

Before She's Ready

15 Places Girls Marry by 15



This report draws on the experience and observations of World Vision field staff working in a variety of countries and cultural contexts where girls are commonly married before they're fully physically or emotionally grown. The insights of these local and international humanitarian workers are here combined with the stories of individuals affected by the practise of early marriage. In pairing these viewpoints with findings from existing research, our hope is to provide insight into the complexities surrounding child marriage and the need for integrated approaches to address its causes and lay an economic, educational and cultural foundation that will allow communities to embrace other options for their girl children.

It is with great thanks to our staff who contributed to this project, and the many more colleagues working to ensure life in all its fullness for girls and their families around the world, that we present this overview of the situation and the work being done around it.

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At the Akha Teej festival in Rajasthan, India, hundreds of children – some under age 10 – are given away in marriage in a mass solemnisation ceremony.¹ In Mwamba, Zambia, a couple contracts a future marriage for their 7-year-old daughter, whom the groom will claim when she reaches puberty. In Afghanistan, a father engages his 11-year-old daughter to a local man in exchange for the equivalent of US\$6,000 to help feed the rest of his struggling family as prices for basic foods surge out of reach.

Today, as every day, an estimated 3,500 girls will marry before reaching their fifteenth birthdays.² Another 21,000 girls each day marry before the age of 18. Their total is expected to reach up to 100 million within the next decade. Already, 51 million girls in the developing world have been married before legal adulthood.³

Early marriage, particularly when the girl is younger than 15, has myriad – and often damaging – effects on the lives of the girls involved and by extension their children and communities, according to humanitarian workers and child protection specialists working in areas where the practise is common.

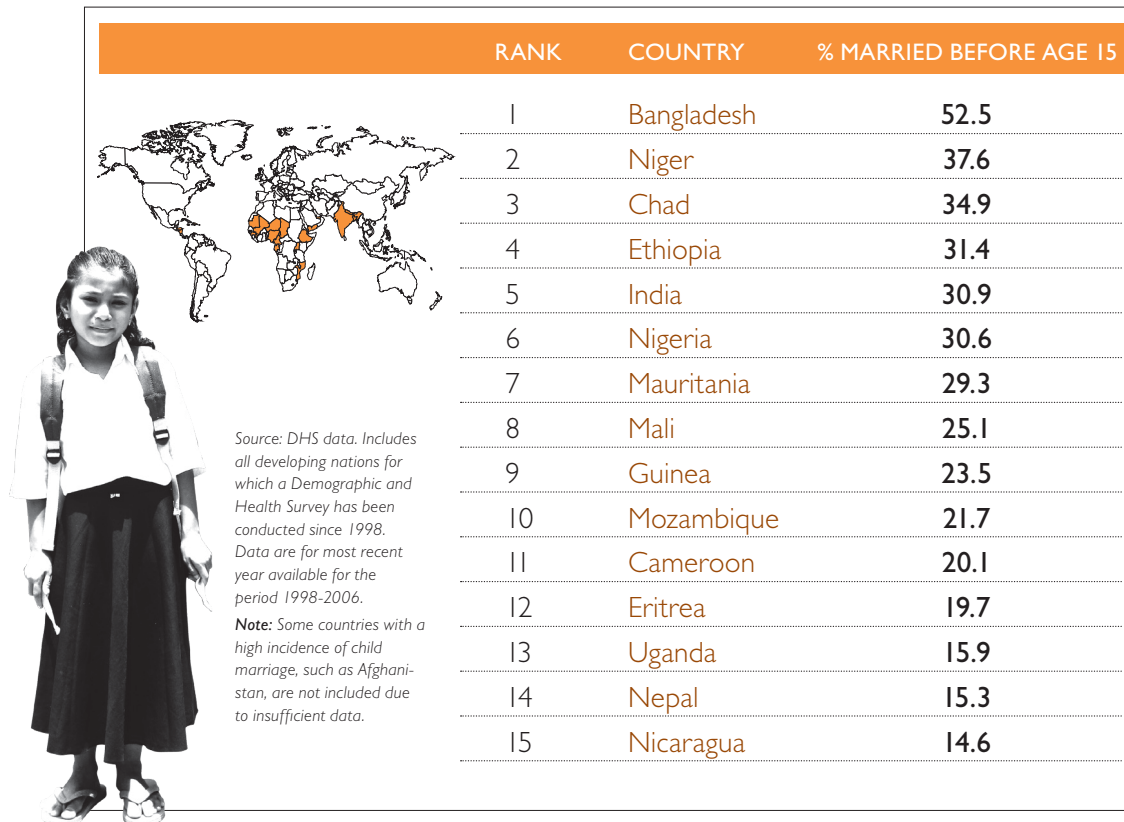
Picture the life of many a child bride. She is removed from her family and taken to live with a man who is rarely of her own age or choosing. Her husband and in-laws demand prompt and repeated childbearing, a task for which her body and mind may be unprepared. She is likely to experience early and forced sexual intercourse without protection, exposing her to potential injury and infection. In childbearing, she is more likely than a woman who marries later to experience complications, give birth to an underweight or stillborn baby or die. She must drop out of school, stunting her intellectual growth and often isolating her from peers.

Her future and the future of her children are compromised as cycles of poverty, illness and ignorance are perpetuated. The costs are borne at multiple levels: by families, communities, societies and nations.

While the practise of early marriage occurs worldwide, including in the world's wealthy and developed nations, it is most common in sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia and parts of Central America.⁴ It is most prevalent in communities and households where the starkest poverty mixes with cultural traditions and lack of education to limit a girl's perceived value and potential.⁵

In South Asia, nearly half of all girls marry before age 18.⁶ This average masks graver situations such as that in Nepal, where 7 percent of girls are married by age 10 and 40 percent by age 15. The rate is even higher in regions such as Rajasthan, India, where nearly seven of every 10 girls marry before the age of 18.⁷ Bangladesh has the highest rate of under-16 marriage: about half of the nation's girls.⁸

Countries where a girl is most likely to be married by age 15



At least a third of girls also marry before age 15 in the Amhara region of Ethiopia; Niassa, Mozambique; and Niger.⁹ Among the African countries surveyed by the United Nations World Report on Violence Against Children, an average of more than 40 percent of girls marry before age 18. That figure rises to 60 percent in some parts of East and West Africa and to as much as 75 percent in Niger.¹⁰

The prevalence of early marriage in Latin and Central American countries where World Vision works, as surveyed by the UN study, averaged 24 percent, and climbed to about 40 percent in some areas of Central America such as Nicaragua and Honduras.¹¹

Local cultures and traditions influence the way the custom of early marriage is practised in different regions, but the causes and consequences are universal. Because the practise is often linked to legitimate economic and social needs of struggling families and societies, addressing those needs may prove essential for communities to accept delayed marriage and childbearing as an integral part of development. For example, parents who marry off a young daughter because they are too poor to feed their children are often doing so because of a genuine need to survive.¹²

With contributions from World Vision field staff in regions where child marriage is common, this report examines the primary factors driving early marriage along with approaches that address its causes and seek to help girls, their families and their communities achieve life in all its fullness.

Causes of Early and Child Marriage

Poverty

Parents who cannot provide for the basic needs of their children may give a young daughter in marriage so they have one less mouth to feed and to ensure she is supported. It's a circumstance cited often by aid workers from Ghana to Nepal. Thirty out of 31 World Vision programme managers, advocacy officers and development workers surveyed for this analysis, working in 18 countries, noted poverty as one of the most powerful factors in early marriage.

In rural Guatemala, for instance, staff members working among indigenous populations have observed very poor families lacking in educational opportunities "handing over" their daughters to other families in order to reduce family expenses.¹³

POVERTY AND DISASTER

KENYA

When a drought in eastern Kenya's Makueni district left Ruth Nthambi unable to pay for her eldest daughter's school fees four years ago, she sent 14-year-old Syowai to a job in Nairobi as a domestic worker. Before turning 15, Syowai was married.

"It's young, yes," says Ruth. "I was not comfortable with that, but it's because of the drought that she dropped out of school and got married."

Drought-induced poverty is compelling older Kenyan children to drop out of school. In an estimated one out of 10 families in Makueni, it is also forcing young girls into early marriages. Ruth's family illustrates this tragic cycle. Ten-year-old Kathina may soon follow in her sister's regrettable footsteps.

Ruth's dreams for her daughter had nothing to do with early marriage. "I wanted her to become a teacher," she says.

Instead, Syowai is married to a gas station attendant in Nairobi. She's had no further education, and has little hope of getting one.

World Vision field officer Abraham Losinyen in Makueni explains, "The community is basically desperate. Many families have to marry off their young daughters to people who can give them food. It's a trend that will likely increase as long as the crisis becomes bigger and bigger."

