

Helpdesk Research Report: Child Marriage

Date: 10.03.2010

Query: Please provide a short report on child marriage, focusing on:

1. Prevalence: including current data on the prevalence of child marriage by country and region.
2. Trends: including trends in age of first marriage, declining or increasing rates of child marriage and reasons for this.
3. Impact: including the impact of child marriage and how it affects other development issues.

Enquirer: Girl Hub, DFID

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1. Introduction

This short report summarises some of the main evidence presented in recent literature about the prevalence, trends and impact of child marriage (defined by UNICEF as customary or statutory union where one or both of the partners is under the age of 18). It is based on a 2-day survey of prominent (widely-cited) literature published by credible institutions. It does not constitute a comprehensive literature review. Rather, the report includes only a selection of the more rigorous studies conducted on child marriage; where possible studies which are based on empirical surveys undertaken over the last five years.

The report indicates that in spite of an overall slow increase in age of marriage around the World, there is nevertheless considerable evidence of the continued high prevalence of child marriage in some regions (South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa). It also suggests there is consensus among prominent international organisations that child marriage has significant negative impacts in terms of girl's rights, and health and education outcomes, and should therefore be a serious concern for development agencies.

2. Prevalence

- 2.1 Several studies acknowledge that accurate data on the true extent of child marriage is difficult to obtain, as many marriages go unregistered and girls ages may be falsified (IPPF, 2006:11). However, UNICEF estimates that globally, some 64 million young women (aged 20-24) were married before the age of 18. Household survey data

collected in 96 countries in the period 2001-2007 indicates that 'more than one third of young women 20–24 years old in developing countries reported that they were married or in union by age 18' (UNICEF 2009a:10).¹ See Table 1: 'Number of women 20–24 years old who were married or in union before age 18'.

- 2.2 Regionally, the proportion of child marriage is reported to be highest in South Asia (46 %) and sub-Saharan Africa (39%). More than half of all the world's women aged 20–24 years who were married or in union by age 18 live in South Asia. Central and West Africa has the highest prevalence rates in sub-Saharan Africa (43%) (UNICEF, 2009a:10). See Table 2: 'Percentage of women 20-24 years old married before age 18 by region'; and Table 3: 'Global map of women married before age 18'.
- 2.3 Among the countries with available data, the reported rate of child marriage is highest in the Central African Republic, Guinea, Bangladesh, Mali, Chad and Niger. In each of these countries, more than 60% of women aged 20–24 years were married as children (UNICEF 2009a:10). See Table 4. 'Top 20 'hotspot' countries for child marriage'.
- 2.4 There is some evidence that child marriage is most common among the poorest households. A 2005 UNICEF study of women aged 20 to 24 in 49 countries found that child marriage was most common among the poorest 20% of households in every country. A girl from the poorest household in Senegal, for example, is more than four times as likely to marry before age 18 as a girl in the richest household (UNICEF 2005:6). On the other hand, in countries where the practice of child marriage is virtually universal, it is almost as common among wealthier families as it is in poorer families. In Chad and the Central African Republic, for example, less difference is observed between the richest 20 per cent (76 per cent in Chad, 55 per cent in the Central African Republic) and the poorest 20 per cent (66 per cent and 52 per cent, respectively) (UNICEF, 2005:6).
- 2.5 The prevalence of child marriage varies starkly within regions and countries. In Africa, for example, countries with very high rates of early marriage, such as Niger (77 %), Chad (71%), and Mali (65%), exist alongside others with relatively low rates, such as Togo (31%) and South Africa (8%). Similarly, in South Asia the rate is very high in Bangladesh (65%), moderately high in India (48%), and very low in Sri Lanka (14%) (Levine et.al. 2009:46). In Ethiopia, most child marriages occur in the North, where the proportion of young women married by age 18 (around 75%) exceeds the national rate (49%). In India, where national prevalence is nearly 50%, five states have a much higher prevalence of child marriage; in Madhya Pradesh, for example, 73% of young women are married by age 18 (Levine et.al. 2009:46). Statistics also reveal sectors or areas of countries – such as ethnic, religious or socio-economic groups – where a large majority of adolescent girls are married before their fifteenth birthday (IPPF, 2006:10). Table 5 shows marriage 'hotspots' within selected countries in West Africa, South Asia and Latin America.
- 2.6 There is some consensus in the literature that rural residents are more likely to be married before 18 than urban residents (UNICEF, 2005:5). One study, which analysed Demographic and Health Survey (DHS) data from 59 countries collected between 1990 and 2002, concluded that with only few exceptions, teenage fertility is higher in rural than in urban areas, and that the reasons for this include later age at marriage and higher levels of education in cities. It also found that in all but a few countries, the median age at marriage in urban areas exceeds that in rural areas by an average of about 1.5 years (Westoff, 2003:24). The International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF) argues this is because rural households tend to have more entrenched

