Lessons from market assessments in Niger and Bangladesh.

Where do we start?

We were recently asked to analyse market systems as part of the formative research phase of CARE’s IMAGINE programme. IMAGINE is testing interventions aimed at delaying the timing of first birth among married adolescent girls in Niger and Bangladesh.

Delaying first birth - among married adolescent girls specifically – is an unusual goal for market system development programmes. It is also rare within the international development community. The focus is more often on preventing unintended pregnancies among unmarried adolescents, and on successfully spacing subsequent pregnancies. Given all of this, our first thought was ‘where do we start’?

The fact that this challenge has been relatively unexplored makes it all the more critical. Development programmes tend to focus on either preventing child marriage or meeting the needs of adult married women. As a result, married adolescents often lack the services and support they need to lead healthy and productive lives, with dire economic consequences for their families, communities and societies.

Factors directly associated with pregnancy and childbirth remain a leading cause of death for girls aged 15-19, and teenage pregnancy reduces their lifetime earnings by up to 30 per cent in some lower-income countries.
CARE understood from the beginning that any efforts to delay the age of first birth are unlikely to succeed without concurrent changes in the opportunities available to women beyond childbearing. To facilitate such opportunities CARE needed to understand the market systems and larger socio-economic shifts taking place in each country. This included identifying if and how these systems and shifts could be harnessed as potential alternative futures to immediate childbearing for married girls.

Rethinking methodology for girls

Before jumping to the economic opportunities we identified, it’s worth noting how our methodology for analysing market systems was adapted to understand the unique perspectives and situations of married adolescent girls:

1. **We got a detailed picture of the lives of girls** through interviews and focus group discussions with both married and unmarried girls and those who influence them (husbands, mothers, and mothers-in-law). This included understanding how much free time girls have, their preferred jobs and life pathways, their mobility constraints, and what control they have over any income earned. We also examined the roles of (older) women because they represent the economic pathways available to adolescent girls and can either sanction or support girls’ life and livelihood choices.

2. **We focused on high-leverage entry points**, or potential interventions that can significantly influence the behaviour of an entire industry or area and actors within those. This key principle of the market systems approach needed particular consideration as girls and women in the project areas were not concentrated in a single sub-sector. Even for sectors where girls are involved in higher numbers, the project could not assume that supporting the sector would automatically benefit girls. Larger or more powerful actors may instead accrue the benefits of sector growth. A strategic leverage point within the sector – such as women’s savings or producer groups – was needed.

There are economic opportunities for married girls – but they are shaped by unique constraints

Aside from local norms of marrying and having the first child by a certain age, married adolescent girls in both Niger and Bangladesh face a number of barriers to pursuing economic opportunities.

**Major barriers facing young girls in pursuing alternative futures**

* Very heavy household labour burden e.g. cleaning, fetching water and firewood for cooking
* Highly restricted mobility outside the home, especially for newly married girls
* Norms restricting the types of work deemed ‘appropriate’ for girls
* Lack of control over money earned
* Lack of economically empowered female role models, resulting in most girls in these communities unable to envision ‘alternative’ futures
* Low levels of literacy and formal education among girls for a variety of reasons
* Limited financial literacy and business acumen
* Limited access to credit
* Lack of land ownership/access

However, despite the barriers that married girls face in engaging in economic activities, the research uncovered a number of broad, cross-cutting opportunities:

We also uncovered a number of specific opportunities within the market systems analysed in each country, which are described in detail in the brief.

Reflections on working with this population in the future

Through carrying out the market analyses with similar target populations in two very different countries, we also uncovered several design principles that programmes
Consider girls’ existing unpaid care duties in intervention design. Girls already bear an extremely heavy unpaid labour burden. Any intervention that offers livelihood or skill-building opportunities will need to be designed around unpaid care constraints e.g. by providing childcare or locating activities close to girls’ homes. The intervention will also need to shift norms around household division of labour, allowing male members to take on household tasks traditionally viewed as the women’s domain.

2. Do no harm and the role of education. Most married adolescent girls have either not gone to school or drop out at the time of marriage. To avoid further drop-outs, programmes must offer girls the choice to study at the same time as pursuing economic opportunities. Interventions could, for example, explore the potential for schools or training institutions to offer economic skills training to girls, or serve as a platform for savings groups and financial literacy.

3. Activities should account for differences between girls’ circumstances. Married adolescent girls experience a wide spectrum of empowerment levels influenced by numerous factors. These include geographical location, household income, formal education of parents, religious beliefs, length of marriage. Market research, intervention design and monitoring and evaluation efforts need to keep this in mind. They need to carefully define what ‘empowerment’ might look like in different contexts and for different groups of girls and women. This might require building a spectrum of options that allow girls to move towards higher-value roles within sub-sectors, but also offer opportunities to those who are more constrained.

Read the brief for more details on the market analyses findings in both countries:

- **Learnings from conducting market analyses for married adolescent girls in two countries**
  Market analysis into improving the lives of married adolescent girls.

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