



Dear Faith Leader,

Thank you for picking up this toolkit. It takes a lot of courage to begin open, honest conversations about harmful practices that are deeply entrenched in a community's culture and tradition. We commend you for taking this first step to eradicating child or early marriage (shortened to EM throughout this toolkit) and promote the health and well-being of girls and women in your community.

No matter what your stance has been in the past, you can make a big difference in helping your congregation and community think more deeply about these practices. Whether you have never spoken to your community about EM, or whether you have been speaking out against this practice for a long time, we offer you ways of starting or re-energizing the conversations around such issues. Your congregation looks to you for guidance and support; this means that you are uniquely positioned to make real and lasting change in the lives of girls today, and for generations to come.

We understand that the traditions surrounding EM are complex, and it will likely be a difficult topic to discuss. This toolkit is designed to educate and make it easier for you to talk about this harmful practice. In it, you will find resources that will arm you with medical facts and theological references that speak out against EM, and ways to answer the tough questions you may face along the way.

We have worked with local and international partners and with faith leaders from diverse faith backgrounds across Africa to develop this toolkit. We recognize that eradicating EM is a vital step to promote the health and well-being of girls and women, which will greatly improve the health and success of communities and nations as a whole.

We urge you to read this toolkit, and understand the value of comprehensive knowledge about the realities of EM. Please feel free to share this approach with peers of your own faith or across faiths in your community. Our hope is that, by equipping you with information and useful tools, you can become a part of the movement to change the knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors of communities – and the lives of girls who need your support the most.

Thank you for joining us in our mission to empower girls by eliminating EM.

National Faith Leader	Ministry of Health Official	Secretary General
Title	Title	National Inter-Religious Council
Denomination	Ministry of Health	Country
Country	Country	



### EARLY MARRIAGE (EM)

#### Addressing Harmful Traditional Practices in Your Community: A Faith Leader Toolkit

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#### **Begin the Conversation:**

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##### **Module 3**

Faith leaders touch the lives of their communities in many ways: at weekly prayers, during major life events, during individual counseling, or out in the community. Each of these interactions can be a *teachable moment* – an opportunity to discuss health and well-being with your community and share important messages that revolve around one common theme: “Honor the Institution of Marriage.” Here are 5 key conversations that all faith leaders – regardless of faith – can have with their community:

##### **Eliminating Early Marriage: “Honor the Institution of Marriage”**

- **Conversation 1:** What are the religious requirements of marriage in the context of our faith? Does that include marrying a child?
- **Conversation 2:** Is marriage a gift from God/Allah? Are we treating it as such when we marry children?

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### Engage Women:

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#### Module 4

This interactive workshop provides an opportunity for women to learn about the negative effects of early marriage (below the full legal age of 18) as well as the benefits of waiting until one is physically, mentally, financially, emotionally, and spiritually prepared to marry. Furthermore, this module can also serve as an inspiration for future workshops and open discussions.

### Engage Youth:

#### Girls, Boys, &/or Mixed groups

#### – Honor the Institution of Marriage

#### Module 5

This interactive workshop is tailored specifically for youth groups within your faith institution – whether girls alone, boys, or mixed groups– providing them with thoughtful opportunities to understand EM and its consequences. How to engage different subgroups of youth will depend on local circumstances, but the key messages remain constant.

### Activity Kit:

#### Everything You Need to Engage Your Community

The activity kit contains an early marriage flipchart activity and lesson instructions to be used as part of modules 4 and 5.



### Get Started: How to Use This Toolkit

Picking up this toolkit for the first time? We suggest you start here.

#### Let's Get Started: What's the Big Idea?

The goal of this toolkit is to help you to protect the health and wellness of your community by eliminating EM, and improving the health and well-being of your community's women and girls. Specifically, we want to make sure that you know about the risks of EM and how to engage your community in a conversation on this harmful traditional practice.

#### How Can I Use This Toolkit?

We know there's a lot that it's in here, but don't worry, you don't have to do it all. Every faith leader is different, and every community is different. You should pick and choose the pieces that work best for you.

Some faith leaders may have been involved in EM work for a long time, whereas many may have only heard about the negative effects of EM recently. Not to worry, we've got something for everyone. Here's how you can get started...



### There is Something for Everyone...

**1**

**About you**

If you had never heard about the negative effects of EM before...

①

If you know about EM practices but have never spoken to your community about it...

①

If you're an expert on the topic and have already begun having conversations with your community...

①

**2**

**Where to start**

Read Over Module 2: "Teach Yourself," and really familiarize yourself with the facts on EM.

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Familiarize yourself with the basics on EM in Module 2: "Teach Yourself," and then begin with Module 3: "Begin the Conversation."

①

Familiarize yourself with EM in Module 2: "Teach Yourself." Review the curricula for Module 4: "Engage Women" and Module 5: "Engage Youth," and select one lesson that you can begin to implement.

①

**3**

**Next steps...**

Review and familiarize yourself with the conversation starters in Module 3: "Begin the Conversation." Pick two of the conversations to have with your community, and find a time you can have them!

Familiarize yourself with EM in Module 2: "Teach Yourself." Review the curricula for Module 4: "Engage Women" and Module 5: "Engage Youth," and select one lesson that you can begin to implement.

Implement the remaining curricula from Modules 4: "Engage Women" and Module 5: "Engage Youth." Review the Conversations in Module 3: "Begin the Conversation"; use these conversation starters to help inspire you to create some conversation starters of your own!

### Some Common Questions You Might Be Thinking About...

#### What if I don't feel comfortable talking about early marriage (EM)?

Marriage practices in your community, including the prevalence of child or early marriage (shortened to EM in this toolkit), can definitely be a difficult topic to discuss. It involves the sensitive issues of sex and sexuality and gender relations in your community. However, conversations don't have to just focus **just on** these challenging topics. This toolkit is about equipping communities to live full, healthy, and happy lives, by improving the lives of girls and women. That's what the conversation is really about.

One important thing to know is that many in your community may support and/or hold strong beliefs about EM. However, often times the sources of information are either unreliable or not based on fact. Their beliefs may reflect incorrect information about the role of marriage in your faith, and they may not fully understand EM's harm to women and girls. That's one reason why it's so important that *you* be an active part of the conversation. If you don't, then you are allowing the conversation to occur without the guidance and wisdom that you can offer.

#### OK, but do I have to talk about sex?

You don't have to talk about any particular topic any more than you are comfortable. However, one thing that we have learned is that communities that speak openly and honestly about all the issues related to EM are best able to protect themselves against unwarranted harm. And yes, sometimes that means dealing with issues of sex and sexuality. However, you don't have to do it by yourself: there are lots of good resources in this toolkit that will help you address these issues in a way that is sensitive to the concerns of faith communities.

#### What if I don't know a lot about the effects of EM?

Don't worry! This toolkit isn't about giving you *all* the answers; it's about giving you the tools to help reduce the risk of injury, disease, and death through the harmful practice of EM on your community's women and girls.

**Not worried about these questions? Ready to get started? Skip this section and start working with the rest of the toolkit!**

**There are definitely some important things that you should know before you begin this process, such as the specific harmful effects of EM. But rest easy! All that you need to know to get started is in Module 2: "Teach Yourself."**

More important than having all the answers is raising important questions in a supportive and caring environment – and as a faith leader, that’s one of the things that you do best.

### **What if someone in my community asks me a question that I don’t know the answer to?**

There’s no way to be prepared for every question that someone might ask. If someone asks a question that you don’t know the answer to, don’t feel like you have to make up an answer. Just tell them that that’s a great question, that you aren’t sure of the answer right now, and that you want to make sure that they get an accurate answer so you are going to get back to them about it. Then, you can consult any of the resources that are available to you.

### **I’m busy. How will I find the time to talk about EM?**

There’s some good news here: you don’t have to do it all yourself! In fact, it’s great if members of your congregation or community take on leadership roles. This creates greater community involvement, and also means makes your job much more manageable. For instance, if you already have a woman’s group, the leader of that group might actually be the best person in your community to lead Module 4: “Engage Women.” Similarly, if someone in your community is particularly good at working with youth, they could lead Module 5: “Engage Youth.”

The other piece of good news is that talking about EM doesn’t have to be a distraction from your regular responsibilities as a faith leader. What we have found is that faith leaders who advocate for the elimination of EM find it to be an extension of their core role – ministering and supporting the needs of their communities. Supporting the health and wellness of women and girls does not need to be a distraction – it’s an important way that you can support the spiritual and physical needs of your community.





## Teach Yourself: Facts about Early Marriage

**Key facts & information to help you inform your community about EM.**

### Introduction

A community's traditional marriage practices, especially early marriage (EM), can be a very difficult topic to talk about – generations of misinformation and secrecy have led many communities to believe that early marriage, before the full legal age of 18, is good for girls, better than keeping them in school, and is demanded by tradition or religion. However, you can equip yourself with knowledge and facts about the devastating effects this harmful practice has on girls and on communities as a whole. Once you have the knowledge, you can begin to speak to your community and spiritual children about these issues with authority.

The following information sheets provide the key medical facts about EM's effects on girls and young women – they also provide answers to some Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ's) that may arise about marriage practices, and their place in your community. These information sheets have many uses in your conversations with your community about EM – it is up to you.

Here are some of the ways you can use these information sheets, and their accompanying FAQ's.

- They are a quick way to brush up on your knowledge about EM.
- They can be used as a quick reference for you when answering tough questions from your community about EM.
- They can be given to your fellow faith and community leaders as a factual resource on the practices of EM.
- They can be given to literate members of your congregation as educational resources on EM, to help them make healthy choices about marriage for their families, and empower their daughters to live fuller, healthier lives.

### Instructions

Read the following information sheets and absorb all the information on them. Begin with the key facts. Once you feel you understand the key facts about both EM, move on to the Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ's). Some of these FAQ's seek to address cultural and historical ideas, rather than medical facts – therefore, when you read these FAQ's, ask yourself if you agree with the answers. If you have questions that these information sheets cannot answer, take this as an opportunity to seek out further information from a trusted source about EM. If you agree with the answers to each FAQ, think of some other questions that members of your community may ask in a conversation about EM, and how you might answer them. The possibilities are endless!



## Key Facts about EM, A Basic Information Sheet

- 1) Early marriage (EM), or marriage under 18 years old, is illegal in Nigeria.
- 2) Our government officially opposes all forms of gender violence and human rights abuses, including early marriage (EM).
- 3) Girls who are married under the age of 18 are often forced to drop out of school, discontinuing their education and seriously limiting their future.
- 4) Children and youth under 18, especially those who have left school, are often not ready to shoulder the responsibilities of a house and family.
- 5) Girls who are married under the age of 18 can develop fistula and other problems that lead to infertility, due to early, forced sexual relations and premature childbirth.
- 6) Girls who are married under the age of 18, and subsequently become very young mothers, are at a much higher risk of maternal death, and their babies are more likely to die as well.

## Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) about Early Marriage (EM): A Christian Perspective

Below you will find both Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) and their answers, relative to Christian perspectives on early marriage (EM) and its negative impact on health and well-being, as well as Biblical references.

### **Q: What is the Church's view on early marriage (EM)?**

It may seem as though the Church condones and even supports EM. However, most faith leaders who condone EM do so because they do not want to incur social stigma by violating the local tradition. The truth is that the Church officially opposes EM. There are several places in the Bible that speak out against EM.

"There is time for everything...a time to love...He has made everything beautiful in its time." (Ecclesiastes 3:1). God wants us to wait until we are adequately prepared for marriage; the child bride is not prepared physically, mentally, emotionally, or financially for marriage.

"Who can find a virtuous woman? For her price is far above rubies. The heart of her husband doth safely trust on her..." (Proverbs 31: 10-33) For the 21<sup>st</sup> century Nigerian, the contextual meaning of Proverbs 31 is a mature woman, one who is well-educated, fit enough to undertake family responsibilities comfortably, and knows how to give love and get satisfaction from her husband. These criteria definitely imply that the ideal, "virtuous woman" is not a child bride, but instead a woman who is at least 18, who has finished school, and has attained the physical, emotional, mental, and financial maturity required for a healthy marriage.

