



EGYPT Country Brief

UNICEF Regional Study on Child Marriage
In the Middle East and North Africa



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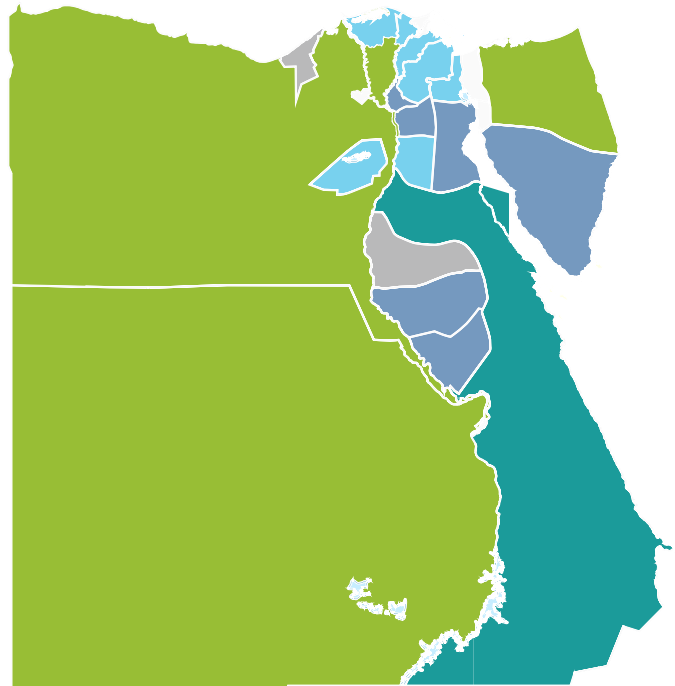
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EGYPT

Regional Study on Child Marriage



Key Recommendations

Girls' Voice & Agency

Strengthen girls' voice within the design and implementation of child marriage prevention programmes and policies.

Make public spaces safer for girls.

Continue to provide financial incentives for sending girls to school.

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Household and Community Attitudes and Behaviours

Leverage social networks to change collective beliefs and practices related to early marriage and FGM/C.

Engage receptive religious leaders.

.....

Service Delivery

Increase reporting mechanisms for child marriage.

Increase investment in secondary education.

Legal Context

Develop strategies to ensure implementation of the National Strategic Plan for Prevention of Early Marriage.

Strengthen legal enforcement of existing child marriage laws.

Capitalize on related government priorities, such as addressing overpopulation and FGM/C.

Consider the unintended consequences of the formalization of 'seasonal marriages' through Ministerial Regulation No. 9200.

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Evidence Generation

Strengthen the coordination of research initiatives.

Build evidence on girls' perceptions of child marriage and how education impacts marriage timing for girls.

Use findings to inform the National Strategic Plan for Prevention of Early Marriage.

POLITICAL & ECONOMIC CONTEXT

Since the 2011 political transition, Egypt has been in a state of flux in respect to the political, social and economic situation in the country.¹ According to the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), these changes have negatively affected the economy, especially the tourism sector, in addition to revenues from the Suez Canal, oil and remittances from Egyptian expatriates due to global economic turndowns.² Political changes include the writing of a new constitution and election of a new president in 2014 as well as the election of a new parliament in 2015.

In general, the new government has demonstrated an interest in increasing political protections for women. For example, the president Al-Sisi declared 2017 as the year of the Egyptian Woman and the cabinet committed to develop a National Council for Women (NCW) with the mandate to “enhance, develop and protect rights and freedoms of women by virtue of the constitution provisions, the agreements and international covenants ratified by Egypt.”³

Despite these commitments to improve the status of women in Egypt more generally, and the fact that Egypt has ratified the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), Egypt still maintains reservations in respect to Article 16. The latter grants men and women equality in all matters related to marriage, family relations during marriage and marriage dissolution. These unequal customary laws violate not only CEDAW but also the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR).

