

Child Marriage and Adolescent Pregnancy in Mozambique: Policy Brief



unite for
children



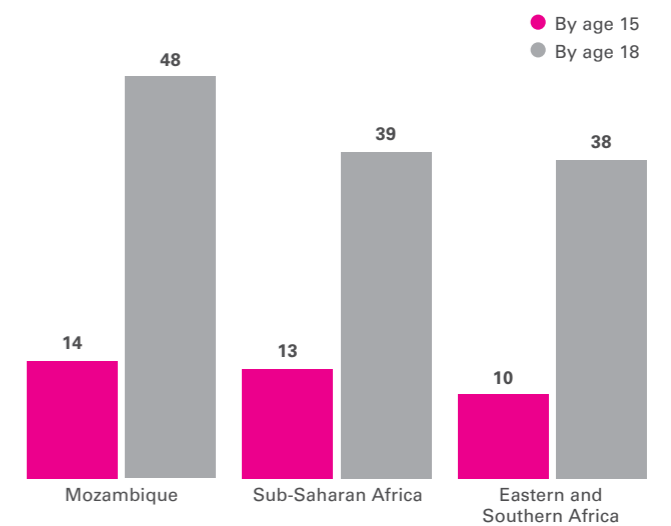
Child marriage is one of Mozambique's most serious but largely ignored development challenges – requiring far greater attention from policy makers.

The fact that Mozambique has one of the highest rates of child marriage in the world, affecting almost one in every two girls, is one of the worst human rights violations against girls. It also undermines efforts to reduce poverty and achieve the Millennium Development Goals – in particular by halting girls' education prematurely and leading directly to teenage pregnancy, with heightened risks of maternal and child mortality.

Economic pressures and sociocultural traditions continue to drive families to marry off their daughters at a very young age when they are not mature enough to give meaningful consent or to take on the responsibilities of becoming wives and mothers. Many drop out of school and quickly become pregnant, before their bodies are ready for childbearing, with very serious implications both for their own health and for the survival of their children.

Mozambique has the world's 10th highest rate of child marriage – measured as the proportion of women aged 20-24 who married in childhood, i.e. before they turned 18. The focus is on girls, since almost no boys marry before this age. The vast majority of these marriages are *de facto* unions, rather than legally registered marriages, but they are marriages nonetheless, formalized usually through customary procedures such as the payment of bride price (*lobolo*) to the girl's family. According to data from the Demographic and Health Survey (DHS) in 2011, 48% of women aged 20-24 married before they were 18 years old and 14% before they were even 15. Mozambique is lagging behind in tackling this problem. Its child marriage rates are much higher than the averages for the Eastern and Southern African sub-region (see Figure 1) and are exceeded by only one other SADC country, Malawi.

Figure 1 – Percentage of women aged 20-24 who married in childhood: Mozambique and Africa



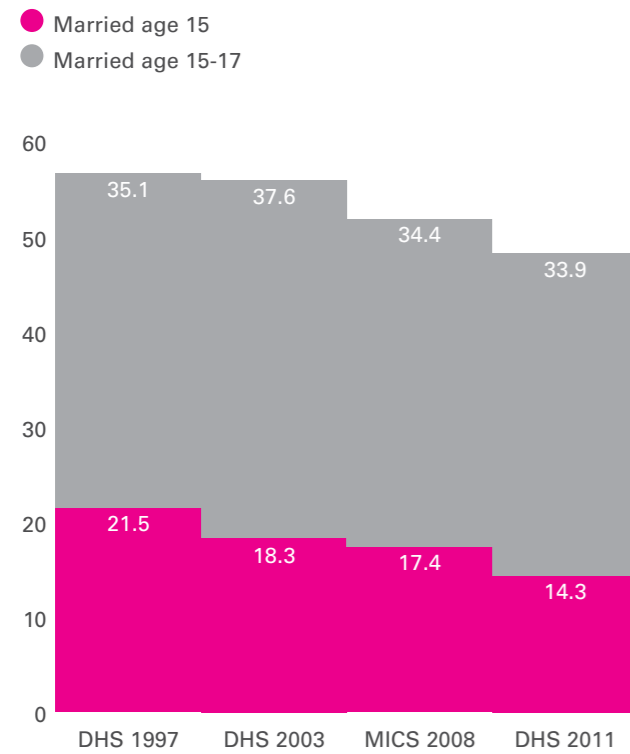
Sources: DHS 2011 and (for international comparisons) UNICEF, State of the World's Children 2014.

