

# Achieving MDG 1 in the Arab region: Gender equality and role of the families<sup>1</sup>

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## INTRODUCTION

The family has always been the center of social life in the Arab region. (2) It is the core of society and is held in great esteem among young and old alike. In Arab countries, the family is the main social security system for the elderly, sick or disabled, and the economic refuge for the unemployed. Parents are responsible for children until they marry or become economically independent. Children reciprocate by assuming responsibility for the care of their parents as they grow older. Therefore, the health and wellbeing of newly formed families are crucial to the health and wellbeing of Arab societies at large not only today, but also well into the future.

The Arab region has made significant strides over the past few decades in improving the health, education, and standard of living of its people, but the gains have been uneven among countries and among population groups within countries. In Egypt and in Iraq, at least one in four people lives in poverty; in Yemen, this ratio is one in three; and almost one in two in Sudan and South Sudan (see Table 1). A key strategy to reduce poverty and improve the health and wellbeing of individuals and families is to make a collective effort to uphold girls' human rights and end the harmful practice of child marriage in the Arab region, where one in seven girls marries before her 18th birthday, according to the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA). (3)

Child marriage—defined as marriage in which the bride or groom is under age 18—primarily involves girls. Compared to a generation ago, rates of child marriage have declined in the region (see Table 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. The highest rates of child marriage in the Arab region are seen in the poorest countries—South Sudan, Somalia, Sudan, and Yemen—where annual per capita incomes in 2011 were less than US \$2,000. One-third or more of the girls in these countries marry before their 18th birthday (see Table 3). 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.

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 daughter's human rights. Early marriage often means an end to the girl's schooling, as well as forced sexual relations, and

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<sup>2</sup>The “Arab region” includes members of the League of Arab States, stretching from Morocco in the west to Oman in the east.

<sup>3</sup>United Nations Population Fund, *Marrying Too Young, End Child Marriage* (New York: UNFPA, 2012).

early childbearing. Moreover, girls who marry at a younger age are generally more vulnerable to spousal violence than girls who wait longer to marry. (4) Child marriage often perpetuates a cycle of poverty, low education, high fertility, and poor health, which hinders societies' economic and social development.

**Table 1. Percent of Population Living in Poverty**

Country	Year	Living below national poverty line	Living with <\$2 per day
S. Sudan	2009	51	...
Sudan	2009	47	44
Mauritania	2008	42	48
Yemen	2005	35	47
Iraq	2007	23	21
Egypt	2008	22	15
Tunisia	2010	16	4
Jordan	2008	13	2
Morocco	2007	9	14

... Data not available. Sources: World Bank, accessed online at <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SI.POV.NAHC> and <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SI.POV.2DAY>, on May 10, 2013.

**Table 2. Declines in the Rates of Early Marriage in Egypt, Jordan, and Morocco**

Country	Year	Percent of women who are married		Percent of married women 20-49 who wed before age 18
		15 - 19	20 - 24	
Egypt	1988	15	58	42
	2008	13	53	25
Jordan	1990	10	45	30
	2009	7	36	15
Morocco	1987	12	41	40
	2003	11	36	25

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

**Table 3. Percent of Women Ages 20 to 24 Who Married Before Age 18 and 15**

Country	Year	Age at marriage	
		<18	<15
South Sudan	2010	52	...
Somalia	2006	45	8
Sudan	2010	33	...
Yemen	2006	32	11
Iraq	2011	25	6
Palestine	2004	19	...

<sup>4</sup>Ibrahim F. Kharboush, et al., Spousal Violence in Egypt (Washington, DC: Population Reference Bureau, 2010).

Country	Year	Age at marriage	
Syria	2009	18	3
Egypt	2008	17	2
Morocco	2011	13	1
Saudi Arabia		12	4
Jordan	2012	8	...
Djibouti	2006	5	...
Algeria	2006	2	<0,5
Libya	2007	2	<0,5

... Data not available. Sources: Special tabulations by PAPFAM for Iraq, Syria, Morocco, and Libya. Data for Jordan is from Jordan Population and Family Health Survey 2012, and data for the remaining countries are from ChildInfo: Monitoring the Situation of Children and Women, accessed at [http://www.childinfo.org/marriage\\_countrydata.php](http://www.childinfo.org/marriage_countrydata.php) on May 13, 2013.

### Ending Child Marriage Is a Global Commitment

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>5</sup> Most countries where the majority of girls marry before age 18 are in sub-Saharan Africa, but the South and Southeast Asia regions together are home to the largest number of child brides, due to their large populations.<sup>6</sup>

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.<sup>7</sup> 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.

