



Defending dignity.  
Fighting poverty.

# ISSUE BRIEF

## FROM AID TO IMPACT

# Child Marriage: A Promise of Poverty

Not every marriage lasts forever, but early marriage has lifelong consequences for girls. By forcing a child into premature adulthood, early marriage thwarts her chances at education, endangers her health and cuts short her personal growth and development. **Maternal health risks are particularly troubling as risk of death in pregnancy and childbirth for girls under the age of 15 is five times higher than for women in their 20s.** Taken together, the costs of this practice are too high to be ignored: Societies cannot progress when even the common practice of marriage condemns girls and women to a life of poverty.

CARE works with families, communities and local organizations to both reduce the prevalence and mitigate the many harmful impacts of child marriage through educational and behavior-change programs. The United States can lead the charge to end this practice by:

- Recognizing child marriage as a human rights violation.
- Developing a comprehensive strategy to prevent child marriage and empower young girls.

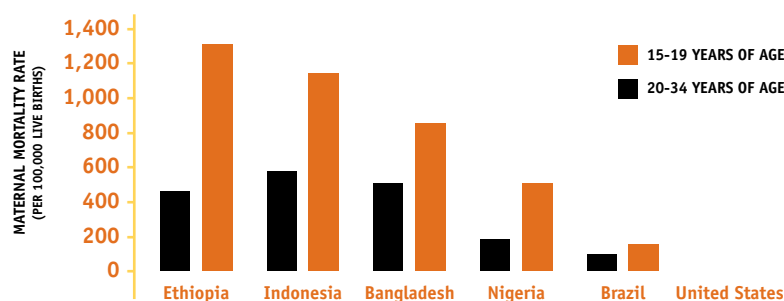
- Integrating child marriage prevention approaches throughout U.S. foreign assistance programs.
- Scaling up proven approaches and programs to end child marriage.

### Why do communities practice child marriage?

**The existence of child marriage is in most cases fueled by poverty and cultural norms.**

- In many families, girls are viewed as an economic burden and marrying them off is viewed as a way to alleviate household expenses.
- If few educational and economic opportunities are available, a girl may be married to cement an alliance that protects her – and the family’s – economic well-being.
- Community customs regarding gender roles, the appropriate age of marriage and the family’s honor can put pressure on families to marry their young daughters.

MATERNAL MORTALITY BY AGE IN SELECT COUNTRIES



Site: Family Care International and the Safe Motherhood Inter-Agency Group (1998). The Safe Motherhood Initiative. FCI: New York. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2002). Vital Statistics Report. CDC: Atlanta.

**Today, 60 million girls ages 17 or younger in developing countries are married; many to men over twice their age. If child marriage continues at its current rate, an additional 100 million girls in developing countries will be married within the next decade, or 25,000 a day for the next 10 years.**

## Issue in Focus

**As levels of education and economic opportunities increase, so does the average age of marriage.** For example, according to the International Center for Research on Women (ICRW), 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 one percent with higher education. Research shows that schooling helps girls develop aspirations and gives them skills to negotiate if, who and when they will marry.

**Girls who marry early face a host of health risks:** higher rates of maternal mortality, infant mortality, obstetric fistula, malnutrition and HIV infection. One of the consequences of early marriage is early pregnancy for girls. According to UNICEF, young mothers are more likely to develop obstructed labor and eclampsia; the risk of death in pregnancy and delivery for girls under the age of 15 is five times higher than for women in their 20s.

**CARE has also identified gender-based violence as a cause and consequence of child marriage.** For example, high bride prices levied on men by families and relatives of the would-be wives have been found to be a key factor for the increased rates of rape and abduction. When a woman is little more than a piece of property to be purchased, she is less likely to have bargaining power with her husband and his family and is often more likely to be subjected to physical and sexual abuse.



## Snapshot of CARE's Work to Prevent Child Marriage

**Nepal:** CARE mobilizes communities in three districts through the creation of child marriage eradication committees and solidarity groups to prevent gender-based violence and support survivors.

**Ethiopia:** Community organizations, parents, and tribal and religious leaders have already mobilized to amend the law to outlaw child marriage. However, the practice is still prevalent in many communities throughout the country. CARE is building the capacity of communities to change social norms through community conversations, savings and loans groups to encourage financial literacy and economic empowerment, and organizations to advocate for the elimination of bride price, bride abduction and early marriage.

**Sierra Leone:** Until recently in Sierra Leone, there was no minimum age for marriage under customary law and, as a result, forced marriages are still common; one in four girls is married by age 15 and 62 percent by age 18. Through radio programs and counseling groups, CARE facilitated community dialogue on child marriage and its negative effects among community members and families. Subsequently, a larger number of youth reported that they can talk to their parents about postponing marriage.



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