

## ICRW Policy Advisory on

# Child Marriage

“*I was married at the age of seven. My husband was much older than me. He waited until I was nine years old to have intercourse. It was very difficult. He passed away when I was 12 years old. I was pregnant at the time, but lost the baby after a difficult labor, which went on for days. I do not want to re-marry. I do not want any man to come near me.*<sup>1</sup>”

—Young woman,  
Ethiopia

In most societies, marriage is a celebrated institution signifying a union between two adults and the beginning of their future together. But the reality of marriage is a very different story, indeed, for millions of girls worldwide (see quote this page). Child marriage is a human rights abuse endured by both girls and boys in dozens of countries, even though the internationally recognized age of legal marriage is 18. Some of those married are as young as four years old. There are ways to reduce the practice of child marriage—but too little attention has been given to this widespread problem.

### Child Marriage is a Human Rights Violation

Child marriage is any marriage that occurs before the age of 18. This standard is reinforced by a general consensus among various international conventions and human rights agreements that outlaw child marriages or the betrothal of young girls before the age of puberty. Typically, these marriages are characterized by a large age gap between the adolescent bride and groom.

Child brides frequently go to live in their in-laws' homes where, often, they become little more than servants. Within the first year of marriage, there is typically tremendous pressure for the newlywed couple to bear children—and for the young bride to prove her fertility. Under these circumstances, a child bride has no power to negotiate contraceptive use within marriage. Consequently, she is more likely to become pregnant and give birth while very young—well before her body is prepared for the

#### Box 1: Special Challenges to U.S. Development Assistance

Child marriage undermines the effectiveness of U.S. development assistance by contributing to:

- ▶ extreme and persistent poverty
- ▶ high illiteracy
- ▶ high incidence of infectious diseases, including HIV/AIDS
- ▶ elevated child mortality rates
- ▶ high birth rates
- ▶ low life expectancy for women
- ▶ malnutrition

<sup>1</sup>“Life after Early Marriage,” (U.K.: UNICEF, March 2001). Web feature story.

## Box 2: The Benefits of Girls' Education

Increasing the number of years girls attend school in developing countries not only delays the average age at which they marry; it also broadens their options and leads to tremendous health benefits for mothers and children. An education enhances a girl's income-earning potential and socio-economic status. This increased opportunity is not only good for girls, but it also has wide-reaching benefits for their future children and for their communities. United Nations, World Bank, and U.S. studies amply demonstrate that women invest their earnings directly in the health, welfare, and education of their children, thus creating a long-term cycle of poverty reduction that spans generations.

### Child Marriage Top Ten List

Country	Percent of Girls Married before age 18
Niger	82
Bangladesh	75
Chad	73
Yemen	64
Mali	63
Nepal	63
Mozambique	59
Ethiopia	57
India	57
Uganda	50

Source: Demographic Health Surveys (DHS), 1996-2001

rigors of pregnancy and childbirth. The grave health risks to both child-mother and infant that result are compounded, because child brides frequently have little or no access to reproductive health services, such as routine gynecologic, obstetric, pre-natal and newborn care.

Child brides also tend to have more—and generally less educated—children, experience higher incidences of sexually transmitted diseases, and die younger than those who marry later. Most child brides drop out of school upon marriage (see Box 2). In addition, child brides are often victims of domestic violence and abandonment, and they remain disproportionately poor. This collectively contributes to an intergenerational cycle of poverty, with daughters of child brides themselves often married as children.

While the age of marriage is on the rise worldwide, child marriage remains a common practice throughout South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa. It is a complex problem with varying causes that may be culture-specific. Even so, **it is possible to reduce the instances of child marriage.** The global effort to end Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) serves as an excellent case in point that we *can* make progress in addressing a delicate and seemingly intractable problem—when we have the will to make a difference.

