

BUILDING ON COMMUNITY KNOWLEDGE



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BUILDING INTERVENTIONS ON EXISTING GENDER AND SEXUALITY INFORMATION-SHARING IN COMMUNITIES

Introduction

Although inequitable norms related to gender and sexuality are the primary drivers of child marriage, discussing sexuality within the community is considered taboo in many societies. Existing ways for communities to share information about gender and sexuality with children typically reinforce existing norms and, in turn, child marriage. For example, early marriage might be encouraged to preserve pre-marital virginity, improving a girl's marriageability, or prevent pre-marital pregnancies. Practitioners often perceive the taboo of talking about sexuality and conservative norms as a barrier to interventions. To overcome this obstacle and create a sustainable impact, this article explores how child marriage interventions can build upon traditional ways of sharing knowledge about gender and sexuality while reorienting social norms away from child marriage.

Key child marriage programme strategies aiming to open discussion about norms and values related to sexuality can be divided into two core approaches: (1) activities focused on the girls themselves through *empowerment* and (2) activities aiming to *mobilise* or *engage families and communities*. To successfully open discussions about child marriage, gender and sexuality, creating *community ownership* is vital. In countries where pre-marital sex is taboo¹, practitioners generally see *mobilising families and communities* as the most effective strategy to address child marriages². These strategies and related concepts are described and questioned in Box 1.

BOX 1: Questioning common language used in child marriage programs.

Child marriage programmes often use similar terms to describe interventions. Building interventions on existing community knowledge may raise questions about some common terms highlighted in *italic* throughout this paper:



- **Empowerment:**

This term describes the process in which girls gain the freedom and power to do what they want and control what happens to them. However, to what extent is the term used to describe the actions of practitioners 'giving' rights to girls, and what if girls make the 'wrong choice' and use their freedom and power in favour of early marriage or pregnancy because they perceive it as their best option? (read more, link to KP1)



- **Mobilising & Engaging families and communities:**

These terms describe activities aimed at ensuring parents and communities change attitudes and behaviours towards child marriage so that alternative options are encouraged for girls. However, when engaging communities, do practitioners have a sufficient understanding of who and what drives existing attitudes and behaviours?



- **Awareness-raising & sensitisation:**

These terms describe activities aimed at making girls and communities familiar with why child marriage is problematic. However, are practitioners sure that the community is not aware of the problem, and are there existing community-based practices that could be part of the solution?



- **Community ownership:**

This term describes when communities take responsibility for the problem and solutions. However, what if communities do not recognise the problem or feel that solutions are imposed on them?



- **Contextualising:**

This term describes the process of making interventions relevant within a certain community. However, what if the contextual situation requires significant adjustments of the donor-funded interventions for the practitioner?

When working with communities, programme designers and implementers often use the term sensitisation. This term may assume that the leading cause of gender and sexuality-related drivers of child marriage is a knowledge gap among girls and their communities that can be filled through expert knowledge. With this in mind, *community engagement* might involve finding the right entry point for sharing sensitive information about gender, sexuality, and marriage. Even if the information is *contextualised* using context-specific language and examples, such an approach may ignore existing community knowledge and strategies to share information about sexuality. Ignoring existing ways in which communities share information about sexuality may increase the risk of conservative backlash and push-back during implementation. Furthermore, if information about gender and sexuality is mostly 'provided' by formal structures, such as education and health services, it might not reach the most vulnerable girls and communities. Therefore, for greater impact and sustainability, child marriage interventions should move beyond *community engagement* in which the goal is to sensitise communities and girls towards interventions based on existing community knowledge and practices regarding marriage and sexuality. This argument feeds into global conversations related to 'shifting the power' and 'decolonising' the aid and global health systems by putting resources and power in the hands of those closest to the issue.³ In short, addressing sexuality norms in child marriage programmes means 'shifting the power' by moving beyond large scalable SRHR education interventions to small scale community-driven interventions that build on local knowledge, practices, and realities.

Build upon traditional ways of sharing knowledge about gender and sexuality while reorienting social norms away from child marriage

By building on the knowledge of communities, programme implementers, and existing research, this article provides some case studies demonstrating how information about gender and sexuality is traditionally discussed in communities and how practitioners have succeeded in building interventions based on existing practices. The second part of the article shares some examples of tools developed to incorporate traditional practices and open up conversations about child marriage and sexuality at the community level. The article ends with a few concrete tips as inspiration for how child marriage interventions can shift gender and sexuality norms by building on existing community practices.

How do communities share information about gender, sexuality, and marriage?

