

Programs to address child marriage: Framing the problem

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Child marriage violates girls' human rights and adversely affects their health and well-being. While age at marriage is increasing in most regions of the developing world, early marriage persists for large populations. Worldwide, it is estimated that more than one out of three women aged 20–24 were married before age 18, and one out of seven were married before age 15 (Population Council analysis of DHS data 2006). There is great variation in child marriage practices across and within regions and between ethnic and religious groups. The highest proportions of child brides are typically found in West Africa and South Asia (see Table 1 for some regional hotspots of child marriage).

Eradicating child marriage has long been on the agenda of the United Nations and of individual countries. Indeed, all countries where child marriage occurs are signatories to international charters and covenants that discourage the practice. International human rights instruments, including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), the United Nations (UN) Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (1979), the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (1990), provide four main protections against child marriage:

- Requiring that intending parties exercise “free and full consent” in the marriage decision;
- Setting the minimum age of marriage at 18, the upper limit of childhood as defined by the Convention on the Rights of the Child;
- Calling on states to ban “harmful practices,” including child marriage; and
- Entitling children to special protections, including the right to express their views freely in all matters regarding their welfare; the right to education on the basis of equal opportunity; the right to protection from all forms of physical or mental violence, injury or abuse, maltreatment or exploitation; and the right to health and access to health services.



Bussarawan Theerawichitchainan

Dao bride in Thai Nguyen province, Vietnam.

Despite these agreements, marriage before age 18—often without the young bride's consent—persists. A number of underlying factors help perpetuate early marriage: traditional gender norms, the high value placed upon female virginity, parental concerns surrounding premarital sex and pregnancy, dowry pressures, the perception that marriage provides protection from HIV and other sexually trans-

TABLE 1 Percentage of women aged 20–24 who were married by age 15 and age 18, by geographical area

| Area | Married by 15 | Married by 18 | Median age at marriage |
|----------------------|---------------|---------------|------------------------|
| Rajshahi, Bangladesh | 52 | 86 | 14 |
| Amhara, Ethiopia | 48 | 74 | 14 |
| Bihar, India | 24 | 68 | 16 |
| Kayes, Mali | 39 | 83 | 15 |
| Jinotega, Nicaragua | 19 | 52 | 16 |
| Northwestern Nigeria | 40 | 79 | 15 |

Source: Demographic and Health Surveys, 1998–2006.

mitted infections, and the desire to secure social, economic, or political alliances. Poverty also plays a major role. An extremely poor family may calculate that the husband's family will be better able to provide for their daughter, or the economic gains incurred through her marriage may be part of the family's survival strategy.

Research suggests that one particular way these factors coalesce is around girls' educational and economic opportunities. For example, the association between child marriage and low levels of schooling is consistently strong across all regions of the developing world. Women with three or fewer years of schooling are significantly more likely to have married early than are those with eight or more years of schooling (Mensch 2005). Being pulled out of school is less likely to be a consequence of early marriage; more often the same underlying conditions that drive the marriage timing decision—poverty, low status, and cultural norms—are responsible for the disinvestments in girls that limit their education (Mensch 2005). Furthermore, women's education and timing of marriage are intertwined across generations. A study in Bangladesh, for example, found that high levels of maternal education are associated with later marriage among daughters (Bates et al. 2007). In addition to schooling there is also a consistent association between early marriage and women's participation in the labor force before marriage. Findings from studies in Bangladesh show that young female garment workers marry significantly later than girls who do not work in the labor force (Amin et al. 1998).

These data suggest that educational and economic opportunities offer young women positive alternatives to early marriage that are acceptable to the family and to the community.

Efforts to end child marriage

The pervasiveness of child marriage requires multi-sectoral efforts to fundamentally reframe the transition to marriage. Such a reframing includes three complementary goals:

- Delaying age at marriage;
- Making the marriage process consensual, safer, and more equitable;
- Providing support for married girls (Haberland 2007).

Population Council researchers are pursuing efforts to prevent child marriage and to support married girls in several countries, including Bangladesh, Burkina Faso, Egypt, Ethiopia, Guatemala, India, Kenya, Nigeria, and Vietnam. These programs include expanding opportunities (education, livelihoods) for girls, especially those most at risk of early marriage, and working directly with gatekeepers (parents, boys/men, religious and community leaders) to remove barriers that prevent girls from accessing those opportunities. Such efforts may entail, for example, mass media messages and meetings with girls and gatekeepers to critically examine causes and consequences of early marriage, and/or economic incentives to delay age at marriage.

Efforts to make the marriage process safer include voluntary counseling and testing (VCT) for young women and men contemplating marriage, fostering more meaningful consent for girls in the marriage process, and fostering better-informed decisions by the bride's family. In some settings, addressing the economic elements, such as dowry and wedding costs, is key. These economic factors are of concern not just as causes of early marriage but as transactions that put girls at risk. For example, young women in Bangladesh who paid dowry are significantly more likely to report having been abused in the past year, and those who made dowry payments after marriage had an even greater likelihood of having been beaten than those who did not pay dowry (Suran et al. 2004).

Kishori Abhijan in Bangladesh

In Bangladesh 68 percent of girls over age 18 were married before their 18th birthday, and one in three girls was married before the age of 15. Although there is wide variation within the country, recent surveys suggest that around half of marriages involve a substantial dowry payment by the girl's family to the groom's family. The majority of marriages are arranged, and, although most girls report that their consent to marriage was sought in keeping with Islamic law, four out of five girls first met their husbands at the time of their wedding. These statistics are particularly baffling given the enormous gains that have been made in primary and secondary school enrollment of girls, the dramatic fertility decline among married women, and the vast expansion of micro-credit programs that cater primarily to women in rural areas. The continuation of early marriage and childbearing counters many of the gains in other sectors.

