International Planned Parenthood Federation and the Forum on Marriage and the Rights of Women and Girls

Ending child marriage

A guide for global policy action

IPPF International Planned Parenthood Federation

From choice, a world of possibilities

UNFPA

The Global Coalition on Women and AIDS

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IPPF
4 Newhams Row
London SE1 3UZ
United Kingdom
Tel: +44 20 7939 8200
Fax: +44 20 7939 8300
Email: info@ippf.org
www.ippf.org

UK Registered Charity No. 229476

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IPPF is a global service provider and a leading advocate of sexual and reproductive health and rights for all. We are a worldwide movement of national organizations working with and for communities and individuals.

IPPF works towards a world where women, men and young people everywhere have control over their own bodies, and therefore their destinies. A world where they are free to choose parenthood or not; free to decide how many children they will have and when; free to pursue healthy sexual lives without fear of unwanted pregnancies and sexually transmitted infections, including HIV. A world where gender or sexuality are no longer a source of inequality or stigma. We will not retreat from doing everything we can to safeguard these important choices and rights for current and future generations.

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Foreword

Ending Child Marriage: A Guide for Global Policy Action appeals to key policy makers to improve the quality of life of millions of girls and young women forced into child marriages. Globally, vulnerable and marginalized rural girls and women continue to bear the health risks and social and economic costs of early and forced marriage, non-consensual sex and early pregnancies. There is now greater urgency for global policy action because child brides are increasingly more vulnerable to HIV infection.

The persistent neglect of the plight of child brides in parts of South Asia, Africa, the Middle East and Latin America is a direct reflection of the failure of our collective responsibility to protect the human rights of vulnerable young people. The silenced voices of the many millions of young women and girls forced into marriage before their eighteenth birthday signify complacency and discrimination. Most countries have laws on the minimum age of marriage, but they are largely ineffective, not enforced or operate alongside customary and religious laws. Traditions and cultural norms which rule the social lives of many practising communities in the developing world should not be used as an excuse to neglect the duty to protect, respect and fulfil the rights of young women.

Ending child marriage is indeed a mandatory task if we are to make progress in global efforts to attain the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). It is that simple. But this will require unambiguous political commitment, visionary leadership, and support for grassroots advocacy to address many of the cultural practices and behaviours that place young women and girls at increased multiple health risks, including HIV.

Ending Child Marriage: A Guide for Global Policy Action makes a strong case for international action, and strengthens the advocacy efforts of development practitioners and women's and children's rights activists to end child marriage. This work is a result of a series of technical consultations on child marriage, organized by the International Planned Parenthood Federation

(IPPF) in collaboration with the Forum on Marriage and the Rights of Women and Girls. This practical tool documents the special needs of child brides and outlines the nature of the economic and social factors which reinforce the practice. It provides solutions based on a child protection framework, and advocates for the use of legal, policy and multi-sector programme strategies for delaying child marriage for those at risk and meeting the needs of young women who are newly married. It will add value to other ongoing efforts to end child marriage and promote the rights and true voices of countless young people, in particular girls and young women around the globe, who have been marginalized for far too long.

IPPF's mission includes a commitment to "defend the rights of all young people to enjoy their sexual lives free from ill health, unwanted pregnancy, violence and discrimination." We will continue to collaborate and advocate for an enabling policy environment to bring an end to child marriage.

This advocacy tool is also part of the wider initiative on preventing HIV infection, particularly among adolescent girls, which is led by the United Nations Global Coalition on Women and AIDS (GCWA), with the support of the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and Young Positives. Collectively, we have the power to change the course of this epidemic and bring dignity and empowerment to women and girls. We believe that bold policy decision making that takes into account the special concerns of child brides in national and international policy and programme responses will help us today to transform the lives of tomorrow's generation.

Lyn Thomas
Deputy Director-General, International Planned Parenthood Federation

Acknowledgments

This publication is part of IPPF's thematic focus on adolescents and young people. We recognize the important role of joint advocacy action in addressing child marriage. *Ending Child Marriage: A Guide for Global Policy Action* is a collaboration between IPPF and several individuals and partner organizations at the international and national level.

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The recommendations in this publication represent the voices of several organizations and participants who attended two technical consultations organized jointly by IPPF and the Forum on Marriage and the Rights of Women and Girls. We are grateful for their expertise and enthusiasm. They include those who took part in the Technical Consultation on Child Marriage (Nairobi, Kenya, October 2005) and in the Ouagadougou Technical Consultation on Early and Forced Marriage and the Rights of Women and Girls (October 2003).

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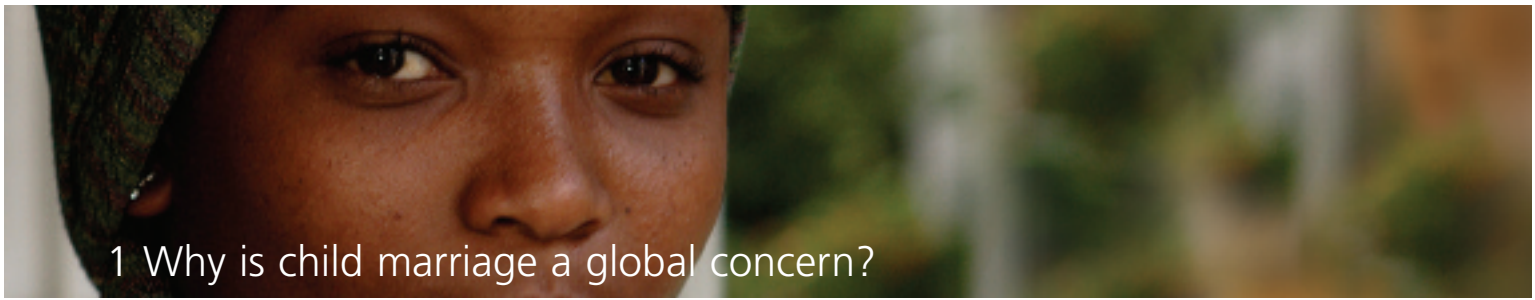
The reality of child brides

"I am one of those unfortunate Hindu women whose hard lot is to suffer the unnameable miseries entailed by the custom of early marriage. This wicked practice of child marriage has destroyed the happiness of my life. It comes between me and the thing which I prize above all others – study and mental cultivation. Without the least fault of mine I am doomed to seclusion; every aspiration of mine to rise above my ignorant sisters is looked upon with suspicion and is interpreted in the most uncharitable manner."
Rukhambai, Letter to the Times of India, 26 June 1885[1]

"You are becoming an obstacle to opportunity of the girls who have been asked for marriage. The government does not give them jobs. What will happen to them? Do you want them to go to the cities?"
A response from an elder during field interviews, Ethiopia 2005

"In Niger, which has the highest proportion of girls aged 15–19 currently in union (60 per cent), a girl in union is most likely to live in a rural area (91 per cent), to have received no education (90 per cent) and to be disproportionately located in the second wealth quintile (33 per cent). She is unlikely to have co-wives (79 per cent), and if she has children (43 per cent have no children) she is likely to have only one or two (56 per cent). Her husband is more likely to be 5–9 years older than she is (38 per cent) compared to other age gaps considered, and it is likely that neither partner received an education (73 per cent). She is likely to know how to protect herself from HIV/AIDS (64 per cent) but is unlikely to have ever used any form of contraception (89 per cent)."
UNICEF, 2005[2]



1 Why is child marriage a global concern?

Today, the devastating impact of child marriage continues to be ignored in the developing world. Millions of child brides, some only just past puberty, are denied access to health, education and economic opportunities. The majority of them are burdened with the roles and responsibilities of wives and mothers without adequate support, resources or capabilities.

