

Research Insights

The Consequences of Child Marriage in Indonesia

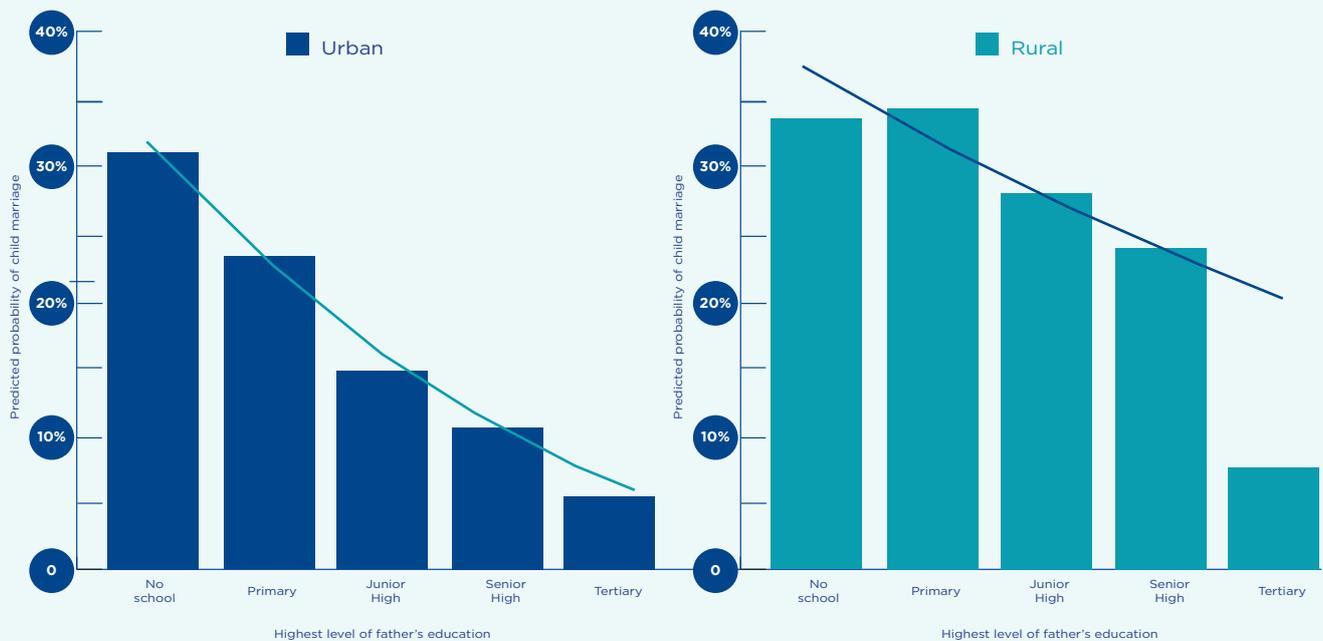
Child marriage is prohibited by international law yet it is estimated that about 150 million girls will be married in childhood by 2030. What are the consequences of child marriage as these children grow into adulthood, for their households and their own children? We examined this in the context of Indonesia where child marriage is common.

Child marriage in Indonesia

More than one in four Indonesian women, and around one in 12 Indonesian men, or 25 million women and seven million men, are estimated to have been married before the age of 19 (the legal minimum age of marriage in Indonesia). Child marriage affects people across the country and of all religious and socioeconomic groups. It is more common among families living in rural areas, and poorer and less educated families (see Figure 1). The relationship between child marriage and economic outcomes is a two-way street. Melbourne Institute research shows that child marriage has significant and persistent negative effects on the lives of women and men (see further reading list). Child marriage reduces educational attainment and restricts access to high quality well-paid work. Women who marry early have more children, at a younger age, and these children fare worse in terms of their health, education and cognitive ability. And so, the cycle continues.

It is well-established that child marriage has a negative effect on girls and boys who are married early, however the magnitudes of these effects have not been widely documented. This information is important for measuring the social cost of child marriage, and for demonstrating to policymakers, community leaders and families the importance of taking concrete steps to reduce it. The data source used here - the Indonesian Family Life Survey - allows an examination of the consequences of child marriage across many aspects of people's lives - education, work, health and development, decision-making power within the household and life satisfaction. It follows households and members across several decades and allows an examination of intergenerational impacts.

Figure 1: Child marriage prevalence for girls by father's education



Notes: IFLS 2015 and IFLS East. Author's calculations including women aged 19 and older.

