

Statement on Child Marriage - 2009

Women of Reform Judaism Board of Directors Statement

Child marriage is commonplace in many areas around the world. The word child is defined by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child as anyone “below the age of eighteen years unless, under the law applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier” (Article 1). In studies and advocacy alerts, child marriage (sometimes called early marriage) generally refers to marriages in which a partner, usually the girl, is less than eighteen years of age.

Marriage of young girls takes place most frequently in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia. As of 2006, seventy-seven percent of women in Niger, between the ages of twenty and twenty-four years of age, were married before they were eighteen years old. The rate was sixty-five percent in Bangladesh (UNICEF, Child Marriage, Child Protection Information Sheet, May 2006). Estimates suggest that within the next ten years, if current trends continue, approximately one hundred million girls in the developing world (excluding China) will be married before they are eighteen years of age.

UNICEF considers child marriage a human rights violation. Recognizing that it is often a response to poverty in struggling nations, it is, however, particularly harmful to young girls. Child brides are more vulnerable to sexually transmitted diseases than are adult women and their pregnancies face higher risks, including death, during delivery. They are often separated from their families and communities and become isolated. Because they usually cannot continue in school, early marriage traps them in ongoing poverty (UNICEF, Child Marriage, Child Protection Information Sheet, May 2006).

In the United States, the International Protecting Girls by Preventing Child Marriage Act of 2009 has been introduced in both the House of Representatives and Senate. It would implement strategies to work towards the elimination of child marriage that include diplomatic and programmatic initiatives; among the latter are programs in education, health, and income generation. We urge WRJ affiliates to identify and support legislation on child marriage in their countries.

Women of Reform Judaism has a long history of resolutions in support of the health, education, and well-being of children (1936, 1944, 1945, 1953, 1977, 1979, 1981, 1983, 1987, 1991, 1996, 1997, 1999, 2000, 2001, 2006). Concerned about the impact of early marriage on girls' health and lives, Women of Reform Judaism urges Congress and the administration to address this issue with legislation, such as the International Protecting Girls by Preventing Child Marriage Act of 2009, and to work with other nations and the United Nations to protect girls. We call on our affiliates in Canada and other parts of the world to advocate appropriate legislation and develop programs in seeking just and healthy lives for women and girls globally.

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