



USAID
FROM THE AMERICAN PEOPLE

ENDING CHILD MARRIAGE & MEETING THE NEEDS OF MARRIED CHILDREN: THE USAID VISION FOR ACTION



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VISION

Child marriage is a human rights violation and a practice that undermines efforts to promote sustainable development. In the last decade, child marriage has affected 58 million girls, many of whom were married against their will and in violation of international laws and conventions.¹ Early marriage stifles boys' and girls' abilities to succeed and grow into empowered men and women able to better themselves, their families, and their communities.

The United States Agency for International Development (USAID) seeks to ensure that children are not robbed of their human rights and can live to their full potential. In line with USAID's Implementation Plan of the U.S. Strategy to Prevent and Respond to Gender-Based Violence Globally, development efforts to combat child marriage should take place in regions, countries, and communities where interventions to prevent and respond to child marriage are most needed and most able to achieve results. USAID must also address the needs of more than 50 million girls and boys who are *already married* and have limited access to education, reproductive and other health services, and economic opportunities.

The Agency is grateful to congressional leaders on this critical issue who influenced this vision, including Senators Richard J. Durbin and Olympia J. Snowe and Representatives Betty McCollum and Aaron Schock. Due to their efforts, and those of Members from both chambers, the global community is now more aware of the detrimental impacts of child marriage on a range of development achievements.

Recognizing that efforts to end child marriage require a collaborative approach, USAID is working in partnership with international organizations and the private sector while concurrently supporting the voices of change agents at the national, local, and community levels seeking to change attitudes and motivations that perpetuate the practice of child marriage. USAID's efforts to end child marriage advance efforts to end gender-based violence while strengthening the Agency's commitment to children in adversity, gender equality, female empowerment, and youth development.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Child marriage is defined by UNICEF as “a formal marriage or informal union before age 18” and occurs throughout the world.ⁱⁱ Being forced into marriage before one is able to give consent violates the basic human rights of boys and girls. Most married youth are girls, with estimates revealing that 1 in 3 girls in the developing world are estimated to be married before the age of 18. On average globally, only 5% of males marry before their 19th birthday.^{iiiiv} The proportion of young women aged 15-19 married to young men aged 15-19 in 2003 was 72 to 1 in Mali.^v

An estimated 10 million girls are married every year before they reach the age of 18.^{vi} In the developing world, 1 in 7 girls is married before her 15th birthday, with some child brides as young as 8 or 9.^{vii} Regionally, 46% of girls under 18 are married in sub-Saharan Africa, 21% in the Caribbean, and 18% in the Middle East.^{viii} Approximately 1 in 3 adolescent girls in South Asia are married.^{ix} An estimated 2.2 million women and girls in Europe and Eurasia were married before the age of 18.^x Furthermore, orphans^{xi} and young girls without involved caregivers are particularly vulnerable to early marriage.^{xii} Studies show that 1 in 9 girls, or 15 million, were forced into marriage between the ages of 10 and 14.^{xiii}



The right to free and full consent to a marriage is recognized in numerous international conventions and declarations including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights^{xiv}, the Convention on Consent to Marriage, and the Convention on the Rights of the Child, with the understanding that consent cannot be “free and full” when one of the parties is not mature enough to make an informed decision about a life partner. Despite efforts in these and other conventions to discourage child marriage, national legal frameworks sometimes violate international norms by treating females and males differently. For example, in Pakistan, where it is estimated that one-third of all marriages fall under the category of child marriage,^{xv} the legal age of marriage for boys is 18 but 16 for girls. Cultural and socioeconomic conditions, poverty, and lack of access to education also influence whether a girl is married early; child marriage is most common in the world’s poorest countries and

among the poorest households^{xvi}, with girls living in poor households twice as likely to marry before the age of 18 as girls from wealthier families.

