

MARRYING TOO YOUNG

END CHILD MARRIAGE

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End Child Marriage
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Cover and Back Photo:
TEHANI, AGE 8 (Yemen)

"Whenever I saw him, I hid. I hated to see him," Tehani (in pink) recalls of the early days of her marriage to Majed, when she was 6 and he was 25. The young wife posed for a portrait with former classmate Ghada, also a child bride, outside their home in Hajjah.

Photo by Stephanie Sinclair / VII Photo / Too Young To Wed

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PREFACE

Child marriage is a human rights abuse. It constitutes a grave threat to young girls' lives, health and future prospects. Marriage for girls can lead to complications related to pregnancy and childbirth, and in developing countries these are the main causes of death among 15-19 year-old girls. Girls who are married are also exposed to sexually transmitted infections, including HIV. For a girl, marriage can mean the end of her education, can set aside her chances of a vocation or career, and can steal from her foundational life choices.

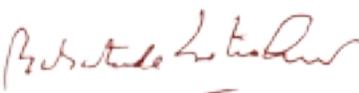
Choosing when and who to marry is one of life's most important decisions. No one else, however well-meaning, has the right to make that decision. The decision to marry should be a freely made, informed decision that is taken without fear, coercion, or undue pressure. It is an adult decision and a decision that should be made, when ready, as an adult. On that virtually all countries agree. The Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), both human rights instruments, outlaw child marriage. The International Conference on Population and Development in 1994 (ICPD) called on countries to eliminate child marriage and to enforce laws that ensure free and full consent.

Yet child marriage persists, especially in poor and rural parts of countries in the developing world. It may be part of local tradition; parents may believe it safeguards their daughters' future; poverty or conflict may propel it. But more often than not, child marriage is the outcome of fewer choices. Girls who miss out or drop out of school are especially vulnerable to it—while the more exposure a girl has to formal education and the better-off her family is, the more likely marriage is to be postponed.

And that is the heart of the matter – when girls have a choice, they marry later. Parents, communities and countries want the very best for their girls. The best for girls is the product of education, good health, including sexual and reproductive health, and broad choices that are to be freely made, not only in regards to marriage, but in all aspects of her life.

Investing in girls, developing their social and economic assets, ensuring they have access to education and health services, and ensuring that they can postpone marriage until they are ready; all this means greater dignity for women. It also means healthier families and higher levels of gender equality. This in turn makes for stronger societies and more vibrant economies. Investment in later marriage for girls is investment in development for everyone.

No society can afford the lost opportunity, waste of talent, or personal exploitation that child marriage causes. And that is why we are publishing this study to show what the evidence tells us about this harmful practice and to assist decision makers sharpen their focus on the urgent protection of girls' human rights. Respect for girls' human rights requires that we prevent and end child marriage and demands that we actively support girls who are already married. Human rights realized for girls is simply the fulfillment of our duty to them. It is the only course by which we can avert what otherwise is the human tragedy of child marriage.



Dr. Babatunde Osotimehin
Executive Director, UNFPA

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Despite near-universal commitments to end child marriage, one in three girls in developing countries (excluding China) will probably be married before they are 18. One out of nine girls will be married before their 15th birthday. Most of these girls are poor, less-educated, and living in rural areas. Over 67 million women 20-24 year old in 2010 had been married as girls. Half were in Asia, one-fifth in Africa. In the next decade 14.2 million girls under 18 will be married every year; this translates into 39,000 girls married each day. This will rise to an average of 15.1 million girls a year, starting in 2021 until 2030, if present trends continue. While child marriages are declining among girls under age 15, 50 million girls could still be at risk of being married before their 15th birthday in this decade.

While most countries allow girls to marry before they turn 18 with parental or other consent, poverty often underlies child marriage. Humanitarian crises exacerbate girls' vulnerability. Some parents genuinely believe that marriage will secure their daughters' future, while others see their daughters as a burden or even a commodity. Child marriage stands in the way of ensuring that girls have healthy and productive lives. Child marriage directly threatens health and wellbeing: complications from pregnancy and childbirth together are the main cause of death among adolescent girls 15-19 in developing countries.

Reaching puberty should mark the beginning of a gradual transition to a healthy and productive adulthood. Instead, for many girls, puberty marks an accelerating trajectory into inequality. Child marriage is a primary source of this, curtailing a critical period for growth, learning, identity formation and experimentation: each of which is essential if maturation into fully rounded human beings is to be unhindered.

International conventions declare that child marriage is a violation of human rights because it denies girls the right to decide when and with whom to marry. This report is intended to help policymakers prevent this violation of girls' rights. It summarizes available data and evidence, while offering advice on the thicket of issues involved, and suggests prioritized actions to reduce and eventually eliminate child marriage.

If nothing changes, developing countries will witness an increase in child marriage: 142 million child marriages in 2011-2020 and 151 million in the subsequent decade. As the numbers of girls who are married as children grows, the numbers of children bearing children will increase and deaths among girls will rise. Given the time lag in the impacts of changing population dynamics, even a reduced rate of child marriage, will mean that absolute numbers may grow for some time ahead.

It is urgent therefore that social norms that serve to legitimate child marriage change. These can and do start to change, once parents and communities understand the harm that child marriage does and once they are able to identify alternatives that discourage and eventually will end the practice. Promising strategies for change are in evidence but they need more investment.

Ending child marriage will help countries reach the Millennium Development Goals, and should be a high priority in the post-2015 development agenda. Each country should collect and analyze its own data to help target geographic "hotspot" areas where high proportions and numbers of girls are at risk. Policies and programmes should be designed accordingly. Policies are needed across sectors to delay marriage, including raising the legal minimum age at marriage

to 18, ensuring that girls go to school and attend beyond primary level, addressing underlying factors perpetuating the practice, identifying alternatives and creating opportunities for girls, and reaching out to communities to support these moves. Girls need, education, health, social and livelihood skills to become fully empowered citizens. Most immediately important is helping already married girls to avoid early pregnancy and when pregnant have access to appropriate care during pregnancy, childbirth and postpartum (including access to family planning).

UNFPA works with governments and civil society partners at all levels to promote and protect the human rights of girls. We support the development of girls' education, economic and health assets, including by enabling the provision of sexual and reproductive health information and services, drawing attention to the risks associated with child marriage, and supporting community-owned solutions. UNFPA also advocates steps to enable the most vulnerable girls to defer marriage and more fully access their human rights to make an appropriate and gradual transition into adulthood.