



**GIRLS
GET EQUAL**

THEIR TIME IS NOW — TIME TO ACT!

**REPORT OF THE REGIONAL COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS
OF APPROACHES TO YOUTH ACTIVISM AND
ENGAGEMENT TO ELIMINATE CHILD, EARLY
AND FORCED MARRIAGE IN ASIA**

Plan International Asia Hub, 2019

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LIST OF ACRONYMS

ACWC	ASEAN Commission on the Promotion and Protection of the Rights of Women and Children
ARI	Aliansi Remaja Independen (Independent Youth Alliance, Indonesia)
ARH	Asian Regional Hub (Plan International)
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
CAN	Child Advocacy Network
CBCPM	Community-Based Child Protection Mechanism
CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women
CEFM	Child, Early and Forced Marriage
CMRA	Child Marriage Restraint Act (Bangladesh)
CO	Country Office
CRC	Convention on the Rights of the Child
CRC Cambodia	Coalition on the Rights of the Child Cambodia (NGO)
CBO	Community-Based Organisation
CSE	Comprehensive Sexuality Education
CSO	Civil Society Organisation
EVAC	Elimination of Violence against Children
GAA	Girls Advocacy Alliance
GBV	Gender-Based Violence
GNB	Girls Not Brides
ICT	Information and Communication Technology
INGO	International Non-Governmental Organisation
IPPF	International Planned Parenthood Federation
KPAD	Kelompok Perlindungan Anak Desa (Indonesia)
LWU	Lao Women's Union
LYU	Lao People's Revolutionary Youth Union
M&E	Monitoring and Evaluation
MYP	Meaningful Youth Participation
NCTF	National Children's Task Force (Bangladesh)
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
NYAP	National Youth Advisory Panel (India)
RAP	Regional Action Plan [to End Child Marriage] (SAIEVAC)
RHCPP	Regional Head of Child Protection and Partnerships
RPA	Regional Plan of Action (ASEAN)
SAARC	South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation
SAIEVAC	South Asia Initiative to End Violence against Children
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
SRHR	Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights
TMBs	Treaty Monitoring Bodies
TOR	Terms of Reference
TYLP	Timor-Leste Youth Parliament
UN	United Nations
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
UPR	Universal Periodic Review
VEDC	Village Education Development Committee
WASH	Water, Sanitation and Hygiene
WHO	World Health Organization
YCG	Youth Coalition for Girls (Indonesia)
YFC	Youth for Change (Bangladesh)
YIDA	Yes I Do Alliance (Indonesia)

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

By committing to the “Leave no one behind” agenda and vision of the Sustainable Development Goals, each country in the Asia region agreed to eliminate child, early and forced marriage (CEFM) by 2030. Political commitment has been expressed at the regional level and both the ASEAN Regional Plan of Action on the Elimination of Violence against Children in Southeast 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.

Recognising youth as key actors and agents of change in eliminating CEFM stems primarily from their right to participate in matters affecting their lives. Moreover, as a growing body of evidence demonstrates, ensuring meaningful youth participation in programmes geared towards CEFM elimination leads to more relevant and effective decisions and outcomes. These include leveraging collective action; influencing families, communities and governments; changing attitudes and practices; and effective approaches reflecting youth’s own needs.

Over the past decade, Plan International has been investing in involving young people in CEFM elimination. Depending on the country context and specifics of the local situation, youth engagement in CEFM elimination has been supported in a variety of ways. For example, youth and student clubs have been formed and are active in Bangladesh, Cambodia, India, Laos, Nepal, Timor-Leste, Thailand and Vietnam. Group activities help build youth confidence and ability to claim their rights and to challenge traditional gender norms through constructive and solution-oriented forms of engagement.

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 Bangladesh, India and Nepal, through door-to-door campaigns, street plays and public rallies, youth groups speak out against CEFM and report CEFM cases to village-level authorities. In Laos, Thailand and Timor-Leste, youth groups motivate peers who have dropped out of school to restart education, provide opportunities for economic empowerment and lead campaigns to improve access to sexual and reproductive health services.



Youth groups also engage beyond the grassroots level and their concerns about CEFM are brought directly to the attention of national parliaments and international policy-makers through the assistance of national child rights coalitions. In Bangladesh, Cambodia, Nepal and Timor-Leste, young people provide inputs for alternative reports to 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 nationwide advocacy on CEFM elimination.

In some of the national contexts, youth-led initiatives are gradually emerging. Through diverse and innovative forms of public communication and campaigning, based on online and social media advocacy activities, networks of young ‘change-makers’ and ‘influencers’ mobilise collective action. In Bangladesh, youth networks campaigned for repealing CEFM legislation, mobilised people against gender inequality and lobbied parliamentarians to introduce legislation to combat sexual harassment. In Timor-Leste, youth networks advocated against the introduction of a retrogressive family planning policy. In the Philippines, youth have been active against online sexual abuse and exploitation. In Indonesia, self-initiated groups of youth activists are mobilising entire communities against CEFM and other harmful practices, while engaging in monitoring and reporting activities on the SDGs.

Drawing general conclusions on the enablers and barriers to youth engagement in CEFM elimination is speculative due to the many variables in the 10 surveyed countries. What works as an enabler in one context, may well represent a barrier in another. With this in mind, some of the identified enablers and barriers include:

At the community level, youth involvement in CEFM elimination has potential to evolve into activism, when youth groups are provided with opportunities to:

- receive ongoing coaching and training,
- engage with community stakeholders,
- elaborate a vision for their future engagement,
- work together with functioning community-based child protection mechanisms, and
- work in youth-friendly environments, timeframes and modalities.

At the district/sub-national level, youth involvement in CEFM elimination is facilitated, when:

- geographical limitations for youth mobility and communication can be overcome, and
- connections between the community and national levels are strengthened, including through the work of child-rights coalitions.

However, in some contexts, religious systems and customary practices at the sub-national level represent key barriers for youth engagement in CEFM elimination.

At the national level, youth involvement in CEFM elimination is facilitated, when:

- government strategies acknowledge youth as key stakeholders in CEFM elimination,
- the normative and policy frameworks create an enabling environment for civil society to operate,
- country-focused internationally led processes (the SDGs, the Universal Periodic Review (UPR), etc.) effectively involve young people, e.g. in monitoring and reporting activities, and
- global programmes on youth empowerment exist and provide opportunities for youth-led initiatives.

The scope and severity of CEFM demands the acknowledgement of young people’s role and contribution to the elimination of CEFM. Countries in South Asia and Southeast Asia have a key role to play in facilitating the recognition of youth as partners in all discussions and actions at both the national and regional levels.

1. INTRODUCTION

WHY THIS COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS: RATIONALE, OBJECTIVES AND LIMITATIONS

Eliminating child, early and forced marriage (CEFM) is a strategic priority area for the Plan International Asia Regional Hub (ARH) holistic integrative programming and influencing, as demonstrated by the increasing focus undertaken over the past decade to accelerate efforts to eliminate this harmful practice. While building on Plan International's global 18+ Framework on Ending CEFM and the underpinning Theory of Change, a distinctive framework, *Time to Act!*, has been developed in Asia to reiterate the urgency of the problem as well as to identify and implement mutually reinforcing solution-based strategies. These efforts are also reflected in the emphasis on the regional research agenda to increase knowledge of both the prevalence and root-causes of CEFM, and the effectiveness of the interventions designed to eliminate CEFM.

As part of a multi-phased research series in the countries of South and Southeast Asia, the recent *Time to Act!* report (2018) identifies youth-led advocacy and activism among the interventions and innovative approaches as having a high potential for impact if implemented at scale by governments and other stakeholders. This comparative analysis builds on *Time to Act!* and on previous CEFM research studies, and focuses on different aspects of youth-led activism, advocacy and engagement to eliminate CEFM in Asia.

The aim is to systematise the information from 10 Asian countries (Bangladesh, Cambodia, India, Indonesia, Laos, Nepal, the Philippines, Thailand, Timor-Leste and Vietnam) where young people are supported by Plan International in preventing, reducing and eliminating CEFM. The report provides an analytical overview of the key enablers and barriers encountered by youth advocates.

Objectives

The comparative analysis pursued the following objectives:

- Undertake remote and broad mapping of the existing Plan International supported youth-led initiatives on preventing, reducing and eliminating CEFM, along with similar initiatives by other key United Nations agencies and international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) at different levels and in various contexts in 10 Asian countries.
- Following the initial mapping, conduct a comparative desk analysis to identify key structural and functional aspects of these youth-led initiatives, including their organisational forms, activities, focus areas, key enablers and barriers, type of support received, etc.
- Produce an analytical report documenting the key findings and providing a set of recommendations derived from

commonly encountered enablers and barriers inherent to CEFM youth activism and additional support needed for their effective functioning.

The comparative analysis provides a set of recommendations for stepping up support to different forms of youth-led activism, engagement and involvement in projects, interventions and movements focusing on the elimination of CEFM across Asia. Findings and recommendations are expected to benefit **different target audiences**:

- **Internally**, for Plan International, it will assist Country Offices (COs) in strengthening and enriching their support to youth-led CEFM advocacy.
- **Externally**, it is expected to reach a wide range of actors that young people involve or target through their advocacy, such as parliamentarians; members of national, regional and local authorities (including policy-makers); and other power-holders who are in positions to extend support to youth advocacy and, therefore, accelerate overall efforts to eliminate CEFM.
- **Young people** involved in different platforms and initiatives will learn from other youth-led initiatives and successful breakthroughs, which will encourage innovative thinking and strategising.

This comparative analysis also contributes to further legitimising youth engagement and strengthening the profile of youth advocacy, which is often underestimated, questioned or simply ignored. It is meant to provide evidence on the importance and added value that youth-led actions bring within the broader multi-stakeholder efforts to eliminate CEFM, as defined by the Sustainable Development Agenda.

Limitations

This comparative analysis represents the first step in providing substantive information on the key dimensions and aspects of youth involvement in CEFM elimination, setting the ground for more comprehensive evaluations and research. Therefore, it has a limited scope and primarily looks into the key structural and functional features, barriers and enablers to youth activism, as well as additional support needed to increase its effectiveness, consistency and quality. The comparative analysis does not include requirements pertaining to an in-depth evaluation.

The comparative analysis is limited by the type of data collected, which is entirely based on secondary information provided by the CEFM focal points from the ten COs on the activities involving youth in CEFM elimination implemented

currently and over the last eight years. In that sense, some of the information provided is historical by nature and refers to projects that are already completed. Nonetheless, the updated figures and the current status of the youth groups have been provided in the individual country profiles based on the information collected.

Another limiting factor is the lack of available and systematically collected information on youth involvement in CEFM elimination, as more recent and often ad hoc components of the relevant projects remain scattered across progress reports and are inconsistently captured. In addition, other key development organisations, including UNFPA, UNICEF and International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF), are currently in the process of reviewing and systematising their internal data on youth involvement in CEFM elimination. For that reason, while solicited, they were not in position to provide external inputs to this comparative analysis, which, therefore, remains primarily focused on Plan International sources of data.

While taking these limitations into account, it is worth noting that they contribute to informing improvements and addressing gaps in the current practice, while providing a basis for further comprehensive analysis and research.

METHODOLOGY

The methodology comprises two distinct phases: mapping and comparative analysis.

Mapping

During this phase, a mapping of the youth-led initiatives for CEFM elimination supported by the COs was conducted, identifying and categorising the initiatives according to the type and level of youth engagement. Two data collection methods were employed:

- a desk review of Plan International's initiatives, and
- a series of in-depth interviews with Plan International informants (CEFM focal points and the Regional Head of Child Protection and Partnerships).

For the desk review, the data-set included key reports, project documents and monitoring reports made available by the relevant COs, as well as relevant online resources. Searching, collecting and reviewing documents were conducted in parallel with the in-depth interviews. Preliminary to interviewing the informants, a questionnaire (Annex 1) was prepared and shared with the CEFM focal points participating in the workshop, Time to Act! Accelerating Efforts to Eliminate CEFM in Asia, organised by Plan International ARH in Bangkok from 23-25 April 2019. The workshop featured a specific session on this comparative analysis aimed at explaining to the participants the scope and methodology, along with clarifying expectations. The workshop provided a unique opportunity to collect preliminary information on the activities of each CO, and allowed the interviewer to meet, in person, the majority of the key informants. There was time to go through the questions in individual sessions

and to generate a schedule for the in-depth interviews remotely based on individual availability of the informants. For informants not present at the workshop, the schedule for interviews was agreed through email. Each interview was conducted upon submission of individual responses to the questionnaire, followed by the provision of relevant documentation. At the end of the data collection phase, data coding helped categorise information according to the following three clusters:

- Number and structure of the youth groups and youth-led initiatives focusing on CEFM, including: types of organisations, membership, leadership and governance, modalities for decision-making and planning processes, communication and information dissemination, outreach base (real/potential, community, sub-national and national levels), partnerships and linkages with broader networks, and sources and types of funding/forms of support received or required.
- Thematic focus of the youth-led initiatives, including continuous awareness raising and education, child education and human rights education; access to health, sexual and reproductive health services; social engagement and mobilisation; youth-economic empowerment; child protection and access to justice, and any other thematic focus.
- Main activities conducted by CEFM-focused youth groups and their main target audiences, including awareness raising, peer education, public advocacy and campaigning, public education, inter-generational dialogues, policy-oriented dialogue, monitoring, data collection, reporting and referral, and any other relevant activities. Target audiences include peers, parents, schools, communities, child protection mechanisms, parliamentarians, national human rights institutions and international organisations.

Preliminary to the comparative analysis, individual country profiles were prepared by combining data collected from the interviews with information researched and summarised from tertiary online sources. The information included in each profile was validated by the relevant CEFM focal points through email communication.

Comparative Analysis

The objectives of the comparative analysis phase were to identify and compare key structural and functional aspects of the youth-led initiatives under review, and to generate insights into the enablers and barriers to CEFM-related youth-led activism, as well as to highlight the emerging good practices and innovations. Based on these objectives, the analysis was organised to respond to three research questions:

- What are the key enabling factors contributing to the effective and successful youth-led initiatives to prevent, reduce and eliminate CEFM prevalence and incidence?
- What are the key barriers to the youth-led activism and how are those being addressed and removed (any successful attempts and examples)?
- What are the common issues and trends relevant for CEFM youth activism observed across the region?

2. BACKGROUND

YOUTH PARTICIPATION AS A RIGHT AND PREREQUISITE FOR INCLUSIVE DEVELOPMENT

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) recognises children’s right to participate (Article 12 and other participation-related articles) in all matters affecting them directly or indirectly, and the duty of State Parties to guarantee the conditions that are conducive to the inclusion of their opinions and concerns in accordance with their evolving capacities.¹ Duty bearers are also required to respect, protect and fulfil children’s freedom of expression; of thought, conscience and religion; of association; and of peaceful assembly.

The term not only applies to ‘children’, defined as persons below the age of 18, but also to ‘young people’ who, according to the United Nations definition, are individuals in the 15-24-year age group.² While age-based definitions are required for monitoring and documenting activities across

different nations and cultures, youth as a homogeneous and indistinct category of stakeholders, does not exist.

The transition from childhood to youth and then adulthood remains fundamentally a personal experience, rooted in the context of where people grow up and largely defined by power dynamics underpinning age, gender, social status, economic conditions, different abilities, ethnicity, sexual orientation and other dimensions contributing to shaping one’s personal identity. These power dynamics cut across the relationships and interactions that young people have with their peers, families, communities and society at large, and are key factors determining the ways in which young people are expected to participate in societal processes and how young people see themselves within these processes.

The extent and scope of young people’s participation are largely determined by the ‘spaces’ and opportunities provided by society, ranging from the possibility of



expressing views and opinions to the possibility that these views and opinions are taken into account in decision-making processes. As such, the possibility for youth to have agency, form opinions, take action and exert influence varies across cultures and societies, evolves through time, and manifests in a variety of ways at both the individual and collective levels.

For development organisations, the multi-faceted and dynamic concept of youth participation has deep implications. Upholding the right of young people to participate (as culturally, socially and politically appropriate) starts with an acknowledgement that youth can participate on equal footing with adults, work independently and in organisations, as well as participate at all stages of programming and policy-making, including design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation. Accordingly, development organisations have been establishing mechanisms for young people to play an active role, in which their voices are heard and recognised in decision-making and actions are supported in line with their evolving capacities.

Plan International's programme and influence approach places youth engagement and empowerment at its core. The organisational LEAD area of global distinctiveness aims to empower adolescents, particularly adolescent girls, to take collective actions for systemic social and political change. One of its key strategies is to work with young people's associations on initiatives they develop and on the topics they are passionate about. In addition, connecting young people with key stakeholders, including policy-makers, has strong potential to contribute towards bringing about systemic change and more inclusive decision-making. Connecting young people and their ambitions for gender transformative change with key protagonists in a global movement for girls' rights will catalyse local efforts, including in eliminating CEFM.

Young people across the world are already active drivers of social and political changes. They initiate and engage with movements in their schools, communities and beyond. Connecting with their initiatives in ways that meet their needs is critical for achieving Plan International's global ambitions and ensuring that the resulting changes are sustainable. While this means working across various themes of young people's agendas, Plan International prioritises engaging with young people's groups and initiatives that work towards promoting girls' rights and gender equality.

Strengthening young peoples' individual and collective capacities to plan and implement social and political action, including sharpening their political consciousness, is an integral part of Plan International's effort to partner with young people. This approach involves creating safe spaces for critical reflection, action-based learning, working with adult mentors and role models, and connecting young people with other youth organisations or organisations with a focus on youth. Plan International is also developing an approach to working with young people as advocates for change that will help link the efforts from local youth advocates with global change efforts.³

YOUTH IN ASIA: OVERCOMING BARRIERS – GAINING INFLUENCE

The greater Asian region is home to almost half of the world's youth, with South and Southeast Asia comprising 26 percent and 18 percent of the world's youth population, respectively.⁴

Asia is the most dynamic region in terms of economic development, including its significant sub-regional differences. Young people account for almost half of the jobless population, despite the fact that one in five workers is between the ages of 15 and 24. A common feature in many Asian countries is that young people who have access to work are generally self-employed and tend to engage in informal economic activities. However, poor working conditions and social exclusion are common, and informal workers are not included in existing social protection frameworks available to the formal sector.

The challenging transition from formal education to employment is one of the main obstacles faced by youth in Asia, especially by young women. Gender inequalities have abated at the primary school level, however gender imbalances remain at the secondary and tertiary school levels. Unequal access to education and vocational training deprives girls of their rights and the ability to make decisions about their lives, including pursuing higher education and formal employment. This is particularly true with regard to girls from poor families, rural areas, urban slums and ethnic minorities who are less likely to complete full education cycles.

While many young people live in conditions where hygiene and sanitation contribute to compromised health outcomes, those in the age group of 10 to 24 years face additional risks related to drug use and lack of knowledge about reproductive health and rights. As a result, young people of these ages account for about 50 percent of all new HIV infections in the greater Asian region.

Generally, youth in Asia are becoming more informed, especially through the rapid advancement of digital communication and social media. In many countries, young people participate in community-based activities, either self-initiated or supported by civil society organisations and international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) providing programmes and services related to education, civic engagement and citizenship. Across the region, youth tend to get involved in volunteerism to promote community development and participate in relief efforts and reconstruction following natural disasters. However, the majority of youth's views and expectations remain outside of development processes.

A main barrier to meaningful youth participation is the lack of recognition of young people as agents for change, caused by patriarchal and age-dominated hierarchies within society. In many settings, the local media frequently portrays young people, especially those who are activists for social change, as troublemakers. Lack of trust in communities, political agendas and the justice system are also key challenges for youth participation in development activities. Civic and political engagement remains largely associated with risks, which leads to a lack of support and encouragement from parents and communities. As a result of this disengagement, youth voices are hardly reflected in the countries' policies and programmes, neither at the local nor national level.



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The responses from governments are generally partial, fragmented and inconsistent. Across the region, several countries have well-developed and stand-alone national youth policies, some have youth policies embedded in their constitutions, while others still lack coherent youth policies, with different ministries and departments responsible for different youth-related issues. However, none of the national youth policies seem to have been developed and implemented in a manner that draws upon rights-based frameworks and/or the specific needs of young people, including those most at risk.

CHILD, EARLY AND FORCED MARRIAGE IN ASIA: SCOPE AND DIVERSITY OF THE PROBLEM

CEFM occurs around the world and cuts across countries, cultures, religions and ethnicities. According to global statistics, 45 per cent of girls under the age of 18 are married in South Asia; 39 per cent in Sub-Saharan Africa; 23 per cent in Latin America and the Caribbean; and 18 per cent in the Middle East and North Africa.⁵

As the world's largest and most populated region, the Asia region is home to the most diverse variations in terms of cultures, religions and traditions. Asia also has highly diversified socio-economic contexts, as well as developmental, health, educational and gender-related achievements and challenges. Legal systems frequently combine statutory law with customary legal practices, as well as religious, tribal and patriarchal norms heavily influencing justice administration. Likewise, the prevalence of CEFM varies substantially among and within different Asian sub-regions and countries.

