

# MARRIED OFF IN MOZAMBIQUE

FEARFUL OF TEEN PREGNANCY, FAMILIES GIVE AWAY THEIR DAUGHTERS EARLY



*Olinda with her 1-year-old child in October, above.*

By Katya Cengel in Majaica, Mozambique

Photos by Jodi Bieber for Al Jazeera America

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**O**linda dropped out of school after giving birth to her first child. She was in the seventh grade. Like many girls in this village in southern Mozambique, she had hopes of becoming a teacher; now, she wishes the same for her daughter.

Olinda had become pregnant at 14. (At the request of the nonprofit group that works with Olinda and assisted Al Jazeera with this story, her real name has been withheld). After her boyfriend disappeared, Olinda's brother arranged her marriage, to a boy a year older than her. His parents wanted him to wed before he impregnated someone and was forced to pay a fine to the girl's family, as is the custom here. Olinda's mother was already dead and her father didn't object to her wedding. "He said it was good if I got married, because he could not afford to look after me," she says.

Olinda's story is not unusual. Teenage pregnancy is a widespread problem in the developed and the developing world. But in this coastal country in southern Africa, it is often accompanied by early marriage, which, studies show, sets a girl up for a

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## SERIES

### CHILD MARRIAGE

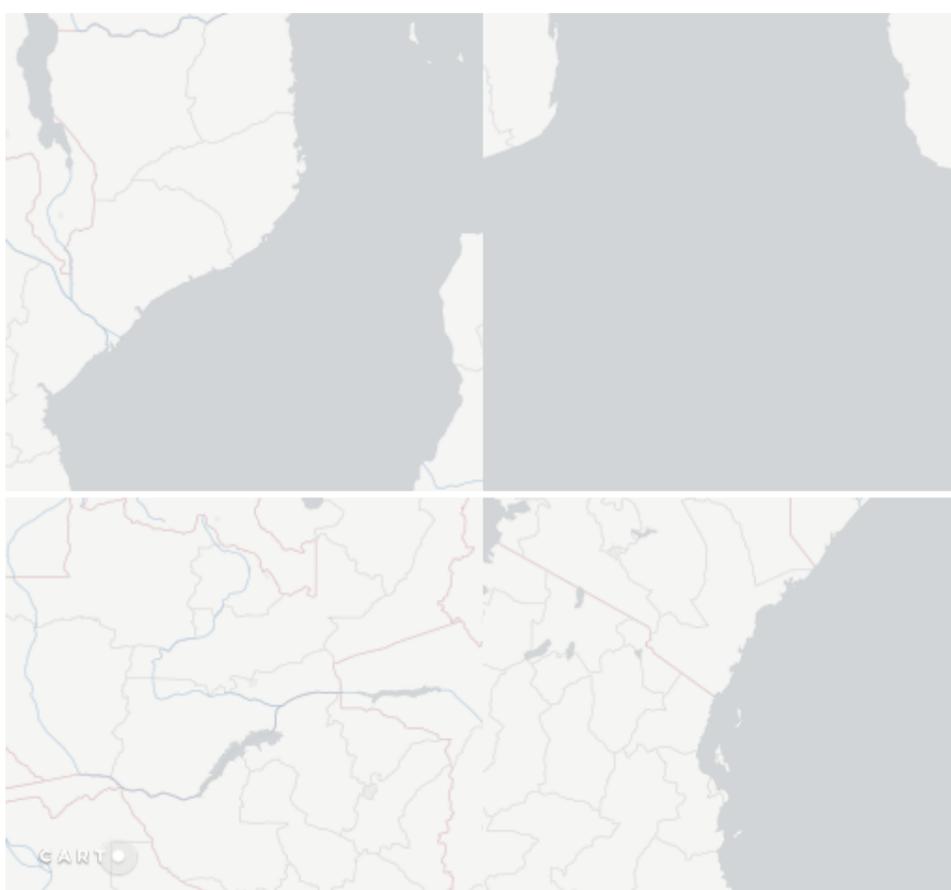
This is the third in an occasional series on child marriage.

- Nigeria: From marriage to murder
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age of 18 are at greater risk of contracting HIV/AIDS and of experiencing domestic violence. They are also less likely to be educated and have economic opportunities, thus perpetuating the cycle of impoverishment for their families.

