UC San Diego
CENTER ON GENDER EQUITY AND HEALTH

Resourcing the Drivers of Change:

Making the Case for Investing in Social Norms to Improve Adolescent Girls and Young Women's Health and Well-Being

CHILD, EARLY, & FORCED MARRIAGE

> *"There were times in this village when if a girl is not engaged in anything for a while they will push you to get married but, for me I told them that I am not ready to get married yet. No one can push me into marriage. Since the programme came, I can speak in public. I can't be forced to marry early at all."* — ***Adolescent girl participating in Every Adolescent Girl Empowered and Resilient, Sierra Leone (2022)***

Let's Imagine

Imagine a world where the harmful social norms that drive child, early, and forced marriage are challenged, girls' choices are respected, and communities unite to end the practice. A world where accurate information replaces myths, and women and girls are free to pursue the futures they envision. **This is the promise of investing in social norms interventions: approaches that shift social norms so that child, early, and forced marriage is never justified, and girls choose if, when, and to whom they will marry.**



This vision is already within reach. In Sierra Leone, the **Every Adolescent Girl Empowered and Resilient** program helped catalyze conversations about social expectations and the harms associated with child, early, and forced marriage, alongside broader issues related to girls' education, protection, and empowerment. Over an eight-month period, the program created learning opportunities for out-of-school adolescent girls aged 13-19 years, while engaging communities through national and local radio broadcasts, a social media campaign, and community dialogues. The impact was significant: 49% of regular radio listeners (compared with 43% of non-listeners) were more likely to **strongly agree that girls and women of any age should have the right to choose whom they marry** ($p<0.05$). Similarly, 40% of regular radio listeners (compared to 33% of non-listeners) were more likely to **strongly agree that girls and women of any age can refuse marriage** ($p<0.05$)**.** Although child, early, and forced marriage is a deeply-rooted practice in Sierra Leone, these shifts in perspectives suggest meaningful momentum toward reducing its acceptability and prevalence.

Social norms programming is not an add-on to efforts to reduce child, early, and forced marriage—it is core to lasting progress. Decades of investment in policy reform and girls' empowerment programs have yielded significant gains, but without shifting deeply held beliefs and social norms progress risks stalling. When norms shift and supportive social environments are created, other investments are amplified and sustained.

Meeting the Moment

Now is the time to invest in social norms change: a proven strategy to protect past gains and secure a future free from child, early, and forced marriage.

Decades of investment have improved outcomes related to child, early, and forced marriage. Yet today, this progress is under threat. Economic uncertainty, geopolitical instability, and shifting donor priorities are straining the ecosystem. Funding streams are sunsetting or shrinking; some partners are ceasing operations altogether. The result is reduced services, disrupted partnerships, and the closure of critical programs and research. Fragmented, short-term funding threatens to reverse hard-won gains in equity and rights, especially for adolescent girls and young women.

These challenges also present an opportunity. Now is the time to re-energize agenda-setting, forge new collaborations, and invest in innovative approaches that can sustain and accelerate progress. Centering the role of shifting social and gender norms can remove barriers necessary to support change. This is outlined in a recent global scoping review by the Center on Gender Equity and Health at UC San Diego.

Why invest in creating a supportive social environment to prevent and respond to child, early, and forced marriage?

Evidence shows investments in social norms interventions lead to meaningful improvements, including reduced acceptance of child, early, and forced marriage, as well as the age at which girls marry.

Social norms matter. Although criminalizing child, early, and forced marriage is widely promoted as a key strategy for ending the practice and signaling public disapproval, evidence from sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia suggests that legal reforms alone have had limited impact—particularly in rural settings where enforcement is weak and social norms deeply entrenched. To achieve lasting, large-scale change, investments must support programs that shift social norms alongside legal reforms. **While evidence on how to shift social norms was once scarce, effective models and tools are now emerging and are ready for scale.**

Social norms, unwritten rules that shape behavior, often reinforce gender inequities and sustain the acceptability of child, early, and forced marriage. Findings from the global scoping review reveal that these norms undermine the safety, dignity, and agency of adolescent girls and young women. Even where laws prohibit the practice, norms that tie a girl's value to purity, marriage, and childbearing continue to drive it. Although some programs offer girls alternative pathways through education or economic opportunities, many discontinue these pursuits soon after puberty to enter marriage. While policy reforms and community-based initiatives have contributed to progress, sustained advancement toward the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals will remain elusive until the social and behavioral drivers of child, early, and forced marriage are addressed.

In today's uncertain funding climate, **solutions that tackle root causes are more urgent than ever. Norm-shifting investments**—whether through engaging community champions, mass media, or edutainment—can transform harmful social norms, reinforce positive ones, and **help ensure that efforts to end child, early, and forced marriage are effective, sustained, and scaled.**

Scale and sustainability through social norms investments. Investing in social norm change, alongside complementary policy reforms and programs, is a cost-effective upstream solution with lasting, cross-cutting benefits, including improved maternal and child health and reduced mortality. The impacts span the life course of girls and women, from infancy through adulthood, and extend to entire communities. *See page 4 for examples of successful programs*.

