

Child Marriage in Tajikistan (Overview)



I was forced to marry at the age of 14 during the civil war and know how destructive it is to marry early. Therefore when my friend was intending to marry off her daughter at 17 because of economic constraints, I persuaded her not to make a big mistake. ‘You found room for your daughter in your tiny stomach, so you can find room for her in your big house,’ I said.

—Child spouse

Child marriage

Child or early marriage is the union 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 free and full consent, meaning that child marriages should be considered a violation of human rights and the rights of the child. In Tajikistan, child marriages occur in some regions of the country, and are primarily linked to social and religious factors, as well 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 the issue of child marriage in Tajikistan 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 Tajikistan, 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

- Encourage a change in social attitudes regarding child marriages and girls' education through raising awareness about the importance of girls' education and the harm caused by child marriages.
- Build the capacity of local religious leaders to present accurate information about girls' and women's status in Islam, through working with the Islamic University.
- Involve local governments, community leaders, activists including women's committees, and law enforcement bodies in addressing the issue of child marriage.
- Provide sexuality education and raise awareness among young people about domestic violence and the realities of marriage through including these topics in the curriculum for primary and secondary education.
- Provide training to judges on the changes to the family code (raising the minimum age of marriage to 18) and encourage them to respect and implement the law.

Legal and national context

Tajikistan became independent from the Soviet Union in 1991, but shortly after independence, fighting between militias representing different regions of the country led to massive destruction. The conflict resulted in the deaths of over 50,000 people and led to a humanitarian catastrophe, with some 1.2 million becoming refugees or internally displaced persons.²

Tajikistan is the poorest country in Central Asia. This is in spite of a fall in the poverty rate from 72 per cent of the population in 2003 to 47 per cent in 2009. The country continues to face challenges related to³ unemployment, food security, and vulnerability to external shocks. Tajikistan is heavily dependent on remittances (more than 1.5 million Tajik citizens work in Russia and Kazakhstan); in 2010 migrant remittance inflows were equivalent to 42 per cent of GDP.⁴

The desk review and interviews conducted for the current study with key experts as well as people who had experienced child marriage revealed that the problem of child marriages is present throughout Tajikistan, but that little action is being taken either by the government or civil society.⁵

“The problem of early marriages ... needs joint, complex, and systematic efforts and approach.” (NGO activist)

International standards

In 1993, Tajikistan ratified both the Convention on the Rights of the Child, and the Convention on the

Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). The NGO ‘Panorama’ and Karat Coalition have been monitoring progress on implementing the Concluding Comments made by the CEDAW Committee in 2007, and have found that out of the 29 recommendations, only one has been fully fulfilled; that of raising the minimum marriage age to 18.⁶

National legislation

Laws relating to the protection of children's rights include the Constitution (1994), Family Code (1999), Criminal Code (1998), and Law on Responsibilities of Parents for Bringing up the Child (2010).⁷ These laws, along with the regulations of the various administrative bodies, form the system of child protection in the country. However, there is no single law in Tajikistan that covers all aspects of child rights protection.

The Family Code provides that a child is a person under the age of 18, in accordance with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. The Family Code is the main instrument regulating relationships between parents and defining parents' obligations to their children, and the responsibility of the state when parents fail to carry out their obligations.⁸ While the law appears to provide protection for children at risk of abuse, neglect, or exploitation, in reality it provides only a general framework, with no details on how children are to be identified, referrals investigated, child protection procedures initiated, or decisions taken, or what measures will be applied.⁹ In theory, Child Rights Commissions (which were established in 2008) are responsible for ensuring the protection of children and the provision of child protection services, although in practice, there are limitations on their functions.¹⁰

“The government structures are making efforts to address the issue, but it is very difficult for a few people with a lack of resources and motivation, to combat this enormous problem.” (Government official)

Who can contract a marriage?

