

# The Psychosocial Impact of Child Marriage

**U**NICEF defines child marriage as the formal marriage or informal union of a child (under age 18 years) either with an adult or another child<sup>1</sup>. Both boys and girls are affected by child marriage but girls are more affected.

There are international legal conventions that prohibit child marriage, including Article 21 of the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACRWC) which states that Governments should do what they can to stop harmful social and cultural practices affecting the welfare and dignity of children, such as child marriage. The Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) is not specific on the issue of child marriage but this is very much linked to the right to protection from all forms of abuse and harmful traditional practices. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and the Convention on the

Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) are other instruments that prohibit child marriage. The Southern African Development Community (SADC) Model Law on Eradicating Child Marriage and Protection of Children Already in Marriage provides best practice guidelines which can be adopted or adapted by Member States in their laws dealing with ending child marriage.

## Situation in the region

Child marriage transcends regional and cultural boundaries. Globally, 1 in 4 girls are married before the age of 18, meaning 15 million girls are married each year before their 18<sup>th</sup> birthday<sup>2</sup>. Child marriages are more prevalent in Africa, with the continent being host to 15 of the 20 countries with the highest rates of child marriage<sup>3</sup>.

Country	% married by age 15	% married by age 18
Angola	-	-
Botswana	-	-
Kenya	6	26
Lesotho	2	19
Malawi	12	50
Mozambique	14	48
Namibia	2	9
South Africa	1	6
Swaziland	1	7
Tanzania	7	37
Uganda	10	40
Zambia	9	42
Zimbabwe	4	31

Source: UNICEF (2014) *State of the World's Children 2015: Reimagine the future*

1 UNICEF. Child Marriage. <http://www.unicef.org>, accessed 16 March 2017

2 <http://www.girlsnotbrides.org/about-child-marriage/>

3 <http://www.girlsnotbrides.org/african-union-launches-first-ever-campaign-end-child-marriage/>

### Factors that facilitate child marriage

A number of factors contribute to the perpetuation of child marriage in the region. Religion, social norms and economic factors interacting with gender inequality are usually cited as catalysts of child marriage. These factors vary across and even within countries. Child marriage is deeply rooted in a number of religions and sects. Gender discrimination also fosters child marriage in some patriarchal communities where legal protection against early marriage is sometimes difficult to enforce as such issues are presided over by conservative male traditional leaders. In some communities, child marriage is viewed as a strategy for economic survival as families marry off their daughters to reduce their economic burden and to receive money or gifts as a bride price. There are instances when marriages are arranged between families to access economic resources or opportunities from the older husband on a longer-term arrangement rather than just a once-off payment of a bride price.

