



Until we are all equal

Global Child, Early, and Forced Marriage and Unions (CEFMU) Programme Model

November, 2025

Live in a World Free from Child Marriage

Acknowledgment

This refresh of the global programme model on Child, Early and Forced Marriage and Unions (CEFMU) has been **co-led** by the **Global Gender and Inclusion Team (Geeta Devi Pradhan, Tinotenda Hondo, Ramil Andag, Aroub Almasri, and Keren Simons)** and the **MEESA Centre of Excellence on CEFMU (Antoinette Ngoma, Annely Chibwe, Samuel Musyoki, and Bevis Kapaso)**.

The updated model was developed with guidance and contributions from the **Global CEFMU Reference Group**, including **Alexandra Pura, Barbara Scettri, Consuelo Laso, Ebba Wigerstrom, Emebet Wuhib-Mutungi, Jeanette Afounde, Jolly Nur Haque, Johanna Westcott-Simpson, Lazarus Mwale, Maria Paula Suarez, Mercedes Barrios, Solomon TesfaMariam, Soumya Brata Guha, and Tanushree Soni**.

Broad **consultations** with **thematic experts, project staff, and managers across Regional and Country Offices**, and the **Global Hub** were conducted and their insights as well as their experiences have shaped the model's evidence base and practical application. A **comprehensive desk review** of internal and external documents further informed the updated design, capturing best practices and lessons learned from across the federation.





Flor*, a young woman from a mountainous community in Cusco, Peru, became pregnant at 15 and entered a forced union with her partner, following local traditions. Despite being in love, the relationship quickly turned abusive – emotionally, physically, and financially. Flor endured violence and control, even as she tried to work, and care for her daughter.

**Name has been changed to protect identity*

Executive Summary

Child, Early, and Forced Marriage and Unions (CEFMU) remains a serious violation of girls' and young women's rights, affecting over 640 million women and girls globally.

CEFMU often ends a girl's education, exposes her to intimate partner violence, and places her at risk of poor health outcomes, including obstetric fistula and maternal mortality. Complications from pregnancy and childbirth are a leading cause of death among **adolescent girls aged 15 to 19**. CEFMU cuts off girls' and young women's opportunities for decent work and perpetuates intergenerational cycles of poverty.

Plan International's Global CEFMU Programme Model presents a comprehensive, gender transformative approach to end CEFMU by addressing its root causes and supporting both girls at-risk of CEFMU and ever-married girls. Grounded in over a decade of global programmatic experience and research evidence the model integrates strategies and good practice across **Plan's thematic areas of Protection, Education and Early Childhood Development, Sexual and Reproductive Health**

and Rights (SRHR), and Livelihoods, Skills, and Work (LSW).

The model brings together Plan International's work on CEFMU from **Asia and the Pacific, the Americas, the Middle East, and Africa**. It was developed in **consultation** with thematic experts, project staff and managers across the organisation, from Global Hub to National Offices, Regional Offices as well as Country Offices. A **desk review** of internal and external documents to identify best practices, lessons learned, and **evidence-based approaches**, further supported the development of the programme model.

The model is built on **three interrelated building blocks**:

- (1) **Empowering girls and young women** to make decisions about their futures,
- (2) **Mobilizing families and communities** to champion girls' rights and reject harmful social and gender norms, and
- (3) **Strengthening legal frameworks, policies, services, and systems** to protect and support girls and young women.

Central to the approach is a robust **Theory of Change** which recognises that achieving long-term impact requires multi-level action involving individuals, families, communities, service providers, policymakers, media, and civil society.

The model places girls and young women at the centre—respecting their diversity, amplifying their voices, and enabling their leadership—while also engaging boys and men, parents and caregivers, husbands and partners, religious and traditional leaders, as well as youth led organisations.

It **applies** across **development, humanitarian and peace** settings, and can be **adapted** to address the specific risks and barriers that girls face in fragile and crisis-affected contexts.

The model includes **implementation guidance** and **key considerations** for **partnerships, sustainability** and **scaling up**. Ultimately, Plan International's Global CEFMU Programme Model aims to catalyse systemic change and advance global commitments to eliminate CEFMU, **including Sustainable Development Goal Target 5.3**.



"If it wasn't for Plan International, I would have children now, and huge responsibilities I can't handle," says 17-year-old Amany from Egypt who was promised in marriage by her family at just 15. Instead she has recently graduated from agricultural college, something that seemed impossible a few years ago.

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Acronyms

APAC	Asia and Pacific Region	MEESA	Middle East, Eastern and Southern Africa Region
CAP	Community Action Plan	MERL	Monitoring, Evaluation, Research, and Learning
CAY	Children, Adolescents, and Youth	NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women	NO	National Office
CEFMU	Child, Early and Forced Marriage and Unions	OPD	Organisation of Persons with Disabilities
CoC	Champions of Change	PFV	Protection from Violence
CO	Country Office	PSEA	Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse
CP	Child Protection	RO	Regional Office
CSO	Civil Society Organisation	ROA	Region of the Americas
CSE	Comprehensive Sexuality Education	SBCC	Social and Behaviour Change Communication
DI	Disability Inclusion	SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
ECD	Early Childhood and Development	SRHR	Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights
FGM	Female Genital Mutilation	ToC	Theory of Change
GBV	Gender-Based Violence	TVET	Technical and Vocational Education and Training
GE&I	Gender Equality and Inclusion	UN	United Nations
GH	Global Hub	UNCRC	United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child
GYW	Girls and Young Women	VBG	Violence Basée sur le Genre (Gender-Based Violence, French)
HIV	Human Immunodeficiency Virus	VSLA	Village Savings and Loan Association
LGBTQIA+	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer/Questioning, Intersex, Asexual, and others	WACA	West and Central Africa Region
LSW	Livelihoods, Skills, and Work		

Introduction

What is the problem?

Plan International defines **Child, Early, And Forced Marriage and Unions (CEFMU)** as any marriage or informal union, whether under civil, religious or customary law, with or without formal registration, where either one or both spouses are under the age of 18 and/or where the full and free informed consent of one or both of the parties has not been obtained. *(Source: Plan International, CEFMU Policy Brief)*

Across all regions of the world, child, early and forced marriage and unions (CEFMU) is violating the fundamental human rights of girls. While both boys and girls experience CEFMU, it disproportionately impacts girls.



Globally, one in every five girls is formally married or in an informal union before reaching age 18. An estimated **640 million girls and women** alive today were married or in unions in childhood by age 18, with **over 207 million** married or in unions by the age of 15. Every year, **12 million girls** are still married before

the age of 18.¹Ending CEFMU is an urgent problem that requires concrete investment in order for millions of girls and young women to reach their full potential.

The drivers of CEFMU are a complex interplay of various factors which differ within and between countries and regions.

Social and Gender Norms

Overall, the practice is a form of **gender-based violence** rooted in gender inequality and harmful social norms (also referred to as social expectations). The **social expectations** that lead to child marriage are shaped by patriarchal beliefs that see girls as less valuable than boys, aim to control girls' sexuality and limit girls' roles to the roles of wives and child-bearers. Due to these beliefs marriage may be seen as a way to prevent girls from having sex before marriage or protect them from sexual violence in order to preserve their family's reputation thus

¹ UNICEF. [Is an end to child marriage within reach?](#) 2023 Update.

² UNICEF. [Early childbearing](#). November 2024.

allowing them little choice in deciding whether, when, or who to marry.

Female Genital Mutilation

In certain contexts, **female genital mutilation (FGM)** is closely linked to child marriage in that it is a rite of passage that marks a girl's transition into womanhood. This practice often inadvertently signals that she is ready for marriage, even though she is still a child, reinforcing harmful social expectations about girls' roles and contributing to the continuation of child marriage.

Poverty

Poverty is another key driver of child marriage, particularly in contexts where families face **chronic economic hardship**. When basic needs such as food, shelter and education cannot be met, marrying off a daughter can be used to reduce household costs or to gain financial security especially in contexts where bride prices are involved. Girls themselves may also see marriage as a means to escape poverty, particularly when they lack access to education, job opportunities or other pathways to independence.

The absence of strong social protection systems can lead further limit alternatives for poor families, making marriage appear to be the only viable option. In these situations, child marriage becomes a coping mechanism even though it reinforces gender inequality and exposed girls to

long term harm and limits girls' futures.

Human Trafficking

In some contexts, CEFMU is the result of **human trafficking** or other forms of coercion. Girls' access to education and economic opportunities are often limited, leaving them with few alternatives to marriage and dependent on men and husbands. Girls themselves seek marriage as way to escape violence in the home or for social status, reflecting internalized social norms and lack of viable alternatives and access to services.

Adolescent Pregnancy

Unplanned adolescent pregnancy is a significant driver of CEFMU, with the regions that have the highest levels of child marriage also having the highest rates of births to adolescent mothers². This issue is often compounded by the social stigma associated with being a pregnant and unmarried girl. These pregnancies often result from limited access to **education** and **sexual and reproductive health services**, as well as from **coercion**, **sexual violence** and **rape**.

In many communities, child marriage is seen as a way to preserve the family honour and protect the reputation of the girl when adolescent pregnancy occurs. This response reflects deeply entrenched gender norms around girls' sexuality and lack of support systems that prioritise girls' rights and wellbeing.

Graphic 1: Protective and risk factors to CEFMU

Risk Factors	Protective Factors
 Poverty and lack of economic opportunities	 Education opportunities
 Harmful gender & social norms	 Quality parent-child relationships
 Female Genital Mutilation (FGM)	 Community leaders supporting girls' rights'
 Human trafficking & coercion	 Viable economic opportunities
 Adolescent & unplanned pregnancy	 SRHR services
 Traditional & faith leaders promoting child marriage	 Social protection systems
 Out-of-school girls	 Implementation of laws & policies

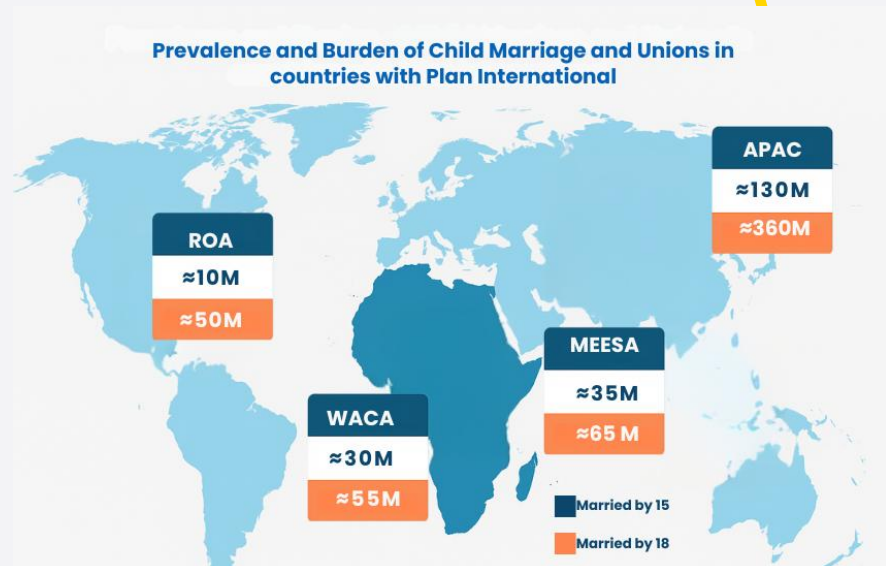
CEFMU occurs in every region of the world although the context and specific drivers vary across regions. In **Asia and the Pacific**, both the practices and prevalence differ across sub-regions. While **South Asia** has seen the largest reductions in the prevalence of child marriage, it still holds the **largest number** of married girls globally, with one in four young women married or in union before the age of 18.



Many countries in Asia continue to permit exceptions under customary or religious laws which allows child marriage to occur with parental or judicial consent, thus undermining the protection of vulnerable girls. Child marriages are also closely linked to human trafficking, often serving as both a form of exploitation and a pathway to further abuse.²

In Southern and East Africa as well as the Middle East, some

² UNODC. Interlinkages between Trafficking in Persons and Marriage: Issue Paper. 2020.



Graphic 2: Prevalence and burden of CEFMU in countries with Plan operational presence.¹

countries have made significant progress in reducing child marriage, while others still experience high child marriage prevalence rates. Notably girls from the wealthiest households have seen the greatest advances in preventing child ³marriage. However, disparities persist, and progress remains uneven across socioeconomic groups and geographic areas.

In the Region of the Americas, CEFMU often takes the form of informal unions and there has been little reduction over the years. By 2030, Latin America and the Caribbean will have the second highest prevalence of child marriage, after sub-Saharan Africa.⁷ The region also faces a culture of hypermasculinity (machismo), and anti-rights and conservative governments which closes space for civil engagement.

In the West and Central Africa (WACA) Region, CEFMU is associated with female genital mutilation/cutting in certain settings. 7 of the 10 countries with the highest prevalence of child marriage are in WACA. Frequent coups or changes in governments mean legal and policy changes may be particularly challenging to implement sustainably.

The same social and gender norms and unequal power dynamics that drive CEFMU also limit opportunities, hinders access to services, and

worsens gender inequality and overall quality of life for many married and ever-married girls and young women, particularly for those with older husbands or partners. Girls and young women who were married before the age of 15 are 50% more likely to experience either physical or sexual intimate partner violence than those married after 18.⁴

Married girls and young women's access to education and economic opportunities is also constrained, due to a lack of flexible alternative education opportunities, educational and economic policies, or expected focus on domestic work. When girls marry, only 13% remain in school, interrupting or ending many girls' education.⁵ Women who were married as children have less control over productive household assets, lower labour force participation and earnings, further perpetuating intergenerational cycles of poverty.⁶

Married and ever-married girls and young women also face challenges in accessing quality sexual and reproductive health services that meet their age and gender specific needs and are at high risk of unintended adolescent pregnancy and less time between pregnancies. 76 percent of childbearing amongst girls occurs within the context of marriage, leading to poor health outcomes, obstetric

³ UNICEF. Is an end to child marriage within reach? 2023 Update. ⁷ UNICEF. *Is an end to child marriage within reach?* 2023 Update.

⁴ Girls Not Brides. *Evidence review: child marriage interventions and research from 2020 to 2022*. January 2023.

⁵ UNICEF. *The Power of Education to End Child Marriage*. 2022.

