

# Uganda: Basic Profile of Child Marriage

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Keeping girls in schools helps in delaying marriage. Conversely, child marriage contributes to lower educational attainment for girls. In Uganda, many girls are still married as children (before the age of 18), before they may be physically and emotionally ready to become wives and mothers. Child brides are at greater risk of experiencing poor health outcomes, having children at a younger age, having more children over their lifetime, dropping out of school, earning less in adulthood, and living in poverty. They are also at higher risk of intimate partner violence and may lack decision-making ability. Apart from affecting girls, child marriage also affects their children, households, communities, and societies. This brief provides a profile of child marriage in Uganda using the Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS) for 2011 and 2016 (these are the most recent surveys implemented under the DHS program).

## One in three women in Uganda still marry early

Table 1 provides statistics on the age at first marriage for women ages 18 to 22 in the last two DHS. This is the youngest age group that can be used to measure child marriage, defined as a formal or informal union before the age of 18. A substantial share of girls still marry before the age of 18, and many do so before 15, but there are differences between the two surveys suggesting that child marriage has decreased slightly over time. The share of women ages 18 to 22 who were married before the age of 18 decreased from 36.5 percent in 2011 to 32.5 percent in 2016.



**Background:** This brief was prepared for a KIX Africa 19 Hub national policy dialogue in Uganda with a focus on inclusive education. KIX (Knowledge and Innovation Exchange) Africa 19 contributes to education systems strengthening in African anglophone countries by bridging the gap between research and policy making. With support from the Global Partnership for Education and Canada's International Development Research Center, KIX Africa 19 is managed by UNESCO IICBA.

**Key findings:** Using data from the last two Demographic and Health Surveys for 2011 and 2016, this brief provides a basic profile of child marriage in Uganda.

- One third of women in Uganda still marry early. The share of women ages 18 to 22 who were married before the age of 18 decreased slightly from 36.5 percent in 2011 to 32.5 percent in 2016.
- Higher order measures of child marriage suggest a similar trend, namely a slight decline over time in the depth and severity of child marriage.
- Girls in rural areas and in the northern region are more at risk of child marriage, as are girls in households with lower levels of wealth (and higher levels of poverty).
- Child marriage is associated with worse educational outcomes, including lower educational attainment and literacy.
- The relationship between child marriage and labor force participation, as well as the type of work held when working is more complex.
- These associations are correlations, not necessarily causal effects, but other briefs in this series look at these issues in more details.

**Table 1: Age at First Marriage for Women, Women Ages 18 to 22 (%)**

	2011	2016
Not Married	39.8	41.7
18 or above	23.8	25.9
Below 12	0.4	0.2
12	1.7	0.7
13	2.2	1.5
14	3.0	3.6
15	7.2	5.8
16	9.2	9.0
17	12.8	11.6
Share married before 18	36.5	32.5
Total	100.0	100.0
Mean age at first marriage (if married)	16.8	17.2

Source: Authors' estimation using 2011 and 2016 DHS.

## Other measures of child marriage are also useful

The negative impact of child marriage for a girl's health, education, and well-being is often larger when the girl marries very early. For example, child marriage is known to have a negative impact on school enrollment and attainment. The earlier a girl marries, the more likely it is that she will drop out of school early and thereby have a low level of educational attainment. This will not only limit her employment and earnings potential for the rest of her life, but it will also have other negative consequences for her as well as for her children.

Most studies on child marriage report the incidence of child marriage - the share of girls who marry early (before the age of 18), sometimes also with the share of girls who marry very early, before the age of 15. Such statistics are useful, but they do not capture the "depth" and "severity" of child marriage well. Measures of child marriage can be adopted from the poverty literature (Nguyen and Wodon, 2012). Three such measures are used here: the incidence of child marriage or headcount index, the child marriage gap, and the squared child marriage gap. Definitions of these measures is provided in an annex. The measures are estimated for child marriage and very early marriage defined as marrying before age 15.

