

CHILD MARRIAGE FREE COMMUNITIES

Guidelines for declaring a community free of child marriage



I. Background

India carries the burden of the largest number of child brides in the world – one third of the global total. Every year, at least 1.5 million girls get married in India¹.

The consequences of child marriage have a dramatic impact on both girls and boys. However, the vulnerabilities of girls increase manifold in comparison to boys. Not only does it increase the incidence of teenage pregnancies, putting young mothers' and their child's lives at risk, but also limits development opportunities in life, increases the risks of violence and abuse, and limits opportunities for informed choices and fulfilling aspirations. This is a violation of children's right to education, protection and development.

In the past ten years, child marriage has sharply decreased from 47 to 27 per cent². This may be the result of multiple factors such as increased literacy of mothers, girls' better access to education, strong legislation and enforcement and migration from rural areas to urban centres. However, progress has been unequal across states and also within states. At least 8 million girls are at risk of getting married in the next five years and half of these girls are at risk of becoming pregnant within a year after they get married. Marriage also increases the vulnerability of children, especially girls to dropping out of school, lack of financial independence, domestic violence, agency and other protection issues.



¹ Estimated as per data from Census 2011

² National Family Health Survey (NFHS) - 4 (2015-16)

A combination of factors contribute to the high incidence of child marriage in India:

- a) Poverty, high wedding costs, dowry and other economic considerations
- b) Gender norms and prescriptions, and lack of girl's agency
- c) Widely accepted social norms
- d) Limited access to schooling, especially at secondary level
- e) Families' concerns over safety and security of adolescent girls
- f) Inadequate law enforcement
- g) Emergencies or natural disasters like floods, drought or man-made conflicts may compel parents/families to get their children married at an early age due to insecurities/safety concerns
- h) Limited/no alternatives for girls after primary/secondary education

II. Why the need for child marriage free community?

Child marriage severely curtails the freedom of choices and opportunities pertaining to almost every aspect of life. At the macro-level, it also contributes to maintaining the intergenerational cycle of poverty and further marginalising women in society³.

Preventing child marriage is an effective entry point to address broader issues such as adolescents' aspirations and opportunities in life, value of girls in society, breaking the intergenerational cycle of poverty and ensuring the roles of young people as agents of change. It is imperative to address the drivers of high prevalence and enhance factors that bring about a change in child marriage and in the attitudes and beliefs that underlie the practice. Based on the prevalence of child marriage and its intensity, concerted efforts of various actors are critical for advocacy, mobilisation, awareness, ensuring access to education and essential services, safety and security.



While declaring an area child marriage free, it is important to ensure basic demographic information and operational governance structures, functionaries and community settings that can ensure sustainable monitoring and follow up mechanisms.

III. What is a child marriage free community?

The geographic area for declaration of child marriage free community is important as that is dependent on *incidence of child marriage, social norms, perception of community members, access to schools and services and community-based stakeholders* who will play an important role in follow up and monitoring the progress. Based on these factors, the geographic area to be declared child marriage free could be a *panchayat*⁴, a village, block or district, ward or any other area.

The time-period for a community to be ascertained as free from child marriage will vary depending on various factors as mentioned above. Once the community is declared child marriage free, it is recommended to have regular follow up and monitoring of predetermined indicators over a period of 2-3 years.

³ Jha, Jyotsna et al., *Reducing Child Marriage in India: A model to scale up results*, Centre for Budget and Policy Studies and United Nations Children's Fund, New Delhi, 2016.

⁴ Village council. In India, the village council is for a certain population and hence it could be one village (in case of a large village) or a group of villages (in case of smaller villages or a larger village with hamlets) for which a village council is formed. The head of the village council as well as the members are democratically elected. This is the lowest geographic level of governance structure that exists in India.

IV. Process of declaration

The entire process has been divided into three distinct phases:



PRE-DECLARATION PHASE

The initial mobilisation, building consensus around the issue, environment building and advocacy with the government both at state and district levels happens during this phase which ultimately leads to the declaration. This phase can last anywhere between six months to a year, depending on the size of the community/geographic area selected, prevalence of the issue, complexities of the social structures (e.g., caste dynamics) etc.