¹ Based on 96 countries, representing 61% of the world's population. Data from Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS), Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys (MICS) and other national household surveys, undertaken 2001-2007.

traditional attitudes and customs, are less affected by external influences, and can provide fewer livelihood options for young women (IPPF, 2006:10).

- 2.7 Child marriage is more likely to affect girls, but in India and Nepal, the rate of child marriage involving boys is 10 per cent or higher (UNICEF, 2009a:26). A 2007 study by the International Centre for Research on Women (ICRW) argues that the 'tipping point' age—the age at which child marriage prevalence in a country starts to increase markedly – is usually 13 or 14 (ICRW, 2007:2). Recent qualitative studies by the Population Council and IPPF in Bangladesh, Ethiopia, and Maharashtra State, India, show that girls in some areas are married very young, well below age 15 (Levine et.al, 2009:65). Children in India, Nepal and Pakistan may be betrothed or even married well before they are 10 years old (UNICEF, 2009a:26).
- 2.8 It is generally found that child marriage is concentrated among groups and societies characterized by poverty, illiteracy, and rural residence (Levine et.al.2009:63; IPPF, 2006; UNFPA, 2006). A 2007 study by the ICRW, which identifies household, individual and community characteristics that are associated with age at marriage, finds that education of girls, age gap, region, and wealth are strongly correlated with child marriage. It concluded that girls' education is the most important factor associated with age at marriage.
- 2.9 Many other reports argue the association between child marriage and low levels of schooling is consistently strong across all regions of the developing world. Many observe that child marriage often correlates with low levels of education, or no education (Westoff, 2003; UNICEF, 2009; IPPF, 2006). One widely-cited study finds that women with three or fewer years of schooling are significantly more likely to have married early than are those with eight or more years of schooling (Mensch, 2005). UNICEF data from 2005 indicates that in 47 countries, girls aged 15–19 who have higher levels of education are least likely to be in any marriage union. Only in a small number of countries are girls with secondary education equally likely to be married (IPPF, 2006:10). In Senegal, for instance, 20% of women with a primary school education married before 18, compared to 36% without a primary school education. In Tanzania, women who attended secondary school are 92% less likely to be married before age 18 than women who attended only primary school (UNICEF 2005, cited in ICRW, 2007:10).

3. Trends

- 3.1 There is some evidence that child marriage is declining in many parts of the world, although these trends are often seen as modest. A study of Demographic and Health Survey (DHS) data from 59 countries between 1990 and 2002 found that age at first marriage was increasing in most sub-Saharan countries, and in Southern and Southeastern Asia and Northern Africa. It found that in general, the trend toward later marriage has occurred in both rural and urban areas and, in many countries, even among women with no formal schooling. However, the trend toward later marriage has been restricted to women - there is little evidence of accompanying increases in men's age at marriage. Slightly more than half of the sub-Saharan African countries reviewed also showed an increase in the age at first birth. The study concluded that exposure to mass media, particularly television, was playing a role in influencing the trend toward later marriage (Westoff, 2003:47).
- 3.2 A more recent empirical study (Jones, 2010) also found that the age of marriage has risen substantially in East and Southeast Asia, where arranged marriage systems have broken down. Nevertheless, child marriage has proven extremely durable in South Asia. Here, the age of marriage has also risen (to a lesser extent), although the

