

Achieving MDG 1 in the Arab Region: Gender Equality and Role of the Families

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Expert Group Meeting on

“Protecting the Arab family from poverty:
Employment, social integration, and intergenerational solidarity”

Doha, 2-3 June 2013

The Arab region has made significant strides over the past few decades in improving the health, education, and standard of living of its people.¹ The gains have been uneven, however, among countries and 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 for the people of South Sudan and Sudan. A key strategy to reduce poverty and improve people’s lives 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.² The highest rates of child marriage are seen in the poorest Arab countries. Egypt—the most populated Arab country—is home to the largest number of child brides in the region.

Child marriage and poverty are linked. Families who marry off their daughters at a young age, in some cases even younger than 15, think it is in the girls’ best interest, not realizing that they are violating their daughters’ human rights and condemning them to a life of dimmed opportunities and profound health hazards. 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 and have more children than girls who wait longer to marry.³ Child marriage thus perpetuates a vicious cycle of poverty, low education, high fertility, and poor health, which hinders families’ wellbeing and societies’ economic and social development.

Addressing poverty was the main goal of the United Nations Millennium Summit held in New York in 2000, where world leaders, including those from Arab countries, adopted the Millennium Declaration and made a commitment to combat poverty, hunger, disease, illiteracy, environmental degradation, and discrimination against women. The declaration resulted in the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), which created a practical vision for addressing the complex issue of poverty holistically and gave the international development community the tools to monitor countries’ progress. The MDGs consist of eight goals along with targets to be achieved by 2015. The essence of the MDGs, with Goal 1 being to “eradicate extreme poverty and hunger,” is that the goals are interrelated and progress toward one reinforces progress toward the others. Achieving universal primary education (Goal 2), promoting gender equality and empowering women (Goal 3), reducing child mortality (Goal 4), improving maternal health (Goal 5), combating HIV/AIDS, malaria, and other diseases (Goal 6), ensuring environmental sustainability (Goal 7), and developing a global partnership for development (Goal 8) are all needed for combating poverty.

Ending child marriage can have a powerful impact because it contributes directly to progress toward each and every one of the MDGs by improving families' health and wellbeing.

Family is the center of life in Arab societies, held in great esteem among young and old alike. Families are the main social security system for the elderly, sick, or disabled, and an economic refuge for financially dependent relatives and the unemployed. In Arab culture, parents are responsible for their children well into their adult lives, and children reciprocate by caring for their aging parents. Arabs take on these responsibilities with great pride. At the center of Arab family values stands the institution of marriage—an essential right of passage for a man and a woman to form a family of their own. The health and well-being of these individuals and their newly formed families are better guaranteed when the bride has at least finished secondary school, when she is more mature physically, emotionally, and mentally prepared to take on family responsibilities as a wife and mother. Children of more educated mothers are more likely to be healthy and educated, thereby becoming productive and contributing to their countries' economic growth. Keeping girls in school is the best defense against child marriage, preventing newlyweds from forming their families on the wrong footing and perpetuating a generational cycle of poverty.

Today, 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 October 11, 2012, with the theme of ending child marriage.⁴ Child marriage will remain central to development discussions as the international community prepares to celebrate the International Year of Family in 2014 and the 20th anniversary of the 1994 United Nations International Population and Development. More important, the international development community is gearing up to prepare an agenda for the post-MDGs—a tremendous opportunity to make the elimination of child marriage a part of international, regional, and national development targets.

This paper presents the latest data on child marriage in the Arab region and explains how ending child marriage would accelerate progress toward meeting the MDGs. It outlines the international agreements condemning child marriage and emphasizes the importance of political commitment and action on many fronts, 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 end child marriage. Finally, it highlights successful programs preventing child marriage and proposes concrete actions to be taken by the Arab region to end the practice.

¹ The "Arab region" includes members of the League of Arab States, stretching from Morocco in the west to Oman in the east.

² United Nations Population Fund, [Marrying Too Young, End Child Marriage](#) (New York: UNFPA, 2012). Child marriage is defined as marriage in which the bride or groom is under age 18.

³ Ibrahim F. Kharboush, et al., *Spousal Violence in Egypt* (Washington, DC: Population Reference Bureau, 2010).

⁴ Ending Child Marriage on the International Day of Girl Child. Press release. UNICEF, 2012.