



An information sheet: child marriage around the world

When a young girl becomes a bride, the consequences are lifelong – for the girl, for her family and for her nation. Child marriage denies girls their rights and their childhood. It often means the end of her formal schooling and the start of her life as a wife and mother – frequently resulting in profound physical, psychological and emotional consequences. **Child marriage disproportionately affects girls, thereby reinforcing gender inequality and limiting millions of girls from fulfilling their potential and leading happy, safe and productive lives.**

Child marriage also undermines efforts to reduce global poverty and to build a world that is more equal. It is a violation of human rights, contravening both the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women. It has also impeded the achievement of goals laid out in various international development agendas, including the Millennium Development Goals. **Ending child marriage will accelerate efforts to achieve a safe, healthy and more prosperous future for girls and women around the world.**

Prevalence: child marriage is a global problem

- Approximately **15 million girls** are married every year before they reach 18 years.¹ That is, approximately 41,000 every day.
- In the developing world, **1 in 3 girls** is married by age 18, and **1 in 9** is married by age 15, some as young as eight or nine.²
- **Child marriage occurs around the world, and cuts across countries, cultures, religions and ethnicities:** 45% of girls under age 18 are married in South Asia; 39% in sub-Saharan Africa; 23% in Latin America and the Caribbean; 18% in the Middle East and North Africa; and in some communities in Europe and North America too.³
- **Niger** has the highest prevalence rate of child marriage in the world with 76% of girls getting married before 18 years, while **Central African Republic** has the highest prevalence of girls getting married before their 15th birthday at 29%.⁴
- **India has the highest absolute number of child brides in the world** with over 26 million girls marrying before 18 years. Surprisingly countries like **Brazil, Mexico and Indonesia** also feature in the top ten countries with the highest absolute number of child brides in the world.⁵
- While there has been a decrease in child marriage over the past 30 years, **progress remains uneven across regions.** While there are substantial variations in the rates of child marriage within and among regions and countries, the rate of progress is not fast enough.

Why does it happen?

- Factors that cause child marriage include **poverty**, concerns about **security and protection** of girls, **lack of education**, **gender discrimination**, **cultural traditions**, and **religious traditions**.
- Other elements that can influence the practice include:
 - **Weak birth registration systems**, which prevent girls from having official proof that they are too young for marriage. Just 46% of children in sub Saharan Africa were registered at birth for the period 2010–2015.⁶

¹ UNICEF, Ending Child Marriage: Progress and Prospects, 2014

² UNICEF, *Progress for Children: A report card on adolescents*, 2012

³ UNICEF, *The State of the World's Children, Table 9: Child Protection*, 2016 for figures for Sub Saharan Africa, Latin America and MENA; UNICEF, *The State of the World's Children, Table 9: Child Protection*, 2015 for South Asia

⁴ UNICEF, *The State of the World's Children, Table 9: Child Protection*, 2016, Excludes China.

⁵ Analysis of *The State of the World's Children 2016*, by UNICEF's Data & Analysis Section, for *Girls Not Brides*

⁶ UNICEF, *The State of the World's Children, Table 9: Child Protection*, 2016, Excludes China.

- The **lack of an adequate legislative framework that can be enforced** to address cases of child marriage. While many countries legislate for a **minimum legal age** for marriage, this is often not effectively enforced at the local level.
- The **lack of harmonisation with customary laws** that may condone the practice of child marriage. Child marriage is generally more prevalent in jurisdictions that offer fewer protections for women and girls.

