

Child Marriage in Azerbaijan (Overview)



Child[hood] dreams end when you get married. It means that you skip your childhood.

—Mother participating in focus group

Child marriages

Early or child marriage is the union, whether official or not, of two persons, at least one of whom is under 18 years of age.¹ By virtue of being children, child spouses are considered to be incapable of giving full consent, meaning that child marriages should be considered a violation of human rights and the rights of the child. Rates of child marriage are high in certain parts of Azerbaijan, and are the result of a combination of cultural attitudes, such as the importance attached to marriage and motherhood for women, and socio-economic factors, such as poverty.

Child marriage is a gendered phenomenon that affects girls and boys in different ways. Overall, the number of boys in child marriages around the world is significantly lower than that of girls. Girl child spouses are also vulnerable to domestic violence and sexual abuse within relationships that are unequal, and if they become pregnant, often experience complications during pregnancy and childbirth, as their bodies are not ready for childbearing. Upon marrying, both boys and girls often have to leave education to enter the workforce and/or take up domestic responsibilities at home.

Various international treaties, conventions, and programmes for action address child marriage. These include: the 1962 Convention on Consent to Marriage, Minimum Age for Marriage, and Registration of Marriages; the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (1979); the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989); and the 1995 Beijing Platform for Action (which followed the UN Fourth World Conference on Women). These international instruments cover the abolishment of harmful customs and traditions, violence against the girl child, marriage consent, marriageable age, registration of marriage, and the freedom to choose a spouse.

This fact sheet provides information about child marriage in Azerbaijan and offers recommendations aimed at addressing the issue. It includes a review of national legislation and the country's ratification of the various international standards relevant to the issue, analysis of current practices and attitudes towards child marriage, and statistical information about the prevalence of the practice. The methodology for this study involved a review of the existing legal framework and literature related to child marriage in Azerbaijan, and interviews and focus groups with child spouses, community members, and experts.

Recommendations

- Harmonise national legislation including the Law of the Azerbaijan Republic on the Provisions of Gender Equality with the provisions of the amendment on the equalisation of minimum legal marriage age.
- Review and amend, if necessary, the national family and marriage laws and policies that foster discrimination against women and girls, in order to enhance women's rights to property, and their economic independence.
- Introduce special temporary measures, such as financial incentives and scholarships for low-income families with girl children, to encourage the delay of marriage.
- Organise country-wide advocacy and awareness-raising campaigns to promote awareness of the rights of girls.
- Develop multisectoral partnerships among state and nongovernmental agencies to address the issue of child marriage in a comprehensive and holistic manner.

Respect for girls' human rights requires that we prevent and end child marriage, and demands that we actively support girls who are already married. Human rights realised for girls is simply the fulfilment of our duty to them. It is the only course by which we can avert what otherwise is the human tragedy of child marriage.

—Dr. Babatunde
Osotimehin, Executive
Director, UNFPA



Legal and national context

On 12 June 1992, less than a year after the restoration of independence, the Azerbaijan National Assembly ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). The National Assembly also ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) on 10 June 1995. The ratification of CEDAW was followed by a presidential decree in 1998, further clarifying the national government's approach to gender issues. On 6 June 2000, the Republic of Azerbaijan signed the Optional Protocol to CEDAW, which entered into force on 16 February 2001.²

In order to meet its international obligations, the Government of Azerbaijan passed the Law on the Rights of the Child in 1998 and issued decrees to improve the implementation of its policies to assist women and children. The provisions of this legislation have been incorporated into various national action plans, although as yet, there has been no dedicated national action plan on children's rights.

The child welfare system in Azerbaijan does not function effectively. For instance, the agencies responsible for child protection under local Executive Committees do not have the capacity to implement effective child protection and care. Agencies are under-resourced and do not have enough staff, and the staff who are working for them are not trained effectively in child protection. In some cases, it may be difficult for families experiencing poverty and hardship to get the support they are entitled to; this was the experience of some of the child spouses interviewed for this research.

“We consider this document [on state control over children's rights] as our success because now the obligations of government institutions regarding the observation of children's rights [are] clear.” (Government official)

A presidential decree signed in May 2012 established a framework for state oversight in regard to children's rights, defining the roles and responsibilities of the various state institutions responsible for protecting children's rights.³ A supreme council that would coordinate the work of all different government

institutions is also planned. The 'Azerbaijan 2020: Future development concept' approved by presidential decree in December 2012 includes provision for the preparation and adoption of a legal code covering children's rights.⁴

Under Article 1 of the Law on the Rights of the Child of the Azerbaijan Republic, adopted in 1998, a person under the age of 18 is legally considered to be a child.

