

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

After almost 16 years of military rule characterized by corruption, an underdeveloped infrastructure, and misallocation of resources, power was peacefully transferred in Nigeria to a civilian government, and a new constitution was adopted in 1999.¹³ This oil-rich country has the human and natural resources to prosper (its population of 133.9 million makes it the most heavily populated country in Africa),¹⁴ yet it remains one of the poorest countries in the world. More than two out of three Nigerians live on less than US\$1 a day,¹⁵ and life expectancy is 52 years.¹⁶ The HIV/AIDS epidemic has had a devastating effect on the country; approximately 3.6 million adults and children are living with HIV, and 1.8 million children have been orphaned because of AIDS.¹⁷

Nigeria, particularly northern Nigeria, has some of the highest rates of early marriage in the world. The Child Rights Act, passed in 2003, raised the minimum age of marriage to 18 for girls. However, federal law may be implemented differently at the state level, and to date, only a few of the country's 36 states have begun developing provisions to execute the law.¹⁸ To further complicate matters, Nigeria has three different legal systems operating simultaneously—civil, customary, and Islamic—and state and federal governments have control only over marriages that take place within the civil system.¹⁹ Domestic violence is a widespread problem; some studies report that up to 81 percent of all married women admit experiencing some form of verbal or physical abuse by their husbands.²⁰ (One study of Demographic and Health Survey data suggests that the lower the age at marriage, the higher the risk of domestic violence.²¹)

A high prevalence of child marriage exists

Nationwide, 20 percent of girls were married by age 15, and 40 percent were married by age 18.²²

Child marriage is extremely prevalent in some regions; in the Northwest region, 48 percent of girls were married by age 15, and 78 percent were married by age 18.²³

Although the practice of polygyny is decreasing in Nigeria, 27 percent of married girls aged 15–19 are in polygynous marriages.²⁴

Married girls receive little or no schooling

Virtually no married girls are in school; only 2 percent of 15–19-year-old married girls are in school, compared to 69 percent of unmarried girls.²⁵

Some 73 percent of married girls compared to 8 percent of unmarried girls received no schooling, and three out of four married girls cannot read at all.²⁶

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 Nigeria, the mean age difference between spouses is 12.0 years if the wife marries before age 15, compared to 8.5 years if the wife marries at or after age 20.²⁷

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 15.3 years, compared to 8.8 years in monogamous marriages.²⁸

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

Eighty-four percent of first births to adolescent girls in Nigeria occur within marriage.²⁹

Among married girls aged 15–19, 62 percent have already given birth.³⁰ Almost one out of four married girls gave birth before age 15.³¹

Prolonged and obstructed labor can result in obstetric fistulas, which disproportionately afflict very young and first-time mothers. The Ministry of Health estimates that between 200,000 and 400,000 girls and women are living with fistulas, with up to 10,000 new cases occurring annually.³² This condition leaves girls and women continually leaking urine and/or feces and frequently leads to abandonment by partners, friends, and family.

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

Some 5.4 percent of Nigeria's population are infected with HIV.³³ Girls aged 15–24 are about twice as likely as boys the same age to be infected.³⁴

87 out of 100 girls in Nigeria who had sex in the previous week were married.³⁵ In the northern regions, where child marriage is common, virtually all sexual activity among girls occurs within the context of marriage.³⁶

Married girls have limited ability to negotiate condom use. Among girls who do not want to get pregnant, 41 percent of married girls had unprotected sex in the previous week, compared to only 0.4 percent of unmarried girls.³⁷

Married girls have less knowledge about HIV than unmarried girls; they are less likely to have heard of HIV (50 percent vs. 83 percent) and are less likely to know that HIV can be transmitted from mother to child (38 percent vs. 52 percent).³⁸

Recommendations to promote later, chosen, legal marriage

- Raise awareness of the extent of early marriage and the human rights abuse it constitutes.
- Encourage state-level authorities to adopt the federal law that establishes 18 as the legal age of marriage for girls.
- Engage communities through public campaigns, pledges, or incentive schemes.
- Raise the awareness of parents, community leaders, and policymakers 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.³⁹
- Develop social and economic programs for out-of-school girls, including nonformal education programs.

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