



IMPLEMENTATION PLAN

ADDRESSING CHILD, EARLY, AND FORCED MARRIAGE AND UNIONS

USAID'S COMMITMENT

Millions of women and girls are at risk of child, early, and forced marriage and unions (CEFMU), which are abuses of human rights and forms of gender-based violence that undermine security around the world, including in the United States.¹

CEFMU is a consequence of deeply rooted gender inequalities and intersecting oppressions that negatively and disproportionately affect girls. It is exacerbated by poverty, insecurity, conflict, inadequate educational and economic opportunities, and restrictions on girls' sexuality, among other factors. One in five girls — approximately 12 million each year — and one in 20 boys marry before the age of 18, and these numbers may grow due to the COVID-19 pandemic.² CEFMU threatens the futures of all children, particularly girls, by depriving them of their rights to make decisions about their relationships and lives; disrupting their education; increasing their risk of violence, discrimination, abuse, and poor sexual, reproductive, maternal, and mental health outcomes; and preventing their full participation in economic, political, and social spheres. These

TERMINOLOGY

Child marriage (also called early marriage) is a formal or informal union where one or both parties are under the age of 18.^a Forced marriage is a marriage in which one or both spouses do not give full and free consent, regardless of age.^b Early unions are informal unions in which a girl or boy lives with a partner as if married before the age of 18.^c The acronyms “CEFM” — and increasingly, “CEFMU” — are often used to encompass all of these practices.

(a) [UNICEF 2021](#), (b) [UNFPA 2020](#), (c) [Girls Not Brides 2020](#)

¹ The White House. National strategy on gender equity and equality. 2021. Available from: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/National-Strategy-on-Gender-Equity-and-Equality.pdf>.

² UNICEF. COVID-19: a threat to progress against child marriage. 2021. Available from: <https://data.unicef.org/resources/covid-19-a-threat-to-progress-against-child-marriage/>.

negative outcomes undermine countries' capacity to develop fully and equitably. While ending CEFMU, in itself, will not create more gender equal societies, it is a crucial step toward this broader goal.

CEFM is now firmly on the global development agenda, most prominently in Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) Target 5.3, which calls for eliminating “all harmful practices, such as child, early and forced marriage and female genital mutilation.” While governments around the world have committed to ending the practice, transformative and multi-sectoral actions are needed to strengthen and translate these commitments into action.

USAID envisions a world in which girls, boys, and children of diverse sexual orientations, gender identities, gender expressions, and sex characteristics (SOGIESC) are free from the risk of CEFMU and are equitably valued and empowered, with safe and enabling environments that support them to realize their full potential.

USAID has a long history of investing in gender equality efforts and preventing gender-based violence around the globe, as well as supporting women's and girls' human rights, including through efforts to end CEFMU. This engagement was intensified a decade ago, with the USAID Vision for Action on Ending Child Marriage and Meeting the Needs of Married Children and has been expanded significantly in recent years through a number of cross-agency and agency-specific policies and strategies. These include the U.S. National Strategy on Gender Equity and Equality; U.S. National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security; and U.S. Government Action Plan on Children in Adversity, as well as the USAID Strategy to Prevent and Respond to Gender-Based Violence Globally; USAID Adolescent Girl Strategy; USAID Gender Equality and Female Empowerment Policy; USAID Youth in Development Policy; and USAID Counter-Trafficking in Persons Policy.

In concert with a **Theory of Change for Addressing Child, Early, and Forced Marriage and Unions** and a **CEFMU Learning Agenda**, this eight-year implementation plan provides a road map for USAID to achieve its vision, both at a global level and in priority countries. It outlines a plan for USAID to leverage its investments with governments, funders, implementing partners, and women- and girl-led organizations across the globe to strategically invest in gender-transformative, context-specific, evidence-based, sector-specific, and cross-sectoral programming and research. It further outlines a plan for USAID to contribute to answering the most pressing questions about CEFMU, meeting the needs of married adolescents and ultimately ending the practice.³ These plans include making funding opportunities available through headquarters- and mission-supported mechanisms.

³ The term “married adolescents” in this document is intended to include children and adolescents who are currently married, separated, divorced, or widowed.

