CHILD MARRIAGES IN FIJI

FWRM FIJI WOMEN'S RIGHTS MOVEMENT

A Situational Analysis, Laws, Policies and Commitments

18+ SAFE HOMES

DEFINITION According to the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) child marriage refers to any formal marriage or informal union between a child under the age of 18 and an adult or another child[1]

Fiji's Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS)

For the first time ever, the Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS) carried out by the Fiji Bureau of Statistics (FBS) revealed alarming statistics of early and forced child marriages in Fiji. About 12 percent of the girl child in Fiji (Northern Division) have been forced into marriage. Fiji, being a patriarchal society, with deeply rooted cultural and religious traditions, has always seen girls being treated unequally and unfairly. Prior to the Marriage Act of Fiji being amended in 2009, the legal age for consent to marry was different for girls and boys. For girls it was 16 years old, with permission of the girl's parents. For boys the age was 18 years old.

Divisional Data on Child Marriage

Division	Marriage by age 18 years
National	9%
Central	8%
Eastern	8%
Northern	12%
Western	9%

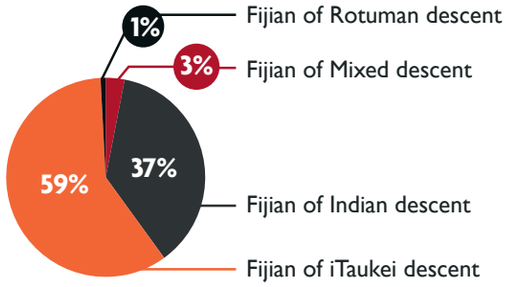
Percentage of women age 20-49 years who were first married or in union before age 18 years by division

WHAT WOMEN ARE SAYING

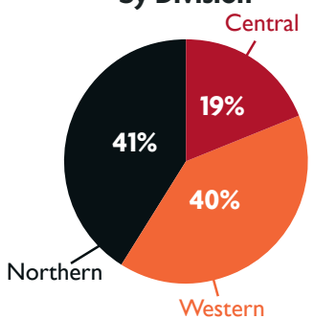
FWRM interviewed 96 women who said that the main causes for Child Marriages in Fiji are:

- **Unintended teenage pregnancies**
- **Poverty**
- **Unemployment**
- **Low education level**

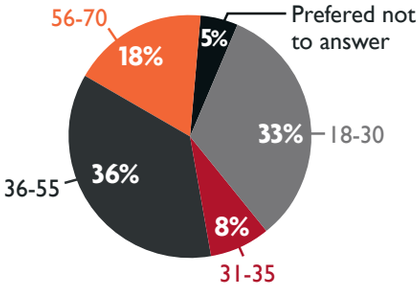
Participant Breakdown by Ethnicity



Participant Response by Division



Participant Breakdown by Age



WHAT IS THE IMPACT OF CHILD MARRIAGES ON WOMEN & GIRLS

UNINTENDED ADOLESCENT PREGNANCY

A girl who marries early is less likely to complete her education, thereby affecting her ability to secure higher paying jobs, and more likely to experience adolescent pregnancy, which can lead to heightened risk to maternal or new born health.

HEIGHTENED RISK TO MATERNALHEALTH

Being forced into adulthood when not physically, emotionally and psychologically ready, the girl child is at a higher risk of sexual violence, complications in pregnancy and childbirth, and overall maternal health and/or new born health.

HEIGHTENED VULNERABILITIES TO POVERTY AND LIFELONG ECONOMIC IMPACTS

The girl child is unable to complete her education and is forced into adulthood because of early and forced child marriage. The girl child is far less likely to return back to school and will face greater risk of experiencing poverty with lifelong economic impacts.

ATTAINING FUTURE EDUCATION OPPORTUNITIES

A girl who marries early is less likely to complete her education because she is forced to be married off to her husband. This impacts her ability to secure employment opportunities, unless there are specific policy and programme interventions available to the girl child.

[1] *https://www.unicef.org/protection/child-marriage accessed 21/06/2023*

MARRIAGE ACT OF FIJI 1968 SAYS...

