

# Child Marriage in Kazakhstan (Overview)



As a 15-year-old, you want to live and take joy in life, like all your peers. My friends and I wanted to finish school, go to university, complete our studies, start working, and, of course, marry for love. I didn't know it would be like this. It's difficult to talk about. How would you like washing floors every day, cleaning the house, never going out, and never talking to anyone?

—Child spouse, member of an ethnic minority

## Child marriage

Child marriage is the union, whether or not official, of two persons, at least one of whom is under 18 years of age.<sup>1</sup> By virtue of being children, child spouses are considered to be incapable of giving free and full consent, meaning that child marriages should be considered a violation of human rights and the rights of the child. In Kazakhstan, child marriages are rare, but do occur in certain communities and among some ethnic groups, particularly those living in rural areas.

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. If they become pregnant, they 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 (CRC) (1989); and the 2005 Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly Resolution on Forced Marriages and Child Marriage. These international instruments revolve around the issues of abolishment of harmful customs and traditions, violence against a girl child, marriage consent, marriageable age, registration of marriage, the freedom to choose a spouse, and annulment of legal effects of child marriages.

This fact sheet provides information about the issue of child marriage in Kazakhstan 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 Kazakhstan, and interviews with child spouses and experts working in the fields of children's and women's rights.

*Child marriage is an appalling violation of human rights and robs girls of their education, health, and long-term prospects. A girl who is married as a child is one whose potential will not be fulfilled. Since many parents and communities also want the very best for their daughters, we must work together and end child marriage.*

—Dr. Babatunde  
Osotimehin, Executive  
Director, UNFPA



## Recommendations

- Develop mechanisms to improve enforcement of laws criminalising sexual contact with persons under 16 years of age, rape and corruption of minors, and kidnapping.
- Increase adolescent girls' awareness of their human and civil rights, with a particular focus on: protection from violence; the fact that payment of *kalym* (bride price) does not confer a legal obligation on the girl and her family in relation to the husband and his family; and the status of marriage and the family.
- Provide support to ethnic communities to overcome customs that harm the development and health of girls and violate girls' rights by conducting communications activities to protect the rights of girls. These should take into account the particularities of cultures and traditions of ethnic groups, focus on rural areas, and involve religious organisations. Communications activities should also be carried out among adolescent girls with regard to protection of their rights.
- In the education system, introduce educational programmes on the protection of sexual and reproductive health of adolescents and youth. Education sector specialists, in collaboration with NGOs, with the technical support of healthcare organisations and the involvement of adolescent psychologists, should conduct professional lectures and seminars on sexual and reproductive behaviour of adolescents and young people, particularly in rural areas. In addition, counselling methods for adolescents on sexual and reproductive health and family planning should be improved, and a system should be introduced for adolescents to access free contraceptives. Finally, access of pregnant girls and minor mothers to medical, legal, educational, and social services should be facilitated.
- Introduce changes to national legislation to lower the age at which adolescents are able to receive the full range of medical assistance without the consent of parents or legal guardians, and ensure the confidentiality of medical services provided. Procedures should be developed for referral by healthcare professionals of patients who have physical and/or psychological conditions, which have been caused by or could have been caused by domestic violence, to psychologists and to social services.
- Carry out periodic expert surveys of the prevalence of the phenomenon of child marriage in order to generate reliable data across the country.

## Legal and national context

### International standards

Kazakhstan has ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). The country's latest report was considered in 2007.<sup>2</sup> In its recommendations following the report, the Committee for the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women expressed its concern that girls were marrying before the age of majority, and also that religious and traditional marriages were not registered and violate the rights of women.<sup>3</sup>

Kazakhstan has also ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). In the recommendations of the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child to the consolidated second and third consolidated reports of Kazakhstan, in the section on Adolescent Health, it is noted in paragraph 51 that some efforts are being undertaken to promote healthy lifestyles through the 'Youth Well-being' programme. However, as highlighted in the recommendations, 'the Committee remains concerned about the prevalence of teenage pregnancy and the high abortion rate' and recommends that Kazakhstan 'take all necessary measures ... with respect to adolescent reproductive health'.<sup>4</sup>