South Asia has the highest rates of CEFM in the world. Almost half (45 percent) of all women aged 20–24 years were married before the age of 18. Almost one in five girls (17 percent) are married before the age of 15. India has the largest number of child brides in the world – one-third of the global total. Bangladesh has the highest rate of CEFM in Asia (the fourth highest rate in the world). Nepal also has one of the highest rates of CEFM in Asia for both girls and boys.⁶

In Southeast Asia, CEFM rates are also considerably high, with Indonesia ranking eighth in the highest absolute number of women aged 20–24 who were married or in union before the age of 18 ranges from 35.4 percent in Laos to 11 percent in Vietnam. However, with the emergence of new forms of early marriages, including adolescents entering self-initiated unions, 'circumstantial' marriages or forced marriages linked with human trafficking (in Cambodia, Laos, the Philippines and Vietnam), CEFM patterns in Southeast Asia are more diversified than in South Asia.⁷

In the region, the adolescent birth rate (births per 1,000 females aged 15–19 years) has generally remained stagnant or even increased, despite the declining rate at the global level, with wide-ranging variations between countries. The average adolescent birth rate in the region is 47, while the global average is 50. The highest adolescent birth rates at the country level are recorded in Laos (94), Cambodia (57), Thailand (50), Indonesia (48) and the Philippines (47). The average adolescent birth rate in South Asia is 35.

Root-causes of CEFM vary significantly. While in nearly every context CEFM is driven by gender inequality and discrimination, a variety of drivers continue to fuel CEFM rates in Asian countries. These include a view of girls that prioritises their sexual and reproductive roles; family expectations and traditions, including religious traditions that focus on family interests and alignments; economic scarcity and the pressures this places on families to marry off their daughters, especially when payments are exchanged between families; conflict and instability and the impact these have on family decision-making regarding marriage; lack of alternatives for girls aside from marriage; and weak legal frameworks with a lack of enforcement of laws on age at marriage and plural legal systems.⁸

REGIONAL FRAMEWORKS GUIDING CEFM ELIMINATION: WHERE DO YOUNG PEOPLE FIT IN?

All countries in the Asia region are state parties to the 1979 United Nations CEDAW and 1989 United Nations CRC. Moreover, they made political commitments to eliminate CEFM under the two regional frameworks for cooperation: The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). However, while in the SAARC context, there is a specific regional plan of action to end CEFM, in the ASEAN context, CEFM elimination is addressed through a comprehensive regional plan of action on the elimination of all forms of violence against children. In both cases, child and youth participation principles are given due space under the priority actions envisaged in the regional plans.

South Asia

The South Asia Initiative to End Violence against Children (SAIEVAC) is an inter-governmental regional body with the mandate to ensure the protection of children's rights in South Asia. In August 2014, SAIEVAC adopted the Regional Action Plan (RAP) to End Child Marriage,⁹ which officially recognises CEFM as a human rights violation and acknowledges that it is a common concern for governments in the region. RAP provides guidance to countries and sub-national entities in the development of their own action plans to end CEFM. It takes a holistic approach encompassing legislative reform, access to services, empowerment of children, advocacy and monitoring. The 2014 Kathmandu Call for Action to End Child Marriage in South Asia¹⁰ complemented this effort by outlining 12 concrete steps that governments need to take towards strengthening laws and policies in addressing CEFM.

Both the Kathmandu Call for Action and RAP stress the need to ensure full participation of young people, both girls and boys, in the elimination of CEFM. Outcome 3 of RAP calls for the "Increased mobilisation of girls, boys, parents, media, religious, cultural and community leaders to change discriminatory norms" by *encouraging the engagement and participation of children at all levels to end child marriage* through the following Regional/National Strategic Actions:

- (3.8.1) Strengthen and expand children's organisations to ensure participation at local and national levels, including on the issues of child marriage
- (3.8.2) Ensure that the voices and perspectives of all children vulnerable and affected by child marriage are taken into account in decision-making at all levels
- (3.8.3) Periodical regional consultation for sharing of national concerns and adopting joint regional plans to end child marriage

The Regional Action Plan to End Child Marriage in South Asia was reviewed in 2018, and a revised RAP with a renewed commitment covers the period 2018–2023. Accelerated efforts are being invested by key actors to try to ensure the accelerated implementation of this RAP.

Southeast Asia

The Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women and Violence against Children adopted in October 2013¹¹ called on ASEAN Member States, individually and/or collectively, to eliminate violence against women and violence against children in the region by "Creating an enabling environment for the participation of women and children, including victims/survivors, in the prevention and elimination of violence against women and violence against children."

The Declaration was endorsed by the ASEAN Commission on the Promotion and Protection of the Rights of Women and Children (ACWC), which operationalised the principles and commitments of the Declaration in two regional action plans adopted in 2015: the ASEAN Regional Plan of Action on the Elimination of Violence against Children (ASEAN RPA on EVAC) and the ASEAN Regional Plan of Action on the Elimination of Violence against Women (ASEAN RPA on EVAW).



The RPA on EVAC includes relevant implementation plans to end all forms of violence against children during the period 2016 to 2025. Participation of children is mainstreamed in eight Actions that the ASEAN Member States are called on to implement through their respective legal and policy frameworks to prevent and combat all forms of violence against children, including CEFM. Examples of the Actions include:

- Action 4 (Capacity building), item 49: Build the capacity and resilience of children and support their active participation in the EVAC process. (National)
- Action 6 (Management, coordination, monitoring and evaluation), item 54: Develop and/or strengthen national plans of action to eliminate all forms of violence against children with participation of all relevant stakeholders, including children, at all stages of the process and to ensure a coordinating mechanism for its implementation. (National)
- Action 7 (Partnership and collaboration), items:
 - 62. Ensure the participation of all stakeholders, especially children and young people, in appropriate programmes/activities related to EVAC. (Regional/National)
 - 63. Promote and support meaningful and active participation of children and young people and integrate their views into policies, plans and programmes to end violence against children. Support children's forums and networks. (Regional/National)
 - 65. Engage the active and safe participation of children in addressing discrimination, prevention of and response to violation of their rights to a childhood free from violence. (Regional/National)

Within the ASEAN framework, the political commitment to eliminate CEFM is also driven by the ACWC, which leads the ASEAN agenda on the rights of children and women. ACWC acknowledges the importance of developing an integrated strategy and a multi-sectoral approach involving a range of actors to end child marriage. CEFM is included among the 16 Thematic Areas in the ACWC's 2012–2016 and 2016–2020¹² work plans.

Although ASEAN does not have a specific regional plan of action to end CEFM, the ASEAN Secretariat expressed a strong commitment to prioritise ending CEFM, and has hosted a Regional Forum on Eliminating Child, Early and Forced Marriage.¹³

PLAN INTERNATIONAL'S REGIONAL CEFM RESEARCH AND INFLUENCING AGENDA

Eliminating CEFM is a strategic priority area for Plan International's holistic integrative programming as demonstrated by the considerable efforts undertaken by the Asian Regional Hub (ARH) over the past decade to develop and implement programming, influencing and research across the region. These efforts are reflected in the emphasis on the research agenda for understanding both the prevalence and root causes of the CEFM as well as the impact of the interventions designed to eliminate it.

As part of a multi-phased research series focusing on countries in South and Southeast Asia, Plan International ARH published the report *Their Time is Now: Eliminating Child, Early and Forced Marriage in Asia* in 2018. This report provided an analysis of recent evidence on the prevalence, causes, trends, drivers and impact of CEFM in Asia. It was followed, within the same year, by *Time to Act!*, which outlined actions and emerging effective interventions by different international agencies and civil-society organisations (CSOs) that support eliminating CEFM. In particular, the report identified youth-led advocacy and activism among the interventions and innovative approaches with a high potential for impact if implemented at scale by governments and other stakeholders.

The examples provided in the report encompass the full spectrum of youth engagement, from informing or assigning roles to girls and young people to participate in and partner with youth-led organisations and networks, to designing their own solutions. These examples may be categorised as follows:

- Programmes engaging youth as peer educators working towards CEFM-related empowerment and social change goals, including young people running campaigns around girls' rights, girls' access to education, and prevention and reduction of gender-based violence (GBV) using skills and information developed through participation in programme activities.
- Programmes engaging youth as peer 'enforcers', helping programme implementers to identify and intervene in CEFM in their communities.
- Programmes working with young advocates and youth-led organisations and networks to design their own programmes and innovations.
- Youth-driven models, including global programmes and funding mechanisms supporting locally led and youth-driven groups.

The report further highlights the different stages within CEFM elimination programmes during which youth participation has been employed to great effect, including formative research, programme design, programme delivery and monitoring and evaluation.

Engaging with and soliciting inputs from children and young people who are most affected by the harmful consequences of CEFM are the central tenets of an emerging line of action geared towards eliminating CEFM. Creating space for youth to engage in advocacy and ensuring opportunities for voicing concerns and recommending solutions are pre-conditions for understanding both the causes and consequences of CEFM, as well as the impact of policies and programmes developed

to address CEFM. To benefit from these policies and programmes, a young person has the right to the opportunity to provide input into their development. Therefore, facilitating the participation of young persons in high-level national and regional advocacy processes, events and forums, helps inform the agendas with the views and the solutions put forward by children and young people as agents of change.

Involving young people in the influencing forums organized by Plan International ARH at the regional level is becoming standard practice. For example, in March 2019 in Jakarta, at the Regional Forum on Eliminating CEFM organised by the ASEAN Secretariat and supported by Plan International ARH, UNICEF and UNFPA, five youth activists from Indonesia and Malaysia brought up their concerns and suggested solutions informed by their own experiences of engagement. The youth activists presented themes and raised issues that otherwise would not have transpired from the adult discussions. These included the importance of involving young men in CEFM-related programmes, challenging gender-based discrimination and exploring the key role of community-based child protection mechanisms in Indonesia (KPADs) in preventing and responding to CEFM.

Another example of creating space for youth advocacy and voices was the launch event for the *Their Time is Now* and *Time to Act!* reports, co-organised by Plan International ARH and UNFPA in December 2018 in Bangkok. At this launch event, young activists who had engaged in fighting against CEFM in Bangladesh, Cambodia, Indonesia, Nepal and Vietnam participated in the presentations and discussions on an equal footing with technical experts from a range of international organisations, including the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child. The practical examples they provided, such as motivating peers who had dropped out of school or raising community awareness through art and other creative ways, suggested new solutions for tackling CEFM and its harmful effects. These solutions were generated and owned by young people and, therefore, have high potential to be sustainable if properly and consistently supported. As such, they require serious consideration from national and international practitioners and policymakers to support their substantive involvement at all levels.



Quotes from youth participating at the launch event of the *Their Time is Now* and *Time to Act!* reports

“I feel that it’s successful to engage all of the community – leaders and parents – to gain a positive response and work collaboratively to end child marriage.”

Female youth activist from Indonesia, 19 years old

“If we work with local partner organisations, the community, the government and together, we can eliminate child marriage in Bangladesh.”

Female youth activist from Bangladesh, 16 years old

“To end child marriage, youth need to be supported with livelihoods. Young people need to have jobs and there should be more opportunities.”

Male youth activist from Vietnam, 21 years old

“Law enforcement is the responsibility of all members of the global community ... we need support from all the people in this room to increase our capacity and increase awareness of child marriage.”

Female youth activist from Cambodia, 18 years old

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

Female youth activist from Nepal, 18 years old



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Based on their first-hand experiences at the community and national levels, youth activists from five countries put forward the following suggestions:

- Integrate child marriage prevention measures into primary and secondary curricula;
- Increase access to educational materials in minority languages that challenge social norms driving CEFM;
- Produce materials for children in a child-sensitive format;
- Increase awareness of the impact of CEFM in communities;
- Present the consequences of CEFM in a child-friendly way;
- In schools, encourage children to remain in education by becoming more child-friendly;
- Align any relevant global standards with the local context;
- Engage parents in preventing CEFM;
- Use ICT in a positive manner and monitor social media through parental supervision;
- Carry out all CEFM campaigning in a child-sensitive way;
- Intensify work with marginalised groups;
- Increase marriage registration;
- Secure formal and regular government support; and
- In schools, establish writing activities to express feelings and after-school clubs to address CEFM.

Furthermore, a regional influencing initiative on scaling up CEFM advocacy in Asia, Time to Act! Accelerating Efforts to Eliminate CEFM in Asia was formed as one of the four regional influencing initiatives endorsed by the Asia Regional Leadership Team for the fiscal year 2019/2020. The Regional Leadership Team needed to explore in detail how the work stream would be taken forward. To that effect, a workshop was held in Bangkok from 23–25 April 2019 to define the priorities and agree on the operational pathways of this group. Out of the twelve strategies inherent to Plan-supported interventions to eliminate CEFM in Asia, the following three were recognised as the top priorities:

1. Youth activism, advocacy and engagement in eliminating CEFM,
2. Mobilising and strengthening strategic partnerships, and
3. Engaging traditional and religious leaders.

These three priorities, complemented by other relevant strategies, were further elaborated and specified in terms of focus, activities and expected outcomes.

3. COUNTRY PROFILES

BANGLADESH



- 59% of girls married before the age of 18, and 22% married before the age of 15.¹⁴
- The minimum legal age to marry for girls is 18 years and for boys is 21 years.¹⁵ However, the Child Marriage Restraint Act (2017) has a special provision, clause 19, which can legalise marriages of girls below 18.
- The median age of marriage for girls living in poorest households is 15 years old, compared to 18 years old for those living in richest households. The median age of marriage for girls with no education is 15 years old, compared to 20 years old for girls who have completed secondary or higher education.¹⁶
- Natural disasters exacerbate CEFM in many regions of Bangladesh. Moreover, initial research shows similar concerns for the displaced Rohingya.¹⁷

Background

In Bangladesh, CEFM is driven by gender inequality and by a combination of other factors, including poverty and limited economic opportunities, unequal access to secondary and higher education, the low social value placed on girls, and the dowry system. CEFM is also fuelled by concerns around adolescent sexuality, particularly the fear that girls become sexually active before marriage, and the potential for unintended pregnancy, loss of family honour and the subsequent loss of marriage prospects. The impact of CEFM on the lives of girls and their families ranges from the interruption of secondary education to serious health consequences as a result of early pregnancy as well as domestic violence from spouses and in-laws.¹⁸

In July 2014, at the London Girl Summit, the Government of Bangladesh pledged to end the marriage of girls below the age of 15 and to reduce by one third the rate of marriage for girls aged 18 by 2021, as well as to eliminate marriage of girls below the age of 18 by 2041. As part of this effort, the Government committed to strengthening the Child Marriage Restraint Act (CMRA, 1929); developing a National Plan of Action on Child Marriage under the leadership of the Ministry for Women and Children Affairs; and taking steps to change social norms and engage civil society in the fight against CEFM.

The government began re-drafting the CMRA, 1929, when a memo was leaked to the press that the government was considering the idea of declaring marriage below 18, but not below 16, as legal under certain circumstances. This led to a massive civil society movement that included young people (children and youth). During a two-year period from 2015 to 2017, young people took action to protest the alleged lowering of the age of marriage for girls to 16 by writing to the Prime Minister and meeting with the National Human Right Commission. Young people also protested, together with child, human and women rights organisations, when the revised CMRA, 2017, was adopted late that year with clause 19 specifying that marriages below legal ages could be considered to be legal marriages under special circumstances.

To summarise, the last four years witnessed significant civil-society activism against the draft CMRA, which initially considered proposals for lowering the age of marriage to 16 years for girls and 18 years for boys, and later incorporated a provision allowing girls to marry before reaching the statutory age limit of 18 years under “special circumstances”. The provision was eventually endorsed in the text adopted in 2017, in spite of the public outcry and the advocacy initiatives driven at the national and international levels by coordinated action of advocacy networks, including youth groups.¹⁹

The National Plan of Action on Child Marriage was developed through an inclusive consultative process involving national and sub-national government authorities, INGOs, CSOs, donors and United Nations agencies that lasted until August 2018, when the document was finally launched for the period 2018–2030.²⁰ The process was accompanied by an institutional campaign encompassing radio and TV announcements, electronic and print media, and a social media component reaching over 25 million Bangladeshis.²¹ The campaign also engaged over 5,000 community-based adolescent clubs in peer-to-peer discussions over CEFM.

Overall, the debate on CEFM in Bangladesh is emblematic of the increased influence of conservative forces on policy-making, which is largely fuelled by the activities of radicalised movements.²² These activities also draw on the growing discontent and feeling of abandonment of the Bangladeshi youth who, despite accounting for one-third of the population, remains largely excluded from decision-making, especially on issues that directly affect their lives.

There are gaps in viewpoints of the population between generations that grew prior to or after the country’s independence and between those living in urban or rural settings. The official Youth Policy, while recognising the need to address the extremely high unemployment rate among the youth, fails to address the root causes and to meet the specific needs of young men and young women by providing opportunities for participating and contributing to society. The gap is widening and policy responses that increasingly focused on state security may result in limiting the operational space for youth to engage in activism.²³

The last five years built momentum for advancing activism on ending CEFM, which calls for the sustained engagement of all stakeholders. For development agencies, this momentum opens up an opportunity for re-thinking and re-strategising the types, forms and modalities to better respond to their mandate to work for youth and with youth.

Key interventions framing CEFM-focused youth engagement and activism

Addressing child marriage is Plan International Bangladesh’s flagship programme. Over the past decade, a number of CEFM-related projects were implemented across the education, health and child protection sectors. All programmes were implemented in partnership with a wide range of NGOs, youth organisations and CSO networks, and in cooperation with the Government of Bangladesh. Overall, the interventions focused on empowering adolescent girls and changing social and gender norms, and included a wide range of activities aimed at the institutional duty bearers. However, from an initial approach based on training young

people and engaging them in project-driven and CEFM-focused activities, new approaches are gradually emerging.

For example, the Protecting Human Rights project, implemented from 2011 to 2017, focused on reducing domestic violence and other human rights abuses through a comprehensive strategy that also included an education campaign in 100 schools. This was to engage children and youth in discussing broader human rights issues, including CEFM, in view of motivating them to speak up and report.

Between 2012 and 2014, the I'MPOWER project in the Nilphamari District initiated the “Wedding Busters”, which were groups of around 20 boys and girls aged 14–18 formed to work on preventing CEFM at the grassroots level. In total, there were about 11 groups, and they targeted approximately 100 villages by holding meetings in open community spaces to persuade parents to allow girls to continue their education and to declare their villages as “CEFM-free zones”. Working in groups was a specific element of the strategy meant to distribute the risk of backlash from adults. The groups were largely instructed and directed by the project staff and were not structured to remain active beyond the project’s end. However, the success of the Wedding Busters is that they managed to continue after the project ended. Today, some of the youth activists continue to take action in their respective areas. One example is K., who has founded his own NGO and immerses himself in advancing child rights and preventing CEFM.

A different approach to engaging youth involved children and young people of various backgrounds in monitoring and reporting the situation of children in the country. Projects such as “Helping Children Growing as Active Citizens”, which started in 2015 and is still ongoing, have a broader focus on child rights through which CEFM is also indirectly mainstreamed.

These projects are built around the mandate and the activities of the National Children’s Task Force (NCTF), the nationwide children’s organisation sponsored by Plan International Bangladesh and Save the Children. The NCTF was established in 2009 by the Ministry of Women and Children’s Affairs to involve children and young people in monitoring the implementation of the National Plan of Action against Sexual Abuse and Exploitation, including Trafficking of Children. The NCTF comprises over 20,000 members, including children and adolescents (both girls and boys) and covers all 64 districts of the country. It has gradually taken on a wider role and is now leading important initiatives such as the Child Parliament and the child-led monitoring and alternative reporting to the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child.²⁴

The Child Parliament initiative is meant to provide children and young people with a platform to reach out to decision-makers at the national level. Through this type of advocacy, policy changes were introduced including banning physical punishment in schools, prohibiting teachers from using cell-phones during class hours and prohibiting the use of children in political rallies. Each session of the Child Parliament is prepared based on a research organised by Child Researchers (who are NCTF members) in all 64 districts. Data on child rights situations is collected by 256 Child Researchers and 80 Child Facilitators. A core team systematises the collected information and selects the Child Parliament issue. Each session is preceded by a preparatory workshop that produces the working document, which is based on the research findings, to be used in the session.

The Child Parliament has been involved in the general mobilisation against the draft CMRA through a dedicated Parliamentary session, and by supporting the NCTF online campaign ‘Not Sixteen’ and submitting a public letter to the Prime Minister.

The 12th Child Parliament Session on 21 December 2014

The 12th Child Parliament Session was held on 21 December 2015. A total of 300 people attended the session, including 42 girls and 42 boys who were members of the Child Parliament. Among them, 64 district members and 20 members from special groups and expansion areas attended. A diverse range of Bangladeshi children, including children in street situations, working children, ethnic minorities, children with disabilities, and other vulnerable and marginalised groups, were also present.

The Deputy Speaker of the National Parliament attended as the Chief Guest. He was questioned by the child parliamentarians on child marriage and its consequences on child protection, including the controversial suggestion of lowering the marriage age.

Admitting the corrupt practices of a section of marriage registrars, the Chief Guest urged the Ministry of Justice to strengthen the monitoring mechanism and to fill the vacant positions of district registrars.

