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UNFPA-UNICEF GLOBAL PROGRAMME TO END CHILD MARRIAGE

A SYNTHESIS PAPER ON THE GENDER-TRANSFORMATIVE ACCELERATOR

JULY 2022

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Introduction

A gender-transformative approach has evolved out of decades of work to promote gender equality.[1] It is one of the primary strategies to advance the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5 to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls. The UNFPA-UNICEF Global Programme to End Child Marriage (the Global Programme)[2] focuses specifically on SDG target 5.3 to eliminate all harmful practices such as child, early and forced marriage and female genital mutilation.

To achieve SDG 5, country implementation plans within UNFPA and UNICEF incorporate elements and strategies from their respective global gender strategies and frameworks. For instance, UNICEF's Strategic Plan is operationalized through the Gender Action Plan (GAP) and the Child Protection Strategy. The GAP focuses on adolescent girl empowerment at the heart of UNICEF's gender equity and equality work. Similarly, UNFPA implements a comprehensive gender strategy anchored in the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and De velopment (ICPD). Its Strategic Plan integrates a dedicated output addressing discriminatory gender and social norms to advance gender equality and women's decision-making along with human rights-based and gender-transformative approaches as a cross-cutting accelerator.[3]

Based on the evidence that child marriage both signals and is a result of deep-seated gender inequalities and restrictive gender norms and discrimination, accentuated by poverty, the Global Programme has embraced a gender-transformative approach since the inception of its Phase II.[4]

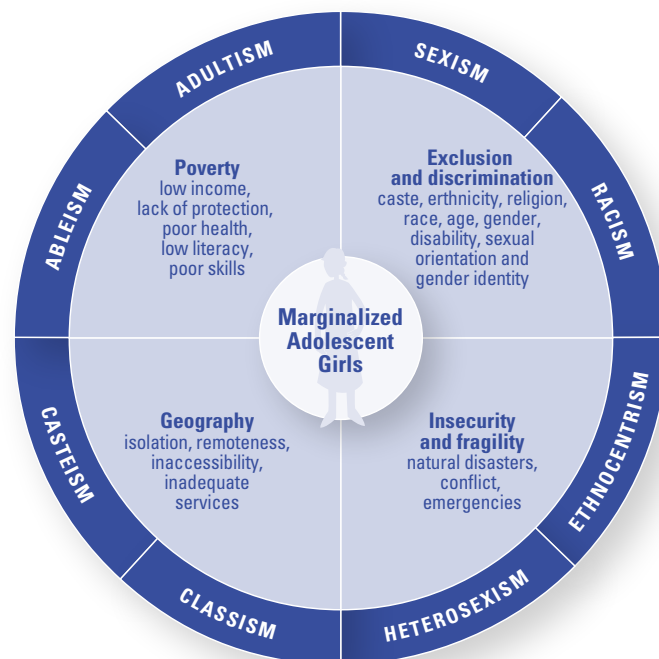## Gender-transformative approaches

Gender-transformative approaches actively examine, question and change rigid gender norms and imbalances of power that advantage boys and men over girls and women. They aspire to tackle the root causes of gender inequality and to reshape unequal power relations, moving beyond individual self-improvement among girls and women towards redressing the power dynamics and structures that reinforce gendered inequalities.[5]

Gender-transformative programming explicitly seeks to redress gender inequalities, remove structural barriers and empower populations disadvantaged based on sexual orientation and gender identity and expression.[6,7] Fundamentally, gender-transformative approaches are focused on shifting power and resources towards people who have been historically marginalized, excluded and discriminated against on the basis of their gender. These approaches recognize that discriminatory gender norms frequently restrict the autonomy and open expression of people across the gender spectrum, and that these restrictions are foundational to inequitable and patriarchal systems of power and oppression.

While a lot of progress has been made in the advocacy of gender norm change, the current discourse alludes to scepticism in well-intended programmes with a gender-transformative focus in that there has been limited investment in system-level and structural change beyond rhetoric.[8] The launch of the global Generation Equality Forum in Paris in July 2021 in part echoes this view, underlining that insufficient investment in gender equality is limiting the advancement of the milestones of the Beijing Platform for Action (1995).[9]

To be truly transformative, programmes, policies, budgets, advocacy and communications must amplify both individual and collective power within these previously excluded groups while leveraging the work of allies, decision makers and systems to create an enabling environment for social change. Furthermore, a systematic and intentional approach is needed to support the redistribution of resources towards marginalized leadership within groups and communities most impacted by intersectional gender inequality – including adolescent girls; young women; young people of diverse sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, racial and ethnic identities, and abilities; survivors of gender-based violence; and people living with HIV.[10]

Figure 1: Intersections between exclusion and power

Source: UNFPA and UNICEF, Technical note on leaving no one behind, https://www.unfpa.org/resources/leaving-no-one-behind-technical-note-global-programme-end-child-marriage

Gender-transformative programming requires deliberate efforts for reaching the most marginalized populations who are experiencing intersectional forms of oppression, discrimination and exclusion (see Figure 1). Transforming unequal power relations such as sexism, racism, ethnocentrism, heterosexism, classism, casteism, ableism and adultism is critical to a transition from oppression to empowerment. As gender is a social construction, being responsive to the systems of exclusion, insecurity, fragility and marginalization is equally relevant.

