Out of wedlock, into school: combating child marriage through education

A review by Gordon Brown
Cover image: Sumeena Shreshta Balami, 15, leaves her home to meet her groom, Prakash Balami, 16, in Kagati village, Nepal.

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Executive Summary

By the end of today another 25,000 young children will have been robbed of their childhoods, cheated of their right to an education, exposed to life-threatening health risks, and set on a road leading to a life of servitude and poverty. Almost all of the children in question will be young girls, many of them barely into their teenage years. Their plight is the result of widespread and systematic human rights violations. Yet the source of the injustice they suffer is hidden in the shadows of debates on international development. These 25,000 children are the world's child brides.

Early marriage is a hidden crisis. Because the victims are overwhelmingly young, poor and female, their voices are seldom heard by governments. Their concerns do not register on the agendas of global summits. But early marriage is destroying human potential and reinforcing gender inequalities on a global scale. It jeopardizes education, is harmful to health and turns millions of girls into second-class citizens, locking them and their children into cycles of poverty. Getting girls into school, keeping them there, and ensuring that they receive a decent quality education is one of the most effective ways of breaking that cycle.

After years of silence it is time to put child marriage at the centre of the global poverty agenda. Governments in the world's poorest countries must act now to protect the rights of children to a childhood. That means challenging social and cultural practices that are hostile to equal citizenship for girls – and it means doing more to keep girls in school and out of marriage. Aid donors also have a role to play. The international community has invested heavily in education and health in the world's poorest countries. Yet is has scarcely engaged with an early marriage crisis that is eroding the benefits of these investments.

The full extent of child marriage is not widely recognized. This report identifies sixteen countries in which over half of young women are married by the age of 18. On a regional basis, West Africa has the highest incidence of child marriage, with Mali, Chad and Niger recording rates in excess of 70 per cent. But the practice is widely spread across sub-Saharan Africa, and in Bangladesh, India, Nepal and Pakistan. Many children marry at a far younger age than 18. We estimate that almost 1.5 million children each year marry by the age of 15.

Early pregnancy is a corollary of early marriage – often with tragic consequences. Death rates among women giving birth before the age of 19 are double the level for those over 20. For girls giving birth at the age of 15 or younger they are five times higher. Over 70,000 teenagers die each year in pregnancy or childbirth. Many more are left with long-term injuries. Most of the 2 million cases of fistula reported in developing countries originated with teenage births.

Education has the potential to act as an antidote to child marriage. There is clear evidence that the more education young girls receive the later they marry, especially if they reach secondary school. Compared with women who have either no education or only a primary school education, the median age for marriage among those with a secondary education is over two years higher in Bangladesh and Nigeria, three years higher in Ethiopia and Mali, and four years higher in Chad. The challenge is to get girls through primary and into secondary education. Gender inequalities in school entry and dropout rates means that over 8 million girls in
sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia face elevated risks of child marriage during their early adolescent years.

These years are a ‘tipping point’. Girls that have dropped out of primary school or failed to make the transition to secondary school are more vulnerable to the social, cultural and economic forces that perpetuate child marriage. That is why education policies need to incorporate tipping point strategies. These include:

- Cutting direct and indirect school fees to keep girls in primary education
- Building classrooms close to communities in rural areas with high early marriage rates, thereby reducing the distance that girls have to travel to school
- Providing support for girls in primary education, including grants for uniforms and textbooks
- Targeting incentives such as stipends and bursaries for girls’ education at critical points, including grades marked by high drop-out rates in primary school, and the transition from primary to secondary school
- Offsetting the financial pressures on families to marry daughters at an early age through social protection and cash transfers that are conditional on girls being kept in school
- Designing programmes that promote all levels of education to ensure that girls reach the age of 18 before they marry

Combined with wider programmes aimed at changing attitudes – through national dialogue, reform of laws, and strategies for the empowerment of women – these are interventions which can make a difference. There is no shortage of good practice – and there is a growing body of evidence documenting what works. The problem is one of scale and policy fragmentation. Currently, the global child marriage crisis is being tackled through small-scale projects, most of which are weakly integrated into national strategies. And many countries lack credible national strategies.

Keeping girls in school and out of child marriages could save lives. If a combination of education and other policies led to half of teenagers delaying birth until after the age of 20, the associated decline in infant mortality rates would save 166,000 young lives a year – or over half a million lives in the three years until the 2015 deadline for the Millennium Development Goal on child mortality.

Early marriage is both a cause and a consequence of girls dropping out of school. Young girls in countries such as Ethiopia and Mali often start school long after the official entry age, with the result that they reach the median age of marriage in their countries before completing primary school. Parents often withdraw girls from school and seek to marry them off because of economic pressures. And once married or pregnant, few child brides make it back into education. Only 2 per cent of married 15-19 year old girls in Nigeria are in school compared to 69 per cent of unmarried girls. At the same time, the high drop-out rate of girls from school reported in many countries adds to risk factors culminating in child marriage.

Getting girls into school and keeping them there would make child marriage less likely and accelerate progress towards the 2015 goal of Education for All. Experience across many countries has demonstrated what works. Financial incentives in the form of conditional cash transfers for parents who keep their daughters in school, mentoring, engagement with communities and persuasion all have a role to play. The problem is that current efforts are fragmented and operating at an insufficient level of ambition.

Part of the problem can be traced to the international aid architecture. There is
chronic under-financing of aid to basic education. Current levels are around $3bn a year – or less than one-fifth of the amount required to achieve the 2015 target. The World Bank’s International Development Association (IDA) has not attached sufficient weight to education in the very poorest countries. And the Global Partnership for Education (GPE), the multilateral vehicle of the Education For All partnership, has struggled to mobilize resources and deliver results. The $1.5bn aid pledged at its 2011 replenishment conference over the next three-to-four years fell far short of the $2.5bn initially sought.

This report sets out the case for a global drive to tackle the child marriage crisis. It calls for:

- **An international summit on early marriage.** The early marriage crisis has to be brought out of the shadows and on to the global agenda. Holding an action-oriented global summit in 2012 would help to galvanize international efforts behind the goal of halving child marriage over the next decade. Summit planning should be led by regional bodies such as the Africa Union and governments in South Asia.

- **National strategies for eliminating early marriage.** These should include laws that set the minimum age of marriage at 18, in accordance with international convention, and national dialogue aimed at changing attitudes.

- **‘Tipping-point’ policies in education.** Evidence in this report documents that education is the most important factor associated with age at marriage. The ‘tipping point’ age at which the likelihood of child marriage starts to increase rapidly is around 13-14. Preventing drop-out before this age and ensuring that girls make the progression from primary to secondary school is the most promising approach for curtailing child marriage. Programmes and policies should aim at reducing the direct and indirect costs of education, ensuring that schools are accessible to young girls, and offsetting financial incentives for parents to marry-off their daughters at a young age through cash transfers, bursaries, and other incentives aimed at keeping girls in education beyond their adolescent years.

