

# A Brief on Key Findings from the Most Significant Change (MSC) Evaluation to Reduce Child, Early, and Forced Marriage in Madhesh Province, Nepal

## Project Overview

Breakthrough ACTION Nepal's Reducing Child Early and Forced Marriage (R-CEFM) project, supported by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), aims to strengthen the institutional and technical capacity of the Government of Nepal in Madhesh Province to design, implement, monitor, evaluate, and coordinate effective social and behavior change activities and to strengthen child protection systems for reducing child, early, and forced marriage (CEFM) through a community-based, multisectoral, data-driven lens.

The Nepal R-CEFM project leads evidence generation, capacity strengthening, "learning by doing," and coordination activities at multiple levels. The activities are intended to produce two intermediate results (IRs) to build progress towards the project's strategic objective of strengthening the institutional and technical capacity of the Government of Nepal to reduce CEFM at the local and provincial levels in Madhesh Province:

- IR1:** Build the capacity of newly elected ward, municipal, and provincial officials, civil servants, and other community actors to advocate, design, and budget for local activities to reduce CEFM
- IR2:** Support the implementation of municipal- and provincial-level activities and initiatives to reduce CEFM

The Breakthrough ACTION-Nepal R-CEFM project conducted 43 key informant interviews and 19 focus group discussions with community and government stakeholders in the six focal municipalities in Madhesh Province where R-CEFM activities occurred, to ascertain significant changes observed during the project and to identify opportunities and challenges in developing programs to reduce CEFM. A story of change was written for each key informant interview and focus group discussion based on the change that participant(s) identified as being "most significant." From these stories, five domains of change were identified. These domains are detailed in this briefing, using information from the stories and their corresponding transcripts.



Figure 1: Participants reviewing the stories during a story vetting workshop

## Changes in Community Awareness

After the introduction of the R-CEFM project to their communities, participants in all focal municipalities reported an increase in community awareness of the adverse effects of CEFM, including potential legal repercussions for all adults involved, the negative consequences for the health of girls and their future offspring, and the potential for it to interfere with other life outcomes related to education and economic security.

Participants reported that activities directly developed by municipalities and wards in coordination with the R-CEFM project led to this change by involving various socially respected community members and government stakeholders and by forming committees and activities with religious and community leaders. Further, activities developed as a result of increased stakeholder involvement, such as programs honoring parents who allowed marriage only once their girls were 20 years of age and door-to-door awareness campaigns, contributed to this change.

## Changes in Education

Participants from all municipalities reported a change in the community-level perception of the value of education. While parents or guardians may have previously prioritized their children's marriage ahead of their education or their wishes, participants reported a change in the mindset of the parents or guardians that favored education for their children and considered their children's interests in their decision making. Further, some participants reported changes in children's ability to advocate for themselves. Numerous anecdotal observations indicated that children were returning to school and staying in school for longer periods of time.

In some municipalities, the R-CEFM project catalyzed the reduction of barriers to obtaining education (such as fees, textbooks, and supplies) during the timeline of the project, which has eased parents' and guardians' decision-making process regarding educating their children. Another key outcome was the municipalities leading the reinvigoration of existing child clubs to conduct activities to encourage school attendance. Further, municipalities involved multiple stakeholders, particularly parents and children, in meetings, discussions, and committees dedicated to reducing CEFM.

## Structural and Institutional Changes

Several participants highlighted R-CEFM capacity and system-strengthening activities, particularly CEFM programming, leadership, and budgetary allocations at municipal and ward levels for activities to reduce CEFM, as being the most significant changes. The budget allocations supported by the R-CEFM program efforts enabled the formation of new structures such as the All-Party committee and Influential Civil Society Members Committee, the coordination of religious leaders talking about R-CEFM, and the strengthening of existing structures such as the Ward Child Rights Committee and child clubs.

Several participants highlighted regulatory changes in how the law on CEFM is enforced among religious leaders and ward officials. Participants attributed regulatory changes in the officiation of child marriage by priests and maulanas to the activities funded by the municipalities that sought to raise awareness and build capacity among religious leaders to prevent CEFM. Some ward-level participants mentioned being motivated by an aspiration to have their municipalities designated as child marriage free. Others pointed to the value of conducting regular reviews and analysis of indicators from health, education, and other sectors to monitor CEFM status.

## Barriers and Challenges to R-CEFM

The major challenges to R-CEFM implementation mentioned by participants included poverty, families' fears and concerns about social ostracization or backlash if their children eloped and had a love marriage, and delays in releasing the allocated funds, which restricted the implementation of some planned activities and the ability to target key groups, including children.

## Observed Reduction of CEFM

In conjunction with the other significant changes, participants reported observing a reduction in CEFM or an increase in the age of marriage in their community. Some mentioned that they were influenced by the fact that the municipalities/wards have taken leadership in financially supporting local committees such as the Local Child Rights Committee, Ward Child Rights Committee, and child clubs to actively monitor local marriage rates with assistance from the All-Party Committee, the Influential Civil Society Members Committee, and religious leaders. The participants mentioned that they were motivated by wanting to declare their area child marriage free. This increased focus on reducing child marriage has also inspired individual action to prevent underage marriages. Many individuals shared firsthand experiences about intervening in planned child or early marriages. Some mentioned appreciating the activities that publicly honor parents whose children married after 20, which made delaying marriage more of a norm in the community. Participants recognized the importance of these various activities, including tracking child and early marriages, that were led by the municipality with technical support from the R-CEFM program.

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