⁶ The World Bank and International Center for Research on Women. [Economic Impacts of Child Marriage: Global Synthesis Brief](#). 2017.

fistula, and maternal mortality.⁷ Complications from pregnancy and childbirth are a leading cause of death among adolescent girls aged 15 to 19.⁸ Children born to girl mothers are more likely to suffer from low birth weight and infant mortality.

Humanitarian crises, such as conflict, displacement, and climate crises, exacerbate CEFMU with the highest child marriage rates in the world are fragile or extremely fragile. With an estimated 18 million forcibly displaced girls under the age of 18, and many more girls are living in crisis-affected settings thus addressing CEFMU in humanitarian crises is an urgent issue.⁹ CEFMU may increase in response to sudden or prolonged economic hardship, food insecurity, weakened social infrastructure, insecurity and violence, or limited access to safe education. In South Sudan, researchers found that pre-conflict, 45% of girls were married before turning 18¹⁰; after the conflict this rose to 71%. In Lebanon, CEFMU rates among displaced Syrian refugees increased from 8.5% to 23%.¹¹

Climate change and climate-related crises are having a tremendous impact on the lives of girls, young women, and their families. It can

Girls at-risk of CEFMU refer to girls under the age of 18 who are at higher risk of entering a formal or informal marriage or union. Risks of CEFMU differ by context. Globally, girls who are from the poorest households, rural settings, and who are less educated are most at-risk of CEFMU. Girls from marginalized groups may face additional discrimination and exclusion, increasing their vulnerability.

Married and ever-married girls and young women refer to married, separated, divorced or widowed girls and women up to the age of 24, with or without children.

result in the loss of protective factors against CEFMU and exacerbate its drivers. As assets and income are lost, food insecurity increases, education and access to basic services is disrupted, and displacement and risk of sexual violence is increased, families may resort to CEFMU as a coping mechanism after crises such as droughts and floods.¹² The effects of

⁷ Molitoris, Joseph, et al., 'Early Childbearing and Child Marriage: An update', *Studies in Family Planning*, first published 5 July 2023.

⁸ WHO. [Adolescent and young adult health](#). 26 November 2024.

⁹ UNHCR. "Mid-Year Trends 2022", 2022. <https://www.unhcr.org/media/mid-year-trends-2022>; UNICEF. "Child Marriage." 2022. <https://data.unicef.org/topic/child-protection/child-marriage/>

¹⁰ E. Buchanan, M. Kuol, G. Tap, and N. Kuol, "Born to be Married: addressing early and forced marriage

in Nyal, South Sudan," 2019. doi: 10.21201/2019.3927

¹¹ S. Abdulrahim, J. DeJong, R. Mourtada, and H. Zurayk, "Estimates of early marriage among Syrian refugees in Lebanon in 2016 compared to Syria pre-2011," *Eur J Public Health*, vol. 27, no. 3, p. 4556833, 2017.

¹² UNFPA. [Child Marriage and Environmental Crises: An Evidence Brief](#). 2021. Pope, Daniel, Heather McMullen, Angela Baschieri, Anandita Philipose, Chiagozie Udeh, Julie Diallo, David McCoy. What is the Current Evidence for the Relationship between the Climate and

climate change will worsen over the coming decades and stronger understanding is needed on how climate crises affect CEFMU across different contexts and effective programmatic responses.¹³

Target 5.3 of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) is aimed

at eliminating harmful practices such as child, early and forced marriage by 2030. However, no region is currently on track to meet this goal.¹⁹ Evidence shows that dedicated investments in coordinated and multi-sectoral approaches can put an end to this harmful practice.

What is the Global CEFMU Programme Model?

The CEFMU Global Programme Model represents Plan International's commitment to tackling the global problem of CEFMU and to driving positive change for girls and young

programming in the **thematic areas** of:

Cutting across each thematic area is Plan's focus on girls, boys, and youth

1.

Protection

2.

Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR)

3.

Education and Early Childhood Development (E+ECD)

4.

Livelihoods, Skills and Work (LSW)

women around the world. The model utilizes strategies to both prevent CEFMU from occurring in the first place and to respond to the needs of married and ever-married girls and young women, a population group whose needs have been overlooked.

The programme model leverages Plan International's expertise in integrated and multisectoral

as active drivers of change (LEAD) and supporting the participation and leadership of girls and young women in particular. The programme model also utilizes the socio-ecological model in order to provide a comprehensive design that recognises the complex realities that shape girls' and women's lives and promotes meaningful and lasting change. The model is premised on

Environmental Crises and Child Marriage? A Scoping Review (Currently under review with the journal Global Public Health)

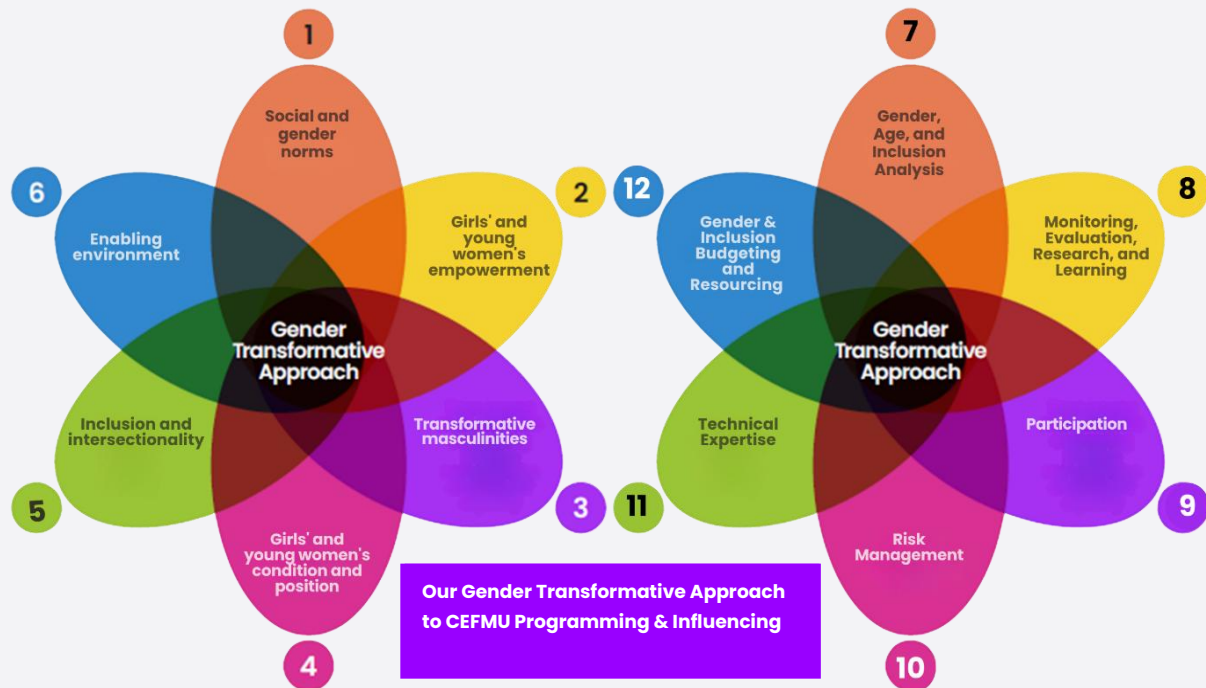
¹³ Girls Not Brides, UNICEF, UNFPA.

[Research Meeting: The interlinkages between](#)

[climate change and child marriage – Learning from emerging evidence and practice](#). 10 April 2025. ¹⁹ UNICEF. [The Child Marriage Data Portal](#).

three key building blocks. Each building block is grounded in evidence-based strategies, global best practices, and Plan International's tested approaches. The foundation of Plan International's Global CEFMU Programme Model is the organisation's **gender-transformative approach** to

producing meaningful and lasting change in the lives of girls and young women.¹⁴ This approach seeks to improve the quality of our CEFMU programming and influencing work and accelerate change by tackling the root causes of the issue and promoting gender equality as well as social inclusion.



The Global CEFMU Programme Model seeks to:

1. Understand and address how **harmful social and gender norms** influence girls in all environments, from birth through to adulthood, in particular during adolescence when girls are at their most at risk of CEFMU.
2. Work to strengthen the **agency of girls**, including married girls, over

decisions that affect them, like when and to whom to marry.

3. **Work with parents, caregivers, boys, young men and men**, including fathers, husbands and partners, to embrace positive masculinities and to promote gender equality.
4. Consider girls and married and ever-married **girls and young women in all their diversity**

¹⁴ Plan International. Global Gender Equality and Inclusion Policy. Plan International. Global Guidance on Gender Transformative Programming.

when identifying and responding to their needs and interests.

5. Improve the **conditions and social position** of girls and young women, including by advocating for legal and policy reforms that protect girls from the CEFMU and its consequences.
6. Foster an **enabling environment** where all stakeholders, including youth groups, women-led organisations, media, service-providers, policymakers, and governments work together to support children and youth and to achieve gender equality.

Our gender transformative approach to CEFMU programming and influencing is relevant and applicable to all our work, in both our **developments and humanitarian work**. For humanitarian contexts, adaptation and flexibility is required to suit rapidly changing needs, navigate unpredictable circumstances and allow for modification of strategies depending on available resources and time.

This model reiterates Plan International's strong commitment to girls' rights, as outlined in Plan International's Global Strategy: ***All Girls Standing Strong Creating Global Change (2022-2027)*** and its work towards a future where all girls are able to learn, lead, decide, and thrive. The model is also aligned with Plan International's Global Advocacy Strategy (2022-2027), which states as a goal:

"Significant progress is made towards preventing and reducing child, early and forced marriages and unions, and realising the right of all girls and young women to freely decide if, when and to whom they should marry across both development and humanitarian contexts. Married girls and young women as well as those at risk of CEFMU will have access to the services and opportunities needed to make decisions about their lives and to thrive."

The model further strengthens other focus areas of the organisation, including Plan International's Adolescent Pregnancy and Parenting Framework, which gives special attention to preventing unintended adolescent pregnancy.

Plan's Experience in CEFMU Programming

The Global CEFMU Programme Model is an evolution of over a decade of Plan's programming and influencing experience in addressing CEFMU. The model builds on the success of the 18+ Programme Model developed by the Centre of Excellence in MEESA. It has been further enriched by the programming experiences and regional initiatives within APAC, MEESA, ROA, and WACA.

"Time to Act" – Eliminating CEFMU in Asia

This initiative facilitates a network of technical expertise across 10 country offices and is focused on generating and sustaining best practice and boosting accelerated efforts to eliminate CEFMU across Asia. This inclusive platform is combining diversified approaches and strategies including research and analysis, capacity advancing, peer-support and learning, campaigning and digital solutions to shape innovative and effective CEFMU focused interventions to be brought to scale.

Centre of Excellence on Ending Child Marriage in Middle East, Eastern, and Southern Africa (MEESA)

The 18+ Centre of Excellence on Ending Child Marriage and Teenage Pregnancy is Plan International's regional hub for shared services providing expertise for programming and evidence-based influencing to end CEFMU and teenage pregnancy in Eastern and Southern Africa. The CoE aims to build capacities and support Country Offices in the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of innovative programmes and influencing strategies, as well as facilitating social movement building at all levels to drive change towards ending CEFMU.

Addressing CEFMU in Region of the Americans (ROA)

EMPODERAR and Girls' Reality Observatory – In ROA, the EMPODERAR ("Empower") programme model and the Girls' Reality Observatory is advancing the fight against CEFMU. Piloted in Guatemala and Colombia with positive results, EMPODERAR supports COs to move towards gender-transformative community protection for children and young people. The model leverages Plan's long-standing experience and commitment to community-based child protection and work at multiple levels of the socio-ecological framework. The Girls' Reality Observatory is the first virtual platform in Latin America and the Caribbean that compiles official data on the situation of girls in 13 countries, with a focus on gender-based violence, adolescent pregnancy and forced marriages and unions, in order to advocacy processes at regional and national levels, as well as achieve improvements in decision-making processes.

Centre of Excellence on Ending Child Marriage and FGM in West and Central Africa (WACA)

Centre of Excellence is designed to foster technical expertise and resource mobilisation in 14 Plan International Country Offices and partner organisations in the delivery of CEFM and FGM programmes through more effective SRHR and social norms programming, influencing and monitoring and evaluation approaches.



Plan International has also invested significantly in expanding the global knowledge base on CEFMU through its research publications, including the Storming the Norms research¹, Marriage Registration¹, A Gathering Storm¹, and the forthcoming State of the World's Girls Report, among others.

Plan International is currently implementing CEFMU programming and influencing across 25 country offices in every region. This includes countries with the highest prevalence rates of child marriage (Bangladesh, Burkina Faso, Ethiopia, Malawi, Mozambique, and Nepal) and also countries with the highest absolute numbers of child marriages (India, China, Nigeria, Brazil, and Mexico).

Current programmes span all thematic areas and all levels of the socio-ecological framework. Plan currently uses a mix of institutional, corporate, private and sponsorship funding for CEFMU programming, with most of the funding coming from institutional donors.

How to Use and Adapt the Programme Model

The following sections provide an overview of the programme model, its Theory of Change, building blocks and key interventions. It provides considerations for implementing CEFMU programmes, strategic partnerships and collaborations, as well as scaling and sustainability. The document also provides specific considerations for addressing child marriage in humanitarian and forced displacement settings.

In using the programme model, Plan International offices should adapt the relevant building blocks and interventions to best meet the needs of girls at-risk and married and ever-married girls and young women in their communities. Country offices are encouraged to adapt their programming to drivers of CEFMU in the specific project location building on the Country Office's existing technical expertise and capacity.

Careful consideration should also be made regarding the combination of interventions selected. Interventions may build on and reinforce each other. For example, interventions at the family and community level can reduce risk of backlash for girls and young women accessing services and supports. Interventions that create demand for services, such as sexual and reproductive health services, must be accompanied by available real services or interventions designed to improve availability of services, either provided by governments, other civil society

organisations, or Plan directly. Not all interventions may be appropriate or feasible in every context. In some cases, other actors may already be addressing certain needs at scale; in this situation, Plan International will work with these actors to avoid duplication of resources and ensure coordinated approaches.

The programme model should be used together with a forthcoming results framework. The programme model is also accompanied by a donor brief to support offices in donor engagement and fundraising efforts.



