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## ENDING CHILD MARRIAGE IN THE ARAB REGION

Child marriage violates girls' human rights and takes a toll on families and societies.

In the Arab region,

**1 IN 7  
GIRLS**

marries before her  
18th birthday.

Ending child marriage requires collective efforts from all fronts: social, economic, judicial, religious, and political.

In the Arab region, one in seven girls marries before her 18th birthday.<sup>1</sup> Families who marry off their daughters at such a young age may believe that it is in the girls' best interest, not realizing that they are violating their daughters' human rights. Early marriage often means an end to the girls' schooling, forced sexual relations, and early childbearing. Moreover, girls who marry at a younger age are generally more vulnerable to spousal violence than girls who wait longer to marry.<sup>2</sup> Child marriage often perpetuates a cycle of poverty, low education, high fertility, and poor health, which hinders societies' economic and social development.

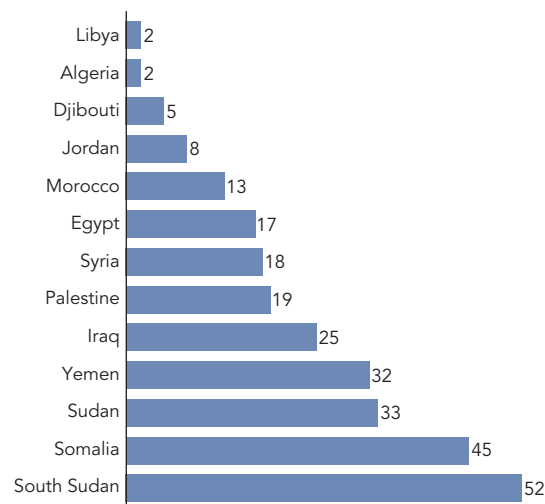
Today, ending child marriage is a global commitment (see Box 1, page 2). To put girls' rights at the center of development efforts, the International Day of the Girl Child was inaugurated on Oct. 11, 2012, with the theme of ending child marriage.<sup>3</sup> Most countries where the majority of girls marry before age 18 are in sub-Saharan Africa. The South and Southeast Asia regions together are home to the largest number of child brides, because of their large populations.<sup>4</sup>

In the Arab region, the highest rates of child marriage are seen in the poorest countries—Yemen, Sudan, Somalia, and South Sudan—where annual per capita incomes in 2011 were less than US\$2,000.<sup>5</sup> One-third or more of the girls in these countries marry before their 18th birthday (see Figure 1). At the other end of the spectrum, child marriage is rare in Tunisia, Algeria, and Libya. Egypt—the most populous Arab country—is home to the largest number of child brides in the region. Compared to a generation ago, rates of child marriage have declined in Arab countries (see Figure 2, page 2). Still, a significant number do marry young, and the decline in early marriage has stopped in some countries such as Iraq, where 25 percent of girls marry before age 18 and 6 percent do so before age 15.<sup>6</sup>

This policy brief presents the latest data on child marriage in the Arab region, which includes

members of the League of Arab States (stretching from Morocco to Oman). It explains how ending child marriage would help countries achieve their Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) that aim to combat poverty and improve health and quality of life for all. The brief emphasizes the importance of taking a broad approach to end child marriage, including mandating more years of compulsory education, setting and enforcing the legal minimum age of marriage, raising community awareness about the harm caused by early marriage, and involving families to find ways to prevent child marriage.

**FIGURE 1**  
Percentage of Women Ages 20 to 24  
Who Married Before Their 18th Birthday



**Note:** Palestine refers to the Arab population of Gaza and the West Bank, including East Jerusalem.

**Sources:** Special tabulations by PAPFAM for Libya (2007), Syria (2009), and Iraq and Morocco (2011). The data for Jordan is from the 2012 Jordan Population and Family Health Survey. The data for remaining countries—Palestine (2004); Algeria, Djibouti, Somalia, and Yemen (2006); Egypt (2008); and Sudan and South Sudan (2010)—are from Childinfo, Monitoring the Situation of Children and Women, accessed at [www.childinfo.org/marriage\\_countrydata.php](http://www.childinfo.org/marriage_countrydata.php), on May 10, 2013.

