



# EMERGING EVIDENCE

## MASCULINITY AND PRACTICES RELATED TO CHILD, EARLY AND FORCED MARRIAGE



Yogesh Vaishnav, center left, is one of the founders of Vikalp—an AJWS grantee working with men and boys to advance gender equality in rural Rajasthan. Photo by Jonathan Torgovnik. *This photo was not taken as part of the research described in this report.*

### BACKGROUND

Current approaches to reducing child, early and forced marriage (CEFM) are limited by a focus on increasing the age at marriage, rather than on expanding young people’s rights to make choices about marriage and to pursue their broader aspirations in life. Global discourse on CEFM fails to explore the role of desire in young people’s decision making about marriage, particularly when it comes to sexual desire and the desire to enter adulthood. Also rarely discussed: boys and their relationship with patriarchy, the political economy and marriage as an institution.

This research explores what it means to work with men and boys and on issues of masculinity when addressing CEFM in India. The research focuses on the interrelatedness of masculinities—the range of perspectives about the position of men in society and related social expectations for how men should look and act—and caste ideologies.

### RESEARCH GOALS

- Review existing theoretical and empirical research on the experiences of boys, the roles of men and the broader field of masculinities in the context of CEFM.

- Describe the landscape of interventions with or on boys and men around CEFM and highlight possible entry points for working with boys and men on masculinities.
- Identify the gaps in our understanding of masculinities and CEFM and develop a possible research agenda to fill them.

### METHODOLOGY

- Literature review related to CEFM, with a focus on how the experiences of boys and men in India and their understanding of masculinity inform perception of CEFM and strategies to address it
- Eleven in-depth interviews and four focus group discussions with a total of 24 development professionals working in 10 organizations across seven locations in India
- Long-term engagement with two organizations working on CEFM in India

### HIGHLIGHTED FINDINGS

- Very little literature examines the experiences of boys or men in relation to CEFM. When men appear in literature

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**Emerging Evidence** is a series of short summaries of research that American Jewish World Service (AJWS) supports as part of our strategy to advance gender equality and end child, early and forced (CEFM) marriage in India.

The AJWS-commissioned study described here, “Searching for the Boys: A review of literature, analyses and practices relating to early and child marriages, with a focus on boys, men and masculinity,” is by akshay khanna—a social anthropologist and political activist based in New Delhi—with assistance from Akhil Kang.

on CEFM, it is most often as the patriarchal oppressor or in a depiction of aggressive masculinity. The male subject of CEFM research is usually from a poor and marginalized socio-economic background—and as a result, this particular class of male masculinity is most frequently presented and analyzed as a problem.

- Young people of all genders often view marriage as a way to fulfill their desires, which may include desire for sex; desire to enter adulthood; desire for release from parental control; desire for privacy; and, in some cases, desire for further education and a career. The assumption that girls or young women are always victims of CEFM and that boys and young men are always perpetrators of patriarchal processes precludes a more nuanced understanding of the phenomena they are faced with in regard to marriage.
- Laws intended to prevent child marriage are being used to deny adolescents their agency and right to marry of their own will. The law acts as a tool for reinforcing caste ideology and heteronormativity. In India, legal action is often taken by parents to disrupt consensual relationships in which adolescents eloped.
- Very few researchers have explored how anxieties around caste purity in India are central to the phenomena of CEFM. In particular, anxieties about masculinity related to caste and religion often fuel CEFM. If a man's sons or daughters marry outside the caste framework or choose their own partners, this threatens traditional expectations of the father's social role.
- Economic transitions in rural India have led to new forms of insecurity and poverty that generate crises of masculinity, as men often feel social pressure to earn money for their families. During times of economic hardship, marriages and weddings often help families secure social status and conserve resources and allow fathers to perform a masculine duty expected by their community.
- Addressing the question of equal right to property is crucial for addressing coercion in early marriage. The unequal right to inheritance in the natal home contributes to CEFM in many ways, including the practice of dowry and related violence. It also reinforces preference for sons.

- The heteronormative focus of research on child marriage ignores tensions about performing traditional masculinity and sexuality. However, the pressure of marriage is a matter of social structure and a performance of responsibility. Thus, a man is often coerced into marrying—not to prove his heterosexuality, but to prove his adulthood and his responsibility, regardless of his sexuality.
- The mobile phone has become a central feature in narratives of sexuality, romance and aspiration as well as a marker of masculinity. The realms of intimacy and sexuality are being radically reconfigured through the advent of new technology.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

- CEFM needs to be disaggregated into the various phenomena within it—including elopements, hasty marriages and arranged marriages of desire—so researchers can increase understanding of the disparate conditions that young people and children face.
- Researchers must recognize how caste ideology and logic underlie the social, political, economic and cultural conditions for CEFM and for masculinities in India.
- Advocates attempting to end CEFM should reconsider their attempts to use criminal law as part of their solutions, as it often does more harm than good.
- Instead, advocates should help refine and support a broader feminist approach to ending CEFM, engaging with the political economy at the macro and micro levels and advancing equal property and inheritance rights.
- Researchers need to further investigate the range of social norms for young men and boys and better understand how these norms shape their life choices, possibilities and experiences in the context of CEFM.
- Researchers and activists need to keep exploring how ideas of marriage and its social meaning are evolving—particularly in terms of how marriage is used as a rite of passage to mark the transition to adulthood in many communities.
- Finally, there is a need to more deeply examine technology in the context of gender, sexuality and relationships among young people—and the plethora of interesting and important questions this topic can generate.

To learn more about our partners' research in India, visit [ajws.org/research](https://ajws.org/research) or contact us at [EmergingEvidence@ajws.org](mailto:EmergingEvidence@ajws.org).



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