



## 16 Days of Activism – Day 6

One out of every three girls in developing countries is married before the age of 18, and one in nine is married before age 15. Many are married as young as the age of 12. These girls are typically from rural areas and have little wealth or education. It is estimated that in the next 10 years, about 14 million child marriages will occur each year in developing countries. Early marriage is a form of sexual and gender-based violence which violates a girl's basic rights and has detrimental physical, social and economic effects. For most young girls getting married results in an end to formal education. Early marriage can also be a precursor to a death sentence: child brides often become pregnant at a

young age, long before they are ready physically or emotionally, and this can have devastating consequences. In fact, complications during pregnancy and child birth is the second most common cause of death for 15-19 year olds globally. Research indicates that adolescent girls who are forced to marry early experience:

- Social isolation
- Poverty
- Gender-based violence, including non-consensual sex and domestic, physical, psychological and sexual violence
- Lack of education
- Lack of access to health services



Ironically, one of the drivers of child marriage is the belief that a girl will be 'safer' if she is married and that marriage will protect her against physical and sexual assault. The very opposite is true. The 14 million young girls married every year around the world are at particular risk of physical, psychological and sexual violence. Child brides are vulnerable to physical violence from their partners or their partners' families. Research shows that they are more likely to be abused, threatened or beaten by their husbands than girls who marry later.

As well as suffering physical violence, child brides often have a distorted sense of their own worth. They are more likely to believe that a man is justified in beating his wife than women who marry later. In fact, globally, nearly half of girls aged 15-19 think that a husband or a partner is justified in hitting or beating his wife or partner in certain circumstances.

The power dynamics within marriage can also lead to sexual violence. Many child brides describe their first sexual experience as forced. The greater the age difference between a child bride and her husband, the more likely she is to experience intimate partner violence. In a study in northern Ethiopia, 81% of girls married aged 10-19 described their first sexual experience as against their will. Other studies have also found that many women who have married young continue to experience forced sex throughout their marriage.

Lack of education means that young brides often don't know about sex, are ignorant about their bodies and unaware about the 'mechanics' of reproduction, all of which are compounded by the silence surrounding these 'taboo' subjects. Married young, these girls are denied control over their own bodies and are unable to make informed choices about sex and when or whether to have children. Adolescent girls need information, access and power to demand health services and education. Early marriage and adolescent pregnancy lead to girls leaving school and deprives them of the right to education, which is necessary for their personal development, their preparation for adult life and their contribution to their own future well-being and that of their families and society overall.

Child marriage and violence are also linked to HIV infection. In 2015, around 7,500 young women became newly infected with HIV every week. That is around 45 young women every hour. It is hard to believe that it is a coincidence that the countries with some of the highest rates of HIV infection often also have high rates of child marriage.

This bleak picture could provide much cause for despair, and it is unsurprising that many child brides suffer mental health problems such as severe depression. However, what continues to give us hope is the stories of girls who have been able to avoid getting married, as well as those of girls who were able to escape violent marriages and rebuild their lives.

Zonta International has worked with UNFPA to reduce early marriage and early pregnancy in Niger since 2014. The program is intended to provide teenage girls in Niger with new skills, health knowledge, and social and economic empowerment. With an average cost of only \$85 per girl, funding from ZI will cover the participation of approximately 11,000 adolescents from 2016-2018. In

addition, parents, relatives and peers will benefit from knowledge shared by the girls, including valuable health and hygiene information. Girls will also receive a holistic program of services from mentors, including basic literacy training, establishment of birth certificates, knowledge on issues of sexual and reproductive health, health services, self-esteem, decision-making, financial management and life skills, including making their voices heard.

It will take focused programs such as this to educate not only the young girls, but also governments and communities. If we work together to tackle child marriage, we can create a world where girls and women are empowered, in charge of their own destinies, and able to live their lives free of violence; a world where women's rights are recognized as human rights and every woman is able to achieve her full potential.

Please watch: <https://youtu.be/lXiSo0TsMuQ> and <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0SwrXYJE6xw>

**SAY NO TO VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN.**