The child marriage gap represents the "depth" of child marriage. It accounts not only for the share of girls who marry early, but also the number of years of early marriage. When using the child marriage gap for the evaluation of programs or policies, instead of simply looking at the share of the girls who marry early, more weight is placed on the girls who marry at a very young

age. While the child marriage gap takes into account the average number of years of early marriage for girls who marry early, the squared gap takes into account the square of that number, thereby putting even more emphasis on girls who marry very early and taking into account inequality in the age of marriage among girls marrying early.

Table 2 provides trends over time in these measures of child marriage inspired by the poverty literature. Consider first the age group 18-22. In that age group, as already mentioned, about one in three girls marry before the age of 18 (36.5 percent in 2011 and 32.5 percent in 2016.). The child marriage gap (CMG) drops from 7.5 percent in 2011 to 6.0 percent in 2016 among women ages 18 to 22. The squared gap (SG) drops from 1.6 percent for that group in 2011 to 1.3 percent. This suggests that apart from the fact that slightly fewer girls marry before the age of 18 in 2016 versus 2011, the age at first marriage is increasing slightly, as shown in Table 1. By estimating the same measures on older groups, Table 2 provides an implicit trend in child marriage over time. There has been some progress in reducing child marriage, but progress has remained limited. Note that all estimates have standard errors which are not shown in Table 2 to save space. Some differences over time of between age groups may not be statistically significant. Importantly, it could also be that the impact of the recent COVID-19 pandemic has made matters worse.

**Table 2: Trends in Child and Very Early Marriage (%)**

	18 years			15 years		
	H	CMG	SG	H	CMG	SG
<b>2011</b>						
All 18-49 years	46.8	7.5	1.6	14.4	2.0	0.4
<b>Age group</b>						
18-22 years	36.5	5.0	0.9	7.3	1.0	0.2
23-30 years	46.3	7.6	1.7	14.5	2.0	0.4
31-40 years	53.3	9.0	2.0	17.8	2.4	0.5
41-49 years	52.8	8.9	2.1	19.4	2.7	0.5
<b>2016</b>						
All 18-49 years	39.4	6.0	1.3	10.9	1.5	0.3
<b>Age group</b>						
18-22 years	32.5	4.1	0.7	6.0	0.6	0.1
23-30 years	36.6	5.6	1.2	10.3	1.4	0.3
31-40 years	45.5	7.4	1.7	14.4	2.0	0.4
41-49 years	46.5	7.4	1.6	14.3	2.0	0.4

Source: Authors' estimation.

## Girls in rural areas and in the north are more at risk

As shown in Table 3, child marriage is more prevalent in rural than in urban areas. There are also large differences between regions, with lower measures observed in the Central and Western regions and higher measures observed in the Northern and Eastern regions. At the same time, some regions with a higher prevalence of child marriage had a larger reduction in the prevalence of the practice between 2011 and 2016 (again, standard errors are not shown in the Table to save space – some differences may not be statistically significant).

**Table 3: Child Marriage by Geographic Location, Age 18-22 (%)**

	18 years			15 years		
	H	CMG	SG	H	CMG	SG
<b>2011</b>						
All 18-22 years	36.5	5.0	0.9	7.3	1.0	0.2
<b>Region</b>						
Central	26.5	3.7	0.8	5.8	0.9	0.2
Eastern	46.6	6.7	1.3	10.8	1.4	0.2
Northern	47.9	6.4	1.2	8.2	1.2	0.2
Western	31.3	3.8	0.6	5.1	0.6	0.1
<b>2016</b>						
All 18-22 years	32.5	4.1	0.7	6.0	0.6	0.1
<b>Region</b>						
Central	25.4	3.3	0.6	5.1	0.5	0.1
Eastern	33.1	4.3	0.7	6.5	0.7	0.1
Northern	41.5	5.1	0.9	6.5	0.8	0.1
Western	31.4	4.0	0.7	6.0	0.7	0.1

Source: Authors' estimation. Values rounding to 0.0 not shown.

