

New research from the Population Council shows child marriage can be delayed

August 12 2015



Today the Population Council released new evidence on what works to delay the age of marriage for extremely vulnerable girls in sub-Saharan Africa. Researchers also shared rarely available data on the cost of interventions that were tested, and issued recommendations for policymakers, donors, and organizations concerned about child marriage.

Each year, more than 14 million [girls](#) around the world get married before the age of 18. In sub-Saharan Africa, more than 1 in 10 girls are married before the age of 15. Four in ten are married before the age of 18. In some "hotspots," such as the areas in which the Population Council's study was conducted, prevalence of [child marriage](#) is even higher.

When girls are married as children, their educational opportunities and future prosperity are limited, they are more likely to experience [intimate partner violence](#), and they are at greater risk for early and unwanted sexual contact, which can result in HIV and other [sexually transmitted infections](#), as well as [unintended pregnancy](#).

Population Council findings released today are from a USAID-funded project, Building an Evidence Base to Delay Child Marriage, which evaluated the effectiveness of four strategies to delay the age at marriage among girls aged 12 - 17 in parts of Ethiopia, Tanzania, and Burkina Faso with a high prevalence of child marriage.

The four strategies tested are: community conversations (informing communities about the dangers of child marriage using community meetings and the engagement of religious leaders); supporting girls' education with cost-effective efforts, such as providing girls with school supplies or uniforms; providing conditional economic incentives to families for keeping girls unmarried, such as chickens or a goat; and combining all these approaches.

The study found that strategies to delay child marriage that are designed to be simple and sustainable work best. In Ethiopia, it was possible to significantly delay child marriage with the following interventions:

- In communities where girls were offered educational support, girls 12 to 14 were 94% less likely to be married at endline than

were girls in that age range at baseline (adjusted odds ratio 0.06, 95% confidence interval 0.01-0.51).

- In communities where girls were offered two chickens for every year they remained unmarried and in school, girls aged 15-17 were half as likely to be married at endline than were girls in that age range at baseline (adjusted odds ratio 0.50, 95% confidence interval 0.29-0.83).
- In communities that were engaged in conversations about the value of educating girls and the harms of child marriage, girls 12 to 14 were two-thirds less likely to be married at endline than were girls in that age range at baseline (adjusted odds ratio 0.37, 95% confidence interval 0.18-0.76).
- In communities where all the strategies were employed, girls 15 to 17 were two-thirds less likely to be married at endline than were girls in that age range at baseline (adjusted odds ratio 0.32, 95% confidence interval 0.19-0.55).

In Tanzania, in communities where girls were offered goats for remaining unmarried and in school, girls aged 15-17 were two-thirds less likely to be married (adjusted odds ratio 0.36, 95% confidence interval 0.17-0.74) than were girls of the same age who lived in a comparison area where the program was not offered, a statistically significant reduction. The interventions to keep girls 12-14 unmarried and in school did not achieve a statistically significant effect. However, in the case of the full model, which included provision of all three interventions, there is evidence of a positive effect among girls 12-14 (adjusted odds ratio 0.33, 95% confidence interval 0.09-1.19) and among girls 15-17 (adjusted odds ratio 0.52, 95% confidence interval 0.26-1.05).

The Population Council's project in Burkina Faso is ongoing; it launched approximately one year after the Ethiopia and Tanzania studies. Results from Burkina Faso will be released in 2016.

"Our research shows that the best approaches to delay child marriage are those that elevate girls' visibility and status in their families and communities, build their skills and knowledge, and are cost-conscious and economical," said Annabel Erulkar, Population Council senior associate, Ethiopia country director, and lead researcher on this study.

"Child marriage is not an intractable tradition. When families and communities recognize the harms of child marriage, and have economic alternatives, they will delay the age at which their daughters get married."

Erulkar also examined the cost of implementing each of the four strategies that were tested, per girl per year, in each country - data that is seldom gathered for programs seeking to improve the lives of adolescent girls.

In Ethiopia:

- School supplies cost \$17 per girl per year
- Community conversations cost \$30 per girl per year
- Conditional economic incentives, 2 chickens, cost \$32 per girl per year
- The full model, providing all three interventions, cost \$44 per girl per year

In Tanzania:

- Community conversations cost \$11 per girl per year
- School supplies cost \$22 per girl per year
- Conditional economic incentives, one goat, cost \$107 per girl per year
- The full model, providing all three interventions, cost \$117 per girl per year

"Because we rigorously gathered and monitored the cost of these interventions, we know more than ever about the cost - and the affordability - of intervening in girls' lives in ways that will delay the age at which they marry," said Erulkar. "Our data show that these costs are manageable and can be contained. For less than \$20 per girl, we can prevent a child in Ethiopia from getting married before she turns 15."

Erulkar and her colleagues issued four recommendations for policymakers and donors concerned about child marriage:

- Recognize the economic elements of child marriage: marrying girls as children is often a response to poverty, seasonal scarcities, and emergency circumstances - not just a matter of tradition. Providing economic incentives can delay child marriage and keep girls in school.
- Invest in the tough areas: this study was conducted in child marriage "hotspots" where large proportions of girls get married as children. It is possible to succeed, even in difficult situations. It's important to invest where girls are most at risk.
- Tailor programs by age and gender: this study found that what works for younger girls - under 15 - was different from what works for girls over 15. When programs are tailored, they can have an impact.
- Avoid duplicating efforts: virtually all regions with high levels of child marriage are in countries that receive development assistance from countries that have made commitments to end child marriage. To have the greatest possible effect, donors and NGOs should divvy up hotspots to avoid duplicating efforts.

Provided by Population Council

Citation: New research from the Population Council shows child marriage can be delayed (2015,

August 12) retrieved 26 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2015-08-population-council-child-marriage.html>

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