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Ending Child Marriage in Malawi

What the evidence tells us

Key Messages

- Malawi has the 11th highest rate of child marriage in the world, with 47% of women marrying before the age of 18.
- Child marriage has numerous adverse impacts on the health of girls, including increased maternal morbidity.
- Education has a significant relationship to age at first marriage in Malawi – women with lower levels of education are much more likely to marry and have children early, and child marriage negatively impacts educational attainment and future earnings of girls.
- Child marriage has implications for population growth, including increased fertility rates as a result of adolescent childbearing.



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Introduction

Malawi has made tremendous progress in recent years toward the goal of ending child marriage. In 2015, Malawi adopted the Marriage, Divorce, and Family Relations Act, which set 18 as the legal minimum age for marriage, and in February 2017, a legal loophole that allowed children between the ages of 15 and 18 to marry with parental consent was closed with an amendment to the Constitution.

Despite recent progress, child marriage (marriage to a person less than 18 years old)¹ remains a key development challenge in Malawi. Malawi has the 11th highest rate of child marriage in the

world, and the 9th highest rate in Africa.² In Malawi, 47 percent of women marry before the age of 18, and 12 percent before the age of 15.³ Typically, the age at first birth is about one year after marriage. As a consequence, Malawi's teenage pregnancy rate is very high – 29 percent of girls aged 15-19 have begun childbearing.⁴

The Southern and Northern regions of the country, which are largely rural, have higher rates of child marriage and early pregnancy than the Central region, which is largely urban. The Southern region exhibits the worst child marriage and early pregnancy rates countrywide – the median age at marriage is 17.8 years compared with 18.2 and 18.6 in the Northern and Central regions, respectively.

Higher rates of child marriage and early pregnancy in rural areas may be related to lower levels of education in rural areas than in urban areas,⁵ due in part to poor retention as a result of primary schools being incomplete (not offering all grade levels) as well as low capacity to accommodate students at the secondary level.⁶ Education has been found to have a significant relationship to age at first marriage in Malawi.⁷ Women with lower levels of education are much more likely to marry and have children early – the median age at marriage is 17.7 years for women with just a primary education and increases to 20.4 for women with a secondary education and 24.8 for women with higher education.⁸

¹The state of the world's children 2016: A fair chance for every child (Rep.). (2016). New York, NY: UNICEF.

²Ibid.

³Malawi: demographic and health survey, 2015-16. (2017). Zomba, Malawi: National Statistics Office.

⁴Ibid.

⁵Ibid.

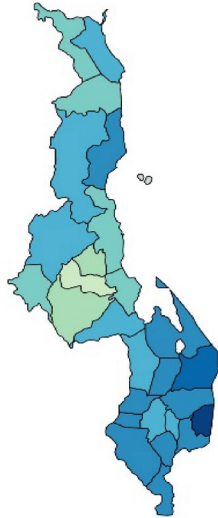
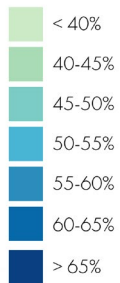
⁶The education system in Malawi (World Bank Working Paper No. 182, Rep.). (2010). Washington, DC: The World Bank.

⁷Palamuleni, M. E. (2011). Socioeconomic determinants of age

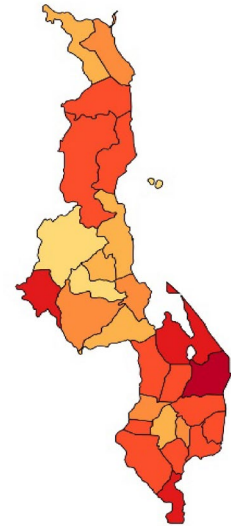
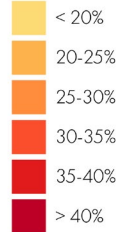
at marriage in Malawi. *International Journal of Sociology and Anthropology*, 3(7), 224-235. Retrieved from <http://www.academicjournals.org/IJA>. Accessed 11 Oct. 2017.

⁸Malawi: demographic and health survey, 2015-16. (2017). Zomba, Malawi: National Statistics Office.

