

Addressing the Risk Factors for Early Marriage in Viet Nam

Today's youth has a crucial role to play in the future development of Viet Nam in terms of both economic and social development. Early marriage is associated with a higher risk of mortality for both mother and child, and takes away learning opportunities from young women. Although the government of Viet Nam has set a minimum age for marriage, the incidence of early marriage has been increasing over recent years. Policies need to address the root factors associated with early marriage.



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Globally, more than 700 million women are married before the age of 18, with 250 million of these married before the age of 15 (UNICEF 2014). The incidence of early marriage has been falling over time, with one in four girls married today before 18, compared to one in three in the 1980s (UNICEF 2014). Although Viet Nam has a relatively low rate of early marriage compared to other low- and middle-income countries, it has increased in recent years. The number of girls and young women aged between 15 and 19 who are married increased from 5.4% in 2006 to 8.4% in 2011 and 10.3% in 2014 (GSO and UNICEF: MICS 2006, 2011, 2014). The proportion of girls married before the age of 15 also increased from 0.7% in 2006 and 2011 to 0.9% in 2014.

The incidence of marriage before age 15 is comparatively higher in the Northern Uplands and Central Highlands which are home to many ethnic minorities. This suggests greater attention is needed to address the factors that put girls at risk. Understanding which girls are more likely to marry early and what are the risk factors, are important for designing effective policies to prevent early marriage. Three important risk factors that we can identify using Young Lives longitudinal data are: having already left school at age 15, being from an ethnic minority, and having a mother with little decision-making power (Brown 2015).

Key messages

One in five (21%) of the older children interviewed in the third round of the Young Lives survey had left school between the ages of 12 and 15. Some groups are more likely to leave school than others:

- Early marriage remains an issue among ethnic minorities and poor girls and young women in Viet Nam, despite legal age of marriage being set at 18.
- Leaving school before the age of 15, being from an ethnic minority or having a mother with little decision-making power are associated with early marriage.
- Policies to support girls to continue their schooling and support them to enter the labour market are essential to tackle early marriage.
- Ensuring that reproductive health services are accessible and 'adolescent-friendly' and empowering young women to have more say in household decision-making are two further important measures.

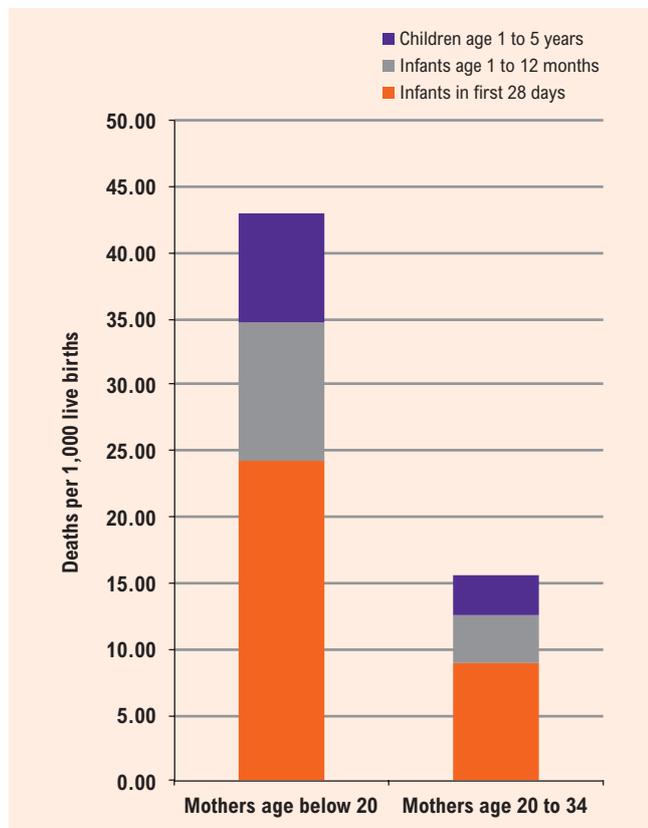
Definition of child/early marriage

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) defines children as 'every human being below the age of eighteen years'. Thus, 'child marriage' is the marriage of an individual under the age of 18 years. Here, we use the term 'early marriage' to include all those who married before the age of 20. In Viet Nam, the minimum legal age of marriage was set as 18 in the 2014 Law on Marriage and Family.