## Girls in poverty are also more at risk

Household welfare can be measured through a wealth index with households categorized in five quintiles from the poorest to the richest. For most women the level of wealth observed is that of the household in which they married, not their household or origin, but it is likely that many women marry with men who have similar socio-economic profiles, in which case the quintile of wealth after marriage may not be very different from the quintile before, although it should be noted that for younger women, assets and wealth may be lower than for older women. Measures of child marriage differ by quintile. In the top two quintiles of wealth is the prevalence of child marriage is much lower than in the bottom three quintiles.

**Table 4: Child Marriage by Quintile of Wealth, Age 18-22 (%)**

	18 years			15 years		
	H	CMG	SG	H	CMG	SG
<b>2011</b>						
All 18-22 years	36.5	5.0	0.9	7.3	1.0	0.2
<b>Wealth quintiles</b>						
Poorest	54.4	7.4	1.4	10.3	1.5	0.3
Poorer	49.9	7.3	1.5	11.3	1.8	0.3
Middle	40.5	5.2	0.9	6.9	0.6	0.1
Richer	29.9	3.5	0.6	4.5	0.5	0.1
Richest	19.9	3.0	0.6	5.3	0.7	0.1
<b>2016</b>						
All 18-22 years	32.5	4.1	0.7	6.0	0.6	0.1
<b>Wealth quintiles</b>						
Poorest	50.9	6.7	1.2	9.1	1.1	0.2
Poorer	45.7	5.5	0.9	7.8	0.7	0.1
Middle	33.8	4.2	0.7	5.3	0.7	0.1
Richer	25.3	3.1	0.5	4.2	0.4	0.1
Richest	16.0	2.2	0.4	4.4	0.4	-

Source: Authors' estimation. Values rounding to 0.0 not shown.

**Table 5: Child Marriage by Education Level and Literacy Status, Age 18-22 (%)**

	18 years			15 years		
	H	CMG	SG	H	CMG	SG
<b>2011</b>						
All 18-22 years	36.5	5.0	0.9	7.3	1.0	0.2
<b>Education</b>						
No education	54.4	8.5	2.0	16.6	2.8	0.7
Primary, some	52.9	7.2	1.3	10.2	1.4	0.2
Primary, completed	42.0	6.2	1.2	11.1	1.3	0.2
Secondary, some	17.3	2.0	0.3	2.2	0.3	-
Secondary, completed	-	-	-	-	-	-
Higher	5.5	0.8	0.1	-	-	-
<b>Literacy</b>						
Cannot read	60.6	8.9	1.8	14.6	2.1	0.4
Limited ability	50.3	6.5	1.2	11.0	1.3	0.2
Full sentence	21.5	2.7	0.5	3.0	0.4	0.1
<b>2016</b>						
All 18-22 years	32.5	4.1	0.7	6.0	0.6	0.1
<b>Education</b>						
No education	52.3	8.1	1.8	15.9	2.2	0.4
Incomplete primary	49.7	6.6	1.2	9.8	1.0	0.1
Complete primary	35.8	4.4	0.7	6.1	0.6	0.1
Incomplete secondary	18.9	2.1	0.3	2.4	0.2	-
Complete secondary	1.6	0.2	-	-	-	-
Higher	2.1	0.3	-	0.3	-	-
<b>Literacy</b>						
Cannot read at all	50.8	7.1	1.3	11.9	1.3	0.2
Limited ability	47.8	6.1	1.0	8.8	0.8	0.1
Full sentence	22.9	2.7	0.4	3.4	0.4	0.1

Source: Authors' estimation. Values rounding to 0.0 not shown.

