

Photo: Asad Zaidi for Save the Children



Save the Children®

CHOICES, VOICES, PROMISES

Creating Equality for Very Young Adolescents
by Shifting Gender Norms

January 2017

Background

There are 1.8 billion young people in the world today. Of those, half are very young adolescents ages 10 to 14. Girls and boys in this age range are at the threshold of adulthood, embarking on an important and transformative journey. However, many young people are subject to harmful gender-based inequities that have life-threatening implications.

In order to improve gender equity among very young adolescents, Save the Children developed a gender transformative package with three distinct interventions: *Choices*, *Voices* and *Promises*. These three programs work across multiple levels of society to accomplish positive social and behavior change, including:

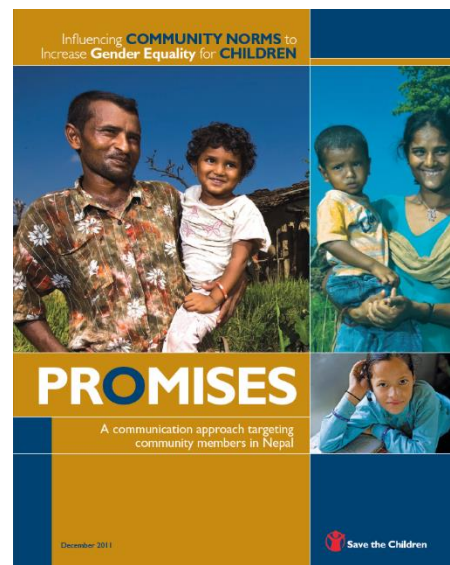
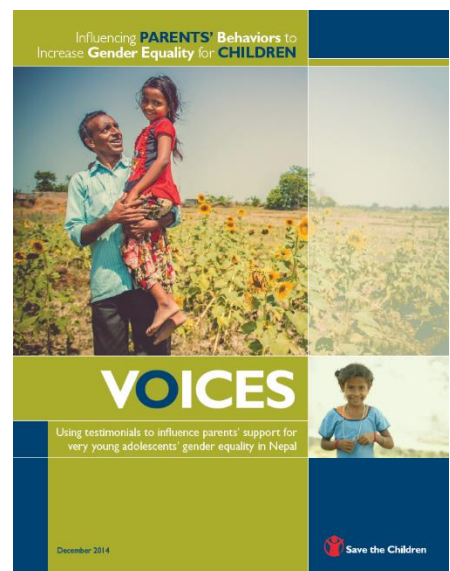
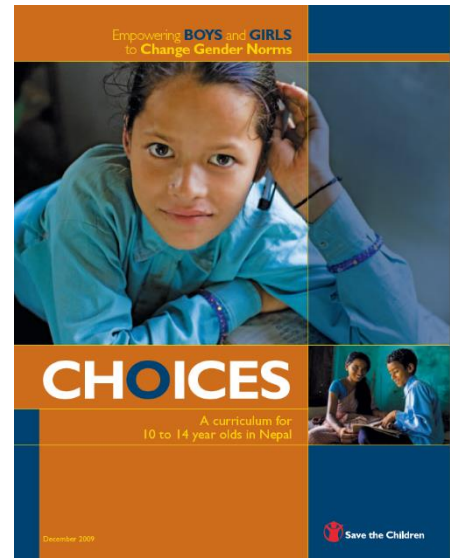
- Challenging **girls' and boys'** views on restrictive gender norms and promoting gender equity (*Choices*)
- Increasing dialogue between **parents** and children to improve gender equity in the household (*Voices*)
- Shifting gender norms within **communities** to create environments where girls and boys are valued equally (*Promises*)

Choices, *Voices*, and *Promises* work across an ecological model, which recognizes that behaviors and norms are influenced by both individual and social factors. This perspective helps us to better understand the complex social system that sets norms between children, families and whole communities – ultimately making positive, lasting change much more likely for adolescents.

Choices

Girls and women around the world are constantly fighting forces that discriminate, violate and exclude them from education, nutrition, work and freedom. Because of their sex, countless females around the world are barred from full participation in school, family life and economic activities, and are exposed to various forms of physical and psychological violence.

Unfortunately, gender-biased social norms are often deeply engrained into the fabric of communities and incredibly difficult to break down. Targeting individuals during adolescence, however, can dissolve such long-standing stigma, improving opportunities for women and girls for generations to come.



In fact, very young adolescence (age 10-14) is often referred to as the “window of opportunity” for formulating positive attitudes and behaviors in children – and by reaching youth at that perfect moment, gender-focused programming can spark attitudes of equity for years to come.

