

**A Gender Analysis of NGOs' Advocacy and Program Reports with respect to Child  
Marriage**

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## **Abstract**

This thesis looks at the issue of child marriage and the discourse used by major international NGOs in their program reports and briefs to promote the end of child marriage. Through this thesis, it is argued that there is a need for a more prominent gender analysis that takes into account the current structural conditions which perpetuate gender inequality and reinforce notions of vulnerability and disempowerment of the child forced to marry (girl or boy). Child marriage programming fails to fully address the transformative changes needed to end – or to significantly impact - this global problem and to fully address the denial of human rights arising from child marriage.

Using a qualitative content analysis and discourse analysis, this thesis examines 10 publicly-available documents based on a continuum of impacts from essentialism, to gender mainstreaming, to transformative change. The findings shows that there is a prevalence of gender mainstreaming discourse, although still often employed in conjunction with some gender essentialist language. To see real change in the world, there needs to be a switch towards transformative language within the discourse of organizations that are trying to make a change on the ground.

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## Introduction

Child marriage has been recognized by international law as a human rights violation that is commonly conceptualized as a formal marriage or an informal union “where one or both parties is below the age of 18” (Warner, Stoebenau, and Glinski 2014, 2). The United Nations bodies addressing the issue of child marriage usually refer to “child, early and forced marriage” (CEFM) to present a nuanced comprehension of the implications of child marriage. The United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner defines child marriage and early marriage the same way, while forced marriages are “marriages in which one and/or both parties have not personally expressed their full and free consent to the union” (UN OHCHR, 2019). It is understood that a child marriage is considered to be a form of forced marriage and in the context of this research, the term “child marriage” will be used to represent CEFM with the understanding that the definition of forced marriage is limited to the context of child and early marriage. I will refer to CEFM only in the context of UN documents to respect their use of the term.

Child marriage can be understood in the context of a human rights framework. Most countries have forbidden the practice of child marriage either through their own national laws or through the ratification of international conventions or both. The *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women* (CEDAW) specifically addresses the situation of child marriage by stating that “[t]he betrothal and the marriage of a child shall have no legal effect, and all necessary action, including legislation, shall be taken to specify a minimum age for marriage [...]” (CEDAW 1979, art. 16-2). Although the *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (CRC) does not specifically address the issue of child marriage, all countries which have ratified it are committed to the overall protection and care of a child, which is defined as “every human being below the age of eighteen years unless under the law applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier” (CRC 1989, art. 1). While the CRC might have failed to address directly the issue of child marriage, it is important to recognise its successful provisions regarding education (article 28), health (article 24), access to information (article 13), protection against sexual abuse (article 34) and violence (article 19); the respect of these rights can all lead to a better chance of reducing the practice of child marriage.

Despite international commitments to end child marriage, a staggering number of young women and girls still end up in early and forced marriages. According to the *United Nations Population Fund* (UNFPA), in 2010, over 67 million women between 20 and 24 years old had been married before their 18<sup>th</sup> birthday (UNFPA 2012, 30). This represents about one in five girls globally. This number doubles in developing countries with 40% of girls married before the age of 18 and 12% of girls married before they turn 15 (UNFPA 2019, 1).

The proposed solutions to end child marriage tend to focus on the pivotal strategy of access to safe, quality education for young girls and adolescents (Girls Not Brides 2017). High-quality schooling is usually thought to be the best way to reduce the likelihood of child marriage (Raj et al. 2014). In some instances, girls are forced into marriage after dropping out of school. The causality may also go the other way: by marrying early, young girls are obliged to drop school in order to focus on their household responsibilities. This is considered to be a violation of their right to education (UNFPA 2019). Research on child marriage often focuses on the impacts of the access to education or how the level of education completed influences the age of marriage for the girl. It is believed that any level of education would have a negative impact on the likelihood of child marriage, but research by Raj, McDougal, Silverman, and Rusch show that, in the case of South Asia where the majority of child marriage occurs, primary education seems to be insufficient for significantly reducing child marriage (Raj et al. 2014, 4). Since education only represents part of the solution for the eradication of child marriage, additional programming is needed to tackle this global problem.

Development organizations, including non-governmental organizations (NGOs) such as Girls Not Brides, International Centre of Research on Women (ICRW), BRAC, PLAN, CARE, and Oxfam track the practice and impacts of child marriage around the world, offering a range of program priorities to end child marriage. As big northern-based organizations, these international NGOs have a major impact on what is being promoted as solutions and can influence the perception of the northern audience on what are considered the most salient elements to be concerned about. While the need for adequate policies and programs addressing the issue of child marriage is widely accepted, debates still exist around several issues, such as: which strategy to favour to ensure the ending of the practice; which policies and programs to push forward to support this strategy; and how to create an inclusive dialogue on the matter. In this

thesis, I review the range of policies and programs designed to end child marriage and consider these programs in relation to their transformational potential. Specifically, I consider the importance of a stronger focus on gender equality and transformational feminist approaches to programs geared to ending child marriage. Using a content and discourse analysis, I examine 10 reports and publicly-available resources produced by six major international NGOs to consider the kinds of approaches taken to promote the end of child marriage.

In order to see significant change on the issue, I argue that there is a need for a more prominent gender analysis that takes into account the current structural conditions which perpetuate gender inequality and reinforce notions of vulnerability and disempowerment of the child forced to marry (girl or boy). In this thesis, I argue that child marriage programming fails to fully address the transformative changes needed to end – or to significantly impact - this global problem and to fully address the denial of human rights arising from child marriage. Several guiding frameworks facilitate the analysis of program commitments to ending child marriage. In this thesis, I examine approaches to ending child marriage using an analytical framework that considers programs on a continuum of impacts from essentialism, to gender mainstreaming, to transformative change. Situating the NGO program reports within this analytical framework demonstrates the impacts and implications of NGO activities specific to child marriage for addressing the changes needed. The thesis draws heavily on postcolonial feminism because this scholarship has effectively identified the limitations of gender mainstreaming and essentialist, women-focused practices. Postcolonial feminism demonstrates the need for systemic and structural changes to patriarchal practices, discrimination, inequality and the root causes of gender inequality that lead to issues like child marriage and therefore provides strong explanatory power for understanding the limited impacts of programs.

## **Literature Review**

### ***Context***

It is estimated that “some 650 million girls and women around the world today have been married as children” (UNICEF 2019). UNICEF (2018) data from 2018 shows that there is a global decrease in the prevalence of the practice of child marriage in the last decade, going from one in four to approximately one in five women who were married as children. However, considering the important population growth in the countries where child marriage is predominant, the total number of cases of child marriage has not been significantly reduced. Even if this trend continues, it is estimated that the total number of child marriages could be increasing by 2030 (UNFPA 2019). Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic is believed to contribute to higher rates of child marriages with a potential additional total of 13 million child marriages that would have otherwise not occurred between 2020 and 2030 due to the negative impact on the implementation of interventions to reduce the practice (UNFPA 2020, 5). These indicators and projections show a disturbing reality which highlights the possible lack of effectiveness of current strategies to prevent and stop child marriage.

While South Asian countries have the largest number of child marriages due to population size, Western and Sub-Saharan African countries have the highest prevalence of child marriage (ICRW 2017). According to Girls Not Brides (2021), based on the UNICEF State of the World’s Children data of 2020, Niger is the country with the highest rates of child marriage with 76% of women between 20-24 years old who were married before the age of 18, followed by Central African Republic (68%) and Chad (67%). In comparison, when looking at countries with the highest absolute numbers of child marriage, India is far exceeding the number of any other country with 15,648,000 girl brides, followed by Bangladesh with 4,382,000 women, aged 20-24 years old, married before 18 (Ibid). In regards to age of marriage, UNICEF data shows that, while the overall median age at first marriage has been gradually increasing, this tendency has been mainly limited to girls coming from families with higher incomes (UNICEF 2016).

While child marriage predominantly affects young girls, it is important to acknowledge that boys can also be forced to marry. However, very little research has been done on the consequences of child marriage on boys who experience similar consequences to girls, with the exception of gender specific situations or inequalities such as early pregnancy or maternal mortality. According to Gaston et al. (2019, 221-223), across the 82 countries analysed in their

research, the percentage of males aged 20-24 years who were first married or in union before age 18 is 4.5% or 1 in 21 males, compared to 21.2% or 1 in 5 women. Plan International and Coram International (2015), through their report called *Getting the Evidence: Asia Child Marriage Initiative*, have looked at three Asian countries where child marriage rates are relatively high: Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Indonesia. This report allows for a better understanding of marriage of boys, giving a clear overview of the rates in each country. While marriage of boys occurs in all three countries, it is in Pakistan that the percentage is the highest: 12.9% of boys married before the age of 18 years compared to 3.7% and 2.8% in Indonesia and Bangladesh respectively (Ibid, 6-7). This significant difference in boy marriage in Pakistan could potentially be explained by the practice of *watta satta* marriages, which consists in the “simultaneous exchange of a brother-sister, uncle-niece, or cousin pairing across two families in order to strengthen the bond between them” (Ibid, 7). Outside of the few statistics on boy marriage, males who participate in – or facilitate - the marriage of child brides are often portrayed in the literature and research reports in pejorative or negative terms such as the strict father, the older groom, or the perpetuator of sexual abuse (Khoja-Moolji 2015, 51). There is thus a need to alter the messaging and promote programming to ensure all genders are included as positive agents of change in programs designed to end child marriage.

### ***Causes and Consequences***

Although the potential causes of child marriage are multiple, there is some consensus in the literature regarding attributing the main driving factors of child marriage to the issue of poverty and economic instability. According to the UNFPA’s report *End Child Marriage*, looking at the “DHS/MICS from 78 countries over the period of 2000-2011”, 54% of the child brides are coming from the poorest 20% of households, compared to 16% of the girls coming from the richest quintile of households (UNFPA 2012, 35). In need of financial resources, the bride’s family often feels obligated to marry their daughter in the hope of getting her a better life, but also to limit their expenses to the needs of the “younger ones” (ICRW 2013). Unfortunately, this situation ultimately creates a vicious circle since one of the most frequent consequences of child marriage is the forced dropping out of school. A lack of education thus leads to a lack of skilled labour, which ultimately leads to an unsustainable economy. Many societal ills are also consequences of that unsustainable practice, perpetuating issues as serious as marital violence, psychological repercussions, and risk of reproductive and sexual health issues such as

propagation of sexual diseases, early pregnancy, and infantile and maternal mortality (UNICEF 2016). Otoo-Oyorley & Pobi (2003, 42) argue that child marriage “perpetuates the feminisation of poverty” by limiting girls’ opportunities and compromising personal growth.

As part of its Creating Spaces Project, Oxfam Canada has published a report of its findings on social norms that are contributing to violence against women and girls, including child marriage (Ghomeshi et al. 2020). Amongst its conclusions, the report found that there are four gendered norms that are central to the issue of child marriage and the denial of agency of women and girls: chastity before marriage; men are decision makers, women are caretakers; boys have greater value than girls; and violence against women and girls is acceptable in certain conditions (Ibid, 4-5). As the pinnacle of social norms that encompasses all the other ones, the report found that the idea that “men have dominion and ownership over women and girls” was the strongest belief held in all regions (Ibid, 4). Families living in poverty, particularly large families where the dowry system is common practice, and conflict-affected areas were also described as prominent factors of the prevalence of child marriage (Ibid, 5).

### ***Normativity/Chronological vs. Social Age***

One of the biggest debates and controversies regarding child marriage is related to the concepts of age and childhood. The age-at-marriage is still something quite debated internationally, mainly because of certain cultural practices and the power relations exerted by parents or guardians over children for important life decisions (Bunting 2005, p. 26). As previously mentioned, the international legal understanding of childhood is “below the age of eighteen years unless under the law applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier” (CRC 1989, art. 1). Many countries where child marriage occurs have fixed legal age for adulthood at 18 years in accordance with the international consensus based on human rights conventions. Recently, a few countries with high rates of child marriage have decided to pass new legislation to stop child marriage. On February 14<sup>th</sup> 2017, the Malawi Parliament banned child marriage by adopting a constitutional amendment raising the minimum age to marry from 15 to 18 years, for both boys and girls (UN Women 2017). The Afghan government, on April 2017, decided to launch the “National Action Plan to Eliminate Early and Child Marriage”, which plans to raise the legal minimum age for both sexes to 18, considering that current law allows marriage at 16 for girls and 18 for boys (Werft 2017). These initiatives, among others, show a current trend from certain governments to abide by the international pressure for legislative reforms that could have an

impact on the incidence of child marriage in the country and, ultimately, lead to “real social change” (Olorunshola 2016). According to a study carried out in 115 low- and middle-income countries from 1989 to 2007, Kim et al. (2013, p. 589-590) have found that “countries with minimum-age-of-marriage laws that set the minimum age of marriage at 18, thus complying with current international standards, are more effective than other countries at reducing rates of adolescent fertility over time”. They also found that the “the nature of the law matters”, which means that countries that allowed exceptions, such as early marriage with parental consent, were seeing a higher prevalence of adolescent pregnancies than countries abiding to the “18 strict rule”. (Ibid).

