

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

This landlocked East African nation is home to more than 70 million people, with 44 percent of its population under age 15.¹³ Ethiopia is one of the poorest countries in the world; approximately 81 percent of its population live on less than US\$2 a day.¹⁴ Life expectancy has fallen to 42 years, owing to recurrent food shortages, ongoing clashes, and a growing HIV epidemic.¹⁵

Ethiopia has one of the most severe crises of child marriage in the world today. The legal age of marriage is 18 for both males and females,¹⁶ but it is widely ignored. Ethiopia is the site of some of the most abusive marital practices, such as marriage by abduction and forced unions between cousins (*abusuma*). Another harmful practice is female genital circumcision, which affects some 80 percent of Ethiopian women. More than half of circumcisions occur before a girl's first birthday.¹⁷

A high prevalence of child marriage exists

Nationwide, 19 percent of girls were married by age 15, and about half of girls were married by age 18.¹⁸

Child marriage is extremely prevalent in some regions; in Amhara, 50 percent of girls were married by age 15, and 80 percent were married by age 18.¹⁹

Married girls receive little or no schooling

Eighty percent of married girls have received no education, and 81 percent cannot read at all.²⁰

Three percent of married girls aged 15–19 are in school, compared to 34 percent of unmarried girls.²¹

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 Ethiopia, the mean age difference between spouses is 10.1 years if the wife marries before age 15 compared to 8.6 years if the wife marries at or after age 20.²²

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 Ethiopia, almost half have already given birth.²³

The vast majority of births occurring to girls before age 18 are first births (77 percent), and nearly all of these first births occur within marriage (96 percent).²⁴

Prolonged and obstructed labor can result in obstetric fistulas, which disproportionately afflict very young and first-time mothers. It is estimated that 9,000 new fistulas occur annually in Ethiopia.²⁵ This condition leaves girls and women continually leaking urine and/or feces, frequently leading to abandonment by partners, friends, and family.

In Ethiopia, where the HIV epidemic is selective of young females, child marriage may be a significant risk factor for adolescent girls

Among young people aged 15–24, girls are more likely than boys to be infected with HIV (10.0 percent vs. 5.6 percent).²⁶

Unmarried sexual activity is relatively rare; 94 percent of sexually active girls in Ethiopia are married.²⁷

Married girls have limited ability to negotiate condom use. Among girls who do not want to get pregnant, 68 percent of married girls are having unprotected sex, compared to only 1 percent of unmarried sexually active girls.²⁸

In Amhara region, two of the four sentinel sites report the highest rates of HIV among pregnant women in the entire country. This region also has the lowest average age of marriage in Ethiopia.²⁹

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.³⁰
- Develop social and economic programs for out-of-school girls, including nonformal education programs.

REFERENCES

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- 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.)
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- 22 *EDHS 2000*. Data are for 25–49-year-olds.
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