



# POLICY FOR ACTION: ENDING CHILD MARRIAGE

## KEY HIGHLIGHTS

- » The legal age of marriage registration in Egypt is set at 18 years. Yet, without criminalizing the perpetrators, girls are still getting married without registering or reporting their marriages, or registering their children born out of these marriages.
- » Girls who marry before the age of 18 experience negative implications on their health, education, participation in the labor market and are at risk of contracting diseases.
- » Child marriage not only affects the girls' wellbeing, but also negatively affects the country with evident implications on higher fertility rates, health risks on the children and their mothers due to premature childbearing.



Adolescent girls in rural areas are

**3** times

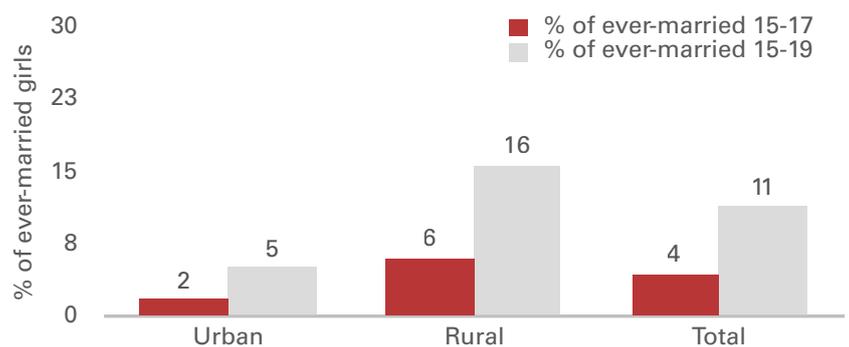
more likely to marry below the age of 18 than in urban areas

## I. CHILD MARRIAGE: THE CONTEXT



Child marriage refers to children who get married before reaching the age of 18 years, following the definition of a child as agreed in the International Convention on the Rights of the Child and adopted by Egypt. The Egyptian Child Law of 2008 sets the minimum age of marriage at 18 years for both females and males. Despite the legislation, child marriage is still being practiced in some regions of the country. According to the Egypt Census of 2017, child marriage remains an issue. In Egypt, nearly 1 in every 20 girls (4%) between age 15 to 17 years and 1 in every 10 (11%) adolescent girls 15-19 years are either currently married or were married before, with large differentials between the rural and urban residence.<sup>1</sup>

**Figure 1: Prevalence of child marriage, by urban/rural residence, 2017**



**Source:** CAPMAS, Egypt Census of Population, Housing and Establishments 2017

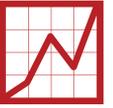
Although the overall prevalence of child marriage has not significantly improved, it shows substantial decline among the younger age groups. For women in the 20-24 age bracket, getting married before age 18, has dropped from 3 out of 10 women born between 1965 and 1969, compared to 2 out of 10 women born between 1990 and 1994.<sup>2</sup>

**Note:** Data refers to girls and women who are currently married, divorced or widowed.

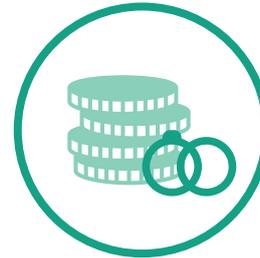
<sup>1</sup>CAPMAS, 2017. Egypt Census of Population, Housing and Establishments, Egypt

<sup>2</sup>Ministry of Health and Population, 2014. Egypt Demographic and Health Survey, Egypt

## II. WHAT ARE THE DETERMINANTS?



It is important to understand the reasons to why families resort to child marriage before analyzing the consequences of this practice. These determinants of child marriage often coexist, amplifying the total impact on its practice and the consequences.



When girls drop out of school, they are more at risk of child marriage.

Education is an important determinant since it plays a role of both cause and effect of the practice of child marriage. Dropping out of the education system increases the risk of child marriage. Even though dropping out of education might not be primarily to get married, it promotes the families to see marriage as the best option for the girl while she is idle. The act of child marriage also results in curtailing education for children as it restricts them from pursuing further education after getting married.



