is considered ‘morally unacceptable’ or ‘sinful.’ Some practitioners admitted that they struggled to communicate effectively with community members on topics related to sex and sexuality and linkages between sexuality and child marriage. At times, they faced warnings and threats from community members. In a few cases, the programme or activity was forced to stop.

Key insights from programme and practitioner perspectives on working with parents

Practice of bundling parents with family and other stakeholders in research and evaluation makes it hard to evaluate the effectiveness of working with parents and to what degrees programmes should be tailored to parents

Lack of conclusive evidence on the effectiveness of working with parents as a strategy

Challenges in addressing the issue of girls' sexuality with parents due to discomfort, parental permission, different understandings of sexuality, and other barriers experienced by practitioners



Why Rethink

The voices from the ground suggest several factors that contribute to the continued practice of child marriage. Crucially, lack of information and low awareness of the negative consequences of child marriage is not one of these factors. Practitioner perspectives highlight several challenges concerning working with parents. These voices and perspectives suggest that there might be a need to revisit the ideas behind current programmatic interventions. We articulate this requirement on the basis of the following inferences drawn from the results of the youth-led research [and other components where this finding emerged]:

- **Parents are in as much need of support as girls:**
Although adolescent girls bear the adverse impacts of early marriages, it would be wrong to assume that parents are willing supporters of the practice. It is evident that, for a range of reasons, parents may choose to place the socio-economic well-being of their daughters and families over their daughters' physical and mental well-being. However, in some contexts and communities, parents may find it difficult to be deviant – going against the practice of early marriage – and challenge established socio-cultural and religious norms. If this is the case, child marriage programmes that bundle parents within a broader group of stakeholders tend to overlook the fact that parents are in as much need of support as girls themselves. Not being considered separate stakeholders means parents' voices and motivations may be lost in the crowd.
- **Going beyond parents as a single unit:**
Parents, as a unit, and separately, as mothers and fathers, play different roles in the lives of their daughters. The relationships they share with their daughters, their roles within the household, and their roles in the larger community have significant bearings on the decisions made about their daughters' lives. A mother could be excommunicated in Mali if a daughter refuses marriage. A father in Pakistan, typically the household's primary decision-maker, is tempted to marry off his daughter as soon as she reaches puberty. Therefore, it is necessary to understand and explore if and how these differences in roles and relationships are considered and adopted by programmes. Beyond separating parents from the broader community, it is equally important to separate fathers and mothers, and even additional guardians, including grandmothers, grandfathers, aunts, or uncles, so that programme activities are designed around the unique roles and responsibilities that parents and guardians play in the lives of adolescent girls.
- **Addressing the relationship between girls and their parents:**
By not fully considering the push and pull factors that force parents to participate in child marriage practices, programmes risk portraying parents as indifferent or even adversarial to their daughters' well-being. To avoid such portrayals and perceptions, programmes need to focus on the relationships between parents and daughters – and among fathers, mothers and daughters. In India, the daughter's position in her household, her interactions with her parents, and the freedoms she enjoys vary widely compared to those of her counterpart in Mali. Voices from the ground and practitioner perspectives indicate that the need for more focused, context-specific approaches to working with parents is recognised to some extent but not yet realised.

The Way Forward – Building on innovative approaches

The voices from MMWWK's fieldwork show that working with parents is essential. Parents are the primary decision-makers in the lives of their adolescent daughters. At the same time, based on practitioner perspectives, working with parents as a standalone approach is complicated and challenging. Despite these challenges, practitioners highlighted some innovative and effective approaches and activities that, according to them, yielded significant results. Future programmes could consider incorporating, building upon, or scaling-up these approaches to strategically engage with parents on sensitive topics related to sexuality and child marriage:

- **Positive deviant approach:** Establishing parent networks led by 'positive deviants' - parents who delayed their daughters' marriages - was mentioned as an effective way to engage with parents. This approach could be particularly helpful in contexts where the risk (or perception) of exclusion from communities - if established customs are not followed - is considered the dominant factor behind child marriage practices. Such networks can also be a viable strategy as parents can check and monitor one another rather than rely on project staff and other external stakeholders to track girls' risk of child marriage. According to practitioners who have seen the success of this approach (most of whom were in Bangladesh), parents who do not support child marriage and are not inclined towards having their daughters married at an early age are personally motivated to influence others. To enable them to advocate for delayed marriages and become role models in their communities, they can be encouraged to participate in training/capacity development sessions to enrich themselves with information and necessary tools and skills. These positive deviant parents can also be involved in wider networks and formal or informal groups. Representatives from a programme in Bangladesh stated that the parent network members are keen to stop child marriage in their communities. According to them, the network with more than 45 active members in different communities has targeted many families and stopped several early marriages.
- **Targeted communication and activities for mothers and fathers:** According to the experiences and opinions of practitioners, this approach can enable a nuanced understanding of the different roles played by fathers and mothers in different communities and how to package the programme interventions accordingly. As understood from the practitioner interviews, some programmes incorporated the distinction between mothers and fathers' roles and attitudes to design separate, targeted activities and interventions for each group. They also stated that separating the ways mothers and fathers were approached yielded encouraging results.

Parents, as a unit and separately as mothers and fathers, don't simply form a sub-set of community stakeholders; they are separate actors with significant influence on their children and their futures.

- For example, **mothers** and daughters who were part of family clubs in Bangladesh were given the same messages and information on the importance of sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) and the consequences of early marriages. The respondent stated that mothers in their programme areas are determined to postpone their daughters' marriage till they turn 18 and are encouraging others in their communities to do the same. In Mali, dedicated sessions with women have helped some women stand up to their husbands and families on issues relating to their daughters, though currently, this number remains small. Income-generating activities for mothers of girls at risk of early marriage in some regions of Mali and Ethiopia are proving helpful in reducing child marriage and keeping the girls in school.
- To address resistance among **fathers**, a programme in India came up with the strategy of male group engagement. Social mobilisers started interacting with fathers, formed small groups, and discussed their daughters' well-being, the effects of early marriage, menstrual hygiene, etc. Religious leaders were also involved in this group discussion. The respondent believed this engagement approach contributed significantly to reducing resistance among fathers on allowing girls to participate in project learning activities and accessing SRHR services. In Bangladesh, owing to difficulties creating groups for fathers, 'tea-stall conversations' were initiated. Facilitators, who could be positive deviants, would begin a conversation on issues relating to girls and young women at tea stalls where men tend to gather and meet their friends. According to the respondent, such informal discussions were a great way to introduce new and alternative information and opinions.