Responding to the allegation of the child parliamentarians that some of the Union Council Chairmen tamper with birth registration dates in collusion with girls’ parents, the Chief Guest urged public representatives to follow laws and conscience over the immediate gain of cheap popularity.

The session was followed by a well-attended press briefing.²⁵

The child-led reporting to the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child follows a consolidated practice with a proven methodology. Accordingly, groups of children and youth, both girls and boys, are trained on the CRC framework. The groups are then structured as research teams and coached through a child-friendly methodology to search and collect information on the five selected clusters of child rights included in the CRC Concluding Observations. The groups gather information through discussions with children from their areas, and are mentored by child facilitators throughout the information gathering and report drafting processes. In all reports produced to date, CEFM has been given a high profile that continues to inform the CRC Concluding Observations.

Another area for youth engagement is global initiatives that are contextualised by and through national change makers.



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An example is the Youth for Change (YFC) project, a Plan International global initiative, implemented in Bangladesh from 2015 to 2018 and involving seven young panellists who worked as ‘change-makers’. They were supported through their personal journeys of change, and the group was trained on gender equality and on fighting against GBV. They took several initiatives on their own, particularly on CEFM and sexual harassment. Examples include:

- Participation in global online campaigns such as #HeForShe²⁶ for women’s solidarity and the One Billion Rising campaign on Violence Against Women, which included 16 days of activism;
- Organisation of the campaign #MeetTheUNO to influence key duty bearers about their roles and accountability;
- Organisation of the social media campaign #AskAndAct on CEFM and GBV;
- Organisation of the online campaign #OrangeDiscussion, which included a 16 days of activism;
- Participation in the Youth Video Contest 2017, organised by UNDP, United Nations Volunteers and UNWOMEN, in which the first prize was from the Preventing Sexual Harassment against Women category); and
- Participation in the Facebook live show of BBC Media Action “Ideal Men” episode to engage men in fighting against GBV.

In addition, the YFC team signed an agreement with the Volunteer Service Overseas (VSO) to develop a strategic partnership for campaigning against GBV and CEFM.

“I am 21 years old studying at a University in Dhaka. I like to debate, read books and inspire people. In the boys’ school, I conducted a workshop to teach them the true meaning of ‘consent’ and ‘equality’ and also showed them how to treat every girl with respect. On the other hand, in the girls’ school, I conducted workshops to motivate the girls to be brave, more confident in expressing themselves and to show them how they can utilise their own rights and empower themselves as well as help other girls around them to become empowered.”

Nickname Upoma, August 2017
(from the YFC website)

Plan International assisted YFC in creating the Young Change Makers Coalition, which connected the YFC activities with seven other CSOs. They autonomously connected with other youth groups such as the UNDP-supported Youthopia Bangla, the National Children’s Task Force and the Barishal Youth Society. When rights groups were mobilising against the draft CMRA, the YFC panellists contributed by organising press conferences in Chittagong, Mymensingh and Barisal,²⁷ and engaging in a conversation with both print and electronic media to publicise their recommendations. The YFC also approached the National Human Rights Commission to reiterate their recommendations and developed a booklet on the CMRA, which included a simplified way to explain the law and was used for interactive presentations.

The Youth for Change and Young Change Makers Coalition recommendations

- To finalise the guidelines of the CRMA quickly and ensure participation of children and youth during the development of the guidelines;
- To rethink the special provision of CMRA 2017 and make the rules in favour of children;
- To set a coordination mechanism between the Child Marriage Restraint Committee and the Child Welfare Board in the upcoming rules of CMRA 2017;
- To prepare guidelines clarifying how “best interest of the children,” as per the CRC, will be ensured when applying the special provision;
- To form a group, including government, civil society, the legal office and children, which will monitor the implementation of the CMRA;
- To ensure stricter punishment for the perpetrators mentioned under the CMRA; and
- To review the National Plan of Action based on the CRMA. (February 2017)

Another global initiative supported by Plan International is the Girls Advocacy Alliance (GAA), which is a five-year project (2016–2020) to promote equal rights and opportunities for girls and young women in 10 countries in Africa and Asia with a focus on GBV. GAA considers young people as the entry point for linking to key stakeholders and for influencing government, communities and the private sector. In Bangladesh, the national GAA advocates for comprehensive legislation to combat sexual harassment, which in the domestic legal system is only regulated with regard to educational institutions and work places. Young people have been involved in lobbying for this cause. In December 2017, at the National Parliamentarian Hall in Dhaka, the GAA organised an interactive dialogue with the Parliamentary Caucus on Child Rights during which powerful audio-visuals were shared on sexual harassment.

“If our Prime Minister could be able to end the terrorism with her one declaration, then why not another declaration for ending the sexual harassment in our country?”

A representative from the Girls Advocacy Alliance, National Parliamentarian Hall in Dhaka, December 2017

Moreover, through various initiatives, young people are also engaged at the field level in preventing CEFM through tracking, monitoring and reporting. For example, GAA change makers and volunteers sensitised 60 informal matchmakers in Rangpur on the penalties envisaged by the CMRA and collected data for reporting on CEFM.

Out of all the projects supported by Plan Bangladesh, a new approach is emerging towards empowering young people to work to overcome the challenges that impact their daily lives. This perspective on youth participation is driven by acknowledging the importance of:

- Listening and understanding what is important in the lives of young people;
- Providing young people with tools, skills, knowledge and information, and opening up opportunities; and
- Supporting young people to take action on issues that matter in their lives.

The YouthTalk series that was launched on International Women’s Day 2019 provides an example. The first talk was an introduction to CEDAW and the reservations on it placed by Bangladesh, and a discussion around the issues cited as to why the reservations could not be lifted. A second talk was with out-of-school youth in rural Bangladesh about their lives. These talks were with youth who were not engaged with Plan International either through projects or young people’s organisations. Instead, they were identified through Plan’s network, which includes young staff members.

This new perspective aims to inform programme strategies away from forming groups of young people, training them and leading their work on CEFM prevention and reduction (as with youth clubs and peer-to-peer activities). Key elements of the new approach include:

- Facilitating the voice and participation of young people;
- Working with registered and unregistered youth organisations;
- Strengthening existing alliances and building new ones to widen the space for advocacy on clearly identified issues, such as protection from sexual harassment; and
- Researching the lives of adolescents and young people.

Determining factors: enablers and barriers to CEFM-focused youth engagement and activism

Enablers

- Opportunities for impact with clearer and more realistic targets for programming provided at the district level,
- National Plan of Action to eliminate CEFM including clear and measurable targets,
- Bangladesh as a focus country of UNICEF/UNFPA Global Programme to Accelerate Action to Eliminate CEFM,

- Large and consistent project investments, and
- Skilled and motivated youth developed through previous projects and actively engaged in advocacy.

Barriers

- Emerging negative trends such as
 - passing of laws that prevent citizens from raising issues in social media (Digital Security Act, 2018), a platform in which youth are most at home, and
 - activities of radicalised groups which may limit the operational space for youth engagement;
- Limited inter-generational dialogue;
- Scale of the challenge, magnified by natural catastrophes; and
- Urban/rural divide.

Additional support needed

- Define youth more broadly to include young females and males, and define strategies based on their respective needs and issues;
- Invest in existing youth partners, individuals and groups, whose capacities were built during previous programmes and who have proven to be ‘natural advocates’; and
- Work with un-registered youth groups.



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CAMBODIA



- 19% of girls married before the age of 18, and 2% married before the age of 15.²⁸
- Under the 2007 Civil Code, the minimum age of marriage is 18 years for girls and boys. However, individuals can marry at 16 years to someone who has reached the age of majority with consent from their parents or guardians.²⁹
- CEFM is most prevalent among ethnic minority populations. However, marriages below the age of 18 also take place across all ethnic groups in the country.³⁰
- In 2014, 20% of Cambodian women aged 15 to 19 were already mothers or were pregnant with their first child.³¹

Background

In Cambodia, CEFM is driven by gender inequality and other factors including level of education, poverty (forcing girls to drop out of school and marry to support their families), traditional customs (pressing girls to marry in order to take on the roles of wives, mothers and housekeepers), unintended pregnancies and trafficking (girls are lured into travelling across provinces or into China on a false promise of employment to be subsequently forced into marriage).³²

Promoting gender equality and women's empowerment are key development priorities of the Rectangular Strategy for Growth, Employment, Equity and Efficiency, the multi-phased socio-economic policy agenda of the Cambodian Government. The commitment to address CEFM was set in the Neary Rattanak IV Strategy (2014–2018) led by the Ministry of Women's Affairs. The strategy identified CEFM as a main barrier for expanding education for girls and women alongside negative social attitudes towards girls' education, illiteracy and low levels of parents' education, domestic violence and opportunity costs of education.³³

To date, the various programmes addressing CEFM have focused on the northeast border provinces of Ratanakiri and Mondulakiri, where minority ethnic communities have maintained autonomous traditional legal structures administered by community authority. Research conducted in Ratanakiri indicates that isolation, marginalisation and discrimination are key determinants for the identified vulnerabilities concerning poverty, education and economic opportunities, the main drivers of the high CEFM rates in these communities.³⁴ Research findings also point to particular social norms that simultaneously promote early sexual debut while stigmatising the use of contraception, which drive young people to marry and begin their families early.

Programmes in Ratanakiri are implemented within the framework of the Provincial Action Plan on Ending Child Marriage and Teenage Pregnancy in Ratanakiri Province, developed by the Ministry of Women's Affairs in cooperation with development agencies, including Plan International Cambodia.

Key interventions framing youth engagement and activism

Since 2002, Plan International Cambodia has been implementing an integrated programme in the provinces of Siem Reap, Tboung Khmum, Stung Treng and Ratanakiri that encompasses early childhood care and development (ECCD); child protection; water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH); nutrition; and education, including technical and vocational training. Preventing and responding to CEFM are mainstreamed throughout all these programme areas, which are implemented through NGO partners.

Focus on child and youth participation is largely through the Child Protection Programme that started in 2005 with projects addressing child protection in school through the "Learn without Fear" campaign and promoting community-based child protection mechanisms including child participation. Since then, the programme continued within the framework of the NGO Coalition on the Rights of the Child Cambodia (CRC Cambodia) coalition, comprised of 53 child-right local and INGOs, working to monitor the implementation of child rights in the country, as well as to influence national and regional levels for child rights realisation. Within that, the promotion of child and youth participation in both the sub-national and national levels was also prioritised and strengthened.

At the sub-national level, to date, 297 child/youth clubs have been formed in 13 provinces, for a total number of 9,405 members, of which 5,106 are girls. The number of clubs is increasing due to the expansion of the programmes in the project areas. Clubs are comprised of an average of 15–17 members that are grouped according to age (13–24 years old for peer-to-peer education and below 13 for child clubs) and are structured according to two levels: adviser, with 3–5 members, and executive, with 10–13 members.

Leadership of the clubs is decided on an annual basis through group elections and consensus from all executive committee members. Membership is inclusive and efforts

are made to reach out to marginalised groups, including sponsored children, children with disabilities, indigenous children, adolescents who dropped out of school, and adolescents struggling with drug addiction. Through NGO partners, child and youth clubs are trained on child rights-related topics, facilitation skills and how to identify and report child protection issues within their communities. Moreover, they are assisting in developing annual action plans based on their identified priorities, with violence against children and CEFM being the most represented themes.

The main activities of the child and youth clubs include holding peer-to-peer actions at schools and homes, holding community forums with adolescents and community leaders, and implementing community-awareness initiatives and child-led performances, including through Facebook. By implementing Plan International's Champions of Change modules, clubs have also been involved in creating peer champions to advocate for gender equality and prevention of early marriage.

Child and youth clubs operating at the grassroots level are required to work closely with other child and youth clubs, and are connected at the provincial and national levels with the Child Advocacy Network (CAN), a national network of child clubs established in 2003 now operating in 13 provinces and municipalities through coordination from the CRC Cambodia coalition. While member organisations provide ongoing technical assistance, CAN is able to make its own decisions and volunteer for participation. For example, the annual child-led Action Research is conducted through a participatory approach, with the specific topic/issues identified and data collected by CAN affiliated members. The research is used for evidence-based advocacy that children can pursue accordingly at the national level, and the research is also used in monitoring mechanisms such as child-led reports on child-rights implementation and Universal Period Review.

The network makes efforts to bring the concerns identified at the grassroots level to the national level through national forums and meetings with the Cambodia National Council for Children and the National Assembly. CAN has six functioning provincial networks with a clear structure and a range of child clubs, which are from different supporting NGOs, and are led by committees comprised of three to five members. Leadership is elected on an annual basis, and currently over half of the provincial networks have female leadership.

CAN, both at provincial and national levels, remains an informal network. This means it is not recognised by the Law on Association and NGOs, which does not explicitly provide for informal networks. However, child representatives can still operate by joining the NGO provincial networks and raising issues to influence provincial government decision-making. Yet, the representatives cannot mention their network's name in order to operate, and their name is not utilised by provincial authorities in responding to their concerns and questions. This is also reflected in the limited visibility of CAN on social media, with one Facebook page utilised to advertise activities at the national level only.³⁵

As a result, at the provincial level, CAN members can only conduct advocacy through the structure and name of their parent NGOs. Of concern are the limited capacities of the network of NGOs and their resources, including time resources, which are increasingly over-stretched to effectively support the structure.

However, at the national level, CAN enjoys a degree of recognition from the government and, while informal, is formally involved as a child participatory mechanism – through the NGO CRC Cambodia – in research and data collection to inform the preparation of the United Nations CRC alternative reporting.

Determining factors: enablers and barriers to CEFM-focused youth engagement and activism

Enablers

- Child and youth club activities are well-established at the grassroots level, which facilitates acceptance at the community level;
- Commitment of the Ministry of Women's Affairs in implementing the Provincial Action Plan on Ending Child Marriage and Teenage Pregnancy in Ratanakiri Province;
- Structured approach providing evidence-based advocacy by linking community, provincial and national levels;
- CRC Cambodia as the functional backbone of the CAN network; and
- CAN has collaborated with other national children- and youth-led networks, such as the Cambodia Children and Young People's Movement for Child Rights and Adolescent and Youth Reference group.

Barriers

- Lack of ownership of parent organisations for the child and youth club network activities and initiatives;
- Constrained advocacy activities at the provincial level and partly at the national level, as the Law on Association does not recognise the informal groups comprised of child and youth clubs; and
- Exclusive focus on ethnic minority communities preventing scaling up activities to majority areas.

Additional support needed

- Request donors' and United Nations agencies' assistance to include the description on the recognition of informal groups, and child and youth groups or networks, in the Law on Associations during their policy discussions with the government;
- Provide capacity-building opportunities on advocacy, leadership and negotiation skills;
- Provide technical skills on effective and meaningful child and youth participation in the clubs, and network with partners and CRC Cambodia and its members so that they can provide support to children and youth; and
- Promote CAN activities through the Plan International website and through other partner organisations' websites.

INDIA



- 27% of girls married before the age of 18, and 18% married before the age of 15.³⁶
- The minimum legal age of marriage is 18 years with no exceptions.³⁷
- The percentage of married adolescents varies widely from state to state, ranging from over 50% in Andhra Pradesh and Bihar, to 7% in Goa and Mizoram. Child marriage is also more frequent in rural areas (56%) than urban areas (29%).³⁸
- 30% of girls married under the age of 15 had experienced physical violence in the last year, while among those who married after the age of 18, the figure was 16.7%.³⁹

Background

Child marriage in India is driven by gender inequality and by a variety of economic, social, cultural and religious factors that intersect and have a cumulative effect. Key drivers include poverty (girls married off at a younger age because less dowry is expected for younger brides), betrothal (girls promised in marriage before they are born in order to 'secure' their future), level of education (girls' education is less of a priority than educating sons), household labour (girls married off at puberty when they are deemed most 'productive'), traditional customary laws (girls pressed to marry due to caste-based discrimination), gender norms (girls expected to be adaptable, docile, hardworking and talented wives), and fear of pre-marital sex (girls expected to marry to preserve their 'purity').⁴⁰

Since 2013, the Indian Government has been addressing CEFM through a National Action Plan to prevent child marriages by training law enforcement agents, changing mind-sets and social norms, empowering adolescents, providing quality education, and sharing knowledge. The plan is also supported by cash incentives, adolescents' empowerment programmes and awareness raising to encourage behaviour change related to child marriage. In 2017, Rajasthan launched a state Action Plan.⁴¹

However, implementation across all 29 states remains uneven, largely depending on inadequate budgets; the complex legal procedures required to give effect to social laws, policies, programmes and schemes; and difficult coordination. Moreover, a great share of the budget remains focused on awareness raising rather than system building, with limited attention paid to preventive planning for eliminating CEFM and for systematic reviews and evaluations.

A number of civil-society initiatives continue to address CEFM in a variety of aspects in all parts of the country. Indicatively, the Indian chapter of Girls Not Brides comprises 137 affiliated organisations, including international and local NGOs,

associations, foundations, charities, voluntary organisations, research centres, and a variety of other entities.⁴²

Youth participation and grassroots engagement also thrive, fostered by a legal framework upholding civil and political rights, promoted by a national youth policy, and supported by the long tradition of volunteerism, civic engagement and social movements in the country.

Key interventions framing youth engagement and activism

Plan India works across 15 states with a focus on adolescent and maternal health, child survival, WASH, quality education, youth employment, disaster-risk management and child protection. As part of Plan India's commitment to engage children and young people in programming, in every state where programmes are implemented, child and youth groups are formed, trained and empowered, and are then supported to undertake advocacy activities at the community level. Youth participation is fostered through routine meetings with Plan India's partner community-based organisations (CBOs) as well as through the active representation of youth in influencing initiatives at the village, block, district, state and national levels.

Presently, 623 child and youth groups exist in the villages and communities where programme strategies are implemented. However, the number increases as Plan India expands operations. Youth groups are comprised of an average of 15 members, both boys and girls, while in some cases, separate groups of adolescent boys and girls are formed.

Membership is open to all young people living in the villages and communities with no discrimination based on gender, religion and caste. However, practice shows that youth with disabilities rarely participate in the activities. Leadership is decided through annual elections and the elected positions of President, Secretary and Treasurer – either male or female – rotate periodically to provide opportunities for other members to lead the group.

The process of forming youth groups is particularly relevant for building young people's awareness and understanding of their protection environments. Through a participatory learning and research methodology centred on the right-based framework of the Child Rights Situational Analysis, young people are assisted in 'scanning' their environments to identify and prioritise protection concerns within their villages and communities.

Roles and mandates of duty bearers and relevant stakeholders, such as community-based child protection mechanisms (CBCPMs), are explained, which also helps young people gain an understanding of the potential risks and opportunities connected to their direct engagement. Importantly, young people are led to autonomously decide what protection issues they intend to focus on. CEFM is one of the most represented themes, together with child labour and education, which are also seen as key to preventing CEFM.

Identification of Issues

The issues and problems identified by the youth groups were varied at the project locations visited. In Uttarakhand, members focused on issues of disaster management, in Delhi it was a cleanliness drive to fight malaria and dengue, in Rajasthan it was child marriage, and in Bihar it was birth certificates.

Source: A Study on Existing Models of Plan India Programmes on Child Participation, 2013

The types and modalities of the initiatives undertaken are decided by the groups, and an annual action plan is set detailing strategies, roles and responsibilities. The plan is then evaluated during monthly meetings. Youth groups continue to receive training support from Plan India's CBO partners, ranging from skill-based training to subjects such as media, reporting, street plays and advocacy. Broader awareness-raising events are also organised on themes such as health, education, knowledge about government programmes and monitoring public services. CBO fieldworkers provide advice and support to the youth-led initiatives when needed, including through limited financial allocations.

In general, when initiatives focus on CEFM, the activities include advocacy, awareness raising and reporting/follow up through relevant institutions (including CBCPMs). Education is the main strategic area, given that the enrolment of girls who have dropped out of school is seen as key for preventing child marriage.

The types of initiatives encompass street plays, songs, peer-to-peer education, public protests, and dialogue with village representatives and local political leaders. There is little or no use of electronic communication in these initiatives, which are conducted through other media. For example, self-made newsletters are printed and disseminated in the local schools, featuring pieces from group members publicising initiatives and calling for mobilising the youth of the village.

How a youth club prevented CEFM

An example of how a youth club prevented CEFM revolves around a 15-year-old boy, who is a resident of village G. and president of one of the youth clubs. He was being forced to get married at the age of 15, with the pressure coming from his family members and relatives. The situation put him in a dilemma – should he obey his parents or follow his own choice?

He discussed this issue with his fellow group members in their school. They decided to discuss the matter in a group meeting to formulate a strategy to stop his marriage. The programme manager was also invited to the group meeting for guidance. The group members visited the boy's house to try to convince his parents, but their pleas received no attention. Therefore, the group decided to visit his house additional times to continue to try to convince his parents to change their attitude. They told the parents about the legal implications of child marriage and the negative impacts on children due to early marriage.

After a series of visits by group members, the parents of the boy understood the implications of early marriage and decided to get him married only when he attained the legal age of marriage. The effort was a lesson for all the villagers. The boy's story was discussed with other youth clubs and a district-level campaign was organised to protest against child marriage. Since the problem of child marriage is very prevalent in the area, the initiative taken by the children created a positive impact in many children's lives.