### **Q: If EM is illegal, then why have our communities practiced it for so long without punishment?**

Generations of practice can often make tradition seem like truth. EM has continued for so long because people fear the social stigma that has come with remaining unmarried for "too long," at whatever age the community says that is. These traditions and their attached social stigmas are very strong. Many law enforcement officials fear social stigma themselves, and are therefore reluctant to fully punish offenders. Additionally, a lack of money, organization, and resources on the legal level makes it very hard to enforce laws against EM. Despite these obstacles, EM is nevertheless still outlawed in Nigeria, and as 1 Peter 2:13-16, says, "submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every human authority, whether to the emperor, as the supreme authority, or to governors, who are sent...to punish those who do wrong and to commend those who do right. For it is God's will that by doing good you should silence the ignorant talk of foolish people. Live as free people, but do not use your freedom as a cover-up for evil." Anti-EM laws agree perfectly with God's will and word in the Bible – therefore, as Christians, we should obey all of these laws.

### Q: How else can I keep my daughter a virgin until marriage?

Practically speaking, for generations, it seems as though early marriage was the best way to guarantee virtue and virginity in a bride. However, early marriage is a cheap and unfair way to accomplish this – the ends do not justify the means. Marrying a girl off before she really knows what sex is – which is often the case in EM – will only have harmful effects, such as fear and resentment between her and her husband, and a dysfunctional home in which to raise children. Terminating a girl's schooling to marry her off before she is 18, as well, will have negative effects on her future, and the future of her children. Studies have shown that well-educated, well-adjusted, successful children come from homes where the mother has finished school. Teaching our children how to resist temptation, exercise self-control, and wait for the right spouse is the most spiritually healthy way to ensure virginity – and build up communities.



Early marriage places the unfair burdens of terminated schooling, a forced sexual life with an adult husband, and the feeding of a family on a young girl who is not ready to handle such adult responsibilities.

## Scriptural and Theological Guides Related to Early Marriage (EM): A Guide for Christian Faith Leaders

**A scriptural guide for Christian faith leaders who seek to eradicate early marriage (EM) of girls under the age of 18.**

**Below are key messages developed by Christian faith leaders, along with scriptural and other references that support that message in relation to promoting healthy marriage practices, and making sure parents understand the importance of waiting until their children are 18.**

### 1) Before entering into marriage, one must understand the requirements of marriage

- Successful marriages demand physical, mental, emotional, spiritual, and financial maturity. The four main purposes of marriage are:
  - To secure an equal, loving partner for life.
  - To experience mutual joy and sexual satisfaction.
  - To safely bear children and create a healthy family.
  - To help us avoid sexual temptation, through fidelity to our spouses.
- “And the Lord God said, ‘It is not good that man should be alone. I will make a helper comparable to him.’” (Genesis 2:18) God united Adam and Eve, so that their lives might be more productive and blissful. Notice that God created Eve “comparable” to Adam – different in build and abilities, but an equal, respected life partner.
- In order for two spouses to be “comparable partners,” both must be physically, mentally, emotionally, spiritually, and financially prepared for marriage. This means that both husband and wife must be physically able to fully enjoy marital relations in order bear healthy children, able to handle household duties, raise children with love and attention, be able to love another person selflessly as God wants us, and have adequate income and means of supporting a family. An underage girl is not yet prepared in any of these ways for marriage, and is therefore not the comparable partner required for a God-pleasing marriage.

**2) Marriage is a gift from God, and should be treated as such.**

- Marriage is a precious, divine gift that demands knowledge and maturity so that we can make the most out of it. Before marriage, we must be mature enough (physically, mentally, emotionally, spiritually, and financially) to know its blessings, challenges, and realities; this includes the willingness to love and sacrifice one's own well-being for one's husband or wife.
- As mentioned in Genesis 2:18, God created Eve so that she and Adam each might have a "comparable" partner in life. An adult husband and a child bride cannot have this kind of relationship, and therefore cannot treat marriage as a gift from God in their daily lives.
- "Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church." (Ephesians 5:25) Christ loved the church, mainly for the benefit of the church. He cared for the church to the extent of sacrificing himself for her well-being. Anyone who marries an unprepared girl with or without her consent, and subjects her to physical/mental suffering, is not God's ideal model of a husband, and abuses God's gift of marriage, which is meant to bring together comparable, mature partners in life.

**3) We must uphold the sanctity of marriage by being properly prepared for marriage.**

- We must be mentally, emotionally, financially, physically, and spiritually prepared for marriage. We must have knowledge of all that marriage entails, including spousal relations and raising a family. Underage youth do not yet possess this knowledge.
- "Who can find a virtuous woman? For her price is far above rubies. The heart of her husband doth safely trust on her..." (Proverbs 31: 10-33) The description of the virtuous woman tells us that she is mature enough to handle household duties, make her husband happy, and fulfill related responsibilities before God and humanity. In other words, she enjoys family life and is a blessing to the household, meaning she is physically and mentally ready for a family life. Even if her age is not stated, her engagements and achievements reveal that she is at her mature age. The contextual meaning (for the 21<sup>st</sup> century Nigerian woman) of Proverbs 31 is a mature woman, well-educated, fit enough to undertake family responsibilities comfortably, and with the knowledge to give love and get satisfaction from her husband.
- Girls are not physically ready to be wives and mothers before menses, or even directly after. At the time of menses, a girl's pelvis is only 85% developed. It will not be fully developed until the age of 18. Thus, pregnant girls under 18 have a much higher risk of obstructed labor and possible death in childbirth.
- Subjecting underage girls to this kind of suffering within marriage does not uphold the sanctity of marriage. Marriage's sanctity is upheld when both spouses are willing to love and support each other, and are physically, mentally, emotionally, spiritually, and financially prepared to raise God-pleasing families.

**4) Marriage is meant to be a partnership based on mutual love and mutual respect.**

- The Bible clearly tells us that both husband and wife must treat each other with love and respect – this can only occur when both spouses are prepared (physically, mentally, emotionally, spiritually, financially) and willing.
- “Let the husband render unto the wife due benevolence; and likewise also the wife unto the husband.” (1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 7:3) “Due benevolence” here means two things: kindness and respect, and also sexual love. Those who take a young, unprepared, and especially a forcibly-consented bride will find it very difficult to foster an environment of caring, kindness, and respect; the immature, underdeveloped child bride can also not be assured a stress/pain-free and joyful sexual life with her adult husband. Marrying a young girl breeds resentment and fear, not love and respect, as God wants.
- A girl is not physically prepared for childbirth and marital relations, even when she first hits puberty. Medical science has proven that a girl is healthiest if she does not have a child until, at the very least, two years after her first menses. Additionally, no one should marry until they are financially and physically able to support a family, and engage in consensual, loving marital relations.
- We honor the institution of marriage, and preserve its sanctity, by reserving it for those who can enter into a mutually respectful, loving partnership.

**5) The proper time for marriage is different for everyone – but successful marriages occur only when both parties are prepared, and preparation is only guaranteed when both spouses are over 18 and finished with school.**

- Sexual morality and purity is best before marriage, and fidelity is necessary for a happy afterwards. However, this does not mean we should marry before we are ready or as early as possible.
- Many believe marrying early, often at or before puberty, is the only way to guarantee virginity, and presumably morality, in a bride. However, physical virginity is not the guarantee to morality: “You have heard it said, ‘you shall not commit adultery.’ But I tell you that anyone who has looked at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.” (Matthew 5:27-28) According to Matthew 5:27-28, sexual sin, or adultery, includes lustful looks and thoughts. This means that marrying a girl early to guarantee that she is a virgin at marriage is not pleasing to God, as it is ignoring the critical need for mental and spiritual purity, which cannot be attained without adult maturity. Learning self-control is a better/healthy way to ensure virginity until after 18, which is healthy and achievable through spiritual growth and through medical, social, historical and legal education. We must exercise purity of mind and discipline – this is what God wants, not early marriage.

- God rewards the patient – especially when they wait/prepare for marriage. The Genesis 24 story of Rebekah and Isaac is a model for chosen marriage. Her family respected her decision. In fact, they wanted to keep her for at least ten days before she married Isaac. But she refused to stay, decided to go, and they respected her right/free will—for she was mature enough to make the right choice. Forcing a girl or boy into a marriage simply to ensure their virginity is not right – good marriages like that of Isaac and Rebekah are formed by mutual free will.
- “There is time for everything...a time to love...he has made everything beautiful in its time.” (Ecclesiastes 3:1) This verse tells us that everything has its proper time, including love affairs and marriage. Everything is beautiful when it is done at the right time, and this means waiting for marriage until everyone is mature enough to bear its responsibilities. Nature clearly tells us that girls are not guaranteed to be ready for marriage or children before 18 years of age.
- The right time for marriage is therefore whenever we are physically, mentally, emotionally, spiritually, and financially prepared to be married and support a family – and this is not guaranteed unless both spouses are at least 18, and definitely not when one spouse is a child.



## Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) about Early Marriage (EM): A Muslim Perspective

**Below you will find both Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) relative to Muslim perspectives on early marriage (EM) and its negative impact on health and well-being, as well as Muslim religious references.**

### **Q: What does Islam say about early marriage (EM)?**

Although there is no mention of specific marital age in the Quran or authentic Hadith, many Hadith and Quranic verses highlight physical, mental, emotional, and financial maturity as essential criteria for marriage. A child bride under 18 is not going to be prepared in any of these ways for marriage – the marriage, therefore, will suffer. It says in the Quran 30:21, “...He created for you spouses of your own kind in order that you may repose to them in tranquility and He instilled in your hearts love and affection for one another...” Marriage is an institution of love, dedication, and genuine affection founded from a consensual, equal match. An adult man and a child bride are not a consensual, equal match.

There are several Islamic references that may be interpreted as arguments against waiting, such as the Hadith in which the Prophet is related to have said, “O people, Jibrael has brought unto me a divine command stating that girls are like fruits from a tree. If they are not plucked in time then they get rotten by the rays of the sun and a slight blow of the wind will result in their falling down from the tree” (as narrated by Imam as-Sadiq). As the Prophet’s teachings do not contradict one another, this sunnah should be interpreted in light of previous sunnahs, which provide ways for us to wait and keep ourselves from temptation. This verse does not warn against waiting the proper amount of time, but warns against delaying marriage when we become, in fact, fully capable of entering into marriage and mature enough to do so. Marriage in Islam is a highly honored institution, and we should enter into it with the knowledge and respect it deserves. Entering into a marriage for financial reasons or because of social pressure is not Islamic – but waiting until the proper time, or at least the age of 18, is.

### **Q: If EM is illegal, then why have our communities practiced it for so long without punishment?**

Generations of practice can often make tradition seem like truth. EM has continued because people fear the social stigma that has come with remaining unmarried for “too long,” whatever the community says that is. These traditions and their attached social stigmas are very strong, and often, local law enforcement feels powerless in the face of community and traditional leaders who permit or encourage the practice. Many law enforcement officials fear social stigma themselves, and are therefore reluctant to fully punish offenders. A lack of money, organization, and resources on the legal level makes it very hard to enforce laws against EM.





Early marriage places the unfair burdens of terminated schooling, a forced sexual life with an adult husband, and the feeding of a family on a young girl who is not ready to handle such adult responsibilities.

**Q: I know the law says that girls cannot be married before they turn 18, but the law has not provided a way for our daughters to stay virgins until then – how do you explain that?**

Practically speaking, for generations, it seems as though early marriage was the best way to guarantee virtue and virginity in a bride. However, early marriage is a cheap and unfair way to accomplish this – the ends do not justify the means. Remember that early marriage is a custom dating back to “*al-gahiliyyah*,” or “the era of ignorance” before Islam. Marrying a girl off before she really knows what sex is – which is often the case in EM – will only have harmful effects, such as fear and resentment between her and her husband, and a dysfunctional home in which to raise children. Terminating her schooling to marry her off before she is 18, as well, will have negative effects on her future, and the future of her children – studies have shown that well-educated, well-adjusted, successful children come from homes where the mother has finished school. Teaching our children how to resist temptation, exercise self-control, and wait for the right spouse is the most spiritually healthy way to ensure virginity – and build up communities.

## Scriptural and Theological Guides Related to Early Marriage (EM) A Guide for Muslim Faith Leaders

**A scriptural guide for Muslim faith leaders who seek to eradicate early marriage (EM) of girls under the age of 18.**

Below are key messages developed by Muslim faith leaders, along with religious references that support that message in relation to promoting healthy marriage practices, and making sure parents understand the importance of waiting until their children are 18.

### 1) Before entering into marriage, one must understand the requirements of marriage

There are several verses that may be interpreted as arguments against waiting for marriage. However, closer examination reveals that Allah above all, wants us to wait until we are prepared for marriage. Successful marriages demand physical, mental, emotional, spiritual, and financial maturity. The four main purposes of marriage are:

- i. To secure an equal, loving partner for life.
- ii. To experience mutual joy and sexual satisfaction.
- iii. To safely bear children and create a healthy family.
- iv. To help us avoid sexual temptation, through fidelity to our spouses.