Changes to the Family Code in July 2010 mean that men and women must be 18 years old to marry.¹¹ Prior to this, the minimum age for marriage was 17. The Family Code also states that this minimum age can be reduced by one year, following a court decision; in such cases, the person who is married legally becomes an adult.¹² The Constitution states that ‘Men and women of marriageable age have the right to enter freely into marriage.’¹³ Forced marriages of girls under the age of 18, or entering into a marriage contract with a girl under 18, are expressly outlawed under Tajikistan's Criminal Code (Articles 168 and 169).¹⁴

Child marriage carries a prison sentence of up to six months, while forced marriage can be punished by up to five years' imprisonment.¹⁵ In practice, in most cases, underage marriage is only punished by a fine.¹⁶

Because couples cannot register a marriage where one of the would-be spouses is under 18 years of age, many simply have a local religious leader perform the wedding ceremony. Later, without a civil registration certificate, the bride has few legal rights.¹⁷

“There are exceptions when girls marry at 17 but with the special decision of the court, otherwise the bride and groom's families will be punished. In 2011, there was one case of early marriage (the bride was 17 years old) in the district and the parents of both bride and groom [were] punished, [were] fined.”

(Local government official)

According to an interview with a state registrar working at the Marriage Registration House of Dushanbe there were 4,350 marriages registered in 2011 and 65 of these were of marriages where at least one spouse was under 18. In 2012, by contrast, 2,220 marriages had been registered as of July, of which 50 involved people who were under 18. The state registrar said figures show that the number of registered early marriages in Dushanbe would be higher in 2012 compared to the previous year.

Family planning and reproductive rights

Following a decision by the Board of the Ministry of Education in February 2006, all schools in the country are expected to provide eight extracurricular classes per year on 'Healthy lifestyles' to students from the 1st to 11th grade. This includes sexual and reproductive health for children in grades 7 to 11. Five hundred schools have also taken part in a pilot project (funded by international organisations such as UNICEF, GIZ, and USAID), whereby they receive extra support to teach this subject. In 2012, GIZ began supporting a project called 'the Route to Safety'. As part of this project, children from the senior grades in the pilot schools travel to different regions of the country and teach lessons on sexual and reproductive health to their peers, using the 'peer to peer' method. UNICEF supports summer camps which also include sessions to increase knowledge of sexual and reproductive health. In 2020, the country will switch to 12-year schooling, and it is planned that the curriculum for the 12th grade will include weekly classes on sexual and reproductive health.¹⁸

Women in Tajikistan have the legal right to access and use contraception.¹⁹ As of 2005, when the last Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS) was carried out, 38

per cent of married women were using contraception in Tajikistan. However, this included only 9 per cent of married girls aged 15-19, compared to 25 per cent of 20- to 24-year-olds and 50 per cent of women aged 35 to 49. Use of contraception also varied significantly by the number of living children, from less than 1 per cent among those with no children to 48 per cent among women with three living children. About one in ten married or in-union women knew of no method for preventing pregnancy. The share was highest among young women aged 15 to 19, at one in three.²⁰

The National Programme on Reproductive Health and Reproductive Rights has been approved and is being implemented in Tajikistan. Reproductive health services have been established and projects expanding access are being realised through the support of the government and international organisations. Improvement of reproductive health, by improving infant and maternal mortality rates and reducing the need for abortions, is a key strategy of public health services in Tajikistan. They seek to improve access to contraceptive services primarily within the framework of primary healthcare services. Additionally, new establishments like the Centres of Reproductive Health have been set up.²¹ Young people under 18 are able to access reproductive health services, but according to an interview with a lawyer on the State Committee on Women and Family Affairs, if any health issues or problems are detected, the health provider has to inform the parents. This is not the case, however, if a person under 18 is legally married.

Many of the respondents noted that young people, especially in rural areas, lack knowledge relating to marriage and reproductive health. Women's status within the household is closely linked to their reproductive role. The experts and child spouses interviewed for this research stated that most girls in child marriages are expected to become pregnant and give birth straight after the marriage. They are not autonomous in the use of reproductive healthcare services. It is either the husband or the mother-in-law or both who make decisions regarding family planning. Interviewees who participated in this research mentioned cases where young girls who are not able to give birth due to reproductive immaturity are blamed and have been divorced. As one reproductive health specialist interviewed for this research said, 'Due to complex reasons also related to early marriage, [sometimes] young women have different health problems and [give birth to] unhealthy offspring.'

