High Stakes
for Young Lives:

Examining Strategies to Stop Child Marriage

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Introduction

"Only once I have settled down and gotten a job will I marry. There is a difference in generations; they have started educating girls because boys and girls are equal now. . . . I will be the first in my family to become a teacher; my parents do farming. That is why I want to make sure I have a job. I will help to take care of my parents."—Sushma, age eighteen, India

"I do know some girls who had to drop out after twelfth class who were good at their studies. Their parents said they couldn't study any further. I felt bad and my mother also tried to encourage the girl, but her parents wouldn't allow it."—Aryu, age eighteen, India

"I want to become a nurse; I am not thinking about a husband. My parents always told me to study and become successful."—Seema, age nineteen, India

An estimated one-third of girls around the globe become brides before the age of eighteen and one in nine do so before the age of fifteen.[1] In recent decades, the issue of child marriage has grown in profile and priority for many policymakers. The Elders, a group of global leaders including former United Nations (UN) secretary-general Kofi Annan and former U.S. president Jimmy Carter, have taken on the issue and opted to use their platform to speak out against the practice, as have other prominent international organizations.[2] The UN estimated that in 2011, nearly seventy million women ages twenty to twenty-four had married before they turned eighteen.[3] If current trends continue without pause, in the next ten years, more than 140 million girls will be married before their eighteenth birthdays. In order to design interventions that can scale to match the level of the challenge, it is critical to understand the drivers of child marriage and the factors that can curb it.

Though global attention is new, the practice of child marriage—which also is called early marriage and forced marriage—is not. For centuries, it was the norm in societies spanning income levels and historical traditions. Policymakers define child marriage as either a formal or customary union in which one or both parties are under eighteen.

Child marriage harms women and girls: it is a practice that disrupts a child bride's educational and economic opportunities, raises her chances of exposure to violence and abuse, threatens her health and the health of her children, and ultimately hampers progress toward nearly every international development goal, including the Millennium Development Goals.[4] Child brides experience heightened exposure to sexual activity at an early age and an increased chance of early childbirth, both of which can have dire consequences on maternal and reproductive health, as well as on the health and well-being of their children. Young girls who are married before they complete their education often drop out of school, ending their educational opportunities and limiting their—and their families'—economic potential. Once married, girls and women face great challenges in entering the workforce, leaving them less able to contribute to household incomes and preventing them from helping to grow local economies. Moreover, child marriage is highly correlated with domestic and sexual violence, as girls who are married as children are more likely to be abused. Indeed, child marriage threatens the stability and economic progress of the communities in which child brides live and perpetuates the cycle of poverty in which so many poor countries find themselves trapped.

A mix of complex factors accounts for the slow pace of eliminating child marriage. Culture and tradition push to maintain the status quo, and the twin perils of poverty and lack of education also drive the practice. Lack of educational opportunity often limits girls' potential; combined with poverty, it makes child marriage an enduring reality. Yet, even as education and economic opportunities become more accessible overall, helping to alleviate poverty, countries where religious and traditional justifications for child marriage are deeply entrenched will not see an end to child marriage without shifts in social norms.

In many countries where child marriage occurs, laws ban the practice. But those laws often remain words on paper only, and are both unenforced and unheeded. Today, child marriage remains the norm in a number of regions around the world. In Niger, 75 percent of girls marry before the age of eighteen, and in India and Eritrea that figure is close to 50 percent.[5] As a recent post from the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) noted, "more than 40 percent of women marry before age eighteen in sixteen of the forty-seven countries surveyed, including three countries where more than 60 percent of women marry before age eighteen: Bangladesh, Guinea, and Mali."[6] Laws also can move in the opposite direction. For example, Iraqi law currently sets the legal marriage age at eighteen, but a current draft law under consideration could pave the way for brides as young as nine.

