



Collaborating Organizations: Population Studies and Research Institute,
 National Council for Population and Development, UNFPA

Youth: Curbing Early Marriage Improves their Prospects

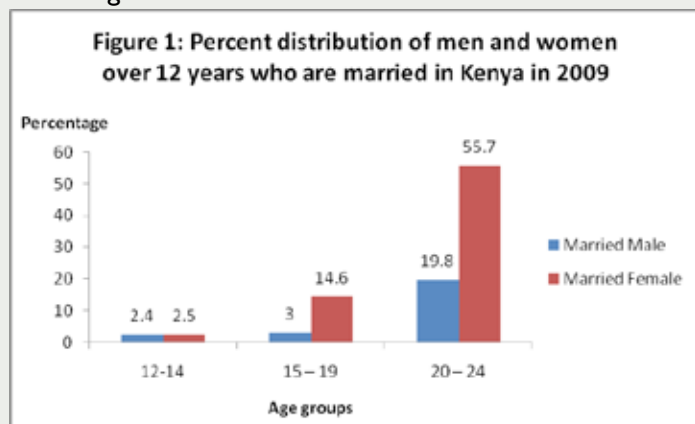
Early marriage is defined as the process of being joined in union with a person of the opposite sex when one is not yet mature physically, socially and biologically to consent or partake of the responsibilities that come with the union. Early marriage usually involves girls younger than 18 years of age. Results from the 2008-09 Kenya Demographic and Health Survey show that among urban women aged 25 - 49 years, at least 30 percent of them got married before attaining age 18. In the rural areas the proportion was slightly above 50 percent.

Concern over early marriage arises from the potential harm it occasions on young women who experience it. This practice has been associated with; polygamous unions, high school drop-out rates, low levels of labour force participation, high fertility and high adolescent and maternal mortality. It is also known to contribute to the increasing prevalence of HIV among the youth. Why does early marriage take place and can something be done to prevent it? This policy brief looks at the prevalence and consequences of early marriage in Kenya and suggests programmatic and policy level action to encourage a delay in sexual debut, age at first marriage and age at first birth.

Understanding early marriage in Kenya

Marriage in the traditional Kenyan context is defined as a rite of passage from childhood to adulthood that every individual is expected to undergo in his or her lifetime, and the integral purpose of this institution is to widen the kinship network of the individual through procreation¹. In most societies, marriage has a strong influence on fertility because it influences the length of women's exposure to the risk of conception. In this regard, age at first marriage is an important indicator for understanding variations in human fertility. More recently, marriage timing has been associated with higher prevalence of HIV and AIDS² and has implications for the organization of the family and gender relations in society³. In addition, the timing of marriage is also of concern because of the potential harm young women face when they get married early^{4,5}.

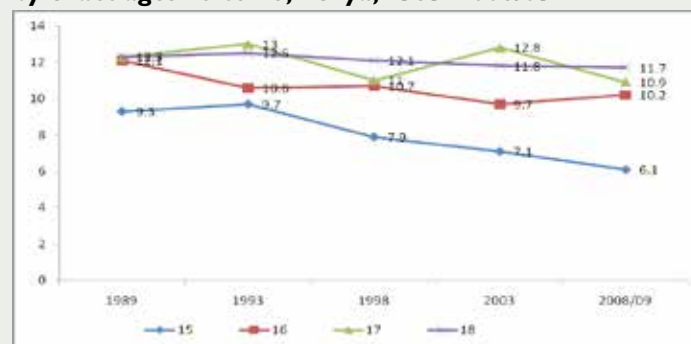
Figure 1 shows that among those aged 15-19 years, the proportion of women who have ever been married is 5 times higher than that of men (15% and 3% respectively) indicating more health threats for the woman.