Informed by global evidence and grounded operational experience, gender-transformative approaches therefore attempt to promote gender equality by:[11]

1. Fostering critical examination of inequalities and gender roles, norms and dynamics

2. Recognizing and strengthening positive norms that support equality and an enabling environment

3. Promoting the relative position of women, girls and marginalized groups and transforming the underlying social structures, policies and broadly held social norms that perpetuate and legitimize gender inequalities.[12]

Core strategies to support a gender-transformative approach include:[13]

• Do work to challenge the structural barriers that uphold gender inequality

• Build the individual and collective agency of women, girls and people of diverse gender identities

• Ensure that girls and women in all their diversity, and people of non-conforming gender identity, especially marginalized groups, have a voice in and can influence and/or lead programme implementation and measurement and evaluation as contextually relevant

• Work with boys and men to embrace gender equality

• Work from an intersectional lens, taking into account other intersecting factors that may increase vulnerabilities, including those related to caste, class, religion, disability, sexual orientation and refugee or migration status

• Take a life course and intergenerational perspective

• Work at all levels – policies and laws, systems, services, communities, families and individuals

• Focus on approaches that will have an impact at a large scale.

Child marriage rates are driven by an intermix of poverty and deeply entrenched patriarchal norms that undervalue women and girls, confine them to restricted roles in their families and communities, and undermine their ability to access and use their power and agency. Without acknowledging and addressing the connection between gender inequality and child marriage, gender-transformative investments in services and programmes will only ever be able to intervene in an ongoing problem, rather than empower adolescent girls and their families and communities to eliminate the problem at its root.

The journey towards gender equality and inclusion

There is a strong set of gender tools, resources and training that provide the foundational knowledge for gender-transformative programming to build staff capacity (Box 1).

Gender-Transformative Accelerator

The Gender-Transformative Accelerator (GTA) tool has been developed to facilitate a process for the Global Programme to identify concrete actions for country office programmes to become more gender transformative. The GTA tool encourages critical reflection and awareness to understand how programmes are addressing the unequal distribution of resources between genders, to consider how roles and responsibilities are allocated between different genders and identities, and to assess how power secures higher status and privilege for some people.

The GTA is geared towards staff and partners who have already started their journey towards gender equality and want some guidance on operationalizing concepts and frameworks. It presents an opportunity to bring a cross-sectoral group together to strengthen gender-transformative approaches into their programmes to shift the needle for girls and have a meaningful impact.

The GTA revolves around a three-day workshop that involves interactive programmatic reflection and action planning.

Day 1 – Core elements of a gender-transformative approach

This is a collective assessment of programme interventions, while clarifying concepts through a consultative ranking process across the gender equity continuum (see Figure 2). The gender equity continuum provides a framework to determine the extent to which programmes are addressing gender inequalities – perpetuating inequalities, ignoring them, acknowledging them and working around them, or working to address the root causes of inequalities instead of just trying to respond to the symptoms/outcomes of inequality. The main goal of the GTA is to support country offices to move further towards the right of the continuum.

BOX 1. RESOURCES FOR THE FIRST STEPS ON A GENDER EQUALITY JOURNEY:

• Course on adolescent girls' agency, safety and well-being (available for free on UNICEF's Agora learning platform)

• GenderPro – educational and credentialling programme

• Seven technical notes on how to implement gender-transformative programming have been produced, and webinars, learning series and clinics have been convened on themes related to gender-transformative programming

• A global depository of Global Programme gender-transformative programming resources has been made available to Global Programme staff

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Figure 2: The gender equity continuum

| GENDER INEQUALITY | GENDER-UNEQUAL Perpetuates gender inequalities | GENDER-BLIND Ignores gender norms, discrimination and inequalities | GENDER-AWARE Acknowledges but does not address gender inequalities | GENDER-RESPONSIVE Acknowledges and considers women's and men's specific needs | GENDER-TRANSFORMATIVE Addresses the causes of gender-based inequalities and works to transform harmful gender roles, norms and power relationships | GENDER EQUALITY |

| Exploit | Accomodate | Transform |

Day 2 – Deep dives

The second day involves in-depth reflection and analysis across the socio-ecological framework (see Figure 3) of barriers and bottlenecks, and exploration of the opportunities based on programme priorities.