- **Change is possible and social norms programs can prevent or delay child, early, and forced marriages in a program time frame.**
- **Child, early, and forced marriage social norms programs can be rigorously measured and evaluated.**
- **Social norms programs can be adapted, replicated and scaled to meet child, early, and forced marriages outcomes at scale.**

The Opportunity

Now is the time to invest in social norms change—cost-effective, scalable solutions that empower girls, advance equity, and create lasting impact across generations. By supporting proven social norms programs to prevent and respond to child, early, and forced marriage, funders can help build supportive environments in which adolescent girls, young women, and their communities can thrive. **Your investment in social norms change will not only strengthen prevention and response to this and other gender-based violence outcomes, but also accelerate progress across a wide array of outcomes, including sexual and reproductive health, maternal and child health and mortality, education, gender equity, and economic participation.**

What should funders support?

Invest in effective social norms programs that **protect progress, drive change, and secure lasting outcomes** for girls, women, their children, and communities.

Invest in Research and Evidence. Fund mixed-methods research to design and test context-specific approaches and generate actionable evidence on how social norm change reduces child, early, and forced marriage. Strengthen the evidence base by centering the lived experiences of adolescent girls and systematically reporting implementation lessons.

Prioritize Multi-Level, Integrated Programs. Fund programs that connect individual, community, and systems change. Effective interventions align with complementary efforts across education, economic participation, legal frameworks and health.

Engage Trusted Champions and Platforms. Support programs that work with faith and cultural leaders, alongside mass and entertainment media. Involve communities in planning and design, spark reflection, make norms visible, and diffuse new ideas and norms.

Ensure Scale and Sustainability. Provide multi-year, flexible funding for interventions to support the adaptation of existing interventions and the development of new approaches. Encourage partners to design, test, and refine models with sustainability in mind by engaging stakeholders, strengthening local ownership, and integrating approaches into existing systems, policies and financing mechanisms.

Strengthen Monitoring and Learning. Invest in high-quality monitoring and evaluation across projects to monitor unintended consequences, enable adaptive management, compare results across contexts, and build evidence of long-term impact and cost-effectiveness.

Amplify and Coordinate. Support the publication and sharing of results, elevate grantee achievements, and align funding priorities and research agendas to strengthen the global evidence base and prevent fragmentation.

Programs in Action

Social norms programs can be adapted, replicated and scaled to meet child, early, and forced marriage outcomes at scale.

Sista2Sista girls-only clubs deliver a 40-exercise curriculum over one year to addresses norms related to sexual and gender-based violence, HIV testing, and family planning, while providing mentorship and support for vulnerable adolescent girls and young women ages 10–24. Initially launched in 2013 across 26 districts in Zimbabwe by the Ministry of Health and the United Nations Population Fund, the program was scaled to an additional 30 districts in 2017 by the National AIDS Council with support from the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria.

Results from an evaluation using program data from 91,612 adolescent girls who participated in Sista2Sista from 2013 to 2019 showed that completing the entire curriculum…

- Reduced the likelihood of child marriage by nearly 60.0% (p-value < 0.001)
- Reduced the likelihood of adolescent pregnancy by 62.0% (p-value < 0.01)

Change is possible and social norms programs can prevent or delay child, early, and forced marriages in a program time frame.

The ***Bangladeshi Association for Life Skills, Income, and Knowledge for Adolescents*** program aimed to address norms related to gender equity, child, early, and forced marriage, sexual and reproductive health, and reduce child marriage among girls 12-18 years in three districts in southern Bangladesh. During an 18-month period, girls received educational support, gender-rights awareness and livelihoods training. Results from a randomized controlled trial showed delayed marriage, along with improvements in indicators linked to education, health, and social outcomes later in life.

Evaluation results at the end of the program showed that relative to control communities…

- Girls were one-third less likely to be married as children (OR 0.69–0.77; p-value ≤ 0.001) and those who were single at the beginning of the study were one-fourth less likely to be married by the end of the study (OR 0.76-0.78; p-value ≤ 0.01)
- Girls who received educational support or training on gender rights were 31% less likely to be married as children (p-value ≤ 0.001)

Child, early, and forced marriage social norms programs can be rigorously measured and evaluated.

Girls Holistic Development in Senegal aims to shift norms, attitudes, and behaviors related to girls' education, child marriage, adolescent pregnancy, and female genital cutting. The program trains grandmothers and teachers to counsel girls ages 10-14 years and their caregivers, and to facilitate community activities that catalyze intergenerational dialogue and collective action. Multiple mixed-methods evaluations show positive shifts in social norms and related behavior.

In communities that participated in the program, results from a realist evaluation indicated that, relative to control sites…

- Very young girls were significantly more likely to believe that no parents in their community supported marrying girls under 16 years (56.6%) compared with girls in control sites (28.4%) (p-value < 0.01)
- Caregivers were less likely to report intending to marry their adolescent daughter before age 16 (13.3%) than caregivers in control sites (27.9%) (p-value <0.05)