



FROM AGE TO AGENCY:

Our approach to ending early and child marriage

INTRODUCTION: WHY FOCUS ON EARLY AND CHILD MARRIAGE?

Each year, roughly 15 million girls around the world get married before they reach adulthood, often without their consent. Although the effects vary across cultures, child marriage typically deprives girls of the freedom to make informed and independent choices about their lives and bodies. These girls frequently experience a range of human rights violations, including poor health, limits on their education and lack of economic opportunities.

Gender inequality is one of the main root causes of early and child marriage. In India—where an estimated 47 percent of girls marry before age 18—many parents believe early marriage is the key to securing their daughters' futures and ensuring they have husbands to support them financially. In addition, conservative communities view girls as symbols of family honor, and parents often try to maintain that honor by arranging early marriages. Some of these parents are motivated by a desire to keep their daughters from having consensual sex outside of marriage. Others fear that their daughters may face sexual violence, and they believe marriage will reduce that risk.

In short, early and child marriage is a complex phenomenon that's closely tied to people's beliefs about gender roles and sexuality—and the behavior that results from those beliefs. That's why early marriage has persisted in India, despite local laws against it.

OUR APPROACH: THE FOUR A'S

American Jewish World Service (AJWS) believes the root causes of early and child marriage can be most effectively addressed through a comprehensive “Four A's” approach:

ASPIRATIONS: Change cultural beliefs about gender roles and encourage women and girls to consider futures that previously seemed out of reach.

AGENCY: Help girls and young women develop the ability to choose and to act independently so they can take action to advance their own goals.

AVAILABILITY: Increase the availability of institutions, policies and services that enhance the ability of girls and young women to pursue jobs and education and realize their sexual health and rights.

ACCESS: Ensure girls and young women can access resources and services and work to overcome resistance from their families and communities.

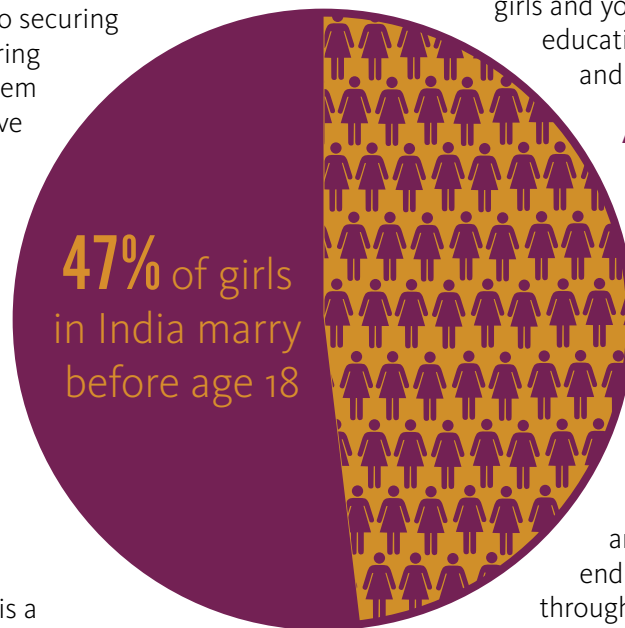
Together, these four principles can give adolescent girls the power to transform their lives—and the freedom to choose if, when and whom to marry. AJWS works to advance the Four A's and empower women and girls to end early and child marriage in India through a unique strategy:

- *Locally-led programs* in India to support women and girls to speak up for their rights and reach for new opportunities
- *Research* in India to identify promising solutions and help programs measure progress in meaningful ways
- *Advocacy* that draws upon insights from India to influence the policies of organizations and agencies across the globe

This initiative emerged from AJWS's more than 15 years of experience providing financial and technical support to Indian activists and organizations who are fighting for equality and justice.

LOCALLY-LED PROGRAMS

AJWS provides grants to Indian organizations that work directly with girls and young women, educating them about their rights and organizing activities designed to



'EARLY' OR 'CHILD' MARRIAGE?

Child marriage takes place whenever a boy or girl marries before reaching age 18, but most of these marriages involve older adolescents. In addition, many young people over the age of 18 face intense pressure to marry earlier than they want to. To reflect this reality, this document primarily uses the term “early and child marriage.”

build their confidence, from self-defense to photography. Our grantees then support them to speak up for their rights and to take a stand together to confront injustice in their communities. Some projects also offer formal education or vocational training to prepare girls for jobs—expanding girls’ options and often relieving pressure from their families to marry early.

Many of these organizations also work with community leaders—who help shape the opportunities available to young women—and with young men and boys, who also face considerable pressure to marry young. By facilitating conversations about rights, desires and healthy relationships, these groups encourage men to think critically about gender norms and to foster equality at home and in society.

