



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 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, 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, not 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 21st 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," whenever 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 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 21st 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” (1st 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 are 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.

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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.’” (Mustadrakul Wasail) 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, Jibarael 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 are, 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 ibn Majah) 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 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 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 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.