

Child Marriage and the 2030 Agenda: Selected Findings from Early Research

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Child marriage—marriage below the age of 18—affects 15 million girls each year. These girls are often robbed of their rights to safety and security, to health, to education, and to make their own choices and decisions for their lives.

There is growing evidence documenting the tragic consequences of child marriage, and, as importantly, ways to end the practice. But a critical barrier to advancing evidence-based interventions has been a lack of rigorous data on the economic impacts of child marriage, including opportunity and financial costs, lost earnings, costs for health care systems, lower growth potential, and the perpetuation of poverty.

To address this challenge, the International Center for Research on Women (ICRW) and the World Bank are collaborating in a groundbreaking multi-year research project. The first of its kind, this project involves the most extensive data collection and analysis ever undertaken to understand the economic costs of child marriage and to make the economic case for investing to eradicate this harmful practice. By establishing the effects that child marriage has on economic outcomes, the project aims to catalyze more effective and evidence-based action to prevent it.

As world leaders convene to adopt the 2030 *Agenda*, a global development framework that will shape international priorities and investments for the next 15 years, they will also commit to ending child marriage as a target under Goal 5, Achieve Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment. Moreover, they will enshrine in the new framework a number of other goals that child marriage has a negative impact on, including, among others: fighting poverty and hunger; and improving nutrition, education, health and workforce participation. At this critical juncture, the World Bank and ICRW hope that the results of this joint research project will help demonstrate the many ways through which child marriage hampers efforts to eradicate poverty and achieve sustainable global development, as well as the need to invest to end this harmful practice.

This brief provides a concise overview of early results from an analysis of existing data across a number of countries to develop preliminary estimates of the impacts of child marriage on a number of indicators. More countries will be added to the analysis in the coming months. The brief presents selected findings from this first

phase of the research, with the next step being to assess the economic costs associated with those impacts and the savings that could accrue were countries to eradicate the practice by 2030. The project will also include primary data collection and analysis through three in-depth country case studies. The findings presented here are therefore a starting point for a large body of research that will provide insights into the impacts of child marriage on the lives of women, girls, their households and communities, and the countries they live in.

For ongoing updates and new findings, visit www.costsofchildmarriage.org.

Trends in Child Marriage

Some 150 million girls will marry before age 18 in the next decade [1]. Analyses conducted for this project show that child marriage rates are highest in sub-Saharan Africa, but the highest number of married girls can be found in South Asia. Child marriage is declining, but slowly. In the past 30 years, the incidence of child marriage was reduced by only 11 percentage points in 60 countries where child marriage measures were



FAST FACTS ON CHILD MARRIAGE

- 15 million girls under the age of 18 are married each year
- Child marriage takes place all over the world, within all cultures and religions
- 90% of births to adolescent girls are within marriage
- Child marriage is a violation of girls' rights and is linked to poor outcomes in health, education, and economic participation
- Child marriage contributes to higher public and private spending and reduced economic growth
- Reducing child marriage will be a new target under Goal 5 of the 2030 Agenda



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Child marriage contributes to higher population growth because girls who marry early have a higher number of births over their lifetime.
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Delaying marriage is likely to result in significant declines in maternal, infant and child mortality and morbidity.

Children born to child brides have higher risks of stunting than children born to mothers over 18 years old.

estimated [2]. There are indications that girls who marry before age 18 do not marry as early as in previous years. Still, much more must be done to reduce and eliminate the practice.

Economic Impacts of Child Marriage

Child marriage has a wide range of economic impacts. The joint ICRW-World Bank project focuses on five pathways through which the practice affects the girls who marry early, their children, families, communities, and societies at large: (i) **Health, Nutrition, and Population**; (ii) **Educational Attainment**; (iii) **Labor Force Participation**; (iv) **Violence**; and (v) **Participation and Decision-making**. Each of these domains of impact may have mutually reinforcing effects.

