



# How to End Child Marriage

**Action Strategies  
for Prevention and  
Protection**



## Why Child Marriage Must End

Girls who marry as children are often more susceptible to the health risks associated with early sexual initiation and childbearing, including HIV and obstetric fistula. Lacking status and power, these girls are often subjected to domestic violence, sexual abuse and social isolation. And early marriage almost always deprives girls of their education or meaningful work, which contributes to persistent poverty.

**CHILD MARRIAGE** perpetuates an unrelenting cycle of gender inequality, sickness and poverty. Its consequences ripple through the world's poorest regions devastating the lives of girls, their families and their communities. Despite nearly universal condemnation, this harmful tradition thrives: 51 million girls are married. If nothing changes, another 100 million girls will be married within the decade.

The international community recognizes child marriage as a serious development problem, but growing awareness has not led to committed, coordinated action against the practice. Political commitment at the highest levels can help achieve a world where girls and women are healthy, safe and empowered. Decision makers, development experts and donors must now turn their attention to what can be done to prevent girls from marrying too early and protect those who are already married.

The good news is that innovative community-based efforts appear to be providing viable alternatives to early marriage. These promising interventions could have a significant impact on reducing child marriage, if more resources are made available to rigorously evaluate what is working and scale up successful programs.

This policy brief outlines what we can and should be doing to end child marriage: changing harmful cultural norms, supporting community programs, maximizing foreign assistance, increasing access to girls' education, providing young women with economic opportunities, addressing the unique needs of child brides and evaluating programs to determine what works.

### Transform Harmful Cultural Norms

Child marriage is deeply embedded in cultural traditions, which can be difficult to change. However, as the campaign against female genital cutting demonstrates, community mobilization can be effective in initiating behavior change and discouraging harmful practices.

Many indigenous communities already are taking action to end child marriage. A program scan conducted by the International Center for Research on Women (ICRW) found these community-based interventions are working to reduce early marriage with multifaceted programs that educate families and community members on the dangers of child marriage, provide girls with education and life skills, and offer legal services, among other activities.

### Support and Scale Up Community Programs

Grassroots efforts, coupled with national policies that prohibit child marriage, signal a desire among governments and local communities to end the practice. Yet many of these countries lack the resources to implement, coordinate and expand efforts to reduce early marriage.

ICRW's Web-based program scan found only 69 programs addressing child marriage. These programs, of various sizes and resources, are missing from areas where the needs are greatest. In six of the 20 countries with the highest prevalence of child marriage, no programs were found.

Aside from ICRW's program scan, there is no known effort to compile information on approaches to reduce early marriage. More information on existing programs can help fill gaps in understanding the complexities of child marriage prevention and identify best practices for replication and scaling up. Policy-makers and program planners could also benefit from improved coordination across countries to share program and advocacy designs, experiences and lessons from their work to delay marriage.

### Maximize Aid Dollars

The negative consequences of child marriage impede international development efforts. The top 20 "hot spot" countries for child marriage also have some of the highest rates of maternal and child mortality as well as extreme and persistent poverty. International donors could improve the effectiveness

of aid dollars by integrating child marriage prevention initiatives into existing development initiatives. The United States, for example, already funds many programs worldwide to reduce poverty; ensure the survival and health of infants, children and mothers; provide access to voluntary family planning; fight AIDS; and invest in girls' education. All of these are undermined by the practice of child marriage.

### Increase Access to Girls' Education

Research suggests programs that provide or increase access to education for girls are crucial to delaying marriage. Girls with eight or more years of schooling are less likely to marry early than girls with zero to three years of education. But primary education is not enough.

