

CONVENING REPORT

TACKLING THE TABOO: TAKING A GENDER-TRANSFORMATIVE APPROACH TO REALIZING ADOLESCENT GIRLS' RIGHTS

Convened by: The Child, Early and Forced Marriage and Unions and Sexuality Working Group¹ and The Kendeda Fund

Hosted by: Ford Foundation Center for Social Justice, New York City

January 22, 2020



A. OVERVIEW

On January 22, 2020, a diverse group of funders, civil society organizations (CSOs), international nongovernmental organizations (INGOs), UN agency and government representatives and advocates working in the area of child, early and forced marriage and unions (CEFMU) and adolescent girls' rights came together for a one-day convening to discuss and unpack key findings from the [Tackling the Taboo](#) report² and share experiences from their own work.

The objective was to identify challenges and opportunities related to increasing understanding of and support for feminist, gender-transformative approaches to CEFMU and girls' rights more broadly, with a focus on the role of funding institutions.

This summary report seeks to highlight key themes, lessons learned and critical questions surfaced in the course of the meeting, as well as action steps that funding institutions, national governments, INGOs, CSOs and others in the room felt were an important part of collective and individual efforts to strengthen this work going forward.

Responses to a follow-up survey of convening participants have also been taken into account in this summary.

Central to the meeting was the premise that **CEFMU is one of many manifestations of systemic gender inequality, power disparities, and patriarchy**, and that control of girls' and women's sexuality is an often under-examined driver of CEFMU. This understanding was acknowledged by convening participants, though the extent to which this understanding is fully evident in their institutional practices varies. Participants declared a strong desire to understand in concrete terms how their work can better reflect this understanding. Much of the day's discussion centered around how global stakeholders and, in particular, donors

can support and strengthen a gender-transformative approach to CEFMU and adolescent girls' rights work that **addresses root causes of CEFMU; prioritizes local, feminist knowledge, strategies and solutions; shifts power and norms; and is responsive to the long-term nature of this social change process.**

B. WHAT MAKES PROGRAMS GENDER-TRANSFORMATIVE, AND HOW CAN DONORS SUPPORT THIS?

Following an initial presentation and discussion on core concepts and elements³ of a gender-transformative approach to CEFMU, four national-level CSOs⁴ from Kenya, India, Pakistan and Nigeria, whose work is featured in the report, shared insights from what has worked and challenges they have faced implementing gender-transformative approaches in their contexts, including how the roles of their donors have enabled and created challenges for them. In addition, four young leaders from a CSO in Delhi ([Feminist Approach to Technology—FAT](#)) that works to promote collective action of girls for gender equality joined remotely and shared successes and challenges from their model of grassroots organizing with

girls and fostering girls' leadership of their organization.

Select key themes that emerged from these discussions included:

- **Empowering girls through a holistic set of resources, including support for building self-determination; individual and collective leadership; negotiation, resistance, and advocacy skills and a deeper understanding of sexuality and gender, is critical. Addressing gender diversity and sexual identity is part of this.** Dorothy Aken'Ova, Executive Director of INCREASE (Nigeria) noted that, "[when

Gender transformative approaches (GTAs) encourage critical awareness of gender roles and norms; promote equitable positions of girls and women in society; challenge the distribution of resources and allocation of duties between men and women; and/or address the unequal power relationships between girls and women and others in the community, such as service providers or traditional leaders. The ultimate aim of GTAs is to achieve gender equality, empower women, girls and gender nonconforming young people, promote health and eliminate violence. (From Tackling the Taboo)

¹American Jewish World Service, CARE, CREA, *Girls Not Brides*, Global Fund for Women, International Center for Research on Women, International Women's Health Coalition, GreeneWorks, Plan International, Nirantar Trust, Population Council, Promundo-US

²Commissioned by the CEFMU and Sexuality Programs Working Group, published in June 2019

³As described in the *Tackling the Taboo* report

⁴Trust for Indigenous Culture and Health (TICAH), The YP Foundation, Aahung, and International Centre for Sexual and Reproductive Rights (INCREASE)

designing a feminist curriculum] we included sexuality and sexual orientation— dealing with internalized needs, homophobia and transphobia—because it is first important for girls to understand who they are in order to be able to make their own decisions.”