The issue with laws concerning age-at-marriage is that they create a strong statement from a politico-legal perspective at the international and national level, but they sometimes do not translate well in the communities that perceive marriage as a private matter over which civil institution has no true authority (Raj et al. 2014, 2) or for communities that follow customary laws. Additionally, inaccurate and inadequate birth registration, especially in countries that require a marriage certificate for birth registration, results in lack of proof of chronological age. Another opposition to this notion of legal age has to do with lack of agreement regarding the definition of childhood. Bunting (2005, p. 18) argues that “the cultural constructions of childhood” are essential in understanding the determinants of early marriage. Through the new sociological models of the child, the concept of childhood is based on “culturally specific, socially constructed, and ‘conflicting or contradictory’” discourses (Bunting 2005, p. 21). Being a child is thus a “lived experience and a constructed status” that creates different limitations and opportunities in various contexts (Camfield et al. 2010, p. 403).

Clark-Kazak discusses the concept of social age in opposition to the predominant understanding of chronological age, which abides by a clear and universal representation of biological development, “despite individual variations” (2016a, 207). Social age, in comparison, demands a more comprehensive analysis of various factors in order to correctly assess the developmental conditions that affect the age significance of an individual. Social age should include data around chronological age and biological development indicators, an understanding of the local interpretation of childhood / youth, an understanding of the generational division of labour to analyse power structure, and an examination of the intra- and inter-generational

relationships (Ibid, 208-209). While it might seem more complex, the connections between all these factors can inform more accurately the meaning of the age of a person, and thus also inform the proper development policy and practice. Furthermore, Clark-Kazak argues that the social age approach “counteracts a problematic ‘children-in-development’ approach that ghettoises and marginalises age issues” (2016b, 105). Indeed, many development initiatives favour a “normative chronological life script” that creates this binary role between child and adult and isolates children in this pre-written mold (Khoja-Moolji 2015, 41; 48). According to Khoja-Moolji, child marriage becomes controversial for many because of this deviation towards “alternate life scripts that are at odds with what is considered normative” (2015, 48). The “specter of failed girlhood” is then addressed through this strategy of mass schooling which acts as a regulatory effect (Ibid, 43). There is a need to re-examine the “gendered, raced, and classed assumptions of the figures and tropes that appear in education and international development discourses” in order to improve the quality of life of girls (Ibid, 55). It can also be argued that too much focus on the question of age might be detrimental to the overall mandate of other children’s rights protection and that no matter how we conceive of childhood or the proper legal age-at-marriage, it is essential to keep in mind the primacy of the social, psychological, and physical development of the child as well as the principle of best interests for the child.

### ***Age Dimensions of Childhood***

It is also important to acknowledge the concept of age and how childhood, in opposition to adulthood, is influencing our perception of child marriage. The concept of childhood can differ “over time, across space and place and as consequences of socio-political identity markers” (Desmet et al. 2015, 413). In opposition, marriage is normally perceived as a social marker of adulthood; a rite of passage where it is understood that the individuals are “ready” to start their adult lives. In certain cases, this event will occur before the chronological age of 18.

There are multiple definitions of childhood that have different expressions of children’s agency, as well as the social structures and power dynamics that influence the level of autonomy they have (Desmet et al. 2015,412). Children are often viewed as passive participants of society, as much in the political sense than from a social perspective where adults have the responsibility to provide for and protect them. Consequently, the mainstreaming of children’s issues in international development programs can lead to essentialism, which often negates the importance of “class and gender relations that they experience through their relationship with adults

(Fernando 2001, 12). These power relations are critical in understanding the issue of child marriage and the decision-making process that is linked to it.

### ***Girls' education to end child marriage***

According to UNFPA's report, 63% of those who had no schooling got married as children (2012, 35). The rate goes down to 45% when looking at child brides who got married after their primary education and 20% for those with secondary education and higher (Ibid). These statistics suggests a double causality between schooling and child marriage where "girls with low levels of schooling are more likely to be married early, and child marriage typically puts an end to a girl's education" (Lee-Rife et al. 2012, 288). Attempts from development initiatives to keep the girls at school are seen as a positive way to postpone marriage, to ensure the social and economic contributions of the girls to the society, to increase their social networks and skills towards autonomy, and to increase girls' scope of choice (Ibid, 293).

The perceived value of keeping girls in school as a strategy to end child marriage led to a "new global consensus" on "girls' education as a leading strategy to end child marriage" (Walker 2013, 11). Walker argues that the convergence of the different development and human rights approaches allowed for "a more coherent set of prescriptions for how girls' education can effectively combat child marriage", linking the legal and the economic benefits approaches, as well as empowerment through education and social benefits approaches (Ibid, 10-11).

While education is definitely an important factor to the prevention of child marriage, there is also part of the literature that argues that addressing girls' education is insufficient for ending child marriage. According to Girls Not Brides (2013), one of the leading NGOs working specifically on ending child marriage, "education alone is not enough" and more needs to be done at the structural level to ensure long-term change while keeping in mind interrelated challenges such as health protection and poverty reduction. Indeed, when examining the discourse on girls' education used in the Gordon & Sarah Brown's report *Out of Wedlock, into School: Combating Child Marriage through Education*, Khoja-Moolji (2015, 45) recognizes that child marriage is a "complex, multidimensional problem" and cautions against "proposing a simple response – education as a panacea". Critical studies have enhanced our knowledge and understanding of the limitations of focusing exclusively on girls' education and the need to move beyond the symptoms of - and short-term solutions to - child marriage.

Building on quantitative evidence, Raj et al. (2014, 1) found that in Bangladesh “there has been no reduction in marriage of 16–17-year-olds over the past 20 years” as a result of programming geared to improving girls’ primary education, even considering that gender parity in relation to basic education has been achieved in the country. In order to see any protective value, studies show that secondary education is now necessary, and in the case of Bangladesh, would prevent “early marriage for both younger girls and older adolescents” (Ibid, 4). However, while those results are positive, the actual effect on the reduction of child marriage would be marginal: “[...] if all girls received secondary education, there would be an expected reduction of 446,567 of an expected 6.9 million girl child marriages, or a 6.5% reduction of early marriage in the region” (Ibid, 8). Thus, in the particular case of South Asia, education should be considered as a right that needs to be advanced, but not the only solution to prevent child marriage.

### ***Other Proposed Solutions to Child Marriage***

The limited success of increased access to education as a strategy to reduce child marriage requires additional research and alternative development strategies. One example of additional research and program commitments to ending child marriage includes an initiative to change attitudes about the social benefits of early marriage. The ICRW has specifically dedicated several of its studies on the issue of child marriage and after carefully evaluating 23 programs (150 efforts reviewed) that attempted to “measure change in child marriage-related behaviors, knowledge, or attitudes among relevant stakeholders”, they came up with five strategies<sup>1</sup>, which are believed to be the most relevant to prevent or delay the practice (Malhotra et al. 2013, 6). Two of those strategies are directed towards the communities of girl brides in order to provide the economic and educational support to the parents, family, and other community members that will greatly influence the outcome of child marriage (Ibid, 13-14; 18-20). If parents benefit from financial support, which acts as economic relief or if community elders are included in the discussions about the negative consequences of child marriage, young girls have a better chance of being married later on. Another strategy concerns the structure of the society through the enforcement of supportive laws and policies (Ibid, 20) regarding the legal age of marriage and the punitive consequences for child marriage. It is equally important afterward to ensure that the

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<sup>1</sup> The five strategies are: 1) Empowering girls with information, skills and support networks; 2) Educating and mobilizing parents and community members; 3) Enhancing the accessibility and quality of formal schooling for girls; 4) Offering economic support and incentives for girls and their families; 5) Fostering an enabling legal and policy framework (Ibid, 13-20).

government officials and leaders are concerned about the issue and actually enforce those laws. Finally, the last two strategies are directly linked to the child brides, suggesting the necessity to “enhance girls’ access to a high-quality education” and to “empower girls with information, skill and support networks” (Ibid, 14-18; 11-12). When looking at the most successful strategies “in preventing child marriage and changes in related attitudes and knowledge”, the analysis of the programs’ evaluation show that “programs focusing on girls’ empowerment and programs offering [economic] incentives” have the highest positive results (Lee-Rife et al. 2012, 297).

Another research report prepared by the Girl Innovation, Research, and Learning (GIRL) Center looked at the types of child marriage interventions to assess what works best and what does not work to reduce child marriage and improve other aspects of girls’ well-being (Chae & NGO 2017, 1). The study divides the approaches into four categories: empowerment approaches such as life-skills training and gender-rights awareness training; community approaches focusing on changing community attitudes towards child marriage while increasing local knowledge of the negative consequences of the practice; schooling approaches focusing on incentive to keep girls at school or for girls to go back to school; and economic approaches such as cash transfers to support families and discourage them from marrying girls off (Ibid, 6-7). The conclusions of the report present that “interventions incorporating an empowerment approach, either as the sole approach or in conjunction with another approach, demonstrated the greatest success in reducing child marriage”, while the economic approaches were the least successful to prevent the practice of child marriage and the community and schooling approaches had ambiguous results in relation to their effectiveness (Ibid, 10). Most of the studied interventions also had a positive impact on schooling outcomes and lowered the risk of pregnancy and childbearing. To better guide the development strategies needed to end child marriages, international policy commitments are also required.

### ***United Nations bodies’ resolutions on child, early and forced marriage***

The international community has resolved to address child, early and forced marriage (CEFM) through a series of UN General Assembly (UNGA) resolutions, including Resolution A/RES/73/153 adopted in December 2018, which builds on earlier UNGA Resolutions 71/175, 69/156 and 68/148 (UNGA 2018; UNGA 2016; UNGA 2014; UNGA 2013). There are also four resolutions from the Human Rights Council specifically on “strengthening efforts to prevent and eliminate child, early and forced marriage” (24/23 (2013), 26/22 (2014), 27/34 (same year,

summary report on the panel discussion), 29/8 (2015)) and one resolution on “child, early, and forced marriage in humanitarian settings” (35/16 (2017)).

Considering that UNGA resolutions are highly negotiated texts whose content is designed to attract support from the maximum number of UN member states, the main principles of those resolutions, such as the four resolutions on CEFM, can be viewed as guiding elements to inspire an international response to the issue of child marriage. From a longitudinal perspective, looking at the CEFM resolutions across the years is a good way to highlight some of the main distinctions and themes that were added and to understand the evolution in the international discourse surrounding child marriage.

To visualise the evolution of this international consensus, it is interesting to look at the number of articles agreed upon for each resolution. UNGA resolution 68/148 only contains 3 articles, mainly announcing the intention to consider the issue of CEFM at the General Assembly’s 69<sup>th</sup> session (UNGA 2013, 2). UNGA resolution 69/156, in comparison, has 9 articles, while UNGA resolution 71/175 and UNGA resolution 73/153 have respectively 19 and 29 articles. A core statement is presented in all three resolutions’ opening paragraphs, stating that

child, early and forced marriage is a harmful practice that violates, abuses and impairs human rights [...] and that such violations have a disproportionately negative impact on women and girls, and underscoring the human rights obligations and commitments of States to promote and protect the human rights and fundamental freedoms of women and girls and to prevent and eliminate the practice of child, early and forced marriage (UNGA 2014, 2).

One of the first opening statements presented in RES/69/156 and RES/71/175 describes the continued prevalence of CEFM, with “approximately 15 million girls married every year before they reach 18 years of age” for a total of 720 million women and girls alive today who were married before their 18<sup>th</sup> birthday (UNGA 2014, 2; UNGA 2016, 2). In 2018, this statement was adjusted in the last UNGA resolution on CEFM to note the recent decrease in the proportion of girls married before the age of 18, from one in four to approximately one in five (UNGA 2018, 2). However, the statement also raises the concern that “despite this global trend, progress has been uneven across regions and the current pace of change is not sufficient to eliminate child, early and forced marriage by 2030”, as aimed for in the Sustainable Development Goals (Ibid).

Another important opening statement is related to the root causes of CEFM, naming “poverty and insecurity” in all three resolutions, while adding “lack of education” in 2016 and “early pregnancy” in 2018 (UNGA 2014; 2016; 2018: Opening Statement). Furthermore, the two most recent resolutions also mention “armed conflict and humanitarian emergencies” as exacerbating factors. The opening statement about gender inequalities was slightly modified from 2014 to 2016, but stayed the same in 2018. The following citation presents the added excerpts from resolutions 2016 and 2018 (bold represents the added language from 2018):

*Noting with concern* also that deep-rooted gender inequalities and stereotypes, harmful practices, perceptions and customs, and **discriminatory norms are not only** obstacles to the full enjoyment of human rights **and the empowerment of all women and girls but are also among the roots causes of child, early and forced marriage**, and the persistence of child, early and forced marriage places children, in particular girls child, at **greater** risk of being exposed to and encountering various forms of discrimination and violence throughout their lives (UNGA 2016, 2).

In the most recent resolutions, the gender inequalities are not only linked to child marriage, but are presented as a root cause of it. Qualifying the norms as ‘discriminatory’ and emphasizing the notion of ‘empowerment’ along the fulfilment of human rights are indications of a certain shift in the accepted language regarding child marriage.

As new resolutions are adopted, new themes have been added, thus presenting a more thorough and holistic understanding of all issues interconnected to the practice of child marriage (see Appendix A). For example, in resolution 71/175, a recognition of “men and boys as strategic partners and allies” was added to highlight their contribution to “transforming discriminatory social norms that perpetuate child, early and forced marriage, ending this practice and achieving gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls” (UNGA 2016, 3).