All of these factors mean that no one option provides an answer to the challenge of child marriage. Instead, a mix of legal frameworks, education policies, enforcement standards, attitude shifts, and economic incentives is required to ensure that the practice is eradicated in all communities, including those where it is a deep-rooted cultural practice.

U.S. policymakers have spoken out on the practice of child marriage at the international level and high-profile campaigns such as Girls Not Brides have highlighted the issue among global policy elites, as well as among the general public.[7] But despite the growing attention on child marriage, a solid understanding about what works and what does not work to combat the practice remains elusive. It is clear that laws alone have not changed the reality of girls' lives and the commonplace nature of the tradition. A number of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) are working on different pieces of the policy puzzle and pressing on different levers to see what interventions make a difference in preventing child marriage and shifting attitudes about the tradition. Further research on the social, economic, and cultural factors that contribute to child marriage will help decrease, if not eventually eliminate, the practice.

Background

Over the past century, the age of marriage has risen in most countries, along with increased household incomes and greater access to education.[8] Yet, child marriage still exists in great numbers across the world and is particularly prevalent among rural and poor populations in developing countries. Though far less common, child marriage is still practiced in parts of the developed world, especially among immigrant populations. As one report from the United Kingdom noted, the number of British children "forced into marriage is hard to gauge," but 14 percent of calls to the country's Forced Marriage Unit's helpline in 2012 concerned the marriage of children under fifteen years old.[9]

The prevalence of child marriage transcends geographical and cultural boundaries, and it is not associated with any single religion or tradition.[10] The practice affects millions of girls annually: based on current rates of child marriages, some fourteen million girls this year—39,000 a day—will marry before they turn eighteen, and nearly half of these child brides will marry before they are fifteen.[11]

For almost a century, local programs and international initiatives have worked to reduce the incidence of child marriage. Organized efforts to curb the practice emerged as early as the 1920s.[12] One of the first legislative attempts to end child marriage occurred in India in 1929 with the passage of the Sarda Act.[13]

In recent decades, global gatherings such as the International Conference on Population and Development Programme of Action and the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action have recognized child marriage as a human rights violation.[14] Many governments with persistently high rates of child marriage have committed to eradicating the practice by enforcing existing laws, raising the legal age of marriage, and increasing support for programs working to prevent and eliminate child marriage.[15] Yet, though child marriage overall is on a "downward trajectory, particularly among younger girls," child marriage rates have remained high in parts of sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia, particularly among the poorest citizens and in rural regions.[16]

INTERNATIONAL INITIATIVES

On the first International Day of the Girl Child on October 12, 2012, the United Nations called on leaders at the local, regional, and international levels to end child marriage. On September 25, 2013, the Human Rights Council, the leading UN body responsible for the promotion and protection of human rights around the world, adopted A/HRC/24/L.34, its first-ever resolution on child, early, and forced marriages.[17] The resolution, which calls on states to recognize "human rights obligations and commitments to prevent and eliminate the practice of child, early and forced marriage," received support from 107 countries around the world, including countries with some of the highest rates of child marriage: Ethiopia, South Sudan, Sierra Leone, Chad, Guatemala, Honduras, and Yemen.

Also in 2013, the fifty-seventh UN Commission on the Status of Women (CSW 57) featured a special session that focused on child marriage in support of UN secretary-general Ban Ki-Moon's Every Woman Every Child effort. The gathering ended with a commitment to "review, enact and strictly enforce laws and regulations concerning the minimum legal age of consent and the minimum age for marriage, raising the minimum age for marriage where necessary, and generate social support for the enforcement of these laws in order to end the practice of child, early and forced marriage."[18]

In determining the world's next set of development goals, the High-Level Panel of Eminent Persons on the Post-2015 Development Agenda proposed ending child marriage by 2030 as a specific

milestone for its second goal to empower girls and women and achieve gender equality. "Child marriage is a global issue across, but sensitive to, culture, religions, ethnicity and countries," reads the report. "When children marry young, their education can be cut short, their risk of maternal mortality is higher and they can become trapped in poverty."[19] The panel's inclusion of child marriage as a goal in its report indicates a growing recognition that eliminating child marriage is not only a human rights issue, but one that limits the potential of communities and economies.

