

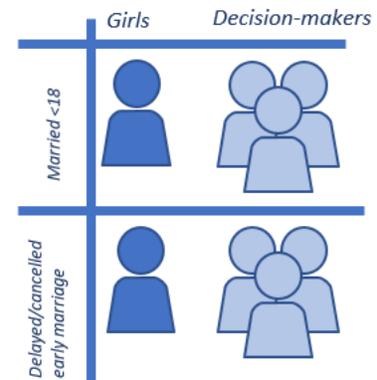
February 2019

# EARLY MARRIAGE DECISION-MAKING: PATHWAYS OF PREVENTION

## BACKGROUND

Between 2018 and 2030, 150 million girls will be married before reaching age 18.(1). Research on early marriage has largely focused on sociodemographic risks (2), rather than girls' potential power in deciding whether or not to marry. This brief summarizes results of a study on how girls and their marital decision-makers initiate, negotiate and finalized decisions on early marriage.

Qualitative data from semi-structured, in-depth interviews in Oromia, Ethiopia and Jharkhand, India was used to explore the process of early marriage decision-making. Interviews were conducted with girls and women between 13-23 years of age who participated in early marriage prevention programs, and either married before reaching age 18, or cancelled/postponed proposed early marriages (n=91). Up to three key marital decision-makers per girl/woman were also interviewed (n=114). Responses were analyzed using latent content analysis.



Structure of interviewee samples in Oromia, Ethiopia and Jharkhand, India (n=205 total).

## FINDINGS

Early marriage was described as a process by most participants, with diverse influencers affecting initiation, negotiation and final decision-making. In the initiation phase, marriage discussions were generally begun by elders or non-nuclear family members, and girls were often not involved. This phase was deeply rooted in cultural traditions, and influenced by the desire to find a “good match” as well as fear of the consequences of not marrying. Social resources and supports, such as parents in favor of delaying marriage, were the primary mechanisms of resistance to early marriage.

### Initiation

*“Lot of proposals use to come but I was never informed about them. Nobody discussed them with me. I would hear my grandfather arguing with my father. My grandfather often use to convince my father to accept proposals but my father wanted me to study and said he will not let me marry before I am 18.”*

–Girl whose early marriage was delayed/cancelled, age 23, India

*“According to the culture of this society, the boy’s family take chat [a mild stimulant] to the girl’s family and ask for their daughter for marriage. Then, those elders have respect and they cannot say no. So, the girl is given by her parents.”*

–Male decision-maker for girl whose early marriage was delayed/cancelled (relationship: local administrator), age 26, Ethiopia

### Negotiation

*“When I went to meet them, they were very rude to me. The brother was taunting. And the mother did not listen to me. She asked me that if her daughter remains unmarried all her life, will [I] take her responsibility. I went to their home at least 5-6 times and slowly they started listening to me. Then I spent one day with her mother... She thought about the proposal and then cancelled it.”*

–Female decision maker for girl whose early marriage was delayed/cancelled (relationship: program educator), age 35, India

*“When she discussed with her aunt, she finally refused the marriage and when they asked her why, she replied, first I don’t marry a person I don’t know. Second, I don’t marry at 14. When she wasn’t able to convince her, we went together ... Her uncle told me that if he was refusing the marriage he was going to be neglected from the society, so he said that it was better if I spoke. So, I convinced them this way. It has many challenges.”*

–Female decision-maker for girl whose early marriage was delayed/cancelled (relationship: teacher/early marriage prevention program staff), age 28, Ethiopia