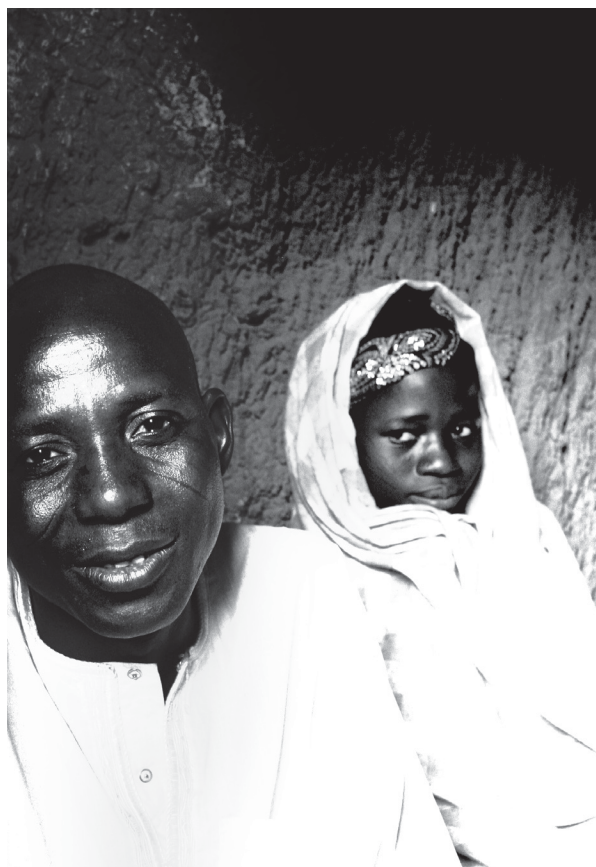
In many traditional sub-Saharan African communities, the bride's family receives a "bride price" in the form of cattle from the groom or his family.¹⁴ The bride price is a widespread custom in many African countries. But what once may have symbolised a token of appreciation to the bride's family has in many circumstances become a transaction. Some fathers view committing their daughters to marriages as an

opportunity to increase household wealth and build alliances. For example, in a community in south-central Somalia where World Vision operates, the bride's father receives a bride price in more than 90 percent of marriages.¹⁵

In parts of India, culture dictates that the bride's family pay the groom's family a dowry, the value of which is lower when the girl is young.¹⁶ This custom reinforces the idea that it's best to hand over a girl child early, before she becomes a greater economic burden. In these circumstances, poor parents consider it a waste to invest in daughters, who are expected to leave at marriage and serve in another's home whereas sons are expected to look after aging parents.¹⁷

Natural disasters and conflict can aggravate poverty's role in early marriage. Recurring droughts in Kenya, for example, have led destitute families to marry off girls in order to get money for food or to restock lost cattle.¹⁸ In Afghanistan, where years of drought followed decades of war, families pushed into desperate situations and relegated to camps for internally displaced people have traded not just livestock, but their daughters. Though early marriage was common in Afghanistan's rural areas before the war years, humanitarian workers now note a significant rise attributable to conflict- and drought-induced poverty and a sharp increase in prices for basic foods.¹⁹

"Women are a commodity, bought and sold like cattle or sheep," says a World Vision programme manager in Afghanistan's Badghis province. He is troubled by what he has witnessed in recent years: commanders abducting girls, and fathers selling daughters into marriage or using them as payments for debts.²⁰



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A 13-year-old child bride sits with her 38-year-old husband after being married and taken to his village in Niger. In Niger, where early marriage rates approach the highest in the world, only 15 percent of adult women are literate, and fewer than one-third of girls are enrolled in primary school.²⁶

In a 2007 survey of World Vision development workers in Ghana, three out of five regional programmes cited child marriage as a top concern in their areas.²¹

It isn't always parents who instigate child marriages. Orphanhood is also a significant risk factor, according to World Vision field staff in areas with growing populations of children whose parents are dying of AIDS.²² Sub-Saharan Africa is home to an estimated 11.4 million children orphaned by AIDS.²³ In Uganda alone, more than 2 million children have been orphaned as a result of the AIDS pandemic and war, and many households are headed by children with no adult caregiver.²⁴

Orphans and vulnerable girl children may marry out of fear that no one will look after them otherwise. Poverty, lack of guidance and the stress of maintaining the home all contribute to girls marrying early.²⁵ Some see marriage as a way out of their desperate situation – even though their husbands are often equally poor.

GHANA

Jane is an orphan whose father died when she was very young and whose mother left home when she was 5 years old. Because she had no other caregiver, Jane's aunt took her in. After the girl had lived in this household for eight years she was given to her aunt's husband as his second wife. Jane could not object. At 13, she was forced into sexual intercourse resulting in two children with her aunt's husband. She said the persistent sexual demands were too much for her to bear, so she ran away at the age of 17.

In another village, she started working as a porter and found a boyfriend, a native of her hometown. At the age of 20, she had a child with him. She is now 21 years old and the mother of three children. Jane brought her boyfriend home with her so they could be married but they were faced with hostilities from her aunt and her aunt's husband, who claimed that she was already married and could not marry again.

Jane has reported her case to local authorities in order to restrain the aunt and her husband so that she can marry a man of her choice, stating that as a child she was forced into marriage and violated sexually.

» *Orphans and children lacking capable caregivers can be especially vulnerable to early and forced marriages. The AIDS pandemic has fueled a substantial increase in the numbers of such vulnerable children, especially in sub-Saharan Africa, where more than 11 million have lost one or both parents to AIDS-related causes. These orphans are exposed to abuse and exploitation as a result of parental loss, poor access to social services, poverty and the need to work in order to earn a living. Their rights to inheritance and other legal protection are also compromised. Girl children affected by HIV and AIDS are more likely to fall prey to arranged and early marriages as a means for extended family members to reduce their costs and care responsibilities.*

*Community-led child-care initiatives are the centerpiece of World Vision's approach of engaging and strengthening local social networks to protect such children and meet their needs. World Vision-supported **community care coalitions** (CCC) train and equip community members to act as caregivers who on a weekly basis visit the households of vulnerable children and families affected by chronic illnesses. Currently, World Vision facilitates and supports about 3,700 CCCs in 19 African countries, with more than 1 million orphans and vulnerable children supported by the groups.*

CCCs are important community stakeholders involved in reducing abusive practices as members are trained in child protection issues. While their role in preventing child marriage at the community level is promising, challenges remain, including the persistence of cultural barriers, inadequate monitoring and reporting of such practices, weak legal instruments or inadequate knowledge of the laws and the role of the state in handling referrals.

Where community care isn't a viable option, orphanages like the one established in 2004 in Eduagyei, Ghana provide food, education, shelter, clothing, medical care and spiritual nurture for orphaned and abandoned children. At Eduagyei, a bakery built in the orphanage helps feed the 60 children living there and serves as a source of income for their care. In Ghana alone, about 170,000 children have lost one or both parents due to AIDS-related causes.

Concern about protection of girls

Parents also say they want to ensure their daughters' safety by pledging them to a regular male guardian, and that marriage will provide security for their future.²⁷ They expect married life will shield girls from exposure to strangers or rape and other attacks. In places where life expectancy is short, some parents marry off children hoping to provide them with stability before their own deaths.

Protecting girls against dishonor such as pregnancy outside of marriage is a frequently cited reason for child and early marriages, as a bride's worth is linked to her virginity in many cultures. Parents fear that a girl who becomes pregnant outside of marriage will lose respect and fail to secure a husband later, or that her bride price will decrease.²⁸

Conflict and social instability can aggravate such fears or force young girls into marriage with men who wield power. In northern Uganda, for example, there have been reports of some families marrying their young daughters to militia members in order to defend family honor or secure protection for themselves and the girl.²⁹ The same has been reported in Somalia.³⁰

Girls abducted as children by the Ugandan rebel group known as the Lord's Resistance Army are forced, under threats of torture or death, to serve as "wives" of commanders and bear their children at a very young age. While this is far from the norm for child marriages worldwide, it affects thousands of children and youth in the region.

CONFLICT

Northern UGANDA

For the past two decades in northern Uganda, young girls have been forced into unions and motherhood as a result of the war between the Lord's Resistance Army and the Uganda People's Defence Force.

Twelve-year-old Lilly was abducted by the LRA in 1996. During her time in captivity, she was "married" against her will to a rebel commander who had a harem of six wives and many children whom Lilly had to help care for. At 14, she had a child of her own. She named him Kilama, which means "I am cursed."

In July 2005, Lilly escaped during a Ugandan army attack. After arriving in Gulu, she and her child were taken to World Vision's Children of War Rehabilitation Centre. It was in this safe haven and with psychosocial counseling that she found love, forgiveness and the courage to move on.

"I don't know how I would have managed on my own," Lilly said. Shortly after being rescued, she gave birth to another son, whom she named Joel Rwot-Omara – "God loves me."