In Mozambique, 21 percent of girls are married by age 15 and 56 percent by age 18 — the seventh-highest rate of child marriage in the world. Although the legal age of marriage here is 18, there is no legislation that specifically criminalizes early marriage and exceptions exist with parental consent. While sexual initiation rites and other factors contribute to child marriage in the country's north, pregnancy is the main cause in the south, says Persilia Muianga, co-chair of the Girls Not Brides program in Mozambique. Exact statistics are hard to come by, however, because of the informal nature of many rural marriages.

## RATES OF CHILD MARRIAGE IN MOZAMBIQUE



Map created by [ajammultimedia](#)

Source: *United Nations Population Fund*. Map uses 2008 UNICEF data from the *Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS)*, the most recently available.

“Sometimes, what they do if the girl gets pregnant, they just take her to the house of the man who impregnated her and drop her there at the door and say, ‘OK, she’s yours, take care of her,’ ” says Ximena Andrade, a researcher associated with Women and Law in Southern Africa Research and Educational Trust, a women’s-rights organization based in Malawi.

In some cases the girl does not even have to be pregnant. Joao Bobotela, program-unit manager for Plan Mozambique in southern Inhambane province, says some parents marry off their girls at the first sign of sexual activity.

## ACCESS TO REPRODUCTIVE SERVICES

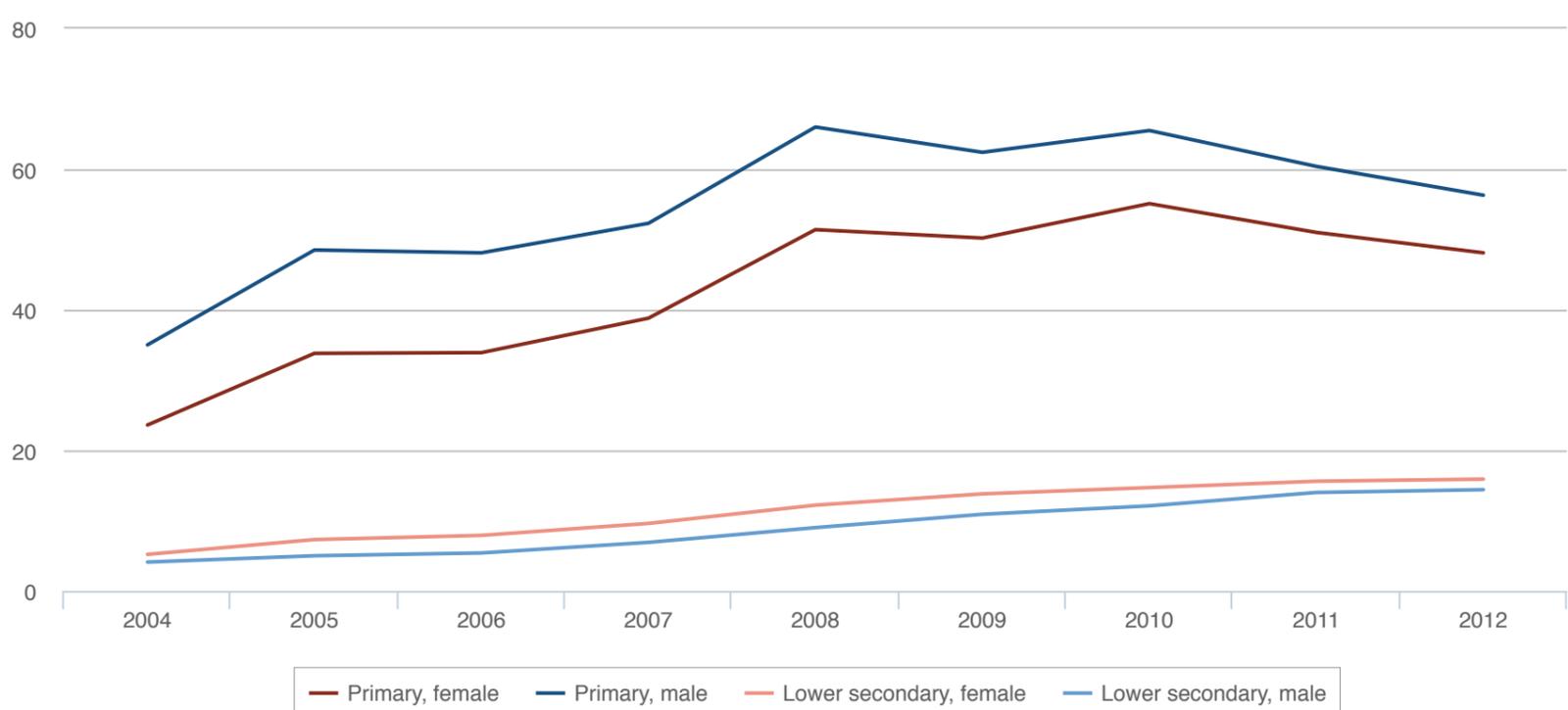
In May the African Union launched a two-year campaign to end child marriage in 10 African countries, including Mozambique. To combat child marriage here and across the continent, government leaders will have to expand access to education,

marriage.