proportion remains high in Bangladesh, Afghanistan, and parts of India and Nepal. The study stresses that early marriage remains prevalent even in countries that have seen some decline. In Bangladesh, for example, a 2007 Demographic and Health survey showed that in spite of a steady decline in the number of women married before 18, nearly two thirds of all women are still married before the legal age of 18. Here, the proportion of marriages before 15 has fallen more sharply – from 6% among women aged 45-49, to 21% among women aged 15-19. The study concludes that attempts to legislate the age of marriage have had little effect, and that consensus about age of marriage needs to be developed at the community-level, rather than imposed from above (Jones, 2010:14).

- 3.3 UNICEF stress that in spite of the observed overall decline of child marriage, the pace of change is slow, and the total number of girls at risk or affected is very significant and cannot be ignored (UNICEF, 2009). Recent UNICEF data indicates that in 34 of the 55 countries with comparable data, there has been no significant change in the percentage of women aged 20–24 married by 18, and only 5 countries experienced a decrease of more than 10 per cent (UNICEF, 2007b:47). Other reports similarly stress that even in areas that have seen a decline, there are regions and/or sub regions where high rates of child marriage are resistant to change (Levine et. al. 2009:63).
- 3.4 In some countries where child marriage has been commonplace, girls are now getting married at a later age (UNICEF, 2009a:11). In Bangladesh, Guinea and Nepal, for example, the median age at first marriage has increased, although it remains below 18 (UNICEF, 2009a:21). In sub-Saharan Africa, 21 countries (of 30 countries studies) have seen an increase in the national age at marriage over the past several decades (Westoff, 2003). This trend is largely attributed to the increase of girls' educational attainment and the increased participation of women in the labor force. The ICRW stress, however, that this increase in the age at marriage is occurring slowly and unevenly within countries, and many girls are missed by this trend (ICRW, 2007:6).
- 3.5 Several studies have identified variables affecting child marriage. The most frequently cited underlying factors which can perpetuate early marriage include traditional gender norms, the high value placed upon female virginity, parental concerns surrounding premarital sex and pregnancy, dowry pressures, the perception that marriage provides protection from HIV and other sexually transmitted infections, and the desire to secure social, economic, or political alliances (Population council, 2008:1). UNICEF has argued that other factors that influence child marriage rates include: the state of the country's civil registration system (which provides proof of age for children); the existence of an adequate legislative framework with an accompanying enforcement mechanism to address cases of child marriage; and the existence of customary or religious laws that condone the practice (UNICEF, 2005: 16). In some contexts, particularly where women have low status, child marriage is an effective way to reduce household poverty and relieve the financial burden girls place on their family of origin (UNICEF, 2009a:26).
- 3.6 There is little empirical research available on factors influencing trends in the age of marriage. A widely-cited 2005 study by the Population Council concluded that the expansion of schooling for women has had some impact, but a considerable portion of the decline in early marriage is not explained by changes in levels of education. Other factors, including the decline in arranged marriages, the deficit of available older men with increasing cohort size and the concomitant rise in the cost of dowries (in South Asia), changes in the legal age at marriage, and a transformation in global norms about the desirability of early marriage for women, were also important (Mensch et.al, 2005:29). A more recent study argues that the declining prevalence of child marriage in middle-income countries (North Africa, and East and South East Asia) has been influenced by economic growth in those countries, which has expanded opportunities

for female employment within low-paid industries. This, it argues, resulted in the erosion of many prejudices against female education and undermined the desire for child marriages, as girls instead become valued for their ability to earn income for their parents. An example is Bangladesh, where poor families who delayed their daughter's marriage or first birth made their decisions primarily based on aspirations for female employment (IFFP, 2006: 21).