Rose, 15, is another such child mother. She has two children and is pregnant with a third. In April 1997, at the age of 7, men she describes as "scary and ugly" abducted her. Rose says that while she was in captivity she was raped by a group of rebels.

"I don't know who the father of my first child is because they were many. That time I could have killed myself but realised it was useless," said Rose. The constant fevers that came with the pregnancy were the worst moments in her life. Now she is faced with the task of raising children she was not ready to have.

continued . . .

» Rose is one of the more than 10,000 girls and women assisted by the **Uganda Child Mothers' Centre** in Gulu over the years. About 60 percent of the girls and young women arrive while pregnant and already have at least two children. This project and the **Children of War Rehabilitation Centre** have served the needs of thousands who have been caught in the region's bloody, two-decade-long conflict. Though far from the norm for early marriages, those between rebel fighters and the girls they have abducted will impact the society for generations to come.

Refugee Camps

Eliza and her family fled to Tanzania from the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) to escape their country's rampant internal conflicts. Formerly a top student, Eliza became pregnant as a young adolescent in one of four camps managed by World Vision Tanzania's Kigoma Refugee Programme (KRP).

Most girls in her situation would have been forced by their families to marry. However, the father of Eliza's child fled back to the DRC.

Although non-governmental organisations work in refugee camps to create awareness about abusive customs, humanitarian workers say that families conspire to fool child protection officials. Child protection laws in Tanzania apply to refugees within its borders. Therefore, a male marrying an underage girl could be arraigned and, if found guilty, penalised. To avoid this, families hurry to settle such matters among themselves—leaving the girl child to bear the brunt of the consequences. To minimise the chance of detection, they try to sneak a girl who has been forced into an early marriage due to pregnancy out of one camp into another until she delivers.

"The family of the girl and that of the man consult secretly at night and decide on bride price. Usually the girl's family gains an upper hand by threatening to bring the case to light," says a child protection officer at the camp.

In Eliza's case, a World Vision social worker counselled her parents and persuaded them not to disown their daughter but to keep her at home and help her return to school. She received twice-weekly counselling from World Vision's Sexual and Gender-Based Violence and Sexual Exploitation Programme while attending school, and has now become a counselor herself. She and other counselors visit youths in other camps to teach them about the risks of early pregnancy and marriage and urge them to stay in school.

» World Vision's **Sexual and Gender-Based Violence (SGBV) programme** deals with the prevention of and response to these problems in the refugee community. It functions through networking among community service staff employed in the camp and the project's Tanzanian staff to deal with rape, sexual harassment, forced and early marriages, domestic abuse and other forms of gender-based violence.

The **Jifunze Kutoka Kwangu** ("Learn From Me") programme begun in April 2005 aims to nurture youth role models who will influence their peers in behavior change, especially regarding adolescent sexual and reproductive health and behavior. In 2006, this programme had more than 1,300 members.

Youth programmes in the camps also include sports, culture and income-generating activities aimed to entertain and alleviate idleness in the camp, which can lead to pregnancy and early marriage. Youth participate in sports such as football, volleyball and basketball. More than 400 have engaged in income-generating activities such as operating hairdressing and barber salons, restaurants, kiosks and tailoring businesses.

Lack of education

Illiteracy and lack of education mean many girls and their families see few alternatives for the future.

In Niger, where early marriage rates approach the highest in the world, only 15 percent of adult women are literate and fewer than one-third of girls are enrolled in primary school.³¹ By contrast, a UNICEF study has found that women with seven or more years of education marry an average of four years later and have 2.2 fewer children than those with no education.³²

Uneducated parents are most likely to be ignorant of laws prohibiting child marriage and of the serious health risks that early sexual debut and pregnancy pose for girls.³³ They are also more likely to see the education of females as wasteful rather than a sound investment.

School is seen as irrelevant in societies where a girl's role is restricted to the home. Many girls are kept out of classes to do chores such as cooking, tending to animals or fetching water. Girls who manage to attend school are more likely to drop out in the absence of expectations to perform well and advance.³⁴ Boys are more likely than girls to continue with education, particularly in rural areas and in poor families who can't afford to pay school fees for all of their children.³⁵

Without educated females to serve as role models in a community, the multiple, proven benefits of educating girls aren't readily apparent.³⁶

YOUTH EMPOWERMENT AND EDUCATION

Maharashtra, western INDIA

Eighteen-year-old Sangeeta works as an intensive-care nurse in a hospital, something neither she nor her family expected a few years ago. In a recent interview with World Vision, she explained her path to education and employment, and away from early marriage and the risk of HIV:

"I used to attend the teenage girls' meeting organised by World Vision. There I was asked whether I would like to continue my education and took the opportunity. I did my general health worker course at Miraj. The training course was for one year. [Since] the training my life has changed.

"Now after the course I feel like I have achieved something and I am also very happy. As a girl I am earning for myself. I now understand the importance of work. I also feel that I am getting out of my poverty situation. My parents, when they refused to let me study, were sulking, but now after the course they are also very happy. They do not look at me as a girl child who is a burden for them, but as a person who is an earning member of the family.

"If I had not done the course I would have been married and staying in some other house and family. My sister was married at an early age. She [had been] married for only three months [when] her husband died of AIDS. [*Sangeeta's sister, 20, has tested negative for the virus.*] Now I do not want to marry early. Child marriage affects the mother and child: both are malnourished and can die due to this . . .

"I would suggest that all teenage girls and boys do [an] HIV test before marriage. I am very vulnerable as I do not know the boy whom I will get married to. Most of the boys go to [a] prostitute before marriage, and we do not know who is HIV-positive.

continued . . .

YOUTH EMPOWERMENT AND EDUCATION *(continued)*

“Because of my education and [the fact] that I am an earning member, I can boldly ask for the boy to be tested and if he refuses, I can refuse the boy . . . But girls who are not educated cannot demand any testing. They will be forced to marry. I have an advantage because of my education.”

» **World Vision children’s clubs** throughout India provide a safe environment for children to learn about their rights and discuss issues that affect them. Each club is run by officers elected by the children. Many of the clubs hold a Children’s Parliament every month, allowing children to discuss the issues they face – including child marriage – and ways to overcome them. The Parliament also teaches children about democracy and helps them to build leadership skills. In one community in Rajasthan this past year, children’s club members actively stopped four child marriages by talking to parents.

At **self-help groups** sponsored by World Vision in India and other countries, women meet regularly and are trained in areas including health and HIV, child marriage and financial and entrepreneurial skills. They learn to save money and form cooperative arrangements in order to make investments in children’s education and other important areas, and to support one another in times of need. These groups are small voluntary associations of people, usually from the same socio-economic background. Through them, many women who married at young ages find strength and unity to face obstacles. In some cases, self-help groups have advocated locally for young victims of marital abuse and sought legal redress on behalf of girls and women.

Long distances and lack of transportation also discourage access to education, especially in isolated areas where the closest school can be dozens of kilometers away. Parents fear their daughters may be harassed or attacked at school or while traveling between home and school, or that they will engage in illicit relationships that expose them to pregnancy outside of marriage.

In India, it has been shown that World Vision education programmes reduce the frequency of early marriage when barriers to girls’ education are addressed along with dowry issues. The same pattern has been observed by World Vision staff in Guatemala, Thailand and Mali.³⁷



The programme manager for a community in Ghana’s Upper-West Region estimates that some 40 percent of girls with no schooling are married before age 14, making the practise twice as common as it is for girls with some education.³⁸ For every 100 married girls ages 15 to 19 in Ethiopia, only three are in school, compared with 34 percent of unmarried girls in the same age set.³⁹ In the Amhara region, 78 percent of never-married girls and women younger than 24 have attended school, compared with 8.9 percent of married girls.⁴⁰

Uneducated girls have few alternatives for their future because they often lack the life skills and self-confidence to be economically independent. Ignorance of rights, skills and health matters typically deprives young wives of decision-making power and makes them vulnerable to violence and abuse.

Culture and religion

Staff in Africa, the Middle East, Asia and Central America alike identify cultural traditions as powerful factors driving early marriage.

The practise of the dowry perpetuates the view that girls are an economic burden on families. In India, the dowry is sometimes linked to child labor, with girls expected to work as domestic servants in a groom's family home to pay for their own or an elder sister's dowry.⁴¹ As a result, they do not attend school, which further increases their vulnerability.