The Programme Model

The overall goal of the Global CEFMU Programme Model is to achieve a world in which girls and young women live free from CEFMU and its consequences. This means that girls and young women are protected, and able to take decisions about their

education, employment, and sexual and reproductive health and rights.

The Global CEFMU Programme Model is aligned to Plan International's global approach to programming and influencing and is grounded in the following:¹⁵

Gender Transformative

Uses a rights-based approach to address gender inequality and to drive norm change and empower girls most at risk of CEFMU to become active agents of change. This includes strategies to shift harmful social and gender norms using **social diffusion** and **behaviour change communication** strategies at individual, family, and community levels.

Girls and Youth Centered

Centres girls' and young women's voices, needs, and aspirations and recognises the unique experiences of girls at-risk of CEFMU and married and ever-married girls and young women.

Evidence-based

Built upon Plan's extensive programmatic experience and the most up-to-date global best practices, including evidence on norm change and community-level behaviour change strategies.

Working at all levels

Uses a multi-sectoral approach across all levels of the socioecological model, combining individual-level empowerment with family, community, and institutional engagement to shift gender norms and harmful social practices that perpetuate CEFMU

Locally Led and Globally Connected

Recognises that efforts to address CEFMU must be contextualized and community-driven and amplifies locally identified best practices to the global level.

Primary Impact Group

The primary impact group of the Global CEFMU Programme Model are girls at-risk of CEFMU and married and ever-married girls.

Most child marriages occur in middle adolescence, with most children married between 16 – 17 years. Child marriage rates gradually increase until age 14 and accelerate significantly at ages 15-17.¹⁶ Given this, Plan International's CEFMU programming focuses on girls in adolescence. This aligns with Plan International's global approach to programming and influencing, in which the organisation commits to making a lasting impact on the lives of the most vulnerable and excluded children while creating greater equality for girls.

Plan International recognises that young people, in particular young

10-17 years: Girls at-risk of CEFMU, married and ever-married young women

18-24 years: Married and ever-married young women

married and ever-married girls, continue to face challenges in fully enjoying and exercising their rights as adults. As a result, the Global CEFMU Programme Model also reaches young married and ever-married women up to 24 years.¹⁷ Country-based programmes may further contextualize the primary impact group based on age of marriage in specific contexts and other risk factors.



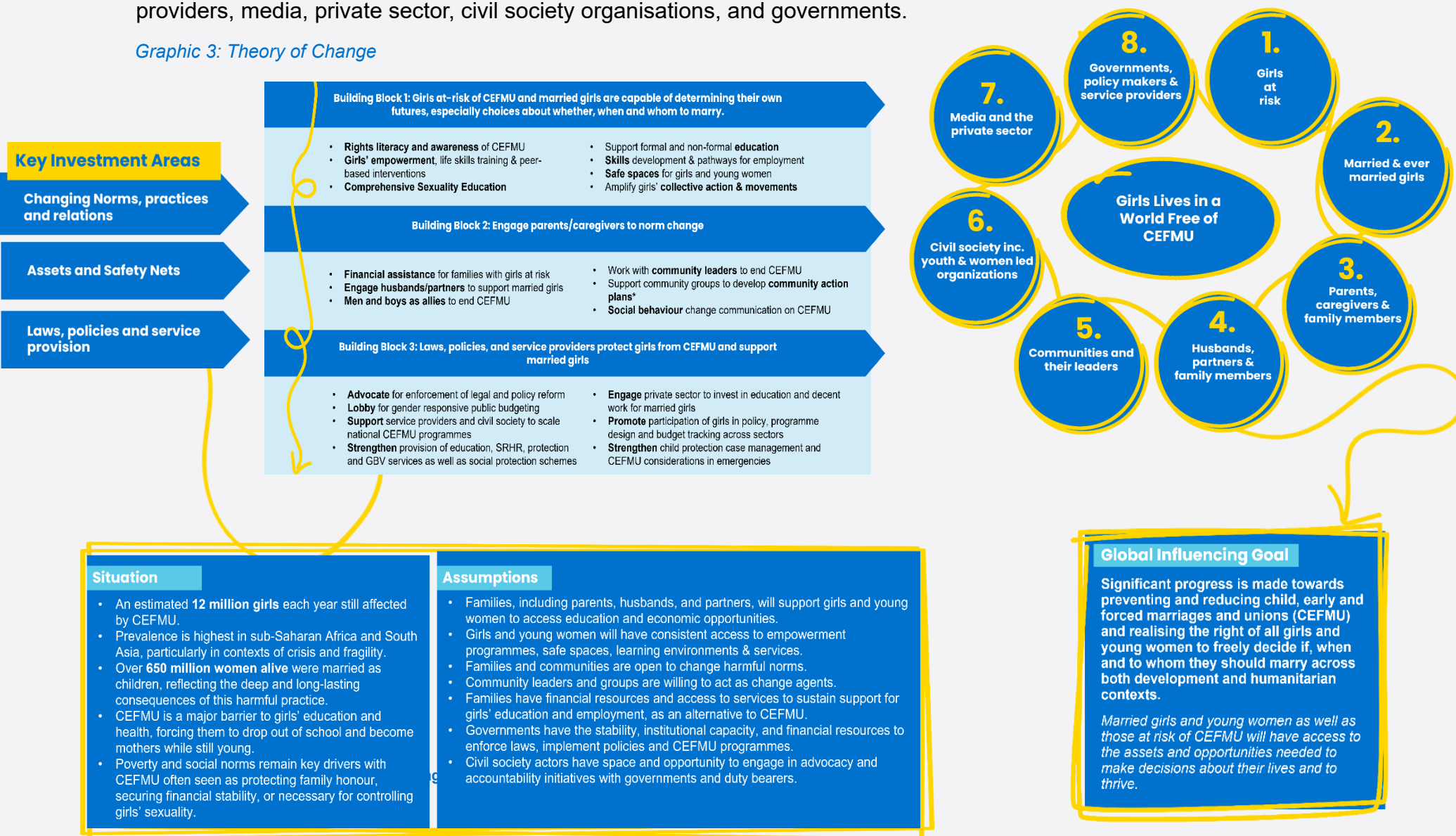
"I want to speak out for all the girls who have suffered, or are still suffering, because of child marriage,"

-Rebeca, 16, Paraguay

Theory of Change

Plan International's Theory of Change (ToC) for CEFMU programming and influencing recognises that sustaining impact in the lives of girls and young women requires working with girls and young women themselves, their families, communities, service providers, media, private sector, civil society organisations, and governments.

Graphic 3: Theory of Change



The programme goal is “*Girls and young women live in a world free from CEFMU*”.

The outcomes of this programme include;

- (1) Girls and young women have essential knowledge, skills and assets to seek alternatives to CEFMU¹⁸
- (2) Families and communities prefer that girls do not marry before the age of 18 and have the resources to delay marriage.

- (3) Laws, policies, programmes and service providers promote alternatives to CEFMU.

The CEFMU programme model provides a gender transformative and inclusive programmatic approach for preventing and responding to child marriage that should be embedded in programming and influencing work across all the thematic areas.

The results of the programme include the following:

Individual Level	Family and Community Level	Institutional Level
Girls and young women are aware of their rights.	Families and communities aware of the consequences of CEFM and value girls' rights.	Laws, policies, programmes, and services are developed in line with international and regional human rights standards and tackle the drivers of CEFMU
Girls and young women participate meaningfully in their families and communities.	Families support and allocate resources for girls' and women's education and employment opportunities. Families and communities, including boys and men, challenge gender stereotypes and harmful social and gender norms that underpin CEFMU and encourage girls and women's participation in decisions that affect them.	Laws, policies, programmes, and services are sufficiently implemented, enforced, and budgeted for, as to effectively reach girls at-risk and married and ever-married girls and young women.
Girls and young women are better able to avoid unintended pregnancy.	Families and communities, including boys and men, support girls to access services related to their protection, sexual and reproductive health, education, and employment	Policymakers, services providers, and other duty bearers receive adequate technical support to design and deliver quality, inclusive, and age and gender-responsive programmes and services
Girls and young women are able to take advantage of education and economic opportunities.	Communities, including religious and traditional leaders and community groups, take actions against CEFMU.	Civil society actors, including girls and young women and youth-led organisations, influence governments, policymakers, and service providers and hold duty-bearers accountable
Girls and young women have solidarity with peers and can take collective action.	Youth-led organisations and activists take collective action to end CEFMU	Education, sexual and reproductive health, child protection, gender-based violence, and employment services are provided in ways that meet the needs of girls and young women.

¹⁸ By “alternatives to CEFMU,” we refer to opportunities and pathways that enable girls and young women to delay or avoid early marriage and pursue their potential. These may include continued education, life skills, participation in

entrepreneurship or vocational training, engagement in leadership and civic activities, and other opportunities that expand girls' choices and agency.

How CEFMU will be prevented and reduced?

The main goal of the CEFMU Programme Model is for girls and young women to live in a world free from CEFMU and its consequences. We will achieve this by working with multiple actors across three levels of change; individual, community and institutional. Actors include;

✎ **IF (1) girls at-risk** are empowered with knowledge, attitudes, skills, and assets to challenge CEFMU, access services, and claim their rights and **(2) married and ever-married girls** and young women are empowered with knowledge, attitudes, skills, and resources to ensure their well-being, access services, and claim their rights;

✎ **IF (3) parents, caregivers, and family members** challenge harmful social and gender norms and practices, receive financial support, support alternatives to CEFMU, and support girls at-risk to access services and claim their rights and **(4) partners, husbands, and family members** challenge harmful social and gender norms and practices around CEFMU and support married and ever-married girls and young women to claim their rights;

✎ **If (5) boys and men** challenge gender stereotypes and are actively engaged in the fighting CEFMU and supporting girls' and women's rights;

✎ **IF (5) communities, including religious and traditional leaders and community-level groups**, mobilise to promote gender equality and tackle the social and gender norms driving CEFMU and limiting girls' access to protection, education,



future employment, and sexual and reproductive health and rights;

✎ **IF (6) civil society organisations, including youth and women-led organisations**, are adequately supported to advocate for changes to prevent and respond to CEFMU;

✎ **IF (7) media and private sector** actors promote gender equality, girls' and women's rights and create gender-responsive services and alternatives to CEFMU for girls and women;

✎ **IF (8) local and national governments, policymakers, and service providers** enact, enforce, implement, and invest in comprehensive legal and policy frameworks and programmes and provide quality services that protect girls from CEFMU and enable married and ever-married girls to claim their full rights;

IF the above are achieved, THEN girls and young women in all their diversity will be able to live free from CEFMU and its consequences.

Dimensions of Change

The CEFMU programme model drives transformative change across three dimensions in order to address the root causes of child, early and forced marriage.

Changing norms, practices, and relationships:

At the heart of the model is a commitment to changing norms, practices, and relationships that perpetuate gender inequality and limit girls' choices. Through Champions of Change initiatives, intergenerational dialogues, and community engagement, the programme challenges harmful social norms by highlighting **positive deviants** (ie. individuals or families already practicing protective or empowering behaviours) to inspire wider community adoption. Using **social diffusion approaches**, these practices which lead to different and more positive outcomes for girls and young women are spread across peer networks and through influential networks. **Social and behaviour change communication (SBCC)** strategies, alongside targeted media, amplify messages that promote girls' rights, challenge harmful attitudes, and support healthy relationships between girls, their families, and communities. This contributes to shifting public perception and strengthening supportive social environments for girls and young women to thrive.

Strengthening assets and safety nets:

To ensure girls are equipped to make informed decisions, the programme focuses on strengthening assets and safety nets. It delivers skills-building programmes, financial assistance, and flexible education pathways, while also supporting girls and young women to access education, employment, sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR), and protection services. Safe spaces allow girls to build social networks, share experiences, and develop leadership skills. The programme also

invests in the capacity-building of civil society organisations, youth groups, women-led organisations (WLOs), and young activists to sustain community-driven change.

Improving laws, policies, systems and services:

Simultaneously, the model works to improve laws, policies, systems, and services. It strengthens child protection systems, tackles service provider bias, and builds the capacity of service providers to deliver inclusive, age-appropriate and gender-responsive services that meet the needs of girls at-risk and married and ever-married girls and young women.

The programme advocates for the harmonization of statutory and customary laws, monitors public budgets, and supports coordination across sectors to ensure effective implementation and enforcement of policies. It promotes youth participation in shaping policies, programmes, and frameworks that affect their lives. Central to this approach is the delivery of quality, curriculum-based comprehensive sexuality education (CSE), which provides girls with the knowledge, vocabulary, and confidence to understand their rights and advocate for themselves. Through community initiatives, including youth-led efforts, the programme fosters local ownership and sustainability in the movement to end CEFMU.

Plan International's CEFMU programming and influencing is part of and supports existing movements of young people to drive social and political change. By empowering and mobilizing girls and young women, together with their families and communities the programme model contributes to building **girl-led social movements** that embrace gender equality, girls' rights, and eliminating the practice of CEFMU.

Building Blocks and Key Interventions

Plan International's Global CEFMU Programme Model consists of three main building blocks, working at different levels of prevention to maximise efforts to reduce harm and promote positive change. Each building block is accompanied by a suite of key interventions.

Building Block 1: Primary prevention

Plan works to prevent CEFMU from occurring in the first place by addressing drivers and root causes. Challenging harmful social and gender norms that drive CEFMU is core to Plan's approaches, as is empowering girls and young women with life skills, education, and economic support.

Building Block 2: Secondary prevention

Plan works with communities and authorities to address risks and early warning signs when CEFMU is about to occur. For example, Plan's interventions may target girls who have recently dropped out of school or mobilise community-level groups to identify girls and families in the planning stages of marriage.

Building Block 3: Tertiary prevention

Also referred to as response. Plan works with married and ever-married girls and young women to reduce long-term effects and prevent further violation. For example, Plan supports education re-entry or work with communities to reduce stigma of girls who leave marriages.

The following section elaborates on each building block and highlights interventions that can be used for programming to prevent and respond to CEFMU. These interventions are **not standalone project activities but a cohesive lens** through which to conceptualize, design, and deliver

CEFMU programming. When integrated across thematic areas, these building blocks can ensure that our work addresses the root causes of CEFMU and consistently contributes to **advance gender justice** within the communities we serve.

