

# 9. Marriage and motherhood

Marriage and relationships present a challenge to teenagers and their families all over the world. In almost every country of the world parents and society at large set boundaries, of one kind or another, over teenagers' freedom to make choices about relationships and marriage. The causes may be social, economic or to do with cultural attitudes in relation to men's authority over women and children. In some societies parents choose when and whom their daughters should marry, and the penalties for transgression can be harsh. In others, young people have much more freedom – but can risk rejection from their families if they defy expectations by choosing 'unacceptable' partners or life-styles. (See Section 8 Social expectations)

Early marriage means that millions of girls (as well as boys) have to take on very grown-up roles – sex, pregnancy and motherhood, when they are still only children. Many poor parents decide to arrange for their daughters to be married very young, often for economic reasons. And it is common for girls to have no say in decisions about who and when they should marry.

**“Surely I’m too young to be thinking of a husband and definitely too young to be married. But I have to tie the knot with a stranger in just a few days. The fact that I am just 13 is of little consequence as child marriage is very much part of our tradition. It seems like just the other day when I was moving around without a care in the world. But suddenly one day I was informed that my marriage had been fixed. My body is unprepared for the tasks it will be asked to perform. In fact, the very idea fills me with fear, and I tried to convey my feelings to my mother. But all arguments with my mother failed. Though I knew she understood my fear, she too was helpless.”**

Vaishali, from Maharashtra, India, on the eve of her marriage<sup>1</sup>.

Early marriage, which is overwhelmingly a problem for girls, takes away childhood and the opportunity for personal development, and can lead to a repressed and insecure existence. Girls are expected to fit into a new household, become wife to an older boy or man, daughter-in-law, housekeeper and mother: a huge burden for a child who is still developing.

Many families living in poverty sometimes see girls as an economic burden and want to marry them off as early as possible to ensure the survival of the rest of the family. But communities with a high number of very young parents are particularly vulnerable to economic and social insecurity.

Some parents believe that marrying their daughters early protects their virginity until marriage and keeps them safe from sexual assault. Early marriage is most common in South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa, although it also occurs in communities in North Africa, the Middle East and other parts of Asia<sup>2</sup>.

UNICEF warns that it is hard to know how many early marriages occur because so many are not registered. However, a survey in Bangladesh in 1996-97 found that 5 per cent of 10 to 14 year olds were married. Anecdotal evidence and small studies indicate that it is widespread: for example, a 1998 survey in the Indian state of Madhya Pradesh found that nearly 14 per cent of girls were married between the ages of 10 and 14. In Ethiopia and in parts of West Africa, marriage at the age of seven or eight is not uncommon<sup>3</sup>.

## Plan's response

After much research, Plan Niger began to educate community members about the dangers of early marriage. Plan staff held discussions with religious leaders about reproductive health issues. From then on, they trained village leaders in these issues utilising the assistance of the well-respected religious leaders. Plan also reinforces girls' education and school youth programs to keep young people engaged in healthy, stable environments where messages can be impressed and self-esteem built. These programs encourage dialogue amongst youth to better understand the issues affecting them and help them become agents for change. On the national level, Plan is working with the Ministry of Social Affairs to implement the Code for the Child, which will discourage the practice of early marriage as a violation of children's rights<sup>4</sup>.

A study conducted by Plan in a rural area of Niger in 2003, found that 68 per cent of girls were married before their first menstruation, 52 per cent had a child before they reached the age of 16 years, and half experienced complications during their first pregnancy<sup>5</sup>.

Of those who had been married before the age of 16, only 16 per cent had received some education. Those who had married later had a much higher rate of schooling, with 42 per cent of them having received some education.



Panos/Martin Adler

It discovered that despite the adverse consequences for girls' education and health, communities in Niger do not regard early marriage as a problem. Different groups had different reasons for supporting it. Most reasons were economic and social rather than traditional or religious. Men were worried about ensuring family continuity, and both men and women saw it as a way of preserving a daughters' virginity until marriage. Girls regarded it as a way to improve their economic status and gain social recognition, and to get away from their families and family domestic duties. Women saw it as a means to ensure their daughters are socially accepted.