USAID: A GLOBAL LEADER AND INFLUENCER

Other funders and actors have contributed significantly to ending CEFMU and meeting the needs of married adolescents, and this plan seeks to position USAID to be a thought leader and influencer in global platforms focused on these important issues. Specifically, it proposes that the Agency leverage funding, as well as evidence generated through research and programs, to support and inform the work of other funders, multilateral agencies, national and subnational governments, implementing partners, and private and civil society actors to accelerate their commitments to addressing CEFMU.

CEFMU affects numerous areas of global development of interest to USAID, including education, other forms of gender-based violence, sexual and reproductive health and rights, economic empowerment, conflict, and crisis. Engaging more deeply in addressing CEFMU presents opportunities for expanded work with a range of stakeholders across sectors on research, program design, implementation, and dissemination.

THE NEED FOR GENDER-TRANSFORMATIVE APPROACHES

CEFMU is a manifestation of gender inequality, which itself has diverse dimensions and drivers. The practice is rooted in unequal gender power relations embedded in a system that sustains itself through discriminatory gender stereotypes and norms, as well as unequal access to and control over resources. Further, the identities of girls, women, and individuals of diverse SOGIESC intersect with age, race, religion, caste, ethnicity, geography, socioeconomic status, education, and other factors to impose multiple layers of discrimination in diverse contexts. As such, transforming the discriminatory systems and structures that underlie CEFMU is critically important to effect and sustain change.

STRATEGIC OBJECTIVES

In addition to the core principles described in the accompanying **Theory of Change: Addressing Child, Early, and Forced Marriage and Unions**, this plan proposes that USAID be guided by the following strategic objectives as it develops and implements specific actions to achieve a world in which all children are free from the risk of CEFMU and are equitably valued and empowered, with safe and enabling environments that support them to realize their full potential.

INTEGRATE CEFMU PREVENTION AND RESPONSE ACROSS ALL SECTORS

CEFMU has consequences at the individual and household levels and negatively affects economic and societal development. The practice, which takes place in nearly every country in which USAID works, likely impedes the Agency from achieving its goals across multiple sectors. Efforts to address it must therefore be integrated into all relevant sectors to create comprehensive strategies for reducing and mitigating the practice, including meeting the needs of married adolescents. This includes, at a minimum, attention within global health; education; economic growth; crisis and conflict; democracy, human rights, and governance; youth; and gender equality and women's empowerment.⁴ As addressing CEFMU is not the core responsibility of any single sector, however, bureaus and missions should consider ways to

⁴ Glinski AM, Sexton M, Meyers L. The child, early, and forced marriage resource guide task order. Banyan Global. 2015. Available from: <https://www.usaid.gov/documents/1865/child-early-and-forced-marriage-resource-guide>.

leverage resources and collaborate through more integrated, holistic, and multi-sectoral approaches. Indeed, programs are most successful when they consider and simultaneously address the multiple factors associated with CEFMU, such as education, health, and economic development.

Evidence indicates that context-specific programs and combinations of programs such as girls' empowerment; access to quality education; provision of comprehensive sexuality education and gender-sensitive sexual, reproductive, and maternal health services; parental and community engagement; and economic incentives and opportunities, along with laws and policies, can all be effective in preventing CEFMU and addressing needs of married adolescents.^{5,6,7,8} Investment in these programmatic approaches can often fit seamlessly into the work of USAID across many sectors. In all cases, CEFMU should be integrated into existing or planned programs only after undertaking appropriate gender analyses in each setting where the work will be focused and should be applied at all levels of the socio-ecological framework (i.e., individual, interpersonal, community, and structural) to shift underlying unequal and harmful norms.

INVEST IN GENDER-TRANSFORMATIVE PROGRAMMING ACROSS THE CONTINUUM OF CEFMU PREVENTION AND RESPONSE

In addition to integrating CEFMU within and across sectors and programs, stand-alone programs specifically designed to prevent CEFMU and respond to the needs of married adolescents are needed to accelerate progress. Stand-alone programming should be developed only after undertaking appropriate gender and gender-based violence (GBV) analyses — in line with the USAID Automated Directives System (ADS) 205 requirement for gender analysis to inform USAID country strategies, projects, and activities — so that programming is survivor-centered and responds to local needs. GBV-focused gender analysis questions are also outlined in the *Foundational Elements for Gender-Based Violence Programming in Development*.

