

ORIGINAL RESEARCH

New Findings on Child Marriage in Sub-Saharan Africa

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Abstract

Despite increasing global attention and commitments by countries to end the harmful practice of child marriage, each year some 15 million girls marry before the age of 18. The preponderance of the evidence produced historically on child marriage comes from South Asia, where the vast majority of child brides live. Far less attention has been paid to child marriage in sub-Saharan Africa, where prevalence rates remain high. The International Center for Research on Women (ICRW) recently conducted research in Kenya, Senegal, Uganda, and Zambia to contribute to greater understanding of the drivers of child marriage in each of these contexts. Synthesizing findings from 4 diverse countries provides a useful opportunity to identify similarities and differences, as well as understandings that may be applicable to and helpful for preventing child marriage across these and other settings.

Across the 4 countries, ICRW's research echoes the existing literature base in affirming that child marriage is rooted in inequitable gender norms that prioritize women's roles as wives, mothers, and household caretakers, resulting in inadequate investments by families in girls' education. These discriminatory norms interact closely with poverty and a lack of employment opportunities for girls and young women to perpetuate marriage as a seemingly viable alternative for girls. We found in the African study sites that sexual relations, unplanned pregnancy, and school dropout often precede child marriage, which differs from much of the existing evidence on child marriage from South Asia. Further, unlike in South Asia, where family members typically determine the spouse a girl will marry, most girls in the Africa study settings have greater autonomy in partner choice selection. In Senegal, increasing educational attainment and labor migration, particularly by young women, has contributed to reduced rates of child marriage for girls.

Our findings suggest that improving gender equitable norms and providing more—and more equitable—opportunities for girls, particularly with regard to education and employment, are likely to improve child marriage outcomes. Providing comprehensive sexuality education and youth-friendly reproductive health services can reduce rates of early pregnancy that contribute to child marriage. Finally, identifying ways in which to improve communication between parents and adolescent daughters could go far in ensuring that girls feel valued and that parents feel heard as they make decisions together regarding the lives and opportunities of these adolescent girls.

KEY WORDS adolescents, child marriage, early pregnancy, gender norms, sub-Saharan Africa.

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INTRODUCTION

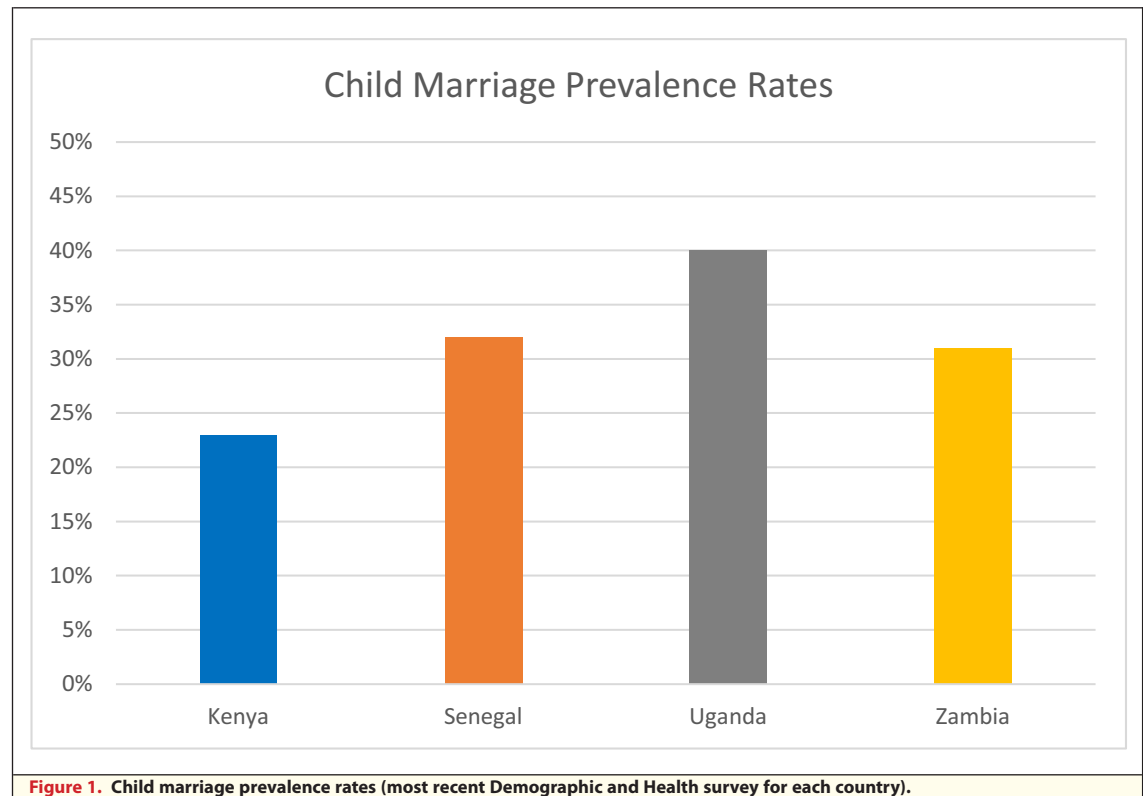
Child marriage is defined as any legal or customary union involving a boy or girl younger than the age of 18.¹ Although some boys marry as children, the practice primarily affects girls. Recent data indicate that 1 in 3 women currently aged 20-24 in the developing world has married before the age of 18, and an estimated 15 million girls under 18 marry each year.² Child marriage is not isolated to any geographic region or defined by any culture or religion. It takes place in countries as diverse as Bangladesh, Burkina Faso, and Brazil, and Niger, Nicaragua, and Nepal. Although the largest total number of child brides resides in South Asia, the majority of countries with the highest prevalence rates of child marriage^[1] in the world are in sub-Saharan Africa.³

In the 4 study countries, child marriage prevalence rates range from 23% in Kenya to 40% in Uganda (Fig. 1).^[2]

The median age at marriage has increased across Africa in recent decades, but there has been markedly uneven progress and considerable variation

between and within countries. Senegal is a positive outlier, having seen the median age at marriage for girls increase quite significantly in the past 2 decades, from 16.2 to 19.8 years of age. Kenya's rate of change is just under half of Senegal's, with age at marriage increasing from 18.8 to 20.2 years over this time. Both Zambia and Uganda have seen far slower shifts, with the median age at which girls marry increasing by less than a year each (Fig. 2).

The slow pace of progress in ending child marriage is concerning for many reasons. First, child marriage is a violation of girls' basic human rights, including their rights to physical and mental health and well-being; to education, equality, and nondiscrimination; and to live free from violence and exploitation, including slavery and servitude; among others. Child marriage places girls at increased risk of early pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections, because married girls typically have limited ability to influence decision-making about condom or contraceptive use.⁴⁻⁶ Women who marry as children tend to have lower levels of knowledge about HIV and AIDS than do those who marry later, as



^[1]Child marriage prevalence rate is defined as the percent of women aged 20-24 years old who were married before the age of 18.

^[2]All figures derived from StatCompiler (Measure DHS), using data from 1992-2015.

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