

**A frightened-looking girl is prepared for her marriage in India. Many young brides live in South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa, where on average one in three girls between the ages of 15 and 19 is already married.**

Image: Zana Briski

# child marriage

- 40%: The percentage of girls in Nepal who marry before age 15.
- 50%: The percentage of girls in the Amhara Region in Ethiopia who marry before age 15.
- 1 in 3: The proportion of married adolescents in Egypt who are beaten by their spouses.
- 41%: The percentage of these Egyptian adolescents who were pregnant when beaten.
- 2,000,000: The number of women suffering from obstetric fistula worldwide.
- 12: The age of one wife in Nigeria whose husband cut off her legs after she repeatedly tried to escape from him.<sup>1</sup>

## What is child marriage?

The Inter-African Committee on Traditional Practices Affecting the Health of Women and Children (IAC) defines child 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.”<sup>2</sup> An array of international instruments — including the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the 1979 United Nations’ Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and the 1990 African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child — echoes the perspective of the IAC: that marriage decisions should be the preserve of consenting adults.<sup>3</sup> Children have the right to be protected from prematurely assuming the responsibilities of adulthood, especially marriage and child-bearing.

Even though some countries permit marriage before age 18, international human rights standards classify these as child marriages, reasoning that those under age 18 are unable to give informed consent. Child marriages involving parental, partner and/or social influence, collusion or pressure are, *de facto*, forced — regardless of the extent of enthusiasm or acquiescence of the child designated in marriage. In many settings, however, these basic standards are considered irrelevant rather than universal and — even more pointedly and dismissively — “Western”. In Ethiopia, where more than half of all girls are married before age 18 and medical problems associated with early child-bearing are rife, one Orthodox priest insisted, “These days, with Western ideas spreading everywhere, girls stay unmarried as late as 30. It’s all very scientific and modern, but in our church it is prohibited. Such girls are neither clean nor blessed.”<sup>4</sup>

“Fatima” carries her three-month-old infant on her back. Still a child herself, Fatima was forced to marry when she was nine years old. After becoming pregnant, she ran away from her husband’s house to stay with her mother. Fatima remains there while recuperating from the surgery that was required to address complications she suffered during obstructed labour — her immature pelvis was too small to deliver a baby. Both Fatima and her mother are slaves in Niger, where an estimated 82 percent of girls marry before age 18. As is custom, Fatima’s master forced her into child marriage to exploit the number of years Fatima can produce slave progeny.

Image: Georgina Cranston/IRIN

The unsurprising upshot of such perceptions resounds in the chatter of 12-year-old Deepali from Bangladesh, who has embraced her society's perception that a girl's worth is measured by her ability to be wed at a young age:

"People say I'm very fortunate to have been born so fair, so beautiful. My parents had no problems finding an eligible husband for me. Unlike my dark cousin Maya, who is 13 and still unmarried! I also don't have to go to school anymore. But Maya — she has to go to school until she gets married."<sup>5</sup>

Others do not embrace their fate as easily as Deepali. Girls in focus group discussions in Afghanistan, for example, repeatedly identified child marriage as a major concern in their young lives. Even those as young as 10 and 11 years of age understood that marriage and schooling for Afghan girls are almost always mutually exclusive.<sup>6</sup> In Afghanistan, as in many other parts of the world, losing out on an education is just one of a broad spectrum of negative consequences of child marriage for a young girl.

## The extent of the problem

The implications of child marriage are all the more alarming given its scope: Around the world, a projected 82 million girls who are now between the ages of 10 and 17 will be married before their 18th birthdays. Of the 331 million girls aged 10 to 19 in developing countries (excluding China), nearly half will be married before turning 20.<sup>7</sup> Although many marriages coincide with a girl's first menstrual period, girls in some communities may be betrothed in infancy and married as early as age eight or nine.

Many of these young wives live in South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa, where on average one in every three girls between the ages of 15 and 19 is already married. In Central America and the Caribbean, the numbers are only slightly better at an estimated 20 percent.<sup>8</sup> And these averages do not capture the remarkable extremes: Two out of every three girls in Yemen, Mali, Nepal and Mozambique will be married before age 18. In Niger, Bangladesh and Chad, the prevalence of underage marriages is as high as 70 percent to 80 percent.<sup>9</sup>

Child marriage is both a cause and a consequence of poverty. While the marriage of young girls and boys is common in the history of most societies around the globe, the average age of wedlock in the world's

industrialised regions has risen along with social and economic development. Only 2 percent to 4 percent of girls in North America, East Asia and Western Europe marry before age 19.<sup>10</sup> By not marrying at a young age, girls in these areas have greater opportunity to complete their education, increase their life skills and develop a sense of personal autonomy. As such, they are better equipped to contribute to society, whether in the public or private spheres. Even among the small

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percentage of girls who do wed at an early age in these regions, entering the marriage is much more likely to be the result of personal choice rather than pressure from parents or community.