Building Block 1 – Girls at-risk of CEFMU and married and ever-married girls and young women are capable of determining their own futures, especially choices about whether, when and whom to marry.

Building girls' agency - their ability to make and act on decisions – and their knowledge, skills, and resources is critical to their ability to delay CEFMU and mitigate its harmful consequences. Interventions that strengthen girls' awareness of their rights, opportunities, and alternatives to CEFMU and promote gender-equitable attitudes are key to building their capacity to determine their own well-being, withstand pressures to marry, and choose alternatives for

their futures. These interventions build girls' protective assets, including group solidarity amongst girls, and reduce risk factors linked to CEFMU, such as unintended and early pregnancy.

Education is a pivotal protective factor against CEFMU; the longer a girl stays in school, the less likely she is to be married. In school, girls acquire skills, confidence, connections and new opportunities, expanding their aspirations. The education

environment itself can promote gender equality and inclusion and positive social norms for all learners. Education is also critical to increase girls' and young women's decent work opportunities, access to and control over resources, and economic autonomy, which in turn reduces girls' and women's financial dependence on men and other family members. School based clubs can contribute to building girls' agency and leadership skills, increase school retention, and contribute to gender transformative norms change.¹⁹ A critical mass of girls going to school can transform social norms and families and expand opportunities for girls.²⁰

For married and ever-married girls and young women, these interventions strengthen their bargaining power, confidence, decision-making autonomy, and give them choices to act on behalf of their own and their families' well-being.²¹

Girls and young women are also supported as **active agents of social norm change**, modelling and promoting positive behaviours within their families and communities. By identifying and amplifying **positive deviants** and **bright spots** among girls and young women, the programme fosters sharing and adoption of empowering practices within peer networks and leadership platforms enable girls to challenge harmful norms, influence attitudes, and champion gender-equitable behaviours that delay CEFMU thus

expanding opportunities for themselves and others.

Interventions under Building Block 1 should be linked with efforts under Building Block 2 to engage parents, caregivers, partners, husbands, and family members, as well as community structures in order to enable girls' access to key interventions and services, prevent backlash, and scale and sustain shifts in CEFMU practices. Service-strengthening interventions under Building Block 3 should complement interventions to increase demand, access, and type of services.

Key Interventions:

[P] [SRHR] [E+ECD] [LSW]

Building girls' and women's knowledge of their rights, laws, services, and programmes related to prevent CEFMU.

The programme seeks to empower girls and young women by enhancing their knowledge about their rights through a range of activities aimed at preventing child, early and forced marriage (CEFMU). Girls and young women will participate in structured information sessions, facilitated dialogues, community campaigns, participatory workshops designed to build their understanding of relevant laws, including the legal minimum age of marriage, the drivers and impact of CEFMU. Workshops will be conducted to explore alternative pathways to CEFMU, such as

¹⁹ Plan International. [Education Uninterrupted: Compendium of promising practices supporting gender transformative, inclusive, quality education in all contexts](#). May 2024.

²⁰ Girls Not Brides. [CRANK Research Spotlight: Education interventions to address child marriage and support married girls](#). January 2024.

²¹ WHO. UN Women. [RESPECT Women: Strategy Summary – Empowerment of Women](#). 2020.

continued education and access to employment opportunities.

Beyond acquiring knowledge, girls are supported to **share this information** within their families, peer networks, and communities. They also **role model protective behaviours and beliefs**, encouraging others to adopt practices that prevent CEFMU and promote gender-equitable norms. In doing so, girls' understanding of their rights is not only reinforced but also **drives broader change** at the community level, helping shift social expectations and attitudes.

Media platforms are leveraged to amplify key messages and equip a critical mass of girls with essential knowledge and tools to make informed decisions, advocate for themselves, and contribute meaningfully to their communities. Through social behaviour change communication (SBCC) strategies, these platforms allow girls to trigger conversations on taboo topics, challenge harmful norms, showcase positive young role models and shift public attitudes around girls' rights. This approach not only reinforces girls' agency and voice but also drives broader social change.

[P] [SRHR] [E+ECD] [LSW]

Girls clubs to empower girls at-risk of CEFMU and married and ever-married girls and young women by building their knowledge, life skills and leadership

Girls and young women participate in girls' clubs or groups designed to

strengthen life skills and empower them by building knowledge, life skills, leadership and strengthening social networks with other girls. The clubs engage and empower girls at-risk of CEFMU, married girls and young women and can be formed in school, community or as online platforms to ensure accessibility and relevance. Empowerment programming provides girls and young women with a platform to develop skills such as critical thinking, information analysis, negotiation and problem-solving. Club sessions are conducted to support girls in identifying risks, promoting health, reducing vulnerability and preventing violence.²²

As part of this component Plan International's Champions of Change methodology can be used to and young women's critical consciousness, rights awareness, and foster collective power. Boys and young men can be engaged through parallel sessions to reflect on and challenge harmful masculinities that reinforce discrimination and inequality. See **Plan International's Champions of Change for Girls' Rights and Gender Equality**.

[P] [SRHR] [E+ECD] [LSW]

Peer-based interventions and role modelling

Plan International implements peer-based interventions – including peer support, peer navigation, peer mentoring, and peer education - to positively influence girls' and young

²² Plan International. Area of Global Distinctiveness: Skills and Opportunities for Youth Employment and Entrepreneurship.

women's confidence to make decisions that impact their protection, education, livelihoods, and sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR). These interventions can be implemented through girls' clubs and youth groups in schools, churches or community spaces.

Girls and young women are reached by peers who are close in age and share similar life experiences, thus building trust and relatability. During adolescence, peers play a significant role in shaping attitudes and behaviours and can also become trusted sources of information and social support. To enable this, peers receive training, mentorship, and supervision from professional staff to ensure quality and consistency in delivery.

Through these interventions, girls and young women can engage others in discussions around values, healthy relationships, risk assessment. Peer interventions complement life skills training and individual empowerment efforts as well information sharing on rights and how to access available services.²³ *For further guidance see [Plan International's Peer Based Interventions for SRHR Programmes: Guidance Package](#)*

Empowerment will also be supported through involvement female role models and mentors who have demonstrated positive behaviour and made commendable personal achievements. These individuals can provide aspiration and encouragement to younger girls and

women supporting them to delay marriage and pursue alternative life paths.

[SRHR] [E+ECD]

Deliver Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE) with promotion of SRH services, including access to contraception and support for married girls

The programme seeks to implement Comprehensive Sexuality Education as a curriculum-based process for young people, especially girls and young women, to learn about sexuality, relationships and social-emotional learning. CSE can equip girls and young women with accurate information, critical thinking skills and values that promote health and wellbeing. The comprehensive sexuality education curricula will cover key sexual and reproductive health topics, including sexual and reproductive anatomy, puberty and menstruation, relationship dynamics, pregnancy and childbirth, contraception as well as sexually transmitted diseases including HIV/AIDS.

Participants are engaged both in and out of school, including girls and young women, boys and young men, as well as parents and caregivers. Through age appropriate and developmentally tailored content, participants will be supported to challenge taboos surrounding girls and young women's sexuality, prevent unintended adolescent pregnancies, and foster safe and respectful

²³ Plan International. [Peer-Based Interventions for SRHR Programmes: Guidance Package](#)

relationships. CSE programmes will be delivered by trained teachers or practitioners and will be accompanied by information and referrals to sexual and reproductive health services, including access to contraception, to empower girls and young women to take control of their sexual and reproductive health and rights.

Depending on the context, Plan International may support the development CSE curricula to ensure that the content align with Plan values and global CSE standards, or provide training to educators and facilitators to strengthen delivery. For further guidance, see *Plan International's Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE) Standards and CSE Programme Model and Implementation Tools*.

[E+ECD]

Access to education and non-formal learning opportunities.

Removing financial barriers that hinder girls access to education is a key strategy to preventing CEFMU under this model. Support will be provided to cover direct and indirect education-related costs, including tuition fees, scholarship schemes, school meals, uniforms, transportation, examination fees and essential learning materials.

Interventions will be designed to support girls in completing at least 12 years of education, with a particular focus on enabling transitions to and through secondary school. Efforts will prioritise the most marginalized girls to promote their rights and close

gender gaps in education access and outcomes.

For married and ever-married girls who re-enter the education systems, tailored support will be offered. This may include access to accelerated learning programmes, non-formal education, flexible delivery models – such as those using information and communication technologies (ICT) and digital platforms. Where needed, basic childcare services should be provided to ensure young mothers can participate in programme activities while their children have supervision.

[LSW]

Develop market-driven, relevant skills and economic pathways to decent work.

Interventions support girls and young women to access decent work and economic opportunities, whether waged or self-employment. This can be achieved through skills building programmes including vocational training, access to microfinance, savings groups, income generating activities, mentorship, career guidance, and linkages to labour and financial markets.

Skills building programmes will include vocational and technical training, employability and work readiness sessions, entrepreneurship development and life skills education. These interventions will be delivered directly by Plan International or in partnership with public and private Technical Vocational Education and Training (TVET) providers.

Digitalisation and the growth of the digital economy present new employment opportunities for young people. However, girls and young women often face barriers to accessing these opportunities due to limited connectivity, less access to digital devices, and gaps in digital literacy. The programme will also provide digital literacy and online safety, enabling girls and young women to participate meaningfully in the digital economy²⁴

In climate-affected settings, gender-responsive approaches are adopted to support girls and young women in accessing green and climate-resilient vocations. Trainings will be provided in areas such as environmental management, green entrepreneurship, sustainable agriculture, and renewable technologies with the aim of positioning girls as leaders and decision makers in their communities.²⁵

Additional support is provided to married girls to ensure their inclusion in economic empowerment initiatives. This may include flexible training schedules, access to child care, and tailored mentorship. Interventions should be complemented by efforts to engage parents and caregivers, husbands and partners, as well as family members to promote girls' and young women's participation in

decision-making and strengthen their control over income and assets.

[P] [SRHR] [E+ECD] [LSW]

Support designated safe physical spaces

Safe physical spaces are established where girls and young women can feel physically and emotionally secure, while building knowledge, skills, and social support through peer networks, trained mentors and facilitators. These spaces serve as platforms for accessing empowerment programmes, vocational training, psychosocial support, social networks and recreation among other things. Safe spaces may be located in schools, community centres, health facilities or other venues, depending on the context.

Girls and young women should be consulted in the selection and refurbishment of safe space and included as members of management committees to promote ownership and sustainability. To support the participation of married girls and girls who are mothers, these spaces should be designed to be infant and child friendly²⁶, and in humanitarian settings should offer essential psychosocial support.

²⁴ Plan International. Area of Global Distinctiveness: Skills and Opportunities for Youth Employment and Entrepreneurship.

²⁵ Plan International. [Young People and Green Skills: Preparing for a Sustainable Future](#).

²⁶ Plan International. Adolescent pregnancy and parenthood (AP&P) framework.

Building Block 2 – Families and communities champion girls' and young women's rights and challenge harmful social and gender norms and practices related to CEFMU.

This building block focuses on working in close partnership with families and communities, to uphold and promote the rights of girls and young women, and address the harmful practice of child, early and forced marriage and unions. This involves building awareness of the harmful effects of CEFMU and leverage norm change approaches to support families in actively challenging discriminatory social and gender norms. Families are encouraged to take concrete actions that protect girls at-risk and support married girls to access education as well as protection, sexual and reproductive health and rights services and employment.

Engagement with parents, caregivers and other family members who are positive deviants is central to promoting adoption of unique and positive behaviours which enable girls to delay marriage, stay in school and live in safe home environments. For married girls working with husbands, partners, and influential family members such as mothers-in-law is important to ensuring more equitable and non-violent marital relationships and access to services that support their rights and wellbeing.

Plan International promotes the active involvement of boys and men in efforts to end CEFMU and advance gender equality. Through targeted interventions, boys and men are supported to recognise the value of equitable societies, challenge harmful

gender stereotypes, develop positive masculinities, and become allies in promoting the rights and agency of girls and women.

Plan's approach includes deep engagement with communities to critically reflect on and transform the social and gender norms that perpetuate CEFMU and other harmful practices. Through facilitated dialogue and participatory processes, communities are supported take collective action to transform social and gender norms. These actions may include co-creating practical solutions, developing action plans and promoting duty bearer accountability for ending CEFMU. Girls and young women are positioned as central actors in these processes, with their voices, leadership, and choices guiding community level change.

Community leaders, including traditional and religious leaders, hold influence and often play key roles in customary marriage practices. Plan International works with these leaders to generate community-level support, challenge discriminatory beliefs and harmful practices, and to promote positive norms that support their rights and wellbeing. These leaders can be powerful allies in influencing norm change, sustaining community ownership and ensuring transformative social change while

safeguarding the voices and leadership of girls and young ²⁷

Plan further strengthens youth-led organisations, networks, and associations (both formal and informal) to build movements that address CEFMU. Initiatives such as the [Equality Accelerator](#), designed with and for girls, provide access to funding and resources that enable youth-led advocacy and action. Girls and young women most affected by CEFMU are supported to identify and pursue solutions based on their lived experiences while developing leadership skills, amplifying their voices and growing solidarity across networks.

Media platforms - including radio, television, print, theatre, and digital channels - can be strategically used to promote public dialogue and raise awareness on girls' rights and CEFMU. Plan International harnesses the power of media to complement community engagement efforts, transform social norms and inspire collective action towards ending child marriage.

Key interventions:

[P] [SRHR] [E+ECD] [LSW]

Engage parents, caregivers, and family members to build awareness about the consequences of CEFMU, strengthen gender-equitable attitudes and norms, and support girls at-risk to claim their rights.

Parents and caregivers of girls at-risk of CEFMU are engaged through structured interventions such as positive parenting sessions, facilitated group discussions, social support groups, parent-teacher associations, group training, and awareness raising activities. These efforts are designed not only to enhance understanding of girls' rights, harmful effects of CEFMU and alternative pathways that support girls' development and autonomy, but also to apply social norm change theory in practice by encouraging parents and caregivers to practice protective and empowering behaviours already being deployed by other families in their communities to delay marriage and promote alternative pathways that lead to better outcomes for girls and young women, this gradually shift community norms around marriage and gender.

