



THEORY OF CHANGE

ADDRESSING CHILD, EARLY, AND FORCED MARRIAGE AND UNIONS

This document introduces a theory of change that describes how USAID should engage in efforts to end child, early, and forced marriage and unions (CEFMU) and meet the needs of married adolescents, to contribute to a more gender-equal world in which all individuals, particularly girls, women, and children of diverse sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression and sex characteristics (SOGIESC), are equitably valued and empowered.

The theory of change (also see Figure 1) aims to help guide USAID’s decision-making related to investments and action; identify potential impacts and outcomes; and provide common language and frameworks for those working across USAID, including implementing partners. It is intended to provide a high-level roadmap for USAID’s work in this area through 2030. All levels and operating units across USAID should work with stakeholders at community and country levels to develop country-specific and sector-specific theories of change that reflect differences across contexts, as well as to identify indicators to assess progress across diverse settings. The theory of change should be seen as a living document that is informed and adapted as new knowledge is gained in each context in which USAID works. This document is also intended to inform and accompany both a USAID Learning Agenda and a USAID Implementation Plan addressing CEFMU.

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](#)

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PROBLEM STATEMENT

Child marriage is internationally recognized as a human rights violation. 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.¹ The practice 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. Child marriage 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 vulnerability to violence, discrimination, abuse, and poor sexual, reproductive, maternal, and mental health outcomes; and preventing their full participation in economic, political, and social spheres. In turn, child marriage undermines countries' capacity to develop fully and equitably. While ending child marriage in itself will not create more gender-equal societies, it is a crucial step toward this broader goal.

VISION

We envision a world in which girls, boys, and children of diverse SOGIESC are free from the risk of CEFMU; equitably valued; and empowered, with safe and enabling environments that support them to realize their full potential.

IMPACT

We will know we are successful in achieving our vision when girls, boys, and children of diverse SOGIESC live their lives free from gender-based discrimination and violence and grow up in communities that support them equally to make healthy, empowered, and informed decisions about their sexuality, gender identity, and relationships. This includes whether, when, and whom to marry or enter into or dissolve a union with. Girls, boys, and children of diverse SOGIESC will lead healthy and empowered lives, where they have agency and decision-making power, including in relationships and in choices about their health, bodies, sexuality, gender identity, education, and meaningful and safe participation in societies and economies. The support of families and communities in providing a nurturing environment in which all children and young people can safely make decisions is critical to achieving this vision.

INTERMEDIATE OUTCOMES

As we work toward our vision, we will measure our progress in various ways. Because child marriage and early unions are both influenced by and, in turn, affect several levels of the socioecological framework, we will assess change from the individual to societal level. Indicators of success along the way include the following:

¹ UNICEF. COVID-19: A threat to progress against child marriage. [Internet]. New York: UNICEF; 2021. Available from: <https://data.unicef.org/resources/covid-19-a-threat-to-progress-against-child-marriage/>.

INDIVIDUAL LEVEL

- Girls have improved self-efficacy and greater control over whether, when, and with whom to engage in personal relationships, including romantic, sexual, and marital relationships. Girls can envision and have the support and resources needed to pursue life goals, other than (or in addition to) the traditional role of wife and mother.
- Girls, boys, and children of diverse SOGIESC, regardless of marital status, have, and are aware of, expanded rights, and have a greater understanding of the importance of gender-equal societies.
- There is improved gender-equal communication between and about girls, boys, and children of diverse SOGIESC and adolescents, as well as intergenerationally between children, parents, grandparents, and other key influencers in their lives.
- Girls, boys, and children of diverse SOGIESC are able to access free, safe, and high-quality formal and informal education beyond primary school, and have access to livelihood and employment opportunities, regardless of gender or marital or reproductive status.
- Girls, boys, and children and adolescents of diverse SOGIESC, regardless of their marital or relationship status, are freely able to access, use, and manage the services they need, including those related to their sexual and reproductive health, mental health, legal needs, and social support.

FAMILY AND COMMUNITY LEVELS

- Social norms are more gender-equal, decreasing pressures that drive child marriage and early unions.
- Families envision and support futures for their female children beyond the traditional roles of wife and mother.
- Communities and families are more resilient and do not see child marriage as a solution to shocks and stressors.
- There is increased dialogue between parents and children, as well as among community members, about gender equality and the negative effects of child marriage and early unions and other harmful practices.
- Men, boys, women, girls, and individuals of diverse SOGIESC actively participate in and support programs that promote gender equality and equity.
- Parents and community members, including traditional leaders and faith-based actors, are increasingly supportive of girls and children of diverse SOGIESC remaining in or returning to school — regardless of marital, relationship, or parenting status — and participating in life skills training and meaningful employment opportunities.
- Parents and community leaders become active allies for girls' rights, take actions against child marriage and early unions, and support the rights of married adolescents.