Although the official poverty rate in Azerbaijan is below 6 per cent,⁵ poverty affects many families. The inability to meet the basic needs of their children was identified as a factor in some parents' decisions to try marry their daughters off early, in order that they might have a better life with their husband's family.

While there are no statistics on sex-selective abortions in the country, the State Statistics Committee has recorded a growing demographic imbalance in female and male births since 2000. The Demographic and Health Survey (DHS) held in Azerbaijan in 2006 found that sex selection was cited as the reason for many abortions.⁶ Sex-selective abortion is closely connected with the low status of girls in Azerbaijani society.⁷

Who can contract a marriage?

Under Article 10 of the Family Code of the Republic of Azerbaijan, the minimum marriage age for men and women is now 18; until November 2011, there was a lower marriage age (17) for women. However, the minimum marriage age can be reduced by one year if permission is granted by the local executive power. Despite the fact that this change in the law occurred over two years ago, some of the experts interviewed for this study were unaware of it. This reveals that this sphere is not well researched and studied in Azerbaijan. The Family Code requires that a marriage be contracted one month after presenting an application.

Under Article 11 of the Family Code, for a marriage to be registered, both spouses must provide written consent, and evidence that they have attained the minimum legal age for marriage. Under Article 12 of the Family Code, marriages cannot be registered if the potential spouses are close relatives or if one or both are already married, among other reasons.

Religious marriages based on the *kabin* marriage contract, performed by the local mullah, are not legally recognised or officially registered. Despite the fact that an agreement between the state and the religious authorities obliges the mullah to require potential spouses to show a civil marriage certificate and birth certificates for the bride and groom before the *kabin*, usually the religious marriage ceremony is conducted without checking either the age of the two spouses or the availability of the official marriage document.

“Sometimes fathers come without [their daughters] to make [a marriage] contract but I refuse, so they make the contract in [another] mosque. I don’t [issue the] *kabin* [religious marriage contract] unless people show me the [civil] marriage certificate.” (Mullah)

Under Article 176-1 of the Criminal Code of Azerbaijan, forced marriage is punishable by up to two years’ imprisonment or a fine of AZN 2,000-3,000 (\$2,500-\$3,800) for forcing an adult woman into marriage. If a minor under the age of 18 is forced into marriage, the penalty rises to four years’ imprisonment or a fine from AZN 3,000 (\$3,750) to AZN 4,000 (\$5,000). It is also illegal to cohabit with a child under the age of 16, according to the Criminal and Civil Codes of Azerbaijan. Cohabitation from the age of 16 is legal, provided no force has been used. Bride abductions, which still take place in the country, qualify as kidnapping and fall under Article 144.1 of the Criminal Code of the Azerbaijan Republic, punishable by five to ten years’ imprisonment. Furthermore, Articles 150.1 and 150.3 of the Criminal Code of the Republic of Azerbaijan state that forcing a person to engage in sexual activity is punishable by three to five years’ imprisonment; if these actions involve a person under 14, the punishment is eight to 15 years’ imprisonment.

Family planning and reproductive rights

Under Article 16 of the Law of the Republic of Azerbaijan on Protection of Health of the Population, every citizen has the right to get free health advice and check-ups, and to access family planning services at

a hospital. A law on reproductive health and family planning is still pending approval. The draft law (initially developed by the National Reproductive Health Centre with the support of UNFPA, in close cooperation with the Parliamentary Commission on Social Policy) has undergone several readings in the country’s parliament. It was rejected following strong opposition put forward by various groups of parliamentarians. The draft law’s opponents argued that artificial insemination, surrogate motherhood, and sperm donation envisaged in the bill contradicted the ‘national mentality’ while its proponents believed adoption of the bill would contribute to preventing divorces and addressing the problem of infertility.

According to Article 18 of the Law on Protection of Health of the Population, minors under age 18 are able to obtain free consultations and services at state health institutions, in line with the guidelines issued by the respective bodies of executive power (local ex-coms). However, the law does not contain a separate provision on reproductive health services to minors. In practice, only married adolescents access reproductive and sexual health services. Premarital sexual relationships are taboo in Azerbaijan, and it would be socially unacceptable for unmarried adolescents to make use of such services.

