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Child Marriage in Georgia

Economic and Educational Consequences

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About CRRC Georgia

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Table of contents

Abstract.....	1
Introduction	1
Methodology.....	3
Findings	4
Who marries underage?	4
Lower levels of education stemming from child marriage hurt women’s economic well-being.....	6
Conclusions and Recommendations.....	8
References	10

List of Figures

Figure 1: Ever married female population under age of 18.....	4
figure 2: Predicted probability of marrying under age	5
figure 3: Predicted annual income by age married	6
figure 4: Predicted annual income by marriage age and educational attainment	7
figure 5: Predicted labor force participation by marriage age and educational attainment.....	7

Abstract

Child marriage remains a persistent problem in Georgia, with approximately 14% of the adult female population married under the age of 18. The trend has remained stagnant, with no statistically significant changes in the rate of underage marriage over the last 70 years. This represents a clear social and public health issue. In addition to well-documented social and health-related issues relating to underage marriage, this study shows that the practice is associated with worse economic outcomes for women who marry underage. Negative outcomes appear to stem from the lower levels of education women who marry underage attain. Although the primary goal of policy on underage marriage should be its elimination, the data suggests clear policy options to alleviate the economic harm women who have married underage experience.

Introduction

Besides being a human rights violation,¹ the negative social, psychological, and health related outcomes associated with child marriage are well documented. Research also suggests that child marriage is associated with negative economic outcomes for women who marry underage.² In Georgia, child marriage³ remains a persistent issue. This brief provides background on the situation in Georgia; identifies which groups are more or less likely to marry as children; and estimates the differences in economic outcomes between women who marry underage and those who do not. Finally, this brief identifies a likely culprit for poorer economic well-being among women who marry as children: lower levels of educational attainment.

Underage marriage is associated with a number of negative social, psychological, and physical health outcomes for women (who are the primary group to marry underage). Women under the age of 18 are at greater risk of dying in childbirth among a wide variety of other health issues,⁴ and children are 50% more likely to be stillborn or pass away in the first week of life when the mother is under the age of 20 compared with women aged 20-29.⁵ Girls in underage marriages are also believed to be at increased risk of psychological abuse and domestic violence.⁶

¹ UNFPA 2014.

² Wodon, Q. et. Al. 2017.

³ Within this brief, child marriage and underage marriage are used interchangeably. Early marriage is not used as some above age marriages are considered early marriages. For more on this subject, see <https://www.unfpa.org/child-marriage-frequently-asked-questions#>

⁴ Nour, N. 2006.

⁵ WHO 2011.

⁶ WHO 2012.

Besides the health and social issues associated with child marriage, a growing literature suggests the practice is associated with negative economic outcomes for women and the societies they live in. A synthesis of evidence on 15 countries highlights that child marriage negatively impacts economic growth through multiple pathways.⁷ First, women in child marriages generally attain less education than women who do not, leading to lower levels of opportunity for individual women and reduced productivity for the economy as a whole. Second, fertility rates are higher for women who are married underage. In turn, this leads to decreased welfare overall.

Rates of child marriage in Georgia are below the global average, with the country tied (alongside Indonesia and Turkey) for the 38th lowest rate worldwide in UNICEF's 125-country dataset.⁸ As in the rest of the world, underage marriage is a highly gendered phenomenon, with the rates of underage marriage being significantly higher for women than men. Georgia has among the highest rates of underage marriage among European countries.⁹

In Georgia, people in rural areas are generally believed to marry at younger ages. The ethnic Azeri population is also thought to have a higher incidence of underage marriage than the general public, with a study in Kvemo Kartli suggesting that a third (32%) of ethnic minority women in the region married underage.¹⁰ Moreover, some experts believe that the rate of child marriage increased following the collapse of the Soviet Union in Georgia.¹¹ Economic circumstances were thought to drive the increase in child marriage as child marriage led to one less mouth to feed for the family of the girl to be married.¹²

The policy environment surrounding underage marriage has changed a number of times over the years. At present, marriage under the age of 18 is illegal.¹³ Until 2017, the age of marriage was 18, unless a girl was pregnant or had given birth.¹⁴ Until 2015, the law had allowed marriage of 16 and 17-year-olds with parental consent. In 2015, a law was also passed making forced marriage illegal.¹⁵

⁷ Wodon, Q. et. Al. 2017.