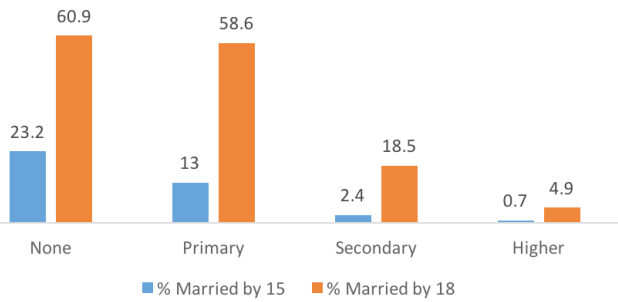
Percentage of women aged 20-49 married before age 18 by district. (Malawi MDG Endline Survey)



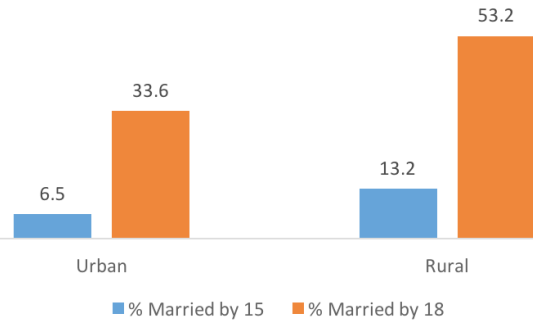
Percentage of women aged 15-19 who have begun childbrith by district. (Malawi DHS 2015-16)



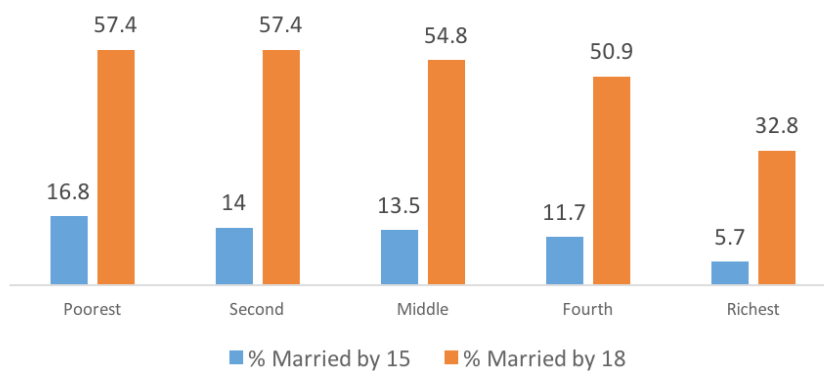
Percent women aged 20-49 married at 15 and 18 years by education level (Malawi MDG Endline Survey, 2014)



Percent women aged 20-49 married at 15 and 18 years by area (Malawi MDG Endline Survey, 2014)



Percent women aged 20-49 married at 15 and 18 years by wealth quintiles (Malawi MDG Endline Survey, 2014)



A 2015 Human Rights Watch (HRW) report on ending child marriage in Africa indicates that in Malawi, a number of entities, including the Ministry of Gender, the Ministry of Justice, and the Ministry of Interior, have responsibility over different

elements of child marriage prevention (child protection workers, prosecutors, and the police, respectively), but there is little coordination between them on matters of child marriage.⁹

This brief provides an overview of the evidence on child marriage in Malawi, and makes recommendations for policy and practice based on a synthesis of research.

⁹Smaak, A., & Varia, N. (2015). Ending child marriage in Africa: Opening the door for girls' education, health, and freedom from violence. Human Rights Watch.

Causes of child marriage in Malawi

Many families in Malawi see child marriage as a way to improve their financial status through the payment of a bride price (*lobola*) or other support from the groom, or to reduce the financial burden of raising a girl. Girls may also view marriage as a way to improve their financial and social status.¹⁰ Regional and cultural differences exist with regard to child marriage – for example, in parts of Chitipa, it is traditionally common practice for parents to give their daughters in marriage to pay a debt in a practice called *kupimbila*.¹¹ Early sexual initiation for girls is encouraged as part of rite of passage traditions that occur in some communities when a girl reaches puberty (for example, the practice of *Msonda*, *Zoma* or *Chidototo* in the Southern region, however, out-of-wedlock pregnancies are stigmatized).¹² A girl who becomes pregnant is often expected (or forced) to marry, in some cases her abuser, to avoid damaging the reputation of her family.¹³ Research has also shown that some male teachers demand sex from school girls, thus contributing to their early childbearing and marriage.¹⁴

Girls who drop out of school are more likely to marry early.¹⁵ Families may encourage their daughters to stop attending school to take up duties around the house or duties that help the family financially. The value of girls attending school is not always clear to girls and their families, as it does not improve finances in the short run (in fact, there are costs associated), and it may not improve job prospects in the long run.¹⁶

