

# Too Young To Wed

Education & Action  
Toward Ending Child Marriage

## SEEKING POLICY SOLUTIONS



*Child marriage is both a human rights violation and a barrier to development. It robs girls of their ability to reach their full potential and makes it harder for families, communities and countries to escape poverty.*

*To succeed in reducing poverty and achieving other development goals—especially improving the lives of women and children—ending child marriage must become a policy priority, both for governments and international donors.*



Today 51 million girls ages 17 or younger in developing countries are married. 🌿 If child marriage is left unchecked, an additional 100 million girls in developing countries will be married within the next decade—some before they reach age 10. 🌿 That's 25,000 girls being married every day for the next 10 years.

**The costs of doing nothing are high for both girls and communities.** In some of the poorest countries, girls are not attending school because they are being prepared for early marriage. Of those attending school, many are forced to drop out

because they are married off at a young age. Their friendships with peers often are restricted. And they cannot take advantage of economic opportunities—including those stemming from development assistance programs. Their health also is at risk because of early sexual activity and child-bearing. And they have little or no access to quality health care services. Many child brides also experience domestic violence from spouses and their relatives.

**The costs also are high for developing countries.** Countries with high child marriage rates have high rates of maternal and child mortality, as well as extreme and persistent poverty.

**Child marriage is a development problem that needs immediate attention.**

The practice is most common in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia, but it also occurs at high rates in parts of Latin America and the Caribbean—including many countries supported by the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR) or the Millennium Challenge Account (MCA)—see related table, this page.

### Child Marriage in PEPFAR, MCA Countries

COUNTRY	RATE OF CHILD MARRIAGE*	PRESIDENT'S EMERGENCY PLAN FOR AIDS RELIEF (PEPFAR)**	MILLENNIUM CHALLENGE ACCOUNT (MCA)**
Mali	65%		X
Mozambique	56%	X	X
Uganda	54%	X	
Ethiopia	49%	X	
Nicaragua	43%		X
Nigeria	43%	X	
Zambia	42%	X	
Madagascar	39%		X
Tanzania	39%	X	
Benin	37%		X
Senegal	36%		X
Cote d' Ivoire	33%	X	
Ghana	28%		X
Bolivia	26%		X
Kenya	25%	X	
Haiti	24%	X	
Rwanda	20%	X	

\*The percentage of 20- to 24-year-old women that were married by age 18; Demographic Health Survey (DHS) data from 1995 to 2003.

\*\*Data is provided for all PEPFAR and MCA countries where the most recent DHS data is available. No data is available for PEPFAR countries Botswana and Guyana. No data is available for MCA countries Cape Verde, Georgia, Honduras, Lesotho, Mongolia, Sri Lanka and Vanuatu. Not included in the table were MCA countries Armenia, Morocco, Namibia and South Africa, which have child marriage rates below 20 percent. MCA countries based on fiscal year 2005 eligibility.

## THE FACTS OF CHILD MARRIAGE CANNOT BE IGNORED

### MANY CAUSES...

The causes of child marriage are complex, varied and often interlinked. Socioeconomic factors such as poverty, family circumstances, a community's marriage customs and practices, and girls' lack of access to empowering options like education all play a role in whether girls marry too young.

- **Poverty:** In some families, girls may be viewed as an economic burden. In these cases, marriage can be perceived as the best tool to alleviate the burden of having one more mouth to feed.
- **Transfer of Wealth:** Dowry and bridewealth—which involve the exchange of money, livestock or other wealth from the bride's family to the groom's, or vice versa—often are determined by the age of the bride. Lower dowry costs or higher bridewealth gains for girls' families serve as a common incentive for marrying girls early.
- **Custom:** Community customs regarding the appropriate age for marriage can exert a great deal of social pressure on parents to marry their daughters at young ages. In places where the custom is to marry daughters at age 9 or 10, a girl reaching her 15th or 16th birthday may be considered past the marriageable age. Parents often worry that if they don't marry their daughters according to social expectations, they will not be able to marry them at all.
- **Protection:** For many parents, marriage is seen as a way to protect their daughters. Parents fear their daughters may become victims of violence or rape; at times girls must walk alone—sometimes long distances—to school or to collect firewood and water. And in some communities where virginity is prized and associated with family honor, parents want to protect their daughters from engaging in premarital sex.
- **Ties that Bind:** Marriage in many communities serves as a means for strengthening economic, social and political ties between different families and communities. The early marriage of a daughter may help reinforce such a tie or establish a new bond that improves the standing of the family or community. It is not uncommon for young girls to be offered in marriage to a family that is known to own more land or livestock.
- **Little Education and Few Options:** If no schooling or work is available, a young girl may get married based on her family's economic need or to secure her economic future. In some communities, young girls are withdrawn from school so they can marry.