Child marriage and its negative consequences are also decidedly gender-biased. The number of boys in child marriages around the world is significantly lower than that of girls. In sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia, for example, only 5 percent of boys marry before age 19.<sup>11</sup> For most boys who do become young husbands, child marriage is not the harbinger of misfortune that it is for many girl wives. Boys from traditional societies who marry at a young age are less likely than girls to be strictly bound by their family responsibilities. Whereas girls who marry early automatically attain the status of adults and lose any special protections that come with being a child, boys have more freedom to continue their education and acquire skills that will further their personal and social development.

## The legal context

Despite national and international laws pertaining to minimum age and consent in marriage, many young girls around the world are still at risk. In 15 countries, the legal age of marriage is 16.<sup>12</sup> Even when legal protections against child marriage do exist, they may be ambiguous, allow for dual existence of customary and civil law and have limited enforcement mechanisms. Some legal provisions, for example, may allow traditional law to override statutory law, and therefore restrictions against early marriage in state law may not apply to customary marriages.<sup>13</sup>

Moreover, in countries "where there is a discrepancy between the minimum age of marriage for boys and girls, it is consistently lower for

girls.”<sup>14</sup> According to CEDAW, these discrepancies “assume incorrectly that women have a different rate of intellectual development from men, or that their stage of physical and intellectual development at marriage

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is immaterial.”<sup>15</sup> The national laws of Cameroon, Jordan, Morocco, Uganda and Yemen do not specifically accord women the right to consent before marriage.<sup>16</sup> Among the “vast majority” of countries around the world that have codified a woman’s equal right to choose a marriage partner, legal provisions are often “merely symbolic” — and as a result unenforced or subject to wide exceptions.<sup>17</sup>

Legislative provisions in many countries allow for child marriage with parental consent, which in the context of traditional societies does little to preserve the rights of girl children. In Algeria, Chad, Costa Rica, Lebanon, Libya, Romania and Uruguay, the law allows a perpetrator of rape — including rape of a minor — to be pardoned of his crime if he marries his victim.<sup>18</sup> In the case of a young victim, stigma, shame, coercion and ignorance of the law, along with a multitude of other factors, may prevent her from exercising her legal right to refuse such a marriage. In Ethiopia, illegal “abduction marriages”, where men kidnap young girls and consummate the marriage with rape, remain prevalent in some rural settings. In a study conducted among 227 Ethiopian wives, 60 percent said they had been abducted before age 15, and 93 percent before age 20.<sup>19</sup>

### The failure to prioritise women’s and girl’s rights

Child marriage predominates in traditional societies around the world, where the desires and needs of parents and community may override considerations for the individual development and wellbeing of a girl child. The patriarchal values buttressing these cultures further erode any rights that might otherwise be afforded a young girl. The fact that marrying young maximises a female’s reproductive lifespan and thus ensures large families justifies the custom of child marriage and ignores the health impact of such a tradition on young wives.

The prevalence of child marriage also may be linked to the economics of poverty. Young girls in certain communities in Africa will generate

more bride price because as virgins they are less likely to have HIV and other sexually transmitted infections. Conversely, African parents in resource-poor settings who are worried about not being able to find men who can afford a high bride price may prevent a daughter from completing schooling for fear that an education will increase her cost.<sup>20</sup> Once a girl has left school, she is much more likely to get married. In the Asian societies where dowry customs dominate, girls may be married off

early because dowry increases as a girl matures. In Bangladesh, for example, dowry doubles once a girl reaches the age of 15, because she is considered less “marriageable”.<sup>21</sup>

Other motives for child marriage include controlling a young girl’s sexuality and curbing any manifestations of independence. Committing a pubescent or even prepubescent girl to marriage reduces the likelihood of premarital liaisons, which is important when the sexual purity of girls and women is seen as a community prerogative and the basis of family and tribal honour. In societies where subservience to husbands is requisite in marriage, young brides offer the additional benefit of being easier to mould into deferential wives.<sup>22</sup>