An extensive review of the literature on the causes and consequences of child marriage prepared by the project suggests that each of these pathways is relevant in terms of economic costs [3]. The literature shows that child marriage reduces literacy and educational attainment for girls, especially at the secondary level. It may also reduce labor force participation directly (because of a lack of agency for child brides) or indirectly (because of the impact of early marriage on educational attainment and on their reproductive lives and responsibilities). By curtailing education, increasing fertility, and limiting opportunities for employment, child marriage contributes to extreme poverty. Furthermore, the practice is also associated with a higher risk of intimate partner violence and other forms of violence, which may themselves lead to severe injuries and even death, as well as losses in earnings and out-of-pocket costs for health care.

The review also found that child marriage is strongly linked to early pregnancy, which for girls, comes with higher risks of maternal mortality and morbidity, as well as malnutrition and depression. It is further associated with additional poor sexual and reproductive health outcomes, including increased sexually transmitted infections. The practice has severe consequences for the children of child brides in terms of infant mortality, low birth weight, and stunting, as well as under-five mortality. Finally, child marriage also leads to losses in girls' and women's empowerment and decision-making, as well as participation in society more generally.

The following sections describe some preliminary findings and conclusions from analyses conducted by the project, focusing on four areas of impact that have clear implications for

economic cost at the individual, household, community and national levels. These impact areas are: Population and Demography; Health and Nutrition; Education, Labor Force Participation, Earnings, and Economic Growth; and Public and Private Social Spending.

Population & Demography

FERTILITY

The number of children a woman has over her lifetime has significant impacts on her health, her ability to engage in activities outside of the household (economic and social), and the poverty level of her household. To explore these issues, Demographic and Health Surveys were used for a half dozen countries to estimate the impact of each year of early marriage on the number of births for women aged 35-49. In Nigeria, for example, those who married at age 12 have a number of births higher by 30 percent on average than women who married after the age of 18 [4]. These results indicate that even relatively small changes in age at marriage matter – even marrying at age 17, rather than 18, increases the number of births over a women's lifetime by 18 percent, or an additional 1.4 children over her lifetime in Nigeria. In some countries, such as Egypt, the impact is smaller, but in other countries such as Ethiopia, it is larger.

POPULATION GROWTH

Because girls who marry early have a higher number of births over their lifetime, child marriage contributes to higher population growth. Estimates suggest that in countries with a high incidence of child marriage, such as Niger, annual rates of population growth could be reduced by up to a third of a percentage point each year if child marriage were eliminated and there were no increases in births outside of marriage by adolescent girls [5]. In countries with lower incidences of child marriage, the impact on demographic growth would be smaller, but still substantial. The implications of these changes at the aggregate level for both government and private expenditures would be very significant, placing less demand on often over-stretched services and infrastructure, as well as government and private budgets.

Health and Nutrition

UNDER FIVE MORTALITY

Child marriage increases the risk of maternal and infant mortality and morbidity, both of which have very significant social and economic impacts from the individual to the national level. Analyses using data from Demographic and Health Surveys find that the risk of death before age five for children increases substantially when the child is born to a mother below 18 years of age, as

compared to a child with similar characteristics born to an older mother [6]. This suggests that delaying marriage therefore is likely to result in significant declines in infant and child mortality, with beneficial effects that directly impact both society and the economy.

UNDER FIVE MALNUTRITION

Children born to child brides also have a higher risk of malnutrition than children born to older mothers, a significant barrier to the health of the child, their educational prospects, and, in the longer term, their contributions to household and national economies through their labor. Multivariate analysis based on Demographic and Health Surveys for a half dozen countries suggests that children born from child brides have higher risks of stunting than children born from mothers over 18 years old, with additional risks resulting from a higher likelihood of low birthweight. In the Democratic Republic of Congo, for example, the effect is estimated at seven percentage points [7]. At the aggregate level, this has very significant effects for countries seeking to enhance the human capacity and health of their population.

Education, Labor Force Participation, Earnings, and Economic Growth

EDUCATION

Two main approaches are used to estimate the impact of child marriage on educational attainment. The first relies on reasons mentioned by parents, school principals or teachers in surveys for why their children have dropped out of school [8]. Using this approach, in Nigeria, child marriage (and to a lesser extent, pregnancies) accounts for 15 to 20 percent of drop-outs for girls in secondary school [9]. In Uganda, head teachers cite child marriage and early pregnancy as the main reasons for girls to drop out of secondary school [10].

