Fact Sheet on Youth Reproductive Health Policy

EARLY MARRIAGE AND YOUTH REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH

Early marriage or child marriage is defined as the marriage or union between two people in which one or both parties are younger than 18 years old (McIntyre, 2006; ICRW, 2005). The Universal Declaration of Human Rights recognizes the right to "free and full" consent to a marriage, acknowledging that consent cannot be "free and full" when one of the individuals involved is not sufficiently mature to make an informed decision about a life partner (UNICEF, 2005). Hence, early marriage is considered a human rights issue. Nonetheless, in many developing countries, particularly in poorer rural areas, girls are often betrothed or committed to an arranged marriage without their knowledge or consent. Such an arrangement can occur as early as infancy. Parents see marriage as a cultural rite that provides protection for their daughter from sexual assault and offers the care of a male guardian (McIntyre, 2006). Many parents often feel that a young girl is an economic burden and therefore wish to marry off their young daughters before they become an economic liability (CGD, 2008; McIntyre, 2006).

According to the Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women, gender-based violence is "...violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual, or psychological harm or suffering of women, including threats of such acts, coercion, or arbitrary deprivations of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life" (United Nations, 1994, p. 1). An analysis of data from 10 country Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS) found that in six countries (Bangladesh, Bolivia, Dominican Republic, Kenya, Rwanda, and Zimbabwe), women who married before the age of 20 were more likely to report experiences of physical or sexual violence when they started living with their current husbands/partners. These findings and other research show that early marriage is associated with gender-based violence (Hindin et al., 2008).

SPOUSAL AGE DIFFERENCES

The age gap between partners can create power dynamics and social isolation, making girls more vulnerable to numerous forms of gender-based violence. These particular types of power dynamics can also limit girls' ability to negotiate contraceptive or condom use, thus putting them at high risk for contracting sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and HIV (IWHC, 2008; Pathfinder International, 2006).

KEY AREAS FOR POLICY ACTION

- **Enforce Existing Laws and Policies.** Although laws against child marriage exist in many countries, the implementation and enforcement of such laws rarely exists. "Social and health policies have paid minimal attention to child brides as a separate category, typically grouping all married women together regardless of current age, age at marriage, or characteristics of the marital partnership" (Bruce, 2007a, p. 1). Government action is critical in providing technical assistance to increase the number of in-country professionals who can appropriately monitor and evaluate programs that help better implement, review, and update customary laws and policies intended to reduce child marriage. Furthermore, a committed multisectoral approach that integrates action plans from the health, education, legal, economic, and labor sectors may be effective in reducing fertility. Effective approaches (i.e., programs, laws, policies, advocacy, and awareness-raising at local and international levels) that promote birth and marriage registration and increase school enrollment and retention rates of girls residing in poor areas are vital to good policy implementation. Moreover, poverty and early marriage are key driving factors associated with high levels of fertility. Implementing vocational programs that make girls essential to the workforce as well as pro-poor

policies are also critical to decreasing poverty and delaying the age at marriage for girls (ICRW, 2007; UNICEF, 2006; USAID, 2007).

- **Provide Economic Incentives for Delayed Marriage.** In certain settings and cultures, addressing the economic factors associated with early marriage, such as dowry practices, is essential to developing successful programs that delay the age of marriage among girls (Amin et al., 2008). One such program for girls in the Masai tribe of Kenya is the Christian Children's Fund's (CCF) program called Turning Child Brides into Scholars. In Kenya, the Masai tribe practices the ritual of *Esaiyata*, otherwise known as "booking" their daughters for marriage—in most cases before they are even born. CCF in Kenya responded to this ritual by creating a program that "books" these girls for school instead. By collaborating with the Naning'oi Girls Boarding School, CCF worked within the cultural context of the Masai tribe, offering a dowry (in the form of donated livestock and gifts) to a girl's father in exchange for committing to his daughter's attendance at the boarding school. To date, 350 girls are enrolled there, and more than 500 additional infants and girls have been booked (CGD, 2008; Child Fund International, 2005).

- **Implement Community-based Mobilization Programs.** Advocating for changes in social attitudes and norms through multisectoral and integrated community-based programs—such as through religious institutions and associations, health institutions, other local civic organizations, and schools—are the best channels for raising awareness on the negative impacts of early marriage. Given the opportunity, young people can be highly effective as participants in civil society who can bring a fresh perspective and generate innovative ideas to motivate change around the cultural practices related to child marriage (UNFPA, 2008). Community-based mobilization programs should seek to educate parents, young people, and other community members that (1) early marriage is a human rights issue; (2) delayed marriage has many economic, social, and health benefits; and (3) early marriage entails many reproductive health risks and does not always protect girls or secure their future (UNICEF, 2006; International Women's Health Program, 2009).

- **Create Safe Spaces for Girls.** Social networks and civil society organizations play a critical role in developing sustainable safe spaces for girls to meet to share information and ideas and obtain support and guidance (see box). Using public facilities, such as schools after hours or during vacations or places of worship during non-worship hours, can offer catch-up education, financial literacy instruction, savings clubs, and health services either directly or on referral. These safe and supportive spaces are crucial to providing preventive measures for girls at risk of HIV, STIs, or sexual violence (CGD, 2008; USAID, 2007).

- **Support Education Beyond Primary School.** Investments must be made to support girls' education in primary and secondary school. This covers the critical time when a girl is at or near puberty (ages 11–14)—also known as the time when a girl is most likely to drop out of school because her parents may encourage her to preserve her reputation related to the prospect of marriage (CGD, 2008). Girls are often expected to leave school and begin working to support their family economically (Bruce, 2007b). Evidence suggests that educated girls are less likely to agree to marry at a young age (UNICEF, 2006). Development programs need to be creative in implementing programs that support a girl through the critical drop-out period, along with secondary and vocational opportunities that are acceptable to the girls' families.

