

# Ending child marriage

A guide for global policy action



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## Who we are

The International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF) is the strongest global voice safeguarding sexual and reproductive health and rights for people everywhere. Today, as these important choices and freedoms are seriously threatened, we are needed now more than ever.

## What we do

IPPF is both a service provider and an advocate of sexual and reproductive health and rights. We are a worldwide network of 150 Member Associations and are active in 182 countries.

## What we believe

We see a world where women, men and young people everywhere have control over their own bodies, and therefore their destinies. A world where they are free to choose parenthood or not; free to decide how many children they'll have and when; free to pursue healthy sexual lives without fear of unwanted pregnancies and sexually transmitted infections, including HIV. A world where gender or sexuality are no longer a source of inequality or stigma. We will not retreat from doing everything we can to safeguard these important choices and rights for current and future generations.

# Contents

|   |           |  |           |
|---|-----------|--|-----------|
| Foreword  | 2         | <b>4 Human rights obligations of governments</b>     | <b>21</b> |
| Acknowledgments   | 4         | Why a human rights framework is critical for         |           |
| The reality of child brides                                 | 5         | stopping child marriage                              | 21        |
|   |           | The right to the enjoyment of the highest attainable |           |
| <b>1 Why is child marriage a global concern?</b>            | <b>6</b>  | standard of physical and mental health               | 22        |
| What is child marriage?                                     | 7         | The right to education                               | 23        |
|   |           | The right to decide if, when and whom to marry       | 24        |
| <b>2 A global snapshot of the problem and its impact</b>    | <b>9</b>  | The rights of the child                              | 25        |
| Trends in the practice of child marriage                    | 9         |  |           |
| Health costs of early sexual initiation and early pregnancy | 11        | <b>5 A call for global action</b>                    | <b>26</b> |
| Increased vulnerability to HIV                              | 12        | Enact, standardize and enforce national laws         | 27        |
| Education and development opportunity costs                 | 13        | Create an enabling environment for social change     | 27        |
| Poverty, deprivation and risks                              | 15        | Develop multi-sectoral programme approaches and      |           |
| Child marriages across borders                              | 16        | partnerships   | 28        |
|   |           | Priority areas for policy and programme development  | 29        |
| <b>3 Factors that promote and reinforce child marriage</b>  | <b>17</b> | Strengthen research and data collection systems      | 30        |
| Family ties   | 17        |  |           |
| Gender inequality   | 18        | <b>Useful contact organizations</b>                  | <b>31</b> |
| Poverty and economic survival strategies                    | 18        | <b>References and notes</b>                          | <b>32</b> |
| Control over sexuality and protecting family honour         | 19        |  |           |
| Tradition and culture                                       | 19        |  |           |
| Insecurity  | 20        |  |           |

## Foreword

*Ending Child Marriage: A Guide for Global Policy Action* appeals to key policy makers to improve the quality of life of millions of girls and young women forced into child marriages. Globally, vulnerable and marginalized rural girls and women continue to bear the health risks and social and economic costs of early and forced marriage, non-consensual sex and early pregnancies. There is now greater urgency for global policy action because child brides are increasingly more vulnerable to HIV infection.

The persistent neglect of the plight of child brides in parts of South Asia, Africa, the Middle East and Latin America is a direct reflection of the failure of our collective responsibility to protect the human rights of vulnerable young people. The silenced voices of the many millions of young women and girls forced into marriage before their eighteenth birthday signify complacency and discrimination. Most countries have laws on the minimum age of marriage, but they are largely ineffective, not enforced or operate alongside customary and religious laws. Traditions and cultural norms which rule the social lives of many practising communities in the developing world should not be used as an excuse to neglect the duty to protect, respect and fulfil the rights of young women.

Ending child marriage is indeed a mandatory task if we are to make progress in global efforts to attain the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). It is that simple. But this will require unambiguous political commitment, visionary leadership, and support for grassroots advocacy to address many of the cultural practices and behaviours that place young women and girls at increased multiple health risks, including HIV.

