

# IT'S TIME FOR AFRICA TO END CHILD MARRIAGE

Globally **650 million women alive today** were married before their 18th birthday.<sup>i</sup> Every year, they are joined by another **12 million child brides** – the equivalent of the entire population of Rwanda or Somalia.<sup>ii</sup>

## Child marriage in Africa: where does it happen?

**18 of the top 20 countries** with the highest rates of child marriage in the world are in Africa.<sup>iii</sup>

**Child marriage happens across countries, cultures, religions, as well as in stable and fragile contexts.**

It is widespread in West and Central Africa where 41% of women are married before they reach 18 years as well as in Eastern and Southern Africa, where 35% of women were married as children.<sup>iv</sup> Even in countries with lower rates of child marriage like Namibia (7%), **national prevalence rates can mask sub-national variations and child marriage hotspots.**

## Progress is possible

In sub-Saharan Africa and countries like Ethiopia, levels of child marriage have declined at a modest rate in recent years through concerted efforts from government and civil society.<sup>v</sup> Political will has been demonstrated with national launches of the African Union Campaign to end child marriage taking place in 24 countries.<sup>vi</sup> However, rapidly growing populations combined with declines in child marriage prevalence in South Asia mean that unless progress is significantly accelerated, sub-Saharan Africa will become the region with the highest absolute numbers of child brides in future.<sup>vii</sup>

**Figure 1: Top 20 countries with highest prevalence of child marriage\***

Country	Prevalence of marriage before 18 (%)
Niger	76
Central African Republic	68
Chad	67
Bangladesh	59
Burkina Faso	52
Mali	52
South Sudan	52
Guinea	51
Mozambique	48
Somalia	45
Nigeria	44
Malawi	42
Madagascar	41
Eritrea	41
Ethiopia	40
Uganda	40
Nepal	40
Sierra Leone	39
Democratic Republic of the Congo	37
Mauritania	37

*\* Child marriage prevalence is the percentage of women 20-24 years old who were first married or in union before they were 18 years old (UNICEF State of the World's Children, 2017). It is based on Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys (MICS), Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS) and other national surveys, and refers to the most recent year available during the period 2010-2016.*



## Child marriage denies girls their rights and holds back Africa's development

- **Child marriage denies girls their right to education.** Millions of child brides in Africa drop out of school to do household work and to care for the elderly and children.<sup>viii</sup> They face barriers re-entering school if they become pregnant or are married.<sup>ix</sup>
- **If governments in Africa fail to address child marriage, they will fail in their commitment to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030.** While governments have committed to address **SDG 5.3 to end child marriage**, SDGs related to poverty, health, education, nutrition, food security, economic growth and reduction of inequality, and other manifestations of gender inequality cannot be achieved without addressing child marriage.
- **Child marriage is negatively impacting Africa's economic prosperity and development.** In Niger, the World Bank estimates that child marriage could cost the country up to \$1.7 billion dollars per year.<sup>x</sup>
- **Child marriage can have life-threatening health consequences for girls.** Many child brides become pregnant before their bodies can safely carry or deliver children. Complications in pregnancy can put them at risk of injury, and even death.
- **Child marriage puts girls at risk of sexual, physical and psychological violence** throughout their lives. Girls who marry as children are more likely to be beaten or threatened by their husbands than girls who marry later. They are also more likely to describe their first sexual experience as forced.
- **Child brides are at greater risk of HIV infection in some contexts.** Factors which can put girls at increased risk of HIV infection (poverty, low education, gender inequality) can also increase the risk of child marriage. Once married, the risk of HIV infection amongst child brides can increase due to the higher frequency with which they have unprotected sex, their limited power to negotiate safe sex and because they often marry older and more sexually experienced husbands.