Marriage is a means to a spiritual end, not the end itself. “When a youngster marries early in his youth, *Shaitaan*(Satan) cries out of desperation and says, ‘Alas! This person has protected one- third of his religion, now he will protect the remaining two thirds also.’” (MustadrakulWasail) Education, self-discipline, and financial independence are absolutely necessary for both spouses, in order to create a happy, healthy marriage and Allah-pleasing family. This verse does not argue for EM; in fact, it argues just the opposite. Satan cries out of desperation when we reach a place of physical, mental, emotional, spiritual, and financial maturity that makes us less likely to be tempted. Healthy marriages within Islam occur where both spouses are mature, finished with school, and above 18 years of age.

“O young men, whoever among you is (financially and physically) able to marry, he should do so, as this helps him lower his gaze and maintain his chastity; and whoever is unable to (marry), he should observe fasting, as this protects him.” (Hadith of Al-Bukhaari) This sunnah clearly tells us that Islam considers the need for mental, physical, and financial maturity before entering into this highly regarded and honored institution, as it provides a way for those who are not prepared to love a spouse and support a family to wait until they are prepared. “Lowering our gaze” and “fasting” are not the only things we can do, but they stand for a multitude of ways we can – and must – practice mental and spiritual discipline. Prayer, education, and self-discipline, and not forced/early marriages, are what we should emphasize to maintain chastity and rightness with Allah.

“O people, Jibrael has brought unto me a divine command stating that girls are like fruits from a tree. If they are not plucked in time then they get rotten by the rays of the sun and a slight blow of the wind will result in their falling down from the tree” (as narrated by Imam as-Sadiq). As the Prophet’s teachings do not contradict one another, this sunnah should be interpreted in light of the previous sunnah, which provides ways for us to wait and keep ourselves from temptation. This verse does not warn against waiting the proper amount of time; rather, it warns against delaying marriage when we have become, in fact, fully capable of entering into marriage and mature enough to do so.

Marrying simply to satisfy sexual urges/maintain chastity is a sign that we are, in fact, not seeing the whole picture/purpose of marriage as Allah sees it. An adult man who marries an underage girl makes it impossible for both to achieve the spiritual end of marriage that Allah intended.

### 2) Marriage is a gift from Allah, and should be treated as such.

- “Marriage is my Sunnah, whoever disregards my (sunnah) path is not from among us.” (Hadith of ibnMajah) Our Prophet endorsed healthy marriages that ensure that both spouses have a reliable partner for life.
- “Whoever is able to marry, should marry.” (Hadith of al-Bukhari) The term “able” is important here; it is interpreted as physical, mental, emotional, spiritual, and financial preparedness.
- “...He created for you spouses of your own kind in order that you may repose to them in tranquility and He instilled in your hearts love and affection for one another...”(Quran 30:21) This verse clearly shows how much of a gift the institution of marriage is, but it also shows how both spouses must be able to love and respect one another as comparable partners. Both spouses must be physically, mentally, emotionally, spiritually, and financially prepared for marriage. This means that both husband and wife must be physically able to fully enjoy marital relations in order bear healthy children, able to handle household duties, raise children with love and attention, be able to love another person selflessly as God wants us, and have adequate income and means of supporting a family.
- Marriage is one of the greatest gifts from Allah to humanity, and we must respect the institution. One way we can do this is to respect our future spouses enough to know when they are prepared, and have adequate knowledge of what marriage involves. Marriage to an unprepared, underage girl does not treat marriage as a gift from Allah.

### 3) We must uphold the sanctity of marriage by being properly prepared for marriage.

We must be mentally, emotionally, financially, physically, and spiritually prepared for marriage. Underage youth do not have adequate knowledge of what marriage entails, and are not adequately prepared to have joyful marital relations or raise a family.

Girls are not physically ready to be wives and mothers before menses, or even directly after. By the time of menses, the pelvis is only 85% developed; it will only develop fully by the age of 18. Therefore, pregnant girls under 18 face a higher risk of experiencing obstructed labor.

“O young men, whoever among you is (financially and physically) able to marry, he should do so, as this helps him lower his gaze and maintain his chastity; and whoever is unable to (marry), he should observe fasting, as this protects him.” (Hadith of Al-Bukhaari) This sunnah does not just refer to young men: It highlights the need for all of us to be physically, mentally, emotionally, spiritually, and financially mature before we enter into the divine institution of marriage. Remember, if Allah did not want us to be properly prepared to love a spouse and raise a healthy family, He would not have given us a way to avoid temptation. “Lowering our gaze” and “fasting” are obviously not the only things we can do; prayer, education, and self-discipline should be the guiding forces in all of our lives. We must practice all of these things, because they help us not only wait until we are prepared financially and physically, but are also the ways we achieve mental, emotional, and spiritual preparedness for marriage!

### 4) Marriage is meant to be a partnership based on mutual love and respect.

- Marriage is an institution of love, dedication, and genuine affection founded from a consensual match between comparable partners.
- Islam emphasizes mutual respect in a marriage, between both husband and wife. Imam as-Sadiq states: “The blessed of women are those who ask for small living expenses, and the evil of them are those who are demanding in terms of living expenses.” Likewise, the Hadith of Abu Dawud tells us: “The most perfect in faith amongst believers is he who is best in manners and kindest to his wife.” These two sunnah, together, show that a good marriage in Islam is one where both husband and wife are mature, kind to others, and respectful of one another.
- Marrying a young girl before she is ready, and forcing her into sexual relations is the opposite of kindness; it is doing harm to an innocent, which is a grave sin. Also, a marriage between an adult man and an underage girl is often a non-consensual match between two people who are at very different places physically, mentally, emotionally, spiritually, and financially, which is an arrangement that breeds resentment and fear, not love and respect.
- A good Muslim will not marry a woman without her full consent, or if she is underage, and will treat her with kindness and respect as a partner, so that she can do the same.

- 5) **The proper time for marriage is different for everyone – but successful marriages occur only when both parties are prepared, and preparation is only guaranteed when both spouses are over 18 and finished with school.**

Sexual morality and purity is best before marriage, and fidelity is necessary for a happy marriage afterwards. However, this does not mean we should marry before we are ready or as early as possible.” (See no. 1) “Before entering marriage, we must understand the requirements for marriage.”

Marriage is not meant to be an institution of financial gain; rather, it is a partnership based on mutual love and respect, between two comparable partners, who can support themselves and their family. Both spouses must be physically, mentally, emotionally, spiritually, and financially prepared for marriage. This means that both husband and wife must be physically able to fully enjoy marital relations in order bear healthy children, able to handle household duties, raise children with love and attention, be able to love another person selflessly as God wants us, and have adequate income and means of supporting a family. See 2.) “Marriage is a gift from Allah, and should be treated as such.”

Marrying a girl off for financial gain is against Allah’s wishes. Therefore, as faithful Muslims, we should fight against and avoid marriages underpinned by direct or indirect material benefit (as widely observed in many parts of Nigeria). A true Muslim understands the importance of supporting the poor without taking their young girl in return. Additionally, parents are supposed to pave the way for their daughters to marry at their right age; they are not supposed to impose a high dowry or demand top-of-the-social-ladder husbands for their daughters before they are even ready to marry. See no. 3) “We must uphold the sanctity of marriage by being properly prepared for marriage” and 4.) “Marriage is meant to be a partnership based on love and respect.”

There is only one verse in the Quran which may appear to support EM: “If you are in doubt concerning those of your wives who have ceased menstruating, know that their waiting period [before one can divorce them] shall be three months. The same shall apply to those who have not yet menstruated.” (Quran 65:4) This is the only verse that specifically mentions early marriage. A footnote acknowledges that child marriages were common custom in the days of Mohammed, dating back to “*al-gahiliyyah*,” or, “the era of ignorance.”

It is a fact that adolescent girls are not physically prepared to have healthy pregnancies and births. They are not mentally or emotionally prepared to love a husband, raise children, and handle household duties. They are not financially prepared to support themselves. If we pull them out of school to marry them early, we stunt them spiritually, and in all of these ways – which is the greatest tragedy of all.

Prosperity and community growth comes from choice. Give your children the choice of whom to marry and when.



### **Begin the Conversation: Four Conversations That Healthy Communities Should Have about Early Marriage (EM)**

Faith leaders touch the lives of their communities in many ways: at weekly prayers, during lifecycle events, during individual counseling, or out in the community. Each of these interactions can be a *teachable moment* – an opportunity to discuss health and well-being with your community and share important messages. Here are five key conversations that all faith leaders – regardless of faith – can have with their community about early marriage (EM) of girls under 18.

#### **Introduction**

Congratulations, and thank you for your willingness to empower girls in your community through the eradication of harmful traditional practices. It may seem a daunting task to change the minds of your community members about these harmful practices. However, educating yourself and continuing to brush up on your newly acquired knowledge about EM will help you pave the way for real and sustainable change in your area. These conversation starters are a good first step to engaging your community in a (you guessed it!) conversation about the practice of EM. They are meant to provide talking points and key messages to convey to your congregation and community about these practices. Each talking point/key message comes with appropriate theological/scriptural references to support them.

There are many ways to use these conversation starters – it's up to you. No matter how you choose to use them, though, be sure to study them carefully before you begin talking to your community about EM, and continue to use them as a resource for yourself, as needed.

#### **Instructions**

Read through these conversation starters, and then Module 2: “Teach Yourself,” the theological/scriptural references around each key message/talking point. Each conversation starter corresponds with the key messages/talking points in Module 2: “Teach Yourself” numerically (1 with 1, 2 with 2, etc.) Each conversation starter comes with a reiteration of the Key Facts about EM for you to use as a reference in each conversation. If you find anything you disagree with, take this as an opportunity to educate yourself further. These theological/scriptural references have been tested, debated, and approved by both Christian and Muslim faith leaders.



When you feel ready, and adequately prepared to speak about EM using these talking points/key messages and their scriptural references, you can begin engaging your community in a discussion about these issues. There are several ways you can do this:

- If you make frequent home visits to your community members, use them to help you structure conversations about these topics. These conversations can be as long or as short as you like – you don't need to get to every talking point/key message! Just one per conversation can be enough, since everyone will likely have a lot to say.
- If you lead a men's or women's group, use them as a way to informally get them thinking about the realities of EM for their daughters. It is best to begin by engaging a small, trusted group you know will listen and discuss issues with each other respectfully.
- If you feel comfortable enough, you can use these conversation starters to address larger groups of adults or youth in your community.

Again, how you use these conversation starters is up to you. Once you have educated yourself, and feel prepared, the possibilities are endless!

### Eliminating EM: “Honor the Institution of Marriage”

- **Conversation 1:** What are the religious requirements of marriage in the context of our faith? Does that include marrying a child?
- **Conversation 2:** Marriage is a gift from God/Allah. Are we treating it as such when we marry underage girls?
- **Conversation 3:** How does preparing adequately for marriage help uphold its sanctity?
- **Conversation 4:** How can we make marriage a mutual partnership based on love and respect?
- **Conversation 5:** What is the proper time for marriage?

## Begin the Conversation: Four Conversations That Healthy Communities Should Have about Early Marriage (EM).

### Begin the Conversation: What's the Big Idea?

Faith leaders touch the lives of their communities in many ways: at weekly prayers, during major life events, during individual counseling, or out in the community. Each of these interactions can be a **teachable moment** – an opportunity for you to discuss health and well-being with your community and share important messages.

'Start the Conversation' outlines 5 key conversations that your can have with your community.

**KEY TERM: A TEACHABLE MOMENT** is any opportunity for you to share an important lesson with your community. It doesn't have to be in a sermon, a class, or a formal setting.

### How Do I "Begin the Conversation"?

It's not about waiting for the perfect moment or having all the answers...it's about offering you opportunities to encourage. Those opportunities might be during a meeting of your women's group, during a sermon, during pre-marital counseling, during a holiday celebration, or another appropriate moment where you can start a conversation about these issues.

Sometimes it can be hard to have conversations about a community's traditional practices, including EM. But when we talk about making sure no one marries underage, what we are really talking about is what we can all do to create healthy and strong communities, and that's a goal that all religious communities share. And remember, you don't have to have all the answers! These are 'conversations,' not lessons. You can just ask the question and support your community as they engage with these issues. However, if you are reading this toolkit, chances are you have a lot to contribute.