### The psychosocial impact of child marriage

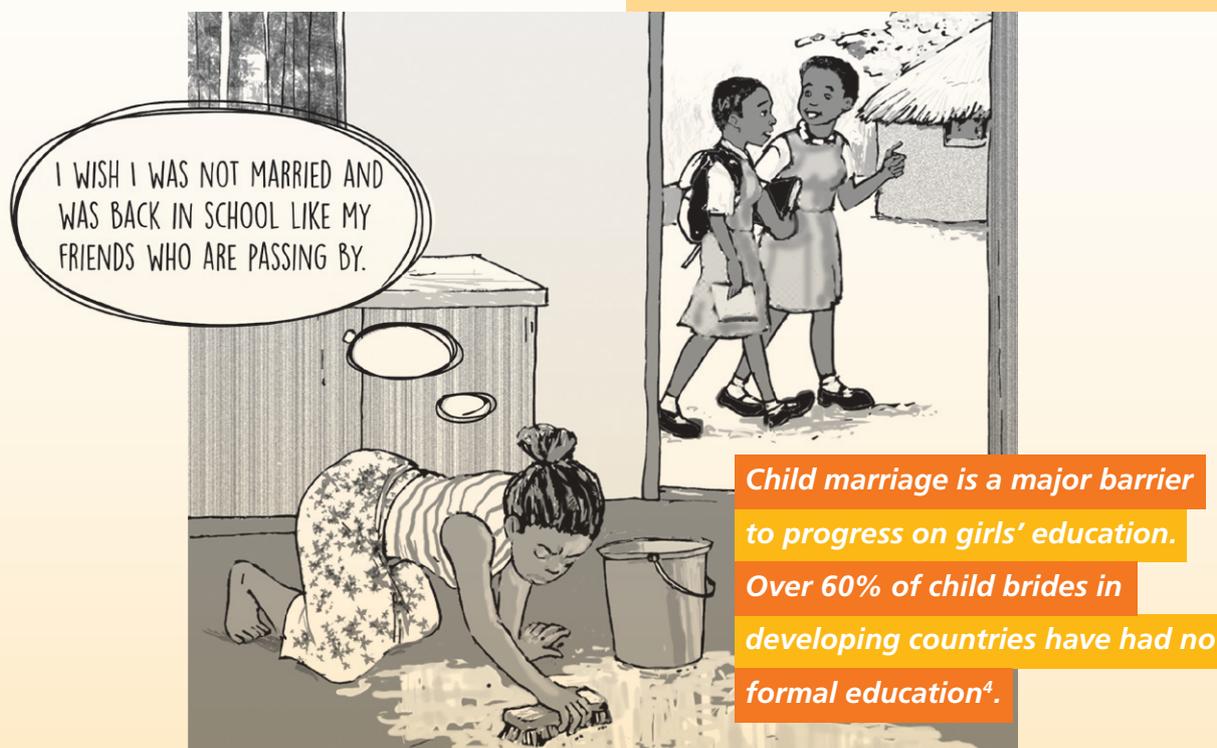
Child marriage affects the overall development of the girl child, leaving them socially isolated (stigmatised

and discriminated), with little or no education, skills and opportunities for employment and a low sense of self-worth.

### Education

Dropping out of school is both a basis for and consequence of child marriage. Whereas limited opportunities for education may contribute to child marriage, married girls are also highly likely to drop out of school. Consequently, child marriage denies girl children their right to formal education, required for academic, intellectual and personal growth. Lack of education may also affect their ability to contribute effectively to their own future and that of their family and society.

Lack of formal or informal education can reduce the options of earning an income thereby rendering girls in child marriages dependent on their husbands, which consequently reduces their power to negotiate. Girl children may also suffer prolonged domestic violence and abuse if they feel unable to leave a marriage because of economic pressures, lack of family support and other social circumstances.





Compared with women older than 20 years, girls who are 10–14 years of age are 5–7 times more likely to die from childbirth, and girls 15–19 years of age are twice as likely<sup>5</sup>.

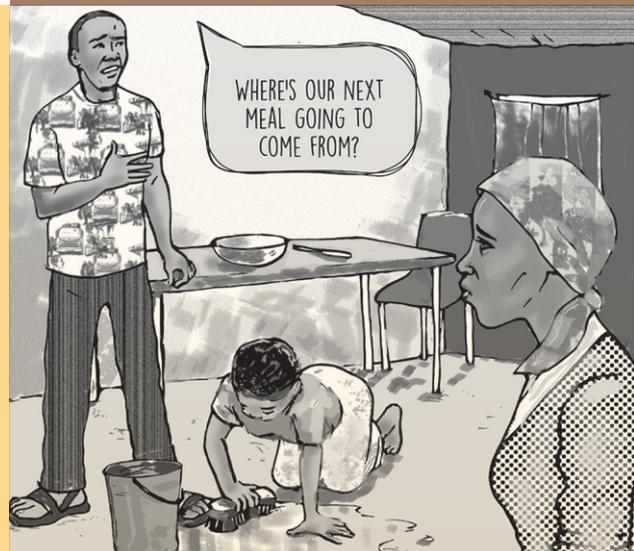
### Isolation

Child marriages often result in girls being cut off from their families, peer networks and community activities, which are a fundamental source of their social and emotional wellbeing. Girls have to deal with the stigma of being married off at a tender age. Child marriage also reduces the girl child’s opportunity to develop her own independent identity and a sense of her right to assert her own point of view. Social connectedness is a critical component of resilience. Isolation often leads to poor psychosocial wellbeing.