- **Understanding the interplay between girls’ sexuality, agency and economic forces—and how that varies across contexts and interacts with other aspects of girls’ identities—is also key.** Jade

Maina, the Executive Director of TICAH (Kenya), spoke about her organization’s experience listening to girls and families in the Masai community talk about why CEFMU continues to happen. What they heard is that marriage is often viewed as a “ticket out of poverty.” In that community, “it’s not taboo to have sex early, just to get pregnant. The mother is afraid the girl might get pregnant in her house and then not be marriageable, so it’s better to marry her off early to an older man. ...Women don’t see themselves as owning their own bodies. They are always owned by their families (fathers and husbands) and collectively by their communities.”

For TICAH, a gender-transformative approach to CEFMU involves bringing all of these issues to the table and having conversations with girls about their own agency and control over their bodies. “Some of the decisions that girls are talking about aren’t necessarily the ones that we think are good, but it is still success that it’s what they have chosen, and that they have had the agency to make that decision.” Maina also noted the economic dimensions: “If you speak strongly against child marriage, it’s because you have the resources...” Other CSOs and INGOs were mindful of the challenge of creating economic alternatives or pathways out of CEFMU, asking “how free are the free choices that young people make?” **The example of how control over women and girls manifests in this particular culture highlights how programs must be tailored based on a deep understanding of local context in order to be relevant and effective. How can global institutions, including donors, support such an approach?**



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—DOROTHY AKEN’OVA, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF INCREASE

- **There was a powerful reminder of the impact of humanitarian crises and natural disasters on further narrowing choices and agency of girls**—as one participant noted: “Women’s bodies are the credit card in times of crisis.”
- **More attention is needed to supporting men and boys to play a role in shifting patriarchal norms and behaviors without instrumentalizing them to “protect girls and women.”** Manak Matiyani, Executive Director of The YP Foundation (India), shared that “boys were asking great questions about how do they know whether their partners are having fun during sex, and were being answered by ‘no means no’—understand consent.” This pushed the organization to develop a curriculum that spoke to men and boys so that they could have better conversations and sex with their partners, without a patriarchal construct of, “I know, I’ll decide, I’ll tell.”
- **Organizational staff’s own understanding of gender, sexuality and choice needs to be invested in and deepened, to ensure those leading programming hold and project feminist values. Values and attitudes are as important as technical skills, and this takes time and resources.** Reflecting on the challenges staff expressed in telling family about their work to support adolescent sexual and reproductive health and rights, Sheena Hadi, Executive Director of Aahung Pakistan, said, “We need to take a step back and ask the question— who are the people speaking to these girls and boys? Have they grappled with their own sexuality and experiences?” Other CSOs described the value of ongoing, regular support for staff, mentors and volunteers for “perspective-building.”
- **Girls’ collectives are a special model of girls’ leadership; they also highlight the important role grassroots groups play, because they understand their context and have insight into how to influence their communities.** The young leaders of FAT described their organization’s three-level girls’

leadership model, which centers on girls learning technology and leadership skills and mobilizing as collectives as a means for effecting personal and social change. Girls identify an issue they want to address (the example given was early and forced marriage) and use technology to grapple with it (in this case, creating a film) and engage their communities and families (in this case, through a campaign on early and forced marriage). Asked what helps them work effectively to create shifts in behavior and attitudes, the girl leaders answered that it is their knowledge of how to talk with the girls in their own communities, and with relatives and community members, and the connection they have to people's lived experiences.



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—JADE MAINA, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF TICAH

- **The girl leaders from FAT also emphasized the value of collectives in providing a space for mutual support, learning and growth, as well as political mobilization.**

They noted that the fact that the four of them are not married and are given space by their families to participate in the organization is a sign of impact in their own lives; the collective also mobilizes to stop marriages of girls in the community. While reactions to their campaign varied among family and community members, the girls succeeded in gaining the support of their mothers as allies. **The importance of collective agency was turned to again over the course of the day**, as an increase in individual agency might lead to increased isolation and vulnerability for girls in their communities. Girls who are active in the collectives go on to hold leadership positions in the organization itself, as part of the goal of transitioning to a girl-led organization. Linked to discussions on the value of supporting individual and collective leadership, CSOs drew donors' attention to the development of leadership as a positive outcome in and of itself, and not to be measured solely in terms of a "means to an end."

