

What Matters? Afghanistan Speaks!

July 2026



B B C MEDIA ACTION

Adolescent Mothers

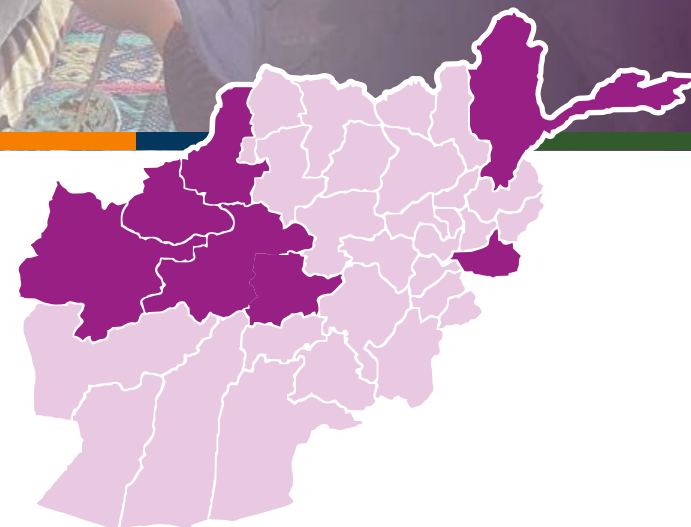
Life Stories of Early Marriage and Pregnancy

“I had to give up a lot of my dreams. I was young and didn’t want to get pregnant... but when it happened and God gave it, I forgot about many of my dreams and felt relieved. Now there’s no dream or anything, I just think a little about raising the kids.”

Adolescent mother, Faryab

Introduction

Child marriage and early pregnancy remain significant challenges for girls in Afghanistan. An estimated 28% of girls marry before the age of 18 ([UNICEF](#)), while 64 births occur per 1000 girls aged 15-19, ([World Bank](#)). Afghanistan has one of the world’s highest maternal mortality rates ([UNFPA](#)), and these issues pose serious risks to girls’ health and wellbeing.



This research explores the reasons that contribute to early marriage and pregnancy. It also seeks to understand how these practices occur intentionally within families and communities.