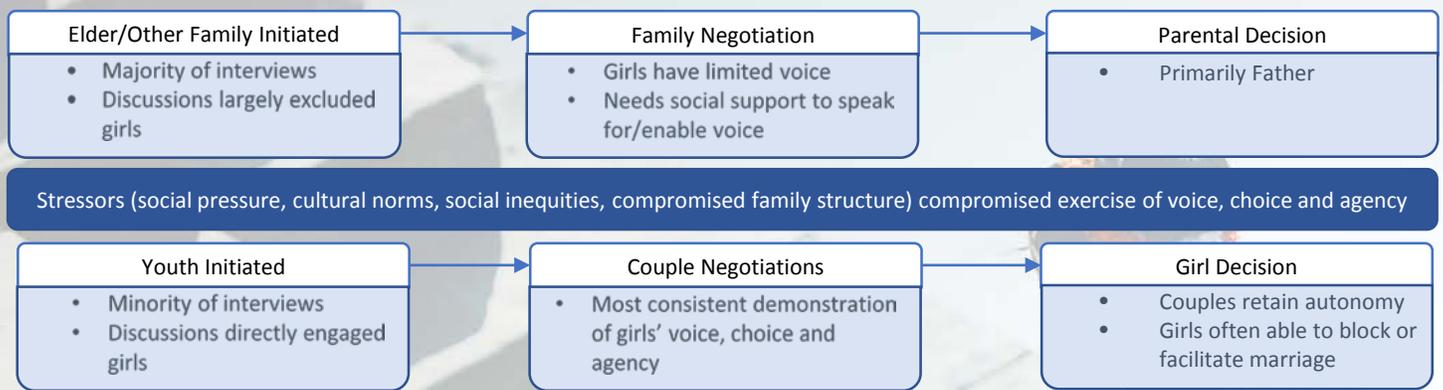
### Final Decision-Making

*“The boy’s family send elders to my family to request the marriage. So, my family heard about my marriage first. I only heard only the wedding day held. My husband was also did not know about our marriage at first. So, both of us are forced to engage in marriage because of the push from our parents.”*

–Girl married as a minor, age 18, Ethiopia

*“We got the proposal when she was 17 years old. We had a fear that she will run away with someone or will opt for intercaste marriage... We were afraid that she might land up as her aunts who never got married. We liked the boy, he was from a good family. He also did not take alcohol... I made the final decision on her marriage.”*

–Male decision maker for girl married as a minor (relationship: father), age 40, India



The negotiation phase was most porous to external influences, and had the greatest variety of actors involved. Respondents noted that having an advocate outside of traditional family or cultural circles helped both provide information and deter adverse social repercussions. These external influencers, such as early marriage prevention program staff and teachers, helped girls voice their resistance to early marriage. Program staff had a unique advantage in this role based on their knowledge and position, though their role was not easy and their influence was not universal.

Final decision-makers were mostly parents, particularly fathers. When mothers were the final decision-maker, they often still needed to convince the fathers to agree with their position. Girls largely acquiesced to their parent's decision, even when it was not their preference. The most common justifications for early marriage were finding a "good match" and fear of limited future marital prospects. Along the traditional pathways of early marriage decision-making, there was little to no opportunity for girls to exercise choice, voice or agency.

In a minority of cases, early marriage proposals and decision-making were initiated at, negotiated within, and decided by the young couple. Girls generally maintained their voice and agency in youth-initiated proposals, exhibiting self-efficacy to

move forward despite potential disapproval from parents, and notwithstanding the adverse health and well-being implications of early marriage. Couple-led early marriage processes tended to be more influenced by peer pressure and less influenced by parents.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PROGRAMMING

1. Supporting the choice, voice and agency of girls is critical to curtail child marriage, but must be paired with program approaches to strengthen social support of decision influencers at critical points of the pathway.
2. Decision-making pathways are diverse. Interventions targeting only one pathway are likely to leave out some girls. Programs should target different influencers depending on the pathways involved.
3. Engaging advocates such as program staff and teachers to provide education on consequences of early marriage can help offset the social repercussions of breaking norms, especially in the negotiation stage.
4. Programs addressing youth-led marriages may require earlier education on early marriage as well as viable alternatives such as education or vocation channels. Programs should address peer groups as well, given that peer influence is a greater factor in this pathway.
5. Parents were consistently involved in early marriage decision-making, and did not always agree on desired outcomes. Programs involving *both* parents may better support delay/cancellation of planned marriages.

## REFERENCES

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This brief summarizes findings from the following research article: McDougal L, Jackson EC, McClendon KA, Belayneh Y, Sinha A, Raj A. Beyond the statistic: exploring the process of early marriage decision-making using qualitative findings from Ethiopia and India. *BMC Women's Health* (2018) 18:144. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12905-018-0631-z>  
Funding was provided by the David and Lucile Packard Foundation.

*Recommended Citation:* McDougal L., Lapsansky, C., Yore, J., Raj A. Early marriage decision-making: Pathways of Prevention. Center on Gender Equity and Health, University of California, San Diego. February 2019.

## FUNDING

This analysis was supported by UNICEF (PCA number 20160656) and the David and Lucile Packard Foundation (Grant number 2017-66705).

## FOR MORE INFORMATION

If you would like more information about this study, or to collaborate with us on its success, please contact the Principal Investigator of this research at UC San Diego.

FOR MORE INFORMATION VISIT [GEH.UCSD.EDU](http://GEH.UCSD.EDU)

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