The CSO leaders reflected on what has been most helpful from donors in supporting, deepening and sustaining their work:

- **Funding without fear** is the most valuable kind of funding. As Sheena Hadi noted, *"a lot of funding will come with a nod to the need to work with girls, but it's*

riddled with fear. Age of marriage has been emphasized too much, instead of what it really means for a girl to be empowered to have agency." The criminalization of adolescent sexuality, and conflation of age of consent with age of marriage have exacerbated this fear in many contexts.

- **Trust and flexibility** from funders are also key. Dorothy Aken'Ova asked for, *"Trust, because so much can change the outcomes that have been agreed upon at the outset. Flexibility, to ensure that we are able to address challenges that emerge along the way."* Organizations are rarely given space to fail, learn from that failure and improve.
- **Long-term investment** that doesn't force CSOs into pivoting to "what is sexy" for a donor in a given moment. CSOs also noted that the pressure to "scale" can detract from the support to do the necessarily "intensive work" that changing social norms requires.

- **The building of a relationship "which cannot be opened and closed overnight"**—with support for organizational development which shifts the engagement from the transactional to the transformational. Within this relationship, introductions to new donors and new platforms are also valued.

When asked what is most challenging for them to find support for, even from the most progressive of funders, the CSO leaders cited:

- **Evaluation** that captures gains from their work that aren't the same as what donors might expect. One leader said, *"For instance, sometimes we're working to prevent pregnancy or ECM, and girls might still get married, but they're doing so with the skills to negotiate and get out of it what they need."* Another challenge shared is that monitoring and evaluation are more geared to accountability and less focused on learning, and drive data collection that is not meaningful to the CSOs or community.
- **Insufficient core funding** to enable the organization to grow and develop and in particular invest in the people who work within the organization. Some CSOs noted that not only is it very difficult to get salaries

funded, but that professional development and capacity development are rarely supported, making investing in personnel and growing as an organization very difficult. It also means that organizations spend valuable time on budgeting acrobatics, trying to figure out how to pay staff—time that could be spent on advancing the work.

- **Intersectional approaches** which a) address the connections between CEFMU and girls' rights work and other essential fields of work (such as political participation or climate justice) and b) are intentional in including marginalized populations, such as people with disabilities and sexual minorities. The siloed, thematic nature of funding streams is one of the barriers to strengthening intersectional work. Work on sexuality through a gender and power lens enhances outcomes in nearly all thematic areas and sectors; for example, within an SRHR-focused program, work on gender and power will enhance positive outcomes in women's political participation and voice.



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—MANAK MATIYANI, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF THE YP FOUNDATION

C. HOW DO WE DEFINE AND MEASURE SUCCESS IN CEFMU AND ADOLESCENT GIRLS' RIGHTS WORK?

A significant portion of the day's discussion centered around how success is defined when it comes to CEFMU programming, by whom, and how to measure it. There was **a general acceptance of the idea that age of marriage alone is not an adequate definition or measure of success**, as programs may successfully delay marriage without addressing the root causes of it, and thus do not necessarily result in improved lives for girls and women. One participant pointed out that if a woman marries against her own wishes at age 19, nothing has been solved. **Progress toward much larger change in the lives of adolescent girls and in social norms around adolescent girls' agency and decision-making power must also be part of the definition of success.**

There was a diversity of approaches to defining and measuring success employed by the institutions represented—ranging from a focus on age of marriage

to trying to measure increases in girls' agency (self-determination, negotiation, confidence, mobility). It was noted that within these broad categories, what confidence looks like, and how to capture changes in it, needs to be highly context-specific. There was also variety in who defined success, with some funders and larger organizations setting quantitative measures for organizations on the ground (i.e., their grantees or implementing partners) to strive to meet, and other funders who made room for grantees to define success and were open to qualitative measurement methods. Other funders focused on site visits and getting girls' perspectives in order to understand progress.