AJWS also provides funding to leading organizations in India’s national movement for women’s rights. These experts provide training and support—on critical topics like comprehensive sexuality education—to AJWS’s grassroots grantees, strengthening their ability to contribute to a growing movement for gender equality across India.



PHOTO: Khushi Prajapati posed in her cab in Delhi. She learned to drive via the “Women on Wheels” project. Khushi had previously worked as a maid and didn’t receive enough pay or respect from her employers. As a professional driver, Khushi has achieved a level of confidence and financial independence that’s rare for women in her community.
Photograph by Jonathan Torgovnik

SINCE 2014, AJWS HAS...

- Provided more than **\$5 million** in grants to **52** Indian organizations working to end early and child marriage by confronting its root causes.
- Initiated and funded **24** cutting-edge research projects by partners in India.

GRANTEE SNAPSHOTS

■ In Mumbai, **Awaaz-e-Niswaan** brings together Muslim women and girls to learn how to advocate for themselves. Awaaz’s classes in computer and English skills give teenage girls with strict parents a socially accepted reason to leave their homes, so they can gain useful skills and receive emotional support from their friends. The girls also take collective action to speak up for their rights. For example: In Mumbra, a conservative community on the outskirts of Mumbai, many people view bike riding as inappropriate for women. In 2015, nearly 100 women and girls rode through the busy streets of Mumbra in a bike rally for gender equality organized by Awaaz.

■ In Delhi, **Azad Foundation’s** “Women on Wheels” project trains low-income young women to become taxi drivers. This innovative approach helps young women secure well-paying jobs in a male-dominated industry—vastly expanding their life choices and shifting the community’s beliefs about what women can and cannot do. One driver, Khushi Prajapati, told AJWS that she faced the likely prospect of an unwanted, early marriage—and a lifetime of poverty—until “Women on Wheels” helped her steer her life in a new direction. “I have so much freedom,” Khushi said. “Right now, I absolutely don’t want to marry. I want to be successful at this profession.”

■ In rural Maharashtra, **Mahila Sarvangeen Utkarsh Mandal (MASUM)** works with young men and women among the Dalit (“untouchable” caste). MASUM teaches young people about their rights and how to advocate for increased choices and opportunities for themselves and others. Notably, MASUM offers sexual health education, which is rarely provided to youth in India—even though it’s crucial for making decisions about their own lives and bodies.

RESEARCH

AJWS supports innovative feminist research conducted by partners in India who explore the complex phenomenon of early and child marriage, examine the most challenging barriers to improving girls’ lives, and identify promising, evidence-based policies and interventions to address those barriers.

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We then apply these lessons to our grantmaking in India and to our global advocacy. We also share the findings with other partners, so they can put this valuable knowledge to use.

Here are just a few examples of research studies currently in progress:

- Adolescent and young brides, marriage and violence: a qualitative study from Rajasthan. *Vikalp*.
- Exploring mental health among young women in Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh, including the impact of early marriage. *Sama Resource Group for Women and Health*.
- Mapping outcomes related to addressing root causes of early and child marriage. *Tata Institute of Social Sciences*.
- Implications of laws on sexuality and early marriage in India on the lives of young people. *Partners for Law in Development*.

ADVOCACY

AJWS shares the findings of our grantees' research from India with global funders and experts, so these powerful insights can influence efforts to support the rights of adolescent girls around the world. AJWS policy experts advocate for strategic shifts in how programs for adolescent girls get developed, implemented and measured—not just in India, but everywhere that early and child marriage persists.

For example, an AJWS-funded study by gender and education experts at Nirantar Trust suggested that to end early and child marriage, the global development field must focus not only on raising the age at which girls marry, but on strengthening girls' agency over their lives. Since then, AJWS has shared this perspective and encouraged other global initiatives to shift their focus from age to agency.

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PHOTO: Shital Waikar taught a sexual health session for MASUM in rural Maharashtra, encouraging participants to ask questions. By increasing young people's knowledge of sexuality, MASUM prepares them to make healthy decisions for themselves, whether they choose to marry or not. *Photograph by Jonathan Torgovnik*

COVER PHOTO: Nearly 100 women and girls rode through the busy streets of a conservative neighborhood in Mumbai. They were participating in a bike rally for gender equality organized by Awaaz-e-Niswaan. *Photograph by Jonathan Torgovnik*

LEARN MORE Looking for more information about AJWS's work to support the rights of girls and women and end early and child marriage? Find videos, photos, policy briefs, research and more at ajws.org/childmarriage.

ABOUT US AMERICAN JEWISH WORLD SERVICE (AJWS) is the world's leading Jewish organization working to end poverty and realize human rights in the developing world. We work to advance the health and rights of women, girls and LGBT people; promote civil and political rights; defend access to food, land, water and work; and aid communities in the aftermath of disasters.

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