This is despite the existence of numerous international and regional human rights laws and conventions against the practice. It is clear that international human rights instruments relating to child marriage remain, at best, rhetoric, or general declarations of principles, without effective national policies and mechanisms to implement and enforce them. There is now an urgent need to do things differently, if the international development agendas agreed by governments within the last decade, particularly the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD), the Fourth World Conference on Women, and more recently the Millennium Development Goals are to become a reality.

Child marriage remains a widely ignored violation of the health and development rights of girls and young women. Governments are often either unable to enforce existing laws, or rectify discrepancies between national laws on marriage age and entrenched customary and religious laws. This is because of the "official tolerance of cultural, societal and customary norms that shape and govern the institution of marriage and family life."[3] In general, there is seldom political will to act when it comes to women's and girls' human rights. Additionally, the international development community has largely failed to target development assistance to address this gross rights violation.

Child marriage is culturally packaged as a social necessity, but in many cases this amounts to "socially licensed sexual abuse and exploitation of a child."[4] It is one of the most persistent forms of sanctioned sexual abuse of girls and young women. "The fact that the arrangement is socially accepted does not

diminish the reality that a girl is deliberately exposed to sexual abuse and exploitation, usually by her parents and family."[5] The silence on the plight of child brides must end, particularly because of the increasing evidence that child marriage is a risk factor for HIV infection. The young age of child brides, their limited power in sexual decision making and reduced economic opportunities compound their vulnerability to multiple health risks.

Many valid reasons are given by parents and guardians to justify child marriage. Economic reasons often underpin these decisions which are directly linked to poverty and the lack of economic opportunities for girls in rural areas. Girls are either seen as an economic burden or valued as capital for their exchange value in terms of goods, money or livestock.[6] A combination of cultural, traditional and religious arguments also justifies child marriage. The fear and stigma attached to premarital sex and bearing children outside marriage, and the associated family honour, are often seen as valid reasons for the actions that families take. Finally, many parents tend to curtail the education of their girls and marry them off, due to fear of the high level of sexual violence and abuse encountered en route to, and even at, school.

Tackling child marriage is a daunting but possible task, requiring political will and proactive multi-faceted strategies at the international, national and community levels. *Ending Child Marriage: A Guide for Global Policy Action* is part of a wider advocacy strategy to raise awareness on child marriage and its effects on communities. It aims to stimulate decision makers worldwide – in particular government policy makers, donors, and international development agencies – to take all necessary measures to end this violation of rights. The publication outlines this global problem and the reasons why child marriage persists, assesses how it contravenes many international human rights standards, and then provides policy and programmatic recommendations. It will assist organizations to accelerate action and advocate for an end to this practice.

What is child marriage?

Child marriage, also known as early marriage, is defined as "[A]ny marriage carried out below the age of 18 years, before the girl is physically, physiologically, and psychologically ready to shoulder the responsibilities of marriage and childbearing."[7] Marriage is a formalized, binding partnership between consenting adults, which sanctions sexual relations and gives legitimacy to any offspring. It is still a respected and valued social institution throughout the world, and may take different forms in different cultures.

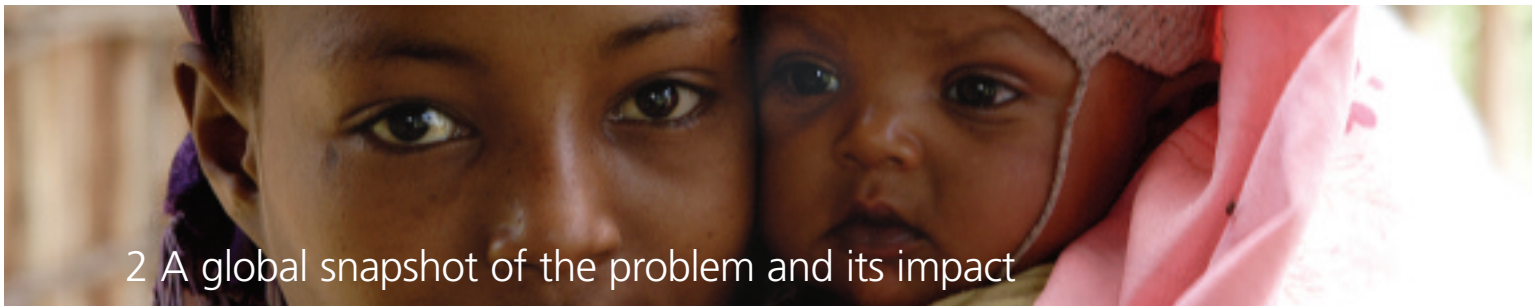
Child marriage, on the other hand, involves either one or both spouses being children and may take place with or without formal registration, and under civil, religious or customary laws. In many societies in developing countries, child marriages are used to build or strengthen alliances between families. Sometimes this may even include the betrothals of young children or babies.

The 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that marriage should be "entered only with the free and full consent

of the intending spouses." But, in the majority of child marriages, there is often an element of coercion involved: parents, guardians or families pressurize, collude or force children into marriage. Today girls are still socialized into accepting child marriage as the norm, a 'given', and many give their consent as a duty and sign of respect. However, where one of the parties in a marriage is under 18 years, consent to marry in such cases cannot always be assumed to be of 'free and full consent' and may also not always be in the best interest of the child.

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) defines a child as "every human being below the age of eighteen years unless, under the law applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier." The expert body that monitors the Convention on the Elimination on All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) in its General Recommendation 21, which explicitly deals with equality in marriage and family relations, outlaws child marriage, and stipulates 18 years as the minimum age for marriage for males and females. This is the minimum age when young people attain "full maturity and capacity to act."[8] This acknowledges that, from a child rights and equity perspective, marriage should not be permissible before 18 years of age. Although an adolescent girl may attain sexual maturity early, she will often not be physically mature enough to conceive a child, nor will she be cognitively or psychologically mature enough for marriage and the related responsibilities of being a wife and mother.

A new study by UNICEF – *Early Marriage: A Harmful Traditional Practice: A Statistical Exploration* – argues that young women in informal unions are equally as vulnerable as child brides. Cohabitation creates similar human rights concerns as marriage and young women under 18 years in such unions live with partners and take on similar roles as care givers, wives and mothers. However, the informal nature of these unions means that they are neither protected by customary nor by civil laws. Informal unions are more common in parts of Latin America, and may present equally challenging and adverse consequences for affected young women. Also "the informality of the relationship – for example, inheritance, citizenship and social recognition – might make girls in informal unions vulnerable in different ways than those in formally recognized marriages."[9] Some of the data used in this publication may not differentiate between children involved in formal or informal unions, since many of the health and social consequences related to child brides aged below 18 apply equally to cohabitating young women.



2 A global snapshot of the problem and its impact

Traditional notions of child marriage continue to justify it as a positive social norm with social and financial benefits. However, new studies on the health and social consequences reveal far more damaging results. Child marriage is a public health concern that violates international human rights laws and seriously compromises the development and health of affected individuals. Child brides are pressured to initiate sexual activity and become mothers too early.

The consequences of child marriage are often far wider than just their impact on the individual children affected. The marriage of children has negative effects on families and communities. The practice thrives on poverty and impacts adversely on a country's health and education sectors. Yet everywhere child brides and child mothers are overlooked and invisible in national policy and programme debates, despite their unique situation and vulnerability.

