



growing up GLOBAL

YOUTH AND MARRIAGE: TRENDS AND CHALLENGES

Marriage patterns are changing throughout much of the developing world. Young men and women are waiting until they are older to marry, they are marrying someone closer to their own age, and they have more say about whom they marry. However long they wait, almost everyone marries or enters into a marriage-like relationship. For many, the transition into marriage is a key component of the transition to adulthood. However, such is not the case for a still-significant number of young women who enter unions before age 18.

While in Decline, Child Marriage Is Still Widespread

Women are less likely to be married as teenagers than in the past; however, child marriage, defined as marriage prior to age 18, persists. Nearly 40 percent of women in countries representing 60 percent of the population of the developing world marry before age 18. The proportion ranges from around 40 percent to 50 percent in South-Central and Southeast Asia; approximately 35 percent in the Caribbean and Central America; about 20 percent to 25 percent in South America and the Middle East; and about 15 percent in former Soviet Asia.

Percentage of Women Ages 20-24 Ever Married by Age 18, by Years of Schooling and Region^a (Weighted Averages)

Region	Population Represented	Years of Schooling		
		0-3	4-7	8+
Eastern/Southern Africa	91.7	51.2	38.6	12.6
Western/Middle Africa ^b	75.2	70.5	36.8	14.1
South-Central/South East Asia ^c	28.0	55.7	44.0	17.3
Caribbean/Central America	21.0	55.5	43.9	14.7
South America	74.1	41.7	30.3	10.8
Western Asia/Northern Africa ^d	49.6	38.9	25.6	6.4
Total—All DHS	34.4	53.2	37.6	13.5

^a Former Soviet Asia excluded because too few women with less than 8+ years of schooling.

^b Gabon excluded; data on women unavailable at time of this analysis.

^c India and Pakistan excluded; lack the all women weight.

^d Yemen excluded; lacks the all women weight.

Sources: Demographic and Health Surveys tabulations from 44 countries, 1990-2001.

Early Marriage Entails Significant Costs

The costs of early marriage are primarily associated with early childbearing. When young women who are not fully developed physiologically give birth early, the health of both mother and infant may suffer. Early marriage is also associated with leaving school, sometimes permanently curtailing a young person's education.

Maternal deaths and ill health are among the most serious threats to young women in developing countries. Most studies show that the risk of dying of maternal causes is higher among women below age 20 than among women in their 20s and 30s. Young women are more likely to experience preterm labor, obstructed labor, and other complications such as obstetric fistula.

Infants born to young women are more likely to experience difficulties. For example, a study in Mali and Burkina Faso revealed that pregnancies to women under age 18 were associated with lower birthweight and greater mortality, especially during the second year of life.

Young People Are Marrying Later

Today, most young people are marrying later compared with earlier generations. Among women, 27 percent of 15- to 19-year-old women in the developing world were married in 1970-1989, compared with 21 percent in 1990-2000. The reduction in the share of married 15- to 19-year-olds is particularly striking in Africa. In Western/Middle Africa, the percentage dropped from 53 percent to 38 percent. In some regions, most notably the Middle East, a large share of men now postpone marriage until their 30s.

Factors Associated With Later Marriage

The decline in early marriage is quite widespread, lending support to the notion that global changes are having widespread effects on personal behavior. Not only is the

Key findings taken from: National Research Council and Institute of Medicine (2005). *Growing Up Global: The Changing Transitions to Adulthood in Developing Countries*. Panel on Transitions to Adulthood in Developing Countries. Cynthia B. Lloyd, ed. Committee on Population and Board on Children, Youth, and Families. Division of Behavioral and Social Sciences and Education. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press. Copyright 2005 by the National Academy of Sciences. All rights reserved.

reduction in early marriage occurring in many settings, it is also occurring, in some regions, over a relatively wide age span. This suggests that policy shifts, such as increases in the legal age at marriage; social shifts, such as the expansion of education; or ideological shifts, such as a change in norms regarding very early marriage, all contribute to the changes observed.

The legal age of marriage for both men and women has risen in many countries over the last decade. Between 1990 and 2000, the legal age of marriage for women increased in at least 23 of 55 countries where data were available. For men, the legal age rose in 20 of the countries.

Large differentials by education, household wealth, and residence exist in the percentage of men and women who marry at young ages. Women and men with eight or more years of schooling, who live in urban areas, and are in the top wealth category, are much less likely to marry early than their less well-educated, rural, and poorer counterparts (see table, page 1). The time between leaving school and marrying has gotten longer.

Policy Recommendations

Given the positive trends with regard to youth and marriage, factors associated with later marriage, and the continued challenges to reduce child marriage, a panel of international experts convened by the National Research Council has made the following policy recommendations. These recommendations are based on the data gathered by the panel, highlighted in this fact sheet.

- Governments should pass legislation prohibiting marriage before age 18.
- Where a substantial percentage of women marry before the legal age at marriage, governments should make an effort to educate parents and their daughters about the existing law.
- Legislative bodies should establish and courts should enforce laws that grant men and women “the same right freely to choose a spouse and to enter marriage only with their free and full consent,” as specified in the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). For women especially, this right is often not available.
- Governments must address the issue of excessive dowry and bridewealth payments, which tend to persuade families to marry their daughters off too early and lead men to delay marriage beyond an age considered desirable. Public relations campaigns to reduce financial transactions at marriage may help to dissuade families from marrying their daughters off too early and to enable men not to put off marrying. Such efforts would benefit by reducing large age gaps between spouses.
- In countries where substantial percentages of girls marry before age 18, the panel encourages policies and programs promoting later age at marriage and evaluations to determine if these interventions are effective.

Call to Action*

In order to achieve a world where young people can live healthy, productive, and fulfilling lives, governments, civil society, and young people themselves must promote policies and programs that support young people’s right to delay marriage, remain in school, and select a marriage partner without coercion.

Governments Should:

- Include young people on local, state, national, and international decisionmaking bodies that directly affect policies and programs regarding marriage practices and access to education.
- Pass legislation and commit funds to reduce child marriage and other potentially harmful marriage practices, and improve access to education for youth.

Civil Society Should:

- Demand laws and funding to protect youth from early marriage, discourage other potentially harmful marriage practices, and increase access to education.
- Sponsor young people as members of decisionmaking bodies affecting young people’s reproductive and sexual health.
- Involve young people in developing and implementing programs designed to improve youth reproductive and sexual health.

Young People Should:

- Speak out for their right to remain in school, delay marriage, and choose their partner.
- Lobby governments to pass legislation and allocate funds to reduce child marriage, discourage other potentially harmful marriage practices, and increase access to education.
- Monitor and voice any problems with implementation of national marriage policies as well as relevant commitments made in international agreements such as CEDAW.

*Developed by Advocates for Youth, the Call to Action is based on the data and policy recommendations included in *Growing Up Global*.

Additional Resources

Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW): www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw/text/econvention.htm

Policy Brief from the International Center for Research on Women: www.icrw.org/docs/2005_brief_childmarriage.pdf

Issue Brief on delayed marriage and abstinence-until-marriage policy from the Guttmacher Institute: www.guttmacher.org/pubs/tgr/07/2/gr070201.html

Issue Brief on early marriage and HIV/AIDS policy from the Population Council: www.popcouncil.org/pdfs/CM.pdf