

Ending child marriage in Africa

A brief by Girls Not Brides

Every two seconds, a girl is married before she is physically or emotionally mature enough to become a wife or a mother. Globally, 720 million women alive today were married before their 18th birthday. Every year, they are joined by another 15 million child brides – the equivalent of the entire population of Mali or Zimbabwe.

All African countries are faced with the challenge of child marriage, a harmful traditional practice that robs girls of their education, their health and their future. In Africa, high rates of child marriage combined with a rapidly growing population could have devastating human and development consequences. If we don't act now, the number of girls married as children will double by 2050 and Africa will become the region with the highest number of child brides in the world.

Fortunately, we have seen a leap in commitment across Africa to address child marriage, with the launch of a continent-wide campaign as well as national action plans in a small but growing number of countries. If Africa is to fulfil its vision for emergence and development, outlined in Agenda 2063, it is time to match this commitment with the coordinated strategies, action and resources to end child marriage and enable every girl to thrive.

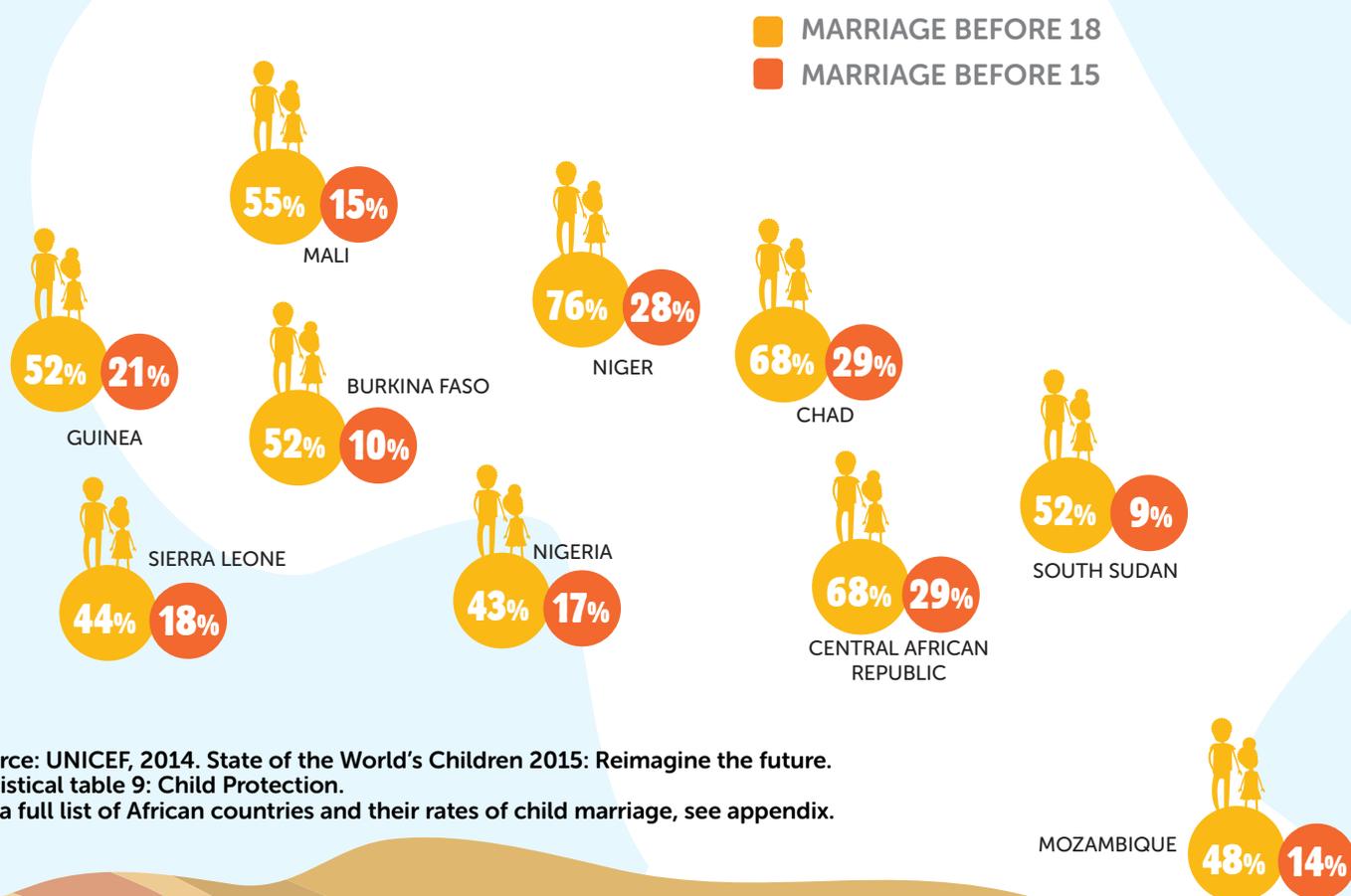


Child marriage: A challenge across Africa

Large numbers of African girls and women suffer the consequences of child marriage.

- In sub-Saharan Africa, 40% of women are married as children.
- Child marriage is widespread in West and Central Africa, where 42% of women are married as children, and in East and Southern Africa, where child marriage affects 37% of girls.
- Africa is home to 15 of the 20 countries with the highest rates of child marriage in the world.
- All African countries are faced with the challenge of child marriage, whether they experience high child marriage prevalence, such as Niger (76%) or lower rates like Algeria (2%)¹.

Ten child marriage hotspots in Africa: Countries with the highest child marriage rates.



Source: UNICEF, 2014. State of the World's Children 2015: Reimagine the future. Statistical table 9: Child Protection. For a full list of African countries and their rates of child marriage, see appendix.

Causes: Why child marriage happens in Africa

The causes of child marriage are common across Africa:

- Where **poverty** is acute, parents may feel that giving a daughter in marriage will reduce family expenses, or even temporarily increase their income, in cases where a bride's parents are paid a bride price.
- **Tradition**: in many places, child marriage persists because it has happened for generations – and straying from tradition could mean exclusion from the community.
- In many areas, marrying off a girl as a child is seen as a way to ensure her **safety**, especially in areas where girls are at high risk of physical or sexual assault.