In Guatemala, intergenerational family affection is cited as a cultural value influencing early marriage. "When women have children at an early age, they can 'enjoy' knowing and being related with their descendants in the second and third generations," says advocacy coordinator Ligia Morales. Roughly one in 10 adolescent girls in Guatemala are mothers.⁴²

The fact that many financially secure families practise early marriage in places such as the Amhara region of Ethiopia indicates that poverty is not always the dominant factor and that cultural traditions can be a strong influence.⁴³

In many cultures, the value of virginity at marriage is so high that families have their daughters marry at or before puberty in order to uphold family honor and to avoid the risk of pregnancy outside of marriage. In groups ranging from the Fulani and Sarakole ethnicities in Mali to the Ashanti in Ghana, girls may be promised to a groom at birth, a custom known as promissory marriage.⁴⁴

"In Mali, in the Fulani tradition, when a girl reaches marriage without having [had] any bed relations with a man, she is awarded a cow by her in-laws," explains World Vision programme manager Catherine Dembele.⁴⁵

Girls who become pregnant while still in school are typically expected to drop out and stay at home to raise their children. They rarely return to classes. Some community workers report gradual changes in that mentality as they push to get young mothers back into school.⁴⁶

Female genital mutilation (FGM) and similar rites of passage are also linked to early marriage in some African contexts, such as the Maasai communities of Kenya and Tanzania. FGM, also known as female circumcision, refers to the harmful traditional practise of the cutting and partial removal of a girl's genitalia. It is compulsory for social inclusion in some ethnic groups.⁴⁷ In Kenya, a Maasai girl is considered mature after FGM has been performed, usually between the ages of 7 and 14, and is then quickly married in order to fetch a dowry.⁴⁸



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Teresa, far left, is a peer educator who tells her schoolmates about the dangers of FGM and alternative ways to mark the transition to womanhood.

KENYA

In Kenya's Rift Valley Province, it is common for girls in their early teenage years to undergo female genital mutilation as part of the ceremonies marking their initiation to womanhood and as a precursor to early marriage. Teresa Cheptoo, a 17-year-old from a village in West Pokot, refuses to be one of these girls.

Teresa, a sponsored child in World Vision's Marich Pass project, is the youngest in a family of eight children. She first heard of the dangers of FGM as a young girl at home. Her own mother, who had undergone the procedure at the age of 14 and was married at 15, cautioned her against the risks. Still, community pressure to participate in the practise was high.

Teresa and her family found support for their stand against FGM through a new approach in their village: an alternative rite of passage. For Maasai girls like Teresa, this means celebrating in colorful traditional dress with dances and meaningful ceremonies that mark the transition without going through a cutting procedure.

As an offshoot of the advocacy clubs set up across Kenya by World Vision, Teresa established Anti-FGM/Early Marriage Advocacy Clubs that also teach about the dangers of HIV and AIDS and the importance of education. With the help of teachers and classmates, Teresa has recruited about 200 girls and boys in 13 schools to educate the community about the negative consequences of FGM.

"It's very upsetting to see girls move out of school to get cut and married to people in their 60s," Teresa says. "I can imagine my life [if I were] circumcised . . . Now, I could have been married to an old man."

She and her family are now outspoken leaders in changing their neighbors' attitudes towards this tradition of violence against girls. Their stand and work to end the practise have been far from easy. Young and old in Teresa's community have ridiculed her for speaking out against culture and traditional values. Her peers who chose to be cut have branded her a coward afraid of facing "the knife." Boys of her age have told her that her decision will mean she will never be married, denying her father gain from a bride price.

Of her community, she says, "it is changing, because I have experienced the boys saying that they will not marry a girl who is circumcised, and also the girls saying that they will not be circumcised at all."

Each member of the advocacy clubs works to influence at least two girls to say "no" to FGM and early marriage, and to encourage two boys to support the girls' decision. They also convince their parents and relatives and neighbours to abandon these harmful traditional practises and adopt alternative rites of passage for the girls.

Her activism was recently recognised by the United Nations when she was invited to represent Kenya on a youth panel during the 51st Session of the Commission on the Status of Women, where she spoke out against FGM and on protecting the right to education for girls. Teresa also won the 2007 World Of Children Founder's Award for Youth Leadership, which she plans to use to help other girls continue their education.

"It is fortunate that through my education and because I did not undergo the cut, I have seen many places and I have hope in my life," Teresa says. "I want to be a judge so that I can assure I can send anybody to judgement according to law who is found sending or forcing a girl to FGM."

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TANZANIA



Naiho* is a 17-year-old Maasai girl from a village in northern Tanzania. A top student, she was the only girl in her school to pass her examinations two years ago and be selected to join a boarding secondary school. Her family couldn't afford to send her, and her father preferred that she get circumcised and married.

That was not her plan. One day before she could be mutilated, Naiho went to a nearby village and shared her story with a teacher, who informed local advocates. Village leaders who had participated in advocacy training looked into her situation and wrote a letter to her parents threatening to report the issue to authorities.

Members of the advocacy unit then took Naiho to the secondary school she had been selected to attend. The school administrators agreed to take her on as a pupil while waiting for financial assistance. Now a high-performing student, she is under the care of village government leadership and studying to become an accountant.

» Teresa and Naiho are among more than 2,000 girls who have refused the FGM procedure and taken part in celebrations through Alternative Rites of Passage programmes developed by World Vision in cooperation with community leaders. These programmes are showing success in reversing harmful traditional practises. Such programmes are also active or in development in several other African countries.

Through these programmes, staff educate families and community leaders about the risks of FGM and early marriage and childbearing, and work with them to develop ways girls can be taken through the ritual of initiation into womanhood without the cutting procedure. This enables the transmission of cultural values from generation to generation while stopping unhealthy practices. Girls join Anti-FGM/ Early Marriage Advocacy Clubs, where they learn about risks and spread the message further. More than 200 boys have also participated by joining the clubs in support of female peers who have refused "the cut." World Vision is also a member of Childline Kenya, a helpline where girls in danger of FGM or early marriage can report their situation and receive counselling.

The FGM Project in Tanzania, started in 2000, empowers children to be agents of transformation in their communities. Children also actively participate in the production of a newsletter in which they exercise their rights of participation and self-expression – activities that recently spurred 12 girls to avoid FGM and pursue secondary education with support from World Vision. Local advocates seek to work at the village level with parents, church leaders and government leaders.

Between 100 and 140 million girls and women worldwide have undergone some form of genital excision or mutilation, often as a cultural precursor to marriage.⁴⁹ It is performed on girls from very young ages up to the mid- or late teens. The procedures are often performed without sterile instruments, thereby risking the transmission of HIV, hepatitis and other infections through blood-to-blood contact. In the most severe version of the procedure, all the external organs are cut off and the wound is tightly sewn together, increasing pain and physical trauma during sexual activity and often causing complications and injury during labor. In nine African countries where World Vision is active, an average of 54 percent of women had experienced FGM and 33 percent had daughters who also experienced it.⁵⁰

* Substitute name used

In many cultures the status of the family is bound up in the success of children, and a daughter's marriage often represents her success. Marriage is associated with respect and prestige. In some cases, girls may want to marry young to earn their family's admiration.

Cultural aphorisms shed light on the thinking behind the customs. A saying in Zambia's Bemba tribe, "A kana ka'gwena kakulila kwitete," means "the child of a crocodile grows stuck on a reed."⁵¹ It refers to a girl coming of age while living with her husband-to-be. Marriage is formalised after the girl experiences her second menses. In some parts of the Kopa chiefdom in Zambia, pre-pubescent girls are betrothed and expected to "warm the beds" of their husbands-to-be. Some report becoming pregnant before ever experiencing menstruation, and are married before the age of 13.⁵²

A Malian proverb says, "A girl of the same age who gets married quickly and has a child quickly will have more luck in life." In cultures where early marriage and childbearing are associated with success and respect, social pressures push girls to have children early.⁵³

A proverb from Nepal says, "Spilled water on the doorstep is very dangerous: anything can happen." This alludes to the idea that a daughter kept at home becomes an invitation to disaster.⁵⁴ Similarly, in some parts of Chad it is considered a curse for a girl to begin menstruating while still living under her parents' roof, observes Catherine Demba, World Vision's national child protection coordinator in that country. Girls in these families generally marry at 12 to 14 years of age.⁵⁵



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Polygamy and religion also play a role. For example, the Muslim culture in some communities allows men to have up to four wives. When one wife ages, the husband may look for a younger one.⁵⁶ Similarly, many Muslim communities in high-prevalence countries believe that when a child begins her monthly cycles, she is ready for marriage.⁵⁷

During the Hindu festival of Shivrathri in India, it is considered auspicious to get girls married.⁵⁸ "The families feel that they would receive special favors from God and will have more blessing," says Priscilla Barnabas, programme manager for World Vision's Girl Child Education Project in Bangalore.

