



CHILD MARRIAGE: GIRLS 14 AND YOUNGER AT RISK

THE REALITIES:

- Marriage of girls ages 14 and younger is a fundamental violation of their sexual and reproductive health and human rights.
- Girls married at ages 14 and younger face an elevated risk of complications in pregnancy and childbirth and contracting sexually transmitted infections (STIs), including HIV and experience social and educational disadvantages.
- Policies and programs require investments to prevent the marriage of girls under age 15; to ensure that all adolescents' sexual, marital, and reproductive transitions are safe, informed, and voluntary; and to support girls who are already married.

WHAT IS CHILD MARRIAGE AND WHERE DOES IT OCCUR?

The United Nations (UN) Convention on the Rights of the Child defines a child as anyone under the age of 18 unless adulthood is legally attained earlier under the applicable country law. Thus, with some exceptions, “child marriages” are generally understood to mean marriages taking place before age 18.^{1,2} This brief focuses on the betrothal and marriage of girls ages 14 and younger, who are especially vulnerable to violations of their health and rights, and considers such marriages *forced* because girls this young rarely have the legal capacity or the personal agency to disobey their elders or to give or withhold their consent.

Worldwide, marriage laws and practices are diverse. In most developing countries, between 20 percent and 70 percent of young women marry (or start living with a partner) before age 18 (see table).^{3,4} In many countries, the arranged marriage of girls at or before puberty in order to “protect their virginity” or the family’s “honor,” or to increase their “exchange value” was never widely practiced; in others, it is common among some groups. Socioeconomic factors also play a role. Parents may feel “forced” to marry their daughter early because they fear for her safety and economic security.

While some marriages of adolescents ages 15 and over occur against their will, thus violating their rights, others are initiated by young people themselves or with their consent. Understanding child marriage requires an understanding of the causes, meanings, and consequences of these marriages, and the degree of coercion or choice involved.⁵

EARLY MARRIAGE JEOPARDIZES GIRLS’ HEALTH

Child marriage is the major cause worldwide of pregnancies before age 15. In most of the developing world, 90 percent of girls who give birth before age 18 are married.⁶ Young brides typically become sexually active as soon as they are married, sometimes before their first menstruation.⁷ Often living in their husband’s household and community, they face intense pressures to bear children as soon as possible, with potentially disastrous results.

Countries with the highest proportions of girls ages 15 – 19 who married before age 15, and proportions who gave birth before age 15, of those with surveys

	M	B		M	B
SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA			SOUTH ASIA		
1998 Niger	27 %	4 %	2004 Bangladesh	26 %	6 %
1999 Guinea	20	7	1999 India	14	2
2001 Mali	19	5	2001 Nepal	9	0
2004 Chad	18	6	Afghanistan	probably high	
2003 Nigeria	16	3	CENTRAL AMERICA		
1995 Central African Rep.	16	4	2002 Dominican Republic	10	3
2000 Ethiopia	14	1	2001 Nicaragua	9	2
2001 Mauritania	13	3			

Source: Demographic and Health Surveys, <http://www.measuredhs.com>, StatCompiler

- Because their bodies (bone structure, pelvis, reproductive organs) are not yet fully developed, girls ages 14 and younger run a very high risk of complications in pregnancy and childbirth compared with older adolescents.³
- Prolonged and obstructed labor, which is common among pregnant young adolescents, can lead to hemorrhage, severe infection, and maternal death. This is especially true for girls who experience additional pregnancy-related complications such as eclampsia. Those who survive may suffer from obstetric fistula, a debilitating condition that causes chronic incontinence and results in shame and social isolation.⁸

Girls who are married young are also more vulnerable to sexually transmitted infections (STIs), including HIV/AIDS. For example, in Kisumu, Kenya, HIV infection rates are nearly 33 percent among married girls ages 15 – 19, compared with 22 percent among unmarried, sexually-active girls of the same age.⁹

- Girls' physiological vulnerability due to the small size, inelasticity, and lack of lubrication of the vagina and cervix is compounded by their exposure to frequent, unprotected, and sometimes forced sexual intercourse within marriage; lack of information about STIs, including HIV; and inability to negotiate their own protection.^{9,10}
- Throughout countries of Africa and Latin America, more than 80 percent of adolescent girls ages 15 – 19 who report having unprotected sex in the previous week are married.⁹
- The average age gap between young brides and the men they marry reaches eight to ten years or more in some countries.³ The older the husband, the more likely it is that he has had multiple sexual partners and may be HIV-positive.^{9,10}

