
Fact Sheet: Early/ Forced Marriage

Early marriage is synonymous with “child marriage” and is a marriage in which at least one party is married before the age of 18. Early/child marriage is often the result of entrenched gender inequality, making girls disproportionately affected by the practice. Globally, the prevalence of [child marriage among boys](#) is just one sixth that among girls.¹⁴

Forced marriage is a marriage in which one or more of the parties is married without their consent or against their will. A marriage can also become a forced marriage even if both parties enter with full consent if one or both are later forced to stay in the marriage against their will.¹⁵

Early marriage is form of forced marriage, as girls are often forced and, according to human rights standards, are not able to provide informed consent to marry under the age of 18.

Early/forced marriage (EFM) is identified as a specific form of GBV but should also be considered a form of sexual violence, where girls forced into marriages are consequently forced into sexual relationships.

Impact of Early/Forced Marriage

Early/forced marriage threatens the lives and health of girls in many parts of the world, despite international agreements, national laws, and substantial evidence of its harm. Being forced into marriage is a grave violation of an individual’s self-determination and bodily integrity. The violation of early/forced marriage is also linked to numerous risks and consequences, compounding the harmful impact of the practice for individuals, families, and communities.

Drivers of Early/Forced Marriage

Forms of early/forced marriage are customary in many parts of the world, but marriage customs have shifted quickly within communities, based on movements to shift practices, as well as changes in livelihoods, emergencies, and displacement. Early marriage is often driven by parents’ interests in protecting girls and securing their marriageability. During emergencies, when strains on family resources are great, these concerns are often heightened, and early marriage may increase and shift to include younger girls and greater age differences.

Individual Consequences

- Girls who marry are more likely to drop out of school.
- Girls/women who experience EFM earn lower income. For each year of primary schooling, a woman’s income increases by 10 to 20%
- Early marriage leads to earlier and more pregnancies, resulting in negative health consequences. Girls who marry often do not have access to, or use, contraception.
- Early marriage significantly increases risks of maternal mortality. Maternal mortality is a leading cause of death of adolescent girls (globally the second highest cause of death for adolescent girls, and in some countries the highest). A multi-country study found that maternal mortality doubled for mothers aged 15-19, compared to mothers aged 20-34. For mothers under 15, the rate doubled again. This means a girl under 15 is four times more likely to die during pregnancy or after childbirth than someone in their 20s.

¹⁴ UNICEF. Webpage on child marriage, Child marriage | [UNICEF](#)

¹⁵ UNICEF. Webpage on child marriage, Child marriage | [UNICEF](#)

- Early pregnancy among girls whose bodies are not ready often leads to medical complications such as obstetric fistula and hemorrhaging. (Obstetric fistula is a condition where a hole develops in the birth canal as a result of childbirth. The hole can be between the vagina and the rectum, ureter, or bladder. It results in continual leakage of urine or feces from the vagina, causing discomfort as well as social stigma.)
- Those who marry early face higher risks of contracting sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and, in some settings, are more likely to be HIV positive. This is due to low negotiating power within their marriages.
- Forced marriage is associated with poor mental health and suicide. Girls who are married are more likely to experience isolation, depression.
- Girls/women who experience EFM are often disconnected from families
- Relationships initiated through EFM are more likely to involve violence, including emotional, physical, and sexual violence. Therefore, EFM is both a form of GBV and also a risk factor for additional forms of GBV.
- In some contexts, relationships initiated through EFM are more likely to result in divorce, and divorce can carry additional negative consequences for women in those contexts.
- Early marriages are often not legally recognized, which contributes to challenges for girls/women to access entitlements.

Family Consequences

- Increased child mortality. Children born to mothers under the age of 15 are 2.5 times more likely to die than those born to mothers aged 24-27.
- Children born to underage mothers are more likely to have problems with nutrition, physical and cognitive development.
- Health complications associated with early marriage lead to increased health expenses for families.
- Lack of education of girls/women affects other family members. This means less income for the family.
- Children with less-educated mothers are also less likely to receive proper nutrition, less likely to be immunized against childhood diseases, and more likely to die.
- EFM is most widely practiced in developing countries, and in poorer communities within developing countries.
- Early marriage contributes to poverty by limiting girls' education and work opportunities. Societies where women are able to complete secondary school are more prosperous.

Societal/ Community Consequences

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