

OVERVIEW OF CHILD MARRIAGE

Child marriage is a fundamental violation of human rights. Many girls (and a smaller number of boys) are married without their free and full consent. By international conventions, 18 years has been established as the legal age of consent to marriage.¹ If the timing of marriage does not change, over 100 million girls will be married as children in the next ten years.²

Child marriage is closely associated with no or low levels of schooling for girls. In West and Central Africa, girls with three or fewer years of schooling are five times more likely than girls with eight or more years of schooling to marry before age 18.³ Poverty leads many families to withdraw their daughters from school and arrange marriage for them at a young age. These girls are denied the proven benefits of education, which include improved health, lower fertility, and increased economic productivity.⁴

Child marriage, in many instances, marks an abrupt transition into sexual relations with a husband who is considerably older and unchosen. The younger a bride is, the more likely it is that she enters marriage as a virgin, and the larger the age difference between her and her spouse.⁵ Parents frequently arrange marriages for their daughters without their input or consent; in Pakistan, only 3 percent of married girls had some say in choosing their spouse.⁶ In some settings it appears that the younger a girl is when she gets married, the less say she has in the choice of her husband.⁷

First births carry special risks for both mother and child. The vast majority of births to adolescent girls are first births that occur within marriage.⁸ The foremost risk first births carry is prolonged or obstructed labor, which can result in obstetric fistulas in settings where access to care is limited. First births also have elevated risks of pre-eclampsia, malaria, and infant mortality.⁹ Girls who give birth during adolescence

require special attention because they are less mature and are simultaneously coping with their own and their baby's physiological, emotional, and economic needs.¹⁰ Globally, adolescent mothers tend to be poorer, less educated, and less adequately nourished than older mothers; they also face greater social disadvantage.¹¹

Married girls have distinct and in some settings substantial risks of acquiring HIV. Child brides typically experience high rates of unprotected sex, have significantly older (and thus more sexually experienced) spouses, and are largely unable to negotiate safer sex.¹² In settings with generalized HIV/AIDS epidemics, these factors may leave married girls vulnerable to infection. Indeed, a study in Kisumu, Kenya and Ndola, Zambia not only found strikingly high HIV prevalence rates among married girls (32.9 percent and 27.3 percent respectively), but also found that these rates were about 11 percentage points higher than the rates among unmarried sexually active girls.¹³

Mali is home to 11.6 million people, with 47 percent of its population under age 15.¹⁴ While the economy of this West African nation is improving, it is still recovering from the devastating droughts and famines of the 1980s. Approximately 73 percent of the population live on less than US\$1 a day,¹⁵ and life expectancy is 45 years.¹⁶

Mali has one of the most severe crises of child marriage in the world today. The legal age of marriage is 18 for girls and 21 for boys, but girls may be married as early as age 15 with parental consent.¹⁷ For civil marriages, the law dictates that prospective spouses discuss and agree on whether their union will be polygynous or monogamous; however, a woman's say in the matter is minimal given her limited options, and most women have only a religious marriage performed. Furthermore, most women in this overwhelmingly Muslim country accept polygyny as a practice sanctioned by Islam, which permits a man to have up to four wives.¹⁸ The payment of bride price is recognized by law,¹⁹ promoting the perception that wives are the property of husbands. In addition, female genital circumcision affects nearly all Malian women (92 percent), with 61 percent of circumcisions occurring before age 5.²⁰

A high prevalence of child marriage exists

Nationwide, 25 percent of girls were married by age 15, and nearly two-thirds of girls were married by age 18.²¹

Child marriage is extremely prevalent in some regions; in Kayes, 39 percent of girls were married by age 15, and 83 percent were married by age 18.²²

Although the practice of polygyny is decreasing in Mali, 22 percent of married girls aged 15–19 are in polygynous marriages.²³

Married girls receive little or no schooling

Eighty-six percent of married girls have received no education, compared to 62 percent of unmarried girls.²⁴

More than nine out of ten married girls aged 15–19 cannot read at all.²⁵

Large spousal age differences are common and may limit married girls' autonomy and decisionmaking ability