**Remember to refer back to Module 2: "Teach Yourself" for more detailed talking points around each of these scriptural references!**

OK, enough chit-chat. Let's start the conversation. Conversation One begins on the next page...



## Begin the Conversation on Eliminating Early Marriage (EM) – “Honor the Institution of Marriage”

**Conversation One: What are the religious requirements of marriage in the context of our faith? Does that include marrying a child?**

**The BIG ideas:**

### **Before entering into marriage, one must understand the requirements of marriage**

- Successful marriages demand physical, mental, emotional, spiritual, and financial maturity. The four main purposes of marriage are:
  - i. To secure an equal, loving partner for life.
  - ii. To experience mutual joy and sexual satisfaction.
  - iii. To safely bear children and create a healthy family.
  - iv. To help us avoid sexual temptation, through fidelity to our spouses.
- “And the Lord God said, ‘It is not good that man should be alone. I will make a helper comparable to him.’” (Genesis 2:18) God united Adam and Eve, so that their lives might be more productive and blissful. Notice that God created Eve “comparable” to Adam – different in build and abilities, but an equal, respected life partner.
- In order for two spouses to be “comparable partners,” both must be physically, mentally, emotionally, spiritually, and financially prepared for marriage. This means that both husband and wife must be physically able to fully enjoy marital relations in order bear healthy children, able to handle household duties, raise children with love and attention, be able to love another person selflessly as God wants us, and have adequate income and means of supporting a family. An underage girl is not yet prepared in any of these ways for marriage, and is therefore not the comparable partner required for a God-pleasing marriage.

### Before entering into marriage, one must understand the requirements of marriage

- There are several verses that may be interpreted as arguments against waiting for marriage. However, closer examination reveals that Allah above all, wants us to wait until we are prepared for marriage. Successful marriages demand physical, mental, emotional, spiritual, and financial maturity. The four main purposes of marriage are:
  - i. To secure an equal, loving partner for life.
  - ii. To experience mutual joy and sexual satisfaction.
  - iii. To safely bear children and create a healthy family.
  - iv. To help us avoid sexual temptation, through fidelity to our spouses.
- Marriage is a means to a spiritual end, not the end itself. “When a youngster marries early in his youth, *Shaitaan*(Satan) cries out of desperation and says, ‘Alas! This person has protected one-third of his religion, now he will protect the remaining two thirds also.’” (MustadrakulWasail) Education, self-discipline, and financial independence are absolutely necessary for both spouses, in order to create a happy, healthy marriage and Allah-pleasing family. This verse does not argue in favor of EM– in fact, it argues just the opposite. Satan cries out of desperation when we reach a place of physical, mental, emotional, spiritual, and financial maturity that makes us less likely be tempted. Healthy marriages within Islam occur where both spouses are mature, finished with school, and above 18 years of age.
- “O young men, whoever among you is (financially and physically) able to marry, he should do so, as this helps him lower his gaze and maintain his chastity; and whoever is unable to (marry), he should observe fasting, as this protects him.” (Hadith of Al-Bukhaari) This sunnah clearly tells us that Islam considers the need for mental, physical, and financial maturity before entering into this highly regarded and honored institution, as it provides a way for those who are not prepared to love a spouse and support a family to wait until they are prepared. “Lowering our gaze” and “fasting” are not the only things we can do, but they stand for a multitude of ways we can – and must – practice mental and spiritual discipline. Prayer, education, and self-discipline, and not early marriages (EM) of girls under 18, are what we should emphasize to maintain chastity and rightness with Allah.
- “O people, Jibrael has brought unto me a divine command stating that girls are like fruits from a tree. If they are not plucked in time then they get rotten by the rays of the sun and a slight blow of the wind will result in their falling down from the tree” (as narrated by Imam as-Sadiq). As the Prophet’s teachings do not contradict one another, this sunnah should be interpreted in light of the previous sunnah, which provides ways for us to wait and keep ourselves from temptation. This verse does not warn against waiting the proper amount of time; rather, it warns against delaying marriage when we have become, in fact, fully capable of entering into marriage and mature enough to do so.

- Marrying simply to satisfy sexual urges or maintain chastity is a sign that we are, in fact, not seeing the whole picture or purpose of marriage as Allah sees it. An adult man who marries an underage girl makes it impossible for both to achieve the spiritual end of marriage that Allah intended.

## Key Facts

- Girls who are married under the age of 18 are often forced to drop out of school, discontinuing their education and seriously limiting their future.
- Children and youth under 18, especially those who have left school, are often not ready to shoulder the responsibilities of a spouse and family.
- Girls who are married under the age of 18 can develop fistula (incontinence of urine or feces) and other problems that lead to infertility, due to early, forced sexual relations.
- Girls who are married under the age of 18, and subsequently become very young mothers, are at a much higher risk of maternal death, and their babies are more likely to die as well.

## Some Quick Tips

- Look for opportunities to begin talking to your community about issues of **health and wellness, as well as marriage**. We want to make sure that people walk away with a sense of personal and communal responsibility for the health and well-being of their community's girls and women.
- Address the **Key Facts** referred to above. If people have misconceptions about EM, it's important to correct those (see below for additional resources to help you do that).

### Additional Resources:

For more basic information and **Key Facts** about EM, see **Module 2**: "Teach Yourself". For more help on how to talk about EM or have difficult conversations, see 'Some Common Questions' in **Module 1**: "Get Started."

## Start the Conversation on Eliminating Early Marriage (EM) – “Honor the Institution of Marriage”

**Conversation Two: Marriage is a gift from God/Allah. Are we treating it as such when we marry underage girls?**

### The BIG ideas:

#### Marriage is a gift from God, and should be treated as such.

- Marriage is a precious, divine gift that demands knowledge and maturity so that we can make the most out of it. Before marriage, we must be mature enough (physically, mentally, emotionally, spiritually, and financially) to know its blessings, challenges, and realities; this includes the willingness to love and sacrifice one’s own well-being for one’s husband or wife.
- As mentioned in Genesis 2:18, God created Eve so that she and Adam each might have a “comparable” partner in life. An adult husband and a child bride cannot have this kind of relationship, and therefore cannot treat marriage as a gift from God in their daily lives.
- “Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church.” (Ephesians 5:25) Christ loved the church, mainly for the benefit of the church. He cared for the church to the extent of sacrificing himself for her well-being. Anyone who marries an unprepared girl with or without her consent, and subjects her to physical and/or mental suffering, is not God’s ideal model of a husband, and abuses God’s gift of marriage – which is meant to bring together comparable, mature partners in life.

#### Marriage is a gift from Allah, and should be treated as such.

- “Marriage is my Sunnah, whoever disregards my (sunnah) path is not from among us.” (Hadith of ibnMajah) Our Prophet endorsed healthy marriages that ensure that both spouses have a reliable partner for life.
- “Whoever is able to marry, should marry.” (Hadith of al-Bukhari) The term “able” is important here; it is interpreted as physical, mental, emotional, spiritual, and financial preparedness.

- "...He created for you spouses of your own kind in order that you may repose to them in tranquility and He instilled in your hearts love and affection for one another..."(Quran 30:21)  
This verse clearly shows how much of a gift the institution of marriage is, but it also shows how both spouses must be able to love and respect one another as comparable partners. Both spouses must be physically, mentally, emotionally, spiritually, and financially prepared for marriage. This means that both husband and wife must be physically able to fully enjoy marital relations in order bear healthy children, able to handle household duties, raise children with love and attention, be able to love another person selflessly as God wants us, and have adequate income and means of supporting a family.
- Marriage is one of the greatest gifts from Allah to humanity, and we must respect the institution. One way we can do this is to respect our future spouses enough to know when they are prepared, and have adequate knowledge of what marriage involves. Marriage to an unprepared, underage girl does not treat marriage as a gift from Allah.

### Key Facts

- Girls who are married under the age of 18 are often forced to drop out of school, discontinuing their education and seriously limiting their future.
- Children and youth under 18, especially those who have left school, are often not ready to shoulder the responsibilities of a spouse and family.
- Girls who are married under the age of 18 can develop fistula and other problems that lead to infertility, due to early, forced sexual relations.
- Girls who are married under the age of 18, and subsequently become very young mothers, are at a much higher risk of maternal death, and their babies are more likely to die as well.

### Some Quick Tips

- Stress the fact that all people can play a role in reducing your community's practice of EM, and thus play a key role in promoting the health and well-being of girls and women. Whether it is telling people about the harmfulness of EM, supporting family members who decide NOT to marry their daughters early, or choosing not to allow our daughters to marry until they are 18, there are many things that we can each do to help create a healthy community.
- Make sure that during this conversation your community begins to really understand the basic facts about EM, as these will be built upon in subsequent conversations.

### Additional Resources:

For more basic information and **Key Facts** about EM, see **Module 2: "Teach Yourself"**. For more help on how to talk about EM or have difficult conversations, see 'Some Common Questions' in **Module 1: "Get Started."**

## Start the Conversation on Eliminating Early Marriage (EM) – “Honor the Institution of Marriage”

### Conversation Three: How does preparing adequately for marriage help uphold its sanctity?

#### The BIG ideas:

#### **We must uphold the sanctity of marriage by being properly prepared for marriage.**

- We must be mentally, emotionally, financially, physically, and spiritually prepared for marriage. We must have knowledge of all that marriage entails, including spousal relations and raising a family. Underage youth do not yet possess this knowledge.
- “Who can find a virtuous woman? For her price is far above rubies. The heart of her husband doth safely trust on her...” (Proverbs 31: 10-33) The description of the virtuous woman tells us that she is mature enough to handle household duties, make her husband happy, and fulfill related responsibilities before God and humanity. In other words, she enjoys family life and is a blessing to the household, meaning she is physically and mentally ready for a family life. Even if her age is not stated, her engagements and achievements reveal that she is of a mature age. The contextual meaning (for the 21<sup>st</sup> century Nigerian woman) of Proverbs 31 is a mature woman, well-educated, fit enough to undertake family responsibilities comfortably, and with the ability give love and get satisfaction from her husband.
- Girls are not physically ready to be wives and mothers before menses, or even directly after. At the time of menses, a girl’s pelvis is only 85% developed. It will not be fully developed until the age of 18. Thus, pregnant girls under 18 have a much higher risk of obstructed labor and possible death in childbirth.

Subjecting underage girls to this kind of suffering within marriage does not uphold the sanctity of marriage. Marriage’s sanctity is upheld when both spouses are willing to love and support each other, and are physically, mentally, emotionally, spiritually, and financially prepared to raise God-pleasing families.

### We must uphold the sanctity of marriage by being properly prepared for marriage.

- We must be mentally, emotionally, financially, physically, and spiritually prepared for marriage. Underage youth do not have adequate knowledge of what marriage entails, and are not adequately prepared to have joyful marital relations or raise a family.
- Girls are not physically ready to be wives and mothers before menses, or even directly after. By the time of menses, the pelvis is only 85% developed; it will only develop fully by the age of 18. Therefore, pregnant girls under 18 face a higher risk of experiencing obstructed labor.
- “O young men, whoever among you is (financially and physically) able to marry, he should do so, as this helps him lower his gaze and maintain his chastity; and whoever is unable to (marry), he should observe fasting, as this protects him.” (Hadith of Al-Bukhaari) This sunnah does not just refer to young men; it highlights the need for all of us to be physically, mentally, emotionally, spiritually, and financially mature before we enter into the divine institution of marriage. Remember, if Allah did not want us to be properly prepared to love a spouse and raise a healthy family, He would not have given us a way to avoid temptation. “Lowering our gaze” and “fasting” are obviously not the only things we can do; prayer, education, and self-discipline should be the guiding forces in all of our lives. We must practice all of these things, because they help us not only wait until we are prepared financially and physically, but are also the ways we achieve mental, emotional, and spiritual preparedness for marriage!

### Key Facts

- Girls who are married under the age of 18 are often forced to drop out of school, discontinuing their education and seriously limiting their future.
- Children and youth under 18, especially those who have left school, are often not ready to shoulder the responsibilities of a spouse and family.
- Girls who are married under the age of 18 can develop fistula and other problems that lead to infertility, due to early, forced sexual relations.
- Girls who are married under the age of 18, and subsequently become very young mothers, are at a much higher risk of maternal death, and their babies are more likely to die as well.



## Some Quick Tips

- Know that EM has never been shown to have ANY beneficial effects whatsoever; on the contrary, all studies on the subject show how much EM hurts girls and women.
- Make the conversation easier by talking about what a healthy marriage and a healthy family looks like and how one way to support one another is making sure that everyone in the family stays healthy. Ensuring both spouses are prepared for marriage is one way to do that.

