

AU summit highlights impact of child marriage

By [Khululiwe Mabaso](#)

2 Dec 2015

The recent African Union's First African Girls' Summit on Ending Child Marriage in Africa, which was held on 26 and 27 November in Lusaka, Zambia, has highlighted the devastating impact of child marriage on the continent.



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The objective of the summit was to share good practices and challenges on ending child marriages at country, regional and international levels.

UNICEF's 2014 statistics on child marriage have indicated that one third of girls in the developing world are married before the age of 18 and one in nine are married before the age of 15. Countries with the highest prevalence of child marriage are concentrated in Western and Sub-Saharan Africa.

These statistics also revealed that in 2012, 70 million women aged 20 to 24 around the world had been married before the age of 18. If this present trend continues, 150 million girls will be married before their 18th birthday over the next decade. That's an average of 15 million girls each year, 39,000 per day, 1,625 per hour. These figures are sobering indeed.

Reasons identified

A number of factors have been identified as the reasons behind the child marriage situation on the African continent:

- Lack of education. 82% of women aged 20 to 24 who had no education were married by the age of 18, while just 13% of women who completed their secondary education had been married by then.
- Poverty. Families often give away their young daughters for a bride price which will temporarily increase their income or will reduce family expenses. This is especially common during periods of drought (drought brides) and famine.
- Tradition. In most developing countries, child marriage is a tradition that has been in place for centuries. Consequently, if young girls or their families were to go against this custom, it could result in exclusion from the community.

Some of these customs include:

- Telefa (Ethiopia) - where a man kidnaps, hides and rapes a girl and then is entitled to marry her as the father of her unborn child.
- Ukuthwala (South Africa) - where a man kidnaps a young woman with the intention of compelling the girl's family to endorse marriage negotiations.
- Trokosi (Ghana, Benin and Togo) - where a young virgin girl is oathed to a priest to obtain the gods' forgiveness when a relative (usually male) commits a crime.

The practice of marrying girls off at such a young age has severe consequences, not only for these young women, but for the continent itself.

1. Denied right to education. Child brides are encouraged to drop out of school so that they can do house chores and rear children. Even more worrying is that over 60% of child brides in developing countries have had no formal education at all. In Ethiopia, 41% of young girls are married before they turn 18, and only 11% are enrolled in secondary school. 45% of girls under 18 who live in Somalia wed before their 18th birthday, while a mere 5% of adolescent girls attend secondary school.

2. Negative impact on Africa's economies. With millions of child brides not attending school, they miss the skills, knowledge and employment prospects that would help them to contribute to their country's economic development and prosperity and lift their family out of poverty.

3. Health complications. As child brides are expected to become mothers soon after marriage, they often become pregnant before they can safely carry or deliver children. Girls who give birth under age 15 are five times more likely to die in childbirth than young women in their early 20s. In addition, child brides are more prone to injury in pregnancy or childbirth: 65% of all cases of obstetric fistula, which causes uncontrollable and embarrassing incontinence, occur in girls under the age of 18.

4. Violence and HIV. Girls who marry as children are more likely to be beaten by their husbands than girls who marry later. They are also more likely to have a first sexual experience that is forced. Because child brides are minors, they rarely have a say in using contraception or practising safe sex, making them susceptible to HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases.

5. Sustainable development goals out of reach. Six of the eight sustainable development goals, which focus on reducing poverty, ensuring universal education, reducing child mortality, improving maternal health, fighting HIV/AIDS and promoting gender equality, are out of Africa's reach if child marriages persist.

We believe that the key to significantly reducing the number of child brides in Africa is education. Through our Always Keeping Girls in School Programme (AKGIS), which was initiated in 2006, we have helped hundreds of thousands of girls in 17 developing countries around the world stay in school.

Absence from school

Research has shown that girls in the developing world are absent from school for four days a month due to their periods. This is because the girls don't have adequate sanitary protection, they lack understanding of the changes their bodies are going through, and the fact that there is a stigma attached to menstruating.

This equates to a loss of two weeks of learning in every school term. During the course of their five-year high school career, girls can lose up to 30 weeks of school out of a total of 180 because of menstruation, leading them to fail school or drop out altogether.

Once they drop out of school, the girls become even more disempowered, as they are far less likely to find employment. In addition, their low self-esteem makes them more susceptible to gender violence, sexual abuse, and unsafe sexual practices.

The AKGIS Programme primarily focuses on remote rural areas and aims to empower female learners by keeping them in school. This is achieved through the monthly distribution of Always sanitary towels and by young female mentors who meet weekly with the girls to give them guidance on puberty, their bodies and their rights.

As a conservative estimate, every adolescent that the AKGIS Programme reaches will impact on an additional five girls and women as the female learners grow in confidence and become eager to share their knowledge. It is important that women older than 20 are also educated, so that they can pass on the information to their daughters and have a better understanding of why education is so important for girls.

AKGIS successes

Some successes AKGIS has achieved through our partner Asante Africa include:

- In Tanzania and Kenya alone, nearly 10,000 girls and women were reached in 2015.
- The number of pregnancies at one school have dropped by 60%.
- 64% of girls say they feel more empowered to manage their bodies' needs and safety.
- 81% of girls report increased self-confidence and knowledge.
- 90% of schools on the programme reported a decrease in the number of pregnancies.
- In one term in 2014, girls from schools on the programme achieved over ten times better results than girls from other schools.

It is clear, therefore, that one of the most important tools to prevent child marriage is education. Through gaining knowledge, girls can feel more empowered and make better choices for their future.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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