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## **Early Marriage and Violence Limit Girls' Opportunities and Violate Their Rights**

Investing in and empowering women and girls is one of the most cost effective and efficient ways to advance the development agenda, according to *The State of World Population 2003* report released today by UNFPA. Yet, in many countries, girls continue to face prospects of early marriage and lower levels of investment in their health, nutrition and education than boys.

Poverty, parental desire to ensure sexual relations within marriage, a lack of educational or employment opportunities for girls, and the sense that girls' main value is as wives and mothers are all factors that perpetuate early marriage, says the report, *Making 1 Billion Count: Investing in Adolescents' Health and Rights*. In Nigeria, almost 80 per cent of the poorest young women marry before age 18, while only 22 per cent of the richest do. In Nepal, 60 per cent of girls marry before age 18 and in Niger the figure is 76 per cent.

Married adolescent girls often find it difficult to negotiate contraceptive use or to access reproductive health services. Only 17 per cent of married women aged 15-19 in less developed countries use contraception, the report says. Complications of pregnancy and childbirth are a leading cause of death and disability for young women aged 15 to 19 worldwide. Teenage mothers are twice as likely and girls under 16 five times as likely to die in childbirth as women in their 20s,

Unsafe abortions are another major concern, says the report. Women aged 15-19 account for at least one fourth of the estimated 20 million unsafe abortions performed each year, which result in some 78,000 deaths.

Adolescent girls are also vulnerable to sexual violence, the extent of which is only beginning to be understood. Studies in India, Jamaica, Mali, the United Republic of Tanzania and Zimbabwe found that between 20 and 30 per cent of adolescent girls had experienced sexual violence.

Many countries are working to address these issues and protect girls' rights, notes the report. In Bangladesh, for example, a secondary school scholarship programme requires that girls remain unmarried through the tenth standard final examination. In areas targeted by the project, female enrolment more than doubled between 1994 and 2001. (See news feature, *An Empowered Young Woman in Bangladesh*.)

Given a chance to be heard, teens speak out against early marriage. Zohal, a 16-year-old Afghan student said in an interview: “If my parents tried to force me to marry, I would refuse. People have to be literate to develop Afghanistan. Girls have to finish their studies; they have human rights.”

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UNFPA’s *State of World Population* report has been published annually since 1978. Chapter 2 of the 2003 report focuses on gender inequality and reproductive health. The full report is available online at [www.unfpa.org](http://www.unfpa.org).

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