

FACTSHEET

Child Marriage

Child marriage is a harsh reality for girls in developing countries. Decisions about if and when to marry a girl are often made without her input, and sometimes without her knowledge.

- Around one third of girls in developing countries, excluding China, are married before their 18th birthday.^[1]
- One in seven girls in developing countries (excluding China) will be married before the age of 15^[2]
- 82 million girls in developing countries between the ages of 10 and 17 will be married before their 18th birthday.^[3]
- More than 60 million adolescent girls in developing countries are married as children.
- Nearly half of all girls in Malawi are married by the age of 19.^[i] These numbers rise in the rural areas and within certain tribes. In Malawi, the law allows girls between the ages of 15-19 to be married with their parent's consent due to traditional cultural practices where girls are prepared for marriage when they are as young as 10 years old.
- In Ethiopia, nearly one in five girls is married by the age of 15,^[iii] and some girls are married as young as 7 years old.[!] The rural Amhara region, where 43% of girls are married by the age of 15, has one of the highest child marriage rates in the world. Three out of four girls are married by the time they turn 18 in this region.^[iv]

Child marriage almost exclusively impacts girls: on average, only 5% of boys are married before they turn 19.^[5] Child marriage puts girls, some as young as 7 or 8, at risk of problems that will impact the rest of their lives.

If a girl is married before her 18th birthday:

- **She is likely to drop out of school** – most married girls will not complete secondary school, and many will become pregnant before their bodies are ready to safely deliver a child. Staying in school is one of the most important factors in reducing child marriage - girls with secondary schooling are up to six times less likely to be married than those who have little or no schooling.
- **She faces a higher risk for health problems, and even death** – one quarter to one half of girls in developing countries become mothers before the age of 18. In fact, medical complications from pregnancy are the leading cause of death among girls ages 15-19 worldwide. Girls between the ages of 10 and 14 are five times more likely to die in pregnancy or childbirth than women aged 20 to 24; the vast majority of these deaths take place within marriage.
- **She is more vulnerable to violence** – married girls are at higher risk of sexual and domestic violence at the hands of their husbands than women who marry later, and are more likely to believe that a husband might sometimes be justified in beating his wife.

Child Marriage Policy: International Policy Progress

An adolescent girl can be the most powerful person in the world. Yet too often girls' dreams are left aside and their possibilities for a better life cut off because of the perception that they are inferior.

In addition to programs working to ensure that girls have the opportunity to become educated, healthy, safe, counted, and positioned to be the next generation of leaders, girls need laws, policies, and budgets that protect and promote their rights.

In recent years, we have begun to see progress on laws related to child marriage in countries like Ethiopia, Madagascar, Sierra Leone and Yemen, which have all passed laws that either raise the age of child marriage or outlaw child marriage all together.

- **India:** In 2008, the Indian government introduced a program in seven states that will give a payment to parents when a girl reaches 18 and she is not married. One state in India, Uttar Pradesh, has worked to increase awareness of the legal age of marriage (18) and deny government jobs to people who marry before that age.
- **Ethiopia: In 2007** Ethiopia passed a law that states that marriage is only legal between consenting adults who have, at a minimum, reached the age of 18.
- **Israel:** In 2007, a coalition of Members of Parliament and activists was formed to raise the minimum age for marriage from 17 to 18.
- **Madagascar:** In 2007, the parliament passed a law that set the marriageable age at 18 for girls and boys. Previously, girls could be married at 14 and boys at 17.
- **Sierra Leone:** In 2007, a law is passed outlawing child marriage (before the age of 18). That same year, Sierra Leone adopted the international definition of "child" as anyone under 18 years of age.
- **Yemen:** In 2009, a law was passed raising the age of marriage to 17.
- **Zimbabwe:** In 2007, the Domestic Violence Bill made cultural practices including pledging girls to for marriage illegal.

Although most countries have laws restricting the age of marriage, one of the greatest challenges in virtually every country where child marriage is an issue is implementation of the law.

For more information on child marriage visit:

- The International Labor Organization (ILO)
- The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)
- The United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA)
- The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)
- The United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM)
- The World Health Organization (WHO)
- The International Center for Research on Women (ICRW)
- International Women's Health *Coalition*
- CARE

-
- [1] United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), *Progress for Children: A report card on child protection*, no. 8, UNICEF, New York, 2009, pp. 46-47.
- [2] Population Council. (2007). *Supporting Married Girls: Calling Attention to a Neglected Group*. Transitions to Adulthood, Population Brief 3: New York. Retrieved from http://www.popcouncil.org/pdfs/TABriefs/GFD_Brief-3_MarriedGirls.pdf
- [3] UNFPA. (2009). *Promoting Gender Equality: The Gender Dimensions of the AIDS Epidemic*. New York, NY: UNFPA. Retrieved from <http://www.unfpa.org/gender/aids.htm>
- [i] Girls Discovered: Global Maps of Adolescent Girls. (2010). *Health and Wellbeing: Malawi*. Retrieved from http://www.girlsdiscovered.org/map/health_and_wellbeing/
- [iii] Fikremarkos Merso. *Women and Girls and HIV/AIDS in Ethiopia*. UNFPA. Retrieved from ethiopia.unfpa.org/.../WomenandGirlsandHIV-AIDSinEthiopia.pdf
- [i] UNFPA. 2004. Child Marriage Advocacy Programme: Fact Sheet on Child Marriage and Early Union.
- [iv] ICRW. (2010). *Improving the Well-Being of Married Adolescent Girls in Ethiopia*. <http://www.icrw.org/where-we-work/improving-well-being-married-adolescent-girls-ethiopia>
- [5] International Planned Parenthood Federation (2006). *Ending Child Marriage: A guide for global policy action*. Retrieved from <http://www.unfpa.org/webdav/site/global/shared/documents/publications/2006/endchildmarriage.pdf>