

How young is too young to be married in Enga?

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Underage marriage in the Kompiam-Ambum district of the Enga province in Papua New Guinea is the focus of this study. While today many young Engans, exercise their freedom to choose their own partners, the marriage of minors still exists, sometimes being arranged and at other times being 'accidental'. The question of the appropriate age to get married evokes a variety of opinions.

The article presents recent research findings into the challenges faced by underage married couples in Enga in the context of rapid social, economic and cultural changes.

Mixed methods were employed and the materials used in the study are data collected during research in 2017 and 2019 through one to one and focus group interviews, as well as quantitative questionnaires administered in four High Schools and several villages.

The findings show different reasons for such marriages: while parents speak of protecting their daughters, increasing their economic opportunities and strengthening family ties by arranging early marriages, the students speak of love, failing in school or being misused by the older partner. Thus, the consequences of underage marriage are: limiting their education, ending their childhood, increasing risk of domestic violence, higher risk of HIV/AIDS infections, etc. Even when a young person gives his/her consent, the marriage can violate a young person's rights.

Finally, the study tries to answer the questions: *how to prepare the young people to assess their own maturity and readiness to assume the responsibilities of marriage? What approach should the Church take as effective pastoral responses?*