



EMERGING EVIDENCE

HOW CONTROL OF SEXUALITY FUELS CHILD, EARLY AND FORCED MARRIAGE



Shital Waikar teaches a sexual health session for adolescent girls at MASUM in rural Maharashtra, encouraging participants to ask questions. Photo: Jonathan Torgovnik. *This photo was not taken as part of the research described in this report.*

BACKGROUND

Child, early and forced marriage (CEFM) violates the rights of girls around the globe, curtailing their schooling, threatening their health and sharply constraining their futures.

Many women and girls also lack autonomy when it comes to their sexual behavior and expression of their gender identity or sexual orientation. In many places, the social reputation and honor of the family and community hinges on keeping girls “pure” until marriage. As girls reach adolescence, anxiety about their emerging sexuality often leads parents to restrict their access to schooling, friends, work and public life—and to arrange their marriages as quickly as possible. These parents aim to prevent desired pre-marital sexual experiences as well as non-consensual assault, but their efforts also vastly limit girls’ autonomy.

RESEARCH GOALS

- Frame the need to address sexuality as part of efforts to end CEFM specifically and to overcome patriarchy and gender inequality more broadly
- Review and critique the history of the international development field’s neglect of this topic
- Document some of the promising ways in which sexuality has been successfully addressed and offer recommendations for future programming

FINDINGS

PATRIARCHY AND THE CONTROL OF FEMALE SEXUALITY

Worldwide, adolescent girls grow up in communities preoccupied with controlling their sexual behavior and protecting them from sexual violence.

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Emerging Evidence is a series of short summaries of research that American Jewish World Service (AJWS) supports as part of our strategy to advance gender equality and end child, early and forced (CEFM) marriage in India.

The study described here, “The Centrality of Sexuality for Understanding Child, Early and Forced Marriage,” was written by Margaret E. Greene, Stephanie Perlson, Jacqueline Hart and Margo Mullinax.

Communities uphold restrictive norms and expectations regarding girls' sexuality by:

- Setting moral expectations that girls will accept conservative, patriarchal control of their fertility and sexuality, while permitting much greater freedom for boys
- Refusing to provide girls with the information, knowledge and skills needed to help them negotiate consensual, pleasurable sex and protect themselves from sexually transmitted illnesses and unwanted pregnancies
- Telling girls that their highest aspirations should be to become wives and mothers—and that alternative goals are not appropriate or desirable
- Restricting girls' opportunities for mobility and social interaction due to concerns about their physical safety or potential for flirtation with young men

CONTROL OF GIRLS' AND WOMEN'S SEXUALITY SHAPES MARRIAGE NORMS

Examples from the United States, Sudan, Tanzania, Italy, Nepal, Vietnam, Cambodia, Bangladesh and Mozambique demonstrate how expressions of sexuality are socially constructed and culturally specific—yet, at the same time, efforts to control female fertility and sexual behavior are nearly universal. Around the globe, marriage is frequently used as a means of controlling girls' and women's relationships, sexual behavior and childbearing.

The power imbalance that shapes female-male interactions also pervades sexual relations. One consequence is that people expect women and girls to be sexually passive and submissive; women are frequently denied sexual autonomy, just as they are denied the autonomy to seek careers and other activities outside the home. Girls who are married young to older, adult men typically face even greater power imbalances and limits on their abilities to make decisions about their own lives.

THE NEGLECT OF SEXUALITY IN INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

The international development field is poorly equipped to integrate considerations of sexuality into its work. This occurs for many reasons. Many people are uncomfortable discussing the topic of sexuality, and some professionals in international development embrace an instrumentalist—

rather than feminist—approach to resolving issues related to sexuality and reproduction. Ignoring the sexuality of girls and young women leads to a failure to provide them with the tools they need to manage their sexual relationships.

PROGRAMS THAT ADDRESS SEXUALITY

Incorporating issues of sexuality into CEFM-prevention and -mitigation efforts can effectively reduce gender inequality and a variety of risks that adolescent girls face. Programs working to address sexuality and end CEFM use many different approaches, including:

- Empowering girls to increase their agency
- Providing comprehensive sexuality education for girls and boys
- Working with girls and boys to explore alternative views of masculinity and femininity and encourage more gender-equitable attitudes
- Teaching parents how to talk about sexuality with young people in a helpful, appropriate way
- Supporting communities to challenge patriarchal ideas about sexuality, such as the link between a girl's virginity and her family's honor

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Mobilize girls to speak out against CEFM and control of sexuality, recognizing that the elevation of their voices is an important pathway to change.
- Build mutual respect and positive relationships between adolescent boys and girls.
- Cultivate intergenerational communication and support between parents and adolescent girls.
- Promote community dialogue about sexuality.
- Help legislators and policymakers better understand how some well-intentioned laws have led to unintended consequences related to sexuality and limited adolescent girls' freedom to engage in consensual relationships.
- Invest in research on sexuality, gender equality and marriage.

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Visit ajws.org/research for more insights on CEFM and gender inequality—in India and around the globe. For questions or to sign up for updates on AJWS research, email EmergingEvidence@ajws.org.

American Jewish World Service

45 West 36th Street
New York, NY 10018

t: 212.792.2900

800.889.7146

f: 212.792.2930

ajws.org • ajws@ajws.org

[f /americanjewishworldservice](https://www.facebook.com/americanjewishworldservice)

[t /ajws](https://twitter.com/ajws)