



Photo: Young Lives

# Understanding Child Marriage: Insights from Comparative Research

This policy brief highlights findings from research on child marriage from Young Lives (Ethiopia, Peru, Vietnam and the Indian states of Andhra Pradesh and Telangana) and Child Frontiers (Zambia).<sup>1</sup> Using data from longitudinal surveys and qualitative research, we find that:

- Despite evidence that both caregivers and young people wish to delay marriage and raising a family until their twenties, poverty and lack of opportunity combine with inequitable gender norms so that many girls marry at under 18 years old and become mothers during adolescence. There is little evidence of a direct impact of legislation on decisions about the timing of marriage.
- School enrolment at 15 years old, living in an urban area, and coming from a more economically or socially advantaged background are associated with lower rates of child marriage.
- There are striking differences between and within countries: for example, there appear to be more unions between adolescent girls and adolescent boys, and more examples of pregnancy before marriage and cohabitation in Zambia and Peru; a predominance of traditional arranged marriages in India; and a combination of arranged marriages, peer relationships, and elopement in Ethiopia.
- The transition to marital life is often difficult for adolescent girls and young women, with few services designed to meet their sexual and reproductive, study and training, or social support needs.

<sup>1</sup> This policy brief focuses on child marriage, that is, marriage before the age of 18. However, some of our analysis includes marriage up to the age of 19, because the larger number of girls married by 19 years old allows for more robust results.

## Introduction

Based on current trends, the world is unlikely to meet the objective of eliminating child marriage by 2030 within the Sustainable Development Goals. Much recent research has focused on understanding which combination of legislative, empowerment and economic interventions are most likely to achieve large-scale reductions in child marriage. However, recent analysis of Demographic and Health Survey (DHS) data, which chart a marked global decline in child marriage rates, alongside distinct regional and country patterns, raises questions about the drivers of change and the circumstances that have led, for example, to declining child marriage rates across South Asia, but much slower declines in sub-Saharan Africa.

To date, analysis of the prevalence, drivers and consequences of child marriage has drawn on national surveys, particularly DHSs. Although longitudinal data such as that gathered by Young Lives is not nationally representative, analysis of longitudinal data has the potential to add value to national surveys by highlighting associations between children's early circumstances and early transitions to marriage, cohabitation, and parenthood, and (in the future) the consequences of child marriage for young women and for future generations.

Young Lives is a unique comparative longitudinal study of childhood poverty, covering 12,000 children in four countries – Ethiopia, Peru, Vietnam and the Indian states of Andhra Pradesh and Telangana – over a 15-year period. Five rounds of household and child survey data are complemented by longitudinal qualitative research with a sub-sample of children and adolescents. This brief also draws on qualitative research conducted in Zambia in 2014 by Child Frontiers.

Young Lives data on marriage and fertility can be explored via an interactive data visualisation at [www.younglives.org.uk/content/marriage-cohabitation-rate-country-sites](http://www.younglives.org.uk/content/marriage-cohabitation-rate-country-sites).

Young Lives, Child Frontiers, the Ethiopian Centre for Child Research (ECCR)/Ethiopian Development Research Institute (EDRI), and Grupo de Análisis para el Desarrollo – GRADE (Peru) are collaborating on YMAPS (the Young Marriage and Parenthood Study), a new study of the experiences of married girls, boys, young women and men that is supported by Canada's International Development Research Centre (IDRC).

## Findings

### ***The majority of caregivers expect their children to marry and start a family in their twenties***

“During our time, we were unable to decide on our life but today children have the right to decide ... Children today are very wise ... Her life will definitely be good because she will be educated and may even marry someone who is educated.”

(Grandmother of Young Lives child, Tigray, Ethiopia)

When children were age 12, most caregivers<sup>2</sup> in all four Young Lives countries said they expected their son or daughter to marry or to start a family during their twenties. Although in practice many girls married during adolescence, analysis from India indicates that caregivers' expectations do have a bearing on girls' age at marriage.

Young people themselves felt that the ideal age for starting a family was during their twenties. When asked what age it is best for women to have children, answers from the 19-year-old female participants ranged from 21 in India to 26 in Peru, while for male participants, the ideal age ranged from 25 in India to 27 in Peru and Vietnam.

These findings highlight the potential for caregivers as well as young people to support delaying marriage against a backdrop of ongoing social change.