CHILD MARRIAGE AND U.S. POLICY

The Obama administration's development assistance funding in the 2014 fiscal year included $19 million to support initiatives that advance gender equality and the status of women and girls with the goal of promoting stability, peace, and development.[20] Because child marriage rates are an indicator of gender equality, reducing the practice globally should help the United States achieve foreign policy objectives that aim to raise the status of girls and women around the world, thereby promoting greater stability and prosperity.

In 2012, the Obama administration announced a strategy aimed at fighting violence against girls and women around the world that named child marriage as a violation of girls' and women's rights.[21] USAID also released a policy framework that offered policy recommendations for eliminating child marriage.[22] Additionally, in launching new public and private partnerships against child marriage, former secretary of state Hillary Clinton announced that the United States would begin requiring that the U.S. State Department's annual Country Reports on Human Rights Practice track each country's legal minimum age of marriage, as well as child marriage rates.[23]

Strategies for Ending Child Marriage

PROMOTING GIRLS' EDUCATION

In his message on the first International Day of the Girl Child, UN secretary-general Ban highlighted education as one of the most effective paths to curbing early marriage, stating, "Education for girls is one of the best strategies for protecting girls against child marriage. When they are able to stay in school and avoid being married early, girls can build a foundation for a better life for themselves and their families."

Several studies have examined the link between education and child marriage. A 2008 study of several West African countries using 1990s data and a recent study using 2006 data from Nigeria revealed that child marriage accounts for 15 to 20 percent of school dropouts.[24] Studies in Bangladesh concluded that each additional year of delay in age of marriage boosted schooling by 0.22 years and the likelihood of literacy by 5.6 percentage points.

Though further research is needed to understand more completely the relationship between child marriage and schooling, what is clear is that education increases women's economic opportunities. According to data from the World Bank, each additional year of education beyond the average boosts women's wages 10 to 20 percent.[25] Often marriage marks the end of schooling for young brides.[26] Studies show that girls with no education are three times more likely to marry or enter into a union before their eighteenth birthday than those who graduate from secondary school or higher.[27] Similarly, girls who complete only primary school are twice as likely to marry before their eighteenth birthday as their peers who obtain a secondary or higher degree.[28] In every region assessed in the United Nations Population Fund's (UNFPA) 2012 *Marrying Too Young* report, child marriage rates were higher for girls who did not reach secondary education levels.[29] The disparity was greatest in sub-Saharan Africa, where 66 percent of women with no education were married before age eighteen, compared to only 13 percent of those with secondary or higher education.[30]

In many cases, staying in school is a consequence of parents' decision to postpone age of marriage.[31] That decision also had positive spillover: First, when the girl was in school, she was more likely to be viewed by her parents as a child and thus not ready for marriage. Second, schooling allowed girls to meet others similarly interested in education and acquire social networks and skills that helped them to better communicate and negotiate their needs and desires.

The correlation between access to girls' education and reduced child marriage rates can be seen through the Berhane Hewan program in Ethiopia.[32] Ethiopia has one of the highest rates of child marriage in the world.[33] Launched with a pilot program in 2004, the Berhane Hewan program uses local strategies that protect young girls aged ten to nineteen from early and forced marriage in the Amhara region, where nearly half of girls are married before they turn eighteen.[34] The program also targets adolescent girls in the same age group who are already married or in unions.[35]

The program was pilot tested in Mosebo village in the Amhara region from 2004 to 2006, with a cohort from Enamirt village serving as the control group. Along with community outreach and awareness efforts, the Berhane Hewan pilot focused on encouraging girls to stay in school. The program offered options for girls in three different circumstances. Those who were still in school received materials, such as pens, notebooks, and readings, that supported their continued education. Those who had already left school but expressed interest in reenrolling received the same materials.