Child marriage is linked to poverty and impacts economic growth

- Child marriage is **most common in the world's poorest countries and is often concentrated among the poorest households**. It is closely linked with low levels of economic development.
- Girls from poor families are nearly twice as likely to marry before 18 as girls from wealthier families, as marriage is often seen as a way to provide for a daughter's future.⁷ However, **girls who marry young are more likely to be poor and remain poor**.⁸
- Girls who do not marry young are more likely to be healthier and wealthier – and reinvest their income back into their families. An extra year of primary education for girls can boost girls' future earnings by 15%, a figure that only increases with the level of education.⁹

Child marriage undermines a child's right to education

- Child marriage often **denies children of school age their right to the education** they need for their personal development, their preparation for adulthood, and their ability to contribute to their family and community. Married girls who would like to continue schooling may be both practically and legally excluded from doing so.¹⁰
- Girls with higher levels of schooling are less likely to marry as children. With half of the world's population under the age of 25, educating youth is crucial to ensuring a sustainable and prosperous future.

Child marriage entrenches gender inequality

- Child brides have **little or no voice in choosing if, when or whom they will marry**. In many cases their husbands are much older.
- Girls who marry before the age of 18 are **more likely to experience physical, sexual, and emotional abuse** than those girls who marry later.¹¹
- Marriage often **ends girls' opportunities for education, better paid work outside the home, and potential decision making roles in their communities**. Eliminating gender inequality and empowering young women requires the fulfilment of girls' basic needs and their rights such as education, health and nutrition, which are undermined by child marriage.¹²

Ending child marriage will help to reduce child mortality and improve maternal health

- Child brides are under intense social pressure to prove their fertility, which makes them **more likely to experience early and frequent pregnancies**.¹³
- **90% of adolescent pregnancies** in the developing world are to girls who are already married.¹⁴
- Early pregnancy endangers child brides' health because many become pregnant before their bodies can safely carry or deliver children.

⁷ International Center for Research on Women, *How to End Child Marriage: Action Strategies for Prevention and Protection*, 2007

⁸ International Center for Research on Women, *Child Marriage Factsheets: Child Marriage and Poverty*, 2007

⁹ Psacharopoulos, G., & Patrinos, H.A, *Returns to Investment in Education: A Further Update*, World Bank, 2002 cited in Glinski, Allison M., Magnolia Sexton, and Lis Meyers, *The Child, Early, and Forced Marriage Resource Guide*, Banyan Global, 2015

¹⁰ UNICEF, *Early Marriage: Child Spouses*, UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre, 2001

¹¹ Malhotra, A., Warner, A., McGonagle, A., & Lee-Rife, S, *Solutions to End Child Marriage: What the Evidence Shows*, International Center for Research on Women, 2011

¹² IPPF and the Forum on Marriage and the Rights of Women and Girls, *Ending child marriage: a guide for global policy action*, 2006

¹³ Levine, R., Lloyd, C., Greene, M., & Grown, C., *Girls Count: A Global Investment and Action Agenda*, Center for Global Development, 2008

¹⁴ UNFPA, *Motherhood in Childhood, Facing the Challenge of Adolescent Pregnancy*, 2013

- Early childbearing also **increases the risks to new-borns**. In low and middle income countries, babies born to mothers under 20 years of age have a 50% higher risk of being stillborn or of dying within the first few weeks of life than those born to older women.

What will it take to end child marriage?

- Ending child marriage will require **long term sustainable efforts by a variety of actors across a number of sectors**.
- **Empowering girls** with information about their rights and ensuring they have the right skills to exercise them is crucial in ending the practice. Girls need to have the opportunity to complete their schooling, build up their protective assets and have opportunities to earn a safe and productive income.
- Simultaneously, girls' **families and communities need to understand the dangers of child marriage** and be able to envisage **alternative pathways and roles for girls**. Changing social norms around child marriage and the value of girls in society is a crucial aspect of ending the practice.
- **Service providers** also have an important role to play in ending child marriage. Schools, health providers and child protection services must be aware of the warning signs and be adequately equipped to prevent girls who are at risk of marriage and support those girls who are already married or living in union.
- Finally, **changing laws and policies** to create a supportive legal and policy environment for girls not only allows girls to exercise their rights but illustrates a government's commitment to addressing child marriage and investing in the wellbeing of girls and women.
- To learn more about what it will take to end child marriage, visit the *Girls Not Brides* [Theory of Change](#) which articulates what an effective response to child marriage entails.