

YouthLens

on Reproductive Health
and HIV/AIDS

Addressing Early Marriage of Young and Adolescent Girls

Girls in many resource-poor countries often have little choice about whom or when they marry. According to an assessment conducted by UNICEF in 2005, among women ages 15 to 24, 48 percent were married before the age of 18 in South Asia, 42 percent in Africa, and 29 percent in Latin America and the Caribbean.¹ Some girls come from villages where social norms encourage early marriage. Their parents may offer them for marriage early to ensure their virginity or to honor the practice of dowry, which often dictates that a lower “bride price” be paid to the groom if a bride is younger.² Orphans and young girls without involved caregivers are particularly vulnerable to early marriage.

Early marriage curtails girls’ freedom, isolates them from peers, and ends their education prematurely. Often wed to men who are older and more sexually experienced, young brides lack power and are more likely to experience partner violence.³ They risk exposure to HIV and other STIs.⁴ Indeed, 80 percent of unprotected sex among adolescent girls in the developing world occurs within marriage.⁵ Many give birth within the first year of marriage, when their bodies are not fully matured. As a result, adolescents are at risk for obstructed labor, which can cause obstetric fistula (a condition in which a hole develops between either the rectum or bladder and the vagina). The consequences of obstetric fistula are devastating: the baby usually dies, and the woman can suffer from constant leakage of urine or feces or both. The condition can result in stigma, isolation, and abuse.

A growing number of interventions are addressing early marriage, but few are adequately evaluated, especially for their public health outcome.⁶ What follows is a discussion of five approaches for delaying marriage that also can help girls avoid HIV, other STIs, and early or unintended pregnancy. Although each program example mentioned is used to illustrate just one approach, these and most other effective programs rely on a combination of them. These programs were selected either because they have produced documented positive results or because they are generally agreed upon by the larger community of practice as being promising.

Extending girls’ schooling and safeguarding its quality

Higher levels of education among girls are linked to lower rates of early marriage and delays in childbearing.⁷ Among other components, the Population Council’s *Berhane Hewan* pilot project (2004–2006) in rural Ethiopia offered school supplies and educational materials to girls in school. Parents and guardians agreed their daughters would not marry for the two years of the program and were promised a goat if they complied. Participants 10 to 14 years old were 90 percent less likely to be married at the end of the program than were girls in the control group. Other improvements associated with the program included increased knowledge about oral contraceptives, condoms, and STIs, and greater contraceptive use among participants.⁸





Helping girls establish supportive relationships with female peers and role models

Frequent involvement with peer educators or role models and participation in a girls' club can encourage girls to delay marriage. One UNICEF program in Bangladesh—*Kishori Abhijan*—offered alternatives to early marriage through girls' clubs, life skills training, and income-generating activities.⁹ After two years, participants earned more money and had more specific knowledge of rights and health than nonparticipants. The program contributed to improved school enrollment and lower marriage rates among girls ages 12 to 14.

In rural Egyptian communities, the Population Council and Save the Children launched *Ishraq* in 2001, which seeks to delay marriage for out-of-school girls ages 12 to 15.¹⁰ Girls access youth centers where they attend learning sessions and spend time with friends. The program also offers girls the chance to play sports, which is uncommon in Egypt. Participation in athletic activities helps girls develop leadership skills and greater self-esteem. A 2004 evaluation showed that, among other positive results, 1 in 10 *Ishraq* participants stated that they preferred to marry before 18, compared with 1 in 4 before the project.

Helping girls develop skills that enable them to earn an income

Girls who earn money are seen as economic contributors to the household, and their families may be more willing to delay marriage.¹¹ The Nike Foundation is supporting several programs that give girls serious earning opportunities. *Drishtee*, for example, is a franchise business in India that licenses girls to operate computer kiosks in rural villages. The kiosks provide community members with access to the Internet and other services.¹²

The Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee uses learning centers to provide girls and young women in rural areas with information on personal finance, life skills, and reproductive health.¹³ Participants also are given microloans (services not generally available to adolescents)

and training to help them leverage the funds they receive.

In India, the Center for Development and Population Activities' (CEDPA's) Better Life Options Program began in 1987 by providing girls with training, education, and life skills.¹⁴ A 2001 impact study showed that girls who completed the program were more likely than their peers to be literate, to have completed secondary education, to be employed, and to have learned a vocational skill. They were more likely to make autonomous decisions, spend what they earned, and decide when to marry. The probability of girls discussing family planning with their husbands was 55 percent higher than the control group, and they were significantly more likely to use contraceptives than the control group.

Mobilizing community members—especially parents—to recognize and support girls' rights and development

Social norms espoused by parents and the greater community often undervalue girls' social and economic contributions and overemphasize their roles as wives and mothers. Therefore, most successful programs address not only girls, but also the people around them.