- **Reforming the international aid architecture in education.** School systems and education policies can play a decisive role in breaking the cycle of disadvantage linked to early marriage. Unfortunately, the aid system in education is not fit for the purpose of reaching the millions of highly marginalised children who are being left behind, including the victims of child marriage. Aid donors need to close the $16bn financing gap in education, in part by increasing the share of aid delivered to basic education to 10%. And the time has come to create a global fund for education that is capable of mobilising the resources, building partnerships and galvanizing the action needed to make a difference to the millions of children – like the 10 million girls forced into child marriage each year – denied the hope and the opportunity that comes with education.
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Introduction

“People in our village value marriage more than the education of girls. I stopped school because I got married at 14 years.”
Mpika, Zambia

“I wanted to get an education but my parents were determined to marry me off.”
Himanot Yehewala, 18 year-old Ethiopian girl married for five years

“Immediately after we were withdrawn from school…we were married against our will and this was the first injustice done to us. I was married off at 14 years of age. I became pregnant three months after I got married.”
A 19 year-old girl in Yemen

Child marriage represents one of the greatest development challenges of our time. It is a practice that robs children of their childhood, imperils their health, and destroys their hopes. This year, 10 million children – most of them young girls – will become wives. That’s 25,000 every day. Coerced into lives of servile isolation, and scarred by the trauma of early pregnancy, child brides are the victims of widespread and systematic human rights violations. They represent a vast lost generation of children. And it is time to put their protection squarely on the international development agenda.

One of the gravest injustices suffered by child brides is the denial of education. As the three young women cited above testify, marriage and premature pregnancy pries millions of girls out of school and into a world of diminished opportunity. Denied the chance to realise their potential through education, many of these girls will be condemned to lives blighted by poverty, illiteracy and powerlessness.

Governments around the world do not recognise the full impact of early marriage. The most brutal toll is levied on the immediate victims. But child marriage imposes wider costs, many of which are hidden. Robbing millions of young girls of an education is not just an indefensible violation of their basic human rights. It is also an act of economic folly because it is destroying the skills base needed to drive economic growth, job creation and shared prosperity.

No country can afford to waste human potential on the scale associated with early marriage – least of all the world’s poorest countries. And no country can neglect the wider social costs. Education – especially girls’ education – is an engine of human development. It empowers women to take greater control of their lives, to participate in decisions that affect their interests, and to improve the health and nutrition of their children. Bluntly stated, today’s epidemic of child marriage is tomorrow’s crisis of ill-health, hunger and avoidable child deaths.

Since leaving office it has been my privilege to serve alongside Graça Machel as co-chair of the High Level Panel on Education. In that capacity, I have been greatly concerned over the slow pace of progress towards the Millennium Development Goal (MDG) target of decent quality basic education for all of the world’s children by 2015. While much has been achieved over the past decade, there is clear evidence that the pace of advance is slowing – and that the world will fall far short of the MDG commitment. One factor behind this state of affairs is the failure of national governments and aid agencies to reach the world’s most disadvantaged and marginalised children. This is a broad constituency. It includes those living in slums, remote rural areas, and conflict zones. Child labourers, ethnic and linguistic minorities, and children with special needs figure prominently – and so
do young girls forced into early marriage. Unless governments around the world come together as a matter of urgency to tackle the deeply-rooted social, economic and cultural factors depriving these children of an education, the MDG promise will be broken.

This paper is the first of several that will focus on hard-to-reach children. Let me be clear at the outset: there are no simple solutions. Passing laws, however stringent, is not enough. Child marriage is a source of injustice and a destroyer of opportunities for education. Yet it is also a symptom of a wider malaise. The low value attached to the education of girls in many societies reflects the low status of women. Child marriage is inextricably linked with the cycle of poverty – and poverty itself pulls girls out of school and into marriage. Cultural values can pressure parents to marry their daughters at a young age if they are unable to afford the costs of schooling. And in some societies dowry systems can create economic incentives for early marriage.

Education has the potential to play a pivotal role in enabling countries to break out of the early marriage trap. Of course, education policies operating in isolation cannot breakdown the structures that perpetuate child marriage. But they can make a difference, especially when linked to policies in other areas. Creating the conditions and providing the incentives for parents to keep girls in school can help to delay marriage, improve the status of women and reverse the cycle of poverty. Education policies can be particularly important in keeping girls out of early marriage in their ‘tipping point’ adolescent years. Among the key policies:

- Cutting the cost of education for poor households by removing direct and indirect fees
- Providing financial support targeting girls, including free textbooks and subsidies for school uniforms
- Creating incentives for parents to keep their daughters in school through bursaries and stipends
- Offsetting the financial pressures that push poor households into marrying off their daughters through social protection programmes and conditional cash transfers

Some of the most deeply entrenched obstacles to change are to be found in public attitudes. Researching this report I came across a statement by a ten year-old class five pupil in Bangladesh called Farzana Akhter. “If I get an education,” she told an interviewer, “people will honour me and my parents will be proud.” Those words capture the immense power of social and parental attitudes to foster self-belief and provide support. Conversely, the low value attached to girls’ education, reinforced by limited expectations, can have enormously corrosive effects. That is why educating parents and communities about the value of their girls’ education must be central to any strategy for change.

Many people have contributed to my understanding of child marriage. Research for this report was led by Kevin Watkins of the Brookings Institution, with support from Alex Canfor-Dumas. I have also had an opportunity to engage with a number of inspirational figures. Special mention must be made of The Elders. Founded by Nelson Mandela and including global leaders such as Ela Bhatt, Gro Brundtland, Graça Machel, and Mary Robinson, this remarkable group has broken through the silence barrier surrounding early marriage. Through a combination of effective communications, advocacy and political engagement, their Girls Not Brides campaign has started to put the issue on the political map. Another inspirational figure that I have had the privilege to work with is Kailash Satyarthi. His organisation - Bachpan Bachao Andolan (BBA) – has actively freed thousands of child labourers and combated child marriage across India. Many thousands of
children, including former child brides, have been rehabilitated in BBA’s Ashrams in Uttar Pradesh, Delhi and Rajasthan, where they have been provided with emotional support and an education. Their courage and fortitude, and Kailash’s leadership, are living proof that change is possible – and that education has the power to transform lives.

Many institutions have taken up the cause of eradicating child marriage. Several non-government organisations (NGOs) have built up a distinguished track record in research and advocacy. They include Human Rights Watch, the International Center for Research on Women, Plan, the Population Council, and the Forum on Marriage and the Rights of Women and Girls. UNICEF has worked over many years to document the scale of early marriage and to promote measures to curtail the practice. I am particularly grateful to Yasmina Haq, UNICEF’s country director in South Sudan, for sharing an early draft of a survey on attitudes to early marriage.

Special mention should be made also of the White Ribbon Alliance, of which I am very proud to say that my wife, Sarah, is Global Patron. Formed in 1999, the Alliance now works with coalitions seeking to promote safe motherhood across 155 countries, and it campaigns tirelessly to raise the visibility of problems like early pregnancy and childbirth.

My hope is that this report will play a part in combating the injustice - and indifference - that perpetuates child marriage. The scale of the challenge is immense. So, too, are our responsibilities. We cannot turn our backs on the millions of vulnerable children whose lives, hopes and futures are at stake. Just as earlier generations of reformers came together to eradicate the scourge of slavery, it falls to our generation to eradicate child marriage.
Part 1: Child marriage – counting the costs of a hidden crisis

Over the past decade the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) have put poverty on the international agenda. Campaigners have worked tirelessly to advance global initiatives aimed at cutting poverty, lowering child and maternal death rates, combating child labour, and getting children into school. Yet one issue has been conspicuous by its absence. The widespread and deeply entrenched practice of child marriage, one of the greatest barriers to achieving the MDGs, has remained hidden in the shadows.

Few issues merit more urgent attention. Early marriage blights the lives of millions of children, locking them into a vicious circle of servitude, isolation and poverty. Robbed of their childhood, cheated of their right to an education, and exposed to grave health risks, these children – the vast majority of them young girls – are consigned to a world of restricted opportunity from which they have little hope of escape. For those most immediately affected – the children themselves – early marriage is a one-way ticket to a life of poverty, illiteracy and powerlessness. There are also wider consequences. Early marriage is destroying on a vast scale the most precious asset held by the world’s poorest nations – the human potential of their children. For countries as well as people, the early marriage epidemic is a barrier to prosperity and poverty reduction.