## Factors Underlying Child Marriage

Child marriage—defined as marriage in which the bride or groom is under age 18—primarily involves girls. Child brides are usually poor, but not always; each has her own circumstances leading to marriage. While a small percentage of child brides in the Arab region are younger than 15, their plight is usually hidden from public view. But occasionally the media has publicized such stories, as was the case in 2008 with Nujood Ali, a 10-year-old bride in Yemen who walked alone to a courthouse in Sana and sought a divorce, which she successfully got after an attorney took her case. Nujood's story drew the world's attention to the plight of child brides in Yemen—where one in 10 girls marries before age 15—when her story appeared in the *Yemen Times*, and was subsequently reported in the international media. Nujood's father,

an unemployed migrant from a village not far from the capital city, had two wives and 16 children. His reason for marrying off Nujood to a man in his 30s from his village was to spare her from the same fate as one of his sisters, who had been kidnapped as a child by a rival tribe; their father allowed the kidnapper to marry his daughter to save the family honor.<sup>7</sup>

Saving family honor—which is linked to preserving girls' virginity and eliminating the possibility (or even suspicion) of premarital affairs—is a main reason that families marry off their daughters at a young age. Financial incentives also play a role for some families. Poor and traditional families who value boys over girls have one less mouth to feed, and they often receive gifts and money from the groom and his family in exchange for the bride.<sup>8</sup> Well-to-do families may also marry off their daughters early to seal family ties that help forge strategic alliances with other clans. Community pressure is an integral part of the practice of child marriage. The sooner a girl is married, the more secure is her family's honor and reputation in the community.

Education is a powerful way to prevent child marriage, especially keeping girls in school through secondary grades. In a study done in Egypt in 2012, educated parents were more likely to keep their daughters in school and less likely to marry them off at a young age than parents who had little or no

### BOX 1

## International Agreements Condemn Child Marriage

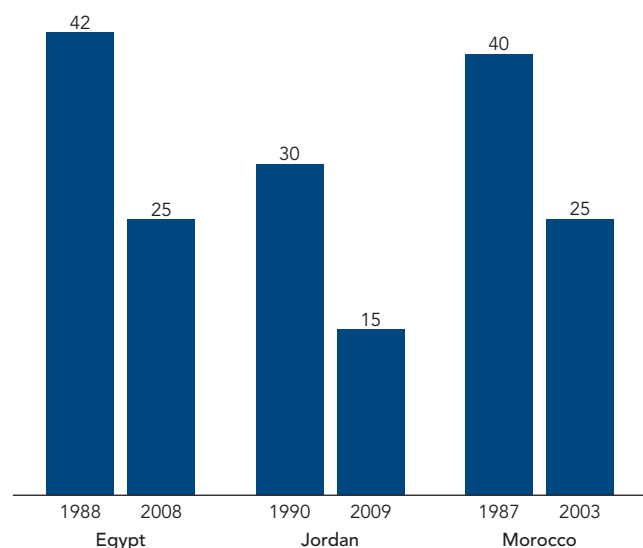
Several international human rights agreements condemn child marriage, beginning with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948). All call for the free and full consent of both parties to marriage, designation of child marriage as a harmful practice, and protection for the rights of children from all forms of exploitation. They include:

- The 1979 Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), the major international agreement defining the rights of girls and women, requires governments to condemn all forms of discrimination against girls and women and pursue all appropriate means to eliminate it.
- The 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), a legally binding international agreement on the rights and welfare of children (defined as those under age 18), requires governments to protect children from hazards of female genital cutting, child marriage, and sex trafficking.
- The 1990 African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child recognizes that a child (defined as those under age 18) requires particular care and legal protection.
- The Programme of Action of the 1994 United Nations International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) calls on countries to eliminate child marriage and to emphasize the social responsibilities that marriage entails in their educational programs.

