Making Evidence Count for Girls
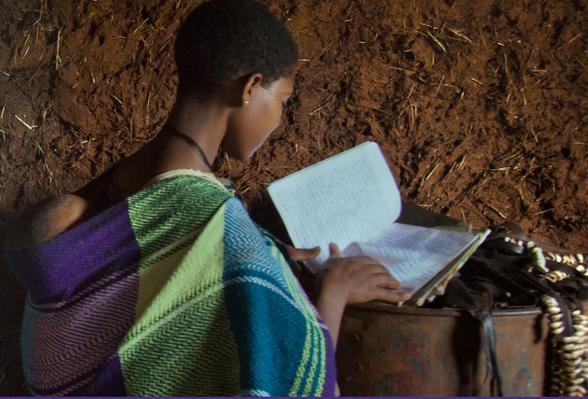
THE CHILD MARRIAGE LEARNING PARTNERS CONSORTIUM

Over the past two decades, global and local advocacy has greatly increased awareness of child marriage across a range of settings. At the same time, researchers have produced a bank of evidence about why it happens, what its consequences are, and how to end it. In 2015, United Nations (UN) Member States committed - through the Sustainable Development Goals - to end child marriage by 2030. However, the world is not on track to achieve this goal and an estimated 12 million girls still marry before the age of 18 each year. **Despite the rapidly growing base of evidence, important gaps remain in translating knowledge into policies and programs across different contexts**.

Consortium built to help fill gaps

The Child Marriage Learning Partners Consortium was established by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation in 2020 to fill some of these gaps. Its creation followed an expert meeting that reviewed existing global evidence and considered how future research could better serve those working to combat child marriage.

The Consortium convened seven research, advocacy, and implementation partners for a global approach: Fraym, Girls Not Brides, Iris Group, The GIRL Center at the Population Council, Unchained At Last, UNICEF, and University of California San Diego – Center on Gender Equity and Health. It aimed to foster more strategic and effective action to end child marriage by connecting research to policy and program needs.

Partners share insights and spark collaboration

Over 18 months, Consortium partners produced new evidence designed to improve shared understanding of the different factors that may drive child marriage in diverse contexts, and to advance effective solutions to end the practice. They analyzed existing datasets to study how social norms can affect individual actions; used geo-tagged survey data to identify child marriage hotspots and trends in South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa; studied state-level data to expose the incidence of child marriage in the United States; produced analyses of global trends in child marriage, together with other key indicators of wellbeing; and developed a new conceptual framework highlighting the diverse, context-specific drivers of child marriage.

Through the consortium, partners learned about new research methods and deepened their understanding of the ways in which existing data could be analyzed and used to expand knowledge around child marriage.

The collaborative process also encouraged a cross-transfer of knowledge and approaches. Advocacy partners helped research partners identify questions that could support effective interventions to prevent and respond to child marriage. In turn, researchers shared and refined their analyses, including by collaborating with advocates to translate findings in ways that could most effectively inform policy and practice. At the same time, partners who have traditionally been more oriented toward advocacy or implementation were able to access new and different types of data and research and are now better positioned to apply evidence to their work.

Consortium partners hope the collaboration's outcomes will:

- **Support** the effective design and implementation of context-appropriate interventions, research, and policies.
- **Increase** resources to support adolescent girls and amplify their voices.
- **Generate** new evidence to fill remaining knowledge gaps.
- **Revitalize** activism to end child marriage.

What we found

Consortium partners identified a number of lessons with global implications:

1. Context is crucial for informing effective, targeted responses

Context matters for understanding the drivers and impacts of child marriage and helps inform appropriately targeted and effective programs and policies. Child marriage takes place across countries, cultures, regions, and ethnicities, but understanding the political, economic, and social conditions of specific contexts is critical for securing sustainable solutions.

2. Approaches to child marriage must consider locally relevant drivers

An understanding of the salient factors that contribute to child marriage in each locale is important for designing and implementing locally adapted solutions. This finding affirms the global evidence base. In some settings, social norms may be a notable driver of child marriage, but poverty, a lack of agency and opportunity for girls, fear of girls' sexuality, and pregnancy (actual or fear of) also interact to place girls at risk.

3. Legal reform is important, but rarely a standalone solution – supporting action is likely needed

Introducing or reforming laws around the age of marriage is rarely a standalone solution to child marriage. It is likely necessary to also support legal enforcement, as well as interventions designed to shift social norms or to promote alternatives to marriage. However, in some countries such as the United States, laws regarding age of marriage are an essential strategy to eradicate the practice. In all contexts, it is important to understand that approaches that rely too heavily on legal restrictions may risk diminishing adolescents' agency and rights.

4. Promoting social norms around gender equality can improve the lives of married girls

Strengthening equitable beliefs and norms regarding women's and girls' decision-making, including around marriage or economic choices, is good for everyone. Further, the Consortium's research showed that it can enhance married girls' social connections and their physical safety in marriage.

5. COVID-19 may not cause a universal rise in child marriage, but its impact is important to consider

The pandemic has exacerbated many of the factors that have traditionally placed girls at higher risk of child marriage, such as reduced education, access to health care, and employment opportunities, alongside increased economic hardship. Lessons from past crises suggest that COVID-19 could result in up to 10 million more child marriages in the next decade, yet new evidence reveals this impact may not be universal. Expanded access to online learning and the prospects of returning to school provide hope, even for girls in rural settings and lower income groups, for a life without child marriage.

Conclusion

The Child Marriage Learning Partners Consortium has demonstrated that coordinating efforts can be an important way to maximize resources and minimize duplication, while filling evidence gaps and inspiring action. Our hope is that the partnerships and knowledge generated through the Consortium's work can inform future research and programming to end the harmful practice of child marriage and to meet the needs of married girls everywhere.

FIND OUT MORE

The Consortium's work, a sample of which appears below, is freely available to use and can be found at this link:

- A special supplement of the Journal of Adolescent Health, The Diversity and Complexity of Child Marriage, with eight original research papers and four commentaries related to the diversity and complexity of child marriage.
- A report on global child marriage trends, along with a set of in-depth country briefs.
- Case studies detailing child marriage at the sub-national level in India, Ethiopia, and Zambia.
- Policy briefs on the relationships between child marriage and female genital mutilation; social protection interventions for ending child marriage; and the importance of intersectional approaches to ending child marriage.

- A policy brief and op-ed on child marriage in the United States.
- A research brief outlining a new conceptual framework for understanding the diverse drivers of child marriage.
- Geospatial insights related to child marriage and its correlates in Bangladesh, Ethiopia, India, Kenya, Malawi, Nigeria, and Senegal.
- Political economy analyses related to child marriage in Bangladesh, Burkina Faso, Ethiopia, India, Kenya, Malawi, Niger, and Senegal.