

# Child Marriage Factsheet

## What do we mean by child marriage?

Child marriage, defined as marriage before age 18, is a violation of human rights, compromising the development of girls and often resulting in early pregnancy and social isolation, with little education and poor vocational training reinforcing the gendered nature of poverty. Most child marriages are also forced marriages, where the consent of the child is not considered before the consummation of the union. While boys are affected by child marriage, the issue impacts girls in far larger numbers and with more intensity.<sup>i</sup>

## Why is child marriage practiced?

- **Economic reasons:** Girls are either seen as an economic burden or valued as capital for their exchange value in terms of goods, money or livestock.
- **Control over sexuality:** Child marriage is often regarded as necessary for controlling girls' sexuality which is directly linked to family honor and status.
- **Custom and tradition:** Where child marriage is prevalent there is strong social pressure on families to either conform or face ridicule, disapproval or family shame. Local perceptions regarding an ideal age of marriage are tied to economic factors such as dowries, bride price, et cetera.
- **Security:** In many cases parents turn to child marriages in order to secure a future for their daughters. Situations of insecurity and acute poverty can prompt parents to resort to child marriage as a protective mechanism or survival strategy.

## What is the prevalence of child marriage?

The prevalence of child marriage varies across region and nation. According to the International Center for Research on Women (ICRW), 51 million girls between the ages of 15-19 are currently married; 100 million girls will be married before eighteen within the next decade.

## What are the consequences of child marriage?

### Health

The majority of young brides have limited access to contraception and reproductive health services and information. They are exposed to early and frequent sexual relations and to repeated pregnancies and childbirth before they are physically mature and psychologically ready. Obstetric fistula is one of the most devastating consequences, affecting over two million girls and young women. Pregnancy related deaths are the leading cause of mortality in 15-19 year old girls, and girls age 15 years or under are five times more likely to die than those over 20.<sup>ii</sup>

### Education

According to the ICRW, education is the strongest predictor of marriage age. For example, in Mozambique approximately 60% of girls with no education are married by 18, compared to 10% of girls with secondary schooling and less than 1% of girls with higher education.<sup>iii</sup> Human rights research shows that the greatest obstacles to girls' education – as identified in many government reports to human rights monitoring bodies – are child marriage, pregnancy and domestic chores.<sup>iv</sup>

## Poverty

In many countries child marriage is linked with poverty. This is because it affects particularly the poorest in the population, and helps to reinforce cycles of poverty. Child wives tend to have more children and fewer independent income options. Poverty ultimately fuels child marriage, which in turn perpetuates the feminization of poverty. This situation is also supported by country economic indicators for measuring the health of the economy: several countries with very low gross domestic products (GDPs) tend to have higher rates of child marriage.<sup>v</sup>

## Domestic Violence

Child brides are often more likely to experience domestic violence and less likely to take action against this abuse. Girls who marry early are also more likely to believe that a man is justified in beating his wife.<sup>vi</sup>

## Which international treaties refer to child marriage?

Article 1 of the Convention of the Rights of the Child (CRC) defines the child as “every human being below the age of eighteen years.” In addition, Article 16(2) of the Convention of the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) states that the “betrothal and the marriage of a child shall have no legal effect, and all necessary action, including legislation, shall be taken to specify a minimum age for marriage and to make the registration of marriages in an official registry compulsory.” In its general recommendation no. 4 on adolescent health and development, the Committee on the Rights of the Child, the body responsible for monitoring state compliance with the CRC, has found early marriage to be a harmful traditional practice that negatively affects girls’ sexual and reproductive health. The CRC requires states to take all measures to abolish such traditional practices (Article 24(3)) and to protect the child from all forms of sexual exploitation and sexual abuse (Article 34).

## What is the minimum age of marriage (for girls) laws from around the world?

See tables below, broken down by region. Exceptions noted in second column. (Research conducted summer 2010.)

### AFRICA

18 years or above	Algeria, Benin, Botswana, Burundi, Cape Verde, Central African Republic, Côte d’Ivoire, Egypt, Ethiopia, Kenya, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, Namibia, Nigeria (18 in 18 states), Rwanda, Seychelles
18 or above with exceptions	Angola (15 based on physical development), Congo (Republic of) (18 but younger with permission from court), Eritrea (18 but 16 if pregnant), Ghana (18 but varies under customary law), Madagascar (18 but 14 with parental consent and court order), Malawi (18 but 15 with consent), Mauritius (16 with parental consent), Mozambique (18 but 16 with consent), Senegal (18 but 16 with consent (13-16 with court order)), Somalia (18 but 16 with consent), South Africa (21 but 15 with parental consent), Swaziland (21 but 16 with consent), Tunisia (20 but 17 with consent), Uganda (18 but 16 with consent), Zambia (21 but 16 with parental consent)
Below 18	Burkina Faso (17 but 15 with court waiver), Cameroon (15), Chad (13), Democratic Republic of Congo (15), Equatorial Guinea (none), Gabon (15), Gambia (none), Guinea (17), Guinea-Bissau (17), Lesotho (none), Mali (15), Niger (15), Sierra Leone (none under customary law, 21 but younger with consent under Christian marriage act), Sudan (16), Tanzania (15, 14 with court order, 12 under customary/religious law), Togo (17), Tunisia (17), Zimbabwe (16)