### Health

Sexual activity at an early age can have severe health consequences. Girls in child marriages are generally expected to procreate shortly after marriage, which makes them susceptible to complications in pregnancy and childbirth, including obstetric fistula.

Children are more vulnerable than mature women to sexually transmitted infections (STIs), including HIV. This is because of both biological factors, such as hormonal imbalance and the thickness of vaginal tissue, and social factors, such as low self-confidence or self-esteem, that make it difficult for girls to negotiate safe sex. These girls face stigma and discrimination associated with STIs, including HIV. Lack of child- and youth-friendly sexual reproductive health facilities, low levels of knowledge and of peer support make it difficult for these girls to access the health services which they need.



### Poverty

Many girls in child marriages lack the skills, knowledge, and social networks to support their household financially, making their families vulnerable to an intergenerational cycle of poverty.

5 United Nations. We the Children: End-decade review of the follow-up to the World Summit for Children. Report of the Secretary-General (A/S-27/3)

## Policy issues

- **Governments should focus** on strengthening child protection system at national, community and family levels. This will include: i) having policies, legislation and regulation that promote the eradication of child marriage; ii) a system in which all actors have the required skills to deal with issues surrounding child marriage; iii) having structures that are family- and community-focused; iv) effective promotion, prevention and response actions, for boys and girls of all ages, delivered through sustainable community-based mechanisms and government services; and v) sufficient resource allocation and efficient fiscal management.
- **Given the multifaceted and inter-related factors that facilitate child marriage, it is important for Governments and other stakeholders to support and resource programmes that focus on the empowerment of girls and boys. These programmes/interventions could include psychosocial support, social protection, child protection, economic strengthening, health and education.**
- **National education policies** should create opportunities for primary and secondary education and informal education for both girls and boys. Education plays a significant role in delaying the age of marriage. Global evidence shows that completing secondary school is the best way to prevent child marriage and teen pregnancies. Both formal and informal education can help girls and boys develop cognitive and social skills, establish social networks, make informed decisions, and increase the opportunity of earning and income. Stakeholders should consider offering education scholarships and support programmes that offer life skills training.
- **National education policies should provide for 'second chance' education through both formal and informal systems. Psychosocial support programmes should be offered to girls who return to school after giving birth.**
- **Governments should formulate** media strategies and support technologies that can reach all communities. Media can be used as a platform to share information on the negative impact of child marriage and provide alternative options for girls and boys. Media offers a useful vehicle to address harmful traditional practices.
- **Interventions should be developed that focus on improving the economic situation of communities as an increase in family income is likely to contribute to the reduction of early marriages.**
- **Governments should enact laws** that criminalise child marriage and strengthen enforcement of such laws where they exist. Supporting laws such as birth registration should also be enforced.
- **Government and other stakeholders should reach the most affected geographic areas. They should convince parents, religious and traditional leaders on the importance of education and the negative impact of child marriage on girls' health and futures. Awareness-raising programmes can shift social attitudes about the roles of girls in society. An informed community is likely to confront, rather than uphold, traditional roles of girls and women.**
- **Government responses to** child marriage should engage not only women but should mobilise boys and men to take the lead in advocating and lobbying to end child marriage.
- **The education sector should incorporate sexual and reproductive health education into school curricula as an effective strategy for building knowledge. This could also help to reduce teen pregnancies. Health facilities should also be easily accessible to girls and boys in child marriages.**
- **Governments and other stakeholders** should promote and fund research on the issue of child marriage in the region. Investment in data-driven research is needed to improve policy development and review, and develop effective programmes.