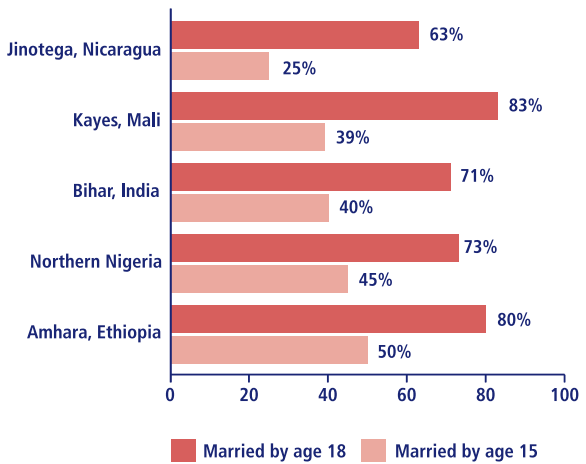
Trends in the practice of child marriage

It is very difficult to get accurate data on the true extent of child marriages. This is because most marriages are not officially registered, and many parents resort to falsifying girls' ages. Such acts are made easier in rural areas where birth certificates are often non-existent or not properly recorded. There is also very little data on girls married before the age of 15. Available data are often outdated and fail to provide adequate information to support meaningful policy and programme development. But research and policy action has continued to focus mainly on the concerns of unmarried young people. Although child marriage is said to be declining in many parts of the world, the total number of girls at risk or affected is very significant and cannot be ignored. It was estimated in 2004 that, within the next decade, more than 100 million girls in the developing world would be married before the age of 18.[10]

The UNICEF statistical study on child marriage confirms that the practice is most common in South Asia, where over 48 per

cent of 15–24-year-olds were married before they reached 18. In Africa this figure is 42 per cent (though this rises to over 60 per cent in parts of East and West Africa), and in Latin America and the Caribbean the figure is 29 per cent. In the Middle East, child marriage is common in Yemen and Palestine, and here about half of under-18s were already married.[11]

Table 1: Percentage of women aged 20–24 who are married by ages 15 and 18, by geographic area



Source: Demographic and Health Surveys
Taken from www.popcouncil.org/ta/mar.html [accessed 8/5/06]

Statistics on the prevalence of child marriage reveal sectors or areas of countries – such as ethnic, religious or socio-economic groups – where a large majority of adolescent girls are married before their fifteenth birthday.[12] *Table 1* provides data on such marriage 'hotspots' within selected countries in West Africa, South Asia and Latin America. Within large countries, such as India and Nigeria, there are often significant disparities in numbers of child marriages across states and regions. Additionally, among conflict or disaster-affected populations, rates of child marriage tend to increase as parents in distress seek to secure girls' sexual protection or to increase economic survival through marriage.

Child marriage – in particular marriages of under-15s – is more common in rural communities. This is because rural households tend to have more entrenched traditional attitudes and customs, are less affected by external influences, and have fewer livelihood options for young women. In general, child marriage is more prevalent among poorer families, although where the practice is virtually universal it may be almost as common among wealthier families. Marriage of girls often correlates with low levels of education, or no education. The UNICEF statistical study, which is the most comprehensive global analysis on child marriage, found that in 47 countries girls aged 15–19 who had higher levels of education were least likely to be in any marriage union. Only in a small number of countries were girls with secondary education equally likely to be married.[13]

Globally, child marriage affects more girls than boys: on average only 5 per cent of males marry before they reach 19 years. Even though child marriage is predominantly a problem of

developing countries, there is still evidence of the practice in a few developed countries, including the United States where parents can give consent to the marriage of their daughters below the age of 15 years.[14]

Health costs of early sexual initiation and early pregnancy

> **"For every woman who dies in childbirth, some 15 to 30 survive but suffer chronic disabilities, the most devastating of which is obstetric fistula. Fistula is an injury to a woman's birth canal that leaves her leaking urine and/or faeces. Young women under age 20 are especially prone to developing fistulas if they cannot get a Caesarean section during prolonged obstructed labour. Prevalence is highest in impoverished communities in Africa and Asia."** (UNFPA, 2003)[15]

Child marriage is often associated with multiple health risks. This is because young brides have limited access to, and use of, contraception and reproductive health services and information. The majority are exposed to early and frequent sexual relations and to repeated pregnancies and childbirth before they are physically mature and psychologically ready. Obstetric fistula is one of the most devastating consequences, with over two million girls and young women affected by this treatable and indeed preventable reproductive health complication. Pregnancy-related deaths are also the leading cause of mortality in 15–19-year-old girls, and those aged under 15 years are five times more likely to die than those aged over 20. Infant deaths are also twice as high in babies of very young mothers.[16] A study in Niger confirmed that pregnant young women from poorer communities are eight times less likely to deliver with the assistance of a skilled birth attendant than young women from the wealthiest quintile of their community.[17]

A study on contraceptive use among 15–19-year-old girls in unions found that many felt pressurized by families to prove their fertility very early in the marriage. For example, 46 per cent of girls in unions had never used any contraception, and only 31 per cent stated that they used modern contraceptive methods.[18] Child brides are also least likely to use reproductive services because of their limited decision making powers and economic dependency. Many married girls either do not know about contraception or are unable to negotiate its use due to fear of violence from their spouses, who often tend to be older.

A World Health Organization multi-country study on women's health and domestic violence found that age was a key risk factor. Younger women, particularly those aged 15–19, with lower levels of education had a higher risk of physical or sexual violence perpetrated by a partner in all the study countries except Japan and Ethiopia. "In urban Bangladesh, 48 per cent of 15–19-year-old women reported either physical or sexual violence, or both, by a partner within the past 12 months, versus 10 per cent of 45–49-year-olds. In urban Peru, the difference was 41 per cent among 15–19-year-olds versus 8 per cent of 45–49-year-olds."[19]

Domestic violence thrives in an environment where women feel powerless and lack access to vital resources and decision making powers. Child marriages tend to create a multitude of conditions that make affected young women vulnerable to violence. The

wide age gap between child brides and their spouses makes them less able to negotiate, they have limited social support networks, are economically dependent and have limited mobility. Younger child brides may also be at risk of sexual violence and abuse from older men in their spouses' families, and are known to be more likely to tolerate violence and less likely to leave abusive partners.

Increased vulnerability to HIV

> **"These data call into question the often deeply ingrained belief that marriage protects young women from HIV. First, for many adolescents – particularly the youngest brides – marriage greatly increases their potential exposure to the virus, because marriage results in a transition from virginity to frequent unprotected sex."[20]**

Despite recent gains in expanding access to HIV prevention and treatment, the epidemic is worsening among young women. The general belief (even among policy makers and communities) that marriage protects girls from HIV infection effectively condones the practice of child marriage. However, recent research conducted by the Population Council shows that child wives are more vulnerable to contracting HIV, particularly in generalized epidemics. *Table 2* shows child marriage hotspots in Africa, together with national HIV prevalence rates among girls married at different ages.[21] Contributory factors include the young age at marriage, the wide spousal age gap, frequency of unprotected sexual activity, limited access to information and negotiation powers. Marriage often increases sexual activity and the likelihood of exposure and risk, particularly because many young brides cannot negotiate safe sex (even when they have knowledge about how to protect themselves) and are under pressure to demonstrate their fertility. It would both be negligent and discriminatory against child brides if their vulnerability to HIV, particularly in parts of sub-Saharan Africa, is not recognized and addressed.

Table 2: Percentage of young women aged 15–24 married by age 15, married by age 18, and infected with HIV, by country and regional hotspot

	Per cent married by age 15		Per cent married by age 18		Nationwide HIV prevalence rate in young women aged 15–24
Country (regional hotspot)	Nationwide	Regional hotspot	Nationwide	Regional hotspot	
Ethiopia (Amhara)	19	50	49	80	10.0
Mozambique (Nampula)	22	53	57	82	18.8
Nigeria (Northwest)	19	41	43	79	7.0
Tanzania (Shinyinga)	6	14	39	59	9.7
Uganda (Eastern)	15	21	54	63	5.6
Zambia (Luapula)	9	16	44	55	25.2

Source: Population Council (2005) cited from Demographic and Health Surveys and UNAIDS

Traditional HIV prevention strategies have focused on the 'ABC' approach: abstinence, being faithful and relying on condoms. The reality is that "many of the world's women are simply not in a position to abstain from sex, rely on fidelity or negotiate condom use. ABC can only be a viable and effective prevention option for women and girls if it is implemented as part of a multi-faceted package of interventions that seek to redress deep-rooted gender imbalances."[22] A publication on HIV and young people revealed in a study in Pune, India, that a quarter of women in an antenatal clinic had contracted a sexually transmitted infection (STI) and about 14 per cent were already HIV positive. The majority were married and 91 per cent reported they had only had sexual relations with their husbands.[23] UNAIDS data show that 60 per cent of new HIV infections in Africa alone are among young women aged 15–24, and in parts of Africa and the Caribbean young women are nearly six times more likely to be infected with HIV than young men.[24] This means that young women are engaging in unprotected sex and are either unable to access relevant information or have little power to protect themselves.