### National legislation

Under Kazakhstan's laws, a child is a person who is under 18 years of age.<sup>5</sup> The Civil Code of the Republic of Kazakhstan (Article 22.1) states that a minor who has reached 16 years of age can be determined to have attained juridical capacity if he or she works under an employment contract or is conducting business activities with the consent of his or her legal representatives.<sup>6</sup>

### Who can contract a marriage?

Under the Republic of Kazakhstan's Marriage and Family Code, in order for a marriage to be contracted, both the would-be spouses must voluntarily agree to the marriage, and both must be of marriageable age.

The legal minimum age for marriage in Kazakhstan is equal for men and women at 18 years. If there is good cause to do so, civil registration bodies may reduce the marriageable age by not more than two years. In all cases, reduction in marriageable age is only permitted with the agreement of those entering the marriage, and with the agreement of their parents or guardians (Article 10).

*“Under our legislation, marriageable age... can be reduced to 16 if there are good reasons, such as pregnancy. Registration of such marriages is secretive, and we only become aware of the fact of the early marriage at the point when the citizens apply for official registration. As a rule, before registration of the marriage the couple cohabit and/or marry in a religious institution. However, such [unofficial] marriages do not have legal force ... if a child is born to an unofficial marriage and the father refuses to recognise the child, the woman is forced to apply for paternity to be established.”* (Local official)

Public bodies (such as tax authorities, customs clearance, and social security services) only recognize marriages which have been contracted in state institutions in their dealings with citizens.

Forcing minor girls into marriage without their consent and kidnapping them with the intention of forcing them into marriage are criminal offences. Under Article 122 of the Criminal Code of the Republic of Kazakhstan, sexual intercourse and other activities of a sexual character involving persons under 16 years of age can lead to up to five years deprivation of liberty. Kazakhstan's criminal code envisages a prison sentence of eight to ten years for kidnapping (Article 125). However, in cases of bride kidnapping, the following article can be applied: 'Persons who voluntarily release the abductee are absolved of criminal responsibility if in this action they did not commit another offence'. Thus, a typical bride kidnapper does not necessarily face criminal responsibility for the act.

*“In our village there have been such cases [of bride kidnapping]... there are lots of ethnic Turkish residents. My classmate was forcibly kidnapped at a young age... nobody could come to her defence. She could not be taken back, as by their traditions returning a kidnapped girl who has spent a night in a man's house is shameful for her family.”* (Child spouse)

Violent sexual crimes against persons under 16 years of age made up 0.8 per cent of the total number of violent crimes committed in Kazakhstan in 2011, and kidnapping of women 0.5 per cent.<sup>7</sup>

### Family planning and reproductive rights

According to national legislation, full capacity of physical persons is reached at the age of 18. While the age of consent is 16, the capacity of young people under 18 does not extend to making independent decisions on receiving services to protect their sexual and reproductive health. If a 16-year-old girl seeks medical assistance, then under Ministry of Health Order 70, the doctor does not have the right to conduct a full medical examination without her parents or legal guardians being informed and participating. While the law gives 16-year olds the right to make decisions about their participation in sexual activity, it does not allow them to make independent decisions about contraceptive use or treatment of STIs. This practice limits the access of young people to sexual and reproductive health services, and reduces the effectiveness of youth-friendly clinic services. Girls under 18 who are officially married do obtain full legal capacity, meaning that they can obtain medical treatment. However, this research revealed that in practice, married girls often have to obtain permission from their husbands and/or mothers-in-law to visit a clinic.