And girls who had never attended school were placed in mentor-led groups that provided them with nonformal education, livelihood skills, and reproductive health education.

Prior to the program's launch, only 71 percent of all girls between the ages of ten and fourteen in the Berhane Hewan experimental group in Mosebo had ever been to school. By the end of 2006, 97 percent of girls in this cohort were attending school. Illiteracy also declined. About 45 percent of adolescent girls in Mosebo could not read at the start of the program, but that number fell to 21 percent by 2006. Additionally, average years of education rose. There was also significant improvement in the timing of marriage for children between the ages of ten and fourteen exposed to the program. These girls were 90 percent less likely to be married before age fifteen compared to their peers in the control group in Enamirt.[36]

ECONOMICALLY EMPOWERING GIRLS AND WOMEN

Research shows that child marriage is concentrated in the world's poorest countries, and those countries with the lowest gross domestic product per capita usually have the highest child marriage rates.[37] Studies also show that household wealth may affect child marriage rates. An analysis by UN-FPA found that more than half of girls in the poorest quintile of households assessed were child brides, more than three times the number in the wealthiest quintile of households. The report cited a "remarkable correspondence between lower rates of child marriage and characteristics commonly associated with higher levels of development such as urban residence, secondary or higher education and wealth."[38] South Asia shows the greatest wealth disparity, with women ages twenty to twenty-four in the poorest 20 percent four times more likely to be married before eighteen than those in the richest 20 percent.[39]

A combination of social, traditional, and economic pressures leads parents to marry their daughters off before they reach legal age. Many parents believe that finding a husband for their daughter secures her future, especially in times of social instability or fragility.[40] Daughters are sometimes also viewed as economic burdens or commodities. Additionally, child marriages can be a solution for mitigating familial or political disputes, or paying off debts, and customary requirements (e.g., dowries or bride prices) can also influence parents' decisions, especially in communities where families can give a lower dowry for young brides.[41] Finance-based programs encourage families to delay marrying their daughters. Loans, scholarships, subsidies, and conditional cash transfers (CCTs) are some of the most common incentives, and many focus on keeping girls in school. Other programs aim to give girls employment opportunities as alternatives to child marriage even beyond schooling. Incentives such as direct and unconditional cash transfers and income-generating activities can help provide girls with additional opportunities that raise their status in families and give them a say with parents and others to influence marital decisions. A World Bank pilot program in Malawi found that unconditional cash transfers led to reduced rates of teen pregnancy and early marriage and had the "effect of significantly delaying both."[42] Repeating this study in other countries and regions is critical to establish whether this approach could prove effective elsewhere.

INDIA: A CASE STUDY ON ENDING CHILD MARRIAGE

Child Marriage in India

South Asia has the highest rates of child marriage of any region in the world and India alone accounts for about 40 percent of the world's child brides.[43] As family incomes increase and more girls attend school in India, child marriage rates are going down, especially for younger girls. The rate of marriage

for girls below the age of fifteen is declining more than twice as rapidly as for those marrying below eighteen.[44] But the percentage of women married before their eighteenth birthday remains high.[45]

A 2012 United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) report echoed UNFPA's results and found that the median age at marriage in India is inversely related to the household economic condition, with the country's poorest women marrying around five years earlier than women in the same age group in the wealthiest quintile.[46] The study also showed that women who had never been to school married at least three years earlier than their counterparts who had completed primary education.

Apni Beti, Apna Dhan: Conditional Cash Transfers

The Indian government has taken steps to prevent child marriage.[47] The relationship between "son preference," education, economic status, and age at marriage, paired with the reality that laws alone do not change social norms, inspired the government of Haryana State to launch a CCT program in 1994 called Apni Beti, Apna Dhan (ABAD), meaning "our daughter, our wealth."[48]

The first of its kind in India, ABAD was a pioneer in testing the idea that a girl could be "revalued" with the help of economic incentives and financial products funded by the state. Implemented from 1994 to 1998 among the state's most disadvantaged families, it later was succeeded by a program called Ladli that was open to all parents, regardless of income.