Poverty is associated with child marriage.

Economic condition of the household also has a bearing on child marriage. Many times, marrying the daughter early is used as a means to reduce the economic burden of the family and to improve their economic condition. Evidence show that even though the median age at first marriage is lower among adolescents from the lower wealth quintiles, adolescents from the middle wealth households show the highest prevalence of child marriage (about 25%).<sup>3</sup>



Cultural beliefs reinforce discriminatory gender norms and practices.

Social norms and inequitable gender norms play an important role in child marriage, affecting the wellbeing, educational attainment and exposure to harmful practices, such as Female Genital Mutilation, for the adolescent girls. The phenomenon is not exclusive to a particular religion but runs deep in Egyptian culture.

<sup>3</sup> Reanalysis of 2014 Egypt Demographic and Health Survey



### III. WHAT ARE THE CONSEQUENCES?



Marriage of the girl as a child not only affects her wellbeing as an individual, but also has negative consequences on the family, community and the nation. Girls marrying before the age of 18 experience negative consequences on their health, curtailed education, reduced employment opportunities and decreased earning potential leading to reduced social and economic welfare of the country.

#### Married adolescent girls are exposed to gender-based violence.

Child marriage places girls at an increased risk of intimate partner and domestic violence. Over half of the girls who are married before the age of 18 report experiencing abusive acts by partner. They become more vulnerable to gender-based violence, sexual problems and health issues.<sup>4</sup> They are not only denied their childhood, but are often socially isolated – cut off from family, friends, and other sources of support.<sup>5</sup>

#### Married adolescent girls are more likely to drop out of school.

As girls reach adolescence, gender and social norms dictate that they should be married. This norm perpetuates the cycle of low educational attainment where there is strong interlinkage between education and child marriage. Girls marrying before the age of 18 are more likely to drop out of school. Almost two-thirds (63%) drop out of school versus 1 in 4 (24%) of those who marry at age 18 years or above (re-analysis of EDHS 2014). This shows a strong correlation between a girl getting married and her dropping out of school.

#### Children born to adolescent mothers are more likely to die.

Infants are at a very high risk of dying if the mother is under the age of 20 at the time of the birth or if the child is born within two years of the previous birth. Globally, complications during pregnancy and childbirth are the second cause of death for 15-19 year-old girls<sup>6</sup>, though evidence on maternal mortality rates for young mothers is not available in Egypt.

#### Married adolescent girls are at a high-risk to contracting diseases.

A study on 'Married Adolescent Girls' in Egypt suggests that girls who marry before the age of 18 are more at risk of contracting diseases as they do not receive a premarital examination (PME). According to Law 126 of 2008, a prerequisite for registering a marriage contract is having a certificate from a public health facility indicating that the couple has received the necessary health examination, which could potentially reduce the risk of disease transmission. The exceptionally low knowledge of diseases among youth makes young girls vulnerable to infection as they engage in risky practices<sup>7</sup>.

#### Child brides experience higher fertility, contributing to the population increase.

Early age at first marriage is usually associated with a longer period of exposure to the possibility of pregnancy and thus higher fertility levels. The total fertility rate has been increasing gradually, from 3.1 children per woman in 2005 to 3.5, intensifying the challenges associated with the rising population. Data shows that in 2014, almost half (46%) of married adolescent girls either have a child or are currently pregnant. This higher level of fertility adversely affects the health of both the mother and the child.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Population Council, 2017. Married Adolescent Girls in Rural Assiut and Souhag, Egypt

<sup>5</sup> UNICEF, 2014. A Statistical Snapshot of Violence against Adolescent Girls, Egypt

<sup>6</sup> WHO, 2014. Adolescent Pregnancy

<sup>7</sup> Population Council, 2017. Married Adolescent Girls in Rural Assiut and Souhag, Egypt

<sup>8</sup> Ministry of Health and Population, 2014. Egypt Demographic and Health Survey, Egypt