Reproductive health care in Azerbaijan is implemented through an extensive system of mobile polyclinics and maternity hospitals. The network of mobile healthcare providers is organised by geographical region. Healthcare is offered through polyclinics running targeted consultations for women, and in rural health facilities. The proportion of women who are able to receive antenatal care varies by region, educational attainment, and wealth quintile. Mothers in Daghlig Shirvan, Aran, Guba-Khachmaz, and Lankaranara are much less likely to receive professional antenatal care than women in the other regions. Overall, according to the Azerbaijan Gender Information Centre (AGIC), in 2007, 67.6 per cent of pregnant women under 20 had received antenatal care from a doctor.⁸ However, women under age 20 are somewhat less likely to deliver in a health facility than older women. Health facility deliveries were highest among women having their first birth (84 per cent), and lowest among women who had received no antenatal care (54 per cent).⁹ The majority of women in Azerbaijan have access to reproductive and sexual health services when they are pregnant.

According to the Demographic and Health Survey (DHS) of Azerbaijan carried out in 2006, 99.4 per cent of girls aged 15-19 included in the survey reported that they were not using any form of contraception, no doubt reflecting very low rates of sexual activity among unmarried girls. Among married adolescent girls, 49 per cent were not using any form of contraception, 37 per cent were using 'traditional' methods (withdrawal or rhythm method), and 14 per cent were using 'modern' contraceptives. Only about two-thirds of young men (60 per cent) and one-third (33 per cent) of young women aged 15-24 said they knew a place where they could obtain a condom.¹⁰ Since 1980, the fertility rate for girls aged 15-19 has increased, while the general fertility rate has decreased.¹¹

There is some social and cultural resistance in Azerbaijan to including sex education in the school curriculum. Currently, only one paragraph (in the ninth grade anatomy textbook) in the entire curriculum deals with sex. But this does not cover reproductive and sexual health, including such issues as unintended pregnancies among adolescents, the use of modern methods of contraception, or the prevention of sexually transmitted infections. There have been some peer-to-peer education programmes targeting adolescents with information about these topics. But the current situation of sex education in schools shows that adolescents do not receive adequate sex education. Sex education among young people requires special attention and emphasis from the government and nongovernmental organisations.

“The first two children were [planned]. We were so happy about our children. But the next children were not wanted by me. We [went] to the health centre for an abortion, but because of the religious holidays, they [advised us not to have the abortion]. After the fourth child, I asked my relatives [for] suggestions about how to prevent pregnancy.” (Female child spouse)

In addition, the DHS found that many women continue to rely on abortion as a primary means of contraception; more than half of abortions were performed on women who had not been using any method of contraception to prevent the pregnancy

(58 per cent).¹² The child spouses who were interviewed during our research also mentioned that they did not use contraception; in fact, every single one of them had had an abortion, or contemplated having an abortion, to terminate an unwanted pregnancy, until they learned about other forms of contraception, and were able to access them. According to the 2006 DHS, 85 per cent of women questioned cited at least one of the following factors as a barrier to their accessing healthcare: cost; lack of provision; lack of transport; and needing to obtain permission to go to the doctor (cited by 15 per cent of women).¹³

Child marriages in Azerbaijan

Azerbaijan traditionally has had high levels of early first marriages, and very few people – in particular, women – remain unmarried in adulthood. However, evaluating the actual extent of early marriage is complicated by the lack of statistical data, as stated by a government official interviewed for this research. The official statistics reflect marriages and divorces registered at state, civil registration agencies. Only this form of registration of citizens' marital status is legally binding. In accordance with this legislation, compelling minors to marry is defined as a crime on the part of all participants except for the minor herself. Therefore, finding cases of early marriage is a difficult task, as so few are registered.¹⁴

“Mentality, different religious beliefs, customs, and traditions [all] play an important role in early marriage.”
(Government official)

According to the official figures from the state statistics agency (SSCRA), since 2003, the number of women entering registered marriages has increased, as has the number of girls marrying before the age of 18. In 2003, 56,091 women were officially married, of whom 2,556 (4.6 per cent) were below 18. In 2005 these figures were 71,643 and 4,016 (5.6 per cent) respectively, and in 2009, 78,072 and 5,380 (6.9 per cent), respectively.¹⁵