Day 3 – Road map of actions

Building on the second day, and based on a shortlist of actions, the last day articulates strategic actions, with details of the time frame, support needed and measures of success. It also assigns responsibilities among team members.
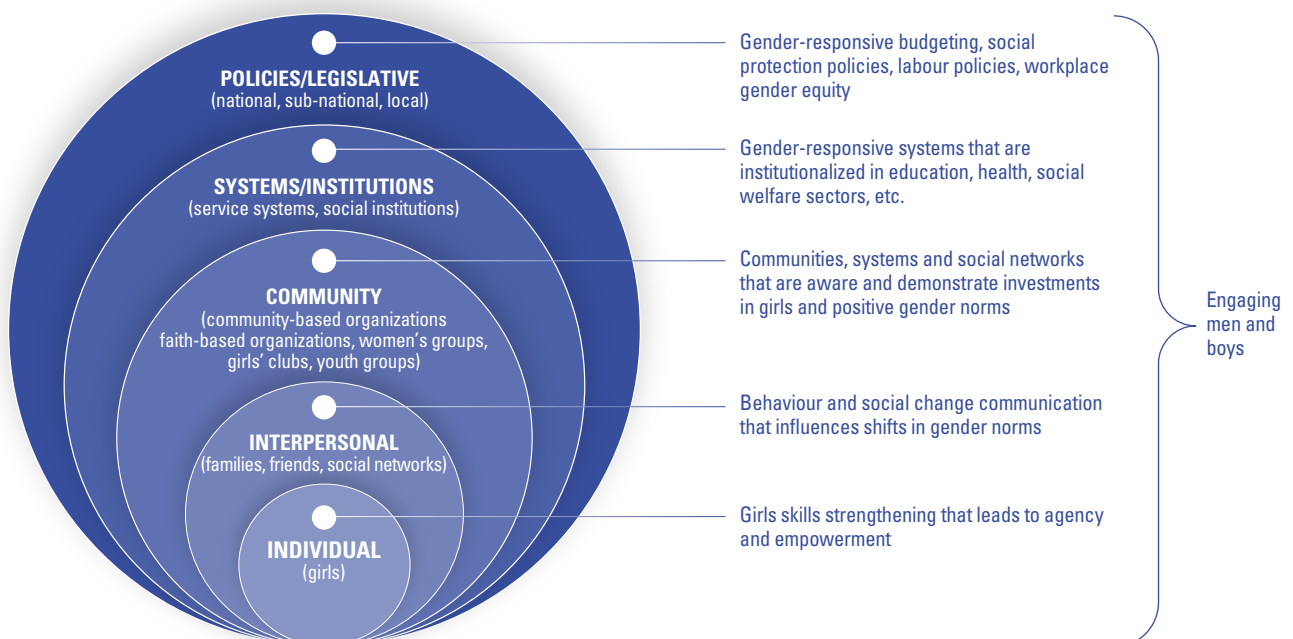
What makes the gender-transformative accelerator powerful?

Grounded in critical pedagogy, gender theory and power analysis, the GTA endeavours to facilitate learning by supporting UNFPA and UNICEF country office staff and partners to reflect on and identify how power operates within their programmes. It builds on and reinforces existing gender frameworks and institutional accountability (e.g., the UNICEF Gender Programmatic Review Framework undertaken in every country

office programme cycle or UNFPA's accelerator on human rights-based and gender-transformative approaches). The GTA asks participants to employ open and democratic analysis to their own work, critically reflecting on the ways in which their programmes challenge or rely on discriminatory gender norms and stereotypes, and to reimagine solutions within a collaborative community space. Critically, it foregrounds the use of power and resources and directs staff and partners to consider questions of who has access to these within a country programme and where investments are needed at the system or institutional level. Through an iterative, dialogue-based methodology, the GTA challenges communities, country offices and programme staff to identify where even subtle shifts in programmatic approaches, technical support, advocacy and expanded partnerships could have catalytic or ripple effects. Against this, they can build a shared action plan for progress within the existing work plan. This approach also permeates an introspective approach, where staff reflect on their own internal gender biases and how these affect their interactions with colleagues and the programmes they are working on.

