Transforming Harmful Gender Norms Through Social and Behavior Change Programming – Findings From the "End Child Marriage" Program Evaluation in Ethiopia

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Chief Editor Web: www.ijsdc.org Email: info@ijsdc.org **Editing Oversight** Imperials Consultants International Limited	**Abstract:** *The prevalence of child marriage in Ethiopia is very high and stands out among many countries in the continent and globally. The effects of child marriage are harmful to the survivors and society. To help eliminate this practice UNICEF Ethiopia launched the End Child Marriage Flagship Programme (ECM Flagship) in 2020, which builds upon decades of global and national programming to combat child marriage. The ECM Flagship pursues a gender-transformative and multisectoral approach to change harmful gender norms and social practices and bridge gaps in public service provisions so that child marriage can be eliminated by 2025. This study used evaluation design critical to allow the systemic assessment of the effectiveness of the ECM flagship. The design incorporated a mixed method approach where qualitative and quantitative data sets were gathered using in-depth- interviews, focus group discussions, and structured surveys. This paper presents and discusses the findings of the ECM programme in bringing about social behavior change (SBC) toward ending child marriage (CM) and other harmful practices. The findings show that the ECM Programme plays a critical role in influencing SBC. The programme enlightens girls on the negative consequences of CM, and encourages peer education and the sharing of personal experiences which influence change of attitude, beliefs, norms, and practice away from CM. The programme also promotes government buy-in and involvement as a way of sustaining the programme and ensuring the continued end to CM.*

Keywords: *Child Marriage; Social Behavior Change; Harmful Practices; Gender Equality, Programme Evaluation* |

1.1 Background of the study

Child marriage (CM) is a violation of human rights that mainly affects girls [1]. Since the 1990s, Ethiopia has recorded progressive growth in legislation and regulations that enhance gender parity and women empowerment. As a result, the country recorded a significant decline in CM between 2005 and 2016 [2]. Although CM is illegal in Ethiopia and there is an increased awareness of this law among the country's residents, the prevalence of child marriage in the country is still alarming [3]. A case in point is that an estimated 40% representing 17.3 million women in the age category of 20-24 years, reported

being married before they attained 18 years of age. More alarming is the statistic that 14% (six million) women in the same age category were married off before they celebrated their 15th birthday [4, 5].

The effects of child marriage are clear according to research. For instance, women involved in CM give birth at an earlier age, bear more children, have a higher likelihood of not delivering in a health facility or with the help of a skilled provider, and have a higher likelihood of being abused physically by their intimate partner(s) [6]. Burgess et al. [7] also find that CM is linked to certain mental health problems and emotional sufferings, while Wodon et al. [8] reveal that CM compromises girls' ability to progress with education hence lowering their earnings during adulthood compared to that of women married after their 18th birthday. What is more, girls married off as children have a lower power to make decisions in their marital homes, have a reduced rate of participation in the labor force, have no earnings, and have minimized control over household assets that are productive [9].

A mix of various factors is associated with the high prevalence of CM in Ethiopia. Religious beliefs and social norms confine women to wifely and motherly tasks in addition to stereotyping women as the suitable performers of all or most household chores and child-rearing duties. This tends to motivate the marriage of girls before they attain their 18th birthday because it is assumed they can perform these roles even at a young age. Things like education that would delay child marriages are considered irrelevant, as women do not need education to perform these roles and tasks [10, 11].

Additionally, the absence of substitute chances for vocational education or safe secondary schools with toilets and water, or opportunities for safe and remunerated labour are the other risk factors for CM [11, 12]. The desire to acquire dowry, the tradition of family honor associated with young virgins [10], forced migration, and displacement [13] are the other drivers of CM, while emergencies like droughts and conflicts further enhance the risk of being married as a child as the marriage is applied as a coping and survival mechanism in response to these emergencies [14]. In 2022, Ethiopia is suspected to have experienced rising trends of child marriage in conflict and drought-affected regions [14]. According to the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) regional analysis of drought-affected regions of Somali, Oromia, and Southern Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples' (SNNP) region, child marriage increased overall by 4% in 2022. Coronavirus disease also enhanced CM incidences across the world by interrupting education and economic systems, increasing the risk of food insecurity, disrupting usual access to programmes and services, increasing adolescent pregnancy, and causing the death of primary caregivers or parents [13].

