

Questions and Answers on International Protecting Girls Through Preventing Child Marriage Act

Q. How many young girls around the world are impacted by child marriage? Are there certain parts of the world where this practice is common?

A. Today, 51 million girls ages 17 or younger in developing countries are married. If child marriage continues at this rate, an additional 100 million girls in developing countries will be married within the next 10 years. That means 25,000 girls will be married every day over the next decade.

This practice is common in certain regions of the world, including sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia. Girls younger than 10 years old are included in this group and many are married to men over twice their age. The problem is most common in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia.

Q. What are the laws around the world dealing with child marriage? Doesn't everyone accept that child marriage is wrong?

A. There is almost unanimous consensus around the world that young marriage is harmful and should be prohibited. Most developing countries are signatories to international agreements that oppose child marriage. In Africa – one of the places where child marriage is most prevalent – countries united over ten years ago to adopt the 1990 African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, which calls on countries to take action to end child marriage.

Moreover, many countries with high rates of child marriage have legally established the minimum age of marriage at 18 in order to end the tradition. For instance, in 12 of 20 countries with the highest incidence of child marriage, the legal age of marriage is 18 or older. These include Bangladesh, Burkina Faso, the Central African Republic, Eritrea, Ethiopia, India, Malawi, Mali, Mozambique, Nepal, Nicaragua and Uganda.¹

Yet child marriage persists for many reasons, including the lack of political will and resources to enforce the laws on the books. Child marriage also exists because of the continuation of traditional practices and strong links to poverty and lack of other opportunities.

Q. What about cultural issues surrounding child marriage? Should we be trying to change cultures?

A. Child marriage is a harmful traditional practice, one that the international community including the United States has deemed hurtful to girls, communities and societies. Child marriage is a human rights violation, denies young girls a choice in whom they marry and exposes them to a wide range of health, psychological, social and economic risks.

In communities where child marriage is common, many young girls and their parents want to delay marriage but lack alternatives because of tremendous poverty and societal pressure. However, if families have feasible alternatives to early marriage, they tend to delay marrying their daughters.

¹ Melchiorre, A. (2004). "At What Age...Are school-children employed, married, and taken to court? 2nd Edition" The Right to Education Project. U.S. Department of State (2005). "Country Reports on Human Right Practices – Nepal www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2005/61709.htm. U.S. Department of State (2002). "2001 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices – Ethiopia" www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2001/af/8372/htm.

Governments and civil society organizations in many developing countries are already actively working to reduce child marriage by raising awareness of the adverse consequences of early marriage, presenting viable alternatives to it and advocating for the implementation of existing laws prohibiting it.

For instance, the government of Bangladesh's secondary school enrollment program requires parents to sign a statement of commitment not to marry their daughters until they reach age 18 and provides compensation for the loss of their daughter's domestic and agricultural labor that is experienced because she is in school. Bangladesh's school program also covers the cost of school fees and books for girls to remain in school. The results have led to a doubling of school enrollment between 1994 and 2001 and an increase in the girls' age of marriage.²

Q. With so many ways to invest in U.S. foreign assistance, why should preventing child marriage be a priority?

A: Child marriage is both a human rights violation and a barrier to development for young girls. It also has interlinkages with several key areas the U.S. addresses through its foreign assistance programs including: basic education, maternal mortality, gender-based violence and HIV/AIDS.

Marrying at a young age means that girls are more likely to drop out of school and have limited economic opportunities in the future, which keeps them and their families locked in a cycle of poverty. Young brides also are more likely to become young mothers who face higher rates of maternal mortality and morbidity. Girls between the ages 10 and 14 are five times more likely to die in pregnancy and childbirth than women ages 20 to 23. Girls ages 15 to 19 are twice as likely to die in childbirth. Furthermore, child brides are more vulnerable to domestic violence and are put at a higher risk of contracting sexually transmitted diseases like HIV/AIDS.

Therefore, efforts to reduce child marriage would make U.S. assistance more effective in addressing a variety of challenges. If child marriage is reduced, progress toward advancing universal basic education, reducing maternal mortality, stopping the spread of HIV/AIDS and preventing violence against young women, will also be achieved

Q. What steps should the U.S. take to work towards preventing child marriage?

A: The U.S. should work with national governments, elected officials, community groups and religious leaders to find ways to reduce child marriage through its foreign assistance programs.

A key step that the U.S. Congress should take is to pass the International Protecting Girls through Preventing Marriage Act. This act would enhance U.S. leadership in preventing child marriage by committing the President to develop a multi-year strategy to prevent child marriage in developing countries; requiring the Department of State to address child marriage in its annual Human Rights Reports; integrating child marriage prevention strategies throughout U.S. foreign policy; and scaling up successful approaches to prevent child marriage.

² Amin, S. and G. Sedgh (1998). Incentive schemes for school attendance in rural Bangladesh. *Policy Research Division Working Paper* no. 106. New York: Population Council. Arends-Kuenning, M. and S. Amin (2000). "The effects of schooling incentive programs on household resource allocation in Bangladesh," *Policy Research Division Working Paper* no. 133. New York: Population Council.