⁸ This comparison comes from UNICEF data. The primary source of data for each country in the dataset is the multi-indicator cluster survey (MICS), although other sources are used in the absence of MICS. The data for Georgia was collected in 2010. New data from the 2018 MICS will likely be incorporated in the near future, but was not available at the time of writing to the best of the knowledge of the research team. The data set is available here: <https://data.unicef.org/topic/child-protection/child-marriage/>

⁹ UNFPA 2014.

¹⁰ UN Women 2011.

¹¹ UNFPA n.d..

¹² UNFPA 2017.

¹³ Kazimova, G. 2019.

¹⁴ Jegorova-Askerova, R. 2019.

¹⁵ UNFPA 2014.

Despite a largely adequate legislative environment, enforcement remains a significant issue.¹⁶ Informal marriages that take place prior to the age of marriage and are registered only after the bride reaches 18 are believed to be widespread.¹⁷ In the case of bride kidnapping, including the kidnapping of women under the age of 18, women are often socially pressured to accept their husband, with law enforcement believed to often turn a blind eye to the situation.¹⁸

Methodology

This brief uses the SDC, UN Women and CRRC-Georgia¹⁹ dataset on women's economic (in)activity and informal employment in Georgia to understand who is more or less likely to marry under the age of 18 and the economic consequences of such marriages. Due to the low prevalence of men who married under the age of 18 within the survey, the data is only analyzed for female respondents. The survey contains 961 female respondents.²⁰

Below, in addition to the presentation of descriptive statistics, two primary data analyses are carried out. In the first, a regression is used to look at the prevalence of underage marriage among different social and demographic groups, taking into account other social and demographic factors. This analysis is intended to provide an understanding of which social and demographic groups are more likely to marry underage. The second analysis uses a technique called matching that first identifies people who are similar except one group married underage and the other did not. After matching, regression analysis is used to understand whether women who marry underage experience different outcomes.²¹

The analysis has a number of limitations. First and foremost, it is correlational, and hence the results should be interpreted with the caution appropriate to observational studies. Second, the survey was carried out with individuals already at or above the age of 18 in spring 2018. Hence, the survey does not capture the situation of women marrying underage during the years immediately prior to the survey.

¹⁶ Kazimova, G. 2019. See also: OC-Media 2019.

¹⁷ Kazimova, G. 2019.

¹⁸ *ibid.*

¹⁹ CRRC Georgia, UN Women, and SDC 2018.

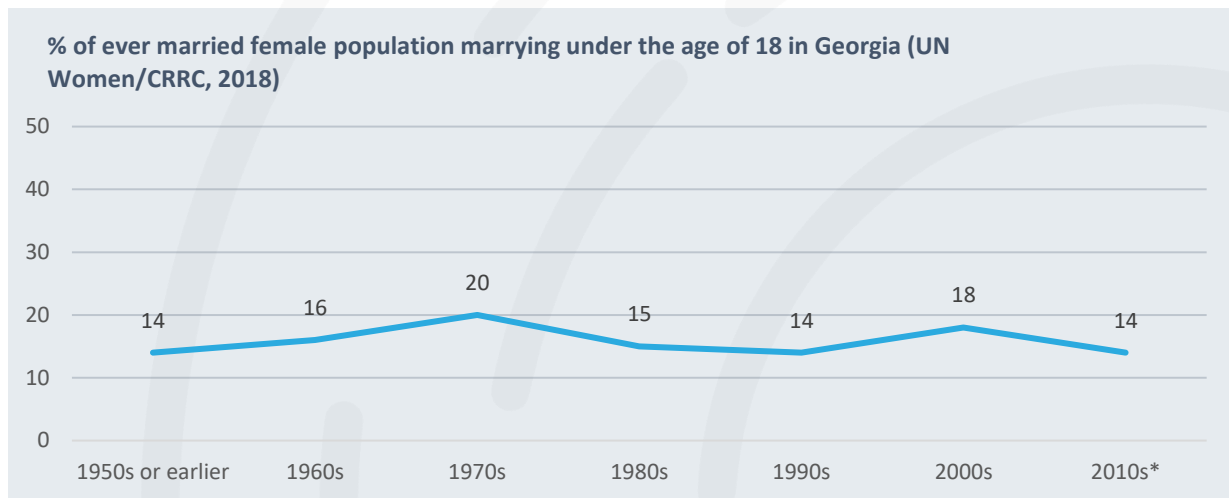
²⁰ Too few men that married under the age of 18 participated in the survey to make accurate statistical estimates about them.

