World Health Organization

Child Marriages: 39,000 Every Day More than 140 million girls will marry between 2011 and 2020

NEW YORK ¦ 7 March 2013 – Between 2011 and 2020, more than 140 million girls will become child brides, according to United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA).

If current levels of child marriages hold, 14.2 million girls annually or 39,000 daily will marry too young.

Furthermore, of the 140 million girls who will marry before they are18, 50 million will be under the age of 15.

Despite the physical damage and the persistent discrimination to young girls, little progress has been made toward ending the practice of child marriage. In fact, the problem threatens to increase with the expanding youth population in developing world.

“Child marriage is an appalling violation of human rights and robs girls of their education, health and long-term prospects,” says Babatunde Osotimehin, M.D, Executive Director, UNFPA.“A girl who is married as a child is one whose potential will not be fulfilled. Since many parents and communities also want the very best for their daughters, we must work together and end child marriage.”

Girls married young are more vulnerable to intimate partner violence and sexual abuse than those who marry later.

"Complications of pregnancy and childbirth are the leading cause of death in young women aged 15–19. Young girls who marry later and delay pregnancy beyond their adolescence have more chances to stay healthier, to better their education and build a better life for themselves and their families,” says Flavia Bustreo, M.D., Assistant Director-General for Family, Women’s and Children’s Health at the World Health Organization. "We have the means at our disposal to work together to stop child marriage.”

On March 7, a special session of the UN Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) will focus on child marriage. The Governments of Bangladesh, Malawi and Canada will jointly sponsor the session. It is held in support of *Every Woman Every Child* , a movement spearheaded by U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon which aims to save the lives of 16 million women and children by 2015.

That session will address the problems created by early marriages and ways to prevent them. Mereso Kiluso, a Tanzanian mother of five now in her 20s, who was married at 14 to an abusive man in his 70s, will describe her experience.

If child marriage is not properly addressed, UN Millennium Development Goals 4 & 5 – calling for a three-fourths reduction in maternal mortality and a two-thirds reduction in child deaths by

2015 – will not be met.

Child marriage – defined as marriage before the age of 18 – applies to both boys and girls, but the practice is far more common among young girls.

Child marriage is a global issue but rates vary dramatically, both within and between countries. In both proportions and numbers, most child marriages take place in rural sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia.

In South Asia, nearly half of young women and in sub-Saharan Africa more than one third of young women are married by their 18th birthday.

The 10 countries with the highest rates of child marriage are: Niger, 75 percent; Chad and Central African Republic, 68 percent; Bangladesh, 66 percent; Guinea, 63 percent; Mozambique, 56 percent; Mali, 55 percent; Burkina Faso and South Sudan, 52 percent; and Malawi, 50 percent.

In terms of absolute numbers, because of the size of its population, India has the most child marriages and a in 47 percent of all marriages the bride is a child.

What progress has been made to stop the practice has been in urban areas where families see greater work and education opportunities for young girls.

A violation of the rights of girls

“No girl should be robbed of her childhood, her education and health, and her aspirations. Yet today millions of girls are denied their rights each year when they are married as child brides”, says Michelle Bachelet, M.D., Executive Director of UN Women.

Child marriage is increasingly recognized as a violation of the rights of girls for the following reasons:

- Effectively ending their education
- Blocking any opportunity to gain vocational and life skills
- Exposing them to the risks of too-early pregnancy, child bearing, and motherhood before they are physically and psychologically ready
- Increasing their risk of intimate partner sexual violence and HIV infection.

“Child marriage is a huge problem in poor communities,” says Nyaradzayi Gumbonzvanda, General Secretary of the World YWCA. “Early marriage and child marriage robs the future. Girls lose the opportunity for education. They lose the opportunity to choose their partner and

must live with that pain for the rest of their lives."

The World YWCA will present a petition to CSW urging the group to pass a special resolution calling for an end child marriage. Signatories believe that by working collaboratively, member states and concerned groups can end child marriage by 2030.

Despite the fact that 158 countries have set the legal age for marriage at 18 years, laws are rarely enforced since the practice of marrying young children is upheld by tradition and social norms.

The detrimental effects of early child marriage

"Child marriage makes girls far more vulnerable to the profound health risks of early pregnancy and childbirth – just as their babies are more vulnerable to complications associated with premature labor," notes Anthony Lake, Executive Director of UNICEF.

According to the UN, complications from pregnancy and childbirth are the leading causes of death for girls aged 15-19 years in developing countries. Of the16 million adolescent girls who give birth every year, about 90 percent are already married. UNICEF estimates some 50,000 die, almost all in low- and middle-income countries. Still births and newborn deaths are 50 percent higher among mothers under 20 than in women who get pregnant in their 20s.

In many poor countries, most young girls, regardless of age, are forced to demonstrate their fertility once they are married.

"These children, because that's what they are, are discouraged from using contraceptives or might have to ask their husbands' permission, or they have no knowledge of or access to what they need," says Carole Presern, PhD, Executive Director of The Partnership for Maternal, Newborn & Child Health and a midwife.

Violence common in child marriages

Loss of girlhood and health problems related to early pregnancy are not the only hazards confronting young brides.

Even though some parents believe early marriage will protect their daughters from sexual violence, the reverse is often true, according to UN studies.

Young girls who marry before the age of 18 have a greater risk of becoming victims of intimate partner violence than those who marry at an older age. This is especially true when the age gap between the child bride and spouse is large.