Gender discrimination

Many societies endorse values that discriminate against girls and women. Girls are socialised to assume low status and their confidence and participation are discouraged, while boys are socialised into rigid roles to take charge of females. This cultural conditioning creates the norms behind traditional practises that harm girls, such as early and child marriage.⁵⁹

In Afghanistan, a country with one of the lowest female literacy rates in the world, men have been observed to scoff at the idea of an educated woman.⁶⁰ Girls in India are expected to participate in household chores from a very young age and stay at home to care for younger children while boys go to school. In times of economic hardship, girls are often the first to be withdrawn from school.⁶¹

The devaluation of girls reinforces many of the factors driving early marriage, including lack of education and practises such as the dowry. Without being encouraged to develop a sense of self-worth, girls become

more willing to accept an unwanted marriage and endure forced sexual intercourse and domestic violence without question.⁶² The behavior codes of some cultures betray a fear that an educated, independent woman is a threat to society and to men.⁶³ Entrenched gender roles make it difficult for a girl to imagine life beyond what her community imposes on her. “The lack of vision of women of having an active role in the society makes them believe or think that their only option is marriage and maternity,” says Ligia Morales, World Vision’s advocacy coordinator in Guatemala.⁶⁴

A lack of female role models compounds discrimination. In many communities, no female has ever completed a degree or attained any high level of professional achievement. As a result, girls have no one to emulate and to show them alternative paths they may take in life outside of early marriage.⁶⁵ Alternately, girls who grow up to be educated and productive role models can change the tide of opinion in their families and communities.⁶⁶



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Lack of law enforcement

Although laws prohibiting child marriage exist in most countries, addressing both minimum age and consent, they are rarely enforced in impoverished developing nations. Some laws do not contain sanctions, which means the only outcome of a case is to declare the marriage invalid, leaving the wife with no further legal protection.⁶⁷ There is considerable discrepancy between the legal and actual marriage age of girls in many poor countries.⁶⁸

In most countries where a legal minimum age for marriage is fixed, it is 18 or above for both males and females, in accordance with the spirit of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC),⁶⁹ which establishes legal adulthood at 18 years.⁷⁰ Marriages before that age violate Article 24.3 of the CRC and Article 21 of the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child.

The age minimum varies, however, from age 14 in Bolivia to 19 in Burkina Faso.⁷¹ It is frequently lower for girls than for boys, and reduced in cases where parents consent to the union. In Guatemala, legal marriage age is 18 for both boys and girls, but marriages for boys over age 16 and girls over age 14 may be authorized with parental consent or if the girl is pregnant.⁷² Furthermore, these laws can only be enforced when cases are reported to police and dealt with in the legal system. In many countries, this doesn’t happen because citizens are ignorant of the national laws and because the parents, who should be the complaining parties, are in most cases endorsing the marriages. In Afghanistan, for instance, the legal minimum age for marriage is 16 for girls and 18 for boys, but humanitarian workers have noted a high level of ignorance about these laws, even among law enforcement agents.⁷³

This situation is aggravated further by the fact that one-third of all births in the world go unregistered, exacerbating the inability to enforce the legal minimum age of marriage.⁷⁴ Many marriages are also unregistered, depriving women of legal redress if there are problems in the marriage and of rights including property rights.⁷⁵ In Chad, Bangladesh and many other countries, World Vision is cooperating with national governments to implement birth registration programs.

BANGLADESH

In the Bangladeshi village of Khordsaguna live Nuran Nahar and her husband with their two sons and only daughter, Rosy. The girl is enrolled as a sponsored child in World Vision's development programme for the area, which began in 1999.

Rosy's parents planned to reduce the family burden by marrying her by age 10 to a 15-year-old boy. A member of a local community group organised by World Vision heard of the arrangements. On the day of the wedding, she ran to the family's home accompanied by other members of the gender task force committee. Together, they persuaded both parties to cancel the marriage by informing them of the laws relating to minimum marriage age. It was illegal for either of the children to be married.

Rosy's parents have now said they will wait until their daughter is 18 years old before marrying her.

» *Gender task forces have been established in Bangladeshi communities where early marriage is contributing to divorce, domestic abuse, polygamy, human trafficking, population growth and poor literacy levels. These gender task forces are transforming lives at the grassroots level through community awareness and education programmes, including direct interventions and consultations with parents in cases where child marriages are planned.*

In related work, World Vision Bangladesh has been conducting reproductive health education in rural areas where child marriage is most prevalent. The programme focuses on creating the conditions necessary for preventing maternal death and disability through access to good ante-natal care, training in safe birth practises and emergency obstetric and post-natal care, along with services related to gender-based violence. Also provided are family planning services that focus on the prevention of sexually transmitted infections, including HIV.



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While laws are an important tool for regulating early marriage, they are in no way sufficient in themselves. In India, recent amendments to child marriage laws give girls who are still legally children the ability to annul their marriage. Civil society organisations, however, claim the bill is insufficient to address issues at the household and community level, and note that it places the onus on girls and their families to report the act.

"Law alone is not good enough," says Bhajirathi Sutar, a World Vision programme manager in Rajasthan, India.

"We need to change peoples' thoughts, and that is what we are doing in the community."

Impact of Early and Child Marriage

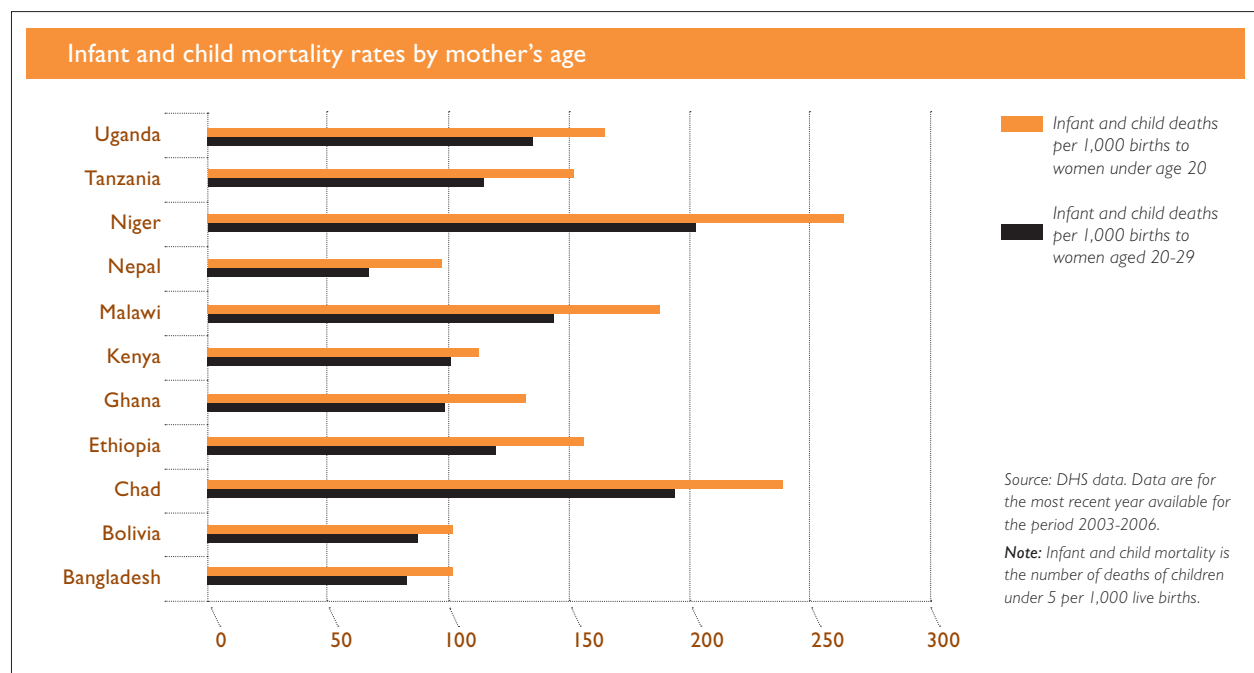
Early marriage and childbearing pose severe risks for girls who are not yet physically, mentally and emotionally developed. Damaging effects are wide-ranging and have implications for entire societies. Where girls are in poor health, uneducated and ill-prepared for their roles as mothers, costs are borne at multiple levels – from the household to the nation as a whole.⁷⁶

Health

The risks begin, but do not end, with reproductive health. Resisting sexual intercourse isn't an option in most early marriages, where consummation is considered the male's right. Unwillingness to cooperate is generally ignored. Forced sex causes skin and tissue damage that makes a female more susceptible to contracting sexually transmitted infections from her husband. She has little or no say in protecting herself against pregnancy or diseases, although her husband may be sexually active outside the marriage. A study of 15- to 19-year-olds in the Dominican Republic found that 87 percent of sexually active girls in the age group were married and only 1.5 percent of the boys used a condom the last time they had sex.⁷⁷

Early marriage raises the risk of contracting HIV, as well as other sexually transmitted infections including syphilis and chlamydia.⁷⁸ Research in Kisumu, Kenya and Ndola, Zambia indicates that some groups of married adolescent girls had higher rates of HIV infection compared with unmarried, sexually active counterparts.⁷⁹

Girls pushed into a husband's bed during puberty are also likely to conceive before their bodies fully mature. Few have access to reliable contraception and reproductive health advice, and the pressure is high for a bride to prove her worth and secure her social status by having children within a year of marrying.



