

# HOW WELL DO ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT EFFORTS PREVENT CHILD MARRIAGE IN SOUTH ASIA?

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## BACKGROUND

The World Bank's South Asia Region Gender Innovation Lab has conducted an evidence review of findings on economic empowerment interventions with direct measures of child marriage (CM) in South Asia (SAR).<sup>1</sup> While attention to women's economic empowerment (WEE) programming has increased in the region, the impact of these programs on CM outcomes has not been synthesized. The aim of this review is to inform programs based on what we know and what we do not know from rigorous evaluations in SAR. The review discusses SAR results in relation to global evidence and focuses on intervention implementation—what strategies improve feasibility and sustainability, and minimize unintended harm in SAR? The collected evidence on CM prevention covers results of WEE programming that promotes income generation, such as job recruitment initiatives and livelihoods programs for girls, and conditional transfers.

## MOTIVATION

Marriage before age 18 is a persistent human rights violation. Typically, CM in SAR is arranged, speaking to immense injustice against girls' agency, rights, and ability to participate fully in public society. While boys also experience CM, rates are significantly higher among girls (Yount et al. 2017). CM deprives youth of healthy transitions to adulthood and increases risk of HIV/AIDS and maternal mortality and morbidity (Lee-Rife et al. 2012). CM is also associated with intimate partner violence (IPV); a study in Pakistan found women who were married before age 18 have increased risk of physical and emotional violence (Zakar et al. 2016). Overall, IPV among youth is high in SAR; three in ten female youth age 15–19 in Afghanistan and two in ten

in India, Nepal, and Pakistan experienced IPV in the past 12 months (UNICEF 2019). Child sexual abuse and exploitation also accompany CM. Behavior that would otherwise constitute child sexual abuse under international law is often shielded from societal intervention within the institution of marriage. Further, CM negatively affects the education and health of the children of people married at an early age (Chari et al. 2017).

In SAR, rates of CM vary across countries, with strikingly high rates in Afghanistan, Nepal, and Bangladesh (Figure 1). Across the region, one-third of women age 20–24 were married before age 18, and 8 percent before age 15 (UNICEF 2019). Causes of CM include the financial burden of rearing a girl, avoiding higher dowry associated with older brides, ensuring sexual purity of girls, creating family alliances, and lack of meaningful alternatives to marriage (Lee-Rife et al. 2012). In all SAR countries, CM is illegal under national law and international human rights treaties.<sup>2</sup> Yet, legal structures have not been effective in preventing the practice, speaking to the need for change in gender norms and public perceptions of women's abilities to contribute to society. A study in Bangladesh found adolescents and adults alike are aware that CM is punishable by law, highlighting the need for complementary programming to accompany legislation (Aker et al. 2022).

Providing families with economic incentives and empowering girls through livelihoods skills are the most common WEE efforts to prevent CM.<sup>3</sup> The main rationale behind economic incentives

<sup>2</sup> Some countries allow exceptions. For example, the Child Marriage Restraint Act passed by Bangladesh's parliament in 2017 has a provision that allows, under exceptional circumstances, child marriage with parental and judicial consent before the minimum age (CARE, 2017).

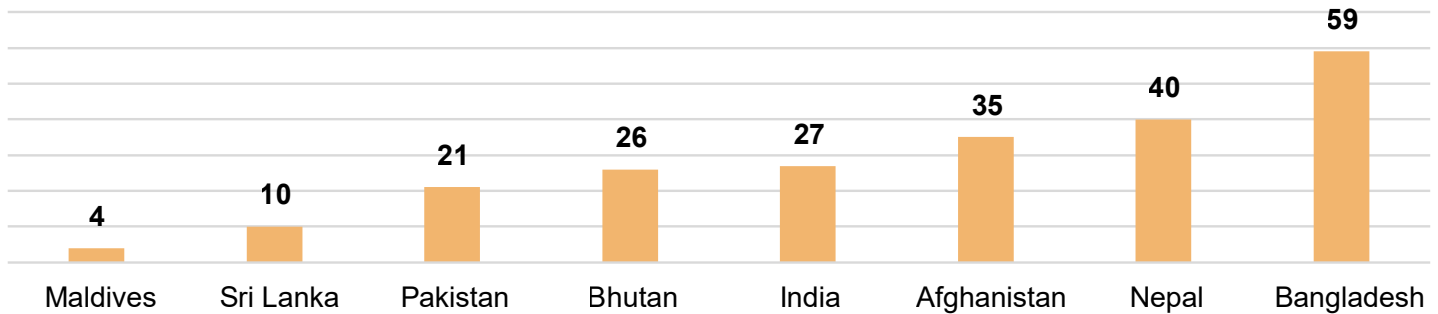
<sup>3</sup> Lee-Rife and colleagues (2012) group child marriage prevention efforts into four areas: (1) empowering girls with information and skills, (2) mobilizing parents and community members, (3) enhancing girl education, and (4) offering economic incentives to families. UNICEF's 2019 *Child Marriage in South Asia: An Evidence Review* and Kalamar et al. (2016) *Interventions to Prevent Child Marriage Among Young People in Low- and Middle-Income Countries: A Systematic Review of the Published and Gray Literature* provide useful recommendations for CM prevention work spanning all types of approaches that go beyond the scope of this review, including policy and legal efforts.