**Sources:** Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, [www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw/cedaw.htm](http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw/cedaw.htm); Convention on the Rights of the Child, [www.unicef.org/crc/](http://www.unicef.org/crc/); African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, [www1.umn.edu/humanrts/africa/afchild.htm](http://www1.umn.edu/humanrts/africa/afchild.htm); and Programme of Action, [www.unfpa.org/public/home/publications/pid/1973](http://www.unfpa.org/public/home/publications/pid/1973).

FIGURE 2

Percentage of Women Ages 20-49 Who Wed Before Age 18



**Source:** ICF International, MEASURE DHS STATcompiler, accessed at [www.statcompiler.com](http://www.statcompiler.com), on May 10, 2013.

schooling.<sup>9</sup> Schooling is an essential part of adolescent lives for both girls and boys. Aside from literacy and numeracy, schools provide a safe place for girls to interact with their peers, develop negotiation skills, and observe female role models outside their family circles. Child brides are generally isolated and more likely to experience domestic violence. A recent study of women victims of violence in Yemen found that half of the cases in a shelter in Aden were due to early marriage.<sup>10</sup>

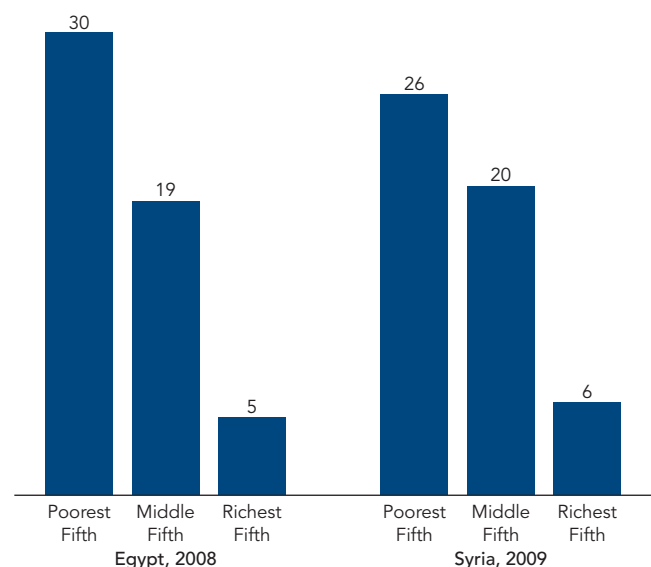
## Breaking the Cycle of Poverty, Achieving the MDGs

Ending child marriage contributes to the efforts aimed at achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), a set of eight interrelated goals that addresses poverty at its core. Child marriage can be seen as both a cause and a consequence of poverty and the low status of girls and women.

**MDG 1: Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger.** Child marriage passes the cycle of poverty, poor health, and low education from one generation to the next. Girls from poor families are more likely than girls from wealthier families to become child brides. In Egypt and Syria, girls belonging to the poorest one-fifth of the population are at least four times more likely to wed before their 18th birthday than those belonging to the richest one-fifth (see Figure 3).

FIGURE 3

Percentage of Women Ages 20-24 Who Wed Before Age 18, by Wealth Quintiles



**Note:** Wealth quintiles (five groups of equal population size) are based on an index of surveyed household assets. Data are shown for the first (poorest), third (middle), and fifth (richest) quintiles.

