



LEARNING FOR CHANGE:

Advancing Girls' Rights



WHAT IT MEANS TO BE A GIRL: Girls of the FAT collective at a meeting to share experiences from their lives. *Photograph by Sasithon Pooviriyakul*

OUR RESEARCH STRATEGY: A FEMINIST APPROACH

Marginalized people and others who have struggled with grave challenges to their human rights possess a unique understanding of the problems in their communities—and their insights have the potential to fuel effective, lasting solutions.

That's why AJWS takes a feminist approach to research, disrupting traditional power dynamics by treating study participants not as subjects, but as experts on the challenges they face. Feminist research methods elevate the voices of marginalized people, and aim to understand how gender, context and other factors intersect to shape the lives of women and girls.

Who does the research and *how* they do it matter. AJWS collaborates with and supports researchers who share our values and have proven themselves to be credible within their communities. By focusing primarily on grassroots researchers, AJWS ensures that the findings will be useful to local communities, activists and organizations—and will be more likely to contribute to lasting social change.

RESEARCH ON CHILD, EARLY AND FORCED MARRIAGE IN INDIA

AJWS supports a variety of research initiatives as part of its child, early and forced marriage (CEFM) portfolio in

India, where we have spent more than 10 years funding and learning from a range of social-change organizations and movements.

The research we support in India aims to reveal the most effective strategies for achieving AJWS's comprehensive approach to addressing gender inequality and CEFM.

FINDINGS: BARRIERS TO AND SOLUTIONS FOR IMPROVING GIRLS' LIVES

Our grantees' research deeply examines the lived realities of women and girls in India who face gender inequality and CEFM, and evaluates existing interventions designed to overcome it. The research has yielded the crucial data needed to implement more effective programming and policies, and improve lives. Read on for a few highlights from the research.

Addressing the Root Causes of CEFM: Age, Agency and Control of Adolescent Sexuality

To achieve gender equality, girls need the freedom to make decisions about their own bodies and whether, when and whom they marry—not just to delay marriage until a minimum age.

AJWS's research into the causes of CEFM in India has unearthed a web of social and economic factors that result from and contribute to gender inequality. The findings demonstrate why efforts to end CEFM should focus not only on raising the age at which girls marry, but on removing the

many limits placed on their agency and aspirations—limits that don't disappear at age 18.

For example, research funded by AJWS has identified patriarchal control of female sexuality as a critical and often overlooked driver of CEFM. Many communities in India—and elsewhere across the globe—often deem sexual activity unacceptable outside of marriage, and many families and societies worry about controlling girls' sexuality once they reach adolescence. This control includes restricting teenage girls' access to information about sex and contraception, isolating them at home and arranging the girls' marriages as quickly as possible.

OUR COMPREHENSIVE APPROACH TARGETS THE 4 A'S:

AGENCY: Help girls and young women develop the ability to choose and to act independently so they can take action to advance their own goals.

ASPIRATIONS: Encourage women and girls to consider futures that previously seemed out of reach.

AVAILABILITY: Increase the availability of institutions, policies and services that enhance the ability of girls and young women to pursue jobs and education and realize their sexual health and rights.

ACCESS: Ensure that girls and young women can access resources and services.

Collectivizing Girls: Feminist Safe Spaces for Adolescent Girls

Collectives are important for supporting girls to confront the harmful social norms that drive CEFM—on both personal and political levels.

“Collectivizing” refers to regularly bringing together members of marginalized groups in ways that enable them to identify mechanisms of oppression, and strategize to achieve both individual and social change. While many programs have focused on getting girls to attend activities, collectives encourage girls to develop their own insights and goals, empowering them to act as agents of change in their own lives and communities.

A recent evaluation of AJWS's strategy to reduce CEFM and advance gender equality in India showed that girls in collectives first build confidence and exercise greater power in their personal lives, and then begin influencing others, sparking social change. Girls then work together to shape new laws, policies or services.

Collectives also build feminist solidarities and networks through intergenerational dialogue with women's collectives. This dialogue leads to mothers supporting their daughters in new ways and helping the girls negotiate for what they want in life, like staying in school or delaying marriage.

Skill-Building and Livelihoods for the Empowerment of Women and Girls

Programs that develop girls' job skills have the potential to build their self-confidence and expand their aspirations—especially when paired with education on gender equality. But training alone doesn't create economic empowerment for young women.

AJWS has supported a series of studies that provides insight into the kinds of work that low-income young women in India want and the skill-building activities available to them. The studies suggest that skill-building improves the self-perception and self-determination of girls and women, especially when integrated with training on gender inequality.

