



Child marriage and family planning: an information sheet

The scale of child marriage is huge: 15 million girls a year are married before the age of 18. Child marriage can have a detrimental impact on the health of girls and their children as child brides are often pressured to prove their fertility early. Child brides have an enormous unmet need for family planning/contraception and are more likely to experience adverse sexual and reproductive health outcomes and increased maternal morbidity and mortality. By acting to prevent child marriage, we could dramatically improve maternal and child health for millions of girls and young children worldwide.

Child marriage drives adolescent pregnancy and impacts girls' ability to choose *if and when* to have children.

- The **relationship between child marriage and adolescent pregnancy varies** across contexts; in most cases, child marriage is a driver of early pregnancy; however, in some cases it is a consequence.
- **Adolescent birth rates are highest where child marriage is most common:** 95% of the world's births to adolescents occur in developing countries. 90% of these adolescent births are to girls already married or in a union.¹
- Child marriage encourages the **initiation of sexual activity at an age when girls' bodies are still developing** and when they know little about their sexual and reproductive health and rights, including their right to access family planning.²
- **Child brides become mothers at an early age**, often because they are **under intense social pressure to prove their fertility**.
- They also **have more children over their lifetimes**: a recent study from the World Bank and ICRW highlighted that on average, girls who marry at 13 years old have 26% more children over their lifetimes than if they had married at 18 or later. Older child brides also have more children. In Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ethiopia, Mali, Pakistan and Zambia, girls who marry at age 17 are likely to have about 20% more children than those who marry at age 18 or older.³ At a national level, child marriage increases population growth rates by increasing fertility.
- Many girls, especially those who are married or living with older partners, **lack the confidence and agency to assert their preferences and needs**, particularly when it comes to negotiating safe sexual practices and using family planning.

Preventing child marriage could accelerate efforts to improve maternal, new-born and child health.

- Pregnancy and childbirth complications are the **leading cause of death among 15 to 19 year old girls globally**.⁴

¹ UNFPA, *Motherhood in Childhood: Facing the challenge of adolescent pregnancy*, State of World Population, 2013

² UNFPA, *Marrying too Young, End Child Marriage*, 2012

³ Data collected in 15 countries. World Bank and International Center for Research on Women, *The Economic Impacts of Child Marriage: Global Synthesis Brief*, 2017

⁴ WHO, *Global Accelerated Action for the Health of Adolescents (AA-HA!): Guidance to support country implementation*, 2017

- It is estimated that 70,000 adolescent girls in developing countries die of causes related to pregnancy and child birth every year.⁵
- Where girls survive childbirth, they are at **increased risk of post pregnancy-related complications**. For example, 65% of all cases of obstetric fistula occur in girls under the age of 18.⁶
- Early childbearing also **increases the risks to new-borns**. In low and middle income countries, babies born to mothers under 20 years of age have a 50% higher risk of being stillborn or of dying within the first few weeks of life than those born to older women. They are more likely to have a low birth weight and experience stunting, which can cause long-term health effects.⁷ Over a fifteen year period, **an estimated 2.1 million children could survive** beyond the age of five if child marriage was ended; 3.6 million could avoid stunting.⁸
- **By accelerating cross-sectoral efforts to prevent child marriage, and addressing the social determinants of adolescent pregnancy** – including tradition, gender roles and inequality, poverty, insecurity, lack of alternative opportunities for girls – we can make significant progress in family planning efforts and maternal, new-born and child health.⁹
- **Ending child marriage and adolescent pregnancy would also benefit the economy:**
 - By ending child marriage, the World Bank estimated that governments could save up to \$98 billion per year by 2030 just from the savings related to reducing stunting and under-five mortality.¹⁰
 - Ending child marriage and adolescent pregnancy would reduce population growth substantially.¹¹ In 2030, annual benefits resulting from reduced population growth would amount to almost \$1 billion in Nepal, \$1.7 billion in Niger and \$4.8 billion in Ethiopia. The World Bank estimated that over a 15 year period, the welfare gains from ending child marriage and early child births across 15 countries could exceed \$5 trillion.¹²

Adolescent girls must be a priority group for family planning efforts

- Despite their significant need for maternal health services, **child brides are often isolated, hard to reach, and unaware that such services are available**. Both **unmarried and married girls often face stigma** when trying to access reproductive health services, meaning they are less likely to return for follow up care. Compared to other age groups, girls who are married have both the lowest use but highest unmet need for contraception.¹³
- **Maternal health and family planning programmes must reach adolescent girls and be tailored to their needs**. It is vital that they are able to access quality health services that are adolescent-friendly and confidential, and therefore must be involved in designing solutions.

⁵UNFPA, *Motherhood in Childhood: Facing the challenge of adolescent pregnancy*, *State of World Population*, 2013

⁶ WHO retrieved from: http://www.who.int/maternal_child_adolescent/topics/maternal/adolescent_pregnancy/en/ Jan 2016

⁷ WHO Guidelines, *Preventing early pregnancy and poor reproductive outcomes among adolescents in developing countries*, 2011, UNFPA, *Motherhood in Childhood: Facing the challenge of adolescent pregnancy*, *State of World Population*, 2013; Girls Not Brides & ICRW, *Taking action to address child marriage: the role of different sectors. Food security and nutrition*, 2016.

⁸ For the time period of 2016 to 2030. World Bank and International Center for Research on Women, *The Economic Impacts of Child Marriage: Child health and nutrition brief*, 2017

⁹ WHO Guidelines, *Preventing early pregnancy and poor reproductive outcomes among adolescents in developing countries*, 2011

¹⁰ World Bank and International Center for Research on Women, *The Economic Impacts of Child Marriage: Global Synthesis Brief*, 2017

¹¹ If child marriage were ended at the beginning of 2015, the annual rate of population

¹² World Bank and International Center for Research on Women, *The Economic Impacts of Child Marriage: Global Synthesis Brief*, 2017

¹³ UNFPA, *Motherhood in Childhood: Facing the challenge of adolescent pregnancy*, *State of World Population*, 2013



- **Programmes which work to provide girls with information and resources about their sexual and reproductive health and rights**, including the harmful impacts of child marriage, can improve knowledge and encourage girls to seek out health care. For example, effective safe space programmes have shown positive results around the proportion of girls who demonstrate health knowledge, increases in the proportion of girls who speak to peers about contraception, and increases in the self-reported use of contraception by sexually active girls.¹⁴
- It is also important that **health services support married adolescent girls** with their reproductive health needs and provide safe and supportive care for unmarried and at risk girls.
- **Health services can also be an entry point to other services.** Since child brides are often hard to reach, it is important that they are simultaneously given opportunities to engage in formal and informal education, skills building activities and income-generating opportunities.¹⁵

About *Girls Not Brides*

***Girls Not Brides* is a global partnership of more than 750 civil society organisations** from over 90 countries united by a commitment to work in partnership to end child marriage and enable girls to fulfil their potential. In consultation with members, *Girls Not Brides* created a common [Theory of Change](#), which outlines the range of approaches needed to end child marriage.

Find out more at www.GirlsNotBrides.org and follow us on Twitter [@GirlsNotBrides](#)

¹⁴ Erulkar, A., & Muthengi, E. *Evaluation of Berhane Hewan: A Program to Delay Child Marriage in Rural Ethiopia*, International Perspectives on Sexual and Reproductive Health, 35 (1), 2009

¹⁵ Partnership for Maternal, Newborn and Child Health, *Reaching Child Brides, Knowledge Summary: Women's & Children's Health*, 2012