- Crucially, **gender inequalities** across Africa also drive child marriage: in many communities where child marriage is practised, girls are not valued as much as boys – they are considered to be a burden or a commodity.

A common but not uniform practice

There are various forms of child marriage, depending on a community's traditions. A few examples:

- In rural northeast Ethiopia, *telefa* is a practice by which a man kidnaps, hides and rapes a girl and then, as the father of her unborn child, can claim marriage.
- In South Africa, *ukuthwala* is a practice by which a girl or young woman is kidnapped by a man with the intention of compelling the girl's family to endorse marriage negotiations.
- A common practice across Ghana, Benin and Togo, *trokosi* is the practice by which a young virgin girl who is offered to a local priest in exchange for the gods' forgiveness when a relative (often a man) commits a crime.

Impact: Child marriage holds back Africa

- **Child marriage can have life-threatening health consequences for girls.** Under pressure to become mothers soon after marriage, 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, as girls who give birth under age 15 are five times more likely to die in childbirth than young women in their early 20s. Child brides are particularly vulnerable to injury in pregnancy or childbirth: 65% of all cases of obstetric fistula occur in girls under the age of 18.
- **Child marriage denies girls their right to education.** Millions of child brides drop out of school to devote their time to house chores and child rearing – if they were in school in the first place. Over 60% of child brides in developing countries have had no formal education². In Malawi, nearly two thirds of women with no formal education were child brides compared to 5% of women who attended secondary school or higher levels of education³.
- **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 and are more likely to describe their first sexual experience as forced.
- **As minors, child brides are rarely able to assert their wishes,** such as whether to use family planning methods or practice safe sexual relations. Married girls can be particularly vulnerable to HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases.
- **Child marriage has negative implications for Africa's economic prosperity and development.** Because of child marriage, millions of girls miss the skills, knowledge and employment prospects that would enable them to lift their family out of poverty and contribute to their country's economic development and prosperity.
- **The persistence of child marriage has hindered Africa's efforts to achieve six of the eight Millennium Development Goals** (to eliminate extreme poverty, to achieve universal primary education, to promote gender equality, to reduce child mortality, to improve maternal health, and to combat HIV/AIDS).