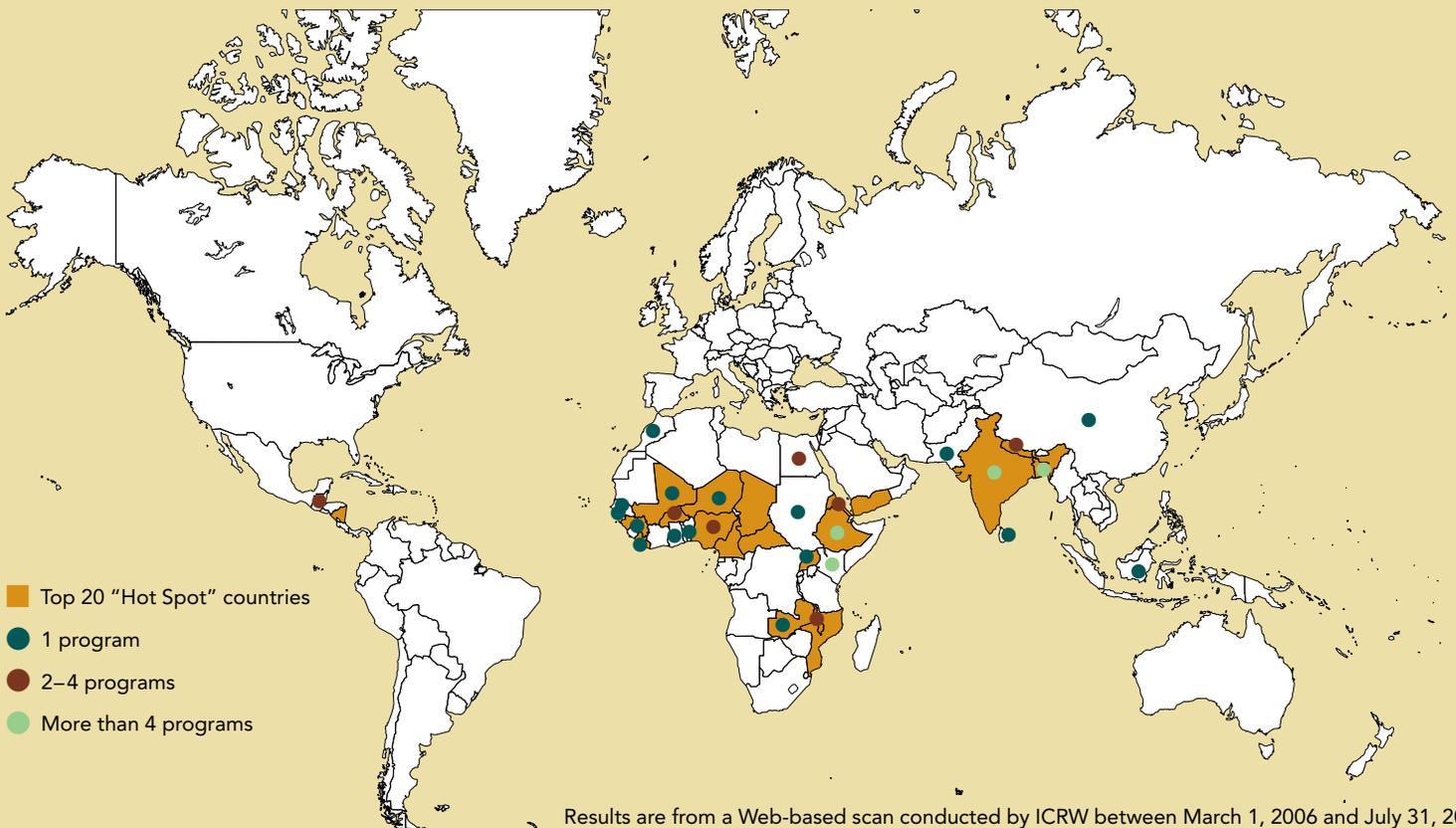
Women are more likely to control their own destinies and effect change in their communities when they have higher levels of education. All levels of education must be made more accessible to girls so that more girls will be enrolled and retained. Parents and community leaders also need to be sensitized to support girls in school. And married girls, too, need to be encouraged to continue their education.

### Provide Economic Opportunities for Young Women

Child marriage is inextricably linked to poverty, and families' economic status strongly indicates whether their daughters will be married early. Child brides have less access to schooling and paid work. Cut off from educational and economic opportunities, girls who marry young are more likely to be poor and remain poor. Eliminating child marriage could contribute to broad efforts to reduce long-term poverty.

In the short term, targeted incentives for postponing marriage into adulthood and providing economic opportunities for unmarried girls after they finish school can help delay marriage. These livelihood opportunities include skills training, micro-credit or savings clubs, and jobs and job placement services. Policy-makers and program planners should also consider ways to make it easier for families to afford education fees and send girls to school. Expanding opportunities for girls and young women can help change social norms that view marriage as their only option, particularly in cultures where bride price and dowry are common.

## Where Are Child Marriage Programs?



Results are from a Web-based scan conducted by ICRW between March 1, 2006 and July 31, 2006.

## Support the Needs of Child Brides

Prevention is the primary focus of child marriage interventions, but policy-makers and program planners must not overlook the millions of girls who have already married early and who bear children while still children themselves. To guard against the increased health risks, programs focused on child marriage should support child brides and their families by promoting earlier and more frequent use of family planning, HIV/AIDS and maternal health services.

Adolescent girls face a greater risk of sexual and reproductive health problems than adult women, but they are less likely to seek health services, often because of their low status in the marital home and community. ICRW research on adolescent reproductive health found that it is possible to change social taboos and gender norms that restrict young people's access to and use of health services in a relatively short period of time by involving family elders, peers and health care staff.