### ***Despite minimum age of marriage laws, many girls continue to be married before their eighteenth birthday***

“A child is that under 18 years of age, but if you ask a grandmother in the village, she will say from 0 to 12 years only. Traditionally, a girl at 12 years old is ready to marry. Boys are ready to marry when they have a beard.”

(Young man in a group discussion of married men in Senanga, Zambia)

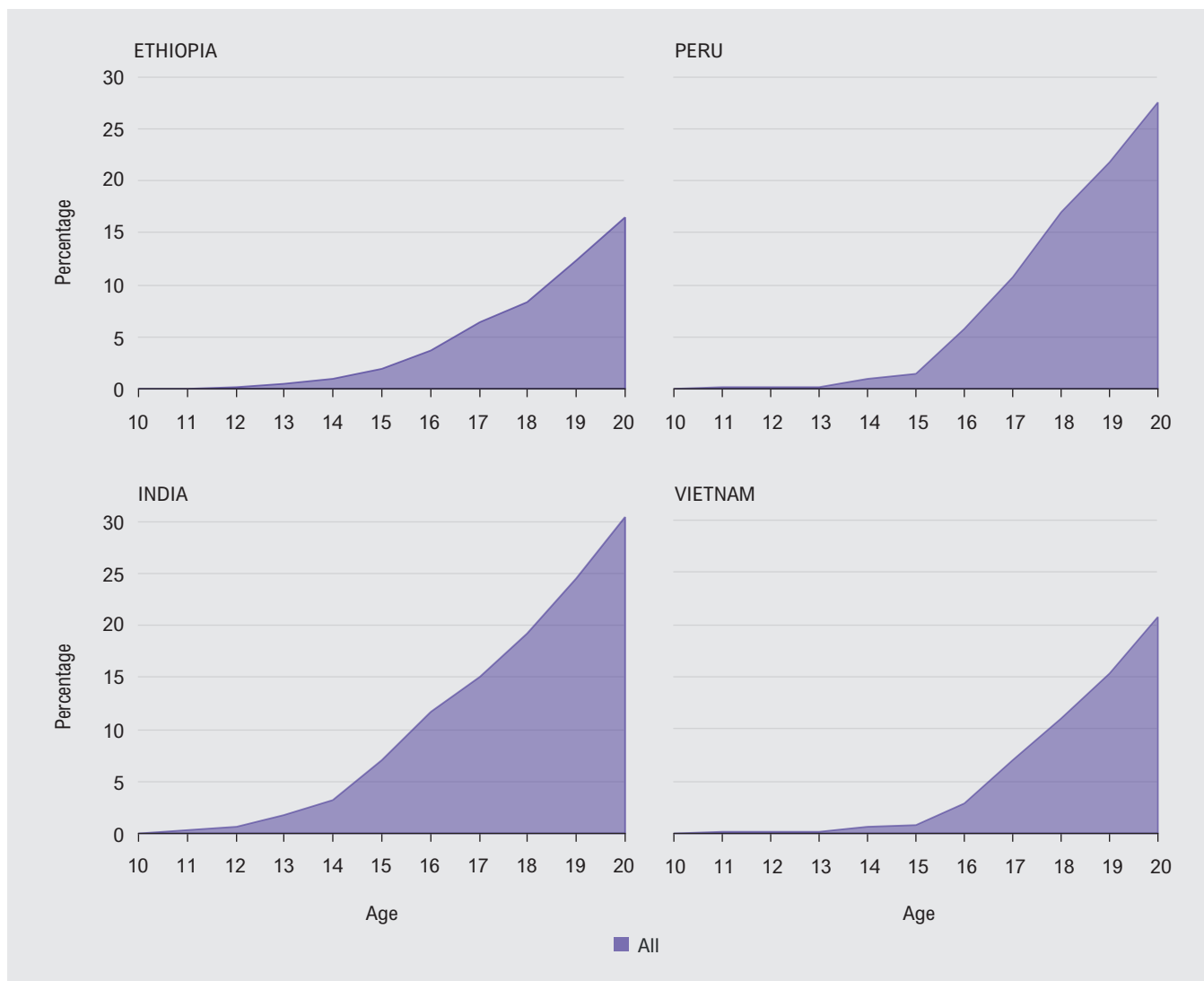
In reality, a large minority of girls married or began cohabitation during adolescence. Young Lives findings show little evidence that minimum age of marriage laws are having a direct impact on the timing of marriage. The proportion of girls who are married rises steadily from the age of around 16 years (15 years in India), with no sign of the kind of discontinuities around the age of 18 which would indicate that girls' marriages are being delayed to conform to the law.