### Causes of Child Marriage

Community customs surrounding marriage, including the age of the bride and groom, generally derive from a given society's view of family and its individual members, as well as the economic, social, and other circumstances of individual families and communities within that society. In this context, child marriage may arise from:

- ▶ **Poverty and economics** – In nearly all societies where it takes place, child marriage is more common among those who are poor, less educated, and who observe more traditional customs and rituals. Young girls may be viewed as economic burdens, and parents may see marriage as a way to provide for their daughter's financial security or as an opportunity to receive compensation

*“In spite of our desire to continue our studies, our parents arrange early marriage for us.”*

—Rural girl, Nepal 2000<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Sanyukta Mathur, Anju Malhotra and Manisha Mehta, “Adolescent Girls' Life Aspirations and Reproductive Health in Nepal.” *Reproductive Health Matters* 9(17) 2001: 91-100.

that enables the family to survive. The relative lack of status girls hold in such societies often underlies and reinforces these practices.

- ▶ ***Desire to protect girls*** – Marriage sometimes is seen as a way to place a girl under the protection and control of a male or household that will shield her from violence. In fact, child brides are often *more* susceptible to domestic violence because of their lack of status within their new households. In Egypt, data indicates that 29% of married adolescents have been beaten by their spouses (or their spouses and others) and of these, 41% were beaten when they were pregnant.<sup>3</sup> In societies where virginity is highly prized, marriage is sometimes also viewed as a way of preventing girls who have reached puberty from engaging in premarital sexual relations—either voluntarily or as a consequence of coerced sex. Marriage is seen as a means of maintaining the honor of the family and precluding unsanctioned sexual relations.
- ▶ ***Desire to reinforce ties between families or communities*** – Marriage may serve as a means of strengthening economic, social, or political ties between different families, communities, castes, or tribes.
- ▶ ***Premarital pregnancy*** – Premarital pregnancy often results in early marriage, particularly in Latin America, where early fertility is not so stigmatized as it is in many other

### Box 3

Bride price (payments by the groom's family to the bride's) contributes to the high incidence of child marriage. Bride price often can be motivated by a desire to exploit the girl's labor and serves as an implicit exchange for a wife's obligation to bear children and fulfill other duties. It also tends to reinforce her subordinate position in the marriage.

parts of the world and is, therefore, less likely to damage a girl's future marriage prospects.

- ▶ ***A lack of livelihood options*** – Research shows that girls tend to marry later if better social and economic options are available. For example, where girls have increased their level of education, as in Bangladesh, the incidence of very early marriage tends to decline.

*Girls ages 10 to 14 are five times more likely to die in pregnancy or childbirth than women who are 20 to 24<sup>4</sup>*

## Health Consequences of Child Marriage

Around 15 million young women between the ages of 15 and 19 give birth annually, accounting for more than 10% of the babies born worldwide. Most of these adolescents and young women are married.

Young women who are married and begin childbearing as teens are more likely to be illiterate and are often isolated from their peers. Their mobility is restricted and their status in their families and society is low. Consequently, they are less likely to have access to reproductive health information and services before or after becoming pregnant. Because adolescent females are not yet fully developed

<sup>3</sup> Judith Bruce, *Married Adolescent Girls: Numerous but Unknown*, (Washington: Population Council, 2000). Presentation for Beijing Plus Five.

