

# Child Marriage in Armenia (Summary)



If I had this knowledge [before] I would never have married at that age. I made my life harder than it could have been

—Child spouse

## Country context

Rates of poverty remain high in Armenia, and poverty continues to be the major cause of exclusion of children from social services, particularly those living in rural areas. The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict (1991-1994) negatively impacted on child rights and protection as many children became fatherless and/or even homeless. High rates of male migration make it difficult for adult women to find spouses. At the same time, a strong trend of sex-selective abortion favouring boys has been noted in Armenia. Naturally, this poses a potential threat in terms of future demographic imbalance.

## Legal context

Armenia acceded to the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) in 1992 and adopted a Law on Children's Rights in 1996, which reinforced the provisions outlined in the CRC. The Government of Armenia also ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in 1993.

Over the last two years, Armenia has introduced amendments to key domestic laws, including the Family Code, Labour Code, and Criminal Code, designed to better protect children; children's rights are also protected under the Constitution. A National Plan of Action for Protection of Children's Rights, as well as Strategic Action Plans, are in place to promote gender equality. Experts interviewed for this study agreed that Armenia has a strong legislative framework to protect children's rights and women's rights, but that these laws are not adequately implemented.

The Family Code of the Republic of Armenia (RA) defines a child as anyone under the age of 18. A similar definition is implied in the Civil Code. The RA Criminal Code does not provide a definition of a child, but stipulates that 'the person who reached the age of 16 before the committal of the crime is subject to criminal liability'. One NGO representative interviewed for this study noted the need to establish a standardised, legal definition of the child in national legislation.

The legal minimum age for marriage was raised to 18 for both men and women in April 2013; before this, the minimum age had been 17 years for women. It is possible for someone aged 16 or 17 to marry, if they have permission from their parents or legal guardian. The Constitution of RA (5 July 1995) enshrines the right to free choice and consent in marriage.

*In Armenia, rates of child marriage are very low.*

*However, child marriages occur in some remote areas of the country, and are also more common among some minority ethnic groups.*



Only civil marriages are legally recognised in Armenia, though religious marriages are traditionally performed as well. There are no official data in the country on the number of religious marriages, as these are not registered in civic registry offices.

Under the Criminal Code, sexual intercourse or other sexual acts with a person 'obviously under 16' (according to the legal wording) by a person who is over 18 years of age is illegal. No information was found on how effectively this law is implemented. There is no specific legislation dealing with forced marriage.

### Family planning and reproductive rights

The Law on Human Reproductive Health and Rights (2002) stipulates that young people under the age of 18 have the right to receive comprehensive, confidential medical advice on sexual and reproductive health issues, and in case of necessity, to obtain medical treatment (Article 5.1). However, they must have permission from parents or guardians for any medical intervention (including prescription of contraceptives). An adolescent girl can only secure an abortion if she has her parents' or legal representative's permission, apart from in certain exceptional circumstances, when a Medical Commission protocol is followed.

According to results from the 2010 Armenia Demographic and Health (ADHS), 1.7 per cent of all girls in the 15-19 age group were using some form of contraception. Among married girls aged 15-19, this figure was 19.1 per cent. The ADHS 2010 also found that virtually all respondents in all age groups, male and female, knew about at least one method of contraception (either modern or traditional).

Since 2008, Armenian students have taken a mandatory 'life skills' course in grades 8-11 of secondary school, which includes information on reproductive health, sex, pregnancy, contraception, and sexually transmitted infections (STIs). However, teaching of this course is unsatisfactory, as teachers often do not have the necessary knowledge, and are unwilling to conduct these lessons.

### Child marriages in Armenia

Statistical information on child marriages in Armenia is very limited, as statistical information on children, adolescents, and young people is generally difficult to obtain. The same is true for sex-disaggregated data. However, respondents interviewed for this study felt that the rate of child marriages among the general population in Armenia is low. Since independence (1991), the average marriage age has increased both among women and men; indirect evidence that child marriages are decreasing. Child marriage is more widely practised among certain minority ethnic groups, in particular the Yezidis. In most cases, those taking part in this study felt that child marriage was a problem that is not being addressed properly.

The statistical information on child marriage that is available comes from the Population Census and the ADHS. The ADHS was last conducted in 2010, and the most recent Population Census was in 2011 (although only partial results are available). According to ADHS data from 2010, girls aged 15-19 made up 7.9 per cent of all married women; boys in the same age group made up 1 per cent of all married men. Elsewhere, official statistics included in the annual Demographic Handbook (based on census data) indicate that for 2012, 5.6 per cent of girls aged 16-19 and 0.9 per cent of boys aged 16-19 were married (both registered and unregistered). These figures indicate that more women than men get married before the age of 19. However, overall, the median age of first marriage is increasing for women and men, according to the same statistical sources. Age-specific fertility among women age 15-19 is also declining.

Study participants felt that the rate of child marriages among the general population in Armenia is very low, as people tend to have traditional attitudes and disapprove of young people having sexual relations and getting married at an early age, and because early marriages are the subject of criminal legislation (in that sex with someone under the age of 16 is a criminal offence). Furthermore, overall high levels of poverty, unemployment, and migration are actually pushing up the average age of marriage, which is increasing year by year.