### Child marriage and gender-based violence

Child marriage is a form of gender-based violence that leads to a range of other forms of violence. Research suggests, for example, that sexual assault in marriage may be more common among wives who marry young, due at least in part to the power inequities between older husbands and younger wives. Indian girls from Calcutta who married early reported that their husbands had forced them to have intercourse before they had started menstruating. Despite protestations of pain and lack of desire, 80 percent of these girls said their husbands continued to force them to have sexual relations.<sup>23</sup>

Girls who marry early also may be at greater risk of physical violence at the hands of their husbands and in-laws. In Jordan, 26 percent of domestic violence incidents reported in 2000 were committed against wives who were under age 18.<sup>24</sup> As with sexual violence, this increased risk may be associated with age and power differentials. Lack of social networks and economic assets, as well as low self-esteem, make child brides less likely to leave abusive husbands and more likely to tolerate the abuse. In studies in Benin, India and Turkey, for example, 62 percent to 67 percent of young wives — as opposed to 36 percent to 42 percent

Twenty-year-old “Salamat” lives in Niger as the second wife to a man 28 years her senior. She had no choice in the marriage. Salamat gave birth to her first baby when she was 13 years old. Her husband’s first wife, who is 35 and lives in a hut nearby, has had six children.

Image: Georgina Cranston/IRIN

Footprints of urine made by a girl at the Fistula Hospital in Ethiopia, which is dedicated to treating women who suffer from obstetric fistula — a malady that is directly related to early child-bearing.

Image: Evelyn Hockstein/IRIN

of older wives — believed that their husbands were justified in using physical violence against them.<sup>25</sup>

Girls who try to escape early or abusive marriages risk retribution from their husbands as well as their natal families, including further abuse, imprisonment or even death. The Commission on the Status of Women in Pakistan, where honour killings are often linked to domestic violence, reported in 1989 that “men are constantly fighting to retrieve their women because they have run away.”<sup>26</sup> Data from prisons in Afghanistan’s capital city of Kabul in 2004 indicated that the majority of female inmates had been married before age 16, and that incarceration was highly correlated to child marriage. “Zabia” is one such case:

“When [Zabia] was 10 years old her parents sold her in marriage to a 50-year-old man who was deaf and dumb. She was raped on her wedding night. In the years that followed, [Zabia] ran away to her father’s house some seven or eight times. Every time she returned, her father beat her and held her in chains until her husband came to retrieve her. She finally escaped to the city, where she met a kind woman who took her in. After some time, [Zabia] met a young male relative of the woman, became engaged and married him. She had been happily married for six months and was pregnant when she told her second husband her true history. The second husband, who accepted her past, went to meet [Zabia’s] parents to tell them of her whereabouts and happy marriage and invited them to visit their daughter. Instead, [Zabia’s] parents reported the couple to the police, who imprisoned them for illegal marriage.”<sup>27</sup>

Husbands of young wives are often significantly older, and therefore more likely to die before their wives. While it may seem a reprieve in cases of violent marriages, lack of property or inheritance rights, as well as high rates of illiteracy among young brides, puts these widows at great risk for multiple forms of exploitation.<sup>28</sup> In certain parts of India, a girl

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whose husband has died may be given in *nata* to a widower in the family. Although officially designated his wife, she may become “the common property of all the men in the family.”<sup>29</sup> In parts of Africa, a widow is remarried, according to the practice of *levirate*, to a brother of her

deceased husband. Any resulting children are given the name of the deceased husband, thus ensuring the continuation of his lineage. If a widow refuses to marry her brother-in-law, she not only risks being cast out of his family, but also losing custody of her children and any rights to her husband’s property.<sup>30</sup> Widowed women also can be traded as commodities in dispute negotiations between families or communities — given as a wife, for example, from one family to another to reinstate the honour of an aggrieved man and his clan.<sup>31</sup>

## The multiple health risks of child marriage

In addition to the physical dangers associated with domestic violence, child marriage poses many other health risks. Because of the greater permeability of their vaginal tissue and other biological factors like hormone fluctuations, girls are more vulnerable than mature women to sexually transmitted infections, including HIV. Their age, limited life experience and inferior status also make it difficult for young wives to negotiate safer sex.<sup>32</sup>

While marriage to girls is considered a protective measure for husbands, it may have the opposite effect on their wives, especially in polygynous societies. In a recent study undertaken in Rwanda and cited in a United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) report on child marriages, 25 percent of girls who became pregnant at 17 or younger were infected with HIV, even though many reported having sex only with their husbands. The study found that a higher incidence of HIV infection was directly correlated to a younger age of sexual intercourse and first pregnancy.<sup>33</sup> In findings from rural Uganda, girls aged 13 to 19 who were HIV-positive were twice as likely to be married as girls who were HIV-negative. For young wives, “abstinence is not an option — those who try to negotiate condom use commonly face violence and rejection.”<sup>34</sup>