*“I was not quite 16 when I gave birth to my son, and I had my daughter two years later. The pregnancies were unplanned.”*  
(Child spouse, member of an ethnic minority)

*“The pregnancies were not planned. As many as God gives.”*  
(Child spouse, member of an ethnic minority)

Kazakhstan is facing a growing unmet need for family planning services. In 2010, 11.6 per cent of women of reproductive age with regular sexual partners who did not plan to have children in the next two years did not use any kind of contraception; in 1999 that figure was 8.7 per cent.<sup>8</sup> A 2011 survey indicated that most of the young respondents from South Kazakhstan oblast and half the respondents from Almaty oblast had no understanding of contraception and, usually, did not make informed decisions about family planning in the first years of marriage.<sup>9</sup>

The results of this 2011 survey of medical personnel working in youth and women's clinics in the city of Almaty indicated that adolescents are beginning their sex lives early, in the context of low contraceptive usage, and an insignificant number of specialised medical, consultative, and psychological services and sex education programmes for adolescents. The educational, informational, and healthcare programmes, activities, and services that do exist in the country to prevent unwanted pregnancy, promote contraception, and protect the reproductive health of adolescents and youth, do not reach most children and adolescents living in rural areas, small towns, and district centres.<sup>10</sup>

All of the child spouses who participated in this research indicated that they did not know what contraception is. Even after the birth of their second child, in most cases they were not planning pregnancies. As noted in a 2011 report by the 'Aman-Saulyk' Social Fund, in cases of child marriages, the traditional expectations of the husband's relatives require the birth of a child in the first year of marriage. Family planning is only possible after women have had children of both sexes: the traditional preference for boys compels women to give birth until a boy is born. Only then will the family agree for the woman to exercise her right to family planning.<sup>11</sup>

### Child marriage in Kazakhstan

Today in Kazakhstan, the statistics available do not allow for calculation of the frequency of child marriage in the country. Reliable statistical data are only available with regard to *de jure* marriage. However, child marriages tend to be *de facto* marriages, with the unions not officially registered. Marriages contracted by religious ceremony, which are the most common form of registration of marriage of minors, as well as cohabitation, are not registered by official marriage registration authorities. Registration of a marriage with an individual who has not reached the age of majority is possible, but not before the age of 16 (the age of consent) and then only in exceptional circumstances: the birth of a child or pregnancy. Therefore, there are no official statistics for *de facto* marriages under the age of 16, and the number of child marriages cannot be precisely measured. Information on cohabitation and marriages contracted by religious ceremony remain inaccessible.

The official data provided in the Youth of Kazakhstan statistical yearbook for 2010 indicate that the number

of female child spouses that have contracted registered marriages is almost 20 times higher than the number of male child spouses. Regional indicators reveal a high number of marriages of minors in Almaty (6/145 boys/girls under 18), South Kazakhstan (2/86), and other economically vulnerable oblasts in Kazakhstan.<sup>12</sup> It is clear from this high ratio between male and female child spouses (the number of female child spouses is 25 to 43 times higher than that of male child spouses) that child marriage in Kazakhstan is a gendered phenomenon.

The Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS) for the Republic of Kazakhstan (carried out in 2010-11) showed that 52 per cent of girls aged 15-19 who were married or cohabiting had husbands or partners who were up to four years older; 35 per cent had a husband or partner who was five to nine years older, and 8 per cent had a husband or partner who was ten years older or more.<sup>13</sup> The survey results also showed that the women respondents who had married at a young age were more likely to agree that a husband has the right to beat his wife or partner in certain situations, such as 'transgressions' in childcare or housework or refusal to have sexual intercourse. These women are also more susceptible to domestic violence.

The problem of child marriage in Kazakhstan is not just linked to economic factors. Other important influences include social and cultural factors, as well as the educational attainment of the women and girls, and their residence in a rural area. It should also be noted that child marriage is most often found among population groups that follow the Islamic faith, and is more frequent among certain minority ethnic groups.<sup>14</sup> However, child marriage is also practised, though to a lesser degree, among the majority ethnic Kazakh population (0.64 per cent of all married ethnic Kazakh women are minors).<sup>15</sup>

Among the ethnic European population of Kazakhstan (in the main Russians) child marriage also occurs (1.2 per cent of married Russian females are minors). This is linked to the tendency of adolescent boys and girls living in urban areas to begin sexual activity earlier (the Russian population mainly lives in towns and cities), and the more tolerant attitude of the Russian population to sex before marriage and to living together without being officially married.<sup>16</sup> Child marriage and cohabitation occur primarily as a result of early pregnancy, which in turn is linked to insufficient awareness among adolescents of family planning methods and how to prevent unwanted pregnancy.