Key Insights

1 Child marriage reduces educational attainment and leads to worse employment prospects and income

Child marriage results in women ending up with about 1.6 years less education than other similar women. Women who marry before the age of 19 are slightly (3 percent) less likely to work than other women. Early marriage however has a large, negative effect on job quality and wages. Women who marry early are less likely to work in the formal sector and their hourly earnings are only 75 per cent of what a similar woman who married later earns. This has serious implications for their quality of life: women who marry early have lower household incomes and less access to benefits such as sick leave, regular wages, employment security and pension plans. These women are also likely to be financially vulnerable later in life.

2 Women who marry early are less satisfied with life and divorce more often

Women who marry early are much more likely to report that their standard of living and that of their children is inadequate. They are also more likely to report much lower levels of overall happiness and dissatisfaction with their children's food intake, healthcare and education. Women who marry early are also about 60 per cent more likely to see their marriage end in divorce. Hence, child marriage has an emotional as well as an economic toll.

3 Younger brides have more children, but receive less care during pregnancy

Risk factors that perpetuate disadvantage among the children of women who marry early can be present even before a child is born. Women who marry before 19 are about 3.5 years younger when their first child is born. They have more children and make fewer antenatal care visits to the doctor during pregnancy. They are also less likely to take iron supplements and have a blood test. Women who marry early are about 5 per cent less likely to have a doctor or a nurse present when they give birth. Having more children and less access to appropriate care are both risk factors for maternal and newborn mortality. The children of women who marry early are about 20 per cent more likely to die in their first 12 months of life. Child marriage thus leads to loss of life.

4 Children of young wives experience persistent disadvantage

Children of young mothers who do survive are 15 per cent more likely to be stunted (low height-for-age) and score worse on tests of cognitive ability. Stunting and lower cognitive ability are strongly associated with other health problems, lower educational achievement and earnings later in life, and higher dependence on social security (Efevbera et al., 2017). The children of early-married mothers are also less likely to have a birth certificate. This can hinder access to education and health services and publicly-provided welfare programs. Disadvantage accumulates through these avenues.

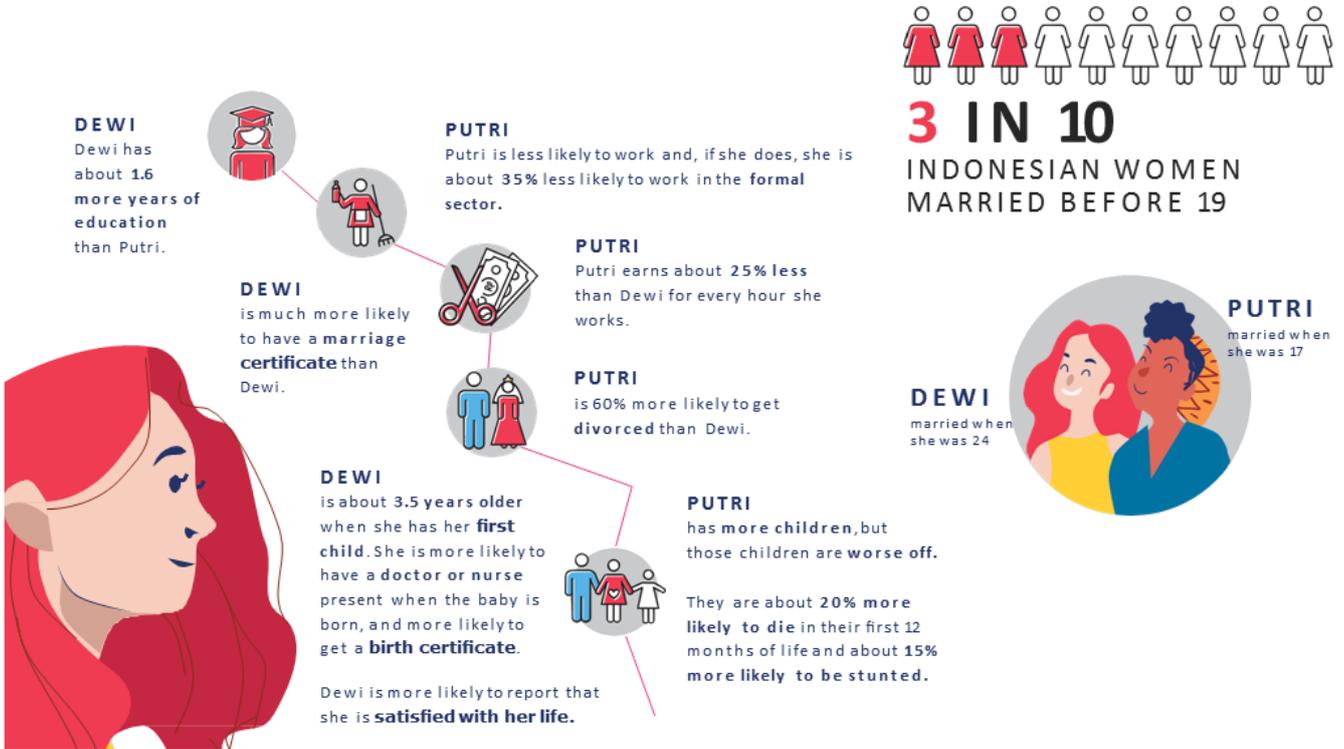
5 Men who marry early are also disadvantaged