The leading cause of death for 15- to 19-year-old girls worldwide is complications from pregnancy and child-bearing. According to public-health experts, for every girl that dies during pregnancy or childbirth, 30 more will suffer injuries, infections and

disabilities. And the risks are not limited to the mother: If a girl is under the age of 18 when she gives birth, her baby’s chance of dying in its first year of life is 60 percent higher than that of a baby born to an older mother.<sup>35</sup> Moreover, the extended reproductive span of a girl who is

married early puts her and her children at risk due to a greater number of pregnancies and deliveries. According to one study, women who marry before age 19 will have two to four times more children than those who marry after age 25.<sup>36</sup>

### The additional burden of obstetric fistula

One of the most physically and psychologically debilitating effects of early child-bearing is fistula, a rupture of tissue that results in an opening between the vagina and the bladder or the rectum, or both, which is repairable only with surgery. Primarily caused by obstructed labour, fistula is closely linked to marriage and child-bearing among girls between 10 and 15 years of age. In one 1995 study in Niger, for example, 88 percent of women with fistula were in this age group when they were married.<sup>37</sup> As with all pregnancy-related injuries, young married girls in resource-poor settings are least likely to get treatment for fistula.<sup>38</sup> With leaking urine or faeces, a malodorous girl suffering an untreated fistula is likely to be ostracised by her community and divorced by her husband.

Child marriage is so common in Ethiopia that doctors at the Fistula Hospital, based in the capital city of Addis Ababa, operate on approximately 1,200 girls a year.<sup>39</sup> Those who are aware of and manage to find transport to the hospital are probably only a small proportion of the young women needing treatment.

### An urgent human rights concern

The Forum on Marriage and the Rights of Women and Girls, from which much of the information included in this chapter has been drawn, is a network of nongovernmental organizations with international affiliates

that shares "a vision of marriage as a sphere in which women and girls have inalienable rights."<sup>40</sup> The early work of the Forum highlighted the fact that very little is being achieved at either the international or national level to address the global problem of child marriage.

The Forum's most recent report in 2003 emphasised that there is considerable work to be done to end the practice of child marriage. Much of this effort involves lobbying governments to adopt and enforce laws that both prohibit child marriage and ensure that girls have equal access to education. Just as important, however, is changing the attitude and behaviour of community and religious leaders, whose complicity

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allows child marriage to continue. Finally, the Forum asked for increased support to programmes that empower young girls, to help them realise that their futures need not be preordained by customs that deprive them of their rights to mental, social and physical wellbeing.

Agencies such as the United Nations Fund for Population Assistance and UNICEF have started to demand action to end child marriage, while international nongovernmental organizations, including Population Council and the International Center for Research on Women, have pioneered initiatives to research child marriage, raise awareness and inform policy discussion. Despite some of these gains, the magnitude of the problem requires greater effort, not only through prevention, but also through supporting girls who are already in child marriages. Policy makers, elected officials and community and religious leaders, as well as individuals, all have a critical role in making a difference in the lives of girls and young women. ■

With leaking urine or faeces, young wives suffering from untreated fistula not only suffer the shame and pain associated with the condition but are often ostracised by their communities and abandoned by their husbands. Fistula is most prevalent in communities where child marriage and early child-bearing are common practices.

Image: Evelyn Hockstein/IRIN

"Jamillah", now 16, was forced into marriage two years ago. She has been staying at a fistula clinic in Niger while she recuperates from the injuries she suffered during the birth of her first child. From the clinic ward, she tearfully relates her story:

"My parents arranged the marriage. I had no choice. I was not even allowed to go to school. In rural areas it is thought, What is the need for formal education, especially for girls? Parents always say, 'No one knows the time we will die, so our girls must get married young so that we have lots of children — children who can take care of us.' I had to accept.

"I had my own feelings, of course, but they were not allowed to come out — they were destroyed by my parents. The culture has control. I was so influenced by my parents that I was not even allowed to go to a literacy programme.

"The delivery of the child I have just lost lasted for three days. It was during the delivery that the fistula occurred. I wept and wept. What shocked me most is that I didn't feel like other women. It is God's will that I have had fistula. All I want now is to recover. My father often comes to visit me — my mother died six years ago. My husband never comes to see me. I want to go home. I have been training here to make beaded necklaces and bracelets. I want to start a small business."

Image: Georgina Cranston/IRIN