The consequences of child marriage are severe. National and international indicators on maternal health, education, food security, poverty eradication, HIV/AIDS, and gender equality are all negatively correlated with high child marriage rates.^{xvii} Child brides are under great pressure to prove their fertility, which often results in pregnancies when their bodies are not yet ready, resulting in greater maternal and newborn morbidity. Married girls under 15 are five times more likely to die in childbirth than married women in their 20s.^{xviii} They are also more likely to experience complications of childbirth including obstetric fistula and hemorrhaging.^{xix} Child brides are also at greater risk for contracting HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases due to their inability to reject unsafe sexual practices.^{xx}

Research indicates a causal link between early marriage and child labor, as household poverty often necessitates children being overworked at home, which can encourage young girls to marry early to escape harsh conditions.^{xxi} Girls are often forced to terminate their education; this, along with limited mobility, limited access to social networks, the burden of household responsibilities, and the obligation to care for other children in the household prevent girls

from reaping the benefits of good education and economic programs. Once out of school, early marriage and pregnancy are often the only economic pathways forward for girls, thus perpetuating the cycle of poverty.



Child marriage also has a complex relationship to human trafficking. Trafficking and forced marriage intersect when marriage is used both in conjunction with force, fraud, coercion, or abuse of power, and as a means to subject wives to conditions of slavery, often in the form of domestic or sexual servitude.^{xxii} Children are trafficked for the purpose of forced marriage, fueling a lucrative trade in girls in some regions. Early marriage also increases the vulnerability of children to being trafficked or re-trafficked. In some cases, girls and boys in child marriages are forced into prostitution or exploitative labor situations by their spouse or spouse's family, while in other cases children may become

easy prey for traffickers when they attempt to flee their marital home as a result of abuse.

Ending child marriage is not only the right thing to do; it can also pay enormous dividends for development. Delaying marriage and childbearing can improve the health of a mother and her child. For one, the risk of malnutrition in children born to mothers over the age of 18 is smaller. Improved nutrition in infants leads to increased schooling and cognitive ability, which contributes to an increase in lifetime savings.^{xxiii} Increasing the age of first marriage reduces girls' risk for physical, sexual, psychological, and economic abuse. Delaying marriage can also increase girls' and women's decision-making power. Keeping girls in

school and delaying marriage increases incomes for individuals and advances economic development for nations. A single year of primary school increases women's wages later in life from 10% to 20%, while the boost from female secondary education is 15% to 25%.^{xxiv} The families of girls who have married later also benefit from their added income and are more likely to invest in their families and children.^{xxv} When girls stay in school, communities and families reap health benefits, such as decreased risk of HIV and reduced infant mortality.^{xxvi} In one study, women in 32 countries who remained in school after primary school were five times more likely to know basic facts about HIV than illiterate women.^{xxvii}

THE STRATEGIC UNDERPINNINGS OF USAID'S COMMITMENT TO ENDING CHILD MARRIAGE

Seeking to end child marriage aligns with the objectives and goals of numerous Agency policies and strategies, including the USAID Gender Equality and Female Empowerment Policy; the National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security, the United States Strategy to Prevent and Respond to Gender-Based Violence Globally, the forthcoming United States Government Action Plan on Children in Adversity and the forthcoming USAID Policy on Youth in Development – all of which underscore the importance of preventing gender-based violence and promoting the development and well-being of women and men, girls and boys, as key components to achieving the Agency's development goals.

For FY 2013, the Department of State and USAID requested \$147.1 million for programs addressing gender-based violence worldwide, of which a portion supports preventing and responding to child marriage, as interventions to address child marriage are often integrated into broader gender-based violence programs. Child marriage interventions have also been incorporated into broader development programs in the areas of economic growth, health, food security, and child protection, underscoring the importance of addressing child marriage throughout USAID's development efforts.



KEY PRINCIPLES FOR ACTION

Building upon research into best practices for addressing child marriage, USAID will focus on key sectoral interventions, recognizing that integrating interventions in and across multiple sectors and engaging girls and boys as well as families and communities are most effective. Additionally, interventions must be designed bearing in mind that promoting girls' empowerment in numerous contexts (socially, economically, and politically) will enable girls and their families and communities to reject early marriage as an option.