- 3.7 A recent report by the IFFP argues that situations of insecurity and acute poverty, particularly disasters such as war, famine or the HIV and AIDS epidemic, can prompt parents or carers to resort to child marriage as a protective mechanism or survival strategy. It suggests that rates of child marriage tend to increase in conflict-affected populations, as parents in distress seek to secure girls' sexual protection or to increase economic survival through marriage (IPPF, 2006:10). The report also suggests that in some parts of sub-Saharan Africa, the HIV and AIDS epidemic has led to an increase in child marriages (IFFP, 2006:20).

4. Impact

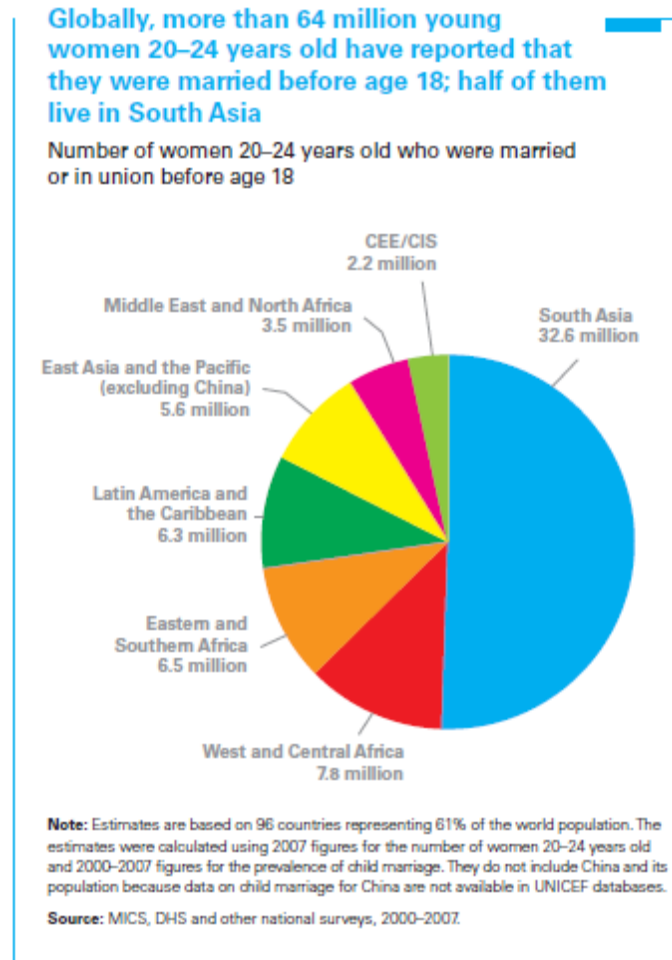
- 4.1 There is considerable evidence of the negative consequences of child marriage on girls, their children and their communities. Many argue that child marriage is not only a violation of human rights, but has serious consequences for national development, stunting educational and vocational opportunities for a large sector of the population (ICRW, 2007; Raj et al. 2009; UNICEF, 2009). Extensive data show that adolescent women are more likely than those marrying in adulthood to remain poor, uneducated, and within rural communities, and to have low access to health care (Raj et.al. 2010). IPPF argue child marriage should be seen as a public health concern (IPPF, 2006:11). UNICEF reports emphasize that child marriage leads to the removal of girls from school, prevents gender equality (MDGs 2 and 3), leads to early pregnancy which carries considerable health risks for girls (MDG 5) and their babies (MDG 4) (UNICEF 2009a:6). Table 7 provides a summary of the impact of child marriage on the MDG's.
- 4.2 Several studies indicate that child marriage makes young wives extremely vulnerable to physical, sexual, psychological and economic abuse (Levine et.al 2009; UNICEF 2005, ICRW, 2007; IPPF, 2006). Much of the literature acknowledges the disempowering affects of marriage for young girls – that is, girls who are married young often lack status and power within their marriages and households, and so are more likely to experience domestic violence, sexual abuse, and isolation from family and community (UNICEF, 2005). Because early marriage limits young married girls' skills, resources, knowledge, social support, mobility, and autonomy, they often have little power in relation to their husband or their husband's family (Levine et.al.2009:65). For example, girls who married before age 18 consistently report being less able to talk to their husbands about when to use contraception, when to have children, and how many children to have (MacQuarrie and Das Gupta 2005, cited in Levine et.al, 2009:49). UNICEF has also expressed concern that the burden of domestic work and childcare severely constrains the life choices available to married girls and child mothers. This, in turn, affects the power that women have over household decisions (UNICEF, 2007a:22).
- 4.3 There is some empirical evidence that child marriage is associated with increased risk of girl's experiencing domestic violence and sexual abuse. An ICRW survey in the states of Bihar and Jharkhand, India, in 2004, found that girls who were married before 18 were twice as likely to report being beaten, slapped or threatened by their husbands than girls who married later. They were also three times as likely to report being forced to have sex without their consent in the previous six months (ICRW, 2007:8).