Several in the room emphasized the **critical importance of listening first to how girls, communities and community-based organizations define success, and having that at the center of what is being measured, how and by whom.** As one participant said, *"As we move beyond age to agency, we need to move further out and*

look at the social context and systems. We need to be guided by communities about how change can be measured, and then make space for learning so that there's safety and trust. And there needs to be funder accountability—funders are a part of systems that perpetuate inequality and have to be accountable for helping to fix this."

Qualitative measures that might align with a broader vision of change around girls' agency and power were discussed, including:

- **The strength of girls' movements and allied feminist movements.** One participant pointed out that *"the fact that a girls' movement exists at all is a measure of success: having girls feel that they are not alone when they're facing a problem. Patriarchy is about dividing and conquering so girls feel powerless—that's what we need to break down."* A related point raised was: What is the role of funders in resourcing social movements, as opposed to organizations and programs? Social movements can be an answer to scale with regard to social change, but would they be compromised by a relationship with donors?
- **Changes in knowledge, attitudes and practices,** and the quality of relationships among girls, within families, and in communities.

There was a **diversity of opinion as to whether an overarching set of indicators, reflecting a broader definition of success than age of marriage, would be possible and helpful** given the heavily contextual, multi-level nature of the work, and the different institutional constraints of funders. Finding points of intersection between systems that don't currently seem to speak to one another (SDG-driven indicators and community-driven definitions and measures of success) was acknowledged as a major challenge that needs further consideration. An alternative to a set of indicators could be a shared conceptual framework that would identify various domains of change needed to realize adolescent girls' rights and ways to measure them.

The under-resourcing of community-based organizations (CBOs) for building their own capacity to carry out meaningful, learning-oriented evaluation was also flagged as an issue requiring greater attention by donors. As one participant said, *"It's difficult [for CBOs] to mobilize resources in general and even harder for capacity-building: not only building technical abilities but for creating their own theory of change...CBOs are struggling to sustain themselves at the same time that donors are trying to get them to evaluate for the future."*

Another participant highlighted the opportunities presented by a **feminist approach to measurement** and evaluation, which involves shifting the locus of power and expertise to those who understand the context best. Partnering with community-based groups to conduct research, and empowering grantees to tell the donor what they should be measuring, provides space for groups to reflect on what they want to accomplish, what is working and what is not. This type of research can itself contribute to gender-transformative change: *"...you can use research to build solidarity and conversations."*

D. OVERARCHING QUESTIONS AND CHALLENGES

Group discussion in the course of the day surfaced a number of important questions and challenges that participants felt require further discussion, introspection (particularly on the part of funders) and strategizing, including the following:

1. **Is the CEFMU frame too narrow, given that it is a manifestation of much larger issues?** Some in the room felt that there is a need to go beyond a CEFMU focus to instead focus on "girls' rights" more broadly. One participating funder emphasized the problem with compartmentalizing issues—e.g., FGM, child marriage, etc., noting that in places where these two "practices" occur, *"they happen to the same girl,"* and are driven by the same forces, and further, separating them can pit advocates or organizations against each other in the quest for funding and support. At the same time, there was acknowledgement that CEFMU serves as a useful point of entry for funders and CSOs and others who do have a broader vision to end gender inequality, and



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—SHEENA HADI, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF AAHUNG

that CEFMU is a helpful focus for then addressing a constellation of issues. A suggestion was also put forward that CEFMU could be used as a "filter" rather than a framework to support decision-making about where priorities and opportunities for supporting broader adolescent girls' rights work reside. Generally speaking, there seemed to be support for the notion of shifting toward a broader framework of girls' rights and empowerment³ with CEFMU as a component, rather than the other way around. Emphasis on not losing the lens of sexuality in this work was emphasized.

2. **How do we move beyond "the choir": Who are our targets in increasing understanding and resourcing of feminist, gender-transformative programs and approaches?** There was acknowledgement that funders and other global organizations, including the institutions in the room, are on a spectrum in terms of knowledge as well as political will with regard to the importance of a feminist, gender-transformative approach to girls' rights and how to support it. There is a need to better understand and leverage where the opportunities lie for further funder advocacy, what the different opportunities and constraints within various institutions are and how they can be leveraged and addressed. What do "sympathetic" institutions need to better support this work, and how can those not already on board be brought along? What institutional barriers do funders face to shifting/strengthening approaches? One funder reflected on how much effort

³With the caveat that "girls' empowerment" itself is a term that can be co-opted by those who are less interested in gender equality and ending patriarchy. The emphasis on "taking power" as opposed to "being given power" is central to a feminist approach to adolescent girls' rights.

should be put toward influencing non-expert individual donors versus focusing on the foundations and bilaterals.