This summary of international commitments provides an important context in which child marriage issues are understood and solutions are considered since these resolutions offer an indication of what is internationally accepted from a political perspective as the main positions relating to the causes, consequences, and relevant factors contributing to the issue of child marriage as well as some of the key components to address in order to prevent, and ultimately eliminate, child marriage. Some of the key messaging used in those resolutions have informed the discourse analysis of this study (see Table 1 on key themes and terms relating to child

marriage) and will be utilized in the content analysis to assess the focus of the discourse for each NGOs' reports analyzed.

### ***Theoretical Framework***

Drawing on the findings in the secondary literature summarized in the previous section, I concur that education is an insufficient focus of development programming to eliminate the practice of child marriage. Furthermore, UN resolutions enable multilateral commitments to address child marriage. These strategies, however, are insufficient for tackling the root causes of child marriage. In order to see significant change on the issue, I argue that there is a need for a gender analysis that takes into account the current structural conditions which perpetuate gender inequality. In order to consider these structural conditions more carefully and consistently, we need to recognize the discursive impact of the language used in programming geared to ending child marriage. Specifically, this thesis considers the rhetoric of vulnerability and disempowerment as problematic terms that reinforce structural inequalities.

The research in this study is framed with the lens of critical feminist scholarship. While feminist theory can be viewed as a tool for “exposing, addressing, and ending women’s subordination”, it can also help inform gender questions more broadly, outside of feminism as a critical discourse (Carpenter 2002, 158).

I employ three analytical lenses that are inspired by post-colonial feminism to present a spectrum of discourses that informs us on the scope and intensity of the language used in reports and briefs addressing the issue of child marriage. Drawing on post-colonial feminism to examine discourses facilitates an analysis of the words and their meanings and implications. Discourse analysis considers words as complicit in power and domination, highlighting artificial binaries between terms such as strong and weak, powerful and powerless, victims and perpetrators (bell hooks 1989, 438).

Critical feminist scholarship has highlighted a trajectory of responses to gender and development programming from minimal or misguided gender-focus (essentialism) to partial gender-focused responses that may have marginal or partial impacts (gender mainstreaming) to high impact gender-focused programming (transformational). In the section below, I explain these three common approaches to gender and development programming.

Feminist scholars have employed the term ‘gender essentialism’ to describe development programming that targets women in generalized and essentialized ways. As defined by Tiessen and Baranyi (2017, 14-15), gender essentialism is “used to describe the stereotypes and societal expectations of men and women and to analyze how they are reinforced through discourse, policy, and practice”. Gender essentialism results when women are perceived in a fixed state by virtue of being women, and expressing that state of being as universal. Feminine attributes are ascribed to women in generalized ways and are often linked to women’s biology. For example, pregnant women may be characterized as vulnerable because of potential health risks associated with pregnancy. While women may experience vulnerability at specific points in their lives, the act of characterizing women as universally vulnerable denies them of their agency and power.

Furthermore, the emphasis on women’s vulnerability and victimhood detracts from the structural inequalities that perpetuate the “deeply entrenched social and cultural values and practices that affect gender power relations” (Tiessen 2015, 13). Gender essentialism reinforces artificial binaries and a dichotomous relationship between men and women rather than focusing on the gender relations that are prescribed through cultural norms and practices. The emphasis on vulnerability for women and girls denies their agency, reinforcing stereotypes of the ‘vulnerable other’ in need of saving (Ibid, 16). The pattern of ‘othering’ is also apparent in generalized discussions of girls’ vulnerability in the context of child marriage (Khoja-Moolji 2015). Programs focused on girls’ vulnerability in child marriage often emphasize the symptoms rather than the causes.

Moving beyond a gender essentialist language and program approach requires a broader analysis of power, gender relations, agency and empowerment. DiQuinzio (1993, p.5) reinforced the need for examining “other aspects of identity, especially those that also function as bases for oppression”. It consists in contrasting these constructed identities within a gendered lens that take into account the harmful connotation inserted in the creation of ‘otherness’. In other words, gender essentialism isolates women and girls in this ‘othered’ group by characterizing them as “innocent, dependent, and vulnerable” (Carpenter 2005, p.303). It encloses both women and men in specific characteristics and needs which perpetuates harmful masculinities for men and lack of agency for women (Tiessen 2015).

Gender mainstreaming refers to the integration of a gender perspective across policies, programs, and activities. From an international development perspective, most institutions have adhered to a similar understanding of the definition of gender mainstreaming (Moser 2005). The United Nation Economic and Social Council (1997, 28) defines the concept of gender mainstreaming as such:

Mainstreaming a gender perspective is the process of assessing the implications for women and men of any planned action, including legislation, policies or programmes, in all areas and at all levels. It is a strategy for making women's as well as men's concerns and experiences an integral dimension of the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of policies and programmes in all political, economic and societal spheres so that women and men benefit equally and inequality is not perpetuated. The ultimate goal is to achieve gender equality.

Gender mainstreaming has been used by governments, development agencies, and NGOs as a strategy to promote gender equality and women's empowerment. However, it has been severely criticized by scholars for promoting only technical solutions that do not actually bring tangible change to the conditions of women and gender equality in general (Tiessen 2005; Moser 2005; Parpart et al. 2002). The technocratic approach to gender mainstreaming has the advantage of considering gender in range of activities. However, its weakness is its failure to address the causes and structural realities that perpetuate gender inequality.

A third approach to gender and development program is considered in relation to transformational development. Transformative gender and development programs focus on the root causes of inequality. Examples may include efforts to change attitudes and behaviours related to gender societal norms, and legal and policy changes that grant rights and freedoms to marginalized groups including women. To ensure that the issue of child marriage is properly addressed, there is a need to reflect on the root causes of gender inequality and to how we can transform the environment surrounding those root causes in order to create sustainable change. In the context of child marriage, a focus on gendered power dynamics and gender norms is necessary to create a shift towards a more equitable world where girls and women's agency is recognised and respected. Through these assumptions of how a specific gender should behave, gender norms are perpetuating "a hierarchy of power and privilege that typically emphasises a gender binary and favours that which is considered male or masculine over that which is female or feminine, reinforcing a systemic inequality that undermines the rights of women and girls" (Heise et al. 2019, 2440).

As argued by Raju (2005, 253), “very often developmental initiatives that look relatively better-conceptualized and inclusive at the outset fail to impact on several basic issues embedded in asymmetrical gendered power dynamics.” In order to change this paradigm, a new approach would need to be inclusive of “individual and/or collective participation in various activities directed at changing the nature and direction of the systemic forces that marginalize women” and young brides (Ibid, 255).

The frameworks of essentialism, gender mainstreaming, and transformative change are important analytical lenses to consider when making sense of programmatic approaches designed to address child marriages. I return to these themes in the analysis section to consider the research findings in relation to the scholarly critiques.

## **Methodology**

### ***Data Collection Design***

The research carried out for this thesis uses a comparative study of the texts of documents of six major international non-governmental organizations (sometimes in collaboration with other smaller organizations) specifically mentioning the core solutions to end child marriage.

Documents selected for use were based on a list of criteria to be applied to the research in order to limit the sample to a specific set of reports coming from a large scale international non-governmental organization that published a report or worked on a program in the last 10 years (since 2010), which addressed the issue of child marriage. While the document can address several issues and priorities, child marriage was the primary consideration for inclusion in this study. The documents chosen cover advocacy and operational purposes since both impact the international discourse relating to how we address child marriage. The documents were examined using a qualitative content analysis and a critical discourse analysis.

Data collection methods began with an internet (Google) search of child marriage policy and program documents from various non-governmental organizations. Subsequently, the websites of CARE, Girls not Brides, ICRW, PLAN, OXFAM, and Save the Children were searched for publications that fit the criteria stated above. Some of the analysed documents have been authored by more than just one organization, which might have an impact on the discourse presented in the final report. This limitation has been taken into consideration during the analysis, although it is assumed that the elements presented in the reports are representative of a

concerted effort which is still representative of the views and preferred discourse of the NGOs studied in this research. The chosen documents can be separated in two categories: five longer reports portraying a fuller presentation of the NGO's discourse and five shorter briefs presenting a more succinct view of the NGO's key messaging.

### ***Content Analysis***

Content analysis seeks to examine the characteristics of language as a communication tool in order to identify the contextual meaning of the text (Hsieh & Shannon 2005). According to Hsieh & Shannon (2005), there are three approaches to qualitative content analysis: conventional, directed, and summative. This research is using a summative approach, which consists of “counting and comparisons, usually of keywords or content, followed by the interpretation of the underlying context” (Ibid, 1277). This approach is useful to highlight some of the patterns that can be present in the text, such as the use or the omission of particular words. This process then allows for the contextualization of the codes and “the interpretation of the context associated with the use of the word or phrase [...] or the range of meanings a word can have in normal use” (Ibid, 1285).

Through this summative content analysis, I examined: How child marriage is framed in development NGO program reports? Specifically, I considered the extent to which education is seen as the primary or sole vehicle for ending child marriage and whether child marriage solutions tackle symptoms of inequality such as school enrolment or structural issues and gendered power dynamics. While concerns around empowerment of women and girls are present in most of the literature, it is important to examine the way it is introduced and discussed in order to achieve meaningful progress on gender equality and power relations. In order to do so, an analysis of the key themes and terms surrounding child marriage should be made through coding (See Table 1 below). In conducting the content analysis, I looked for references to certain terms and the context in which they are used (i.e., ‘empowerment’, ‘vulnerable’, ‘victim’, etc.); whether men and boys are mentioned as part of the problem (i.e., gender-based violence) and/or as part of the solution (i.e., community education and gendered power relations). Finally, the content analysis included an investigation into the main solution(s) to end child marriage and the language used in reference to these core solutions.

*Table 1: Key Themes and Terms related to Child Marriage*

<b>Themes</b>	<b>Terms</b>
Child marriage	Child / Early / Forced / Marriage / CEFM
Age / Childhood	Girl / Women / Child(ren) /Adult
Gender	Boy / Men
Empowerment	Bride / Wife /Child(ren)
Gendered Power Dynamics	Change / Norms
Youth	Young / Adolescent / Teenage
Vulnerability and Othering	Vulnerable / Innocent
Agency / Responsibility	Agent / responsible / in charge / decision-making
Education / Schooling	Solution / Recommendation / Panacea
Gender mainstreaming	Gender equality, empowerment

In parallel, this research is using a directed content analysis, which consists in using existing theory to identify key concepts as initial coding categories (Hsieh & Shannon 2005, 1281). This approach allows the researcher to initiate the data gathering having already in mind the potential results of the findings, but being aware that the data might not fit in the original coding, which may create new categories. As part of this directed content analysis, a series of questions has been prepared to support my data gathering and identify in which categories they fit the most. Examples of these guiding questions are: Are women and girls presented as vulnerable groups requiring external help or as bearers of agency with respect to their own life plans and the achievement of gender equality? Are the solutions to ending child marriage presented in a certain order to show relevancy or importance of some before others? Does the language used within the analyzed NGO's programs or reports promote an essentialist, mainstreamed, or transformative discourse?

I have divided my coding categories in three to depict a continuum of responses to the issue of child marriage and how they are displayed in the texts to form a particular discourse. Concretely, the continuum will (see Table 2 below) portray the difference between technocratic (perpetuate the concept of othering or essentialize girls and women), gender mainstreaming (focus on the promotion of women's rights through a high-level political discourse) and transformative solutions (seek to address the underlying power dynamics, tensions and inequalities that perpetuate child marriage) to address the issue of child marriage.

Table 2: Discourse Continuum in Relation to NGOs' Proposed Solutions to Child Marriage

	<b>Gender Essentialism</b>	<b>Gender Mainstreaming</b>	<b>Transformative Change</b>
<i>Type of approach</i>	Low change / Focus on technocratic results such as number of girls at school or effects on GDP.	Medium Change / Focus on inclusion and the community system. Use of buzzwords (empowerment, agency, etc.) to advance women's rights in the political agenda.	High Change / Focus on systemic change based on concrete actions and addressing root causes.
<i>Gender perspective</i>	Othering, girls are represented as victims with no power or voice.	Girls are represented as heroine full of capacity, agency and with a real voice.	Girls are represented as decision-makers who have to deal with gender power dynamics. Acknowledgement of the importance of engaging men and boys in a positive way.
<i>Family/Community perspective</i>	Blame is put on the parents or family.	Acknowledgement of the role of the family and community (teachers, leaders). Girls must resist family pressure.	The girls and their families all have a role in changing the norms.
<i>Solutions proposed</i>	Education leads to an economic betterment for everyone.	Local policy, national laws, and community education on gender equality.	Review of gender and social norms through actions by the community (ex. Annulment of all child marriages by the village Chief)

### **Critical Discourse Analysis**

The use of discourse analysis enables us to examine the internalized perceptions and societal realities that have been constructed, which then are used as political, socio-cultural, and economic rationales for certain practices pursued by governments and other organizations (Tiessen 2015). In this research, attention is put on the implications and power of the particular language used by the selected NGOs to address the issue of child marriage.

The importance of analysing the discourse used in NGOs' reports comes from a need to "understand the construction of social meanings" in order to situate specific statements in relation to their dominant perspective, but also to their implications at a deeper level (Parpart 1993, p.440). Once the discourse is integrated within the public understanding, it has the power to influence political actions, hence the importance of critically assessing the effect of words on practice (Tiessen 2015).

