



**GIRLS
GET EQUAL**



THEIR TIME IS NOW – TIME TO ACT!

**ENGAGING YOUNG PEOPLE IN ACCELERATING
EFFORTS TO ELIMINATE CHILD, EARLY AND
FORCED MARRIAGE IN ASIA**

THEMATIC BRIEF

Plan International Asia Hub, 2019

ENDING CHILD, EARLY AND FORCED MARRIAGE: A PRESSING PRIORITY

Child, early and forced marriage (CEFM) is recognised as a human rights violation that has devastating consequences on individuals, families, communities and societies across the Asia region. CEFM deprives children and young people, girls in particular, of their rights and agency to make decisions about their own lives, and denies them access to education and sexual reproductive health services, while exposing them to increased risks of violence.

By committing to the “Leave no one behind” agenda and vision of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), each country in the Asia region agreed to eliminate CEFM as a key impediment to human development by 2030 (SDG Target 5.3). In order to meet this target, global progress needs to be 12 times faster than the rate observed over the past decade.

Decisive political commitment has been expressed at the regional level. Both the ASEAN’s Regional Plan of Action on the Elimination of Violence against Children in South East Asia, and the SAARC Regional Action Plan to End Child Marriage in South Asia provide their respective member states with operational guidance on accelerated efforts towards ending CEFM. These mechanisms recognise and promote the significant role played by young people in mobilising collective action, raising awareness and facilitating progress towards achieving results.

“If we work together with local partner organisations, communities and government, we can eliminate child marriage in our country.”

Female youth activist from Bangladesh, 16 years old



YOUNG PEOPLE AS DRIVERS OF CHANGE: SOURCE OF SOLUTIONS

Young people, who are the most affected by CEFM, need to be recognised as key actors and agents of change in eliminating this harmful practice. This recognition stems primarily from the rights-based principle that every child and young person has the right to participate in matters affecting their lives and decisions that impact their overall development and wellbeing. By ratifying UNCRC, all states in Asia have accepted responsibility to respect, protect and fulfil this right.

Youth participation implies, at a minimum, that young people are free to get involved in social and developmental processes. Their involvement is voluntary, well informed, inclusive and proactive. To ensure ethical, quality and meaningful participation, specific efforts are expected to be made to build and strengthen young people’s knowledge and skills for effective implementation of activities they identify based on their own ideas and solutions.

Recognising youth as agents of change in the elimination of CEFM is also rooted in more practical considerations: as social actors provided with skills and capacities, young people play a critical role in bringing about solutions to the problem affecting them in different ways. A growing body of evidence confirms that the meaningful involvement and participation of young people informs decision-making and leads to more relevant and effective outcomes.

Young people have first-hand experience unique to their own lives, views and ideas, which is key to addressing challenges they face through concrete and innovative solutions. The emerging good practice from all over the world highlights the essential contributions provided by young people in:

- Leveraging collective action;
- Influencing families, communities and governments;
- Changing attitudes and practices; and
- Developing effective approaches reflecting their own needs.



MAKING CHANGE HAPPEN: SUPPORTING YOUTH ENGAGEMENT AND ACTIVISM TO ELIMINATE CHILD, EARLY AND FORCED MARRIAGE IN ASIA

Over the past decade, many countries in Asia have been investing progressively in involving young people in CEFM elimination. Depending on the country context and specifics of local situations, youth engagement in CEFM elimination has been supported in a variety of ways. The vast range of diverse types and forms of involvement reflects the nature of home-grown solutions and demonstrates that substantial effort has been made to create opportunities for meaningful youth participation in preventing and responding to CEFM.

Youth and student clubs, forums and platforms have been formed and are active in Bangladesh, Cambodia, India, Indonesia, Lao PDR, Nepal, Timor-Leste, Thailand and Vietnam. In all these countries, through modalities that foster inclusiveness, shared decision-making and alliance building, young people learn about their rights and how to exercise them, while gaining a deeper understanding of the harmful effects of CEFM. Group activities and collective efforts help build their confidence and ability to claim their rights and to challenge traditional gender norms through constructive and solution-oriented forms of engagement.

“What makes a difference is engaging the entire community – including parents and leaders – to achieve a positive response and work collaboratively to end child marriage!”

Female youth activist from Indonesia, 19 years old

Across the region, youth clubs are supported in their decisions to take action against CEFM within their own communities. Youth engagement ranges from raising community awareness on the need to prevent and eliminate CEFM, to holding community forums and direct discussions with peers at risk of CEFM and their parents. In **India**, through door-to-door campaigns, street plays and public rallies, youth groups speak out against CEFM and report CEFM cases to village-level authorities. Through similar forms of engagement in **Nepal**, youth advocacy led to declaring dozens of villages ‘CEFM-free zones’. In **Bangladesh**, the proactive intervention of young ‘wedding busters’ in rural areas stopped imminent cases of CEFM and prevented many others.

“We need formal and regular government support to end child marriage. We need more help with training opportunities for girls and on the importance of marriage registration.”