However, local human rights nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) insist that more than 10,000 early marriages have been carried out in the Republic of Azerbaijan since the country regained independence, and that their number is increasing

every year. For instance, work by various public organisations has revealed an increase in the number of early marriages among girls aged 12-16 in the southern regions of Azerbaijan, especially in the Jalilabad and Masalli districts, and that the majority of these girls had only received primary education.¹⁶ These figures are neither confirmed nor refuted by state statistics. But interviews with some NGO representatives suggest that research is not always conducted objectively, and is often limited by anecdotal evidence, or retelling of individual cases.

As one of the experts on child marriage interviewed for this study stated, 'Early marriages are a destructive social phenomena [that are not limited to any particular] ethnic or religious groups.'

In popular understanding, Islam allows early marriages. But this reveals a very superficial comprehension of Islam and Sharia law. Sharia law does not specify the exact age of marriage, but it does stipulate a fixed standard of mental maturity or sound judgment that must be reached before a person should marry. There is clearly a difference between attaining puberty and physical maturity on the one hand and emotional and psychological maturity and the capacity to manage life on the other. According to the Quran, married life necessitates that both husband and wife are enlightened and sensible. It is not, therefore, served by the marriage of children. As a mullah interviewed for this research explained, 'early marriage' in Islam does not mean child marriage. The child spouses that were interviewed during this research were not actually practising Muslims. That said, most had had a religious marriage ceremony and had a *kabin* religious marriage contract, although some did not even have this.

Given that this was a small-scale, qualitative research project, the research findings presented here cannot be taken as representative of the country as a whole. In particular, while the research participants all came from low-income families living in poor conditions (and married into low-income families), child marriages also take place among wealthier families.

Early marriage is not a problem, [but] by ... 'early' I don't mean child marriage, I mean a psychologically and physically mature person. If a person is not ready for marriage and [she gets married], then it is a problem. (Mullah)

According to earlier research by UNICEF on early marriage in Azerbaijan,¹⁷ early marriages occur throughout the country, but the prevalence is higher in certain regions. For instance, data that are available indicate that child marriage is widespread among villages on the Absheron peninsula (not only among the local population but also among refugees and forced migrants), as well as in the southern (Lenkaran) and northern (Guba) regions. Prevalence is lower in the western zone (Aghstafa). Focus group participants identified southern districts as having particularly high rates of child marriage, especially Masally and Lerik. One of the focus group participants also mentioned that among child marriages overall, the marriage age varies between families and regions; for example, most of the girls in Shamakhy get married at the age of 13, according to this participant.

“I have a daughter who is 14 years old. She [still sleeps] with a doll. How can I marry her [off] now? How can she get used to the new environment of a new family?”
(Mother, a focus group member)

Indirect indicators for child marriage, such as the number of female students enrolling in university, also show considerable regional variation. According to data from the State Student Admittance Commission, the proportion of girls among university entrants in the southern districts of Yardimli, Lerik, Jalilabad, and Masalli fluctuates between 8 per cent and 33 per cent, while the proportion of girls among university entrants from Zaqatala, Balaken, and Gakh districts in the northwest part of the Republic is 63 to 69 per cent.¹⁸

These regional differences can be accounted for by the more traditional and conservative attitudes in the southern districts. Mountainous areas in these regions and communities are relatively conservative, and child marriages often take place there.

The State Committee on Family, Women, and Children's Affairs, with support from UNICEF

Azerbaijan and in cooperation with the International Centre for Social Studies (ICSS), carried out a joint study on the theme of 'Early marriages: violation of the human rights of children' in 2008.¹⁹ According to that report, the different factors which have triggered the increasing prevalence of early marriages in Azerbaijani society are mutually related and closely interwoven. These factors can be divided into two groups: cultural-psychological and socio-economic.

The first group includes traditional attitudes towards the family institution and gender relations, including the idea that it is a woman's destiny to marry, and that marriage and childbearing should be a woman's main accomplishment in life. There is also the importance placed on girls' virginity and chastity, and family 'honour'. Families in Azerbaijan for the most part remain strongly patriarchal, and this is another factor. In addition, as discussed above, many people wrongly believe that Islam condones child marriage.