²¹ For further details on the data analysis, replication code is available at: https://github.com/crcrgeorgia/child_marriage

Findings

Globally, women are significantly more likely than men to marry under the age of 18 in Georgia. The data suggest that 14% of women and 3% of men in Georgia were married under the age of 18. The average age of marriage was 22 for women and 25 for men. The graph below provides the share of the ever married female population that wed under the age of 18 by the decade in which the marriage took place. Although the numbers fluctuate slightly over the decades, none of the differences are significant.

FIGURE 1: EVER MARRIED FEMALE POPULATION UNDER AGE OF 18

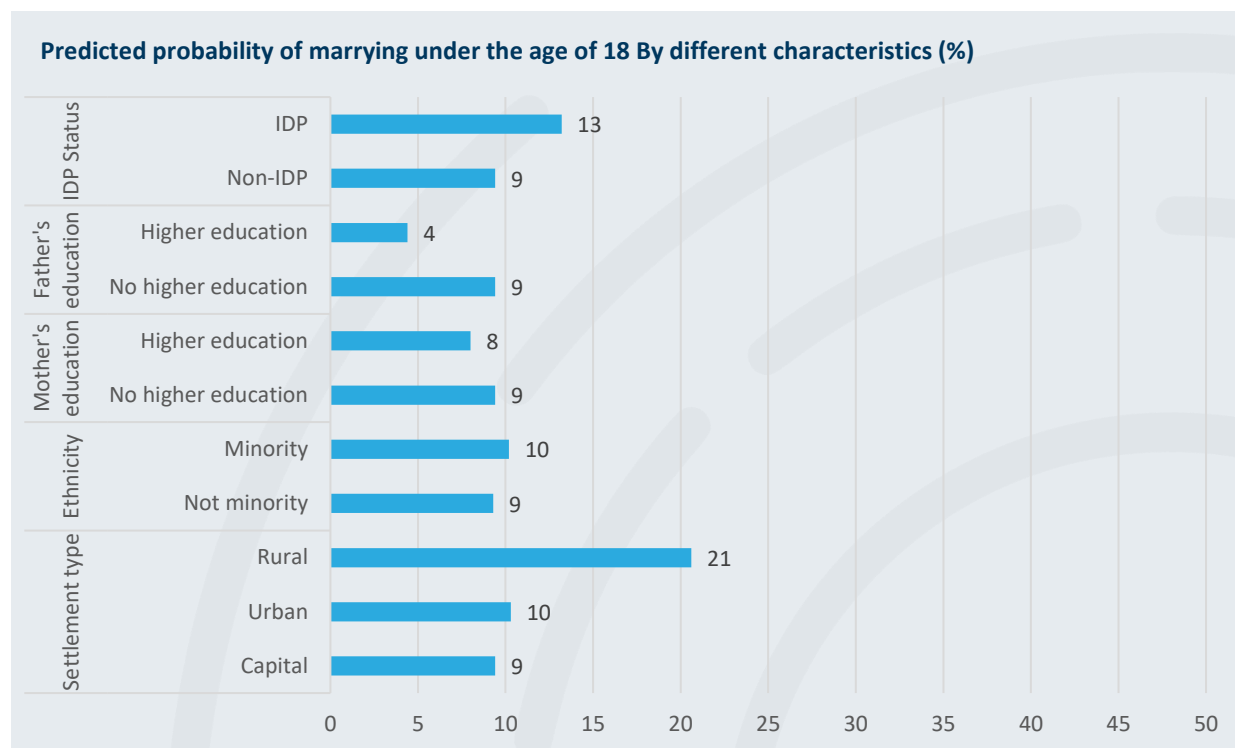


**The number for the 2010s likely underestimates the extent of underage marriage to a certain extent, because only adults were interviewed in the survey. For example, if a 16-year-old was married in 2017, s/he would not be eligible for participation in the survey.*

Who marries underage?