DECLARATION PHASE

The shortest, but perhaps the most high-profile phase. This consists of the actual day of declaration and the days immediately preceding and succeeding the day of declaration, a period of about a week.



POST-DECLARATION PHASE

This is critical if the momentum is to be sustained. Slip back is a real possibility, unless the community, key stakeholders and duty bearers are vigilant. The role of the monitoring committee is very important at this stage. Suggested period is at least two years from the day of the declaration.



Pre-declaration Phase

(6 months – 1 year)

The selection of the geographic area/community is a critical activity and needs to be carefully done. The objective of the interventions in the community could be to saturate the entire larger geographic area or to intervene in selected *panchayats*/villages or blocks in the larger geographic area. The approach could be to do it all in one go or intervene in a phased manner. The selected community could be one with an existing programme on child marriage or programmes focusing on adolescent priorities (or any other related programmes) or a completely uncharted territory or a community with high burden of child marriage as per NFHS or other reliable data sources.

Whatever the case might be, it is always useful and recommended to collect some basic demographic information about the selected community. If it is a *panchayat*/village/ward with an existing programme, it might be easier to do the initial set of activities. However, the sequence of activities will remain similar for both types of communities.

Below is an illustration to understand the process when the selected community is a *panchayat*. A similar process can be undertaken in any other geographic area selected

The process at the *panchayat* level should start with an **introductory meeting** with the *Sarpanch*⁵ and other members of the *panchayat*. The objective of the introductory meeting is to explain the concept and broad process to be followed. In *panchayats* with an existing programme on child marriage (or programmes of similar nature), there might already be some awareness on the issue and hence the buy-in might be easier. However, in the new *panchayats*, it might take several rounds of discussions, before the necessary buy-in is garnered.

While the *Sarpanch* and other *panchayat* members should definitely be part of

the conversation at this stage, frontline functionaries of the village, community leaders, religious leaders and other influencers could also be brought in after consulting with the *Sarpanch* and other *panchayat* members.

Once the *panchayat* head and members are on board, it is advisable to carry out a comprehensive **situational analysis** vis-à-vis child marriage in the *panchayat*. This will help in planning specific activities leading to the declaration as well as work out the modalities to be followed during the entire process. This could be done in a half day group meeting of *panchayat* members, frontline workers, community leaders and other interested community members etc.

The situational analysis will involve:

1. Listing all the girls and boys in the *panchayat* in the 15-19 years age group (some of this information might already be available in records at service delivery points including



⁵ The *panchayat* head, in some states called the *Pradhan* or *Mukhiya*



schools and Anganwadi Centres (AWCs). This group of girls and boys are most likely to be married early

2. Mapping all the possible stakeholders and influencers vis-à-vis child marriage in the *panchayat*
3. Documenting the social, cultural, economic and religious factors that contributes to child marriage in the *panchayat*. Some of these factors could be generic i.e., common to the larger geographic area, while some could be very specific to the *panchayat* or region
4. Discussing the potential solutions/ways to address the factors that lead to child marriage and prevention approaches
5. Identifying members of the community who can lead the process in the *panchayat*. They could be selected based on their willingness, leadership, ability to mobilise and influence etc. An informal (or formal group, if the *panchayat* desires so) can be formed, which can act as the Core Team during the process.

Concurrently with the situational analysis or after that, a special *Gram Sabha*⁶ can be called, where the entire population of the *panchayat* is informed about the concept and the process to be followed. In a completely new *panchayat*, it might be a little premature to call for a *Gram Sabha*, immediately after the introductory meeting(s), as the community might be completely unaware of or unwilling to acknowledge child marriage as a harmful social practice.

