

YOUTH MOBILIZING CHANGE TO PREVENT VAWG AND CEFM

Oxfam’s **CREATING SPACES To Take Action on Violence Against Women and Girls¹** (CS) project (2016-2021) aims to reduce violence against women and girls (VAWG), including the prevalence of child, early and forced marriage (CEFM) in Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, Nepal, Pakistan, and the Philippines. The project is implemented by local partner organizations, with support from Oxfam country offices and Oxfam Canada.

In communities where violence is normalized, recognizing it as a social problem is the first step towards changing mindsets, norms, attitudes and behaviors. Following the socio-ecological model on violence prevention,² the Creating Spaces project applied a multi-pronged, multi-stakeholder approach, at the individual, household, community, and societal/institutional levels, to ignite change and prevent VAWG and CEFM. Following best



Youth are taking the pledge to ensure violence-free relationships. Photo: Oxfam India

1 The Creating Spaces project was designed in 2016, to primarily address violence against cis gender women and girls. Oxfam Canada acknowledges that gender-based violence also has a disproportionate impact on trans, non-binary, and gender diverse people, and the institution is working to expand its programming to be inclusive to gender non-conforming people.

2 The socio-ecological model on violence prevention is a best practice theory of change utilized by practitioners to consider four levels of intervention that are instrumental in combating gender-based violence – individual, relationship, community, and societal. Each level has risk factors that put people at risk of experiencing violence, and these levels overlap and influence one another. The model suggests that action at multiple levels are required at the same time to prevent violence. For more information visit the Oxfam’s Ending Violence Against Women and Girls Guide (pg.13): https://www-cdn.oxfam.org/s3fs-public/file_attachments/ending-violence-against-women-oxfam-guide-nov2012_2.pdf

practices³, educating and engaging adolescents and youth was a key project strategy to encourage the adoption of positive, gender-equitable attitudes and behaviours from an early age - when social norms begin to be internalized.

The project partners aimed to educate youth on i) human rights and children’s rights; ii) traditional beliefs and norms that promote gender discriminatory practices, and iii) the risks associated with VAWG and CEFM using innovative approaches. They trained 177,544 adolescents and youth with life skills to develop healthy relationships, advocate for themselves, educate and support their peers, and to advocate for change more broadly to stop VAWG and CEFM. Finally, the CS project engaged other stakeholders and influencers as well, such

as families, police, religious leaders, and local authorities within the project districts, to ensure a safe and supportive environment for youth to mobilize on these issues.

Fostering young people’s awareness, participation, and leadership was instrumental in mobilizing change to prevent VAWG and CEFM. Youth were driven to act more than any other constituency. Through their bold efforts, they succeeded in delaying marriages for countless adolescent girls and boys, and influencing policy and legislative changes. This learning brief highlights project learnings on how to effectively engage youth to embolden their leadership on women’s and girls’ rights, and some of the concrete youth-led outcomes on VAWG and CEFM across the CS countries.

1. LESSONS FROM ENGAGING YOUNG PEOPLE TO PREVENT VAWG AND CEFM

USE INNOVATIVE APPROACHES TO ENGAGE YOUTH

Innovative approaches used by CS were successful in broaching difficult and often taboo subject matter with youth related to gendered social norms, gender-based violence and inequality. Using participatory and creative tools, young people were more likely to open up and express themselves, and to tackle gendered social norms related to a women’s right to work, control over income, women’s and girls’ mobility, access to education, sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR), menstrual taboos, and VAWG/CEFM.

The CS project designed various approaches to engage youth, either through direct education and training and/or through community-wide engagement such as edutainment, radio, and social media campaigns. Some of the most successful youth interventions are highlighted in Box 1.