Children primarily learn about gender and sexuality through their families. Formal, institutional sexuality education only started in the early 20th century (Ponzetti et al., 2016). In many contexts in which child marriage is prevalent, strong health and education systems that provide formal sexuality education remain absent or insufficient. Even though some children are increasingly able to access information through (social) media, families remain the primary source of information about gender and sexuality. How families and communities pass information about sexuality varies across time and context. However, across contexts, a common traditional practice seems to be the consultation of trusted elders, often referred to as 'mentors'⁴. These mentors can be family members or respected people in a community tasked to provide information about sexuality and gender. Information can be passed informally or in ceremonies such as initiation ceremonies into adulthood and marriage ceremonies. An example of these mentors is traditional sex advisors called 'Sengas' (father's sisters) in Uganda. Today, owing to changing dynamics of nuclear families, the description of 'Senga' has gone beyond 'the Father's sister' to a trusted woman in a community who usually offers sex and sexuality education. The case example below shows how the Mentoring and Empowerment Programme for Young Women (MEMPROW) in West Nile, Uganda, collaborates with Sengas to diminish child marriage. A similar approach has also been used successfully to control HIV in Uganda (Muyinda et al., 2003 and 2004).

CASE 1: Collaboration with traditional sex advisors in Uganda

When working with rural communities, tradition often supersedes national laws. So, how can programmes seeking to address child marriage collaborate with local institutions? Reaching this impasse, The Mentoring and Empowerment Programme for Young Women (MEMPROW) sought to work closely with 'Sengas,' traditional sex advisors who impart conventional insight to adolescent girls in West Nile, Uganda.

Across West Nile, sexuality remains a private issue, especially within the family. Instead, girls learn about sex from other sources, like Sengas. Sengas' roles involve guiding girls in social matters, including career prospects, their choice of partner, and, crucially, when and how to engage in sexual activity and start a family. Typically, advice might involve telling girls how to behave in marriage (e.g., the wife's roles and responsibilities and certain 'dos and don'ts'). Sengas also share information about taking care of one's husbands (including sex), childbirth, raising children, connecting with in-laws, and attending to familial or domestic work. To update Sengas' more traditional community role, MEMPROW offers training on gender awareness and psychosocial care. This training emphasises how these ideas complement existing cultural practices.

Before, Sengas had a typically conservative social function. Now, having recentered the lived experiences of young women and girls, Sengas cultivate spaces where adolescent girls can articulate and relieve the social pressures that, up until now, had been inexpressible. It is as though adolescent girls in West Nile have been given a stage, made safe by the assurances of trusted community leaders, on which to voice their inner selves and question their external realities. Through Senga-supervised group therapy, where girls express their feelings about gender and sexuality together (sometimes for the first time), they immediately learn they are not alone.



Applauding one Senga in particular, Immaculate Mukasa from MEMPROW explains that "as a result of her work, two girls went back to school while seven engaged in vocational training." Other members in the community are now demanding her services and calling on her to support more girls. The programme's success boils down to how training always follows from a learning exchange in which MEMPROW engages the community in conversation, inviting local actors to reflect on the positive and negative aspects of existing social norms. By immediately introducing collaboration and trust, MEMPROW establishes a less intrusive intervention, avoiding the kind of undesirable doctrine that the community might ultimately reject. Instead, MEMPROW collaboratively addresses the benefits and dangers of existing norms, offering alternative frames of understanding to communities that are now gradually embracing progressive change.

How and from whom families and communities pass information about sexuality and gender may change over time. For example, some practitioners in Mali mentioned that traditional ways in which grandmothers provided information about sex and marriage seem to have disappeared.⁵ Traditional practices may be influenced by larger socio-political debates and tensions regarding gender equality and formal sexuality education. Sexuality education can reinforce strict gender and sexuality norms, such as promoting sexual abstinence before marriage, or it can be more comprehensive, promoting individual sexual choice. These debates and the execution of (comprehensive) sexuality education may challenge and change community practices. Even if traditional methods of sharing information about sexuality change, practices can still be revived, as shown by the case example below from The Association for Social and Human Awareness (ASHA) in Jharkhand, India.

CASE 2: Revival of a dormant traditional youth institution in Jharkhand, India

What if a decades-old local institution could be revived to empower young people to put an end to child marriage through self-expression? In Jharkhand, India, the Association for Social and Human Awareness (ASHA) is demonstrating just how effective interventions built on existing community practices can be. ASHA's renewal of the Oraon tribe's dormant, traditional youth institution, 'dhumkuria,' goes to show how much is achieved through considered, community-led learning exchange.