Through a small payment at birth and a later conditional cash transfer if the daughter reached the age of eighteen unmarried, ABAD provided families with an incentive to embrace the idea of having a daughter, as well as to delay marriage by helping them to lighten other financial "burdens" associated with having a girl child, such as the cost of wedding clothes and jewelry. The program aimed to elevate the status of girls by reshaping perceptions of the value of daughters, traditionally viewed as burdens in Indian society, and was initially conceived as a way to change the country's skewed sex ratio.[49] In 1991, the sex ratio for the child population in Haryana (ages zero to six years) was 879 girls for every 1,000 boys.[50]

Through ABAD, the Haryana government gave mothers five hundred rupees (about eleven U.S. dollars) upon the birth of a daughter. Additionally, the government invested around 2,500 rupees in a savings bond under the girl's name. The initial cohort of ABAD participants, enrolled in 1994, reached their eighteenth birthdays in 2012, granting the first opportunity for program evaluators to assess the effectiveness of this program in delaying age of marriage.

Shifting Social Norms

It is important to remember that ABAD addressed only one piece of the complex social ecosystem in which girls in India live. Between 1994 and 2014, much has changed. A push for greater awareness by the Indian government means that most families now know that the legal age of marriage in India is eighteen. In some cases, authorities intervene when underage marriage ceremonies are being conducted. In interviews with ABAD program participants, families cited weddings that were stopped because the bride was under the legal age of eighteen as one of the factors motivating them not to marry off their daughters.

Technology and access to schooling are also changing norms. The Internet and cellular phone technology have connected India to the world in ways that were unheard of only two decades ago. Access to social media, online Indian media, and global media content means modern and international influences are felt across India, including in rural regions.

Additionally, along with legal norms, enforcement, and technology, the trends regarding girls' education have been largely positive. The number of girls in school is rising and the gender gap in primary education has narrowed. Girls' enrollment at "both the primary and upper primary stages in-

creased sharply" between 1990 and 2006.[51] Though parents remain more interested in their sons' educations than their daughters', girls' schooling is becoming increasingly accepted and embraced in many communities. The International Center for Research on Women (ICRW) found that more than two-thirds of Haryana's girls now are enrolled in secondary schools, compared to less than 50 percent in 2005.

Yet some recent changes have been far less promising for girls. In 2011, the Indian government census counted 830 girls (aged zero to six) for every 1,000 boys in Haryana, up from 820 a decade earlier, but still significantly lower than the 879 girls for every 1,000 boys counted in 1991.[52] Gender-biased sex selection and the skewed sex ratio in Haryana have an effect on girls' lives. In some communities, the scarcity of girls actually increases the risk that they will be subjected to violence, making some families even more likely to see marriage as a refuge that will guarantee their daughters' safety. As brides of marriage age become rarer, those few eligible girls who do remain in the community are increasingly vulnerable to rape and trafficking. These risks also make parents less willing to send their girls to secondary schools and colleges far from their home villages.[53]

It is against this evolving backdrop in India that the ABAD program unfolded. With funding from USAID, which wanted to understand the role of conditional cash transfers, ICRW is now completing its evaluation of the program. One of the earliest findings shows that the program has had a positive effect on girls' education. More girls who participated in the program stayed in school than those who did not. In its recent report, ICRW stated, "The girls who were beneficiaries attained higher levels of schooling, were more likely to continue their education and less likely to drop out than non-beneficiary girls, controlling for all other factors." Even though families did not receive the cash benefit until the girl turned eighteen, "the knowledge of the protracted benefit clearly influenced their decision to invest in their daughters' education. This is evident not only from the results on schooling but also some of the supplementary findings on the time girls get to study at home and the investment in sending them to a private school."[54]

In interviews with ABAD program beneficiaries, parents said that fewer girls in the community were getting married before age eighteen—though they did not always think this a positive development—and that many more people than in their generation sent their girls to school. Some fathers and mothers who had not completed their own secondary educations spoke about the importance of having their daughters complete school before being married: "Our parents didn't bother so much with our education," said one mother, Sarla, in an interview. "What I had to go through, I don't want my daughter to go through."