Further, interventions should work across the socio-ecological model to effect change at the individual, family, community, and institutional levels to promote gender-equal norms and systems, as noted above. For example, programs that empower individual girls with knowledge and skills may include components at the household level to expand male engagement in care work so girls can go to school and marry only when and if they are ready; at the community level to shift social norms around the value of girls and women; and through education systems to promote gender-equal instruction and policies. Even if programs change the age of marriage, they will not shift underlying norms and power structures that perpetuate inequality unless they emphasize gender norms and promote gender equality.

⁵ Kalamar AM, Lee-Rife S, Hindin MJ. Interventions to prevent child marriage among young people in low- and middle-income countries: a systematic review of the published and gray literature. *J Adolesc Health*. 2016 Sep;59(3 Suppl):S16-21. doi: 10.1016/j.jadohealth.2016.06.015.

⁶ Petroni S, Steinhaus M, Fenn NS, Stobenau K, Gregowski A. New findings on child marriage in sub-Saharan Africa. *Annals of global health*. 2017 Sep;83(5-6):781-790. doi: 10.1016/j.aogh.2017.09.001.

⁷ Chae S, Ngo TD. The global state of evidence on interventions to prevent child marriage. 2017. Available from: https://www.popcouncil.org/uploads/pdfs/2017PGY_GIRLCenterResearchBrief_01.pdf.

⁸ Svanemyr J. Literature review on effects of interventions to reduce the prevalence of child marriage. 2020. Available from: <https://www.cmi.no/publications/7358-literature-review-on-effects-of-interventions-to-reduce-the-prevalence-of-child-marriage>.

EXPAND COLLABORATION AND PARTNERSHIPS WITH OTHER STAKEHOLDERS TO LEVERAGE RESOURCES AND PROMOTE CROSS-LEARNING AND ENHANCED PROGRAMMING

USAID should foster collaboration and expand its partnerships and engagement with multilateral agencies and programs, other bilateral funders, foundations, and private sector and civil society actors, including girl-, youth- and women-led organizations at the local and regional levels.⁹ Inclusive partnerships with local organizations and networks will allow for the amplification of voices that too often have been left out and that are critical to create more effective and sustainable programs and investments.

SUPPORT PARTNER GOVERNMENTS TO ADOPT POLICIES, PLANS, AND EXPANDED CAPACITY TO REDUCE CEFMU AND ADDRESS THE NEEDS OF MARRIED ADOLESCENTS

USAID aims to support policies and strategies at the local, country, and global levels in ways that create enabling and empowering environments for reducing CEFMU and for advancing the rights of all girls and women, including married adolescents. At the same time, USAID recognizes that laws and policies are necessary but often insufficient to end this harmful practice.

USAID should engage in and encourage partnerships to mobilize political will and enable action to adopt and implement gender-transformative legal and policy frameworks and activities that reduce CEFMU and build supportive environments for gender equality. This strategy aligns with the Agency's commitment to support country efforts to meet global policy commitments, including the Sustainable Development Goals.

DOCUMENT PROGRESS AND CHALLENGES, INTEGRATE LESSONS LEARNED, AND PROMOTE BEST PRACTICES: MONITORING, EVALUATION, AND LEARNING

Thoughtfully designed and well-implemented monitoring and evaluation to track progress toward the goals of this implementation plan will help hold USAID accountable to its commitments and will contribute to expanded global learning about CEFMU. Additionally, through an ambitious and wide-ranging learning agenda, USAID aims to continuously learn from and improve its programs and the programs of others. Specifically, the **CEFMU Learning Agenda** reflects work currently being carried out by USAID and its partners that will inform USAID programs as well as the broader global research agenda. At the same time, the learning agenda can serve as a guide for potential questions to include in new research, impact, and performance evaluations, and other analyses that are conducted under future USAID investments and programming.

⁹ The UNICEF-UNFPA Global Programme to Accelerate Action to End Child Marriage, for example, has operated since 2016 in some of the most high-prevalence and high-burden countries for child marriage.

STRATEGIES AND ACTIVITIES

A growing evidence base documents the many, often interconnected, drivers of CEFMU, from the individual level to the societal and structural levels, which differ across and within country contexts and settings. For example, research and programmatic experiences from parts of South Asia suggest that families, influenced by long-standing and deep-seated social norms, dominate decision-making related to marriage. This is illustrated in the following quote from CARE's Tipping Point program in Bangladesh and Nepal.