## Analysis of the problem of child marriage in Almaty oblast

In order to study the regional specificities of child marriage in more detail, statistical data from Almaty oblast were analysed, and interviews carried out with child spouses and local experts. The total population of Almaty oblast is 1,807,849, and 11 per cent of all young people in Kazakhstan between the ages of 14 and 28<sup>17</sup> live there.<sup>18</sup>

Statistical information on child marriage in Almaty oblast<sup>19</sup>

Number of 15- to 19-year-old girls living in the oblast	84,684
Of these, the proportion that have completed secondary education (11 <sup>th</sup> grade)	56.3%
Married girls aged 15-19 as % of total married women	4.8%
Girls aged 15-19 who gave birth as % of total number of births	3.1%
The number of births to adolescent girls aged 15-18 years	415 <sup>20</sup>
Age-specific fertility rate for 15-18 age group for Almaty oblast <sup>21</sup>	25.2
The number of abortions performed on adolescent girls aged 15-18	155 <sup>22</sup>
The number of abortions performed on adolescent girls aged 15-18 per 1,000 girls in that age range	9.4

In Almaty oblast, child marriages remain a hidden phenomenon, supported by social and cultural stereotypes that prevail among the rural population. The practice is most typical among minority ethnic groups in the oblast, though during the research we also discovered cases of child marriage among Kazakhs. In districts where minority ethnic groups (Turks, Uighurs, Dungans, and others) live together, as well as in several Kazakh communities, stereotypes still predominate concerning the subordinate status of women in families, and the complete subjection of daughters to their parents' will. At the same time, economic factors also influence some parents' decisions to arrange early marriages for their children, as this gives them access to the bride price that they will receive from the groom's family on their daughter's marriage.

*“Early marriage is typical for the Uighur population. They believe that a girl who doesn't marry before the age of 18 has failed.”* (Child spouse, member of an ethnic minority)

In these districts, there is a widespread view that child marriage is encouraged under Sharia law, and many child marriages are registered with imams. However, according to a representative of the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Kazakhstan, official Islam categorically forbids any discrimination against girls and women.<sup>23</sup>

*“According to a representative of the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Kazakhstan, the family's role in protecting its daughters from violence is paramount in scripture. In his words, Islam forbids forced marriage:*

*It is written in the Koran that you cannot force someone into marriage. Everyone has a choice, and this choice should be voluntary.”*

As revealed by this small expert survey of eight women who had been married early, not all the marriages were based on their voluntary agreement with the will of their parents. Adolescent girls are told that it is normal, as 'that's the way all women in our family and our people get married'. Girls are sometimes matched off long before the age of majority, and marriage with a minor girl is considered an ordinary custom among some ethnic groups: 'that's the way it's done among our people'.

*“...our grandmothers married before the age of 16.”* (Child spouse, member of an ethnic minority)

The statements made by respondents who had married early suggested they had suffered many problems in their married lives. These included neglect and violence from husbands, mothers-in-law, and other members of the husbands' families. There was also constant housework, isolation, and a lack of communication with the outside world, peers, and even their own parents. More often than not the female child spouse was treated as a person without rights, and was not even allowed to think about studies or work. It was assumed that she should serve the family – her husband's relatives – in an unquestioning way, and if she refused or resisted, she was subjected to physical violence or humiliation. Rape in child marriages is common.

“When she got angry, my mother-in-law could throw dishes at me if I hadn't set the table correctly or took something incorrectly... my husband was always edgy and discontented: there either wasn't enough salt or it was too salty. He could hit me for that. If he wanted me, he could take off my skirt and do whatever he wanted, like an animal, and I thought that's the way it should be.” (Child spouse, member of an ethnic minority)

“We don't even understand each other: he treats me like an object. He paid the kalym, bought me, and I'm his possession, history.” (Child spouse, member of an ethnic minority)

“After his parents died, my life and health were endangered. My husband was physically violent towards me. There were even cases when my husband took up a knife...” (Ethnic Uighur child spouse)

The situation is aggravated in most cases by the onset of health problems associated with early pregnancy and motherhood.