Similarly, although an amendment to Egypt’s Child Law increased the age of marriage to 18 for girls in 2008, prohibiting the registration of child marriages, families may

evade legal obligations by arranging a religious marriage and then waiting until the bride turns 18 to register the marriage with the State.

To address this gap, the National Population Council (NPC), a governmental body that establishes national population policies and strategies, led the process of developing a five-year national strategy to prevent child marriage, launched in 2014. The strategy focuses on two approaches:

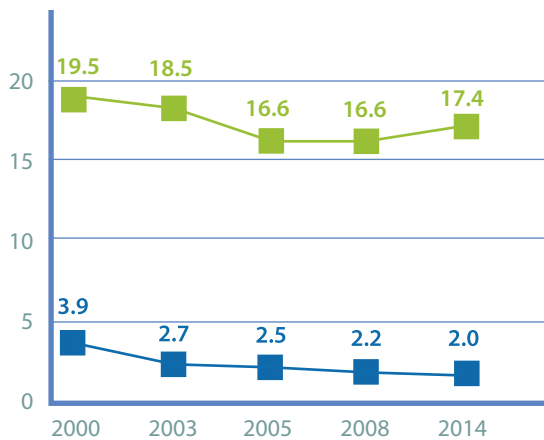
- A rights-based approach, ensuring children’s rights are upheld by religious and customs, not just by the Constitution.
- A partnership approach, bringing together government, civil society and the private sector to work together.

However, the Ministry of Population has since then been reorganized into the Ministry of Health, which, combined with increasing political insecurity and restrictions on civil society, slowed down the implementation of the strategy.⁴

PREVALENCE OF CHILD MARRIAGE

As noted above, the Child Law of 2008 sets the minimum age of marriage in Egypt at 18 years for females and males. Despite the legislation, many girls are still married before the age of 18. In fact, using data from Egypt’s Demographic and Health Surveys, Figure 1 below reveals that though the percentage of women aged 20 to 24 years who were married before the age of 18 had declined from 19.5 per cent in 2000 to 16.6 per cent in 2005, it remained steady at 16.6 per cent from 2005 to 2008 and increased slightly to 17.4 per cent in 2014. In contrast, the percentage of women aged 20 to 24 years who married before the age of 15 has remained low and declined steadily during the same time frame, going from 3.9 per cent in 2000 to 2.0 per cent in 2014.⁵

Figure 1: Prevalence of child marriage in Egypt, 2000 to 2014

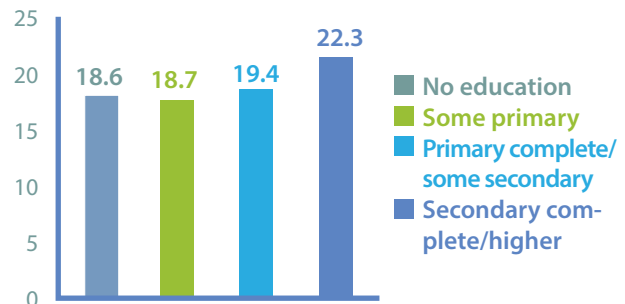


■ Percent of women 20-24 married before age 15
 ■ Percent of women 20-24 married before age 18

Source: Egypt's DHS, 2000, 2003, 2005, 2008, and 2014

The median age at first marriage amongst women in Egypt ages 25 to 49 is 20.8 years, but this varies by several background characteristics.⁶ It is lower amongst women who live in rural areas (20.0 years versus 22.4 in urban areas) and those who live in Upper Egypt (19.9 years) compared to Lower Egypt (20.8).⁷ It also varies by wealth, with the median age at first marriage of women in the poorest quintile more than four years younger than those in the wealthiest (18.9 years versus 23.2).⁸ Figure 2, below, shows the positive association between educational attainment and median age at first marriage in Egypt. The difference is especially large for women who have completed secondary education or higher; their median age at first marriage is almost four years older than women who completed little or no education and almost three years older than those who completed primary or even some secondary education.⁹ It is important to note that the causality of this association is not clear; low education may be both a cause and/or a consequence of child marriage.

