



## Working Towards Gender Equality in Early Marriage: An Over View

Sri.C.V.Kalburgi

Associate Professor in Rural Development, HKE Society Smt.C.B.Patil Arts & Commerce College, Chincholi-585307.

### KEYWORDS :

Early marriage in India represents a major threat to a child's well being. While the practices affect both girls and boys, the most fundamental rights of a child bride – to survive, to develop – are undermined. She is left with little or no opportunity to influence her own sexual life or the number, timing and spacing of her children. It is only through the development of gender equality, both inside and outside marriage, that such rights violations can be overcome.

In some developing countries, half or more of all women marry or start a union before they reach age 18, and 70 per cent or more do so by the time they are 20. Sizeable proportions even form unions before they are age 15.1 and early marriage generally means early motherhood.

In many developing countries, like India at least 20 per cent of women – and in some about 50 per cent – have had their first child by the time they are 18 years of age.

The good news is that the age of marriage appears to be rising – most rapidly in Asia and in North Africa. In eight Asian countries, for example, data published in 1997 found that while 57 per cent of women aged 40-44 were married by age 20, only 37 per cent of those aged 20-24 were. In Northern Africa, the corresponding figures were 66 and 34 per cent. In Sub-Saharan Africa, where the prevalence of teenage marriage remains high, the figures were 73 and 59 per cent respectively.

The bad news is that such statistics may disguise the continued practice of early Marriage in certain areas or among certain population groups. And it seems that early Marriage is increasing among populations under severe stress – in conflict situations, confronted by the HIV/AIDS epidemic, or facing extreme poverty.

At UNFPA we believe that 'population' is about more than numbers and statistics. It is about people. It is about helping young women fulfill their potential, ensuring their access to schooling, to reproductive health care, to a fair and equal chance in the workplace. It is about involving men in programmes to encourage responsible behavior, including joint decision-making by spouses and male support for their female partners' choices. It is, essentially, about gender equality and equity

### The perpetuation of inequality in early marriage

The imposition of marriage upon a young couple signals an effective end to their childhood or adolescence, and exposes a young wife to the grave risks associated with the physical dangers of early pregnancy and childbirth. In turn, the impact of early marriage and early pregnancy is visited upon her children: babies born to young mothers face much higher than average levels of morbidity and mortality. Around 15 million young women aged 15-19 give birth each year, accounting for more than 10 per cent of all babies born worldwide.<sup>5</sup> Girls aged 10 to 14 are five times more likely to die in pregnancy or childbirth than women aged 20 to 24,6 while girls aged 15-19 are twice as likely to die.<sup>7</sup> Many, if not most, of these deaths take place within marriage.

Back in 1990, world leaders at the World Summit for Children pledged to work to halve maternal mortality rates – then standing at around 500,000 each year – by the year 2000. Despite this commitment, some 585,000 women are now thought to die each year as a result of pregnancy or childbirth.<sup>8</sup> The reasons for the lack of progress are complex, but undoubtedly include the status of women in society,

their economic disadvantage and the lack of respect for women's basic human rights.

As well as threatening her right to life itself, early marriage almost inevitably marks the end of a girl's schooling. Her opportunity for individual development and growth is stifled, and her potential to become an autonomous, informed and empowered adult is compromised. Moreover, a girl may be exposed to oppression and violence (sexual and non-sexual) within marriage, but almost inevitably, she has no voice with which to protest.

### Meeting the challenge Moving towards Gender Equality in Marriage

Marriage should be a voluntary choice for both partners. Equality is simply not possible when choice is absent. Choices that are in the best interest of the couple usually benefit from the maturity that comes with age. Raising the age of marriage will help both men and women arrive at more satisfying and successful married relationships, as well as reduce the girls' reproductive span and vulnerability to risky childbearing. At the same time, adolescence must be supported; both boys and girls need life skills and other means of self-protection to negotiate the passage from childhood to adulthood safely.

The right to make choices about one's own reproductive health is particularly important within the institution of marriage. It is a right that is shared by the couple; a right that is sometimes contested by tradition or claimed by others. Early marriage severely undermines the adequate exercise of this right. A number of strategic actions are needed to address the phenomenon of early marriage:

### Improving Data

Although early marriage is a matter of great concern, there is far too little concrete information on its prevalence or its impact. Consequently, the first requirement in addressing early marriage must be more research and more understanding. More effective advocacy and programming will follow.

One important strategy must be to improve data collection. Actions must be informed by knowledge, and for this reason, an essential first step is to ensure that existing data collection programmers – be they run by national governments, international organizations, or NGOs – are sensitized to the issue of early marriage. They should be encouraged to provide full information on the marital status of children and young people, disaggregated by age and gender. Comprehensive data such as these are essential for making significant progress in understanding the risks associated with, and the dynamics of, early marriage.

### Changing Legislation

The legal situation on early marriage is complex. Marriage is legally regulated in all countries, but national legislation may bear no relation to the ages at which parents can and do marry off their children in practice.<sup>10</sup> Changing legislation is, nevertheless, an important strategy. Legislation on its own may have only limited impact, but the very process of legislative examination and reform, together with related advocacy efforts, is an essential step towards lasting change. It is important, for example, that governments revise or enforce legislation

Regarding minimum age of marriage. This includes a serious examination of customary marriages that contravene existing legislation.