According to a recent article, marriage in Tajikistan is more likely to be endogamous (i.e. between members of the same extended family), in order to ensure that wealth remains within the family. Tajik scientists quoted in the article think the tendency towards endogamous marriages has been increasing since the 1990s. Marriage between close relatives may have political, social, and health consequences.²²

Child marriage in Tajikistan

According to the Demographic and Health Survey, conducted in 2012 in Tajikistan, fewer than one per cent of women aged 25-49 married for the first time before age 15, and 15 per cent married before age 18. The median age at first marriage is 20.2 years.

Most of the respondents interviewed for the study highlighted that rates of child marriage were low during the Soviet period, but increased significantly during the civil war (1992-1997). As the research respondents recounted, many girls were forced to marry because marriage was seen by their parents as a way of protecting their daughters from rape, and safeguarding their reputation.

“I was 14 years old when I was forced to marry. It happened in 1993 during the civil war. I begged my parents, do not marry me at this age, but my parents told me that there was no other way to preserve my reputation. I was not allowed to go out of our yard and even there I was accompanied by my mother and was wearing a big kerchief to hide my face. I hated my former husband and his family but there was no other option. I never thought that the stories about early marriage narrated by our grandmothers would come true for us.”
(Child spouse)

Some young girls were forced to marry combatants, including one of the interviewees for this research.

Most of the interviewees were of the view that there was a boom in child marriages in the period 1992-2001. However, according to the 2010 census statistics, in fact there has been little change in the number of young people in child marriages: Out of a total population of 424,996 girls aged 15-19 in 2010, 56,914 – 13.4 per cent – were currently married, widowed, or divorced, compared to 13.9 per cent in 2000 (this included registered and unregistered marriages). At the same time, out of 439,190 boys of the same age, 2.2 per cent (9,859 in total) were married, widowed, or divorced in 2010, compared to 2.3 per cent in 2000.²³

There are several reasons behind the practice of child marriage in the country today. Secondary sources identified widespread poverty as the main reason. Poorer families view girls as economic burdens, and child marriages mean that families no longer need to provide food, provisions, and physical space for their daughters. In addition, given the weak state of the economy and gender discrimination in employment, there is little incentive to support daughters wishing to pursue higher education before marriage.²⁴ According

“I was 17 when I was forced to marry a commander of combatants. He came to our house first and told my parents that he wanted to marry me. My parents refused. I also said that I would not marry him. Afterwards he started to terrorise my parents. He put a gun to my father’s head and said he should agree otherwise he would be killed. He made nikah [Muslim marriage] and I became his second wife. I spent seven years with him that were full of violence and humiliation.” (Child spouse)

to some of the research respondents, high levels of male labour migration to Russia and Kazakhstan have also contributed to a worsening of the situation. Migration is resulting in a disproportionate number of women relative to men in the country; this means that parents are prepared to give their daughter away to the first man who asks to marry her, or as a second or a third wife out of fear that she will be left unmarried.

However, it is important to highlight that social and religious factors also play a very important role. Indeed, the primary research undertaken for this study revealed that among the respondents, these were considered much more important than economic factors. This is backed up by recommendations made by the UN CEDAW Committee in its Concluding Observations on Tajikistan in October 2013. The Committee said that it remained concerned about the persistence of adverse cultural norms, customs, and traditions, as well as patriarchal attitudes and deep-rooted stereotypes regarding the roles and responsibilities of women and men in the family and in society. According to the Committee, these stereotypes contribute to the continuation of practices such as child marriage, which leads to the disadvantaged and unequal status of women in many areas.

