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The plight of Malawi's child brides

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Innat Edson didn't think it would end this way. Last year, she was making wedding plans. Now, at just 15, she is back at her mother's cramped, dingy house, nursing a fussing baby her former fiancé refuses to acknowledge is his.

Here, and in isolated villages and crumbling cities across the most destitute continent, girls younger than 14 are finding boyfriends and getting married in a bid to escape the empty bellies, numbing work and overwhelming tedium of poverty.

Encouraged by their parents, many marry much older men who they hope can give them a better life. Often, they are disappointed.

"Poverty is the cancer in our society," says Joyce Banda, Malawi's Minister of Gender, Child Welfare and Community Services. "More girls are marrying young -- not out of choice, but because they have no choice."

No figures are available because such marriages usually happen in secret. Banda and some aid groups, though, assert they are becoming more common, citing anecdotal evidence.

The legal age for marriage is 16 in Malawi, but girls as young as 14 can marry with their parents' consent. The government is proposing increasing this minimum to 18, but has had little luck enforcing its existing laws. Some elders see nothing wrong with allowing an 11-year-old to wed a man in his 30s.

"When they are exposed, we find that the young girls are so brainwashed they don't see anything wrong, and their parents are willing participants," Banda says.

Early marriage takes girls out of school and forces them into motherhood before they are biologically ready, contributing to some of the highest maternal mortality rates in the world. About 1 800 mothers died for every 100 000 deliveries in 2003, the last year for which figures are available. The practice can also expose girls to HIV/Aids before they are equipped to protect themselves.

The deadly pandemic has left thousands of Malawian children to fend for themselves in a country gripped by perpetual food shortages.

Innat's mother has been in and out of hospital for three years with an illness the family does not name. Her father drinks heavily and provides little for his six children. Innat dropped out of school in 7th grade to work as a maid in Blantyre -- a three-hour walk down a winding, rutted road. But the job didn't pay much, and she continued to struggle.

"I had no money to buy soap or lotion for my body, so I thought the only way was to find a boyfriend to take care of my needs," explains the sad, wide-eyed girl.

Her 13-year-old sister, Isme, escaped home by marrying a painter. So when a young man from their village proposed, Innat thought her problems were solved. When she fell pregnant, he deserted her.

Soon after, a trader came looking to buy charcoal. He too proposed, and she agreed. "I was just thinking about my baby," she says.

Eventually, however, the man returned to the city.

"He said he would come back for me," she says, her eyes welling up, "but he never did." Some 30 to 40 girls drop out every year from the local primary school, where English lessons are taught on a blackboard nailed to a tree. Some leave to help at home, but most get married, says deputy headmaster James Kampira.

Primary school is free, but high school costs around 3 500 kwacha (about \$27) a term -- more than many families earn a month.

If there is a choice, they usually give the extra schooling to sons. Just 15% of Malawian girls finish high school, compared with 26% of boys, according to government figures.

Some girls are pressed into marriage for the sake of a dowry, or because their parents have too many mouths to feed. But many enter willingly into unions that give them a kind of status.

Elube Matebule traded a cracked mud-and-thatch home for a brick house with a tin roof when she married her 22-year-old boyfriend, Edwin, last August.

"Life was difficult at home. There wasn't enough food, there weren't enough clothes, there wasn't enough money. But in marriage, I have those things," says Elube, a shy, giggly girl in a torn, white blouse, who says she is 18, but looks barely 14.

Marriage wasn't quite the escape she'd hoped for. Every day the girl who once dreamed of being a nurse is up at dawn to work in her new family's maize field. In the afternoon, she cooks for her husband, his parents and two brothers. Only then can she relax before the work starts again.

"I am very disappointed," she says, sitting on a step, twisting a blade of grass.

The average age of sexual debut is just 12, according to government research. In a few traditional communities, girls are forced to have sex with older men as part of rites initiating them into adulthood. But most have their first experience with a friend or relative.

Girls who have lost one or both parents to HIV/Aids are especially vulnerable to exploitation. In cities like Blantyre, it is not unusual for them to have several "boyfriends" who support them, according to the United Nations Children's Fund (Unicef) in Malawi. This in turn exposes them to the risk of infection with HIV, the virus that causes Aids.

Some older men will marry young girls after their wives die of HIV/Aids because they believe sex with a virgin will "cleanse" them, says Banda. It is also traditional in some cultures for a man to marry his wife's younger sister if she dies.

The government and Unicef campaign against such practices and hope raising the legal age for marriage will alert people to the dangers.

Others, however, worry the proposed law will leave pregnant teens without even the option of marriage.

Innat has no idea how to fend for two-month-old Crispin. "I wish I had money so I could raise goats to put him through school," she says wistfully. "I see no future for any of us." -- Sapa-AFP