#### Education is a powerful tool

to end child marriage and face other gender-inequality issues



#### Almost 2 thirds (63%)

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#### Children are at a very high risk of dying

if the mother is younger than 18 years at the time of the birth



Early age at first marriage is usually associated with a longer period of exposure to the possibility of pregnancy, which adds to the challenge of the rising population



## IV. POLICY RESPONSE



In 2014, Egypt developed the National Strategic Plan (NSP) for Prevention of Early Marriage led by the National Population Council (NPC), with an aim to reduce the prevalence of child marriage by 50% within a five year period. There is a strong political will to end child marriage through opportunities for adolescent girl development and empowerment, particularly in the light of the prevalence levels shown by Egypt's census 2017. The National Council for Childhood and Motherhood (NCCM) has been committed to ending child marriage. It provides reporting mechanisms through the Child Helpline 16000 and the Family Counselling line 16021 providing support for children and families. Other leading governmental bodies, such as the National Council for Women (NCW), have been actively combating the persistent issue in Egypt.

### System strengthening

#### **Increase reporting mechanisms for child marriage**

In addition to enhancing the legal reporting mechanisms, there is also a need for strengthening local prevention and response mechanisms. The Child Protection System through its governorate and district committees, as stipulated in the Child Law 126, has the mandate to identify children at risk of any type of violence, including child marriage. Besides this, having a unified framework, which provides the basis for coordinating the work of all partners, is also needed to integrate the efforts of different stakeholders to achieve a unified goal. Expediting the formation of a specialized unit in the National Council for Childhood and Motherhood (NCCM) to combat the child marriage in the country therefore becomes important in this context.

#### **Criminalize child marriage and strengthening legal enforcement**

Without effective enforcement, laws prohibiting child marriage will not be able to restrict this practice. Legal reform and law enforcement on criminalization of perpetrators can also influence changing gender and cultural norms. Strong enforcement of legal provisions is needed to effectively move towards ending child marriage.

### Access to quality services

#### **Increase investments in education**

There is a pressing need to increase investment in education and to use the school facilities to empower girls, thereby ending child marriage and other harmful practices. Special measures ought to be taken to reach girls in disadvantaged areas and retain them in education by engaging with the parents and building their ownership in schools in their local communities. Other areas for investment in education include building secondary schools that are closer to the communities or subsidizing transportation costs, as well as creating safe spaces for girls and boys to empower them outside the home.

#### **Make services and public spaces safer for girls**

Girls generally face restrictions on their freedom of movement and choice, out of the need to 'protect' them; hence depriving them of services and public spaces that are seen as dangerous for girls. Instead of adding restrictions on girls, the focus should shift to increasing the girl-friendliness of spaces. This would reduce the risk of physical and sexual violence that girls face on their way to the educational, health, youth or community facilities.

### Social and behavioral change

#### **Shifting individual attitudes, social and behavioural norms**

Changing collective practices and beliefs is challenging, especially when they rely on strong social norms, as is the case of child marriage. There is a need to optimize social and behavioral change opportunities to address child marriage, which includes engaging men to mobilize communities and media to shift perpetual norms.

#### **Engage receptive community influencers and religious leaders**

Another necessary component of facilitating such changes is through tackling the beliefs and practices of people who influence a family's decision, such as relatives, neighbors, friends and community leaders. Making influencers and religious leaders aware of the negative consequences of child marriage and supporting them to become vocal advocates can have a powerful impact on community members' perception on child marriage.

### Promote data generation and evidence-based decision making

Additional studies with innovative data-collection methods are needed to inform project design and planning. There are several areas that should be enhanced by more evidence generation when it comes to child marriage data such as a) the cost of child marriage prevention and response interventions for the government, b) understanding the causes and effects of child marriage and analyzing the characteristics and profiles of child brides, for designing and implementing effective policies to end child marriage, and c) the social and health effects to further contribute a clearer evidence-based picture on child rights