“Religious freedom, along with positive influences, has had a negative influence and specifically on girls.” (Government official)

An increase in religious influence after the civil war led to an increase in the number of religious leaders (mullahs), many of whom lacked adequate religious and secular knowledge, which in turn promoted a misinterpretation of girls’ and women’s status in Islam. Some of the experts interviewed for this research felt that mullahs’ propaganda on early marriage and polygamy has played a crucial role in increasing the numbers of child marriages and polygamous marriages. Islamic clerics are often willing to perform the religious ceremony regardless of whether or not the couple has registered their marriage at a state register office.²⁵

A lack of importance placed on girls' education is another factor in child marriages in Tajikistan. A recent report by the Eurasia Foundation found that in rural areas of Tajikistan, it is common for girls to leave school at grade nine due to inadequate educational facilities and economic constraints. Families have to contribute money for their children's education, including buying uniforms and renting textbooks. Additionally, they are expected to give gifts to the teachers, who receive very low salaries. Due to limited resources, families make conscious decisions to educate boys over girls, as girls' education is not seen as a pragmatic investment. Parents are also taking girls out of school when they reach puberty out of fear that they may have an illicit relationship with a male classmate in co-educational settings, thus harming their marriage prospects.²⁶

These findings are backed up by school attendance rates. According to a representative of UNICEF Tajikistan, while official statistics claim that more than 99 per cent of girls attend primary-level school in the country, UNICEF estimates that girls' overall attendance at school was about 90 per cent for compulsory primary education in 2011. According to NGO activists interviewed for this report, in some districts it is even lower, at 60 to 70 per cent. The situation with secondary education is worse, noted the UNICEF representative, and differs from district to district. In total, UNICEF believes that only 42 per cent of girls completed secondary education in the country in 2011.

Women's education is also strongly associated with fertility. According to the DHS, the total fertility rate (TFR)²⁷ decreases from 4.2 births for women with no education or only primary schooling to 2.7 births for

“Girls' [attendance] in schools specifically after grade nine is a big problem in our district. [Attendance] for primary education is 98 per cent whereas secondary education is only 10 per cent. For example, in our school in the village, there were four grade nine classes, but only one grade 10 class this year and out of 31 students, 26 were boys and only four were girls. Approximately, only 2 per cent of girls receive higher education.” (NGO representative)

'The Koran does not define a minimum age for marriage,' a Dushanbe imam who asked to remain anonymous told EurasiaNet.org. 'Islam encourages women to marry at a young age. This means that they can have children, which is a woman's duty.'

Source: EurasiaNet (2012) 'Tajikistan: Poverty encourages early marriages', 2 March 2012, <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/65075> (accessed 18 September 2012)

women with higher education. Fertility is also negatively associated with wealth; the difference in fertility between women in the lowest and highest wealth quintiles amounts to almost one child per woman.

It is notable that the research for this fact sheet found that in the areas of Tajikistan where child marriage is less prevalent, girls' education is valued. For instance, Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Oblast (GBO) is one of the poorest regions of Tajikistan, but rates of child marriage are lower here than elsewhere in the country (data from the 2005 MICS indicated that 1 per cent of 15- to 19-year-old girls were married or in union).²⁸ One factor determining this outcome may be that the majority of the population are followers of the Ismailia branch of Islam, and Ismailis attach great importance to girls' education. As such, girls are expected to complete secondary school before they marry, and often then go on to higher education, and school attendance rates are very high.²⁹ Experts interviewed for this report associated lower prevalence of child marriages in some other areas of Tajikistan with social attitudes placing value on girls completing secondary education; lower influence of fundamentalist

Islam compared to other regions of the country; and the fact that these areas escaped fighting during the civil war.

“The problem of early marriages is [present in almost] every district in [Soghd oblast] and [early marriages] make up approximately 10 to 15 per cent [of all marriages]. ... Different social, economic, and religious reasons are behind it. It is practised not only in poor families but in wealthy families as well. Some families, in order [to ensure] their sons avoid compulsory military service, marry them at an earlier age (17-20), hence a bride of a younger age is selected. There are some cases where the court has made a decision and there is official registration but some are just through Muslim marriage (nikah).” (NGO activist)

“Usually relatively old men (45-50 years old) marry young girls (16-18 years old) in order to show that in spite of their age, they are able to marry young girls.” (NGO activist)

Elsewhere, for Bokhtar district (one of the target districts in Khatlon oblast) while there was no official data on child marriages available, according to the representative of an NGO and a reproductive health specialist interviewed for this research, child marriages account for between 10 and 20 per cent of the total marriages in the district. The NGO representative and reproductive health specialist said that with the changes to the family code, increasing the minimum age of marriage from 17 to 18, the situation was changing, but there are still cases where girls marry at 16 or 17 years old. Some apply to the court, but it is also common for girls to marry at 16 or 17 in religious ceremonies and without the court's permission.