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<sup>1</sup> South Asian countries included in the review are Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka. The countries with eligible programs discussed in this review are Bangladesh, India, Nepal, and Pakistan.

**Figure 1: Percent of women age 20 - 24 who were married before age 18**



Source: United Nations Children's Fund and United Nations Population Fund (2019)

is to offset the cost of rearing girls and change norms toward viewing girls as economic assets rather than economic burdens. The main rationale behind empowerment training is that girls can gain an increased ability to advocate for themselves, both in marriage choices and in economic self-sufficiency (UNICEF 2019). Girls' groups, which typically deliver the skills training, are increasingly used to improve the well-being of adolescents and young adults, with substantial evidence of positive results, yet persistent questions about their sustainability and cost-effectiveness (Marcus et al. 2017).

Despite ongoing focus on CM, including important work by the Global Programme to Accelerate Action to End Child Marriage, few rigorous impact evaluations have looked at the issue (UNICEF 2019). Malhotra and Elnakib (2021) conducted a rigorous systematic review of CM prevention evidence, identifying 30 studies globally that experimentally or quasi-experimentally measure program impacts on CM. Most research has focused on drivers. A key finding across the global literature is that child marriage is driven by different factors in different places, and therefore interventions should be contextualized to the CM drivers in a particular setting (Malhotra & Elnakib 2021, Chae & Ngo 2017). UNICEF's 2016 Child Marriage in South Asia: An Evidence Review is a useful overview of where CM stands in SAR, along with key drivers of CM and synthesis of preventive strategies. There remains a lack of synthesis of the evidence on the WEE-CM relationship in SAR. Further, a recent review highlights mixed or null results overall as to whether economic empowerment for young women and girls can delay marriage globally (Haberland et al. 2021).

Against this backdrop, three overarching goals characterize our evidence review. First, we seek to zero in on SAR and examine experimental results in the context of global evidence, exploring the impact of context. Second, we aim to synthesize implementation lessons critical to operational knowledge in

SAR, with particular attention to strategies to avoid harmful unintended consequences. Third, we discuss gaps in evidence to inform future policy and research.

## WHAT DOES THIS REVIEW INCLUDE?

The review includes evaluations with experimental and quasi-experimental evidence of WEE programmatic impact on CM among girls in SAR with no date restrictions.<sup>4</sup> The program evaluation studies included range from 2005 to 2021. The criteria for inclusion are: (1) the evaluation measures marriage as an outcome among women younger than 18, (2) the program includes a WEE component, (3) the study employs an experimental or quasi-experimental design, and (4) it meets basic quality standards for implementation. For program evaluations that meet criteria (1) – (3), but not criterion (4), we draw on implementation lessons only.

The review organizes WEE interventions into labor force participation promotion, microfinance, and social protection (Figure 2). In the literature, WEE efforts that work with young women and girls typically fall under labor force participation promotion and social protection, which are covered in the evaluations reviewed. Educational programming for girls without a specific focus on livelihoods skills does not fall under our definition of WEE. We do not include WEE programs aimed at the mothers of girls at risk for CM. Further, we do not cover legislation and structural WEE interventions, a key area in need of further testing and exploration.

<sup>4</sup>We reviewed the review literature on CM across several databases. We extracted primary evaluations from the reviews and, to check for primary evaluations that may have been missed, we searched databases for articles evaluating an economic empowerment program in SAR since January 1, 2018. We found five articles that were not in any of the reviews. In total, 24 interventions in South Asia met the inclusion criteria. Of the 24 intervention studies, 10 were dropped from the analysis because they did not measure child marriage or because the WEE part of the intervention was not evaluated. More information on methodology is available upon request.