## Additional Resources:

For more basic information and **Key Facts** about EM, see **Module 2: “Teach Yourself”**. For more help on how to talk about EM or have difficult conversations, see ‘Some Common Questions’ in **Module 1: “Get Started.”**

### Start the Conversation on Eliminating Early Marriage (EM) – “Honor the Institution of Marriage”

**Conversation Four: How can we make marriage a mutual partnership based on love and respect?**

**The BIG ideas:**

**Marriage is meant to be a partnership based on mutual love and respect.**

- The Bible clearly tells us that both husband and wife must treat each other with love and respect – this can only occur when both spouses are prepared (physically, mentally, emotionally, spiritually, financially) and willing.
- “Let the husband render unto the wife due benevolence; and likewise also the wife unto the husband.” (1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 7:3) “Due benevolence” here means two things: kindness and respect, and also sexual love. Those who take a young, unprepared, and especially a forcibly consented bride will find it very difficult to foster an environment of caring, kindness, and respect; the immature, underdeveloped child bride can also not be assured a stress/pain free and joyful sexual life with her adult husband. Marrying a young girl breeds resentment and fear, not love and respect, as God wants.
- A girl is not physically prepared for childbirth and marital relations, even when she first hits puberty. Medical science has proven that a girl is healthiest if she does not have a child until, at the very least, two years after her first menses. Additionally, no one should marry until they are financially and physically able to support a family, and engage in consensual, loving marital relations.
- We honor the institution of marriage, and preserve its sanctity, by reserving it for those who can enter into a mutually respectful, loving partnership.

### Marriage is meant to be a partnership based on mutual love and respect.

- Marriage is an institution of love, dedication, and genuine affection founded from a consensual match between comparable partners.
- Islam emphasizes mutual respect in a marriage, between both husband and wife. Imam as-Sadiq states: “The blessed of women are those who ask for small living expenses, and the evil of them are those who are demanding in terms of living expenses.” Likewise, the Hadith of Abu Dawud tells us: “The most perfect in faith amongst believers is he who is best in manners and kindest to his wife.” These two sunnah, together, show that a good marriage in Islam is one where both husband and wife are mature, kind to others, and respectful of one another.
- Marrying a young girl before she is ready, and forcing her into sexual relations is the opposite of kindness; it is doing harm to an innocent, which is a grave sin. Also, a marriage between an adult man and an underage girl is often a non-consensual match between two people who are at very different places physically, mentally, emotionally, spiritually, and financially, which is an arrangement that breeds resentment and fear, not love and respect.
- A good Muslim will not marry a woman without her full consent, or if she is underage, and will treat her with kindness and respect as a partner, so that she can do the same!

### Key Facts

- Girls who are married under the age of 18 are often forced to drop out of school, discontinuing their education and seriously limiting their future.
- Children and youth under 18, especially those who have left school, are often not ready to shoulder the responsibilities of a spouse and family.
- Girls who are married under the age of 18 can develop fistula and other problems that lead to infertility, due to early, forced sexual relations.
- Girls who are married under the age of 18, and subsequently become very young mothers, are at a much higher risk of maternal death, and their babies are more likely to die as well.

### Some Quick Tips

- Recognize that our decisions do not just affect us – they affect our families, loved ones, and all those around us.
- Help your community to understand that this means: EM similarly does not just affect us. If a daughter or mother dies in childbirth because she is too young to be married and bearing children, or is shunned because she has developed fistula from traumatic childbirths or forced sexual relations, they are less able to work and support our families. We have a responsibility to protect ourselves and those around us.
- Above all, emphasize this: **the practice of EM does not just hurt one girl; it hurts the entire community, and robs it of its dignity.**

### Additional Resources:

For more basic information and **Key Facts** about EM, see **Module 2: “Teach Yourself”**. For more help on how to talk about EM or have difficult conversations, see “Some Common Questions” in **Module 1: “Get Started.”**

## Start the Conversation on Eliminating Early Marriage (EM) – “Honor the Institution of Marriage”

### Conversation Five: What is the proper time for marriage?

#### The BIG ideas:

**The proper time for marriage is different for everyone – but successful marriages occur only when both parties are prepared, and preparation is only guaranteed when both spouses are over 18 and finished with school.**

- Sexual morality and purity is best before marriage, and fidelity is necessary for a happy afterwards. However, this does not mean we should marry before we are ready or as early as possible.
- Many believe marrying early, often at or before puberty, is the only way to guarantee virginity, and presumably morality, in a bride. However, physical virginity is not the guarantee to morality: “You have heard it said, ‘you shall not commit adultery.’ But I tell you that anyone who has looked at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.” (Matthew 5:27-28) According to Matthew 5:27-28, sexual sin, or adultery, includes lustful looks and thoughts. This means that marrying a girl early to guarantee that she is a virgin at marriage is not pleasing to God, as it is ignoring the critical need for mental and spiritual purity, which cannot be attained without adult maturity. Learning self-control is a better/healthy way to ensure virginity until after 18—which is healthy and achievable through spiritual growth and through medical, social, historical and legal education. We must exercise purity of mind and discipline – this is what God wants, not early marriage.
- God rewards the patient – especially when they wait/prepare for marriage. The Genesis 24 story of Rebekah and Isaac is a model for chosen marriage. Her family respected her decision. In fact, they wanted to keep her for at least ten days before she married Isaac. But she refused to stay, decided to go, and they respected her right/free will—for she was mature enough to make the right choice. Forcing a girl or boy into a marriage simply to ensure their virginity is not right – good marriages like that of Isaac and Rebekah are formed by mutual free will. “There is time for everything...a time to love...he has made everything beautiful in its time.” (Ecclesiastes 3:1) This verse tells us that everything has its proper time, including love affairs and marriage. Everything is beautiful when it is done at the right time, and this means waiting for marriage until everyone is mature enough to bear its responsibilities. Nature clearly tells us that girls are not guaranteed to be ready for marriage or children before 18 years of age.

- The right time for marriage is therefore whenever we are physically, mentally, emotionally, spiritually, and financially prepared to be married and support a family – and this is not guaranteed unless both spouses are at least 18, and definitely not when one spouse is a child.

**The proper time for marriage is different for everyone – but successful marriages occur only when both parties are prepared, and preparation is only guaranteed when both spouses are over 18 and finished with school.**

- Sexual morality and purity is best before marriage, and fidelity is necessary for a happy marriage afterwards. However, this does not mean we should marry before we are ready or as early as possible. (See no. 1 “Before entering marriage, we must understand the requirements for marriage.”)
- Marriage is not meant to be an institution of financial gain: rather, it is a partnership based on mutual love and respect, between two comparable partners, who can support themselves and their family. Both spouses must be physically, mentally, emotionally, spiritually, and financially prepared for marriage. This means that both husband and wife must be physically able to fully enjoy marital relations in order bear healthy children, able to handle household duties, raise children with love and attention, be able to love another person selflessly as God wants us, and have adequate income and means of supporting a family. (See no. 2 “Marriage is a gift from Allah, and should be treated as such.”)
- Marrying a girl off for financial gain is against Allah’s wishes. Therefore, as faithful Muslims, we should fight against and avoid marriages underpinned by direct or indirect material benefit (as widely observed in many parts of Nigeria). A true Muslim understands the importance of supporting the poor without taking their young girl in return. Additionally, parents are supposed to pave the way for their daughters to marry at their right age; they are not supposed to impose a high dowry or demand top-of-the-social-ladder husbands for their daughters before they are even ready to marry. (See no. 3 “We must uphold the sanctity of marriage by being properly prepared for marriage” and no. 4 “Marriage is meant to be a partnership based on love and respect.”)
- There is only one verse in the Quran which may appear to support EM: “If you are in doubt concerning those of your wives who have ceased menstruating, know that their waiting period [before one can divorce them] shall be three months. The same shall apply to those who have not yet menstruated.” (Quran 65:4) This is the only verse which specifically mentions early marriage. A footnote acknowledges that child marriages were common custom in the days of Mohammed, dating back to “al- gahiliyyah,” or, “the era of ignorance.”

- It is a fact that adolescent girls are not physically prepared to have healthy pregnancies and births. They are not mentally or emotionally prepared to love a husband, raise children, and handle household duties. They are not financially prepared to support themselves. If we pull them out of school to marry them early, we stunt them spiritually, and in all of these ways – which is the greatest tragedy of all.
- Prosperity and community growth comes from choice: give your children the choice of whom to marry and when.

## Key Facts

- Girls who are married under the age of 18 are often forced to drop out of school, discontinuing their education and seriously limiting their future.
- Children and youth under 18, especially those who have left school, are often not ready to shoulder the responsibilities of a spouse and family.
- Girls who are married under the age of 18 can develop fistula and other problems that lead to infertility, due to early, forced sexual relations.
- Girls who are married under the age of 18, and subsequently become very young mothers, are at a much higher risk of maternal death, and their babies are more likely to die as well.

## Some Quick Tips

- Be sure that your congregants understand that marriage is a path to spiritual peace and righteousness for both spouses. Marrying a young girl, when she is not fully prepared to be a wife and mother, has the opposite effect, and does not breed mutual love or spiritual growth.

## Additional Resources:

For more basic information and **Key Facts** about EM, see **Module 2:** “Teach Yourself.” For more help on how to talk about EM or have difficult conversations, see “Some Common Questions” in **Module 1:** “Get Started.”



## Engage Women: “Honor the Institution of Marriage”

These interactive workshops provide an opportunity for women to learn about early marriage (EM), understand why it is wrong, discuss the specific ways it affects them and their families, and develop ways they can act to eliminate EM for good. These workshops can be implemented in any women-only setting – whether you have a longstanding women’s group within your faith community or if this is the first time that a group of women are coming together. The workshops can be facilitated by any capable person you trust who has a good grounding in these materials. They might be a faith leader, lay leader, women’s group leader, or other caring member of the community. Keep in mind that depending on the region you work in, it might be best to choose a woman to act as facilitator, or if that is not possible, as a co-facilitator. The module is structured around several workshops, whose topics are as follows:

- Before you begin: create a **Safe Space** for the participants
- **Workshop 1: EM: The Facts.**
  - The purpose of this workshop is to acclimate participants to discussing EM, and to introduce the key facts about EM, and how the practice affects their families. This workshop can be used as a stand-alone workshop, or as a “warm-up” immediately preceding Workshop 2.
- **Workshop 2: Uphold the Sanctity of Marriage by Stopping Early Marriage**
  - The purpose of this workshop is to emphasize how EM hurts not only women, but entire communities, and goes against God/Allah’s purpose for marriage. The end goal of this workshop should be to encourage these women to speak to their families and fellow community members on the topic, because happy, healthy, and productive communities work together to eliminate harmful practices like EM, and ensure no one marries until they are above 18, and are ready and willing to do so.

**However, you don’t just need to stick to the sample workshop plans: Change or adapt these in order to best suit your needs. Use the activities that work best for you and feel free to add your own elements as well. It’s important to try and include the ‘Key Facts’ and ‘Big Ideas’ in your workshops, but there’s no reason not to get creative.**

These workshops can be introduced together or separately, either as part of a workshop series, or as stand-alone workshops themselves. Workshop 1 can be used as a “warm-up” for Workshop 2, and they can be presented all in one session, if you wish.



## Introduction

This women's group module is designed to engage a group of women in a conversation about early marriage (EM), and what it means to be prepared for marriage. The session should be facilitated by a faith leader, an elder, or any other member of the community who would normally be responsible for leading the regular women's group sessions.

EM is a practice that can have devastating effects on the lives of women and girls. Not only does marrying early deprive a girl of her childhood growth and schooling, but marrying and bearing children too early can seriously impair a girl's health, and these effects will only worsen as she grows to be a woman.

Many of the women in your women's group may have been married underage themselves, or have allowed their daughters to marry early. Therefore, you must be sensitive to their experience when engaging them in conversations about this topic. Many have been led to believe that this was the best thing that could have been done for them, and continue to perpetuate these practices with their own daughters for the same reasons. In order for this women's group activity to work, you or the facilitator must make sure the women feel like they have a safe space where they can talk about their own experiences honestly.

## Instructions

This Women's Group Module contains different lessons/group activities to engage women in a conversation about EM. They should ideally be used in a group of 12 women or less, and be facilitated by a faith leader, or a trusted, educated lay leader, male or female.