Source: A Study on Existing Models in Plan India Programmes on Child Participation, 2013

In 2017, youth groups participated in a campaign to end child marriage, organised and coordinated by Plan India in six states, which lasted from 10 to 40 days. The campaign included rallies, street plays, announcements through rickshaws, posters, opinion polls on social media, one-to-one contact sessions with vendors, puppet theatres, wall paintings, etc. Local media was also extensively used to promote the dialogue, and radio programmes aired discussions with religious leaders to take a pledge to not support nor participate in child marriage. Many of these activities saw the direct participation of youth groups, which, to different degrees, were exposed to nationwide advocacy and support within their communities through their own limited means and possibilities.

In recognition that the impact of youth-led initiatives remained confined to the community level, Plan India established the National Youth Advisory Panel (NYAP) in 2015. NYAP is comprised of 24 representatives (12 boys and 12 girls) elected from nine states where programmes are implemented.



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The engagement of the NYAP spans from supporting Plan India's internal decision-making processes to developing the skills and leadership of the affiliated youth groups and driving the collective agenda at the national level through conferences, dialogues and events on key issues. Continuous efforts are made to motivate youth groups at the state level and, from there, to connect to the NYAP.

Dialogue with State Ministers (Bihar)

“In Bihar, children and state-level YAP representatives organised a campaign on ending child marriage in Patna. During a key event, the youth disseminated a pictorial book they had developed highlighting the issue of child marriage. Children and youth along with members of the District Child Welfare Committee, Juvenile Justice Board and District Child Protection Unit pledged to end child marriage in their home state through a signature campaign. Hon’ble Ministers of the Government of Bihar, Youth Affairs and Culture, Mr Shivchandra Ram and Mr Alok Mehta, participated and lauded the efforts of Plan India YAP initiatives on ending child marriage in Bihar.”

Source: Plan India website <https://www.planindia.org/youth-advisory-panel>

Through the NYAP's engagement, an attempt is being made to bring advocacy on eliminating CEFM to the next level. For example, starting in 2016, NYAP has been engaged in the national Difficult Dialogues town hall conference series, where they perform a Theatre for Development play on child marriage and raise questions to the expert panel of policy makers, health professionals and corporate representatives.

Determining factors: Enablers and barriers to CEFM-focused youth engagement and activism

Enablers

- Feasible and realistic achievements at the village level due to the cumulative result of engaging all community stakeholders,
- CBO partners ensuring ongoing coaching and guidance for the youth groups,
- Linking youth groups to Panchayats and other systems as a sustainable exit strategy,
- Government commitment to eliminate CEFM through the National Action Plan,
- Constitutional guarantees for civil society/tradition of volunteerism and civic engagement, and
- Engagement of human-rights-based CSOs and social change movements.

Barriers

- Inherent limitations at the local level where youth groups only receive limited information through CBOs;
- Limited exposure of NYAP to social media;
- Lack of district-level strategies and action plans;
- A bureaucratic and political class disconnected from the needs of the citizens and vulnerable populations;
- The challenge of consistent and uniform enforcement of policies and legislation;
- Persisting gender norms and traditional customary laws that are difficult to change; and
- Limited interaction of parliamentarians on CEFM.

Additional support needed

- Provide youth groups with training on advocacy skills on engaging with the media,
- Lobby for the introduction of monitorable district-level action plans, and
- Conduct research on specific gaps observed in the implementation of the National Action Plan.

INDONESIA



- 14% of girls married before the age of 18, and 1% married before the age of 15.⁴³
- The minimum legal age to marry is 21 for both males and females. However, the permitted age is 16 for girls and 19 for boys with parental consent.⁴⁴
- 9 out of 10 child marriages involved children who did not have birth certificates. Birth registration is not consistent across the regions within the country.⁴⁵
- CEFM prevalence has declined, although national data do not cover customary child marriages that are often not registered. Progress is stagnating, especially in 20 provinces in western and eastern Indonesia that have a higher prevalence than the national average, due to the traditional and religious laws and customs prevailing over the applicable legislation.⁴⁶

Background

In Indonesia, CEFM is driven by gender inequality and by a combination of factors, including level of education, poverty, gender norms, views of family honour, and early and/or unwanted pregnancy.⁴⁷

Since 2002, Plan International Indonesia⁴⁸ has been working in partnership with the Government of Indonesia to develop a community-based child protection mechanism within the broader national child protection system. The village-level Kelompok Perlindungan Anak Desa (KPAD) is a community-driven and community-owned mechanism that is fully integrated in the life and governance of the villages. Members of KPADs include midwives, village representatives, teachers, religious and cultural leaders, as well as young people who are committed to protecting children from violence and abuses. The main functions of the KPAD include preventing and early-detection of violence against children, ensuring case referrals, and reporting and raising community awareness by integrating discussions on child protection in cultural and religious community dialogues.

To date, almost one thousand KPADs have been established in East and West Lombok and Central and West Java, where baseline research revealed high rates of early marriage and other harmful practices, such as female genital mutilation (FGM)/cutting and unintended pregnancies. In addition, thousands of stakeholders have been trained to contribute to KPAD functioning, particularly female and male adolescents, who work together through peer-to-peer education in order to raise awareness on preventing and responding to harmful practices and child rights violations.

The array of awareness raising activities conducted by young people within their communities is indicative of the level

and quality of their engagement. These activities include digital story-telling, short movies, video blogs, graffiti on village walls, 'youth-friendly local touristic sites', 'KPAD roads to schools', petitions, community dialogues (both face-to-face and through social media), adolescent business groups, and religious-based discussion forums.

As a result, KPADs have become the seedbed for youth activism for the elimination of CEFM in Indonesia, which is led by informal youth groups connected through local networks. Results are progressively emerging in the reduction of early marriage and other harmful practices, and KPADs prove to be instrumental for fostering youth participation in the decisions affecting their lives. As an example, in 2019 the first female KPAD leader was appointed in West Lombok.

“As a leader of the KPAD, I successfully advocated for increased funding out of the village budget to cover KPAD operational costs and ensure its functions included providing integrated adolescent health services and youth-friendly health services (e.g., providing information regarding SRHR, counselling and referral), as well as reserved seats to enable child and youth groups to participate in decision-making forums. Under my leadership, the KPAD in my village is presently advocating for child protection regulation at the village level, which also encourages the revision of Awig-awig, a cultural and community-based law that is stronger than formal law, to accommodate child protection aspects, including the prevention of CEFM.”

Female from West Lombok, 19 years old



Much of the credit for these initial results goes to the focus of the global sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) programme, the Yes I Do Alliance (YIDA), which, in Indonesia, has been implemented since 2016 through a partnership between Plan International Indonesia, Rutgers WPF and the Independent Youth Alliance (Aliansi Remaja Independen, ARI). ARI is a leading youth-led NGO specialising in advocacy, peer-training, research and campaigning, and is one of the partners of the Ministry of Health in the SRHR domain. Outside the framework of the YIDA programme, ARI works closely with CHOICE, which is Plan International's partner in the development of the Global Champions for Change module. In the YIDA programme, ARI conducts regular surveys to monitor and evaluate meaningful youth participation standards.⁴⁹

Key interventions framing youth engagement and activism

At the national level, youth activism for the elimination of CEFM is indirectly advanced through female-oriented advocacy, driven since 2014 by the Jakarta Feminist Discussion Group. Mainstream media are generally supportive and provide opportunities for publicising events (such as marches and demonstrations to celebrate International Women's Day) as well as for amplifying advocacy messages, including on ending CEFM. However, the growing activities of radicalised groups are increasingly restricting the operational space for advocacy on women and child rights, including CEFM. Examples include a radicalised movement that advocates for early marriage as a way to prevent pre-marital sex.

The most prominent youth network is currently the Youth Coalition for Girls (YCG), a self-initiated community-based youth network that is increasingly expanding its activities and is now in 11 provinces. The group started to form in 2016, when young activists involved by Yayasan Plan International Indonesia, in preparation of its Country Strategy, mobilised to advocate for girls' rights. Notably, some of ARI's former members are now active within the YCG network, which is indicative of the transfer of knowledge and shared participation among these groups. Since its start, the YCG has been progressively emerging as a leading advocate for CEFM elimination at the national and regional levels.

Regional Forum on Solutions to end CEFM

In March 2019, the YCG participated in the Regional Forum on Solutions to end CEFM, organised by the ASEAN Secretariat in Jakarta. In a powerful address to the audience, the YCG representative made a strong case for engaging boys and men in advocating for gender equality and CEFM elimination. "I am a young activist, and can boldly say that I am a feminist who has been actively advocating for the fulfilment of child rights in Indonesia", said the 22-year-old male youth. He went on to explain the reasons behind his decision to engage in advocacy. "Since I was a boy, I decided to take concrete action. I initiated three youth platforms through which I lead peer-to-peer dialogue with children and youth on violence against children, including sexual violence, and conduct child-led research on child marriage."

The young man explained that many interventions focusing on eliminating CEFM fail to engage boys and young men, which is critical for addressing gender inequality as a root cause of child marriage: "Men and boys are key actors for raising awareness on CEFM and challenging the patriarchal norms of Indonesia that see men as the ultimate decision-makers on whether or not to get married. Having boys and men with gender-sensitive behaviour helps in creating opportunities for promoting more equal relations with girls and preventing risky behaviours such as child pregnancy as well as gender-based violence."

The YCG representative concluded by calling on ASEAN leaders to invest in supporting platforms for involving and engaging more boys and men to advocate for gender equality.

The YCG has over 2,000 members, including both young women and men. Membership is open and inclusive, and efforts are made to reach out to youth with disabilities, those from disadvantaged areas and those who identify as LGBTIQ. However, engaging LGBTIQ youth in advocacy initiatives remains challenging due to the risks inherent in increasing discriminatory attitudes towards individuals and groups based on their sexual identity or gender expression.⁵⁰

The YCG is led by a young National Coordinator who is appointed on a rotational basis by a national committee of 13 young members (75 percent young women and 25 percent young men). The organisational structure at the central level includes three divisions: Research and Development, Communication, and Monitoring and Evaluation. Each division is comprised of five to six people.

The network organises, coordinates and publicises its advocacy work through social media, mostly Instagram, while public information recently started to be delivered through

the YCG's official Blog.⁵¹ However, initiatives at the local level are less documented than those organised at the national level due to the lack of a comprehensive communication strategy. Nonetheless, there are strong indications that YCG's popularity is expanding, including an increasing number of requests for affiliations. This is due both to the growing acceptance and support received at the community level and to the increasing visibility of the network at the national and regional levels.

For the YCG – as well as for other youth groups – the SDGs provide a key opportunity to scale up its advocacy potential. In Indonesia, this is underpinned by the Government's commitment to involve youth in the implementation of the SDGs (as stated in the 2017 SDGs' Voluntarily National Review⁵²). The YCG is seizing these opportunities to raise its profile and visibility, as evidenced by the increased affiliations to national networks to support the implementation of the SDGs, including KAMUS (Youth Coalition for SDGs), the 2030 Youth Force and the Jaringan AKSI (Adolescent Girls Network).

The partnership established with Yayasan Plan International Indonesia is also instrumental for the YCG's advocacy for CEFM elimination. Since 2016, the network supports nationwide advocacy of the activities conducted at the local level under the YIDA programme. Moreover, YCG participated in the "Girls Get Equal" global campaign and was a key partner for the design, organisation and implementation of the yearly "Girls Take Over" initiatives from 2016 to 2019, including by transferring knowledge on CEFM to the girls selected to take over the various institutions.

However, despite growing visibility and acceptance, the strategic planning of the network remains limited, with the first available work plan for the period 2018–2020 developed late in October 2018. Financial sustainability is also a major challenge, due to the fact that, as an informal network, YCG cannot officially register as an NGO and can only apply for funding as a partner of a registered organisation. This hinders the possibility of scaling up advocacy on CEFM while developing and structuring its organisational capacities.

Nonetheless, the YCG has a legitimate ambition to expand both its activities and membership base. This opportunity was recently provided by the partnership with Yayasan Plan Indonesia, which enabled the YCG to access project funding from the European Union. The project, covering the period 2018–2021, aims to build YCG's monitoring and reporting capacities with regard to the SDG National Action Plan (SDGs 5 and 16) and to contribute, together with other networks, to the Youth Alternative Report on SDGs 5 and 16. A long-term objective of the project includes advocating the Ministry of Planning to establish a youth engagement mechanism for the implementation and monitoring of the SDG National Action Plan.

As envisaged by the project, the YCG is set to expand the reach of youth and youth groups to 11 provinces, including Jakarta (where over 150 youth groups operate), Central Java, West Nusa Tenggara and East Nusa Tenggara. While ambitious, given the currently available capacities, the project represents a testing ground for the YCG's maturity for generating broader impact at the national level.

Determining factors: Enablers and barriers to CEFM-focused youth engagement and activism

Enablers

- The momentum created at the grassroots level for engaging youth and communities in the prevention, reduction and elimination of CEFM (KPADs as bed seeds for youth activism);
- A unique opportunity provided by a large programme such as YIDA, with a strong focus on meaningful youth participation, providing the YCG with policy and capacity-building support, as well as opportunities for engaging in CEFM-related initiatives;
- The inclusive approach to nationwide advocacy on CEFM elimination, with young women and girls, young men and boys, and persons with disabilities and other groups all involved;
- The use of social media and electronic communication as a means to mobilise public support and connect young people beyond the community level; and
- The SDG consultative and reporting mechanism as a driving factor for influencing the government and for augmenting YCG's organisational development and advocacy capacity.

Barriers

- Limited information of SRHR at the community level;
- Gender-based stereotypes and social norms pressing girls to marry young;
- Entrenched discrimination against LGBTIQ which also limits their engagement in advocacy activities;
- Limited investments made by YCG to strengthen the organisational capacity and enhance strategic planning, strategic communication and monitoring and reporting capacities;
- Limited financial sustainability of the YCG due to the informality of the network;
- Regulatory framework for civil society organisations requiring informal networks such as the YCG to register as NGOs in order to access funding;
- Limited coordinated action for civil society to effectively influence institutional decision-making; and
- Increasing radicalisation of the society.

Additional support needed

- Provide the YCG with capacity-building support, including training on public mobilisation, digital skills for online advocacy, fundraising, and monitoring and evaluation;
- Facilitate YCG to have increased access to mainstream media; and
- Increase YCG exposure to the regional dimension by facilitating the exchange of practices and joint advocacy with other similar platforms active in other countries in Asia.

LAOS



- 35% of girls married before the age of 18, and 9% married before the age of 15.⁵³
- For boys, the CEFM prevalence rate is over 10%.⁵⁴
- The minimum legal age to marry is 18 years old. However, individuals may marry at 15 years in special cases, with mutual consent from both sides.⁵⁵
- 50% of women with no education were married before the age of 18, compared to only 13% who completed upper secondary education.⁵⁶
- Child marriage is most prevalent in remote rural areas including the northern provinces of Bokeo and Oudomxay, where 46% of women aged 20-49 married before the age of 18.⁵⁷

Background

In Laos, CEFM is driven by gender inequality and by numerous other factors including poverty, level of education, pre-marital sex and adolescent pregnancy, and traditional customs and gender norms.

In 2014, the Government of Lao launched the National Plan of Action for the Prevention and Elimination of Violence against Women and Violence against Children (2014–2020), which includes broad and far reaching commitments that, due in part to the lack of comprehensive data, were difficult to operationalise. The country's first national Violence against Children Survey, conducted in 2014 by the Lao Statistics Bureau in cooperation with UNICEF, provided the necessary evidence to translate these commitments into action. As a result, in April 2018, a multi-sectoral response to the national Violence against Children Survey was launched⁵⁸ under the leadership of the National Commission for the Advancement of Women, Mothers and Children. This response included CEFM prevention and elimination within a set of priority actions tailored to eliminate violence against children.

Key interventions framing CEFM-focused youth engagement and activism

Working with young people as direct partners in Laos is constrained by the inherent sensitivities of working through highly controlled processes. Youth participation and youth mobilisation are mandated under the auspice of the Lao People's Revolutionary Youth Union (LYU). This organisation represents the youth wing of the country's ruling party. Alongside this is the Lao Youth Pioneers, comprised of children below the age of 14. The LYU core functions relate to educating the youth population in the principles and standards of the Party; disseminating national laws; building grassroots-level participation in support of the government and party;

and upholding Lao tradition and culture among the youth population. Similar to other mass organisations of the country, such as the Lao Women's Union (LWU), the LYU has strong vertical networks, with representatives in each village that are linked to the district, provincial and national levels. Through a workforce of almost 280,000 members, the LYU mobilises youth solidarity in implementing the goals of the ruling Party. It is involved in some vocational training and development activities, and operates youth centres and handicrafts marketing outlets. The LWU can count on over 800,000 affiliates with strong grassroots linkages and is involved in community-level socio-economic development work as an implementer of donor-funded projects.

In Laos, CSOs represent a variety of organisations, including CBOs and development associations that have grown exponentially since 2009 when they were allowed to officially register. While retaining close links with the government and mass organisations, CSOs are instrumental for linking communities, donors, the government and vital partners in any effort to increase the space for legitimate and active involvement of youth.⁵⁹

Engaging young people at the grassroots level requires the involvement of mass organisations and government bodies, such as the Village Education Development Committee (VEDC). VEDCs are bodies established by the Ministry of Education to support community-level education, chaired by the village head and including the school director, teachers and representatives of LWU, LYU and the Student Parent Committee. VEDCs' role and function provide an important entry point for increasing the quality of education and garnering community support for children's education.

Since 2016, Plan International Laos has begun to build a portfolio of projects focusing on adolescent girls. By 2018, this portfolio had formed the Adolescent Education and Skills

programme to complement other programmes focusing on pre-primary education and public health. The programme is a coalition of Plan, the government and CSOs, and focuses on adolescent girls,⁶⁰ including one project to support secondary education access and gender equality. Since 2018, there have been three more projects designed to specifically tackle the social and cultural causes of CEFM. The intervention area covers the two northern border provinces of Oudomxay and Bokeo, where several minority communities live in isolation, lack access to basic services and are vulnerable to human trafficking and other forms of exploitation. Among these communities, the percentage of CEFM is higher than the national average, with 46 percent of women aged 20–49 having been married before the age of 18.⁶¹

All four projects are being implemented in partnership with the Ministry of Education and Sports, and include the Ministry of Health; LYU; LWU; and CSOs working on gender empowerment (such as the Gender and Development Association and the Women Participating in Development Association), SRHR (such as the Promotion of Family Health Association, Lao PDR) and on rural development (such as the Community Association for Mobilizing Knowledge in Development). Moreover, selected youth-led social enterprises (including Stella, the Global Shapers, Fanglao Dance group and Khao Niew theatre group) also are involved using their creative and performing art platforms.

The common strategy of these projects is to address social, cultural and gender norms by engaging with youth, through student clubs focusing on life skills, leadership skills and reproductive health; with teachers, through training on comprehensive sexuality education and gender equality; and with parents and VEDC representatives to support girls' education, leadership and gender equality.

By forming student clubs, young people are given the space to explore their ideas and how they want to express themselves, and are able to increase their understanding of issues such as child rights and child protection, as well as comprehensive sexuality education (CSE). The student clubs also provide opportunities for youth to develop their ideas into school or community development activities. Student club members are encouraged to value education and are motivated to pursue their studies, which may have been prevented by early marriage.

As part of a peer-to-peer strategy, young people are brought together in sharing their voices as a means to explore their identities, talents and ideas, and to develop their messages to transfer them, with substantive knowledge and skills, to other groups. The interaction of the student club members with the adult cohort, in both structured and informal meetings, provides a chance for adults to listen to the voices of young people and reduce the sense of isolation that can develop from living in rural and remote areas.

The youth activities take place outside of school hours in child-friendly designated spaces within schools and through SRHR resources that are adapted to young people. Theatre, music, dance performances and story telling are geared to stimulate young people's interest and engagement, and demonstrate that there are many ways to communicate feelings, thoughts and ideas. These forms of expression are important and, under the programme, are intended to facilitate the means and methods through which young people may wish to engage with others, especially duty bearers, parents and peers.

In February 2019, the Adolescent Education and Skills programme conducted a workshop on story telling in two schools in Houayxai and Paktha Districts, in Bokeo Province. As a result, 16 young people (8 girls and 8 boys) improved their abilities in story telling and gained an understanding of gender equality and sexual and reproductive health.

Source: Plan Laos project documentation

In Laos, peer-to-peer education is a viable strategy for engaging young people on issues such as HIV/AIDS prevention, combatting human trafficking, combatting GBV, and children's rights. There is a considerable body of literature demonstrating how young people learn relevant issues through youth and child friendly means, how to develop messages, and how to transfer skills and knowledge to younger people.⁶²

Within the broader SRHR domain, a key example includes the Nang Noi – Girls' Group programme, sponsored by UNFPA, which has been piloted since 2017 through Village Focus International in 10 villages. Under the programme, 20 mentors (girls aged 15–19) were trained to provide life skills to vulnerable girls while informing them about the consequences of CEFM and pregnancy.