Men who marry before the age of 19 are, maybe surprisingly, disadvantaged in similar ways to women. Men's legal age of marriage has been 19 in Indonesia since 1976. Men who marry before 19 obtain about 1.8 fewer years of education than other men. While they are slightly more likely to work, they are about 15 per cent less likely to work in the formal sector and earn about 20 per cent less than those who marry at an older age. Like women, they are much more likely to divorce than similar men, and much less satisfied with their lives. In this sense, child marriage is gender-neutral.

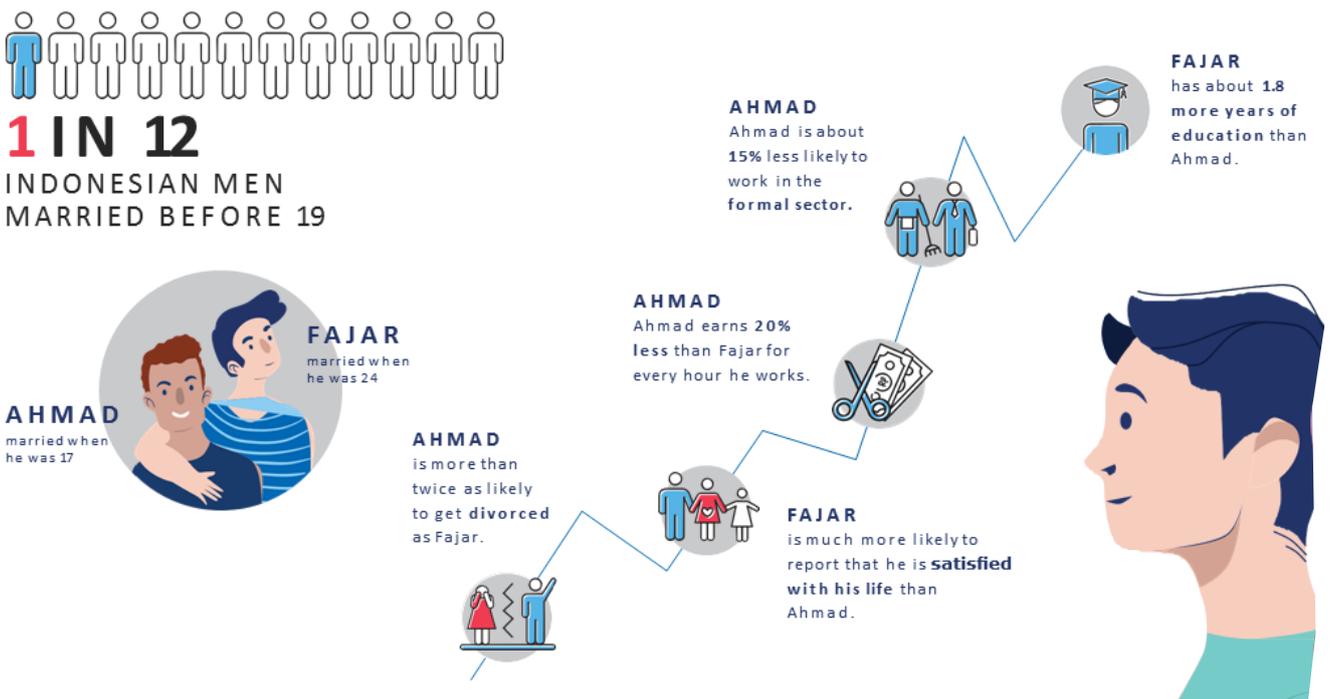
Figure 2

THE CONSEQUENCES OF CHILD MARRIAGE

Indonesian women who are married before the age of 19 can expect a **lower quality of life** for themselves and for their children, compared with women who wait a few years. Putri and Dewi are friends. Putri marries early and Dewi waits a bit longer. Otherwise, up to that point they have had a very similar life.