“It is a complex set of steps and exchanges involving families, neighbors, business interests and government people... Throughout this, though, the voices and decision-making power of the adolescents themselves is absent/negligible... When adolescents, especially girls, try to assert their choices around if, who, and when to marry, they are often stigmatized by their families and communities.”¹⁰

Many of the factors described are at play in communities in different parts of the world where CEFMU is a social norm. However, increasing evidence from other regions of the world, including parts of sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America and the Caribbean, suggests that CEFMU is not so much a norm as one of the only options available to girls as well as boys, particularly in areas where education and employment opportunities are limited, and especially for girls who become pregnant. Evidence from Kenya, Senegal, Uganda, and Zambia, for example, suggests that:

“Sexual relations, unplanned pregnancy, and school dropout often precede child marriage... Further, unlike in South Asia, where family members typically determine the spouse a girl will marry, most girls in the Africa study settings have greater autonomy in partner choice selection.”¹¹

Understanding the local context and what drives CEFMU is critically important to identify effective solutions to end the practice. While there are no one-size-fits-all solutions, interventions need to be gender transformative, tackling the gender inequality that underlies more proximal drivers of CEFMU.

A range of strategies and investments is needed to address the drivers and consequences of CEFMU and to effect change at all levels. USAID's engagement in addressing CEFMU will necessarily take place within a broader global ecosystem of actors that are employing such strategies. As such, USAID should aim to align its programming with these efforts, as well as those that address other forms of gender-based violence, such as FGM/C.

At the country level, for example, USAID should first review existing national action plans and strategies to end CEFMU, many of which have been developed through government and civil society collaboration and all of which reflect national commitments and local context. At all levels, USAID should seek to understand the priorities of funders and actors and where it can best fill gaps. CEFMU affects girls, boys

¹⁰ CARE. Tipping point: digging up the roots of child marriage to replant the future. 2016. Available from: https://www.care.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/CARE_Tipping_Point_Web.pdf.

¹¹ Petroni S, Steinhaus M, Fenn NS, Stoebenau K, Gregowski A. New findings on child marriage in sub-Saharan Africa. *Annals of global health*. 2017 Sep;83(5-6):781-790. doi: 10.1016/j.aogh.2017.09.001.

and children of diverse SOGIESC. However, girls are disproportionately, and more negatively, affected by the practice, and as such, USAID should keep girls at the center of its work.

Efforts to respond to CEFMU fall along a continuum from prevention to mitigation and response. But, USAID's efforts cannot focus on only part of the continuum; interconnected programming that prevents CEFMU and meets the needs of married adolescents is required.

Many strategies USAID should undertake may both prevent and mitigate CEFMU. This said, all programs should clearly articulate the target audience in program design and implementation so the work that seeks to meet the needs of ever-married adolescents is clearly delineated from the work that seeks to prevent CEFMU.

With this in mind, USAID should support gender-transformative, context-specific, evidence-based, sector-specific, and cross-sectoral approaches to foster enabling environments for change at all levels — from family and community to institutional and structural. Ultimately, the strategies outlined here will contribute to the elimination of CEFMU in priority countries and globally.

STRATEGY I: ADVANCING GIRLS' RIGHTS, DECISION-MAKING, AND LEADERSHIP, ESPECIALLY FOR THE MOST MARGINALIZED

Advancing girls' rights and decision-making and leadership skills, especially for the most marginalized, can be the first step in shifting power and control from parents to girls, and can also increase their aspirations and reduce their social isolation. In addition to providing opportunities for girls to become more empowered, programs can create a more enabling environment for girls by engaging family and community leaders, who may also benefit from the resources. Advancing rights and decision-making abilities can be especially relevant for married adolescent girls who may experience isolation and lack of resources previously available to them.

Activities:

- Expand and strengthen programming that enhances girls' empowerment, and meaningfully engage girls in program design, implementation, and monitoring. This may include the creation of mentorship programs; community-based rights awareness and training programs; and safe spaces where they can learn about legal, health, and educational resources available to them; gain skills and training; access livelihood support; learn financial literacy; and increase their self-confidence, among other activities.
- Provide married girls with access to friendly, inclusive spaces to learn skills and receive support and services, including resources and information about sexual and reproductive health. Programs can also engage husbands to enhance couple communication and promote more equitable decision-making, gender norms, and power dynamics within relationships.
- Design and implement programs that engage parents, guardians, teachers, community leaders, and faith-based actors as allies for girls and as creators of supportive environments in which girls can learn, lead, and thrive.