- 4.4 Some studies have shown a strong association between child marriage and early childbirth. A study of child marriage and fertility in India, published in 2009 (using data from National Family Health Surveys 2005–06), found that child marriage was significantly associated with no contraceptive use before first childbirth, high fertility (three or more births), a repeat childbirth in less than 24 months, multiple unwanted pregnancies, pregnancy termination, and female sterilisation (Raj et.al, 2009:1883). In West and Central Africa, the four countries reporting the highest rate of child marriage – Niger (75 per cent), Chad (72 per cent), Mali (71 per cent) and Guinea (63 per cent) – also have the highest fertility rates, and at least 44 per cent of women 20–24 years old had given birth before age 18 (UNICEF 2009a:23). ICRW attribute the correlation between child marriage and early childbirth to girls being pressured to prove their fertility soon after marrying, and because they have little access to information on reproductive health, or ability to influence decision making on family planning (ICRW, 2007:7). Similarly, the India study cited above concludes that improved family-planning education, access, and support are urgently needed for women married as children, their husbands, and their families to reduce the high fertility and poor fertility-control outcomes of child marriage (Raj et.al, 2009:1883).
- 4.5 There is evidence that girls having children at a young age creates significant health risks for both mother and baby (UNICEF 2009a:11). Early pregnancies have been linked to increased risk of maternal and infant morbidity and mortality. UNICEF report that girls under 15 are five times more likely to die during pregnancy and childbirth than women in their twenties (UNICEF, 2007a:4). Adolescent mothers are also more likely to experience fistula, pregnancy complications, and death during childbirth than are older mothers. In 2004, Save the Children reported that girls aged 15-19 are twice as likely as older women to die from childbirth and pregnancy, making pregnancy the leading cause of death in poor countries for this age group (Save the Children 2004, cited in ICRW, 2007:7). A study in Niger indicated that pregnant young women from poorer communities are eight times less likely to deliver with the assistance of a skilled birth attendant than young women from the wealthiest quintile of their community (IPPF, 2006:17).
- 4.6 The infants of adolescent mothers also face increased health risks. UNICEF report that if a mother is under 18, her baby's chance of dying in the first year of life is 60 per cent greater than that of a baby born to a mother older than 19. Even if the child survives, he or she is more likely to suffer from low birth weight, under-nutrition and late physical and cognitive development (UNICEF, 2007a:4). A recent study of children of adolescent mothers in Bangladesh found that they are likely to be more malnourished, have lesser opportunities for DPT immunization and have longer duration of hospitalization. They were also more likely to be illiterate (Abdullah et al., 2007).
- 4.7 There is increasing concern, and growing evidence of the links between child marriage and the risk of girls contracting HIV. Whereas there has been a general belief that marriage protects girls from HIV infection, recent evidence has shown the contrary – that in fact married girls may be more vulnerable to contracting HIV, particularly in generalized epidemics. A widely-cited study conducted in Kenya and Zambia (Clark 2004) found that 15- to 19-year-old married girls were 75% more likely to have HIV than sexually active, unmarried girls. A later study by the same author found similar results in 29 countries in Africa and Latin America. It concluded that married girls may be more vulnerable to HIV infection because early marriage increases coital frequency, decreases condom use, and virtually eliminates girls' ability to abstain from sex (Clark, 2006). In addition, married adolescents have relatively little access to educational and media sources of information about HIV. Table 6 shows child marriage hotspots in Africa, together with national HIV prevalence rates among girls married at different ages (IPPF, 2006:12).