The UN Task Force on Women, Girls and HIV/AIDS in southern Africa identified three key factors that fuel the vulnerability of women and girls to HIV infection. The general culture of silence around sexuality, exploitative transactional and intergenerational sex, and violence against women.[25] These factors in conjunction with the wider root causes of poverty and gender inequalities make women and girls vulnerable to HIV. This is further worsened by myths that drive men to marry virgins in the hope of being 'cured' of HIV. Traditions such as widow cleansing in some parts of Africa and Asia require widows to have sexual relations with total strangers or relatives. In other cultures widows are forced to marry a dead husband's brother. Child brides will invariably be more likely to go along with many of these traditional norms and social pressures.

The global HIV pandemic is now recognized as requiring exceptional responses, and a new way forward is to acknowledge that many HIV prevention programmes have failed to reach out to vulnerable young women. Without redressing entrenched gender norms and codes of conduct on sexual relationships, gender discrimination and inequalities will further increase young women's vulnerability. In addition, child brides who are HIV positive will become more marginalized and less able to access much needed treatment and care.

Education and development opportunity costs

> **"Immediately after we were withdrawn from the school by our father, my maternal uncle came to ask for our hands in marriage for his sons. My sister and I refused. Our father forced us and of course we were married against our will and this was the first injustice done to us. I was 13 years old and I had just started menstruating. I was engaged for a year before I was married off at 14 years of age. I became pregnant three months after I got married."** A 19-year-old girl from Yemen, in conversation with Dr Husnia Al-Kadri and Maha El-Metwally[26]

Education and social development are key areas where many child brides lose out when they are married too early. In large parts of Asia, Africa and in some Middle Eastern communities, girls are not enrolled in school or are withdrawn at puberty, often to undertake domestic duties or specifically for marriage. Education and employment outside the home may be considered irrelevant or undesirable where women's roles are confined to those of daughter, wife and mother. This is more so for girls from poor communities who have less access to education, and are more likely to marry early. Several studies confirm a strong correlation between the level of women's education and their use of reproductive health services. Secondary education, in particular, improves women's status, delays the age of marriage, and enhances reproductive decision making. Conversely, women who are poor and have little education "tend to start childbearing at younger ages, have more children too close together, and prolong childbearing."[27]

The children of young, uneducated mothers are also less likely to attain high levels of education, perpetuating cycles of low literacy and limited livelihood opportunities. Child marriage deprives societies of the intellectual and financial/livelihood contributions of girls, and of their offspring. Human rights research shows that the greatest obstacles to girls' education – as identified in many government reports to human rights monitoring bodies – are child marriage, pregnancy and domestic chores.[28] The curtailment of girls' education in this way directly undermines national and international efforts to achieve targets on education and gender equality in education. Reduced literacy levels ultimately lead to a reduction in employment or income generation options, and impair the ability of child wives to absorb and utilize information. This tends to affect autonomy in making key decisions, including those that relate to their reproductive health and the well-being of their children. Girls who are denied education are also invariably denied exposure outside the home environment, resulting in low self-confidence, further perpetuating women's powerlessness and vulnerability to poverty.

The current international development targets, the MDGs, particularly those on poverty, universal primary education, maternal and child mortality, and HIV/AIDS, have not been met in many countries in Africa. Child marriage directly hampers efforts to achieve the MDGs, as the box on the next page illustrates.

When girls' education is disrupted to get them married early, they also lose valued opportunities to other benefits of formal education. This makes the smooth transition from adolescence into adulthood for the majority of married girls very problematic. Where the transition to adulthood is managed and supported, the majority of young women and girls become more empowered to effectively play their future roles as women, mothers, wives, wage earners and active citizens of their country. Education is known to play a vital part in this transition. Yet "girls of primary school age not only are precluded from school but also lose their rights as children. Child marriage transforms a school girl into an adult, even if she is only seven years old."[29]

Child marriage impedes the Millennium Development Goals[30]

Ending child marriage will have a direct effect on realizing six of the MDGs, the key development priorities until 2015, agreed by governments and the international community in September 2000.

Goal 1: Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger. **Child mothers often have limited skills, education and access to the economic assets and decision making powers necessary to properly nourish their offspring, and are therefore likely to perpetuate the cycle of poverty.**

Goal 2: Achieve universal primary education. **Access to universal education is a right which many girls forced into child marriage are denied. Their limited education reduces their chances of acquiring related skills and economic opportunities. Globally, there is a strong link between child marriage and low levels of education or non-education.**

Goal 3: Promote gender equality and empower women. **Eliminating gender inequalities and empowering young women requires access to basic capabilities such as education, health and nutrition, as well as critical social and economic resources and opportunities within an enabling environment. Child marriage disadvantages women and girls and entrenches gender inequalities.**

Goal 4: Reduce child mortality. **Children of child mothers are more likely to be premature and have low birth weight. Additionally, because child brides are more vulnerable to HIV, there is an increased risk that they will pass their infection to their babies. Delaying child marriage will ultimately reduce child mortality figures.**

Goal 5: Improve maternal health. **Maternal mortality remains a major problem for many countries in Africa which have high levels of child marriages. Child mothers have double the chance of dying during or after childbirth, and suffer more from maternal morbidities such as debilitating obstetric fistula.**

Goal 6: Combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases. **Marriage is a risk factor in the spread of HIV and other STIs. Child brides who marry older and more sexually experienced men have a heightened risk of contracting HIV. Reducing levels of child marriage should be an essential strategy in attaining targets for reducing the rate of HIV infection among young people aged 15–24.**

Poverty, deprivation and risks

> **"Child marriage makes it harder for families, communities and countries to escape poverty. It erodes the health and well-being of girls and the overall welfare of communities. It also undercuts international efforts to fight poverty and HIV/AIDS, improve child health and survival, and support other international development initiatives, making billions of development assistance dollars less effective."**
>
> International Centre for Research on Women (2005)[31]

In many countries child marriage is linked with poverty. This is because it affects particularly the poorest in the population, and helps to reinforce cycles of poverty. Child wives tend to have more children and fewer independent income options. But child marriages can result in the fragmentation of families, either due to early widowhood, when the older spouses of child brides die, or due to higher levels of divorce. Child brides are often more likely to experience domestic violence and least likely to take action against this abuse. The majority of affected girls become condemned to a life of financial and social insecurity. This is a real paradox for many parents, given that they marry off their daughters at a young age in the belief that this will enhance the girl's and the family's security. Poverty ultimately fuels child marriage, which in turn perpetuates the feminization of poverty. This situation is also supported by country economic indicators for measuring the health of the economy. Several countries with very low gross domestic products (GDPs) tend to have higher rates of child marriage.[32]

Son preference is very strong in many communities in South Asia, which may not be unrelated to the expenses involved when marrying off a daughter. The rising costs of marriage ceremonies and related dowry costs force many families to marry their daughters at the same time to reduce costs. In many villages that practise child marriage in Tamil Nadu State in India, girls are married off before they attain puberty because of the social stigma the community attaches to marriage after puberty. Many such marriages end in divorce or the girls become widows, and custom forbids divorced or widowed women to remarry, further impoverishing them.[33] Entrenched community norms and myths clearly help to perpetuate the practice of child marriage and related poverty.