In order to categorize each document analyzed in the discourse continuum, the reports and briefs were analyzed and compared based on four themes: presentation of the decision-making process in relation to the choice of proceeding with child marriage, the gender perspective and the representation of girls (or boys if mentioned), the perceived or proposed participation of the family and/or the community in the practice of child marriage, and the main recommended solutions (see Appendix C for full analysis).

### ***Ethics***

My research did not require a review under the University of Ottawa Research Ethics Board (REB) because it consists of a document review of primary and secondary literature and thus does not involve any human participants.

This thesis relies upon publicly accessible information in order to create primary analysis findings on the discourse and content predominance in addressing the issue of child marriage. Through this research, I stayed as impartial as possible, to seek out a variety of viewpoints and explanations and to keep accurate records of my research. The links of all of the documents that will be used in my analysis are presented in Appendix B for better access.

### ***Positionality***

This research topic comes from a deep interest and passion for promoting children's rights and for clarifying the nuances and prejudices that are intricately related to child marriage. I understand my positionality and perspective as a privileged, educated, white, cis-woman from the Global North who has not experienced child marriage and is only inquiring on the subject through literature. While I am limited by own experiences and knowledge of what I have studied, I have kept an open mind about the relativity of the child marriage experience and what it can mean in different contexts. For this reason, while child marriage is sometime a sub-optimal solution to difficult gendered and socio-economic conditions, it should be understood, in my

view, in the context of enlightened consent. The notion of agency in child marriage is essential to fully understand the process that an individual went through to make an educated choice, or lack thereof.

Through my former work with Amnesty International, I had the opportunity to learn about the broad causes and consequences of child marriage through a human rights advocacy perspective. This research will be more academically oriented in order to present the multiple narratives of individuals who experienced child marriage while being mindful that each lived reality is distinct and cannot be generalized.

### ***Limitations***

This research does not incorporate the views of individuals who have experienced child marriage or any other actors who have dealt with the issue. Furthermore, it does not explicitly incorporate the views of the people working for the NGOs analyzed in this research. The analysis is only based on what was written in the selected documents and may not reflect the actual context from a local perspective. Indeed, although this research is based on the premise that the discourse used in the NGOs' reports have an impact on the way programming is operationalised and thus on the outcomes of such programming on the reduction (or not) of the prevalence of child marriage, the direct correlation has not been studied or evaluated. This research only focused on a critical discourse analysis which can highlight insights, innovations, crucial elements or persistent challenges that can be found in the language used in NGOs' reports. This information can then inform new ways of imagining changes to transformative gender relations in an effort to end child marriage.

Findings should not be taken as absolute trends on the preferred discourse of a specific organization. Most of the organizations studied in this research have published many reports on the issue of child marriage and their discourse may differ depending on the publication year and the political agenda and/or strategic planning of the organization at that time. The exclusion in this research of reports presenting a national, regional, or local perspective might have influenced the perceived discourse of the organizations since their views and recommendations are likely more general, broad or all-encompassing. As previously stated, some analyzed documents have been authored by more than one organization and this collaborative approach might have influenced the final views presented in the reports as well. However, considering that

each organization has agreed to put their name on the report, the analysis of the overall discourse presented in each studied document is still valid.

Lastly, although best efforts were made to gather an exhaustive list of documents from the major NGOs currently working on the issue of child marriage, there might be documents that could have been included in this analysis, but were not found in the NGO's websites. There were also some limitations in the collection of documents considering that this research was trying to compare reports and briefs. Performing a discourse analysis on two different types of documents was also a challenge since the reports were usually more insightful and thus were analysed in more depth.

## **Findings**

Through a mix of content analysis and critical discourse analysis, the findings section highlights the gender-themed representations found in the analyzed documents, which impact the perceived discourse promoted by NGOs. This was done through an incremental approach, first by comparing the language used in relation to three themes: how the various actors impacted by child marriage are represented; whether the documents use emotive language that perpetuates gender essentialism; and how often the documents use positive language related to gendered power dynamics or gender equality. Findings are described in subsections of ‘reports’ and ‘briefs’ to further illustrate the distinctions between more detail-oriented documents and more succinct, focused documents. Secondly, the main recommended solutions presented in the documents to end child marriage are summarized to link them to the discourse continuum. Finally, each document is situated within the discourse continuum based on the above findings and the results of a points-based system summing up the important elements for each discourse.

### ***Representation of actors***

Table 3 reflects findings for each document based on the absolute number of references to language related to the representation of actors involved or impacted by the practice of child marriage. The content analysis does not include references to names of programs, laws, initiatives, or organizations since the analysis is done to assess the words intentionally used throughout the document. For example, the references to *Girls not Brides* as the organization were omitted from the final count. Similarly, references to child marriage, the Convention on the Rights of the Child, CEFM, childbirth, childhood, parental consent, or parenthood were omitted as well to only account for the use of the words ‘child(ren)’ and ‘parent(s)’ in the sense of people or actors.

The content analysis reveals a **strong emphasis on girls** as the main actors being addressed in the documents analyzed. This girls-focused agenda is explained in some documents due to the prevalence of child marriage impacting girls more than boys, but also in more general terms when advocating for gender equality and the importance of promoting girls’ rights. The Save the Children report called “Every Last Girl: Free to live, free to learn, free from harm” has the second highest use of the word per pages and focuses on presenting solutions to achieve progress for girls by addressing barriers to girls’ equality such as, among other things, child marriage, gender-based violence and harmful practice, economic exclusion, and lack of voice

and recognition (Lenhardt et al. 2016, vi-vii). The report goes beyond the specific topic of child marriage, but presents it as its first chapter while acknowledging that “[c]hild marriage can trigger a cycle of disadvantage across every part of a girls’ life” (Ibid, vi).

Another representation of girls which is present in a few documents is the “girls as agent of change”. This perspective is important in the context of child marriage because it creates a sense of inclusivity by presenting the girls not only as the primary subject who is subdued to this particular issue, but as an essential actor who can raise concerns and opinions about her own experience to influence others. In the CEFMU Working Group report, promotion of girls’ agency is highlighted as one of the factors influencing the success of NGOs’ fieldwork programs: “once girls asserted their own rights, it was generally easier for other people, such as their parents, to support their decisions” (CEFMU and Sexuality programs Working Group 2019, 15). The report makes the connection between increased agency and networking and learning opportunities to ensure the girls are given safe spaces and training to learn important set skills at the individual and collective levels. According to the report, the most successful programs analyzed were promoting agency enhancement through clubs, social action-oriented collectives, advocacy groups, and youth-led organizations (Ibid, 15-16). This language around agency intersects with the section on positive language that will be discussed further below.

In comparison, **the word ‘child(ren)’ is used much less often**, which mean that instead of presenting child marriage as an issue impacting children, the documents are using a gender lens to focus on how to improve women’s and girls’ lives while addressing the issue of child marriage. In a few documents, the expression ‘girls and boys’ is even used instead of referring simply to ‘children’. For example, in the PLAN report, out of the 72 references to boys, 36 of them are in the context of ‘girls and boys’ such as “support girls and boys who are already married” or “ensure that girls and boys are not excluded from school on the grounds of marriage, pregnancy and parenthood” (Davis et al. 2013, 54). The reference to ‘girls and boys’ allows for a greater sense of inclusivity while still presenting a gender perspective.

The only exception to the results of the content analysis about children is the PLAN report and, to a lesser extent, the Save the Children report. In the PLAN report, while a few sections present a focus on girls such as “the challenge of keeping girls at school” or “the toll on girl’s health and well-being”, there is also a strong emphasis on children’s rights and how child

marriage is a human right violation. The various international legal conventions on the rights of women and children are presented to reiterate the commitments of most countries to protect those rights and to prohibit child marriage (Davis et al. 2013, 20-23). The report refers to the importance of supporting and promoting ‘children’s rights’ several times, but also connects this recommendation to ‘gender equality’ in a few parts of the document.

The results from the **content analysis in relation to “boys”** vary from one document to another, as much in terms of number of references in the text as the representation of the role of boys. Like mentioned above, boys are sometimes being referred to along with girls to represent primary actors who would be married as children, such as in the CARE report where it mentions that “boys, too, are subject to marriage before the age of 18 and its negative consequences, at a prevalence roughly one-fifth of that for girls” (Boender 2018, 2). In the PLAN report, there is a small section on “child marriage and boys” that notes that “[f]or boys, child marriage can also shut down opportunities to go to school, can have profound psychological consequences, and is no less a violation of their rights” (Davis et al. 2013, 14).

In other circumstances, they are referred to as male actors, alongside men. **When referring to boys or men as stakeholders, the documents characterized them either as a perpetrator or an ally.** The ‘male as a perpetrator’ narrative is, however, less straightforward, but is usually implied through the characterization of the most common critique of gender norms: “placing less value on girls and women than boys and men” (Girls not Brides 2019, 2), “prioritizing boy’s education over girls” (Lenhardt et al. 2016, vii), or “assign[ing] [women and girls] a lower status than men and boys within the household” (Davis et al. 2013, 25). In most of these instances, these characterizations are done to show the reality of gender discrimination more than to put the blame on someone, but without the proper contextualization on the root causes of this issue, they can easily be misinterpreted as antagonizing male actors.

In comparison, in the CARE report, men and boys are portrayed more as allies, with a section of the document specifically on “men and boys as change agents”, recognizing their “key roles in the lives of girls, whether as fathers, brothers, uncles, future husbands, or community leaders” (Boender 2018, 17). The report advocates for the importance of engaging “men and boys in addressing systems and structures that perpetuate gender inequality” (Ibid, 4). In doing so, there is a transition in the perception of the roles of men and boys from gatekeepers – sole

decision-makers – to allies for gender equality and girls’ empowerment (Ibid, 17). The report presents various examples of CARE’s programs which play a significant role in the conscientization of men and boys to gender norms, gender roles, and the limitations they place on their own lives and the lives of their female relatives. These processes are helpful to raise awareness about children’s rights, gender equality, sexual and educational rights, but also simply to better understand others’ experiences. The report concludes these types of engagement have shown positive results, especially “changes among households in terms of decision-making patterns at home, reductions in alcohol abuse and domestic violence, more cooperative and equitable divisions of labor, and better spousal communication” (Ibid, 20).

**Women are referred to more than men, but most of the time in a general context.** In the CEFMU Working Group report, women are mentioned most often alongside references to girls to represent the gender perspective as a whole, thus acknowledging that the consequences of child marriage and discriminatory gender norms in general are perpetuated from childhood to adulthood. The responses to address these issues are also impacting both women and girls, which shows the need to expand programs to mobilize participants from different settings such as schools or homes in order to reach all potential agents of change (CEFMU and Sexuality programs Working Group 2019, 30). In comparison, in the PLAN report, women are often referred to as primary actors who were married as children. The report presents various statistical examples of “women aged 20 to 24 married or in union before age 18” to show prevalence across countries (most common in rural regions), by education level (most prevalent with girls with no education), and by household wealth (most prevalent with the poorest 20%) (Davis et al. 2013, 19).

**References to parents as actors involved in child marriage is present in all documents, but not necessarily predominant.** Their role is mainly related to the decision-making process of allowing one of their children to be married, but the subjectivity of the language used to describe the role of parents differs from one document to another. In the PLAN report, engaging and mobilizing parents, teachers, and community leaders is the third recommendation for action, after access to education and legislation to prohibit child marriage and ensure minimum age to marry at 18 (Davis et al. 2013, 10). However, when mentioning the role of parents, the report focuses a lot on the ‘parental consent’ to allow marriage before 18

depending on the national legislation (14 references). The report also refers to parents mainly to present their negative assumptions towards girls and a woman's place in general. When describing the potential barriers to education for girls, the report states that "financial barriers and harmful gender norms can drive parents to prioritise sons' education over that of daughter's – often on the assumption that girls will marry soon anyway" (Ibid, 9). Another example presented in the report is that "parents can see marriage as protection for the girl herself and for the honour of the family" (Ibid, 31). The emphasis is thus on presenting the potential reasons why girls would be married early, but mainly by placing the blame on parents. Even in the section where the report explains how to create an enabling environment for change, the first sentence states that "a girl's choice over if, who and when to marry is all too often in the hands of parents and guardians" (Ibid, 46), again choosing negative language where parents need to change their behavior instead of presenting them as potential allies.

In the CARE brief, parents are only referred to in the *Causes* section and the emphasis is on the reasons why they would marry off their girls at a younger age, such as securing a future, keeping the dowry low, or protecting her after puberty (CARE 2014, 1). In the five short paragraphs explaining the key reasons for child marriage (lack of alternatives for girls, concern for girl safety, economics, controlling a girl's sexuality, demand), parents are mentioned 7 times and in every paragraph. Parents are essentialized as the main actors responsible for the perpetuation of child marriage and are represented through negative connotations. For example, in the economics section, the brief states that "[p]arents marry a girl early to keep dowry low, and so they don't have to support her" and that "parents may also marry a daughter for the cash they will get" (Ibid). This type of language is stigmatizing the role of parents while directing the blame towards them instead of engaging them as positive agents.

