Policy Brief

POPULATION REFERENCE BUREAU

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BY **ALEXANDRA HERVISH** AND **CHARLOTTE FELDMAN-JACOBS**

WHO SPEAKS FOR ME?
ENDING CHILD MARRIAGE

In 10 countries, at least one in two girls are married before the age of 18.

58 MILLION

young women in developing countries have been married before the age of 18.

One in nine girls have been forced into marriage between the ages of 10 and 14 in developing countries.

"I told them I was terrified and desperate, that I was just a child and far too young to get married…I used to scream and cry all night. I was too young, too tender. It killed me inside. Life became meaningless."[1]

Young Turkish Kurdish girl married at age 12

In the last decade, 58 million young women in developing countries—one in three—have been married before the age of 18, many against their will and in violation of international laws and conventions on women's rights.[2] Even more disturbing, according to new figures, one in nine girls, or 15 million, have been forced into marriage between the ages of 10 and 14.[3] With limited education and economic opportunities, child brides are often condemned to a life of poverty, social isolation, and powerlessness, infringing on their human rights, health, and well-being.

In developing countries with a rapidly growing youth population, investments in adolescent girls are critical. Ultimately, to meet goals related to poverty, education, gender equality, maternal and child health, and HIV and AIDS, nations and communities must put an end to child marriage.

This policy brief explores trends in child marriage and the benefits of delaying marriage. It examines promising approaches in developing countries to end child marriage and provides recommendations to advance policy and advocacy efforts.

Child Marriage Is a Global Problem

Child marriage, generally defined as marriage before age 18, is not limited to any one country or continent.[4] Ten countries have particularly high prevalence rates, with one-half to three-fourths of girls marrying before their 18th birthday (see table, page 2). Regions within countries, however, can have widely varying rates. For example, in Ethiopia, 49 percent of girls are married by age 18, but in the Amhara region, 74 percent are married by age 18 and half of all girls are married before their 15th birthday.[5] Moreover, a study in two districts of Amhara found that 14 percent of girls were married before age 10.[6] Generally, girls living in rural areas marry earlier than girls in urban areas. In rural areas of Nigeria, for example, 21 percent of young women, who are now 20 to 24, were married by age 15, as compared to 8 percent in urban areas.[7]

Curt Carnemark/The World Bank

Only recently have more data become available regarding marriage of young adolescents, generally defined as those ages 10 to 14. In Nepal, 7 percent of girls are married by age 10 and 40 percent by age 15.[8] In Mali and Bangladesh, more than one in five girls ages 15 to 19 reported that they had been married by age 15 (23 percent and 21 percent, respec-

Top 10 Countries for Child Marriage

COUNTRY	% OF GIRLS MARRIED BEFORE 18
Niger (2006)	74.5
Chad (2004)	71.5
Mali (2006)	70.6
Bangladesh (2007)	66.2
Guinea (2005)	63.1
Central African Republic (2006)	60.6
Mozambique (2008)	52.0
Nepal (2006)	51.4
Malawi (2006)	50.2
Ethiopia (2005)	49.2

Note: Rankings are based on national surveys conducted between 2000 and 2010 in which women ages 20–24 reported being married by age 18.
Sources: ICF Macro, Demographic and Health Surveys, 2000-2010; and UNICEF Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys, 2000-2010.

tively). Between 2000 and 2010, in the Indian states of Andhra Pradesh, Jharkhand, and Rajasthan, one in five young women who are now ages 20 to 24 said they had been married by their 15th birthday, higher than the national average for India of one in seven.[9] And in some countries, while marriage of young girls continues, the data do indicate some progress (see box, page 3).

Why Does Child Marriage Persist?

Although most countries have passed laws declaring 18 as the minimum legal age for marriage, too often the laws are not enforced and social, economic, and cultural realities perpetuate the practice. Certain risk factors, such as poverty, low levels of education, and region, are directly correlated with higher rates of child marriage.[10] Poor families have few resources to support healthy alternatives for girls, such as education, or even to feed and clothe them, and economic gains to families in the form of a bride price may act as further motivation for child marriage.[11]

The lack of education for girls as a risk factor for child marriage has been well documented.[12] In a UNICEF study of 42 countries, women between the ages of 20 and 24 who attended primary school were less likely to marry by age 18 than women without a primary education.[13] The same study found that in Tanzania, women with secondary education were 92 percent less likely to be married by their 18th birthday than women who only attended primary school.