The upcoming International Year of Family next year is yet another opportunity for the international community to condemn child marriage and introduce an action plan for upholding girls' human rights and ending child marriage.

<sup>5</sup>Ending Child Marriage on the International Day of Girl Child. Press release. UNICEF, 2012.

<sup>6</sup>United Nations Population Fund, *Marrying Too Young, End Child Marriage* (New York: UNFPA, 2012).

<sup>7</sup>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).

### Factors Underlying Child Marriage

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 publicize 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. (8)

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. 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. According to a recent survey in Iraq, killing a woman for shaming her family's honor is acceptable to nearly 70 percent of young men there. (9)

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 schooling. (10) 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.

### Ending Child Marriage Helps Achieve MDGs

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

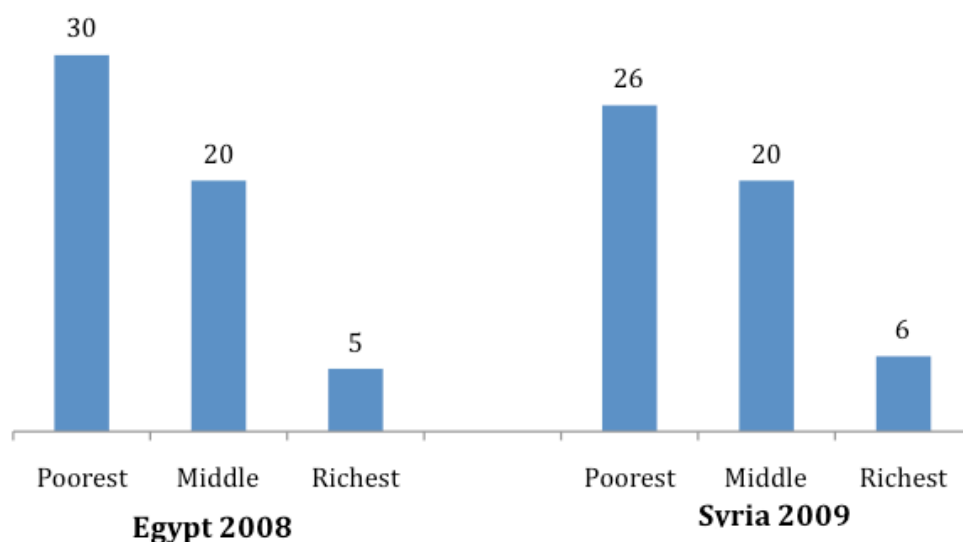
#### MDG 1: Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger

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 their populations are four times more likely to wed before their 18th birthday than those belonging to the richest one-fifth (see Figure 1).

<sup>8</sup>Borzou Daragahi, "Yemeni Bride, 10, Says I Won't," Los Angeles Times, June 11, 2008, accessed at <http://articles.latimes.com/print/2008/jun/11/world/fg-childbride11>, on Jan. 4, 2013; and Nicholas D. Kristof, "Divorced Before Puberty," New York Times, March 4, 2010, accessed at [www.nytimes.com/2010/03/04/opinion/04kristof.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2010/03/04/opinion/04kristof.html?_r=0), on Jan. 4, 2013. "8-year-old Saudi girl divorces 50-year-old husband," USA Today, April 30, 2009, accessed at [http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/news/world/2009-04-30-saudi-arabia\\_N.htm](http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/news/world/2009-04-30-saudi-arabia_N.htm), on May 13, 2013.

<sup>9</sup>UN Iraq, Women in Iraq Factsheet, March 2013.

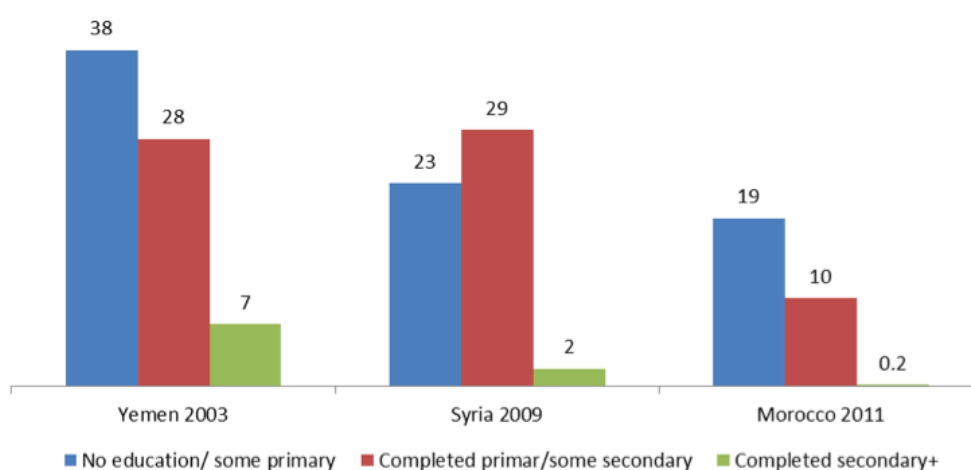
<sup>10</sup>Mawaheb El-Mouelhy, "KABP Base Line Survey, Basic Life Options for Girls: Addressing Early Marriage in Egypt," research conducted in 2012 on behalf of CARE Egypt Country Office.