Interventions focus on strengthening parenting skills and improving parent-child relationships to create safe, non-violent, and gender equitable home environments. Improved communication is promoted on critical topics including sexuality, relationships, the value of education, and access to essential services. Through these processes, parents and caregivers are empowered to become champions for gender equality within their communities, influencing peers to reconsider and reject harmful practiced such as child marriage. Resources such as **Plan International's Building Bridges: Conversations on**

²⁷ Girls Not Brides. UNICEF. UNFPA. [CRANK Research Spotlight: Girls' empowerment](#)

[interventions to address child marriage and support married girls](#). December 2024.

sexuality and relationship for parents and caregivers of young adolescents and Parenting Under Pressure provide practical guidance to support this work.

[E+ECD] [LSW]

Financial assistance for Girls Education

Financial assistance, including conditional cash transfers, is utilized to incentivise girls continued education to delay marriage. These transfers may be linked to specific conditions such as school attendance and are designed to reduce economic pressures that contribute to child, early and forced marriage and unions.

Plan International collaborates with governments or other actors to strengthen and expand existing social protection programmes, ensuring that they reach the most vulnerable girls including married girls. In contexts where state mechanisms are limited or inaccessible, Plan may directly administer cash transfers, with careful consideration given to the adequacy, duration and sustainability of support to achieve meaningful impact.

[P] [SRHR] [E+ECD] [LSW]

Conditional cash transfers are implemented in a non-punitive and confidential manner, particularly for households experiencing extreme poverty. Complementary interventions – referred to as cash plus – may include savings groups, livelihoods support or skills-building opportunities to enhance the protective and empowering effects of financial assistance.

[P] [SRHR] [E+ECD] [LSW]

Engage husbands, partners, and influential family members to support married girls

Husbands, partners, and influential family members such as mothers-in-law are engaged through targeted interventions including facilitated group discussions, father's groups, home visits, and awareness raising activities. These efforts not only build support for married girls to access to key services and protections, but also shift social and gender norms which contribute to intimate partner violence and perpetuate gender inequality within households and community

Tailored approaches are used as entry points to reach each group, combining both group based and individual-level strategies. Husbands may be engaged during antenatal care visits, in workplace settings, after religious gatherings, or in existing public spaces where men commonly convene. Mothers-in-law may be reached through intergenerational dialogues or through existing women's or elders' groups. These interventions are designed to foster reflection on gender norms, promote non-violent relationships and strengthen support systems around girls and young women.

By **spotlighting positive deviants and bright spots**, participants can observe their peers modelling equitable and supportive behaviours, which encourages **social diffusion of new norms**. These interventions foster reflection on gender roles, promote non-violent and equitable relationships, and strengthen

household and community support systems around married girls, positioning key family members as **champions of girls' rights and gender equality**.

For further guidance, see [Promoting Men's Engagement in ECD: A Programming and Influencing Package](#).

[P] [SRHR] [E+ECD] [LSW]

Engage boys and men as allies

Plan International works with boys and men, encouraging critical reflection on social and gender norms that devalue girls and women, and to promote active support for their rights including the right to decide if, when, and whom to marry. Through awareness raising, facilitated dialogues, workshops, peer-led approaches, and the use of positive role models, boys and men are engaged to understand the root causes of child marriage and their impact on girls' and young women's futures.

Trained male facilitators lead inclusive conversations in male only group spaces, creating safe environments for reflection and learning. These efforts are linked to gender synchronized sessions and broader community level initiatives to reinforce collective responsibility for norm change.

Plan also identifies and profiles male role models - positive deviants, early adopters and champions – who demonstrate commitment to delaying marriage, supporting girls' access to education, employment and other viable alternative pathways. Their

stories are shared within communities to inspire change and promote new norms. For further guidance, see *Plan International's Father's Club Manual*.

[P] [SRHR] [E+ECD] [LSW]

Work with community leaders, including traditional and religious leaders, as agents of change to prevent CEFMU and promote alternatives to CEFMU.

Plan International supports community leaders to take bold and innovative actions to end child marriage. These efforts include supporting the establishment of local by-laws and prevention committees, mobilizing campaigns to achieve child marriage-free zones, and encouraging leaders to publicly denounce CEFMU as inconsistent with religious and cultural values. In some cases, religious leaders and other marriage officials may refuse to officiate or bless marriages involving children, reinforcing community level accountability.

Engagement includes working with traditional councils, religious institutions, faith based groups and other influential actors to facilitate dialogue and disseminate key messages on CEFM. These platforms promote reflection on harmful practices and encourage leaders to use their authority to advocate for girls' rights and wellbeing.

Traditional leaders are also supported to understand legal frameworks related to CEFMU and to participate in structured discussions that promote norm change. Given their role in customary law and traditional courts,

including conflict resolution and mediating domestic disputes, traditional leaders are well positioned to strengthen referral pathways and reporting mechanisms for cases of CEFMU. Their leadership is critical to shifting customary practices and sustaining community ownership of efforts to end child marriage.

[P] [SRHR] [E+ECD] [LSW]

Mobilise community-level groups to challenge harmful social and gender norms regarding CEFMU and take action to address CEFMU.

The programme model mobilises community groups to raise awareness and create space for dialogue on CEFMU. These groups organise intergenerational dialogues, courtyard sessions, community rallies and campaigns to engage community members and promote shifts in social and gender norms that drive continuation of child marriage.

Existing structures such as child protection committees, youth groups, women's associations, and other active community groups are identified and strengthened through training, technical support as well as access to platforms. Trusted and well-established groups are particularly effective in facilitating conversations on sensitive topics related to CEFMU. Women's groups play a critical role in directly engaging girls at-risk girls, married girls and influential female family members. Their involvement enhances outreach and ensures that interventions are responsive to the lived realities of girls and women.

Ultimately, Plan supports communities and their leaders to develop community-level action plans with targeted commitments to eliminate CEFMU, thus encouraging local solutions, ownership and accountability for change efforts.

[P] [SRHR] [E+ECD] [LSW]

Strengthen civil society actors, in particular girl and youth-led organisations and youth activists, to drive changes to address CEFMU and take collective action to advance girls' and women's rights.

Plan International partners with civil society actors - particularly feminist, girl-led and youth-led organisations as well as youth activists - to build their individual and collective capacity for advocacy to end CEFMU. Support is provided through mentorship, training, small grants (such as the [Equality Accelerator](#)), and by facilitating connections with broader civil society networks. These efforts focus on uplifting youth voices and enabling young people to define their advocacy roles, messages and strategies in addressing CEFMU. Resources such as [Time to Act! A toolkit for youth activists to end CEFMU in APAC](#), and Building Better Partnerships to Advance Children's Rights and Equality for Girls guide Plan's principles for meaningful and equitable partnerships, including with youth organisations.

Utilize media and digital technologies to raise awareness on the effects of CEFMU, promote gender equality, and change attitudes and practices related to CEFMU and promote gender equality.

Plan International leverages media - including radio, television, and digital platforms - to promote public dialogue and discourse at scale around gender norms related to CEFMU, girls and women's roles in society, and sexuality. Media formats such as television shows, radio dramas, and digital campaigns, are used to promote non-discriminatory representations of girls and young women, highlight the value of girls' education and advocate for their access to decent work opportunities. Digital technologies, including mobile

and web applications, social media platforms, video conferencing, distance learning systems, are used to disseminate information, conduct online campaigns and support authorities with age verifications.²⁸ These platforms expand the reach of advocacy efforts and enable inclusive participation.

The programme model also engages influential media actors and celebrities to amplify messages and spotlights role models - positive deviants and champions - who support girls' rights and encourage them to delay marriage. Partnerships between young women and media institutions are facilitated to co-create content that challenges stereotypes and promotes leadership of girls and young women. These efforts are complemented by initiatives to strengthen girls' and young women's knowledge and skills in digital safety and responsible media use.

Jen, 18, moved in with her 'husband' (as she refers to him, despite there being no legal marriage) when she was 15 and he was 22. They met when she was 13 and were neighbours in the same community. They kept their relationship secret at first. **"I didn't feel confident enough to tell my family about my relationship with him,"** she explains. **"They didn't like him here because he was older than me."**

Under mounting pressure at home, Jen decided to move in with her partner's family aged just 15. However, she was treated harshly due to her in-laws' traditional expectations of her role as a woman and partner. At 17, Jen became pregnant and gave birth to a daughter, forcing her to drop out of school.



Building Block 3 – Laws, policies, programmes, and service providers are strengthened to protect girls from CEFMU and its consequences.

Building Block 3 of the programme model emphasizes a systems-strengthening approach to ensure that laws, policies and service provision work in coordination to prevent and respond to CEFMU and to enable girls and young women to fully realise their rights. A comprehensive legal and policy framework is essential to addressing the root causes of CEFMU, including gender inequality.

While laws that establish 18 years as the minimum age of marriage can be an important tool for communities mobilization, they must be embedded within broader frameworks that address interconnected issues such as divorce, property rights, gender-based violence, child trafficking, social security, birth and marriage registration among others. Legal bans on CEFMU, when implemented without corresponding systems support risk driving the practice underground, increasing girls' vulnerabilities and as well as undermining their agency and safety.²⁹

Plan International identifies gaps in laws, policies and service provision, and advocates for reforms – particularly in contexts with dual legal systems where customary or religious laws differ from statutory laws creating loopholes which are exploited to continue child marriage. Where services are lacking, such as legal aid for married girls, Plan works with local

and national governments to expand access

To ensure that laws and policies related to CEFMU are fully implemented, Plan also engages in gender responsive budgeting to influence allocation and tracking of public budgets. Technical support is provided to governmental ministries through capacity-building and the development/review of technical standards, guidelines, and curricula.

Ensuring the availability of quality adolescent-friendly and gender-responsive services and programmes in protection, education, employment, and sexual and reproductive health is essential to addressing the drivers of CEFMU and enabling married and ever-married girls and young women to live safe, healthy and empowered lives.

Plan also promotes the active participation of girls and young women in government planning, budgeting, and accountability processes and in assessing the performance for service providers. This enables the voices of girls and young women to be included in the decision-making processes of governments, policymakers, service providers, and other duty-bearers.

²⁹ The Child, Early, and Forced Marriages & Unions and Sexuality Working Group. Position Statement and Recommendations. November 2023.

Key Interventions:

[P] [SRHR] [E+ECD] [LSW]

Advocate for robust legal and policy frameworks, programmes and other legal reforms, in line with international and regional human rights standards.

To advance legal and policy frameworks reform and protect children from CEFMU, Plan International engages in legal and policy analysis, development of policy briefs, strategic lobbying of parliamentarians and policymakers, coalition-building, and leveraging regional commitments as well as model laws. In relevant contexts, Plan advocates for the establishment of 18 years as the minimum legal age of marriage for both girls and boys, in line with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, and without loopholes.

Plan may also advocate for the removal of laws and policies that restrict adolescents' access to SRH services based on parental consent or marital status. Additional advocacy priorities can include elimination of barriers that prevent married or pregnant girls from accessing continuing education and promoting gender responsive and child-friendly justice systems.

[P] [SRHR] [E+ECD] [LSW]

Advocate with governments and other duty bearers to enforce and implement laws, policies, and programmes that prevent CEFMU and support the education, employment, protection, and sexual

and reproductive health and rights of girls and young women

To ensure that legal reforms and policy measures addressing CEFMU are effective, enforcement and implementation must be prioritised. This includes reforms related to the minimum age of marriage, consent to sex, and access to services, as well as broader policies and programmes to address the drivers of CEFMU.

Plan International works in coalition with civil society actors, including traditional and religious leaders, to engage government officials, parliamentarians and policymakers. Through evidence-based policy briefings, strategic advocacy and public engagement, Plan promotes the adoption and enforcement of comprehensive legal and policy frameworks. Key messages are amplified through media, public mobilization, and community led campaigns to build momentum and accountability for implementation. These efforts aim to ensure that legal protections create an enabling environment for girls and young women, especially those most vulnerable to CEFMU.

[P] [SRHR] [E+ECD] [LSW]

Monitor the implementation and enforcement of laws, policies, and programs related to CEFMU, including budget allocations, and advocate for improvements.

The programme model further supports the effective implementation and enforcement of laws, policies, and programmes related to CEFMU by

tracking progress across multiple dimensions, including budget allocations and expenditures for child protection, girls' education, sexual and reproductive health services, and employment initiatives.

This may include the development of public-facing accountability tools such as scorecards and dashboards, as well as establishment of community based monitoring and reporting mechanisms that feed into government accountability systems. Plan also leverages national, regional and international child rights monitoring mechanisms including the submission of shadow or alternative reports to document gaps in enforcement and advocate for systemic improvements.

Disaggregated data is used to highlight disparities in implementation, particularly for girls and young women most vulnerable to CEFMU, including those at risk, married and ever-married. These insights inform advocacy and programming to ensure that systems are responsive and inclusive for all.

[P] [SRHR] [E+ECD] [LSW]

Support regional and national governments, ministries, and technical fora in the development and scale-up of action plans, models, and programmes to eliminate CEFMU.

Plan International provides dedicated technical support to national governments, line ministries, technical forums, as well as regional and

intergovernmental bodies to strengthen legal, policy and programmatic responses to CEFMU. This includes conducting policy analysis and reviews, facilitating consultations with government stakeholders, drafting policy frameworks, and supporting the scale-up of proven interventions.

Key areas of support include efforts to integrate comprehensive sexuality education into national curricula, expanding civil registration systems – particularly birth and marriage registration in remote or underserved communities – as well as developing model laws and policies for regional bodies. Plan also works to improve coordination and referral pathways between existing services and programmes to ensure girls and young women can access holistic support.

In contexts vulnerable to climate related crises, Plan advocates for the establishment of early warning systems with pre-established triggers and actions to prevent CEFMU and provide support for married girls. These preparedness measures may include cash transfers to high-risk households, readiness of health services, and pre-positioning of essential supplies such as menstrual hygiene packs, contraceptives and safe delivery kits.³⁰ These efforts aim to ensure continuity of education and access to critical services during emergencies.

³⁰ Plan International UK. [Protection, Gender and Inclusion in Anticipatory Action Guide and Toolkit: Applying the principles of dignity, access,](#)

[participation and safety to ensure that anticipatory action includes and protects those most at-risk and marginalised](#). 2024.