- **Inter-generational dialogues:**

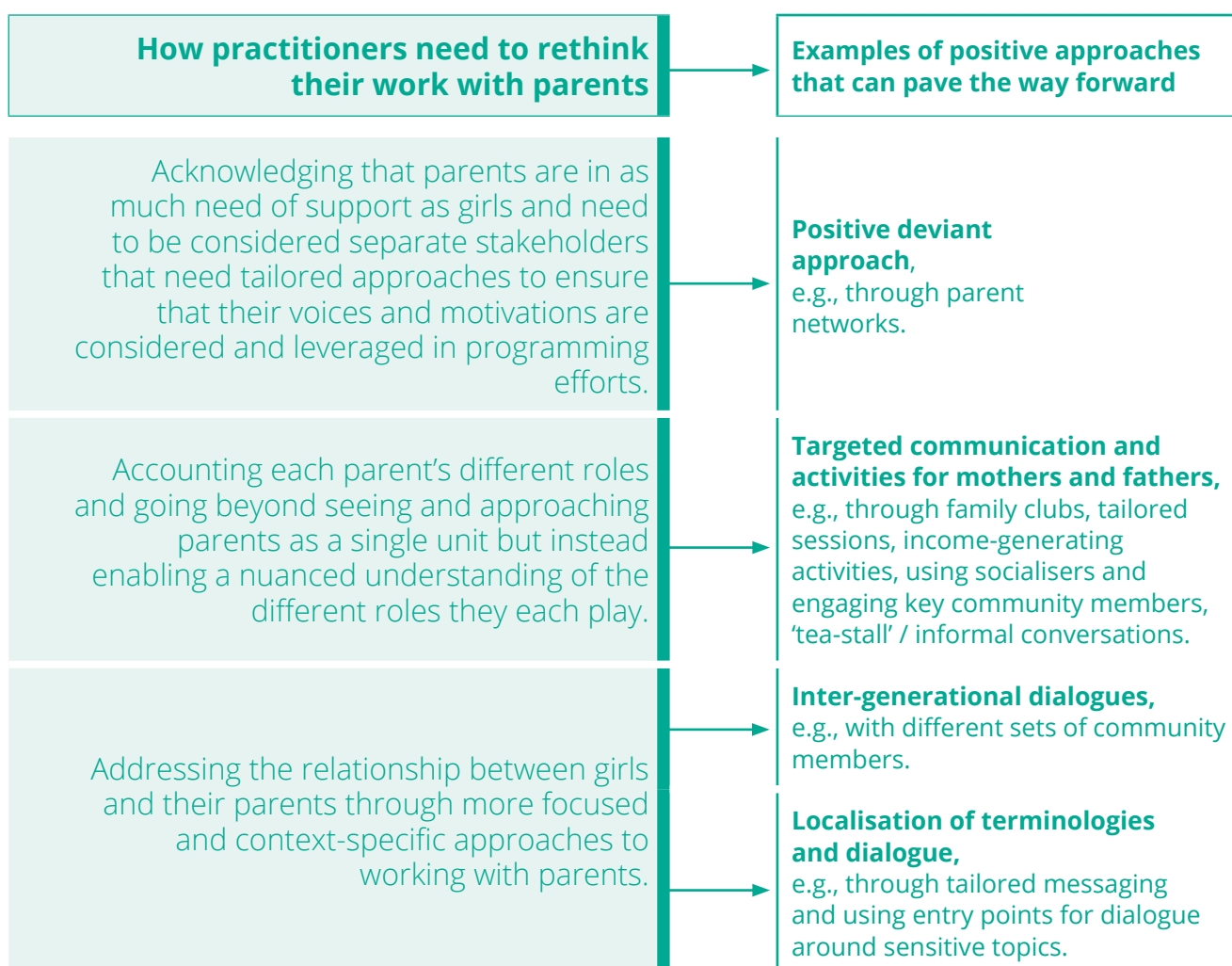
Many practitioners vouch for the success of intergenerational dialogues and the contribution of this approach towards child marriage prevention. A few initiatives like this have been implemented with significant success, especially in Bangladesh and Uganda. According to practitioners, while most programmes have separate sets of activities for separate groups of stakeholders, there were hardly any avenues where the whole family had an opportunity to discuss issues relating to sexuality and early marriage together.

Some studies highlight the effectiveness of inter-generational approaches, though not necessarily in preventing child marriage. A study exploring parental discussions with adolescents around SRHR topics in Tanzania (Muthengi et al., 2015)⁸ found that the content of parental communication on topics related to sexuality is an important consideration for adolescent behaviour. The authors note that interventions should not only engage parents but also provide guidance on how to communicate clearly and comprehensively about sexuality and related topics. Another study among slum-dwelling adolescents in Nairobi found that cross-gender communication with parents is associated with a delay in the onset of sexual intercourse among slum-dwelling adolescents (Okigbo et al., 2015⁹).