Married girls also need educational and economic opportunities to help break the cycle of inequality, illiteracy, illness and poverty that perpetuates child marriage. Educated women have more opportunities to improve their own well-being and that of their family than women without an education. Research shows that the education of girls and mothers leads to sustained increases in educational attainment from one generation to the next. Also, improving women's access to paid work is critical to the survival and security of poor households and an important way to lift these households out of poverty.

## Evaluate Programs to Determine What Works

Some community-based approaches to delaying marriage appear to be working, but few programs are evaluated for impact, making it difficult to determine whether and how age of marriage was increased. Donors should support monitoring and evaluation components of programs because these funds help ensure programs are achieving their intended results. Ongoing monitoring and evaluation can be contained to as little as 20 percent of total program costs, an investment that ensures programs can be adjusted for effectiveness and replicated when successful.

## Why the Youngest Girls Are Vulnerable

Younger girls are particularly vulnerable to being married to men who are significantly older or men who have multiple wives. Wide spousal age gaps are far more customary in countries with high rates of child marriage than in countries with lower rates. Large age differences between husband and wife may intensify a young bride's lower status and lack of power, increasing the likelihood that she will experience violence and health risks, including HIV.

ICRW research shows that in countries with high prevalence, child marriage first begins to increase significantly at a "tipping point" age. Prevention efforts should target young girls before they reach the tipping point. These may include promoting primary education for girls and educating families and communities on the dangers of early marriage for young girls.

### "Tipping Point" Age: Bangladesh

Number of girls married (N=1,924)



In Bangladesh, nearly 70 percent of girls are married before 18. Although the median age of marriage for girls is 15, the incidence of child marriage spikes earlier at 13. This "tipping point" is 13 to 14 years in most of the top 20 countries with the highest child marriage prevalence.

Source: ICRW analysis of Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS) data.

## What We Know about the Risk and Protective Factors for Child Marriage

Understanding and addressing the factors that influence whether a girl will be married early can help guide efforts to reduce child marriage and mitigate its unwanted consequences. ICRW research found the following risk and protective factors.

### Region

Cultural and socioeconomic factors that reinforce child marriage vary from region to region. Where a girl lives within a country may strongly influence whether she will marry early. For example, prevalence varies widely in India, where half of girls are married before 18. The highest rates are concentrated in five states: Madhya Pradesh at 73 percent, Andhra Pradesh at 71 percent, Rajasthan at 68 percent, Bihar at 67 percent and Uttar Pradesh at 64 percent. Similarly, in Ethiopia, almost half of early marriages are concentrated in four northern regions.

### Poverty

Child marriage is most common in the world's poorest countries and among the poorest households. Girls living in poor households are almost twice as likely as girls from wealthier homes to marry before 18. Although families have different motivations for marrying their daughters early, girls are sometimes seen as an economic burden that can be relieved through marriage.

### Education

Girls in developing countries often must overcome substantial obstacles in accessing educational opportunities. Research shows that low levels of education greatly increase the risk that a girl will marry as a child.

Higher levels of education—particularly attending secondary school—can protect girls from early marriage. In Mozambique, nearly 60 percent of girls with no education are married by 18, compared to 10 percent of girls with secondary schooling and less than 1 percent with higher education. Research shows that schooling helps girls develop aspirations and gives them skills to negotiate who and when they will marry.

## Top 20 “Hot Spot” Countries for Child Marriage

Ranking	Country	Percent Married Younger than 18
1	Niger	76.6
2	Chad	71.5
3	Bangladesh	68.7
4	Mali	65.4
5	Guinea	64.5
6	Central African Republic	57.0
7	Nepal	56.1
8	Mozambique	55.9
9	Uganda	54.1
10	Burkina Faso	51.9
11	India	50.0
12	Ethiopia	49.1
13	Liberia	48.4
13	Yemen	48.4
15	Cameroon	47.2
16	Eritrea	47.0
17	Malawi	46.9
18	Nicaragua	43.3
18	Nigeria	43.3
20	Zambia	42.1

Source: Demographic Health Survey (DHS) Data





1717 Massachusetts Ave., NW, Suite 302  
Washington, DC 20036, USA

Phone: 1-202-797-0007  
Fax: 1-202-797-0020  
E-mail: [info@icrw.org](mailto:info@icrw.org)

*Country Office*  
42, 1st Floor  
Golf Links  
New Delhi, India 110 003  
Phone: 91-11-2465-4216  
Fax: 91-11-2463-5142  
E-mail: [info@icrwindia.org](mailto:info@icrwindia.org)

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## About the International Center for Research on Women (ICRW)

ICRW's mission is to advance gender equality and women's rights, fight poverty, and promote sustainable economic and social development for all. ICRW works with partners in low- and middle-income countries to promote innovative, evidence-based solutions so that institutions, policies and programs can enable women to control their own lives and participate fully in shaping the future of their societies. For more information about ICRW, please visit our Web site at [www.icrw.org](http://www.icrw.org).

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