Many of the world's innovative programmes to address child marriage are implemented in Africa

- The Berhane Hewan programme (2002-2008), designed and implemented by Population Council, targeted married and unmarried girls aged 10 to 19. Interventions include community conversations to raise awareness and address cultural and social norms; provision of school supplies to enable girls to remain in school; conditional asset transfers to address economic incentives to marry girls; and girls' mentoring groups. A research component was associated to determine the most effective and cost-efficient strategies to reduce child marriage.
- In Egypt, the Population Council's Ishraq programme (2001-present) provides 12-to-15-year-old out-of-school girls with access to literacy and numeracy classes, as well as health and life skills. The programme also provides financial education and sports programming, and engages community members through group education sessions about the consequences of and alternatives to child marriage.
- In rural areas of Senegal, Tostan's Community Empowerment Programme empowers women and adolescents with nonformal education in their local language. Through a three-year comprehensive curriculum about democracy, human rights and health, women and girls learn to apply human rights to their own cultural context and challenge harmful traditional practices such as child marriage. It also mobilises village leaders and community members to abandon child marriage and encourage relatives and friends to end the practices with them.



Now is the time to act

In Africa, even more than elsewhere, ending child marriage is an urgent task

- Child marriage is slowly declining, but progress is uneven and too slow. The steady decline of child marriage prevalence rates in Northern Africa, and the general increase of the median age of marriage, contrast with persistent high rates of child marriage in countries where there has been little to no progress in the past three decades. Prevalence rates in Burkina Faso, for example, have remained high at around 50% for the past 30 years.
- Projections on child marriage in Africa are alarming. They indicate that, due to population growth, the devastating consequences of child marriage are likely to affect an even larger number of girls in Africa in the coming years. If we do nothing to accelerate progress, the number of child brides in sub-Saharan Africa is expected to double by 2050, and sub-Saharan Africa will overtake South Asia to become the region with the largest number of child brides in the world⁴.

Commitment to end child marriage in Africa is growing

In recent years, political leaders, civil society and the donor community have begun to recognise the importance of addressing child marriage in Africa.

Civil society organisations across Africa are mobilising to prevent child marriage and support married girls

Civil society organisations across Africa address child marriage at the community, national and regional levels. Organisations across sectors such as health, education, poverty alleviation, and human rights, and humanitarian response are developing programmes to prevent child marriage and mitigate the effects of child marriage on child brides. Many of the most innovative programmes to address child marriage have been developed in Africa.

Brought together by **Girls Not Brides: The Global Partnership to End Child Marriage**, hundreds of NGOs across Africa and beyond share learnings on what works to end child marriage and work together on joint programmes and advocacy initiatives to address the practice.

A violation of human rights

Child marriage violates **girls' human rights**, including their right to choose if, when and with whom to marry. Several African human rights instruments condemn child marriage and/or establish 18 as the minimum age of marriage:

- **The African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (article 21);**
- **The Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa (article 6);**
- **The African Youth Charter (article 8);**
- **The SADC Protocol on Gender and Development (article 8).**



A small yet growing number of governments are developing national strategies or other initiatives to end child marriage.

Increased political will to curb child marriage is reflected in a growing number of government initiatives. Examples include:

- In 2014, the government of **Egypt** developed a national strategy to prevent child marriage and promote young people's sexual and reproductive health and rights. Led by the National Council for Women, the National Council for Childhood and Motherhood and the Ministry of Health, and in collaboration with civil society organisations and religious leaders, the strategy is accompanied by a five-year implementation plan that relies on partnership across government and between actors, including civil society and the private sector.
- Recognising that improving the status and opportunities of girls and women is essential to achieving its goal to reach middle-income country status by 2025, the government of **Ethiopia** developed a National Strategy on Elimination of Harmful Traditional Practices. The strategy adopts a multi-sectorial approach to addressing child marriage and female genital mutilation (FGM).
- In 2013, the government of **Zambia** launched a **three-year national campaign** to end child marriage. Spearheaded by the Ministry of Chiefs and Traditional Affairs, the campaign aims to empower traditional leaders to become champions and agents of change in their chiefdoms; and to amend relevant laws and policies to ensure that girls are legally protected from child marriage. Campaign plans include the development of a comprehensive national strategy to curb the practice.



