

The economic impacts of child marriage – Q&A for *Girls Not Brides* members July 2017

On 27 June 2017, the International Center for Research on Women (ICRW) and the World Bank released findings from their ground-breaking research project revealing the economic costs of child marriage. Information about the project can be found [here](#).

Wondering how the findings of this new research can help you? Or confused about what some of the findings mean? This Q&A is a working document for *Girls Not Brides* members who want to know whether this research helps to make our case for an end to child marriage.¹ If you would like to share your comments or have any questions, please [let us know](#).

Making the case to end child marriage

Q: Does this strengthen the case for ending child marriage? If so, how?

Yes, this is the first time that we have global and multi-country estimates of the economic costs that result from child marriage and the benefits that would be reaped through ending the practice. Those costs are in the trillions of dollars.

Before this, we knew of 2 country studies done by UNICEF Social Policy teams:

- In Nepal they estimated the national economic loss in terms of potential cash flow from the labour market that could have been generated had girls delayed their marriage until the age of 20. It found the economic cost of child marriage was 3.87% of GDP.
- In Indonesia they estimated the cost of child and adolescent marriage (15-19 years) amounted to 1.7% of Indonesia's GDP in 2014 assuming education drop-out and loss of earnings.

Now we know the economic costs of child marriage not only through loss of earnings but also through impact on fertility and population growth, as well as child health and nutrition, among others.

Q: How can I use the global report?

The global report has useful figures on the potential magnitude of the economic cost of child marriage. It also confirms much of what we know from existing evidence of the impact of child marriage on other development outcomes. Use them to update your advocacy and communications materials!

If you're from any of the following countries, you can expect country reports with figures and statistics from the World Bank soon:

- Early August: Niger, Nepal and Ethiopia
- End September: Burkina Faso, Egypt, Nigeria, and Uganda

¹ Our thanks go to Suzanne Petroni, project lead for the International Centre for Research on Women, for this research on the economic impact of child marriage, for her comments and insights for this brief.

- No set dates: Bangladesh, Democratic Republic of Congo, Malawi, Mali, Mozambique, Pakistan, Republic of Congo, and Zambia.

There will also be some qualitative findings from several of these countries.

Estimating costs

Q: Is it really possible to give exact costings?

A: No, of course not! The costs associated with certain impacts are based on a number of assumptions - they give a sense of the overall magnitude of potential costs, rather than precise estimations. What it tells us is that they are huge and cannot be ignored.

Q: We were expecting the cost to be higher.

Costs estimated tend to be on the lower scale because (i) they only estimate some impacts and (ii) costs have been estimated on a conservative basis.

Q: How were these costs calculated?

Regression analyses and simulation tools were used to isolate - to the extent feasible - the effects of child marriage and calculate the economic costs associated with some of these impacts.

Q: Aren't the costs of child marriage on women's health quite low?

A: The study doesn't actually assess any costs related to women's health, including those related to maternal, reproductive, psychological, sexual and health, other aspects of women's health - these are likely to have huge impacts.

Interpreting the findings on impact of child marriage

Q: What does it mean if the report didn't find a statistically significant or direct link between child marriage and X?

In some places, the report focuses primarily on the direct link between child marriage and X issue which might not be large because the impact is mainly indirect. Don't be fooled by this - it does not mean that child marriage does not affect this issue.

Let's take an example. The study finds no consistent relationship between child marriage and contraceptive use once other factors are taken into account. But we know that if a girl does not marry young she is more likely to be educated and because she is more educated she is more likely to use modern contraception. Child marriage has a big impact, even if it is indirect.

Q: We thought child marriage would have had more of an impact in X area.

A: The study estimates impact by trying to isolate the potential impact of child marriage on various outcomes, controlling for other factors affecting those outcomes. Sometimes isolating the direct impact of child marriage on specific outcomes doesn't give a full picture of the direct and indirect impact of child marriage. See above.

Q: We've been saying that child brides are more likely to experience violence, less likely to go on to participate in the labour force and less able to make decisions. Yet this study says that these associations are less significant. Were we wrong?