Socio-economic factors identified in the UNICEF report include the ongoing process of economic and social transition. Through arranging early marriages for their children, people strive to overcome poverty or better their economic and social status. Economic uncertainty has served to reinforce practices of nepotism, with people seeking support from the extended family, and taking refuge in traditional social norms. Early marriages, especially marrying off young girls, is perceived as indicative of the husband's family's stability and prosperity; the extended family may overtly promote early marriage by providing support in the form of an apartment for the young married couple, or help in obtaining higher education or getting a prestigious job. At the other end of the social spectrum, there remain more than one million refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Azerbaijan, as a result of the conflict with Armenia, and in neighbouring Chechnya. The UNICEF report noted that most IDPs and refugees live in very poor conditions; for

girls from these families, early marriage can seem like a way of escaping from poverty and overcrowding.

The UNICEF research found that there was a very high degree of acceptance of child marriage both among families in which early marriages have taken place and in the society as a whole. Among relatives and acquaintances, very few condemned early marriage, while more than half welcomed it.

This high degree of social endorsement of early marriages reveals how little is known in Azerbaijan about the negative consequences of the practice. It also shows the deeply rooted traditional perception that marriage is a measure of social advancement.²⁰ Indeed, focus group participants in this study supported this idea, with some referring to the proverb, 'those who wake up and get married early would never lose or be losers'.

Focus group participants

also pointed to the advantages of marrying and becoming a mother at a young age.

In some cases of child marriage, the marriage is contracted because of the girl's genuine will to marry. More often, it is her parents' decision. There are also a few cases of abduction. These factors are surprisingly intertwined, and the line between the girl's motivation to marry and her parents' compulsion is sometimes very thin.

*It is a big problem. If I still feel like a child even though I am 19 years old, how I can be a mother myself? Of course not. Most of the girls cannot think clearly and understand... married life. They think only about the fancy wedding party. But problems start afterwards.
(Young girl, a focus group member)*

“I was a child. That is why I have many difficulties with my family. My first two children died because I was too weak. They lived for just seven months.” (Child spouse)

Analysis of focus group discussions and in-depth interviews shows that a relatively high number of early marriages encountered in this study involved abduction. Most families will not allow a son to marry a girl or woman who was in the past abducted by another man, even if she did not have sexual

relations with her abductor. This means that in cases of bride kidnapping, the girl has little choice but to stay with her abductor.

One of the main impacts of child marriage in Azerbaijan is early motherhood. Focus group participants explained that in Azerbaijani society, a new bride is expected to give birth as soon as possible after the marriage; this is very important for a woman's social status. The family exerts strong pressure on the newly married couple to begin childbearing quickly.

“I attended school till eighth grade. Then we [moved to another place] and I didn't continue my education.” (Child spouse)

Early marriage inevitably denies school-age children their right to the education they need for their personal development, their preparation for adulthood, and their effective contribution to the future well-being of their family and society. The research by UNICEF found that 86 per cent of 488 respondents answered 'no' to the question, 'Do girls continue their education after marriage?'

Most of the child spouses interviewed for this study mentioned that they have faced domestic violence and isolation during the marriage.

“He was beating me up very often when I was pregnant. He kicked my stomach and wanted to kill my baby before birth. He didn't give me money for [food]. Also he brought other women home. After this I left home. My mother-in-law also beat me up.” (Child spouse)

Responses to child marriage

Mobilising local communities. A government official interviewed for this study reported on a successful pilot awareness-raising campaign, run in Masalli and Lankaran districts, in the south of the country. Police officers, mullahs, and community elders were invited to join groups to collect information about early marriages in their districts, and to inform families about the law, and about the consequences of the practice. Executive authorities also participated. As a result of this campaign, some child marriages were prevented in these districts.

Key points

Azerbaijan has a good legislative framework to protect children's rights, but the implementation process for child protection in Azerbaijan is not clear. A code on the rights of children will be adopted in the future to address this problem.

Adolescents do not receive adequate information and education about reproductive and sexual health, and contraception. Married adolescents reported relying on abortion to avoid unwanted pregnancies.

There is a lack of statistical data on child marriage in the country, but this research, and studies by NGOs and international agencies reveal that prevalence is different in different parts of the country.

A combination of cultural and socio-economic factors uphold support for child marriage.

Most child marriages are arranged by parents or the extended family, or are the result of bride abduction.

Girls who are married as children lose out on their education and their childhood.