The time has come to remove that barrier.

The scale of the problem

By international convention, child marriage refers to unions in which one or both partners are under the age of 18. This is an umbrella category that covers a multitude of arrangements. The full extent of early marriage is difficult to gauge. In part because the practice is illegal in most countries, and in part because many of those affected are not in a position to make their voices heard. With these caveats in mind, this section draws on new data analysis to provide a snapshot of what is known about child marriage.

International conventions have long treated child marriages as a violation of human rights. The Universal Declaration on Human Rights stipulates that recognition of marriage is subject to ‘free and full’ agreement on the part of consenting adults. The Convention of the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women established that the betrothal and marriage of a child ‘shall have no legal effect’. Other agreements reinforce the same principle. But if the right of young girls not to be forced into marriage is a basic human right, then it may be one of the most widely and systematically violated rights in the world.

The headline numbers provide an insight into the scale of the violation. Globally, it is estimated that one in every three women aged 20-24 marries before the age of 18. That failure translates into 10 million child marriages each year – or 19 every minute of every day. The majority of these marriages occur in South Asia (where the incidence of early marriage is reported at 46 per cent) and sub-Saharan Africa (where the incidence is 38 per cent). Figure 1 provides an insight into the scale of the problem. It identifies twenty-four countries in which the median age of marriage is less than 20. In nine of these countries, the median age is below 18.
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![Figure 1: Median age of marriage for women aged 20-24: selected countries](image)

Source: ICF International, MEASURE DHS, Demographic Health Surveys (most recent survey)

**Figure 2** looks beyond the median age of marriage. It ranks countries on the basis of the share of the population married by the age of 18, identifying sixteen countries in which over half of the young women fall into this category. On a regional basis, West Africa has the highest incidence of child marriage, with Mali, Chad and Niger recording rates in excess of 70 per cent. But the practice is widely spread across sub-Saharan Africa, with countries such as Burkina Faso, Guinea, the Central African Republic, Mozambique and South Sudan registering rates of over 50 per cent. In South Asia, Bangladesh has the highest rate of child marriage (and the second highest in the world), though India has by far the largest population of child brides because of population-size effects. The highest reported rate of child marriage in the Arab States is in Yemen, where just over half of girls are married by the age of 18.

As striking as the data is on under-18 marriage, it understates the problem. Because it is illegal in most countries, the practice tends to go under-reported. Moreover, the ‘under-18’ category does not capture the age profile of child brides. In many countries with high rates of early marriage, a significant proportion of young children are married by the age of 15. That proportion is highest in Niger, where 36 per cent were in wedlock by their fifteenth birthday. One in every seven 20-24 year-old women in India is married by 15. There is a large group of countries in sub-Saharan Africa – including Chad, Ethiopia, Guinea, Mali, and Sierra Leone – where...
between 19 and 37 per cent of girls are married by this age. **We estimate, on the basis of Demographic and Health Survey data for twelve countries with a combined population of over two billion, that some 1.5 million girls globally are marrying below the age of 15 every year.**

It should be emphasised there are gaps in our data, which are drawn from recent Demographic and Health Surveys. We have no recent nationally representative surveys from Afghanistan, which probably has one of the highest rates of child marriage in the world. UNICEF puts the adolescent birth rate at 150 for every 1,000 girls aged 15-18. Anecdotal evidence points in a similar direction. The child marriage problem also extends beyond the poorest countries. Research in Egypt has documented high levels of child marriage in rural areas and Upper Egypt, with one village-level study finding 44% of children married before the age of 16.

The age profile for child marriage is important because in most countries the younger the bride, the larger the age difference between her and her husband. In Nigeria, the mean age difference between spouses is 12 years if the wife marries before 15, compared to 8 years if she marries after 20. For child-brides in polygamous marriages the age difference is 18 years.

National data do not capture sub-national variations in patterns of very early marriage; the incidence of early marriage is higher, for example, in rural areas than in urban ones (Figure 3).

National survey data can sometimes obscure large variations across regions. Child marriage is common across much of India, but prevalence rates are highest in northern states such as Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and Rajasthan. According to the ICRW, 68 per cent of girls in the Indian state of Rajasthan are married by 18. In the western Malian region of Kayes the incidence of early marriage has been estimated at over 80 per cent. Northern Nigeria has some of the highest rates of child marriage in the world. Nationwide, the share of young women who...
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Source: ICF International, MEASURE DHS, Demographic Health Surveys (most recent survey)

were married by the ages of 15 and 18 is respectively 16 per cent and 39 per cent. For northern Nigeria those figures rise to 48 per cent and 78 per cent. As Figure 4 shows, the child marriage map of Ethiopia is also highly differentiated across regions. Beyond the capital of Addis Ababa, prevalence is high across the country, but there are large differences in the proportion of females marrying before the ages of 15 and 18. In the rural Amhara region of Ethiopia, half of girls are married by the age of 15 – three times the national average.

Is the incidence of early marriage declining over time? One recent study conducted by the ICRW found that child marriage prevalence is decreasing overall, but very slowly and unevenly. In 34 of the 55 countries with comparable data from two recent surveys, there has been no significant change in the percentage of women aged 20-24 married by 18 – and only 5 countries experienced a decrease of more than 10 per cent. This is consistent with research conducted by this report comparing trends in the median age of marriage across a broad group of countries with a high incidence of pre-18 marriages (Figure 5). Niger, Mali and Chad, for example, have made no discernible progress in raising median marriage over the past two decades. Only one country – Bangladesh – has increased the median age of marriage by over one year since the early 1990s.

Drivers of early marriage

The causes of child marriage are varied and complex. They vary across and even within countries, with cultural factors, social practices, and economic pressures interacting with poverty and gender inequality to drive children into marriage. Legal protection against early marriage is uneven and weakly enforced.

Most countries with high levels of child marriage are party to international treaties and conventions aimed at protecting children
against early marriage. These include the Convention on the Rights of the Child, and the Convention of Consent to Marriage, Minimum Age for Marriage and Registration of Marriage, and the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women.

Figure 4: Early marriage in Ethiopia, by region

Figure 5: Median age of marriage: change over time (selected countries)


Source: ICF International, MEASURE DHS, Demographic Health Surveys (most recent survey)
National legislation often falls short of both the letter and the spirit of these conventions. Around one-third of countries have laws that set a lower minimum age for girls to marry than for boys. In Mali, a girl is legally allowed to marry at the age of fifteen with the consent of her parents. Several countries with high rates of early marriage – including Niger – have unequal laws of consent.

Efforts to align national laws with international human rights principles have met with mixed success. In 1999 Yemen’s parliament abolished a law setting the minimum age for marriage at 15. Ten years later, a majority of parliamentarians voted to restore a minimum age of 17. However, a small group of parliamentarians have successfully blocked the law claiming that it will lead to ‘the spreading of immorality’, the weakening of ‘family values’ and the violation of Sharia, Islamic law. Yemen has one of the highest levels of maternal mortality in the world and some of the largest gender gaps in basic education.

While laws matter, strong legislation has often delivered weak results. It is now over three decades since India raised the legal age for marriage from 12 to 18, but half of the country’s young women married below the legal age limit. The Revised Family Code for Ethiopia, adopted in 2003, also sets the legal age of marriage at 18 for girls and boys. This provision is reinforced by a constitutional provision that “marriage shall only be entered into with the full and free consent of the intending spouses.” But the law is seldom enforced.