AJWS has also supported research on nontraditional livelihoods for women and girls. These jobs have the potential to challenge gender norms about what women and girls can do. Girls trained in trades typically dominated by men (cab drivers, electricians, etc.) have additional difficulty finding employment, because employers often reinforce gender biases. Women seeking employment also need networks of support and policies to ensure equal remuneration and representation.

Given their considerable responsibilities at home, women and girls often choose vocational training that can accommodate these demands. Programs that attempt to expand women's job options cannot succeed without simultaneously addressing gendered divisions of labor at home.

Exploring Adolescent Girls' Lives and Their Intersectional Vulnerabilities

While all girls face inequalities, context remains key to understanding the particular lived realities of girls—an important aspect for developing effective empowerment programs and building solidarities across diverse groups of girls.

The research AJWS has supported related to CEFM has revealed important distinctions in the experiences of adolescent girls in India. Girls' needs vary based on:

- **Location:** Regional and religious identities often govern girls' lives in urban areas, whereas caste identity has a greater influence on the lives of rural girls.
- **Marital Status:** Newly married girls face more restrictions on their mobility and experience—and additional surveillance from family members, compared to their unmarried peers. Adolescent girls who marry often conceive and bear a child within the first year of marriage.
- **Freedom of Movement and Opportunity:** Adolescent girls view mobility not just as physical freedom, but as social and cultural freedom that allows them to explore their dreams and possible future selves. Participating in

networks, teams and other relationships—being a mentor or a peer counselor, for example—can also create a sense of mobility for girls.

Interrogating Masculinity and Marriage

Work on CEFM must include boys—and must analyze their relationship with patriarchy, the political economy and marriage as an institution.

AJWS has also supported research on working with men and boys to address CEFM in India. The studies have revealed how young men's social anxieties over traditional masculinity, sexuality, caste and religion often fuel CEFM. Contemporary masculine ideals and economic factors often lead to intense mental and emotional pressure for men and boys to marry.

Young people of all genders often view marriage as a way to fulfill their desires—for sex or a release from parental control, for example. Laws intended to prevent child marriage are being used to deny adolescents their agency, acting as tools for reinforcing caste ideology and heteronormativity.

Understanding How CEFM Affects Mental Health

CEFM increases depression and anxiety, but adolescent girls' mental health issues have historically received little attention from the international development field.

AJWS grantee researchers have found that adolescent girls in India face a variety of challenges that have a severe impact on their mental health. These challenges are often related to their mobility, their freedom to choose whether to marry, their privacy, their ability to break highly restrictive gender norms and their right to live without violence and abuse.

Public health discourse, programming and services often lack a comprehensive and intersectional understanding of mental wellbeing. India still has a highly limited availability of public mental health care, and there is a clear need for models of health care that better respond to community needs.

RESEARCH IN ACTION

AJWS funds opportunities for our research partners to network, collaborate and expand the reach of their findings—with the goal of improving programming and policy related to CEFM and girls' rights.

For example, AJWS has supported research on the quality of shelters and related services for women and girls in India. The coalition of researchers has used the new evidence

to try to improve those institutions—advocating for the insights of grassroots organizations to be included in government audits of the shelters, and campaigning for support programs and services for women and girls in the shelter system.

AJWS also supports researchers to develop creative products to convey their findings to communities in meaningful, engaging ways. For example, AJWS has funded researchers and collaborators to showcase new insights and girls' voices—developing a graphic novel and an interactive multimedia exhibit to share stories about the power of girls' collective action.

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FUTURE RESEARCH

AJWS is continuing to investigate new research questions that we believe will make powerful contributions to improving CEFM programming—in India and around the globe. These questions include:

- What types of resources and opportunities do adolescent girls and young women—vulnerable to CEFM in India—need? What would best facilitate their access to these resources and institutions?
- What are the strengths and shortcomings of using the law to address CEFM? How are current laws against CEFM in India being used to criminalize adolescents for consensual sexual activity, instead of empowering them to make decisions about their lives and bodies?

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To learn more about our partners' research in India and read short summaries of their insights, visit ajws.org/research or contact us at EmergingEvidence@ajws.org.

AJWS-SUPPORTED RESEARCH PUBLICATIONS

Our Research Strategy: A Feminist Approach

Akshara. [Girls Map Change: A Girl-Led Experiment to Measure Program Impact](#). 2019.

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AMERICAN JEWISH WORLD SERVICE (AJWS) promotes civil and political rights; advances sexual health and rights; defends land, water and climate justice; and aids communities in the aftermath of disasters. We pursue lasting change by supporting grassroots human rights organizations in Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean, and by advocating for U.S. and international policies for justice and equality worldwide.

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