INSTITUTIONAL LEVEL

- Education, health, justice, child protection, and other social service providers are trained and equipped to deliver gender-transformative, high-quality, adolescent-responsive services to meet the needs of girls, boys, and children of diverse SOGIESC who are at risk of child and forced marriage

or early unions, as well as those of ever-married children (i.e., those currently married or in union, separated, divorced, widowed).

- High-quality, gender-responsive comprehensive sexuality education that addresses gender and power is taught to all children and adolescents in schools. Inclusive, gender-responsive sexual and reproductive health information and services are available and accessible in schools and health facilities for all children and adolescents, regardless of their gender, marital, relationship, or parenting status.
- Traditional and social media increasingly challenge gender stereotypes and present more gender-equal language and scenarios, including regarding equal opportunities for girls, boys, and children of diverse SOGIESC and the harms of child marriage and early unions.
- Children and adolescents, particularly those at risk of or involved in child marriage and early unions, are meaningfully included in policymaking processes and program design, implementation, and evaluation.
- There is increased investment in data collection and tracking for birth and marriage registration and dissolution, as well as data to inform policy and assess the outcomes of country-level action plans, national strategies, local government policies, and policies that aim to serve unmarried and married adolescent girls.
- Locally driven, rights-based, gender-transformative action plans designed to end child marriage and early unions and to meet the needs of married adolescents are developed, funded, and implemented.
- There are more robust and inclusive national level policies that address the drivers of CEFMU, such as universal access to education, strengthening health systems to reach vulnerable and hard-to-reach populations, and providing increased economic opportunity for women and girls.

STRATEGIES

A wide range of strategies and investments is needed to address the multiple drivers of child marriage and early unions and to effect change at different levels (i.e., local, national, regional, and global). USAID should recognize that its engagement in ending child marriage and early unions must be situated within and designed to complement the work of a broader global ecosystem that is employing such strategies, as well as those that address other manifestations of gender inequality and gender-based violence such as female genital mutilation/cutting. At the country level, for example, USAID should first review existing national action plans and strategies to end child marriage, many of which have been developed through government and civil society collaboration, and all of which reflect both national commitments and local context. At all levels, USAID should seek to understand what other funders and actors are prioritizing and where it can best fill gaps. Child marriage affects both boys and girls; however, girls are disproportionately and more negatively affected by the practice and as such girls should remain at the center of efforts to end child marriage.

With this in mind, USAID should undertake a number of gender-transformative, context-specific, evidence-based, sector-specific, and cross-sectoral approaches to achieve its vision, both at a global level and in priority countries. These include:

INDIVIDUAL LEVEL

- Advancing girls' rights, decision-making, and leadership skills, especially for the most marginalized.
- Increasing access to quality, safe education and skills training programs for all children and adolescents, with a particular focus on girls and children and adolescents of diverse SOGIESC.
- Supporting developmentally appropriate, comprehensive, rights-based sexuality education for all children and adolescents that addresses power and gender and making these resources available to families and communities.
- Expanding access for all children and adolescents to adolescent-responsive, inclusive sexual and reproductive health services, including for those who are unmarried, ever-married, or in union.

FAMILY AND COMMUNITY LEVELS

- Enhancing the environment for girls and women to equally access safe, satisfying, paid employment opportunities outside the home.
- Mobilizing families and communities, including political, traditional, and faith-based actors, to promote more gender-equal norms and systems, building on the support of families and communities.
- Supporting investments and local efforts to enhance economic opportunities for families.
- Supporting local, grassroots, advocacy and other organizations working to reduce CEFMU and meet the needs of married adolescents with data and resources needed to implement or scale their work.

INSTITUTIONAL LEVEL

- Building partnerships with other funders, including to leverage resources and promote cross-learning and enhanced programming.
- Exploring the possibility of designing and implementing multisectoral programs to address CEFMU, such as across sectors of health, education, sustainable economic growth, and democracy, rights, and governance.
- Supporting governments to advance gender equal laws, policies, and comprehensive strategies that include, among others, gender-transformative, cross-sectoral approaches to ending child marriage and early unions, and that advance the rights and opportunities of children and adolescents, especially girls and children of diverse SOGIESC, including their sexual and reproductive health and rights, regardless of marital status. This includes working with traditional and customary judicial systems that may exercise authority beyond the reach of national governments.
- Expanding access to economic opportunities for girls and women through investment in training and education programs, in collaboration with governments and the private sector, as applicable.
- Investing in the generation and appropriate use of innovative data and evidence to design, implement, and evaluate effective policies and programs. Evaluations and research should go beyond measuring whether individuals marry before or after age 18, to understand broader empowerment outcomes for girls, boys, young women, and youth of diverse SOGIESC, as well as shifts in the underlying social factors that drive child marriage and early unions.