### *Protective or Risky? Marriage to Older Men*

Research shows that the younger girls are when they marry, the wider the age difference between husband and wife. Married girls often lack status and power within their marriages and households—especially when their spouse is significantly older. A wide spousal age gap increases the likelihood that girls will be isolated and experience domestic violence and health risks, including HIV infection.

In sub-Saharan Africa, especially West Africa, a significant spousal age gap often is tied to the practice of polygamy—the marriage of one man to more than one woman. Large age gaps between spouses are more common in polygamous than monogamous unions because men tend to wait until they are older and can afford to have multiple wives; adolescent girls often are taken as a second or third wife.

### ...AND MANY CONSEQUENCES

Child marriage makes it harder for families, communities and countries to escape poverty. It erodes the health and well-being of girls and the overall welfare of communities. It also undercuts international efforts to fight poverty and HIV/AIDS, improve child health and survival, and support other international development initiatives, making billions of development assistance dollars less effective.

#### Child Marriage Threatens the Effectiveness of Economic Growth Programs

Girls who marry young are more likely to be poor and remain poor. Child marriage is most common among the poor and in rural communities. In sub-Saharan Africa, the practice is twice as common among the poorest families (lower 40th percentile) as compared to the richest families (top 20th percentile). In certain countries, this income gap is even wider. A poorer woman in Senegal, for example, is more than four times as likely to be a child bride as her richer peers. Moreover, girls who marry young have less education and fewer economic opportunities, which greatly increases the chance that they—and their children—will remain poor.

#### Child Marriage Undercuts Health and Nutrition Programs

Girls who marry young experience greater health risks.

- **Undernutrition and Malnutrition:** Early marriage is often followed by early pregnancy. Girls who are pregnant or lactating require more calories and nutrients compared to those who are not, and when this extra nutrition is not available, their nutritional status is compromised. Married girls who are thin and undernourished before becoming pregnant are particularly vulnerable to becoming malnourished during pregnancy. Young mothers also

are less able to adequately care for their children, and this often compromises their children's nutritional status.

- **Maternal Mortality:** Girls between the ages of 10 and 14 are five times more likely to die in pregnancy and childbirth than women ages 20 to 24; girls ages 15 to 19 are twice as likely to die.
- **Infant Mortality:** The underdeveloped bodies of young girls can lead to complication in childbirth that can result in the death of the child (see related chart, page 5).
- **Obstetric Fistula:** A 2003 study by the U.N. Population Fund and EngenderHealth of nine African countries found fistula patients to most often be poor young women, ages 15 to 20, many of whom reported having been married young. Obstetric fistula results when a young mother's vagina, bladder and/or rectum tear during childbirth, a condition that causes urine and feces leakage.
- **HIV Infection:** The 2004 study, *Early Marriage and HIV Risk in Sub-Saharan Africa* by Shelley Clark, found that in Kenya and Zambia being married increases a girl's chance of being HIV-positive by more than 75 percent over sexually active unmarried girls.

### Who Am I? A Child Bride

I am 14 years old.

I was promised into marriage at birth.

My husband is nearly twice my age.

I've dropped out of school.

I have no job opportunities.

I am hungry and there's little food to eat.

My husband and family pressure me to become pregnant and have children.