Impact on girls and their families

Child marriage is a human rights abuse, violating a girl's rights to health, education, and freedom from violence, exploitation, and discrimination. These rights are recognized in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Convention on the Rights of the Child, and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination

Against Women, among others. In some cases, child marriage can be considered slavery.¹⁷

Child marriage can adversely impact girls' health, mental health, and educational attainment, as well as the health of their children. Child marriage results in girls leaving school early, and can expose girls to marital rape, domestic violence, and labor exploitation.¹⁸ Child marriage increases the risk of sexually transmitted diseases, cervical cancer, obstetric fistulas, and maternal death among affected girls; their children are at increased risk of premature birth and other complications. Girls who marry early are also at heightened risk of isolation and depression.¹⁹

There is evidence to show that children of adolescent mothers in Africa have higher mortality risks, are more likely to be stunted, and have lower cognitive development; some explanations for this link include the lower socioeconomic status of adolescent mothers, less experience in parenting, and less utilization of maternity services.²¹

The impact of child marriage on educational attainment in sub-Saharan Africa is well-documented. A study that looked at the impact of early marriage on schooling outcomes in sub-Saharan Africa found that each year early marriage was delayed was associated with an additional half-year of schooling.²² A study of the impact of child marriage on literacy rates for women in Africa indicated that each additional year of early marriage reduces the likelihood of literacy by 5.7 percentage points.²³ The impact of child marriage on educational attainment also negatively impacts the future earnings of girls.²⁴

Economic impact

Child marriage not only has negative implications for girls, it also poses costs to society. The annual costs of child marriage globally were estimated to be \$22 billion in 2015 and \$566 billion in 2030 as a result of increased fertility and population growth that has a cumulative effect over time.²⁵ Ending child marriage in Malawi would

result in an estimated 0.21 reduction in the population growth rate for 2015.²⁶ There are also costs associated with the adverse impacts of child marriage on child health, educational attainment, and future earnings.

Options for policy and practice

Given the strong relationship between educational attainment and child marriage, and also the fact that the prevalence of child marriage is higher among the poor, many of the strategies and interventions pointed to by the evidence are related to keeping girls in school by alleviating the economic burden of schooling for girls and their families and creating safe school environments for girls. However, it has been observed that programmes to prevent child marriage must strike a balance between depth, sustainability, and scalability,²⁷ which can prove difficult for high-cost programmes such as those that provide financial incentives for girls to attend school.

Evidence from systematic reviews

A 2016 systematic review of published and grey literature on interventions to prevent child marriage found a number of high quality programmes that were shown to reduce the proportion of child marriages and/or increase the age of marriage of participants. Interventions included school vouchers or the payment of school fees, cash transfers on the condition of school attendance, sexual and reproductive health education and services, life skills training and community service programmes, parental education programmes, and mentorship. The review found that most economic interventions with a focus on cash transfers or reducing the cost of school decreased the rate of child marriage or increased the age at marriage. It also found that less successful interventions often had a broader focus beyond child marriage (targeting HIV, sexual health, girls' empowerment, etc.).²⁸ This suggests that a targeted approach that reduces the economic burden of schooling for girls and their families would be particularly effective.

¹⁰Odhiambo, A. (2014). I've never experienced happiness: Child marriage in Malawi. Human Rights Watch. Retrieved from: <https://www.hrw.org/report/2014/03/06/ive-never-experienced-happiness/child-marriage-malawi>. Accessed 11 Oct. 2017.

¹¹Malawi Human Rights Commission. (2006). Cultural Practices and Human Rights. ¹²Ibid.

¹³Odhiambo, A. (2014). I've never experienced happiness: Child marriage in Malawi. Human Rights Watch. Retrieved from: <https://www.hrw.org/report/2014/03/06/ive-never-experienced-happiness/child-marriage-malawi>. Accessed 11 Oct. 2017.

¹⁴Schwandt H.M. and Underwood C. Engaging school personnel in making schools safe for girls in Botswana, Malawi, and Mozambique. *International Journal of Education Development*. Volume 46, January 2016, Pages 53-58

¹⁵Odhiambo, A. (2014). I've never experienced happiness: Child marriage in Malawi. Human Rights Watch. Retrieved from: <https://www.hrw.org/report/2014/03/06/ive-never-experienced-happiness/child-marriage-malawi>. Accessed 11 Oct. 2017.