Boys forced into marriage early may also suffer financially. Economic responsibilities can place heavy burdens on them and curtail their education sooner than they might want. However, while boys can leave their wives at their parents' homes and seek employment opportunities elsewhere, this option is not available to the majority of young wives.

Research on the link between education and poverty reduction indicates that secondary education may help reduce poverty. However, in many communities the high cost of education means that parents make choices that disrupt girls' education (marrying them off instead). This is because the majority of poor parents fail to see the "economic rationale for investing in their daughter's education."[34] Thus national and international targets for the reduction of poverty will be harder to reach if practices like child marriage which undermine the livelihood capacities of large sections of society persist.

Child marriages across borders

Child marriage creates numerous challenges which may be of interest at the global or regional level. In some parts of Asia, many girls are forced into child marriages to facilitate their (or their relatives') emigration to the West, particularly the UK and North America. There have been several reports of 'community marriages' in the UK, which involve underage girls marrying within immigrant communities from the Middle East, North Africa, Turkey and South Asia.[35] Over the last decade a highly commercial form of short-term marriages has also operated in Arab countries. Here, young girls are given in marriage to wealthy men from Arab Gulf countries only to become domestic servants or abandoned after a short time period.[36] Many migrant girls forced into such marriages invariably encounter barriers such as language, curtailed education and limited employment opportunities in their new country. In general the majority of young women marry migrants in the hope of improving their family status. Those unable to emigrate with their husbands are often abandoned and face other economic difficulties and loss of male protection. These wives may be put under tremendous pressure to fend alone for any children that result from such temporary marriages.

Child marriages linked to migration and trafficking necessitate complex relationships among authorities in the countries involved. If receiving countries have signed international commitments to uphold children's and women's rights then they will be obliged to monitor and enforce appropriate legislation to protect all child spouses who live within their borders, regardless of their place of origin.

3 Factors that promote and reinforce child marriage

Throughout the world, child marriage is held as a deeply entrenched social and economic institution, which is enshrined in religion or tradition and continues to flourish for many different reasons. The practice is similar in many ways to the social dynamics related to female genital mutilation (FGM) which is also reinforced by social norms.

In several societies in Africa, child marriage is also intimately connected with FGM, because the practice forms part of the requirements of a girl for her distant or imminent marriage. As demonstrated earlier, there are a number of reinforcing factors that continue to perpetuate both practices. These pose numerous challenges for policy makers.

Family ties

The marriage or betrothal of children in parts of Africa and Asia is valued as a means of consolidating powerful relations between families, for sealing deals over land or other property, or even for settling disputes. Marriage may also be a way of maintaining ethnic or community relations. Children's rights as individuals in such situations are often disregarded; they may instead be seen purely as commodities at the family's disposal. Betrothals are traditionally not supposed to involve sexual relations until the girl reaches adolescence, but in reality husbands are rarely restrained. Young girls may be forced or coerced to initiate sex even before it is traditionally permitted.

In parts of South Asia, the practice of families using young girls to settle family feuds is a form of child marriage, which is driven by tradition and family ties. In Pakistan, the practice of 'vani' requires giving away girls in marriage to relatives of murder victims, as compensation for crimes committed, or to settle feuds between families or clans.[37]

Trokosi is a form of ritual slavery practised in parts of Ghana, Togo and Benin. Girls begin their life of slavery within the shrine in pre-adolescence – some as young as four. Under this custom, a family must offer a virgin daughter to the gods to atone for the 'sins and crimes' of a relative who, in most cases, may be long dead. These crimes may range in severity from murder to petty thefts. Trokosi are always girls – literally 'wives of the gods' – forced to perform sexual services for the idol priests. Their children also become slaves of the priest, working in his fields. These girls are denied access to education and health care, and are required to spend the rest of their lives as 'wives of the gods', through the gods' medium, the fetish priest. Girls live constantly at the mercy of these fetish priests, who justify their rape and other violations with the claim that Trokosi slaves are like priestesses who copulate with the gods through their earthly servants. If a girl dies or the priest tires of her, she has to be replaced. The majority of parents are fearful of the consequences of not complying with the terms of these shrines. Anti-Slavery International, 2005[38]

Gender inequality

Gender inequality persists in most societies despite global statements of commitment to empower women and improve gender equality. In many societies worldwide power structures are still overwhelmingly male-dominated or patriarchal. Under such conditions, the marriage of girls is perceived as a necessary way of reinforcing existing norms. It ensures that girls and women accept their domestic roles and have a limited role within the wider society. This clearly results in women's total dependency on men. Therefore, any government making genuine efforts to eradicate gender inequality will find its path blocked unless it explicitly tackles entrenched social norms, attitudes and practices in relation to marriage, as an integral component of its gender equality strategy.

Poverty and economic survival strategies

In traditional societies – where infant mortality was very high and survival depended on a family's ability to produce its own food or goods for sale – child marriage helped to maximize the number of pregnancies and ensure enough surviving children to meet household labour needs. Although the costs of raising children (e.g. funding education) may be increasingly putting pressure on families to reduce the number of births, parents in rural communities least impacted by outside influences are still motivated by traditional desires for large families. Having a large number of children, depending on the social norm, also provides a source of social security for parents in their old age.

Child marriage is valued as an economic coping strategy which reduces the costs of raising daughters. In this sense, poverty becomes a primary reason for child marriage because of perceived benefits to the family and the daughter. Marriage arrangements and requirements, such as dowry payments in parts of South Asia where parents of the young woman are obliged to give gifts to the spouse and his family, perpetuate

child marriages. This is because the dowry requirement often increases with the age and the education level of the girl. Additionally, poor families tend to marry off girls at the same time to help reduce the burden of high marriage ceremony expenses.

Families in parts of sub-Saharan Africa affected by poverty and other disasters often resort to marrying off their daughters early so as to benefit from bride price or acquire additional help in the family. In some communities, men who cannot afford to pay the bride price for a woman resort to violent abduction and rape of young girls. The challenge for policy makers in such contexts is how to promote the development of alternative survival options for communities, so that child marriage and high birth rates are no longer seen as central to a family's survival.

Economic growth in many middle-level countries in North Africa and East and South East Asia has expanded opportunities for female employment within low-paid industries. This has also resulted in the erosion of many prejudices against female education and undermined the desire for child marriages. Girls instead become valued for their ability to earn income for their parents. A study in Bangladesh found that 'positive deviant' families – poor families who delayed their daughter's marriage or first birth – made their decisions primarily based on aspirations for female employment. Others felt it was justified for mature girls to stay unmarried so long as they were in school, indicating the need for more schemes to support girls' secondary education.[39]

Control over sexuality and protecting family honour

Child marriage is traditionally recognized as necessary for controlling girls' sexuality and reproduction. Cultural and religious notions of a girl's virginity and chastity in many societies are directly linked to the honour and status of a family or clan. This means that there is tremendous pressure on parents to marry off girls early to preserve family honour and minimize the risk of improper sexual activity or conduct.[40] Indeed, girls are perceived as incapable of protecting themselves through their own agency. Girls in rural communities may be withdrawn from school at first menstruation to restrict their movements in order to protect their sexuality.[41] This is also linked to the belief that girls' education will, in the long term, adversely influence their future roles as wives and mothers, leading families to continue justifying child marriages.