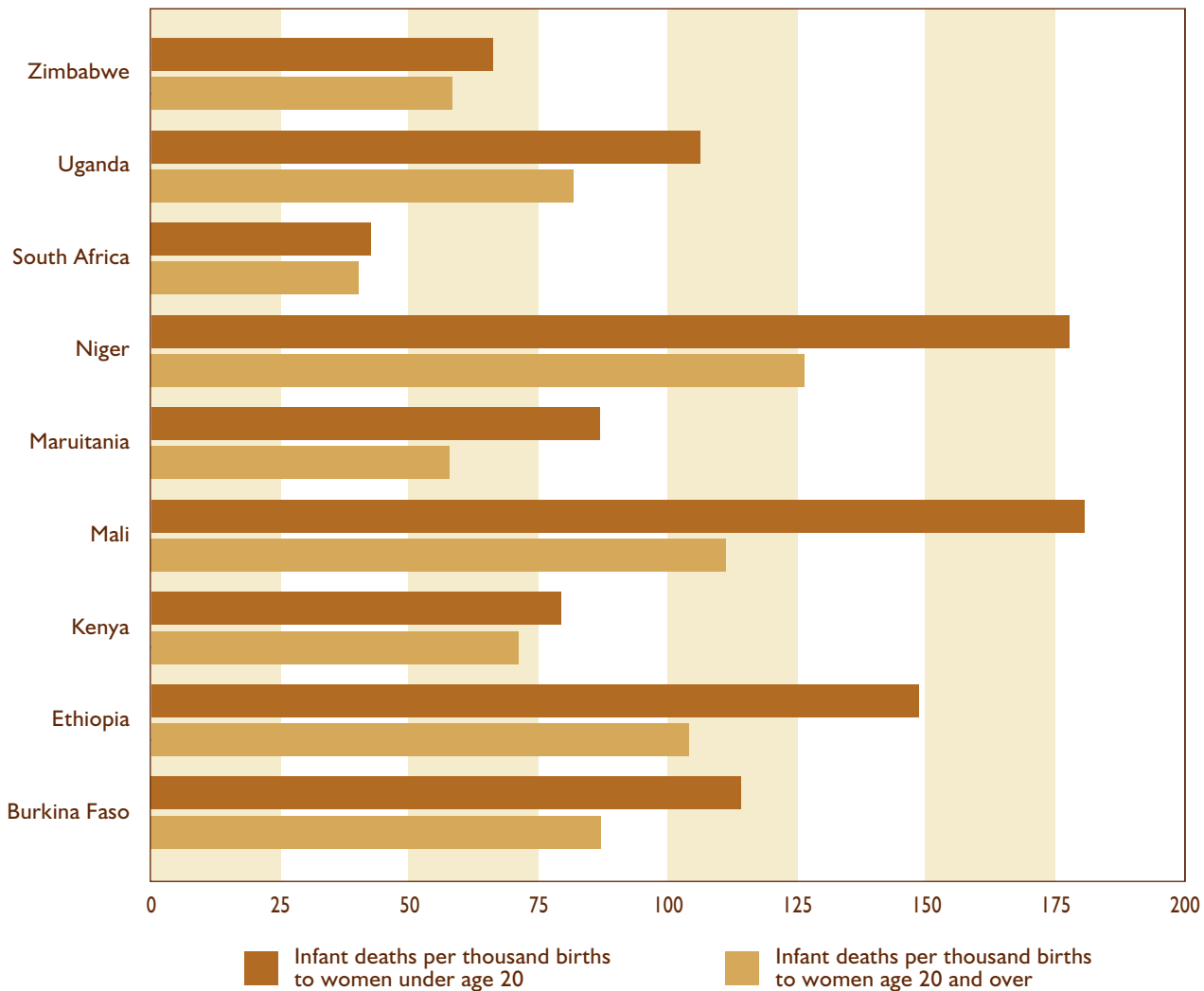
My chance of dying in childbirth or from related complications are much higher than average.

The chance of my child being healthy and surviving birth or infancy are much lower.

I am more likely to become infected with HIV.

I have few friends; my husband controls where I can go and who I can see, and I often feel lonely.

## Infant Mortality Rates: Mothers Under and Over Age 20



Source: DHS data (1995–2003). Infant mortality rates for women ages 15–19 and 20–49.

Note: Infant mortality is the number of deaths of children under age 1 per 1,000 live births.

### Child Marriage Impedes the Success of Education Programs

Child marriage often ends a girl's education. In Mali, 86 percent of married girls have received no education, and nine out of 10 married girls cannot read.

### Child Marriage Violates the Human Rights of Women and Girls

Married girls are more susceptible to domestic violence. ICRW research in India shows that women married as children were twice as likely to report being beaten, slapped or threatened by their husbands as women who were married as adults. They also were three times as likely to report being forced to have sex.