To deal with CM in Ethiopia UNICEF Ethiopia has implemented the United Nations (UN) Global Programme to End CM since 2016. Since 2020, UNICEF and the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) have implemented the second Phase of the Global Programme (2020– 2023).
Still, the Evaluation of UNICEF Ethiopia Country Programme (2016-2020) and the Partners Perception Study both conducted in 2019 posited the need for enhanced inter-programme collaboration to fast-track results for children. In reaction to this, UNICEF Ethiopia listed sections of existing programmes (like the ECM Programme) around four Flagship Results for the new 2020-2025 Country Programme. UNICEF chose the 'End Child Marriage' (ECM) as one of the four Flagship Result Programmes.

The ECM Flagship Result Programme is intended to play a role in the implementation of the National

Costed Roadmap to End Child Marriage and Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting (FGM/C) 2020-2024. The roadmap is focused on ending the practice of harmful acts on children and women by 2025 [15] and was developed by the Ministry of Women, Children and Youth (MoWCY) of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, with financial and technical support from United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), UNICEF, and the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women). Additionally, the ECM Flagship aims to make faster the journey towards the attainment of SDG 5.3 on eliminating "all harmful practices, such as child, early, and forced marriage and female genital mutilation by 2030." The Flagship Result programme is streamlined to UNICEF's Strategic Plan Goal Area 3 which aims to attain a violence and exploitation-free society for all children, and Article 35(4) of Ethiopia's Constitution, which guarantees women the right to state protection from harmful customary or traditional practices. The roadmap is also aligned to the "Proclamation No. 414/2004 of the Criminal Code of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia" which criminalizes the performance or procurement of FGM in Ethiopia [5]. By attaining these objectives, the Flagship programme aims to eliminate the practice of harmful acts to children and women which will also minimize the prevalence of women aged 20-24 being married before age 18.

1.2 Objectives of the Evaluation
To evaluate the progress of the ECM Flagship so far, an evaluation was commissioned to be conducted in 2023. The evaluation's main objective was to investigate to what extent and how UNICEF Ethiopia's ECM programmes affected the transformation of harmful gender norms/practices (specifically child marriage) through its social behavior change programming.

1.3 Methods and Materials
This study applied evaluation research design which was theory-based and applied an embedded, mixed-methods approach [16] which utilizes qualitative and quantitative data where one category of data is embedded within the methodology framed by the other dataset [17]. An evaluation design offers systematic assessment of the effectiveness, efficiency and impact of a program in order to guide on improvement of decision-making hence is suitable for use to assess the effectives of the ECM flagship project in relation to assessing its effectiveness in ending child marriage in Ethiopia [18]. Through the embedded methodology, secondary quantitative data was incorporated to address gaps within the theory-based qualitative investigation. A convergent mixed-methods approach was applied such that quantitative and qualitative secondary and primary data was gathered within the same timeframe, and then the arising findings converged through comparisons and contrasts at the interpretation stage of the analysis. The methodology adopted the human rights-based approach to participatory methods that offered adolescents the chance to express their personal opinions and views on the outcomes, outputs, and activities, of the ECM Programme, and the evaluation findings. The adopted data collection approaches comprised the collaborative models (in-depth- interviews in the form of life histories) and consultative models (focus group discussions and analysis of structured surveys) of participatory involvement of adolescent girls during the evaluation process [19]. The interviewing of adolescent girls used a life-history approach which allowed the participants room to spearhead discussions. This approach recognized respondents as active parties in defining the issues of importance to the evaluation. Besides interviewing adolescent girls, the evaluation also gathered the views of male and female participants from the community. The qualitative interviews used in the evaluation were carried out in the Somali, Oromia, and Amhara regions of Ethiopia. These regions have some of the highest prevalence rates of CM in the country and they were accorded high geographical and budgetary

attention of UNICEF's ECM Flagship. Two *woredas* in each of these regions were chosen purposively from whom one kebele was chosen for data collection. A total of 227 respondents comprising 102 adolescent girls, 49 community members, 48 implementers, 19 UNICEF staff, and 9 family members, were interviewed.