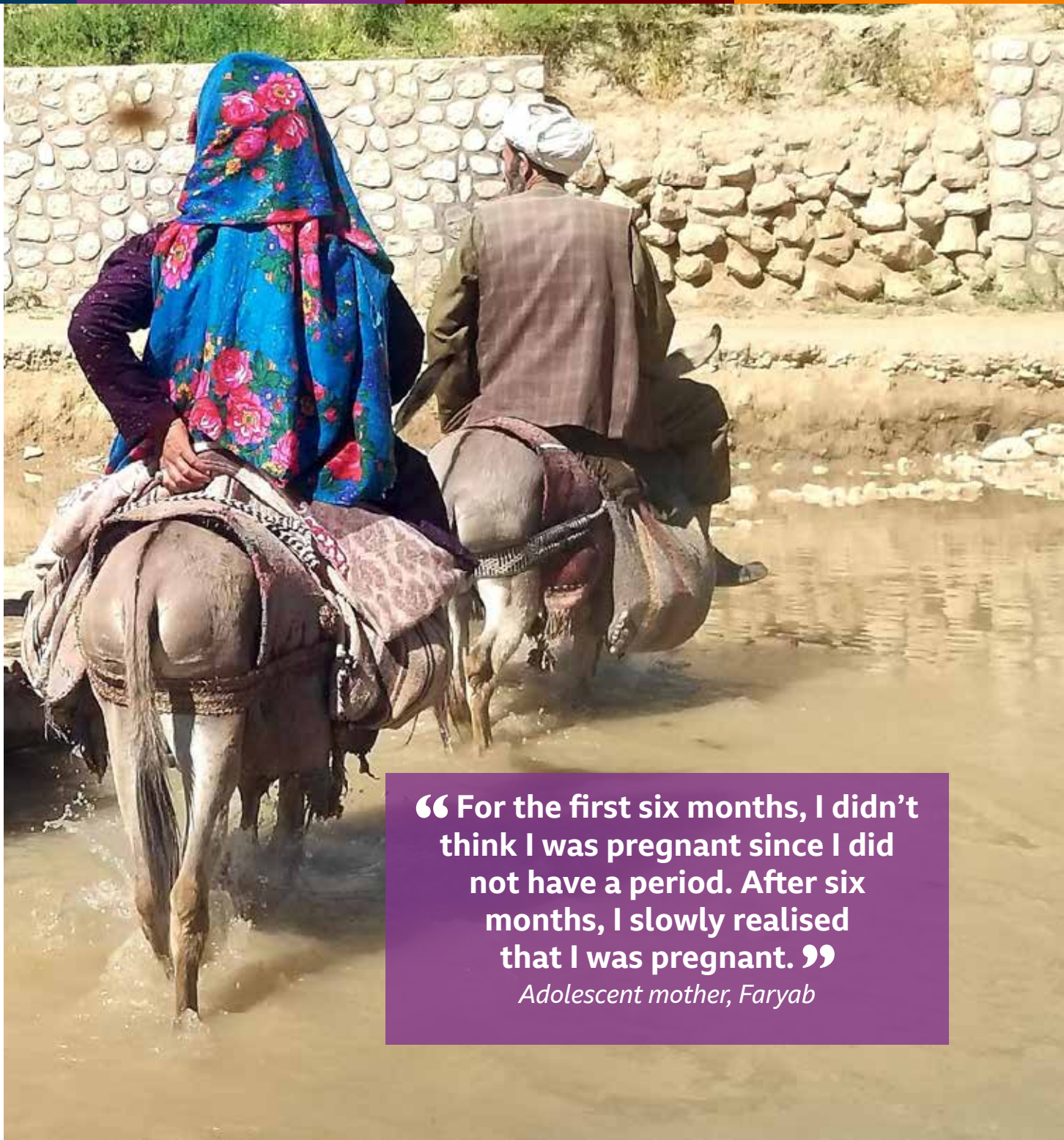
Research approach

This research draws on 84 in-depth interviews with adolescent mothers, husbands, and mothers-in-law, and four key informant interviews with health service providers across seven provinces in June 2026.

Early marriage: Girls reported having little say in decisions about marriage and childbearing

Adolescent mothers who participated in this study reported that they had been forced into marriage as young as 14 or 15, without their consent. Adolescent mothers typically said that they were opposed to their marriage and pregnancy, and some said they attempted to terminate their unwanted pregnancies. Also, mothers-in-law stopped them from delaying their pregnancy as this was seen to reduce their chances of becoming pregnant.

Some adolescent mothers shared their experiences of early marriage. They explained that when they became pregnant, they had limited understanding of reproductive health and did not always recognise the signs of pregnancy.



“For the first six months, I didn’t think I was pregnant since I did not have a period. After six months, I slowly realised that I was pregnant.”

Adolescent mother, Faryab



Some adolescent mothers said that after they got married, they were unhappy because they still considered themselves children. They expressed a desire to engage in activities, such as playing and spending time with other girls, rather than fulfilling the adult responsibilities associated with marriage and motherhood.

“ Now, my life has changed a lot. While other girls my age were playing, I was busy with illness, pregnancy, a child, and those kinds of things. My life changed a lot. ”

Adolescent mother, Ghor

Adolescent mothers reported that they had a lack of understanding of marriage and childcare and were scared of giving birth. They felt nervous along with uncertainty about entering married life.

“ When I was very young, the marriage proposal came for me, but I didn’t agree at all. When they wanted to marry me off, I wasn’t home that day; I was at my grandfather’s house. They [my parents] came to take me home, and I realised they were going to make me get married. I cried and ran away from them because I didn’t want to marry, but they forced me and brought me to get married. I wanted to grow up and study, but they didn’t let me. I was married off and went to my husband’s house. I got pregnant at a very young age and gave birth with a lot of difficulty. I didn’t understand anything and was scared of giving birth. When my child was born, I didn’t know how to take care of them. The child became malnourished and had to stay in the hospital for six months. I went through so many hardships. Now I don’t want other girls to suffer like I did. ”

Adolescent mother, Ghor

Why do families endorse early marriage?

Child marriage (under 18 years old) emerges as a complex interplay of deeply embedded social practices shaped by cultural norms, family expectations, and economic pressures. The findings from this research show how these factors overlap and reinforce each other in shaping decisions around marriage and childbearing.

Marriage and motherhood as an expected pathway for girls

Based on these interviews, early marriage and pregnancy are widely accepted in most communities. When girls reach the age of 15 or 16, families begin to view marriage and then pregnancy as the next expected step.

Mothers-in-law said that they encouraged adolescent girls to become pregnant soon after marriage, and often from the age of 15 years and above.





