



CHILD MARRIAGE



She has a **right** to her adolescence.

Nujood Ali was 10 years old when she was married. Just hours after her wedding, Nujood's 30-year-old husband raped her, defying his promise to her father that he would not touch Nujood until she began menstruating. After weeks of physical and sexual abuse, Nujood was finally able to visit her family. With the help of an aunt, Nujood fled her husband and ran away to the courthouse to find a judge who would grant her a divorce. She luckily found a judge willing to help her and, at age 10, Nujood became the youngest girl in Yemen to be granted a divorce.

But millions of girls are not as lucky as Nujood. Millions of young girls are prisoners of child marriages, separated from their family and friends, unable to attend school, and subject to rape and abuse.

The plight of child brides cannot go unnoticed.

What you should know about child marriage.

Each day, more than 25,000 young girls become child brides, joining almost 60 million girls who have married before their eighteenth birthday.¹ Within the next ten years, over 100 million girls in the developing world are predicted to be married before they reach adulthood.² The practice of child marriage is essentially confined to the poorest 20 percent of the world population, most commonly in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia.³ For many, including Nujood's father, child marriage is seen as a way to protect young girls, ensuring they have a man to care for them. Unfortunately, early marriage does not protect girls, but leaves them physically and socially vulnerable to illness, poverty, and gender inequality. Child brides, like Nujood, are at a heightened risk of sexual and physical abuse, reproductive health complications, HIV/AIDS infection, and other adverse physiological and social outcomes.⁴ Young brides are also forced to forego education, employment opportunities, and their general adolescence, ultimately perpetuating gender inequality and the cycle of poverty. Without political attention and global action, this practice will continue to endanger the health and wellbeing of millions of children each year.

Child marriage endangers the physical and reproductive health of young girls.

Because of physiological vulnerabilities, girls aged 10-14 are five times more likely to die in childbirth than women aged 20-24.⁶ In developing countries, complications during pregnancy or childbearing has become the leading cause of death for girls aged 15-19.⁷ Contrary to the belief that marriage protects individuals from HIV/AIDS, rates of infection are higher among child and adolescent brides, because of spousal age gaps, unprotected sex, and the transition from no sexual exposure to frequent intercourse.⁴

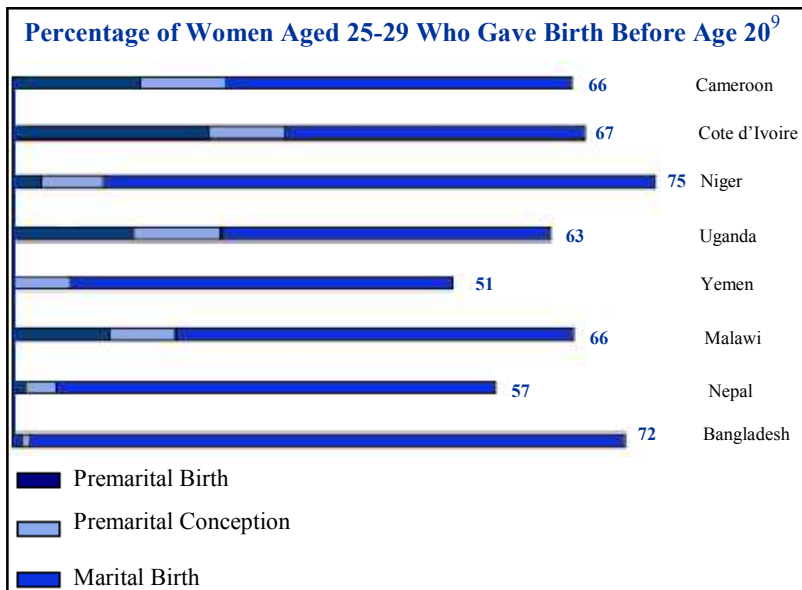
Child marriage contributes to high fertility and exacerbates the problem of rapid population growth.

Child brides are young and under pressure to prove their fertility, making them more likely to have early and frequent pregnancies. In many nations, adolescents (15-19) account for almost 20% of all births, amounting to 14 million births each year.⁸ In Bangladesh, 100% of women aged 20-24 with at least five children had been married before they were 18.³ Such high fertility rates among child brides are largely due to a lack of access to family planning and contraceptive methods. In many areas, child brides encounter substantial resistance when seeking family planning services.⁹ Consequently, adolescents account for at least 25% of the estimated 20 million unsafe abortions and nearly 70,000 abortion-related deaths each year.¹⁰

Spousal Age Differences: Columbia, Egypt, and Turkey⁹

	Women aged 20-29 married before age 20 (%)			Women aged 20-29 married b/w ages 20-29		
	Columbia	Egypt	Turkey	Columbia	Egypt	Turkey
Husband younger than wife	5.7	0.8	3.1	21.9	7.1	16.5
Husband same age as wife	5.3	1.4	4.2	12.6	7.1	12.5
Husband 1-5 years older	45.9	33.2	47.9	38.4	42.8	54.5
Husband 6-10 years older	25.5	40.3	37.7	16.6	30.7	11.3
Husband 10+ years older	17.6	24.4	7.1	10.4	12.4	5.2

Nujood is not alone. Millions of child brides are married to men twice or three times their age. In Egypt, for instance, over a quarter of child brides are married to men more than ten years older. Large spousal age differences suggest that young brides are often unable to negotiate with husbands about sex, contraception, and birth spacing.



Early childbearing is common in developing nations, especially among women who are married young. Delaying the age of marriage may be effective in delaying the age of first birth, helping to reduce fertility and population growth.

Child marriage is a human rights violation.

Child marriage is a violation of Article 16 of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* that states, "Marriage shall be entered into only with free and full consent of intending spouses".¹¹ As is the case of child marriage, when one of the parties is not sufficiently mature enough to make an independent and informed decision, consent is neither free nor full. Child marriage is also in violation of the *Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989)* and the *UN Committee on the Convention of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (1994)*. The basic human rights of these young girls must be respected.

"When a girl becomes a mother before she becomes literate, when a woman gives birth alone and is left with a permanent disability, when a mother toils daily to feed her large family but cannot convince her husband to agree to contraception, these struggles represent suffering that can and should be avoided. They represent potential that goes unfulfilled."

~ Secretary of State Hillary Clinton

References

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Strategies and proposed legislation to combat child marriage.

Policy

In 2009 the House of Representatives passed the Foreign Relations Authorization Act (H.R. 2410), which contained a provision based on H.R. 2103, the International Protecting Girls by Preventing Child Marriage Act of 2009, as introduced earlier by Rep. Betty McCollum (D-MN4). The provision calls upon the President, Congress, and relevant federal departments and agencies to devise a strategy for preventing child marriage and promoting the education, health status, and economic and social wellbeing of young girls. H.R. 2410 has been referred to the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations as SB 987. On September 21, 2010 it unanimously passed the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations.

In recent years several governments in North Africa and the Middle East have enacted laws that raise the legal age of marriage, but the practice of child marriage still persists in many of these countries, particularly in remote rural areas.¹²

Program Strategies

Strategies to combat child marriage should be culturally relevant and support the economic and social wellbeing of young girls. Such support includes promoting education of women beyond primary school, supporting community-based efforts to address local attitudes, customs, and beliefs through education and advocacy, and improving young women's sexual education and access to family planning services.