While more than 87 percent of girls in Mozambique are enrolled in primary school, the percentage drops to less than 17 percent in secondary school, according to UNICEF. “A couple more years of education under your belt — that’s a couple years of thinking of things very differently and having the opportunity to make different choices,” says Jennifer Topping, United Nations Mozambique resident coordinator. “So I think the education piece of it is really important.”

## RATES OF SCHOOL COMPLETION BY GENDER

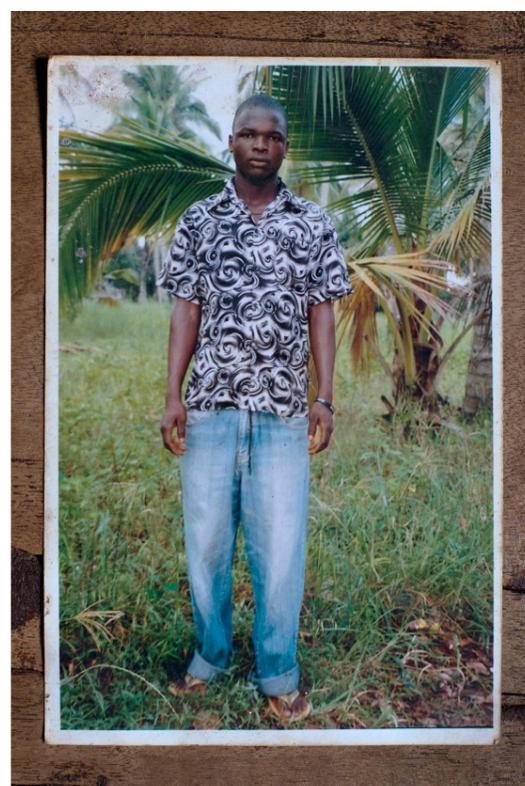
Percentage of male and female students who completed primary or lower secondary school. In Mozambique, primary school lasts for seven years, for children ages 6 to 12. Lower secondary school is three years, for students 13 to 15.



Source: *World Bank Development Indicators*.

After Olinda married and stopped attending school, her baby died. She hadn't been able to afford a blood transfusion doctors said the child needed. Her husband works in a factory in a nearby town where he stays during the week. She lives with his parents in the small village reachable by a dirt road in Inhambane province. In the yard she has arranged upside down glass beer bottles around little purple flowers, shaping the improvised flowerbeds into a heart and a star. She spends her days cooking and cleaning; watching her second child, a 1-year-old girl; gathering wood; and hauling water.

Low levels of education are compounded by lack of access to reproductive health information and services. According to



Olinda has this photo of her husband, who spends his weekdays working in a nearby town. [\(Click to enlarge images\)](#)

HIV/AIDS has devastated the population, especially in rural areas where low levels of education and stigma have contributed to the spread of the deadly disease. Migration to South Africa — for work in the gold mines, construction and retail — has also contributed to the disease’s spread. According to the [U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#), Mozambique has one of the highest HIV rates in the world. In the southern province of Gaza, [one in four people](#) between ages 15 and 49 are HIV positive; this is in comparison with the national prevalence of 11.5 percent, which is already among the world’s highest. Ill or absent parents are more likely to marry off their daughters when they become pregnant or take up with boyfriends.

That is what happened to Dulce Mucavel, who was 13 when she married. At the time, she was living with her older brother’s wife. Her brother and mother were working in South Africa; men who have jobs in that more-prosperous country are seen as good catches, says Muianga, also a child protection coordinator with Plan Mozambique. Dulce’s father was dead. She was dating the man whom she later married, but says it was not her decision to marry him. “It started with my mother,” she says.

If a girl’s parents are absent, marrying her off is an easy way to ensure her financial stability. According to a [2013 UNICEF report on Mozambique](#), children who do not live with their parents because they have died or migrated “are vulnerable in almost all aspects of their lives.”