“In the past years, UNFPA along with other partners (including Plan International Laos) have been working hard to promote Noi so that adolescent girls become the centre of our dialogues. It is because we truly believe that investing in Noi will accelerate poverty reduction, reduce socio-economic disparities and promote gender equality. Once we provide all adolescent girls with opportunities to learn, they will start blossoming and achievement of the national and global development agenda will be within our reach.”

“Currently, adolescents and young people are often left out of dialogue about them and their voices are often not heard. To change this, there is a need for an enabling policy environment where adolescents and young people are given specific attention and where national development takes their particular needs into account.”

Frederika Meijer, UNFPA Lao PDR Representative⁶³

A shared feature of the various peer-to-peer programmes is that youth groups are formed on a project basis and work on priorities set by donors and development agencies. The groups are informal and lack an organisational structure. There are no strategic discussions or planning, and communication is limited to face-to-face interactions with no use of digital communication.

Determining factors: Enablers and barriers to CEFM-focused youth engagement and activism

Enablers

- Engagement of all stakeholders in the communities and mobilise community-internal resources;
- Created opportunities for youth to engage in dialogue with their peers and other stakeholders in their communities;
- Use of youth-friendly tools, creativity and arts;
- Child-centred physical spaces designed and allocated for youth activities;
- Innovate partnerships with youth-led CSOs and service providers;
- A peer-to-peer model adopted with development partners in different sectors;
- Investment in the education sector with government funding; and
- Priority given to CEFM elimination through the United Nations country programme.

Barriers

- Limited access of minority communities to opportunities, and quality and culturally-sensitive services;
- Isolation of communities and limited access to means of communication; and
- Lack of an enabling legal and policy environment, and limited operational space for independent civil society work.

Additional support needed

- Partner with the private sector to bring innovative practices and resources, and
- Document good practices and provide the National Commission for the Advancement of Women, Mothers and Children with tools and methodologies for expanding the intervention to other areas.



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NEPAL



- 37% of girls marry before the age of 18, and 10% marry by the age of 15.⁶⁴
- The minimum legal age to marry is 20.⁶⁵
- 27% of the girls in urban areas and 43% of the girls in rural areas marry before the age of 18 years.⁶⁶
- Child marriage rates are higher among the illiterate, Madhesi, Janajati and Dalit.⁶⁷

Background

In Nepal, CEFM is driven by gender inequality and by a combination of other factors including poverty (the payment of dowry by a bride's family, while illegal, is widespread, particularly in the Terai region); family-induced practices (most child marriages are arranged by family members); traditional customs, stigma and access to information (social stigma linked to love affairs, shame surrounding pre-marital sex and limited information on SRHR prompt girls and boys to marry early); and self-initiated marriages/early voluntary unions (girls marrying spouses of their own choosing to escape abusive circumstances and discriminatory behaviours). CEFM is exacerbated by the humanitarian context (families marrying girls as a 'safety measure').

Eliminating CEFM is a top priority for the Government of Nepal, and, over the last five years, the commitment has been reiterated at national, regional and international levels, including at the South Asia Initiative to End Violence against Children (SAIEVAC). To translate this commitment, the Government of Nepal developed a multi-sectoral national strategy to address child marriage. The strategy, led by the Ministry of Women, Children and Senior Citizens, envisions change based on:

- Empowering girls (including through economic empowerment),
- Providing quality education for girls,
- Engaging men and boys,
- Mobilising families and communities,
- Strengthening and providing services, and
- Implementing laws and policies.

These strategic directions acknowledge the complex nature of CEFM in Nepal and the need to engage frequently overlooked stakeholders, including boys and men, as well as married adolescent girls. However, despite the strategy being launched in April 2014, the adoption of the National Action Plan was delayed until 2017⁶⁸ due to the earthquake that devastated the country in 2015.

The entry into force of the 2015 Nepal Federal Constitution is a main factor to consider when it comes to the opportunities for youth groups to contribute to CEFM elimination.

- The Constitution upholds international human rights standards, including on civil and political rights, and prohibits discrimination. Moreover, the new Civil and Criminal Code rules out discrimination based on harmful traditional practices and CEFM.
- The new bottom-up decentralised system requires inclusive and participatory planning processes at the local government level.

Altogether, these two factors create opportunities both in terms of youth empowerment and for impact on the elimination of CEFM. However, to date, the implementation is fraught with challenges, due to the fact that it is based on the previous mechanisms, the re-design of constituencies (from Village Development Committees to Municipalities and Rural Municipalities), and insufficient budget allocations.

Key interventions framing youth engagement and activism

Plan International Nepal's Country Strategy 2018–2022 provides for the initiative Reaching 1 Million Girls through 'learn, lead, decide and thrive' programmes to eliminate child, early and forced marriage. This is a robust gender transformative approach and has a strong emphasis on inclusion for children with disabilities and other marginalised groups including Dalits. CEFM elimination is an overarching goal and all programme objectives aim to contribute to it.

The key focus is on strengthening the national child protection system by targeting communities and their members (children, parents, teachers, child-protection committees, religious leaders, political leaders and law enforcement). The approach aims work toward declaring villages and districts 'CEF-free zones' by assisting local authorities and stakeholders to develop strategies and costed plans to end

CEFM. The child and youth clubs are a central platform of the approach, with a child-rights mandate and a commitment to creating momentum across all Plan working districts.

Over the last five years, youth groups were formed through projects such as the *Child Marriage Reduction Project (CMRP)*, *Say 'No' to Child Marriage!*, *Girls Advocacy Alliance*, *Girls Protect*, and *Preventing Child Marriage in Nepal*, implemented by Plan International Nepal and local NGO partners. In addition, female adolescent groups were formed by adolescents after they had participated in various programmes. These groups have a broader focus on empowerment, for example, the *Better Life Option Programme*, child rights orientations and the *Campaign of Change*. Similarly, youth groups have been formed as a progression of the child clubs with the aim of social and economic empowerment.

These child and youth groups are supported for building their capacities in gender empowerment, child rights, CEFM elimination, leadership, advocacy, proposal writing, and developing action plans and implementation of those action plans. Plan International Nepal also initiated preparing a child-led alternative report on the CRC and two child representatives attended the United Nations pre-session. Similarly, a girls-led alternative report on United Nations CEDAW was prepared in collaboration with the consortium of organisations working for child participation.

To date, child and youth clubs supported by Plan International Nepal include 146 child clubs and 121 youth clubs that are active, comprised of 20-25 members each, with both girls and boys aged 10-18 for child clubs and 16-24 for youth clubs. Leadership and executive members are decided through elections or selection during general assemblies. Efforts were made to ensure a proper balance in the composition of the groups, including members from minority populations and vulnerable communities. However, there was limited success in the inclusion of adolescents with disabilities.

Generally, groups were formed after an orientation on child rights, which covered the importance of groups and organisations among children. Adolescents are guided in identifying child-protection challenges and issues within their communities, with CEFM as the predominant concern. In this phase, through the use of child-centred participatory tools, such as Plan's *Sticks and Stones* and *Bamboo Shoots*, group members are supported in the development of goals and objectives, and in the preparation of annual action plans. These are reviewed during meetings/discussions held on a monthly or bi-monthly basis, while activities are implemented

outside of school hours. Some groups are formed by youth after participating in programmes as a result of increased sensitisation and motivation.

Youth groups are also supported in implementing their action plans through specific training events, such as sessions on leadership skills, project proposal writing, advocacy and CEFM-related substantive knowledge. The activities to be undertaken are decided by the youth groups and largely aim at preventing CEFM by raising awareness among community members. The use of social media is generally limited due to irregular access to electricity and Internet in remote areas.

Examples of types of activities include street drama, orientations, rallies, speech contests, 'miking' (providing microphones to speak out in gatherings), drawing competitions, door-to-door visits, 'wall newspapers', and interventions at local radio stations. Plan is also collaborating with youth clubs based in cities to build capacities and facilitate children and youth clubs in working areas.

L. was 16 when her parents told her they had found a boy who would be good for her to marry. Shocked to hear this news, she immediately told her friends at Plan International's children's' club. "If I had been married so young, it would have been like a suicide. I might get pregnant and giving birth wouldn't be easy. It's a risk for my physical health and wouldn't be good for my mental health either. I will have to obey my in-laws and my fate would depend on them. I would feel like my life is dark and lonely." The club facilitators put L. in touch with the NGO FOHRE, one of Plan International's partners in Nepal, which helped her to persuade her parents to prevent child marriage just before it was due to take place. "We have to empower girls," says L. "If more girls are aware of their rights, their situation will improve." (Plan International website: <https://plan-international.org>)

Child and youth groups are also engaged in initiatives to stop or delay CEFM by taking commitments from families to end arranged marriages and by referring cases to child-protection committees and local police officers.



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“We are very serious about child marriage now. We are ready to work with child clubs and NGOs to prevent it.”

Madhav Pokhrel, Inspector District Police Office, Banke (Child Marriage Reduction Project report)

The phasing-out strategy for youth groups is currently being given due consideration. The bottom-up approach and inclusive planning required by the decentralisation process provide good opportunities to link the groups to village/district level governance structure. However, this also requires additional capacity-building efforts and advocacy skills which would enable youth groups to consolidate their advocacy and influence local development processes, for example, by ensuring that adequate budgets are provided for eliminating CEFM. Facilitating connections with networks operating at the national level seems more complicated due to financial implications, extensive travel and limited means of communication available.

The turnover within the youth groups is a challenge due to graduation of members at the age of 25, and the high mobility and time required for formal education. As a result, new members need to be selected and re-oriented as a continuous process.

Determining factors: Enablers and barriers to CEFM-focused youth engagement and activism

Enablers

- Community acceptance and limited risks for youth engagement,
- Village/district levels within reach of youth groups,
- CEFM elimination as a key government priority and priority of children themselves, and
- At least four to five child advocates available in each working area.

Barriers

- High membership turnover within the groups;
- Lengthy decentralisation processes and unpreparedness of local governments to take on responsibilities;
- Budget considerations, time-consuming travel and poor communication limiting potential for advocacy at the national level; and
- Non-institutionalised child and youth participation at all levels of government.

Additional support needed

- Provide training on budget planning/monitoring, advocacy skills, reporting methodologies and engaging in local government planning processes (e.g. in relation to the National Action Plan implementation), as well as on risk assessment and mitigation measures for development and implementation;
- Facilitate regular exchanges among existing youth groups, including those created by INGOs to build alliances at the district levels; and
- Identify a joint phasing-out strategy with other INGO partners and local government.

THE PHILIPPINES



- 15% of girls married before the age of 18, and 2% married before the age of 15.⁶⁹
- The minimum legal age to marry is 18. However, under the Muslim Law on Personal Status, girls are eligible to marry as soon as they reach puberty and with permission of the court.⁷⁰
- Women in ARMM, MIMAROPA and SOCCSKSARGEN marry earlier than those in other regions.⁷¹
- 18% of women have experienced physical and sexual abuse by their spouses, and one in five women over the age of 15 had experienced some form of physical violence.⁷²

Background

In the Philippines, CEFM is driven by gender inequality and by other factors, including poverty, conflict and insecurity, as well as vulnerability to the impact of natural disasters. Additional drivers for CEFM include human trafficking, social norms, religious beliefs and limited access to SRHR and ASRH services.⁷³ Furthermore, there is very limited information available on CEFM.

In the Philippines, despite the commitment to international human-rights standards, and the endorsement of the ASEAN Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women and Violence against Children (2013), there are no specific laws prohibiting CEFM, and efforts to prevent and eradicate CEFM are largely driven by INGOs and United Nation agencies.

The Philippines is predominantly Roman Catholic and does not allow divorce, although applicable legislation provides for legal separation, annulment and marriage 'voids', including in cases of forced marriage. There are ongoing initiatives to advance the legalisation of divorce but the issue is highly contentious.⁷⁴ Moreover, the Catholic religion largely influences government policies with regard to contraception, including limiting access to SRHR information.

The minimum age of marriage for certain religious and ethnic communities contributes to CEFM. The Muslim minority (and other ethnic and cultural communities) are allowed to enter into marriages without official approval, provided they are solemnised in accordance with their own customs, rites or practices. The Muslim Law on Personal Status, based on Shari'ah law, allows marriage at the age of 15 years for males and at age 15, or at the onset of puberty, for females. Muslims are able to divorce, with this process being more challenging for women than for men.

The mail-order bride system, whereby a woman lists herself in a catalogue and is selected by a man for marriage, places women and girls at risk of being subjected to forced marriages.⁷⁵ Despite the enactment of the 1990 Mail-Order Bride Law (which includes criminal penalties), the system continues to thrive as poverty in the Philippines worsens.

Human trafficking is a serious problem in the Philippines, with some victims forced into marriage. The trafficking of women and girls from rural regions of Visayas and Mindanao to urban areas such as Cebu City, Manila and Quezon City is frequent. Trafficking also occurs in tourist destinations, including Boracay, Angeles City and Surigao, where there is a high demand for commercial sex involving women and girls. In addition, some girls are forced into marriage.

It is uncertain whether women and girls facing forced marriage would be able to access adequate protection in the Philippines. While there are laws protecting women and children from abuse, rates of violence against women and girls remains high, largely due to the "entrenched patriarchal attitudes and imbalanced power relationships within the family."⁷⁶

Women may have difficulty accessing legal protection through local authorities or the judicial system, particularly in rural areas. Rape is also a serious problem in the Philippines, and may be under-reported due to cultural barriers, fear of social stigma and retaliation, and a lack of confidence in the judicial system. Marrying a victim to the perpetrator will waive any criminal penalty imposed for the offense, which can also put rape victims at risk of forced marriage.⁷⁷

In 2016, the CEDAW Committee urged the government to eliminate the root causes of child and forced marriage, including poverty, conflict and insecurity, as well as vulnerability to the impact of natural disasters.⁷⁸



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The civil-society sector in the Philippines thrives and the country has the largest number of NGOs per capita in Asia.⁷⁹ The right to freedom of association, assembly and expression are constitutionally guaranteed and many believe that if civil society has contributed to democratisation anywhere, it is in the Philippines. It is organised in multiple forms (including people’s organisations, religious groups, development NGOs, cooperatives, etc.) and is often informal and not registered.

Many Philippine CSOs operate according to volunteerism and secure funding through membership dues, donations, subsidies and revenues from income-generating activities. However, it has been noted that many of them are dependent on external funding and are affected by lack of staff for sustaining the organisation beyond the founding group and weak internal governance.⁸⁰ Civil society has become a much more influential actor in development, demanding greater accountability and transparency as well as engagement on key issues such as human rights, good governance and climate change at the national, regional, and global levels.

The legal framework in the Philippines upholds the right of children to participate in community decision-making. For example, the 1996 Local Government Code envisages the creation of the Youth Council and Youth Federation mandated to initiate programmes and projects “for the physical, social, cultural, spiritual and political development of the children and the youth in their communities (Barangays)”.⁸¹

The Barangay Council for the Protection of Children (BCPC)⁸² and the Council for the Welfare of Children both involve child and youth representation in their boards. Likewise, since 1995, a Children Sector exists within the Social Reform Council, which enables young persons to exercise their right to participate in the design of public policies. Through representation and participation in policy making, children and youth are playing an increasingly influential role in development. Part of the credit goes to child-rights organisations, including Plan International, which build capacities through training in leadership and value formation, life goals and skills, advocacy, and media work. As a result, children and youth continue to serve as a pressure group, such as asserting their rights in the passing of legislative bills, and are increasingly engaged in networking and coalition building.

Key interventions framing youth engagement and activism

Plan International Philippines’ country programme focuses on child protection, youth economic empowerment, disaster-risk management, nutrition and responsive care. Projects are implemented through a vast project area including Masbate; North, West and East Samar; Western Mindoro; Metro Manila; and Central Mindanao.

With regard to CEFM elimination, while providing an important contribution to research through the ongoing analysis on CEFM in emergency settings, Plan International Philippines mainstreams youth participation throughout project activities and supports, in a variety of ways, youth-led initiatives that focus on SRHR, ASRH and GBV. In a country where there is no law prohibiting CEFM, advocacy can only be conducted through issues that indirectly contribute to preventing and reducing CEFM. However, there are indications that the number of youth-led initiatives is growing due to the increased availability of grants for projects involving adolescents and youth aiming at advancing the rights of children and equality for girls.

Out of the organisations and initiatives surveyed for this comparative analysis, no youth initiative directly related to CEFM elimination is supported by the Plan Philippines country office. However, 60 youth-led groups/initiatives have broad mandates and objectives with potential for CEFM-related activism. Their advocacy is based on awareness raising and public education to improve access to SRHR services for both girls and boys. However, there is little information on their contributions and, what is generally available on their websites, provides limited evidence of the scope and results of their engagement. All groups are active in online networking activities, mostly through social media; Facebook in particular. However, there is limited information on the groups’ internal governance and organisational structures, as out of the 60 youth-led initiatives, only 6 are legally registered. Membership of these groups is arguably inclusive, due to the themes for engagement, and are comprised of young people, regardless of their sexual orientation and gender identity, and include youth from minority and indigenous communities.

Out of the 60 initiatives with a broader and indirect focus on CEFM, the majority (49 groups) focus on SRHR with fewer focusing on ASRH (8 groups) and GBV (3 groups). Almost all are conducted at the sub-national level and have been functioning on an ad hoc and project basis. In many cases, youth groups were included in the implementation of global campaign initiatives, such as #GirlsGetEqual and #GirlsTakeOver for which groups were supported by Plan International Philippines through training and logistical assistance enabling them to replicate activities at the sub-national level with some degree of success. For example, in Mangyan in the indigenous communities in Western Mindoro, the #GirlsTakeOver initiative resulted in the passage of a local resolution calling to end arranged and early marriages. However, the results remain largely undocumented.

An interesting initiative to influence and advocate for ASRH, was led by the Young Hearts⁸³ in Masbate through a school-based campaign to prevent teenage pregnancy that was organised in partnership with the District School Heads.

As part of the “Not for Sale Campaign”,⁸⁴ the UNICEF-affiliated Cyber Safe Spaces Support Groups lobbied parliamentarians on the need to prevent child sexual exploitation and abuse as a way to avoid teenage pregnancy. The Cyber Safe Spaces Youth Support Group is currently engaged in awareness raising activities on online sexual abuse and exploitation.⁸⁵

The more structured groups represent local chapters of United Nations-driven global platforms. For example, the local branch of the 2030 Youth Force was formed in 2017 through UNDP support as part of the global campaign to mobilise young ‘advocates’ to support the SDG process. The organisational structure is well defined, with a seven-member council selecting 17 SDG Ambassadors and 17 Regional Representatives, and membership, currently 3,000 members, is expanding due to ongoing outreach. However, to date, with the exception of online presentations and appeals focusing on promoting Youth Force,⁸⁶ no involvement concerning SDG 5 has been registered.

Y-PEER Pilipinas is part of the global Youth Peer Education Network, a youth-to-youth initiative pioneered by UNFPA to support activism around adolescent sexual and reproductive health. The network was launched in 2010, with 17 youth organisations as its charter members representing the youth-sectors and regions of the Philippines. Members of Y-PEER Pilipinas include young people, active peer educators, trainers and youth advocates for adolescent sexual and reproductive health.



Determining factors: Enablers and barriers to CEFM-focused youth engagement and activism

Enablers

- Increased support to youth engagement through grants and opportunities for engaging with SDG participatory mechanisms, and
- Use of digital means of communication and social media.

Barriers

- Limited commitment from the government to address the root causes of CEFM;
- Prevailing social norms and persistence of discriminatory practices violating women rights, including GBV and human trafficking;
- Lack of specific legislation prohibiting CEFM; and
- Public policies limiting access to SRHR.

Additional support needed

- Provide continuous guidance and interaction with youth-led initiatives to sustain interest and commitment, including technical assistance and logistical support;
- Facilitate contacts of youth groups with United Nations bodies, INGOs and global platforms on CEFM;
- Finance public education on gender equality;
- Research and document activities implemented at the sub-national level;
- Undertake comprehensive situational analysis on CEFM in the country; and
- Develop a more appropriate strategy, either directly addressing CEFM or working on other issues that indirectly contribute to addressing CEFM, and a risk assessment on CEFM programming and influencing.

THAILAND



- 23% of girls married before the age of 18, and 4% married before the age of 15.⁸⁷
- The minimum legal age to marry is 20 years. However, individuals are able to marry at the age of 17 or before with the permission of a court.⁸⁸
- 30% of women in Thailand's poorest households were married before 18, compared to 10% from the richest households.⁸⁹
- The percentage of girls aged 15 to 19 who are currently married is higher in the north and northeast of Thailand than in the rest of the country.

Background

In Thailand, CEFM is driven by gender inequality and by numerous other factors, including adolescent pregnancy, poverty, level of education, traditional customs and practices, and ethnicity.⁹⁰

In recent years, Thailand made efforts to reduce the prevalence of CEFM, including by increasing the minimum age of marriage, expanding education and economic opportunities for girls and young women, and raising parents' awareness and knowledge of the harmful effects of CEFM. These developments have contributed to improving health and decreasing infant mortality rates through the reduction of early pregnancies.