Read through each lesson/group activity carefully, and make sure you do not have any questions about the content before you proceed. If you do, please take this as an opportunity to seek more information from a trusted source, such as a local health clinic.

Please use the instructions provided in each lesson/group activity, and always allow women the opportunity to speak up or ask questions if they wish to do so.

NOTE: If you can, try to get to know a bit about each of the women in your group, so you may ask the appropriate discussion questions. Please refer to the discussion questions in the lesson/group activity for the questions to ask married women, married women with sons, married women with daughters, and unmarried women.

**Start your first women’s group session with a very brief introduction.**

“I’ve invited you here to participate in this women’s workshop so that we can feel more comfortable discussing Early Marriage (EM), and other harmful traditional practices that hurt women. Let’s start with an interactive exercise that helps us create a space in which we feel safe to have conversations about these difficult topics. “

## Engage Women: All Human Life has Dignity

### Activity

#### Creating a Safe Space – Before You Begin

**Suggested Time: 15 minutes**

Before you begin your first workshop with a group, it is important to establish what is called “**safe space**.” Safe space doesn’t just happen – it’s up to you to take a proactive role in creating an atmosphere that will best support the growth and learning of each participant. Here’s a quick activity that will help establish safe space:

- 1) Explain to participants that the workshop(s) they’ll be taking part in are not just about you giving them information, but rather about people supporting each other to discuss difficult issues and learn from one another. Say that in order to do this effectively, we need to have a space in which each person feels comfortable and safe.
- 2) Ask the group, ‘How can we support each other to create a safe space?’ or ‘What do you need in order to feel fully comfortable in this group?’ Write the various answers that you hear on a large piece of paper or on a chalkboard so that everyone can see them.
- 3) Once you have received answers from as many women as would like to contribute, read everything that is written on the paper aloud, and ask the group if they think anything should be added. If not, ask the group if they are willing to commit to upholding what is written as group standards for the workshop.
- 4) Have participants signify their commitments by writing their names, initials, or drawing a marking or symbol on the sheet of paper with the safe space agreement.

It doesn’t have to end there! You can always come back to your safe space agreement. If your group ever meets again, you can remind people of their commitments at subsequent sessions. Additionally, if there is ever a difficult conversation or tension in the group, you can remind people of their safe space agreement and hold people to the intentions and norms that they set.

#### KEY TERM:

**SAFE SPACE** refers to a cooperative learning environment in which all participants feel comfortable and safe to fully participate. A safe space is one in which every person respects the ideas and thoughts of each other and people are supportive of each other’s growth and learning.

## Engage Women: Honor the Institution of Marriage

### Introduction to Early Marriage (EM)

**Materials needed: EM narrative flipchart\*, chalkboard and chalk or flipchart and markers, paper, pencils, pens.**

**NOTE: Please give the family in your faith-specific EM flipchart narrative an appropriate local name!**

#### Speaking Guide

“We are here to understand your views and to learn from you your thoughts and feelings pertaining to some specific topics that may have touched your lives or the lives of women around you. Today’s session will focus on our community’s marriage practices, specifically early marriage. Many of you may have married before you turned 18, and you may have allowed your daughters to do the same. Everyone has different reasons for doing so, and we all know the power of tradition can be very strong. However, today, we are here to talk about how we can honor the institution of marriage, by making sure that all who marry are physically, mentally, emotionally, spiritually, and financially prepared for marriage.”

“We will be asking you to feel free to speak up and/or ask questions, but also to participate in the activities that we suggest.”

### Workshop 1

#### EM illustration

Show the group the faith-appropriate illustration. Ask the group to describe the first illustration. What is happening? Once the group has given their answers, tell them that the girl struggling with the boulder represents a girl struggling under the burdens of marriage, before she is ready. Then, show the group the second illustration, with the words representing various aspects of EM that are too much for a girl to bear, as well as some of the negative effects of a girl marrying an adult man. Read what is written on the boulder to the group. Ask them if any of the negative words (like “abuse” and “disease”) sound like words that should be associated with marriage, or if they echo any of their experiences with marriage. Then, ask group members if they see any connection between the words normally associated with marriage (“husband,” “children,” “feeding family,” etc.) and “abuse” and “disease” in this girl’s burden. Do they believe that otherwise good things like a husband and children might be a burden on a young girl who is still a child herself? Then, ask members of the group to volunteer any stories about their experiences with marriage, or the experiences of women and girls they know. Once everyone has shared, review the Key Facts about EM.

## Early Marriage

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ENGAGE WOMEN  
MODULE 4

CHRISTIAN





## Early Marriage

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to Address Harmful  
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ENGAGE WOMEN  
MODULE 4



MUSLIM

### Key Facts about EM

- 1) Early marriage (EM), or marriage under 18 years old, is illegal in Nigeria.
- 2) Our government officially opposes all forms of gender violence and human rights abuses, including early marriage (EM).
- 3) Girls who are married under the age of 18 are often forced to drop out of school, discontinuing their education and seriously limiting their future.
- 4) Children and youth under 18, especially those who have left school, are often not ready to shoulder the responsibilities of a house and family.
- 5) Girls who are married under the age of 18 can develop fistula and other problems that lead to infertility, due to early, forced sexual relations and premature childbirth.
- 6) Girls who are married under the age of 18, and subsequently become very young mothers, are at a much higher risk of maternal death, and their babies are more likely to die as well.

If scriptural questions emerge, you will find Christian and Muslim FAQs and religious references in Module 2: "Teach Yourself".



## Workshop 2

### Topic: Honor the Institution of Marriage

This women's group module is designed to engage a group of women in a conversation about what it means to be prepared for marriage, and how early marriage (EM) of girls under 18 affects the health of our community. The session should be facilitated by a faith leader, an elder, or any other member of the community who would normally be responsible for leading the regular women's group sessions.

**Materials needed:** The accompanying illustrated flipchart with the family narration for the EM flipchart activity, and any materials that the facilitator deems necessary based on what main activity they would like to engage the participants in. This may vary depending on whether the participants are married or unmarried women.

Please read through the instructions to the flipchart activity before this lesson, to familiarize yourself with each picture, the narrative, and the discussion questions involved.

**FACILITATOR SPEAKING GUIDE:** Welcome, and thank you for joining me! Today, we are going to discuss marriage, and more specifically, how we can truly honor marriage as a gift from God. One way we can do this in our community is to avoid early marriage, or marriage before one is mature enough to handle its responsibilities – this can often only happen when we are above the age of 18. Before we begin, let's play a quick game.

#### Initial icebreaker: "Sharing the Burden."

This is an exercise to demonstrate the equal and interdependent roles of husbands and wives. Divide into pairs. Ask each pair to sit on the floor with their partner, backs together, feet out in front and arms linked. Their task is to stand up together. Once everyone has done this, have two pairs join together and then instruct the group of four to try to repeat the task. After they succeed, add another two and try again. Keep adding people until your whole group is trying to stand together. This can lead to a discussion of teamwork and equality.

**For all women: How do you feel about the institution of marriage? Do you believe it is supposed to be an equal partnership?**

For married women with sons: Ask them how much they have discussed equality and division of work in the house. How do they treat their sisters? How do they view women?

For married women with daughters: Ask them how much they have discussed equality and division of work in the house. How does she treat others? Do you encourage her to educate and support herself?

For married women without children: Ask them what their expectations were before they got married. If they were to have children, would they treat their sons and daughters equally?

For unmarried women: Ask them what their expectations are of marriage. How are they viewed/treated by their families? What is their experience with division of labor in the house? Do they feel that all do their equal share? If not, what are ways they could remedy that?

**Supporting verses:** Read verses about fair treatment between husband and wife, and about how marriage is a gift from God, meant to be based on mutual love and respect.

**FACILITATOR SPEAKING GUIDE:** Marriage is a gift from God, and we should not enter into it lightly. It is meant to be an equal partnership based on mutual love and respect – anything else is displeasing to God. Love and mutual respect cannot easily grow in a forced, early marriage between an underage girl and an adult man, as the relationship will be more like father-daughter than that of husband and wife. Overburdening an unprepared underage girl with the duties of marriage is not pleasing to God – instead, God wants us all to wait until we are mentally, emotionally, financially, physically, and spiritually prepared for marriage.

## Emphasize the following key messages:

- 1) Marriage is a gift from God, meant to be enjoyed as a partnership based on mutual, unconditional, equal love.
- 2) Like everything, marriage has its proper time: we must be mentally, emotionally, financially, physically, and spiritually prepared for marriage.
- 3) We must have knowledge of all that marriage entails, including spousal relations and raising a family; underage youth do not have adequate knowledge of what marriage entails and are not adequately prepared to have joyful marital relations or raise a family.

**Supporting verse:** “Let the husband render unto the wife due benevolence; and likewise also the wife unto the husband.” (1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 7:3)

- Ask the group what “due benevolence means,” then ask them how they think it relates to the icebreaker exercise. Then, tell them that it means, above all, trust and kindness to one another.

## Main activity

For a group of married women:

- 1) Ask women about their experiences being married. Have them call out words they associate with marriage, and write them down on a chalk board/ large piece of paper. Ask them to pick which words (read them out loud in semi-literate settings) seem to belong in an ideal marriage.
- 2) Ask them how prepared they felt when they were married. Go over what it means to be physically, mentally, financially, and emotionally prepared for marriage. Go into more detail about preparation for marriage if they were mostly child brides, with the intent of teaching them about having their daughters wait.

For a group of un-married women:

- 1) Use a physically resonant example. Have a bag full of rocks ready, and a sack. Have two volunteers stand holding the sack, and tell them they must not let the sack touch the ground. Add rocks to the sack one by one, naming them things like, “married life,” “a house,” “a farm,” “one child,” “another child,” “another child,” “feeding your family,” “pleasing your in-laws,” etc. At a certain point, the sack will become heavy. After the sack has touched the ground or the women can’t hold it up anymore, have everyone return to their seats, and talk to them about the responsibilities of marriage. Ask them what they think about the activity, and

**\*NOTE: Please give the family in your faith-specific EM flipchart narrative an appropriate local name!**

how heavy the responsibilities of being married seemed. Ask what might have happened if their partner were much younger/physically weaker than they were, or if one partner refused to hold their end of the sack. Emphasize that because marriage is so full of important responsibilities, it requires two mature, willing, equal partners.

**FACILITATOR SPEAKING GUIDE:** Thank you for sharing your thoughts, ideas, and experiences. No matter what our view of marriage is, this is what God wants us to know: it is a gift, meant to be based on love and respect, but can only be a true blessing when we wait until we are prepared and mature enough.

**Supporting verses:** “There is time for everything...a time to love...he has made everything beautiful in its time.” (Ecclesiastes 3:1)

**EM flipchart activity:** Engage the participants in the flipchart activity, featuring the \_\_\_\_ family and their four children. Please refer to the accompanying flipchart instructions/narrative and speaking guide. Show each child in the \_\_\_\_ family, and provide the details about how old they are, where they are in school, what they do to help at home, etc. At the end, ask participants which child seems most prepared for marriage. Once all participants have given their answers, flip to the last picture, featuring the oldest daughter in the family with her new husband and both sets of parents on the third day after the marriage, in a traditional coffee ceremony.

**Supporting verses:** Return to Ecclesiastes 3:1 and 1 Corinthians 7:3, and ask the women if these verses have any more meaning after this flipchart activity.

**FACILITATOR SPEAKING GUIDE:** Marriage is good, and a blessing, but God wants us to be prepared for marriage. A young girl’s body is physically not ready for marriage, she is not mentally or emotionally ready to take on a house/husband/children/sexual relations/sole responsibility for domestic work, and it is dangerous to entrust a young girl who is unable to support herself financially completely to an older man. Early marriage deprives girls and women of a full, God-pleasing life, and cannot foster the kind of love and respect that God wants in marriage.

### Conclusion

**FACILITATOR SPEAKING GUIDE:** Marriage is meant to be an equal partnership, and while it is a wonderful blessing that should be enjoyed as soon as we are able, we first must make sure we are ABLE. This means waiting until both parties are physically, mentally, financially, and emotionally prepared, and – above all- WILLING. Marriage is a means to a spiritual end, not an end in itself.

## Early Marriage

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ENGAGE WOMEN  
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Thank you again for joining me today. I know this discussion may have been difficult for some of you. However, through open, honest discussion about these things, we can do our part to stop a harmful tradition that is keeping our girls from reaching their full potential. God truly wants us to stop harmful traditions like EM – by doing so, we show respect for God’s gift of marriage, and above all, become a community based on love, mutual respect, and kindness towards one another, just as God would like us to do.

