



CHILD, EARLY AND FORCED MARRIAGES AND UNIONS:

Evidence of a shift towards a feminist perspective

The global discourse on child, early and forced marriages and unions (CEFMU) is evolving. Focus on the issue is expanding beyond just preventing underage marriage, to fostering greater agency and opportunity for adolescent girls and young women (AGYW). The field is increasingly recognizing gender inequality as a root cause of the interconnected barriers AGYW face, including child marriage.¹ Further, as part of this feminist perspective, a growing number of advocates and practitioners are willing to confront the key role control of AGYW's sexuality plays in driving child marriage.² Control of girls' sexuality has historically been a taboo issue in the response to child marriage and gone unacknowledged and unaddressed.¹

These changes signal a shift away from seeing child marriage as a child protection issue to one situated within a more feminist, gender-transformative framework. Under a child protection frame, girls need to be protected against underage marriage at all costs, regardless of their own views and wishes. This is often enforced through legalistic or technical approaches that fail to address the deep-rooted structural inequalities that drive girls' and women's oppression and that manifest through child marriage. A feminist, rights-based frame means understanding AGYW as people with agency, including over their own sexuality. It necessitates an approach that seeks to transform the social norms and structures that relegate girls and women to lower status in society.

This brief summarizes researchⁱⁱ that demonstrates the shift in CEFMU discourse over time and explains the factors that are driving progress towards a contextualized, feminist understanding of child marriage.

¹ The term CEFMU is used to distinguish between “child marriage,” “early marriage” “forced marriage” and informal “unions.” This language attempts to recognize the different contexts of relationships taking place before the age of 18 and the fact that different situations warrant different responses. In this summary, “child marriage” and CEFMU are used interchangeably for ease of reading.

² In places where patriarchal gender norms are strictly enforced, AGYW are not free to express their sexuality. They are valued for their virginity, and those who engage in sex before marriage may be ostracized. Families and communities are often motivated to ensure girls are married, regardless of their own dreams or wishes (CEFM and Sexuality Programs Working Group. (2019). *Tackling the taboo: sexuality and gender-transformative programmes to end child, early and forced marriage and unions*. <https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/learning-resources/resource-centre/tackling-the-taboo-sexuality-and-gender-transformative-programmes-to-end-child-early-and-forced-marriage-and-unions/>).

LET’S TALK ABOUT SEXUALITY: ANALYZING A DECADE OF DISCOURSE

Researchers from University of Georgia and East Carolina University, along with members of the Strategic Learning, Research & Evaluation team at American Jewish World Service (AJWS), partnered to document trends in the global conversation about child marriage. They used quantitative text analysis to examine over 40,000 English-language documents published between 2011 and 2019 by 147 member organizations of Girls Not Brides (GNB)³, a global alliance of organizations focused on preventing child marriage.

Based on background knowledge and researchⁱⁱⁱ, the team established that CEFMU^{iv} had historically been written about “as a development or educational issue that can be stopped by instituting legal age restrictions to marriage.” To assess change over time, they investigated how often key terms were mentioned by organizations writing about child marriage. Terms such as “development” and “education” signified the traditional way of thinking about child marriage, while terms such as “sexuality,” “gender,” “patriarchy,” and, to a lesser extent, “adolescent health” represented the newer feminist frame.

The document analysis detected a shift in the way child marriage was being discussed, surfacing the adoption of a “new frame focus[ing] on the agency of...affected girls and teens, and the need for a broader social transformation.” While CEFMU publications increased overall during the time period, the number of documents specifically mentioning sexuality in relation to child marriage soared. Child marriage documents mentioning gender also rose significantly, with smaller increases in documents connecting CEFMU to patriarchy and to adolescent health (Figure 1). Beginning in 2014, sexuality overtook development and education as the most common framing for CEFMU, though education remains prominent (Figure 2).

Figure 1: Framing of CEFMU Over Time, New Frames

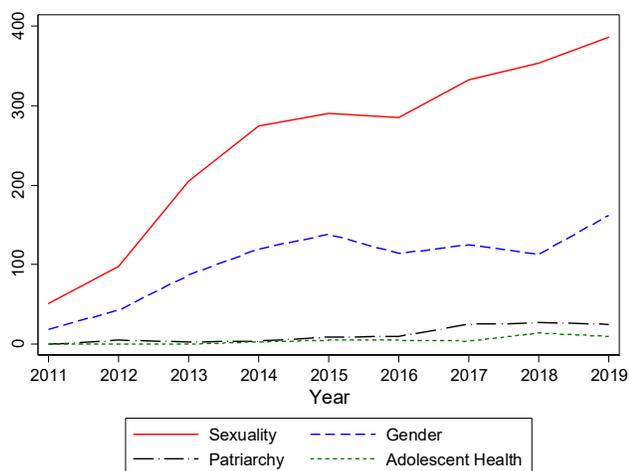
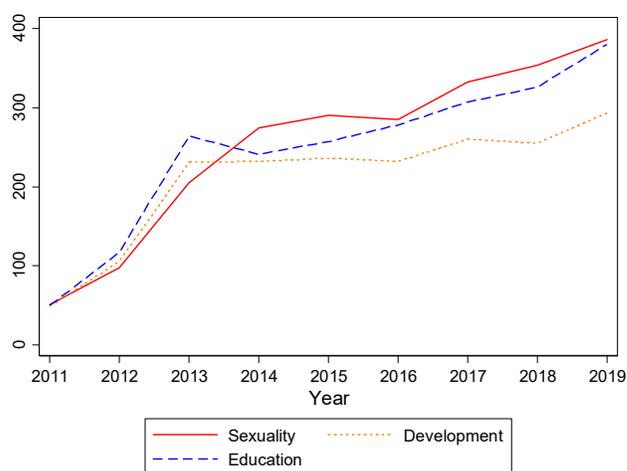