In keeping with this pedagogical approach, the GTA is not an evaluation conducted by an external reviewer. Informed by evidence, existing assessments and evaluations, it is a guided

Figure 3: The socio-ecological framework

POLICIES/LEGISLATIVE (national, sub-national, local)
— Gender-responsive budgeting, social protection policies, labour policies, workplace gender equity

SYSTEMS/INSTITUTIONS (service systems, social institutions)
— Gender-responsive systems that are institutionalized in education, health, social welfare sectors, etc.

COMMUNITY (community-based organizations faith-based organizations, women's groups, girls' clubs, youth groups)
— Communities, systems and social networks that are aware and demonstrate investments in girls and positive gender norms

INTERPERSONAL (families, friends, social networks)
— Behaviour and social change communication that influences shifts in gender norms

INDIVIDUAL (girls)
— Girls skills strengthening that leads to agency and empowerment

Engaging men and boys

self-reflection meant to encourage teams to consider where they are on the gender equity continuum (and to be honest and realistic about this). It is meant to meet people where they are at, while also making it clear what the end goal is and then guiding them through a process to identify and commit to steps they can take to get there. Participants leave with a road map for how they can integrate what they have learned to strengthen their existing programming.

Starting with girls and expanding to system-level investment for agency and empowerment

The GTA is aligned to the Global Programme's theory of change with a focus on girl-centred programming. The theory of change[14] starts with girls at the centre and connects with supporting an enabling environment, including the engagement of men and boys, communities, systems and policy investments. For instance, one level of the GTA examines whether existing adolescent girl-focused life skills programmes challenge gender relations with boys, and supports critical awareness and leadership competencies.[15] Adolescent girl empowerment programmes are where there are systematic investments at the different levels of the social-ecological model, while incorporating programming to address the engagement of boys and men (gender synchronisation).

System-level investments are inherent in the application of the GTA, especially in its application in addressing child marriage prevention and mitigation. This approach is founded on the importance of a structural approach, as opposed to a community-level social and behaviour change approach, and aligns with recent critique of well-intended gender equality programmes failing on system-level investments (Box 2). UNFPA and UNICEF are uniquely situated to implement these types of intervention because, as United Nations entities, they can leverage their access to government agencies and their influence based on their standing and connections.

It is vital for UNFPA and UNICEF to use their influence to ensure that social change is led by women and adolescent girls in communities, to avoid the common pitfall of a backlash or regression as seen in externally designed and top-down social change programmes.[16]

Key takeaways from gender-transformative accelerators in six trailblazer countries

The GTA was piloted in six countries between June 2021 to May 2022. The tool was adjusted in response to feedback after each round. Throughout all six of the GTAs, it was clear that power relations are at the heart of gender inequalities and need further

attention. The key takeaway lessons from each country are summarized below.

- **Bangladesh** – This programme acknowledged that gender issues are context-specific and so need to be framed from a country-specific lens rather than a broader global perspective. Addressing power and privilege is important, yet not through widening the reach of the programme, but by deepening the effort using a critical analytical lens: incorporating a gender-transformative lens in research evaluation and meso- and micro-level structural mechanisms. Within the humanitarian context of the Cox's Bazar area, the Bangladesh Country Office noted it was much more challenging to implement a gender-transformative approach, although they have aimed to be at least gender-responsive. They committed to work to build pathways towards transformative change while simultaneously pushing for more long-term investments in education. There is also a need to go beyond connecting with parents of girls and boys who are part of the programme interventions to connect with communities more broadly, to engage in gender norm change more widely.

- **Burkina Faso** – This team took into account the current social-political context of the country while recognizing the impact of the three-year political transition as an opportunity to accelerate social and institutional changes for gender equality. They also considered the security and humanitarian crises, including the effects of COVID-19 and a major food crisis, in determining actions that will accelerate a paradigm shift in power dynamics to halt child marriage in the country. They thus considered the strengthening of existing programmes to reach the most vulnerable communities of young women and girls, while engaging men and boys in the promotion of gender equality in the country. The major activities to enable existing programming to become more gender transformative will focus on the improvement of programme implementation strategies through the revision of training curricula, capacity strengthening of programme implementers/service providers, and sensitizing the policy-making structures to commit to gender-transformative programming.

- **Ethiopia** – The Ethiopia Country Office focused on the need to ensure inclusive and gender-transformative social protection, education and health services to address the dual challenges of poverty and conflict, both of which are grounded in power dynamics and are crucial drivers of child marriage. As a result of the GTA process, and among a number of actions, staff recognized the importance of strengthening the capacity of government workforces, in particular health, justice and social service providers, through approaches such as the social analysis and action approach that address value clarification and internal biases.

