

PRESS RELEASE

CF/DOC/PR/2001-21

EMBARGOED UNTIL WEDNESDAY, 7 MARCH 10:30am
GMT

**UNICEF: CHILD MARRIAGES MUST
STOP**
***New Report Says Millions of Children, Mostly
Girls, Suffer from the Practice***

FLORENCE/GENEVA/NEW YORK, 7 March 2001 – Armed with statistics showing that half of all girls in some countries are married by the time they reach age 18, the United Nations Children's Fund called today for a global campaign to prevent the widespread phenomenon of child marriage.

This call, on the eve of International Women's Day, is part of a new report released today by UNICEF. Entitled "Early Marriage: Child Spouses," it discusses why early marriage continues, and may even be on the rise among extremely poor populations.

"Forcing children, especially girls, into early marriages can be physically and emotionally harmful," said Carol Bellamy, the Executive Director of UNICEF. "It violates their rights to personal freedom and growth. Yet until now there has been virtually no attempt to examine child marriage as a human rights violation in and of itself."

By analyzing child marriage as a violation of a child's basic rights, the report seeks to build momentum for change. "This is another step in a growing movement to end the silent despair of millions of children, especially girls, who are being shuttered away in lives often full of misery and pain," Bellamy said.

The report examines many of the implications of child marriage, from its restriction of personal freedom to its impact on health and education. For both boys and girls, early marriage has profound physical, intellectual, psychological and emotional consequences, cutting off educational opportunities and chances for personal growth. For girls, in addition, it will almost certainly mean premature pregnancy – which causes higher rates of maternal mortality – and is likely to lead to a lifetime of domestic and sexual subservience. Teenage girls are also more susceptible than mature women to sexually-transmitted infections including HIV/AIDS. Their vulnerability is dangerously increased because of the false belief in many places that if a man sleeps with a virgin, he'll be cured of HIV/AIDS.

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Child marriages can be found across the globe, but are pervasive in parts of Africa and South Asia. The percentage of girls aged 15-19 in selected countries who are already married include:

Democratic Republic of Congo	74%
Niger	70%
Afghanistan	54%
Bangladesh	51%
Honduras	30%
Iraq	28%

Poverty is one of the major factors underpinning child marriage. In Bangladesh, poverty-stricken parents are persuaded to part with daughters through promises of marriage, or by false marriages, which are used to lure girls into prostitution abroad. Accounts from Iraq indicate that early marriage is rising there in response to poverty.

The traditional desire to protect girls from out-of-wedlock pregnancies is also a primary factor. A recent UNICEF survey showed that 44 per cent of 20 to 24 year-old women in Niger were married before they reached age 15 because of this concern. In the communities studied, all decisions on the timing of marriage and the choice of spouse were made by the father.

Abuse is common in child marriages. Data from Egypt indicates that 29 per cent of married adolescents have been beaten by their husbands (or husband and others) and, of these adolescents, 41 per cent have been beaten during pregnancy. A study in Jordan, published in 2000, found that 26 per cent of reported cases of domestic violence were committed against wives under 18.

Domestic violence causes some girls to run away in desperation. “Those who do so, and those who choose a marriage partner against the wishes of their parents, may be punished, or even killed by their families. These

girls run the risk of ‘honour killings’ that occur in Bangladesh, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Pakistan, Turkey and elsewhere,” the report states.

PREVENTING CHILD MARRIAGE

To prevent child marriage a wide range of individuals and organizations, from community leaders to international bodies, must take action. A first step is to inform parents and young people about the negative implications of child marriage so they can choose to prevent it.

Education is key in this process. Persuading parents to keep their daughters in school is critical for the overall development of girls – and in the postponement of marriage. Sri Lanka and the Indian state of Kerala are good examples. Both have a high age of first

marriage. Both also have given priority to girls’ education. “This has changed the way men and women perceive their roles and potential, and has led to a greater support for the rights of women than is found in many other parts of (South Asia),” says the report.

For girls who are already married, services must be developed to counsel them on issues ranging from abuse to reproduction. Girls aged 15 to 19 give birth to 15 million babies a year. Many of them do so without attending an ante-natal clinic or receiving the help of a professional midwife. These can have serious repercussions on the health of both mother and child.

What is UNICEF doing to address the problem of early marriage?

UNICEF addresses child marriage as part of its broader approach to gender discrimination, which undermines the right of women and children. UNICEF’s Global Girls’ Education Programme operates in more than 60 countries to ensure that girls have an equal opportunity at education, which is key in postponing marriage and for the overall development of girls.

In addition to supporting advocacy and communication campaigns in several countries, UNICEF also has helped develop two successful initiatives in the regions with highest rate of child marriage, South Asia and sub-Saharan African.

The Meena initiative in South Asia is named after the young cartoon heroine of a multi-media package and serves as a catalyst for discussion on gender discrimination in childhood. Issues covered include son preference, unfair treatment of girls in the family, their lesser access to health and education services, harmful traditional practices such as dowry and sexual harassment,

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as well as early marriage.

Building on Meena's success, the Sara Adolescent Girl Communication Initiative has been developed in 10 Eastern and Southern African countries. The importance of staying in school is one of the main messages of this radio series. Other issues covered include, HIV/AIDS, domestic workload, FGM and early marriage.

“Early Marriage: Child Spouses” was produced by UNICEF's Innocenti Research Centre in Florence, Italy. All press materials, including the text of the Digest are available from 28 February at www.unicef-icdc.org/presscentre/newsroom

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