3 Crooks, Claire V. et al. 2019. Preventing Gender-Based Violence among Adolescents and Young Adults: Lessons from 25 Years of Program Development and Evaluation. *Violence Against Women* 25(1):29-55; Amnesty International Zimbabwe. 2017. Youth Stand up to End Gender-Based Violence. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/act10/5703/2017/en/>

BOX 1: INNOVATIVE APPROACHES TO ENGAGE YOUTH



FILM APPRECIATION The CS project In India used interactive modules and film clips to educate youth about gender stereotypes in Bollywood and other Indian cinema. This served as an entry point to discuss gendered social norms that perpetuate violence. Youth are now spreading the message to their peers through social media.



EDUTAINMENT In Pakistan and Nepal, interactive theatre and puppet shows shed light on harmful gender stereotypes and norms through relatable stories, and presented positive alternatives that promote an equitable society for women and girls. The performances drew an intergenerational audience, and reached a wider demographic of children and youth across the project districts.



SOCIAL MEDIA CAMPAIGNS were a primary vehicle for project partners to maintain momentum on advocacy efforts, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. In the Philippines, youth-led online events and rallies provided opportunities to connect with legislators and push for the successful passing of the 'Girls Not Brides' bill in the Senate.



SOCIAL NORMS DIAGNOSTIC TOOL⁴ A participatory action research tool used in the Philippines and India to identify and dissect gendered social norms. It uses innovative methods such as vignettes and Theatre of the Oppressed techniques to engage community members as "agents of change identifying solutions to their problems."



PHOTOVOICE AND CELLPILMS⁵ are visual participatory methods used with youth In India. They explored the intersections of SRHR and VAWG as it related to their lives through photo and video documentation. The videos were featured In Oxfam India's #EmpowermentNotAge campaign.

4 Social norms diagnostic tool [https://policy-practice.oxfam.org/resources/social-norms-diagnostic-tool-sexual-and-reproductive-health-and-rights-and-gend-621097/#:~:text=0verview-,This%20Social%20Norms%20Diagnostic%20Tool%20is%20a%20feminist%20C%20participatory%20research,and%20forced%20marriage%20\(CEFM\)%3B](https://policy-practice.oxfam.org/resources/social-norms-diagnostic-tool-sexual-and-reproductive-health-and-rights-and-gend-621097/#:~:text=0verview-,This%20Social%20Norms%20Diagnostic%20Tool%20is%20a%20feminist%20C%20participatory%20research,and%20forced%20marriage%20(CEFM)%3B)

5 The participatory research on SRHR and VAWG in India was primarily funded by the International Development Research Centre and supported by the Participatory Cultures Lab at McGill University.

PEER-TO-PEER APPROACHES ENCOURAGE YOUTH EMPOWERMENT AND LEADERSHIP

The CS countries established child and youth groups based on peer-to-peer learning approaches. The peer-to-peer method was highly successful in mobilizing children and youth to address CEFM and VAWG because it gives them:

- the agency and autonomy to decide what issues matter to them and what actions they want to take;
- a sense of belonging which can elevate the desire and confidence to express oneself, learn, participate, and lead;
- a sense of ownership and accountability over the decisions, strategies and actions taken by the child/youth group; and
- more leadership opportunities to act upon their ideas.

In **NEPAL**, Child Clubs enabled adolescents to hone their life-skills, expand and strengthen their social networks, and become agents of change for gender equality in their communities. This growth in confidence made them more outspoken about VAWG, CEFM and harmful menstrual taboos that have been passed on across generations. At present, 23 out of 40 Child Clubs are led by girls, even in areas where girls are traditionally disallowed from attending school. The Child Clubs shifted community perceptions about girls' education and provided a safe space to foster girls' life and leadership skills. School management committees and teachers noted the marked positive impact of these and other CS activities on young people's development. In addition, four Child Club members were elected to the Board of Directors of the National Adolescent Girls' Forum, and submitted recommendations to the former Minister of Women, Children and Senior Citizens and the National Planning Commission, both pledging their support to combat VAWG and CEFM.



Creating Spaces youth forum group discussion, Indonesia. Photo: Yayasan Tunas Alam Indonesia (SANTAI)

“Before the formation of the child club, we were more diverted towards our household chores, but now after our involvement, we feel more responsible for bringing change in our own society.”

