



# ISSUE BRIEF

## Preventing Child Marriage: Protecting Girls' Health

Significant numbers of girls in the developing world are married before they reach adulthood. Early marriage can prevent them from accessing health services or attaining educational, economic, or social opportunities. Historically, early marriages have been used to secure critical social, economic, and political alliances for families or clans. Today, poverty, malnutrition, poor educational and economic options, concern regarding violence and safeguarding virginity, as well as traditions and cultural norms, are all cited as contextual factors surrounding child marriage.(1)

Worldwide, millions of girls aged 15 to 19 years are married each year, exposing them to the risks associated with early sexual activity and pregnancy, HIV/AIDS, social exclusion, and gender-based violence. Studies have found that child marriage often coexists with other poor reproductive health practices, including female genital cutting (FGC), cross-generational sex (spousal age gaps), domestic- and gender-based violence, a higher risk of contracting HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted infections, and obstetric fistula, a highly stigmatized condition involving incontinence brought on as a result of prolonged labor.(2)

With rising international concern around child marriage, U.S. Government officials and legislators have become increasingly interested in addressing the practice.

### What USAID Is Doing

USAID supports a number of programs at the local and country level that aim to reduce child marriage. Experience has shown that effective interventions are long term and must engage community and religious leaders, women, men, and adolescents, and be reinforced by messages about the risks of child marriage. Although many of these programs are relatively new, significant impact is already being measured in the regions where USAID partners work.

Currently, USAID supports programmatic interventions that focus on community mobilization, engagement of community and religious leaders, enforcement and awareness of legislation stipulating the legal age at marriage, life skills and health training, and alternative educational, economic, and social opportunities for girls. In addition, USAID supports research and evaluation activities to identify successful program models that could be replicated in coming years.

### Forming Child Marriage Eradication Committees in Nepal

In Nepal, efforts focused on the formation of Child Marriage Eradication Committees; selection of peer educators for all wards in the 30 Village Development Committees; and training 270 peer educators on issues related to GBV and child marriage. The project's 67 social campaign rallies were attended by 20,000 people, raised awareness of child marriage and GBV. The project received commitments from Hindu and Muslim religious leaders that they would not play a role in child marriage ceremonies. The media committed to highlighting cases of child marriage and dowry. The project reached out to leaders of vulnerable castes to educate them on the laws against child marriage and to get their support to stop the practice.

### **Focusing on Delaying First Birth through Radio Programs in Nepal**

In Nepal, child marriage and early childbearing are subjects often included in widely broadcast radio dramas. The shows intend to raise public awareness about the dangers associated with child marriage including the health consequences of girls becoming pregnant and giving birth before their bodies are fully grown.

### **Educational and Behavioral Change Campaign in Bangladesh**

USAID has provided over \$1.3 million in funding for a three year program in Bangladesh to help prevent violence against women. The initiative focuses on increasing understanding about the negative effects that violence, early marriage, dowry and polygamy have on the development process in Bangladesh. Educational and behavioral change campaigns as well as efforts to influence national policy will be part of the program.

### **Community Mobilization to Increase the Age of Marriage in Egypt**

A deeply rooted belief exists in the Egyptian culture that early marriage is better for girls. By spreading the message that delaying marriage can improve women's health and provide other advantages to girls and their families, USAID partners are working to increase the average age of marriage of girls in Egypt. This broad-based community mobilization project includes the airing of messages about the dangers and health consequences of early marriage on local TV and radio stations; the use of community outreach workers to spread the message about delaying marriage; and training of religious leaders on the issue to share with their congregations.

### **Girls' Advisory Committees in Ethiopia**

Nearly half of Ethiopian girls are married by the time they turn 18. USAID partners have established girls' advisory committees in association with more than 3,700 public schools in eight regions of the country to prevent child marriages and encourage both unmarried and married girls to attend school. The committees communicate with parents, teachers, and religious leaders about the dangers of child marriage and the importance of girls continuing their education. The committees have been responsible for stopping more than 4,000 child marriages and keeping many more girls in school.

### **Reducing Harmful Traditional Marriage Practices in Ethiopia**

Community mobilization efforts in Ethiopia continued work to reduce harmful traditional practices related to marriage. Community members (49,720 men/47,075 women) attended awareness-raising sessions, which encouraged participants to combat harmful traditional practices and gender-based violence and to promote human rights. An additional 10,193 adults participated in larger community conversation meetings to discuss various aspects of harmful traditional practices, especially early marriage, bride abduction, and bride price. The 173 Community Self-help Saving Groups established by the project include a total of 3,460 members. These groups strengthen women's economic opportunities and help to change attitudes that women are valuable only for their marriageability and reproductive role. About 3,900 copies of the regional family law were distributed to project sites.

### **The Safe Age of Marriage Project in Yemen**

In Yemen, where approximately half of all girls are married by age 17 and 14 percent are married by age 14, USAID supports the Ministry of Health to increase the age of marriage in the rural Amran governorate. Trained male and female outreach educators inform community members about the negative health and social consequences of child marriage. Activities include mobile clinics, community awareness sessions in schools involving parents, teachers and parents, and engagement of religious leaders. The Ministry of Religious Affairs in Amran Governorate issued a directive that all religious leaders publicly address the negative social and health consequences

of child marriage in Friday sermons. Momentum generated by this project also contributed to the parliament putting forth a policy to increase the legal age of marriage to 17, which is now awaiting the president's signature.

### **The Women's Legal Rights Initiative in India**

USAID funds the training of lawyers and counselors in two Indian states on various women's issues including the legal age of marriage. Within a network of women's self-help groups, these legal professionals also conduct workshops for local police and religious leaders on the issue of child marriage. The network also successfully encouraged the government of one Indian state to amend its Child Marriage Restraint Act and create a provision to appoint child marriage prevention officers.

### **State Department Response**

The U.S. Department of State recently collected information about the legal age of marriage, the extent of underage marriage, and any efforts to combat child marriage from all embassies. According to 178 responses received by the Office of the Senior Coordinator for International Women's Issues, child marriage is considered to be a problem in 62 countries. Of these countries, 25 are in sub-Saharan Africa, 11 in Europe and Eurasia, eight in the Western Hemisphere, seven in East Asia, six in the Near East, and five in South Asia. In most regions, child marriage was reported to occur more in rural areas, with poverty and local customs as some of the major driving forces.(3)

### **Resources:**

1. ICRW. *Too Young to Wed: the lives, rights, and health of young married girls*, 2003: [http://www.icrw.org/photoessay/pdfs/tooyoungtowed\\_1003.pdf](http://www.icrw.org/photoessay/pdfs/tooyoungtowed_1003.pdf); UNICEF. *Early Marriage: a harmful traditional practice*, 2005: [http://www.unicef.org/publications/files/Early\\_Marriage\\_12.10.pdf](http://www.unicef.org/publications/files/Early_Marriage_12.10.pdf)
2. National Research Council. *Growing Up Global*, National Academy of Sciences, 2005
3. Department of State. *Poverty, Illiteracy, and Child Marriage: A U.S. Response*, 2005: <http://www.state.gov/g/wi/53161.htm>

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