### Workshop 2

This women's group module is designed to engage a group of women in a conversation about what it means to be prepared for marriage, and how early marriage (EM) of girls under 18 affects the health of our community. The session should be facilitated by a faith leader, an elder, or any other member of the community who would normally be responsible for leading the regular women's group sessions.

**Materials needed:** The accompanying illustrated flipchart with the family narration for the EM flipchart activity. Any materials that the facilitator deems necessary based on what main activity they would like to engage the participants in. This may vary depending on whether the participants are married or unmarried women.

Please read through the instructions to the EM flipchart activity before this lesson to familiarize yourself with each picture, the narrative and the discussion questions involved.

**Topic:** We must uphold the sanctity of marriage by being properly prepared for marriage.

**FACILITATOR SPEAKING GUIDE:** Welcome, and thank you for joining me! Today, we are going to discuss marriage, and more specifically, how we can truly honor marriage as a gift from Allah. One way we can do this in our community is to avoid early marriage, or marriage before one is mature enough to handle its responsibilities – this can often only happen when we are above the age of 18. Before we begin, let's play a quick game.

**Initial icebreaker: "Sharing the Burden."**

This is an exercise to demonstrate the equal and interdependent roles of husbands and wives. Divide into pairs. Ask each pair to sit on the floor with their partner, backs together, feet out in front and arms linked. Their task is to stand up together. Once everyone has done this, have two pairs join together and then instruct the group of four to try to repeat the task. After they succeed, add another two and try again. Keep adding people until your whole group is trying to stand together. This can lead to a discussion of teamwork and equality.

**For all women: How do you feel about the institution of marriage? Do you believe it is supposed to be an equal partnership?**

For married women with sons: Ask them how much they have discussed equality and division of work in the house. How do they treat their sisters? How do they view women?

For married women with daughters: Ask them how much they have discussed equality and division of work in the house? How does she treat others? Do you encourage her to educate and support herself?

For married women without children: Ask them what their expectations were before they got married. If they were to have children, would they treat their sons and daughters equally?

For unmarried women: Ask them what their expectations are of marriage. How are they viewed/treated by their families? What is their experience with division of labor in the house? Do they feel that all do their equal share? If not, what are ways they could remedy that?

**Supporting verse:** Quran 30:21“...He created for you spouses of your own kind in order that you may repose to them in tranquility and He instilled in your hearts love and affection for one another...”

**FACILITATOR SPEAKING GUIDE:** Marriage is a gift from Allah, and we should not enter into it lightly. It is meant to be an equal partnership based on mutual love and respect – anything else is displeasing to Allah. Love and mutual respect cannot grow in a forced, early marriage between an underage girl and an adult man, as the relationship will be more like father-daughter, than like husband and wife. Overburdening an unprepared underage girl with the duties of marriage is not pleasing to Allah – instead, Allah wants us all to wait until we are mentally, emotionally, financially, physically, and spiritually prepared for marriage.

Begin by reminding everyone about the benefits of a true, loving marriage before Allah.

- Marriage should help both partners dwell in spiritual tranquility, and live a calm, peaceful life, without excessive worry.
- Marriage should help safeguard one'simaan (faith). It should help to both prevent sin, and to promote stronger faith.
- Marriage should serve as a means to emotional and sexual gratification.



- Marriage should be a form of Ibadah (Worship) because entering into a good marriage is a way of obeying Allah and His Messenger.
- Marriage should be a way of achieving goodness in life through mutual support between spouses.
- Marriage should be a way for us to build good societies, by establishing healthy families.
- Because of Islam's great honor for marriage, it strongly emphasizes that people should marry as soon as possible, but this means as soon as we are prepared, **not in childhood**.

**Supporting verse:** “O young men, whoever among you is able to marry, he should do so, as this helps him lower his gaze and maintain his chastity; and whoever is unable to (marry), he should observe fasting, as this protects him.” (Hadith of Al-Bukhaari)

**FACILITATOR SPEAKING GUIDE:** We all may think this verse applies only to young men, but it applies to all of us: it is Allah’s way of telling us we must wait to marry until we are prepared for marriage. This next activity will help us think about what it means to be prepared for marriage.

### Main Activity:

For a group of married women:

- 1) Ask women about their experiences being married. Have them call out words they associate with marriage, and write them down on a chalkboard or large piece of paper. Ask them to pick which words (read them out loud in semi-literate settings) seem to belong in an ideal marriage.
- 2) Ask them how prepared they felt when they were married. Go over what it means to be physically, mentally, financially, and emotionally prepared for marriage. Go more into detail about preparation for marriage if they were mostly child brides, with the intent of teaching them about having their daughters wait.

For a group of un-married women:

- 1) Use a physically resonant example. Have a bag full of rocks ready, and a sack. Have two volunteers stand holding the sack, and tell them they must not let the sack touch the ground. Add rocks to the sack one by one, naming them things like, “married life,” “a house,” “a farm,” “one child,” “another child,” “another child,” “feeding your family,” “pleasing your in-laws,” etc. At a certain point, the sack will become heavy. After the sack has touched the ground or the women can’t hold it up anymore, have everyone return to their seats, and talk to them about the responsibilities of marriage. Ask them what they think about the activity, and how heavy the responsibilities of being married seemed. Ask what might have happened if their partner were

much younger/physically weaker than they were, or if one partner refused to hold their end of the sack. Emphasize that because marriage is so full of important responsibilities, it requires two mature, willing, equal partners.

**\*NOTE: Please give the family in your faith-specific EM flipchart narrative an appropriate local name!**

**FACILITATOR SPEAKING GUIDE:** Thank you for sharing your thoughts, ideas, and experiences. No matter what our view of marriage is, this is what Allah wants us to know: it is a gift, meant to be based on love and respect, but can only be a true blessing when we wait until we are prepared and mature enough.

**Supporting verse:** Return to Quran 30:21, then discuss the following Hadith:

- “O young men, whoever among you is (financially and physically) able to marry, he should do so, as this helps him lower his gaze and maintain his chastity; and whoever is unable to (marry), he should observe fasting, as this protects him.” (Hadith of Al-Bukhaari)
  - i. This sunnah clearly tells us that Islam considers the need for mental, physical, and financial maturity before entering into marriage. It is not just referring to young men – it refers to all of us! If we are afraid that we may be tempted into premarital sex by waiting “too long,” we must instead practice discipline, self-control, and prayer – this, instead of early marriage, makes us stronger in the faith.

**EM flipchart activity:** Engage the participants in the EM flipchart activity, featuring the \_\_\_ family with four children. Please refer to the accompanying flipchart instructions/narrative and speaking guide. Show each child in the \_\_\_ family, and give details about how old they are, where they are in school, what they do to help at home, etc. At the end, ask participants which child seems most prepared for marriage. Once all participants have given their answers, flip to the last picture, featuring the oldest daughter in the family with her new husband and both sets of parents on the third day after the marriage, in a traditional coffee ceremony.\*

**FACILITATOR SPEAKING GUIDE:** Marriage is good, and a blessing, but Allah wants us to be prepared for marriage. A young girl’s body is physically not ready for marriage, she is not mentally or emotionally ready to take on a house/husband/children/sexual relations/sole responsibility for domestic work, and it is dangerous to entrust a young girl who is unable to support herself financially completely to an older man. Early marriage deprives girls and women of a full, Allah-pleasing life, and cannot foster the kind of love and respect that Allah wants in marriage. There may be a few Quranic verses and Hadiths that are

confusing, and appear to support early marriage. Let's go through two of these references, and clear up some of the confusion.

- Quran 65:4 "If you are in doubt concerning those of your wives who have ceased menstruating, know that their waiting period [before one can divorce them] shall be three months. The same shall apply to those who have not yet menstruated."

This is the only verse which specifically mentions early marriage. A footnote acknowledges that child marriages were common custom in the days of Mohammed, dating back to "al- gahiliyyah," or, "the era of ignorance."

- "O people, Jibaraell has brought unto me a divine command stating that girls are like fruits from a tree. If they are not plucked in time then they get rotten by the rays of the sun and a slight blow of the wind will result in their falling down from the tree." (Hadith of Imam Sadia)

As the Prophet's teachings do not contradict one another, this sunnah should be interpreted in light of the sunnah that provides ways for us to wait and keep ourselves from temptation ("O young men, whoever among you is (financially and physically) able to marry, he should do so, as this helps him lower his gaze and maintain his chastity; and whoever is unable to (marry), he should observe fasting, as this protects him"). This Hadith does not warn against waiting the proper amount of time; rather, it warns against delaying marriage when we have become in fact, fully capable of entering into marriage and mature enough to do so.

## Conclusion

**FACILITATOR SPEAKING GUIDE:** Marriage is meant to be an equal partnership, and while it is a wonderful blessing that should be enjoyed as soon as we are able, we first must make sure we are able. This means waiting until both parties are physically, mentally, financially, and emotionally prepared, and – above all – willing. Marriage is a means to a spiritual end, not an end in itself.

Thank you again for joining me today. I know this discussion may have been difficult for some of you. However, through open, honest discussion about these things, we can do our part to stop a harmful tradition that is keeping our girls from reaching their full potential. Allah truly wants us to seek knowledge about things we do not understand, and stop harmful traditions like EM – by doing so, we show respect for Allah's gift of marriage, and above all, become a community based on love, mutual respect, and kindness towards one another, just as Allah would like us to do.



### Engage Youth: Girls, Boys, &/or Mixed groups – “Honor the Institution of Marriage”

This interactive session is tailored specifically for the youth – whether girls alone, boys, or mixed youth groups – providing them with thoughtful opportunities to understand EM and its consequences. How to engage different subgroups of youth will depend on local circumstances, but key messages remain constant. The session should be facilitated by a faith leader, an elder, or any other member of the community who would normally be responsible for leading the regular youth group sessions. Because this topic is particularly sensitive, there are two main activities outlined in the module, one for children 14 and younger, and one for young adults ages 15-18.

In preparation for the youth group meeting, read the scriptural support elements in Module 2 to identify verses that you may want to use as part of the lesson, and review the EM narrative flipchart for your faith, featuring the \_\_\_ family (Christian) or the \_\_\_ family (Muslim)\* . For information about EM, refer to the “EM Information Sheet” in **Module 2: “Teach Yourself”**.

**\*NOTE: Please give the family in your faith-specific EM flipchart narrative an appropriate local name!**

# Early Marriage

## A Faith Leader Toolkit to Address Harmful Traditional Practices in Your Community

### Activity

#### Creating a Safe Space – Before You Begin

**Suggested Time: 15 minutes**

Before you begin your first workshop with a group, it is important to establish what is called “**safe space.**” Safe space doesn’t just happen – it’s up to you to take a proactive role in creating an atmosphere that will best support the growth and learning of each participant. Here’s a quick activity that will help establish safe space:

- 1) Explain to participants that the workshop(s) they’ll be taking part in are not just about you teaching them, but rather about everyone discussing difficult issues and learning from one another. Say that in order to do this, we need to have a space in which each person feels comfortable and safe.
- 2) Ask the group, ‘How can we create a safe space?’ or ‘What do you need in order to feel comfortable with everyone in this group?’ Write the various answers that you hear on a large piece of paper or on a chalkboard so that everyone can see them.
- 3) Once you have received answers from as many women as would like to contribute, read everything that is written on the paper aloud, and ask the group if they think anything should be added. If not, ask the group if they are willing to commit to upholding what is written as group standards for the workshop.
- 4) Have participants raise their hands if they promise to make this a safe, comfortable space for everyone!

It doesn’t have to end there! You can always come back to your safe space agreement. If your group ever meets again, you can remind people of their commitments at subsequent sessions. Additionally, if there is ever a difficult conversation or tension in the group, you can remind people of their safe space agreement and hold people to the intentions and norms that they set.

#### KEY TERM:

**SAFE SPACE** refers to a cooperative learning environment in which all participants feel comfortable and safe to fully participate. A safe space is one in which every person respects the ideas and thoughts of each other and people are supportive of each other’s growth and learning.

## Youth Workshop

**Materials needed:** The accompanying illustrated flipchart with the family narration for the EM flipchart activity, and any materials that the facilitator deems necessary based on what main activity they would like to engage the participants in (blackboard, paper and pens, etc.). This may vary depending on the age and literacy level of the group.

Please read through the instructions to the EM flipchart activity before this lesson to familiarize yourself with each picture, the narrative, and the discussion questions involved.