29. Any person who -

(a) Willfully and unlawfully married a person under the age of 18 years; or

(b) Induces or endeavors to induce any marriage officer or other person to solemnize marriage between parties when the person so acting knows that one of the parties is a minor; or

(c) Abets or assists the principal offender in any such act or endeavor as is described in paragraphs (a) and (b), knowing that a party to the marriage or intended marriage is a minor, shall be guilty of an offense and liable on conviction to a fine not exceeding $500 or to imprisonment for a term not exceeding 2 years.

INTERNATIONAL COMMITMENTS

CONVENTION ON THE RIGHTS OF THE CHILD ARTICLE 34
State parties to ensure that all children and young people to be protected from all forms of sexual exploitation and abuse.

GOAL 5 (TARGET 5.3) SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOAL
Eliminating all harmful practices such as child, early and forced marriage.

COMMISSION OF THE STATUS OF WOMEN 57TH
End the practice of child, early and forced marriage.

CONVENTION ON THE ELIMINATION OF ALL FORMS OF DISCRIMINATION AGAINST WOMEN ARTICLE 16
State parties shall ensure: The same right freely to choose a spouse and to enter into marriage only with their free and full consent.

UNIVERSAL PERIODIC REVIEW 2019
Fiji accepted Belgium's recommendation in enforcing "the prohibition of child marriage, prohibiting all forms of pressure on victims of rape to marry perpetrators & increase efforts to prosecute and punish perpetrators and accomplices in cases of child marriage".

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

Below are key recommendations stemming from the High Level stakeholder dialogue convened by 11 organisations in Suva on 11 July 2023. All key stakeholders discussed and highlighted on the impact and vulnerabilities of child marriages for women and girls in Fiji, and the recommendations agreed on are as follows:

1. The State to allocate adequate resourcing towards looking at the issue of Child Marriages in Fiji, as a priority, & work with partners to achieve its prevention, using existing work such as the Fiji National Action Plan to Prevent Violence Against All Women and Girls 2023-2028;

2. Enforcement agencies such as the Fiji Police Force, Child Protection Unit and Social Welfare Department under the Ministry of Women, Children and Poverty Alleviation be adequately resourced and trained to successfully identify victims of child marriages and prosecute perpetrators for violence perpetrated against children, specifically the girl child

3. The Ministries of Health and Education re-look at school curriculum to include comprehensive sex education to address the issue of unintended teenage pregnancies;

4. Service providers such as teachers, doctors, nurses, law enforcement officers, lawyers, frontline responders of violence against children and others to be adequately trained to identify risk factors and possible victims of child marriage, and thereby report occurrences of the same;

5. Faith based organisations be sensitized to prohibit any performance of cultural/religious wedding ceremonies involving children.

6. Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) including women's rights groups like FWRM, to undertake a comprehensive Study to:

   - better understand why child marriages are happening in Fiji
   - identify why are the implementation gaps in ensuring compliance with the Marriage Act
   - develop strategies that should be undertaken to prevent child marriages in Fiji

7. CSOs who work with grassroots communities work collaboratively to disseminate information on access to justice specifically on the issue of child marriage in communities.

PRESENT AT THE STAKEHOLDER MEETING WAS FIJI WOMEN'S CRISIS CENTRE, PACIFIC COUNCIL OF CHURCHES, NATIONAL COUNCIL OF CHURCHES, FIJI POLICE FORCE, MINISTRY OF WOMEN, CHILDREN & SOCIAL PROTECTION, FIJI BUREAU OF STATISTICS, MEDICAL SERVICES PACIFIC, HOUSE OF SARAH, SAVE THE CHILDREN FIJI, MINISTRY OF HEALTH & MEDICAL SERVICES, OFFICE OF THE DIRECTOR OF PUBLIC PROSECUTIONS, NATIONAL COUNCIL FOR DISABLED PERSONS AND THE FIJI WOMEN'S RIGHTS MOVEMENT.

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