



What's Missing in the Fight Against Early and Child Marriage: Insights from India



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Written by Margaret Greene of GreeneWorks and Timi Gerson of American Jewish World Service and edited by Elizabeth Daube. Editorial contributions from Manjima Bhattacharjya, Jacqueline Hart, Leah Kaplan Robins, Praneeta Kapur, Jennifer Parsons, Dave Scamell, Javid Syed, Shari Turitz and Rama Vedula. Thanks to Ariela Blatter, Manisha Gupte, M.A. Keifer, Helena Minchew, Leigh Stefanik, Lyric Thompson and Yogesh Vaishnav for their feedback and insights.

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FRONT COVER Women and girls play sports at the MBBCDS school in rural West Bengal. MBBCDS provides education and group activities designed to help girls build confidence and learn how to advocate for their rights, so they can have greater control over their lives and avoid unwanted or early marriages.

ABOVE Adolescent girls hang out at Awaaz-a-Niswaan in Mumbai. Formed 30 years ago to challenge laws in Muslim communities that restrict women's rights, Awaaz now organizes gatherings for women and girls to learn how to advocate for themselves. They offer computer and English classes that provide young women with strict parents an excuse to get out of the house and seek support from friends.

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INTRODUCTION:

The Global Challenge of Early and Child Marriage

Every year, about 15 million girls around the world get married before they turn 18.² These young brides are more likely than their unmarried peers to face an array of devastating outcomes: to drop out of school, to experience violence, to live in poverty or to die while giving birth.^{3,4,5,6} While the effects of early and child marriage (ECM) vary, the practice nearly always begins with a clear violation of human rights: denying girls the freedom to make informed and independent choices about their lives and bodies. The presence of ECM in a community usually indicates that women and girls face tremendous inequality there—not just in their families, but in society overall.

Early and child marriage is a global phenomenon that occurs across cultures, religions and ethnic groups. Countries as diverse as Niger, Nepal and Nicaragua have earned a spot on the list of the top 20 countries with the highest rates of ECM.⁷ No region on the planet can claim to be completely free of the practice, including the United States—where several states still have laws that allow adolescents to marry as early as age 15 with parental consent.⁸

Despite its global reach, ECM is particularly common in the developing world, where one out of every three girls gets married before the age of 18.⁶ Almost half of these marriages take place in South Asia, with one-third of the global total in India alone.² India currently ranks as the top country on the planet for its massive number of women and girls who marry before reaching 18,⁷ the legal age of female marital consent.* Given the ubiquity of ECM in India and AJWS's experience supporting initiatives to empower Indian girls, this policy brief focuses on lessons learned from efforts to stop the practice in the country.

This brief, *What's Missing in the Fight Against Early and Child Marriage: Insights from India*, summarizes the factors causing and contributing to ECM in India. In addition to highlighting relevant research findings, this report draws on the knowledge and experiences of local organizations that AJWS supports in the country—organizations committed to empowering young women and girls and expanding their opportunities and choices. Finally, this report offers policy recommendations to help guide the United States government's contributions to the worldwide effort to end early and child marriage.

What Is Early and Child Marriage?

The practice commonly known as child marriage takes place whenever the bride or husband is below age 18. However, in many countries, the majority of these marriages involve older adolescents, not young children. To better reflect this reality, AJWS and other organizations often use a less commonly known term: 'early and child marriage' (ECM).¹

CAUSES AND CONSEQUENCES OF ECM IN INDIA: Social Norms, Poverty and Violence

Social norms and economic insecurity have led many parents in India to view ECM as the key to fulfilling a traditional and critical responsibility: to secure safe futures for their daughters and guarantee their long-term access to food, shelter and other basic necessities.¹ Highly restrictive beliefs about gender roles often make it difficult for girls and women in India to gain equal access to higher education or well-paying jobs. These entrenched, structural barriers reinforce an idea long-held by many communities already: that a girl's best option in life is to marry someone who will support her financially.