Why early marriage matters?

Early marriage not only violates girls' human rights, it makes young women vulnerable to risks such as physical and sexual abuse by their partners. Early child-bearing is also linked to higher mortality for both young women and their children. Girls who marry young are more vulnerable to HIV or other sexually transmitted infections, as they are less able to negotiate safer sex (UNICEF 2014). In addition, married immature girls often have a heavy burden of housework and emotional stress caused by complicated relationships with their husband's family.

Figure 1. Infant and child mortality is strongly linked to mother's age (per 1,000 live births)



Source: MICS 2014

Poverty, ethnic minority status and low empowerment are risk factors for early marriage

Of the 462 young women in the Young Lives sample, 19% (85 girls) were married by the age of 19 (Young Lives 2014). Of these, 30% had married at age 16 or below; 39% at age 17; 26% at age 18, and a further four young women (5%) had married at age 19. In other words, two-thirds (69%) were married before the minimum legal age of marriage. The incidence of child/early marriage is concentrated among young women in the Northern Uplands, from the poorest quartile of households, or with caregivers who did not complete primary education – with more than 30% of young women in each of these categories having married. After controlling for child and household characteristics, we found that not being enrolled in school at age 15, being from an ethnic minority group, and having a mother with little decision-making power in the household are all associated with higher risk of girls marrying early.

Within the Young Lives sample girls from ethnic minorities were more likely to marry early regardless of which group to which they belonged. Other analysis shows that H'Mong girls have higher rates of child/early marriage. In some isolated villages, early marriage is a result of abduction (*bat vo*) (Jones et al. 2014).

Ho-mai's view

"Getting married is totally different to living with our parents. When living with my parents I felt very comfortable, I could do whatever I liked, I could go wherever I wanted. But now after getting married, if I go anywhere I need to ask my parents-in-law and I can go only if they agree. Whatever I do I need to ask their permission and do only if they have no objection." (Interview with Ho Mai, aged 20, who married at age 16)

Ho Nit's view

"I have to work for my husband's family. My work includes agricultural work... And housework like cooking meals, clean the house. When living with my parents I work and take a break whenever I like, but now when I live with my parents in-law and I'm afraid they may say 'I do nothing at all and already want to rest' (so I just work non-stop). (Interview with Ho Nit, aged 20)

School enrolment is a protective factor

Being enrolled in school is associated with a 35% lower chance of girls marrying early. This effect is after controlling for other factors such as poverty, which may themselves affect the chances of early marriage. This protective effect is stronger for girls and young women from disadvantaged backgrounds, (i.e. poor, from a rural area, from an ethnic minority, or whose mothers have low levels of education) at around a 47% decrease in the likelihood of marrying early.

This may be because of the opportunities school opens up for the future, or the knowledge and messages that girls are taught in school, or it could reflect the change in time-use when a girl leaves school. One health officer in Phu Yen province (in the Central Highlands) explained that: "The reason why ethnic minority girls get married early is they are not going to school (thus they have time to hang out). Being close (to boyfriends) makes them afraid of getting pregnant, thus they want to get married early." (There are strong social norms that stipulate that women should not have children outside marriage.)

Leaving school early also means that girls have limited chances of finding decent work and so early marriage is seen as 'better' choice for girls. There are also social risks associated with delaying marriage. One ethnic minority girl left school after Grade 4 because she could not follow the lessons in Vietnamese, which was not her first language, and she was married at age 19. Her father explained that he thought it would be better if his daughter married sooner because if: "someone at her age [19] is still in school, say Grade 11 or 12, I would have not allowed her to get married.... But she only works at home and may go to 'bo ma' ceremony and hang out with others (young men). She does not know 'words' [meaning being able to read and write]. If she did, I would support her to study further to find a good job after graduation. But this is not the case, she does not know the words."