Since 1997, TOSTAN has employed community meetings, dance, poetry, theater, and song to encourage Senegalese communities to abandon child marriage by issuing public declarations opposed to this practice.¹⁵ In Ethiopia, Pathfinder organized committees of trusted government, community, and religious leaders, and members of the local women's groups to help change social norms that favor early marriage and to discuss the importance and benefits of safer sexual behaviors and maternal and child health care. The committees also worked closely with community health workers in disseminating messages about family planning methods. Over four years, more than 14,000 early marriages were prevented or annulled.¹⁶

Offering incentives to parents might encourage them to value daughters more highly, keep their daughters in school, and delay their daughters'

marriages. Save the Children, Bangladesh is testing whether adding an incentive (16 liters of cooking oil per year for girls who remain unmarried until the legal age of 18) influences outcomes.¹⁷ In the Indian state of Haryana, the *Apni Beti Apna Dhan* (Our Daughter, Our Wealth) program offers parents a cash grant when a daughter is born and a savings bond that matures when the girl turns 18 and is unmarried.¹⁸ (Additional funds are offered as incentives for the girl's education.) Limited evaluation data show that the program improved the sex ratio of surviving children.

Several programs are promoting behavior change through mass media campaigns that disseminate messages on ending early marriage. After conducting in-depth interviews with girls and young women in Nigeria, the Population Council developed messages encouraging delayed marriage and supporting married girls. The organization collaborates with community leaders to promote these messages through existing community forums and radio broadcasts.¹⁹

Encouraging the implementation of existing laws and policies designed to protect everyone, including girls

The 1948 United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that people must be at “full age” when married and that marriage should be entered into freely. In 1989, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child defined legal age as 18. However, countries have their own laws defining the age for marriage and the age for consent to sexual intercourse, and many set different minimums. Almost all countries grant exceptions to minimum age rules with the agreement of parents or judges. Poor record keeping can make it difficult to find official documentation of a young woman's age and to enforce marriage and consent laws.²⁰

Legal and political activism is one way to press for enforceable laws that protect young women and girls from early marriage. *Equality Now* is a nongovernmental organization that documents rights violations against women and encourages activism to draw

public attention to the problems girls face. Through its Women's Action Network, *Equality Now* called attention to the plight of a 12-year-old Yemeni girl who died after struggling in labor for three days, and to the case of a 14-year-old who ran away from her husband but was returned to him by force, ultimately requiring the intervention of the governorate.²¹ Members were encouraged to contact Yemeni officials to encourage them to ensure establishment of a minimum age of marriage.

Laws and policies that limit child marriage need to provide for coordination of implementing bodies, provide appropriations to support the work, and develop systems to monitor results. For example, in 2006 the Indian Parliament passed the Prohibition of Marriage Act, which punishes guardians and communities involved in child marriage and allows girls married before 18 to nullify the marriages without being considered divorced. States appoint child marriage prohibition officers as executors. Despite good intentions, the law has limitations: the child or guardians must declare the marriage void, officials who do not fulfill their duties are not punished, and marriage registration is not a compulsory precondition. In addition, research by the International Center for Research on Women revealed that many state government officials were unaware of the act, and many communities still did not know that child marriage was illegal.²²

HELPING MARRIED GIRLS

Although young married girls face risks of early childbirth and sexually transmitted infections, few programs have been tailored to their needs. One of the few evaluated programs focusing on married girls is Pathfinder International's Promoting Change in Reproductive Behavior (PRACHAR) in India (see www.pathfind.org). Since 2001, PRACHAR has encouraged newlyweds and mothers-in-law—whose influence is significant—to delay young brides' first births until age 21 and to space children at least three years apart. Young couples with one child receive information about child spacing and postpartum contraception. *Dais* (skilled birth attendants) were trained in safe delivery, postpartum counseling, and contraception for birth spacing. The percentage of women using contraception to delay their first child increased from 5.3 percent to 20 percent in intervention areas, and the percentage of women using contraception to space their second child increased from 14 to 32 percent. Now in its second phase, PRACHAR II is targeting a broader population with the same messages but is experimenting with different approaches for delivering those messages.

Where to go from here

Although some argue that attempts to end early marriage interfere with cultural values, agreements brokered by the United Nations reflect broad international agreement on the need to end this practice and define the legal age of marriage as 18.²³ More importantly, girls themselves usually wish to marry later, and they view the interruption of their schooling and broader prospects as losses.²⁴ This brief has explored several approaches for delaying child marriage and mitigating its effects on girls' lives. But, it is important to remember that a holistic approach has the best chance of success. Holistic programs address economics, social norms, education, and tradition, and work in schools and communities and in the political and legal arena. Research and programs addressing child marriage would benefit from a shared logic model, including better evaluation methodology and indicators. There is room for much more exchange and coordination among organizations working in this area to bring about the global awareness the issue deserves.

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