Save the Children developed *Choices* to target girls and boys in that formative age range. We first implemented the program in Nepal in 2009, and it was the first of its kind in the country. Through *Choices*, our expert staff helped very young adolescents discover alternative views of conventional gender roles and behaviors through engagement in developmentally-appropriate participatory activities. The program stimulated discussion and reflection around:

- The relationship between gender inequity and power
- How social norms restrict boys from treating girls as equals
- Expressing emotions and realizing future hopes and goals
- Empowering girls to achieve their dreams

After the project’s completion, Georgetown University’s Institute of Reproductive Health conducted an evaluation with control and experimental groups engaged in *Choices*. The Institute found that our program resulted in statistically significant differences in gender attitudes and behaviors. Qualitative and quantitative findings found that after engaging in our program:

- Girls felt empowered to talk to their parents about continuing their studies and avoiding early marriage
- Brothers advocated with their parents for their sisters’ education and delayed marriage
- Boys were able to recognize unfair gender norms
- Brothers helped their sisters with schoolwork and housework
- Children’s perceptions of gender roles were altered and were more accepting of non-traditional gender roles. Girls and boys were both more likely to view household chores, for example, as gender neutral tasks
- Children were provided with skills to make gender equitable behavior more normative
- Participants felt more confident discussing their feelings and promoting gender equality



“I want to fight for a world in which girls have power over their own decisions,” said Asha,* age 16, who sits with her father in their home in India. “When girls are the same as boys, and parents don’t have society pressuring them to marry off their daughters, girls will be allowed to decide their own futures.”

Such positive findings from *Choices* suggests that by implementing the curriculum at a larger scale (while also implementing complementary activities for parents and communities) we can actively contribute to more equitable gender norms throughout the world. An adapted curriculum of *Choices* is currently being implemented in Bolivia, Bangladesh, Egypt, Ethiopia, El Salvador, Malawi and Zambia.

Voices

Save the Children developed *Voices* to target the parents of very young adolescents, helping to challenge the gendered expectations placed on their children. The program also aims to increase and facilitate dialogue between parents and their children around gender equity.

The basis of the *Voices* intervention includes six short testimonial videos featuring community members who have recently adopted the targeted behaviors. Following each video, parents participate in facilitated discussions, reflecting on the actions families can take to improve gender equity in their own households. The videos are shown using mini-LCD projectors with groups of parents whose children are going through the *Choices* curriculum.



Sunita,* age 13, was able to continue her schooling in Nepal after Save the Children staff improved her parents understanding about the dangers of early marriage. We reached her just in time to halt the marriage, which her parents had initially orchestrated.

Other major components of the *Voices* curriculum are story-telling and group discussions. In these sessions, our program staff encourage parents to talk with their children about equal opportunities for both girls and boys, helping to level the playing field between genders. We also encourage parents to give their daughters and sons equal responsibilities, and are instructed to ensure household chores are divided equally, and that girls and boys are eating the same amounts. We also help parents to understand the risks of early marriage, and encourage them to delay such practices and keep their daughters in school.

Promises

Save the Children developed a community-wide innovation, *Promises*, to help shift community norms around early marriage and domestic violence. These specific norms were chosen because of their link with gender equity and the potential impact they have on the lives of very young adolescents. *Promises*, like *Choices* and *Voices*, aims to create an environment where girls and boys are raised and treated equally and are given the same opportunities. *Promises*

also works to empower community leaders to protect females and prevent fathers from using violence against their spouses.

The *Promises* approach includes the establishment of six large posters in the community. These posters illustrate evidence-based “influence principles” to help spark discussion around gender norms in a proactive way. At each poster unveiling, a small group of identified community influencers engage in a facilitated discussion around the poster and the themes it represents. These individuals are then asked to discuss the poster’s message within their social network, expanding the breadth and depth of the issues at hand. Each poster is displayed for two weeks, sparking dialogue and reflection at the community level and encouraging further discussion. *Promises* provides beneficiaries of *Choices* and *Voices* with a larger context in which to sustain their new attitudes around gender equity, targeting larger social norms, and, in turn, influencing individual and household behaviors.

In Nepal, we conducted a mixed-method process evaluation of *Promises* through the use of structured interviews and focus group discussions. After the program, husbands were shown to feel more positively about their daughters’ future abilities to contribute to the community. Parents also were shown to express an increased understanding of the need for their daughters to be physically mature before entering into a marriage. In addition, children reported an increased sense of optimism around their own potential educational achievement, and identified a boost in love and openness from both their parents when they discussed future hopes and dreams together. All respondents reported community changes, including decreased alcohol consumption, fewer disputes, and an increased use of loving words to solve conflicts. The above evaluation did not measure actual social and behavior changes, nor the synergistic effects of using *Promises* simultaneously with *Choices* and *Voices*. This is the focus of a study we are currently embarking on – the results will be available in the early spring of 2017.

Read the peer-reviewed article on the *Choices* evaluation:

[Whose turn to do the dishes? Transforming gender attitudes and behaviors among very young adolescents in Nepal](#)

Read the NY Times feature: [In Egypt, Sowing Seeds of Gender Equality](#)



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