However, CEFM and adolescent pregnancy rates remain high among indigenous and minority communities. In particular, the Malay Muslim women living in the south of Thailand, who are governed by customary practices and Islamic Family law, and the Hmong women, who live on the Thai-Myanmar border in the north of Thailand. Hmong communities live in poverty, lack access to basic services and rely on subsistence agriculture to meet their food consumption and livelihood needs. Moreover, many Hmong are stateless and lack security of tenure.

Recent research conducted by Plan International Thailand identifies a combination of gender norms and deeply rooted cultural beliefs and practices as key determinants of CEFM and adolescent pregnancy among minority communities, together with socio-cultural factors such as lack of knowledge and access to SRHR, drug abuse, and language and cultural barriers in schools. The impact of CEFM and adolescent pregnancy on ethnic minority girls further deepens the entrenched gender-based discrimination and social exclusion, and leads to other risks including dropping out of school, unsafe abortions and gender-based violence.⁹¹

Since 1981, Plan International Thailand has been working with these communities to strengthen the participation and leadership capacity of girls and women so they can make informed decisions about their lives and help stateless girls exercise their rights and access services.

Key interventions framing youth engagement and activism

Since 2018, Plan International Thailand has been working on decreasing CEFM and adolescent pregnancy in ten minority villages in the northern province of Chiang Mai. The strategic focus has been on empowering young people to become agents of change in their communities through a gender-transformative approach. For this purpose, 10 groups of young persons and parents have been formed, and 10 more envisaged to be established in the next year. Specific objectives include shifting attitudes and behaviours of peers and parents by providing access to SRHR services and contraceptive devices, as well as by increasing economic opportunities, including through training on project management and access to limited financial support from Plan International Thailand.

To date, these youth groups have been led by committees comprised of an average of 10 members, including 4–5 young people and 4–5 adults/parents. Membership in the groups is rapidly expanding to other young people who are attracted by the opportunities made available by the project remit. While membership is open and inclusive, it specifically targets stateless youth. Efforts to involve boys and young men prove to be challenging due to the influence of gender norms. Participation of youth with disabilities is also limited.

All 10 youth groups are led by females, who are appointed, together with secretaries and treasurers, through elections held every two years. The youth groups receive ongoing capacity building assistance through coaching and training

on topics such as SRHR, violence against children, CEFM, adolescent pregnancy, gender equality, facilitation skills and the functioning of a revolving fund.

The objectives and types of activities to be undertaken by each youth group were identified after their formation. However, the planning process is still at the initial stage. The selected awareness-raising activities consist essentially of peer-to-peer discussions and the organisation of a campaign titled “Under 18: too early and too young to be a bride and a mother”. The development of the joint revolving fund to stimulate savings is also at a very initial stage. Action plans are currently being developed and reviewed during monthly meetings in which the preparation of project proposals is also discussed.

The youth groups are set to work closely with sub-district administrative offices, sub-district health promotion hospitals, municipalities and with the National Human Rights Commission to advocate for the elimination of CEFM. However, the possibility of working with CBCPMs on CEFM has not yet been addressed, although these mechanisms exist in 9 out of 10 villages in the area.

As part of the longer-term goals, the youth groups are set to be connected to other youth networks and to the Children and Youth Council at the sub-district level. The creation of an online counselling centre is also being considered to promote peer-to-peer support on the available SRHR services. However, this is still under consideration due to the youth safeguarding policy concerning the administration of the possible centre.

The views of children and young people on CEFM are set to be incorporated in the child-led alternative report. The preparation and submission of this report is linked to the precise timing of the UPR for Thailand.

As the project started recently, only one advocacy initiative has been undertaken: the Voice of Children forum. This activity ensured children’s and young people’s meaningful participation in sharing ideas and solutions to end CEFM and adolescent pregnancy. It resulted in the submission of recommendations to the institutions operating at district, sub-district and municipality levels.

The ‘Voice of Children’ forum provided the following recommendations to the local government:

- Allocate budget for training on SRHR and on the impacts of CEFM and adolescent pregnancy,
- Promote vocational activities for children and their families,
- Promote the importance of education and foster action to encourage children and young people to stay in the education system, and
- Promote extracurricular activities and make better use of free time, including through sports and vocational activities.

Due to their recent formation, youth groups have yet to draw the attention of media, influencers and decision-makers. While developing progressively, capacities are minimal, especially at policy levels. Moreover, it is already becoming evident that gaining acceptance and support from parents and communities for ending CEFM is challenging mainly because it is not seen as a priority and the impact on individuals and the community is not well understood. One constraint is the belief that children are parents’ property, and a way of showing gratitude to parents is to get married, which is seen as a private/domestic matter.

Determining factors: Enablers and barriers to CEFM-focused youth engagement and activism

Enablers

- Community acceptance;
- Regular participation of young persons, including boys and young men, in activities organised by the youth groups;
- Development of clear working relations developed with CBCPMs;
- Utilisation of social media to mobilise youth and create a joint identity;
- Identification and mobilisation of local champions and role models who promote gender equitable practices; and
- Engagement of traditional and religious leaders on the importance of tackling harmful norms and practices contributing to CEFM.

Barriers

- Prevailing practices and traditions in the communities, based on stereotyped gender norms;
- The belief that children are parents’ property and marrying is a way to express gratitude to the parents;
- Limited and unequal access to quality services such as health and education, including in minority languages;
- Lack of awareness on the importance of education and lack of financial resources to help girls who have dropped out to return to the education system;
- Limited availability and accessibility of SRHR services; and
- Poverty and limited opportunities for economic empowerment.

Additional support needed

- Develop innovative means to involve youth in activities and to involve more boys and young men,
- Provide support to income-generating activities while making efforts to expand market opportunities, and
- Provide support to the development of a communication and advocacy strategy on CEFM elimination.

TIMOR-LESTE



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Background

In Timor-Leste, CEFM is driven by gender inequality and by a combination of other factors including adolescent pregnancy (given conservative attitudes towards teenage sex, many girls are encouraged to ‘fix’ pregnancy through marriage before neighbours find out), traditional customs (such as arranged marriages), family honour (some girls are forced into marriages by their parents when the time comes to ‘formalise’ their relationships with boyfriends), escaping harm (some girls choose to get married to escape abusive situations at home or to improve life prospects), poverty (in many cases, mothers force daughters to marry off to meet financial obligations/release the economic burden), and level of education (girls leaving school early are considered ‘eligible’ to marry)⁹⁶.

Timor-Leste remains the poorest country in the Asian region and is highly dependent on donor finance, technical assistance and external policy advice. According to the 2017 Human Development Report, the country ranks 132nd out of 189 countries globally.⁹⁷ Statistics show that 30 percent of people aged 15–24 are illiterate, children are expected to stay in school only until age 13 and 70 percent of job seekers are aged 15–29.⁹⁸ The rapid growth of the population, the majority of which live in rural areas, places the government under pressure for engaging and supporting almost 1 million young people with low literacy and employment rates.

Timor-Leste’s legal framework upholds human and women’s rights and largely complies with international standards. However, various operational, procedural and institutional weaknesses remain. The Timorese constitution provides strong guarantees for gender equality, including a reserved quota system for representation in both parliament and village council levels. However, the meaningful participation of women in society is largely prevented and compromised by the high rate of domestic violence. Despite a 2010 law that penalises abuse against women, GBV remains a serious concern due to gaps in investigations, prosecutions and

- 19% of girls married before the age of 18, and 3% married before the age of 15.⁹²
- The minimum legal age of marriage is 17 years. However, it is possible to marry at 16 years old with parental consent.⁹³
- 24% of women have a child by the time they turn 20. The unmet needs for family planning among 15 to 19-year-old youth is 27%.⁹⁴
- With a median age of 18.9 years, Timor-Leste is the second youngest nation in the Asia-Pacific region. Youth below the age of 35 accounts for 74% of the total population.⁹⁵

convictions. Moreover, despite a referral and protection system being in place – led by the Ministry of Social Solidarity and Inclusion – not all victims of domestic violence are assisted, sometimes due to delays in transferring funds for NGOs and service providers.⁹⁹

The participation of women is also constrained by discriminatory customary practices, including the inheritance system and the payment of a bride price as part of marriage agreements. These practices, while penalised by the formal legal system, remain key in preventing factors for women’s empowerment. In a context where families and communities add considerable pressure on young women to bear children,¹⁰⁰ women, particularly girls, lack decision-making on their sexual reproductive health and rights.

The normative and policy framework in Timor-Leste ensures a safe and free operating environment for the civil-society sector. Government policies explicitly recognise the role of civil society in strengthening the country’s democratisation. This is translated in the inclusion of CSOs in consultative processes and in the variety of partnerships at policy and operational levels. Consequently, the number of CSOs is very high: data from 2014 show that over 600 CSOs operated in the country, about half of which were local NGOs, one-third CBOs and the rest INGOs.¹⁰¹ However, Timorese CSOs are fragmented, lack capacities and are largely donor-driven and donor-dependent.¹⁰² A key reason is that most of the funding for CSOs has been short term and project based. It has focused on poverty reduction, development and policy impact to the detriment of the capacity development of local organisations.

Key interventions framing CEFM-focused youth engagement and activism

In 2007, a National Youth Policy was approved by the Council of Ministers, with the intention of accelerating youth participation and improving the overall wellbeing of Timorese young people. The policy is administered by the National Youth Council (CNJTL). In 2009, a Timor-Leste Youth

Parliament (TLYP) was established by UNICEF and the Secretary of State of Youth and Sports, to provide a forum for young people to raise concerns and become part of the nation-building process.

The TLYP is set to serve as the main platform for adolescents and youth to learn about and practice democratic values and leadership skills. It is comprised of young parliamentarians aged between 12 and 17 years old who represent their local areas for a period of two years. There are 132 youth representatives in the TLYP, two per sub-district. Candidates are identified through a community selection process operated throughout the sub-districts. TLYP aims to assist young parliamentarians in identifying and addressing the challenges of Timorese society. The young parliamentarians receive training from UNICEF on topics such as children's right to education, protection and health, and receive briefings from local government officials on specific local issues. The creation of such a space for raising awareness and the education of youngsters is integrated in the vision of development and capacity building of young Timorese people that is promoted by the government.

Plan International has been working in Timor-Leste since 2001, with a multi-pronged focus on:

- Water and sanitation,
- Child protection,
- Education,
- Women and girls' participation,
- Disaster risk management, and
- Youth economic empowerment.

CEFM elimination is largely addressed through the combined efforts and resources of these programmes.

Forming youth groups has been a key feature of the country strategy. For example, since 2013, the Women and Girls' Participation in Local Governance programme has encouraged active participation and representation in villages and hamlets within the Aileu District. Women were encouraged and supported to form women's associations, join and participate in village councils, and self-nominate as candidates in village council elections.

Youth groups were also established through the Child Protection programme. For example, in 2014, 12 community-level youth clubs were formed, comprised of 25 members each (both sexes) which included youth with disabilities and from ethnic minorities. Each youth club was structured with three mandatory positions (President, Vice President and Secretary), trained on child protection and advocacy, and connected to the work of CBCPMs. Moreover, youth clubs were instructed to conduct peer-to-peer activities in schools and communities, and were provided with opportunities to promote child-rights through local radio and TV stations. In addition, they were engaged in the preparation of the National Action Plan for Children and in drafting the child-led alternative report under the UN CRC. Presently, these youth clubs are members of the Child Rights Coalition.

The Child Rights Coalition was established in 2013, co-supported by Plan International Timor-Leste and Save the Children. The Coalition supported the development of the child protection law and organised the consultations for the preparation of the alternative report under the UN CRC. However, after four years, the Coalition was discontinued due to lack of financial support. In 2018, Plan International Timor-Leste re-activated the Coalition together with other child rights organisations, including 10 local NGOs. Currently, the Child Rights Coalition has developed an advocacy strategy that focuses on eliminating CEFM, promoting SRHR and preventing violence against children.

Youth groups were also formed under the Youth Economic Empowerment programme and are structured as youth-led CBOs, each with 10-15 members of both sexes, aged 15–24 years. While not formally registered, these groups enjoy a degree of recognition from the community and local government. Their engagement covers a broad range of issues, primarily focusing on SRHR, GBV, education and CEFM. Key activities include:

- Monitoring activities in schools, including the implementation of the SRHR curriculum and the re-admission policy of girls who dropped out of school due to pregnancy.
- Providing peer-to-peer education on SRHR in rural areas and outreach to young married women.
- Researching and collecting data, including surveying nine communities to understand the impacts of early pregnancy and CEFM. The data collection informed the research supported by Plan International Timor-Leste and UNFPA on *Decision-Making Pathways of Young Women in the Municipalities of Covalima, Aileu and Dili*.
- Organising public debates at the community level on SRHR and CEFM.
- Organising debates in secondary schools on education and SRHR in connection with the organisation of international days on women, youth, etc.
- Training of boys and young men from eight secondary schools on leadership skills to promote role models for combating GBV.

An example of the engagement of these groups is seen in the mobilisation that followed the proposal made in July 2017 by the then Ministry of Health to introduce a new family planning policy. The proposal, largely inspired by Timorese Catholic beliefs, promoted the Billings Method over more modern forms of contraception, with access to contraception itself granted only to women who were already married. The concern was that the proposed policy excluded young and unmarried women, and would not only deny women and girls their right to make decisions about their sexual life, but would perpetuate the practice of child marriage and seriously endanger girls' health. While the policy remained only a proposal and was eventually withdrawn, youth groups and activists demonstrated their ability to mobilise and influence public discussion by launching appeals and collecting support through online petitions.¹⁰³



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Statement: Women and girls of Aileu on the draft family planning policy

On 10 August 2017, women and girls of Aileu municipality made an official statement regarding the draft family planning policy presented by the Ministry of Health in July.

We, the women and girls from Aileu municipality, have been made aware of and are very concerned about the implications of the draft family planning policy proposed by the Ministry of Health of Timor-Leste last month.

This draft policy is discriminatory against young and unmarried people, as it denies them access to contraception. The draft policy is also denying women and girls their right to use the contraception method of their choice, by promoting the Billings Method as the leading form of contraception.

All women and girls, regardless of their age or civil status, must have access to family planning in Timor-Leste, including to the contraception method of their choice. Denying or limiting women's and girls' sexual and reproductive rights has devastating consequences for their lives, and repercussions for their families and communities.

The draft Family Planning Policy that the Ministry of Health recently presented will violate our constitution, national laws and policies and international agreements that Timor-Leste has agreed to follow.

We, the women and girls of Aileu municipality, therefore recommend to the government:

- To conduct further and broader consultations on this matter with all stakeholders in order to understand the needs of the population, especially women and girls in rural areas.
- To use the results of those consultations to deeply revise the policy currently proposed, so that it includes all individuals, including adolescents, young people, and unmarried people, and promotes access to all modern ways of contraception.
- To work in close collaboration with civil society and women's organisations like FADA, who know the reality of women and girls in rural areas and understand their needs, when drafting the revised policy.
- To change the title of the policy to "Integrated Reproductive Health Policy", so it reflects the inclusion of young and unmarried people, not only families.

Source: Plan India website <https://www.planindia.org/youth-advisory-panel>

In August 2018, Plan International Timor-Leste launched the Girls' Alliance Initiative, with the purpose of building a collective voice for girls to advocate for social change. The Girls' Alliance is set to provide youth organisations with a platform for engaging on girls' rights and empowering girls to become agents of change. The platform is active at both local and national levels and is led by a group of 22 young people (15 females and 7 males). It is comprised of members who are already engaged with Plan International Timor-Leste's existing programmes (youth-led CBOs, youth clubs and the Young Women Citizen Committee) as well as members who are active in other organisations, such as the Youth Parliament and the Timor-Leste Youth for Peace.¹⁰⁴

The activities implemented to date include:

- Promoting the Girls and Technology project, which focuses on delivering quality information about SHRH to young people by means of a mobile application: E-Reproductive Health. In this application, girls and young women are able to browse through the information or to directly ask questions to moderators.
- Leading and organising a conference, entitled "My Right to Decide: Securing My Future through Reproductive Health Education", focusing on early pregnancy and early marriage. The conference brought together government representatives, religious leaders, women activists and members of the National Youth Council. Members of the Girls' Alliance prepared the conference and led the event, including an action plan for the period 2019–2022.

The Young Women Citizen Committee was established in December 2018 through the Girls and Women Participation programme. To date, the Committee has met members of the Parliamentary Committee on Gender and Inclusion, Health and Education, and contributed to the "My Right to Decide" conference.

The groups hold regular monthly meetings to discuss and review their activities, and although they are not structured and registered as NGOs, they have internal rules and procedures regulating their work. Group leadership is dominated by female activists, with limited inclusion of male members. Moreover, despite outreach efforts to youth with disabilities and marginalised youth, these categories remain under-represented. As for many of the CSOs in Timor-Leste, these groups remain donor dependent and lack sustainable fundraising strategies.



Determining factors: Enablers and barriers to CEFM-focused youth engagement and activism

Enablers

- Supportive normative framework for civil-society engagement,
- Government openness to civil-society contributions,
- SRHR identified as a key area of intervention,
- Evidence-based information on the root causes of CEFM, and
- Coordinating abilities of advocacy groups.

Barriers

- Traditional social norms and discriminatory practices prevailing at the community level,
- Limited awareness and engagement of girls in rural areas,
- Lack of access to SRHR information and contraception,
- Widespread GBV and a culture of violence,
- Religious values informing institutional policies,
- Limited implementation and enforcement of applicable legislation, and
- Limited engagement of boys and young men in CEFM-related activism.

Additional support needed

- Increase capacities of youth groups to work at the community level,
- Address funding gaps and facilitate linkages between community and national levels,
- Facilitate inclusion of boys and young men in the activities of the youth groups, and
- Facilitate representation of disadvantaged young persons in youth groups.

VIETNAM



- 11% of girls married before the age of 18, and 1% married before the age of 15.¹⁰⁵
- The minimum legal age to marry is 18 for women and 20 for men.¹⁰⁶
- 33% of women with no education were married before the age of 18, compared to only 1% who had completed tertiary education: being enrolled in school can decrease the likelihood of a young girl from a poor, rural or ethnic minority area getting married by 47%.¹⁰⁷
- The incidence of CEFM is comparatively higher among ethnic minority communities: 19% of women aged 20–49 were married before the age of 18 in the Northern Highlands, and 16% in the Central Highlands.¹⁰⁸

Background

In Vietnam, CEFM is driven by gender inequality and a combination of factors including level of education, prevalence of traditional customary law at the community level (which allows young girls to marry with the consent of parents), pre-marital sex (fear of remaining pregnant outside of wedlock while transgressing social norms), poverty (poorer families tend to marry off their daughters as an economic survival strategy), and customs and practices among minority communities (CEFMs resulting from traditional kidnapping of girls).¹⁰⁹

Recent anthropological research¹¹⁰ points at the introduction of modern cultural ideas and technologies as the actual catalyst behind child marriage behaviours in ethnic groups. These factors include access to modern means of communication, such as the Internet and social media; investment in infrastructure, particularly transport; the opportunity to go to boarding schools; the increase in number of private vehicles; the popularity of television; and the simplification of traditional marital rituals, which have lowered the financial pressures of marriage. The study concludes that in a context of poverty and limited choices, the increase in the rate of child marriage is a consequential reaction of ethnic communities' loss of livelihood security and a response to the risks of social life in the modern era.

In Vietnam, government efforts to eliminate CEFM are connected to the reform of the child protection system brought forward by the 2016 Children Law. While defining children as individuals below 16 years old (which is contrary to the CRC definition), the law prohibits marriages below the age of 20 years for males and 18 years for females. Moreover, it defines children involved in child marriage and under-age couples as children with special protection needs, who are therefore entitled to receive social/welfare assistance. The law entered into force in 2017 and was accompanied by supporting action programmes, legal

guidance and the National Action Program for the period 2016–2020, along with a mass public information campaign warning that CEFM is illegal.

The government has been concentrating exclusively on ethnic minority communities, despite evidence that CEFM also occurs in majority-populated areas, such as the Mekong River Delta.¹¹¹ As a result, there is limited information on the prevalence of CEFM in all areas of the country, and on other forms and types of CEFM, such as 'marriages by choice' and 'love marriages' (early voluntary unions), which are increasingly frequent, as anecdotal evidence confirms.¹¹²

In 2015, the Prime Minister of Vietnam approved the Reduction of Early and Inter-Family Marriage in Ethnic Minorities in the Period 2015–2025 programme, implemented through the Committee of Ethnic Minority Affairs within the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs. In the 2018 Voluntary National Review concerning SDG 5, Vietnam reported on progress made in reducing the rate of CEFM in ethnic minority areas.¹¹³

Key interventions framing youth engagement and activism

At Plan International Vietnam, the projects addressing CEFM are associated with the Child Protection thematic area and are implemented in 63 communes across five provinces, home to various ethnic groups (including Hmong, Dao, Tay, Nung, Thai, Van Kieu and Pako). Child and youth participation are integrated in all programmes implemented by Plan International Vietnam and local NGO partners. While several child groups were formed and are actively engaged in peer-to-peer and other activities, including with CBCPMs, the focus on economic empowerment as a way to prevent and redress CEFM is more recent. Only one initiative is being piloted within the framework of the Youth Economic Empowerment programme and is meant to provide a model for possible replication in other communes.

