



# LEARNING FOR CHANGE: RESEARCH ON EARLY AND CHILD MARRIAGE

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## AT A GLANCE: RESEARCH STRATEGY

Research has the power to transform how people think about and take action in response to critical problems in our world today. At AJWS, we support research on early and child marriage (ECM). This complex phenomenon has persisted in many countries, despite decades of laws and numerous interventions, because of limits on the opportunities and freedom of women and girls. AJWS believes new qualitative research—focused on adolescent girls and the social norms that shape their lives—can fill significant gaps in knowledge about the causes and consequences of ECM and lead to more effective solutions.

AJWS has launched this effort in India, where we have spent more than 10 years funding a range of social change organizations and movements and learning from them. For the past two years, we have been identifying and supporting cutting-edge research conducted by local partners, who explore the complex phenomenon of ECM and help identify the most promising, evidence-based policies and interventions to address it. We then apply these findings to our grantmaking in India and share them with other global funders—with the ultimate goal of expanding girls’ options beyond early marriage and helping them develop the skills to advocate for their rights throughout their lives.

## FINDINGS: AGENCY MATTERS MORE THAN AGE

AJWS’s initial research in India has resulted in a wealth of new knowledge and insights. For example, one study—



Youth from AJWS grantee MASUM gather in rural Maharashtra, India, to protest early marriage and promote gender equality. *Photograph by Jonathan Torgovnik*

conducted by gender and education experts at Nirantar Trust—found that, counter to common belief, most early marriages in India now occur among adolescent girls, not children. They also found that the root causes are a web of social and economic factors, including rigid norms that limit the roles of girls in families and communities; traditions like dowry, a price paid to a groom’s family to offset the perceived burden of supporting a wife; societal taboos against “mixed” marriages between different castes and social classes; and prohibitions against female sexuality outside of marriage. The Nirantar researchers concluded

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**AMERICAN JEWISH WORLD SERVICE (AJWS)** is the world’s leading Jewish organization working to end poverty and realize human rights in the developing world. 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.

To promote lasting change, AJWS funds and strengthens grassroots and global human rights organizations—with the understanding that the people who are most affected by problems are best suited to address them. We also advocate for U.S. and international laws and policies that help overcome injustice; we conduct research to learn about and strengthen our work and advance the field of human rights; and we use strategic communications to amplify our grantees’ voices and influence funders and policymakers in the U.S. and around the globe.

Since 2014, AJWS has provided more than \$5 million to local organizations working to end early and child marriage in India.

that many low-income families in India view early marriage as the key to obtaining security for their daughters. As a result, families pass these norms and challenges on from one generation to the next.

This and other research suggests that to end ECM, we must focus not only on raising the age at which girls marry, but on removing the limits placed on girls' agency and aspirations—their abilities to make decisions about their lives and to imagine and pursue opportunities beyond early marriage. Simply postponing a girl's marriage by a few years does not necessarily address her lack of choice regarding crucial aspects of her life, such as whom she weds, whether and when she has children, and her work and leisure activities.

AJWS has commissioned additional studies to investigate the best methods for addressing these social challenges. For example: we supported Indian education experts Dipta Bhog and Disha Mullick to explore the use of collectives as a tool for reducing ECM in communities. They found that collectives bring adolescent girls together, creating



AJWS grantee MBBCDS empowers girls in rural West Bengal to delay marriage, continue their educations and pursue their aspirations. *Photograph by Jonathan Torgovnik*

safe spaces where they can find strength and emotional support, learn to negotiate for themselves and work as a group to overcome the strict limits that families and communities often place on their lives.

## GOAL: CHANGING DISCOURSE AND ACTION

While the evidence indicates that increasing a girl's age at marriage does not necessarily expand her opportunities or ensure that she can make decisions about her life, many organizations and international institutions working on ECM continue to focus on and measure success primarily through the indicator of age. Through our research, AJWS aims to expand this focus to include other critical indicators related to ending ECM. We have initiated a participatory study, conducted by Tata Institute of Social Sciences, which will produce monitoring and evaluation tools that focus less on a girl's age at marriage and more on her agency, aspirations and access to supportive services.

As we learn, we continue to hone our strategies and share our findings, so that we can better foster changes that give girls the freedom to make choices about marriage—and, ultimately, help them gain the power to transform their lives.

## RESEARCH PORTFOLIO

Since 2014, AJWS has funded 24 research projects conducted by experts on early and child marriage in India. The following is a selection of research currently in progress:

- Exploring mental health among young women in Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh, including the impact of early marriage. *Sama Resource Group for Women and Health.*
- Mapping outcomes related to addressing root causes of early and child marriage. *Tata Institute of Social Sciences.*
- Challenging the marginalization of single women: action research in West Bengal. *Sappho.*
- Implications of laws on sexuality and early marriage in India on the lives of young people. *Partners for Law in Development.*
- Adolescent and young brides, marriage and violence: a qualitative study from Rajasthan. *Vikalp.*

To learn more about our partners' research in India and read short summaries of their insights, visit [ajws.org/research](https://ajws.org/research) or contact us at [EmergingEvidence@ajws.org](mailto:EmergingEvidence@ajws.org).

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