In Nepal, where 40 per cent of girls are married before the age of 14, different communities' traditional beliefs emphasise the importance of early marriage. The Majhi and Danuwar communities, for example, insist on the early marriage of their daughters because the death rituals demand the presence of married daughters who need to present the holy spirit with gifts for the peace of the departed souls. Among the orthodox Brahmin/Chetri in the Karnali zone of the far west, girls need to get married before they attain puberty in order to be socially accepted. Parents may also see it as a way to protect their daughters from rape, prostitution and trafficking<sup>6</sup>. Economic factors are also significant. Child marriage can be a way of securing free labour for the family. The dowry system in Nepal (and other parts of South Asia) is a strong contributory factor. The amount of money demanded by the groom's family increases with the education and qualifications of the boy, so it

increases the older he becomes. Therefore the parents of girls try to marry them off as quickly as possible, since a younger girl can get a groom who is younger and demands less money.

## Plan's response

Plan works with adolescents to inform and educate them about sexual health, reproduction, and family planning. It tries to ensure that young people understand their bodies, and that girls are empowered by knowing their reproductive rights. In 2004 Plan Philippines won an award for its Teen's Guide for a Healthy Lifestyle - Healthy Young Ones, Yo!

Plan's Basic Life Options project for girls and boys in Nepal addresses early marriage by enhancing the life skills of teenagers. The project aims to:

- enhance girls' assertiveness and develop positive thinking about their future lives
- equip them with the necessary life skills to protect themselves from harmful practices and risk situations and
- promote equality between girls and boys

The project informs young people about their legal rights, family planning and sexual health, work and financial planning, as well as promoting awareness of risks such as early marriage, sexual exploitation and domestic violence. As a result, the teenagers understand the benefits of staying on at school and know how to raise their voices against injustice and organise their own self-help or pressure groups.

Plan Nepal, in common with many of Plan's country programs, campaigns to encourage parents to register the birth of their children in order that their ages are on record and that in the future they may be able to benefit from legal protection against early marriage.

Education is at the heart of the problem of young marriage. Educated women are less likely to allow their children to be married off. But education is precisely what is denied when girls are married too early, which perpetuates the cycle in poor communities. As well as stopping girls' education (if they were receiving any in the first place), early marriage isolates children from their peer networks, and leaves them more vulnerable to abuse within the marriage. Children who refuse to marry or choose a partner not approved by their parents may be punished or even killed by their families in so-called 'honour killings'. (See Section 8 Social expectations)

## Plan's response

All over the world, Plan is working to increase girls' access to education. (See Section 14 Education). There is a strong correlation between the number of years schooling a girl receives and the age she reaches before becoming a bride and/or mother.

Another area of risk associated with early marriage is the impact on reproductive health. Girls whose bodies are too young for sex suffer physical consequences such as cervical cancer, and because their bodily tissues are more easily damaged, are more vulnerable to contracting sexually transmitted diseases including HIV.

It has been estimated that one in every ten births worldwide is to a mother who is still a child herself. But girls whose bodies have not yet developed are at serious risk of fatal complications from pregnancy and childbirth, particularly when medical attention is not available during a difficult birth. Globally, girls aged 15-19 are twice as likely to die in childbirth as women in their twenties. And girls aged 10-14 are five times as likely to die<sup>7</sup>. Save the Children estimates that 70,000 adolescent mothers die every year in the developing world because young girls are having children before they are physically ready for parenthood<sup>8</sup>.

The physical risks of adolescent childbearing include toxæmia, haemorrhage, anaemia, infection, and obstructed labour which, when the girl is poor and a caesarian is not available, can result in fistula for the mother and the death of the baby. Girls with fistula suffer incontinence, and face a bleak future. Surgical treatment costs \$100-400 and so is usually out of reach; some girls are rejected by their families and have to turn to prostitution to survive<sup>9</sup>.

