Child Marriage and Education

Child marriage and education are intrinsically linked. The continuing practice of child marriage undermines efforts to improve girls’ education and must be addressed to make progress on global education goals. At the same time, education is a critical strategy in ending child marriage.

Efforts to improve girls’ education will only be successful if they also address child marriage

- **Child marriage is a major barrier to progress on girls’ education.** There are strong correlations between rates of child marriage and levels of education for girls.
  - Child marriage is a problem on a global scale. **Approximately 14 million girls are married every year before they reach 18 years.** 1 in 3 girls in the developing world are married by age 18, and 1 in 9 are married by age 15, some as young as eight or nine.¹
  - In some cases child marriage directly impacts rates of drop-outs from school. For example, in Nigeria child marriage (and to a lower extent pregnancies) account for 15-20% of the reasons parents give for their children dropping out of school. ²
  - Over sixty per cent of child brides in developing countries have had no formal education.³
  - If child marriage and early pregnancies could be eliminated, the gender gap in education could potentially be reduced by about half.⁴
- Married girls who would like to continue schooling may be both **practically and legally excluded from doing so.⁵** Marriage often means the end of education for girls.
- **Girls who marry young do not receive the educational and economic opportunities** that help lift them out of poverty and which are necessary to build a sustainable and prosperous future for their communities and countries.
- **Child marriage is underpinned by the low status of girls.** Unless efforts are made to change the underlying norm that girls are only viewed as future wives and mothers, progress on a range of issues, including education, will be undermined.
- It is vital that **education sector plans** integrate the goal of ending child marriage into components related to girls’ education, for example by developing a prevention strategy that targets girls at risk, creating an enabling environment both within and outside the school to promote girls’ education, and ensuring that education is of high quality and relevant to girls.

Education is a key strategy to address child marriage⁶

- **Education is a key protective factor against child marriage.**
  - The longer a girl stays in school, the less likely she is to be married before the age of 18 and have children during her teenage years.
  - Being in school can help support the perception that girls are still children and are therefore not of marriageable age.
- Primary schooling is not enough; the **critical transition from primary to secondary schooling,** and completion of secondary schooling must be addressed. School dropout rates for girls escalate during this transition period in many parts of the world.
Education must address factors threatening the confidence or ability of families to keep their children in school.

- **Quality**: Education services must be of high quality and relevant to the needs of girls. The curriculum should be empowering for girls by providing them with life skills and by helping them to develop the knowledge and skills to make free and informed decisions, including if, when and whom to marry.

- **Safety**: Concerns about travelling to school, safety at school, sanitation facilities and gender based violence must be addressed.

- **Accessibility**: Education provision should address financial barriers to girls continuing their education, for example, by providing incentives to girls and their families to encourage them to stay in school, or providing them with livelihood skills and opportunities.

**Comprehensive sexuality education that explicitly addresses gender inequality** can transform the harmful gender and social norms that perpetuate child marriage.

- Providing comprehensive sexuality education to all girls and boys, both in and out of school, is critical for girls to understand their body and rights. It enables them to understand that girls are equal to boys and that violence is never acceptable.

**Education alone will not be enough to end child marriage**

- Ending child marriage **requires action at all levels and across sectors** to address the root causes of child marriage such as poverty, insecurity, the lack of alternative opportunities for girls, the traditional roles of wives and mothers, and gender inequality.

- **Girls Not Brides** is currently developing a **global theory of change on child marriage** which articulates the range of different approaches needed to end the practice.

**Further reading about child marriage and education**

- Plan International, 2013 – *A girl’s right to say no to marriage*
- Right to Education Project, advocacy factsheet - *At what Age...Early marriage and the right to education*
- Judith-Ann Walker – *Why ending child marriage needs to be an education goal*

**Endnotes**