**Sources:** Egypt 2008 Demographic and Health Survey; and Syria 2009 PAPFAM survey.

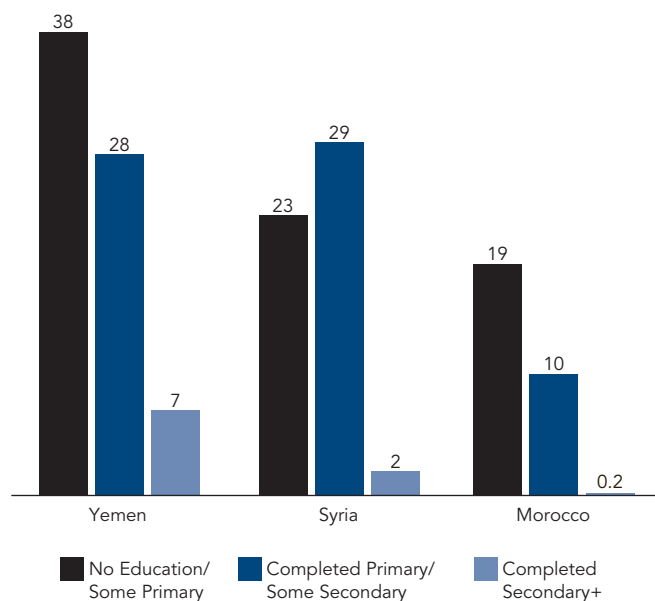
**MDG 2: Achieve universal primary education.** Girls who finish primary school have the chance to continue their education into secondary and higher levels. Supporting girls to stay in school and delay marriage and childbearing translates into greater opportunities for them and their children, allowing them to develop new skills and generate income. Figure 4 shows that girls who have completed secondary education are far less likely to be married than their less-educated peers.

**MDG 3: Promote gender equality and empower women.**

Ending child marriage must be an integral part of efforts to promote gender equality in the region. Child brides have little opportunity to develop awareness of their rights, and are in no position to demand them. Too often, child brides are much younger than their husbands (see Figure 5, page 4), which adds to the uneven power dynamic between the brides and their husbands—and their husbands' families. Marriage is a main reason why girls drop out of school, ending their opportunities for better-paying jobs and decisionmaking positions outside the home. Two of the indicators for monitoring progress toward achieving MDG3 are the "share of women in wage employment in the nonagricultural sector" and the "proportion of seats held by women in national parliament." Child brides are less likely to have gainful employment. And because child marriage affects the status of girls for life, their chances of holding public office, such as being elected to parliaments, are remote.

FIGURE 4

Percentage of Married Women Ages 20-24 Who Wed Before Age 18, by Education



**Source:** Special tabulations by PAPFAM for Yemen (2003), Syria (2009), and Morocco (2011).

**MDG 4: Reduce child mortality.** Having babies during early and mid-adolescence has serious consequences for the health of mothers and their newborns. Children born to adolescent girls are more likely to be premature and have low birth weight, conditions that have a long-term impact on the newborns' health and development and put them at a higher risk of dying before their first birthday. Stillbirths and deaths during the first week of life are 50 percent higher among babies born to mothers under age 20 than among babies born to mothers in their 20s.<sup>11</sup>

**MDG 5: Improve maternal health.** Complications from pregnancy and childbirth are the leading cause of death among girls ages 15 to 19 in many low- and middle-income countries.<sup>12</sup> Early marriage generally leads to early childbearing and high fertility. Moreover, girls who marry young are usually not empowered to make important health decisions, such as practicing family planning to avoid unwanted pregnancies.<sup>13</sup> And girls under age 15 are five times more likely to die from maternal causes than women in their 20s.<sup>14</sup> Pregnant adolescents, particularly from the poorest segments of society, may not have completed their physical growth, and may be malnourished, thus increasing their risk of complications requiring medical care, including obstetric fistula (the internal ruptures that can lead to lifelong incontinence).<sup>15</sup>