Female youth activist from Nepal, 18 years old

The majority of peer-to-peer activities at the community level address the key drivers of CEFM. Subsequently, sexual reproductive health and rights are at the heart of peer-to-peer discussions in **Lao PDR**, **Thailand** and **Timor-Leste**. In **Cambodia**, youth groups engage in peer-to-peer education to motivate youth who drop out of school to restart their education. In **Vietnam**, activities go as far as to provide youth who drop out of school with concrete opportunities for economic empowerment. Youth networks also leverage public opinion on CEFM related topics, including gender-based violence and improving access to sexual reproductive health services.

“To end child marriage, young people need to be supported with livelihood options. We need to have jobs and there should be more opportunities.”

Male youth activist from Vietnam, 21 years old



Youth groups also engage beyond the grassroots level: through the assistance of national child rights coalitions, their CEFM related concerns are being brought directly to the attention of national parliaments and international policy-makers. In **Bangladesh, Cambodia, Nepal** and **Timor-Leste**, young people have been collecting data to provide inputs into the alternative reports to the United Nations treaty-monitoring bodies. Similarly, in **Cambodia, India** and **Timor-Leste**, Plan International supported the creation of youth networks at the national level to facilitate youth engagement in policy making and country-wide advocacy on CEFM elimination.

In many national contexts, youth-led initiatives are gradually emerging. Using diverse and innovative forms of public communication and campaigning, through online/social media and advocacy activities, networks of young ‘change-makers’ and ‘influencers’ are mobilising collective action. In **Bangladesh**, youth networks campaigned for repealing CEFM legislation alongside mobilising people against gender inequality and lobbying parliamentarians for introducing legislation to combat sexual harassment. In **Timor-Leste**, youth networks advocated against the introduction of a regressive family planning policy, while in **the Philippines**, youth-led platforms have been active against online sexual abuse and exploitation. In **Indonesia**, self-initiated groups of youth activists are now mobilising entire communities against CEFM and other harmful practices, while engaging in monitoring and reporting activities on SDG 5.

Involving young people in CEFM related forums and dialogues at the regional level is becoming standard practice. A group of youth activists was involved in the Regional Forum on Eliminating CEFM hosted by the ASEAN Secretariat (March 2019), while youth-generated solutions were presented at the launch event of regional CEFM research reports *Their Time is Now* and *Time to Act!* (December 2018). The practical examples provided by the youth activists from five Asian countries included motivating peers who dropped out from school and raising community awareness through art and creativity. These solutions were initiated and owned by young people and, therefore, have high potential to become sustainable if consistently supported. As such, they require serious consideration from national and international development practitioners and policy-makers to support their substantive involvement at all levels.

“Law enforcement is the responsibility of all members of the global community...we need support from all the people to strengthen our capacities and increase awareness on child marriage.”

Female youth activist from Cambodia, 18 years old

THE WAY FORWARD: PARTNERING WITH YOUNG PEOPLE TO ELIMINATE CHILD, EARLY AND FORCED MARRIAGE IN ASIA

The scope and severity of child, early and forced marriage demands joint and accelerated efforts by all relevant actors. Acknowledging young people's role and contribution to the elimination of CEFM by recognising them as partners in all discussions and actions at the community, national, regional and international levels constitutes a decisive step forward.

To that effect, relevant stakeholders including families, communities, local and national authorities, civil society organisations, United Nations agencies and international non-governmental organisations are recommended to:

- 1 Engage in ongoing action-based and solution-oriented dialogues and decision-making processes** involving young people by soliciting their views in the formulation and enforcement of policies geared towards eliminating CEFM;
- 2 Ensure meaningful involvement of young people in the design and implementation of interventions and initiatives** to prevent, reduce and end CEFM, and foster their active participation in monitoring and evaluating relevant strategies and action plans;
- 3 Create an enabling and safe environment for youth to voice their concerns, recommend solutions and contribute to implementation** of CEFM-focused programmes by facilitating and promoting youth activism and engagement through strengthening support from duty-bearers at all levels, including parents and carers, community leaders, and government representatives at all levels, including policy-makers;
- 4 Contribute to young people's efforts to mobilise all sectors of society** by facilitating the inclusive involvement of marginalised and disadvantaged individuals and communities;
- 5 Facilitate young people's access to funding opportunities** by making provisions in the national budgets to support youth engagement in CEFM elimination and by encouraging donors to finance youth-lead initiatives; and
- 6 Support young people's consultations and participation in national review processes** concerning the implementation of state commitments under the relevant international frameworks, including the SGDs, the Universal Periodic Review and periodic reporting on implementation of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and other relevant treaty-monitoring bodies.

Young people's ideas, solutions and actions to end child, early and forced marriage are gathering considerable momentum across the Asia region. The creativity, boldness and energy that young people are contributing needs to be built upon, scaled up and sustained. Their time is now – time to enjoy their childhood and youth, to learn, to be educated and to explore life options and opportunities. Their time is now – time to act and to end child, early and forced marriage, once and for all!

This Thematic Briefing builds on the findings and recommendations of *Their Time is Now – Time to Act! Regional Comparative Analysis of Approaches to Youth Involvement and Activism to Eliminate Child Early and Forced Marriage in Asia*. For more information, please contact: asia.ro@plan-international.org



Plan International Asia Regional Hub

14th Floor, 253 Asoke Building
Sukhumvit 21, Klongtoey Nua
Wattana, Bangkok 10110, Thailand



PlaninAsia



PlanAsia



PlanAsia