“Before, usually, in remote villages girls married at 16 to 17 years old. After the change to the Family Code the marriage age was increased to 18. This [led to] a decrease in early marriages; however, there are still cases of early marriage and most [take place following a] court decision to decrease the marriage age to 17.” (Government official)

“Some people try to decrease the marriage age by applying to the court or changing the birth year of their daughter/son in their IDs. Even MPs do it: when they find an appropriate groom for their daughter, they marry her off by changing the birth year. My friend from a wealthy family married her daughter at 17 because she found a suitable, wealthy groom for her, but with the condition that her daughter would continue her education.” (Women's Crisis Centre employee)

The experts interviewed for this research identified various reasons for the higher prevalence of child marriage in these regions. First, they were the areas most affected by the civil war, and second, the religious influence was/is very strong in these areas. Apart from this, social perceptions about girls and their role are promoting child marriages in these areas.

It is clear that many young girls face violence from their spouse or his relatives. There are no official statistics, but figures given during an interview with the director of a crisis centre in Khatlon region showed that out of 361 women who applied to the crisis centre for help in the first six months of 2012, 55 were child spouses – 15.2 per cent. At the same time, out of eight women married as children interviewed during the current study, six had faced violence within their marriage.

In Tajikistan, child marriage is closely associated with early motherhood. The onset of childbearing at an early age has a major effect on both the mother and the child's health. Teenage mothers are more likely to suffer from severe complications during delivery, which result in higher morbidity and mortality for both themselves and their children. In addition, young mothers may not be sufficiently emotionally mature to bear the burden of childbearing and rearing. An early start to childbearing often also reduces women's educational and employment opportunities and is associated with higher levels of fertility. As such, teenage pregnancy and motherhood is a major social and health concern. DHS shows that 7 per cent of adolescents aged 15 to 19 in Tajikistan have begun childbearing. Four per cent of teenagers have given birth, and another 4 per cent are pregnant with their first child.

“Several meetings have been conducted in Fayzabad district with the participation of sub-district heads, heads of mahalla [neighbourhood] committees, women leaders, religious leaders, and other local activists after the order of the president about prohibiting religious marriage before official registration. Consequently, the local government along with the mahalla committees started to control unregistered marriages. Due to the awareness-raising and the control, the number of unregistered marriages decreased significantly in the district.” (Government official)

Stigma is attached to divorce in Tajik society. It is considered essential for a woman to be married even if she is unhappy in her married life and as a result, divorce is very rarely initiated by women. Most respondents interviewed for this research pointed out a strong link between child marriages and divorce, because young girls become victims of domestic violence and leave their husbands as a result, or are divorced by their husbands soon after the marriage. The director of the Child Rights Centre of Tajikistan noted that because child spouses often have not completed education and/or have no employment experience, they have very limited options in the event of divorce.

Responses to child marriage

Mobilising religious and community leaders.

Following an oral order made by the President of Tajikistan banning mullahs from conducting religious ceremonies before an official marriage registration has been submitted, some positive changes have been observed. Meetings have been conducted with the participation of government officials, heads of *mahalla* (neighbourhood) committees, women leaders, religious leaders, and other activists to follow the order and to prevent unregistered marriages.

Youth education. In 2012, GIZ began supporting a project called 'the Route to Safety'. As part of this project, children from the senior grades in the pilot schools travel to different regions of the country and teach lessons on sexual and reproductive health to their peers, using the 'peer to peer' method. UNICEF supports summer camps that include sessions to increase knowledge of sexual and reproductive health, while UNFPA and the Education Academy of Tajikistan have worked on updating the national programme of the Republic of Tajikistan on Healthy Lifestyle Education (HLSE) for schoolchildren, and on integrating USAID-developed textbooks on HLSE to the programme.