Particularly in areas with conservative or traditional values, communities in India often believe that a girl's highest aspiration should be marriage—and that a parent's most important obligation to a daughter and to the entire community is to arrange that marriage.^{1,6} As a result of these long-standing community norms, some parents have difficulty imagining futures for their daughters that extend beyond housework and childrearing. Surrounded by these constraining cultural messages and limiting structures, many girls in India grow up believing they don't have a right to make informed choices about their lives and bodies. In turn, many girls and young women are effectively denied the right to choose if, when, whom and how to marry.

*Although the minimum age for marital consent is 18 for females in India, it's age 21 for males. This discrepancy in the law demonstrates significant gender inequity in the country and different expectations regarding the respective trajectories of women's and men's lives.



Girls rehearse a dance at MBBCDS.

Although early and child marriage occurs across India and affects people of all social, ethnic and religious backgrounds, it occurs most frequently in the poorest states and among communities experiencing intense poverty, regardless of their location.^{1,6,9} Families facing economic insecurity—particularly in areas prone to natural disasters—often feel significant pressure to marry off their daughters as soon as they have any access to funds, regardless of their children’s ages.^{6,10,11} That’s because marriage ceremonies in India are expensive, and the costs are typically paid for by the bride’s family. When families cannot predict their next source of steady or significant income, they may decide to arrange and pay for a wedding while they have the means.

Indian families living in environments where violence against women and girls is particularly common—or perceived as a significant threat—also feel heightened pressure to marry girls at an early age. For example, in camps set up for Muslim communities displaced by conflict in Uttar Pradesh, conservative religious leaders have suggested that it would be safer for girls to get married and live in their new husbands’ homes than to remain within the camps, where they face a heightened risk of experiencing sexual violence.^{6,12,13,14} In an attempt to prevent violence against girls, these leaders have urged displaced families to marry their daughters early and, in some cases, without the girls’ full knowledge and consent.

Adolescent Sexuality: The Elephant in the Room

Contrary to popular belief, most early marriages in India take place in later adolescence, not among young children; the median age of marriage for women in India is 17.2 years.¹⁵ Adolescence is, by definition, the period of time when children begin to physically, mentally and emotionally mature into adulthood—and this development brings a surge in hormonal and bodily changes related to sexual desire and reproduction.¹⁶ Understanding the emerging sexuality¹⁷ of adolescents—both girls and

boys—is critical to understanding and addressing complex cultural beliefs that perpetuate ECM.

Yet many health and development experts—in India and around the world—are uncomfortable discussing adolescent sexuality. This topic often remains “the elephant in the room”¹⁸ during conversations about how to address ECM. Sex is considered too taboo to talk about, despite its obvious relevance. To understand why, it’s useful to explore views of sexuality in India.

Communities with high levels of ECM often view girls and women as symbols of family honor that must be protected or controlled. Maintaining that collective honor often hinges on the ability of girls to navigate their adolescence without engaging in sexual activity, which would compromise their reputation in the community.

This desire to control girls’ behavior goes beyond regulating sex. In especially conservative areas of India, families and communities restrict girls from spending time outside the home alone—because of fears that girls might interact with boys and that rumors or scandals might follow, regardless of whether the girls actually engaged in sexual or romantic behavior. In these contexts, girls who do not conform to the social norms that regulate their lives and bodies may face significant repercussions, ranging from shunning and vicious rumors to community-sanctioned honor killings.¹⁹

Particularly in areas with conservative or traditional values, communities in India often believe that a girl’s highest aspiration should be marriage.

Given the severity of the consequences, it’s understandable that many families in India fear the possibility of their daughters becoming sexually active before marriage.^{5,20,21} In an attempt to prevent girls from acting on their own desires—or experiencing sexual violence—families

and communities often sharply restrict girls' access to information about sexuality. Thus, adolescent girls in India who engage in sexual activity rarely know how to prevent pregnancy or protect themselves from sexually transmitted illnesses. And if they experience sexual violence, the community may even blame the girls for the crimes committed against them.

Communities with high levels of ECM often view girls and women as symbols of family honor that must be protected or controlled.