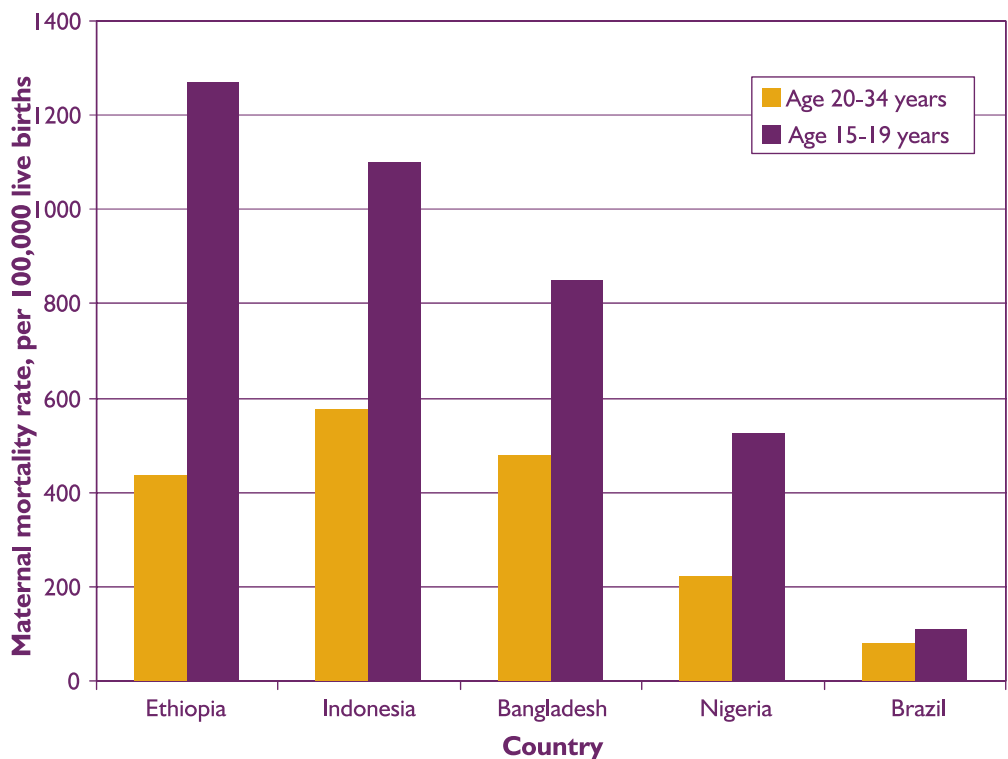
<sup>4</sup> *Sex Education in America, Summary of Findings* (Menlo Park: Kaiser Family Foundation, 2000).

emotionally and physically, pregnancy and childbirth are often life threatening, and the outcomes for their newborns are much worse than for older women. Research findings indicate that younger adolescents have a higher risk of delivering babies with low birth weight and delivering prematurely than older adolescents and persons who are 20 to 34.<sup>5</sup>

**Pregnancy-related circumstances represent the single greatest cause of death to adolescent girls in developing nations.** Girls who are 10 to 14 are five times more likely to die in pregnancy or childbirth than women ages 20 to 24, while girls who are 15 to 19 are twice as likely to die.<sup>6</sup>

Fistula is a health risk commonly associated with child marriage because of the mother's physical immaturity at the time of childbirth. A girl whose pelvis and birth canal are not fully developed at the time of delivery often endures labor that lasts for many hours or days. Unless emergency obstetric care is available, the pressure from the baby's head in the birth canal may cause tearing of the young mother's vagina, bladder and rectum, causing uncontrollable leakage of urine or feces. This condition can only be repaired with reproductive surgery, which is usually inaccessible to the girls who need it. Some two million adolescent girls are living with fistula and up to 100,000 new cases occur every year.<sup>7</sup>

### Maternal Mortality by Age



Source: *Safe Motherhood Fact Sheet: Adolescent Sexuality and Childbearing*. Prepared by Family Care International and The Safe Motherhood Inter-agency group, 1998. Available online at: [www.safemotherhood.org/facts\\_and\\_figures/adolescent\\_sexuality.htm](http://www.safemotherhood.org/facts_and_figures/adolescent_sexuality.htm)

<sup>5</sup> Kathleen Kurz, *Health and Consequences of Adolescent Childbearing in Developing Countries* (Washington: ICRW, 1997), 1.

<sup>6</sup> *Sex Education in America*.

<sup>7</sup> C. Murray and A. Lopez, *Health Dimensions of Sex and Reproduction* (Geneva: World Health Organization, 1998).

Girls who suffer from this condition are often considered “unclean,” are abandoned by their husbands and ostracized from their families and communities, and left poor, ill, and marginalized.<sup>8</sup>

Teenage girls are more susceptible than mature women to sexually transmitted infections, including HIV, due to both biological and social factors. Girls have thinner vaginal membranes and produce less mucus than women, so their membranes are more likely to tear during sex. This tearing, in turn, makes them much more likely to contract infections. Girls married to older men are particularly vulnerable, as these men typically have had multiple sexual partners and have been exposed to infectious diseases. Girls do not have sufficient power within the marriage to demand the use of protection, such as condoms. In many instances, there is also strong social pressure for young brides to avoid using contraceptives in order to bear children immediately. As a result, married girls are at a high risk of contracting infectious diseases and passing them on to their children.