Teachers are an important actor of the community and can have a positive influence in the lives of the children who has to deal with child marriage. **In most documents, there were minimal or no reference to teachers.** 4 out of the 10 documents analyzed make no mention of teachers with an additional 3 documents with fewer than 5 references. None of the documents analyzed had a clear positive representation of teachers. In the ICRW report, teachers are represented as contributing to school drop-out by providing minimal support to students and berating them (Warner et al. 2014, 14). In the PLAN report, many references to teachers were

actually portraying them as perpetrators, either by engaging in sexual interactions with girls and putting them at risk of public shame or early pregnancy, or either by reinforcing gender discrimination and stereotypes (Davis et al. 2013, 36). In addition, when referring to female teachers, the report acknowledges their potential to act as positive role models, but then negates this statement by mentioning how few of them are teaching in secondary schools (Ibid, 37). The document also speaks to the teacher's lack of adequate training and insufficient knowledge about children's rights and gender equality as contributing factors to gender stereotypes and ultimately to the practice of child marriage. Out of the 35 references to teachers in the document, only 6 of them were presenting the actor using a positive or neutral connotation.

The only document presenting somewhat of a neutral representation of teachers is the CEFMU Working Group report. They are most often referred to alongside other actors, mainly parents, and are portrayed as actors who must be part of the "staff transformation" and who needs to be properly trained in gender-transformative training in order to contribute to meaningful change (CEFMU and Sexuality programs Working Group 2019, 17). Teachers are thus seen as key actors who have the potential to be agents of change, but who currently lack the resources and training to pursue this higher purpose.

The content analysis also looked at the use of the words bride or groom to understand the connotation associated with these titles. As in other instances of gendered-focus language, the documents have used the term 'bride' more often than the term 'groom'. **In more than 75% of the time (26 out of the 34 references), references to 'bride' were utilized in the expression 'child bride'**. For example, in the PLAN report, 9 out of the 12 references to 'bride' were in the context of presenting girls as child brides. When the report states that "[m]ore than 140 million girls will become child brides by 2020, if current rates of child marriage continue" (Davis et al. 2013, 6), it intentionally uses the term 'child bride' to emphasize the dichotomy between childhood and marriage and thus creates an image of vulnerability. There is an unfortunate sense of othering with this expression which is stripping the girls from their identities and agency to be solely represented as this married entity.

Table 3: Results of Summative Content Analysis in Relation to Representation of Actors

Representation of actors	Child(ren)	Girl	Boy	Women	Men	Parents	Teachers	Bride	Groom
CARE Report (30 pages)	23	127	22	19	20	7	2	3	3
CEFMU Working Group Report (40 pages)	12	261	45	83	37	27	15	0	0
PLAN Report (60 pages)	142	408	72	54	20	55	35	12	1
Save the Children Report (40 pages)	94	350	38	71	13	11	0	1	0
ICRW Report (30 pages)	23	319	13	34	18	39	5	7	6
CARE Brief (2 pages)	4	30	4	3	2	7	0	3	1
Girls Not Brides: Form of violence (4 pages)	23	22	1	2	1	2	0	0	0
Girls Not Brides: Gender Equality (5 pages)	7	70	2	9	2	1	1	3	1
Save the Children: Governments (16 pages)	25	97	2	16	3	8	1	2	0
Save the Children and World Bank: Laws (10 pages)	11	90	5	5	0	6	0	3	0

### *Emotive Language*

Table 4 presents the results of the content analysis in relation to terms in the documents that are used as emotive language. Emotive language can be used as a tool to shape the perception of the reader and project a certain negative or positive connotation to the described situation. In the context of child marriage, most of the time, the use of such language will influence the perceived agency of the individual or group of people discussed through the use of negative language that creates a sensationalist perspective to either shock or sadden the reader. **Within the list of words that were researched in this analysis, the findings show minimal to no use of the terms.** The terms ‘vulnerable’, ‘vulnerability’, ‘vulnerabilities’ were only counted when referring to the subjective state of a person or of child marriage. Instances where the documents described, for example, ‘social or economic vulnerabilities’ were omitted from the analysis. Similarly, the term ‘poor’ was only counted when used in a subjective way, thus excluding all references relating to

poverty. In order to correctly represent the word count for the term ‘Voice’ in the *Positive Language* section, the term ‘lack of voice’ has been included in the word count for ‘voiceless’. A similar methodology was used for ‘lack of power’ (inclusion within the word count of ‘powerless’).

**The most frequently used term within the emotive language analysis was ‘vulnerable/vulnerabilities’.** The PLAN report was the document analyzed with the most recurrent use of the term. It presented the girls in an essentialist way, showing the vulnerabilities as a weakness or portraying the girls as victims such as in the following example: “Those most affected are among the most vulnerable and powerless: they are young, rural, uneducated, poor and female – and their voices are rarely heard” (Davis et al. 2013, 13). In those instances, the term ‘vulnerable’ was used as a qualifier, labelling the individuals in a certain way and in a sense, reducing their own agency. In other instances, the term ‘vulnerable’ was used to illustrate what the individuals, mainly the girls, were ‘vulnerable to’: sexually transmitted infections; violence and abuse; marriage; sexual assault; sexual exploitation; sexual and reproductive ill health and other negative maternal health outcomes.

**While the term ‘innocent’ was not used in any of the documents, the terms ‘voiceless’, ‘victim’ and ‘powerless’ were only counted once or twice each.** In the Save the Children report, although the word ‘victim’ appears in the document three times, the report is not representing the girls or other actors linked to child marriage as victims and thus, is not using the term for emotional purposes. In fact, the report argues that “everybody the world over must recognise that girls are nobody’s property and nobody’s victims” (Lenhardt et al. 2016, vi). However, it acknowledges that for some families facing humanitarian crises and greater risk of violence against girls and women, “families see girls as having only two options: to be victims or to be wives” (Ibid, 6). There is some ambiguity in this last statement whether or not the intention of the author was to pass judgement on the families by using the word ‘victim’ as one of the only choices for the girls. In any case, the choice of words is perpetuating a misrepresentation that is essentializing both the families, who are portrayed as understanding and taking very simplistic choices, and the girls, who are reduced to two powerless identities they have not chosen.

Another example of the use of emotive language is within the CARE report when noting that “CEFM is an expression of gender inequality and the powerlessness of children” (Boender

2018, 2). This statement was made in the report after presenting some underlying causes of child marriage such as the “undervaluing of girls and restricting them to domestic and reproductive roles; patriarchal control over adolescent sexuality, particularly female sexuality; [and] gender-based violence [...]” (Ibid). Considering that the document was presenting a fact-driven analysis that was, for the most part, avoiding sensationalist wording, the statement about the powerlessness of children was unnecessary to make the case of the root causes of child marriage. This language is thus used to create an emotive visualization for the readers of a helpless child instead of focusing on how to create structural opportunities for those children to feel more empowered.

While this content analysis relating to emotive language has yielded less straightforward results, most reports have nonetheless used phrasings intended to create an emotional response or portrayed an essentialist view, mainly towards girls dealing with child marriage. For example, to emphasize the grave statistic on the number of cases of child marriage, the CARE report is using subjective language to create a visual of the challenges lived by those girls: “[e]ach year, 12 million girls are married before the age of 18, marking the start of their lives as wives and mothers well before they are physically or emotionally ready” (Boender 2018, 1). This statement uses generalized arguments, basically essentializing the girls to the new roles of wives and mothers while presenting them as vulnerable and not ready. While perhaps true in some instances, this language is perpetuating a certain image of ‘the struggles of the young married girls’, which is unnecessary to grasp the factual context of the situation and harmful to the progression of girl’s agency and self-awareness.

A similar example can be read in the PLAN report in which it is stated that underlying causes of child marriage “often intersect to rob many girls of their childhood, their right to go to school and their chance to determine and secure their own future” (Davis et al. 2013, 25). Again, in this statement the document is utilizing wording that creates an uncomfortable visual representation of loss childhood to trigger some reactions from the readers. NGOs might be using this emotive language intentionally to incite readers to support the cause more strongly, but it may also shift the attention of readers away from important information and incite them to characterize the issue in similar ways, thus perpetuating a misguided and incomplete portrayal of the causes, consequences, and potential solutions of child marriage.

Table 4: Results of Summative Content Analysis in Relation to Emotive Language

Emotive Language	Vulnerable / Vulnerability(ies)	Poor	Innocent	Voiceless	Victim	Powerless(ness)
CARE Report (30 pages)	4	1	0	0	0	1
CEFMU Working Group Report (40 pages)	7	0	0	0	0	0
PLAN Report (60 pages)	22	2	0	1	2	1
Save the Children Report (40 pages)	6	5	0	0	3	0
ICRW Report (30 pages)	1	0	0	0	0	0
CARE Brief (2 pages)	0	0	0	0	0	0
Girls Not Brides: Form of violence (4 pages)	0	0	0	0	0	0
Girls Not Brides: Gender Equality (5 pages)	2	0	0	0	0	0
Save the Children: Governments (16 pages)	1	0	0	0	0	0
Save the Children and World Bank: Laws (10 pages)	0	0	0	0	0	1

Note: In the Save the Children Report, although the word ‘victim’ appears in the document three times, the report is not representing the girls or other actors linked to child marriage as victims and thus, is not using the term for emotional purposes.

### **Positive Language**

The content analysis of the positive language shows various levels of responses with distinct use of the terms (see Table 5). For the purpose of this research, the term ‘change’ was counted when referring to social change or a change in behavior and is omitted when change is discussed more generally. In comparison, the term ‘empowerment’ was also counted when used as a verb or an adjective such as ‘empowering’, ‘empowered’, ‘empower’, but only when referring to empowering an actor in the context of child marriage. Finally, the term ‘power’ was analyzed in the sense of ‘balance of power’ or power dynamics between different actors involved in the issue

of child marriage. Considering the difficulty to summarize the results in general statements like in previous sections, a few examples will be given for the most relevant documents.

In general, the CARE's report has a positive-oriented messaging, presenting its approach to address child marriage in six categories: social norms; accommodating complexity in girl's lives; building agency and solidarity; men and boys as change agents; bringing insight to advocacy; and addressing CEFM in emergencies and humanitarian crisis (Boender 2018). As shown in table 5, the word 'change' was used several times, mainly in relation to social norm change or behavior change. It was also used in the context of 'men and boys as change agents', which recognizes men and boys as more than just 'gatekeepers', but also as allies for women and girls to reflect on gender roles and assumptions about decision-making powers (Ibid, 17).

From all the documents analyzed, the CEFMU Working Group report has the highest absolute number of uses of positive language (198 times) while the ICRW report has the highest number of references to positive language relative to its number of pages (10.18 references per page). In the CEFMU Working Group report, the context around the use of this positive language may not always be from an affirmative perspective, but to present a lack thereof, such as in the following statement: "Adolescent girls usually lack power and agency over their own lives and are often highly constrained in their ability to make decisions for themselves" (CEFMU and Sexuality programs Working Group 2019, 5). Nonetheless, by conceptualizing the actual unfavorable situation of girls through this specific language, the report is suggesting wording that can be reemployed when conceiving of potential solutions and concrete measures to address the issue of child marriage. Another example of positive language in this report is the reference to change in a transformative way, through social norm change or participation of girls as agents of change. The report mentions that "change can be measured by examining individual and collective agency; cooperative dynamics and expectations; and the informal and formal institutional rules that govern our social practices" (Ibid, 9). Through this clear definition, the report is enabling the reader to translate this positive language into a more concrete understanding of the necessary steps to achieve change as an outcome. The language used thus become more than just an aspiration, but a tool to comprehend and then operationalize the proposed solutions.

Finally, the highest number of references to ‘empowerment’ and ‘agency’ was in the ICRW report. As in the previous example, the strength of this document is in the clear definitions given to these terms that will be used as the foundations of the text. The report draws on the extensive work on women’s empowerment from the scholar Naila Kabeer to situate its analysis, notably through the definition of ‘agency’ as “the ability to define one’s goals and act upon them” (Warner et al. 2014, 5). The report further expands on the notion of agency by explaining that agency can also be relational, either through proxy agency (process of influencing other to make decision on their behalf) or collective agency (using shared belief in collective power to produce desired results) (Ibid, 8).

Positive language can thus be characterized by the critical use of words to ensure the document is precise, accurate, and meaningful. Positive language should be used to enhance the understanding of the reader, which calls for clear definitions and proper use of the terms.

Table 5: Results of Summative Content Analysis in Relation to Positive Language

Positive language	Empowerment	Decision-making (maker)	Agency	Change	(Gender) (In)equality	Power	Voice
CARE Report (30 pages)	5	6	14	25	12	8	4
CEFMU Working Group Report (40 pages)	7	21	28	58	43	33	8
PLAN Report (60 pages)	9	3	3	13	20	6	4
Save the Children Report (40 pages)	32	17	10	25	24	18	35
ICRW Report (17 pages)	70	9	43	20	7	15	8
CARE Brief (2 pages)	0	1	0	5	0	0	0
Girls Not Brides: Form of violence (4 pages)	1	1	0	2	1	1	0
Girls Not Brides: Gender Equality (5 pages)	1	2	13	2	23	2	4
Save the Children: Governments (16 pages)	15	4	1	7	11	1	0
Save the Children and World Bank: Laws (12 pages)	0	1	0	0	0	0	0

**Comparison between reports and briefs**

There are significant distinctions between the reports and the briefs which, in general, result in more nuances and complete explanation from the former and fewer tangible and meaningful findings from the latter. While briefs can be a useful tool to give a quick overview of an issue, the content analysis has shown that there is a sparse use of the relevant language identified and thus might not be as impactful to showcase the array of factors to consider while addressing the issue of child marriage.