*Ending Child Marriage: A Guide for Global Policy Action* makes a strong case for international action, and strengthens the advocacy efforts of development practitioners and women's and children's rights activists to end child marriage. This work is a result of a series of technical consultations on child marriage, organized by the International Planned Parenthood Federation

(IPPF) in collaboration with the Forum on Marriage and the Rights of Women and Girls. This practical tool documents the special needs of child brides and outlines the nature of the economic and social factors which reinforce the practice. It provides solutions based on a child protection framework, and advocates for the use of legal, policy and multi-sector programme strategies for delaying child marriage for those at risk and meeting the needs of young women who are newly married. It will add value to other ongoing efforts to end child marriage and promote the rights and true voices of countless young people, in particular girls and young women around the globe, who have been marginalized for far too long.

IPPF's mission includes a commitment to "defend the rights of all young people to enjoy their sexual lives free from ill health, unwanted pregnancy, violence and discrimination." We will continue to collaborate and advocate for an enabling policy environment to bring an end to child marriage.

This advocacy tool is also part of the wider initiative on preventing HIV infection, particularly among adolescent girls,

which is led by the United Nations Global Coalition on Women and AIDS (GCWA), with the support of the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and Young Positives. Collectively, we have the power to change the course of this epidemic and bring dignity and empowerment to women and girls. We believe that bold policy decision making that takes into account the special concerns of child brides in national and international policy and programme responses will help us today to transform the lives of tomorrow's generation.



**Lyn Thomas**

*Deputy Director-General, International Planned Parenthood Federation*

## Acknowledgments

This publication is part of IPPF's thematic focus on adolescents and young people. We recognize the important role of joint advocacy action in addressing child marriage. *Ending Child Marriage: A Guide for Global Policy Action* is a collaboration between IPPF and several individuals and partner organizations at the international and national level.

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The recommendations in this publication represent the voices of several organizations and participants who attended two technical consultations organized jointly by IPPF and the Forum

on Marriage and the Rights of Women and Girls. We are grateful for their expertise and enthusiasm. They include those who took part in the Technical Consultation on Child Marriage (Nairobi, Kenya, October 2005) and in the Ouagadougou Technical Consultation on Early and Forced Marriage and the Rights of Women and Girls (October 2003).

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## The reality of child brides

“I am one of those unfortunate Hindu women whose hard lot is to suffer the unnameable miseries entailed by the custom of early marriage. This wicked practice of child marriage has destroyed the happiness of my life. It comes between me and the thing which I prize above all others – study and mental cultivation. Without the least fault of mine I am doomed to seclusion; every aspiration of mine to rise above my ignorant sisters is looked upon with suspicion and is interpreted in the most uncharitable manner.”

Rukhambai, Letter to the Times of India, 26 June 1885<sup>1</sup>

“You are becoming an obstacle to opportunity of the girls who have been asked for marriage. The government does not give them jobs. What will happen to them? Do you want them to go to the cities?”

A response from an elder during field interviews, Ethiopia 2005

“In Niger, which has the highest proportion of girls aged 15–19 currently in union (60 per cent), a girl in union is most likely to live in a rural area (91 per cent), to have received no education (90 per cent) and to be disproportionately located in the second wealth quintile (33 per cent). She is unlikely to have co-wives (79 per cent), and if she has children (43 per cent have no children) she is likely to have only one or two (56 per cent). Her husband is more likely to be 5–9 years older than she is (38 per cent) compared to other age gaps considered, and it is likely that neither partner received an education (73 per cent). She is likely to know how to protect herself from HIV/AIDS (64 per cent) but is unlikely to have ever used any form of contraception (89 per cent).”

UNICEF, 2005<sup>2</sup>



## 1 Why is child marriage a global concern?

Today, the devastating impact of child marriage continues to be ignored in the developing world. Millions of child brides, some only just past puberty, are denied access to health, education and economic opportunities. The majority of them are burdened with the roles and responsibilities of wives and mothers without adequate support, resources or capabilities.

This is despite the existence of numerous international and regional human rights laws and conventions against the practice. It is clear that international human rights instruments relating to child marriage remain, at best, rhetoric, or general declarations of principles, without effective national policies and mechanisms

Governments are often either unable to enforce existing laws, or rectify discrepancies between national laws on marriage age and entrenched customary and religious laws. This is because of the "official tolerance of cultural, societal and customary norms that shape and govern the institution of marriage and family life."<sup>3</sup> In

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