As a first step, in 2017, an NGO partner reached out to young people in 18 communes to invite them to take part in the initiative. However, due to low response, youth groups could only be formed in 6 communes. To date, 6 youth groups are active and total 48 members. Membership is skewed towards young men, with 23 males and 15 females. Youth with disabilities were not included, despite efforts to reach out and involve them. Group leaders were selected by group members through voting, based on clear and detailed procedures. A Facebook page has been created with members from different provinces. The group is used for sharing information, updating reports and online coaching from the NGO partner.

In the orientation phase, the NGO partner led discussions guiding youth through issues such as the scope of self-organised volunteerism, economic empowerment, leadership skills, identifying solutions, public speaking and CEFM-related topics. The youth groups engage in two types of activities:

- Awareness raising activities, targeting parents and guardians, based on discussions on the importance of education, missed opportunities due to CEFM, and the possibility of regaining opportunities in life by re-starting education. These discussions are meant to convince parents to change their views and decision-making on whether to approve early marriages.
- Peer-to-peer education, targeting young, unmarried adolescents who dropped out of school. These discussions are meant to lead the peers to identify their own solutions for economic empowerment and include issues such as job placement and income generating opportunities. As such, married adolescents of both sexes are not included in the target group.

Depending on the identified solutions, the local NGO partner provides further training, including on entrepreneurship, farming skills and techniques for growing specific crops, and negotiation skills to run their businesses and connect with local producers. These training activities are demand-driven and training may cover additional topics, e.g. taking pictures to showcase farming products and being able to access markets beyond the community.

To facilitate advocacy and the opportunity to speak up, Plan International Vietnam and the partner NGO are in the process of organising dialogues and events that involve enterprises and policy makers at the national level. For example, the NGO partner is currently facilitating participation in the dialogue “Start-up of Ethnic Minority Youth: Chance and Choice” under the I Believe I Can event for ethnic minority groups planned in Hanoi in June 2019.¹¹⁴



Determining factors: Enablers and barriers to CEFM-focused youth engagement and activism

Enablers

- Immediate and visible opportunities for engaging adolescents who have dropped out of school;
- Community acceptance;
- Integration with other programmes in the project area which, in closed communities, multiplies results and has a cumulative effect;
- Opportunities for closed communities to open up to the national level; and
- Government commitment to addressing CEFM within the strengthening of child protection system.

Barriers

- Narrow focus on ethnic-minority communities,
- Potentially limited economic impact of activities depending on broader conditions and opportunities, and
- Limited possibility for scaling-up promising models to majority-population areas.

Additional support needed

- Include married girls in the target groups for youth economic empowerment;
- Ensure more inclusive membership of youth groups;
- Following positive evaluation of the pilot initiative, consider replication of the model to other communes/provinces; and
- Increase research.

4. OVERVIEW OF FINDINGS



While organising findings, an attempt has been made to highlight the level of youth engagement, taking into consideration the specific contextual limitations. The classifications provided by the *Time to Act!* report¹¹⁵ are useful, as they are based on identified types of CEFM-related programmes that support youth involvement. These are divided in two broad areas:

- Informing or assigning roles to girls and young people, and
- Supporting and partnering with youth-led organisations and networks to design their own solutions.¹¹⁶

Within these two categories, findings are organised by the focus of this comparative analysis and related mapping as follows:

- i. Number and structure of youth-led or youth-involved initiatives, and
- ii. Key activities and thematic areas of the youth groups.

INFORMING OR ASSIGNING ROLES TO YOUNG PEOPLE

Within this first cluster, young people are engaged as peer educators and as young outreach activists within the broader framework of Plan International's programmes. This cluster comprises the vast majority of CEFM-related interventions involving young people. In some cases, the same youth groups, alongside other youth groups, are linked with the sub-national or national levels.

Programmes operating at the grassroots level with peer educators and young outreach activists

Numbers and structures of youth groups

In all surveyed countries, youth groups have been formed largely as a part of child protection programme frameworks, including on a project basis and through the sponsorship-supported activities. This distinction adds complexity to an assessment of the precise number of currently operational groups, as a number of projects have ended. The latest figures and the current status of youth groups have been provided in each country profile.

In terms of composition, the youth groups are comprised of an average of 10 to 20 members and generally include both girls and boys. In **India**, however, separate groups of girls and boys also exist in parallel. In some cases, depending on the prevailing conditions in the different contexts, the group composition is skewed towards girls (e.g. in **Thailand** and **Timor-Leste**) or boys (e.g. **Vietnam**). In all the surveyed countries, membership of the youth groups is open and inclusive, and efforts are made to reach out to disadvantaged youth, such as marginalised communities (for example, Dalits in **India** and **Nepal**, and stateless youth in **Thailand**), youth who have dropped out of school (**Cambodia**, **Thailand** and **Vietnam**), and young people experiencing challenges with substance abuse (e.g. **Cambodia**). However, youth with disabilities are largely under-represented in these groups due to contextual factors, including access-related issues. Programmes focusing on ethnic minority populated areas (e.g. **Cambodia**, **Laos**, **Thailand** and **Vietnam**) only include youth from ethnic minority communities.

In **Cambodia, India, Nepal, Thailand, Timor-Leste** and **Vietnam**, child/youth/student clubs are structured according to democratic principles that include holding elections to nominate group leaders and other mandatory positions, such as secretary and treasurer, and holding regular assemblies. Leadership is generally renewed or confirmed on an annual basis. The student clubs formed on a project basis in **Laos** include young people who are grouped based on the classes they attend in school.

The objectives and the types of activities to be undertaken by each youth group are identified throughout the process of group formation. For those led by Plan International and/or its implementing NGO partners, youth groups are trained during the orientation phase by means of child situation analyses and participatory tools and methodologies such as *Bamboo Shoots* and *Sticks and Stones*. Through focus group discussions, adult facilitators guide young people to understand the protection environment within their communities and are encouraged to identify challenges and solutions inherent to child protection issues, including CEFM.

Keeping in mind that themes addressed during the discussions are largely introduced by adult facilitators, a distinction can be made on the perceived level of autonomy afforded to the youth groups in deciding the issues to focus on through their involvement.

In **Cambodia, India, Nepal** and **Timor-Leste**, the youth groups identified CEFM alongside other priority areas for engagement (for example, violence against children in **Cambodia**, child labour in **India**, etc.). In other countries, the agenda is predominantly shaped by the thematic focus chosen by the adult facilitators and concentrates on the local drivers for CEFM and on prevention-related aspects, such as sexual reproductive health (**Laos**), adolescent pregnancies (**Thailand**), and unemployment (**Vietnam**) – all relevant for the complexities surrounding CEFM. The Wedding Busters project implemented in **Bangladesh** (2012–2014) provides a unique example of youth groups being formed, trained and empowered to directly address CEFM in their communities based on a project strategy.

The types and modalities of the initiatives are incorporated in annual action plans that define roles and responsibilities, which are periodically revisited and assessed during the regular meetings. Examples include **Cambodia, India, Nepal** and **Thailand**. Throughout the implementation, youth groups are also supported by the fieldworkers of NGO partners, which continue to provide training opportunities (ranging from skill-based training to subjects such as reporting on CEFM cases and advocacy skills) and coaching.

Key activities and thematic areas of the youth groups

Preventing CEFM by raising the awareness of peers, parents, schools and communities is the main strategic approach chosen and utilised by these youth groups. Moreover, youth groups are also involved in implementing Plan International's global campaigns and events (e.g. Girls Get Equal and the annual Girls Take Over) and some have been engaged in implementing the Champions of Change methodology. Peer-to-peer education is the most prevalent activity and is implemented at the household, school and community levels. The topics broadly cover child rights and specific drivers triggering CEFM. In **Cambodia, India, Laos, Thailand,**

Timor-Leste and **Vietnam**, peer-to-peer discussions generally focus on education and are geared towards motivating peers to pursue their studies, which would be otherwise prevented by CEFM. In **Laos, Thailand** and **Timor-Leste**, activities also focus on SRHR and GBV. **Timor-Leste** is unique for targeting married adolescents who are not necessarily targeted in other countries.

The direct engagement with duty bearers (representatives of carers and authorities at different levels including policy- and decision-makers) is neither frequent nor uniform. Dialogue with parents and guardians to convince them to stop CEFM and to re-enrol their children in school is specific for **India, Nepal** and **Vietnam**. In **India** and **Nepal**, youth groups also engage in reporting, referrals and follow-up on individual cases through the CBCPMs, local police officers and village representatives. Similarly, in **Bangladesh**, within the framework of the Wedding Busters project, youth groups were proactively stopping identified cases of early marriages. In **Timor-Leste**, youth groups monitor the re-admission of girls who drop out of school (including married girls) and engage in conversations with school boards.

Public advocacy at the community level is a prevalent activity in **India** and **Nepal**. Campaign activities include street plays, songs, public protests, rallies, speech contests, “miking” (providing microphones to speak out in public gatherings), door-to-door visits, drawing competitions, ‘wall newspapers’ and newsletters distributed in schools, and involvement in local radio programmes.

The use of social media is limited to a few Facebook groups that were created in **Cambodia** and **Vietnam**. In the communities in **India, Laos, Nepal** and **Timor-Leste**, poverty and/or the limited access to electricity restrict communication to face-to-face interactions with no digital opportunities.

Programmes connecting grassroots-level youth groups with sub-national and/or national networks and initiatives

In some of the surveyed countries, as part of Plan International's programme strategies, youth groups formed and operating at the grassroots level are directly connected to higher-level networks in an effort to reach out to decision-makers at the national level. Regardless of the levels of integration and the different degree of achievements, the established links provide opportunities for youth groups to be exposed to nationwide mobilisation, and for the national networks to ground their strategies with evidence-based inputs. In the majority of cases, the nationwide networks are created and/or supported by coalitions of child rights NGOs, which involve youth groups in research and data-collection for the preparation of youth-led reporting under international conventions and treaties.

For example, in **Cambodia**, youth groups are invited to work closely with other youth clubs and are mutually connected at the provincial and national levels with the Child Advocacy Network, an alliance of youth clubs operational since 2006 and supported by the NGO CRC Cambodia. Likewise, in **India**, efforts are made to connect the youth groups to the National Youth Advisory Panel, which was formed by Plan International in 2013 and is comprised of 24 representatives elected from across nine states where youth groups are

operational. In **Timor-Leste**, the Girls' Alliance was recently formed for the purpose of connecting youth groups from the grassroots level to the national level where the Alliance also includes members of the institutional Youth Parliament.

Child- and youth-led alternative reporting to the United Nations CRC is centred on the activities of the youth groups formed by Plan International at the community level and provide an entry point for advocacy on the CEFM elimination. However, the relationships are not systematic and are driven by the deadlines of the reporting cycles. For example, in **Bangladesh**, youth groups were formed under the "Helping Children Growing as Active Citizens" project to support research and data collection within the framework of the National Children's Task Force and the child-led reporting to the United Nations CRC, organised by the Child Parliament. Likewise, in **Cambodia, Nepal and Timor-Leste**, youth groups have been involved in research and data collection for the preparation of child-led reporting to United Nations CRC (and CEDAW in **Nepal**) within the framework of child-rights coalitions formed by INGOs, including Plan International. This is possibly the highest level of advocacy for CEFM elimination provided to youth groups.

SUPPORTING YOUTH-LED ORGANISATIONS AND NETWORKS TO DESIGN THEIR OWN SOLUTIONS AND PARTNER WITH SELF-INITIATED GROUPS TO IMPLEMENT ORGANIC SOLUTIONS

In some of the surveyed countries, global funders and funding mechanisms are directly supporting locally led and youth-driven groups. This second broad category began more recently and includes young change-makers, youth-led organisations and networks that are supported in the implementation of their own strategies. In spite of the limited number of examples within the programmes of the surveyed countries, supporting these youth-led groups and their independent initiatives brings in a new perspective on youth participation, away from organisational programmatic priorities linked to preventing and reducing CEFM. This includes forming child/youth/student clubs on a project basis. The new perspective acknowledges young people's own priorities and provides tools, skills, knowledge and information to empower them to take action on issues that are affecting their lives directly.



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Numbers and structures

One shared characteristic of these groups is their semi-informal or informal organisational structure. They are self-initiated and not structured nor registered as NGOs, which may create challenges for accessing funds. In **Indonesia**, groups frequently overcome this by affiliating with other NGO/CSO registered groups to participate in calls for proposals for funding.

The composition of these groups is largely based on the expressed interests of their members in pursuing issue-based advocacy and on adherence to key principles. Membership is open and inclusive, and efforts are made to encourage the participation of under-represented and excluded groups.

The ability to synergise with other like-minded organisations in national and global advocacy networks is another shared characteristic that enables the youth groups to expand by forming issue-oriented thematic alliances. A key feature is the use of digital communication to organise campaigns and advocacy events. In some countries, social media and blogs are widely utilised to promote and showcase their work.

Monitoring and reporting on the SDGs provide an example of recent engagement (Girls Advocacy Alliance in Bangladesh, and the Youth Coalition for Girls in Indonesia) and offers an opportunity for visibility and for scaling up their CEFM-focused advocacy potential.

Key activities and thematic areas of the youth groups

In **Bangladesh**, since 2015, Plan International has been supporting the advocacy activities of young change-makers, which includes, from 2015 to 2018, training seven young panellists from the global Youth for Change on gender equality. Under their own initiative, the group conducted CEFM-related advocacy initiatives, in particular against the proposed draft Marriage Restraint Act. For example, they drafted a set of recommendations and disseminated them through press conferences, online activities and high-level meetings. Similarly, since 2016, change-makers of the global Girls Advocacy Alliance project have been advocating for comprehensive legislation to combat sexual harassment. In this case too, the draft Marriage Restraint Act provided an opportunity for advocacy. The group also decided to conduct awareness-raising initiatives to sensitise informal match-makers on the penalties envisaged by the law.

In **Indonesia**, since 2016, the YCG has been a key partner for Yayasan Plan International Indonesia. Through the partnership, the self-initiated youth network supports nationwide advocacy with activities implemented at the community level under the Yes I Do project. Moreover, the YCG was a key partner for the design, organisation and implementation of the yearly Girls Take Over initiatives from 2016 to 2019, which included transferring knowledge on CEFM to the girls selected to take over the various public functions, positions and institutions. Yayasan Plan International Indonesia helped raise YCG's advocacy to the regional level by supporting the participation of two YCG representatives in the high-level Regional Forum on Eliminating Child, Early and Forced Marriage, organised by the ASEAN Secretariat in Jakarta in March 2019.

Similarly, in **the Philippines**, Plan International is partnering with youth groups engaged in awareness raising and public education on improving access to SRHR services for both girls and boys, and on Online Sexual Abuse and Exploitation. For example, Y-Peer PILIPINAS is part of the global Youth Peer Education Network, the youth-to-youth initiative pioneered by UNFPA to support activism around adolescent sexual and reproductive health. However, the relationships with these youth-led groups are in the development phase, which means that the engagement is not yet fully documented. Nonetheless, some of these groups are already engaged in advocacy and lobbying activities with the national parliament, for example on advancing a law prohibiting CEFM.

In addition, the partnership established by Plan International in **Laos** with youth-led social enterprises (such as Stella and the Global Shapers) may be considered within this group. While not directly engaged in CEFM or on broader human rights issues, these organisations, which are implementing partners in three recent projects, are working towards empowering youth by providing them with access to digital resources and transferring knowledge through creative and innovative means.

FINDINGS ON KEY ENABLERS AND BARRIERS

Drawing conclusions on the enablers and barriers to youth engagement in CEFM elimination is inherently a speculative exercise due to the many variables in the 10 surveyed countries. These variables include the existing spaces for youth advocacy, the available opportunities for youth to engage, the extent of CEFM and the variety of drivers. What works as an enabler in one context may well represent a barrier in another.

At the community level

Community acceptance is a key pre-condition for enabling youth groups to pursue their CEFM-related activities

The village environment is where actual and potential victims of CEFM live and where face-to-face interactions shape power relations among CEFM-related actors. At this level, with adequate support, achievements are feasible and realistic, particularly when youth groups manage to involve the entire community and mobilise internal resources in a united endeavour eliminate CEFM. The experience of **Nepal** (and previously in **Bangladesh**), where entire communities accepted declaring their villages “CEFM-free zones” is indicative of the importance of working with all community members. Similar conclusions apply to **Bangladesh, India and Laos**, where youth groups engage in dialogue with their female and male peers and with all other stakeholders within their communities. In **all surveyed countries**, despite outreach efforts, youth with disabilities are not included in project activities. In **Vietnam**, married women are also not included.

The community is the level where social norms pose strongest barriers for youth involvement in CEFM elimination

Particularly in closed communities, where traditional discriminatory practices are overtly defended as a way to preserve collective identity, social norms pose key barriers for youth engagement, which subsequently runs the risk of being de-legitimised. The difficulty experienced in **Thailand** in involving young men in CEFM elimination-related projects is a reminder of the pervasive domination of gender norms at the community level. This is particularly true when specific groups are not being targeted, such as married girls in **Vietnam**, which may reinforce – as opposed to decrease – the legitimacy of youth-led engagement in CEFM elimination. Moreover, when community pressure on women to marry early is strong, especially if compounded by lack of access to SRHR information and services, as in **Indonesia** and **Timor-Leste**, the engagement of youth groups working on CEFM elimination may be prevented from addressing root causes including lack of women’s decision-making on their own sexuality.

The engagement of youth groups in preventing and reporting CEFM cases is facilitated by the existence of functioning CBCPMs

When community-based arrangements for monitoring and responding to child protection concerns are effective, the support provided by youth groups is genuinely recognised by CBCPMs as a distinct contribution to the implementation of their mandate. As the experience in **Indonesia** demonstrates, youth groups’ activities (community awareness, community education and case reporting, and referral and follow-up) make a significant difference both to the prevention and protection functions of KPADs (CBCPMs). Additional research is needed to establish a better understanding of the relationships between youth groups and CBCPMs. For example, in **Cambodia**, CBCPMs are not fully connected with the nationwide child protection system; while in **Thailand**, the possibility of linking youth groups’ activities on CEFM cases with CBCPMs is not yet fully explored, although these mechanisms exist in 9 out of 10 villages in the project area.

The community environment may limit the operational space for youth groups to engage in CEFM elimination

The awareness-raising and peer-education activities of youth groups engaged in CEFM elimination are implemented largely outside of school hours and when schools are closed for holidays. This limits their engagement and the possibility to reach out to vulnerable groups, such as youth with disabilities. Moreover, the activities of youth groups are generally confined to designated areas in the community that are not always youth friendly and within reach.

At the district/sub-national level

The district level may work both as an enabler as well as a barrier for youth engagement in CEFM elimination

While the district level provides the ideal administrative coverage and sectoral integration for reducing CEFM, especially in the case of large programmes (e.g. in **Bangladesh**), this level is also where coordination aspects become relevant for youth groups to synergise and network for advocacy purposes. However, prevailing non-conducive contextual conditions, including distance and difficult communication, differences between rural and urban settings, or lack of district level strategies (as in **India** and **Nepal**) can limit this possibility. Overall, the use of digital communication and of social media facilitates advocacy (with **Indonesia** as the main example).

Different religious systems and customary practices at the sub-national level represent barriers for youth engagement in CEFM elimination

At the sub-national level in the surveyed countries, the engagement of youth in CEFM elimination is effectively prevented by the predominance of Shari’ah law, which in some areas is enforced as a separate legal system (in **Indonesia** and parts of the **Philippines**). In other areas, it is prevalent among community practices (as in **Bangladesh**, **India** and **Thailand**). In some countries, the concentration of ethnic minority groups at the sub-national level (e.g. in **Cambodia**, **Laos**, **Thailand** and **Vietnam**), also limits the possibilities for youth groups to achieve specific CEFM-related outcomes.

At the national level

Government strategies to eliminate CEFM facilitate CEFM-related youth activism

Where national action plans exist, youth engagement in CEFM elimination is commonly enabled by the provisions made in these documents concerning the involvement of young people at the national level. Out of all surveyed countries, **Bangladesh**, **India** and **Nepal** adopted specific national action plans to eliminate CEFM that are supported by a range of stakeholders. In other countries (such as **Laos** and **Vietnam**), CEFM elimination is a part of institutional strategies but is not elaborated in an action plan. An exception is **Cambodia**, where the only CEFM Action Plan is a provincial one that is specifically focussed on ethnic minority communities.

Normative and policy frameworks creating an enabling environment for civil society are conducive to youth activism in CEFM elimination

Where the legal frameworks promote civil rights, such as freedom of association, and facilitate NGO activities, including facilitating NGO registration, youth activism generates youth-led initiatives to eliminate CEFM. In **India, Indonesia, Nepal, the Philippines** and **Timor-Leste**, particularly in connection with feminist movements, youth groups are engaged in advocacy activities encompassing both the national and grassroots levels. Moreover, youth groups tend to associate within networks and to join forces for mobilising all sectors of society in eliminating CEFM. In **Cambodia** and **Indonesia**, the informal nature of the youth networks is not recognised by their respective normative frameworks on civil society organisations, which do not provide for registration of informal networks and, therefore, limit the access to funding opportunities. On the other hand, institutional youth policies based on mass government-controlled movements (as in **Laos** and **Vietnam**) while facilitating youth involvement within the national structures and processes, prevent genuine youth activism. Furthermore, where national policies envisage structures such as youth parliaments (**Bangladesh** and **Timor-Leste**) involving young people in a variety of activities, these structures do not necessarily encourage youth activism on CEFM elimination, largely due to their top-down approach and affiliation with the national governments.