**Figure 1. Percentage of Women Ages 20 to 24 Who Wed Before Age 18, by Wealth Quintiles**  
**Notes:** 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. Source: Egypt DHS and Syria PAFAM surveys.

### MDG 2: Achieve universal primary education

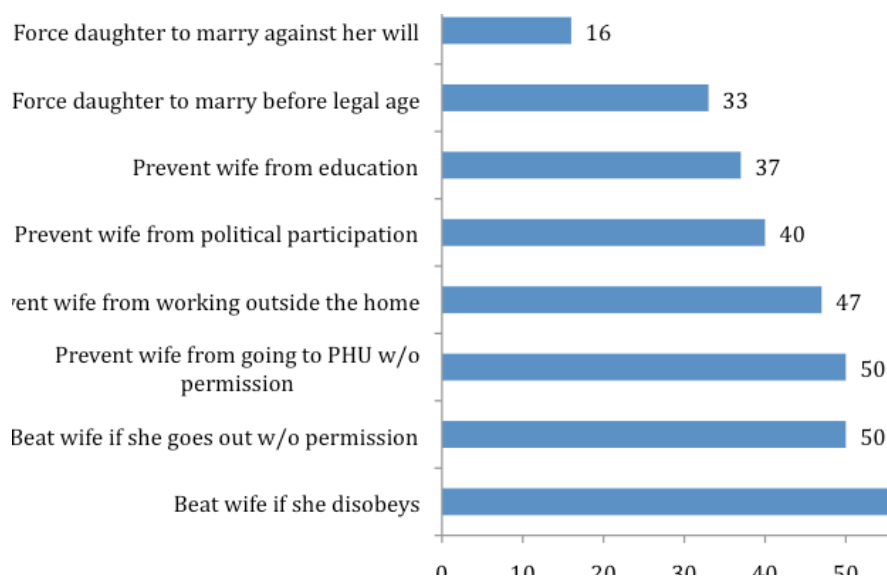
Girls who finish primary school have the chance to continue their education into secondary and higher levels. Supporting girls to stay in school and delay marriage and childbearing translates into greater opportunities for them and their children, allowing them to develop new skills and generate income.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



**Figure 2. Percent of Women Ages 20 to 24 who Wed before Age 18, by Education.** Source: Special tabulation by PAFAM.

### MDG 3: Promote gender equality and empower women

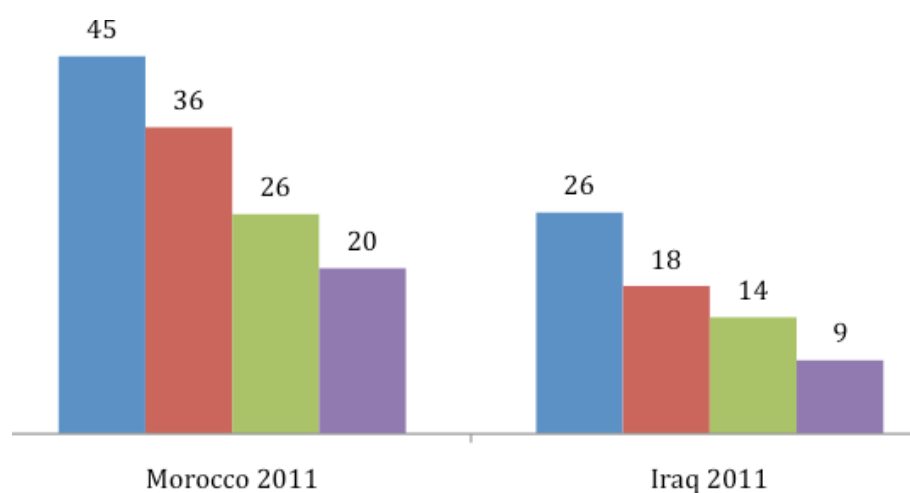
Ending child marriage must be an integral part of efforts to promote gender equality. Ending child marriage helps improve gender equality in the region where women routinely experience discrimination and violence. In Iraq, for example, more than half of the men aged 18 and over believe that a husband has the right to beat his wife if she disobeys (see Figure 3); half believe that a husband has the right to prevent his wife from going to a public health unit; a third believe that a father has the right to force his daughter to marry before legal age; and one in six believes that a father has the right to force his daughter to marry against her will. (11)