However, in contrast to many of their mothers and grandmothers, only a very small number of adolescent girls in the Young Lives study married very early. This is important because of the heightened risks of pregnancy for girls aged under 15. The exception was India, where 6 per cent of girls married before their fifteenth birthday. In Zambia, too, it was common for girls of 12 or 13 years old and above to form relationships with boys two or three years older than them. In Ethiopia, there were examples of very early arranged marriages in specific regions.

In some circumstances, vigorous enforcement of such legislation may leave girls more vulnerable. Interviews in five Young Lives study locations in Ethiopia found that efforts to eradicate deeply rooted practices of female child marriage and female genital mutilation/cutting were sometimes contested and had had unexpected negative consequences, such as increasing premarital sex with little access to contraception, and clandestine surgeries.

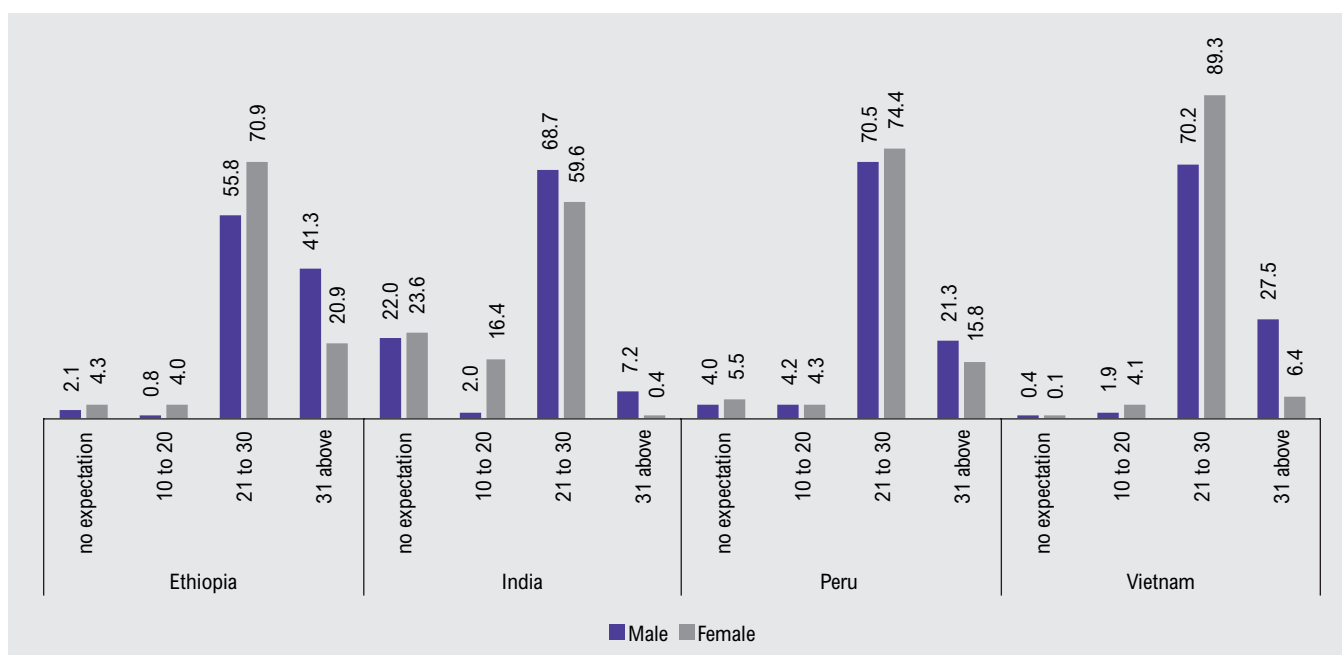
<sup>2</sup> Caregivers' include parents, guardians and other carers of children.

Figure 1. Marriage and cohabitation rates in country sites



Source: Young Lives data visualisations ([www.younglives.org.uk/content/marriage-cohabitation-rate-country-sites](http://www.younglives.org.uk/content/marriage-cohabitation-rate-country-sites)).

Figure 2. Caregiver expectation of age at which son/daughter should have first child



Source: Young Lives Round 2 household survey, 2006.



### **Patterns of family formation are highly gendered**

“ People are always ready to slander a girl if she is alone. ”

(Mother, urban Andhra Pradesh, India)

Where ‘peer relationships’ were common, these gender differences were not as great. By age 19 in Peru, 27 per cent of women but also 7 per cent of men had married or cohabited. In Zambia, the most common form of marriages described in qualitative research were relationships between teenage girls and boys two or three years older than them.