**Figure 2: WEE programming framework**

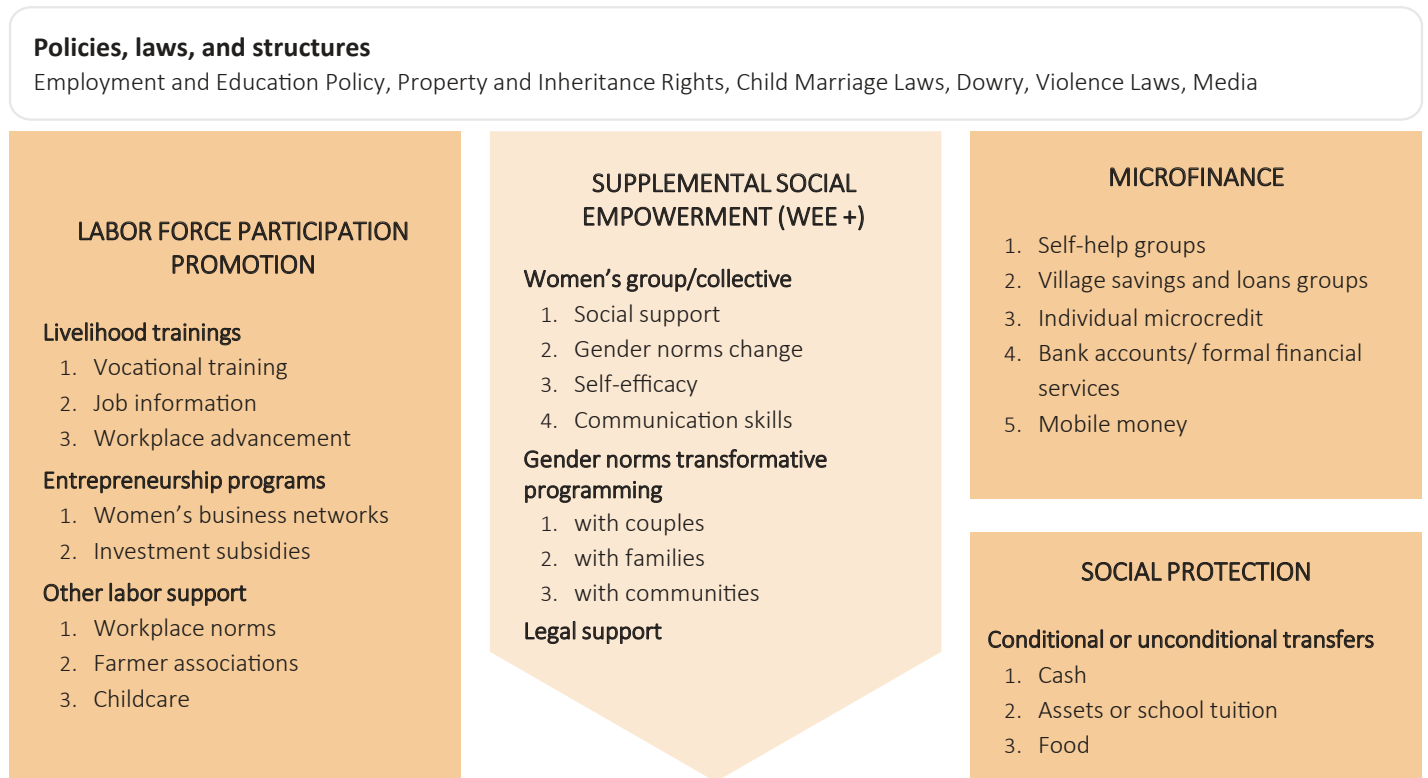


Figure 2: Dark shading signifies WEE program eligible for inclusion. Light shading (center) signifies supplemental programming that may complement WEE programming but was ineligible for inclusion on its own. No shading (top) signifies ineligibility for inclusion.

Many broader empowerment programs for girls measure CM as an outcome. For this review, we only include empowerment programs with a focus on current or future income generation or include a transfer, and thus have a WEE component. Most livelihoods programs were embedded in broader life skills programs. The programs testing transfers (cash, food, or asset) on CM consisted of both transfers conditional on a girl remaining unmarried and on a girl’s school attendance. The review also identified two programs that involved, or sought to involve, microcredit schemes; however, due to methodological limitations we draw only from implementation lessons of these evaluations.