This is part of a wider pattern of non-compliance. In countries such as Bangladesh, Cameroon, Mali and Niger the vast majority of young girls marry before they are legally allowed to do so. In some cases, laws themselves are applied in an erratic fashion. The Child Rights Act in Nigeria, passed in 2003, raised the minimum for girls to marry to 18. To date, however, only a few of the country’s 36 states have begun developing legal provisions for implementing the law. To complicate matters further, the country has three different legal systems – civic, customary and Islamic – with different rules on child marriage. Federal and state government have control only over civic law marriages.

The limited writ of the law in many countries underlines the force of customary practices, social attitudes and economic pressures. When it comes to early marriage, ‘tradition’ is a potent force. Dowry or bride-price systems, in which money or gifts change hands, can create powerful inducements for parents to marry-off their daughter. In Bangladesh, the price of dowry payments rises as girls become older.

For the very poorest households this creates a strong incentive in favour of early marriage. Bride-price arrangements, which are a common practice in sub-Saharan Africa, generate similar pressures. Survey research carried out by UNICEF in South Sudan found that financial considerations weighed heavily in parental decisions to marry-off their daughters at a young age, especially during periods of drought and economic hardship. Similarly, in northern Cameroon marrying off daughters is both an economic transaction and a social rite. In exchange for a daughter’s ‘hand-in marriage’ a father receives payments – and younger girls often fetch a higher price.

Dowry and bride-price systems are traditional practices rooted in wider systems of gender inequality. Several studies from South Asia report that parents often view daughters – who generally move to their husband’s home after marriage – as a burden on the household. Similar findings are reported from sub-Saharan Africa. Early marriage can be seen as a way of transferring a liability and reducing household costs. Where there are significant costs attached to schooling, poor households may view educating their daughters as a
questionable investment given that the benefits will be transferred to their husband’s households. The wider calculation may entail an assessment of the costs associated keeping a girl at home against the financial benefits of bride price. As one analysis of public attitudes in eastern Nigeria puts it, “most parents have calculated the gains and privileges to be derived from their daughter’s marriages long before the girls have matured.”

While gender roles in countries with high rates of child marriage vary enormously, there is one unifying feature – the low status of women and girls. Social and religious norms are sometimes used to reinforce that status. In Pakistan, many girls become child brides through Watta Satta, an exchange aimed at strengthening ties between families. The notion that women and girls have a right to decide who to marry, conflicts with the norms of patriarchal systems in which they are seen as the property of fathers and husbands.

In some cases, parents actively push young girls into marriage because they believe it will protect them – and the ‘honour’ of the household – from the risks of sexual assault and pregnancy outside marriage. In others, parents see early marriage as a source of security. As one mother in Egypt put it, “getting a girl married at an early age is the best protection for her.” In many cultures young girls are socialised from a very young age into accepting that early marriage is their destiny, a source of status and a route to enhanced welfare. In a study of 36 villages in Niger, Plan International found that the “strongest argument girls themselves made in favour of early marriage” was that it would improve their economic wellbeing.

In practice it is difficult to separate the effects of social attitudes and economic circumstances. There are certainly instances in which questionable cultural or religious beliefs are cited in defence of child marriage. In some cases, for example, Koranic law has been used as a justification, even though the Koran calls for the consent of both parties in order for a marriage to be valid.

What is clear from evidence across many countries is that poverty and economic pressure can magnify the effects of cultural practices. Child marriage is often seen as part of a wider economic coping strategy which generates income and assets, while reducing the costs associated with raising a daughter. This explains why early marriage is more common among poorer than richer households (Figure 6).

It also explains why child marriage is sometimes observed to increase during periods of crisis, as witnessed by the phenomenon of ‘drought brides’ in Kenya.

Child marriage and early pregnancy play a pivotal role in transmitting poverty and disadvantage across generations. The link between education on the one side, and the status of women and the wellbeing of their children on the other, is well known. Child marriage breaks that link. Girls entering early marriage tend to start childbearing at a younger age, have more children closer together, and longer periods of childbearing. Apart from the direct risks to the women involved, the children of young, uneducated mothers are also more likely to be malnourished and less likely to attain higher levels of education, perpetuating the cycle of poverty. Similarly, the poverty that fuels child marriage in turn perpetuates poverty by transmitting diminished life-chances to children.
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The consequences – home and reproductive health

Early marriage marks an abrupt transition for millions of young girls into an adult world – a world for which they are emotionally and physically unprepared.

Women who marry younger face elevated risks in many areas. There is evidence from household surveys that women who marry younger are more likely to be beaten – and more likely to believe that a husband might be justified in beating his wife. One World Health Organisation (WHO) survey found that women under the age of twenty were consistently at higher risk of physical or sexual violence from a partner. In urban Bangladesh, 48 per cent of 15-19 year old women reported either physical or sexual violence, or both, by a partner within the past 12 months, versus 10 per cent of 45-49 year olds. Less easy to capture in data are the psychological effects of early marriage. Lacking support systems, young brides are often left isolated, powerless, and lacking in self-esteem.

Nowhere are the risks of child marriage more evident than in the area of sexual and reproductive health. Girls who marry early typically have their first pregnancy and experience of childbirth at a young age. The graph documents the high level of births among girls in the age range 15-17. The vast majority of births to adolescent girls occur within marriage. In countries such South Sudan, Guinea and Bangladesh over half of the age group have already given birth, rising to over two-thirds in Mali, Chad, Liberia and Niger (Figure 7). In 17 of the countries in the sample at least 5 per cent of 15 year olds have given birth.

Behind the headline numbers are stories of human tragedies. Complications during pregnancy and childbirth are the single largest cause of mortality for girls in the age range 15-19 years, accounting for 70,000 deaths each year. Compared with women over the age of 20, girls between the ages of 15-19 are twice as likely to die during pregnancy and childbirth. For girls aged below fifteen, the likelihood of death is five times greater. And the risks extend beyond the mother to their children:

- Infants born to mothers aged under the age of 18 are 60 per cent more likely to die in their first year than infants born to mothers aged over 19.

In Niger, the death rate among children born to mothers aged 20 or
above is 32 per cent lower than for children born to teenage mothers. In Bangladesh and Nepal the comparable risk reduction is respectively 39 per cent and 40 per cent.

- Children born to mothers aged under 18 years of age are more likely to suffer from low birth weight, malnutrition and impaired cognitive development, with damaging consequences for their future education prospects.

**Figure 7: Childbearing rates: mothers under 18 and under 15 (selected countries)**

Disturbing as the statistics of maternal mortality and child health are, they tell only a partial story. Pregnancy and childbirth pose wider threats to adolescent girls. The foremost risk is prolonged or obstructed labour. In settings where access to care is limited, this can result in obstetric fistula. Untreated fistulas can be fatal. But as many as 2 million women are living with the consequences of untreated fistulas, including lifelong incontinence, loss of livelihoods, and social isolation. In Nigeria alone the Ministry of Health estimates that 10,000 new cases of fistula occur each year, the vast majority among teenage girls. The large majority of fistula sufferers in Nigeria, as in other countries, are young, poor, rural women with a limited education.

Limited access to antenatal care and other health services creates another layer of risks. Girls who conceive before the age of 18 need additional support during pregnancy, childbirth, and the post-natal period. Yet a combination of poverty, limited education and restricted provision of basic services makes it difficult for pregnant teenagers to access adequate care. In rural areas of Mali, over 80 per cent of girls and women live at least 30 kilometres from the nearest health centre, and only 28 per cent of deliveries take place with a skilled attendant.