Dulce’s husband, too, works in South Africa, in a shop. She is 17 now, with an easy smile, a smattering of freckles and a toddler. After she married, life improved, she says. Her husband phones her regularly and sends money. Whenever he can, he visits, laden with gifts. Her home is a single room like the others in the village, but it has a metal roof instead of thatch, a strong wood door and sturdier walls. She has her own dishes, three cows and nice furniture — all things she lacked before, made possible by her husband’s salary.

Jorge Zita and his wife, Alice Cuna, subsistence farmers in an isolated village in Gaza province, believe HIV/AIDS and migration have left young girls particularly vulnerable to early pregnancy and marriage.

“There are very few older people alive now,” said Zita, a thin and quiet man of 67.

Zita and his wife live in a small village of scattered one-room mud homes with thatch roofs. They raised 12 children between them and support themselves by growing beans, corn and cassava. Cuna is 52, an age she deciphered after asking her oldest daughter. She is a jovial woman who enjoys playing with her grandchildren.

When her daughter, Berta, became pregnant last year, she encouraged the 16-year-old to marry the father of the baby. Cuna believed Berta was too young to wed, but says the girl’s pregnancy left her with “no way out or other option.” Her husband agreed that Berta was too young, but he too encouraged her to marry anyway



Ilda, 18, with her 2-year-old boy, Walter. Rejected by her mother-in-law she lives with her parents. Though she would like to return to school, she lacks the paperwork for admission. *(Click to enlarge images)*

But the young man made it clear he did not want to marry Berta. His mother, with whom he lived, was too ill to get involved. So Berta's parents took her back in. But after the baby was born, they tried again to marry off their daughter. Again she was refused. Later, her parents discovered the man had taken a different wife. Still, when it came time to name the baby, Berta let the baby's father name the boy Nelio.



Anastasia, 17, left, and her 6-month-old baby. She is not married to the child's father, who spends most of his year in South Africa. Zubaida, 16, is the mother of a 6-month-old. She makes ends meet by working the neighbor's garden or plaiting women's hair. *(Click to enlarge images)*

For eight of the current leaders of the grass-roots organization Nova Vida, the path to early marriage is all too simple. Most of them were forced to marry as teenagers after becoming pregnant or impregnating a girlfriend. Some were forced into marriage by their parents, others by their church, but the result was the same. They were almost all married and school dropouts before the age of 18. Now in their mid-20s or 30s, they are determined to ensure that the same doesn't happen to the next generation and founded Nova Vida in Xai-Xai, the capital of Gaza province, in order to educate youth about sexual reproduction.

In a rural community outside Xai-Xai, New Life member Lucia Salvador, who is 27, stands in front of a group of teenage girls and asks them about their rights. She was 14 when she married and 20 when her husband died of complications from AIDS and tuberculosis.

"What should you do if someone forces you to live with a man?"

A girl raises her hand: "We need to tell a community leader."

Outside the open-sided classroom, women and girls collect water at a borehole.

Salvador continues: "And what do you do if you don't want to get pregnant?"

Another girl whispers: "You should avoid sex."

Salvador offers another option, pulling a string of condoms from her purse. When the lesson is finished she heads to the home of a 16-year-old girl who was forced to marry her boyfriend after simply spending the night with him. The girl, Nercia, wipes her wet eyes with the edge of her capulana, a traditional skirt. After sending her away, she says her father brought her school books to her.

"He said I should be here, but I should go to school," she says.

She is crying outright now and walks away to compose herself. When she returns she alternates cracking her knuckles and wiping tears from her face. Nercia wants

doesn't want to be married. Her husband, Castigo, would also like to "grow up a bit" before settling into married life. He is 16 and wears baggy shorts and an Everlast athletic T-shirt. His father became sick while working in South Africa and has since died, leaving him the head of the family.

New Life is working with the community to convince Nercia's father to take her back. They know that if she gets pregnant their efforts will be in vain. Salvador asks Castigo what he is using for protection: nothing. She pulls out a handful of condoms and thrusts them at him. He takes a few and stuffs them in his pocket. Then he hands the rest back. Salvador pushes them back at him. He laughs, then pockets the rest.

*Katya Cengel reported from Mozambique as a press fellow with the International Center for Journalists and the U.N. Foundation.*

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Edited by Caroline Preston, Mark Rykoff



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