Pregnancy and childbirth are far more hazardous for pre-teens and young teenage mothers than for their older counterparts. Complications during childbearing and delivery are most common in this age set, significantly raising the risk of death, premature delivery, infant mortality and low birthweight. Pregnancy-related deaths are the leading cause of mortality for 15- to 19-year-old girls (married and unmarried) worldwide. Mothers in this age group face a 20 percent to 200 percent greater chance of dying during pregnancy than women ages 20 to 24; girls under age 15 are five times as likely as women in their twenties to die. The main causes are hemorrhage; obstructed labor; sepsis, an overwhelming immune response to infection; and preeclampsia (hypertension) and eclampsia (convulsions).

In girls whose pelvis and birth canal are not fully developed, delivery of the baby can be obstructed. Pressure from the infant's skull during prolonged labour can damage the birth canal, tearing the internal tissue that separates the bladder or bowel from the vagina. This tear, or fistula, causes uncontrollable leakage of urine or feces unless the injury is surgically corrected.

While improvements in obstetric care have virtually eliminated the condition in Europe and North America,⁸⁰ it is estimated that some 2 million women worldwide – almost all of them in the developing world – suffer from obstetric fistula.⁸¹ These girls and women live in shame. The condition keeps them perpetually soiled and they smell. They are usually ostracised as a result, and many are abandoned or divorced by their husbands. At the Addis Ababa Fistula Hospital in Ethiopia, more than half of patients said their husbands had left them, and many were destitute.⁸² In Niger, where marriage before age 15 is common, fistula counts for nearly two-thirds of divorces.⁸³

In poor and rural areas, few are aware of, have access to or can afford surgical treatment to repair their bodies.

FISTULA

SOMALIA and ETHIOPIA

*The story of Isaa**

"I was born in 1988 in a small village about 35 kilometers [22 miles] from Waajid in south-central Somalia. In 2001, my parents gave me to be married to an old man over four times my age. Two years later, I got pregnant without ever observing my period. Because of a difficult delivery, I lost the baby, had an anal-vaginal fistula and started leaking. My husband could not stand the smell of my body so he sent me out of his home and I was living under a tree.

"Within those six years of misery, I hated my own life and myself. I thought it was my fault and I had nobody to explain anything to me. I could not even pray because I really was frustrated.

"In 2004, I was found by the World Vision Somalia FGM project team. I do not know who told them about me, but they came directly to meet me under the tree that [had] been my home and sleeping space. They talked with me and took me to Waajid. A few weeks later, I was transferred to a hospital in Ethiopia. It was a long journey, especially since I did not know what the future held for me. In the hospital I was admitted with others and I saw many girls sleeping in beds.

"Since I was healed, [my husband] has been appealing to take me back. I refused. The shame I went through has taught me a lesson. Society brings down people with fistula cases. I had to encourage myself and rise above the humiliation.

continued . . .

* Substitute name used

FISTULA (continued)

"After I came back, I refused to go back to my village. I have been working here for two years. Now I have friends, I can pray . . . I pay my rent, do my gardening and spend most of my time at the centre. I just love it."

Isaa is one of many women who have been helped with access to reconstructive surgery at the Addis Ababa Fistula Hospital in Ethiopia. Hadija and Fatuma, two of a group of 10 women taken



Annastacia Olembo (left), a World Vision Advocacy and Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) staff worker, stands with two women headed to Addis Ababa for fistula reconstruction surgery.

from Somalia to the hospital in October 2006, have similar stories. Hadija was married at 15, became pregnant at 16, suffered through a stillbirth and four days later began experiencing uncontrollable urine flow. By age 17, she was divorced. Fatuma was divorced at 16, shortly after she began suffering from the same condition. Their stories are replicated in neighbouring Ethiopia, where thousands of women develop obstetric fistula each year, due largely to the common practises of FGM and early marriage.

» **The Addis Ababa Fistula Hospital** is the only one of its kind to treat fistula patients exclusively. Founded in 1974 by Australian physicians Reginald and Catherine Hamlin, the hospital relies solely on donations and doesn't charge patients fees. The hospital, holding only 100 beds, provides surgery for more than 1,200 patients a year, curing over 90 percent of them. World Vision is proud to contribute over half of the hospital's funding and is working to help build fistula-related capacity among physicians there and elsewhere.

In addition to supporting treatment of fistula cases, World Vision Somalia provides a resource centre in Waajid where girls can attend school and are taught about maternal health along with a regular class curriculum.

The children of immature and undeveloped mothers start life with setbacks: higher risk of being underweight at birth and/or malnourished during the crucial years of early childhood development. Malnutrition in early childhood can result in severe physical and cognitive stunting later in life.

Denial of education

While lack of education is a risk factor for girls entering into early marriage, denial of education is also a direct consequence of early marriage. Often, the expectation that a girl will soon be married keeps parents from sending her to school. In Bangladesh, a girl is withdrawn from school when a marriage possibility presents itself.⁸⁴ These actions deprive children of the education they need to develop, prepare for adulthood and make a healthy contribution to family and society.⁸⁵

Although the attitude towards girls' education is beginning to change, even in traditional societies, many parents still consider it a waste to invest in their daughter's education since when she marries she will leave

and work in another's home. In rural Niger, secondary school often requires children to live away from home, something a husband is unlikely to permit.⁸⁶

Girls who become pregnant are often not allowed to continue their schooling. In Uganda, although some efforts have been made to encourage child mothers to return to school after delivery, the majority of teenage mothers never again enter a classroom. The burden of childcare, household responsibilities and the inability to raise money for school fees and expenses are deterrents. Many families believe that girls who have become mothers are now women and no longer belong in school.⁸⁷

Teachers at World Vision-supported schools in Qala-i-Naw, the small-town capital of Afghanistan's Badghis province, say that many female students are unable to complete their education due to early and/or forced marriage.⁸⁸ Nearly 60 percent of girls here are married by age 16; girls in rural areas marry even younger, often around 11 or 12.⁸⁹ Only one in 20 Afghan girls attends school beyond sixth grade.⁹⁰

The denial of education, which stunts girls' intellectual development and productivity, has grave repercussions for society. Studies have shown that girls' education increases incomes, benefiting both families and nations; reduces the number of children girls will have and ensures that the children will be healthier; decreases the risk of HIV infection; reduces domestic violence; decreases the likelihood of FGM; and can even foster democracy and political participation.⁹¹



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Psychosocial impact

Child marriages are frequently characterised by forced sexual intercourse, domestic violence and denial of freedom. Studies have shown that women married as children are more likely than women who marry later to have husbands who are significantly older. A large age gap between husband and wife may affect power dynamics within the household. It can also mean the husband has had more previous sexual partners, which can increase the risks of HIV or other sexually transmitted infections. In Ethiopia, the mean age difference between spouses is 10.1 years when girls marry before age 15.⁹² In Burkina Faso, 65 percent of girls have a partner who is more than 15 years their senior; this age difference is likewise found in one-fourth of child marriages in Guinea, Mali, Mozambique and Nigeria.⁹³

Evaluating the large-scale psychological impact of early marriage is difficult. Confinement and the resulting social isolation impede a girl's ability to forge her own identity and limit her access to services and programmes that may benefit her.⁹⁴

Painful early initiation to unwanted sexual activity can cause long-term psychological and emotional trauma.⁹⁵ For reluctant child brides, the marriage amounts to legally sanctioned sexual abuse. These girls often show signs symptomatic of child sexual abuse and post-traumatic stress, such as hopelessness and severe depression.⁹⁶

CHAD

Fourteen-year-old Falmata* found out about her impending marriage to a 65-year-old friend of her father just 10 days before she was set to be given away. The girl tried to convince her mother against the marriage, but her mother, who had also been married young, was powerless to change the decision. Falmata, ashamed by village girls' taunts of "mara ana chaib" (in local Arabic, "wife of an old man"), ran away to an aunt in a neighboring village. The aunt returned her to an angry father, who beat her to dissuade her from attempting another escape.

But the young girl hadn't given up. She tried to run away again, to another aunt living across the river. Men from her village who knew about the wedding refused to let her pass and she was again caught by her father. He shut her in a small room, intending to leave her there until the marriage day. There was a kerosene lamp in the room with Falmata. She poured the contents on herself and set herself on fire. Alerted by the smell of smoke, Falmata's mother ran in to find her daughter almost entirely burned except for her head and hands. Falmata required extended hospital care, with third-degree burns over most of her body.

»» *In Chad and many other countries, World Vision and partner organisations tackle the issue of early marriage through approaches including village-based **awareness workshops** that address children's rights and needs with regard to health, education, early marriage and other issues. These workshops deal with "taboo" topics that are harming communities and allow women and girls to speak freely in a comfortable and safe environment about problems affecting them. In addition, social workers follow up with married girls in their homes and help ensure children have birth certificates, which facilitates enrollment in school and serves as an example in the area.*

AFGHANISTAN

After breakfast one morning, Sara* decided she couldn't take it anymore. She doused herself with gasoline and lit herself on fire. With the strike of a match, Sara became one of hundreds of women who decided in recent years that self-immolation was preferable to life in western Afghanistan.