**Most of the briefs are showing oversimplification of the causes and consequences of child marriage as well as a narrow explanation of the main solution.** While it was hypothesized that the briefs would be useful to better understand the key messaging of a particular NGO, the

documents were often too narrow to clearly represent the core solutions to child marriage or to expand on the roles of important stakeholders. If briefs are supposed to be used to inform or report on a specific issue in a succinct way, then every word counts to present a proper representation of the issue while making sure the language used is aligned with the recommended solutions for change.

**Most of the briefs are presenting a specific sub-theme used as a panacea to tackle child marriage**, such as the concept of ‘valuing girls’ or addressing norms that ‘devalue girls’. They often use affirmative expression that oversimplify the issue and gives the impression that the solution is obvious and easily achievable. For example, the title of the CARE brief is “Child Marriage: Complicated Problems, Simple Solution: Value Girls” (CARE 2014, 1). The document argues that because the communities does not value girls as much as boys, “the solution is to work with communities to increase the value of girls”, but the document fails to present any example of community-driven solutions (Ibid, 2-3).

In other instances, such as in the Girls Not Brides brief on child marriage as a form of violence against children, the issue of child marriage is intertwined with a larger issue that is either exacerbated by the prevalence of child marriage or exacerbating the practice. Considering the shorter nature of a brief, the relevant information to clearly comprehend the issue of child marriage is somewhat diluted. Furthermore, the proposed solutions are often broader in scope and do not address the more complex and case-specific components of the practice of child marriage. In the aforementioned brief, while child marriage is the main theme of the document, the emphasis is placed on the importance of addressing physical, sexual, emotional, and psychological violence as a larger cause. Child marriage is thus interlinked to this problem since “we will not end violence against children as long as girls marry as children” (Girls Not Brides 2019, 2).

### ***Recommended solutions***

A summary of the core recommended solutions to prevent or address child marriage found in each document and how they envision the implementation of the main solution put forward are presented in Table 6 below. The most common solution, with 6 out of 10 documents presenting it as their main solution, pertains to “tackling discriminatory gender norms”. The CARE report looks at social norm change theory and how it can help create “practical ways to record and

measure gendered social norms as distinct from individual attitudes or beliefs” (Boender 2018, 6). CARE has developed a framework to analyze the various ways social norms can be perceived: the empirical expectations are what we think others do or think; the normative expectations are what we think others expect us to do or think; the sanctions are social, economic, or political risks that can occur when someone violates the norm; sensitivity to sanctions is how anticipation of those sanctions influences behavior; and the exceptions are situations when it is considered acceptable to break the norms (Ibid, 6-7). The CARE report then goes on to explain how this social norms framework can be explained and changed through eight design principles: find early adopters who support girls’ choice and opportunities; build support groups of early adopters; use future-oriented positive messages; create open space for dialogue; facilitate public debate; move from envisioning possibilities of justice to action; show example of positive behavior in public; and identify the resources and networks necessary to support positive change (Ibid, 6).

The Save the Children report presents one of its programs called “Choices, Voices, Promises” whose objectives is to address discriminatory gender norms at the individual, family and community levels. The *Choices level* works with girls and boys through participatory activities to reflect on “gender inequality, power dynamics and aspirations in life” (Lenhardt et al. 2016, 6). The *Voice level* is targeted for parents “to facilitate dialogue about gender equality in the household” and the *Promises level* is to include community leaders in a dialogue about “the impact of early marriage and violence on girls’ opportunities to access education” (Ibid). Although the report presents several examples of language linked to the transformative change discourse, such as the references to transformative change, power dynamics, and normative changes, the actual proposed solutions are most of the time to address other pressing issues first, as if child marriage was an exacerbating cause of other issues more than the predominant problem to tackle. For example, in the citation above about the *Promises level*, the emphasis is put on access to education and thus child marriage becomes a secondary factor to it.

In comparison, the PLAN report is the only document to present education as the main solution to end or prevent child marriage (although the Save the Children brief on governments’ coordinated actions makes the same arguments, but by promoting a multisectoral approach). In fact, the report explains that the correlation goes both ways: child marriage is an impediment to

girls' rights to education, but also education is key in delaying child marriage by "giving girls more choices and opportunities, and enabling them to develop to their full potential" (Davis et al. 2013, 6). Learning in a safe environment also enables girls to "assert their autonomy, helping them to make free and informed decisions about their life, including whether, when and who to marry, along with decisions affecting their sexual and reproductive health" (Ibid, 8). The report presents child marriage as "a global problem that presents a major barrier to millions of girls realizing their right to education" (Ibid, 14). Through this statement, it is clear that education is used as a multi-folded solution for many issues lived by girls and that child marriage is only circumstantially addressed by this solution. While education is part of the solution, it does not offer a direct path towards the end of the practice of child marriage unless gender norms are discussed at school and educational training is also offered to parents and the community.

Table 6: Recommended Solutions

	<b>Primary recommended solution</b>	<b>How?</b>	<b>Other recommended solutions</b>
<b>CARE Report</b>	Shifting social norms	Making existing systems work better	Developing male allies; Fostering girl’s agency
<b>CEFMU Working Group Report</b>	Address harmful gender norms	Through gender-transformative approaches to reshape gender relations	Programming that addresses root causes and places girls at the center; Work with men and boys to become active supporters of gender equality, Strong relationships with stakeholders for norm change at all level; Take an intersectional approach.
<b>PLAN Report</b>	Prevention through education	Ensure girl’s access to quality primary and secondary education	National legislation; Engage parents, teachers, community leaders; Provide comprehensive sexual and reproduction health information and services; Recognise and promote participation of children in decisions affecting them; Ensure support and protection for children already married.
<b>Save the Children Report</b>	Tackling discriminatory gender norms at all levels	Challenge gender inequality at the individual, family, and community levels	Legal and normative changes; Investing in girl’s education; Minimum financial security for all children; Holistic approach.
<b>ICRW Report</b>	Empowering girls with information, skills, and support networks	Self-transformation; Enhanced alternatives & opportunities; Increased influence over others	Educating and mobilizing parents and community members; Enhancing the accessibility and quality of formal schooling for girls; Offering economic support and incentives for girls and their families; Fostering and enabling legal and policy framework.

<b>CARE Brief</b>	Work with communities to increase value of girls	Educational and behavior-change programs	Passing laws to protect girls and prevent child marriage; Implement laws that already exists.
<b>Girls Not Brides: Form of violence</b>	Tackle the norms and beliefs that discriminate by placing less value on girls and women than boys and men	Strategies to prevent violence against children; Empower and support families and communities; Child protection workers at community level	Strong legal and political frameworks which set the minimum age at 18; Ensuring access to education and health services; Protecting girls' rights.
<b>Girls Not Brides: Gender Equality</b>	Address discriminatory gender norms and stereotypes that devalue girls and erode their rights, freedoms and agency, including if, when and who to marry	Increase investment in the community level work of civil society organizations promoting gender-transformative programs	Support the right of all girls to live free from gender-based violence; Guarantee to all girls sexual and reproductive health products, services and advice; Support girls' economic empowerment; Support feminist action on climate justice; Make technology and innovation work for girls; Support feminist movement-building and leadership; Develop a robust accountability framework.
<b>Save the Children: Governments</b>	States must intensify efforts to develop and implement multisectoral national action plans to end child marriage	Strong, centralized leadership through all ministries to ensure all relevant sectors are fairly and adequately funded to design, influence and deliver their responses as part of a coordinated response	Strong focus on education; Drive change in social norms; Work in cooperation with health and nutrition interventions; Empowering girls to hold leaders to account and to access livelihood opportunities; Work actively in communities.
<b>Save the Children and World Bank: Laws</b>	Minimum age for marriage at 18, eliminating exceptions with parental or judicial consent for minors	Harmonizing discrepancies with customary and religious laws when such disparities exist	Adoption of action plans with clear interventions to delay marriage and increase investment in the poorest and most marginalized girls; Keep girls in school; Address discrimination and social norms; Schools must be safe, have adequate facilities, be accessible and affordable, and provide quality education.

### ***Discourse Continuum***

Based on the findings above, each report and brief have been categorized in one of the three discourses used in the analytical framework (see Table 7). In some cases, the documents were presenting characteristics associated with two discourses and thus have been represented as such. To help categorize the documents within the discourses in a more structured way, a more detailed table has also been designed (see Table 8 at the end of the section) to assess four important themes that are essential to the matter of child marriage: the decision-making process; the gender perspective; the stakeholders; and the recommended solutions. The following section summarizes the main results found for each discourse in relation with the documents analyzed.

*Table 7: Discourse Continuum based on Documents Analyzed*

<b>Gender Essentialism</b>	<b>Gender Mainstreaming</b>	<b>Transformative Change</b>
PLAN Report	CARE Report	
CARE Brief	Save The Children Report	CEFMU Working Group Report
Girls Not Brides: Gender Equality	ICRW Report	
Save the Children and World Bank: Laws	Save the Children: Governments	
Girls Not Brides: Form of Violence		

### ***Gender Essentialism***

**Girls are portrayed as victims or otherwise essentialized through technocratic or sensationalist language.** NGOs perpetuating a gender essentialist discourse through their organization’s reports are positioning, intentionally or not, the main individuals they are trying to help (mainly girls) in an external role, deprived of agency and powerless in front of the various external circumstances that are negatively impacting their lives. The most straightforward example of this tendency is the Save the Children and World Bank brief on child marriage laws and their limitations. The document highlights the lack of legal protection against child marriage and the importance of “legal reforms setting the legal age for marriage at 18 or higher and

eliminating parental or judicial exceptions” (Wodon et al. 2017, 7). The majority of the document focuses on statistical tables presenting the “number of girls not protected against child marriage” and “the number of girls marrying illegally” (it is important to note that even the choice of words of ‘girls marrying illegally’ is problematic, as if the girl was the primary actor intentionally pursuing this illegal action). There is barely any use of positive language, which tends to demonstrate that no attention is being placed on more substantial solutions to the issue of child marriage, other than “access to quality education and other opportunities for girls” (Ibid, 2). The acknowledgement of the need to address discrimination and social norms is only made in the context of enhancing the opportunities for girls to attend school so that “parents can see continued schooling at the secondary level as a viable alternative to marriage” (Ibid, 7). The brief is directed towards very technocratic arguments, essentializing the girls’ lives through numbers and presenting the legal issue of age at marriage as the primary element to fix. The participation of the World Bank may have influenced the depth and connotation of this brief considering the minimal analysis of important social factors, relevant stakeholders, and comprehensive solutions.

**There is a tendency in the documents to portray actors other than girls in a negative way**, as inhibitors of girl’s autonomy or as ‘passive actors’ who are also victims of environmental causes such as poverty or cultural traditions and thus perpetuating the practice of child marriage. For example, most of the causes of child marriage described in the CARE brief are linked to a simplistic justification of why the parents would have chosen to marry their daughter, such as in the following statements: “[p]arents worry that as a girl hits puberty, she will be subject to harassment and violence, so they marry her to protect her” or “[p]arents-in-law often want their son’s wife to be younger so that she will be easier to control and stay home to take care of the household” (CARE 2014, 1). These generalizations are reducing complex situations to wrongful correlations and are portraying parents as uncaring, detached decision-makers. The discourse around enabling change must avoid the tactics of othering and blaming individuals who are directly or indirectly involved in the practice of child marriage. Using that kind of negative language reinforces stereotypes that are not helpful in finding concrete and constructive solutions that can be implemented through NGO’s initiatives and programs.

**The main solutions proposed within this discourse are often framed in a way to resolve other social issues which would, consequently, have an effect on the prevalence of**

**child marriage.** For example, in the PLAN report, initiatives to address poverty such as cash transfers or school supplies donations are presented as solutions to child marriage since research has shown that these economic reliefs have helped families to delay marriage (Davis et al. 2013, 30). While there may be a correlation between poverty alleviation or increased access to education and the prevalence of child marriage, these recommendations are not the most direct ways to address the issue and unfortunately do not address the root causes of child marriage relating to gendered power dynamics and social norms.

**Through the gender essentialism discourse, language is often, consciously or not, manipulated to appeal to the emotional side of the reader to instigate a reaction.** In the case of a passive reader (someone who is trying to get informed on the subject), the essentialist lens will perpetuate some emotive reactions or ways of thinking towards child marriage that are not helpful to the betterment of the child. In creating a discourse that puts the child in a situation of powerlessness, vulnerability, or almost pity, the agency of the child or of his/her allies is denied. This type of language thus creates a sensationalist discourse, which is not presenting the actual reality on the ground. In the case of an active reader (someone working on the issue of child marriage through research or on the field), this type of discourse will have an influence on the proposed strategies to address child marriage. This lens perpetuates the idea of ‘the white savior’, the big NGO that will come save/help those in need. This approach from a programming perspective can have detrimental effect on the perceptions of field workers and on the types of projects promoted, focusing on immediate response or poorly adapted projects instead of developing tools with the help of the communities and enhancing the capacities of those that are directly concerned by the issue of child marriage.

