

Child Marriage

Child marriage is a violation of human rights whether it happens to a girl or a boy, but it represents perhaps the most prevalent form of sexual abuse and exploitation of girls. The harmful consequences include separation from family and friends, lack of freedom to interact with peers and participate in community activities, and decreased opportunities for education. Child marriage can also result in bonded labour or enslavement, commercial sexual exploitation and violence against the victims. Because they cannot abstain from sex or insist on condom use, child brides are often exposed to such serious health risks as premature pregnancy, sexually transmitted infections and, increasingly, HIV/AIDS.

Parents may consent to child marriages out of economic necessity. Marriage may be seen as a way to provide male guardianship for their daughters, protect them from sexual assault, avoid pregnancy outside marriage, extend their childbearing years or ensure obedience to the husband's household.

FACTS AND FIGURES

- Globally, 36 per cent of women aged 20–24 were married or in union before they reached 18 years of age.¹
- An estimated 14 million adolescents between 15 and 19 give birth each year. Girls in this age group are twice as likely to die during pregnancy or childbirth as women in their twenties.²
- Marriage of young girls is most common in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia. In Niger, 77 per cent of 20- to 24-year-old women were married before the age of 18. In Bangladesh, this rate was 65 per cent.

BUILDING A PROTECTIVE ENVIRONMENT FOR CHILDREN

Government commitment and capacity

The role of government and civil-society institutions is to develop and implement systems to prevent

HUMAN RIGHTS

The right to free and full consent to a marriage is recognized in the **Universal Declaration of Human Rights** (1948) with the recognition that consent cannot be 'free and full' when one of the parties involved is not sufficiently mature to make an informed decision about a life partner. The **Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women** (1979) states that the betrothal and marriage of a child shall have no legal effect and all necessary action, including legislation, shall be taken to specify a minimum age of marriage. The Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women recommends this age to be 18.

or discourage this practice. Government action is required to review customary and civil law. Because child marriage is closely associated with poverty, government commitment to poverty reduction is likely to lead to a decrease in child marriages.

Legislation and enforcement

Governments need to establish 18 as the legal age of marriage for girls, as well as boys, and ensure its implementation. Promoting birth and marriage registration will help enforce these laws.

Attitudes, customs and practices

Ending child marriage is challenging because even parents who understand its negative impact may find it hard to resist economic and societal pressures and traditions. Addressing attitudes and customs that promote or condone the practice is vital to changing the acceptable age for marriage.

Open discussion

Marriage is regarded as a private subject in many cultures. Communication campaigns can help create circumstances in which it can be discussed and traditional beliefs about marriage can be examined. To foster behavioural change from within communities, human rights should be emphasized,

particularly those of women – including equality, access to education and freedom from exploitation and discrimination.

Children’s life skills, knowledge and participation

Expanding children’s knowledge and empowerment is crucial, particularly for girls. Educated girls are less likely to agree to marry at a young age. Attempts to close gender gaps in education can include the establishment of child-friendly schools, cash incentives for parents and the expansion of non-formal education.

Capacity of families and communities

Community-level women’s organizations need support to act as effective advocates and educators. Human rights-based development and education programmes can create dynamics leading to a change in customs, hierarchies and prejudices linked to the tradition of child marriage.

Essential services, including prevention, recovery and reintegration

Counselling services on abuse, reproductive health and protection from HIV infection are imperative for young girls. Girls who run away from marriages need emergency support, as do those running

away from parents forcing them into an unwanted marriage.

Monitoring, reporting and oversight

Demographic Health Surveys and Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys collect valuable data on prevalence and reasons for child marriage. Community-level monitoring systems can also help record frequency of child marriage. Marriage registration should be promoted.

EXAMPLES OF UNICEF IN ACTION

Globally, one way UNICEF is addressing the issue of child marriage is through the promotion of girls’ education. Research has shown that higher levels of education for girls prevent child marriage³. UNICEF is the lead agency for the United Nations Girls’ Education Initiative, which works to ensure that by 2015, all children everywhere will be able to complete primary schooling.

In **Bangladesh**, UNICEF has been supporting Kishori Abhijan, a project promoting the rights of adolescent girls and combating rights violations such as child marriage and dowry. The project provides education, training and links to economic activities for networks of adolescent girls to help them gain livelihood skills.

MILLENNIUM DEVELOPMENT GOALS

Child marriage is both a response to deprivation and a harmful practice that keeps families ensnared in poverty. Married children are generally isolated – removed from their immediate families, taken out of school and denied interaction with their peers and communities. For girls, early pregnancy leads to higher risks, including death during delivery, jeopardizing the health of these young mothers and their babies. Teenage girls are more susceptible than mature women to sexually transmitted diseases. Because marriage before age 18 is so prevalent in many struggling countries, the practice becomes an obstacle to nearly every development goal – eradicating poverty and hunger (MDG 1); achieving universal primary education (MDG 2); promoting gender equality (MDG 3); protecting children’s lives (4); and improving health (5, 6).

Notes

¹ This figure does not include China. Unless otherwise indicated, figures are from United Nations Children’s Fund, *The State of the World’s Children 2006*, UNICEF, New York, 2005, p. 131.

² United Nations Population Fund, *State of World Population 2005: The promise of equality: Gender equity, reproductive health and the Millennium Development Goals*, UNFPA, New York, 2005, p. 50.

³ United Nations Children’s Fund, *Early Marriage: A harmful traditional practice: A statistical exploration*, UNICEF, New York, 2005, pp. 12-13.

For further information please contact:
The Child Protection Section
Programme Division UNICEF NY
childprotection@unicef.org
www.unicef.org