Unlike most of these women, Sara survived. Her mother got her to the hospital in the city of Herat where doctors skilled in caring for burned women – or anaesthetising their last painful days – treated Sara's wounds and prepared her body, burned from torso to thumb tips, for a skin graft.

When Sara's husband visited the burn unit, she told him she couldn't bear the fighting – all the bitter arguments with her mother-in-law. Sara's lot is typical of an Afghan woman. She doesn't know how old she is (she guesses 18) or when she was married – maybe at 12. She has a 3-year-old son. She lives with an extended family of 20, none of whom have steady work. Sara has never been to school. She rarely leaves home.

The burn unit at Afghanistan's Herat Regional Hospital is crowded with cases like Sara's, of women who have tried to burn themselves to death. The country's poverty and misery is compounded for women. Fifty-seven percent of girls are married before the legal age of 16. Nine of every 10 women cannot read or write. The death rate for women in childbirth is the third-worst in the world, behind only Sierra Leone and Angola. Life expectancy for a woman in Afghanistan is 43 years.

continued . . .

* Substitute name used

DEPRESSION and SUICIDE (continued)

Reasons for this tragic suicide trend are many. Most of these women have suffered from forced marriages and abusive husbands or in-laws.

» World Vision has supported **Herat Regional Hospital** with donations of pharmaceuticals and medical supplies. Other local health programmes that support women include a centre for sexually transmitted infections and a programme training midwives for village practise, which teaches rural women the importance of regular check-ups during pregnancy and the benefits of later marriage. Since 2004, 140 midwives have graduated from World Vision's **Midwifery Training Programme** and are at work throughout western Afghanistan. Another 68 students are now in training.

Depression, social withdrawal and loss of self-esteem are common results of early and forced sexual activity as observed across cultures by World Vision staff. Married girls who are suffering often have no one to confide in because they are surrounded by others who condone their situation.

"The indifference of adults towards a young girl affected by child marriage adds to the sorrows she carries with her all her life," notes Sabine Woube, World Vision's national coordinator for gender and development in Chad. "These experiences are simply considered a normal and unavoidable part of life, which plunges the girl into a state of resignation."



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Loss of childhood

A girl who marries early is a child thrown into adulthood.

"Her behavior changes in relation to the change of her status so that she becomes a woman with the mentality of a child, or a woman in some ways but [a child] in others," says Woube. "Her life becomes one of deprivation; she does not get to enjoy the games and fun that other children enjoy."

A child bride loses the label of "child" while still psychologically and emotionally immature. Some observers call this a stage of being a "social misfit" because she fits in neither with children nor with adult women.⁹⁷

Many programme managers remarked that girls who marry as children soon look old and tired. They age prematurely as a result of repeated pregnancies, the heavy demands and responsibilities of motherhood, for which they are unprepared, and a heavier burden of house- and field-work.⁹⁸

ZAMBIA

Gertrude Chanda, World Vision's head of advocacy in Zambia, relates the story of a memorable walk she took with some young married girls:

"Five years ago, while on assignment in the rural northern district of Mpika, Zambia, I met two girls named Mulenga and Chilufya* as they walked to a river to draw water. Between them they carried five containers, including two that held 20 liters [more than 5 gallons] each. Both girls were 17 and had been married for over three years. Each had a child, and one of them was expecting a second. I fell into step with them and accompanied them to the river.*

"When we arrived, the girls threw their buckets into the sand, stripped off their clothes and jumped into the river, splashing and playing around like little girls as I sat on the riverbank waiting for them. They came out and chased each other, stopping only when a fellow community member soaking her cassava in the river reminded them they were married women.

"On the way back, I learned that the husband of one of the girls had lost a leg to diabetes and could not till the land. She woke up at 4 o'clock every morning during the planting season to work on the family farm, except for Sunday. Her husband's elder brother used to beat her when she refused to go to the farm or [he] thought she was not taking care of his brother properly. She was planning to run away from her marriage. The other girl considered herself relatively 'well' married. Her husband had found a job in the nearest town, 70 kilometers [40 miles] away, as a domestic.

"The girls' conversation centred on what crops they would grow that year. When I asked them why they had married early, they said their families forced them for a bride price. Among the things they missed the most were playing sports and spending time with friends. The girls missed being children."

Cycle of poverty

Withdrawal from education, severe maternal and child health problems with limited access to services and restricted ability to participate in income-generating activities are among the key factors that contribute to the perpetuation of poverty.

Having children may decrease already scarce resources in a poor family. In fact, child brides are significantly more likely to have more children than women who marry later, while being less able to provide for them. In Bangladesh, all women with three or four children were married by age 18, compared with just 14 percent of those with no children. This pattern holds across countries in different regions.⁹⁹

Abandonment and divorce are also common among girls who are married very young, often plunging them further into poverty as they assume sole responsibility for dependent children.¹⁰⁰ A study in Ethiopia, where nearly half of all first marriages end in divorce, finds that early age at marriage has a significant impact on the risk of divorce.¹⁰¹ A considerable number of street children in Adama, Ethiopia have been abandoned by their husbands or have fled due to the traumatic experience of early marriage.¹⁰²

World Vision humanitarian workers in Mali and Tanzania also report that girls who marry very young tend to be unloved by their husbands and later divorced.¹⁰³ Domestic violence often plays a role in the marital breakdown that leads to divorce.

* Substitute name used

“Girls who are married very young tend to have poor management of their homes and families. As a result, they are often beaten by their husbands. Where these problems continue, girls may be divorced or separated” from their husbands, says World Vision Tanzania gender coordinator Rita Kahurananga.

Husbands may leave their young wives to find work elsewhere, seek additional wives or stop providing for children. An uneducated girl or woman is left with few options for supporting herself and her children, and may resort to selling sexual favors to survive.

ABANDONMENT

NIGER

Married at age 12, Amina* recently gave birth to a boy whose father had already abandoned the family. Living with her mother, who was abandoned three years ago by her own husband, Amina began suffering from chest pains that prevented her from sleeping and even eating. World Vision workers in her village in southern Niger learned of Amina’s condition and took her to a hospital where they and social services are following up with her and feeding milk to her newborn baby. There was no word from her husband.

» *In landlocked Niger, which has the second-highest rate of under-18 marriage in the world, humanitarian development workers are struggling against long-standing traditions and desperate poverty to turn the tide towards later marriage and childbearing. Promoting school enrollment for girls is high among priorities, although drop-out rates for girls ages 12 to 14 are still high due to marriage at those ages.*

*Across 32 villages in the Tillaberi district of southwestern Niger, on the banks of the Isa river, World Vision’s **Girl Rights Project** has worked for three years to promote rights and educate girls and women as well as sensitise boys and men to women’s needs and rights. This project includes a micro-credit component that enables women to build small businesses and increase their incomes, an important intervention in a zone where erratic weather has led to a shortfall in local rice and millet crops in nine of the last 10 years. The creation of opportunities for women is resulting in transformation in the local community. For example, in the 22 village clusters around Tera in southwestern Niger, some 355 women have received micro loans and taken up training in creating small enterprises.*

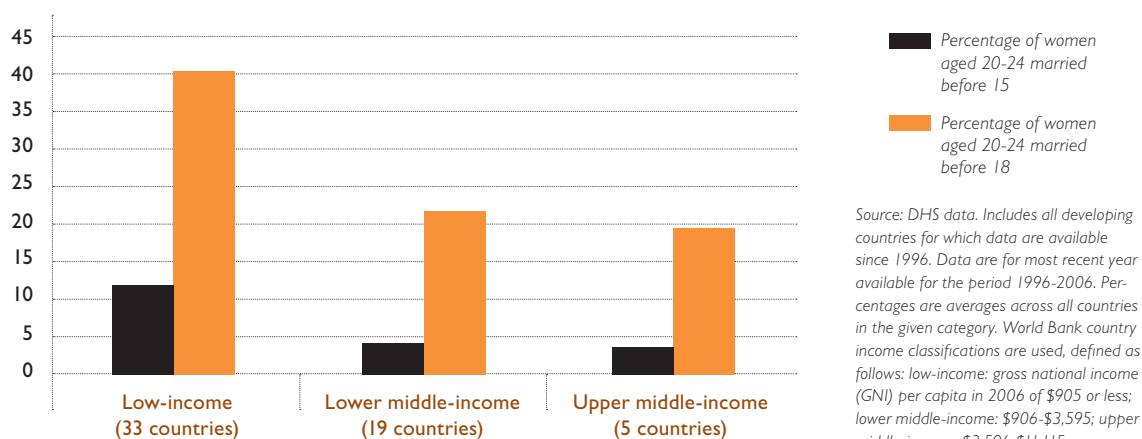
“Experience has shown that many girls who marry early end up divorcing or becoming prostitutes when they are older” because of abandonment, says Catherine Demba, national child protection coordinator for World Vision in Chad.