As already mentioned, residency within certain regions in a particular country may put girls at higher risk for child marriage—as in the Amhara region of Ethiopia.[14] At the same time, there are social and cultural norms that exert pressure on families to marry daughters at young ages. Parents may worry that if they do not marry their daughters according to local expectations, they will be unable to marry them at all.[15] They may also believe that marriage will ensure their daughters' safety by preventing premarital sex and out-of-wedlock pregnancy.[16] And traditional cultural norms of older men marrying young, virginal girls to prove their masculinity continue to drive this behavior. These factors must all be taken into account in developing interventions that work to end child marriage and its devastating outcomes.

Benefits of Delaying Marriage

Child marriage undermines nearly every Millennium Development Goal; it is an obstacle to eradicating poverty, achieving universal primary education, promoting gender equality, improving maternal and child health, and reducing HIV and AIDS.[17] Child marriage also infringes on the rights of women and children by denying them access to an education, good health, and freedom. These rights are spelled out in international agreements such as the Convention on the Elimination on All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC).

Delaying marriage positively affects development in these ways:

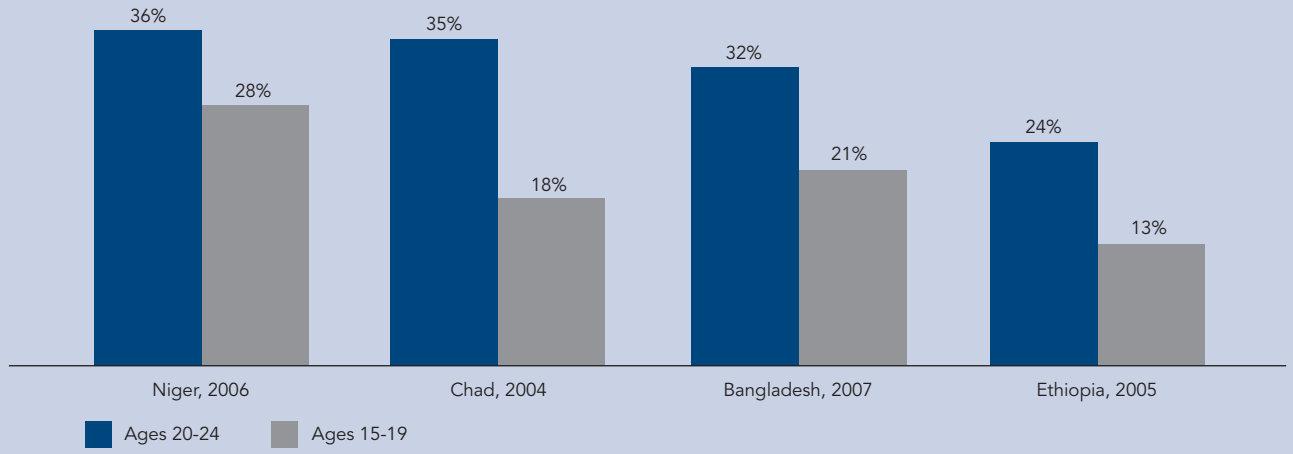
Maternal and Infant Health. Delaying marriage and childbearing can improve the health of a mother and her child. Childbirth complications are the leading cause of death for girls ages 15 to 19 in developing countries. The situation is even graver for girls under age 15, who are five times more likely to die from maternal causes.[18] In addition, girls who are married young and pressured to have children before their bodies are fully developed are at greater risk for obstetric fistula, a debilitating medical condition often caused by prolonged or obstructed labor.[19]

Also, infants born to young mothers are more likely to suffer low birth weight and premature birth, and are more likely to die.[20] When a mother is under 18, her baby's chance of dying in the first year of life is 60 percent greater than that of a baby born to a mother over age 18. In addition, the risk of malnutrition in children born to mothers under age 18 is higher.[21] Evidence exists that improved nutrition in infants leads to increased schooling and cognitive ability, which ultimately leads to increased lifetime earnings.[22]

