

# Influencing policy on child marriage in India and Ethiopia

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- Most countries worldwide have either banned child marriage or are working towards a ban, but the practice persists. Millions of children, mainly girls, are affected, especially those from poor backgrounds. Child marriage has serious economic, educational and health consequences.
- Young Lives research reveals the extent of child marriage in the four study countries, and also the severity of its impact on the life chances of girls in particular.
- In India, Young Lives evidence has contributed directly to a change in the law which makes sex with a wife who is a child an offence of rape.
- In Ethiopia, Young Lives has highlighted the complexity of factors affecting child marriage, and shared findings with the Ethiopian Government and other influential stakeholders including UNICEF and the Population Council.

## Setting the scene

Child marriage is a global problem. It is estimated that 15 million girls every year are married before they reach the age of 18. It is the poorest children who are most likely to be affected, and child marriage perpetuates cycles of deprivation related to poverty, lack of education and poor nutrition. Girls who marry seldom go to school (either because they dropped out of school prior to marriage or on marriage), and this has a profound impact on their life chances and those of their children. Child marriage reduces girls' expected earnings in adulthood, and increases their risk of experiencing violence within relationships. From a purely health perspective, child marriage increases the risks of premature pregnancy, and maternal and infant mortality and health problems.

Most countries have pledged to end child marriage within the next decade, or (like India) already have legislation in place that prohibits it – but the practice still continues, suggesting that the underlying causes of child marriage are complex and deep-rooted, and that there is resistance to change.

## What does Young Lives research show?

Young Lives' research on adolescence, youth, gender and poverty (see separate case study on this topic) finds a specific focus in its work on child marriage and child-bearing. The life opportunities of young people, particularly girls, are strongly affected by expectations and practices in this area, but the factors affecting child marriage are complex. By examining and connecting many different aspects of young people's lives (work, school, home, marriage, community, peers), Young Lives can build a powerful picture of this complexity and hence be in a strong position to inform policy in constructive ways.

Young Lives research has looked across all four countries, and this has been an area of important activity in India and Ethiopia, where the effects of child marriage and the practices surrounding it (for example, FGM or dowry payments) are particularly marked. In these countries Young Lives seeks to understand why child marriage persists, and the social and economic norms that support it. Our qualitative evidence

shows that the root causes of the disadvantages faced by girls are connected with the need to safeguard social reputation (and so future perceived marriageability) and prepare for adulthood, often in a context of risk and inadequate resources.

### 1. General findings from across the study countries

Despite considerable national differences key findings are:

- Child marriage is extremely gendered: girls make up the overwhelming majority of those married before they reach the age of 18.
- Child marriage rates are significantly higher in rural areas, and among poorer and less well educated households.
- Not being enrolled in school at age 15 is a strong predictor of child marriage and/or early child-bearing. Keeping girls in school for longer is therefore protective.
- Low aspirations of both parents and children make child marriage more likely.
- Marriage has profound effects on girls' time-use: girls who are married or cohabiting by the age of 19 typically spend 6-8 hours a day on unpaid work.
- The likelihood of girls continuing with education is constrained after marriage.
- Parenthood often follows marriage and often quickly. Delaying marriage is also therefore likely to delay child birth. Many girls face pressure to conceive soon after marrying: having a baby marks an abrupt change to their lives and deepens their financial dependence on husbands.

### 2. Findings in India

Data collected from 1,000 19-year-olds in two Indian states, Andhra Pradesh and Telangana, confirm the findings listed above and in addition the data show that:

- 28% of girls in the Young Lives Older Cohort were married before the age of 18. Only 1% of boys had married before the age of 18.
- 59% of married girls had given birth to their first child by the age of 19. All recorded births had happened within marriage.
- Girls who had left school by age 15 were four times more likely to marry before the age of 18 than girls who were still in school at age 15.
- Girls from the poorest households were twice as likely as girls from the least-poor households to be married before the age of 18.
- Girls whose parents had the lowest educational aspirations for their daughters at age 12 were twice as likely be married before age 18, compared with girls whose parents had the highest aspirations for them.

Social and economic drivers, including the practice of dowry, play a key part in sustaining social norms around child marriage in India. Arranging child marriage can be seen by families as a way of 'protecting' girls and preserving family honour.

### 3. Findings in Ethiopia

In Ethiopia, Young Lives evidence shows that:

- Overall 10% of girls married before age 18 – actually fewer than in either India or Vietnam Young Lives samples.
- However, the social norms that support child marriage and female genital mutilation (FGM) are reinforced when families' options are limited by poverty and vulnerability.
- Marrying off daughters can be seen by families (and sometimes by girls themselves) as necessary and 'protective'. FGM can be seen as assuring marriageability and girls' culturally appropriate transition to adulthood.
- Legal measures to tackle such harmful traditional practices are inadequate by themselves and can drive the practices underground.
- To overcome these practices it is important to improve the options available to young women through schooling, training and employment promotion, social protection and poverty reduction.