Unsafe abortion is another threat. Many young girls are forced out of fear and desperation to terminate their pregnancies. Lacking access to medical advice and care, the consequences are sometimes fatal and often
leave teenagers facing long-term health problems. According to the World Health Organization, 14 per cent of all unsafe abortions that take place in the developing world – some 2.5 million a year – involve girls still in their teens, accounting for 18 per cent of abortion-related maternal deaths.

Box 1 Yeruknesh Mesfin from Ethiopia – married at 13, died in childbirth aged 15

Yeruknesh was from Goradit, a small village in Ethiopia; she never had the chance to go to school, but from the age of seven looked after her family’s cattle. Ten days after her birth Yeruknesh was circumcised. Then, at 13, she was abducted, raped by and married to a local farmer, Mr. Zena. He was 32 years old and his first wife had died in childbirth. Yeruknesh became stepmother to his four year-old son and two-year-old daughter and took over the household chores and helped with the harvest.

Shortly after her marriage, Yeruknesh started menstruating and became pregnant. Yeruknesh felt pain and discomfort during her pregnancy, but carried on with her daily work. During her labour, women neighbours came into Yeruknesh’s small thatched grass hut praying that Yeruknesh would deliver safely, but complications of the birth were far beyond the capacity of the traditional birth attendant, who had no formal training.

Yeruknesh was carried to Bahir Dar Hospital, but both she and her baby died.

Box 2 Husan Pari, from Pakistan, was married at 12 and died in childbirth aged 13

“She was the only child God gave to me, an angel so lovely that we called her Husan Pari, meaning pretty fairy. But her luck was not pretty and when she was eight, her father died in a road accident. I worried that if I died too, who would take care of my daughter? I wanted her to get married, to be happy and secure. I found a match for her – a farmer in a nearby village. Husan Pari was very excited about her wedding and her new clothes, but she did not know what marriage would bring.

Within three months she was pregnant and I took her to the traditional birth attendant, the Dai, who gave her remedies for vomiting. We could pay the Dai in small instalments and we liked her prayers and herbs. Our grandparents say that birth can bring death and the forces that keep a woman alive are strongest in the home. Husan Pari worked very hard and her diet was poor – superstitions stopped her from eating eggs and fish and she became terribly thin. I worried how she would bear the pain of labour; I didn’t know that my daughter, the heart and light of my eyes, would die.

The worst time came on 26 June 2005. We went to help her when we heard her screams but the baby would not emerge. The Dai became nervous, refused to help anymore and said we must take her to the hospital. On the way, Husan Pari became blue, cold as ice and died in my arms. I could not save her or her baby. I cannot remember how we reached home, or how the funeral happened. The pain was unbearable.

Husan Pari could have lived if she had skilled health care and not married so young. I blame myself for her death.”
Early marriage disadvantages young girls in other ways, some of them life-threatening. Having married at a young age, they are more likely to have unprotected sex with partners who are more likely to be HIV-positive by virtue of their older age. They are also less likely to be aware of contraception – and even if they are aware may lack the authority to exercise an informed choice. Figure 8 illustrates the far higher reported rate of modern contraception use among married women aged 30-34 than among the 15-19 age group. While some of the difference is doubtless the result of changed preferences regarding pregnancy, other factors are also at play, including lack of information, levels of education, self-esteem, and unequal decision-making power. Girls who marry young often have insufficient information on family planning, and they find it difficult to assert their demands against older husbands in matters of family planning.

Whatever the weight of these factors the combined effect is devastating. Unable to control their own fertility, the victims of early marriage are less able to space births – and birth spacing is one of the principal risk factors for maternal and infant mortality. Limited access to contraception also elevates the risk of HIV. Studies in countries such as Kenya and Zambia have found HIV infection rates that are 48-65 per cent higher among young married girls by comparison to sexually active unmarried girls.

**Figure 8: Married women currently using modern contraception, by age (selected countries)**

Source: ICF International, MEASURE DHS, Demographic Health Surveys (most recent survey)
Part 2: Child marriage and education – breaking the vicious circle

Getting young girls into school, keeping them there and ensuring that they get a decent quality education is the single most powerful antidote to early marriage. The problem is that education is part of the early marriage trap. That trap operates in two directions. In some cases, girls are withdrawn from schools as a result of marriage and pregnancy. In others, girls enter marriage either because they have dropped out of primary school, or because they were unable to make the transition to secondary school. The ‘tipping point’ age at which the risk of early marriage escalates is often around 13-14. De-escalating the risk requires strategies that prevent primary school drop-out and facilitate a smooth transition to secondary education.

Figure 9: The education gap: median marriage age by level of schooling (selected countries)

Data constraints make it almost impossible to provide a detailed picture of the interface between education and early marriage. The illegality of early marriage almost certainly leads to systematic under-reporting in household surveys. School-based administrative data is equally problematic because school authorities may be unaware of the reasons that girls drop out, or they may be loath to report on what is seen as a sensitive cultural issue. There can also be a gap of several years between girls being taken out of school and entering early marriage. Parents may decide to discontinue their daughter’s education on the grounds that the costs are unjustified in the light of an impending marriage, but report the reason for non-attendance as a consequence of their inability to afford the fees. The combined effect of these reporting problems is that official data dramatically understate the impact of early marriage on education.

Whatever the data problems there is clear evidence that more education means less early marriage, fewer teenage pregnancies, and lower levels of risk for mothers and children. More educated women marry later,
especially if they reach secondary school. Compared with women who have either no education or only a primary school education, the median age for marriage among those with a secondary education is over two years higher in Bangladesh and Nigeria, three years higher in Ethiopia and Mali, and four years higher in Chad (Figure 9).

Education levels have an even more striking bearing on the likelihood of teenage pregnancy and childbirth (Figure 10).

Consider the case of Ethiopia, where the reported incidence of teenage pregnancy or childbirth is 29 per cent among those with no education, 10 per cent among those with a primary education and just 3 per cent among girls with a secondary education or higher. In India, the teenage pregnancy and childbirth rate is almost four times higher among girls with no education than among those with secondary education.

The pattern of correlation between education level attained and teenage pregnancy varies across countries. The general picture that emerges is one of a strong inverse association between education and teenage pregnancy: the higher the level of education the lower the incidence of pregnancy. We calculate that completing a primary education cuts a teenager’s chance of getting pregnant by more than one-third, relative to a girl who receives no education. However, the association is strongest at secondary school level: girls with a secondary education are half as likely again to get pregnant while still in their teenage years.

This is an area in which risk reduction has the potential to save lives and avoid long-term health threats. The delayed pregnancy effect of more education has the potential to cut the toll of 70,000 teenage deaths that happen each year as a result of complications during pregnancy and childbirth. It could also save the lives of many children. Currently, 11.2 million children are born each year to teenage mothers in South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa. Around one million of these children die before their first birthday, most of them in the first few months of life. If a combination of education and other policies led to half of teenagers delaying birth until the age of 20-29, the associated decline in infant mortality rates

![Figure 10: Education and teenage childbearing (selected countries)](image-url)
would save 166,000 young lives a year – or over half a million lives in three years.

Of course, data exercises such as these have to be interpreted with some caution. The evidence points to a strong association between education on the one side and later marriage and pregnancy on the other. However, association is not the same as causation. The data do not indicate the direction of influence or the wider influences at play, such as the higher levels of household income associated with more education. Yet the strength of the association is marked enough to warrant the conclusion that education has an enormous potential to curtail early marriage.


Early marriage – a prompt for school drop-out

Charting the interaction between early marriage and participation in school is not straightforward. Experts continue to debate the direction of causality. Do children drop out of school as a result of early marriage? Or do they marry early because they have dropped out of school? These are important questions. Data constraints in most countries mean that more research is required to provide definitive answers. However, we know enough to identify the underlying drivers of early marriage – and to design policies that weaken these drivers.