A: One of the reasons that the study finds smaller impact in these areas is because they depend on many other factors than age of marriage. E.g. intimate partner violence and a lack of decision-making ability are the result - at least in part - of widespread gender inequality. Delaying marriage by a few years won't be sufficient on its own to fundamentally change gender roles and social norms. Which is why it is important to ensure that our efforts to end child marriage are intended to create a world where girls and women enjoy equal status with boys and men and are able to achieve their full potential in all aspects of their lives, not just to delay the age of marriage.

Q: Can you really prove that ending child marriage will lead to X development outcome?

A: This study shows statistical associations between child marriage and other development outcomes, so you can't infer causality, i.e. we can't say for sure ending child marriage will reduce X.

Q: It looks like child marriage doesn't have much of an impact on women's ability to make decisions? Is this true?

A: No, the study shows that the indirect impact through education is big. The direct impact is lower but this can be explained by a number of factors:

- In many countries women's decision-making ability may be quite low anyway, regardless of age at marriage, so that might be the reason the statistical direct impact isn't as big as you might imagine.
- In addition, the study looks at decision-making later in life, but not immediately upon marriage. So a woman who is 35 but married at 15 may not have a statistically significantly larger difference in household decision-making ability, but what about the impacts when she was 15, 16, 17, 18, etc?
- Further, the study uses an index of decision-making based on data from the Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS) for several countries. There are two considerations to keep in mind here. First, the DHS questions regarding decision-making are not comprehensive and under-reporting is very likely (as is the case with reporting of intimate partner violence). Second, by combining the measures equally in an index, rather than assessing them individually or giving them weights, the index may undercount the true impacts.
- Finally and importantly, even if there isn't a large direct effect, we know that it does have an indirect effect because child marriage reduces educational attainment which influences decision-making ability significantly later in life.

Q: The study says child marriage is not associated with less knowledge of HIV/AIDS or less probability that children would be registered at birth. Is this true?

A: The direct impact is estimated to be low but the indirect impact through reduced educational attainment of child brides is significant.

Q: The study suggests ending child marriage only slightly decreases contraception use and that it's not the case in all countries. Don't we always say that child brides are less likely to have access to contraception?

A: We know that child brides are less likely to use contraception because they are often isolated and vulnerable, and lack the confidence and agency to be able to assert their preferences and needs, especially when it comes to negotiating safe sex.

This study finds less of a direct correlation between child marriage rates and rates of contraceptive use when other factors are taken into account. However, these other factors are important: we know that child marriage impacts education levels, and education levels impact contraceptive use. We also know that comprehensive sexuality education is a critical part of efforts to end child marriage.

Q: Why does the study say that the impacts of child marriage on maternal mortality and morbidity are unclear? If we end child marriage, won't we see a reduction in maternal mortality rates?

A: We know that the risks of both maternal mortality and morbidity (which isn't assessed in this study) for girls under 15 are significant and that girls aged 15-19 have higher rates of maternal mortality than young women aged 20-24. So (assuming no increases in rates of early pregnancy outside of child marriage), we should see lower maternal mortality and morbidity if child marriage is reduced.

But new estimations on maternal mortality are showing the highest risk for women in their late 30s and over, and, although the study finds that ending child marriage would reduce fertility rates, we don't know whether women who marry and begin childbearing later in life would have children later, when maternal risks are greater. Thus, we don't know the precise relationship between delaying child marriage and the risks of giving birth later in life which is why the study suggests that ending child marriage won't necessarily reduce maternal mortality rates.

Background

Q: Why is the World Bank focusing on child marriage now?

We encouraged the World Bank to do this research with the International Center for Research on Women, who brought their expertise and experience of research on child marriage to the project. Since the early stages of the partnership we knew we needed evidence to show the economic impact of child marriage and that it would have substantial weight coming from the World Bank. The fact that the World Bank has said it helps ensure Finance Ministers will listen.

Q: What is the World Bank's future agenda for work on child marriage?

We are in discussions with them about this. We hope that they will include child marriage in their work on education, health, and other related areas. This research helps to put this issue on their radar.

One of their big projects in this area is the Sahel Women Empowerment and Demographic Dividend project (SWEDD), which is a multi-sector project with UNFPA in 6 countries, and has a dedicated budget for female empowerment interventions implemented by NGOs and others. Examples include 'safe space' programmes for girls-in-school and out-of-school, efforts to deliver contraceptives through community health agents, and the inclusion of sexuality education in curricula. It also supports work on behavioural change campaigns, as well as incentives to keep girls in school.