Tradition and culture

In communities where child marriage is prevalent there is strong social pressure on families to conform. Failure to conform can often result in ridicule, disapproval or family shame. Local myths encourage earlier marriage of girls – such as in the Amhara Region of Ethiopia where people perceive menstruation to be induced by intercourse – and such myths encourage earlier marriage of girls.[42] Invariably, local perceptions on the ideal age for marriage, the desire for submissive wives, extended family patterns and other customary requirements (e.g. dowries or bride price), are all enshrined in local customs or religious norms. In many contexts child marriage is legitimized by patriarchy, and

related family structures, which ensure that marriage transfers a father's role over his girl child to her future spouse. This is often encouraged "to take place before a girl reaches the age when she might question it."[43] The reality for many women and girls in rural areas is that their daily lives are more often dictated by customary laws than by national laws. Clearly, many of the social and cultural issues that reinforce child marriage indicate challenges that need to be addressed, but they also provide opportunities for advancing many development and human rights goals.[44] The use of religion and tradition to justify child marriages shows an urgent need for developing effective strategies for collaboration with religious and traditional leaders.

Insecurity

Situations of insecurity and acute poverty, particularly during disasters such as war, famine or the HIV and AIDS epidemic, can prompt parents or carers to resort to child marriage as a protective mechanism or survival strategy. In some parts of sub-Saharan Africa the HIV and AIDS epidemic has led to an increase in child marriages. This could be due to families' desires to secure the future of their daughters. Among some populations which have been disrupted by war (e.g. in Burundi, Somalia, Northern Uganda and Afghanistan), marrying a young daughter to a warlord or someone who can look after her may be a strategy for physical security or family support. In the worst cases girls are abducted or kidnapped by armed militia or rebels and forced into temporary marriages which amount to "a combination of child prostitution and pure slavery." Displaced populations living in refugee camps may feel unable to protect their daughters from rape, and so marriage to a warlord or other authority figure may provide improved protection.[45]

4 Human rights obligations of governments

"By ratifying or acceding to international conventions, state parties accept the legal duty to abide by the conventions and thereby become obliged to take steps to protect the exercise and enjoyment of human rights, to investigate violations, and to provide effective remedies to victims." Sagade, 2005:113

One of the many benefits of being a citizen of any country is that one is entitled to a level of protection of one's rights either through the national constitution or the laws of the country. Similarly therefore all girls and women expect their governments to protect their rights because they are citizens by law. Human rights standards and norms also require that the rights of particularly vulnerable groups be respected, protected and fulfilled. This, in practice, means that all girls should be protected from being forced into marriage at a young age. Key international and regional human rights laws on women and children have addressed in various ways the problem of child marriage. Therefore governments have a duty to translate these laws into national legislation and introduce mechanisms to implement them. However, many countries that ratify international human rights treaties often opt out of crucial clauses relating to women's rights within marriage, and so by default endorse discrimination and gender inequality.

Why a human rights framework is critical for stopping child marriage

A human rights framework provides an empowering framework for protecting vulnerable and at-risk girls from child marriage. Governments which ratify international human rights conventions are bound by minimum global standards and have a legal responsibility for preventing violations of rights.[46] Signatory states are obliged to protect their citizens, particularly children,

due to their vulnerability, dependence and specific entitlements essential for their overall development. In the context of child marriage, although it is conducted by private individuals and not directly by the state, the state can be held responsible for "lack of diligence in preventing through its executive, legislative, or judicial organs the private act of contracting child marriage."[47] International human rights laws are now increasingly being used in national courts as well as in human rights treaty monitoring bodies to promote and improve girls' and women's human rights.

Key international and regional human rights instruments relating to child marriage

- **Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) Article 16**
- **Supplementary Convention on the Abolition of Slavery, the Slave Trade, and Institutions and Practices Similar to Slavery (1956) Article 1(c)**
- **Convention on Consent to Marriage, Minimum Age for Marriage and Registration of Marriages (1964) Articles 1, 2 and 3**
- **Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) (1979) Articles 2 and 16**
- **The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1976) Article 12**
- **The Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) (1989)**
- **The African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (2000) Article XXI**
- **Protocol to the African Charter on Human and People's Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa (known as the Maputo Protocol) (2003) Article 6, clauses (a), (b), (d)**

Although the international human rights conventions highlighted on the left may not provide comprehensive guidance in the area of child marriage, CEDAW – which is widely recognized as the women's bill of rights – provides explicit clauses on key areas. This includes the issue of consent, and a minimum marriage age of 18 years which outlaws discriminatory ages for males and females. The Protocol to the *African Charter on Human and People's Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa* (also known as the Maputo Protocol) goes further to address all the above and calls for registration of all marriages.[48] Articles 2 and 16 are recognized as core provisions in CEDAW, addressing discrimination, marriage and family relations, but many states that have ratified this convention continue to make reservations on these key articles. Additionally, countries which have national laws on the minimum age of marriage often do not have the political will or resources to enforce them. Nevertheless, human rights treaties monitoring bodies are beginning to take note of child marriage and can provide opportunities to hold governments accountable to child brides. A combination of international human rights conventions and national laws and policies is, essentially, the best way to make any meaningful and sustainable change on the problem of child marriage.

The right to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health

Child marriage violates the rights of girls to enjoy the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health. It is particularly in the context of sexual and reproductive health that child brides

and their offspring face the greatest risks. Over 70 per cent of states in the world have ratified the *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights*, which provides standards on the right to health. Governments, therefore, have a duty to monitor compliance with this right. In particular they must ensure that information and services are made more accessible to vulnerable groups, including child mothers; are accessible to all income groups without discrimination; are acceptable to cultural needs; and are of good quality.[49]

Three key international agreements that provide added standards for governments in realizing reproductive health and rights are the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development; the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women; and the 2001 and 2006 United Nations General Assembly Special Session (UNGASS) on HIV/AIDS. These landmark agreements promote human rights, gender equality and empowerment as critical to the overall development and well-being of women, girls and young women.

In the context of the HIV epidemic, governments pledged at their meeting in 2001 to progress by 2005 on a number of actions. They pledged to "ensure development and accelerated implementation of national strategies for women's empowerment, the promotion and protection of women's full enjoyment of all human rights and reduction of their vulnerability to HIV/AIDS through the elimination of all forms of discrimination, as well as forms of violence against women and girls, including harmful traditional and customary practices…"[50] The failure of many HIV programmes to integrate reproductive health concerns in areas of high prevalence amounts to discrimination against child brides, who are more likely to require frequent use of reproductive health services.

The right to education

Several studies recognize that child marriage limits girls' rights to education. The essence of the rights to education and to health is that they facilitate and ensure the effective enjoyment of other human rights. Their denial results in the denial of other rights such as the right to work, the right to life and so on. Many child brides are withdrawn from school before they have the opportunity to acquire the relevant skills, abilities and self-confidence that will enable them to enjoy or exercise these other key human rights entitlements.

"International human rights law lays down a three-way set of criteria, whereby girls should have an equal right *to* education and equal rights *in* education, and their equal rights should be promoted *through* education."[51] The denial of formal education means that child brides are often deprived of opportunities to access in-school programmes on HIV prevention and reproductive health information. The Convention on the Rights of the Child addresses other essential rights in relation to education. They include the right to educational and vocational information and guidance as well as the right to seek, receive and impart information and ideas. In addition, schools are better suited to deliver the ICPD Programme of Action, including the call for programmes to meet the reproductive health needs of young people. Access to educational information and advice on

reproductive health should be objective and free from stereotypes, and should support informed, full and free decision making in matters related to reproductive health and rights.[52] Many child brides who become pregnant, however, are forced to leave school because of discriminatory policies and unfavourable school environments.

The Regional Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the African Child calls on parties who ratify it to ensure that child mothers complete their primary education, or are given the chance to continue their education. This clause requires enforcing the right to education for all pregnant girls and child mothers. Often "parents, teachers and community leaders support the expulsion of pregnant girls from school, rationalizing this choice by stating the need to uphold moral norms that prohibit teenage sex, and pregnancy is treated as irrefutable proof that this norm has been breached. Adult men, including teachers, who seem to be responsible for most teenage pregnancies, have remained beyond the remit of punishment."[53] This is a sad reality in many countries, where school discriminatory policies and gender-biased environment and limited community support systems make it impossible for married girls and young mothers to return to school.