Challenges with minimum age legislation

The commune health officer in one of the Young Lives study sites in Hung Yen province in the Red River Delta observed that many young girls who are not in school get married between the ages of 18 and 20. In comparison, young people who complete their education do not marry until age 24 or 25 and often find a permanent job before getting married.

The commune health officer in another study site in Phu Yen in the Central highlands described differences between Kinh girls and those from ethnic minorities. While some Kinh girls may marry as young as 17, girls from ethnic minorities sometimes marry at age 14 or 15. In her commune there are 4 or 5 cases of child marriage each year. Young couples then wait a few years to obtain a marriage certificate and birth certificate for their children, once they have reach the legal marriage age of 18.

Conclusion

Girls who were not enrolled in school at age 15, or are from an ethnic minority group, or whose mothers had little decision-making power within the family are at greater risk of early marriage. We found that school enrolment is the strongest protective factor and these findings are very much in line with the recent UNICEF Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys 2014 (MICS 2014). Longitudinal analysis adds value by identifying the earlier determinants of early marriage.

Implications for policy

The Government took an important step forward in the new Law on Marriage and Family in 2014 by raising the age of marriage to after the 18th birthday instead of after the 17th birthday for girls (and the 20th instead of 19th birthday for boys). Although the legislation is an important step, it does not address the root causes of why early marriage persists.

A number of policy implications can be teased out from our analysis to complement the law in fighting against early marriage:

- Helping ethnic minority girls and young women who leave school early to find suitable jobs. If young women remain in agricultural work with few other opportunities, they may feel that getting married is the only option available. Vocational training and support to find jobs (or part-time jobs) such as craft work, tourist service, etc. may help to delay marriage.
- Expanding and sustaining the policies that are already in place to support poor and ethnic minority children to attend secondary school to ensure poor and ethnic minority girls stay in school as long as possible. Current education support programmes target mainly children from the official 'poor' households, leaving behind children from families who are just above the poverty line. Given free primary education and the relatively low poverty line in Viet Nam, incremental incentives should be given to all ethnic minority girls as they progress to higher grades.

- Extending reproductive health education and services to adolescents, especially girls who are likely to marry early. Better knowledge about their health and the contraceptive options available to them will help girls to avoid feeling forced to enter marriage because of the fear of getting pregnant.
- Raising awareness against early marriage through strong propaganda campaign. Media and information campaigns about the negative impacts of early marriage and the legal minimum age of marriage should be arranged in the poor and remote areas. Since early marriage is more prevalent among ethnic minority groups, it is essential that information is available in minority languages.
- Strengthening the enforcement of the Law on Marriage and Family in general, especially in the Northern Uplands and Central Highlands. In practice, implementation of the law differs from one place to another and uniform implementation is necessary across the whole country.
- Involving community elders and families in programmes for early marriage prevention. The cultural norm in many parts of the country is that girls should marriage early. Old people are highly respected, especially among ethnic minority groups, and thus they can help to convince young people to delay marriage.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS AND CREDITS

This policy brief has been written by Hang Nguyen Thu, Policy Officer for Young Lives in Viet Nam, based at the Centre for Analysis and Forecast of the Viet Nam Academy of Social Sciences. The author is grateful for input from Nguyen Thu Huong, Kiriilly Pells and Paul Dornan. This work has been carried out as part of the Multi-Country Study on the Drivers of Violence Affecting Children; the financial support of the UNICEF Office of Research is gratefully acknowledged.

Young Lives is funded by UK aid from the Department for International Development (DFID) and co-funded from 2014 to 2015 by Irish Aid. The views expressed are those of the author(s). They are not necessarily those of, or endorsed by, Young Lives, the University of Oxford, DFID or other funders.

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Funded by



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