In an effort to change these patterns, the Population Council partnered with two Bangladeshi nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) to design and evaluate a large-scale program for adolescent girls. The program, known as Kishori Abhijan, sought to create opportunities that would inspire girls and their families to seek alternatives to early marriage. It provided a safe space for girls to meet, offered life skills lessons, and, in some cases, provided access to livelihoods training, savings, and credit options. At the end of two years the program was successful in delaying marriage among the youngest and poorest girls. However, because girls still must pay dowry and older girls have to pay higher dowries, the average dowry paid among those who delayed marriage increased. Program leaders concluded that efforts to delay marriage are most beneficial when they expand economic opportunities for girls who see these new opportunities as meaningful alternatives to early marriage. These opportunities also help to defray the increasing costs of dowry that later marriage entails.

Berhane Hewan: Providing skills and resources to avoid early marriage in Ethiopia

In the Amhara region of Ethiopia, rates of child marriage are among the highest in the world. Half of all girls in Amhara are

married before their 15th birthday. A Council study in Amhara and Addis Ababa found that for many young girls marriage may mean having sexual relations with a virtual stranger: 95 percent of the girls surveyed did not know their husbands before marriage, and 85 percent were given no warning that they were about to be married. More than two-thirds of the married girls reported that they had not yet begun menstruating when they had sex for the first time (Erulkar et al. 2004).

Berhane Hewan (meaning “Light for Eve” in Amharic) is designed to assist unmarried girls by imparting the knowledge, skills, and resources to help them avoid child marriage. The program promotes functional literacy, life skills, and reproductive health education through groups of girls mobilized and led by a female mentor. In recognition of the economic motives for child marriage, material incentives were added to encourage families to allow their daughters to participate in girls’ groups and to remain in school. The program was evaluated after 18 months. Preliminary findings suggest that, compared to levels of marriage at baseline, significantly fewer girls aged 10 to 14 are married, and significantly more girls in the younger age group are attending school.

Abriendo Oportunidades: Alternatives to early marriage in Guatemala

Guatemala is one of the most ethnically diverse countries in Latin America. It is also one of the poorest places in the Western Hemisphere, with poverty mostly concentrated among Mayan groups. Mayan girls are the most disadvantaged group in the country; early school dropout, early marriage, early and unwanted pregnancy, illiteracy, and limited life opportunities are all common features of their transition to adulthood. Almost 40 percent of Mayan girls are married by age 18.

In 2004 the Population Council began a project, Abriendo Oportunidades, designed to help girls make a successful transition to adulthood, including delaying marriage. Selected Mayan girls aged 16–20 participated in workshops on topics such as leadership, professional skills, public speaking, gender, and sexual and reproductive health. Girl leaders from local NGOs trained groups of younger girls (aged 10–15) in their communities to become mentors and to teach them about self-esteem, life skills, and reproductive health. The project thus created “safe spaces” for Mayan girls and developed a sense of community among the girls. In addition to gaining valuable life skills, many girls were also able to better articulate plans for the future, such as furthering their education and opening their own businesses.

Early marriage among the Hmong and Dao in the Vietnamese Northern Uplands

In Vietnam, a rapidly growing economy has benefited some groups, such as the majority Kinh population, while leaving oth-

ers behind. Along with low education and poor health, early marriage is one of the defining characteristics of two of the most disadvantaged minority groups, the Hmong and the Dao.

Council researchers conducted a study in the poor and remote district of Vo Nhai in Thai Nguyen province, where the Dao and Hmong live with their Kinh neighbors. The Kinh, researchers learned, are likely to find opportunities for education and work outside the commune and tend to delay marriage. In contrast, over 65 percent of Hmong and Dao men and women aged 20–25 are married. Marriage is an important means of gaining economic independence from natal families and achieving recognition as an adult.

Based on the findings of this exploratory study the Population Council, in partnership with the Thai Nguyen Medical College, is designing a livelihoods-based initiative for youth in remote rural areas.

Areas for future work

The great variation in marriage practices even within countries and communities suggests that our understanding of the marriage process remains limited. Little is known, for example, about consent to marriage, choice of spouse, familiarity with the selected spouse, and marital transactions. There is some evidence of growing agency among young women with regard to the marriage process, perhaps associated with the decline in early marriage. We hypothesize that these characteristics of marriage interact with poverty and girls’ and women’s autonomy in the groom’s family and the community to affect girls’ and women’s reproductive and sexual health and well-being.

Future programs and research must seek to better understand and address the pressure on families to marry off their daughters early; examine whether and how marriage—or specific components of the marriage process (such as consent, dowry, age at marriage)—disempower women in their intimate relations and place them at risk for adverse reproductive and health outcomes, including HIV (see Brief no. 11 on HIV and early marriage); and test how these effects may be ameliorated and the transition to marriage made safer. For example, can the right to consent be made more relevant in the context of girls’ lives in terms of choosing when and whom to marry? And how is meaningful consent supported by providing alternatives to early marriage in settings where traditionally few or no alternatives existed?

It is clear from our experience that successful programs for girls are based on a clear understanding of the local cultural and economic context, and seek to expand opportunities for girls and limit the constraints to economic empowerment that compel girls and their families to choose lives of early marriage and child-bearing.

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