However, some child marriages do take place among Armenians. Cases of early marriages are more prevalent in remote *marzes* (administrative

districts) of the country. In these areas, factors such as lack of employment, poverty, and migration are actually associated with child marriage, as is limited access to education for girls in comparison to urban areas. Also, traditions are stronger in rural districts than in urban ones: little value is placed on the role of adolescent girls in society. That said, this study found that vulnerability to child marriage is primarily determined by belonging to a particular ethnic or religious group; in addition, the practice is more common among socially disadvantaged and vulnerable groups. Reasons given for contracting child marriages identified by research participants included a young couple falling in love and being pressured to marry to avoid scandal, parents' decision, or even the possibility of emigrating. In most cases discussed during this study, parents had made the decision that a child would marry.

Most child marriages are not officially registered, or are registered only after the couple reaches the legal age for marriage, or when the first child is born. The couple commonly begin living together right after the religious wedding (*barsaniq*), even in cases of early marriage. Parents sometimes agree to carry out religious marriage ceremonies for couples when one or both spouses is under 18 as the religious marriage ceremony is the key event for relatives and friends. Religious marriage without legal registration leaves girls and women extremely vulnerable and contributes to gender inequality, as they have no recognised legal rights in the marriage.

Study participants also mentioned cases of bride abduction; however, this is a practice that was more common during the Soviet period, and rarely occurs now.

According to data from interviews and focus groups in this study, child marriage has multidimensional impacts on adolescents. It can result in leaving school early, limiting access to education, as well as unemployment and poor health. Child spouses reported being expected to take on a large burden of childcare and housework; in rural areas, they also had to do hard physical work, impacting negatively on their health and reproductive capacity. Child marriage also reinforces gender inequality and women's social exclusion. In most cases, the child spouses who participated in this study admitted that they had made a mistake in agreeing to marry at an early age.

## Child marriages among Yezidis

Rates of child marriage are much higher among the Yezidi minority than among the general population in Armenia; in addition, rates of unregistered marriages are also very high in these communities. Yezidis live mainly in rural communities. The Yezidi population is estimated to be between 40,000 and 60,000.

Focus group discussions with Yezidi women revealed that for Yezidis, marriage is considered more important than an education, particularly for girls and women; as such, girls are taken out of school at a young age. Commonly Yezidi women do not work, and can only do so if their husbands give permission; this is a tradition that is still strong today. Boys are also usually taken out of school after 8<sup>th</sup> grade.

Yezidi girls usually marry at age 13–14 years old, while boys marry at age 17–20. In most cases, marriages are arranged by parents.

For this group the key impact of child marriage is early childbearing. Yezidi women want – and are expected – to have as many children as possible, as this is considered women's main role. Yezidis usually live six to eight months out of the year in remote pastures, tending to sheep and cattle, during which time it is difficult for them to access health facilities, including prenatal and neonatal care. Child spouses and their babies are particularly vulnerable, as pregnancy and birth are dangerous for girls whose bodies are not yet physically mature.

## Responses to child marriage

**Raising the minimum marriage age.** Recently the Armenian government raised the legal age of marriage for women from 17 to 18 years old, the same age as for men. In addition, all children are now expected to complete 12 years of schooling.

**Youth and adolescent reproductive health in Armenia.** UNFPA has implemented a wide range of projects focused on the provision of basic health services delivered by trained healthcare providers in adequately equipped health facilities, targeting mostly young people and women, to the benefit of whole communities and their surroundings. Activities have included improving health facility infrastructure and the provision of medical equipment in remote areas, and establishing Youth-Friendly Health Centres.

## Recommendations

- Improve sexual education for young people. This could include enlarging the geographical area covered by projects offering youth and adolescent reproductive health education, especially in bordering *marzes*. Also, the rights of women should be considered as an important factor in family formulation issues.
- Ensure the collection of more specific gender- and child-related statistics.
- Increase the number of youth-friendly centres (YFC) especially in *marzes* and rural communities in order to help young couples with family planning and reproductive health issues. The scope of similar projects run by international organisations focused on reproductive health and family planning issues for youth and adolescents should be extended and firm cooperation with local governance authorities is highly welcomed.
- Develop mechanisms to increase the low level of awareness of family planning and reproductive health issues among national minorities, refugees, and other vulnerable groups, with the active participation of community leaders, local governance authorities, and NGOs. Development of relevant mechanisms should be incorporated into national and territorial development policies as well.
- Improve legislation and enforcement mechanisms to address underage married women as children with regard to protecting their rights.



### Contact Details:

This summary is based on a fact sheet prepared by Agapi Harutyunyan for UNFPA.

UNFPA Armenia: 14 Petros Adamyan St., Yerevan 0010, Armenia; [manukyan@unfpa.org](mailto:manukyan@unfpa.org)

UNFPA EECARO: Hakki Yeten Caddesi, Selenium Plaza, No:10/C Kat 18-19, 34349 Besiktas, Istanbul, Turkey; [eecaro@unfpa.org](mailto:eecaro@unfpa.org)