¹ This policy brief has been written for UNICEF, UNFPA and the National Coalition to Eliminate Child Marriage in Mozambique by Oxford Policy Management (OPM) consultant Anthony Hodges. It is based partly on UNICEF, UNFPA and National Coalition to Eliminate Child Marriage (2014) report 'Statistical Analysis of Child Marriage and Adolescent Pregnancy in Mozambique: Determinants and Impacts'.

Child marriage rates are still very high despite a long-term decline, especially in marriage before the age of 15.

Figure 2 shows data from four successive national surveys in 1997, 2003, 2008 and 2011 on the proportion of women aged 20-24 married by ages 15 and 18. The proportion married by 18 fell from 56.6% in 1997 to 48.2% in 2011. Most of the decline was in the proportion of women married by age 15, which fell by one third during this period. By contrast, there was only a modest decline of 3% in the proportion married in the age band 15-17. However, as can be seen, there is still a very long way to go to eliminate the practice of child marriage.

Figure 2 – Trends in child marriage, 1997-2011 (% of women aged 20-24)



Sources: DHS 1997, 2003 and 2011, and MICS 2008.

Child marriage is more prevalent in the rural areas and heavily concentrated in the Northern and Central regions. According to the 2011 DHS, 56% of women aged 20-24 were married by the age of 18 in rural areas, compared with 36% in the cities. Marriage before the age of 18 was found to be particularly high in the provinces of Niassa, Cabo Delgado and Manica. In Niassa, almost one quarter of women (24%) were married by the age of 15, as can be seen in Figure 3.

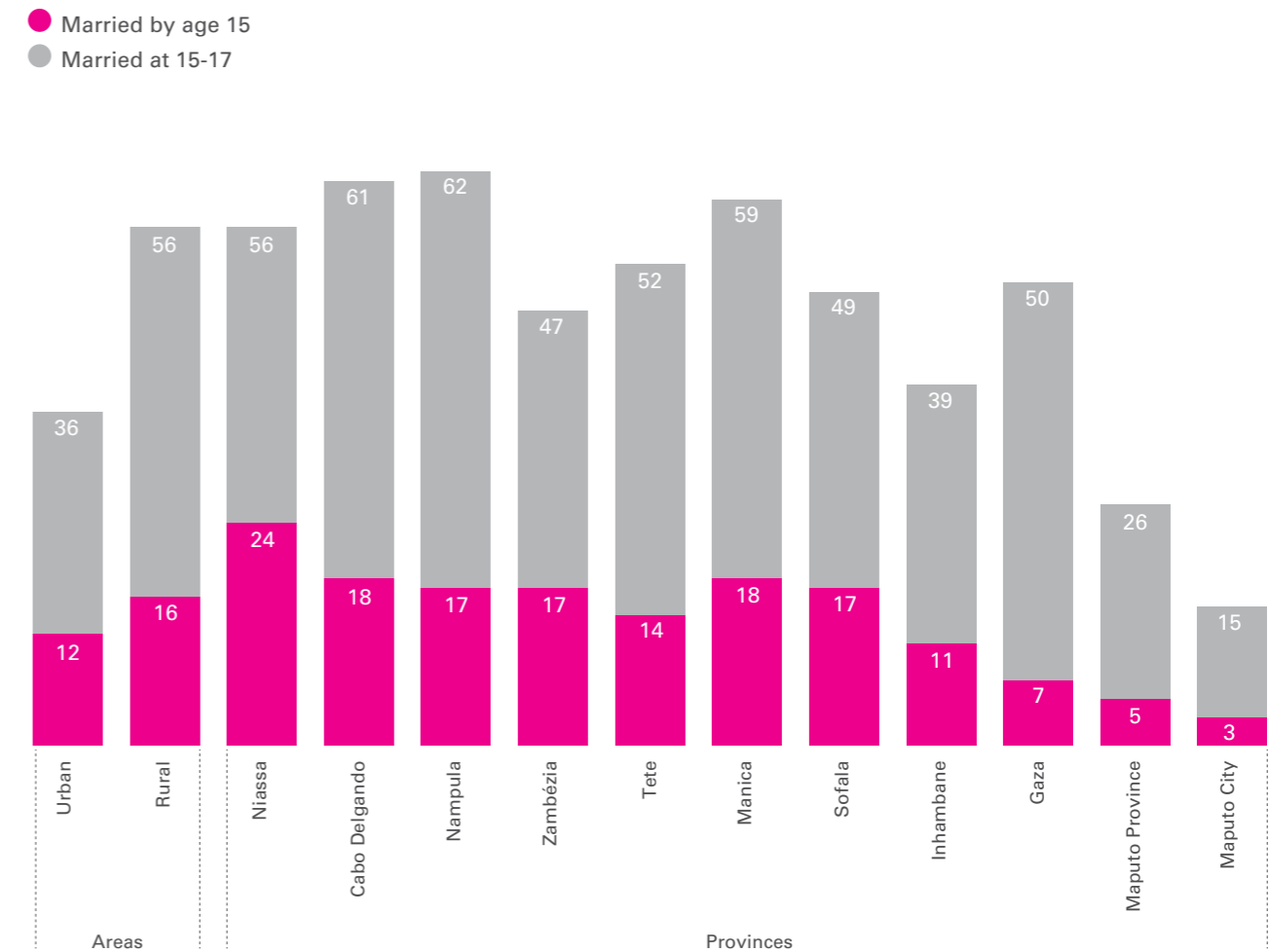
However, the practice of early marriage has declined most sharply in the provinces where it is most common, suggesting that cultural norms about marriage are evolving in these areas. In Nampula, for example, the proportion of women aged 20-24 who married before they were 15 fell from an incredibly high rate of 53% in 1997 to 17% in 2011, while the proportion married before age 18 fell from 82% to 62%. In the same current age group in Cabo Delgado, marriage before 15 fell from 42% to 18% and marriage before 18 from 78% to 61%. Tete also showed a decline in marriage before age 18, from 17% to 14%.²