Many families in India have found a reliable, lasting way to ease their anxiety about their adolescent daughters' sexuality: by arranging early marriages that will be celebrated by the community.

A Vicious Cycle: The Effects of Early Marriage

Many parents begin thinking about marriage as their daughters physically mature and hit puberty—and once marriage is on the horizon, girls' prospects for education and economic opportunity are sharply curtailed. After the onset of puberty, some parents begin encouraging their daughters to spend less time on schoolwork and more time on domestic activities, like cooking, cleaning or taking care of sick relatives and younger children.¹ Once marriages are arranged—and sometimes even before—girls typically drop out of school to attend to their marital and familial duties.^{22, 23, 24}

This lack of education makes young brides dependent on their husbands for economic security—thus making them less able to pursue other options or separate if the unions are unsatisfying or violent. Girls married young also face increased risks for a host of problems, from abuse to death during childbirth.

This cycle often perpetuates itself from one generation to the next. Poverty, insecurity and unequal gender norms lead to early marriage. Early marriage, in turn, perpetuates girls' vulnerabilities to economic insecurity and violence; it reinforces existing gender roles and reduces the likelihood that the next generation of girls might envision and attain a different future.^{1, 18, 25}

THE FOUR A'S: A Comprehensive Approach to Ending Early and Child Marriage

Many current efforts to address ECM in India have focused on delaying the age of marriage until 18 or older in order to reduce negative outcomes, including reduced access to education and job opportunities and poor health for girls and their children.

But postponing marriage by a few years will not necessarily expand girls' opportunities. For example, research shows that delaying marriage until 18 or older leads to a reduction in maternal mortality²⁵—but it does not change restrictive gender norms or address girls' lack of choice regarding their partners and future plans.²⁶ Early and child marriage doesn't just *lead* to a set of restricted choices; it reflects and reinforces a set of restricted choices that *already exist*.

To address the root causes of ECM in India—and in other countries facing similar challenges—programs and policies need to change gender norms and help women and girls think differently about themselves, so they can increase their self-confidence and power. This can be achieved by providing accessible, high-quality services and resources for women and girls related to education, jobs and health; by supporting them to make choices for themselves, demand their rights and pursue expanded opportunities in life; and by changing the ways that families and communities perceive girls' roles and abilities.

“The more options we create in people's lives, the more marriage won't be the only or primary option.”

—**Manisha Gupte**, Founder of MASUM, AJWS grantee working to end ECM in rural Maharashtra, India

To improve the lives of girls facing early and child marriage in India, AJWS worked closely with its local partners and developed a comprehensive approach to addressing the practice and the multiple factors that exacerbate it. This approach focuses on four key concepts that give girls the freedom to choose whether, when and whom to marry—and, ultimately, the power to transform their lives: **aspirations, agency, availability and access.**

Adolescent girls watch a self-defense demonstration at MBBCDS.



THE FOUR A'S OF ENDING CHILD MARRIAGE

EXPAND
ASPIRATIONS
FOR ALL GIRLS

BUILD
AGENCY
SO GIRLS CAN MAKE DECISIONS

INCREASE
AVAILABILITY
OF RESOURCES AND INSTITUTIONS

ENSURE
ACCESS
TO SERVICES AND OPPORTUNITIES

ASPIRATIONS

Change cultural beliefs about gender roles and encourage women and girls to consider futures that previously seemed out of reach.

Individuals, families, communities and organizations need to work together to envision new opportunities and societal norms for women and girls. This shift—in which girls can imagine futures for themselves that extend beyond marriage and share those dreams with supportive friends and family—is a key step toward ending ECM in communities that have relied on the practice for generations. Over time, many different strategies and social change efforts contribute to this cultural transformation.

AVAILABILITY

Increase the availability of institutions, policies and services that enhance the ability of girls and young women to pursue jobs and education and realize their sexual health and rights.

For a girl to have options for a secure future—one not solely dependent on marriage—she needs high-quality institutions and services. For example: she needs safe schools that are located nearby and staffed by capable, encouraging teachers. She needs laws and policies that protect her from violence and enable her to attain economic security, and she needs quality health services and accurate information about sexuality and reproduction.