The right to decide if, when and whom to marry

A number of factors are now known to contribute to the practice of child marriage, including the state of the country's civil registration system, the lack of legislative framework and enforcement mechanisms, and the existence of traditional and religious laws that support the practice.[54] An effective legal framework, which is supported by resources and enforcement mechanisms, provides a protective framework that ensures spouses' rights to decide when and whom to marry. It also provides an enabling and supportive environment that will help to guide advocates and activists to mobilize communities to end child marriage.

CEDAW states that: "the betrothal and marriage of a child shall have no legal effect, and all necessary action, including legislation, shall be taken to specify a minimum age of marriage." CEDAW recommends this should be 18 years for both girls and boys; an ideal age when they attain full maturity and adequate capacity to act. In reality, many laws on minimum marriage age are poorly enforced, often lack effective punitive measures or do not apply to communities in rural areas. This is because "civil, religious, customary and traditional laws often co-exist side-by-side, with no hierarchy of laws."[55] As such many laws on minimum age of marriage are unclear, confusing and ultimately impossible to enforce. Discrimination between marriage ages for males and females is still widespread. A study in 2004 found that in 44 countries, girls were, by law, allowed to marry earlier than boys.[56]

Article 1 of CEDAW defines 'discrimination against women' as "any distinction, exclusion or restriction made on the basis of sex which has the effect or purpose of impairing or nullifying the recognition, enjoyment or exercise by women, irrespective of their marital status, on a basis of equality of men and women, of human rights and fundamental freedoms" in all spheres.[57] Child

marriage clearly discriminates against girls because they are disproportionately affected by the practice, and bear the greater health, social and development burdens.

A key requirement of the right to marry is that all parties are able to enter marriage with their free and full consent. The right to exercise choice in relation to a spouse has also long been recognized in human rights law. But there are many serious loopholes and inconsistencies in national laws on minimum age of marriage that can undermine these rights (e.g. rapists being permitted to marry underage girls they have abused). Even where the laws are very clear, many still encourage child marriage either with parental consent or judicial authority. Where statutory laws coexist with religious and customary laws, they often fail to ensure effective protection of girls. Clearly, many religious and customary norms lack the necessary legal clarity or do not adequately protect girls. Also, "parental consent is likewise not protective when not regulated to ensure that the principle of the best interests of the child is applied."[58]

The rights of the child

Although the Convention on the Rights of the Child does not specifically address child marriage, it provides a number of norms and protective measures for children which collectively provide an enabling framework for tackling child marriage. While the CRC defines a child as below the age of 18 years, at the same time it allows situations where a state can legislate for this age of 18 years to be reduced. However, the articles contained in the Convention make it clear that child marriage undermines a number of rights which are guaranteed by this Convention. They include the following:

- The right to life, Article 6
- The right to health, Article 24
- The right to be protected from harmful practices, Article 24
- The right to freedom from abuse and exploitation, Articles 19, 34, 39
- The right to education, Articles 24, 28, 29
- The right to participation, Articles 12, 13, 14, 15

Remarkably, almost all countries in the world, with the exception of Somalia and the United States of America, have signed the CRC. States Parties that sign the CRC are expected to introduce appropriate measures to ensure the implementation of the rights recognized in the Convention. Additionally the Convention stresses that in all matters concerning children, whether in the public or private arena, "the best interest of the child shall be a primary consideration."[59] This all confirms that child marriage falls within the protective measures outlined in the CRC, thus providing valuable opportunities to use the Convention's monitoring bodies to ensure adequate protection of girls and young women and to delay the age of marriage.

5 A call for global action

This policy guide has demonstrated the problem of child marriage and its impact at national and global levels. This section provides recommendations and practical steps for policy makers to respond to this problem.

These actions should be viewed within the context of a wider strategy, based on action at international, national and community levels. The challenge for governments and the international community is to demonstrate their commitment to promote and protect the rights of girls and women by introducing appropriate laws and policies. Additionally, political will is needed – in the form of resources and accountability measures – to ensure the effective implementation of laws, policies and programmes that respect rights and enhance the capacity of duty bearers, in particular parents and guardians, to meet their duties and obligations.

The recommendations provided here are based on two technical consultations on child marriage held in Burkina Faso (2003) and in Nairobi (2005). These brought together international and regional participants, from a variety of disciplines, to share research and programmes and to discuss strategies for action to address child marriage. The two consultations addressed many facets of child marriage programming and outlined priority areas of action at national, regional and international levels. These recommendations therefore reflect the views of a number of players and more recent programme lessons and can be applicable globally.

This policy guide appeals to key policy makers especially governments, international development agencies, donors and non-governmental organizations to strengthen global commitments and fulfil pledges to empower women and girls by

doubling efforts to end child marriages. This is a call for global action now.

Following the technical consultation on early and forced marriage held in Ouagadougou, October 2003, participants drew up a declaration, stating:

- **We call on governments and international development agencies to recognize the efforts being made by civil society organizations in addressing the concerns and situation of girls and women affected by child marriages by providing the necessary support and resources to respond to the challenges posed by child and forced marriages.**
- **That our governments and the African Union adopt a clear and unambiguous position on child and forced marriages and rectify the legislative loopholes between religious, customary and civil marriages, and sign the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and People's Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa and ensure that special measures are taken to help end this practice.**

Ouagadougou Declaration on Child Marriage, October 2003[60]

Enact, standardize and enforce national laws

National laws represent commitment by governments to translate and domesticate international human rights instruments and give guidance to policy makers and community activists. Laws should be introduced, where no minimum age of marriage exists, to bring the situation in line with the human rights standards discussed earlier. The focus of national law should be on safeguarding the rights of children and women and eliminating discrimination between males and females. Action to enact and enforce national and international laws on child marriage should include the following measures:

- **Amend or introduce new legislation on child marriage and enforcement mechanisms** where necessary, to guarantee 18 as the minimum age of marriage for both males and females and to address consent and appropriate sanctions.
- **Review and amend, where necessary, national family and marriage laws and policies that discriminate against women and girls,** so as to enhance their rights to property and economic independence.
- **Enforce the registration of all births and marriages** to support effective implementation of laws on minimum marriage age.
- **Work towards the removal of reservations to key conventions,** including CEDAW.
- **Ensure that reports to international human rights treaty bodies,** in particular the CRC and CEDAW, include a focus on measures adopted to delay child marriage and progress towards reducing child marriage.

Create an enabling environment for social change

Alongside the introduction of national laws, there needs to be a holistic policy environment that supports and promotes human rights, builds capacity and empowers individuals, community stakeholders and organizations to change attitudes and the cultural and religious norms that perpetuate child marriage. Changing entrenched social norms will require both national and community-level actions. In some contexts this will require different approaches at the community level. A flexible strategy – based on creating an enabling environment at the policy level, and ensuring adequate resources and incentives for meaningful

social change at the community level – includes the following elements:

- **Improve data and monitoring systems**. Introduce mechanisms to enable regular monitoring of national laws and policies relating to child marriage to help assess progress. Listen and respond to the voices of child spouses and those at risk of child marriage when conducting situation analyses.
- **Assess the role of customary and religious laws that condone child marriage** and promote dialogue with traditional and religious leaders to identify practical ways to reduce child marriage.
- **Train key government officials, judiciary, law enforcement officers and policy makers, at all levels,** on the law and related gender equity and human rights to support the effective implementation and enforcement of the law and related policies.
- **Support awareness-raising and public education programmes about the negative effects of child marriage**, and related human rights of girls and women, to help change attitudes, and strengthen duties of parents, guardians and the community to protect vulnerable girls.
- **Support civil society organizations, including financially**, and ensure they have the skills and capacity to mobilize communities to end child marriage.
- **Create opportunities for dialogue with men, including traditional and religious leaders**, on women's and girls' rights within marriage, and discriminatory cultural norms.
- **Establish global and national structures** with a mandate to review laws and policies, monitor the practice, particularly within hotspots and advise on the formulation of relevant policies and programmes that will help promote the rights of married young women; and coordinate national efforts to end child marriages.
- **Raise awareness within the international development community** about the effects of child marriage on international development agendas, including the MDGs, the Poverty Reduction Strategy Policies, and the landmark Cairo and Beijing women's human rights and development agendas.