A total of 14 studies were identified. Table 1 outlines the methodologies employed by the included studies. Of the 14, four are only used for implementation lessons due to three not meeting basic quality standards for study implementation and one not providing adequate details on study methodology. The reason for non-inclusion of results for each of these four studies is provided in Table 2.

Of the 10 studies from which we draw statistical results, five involved a livelihoods program: four of which were within a broader girls’ empowerment program and one was a job

recruitment program for adolescents and young women. Five studies involved conditional transfers: two were conditional on the girl remaining unmarried, one was conditional on the girl remaining in school, and two were conditional both on the girl remaining unmarried and engaged in educational pursuits. All 14 programs are listed in Table 2.

## WHAT HAS WORKED AND HAS NOT WORKED IN SAR, AND HOW DOES THIS COMPARE TO GLOBAL EVIDENCE?

**Conditional transfer programs have had positive impacts on increasing age of marriage. Four out of five transfer programs evaluated in SAR show either significant reductions in CM or significant increases in age of marriage (Table 2).**

- Three studies with positive results evaluated transfers conditional on school attendance (the Female School Stipend Programs in Pakistan and India and the Kanyashree Prakalpa program in India [Alam et al. 2011, Hahn et al. 2017, Dey & Ghosal 2021]), and one evaluated cooking oil transfers given to girls age 10–19 if they

**Table 1: Study types**

	Count	Author, Year
<b>Rigorous program evaluations</b>	10	
Clustered RCT plus qualitative	2	Buchmann et al., 2018; Amin et al., 2016
Clustered RCT	2	Jensen, 2012; Pande et al., 2006
Quasi experimental plus qualitative	1	Nanda et al., 2015
Quasi experimental	5	Acharya et al., 2009; Alam et al., 2011; Hahn et al., 2017; Dey & Ghosal, 2021; Amin and Suran, 2005
<b>Studies with implementation lessons</b>	4	
Quasi experimental	4	Shahnaz et al., 2010; Mathur et al., 2004; Kanesathasan et al., 2008 ; Landesa Rural Development Institute (RDI), 2013

remained unmarried regardless of school attendance, finding participants 21 percent less likely to be married by 18 (Buchmann et al. 2017). Apni Beti, Apna Dhan, a cash transfer to families at a girl’s birth followed by a transfer at age 18 if the girl is unmarried, did not reduce marriage before age 18 in India (Nanda et al. 2015). Further, the evaluation suggests that Apni Beti, Apna Dhan may have increased rates of marriage immediately after the age 18 cutoff, suggesting no impact on marriage norms (Nanda et al. 2015).<sup>5</sup> The authors suggest that a more effective option might be positioning girls as financial contributors through giving transfers directly to girls rather than families, as was done in successful transfer programs.

- Global results on transfers and CM show that transfers aimed at supporting girls’ schooling show the most promise for preventing CM; with 8 out of 11 studies globally showing significant positive effects (Malhotra

& Elnakib 2021). The review asserts that transfers conditional on marriage alone, rather than school, are less effective with only a 50 percent success rate.

- Global evidence suggests that transfer programs may not be cost sustainable (Kalamar et al. 2016). However, Buchmann and colleagues (2018) found the conditional cash transfer in Bangladesh highly cost-effective. The cash transfer generated an estimated \$1,078 in Net Present Value overall, attributed to 6.3 years of delayed marriage, 1.4 averted child marriages, and 4.3 years of schooling, for every \$1,000 invested by the implementor.

**Overall, the impact of girls’ livelihoods training on CM prevention is mixed but promising.<sup>6</sup> This review finds that four of the six livelihoods-focused programs in SAR significantly reduced CM (Table 2).** While no stark differences emerge between successful and unsuccessful programs, we provide the following observations:

- The four successful programs provided girls with hands-on practice rather than curriculums. For instance, Delaying Age at Marriage in Rural Maharashtra, Institute for Health Management (IHMP) had girls participate in a practicum in the community, Better Life Options Program (BLP) brought tailoring trainers into the centers, Balika had computers for girls to train on during the entrepreneurship and livelihoods skills training, and the business process outsourcing (BPO) recruitment scheme linked young women with available jobs (Pande et al. 2006, Acharya et al. 2009, Amin et al. 2016, Jensen 2012).
- Of the four successful programs in SAR, two engaged families or communities (Balika and IHMP). A global review supports family engagement. The global review found that most adolescent empowerment programs that successfully reduced CM were community-based and involved parent or family outreach (Marcus et al. 2017).
- Jensen (2012) evaluated an intervention where job recruiters visited rural villages to hold information sessions on job opportunities in the BPO sector. The intervention was conducted in 80 villages, and outcomes in women age 15–21 were compared three years later to outcomes of women from 80 other villages where no job recruitment program was implemented. Young women in intervention villages were 5.1 percent less likely to

<sup>6</sup>The GAGE 2017 rigorous review *Girls’ Clubs, Life Skills Programmes and Girls’ Well-Being Outcomes* usefully analyzes the effectiveness of girl livelihoods and life skills programming on girls’ empowerment broadly using a global lens.