Child spouses face domestic violence and isolation.

Quotes

The underlying causes [of child marriage] include the lack of local child-protection officers with appropriate training at the local level (who should be part of an integrated system of local child-protection services), to whom girls could turn if they are being pressured into child marriages, and also when they are already married and experiencing negative consequences. (Representative of an international organisation)

After having two children, me and my wife decided to prevent the birth of an additional child because of the hard financial conditions we lived in. But, we had to give birth to the third and fourth child as well, since the doctors refused to perform an abortion during the religious holidays. And only after this did my wife go to her mother to get some advice on how to prevent the birth of more children. Following this, we started using [contraception]. (Male child spouse)

It is almost the same in all regions; women are married off at [an] early [age]. (Focus group participant)

Especially, men are looking for girls who have not even graduated from school. In the mind of [these] boys, such girls are more pure and clean. Most of the time girls get married at the age of 16 or 17. (Mother, a focus group participant)

To get married at an early age was my family's decision. When I gave my opinion, they told me, it is already [too] late. (Child spouse)

Child[hood] dreams end when you get married. It means that you skip your childhood. Most of the child spouses are dissatisfied with their lives. (Mother, a focus group participant)

They [my mother-in-law] insulted me, but I was not able to defend [myself] because I was too young. (Child spouse)

Data overview

Total population (2013):	9,356,500 ²¹
Average household size:	4.70 ²²
Life expectancy at birth (2012):	71.3 (males); 76.6 (females) ²³
Population under age 15 as of 2013:	22.3% (2,087,100 in total) ²⁴
Population aged 15-18 years (2013):	8.6% (801,900 in total) ²⁵
Population below national income poverty line (2011):	7.6% ²⁶
Unemployment rate:	10.4% ²⁷
Youth literacy rate (2013):	99.9% (males); 99.7% (females) ²⁸
Health expenditure per capita per year (2011):	US \$523 ²⁹
Main ethnic groups:	Azerbaijanis, Lezgins, Russians, Armenians ³⁰
Main religions:	Islam, Christianity, Judaism
Main languages:	Azeri (official), Russian
Number of marriages (2012):	79,065 ³¹
Average age at first marriage (2012):	28.4 (males); 24 (females) ³²
Total fertility rate:	2.3 ³³
Age-specific fertility rate for girls aged 15-18 (2011)	33.0 births per 1,000 girls ³⁴

Child marriage statistics

Table 1. Marriages by bride's age and groom's age (2012)³⁵

Total number of marriages	Bride's age (years)		Groom's age (years)	
	Under 15	15-18	Under 16	16-18
79,065	N/A	5,380 (6.8%)	N/A	N/A

Table 2. Girls under age 18 who are married or cohabiting (2011)³⁶

Age	Number	% of all girls of this age
<15	-	-
15	-	-
16	115	-
17	1,986	-
Total under 18	2,101	-

Table 3. Live births by mother's age³⁷

Total number of live births	Mother's age						Total under 20
	Under 15	15	16	17	18	19	
174,469	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	20,337 (11.7%)

Table 4. Percentage of men and women in 15-18 age group currently married/in union, by level of education (2011)³⁸

Level of education	% men 15-18 years married/in union	% women 15-18 years married/in union
Primary	N/A	2.1
Secondary – not completed	N/A	45.0
Secondary	N/A	52.5
Higher	N/A	0.4

Table 5. Percentage of men and women in the 15-18 age group currently married/in union, by place of residence³⁹

Place of residence	% men 15-18 years married/in union	% women 15-18 years married/in union
Urban	N/A	38.9
Rural	N/A	61.1