- 4.8 There is considerable evidence that child marriage negatively impacts on education outcomes for married girls. The UNESCO Global Education Monitoring Report acknowledges that marriage is a barrier to education (UNESCO, 2010). There is widespread consensus in the literature that child marriage, pregnancy and domestic chores constitute severe obstacles to girls' education. Many argue that after marriage, young girls' access to formal and even non-formal education is severely limited because of domestic burdens, childbearing and social norms that view marriage and schooling as incompatible (ICRW, 2005:3; IFFP: 2006: 14; Levine et.al. 2009: 34). In the Amhara region of Ethiopia, for example, nearly one in every three girls who were not in school said that the primary reason was marriage (Erulkar and others 2004, cited in Levie et.al, 2008:34). Some argue the children of young, uneducated mothers are also less likely to attain high levels of education, perpetuating cycles of low literacy and limited livelihood opportunities, although there is less empirical evidence of this.
- 4.9 Leaving school early is often cited as one of the most negative consequences of early marriage. There is some evidence of links between girl marriage and school drop-out, although the exact relationship between child marriage and school drop out is contested in the literature. In the Acholi region of Northern Uganda, one study showed that early marriage or pregnancy accounted for almost 10% of school dropout rate (UNESCO, 2010:147). Other recent studies have concluded that being pulled out of school is less likely to be a consequence of early marriage, and that more often the same underlying conditions that drive the marriage timing decision (poverty, low status, and cultural norms) are responsible for the disinvestments in girls that limit their education (Mensch, 2005). A recent study in francophone Africa found that child marriage explains no more than 20 per cent of school dropouts, and that the risks of leaving school during adolescence for reasons other than childbirth or marriage far exceed the risks associated with early marriage. It also found that 'schoolgirl pregnancy' typically accounted for only between 5 and 10 per cent of girls' departures from school. Furthermore, the risks of leaving school because of pregnancy or marriage have declined over time with the decline in rates of early marriage and childbearing (Lloyd, 2008:12).

5. Tables

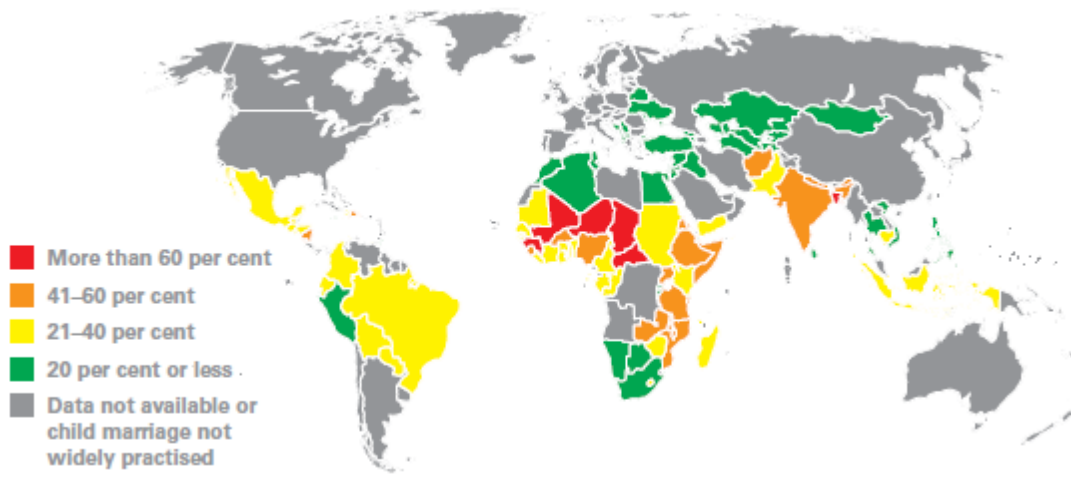
Table 1. Number of women 20–24 years old who were married or in union before age 18