Figure 2: Median age at first marriage by educational attainment amongst women 25-49, Egypt, 2014



Source: Egypt's DHS, 2014

METHODOLOGY¹⁰

The data presented here was collected via 12 key informant interviews with staff in two governmental institutions, three UN agencies, and five non-governmental organizations. Interviews were conducted in person from November 25 – December 9, 2016. All interviews were coded independently by two researchers, using NVivo 11 to distill key themes which were then organized through thematic content analysis. The findings were then organized according to the Global Programme's five outcomes (described below) and cross-checked with the local researchers to ensure that the data were consistent with their overall impressions during the field missions.

Table 1: Key Informant Interviews

Government

National Population Council (NPC)

Ministry of Youth and Sports

UN

UNICEF (3)

UNFPA (1)

WFP (1)

NGOs

National Board for Certified Counsellors International (NBCC-I)

Population Council

Assiut Childhood Development Association (ACDA)

Gozour Foundation

LIMITATIONS

This report presents the main findings strictly based on the interviews conducted in Cairo, Egypt, and is therefore limited to those categories of respondents. Considering the study's goals and focus on scaling up promising programmatic approaches, the study focused on service providers, government officials, multilateral agencies, and donors – to identify best practices to end child marriage. As a result, the findings are only representative of these respondent's views of promising approaches to end child marriage in Egypt.

KEY FINDINGS

The key findings are outlined within the framework of the UNFPA-UNICEF Global Programme's five outcomes:¹¹

- Adolescent girls at risk of and affected by child marriage are better able to express and exercise their choices.
- Households demonstrate positive attitudes and behaviours regarding gender equality and equity.
- Relevant sectoral systems deliver quality and cost-effective services to meet the needs of adolescent girls.
- National laws, policy frameworks and mechanisms to protect and promote adolescent girls' rights are in line with international standards and properly resourced.
- Governments support and promote the generation and use of robust data and evidence to inform programme design, track progress and document lessons.

1 Girls' Voice and Agency

Findings from Egypt indicate that girls have

very restricted rights when it comes to expressing ideas and opinions and influencing decisions in the household as well as in public. This discriminatory context affects girls in many aspects of their lives, including domestic chores, healthcare, psychological and emotional health, education, and their ability to build social capital through a network of friends and activities outside of the confinements of their home.

■ Restricted mobility

Almost all key informants indicated that girls cannot move freely within and outside the household due to a culturally prescribed norm of men's control over women's and girls' mobility. For example, one key informant noted how "a girl moves from the protection of her parents to that of her husband." In addition, deeply ingrained notions of honour and shame permeated all interviews and were cited as a key factor that drives families into marrying their daughters early. For example, when discussing the drivers of child marriage in Egypt, a key informant stated that:



"...girls are married young as way to protect the girl and preserve the family honour, in addition to reserving the family wealth in some cases. It is most common in remote rural areas especially in Upper Egypt. It is totally acceptable by the community and even the girls themselves do not mind it because they want to live up to the community expectations."



The need to protect girls from street harassment also came out several times as a justification for restricting girls' mobility.

According to the key informants interviewed, further limiting a girl's voice and agency relates to the notion that she belongs to the home and, once married, to the home of her husband and in-laws. After marriage, she is expected to move in with her husband and in-laws and to take on the household chores and care responsibilities. Respondents felt that this discriminatory practice drives married girls out of school because school demands are often incompatible with

the burden of domestic chores and child care. They also stated that lack of alternative educational opportunities severely constrains a girl's life choices and affects her ability to make household decisions.

Distance to school

Key informants stated that distance to school further affects a girl's voice and agency by preventing her from attending school. Several noted that schools are often far away from girls' homes, exposing them to various risks such as physical and sexual violence. This was noted by one key informant from a UN agency who explained that access to schools was playing a major role in school dropout and, hence, child marriage. In this context, respondents reported that parents prefer relying on religious education, which is offered in close proximity to girls' homes.

Box 1: Quote from UN official

"Some villages do not have schools, and the girls have to walk a very long distance to reach the nearest school, which is not safe sometimes, leading many girls to drop out."

