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## Editorial

## Adolescence Lost: The Realities of Child Marriage

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There are more than 1.2 billion adolescents in the world—and 90% reside in developing countries [1,2]. Adolescence is commonly viewed as a time when young people focus on education, gain skills to be used in adulthood, and, perhaps, enter the workforce and into romantic relationships. However, for a large number of girls—especially those residing in the poorest countries—arranged, early marriages mark the end of their childhood and any possibility of further personal growth and development.

Early marriage is defined as marriage before the age of 18 [3]. It is associated with increased fertility and population growth because early marriage lengthens the time girls and women spend in childbearing years and shortens the time span between generations. The practice tends to persist in areas that are remote and rural, underdeveloped, and poor. Child brides are at a distinct disadvantage and the impact of early marriage on their lives is far-reaching. They usually enter marriage with low levels of education or no education whatsoever and limited knowledge and skills that are needed to negotiate adult marital roles. Girls married at early ages tend to have larger age differences with their husbands than those married later, and it is more likely that their marriages were arranged, unwanted, and unexpected [4,5]. A married girl is frequently expected to bear a child soon after marriage, representing a significant health risk to both the girl and her baby. The World Health Organization's recent guidelines on preventing early pregnancy lists the prevention of child marriage as one of six primary goals [6]. Studies in some settings in sub-Saharan Africa suggest that girls who marry early have increased risk of HIV infection, even compared with their unmarried sexually active peers, with 50% higher rates of infection among married adolescents compared with unmarried, sexually active girls. Married girls' high infection rates are related to more frequent intercourse, limited condom use, and husbands who are significantly older, more experienced, and more likely to be HIV-positive compared with boyfriends of unmarried girls [7]. Evidence is also emerging that girls married early are more likely to be victims of violence at the hands of their husbands than women who marry later [8]. In her article in this issue of *Journal of Adolescent Health*, Gage adds another dimension to the multiple adverse consequences that accrue to girls from early and unwanted marriages [9]. Gage's study documents elevated rates of suicidal thoughts or attempts at suicide among Ethiopian married girls and those who are promised or

requested in marriage, as opposed to girls not yet in the marriage process. Her findings underscore the extent to which girls themselves experience their early arranged marriages as doors closing on their futures.

The magnitude of the problem outweighs the policy attention we pay to it. It is estimated that more than 100 million girls will be married as children over the next decade, if present patterns remain unchanged. A review of physiological and cognitive readiness at different stages of adolescence concluded that early adolescence (younger than age 15) is generally “too early” from any point of view, for transitions such as sexual initiation and marriage [10]. Nevertheless, marriage to very young adolescent girls—those younger than the age of 15—is still far too common. Worldwide, roughly 14 million girls younger than 15 will marry in the next decade. An analysis by the Population Council identified 76 regions or provinces in 22 countries where at least one in five girls marry before age 15 [11]. A recent large-scale study in Ethiopia highlighted both the extreme disadvantage and trauma experienced by the earliest marrying girls. In that study, 79% of girls who married before age 15 had never been to school; 61% experienced sexual initiation before their first menses; less than half of the girls wanted sexual debut at that time; and one third reported forced consummation of the marriage [12].

However, it is possible to change patterns of marriage and give girls time for an education and to develop as individuals before they enter into long-term relationships of their choosing. For example, a program in Ethiopia, *Berhane Hewan* (Amharic for “Light for Eve”) demonstrated significant reductions in marriage to girls younger than age 15. The project used a combination of support for girls' school supplies to encourage school attendance, the promise of a goat to girls and their families who kept their girls unmarried and in school, and discussions among community members to change attitudes. After just 2 years of implementation, girls aged 10 to 14 in the project site were one tenth as likely to be married and three times more likely to be in school compared with girls in the control site [13]. The study demonstrated that modest investments made directly to the girl can change her life's trajectory and give her a better chance at a more productive and fulfilling future.

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