### **Children from rural households, the poorest and socially marginalised households are more likely to marry and cohabit before 18 years old**

“ ... they don't have funds for school fees. Hence, children stay at home without anything to do ... Children here have no recreational centres: hence if they can't go to school, recreation becomes sexual activities. ”

(Elder father in Luwingu, Zambia)

In common with other research, Young Lives finds that location and wealth shape whether girls marry and cohabit as children. Many girls from poorer rural households have limited job opportunities, and they and their families face risk from weather events, economic shocks and illness. Many

families, and some girls themselves, regard marriage as a way of ensuring that girls are provided for in adulthood, and of reducing the households' expenses. Economic pressures interact with powerful social norms: families may seek arranged marriages for their daughters in order to shield them from the perceived dangers and stigma associated with premarital sex, with the poorest households having fewest resources to identify alternatives to early marriage.

### **School enrolment in mid-adolescence is strongly associated with delayed marriage**

“ Once you get married, you must have children, and it leads to so many things. So I think she should spend a certain time in her life to complete all her studies, in a systematic manner. ”

(Mother of My, Vietnam)

Analysis of Young Lives data supports findings from cross-sectional studies which show a strong relationship between school enrolment and marriage.

- In India, whether a girl was enrolled at the age of 15 is quantitatively the most important single predictor of early marriage, reducing the likelihood of being married at age 19 by 32 per cent.
- In Vietnam, being enrolled in school at 15 years old is associated with a 35 per cent lower chance of girls marrying by age 19. This effect is after controlling for other factors such as poverty and is stronger for girls and young women from disadvantaged backgrounds.

#### **Ethiopia in context**

*Legal minimum age of marriage: 18 for women and men\**

Traditional forms of child marriage (particularly in the Amhara and Tigray regions) often involve girls under the age of 15 and coexist with newer, more fluid arrangements. Girls who are 16 years old and over often have more say in marriage decisions than is assumed, and some are part of ‘peer’ marriages initiated by the couple themselves. Forcible abductions were reported to be on the decline.

However, communities report a growing number of elopements, where couples leave together to avoid bride price. These arrangements are not endorsed by the couples' wider families, leading to new vulnerabilities if the marriage breaks down.

Among the Young Lives participants, there are a number of examples of divorce and separation shortly after marriage.

#### **Peru in context**

*Legal minimum age of marriage: 16 for women and men\**

Formal marriage is rare in Peru, where the vast majority of young people who are in a union are cohabiting. Of those Young Lives participants who are living with the other parent of their child, an estimated seven in 10 started cohabiting or got married when they discovered they were expecting a child.



Photo: Young Lives

\* Although there is a legal minimum age of marriage, in many countries boys and girls below that age can get married with parental consent.

- In Ethiopia, there is a statistically significant link between the highest grade completed and girls' marital status.
- In Peru, school achievement is an important influence over early marriage or cohabiting.

An important question for policy is whether child marriage is a consequence or a cause of girls leaving school. In Zambia, young people who could not attend secondary school because of the prohibitive cost explained that developing sexual relationships was a consequence of long periods of idle time with few opportunities for recreation or earning. In Ethiopia, almost every married girl in the Young Lives qualitative sub-sample initially left school to support their families at a time of hardship, and they married later. In India, some families took girls out of school or did not allow them to re-enroll after the holidays in order to marry, while others girls left school initially in order to work. Although illegal, dowry played a part in triggering early exit from school: for example, when a family received an offer with a low dowry demand, or where caregivers feared that educated girls would require a higher dowry.

Staying in school can contribute to delaying marriage, and there is evidence across Young Lives locations of more girls staying in school for longer. However, enrolment alone is not enough if schools are to contribute to girls' well-being and opportunities. Greater attention is needed to address poor learning progress, the high costs of learning, and school environments which are insanitary or unsafe for girls.

### India in context

*Legal minimum age of marriage: 18 for women and 21 for men\**

Arranged marriages with a man several years older are the norm across the Young Lives study locations, and self-arranged marriages are rare, only being possible with the support of family members. Whereas some communities did not practice dowry payments historically, dowry is now very prevalent and can drive early marriage: for example, where a good match with a low dowry offer is available at an early age.

