



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 come up with ways they can act to eliminate EM for good. These workshops can be implemented in any women’s 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, 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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Traditional Practices
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ENGAGE WOMEN MODULE 4

CHRISTIAN



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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 like 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” (1st 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 more into detail about preparation for marriage if they were mostly child brides, with aim 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!**

- 2) 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 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 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 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 MODULE 4

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’s imaan (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 chalk board 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 aim 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 such a heavy responsibility, 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."
 - ii. 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)
 - iii. 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 are, 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.