2

Household and Community Attitudes and Behaviours

Cultural and religious beliefs reinforce discriminatory gender norms and practices

As is well established, child marriage is a practice that is rooted in deep-seated inequitable norms related to gender – a point confirmed by one key informant from the NPC:

““

"We have two main types of child marriage in Egypt; the first one is very traditional and related to culture and is common amongst certain tribes and is very acceptable by the community. The second is economic where the girl's families decide to marry them to a rich man in exchange of a sum of money that will support the rest of the family for a while. The husband is very rich and usually from the Gulf region or a rich business man from Egypt. This kind of marriage is usually temporary and tends to end with divorce without any benefits or maintains for the girls afterwards. The practice is most common in pockets in slums and poor areas of the big cities like Cairo and Alexandria."

””

Box 2: Quote from UN official

““

"It's because of social norms and how they are related to honour."

””

Female genital mutilation/cutting is perpetuated by social sanctions

Female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C) is inextricably linked to child marriage in Egypt and, although illegal since 2008, it remains widespread in the country. Based on data from the DHS, MICS, and SHHS from 1997-2012, UNICEF estimates that 91 per cent of girls and women aged 15 to 49 in Egypt have undergone FGM/C. Findings from this study support this evidence, with almost all informants noting that it is one of the most important human rights issues girls still face in Egypt, particularly in rural areas. Respondents also suggested that child marriage tends to follow immediately after FGM/C has been performed. They felt that a combination of religious misconceptions and cultural expectations drive families to perform FGM/C on their daughters prior to marriage.

Whilst some key informants referred to FGM/C as being associated with maintaining family honour, others pointed to its role in controlling a girl's sexual activity. However, respondents noted that the main driver of FGM/C was the cultural expectation to conform to the practice for fear of social sanctions, such as not being accepted by the community. This echoes a UNICEF report on FGM/C, which stated that "Amongst girls and women, as well as boys and men, the most commonly reported benefit of FGM/C is gaining social acceptance."¹³ Unfortunately, as noted by a key informant from UNICEF, changing social norms and their relation to family honour is a challenge. Even if a service provider can dissuade a girls' parents, her grandparents and future in-laws often remain unconvinced:



"If you want to get married, the mother in law has to make sure that the girl is circumcised and even if we convinced the parents that FGM/C is bad we face the grandparents then we go through the in laws and their expectation for the girl."



Although not a religious phenomenon, FGM/C is endorsed by religious narratives which guide the practice. Almost all informants underscored the importance of working closely with religious leaders in the community, who strongly affect decision making within community households.

Box 3: Quote from UNICEF official



"We need to have religious leaders who can deliver the message with the current language so young people can understand it and adopt it in addition to convincing other religious leaders that child marriage is harmful."



3 Service Delivery

Education

Several key informants noted that cultural restrictions on girls' schooling affect their attendance as parents tend to give boys precedence over girls to enrol in schools. However, according to one key informant from UNICEF, Egypt has made significant progress towards expanding girls' access to primary education and narrowing the gap between girls' and boys' enrolment. The informant felt that, instead, gender disparities in schooling were mainly due to girls dropping out at higher levels, such as secondary school, due to accessibility challenges:



"In primary schools both genders are attending schools with more than 90 per cent attendance. Their access to education continues to be good until they reach the preparatory school level; then the drop out starts, in the secondary level the access goes down especially for girls. At the primary school level, girls are learning more than boys in terms of academic achievement and grades. Yet they are the ones who drop out later on because of issues around accessibility of schools."



Indeed, primary enrolment in Egypt is high and gender equitable, according to UNICEF's calculations based upon the Ministry of Education's data for 2014-2015, which show that net enrolment in primary education was 90.0 per cent for boys and 92.2 per cent for girls.¹⁴ In addition, two informants pointed to the lack of funding in supporting subsidies to help families keep girls in school. As one stated:



"The only missing part of the National Strategic Plan is to enable young wives to stay in school. The NSP could provide subsidies to families to keep their girls in school, and income-generating activities to encourage families to wait for their girls to reach 18 years."