The younger a bride is, the greater the age difference between her and her spouse. In Mali, the mean age difference between spouses is 12.7 years if the wife marries before age 15 compared to 9.9 years if the wife marries at or after age 20.²⁶

Spousal age differences are even greater when the girl is a second or third wife. In polygynous marriages, the mean age difference between spouses is 15.1 years, compared to 9.9 years in monogamous marriages.²⁷

First births have elevated risks; the youngest first-time mothers and their children are especially vulnerable to poor health outcomes

A weak health infrastructure makes it difficult for mothers to receive adequate care. In rural areas, where the majority of Malians live, 85 percent of girls and women live at least 30 kilometers away from

the nearest hospital,²⁸ and only 28 percent of deliveries occur with the help of a skilled attendant.²⁹

Among married girls aged 15–19 in Mali, 63 percent have already given birth.³⁰

One out of ten married girls aged 15–19 gave birth before age 15.³¹

The condition of girls' sexual lives in early marriage may place child brides in a particularly vulnerable position in the context of the HIV epidemic

The prevalence of HIV/AIDS in the adult population is 1.9 percent.³² However, extremely high prevalence rates have been recorded in certain populations; UNAIDS reported that HIV prevalence among sex workers in one of its sentinel sites was as high as 45 percent.³³ This has serious implications for men who have extramarital sex and may bring HIV home to their wives.

Unmarried sexual activity is relatively rare; 75 percent of sexually active girls in Mali are married.³⁴

Married girls have limited ability to negotiate condom use.

Among girls who do not want to get pregnant, married girls were more than 10 times as likely as unmarried girls to have unprotected sex in the previous week (54 percent vs. 5 percent).³⁵

Recommendations to promote later, chosen, legal marriage

- Raise awareness of the extent of early marriage and the human rights abuse it constitutes.
- Publicize and enforce the national law that establishes 18 as the legal age of marriage.
- Engage communities through public campaigns, pledges, or incentive schemes.
- Raise the awareness of parents, community leaders, and policy-makers about the health and rights implications of young girls marrying much older men.
- Develop special social and health support structures for young, first-time mothers.
- Encourage governments and communities to commit to getting girls to school on time and to keeping them in school through the secondary level. Being in school during adolescence has important health and development benefits for girls.³⁶
- Develop social and economic programs for out-of-school girls, including nonformal education programs.