Source: MPND, Vol.V (Forthcoming)

Figure 2 presents the trends in the proportions of women 25 – 49 years of age who were married by exact ages 15 through to 18. The proportion of women married at age 18 has been relatively stable at about 12 percent between 1989 and 2009. However, very early marriages, at age 15, have been declining overtime from about 10 percent in 1993 to 6 percent in 2009. Studies have found that age at first marriage among women is mainly influenced by religion, polygyny and urbanization⁶. Other factors promoting early marriages include customs that encourage early marriage of women as a source of wealth, such as dowry⁷.

Figure 2: Trends in the women aged 25-49 years married by exact ages 15 to 18, Kenya, 1989–2008/09



Sources: CBS, MOH and ORC Macro International (2004); KNBS and ICF Macro (2010); NCPD, CBS and Macro International (1994; 1999)

Table 1 presents early marriages among women aged 25-49 years by socio-economic characteristics as of 2008/09. The Table shows that the prevalence of early marriage decreases with increasing levels of education and household wealth status. For example about 24 percent of the women with no education were married at age 15 compared to only 2 percent of those with at least secondary education. This difference can be ascribed to the effect of schooling in that staying longer in school decreases the chances of early marriage among females. At the same time, the proportion

of women who got married at age 15 is four times higher among the poorest women when compared with the wealthiest. Table I also shows that early marriage is more prevalent in rural areas when compared to the urban areas.

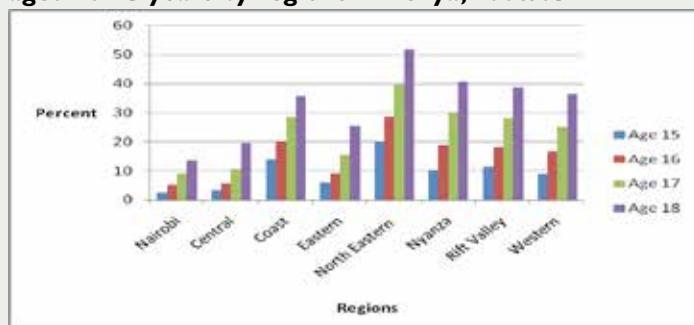
Table I: Prevalence of early marriages among women aged 25-49 years by socio-economic characteristics, Kenya, 2008/09

Characteristics	Percentage first married by exact age:			
	15	16	17	18
Place of residence				
Urban	5.7	10.1	14.6	20.5
Rural	9.7	15.8	25.2	35.9
Education level				
No education	23.6	32.6	44.3	54.9
Primary education	9.5	16.5	27.6	39.8
Secondary and above	2.4	4.6	6.8	11.4
Wealth quintile				
Poorest	15.0	22.9	33.0	43.7
Poorer	11.8	17.2	29.1	40.9
Middle	9.6	16.7	26.5	38.7
Richer	6.1	11.4	18.0	27.7
Richest	4.3	8.0	12.5	17.9

Source: KNBS and ICF Macro (2010)

Figure 3, gives regional disparities in the prevalence of early marriage by exact ages. About 1 in every 5 women aged 25 – 49 years in North Eastern region got married at age 15. In the same region, over half of these women got married at age 18. Coast region has the second highest prevalence of marriages occurring by exact ages 15 and 16 years (about 15 and 20 percent respectively) while Nyanza region has the second highest prevalence of marriages occurring by exact ages 17 and 18 years (about 30 and 40 percent respectively). Generally the prevalence of early marriages is lowest in Nairobi and Central regions.

Figure 3: Prevalence of early marriages among women aged 25-49 years by regions in Kenya, 2008/09



Source: KNBS and ICF Macro (2010)

Why early marriages occur

When girls are married at a young age, it is often due to poverty, dowry pressures, parental concerns about premarital sex and pregnancy, or other economic or cultural reasons. In Kenya, poverty and other cultural, religious and social barriers are responsible for two million boys and girls not being in school⁸. Below is an explanation of some of the key reasons why early marriages occur in Kenya;