<sup>5</sup>Other programs in this review did not explore changes in marriage rates at 18 or above.

**Table 2: Program evaluation summary**

<b>Intervention</b>	<b>Author, Year</b>	<b>Target, Country</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Reduced CM?</b>
<b>Livelihoods</b>				
<b>Adolescent Participation Project 1998-2003</b>	Mathur et al. 2004	All youth age 10-24, and adults in community, Nepal	Community participatory planning to design the youth livelihood programs; 12-24 months	Statistical analysis comparing the control to intervention sites was not provided and intervention varied between communities due to participatory design.
<b>Balika</b>	Amin et al. 2016	Girls ages 12-18, Bangladesh	44 hours of basic life-skills training plus 100 hours of skills training on computers, income-generation options, mobile usage, and entrepreneurship in “safe spaces”; 18 months	The probability of CM was 23% lower for the livelihoods intervention villages, statistically significant at 1%.
<b>Better Life Options Program (BLP)</b>	Acharya et al. 2009	Girls ages 13-17, India	69 sessions covering goal setting, communication skills, legal rights, gender equality, sexual and reproductive health, and vocational skills training; 6-9 months	The increase in mean age of marriage of the intervention participants was 0.6 years greater than the increase in mean age of marriage of the control participants, statistically significant at 10%.
<b>BRAC Empowerment and Livelihood for Adolescents Centres Microfinance Groups</b>	Shahnaz et al. 2010	Girls ages 10-24, Bangladesh	Weekly sessions to pay loan and savings installments; monthly issue-based meetings on health, women’s rights, dowry, CM; 2 years	Significant differences between non-participants and participants suggest strong self-selection bias for which the study had not adjusted. There was evidence of spill over. The intervention was layered onto another intervention, creating potential bias.
<b>Business process outsourcing (BPO) industry job recruitment</b>	Jensen 2012	Young women ages 15-21, India	Job recruitment outreach in rural villages; 2-hour session once per village	The likelihood of marriage in intervention villages reduced by 5.1% relative to control villages, statistically significant at 5%.

**Table 2: Program evaluation summary**

<b>Intervention</b>	<b>Author, Year</b>	<b>Target, Country</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Reduced CM?</b>
<b>Livelihoods</b>				
<b>Delaying Age at Marriage in Rural Maharashtra, Institute for Health Management (IHMP)</b>	Pande et al. 2006	Unmarried adolescent girls ages 12-18, India	One-hour session each weekday evening to increase girls cognitive and practical skills; involved a practicum in the community, such as teaching basic literacy in a school; 1 year	The control group was four times more likely to marry before 18 than the group who fully participated in the program, statistically significant at 1%.
<b>Development Initiative Supporting Healthy Adolescents (DISHA)</b>	Kanesathasan et al. 2008	Youth ages 14-24, India	Micro-savings and credit groups for youth; 2 years	The number of participants in the livelihoods activities was not large enough to conduct impact analysis; qualitative process data used only.
<b>Kishori Abhijan Adolescent Peer Organized Network (APON/JVO)</b>	Amin and Suran, 2005	Rural girls ages 15-18, Bangladesh	Life and livelihood skills with the establishment of savings accounts; 3 years	The intervention arm was not significantly less likely to get married during the study period.
<b>Rajiv Gandhi Scheme for Empowerment of Adolescent Girls (SABLA)</b>	Landesa Rural Development Institute (RDI), 2013	Unmarried girls ages 10-19, India	Weekly girls' groups on land rights, assets, inheritance rights, land-based livelihoods; community meetings that engaged adults; 1 year	The report did not provide details of the methodology.
<b>Transfers</b>				
<b>Apni Beti, Apna Dhan (ABAD)</b>	Nanda et al. 2015	Low-income parents with the birth of a girl child, India	Cash was given at two points: 1) \$8 USD to mothers within 15 days of a girl child's birth and 2) a savings bond with the girl child's title amounting to \$380 USD when the girl turned 18, if unmarried	The intervention arm was not significantly less likely to get married before age 18.
<b>Female School Stipend Program, Pakistan</b>	Alam et al. 2011	Girls in middle school (grade 6-8), Pakistan	Stipends of \$10 per quarter to cover costs for middle school (Grades 6-8) up to 3 years; conditional on 80% attendance	Age of marriage among intervention participants was 1.2-1.5 years later, statistically significant at 10%.