3. Related, an **important distinction was made between funders supporting gender-transformative programming, and funders taking a feminist, gender-transformative approach to funding.** This distinction is critical, as the latter better encapsulates the need to let local feminist organizations and movements lead the charge, define the problem and identify solutions in their context, as opposed to reacting to a top-down approach from global north institutions.
4. Working to promote the sexual rights and agency of girls is at the sharp end of confronting patriarchy and the status quo. The **backlash** organizations face for addressing sexuality was raised as an important reality that both organizations and funders should seek to better understand and address.
5. **How do we grapple with the larger economic and political context and systems in which this work is situated while still centering communities' priorities and strategies to create change?** One participant questioned, *"In highlighting the problem of CEFMU, are we continuing to put the blame into the community rather than addressing systemic inequality and white supremacy?"*
6. There are important **evidence gaps**, including in Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) and in humanitarian settings. The CEFMU and Sexuality Working Group plans to develop case studies on LAC community-based organizations that address sexuality from a gender-transformative approach to complement the Tackling the Taboo report.

E. BUILDING MOMENTUM AND TAKING THIS WORK FORWARD

Participants recommended a number of action—and learning—oriented next steps, seeking to address some of the questions and challenges discussed in the course of the day with a view to identifying important resources and actions that will continue to build support for resourcing a gender-transformative approach to CEFMU. The follow-up survey collected information on which participants and organizations would want to contribute to the different areas of work and otherwise remain connected for joint action on adolescent girls' rights. Among those considered a priority were the following:

1. Building a shared understanding/conceptual framework for gender-transformative programming for addressing CEFMU
2. Creating a measurement framework and/or guidance for taking a gender-transformative approach to measurement, linked to the conceptual framework
3. Using the gender continuum to illustrate the trajectory to a gender-transformative approach, plotting examples from practice to show differences between gender-neutral, sensitive and transformative
4. Building capacity for CSOs and other implementing organizations to work from a feminist perspective and take gender-transformative approaches and address sexuality in their work
5. Naming and agreeing upon funding practices that support gender-transformative programming; capacity-building for donors to work from a feminist perspective
6. Developing a donor mapping to identify potential allies and advocacy targets and the best spaces and modes for engagement
7. Undertaking advocacy activities to strengthen support among global institutions for a gender-transformative approach to CEFMU and adolescent girls' rights
8. Creating a community of support for funders and practitioners who are already supporting feminist, gender-transformative work ("the choir") and want to deepen it and/or expand support within their larger institutions
9. Articulating the process(es) by which girls' and communities' voices can be centered in defining and measuring success
10. Continuing to build evidence for what works and what doesn't, with support for local research and knowledge-generation
11. Building a better shared understanding of gender-transformative work that is addressing the macro-economic and political systems that undermine gender equality and limit the exercise of real choice for girls

12. Creating opportunities for community-based organizations and activists to share their knowledge and experience in a way that minimizes the power dynamics inherent in funder spaces
13. Creating space to strategize and deepen understanding around the impact of criminalization of adolescent sexuality on CEFMU and adolescent girls' rights work, as well as intersectional linkages, including, but not limited to, girls with disabilities and other marginalized groups
14. Compiling new and existing resources that highlight the intersection between sexuality, CEFMU and gender-transformative approaches, and address the gap in current resources providing practical guidance on gender-transformative programs that include issues of sexuality

F. CONCLUSION AND NEXT STEPS

The CEFMU and Sexuality Working Group will consider its role and contribution to the recommended steps above, and seek to further build alliances and coordinate action with a variety of stakeholders at all levels to build toward a more feminist, gender-transformative approach to girls' and women's rights.

Recognizing that the priorities and needs of funders, program implementers, policy and research organizations and community-based groups and individual activists are multi-faceted and different, **the Working Group welcomes further input and engagement of all those who are interested in advancing this collective work going forward.**

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