Interviews with girls and their parents included some families who said they had waited to marry their daughters until the girls reached age eighteen in order to receive the cash benefit.[55] Families used the ABAD money in a variety of ways. Some used it to cover the expense of wedding clothes and jewelry. A number of others, however, used the funds to cover school fees.

"Only once I have settled down and gotten a job will I marry," said Sushma, an eighteen-year-old woman enrolled in a basic training course for teachers. "I already spent my money on the course to become a teacher. . . . Girls I know are studying, but those who are married are not studying." Another young woman, Seema, used her ABAD money to enroll in a nursing course.

Additional evidence will be forthcoming as the ICRW study continues, and it will be important to see whether cash transfers, if shown to be effective, can be scaled in other locations where child marriage is prevalent in order to shape perceptions and practices that directly and indirectly affect the value families place on girls.

CHANGING COMMUNITY PERCEPTIONS AND BEHAVIOR

Although laws and economic incentives can help to make child marriage less attractive for families, they cannot on their own effectively end the practice and provide greater opportunities for all girls. For that, a broader and longer-term mindset evolution around the role of the girl is critical.

Interventions that use community-based behavior-change strategies can help to promote social change around the perception of girls and women, especially in countries that have yet to set a legal age of marriage.[56] In a review of child marriage programs, ICRW found that interventions that use behavior-change communications and community mobilization help to influence traditional perceptions and practices that "encourage or condone child marriage."[57]

These strategies acknowledge that girls rarely hold the power in their communities to decide when they marry, and that it is thus important to work with parents and community leaders—such as religious leaders and society elders—who make decisions on girls' behalf. Changing attitudes about child marriage is an especially critical intervention in communities where nonstate law dominates and where religious leaders often perform the marriage ceremonies.

A more comprehensive strategy will include programs working with religious leaders and educating men and boys on why delaying age of marriage is beneficial to all. Highlighting these two strategies is not meant to discount other interventions but rather to note two groups that are influential in deciding the future of girls and women in many communities.

Religious and Cultural Leader Involvement

In a 2007 review, ICRW found that religion was a significant factor associated with child marriage prevalence.[58] However, there was no *single* religion associated with the practice across countries; various religions had high rates of child marriage, depending on the country.

Because people look to culture and religion to justify child marriage, religious and traditional leaders can be uniquely effective in shifting social and cultural norms away from the practice. They can leverage their networks to lobby for legal reform and use their spiritual influence to encourage followers to change views about sensitive cultural norms, including child marriage.

Working With Men and Boys

In order to shift attitudes toward child marriage, some initiatives have sought to involve men as decision-makers, and boys as future decision-makers, in awareness-raising and outreach campaigns. In many countries where child marriage remains the norm, men serve as the gatekeepers for the women in their families, with fathers, brothers, husbands, and other male figures making most household and communal decisions, often with input from religious leaders. Particularly in communities where child marriage is deeply rooted in religious and cultural traditions, these groups should be included in efforts to prevent and eliminate child marriage if the practice is to be eradicated in regions and among populations where it has proved harder to stop.