“ I had wished to have a young bride [for my son], and I have the bride that I wanted. Other mothers-in-law did the same thing. After all, my daughter-in-law is a very good bride, thank God. I had a 13-year-old daughter-in-law, and she had her children at the age of 14, yes, very good, in my opinion. I love my young daughter-in-law very much, and also, I love my grandchild just as much as I love myself. ”

*Mother-in-law of an adolescent mother,
Faryab*

Stigma around delayed marriage: Fears of girls becoming “too old”

Participants reported that unmarried girls aged over 19 were often the subject of negative comments and social stigma. Community members frequently made disparaging comments suggesting that older girls were unsuitable for marriage – “*the girl has a flaw*”, “*girl has become older*”, “*no one will marry an older girl*”, “*she is not [suitable for a] marriage proposal*”, “*the girl has remained in her father’s home*”, “*girl above 19 is old*”, and “*mothers and fathers do not like to marry girls above 19 to their sons*”. These attitudes reflect a strong social pressure for girls to marry at a young age and stigmatisation for those who decide to delay marriage.

“If girls who are thirteen or fourteen years old, are not married off, people make fun of them and say [to the parents], ‘Why aren’t you giving your daughter in marriage? Maybe your daughter has some flaws or some other issue, that is why you aren’t giving her in marriage.’ And the family ends up being forced to marry off their daughter. In the village, it is not the culture to keep girls unmarried; they are married off at a young age.”

Adolescent mother, Badghis

Participants reported that households perceive the presence of unmarried girls who remain single into late adolescence as damaging the reputation of the family and believe it runs the risk of fewer marriage proposals.

Participants reported that the presence of an unmarried girl aged 16 or 17 in the household reduced their chances of getting marriage proposals. Therefore, families said they tried to marry their daughters before the age of 19.

“When a girl is older than 16 or 17, there are fewer marriage proposals, and the sooner she gets married, the better. She must definitely get married by the age of 18.”

Husband of an adolescent mother, Herat

“It’s better for adolescent girls to marry because if they grow up, no one will marry them, and people will say they’re too old and make fun of them, and that’s how our tradition and customs are, that we give girls in adolescent marriage.”

Mother-in-law of an adolescent mother, Ghor

Perceived consequences of late marriage and pregnancy:

Mothers-in-law often attributed their own experiences of marrying and having children later in life to having smaller families. Drawing on these experiences, they encouraged or pressured girls to marry and become pregnant at a young age in order to quickly increase the size of their families. This also highlights the desire and preference for larger families.

“I had wished to have children but there was no luck, my husband was far away in Iran. Later at the age of 33, I had children. For this reason, I accompanied my daughter-in-law to the doctor and received medicine (fertility treatment) to help her become pregnant soon. Thank God, now my daughter-in-law has children. Wherever there is a child in that house, there is no absence, and it is comforting.”

*Mother-in-law of an adolescent mother,
Faryab*

Adolescent mothers also reported that people believe that every menstrual cycle experienced by an unmarried girl increases the burden of sin on her household, and a belief that delayed marriage reduces a girl's chances of getting pregnant.

“In our village, when doctors come and give health advice, some people listen and some don't. Those who don't listen say that once a girl reaches puberty and begins menstruating, she should be married. If she remains unmarried, her monthly period is seen as a source of sin for her parents, so the parents would prefer to marry her off quickly.”

Adolescent mother, Badghis



Family pressures and prestige

Marriage is not only about the couple but about a family's reputation, continuity, and social standing. The findings show that elders often push for early marriage because it strengthens their household's position in the community.

Family members, particularly mothers-in-law, felt pride in the presence of adolescent daughters-in-law and were anxiously waiting for their pregnancies soon after marriage. Participants said that having a young bride and quickly increasing the number of grandchildren was viewed as a source of status, pride, and social recognition within the community.

“It was the right time when my daughter-in-law got married. [I prayed to] God, grant us children, I must have grandchildren so that I can hold my grandchild close. My daughter-in-law married [my son] at 13 and had a child at 14. I took care of her, so nothing was lacking. I took care of everything for her.”

Mother-in-law of an adolescent mother, Faryab

“The household is competing (with others) in their community and tribe. They say that when a family has married off its son, and a grandson has been born, this is seen as an achievement. Because of this, people marry off their sons and daughters.”