Cases were encountered in which a girl who had been prepared for marriage from childhood was not given the chance to complete school, as a result of unwanted pregnancy and childbirth. As a rule, becoming a mother early on limits the chances of a girl receiving a decent education and work.

“There were problems both during pregnancy and after the birth, but my mother-in-law thought it was nothing to worry about: it happens to many women and that's how it should be. My mother-in-law said I should put up with all the pain.” (Child spouse, member of an ethnic minority)

“I became a mother too early, I still was a little girl at the time (16 years). I haven't really seen much in life and the most wonderful part of it is gone.” (Child spouse)

“I was 15 years old when I was forced to marry: they matched me off, paid kalym [bride price] for me and my father gave me away, as he was having financial difficulties. I didn't know my husband. I wasn't ready for married life; I didn't even know what it was. But life was difficult: there was hardly enough money for food, and I had three younger brothers. My youngest brother had to go to school, he needed to study.” (Child spouse, member of an ethnic minority)

During interviews with representatives of communities that practise child marriage, it became clear that many among them think that arranged child marriages are strong and resilient. However, practice shows that child marriages are not stable and can break up even before the official registration.<sup>24</sup>

“...underage female child spouses have to face the fact that they are not psychologically mature enough for marriage, and their parents in practice pass all of their responsibility (economic and social) on to the husbands. Young spouses are not protected enough; their lack of education and limited legal awareness prevents them from seeking assistance. Cases of suicide are known to occur. One girl was married off at 15... She didn't love her husband and so suffered a lot: her husband's family exploited her, making her work in the garden, house, and so on. By the age of 21 she already had three children, and she admitted to being beaten not just by her husband but also his relatives. She had, in fact, become a slave to the family. When she told her mother everything, her mother told her that she would have to put up with it if she wanted to live in the family: her husband also beat her. In the end the girl hanged herself.” (Local government official)

If a relationship breaks down, women who are not officially married face difficulties acquiring documents for property, and they cannot apply for child support if they do not establish paternity. Though national legislation allows for establishment of paternity, in practice this is very difficult to achieve, entailing treks to successive courts, collecting evidence, and paying fees. For a young woman who is isolated and lacks support, this is almost impossible to handle. The number of such court cases is rising every day.<sup>25</sup> Child marriages, rape of underage girls, and abuse from the husband's side are rarely made public. Though they are rare, cases of suicide occur, as recounted by a civil servant interviewed for this research

Usually there is simply nowhere to go to seek assistance and support in rural areas, moreover, a girl is not able to do so, as she is left isolated. Even when cases of violence are made public, often the victims are not protected and the perpetrators go unpunished. 'It is relatively easy for a rapist to avoid criminal responsibility because it is difficult to obtain irrefutable evidence, and circumstantial evidence is not taken into account.'<sup>26</sup>

*“Would you support your children's decision to marry at the age you did, if they wanted to?”*

*‘No, I would try not to let it happen. It is too early to marry at that age. I'm glad I have two sons. I don't want a daughter because otherwise she would have had to marry early as well. I've seen all that. It's still happening to me now.’* (Child spouse, member of an ethnic minority)

In bride kidnapping cases, according to experts, only 16.7 per cent of victims seek assistance from law enforcement agencies, while 51 per cent count on support from relatives.<sup>27</sup> According to information provided by the Commissioner for Human Rights, not a single complaint has ever been received from a citizen who was subjected to a forced marriage. The Ministry of Internal Affairs reports that in the last two years not one person was held criminally responsible for 'bride kidnapping' (under Article 125 of the Criminal Code), despite the fact that in the first three months of 2012 in South Kazakhstan oblast alone six complaints of kidnapping of minors were registered.<sup>28</sup> However, these cases are

not taken any further because families and victims withdraw their complaints, finding ways to resolve the problem on their own. Usually, this is done by intimidating the girl, who, if the case becomes public, is subjected to condemnation from the community. The public's overall attitude is that even law enforcement agencies 'couldn't care less about such cases', as people are often being advised to 'sort it out themselves'. According to a report by the Women's League of Creative Initiative, 'Problems of early and forced marriage in Kazakhstan', if a family persists in making a complaint to the police, the case becomes one of moral torture, accompanied by humiliation and bureaucracy. Therefore, the victim and her parents are usually forced to come to terms with whatever had happened".<sup>29</sup>