The USAID Vision for Action cites the critical role of men in curbing child marriage: "Interventions that involve fathers and religious and traditional leaders broaden understanding of the dangers of child marriage, and the long-term benefits of education and economic opportunities."[59] Notably, the Vision for Action also prioritizes the involvement of boys: "Equally important is reaching out to boys at a young age to encourage equitable gender attitudes and norms so that they can be allies in preventing child marriage and change agents within their communities."[60]

"Safe Age of Marriage" in Yemen: Fostering Change in Social Norms[61]

In an effort to mitigate child marriage in Yemen—one of twenty "hot spot" countries—the Safe Age of Marriage program aimed to alter social norms and community attitudes around child marriage by improving community knowledge of dangers associated with the practice, strengthening local support for extending girls' education, and working closely with religious figures and community leaders.[62]

The program trained twenty male and twenty female volunteer community educators, including religious leaders and midwives—individuals already respected in the community—to conduct outreach educational activities. For example, the community educators were each responsible for organizing four awareness-raising sessions that employed various techniques, such as role-playing, poetry recitations, and small discussion groups, and held these in community spaces, including schools and mosques. The community educators also hosted monthly health clinics to address the reproductive health challenges associated with early marriage and childbearing, worked with schools to raise awareness of the social and health consequences associated with child marriage, and distributed printed materials and disseminated radio messages on the health and social consequences of the practice.

After one year of the Safe Age of Marriage project, the community educators had conducted more than 1,316 outreach initiatives reaching nearly 29,000 people. The results from the final survey found that there was an 18 percent increase in awareness in the community about the benefits of delaying marriage. There is evidence that the Safe Age of Marriage project helped avert early marriages and reduce child marriage rates, but it is still too early to see representative results of the program. Additionally, the Yemeni government requested that religious leaders include child marriage messages in their sermons and the community educators continued to mobilize support around girls' education. Due to its success, the program was scaled up to include two additional districts in Yemen and increase outreach to religious leaders and policymakers to push implementation of a law that prohibits marriage for girls under seventeen. Conservative religious leaders and clerics objected to the law, first passed in 2009, and it continues to be a topic of legislative conversation. The recent National Dialogue Conference in Yemen issued a proposal for the country's new constitution to make marriage before age eighteen illegal.[63] Even Islah, an influential Islamist party in Yemen that has opposed such legislation in the past, has stated that if the proposal goes through, it will not fight to have it repealed.[64]

STRENGTHENING LEGAL FRAMEWORKS

A number of international frameworks define the minimum age for marriage at eighteen and most countries around the world have laws in line with these agreements. Though laws alone will not end child marriage, in some places attitudes are shifting, as illustrated by the proposal from Yemen's recent National Dialogue Conference. Enforcement, however, often lags behind the laws on the books. Additionally, criminalization of child marriage is not always effective in preventing or eliminating the practice, since it can drive the practice further underground. Law enforcement officials and activists are also subject to violent repercussions in trying to prevent marriages, and few regulations exist to protect them from such retaliation.[65]

Yet despite the challenges, strategies for preventing and eliminating child marriages cannot be successful without clear and enforceable laws that are upheld by local governments. Child marriage laws can be incorporated into a number of other regulations implemented and enforced to protect against human rights violations, especially those guarding the rights of children and women. Such regulations include those that criminalize marital rape, gender-based violence, and violence against

women; human trafficking and slavery laws; and ceremonies that require consent to marriage from both individuals.

Another tool available is the passage of laws mandating birth and marriage registration. Only half of children under five in developing countries are part of birth registries, with some regions such as eastern and southern Africa and South Asia seeing registration rates hovering at around a third of their populations.[66] Birth registration gives a child an official and permanent identity.[67] The government then has a record of the child and can track his or her age, thereby decreasing the child's vulnerability to practices that include child marriage.[68] By documenting the actual age of girls, law enforcement officials would be better able to stop child marriages and girls would be more aware of their own age and whether they can legally be married.