**Topic: “Honor the Institution of Marriage.”**

**FACILITATOR SPEAKING GUIDE:** Welcome, and thank you for joining me! Today, we are going to discuss marriage, and more specifically, how we can truly honor marriage as a gift from God. One way we can do this in our community is to avoid early marriage, or marriage before one is mature enough to handle its responsibilities – this can often only happen when we are above the age of 18. Before we begin, let’s play a quick game.

**Initial icebreaker: “Blind Leader.”**

This is an exercise that emphasizes trust of your partner. One partner is blindfolded, and the other partner must stand at one end of the room, and lead the blindfolded to another corner by calling out directions like, “move to your left!” “walk forward!” This activity engages two participants who may not know each other and builds a quick sense of trust among the group.

**Discussion Questions:** How did you feel about that activity? Did you enjoy it? What parts were challenging? How do you think this might be like marriage, in any way?

**FACILITATOR SPEAKING GUIDE:** Marriage is a gift from God, and we should not enter into it lightly. It is meant to be a partnership based on mutual love and respect – anything else is displeasing to God. God wants us all to wait until we are mentally, emotionally, financially, physically, and spiritually prepared for marriage, so that we can treat our husband or wife with the love and respect they deserve, and that God wants us to show!

### Emphasize the following two key messages:

- 1) Marriage is a gift from God, meant to be enjoyed as a partnership based on mutual, unconditional, equal love.
- 2) Like everything, marriage has its proper time: We must be mentally, emotionally, financially, physically, and spiritually prepared for marriage.

**Supporting verse:** “Let the husband render unto the wife due benevolence; and likewise also the wife unto the husband.” (1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 7:3)

- Ask all participants what “due benevolence” means, then ask them how they think it relates to the icebreaker exercise. Then, tell them that it means, above all, trust and kindness to one another.

### Main activity:

- 1) Depending on the children’s literacy levels, have them either write down or call out what they are looking for in a spouse. If they are too young or don’t have any ideas, give them examples of traits like, “beautiful,” “kind,” “hard-working,” “lazy,” “selfish,” or “good Christian,” and ask what types of people would make the best husbands/wives.
- 2) Then ask them what they think being married means. If they are reluctant to speak out at first, write a few things down on the wall/board or state things like, “trust,” “being able to raise children,” “selfishness,” “fighting,” “love,” and “sacrificing yourself for the other.” Ask which of these is best in marriage. Make sure to emphasize “equality” and “sacrificing yourself for the other” above all.
- 3) Finally, use a physically resonant example – this really helps to emphasize the need for capable, “equal” partners in marriage. Have a bag full of rocks ready, and a sack. Have two volunteers stand holding the sack, and tell them they must not let the sack touch the ground. Add rocks to the sack one by one, naming them things like, “married life,” “a house,” “a farm,” “one child,” “another child,” “another child,” “feeding your family,” “pleasing your in-laws,” etc. At a certain point, the sack will become heavy – watch and make sure the children aren’t hurting themselves. After the sack has touched the ground/the children can’t hold it up anymore, have everyone return to their seats, and talk to them about the responsibilities of marriage. Ask them what they think about the activity, and how heavy the responsibilities of being married seemed. Ask what might have happened if their partner were much younger/physically weaker than they were, or if one partner refused to hold their end of the sack. Emphasize that because marriage is such a heavy responsibility, it requires two mature, willing, equal partners.

**FACILITATOR SPEAKING GUIDE:** Thank you for all your participation! No matter what our view of marriage is, this is what God wants us to know: It is a gift, meant to be based on love and respect, but can only be a true blessing when we wait until we are prepared and mature enough.



**Supporting verse:** “There is time for everything...a time to love...he has made everything beautiful in its time” (Ecclesiastes 3:1).

**EM flipchart activity:** Engage the participants in the EM flipchart activity, featuring the \_\_\_\_ family and their four children. Please refer to the accompanying flipchart instructions/narrative and speaking guide. Show each child in the \_\_\_\_ family, and give details about how old they are, where they are in school, what they do to help at home, etc. At the end, ask participants which child seems most prepared for marriage. Once all participants have given their answers, flip to the last picture, featuring the oldest daughter in the family with her new husband and both sets of parents on the third day after the marriage, in a traditional coffee ceremony.\*

**\*NOTE: Please give the family in your faith-specific EM flipchart narrative an appropriate local name!**

**Supporting verse:** Return to Ecclesiastes 3:1 and 1 Corinthians 7:3, and ask all participants if these verses have any more meaning after this flipchart activity.

**FACILITATOR SPEAKING GUIDE:** Marriage is good, and a blessing, but God wants us to be prepared for marriage. When we marry too young, before we are prepared, we cannot live a full, God-pleasing life, and cannot foster the kind of love and respect that God wants in marriage.

### Conclusion

**FACILITATOR SPEAKING GUIDE:** Marriage is meant to be a mutually loving partnership, and while it is a wonderful blessing that should be enjoyed as soon as we are able, we first must make sure we are ABLE. God loves us all, and wants the best for us – so we must respect all of God’s great gifts to us, including marriage!

Thank you again for joining me today. I hope you all had fun and learned something. The one thing we all need to know is this: by waiting until we are mature and ready to marry, we show respect for God’s gift of marriage, and above all, become a community based on love, mutual respect, and kindness towards one another, just as God would like us to do.

**Materials needed:** The accompanying illustrated flipchart with the family narration for the EM flipchart activity, and any materials that the facilitator deems necessary based on what main activity they would like to engage the participants in (blackboard, paper and pens, etc.). This may vary depending on the age and literacy level of the group.

Please read through the instructions to the EM flipchart activity before this lesson to familiarize yourself with each picture, the narrative, and the discussion questions involved.

**Topic:** “Honor the Institution of Marriage.”

**FACILITATOR SPEAKING GUIDE:** Welcome, and thank you for joining me! Today, we are going to discuss marriage, and more specifically, how we can truly honor marriage as a gift from Allah. One way we can do this in our community is to avoid early marriage, or marriage before one is mature enough to handle its responsibilities – this can often only happen when we are above the age of 18. Before we begin, let’s play a quick game.

**Initial icebreaker:** “Blind Leader.”

This is an exercise that emphasizes trust of your partner. One partner is blindfolded, and the other partner must stand at one end of the room, and lead the blindfolded to another corner by calling out directions like, “move to your left!” “walk forward!”. This activity engages two participants who may not know each other and builds a quick sense of trust among the group.

**Discussion Questions:** How did you feel about that activity? Did you enjoy it? What parts were challenging? How do you think this might be like marriage, in any way?

**Supporting verse:** Quran 30:21“...He created for you spouses of your own kind in order that you may repose to them in tranquility and He instilled in your hearts love and affection for one another...”

**FACILITATOR SPEAKING GUIDE:** Marriage is a gift from Allah, and we should not enter into it lightly. It is meant to be a partnership based on mutual love and respect – anything else is displeasing to Allah. Allah wants us all to wait until we are mentally, emotionally, financially, physically, and spiritually prepared

for marriage, so that we can treat our husband or wife with the love and respect they deserve, and that Allah wants us to show!

### Emphasize the following two key messages:

- 1) Marriage is a gift from Allah, meant to be enjoyed as a partnership based on mutual, unconditional, equal love. It is a path to closeness with Allah, not a financial end in itself.
- 2) Like everything, marriage has its proper time. We must be mentally, emotionally, financially, physically, and spiritually prepared for marriage.

**Supporting verse:** Quran 30:21“...He created for you spouses of your own kind in order that you may repose to them in tranquility and He instilled in your hearts love and affection for one another...”

- 1) Ask the children how they think this relates to the trust exercise. Make sure that they know that above all, marriage is a gift from Allah, a way to have a trustworthy partner in life. However, to be trusted and to trust another person this much, we must be adequately prepared for marriage.

### Main activity:

- 1) Depending on the children’s literacy levels, have them either write down or call out what they are looking for in a spouse. If they are too young or don’t have any ideas, give them examples of traits like, “beautiful,” “kind,” “hard-working,” “lazy,” “selfish,” or “good Muslim,” and ask what types of people would make the best husbands/wives.
- 2) Then ask them what they think being married means. If they are reluctant to speak out at first, write a few things down on the wall/board or state things like, “trust,” “being able to raise children,” “selfishness,” “fighting,” “love,” and “sacrificing yourself for the other.” Ask which of these is best in marriage. Make sure, at the end, to emphasize the need for “equality” and “sacrificing yourself for the other.”
- 3) Finally, use a physically resonant example – this especially helps demonstrate the need for two capable, equal partners in a marriage. Have a bag full of rocks ready, and a sack. Have two volunteers stand holding the sack, and tell them they must not let the sack touch the ground. Add rocks to the sack one by one, naming them things like, “married life,” “a house,” “a farm,” “one child,” “another child,” “another child,” “feeding your family,” “pleasing your in-laws,” etc. At a certain point, the sack will become heavy – watch and make sure the children aren’t hurting themselves.

After the sack has touched the ground/the children can’t hold it up anymore, have everyone return to their seats, and talk to them about the responsibilities of marriage. Ask them what they think about the activity, and how heavy the responsibilities of being married seemed. Ask what might have happened if their partner were much younger/physically weaker than they were, or if one partner refused to hold their end of the sack. Emphasize that because marriage is such a heavy responsibility, it requires two mature, willing, equal partners.

**FACILITATOR SPEAKING GUIDE:** Thank you for all your participation! No matter what our view of marriage is, this is what Allah wants us to know: it is a gift, meant to be based on love and respect, but can only be a true blessing when we wait until we are prepared and mature enough.

**Supporting verse:** Quran 30:21“...He created for you spouses of your own kind in order that you may repose to them in tranquility and He instilled in your hearts love and affection for one another...”

**FACILITATOR SPEAKING GUIDE:** As we know, Quran 30:21 says that Allah “created for you spouses of your own kind in order that you may repose to them in tranquility and He instilled in your hearts love and affection for one another...” Did naming what makes a good spouse, and talking about sharing the burdens in marriage, make you think about this verse any differently?

What is the sort of person would make a spouse in whom we could “repose in tranquility,” as Allah wants us to do?

**\*NOTE: Please give the family in your faith-specific EM flipchart narrative an appropriate local name!**

**EM flipchart activity:** Engage the participants in the EM flipchart activity, featuring the \_\_\_\_\_ family with four children. Please refer to the accompanying flipchart instructions/narrative and speaking guide. Show each child in the \_\_\_\_\_ family, and give details about how old they are, where they are in school, what they do to help at home, etc. At the end, ask participants which child seems most prepared for marriage. Once all participants have given their answers, flip to the last picture, featuring the oldest daughter in the family with her new husband and both sets of parents on the third day after the marriage, in a traditional coffee ceremony.\*

**Supporting verse:** Return to Quran 30:21 again, and now discuss the following Hadith:

- “O young men, whoever among you is (financially and physically) able to marry, he should do so, as this helps him lower his gaze and maintain his chastity; and whoever is unable to (marry), he should observe fasting, as this protects him.” (Hadith of Al-Bukhaari)

This sunnah clearly tells us that Islam considers the need for mental, physical, and financial maturity before entering into marriage. It is not just referring to young men – it refers to all of us! Waiting until we are properly prepared, as the Prophet tells us in this Hadith, can be hard—however this, instead of early marriage, makes us stronger in the faith, and is far more pleasing to Allah!

**FACILITATOR SPEAKING GUIDE:** Marriage is good, and a blessing, but Allah wants us to be prepared for marriage, as much as He wants us to be married. When we marry too young, before we are prepared, we cannot live a full, Allah-pleasing life, and cannot foster the kind of love and respect that God wants in marriage.

### Conclusion

**FACILITATOR SPEAKING GUIDE:** Marriage is meant to be a mutually loving partnership, and while it is a wonderful blessing that should be enjoyed as soon as we are able, we first must make sure we are ABLE. Allah wants the best for us – so we must respect all of Allah’s great gifts to us, including marriage!

Thank you again for joining me today. I hope you all had fun and learned something. The one thing we all need to know is this: by waiting until we are mature and ready to marry, we show respect for Allah’s gift of marriage, and above all, become a community based on love, mutual respect, and kindness towards one another, just as Allah would like us to do!

## Early Marriage

A Faith Leader Toolkit  
to Address Harmful  
Traditional Practices  
in Your Community



ACTIVITY  
KIT

### Activity Kit: Everything You Need to Engage Your Community

The activity kit contains an early marriage flipchart activity and lesson instructions to be used as part of modules 4 and 5.