Too often, for example, harmful traditional practices are allowed to continue in spite of laws that forbid them. Legislation needs to be reassessed and enforced in the interest of the rights and health of young people.

The international precedent comes from two key human rights treaties: the Convention on the Rights of the Child, ratified by 191 Governments and the Convention on the Elimination of All forms of Discrimination against Women, ratified by the Governments of 165 countries including India.

All countries that have ratified these treaties are obligated to modify their laws accordingly. In addition, countries that adopted the Programmers of Action agreed at the World Summit for Children in 1990, the International Conference on Population and Development and the Fourth World Conference on Women, to bring their legislation in line with these agreements.

The International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD), for Example, affirmed the right of couples and individuals "to make decisions concerning reproduction free of discrimination, coercion and violence, as expressed in human rights documents."

### Changing Attitudes

Changing attitudes is the strategy that underpins all other efforts to end early marriage. Real progress will come from introducing and promoting initiatives to change attitudes towards the gender roles of girls and boys in general, and towards the practice of early marriage in particular. This means that societies must reexamine traditional gender roles. Marriage is a sensitive issue, but action on other sensitive issues, such as education for HIV/AIDS prevention, provides models for action and indicates strategies for successfully raising the age of marriage.

It is important, for example, to work with the 'social gatekeepers', such as religious leaders, policy makers and parents – those who actually make the decisions – in attitudinal change. Programmer designers need to respect and work with these influential adults, whose concerns – and the reasons for them – should be understood and evaluated in a search for areas of consensus around the overall goals.

### Promoting Education

In every region girls who receive less schooling are more likely to marry young. In Zambia, for example, only 44 per cent of women aged 20-24 married before the age of 20 had completed primary school, compared to 83 per cent of those married at age 20 or older, according to research in the mid-1990s. A similar story was found in other countries, such as Kenya, Indonesia, Peru and Morocco. It is clear that the promotion of education is a strategy with potential for a far-reaching impact on early marriage. Girls who attend school become educated women and, in turn, contribute in human and economic terms to society in a way that goes far beyond their capacity for child bearing and domestic work. School systems can and should be adapted to be more sensitive to girls' needs and more responsive to family concern about the safety of their girls.

### Experience shows that it is possible to introduce some of the most important

concepts surrounding sexuality and reproduction into education without arousing controversy. These include respect for others; self-esteem; the importance of postponing the first pregnancy; and the ability to withstand peer pressure.<sup>15</sup> The long-term impact of such 'population Education' has not been studied, but there are indications that it has an impact on behavior. In China, for example, pilot school projects reported that following exposure to population education, students who had agreed to postpone marriage were sticking to their agreement.<sup>16</sup> Schooling is also an important means by which boys can learn the importance of respect for girls' rights, and can develop the positive attitudes that influence their behavior through life. There is far more to be learned about how to influence boys' attitudes, to help them develop into responsible, healthy young men. Research institutions need to combine forces with the education sector to overcome this problem.

### Partnerships for Change

Finally, the formation of partnerships is a strategy that increases the chances of success

in addressing this problem. To end the practice of early marriage, resources must be mobilized at all levels, within a coordinated and cooperative structure. All actors have a role to play – families, communities, health providers, and education services, religious leaders, local and national government, and international organizations. NGOs can provide valuable lessons from the field, and offer a means of establishing new initiatives. The media has a crucial role to play in terms of changing attitudes and raising awareness amongst these different actors. It can promote

Arguments against early marriage, raise awareness of the potential of girls and women, and depict positive role models. It is important that adolescents are involved in designing, implementing and evaluating programmes intended for their benefit.

### Conclusion

In my own country, Indian, girls still get married early and many start having children while they are still in their teens. This is a threat to their health and their lives; maternal mortality is unacceptably high and the greatest danger is to the youngest women. Early marriage is a powerful disincentive to their educational opportunities; it is a threat to their reproductive health; and it is highly risky for both mother and child, for adolescent girls are physically, mentally and emotionally unprepared for childbirth. Our common aim should be to make it unacceptable in a social as well as a legal sense, to men as well as to women; and to promote actions that will enhance the physical and mental development of young girls and boys and their human rights as a whole. We want to promote an atmosphere in which couples are free to make choices, firmly grounded in maturity, and to wait until they are ready for marriage. Working together to change attitudes and legislation, improve data collection and promote education, we can achieve this goal.

## REFERENCES

- 1 UNFPA, Early sexual unions can undermine well-being ([www.unfpa.org/modules/intercenter/hopes/early.htm](http://www.unfpa.org/modules/intercenter/hopes/early.htm)) | 2 Ibid | 3 UNFPA (1997), State of World Population. | 4 UNFPA (2000), Population Issues Briefing Kit. | 5 UNFPA (1997), Annual Report. | 6 UNFPA (2000), op-cit. | 7 UNFPA (1997) Annual Report. | 8 UNICEF (1996), The Progress of Nations. | 9 Progress Report on follow-up to the World Summit for Children, UNICEF Executive Board | Annual Session (2000), E/ICEF/2000/11, para 28. | 10 UNFPA (1997) State of World Population. |