## Tools to End Child Marriage

The United States can play an important role in fostering development by addressing the problem of child marriage and its underlying causes. Specifically, U.S. efforts should:

- ▶ help the victims of child marriage and those at high risk.
- ▶ reduce the incidence of—and ultimately bring an end to—child marriage in developing countries.

The most promising actions the United States can take through its development assistance programs include:

- ▶ **Educating parents and young people about their rights, and about laws and international norms.** Child brides and their parents should know that there are international standards which, in addition to discouraging child marriage, stipulate that both marriage partners should enjoy certain rights such as education, health care, and freedom of movement.
- ▶ **Educating parents and young people about the benefits of later marriage.** Individuals in societies practicing early marriage should learn of its implications and be given the information necessary to resist it. The involvement of families and communities is indispensable to ending child marriage.
- ▶ **Increasing girls’ access to, enrollment in and completion of primary and secondary education and vocational training.** Creating incentives for parents to keep their girls in school as long as possible, for example by waiving school fees, will yield a number of positive social and economic benefits. Studies show that when girls remain in school they marry later, have fewer children spaced farther apart, and are less likely to live in poverty (see chart on page 6). Changing attitudes so that girls’ education is

*Nearly 6,000 young people become infected with HIV every day worldwide.<sup>9</sup>*

<sup>8</sup> “Fistula Women,” (London: BBC World Service, 2001). This news article is available online at [www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/sci\\_tech/highlights/010321hospital.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/sci_tech/highlights/010321hospital.shtml).

<sup>9</sup> *Young People and HIV/AIDS: Opportunity in Crisis* (New York: UNICEF, UNAIDS, World Health Organization, 2002), 5. A joint report.

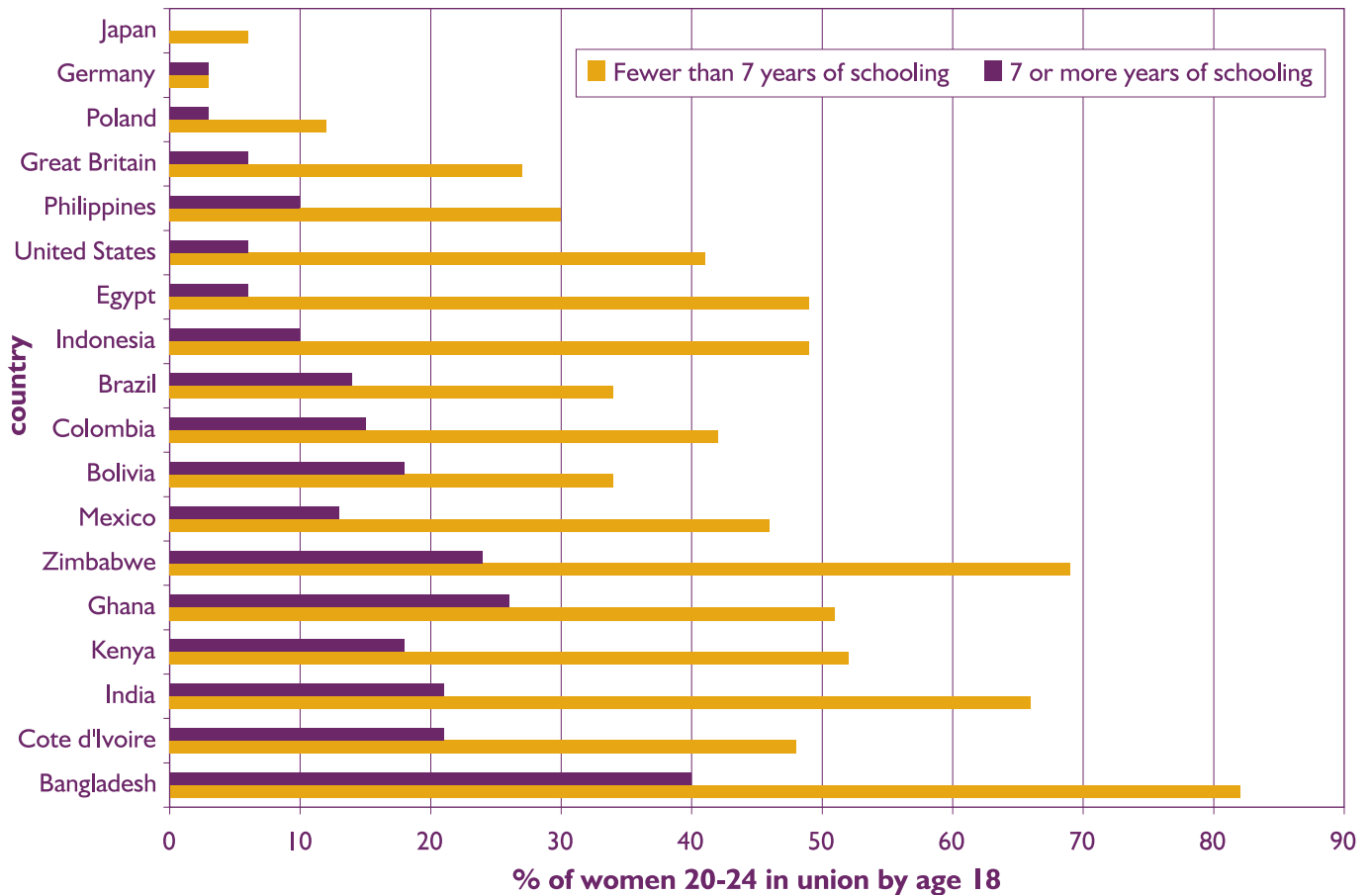
more highly valued is one of the most essential steps toward reducing child marriage.