## The impact of Young Lives research

### 1. India

According to UNICEF, one in three of all child marriages worldwide takes place in India. The practice has origins going back to ancient times, and although it is declining slowly, rates of child marriage remain high. The Government of India has made combatting child marriage and early childbearing a priority, and passed the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act in 2006. However, a weakness of this law is that it does not automatically declare child marriages to be illegal; rather it makes child marriages 'voidable' only when the child or the guardian seeks an annulment.

In India, Young Lives has been supporting state-level approaches to preventing child marriage and the development of effective adolescent sexual and reproductive health care policies for some time. In May 2016 Young Lives organised a series of workshops in India to disseminate its findings on child marriage. These were well-attended by a range of state, national and international organisations, including India's National Council for the Protection of Child Rights (NCPCR). NCPCR has good links to state-level actors through State Commissions for the Protection of Child Rights, and has the power to convene senior representatives from across government and the research community. As a direct result of the dissemination workshops and Young Lives' reputation for high-quality research, a formal partnership was developed with NCPCR and Young Lives was commissioned by them to use data from the 2011 census to carry out a systematic analysis of child marriage across the whole of India.

'A Statistical Analysis of Child Marriage in India – Based on Census 2011' was published jointly by Young Lives and NCPCR in June 2017. The 2011 Census data showed that there was a declining trend in child marriage at the national level; despite this, 12 million girls under 18 and boys under 21 were recorded in the Census as being married. There was a high variance between different districts and states, and between rural and urban areas. Child marriage was actually

on the increase in some urban areas. Young Lives' qualitative data from the longitudinal study in two states were used throughout the report to enhance the analysis and provide compelling evidence of the drivers and consequences of child marriage. Young Lives is the only group to be conducting longitudinal research in India. The report concluded with a series of recommendations.

Before the formal launch of the report, NCPCR held a legal consultation which drew the attention of judges, lawyers, academics and officials from the Law Commission and State Legal Authorities to the negative effect of child marriage on girls in particular. Publication of the report led to immediate and widespread media coverage. At the invitation of NCPCR the report was unveiled by Supreme Court Judge A.K. Sikri, who was widely quoted in the press condemning the practice of child marriage. As a result of his involvement, the report was used as one of the main pieces of supporting evidence for a new [Indian Supreme Court Judgement](#), issued in October 2017, ruling that a man who has sex with his wife where she is aged less than 18 years is committing rape. The Young Lives/NCPCR report is quoted extensively in the judgement, with a particular focus on evidence from Young Lives' longitudinal study. The ruling means that men can be jailed for sexual assault under those circumstances. Young Lives' research has thus made a direct and significant contribution to a landmark change in the law which will have a major impact on child marriage in India.

“ Child marriage is a socio legal issue and legislation and implementation of the law is very critical in reducing child marriage. It is very useful that the report has identified 70 districts with the highest incidence of child marriage. I hope that the 13 identified States will take concrete steps to strengthen the implementation of the Prohibition of the Child Marriage Act (PCMA) 2006. The role of Child Marriage Prohibition Officers (CMPOs) is extremely important and we should appoint CMPOs in every district. ”

**Supreme Court Judge A.K. Sikri**

“ Another extremely useful report referred to is “A Statistical Analysis of Child Marriage in India based on Census 2011”. This report is prepared by a collaborative organization called Young Lives and the National Commission for the Protection of Child Rights... There is a specific discussion in the Statistical Analysis on the impact of early child birth on health... There is also a useful discussion on violence, neglect and abandonment; psychosocial disadvantage; low self-esteem; low education and limited employability; human trafficking and under-nutrition, all of which are of considerable importance for the well-being of a girl child... All that we need say is that a reading of [this and other] reports gives a good idea of the variety and magnitude of problems that a girl child who is married between 15 and 18 years of age could ordinarily encounter. ”

**From the Indian Supreme Court Judgement** of October 2017

The report has now also attracted interest from the Government of India's Ministry of Women and Child Development and Young Lives data has been used to answer parliamentary questions. NCPCR is commissioning Young Lives to examine the issue of teenage pregnancy using national data from the National Family Health Survey 4.