In this case, community mobilisation activities/events⁷ need to be organized across the *panchayat* periodically to create awareness and build consensus. Mid-media activities, inter-personal communication including door-to-door visits are some of the ways to do this. Existing community-based structures like School Management Committees (SMCs), Child Protection Committees (CPCs), Self Help Groups (SHGs), AWW/ASHA/frontline workers youth clubs, community based organisations etc. could be

⁶ Village assembly

⁷ Some of the resources that can tapped for supporting community mobilisation activities are: Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao (BBBP) (awareness, information, education and communication (IEC), innovation), state level social schemes (funds for IEC materials e.g. Kanyashree, Uthan etc.)

platforms for community mobilisation. Platforms such as Meena and Raju Manch, Kishori groups of the Scheme for Adolescent Girls (SAG) groups, community champions⁸ through Beti Bachao Beti Padhao (BBBP), institutions like schools, AWCs⁹ can also be important platforms for awareness activities.

In the initial phase, the Core Team should meet every month to take stock of the situation and plan. Emerging bottlenecks and challenges need to be dealt with on an ongoing basis. A space (e.g., the *panchayat* office or school) and time (e.g., first Monday of every month) should be designated for the meeting so that it happens on a regular basis.

Process of declaration

- State government to place an advertisement or Government Order announcing communities to send their applications for pronouncement of the respective community unit as child marriage free. The applications will include questions related to criteria for declaring a community free of child marriage (Sample Format – Annexure I)
- The Core Team can provide necessary data for completion of the application
- **Validation by team** – the District Collector will send out a validation/verification team before awarding the status of child marriage free community. The team suggested for district and block level is as follows:

District Level	Block Level
President, Zilla Parishad	Block Development Officer
District Child Protection Officer	Child Marriage Prohibition Officer
District level Women & Child Development/Child Protection functionary	Child Development/Protection Officer
District Panchayati Raj Officer	Block Panchayat Officer
District Education Officer	Block Education Officer
Sub District Magistrate of the area	Tehsildar
Civil society member nominated by District Collector/Magistrate	One civil society member working in the block

⁸ Also called Gender Champions

⁹ Childcare centre



- District/Block officials to review applications based on the criteria. Final approval can be given by the District Magistrate/Collector.

Declaration Phase (about a week)

The timing of the declaration must be well thought out. It should not be too early i.e., when the community is not yet ready for it, as then it just becomes an event and there is no ownership. It should also not be delayed too much as then the community starts losing interest. As mentioned earlier, the declaration is the most high-profile event during the entire process and hence needs to be timed perfectly for the maximum impact.

(Annexure I provides a checklist for declaring a community child marriage free.)

The declaration can be done through various modalities such as in a *Gram Sabha*, during a community *mela*¹⁰, key festivals associated with marriage (e.g. *Akshaya Tritiya*), in school assembly etc. A special event can also be organized (subject to availability of resources

and organization capacity) for the declaration, however it is neither necessary nor mandatory.

The declaration itself can be a simple ceremony of taking a collective pledge and/or signing a commitment. It could also be done in an elaborate ceremony where selected parents, adolescents, children and others can address the community members and share their experiences/insights on child marriage as a harmful practice. Government officials based in the *panchayat*, block or district can be invited to participate in the event. Community members, including adolescents themselves, who have taken action against child marriage can be felicitated and honored. A rally could be organized in the morning before the main event to generate further awareness on this.

Depending on the scope of the ceremony/event, the preparations can take 3-4 days. After the ceremony/event, as soon as possible but not later than 2-3 days, the Core Team should meet to chalk out the plan for the post-declaration phase. An action plan with assigned responsibilities needs to be developed.



Post-declaration Phase (at least 2 years)

Many a great initiative lose momentum with time and tend to taper off. The initial enthusiasm dies down and then it becomes business as usual, making all the hard work a wasted effort. The Open Defecation Free (ODF) concept is a classic example of this in India. A village/*panchayat* is declared ODF with much fanfare. However, with time, many of these villages/*panchayats* slip back to practicing open defecation.

One of the reasons for these slip backs is lack of sustained momentum post achieving the ODF status. There is no mechanism to monitor whether the ODF status is maintained or not. For the community to remain child marriage free, these two issues need to be addressed.