Besides sex, a number of demographic characteristics are associated with different rates of underage marriage in Georgia. Women in rural areas are significantly more likely to marry below 18. Social and economic background, as proxied by parent's education level, appears to also play a role. If a woman's father attained at least some tertiary education, she is significantly less likely to have married under the age of 18. However, a mother's education does not appear to have a significant impact on the chance that a woman will marry underage or not. The rates of underage marriage are not significantly different

FIGURE 2: PREDICTED PROBABILITY OF MARRYING UNDER AGE



for ethnic minorities compared with ethnic Georgians. This lack of statistically significant difference should be taken with a good degree of caution, because of the relatively small sample of ethnic minorities within the overall sample. This in turn leads to a large margin of error for this population. There are also no differences between the internally displaced and non-internally displaced populations in terms of underage marriage prevalence. A number of other factors are plausibly associated with underage marriage, such as religion,²² economic status,²³ values,²⁴ and social pressure²⁵. Religion is not taken into account in the analysis as the dataset does not allow the establishment of whether or not an individual has converted or not. Moreover, religion is highly correlated with ethnicity in Georgia. Economic status of the household a woman grew up in is partially proxied by parental education, however, the data analysis does not provide a more direct, pre-marriage measure of economic circumstances. Finally, the data does not contain information on values and social pressure surrounding marriage.

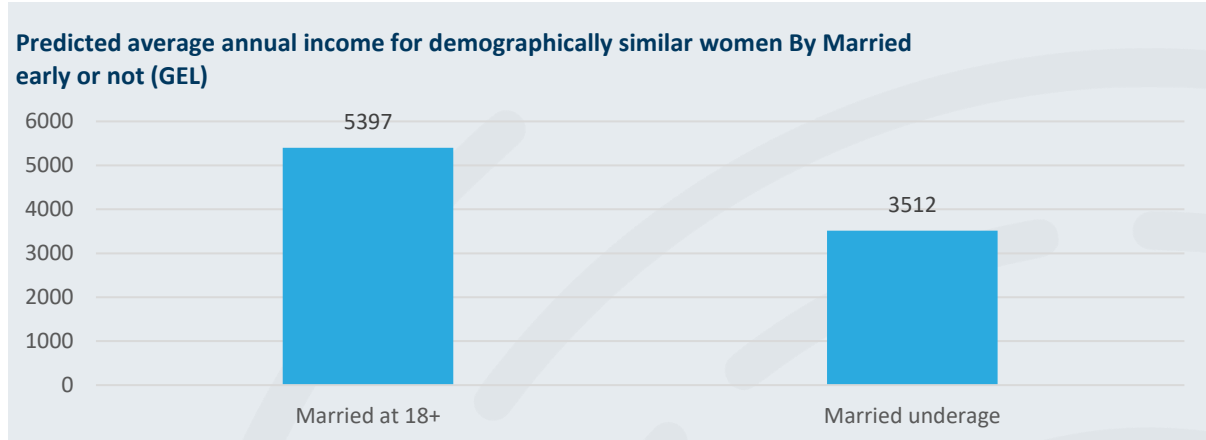
²² UNFPA n.d.

²³ UNFPA 2017.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

FIGURE 3: PREDICTED ANNUAL INCOME BY AGE MARRIED



Lower levels of education stemming from child marriage hurt women's economic well-being

The data suggest that women who marry underage are economically worse off than their peers who do not. Women who marry underage are significantly less likely to be in the labor force²⁶ than women who do not. The data suggest that 45% of women who marry underage participate in the labor force compared with 52% of women who are otherwise similar in terms of demographics but did not marry underage. Among women who are employed, incomes are GEL 1,885 lower per year on average (i.e. 35% less) if a woman was married under the age of 18 compared with a woman with statistically similar characteristics but who did not marry underage.²⁷

This lower level of economic well-being appears to stem primarily from the lower level of educational achievement that those who marry young achieve, with women who marry underage being less likely to gain either vocational or higher education. Women who did not marry underage have a 37% chance of attaining higher education, compared with a 16% chance for otherwise similar women who married under the age of 18. Similarly, women who marry at or above 18 have a 27% chance of obtaining vocational education, while women who marry underage have a 21% chance. Two thirds of women who marry underage (64%) obtained no higher than secondary education, compared with 36% of similar women who did not marry as children. It is not clear whether this disparity stems from school dropout or is due to women completing secondary education and not continuing to further education. There is

²⁶ Labor force participation is defined as being either unemployed or employed. A person is only considered unemployed if they have searched for work in the last two weeks, are interested in a job, and could start a job in the next two weeks. An individual without work and these characteristics is considered outside the labor force.