In Bangladesh, where child marriage prevalence is the highest in South Asia and one of the highest in the world, the government has been working with Plan International to implement online birth registration programs.[69] In 2006, only 10 percent of Bangladesh's population had birth documents. Today, the government estimates that number has climbed to more than 75 percent of the population. Findings from Plan International show that birth registration has helped to reduce child marriage in Bangladesh as the organization and its partners work with the government "to expedite a shift to online birth registration in its working areas so that certificates can no longer be falsified to show an underage girl as being above eighteen."[70]

Recommendations

Success in eliminating child marriage depends foremost on those countries where the practice remains highly prevalent and/or legal, as well as in communities in which the tradition is still socially acceptable. However, the United States—in concert with NGOs, UN agencies and other intergovernmental organizations, and the private sector—can play a catalytic role in curbing, and eventually ending, the practice of child marriage around the world by pursuing the following:

- *Better track dollars and focus on more in-depth evaluation processes.* With many child marriage programs still relatively new, there is limited data available to date that can point to statistical successes in child marriage prevention and elimination. The United States can help to fund additional evaluations on existing programs and require that analyses be regularly conducted on all U.S.-funded projects. The United States can also use its leverage with other international institutions and multilaterals to push for high standards of analysis.
- *Break out data on gender-related programs to separate dollars devoted specifically to curbing child marriage.* Currently, it is not possible to determine how much the United States, other governments, and international institutions are spending on programs aimed specifically at curbing and eliminating child marriage. Instead, funding for child marriage falls into broader pools focused on gender, education, or health-related issues. Eliminating this data gap to more clearly understand specific and targeted child marriage–related investments would help to identify where current dollars are going and to understand if further investments are necessary, or if current investments should be redirected to increase effectiveness and efficiency.
- *Focus on innovations and the role they can play in curbing child marriage.* The United States is currently studying the role of conditional cash transfers, such as in the ABAD case. More research should be conducted to better understand the strategies that help to extend girls' education into secondary school and the effect of additional education on child marriage. Specifically, improving understanding of both unconditional and conditional cash transfer programs in other contexts, in addition to ABAD, would be a great help in deciding whether to scale up such programs, and where to do so. Legal registries also offer opportunities for further study, addressing whether current successes should be repeated in other contexts and determining what should be done to help support government implementation of such registries. This evaluation should be conducted in coordination with other partners such as the World Bank and initiatives and NGOs focused on ending child marriage.
- *Include child marriage elimination and prevention priorities in diplomacy.* In addition to analyzing programs to curb child marriage, the United States should use its diplomatic leverage to encourage government leaders and policymakers in other countries to prioritize eliminating the practice, and to support them in doing so through policy advising and funding. The importance of ending child marriage in efforts to improve educational attainment, economic development, and social stability should be included in diplomatic conversations with high-prevalence countries. The issue should also be included in broader conversations around gender equality, educational access, maternal and child health, violence against women, and human trafficking—issues that undermine development progress.
- *Support efforts to address the root causes of child marriage.* The United States should deploy public-private partnerships and use diplomatic platforms to support civil society efforts aimed at chang-

ing local perceptions by working with community leaders, including elders and religious leaders, and men and boys. This would not necessarily entail additional funds, but instead involve spotlighting such efforts through public events and written assessments and evaluations of programs where the data shows results. The universal nature of child marriage should be highlighted, as should the fact that local leaders are often at the forefront of making change. Additionally, the United States should conduct more thorough and accurate analyses of child marriage intervention programs targeting the social and cultural drivers of the practice; this would allow the United States, other funders, and local leaders to determine which strategies to prioritize in community-based interventions that can be implemented within stronger legislative frameworks and alongside other interventions addressing economic drivers.

- *Target funding for programs in countries with high prevalence rates by proportion and absolute numbers.* The United States should focus its development investments in countries with the highest prevalence rates; this will help determine where effective interventions can make a difference and whether and how they can be scaled. A particular focus should be placed on countries where clear majorities of girls are wed before the age of fifteen, such as Niger and several others in the West Africa region, and on countries where large population size means scaling successful interventions could have a large and significant effect, such as India. Special attention should also be devoted to girls from the poorest and most rural regions, given their higher likelihood of being married before the age of eighteen.

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