The Resource Centre for Healthy Lifestyle was established in Dushanbe by the Tajikistan Academy of Education in cooperation with UNFPA. In accordance with the agreement signed recently in Dushanbe, the Centre promotes education on healthy lifestyles in schools throughout the country.

Work with journalists. A competition was held to encourage journalists to write articles promoting health lifestyles, to raise awareness of health protection issues among the population. In total, 22 applications from various newspapers and 130 articles were submitted. The contest was held under the auspices of the Ministry of Health with financial support from the Tajik Branch of Open Society Institute/Assistance Foundation (OSI/AF) within the framework of the USAID-funded Drug Demand Reduction Program. The prize ceremony was held in the Republican Centre for Formation of Healthy Lifestyle in Dushanbe.

Human Rights Treaties. The 5th round of Human Rights talks between Switzerland and Tajikistan took place in Dushanbe in February 2014. The aim of this annual meeting was to take stock of progress made in the protection and promotion of Human Rights. In 2014, particular emphasis was placed on the prevention of torture and early marriage.

Key points

Child marriage is not common to the same extent in all parts of Tajikistan. In areas where rates are lower, girls' school and college attendance rates are higher.

With the exception of data from the 2005 MICS, there is a lack of statistical records on child marriage in the country and no specific, in-depth analysis of the problem.

This research found that the factors driving child marriage include religious misinterpretation, tradition, and economic factors.

Little change will occur until social attitudes towards marriage begin to change. Currently, there is lack of specific emphasis by civil society institutions to address the issue properly.

It is important to promote the importance of education for girls, as there is a close link between girls' leaving education and child marriages.

Issues like unregistered marriages, domestic violence, high rates of divorce, and reproductive health problems are associated with child marriage.

Quotes

Most girls from Badakhshan region complete their secondary education, while those who stop attending [at secondary level] continue their education in medical or pedagogical colleges [for instance]; therefore the problem of early marriages is not common in the region. (Government official)

It is obvious that the problem of early marriages is common in many areas of the country, but very limited statistical records are available and no analysis of the problem [has been] made for a better and more comprehensive understanding of the [situation]. (NGO activist)

I do not think poverty is a primary reason for early marriages in the country, because [early marriages are] not just common in poor families but also in wealthy ones. I doubt that MPs and other officials marry off their daughters and sons due to economic reasons. (NGO activist)

The root course of the problem is ... in the mentality, so it is crucial to change the mentality. (NGO activist)

None of the NGOs in the country, in my opinion, are specifically and directly tackling the issue of early marriages. The NGOs encounter the problem and attempt to address it more or less, while dealing with other issues related to child marriages. (NGO activist)

Girls leave education because of early marriage or marry earlier because they leave education. (NGO activist)

Child marriage is not [an isolated] problem, it leads to other problems as well. (NGO activist)

Data overview

Population size (2012 est.):	7,800,000 ³⁰
Life expectancy at birth (2009):	68 (overall); 66 (males); 69 (females) ³¹
Population under age 15 (2010):	38% ³²
Population below national income poverty line (2009): line (2011):	47.2% ³³
Official unemployment rate (2009):	2.2% ³⁴
Youth literacy rate for ages 15-24 (2010):	99.9% ³⁵
Youth literacy ratio (female rate as a percentage of the male rate, ages 15-24) (2010):	100% ³⁶
Health expenditure per capita per year (2010):	US \$49.07 ³⁷
Main ethnic groups:	Tajik (80%), Uzbek (15%) Russian and other (5%) ³⁸
Main religions:	Sunni Muslim (85%), Shi'a Muslim (5%), other (10%) ³⁹
Main languages:	Tajik, Russian, Uzbek

Child marriage statistics

Table 1. Girls aged 15-19 married, widowed, or divorced (2010)⁴⁰ and boys aged 15-19 married, widowed, or divorced (2010)⁴¹

Total female population aged 15-19	Number of girls aged 15-19 married, widowed, or divorced	Total male population aged 15-19	Number of boys aged 15-19 married, widowed, or divorced
424,996	56,914 (13.9%)	439,190	9,859 (2.2%)