- **Provide Safe and Nonexploitative Means of Livelihood Outside the Home.** "Early marriage declines if there are viable and safe alternatives for girls. Education and training leading to paid employment are two reasons why girls may postpone marriage" (McIntyre, 2006, p. 18). When education is not a feasible option, income-generation

Population Council and Christian Children's Fund's **Binti Pamoja Center, Family Options Project**, is an example of a safe space program that works to empower girls and increase their safety by serving the adolescent community residing in the Kibera slum of Nairobi, Kenya (2006-2009). The goal of the project is to broaden adolescents' understanding of the experiences they face in the Kibera slums in order to develop context-specific programs for adolescents. Two of the program's four objectives are focused specifically on supporting vulnerable (married and unmarried) adolescent girls residing in the Kibera slum by (1) researching the different aspects and dimensions of vulnerability among married and unmarried adolescent girls ages 10-19; and (2) working with local Kenyan organizations active in Kibera slums in developing programs, including livelihood programs, that support the most vulnerable adolescent girls. The program established safe spaces with female mentors who offer various training programs on such subjects as financial literacy (with planned links to savings institutions), reproductive health, and life skills (CGD, 2008; Population Council, 2009).

programs can empower women and adolescent girls with the skills and tools to reduce their dependency on family members and gain some autonomy in their lives (CGD, 2008). The Drishtee Foundation, a private Indian firm, and Microsoft Corporation implemented the Unlimited Potential Training Project, which is intended to inform and train young girls and women who reside in rural areas on the field of information technology. The program empowers young girls and women by building their capacity to generate income by developing their computer skills.

> ### Government Travel Stipends for Girls in Pakistan?
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> The World Bank conducted a country gender assessment in Pakistan that found that Pakistanis restricted women's ability to travel, given concerns for their security and reputation. The overarching reason that parents did not allow their daughters to continue their education was concern for family honor (Viswanath et al, 2006). This prompted the idea of offering stipends for those who must travel a long distance to go to school so that girls can continue their education. This program also addressed the families' concerns by providing transportation to allow their daughters to travel long distances in a safe manner. The results of this project are not yet known.

THE STATE OF POLICYMAKING

Policy dialogue and research have continued to focus mainly on the concerns of unmarried young people. However, child marriage affects millions of girls in the developing world. According to Population Council projections, more than 100 million girls in the developing world will be married before the age of 18 during the next decade (FHI, 2005).

A global consensus exists that early marriage is a human rights and health concern that needs to be addressed urgently. In countries in South Asia, sub-Saharan Africa, and the Middle East, policymakers recommend enforcing existing laws about age at marriage and implementing programs to delay marriage. Gaining the commitment of law enforcement agencies in countries with a high prevalence of early marriage is important (IIPS and Population Council, 2008). Greater involvement of schoolteachers and administrators, health officials, and other authorities is critical in supporting girls in resisting parental and social pressures for early marriage.

In the wake of the **Universal Declaration of Human Rights** in 1948, several international treaties and agreements have followed to eradicate early marriage to protect the human rights of children. The 1962 **Convention on Consent to Marriage, Minimum Age for Marriage, and Registration of Marriages** establishes minimum marital ages and requires the registration of marriages. Building on that treaty, the 1979 **Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women** (CEDAW) states that "the betrothal and the marriage of a child shall have no legal effect, and all necessary action, including legislation, shall be taken to specify a minimum age for marriage and to make the registration of marriages in an official registry compulsory." CEDAW also states that the marriage of a girl is not an official marriage, because the girl is not an adult who can freely and fully consent to the union. This declaration was re-emphasized by the **Convention of the Rights of the Child** in 1989.

RELATED LINKS AND RESOURCES

- [Addressing Gender-Based Violence from the Reproductive Health/HIV Sector: A Literature Review and Analysis](#) (Guedes, 2004). This USAID-commissioned literature review analyzes programs in developing countries and includes chapters on policy and on youth-focused programming.

- [IGWG Technical Update on Child Marriage (USAID, 2006](#)). This website contains documents and resources from the *IGWG Technical Update* on child marriage. Participants at the forum discussed child marriage and its negative implications for public health and human rights.

- [Providing New Opportunities to Adolescent Girls in Socially Conservative Settings: The Ishraq Program in Rural Upper Egypt (Full Report) (Short Report)](#) (Population Council, 2007). These two publications document the creation, implementation, and evaluation of the Ishraq pilot project, an initiative designed to address the unmet needs of out-of-school adolescent girls.

- Protecting Young Women from HIV/AIDS: The Case against Child and Adolescent Marriage (Clark et al., 2006). This report presents data from DHS in 29 African and Latin American countries to determine the factors that lead to increased prevalence of HIV in married women ages 15-19.

- Transitions to Adulthood: Child Marriage/Married Adolescents (Population Council). This website contains reports and briefs from various projects implemented by the Population Council.

- Married Adolescents: No Place of Safety (WHO, 2006). This document explores issues on early marriage and outlines some promising programs in countries where early marriage and early childbirth are common.

- New Insights on Preventing Child Marriage: A Global Analysis of Factors and Programs (ICRW, 2007). This 60-page booklet examines factors associated with the risk of or protection against child marriage, as well as action strategies and the effectiveness of current approaches to preventing child marriage in developing countries.

- Early Marriage: A Harmful Traditional Practice, A Statistical Exploration (UNICEF, 2005). This report presents DHS data on early marriage. The objective of the study was to estimate the prevalence of child marriage and understand its causes and consequences.

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