**Table 2: Program evaluation summary**

Intervention	Author, Year	Target, Country	Description	Reduced CM?
<b>Transfers</b>				
<b>Female School Stipend Program, Bangladesh</b>	Hahn et al. 2017	Girls of secondary school age (grade 6-10), Bangladesh	Annual stipend of \$18 for Grade 6 to \$45 for Grade 10, conditional on 75% attendance, test scores, and remaining unmarried	For girls exposed to the program for 5 years, exposure delayed age of marriage by 0.57 years or 0.11 years for each year of exposure, statistically significant at 1%.
<b>Kanyashree Prakalpa</b>	Dey & Ghosal, 2021	Girls ages 13-18, India	Annual scholarship of 750 rupees to unmarried girls, and then 25,000 rupees at age 18 if still unmarried and engaged in educational or occupational pursuit	Exposure to the program reduced child marriage by 6.7%, statistically significant at 5%.
<b>Kishoree Kontha conditional transfer</b>	Buchmann et al. 2018	Girls ages 10-19, Bangladesh	Cooking oil transfer conditional on being unmarried; up to 3-year incentive (age 15 to 18)	Exposure to the program reduced the likelihood of child marriage by 21% overall, statistically significant at 1%.

become married than women in the control villages. The study suggests direct advertisement of jobs and perceptions of women’s earning potential in villages can have positive impacts on marriage trajectories.

recommendation is supported by the success of the transfer programs contingent on girls remaining in school (Kanyashree Prakalpa and the Female School Stipend Program) on CM prevention (Dey & Ghosal 2021, Hahn et al. 2017, Alam et al. 2011).

## PROGRAMMATIC RECOMMENDATIONS

**Programs should enhance girls’ own human capital but also address structural barriers to income-generating opportunities with specialized strategies focused on individual and family behavior.** Many livelihoods programs aim to change individual or family behavior through awareness and advocacy, rather than affecting the structural factors that cause CM; namely, educational systems, dowry practices, gender inequality, and low female labor participation. Transfer programs have similar concerns, with unclear evidence as to whether norms and perceptions of CM change after programs conclude.

- Transfers, often large-scale and institutionalized, would benefit from incorporation of livelihoods training, family engagement (as opposed to family awareness), and broader structures such as educational systems. This

- Livelihood training would benefit from stronger ties with existing systems that girls already have to navigate, such as school systems. Programs should provide job activities to be more effective, rather than curriculums or community awareness only. Livelihood training should connect young women with actual income-generating opportunities, thus embedding the program into the broader context for young women to apply newfound skills. This recommendation is supported by the success of the BPO job recruitment intervention in India, which reduced early marriage by linking girls to employment opportunities (Jensen 2012). The recommendation also aligns with the pilot evaluation of the Rajiv Gandhi Scheme for Empowerment of Adolescent Girls (SABLA), in which the authors state the program will become more integrated within school systems for improved success based on implementation findings (Landesa Rural Development Institute [RDI] 2013).

**As the drivers of early marriage differ from setting to setting, it is important to contextualize programs to the specific drivers and opportunity structures of the setting.**

For example, dowry is often a driver of CM in SAR. Amin (2011), for instance, reports not including discussion of dowry in the Kishori Abhijan program as a key barrier to the program's ability to prevent CM. In other places, the purity of girls may be a driving factor, in which case, successful interventions would likely look different.

**Approach microcredit programming for adolescent girls with caution.**

Two programs identified in our review included microcredit; however, both programs had significant methodological limitations, so we draw from their implementation notes rather than evidence. In terms of implementing microcredit initiatives for girls and young women, girls' lack of confidence and parental opposition are both barriers to success. The Bangladesh Empowerment and Livelihoods for Adolescents (ELA) program, which aimed to host weekly sessions for adolescents to meet and pay loan and savings installments, for example, took months to recruit a single participant for its loan program (Shahnaz & Karim 2010). DISHA in India was unable to provide microfinance to youth as planned due to lack of government and private sector infrastructure; most banks in India do not allow youth to open accounts or access loans until age 18 (Kanesathasan et al. 2008). Programs seeking to provide loans should start with small amounts and do extensive formative work with target families and banks alike. Further, it is critical to directly teach financial literacy to girls when involving them in microcredit or livelihood programs.