"Child marriage marks an abrupt and often violent introduction to sexual relations," says Claudia Garcia Moreno, M.D., of WHO, a leading expert in violence against women. "The young girls are powerless to refuse sex and lack the resources or legal and social support to leave an abusive marriage."

A complex issue with deep roots

Child marriage, which has existed for centuries, is a complex issue, rooted deeply in gender inequality, tradition and poverty. The practice is most common in rural and impoverished areas, where prospects for girls can be limited. In many cases, parents arrange these marriages and young girls have no choice.

Poor families marry off young daughters to reduce the number of children they need to feed, clothe and educate. In some cultures, a major incentive is the price prospective husbands will pay for young brides.

Social pressures within a community can lead families to wed young children. For example, some cultures believe marrying girls before they reach puberty will bring blessings on families. Some societies believe that early marriage will protect young girls from sexual attacks and violence and see it as a way to insure that their daughter will not become pregnant out of wedlock and bring dishonour to the family.

Too, many families marry their daughters simply because early marriage is the only option they know.

“Many faith leaders and their communities are already working to end child marriage and other forms of violence against children. Changing stubborn behavior is immensely challenging, so we must go further to positively influence beliefs and actions,” says Tim Costello, Chief Executive of World Vision Australia.

Malawi's work to end child marriage

In Malawi, one of the world's poorest countries, at least half of young women are married before the age of 18. The country is working to end the practice “to allow the girl child to continue with education, to become a learned citizen who can contribute to the development and economy of the country,” says Mrs Catherine Gotani Hara, Malawi's Minister of Health.

Another reason for Malawi's effort is the high teenage pregnancy rate and the fact that teen pregnancies contribute to 20-30 percent of maternal deaths in the country. “By ending early marriages we can avert up to 30 percent of maternal deaths and also reduce the neonatal mortality rate,” she says.

The Minister reports that Malawi has taken a number of steps aimed at ending the practice of child marriage. These include:

- Providing free universal access to primary education;
- Working with chiefs to sensitize their communities on the importance of sending children to school, with an emphasis on the girl child;
- Implementing a policy that allows girls who become pregnant during school to go back to

school after delivery to continue their education;

- Working with parliamentarians to raise the age at marriage to 18 years by 2014; and
- Providing Youth Friendly Health Services. This outreach empowers youths with the information that would enable them to make informed choices about their reproductive health.

UN Millennium Development Goals

Ending child marriage is closely related to UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon's **Every Woman Every Child** initiative and to efforts to reach Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) 3, 4 and 5 to promote gender equality, to reduce child mortality and to improve maternal health.

The continued occurrence of child marriage has hindered the achievement of these MDGs, especially in sub-Saharan Africa and south Asia.

"I urge governments, community and religious leaders, civil society, the private sector, and families—especially men and boys—to do their part to let girls be girls, not brides," says the Secretary-General.

Ending child marriage would also help countries achieve other MDGs aimed at eradicating poverty, achieving universal education and combating HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases, and should also figure within a renewed development agenda.

"The needs of adolescent girls were overlooked in the Millennium Development Goals; they must have a central place in any new goals set by the international community," said Lakshmi Sundaram, Global Coordinator of *Girls Not Brides.* "By using the rate of child marriage as an indicator to monitor progress against new goals, we can make sure that governments address the practice and focus on ensuring the welfare of their girls."

Strategies for ending child marriage recommended to the Commission on the Status of Women include:

- Supporting and enforcing legislation to increase the minimum age of marriage for girls to 18 years;
- Providing equal access to quality primary and secondary education for both girls and boys;
- Mobilizing girls, boys, parents and leaders to change practices that discriminate against girls and to create social, economic, and civic opportunities for girls and young women;
- Providing girls who are already married with options for schooling, employment and livelihood skills, sexual and reproductive health information and services (including HIV

prevention), and offering recourse from violence in the home;

- Addressing the root causes of child marriage, including poverty, gender inequality and discrimination, the low value placed on girls and violence against girls.

Participants at the special session on child marriage will include: Dr Fahmida Mirza, Speaker of Pakistan's National Assembly; Michelle Bachelet, M.D., Executive Director of UN Women; Babatunde Osotimehin, M.D., Executive Director of UNFPA, Lakshmi Sundaram, Global Coordinator of Girls Not Brides; and Her Excellency Marjon Kamara, Ambassador of the Republic of Liberia to the United Nations. Nyaradzayi Gumbonzvanda, General Secretary of the World YWCA, will moderate the session.

Child Marriage is 30 percent or more in 42 Countries

Women 20-24 years old who married or entered into union by the age of 18, 2000-2011

Haiti	30
Guatemala	30
Zimbabwe	31
Yemen	32
Senegal	33
Sudan	33
Congo	33
Gabon	34
Benin	34
Sao Tome and Principe	34
Côte d'Ivoire	35
Mauritania	35
Brazil	36
Cameroon	36
Gambia	36
United Republic of Tanzania	37
Liberia	38
Honduras	39
Democratic Republic of the Congo	39
Nigeria	39
Uganda	40
Afghanistan	40
Cuba	40
Nicaragua	41
Nepal	41

Dominican Republic	41
Ethiopia	41
Zambia	42
Sierra Leone	44
Somalia	45
Eritrea	47
India	47
Madagascar	48
Malawi	50
South Sudan	52
Burkina Faso	52
Mali	55
Mozambique	56
Guinea	63
Bangladesh	66
Central African Republic	68
Chad	68
Niger	75

Source: UNICEF