

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 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

Child marriage may put girls at increased risk of HIV infection compared to unmarried sexually active girls.

Married girls have sex more often, have more unprotected sex, and have partners who are more likely to be HIV-positive because of their older age. In countries where the HIV epidemic is well established, such as Kenya and Zambia, studies have used biomarkers to confirm HIV infection rates that are 48–65 percent higher among married girls compared to sexually active unmarried girls.¹²

Mali is home to 11.6 million people, with 47 percent of its population under age 15.¹³ 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,¹⁴ and life expectancy is 45 years.¹⁵

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.¹⁶ 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.¹⁷ The payment of bride price is recognized by law,¹⁸ 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 5.¹⁹

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 18.²⁰

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 18.²¹

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

Married girls receive little or no schooling

Eighty-six percent of married girls have received no education, compared to 62 percent of unmarried girls.²³

More than nine out of ten married girls aged 15–19 cannot read at all.²⁴

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 20.²⁵

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.²⁶

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,²⁷ and only 28 percent of deliveries occur with the help of a skilled attendant.²⁸

Among married girls aged 15–19 in Mali, 63 percent have already given birth.²⁹

One out of ten married girls aged 15–19 gave birth before age 15.³⁰

Although current HIV prevalence is relatively low in Mali, child marriage may be a significant risk factor for adolescent girls

The prevalence of HIV/AIDS in the adult population is 1.9 percent.³¹

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.³² 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.³³

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).³⁴

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.³⁵
- Develop social and economic programs for out-of-school girls, including nonformal education programs.

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