Source: UNICEF, 2009a:10

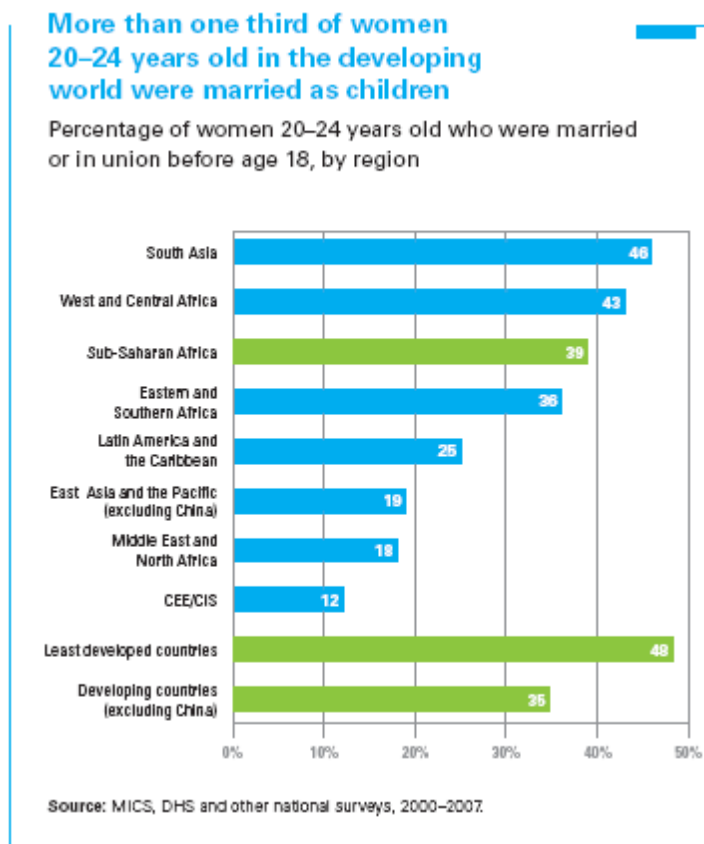
Table 2. Global map of women married before age 18

Percentage of women aged 20–24 who were married or in union before age 18 (1987–2006)



Source: UNICEF, 2007b:45
Data source: UNICEF global databases, 2007, based on MICS, DHS and other national surveys, 1987-2006

Table 3. Percentage of women 20-24 years old married before age 18 by region



Source: UNICEF, 2009a:10

Table 4. Regional 'hotspots' of child marriage

TABLE 1 Percentage of women aged 20-24 who were married by age 15 and age 18, by geographical area

Area	Married by 15	Married by 18	Median age at marriage
Rajshahi, Bangladesh	52	86	14
Amhara, Ethiopia	48	74	14
Bihar, India	24	68	16
Kayes, Mali	39	83	15
Jinotega, Nicaragua	19	52	16
Northwestern Nigeria	40	79	15

Source: Demographic and Health Surveys, 1998-2006.