The following key principles will guide USAID efforts:

CULTIVATE PARTNERSHIPS BROADLY

Ending and responding to child marriage requires the commitment, involvement, and collaboration of a diverse network of partners, who bring unique perspectives, skills, and resources to face a daunting challenge. USAID's intervention must be leveraged by efforts by **host governments and the private sector**. Governments need to uphold the international treaties they signed and ensure the rights of children by enforcing laws within their countries. Private organizations and international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) can elevate the need to end child marriage by

making it a priority and dedicating resources to the effort.

Working with lawmakers and parliamentarians is also critical, as they can promote enactment, implementation, and enforcement of laws and policies that discourage child marriage. **Community leaders, traditional leaders, and members of law enforcement and the judicial community** have critical contributions to make in implementing and enforcing laws passed.

MOBILIZE COMMUNITIES TO SHIFT NORMS THAT PERPETUATE CHILD MARRIAGE

Often, child marriage is considered a private family matter, governed by religion and culture. In some cases, child marriages are pursued by families as a social and/or economic imperative. In other cases, child marriages are used to consolidate relations between families, secure deals over land or other property, or even to settle disputes.^{xxviii} Other times, families present child marriage as a viable and necessary way to protect girls from sexual violence or the consequences of unprotected pre-marital sex, including becoming unwed mothers who are vulnerable to abandonment and ostracism in their communities. These cultures are not recognizing children's rights as individuals,

valuing instead overall family well-being. Programming efforts must bear in mind that they are seeking to tackle complex economic issues and deep-rooted social norms, attitudes, and practices. As such, it becomes absolutely essential to engage with communities in finding locally appropriate strategies for ending child marriage. Local civil society and NGOs are important to the cause as they can mobilize their communities, and encourage children, youth, and adults to participate in developing programs at the national, regional, and community levels.

Working in partnership with parents is also essential, as child marriage is often a consequence of the constraints and stresses experienced by families as a result of poverty, displacement, or societal pressures. Working with parents to transform attitudes and identify viable alternatives that advance the interests of individual children and the well-being of the entire family is critical to ensuring that interventions have positive, sustainable results.

Engaging men, particularly fathers and brothers will be necessary. 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. 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.



Finally, interventions should leverage the role of **women and girls as change agents** within their societies. Women and girls must be recognized as more than victims or people at risk. Because they are closest to the problem, they will have particular insights helpful in finding solutions. They must have a voice in decision-making and be allowed to become leaders in national-, regional-, and community-level decision processes, enabled to speak out to advance their own rights.

ADDRESS THE UNIQUE NEEDS OF MARRIED CHILDREN IN PROGRAMS

Married girls are among the most vulnerable and marginalized, often isolated from family, social, and support networks, with very little education and decision-making power. Often the spouses of much older (and sexually experienced) men, young brides are more likely to begin early and frequent childbearing,

experience partner violence, and become exposed to HIV and other sexually transmitted infections. These girls should be provided with opportunities to thrive within their societies through “second chance” opportunities. To address the needs of married children, existing interventions should be expanded to enhance married girls’

and boys’ educational opportunities, social networks, economic assets, negotiating skills, and access to health and other social services. These efforts should always be designed to take into account the power dynamics behind male and female relationships, in part to avoid placing married children at additional risk.

WHERE USAID WILL PRIORITIZE EFFORTS TO ADDRESS CHILD MARRIAGE

Recognizing that USAID has finite resources to address child marriage, the following criteria should be used to determine Bureaus’ and Missions’ decisions to address child marriage:

I. PREVALENCE RATES

Rates of child marriage vary significantly around the globe. The highest prevalence rates are in West Africa, followed by South Asia, North Africa/Middle East, and Latin America.^{xxix} Taking into account both population size and prevalence rates, approximately 50% of girls affected by child marriage live in South Asia, including Afghanistan, Bangladesh, India, and Nepal.^{xxx}

The cultural and socioeconomic factors reinforcing child marriage also can vary by

region within a country.^{xxxi} Prevalence varies widely within India, for example, where half of girls are married before age 18 but elevated prevalence is most concentrated within five of India’s 28 states. Likewise, in Ethiopia, almost half of early marriages are concentrated in four northern regions. USAID Bureaus and Missions should pay special attention to the prevalence of child marriage at the sub-national level, as prevalence can often differ significantly even among districts within a region. They should also prioritize efforts in districts/provinces/regions where child marriage occurs within the particular cohorts of younger girls (ages 10-14), as these girls are especially vulnerable and adversely affected by child marriage.