**The programmatic complexity of multifaceted programs limits effective evaluation and may not be sustainable.**

In most cases, multicomponent livelihoods program evaluations did not measure the impact of different components separately, making it impossible to disentangle the mechanisms that caused the outcomes. For instance, the Adolescent Participation Project 1998–2003 was well-intentioned in its use of community participation for program design, yet the program became too complex to be effectively implemented or evaluated (Mathur et al. 2004). Global evidence suggests that multicomponent programs may be less effective on CM overall, particularly related to their lack of sustainability (Malhotra & Elnakib 2021).

## WHAT IMPORTANT IMPLEMENTATION LESSONS DID WE LEARN?

**Pursuing efforts to sustain programs longer term helps gain community acceptance.** For example, the most successful adolescent livelihoods programs were those that implemented alumni clubs to facilitate continued engagement of girls and

young women in the program. Alumni clubs promote girl ownership of the program while actively embedding the program into the community. The Balika study found local mentorship by older girls from their community one of the program's main success factors (Amin et al. 2016). Making sure programs run long enough (as least two years) so that they can form a program identity within the community is critical.

**Provide girls with a sense of ownership to ensure consistent attendance.**

Low attendance is often due to lack of time, housework responsibilities, lack of parental permission, marriage, location of the training, and not liking the program topics. In the BLP program, girls were asked to contribute a small sum of 10 rupees per month to participate, which was reported to encourage attendance and a sense of entitlement to the program (Acharya et al. 2009). Other evidence suggests transfers can help with attendance; Buchmann et al. (2018) found that attendance at a life skills training was higher among girls who were also enrolled in the transfer arm. Training location is important; the Balika program found running training through schools, rather than buildings near markets or other social areas, ensured girls' safety, access, and ownership (Amin et al. 2016).

**Identify local government partners that are comfortable with program goals and allow time for capacity building, sensitization, and clarification of values.**

While partnership with local government is recommended, some programs faced resistance to a curriculum focused on reproductive health and transforming gender norms. Allowing time and resources for extensive gender and rights training is recommended for local staff to feel confident challenging norms and advocating for the program. Studies noted government partnership as critical for program success.

**When designing programs, take measures to balance promoting family support and preventing the exclusion of the most vulnerable.**

Often girls from highly conservative families are the most difficult to reach due to family unease with the intervention and more restrictive mobility norms. This can lead to not reaching the most vulnerable. Factoring in time and resources for household visits and in-depth conversations with parents and partners is recommended, particularly in less egalitarian settings. Selection bias likely causes intervention estimates to be upwardly biased.

## UNINTENDED HARM OF CM PROGRAMMING

**Burdening girls.** The most frequent criticism of livelihoods programs is their focus on equipping girls with skills without addressing structural issues, thus putting the burden of change on girls themselves. While the study did not measure actual



rates of CM, qualitative evidence of the large-scale Adolescent Development Programme (ADP) through the Adolescent Peer Organized Network (APON) in Bangladesh found that while girls' knowledge and attitudes toward CM changed, many adolescent girls were still unable to prevent early marriage from happening to them (Marcus et al. 2017). Intervening with girls thus may shift the burden on the victims and can even lead to girls experiencing harm.

**Incentivizing marriage at age 18.** While marriage at 18 is healthier than child marriage, programs should avoid sending messages that promote marriage at age 18, as opposed to later when the young woman is ready. In one case in India, cash transfers conditional on adolescent girls not being married were understood by some families to be provided for marriage costs for when the girl turned 18. In turn, some transfers were used for dowries, resulting in an increase in marriage when girls turned 18 (Nanda et al. 2015). This is an example of the need for clear messaging on program intentions.

**Increasing financial burden of families through increased dowry.** Kishori Abhijan in Bangladesh had the unintended consequence of raising dowry prices for families whose daughters participated in the program, since they were older when they did marry (Amin 2011).

**Reinforcing gendered work practices.** In several programs, women and girls overwhelmingly wanted to learn about tailoring, even though the program encouraged skill building in other employment areas. Working on norms changes related to gendered employment practices, while keeping participant safety in mind, may further enhance program impacts and gender equality more broadly. The recent report *Breaking Barriers: Female Entrepreneurs Who Cross Over to Male-Dominated Sectors* covers the literature on gender-based sectoral segregation and helps to identify some of the factors that support women in entering male-dominated work sectors (World Bank 2022).