Figure 2: Comparison of New and Old Frames of CEFMU Over Time



³ While GNB had over 1300 members at the time of the study, only 147 members had published English-language documents online. The study authors make the case that this sample is sufficient because it includes a diverse subset of organizations “actively presenting discourse publicly concerning the international norm.” The study also explains that the vast majority of GNB organizations with an online presence produce their documents in English (or with available English translation). Therefore, the researchers do not believe they excluded a significant number of organizations based on only including English documents in the study. Nonetheless, it is important to acknowledge the limitations based on the size and language of the sample.

WHAT DROVE THE CHANGE?

In addition to their quantitative analysis of published documents, the researchers applied a qualitative methodology called process tracing to determine the factors that contributed to the shift in discourse. They interviewed AJWS staff, grantee partners, funders and close collaborators in the CEFMU field to gather their perspectives on the changes that had occurred and what drove them.

Four key influential factors emerged from these interviews:

- 1 **Local, grassroots, feminist leadership:** The study concluded that “The new frame diffused as a result of the analysis and work of local partners [organizations and advocates working in places where CEFMU is prevalent].” The researchers found that the conceptualization of child marriage as an AGYW’s empowerment issue linked to control of girls’ sexuality was not a Western-imposed idea. Local grassroots experts from the Global South were crucial to both the introduction of this framing on the global stage and its ability to take hold among other stakeholders in the field. The leadership of these local, grassroots feminists helped establish trust and credibility for the new frame and drive greater consensus in the field at large. The research team wrote, “The goal was not to take a Northern/Western framing to local audiences; instead, the focus was getting the work and voices of local actors to an international audience.”
- 2 **Convening, dialogue and interaction:** In addition to credible, experienced local advocates, another core factor was funding opportunities for local and global stakeholders to have frank, open and confidential discussions. The study authors found that occasions for active engagement and honest conversation among people working in both local and international contexts resulted in a deeper level of buy-in to this new way of thinking. Repeated gathering and dialogue facilitated the creation of “an ‘informal tribe’ of like-minded and empowered groups” that could then present a critical mass in favor of the discussion of AGYW agency and sexuality in global advocacy spaces. A subsequent study by the same research team underscored these findings: organizations most likely to report adopting the holistic, feminist frame for CEFMU said that their change in thinking was influenced by research and their opportunities to engage in dialogue with peers and colleagues about new research on CEFMU.
- 3 **Linking CEFMU to the movement for gender equality:** Another critical element was the connection between CEFMU and a broader push for gender equality at a global level at a time when ideas about women’s empowerment had already taken hold. Significantly, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were adopted in late 2015. A critical mass of advocates worked for years to ensure that child marriage was included under SDG 5, “Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls.” This reflected a shared understanding of child marriage as an issue linked to gender equality. Developments like these show that the global environment was becoming more conducive to adopting a holistic, feminist understanding of child marriage.

Further, the researchers explained that according to prior research in sociology and international development, a framing that “provides a clear interpretation of the problem, remedy, and who is to blame” is more likely to proliferate. There was an opportune clarity in providing an explanation of CEFMU that positioned the **patriarchy as “a clear-cut violator”** and “empowerment or equality” as the remedy. This resonated with practitioners and advocates who were already fluent in these ideas as part of their worldview.

- 4 **Time:** Finally, the research team emphasized that a generous timeframe was key. They pointed to the all-too-common funder requirement for evidence of change in a year or less. In the case of evolving the understanding of “a world problem, [they] caution against focusing only on short-term changes. [The researchers] hope future work continues to problematize the issue of time in the advocacy process.”

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- i Greene, M.E., Perlson S.M., Hart, J. and Mullinax, M. (2018). *The Centrality of Sexuality for Understanding Child, Early and Forced Marriage*. Washington, D.C. and New York: GreeneWorks and American Jewish World Service. https://ajws.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/centrality_of_sex__final.pdf; CEFM and Sexuality Working Group. (2019). *Tackling the taboo: sexuality and gender-transformative programmes to end child, early and forced marriage and unions*. <https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/learning-resources/resource-centre/tackling-the-taboo-sexuality-and-gender-transformative-programmes-to-end-child-early-and-forced-marriage-and-unions/>
- ii Murdie, A., Barney, M., Park, B., Hart, J., and Mullinax, M. *From Age to Agency: Frame Adoption and Diffusion Concerning the International Human Rights Norm Against Child, Early, and Forced Marriage*.
- iii Vilán, A. (2022). "The evolution of the global movement to end child marriage." *Journal of Human Rights* 21, No. 2: 227-244.
- iv Murdie, A., Barney, M., Park, B., Hart, J., and Mullinax, M. (under review). *The Process of Frame Change and Embedding Among Organizations Working on Child, Early, and Forced Marriage*.