1.4 Findings
1.4.1 Knowledge and Awareness Creation as an Influencer of SBC
The flagship programme has increased (among Ethiopian communities) knowledge and awareness of harmful practices affecting girls including CM, FGM, sex education, gender inequality, menstrual health and hygiene management, and family planning. The programme has enlightened underage girls of all ages on the negative consequences of child marriage which discourages their partaking in the practices. The increased knowledge and awareness have influenced a changed attitude, beliefs, and norms towards CM and other harmful practices practiced in the country. Interviews revealed that there is a significant **change in attitudes, practices, norms, and beliefs** among programme participants as well as the entire community. The evidence of this was in the finding that girls participating in girls/gender clubs had higher levels of self-confidence and self-efficacy than those who did not. Some of the programme girls whose attitudes and beliefs were changed also showed changed practices. For instance, in Amhara and Oromia some girls completely refused to be married off by their kin by sharing information they had learned from programme training on the negative effects of CM as well as standing up for their beliefs against their family members. Elsewhere, some girls also recounted how they reported CM incidences to save their sisters and friends from the practice. Other girls also narrated how the programme had equipped them to speak in public where (in partnership with their teachers) they created awareness to the larger community through community forums on CM and other harmful practices.

The interviewees revealed that programme participants and the entire community also experienced changes towards harmful practices including CM and FGM, and gender inequality. This change in attitude was linked to the training conducted by UNICEF. Through the training, people were equipped with knowledge that transformed their perception towards harmful practices girls are exposed to hence changing their attitudes from a tolerant one to a resistant attitude towards such practices. However, the programme was not the only source of the attitude and belief change as findings given by community and family members showed that the change had been slowly progressing for decades, yet the Flagship programme had not existed for even one decade.

Gaps between changed beliefs and changed practices were evident while analyzing SBC among boys participating in the gender clubs. Although reports showed that boys changed their attitudes on gender roles after participating in gender clubs, the actual change in practice (like assuming cooking roles and other household chores presumably set aside for girls) was reportedly minimal or non-existent. Additionally, girls inveterate the significance of (apparent) changed attitudes among boys taking part in gender clubs to form a safe and enabling environment at school. As such, most of the girls interviewed favored mixed-gender clubs as opposed to gender-segregated clubs.

1.4.2 Influence from other people's experiences
Victim experiences

The ECM Flagship programme influenced programme participants and affected girls from the general community to share personal experiences boldly and learn from those experiences. The evaluation revealed that personal experiences are significant determinants of girls' attitudes toward harmful practices. Victim experiences and stories shared by victims influenced girls to perceive CM, FGM, and gender inequality practices as harmful and unworthy to be practiced on women. For instance, married and divorced girls disapproved of CM based on their own negative experiences, while unmarried girls depended on their learnings from gender clubs to make the disapproval. Additionally, there was evidence that unmarried girls often sought advice from their married/divorced peers concerning CM.

Peer sharing

Peer sharing that takes place in gender clubs also seemed to have a significant effect on girls' attitudes towards education as many girls (both married and unmarried) changed their attitude towards education after being influenced by the clubs. To some girls, the clubs influenced improved performance at school while in others it changed their perception of education leading to re-enrolment in some. Additionally, out-of-school girls felt more optimistic and less frustrated based on their interest and opportunity to re-enroll in school. One married girl substantiated:

> *"Back then I felt nothing, but now I feel bad and regret when I see my friends in school. I couldn't continue school as my husband was not encouraging me. […] Immediately after I got married, I have seen that child marriage is not good. I have no interest in staying in my marriage."* (Female Respondent, OR024, February 14, 2023).

Further, the clubs changed girls' perceptions about education (from a negative to a positive perception) and increased their optimism to create longer-term plans for their future. The education also enhanced awareness of family planning and gender equality in education (as evidenced by the quote from Respondent OR004), although many girls considered marriage and education mutually exclusive.

> *"Frankly speaking, my daughter and niece didn't directly discuss marriage with me. However, I occasionally observed when they spoke with their friends and I repeatedly told them that I didn't want them to talk about marriage at the time; instead, they should prioritize their education unless they wanted to be illiterate and sweeping livestock manure. I even chose who they should be friends with and advised them not to waste their time getting married when they could use their education to find employment and make money."* (Male Respondent, OR004, February 10, 2023).

In some regions particularly in Amhara and Oromia regions, peer pressure and the 'need to fit' significantly determined child marriage. Some married/divorced girls emphasized that they decided to marry against the wishes of their parents based on advice from close friends or the need to be like their friends. One married girl testified:

> *"I dropped out of school because at that time, all of my friends got married. There was my cousin who was engaged at that time, and she was my best friend and she told me to do whatever she did. I got married because she was encouraging me to get married. […] I saw married girls looking good, I was inspired by them and wanted to get married, but my family was angry and not happy. […] Me and my husband started dating on the phone, and people encouraged us. Nobody forced me to get married, at that time, if I were thinking of stopping the marriage, no one would have enforced it, it was me who chose to get married,"* (Female Respondent, OR027, February 27, 2023).