Gender inequality in education is both a cause and a symptom of child marriage. While gender gaps have been narrowing at the primary school level, girls still account for 54 per cent of out of school children in the primary school age group in sub-Saharan Africa, and 59 per cent in South Asia. This figure implies that there are 2.7 million ‘missing girls’ of primary school age excluded from education by virtue of gender inequality. These girls face elevated risks of early marriage at the adolescent age tipping point for early marriage.

Disparities are even more marked at the tipping point itself. There are 51 million adolescents out of school in South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa, of which 55 per cent are female. The gender disparity is greatest in sub-Saharan Africa, where being female adolescents face a risk of being out of school around one-third higher than for males. Gender disparities in this age group mean that there are 5.6 million ‘missing girls’ of secondary school age in the education
systems of the two regions with the highest child marriage rates.

These figures provide an insight into the interface between education and early marriage. Caution has to be exercised in drawing conclusions about cause and effect. But the unequal distribution of opportunity to enter school and progress through the education system means that over 8 million young girls are put in a situation where child marriage becomes more likely.

Evidence on school progression in countries with high levels of child marriage captures the effects of gender disparity. Young girls are less likely to be in school and more likely to drop out as they make the transition from primary to higher levels of education. In the Central African Republic, Chad and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, between 57 and 69 girls enter the last grade of school for every 100 boys. One way of charting gender disparity through the education system is through a simple comparison of the ratio of girls to boys in school, using UNESCO’s Gender Parity Index (GPI). As illustrated in Figure 11, countries such as Chad, Niger and Mali register very low levels of parity. There are exceptions to this particular rule of association. The most notable is Bangladesh, which has made extraordinary progress in gender parity in education.

While it is difficult to isolate the early marriage effect from the wider social, cultural and economic forces that act to disadvantage young girls, there is compelling evidence that it contributes to gender disparity. Some of that evidence comes from data on the education status of teenage girls who are

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**Box 3 Voices of the victims**

Thousands of young girls every day see their hopes for an education sacrificed through forced marriage. The termination of schooling is typically brutal and abrupt. When they become adults, many of the victims of child marriage see the loss of their education as the point at which their lives changed irrevocably for the worse.

"Young children have babies – your life is ruined, your education is ruined. You become upset with everything in your life,"

Kanta Devi, aged 21. Married at 16, Rajasthan, India

"Had I been married later, I'd have learned to read and write. If I'd studied, I wouldn't have had to work in the scorching heat, harvesting in the fields."

Rukhmani, a 26-year-old mother of two, betrothed at six years old and started living with her husband aged 15, India

"After marriage, what is my work now? Washing dishes, cleaning the floor, washing clothes and cooking. Before I was a kid, and now I'm having a kid."

Seema, married aged 14, Bangladesh

"I wanted to get an education but my parents were determined to marry me off. I tried to run away but my mother said she would kill herself if I did not marry him. I was not mature physically or emotionally so it was not easy for me to go and sleep with my husband."

Himanot Yehewala, married at the age of 13, Ethiopia

I finished seventh grade and left school because of marriage. I didn’t want to get married, but my father forced me to. He told me that education won’t do anything for me… I had no choice.”

Sultana, married at age 16 in 2009, Yemen
married:

- In Ethiopia 3 per cent of married girls aged 15-19 are in school, compared to 34 per cent of unmarried girls.
- In Mali 86 per cent of married girls have received no education compared to 62 per cent of unmarried girls.
- Only 2 per cent of married 15-19 year old girls in Nigeria are in school compared to 69 per cent of the married girls received no schooling, compared to 8 per cent of their unmarried counterparts.

Statistics alone cannot capture the human tragedies behind the lost opportunities for education. The voices of the victims themselves provide a chilling reminder of what it means for young girls to see their hopes and dreams shattered by a forced withdrawal from school (Box 3).

Transmission mechanisms from early marriage to loss of opportunities for education can be summarised under four broad headings:

**The deadly interaction of economic pressure and gender inequality:** Just as household poverty can drive parents to push their daughters into early marriage, so it can drive them to curtail their education. The value attributed to girls’ education is an important part of the equation. If parents view expenditure on girls’ education an implicit transfer to her future husband’s family, they may be less willing to meet the costs. Similarly, in societies where livelihood opportunities for young girls are restricted by gender disparities in the labour market, or by low expectation, the case for investment in school will be diminished.

**Delayed entry to school:** Many children in the poorest countries start school after the official entry age. In countries such as Guinea, Uganda and Nigeria, over one-third of children start school at an age that is two years or more above entry age, rising to over 60 per cent in Ethiopia. In Liberia, over two-thirds of the children in grade 5 of primary school are more than two years over-age. Late entry matters for both girls and boys because being over-age is one of the strongest markers for dropping out of school. In the case of young girls, late entry to school can magnify the risks associated with early marriage. Consider the position of a young girl from a poor household in Ethiopia starting school three years after the official entry age of 7 years. Even on the assumption that she progresses smoothly through successive grades, after just five years in school she will reach the median age of marriage. This is not an untypical case. Across a broad group of countries with high levels of early marriage a delay of two years in school entry, and the loss of a further year due to repletion or drop out, would mean young girls reaching the median age of marriage before completing an eight year basic education cycle.

**School barriers and social stigma:** Early marriage, pregnancy and childbirth should not automatically spell the end of a girl’s education – but it usually does. Schools often have a policy of refusing to allow married or pregnant girls, or girls with babies, to return to education. Customary laws adopted by traditional chiefs in parts of northern Sierra Leone decree that pregnant girls have to drop out of school. Even when the law allows for a return to education, social attitudes created a barrier to entry. An interview given by a 17 year old Kenyan girl in 2008 powerfully captures the debilitating effect of stigma: “My classmates in my former school would laugh at me when they realised I was pregnant. They even drew cartoons to illustrate my condition on the blackboard just to ridicule me.” Bullying and abuse by teachers, pupils and other parents can reduce self-confidence, forcing them out of education.
Restricted access to school, and dropping out: Being out of school can increase the pressures drawing young girls into early marriage. While gender gaps are narrowing, primary school girls still account for the majority of out-of-school children – and out-of-school girls are less likely than boys to enter education. Distance between home and school has a marked bearing on girls’ attendance, reflecting parental security concerns. Once in school, there are many factors that can prompt girls to drop-out. Some of them are economic. Apart from the direct financial costs of education (in the form of fees and spending on uniforms, books and writing material) parents also face indirect costs, including a loss of labour to support the collection of water and firewood, childcare and other chores. The quality of education can also weigh in parental calculations.

Evidence emerging from learning assessment exercises documents some abysmal outcomes in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia. In many countries, having five years in education is insufficient to equip children even with the most basic literacy and numeracy skills. Inevitably, poor households are likely to call into question the merits of meeting the direct and indirect costs of schooling when learning outcomes are. The classroom environment itself can further reduce the chances of girls progressing through school. Teachers with low expectations of girls, along with the absence of female teachers as role models, can significantly increase the likelihood of girls failing, creating the conditions for drop out in the process. Research by UNICEF in South Sudan has shown how education intersects with wider social and cultural forces to push girls into early marriage (Box 4).

Reversing the cycle – education as a catalyst for change

National laws rooted in international human rights principles have a critical role to play in combating child marriage – but they are not enough. Governments around the world have to challenge the underlying conditions that perpetuate the problem, irrespective of the legal frameworks adopted by countries and the injunctions of the international community. That means reducing the economic pressures on poor households so that child marriage is not seen as part of a family’s coping strategy. It means changing attitudes by persuading parents, community leaders, and others that child marriage is unacceptable. And it means incentivising change, both through law and through economic measures.