Source: Population Council 2008:1

Table 5. Top 20 'hotspot' countries for child marriage

Rank	Country	% Women Married < 18
1	Niger (1998)	76.6
2	Chad (2004)	71.5
3	Bangladesh (2004)	68.7
4	Mali (2001)	65.4
5	Guinea (1999)	64.5
6	CAR (1994/95)	57.0
7	Nepal (2001)	56.1
8	Mozambique (2003)	55.9
9	Uganda (2000/01)	54.1
10	Burkina Faso (2003)	51.9
11	India (1998/99)	50.0
12	Ethiopia (2000)	49.1
13	Liberia (1986)	48.4
13	Yemen (1997)	48.4
15	Cameroon (2004)	47.2
16	Eritrea (2002)	47.0
17	Malawi (2000)	46.9
18	Nicaragua (2001)	43.3
18	Nigeria (2003)	43.3
20	Zambia (2001/02)	42.1

Source: ICRW analysis using MEASURE DHS STATcompiler. From <http://www.measuredhs.com>.
Jan. 20, 2006.

Source: ICRW, 2007:14

Table 6. Child Marriage and HIV Prevalence rates

Table 2: Percentage of young women aged 15–24 married by age 15, married by age 18, and infected with HIV, by country and regional hotspot

Country (regional hotspot)	Per cent married by age 15		Per cent married by age 18		Nationwide HIV prevalence rate in young women aged 15–24
	Nationwide	Regional hotspot	Nationwide	Regional hotspot	
Ethiopia (Amhara)	19	50	49	80	10.0
Mozambique (Nampula)	22	53	57	82	18.8
Nigeria (Northwest)	19	41	43	79	7.0
Tanzania (Shinyinga)	6	14	39	59	9.7
Uganda (Eastern)	15	21	54	63	5.6
Zambia (Luapula)	9	16	44	55	25.2

Source: Population Council (2005) cited from Demographic and Health Surveys and UNAIDS

Source: IPPF, 2006:12

Table 7. Impact of child marriage on the MDGs

Child marriage impedes the Millennium Development Goals³⁰

Ending child marriage will have a direct effect on realizing six of the MDGs, the key development priorities until 2015, agreed by governments and the international community in September 2000.

Goal 1: Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger. Child mothers often have limited skills, education and access to the economic assets and decision making powers necessary to properly nourish their offspring, and are therefore likely to perpetuate the cycle of poverty.

Goal 2: Achieve universal primary education. Access to universal education is a right which many girls forced into child marriage are denied. Their limited education reduces their chances of acquiring related skills and economic opportunities. Globally, there is a strong link between child marriage and low levels of education or non-education.

Goal 3: Promote gender equality and empower women. Eliminating gender inequalities and empowering young women requires access to basic capabilities such as education, health and nutrition, as well as critical social and economic resources and opportunities within an enabling environment. Child marriage disadvantages women and girls and entrenches gender inequalities.

Goal 4: Reduce child mortality. Children of child mothers are more likely to be premature and have low birth weight. Additionally, because child brides are more vulnerable to HIV, there is an increased risk that they will pass their infection to their babies. Delaying child marriage will ultimately reduce child mortality figures.

Goal 5: Improve maternal health. Maternal mortality remains a major problem for many countries in Africa which have high levels of child marriages. Child mothers have double the chance of dying during or after childbirth, and suffer more from maternal morbidities such as debilitating obstetric fistula.

Goal 6: Combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases. Marriage is a risk factor in the spread of HIV and other STIs. Child brides who marry older and more sexually experienced men have a heightened risk of contracting HIV. Reducing levels of child marriage should be an essential strategy in attaining targets for reducing the rate of HIV infection among young people aged 15–24.

Source: IPPF, 2006:15

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Authors and contributors

Author

This query response was prepared by **Claire Mcloughlin**: claire@gsdrc.org

Contributors

Sarah O'Connor (GSDRC)

Websites visited

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