- **Localisation of terminologies and dialogue:**

This approach depends on the local context and its specific requirements. According to some practitioners, the same logic should be applied to the term 'sexuality,' related terminologies, and general dialogue around sexuality. Localisation of terminologies and providing relatable information based on the context of the communities is imperative. This would mean adapting the phrasing of important terms relating to child marriage and SRHR to the culture and context of the intervention area as an entry point for dialogue.

This aspect is particularly relevant in countries where discussing sexuality or even mentioning sexual activity of any kind - including discussion from a reproductive health point of view - is fraught with challenges. For example, in a programme in Ethiopia, girls do not explicitly discuss sexuality; they focus more on future goals, continuing their education, and leading better lives while working with parents. The intention is to incorporate sexuality as a primary consideration while designing activities around early marriage and tailoring messages to meet parents in dialogue while still addressing key root causes of child marriage. However, this example highlights the possible risks of erring on the side of caution. While adapting language to account for the needs and sensitivities of communities can lead to more impactful dialogue and can form an entry point to discuss more sensitive or taboo issues that lay at the centre of child marriage, practitioners must be mindful of the risk of diluting important language to the point of losing sight of their rights-based approach. Although a balance is hard to strike, efforts in this direction need to be sustained and not disregarded in favour of more agreeable approaches. For more details on how programs can build on community knowledge, check out [the knowledge product on this topic](#).



Inspiration for future child marriage programmes

This paper began by questioning whether there's a need to revisit and recalibrate existing programmatic interventions that involve working with parents. The voices from adolescent girls and other stakeholders on the ground show that the continued participation of parents in child marriage practices results from complex and interrelated factors. Practitioner perspectives highlight the challenges of working with parents. These experiences and perspectives reveal a lack of agency not only of girls but also among parents (as a unit and separately, as mothers and fathers). The paper goes on to suggest some interesting and impactful approaches that have showed positive results.

Based on this exploration, the following bullets summarise what child marriage prevention practitioners could start doing, do differently, and stop doing to move towards better engagement with parents:



Start doing:

- Acknowledge that parents are key and primary decision-makers in adolescent girls' lives but can also be one of the most significant barriers to programmatic interventions. Acknowledging this could spur increased emphasis on designing interventions targeted at parents specifically.
- Understand that parents are also vulnerable stakeholders who may find themselves unable to deviate from socio-economic demands and benefit from support. As a result, families' socio-economic well-being is prioritised over young women's physical and mental well-being.
- Invest in programmes and activities that focus on improving communication/relationships between parents and daughters, which can also help address gender norms and traditions that directly bear on child marriage practices.
- Focus more on informal and interactive ways of engaging with parents. Practitioner perspectives suggest that informal dialogues positively impact the engagement of parents in CM interventions and improve their receptiveness to new information.



Do differently:

- Gain better and nuanced understandings of the push and pull factors that influence parents to continue participating in child marriage practices in a given setting.
- See 'parents' as mothers, fathers, aunts, uncles, grandparents, and other guardians, with distinctive roles, responsibilities, and resources. This means identifying each actor's different roles and expectations as both unit constituents and separate identities in different contexts and addressing them when designing interventions.
- Ensure commitment - in the form of time, energy and resources - towards continuous and strategic scoping of innovative approaches to tackle the stigma around discussing sexuality. This would involve anticipating backlash as engaging with parents could be seen as encroaching on the private domain.



Stop doing:

- Seeing parents as part of a larger group of stakeholders, such as the community. Bundling parents with others in the community takes the focus away from the unique and highly influential pressures on parents to conform to community norms and practices. Parents should be categorised as separate actors with significant influence on their children and substantial potential to contribute to improved outcomes of CM programming.
- Assuming that focusing on awareness-raising approaches is sufficient or the primary strategy to prevent child marriage. Other approaches to tackling the root causes, such as those highlighted here, need to be prioritised more in CM programming.
- Shying away from addressing sexuality in CM programming and not treating it as intrinsically linked to the practice of child marriage. How the subject can be tackled will depend on the context and circumstances. But integrating it as a key component in interventions directed at parents is critical.

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