¹⁶Ibid.

¹⁷Girls Not Brides. Human rights and justice. Retrieved 11 Oct. 2017, from <http://www.girlsnotbrides.org/themes/human-rights-and-justice/>

¹⁸Varia, N. (2016). Ending child marriage: Meeting the global development goals' promise to girls. Human Rights Watch. Retrieved from: <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2016/ending-child-marriage>. Accessed 11 Oct. 2017.

¹⁹Nour, N. M. (2009). Child marriage: A silent health and human rights issue. *Reviews in Obstetrics and Gynecology*, 2(1), 51-56. Retrieved from <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2672998/>. Accessed 11 Oct. 2017.

²⁰Nour, N. M. "Health Consequences of Child Marriage in Africa." *Emerging Infectious Diseases* 12.11 (2006): 1644-1649. *PMC Web*. 5 Oct. 2017.

²¹Madise, N.J., Banda, E.M., Benaya, K.W. Infant mortality in Zambia: socio-economic and demographic determinants. *Social Biology*, 2003, 50 (1-2): 148-166.

²²Delprato, M., Akyeampong, K., Sabates, R., & Hernandez-Fernandez, J. (2015). On the impact of early marriage on schooling outcomes in Sub-Saharan Africa and South West Asia. *International Journal of Educational Development*, 44, 42-55. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijedeudev.2015.06.001>

²³Nguyen, M., & Wodon, Q. (2014). Impact of child marriage on literacy and

education attainment in Africa. Global Partnership Initiative.

²⁴Wodon, Q., C. Male, A. Nayihouba, A. Onagoruwa, A. Savadogo, A. Yedan, J. Edmeades, A. Kes, N. John, L. Muriithi, M. Steinhaus and S. Petroni (2017). *Economic Impacts of Child Marriage: Global Synthesis Report*, Washington, DC: The World Bank and International Center for Research on Women.

²⁵Ibid.

²⁶Ibid.

²⁷Malhotra, A., Warner, A., McGonagle, A., & Lee-Rife, S. (2011). *Solutions to Ending Child Marriage: What the Evidence Shows*. International Center for Research on Women.

²⁸Kalamar, A., Lee-Rife, S., & Hindin, M. J. (2016). Interventions to prevent child marriage among young people in low- and middle- income countries: A systematic review of published and grey literature. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 59, S16-S21. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jadohealth.2016.06.015>

A 2012 systematic review of child marriage prevention programmes found that programmes employed one or more of the following core strategies: 1) empowering girls with information, skills, and support; 2) educating and mobilizing parents and community members; 3) improving the accessibility and quality of schooling for girls; 4) economic support or incentives for girls and families; and 5) promoting a legal/policy framework. This review found that the most effective interventions sought to empower girls by working directly with them to provide information, skills, and support – this includes life skills training, vocational skills training, sexual and reproductive health training, mentorship, campaigns to spread relevant information (on topics such as child marriage, education, and sexual health), and “safe spaces” for girls to meet. Also effective was the provision of economic support or incentives.²⁹

Interventions to keep girls in school

Keeping girls in school has been shown to have a positive impact on child marriage. Some strategies that have been effective in this regard include scholarships and cash transfers for girls, hiring more female teachers, reducing distance to schools, and conducting gender sensitivity trainings for teachers.³⁰

Economic support to girls and families offered with the aim to keep girls in school has been found to have more of a positive impact on school participation for girls from poorer families, girls from rural areas, and girls with parents that have at least a primary education. It has also been found to potentially have a negative impact on boys’ school participation.³¹ Cash transfers

conditional on schooling have been found to be especially effective in areas with low enrollment and school attendance and at improving outcomes at the secondary level. Conditional cash transfer programmes that included conditions on achievement (grades, scores, etc.) in addition to attendance were also found to have positive effects.³²

Cash transfers and other economic support

Evidence from Malawi, Kenya, and Zimbabwe on the impacts of economic support on child marriage show promising short-term results, though long-term results are mixed. The Zomba Cash Transfer Programme was a two year programme that provided conditional (on schooling) and unconditional cash transfers to the families of unmarried women and girls aged 13-22. In the short-term, the cash transfers that were conditional on schooling were shown to improve educational outcomes, however, the teenage marriage and pregnancy rates were higher in the conditional arm than the unconditional arm. In the long-term, positive benefits in educational attainment, marriage rates, and fertility rates were only sustained by girls who received conditional cash transfers that had dropped out and returned to school as a result of the study. Others, who had been schoolgirls at baseline, did not see long-term positive benefits regardless of whether they had received conditional or unconditional cash transfers.^{33,34}