However, the ECM Flagship has been attempting to change this by empowering programme participants and the larger community to encourage girls to attend school and redirecting the girls' attention from marrying while still children, as a way of dealing with economic challenges as well as

diverting their attention from focusing on marriage as the end goal of their life. The programme encourages girls to get an education that they will be able to use to get better opportunities that will enable them to deal with economic challenges.

1.4.3 Challenges to SBC and Way Forward
The study also revealed factors that can challenge SBC in the future. For instance, unchanged attitudes, practices, and norms among family and community members can bar girls from acting upon their beliefs. Poor or inadequate support structures (like the lack of women's shelters, lack of good water and sanitation at school, poor law enforcement mechanisms, and lack of disability-accessible venues, etc.) reportedly undermined programme participants' agency in changing HP. Budgetary constraints also challenged the attainment of SBC as submitted by a UNICEF country office staff:

> "*In some regions budget itself is problematic. People have intentions to change, but the [governmental] support is not there. Unless everything is in place, it is difficult to see change,*" (Female Respondent, SO016, February 12, 2023).

To ensure the sustainable transformation of the ECM Flagship programme even after UNICEF exits, the government has been brought on board to buy in and own the programme by incentivizing the Ethiopian government to co-fund, duplicate, upscale, and take over SBC interventions that aim to end HP. One output of the ECM Flagship's log frame was for UNICEF to capacitate the government to implement its own National Costed Roadmap to End Child Marriage and FGM. This was expected to form a great step towards ensuring a sustainable government-led initiative that aims to end HP against women and children. An examination of the implementation status of the roadmap reveals that the roadmap's activities to arrest CM was made and expected targets were partially achieved. However, the role of government in ensuring people's SBC against HPs in Ethiopia remains hinged in its capacitating. Once stable, the government's role in ending the HP through SBC will be significant.

1.5 Discussions
Social Behavior Change (SBC) is a process through which communities and individuals collaborate to acquire and sustain positive behaviors [20]. This means that the goal of SBC is to bring about acceptable transformation. Child Marriage, FGM and gender inequality are some of the HP to women that the ECM Flagship programme aimed to address through SBC. Since these HPs are culturally rooted, they are socially acceptable among practicing communities hence a social process like SBC is expected to bring about transformation.

1.5.1 Knowledge and Awareness Creation
As established in the findings of this assessment, it is evident that the ECM Flagship programme brought about a change in attitude, practice, norms, and beliefs among programme participants as well as the larger community of the target regions. This behavior change is attributable to various things, as evidenced in the findings, including increased knowledge and awareness of the harms of HP against children and women. Noteworthy, the knowledge and awareness gathered through UNICEF training sessions enlightened girls and the community on the negative effect CM has on their health and society. As such, these educational training sessions raised awareness and knowledge on the ills of CM that the programme participants and community could learn from. This is in line with UNICEF's [21] submission that awareness creation is foundational to attitudinal and behavior change. Thus, from the

leanings, the community imagines and compares the negative effects CM poses to them against the positives they are likely to gain if they avoid it, and by that, stirring in them a change away from the practice. The study further reveals that awareness and knowledge creation is not a guarantee of behavior change just as is indicated in Arlinghaus and Johnston's [22] study. This was evidenced by the unchanged behavior of boys who, after participating in gender clubs and appreciating gender equality, only changed their attitudes but failed to change their behavior to match their appreciation of gender equality in household chores.

The assessment also reveals that through the ECM programme, participants gathered knowledge and awareness that gave them increased confidence and higher self-efficacy which are important in motivating one's actions [23]. Confidence enables participants to have a strong belief against CM, while efficacy gives them the belief that they have the capacity and ability to escape CM. Additionally, self-efficacy increases people's confidence in what they believe in. Through these, programme participants have a belief that they can control or influence their social environment hence are able to change perceptions, norms, and attitudes the community holds on CM and other HP leading to a positive behavioral change [24]. The evidence of the effects of higher self-efficacy is seen among programme participants completely refusing to be married off against their parents' wishes. Among others, the grown confidence and self-efficacy could have been the motivators towards public speaking against CM and other HP.