#### Gender Mainstreaming

**Through the gender mainstreaming discourse, there is often a strong emphasis on girl empowerment, but without a clear and fixed definition of the term.** The Save the Children brief on governments’ coordinated actions to end child marriage is a clear example of this statement with 15 references to ‘empowerment’, but no mention of what empowerment actually means. The brief makes reference to ‘empowerment interventions’ part of its *Children’s Choices, Voices, and Promises* program which help young boys and girls: “unpack discriminatory social norms that lie at the root of harmful practices like child marriage; build alliances for girls’ education; and delay child marriage through child advocacy to parents and sharing of chores”

(Save the Children 2018, 8). While these initiatives may be important steps to enhance girls' empowerment, without a clear understanding of how empowerment will be measured, it is difficult to ensure that the results are linked to this important pillar of gender equality.

The main exception to this statement is the ICRW report which is primarily focused on the concept of empowerment and gives a clear definition of the term. It explains that “empowerment implies an expansion of an individual’s power to influence her environment” through resources and agency in order to reach achievements that they would not otherwise have been able to (Warner et al. 2014, 5). Resources are defined as “material, such as food, shelter, or financial assets” or it could be information or social resources accessed through family, friends, the school, the market, or the broader community (Ibid). Agency can be seen as the essence of empowerment since it allows an individual the freedom and ability to choose to utilize the previously mentioned resources to achieve desired outcomes. The outcomes of this empowerment process, in a context where these outcomes would have not been previously attainable, are thus called “achievements”. To illustrate this concept, the report gives the example of an adolescent girl who was never given the opportunity to have a say in key life decisions such as the timing of her first child (Ibid, 8). To achieve control over her reproductive choices, “she would need both resources (information, services, skills, social support) and the ability to decide when and how to utilize these resources” (Ibid). She would also need to recognize that she is entitled to an opinion and rights, that she can intentionally control this decision, and is capable of making a change in her life. This would increase her chance to have a role in deciding if, when, and with whom she will have her first child.

**In some cases, the programs and initiatives presented by the NGOs are not actually primarily designed to address child marriage, but gender equality more generally.** The documents analysed show a tendency to promote solutions that are not primarily to address child marriage, but that would also have an effect on the prevalence of the issue. For example, the Save the Children Report presents a section on “empowering girls to engage in decision-making and governance at all levels” portraying some examples of initiatives that can ultimately help reduce child marriage such as children’s club, encouraging information sharing, socialization, and life skills development, or other public spaces where the participatory rights of children are respected and promoted to change discriminatory norms (Lenhardt et al. 2016, 19). The

importance of allies to represent girls at the political level is also noted, promoting the idea of gender parity in leadership and policy-making positions so that women can act as “role models and [help] to shift societal norms about the suitability of females for leadership positions” (Ibid, 20). Those recommendations are great examples of the incremental and broader approach taken by the gender mainstreaming discourse to promote gender equality as general solutions to other societal issues such as child marriage.

Another example is the brief prepared by Girls Not Brides on gender equality which presents “six issues that must be addressed to end CEFM and promote gender equality”: gender-based violence; economic justice and rights; bodily autonomy, sexual and reproductive health and rights; feminist action on climate justice; technology and innovation for gender equality; and feminist movement and leadership (Girls not Brides 2020, 2-3). The document calls for investments in solutions “that influence every area of a girl’s life” and encourage change across sectors and at all levels to promote a collective movement (Ibid, 4). By addressing such wide-ranging concerns, you increase the probability of attaining certain positive results, but these results may be difficult to measure, especially when attempting to correlate these results with the decrease of prevalence of a certain issue such as child marriage.

**Finally, while the gender mainstreaming discourse makes a connection between the primary causes of child marriage and the necessity to address gender norms as part of the solution, it sometime fails to present the underlying societal power relations that needs to be transformed in order to see a substantive normative change.** In the ICRW report, references to ‘power’ are limited to the concepts of ‘empowerment’ or ‘influence and power’, but do not reflect a more in-depth analysis of harmful social structures. The same goes for references to ‘change’: the emphasis is on behavior or attitude change without exploring the importance of systemic change. In the case of the Save the Children report, there are some references to the concepts of ‘balance of power’, ‘power dynamics’, and ‘decision-making power’. However, ‘change’ is mainly used as a buzzword or a mantra, as in the expression ‘change is possible’, used four times in the document. The only exception is when the report mentions the importance to ensure that “the wider social, political, and economic environment is conducive to transformative change” (Lenhardt et al. 2016, 3). As the content analysis has shown, these reports have yielded good results around positive language, which are expected to

translate in meaningful discourse. The distinction between gender mainstreaming and transformative change discourses might not be relating to the type of terms used, but how they are explained, operationalized, and discussed within the larger context of social issues to address specifically (or not) the practice of child marriage.

### Transformative Change

**A transformative change discourse takes into account the essential active role of all actors while promoting girls as agents of change.** Only one of the documents analyzed has clearly utilized language that was promoting transformative change in addressing child marriage: the CEFMU Working Group report. This report offers a summary of the conclusions of a working group (mainly formed by NGOs, including CARE, Girls not Brides, ICRW, and PLAN) formed after a 2-day meeting in March 2016 to discuss the control of adolescent girls' sexuality in the context of child, early, and forced marriage and unions (CEFMU). It identifies gender-transformative programs that promote bodily integrity and girls' rights and development and result in normative change that helps end CEFMU.

Compared to most of the other documents analyzed, the CEFMU Working Group report takes an objective lens, placing less emphasis on the "girls to be saved" narrative in order to shift the attention to all relevant agents of change who can help address the control of girls' sexuality in the context of child marriage, including women and girls, men and boys, parents, community leaders, teachers, mentors, etc. As part of its key findings on successful elements of program design and implementation, the report highlights the importance of "taking an ecological approach, i.e., working at various levels with girls and boys, their families, communities and the institutions that affect them to address the drivers of CEFMU" (CEFMU and Sexuality programs Working Group 2019; 19). These collaborations allow for the creation of positive engagement which can lead to change in the dynamics of power and are essential to secure buy-in and manage backlash before, during, and after the implementation of programs addressing child marriage (Ibid, 19-20). The report calls for the establishment of intergenerational dialogue with parents to build "mutual understanding and appreciation of different perspectives on a certain topic"; engagement with community and religious leaders to take measures to reduce child marriage; and partnership with local service providers to achieve systemic change through the health system (Ibid).

**Through the transformative change discourse, the focus is on transformative gender norms.** This review of social and gender norms is presented as a main solution to address child marriage, but is also explained as a root cause related to power relations. The transformative change discourse goes beyond the critique of gender norm around ‘valuing girls’ and addresses issues of gendered power dynamics such as authority, decision-making and dominance. In the CEFMU Working Group report, it is argued that “unless control of sexuality and harmful gender norms that subordinate the position of women and girls in society are addressed head on, CEFMU will persist” (Ibid, 5). However, in order to fully understand how this change can be done, the report also recommends further research on the “linkages between sexuality, rights, autonomy, poverty, class and caste in the context of CEFMU” to design indicators measuring success beyond age of marriage, which would help to properly assess larger issues such as gender inequality, choice, and consent (Ibid, 6). The development of “additional short-term and long-term measurements for assessing social norm change and impacts of CEFMU programming” is also recommended in order to demonstrate stronger causality between program interventions and attitude shifts (Ibid).

**Gender transformative approaches are critical for the operationalization of the change expected on the ground.** According to the CEFMU Working Group report, gender transformative approaches promote a critical understanding of gender roles and norms by advocating for “equitable positions of girls and women in society; challeng[ing] the distribution or resources and allocation of duties between men and women; and/or address[ing] the unequal power relationships between girls and women and others in the community [...] (CEFMU and Sexuality programs Working Group 2019; 5). Gender transformative approaches thus go beyond the symptoms of child marriage to reshape relations while tackling the root causes of discriminatory power relations that perpetuate gender inequality. In addition, this approach advocates for a critical awareness of intersectionality by using a feminist methodology that factors in complex matters that can impact marginalization such as caste, migration, sexual orientation, gender identities, religion, power, patriarchy, mobility, and violence (Ibid, 18).

Consequently, a strong emphasis is placed on the notion of girls as agents of change while recognizing the contribution of men and boys to achieve gender equality (CEFMU and Sexuality programs Working Group 2019; 25):

Empowering women and girls to envision change in their own lives does not make it their responsibility to challenge patriarchy and dismantle harmful social norms on their own. Programming should creatively engage men and boys with methodologies that support them to recognise, question and eventually reject their unequal share of power in society and control over women and girls, become active in working toward gender justice and equality, and hold other men and boys accountable.

The CARE and the ICRW reports showcase some elements of the transformative change discourse, most notably around the recognition of the complexities of the decision-making process. The CARE's report also mentions "CARE's commitment to a gender transformative approach", but it situates this approach through a so called "Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment framework", which is quickly summarized as the connection between agency building, change in power balance relationships and structural transformation to help "women and girls realise their human rights and [for] people of all genders and life stages [to] live in gender equality" (Boender 2018, 4-5). In comparison, the ICRW report present "pathways to empowerment through girls-centered programs" which act through a trickling down effect. First, by increasing access to critical resources (information, skills, social support), interdependent pathways are unfolding: self-transformation through self-awareness and efficacy; access to alternatives to marriage and economic opportunities; and influence over others (Warner et al. 2014, 22). While those two reports may not encompass all elements of the transformative change discourse, these two examples of empowerment framework are informative tools to conceptualize the incremental process of change toward more equitable gendered power dynamics.



## **Analysis**

One of the findings I expected to encounter in analyzing NGO strategies and reporting on child marriage was a disproportionate emphasis on girls' education as the core solution to ending child marriage. The literature review confirms that enhancing access to education is perceived to be a core strategy for ending child marriage (see Lee-Rife et al. 2012, Walker 2013). Critical scholarship challenges this assumption and calls for more substantive responses that get to the root problems associated with child marriage (see Khoja-Moolji 2015, Raj et al. 2014). A careful review of 10 NGO documents pertaining to programming on child marriage show that the emphasis on education is not, for the most part, presented as the core or only solution to ending child marriage. One explanation for this may be the dates of publication of the reports reviewed. All reports in this study were produced since 2010. A longitudinal analysis of programmatic priorities that dates back to the early 2000s or earlier may have yielded different results. Instead, most of the NGO reports provided some focus on structural realities, societal issues and gender relations, emphasizing the importance of gender equality and how communities can help foster girls' agency. Girls' access to education remains a vital contribution to the recommended actions for ending child marriage, but the results from this study show a more comprehensive approach. The only document that promotes education as a key factor in preventing child marriage is the PLAN report. In comparison to the other documents, the PLAN report pays less attention to the gender perspective and showcases child marriage as a human right violation impeding on children's right to education. This is also perceivable through the content analysis considering the highest number of references to 'child(ren)', and the section on "child marriage and boys" which mentions that "[i]t is important that child marriage is not treated just as an issue specific to young women and girls" (Davis et al. 2013, 14). This contrast in the underlying agenda of the PLAN report might be due to the earlier publication year (2013): the Millennium Development Goals were still in effect and the United Nations Special Envoy for Global Education had recently published the report *Out of Wedlock, into School*, recognising child marriage as a barrier to the right to education (Davis et al. 2013, 21).

There is also an important distinction to be made between schooling and education. As presented in the literature review, schooling as the main or sole solution to end child marriage is not reflective of deeper structural issues that perpetuate harmful gendered power dynamics. Schooling needs to be more than just an operational tool to keep girls at arm's length of child

marriage and thus should be perceived as a medium to promote education on social and gender issues. It is an opportunity to enable girls and boys “to develop the knowledge and skills to nullify and counter sexual stereotypes and conceptions of masculinity and femininity that limit the social potential of women” in order to create a safer and more equal environment (Stromquist 2002, p.24). But in order to do so, you need the support of teachers and community leaders to ensure proper training at the local level in regards to the curriculum and negotiation tools to promote the advantages of such curriculum.

Scholarly literature on child marriage has often referred to children as passive participants in society (see Bunting 2005, Desmet et al. 2015, Fernando 2001, Tisdall & Cuevas-Parra 2020). Reports analysed for this study show that several documents perpetuate the association of children with passivity, with some discussion on the role of the parents but with little indication of the agency or decision-making contributions of children. Creating participatory spaces for children to be able to raise concerns and bring forward their own voices in decisions that concern them must be done while recognizing the important and positive role of parents and other community caretakers in this dialogue and ultimately in the protection of the child.

Several references to the impact of poverty and inequality as contributing factors to child marriage are highlighted in the literature (see Ghomeshi et al. 2020, Otoo-Oyorley & Pobi 2003, UNFPA 2012). The findings confirmed that this is also a priority for the NGOs according to their reports. For example, when using a gender essentialist discourse, some of the documents analyzed were presenting economic issues as one of the main causes of child marriage. However, this was usually done in a way that portrayed parents as poor decision-makers without clearly identifying the socio-economic factors that also influence the prevalence of child marriage. In the brief prepared by CARE, one of the reasons why parents would marry their daughter early is because “[a]s a girl gets older, her dowry costs usually go up, as do the costs of her education and support” (CARE 2014, 1). This example demonstrates how economic pressures, most notably poverty, are influencing decisions around child marriage. The challenge, however, is that by putting the blame or responsibility on parents without contextualizing the root causes, this language is perpetuating harmful assumptions about the role of decision-makers and the impact of poverty. Instead of oversimplifying the correlation between poverty and the prevalence of

child marriage, some documents have opted to promote solutions that are addressing economic inequities through a gender lens, thus acknowledging how socio-economic issues are disproportionately affecting women and girls, which in turn exacerbate the issue of child marriage. This is an important advancement in our understanding of the relationship between gender inequality, poverty and child marriage.