— Child Club member, Aathbis Municipality, Dailekh, Nepal

YOUNG PEOPLE’S VOICES ARE AMPLIFIED WHEN OTHER HOUSEHOLD AND COMMUNITY MEMBERS ARE ENGAGED

Young people have often felt frustrated by their limited power to change prevalent social norms kept in place by parents, community leaders, and elders. Their junior position in households and in their communities was sometimes a barrier to influencing change. Some youth leaders have even encountered backlash and verbal harassment from members of their communities when challenging the status quo. However, **when multiple members of a household engaged in CS activities, there was greater likelihood for more fundamental shifts in perceptions, attitudes, and behaviours related to gender roles and the treatment of women and girls.** These positive changes at the household level showed potential to facilitate broader shifts in community-level perceptions and attitudes as well.

In Odisha, **INDIA**, an adolescent girl and her parents were members of the girls’, women’s and men’s collectives established by the CS project. This made it easier to convince her parents not to marry her off as a child. They allowed her to continue her studies instead. Similar success stories were reported in Bihar, and Chhattisgarh as well. In **PAKISTAN**, engaging all family members in different project activities and consistently delivering the same messaging and modeling on women’s rights has successfully promoted positive norm change. For instance, Amina Khatoon from Sindh received the support of her husband and son to advocate for women’s rights after they participated in the CS project trainings. In **BANGLADESH**, Rubina was married when she was just 12 years old as were four generations of women before her including her mother, Lovely. Rubina, Lovely and Faridul (Rubina’s brother) joined the CS Community Group and now work together to end child marriage for other young girls. Rubina is determined that her three-year old daughter Jhim gets an education.



Faridul, Lovely and Rubina. Photo: Abir Abdullah/Oxfam

“We cannot change the past, but we can change the future. We can show the villagers that it takes the whole family to end child marriage.”

—Rubina, Lovely, and Faridul

Beyond the household, youth were more successful in advocating for women’s and girls’ rights at the community level when the CS project had already engaged a diverse spectrum of influencers including traditional and religious leaders, law enforcement, local authorities, and service providers. This community-wide engagement created a supportive ecosystem for young people’s voices to hold greater traction.

AN INTERGENERATIONAL, MULTI-STAKEHOLDER APPROACH TO ADVOCACY STRENGTHENS CREDIBILITY AND INFLUENCE

Across CS countries, young people showed great courage and leadership in advocating against local to national practices and policies that reinforced VAWG and CEFM. However, youth demands had greater influence and reach when working together as a unified entity with women advocates, civil society organizations (CSOs), women’s rights organizations (WROs) and other champions for women’s and girls’ rights. Recognizing the power of multi-stakeholder approaches, CS teams connected youth leaders to formal and informal networks advocating for women’s and children’s rights. They made substantial contributions by representing the interests of children and youth directly impacted by child marriage practices.

In **BANGLADESH**, youth built collaborative relationships with adult, female change makers who provided constructive guidance on how to deliver youth-led campaigns to stop CEFM and connected the youth with more diverse stakeholders. The women advocates mutually benefitted from this partnership, because the youth were effective at mobilizing others, reaching families, and using creative means to engage influencers. In **NEPAL**, members of the Child Clubs and women-led Community Discussion Centres banded together

to campaign on harmful social norms in their communities, particularly targeting norms that enforced child marriage practices and menstrual taboos (see below). In the **PHILIPPINES**, the youth-led #GirlDefenders Alliance gained legitimacy through its diverse membership of national and local legislators and government agencies, Muslim religious leaders, CSOs, and women and youth advocates; the Alliance continues to expand and raise significant public support for the Girls Not Brides bill to end child marriage.