Due to their large populations, Zambézia and Nampula are the two provinces with the highest absolute numbers of girls married during childhood, accounting between them for 44% of all women aged 20-24 who married before the age of 15 and 42% of those who married by the age of 18. Efforts to address child marriage clearly need to focus on these provinces, as well as the provinces with smaller populations but very high child marriage rates, such as Cabo Delgado, Niassa and Manica, which together account for a quarter of marriages by girls below the age of 18 (24%).

² The declines in each of these provinces were statistically significant.



Figure 3 – Child marriage by provinces and areas, 2011



Sources: DHS 2011

Economic pressures and the incentive of bride price appear to be powerful factors driving parents to marry off their daughters at a young age.

Giving girls away in marriage not only brings an immediate material windfall, in the form of *lobolo*, but also removes a mouth to feed – an important consideration for families living below or only slightly above the poverty line. This economic factor cannot easily be seen in the DHS, which shows child marriage rates as changing little by socioeconomic quintiles, except in the richest quintile, where there is a significant reduction.³ This reflects the fact that poverty is a mass phenomenon in Mozambique, affecting about half of the population, and that many of the non-poor are still very close to the poverty line.

Sociocultural factors appear to play a major role in shaping norms on the age of marriage. The stark regional disparities in child marriage rates suggest that sociocultural factors specific to the high incidence regions may be particularly important drivers of child marriage. Norms about the appropriate or desired age of marriage are transmitted and sustained by community institutions and opinion-leaders, including the *madrinhas* and *matronas* responsible for the initiation rites for young adolescent girls, which are most common in ethnic groups in the Northern and Central regions with the highest incidence of child marriage. Besides inculcating a general sense of female submissiveness to men, these important life-cycle events constitute a rite of passage to adulthood, endorsing as a social norm the idea that, once initiated in their early teens, girls are ready for marriage and procreation.⁴

