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Research for Informed Decision-making

Factors Associated with Afghanistan's Child Marriages

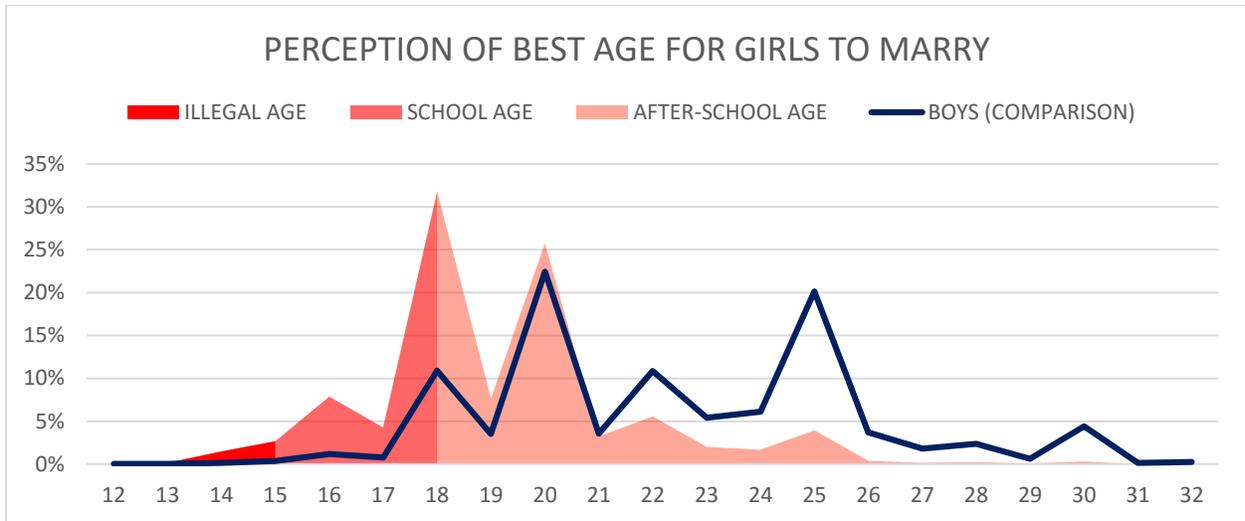
By [Sayed Masood Sadat](#)

Afghanistan is considered one of the [most dangerous countries](#) in the world to be a woman. Contributing factors include different forms of gender-based violence, poor education, limited access to healthcare, and not being allowed outside the home. Sadly, many Afghan women also face [forced child marriage](#)—despite it being illegal.

A significant amount of research confirms that child marriages [undermine girls' participation](#) in decision-making, educational attainment, and labor force participation, and leave them vulnerable to violence and health risks throughout their life. Furthermore, these risks can be transferred to their children, leading to an intergenerational effect—impacting their children's education, nutrition, and health.

One of the key challenges to addressing this problem is a lack of data that policymakers can use to design better interventions and target relevant populations. The data that is available suggests that one in eight Afghan girls is married before the age of 16—the minimum legal age according to the Afghan law—and that [one in three](#) Afghan girls is married by the time she turns 18. A 2015 research report from the [Norwegian Refugee Council suggests](#) that the situation is even more grave for internally displaced women and girls living in informal settlements in urban areas, who, compared with other Afghans, are more likely to be non-literate, to have lower rates of school enrollment, to live in larger households (but with lower household incomes), and to be unemployed.

Since 2006, The Asia Foundation has been conducting an annual *Survey of the Afghan People*, the most comprehensive public opinion survey in the country, which includes perception data on a wide range of topics, including women's issues. In 2014, we added a question to the survey regarding Afghans' perception of the ideal marriage age for women and men. On average over the last three years, respondents said that the best age for women to marry is 19.2 and for men is 22.5, a difference of more than three years. Furthermore, 4.6 percent of respondents said that the best age for women to get married is before the age of 16 years, which is currently prohibited under Afghan law. Here are some other factors associated with child marriage from the survey:

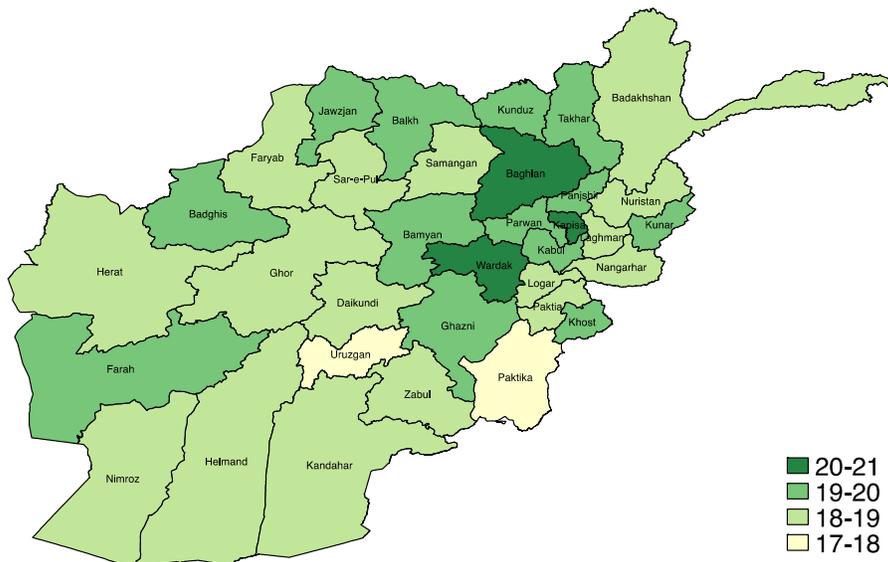


Gender. Women on average are more likely to suggest an older marriage age for women than men—women said the best marriage age for women should be 19.5 years, compared to men’s view of 18.8 years.