There are very specific cultural practices related to marriage in some communities in Andhra Pradesh and Telangana: for example, specific windows for marriage in the years following the death of a family member, and a requirement that a girl of marriageable age must be married before her brother marries. Having an older brother is therefore a predictor of early marriage. Nearly three in 10 married girls had married a relative – often a maternal uncle or cousin.

### Striking diversity in marriage practices points to the importance of tailored interventions

Although growing, the research base for much policy on child marriage is relatively limited to a small number of countries in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia. Across all contexts, child marriage is strongly linked to being out of school, and being from a poorer and rural background. Nevertheless, patterns of marriage and cohabitation are different between and within countries.

### Young married girls, women and couples have limited support at a key turning point in their life

“Be submissive to the husband and silent.”

(Advice received by Radha before her marriage from her aunt)

In all countries studied, marriage and cohabitation signalled a dramatic change of status for girls and young women who often moved away from their natal home and their childhood friends, negotiating sexual and domestic relationships with their new partner and his family with little support. Married girls' work and care responsibilities increased sharply: girls who were married or living with a partner by age 19 were spending as much as eight hours on unpaid work in Peru and Ethiopia, seven hours in India, and almost six hours in Vietnam. Marriage and cohabitation was often swiftly followed by childbirth, with little evidence that young couples had received the information or services they needed to postpone the birth of their first child.

### Zambia in context

*Legal minimum age of marriage: 21 for women and men\**

Traditional forms of marriage involving families and the payment of bride price continue, but the most common unions are those that take place between peers, either through marriage or cohabitation. Some marriages are undertaken in response to a pregnancy or birth of a child. Others are transactional, where girls (and occasionally boys) enter into a relationship with an older partner who can bring financial and material benefits.



Photo: M. Munkondya Kennedy/Child Frontiers

\* Although there is a legal minimum age of marriage, in many countries boys and girls below that age can get married with parental consent.

## Policy principles

Findings from longitudinal and comparative research in five different contexts highlight the diversity and changing face of child and early marriage and cohabitation practices, together with the common themes of poverty, lack of services and opportunities, and unequal gender norms that sustain high rates of child marriage.

1. Longitudinal analysis highlights the association between school enrolment and delayed marriage. Making it possible for girls to remain in school is particularly urgent for younger adolescent girls who bear the greatest health risks from early pregnancy and childbirth resulting from very early marriage. High levels of parental support for education mean that this is a promising avenue for policy. Keeping girls in school involves much more than just making schooling available: it requires improving school effectiveness, reducing the direct and indirect costs of school, and protecting girls from violence and harassment.
2. The diversity of girls' experiences points to the importance of contextually relevant responses to early and child marriage: addressing 'peer' arrangements, supporting young women and mothers who are separated and divorced, as well as more traditional arranged marriages. Boys and young men are important actors in some contexts and should be engaged in policy and interventions addressing child marriage.
3. Across all locations, child marriage is underpinned by high levels of poverty and risk, limited services and opportunities for young women, combined with inequitable gender norms. Without action to address these underlying drivers, simply delaying marriage until the age of 18 will have limited benefits for girls' and young women's well-being and empowerment. Tackling these issues is not something that can be achieved by girls acting alone, it is a matter for whole communities and societies.
4. There is a striking lack of support and options for married girls and young women. Access to education and training, effective sexual and reproductive health information and services, and support from community and women's organisations has the potential to mitigate the impact of marriage on girls' and young women's ability to control their own fertility, their income and opportunities, and protection from violence and abuse. The needs of married girls and young women should be a priority for research and policy.

For more information on YMAPS visit [www.younglives.org.uk/content/funding-comparative-study-young-marriage-and-parenthood-ethiopia-india-peru-and-zambia](http://www.younglives.org.uk/content/funding-comparative-study-young-marriage-and-parenthood-ethiopia-india-peru-and-zambia) and follow [@yMAPStudy](https://twitter.com/yMAPStudy) on Twitter.

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The Young Marriage and Parenthood Study (YMAPS) is a new programme of comparative research examining young marriage and parenthood. The study is a collaboration between Young Lives, a longitudinal study of childhood poverty following the lives of 12,000 children in Ethiopia, India, Peru and Vietnam over 15 years, and Child Frontiers, a consulting company that works in partnership to promote the care, well-being and protection of children. YMAPS is funded by Canada's International Development Research Centre (IDRC). The views expressed are those of the authors. They are not necessarily those of, or endorsed by, Young Lives, Child Frontiers, the University of Oxford, IDRC or other funders.





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