## Responses to child marriage

The National Centre for Problems of Healthy Lifestyle Development has prepared a national report, 'Health of adolescents in the Republic of Kazakhstan', which raises issues of mortality and suicide among adolescents, reasons for which, among other issues, include adolescents' unpreparedness for pregnancy and childbirth,<sup>30</sup> which are indirectly associated with the problem of child marriages. At the 1<sup>st</sup> Adolescent and Youth Forum, which was held in 2011, participants discussed reproductive health, suicide, and other social and medical problems.

Since 2006, a range of medical, psychological, and social services are being provided in Kazakhstan under the 4 'D' [Russian acronym] principles: 'voluntary, friendly, accessible, and trust'. However, actual provision of these services remains inadequate. Apart from that, on many occasions adolescents themselves refuse to seek medical assistance, because they do not believe in medical privacy and that their patient confidentiality will be respected.<sup>31</sup> What is more, as mentioned above, doctors are powerless to do anything without the consent of parents or legal guardians if problems arise that require medical intervention. Not all polyclinics employ psychology specialists, whose services are very important for work with adolescents and youth. There are websites in operation on youth reproductive health: [www.zhas.kz](http://www.zhas.kz) and [www.ypeerastana.kz](http://www.ypeerastana.kz), which are available in the Russian and Kazakh languages and are supported by the UN Population Fund (UNFPA), as well as the site [www.Y-peer.kz](http://www.Y-peer.kz), which provides information about the Y-Peer youth network. However, they are not always accessible to adolescents living in rural areas as many do not have computers or access to the internet.

## Key points

Child marriages are linked to several factors: traditional socio-cultural stereotypes in some communities, poverty and other social problems (for example, the educational attainment of women and girls, and their residence in rural areas) in others.

Many child marriages are just registered with imams. This makes the situation even more problematic, as there are no official statistics on such marriages and because religious marriages do not confer any legal rights on women.

The continued practice of child marriage is also connected with the imperfect mechanism to implement national legislation (processes to expose, react, and monitor); the poorly developed system to protect girls from sexual abuse, unwanted pregnancy and abortion; and harmful traditional practices.

Child and forced marriages violate the right of girls to education. In addition, the practice limits their right to health, increasing morbidity and mortality.

While encouraging the development of cultures and traditions of ethnic groups and communities, in which child marriage still is a norm, we should consider and propose strategies and mechanisms that can help the communities determine which customs harm the development and health of girls who are forced into marriage. Meanwhile, pregnant girls and adolescent mothers should be provided with full opportunities to access medical, legal, educational, and social services for both them and their children.

Children, adolescents, and young people, particularly girls, should be free to seek assistance without hindrance.

From the outset of puberty, girls need to be provided with relevant information and be given access to services including family planning, quality antenatal care, support in childbirth, and appropriate postnatal care.

## Quotes

*It seems to me that, first of all, there is an economic factor: a family's desire to earn money and the fact that parents see their child as a source of income. When we are told that this is a tradition and a custom, in my opinion, it is just a curtain, an attempt to excuse or justify their actions.* (Expert on protecting women from violence and on gender equality)

*Firstly, I see a link between child marriage and religion, as people who adhere to Islam are more susceptible to the problem.* (Local state official)

*The priority for state policy, primarily, should be the sexual safety of girls. In cases of forced child marriage, by its very nature, rape of a minor occurs, which in fact is a criminal offence. However, in my years of practice I have never come across cases in which someone was punished for this.* (Expert on women's rights)

*I wasn't ready for married life and wanted to study. I only completed four years of school...* (Child spouse, member of an ethnic minority)

*In our village it is normal. It is acceptable for girls to be married off before the age of 18. The earlier, it is believed, the better.* (Child spouse, member of an ethnic minority)