Just as it helps to prevent young teenage marriage, education is also vital in the field of maternal health. Even mothers who have only a basic education have healthier pregnancies, safer deliveries and healthier babies because they are more likely to seek healthcare for their children and themselves. Mothers who have had some education are more likely to send their children to school, and to use contraception to increase space between births. Girls who begin childbearing early are more likely to fall into a pattern of having babies in quick succession, to the detriment of their own and their child's health<sup>10</sup>.

Child rights activists in Bangladesh have identified birth registration as a guard against child marriage. Parents may conceal the real age of their daughter and offer her in marriage when income is low as a way of relieving their economic 'burden'. The absence of a birth certificate makes it difficult to verify the age of the girls concerned<sup>11</sup>.

Thirteen year-old Lydia from Ethiopia says: "In the news we hear about the problems of girls being abducted when they are going home from school. After being abducted they are raped and forced to marry. On the radio we hear about girls who fight against this practice and take them to court. If these girls don't know how old they are, then they will have problems in court. If they can prove that they are underage, their case will be stronger."<sup>12</sup>

In Andhra Pradesh, India, the mean age for marriage for girls in rural areas is just 14.7 years<sup>13</sup> which explains why, in the country as a whole, studies reveal that between one in five and one in three girls in India give

birth by the time they are 17<sup>14</sup>. According to a UNESCO report, 73 per cent of girls in Bangladesh are married by age of 15 with 21 per cent having at least one child<sup>15</sup>.

The incidence of HIV infection is considerably higher among young married adolescent girls than unmarried girls - 47.5 per cent higher among married adolescent girls in Kisumu, Kenya, and 65.5 per cent higher in Ndola, Zambia<sup>16</sup>. Often young married girls are violently initiated into sexual life and subjected to early pregnancies. Pregnancy is the leading cause of death for young women aged 15 to 19 worldwide<sup>17</sup> and half a million women die during pregnancy or childbirth every year<sup>18</sup>.

Teenagers in developing countries need access to confidential, low-cost, culturally-appropriate and youth-friendly contraceptive services to delay too-early childbearing and protect themselves from sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV. Married girls need contraception, and so do unmarried teenagers; premarital sex is common<sup>19</sup>.

They also need comprehensive sex education, which includes information about contraception as well as being informed about the benefits of abstaining from sex until marriage. Children who have received comprehensive sex education are more likely to initiate sexual activity later and to use contraception when they do. They delay the onset of sexual activity, reduce frequency of sexual activity, reduce the number of partners, and increase contraceptive use<sup>20</sup>.

But even if teenagers know about contraception, they often cannot get access to contraception services. Two percent of sexually active young women in Niger, Rwanda, and Senegal reported using contraception; 23 per cent in Cameroon; one per cent in the Philippines; 34 per cent in Indonesia; and less than 11 per cent throughout Latin America and the Caribbean<sup>21</sup>. There are also practical constraints: incorrect or inadequate information, difficulty in travelling to and obtaining services, prohibitive cost, and fears about confidentiality. There are also personal issues that prevent girls in particular from accessing and using contraception: fear of parents finding out, unequal power relations which make it difficult to negotiate condom use with male partners, fear of violence from their partner, and concerns about the side effects of contraception.

Peer education can be an effective way to get information about contraception to teenagers. An initiative by Advocates for Youth to use peer educators to provide reproductive health information to 12 to 24 year olds in West Africa found that participants increased their knowledge and changed their behaviour, and were much more willing to buy and use contraceptives<sup>22</sup>.

Improved access to and use of contraception would reduce the number of dangerous abortions undergone by teenage girls. In Nigeria, for example, where abortion is illegal except to save a woman's life, it is thought that more than 600,000 women have abortions every year - and that a third of these may be adolescent girls. Hospital studies show that up to 80 per cent of Nigerian patients with abortion-related complications were adolescents<sup>23</sup>.

## **The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child**

### **Article 3**

1. In all actions concerning children, whether undertaken by public or private social welfare institutions, courts of law, administrative authorities or legislative bodies, the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration.

### **Article 12**

1. States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.

2. For this purpose, the child shall in particular be provided the opportunity to be heard in any judicial and administrative proceedings affecting the child, either directly, or through a representative or an appropriate body, in a manner consistent with the procedural rules of national law.