## Child marriage is associated with worse educational outcomes

Table 5 provides data on child marriage by level of education and literacy. Child marriage affects educational attainment negatively as girls often drop out of school when they marry. The causality goes the other way as well, as pursue one's education may delay marriage. These relationships are apparent in the data: measures of child marriage are higher among women with lower levels of education, and the same is observed for literacy. Marrying between the ages of 15 and 17 may not affect the completion of primary education but marrying earlier can prevent girls from completing their primary education.

## Child marriage may not affect labor force participation

Table 6 provides data on labor force participation. In some countries child marriage may reduce labor force participation, for example through higher fertility. In others, if child marriage is associated with poverty, women may have little choice but to work. Other effects could be at work. In Uganda, in both 2011 and 2016, labor force participation is higher for women who were married as children. Considering data for both years, the type of work undertaken may not be fundamentally different depending on whether women were married early or not. As for other statistics in this brief, these basic statistics however do not imply causality.

**Table 6: Child Marriage by Labor Force Participation Status, Age 18-22 (%)**

	18 years			15 years		
	H	CMG	SG	H	CMG	SG
<b>2011</b>						
All 18-22 years	36.5	5.0	0.9	7.3	1.0	0.2
<b>Working</b>						
No	29.9	3.9	0.7	5.7	0.7	0.1
Yes	40.4	5.6	1.1	8.3	1.1	0.2
<b>Type of work</b>						
Not paid	29.9	3.9	0.7	5.7	0.7	0.1
Cash only	38.1	5.4	1.1	9.2	1.3	0.2
Cash and in-kind	43.9	6.2	1.2	8.7	1.3	0.2
In-kind only	32.8	3.6	0.4	1.8	0.1	-
<b>2016</b>						
All 18-22 years	32.5	4.1	0.7	6.0	0.6	0.1
<b>Working</b>						
No	25.1	3.1	0.5	4.4	0.5	0.1
Yes	35.4	4.6	0.8	6.6	0.7	0.1
<b>Type of work</b>						
Not paid	39.7	5.3	0.9	7.4	0.9	0.1
Cash only	31.0	4.1	0.7	6.5	0.6	0.1
Cash and in-kind	39.4	4.8	0.8	6.1	0.6	0.1
In-kind only	39.2	5.2	0.9	5.8	0.7	0.1

Source: Authors' estimation.

## Takeaways

This brief has provided a basic profile of child marriage in Uganda. Measures of child marriage are high. The share of women ages 18-22 who married as children is at 32.5 percent in the 2016 survey, which is only slightly below the estimate of 36.5 percent in 2011. Child marriage is (not surprisingly) associated with lower wealth, lower education levels, and lower literacy. The relationship with labor force participation is more complex. These are correlations, not necessarily causal effects. Other briefs in this series look at these issues in more details.

## References

- Foster, J., J. Greer, and E. Thorbecke, 1984, A Class of Decomposable Poverty Measures, *Econometrica* 52: 761-776.
- Nguyen, M. C., and Q. Wodon, 2012, Measuring Child Marriage, *Economics Bulletin* 32(1): 398-411.

## Annex: Methodological Note

The headcount index, child marriage gap, and squared child marriage gap are the first three measures of the FGT class (Foster et al., 2014). Denote by  $q$  the number of girls who marry early and by  $n$  the number of girls in the overall population. Denote by  $y_i$  the age of marriage of girl  $i$  and by  $z$  the age threshold defining child marriage (18 years of age, but a lower age threshold can also be used to measure very early marriage). The general formula for the FGT class of measures depends on a parameter  $\alpha$  which takes a value of zero for the headcount, one for the child marriage gap, and two for the squared child marriage gap as follows:

$$P\alpha = \frac{1}{n} \sum_{i=1}^q \left[ \frac{z - y_i}{z} \right]^\alpha$$

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The analysis in this brief is that of the authors only and need not reflect the views of UNESCO, its Executive Directors, of the countries they represent, nor do they necessarily represent the views of the UNESCO International Institute for Capacity Building in Africa. This brief is an updated version of previous analysis conducted by the authors while at the World Bank.