Mother-in-law of adolescent mother, Nangarhar

Household competition for grandchildren:

Families, particularly mothers-in-law, compare themselves with other households that have many children or grandchildren. This social pressure can encourage families to marry adolescent girls and prepare them for early and consecutive pregnancies in order to increase their household status.



Family expectations and future support:

Beyond social expectations, husbands also said that fathers like to have children to help them in the near future, as they would contribute to their economic security as they grew older. This highlights the expectations of parents for future livelihood support and can further create pressure for adolescent girls to become mothers soon after marriage.

“We should have children earlier because it’s better for our life; that someone will support a person in his old age. In Afghanistan, this is a so-called art [accomplishment] to give birth to a baby-boy as nothing else is achieved here.”

*Husband of an adolescent mother,
Herat*



Emotional value of childbirth and happiness:

Families see the birth of a child as a major source of happiness and celebration. Mothers-in-law said that the presence of a baby brings emotional comfort and companionship, particularly for adolescent mothers who may experience loneliness when their husbands are away due to work or other commitments.

“Thank God it happened because I really wanted grandchildren. I loved my child, and I loved my grandchild. God gave me a grandchild.”

Mother-in-law of an adolescent mother, Faryab

Marriage as a pathway to sons' maturity and readiness for life:

Families often push marriage for adolescent boys as a response to behaviours that they considered unacceptable by community standards, such as unemployment, substance use, or other activities considered particularly damaging to a family's reputation. Families believe that early marriage will make adolescents become more mature by requiring them to take on adult roles and responsibilities for their own children, families, and household chores.

“The reason for this is that when some households view their boys as a bit wayward, they marry them in order to correct them.”

Mother-in-law of an adolescent mother, Nangahar

“They marry at a young age so that they can have children and work and not go astray or get involved in wrong things. Based on my experience, and as we elders understand, mothers always try to keep their children busy with something good. This is a village here, so when a girl or boy turns 15 or 16, they should get married because we think that if they don't get married, they will go astray, get into drugs, and then we say, let responsibility reach them, and they will have children. If not, they will grow up lazy which is not a good thing.”

Mother-in-law of an adolescent mother, Nangarhar

Economic and Survival Strategies

Economic and survival strategies in the context of early marriage highlight how families use marriage as a way to cope with financial hardship or resolve household challenges.

Poverty and dowry as an economic driver for early marriage

Participants said that poor households often accept large amounts of money as a dowry payment (Toyana or Qalin) in advance, in exchange for the marriage of adolescent girls. This money is spent by households to meet their household expenses. This means adolescent girls' lives are often sacrificed to improve the economic conditions of their families. This finding suggests that poverty can contribute to early marriage by creating a financial incentive for poorer families to marry off their daughters at a young age.

“It’s like this in our area, people, either because of unemployment or poverty, marry off their daughters. They get their daughters engaged at eight or nine years old and then marry them off at thirteen or fourteen. They receive a dowry payment which is a hundred thousand or two hundred thousand, so it will slowly be settled, then they marry off their daughters.”

Adolescent mother, Badghis



Additionally, participants explained that households with a large number of female members also tended to marry their daughters in adolescence in exchange for money for their household livelihood expenses.

“Yes, there are financial considerations. Firstly, I arranged my daughter’s engagement at the age of twelve due to poverty. I sold my daughter, and my daughter was not even fourteen years old when my daughter’s future husband said she would have to get married. I said that my daughter is still young, but because I had taken the offer earlier (and we had consumed the dowry money), I had to give her to the husband. So, I married off one of my two daughters, and the husband took her from me. Now only one of them [my daughters] has remained with me. People marry off their daughters due to poverty.”

Mother, Badghis

Participants also reported that the consecutive birth of female babies also led women to avoid delaying pregnancy in the hope of giving birth to a male child.

Health risks

Limited awareness of the health risks of adolescent pregnancy:

Participants demonstrated a lack of awareness of the associated health risks of adolescent marriage and early pregnancy. Many perceived girls aged 15 or above as suitable for marriage and childbearing, viewing early pregnancy as an opportunity for completing the desired family size while remaining youthful in later life.

While some other participants were opposed to marriage at this age, their concerns were mainly related to the girls' lack of life experience and skills needed to manage household responsibilities. They highlighted skills such as cooking, household chores, and respectful behaviour with mothers-in-law and other family members. They did not mention the health risks associated with adolescent marriage and early childbearing.