AGENCY

Help girls and young women develop agency—the ability to choose and to act independently—so they can take action to advance their goals.

Girls must be empowered with the confidence and skills they need to make critical decisions about their lives. The highly controlling environment that girls face within some communities in India stunts the development of agency and encourages girls to defer decisions to their parents and, subsequently, to their husbands. To prepare girls to take more control over their own lives, programs seeking to end ECM should provide them age-appropriate information, skills training and other support to help them make choices and pursue goals.

ACCESS

Ensure access to support, resources and services and overcome any resistance from families and communities.

Families and communities hold great power over girls and can prevent them from accessing the support they need to pursue alternatives to ECM. To increase girls' access to services, organizations need to win the trust of key decision makers in communities, often by offering programs that parents do not find controversial—such as sewing or computer skills classes.

Organizations with long-standing ties to communities can best implement the Four A's because they have established the relationships needed to make seismic shifts to social norms. In addition, programs can increase their effectiveness by bringing girls together. Collective strength and solidarity enables girls to better advocate for their own needs—in their homes and in the broader community.

The Four A's in Action: MASUM

AJWS Grantee in Maharashtra, India

Women's rights activist Manisha Gupte and her husband, Ramesh Awasthi, founded MASUM in 1987 to promote human rights in rural Maharashtra. They work in low-income districts, where many families have limited education and make a meager living off farming the land. In recent years, MASUM has launched new initiatives to address early and child marriage—and, because of the trust MASUM has developed over time, parents don't hesitate to allow their children to attend MASUM camps and activities.

According to Manisha, many adolescents in India marry because it's the only socially acceptable way for them to do what many teenagers worldwide do: flirt with peers to whom they are sexually attracted. MASUM has found that this prohibition on interaction between young men and women does not effectively deter sex, but pushes it underground and further pressures young people into early marriage. Gupte notes that the illicit nature of these relationships have a detrimental effect on girls, in particular. "If boys and girls could meet and interact with each other in public—say, going bicycling together or holding hands," she says, "they wouldn't be forced to hide in private rooms or secret places, where girls are more susceptible to sexual pressure."

Drawing on this insight, all of MASUM's ECM projects involve both boys and girls from young ages. MASUM's

camp activities include discussions on gender equality, leadership, civic engagement and religious tolerance—as well as friendship, love and attraction. By bringing young people together to share perspectives and interact informally, MASUM helps them develop communication and decision making skills. They come to view their opposite-sex peers as people, rather than mysterious or forbidden objects of desire.

MASUM also offers after-school projects to youth throughout the year. By creating peer networks and support, the organization helps girls and young women overcome isolation and gain access to services, mentors and information, including sexual health education. They eventually learn how to negotiate to fulfill their own needs and to advocate for change in their communities. MASUM youth regularly meet with local leaders and recommend ways to address issues facing women and girls.

Over time, these efforts have contributed to a cultural shift in the aspirations of local women and girls, as well as the community's expectations of them. Every year, MASUM conducts an evaluation of gender equality in the villages—and they've seen signs of progress. More and more women of all ages now meaningfully participate in politics and have gained the confidence needed to question powerful men about how village budgets are spent. And more young women are pursuing options that their mothers could not: delaying marriage, going to college to pursue their dreams and eventually choosing for themselves if, when, whom and how to marry.

Shital Waikar teaches a sexual health session for MASUM, encouraging participants to ask questions—not a typical approach to many sex education efforts in India. By increasing young people's knowledge of sexuality, MASUM prepares them to make healthy decisions for themselves, whether they choose to marry or not.



