



**Forum on  
*Child Marriage in Developing Countries***

**Sept. 14, 2005  
10:00 – 11:30 am  
U.S. Department of State**

**Remarks by Dr. Geeta Rao Gupta**

Thank you Charlie and State Department staff for your help in organizing this event. It is timely, as I just returned from a trip to India and heard a lot from Cherreka about her recent trip to Ethiopia – both countries in which the prevalence of child marriage is high.

**For 30 years ICRW’s research has provided real-world solutions to social and economic development problems that face women and their families.** For 15 of those years, our work has shown that marriage is a key transition point in a woman’s life – it marks the transition from childhood to adulthood. Its timing and the investments made in a young woman prior to that transition are significant determinants of the consequences of marriage for women. When marriage occurs too early and without adequate preparation, the health, education and economic consequences can be negative for both the girl and for the future generations that she bears. Child marriage – that is marriage before the age of 18 and sometimes as early as at the age of 10 – is both a risk and barrier to the

health, well-being, and future opportunities of millions of girls in the developing world and can contribute to the intergenerational transmission of ill-health, illiteracy and poverty. Over 51 million adolescent girls aged 15-19 are currently married as children and bearing the burden of domestic responsibility and teen pregnancy, and they are exposed to other risks including domestic violence, illiteracy, and HIV/AIDS. For these reasons, child marriage undermines U.S. development assistance programs and the following international Millennium Development Goals:

- *Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger*
- *Achieve universal primary education*
- *Promote gender equality and empower women*
- *Reduce child mortality*
- *Improve maternal health*

**Despite national laws and international agreements prohibiting child marriage, millions of children in the developing world are married, and as a result, denied the ordinary experiences of childhood and adolescence.** For example, in 1929 India prohibited child marriage under the Child Marriage Restraint Act. However, today in parts of India, like the state of Rajasthan, nearly 80 percent of the marriages are among girls under the age of 15. In Rajasthan, some girls are married as early as age 7. Efforts at the national level are underway in India to amend this law to make all child marriages void through the Prevention of Child Marriage Bill 2004.

If laws are on the books to prohibit child marriage, why does the practice still exist? The reasons are due somewhat to culture and custom, but mainly to ignorance and poverty. To end this practice we need to be aware of two basic facts:

**Child marriage has to do with the overall status of girls and the perception of their role in society and its economic value.** In many countries the decision to get a girl married early begins in infancy and has to do with the perceived cost of girls to their natal families. An investment in girls is seen as a lost investment because the girl leaves to join another home and her economic contributions are to that home – so the earlier she is married, the less of a lost the investment. This fact often leads to the practice of betrothing a daughter as early as infancy. Market rates for dowry are lower when the girl is married young. Often girls are married early in childhood at the age of 8 or 10, but sent to the spouse's home only after puberty.

**Child marriage is more prevalent in poor households and in poor communities.** Almost all countries in which more than 50 percent of girls are married before the age of 18 have GDP per capita under \$2,000 per year.

**We know moms and dads want better for their children but do not see any viable alternatives for their daughters if marriage is delayed – alternatives that are safe and will protect the honor of the family while**

**also providing an economic return.** They also do not fully understand the costs of early marriage for their daughters and their grandchildren.

ICRW's work on this issue therefore has had two objectives:

- To increase the understanding of the costs of early marriage and to change social attitudes by providing support and information to parents and communities; and
- To provide the necessary services and facilities for girls to ensure that a delay in marriage does not put girls at any risk – that the delay is used to make some investments in daughters that will be viewed as positive by parents – investments that will make girls more able to maximize all that is positive in marriage. Simultaneously, there is a need to ensure that married girls have access to health, economic and educational services so that the risks to them can be minimized despite early marriage.

**ICRW's experience has shown that the best way to achieve both these objectives is to increase investments in community-based programs and services.**

Our work in India shows that the age of marriage can be increased by one year after only four years of intervention if laws prohibiting child marriage are combined with:

- Community education on the risks of child marriage, with the full involvement of parents, girls and other key stakeholders in the community; and
- Services and interventions that provide educational opportunities and health services for young people.