#### **MDG 6: Combat HIV/AIDS, malaria, and other diseases.**

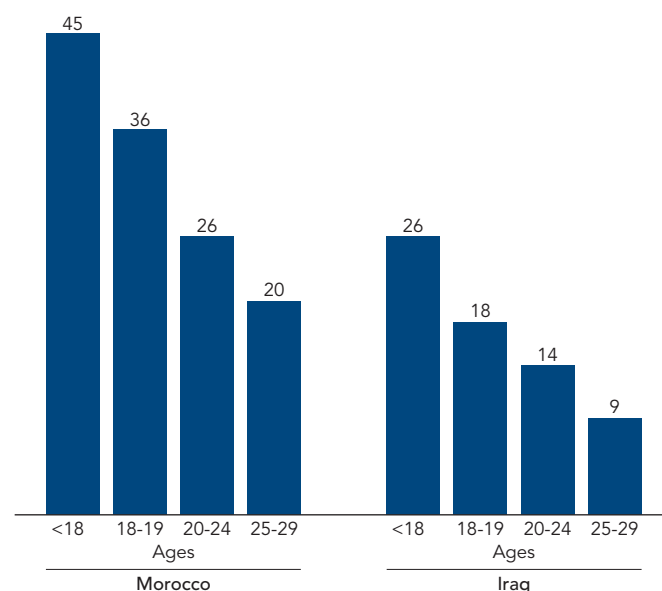
Child brides are especially vulnerable to sexually transmitted infections (STIs)—including HIV—for both biological and social reasons. Young women are biologically more susceptible to infection than older women because of immature reproductive and immune systems.<sup>16</sup> Additionally, young brides are at risk of acquiring STIs if their husbands have had sexual experiences and multiple partners before marriage. Moreover, young brides have little power in asking their older husbands to use condoms or abstain from sex. A study in Oman found that 4 percent of married women of reproductive age had STIs, and those ages 15 to 24 were twice as likely as those ages 25 to 49 to have STIs.<sup>17</sup>

**MDG 7 and MDG 8,** “ensure environmental sustainability” and “develop a global partnership for development,” respectively. Ending child marriage would help slow population growth and give Arab countries time to put in place the infrastructure needed to deal with their growing populations and environmental degradation. The Middle East and North Africa region has the lowest per capita of renewable freshwater of any region in the world.<sup>18</sup> The region now has the opportunity to develop partnerships among countries and regional institutions to help resource-poor Arab countries conduct research and establish programs to end child marriage and accelerate the region's progress toward achieving the MDGs and beyond.

The MDGs and their targets—which are meant to be achieved by 2015—are useful tools for global development efforts and monitoring countries' progress. Building on the MDG experience and focusing on inequalities, the international community is gearing up to introduce development goals for post 2015, providing an opportunity to include a target for ending child marriage.

**FIGURE 5**

**Percentage of Married Women Ages 15-49 Whose Husbands Are at Least 10 Years Older, by Women's Age at Marriage**



**Sources:** Special tabulations by PAFAM for Morocco and Iraq (2011).

## **Broad Approaches Are Needed**

The forces underlying child marriage are complex and interrelated, and ending this practice requires collective efforts from all fronts: social, economic, judicial, religious, and political. Addressing religious concerns and educating religious leaders on the hazards of early marriage should be a major component of such efforts.

### **REFORMING FAMILY LAWS**

In the Arab region, gender-based discrimination is codified in family laws that govern marriage, divorce, maintenance, paternity, custody of children, and inheritance. With the exception of Tunisia, where family laws are drawn from mostly secular sources, family laws in Arab countries are mainly or solely based on interpretations of Islamic *Sharia*, allocating different rights and responsibilities to men and women.<sup>19</sup> These family laws, along with patriarchal attitudes, limit women's mobility and grant privileges to male kin—notably

“guardianship” over women in all areas of decisionmaking in the public sphere. A woman’s interactions with the state and society are often mediated through her father, uncles (on her father’s side), brothers, husbands, or other male relatives. A young woman’s position as a dependent of her male guardian is used to justify her second-class citizenship and allow her to be married off at his discretion.