Includes registered and unregistered marriages

Table 2. Marriages by bride's and groom's ages (2006)⁴²

Bride's age (years)	Groom's age (years)							
	Under 16	16-19	20-24	25-29	30-34	35-39	40-44	45-49
Under 16	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
16-19	N/A	1,698	9,996	3327	229	31	12	2
20-24	N/A	344						
25-29	N/A	27						
30-34	N/A	1						
35-39	N/A	-						
40-44	N/A	-						
45-49	N/A	-						

Data from the Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS) for 2005 found that girls in rural areas were more likely to be married than those from urban areas: 8.8 per cent of girls aged 15-19 questioned living in rural areas were married or in union, compared to 5.1 per cent of girls living in urban areas.⁴³ However, poverty did not seem to be a strong determining factor; in fact, 9.2 per cent of girls aged 15-19 from the fourth-highest wealth quintile were married, compared to 4.4 per cent from the lowest wealth quintile (the rate for the highest wealth quintile was 6.3 per cent).⁴⁴ Significant differences were evident in regard to region, and level of education.

Table 3. Percentage of women/men married before the age of 18, by region (2005)⁴⁵

Region	% of women married before age 18	% of men married before age 18
GBAO	7.8	N/A
Khatlon	15.9	N/A
Soghd	12.8	N/A
DRD	16.8	N/A
Dushanbe	14.6	N/A

Table 4. Percentage of women/currently in union, by region (2005)⁴⁶

Region	% of women 15-19 married/in union	% of men 15-19 married/in union
GBAO	1.0	N/A
Khatlon	5.5	N/A
Soghd	7.6	N/A
DRD	7.1	N/A
Dushanbe	4.7	N/A

Table 5. Percentage of women/men married before the age of 18, by level of education (2005)⁴⁷

Education	% of women married before age 18	% of men married before age 18
No education/Primary 4 year	14.2/27.7	N/A
Primary 8 year	21.7	N/A
Secondary	14.3	N/A
University +	4.5	N/A

Table 6. Percentage of women/men currently in union, by level of education (2005)⁴⁸

Education	% of women 15-19 married/in union	% of men 15-19 married/in union
No education/Primary 4 year	9.5/11.1	N/A
Primary 8 year	5.2	N/A
Secondary	7.5	N/A
University +	2.9	N/A

There were no data on divorce available disaggregated by age and sex.

Of the total number of abortions, 1.43 per cent of the cases are girls under 19 years of age (data from 2004).⁴⁹ Data were not available on the number of live births and stillbirths to girls aged 15-19.

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 United Nations (2004) '10 stories the world should hear more about: Tajikistan: rising from the ashes of civil war', <http://www.un.org/events/tenstories/06/story.asp?storyID=600> (accessed 17 September 2012).
- 3 Laws are available at <http://www.parlament.tj> (accessed 27 September 2012).
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- 27 The total fertility rate (TFR) is defined as the total number of births a woman would have by the end of her childbearing period if she were to pass through those years bearing children at the currently observed age-specific fertility rates (ASFRs). The TFR is obtained by summing the ASFRs and multiplying by five. The general fertility rate (GFR) is expressed as the annual number of live births per 1,000 women aged 15-44, and the crude birth rate (CBR) is expressed as the annual number of live births per 1,000 population.
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- 29 In an interview, the head of the Committee for Women and Family Affairs of GBAO stated that attendance for secondary education is about 98 per cent, and does not reach 100 per cent mainly due to a shortage of secondary schools in the remotest sub-districts of GBAO, such as Sagridasht. One of the *farmans* (orders) of the spiritual leader of Ismailia Muslims, the Aga Khan IV, says that if you have two children in your family and one of them is a boy and the other is a girl, educate the girl because she is a future mother and she must be educated in order to bring up her children and to be able to educate them. A collection of the Aga Khan III and IV's *farmans* is available upon request at the Ismailia Tarika Religious Education Board (ITREB) in Khorog town and Dushanbe city.
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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, 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 lifesaving 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, 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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