In some cases, divorced or abandoned girls face stigmatisation from their families and communities. “Girls who are left behind [after divorce or abandonment] are commonly subjected to verbal and physical abuse and neglect, or are otherwise mistreated by family and communities that perceive them as ‘dishonored,’” says World Vision Uganda gender and development advocacy specialist Doreen Komuhangi.¹⁰⁴

A girl’s burdens also increase when she loses her husband to death. In many cases, she is given away to another member of the husband’s family in a custom known as *levirate*.¹⁰⁵ The in-laws own the girl, her children and all her resources; in other words, she becomes a possession of her former husband’s family. In countries where legal systems fail to protect widows’ property rights, a woman who is out of favor with her in-laws may be kicked out of her home and find herself bereft of family or financial support. Child widows are especially powerless.

* Substitute name used

Percentage of women married as children by country income level



Cycles of abuse and neglect

Girls married as children are significantly more likely to experience domestic violence and abuse. A survey in India found that girls who married before 18 were twice as likely to report being beaten, slapped or threatened by their husbands than girls who married later and three times as likely to have been forced to have sex in the previous six months.¹⁰⁶ They are also significantly more likely to report never participating in decisions about their lives.¹⁰⁷

In Kenya, 36 percent of girls married before age 18 believe that a man is justified in beating his wife, compared to 20 percent of women married as adults.¹⁰⁸ In Guatemala, World Vision staff report that early marriage is most likely to lead to domestic violence when young girls feel that they are dependent on their spouses and must ask permission to engage in activities.¹⁰⁹



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Returning to their family home is rarely an option. Girls who run away to their parents' homes are often punished and sent back to their husbands, according to Sabine Woube of World Vision Chad.¹¹⁰

The ultimate result of early marriage is that children raise children, compromising the well-being of both generations. An impoverished young mother, inexperienced and untrained in child-rearing, is at high risk to have children who are malnourished and unhealthy.

Many girls married in their early teens run away after a decade of marriage and leave their children in their parents' homes, reports Gertrude Chanda, World Vision's head of advocacy in Zambia.¹¹¹

The practise of early marriage can perpetuate vicious cycles of poverty, abuse and neglect as the girl begins to relive the life her elders experienced. The damage of early childbearing, social isolation and violence are compounded by a society in which family members and neighbors are indifferent or powerless because they themselves endured the same.¹¹²

Responses and Conclusions

There is no single defensible cause for child marriage – legal, social or economic. Complex and interwoven factors promote the practise. Humanitarian workers say efforts to delay marriage and childbearing until adulthood work best when they tackle root causes in ways that are appropriate and acceptable to the local context.

National laws and international accords that establish rights for children and women are important instruments for their protection. Yet as evidence in dozens of countries shows, legal frameworks alone are not enough to quell harmful practises.

Raising awareness is key when targeting at-risk girls and their families. School and community workshops and educational performances by traveling theatre and music troupes help spread the message of the risks of early marriage among poor, isolated or uneducated populations.

Multiple examples also show that engaging and informing traditional leaders, such as tribal chiefs, can mobilise them to dissuade their communities from practising early marriage and to promote educating girls instead. Helping men realise the extent of the problem and tapping their sense of responsibility to promote change may take substantial time, but is essential, advocates say.

“Men need to be partners in ending this situation,” says Natalia Buratti, World Vision’s regional advocacy director for Latin America and the Caribbean. “Men need to know that the problems this practise creates impact not only women, but themselves. For example, having underdeveloped children from an unready mother also means big problems for fathers.”

Clergy and other faith leaders are also a vital group to reach, as they are counsellors and arbiters of moral opinion. One approach involving faith leaders, Channels of Hope, is a series of workshops that help clergy identify the cultural, religious and societal practises that increase HIV infection risk in their communities. Participants consistently cite early marriage as an issue that makes women and children more vulnerable.

“It is amazing to see how the penny drops for many of the religious leaders, who always saw HIV as a problem of individuals making immoral choices,” said Rev. Christo Greyling, World Vision’s global advisor for HIV/AIDS and faith-based partnerships. “During their participation, religious leaders take the responsibility on themselves to become advocates and work against practises they identified as increasing risk.”

Training in life skills for youth, particularly orphans and vulnerable children, lays the groundwork for healthy choices. Children’s clubs that encourage girls to articulate their concerns and engage in leadership and advocacy activities are proven conduits for change in places as diverse as Kenya’s rural Maasai communities and India’s inner cities.

Locally led networks that care for orphans and the vulnerable identify and train volunteer caregivers in strategies that protect children. World Vision has helped establish more than 3,500 such community care coalitions in 16 African countries to date. These groups have the potential to lead shifts in public

opinion on harmful practises. They also provide traction for local advocacy efforts that encourage community members to identify cases and guide them in lobbying authorities to promote the legal rights of children and women.

Opening doors to economic opportunities for families is also a proven strategy for helping people extricate themselves from desperate circumstances. For example, the microfinance institution VisionFund, in concert with humanitarian development programmes in many countries, offers small loans and job training to help women start or expand small businesses. In some cases, girls and parents credit this kind of economic assistance with obviating the “need” to sell a daughter into an unwanted marriage due to lack of money or resources.

LIFE-SKILLS

ZAMBIA

Susan* was forced into early marriage at the age of 14. At the time, she was in grade 3 at school. She has now been married for five years and borne three children, the last of whom died. Because of her lack of education, Susan’s income depended entirely on her husband, who wouldn’t tell her how much he earned.

Seeing her difficulties, neighbors selected Susan to attend a two-week training course where she learned skills such as jam-making, baking and drying foods. At the end of the workshop, she received a certificate and, with start-up capital provided by World Vision and a partner organisation, she started a pie-making business.

» *Financial assistance and training in job skills and household economics through micro-lending programmes incorporated into development work are helping alleviate the strain of extreme poverty in communities in many countries with high early marriage rates. **VisionFund International**, a World Vision-affiliated organisation, manages microfinance institutions that provide loans and training to nearly 500,000 clients in 47 countries. Most of these clients are women.*

This holistic approach helps the enterprising poor make sustainable improvements for their families and communities. As of June 2007, VisionFund International’s loan portfolio of US\$249 million was impacting the lives of an estimated 1.2 million children. With a client repayment rate of over 98 percent, micro loans are proving to be a sustainable, effective model for reducing poverty and creating lasting change. Over time, this improves the lives of women who have married early, and has in some cases diminished the perceived financial need to send daughters into marriage early.

*World Vision’s **Harmos Microenterprise Development Programme** is one of those in Zambia that aim to alleviate poverty by providing small loans and business training for poor entrepreneurs along with education on HIV and AIDS. In 2006 in Zamtan, Zambia, over 100 clients – 84 of them women – received loans from Harmos enabling them to start small businesses. Thirty jobs were also created as a result of the loans, and more than 700 children directly benefited through the increased income of their guardians who are now better able to meet their basic needs.*

* Substitute name used



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Similarly, temporary hunger relief and long-term agricultural programmes that help families provide for themselves and produce income give parents the option to keep their daughters at home longer without going hungry.

Food for Education projects, for example, have a three-fold effect of addressing hunger, ensuring education and discouraging early marriage. These programmes provide food incentives to children when they attend school. Girls have told World Vision staff that they are sent to school in order to collect food, and would otherwise be forced to drop out and marry or work.

World Vision programmes in many countries help provide access to education for girls and literacy training for women – cornerstones of women's development.

Training in HIV awareness and prevention, along with access to treatment, helps reduce the spread of infection and highlight the risks of early marriage and unsafe sexual practises. Facilitating access to maternal-infant health-care services, as well as training caregivers and midwives, diminishes risks associated with early pregnancy and can help promote wise family planning. Delaying pregnancy and assuring adequate pre-natal care go a long way in eliminating pregnancy-related deaths, complications and fistulae. For those already affected, ensuring access to public health and medical care can mend lives and restore futures.

Humanitarian staff working in high-prevalence countries agree: the struggle to turn the tide against child marriage is a long-term one. It involves partnering across sectors, with governments and local authorities and most of all within the communities where the practise persists.

“Alone, we can't do too much,” says Maimouna N'Diaye, a Mali-based World Vision advisor on transformational development for West Africa. “Transformational development in this system will require a lot of advocacy, child participation and empowerment and integrating activities with governments and other partners.”

By marrying after reaching adulthood and completing an education, girls secure vastly better chances of a full, healthy life for themselves, their children and the broader community. Recognising this is an essential step to sustainable development, as are healthy alternatives that meet legitimate material and moral needs.

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