2. DISASTER, INSTABILITY, OR POLITICAL CHANGE ADVERSELY AFFECTS WOMEN AND GIRLS

Disasters, violent conflict, and periods of instability place girls at particular risk. For example, during the recent droughts in the Horn of Africa and the Sahel, the rate of child marriage in affected communities rose.^{xxxii} Families often marry young girls as a way of coping with food insecurity when dowries take the form of livestock. In countries facing violent conflict, insecurity decreases the number of girls attending schools; as a result, child marriage becomes a socially acceptable path to adulthood. In addition, in situations where the political environment has changed dramatically, such as in post-Mubarak Egypt, proposals are pending to legally reduce the age of marriage. In line with USAID's commitments for the Implementation of the National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security, Bureaus and Missions must consider the risks associated with child marriage as part of established and new initiatives to promote women's engagement in preventing and managing conflict and reducing risks posed by natural disasters, in early warning and response efforts, and when making investments in women's and girls' health,

education, food security, and economic empowerment to build resilience.^{xxxiii}



3. INVESTMENTS BY OTHER STAKEHOLDERS

Eliminating child marriage will necessitate commitment and investment by host governments, local government and leaders, private and other donors, civil society, and NGOs. USAID will seek to fill gaps, as well as complement and work alongside other stakeholders, leveraging the unique skills and resources that each stakeholder brings to the table.

PROMISING INTERVENTIONS TO END CHILD MARRIAGE AND SERVE MARRIED CHILDREN

USAID has supported numerous programs to address child marriage. Project evaluations and research findings suggest that the following interventions have the greatest promise for reducing child marriage.



EFFORTS THAT ARE INTEGRATED WITHIN AND ACROSS SECTORS

Some of the most effective interventions to address child marriage and gender-based violence require the integration of prevention and response efforts within and across programs in various sectors, including health, education, food security, economic growth (with an emphasis on strengthening economic security of households and families), governance, justice, and rule of law. As a major goal of USAID's implementation plan of the *U.S. Strategy to Prevent and Respond to Gender-Based Violence Globally*, and important aspects of the forthcoming *U.S. Government Action Plan on Children in Adversity*, and USAID's *Policy on Youth in Development*, child marriage prevention and

response efforts will be integrated throughout country portfolios, in both humanitarian relief and development settings.

HEALTHY UNIONS: COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND BEHAVIORAL CHANGE TO ELIMINATE BRIDE PRICE, BRIDE ABDUCTION, AND EARLY MARRIAGE IN ETHIOPIA

USAID's Healthy Unions project addressed the interlinked harmful traditional practices of bride abduction, bride price, and early marriage by promoting community conversations and raising awareness about the harmful effects of these practices. This program addressed child marriage through interventions related to the economic growth, education and training, rule of law, and health sectors. The project reached 84,000 people and was carried out by CARE Ethiopia in close partnership with a local NGO, community based organizations, local government officials, and schools. The project established 78 community-level committees of volunteers trained to prevent bride price, bride abduction, early marriage and other harmful traditional practices. It also assisted girls who married early and had complications from giving birth, by identifying and providing medical services for fistula cases. As a result of establishing a strong network of volunteers and working with local government officials, 75 cases of Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting (FGM/C) were brought to court and resulted in convictions. Furthermore, because of community mobilization and awareness raising efforts, it is estimated that 75% of the FGM/C practitioners in the project area abandoned the practice. To advocate for the human and legal rights of women and girls and to ensure their voices were heard, the project provided paralegal training for 650 community volunteers.

The Healthy Unions project conducted school-level interventions involving government education offices, parent-teacher associations, and school clubs. The project held 75 forums at schools for nearly 20,000 students, parents, and teachers. It formed and built the capacity of 68 clubs that had male and female members between the ages of 10-16 years. In addition, the Healthy Unions project established 428 Community Self-Help Savings Groups (CSSGs) with 8,560 members in which members pooled their financial resources into a fund from which individuals could take loans. The self-help savings groups taught school-aged girls about basic finance management and provided a platform for empowered women and girls to speak out and take collective action against harmful traditional practices, such as early marriage. The CSSGs provided women with the opportunity to engage in income generation activities; in economically empowering women, the program helped communities value women as individuals.