■ Legal services

Several key informants noted that there is a need to identify girls at-risk of child marriage, but legal measures to report cases are lacking, as observed by the NPC, “Protection committees at village level are very important to identify girls at-risk of child marriage and report the cases.”

4 Legal Context

■ National efforts to end child marriage

In 2013, Egypt developed the National Strategic Plan (NSP) for Prevention of Early Marriage, aiming to reduce the prevalence of early marriage by 50 per cent within a five years’ time-frame. The plan was developed by the NPC in collaboration with key stakeholders working on child marriage in Egypt. However, according to Girls Not Brides, the implementation of the strategy slowed down due to shifts in the Ministry of Population and the fluid political situation and restrictions on civil society. This led to uncertainty on the strategy’s status amongst those working on the ground on child marriage issues.¹⁵ This point was confirmed by several key informants who noted that the political instability makes it difficult to address child marriage due to its sensitive nature.

Box 4: Quote from UNFPA key informant

“There is definitely a commitment from the presidential level to address the whole population issue in general. But we need to put it in context; because sometimes there is a backlash from the parliamentarians, especially during the Muslim Brotherhood leadership, there was a lot of talking about reducing the minimum age of marriage. So, we need to be very careful in addressing this issue.”

■ Legal loopholes in addressing child marriage

Though the legal age of marriage has been set at 18 years old since 2008, respondents noted that child marriage is still frequently practiced in Egypt because the law prohibits but does not criminalize the practice. In addition, respondents noted that many marriages involving a child under 18 are not officially registered, with legal consequences for children who are born out of these marriages as they cannot obtain birth certificates. One key informant noted that this situation creates significant obstacles for service providers:



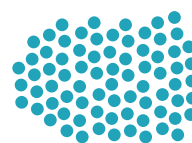
“We can identify the cases but cannot intervene because there is no legal document that we can rely on to present a legal case, because wedding certificates are not registered.”



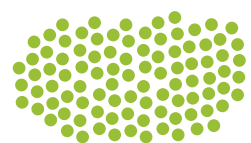
■ Competing government priorities

On the backdrop of the severe economic crisis, Egypt is facing competing human development priorities including overpopulation, female circumcision, and violence against children – altogether making child marriage less of a priority for the national government. In about ten years, Egypt’s population grew from 77.6 million in 2007¹⁶ to 93.1 million as of June 1, 2017.¹⁷ According to a key informant from the NPC, this surge in the Egyptian population is at the moment “the top priority for the government.”

Egypt’s population grew from



77.6 M
In 2007



93.1 M
In 2017

As stated by several respondents, amongst the top national priorities in Egypt, female genital mutilation takes precedence over child marriage because of its high prevalence despite a law prohibiting the practice. Estimates of FGM/C are staggering, with 92 per cent of ever-married women between the ages of 15-49 having been circumcised.¹⁸ According to key informants, FGM/C serves as an entry point for addressing child marriage as both practices are inherently linked. Respondents also indicated that violence against children (physical, verbal, emotional, and sexual) ranks high as a priority after the latest DHS figures revealed that 93 per cent of Egyptian children are subjected to at least one type of violence.¹⁹

92%
Girls and women aged 15 to 49 in Egypt have been circumcised

.....

93%
of Egyptian children are subjected to at least one type of violence

Source: DHS 2014

■ Economic hardship reinforces gender inequality

As seen in other MENA countries, key informants indicated that marrying off a young daughter in Egypt allows parents to reduce household expenses and to gain a source of income through the dowry paid to the bride's family. As explained by a key informant from the NPC:

“Poverty and economic deprivation, which has increased since 2011, are the main root causes for child marriage... the father wants to marry his kid because he can't afford to feed her and his religion supports it.”

Due to women's and girls' dependence on men's economic power, respondents reported that child marriage is also seen as a means to provide financial security to a daughter, reinforcing the perception that a girl will be better protected if she marries at a young age.