“ A girl, once she grows up a bit, should be given to a husband. She should understand housework; she should respect the honour of elders. Some girls, however, don’t understand the extent of running a household, nor respect their father-in-law, mother-in-law, or sister-in-law, and they don’t understand anything about cleanliness. When a girl comes as a bride, she must do housework, cook meals, and bake bread. People expect the same from their own daughters-in-law. Some brides can’t even bake a bread. ”

*Mother-in-law of adolescent mother,
Badghis*

At the same time, there was a limited awareness and access to family planning information and services. Participants reported receiving little or no information about early marriage, early pregnancy, or the health risks associated with them.





Recommendations

Public awareness and behaviour change: Increase public awareness through radio programmes, health clinics, community outreach activities and other platforms regarding the negative outcomes of adolescent marriage and the health risks associated with early pregnancy.

Media programmes and community outreach could:

- **Target male decision makers:** Fathers and male family members are often the key decision-makers in determining when girls should get married. Radio programmes could engage men in discussions about the benefits of delaying marriage and feature positive male role models who have chosen to postpone the marriage of their daughters.
- **Engage mothers-in-law as key influencers:** This research found that mothers-in-law often encourage pregnancy soon after marriage. Radio dramas and outreach activities could show positive role models who support young girls in delaying pregnancy and maintaining birth spacing practices. They could also promote the importance of providing adolescent mothers with health, nutrition and emotional support during pregnancy and early motherhood.
- **Feature doctors and health workers as trusted voices:** Health professionals can discuss the health risks of early pregnancy to both the mother and her baby. Doctors could provide clear information about the risks, complications, difficult deliveries and newborn health risks for adolescent mothers.
- **Promote birth spacing:** Provide information on the health, social and economic benefits of birth spacing for young mothers and children.
- **Address the stigma around delayed marriage and childbearing:** Challenge the stigma and social norms that stigmatise girls who marry later as being seen as 'too old'.
- **Provide information on available family planning services:** Increase awareness of services amongst adolescent girls, husbands, mothers-in-law and other family members. Provide accurate information on the benefits of birth spacing for the health of mothers and children.
- **Provide mental health and psychosocial support services:** Increase awareness and access to MHPSS services for adolescent mothers who experience mental health issues due to adolescent marriage and early pregnancy. Support adolescent mothers with these services to help improve their mental wellbeing.
- **Strengthen and promote employment opportunities for adolescent girls and families:** Address the economic drivers of early marriage by providing advice and information on employment opportunities for adolescent girls' and their families. This could include information on vocational professions specifically for girls such as tailoring, carpet weaving, and other small and medium enterprises that can help lead to a decrease in financial pressures that often drives adolescent marriages.



About What Matters? Afghanistan Speaks!

What Matters? Afghanistan Speaks! is a quarterly bulletin which informs the humanitarian community about how people are experiencing issues on the ground. It is part of the Driving Action for Well Being to Avert Mortality (DAWAM) project which aims to contribute to decreased morbidity and mortality in women and girls and high-risk groups including persons living with disability in Afghanistan. The project is funded by the Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO). It is implemented in seven provinces by a consortium consisting of World Vision-Afghanistan, Action Against Hunger (ACF), Action Aid (AA), BBC Media Action, Nai Qala, Afghan Women's Educational Centre (AWEC) and AADA. This bulletin is produced by BBC Media Action, Afghanistan. The content of What Matters? Afghanistan Speaks! is the responsibility of BBC Media Action. Any views expressed in this report should not be taken to represent those of the BBC itself, nor any donors supporting What Matters? or the work of the charity. BBC Media Action welcomes collaboration with other organisations collecting feedback in areas where they work or who would like to contribute to the analysis and production of this bulletin.

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Methodology

This research utilised a qualitative approach to explore people's experiences and perceptions related to early marriage and early pregnancy. Data was collected through 84 in-depth interviews (IDIs) with adolescent mothers, their husbands, and mothers-in-law across seven DAWAM provinces, capturing diverse perspectives on early marriage and pregnancy. Four key informant interviews (KIIs) were conducted with health services providers in health clinics across four provinces to understand existing health interventions and the accessibility of services and communication channels particularly for adolescent mothers. Most of the adolescent mothers interviewed were married at 14 or 15 years old and became pregnant at the age of 15 or above. The husbands and mothers-in-law interviewed in this research were the spouses and family members of the adolescent mothers. These insights offer valuable learnings for communities and practitioners working in the health and nutrition sectors.

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