Common Ground: Global Research Highlights

- In Brazil, the country with the fourth highest number of marriages before age 18, recent research found that most of these marriages took place among adolescents aged 16 or 17, as opposed to younger children.²⁰
- Of the five main factors identified as motivating early marriage in Brazil, two were strikingly similar to what AJWS's partners discovered in India: "desire to secure financial security via marriage" and "decisions to marry as a desire to control girls' sexuality and limit perceived 'risky' behaviors."²⁰
- A 2014 survey of four programs targeting adolescent girls in Bangladesh, Egypt, Ethiopia and India found three pathways to increased decision-making power by girls. These interventions had much in common with the Four A's approach that AJWS developed with its partners in India, focusing on "agency and self-efficacy," "opportunities and alternatives" and "increased influence over others."²⁶

SHIFTING FOCUS FROM AGE TO AGENCY: Recommendations for the U.S. Government

As the world's largest government donor, the United States plays a significant role in supporting the availability of health and education services in many countries, including India. In recent years, the Obama Administration has led an unprecedented effort to establish new and comprehensive policies to promote the rights of women and girls on a global level. Despite this important initiative, the U.S. government lacks a concerted and consistent approach to ending early and child marriage that draws on all possible resources.

To develop a coordinated, comprehensive and effective approach to early and child marriage, the U.S. government should commit to investing in and developing programs that draw upon the Four A's approach:

1) **Contribute to conversations in the international community that seek to expand the *aspirations* of girls and the *aspirations* of their societies for what girls can accomplish.**

- Raise the issue of early and child marriage and its root causes in diplomatic relations with countries that have a high prevalence of the practice.
- Advocate for more multi-lateral attention and resources to address the root causes of ECM in venues such as the United Nations, the G-8 and the G-20.
- Support other countries in evaluating progress toward Sustainable Development Goal 5.3, which aims to eliminate early and child marriage. Measure indicators of young women's empowerment, not just their age at marriage.

2) **Design and fund programs centered on building girls' *agency*.**

- Support interventions that address the issue of sexuality and offer girls the information and skills they need to make informed decisions about their lives—including comprehensive sexuality education and sexual health services.
- Evaluate programs using a variety of important indicators across sectors and interventions (such as educational attainment and measures of girls' agency) as opposed to focusing solely on the age of marriage.

3) **Support efforts to ensure the *availability* of institutions, policies and services that empower girls and young women.**

- Leverage existing aid investments and initiatives in food security, education, health, jobs and political participation (such as PEPFAR, Feed the Future and Let Girls Learn) to benefit communities where girls face a high risk of ECM.
- Encourage countries and multilateral partners to pass and implement laws that promote gender equality, such as laws to reduce intimate partner violence or ensure education for all.

4) **Expand girls' *access* to information, resources and services by supporting effective programming and innovations.**

- Support organizations that are deeply rooted in communities with high rates of ECM and have earned the trust of communities over time.
- Focus on addressing issues that contribute to ECM, particularly gender inequality, sexual norms and poverty.
- Work with families, community leaders and people in positions of influence to overcome potential resistance to changing the cultural norms that perpetuate ECM.

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Women and girls prepare signs for a women's rights demonstration at Awaaz-e-Niswaan.



AMERICAN JEWISH WORLD SERVICE (AJWS) is the world's leading Jewish organization working to end poverty and realize human rights in the developing world. Through our international grantmaking and our U.S. and global advocacy, we work to advance the health and rights of women, girls and LGBT people; promote civil and political rights; defend access to food, land, water and work; and aid communities in the aftermath of disasters.

Since 2014, AJWS has provided more than \$3 million to local organizations working to end child marriage in India. This initiative emerged from AJWS's 15 years of experience funding and learning from social change organizations in the country. Learn more about the advocates, leaders, strategies and research that AJWS supports on this topic at ajws.org/childmarriage.

ABOVE Nearly 100 women and girls from Awaaz rode through the busy streets of a conservative community in Mumbai to rally for gender equality.

BACK COVER The staff at MBBCDS encourage girls to use bicycles—despite community disapproval—to increase their mobility and opportunities.



American Jewish World Service
45 West 36th Street
New York, NY 10018
t: 212.792.2900 / 800. 889.7146
f: 212.792.2930

w: ajws.org
e: ajws@ajws.org
f: [/americanjewishworldservice](https://www.facebook.com/americanjewishworldservice)
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i: [@americanjewishworldservice](https://www.instagram.com/americanjewishworldservice)