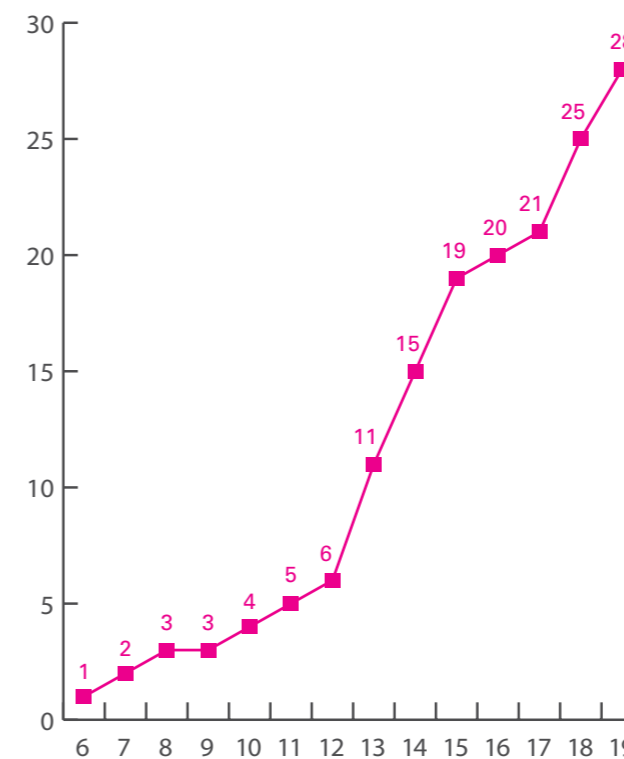
DHS data suggest that other key factors are education, religion and the sex and age of household heads. A regression analysis on 2011 DHS data for women aged 18-24 showed that, for those with secondary education, there was a 53% lower likelihood of being married by age 18, compared with girls with no education at all.. Girls from religious households, whether Muslim, Christian or other, are less likely to marry in childhood than households professing no faith and this is particularly the case for girls in Muslim households, who have the lowest probability of marrying before 18. Girls in female-headed households and with older household heads are also less likely to be married before 18.



Child marriage disempowers girls, closes off opportunities for their development and leads directly to adolescent pregnancy and its associated high risks. When teenage girls are married, their aspirations and opportunities for further development immediately close off. Those that are still in school will almost invariably drop out. They will also become subordinate to their husbands, who in many cases are much older, are better educated and have greater access to resources. About a fifth of married girls aged 15-19 have husbands who are 10 or more years older than themselves, according to the 2008 MICS. In some cases these young girls are also second or third spouses, with the 2011 DHS data showing that about 9% of married girls aged 15-19 have co-wives.

Child marriage is one of the main causes of school dropout among teenage girls. Analysis by the World Bank, using data for 1998-2008 from a national panel survey, found that 'marriage, pregnancy and health' were cited by 7% of households as a reason for girls not being enrolled in school, with the proportion rising to 15% by age 14, 18.5% by age 15 and over 20% from age 16 onwards (see Figure 4). For girls, these proportions are much higher, as almost no boys are married before the age of 18. The regression analysis of DHS 2011 data found that child marriage is associated with a reduced likelihood of girls finishing primary school (-11.7% if married before 15 and -5.5% if married before 18) and starting secondary school (-12.9% and -6.4% respectively).

Figure 4 – Reasons for children being out of school: Percentage of households citing marriage, pregnancy and health, by age of children, 1998-2008



Source: L Fox, L Santibáñez, V Nguyen and P André, Education reform in Mozambique, lessons and challenges, World Bank, Washington DC, 2012.

Sexual activity is much higher in married than unmarried adolescent girls, so child marriage also leads to teenage pregnancy and higher risks of maternal and child mortality.

The 2011 DHS data indicate that 39% of girls who married before the age of 15 also had their first child before they were 15, compared with less than 3% of girls who married after 15. Overall, the median interval between marriage and first birth is only 15 months. So, when girls marry young, they tend to become pregnant and give birth before they are physically (or emotionally) mature enough to become mothers, with all the attendant risks of low birth weight, foetal obstruction and maternal mortality. In fact, the risks go beyond this, as the data shows that the children born to these mothers are also at higher risk of under-nutrition and mortality, not only in the neonatal period but up to the age of 5.