Linkages with global programmes on youth empowerment are key enablers for youth activism in CEFM elimination

Where connections with global youth-driven initiatives are supported, youth activists and self-initiated groups are enabled to advocate for their own solutions and to mobilise additional networks to campaign on the themes they perceive as priorities. Key examples include **Bangladesh, Indonesia** and the **Philippines**, where youth activism independently engages on CEFM elimination within a broader focus on themes such as the fight against gender inequality and GBV, and promoting access to SRHR. However, many of the activities of these groups remain undocumented (or are only being promoted online), which may lead to over-estimating their abilities and capacities. This may also be true when considering that these groups are often based in the capital cities and may not necessarily have a close connection with grassroots constituencies.

Country-focussed internationally led processes enable youth advocacy on CEFM elimination

The SDG framework envisages setting up national-level consultative mechanisms involving youth. These institutional mechanisms are complemented by global programmes aimed at creating local chapters of Youth Force 2030 (presently established in **Cambodia, India, Indonesia, Nepal, the Philippines** and **Vietnam**). However, the potential of these mechanisms to catalyse youth participation and engagement is largely unexplored due to the initial focus on non-controversial SDGs. However, when donors provide support to the implementation of SDG 5, the opportunities to scale up youth advocacy in CEFM elimination expand, as in the case in **Indonesia**.

Equally relevant to scaling up youth advocacy on CEFM is engaging in processes driven by the United Nations, such as national reporting to treaty monitoring bodies, Special Procedures and the UPR. In most of the surveyed countries, young people have been typically involved in supporting the preparation of child- and youth-led alternative reporting under the leadership of INGO child-rights coalitions. This approach limits the potential for advocacy that some of the youth groups already demonstrate. Opportunities for increased focus on CEFM elimination with United Nations treaty monitoring bodies remains to be further explored.

At the regional level

ASEAN and SAARC provide regional mechanisms and processes with significant opportunities for scaling up youth advocacy on CEFM elimination

Two regional mechanisms to operationalise the commitments made by the countries in South and Southeast Asia to eliminate CEFM, the SAIEVAC/RAP and the ASEAN RPA on EVAC, respectively, provide opportunities for youth groups to scale up their advocacy. However, the exposure to the regional setting has thus far been limited to the participation of five young people from **Indonesia** and Malaysia in the Regional Forum on Eliminating CEFM organised by the ASEAN Secretariat in March 2019. While a positive and encouraging development, much more should be done to enable the voices of youth not only to be heard but also to be effectively reflected and integrated in the deliberations and policy frameworks of these regional mechanisms.

5. CONCLUSIONS AND SYNTHESIS

The youth-involved and youth-led initiatives, and the varieties of modalities in which they are conducted across the 10 surveyed countries, indicate strong relevance to local contexts for shaping the involvement of young people in strategies to eliminate CEFM. These initiatives reiterate the efforts made by Plan International to mainstream meaningful and ethical youth participation principles throughout their programmes and practices.

Youth clubs, platforms and forums provide spaces where young people learn about their rights and gain exposure to knowledge and resources that build their ability and confidence to challenge harmful and negative social/gender norms and traditions. Youth clubs are also places where inclusiveness, tolerance and respect for the others and shared decision-making are promoted and fostered, which empowers young people to claim their rights through democratic means. There is an inherent added value in youth engagement, which goes beyond the observable results in terms of CEFM reduction and elimination, which remain a primary responsibility of parents, caregivers and institutional duty bearers. A plethora of different types of youth engagement identified in this comparative analysis remains to be further researched, documented, analysed and evaluated.

Youth engagement in ending CEFM, which is currently supported on an ad hoc basis, will be sustained – and further increased and strengthened – if the entire community, including CBCPMs and other community-based entities, is properly sensitised and educated in understanding and addressing the root causes and harmful consequences of CEFM. The community is the environment where youth involvement in CEFM elimination has strong potential to develop and evolve into systematic and well-strategised activism, especially when opportunities for growth continue to be provided through coaching, training and material support. However, in order to remain engaged, young people also need a vision about their future and a continuous assessment of realistic opportunities to make change happen. Such a vision, for many youth groups, remains to be developed.

In some of the surveyed countries, phasing-out strategies have been elaborated, linking up youth groups with local authorities and duty-bearers. This appears to be a realistic ground for testing advocacy skills and bringing youth engagement in CEFM elimination to the next level, by addressing municipal responsibilities in preventing CEFM, including by allocating budgets to the implementation of the relevant action plans.





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In some countries, the long-term vision is based on connecting youth clubs with similar peer groups to create or expand youth networks at the sub-national and national levels. This seems to be largely prompted by operational necessities, rather than by the need to sustain and further develop levels of youth engagement. In fact, all too often, the sub-national and national dimensions remain out of reach of many youth groups, especially those from isolated communities, where geographical distance and poor communication infrastructure compound the cultural distance from the capitals. The ‘horizontal’ expansion through networks of youth groups is not necessarily matched by a ‘vertical’ increase in the level and quality of youth-led influencing and engagement in CEFM elimination.

Defining strategic solutions to ensure the sustainability of the existing youth groups is a pressing priority, keeping in mind that many of these groups have been formed through projects that by definition have a completion date. If considerations about sustainability are not addressed in a timely manner, the chances for the existing youth groups to continue engaging in CEFM-focused advocacy will be limited. Involving the existing youth groups on a project-basis in assessing the options for sustainability therefore provides an opportunity to prevent an abrupt termination of the support secured for years. This termination would be likely to lead to youth disengagement and subsequent disempowerment.

Likewise, involving newly formed groups in shaping a vision for their future, especially if ‘graduating’ group members are also involved in the process, contributes not only to the sustainability of initiatives, but significantly increases

ownership and accountability, which are preconditions for continuing advocacy on CEFM elimination. Ultimately, involving young people in the design of the CEFM-focused projects helps them decide how to continue engaging beyond the project cycle. Moreover, it can help identify solutions to the inherent challenges, including generational turnover and a range of practical operational aspects, including scheduling and locations for youth group gatherings.

In contexts where youth activism already exists within a conducive environment, supporting youth-led organisations advocating for CEFM elimination takes a different approach, linked with but not necessarily bound by the programmatic priorities related to preventing and reducing CEFM. Such an approach focuses on empowering young people to address, in their own ways, the challenges that closely affect their daily lives. It acknowledges the importance of engaging in an ongoing dialogue with young women and men to understand what really matters in their lives, and encourages commitment to providing the specific tools, skills and information they need while supporting them to take action based on their own solutions. A model based on partnership, therefore, emphasises meaningful participation principles and is attuned to the modalities of global youth-driven systems for shared skill building and supporting joint development of programmes between young people and adults.

Across the 10 surveyed countries, a few examples emerged of this partnership model, signalling a change in the direction of the support provided by Plan International to youth-led engagement in the elimination of the root causes of CEFM and other human rights violations.



6. RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations are based on the findings of this Comparative Analysis and reflect the Plan International global 18+ Theory of Change along with its three key strategies. These recommendations also build and further elaborate on the recommendations provided in the *Their Time is Now* and *Time to Act!* regional reports. The recommendations are offered to Plan International Country Offices for further adaptation and development, in line with local contexts and current stages of investment in youth engagement and activism to eliminate CEFM.

In order to increase consistency and strengthen the quality of youth engagement and activism in eliminating CEFM in Asia, while building on strengths of the existing organisational expertise and programmatic experience, the following actions are recommended for consideration to Plan International in Asia:

1. Adopt robust and comprehensive organisational standards for meaningful and ethical participation and involvement of young people, complemented with clear, simple and measurable set of indicators and monitoring mechanisms to be consistently used in assessing the levels, quality and effectiveness of youth involvement. Externally, engage in advocacy and influencing with national governments and regional bodies for adoption of policies on mandatory youth participation and engagement in matters affecting their development.

2. Involve young people consistently and regularly in the design of CEFM-focused interventions by soliciting their suggestions, ideas and solutions, and including them throughout the implementation cycle, starting with the planning stage. Consider facilitating youth engagement in monitoring the implementation of existing CEFM-related action plans, including by clarifying data requirements and jointly defining data collection methods. Furthermore, consistent efforts need to be made to translate youth ideas and solutions into concrete actions, while taking into consideration the support required and ensuring safeguarding measures with appropriate risk analysis.

3. Ensure that youth groups currently implementing CEFM-related project activities develop their own authentic vision concerning the future configuration of their groups, including defining the types and modalities of their engagement beyond the project timeframes. Support cross-generational transfer of knowledge upon the formation of new groups or admission of new members by including 'graduate members' in the orientation phase in order to highlight strengths and limitations, risks, and opportunities for engaging in advocacy activities in the local contexts and at different levels. Moreover, support youth groups in the preparation of specific strategies to increase sustainability and develop modalities for assessing progress towards meeting higher levels of engagement.

4. Promote efforts to include and involve young people from marginalised groups, including children and young people with disabilities, in youth clubs and forums, while ensuring enabling environments by adjusting operational requirements for trainings and other activities to their specific needs. Create regular opportunities for marginalised and excluded youth to share their perspectives and influence solutions and intervention frameworks.

5. Develop youth-sensitive and user-friendly resource materials for CEFM awareness-raising activities and campaigns by utilising tools designed in cooperation with young people, tailored to the specific needs of young women and young men, and by providing practical guidance and examples. This includes support to the organisation of training modules aimed at building skills selected on the basis of learning needs identified by members of youth groups, including skills on advocacy, budget monitoring, digital applications, engaging with media, fundraising, monitoring and evaluation, negotiation, and public presentation.

6. Strengthen existing youth groups and alliances, and facilitate the creation of new groups to widen the space for advocacy on clearly identified issues. Consider investing in existing youth partners, both individuals and groups, with capacities that were built during previous programmes and that have evolved into effective mobilisers and advocates. Moreover, promote the regular exchange of practices and joint advocacy between similar platforms active in different Asian countries. Consider working with both registered and unregistered youth organisations, and consider addressing existing limitations in the normative/policy frameworks governing civil society in policy dialogues with governments and bilateral and multi-lateral donors.

7. Secure additional investments in youth-led innovations and solutions, including by creating digital platforms for monitoring CEFM incidence and providing young people with adequate opportunities for incubating ideas, creating approaches and experimenting with innovative techniques.

8. Create opportunities for youth activists to engage in periodic inter-generational dialogues on CEFM, including with community elders, traditional and religious leaders, and other key decision makers. Facilitate youth engagement in policy-making mechanisms at sub-national, national and regional levels with defined and agreed follow-up actions. Facilitate direct engagement of relevant CEFM youth networks with international treaty monitoring bodies, including by providing training opportunities on the most recent alternative reporting procedures.

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 time to end child, early and forced marriage, once and for all!

ENDNOTES

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ANNEXES

ANNEX 1: LIST OF ONLINE RESOURCES

- Asian Development Bank, Civil Society Policy Briefs:
<https://www.adb.org/publications/series/civil-society-briefs>
- Girls Not Brides, Resource Centre:
<https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/resource-centre/>
- Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, Country Pages:
<https://ohchr.org/EN/Countries/AsiaRegion/Pages/AsiaRegionIndex.aspx>
- Plan International global website, Youth Activism:
<https://plan-international.org/youth-activism>
- Save the Children, resources on Child Participation:
<https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/our-thematic-areas/cross-thematic-areas/child-participation>
- Sustainable Development Goals, resources on Gender Equality:
<https://sdgresources.relx.com/goal-5-gender-equality>
- UNICEF, Regional Resource Centre on CEFM:
<https://www.unicef.org/rosa/what-we-do/child-protection/child-marriage>
- UNICEF, Resource Centre on Child Participation:
https://www.unicef.org/adolescence/cypguide/index_child_adult.html
- UNICEF/UNFPA, Global Programme to Accelerate Action to End Child Marriage:
<https://www.unicef.org/protection/unfpa-unicef-global-programme-accelerate-action-end-child-marriage>
- Universal Periodic Review, database of country reports:
<https://www.upr-info.org/database/>
- Youth Policy, Resource Centre on Country Youth Policies:
<http://www.youthpolicy.org/resources/>

ANNEX 2: QUESTIONNAIRE FOR THE IN-DEPTH INTERVIEWS

1. Number of youth-led initiatives focusing on CEFM

(a) How many youth-led initiatives focusing directly or indirectly on eliminating CEFM is your Country Office currently supporting? How long have they been in operation? Have they been functioning continuously or on an ad hoc basis? Is the total number increasing or decreasing and what are the reasons?

2. Structure of youth groups and youth-led initiatives focusing on CEFM

(a) What organizational form do these youth groups/initiatives generally take? Examples include (but are not limited to):

- Community-based self-initiated youth groups active at the grassroots level
- Youth groups linked to and/or supported by NGOs/Civil Society Organizations active at the sub-national and/or national levels. Are they formally registered/non-registered?
- Loose/informal youth networks, including “virtual” networks
- “Temporary” and ad hoc youth coalitions and project-based initiatives
- Any other type and form of CEFM-focused youth group/initiative?

(b) Membership base: Do these youth groups/initiatives generally involve boys and girls or are they limited to boys/girls only? Do they include and involve disadvantaged children (members of minority communities, children with disabilities, etc.)? What is the indicative number of members of the smallest/largest youth-group?

(c) Governance/Leadership: How many of these youth groups are formally led by a male or female leader? Does the leadership rotate? How are youth leaders appointed/elected?

(d) Strategic planning: How do these youth groups identify their goals, objectives and activities? Do these groups hold regular discussions and how often? Do they have action plans? Are these regularly reviewed?

(e) Information/Communication: How do these youth groups generally present and showcase their CEFM-related initiatives? Are there examples of functioning websites? What social media are more often utilized? How well are their initiatives publicized? Any example or reference?

(f) Outreach base: What is the youth-led initiative with the largest audience actually reached or with the greatest outreach potential? Any example or reference?

(g) Affiliation: Are there youth-led initiatives implemented in partnerships and/or are they connected to broader networks? Examples include (but are not limited to):

- Country-wide coalitions linked to social change and other movements.
- Regional, international/global platforms e.g. Girls Not Brides, etc.
- International NGOs and Civil Society coalitions.
- UN agencies’ programmes e.g. UNICEF, UNFPA, UNDP, etc.
- Sustainable Development Goals e.g. Voluntary National Review.
- Universal Periodic Reviews or UN Treaty Monitoring Bodies’ periodic reviews of the concerned country.
- Any other example?

(h) Support: What forms of support do these youth groups/initiatives generally receive, including by Plan International? What are the main sources of funding? Which are the main donors? What additional assistance and support are needed? Do the youth groups have any fundraising activities? Please provide examples and references.

3. Thematic focus of the CEFM youth-led initiatives

- a) What is the major focus of the youth-led initiatives targeting prevention and elimination of CEFM at the community/sub-national/national levels? Examples include (but are not limited to):
- Preventing/Eliminating CEFM through continuous awareness raising and education, including child education and human rights education.
 - Preventing/Eliminating CEFM through improved access to Health, Sexual and Reproductive Health services, including for girls and boys.
 - Preventing/Eliminating CEFM through social engagement and mobilization, including particularly vulnerable groups of children.
 - Preventing/Eliminating CEFM through youth-economic empowerment.
 - Preventing/Eliminating CEFM through child protection and improved access to justice.
 - Any other example?
- b) What is the most/least represented focus of these youth-led initiatives? What are the reasons?

4. Key activities conducted by CEFM-focused youth groups

- a) What are the different types of activities pursued by the youth groups? Examples include (but are not limited to):
- Awareness-raising activities: specific on CEFM or as a part of broader topics connected e.g. on gender equality (e.g. gender-based violence, discrimination against women, etc.).
 - Peer education, outreach, advocacy (including by promoting positive role models).
 - Public advocacy, including through media campaigns.
 - Public education, including in partnership with government bodies, think-tanks, etc.
 - Inter-generational dialogue with power-holders, decision makers, religious and community leaders etc.
 - Policy-oriented dialogue with elected/perspective government representatives.
 - Monitoring-oriented activities, including data collection for reporting purposes e.g. under national action plans and regional or international platforms.
 - Reporting and referrals of CEFM cases.
 - Any other example?
- b) What are the main target audiences of the youth-led initiatives? Examples include (but are not limited to):
- Peers.
 - Parents, Schools and Communities.
 - Child Protection mechanisms.
 - Public services.
 - Local and National governments, including Parliamentarians.
 - Other local youth groups and initiatives (e.g. formative research, capacity building)
 - National Human Rights Institutions.
 - International organizations.
 - Any other target audience?
- c) Which specific audience is currently not included that would require to be targeted to maximize CEFM-related efforts and in which way?

5. Influencing factors

- a) What are the main factors contributing to or impeding the work of these youth-led groups and influencing the effectiveness of their CEFM-related initiatives? Examples include (but are not limited to):
- Existing capacities: Project management capacities; organizational and mobilization capacities; policy and strategic capacities; human capacities; communication and influencing capacities; networking capacities, etc. Any positive/negative example?
 - Legal/Policy frameworks: Are they supportive or restrictive with regard to youth participation and activism? Are the existing laws and policies generally understood, promoted and enforced? Any positive/negative example?
 - Social norms and traditional codes of behavior: How rigid are they, can they be overcome and how? Any positive/negative example?
 - Role of the media: How supportive are mainstream media in providing space and exposure to youth-led initiatives, in raising parent and community awareness and in providing relevant information on CEFM? Any positive/negative example?
 - Presence/interest of international organizations: Do they provide public support or visibility to CEFM-related youth-led initiatives? How available is donors' assistance e.g. through grants and project opportunities? Any positive/negative example?
 - Any other example of factors influencing performance and outcomes of youth-led initiatives?

6. Good practices

a) What elements of the youth-led initiatives supported by your Country Office are particularly effective and innovative? Examples include (but are not limited to):

- Focus (e.g. involving boys and young men or other less obvious actors)
- Inclusive approach (e.g. including disadvantaged groups of young people)
- Strategic approach (e.g. effective media strategy, use of digital platforms and applications).
- Partnerships (e.g. synergies with other youth groups, civil society actors, government bodies, etc.)
- Project design (e.g. realistic timeframe, use of the available human, financial and community resources).
- Measurable impact of the CEFM-related initiative (e.g. on the target audience).
- Replicability of the approach (e.g. scale-up through involving more and new stakeholders).
- Contribution to learning and growth of the youth group.
- Any other example of innovative elements and practices?

b) What type of additional support may youth groups need in order to increase their effectiveness and linkages with other CEFM-specific interventions within the same country? Examples include (but are not limited to):

- Increased capacities and abilities of the youth groups.
- Youth friendly awareness raising tools.
- Increased coordination and communication among youth groups.
- Increased availability of funding.
- Increased strategic and operational support.
- Increased involvement in policy making.
- Increased visibility.
- Any other example?

c) What are the elements of the youth-led initiatives that may be realistically replicated in other countries? What would be required to move beyond the various contexts?

7. Additional information

Please provide any additional relevant information that you think was not included or not clearly elaborated in the questionnaire. Also, kindly share any relevant documents (evaluation reports, project reviews, thematic reports etc.) that could strengthen the evidence base in support to the importance of CEFM focused youth-led activism, initiatives and groups.



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ACCELERATING EFFORTS TO ELIMINATE CHILD, EARLY AND FORCED MARRIAGE: A PRESSING PRIORITY

Child, early and forced marriage (CEFM) is recognised as a human rights violation having 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 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 Asia has 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 Regional Plan of Action on the Elimination of Violence against Children in Southeast 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.

ABOUT THIS COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS REPORT: *THEIR TIME IS NOW – TIME TO ACT!*

As part of a multi-phased research series in the countries of South and Southeast Asia, the recent *Time to Act!* report (2018) identified youth-led advocacy and activism among the interventions and innovative approaches with a high potential for impact if implemented at scale by governments and other stakeholders. This comparative analysis, *Their Time is Now – Time to Act!* builds on the report and on previous CEFM research studies and focuses on different aspects of youth-led activism, advocacy and engagement to eliminate CEFM in Asia.

This comparative analysis aims to systematise the information from 10 Asian countries (Bangladesh, Cambodia, India, Indonesia, Laos, Nepal, the Philippines, Thailand, Timor-Leste and Vietnam) where young people are supported by Plan International in preventing, reducing and eliminating CEFM. It also provides an analytical overview of the key enablers and barriers encountered by youth advocates.

This comparative analysis report presents key findings on structural and functional aspects of the youth groups engaged in CEFM elimination, while offering a set of practical recommendations for key stakeholders. It is complemented with a Thematic Brief, serving to strengthen and further legitimise youth engagement and activism in ending CEFM across Asia.

CALL TO ACTION

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!



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