

Child Marriage and HEALTH

Child marriage means early sexual activity and, in most cases, early childbearing. 🌿 Despite widespread recognition that childbearing in the adolescent years is harmful to both mother and child, it is common in large parts of the developing world. 🌿 In Chad, Guinea, Mali and Niger, where child marriage is prevalent, half of all girls give birth before their 18th birthday.¹



Rick Maiman / David and Lucile Packard Foundation

CHILD MARRIAGE ENDANGERS THE HEALTH OF GIRLS

Girls are not physically suited for giving birth.

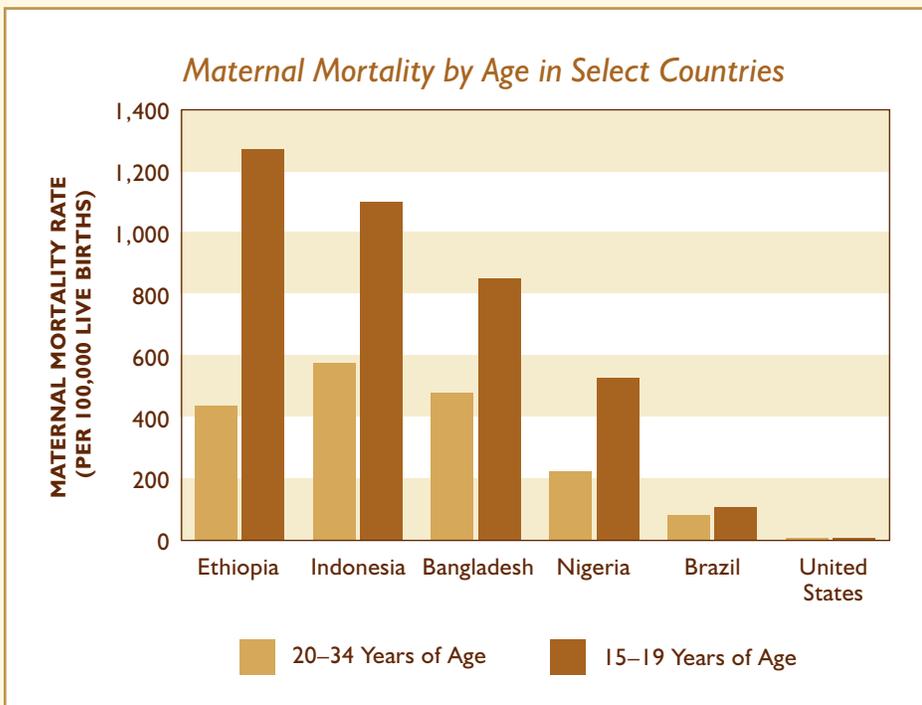
When this is combined with a lack of power, information and access to services, married girls experience much higher rates of maternal mortality and morbidity than women who give birth. Girls younger than 15 are five times more likely to die in childbirth than women in their 20s, and pregnancy is the leading cause of death worldwide for women ages 15 to 19.² The chart shows the maternal mortality rate for young women ages 15 to 19, compared to women ages 20 to 34 in select countries.³

Adolescent childbirth is dangerous for the infant as well as the mother. The underdeveloped bodies of girls can lead to complications during childbirth and the death of the child. Infants born to adolescent mothers are much more likely to die than those born to women in their 20s.⁴

CHILD MARRIAGE FACTORS INTO THE SPREAD OF HIV AND AIDS

Another serious health risk to adolescent married girls is HIV/AIDS infection. Growing evidence from sub-Saharan Africa shows that married girls in the region are at greater risk of HIV infection than sexually active, unmarried girls. One study from Johns Hopkins University found higher HIV rates among married women in rural Uganda (18 percent) than young unmarried women (15 percent).⁵ A study in Kenya and Zambia by University of Chicago researchers found that among 15- to 19-year-old girls who are sexually active, being married increased their chances of having HIV by more than 75 percent.⁶ These studies investigated a limited number of girls in a select number of countries. Further research is needed to fully understand the connection between child marriage and HIV infection.

Existing research suggests that one reason why married girls may be more vulnerable to HIV is because they have little option to change their sexual



behavior in response to knowledge about HIV. For example, when asked how HIV knowledge changed their behavior, unmarried girls in Zambia and Kenya were much more likely than married girls to report that they stopped having sex in response to knowledge about HIV risk (18 percent in Kenya and 27 percent in Zambia). In contrast, married girls do not have the option of abstaining from sex. The Kenya and Zambia study found that unmarried girls were more likely

in polygamous unions, where adolescent girls can be the second or third wife of an older man. There is evidence that the earlier a girl marries, the more likely her husband is to be significantly older than her.⁹

Ending child marriage will eliminate a significant source of health risks for girls.

Painful Consequences: Obstetric Fistula

Early childbearing can lead to serious health problems, such as obstetric fistula. Obstetric fistula results when a young mother's vagina, bladder and/or rectum tear during childbirth, a condition that causes urine and feces leakage. It can occur when a young woman with underdeveloped physiology gives birth. Fistula patients are commonly poor women, ages 15 to 20, many of whom report early marriage.

Source: United Nations Population Fund (2003). *Obstetric Fistula Needs Assessment Report: Findings From Nine African Countries*. UNFPA: New York.

to report condom use than married girls. This makes sense because research shows that men are more likely to use condoms outside of marriage than with their wives.

Married girls responded to information about HIV by asking their husbands to be faithful — something that they have little or no power to enforce. Despite taking this action, 30 percent of married girls in the Zambia survey felt they were at “moderate” or “great” risk of contracting HIV, compared to 18 percent of sexually active unmarried girls.⁷

Young married girls can be at risk of contracting HIV and AIDS if their husbands are significantly older and therefore more likely to have contracted HIV or AIDS in their lifetime. Large age gaps between husband and wife are common in some regions of the world. In central and western Africa, one-third of young women in their first marriages report having a partner that is at least 11 years their senior.⁸ A large age difference between the spouses is particularly prevalent

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- ⁹ The National Research Council and Institute of Medicine (2005).

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