Develop multi-sectoral programme approaches and partnerships

Given the multiple consequences of child marriage, a multi-sectoral and multi-pronged approach is the most effective way to address this issue. Girls at risk of child marriage and married young women will need different services and support. In addition, key support services such as reproductive health, education, law and employment need to work together at different levels, both national and community. Building alliances and working through partnerships and networks with multiple players is needed: from government agencies, civil society, researchers and human rights activists. The synergy of efforts will ensure effective policy and programme development and implementation.

- **Strengthen the integration of child marriage prevention and support programmes** into other government sector initiatives, especially in the areas of health, education, HIV and employment.
- **Increase collaboration between civil society and national programmes** to support, in particular, community-based efforts to reduce child marriage.
- **Strengthen participation of key stakeholders in prevention programmes,** in particular young people and community stakeholders,

including parents, religious and community leaders and opinion makers, teachers and so on. Their participation is essential in efforts to reinforce and implement policies and laws.

- **Strengthen the role of community-based organizations**, especially women's and young people's organizations, to enable them to engage better with community and religious leaders.
- **Support health professionals to promote anti-child-marriage messages**, and help them to mobilize at the community level, as these workers may be highly respected by communities. Health and reproductive health programmes and departments should play a key role in the development and implementation of policies on child marriage.
- **Teachers in primary and secondary schools can help create an enabling environment** for increased school enrolment of girls. Ensure that policies and programmes to improve school environments and the safety and retention of girls have full support from teachers.

Priority areas for policy and programme development

Initiatives at the national level aim to change policies and legislation, but at local and community levels, where traditions and customs reinforce child marriage, interventions should aim to change attitudes and behaviour, and improve entitlements. Efforts to deal with gender relations and reproductive health and rights should be based on sensitivity to local social dynamics, gaining the support of leaders and developing allies with local change agents.[61] This includes the following components:

- **Promote the right to education for all children**, especially girls' rights to primary and secondary education.
- **Introduce scholarships and other incentives** to enable girls from poor and vulnerable communities to access education. Review and amend school policies that discriminate against married and pregnant girls. Address barriers within the school environment, including sanitary facilities and sexual violence, and ensure that the content of education is empowering and improves gender equality. In addition, train teachers to deal sensitively with at-risk girls and provide assertiveness advice for girls and support parents to send girls to school.
- **Improve support for girls who escape child marriages through the creation of safety nets**, such as the provision of shelters, education and health services that can address the specific needs and fears of married children.
- **Provide support for economic and livelihood opportunities for girls and young women in rural communities**. This can help ensure that marriage is not seen as the only option available to poor families. Credit schemes, growing in popularity across many developing countries, need to be more carefully thought out, so that they provide genuine alternatives to marriage and do not inadvertently encourage families to marry off girls in order to access credit schemes targeted only at married women.
- **Ensure that child brides living with HIV are able to access new technologies for care**, including antiretroviral drugs and community-based care. This should include access to voluntary counselling and testing for couples.
- **Ensure universal access to reproductive health services** for all young people, in particular girls and young women. Provide access to family planning and contraceptive services and information, and specialist services and care (including HIV and STI prevention, and obstetric care for fistula patients). Where possible introduce special initiatives to enable

child brides and their spouses to negotiate effective use of contraception to help delay first births.

- **Improve access to child and maternal health services**, including antenatal and obstetric care, and child immunization and nutrition programmes, particularly for child wives/mothers who often have the least access to these services.
- **Empower young women and girls, including married young women, and improve access to assertiveness skills and leadership programmes**. Also create opportunities for their active engagement in all child marriage intervention programmes. Support individual girls to develop strategies to enable them to negotiate with families and resist child marriage.
- **Combat all forms of violence against girls and women**, especially sexual violence and abuse, through policies and programmes focusing on prevention, treatment, counselling and legal protection.
- **Support grassroots advocacy that targets males within the community**, in particular boys, young men, fathers and community gatekeepers such as religious and community leaders.
- **Support and encourage families and communities who delay their children's marriage**, and document and share community-based individual and collective interventions to end child marriage.

Strengthen research and data collection systems

The need for evidence-based policy making requires support for research that will provide both qualitative and quantitative information on child marriage. Data should be up to date, reliable, and reflect the voices and needs of child brides. Research institutions, particularly in resource-poor settings, should have the capacity to do this and research findings need to be disseminated at all levels to support policy and programme development. The following priority questions are provided to help guide research on child marriage:

- **What are the determinants of child marriages in hotspot areas?**
- **What is the impact that laws have on the practice of child marriage?**
- **What is the impact of child marriage on the health of young women and infants?**
- **What indicators are needed to measure child marriage intervention programmes?**
- **What are the links between child marriage and key development concerns including education, maternal and child health, gender equality, poverty and HIV?**

Useful contact organizations

Anti-Slavery International
Thomas Clarkson House
The Stableyard
Broomgrove Road
London SW9 9TL
UK
Website: www.antislavery.org

Coptic Evangelical Organization for Social Services (CEOSS)
PO Box 162-11811
El Panorama
Cairo
Egypt
Website: www.ceoss.org.eg

Enabling Education Network (EENET)
c/o Educational Support and Inclusion
School of Education
University of Manchester
Oxford Road
Manchester M13 9PL
UK
Website: www.eenet.org.uk

Ethiopian Women Lawyers Association
PO Box 29025
Addis Ababa
Ethiopia
Email: ewla@ethionet.et
Website: www.ewla.org

Foundation for Women's Health Research and Development (FORWARD)
Unit 4
765–767 Harrow Road
London NW10 5NY
UK
Website:
www.forwarduk.org.uk

Inter African Committee (IAC) on Traditional Practices
c/o ECA/ICA
PO Box 3001
Addis Ababa
Ethiopia
Website: www.iac-ciaf.ch

International Center for Research on Women
1717 Massachusetts Avenue NW
Suite 302
Washington, DC 20036
USA
Website: www.icrw.org

International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF)
4 Newhams Row
London SE1 3UZ
UK
Website: www.ippf.org

International Women's Health Coalition
333 Seventh Avenue
6th Floor
New York, NY 10001
USA
Website: www. iwhc.org

Pan African Christian Women Alliance (PACWA)
PO Box 55148 – 00200
Nairobi
Kenya

Population Council
1 Dag Hammarskjold Plaza
New York, NY 10017
USA
Website: www.popcouncil.org

SWAASTHYA
G - 1323
Lower Ground Floor
Chittaranjan Park
New Delhi - 110 019
India
Email:
swaasthya@satyam.net.in
Website: www.swaasthya.org

United Nations Children Fund (UNICEF)
3 UN Plaza
New York, NY 10017
USA
Website: www.unicef.org

United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA)
220 East 42nd Street
New York, NY 10017
USA
Website: www.unfpa.org/intercenter/violence

WOMANKIND Worldwide
Development House
56–64 Leonard Street
London EC2A 4JX
UK
Website:
www.womankind.org.uk

Women Studies/ Gender-Development Research Center
Sana'a University
PO Box 11923
Sana'a
Republic of Yemen

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International Planned Parenthood Federation

IPPF
4 Newhams Row
London SE1 3UZ
United Kingdom
Tel: +44 20 7939 8200
Fax: +44 20 7939 8300
Email: info@ippf.org
www.ippf.org