



Too Young to Marry

Child brides are stripped of their rights, their health, their lives

IN APRIL OF 2008, 10-YEAR-OLD Nujood Ali walked into a courthouse and demanded a divorce. Raised in poverty in Yemen, she had been forced into marriage with a stranger by her father. Although she claimed that her 30-year-old husband beat and sexually abused her, her family refused to intervene. "I asked and begged my mother, father and aunt to help me get divorced," Nujood told the *Yemen Times*. "They answered... 'If you want, you can go to court by yourself.' So this is what I have done."

Nujood was the first child in Yemen to petition for divorce on her own, but her tale of forced marriage is not uncommon in the developing world, where millions of girls are fated to become child brides. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the practice is most common in Africa and South Asia, where, respectively, 42 percent and 48 percent of girls are married

before age 18. In especially poor countries such as Yemen, it is not unusual for girls to wed even before reaching puberty.

Not only poverty but cultural biases against women are to blame.

"Girls are simply not valued as much as boys are," says Jennifer Wilen, assistant program officer of Francophone Africa for the International Women's Health Coalition (IWHC). Daughters are married off as early as possible so that families no longer need provide for them. Parents have little incentive to delay the marriages or keep children in school; they are exchanged for money or livestock, a windfall for the rest of the family. Child brides are transferred to the homes of their new husbands, where their educations and childhoods are halted and they begin lives of social isolation and forced labor.

It's difficult to estimate how many girls are affected by early marriage,

since weddings in many countries are not registered legal unions but rather traditional or religious ceremonies. Although many countries have laws requiring that individuals consent to marriage, parents often arrange marriages without their daughters' knowledge or approval. "Laws prohibiting child marriage have been created, yet are openly flouted," says Dr. K.G. Santhya, senior program officer at the international nonprofit Population Council.

The practice has a disastrous impact on girls' health and development. Girls are pressured to prove their fertility by bearing children as soon as possible, although their still-developing bodies are not yet ready for pregnancy. "Young adolescents are more at risk of morbidity and mortality from pregnancy and childbirth," Santhya says. According to the CDC, girls 10 to 14 years old are five to seven times likelier to die in childbirth than women over

◀ Nujood Ali speaks to the media after her divorce.

age 20, and girls 15 to 19 twice as likely. Child brides typically suffer from obstructed labor, postpartum hemorrhaging, obstetric fistula and other debilitating complications, and have less access than older brides to health services that could prevent or treat many of these conditions. In addition, they are rarely able to decide for themselves when to seek help and must rely on husbands to make decisions about their medical care.

“Marriage itself has become a risk factor for HIV,” according to Wilen. In sub-Saharan Africa, several studies have shown that married girls under age 20 have alarmingly high rates of HIV infection, partly due to the age difference between girls and their husbands. Older husbands are likely to have multiple sex partners and more likely to be infected with HIV or other diseases. Compounding the problem is the polygamy practiced in some parts of Africa and Asia, where younger girls are likely to be a third or fourth wife to a much older man. Because child wives are financially dependent on their husbands, they have no power to use birth control, abstain from sex or request HIV testing.

No matter how subservient a girl is in a traditional culture, there is also a risk that she will simply be abandoned. Girls who are infertile, suffer birth complications or contract HIV are often turned out into the street. “Even though their marriage is horrible, at least it’s economically stable,” Wilen says. “Once they leave or are kicked out, they often have no means of supporting themselves or their children.”

Nujood was fortunate to plead be-

▶ Nujood is congratulated by her lawyer.

fore a sympathetic judge and was granted her divorce. But although her case garnered international headlines, it did little to help the millions of girls who still suffer forced early marriages every year. “We need to address the gatekeepers—parents, teachers, health-care providers—to build awareness of the need to eliminate

countries,” McCollum says. “Child marriage is a practice that undermines that investment. And it is a horrific violation of human rights.”

For 20 years, the IWHC has supported local organizations in Western Africa that teach parents, communities and policy-makers that child marriage is not a harmless tradition but

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child marriage,” says Santhya.

U.S. Rep. Betty McCollum (D-Minn.) has proposed the International Protecting Girls by Preventing Child Marriage Act, which would help fund groups that are trying to prevent child marriage by working to raise the value of girls in traditional societies, and by giving parents incentives to keep daughters in school. “The U.S. invests billions of dollars to improve the lives of people in poor

one that places their daughters in danger. These organizations spread the word that girls can become valuable members of their communities, able to earn money and support themselves and thereby reduce the burden on their families. “If you provide an education for your daughter, she will be able to get a job,” Wilen says, “and educating and empowering women fortifies your whole country.”

—ALLISON FORD