The second approach relies on regression techniques with instrumental variables. Prior research found that each additional year of delay in the age of marriage increases schooling by 0.22 years and the likelihood of literacy by 5.6 percentage points [11]. Analyses find that, in Africa, each year of early marriage reduces the probability of secondary school completion by about four percentage points [12]. In other regions, such as Latin America and the Caribbean, the impacts can be higher, in part because educational attainment itself is higher [13].

LABOR FORCE PARTICIPATION & EARNINGS

Child marriage may reduce labor force participation both directly and indirectly, as noted above.

Post-primary education is associated with higher labor force participation, at least in the formal labor market. A larger number of children, as well as household responsibilities that come with marriage for girls and women, make it more difficult to engage in (so-called) productive, as opposed to domestic, work. Simulations using household surveys for a half dozen countries find that the combined effect of lower educational attainment and a higher number of children can lead to a reduction in labor force participation for women who have married early by five to 15 percentage points. In Ethiopia, for example, the increase in labor force participation that would result from eliminating child marriage would be 10 percentage points for the women who otherwise would marry early [14]. The impact on earnings for women who marry early is much larger, but the magnitude of this effect varies markedly depending on the country being considered.

Furthermore, there is evidence that, even after controlling for the demographic structure of households (i.e. number of children) and the educational attainment of women, marrying early may have an additional direct negative impact on labor force participation for women. This seems to be the case in Egypt [15], among others.

Apart from reducing labor force participation, child marriage is likely to lead to lower earnings for women who work through its impact on educational attainment. As a result, child marriage contributes to poverty not only by increasing the resources needed by households (because of a higher number of children in the household), but also by reducing earnings.

ECONOMIC GROWTH & POVERTY

The negative impacts of child marriage on labor force participation and on earnings for women who work in the labor market lead to lower levels of economic growth for countries, thereby limiting poverty reduction efforts. In addition, the effect of child marriage on demographic growth also affects growth in Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per capita and poverty reduction. On top of labor force participation and earnings effects, the reduction in population growth that would be achieved by eliminating child marriage would result in a corresponding increase in the rate of growth in GDP per capita, thereby contributing further to poverty reduction. The largest benefits would be observed for the extreme poor, who are also the most likely to marry early [16].

Public and Private Social Spending

Eliminating child marriage would also have large positive effects on public spending for the social

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Marrying early has negative impacts on female participation in the labor force and likely also leads to lower earnings for women.
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Child marriage limits girls' educational attainment.

Child marriage contributes to higher public and private spending and lower levels of economic growth.

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By reducing demographic pressure, the elimination of child marriage would help countries invest more in the quality of education, health, and other services.
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sectors, reducing the pressure to spread budgets allocated to education and health thinly among a large population. By reducing the population of future children to be served, eliminating child marriage would generate fiscal space for increasing the quality of education and health services and reaching those not yet served by public schools and health facilities. Similar effects are likely to also be evident in household budgets, with lower fertility making it easier for households to invest more robustly in the human development of a smaller number of children.

Conclusion

While still in the early phases of our project, the research indicates quite strongly that, in addition to harmful effects on girls' health, education, rights, and wellbeing, the economic impacts of child marriage from the individual to the national levels are potentially very substantial. These impacts are particularly significant for those living in extreme poverty, implying that without eradicating the practice, child marriage will continue to serve as an impediment to moving

families, communities, and societies out of extreme poverty.

This new evidence adds to a growing list of arguments that investing in ending child marriage is not only the right thing to do, but is also an economically practical decision. For many reasons and across many goals, ending child marriage will be essential – and worth the investment – in achieving the 2030 Agenda.

The good news is that an increasing base of evidence suggests some helpful ways forward. Research by ICRW [17], the World Bank [18], and other organizations have documented a range of strategies that can, when implemented properly, delay the age of marriage and drive associated development benefits. While more research will help to refine appropriate interventions across diverse settings, we know enough for governments and development agencies to prioritize investments to end child marriage as smart investments in the health, education, labor force and overall economic growth of their nations.

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