Male guardianship, men’s exclusive right to polygamy, and unilateral divorce—all inscribed in the family laws drawn from *Sharia*—are often debated within the framework of religious versus secular values. To move beyond such a binary framework, Muslim human rights activists and their supporters—both men and women—are looking to the *Qur’an* and the *Sunnah* (the sayings and deeds of the Prophet Mohammad and his companions) to develop new, more egalitarian interpretations of family law. These activists believe that Islam is at heart egalitarian, and that parts of *Sharia* codified in family laws were interpretations by men whose views were rooted in patriarchal traditions.<sup>20</sup>

Moroccan civil society has been at the forefront of such activism, and brought about a change to Moroccan family law after years of struggle. In 2003, the new Moroccan family law was heralded as a giant leap for women’s rights and for children’s rights. Several features of the Moroccan law can directly affect the practice of child marriage:<sup>21</sup>

- The minimum legal age of marriage is 18 for both men and women.
- The adult woman is entitled to self-guardianship and may exercise it freely and independently.
- The woman has the right to impose a condition in the marriage contract requiring that her husband refrain from taking other wives.
- The child’s right to acknowledgment of paternity is protected in cases where the marriage has not been officially registered.

## ENFORCING THE LEGAL AGE OF MARRIAGE

Setting and enforcing a minimum legal age for marriage is necessary to protect girls. Judges and law enforcement agencies need to be trained, and a well-functioning system of universal birth registrations should be in place to ensure that girls have a proper document of their age. A number of Arab countries, such as Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, and Morocco, already have 18 as the minimum legal age for girls, but the laws are not necessarily strong or clear enough.<sup>22</sup> As a result, families take advantage of loopholes that give judges leeway to allow underage girls to marry at the request of their guardians. In Jordan, for example, more than 16,000 marriages of girls younger than 18 were registered in 2010 and 2011, representing 15 percent of first-time marriages for females.<sup>23</sup>

### BOX 2

## Two Programs Seek to Delay Marriage

“Ishraq” (“sunrise” in Arabic) is a project for vulnerable girls in Upper Egypt.<sup>1</sup> Begun in 2001, the project aims to improve education, health, and social opportunities by bringing the girls into safe learning spaces. It offers out-of-school girls literacy and numeracy skills, life skills, and—for the first time in Egypt—sports, to prepare them for integration into formal schooling. Girls ages 13 to 15 meet with Ishraq promoters four times a week for 24 months, after which they take an exam to get into the public school system; generally more than 90 percent pass. The promoters are local women who have finished secondary school and serve as role models. Started as a pilot project in four rural communities in El-Minya Governorate, Ishraq has expanded to rural communities in Fayoum, Sohag, and Qena governorates in Upper Egypt, reaching more than 3,000 girls. The program also involves parents, community leaders, and boys to help create an environment conducive to social change.

“Safe Age of Marriage” was a one-year pilot project conducted in 2009 in Yemen’s Amran Governorate, covering communities in Al-Sawd and Al-Soodeh districts, where only 8 percent of girls ages 15 to 17 attended school.<sup>2</sup> The project trained 20 male and 20 female volunteer community educators, including religious leaders and nurse-midwives. The educators conducted a baseline survey of 400 households to assess knowledge, attitudes, and practices related to child marriage. The majority of the population was illiterate (only 1 percent of women had some schooling); 38 percent of the mothers had their first child before age 18; and each family had an average of 7.6 children. Community educators conducted more than 1,300 outreach interventions, reaching nearly 29,000 people, and were instrumental in postponing and preventing 53 girl-child and 26 boy-child marriages. To reach target audiences about the negative consequences of child marriage, they regularly held discussions, role-playing exercises, storytelling, and poetry sessions in schools, health centers, mosques, and social gatherings. They also held monthly fairs, where a mobile clinic provided women reproductive and child health services. Influential speakers, such as the governor and other local officials, were invited to speak at the fair about the dangers of child marriage, and a movie was shown about a Yemeni girl who was married off at a young age and died in labor. Community educators then facilitated a discussion on the consequences of child marriage. In a separate activity, the community educators engaged 9-to-15-year-old students to develop and perform school plays on the health and social consequences of early marriage and the importance of completing high school, and launched a magazine competition among 20 schools. They also were involved in selecting 10 model families (five per district) who delayed the marriage of their daughters and ensured that they completed high school. The pilot project has been scaled up to cover other districts in Amran Governorate.