[P] [SRHR] [E+ECD] [LSW]

In humanitarian settings, strengthen CEFMU considerations in needs assessments, response plans, and coordination mechanisms

In humanitarian settings, the programme model works with humanitarian coordination mechanisms and actors to ensure that CEFMU is prioritised within emergency response frameworks. This includes building awareness among humanitarian actors of national and international legal standards related to child marriage and advocating for the enforcement of protective laws among crisis-affected populations.

Plan mobilises humanitarian coordination structures to integrate CEFMU in key processes such as humanitarian needs assessments, situation overviews, and strategic planning documents. Efforts are made to ensure that laws, policies, and programmes are inclusive of the needs of displaced and crisis-affected communities, and that CEFMU prevention and response is coordinated across the humanitarian-development-peace nexus.

For example, Plan supports integration of CEFMU in National Preparedness Plans and Anticipatory Action Frameworks to safeguard girls access to education, protection and health services before, during and after crises.

[P] [SRHR] [E+ECD] [LSW]

Promote meaningful engagement and consultation with girls and young women and youth-led

organisations in the development and implementation of laws, policies and programmes

Plan International advocates with duty bearers to systematically engage girls and young women, including through youth organisations, in development of laws, policies, and programmes at sub-national, national, and regional level. This includes facilitating their participation in influencing public budgeting related to health service delivery, protection, education, and employment, ensuring that their voices shape decisions that directly impact their lives.

Plan also promotes child and youth participation in monitoring the implementation of laws and policies through social accountability mechanisms. Tools such as the Young Citizens Score Card enable children and young people, alongside their communities, to assess the quality of public services, advocate for improvements and engage directly with governments officials to co-analyse service delivery and identify solutions. These approaches strengthen transparency, responsiveness and youth led accountability. For further guidance, see [Plan International's Young Citizens Score Card](#).

[P] [SRHR] [E+ECD]

Strengthen quality, inclusive, and safe school environments and programmes that are gender transformative

Quality, inclusive, and safe school environments are essential to supporting girls' retention academic

performance, and successful transition to secure, paid employment. Plan International works to strengthen education systems by promoting gender-responsive curricula and teaching practices that advance gender equality and challenge discriminatory social and gender norms. Efforts include the integration of comprehensive sexuality education, prevention of school-related gender-based violence through codes of conduct and response mechanisms, the provision of safe sanitation facilities that support menstrual health and hygiene management.

For married girls, including those with children, Plan collaborates with Ministries of Education and other education stakeholders to expand access to alternative education pathways. This includes flexible learning schedules, adapted study and assessment delivery models, as well as provision of child-care options to support continued education.

[SRHR]

Strengthen adolescent-and-gender responsive and inclusive sexual and reproductive health services to ensure girls at-risk of CEFMU and married and ever-married girls and young women access the SRH services they need to prevent unintended pregnancy and respond to their other SRH needs.

Plan International supports the delivery of tailored, age appropriate and gender responsive and responsible sexual and reproductive health services for adolescents at risk of CEFMU as well as married girls. Priority services

include access to contraception, safe abortion care, maternal health services and clinical management of sexual violence. Strengthening holistic and responsive health systems is essential to meeting the needs of adolescents and young people, and includes removing barriers to access, ensuring service integration, safeguarding confidentiality and promoting non-discriminatory care - elements which are often lacking in current service delivery.

This may include working with health providers to address biases related to age, gender, and marital status that hinder adolescents from accessing SRH services. Collaboration with Ministries of Health focuses on updating and implementing adolescent SRH guidelines and ensuring health facilities are equipped with the necessary commodities and materials to meet the needs of adolescents.

For further guidance see Plan International's guidance on strengthening access to quality age- and gender-responsive SRH services and health provider training package.

[P]

Strengthen gender-transformative, age-responsive and inclusive child protection and gender-based violence services that reach girls at-risk of CEFMU and married and ever-married girls and young women.

Plan International supports child protection and gender based violence actors to enhance coordination, reporting, information management systems, while building workforce capacity to respond effectively to the

needs of girls at-risk of CEFMU and married girls experiencing gender-based violence.

Key actors and services include government and para-professional social workers, police, judicial systems, alternative care providers, shelters and safe houses, drop-in centres, helplines, civil registration systems (including birth registration), and mental health services. These actors work in coordination with health, education, and economic sectors to prevent and respond to violence and abuse, including CEFMU.

The programme model emphasizes integrated, survivor centred service delivery and system wide collaboration to ensure girls and young women receive timely, safe and appropriate support across sectors

[P]

Provide direct child protection case management to vulnerable girls and boys, including girls at-risk of and survivors of CEFMU. In humanitarian settings, Plan provides case management services for girls and boys who have experienced violence, abuse, neglect, and exploitation. Case management for girls and boys at-risk of CEFMU and survivors must be done in the best interest of the child and adopt a survivor-centred approach.

Plan case workers provide individualized support and coordinate comprehensive services, including psychological, health, protection, and/or legal support.

See Plan International's **case management and child marriage**

learning paper; brief and staff checklists.

[LSW]

Engage the private sector to develop opportunities for girls at-risk of CEFMU and married and ever-married girls and young women.

This model facilitates dialogue and collaboration between the private sector, government, civil society and service providers to strengthen pathways to economic empowerment for girls and young women. This includes working with private sector actors to enhance training and job placement opportunities, integrate skills development into formal education systems, and promote inclusive workplace practises. Plan also partners with financial institutions to design and deliver youth responsive and gender transformative financial services, and to support youth-led enterprise development. These efforts aim to ensure that girls and young women at risk of CEFMU and married girls can access the resources, skills and opportunities needed to transition into decent work.

[P] [SRHR] [E+ECD] [LSW]

Strengthen social protection schemes to ensure household with girls at-risk of CEFMU and married and ever-married girls and young women are targeted and included in entitlements. This includes working with governments and other stakeholders to leverage existing social protection programmes, ensuring they are inclusive and effectively reach the most vulnerable girls and young women.

Programming on child marriage in humanitarian and forced displacement settings

Responding to child marriage in humanitarian settings requires a strong focus on direct service delivery to meet the urgent needs of girls and their families—such as case management and mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) for married girls. Crises and forced displacement often create acute and sudden risks across entire populations, particularly linked to economic hardship and food insecurity. Responding to these drivers often require child marriage programmes to integrate food security and livelihoods assistance as well as other life-saving services.

Programming must also navigate short-term funding cycles, and operational and security constraints, in addition to adhering to humanitarian standards, principles and ways of working. In refugee settings, complex legal considerations arise, including how child marriage is treated under national laws and customary systems, and how it impacts refugee status, resettlement, and family reunification.

Due to competing needs, insufficient funding, and limited robust intersectional analysis informing programme design, girls—especially married girls and adolescent mothers—are still largely invisible in programmes. Plan International advocates for their inclusion across the humanitarian response and is increasing scale up of interventions to

respond to child marriage through adolescent (girl) programming.

All humanitarian actors share responsibility for assessing and mitigating the risk of inadvertently incentivising child marriage or reinforcing harmful norms through our actions. While humanitarian programming alone cannot eliminate child marriage, we can implement impactful, community-driven prevention and lifesaving response strategies that reduce risks and support affected girls.

Addressing child marriage as part of the Adolescent Girls in Crisis programme model

Our evidence and programme experience has found that rather than promoting issue-based programming, child marriage programming in humanitarian settings must be embedded within broader adolescent (girl) programming approach, as described in [Plan International's Adolescent girls in Crisis programme model](#).

As child marriage in humanitarian settings is often inter-related with other child protection risks and urgent humanitarian needs, it is key that Plan International promotes programming that meets the needs of adolescent girls holistically, through a multi-sectoral and multi-level programme approach.

The Adolescent Girls in Crisis programme model focuses on empowering girls—including married girls and young mothers—while promoting their protection from all forms of violence, building resilience and providing alternatives within their communities.

At Plan International, child marriage prevention and response efforts fall under the child protection in humanitarian action portfolio. However, through approaches like the adolescent girls in crisis programme model, it is strongly recommended to work together with other sectors to integrated strategies and programming – namely with education, SRHR, food security and livelihoods.

For support on programming on child marriage or with ever-married girls and

young mothers, reach out to the Global Hub Child Protection in Humanitarian Action Unit or to the **Plan International-UNHCR Helpdesk on Adolescent Programming** at

helpdesk.childmarriage@plan-international.org

Find a full list of recommended resources for programming on child marriage [here](#) or see Plan's Programme Brief on child Marriage.



Dorcas is a 16-year-old girl from Togo who grew up in a community where girls were expected to leave school early to prepare for marriage. Having witnessed her older sisters being married off at a young age, she feared the same would happen to her. Initially unaware that this was a form of gender-based violence, she believed it was simply her destiny. However, **her perspective** changed after she attended an awareness session organised by her school's youth club, where she learned about girls' rights and the importance of education. When a man came to propose marriage, Dorcas sought help from her teacher. With the backing of the school and a trained community leader, mediation was arranged with her parents. Although it was difficult, her parents eventually agreed to cancel the marriage and support her education.

Implementation Guidance

The following section contains key considerations for the design, start-up phase, implementation, monitoring and evaluation,

Design Phase

Conduct a situational analysis and consult key stakeholders, including girls and young women, to identify and prioritise needs and solutions.

A situational analysis should gather information on the current state of CEFMU, including root causes, which girls and young women are most affected, formal and informal practices, prevalence, existing legislation, policies, and programmes, and their enforcement and implementation. It should also gather information on which services exist for children and young people in project locations, barriers to access (e.g. parental or spousal consent to access family planning methods), and a gender, age and inclusion analysis.

Undertake formative research on social and gender norms related to CEFMU.

As part of the situational analysis or as a distinct step, Plan should conduct formative research to understand the population of girls and young women targeted by the programme, their beliefs and behaviours, needs and barriers faced, and social, cultural, and structural factors influencing decisions around CEFMU, including risk and protective factors. This can use methods such as focus group

Key principles of CEFMU programming

- best interests of the child
- survivor-centered approach
- safety and do no harm
- meaningful child and youth participation
- children and young-people's evolving capacities
- girl centered
- rights-base

discussions, key informant interviews, or survey questionnaires. Social and gender norms formative research is key to developing a social and behaviour change communication campaign.

Contextualize the model and select relevant building blocks and interventions.

Based on the situational analysis and consultations, identify together with girls and their communities, which building blocks and interventions are relevant given the needs, barriers, and resources in each context. Several interventions should be implemented as one component of a wider programme. For example, peer-based

interventions should not be implemented in isolation;³¹ interventions to increase demand for services should not be implemented without ensuring services are sufficiently available or implementing interventions to strengthen service provision.

Select partner organisations, if relevant.

Map existing youth and women-led organisations and consider partner organisations that can provide complementary services and supports, such as health organisations that provide clinical support for specific services (e.g. family planning, safe abortion), legal aid organisations that provide counselling to girls and women, and think tanks that conduct policy and budget analysis.

Conduct a safeguarding risk assessment and develop a mitigation plan

It is crucial that programme interventions do not inadvertently exacerbate vulnerabilities of children and youth, for example increasing stigma against married and ever-married girls and young women. Care must also be taken to give communities ownership over actions that are taken in order to reduce community backlash.

Develop agreements and MOUs with relevant line ministries or other actors mitigation plan

Plan should explore partnerships with government entities. Memorandums

of Understanding or other similar agreements can be facilitated with Ministries of Health, Social Welfare, Education, etc. in order to enable working with government service providers and should be negotiated before project start-up, in order to avoid delays.

Develop an implementation plan, budget, and monitoring and evaluation framework.

Ensure that adequate resources, including time, staffing, and training, are identified to support programme staff, partners, mentors, and other programme actors.

Develop a sustainability strategy and exit plan.

Developing a strategy for project exit and closure, including community handover, can ensure that the project is able to sustain positive changes for girls and young women beyond the life of the project.

Start-up phase: Preparing for Implementation

Conduct capacity assessment and capacity strengthening plan for staff and partners.

All staff should possess expertise and experience working with vulnerable populations and girls and women. Required knowledge, skills, and competences for all programme staff should be identified, based on their specific roles, and a capacity assessment should be conducted into

³¹ Plan International. [Peer-based Interventions on SRHR: 'Do No Harm' Guidance](#).

inform a tailored capacity strengthening plan.

Train staff, partners, mentors, facilitators, volunteers and other project actors.

Staff working on specific intervention areas should receive relevant technical capacity-building at the start and through-out the project, including on Plan's Planting Equality training, and be socialized on the Global CEFMU Programme Model. Training female community mentors and facilitators can strengthen women's leadership and advocacy for girls over the long-term. Working on issues that challenge existing social norms can elicit strong personal reactions from staff, partners, and other project-level actors. Training on values and beliefs around CEFMU, including SRHR, using training materials such as "Conversations that Matter" can better prepare staff to work with girls, families, and communities.

Update service mapping and train all staff and partners on referral pathways.

It is important for all project staff to understand the real availability of services in order to ensure that referrals are not made to services that only exist in theory. All project staff, facilitators, etc. must be trained to handle disclosures of gender-based violence, including intimate partner violence, and provide safe referrals.

Safeguarding risk assessment and mitigation plan and training of staff and partners

It is important for all project and partner staff to be aware of the project's risks to girls and young women and associated mitigation measures. All project staff, partners, and associates are required to be aware of Plan International's Child Safeguarding Policy and sign a code of conduct.

Develop and implement a social and behaviour change communication (SBCC) strategy.

Using findings from the formative research at design stage, Plan should use a structured process to influence knowledge, attitudes, norms, and behaviours around CEFMU. An SBCC campaign should have tailored messages to segmented population groups and use appropriate channels and tactics, such as peer-based approaches, community approaches (theatre, drama), mass media (TV, radio), and digital (social media).

Contextualize key messages, and other content

In some cases, nationally approved curriculums around comprehensive sexuality education or life skills may already exist; in this case, Plan International may support the implemented of the curriculum or advocate for any improvements. For other packages such as Champions of Change or CSE implementation tools, it is important that a process is undertaken to adapt content to specific target groups and contexts.

Implementation Phase

Sensitize communities on programme interventions and approaches.

At the start of implementation, Plan staff and partners should once again meet with relevant community authorities and other stakeholders to inform them of the objectives of the programme and get their feedback on programme implementation. Sensitization activities should include parents and caregivers, husbands and partners, men and boys, and other relevant stakeholders.