Dhumkuria is the Oraon Tribe's youth dormitory, constituting a centre of cultural education for young people in the community. Its fundamental aim is to shape local children and adolescents into healthily disciplined, respectful, and self-controlled adults through collective knowledge elaboration. Dhumkuria has a unique way of sharing knowledge based on experiential learning, whereby tutors (usually community elders) act as a 'duenna' (mentor) to the local youth. The mentor's job is to create an environment in which young people feel comfortable participating in knowledge exchange. Then, once new ideas and understandings have been developed, mentees become mentors to younger initiates. Dhumkuria is currently being revived and updated with the more specific aim of imparting sex education to adolescents.

For adolescents in Jharkhand, it is vital to have a community-approved safe space where they can willingly engage with the typically private matter of 'yonikta' (sexuality). Dhumkuria now offers young people in Jharkhand an indispensable platform for self-expression. Imagine the most pertinent issues of adolescent life and being unable to articulate those pressures. Now, for the first time, adolescents in Jharkhand can relate to one another and learn from more experienced community actors about their previously unutterable concerns. As such, ASHA's learning exchange constitutes a historical turning point in how young people of the Oraon Tribe express their attitudes towards their lives and their sexuality.

One of the biggest challenges ASHA faced was to create a culturally sensitive platform while reflecting on both the positive and negative aspects of the community's norms related to child marriage and sexuality. However, following a considered approach, ASHA saw that creating a platform that includes the views of all kinds of community actors (adolescents, their parents, gatekeepers, officials, and those working in child rights) made for a fertile learning environment to change social norms organically and unobtrusively. According to the Mukhiya (the village head) of Gram Panchaya, among all the villages in Jharkhand, the Oraon Tribe has best been able to address child marriage while critically also preserving adolescents' sexual agency.

Both case examples show how engaging traditional practices can successfully contribute to ending child marriage and enhancing girls sexual and reproductive health and rights. That said, not all communities necessarily have relevant community practices to be transformed in the first place. In those cases, effective engagement with parents as a key source of information for children remains an important intervention strategy when addressing gender and sexuality norms.

Some traditional practices to share knowledge about sexuality and marriage may threaten the physical wellbeing of girls. For example, during the 'fisi' (hyena) practice in some parts of rural Malawi, as soon as girls reach puberty, their parents may send them to a 'camp' to learn about womanhood. At this camp, an elderly man (hyena) is hired to 'brush of the dust' by initiating girls into sex. This practice exposes girls to nonconsensual sex and physical health risks, such as sexually transmitted diseases and unwanted pregnancies.⁶ Rites de passage⁷ that include female genital mutilation also threaten the health and wellbeing of girls. Even if a traditional practice causes direct physical harm to girls, it can be more effective for interventions to understand and alter this practice into something less harmful rather than assuming that sensitising communities about the harms of the practice will lead to its abolition. Massai communities in Kenya demonstrate how a harmful practice can be changed. An alternative rite de passage was developed in collaboration with Masai elders and Amref Health Africa. Girls are still perceived to transition into womanhood during the new rite, but instead of the traditional genital cutting, they receive training on sexual and reproductive health and wellbeing.⁸

How can child marriage programmes build on existing practices?

The previous section shows several examples of organisations that have successfully managed to build interventions upon traditional methods of sharing information about gender and sexuality. In each case example, building relationships and creating a deep, respectful understanding of how and what information is shared about gender and sexuality seem to be key components of success. Based on the examples provided by practitioners in the MTBA learning project and grey literature, this section provides some examples of methods and tools that can be used to build on community knowledge and practices.

During the learning project, practitioners mentioned several methods, such as actor mapping⁹ and value clarification exercises, as entry points for understanding the challenges girls face and, specifically, which gender and sexuality-related norms drive child marriages in a given context. More Than Brides Alliance's partner, Population Council, has developed several toolkits and guides for effective girls programming, some of which focus particularly on the role of communities in programmes for adolescent girls. For example, the 'More Than a Backdrop: Understanding the Role of Communities in Programming for Adolescent Girls—Action Guide' aims to support practitioners to set up community-based girls clubs or mentor guided 'safe spaces' by building on available community knowledge and resources. Some key questions are worked out in the detailed 'Building Assets toolkit', a programme design tool that demonstrates how to involve multiple stakeholders in determining what assets girls need to survive and thrive in their communities. This toolkit includes a method for mapping sexual relationships, which can be useful to understand community norms regarding sexuality.¹⁰ Although both the action guide and building assets toolkit seem to be relevant for designing community-based girls' programmes, they seem to take a 'girl's club' approach as an intervention starting point. With a slight adaptation, these assessment tools could address practitioners' frequently asked questions. For example, they might identify who is traditionally responsible for providing information about gender, sexuality, and marriage in that community, what information is shared and considered appropriate, who girls trust, and what existing structures are currently available from which to develop interventions. This approach may result in an alternative intervention that builds on existing practices, such as the case examples provided in this article, or adaptations of approaches, such as girls clubs.