- Cultural practices over the years have contributed to the unequal treatment of the girl child when compared to the boy child. The unequal power relations between the boy and the girl child have led to discrimination against the girl child in access to education. In many instances the girl child is expected to remain home and assist in the household chores while the boy child pursues his education. This is mainly because girls are viewed as a source of wealth thereby encouraging early marriage so that the dowry paid can be used to improve the family economic status.
- Female Genital Mutilation (FGM), which entails removing some or all of the female genitalia, although banned in Kenya continues to be practiced on a wide scale by the some communities in the country. FGM is considered as a rite of passage from childhood to adulthood and therefore girls who have undergone this practice, their young age notwithstanding, are viewed as ready for marriage thereby giving rise to child brides. In Kenya, 15 percent of females aged 15 to 19 years, and 21 percent of females aged 20 to 24 years have undergone FGM⁹.
- Poverty often triggers early entry into marriage, motherhood and family establishment thus denying young people greater prospects for further career development. The youth are potential future leaders and are vital human capital for present and future development through family formation and participation in the labour force. It is estimated that among 13.7 million youth in Kenya (in 2011), 7.6 million live in poverty¹⁰. Among the poor households, the education of girls is usually given a low priority¹¹.

Dangers of early marriages

For many young girls, marriage marks the beginning of their sexual life and an increased social isolation, as girls typically leave their homes and childhood villages, losing contact with friends and peers. Studies have found that girls who get married early have many disadvantages related to health, social, and economic spheres, hampering their ability to negotiate their reproductive and broader lives, including the needs of their children. Here below are the main health and socio-economic risks associates with early marriages:

Health risks: Marriage for many girls is the beginning of frequent and unprotected sexual activity. The younger the bride, the more likely she is to be a virgin. Frequency of sexual intercourse among married girls is far higher than among unmarried sexually active girls. Married girls, under pressure to become pregnant, are likely to face the risks of childbirth yet their bodies are not ready to go through pregnancy and childbirth. This often leads to the pregnant girls dying during child birth or losing the infant due to prolonged labour¹².

“decisions that will affect young people’s well-being and society’s are those that shape the foundational human capital to be productive workers, family heads, citizens, and community leaders” (World Bank, 2007: 5)

Girls who get married early have a distinct, and in some settings, substantial risks of acquiring HIV. Child brides have frequent, unprotected sex, often with an older partner. Older males are more likely to be sexually experienced and may thus have a higher risk of being HIV-infected.

Low education attainment and socio-economic empowerment: Across the world and also in Kenya, the percentage of girls married by age 18 decreases as the number of years of schooling a girl has received increases¹³. This means therefore that girls who marry early have not gone through the school learning cycle. Such girls then have low educational attainment and few schooling opportunities.

Women who experience early marriage hardly attend school and as a result they have less household and economic power than their counterparts who get married later in life. This means that girls who get married early have less decision-making power and often live with little authority under the supervision of their new mothers-in-law¹⁴. These girls are therefore at a greater risk of gender-based violence in some settings. An analysis of DHS data from nine countries found that young age at marriage significantly increased a girl's or woman's risk of ever experiencing violence¹⁵.

Policy responses to early marriages

The government of Kenya has progressively put in place policies aimed at delaying marriage as well as increasing the average age at first sexual debut and first childbirth. These policies by their nature directly impact on the age that girls get married without expressly defining the age. In 1983, the president of Kenya issued a decree against FGM. Ten years later in 1993, following the United Nations Declaration on Elimination of all forms of Violence against Women, Kenya developed a National Plan of Action to eliminate FGM.

In 2000, Kenya enacted a law known as the *Children's Act*. The primary purpose of this law was to enhance the protection of children in the country. This law states that no person shall subject a child to female circumcision, early marriage or other cultural rites, customs or traditional practices that are likely to negatively affect the child's life, health, social welfare, dignity, physical or psychological development. Later in 2010, Kenya promulgated a new constitution that declared education as a basic right and made provision for free and compulsory education for all children in the country. Some specific articles of this constitution obligate both the state and the parents to facilitate acquisition of quality basic education by all children.

