



Preventing Child Marriage: Protecting Girls' Health

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

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

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

What USAID Is Doing

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

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

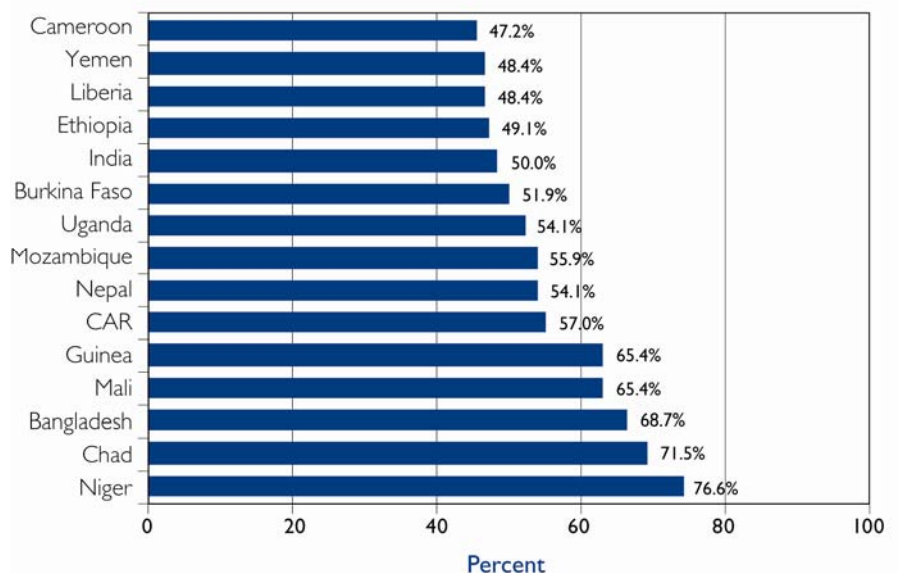
Focusing on Delaying First Birth through Radio Programs in Nepal

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

Community Mobilization to Increase the Age of Marriage in Egypt

A deeply rooted belief exists in the Egyptian culture that early marriage is better for girls. By spreading the message that delaying marriage can improve women's health and provide other advantages to girls and their families, USAID partners are working to increase the average age of marriage of girls in Egypt. This broad-based community

Percent of Girls Married by Age 18



mobilization project includes the airing of messages about the dangers and health consequences of early marriage on local TV and radio stations; the use of community outreach workers to spread the message about delaying marriage; and training of religious leaders on the issue to share with their congregations.

Girls' Advisory Committees in Ethiopia

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

The Women's Legal Rights Initiative in India

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

State Department Response

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

Resources:

(1) ICRW. *Too Young to Wed: the lives, rights, and health of young married girls*, 2003: http://www.icrw.org/photoessay/pdfs/tooyoungtowed_1003.pdf; UNICEF. *Early Marriage: a harmful traditional practice*, 2005: http://www.unicef.org/publications/files/Early_Marriage_12.10.pdf; (2) National Research Council. *Growing Up Global*, National Academy of Sciences, 2005; (3) Department of State. *Poverty, Illiteracy, and Child Marriage: A U.S. Response*, 2005: <http://www.state.gov/g/wi/53161.htm>; (4) WHO/UNFPA/Population Council. *Married Adolescents: An Overview*, 2003: <http://www.popcouncil.org/pdfs/MA-Overview.pdf>; (5) WHO/UNFPA/Population Council. *Including Married Adolescents in Adolescent Reproductive Health and HIV/AIDS Policy*, 2003: <http://www.popcouncil.org/pdfs/CMImplications.pdf>; (6) YouthNet: YouthLens. *Early Marriage and Adolescent Girls*, Family Health International, 8/2005: <http://www.fhi.org/>; (7) Save the Children. *Children Having Children: State of the World's Mothers*, 2004: http://www.savethechildren.org/mothers/report_2004/index.asp

Prepared November 2006