A final example of methods and tools that create space to discuss community practices are the methods used by the Tipping Point programme, initiated by Care in Nepal and Bangladesh. The programme uses synchronised engagement with different participant groups (e.g., girls, boys, parents, community leaders) around gender, child marriage, and sexuality. It creates public spaces in which all community members can be part of the dialogue. The programme does not directly challenge or raise questions about pre-existing perceptions but instead aims to create space to build on existing community knowledge in dialogue sessions. Detailed guides on how best to engage in dialogue with each target group are available on the [tipping point website](#). These dialogues could be a starting point for further interventions that build on existing community knowledge and practices. The [Raksha Bandan innovation](#) in Nepal is a strong example of this approach. The tipping point programme managed to transform a traditional ritual in which a sister would tie a thread around a brother's wrist and ask for his protection. Now, brothers also tie a ribbon around their sisters' wrist, and both siblings vow to practice gender equality and pursue their dreams. The initiative garnered public support for growing equality between sisters and brothers.

Inspiration for future child marriage programs

This exploration showed that it can be more effective and sustainable to address the gender and sexuality-related root causes of child marriage by building on existing ways to share information within communities. By 'shifting the power' and starting project development from what a community knows and trusts, interventions will inform the execution of more effective, comprehensive sexuality education through media, education, and health services. The bullets below summarise what practitioners should start doing, do differently, and stop doing to move towards community-driven and community-owned initiatives that contribute towards ending child marriage:

Start doing:

- Centre girls and communities in the design, implementation, and evaluation of the programme as experts, for example, using [available tools for girl programming](#) to open up dialogue about the gender and sexuality-related drivers of child marriage in the target community.
- Incorporate traditional ways of sharing information about gender, sexuality, and child marriage as a starting point for designing interventions to ensure a sustainable, long term impact.

Do differently:

- Move beyond strengthening sexuality education through formal education and health services to build upon community systems, movements, and practices.
- Align and complement interventions, such as media campaigns, formal, comprehensive sexuality education curricula, and health services, to existing community systems and practices.
- Anticipate both positive changes and backlash in the community. External, local and national developments, such as media and political campaigns, may influence community norms, values, and gender and sexuality-related practices.

Stop doing:

- Short-term sensitisation campaigns. Instead, take time to understand and invest in the people or practices you can best support to change gender and sexuality norms.
- Stop taking pre-defined intervention approaches. Instead, analyse which intervention can build on existing community knowledge and practices and adapt common interventions to ensure the sustainable change of gender and sexuality norms.
- Practitioners should try not to judge but rather understand why cultural practices such as child marriage persist in a community. An open dialogue about gender and sexuality based on listening and learning from the community can be a starting point for building strong relations.

References:

- 1 From the nine participating countries in the learning project, DHS data shows that sex before marriage is common in Malawi, Uganda and Mali and uncommon in Niger, Ethiopia, Pakistan, Nepal, India and Bangladesh.
- 2 See the results of a survey among 144 practitioners about the 'most effective program strategy' at the bottom of our recommendations page.
- 3 Examples of the conversations include the grand bargain in the international (humanitarian) aid sector and academic discussions in the field of global health such as; Decolonising global health: if not now, when?, *BMJ Global Health*, 2020, Büyüm et al.
- 4 In this article, 'mentor' describes any person trusted by a community to provide information about gender and sexuality. This is different from the way 'mentor' is sometimes used in interventions such as peer education, in which often new 'mentors' are trained who may have not (yet) gained trust in their community.
- 5 The remark was made during the international learning event in March 2021 in a session discussing interventions to mobilise families and communities.
- 6 2018, Waria, A., *Girls' innocence and futures stolen: The cultural practice of sexual cleansing in Malawi*, *Children and Youth services review* 91. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0190740918300288>
- 7 A rite de passage is a term that describes a ritual or ceremony signifying an event in a person's life indicative of a transition from one stage to another, as from adolescence to adulthood.
- 8 For more information, see: <https://amref.org/news/voices-community-embrace-alternative-rite-passage-place-fgm/#gsc.tab=0>
- 9 Based on the insights of communities and practitioners, this article provides an overview of actors and institutions that may influence perceptions regarding girls sexuality in a community.
- 10 See the *Ascertaining Sexual Relationship Types* guide on page 40 of the building assets toolkit.