HIV and AIDS. Although child marriage is sometimes believed to be a protective mechanism, the truth is that early marriage can increase young girls' risks of HIV and AIDS and other sexually transmitted infections (STIs). Husbands of married girls are often much older than their young wives, with multiple sex partners prior to marriage, making them more likely to be HIV-positive. These married girls have frequent, unprotected sex with little ability to persuade their husbands to abstain or use a condom.[23] A 2004 study in Kenya and Zambia found that being married young increases a girl's chance of being HIV-positive by more than 75 percent compared to sexually active, unmarried girls. In both countries, early marriage virtually eliminated girls' ability to negotiate condom use or abstain from sex.[24] Similarly, in

Marriage Among Adolescent Girls Has Declined, but Still Persists

Surveys conducted between 2000 and 2010 show a decline in the number of adolescent girls marrying at the youngest ages—before age 15. In countries such as Chad and Ethiopia, half as many girls ages 15 to 19 reported being married before age 15 compared to women ages 20 to 24. In developing countries as a whole, excluding China, 7 percent of 15-to-19-year-old girls said they were married by their 15th birthday, compared to 11 percent of 20-to-24-year-olds who were asked. While these trends indicate progress in delaying marriage, millions of girls remain at risk.



Sources: ICF Macro, Demographic and Health Surveys, 2000-2010; and UNICEF Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys, 2000-2010.

Uganda, 17 percent of previously (but not currently) married girls ages 15 to 19 were found to be HIV-positive—a rate five times that of sexually active, unmarried girls and four times that of currently married girls.[25]

Reproductive Health and Well-Being of Women and Girls. Increasing the age of first marriage reduces girls' risk for physical, sexual, psychological, and economic abuse. Delaying marriage can also increase girls' and women's decisionmaking power and improve their reproductive health. A study in India found that young women who married at age 18 or older were more likely than those married before age 18 to have been involved in planning their marriage (27 percent versus 10 percent, respectively); to reject wife beating (47 percent versus 36 percent, respectively); to have used contraceptives to delay their first pregnancy (11 percent versus 3 percent, respectively); and to have had their first birth in a health facility (70 percent versus 45 percent, respectively).[26]

Education and Economic Opportunities. Keeping girls in school and delaying marriage can increase income for individuals and boost economic development for nations. A single year of primary school boosts women's wages later in life by 10 percent to 20 percent, while the boost from female secondary education is 15 percent to 25 percent.[27] The families of girls who have married later benefit from their added income, which they are likely to invest in their families and children.[28] Also, when girls stay in school, communities and families reap health benefits, such as decreased risk of HIV and reduced infant mortality.[29] For instance, women in 32 countries who remained in school after primary school were five times more likely to know basic facts about HIV than illiterate women.[30] A child born to a mother who can read is 50 percent more likely to survive past the age of 5.[31]

Promising Approaches

To be as effective and transformative as possible, interventions to eliminate child marriage must span multiple sectors and include different approaches, such as increasing education and income, creating safe spaces for girls, increasing family planning and reproductive health knowledge and access to services, working with communities (men and women) to change norms, and developing media messages. Unfortunately, few evaluations of child marriage prevention programs have been conducted. But the programs described below offer many promising approaches for delaying marriage and improving the quality

of life for women and girls, and can produce benefits beyond delaying marriage.

CREATING SAFE SPACES AND REDUCING THE ISOLATION OF GIRLS

Some interventions support the most vulnerable adolescent girls by creating a place for them to interact and seek support from their peers. Often, female mentors from the community provide training sessions on reproductive health, life skills, and savings and investment skills to younger girls. These mentors serve as a buffer between girls and the marriage pressures they face from adults in their families and communities. These interactive activities reduce the isolation of both married and unmarried girls in the community while providing a supportive social network.

Ethiopia: The *Berhane Hewan* Program. The Population Council's Berhane Hewan Program ("Light for Eve" in Amharic) is one of the few child marriage interventions to have been rigorously evaluated. The program targeted married and unmarried girls ages 10 to 19 in rural Ethiopia, providing them with mentoring from adult women in the community, economic incentives to remain in school, and improved access to reproductive health information and services. The evaluation compared a group receiving the program interventions from 2004 to 2006 to a control group. It found considerable increases in girls' social networks, age at marriage, reproductive health knowledge (including HIV, STIs, and family planning), and contraceptive use. The proportion of girls who discussed family planning methods with a close friend after participating in the program significantly increased from 30 percent to 58 percent. Regarding child marriage, the proportion of girls participating in Berhane Hewan who had ever married decreased from 10 percent to 2 percent. For young adolescents ages 10 to 14 in the control group, the proportion who got married in the previous year increased from 2 percent to 5 percent, while none of the 10-to-14-year-olds in the program had married in the previous year. Using an approach that addressed both the social and economic factors that drive child marriage, the program demonstrated that norms about early marriage can change in a relatively short time.[32]