2. THE RIPPLE EFFECT

YOUTH BECOME CHAMPIONS FOR WOMEN'S AND GIRL'S RIGHTS

Empowering youth to model positive social norms has led to ripple effects of change in their households and communities (see diagram page 6). The CS project enabled youth to contribute to the prevention of VAWG and CEFM for themselves, their peers, and family members. Some youth leaders were further motivated to join CS partners (CSOs and WROs) and other civil society stakeholders to promote structural changes in gender-discriminatory practices and policies at the local and national levels. In effect, youth beneficiaries became model champions for women's and girls' rights. This section shares some examples of young people's positive influence on efforts to stop VAWG and CEFM.

GIRLS ADVOCATE FOR THEMSELVES AND SAY NO TO CEFM

Many girls involved in the CS projects have displayed incredible bravery in stopping their own marriages and demanding their protection from violence. In Johi, **PAKISTAN**, Farhan Channa, a 17-year-old student boldly refused to marry her cousin until they both turned 18 at minimum and finished school. In **INDIA**, tribal girls in Chhattisgarh courageously resisted public harassment by local men, threatening to take police action against them once they became aware of their rights, and the responsibility of the police to protect their rights.

In the Faridpur district of **BANGLADESH**, a youth group team leader was being forced into marriage. With knowledge gained through CS, she sought

support from appropriate authorities and successfully stopped her own marriage. She continues to motivate other women and girls to speak up against CEFM in their community. In Rautahat district, **NEPAL**, 84 adolescent girls and 3 adolescent boys reported that they stopped their own marriages.⁶

YOUTH SUPPORT EACH OTHER TO PREVENT CEFM AND UPHOLD WOMEN'S AND GIRLS' RIGHTS

Youth have proven to be effective influencers at both household and community levels, actively sharing new knowledge gained from CS training interventions with their peers, parents, siblings, relatives, neighbors, and community leaders. This includes advocating for more gender equitable sharing of household care work, increased support for girls to complete their schooling before marrying, shifts in attitudes on gender-based violence, and challenging age-old beliefs that value sons more than daughters.



6 These results were documented in 2020, after three years of Child Club programming.

“[In the meetings], we were made to realize what are our rights, and what are our rights in the family itself. At first, our families would doubt and they thought what wrong things are you being taught? They were suspicious. But then they became more open to it and supported us.”

— Kenapali village, India, young woman, 20 years old

Youth have been particularly effective at advocating against child marriage at the community level. In the Philippines, youth leaders involved in the Creating Spaces project self-organized the Maguindanao Alliance of Youth Advocates (MAYA), a network of

students who use social media, radio broadcasting and door-to-door campaigning to advocate against CEFM. In **NEPAL**, Child Club members stopped more than 300 child marriages over the course of the project. For instance, when his family and community began to discuss the marriage of his 14-year-old cousin, Munna Patel, a Child Club member, took the lead in stopping her marriage.

Mahmuda Akter is now a youth leader in her community in the Netrokona district of **BANGLADESH**. Ever since joining the CS youth group, she has been raising awareness among her family and neighbors about CEFM and VAWG and intervening when necessary. For instance, she and other youth group members supported a young woman and her mother who were being physically and mentally abused by a male relative. They also successfully supported their peers to stop and/or delay child marriages.

THE RIPPLE EFFECT

YOUTH BECOME CHAMPIONS FOR WOMEN'S AND GIRL'S RIGHTS



Male youth shift their attitudes and demonstrate allyship

Men and boys championing actions against VAWG and CEFM have helped to create a safer environment for women and girls to challenge harmful practices and norms. Across project districts in **INDIA**, members of male youth groups played important roles in countering gender stereotypes in their local communities by facilitating discussions on women's rights in *gram sabhas*; these are community meetings that form part of village-level governance systems. Young men used this space to advocate for their sisters' school completion and higher education, for increased respect for women, and for a fairer distribution of care duties within the household. They have served as positive role models for other men and boys in their communities. During the COVID-19 pandemic, many youth group members shared in the increased care work at home (ie. child and elder care and household duties), and helped survivors of violence, child brides, and other vulnerable women and girls access social protections and services.

