

# Ending Child Marriage and Empowering Child Brides

One out of every three girls in developing countries is married before the age of 18 and one in nine is married before age 15. Each year, it is estimated that 14 million girls in developing countries under the age of 18 are married. That is 39,000 marriages each day.<sup>1</sup>

Although most common in Asia and Africa, child, early and forced marriages take place in nearly every region of the world.<sup>2</sup> There are a number of drivers of child, early and forced marriage, including poverty, gender inequality, cultural norms, early pregnancy and the belief that early marriage can be a form of protection for young girls—particularly in humanitarian emergencies where there may be a high risk of other forms of gender-based violence.<sup>3</sup>

The practice is most prevalent in the world's poorest countries. In fact, girls from poor families are twice as likely to be married before age 18 as their peers from more well-off families.<sup>4</sup> Child marriage remains all too common in patriarchal societies where women's value is based primarily upon their purity as girls or their role as mothers and wives.<sup>5</sup> These girls often have limited education and little agency over their own lives, rarely having a say in when or whom they marry.

**Early or forced marriage is a severe violation of a girl's rights, and causes abrupt, radical changes in her life.**

These girls are isolated, uprooted from their home, family, and the social networks in which they were brought up. For many, staying in school and continuing their education is no longer an option. Instead, they are now responsible for a managing

a household and bearing children.<sup>6</sup> Additionally, age and power disparities within these marriages may place some girls at an increased risk of violence.<sup>7</sup>

**Some of the most profound and potentially deadly impacts of child, early and forced marriage are related to the sexual and reproductive health of girls.**

Girls often lack information and access to contraceptives and other reproductive health services needed to protect themselves from pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections. Young brides may also be unable to negotiate the parameters of sexual activity in their relationship, including the use of contraceptives, and may be expected to prove their fertility as soon as possible following the marriage.<sup>8</sup>

Nearly one in five girls in the developing world will become pregnant before the age of 18, and about 90 percent of those who give birth are married.<sup>9</sup> For girls under 15, adolescent pregnancy is particularly risky. These girls are more than twice as likely to die during delivery as older women.<sup>10</sup> Consequently, maternal mortality remains the second leading cause of death for girls ages 15-19 around the world.<sup>11</sup>

HIV disproportionately impacts young women. In sub-Saharan Africa, prevalence rates among young women aged 15-24 are twice as high as they are for their male peers.<sup>12</sup> Early marriage is a strong contributing factor in these statistics. Girls are particularly vulnerable because of a combination of biological factors, and the fact that their husbands are often a decade or more older than them, with a history of sexual partners.<sup>13,14</sup>



*One out of every three girls in developing countries is married before the age of 18 and one in nine is married before age 15.*

## Bringing an End to Child, Early and Forced Marriage

**Ending child, early and forced marriage will require a fundamental normative change, which takes time, but there are ways to facilitate that change and protect the rights of girls now.** However, there is no single intervention that can prevent child marriage. A multisectoral approach is necessary. Girls need access to education, information and basic life skills. This includes basic literacy, money management skills, negotiation and problem solving skills, and comprehensive sex and health education.

A girl's ability to stay in school has been shown to delay or prevent child, early and forced marriage. Access to contraceptives for adolescent girls can help them prevent pregnancy, removing one possible cause of early marriage and making it more likely that a girl will stay in school.

## Meeting the Needs of Married Girls

Although the goal of the international community is to end the practice of child, early and forced marriage, we cannot forget about the needs of the millions of child brides living in the world today.

**Married adolescents have unique reproductive health needs.** They often face pressure to get pregnant in order to prove their fertility—a factor that sexual and reproductive health programs that focus explicitly on youth or the needs of married adult women are unable to address. In order to be effective, these unique needs must be taken into account. Increasingly, organizations are looking at young married women's first pregnancy as a point of entry to engage them, and in many cases their partners. These interventions are designed to educate them about reproductive health and help them access services, which may help them delay future pregnancies.<sup>15</sup>



**As with prevention efforts, programming for married girls should be multisectoral in order to be most effective.** Therefore, health programs should exist in tandem with other interventions, such as formal or informal educational opportunities, as well as economic livelihood opportunities designed to work for married girls. Programs must also address the social needs of girls by helping married adolescent girls and first-time mothers build support networks.

**Programming can be further improved through better data, disaggregated by both sex and age, and by ensuring that data and evidence are used to inform improvements to programs and the design of future programs.**

We know that married girls under 15 engage in sexual activity, but surveys are generally not designed to collect data on this age group. This leaves a major gap in the data necessary to understand the needs of these girls.

## Policy Recommendations

- Raise the age of legal marriage to 18.
- Train and educate law enforcement professionals, including police and judges, to implement and enforce the rights of girls at risk of child, early and forced marriage and those who are already married.
- Increase investments in strategies that address the root causes of the issue, such as improving youth-friendly reproductive health services, increasing girls' educational opportunities, engaging parents and local leaders in dialogues on community norms around the practice of child marriage, and continuing other complementary efforts to combat poverty.
- Expand and improve data collection efforts for youth and adolescents—particularly very young adolescents between the ages of 10-14—to build evidence supporting effective interventions that can be scaled up or used to inform future programs. Data must be disaggregated by both age and sex.