Indonesian men who are married before the age of 19 can expect a **lower quality of life**. Ahmad and Fajar are friends. Ahmad marries early and Fajar waits a bit longer. Otherwise, up to that point they have had a very similar life.



Changing laws is not enough

Child marriage has been a long-standing issue in Indonesia, and the Indonesian government is ramping up its efforts to address it. In September 2019, Indonesia's parliament raised the minimum age of marriage for girls from 16 to 19 years. UNICEF's representative for Indonesia described the change as 'a major milestone in the fight against child marriage', but warned there was still work to be done to reduce the rate of child marriage across the country (UNICEF Indonesia, 2019).

Marriage laws can help to reduce the rate of child marriage (Lyn et al., 2019) but, in the absence of supporting policy initiatives, they are insufficient to stop it from occurring. Families may choose a religious marriage, without a civil service, and so sidestep the law. This point has been well established internationally. For example, child marriage has been outlawed in India since 1978, with those laws further strengthened in 2006 to make it easier to punish offenders, and yet the rate of female child marriage remains high in India (27 per cent in 2016). See, for example, Raj et al. (2009), Ghosh (2011), and UNICEF (2020; 2018).

There are few examples of policy measures that are directly linked to a reduction in child marriage, however policies that empower girls to make informed decisions about marriage and be active decision-makers within their household are likely to have the greatest impact (Girls Not Brides, 2014). One example, a program in Uganda, provided girls with vocational skills to enable them to start a small-scale business, and life skills to help them make more informed decisions about sex, reproduction and marriage. A randomised controlled trial of the program found that girls who participated were less likely to have become pregnant and were also less likely to be married or co-habiting with a partner (Bandiera et al., 2020). Another program in Bangladesh that provided a financial incentive in the form of free cooking oil for girls to remain single until they reach adulthood was found to be effective (Buchmann et al., 2018).

More generally, policies that increase access to education for both boys and girls are likely to reduce the rate of child marriage. Reducing the cost of education has the potential to delay the age of marriage as parents may be more inclined to keep girls (and boys) at school rather than marrying them. In addition, in later generations, our data show that better educated parents are less likely to arrange for their own children to marry early (figure 1).

Social protection programs, like cash or in-kind

transfer programs that currently exist in many developing countries, can be designed to incorporate conditions related to child marriage. The Indonesian program, Program Keluarga Harapan (PKH) provides cash transfers on the condition that children are enrolled in school (among other conditions). PKH has been credited with increasing educational attainment for children. PKH does not focus on early marriage and does not appear to affect the early marriage rate. However, testing the addition of conditions or incentives to reduce child marriage in a few provinces or districts where child marriage is common would be a worthwhile policy trial.

Information campaigns could be effective in reducing child marriage. Child marriage is, in large part, a cultural phenomenon, driven by social norms in local communities. When new laws conflict with social norms, there's a risk that the laws will go unenforced (Acemoglu and Jackson, 2017), but information campaigns can help by driving changes to social norms. Such campaigns are most effective when conducted in partnership with traditional leaders and tailored to address the distinct culture and behaviours of individual communities (Muriaas et al., 2019).

Policies can also be developed to reduce the negative impacts of child marriage. Programs that provide young mothers with free childcare and support to further their education (Crean et al., 2001); policies that encourage and support young mothers to access health care during pregnancy and childbirth; and policies that make it easier for women to obtain a marriage certificate and birth certificates for their children are all examples of policies that could disproportionately benefit women who have married at an early age, and their children, and improve their life chances.

The Australian aid program is working with its Indonesian counterparts to reduce child marriage to reduce gender inequality and promote regional economic stability and growth. This project was a collaboration between the Melbourne Institute and MAMPU - The Australia-Indonesia Partnership for Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment.

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Further Information

Datasets:

Our research draws on the Indonesian Family Life Survey (IFLS), waves 1-5 (1993, 1997, 2000, 2007, 2014) and East (2012). The survey is representative of more than 80% of the Indonesian population and follows participants' lives over the course of 20 years. Our sample is comprised of over 40,000 Indonesian women, men and children.

Further Reading

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