In **PAKISTAN**, adolescent boys who participated in CS are internalizing the project teachings, reevaluating their own behaviours, and learning how to treat women and girls respectfully. One youth group member, Faizan, was more supportive of his sister's right to education, and her role in family decision making after attending CS trainings on women's rights. A male youth member, Moolchand, was inspired to become a project trainer on women's rights, and now organizes sessions with government departments. Another participant stopped standing outside the schools and colleges and staring at girls, because the project helped him realize his actions were inappropriate, disrespectful, and constituted harassment.

YOUTH INFLUENCE STRUCTURAL AND INSTITUTIONAL CHANGES ON GENDER EQUALITY

Across the CS countries, there are several examples of young people emboldened to safeguard women's and girls' rights by pushing for policy changes from the village to national levels. They held bilateral meetings with government representatives,

joined other stakeholder groups to put forth policy recommendations, and participated and/or led campaigns to end VAWG and CEFM. They played an influential role in raising the profile of these issues on the political agenda, and contributed to concrete changes in policies and processes.

Shifts in local policies and traditions

In Odisha, **INDIA**, Samir Pujhari, a youth collective leader, convinced his grandfather who was paying women agricultural employees less than men to close the gender wage gap. Samir and other youth collective members then discussed the gender wage gap with village governance leaders, who passed a resolution to ensure equal wages for women and men in the agriculture sector.

In **INDONESIA**, youth activists participated in the Musrebang, a public, district-level government gathering that determines development programs and budget priorities. Through their active participation in this space, and through public seminars and campaigns, they convinced their local government to recognize child marriage as an urgent and priority issue.

Youth groups in South Sulawesi, Nusa Tenggara Barat (NTB) and East Java actively influenced village governments to prevent and respond more effectively to VAWG and CEFM. They succeeded in securing their commitment to allocate a portion of village funds towards counselling for survivors, the socialization of village regulations on the protection of women and children from violence, and the financing of productive business training for youth.

In Baitadi, **NEPAL**, perceptions around menstruation have notably changed following the persistent calls by youth and women beneficiaries. Parents of young women and girls have stopped enforcing 'untouchability'⁷ during their menstrual period, a particularly harmful practice that disallows menstruating women and girls access to their homes, families, community and religious spaces. These shifts away from the *chaupadi* practice are monumental in decreasing women's and girls' risk of experiencing physical injury, illness, and sexual violence.

⁷ Chhaupadi Pratha is a Nepali tradition yet iterations of it are seen in other countries. Women and girls are considered "impure" when menstruating and forced to isolate themselves from their families in menstruation huts where they are deprived of nutritious foods during their cycle. This practice increases their exposure to sexual violence, wild animal attacks, illness, and death.



Launch of the youth-led, multisectoral alliance of #GirlDefenders, Philippines. Photo: Patricia Miranda/Oxfam

National legislation on child marriage

CS youth group members were instrumental in the campaigning and advocacy efforts in both Indonesia and the Philippines to prohibit child marriage practices through national legislation.

In **INDONESIA**, the Coalition 18+ coalesced multiple stakeholder groups, including CS project partner Koalisi Perempuan Indonesia (KPI) and youth group members to campaign on CEFM. In a historic victory, the Marriage Law was amended in September 2019 to increase the age of marriage for females from 16 to 19 years old (the same as males).

In the **PHILIPPINES**, the CS project organized a dialogue between 13 young girls, youth advocates, and legislators to present issues associated with CEFM. This led Senators Lagman and Herrera-Dy to sponsor a bill prohibiting child marriage. The CS project launched the #GirlDefenders alliance a year later, composed of multi-sectoral representatives from the government – both executive and Congress – CSOs, youth, and community leaders. This alliance, spearheaded by CS partner, Philippine Legislators' Committee on Population and Development (PLCPD), is now a nationwide movement to end child marriage. In November 2020, the Girls Not Brides bill passed in the Senate, and in August 2021, its counterpart bill was approved on second reading in the House of Representatives.

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For more information on Oxfam Canada's EVAWG programming, visit: <https://www.oxfam.ca/what-we-do/issues-we-work-on/ending-violence-against-women-and-girls/>

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