Moreover, findings indicate that acute poverty forces poor families to resort to what is known as 'tourist' or 'seasonal marriages'. According to Adel SZ Abadeer in her book on Norms and Gender Discrimination in the Arab World, 'tourist marriages' are on a rise in Egypt and other Arab countries:

“

“...where much older wealthy tourists from the Arabian Gulf (mostly from Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and United Arab Emirates) marry underage girls for a temporary period ranging from two weeks to two months (in some cases for a few hours) through marriage brokers who share the dowry with the parents of the underage brides.”²⁰

”

This practice is confirmed in a report by the United States Department of Labor's Bureau of International Labor Affairs which notes that “Child sex tourism exists in Cairo, Alexandria and Luxor. In return for payments, some parents sell girls into temporary 'summer' marriages to wealthy foreign men.”²¹

Several key informants decried the legal environment permitting this type of marriage, which one respondent reported:

“

“...is even supported by the Government because there is a law (seasonal marriage law) that allows families to marry off their daughters to foreign men mostly from the Gulf countries. And they say it's to help poor families and protect Egyptian women!”²²

”

The law, Ministerial Regulation No. 9200 of 2015, requires a specific payment (about \$6,400) be paid in the case that the wife is 25 years or younger than her intended husband.²³ Whilst a spokesman for the Egyptian Ministry of Justice claimed that the law protects the rights of the wife, our informants' opinions align with those of human rights organizations and activists who oppose the regulation because it legalizes and formalizes sexual exploitation of young women and girls in Egypt.²⁴

5

Evidence Generation

Lack of coordination and collaboration

Several key informants urged for better coordination of research activities in child marriage in order to understand the dynamics of the practice. They indicated that the lack of coordination and collaboration between research institutes and NGOs working on child marriage reinforces the gap in the evidence on the factors driving the practice.

More robust evidence on the links between child marriage and education

Respondents indicated that more evidence was needed on the link between education and child marriage. As one UNICEF key informant noted:



"So far there is no evidence that schools are succeeding in delaying child marriage. We need evaluations to understand what is working and what needs to be improved."



PROMISING APPROACHES IDENTIFIED BY KEY INFORMANTS

Initiatives to promote girls' education

According to the World Food Programme's (WFP) key informant, the Girls' Education Initiative led by the Ministry of Education and WFP shows promising results. The goal of the initiative is to encourage girls' education and help girls who have dropped out of school to return and complete their primary education. Students' families receive monthly, nutritious take-home rations of food for each girl student who maintains an 80 per cent class attendance. Additionally, WFP has recently started offering vocational training to the mothers of students attending the community school. WFP also provides the mothers with microloans to start small businesses as a way to encourage financial independence. According to one key informant, the NPC is also engaged in projects aimed at keeping girls in schools, such as making schools more accessible to girls by adding "life skills and livelihoods, communication and advocacy skills in the curriculum so girls can benefit from them."

Use of media

The media was cited several times by key informants as an effective tool to help combat child marriage. Respondents felt that media could both be used to raise awareness of the negative consequences of child marriage and to change social norms related to women's and men's roles.

Engaging the community.

According to respondents, community engagement is essential in combating child marriage. As one key informant noted:



"Building trust and credibility with the communities in order for them to accept our interventions is crucial. Using positive models; using peers to communicate with youth; and using religious leaders and doctors has also been very useful."



RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings, ICRW identified key recommendations for eradicating child marriage. They are grouped under the UNFPA-UNICEF Global Programme's five outcomes:

Girls' Voice & Agency

■ Strengthen girls' voices within the design and implementation of child marriage prevention programmes and policies.

Valuing girls' own expression of their needs is critical for designing successful programmes and policies that will meet these needs. Findings suggest that involving girls in the design and implementation of projects, especially through positive youth development approaches, will allow them to have a voice and express their agency. As one respondent indicated,



"There is a need to involve girls as change agents, and to ask them about their thoughts; how they think they can protect themselves from early marriage, because they are the ones affected."



