

CHILD MARRIAGE BRIEFING

MOZAMBIQUE

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

Mozambique, in southeastern Africa, is home to 17.5 million people, with 45 percent of its population under age 15.¹⁴ Its development was hindered by brutal wars from 1977 to 1992 and severe flooding in both 1999 and 2000.¹⁵ More than three-quarters of Mozambicans live on less than US\$2 a day.¹⁶ The HIV/AIDS epidemic has had a devastating effect on the country; approximately 1.3 million adults and children are living with HIV, and 470,000 children have been orphaned because of AIDS.¹⁷ Life expectancy has fallen to 34 years, among the lowest levels in the world.¹⁸

Mozambique has one of the most severe crises of child marriage in the world today. Several local women's rights groups have begun speaking out about this issue and were instrumental in ensuring the passage of the recent Family Law, which raises the minimum age of marriage for girls from 14 to 18, allows women to inherit property in the case of divorce, and legally recognizes traditional marriages (which constitute the vast majority of marriages in Mozambique).¹⁹ However, little capacity exists to implement the law.

A high prevalence of child marriage exists

Nationwide, 21 percent of girls were married by age 15, and 57 percent were married by age 18.²⁰

Child marriage is extremely prevalent in some regions; in Nampula, 53 percent of girls were married by age 15, and 82 percent were married by age 18.²¹

Some 19 percent of married girls aged 15–19 are in polygynous marriages.²²

Married girls receive little or no schooling

A number of factors limit the education of Mozambique's young people, including insufficient numbers of schools, matriculation fees, and persistent corruption.²³ While schooling levels are low overall, girls are more disadvantaged than boys, and married girls are the most disadvantaged group of all.

Unmarried girls aged 15–19 are 13 times more likely than married girls to be in school (28.9 percent vs. 2.2 percent).²⁴

Nearly three out of four married girls cannot read at all.²⁵

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

The younger the bride, the greater the age difference between her and her spouse. 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 9.5 years, compared to 6.1 years in monogamous marriages.²⁶

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

Among married girls aged 15–19 in Mozambique, 55 percent have already given birth.²⁷

One out of twelve married girls gave birth before age 15.²⁸

Less than half (44 percent) of deliveries occur with the help of a skilled attendant.²⁹

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

Some 12 percent of Mozambique's population are infected with HIV.³⁰ Girls aged 15–24 are more than twice as likely as boys the same age to be infected.³¹

Unmarried sexual activity is relatively rare; 80 percent of girls in Mozambique who had sex in the previous week were married.³²

Married girls have limited ability to negotiate condom use. Among girls who do not want to get pregnant, married girls were more than six times as likely as unmarried girls to have unprotected sex in the previous week (32 percent vs. 5 percent).³³

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.³⁴
- Develop social and economic programs for out-of-school girls, including nonformal education programs.

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