

# Child, Early and Forced Marriage and the Control of Sexuality and Reproduction

The control of sex and sexuality are at the heart of marriage and thus early and child marriage. But child marriage programs for the most part do not talk about sexuality nor address it as a means of ending the practice. This must change. There are many ways of tapping into sexuality, with its potential to open up conversations about other structural issues like gender, caste, class and poverty.

– Archana Dwivedi, Nirantar,  
New Delhi, India

## Key Statistics

**About 15 million girls are married before age 18 every year.**<sup>1</sup>

**Child marriage is a key driver of adolescent childbearing: 90% of adolescent pregnancies in the developing world are to married girls.**<sup>2</sup>

**The second leading cause of death among girls aged 15-19 is complications in pregnancy and childbirth.**<sup>3</sup>

**In a study in Kenya and Zambia among 15 to 19 year old girls who are sexually active, being married increased their chances of having HIV by more than 75%.**<sup>4</sup>

**Girls who marry before 18 are more likely to report intimate partner violence and forced sex than those married later.**<sup>5</sup>

**In a study in northern Ethiopia, 81% of child brides interviewed described their sexual initiation as forced.**<sup>6</sup>

## The problem

The subjugation of women and girls takes many forms. One of the most common, unquestioned and lasting is the practice of child, early and forced marriage (CEFM). Underlying the practice of CEFM is the control of women and girls' lives by families and communities, particularly the control of their sexual and reproductive lives.

Poverty has long been articulated as the foremost reason for CEFM but if poverty is the reason, why are boys not marrying as early as girls? Sexuality and gender are central concerns of early and child marriage. Yet these issues have been sidelined.

The social and cultural construction of sexuality—and its explicit emphasis on subordination—determines if, when and whom girls marry, as well as many conditions of marital life for girls and women.

Decisions about sexuality, sexual relationships and reproduction are some of the most important that an individual can make, and determine many other aspects of a person's life, including their living arrangements, their access to resources, and their roles inside the family and outside it; yet CEFM prevents millions of women and girls from making these decisions for themselves. In fact, marrying a girl simply transfers the control of her sexuality to others: fathers and other family members are replaced by husbands and in-laws,

who assess a girl in terms of the physical and reproductive labor she brings to the family. They generally do not believe that a girl should have the right to make decisions regarding sex or reproduction, including whether and when to engage in sexual activity, use contraception, or access reproductive health services, as this will diminish the family's power over her reproductive contributions.

### *The problem has deep roots*

Why are families so vested in the close management of girls' sexuality and sexual lives? More than any other group, girls' identity and life choices are defined by expectations regarding their sexual roles and behavior.<sup>7</sup> The 'proper' management of these can often determine a young woman's success in life.

Female sexuality shapes family honor in the eyes of parents and communities: virginity for the unwed, and faithful, monogamous childbearing for the married. The commodification of girls' sexuality is part of upholding this honor since a girl's virginity and reproductive capacity are exchanged between families.<sup>8</sup> The shame that families want to avoid is sometimes related to fear that their eventual business transaction will be compromised. Parents often cite fear of premarital sex, expressions of sexual autonomy, pregnancy out of wedlock and sexual violence and harassment as reasons for marrying girls as

children, as any of these situations could bring shame upon a girl and her family. In some settings, armed combatants "marry" young girls as a weapon of war.<sup>9</sup> These are legitimate concerns, particularly in times of increased insecurity and conflict.<sup>10</sup> And parents often respond to these fears by directing their daughters' sexuality and reproduction into child, early and forced marriage.

### **The implications of the control of sexuality for other aspects of girls' lives**

The management of girls' sexuality is a source of great anxiety to their families in many settings, and contributes to undermining many life choices for girls. In addition to driving **child marriage**, this anxiety can undermine girls' **mobility**, weaken their families' commitment to girls' **schooling**, impede their access to **health services**, undermine their ability to **consent to sex**, and limit their opportunities for **social engagement** or **work opportunities** outside the household.<sup>11</sup> Families worry about the risks—real and imagined—that girls may face when they find themselves away from home or in the presence of unrelated boys and men. They worry that girls who seek out health services may be assumed to be sexually active, or as having some problem related to their reproductive health. Some of their

fears are realistic, but they also reflect the preponderant, one-dimensional emphasis placed on girls' sexual and reproductive roles to the neglect of other aspects of their lives.

### Addressing sexuality holistically

We need to understand more about how the social construction of sexuality shapes all aspects of a person's life. Our choices are determined and constrained by culturally determined expectations and beliefs about how our sexual lives should unfold and to what extent we should be involved in deciding for ourselves. Promoting the rights of the individual requires these decisions to be made with the information, services and education necessary to make sex and reproduction safe, pleasurable and at a time of one's own choosing. And it requires inter-generational dialogue and the development and reinforcement of supportive community norms.

Policies and programs that ensure that women and girls can make informed decisions about their lives and that work systematically to break down gender discrimination are crucial to ending CEFM and mitigating its negative consequences.<sup>11</sup> Governments and international organizations can look to multiple international

agreements, including UN resolutions and conventions, for guidance and mandates to do just this, from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights to July 2015's Human Rights Council Resolution on the practice.