STRATEGY 2: PROMOTING COMPREHENSIVE SEXUALITY EDUCATION

Developmentally appropriate, comprehensive, rights-based sexuality education that addresses power and gender provides resources allowing children and adolescents to make healthy and informed decisions about relationships, sexual activity, and whether, when, and whom to marry. Further, making these resources available to families and communities facilitates learning and dialogue to promote more gender-equal social norms. In addition, this kind of education, paired with appropriate health services (as described below) can reduce rates of early pregnancy that contribute to CEFMU in some settings. For married children and adolescents, sexuality education provides much-needed knowledge and resources to support equitable decision-making about sexual activity, pregnancy, and childbirth.

Activities:

- Support comprehensive, rights-based, developmentally appropriate, gender-transformative sexuality education programs in and out of school that address power dynamics and gender. Provide gender-transformative training and guidance for teachers, school staff, and others who implement these programs. Programs should address the root causes of CEFMU and provide information on sexual and reproductive health and rights. Programs should include instruction about contraception and family planning, as well as other aspects of sexuality and relationships, including gender norms, power dynamics, and decision-making. Providing a safe and confidential space where adolescents can ask questions and raise concerns is critical to addressing these issues.
- Work with men and boys to educate them about CEFMU and challenge their privilege and power, and to encourage all to become active supporters of gender equality and ending CEFMU.
- Promote enabling environments for gender-equal norms. Engage in strategic partnerships with key stakeholders at all levels during program design and implementation, including local policymakers, community leaders, and family members.

STRATEGY 3: SUPPORTING ADOLESCENT-RESPONSIVE AND GENDER TRANSFORMATIVE HEALTH SYSTEMS

Increasing evidence suggests pregnancy is a driver of CEFMU in many settings. Harmful gender norms and inequalities contribute to girls' vulnerability to many negative physical and mental health outcomes. Changes at the systems level can support children and adolescents of all genders by providing access to adolescent-responsive, non-discriminatory health services that meet their needs and empowering married and unmarried adolescents to make decisions about their health and well-being. These services may prevent CEFMU and are responsive to the needs of adolescents, including preventing unintended pregnancy and supporting safe and consensual sexual relationships.

Married girls are at higher risk than their unmarried peers for early pregnancy and childbearing, which increases the risk of morbidity and mortality for them (particularly very young adolescents ages 10–14) and their children. Married girls also face increased risk of intimate partner violence, sexually transmitted infections (STIs), and poor mental health and psychological well-being, including anxiety and depression.

Married girls have distinct sexual and reproductive health needs, including access to information and services on pregnancy, STIs, and HIV prevention, as well as maternal health care. Yet the health care system often treats them in the same way as other pregnant women, disregarding the differences in their physical, emotional, and mental development, as well as specific barriers they face as married adolescents.

Activities:

- Build a health care system that is accessible and responsive to the needs of adolescents in which providers establish relationships that foster trust and communication. Engage health care providers as advocates against CEFMU and train them to be aware of how the health needs of married adolescents differ from older pregnant women and how to educate patients about the health risks associated with child marriage.
- Expand access for all unmarried and married adolescents and women to age-responsive, inclusive, developmentally appropriate sexual, reproductive, maternal, and mental health services, including contraception. This includes training and equipping providers to respond to the needs of pregnant adolescents before, during, and after pregnancy and childbirth.

STRATEGY 4: SUPPORTING EDUCATION, ECONOMIC, AND EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITIES

Poverty is one of the factors most closely associated with CEFMU, interacting with inadequate educational and economic opportunities for women and girls. Improving gender-equal norms and providing more — and more equitable — opportunities for girls, particularly education and employment, are likely to improve CEFMU outcomes. Interventions that increase enrollment and keep girls in school have shown promising results in reducing CEFMU, specifically those with an economic incentive for girls and their families. Promoting access to livelihood and employment opportunities, regardless of gender, marital, or reproductive status, is equally important to achieve equitable and far-reaching results.

Activities:

- Increase access to quality, safe education and skills training programs for all children and adolescents, with a focus on girls and children of diverse SOGIESC. Prioritize programs that reduce school-related gender-based violence and that build skills and agency to raise possibilities of life options beyond marriage and parenthood.
- Support the provision of school fees, uniforms, books, and other school supplies and safe transportation for all adolescents who wish to attend school.
- Collaborate with governments and the private sector, as applicable, to support local efforts to enhance economic opportunities for families.
- Expand access to economic opportunities for girls, regardless of marital or relationship status, through investment in training and education programs, and by enhancing the environment for girls and women to equally access safe, satisfying, paid employment opportunities outside the home.

