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Child Marriage – Teenage Pregnancy – School Dropout: The CTS Nexus

*Key reflections from a multi-stakeholder consultation convened by
Ipas Development Foundation*



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Ipas Development Foundation (IDF) works with governments, health systems, and communities across 10 states in India to ensure every woman and girl can access choice-based safe abortion care, contraception, and comprehensive sexual and reproductive health (SRH) services.

Introduction

Child marriage, teenage pregnancy and school dropout are not isolated issues. They reinforce one another and disproportionately shape the lives of adolescent girls from low-income and marginalized communities: when a girl leaves school early, her risk of early marriage and pregnancy rises sharply, and early marriage and pregnancy in turn often end her education, restrict her mobility, and narrow her access to skills, livelihoods and services. India has made real progress in reducing child marriage over time, yet the burden remains significant and uneven across states, and secondary-level dropout and adolescent pregnancy continue to expose gaps in retention, protection and support. Organizations across the sector are working on different parts of this cycle, through diverse approaches and entry points — and yet many of the underlying challenges cut across mandates, geographies and thematic focus areas.

Against this backdrop, Ipas Development Foundation (IDF) convened a small-group consultation on 19th June 2026 in New Delhi, bringing together a select group of 19 senior practitioners, funders, researchers and civil society leaders working across different dimensions of the CTS nexus. The consultation was designed as a space for candid, evidence-informed dialogue — not only about what has worked, but about what has been counter-intuitive for us, what we assumed would work and did not, and what adolescents and their families are telling us that does not fit neatly inside program design.

The consultation was structured in two parts. It opened with a lightning round of perspectives from senior leaders and practitioners of five organizations — The YP Foundation, Breakthrough, C3, PCI India, and IDF — each of whom shared insights and experiences from their respective areas of work that intersect with different dimensions of the CTS nexus. This was followed by a moderated discussion, facilitated by Anubha Bhonsle, journalist and gender advocate, who invited participants to surface counter-intuitive findings from their own work and connect the dots across school, marriage, sexuality, family decision-making, male engagement, and systems.

This brief captures the themes that emerged, the reflections they surfaced for the sector, and the open questions IDF intends to keep working with.



AT A GLANCE

19 senior practitioners, funders, researchers and civil society leaders

5 lightning perspectives from organizations working across different dimensions of the CTS nexus

Moderated dialogue with all participants, led by journalist and gender advocate, Anubha Bhonsle

Emerging Themes and Reflections

1 As adolescent realities shift, the goal is not to prescribe pathways but to expand meaningful choice

Some of the most valuable moments in the discussion came from surfacing assumptions that no longer hold as neatly as they once did. Participants spoke of girls "waiting to turn eighteen so they could marry." Girls who had already tried the educational route and not found it meaningful — complicating the familiar image of child marriage as something wholly imposed on unwilling daughters by parents. Across education, marriage, contraception and livelihoods, the discussion returned repeatedly to the question of choice, and to what sits uncomfortably with program logic built on the assumption of coercion: a rise in consensual elopement and in girls actively opting into early marriage.

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Girls are increasingly asserting their agency by choosing to marry early. If marriage is inevitable, they would rather choose their husband themselves than marry according to their parents' choice.

— Consultation participant

This raises harder questions than the sector has typically been willing to hold. What does informed choice mean when the options of real alternatives is narrow? How should programs respond when adolescents exercise agency in directions programs did not design for? And are we prepared to keep testing our own assumptions as adolescents' realities continue to shift?

2 Education is not yet a credible pathway to aspiration — and 'aspiration' itself may need rethinking

Education is often positioned as the route through which girls will reach the futures they aspire for. Yet participants noted that school frequently does not deliver on that promise — and can leave girls feeling smaller and more disconnected from the futures being promoted to them. The discussion also turned uncomfortably on the sector itself: in its efforts to build aspiration, programming tends to celebrate the exceptional outcome — the first-generation graduate, the outlier who "escapes" her circumstances — and, in doing so, may quietly narrow what a good adolescent life is allowed to look like.

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Why does success in schools always have to look extraordinary?

— Consultation participant

3 Family decisions reflect constrained realities more often than resistance

Marriage, dropout and early pregnancy decisions are frequently rational responses to a landscape of insecurity — climate shocks, migration, safety concerns, dowry economics, and doubts about whether schooling will lead anywhere. Sudha's story* — married at 15 after a drought lowered dowry rates, and who died in childbirth soon after — was a reminder that a single clinical outcome often sits on top of layered structural drivers.

Parental fears — that "all the good boys will be taken", that unsupervised school journeys risk reputation, that education without a visible pathway is a weak investment — deserve to be engaged with seriously, not dismissed as ignorance.

*Based on a case study shared during the consultation.

4 Individual agency can only flourish within systems that move with it

A recurring tension was that girls are asked to navigate systems — schools, health services, families, panchayats, labour markets — over which they hold little influence. One anecdote shared captured this sharply:

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Before you came, we didn't know what rights we had. Now we know our rights, but you've done us a disservice. Earlier we thought our lives were fine. Now we know what we don't have, but nothing around us has changed.

— Consultation participant, recalling a conversation with girls she worked with

Awareness without corresponding shifts in institutions, opportunities and relationships risks leaving adolescents better informed but no more able to act.

5 Engaging boys and men remains a critical gap — as allies, and as young people in their own right

Engagement with boys and men was recognized as both necessary and under-invested. Two distinct threads emerged. The first is instrumental: without working with the men and boys around a girl — fathers, brothers, partners, teachers, officials — the enabling environment does not move, and the burden of change falls back on her. The second is that boys themselves remain largely absent from CTS-adjacent programming, despite school dropout rates in several states being equal to or higher than those of girls. As one participant reflected, "Who is talking about the boy who became a father at 18 or 19, whose life then became centered on providing for his wife and child?" Participants noted that engaging boys should also be an opportunity to better understand how gender norms, early adulthood and limited opportunities shape the lives of young men themselves.

6 The CTS cycle is lived as one negotiation — so the response has to be coordinated

For an adolescent girl, school, marriage, pregnancy, safety, dowry, migration, menstruation, reputation and household debt are not separate issues to be addressed in sequence — they are negotiated simultaneously. Yet organizational specializations and thematic silos often force these back into distinct compartments. At the same time, the discussion was clear-eyed that no single organization can address the full CTS nexus, and that not every organization should try. Meaningful collaboration depends on recognizing complementary strengths, building working referral and partnership pathways, and aligning around shared outcomes.

The challenge, therefore, is less about broadening every mandate and more about strengthening how different actors work together.



Questions Worth Staying With

Open questions IDF will carry forward

The consultation did not produce a checklist of next steps, and it was not designed to. What it did surface were a set of questions that IDF — and, we hope, others in the sector — will continue to consider, well beyond the room.



If the goal is to expand meaningful choice, how should programmes respond when adolescents exercise agency in directions programmes did not design for?



If aspiration is central to how we frame adolescent futures, how do we hold space for ordinary lives to also count as success, rather than only celebrating the outlier who escapes her circumstances?



When is school "strong enough" — socially, economically and emotionally — to genuinely compete with marriage as a pathway?



How do we protect young people without turning their relationships, pregnancies or families into purely punitive cases?



What does meaningful engagement with boys and men look like — as allies, and as adolescents in their own right?



What kind of partnership and funding architecture is needed for work that is genuinely interconnected?

The consultation reinforced the importance of continued dialogue and honest reflection across the sector. IDF will carry these questions forward — into its own programming, into its collaborations with partners working across education, livelihoods, gender norms and SRHR, and into future convenings that keep this conversation open.