GIRLS MARRIED AT 14 OR YOUNGER EXPERIENCE DISADVANTAGES

Girls who are married at a very young age experience related educational, social, and personal disadvantages compared with those who marry later, including:^{1,2,6}

- greater control over the young bride by her husband and his family, including restrictions on her freedom of movement and her capacity to seek health care and family planning services;

- increased likelihood that she will experience domestic violence and sexual abuse;
- little if any schooling and little possibility of pursuing educational opportunities;
- limited capacity to enter the paid labor force and earn an independent income;
- greater personal insecurity in the face of the possibility of divorce or early widowhood; and
- social isolation from her own family, friends, and other social networks.

THE LAWS OF SOME COUNTRIES PERMIT CHILD MARRIAGE

In 1994, the UN Committee on the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women issued a nonbinding recommendation that countries adopt a minimum age for marriage of 18 years for both sexes.¹¹

Yet the marriage laws of developing countries vary widely. The most common minimum age at which a young person who wishes to marry may do so *without obtaining parental consent* is 18 years. Virtually all developing countries permit earlier marriages *with* the consent of parents, legal guardians, or judicial or religious authorities, however, often without specifying any minimum age or requiring the consent of the underage bride or groom.¹² Notably, marriages before age 15 or 16 violate the laws setting a minimum age for a young person's consent to sex in most countries.¹³

Exceptions to legal statutes are often made for religious laws or customary practices. For example, in Niger, the civil code prohibits the marriage of boys under 18 and girls under 15. According to observers, the code is “virtually never applied” due to the existence of two other legal systems, one judicial and the other Islamic, which allow marriage at younger ages.¹²

Even without these exceptions, laws regulating minimum age at marriage may be ignored or easily circumvented. A girl may be married in a traditional ceremony long before the union is registered with civil authorities (if it is registered at all), or the ages may be falsified in the absence of birth certificates or other documentation.

MULTIPLE APPROACHES ARE NEEDED TO ELIMINATE CHILD MARRIAGE

Interventions are needed to prevent or eliminate the forced marriage of girls ages 14 and younger; to help ensure a safe passage to marriage and adulthood for all girls; and to support girls who are already married. These actions include (but are by no means limited to):^{1,2,3,14}

- Advocate for governments to set a minimum legal age at marriage of 18 years without the requirement of parental consent for young people who wish to marry, and at least 15 years with the free consent of both parties and the consent of parents, guardians, or judicial authorities. Safeguards must be included in the law and its implementation to ensure that both parties freely choose to marry and that “parental consent” is not used to justify customary or religious laws or practices that permit forced marriages.

In those countries where the marriage of girls under age 15 is practiced, and in all places where forced marriage occurs, special legal and programmatic initiatives are warranted, such as identifying and bringing cases to court, educating customary and religious authorities, and penalizing violators.

- Strengthen marriage registration systems to require compulsory civil registration, age confirmation, and “free and full consent” of the bride and groom. Other government registration systems should also be developed and/or strengthened for adolescents, including provision of identification cards, birth certificates, health certifications, and proof of school enrollment.
- Create incentives and promote campaigns for the elimination of child marriage among community leaders and organizations, stressing the benefits to girls’ health and human rights, families, and communities. Work to dispel the myth of marriage as a safety zone for girls and women.
- Expand investments in girls’ education, the quality of teaching, the safety of school environments, and promote universal attendance of all girls, at least up to age 15. Eliminate school fees and provide incentives for parents to send their daughters to school.
- Support comprehensive sexuality education programs in schools and communities that begin early in primary school and continue through adolescence. These programs should stress human rights and gender equality, including the right to refuse marriage.
- Provide vocational training and financial literacy programs, both in schools and also for out-of-school girls ages 10-14, to facilitate their income-earning capacity and employment now or later. Establish safe girls-only spaces in schools and clubs for girls who are out of school and may already be married.
- Invest in the sexual and reproductive health of young adolescent girls, both married and unmarried, by providing comprehensive reproductive health care that is accessible to girls of all ages and includes family planning and HIV prevention services, pregnancy and delivery care, and information and education on sexual and reproductive health.

Each of these actions promotes the health and well-being of young adolescent girls and contributes to the elimination of child marriage.

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FOR MORE INFORMATION:

For references, please visit references.iwhc.org.

For more information on adolescents, please visit www.iwhc.org.

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