### How can addressing sexuality contribute to ending child, early and forced marriage?

Some examples of programs and policies that address sexuality to end CEFM include:

- Work with women and girls themselves to ensure they understand all their human rights, particularly their sexual and reproductive rights, and empower them to make decisions about their lives, including their sexuality and sexual and reproductive health;
- Community-based programs that:
  - ◆ Address concerns about safety and mobility of girls, concerns that often limit social networks, and end girls' schooling;
  - ◆ Work to shift expectations about girls' and women's school and work opportunities and their linkages with girls' reproductive and gender roles;
  - ◆ Work with men and boys to ensure their

respect for girls' and women's rights and ensure their skills and commitment to equitable decisions in the household;

- ◆ Expand life-skills training in schools for early adolescents, including negotiation skills and understanding of rights and responsibilities of husbands and wives under family law.
- Youth-friendly sexual and reproductive health services, without parental or spousal consent stipulations, which are crucial for ensuring that women and girls are able to make informed and healthy decisions about their sexual and reproductive health;
- Comprehensive sexuality education that includes discussions of gender norms, rights, relationships and power dynamics, and decision-making, and implemented through school curricula and via informal education, for both boys and girls;
- Efforts to eliminate laws that permit marriages of children with parental or judicial consent or make no reference to the right to choice in marriage: these perpetuate the notion that anyone other than the girl should have the right to control her sexuality and reproduction or define age of marriage as age at menses.



INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S  
HEALTH COALITION



nirantar trust



CARE



AMERICAN  
JEWISH  
WORLD  
SERVICE



GreeneWorks  
Social change for health & development

<sup>1</sup> UNICEF. 2014. *Ending Child Marriage - Progress and Prospects*. New York, UNICEF. [http://www.unicef.org/media/files/Child\\_Marriage\\_Report\\_7\\_17\\_LR.pdf](http://www.unicef.org/media/files/Child_Marriage_Report_7_17_LR.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> UNFPA. *Motherhood in Childhood: Facing the Challenge of Adolescent Pregnancy*. New York: UNICEF. <http://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/EN-SWOP2013.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> Patton, GC, C Coffey et al. 2009. "Global patterns of mortality in young people: a systematic analysis of population health data." *Lancet* 374: 881-92; Nove, A, Z Matthews, et al. (2014). Maternal mortality in adolescents compared with women of other ages: evidence from 144 countries. *The Lancet* 2(3): e155-e164; WHO. 2014. *Adolescent pregnancy*, Fact Sheet 364, <http://www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs364/en/>

<sup>4</sup> Clark, Shelley, Judith Bruce, and Annie Dude. 2006. "Protecting Young Women from HIV/AIDS: The

Case against Child and Adolescent Marriage." *International Family Planning Perspectives* 32 (2): 79-88.

<sup>5</sup> Speizer, IS and E Pearson. 2011. Association between Early Marriage and Intimate Partner Violence in India: A Focus on Youth from Bihar and Rajasthan. *J Interpers Violence*. Jul 26(10):1963-81. <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3741349/#:po=16.6667>; Rahman M, Hogue MA, Mostopfa MG, Makinoda S. 2011. Association between adolescent marriage and intimate partner violence: a study of young adult women in Bangladesh. Available online: <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/21980145>; Rahman M, K Nakamura, K Seino, M Kizuki. 2013. « Does gender inequity increase the risk of intimate partner violence among women? Evidence from a national Bangladeshi sample." <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/24376536>; ICRW. 2006. Child Marriage and Domestic

Violence. <https://www.icrw.org/files/images/Child-Marriage-Fact-Sheet-Domestic-Violence.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> Erulkar AS and E Muthengi. 2009. Evaluation of Berhane Hewan: A Program to Delay Child Marriage in Rural Ethiopia. <http://www.guttmacher.org/pubs/journals/3500609.html>

<sup>7</sup> Greene, ME, SM Perlson, and Child Marriage Research network. Forthcoming. *The Centrality of Gender and Sexuality to Understanding Child, Early and Forced Marriage*.

<sup>8</sup> Parikh, S. 2012. "They arrested me for loving a schoolgirl": *Ethnography, HIV, and a feminist assessment of the age of consent law as a gender-based structural intervention in Uganda*. *Social Science & Medicine*, 74: 1774-1782: 1779.

<sup>9</sup> CARE. 2015. "To Protect Her Honour": Child marriage in emergencies - the fatal confusion between protecting girls and sexual violence."

<sup>10</sup> Save the Children has published a number of reports on this phenomenon, e.g., on Syrian girls in Jordan: [http://www.savethechildren.org/atf/cf/%7B9def2ebe-10ae-432c-9bd0-df91d2eba74a%7D/TOO\\_YOUNG\\_TO\\_WED\\_REPORT\\_0714.PDF](http://www.savethechildren.org/atf/cf/%7B9def2ebe-10ae-432c-9bd0-df91d2eba74a%7D/TOO_YOUNG_TO_WED_REPORT_0714.PDF).

<sup>11</sup> Greene, ME, SM Perlson, and Child Marriage Research network. Forthcoming. *The Centrality of Gender and Sexuality to Understanding Child, Early and Forced Marriage*; AJWS. Forthcoming, November 2015. Policy Brief. Washington, DC: AJWS; CARE. Forthcoming, December 2015. *Findings from Participatory Community Analyses Research on Child Marriage in Bangladesh and Nepal*. Washington, DC: CARE.

<sup>12</sup> A program that works with parents, particularly fathers, to end CEFM: <http://www.girlsnotbrides.org/sex-and-sensibility-breaking-through-indias-patriarchal-bias/>