



INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S HEALTH COALITION

The Facts on Child Marriage

What is Child Marriage?

“Child marriage” is generally understood to mean marriages that take place before age 18, but for many girls, marriage occurs much earlier. In some countries, girls as young as 7 or 8 are forced by their families to marry much older men. The reasons girls are married are diverse, and parents sometimes believe that through marriage, they are protecting their daughters and increasing their economic opportunities. However, child marriage exposes girls to increased health problems and violence, denies them access to social networks and support systems, and perpetuates a cycle of poverty and gender inequality.

The Facts:

- According to the UN, **37,000 girls under the age of 18 are married each day**. We now have the greatest number of married girls and girls at-risk of child marriage than ever before
- **1 in 3 girls** in the developing world are married before 18; **1 in 9** are married before the age of 15
- If present trends continue, **more than 140 million girls** will be married before the age of 18 in the next decade
- Globally, almost **400 million women** now aged 20-49 were married before the age of 18

Consequences of Child Marriage:

- Child marriage effectively ends a girl's childhood, curtails her education, minimizes her economic opportunities, increases her risk of domestic violence, and puts her at risk for early, frequent, and very high-risk pregnancies
- Girls under 15 are **five times** more likely to die in childbirth than women in their 20s and face higher risk of pregnancy-related injuries, such as obstetric fistula
- Child brides are often unable to negotiate safer sexual practices and are therefore at a higher risk of HIV and other sexually transmitted infections
- The negative consequences of child marriage reach beyond the girls themselves: children of child brides are **60 percent more likely to die in the first year of life** than those born to mothers older than 19, and families of child brides are more likely to be poor and unhealthy

Where Does Child Marriage Occur?

Child marriage occurs in every region of the world, and is practiced across cultures, religions, and ethnicities. The highest rates of child marriage by country are observed in Sub-Saharan Africa, in countries such as Niger, the Central African Republic, and Chad. However, the largest number of child brides live in South Asia, where 46 percent of girls are married before the age of 18. Incidents of child marriage have been shown to increase as instability increases, making girls living in conflict or crisis settings particularly vulnerable to the practice.

Why should the U.S. Government Care About Ending Child Marriage?

- **Ending child marriage is the right thing to do.** Girls around the world deserve to live full childhoods, go to school, be free of the violence and negative health consequences associated with child marriage, and choose—for themselves and without violence or coercion—when and whom they marry. Not only does child marriage negatively impact the lives of girls themselves, it also directly hinders the accomplishment of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), which set development priorities for the world. Efforts to end child marriage and advance the health and rights of girls must be at the center of the global development agenda in order to end extreme poverty and ensure human rights for all.
- **Ending child marriage is the smart thing to do.** Child marriage perpetuates the cycles of poverty, poor health, illiteracy, and violence that have negative impacts on overall development, prosperity, and stability. As the U.S. government continues to invest in development programs around the world, a focus on child marriage could ensure that goals on issues as diverse as education, health, violence, and economic advancement are met for both this and future generations of girls, their families, communities, and countries.

To learn more, go to www.iwhc.org and www.girlsnotbrides.org