Programme responses to early marriages

The Government, Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), Faith Based Organizations (FBOs) and some individuals have put in place various programmes that aim to curb incidents of early marriages in the country. Here below are some of the activities that are being implemented by these organizations;

- Alternative rites of passage have been used among the pastoral communities to ensure the girls are rescued

from FGM and early marriage. Rescue shelters have been put up and in the process educational institutions set up to continue to give girls saved from FGM and early marriages a home and much needed education. This is coupled with advocacy and sensitization efforts that aim to discourage these communities from practicing FGM and early marriages.

- The Kenya Vision 2030 recognizes education as key in facilitating both social and economic development. In this regard the Government has continued to invest heavily in the education sector while providing free primary and day secondary school education. In the arid and semi arid areas, free boarding schools have been instituted in both primary and secondary schools and bursaries provided by the government to encourage education for all. School feeding programmes have been put in place in some communities as a way to encourage children to remain in school. Various organizations have also joined efforts to supplying free sanitary towels to girls in some schools especially in poverty stricken areas of the country. All the above measures are aimed at ensuring that children from poor households have access to education.

The outlawing of FGM and early marriages coupled with the above programme responses have contributed to a reduction in these practices and an improvement in the wellbeing of the girl child. Despite this contribution, more needs to be done to eliminate incidents of early marriages in Kenya.

Policy and programme implications

The prevalence of early marriages in Kenya is an issue of great concern as it impacts negatively on the future of a considerable segment of the country's population. Large regional disparities in early marriages exist. This poses major challenges to socio-economic development of the country. Early marriages are prevalent in the arid and semi-arid lands, urban informal settlements, pastoral communities and communities where female genital cut is still practiced. In order to reduce and consequently eliminate early marriages in Kenya, the existing policies against this practice need to be fully enforced.

At the programme front, more needs to be done urgently in terms of advocacy and sensitization to discourage the practice. This should be supported by efforts to reduce poverty and ensure access to education for all children in the country. For this to be successful, all stakeholders should be involved in the process. These efforts should also be monitored closely to ensure that they are producing the desired effect.

Recommendations

In order to reduce prevalence of early marriages in Kenya and positively impact the lives of vulnerable girls, the following recommendations need to be implemented:

- The Government of Kenya should review the challenges it is facing in enforcing laws and policies that aim to eliminate early marriages. The need for this review arises from the fact that early marriages have

NCPD is a semi-autonomous government agency that formulates and promotes population policy and coordinates related activities for sustainable development in Kenya.

National Council for Population and Development (NCPD)

P.O. Box 48994 - GPO,
Nairobi 00100, Kenya
Tel: 254-20-271-1600/01
Fax: 254-20-271-6508
Email: info@ncpd-ke.org
www.ncpd-ke.org

The Population Studies and Research Institute (PSRI), University of Nairobi, was established in 1976 with the mandate to undertake postgraduate training, research and Government backstopping in the field of population and development.

Population Studies and Research Institute (PSRI)

P.O. Box 30197 – 00100 Nairobi
Tel: 020 318 262
Email: psri@uonbi.ac.ke

Website: <http://psri.uonbi.ac.ke>



UNFPA-because everyone counts

Development and printing of this Policy Brief was supported by the United Nations Population Fund through the 7th Country Programme of Assistance to Kenya

persisted despite the existence of laws and policies against them. With the help of stakeholders, strategies for overcoming these challenges should be formulated within the next one year. This exercise should be cascaded to the county level so that county specific strategies can be generated.

