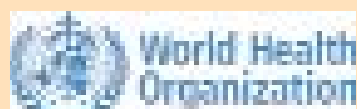


MARRIED ADOLESCENTS



Married Adolescents

NO PLACE OF SAFETY



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Cover photo by Sandeep Saxena, Frontline Magazine, India, shows an adolescent bride at a temple
near Jaipur the day after her wedding.

Title page photo by © Adam Hinton/ PANOS PICTURES

Preparing a wedding day veil in Donetsk, Ukraine.

Much of the material for this document was provided or suggested by experts of the World Health Organization, the United Nations Population Fund, The Population Council and others who attended a Technical Consultation in Geneva in December 2003 to consider the evidence regarding married adolescent girls' reproductive health, vulnerability to HIV infection, social and economic disadvantage, and rights.

Executive summary

Marriage is widely regarded as a place of safety to shelter from the risks of adolescence. In many parts of the developing world, parents and policy makers see marriage as a walled garden where cultural and family values protect young girls from defilement and stigma. Particularly in poorer and rural areas, there is pressure on parents to marry off their daughters while they are very young before they become an economic liability. Millions of girls reluctantly enter into marriage while they are still children, just sexually mature but unready in every other way for this profound change in their lives. Typically, an adolescent bride knows little of her new husband or new life, has little control over her destiny and is unaware of the health risks that she faces.

When an adolescent girl starts a sexual relationship with a man 10 years older than she is, he may be sexually experienced. If he is infected with a sexually transmitted infection (STI) or with HIV, a marriage certificate offers no protection. In the context of the AIDS pandemic, it is a chilling fact that the majority of unprotected sex between an un-infected adolescent girl and an infected older man takes place within marriage with the blessing of parents and community. Neither AIDS nor STIs respect marriage as a place of safety.

Early marriage below the age of 18, and particularly very early marriage below the age of 16, distorts the life pattern of young girls. It often brings an end to their education and their hopes of an independent income. It places a young girl in a position of isolation, detached from her own family and friends and living within a household where she may not be val-

ued until she has proved her fertility.

The newly married couple must try to create a life-long relationship under conditions where they have little or no pre-existing knowledge of each other, there is no sense of equality and they have little support. They have unprotected sex, under pressure for the young bride to conceive within the first year of marriage. If sex is not freely given by the girl, it may be taken as a right by the man.

In sub-Saharan Africa the risk of HIV infection is very high, and everywhere there is a risk of sexually transmitted infection. Such infections may damage the fertility of a young woman, and cause the stigma that early marriage was supposed to avoid.

An adolescent bride who becomes pregnant receives new status as a mother-to-be, but also faces new dangers. Pregnancy and delivery carry increased risks for adolescent first time mothers, who may be neither physically nor psychologically ready for childbirth.

In the case of very young mothers risks may arise from becoming pregnant before the body is fully grown and prepared. In the case of older adolescents, the risks are mainly those associated with a first pregnancy. The young mother knows little about her own body or warning signs, and lacks sufficient money and status in her new household to access antenatal care or a skilled attendant at the birth. There is unlikely to be a system for her to receive obstetric care in an emergency. These circumstances lead to death in childbirth for too many young mothers, while for every girl who dies, another 30 suffer a pregnancy related illness, injury or disability. Some injuries cause a young married girl to be abandoned by her husband and new family and left with no means of support.

This picture of too early marriage is reflected in South Asia, parts of sub-Saharan Africa, and some parts of Western Asia¹ and Latin America.

1. In line with current UN usage, this document uses Western Asia for what was previously referred to in English as the Middle East, except when referring to data collected and cited as being for 'the Middle East'.

Mothers who were unable to make choices for themselves, are often under pressure to compel their daughters to repeat the cycle.

Early marriage often takes away a girl's human right to choose when to marry, to choose her husband or to consent to sex. It prevents her from making informed choices about protected sex based on an understanding of the risks and the options.

Even when legislation protects girls from early marriage and early childbirth, deep rooted cultural customs may slow the pace of change. However, in many places there are programmes designed to delay marriage, to encourage adolescent girls to stay in school and

to delay the birth of the first child. Programmes also seek to ensure that young married girls have a better chance of a healthy pregnancy, safe delivery and good quality postnatal care. The most promising programmes engage adolescent girls, parents, husbands and in-laws, as well as social and cultural issues, so that the rights of adolescent girls can be protected by the societies in which they grow and develop.

The Millennium Development Goals for international development cannot be achieved without tackling early marriage. This document explores these issues and outlines some promising programmes in countries where early marriage and early childbirth are common. ■

Millennium Development Goals

Tackling the ill-effects of early marriage has a direct bearing on six of the eight Millennium Development Goals agreed in September 2000 as development priorities until 2015.

Goal 1: Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger

Young brides are less likely to have the training and opportunity to earn, and less likely to be able to access resources.

Goal 2: Achieve universal primary education

Eliminating the worst examples of early marriage, below the age of 15, will allow girls to complete primary education, and acquire skills to increase their chance to earn an income.

Goal 3: Promote gender equality and empower women

Giving adolescent girls a choice in whether to marry and providing alternatives to early marriage will give girls greater self-confidence and choice. Girls who marry will have greater confidence to control their own fertility, and to seek treatment for infections or when pregnant.

Goal 4: Reduce child mortality

Delaying first births and improving antenatal, delivery and postnatal care for young first time mothers will have a significant impact on child mortality figures.

Goal 5: Improve maternal health

The target is to reduce by three-quarters the ratio of women dying in childbirth by 2015. Young first time mothers have double the chance of dying during or after childbirth. Very young mothers below the age of 15 have a five-fold chance of death.

Goal 6: Combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases

Adolescent girls who marry older men have a heightened risk of HIV. Reducing levels of adolescent marriage is an essential part of an overall programme to reduce the risks of HIV.

What do we mean by early marriage?

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) marks the age of 18 as the dividing line between childhood and adulthood. However, the legal framework for marriage varies between countries and can be different for males and females. In some cultures, religion or tradition permit marriage at the age of 12 or earlier.

The CRC promises children the right to education and the highest attainable standards of health, and the right to be protected from mental and physical violence, sexual abuse and sexual exploitation. Children have the right to have their views taken into account and not to be separated from their parents against their will. Anyone below the age of 18 is a child “unless under the law applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier”¹. In some countries marriage automatically confers adult status. Girls who marry below the age of 18 can lose the protection of the CRC.

International conventions have insisted for more than 50 years that marriages should be freely entered into. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights says marriage shall only be entered into “with the free and full consent of the intending spouses”. However, the legal

The Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) defines a child as anyone under the age of 18. The World Health Organization defines an adolescent as a person aged 10-19.

Young people are defined as persons aged 10-24, while youth are defined as 15-24-year-olds.

Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) has recommended that 18 should be the minimum legal age for marriage for both males and females. However, 20 countries are not parties to CEDAW and another 23 have made reservations, withholding support from Article 16 which guarantees equal rights in marriage.³

The legal age of marriage varies from 14 in Bolivia to 21 in Cameroon. Traditional marriages are often allowed at ages well below the legal age and there are still many marriages initiated as soon as the girl becomes sexually mature as defined by the onset of menarche, typically around 12 to 14 years of age. In Ghana, young people below the age of 18 can marry with the consent of a parent or guardian. In Colombia, the legal age of marriage is 18 for boys and girls, but boys over the age of 14 and girls over the age of 12 can marry with the consent of their parents. Turkey has a legal age of 15 for girls and 17 for boys, but religious marriages can take place at younger ages.²

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