

Success on the Ground

# REDUCING CHILD MARRIAGE

**Although the practice of child marriage is deeply rooted in traditions and cultural beliefs, it is possible to change the practice within a community over the course of a few years. Following are two examples of interventions that have worked to delay the age of marriage.**

## DELAYING MARRIAGE IN INDIA

Like so many girls from Maharashtra, Janabai would have been married by 15 and a mother soon after. She would have been plagued by the myriad problems that come with child marriage and deprived of opportunities to fulfill her potential. Instead, her life took a more promising direction thanks to an innovative program that delays marriage for a growing number of girls in India.

The Life Skills Education Program is run by ICRW's research partner, the Institute for Health Management, Pachod (IHMP), a nongovernmental organization that works with marginalized individuals, families and communities. IHMP's research in the Marathwada region revealed that the median age at marriage for girls was a mere 14.5 years, alarmingly low especially when compared to other areas in Maharashtra.

The one-year life skills course is premised on the idea that empowering girls improves their health and social status. The intervention achieved impressive results after two short years, raising the median age at marriage to 17. Additionally, thousands of adolescent

girls have been transformed in a culture that relegates them to second-class citizens. Girls who completed the life skills course exhibit more self-confidence, speak without hesitation and fear, are more independent in daily activities and are better prepared to influence decisions about their own lives, including marriage. With her newfound confidence, Janabai prevailed upon her parents to delay not only her own nuptials but those of her two younger sisters.

The course curriculum focuses on self-sufficiency and covers a wide range of practical lessons, from using the post office to the negative health and social consequences of early marriage. Janabai not only learned the importance of education, she also learned how to persuade her parents to allow her to continue her schooling. She completed her 12th standard exam and aspires to become a teacher.

Much of the program's success and sustainability depends on community involvement. IHMP invites parents to participate in various ways throughout the intervention. Actively involving parents helps retain girls for the one-year duration of the course. The community helps recruit qualified teachers from within their villages, and in some cases, community members persuade wary parents to allow their daughters to participate. Local leaders are kept apprised of the program's progress and offered numerous opportunities to observe activities.

By building local capacity, enrollment in IHMP's life skills course has grown dramatically. In its first year, 300 girls were enrolled. By the second year, more than 2,000 girls were enrolled throughout rural and urban Maharashtra. And the numbers continue to climb. Even decision makers are taking notice. The government of Maharashtra is scaling up IHMP's life skills model to improve girls' reproductive and sexual health across rural areas within the state.

Most important, IHMP's life skills program is empowering girls like Janabai to dream a hopeful future. "I have changed a lot because of this program," she says. "I feel I can overcome any difficulty, do any work and realize my dreams."



**Innovative community programs help reduce child marriage by teaching life skills to girls.**

## COMMUNITY TRANSFORMATION IN ETHIOPIA

Alitash's parents promised to give their daughter in marriage when she turned 8 years old, a common practice in Ethiopia where 60 percent of girls are married before the legal age of 18. But when a local women's association learned of her impending marriage, the community convinced her parents that allowing their daughter to receive an education would enable her to earn a better living. As a result, her parents cancelled her wedding, and today she is in school with the possibility of a full life ahead of her.

Reforming entrenched cultural beliefs about child marriage does not come easy, but communities in Ethiopia are coming together as a powerful force for change. In the Amhara and Tigray regions, where child marriage prevalence hovers around 80 percent to 90 percent, grassroots efforts are engaging entire communities in the fight against early marriage and the promise of empowering girls.

Pathfinder International/Ethiopia collaborates with local partners to form early marriage cancellation committees, which involve all levels of civil society, including *kebele* (ward) administration officials, women's associations, religious leaders, health officials, teachers, parents and the girls themselves. Seada, an adolescent girl from Amhara, evaded two marriage proposals because her aunt enlisted the help of her local early marriage committee. When word of a wedding arrangement reaches the committee, it is reported to the *woreda's* (district) women's affairs department, which responds with legal action through law enforcement or legal representation. Seada's reluctant parents were persuaded to prevent the marriages.

Seada remains in school and participates in the girls' club, another key to preventing child marriage. Girls' clubs educate girls about harmful traditional practices such as early marriage as well as reproductive health and other life skills. These clubs empower girls to act as peer educators and serve as a support network for girls trying to escape early marriage. Girls in these clubs frequently report the planned early marriages of friends to the head of the club or a women's association

Girls' clubs educate girls on harmful traditional practices and empower girls to report early marriages to community members.



representative, which triggers efforts to counsel parents to prevent the marriage. If parents persist in marrying their young daughters, early marriage committees will take legal action.

On the legal front, the Ethiopian Women Lawyers Association (EWLA), a nonprofit women's advocacy group, educates community leaders, law enforcement and judicial bodies about Ethiopia's revised Family Law, which raised the legal age for marriage from 15 to 18 and established a penal code criminalizing harmful traditional practices. EWLA also provides legal aid and shelter to girls who run away from their homes to avoid child marriage. The National Committee on Traditional Practices of Ethiopia, the Federal Ministry of Justice Women's Affairs Department, regional women's affairs bureaus, and women's associations of the Tigray and Amhara regions work in partnership with Pathfinder International to stop the practice of early marriage through community- and policy-level interventions. Pathfinder also provides scholarships to promote educational opportunities for young girls whose marriages have been cancelled.

Recognizing that legal enforcement alone cannot change deep-rooted traditions, Pathfinder and its partners also have engaged faith-based organizations and leaders who wield enormous influence within communities. Pathfinder invites religious leaders to participate in early marriage committees and conducts workshops to educate them on the negative consequences of harmful traditions.

In one year, Pathfinder and such partners as EWLA prevented more than 12,000 marriages: 9,000 in Amhara and 3,000 in Tigray. The success of these holistic interventions demonstrates that change is possible.

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To learn more about child marriage, contact the **International Center for Research on Women**

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