“ Young Lives has closely worked with NCPCR on the issue of child marriage and I recollect that it was their finding that 37 percent of the girls are married in Round 4 that made me realise how powerful the dataset was. Round 5 now tells us that 56% of the women are now married and less than half the women are engaged in economic activities compared to 3 out of 4 young men at age 22. I am really glad to be part of this dissemination and hope that the insights and policy recommendations that Young Lives team has provided will be taken forward in intervention, designed to reach the last child. ”

**Stuti Kacker**, Chairperson, National Commission for Protection of Child Rights (NCPCR)

“ I would like to compliment Young Lives for a very unique, comprehensive and in-depth study which brings out real data and will benefit many of us in NITI Aayog. We will very closely examine the findings and will take this further to learn the lessons and make policy changes based on this study. ”

**Amitabh Kant**, CEO, NITI Aayog (National Institute for Transforming India)

Young Lives is in discussion with the Children's Investment Fund Foundation (CIFF) about expanding the support they provide for the research in India.

## 2. Ethiopia

In Ethiopia, Young Lives has developed timely messages around the topic of child marriage, arguing that there should be a focus on preventing child marriage among younger adolescents, that for girls who marry in late adolescence it is more important to improve access to sexual and reproductive health, and that the priority focus should be on education, training, work and migration. These issues were raised in a [blog](#) for Thomson Reuters by Country Director Alula Pankhurst on International Day of the Girl Child referencing a new Young Lives working paper to draw attention to the complexity of factors influencing child marriage and warning that enforcement of the ban on child marriage (rather than using persuasion) risked forcing the practice underground. Understanding why harmful traditional practices persist is key to developing strategies to tackle them. Young Lives blogs and news stories in [New Internationalist](#) and on the [University of Oxford website](#) have also been able to address the way boys are neglected in the gender and empowerment discourse, and to argue for a stronger relational gender approach.

Research findings have been shared through relationships with a range of stakeholders in Ethiopia including UNICEF and the Population Council. Young Lives was asked by the Ethiopian Ministry of Women, Children and Youth Affairs to provide comments on the National Strategy and Action Plan on Harmful Traditional Practices against Women and Children and took part in workshops discussing the draft legislation which was approved in 2013. Young Lives also commented on Ethiopia's new national Child Protection Strategy in 2013-14. As a result of our engagement on this issue, the country director, Alula Pankhurst, was invited to take part in the African Union's twenty-third session of the African Committee of Experts on the Rights and Well-being of the Child (ACERWC) in April 2014, with discussions notably on the issue of child marriage.

In July 2014, the Ethiopia Young Lives Country Director played a key role with Ethiopia's Ministry of Women Children and Youth Affairs (MoWCYA) in preparing for Girl Summit in London, where the theme was 'A future free from FGM and child and forced marriage'. The Deputy Prime Minister of Ethiopia, representatives from MoWCYA and Ethiopian civil society organisations all took part in the summit. MoWCYA invited Young Lives to participate in post-Summit activities and a 'Day of the Girl Child' event and march on child marriage and FGM. Young Lives researchers also presented at the follow up national meeting in June 2015 and the Country Director wrote a [blog for the Conversation](#) suggesting priorities to continue promoting progress.

In August 2016 Young Lives delivered training to the Ministry of Women, Children and Youth Affairs staff, and in November 2016 Young Lives moderated a Population Council dissemination workshop on the experience of Ethiopian adolescents and youth. Uptake of research findings has been effected especially through Young Lives presentations to the Child Research and Practice Forum (CRPF). The CRPF has promoted a series of presentations by non-Young Lives researchers showcasing research on gender in adolescence, including on child marriage. Ethiopia is committed to abolishing child marriage and FGM by 2025 and Young Lives has presented findings and recommendations to the alliance working to achieve this. Young Lives has also provided advice for the costed roadmap to end FGM and child marriage, and participated in the workshop.

Young Lives maintains country-based advisory groups on child marriage and adolescent parenthood in India and Ethiopia, and we intend to continue to use these groups for expert advice and as a mean to further amplify our findings in future.

### 3. Other influence

As a consequence of our work on child protection and our engagement with the BOND child rights working group, in 2013-14 Young Lives was approached by World Vision UK to advise on research and programming about children's work and violence against children. We provided training for country programme managers on using evidence in programme work, and training on ethics and research methods for HQ staff – which challenged their ways of working and facilitated them to think about the issues in a different way. The resulting World Vision research programme on harmful traditional practices benefited from significant substantive input from our Ethiopia country director, and led to further collaboration on reports and events, including a [joint comment piece on FGM published by \*The Guardian Online\*](#) in April 2014.

Through a new project known as YMAPS (the Young Marriage and Parenthood Study) in collaboration with the organisation Child Frontiers and Young Lives country partners, notably the Ethiopian Centre for Child Research, and with funding from Canada's IDRC, Young Lives will be exploring how marriage, relationships and parenthood shape the lives of adolescents and young women and men in Ethiopia, India, Peru and Zambia.