1.5.2 Sharing Personal Experiences
Sharing of personal experiences was also found to influence SBC against CM and other HP according to the ECM Programme. The ECM Flagship programme encouraged participants (married and divorced girls) to boldly share their personal experiences on how marrying while still children affected them, which strongly influenced the attitudes of the unmarried girls against marrying at a young age and even encouraged them to complete school before marrying. This sharing offered first-hand practical information that unmarried participants and the community at large would easily relate to and apply. This concurs with the submission by Tahirih Justice Center [25] that survivor sharing inspires the community hence growing the anti-CM movement. It is easier for unmarried girls to follow the advice of a person with practical experience than one with theoretical knowledge hence the finding.

1.5.3 Peer Sharing
Peer sharing is also seen to have a significant influence on changed attitudes towards CM among programme participants and the community. Research shows that peer education plays a significant role in delaying or ending child marriage [26] because it allows peers to learn from each other as they easily connect due to the many things they have in common. Additionally, peer education allows free sharing as the peers feel less judged and intimidated compared to when they are being educated by an adult. Since the learning environment is conducive in peer education, the girls tend to grasp and comprehend things better hence putting them in a position to apply their knowledge to change unacceptable situations. This grasped knowledge promotes attitude change which in turn leads to behavior change. Changed behavior is evidenced in school re-enrolment, improved performance in school, and shunning CM.

Girls'/gender clubs (which is one of the places peer education took place) allowed girls to interact by sharing the demerits of CM and other HP while advancing the need and value of education to a girl.

This changed the previously held perception about education and CM (where it was believed that educating a girl is useless and that girls are meant to be married off for wealth) to a positive perception where education is considered useful and key to addressing the economic hardships people go through [8]. Besides equipping girls with knowledge against CM in favour of education, gender clubs also equipped girls with knowledge on family planning and gender equality [4] an illustration that much more than educating girls on CM was done in the gender clubs—from the clubs, girls were educated on their reproductive health (family planning) to give them the capacity to control when or whether they sire children or not. This puts women in control of their health and family size. The critical role of peers in girls' attitudes and behaviour towards marriage could not only be seen in the positive effects of peer education within the gender clubs but also interviewed girls recounted that some girls married due to pressure from their peers. To overcome this negative influence, the study revealed that participants and the larger community were being empowered to encourage girls to attend school and redirect the girls' attention from marrying to schooling as indicated by UNICEF [4, 5]. This way, peer influence was guided in a manner that leads to a positive effect towards SBC to end CM.

1.5.4 Strengthening Government Structures

Strengthening government structures to deal with CM and other HP is also a way of promoting SBC among Ethiopian communities. When government structures are strengthened, capacity is created to deal with hindrances to ending CM and other HP. The government, compared to NGOs that depend on donations, is well-resourced and has the machinery to deter the continuation of HP hence can ensure the sustainability of the ECM programme if well-capacitated. Due to its duty to protect its people, the government should come up with or enforce regulations and policies that criminalize CM-propagating behaviors while promoting positive SBC against the practice. This puts the government in a better position to advance the ECM programmes in Ethiopia.

1.6 Conclusion

Evaluation findings show that the ECM Flagship programme presents many positive changes among programme participants and their communities toward ending child marriage. The programme is effective for realizing SBC by enlightening girls on the negative consequences of CM, enhancing the girls' self-efficacy and confidence, and promoting attitude change towards girls' education and gender equality. The programme also encourages survivors to share their personal experiences with unmarried girls, to peer educate, and to influence, as well as promote girls' education and awareness— all of which play a role in SBC through changed attitudes, norms, beliefs, and practices against CM. The ECM Flagship programme is also strongly focused on sustainability by increasing government ownership and involvement to uphold and enhance activities for ending CM.

1.7 Recommendations

Owing to the successful effects of the ECM on ending harmful practices against women by influencing SBC, the Ethiopian government and NGOs inclined towards protecting the rights of women should adopt and enforce the principles highlighted in the ECM programme.

UNICEF in partnership with the Ethiopian government should expand the ECM programme to the larger part of Ethiopia where harmful practices are being carried out against women and girls. The programme should also incorporate more girls and women to increase the impact. This will increase knowledge and awareness among Ethiopians and influence SBC towards vacating these harmful

practices leading to the attainment of national and international goals of ending harm towards women and girls.

Government of Ethiopia through local administration functions, women advocacy groups, concerned NGOs, and the community should promote practices like peer sharing, sharing of personal testimonies among other cases that show practical steps that can influence change away from harmful practices.

Government of Ethiopia and well-wishers like NGOs should promote women and girls' access to support structures (like basic needs and adequate budgetary allocation) by, for instance, offering handouts to rural or needy women and girls, which will minimize women vulnerability and promote SBC towards escaping harmful practices.

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