Notes and references

- 1 A child is 'every human being below the age of 18 years unless under the law applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier'. United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), available at: <http://www2.ohchr.org/english/law/crc.htm> (accessed 29 May 2012).
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- 4 Presidential Decree on 'Azerbaijan 2020: Future development concept', December 2012, available at: http://www.president.az/files/future_az.pdf (accessed 23 November 2013).
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- 14 Azerbaijan Gender Information Centre (AGIC) (2007), *op. cit.*
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- 19 UNICEF (2009), *op. cit.*
- 20 *Ibid.*
- 21 State Statistical Committee of the Republic of Azerbaijan (2013) Statistical yearbook 'Women and men in Azerbaijan', Baku, Azerbaijan: State Statistical Committee, p.15.
- 22 The State Statistical Committee of the Republic of Azerbaijan, 'Table 1: Average size of household by economic regions', available at: http://www.azstat.org/statinfo/budget_households/en/index.shtml (accessed 30 November 2013).
- 23 State Statistical Committee of the Republic of Azerbaijan (2013), *op. cit.*, p.38.
- 24 *Ibid.*, p.15.
- 25 *Ibid.*, p.15.
- 26 The State Statistical Committee of the Republic of Azerbaijan 'Azerbaijan Republic: MDG indicators', available at: http://www.azstat.org/MDG/MDG_.pdf (accessed 30 November 2013).
- 27 State Statistical Committee of the Republic of Azerbaijan (2013), *op. cit.*, p.92.
- 28 *Ibid.*, p.69.
- 29 World Health Organization Statistics (2011), available at: <http://www.who.int/countries/aze/en/> (accessed 23 November 2013).
- 30 State Statistical Committee data, 'Demographic indicators: Population by ethnic groups in Azerbaijan', available at: http://www.azstat.org/statinfo/demographic/en/AP_/AP_1.shtml (accessed 27 November 2013).
- 31 State Statistical Committee of the Republic of Azerbaijan (2013), *op. cit.*, p.48.
- 32 *Ibid.*
- 33 *Ibid.*
- 34 The Statistical Committee of the Republic of Azerbaijan (2011), *op. cit.*, p.54.
- 35 State Statistical Committee of the Republic of Azerbaijan (2013), *op. cit.*, p.51.
- 36 The Statistical Committee of the Republic of Azerbaijan (2011), *op. cit.*, p.38.
- 37 The Statistical Committee of the Republic of Azerbaijan (2011), 'Demography and social statistics/Population/Live births by mother's age', available at: <http://www.stat.gov.az/source/demography/> (accessed 13 January 2014).
- 38 The Statistical Committee of the Republic of Azerbaijan (2011), *op. cit.*, p.50.
- 39 *Ibid.*, p.59.

Key messages

When a girl delays marriage, everyone benefits. A girl who marries later is more likely to stay in school, work, and reinvest her income into her family. Crucially, a girl who marries later is more empowered to choose whether, when, and how many children to have. When investments in girls are made, everyone benefits: their families, communities, and most importantly, the girls themselves.

There is a huge cost to inaction on child marriage. It is time for policy-makers, parliamentarians, communities, families and young people to address this issue head on. Let's deliver a world where every pregnancy is wanted, every birth is safe, and every young person's potential is fulfilled. Let girls be girls.

Child marriage violates girls' rights, denies them of their childhood, disrupts their education, jeopardises their health, and limits their opportunities. No cultural, religious, or economic rationale for child marriage can possibly justify the damage these marriages do to young girls and their potential. A girl should have the right to choose whom she marries and when. Parents want the best for their children, and need to support their girls' choices and decisions to marry.

UNFPA is working with governments and partners at all levels of society to deliver comprehensive programmes addressing the needs of vulnerable and married girls, and providing access to livelihoods, social support, and health programmes, including sexual and reproductive health. The ultimate aim is to end child marriage in this generation and to shift cultural attitudes to protect girls' rights.

What must be done to break the silence on child marriage?

Bring greater attention to the situations faced by married girls and girls at risk of child marriage, and advocate strongly for their rights. Child marriage is not good for girls or development. The world cannot afford to see the rights, health, and potential of thousands of girls being squandered each day.

Promote investments that build up adolescent girls' capabilities and skills, especially education. Girls' education, particularly post-primary and secondary, is the single most important factor associated with age at marriage. Girls especially need social support and access to programmes that provide life skills, literacy, livelihoods, and sexual and reproductive health information and services, such as family planning and life-saving maternal health services.

Invest in adolescent girls!

Investments should provide platforms for vulnerable girls to develop life skills and critical health knowledge, obtain access to social services including sexual and reproductive health and HIV prevention, gain vocational and employable skills for work, and have access to friends and mentors.

Married girls need special targeted strategies that provide access to education, life skills, and health including SRH and HIV prevention, and opportunities to participate fully in society. Maternal health programmes need to be reoriented with dedicated outreach for the youngest, first-time mothers, to enable them to use antenatal, essential and emergency obstetric care, and post-delivery services.

Acknowledgements and contacts

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