Education is at the heart of the policy challenge. Getting girls into primary school at the right age, ensuring that they are able to learn, and facilitating their access to secondary school would help to keep girls out of early marriage. The empowerment effects of education would give them a greater say over their lives in key areas, including the selection of their partners, their fertility and their reproductive health. Unlocking these effects will require political leadership and practical policies to remove the obstacles to an education.

Current programmes demonstrate that change is possible. Some of the most successful have sought to incentivise parents to keep girls in school, while providing mentoring support and engaging with community leaders. One example comes from Ethiopia. In 2004 the Ethiopian government, working with local authorities and the Population Council, initiated the Berhane Hewan programme to counter early marriage in rural Amhara region. The intervention included ‘community conversations’ to engage elders in a dialogue, the engagement of adult female mentors with young girls, and the provision of financial incentives in the form of a cash transfer conditional on girls being kept in school and school supplies. The financial incentives were limited, amounting to around $4 for a school year in supplies and $20 at the end of the
Combating child marriage through education

The Bethane Hewan programme, is one of the few child marriage prevention interventions that has been rigorously evaluated. Results show that over a two-year period (2004-2006), school attendance in the project area among girls aged 10-14 increased from 78 per cent to 96 per cent. Young adolescents aged up to 14 were three times more likely to be in school and 90 per cent less likely to be married.

Beyond these school-attendance differences, girls who participated in the programme demonstrated an improved knowledge of HIV, sexually transmitted infections and family planning methods.

### Box 4  Child marriage in South Sudan

South Sudan is the world’s newest nation. The new government has shown great vision in adopting legislation – the Child Act of 2008 – that reflects international conventions on the rights of children. However, child marriage is widespread. An important survey carried out by UNICEF and the Government of the Republic of South Sudan (GRSS) provides insights into the attitudes and practices that perpetuate child marriage – and into the role of education as a potential force for change.

While the data is patchy, South Sudan probably has one of the highest rates of child marriage in the world. It is estimated that 57 per cent of women aged 15-19 are married, and 17 per cent before the age of 15. One corollary of these high levels of child marriage is a maternal mortality rate which is among the highest in the world, and a girls’ school enrolment rate that is among the lowest.

The UNICEF-GRSS survey documents a broad range of attitudes towards child marriage. Around half of the respondents covered thought that wealth generation was a legitimate reason for parents to marry-off their children, with some marked differences across states. However, the view that ‘there is nothing wrong with child marriage’ was rejected by over two-thirds of those surveyed, with a similar proportion rejecting the view that marriage was more important than a girls’ education.

The survey results are instructive on several counts. They demonstrate that attitudes vary across the country, that they are often ambivalent, and that they reflect different interpretations of tradition and law.

In explaining why child marriages happen, most respondents cited material gain. The high bride price in some states was seen as a major incentive to marry-off young girls, in some cases to meet the dowry payments of brothers. Family and clan pressures were also identified as major drivers. Significantly, though, the lack of educational opportunity was also seen as one of the main reasons for early marriage since it reduced the incentive to delay betrothal.

This is a finding of tremendous importance for South Sudan. Six years after a comprehensive peace agreement, South Sudan still has over 1 million primary school age children out-of-school. The net enrolment rate for girls is just 36 per cent (compared to 50 per cent for boys). And there are fewer than 10,000 girls in secondary school.

Improving access to education and cutting gender disparities would help to create incentives for delayed marriage, with far-reaching additional benefits for maternal and child health, employment and economic growth. Yet donors have been slow to support South Sudan’s education strategy. Aid commitments for the period to 2015 are currently around $80m a year, while at least $400m is needed to get all children into school by 2015.

In a separate paper, we shall be setting out the case for a significant increase in aid for education in South Sudan.
Other programmes have adopted a similar mix of interventions. In India, the Haryana state government’s Apni Beti Apna Dhan program has designed incentives aimed at changing behaviour. It provides cash incentives to families conditional on girls remaining unmarried until the age of 18. In this case, the aim is to promote school retention by disincentivising early marriage. The evaluation planned for 2012 will provide important lessons for policy design. In Bangladesh, Pathfinder International and Swanirvar, a Bangladeshi NGO, have also used incentives to target five sub-districts of one of the poorest areas of the country, targeting support on the last three years of primary and first year of secondary school. Reported enrolment rates increased by 14 per cent in the areas covered by the project.

The success of school-based incentive programmes is consistent with wider evidence. In Bangladesh, the Female Secondary School Stipend program was designed with a view to facilitating the transition from primary to secondary school. When the program was introduced in the mid-1990s, with funding from the World Bank and Asian Development Bank, Bangladesh had some of the world’s largest gender gaps in secondary education. Today, stipends are provided to around 2.3 million girls on a conditional basis up to class 10: the girls must remain unmarried, they must maintain 75 per cent attendance in school, and pass annual exams. In the space of fifteen years, Bangladesh has achieved gender equity in lower secondary education. Many other countries have since adopted this model. For example, both Kenya and Nigeria have created bursary programs for girls in areas marked by high marriage. From a different policy direction, education has also been an integral element in the large-scale conditional cash transfer programs adopted by governments in Brazil and Mexico. In both cases, cash transfers are made to poor households subject to children attending school – and in both cases there have been marked declines in drop-out rates.

Strategies for changing attitudes and practices are critical to success in combating child marriage. While laws may not change behavior, it is nonetheless important that they establish clear principles, rules and norms. Political leaders have to take responsibility for ensuring that national legislation prohibits early marriage, does not recognise child marriage, and makes provision for punitive measures. But lasting behavioral change will only come from an attitude shift. That is why national and local leaders, including religious leaders, should be engaged in a dialogue aimed at winning the battle of ideas and challenging the legitimacy of cultural practices and beliefs that tolerate child marriage. Many non-government organisations around the world are doing remarkable work in this area, often in face of entrenched opposition. In Senegal, the Tostan community empowerment project is reported to have reduced early marriage through a process of intensive and continuous dialogue across districts and villages. The dialogue includes education on human rights, the value of girls’ schooling, and the health problems that early marriage can bring. Another example comes from the Girls’ Scholarship Programme in Cameroon. Funded by USAID and Plan but operating through local governments, the project provides financial and mentoring support to young girls. It has contributed to a drop in teenage pregnancy and marriage rates in regions with low school enrolment and high child marriage rates. One of the effects of mentoring is that girls themselves are more vocal in challenging parental decisions on marriage.

School-level policies and the attitudes of education planners also have to change. Teenage pregnancy and childbirth are realities that millions of vulnerable young girls have to adjust to. Schools should confront this situation not by punishing the victims through exclusion, but by supporting their efforts to
continue with their education. Several countries have now introduced laws to protect the right to education of teenagers who become pregnant, in some cases after judgements passed down by judicial authorities. In Chile, the education law was reformed to prohibit schools from refusing pregnant girls or young mothers from registering, even if they were unable to meet full attendance requirements. Similar legislation has been adopted in Namibia. Policies adopted in 2009 allow ‘learner-mothers’ to return to school shortly after giving birth if they wish, subject to provision for childcare with support from family, community and government providers. No pregnant girl or ‘learner-mother’ can be forced to remain out of school against her will. Of course, laws have to be supplemented by training programmes that equip teachers and school authorities to identify and challenge the stigmatisation of pregnant teenagers. But laws nonetheless have an important part to play in changing attitudes.
Going to scale – global responses to a global crisis

Early marriage is one of the most intractable and complex challenges facing governments across the world. Rooted in tradition, perpetuated by poverty, lack of education and economic opportunity, and reinforced by social customs and the limited rights of young girls and women, there are no easy solutions. Yet the evidence from projects and programmes across the world demonstrates that change is possible. Well-targeted financial incentives, allied to social engagement with girls, parents and communities, can counteract the economic and cultural pressures that lead to early marriage.