STRATEGY 5: ADVANCING GENDER-EQUAL SOCIAL NORMS

CEFMU is driven by gender inequality, including patriarchal norms related to women's and girls' sexuality. As such, addressing these issues systematically is critical. This can be done by shifting away from harmful norms and toward more gender equal ones that actively promote alternatives to early marriage, enhance the agency of adolescents, and discourage CEFMU. Comprehensive, multi-sectoral, context-specific, gender-transformative approaches that engage local communities can support such shifts.

Activities:

- Engage in social and behavior change interventions, such as traditional and social media campaigns, and community-led efforts that seek to influence societal expectations of adolescents, particularly girls. These campaigns can prevent CEFMU by shifting the norm that girls are only valued in the role of wife and mother and can respond to the needs of married adolescents by creating new norms for the expectations of girls and boys and women and men once they are married.
- Engage men and boys to act as allies and champions for girls and women, and against CEFMU.
- Work with parents, guardians, teachers, community leaders, and faith-based actors to raise awareness of CEFMU, discuss alternatives, and change how girls are seen and valued in their communities.
- Support gender-transformative child protection systems and services, including gender-responsive parenting programs.

STRATEGY 6: SUPPORTING ENABLING LEGAL AND POLICY FRAMEWORKS AND SYSTEMS

Supportive legal and policy frameworks are critical to build enabling environments for women's and girls' agency and empowerment, and to address and end CEFMU. Given that plural legal systems are often allowed to exercise authority beyond the reach of national governments, strategies must consider the need to work with traditional and customary judicial systems.

Activities:

- Increase the capacity and commitment of governments, civil society, and the private sector in partner countries — at the national and local levels — to design and implement gender equal laws, policies, and strategies. These gender-transformative, cross-sectoral approaches to preventing and responding to CEFMU might include laws to prevent marriage for individuals younger than 18 and to allow ever-married, pregnant, or parenting children to return to school and to access the services they need.
- Support policies that address the drivers of CEFMU, such as providing universal access to education, including for pregnant or parenting adolescents; adolescent-responsive sexual and reproductive health services; and expanded access to childcare to prevent girls from dropping out of school to care for their children or siblings. Special attention should be given to marriage and family law, property and inheritance rights, birth and marriage registration, sexual and reproductive rights, and protection from gender-based violence.

- Support gender-transformative training for child protection, law enforcement, and justice sectors to enforce child marriage laws and support married adolescents.
- Support the development and use of mechanisms to maintain accountability by stakeholders at all levels for gender-equal laws, commitments, and plans, including national strategies and plans of action to end CEFMU.

STRATEGY 7: GENERATING CONTEXT-SPECIFIC DATA AND EVIDENCE TO INFORM INTERVENTIONS

More is known now about CEFMU than ever before, including its drivers and consequences, and how to prevent it. The challenge is to generate significantly more nuanced and context-specific data for those drivers and consequences within the diverse contexts in which CEFMU takes place, and to use that data to effectively design, implement, and evaluate targeted interventions that work. The **CEFMU Learning Agenda** includes a set of research and learning questions to address this challenge. The overarching questions include:

- What can prevent CEFMU in under-studied countries and contexts?
- Measuring success differently — how can CEFMU interventions promote girls’ agency and opportunities?
- What can prevent child and forced marriage in crisis and conflict settings?
- How can interventions tackle the taboo of sexuality as a key driver of CEFMU?
- What role can civil society — including youth-led, women’s rights, and grassroots organizations — play in supporting the most marginalized and underserved girls, ending CEFMU, and holding governments accountable?
- What are the needs of currently married girls, and how can they best be met?
- What are the needs of girls whose marriages have ended, and how can they best be met?
- What is the experience of married boys and of children of diverse SOGIESC?
- How do changes in societies, including laws and policies, affect CEFMU and broader issues related to adolescent sexuality?