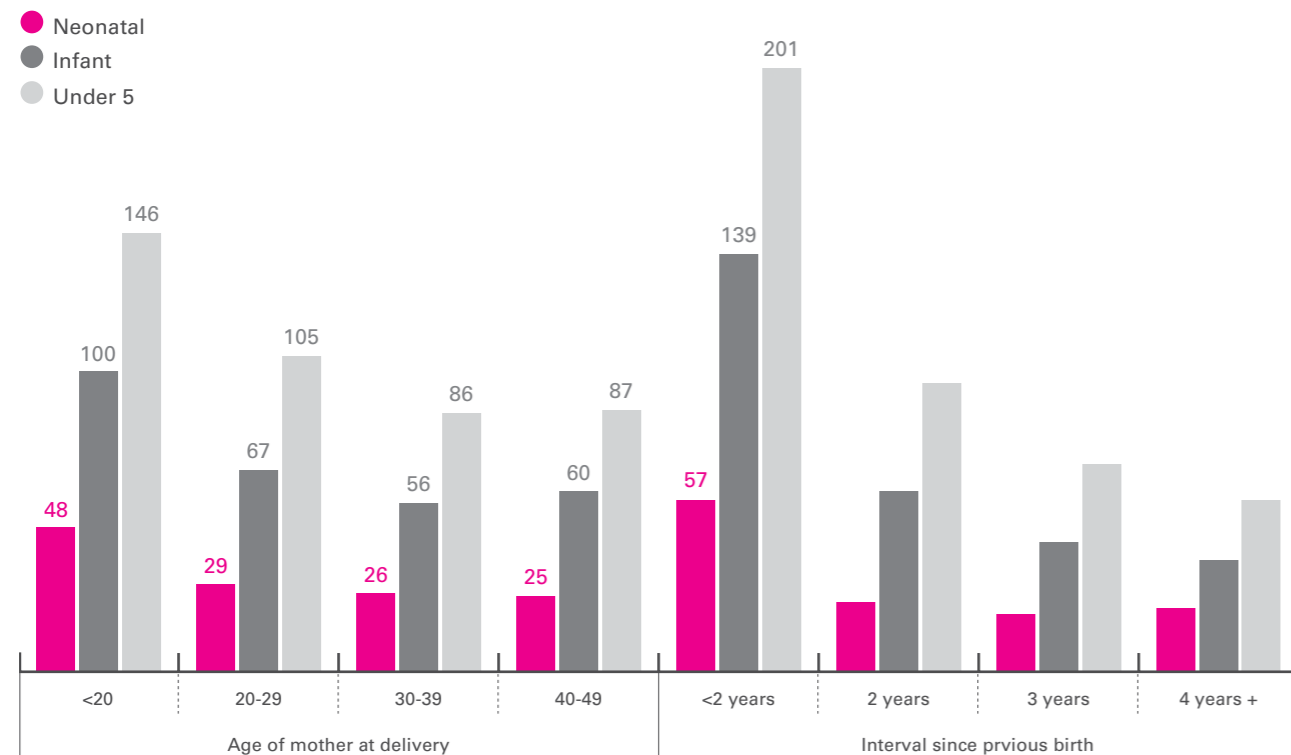
³ Quintiles structure the population into 20% groups, going from the poorest (1st) quintile to the richest (5th) quintile.

⁴ C Matsinhe, E Cumbe, A Biza, A Miambo, R Cristina and T Quembo, *Pesquisa etnográfica: Práticas culturais e comunitárias de promoção de saúde sexual e reprodutiva, Nampula, Sofala, Inhambane – Moçambique, Maputo, 2010.*

The children of adolescent mothers are also at higher risk of under-nutrition.

The rates of neonatal, infant and under-5 mortality are much higher for children born to mothers aged under 20 (see Figure 5). The 2011 DHS data show that under-5 mortality for these children (146 per thousand live births) is almost 40% higher than for children born to mothers aged 20-29. Neonatal mortality is almost two thirds higher. The risks of mortality are even higher when the two high-risk factors of young age of mother (below 18) and short birth interval (below 24 months) are combined. For example, the risk of death before the age of 5 is 4.35 times higher in this dual high-risk category than for children born with three low-risk characteristics (mother aged 18-34, birth interval above 24 months and birth order below 4).⁵

Figure 5 – Neonatal, infant and under-5 mortality rates by age of mother and birth intervals, 2011



Source: DHS 2011.