One of the barriers to more rapid and lasting change is the scale of current interventions. In a penetrating analysis of the available evidence, the ICRW identified twenty-three projects meeting high standards of evaluation. But only six reached more than 60,000 beneficiaries, with fourteen reaching fewer than 15,000. In a world where 10 million child marriages take place every year, it is clear that a project-based approach will only scratch the surface unless the lessons learnt are scaled-up through national and international action.

Nowhere is the scale problem more evident than in education. The potential for education to contribute to a significant reduction in early marriage is beyond serious dispute, especially where school-based interventions are linked to wider strategies for changing attitudes. Many governments have identified promising approaches for combating early marriage. Yet few national education strategies incorporate policies and financing provisions that are commensurate with the scale of the problem. Similarly, many donors are supporting pilot projects that are delivering results without putting early marriage at the centre of wider strategies for gender equity in education.

Current practices are counter-productive and at variance with the spirit of international commitments on education. They are counter-productive because the early marriage crisis is a source of gross inequality and inefficiency in education. Many of the world’s poorest countries are spending 5 per cent or more of their national income on education. The benefits of that spending, and of international development assistance, are eroded by gender inequalities and associated loss of potential caused by early marriage. And current practices are at variance with the MDG and Education for All targets for a simple reason: without decisive action on early marriage, the targets will be missed by a wide margin.

Action on early marriage should be seen as an integral part of the promise to deliver education for all of the world’s children. Young girls denied opportunities for education as a result of the poverty, inequality and cultural practices that perpetuate child marriage are among the very hardest to reach. The barriers that they face in education are among the hardest to remove. But that is precisely why they should be at the centre of the international agenda for delivering on the education promise.

In an earlier report I argued that the current aid architecture in education is not fit for the purpose of achieving the international development goals. The following were among the core problems that I identified:

- **Chronic under-financing:** The $3bn in aid provided to the world’s poorest countries in 2009 represents less than one-fifth of the aid required to bring the 2015 goals within reach.

- **The Global Partnership for Education (GPE) has not galvanised international support:** Having set a target of $2.5bn for its
2011 financial replenishment, the GPE received donor commitments of less than $1.5bn. The GPE has also failed to set out a clear vision and strategy for reaching the most marginalised countries and social groups, including young girls facing the risk of early marriage.

- Limited support from the World Bank’s International Development Association (IDA). The IDA is the principal source of multilateral finance for education in the poorest countries. While lending has increased over the past decade, with the three year average reaching $1.1bn for the period 2008/2010, the overall envelope is too small – and sub-Saharan Africa receives limited support ($157m for primary education in 2011).

In the light of these and wider concerns I published a report in January 2012 making the case for a Global Fund for Education. Drawing on the best practices of the global funds in health, and building on the foundations of the Global Partnership for Education, my proposal envisaged a mechanism with annual funding of $3-4bn. These resources would be explicitly geared towards reaching the most marginalised children working through government strategies, or through wider partnerships between governments, non-government organisations and the private sector.

Having reviewed the evidence on early marriage, I am convinced that this type of arrangement could provide a powerful impetus for reform. The global fund facility would invite proposals from governments and non-government organisations with a proven capacity to scale-up successful interventions, but constrained by a lack of financing.

None of this is to understate the magnitude of the challenge. There are no blueprints for overcoming child marriage – and no easy answers. That is why, drawing on the example and the inspiration of Desmond Tutu, Mary Robinson and their fellow Elders, we need an international partnership to take up the cause, and to give a voice to the millions of young girls whose future is at stake. The education community can – and must – be a central player in the partnership. To that end, I propose the following measures:

- A global campaign on child marriage and education that brings the issue from the sidelines to the centre of the international development agenda. Over the past decade global campaigns have achieved breakthroughs in areas ranging from debt relief to HIV/AIDS and child immunization. The time has come to put the hidden crisis of child marriage on the map.

- An international summit on education and child marriage. UN agencies, the World Bank, bilateral donors and regional development agencies in South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa should be more actively engaged and better coordinated in their response to early marriage. The European Union should host a global summit on early marriage in 2013, with preparatory work paving the way for a concerted strategy for international cooperation.

- National goals backed by comprehensive education strategies. All governments in countries with high levels of child marriage should prepare a national strategy for halving over the next decade the level of marriage before the age of 18, with a strong focus on children aged 15 and below. This is a target that should be included in the post-2015 international development goals. National education strategies for achieving this target should include financing provisions for cash transfer programmes aimed at keeping girls in school, reforms that make education systems more amenable to pregnant girls. Combating child marriage through education
teenagers and mothers, and a strengthened legal framework.

- **Strengthening and reforming the aid architecture.** Bilateral aid donors need to close the $13bn financing gap in education. The Global Campaign for Education has argued for 10 per cent of aid to be allocated to basic education, which is an achievable goal. The World Bank should deliver on its pledge to provide an additional $750m in loans for education to 2015. This implies an annual financing level of between $1.1bn and $1.3bn annually. Additional IDA resources should be geared towards the poorest countries in sub-Saharan Africa, conflict-affected states and hard-to-reach populations, including girls currently in, or at risk of, early marriage.

- **Strengthening the Global Partnership on Education (GPE) to create an effective global fund.** An effective global fund in education could provide flexible support to governments and non-government organizations seeking to address the child marriage crisis. The GPE could provide a basis for the development of such a fund, subject to it demonstrating a capacity for swift, flexible, and innovative actions.
Conclusion

“Never, never will we desist till we have wiped away this scandal.”

These words are from a speech that helped to launch one of the most successful campaigns in British history. They were delivered by William Wilberforce to Parliament in 1791. It took another four decades to secure the legislation that abolished slavery — and longer still to eradicate the practice. Yet few of the parliamentarians listening to Wilberforce’s speech would have imagined that Britain would abolish slavery in their lifetime. Ultimately, abolition happened because campaigners came together through organisations like the Anti-Slavery Society, to combat indifference, raise public awareness, appeal to human decency and morality, win the argument, and act as advocates for change.

We need to bring the same armoury to bear against child marriage. It is time to draw back the veil of secrecy and indifference. Just as the Anti-Slavery Society provided a focal point for changing attitudes to slavery in nineteenth-century Britain, so today we need to form a global coalition for change on child marriage. The Girls Not Brides campaign led by The Elders has shown the way. Across the world, civil society groups, women leaders and reformers are coming together to change attitudes and laws. We must now build on this momentum. No issue merits more urgent attention. Child marriage is one of the defining ethical challenges of our age. It is a practice that is depriving millions of the world’s most vulnerable children of their childhoods, their education, and their hope for a better future. These children have a right to expect that our generation, to paraphrase Wilberforce, never desists in its efforts to wipe away the scandal that blights so many lives. Human solidarity demands that we hear their voices, demand their freedom, and act as their advocates for change.
This paper is one of a series released to support Gordon and Sarah Brown’s Education For All campaign. We are working to find solutions to the global education crisis - boosting the number of children in primary schools worldwide, and partnering with government, business and non-profit leaders and organizations across the globe to achieve the Millennial Development Goal of universal primary education by 2015.

Learn about the campaign at gordonandsarahbrown.com