## ASIA

18 years or above	Bangladesh, Bhutan, Cambodia, China, Iraq, Mongolia, Oman, Singapore, Taiwan, Tajikistan, Vietnam
18 or above with exceptions	India (18 except under Mohammedan Law), Iraq (18 but 16 with consent), Japan (20 but 16 with parental consent), Jordan (18 but 15 with civil court consent), Kazakhstan (18 but 16 with court permission), Kyrgyzstan (18 but can be lowered to 17), Laos (18 but 15 under special circumstances), Malaysia (18 but 16 with court order: non-Muslims), Maldives (18 with exceptions), Myanmar (20 but 14 with consent), Nepal ( 18 but 16 with consent), Philippines (21 years but 18 with consent for non-Muslims), Russia (18 but 16 with parental consent), Sri Lanka (18 but not for Muslims)
Below 18	Armenia (17), Azerbaijan (17), Bahrain (15), Brunei (14), Indonesia (16), Iran (13), Israel (17 but 14 with parental consent), N. Korea (17), S. Korea (16), Kuwait (15), Lebanon (depends on religion), Malaysia (16 but under 16 with court consent: Muslims), Pakistan (16), Papua New Guinea (16 but 14 under special circumstances), Qatar (16), Saudi Arabia (none), Syria (17 but 13 with judicial consent), Thailand (17 but 13 with parental consent), Turkmenistan (16), Uzbekistan (17 but 16 under special circumstances), Yemen (None)

## EUROPE

18 years or above	Belgium, Finland , France, Germany, Ireland, Lithuania, Slovakia,
18 or above with exceptions	Albania (18 but lower in case of pregnancy), Austria (18 but 16 with consent), Belarus (18 but 15 under special circumstances), Bulgaria (18 but 16 with court order), Bosnia (18 but 16 with court order), Croatia (18 but 16 with court order), Cyprus (18 years but younger with parental consent), Czech republic (18 years but 17 with parental consent), Denmark (18 but lower with consent of High Commissioner), Estonia (18 but 16 with parental consent), Georgia (18 but 16 with consent), Greece (18 but younger with court order), Hungary (18 but 16 with parental consent), Iceland (18 but younger with court order), Italy (18 but 16 with parental consent), Latvia (18 but 16 with consent), Liechtenstein (18 but younger with parental consent), Malta (18 but 16 with parental consent), Montenegro (18 or lower with courts consent), Netherlands (18 except in case of pregnancy), Norway (18 but younger with permission of authorities), Poland (18 but 16 with permission from the court), Portugal (18 but 16 in special circumstances), San Marino (18 but 16 in special circumstances), Serbia (18 but 16 with permission of court), Slovenia (18 but 15 with consent), Spain (18 but 14 with court permission), Sweden (18 but below with permit), UK (18 but 16 with parental consent)
Below 18	Andorra (16), Armenia (17), Azerbaijan (17 but 16 under special circumstances), Luxembourg, 16 but lower with parental consent), Macedonia (16), Moldova (16), Monaco (15), Romania (16 and 15 in special circumstances), Switzerland (17), Turkey (17 but lower with consent), Ukraine (17)

## LATIN AMERICAN COUNTRIES

18 years or above	El Salvador, Honduras
18 or above with exceptions	Anguilla (18 but under with consent), Antigua and Barbuda (18 but 15 with consent), Brazil (21 but 16 with consent), Bahamas (18 but lower with permission), Belize (18 but 16 with consent), Bermuda (18 but 16 with consent), Cayman Islands (18 but lower with consent), Colombia (18 years but 12 with consent), Cuba (18 but 14 with consent), Dominican Republic (18 but 15 with consent), Ecuador (18 but earlier in special circumstances), Grenada (21 but lower with consent), Guatemala (18 but 14 with consent), Jamaica (18 but 16 with consent), Nicaragua (18 but 14 with consent), Panama (18 but 14 with consent), Saint Lucia (18 but 16 with consent), Trinidad and Tobago (18 but 12 with consent), Venezuela (18 but 14 with consent)
Below 18	Argentina (16), Barbados (16), Bolivia (14), Chile (16), Costa Rica (15), Dominica (16), Guyana(16), Haiti (15), Mexico (Varies by State –ranges from 14-16), Paraguay(16), Peru(16), Suriname(15), Uruguay (12)

## **NORTH AMERICA AND PACIFIC REGION**

18 years or above	New Zealand
18 or above with exceptions	Australia (18 but 16 with courts approval), Canada (varies in provinces, 18, 19, 16 with consent), Fiji (21 but 16 with consent), Samoa (19 but 16 with consent), United States
Below 18	Vanuatu (16), Solomon Islands (15)

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<sup>i</sup> UNICEF Early Marriage – A Harmful Traditional Practice 2005 p.1

<sup>ii</sup> IPPF and UNICEF - 'Ending Child Marriage - A Guide for Global Policy Action' p.11

<sup>iii</sup> ICRW 'Too Young to Wed' 2006 p.3

<sup>iv</sup> IPPF & UNICEF –'Ending Child Marriage - A Guide for Global Policy Action' p.13

<sup>v</sup> IPPF & UNICEF –'Ending Child Marriage - A Guide for Global Policy Action' p.15

<sup>vi</sup> ICRW – Too Young to Wed, 2003p.1