An analysis of data from the Household Budget Survey (IOF) in 2008 found that the risks of stunting, wasting and underweight are all significantly higher when mothers are under 19 years of age at the time of delivery.⁶ The UNICEF, UNFPA and National Coalition to Eliminate Child Marriage (CECAP) study using DHS 2011 data came to a similar conclusion with respect to stunting, finding that children under 5 born to mothers below 18 years old were likely to be at least one third of a standard deviation further away from the WHO mean for height-for-age than children born to older mothers.

⁵ Taken alone, the risk of mortality is 2.05 times higher for children born to mothers less than 18 years old and 2.30 times higher for children born less than 24 months after a previous birth, compared with the low-risk category. These 2 high-risk categories account for 9.2% and 4.1% of births respectively, while the third high risk category (birth order of 4 or more) is larger (25.2% of births) but with a lower risk ratio (1.13) compared to the other two.

⁶ C Azzari, G Carletto, B Davis & A Nucifora, *Child under-nutrition in Mozambique*, World Bank, 2011.

What needs to be done

The high rates of child marriage cannot be allowed to continue without a vigorous response from the government, civil society and development partners.

As this policy brief has shown, the extent of child marriage and the very early age at which this often takes place have far-reaching implications for the wellbeing, education and health of a large proportion of teenage girls, with knock-on effects on the quality of their adult life and long-term poverty reduction. Graça Machel, the former first lady of Mozambique and a renowned social activist for the rights of women and children, has shown the way forward by launching a national campaign against this retrograde social practice that both violates human rights and holds back national development. The challenge now is to make this an explicit development priority, at the highest levels of government, and to take the measures needed to eliminate the risk of child marriage for the next generation of girls.



The country needs a multifaceted strategy to prevent and eliminate child marriage, including legal reform, changes in cultural norms at community level, and measures to strengthen girls' education and improve economic opportunities for young women.

1. Sociocultural change

Little progress will be made unless cultural norms and expectations change. Marriage is an institution shaped by societal attitudes, so changes in marriage age preferences in individual families are unlikely to affect practices without changes in the wider community. Working with traditional leaders, churches and mosques, as well as the women in charge of initiation rites, is crucial to convey the benefits of delaying marriage. This can be supplemented by campaigns through the mass media, including community radio stations.

2. Keeping girls in school.

Stemming school dropout by girls, so that they can complete primary school and make the transition to lower secondary school, is crucial, as school and marriage are often mutually exclusive in practice – although measures can and should be taken to provide opportunities for married girls to remain in or return to school. Although much progress has been made towards gender parity at primary level, the gross primary completion rate is still lower for girls than boys and the net attendance ratio for girls trails that for boys at secondary level, with a gender parity index of 9.0 in 2011 and even wider disparities in the northern and central regions. The main problem, however, is that primary completion and transition to secondary school are low for all pupils, boys and girls, with a gross primary completion rate of 47% in 2012. Poor quality of education is leading to children (both boys and girls) dropping out and not completing schooling, hence enhancing the quality of education is a key strategy to keep girls in school.

3. Economic empowerment of women.

Ultimately, girls and their families need improved economic prospects. It is when families and girls themselves can reap economic benefits from investment in their education, in the form of higher earning power in adult life, that there will be a much stronger incentive to delay the age of marriage. This will require giving special attention to women in job creation programmes, technical and vocational education, and the expansion of access to micro-finance, among other measures to empower poor women economically. Cash transfers could also play a role in stemming the economic pressures on households that lead to child marriage.

4. Legal reform.

The legal age of marriage is 18 under the Family Law (law no 10/2004) and the Law on the Protection and Promotion of Child Rights (law no 7/2008). However, there is a loophole allowing marriage at age 16 with the consent of parents (ironically with no mention of the child's consent). Since most of these marriages result from family agreements, this effectively gives legal cover to child marriage from age 16. An immediate priority is to make the legal age of marriage 18 without any exception, and to strengthen enforcement, which at present is almost non-existent, even for marriages below the age of 16.

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