STRATEGY 8: BUILDING PARTNERSHIPS

Regional and global partnerships have been developed to prevent and respond to CEFMU, as well as other barriers faced by adolescent girls. Successful implementation of the USAID plan to end CEFMU and respond to the needs of married adolescents requires robust, inclusive, and creative engagement with a range of these and other partners. USAID should leverage resources, mobilize political will, promote cross-learning, and enhance programming that builds upon and expands those efforts.

Activities:

- Increase collaboration with a diverse set of CEFMU stakeholders, including multilateral and bilateral organizations, host governments, foundations, the private sector, and international, national, and local nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and other civil society actors such as adolescent-led organizations and community and faith-based actors. Foster an open environment that encourages meaningful partnership and consultations to inform and continuously improve global efforts to prevent and respond to CEFMU.
- Engage with and support existing and new multilateral efforts to end child marriage
- Participate in the Child Marriage Research to Action Network (CRANK), established to facilitate interaction and coordination among researchers, policymakers, and programmers, and to fill priority research gaps.

PRIORITIZING CEFMU WITHIN USAID'S OPERATIONAL STRUCTURE

Agency leadership and staff at all USAID missions and bureaus have a role to play in the implementation of this plan, particularly in coordination and collaboration with regional, country level, and local partners.

- **Senior leadership:** USAID should designate a senior level leader to coordinate this eight-year implementation plan, support high-level USAID engagement on CEFMU-related issues in U.S. Government interagency processes and external fora, and promote accountability across the Agency for implementing the strategies described herein. USAID missions are encouraged to support high-level engagement on CEFMU issues within the country and the mission.
- **Agency-wide training and coordination:** To adequately equip staff across sectors, USAID should include CEFMU prevention and response in its Education, Health, and Economic Empowerment trainings for staff, among others. USAID should establish and maintain an Agency-wide CEFMU Community of Practice (COP) with designated points of contact in relevant regional and functional bureaus with responsibilities for implementing this plan and the associated **CEFMU Learning Agenda**. This COP can support relevant missions and bureaus with training, tools, and technical assistance to integrate CEFMU objectives in their portfolios and will facilitate the dissemination of best practices on addressing CEFMU within and outside the Agency.
- **Integration in the program cycle:** Automated Directives Systems Chapter 205 (ADS 205) provides guidance to all USAID operating units for integrating gender equality and female empowerment into USAID's program cycle and reminds staff that responsibilities are distributed across bureaus and staff roles. If a project or activity addresses CEFMU, operational plan narratives should describe CEFMU-related activities in detail. CEFMU prevention and response should be integrated into the program cycle in the following five areas:
 - *Agency level policy and strategy formulation:* Include specific guidance on how preventing CEFMU and addressing the needs of married adolescents is situated within any new or updated strategy or policy across the Agency, with the goal of supporting more gender-equal societies.

- *Country Development Cooperation Strategies (CDCS)*: Include gender-transformative, context-specific, evidence-based, sector-specific, and cross-sectoral programming to reduce CEFMU and address the needs of married adolescents as a priority within the objectives of the strategies developed in priority countries and include these initiatives in program resources and priorities.
- *Project design and implementation*: Include CEFMU prevention and address the needs of married adolescents in projects that target adolescents. Youth and other community stakeholders should be meaningfully engaged in the design and implementation of these projects.
- *Activity design and implementation*: Include gender-transformative and inclusive activities that prevent CEFMU and respond to the needs of married adolescents, and seek input from youth in designing programs and carrying out activities.
- *Monitoring, evaluation, and learning*: Collect context-specific, age- and sex-disaggregated data related to the drivers and consequences of CEFMU at the country and local level at all stages of the program cycle. Use that data to effectively design, implement, and evaluate targeted interventions in priority countries.

MEASURING PROGRESS: MONITORING, EVALUATION, AND LEARNING

This implementation plan is designed to guide USAID’s work on CEFMU through the year 2030. As an eight-year plan, it allows the agency to monitor progress through a process of collaboration, learning, and adaptation. The plan focuses on using best practices, lessons learned, and ongoing performance and impact evaluations and innovation across USAID strategies and activities.

The **USAID CEFMU Custom Indicators** are designed to support this process, and to work alongside the **USAID CEFMU Learning Agenda**, through which USAID can expand the global evidence base by using systematic organization and sharing generated evidence.

Further, as critical as it is to end CEFMU, ending CEFMU alone will not end gender inequality and empower girls and women. Thus, in monitoring and evaluating CEFMU programs, USAID should invest in the generation and appropriate use of innovative data and evidence and go beyond measuring whether individuals marry before age 18 to understand broader empowerment outcomes for girls, boys, young women, and children of diverse SOGIESC, as well as shifts in the underlying social factors that drive CEFMU.

