

A GRIM REALITY: THE REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH OF MARRIED GIRLS

Background

One out of every three girls in developing countries is married before the age of 18 and one in nine is married before age 15. In addition to falling victim to early marriage, these girls are typically from rural areas and have little wealth or education. It is estimated that in the next 10 years, approximately 14 million child marriages will occur each year in developing countries.¹

On the occasion of the 2014 U.S.-Africa Leaders Summit, sexual and reproductive health have barely made the agenda despite their importance to unlocking women's—and the continent's—potential. In the 50 African countries invited to the Summit to discuss investing in the next generation, roughly one-third of girls are married before age 18. Global advocacy efforts and last month's Girls' Summit have brought attention to the issue of child marriage, but few have focused on providing child brides with reproductive and sexual health care. This is particularly true for those under age 15, whose needs are poorly understood due to lack of data.

The African and American leaders gathered this week must place sexual and reproductive health and rights at the forefront of the agenda and address the ramifications of child marriage for girls and for the continent's future. We challenge these leaders to hear the voices of their female citizens and heed the call to end child marriage and provide women and girls with the health care they need.



Talk to Our Experts

Rebecca Dennis
Legislative Policy Analyst

Gina Sarfaty
GIS Specialist and Research Associate

Contact:
dseverin@popact.org
Tel: 202-557-3423
Mobile: 301-938-5187

What We Know

- Early marriage puts girls at risk for numerous health problems. The likelihood of adolescent pregnancy is greater among girls married before age 18 and poses serious health risks. Each year, 70,000 girls ages 15-19 die from complications related to pregnancy and childbirth.²
- For girls under age 15, adolescent pregnancy is particularly risky. These girls are five times more likely to die during delivery than women in their twenties.³
 - We know that married girls under 15 engage in sexual activity, but surveys are generally not designed to collect data on this age group. Providers and advocates therefore cannot meet their needs.
- Infants born to a mother under the age of 18 also have a 60 percent greater risk of dying within their first year than those born to mothers over age 19. Even when children born to adolescent mothers do survive, they face an increased risk of low birth weight, under-nutrition, and developmental delays.⁴
- In addition to serious implications for their health, adolescent wives are more vulnerable to violence and are prone to diminished educational opportunities due to early pregnancy.⁵

HIGH RATES OF CHILD MARRIAGE IN AFRICAN COUNTRIES INVITED TO THE US-AFRICA LEADERS SUMMIT

COUNTRY	% GIRLS (AGE 20-24) MARRIED BEFORE AGE 18	% BOYS (AGE 20-24) MARRIED BEFORE AGE 18	% GIRLS (AGE 20-24) WHO WERE MARRIED BEFORE AGE 15	% BOYS (AGE 20-24) WHO WERE MARRIED BEFORE AGE 15	LEGAL MINIMUM AGE FOR MARRIAGE (WOMEN)
NIGER	76	6	28	0	15
CHAD	68	No Data	29	No Data	15
MALI	55	No Data	15	No Data	15
GUINEA	52	2	21	0	17
BURKINA FASO	52	4	10	0	17
SOUTH SUDAN	52	No Data	9	No Data	No Data
MALAWI	50	6	12	1	18
MADAGASCAR	48	16	14	2	18
MOZAMBIQUE	48	9	14	0	18
SOMALIA	45	No Data	8	No Data	18

What You Should Know

- The positive impacts of investing in reproductive health and rights are well-documented. When women and girls have equal access to education, economic opportunities, and rights, countries benefit from increased development and economic growth.⁶
 - A group of 60 leading economists recently estimated that providing universal access to sexual and reproductive health could provide up to \$150 in benefits for every dollar invested.⁷
- In countries with high rates of child marriage, young women are systematically deprived of their reproductive rights. Youth are key drivers of development, and child marriage stifles girls' potential by depriving them of education, safety, and economic mobility.
- Without supportive policies and sufficient investment in reproductive health, economic and social development stagnates because women are prevented from contributing socially, politically, and economically.
 - Teenage girls who have access to family planning are more likely to stay in school, giving them better opportunities to obtain a secure income and fully contribute to a country's economic growth.⁸
 - Access to family planning and reproductive health is critical for women's full participation in the work force. Unplanned pregnancies that result from a lack of contraceptives can impede a woman's ability to support herself, with adolescent mothers half as likely as adult mothers to earn a salary. Therefore, providing access to family planning would help spur economic growth and reduce unemployment.⁹
- Policymakers must, at a minimum, pass and enforce legislation that establishes 18 as the legal minimum age of marriage. However, while policies are an important first step, they are not enough. Full implementation and enforcement of policies are necessary, as well as initiatives to equip girls with education, sexual and reproductive health resources, and life skills that empower them.



Sources

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- 7 Wall Street Journal. (July, 21, 2014) *Smart Aid for the World's Poor*. Retrieved from <http://online.wsj.com/articles/smart-aid-for-the-worlds-poor-1406326677?tesla=y&mg=reno64-wsj&url=http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052702304751404580049513806731890.html>. Wall Street Journal (July 25, 2014) *A New Way to Set Goals for Fighting World Poverty*. Retrieved from http://online.wsj.com/public/resources/documents/fighting_world_poverty.html
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