The Core Team will play an important role in this phase to monitor child marriage free status. They will meet quarterly and take stock. Families identified as vulnerable i.e., likely to get their girls or boys married early, need to be closely tracked. Some of the criteria for vulnerability are – children, especially adolescent girls out of school; adolescent girls and boys not in education, children belonging to marginalised and economically weak families, children with single parents or orphans. If there is information about any child marriage being planned or likely to take place, immediate preventive action needs to be taken.

(Annexure II provides post-declaration monitoring indicators.)

All the factors that are responsible for creating an enabling environment like access to quality education (including creating safe passage to and from schools), opportunities for skills training, linkages with social protection schemes etc. need to be promoted.

Discussions on this need to be continued in various forums as they were done in the pre-declaration phase. The mobilisation activities,

though they need not be as intensive or frequent, need to be continued.

Out of school children are especially vulnerable to becoming victims of child marriage. Schools have an important role to play here. All the irregular students need to be followed up and made sure that they attend school.

Marriages are solemnised by priests of different religions and hence they can play an important role in stopping child marriage. In some geographies, caste leaders also play a very influential role in deciding on the marriages. If they can mobilise and convince not to perform marriages of any underage girl and boy, it will create societal pressure on parents not to marry their girl or boy at an early age.

The anniversary of the declaring the *panchayat* child marriage free has the potential of being a high-profile event. This helps to sustain the momentum and give a big push to the initiative.

The *panchayat* can organize the ceremony/event in line with the one celebrated a year earlier. A high-ranking government official or political leader or influential community leader can be invited for the event to give this further impetus. Felicitation of girls and/or family members who have completed school education till class 12 and pursued higher education, or girls/boys who have stopped their own marriage etc. can be organized. Also, the community champions or key stakeholders should be felicitated for keeping the community child marriage free for one year. This will act as a big motivation for not only the concerned stakeholders but also others in the vicinity.

This guideline is only indicative and by no means an attempt to be prescriptive. States can (and should) develop and customise the guidelines based on the context of the area. The guideline is an attempt to standardise the process and lay down some ground rules for achieving the status of 'child marriage free' community.

ANNEXURE I

Pre-declaration checklist for District Administration

- ✓ Mapping of vulnerable children and families
- ✓ Listing of girls and boys dropped out or never been to school
- ✓ Mapping of community-based institutions for addressing child protection and adolescent issues
- ✓ Mapping of number of adolescent girls and boys who access these schemes and programmes, distance of service facilities, infrastructure and other details
- ✓ Registration of marriages within the community¹¹
- ✓ Mobilise the community towards mass level awareness generation activities including hoardings, wall writings, street plays etc. to prevent child marriages

Checklist for declaring a community child marriage free

The Core Team will collect the following information through data from the last one year. The team will collect this information periodically and also track them over a period of time and ensure that they reach desirable¹² levels before the community is declared child marriage free. The data collected before efforts are undertaken towards declaring a community child marriage free, would serve as the baseline. The progressive checklists can then serve to indicate the effectiveness levels of the programme.

School based information¹³

- ✓ Percentage of girls age 6-10 years who are currently enrolled in primary school
- ✓ Percentage of girls age 6-10 years who attend school regularly¹⁴
- ✓ Percentage of boys age 6-10 years who are currently enrolled in primary school
- ✓ Percentage of boys age 6-10 years who attend school regularly

- ✓ Percentage of girls and boys, who had dropped out from school, and have been mainstreamed into primary school
- ✓ Percentage of girls age 11-18 who are currently enrolled in secondary school
- ✓ Number of girls age 11-18 who attend school regularly
- ✓ Number of boys age 11-18 who are currently enrolled in secondary school
- ✓ Number of boys age 11-18 who attend school regularly
- ✓ Number of girls and boys, who had dropped out from school, and are mainstreamed into secondary school

Marriages in the community (The number has to be in the range of 80–100% of the respective cohorts for child marriage free declaration)