Data should be collected and reported through a variety of mechanisms, such as performance plans and reports (PPRs). Examples of custom indicators include:

CEFMU PREVALENCE INDICATORS

- Percentage of women/men ages 20–24 who were first married or in union by age 18
- Percentage of women/men ages 20–24 who were first married or in union by age 15
- Median age at first marriage, female/male

INDICATORS OF PROGRAMMATIC SUCCESS

- Percentage of married girls/boys who say they wanted to get married at the time that they were married
- Percentage of girls who have life goals beyond roles of mother, wife, and homemaker, disaggregated by age and marital status
- Percentage of parents who support their child's decision to pursue roles and goals beyond those of mother, wife, and homemaker
- Percentage of parents who envision roles and trajectories for their daughters beyond those of mother, wife, and homemaker, disaggregated by sex of parent
- Percentage of unmarried girls/boys who are confident in their ability to pursue alternatives to CEFMU
- Percentage of adolescent girls who report having a say in important decisions (i.e., regarding schooling, marriage, finances, sex, pregnancy, childbearing), disaggregated by age and marital status
- Percentage of parents who say they will not marry their sons/daughters to a girl/boy younger than 18
- Number of national or subnational strategies or plans of action to address CEFMU
- Percentage of key stakeholders (parents, adolescents, young people, community and political leaders, and faith-based actors) who believe it is harmful to get married before age 18
- Percentage of organizations (i.e., nongovernmental organizations, local institutions, schools) receiving USAID support for CEFMU-related work that demonstrate improved performance
- Number of influential leaders (traditional, cultural, political, and faith-based actors) who have made public declarations against CEFMU and in support of alternative roles for girls
- Number of news media stories, edutainment programs, dramas, or films aired on television or radio that address CEFMU and related gender norms

INDICATORS OF PROGRESS TOWARD IMPLEMENTATION PLAN AND LEARNING AGENDA

- Number of activities that incorporate CEFMU prevention or response (new and existing)
- Amount of funding invested in CEFMU prevention or response programming
- Number of partnerships USAID engages in on CEFMU, by type of partner (i.e., funder, government, private sector, implementing partner, community-based organization)
- Number of governments USAID supports to develop or implement CEFMU laws, policies, and implementation plans

- Number of research studies funded to build evidence on CEFMU
- Number of new trainings or materials (e.g., toolkits, how-to notes, and fact sheets) developed to expand capacity within USAID or to communicate best practices on CEFMU, within and outside the Agency
- Number of USAID staff, implementing partners, and host country government officials trained on CEFMU prevention or response

CLOSING

More attention to, funding for, and engagement in addressing CEFMU exists than ever, but we are far from achieving the globally agreed goal of ending the practice by 2030. This implementation plan, combined with an associated **CEFMU Learning Agenda**, and in alignment with a **Theory of Change for Addressing Child, Early, and Forced Marriage and Unions**, is an important tool for guiding USAID’s engagement toward achieving its vision of a world in which girls, boys, and children of diverse SOGIESC are free from the risk of CEFMU, are equitably valued and empowered, and have safe and enabling environments that support them to realize their full potential.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This document was written by Suzanne Petroni and Jennifer Parsons, with support from Michele Lanham and other members of the CARE-GBV team, including Diane Gardsbane, Sarah Muthler, and Jill Vitick. Thank you to the USAID staff who provided review and input, including Chaitra Shenoy, Mieka Polanco, Ritika Chopra, Hilary Taft, and Mariela Pena.

Suggested citation: CARE-GBV. Implementation Plan: Addressing Child, Early, and Forced Marriage and Unions. Washington (DC): USAID; 2022.

The goal of the Collective Action to Reduce Gender-Based Violence (CARE-GBV) activity is to strengthen USAID’s collective prevention and response, or “collective action” in gender-based violence (GBV) development programming across USAID. For more information about CARE-GBV, click [here](#).

To learn more, please contact:

Chaitra Shenoy
Contracting Officer’s Representative
 Gender Equality and Women’s Empowerment Hub
cshenoy@usaid.gov

Diane Gardsbane, PhD
Chief of Party
 CARE-GBV
diane@makingcents.com