*I would have never married that sort of man; people like that don't change. My husband was brought up that way by his parents and he wanted to bring up our children in the same way, but I don't want our children to grow up in that sort of atmosphere... I ran away from him practically in just a dressing gown and slippers. Later we divorced.* (Child spouse, member of an ethnic minority)

*I didn't even know about it [contraception] then. In our family, sex could not be discussed. It wasn't talked about at school back then, though girls discussed it between themselves sometimes.* (Child spouse, member of an ethnic minority)



## Data overview

<b>Population (2012):</b>	16,675,392 <sup>32</sup>
<b>Life expectancy at birth as of 2011:</b>	69 (overall); 64 (males); 74 (females) <sup>33</sup>
<b>Population under age 18 (2011-12):</b>	30.6% <sup>34</sup>
<b>Population below national income poverty line (2011):</b>	5.3% <sup>35</sup>
<b>Unemployment rate (2012):</b>	5.4 per cent <sup>36</sup>
<b>Youth literacy rate (2009):</b>	99.8% (overall); 99% (males); 99.9% (females) <sup>37</sup>
<b>Health expenditure per capita per year (2011):</b>	US \$258 <sup>38</sup>
<b>Main ethnic groups (2009):</b>	Kazakh (63.1%), Russian (23.7%), other (13.2% – Uzbek, Ukrainian, Uighur, Tatar, German, Turkish, Dungan, Kurdish, Chechen) <sup>39</sup>
<b>Main languages (2012):</b>	Kazakh (official), Russian <sup>40</sup>
<b>Main religions (2012):</b>	Islam, Orthodox Christianity <sup>41</sup>
<b>Average age at time of marriage (2009):</b>	27 (males); 24 (females) <sup>42</sup>

## Child marriage statistics

**Table 1.** Marriages by bride's age and groom's age (2011)<sup>43</sup>

Total number of marriages	Age of bride (years)		Age of groom (years)	
	Under 15	Under 18	Under 15	Under 18
160,494	Unknown	1,373 (0.86%)	Unknown	79 (0.05%)

The 2009 census provides some information about child marriages at ages 15-17, as the respondents gave information about their marital status without referring to official documents.<sup>44</sup> This provides information about couples cohabiting in *de facto* marriages, even if the marriage was not officially registered.

This census data reveals that girls living in rural areas in this age group get married before reaching the age of 18 at a rate 1.5 times higher than their urban peers. There are seven times fewer married 15- to 17-year-old boys than girls in this age group (0.15 per cent in 2009). In general, married underage girls are married to adult men older than 18 years.<sup>46</sup>

The Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS) in the Republic of Kazakhstan in 2010-11 showed that 26.7 per cent of girls who had married before the age of 18 had not completed secondary education.

In 2011, the country's judges oversaw 52,173 cases of dissolution of marriage. Of these, 14,362 involved young people under 28, and nine (0.06 per cent) involved young people under 18.<sup>47</sup>

**Table 2.** Girls aged 15-17 married or cohabiting (2009)<sup>45</sup>

Age	Number	% of all girls of this age
15	152	0.1%
16	884	0.6%
17	3,258	2.1%
15-17	4,294	1.0%

**Table 3.** Number of births and abortions among 15- to 18-year-old girls in Kazakhstan (2011)<sup>48</sup>

Number of registered births	Number of registered abortions
4,639 (of a total of 372,544 births in Kazakhstan)	2,837

**Table 4.** Age-specific fertility rates in the 15-18 age group (per 1,000 girls of that age) for Kazakhstan as a whole in 2011<sup>49</sup>

Age (years)	Age-specific fertility rate (per 1,000 girls)
15	1.46
16	5.11
17	16.90
18	39.52
15-18	16.52

There is no data about maternal and infant mortality in the 15-19 age group.

## 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).
- 2 The next report by Kazakhstan is due to be considered in 2012-13.
- 3 Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women, 37th session (2007) 'Concluding comments of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women: Kazakhstan', CEDAW/C/KAZ/CO/2, New York, United Nations. Recommendation no. 29.
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## 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, jeopardizes 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.

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