The community interventions that ICRW developed in India and Nepal in partnership with local organizations which achieved success had the following key ingredients:

- Community involvement and consultation – the best solutions often come from communities. Our program experience has taught us that we have to solicit input from adolescents, their parents and the communities when designing the program. When addressing child marriage, for young girls in South Asia and in other parts of the developing world, parents and communities are key decision makers;
- The use of existing community structures and leadership in implementing programs and where this does not exist, providing the training for such indigenous capacity to be built. This also served to break the taboo around discussing sensitive issues like child marriage and making this a community issue. We feel strongly that this was, and continues to be, critical in the success of our programs;
- The provision of life skills training to increase girls' skills to negotiate with decision makers to delay marriage. Our work, with support from local partners, provides adolescent girls knowledge and skills ranging

from using a telephone, to managing a bank account, to negotiating age at marriage with parents. These skills help girls gain the confidence to negotiate the timing of marriage; and finally,

- The provision of basic health, education, and economic services for girls, both married and unmarried, that are accessible. We know that child marriage is an issue that threatens the health of mothers, children and future generations. Access to medical care and reproductive health services are critical to prepare young women for marriage and to improve the health of young married girls and their children. Girls below the age of 14 are five times more likely to die in pregnancy or childbirth than women in their twenties. Without access to healthcare services including family planning information and services, young married girls face the risk of pregnancy complications, including obstetric fistula and HIV infection. In addition to health care services, access to schools, primary and secondary, must be guaranteed. The schools must be affordable, close by and safe so that the girls can get an education before marriage, and policies should be implemented to ensure that there are no barriers to block married girls from attending schools. We must have livelihood and economic programs for both married and unmarried girls to both make them more economically secure and be able to have some leverage in influencing the decisions that affect their lives.

Based on our research and program experience, to end child marriage, ICRW specifically calls for policies and programs that will

1. **Support community-based interventions.** Programs should involve parents, the local media and religious leaders in public messages to denounce the practice of child marriage. Efforts to reduce the number of child marriages must focus on addressing the local communities -- the social environment -- by involving men, parents, families, religious leaders, and other key stakeholders.
2. **Support for income generating activities for (married and unmarried) girls.** These activities must include safe economic opportunities for adolescent girls who are not attending school.
3. **Support for primary education programs to enroll girls (married and unmarried) in school and ensure that girls (married and unmarried) complete their education.** Additional support for primary education programs is necessary to reduce the barriers that prevent girls (married and unmarried) from staying in school.
4. **HIV/AIDS prevention, care and treatment programs should focus on the special needs of young married girls.** There is a critical need for support for special HIV prevention programs for married girls to ensure their health and the health of their spouses and families. HIV prevention strategies should include prevention messages that address child marriage and the vulnerabilities to HIV infection of young married girls and girls at risk of early marriage.
5. **Support for maternal and child health programs to address the needs of young married girls.** Twenty-four hour emergency obstetric care is needed as well as support for timely health interventions including

emergency obstetric care and medical/health outreach centers in rural areas.

6. **Support programs to end violence against women.** In some cases there are marriages by abduction/rape and forced marriages.

Another way to describe what needs to be done to end child marriages and address the risks that girls face in such marriages is to focus on three P's:

- **Provide services** – education, nutrition, immunization, life skills, and health care – to children and youth for a healthy adult life.
- **Protect** - adolescents' human rights throughout the transition from adolescence to adulthood – ensure that girls have equality to boys in access to all of life's opportunities and that they are not disadvantaged because of their gender.
- **Promote a broader context of equality and economic well being.** Poverty perpetuates child marriage – while we focus specifically on addressing this issue, it is important to ensure that investments are being made to reduce poverty.

Communities throughout the developing world are mobilizing to end child marriage. They want to offer their daughters better and different lives. Grassroots and community-based groups in a number of countries are trying to eradicate this harmful traditional practice, but their efforts are hampered by lack of funds and coordination. **The time has come for development policies to focus on and respond to the special needs and**

**vulnerabilities of married women and young married girls. We need to act now to help communities prevent child marriage in order to make marriage safe and healthy for all.**