

MALI

Child Marriage is a Death Sentence for Many Young Girls

In spite of the abuse and deprivation many girls suffer as a result of forced early marriage, the practice continues to be alarmingly common, with more than 60 million women age 20-24 married before they turned 18. In some countries more than half of all girls are married or in union before the age of 18. These include Niger – where the incidence of child marriage is a staggering 75 percent, Chad (72 per cent), Mali (71 per cent), Bangladesh (64 per cent), Guinea (63 per cent), Central African Republic (61 per cent), Mozambique (56 per cent), and Nepal (51 per cent).

Justified as an accepted norm with social and financial benefits, child marriage has little or no benefit for the young girls themselves, who are more vulnerable to domestic violence, more likely to be uneducated, at greater risk of contracting HIV/AIDS, and more likely to bear children before they are physically ready. Indeed, for some 70,000 young brides who die every year as a result of pregnancy or childbirth complications, early marriage is a death sentence.

Studies show that girls who give birth before the age of 15 are five times more likely to die in childbirth than women in their twenties. Furthermore, the infants of child mothers are also at greater risk. If a mother is under the age of 18, her baby's chance of dying in its first year of life is 60 per cent greater than that of an infant born to a mother older than 19.

In few countries has the crisis of forced early marriage reached such proportions as in Mali, where nearly three-quarters of all women are married before the age of 18. Driven by poverty and the incentive to claim a dowry for their daughters, many families are complicit in forcing young girls to wed.

With so many young girls forced into early marriage and bearing children before they are physically mature, the corresponding rates of maternal and neonatal death in Mali are dangerously high. A Malian woman's chances of dying due to pregnancy or childbirth related complications are 1 in 15. As for neonatal mortality rates, Mali ranks number seven in the world, with 54 deaths per 1,000 live births.

While there has been a slight decrease in child marriage rates since 1987, when nearly 80 per cent of Malian women married as children, the numbers are not dropping fast enough. The fact is, child rights activists say, child marriage is a neglected issue.

Indeed, while public awareness campaigns have made progress educating the population about the dangers of harmful practices such as Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting (FGM/C), less energy and resources have been funneled into the campaign against forced early marriage.

To correct this imbalance, last year UNICEF joined together with a local NGO, government agency, and media representatives to organize the country's first public awareness campaign in the region of Kayes – an area of Mali with particularly high rates of child marriage. The programme included a three-day workshop for religious and community leaders, informing them of the dangers of early marriage and helping them produce messages against the practice for the local media to broadcast.

"We were ignorant," said one of the community representatives present at the workshop. "We married girls at 9, 10, 11 or 12 years old. Now, we've seen the reality. We will no longer practice this."