BOX 2. NEED FOR A STRUCTURAL HEALTH SYSTEMS APPROACH

The preoccupation with community-level norms change in gender-related programming misses the opportunity for a more fundamental transformation in how health systems address women as both consumers and producers of health care. It also confirms existing gender biases in the health field by classifying small, boutique, poorly resourced programmes – which are at the margins of the health sector – as gender-transformative, while dismissing matters at the heart of health systems as being outside of the gender domain. This overwhelming reliance on community-based and non-health interventions in programming and evidence-building has been a missed opportunity to build on the strong body of work by feminist health researchers who have highlighted how health systems exhibit but also reproduce gender inequalities (as most recently and starkly illustrated throughout the progression of the COVID-19 pandemic).[19]

- **India** – In the India Country Office, the GTA helped with moving the needle from conceptual clarity to implementation, building capacities on *how* to understand where and how a power structure manifests in inequalities and subjugates certain sections of the population such as the marginalized, including women and girls. One concrete and immediate deliverable was the development of a GTA checklist, which was used with curriculum developers to review gender-transformative approaches across a multitude of curricula, technical guides and modules.

- **Mozambique** – Here, there was a eureka moment when participants realized they could strengthen their existing work engaging men and boys and go one step further to really make it transformative. They understood how they could do more to foster critical reflection about power dynamics and strengthen positive masculinities instead of just engaging men and boys to improve the lives of women and girls. The Mozambique Country Office will review the manual for economic empowerment and accompanying entrepreneurships kits to expand the employment opportunities presented for girls to include areas that have been dominated by men and boys (electrician, plumbers, etc.). They will also seek to create more opportunities for girls to apply the knowledge in their small communities to earn income.

- **The Niger** – This programme reflected on the need for incremental but fundamental shifts in engaging men and boys, towards more diverse and positive expressions of masculinity. It destigmatized power-sharing with women and adolescent girls in families and communities, through the development of a common language among partners and the targeted clarification of gender norms and values among decision-makers and people wielding traditional power. In addition, the Niger's country programme investments into expanding economic and health opportunities for girls out of school and young women – through vocational training, community health worker recruitment and training, and skills-building programmes – could be leveraged to increase the diversity of visible roles and life opportunities, contributing to normative shifts in girls' agency and planning. Combined with a review of existing school and out-of-school curricula for gender messages, these simple shifts could extend the programme's reach and sustainability for social norm change.

What next?

While pathways for transformative change can be laid across a short and medium time frame, sustained gender-transformative change is long-term. The following considerations are key in thinking through the next steps beyond rolling out GTAs.

- **Sustain deeper reflection on power as a critical domain** to understand gender-transformative change through sustained gender capacity building and systemic change.

- **Embed gender-transformative programming into programme milestones**, as opposed to parallel or one-off undertakings.

- **Ensure the measurement and tracking of results across a long-term pathway.** For instance, under the Global Programme, the technical note on gender-transformative approaches[17] points to evidence that transformative change is possible, while cautioning that change can be long-term, often generational and needs sustained investments, with strong measures to track change through monitoring and evaluation as well as research. For example, it conveys measurements of success as going beyond prevalence data and underlines the need for intermediate measures to track changes in (i) girls' individual agency and empowerment (e.g., changes in girls' self-esteem, aspirations and self-efficacy, and physical and bodily autonomy), (ii) tracking change in gender relations (e.g., tracking community perception and beliefs around the acceptability of gender-based violence, gender roles and responsibility), and (iii) interventions that transform structures,[18] such as gender-transformative legislative, systems and institutional change. Within the Global Programme, while the Results Framework and accompanying indicator reference sheet provide a robust measurement framework, there is an increasing demand for quantitative, qualitative, participatory measures to track gender nuances.

- **Support evidence generation and documentation of what works and does not work,** through for example the Global Programme research strategy and the Child Marriage Research to Action Network (the CRANK, in partnership with Girls Not Brides), and together with other players.

- Align the work of the Global Programme to support **feminist civil society organizations.**

- **Expand the application of the GTA tool** across and beyond the Global Programme countries. Several additional countries have expressed interest, including Ghana, Nigeria and Tanzania.

- **Adapt the tool to address other harmful practices like female genital mutilation**, in collaboration with the Joint Programme on the Elimination of Female Genital Mutilation.

- **Partner** with civil society organizations like Girls not Brides.

- **Adapt and translate the GTA into programmatic and evaluation tools and indicators** to guide and track transformative processes.

- **Address values clarification and attitudes transformation approaches** with staff and partners to challenge biases and stereotyping.

ENDNOTES

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Belgium
partner in development

Canada

Co-funded by
the European Union

Ministry of Foreign Affairs
and International Cooperation

Government of the Netherlands

Norad

UKaid
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