EMPOWERING AND INFORMING GIRLS

In order to change norms about child marriage, it is important to impart knowledge to girls about their human rights as well as information about family planning and reproductive health issues. In addition, mobilizing communities to respect the rights of women and girls to make decisions about their lives and improve reproductive health knowledge and outcomes for girls can bring about important social change.

Senegal: Tostan's Community Empowerment Program. Through education sessions on human rights, democracy, and health, adolescents and adults who participate in Tostan's workshops learn about their right to free consent to marriage as well as the negative health consequences related to child marriage and early childbearing. Tostan, which is best known for its work related to female genital cutting, has shown an impact on child marriage as well. An evaluation of the program found that those villages completing Tostan modules had experienced a 49 percent decrease in the proportion of girls married before the age of 15, versus a 33 percent drop in control villages during the same period.[33] As of February 2011, 5,221 communities in East and West Africa have publicly declared their abandonment of child/forced marriage as well as female genital cutting.[34] Overall, Tostan's education philosophy helps adolescents and adults respect girls' and women's health rights.

WORKING WITH COMMUNITIES AND FAMILIES

Working directly with communities—women and girls, men and boys—is a powerful force to change attitudes, behaviors, and gender norms.[35] Programs may encourage communities to discuss the underlying cultural norms that support child marriage, create committees to end child marriage, and improve communication between parents and children.[36]

Benin: Community Action for Girls' Education Project. Between 2001 and 2005, the Community Action for Girls' Education (CAGE) project targeted communities in northern Benin to change attitudes about child marriage. The project conducted community sensitization programs to raise awareness among parents, teachers, and local authorities about the importance of girls' education and the harmful consequences of child marriage. Communities then established local monitoring committees to ensure that girls remained in school and did not marry. The final evaluation found that school enrollment rates for girls increased by 67 percent from 2000 to 2004, while dropout rates decreased from 36 percent to about 11 percent.[37] The evaluation also found that the project's community-based approach created new partnerships among teachers and school administrators, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and local government representatives to support girls' education.

INCREASING EDUCATION OPPORTUNITIES FOR GIRLS

Expanding girls' access to primary and secondary school and offering financial incentives for disadvantaged girls to stay in school reduces dropout rates and can delay marriage. Improving the quality of education for girls—revising school curricula, increasing the safety of school infrastructure, recruiting female teachers and training all teachers, and fostering an environment where girls and boys are treated equitably—also increases the likelihood that girls will remain in school. In addition, nonformal education and mentoring programs can provide critical reproductive health information and life skills for girls.[38]

Bangladesh: The Female Secondary School Assistance Program. Research from Bangladesh illustrates that scholarships for secondary school greatly influence parents' decisions to keep their daughters in school. For example, the Female Secondary School Assistance Project (FSSAP)—which provided secondary school scholarships from 1994 to 2001 for girls ages 11 to 15 to delay marriage—had a positive effect on girls' enrollment, attendance, and retention rates.[39] An evaluation found that girls' secondary school enrollments more than doubled from 442,000 in 1994 to over 1 million in 2001.[40] The second phase of the project, which began in 2002, continued to increase girls' school enrollment while improving the quality of education through teacher training and recruiting female teachers.[41]

GENERATING INCOME FOR GIRLS AND FAMILIES

Programs that enable girls to gain skills in microfinance and microcredit, vocational training, and savings and investment help them to earn an income and postpone marriage.[42] Also, giving parents financial incentives, such as payment of school fees or rewards for delaying girls' marriage, can help keep girls in school.