## Sources

1. **United Nations Population Fund.** *Motherhood in Childhood: Facing the Challenge of Adolescent Pregnancy.* Publication. New York: United Nations Population Fund, 2013. <http://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/EN-SWOP2013-final.pdf> (p. 9, 48)
2. **Council on Foreign Relations.** "Child Marriage." *Child Marriage.* Council on Foreign Relations, n.d. Web. 2 Nov. 2014. <[http://www.cfr.org/peace-conflict-and-human-rights/child-marriage/p32096#!/?cid=otr\\_marketing\\_use-child\\_marriage\\_Infoguide#overview-video](http://www.cfr.org/peace-conflict-and-human-rights/child-marriage/p32096#!/?cid=otr_marketing_use-child_marriage_Infoguide#overview-video)>.
3. **Council on Foreign Relations.** "Child Marriage." *Child Marriage.* Council on Foreign Relations, n.d. Web. 2 Nov. 2014. <[http://www.cfr.org/peace-conflict-and-human-rights/child-marriage/p32096#!/?cid=otr\\_marketing\\_use-child\\_marriage\\_Infoguide#overview-video](http://www.cfr.org/peace-conflict-and-human-rights/child-marriage/p32096#!/?cid=otr_marketing_use-child_marriage_Infoguide#overview-video)>.
4. **United States of America.** USAID. *Ending Child Marriage and Meeting the Needs of Married Children: The USAID Vision for Action.* Washington, D.C.:USAID, 2012. [http://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf\\_docs/PDACU300.pdf](http://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/PDACU300.pdf) (pg. 2-3)
5. **International Planned Parenthood Federation.** *Ending Child Marriage: A Guide for Global Policy Action.* Publication. International Planned Parenthood Federation / Forum on Marriage and the Rights of Women and Girls, Nov. 2007.
6. **United States of America.** USAID. *Ending Child Marriage and Meeting the Needs of Married Children: The USAID Vision for Action.* Washington, D.C.:USAID, 2012. [http://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf\\_docs/PDACU300.pdf](http://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/PDACU300.pdf) (pg.3)
7. **United States of America.** USAID. *Ending Child Marriage and Meeting the Needs of Married Children: The USAID Vision for Action.* Washington, D.C.:USAID, 2012. [http://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf\\_docs/PDACU300.pdf](http://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/PDACU300.pdf) (pg.7)
8. **United Nations Population Fund.** *Motherhood in Childhood: Facing the Challenge of Adolescent Pregnancy.* Publication. New York: United Nations Population Fund, 2013. <http://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/EN-SWOP2013-final.pdf> (pg. 24, 36).
9. **United Nations Population Fund.** *Motherhood in Childhood: Facing the Challenge of Adolescent Pregnancy.* Publication. New York: United Nations Population Fund, 2013. <http://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/EN-SWOP2013-final.pdf> (pg. 3, 24).
10. **United Nations Population Fund.** *Motherhood in Childhood: Facing the Challenge of Adolescent Pregnancy.* Publication. New York: United Nations Population Fund, 2013. <http://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/EN-SWOP2013-final.pdf> (pg. iv).
11. **World Health Organization.** "Health for the World's Adolescents." *Mortality, Morbidity and Disability in Adolescence.* World Health Organization, 2014. <<http://apps.who.int/adolescent/second-decade/section3>>.
12. **Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS).** 2014. *The Gap Report.* Geneva: UNAIDS. [http://www.unaids.org/sites/default/files/en/media/unaids/contentassets/documents/unaidspublication/2014/UNAIDS\\_Gap\\_report\\_en.pdf](http://www.unaids.org/sites/default/files/en/media/unaids/contentassets/documents/unaidspublication/2014/UNAIDS_Gap_report_en.pdf); (pg. 20)
13. **United Nations Population Fund.** *Motherhood in Childhood: Facing the Challenge of Adolescent Pregnancy.* Publication. New York: United Nations Population Fund, 2013. <http://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/EN-SWOP2013-final.pdf>. (Pg. 41).
14. **United States of America.** USAID. *Ending Child Marriage and Meeting the Needs of Married Children: The USAID Vision for Action.* Washington, D.C.:USAID, 2012. [http://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf\\_docs/PDACU300.pdf](http://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/PDACU300.pdf) (pg.7)
15. **Margaret E. Greene, Jill Gay, Gwendolyn Morgan, Regina Benevides, and Fariyal Fikree,** *Reaching Young First-Time Parents for the Healthy Spacing of Second and Subsequent Pregnancies,* Washington, DC: Evidence to Action Project, July 2014

CM2015.05



1300 19th Street NW, Suite 200  
Washington, DC 20036-1624 USA  
PHONE: (202) 557-3440  
EMAIL: [info@pai.org](mailto:info@pai.org)