## We all have a role to play in ending child marriage

- **Girls** are able to support one another through knowing their rights, peer groups and collective action.
- **Parents** refuse to engage in dowry or bride price and choose not to marry off their daughters.
- **Men and boys** choose not to marry girls who are still children and speak up against child marriage when they see it.
- **Traditional, cultural and religious leaders** are role models to others in the community. By saying no to child marriage and supporting alternative roles for girls beyond marriage, leaders help shift the social and gender norms that drive it.
- **Teachers, doctors and other service providers** are trained to identify and report child marriage and support married girls.
- **Law enforcement officials** register children at birth and check the ages of the bride and groom before marriage, and also respond to reported cases of child marriage or support girls who experience violence.
- **Government officials** from health, education and child protection line ministries and departments ensure that government funding and services for preventing and responding to child marriage reach girls. If the funding or services are not available, they should ask their line ministries for these to be included in their relevant sectoral planning processes and budgets.
- **Ministries of Finance** work to ensure that adolescent girl-related programmes are budgeted for each budget cycle in sectoral national expenditure and hold line ministries accountable to effectively spending government funds allocated to those programmes.
- **Government leaders** (political leaders, parliamentarians, etc.) lead by example and call for the adoption, funding and implementation of multi-sectoral policies and strong laws to prevent child marriage and support married girls. They support the lead ministry responsible for coordinating the multi-sectoral government response to child marriage both technically and financially, and instruct line ministries to take action by integrating child marriage interventions in their sectoral planning and budget processes.
- **Regional human rights bodies such as the African Committee on the Rights and Welfare of the Child and the African Commission on Human and People's Rights** hold governments accountable for implementing their commitments to end child marriage. These include monitoring countries' reporting on key instruments such as the **Maputo Protocol, the African Charter on the Rights of the Child and the Joint General Comments on ending child marriage in Africa**. This will ensure that conversations on ending child marriage remain high on the political and development agenda in Africa.

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<sup>i</sup>UNICEF, 2018, *Global child marriage database*, available here: <https://data.unicef.org/topic/child-protection/child-marriage/>  
Ibid.

<sup>ii</sup>UNICEF global databases 2018, based on Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys (MICS), Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS), and other national surveys. Population data from United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division (2017). *World Population Prospects: The 2017 Revision, DVD Edition*. This includes: Niger, Central African Republic, Chad, Burkina Faso, Mali, South Sudan, Guinea, Mozambique, Somalia, Nigeria, Malawi, Madagascar, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Uganda, Sierra Leone, Democratic Republic of the Congo and Mauretania.

<sup>iii</sup>UNICEF global databases, 2018, based on Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS), Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys (MICS) and other nationally representative surveys.

<sup>iv</sup>UNICEF, 2018, *Global child marriage database*, available here: <https://data.unicef.org/topic/child-protection/child-marriage/>

<sup>v</sup>UNICEF, 2012, *The State Of The World's Children 2012, Children in an urban world*, New York; Central Statistical Agency Ethiopia and ORC Macro, 2006, *Ethiopia Demographic and Health Survey 2005*, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia and Calverton, Maryland, USA: Central Statistical Agency and ORC Macro.

<sup>vi</sup>Ethiopia, Niger, Burkina Faso, Chad, Democratic Republic of Congo, Madagascar, Uganda, Zimbabwe, Mali, Sudan, Ghana, Eritrea, The Gambia, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Cameroon, Nigeria, Liberia, Kenya, Benin, Lesotho, Cote d'Ivoire, Guinea and Gabon

<sup>vii</sup>UNICEF, 2018, *Global child marriage database*, available here: <https://data.unicef.org/topic/child-protection/child-marriage/>

<sup>viii</sup>Wodon, Nguyen, Yedan, and Edmeades, 2017, *Economic Impacts of Child Marriage: Educational Attainment*. Washington, DC: The World Bank and International Center for Research on Women.

<sup>ix</sup>Sperling and Winthrop, *What Works in Girls' Education: Evidence for the World's Best Investment*, Washington DC, Brookings Institution Press, 2016.

<sup>x</sup>Wodon et. al., 2017, *Economic Impacts of Child Marriage: Global Synthesis Brief*, Washington, DC, The World Bank and International Center for Research on Women.



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**Girls Not Brides is global partnership made up of more than 1000 civil society organisations from over 95 countries, committed to ending child marriage and enabling girls to fulfil their full potential.**