■ Make public spaces safer for girls

According to respondents, a major barrier preventing girls from exercising their choices in Egypt is restriction of their freedom of movement in the name of "protection," since public spaces are seen as dangerous for girls. Instead of constraining girls' movements, focus should be shifted to increasing the girl-friendliness of public spaces. This would not only remove "protection" as a justification for child marriage, it would also likely increase school attendance and reduce dropout by reducing the risk of physical and sexual violence

girls face on their way to and from school. Future interventions could be modelled on UN Women's "Safe Cities Free of Violence against Women and Girls" Global Programme, now the "Safe Cities and Safe Public Spaces" initiative, which included Cairo, Egypt as one of its founding cities. Thus far, the initiative has resulted in Egypt's Ministry of Housing, Utilities and Urban Development adopting women's safety audits as part of its gender approach to urban planning and has trained 100 youth agents of change to lead "transformative activities in schools and other settings in the programme intervention sites to promote respectful gender relationships, gender equality, and safety in public spaces" in Cairo.²⁵

Another intervention designed to improve the safety and acceptability of girls' public participation is the Ishraq programme. Started in Upper Egypt in 2001, the Ishraq programme provides out-of-school girls ages 15 to 17 with literacy classes, life skills programming, and sport activities whilst also intervening with their parents and communities in order to change norms about girls' roles in society.²⁶ An evaluation of the programme, conducted in 2007, found that in addition to girls' achievements in literacy and participation, "Ishraq girls expressed a desire to marry at older ages and to have a say in choosing a husband" and that, compared to non-participants, 22 per cent of whom married during the time of the intervention, just 12 per cent of girls who participated in Ishraq for 13 to 29 months and 5 per cent of girls who participated in the full term married.²⁷ The Ishraq programme, therefore, serves as a model for future interventions aiming to reduce child marriage by increasing the safety and acceptability of girls' public participation.

■ Continue to provide financial incentives for sending girls to school

With support from the World Bank's Strengthening Social Safety Nets Project, Egypt's Ministry of Social Solidarity's Takaful cash transfer programme provides monthly income to 1.5 million poor households in Egypt, conditional on children's 80 per cent school attendance as well as medical check-ups for mothers and young children.²⁸ Though the results of a planned impact evaluation of the programme are not yet available, its design shows promise in not only increasing

social protection for Egypt's poorest households, but also reducing child marriage, given that it disrupts both poverty and school dropout as intermediate pathways.

Household and Community Attitudes and Behaviours

■ Leverage social networks to change collective beliefs and practices related to early marriage and FGM/C.

Our findings show that child marriage is perpetuated by several collective practices including cultural traditions of early marriage and FGM/C. Changing collective practices and beliefs is challenging, especially when they rely on strong social sanctions as is the case here. A necessary component of facilitating such changes is changing the beliefs and practices of opinion leaders in the community as well as those of people who influence a family's decision, such as relatives, neighbours, and friends. Many informants suggested using the media to communicate behaviour change messages against child marriage and FGM/C. As one key informant suggested: "Introduce these issues through a simple language that can be understood by the general population."

Another mechanism to achieve changes in collective beliefs and practices related to early marriage is to embed gender-transformative programming in the school environment. The Gender Equity Movement in Schools (GEMS) programme is an example of an effective evidence-based programme from India that could be adapted to the Egypt context. GEMS trains teachers to identify their own gender biases before leading both male and female students ages 14 to 16 in 24 sessions related to gender, violence, bodily changes, emotions, and conflict resolution over two years.²⁹ A 2016 evaluation of the GEMS programme demonstrated that both girls and boys who participated in the programme showed improvements in the gender-equitability of their

attitudes and that the improvements were larger for those who had participated in more sessions.³⁰ It also showed that the programme led teachers to reflect on gender norms and inequities both in their professional environments and home life.³¹

■ Engage receptive religious leaders

Engaging religious leaders through dialogue and awareness workshops is key to addressing child marriage in Egypt. Making religious leaders aware of the consequences of child marriage, and supporting them to become vocal advocates can have a powerful impact on the ways in which community members perceive child marriage. As a recent report by PLAN noted:



"By speaking out against child marriage and identifying and championing community-led strategies for ending the practice, [religious leaders] can create environments where parents who decide not to marry their daughters early are supported."³²



However, caution must be exercised to ensure that religious leaders are promoting evidence-based messages and not reinforcing harmful ideas. Therefore, this type of intervention requires careful selection of receptive religious leaders and large amounts of training and oversight.