Nepal: Bhaktapur Adolescent Girls' Education Project. In Nepal, the Bhaktapur Adolescent Girls' Education Project uses several approaches to end child marriage. First, the project provides livelihood and income-generating skills to young girls to help them support themselves financially, stay in school, and avoid early marriage. At the same time, parents participate in income-generating activities to earn money and save for their daughter's school fees for the coming academic year. Parents also learn about the importance of keeping girls in school and finding solutions to household problems that fuel child marriage, such as lack of money.[43]

MESSAGES FOR SOCIAL CHANGE

Using various communication channels to reach communities with messages about the importance of ending child marriage is crucial to raise awareness and change norms. For example, mass media can be an effective tool for educating families and communities about the harmful consequences of child marriage as well as for getting the word out that there has been a policy change regarding age of marriage.

Ethiopia: The Early Marriage Evaluation Study. The 2007 Early Marriage Evaluation Study (EMES) in Amhara region, Ethiopia, is one of the few large-scale studies on the effects of USAID-funded child marriage prevention initiatives in the districts in Amhara. The study found that communities that were exposed to a greater number of early marriage prevention messages (six messages or more) were more likely to report a higher age cutoff for early marriage. For example, caretakers who had never been exposed to any source of information considered a girl's marriage to be early if it occurred before age 14.5 years; however, caretakers who had been exposed to 10 or more messages considered a girl's marriage to be too early if it occurred before age 17. Also, a higher level of exposure to prevention messages increased the percentage of community members who knew the minimum age at marriage and of those who stopped a forced marriage.[44]

Recommended Policy and Program Actions

While much work remains to be done to eliminate child marriage, there is evidence that policies and programs that span multiple sectors and integrate different approaches to reach communities can successfully delay marriage and improve girls' and women's health and well-being. Policymakers and program managers must address the complex factors that fuel child marriage.

Priority actions include:

Pass legislation as an important first step. Legislation is necessary to prevent child marriage, but it is not sufficient to foster behavior change. Consequently, policymakers need to enforce existing laws that increase the age of marriage to 18 for girls and boys and develop more stringent penalties for parents who arrange for their children to be married. Ideally, policy change should be accompanied by trainings and workshops with judges, police, and parliamentarians to ensure that laws are enforced.

Develop policies and programs based on risk factors. Child-marriage interventions are most effective when they are based on evidence related to the risk factors for child marriage. Policymakers should ensure that girls stay in school during adolescence (especially secondary school) and acquire economic and livelihood skills. They should also provide resources for at-risk girls and their families. In addition, because the cultural and socioeconomic factors that influence whether a girl will marry early vary from region to region, policymakers should target interventions in areas of the country that have higher prevalence rates of child marriage.

Include multiple sectors in interventions. Given the pervasiveness and far-reaching impact of child marriage, multisectoral approaches are an effective way to improve the education, health, and social status of girls. Child marriage programs often involve the education, legal, economic, law enforcement, and health sectors and include multiple approaches such as training, advocacy, and awareness-raising. Multisectoral approaches also present policymakers and program managers with opportunities to partner with diverse community leaders and networks, such as religious institutions, law enforcement, health institutions, schools, and local NGOs. In particular, engaging religious leaders is an important strategy because they are well-known and respected in the community and can influence people's attitudes and behaviors. Other key actors, such as journalists and the

media, can bring widespread attention to and encourage open discussion about child marriage.

Use behavior change techniques to change community norms. Although many countries have passed laws against child marriage, adequate enforcement will happen only when accompanied by changes in the values and beliefs of individuals and communities. Donors and program planners should support programs that work to change the attitudes that perpetuate child marriage. Programs must also involve males within the community—boys, young men, fathers, and religious and community leaders—to achieve greater gender equality and norm change.

Address the needs of very young adolescent girls. Research and policies need a greater focus on 10-to-14-year-old girls, an extremely vulnerable group. While many developing countries have promoted girls' education, health policies are almost nonexistent for this age group. Priorities for policy change include integrating adolescent reproductive health in national health policies, developing benchmarks for adolescent well-being, and recognizing the rights of young girls to receive health information and services. These policies also need to be reinforced with training of health providers to ensure adolescent girls can access and use health services.

Collect and provide evidence about "what works." To date, few evaluations of child marriage programs have been undertaken. With reliable and up-to-date research results, decisionmakers can identify the regions and communities with the greatest need for interventions and the most promising programs for scaling up. Donors and program managers should exchange information about the design of programs and advocacy efforts through conferences, meetings, and dissemination of lessons learned.

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