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Also, families may bypass the law by arranging a religious marriage ceremony for their underage daughters and then waiting to officially register the marriage after she reaches age 18. In such cases, if the marriage isn't registered and the husband decides to leave, the child bride is left without legal protection for herself and her children.

## RAISING PUBLIC AWARENESS

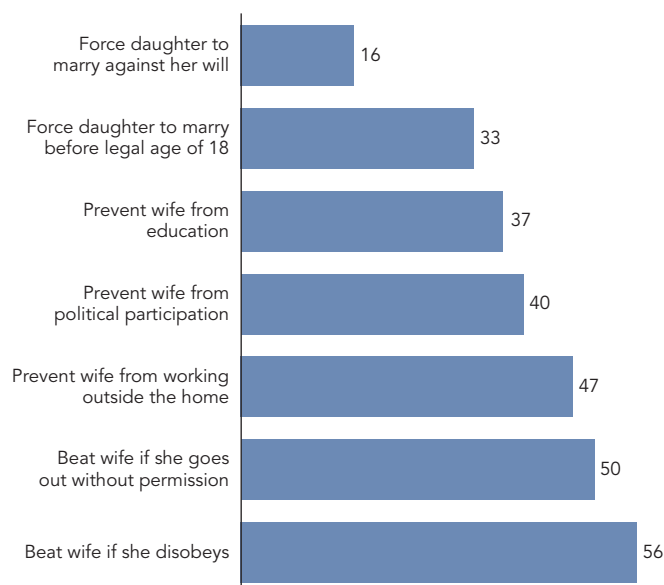
Strengthening and enforcing family laws must go hand-in-hand with raising awareness in communities about the dangers of child marriage and making sure that schools are available and accessible to girls, since their movements are restricted (see Box 2). In rural communities in Yemen, for example, not having enough girls' schools is a major deterrent for families who do not want to send their girls to school too far away from home. Increasing the years of compulsory education can also help prolong the period of time when a girl is in school and unavailable for marriage. In addition, policies and programs can discourage early marriage by:

- Encouraging parents to keep their daughters in school until they finish high school, and subsidizing the cost for families with limited financial resources.
- Raising public awareness about children's rights to education and protection against exploitation.

FIGURE 6

### Iraqi Men's Perception of Their Rights

Percent of Men Who Believe They Have the Right to:



Source: UN Iraq, *Women in Iraq Factsheet* (New York: UN, 2013).

- Changing attitudes toward early marriage through targeted campaigns and use of the mass media, showcasing the benefits of school for girls and hazards of early marriage.

Community leaders, including religious leaders, should be asked to help change attitudes about the status of girls and women, including changing their own attitudes if they support child marriage. In Iraq, for example, a third of men believe that a father has the right to marry off his daughter before the legal age of 18; and more than half believe that a husband has the right to beat his wife if she disobeys (see Figure 6). Such attitudes are not limited to Iraq or men. In a recent survey of young people in Egypt, three-quarters of women said that a husband is justified in beating his wife under certain circumstances; and a similar proportion of woman said that a woman should obtain her husband's permission for everything she does.<sup>24</sup>

Families and communities should be empowered to create safe, public spaces for girls to interact and grow through their crucial adolescent years, free from forced sexual relationships and childbearing. The ministries of *awqaf* (religious endowment) in Arab countries can play a crucial role in getting such messages across. Creating community-based hotlines and child protection committees can help identify and support girls at risk.