**Figure 3. Iraqi Men's Perception of Their Rights . Source: UN Iraq, Women in Iraq Factsheet, March 2013.**

Marriage is often the main reason why girls drop out of school, ending their opportunities for better-paying jobs and decision-making 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.

Child brides have few opportunities 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 4), which adds to the uneven power dynamic between the brides and their husbands—and their husbands' families. 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. (12)



**Figure 4. Percentage of Married Women Ages 15 to 49 Whose Husbands Are at Least 10 Years Older, by Women's Age at Marriage Source: Special tabulations by PAPFAM.**

<sup>11</sup>UN Iraq, Women in Iraq Factsheet, March 2013.

<sup>12</sup>Personal conversation with Dr. Rashida Al-Hamadani, adviser to the Prime Minister of Yemen, Feb. 13, 2013.a

#### **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. (13)

#### **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. (14) 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. (15) And girls under age 15 are five times more likely to die from maternal causes than women in their 20s. (16) 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). (17)

#### **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. (17) 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. (18)

#### **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. (19) 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. (20)

<sup>13</sup>World Health Organization, “Fact Sheet on Adolescent Pregnancy,” accessed at [www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs364/en/index.html](http://www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs364/en/index.html), on Jan. 13, 2013.

<sup>14</sup>World Health Organization, “Fact Sheet on Adolescent Pregnancy.”

<sup>15</sup>Farzaneh Roudi-Fahimi, Ahmed Abdul Monem, Lori Ashford, and Maha El-Adawy, *Women's Need for Family Planning in Arab Countries* (Washington, DC: Population Reference Bureau, 2012).

<sup>16</sup>World Health Organization, “Fact Sheet on Adolescent Pregnancy.”

<sup>17</sup>Rhonda Smith et al., *Family Planning Saves Lives*, Fourth Edition (Washington, DC: Population Reference Bureau, 2009).

### Recommendations: 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. (21) 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 decision making 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. (23)

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: (24)

- 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. Vital registrations systems are weak or dysfunctional in Somalia, Sudan, South Sudan, and Yemen, where rates of child marriage are the highest in the Arab region (see Table 4). (25)

<sup>18</sup>Linda H. Bearinger et al., “Global Perspectives on the Sexual and Reproductive Health of Adolescents: Patterns, Prevention, and Potential,” *Lancet* 369, no. 9568 (2007): 1220-31.

<sup>19</sup>Ruth Marby, Asya Al-Riyami, and Magdi Morsi, “The Prevalence of Reproductive Morbidities in Ever-Married women in Oman and Their Risk Factors,” *Studies in Family Planning* 38, no. 2 (2007).

<sup>20</sup>Peter H. Gleick et al., *The World's Water, Volume 7: the Biannual Report on Freshwater Resources* (Washington, DC: Pacific Institute for Studies in Development, Environment, and Security, 2012).

<sup>21</sup>United Nations Economic and Social Council, “The Millennium Development Goals and Post 2015 Agenda.” Accessed online on May, 10 2013, at <http://www.un.org/en/ecosoc/about/mdg.shtml>.

<sup>22</sup>See Abdullahi An-Naim, *Islamic Family Law in a Changing World* (London: Zed Books, 2002). In Lebanon, there are 15 personal status codes for the 18 recognized ethnic-religious communities, including Christian ones. In Muslim-majority countries, non-Muslim communities are exempt from Islamic law and family matters are governed by religious codes supervised by churches.



**Table 4. Status of Vital Registration Systems in the Arab Region**

Weak or dysfunctional	Functional, but inadequate	Satisfactory
Djibouti, Lebanon, Morocco, Somalia, Sudan, South Sudan, and Yemen	Egypt, Iraq, Libya, Palestine, Saudi Arabia, and Syria	Bahrain, Jordan, Kuwait, Qatar, and UAE

**Source: WHO/HMN, Consolidated Country Rapid Assessment Report of the Civil Registration and Vital Statistics (CRVS) systems in the Eastern Mediterranean Region (Final Draft), prepared by Dr. Salah Badr in collaboration with WHO-EMRO, the Health Metrics Network, and the University of Queensland, Health Information Systems Knowledge Hub. Information paper: January 2013.**

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. (26) 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. (27)

Also, families may bypass the law by arranging a religious marriage ceremony for their underage daughters and then wait 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. 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.
- Changing attitudes toward early marriage through targeted campaigns and use of the mass media, showcasing the benefits of school for girls.