Select programme participants.

Profiles and criteria of programme participants should be determined from the formative research conducted at design stage and target girls who are most at-risk of CEFMU and married and ever-married girls and young women who are most vulnerable. These may include girls and young women living in poor households, without access to education or employment, girls who are sexually active, pregnant girls and young women, and girls and young women who are socially isolated.

Enrolling the most vulnerable girls at-risk of CEFMU and married and ever-married girls and young women may require specific strategies, such as house-to-house outreach or outreach through education actors, health workers, and community-based child protection groups. Whenever relevant and possible, parents and caregivers of girls or husbands and partners of girls should be targeted in

complementary programme interventions. All participation in programme activities must be voluntary.

Promote active participation of girls and young women in the delivery of activities.

Girls and young women targeted in the programme should play a role as active participants and decision-makers in the programme's implementation. Girls and young women can play active roles as peer educators and mentors and role models. They may be invited to co-create elements of certain interventions, included in the management committees for safe spaces, or members of an adolescent or youth advisory group.

Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning

Engage girls and young women in the monitoring and evaluation of programme activities.

Girls and young women can participate in monitoring and evaluation of programme activities through collecting programme feedback, conducting surveys with peers, documenting stories, creating adolescent and youth-friendly reports using creative media.

Gather ongoing feedback from girls and young women.

Ensure that feedback and complaints mechanisms are accessible to girls at-risk of CEFMU and married and ever-married girls and young women.

Ensure ethical and safe data collection.

CEFMU is a form of gender-based violence and Plan staff must take care when gathering primary data to guarantee safety, confidentiality, and informed consent. Unless absolutely necessary, it is not advisable to collect data or ask direct questions about individual's experiences of GBV (including CEFMU, intimate partner violence, sexual violence, and child sexual abuse). Any data collection activity with survivors of GBV must be conducted by trained staff with a clear protocol for handling disclosures of GBV and making referrals.

Document and disseminate impact and key learnings.

Final evaluations should document key learnings and significant changes as a result of the programme. Evaluation questions should ideally contribute to the organisation's wider learning agenda on CEFMU. Findings should be shared with the Global Centre of Excellence on CEFMU and disseminated to communities, partners, and donors.

Closing and follow-up

Handover to community and duty-bearers

Based on the strategy developed during design stage, Plan should prepare to handover components of the programme to the local community and to duty-bearers and other stakeholders, including youth and women-led organisations, throughout the implementation of the project. Prior to project closure, all stakeholders should be informed and a joint plan developed to transfer ownership, knowledge, and responsibility for programme interventions. An MOU or agreement with community leaders or organisation can formalize the transition.

Plan for a follow-up assessment, after project closure, to identify sustained changes

This is critical to identifying the extent to which changes in knowledge, attitudes, and behaviours and work with community-level structures and government institutions were sustainable beyond the life of the project.

Management and Coordination

Plan International's Global CEFMU Programme Model will be spearheaded by the **Centre of Excellence (CoE) on CEFMU**, sitting in MEESA, and overseen by a lead with global mandate. The **CoE Lead** will be responsible for strategic leadership, programme design and fidelity assurance, donor engagement, and coordination across the Plan Federation. They may be hosted by any Plan country office.

The Lead reports to the Head of the Host CO with matrix management line to the Global Programmes Team and leads the COE's vision, strategy, and performance, ensures alignment with Plan's wider strategic programming and influencing priorities, and is responsible for raising funds to advance the work Centre of Excellence as well as broader fundraising with the understanding that CEFMU has various entry points for programming. They work closely with CEFMU Focal Points from each of Plan's Regional Offices, who act as champions of the programme model and liaisons with Country Offices within their regions. Regional CoE Focal Points support the update of the programme model and associated guidance, tools, and capacity-strengthening opportunities and promote the contextualization of the programme to specific contexts.

The CoE is further supported by a core technical team sitting across Plan's existing thematic areas, MERL,

and communications. This team dedicates a percentage of time the development of guidance, tools, and capacity strengthening materials and working directly with CO teams to share technical capacity.

The Global Centre of Excellence (CoE) is guided by a **Global Steering Committee (SC)** on CEFMU which includes representatives from RO, CO, and NO, and external partners, such as representatives from youth and women-led organisations. The Steering Committee supports the CoE with advice on strategic direction and priorities, reviews workplans and CoE performance, and promotes uptake of the model across the Federation. The SC includes a balanced number of representatives from each of Plan's regions to ensure a diverse perspectives and programming contexts are considered in the CoE's work planning. This builds on Plan's successful experience with similar governance and coordination mechanisms in the MEESA region.

The CoE is further complemented by sub-working groups or communities of practice at the global and regional level that are dedicated to peer exchange, learning, and innovation on specific issue-areas related to the Global CEFMU Programme Model. These groups consist of thematic advisors, managers, and other relevant staff from all levels of the Federation.

Strategic Partnerships and Collaboration

Plan International works in partnership and collaboration with actors at different levels to deliver coordinated, multi-sectoral, and impactful programmes to prevent and respond to CEFMU. The aim of Plan's partnerships and collaborations are to: strengthen advocacy and influencing with governments and policymakers at regional, national and sub-national levels; mobilise resources from different funding sources; strengthen learning and knowledge sharing; and scale interventions.

Plan International is already an active member of Girls Not Brides, a global network of civil society organisations committed to engaging child marriage, and the Child Marriage Research to Action Network (CRANK) – a joint initiative of Girls Not Brides and the UNICEF/UNFPA Global Programme to End Child Marriage. Plan is also actively engaged in regional and sub-regional CEFMU initiatives, such as ROA's participation in ALIADAS, an alliance of UN agencies, civil society organisations, and youth leaders working to end CEFMU.³²

In order to grow its CEFMU impact, Plan will continue to strengthen and explore new partnerships and collaborations with actors such as:

- **Youth-led and women-led organisations and other feminist civil society organisations**, including as implementing partners - particularly those who work directly with girls at-risk and married and ever-married girls and young women.
- **Technical experts and service providers**, in particular those who provide complementary services to Plan's interventions. This may include expert organisations in social and behaviour change communication (SBCC), policy analysis and budgeting, health service delivery, and others.
- **Academic and research organisations** to support Plan in strengthening evidence generation on 'what works' to prevent and respond to CEFMU, in particular through high-quality final evaluations, post-implementation studies, and impact evaluations.
- **Private sector actors**, to generate innovation and support use of digital technologies as well as generate funding.
- **Networks and advocacy platforms** at international, regional and national level, including Girls Not Brides, intergovernmental advisory bodies, and other mechanisms.
- **Regional and national governmental bodies**, to enact policy reforms, enforce and monitor laws, embed key approaches, curricula, and tools, and capacity-build workforces.

³² <https://aliadas-lac.org/>

Sustainability

The Global CEFMU Programme Model aims to achieve sustainable changes by building the long-term resilience and capacity of girls and young women and maintaining structural gains in ending CEFMU, including the transformation of social and gender norms. Previous challenges in sustainability of CEFMU programmes have included: turnover of service providers; over-reliance on voluntary commitments of young people and communities; missing mechanisms for ongoing capacity building or support to maintain quality of services and activities community-level actors, such as youth groups; and lack of follow-up assessments (post-project closure) to identify actual sustained changes.³³ Based on lessons learned, sustainability is embedded in the programme's design and approach in the following ways:

Community ownership and leadership of girls and young

women: Engaging key local stakeholders and champions, including community leaders such as religious and traditional leaders and existing community-based groups, can serve as powerful influencers and catalysts for change. Girls' and young women's active participation throughout the programme cycle, including as peers and role models, supports their confidence, solidarity,

and agency. Together, these community-level actors transform how girls, families, and communities view girls and young women and their rights.

Institutional integration:

Wherever possible, Plan International aligns interventions to existing government commitments and policies and embeds its interventions and programmes into existing systems, structures, and plans (e.g. district level strategies and action plans).³⁴ Aligning and embedding its interventions provides opportunities to institutionalize key approaches to tackle CEFMU. Plan also engages in participatory planning and coordination by bringing together multi-stakeholder groups, such as line ministries, planning councils, district governments, and local structures (e.g. SBMCs) to jointly plan, implement, and monitor interventions and build understanding and commitment to maintaining changes after a project's closure.

Social and behaviour change communication:

Embedded as a key step at programme design stage, the Global CEFMU Programme Model's application at country-level is guided by a social and gender norms formative research which feeds directly in an SBCC strategy. Plan utilizes a multi-level approach to SBCC strategy and promotes

³³ Plan International. FY24 Impact Evidence Reviews for SRHR, PfV, IQE, ECD, SOYEE. Plan International. Their Time is Now - Time to Act! Report of the Regional Comparative Analysis, 2019

³⁴ Plan International. Their Time is Now - Time to Act! Report of the Regional Comparative Analysis, 2019

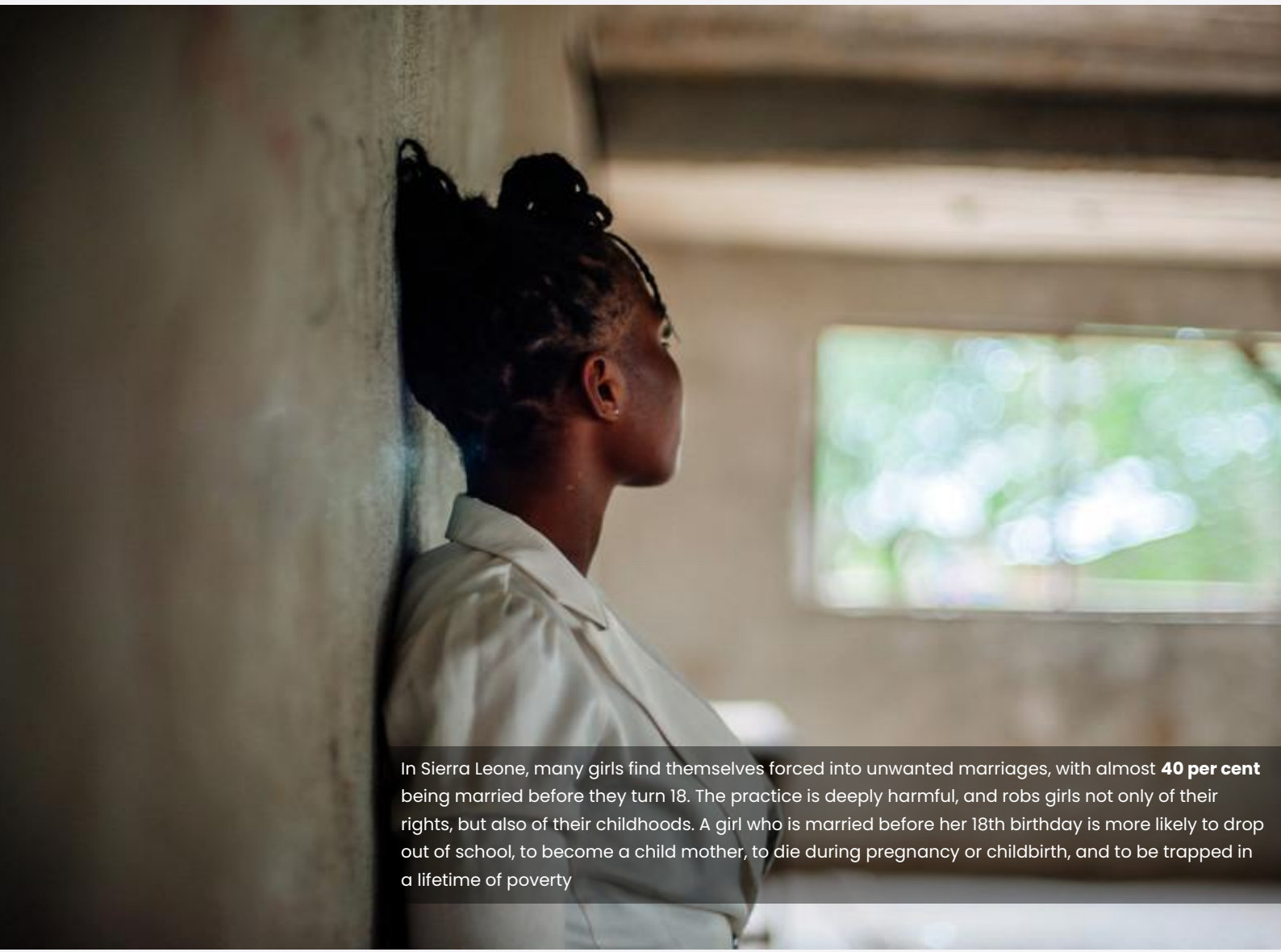
reflective dialogue with girls, young women, family members, and communities and harnesses media resources. Plan also works with local leaders and duty-bearers to promote community action plans, public declarations, and other actions that demonstrate collective intent to end the practice of CEFMU.

Capacity-building: Capacity-building duty-bearers and service-providers and strengthening systems at local, sub-national, and national level has the potential to result in long-term, significant changes for girls and young women. Plan International identifies processes and mechanisms

to embed technical guidance and support into existing structures and processes and systematize training, mentorship, and supervision for service providers, in collaboration with other partners.

Evidence generation:

Strengthening the global evidence-base on 'what works' to prevent CEFMU is also key in identifying approaches most appropriate and realistic to ensure the sustainability of key interventions. This requires including criteria related sustainability in programme final evaluations and post-intervention/post-project impact evaluations.



In Sierra Leone, many girls find themselves forced into unwanted marriages, with almost **40 per cent** being married before they turn 18. The practice is deeply harmful, and robs girls not only of their rights, but also of their childhoods. A girl who is married before her 18th birthday is more likely to drop out of school, to become a child mother, to die during pregnancy or childbirth, and to be trapped in a lifetime of poverty

Scaling Up

The Global CEFMU Programme Model aims to scale up both horizontally – by implementing the programme across regions and countries – and vertically by embedding the programme into core strategies of the organisation and other institutions. Without scaling up and embedding the model into systems and approaches, positive progress can be undermined. This dual approach ensures that Plan's CEFMU efforts are anchored for maximised global impact.

Horizontal scaling – Plan will focus efforts on replicating and adapting the programme model across all four regions of operations and to diverse country contexts while maintaining the model's core evidence-based approaches, interventions, and programming principles. Plan offices and staff will be briefed on how to use and adapt the programme model and to understand which components are considered core versus adaptable.