- Cultural practices that encourage early marriages should be addressed by all stakeholders through intensified advocacy and sensitization activities over the next decade in the worst affected communities. This activity should be spearheaded by the Government and supplemented by NGOs, FBOs, and other organizations.
- Each county, in collaboration with the Ministry of Education, should endeavour to ensure that all children are able to access education at least up to secondary level. This will entail eliminating biases against the girl child education as well as putting in place more education facilities especially at the secondary school level. Each county should achieve O-level education for all over the next decade. These efforts will help to keep the girl child longer in school thereby contributing to a reduction in the prevalence of early marriages while improving their prospects for a better future.
- Poverty eradication should continue to be prioritized by the Government. Under the umbrella of Vision 2030, all the necessary measures should be implemented with a view of reducing household poverty. This will help to improve the wellbeing of the girl child who will not be seen by the family as a solution, through early marriage, to their economic problems.

Conclusion

Culture and poverty have been associated with the early entry into marriage by the girl child. Over the years girls who have been married off early continue to be subject to health risks as well as economic and social inequities. It is now time to bring to an end the harm caused to these young girls by early marriages.

REFERENCES

- 1 <http://family.jrank.org/pages/1010/Kenya-Concept-Marriage-Family.html>
- 2 Bongaarts John 2007. "Late marriage and the HIV epidemic in sub-Saharan Africa." *Population Studies* 61(1): 73-83.
- 3 Mensch, Barbara S., Susheela Singh, and John B. Casterline. 2005. *Trends in the timing of first marriage among men and women in the developing world*. Population Council Working Paper No. 202.
- 4 Singh, S. and Samara, R. 1996. "Early marriage among women in developing countries." *International Family Planning Perspectives* 22(4): 148-157, 175.
- 5 Zabin, Laurie Schwab and Karungari Kiragu. 1998. "The health consequences of adolescent sexual and fertility behavior in sub-Saharan Africa." *Studies in Family Planning* 29(2): 210-232.
- 6 Garenne, M. 2004. "Age at marriage and modernization in sub-Saharan Africa." *Southern African Journal of Demography* 9(2): 57-77.
- 7 Ayiemba, Elias, H.O (1990): *Kenyan Marriages in Transition: A Research Agenda*. Population Studies and Research Institute, University of Nairobi, Nairobi.
- 8 Lewis, M.A., and M.E. Lockheed. 2006. *Inexcusable Absence: Why 60 Million Girls Still Aren't in School and What to Do About it*. Washington, D.C.: Center for Global Development.
- 9 KNBS [Kenya National Bureau of Statistics] and IFC Macro. (2010b): *Kenya Demographic Health Survey 2008-09*. Calverton, Maryland: KNBS and ICF Macro.
- 10 NCPD [National Coordinating Agency for Population and Development]. 2011. *State of Kenya Population 2011: Kenya's 41 Million People: Challenges and Possibilities*. Nairobi: NCPD.
- 11 UNICEF. 2005. "Quality at the centre of girls education". *Eastern and Southern Africa Region Education Newsletter*: Vol 5. No. 1. May 2005.
- 12 Miller S, Lester F. 2003. "Meeting the Needs of the Youngest First-Time Mothers". Background paper presented at WHO/UNFPA/Population Council Technical Consultation on Married Adolescents. New York.
- 13 Mensch B. 2005. "The transition to marriage". In Lloyd CB, ed. *Growing Up Global: The Changing Transitions to Adulthood in Developing Countries*. (Washington, DC: The National Academies Press, 2005) 416-505.
- 14 Santhya, KG, Jejeebhoy S. 2003. "Sexual and reproductive health needs of married adolescent girls". *Economic Political Weekly* 2003; 38(41): 4370-77.
- 15 Kishor S, Johnson K. *Profiling Domestic Violence: A Multi-Country Study*. Calverton, MD: ORC Macro, 2004.

Disclaimer: this brief is part of a series of 7 briefs (No. 35, 36, 37, 38, 39, 40, 41) that were developed using the 2013 Kenya Population Situation Analysis (PSA) report. Publication of this was made possible by the Government of Kenya with support from the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA). The contents are the responsibility of the National Council for Population and Development (NCPD) and the Population Studies and Research Institute (PSRI). They do not necessarily reflect the views of the UNFPA.