

Child marriages in Indonesia increase women's depression, research shows

May 16 2023, by Danusha Jayawardana



A one-year delay in marriage decreases the likelihood of women having depression. Credit: [Rizka/2019-UNICEF](#)

An estimated 640 million girls and women in the world today were married in childhood, [according to UNICEF](#). The prevalence has slightly

declined: with one in five young women aged 20 to 24 years being married as children, down from nearly one in four 10 years ago.

But child [marriage](#) continues to be a harmful practice in many developing countries, where it is often seen as a necessity for survival. In many communities, child marriage is seen as a way to protect girls and ensure their financial security, while also aligning with [traditional gender roles](#) and expectations.

Indonesia has a high incidence of child marriage in the Asia Pacific region, and [the eighth highest in the world](#). [One in every nine girls](#) in Indonesia are married before they turn 18.

Though the detrimental effects of child marriage on [girls' education](#), career opportunities, [physical health and safety are well documented](#), the deep impacts it can have on the emotional and [mental health](#) of women are often overlooked.

[My quantitative study in Indonesia shows](#) that child marriage has a strong negative impact on women's mental health.

Not so happily ever after for Indonesia's child brides

In 2019, the Indonesian government revised the [Marriage Act](#), raising the minimum age for girls to marry to 19 years old—the same age as boys. Previously, with parental permission girls were allowed to marry from 16 years old.

But it is possible to marry off girls even earlier by obtaining approval from religious courts or local officials, in which case there would be no minimum age of marriage.

Using data from more than 5,000 Indonesian women, I found that

marrying early—particularly by age 18—leads to higher depression. I found that a one-year delay in marriage decreases the likelihood of women having depression.

My research also showed that limited job market mobility and poor [physical health](#) are potential underlying factors that contribute to this relationship.

These findings imply that the costs of child marriage are underestimated. This is because, in addition to adverse impacts of child marriage on physical well being, it can also have a significant effect on the emotional well-being of girls.

This suggests that the [welfare benefits](#) of ending this harmful practice worldwide would be much greater than the previously [estimated US\\$22 billion](#), if we consider the large economic costs of mental disorders in developing countries.

Mental health effects

Marrying at a young age can [be a traumatic and stressful experience for girls](#). They are often separated from their families and friends, and forced to live with their husband and his family, increasing their risk of social isolation.

The responsibilities of marriage, such as childbearing and child rearing, can put significant physical and emotional pressure on young girls who are still developing. International research shows they are also more likely to [be victims of intimate partner violence and forced sexual relations](#).

According to [psychological research](#), being constantly exposed to such adverse and stressful experiences can negatively affect mental health,

leading to disorders such as depression, anxiety and panic attacks.

Gender discrimination

My research findings shed further light on the phenomenon of "[missing women](#)." This refers to the low ratio of women to men in the population of developing countries.

Child marriage is often the result of gender inequality, disproportionately affecting women and aggravating mental health problems such as [depression and severe stress](#). This can lead to detrimental consequences, as individuals with mental disorders are more vulnerable to engage in risky behaviors, such as self-harm.

When considering the estimates of missing women, Indonesia is identified as one of the Asian countries with [a significant number of missing females](#), accounting for more than one million in 2010.

As child marriage is linked to poor mental health, the findings provide a possible explanation for the excess mortality of women in Indonesia.

Protecting against lasting harm from child marriage

With almost 640 million girls and women around the world married as children, this study identifies a cohort of women who require psychological support and access to mental healthcare.

Addressing the mental health issues of these women would not only ensure their mental well-being but also that of their children, [as poor mental health can be passed down through generations](#).

Importantly, the findings provide insights into laws and policies targeted

at ending child marriage. Specifically, it supports the rationale behind Indonesia's recent policy of raising the minimum age for girls to marry from 16 to 19 years— a crucial step towards eradicating [child marriage](#) in Indonesia.

Such policy measures will promote gender equality, as well as better outcomes for women.

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