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. 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

<sup>23</sup>Amira Mashhour, "Islamic Law and Gender Equality—Could There Be a Common Ground? A Study of Divorce and Polygamy in Sharia Law and Contemporary Legislation in Tunisia and Egypt," *Human Rights Quarterly* 27, no. 2 (2005): 563-82.

<sup>24</sup>Valentine M. Moghadam and Farzaneh Roudi-Fahimi, *Reforming Family Laws to Promote Progress in the Middle East and North Africa* (Washington, DC: Population Reference Bureau, 2005).

<sup>25</sup>WHO/HMN, *Consolidated Country Rapid Assessment Report of the Civil Registration and Vital Statistics (CRVS) systems in the Eastern Mediterranean Region (Final Draft)*, prepared by Dr. Salah Badr in collaboration with WHO-EMRO, the Health Metrics Network, and the University of Queensland, Health Information Systems Knowledge Hub. Information paper: January 2013.

<sup>26</sup>United Nations, "Minimum Legal Age for Marriage Without Consent," accessed at <http://data.un.org/Data.aspx?q=marriage&d=GenderStat&f=inID:19>, on Jan. 4, 2013.

<sup>27</sup>The Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, Department of Supreme Judge, "The Annual Statistical Report for 2010 and 2011," accessed at [www.sjd.gov.jo/StudiesAndStatistics.aspx](http://www.sjd.gov.jo/StudiesAndStatistics.aspx), on May 6, 2013.

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 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. (28) 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. (29) 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.

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 nongovernment organizations need to take similar steps in collaboration with international and regional organizations to ensure efficient use of scarce resources.

### **Reaching Out to Young Married Women**

While focusing on the goal of ending child marriage, special efforts are also needed to address the needs of young married women. These efforts include:

- Ensuring that young women can continue their education
- Decreasing the pressure on young women to become pregnant through advocacy and education on the dangers of early motherhood
- 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

### **Conclusions and Recommendations**

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. Ending child marriage helps reduce poverty. It would protect girls' rights to education and protection, save the lives of young mothers and their newborns, and improve gender equality and family health and well-being.

Since the forces underlying child marriage are complex and interrelated, ending this practice requires collective efforts from all fronts: social, economic, judicial, religious, and political.

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<sup>28</sup>Susan Lee-Rife, et al., "What Works to Prevent Child Marriage: A Review of the Evidence," *Studies in Family Planning* 43, no. 4 (2012): 287-303.

<sup>29</sup>Rates from Egypt Demographic and Health Surveys in 2000 and 2008 were applied to the UN Population Division's population estimates for Egypt for 2000 and 2010.

Therefore, research should be conducted from all these perspectives, and results should be disseminated to inform policies and programs aimed at ending child marriage. The information should also be shared with the media, which plays a key role in informing the public, breaking taboos, and changing attitudes.

A collective, regional political commitment is needed to make ending child marriage a priority in the region's development agenda. Vital registration systems in the region need to be strengthened, so that every girl living there has a proper birth certificate. Efforts should be made to reform family laws and improve the status of girls and women in family and society. Universal policies and programs should be put in place for girls to attend school all the way through high school and stay out of the marriage market. Judges and law enforcement agencies should be trained to enforce laws that prevent guardians from allowing underage girls to marry. At the same time, special programs should be put in place to meet young married women's reproductive health care needs and improve their life skills, to ensure that they can earn a livelihood, if they need to.

Arab countries' governmental and nongovernmental organizations at all levels need to collaborate to raise community awareness about girls' rights to education and protection and about the harmful consequences of child marriage. Addressing religious concerns and educating religious leaders on girls' rights to education and protection and about the hazards of early marriage should be a major component of such efforts. 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.

The United Nations is celebrating the Twentieth Anniversary of the International Year of the Family in 2014 that provides an opportunity for Arab countries to collectively voice against child marriage. Also, building on the MDGs experience and focusing on inequalities—gender inequalities in particular—the Arab region has the opportunity to contribute to the current international dialogue surrounding development goals for post 2015 and introduce a target for ending child marriage globally.