The media play a key role in raising awareness of the issue of child marriage. Journalists can use current data to inform human rights advocates, religious leaders, and policymakers of the negative effects of child marriage by covering the issue from multiple perspectives—the illegal violation of girls' human

## BOX 3

### Reaching Out to Young Married Women

Efforts are needed to address the needs of child brides. These efforts include:

- Ensuring that young married girls can continue their education.
- Decreasing the pressure on young brides to become pregnant.
- Improving their access to reproductive health care, including family planning counseling and services.
- Empowering them with training programs to improve their life skills and ensure that they can earn a livelihood if they need to.
- Providing services to victims of domestic violence.

rights, the mental and physical harm on girls' development, and the negative consequences for families and societies.

## Gaining Political Commitment

Evidence shows that programs that attempt to empower girls and offer incentives to families can be effective in preventing child marriage, but the existing programs in the region are too few, scattered, and small in scope to be able to make an impact at the national level.<sup>25</sup> In Egypt, for example, the percentage of women ages 20 to 24 who wed before their 18th birthday declined from 20 percent in 2000 to 17 percent in 2008. But in the 10 years between 2000 and 2010, the actual number of such women is estimated to have grown by around 10 percent because of the country's population growth.<sup>26</sup> The enormity of the efforts needed to end child marriage in the Arab region requires collective political commitments, backed by financial support and concrete actions, at both the national and regional levels. At the same time, it is important to reach out to young married women and meet their needs (see Box 3, page 6).

International and regional institutions, such as the Organization of Islamic Cooperation and the League of Arab States, are well positioned to take the cause of eradicating child marriage as part of region's development agenda, by mapping out "hot spots" in the region where child marriage is practiced, supporting research that can help improve policies and programs, and developing databases of successful programs that have shown results in keeping girls in school and postponing marriage. Nationally, government agencies and nongovernmental organizations need to take similar steps in collaboration with international and regional organizations and among themselves to ensure efficient use of scarce resources.

## Conclusions

Child marriage is a critical social, health, and development issue in the Arab region. The practice violates girls' human rights and takes a toll on families and societies and perpetuates a generational cycle of poverty, low education, early childbearing, and poor health. A collective regional political commitment is needed to make this issue a priority in the region's development agenda. Arab countries' governmental and nongovernmental organizations from all sectors and at all levels need to collaborate to raise community awareness about sexual and reproductive health and the harmful consequences of child marriage. Universal policies and programs are needed to help all girls under age 18 attend school and stay out of the marriage market, and laws that prevent guardians from allowing underage girls to marry need to be enforced. Ending child marriage would protect girls' rights to education and protection, save the lives of young mothers and their newborns, and improve family health and well-being. Since families have tremendous influence in their daughters' marriages, they need to be involved in the solutions and are key to ensuring a healthy transition to adulthood for all girls.

## Acknowledgments

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## PRB's Middle East and North Africa Program

PRB's Middle East and North Africa (MENA) program, initiated in 2001 with funding from the Ford Foundation, responds to the region's need for timely and objective information on population, socioeconomic, and reproductive health issues. The project explores the links among these issues and provides evidence-based policy and program recommendations for decisionmakers in the region. Working closely with research organizations in the region, the project team produces a series of policy briefs (in English and Arabic) on current population and reproductive health topics, conducts workshops on policy communication, and makes presentations at regional and international conferences.

In 2012, PRB began its collaboration with UNFPA Arab States Regional Office (ASRO) to produce policy briefs and hold policy communication workshops in the region.

### MENA Policy Briefs: Selected Titles

*The Need for Reproductive Health Education in Schools in Egypt* (October 2012)

*Women's Need for Family Planning in Arab Countries* (July 2012)

*Egypt Youth Data Sheet: Selected Data From SYPE 2009* (February 2012)

*Facts of Life: Youth Sexuality and Reproductive Health in the Middle East and North Africa* (June 2011)

*Spousal Violence in Egypt* (September 2010)

*Sexual and Reproductive Health in the Middle East and North Africa: A Guide for Reporters* (May 2008)

*Reforming Family Laws to Promote Progress in the Middle East and North Africa* (December 2005)

*Marriage in the Arab World* (September 2005)

*Progress Toward the Millennium Development Goals in the Middle East and North Africa* (March 2004)

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