



Online learning series: Session 2

The state of child marriage in the world: Latest trends and evidence on child marriage

Key takeaways: Current state of child marriage around the world

- **Urgent action is needed if we are to meet the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) Target 5.3** to “eliminate all harmful practices, such as child, early and forced marriage and female genital mutilations”. We need increased investment to scale up policy and programming. If we are to reach SDG Target 5.3, child marriage needs to decline *15 times faster* than it has over the past decade.
- Globally, both **prevalence and absolute numbers are declining, but not fast enough** to meet the SDG target.
- Over the past 20 years, **progress on child marriage has been unequal** between and within countries and regions. Child marriage has declined most among girls from the richest backgrounds, while it has remained stagnant or increased among girls from the poorest backgrounds.
- South Asia has seen the greatest declines, but also has the largest number of child brides; **child marriage rates are stagnant in Latin America and the Caribbean and in West and Central Africa.**
- To accelerate reductions, girls from the poorest and most marginalised backgrounds need to be prioritised, as do the regions where prevalence is stagnant, particularly Latin America and the Caribbean and the Sahel, in West and Central Africa.
- The COVID-19 pandemic is making the SDG target more unattainable: **10 million additional marriages expected by 2030 (total projected = 110 million marriages).**

Why there has been change in some regions and stagnation in others

- Progress on child marriage is associated with broader socioeconomic and legal changes, in particular:
 - Economic development and poverty reduction
 - Increased girls’ enrolment in and completion of education
 - Female labour force participation
 - Increased access to sexual and reproductive health (SRH) care and reduced adolescent pregnancy
 - Improved legal protections
- Regions that have made progress in these different areas tend to have made more progress on child marriage and/or have lower child marriage prevalence.

- Over the past decade, per capita gross domestic product (GDP) has stagnated or declined in sub-Saharan Africa,¹ Latin America and the Caribbean, and the Middle East and North Africa, where child marriage rates have been relatively stagnant.
- South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa have both made strong improvements in increasing girls' access to education. South Asia has made stronger progress at the secondary school level, which may have contributed to the dramatic decline in child marriage prevalence in the region.
- When it comes to female labour force participation (FLFP), increasing access to quality employment is most strongly associated with reductions in child marriage. Regions with a higher proportion of women in salaried/wage jobs have lower prevalence of child marriage.
- South Asia is also the region that has made strongest progress in reducing adolescent pregnancy: between 1990 and 2018, births to girls aged 15-19 reduced from over 100 per 1,000 girls to around 50. The reduction in child marriage prevalence and adolescent pregnancy prevalence in South Asia is likely to be closely linked, as child marriage is both a cause and a consequence of adolescent pregnancy.

What is needed to accelerate change in the decline of child marriage

The associations between child marriage reduction and broader socioeconomic and legal changes suggest the following are key to ending child marriage:

- Ensuring that economic growth is equitable, by ensuring that governments invest increased revenue in childhood development and social protection.
- Increasing girls' completion of secondary education.
- Increasing access to quality, secure employment opportunities for women.
- Ensuring access to sexual and reproductive health care.
- Setting 18 as the legal minimum age of marriage, closing loopholes and addressing contradictory laws.

¹ *Girls Not Brides* generally avoids the term "sub-Saharan Africa" due to its racial and colonial connotations, and lack of specificity. We have used it here to reflect the available data and evidence, which refers to sub-Saharan Africa as a geographical region. For regional and country-level detail, see our [Atlas](#).