CORE PRINCIPLES

USAID has long understood that child marriage is a form of gender-based violence and a human rights abuse driven by gender discrimination.² The practice constitutes an extreme form of discrimination. While ending child marriage and early unions should thus be an important goal for the Agency, this goal must be deeply grounded in USAID’s efforts to advance gender equality and empower women and girls, and intertwined with other goals, such as preventing female genital mutilation/cutting and other forms of gender-based violence. The goal of ending CEFMU is also solidly aligned with the globally-endorsed Sustainable Development Goals — specifically, Target 5.3, “eliminate all harmful practices, such as child, early and forced marriage and female genital mutilation.”

USAID must remain committed to meeting the needs of ever-married girls, boys, and gender nonconforming children, including those currently married or in union, divorced, separated, or widowed, and will continue to advance this work in coordination with its prevention efforts.

Finally, in its work to end child marriage and early unions, USAID should seek to uphold the following core principles:

DO NO HARM

Addressing CEFMU must not jeopardize the well-being of program participants, community members, or the staff of USAID and its implementing partners — physically, emotionally, or otherwise. CEFMU standalone programs and any programs that integrate CEFMU-related activities must prioritize efforts to promote the physical and emotional safety of those at risk of CEFMU or who have experienced it, as well as their children and other family or dependents. This do-no-harm approach ensures that program designers and implementers understand, plan for, and adapt to underlying social norms, relationships, and potential negative outcomes and deliberately design, implement, and monitor interventions with these factors in mind.

RIGHTS-BASED

Efforts to end child marriage and early unions, which are a consequence and a perpetuator of gender inequality, must be grounded in support for human rights and the advancement of gender equality and they must do no harm. To advance human rights, including specifically girls’ rights, and to foster sustainable development in ways that most appropriately respond to the lived experiences of individuals, USAID should support culturally sensitive, context-specific, and gender-transformative programs designed to end child marriage and early unions and support the rights of and opportunities for girls, boys, and gender nonconforming children and youth.

² See, for example: Glinski AM, Sexton M, and Meyers L. Washington, DC: 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>, and Ending Child Marriage and Meeting the Needs of Married Children: The USAID Vision for Action. n.d. Available from: https://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/2155/Child_Marriage_Vision_Factsheet.pdf.

COORDINATION AND COLLABORATION

USAID recognizes that numerous actors have been working tirelessly to end child marriage and early unions and other harmful practices in their pursuit of gender equality. To ensure that the Agency's efforts complement theirs and build on learnings from their expertise and experience, USAID should leverage its work with that of other U.S. government agencies, funder colleagues, private sector actors, and country and local governments, as well as local civil society organizations, including movements led by women and girls. In addition, USAID should strategically implement comprehensive, multifaceted, multisectoral programming at the macro and micro levels to ensure the highest impact, avoid fragmented programming, and maximize resources.

SURVIVOR-CENTERED AND TRANSFORMATIVE

To ensure transparency, accountability, integrity, respect, accessibility, and consistently high ethical standards, USAID should prioritize support for learning from local partners, including survivors of CEFMU, using locally produced data, and, in all cases, engaging with communities to ensure that local context informs program design and implementation. USAID should seek community engagement and invest in local systems, as well as community-based, survivor-led, and youth-led organizations working to advance gender inequality and end child marriage.

USAID must involve girls, including ever-married girls, in program design, implementation, and monitoring. This effort recognizes that to be effective, those who are most affected by the practice must be meaningfully engaged in solutions to end it. In demonstrating that it values differences and draws strength from diversity, USAID should seek to reach the most marginalized girls in our child marriage programming and investments.

Finally, in working to shift unequal gender dynamics and power structures to promote equality and achieve program objectives, USAID should ensure increasingly accessible, equitable, inclusive, culturally appropriate, context-sensitive, and survivor-centered engagement in CEFMU programming and research. The Agency should engage historically neglected and under-funded groups, particularly women- and girl-led groups, as well as local organizations that work in the most marginalized communities and with the most marginalized girls.

INTERSECTIONAL

USAID should take an intersectional approach to its CEFMU work, considering where overlapping and compounding forms of oppression produce unique risk factors, barriers, and experiences for those at risk of or experiencing CEFMU. Addressing CEFMU with an intersectional lens helps USAID analyze how overlapping and compounding forms of oppression intersect with different experiences and supports the design of appropriate programming to meet individual needs.