**General backlash to enrolled girls.** Increasing the visibility and mobility of girls can yield positive benefits in many settings. In highly conservative settings, however (such as those that practice *purdah*), doing so can pose some risks. Understanding norms for female mobility in the program setting is critical for initiatives that bring girls out of the home. Backlash against girls can also occur through unrealistic expectations by participants and families. Programs that involve vocational skill building or transfers generally attract widespread community interest due to the potential financial benefits. For programs that involve credit, livelihoods, or other promises of financial opportunity, it is important that programs actively manage the expectations of participants, families, and other community members.

## LIMITATIONS OF THE EVIDENCE REVIEW

Several limitations on generalizability of findings are persistent across the WEE-focused CM prevention literature. One set of issues relates to the sample comparability. Context involves several factors affecting generalizability, including economic infrastructure, cultural practice, religious beliefs, as well as the normalization of WEE. Second, some programs occurred as early as the 1990s. Norms, cultures, laws, infrastructure, and practices have changed substantially since then, affecting external validity.

A second set of issues relates to program evaluation design, particularly for livelihoods training. The most substantial issue is differences in components accompanying the training. Noting how the livelihoods training is structured within a wider intervention, as well as its sequencing, is important for comparability and generalizability of findings. Moreover, program duration varies considerably across evaluations. Also, results of evaluated programs are only available for Bangladesh, Pakistan, and India, restricting representation of the region as a whole.

There is limited rigorously evaluated evidence on the WEE-CM relationship in SAR. The results of only 10 program evaluations were included in this evidence review. Of these, only four employed a randomized control trial, often considered the gold standard methodology for assessing program impacts. Lack of rigorous evaluation limits the ability to make definitive statements on causal effects and hence affects the conclusions that can be drawn. Finally, this is an evidence review rather than a systematic review in that articles were mostly identified through assessing the review literature, rather than extensive article searches through databases, and thus may have limitations regarding the programs covered.

## HIGHLIGHTED GAPS IN RESEARCH

More evidence is needed on the mechanisms through which WEE can prevent CM. While studies have explored the unintended benefits of unconditional cash transfers for CM in Africa (Kenya, Malawi, and Zambia), most widescale poverty alleviation programs in SAR have not analyzed CM outcomes (Malhotra & Elnakib 2021). We recommend that future economic empowerment programming in SAR, as well as broader poverty reduction programs, evaluate CM impacts, particularly using rigorous evaluation designs. Below is a list of specific recommendations for future research:

### RESEARCH DESIGN

- Future testing of community participatory approaches and how to effectively evaluate them for CM is encouraged. While community participatory programming is promising,

existing evaluations in SAR have faced challenges effectively monitoring and evaluating these complex designs.

- More rigorous evaluations with longer duration of follow-up are needed. Of the few causal and longitudinal studies in SAR, most do not have long enough follow-up periods to fully capture the effects on CM. The limited observations of marriages within short follow-up windows minimizes study power.
- Interventions should begin with formative research on the drivers of CM in the specific context and build from there.
- Studies should articulate clear theories of change that outline the mechanisms through which they anticipate their WEE efforts to influence CM. Our review highlights the importance of gaining consensus on how to measure, conceptualize, and report WEE impact on CM. The diversity of ways that programs approach WEE undermines the ability to synthesize evidence.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- Future studies should examine both the scale and cost of the interventions; readily available cost analysis would be helpful for evaluating future interventions and weighing the costs and benefits of different programs.
- More research should examine how to structure and program livelihoods training in contexts where dowry payments are prevalent.
- Understanding how to equip girls effectively and safely with technology access and skills is needed, as mobile phones and tech usage increases in even the most remote parts of the world.
- Future work should measure child sexual abuse alongside CM as outcomes to monitor and prevent. Few studies have focused on child sexual abuse and exploitation, and none of the CM literature in SAR focuses on this area.

## RESEARCH POPULATIONS

- Other countries, notably Nepal and Afghanistan, where CM rates are higher than in India, need contextualized research on how to prevent CM. The vast majority of evaluated programs were in India and Bangladesh, precluding useful regional synthesis.
- Future studies should stratify on age; WEE programming impact on CM could substantially vary across adolescent ages, and, in addition, monitor impacts on girls immediately after the age 18 cutoff.
- Investing in discussions on masculinity and how it relates to early marriage and women's economic participation is

needed; how to effectively engage fathers and young men in CM prevention efforts is understudied.

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