

Different dimensions and the importance of gender disparities

Despite efforts and discussions at local, national, and international levels, women and girls continue to face discrimination of different forms:

Human rights

Despite international laws guaranteeing women equal rights with men, women around the world are denied their rights to land and property, financial resources, employment and education, amongst others. In many cultures, women and girls are harmed and even killed in the name of tradition. And for women in all countries, gender-based violence constitutes perhaps the most common and serious violation of human rights.

Work

Women's economic roles are often invisible, as they tend to be more informal in nature, such as self-employment, subsistence production or water provision. Even when women and men do perform the same tasks for pay, women are often paid less and receive lower benefits from their work than men in HICs as well as MICs/LICs.

Men hold the majority of positions of power and decision-making in the public sphere, with the result that decisions and policies tend to reflect the needs and preferences of men, not women. In addition, women's larger share of reproductive work, often known as the unpaid care economy, is undervalued as well as statistically invisible.

Assets

The world's resources are very unevenly distributed, not only between and within countries, but also between men and women within countries. While it is estimated that women perform two-thirds of the world's work, they only earn one tenth of the income, and own less than one per cent of the world's property.

In many cases, women's rights and access to land, credit and education, for instance, are limited not only due to legal discrimination, but because more subtle barriers (such as their work load, mobility and low bargaining position at household and community level) prevent them from taking advantage of their legal rights (if they exist).

Education

60 million children are not in school (have not enrolled in the primary education) – more than 50% (32 million) of them are girls. Also most of the world's illiterate adults are women. However, in recent years the education gap has been closing and for example in the case of secondary schooling more boys have not been enrolled than girls. Additionally, in many countries girls and young women tend to be better educated.

Significant proportion of the girls who live in MICs/LICs (excluding China) will be married by their 20th birthday. Increasing girls' time in school is one of the best ways to foster later, chosen marriage.

Early marriages

In 2000 UNICEF estimated that 1 in 3 women between the ages of 20 and 24 were married before the age of 18. In 2017 this number was just over one in five. However, in some African countries this figure was much higher, such as in Niger where there was a 76% incidence of child marriage. The age at which children are married also varies between countries but marriage before the age of 15 is not uncommon and in some areas of West Africa and in Ethiopia, girls are sometimes married as early as age 7, despite recent changes in law.

While the vast majority of early marriages involve girls, boys can also be married off. Also in many cases both parties (bride and groom) are young, but girls tend to be younger and underaged (below the age of 18). In such cases only bride can be recognized as experiencing early marriage.

Across the globe, levels of child marriage are highest in Sub-Saharan Africa, where nearly 4 in 10 young women were married before age 18, followed by South Asia, where 3 in 10 were married before age 18. Lower levels of

child marriage are found in Latin America and Caribbean (25%), the Middle East and North Africa (18%), and Eastern Europe and Central Asia (11%).

The prevalence of child marriage is decreasing globally, with the most progress in the past decade seen in South Asia. Still, the total number of girls married in childhood stands at 12 million per year.

Why does child marriage occur?

In most cases, child marriage is the result of girls and families having few choices or no choices at all. Overwhelmingly, when young people have a choice, they marry later. **Early marriages mostly happen because of poverty and food insecurity.**

However, young girl may be regarded as an economic burden and her marriage to a much older - sometimes even elderly - man is believed to benefit the child and her family both financially and socially. In communities where child marriage is practiced **marriage is regarded as a transaction**, often representing a significant economic activity for a family. A daughter may be the only commodity a family has left to be traded and sometimes girls can be used as currency or to settle debts.

Dominant **notions of morality and honour** are important factors encouraging the practice of child marriage. These are influenced great by the importance placed on maintaining 'family honour' and the high value placed on a girl's virginity. Young girls may also be encouraged to marry older men, due to the perception that an older husband will be able to act as a guardian against behaviour deemed immoral and inappropriate. Also child marriages rates increase in conflict areas, where the marriage is seen as a protection against sexual violence.

Most adolescent pregnancies in LICs take place among girls who are already married, however in some places teenage pregnancy prompts parents to marry their daughters off. This is seen in both wealthy and poor countries **where communities consider pregnancy outside of marriage to be shameful.** Girls may even be forced to marry rapists to spare their families the stigma associated with unmarried pregnancy.

Also child marriage is a **traditional practice** that in many places happens simply because it has happened for generations. In some communities, when girls start to menstruate, they become women in the eyes of the community. Marriage is therefore the next step towards giving a girl her status as a wife and mother. Moreover, in selected regions of East Africa, child marriage usually follows the practice of female genital mutilation/cutting, which is considered a rite of passage to womanhood.

Consequences of early marriages

Child brides are likely to become pregnant at an early age and there is a strong correlation between the age of a mother and maternal mortality. Girls ages 10-14 are five times more likely to die in pregnancy or childbirth than women aged 20-24 and girls aged 15-19 are twice as likely to die so.

Child brides may also suffer vulnerability to HIV/AIDS. Being young and female in selected regions of Africa is a major risk factor for infection and young girls are being infected at a considerably disproportional rate to that of boys. Whilst early marriages are sometimes seen by parents as a mechanism for protecting their daughters from HIV/AIDS, future husbands may already be infected from previous sexual encounters; a risk which is particularly acute for girls with older husbands.

Developmental consequences

Child marriage also has considerable implications for the social development of child brides, in terms of low levels of education, poor health and lack of agency and personal autonomy.

Whilst girls in Africa are already less likely to go to attend school than boys, particularly in poorer households, the non-education of the girl child is a problem compounded by child marriage, with studies showing a strong correlation between a woman's age at marriage and the level of education she achieves.

Large numbers of the girls who drop out of school do so because of early marriage, leaving many women who married early illiterate. Early marriage plans can also discourage a girl's parents from educating their daughter because they believe that a formal education will only benefit her future family in law.

Psychological and social consequences

It is a huge responsibility for a young girl to become a wife and mother and because girls are not adequately prepared for these roles this heavy burden has a serious impact on their psychological welfare, their perceptions of themselves and also their relationship.

Women who marry early are more likely to suffer abuse and violence, with inevitable psychological as well as physical consequences. Studies indicate that women who marry at young ages are more likely to believe that it is sometimes acceptable for a husband to beat his wife, and are therefore more likely to experience domestic violence themselves.

Gender and violence against women and girls and child protection issues

Data shows that at least one in every three women is a survivor of some form of gender-based violence, most often by someone in her own family.

Related links:

- <https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/about-child-marriage/>
- <https://www.unfpa.org/child-marriage-frequently-asked-questions>
- <https://data.unicef.org/topic/child-protection/child-marriage/>
- <http://www.ungei.org/>
- <https://ourworldindata.org/how-many-children-are-not-in-school>
- <http://reports.weforum.org/global-gender-gap-report-2016/#read>
- <http://reports.weforum.org/global-gender-gap-report-2017/>
- http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_GGGR_2018.pdf