- ▶ **Providing safe, non-exploitative employment opportunities outside the home.** Sometimes education is not an option for logistical or financial reasons—perhaps the school is too far, no transportation is available, or the family cannot afford fees for books or uniforms. When this is the case, girls and boys should have access to employment opportunities—in hazard-free environments—governed by fair labor laws, standards, and practices that include reasonable working hours, decent wages, and access to food, potable water, and restroom

facilities. Because girls who earn wages are less dependent on others for their survival, they are less likely to marry early. A girl’s employment could also contribute to later marriage if her family perceives that the value of her economic contributions is greater than the value of her early marriage.

- ▶ **Tailoring reproductive health services to young married people and unmarried youth in countries with high incidences of child marriage.** Even young married girls with no power to negotiate contraceptive use need reproductive health services, such as basic health and hygiene counseling, to understand and deal with their bodies’ changing

### Women with More Education Tend to Marry Later



Source: Into a New World: Young Women’s Sexual and Reproductive Lives, Alan Guttmacher Institute (AGI), 1998. New York, NY.

needs as they grow and mature through puberty into adulthood. Among other services, young married girls should have routine gynecological screenings for reproductive tract infections (RTIs) and sexually transmitted infections (STIs)—the presence of either increases their risk for contracting HIV/AIDS. Through the information provided during such examinations, girls can learn how to recognize symptoms of infection, and will be better equipped to seek immediate, and appropriate treatment. In fact, all youth would benefit from reproductive health services—for example, reproductive tract infections are a serious, but relatively common problem among young girls even when they are not sexually active.

- ▶ ***Supporting further research on child marriage, its causes, and solutions.*** The scope and causes of child marriage are not fully documented. Additional study and work in developing nations is needed to establish a comprehensive response to this global abuse of children’s rights.

Child marriage has a tremendous, adverse, and largely unacknowledged impact in many countries worldwide. It puts girls under great pressure to bear children before they are physically and emotionally prepared, endangering their health and the health of their children. It contributes to increased domestic violence, complications during pregnancy, and soaring rates of HIV and AIDS. It feeds a vicious cycle of less educated and less healthy children.

In light of this, it is critical that child marriage gain a place on the agenda of U.S. foreign policy and development assistance. Immediate action is required, even as understanding and awareness of the dimensions of the problem continue to develop and additional solutions are identified. By ending child marriage, we will not only eliminate a source of grave physical and psychological health risks to children. We will also help brighten their future and that of their families and societies, and make another important contribution toward just, healthy, and effective development.

### **The Youngest Child Brides**

In the Indian State of Rajasthan, more than 15% of girls are married before they are **10 years old**.

In Kebbi State, Nigeria, the *average age of marriage is just over 11 years*.

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