REFERENCES

- 1 See, among others, The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948); The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (1979); The Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989); and The African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (1990).
- 2 2002 Population Council analysis of United Nations country data on marriage.
- 3 Mensch, Barbara, Susheela Singh, and John Casterline. Forthcoming. "Trends in the timing of first marriage among men and women in the developing world," in C.B. Lloyd, J.R. Behrman, N.P. Stromquist, and B. Cohen (eds.), *The Changing Transitions to Adulthood in Developing Countries: Selected Studies*. Washington, DC: National Academies Press.
- 4 Population Council. 1995. "Accelerating girls' education: A priority for governments," fact sheet compiled for the Fourth World Conference on Women, Beijing, 4–15 September. See also Herz, Barbara and Gene B. Sperling. 2004. "What works in girls' education: Evidence and policies from the developing world." New York: Council on Foreign Relations.
- 5 Mensch, Barbara S., Judith Bruce, and Margaret E. Greene. 1998. *The Uncharted Passage: Girls' Adolescence in the Developing World*. New York: Population Council.
- 6 Figure is for 15–19-year-old married girls. Sathar, Zeba A., Cynthia B. Lloyd, Minhaj ul Haque et al. 2003. *Adolescents and Youth in Pakistan 2001–02: A Nationally Representative Survey*. Islamabad: Population Council.
- 7 Sajeda Amin and Luciana Suran, personal communication, 2004. Based on data from Amin, Sajeda, Simeen Mahmud, and Lopita Huq. 2002. "Baseline survey report on rural adolescents in Bangladesh." Dhaka: Ministry of Women's Affairs, Government of Bangladesh. See also El-Zanaty, Fatma, Enas M. Hussein, Gihan A. Shawky et al. 1996. *Egypt Demographic and Health Survey 1995*. Calverton, MD: National Population Council (Egypt) and Macro International, Inc.
- 8 78 percent of births that occur before age 18 are first births, and 90 percent of first births that occur before age 18 occur within marriage. DHS data analyzed by Monica Grant, Policy Research Division, Population Council. (DHS surveys cover 60 percent of developing-country populations.)
- 9 Kiely, Michele (ed.). 1991. *Reproductive and Perinatal Epidemiology*. Boca Raton, FL: CRC Press. See also Kline, Jennie, Zena Stein, and Mervyn Susser. 1989. *Conception to Birth: Epidemiology of Prenatal Development*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- 10 Nancy Sloan, personal communication, 2004.
- 11 Miller, Suellen and Felicia Lester. 2003. "Married young first-time mothers: Meeting their special needs," paper prepared for the WHO/UNFPA/Population Council Technical Consultation on Married Adolescents, WHO, Geneva, 9–12 December.
- 12 Clark, Shelley. 2004. "Early marriage and HIV risks in sub-Saharan Africa," *Studies in Family Planning* 35(3): 149–160.
- 13 Glynn, J.R., M. Caraël, B. Auvert et al. 2001. "Why do young women have a much higher prevalence of HIV than young men? A study in Kisumu, Kenya and Ndola, Zambia," *AIDS* 15(suppl 4): S51–S60.
- 14 Population Reference Bureau (PRB). 2003. "2003 world population data sheet." Washington, DC: PRB.
- 15 United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). 2004. *Human Development Report 2004: Cultural Liberty in Today's Diverse World*. New York: UNDP.
- 16 PRB 2003.
- 17 International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF) and the International Women's Rights Action Watch. 2000. "Reproductive Rights 2000," wall chart. London: IPPF. See also "Options and opportunities for adolescents: Mali," <http://www.unfpa.org/adolescents/opportunities/mali/mali-npr.html>, accessed 13 July 2004.
- 18 Royal Tropical Institute (Netherlands). 2001. *Muslim Women and Development Action Research Project: Synthesis Report*. Amsterdam: Women and Development Division, Ministry of Foreign Affairs.
- 19 Center for Reproductive Law and Policy (CRLP). 1999. *Women of the World: Laws and Policies Affecting their Reproductive Lives (Francophone Africa)*. New York: CRLP.
- 20 Cellule de Planification et de Statistique du Ministère de la Santé (CPS/MS), Direction Nationale de la Statistique et de l'Informatique (DNSI), and ORC Macro. 2002. *Enquête Démographique et de Santé au Mali 2001* [Mali Demographic and Health Survey 2001]. Calverton, MD: CPS/MS, DNSI, and ORC Macro.
- 21,22 *Mali Demographic and Health Survey 2001 (MDHS 2001)*. Data are for 20–24-year-olds.
- 23–25 *MDHS 2001*. Data are for 15–19-year-olds.
- 26,27 *MDHS 2001*. Data are for 20–29-year-olds.
- 28 United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and EngenderHealth. 2003. *Obstetric Fistula Needs Assessment Report: Findings from Nine African Countries*. New York: UNFPA and EngenderHealth.
- 29 *MDHS 2001*.
- 30,31 *MDHS 2001*. Data are for 15–19-year-olds.
- 32 Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS). 2004. *2004 Report on the Global AIDS Epidemic*. Geneva: UNAIDS.
- 33 UNAIDS. 2002. "Mali—Epidemiological fact sheets on HIV/AIDS and sexually transmitted infections: 2002 update." Geneva: UNAIDS.
- 34,35 Bruce, Judith and Shelley Clark. 2003. "Including married adolescents in adolescent reproductive health and HIV/AIDS policy," paper prepared for the WHO/UNFPA/Population Council Technical Consultation on Married Adolescents, WHO, Geneva, 9–12 December.
- 36 Herz and Sperling 2004.

**FOR MORE INFORMATION ABOUT CHILD MARRIAGE, CONTACT ERICA CHONG AT echong@popcouncil.org
TO VIEW OTHER COUNTRY BRIEFINGS IN THIS SERIES, VISIT www.popcouncil.org**