Implementing Partner: CARE Ethiopia (From: 2007-2010)

PROGRAMS THAT FOCUS ON ENSURING GIRLS' EDUCATION

As of 2008, 67 million primary-school-aged children were still without education.^{xxxiv} One of the best ways to enable children to avoid early marriage is to keep them in school. As stated in USAID's Education Strategy, children are less likely to marry early if they are kept in school, emphasizing quality primary schooling, which facilitates the transition to higher levels of schooling. USAID's programming efforts help promote this transition through equal access for boys and girls to primary and secondary education and help create safe school environments free of the risk of school-related gender-based violence.

In FY 2011, more than 31 million girls benefited from USAID programs in primary and secondary education. Education programs that provide scholarships and mentoring to girls, develop bias-free curricula, train teachers to treat boys and girls equitably, address various forms of gender-based violence in the curriculum, and work with community leaders to mobilize local support for girls' education are critical to reducing child marriage.

ORPHANS AND VULNERABLE CHILDREN EDUCATION SUPPORT INITIATIVE – TIME TO LEARN PROJECT

In Zambia, USAID is using education development assistance and PEPFAR funding to assist the Ministry of Education with strengthening educational support for vulnerable students in its community schools. Roughly 70% of Zambia's student population does not finish school because of early marriage, loss of parents, pregnancy, or lack of resources. The Time to Learn Project builds on a previous Orphans and Vulnerable Children, Education Support Initiative that provided support for over 500,000 vulnerable children attending 2,747 community schools.

Neglected orphans and vulnerable children (OVCs) are at a high risk for contracting HIV. Many girls, for example, are forced or coerced into early marriages before completing their education. The combination of early marriage and incomplete education greatly exacerbates risk. To reduce vulnerability among these high risk groups, USAID supports scholarships covering all school-related expenses for OVCs needing financial support for entering community schools in grade eight. By providing financial support and special services, the hope is that students will be able to remain in school and in an environment where they can learn to care for and protect themselves – in turn reducing their risk.

Implementing Partner: Education Development Center (From: 2012-2017)

ACTIVITIES THAT ENSURE SUPPORT FOR MARRIED CHILDREN

The needs of the millions of children who are already married must not be overlooked. To mitigate the increased health, economic, and educational risks posed by child marriage, USAID Bureaus and Missions should promote better access to and use of reproductive, family planning, maternal and child health care, and other social services to married children. They should also better assess whether or not they are reaching married people under 18.

THE REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH FOR MARRIED ADOLESCENT COUPLES PROJECT (RHMACP)

In Nepal, the Reproductive Health for Married Adolescent Couples Project (RHMACP) built on existing communications networks to improve the reproductive health of married adolescents. Original project objectives were to: (1) increase married adolescents' knowledge about family planning, maternal health, and HIV and sexually-transmitted infections; (2) increase access to quality services; and (3) increase community and family support for the reproductive health of married adolescent couples. Married adolescent peer educators served as role models and community outreach volunteers. The RHMACP also provided training and support to health care providers and local health care facilities to ensure that quality youth-friendly services were available and accessible. During implementation, the peer educators recognized the need to address norms relating to child marriage, so they established child marriage eradication committees, conducted rallies, and organized a conference on child marriage and dowry system eradication.

Evaluation data showed positive shifts in attitudes and behaviors. For example, strong changes were recorded in perceptions about who is responsible for deciding whether or not to use family planning. At the endline, 65% of female adolescents and 79% of males believed that the husband and wife together were responsible for family planning decisions, up significantly from 37% and 57%, respectively, at baseline. Although the use of family planning prior to a couple's first birth did not change, the percentage of married adolescents visiting government health facilities for services rose from 36% in 2005 to 42% in 2007. The project was also associated with an increased age at first marriage in the two districts, from 14 to 16 years among females.