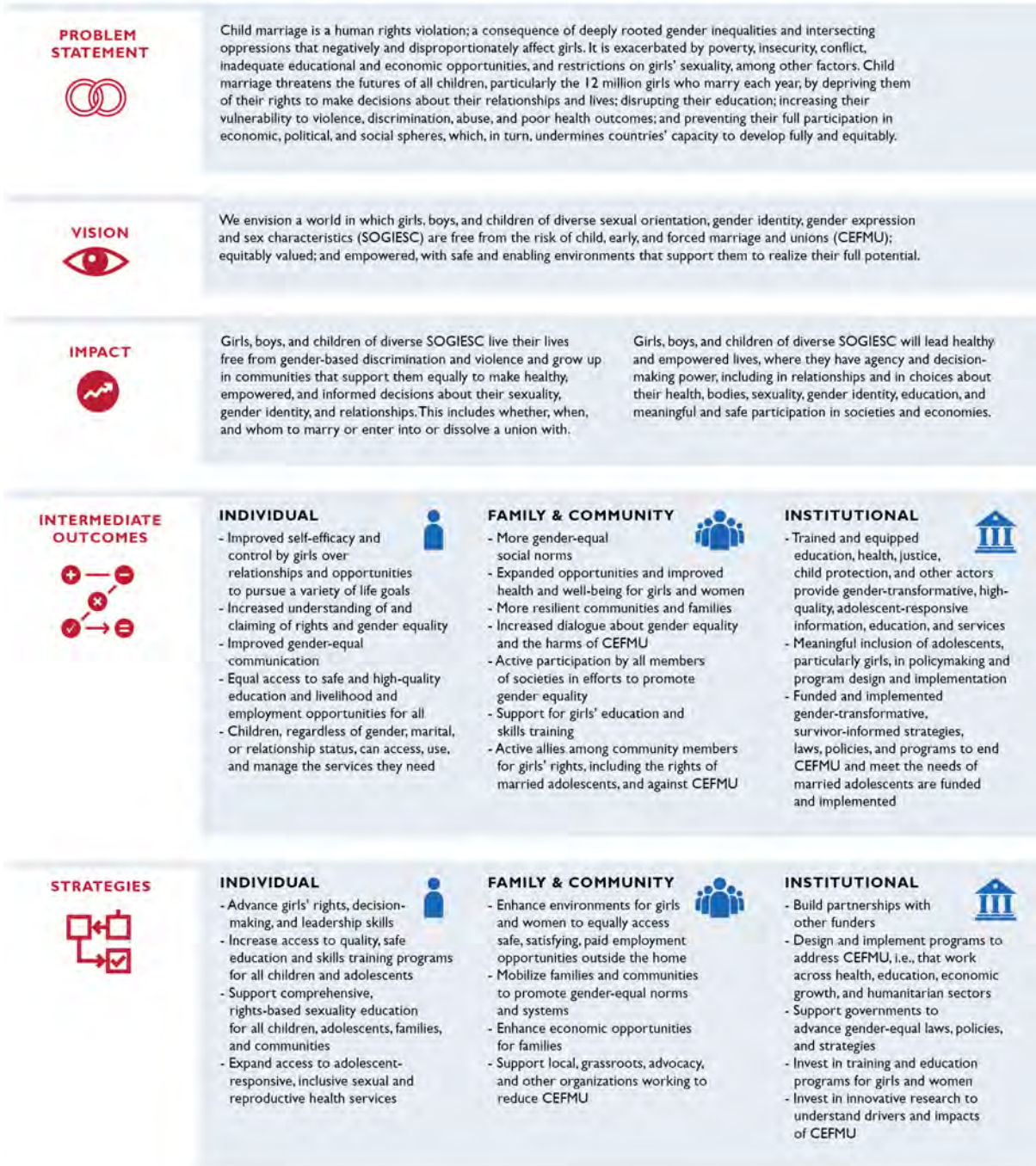
ITERATIVE AND RESPONSIVE DECISION-MAKING

To ensure continuous improvement and learning, USAID should invest in long-term child marriage programming that includes robust, innovative, and increasingly gender-transformative monitoring and evaluation systems that both track progress and hold us accountable at all levels. Because social norm change is not linear and often requires adaptive approaches, we will support innovative, increasingly gender-transformative, context-specific research and evaluation. USAID must further commit to sharing information and learnings within and outside of USAID, including particularly with programs and partners working to eliminate child marriage and early unions.

ACCOUNTABLE

USAID should hold its staff and implementing partners accountable for the values described above and for effectiveness in programming. It will do this by documenting the meaningful engagement of survivors, youth activists, and other members of affected communities in decision-making processes; assessing progress in innovative and survivor-informed ways; sharing stories of success; prioritizing efforts to do no harm in our interventions and evaluations; and reporting publicly on progress against its goals.

FIGURE I. THEORY OF CHANGE: ADDRESSING CHILD, EARLY, AND FORCED MARRIAGE AND UNIONS



CORE PRINCIPLES: Do no harm, rights-based, coordination and collaboration, survivor-centered and transformative, intersectional, iterative and responsive decision-making, and accountable

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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](#).

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