3

Service Delivery

■ Increase reporting mechanisms for child marriage

In addition to the need for increased legal reporting mechanisms, other key informants noted the need for local prevention and response mechanisms as one

NPC key informant said: “Protection committees at village level are very important to identify girls at-risk of child marriage and report the cases.” These could involve supporting community dialogues and fostering the creation of safe spaces for women and girls to meet and build a social network. For those who are married, providing services such as legal aid services, vocational training, and health support could contribute to building their social capital. Finally, increased economic opportunities for girls could help them be more independent and gain in decision-making power.

■ Increase investment in secondary education

Considering the promising progress Egypt has made in growing primary school enrolment and retention for both girls and boys, now is the time to invest in achieving the same calibre of results for secondary schools. Some areas for improvement include building secondary schools that are closer to the communities or subsidizing transportation costs, reduce barriers for married girls and girls who have given birth to return to school by offering child care, create safe spaces for girls and boys to allow them to build a social network outside of the home, hire more female teachers, and integrate lessons about the negative consequences of harmful traditional practices into school curricula.

4 Legal Context

■ Develop strategies to ensure implementation of the National Strategic Plan

Respondents noted that despite the difficult political climate, it is still imperative to implement the National Strategic Plan for the Prevention of Early Marriage. Through careful strategizing, it should be possible to slowly

build support for the NSP and ease restrictions on civil society organizations that are working to enact it. This process should be highly participatory in order to foster champions from all sides of the political spectrum.

■ Strengthen legal enforcement of existing child marriage laws

Without effective enforcement, laws prohibiting child marriage will not be a deterrent to the practice, but will continue to have negative consequences such as the lack of birth registration for children born of young mothers.

■ Capitalize on related government priorities

Respondents indicated that one barrier to addressing child marriage at the legal level are the competing government priorities of overpopulation and FGM/C. However, both reducing overpopulation by ensuring reproductive choice for women and reducing FGM/C have the potential to have secondary impacts on child marriage. The former through reductions in early and unwanted pregnancies, which may lead to child marriage or prevent girls from returning to school. The latter through changes in social norms related to girls’ “readiness” for marriage. Therefore, attention should be paid to integrating child marriage prevention strategies within these other initiatives if they are to be prioritized.

■ Consider the unintended consequences of the formalization of “seasonal marriages” through Ministerial Regulation No. 9200

Advocates and key informants have raised serious doubts in terms of the actual impact of this law in Egypt, especially on young, impoverished women and girls. In light of these concerns, a thorough review of the consequences of the law is necessary to ensure that it effectively protects those it targets.

5 Evidence Generation

■ Strengthen the coordination of research initiatives.

As articulated by respondents, there is a need for better coordination of child marriage research activities across organizations at all levels in order to avoid duplication of existing research and perpetuation of research gaps.

■ **Build evidence on girls' perceptions of child marriage and how education affects marriage timing for girls.**

Additional qualitative studies should be conducted to better understand girls' perceptions of child marriage, so that future studies can better emphasise the voice of the girls themselves when developing solutions to end child marriage. According to respondents, more evidence is also needed on the link between education and child marriage in Egypt, and in particular, whether and how additional education for girls succeeds in delaying marriage.

■ **Use findings to inform the National Strategic Plan.**

The National Strategic Plan involves mainstreaming gender and the issues of child marriage and FGM/C into the population strategy; robust data and analysis are therefore needed to guide the governmental response to these issues moving forward.

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