Age and marital status. Younger Afghans and those who are single (on average) are more in favor of an older marriage age for women, compared to older and married Afghans.

Geographic location. An older marriage age for women has more support among Afghans living in urban centers, than those living in rural areas (who make up 75 percent of the population). Residents of Kabul are on average more in favor of an older marriage age for women (20.6 years).

PERCEPTION OF BEST AGE FOR GIRLS TO MARRY



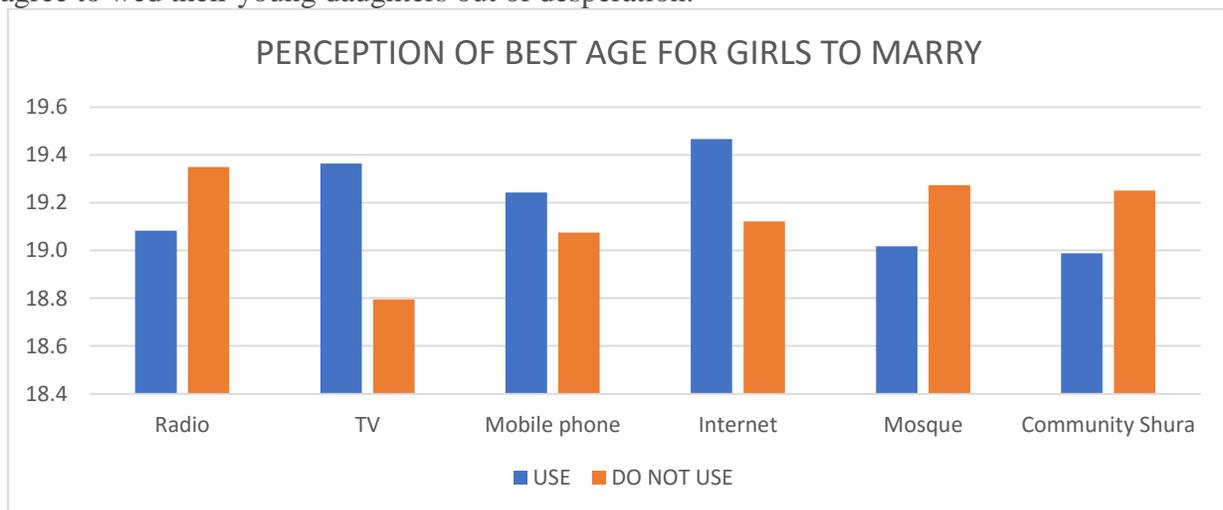
Ethnicity. Afghanistan is a multiethnic country, with each ethnic group generally distinguishable in terms of their cultural practices. While on average all four major ethnic groups agree in terms of views about the best marriage age for women, Hazara followed by Tajik respondents have

suggested an older age for women’s marriage compared to Pashtun or Uzbek respondents who have consistently given a lower age.

Education. Afghanistan has one of the lowest literacy rates in the world, and about 55 percent of survey respondents have never attended school. As respondents’ education levels increase, the age preference for marriage also appears to increase, though the correlation between education and age preference for marriage as suggested in the survey is not as strong as one might expect.

Migration. Afghanistan’s decades-long instability has resulted in the country being one of the largest sources of refugees and internally displaced persons in the world. Pakistan and Iran are the two neighboring countries that most Afghan refugees emigrated to. Among the survey respondents, 22.2 percent of them reported having migrated to another country since 1991 but were at the time living in Afghanistan. Those who have migrated to Pakistan at some point since 1991 are more likely to support a younger marriage age compared to those who have migrated to Iran. Eleven provinces bordering Pakistan supported a younger marriage age compared to the rest of the country.

Income. Anecdotal research suggests that poverty contributes to the prevalence of arranged child marriages. The self-reported family income data in the survey does indicate that lower income levels support younger marriage age, but the difference is negligible. This is perhaps because all respondents across different income levels have similar views about girls’ marriage age, but they agree to wed their young daughters out of desperation.



Television and sources of obtaining news and information. Radio and television are the most common mediums of obtaining news and information in Afghanistan. Those who reported obtaining news and information from television and the internet support an older age for women’s marriage, while those who rely on community *shuras*(councils), mosques, and radio support a younger age for marriage.

While data alone won’t solve Afghanistan’s child marriage crisis, understanding people’s perceptions of it, as well as the challenges and social pressures that influence their decision-making, is a critical step forward.