Regional and country level pilots will further support understanding how the programme model can most effectively and efficiently be replicated. These efforts will be supported by the Global CoE on CEFMU's Regional Focal Points, who are responsible for supporting the dissemination and contextualisation of the programme model, as well as its Communities of Practice, which will foster learning exchanges and support sharing of tools, research and evaluation findings, and capacity strengthening opportunities.

Expanded partnerships and alliances, and an up-to-date resource mobilization strategy, will further guide the organisation into strengthening opportunities for horizontal scaling and tapping into new and diversified sources of funding.

Vertical scaling – Plan will further focus on embedding the programme model into the organisation's own internal approaches as well as influencing other institutions and policies to create structural change. The Global CoE on CEFMU will support the organisation to mainstream the programme model into the organisation's core strategies and long-term plans, including fundraising plans, at every level of the organisation.

The CoE's Global Steering Committee will further promote uptake of the programme model and guide the CoE in programme expansion efforts. Within the wider organisation, the programme model's key indicators will sit under each thematic area, ensuring that programme results are captured across sectors and that all thematic areas have shared ownership over its implementation.

Externally, Plan will foster collaborations with institutions such as governments and service providers to integrate over time the programme model's approaches into national development plans, frameworks, budgets, monitoring plans, and curricula. Institutional engagement will begin at the onset of programme design and planning in order to build understanding and buy-in from key

actors. Sharing of learning and evidence from Plan's experience implementing the model in the specific context will raise awareness of the programme model's impact, effectiveness, and cost value and further mobilise governments and other actors to adopt key components.

Plan will work with coalitions of civil society organisations, including youth

and women-led organisations, at national and sub-national level, to advocate for the integration of the programme model and to link the model's approaches to existing governmental policies and commitments. Efforts to scale will be supported by partnerships and signed MOUs with relevant governments or coordination structures and long-term capacity-building and technical assistance to institutions.

Conclusion

Ending CEFMU demands a coordinated, sustained, and systemic response that transforms the environments in which girls and young women live. Plan International's Global CEFMU Programme Model offers a comprehensive framework rooted in gender equality, human rights, and community-led change. By combining empowerment, norm-shifting, and institutional reform, the model provides a pathway for realizing a world where **girls and young women are free from child**

marriage and able to shape their own futures.

To achieve this vision, the Plan International's Global CEFMU Programme Model calls for collaborative action across sectors and stakeholders, with girls' leadership at the centre. It challenges governments, civil society, service providers, and donors to scale investments, strengthen accountability, and remove structural barriers.



Sopheak is a 15-year-old girl from Ratanakiri Province in rural Cambodia. As leader of her youth club, she is helping to transform attitudes in her community towards reproductive health, child marriage and menstrual hygiene. The club provides a confidential space where girls can share their experiences and seek support.

Annex I

18+ Ending Child Marriage in Zambia – Example Concept Note

Annual Investment Required: €750,000 **Duration:** 12 months **Geographic Focus:** Zambia
Direct Reach: 60,750 girls, caregivers, leaders and public officials
Lead: Plan Zambia in collaboration with Centre of Excellence on CEFMU (MEESA)

1. The Challenge: Why Now

Zambia continues to carry one of the highest burdens of child, early and forced marriage (CEFMU) in Southern Africa.

- **29% of girls** are married **before age 18**; in rural districts this exceeds **40%**³⁵.
- Child marriage rates have **declined** from **42% in 2002** to **29% in 2018**³⁶ with steep declines for marriage **before 15 years**.
- **Poverty**, restrictive gender norms, adolescent pregnancy, climate shocks and school dropout are accelerating vulnerability for adolescent girls.
- Despite decline in child marriage seen in the past decade, a closer look reveals that advances have occurred among the richest families with rising levels of child marriage among the poorest³⁷.
- **National momentum exists**, such as the Children's Code Act, traditional leaders' reforms, and district-level efforts but implementation gaps and weak coordination persist.

This is the window to translate policy into impact and scale proven

approaches to ensure girls can marry later, by choice.

2. The Opportunity: What Your Investment Makes Possible

This **€750,000 investment** delivers a full-spectrum project under **Plan International's** 18+ programme model. It includes a **3-7%** contribution to the Centre of Excellence for global coordination, technical oversight and quality assurance. This is an indicative estimate; actual costs will vary depending on scale, delivery modality, geographic coverage, and donor compliance requirements.

Direct Impact in 12 Months

a. Girls' Agency & Alternatives

- **17,500 girls** participate in safe spaces, leadership clubs, SRHR/CSE sessions.
- **5,750 girls** supported with school retention, re-entry, vocational pathways, or mentoring.

b. Families & Communities Shift Norms

- **35,000 caregivers** engaged through structured gender-norm dialogues.

³⁵ <https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/learning-resources/child-marriage-atlas/atlas/zambia/>

³⁶ Zambia Demographic and Health Survey (2018)

³⁷ United Nations Children's Fund, Is an End to Child Marriage within Reach? Latest Trends and Future Prospects. 2023 update, UNICEF, New York, 2023

- **1200 traditional and religious leaders** issue public commitments and support community action.

c. Systems & Services Strengthened

- **300 government officials** and service providers engaged on legal and policy reform, capacity strengthening, coordination,
- **5 district mechanisms** strengthened to strengthen case management, and referral pathways.

Total Reach: 60,750 direct | approx. 240,000 indirect

3. What Success Will Look Like After 12 Months

- Girls' demonstrate measurable gains in self-efficacy of **30–40%**, with stronger ability to articulate aspirations, resist pressure to marry, and negotiate decisions about education and relationships.
- **Early, localised shifts in norms** are observed, with community acceptance of child marriage decreasing in targeted districts, measured through perception surveys.
- **Community, traditional and religious leaders** as well as community influencers show public commitment and imbed actions to end CEFMU in community bylaws, and local governance structures
- **Case management and referrals** improve by 20%, with frontline workers providing adolescent-responsive services and reducing delays in accessing protection and SRHR service
- **Countries receive coordinated technical backstopping**, and capacity strengthening through the **Centre of Excellence (MEESA)** enabling replication of high quality

scalable CEFMU programming and influencing across the regions.

4. Budget Overview & Value for Money

Total Investment: €750,000
Cost per direct beneficiary: €14

This budget breakdown reflects typical cost drivers for a high-quality CEFMU project:

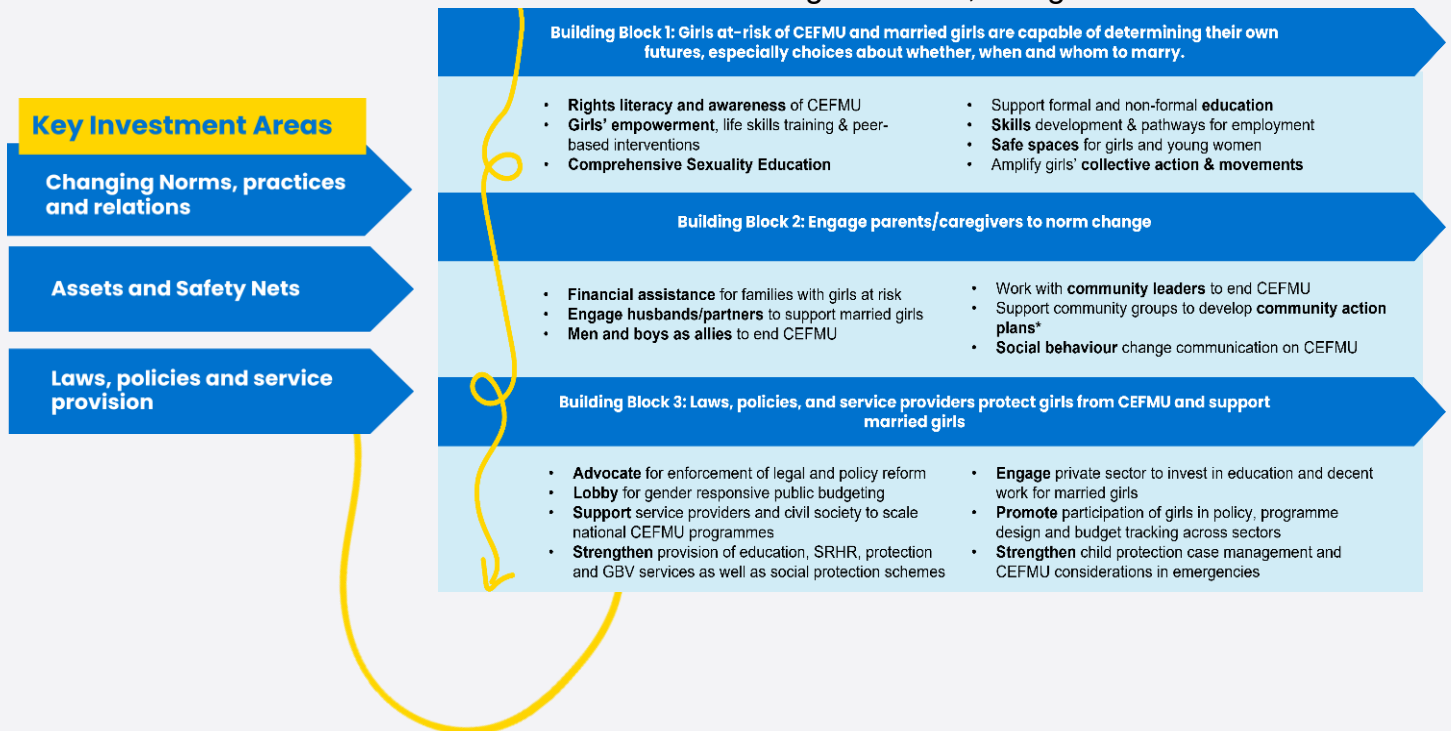
- **25% Girls' Agency, Leadership & Economic Pathways:** Strengthens girls' protective assets through life-skills and girls' clubs, safe spaces, CSE, school retention and re-entry support, and pathways to decent work including vocational skills and financial literacy.
- **35% Families, Communities, Norm Change & Youth Mobilisation:** Works with families, teachers, religious and traditional leaders to shift harmful gender and social norms. Drives community mobilisation, youth-led activism, and SBCC campaigns to shift attitudes at scale.
- **15% Systems Strengthening, Policy, Services & Coordination:** Strengthens legal and policy frameworks, improves child protection/GBV/SRHR services, integrates CEFMU into district plans and budgets, and reinforces case management and referral pathways.
- **10% Monitoring, Evaluation & Learning:** Ensures evidence generation, data collection, programme quality assurance, and adaptive learning.
- **10% Project Management and operational support**
- **5% Centre of Excellence** for technical leadership, consistency and quality assurance

This demonstrates strong value for money for multi-layered, gender-transformative impact.

5. Theory of Change

The 18+ model's **Theory of Change (ToC)** for CEFMU recognizes that

sustaining impact in the lives of girls and young women requires working with girls and young women themselves, their families, communities, service providers, media, private sector, civil society organizations, and governments.



Short Term indicators

- % of girls and young women demonstrating **autonomy and self-confidence** about ending CEFMU and related harmful practices.
- % of girls and young women with improved **access to education** and economic empowerment.
- % of traditional, religious and community leaders taking concrete action to end CEFM and harmful practises affecting girls in target communities.
- % of families who denounce **harmful social norms** and deny to let their girls marry before 18 years
- Number of policymakers who publicly support improvement in the legal and policy framework.

- Degree to which protection, education and SRHR services are adolescent-friendly, gender responsive and inclusive

6. Evidence of Success

Evaluations of major child-marriage prevention programmes in Zambia, including Break Free! and the UNFPA–UNICEF Global Programme, show modest but significant progress. In the highest-prevalence districts, child marriage reduction of 2–5% was documented, where intensive norm change, service strengthening, and girls' empowerment activities are implemented.

While national rates remain high at 36%, the evidence confirms that sustained, community-anchored

interventions produce measurable shifts.

7. Why Plan International?

Plan International is uniquely positioned to deliver results:

- 90+ CEFMU projects across 57 countries, backed by a joint up global programme model.
- Proven leadership in gender-transformative norm change, adolescent programming, and community mobilisation.
- Strong partnerships with Zambian government ministries, traditional leaders, youth networks, and CSOs.
- Ability to integrate CEFMU work across education, SRHR, child

protection, livelihoods, and humanitarian systems.

- Supported by a Global Centre of Excellence that provides evidence, quality standards, and cross-regional learning.

8. The Ask

Join us in ensuring that girls in Zambia marry later; by choice, with dignity, and with real opportunities for their futures. Your investment will catalyse community, system, and national-level change, protecting girls at risk of child marriage and married girls and strengthening resilience for generations.



From a young age, Miranda* had dreamed of continuing her studies and becoming a professional. However, she could not continue her education after finishing sixth grade due to her family's financial situation. "I wanted to keep studying, but there was no way," she explains. In her traditional community, girls are often expected to marry once they have left school. "It's customary," she says. "It's normal for a woman to get married at a very young age because it's considered best for us. That's what everyone in the village says." Encouraged by her family and community, Miranda got married. "I was 14 and he was 22. I felt terrible; I lost all meaning in my life," she admits.

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Until we are all equal

About Plan International

Plan International is an independent development and humanitarian organization that advances children's rights and equality for girls. We believe in the power and potential of every child but know this is often suppressed by poverty, violence, exclusion, and discrimination. And it is girls who are most affected. Working together with children, young people, supporters, and partners, we strive for a just world, tackling the root causes of the challenges girls and vulnerable children face. We support children's rights from birth until they reach adulthood and we enable children to prepare for and respond to crises and adversity. We drive changes in practice and policy at local, national, and global levels using our reach, experience and knowledge. For over 85 years, we have rallied other determined optimists to transform the lives of all children in more than 80 countries.

**We won't stop until
we are all equal.**

Plan International

International Headquarters
Dukes Court, Duke Street, Woking,
Surrey GU21 5BH, United Kingdom
T +44 (0) 1483 755155
F +44 (0) 1483 756505
E info@plan-international.org
plan-international.org

 facebook.com/planinternational

 x.com/planglobal

 instagram.com/planinternational

 linkedin.com/company/plan-international

 youtube.com/user/planinternationaltv

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