- ✓ Community had a reduction of 80-100% of child marriages for a period of one year
- ✓ A hoarding endorsed by the *panchayat* outside the village/community- 'This is a child marriage free *panchayat*/community' with the period mentioned

Community awareness

- ✓ Number of community awareness activities, dialogues, meetings with parents/mothers' groups/self help groups (SHGs)/child protection committee (CPC) members/religious leaders, discussions with adolescents/groups, mid-media activities (among others) organised in the community in the last one year
- ✓ Number of household members, who have participated in a community-based activity discussing child marriage (community theatre, etc.) in the last 6 months

If these indicators are met consistently for a period of at least one year¹⁵ then the *panchayat*/community/village is officially acknowledged to be "child marriage free"

¹¹ This is part of long term advocacy and may not be completely fulfilled in the pre-declaration phase.

¹² This could be customised based on the state characteristics; in this document we have marked 80% reduction as the standard.

¹³ An ideal percentage will be between 80-100%.

¹⁴ Defined as per the state rules.

¹⁵ Officially acknowledged means that the *panchayat* (or any other community level) has an official document signed by the local/state government that the community is "child marriage free". It is sometimes part of the process that the CPC swears an oath or signs a specific paper in which they adhere to keep the village child marriage free. It is not sufficient that the *panchayat* or other CPC members claim that no child marriages have been conducted. The official acknowledgement must exist.

ANNEXURE II

Post-declaration monitoring indicators

****Data to be collected over a period of 2-3 years after the community has been declared child marriage free***

School based information

- ✓ Number of girls age 6-10 years who are currently enrolled in primary school
- ✓ Number of girls age 6-10 years who attend school regularly
- ✓ Number of boys age 6-10 years who are currently enrolled in primary school
- ✓ Number of boys age 6-10 years who attend school regularly
- ✓ Number of girls and boys, who had dropped out from school, and have been mainstreamed into primary school
- ✓ Number of girls age 11-18 who are currently enrolled in secondary school
- ✓ Number of girls age 11-18 who attend school regularly
- ✓ Number of boys age 11-18 who are currently enrolled in secondary school
- ✓ Number of boys age 11-18 who attend school regularly
- ✓ Number of girls and boys, who had dropped out from school, and mainstreamed into secondary school

Marriages in the community

- ✓ Community had no child marriage for a period of one year
- ✓ Number of cases of child marriages that have been brought to the attention of the CPC/police or similar authorities in the last 6 months

- ✓ Marriages registered in the community in the last one year
- ✓ Is the village officially acknowledged to be "child marriage free" for at least 1 year¹⁶?

Community awareness

- ✓ Number of community awareness activities, dialogues, meetings with parents/mothers' groups/SHGs/CPC members/religious leaders, discussions with adolescents/groups, mid-media activities (among others) organised in the community in the last one year
- ✓ Number of household members, who have participated in a community-based activity discussing child marriage (community theatre, etc.) in the last 6 months

Addressing children's vulnerability

- ✓ Number of children who have been linked with social protection schemes
- ✓ Number of CPCs (or similar community-based structures) with a concrete plan of action to combat child marriage

Adolescent participation and engagement

- ✓ Number of participation platforms for adolescent girls and boys (school or community based)
- ✓ Number of community meetings/Gram Panchayat Development Plan (GPDP)/ *panchayat*/CPC/School Management Committee (SMC) meetings in which children and adolescent participated to raise their concerns
- ✓ Number of community awareness activities initiated by children and adolescents

¹⁶ Officially acknowledged means that the panchayat (or any other community level) has an official document signed by the local/state government that the community is "child marriage free". It is sometimes part of the process that the CPC swears an oath or signs a specific paper in which they adhere to keep the village child marriage free. It is not sufficient that the panchayat or other CPC members claim that no child marriages have been conducted. The official acknowledgement must exist.



UNICEF India
73 Lodi Estate
New Delhi 110 003, India
Tel: 91 11 2469-0401, 2469-1410
Fax: 011 2462-7521, 2469-1410
Email: newdelhi@unicef.org