Findings of the content and critical discourse analysis have confirmed some of the major arguments made in the literature review in regard to gender-focused discourses. First, gender essentialism remains a central feature in some NGO discourse through the oversimplification of the role and agency of primary actors in dealing with child marriage. Second, the gender mainstreaming discourse is overwhelmingly utilised in most NGOs' documents as a 'one size fits all' strategy to address issues, such as child marriage, that are more significantly impacting women and girls. Finally, gender transformative approaches are missing from most NGOs' discourses, which may affect the results sought. Those main conclusions about each discourse are explained in more detail below.

### ***The Power of Language***

Gender essentialism should be seen as a counter-productive exercise since it works against the dismantling of gender stereotypes by reinforcing a discourse of vulnerability where women and girls are portrayed as powerless and in need of help. International programs and policies cannot be simplified to a unidimensional message of 'vulnerable groups in need' since "women's development might require fundamental social change" (Parpart 1993, p.449). Another way to think of essentialism is to consider how essentialisms or generalizations are associated with biological characteristics, devoid of references to societal realities, gender and power relations or structural inequalities. Pregnant girls are essentialized as vulnerable but never as strong or powerful, life-generating beings who may see themselves as women (not girls). This then denies them their agency over their own choices (though constrained choices - choosing early marriage over other less favourable options they may see for themselves). International development advocates need to be careful about not essentializing girls as victims or perpetuating a harmful status quo through poor choice of words.

Language is critical when trying to convey a message since one statement can create two distinct responses depending on the choice of words. For example, the sentences 'girls are

vulnerable to child marriage’ and ‘child marriage is disproportionately affecting girls’ could ultimately be seen as similar statements, but in fact the interpretation is quite different. The first sentence is vague, emotive, and ambiguous vis-à-vis the correlation between the two subjects. It portrays the main actor, the girls, in a position where their agency is compromised, as if they are at the mercy of child marriage and they need to be more ‘careful’. In comparison, the second sentence presents a factual statement, without any insinuation about the girl’s condition in relation to this issue. Ultimately, the two sentences may have a similar informational objective, but the respective chosen language influences the final result of the discourse.

### ***Gender Mainstreaming: Watering Down the Message***

The gendered focus towards girls within the NGOs’ documents in relation to child marriage has been confirmed by this research findings. It might seem like an obvious result considering the prevalence of the issue mainly affecting women and girls, but it is also indicative of what has been left out of the discourse, such as the multiple other important actors that need to be taken into consideration when looking at a holistic solution. An overemphasis on the ‘girls’ might also be a consequence of the gender mainstreaming strategy, which pushes the gender equality agenda, sometimes without looking at the bigger picture. Milward et al. (2015, 75) characterizes one of the main critiques of gender mainstreaming as the “lost politics” analysis, where the “transformative aim of gender mainstreaming is lost by trying to make the approach more palatable in order to be taken on by development organizations and governments”. The feminist goal to produce fundamental change is then somewhat blurred in a performative jargon that only answers to the purpose of gender mainstreaming policy without looking at the ultimate outcomes it is supposed to create. In the context of child marriage, a gender mainstreaming discourse may influence the scope of the proposed solutions to the issue since the language used becomes generalised to gender equality outcomes, not to a comprehensive analysis of all the factors impacting child marriage.

It is important to note that, while a gender mainstreaming discourse may not promote the strongest language to address child marriage at its core, it does bring important themes that can ultimately help redefine the way NGOs are introducing the issue of child marriage. The main criticism of the gender mainstreaming discourse is the lack of clarity surrounding those ‘buzzwords’ that are supposed to be the solutions to many social issues such as child marriage. The word ‘empowerment’ has been both embraced and challenged by development scholars. For

example, Parpart et al. (2002) point out that the term empowerment has been accepted by very different institutions and practices, which raise some doubts on the actual meaning of it and how it is being interpreted. By becoming a ‘buzzword’, it “encourages a rather romantic equation between empowerment, inclusion, and voice that papers over the complexities of em(power)ment, both as a process and a goal” (Ibid, 3).

Ultimately, the gender mainstreaming discourse is using progress on gender issues as an end goal instead of a process towards transformative change in all aspects of an individual’s life. While child marriage is intrinsically linked to gender, it does go beyond questions of gender equality. Solutions to end the practice of child marriage should promote a holistic approach that transforms the social, economic, and political spheres that are perpetuating harmful gendered power dynamics.

### ***Change through Words and Gender Norms***

The findings have confirmed one of the main critiques of the literature: not enough emphasis is placed on transformative change to address discriminatory gender norms. While gender and social norms are at the core of the structural changes needed to bring about a significant reduction of the prevalence of child marriage, the development organizations studied here have opted to present this solution without clarifying the necessary systemic changes that should occur. While a gender lens was present in most of the documents analyzed, most of these documents did not fully connect their recommendations to a transformational feminist approach that takes into consideration power relations and the complexities of intersectional issues surrounding child marriage.

The NGO reports studied here focused to a great extent on the impact of socio-economic factors and the negative consequences relating to sexual, reproductive and maternal health. Some of the documents discussed these considerations in great detail, calling for stronger gender transformative approaches. In the context of child marriage, this would mean that special attention is given to gendered power dynamics between girls and the decision-makers surrounding them in order to ensure that girls and adolescents are involved in the decision-making process and will have a say regarding if, when, and who they will marry.

The transformative change discourse allows for more than just a simplistic representation of ‘girls being forced to marry’ by emphasizing the complex power balance that can exist in

different households and how this can have an impact on how decisions are made, by whom, and for what reasons. While respecting this matter of agency that can bring girls themselves to take the decision to marry early, the transformative change discourse goes a step further in trying to modify the structural factors that are putting pressures on families or communities to pursue child marriage.

Based on these findings, I recommend that international NGOs' development discourses must include a reassessment of its "gendered, raced, and classed assumptions" in order to improve the quality of life of all individuals having experienced child marriage (Khoja-Moolji 2015, p.55). This means creating programs and policies that directly address structural limitations and gendered-power dynamics while putting the central focus on every possible agent of change, including girls and boys, fathers, mothers, family relatives, teachers and community leaders, but also NGO workers, public authority agents, and policy-makers. Everyone should feel concerned about the capacities of the future generation and in order to do so, positive gendered norms and structural changes are essential to the process of development.

Another level of engagement towards transformative change required for improving our knowledge and understanding of child marriage is the process of data collection and research and how knowledge is generated. Improving knowledge requires building stronger relationships between locally-based researchers and program participants in order to address questions of power relations. Nazneen and Sultan (2014, 63-64) reflect on the epistemological and ethical dilemmas of researchers when engaging with issue of positionality and reflexivity while conducting fieldwork. The NGO might have a clear understanding of how it will measure progress towards empowerment, but it should also be aware of possible different interpretations by the participants and the impacts on the expected final outcomes. Additionally, researchers must be cautious about their own power relation dynamics when carrying out data collection in order to avoid unconscious bias that could counteract the expected results of empowerment (Ibid, 64). Finally, the question of transformative knowledge is a crucial concept that was advocated for throughout this research, which "not only requires a focus on the content of what we produce but also how we produce it, the forms of outputs we produce and also to whom we selectively reveal research information" (Ibid, 70). Therefore, changes to data collection will improve how

knowledge is produced and change the discourse of the reports published by development organizations.

## **Conclusion**

Documents analyzed for this study addressed the issue of child marriage through a gender perspective in order to propose solutions that would end or significantly reduce this practice while improving the lives of girls more broadly. Through the content analysis of documents prepared by major international NGOs on child marriage, this research has shown that there is a prevalence of gender mainstreaming discourse, although still often employed in conjunction with some gender essentialist language. To see real change in the world, there needs to be a switch towards transformative language within the discourse of organizations that are trying to make a change on the ground. Social norms need to be examined and questioned in order to address the systemic issues that are causing the perpetuation of the practice of child marriage.

One of the most significant findings of this research is that a majority of the documents analyzed are proposing to address discriminatory gender norms as their main solution. Social norms change is essential to move away from harmful gendered norms and to encourage the recognition of the agency of women and girls in all aspects of their lives. NGOs, therefore, need to analyze and demystify current social norms which diminish the value and power of women and girls, particularly by presenting the negative consequences of perpetuating these norms through the practice of child marriage. This educative role of NGOs to raise awareness is crucial considering their influence at the international, political, and community levels. This responsibility also means that NGOs need to be more accountable for the way they carry out and present programs and fieldwork in order to ensure concrete results and meaningful change. Transformative gender norms need to be properly operationalized by addressing root issues such as power gendered dynamics, masculinities, and awareness around sexual, reproductive, and maternal health.

The findings also show that there is still improvement to be made in relation to the inclusion and representation of all relevant actors directly or indirectly impacted by child marriage. Strategies to prevent and address the issue of child marriage must include the active participation/contribution of key influencers, in particular men and boys, but also parents, families, community leaders, religious leaders, and teachers. While the focus should be on promoting the agency and decision-making power of women and girls, it is also important to take into consideration the environmental factors (both enabling factors and barriers) impacting and influencing the life decisions of women and girls. In order to ensure a meaningful representation

of all stakeholders, NGOs must be careful about how they are portraying each actor to avoid negative connotation that can be dismissive of their important roles in addressing child marriage. While it is important to acknowledge socio-economic factors that might influence parents or caretakers in their decision-making process surrounding child marriage, the use of neutral or factual language is preferable when addressing causes and consequences of child marriage, which would stay clear of putting the blame on anyone or depicting them as perpetrators. Presenting stakeholders through a positive light, acknowledging their potential influence as allies, and promoting a critical view of the complex issue of child marriage will allow readers to be better informed and to develop more targeted strategies to address child marriage.

As additional recommendations, this research has highlighted the relevance of pursuing initiatives that address gender-biased attitudes, behaviours, and discriminatory laws while also supporting multi-disciplinary work of local organizations, community leaders, and women's groups to strengthen the implementation of prevention strategies against child marriage.

This research focused on an international perspective and did not address the specific context of child marriage at the national, regional, or local levels. While it is argued that the discourse does matter in terms of the potential results for ending child marriage, the proposed solutions presented by the NGOs might have different results depending on the socio-political context in which the policy or the program is being implemented. Other areas of research that were outside of the purview of this research that could be carried out in the future include: how child marriage programming is effectively implemented on the ground; further exploring the link between gendered power dynamics/masculinities and the prevalence of child marriage; and how globalization is affecting the prevalence of child marriage. In addition, this research focused on a reading of global North reports aiming to inform a global North audience. In order to get a fuller sense of NGOs discourse in general, additional studies could be done to look at global South NGOs to bring forward their voices and perspectives. Looking at reports in various languages other than English could also shed light on different ways of presenting the discourse and on voices that are closer to the issue of child marriage.

According to Wong (2012, 12), “[t]he role of NGOs as agents of change forces the political salience of some rights onto the international agenda and helps direct how we understand human rights norms”. This research hopes to encourage organizations to be more

conscious of the power of words and how they can influence general comprehension of readers which can then lead to more fulsome awareness. From an internal perspective, NGOs can also improve how they train their employees, prepare for fieldwork, and reflect on terminology used for result-based management through a better understanding and implementation of transformative change discourse when addressing gender-based issues such as child marriage.

## Appendices

### *Appendix A: Themes Presented in the United Nations General Assembly Resolutions on Child, Early and Forced Marriage*

	<i>Opening Statements</i>	<i>Articles</i>
<i>Themes covered in RES/69/156</i>	Root causes; Gender inequalities; Women’s and girls’ autonomy and decision-making; Education; Physical and psychological health.	Laws and policies; Participation of stakeholders; Eradication of extreme poverty; Right to education; Human rights promotion; collaboration to prevent CEFM.
<i>Additional themes covered in RES/71/175</i>	Social Norms; Men and boys as allies; Humanitarian emergencies.	Registration of births and marriages; minimum age of marriage; meaningful participation and active consultation of children; Awareness-raising; Best interests of the child; Removing barriers to education; Poverty and lack of economic opportunities; Justice and accountability mechanisms; Physical and mental health; Humanitarian responses; Improve collection and use of data; National reports on progress.
<i>Additional themes covered in RES/73/153</i>	Empowerment of the girl child; CEFM includes not formalized, registered, or recognized arrangements; Lack of accountability; Economic empowerment and development; Birth registration; Community leaders; Structural barriers to services’ access; Access to education; Gap in collection and use of reliable data.	Measures at all political levels; Family poverty and social exclusion; Human rights of already married girls and women; Promotion of technical and vocational training, skills development and lifelong learning opportunities; Discrimination and violence; Building capacity for data and reporting systems; Supporting developing countries’ capacity for high-quality data.

## ***Appendix B: List of Documents Analyzed***

### ***Reports***

- Boender, C. (2018). *Child, Early, and Forced Marriage: CARE's Global Experience*. Retrieved from [https://www.care.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/care\\_cefm\\_capacitystatement\\_0.pdf](https://www.care.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/care_cefm_capacitystatement_0.pdf)
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