## WHAT CAN POLICYMAKERS DO? END CHILD MARRIAGE

Countries like South Korea, Taiwan and Thailand have eliminated the practice of child marriage in little more than a generation. The marriage-age increase in these countries has been coupled with increases in the levels of education and economic opportunities for girls and young women as well as broader development success in terms of economic growth and improvements in health and welfare. Experience in these countries shows the close connection between later marriages and successful development investments.

The means for tackling the global problem of child marriage exist. They include programs that educate parents and young people about the effects of child marriage; improve girls' access to health care services; and provide girls better educational, nutritional and economic opportunities. Research shows that girls tend to marry later if they have higher levels of education and access to employment options.

Positive change also stems from efforts that mobilize communities and equip them with information about the causes and consequences of child marriage. Community organizations, parents, and tribal and religious leaders in Ethiopia have mobilized—and continue to mobilize—to end the practice of child marriage in their communities. The Ethiopian government also recently amended the country's family law and penal code to outlaw marriage before the age of 18. Similar efforts are taking place in communities throughout the developing world.

## *Understanding the Legal Environment of Child Marriage*

*“Child marriage and the betrothal of girls and boys shall be prohibited and effective action, including legislation, shall be taken to specify the minimum age of marriage to be 18 years.”*

—1990 AFRICAN CHARTER ON THE RIGHTS AND WELFARE OF THE CHILD

Prohibiting the marriage of girls and boys before they become adults has near universal consensus among governments. In Africa—one of the regions with the highest incidence of this practice—countries came together more than a decade ago to adopt the 1990 African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, which calls for states to take action to end child marriage. In fact, most developing countries are signatories to international agreements and conventions opposing child marriage and have laws setting a minimum age of marriage.

Despite such efforts, the legal age of marriage remains 16 in at least 15 countries, and 20 countries have no minimum age requirement.\* Many countries also allow early marriage with parental consent. Moreover, in a handful of countries the law

allows a perpetrator of rape—including statutory rape of a minor—to be excused of his crime if he marries his victim.

Even when legal protections exist, they may not be fully enforced and in some cases, traditional law overrides statutory law.

The international consensus is that early marriage is harmful and should be prohibited. The Inter-African Committee on Traditional Practices Affecting the Health of Women and Children defines early marriage as “any marriage carried out below the age of 18 years, before the girl is physically, physiologically and psychologically ready to shoulder the responsibilities of marriage and childbearing.”

An array of international instruments echoes this perspective. The 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that men and women of “full age” have the right to marry and have a family. It adds: “Marriage shall be entered into only with the free and full consent of the intending spouses.”

\* United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) “Early Marriage: Child Spouses” in *Innocenti Digest* No. 7, March 2001, p. 7.

The potential for eliminating child marriage through community mobilization is great. Other harmful traditional practices have been eradicated through community action. For example, over the past decade the practice of female genital cutting has been nearly eliminated in some African settings because local communities and international development organizations worked together to generate the necessary support.

The United States through its diplomacy and development assistance programs is well-placed to demonstrate leadership on the issue of child marriage. Specifically, U.S. development assistance programs can further efforts to:

- **Increase** access to, enrollment in and completion of both primary and secondary education by girls—both married and unmarried.
- **Provide** girls and young women with safe employment opportunities outside of the home.
- **Support** and expand nutrition and immunization programs for young mothers and children.
- **Support** and expand access to family planning services and information for both married and unmarried youth.
- **Increase** women's and girls' access to health care services by providing funding for medical outreach centers in rural communities, modern equipment and supplies, emergency obstetrics care and the medical transportation needs of rural families.
- **Increase** opportunities for local communities to train and retain skilled health care workers, including midwives.
- **Educate** parents and young people about their rights, laws, international norms and the benefits of delaying marriage.
- **Include** the special needs of young married girls in HIV/AIDS prevention, care, testing and treatment programs.
- **Support** programs to end violence against women.
- **Support** additional research on child marriage, its causes and solutions.

Child marriage is a development problem that must not be ignored. Addressing its causes and providing solutions for its consequences should be part of any compassionate development agenda. Ending child marriage not only will protect girls and ensure a better future for them and their families, it also will ensure stronger and healthier families and communities.



"I did not  
want to get married.  
I had other plans  
for my life. I wanted to  
continue studying."

—ROHINI, AGE 16, MARRIED AT 15 IN INDIA



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