A study of the impact of cash transfers for orphaned and vulnerable girls in Kenya was found to reduce the likelihood of early pregnancy, but had no impact on age at marriage.³⁵ However, a study of the impact

of school support (in the form of school fees, uniforms, and a dedicated helper in school) on marriage among orphaned girls in Zimbabwe found that school support served to delay marriage and pregnancy.³⁶

The evidence suggests that the effects of cash transfers on marriage and pregnancy are modest or insignificant; however, cash transfers are an effective instrument for enticing girls who have dropped out to return to school and have a number of other positive impacts on this population, including age at marriage and fertility rates.

Recommendations

- The evidence suggests that working directly with at-risk girls to provide information, skills, and support could have positive impacts on child marriage rates in Malawi.
- While interventions that reduce the economic burden of schooling on girls and their families have had positive impacts on girls that had dropped out of school in Malawi, these programmes may be difficult to scale.
- School or community-based programmes that empower girls by educating them about their rights and health, by teaching them life skills (such as financial literacy) and vocational skills that allow them to economically support themselves, and/or by providing mentorship and “safe spaces” to provide girls with both information and emotional support could be piloted in select communities.

²⁹Lee-Rife, S., Malhotra, A., Warner, A., & Glinski, A. M. (2012). What Works to Prevent Child Marriage: A Review of the Evidence. *Studies in Family Planning*, 43(4), 287-303. doi:10.1111/j.1728-4465.2012.00327.x

³⁰McCleary-Sills, J., Hamner, L., Parsons, J., & Klugman, J. (2015). Child marriage: A critical barrier to girls’ schooling and gender equality in education. *The Review of Faith and International Affairs*, 13(3), 69-80. doi:10.1080/15570274.2015.1075755

³¹Dickson, K and Bangpan, M (2012) Providing access to economic assets for girls and young women in low-and-lower middle income countries. A systematic review of the evidence. London: EPPI-Centre, Social Science Research Unit, Institute of Education, University of London

³²Saavedra, J., & Garcia, S. (2012). Impacts of Conditional Cash Transfer Programs on Educational Outcomes in Developing Countries: A Meta Analysis. *RAND Labor and Population*.

³³Baird, S, Chirwa, E, McIntosh, C, & Özler, B. (2015). What happens once the intervention ends? The medium-term impacts of a cash transfer programme in Malawi, 3ie Impact Evaluation Report 27. New Delhi: International Initiative for Impact Evaluation (3ie)

³⁴Baird, S, McIntosh, C, & Ozler, B. (2010). Cash or condition: Evidence from a cash transfer experiment [Ser. 45, Rep. No. 5259]. World Bank Development Research Group.

³⁵Handa, S, Peterman, A, Huang, C, Halpern, C, Pettifor, A, & Thirumurthy, H. (2015). Impact of the Kenya Cash Transfer for Orphans and Vulnerable Children on early pregnancy and marriage of adolescent girls. *Soc Sci Med*, 141, 36-45. doi:10.1016/j.socscimed.2015.07.024

³⁶Luseno, W. K., Zhang, L., Iritani, B. J., Hartman, S., Rusakaniko, S., & Hallfors, D. D. (2017). Supporting Adolescent Orphan Girls to Stay in School as HIV Risk Prevention: Evidence from a Randomized Controlled Trial in Zimbabwe. *Health Care for Women International*, 38(3), 283-299. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/07399332.2016.1191494>

This brief was prepared by Claire Jensen, Knowledge Translation Officer - AFIDEP

African Institute for Development Policy

Area 6, Plot #6/3
Off Maula Prison Road Lilongwe 3
P.O. BOX 31024,
Tel: +265 111 581 375 | +265 995 495 143
Lilongwe 3, Malawi

Email: info@afidep.org | www.afidep.org

Ministry of Gender, Children, Disability and Social Welfare

Gemini House, City Centre
Private Bag 330
Tel: +265 1 770 411/740/203 | +265 1 770 826
Lilongwe 3

Email: info@gender.gov.mw | www.gender.gov.mw