²⁷ In the matched sample, women who did not marry early made GEL 5,161 per year on average compared with GEL 3,512 for women who did.

likely a mix of both. Still, the overall pattern is clear: child marriage is associated with lower levels of educational attainment.

Economic disparities between women who marry underage and do not disappear after controlling for educational attainment. There is no statistically significant difference between women who marry underage and do not in terms of labor force participation or incomes if they have the same level of education.

FIGURE 5: PREDICTED LABOR FORCE PARTICIPATION BY MARRIAGE AGE AND EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT

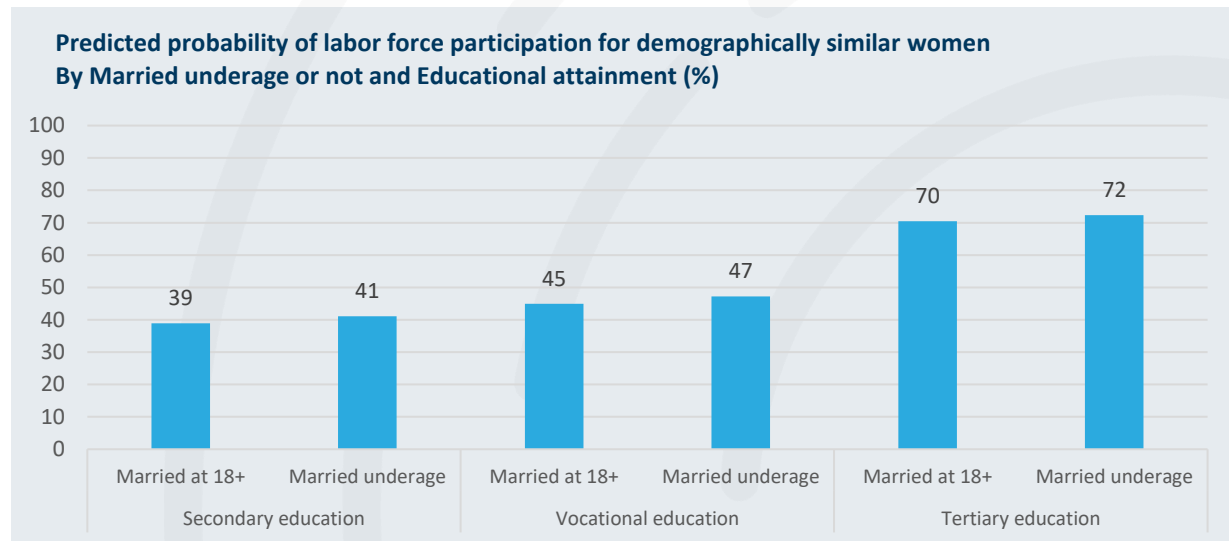
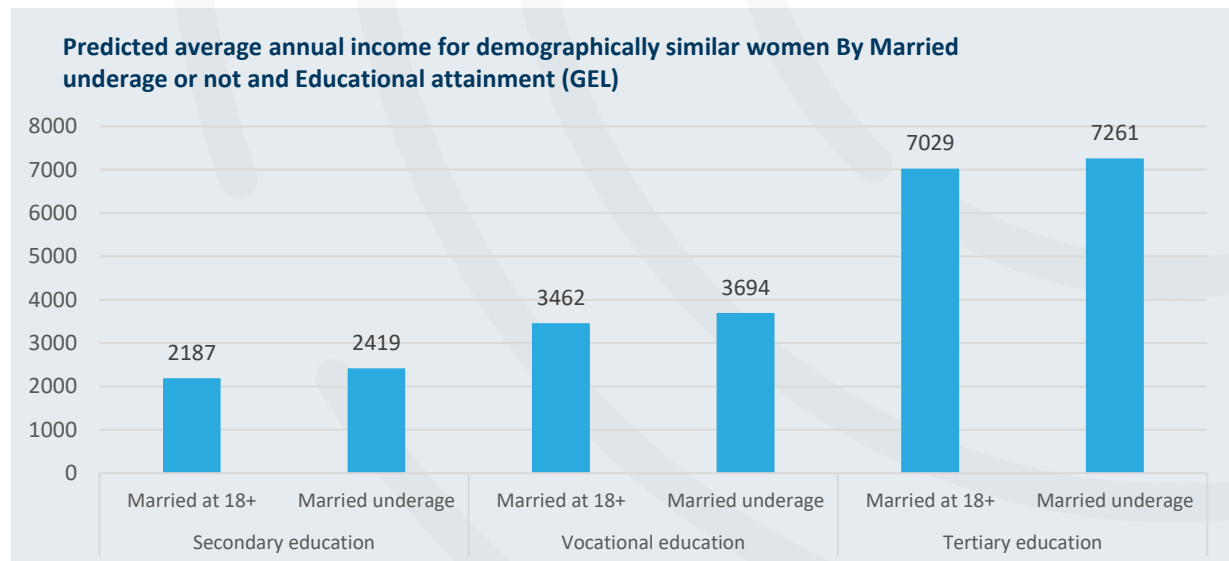


