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## On world's first International Day of the Girl Child, UN calls for end to child marriage



Soon-to-be-wed Faiz Mohammed, 40, and Ghulam Haider, 11, at her home in a rural village in Afghanistan. © Stephanie Sinclair/VII/Tooyoungtowed.org

11 October 2012 – The United Nations today marked the first *International Day of the Girl Child* by calling for an end to child marriage, and stressing education as one of the best strategies for protecting girls against this harmful practice.

“Education for girls is one of the best strategies for protecting girls against child marriage,” [Secretary-General](#) Ban Ki-moon said in his [message](#) for the Day. “When they are able to stay in

school and avoid being married early, girls can build a foundation for a better life for themselves and their families.”

“Let us do our part to let girls be girls, not brides,” he stated, urging governments, community and religious leaders, civil society, the private sector, and families – especially men and boys – to promote the rights of girls.

The *International Day of the Girl Child* was designated as 11 October by a [resolution](#) adopted by the UN General Assembly in December 2011, to recognize girls’ rights and highlight the unique challenges girls face worldwide. The theme of this year’s observance is ‘Ending Child Marriage.’

Approximately 70 million young women today were married before age 18, according to the UN, which notes that child marriage denies a girl her childhood, disrupts her education, limits her opportunities, increases her risk of being a victim of violence and abuse, and jeopardizes her health.

Girls with low levels of schooling are more likely to be married early, and child marriage has been shown to almost always end a girl’s education, the world body adds. Conversely, girls with secondary schooling are up to six times less likely to marry as children, making education one of the most effective ways of combating child marriage.

If current trends continue, the number of girl child marriages will increase dramatically over the next 10 years, according to *Marrying too Young: End Child Marriage*, a new report released today by the UN Population Fund ([UNFPA](#)). It also finds that, despite laws to prevent its practice, child marriage has remained mostly constant in developing countries in the past decade.

The report calls on governments and leaders to end child marriage by: enacting and enforcing national laws that raise the age of marriage to 18, for both girls and boys; using data to identify and target geographic “hotspots,” which have high numbers of girls at risk of child marriage; expanding prevention programmes that empower girls at risk of child marriage and address the root causes underlying the practice; and mitigating the harmful impact of child marriage on girls.

“A girl should have the right to choose whom she marries and when,” UNFPA’s Executive Director, Babatunde Osotimehin, said at the launch at UN Headquarters in New York, adding that the report is “a clarion call to decision-makers, to parents, to communities and to the world to end the unacceptable practice of child marriage now.”

Numerous events are taking place around the globe on the theme of the Day, including a parliamentary debate in Malawi on child marriage and special debates on television and radio in South Sudan. In Uganda, SMS technology is being used by young people to discuss child marriage

Among the events taking place at UN Headquarters is a high-level panel, featuring Archbishop Desmond Tutu and representatives from UNFPA, the UN Children’s Fund ([UNICEF](#)), and the UN Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women ([UN Women](#)). In addition, a photo exhibition entitled “Too Young to Wed” will open this evening.

Speaking at the high-level panel discussion, Secretary-General Ban noted that the Day is also an occasion to highlight the “alarming” levels of discrimination, violence and abuse that girls still face worldwide, and recalled the recent “heinous” attack on three school girls in Pakistan. The main target of the attack, Malala Yousufzai, is a champion of girls’ education and girls’ rights.

“The attack on her was abhorrent and cowardly. The terrorists showed what frightens them most: a girl with a book,” said the Secretary-General. “Nowhere in the world should it be an act of bravery for a young girl to go to school.”

UNICEF says that experiences in a number of countries show how combining legal measures with support to communities, providing viable alternatives – especially schooling – and enabling communities to discuss and reach the explicit, collective decision to end child marriage, yields positive results, the agency noted in a [news release](#).

“Through global commitments, civil society movements, legislation and individual initiatives girls will flourish in a safe and productive environment,” said Anju Malhotra, of the Gender and Rights Section in UNICEF. “We must accelerate progress and dedicate resources for girls to claim their rights and realize their full potential.”

Globally, around one in three young women aged 20-24 years were first married before they reached age 18, according to UNICEF. One third of them entered into marriage before they turned 15.

Child marriage, the agency notes, often results in early and unwanted pregnancies, posing life-threatening risks for girls. In developing countries, 90 per cent of births to adolescents aged 15-19 are to married girls, and pregnancy-related complications are the leading cause of death for girls in this age group.

Building on its ongoing work to promote adolescent sexual and reproductive health, UNFPA has announced that it will invest an additional \$20 million over the next five years to reach the most marginalized adolescent girls in 12 countries with high rates of child marriage. The countries to be focused on include Guatemala, India, Niger and Zambia.

A group of independent UN human rights experts issued a joint statement to mark the Day, in which they state that child marriage is a violation of all the rights of the child, and forces children, particularly girls, to assume responsibilities for which they are often physically and psychologically not prepared for.

“Girls who are forced to marry are committed to being in slavery-like marriages for the rest of their lives. Girls who are victims of servile marriages experience domestic servitude, sexual slavery and suffer from violations to their right to health, education, non-discrimination and freedom from physical, psychological and sexual violence,” they said.

The Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court ([ICC](#)), Fatou Bensouda, used the occasion of the Day to call for an end to the suffering of girls in armed conflicts all over the world. “Girls are among the most vulnerable members of society: they should not be made to serve as sex slaves

and soldiers. They should not be subjected to rape and sexual violence, nor made to witness brutal sexual attacks,” she said.

“The women of the future, the young girls of the world, should not be deprived of their fundamental human right to play and learn and enjoy being children,” she added.

Also to mark the Day, the UN International Telecommunication Union ([ITU](#)) and its partners have [launched](#) the Tech Needs Girls Prize to inspire more girls to embrace technology and spark creativity.

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