The project was replicated in 21 districts in Bangladesh, where it has trained 210 peer educators and 665 fieldworkers and service providers, staged 33 community dramas, broadcast a documentary on a local cable network, and organized group meetings for nearly 20,000 married adolescents. Evaluation findings are expected in 2013.

Implementing Partners: EngenderHealth and CARE (From: 2005-2007)

INTERVENTIONS TO PROMOTE ENACTMENT AND ENFORCEMENT OF LAWS/POLICIES THAT DELAY MARRIAGE

Enactment, implementation, and enforcement of early marriage laws and policies can discourage child marriage. Because existing laws are often poorly enforced or superseded by customary and religious laws, it becomes particularly important to work with community leaders and members of the law enforcement and the justice sectors. Interventions to promote legal literacy and support paralegal services can be important prevention efforts. Legal and other support services must exist for those who want to escape child marriages and for those who are facing the prospect of early marriage.

WOMEN'S LEGAL RIGHTS INITIATIVE IN BENIN

The passage of an innovative family code in Benin in 2004, which addressed customary laws and practices including early marriage, divorce, dowry, succession, and inheritance, drastically changed the rights and responsibilities of men and women. After the passage of the family code, USAID's Women's Legal Rights (WLR) Initiative conducted an intensive grassroots public awareness campaign on women's legal rights and the family code throughout Benin, reaching more than 100,000 people. The campaign involved disseminating booklets and brochures in local languages, developing and screening a film on family law issues (child marriage, polygamy, dowry), organizing community meetings to discuss the new law, and participating in roundtables on women's legal rights that were broadcast on television and radio. In addition, WLR trained hundreds of trainers and justice-sector workers at all levels on the country's new family code and developed a training manual specifically for paralegals.

Implementing Partners: Chemonics International Inc., Centre for Development and Population Activities, MetaMetrics, Inc. and Partners of the Americas. (From: 2002-2007)

PROGRAMS THAT ENABLE COMMUNITY MOBILIZATION AND OUTREACH TO SHIFT ATTITUDES

The decision to marry girls early is generally in the hands of family and community leaders; local communities must play an active role in addressing the norms that perpetuate the practice. Community mobilization has been very effective in initiating behavior change and discouraging harmful practices.

THE SAFE AGE OF MARRIAGE PROJECT, EXTENDING SERVICE DELIVERY

In rural Yemen, USAID's Safe Age of Marriage Project used community mobilization efforts, including school and community-based awareness sessions and mobile clinics to raise the age of marriage in two districts. In 2010, community members pledged to ban child marriage and set marriage dowry at approximately \$2,000 to deter trade marriage. As a result, the most commonly reported age of marriage of girls rose from 14 to 17 over the duration of the project. The project also helped avert child marriages and helped the first ever female school principal be appointed in Al Sawd District, encouraging parents to enroll and keep their daughters in school.

From baseline to endline, there were statistically significant increases in the proportion of people identifying benefits to delaying marriage (e.g., from 45% to 79% agreed that delayed marriage provides more opportunities for girls' education and from 36% to 67% agreed that delayed marriage leads to healthier pregnancies). The intervention is now being replicated in two new districts, and it will be managed by the Yemeni Women's Union. Due to the entrenched beliefs that Islam condones child marriage, the Yemeni Women's Union is planning to engage a larger proportion of religious leaders as community educators to address these religious misconceptions. In addition to assuming the management of Safe Age of Marriage activities, the Yemeni Women's Union has been actively lobbying the Yemeni government for a change in Yemeni law that would prohibit the marriage of girls under age 17.

*Implementing Partners: Pathfinder International, Basic Health Services Project and Yemeni Women's Union
(From: 2008 – 2010)*

CONCLUSION

Child marriage is a traditional practice that violates the rights of boys and girls and undermines efforts to achieve sustainable development. To end child marriage and meet the needs of married children, USAID must leverage the expertise and skills of local change agents and international stakeholders, and maximize the impact of established best practices. This vision provides guidance that will help USAID ensure that boys and girls can reach their full potential, end gender-based violence, foster gender equality, and promote girls empowerment.

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