FIGURE 4: PREDICTED ANNUAL INCOME BY MARRIAGE AGE AND EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT



Conclusions and Recommendations

Clearly, ending child marriage is the best option for eliminating its consequences. Until the time that this goal is reached, and potentially for some time after, it is important to attempt to reduce the harm associated with underage marriage for those who marry as children. Although the social, psychological, and physical health consequences are evidently more important than (and likely contribute to) the economic issues, the above data also show that women who marry underage suffer economic consequences. This finding is present in data on both labor force participation and income.

Differences in economic outcomes appear to stem from lower rates of educational attainment. Women who marry as children are significantly less likely to attain either vocational or higher education compared with women who do not marry underage. This finding is arrived at taking into account other factors, such as settlement type and socio-economic background, through a matching algorithm. Although the data do not enable us to determine whether lower levels of education among those who marry underage stems from school dropout or non-continuation to further education, the overall pattern is clear. Differences in economic outcomes, however, disappear when comparing women who attain similar levels of education, whether or not they married young. This suggests that:

- The key to reducing the gap in economic outcomes between women who marry young and not is ensuring they are able to attain a higher level of education.

There are two paths to decreasing the educational achievement gap. Through:

- Encouraging more girls to stay in and complete school despite marrying underage and;
- Incentivizing women who have left education stemming from underage marriage to continue their education.

Numerous policy options could encourage both outcomes. To achieve the first goal of encouraging girls who marry underage to stay in education, a number of steps are possible. First among them is creating an enabling environment in schools for girls who marry as children to stay in and complete school. Aside from an enabling environment, The Ministry of Education and Sciences of Georgia could provide support services to girls who marry underage that help them remain in and complete education. This could take many forms, from academic support to conditional cash transfers. Another practical option that could support both the goal of keeping girls in school and encouraging them to continue their education would be the provision of guidance counseling. This type of service for young people within schools generally aims to support them in making decisions about their future and education, as well as supporting them

in dealing with current difficulties. School psychologists could play this role in part, and with further training could potentially play this role in full.

In support of the second goal of encouraging women to re-enter education, numerous policy options are available. Providing simple pathways towards re-entering secondary, vocational, and tertiary education for women who have left early would likely support this process. In this regard, online and other distance-based learning options should be explored. Together with making it easier to further their education, incentives should also be considered. As with services that could be provided to encourage girls to stay in school, these could take many forms, from conditional cash transfers for satisfactory progress towards higher education to reduced or waived tuition fees at vocational and tertiary educational institutions. Given the returns from education both to society and the individual, this option has the potential (though not the certainty) to be cost neutral in the long term.

Whatever policies are adopted, they should be a) piloted, b) rigorously evaluated; and c) minimize any perverse incentives to the extent possible.

In terms of which groups are more likely to marry underage in Georgia, the data provides a number of findings. First, the data clearly show that child marriage is significantly more common in rural areas of Georgia. Hence, it is recommended that:

- Efforts aimed at preventing child marriage should focus on rural areas of the country, where the problem is most acute.

Second, the data suggest that further research is needed to understand whether underage marriage is more common among ethnic minorities than ethnic Georgians. This study had a relatively small sample of ethnic minorities and particularly ethnic Azerbaijanis which are the minority group thought to marry underage more often. The data in this study does not suggest a significantly higher rate of child marriage among this group. Given the small sample, it is recommended that further research is conducted, making use of data that has larger samples of ethnic minority respondents to further investigate this finding.

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