African regional institutions are mobilising to end child marriage

- In May 2014, the African Union launched the first-ever Campaign to End Child Marriage in Africa⁵. The two-year campaign focuses on accelerating change across the continent by encouraging AU member states to develop strategies to raise awareness of and address the harmful impact of child marriage.
- The appointment by the African Union of a Special Rapporteur⁶ and a Goodwill Ambassador⁷ with a mandate exclusively focused on child marriage is also a promising sign of African commitment.
- In April 2014, The African Committee of Experts on the Rights and Welfare of the Child adopted a declaration urging AU member states to set the minimum age for marriage at 18 years for both girls and boys without exception and to develop and implement holistic strategies to end child marriage⁸.
- The need to end child marriage and other harmful practices affecting women and girls is embedded in the Agenda 2063, the African Union's fifty-year vision for the development of the continent, which includes a commitment to "mobilise a concerted drive towards immediately ending child marriages, female genital mutilation and other harmful cultural practises that discriminate against women⁹."

What will it take to end child marriage in Africa?

While the political will to child marriage seems higher than ever, much remains to be done to ensure that the growing momentum positively affects the lives of millions of child brides and girls at risk of child marriage across Africa.

Governments should develop national action plans to end child marriage

In collaboration with civil society organisations, development partners and other actors, governments should develop and implement comprehensive and well-resourced action plans to end child marriage. We recommend that national action plans include the below four approaches, which *Girls Not Brides* members¹⁰ have identified as key to building effective plans to end child marriage:

- **Empower girls:** enable girls to value themselves, to know and exercise their rights, to develop skills to support their own life plans and to have opportunities to connect with their peers and support one another. This can be achieved through programmes that equip girls with training, skills, information, as well as the provision of safe spaces and support networks.
- **Mobilise families and communities as agents of change,** by creating awareness of the harmful impact of child marriage, and of alternative roles for girls and women, so that families and communities prefer not to marry their daughters as children and so that they themselves take part in efforts to end child marriage.
- **Provide adequate health, education, justice and other services,** to remove the structural barriers that push girls into child marriage and prevent them from accessing support within marriage. These services range from providing adolescent-friendly health services, to ensuring that schools are accessible and child friendly, and to providing safe spaces and other support services for married girls.
- **Provide an enabling legal and policy framework,** including legislation that sets 18 as the minimum age for marriage and removes legal loopholes related to parental consent or customary laws. Policies must be in place which protect women and girls' rights, including property rights, access to remedies, support for those wishing to leave a marriage, protection from violence, access to health services, etc. Strengthened civil registration systems which record births and marriages are also important. Government policy frameworks must define roles and dedicate resources across relevant ministries to expand opportunities for girls at risk and to support married girls.

The African Union should ensure that its approach to ending child marriage is comprehensive and integrated

Strategies to reduce child marriage should be integrated into existing African Union initiatives that seek to protect and improve the lives of girls and women in Africa, including the Campaign for Accelerated Reduction of Maternal Mortality (CARMMA), the African Women's Decade and the African Youth Decade Plan of Action. Plans to operationalise Agenda 2063 should also include concrete and concerted actions aimed at ending child marriage and other harmful practices, and its monitoring mechanisms should include an indicator of progress towards ending child marriage.

The various initiatives, institutions and mandate-holders addressing child marriage should complement one another and seek to achieve the same goals. These include the African Union Campaign to End Child Marriage, the African Committee of Experts on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, the African Commission on Human and People's Rights, the African Union Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Women in Africa, the African Union Special Rapporteur on Child Marriage, and the Goodwill Ambassador of the AU Campaign to End Child Marriage in Africa.

African Regional Economic Communities (RECs) should include child marriage in development strategies.

These include the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the Southern African Development Community (SADC), which cover the African regions most affected by child marriage.

African governments should continue to support efforts to recognise child marriage as a critical issue on the global development agenda.

The government of Zambia has co-led (with Canada) the development and adoption of two resolutions on child, early and forced marriage at the UN General Assembly; both resolutions were co-sponsored by a high number of African governments.

Such African leadership should be pursued through strong African support for a target to end child, early and forced marriage in the post-2015 development framework and through co-sponsoring the resolution on child marriage which is scheduled to be considered by the Human Rights Council in 2015.

COUNTRY	% MARRIED BY 15	% MARRIED BY 18
Algeria	0	2
Angola	–	–
Benin	11	32
Botswana	–	–
Burkina Faso	10	52
Burundi	3	20
Cabo Verde	3	18
Cameroon	13	38
Central African Republic	29	68
Chad	29	68
Comoros	10	32
Congo	6	33
Côte d'Ivoire	10	33
Democratic Republic of the Congo	9	39
Djibouti	2	5
Egypt	2	17
Equatorial Guinea	9	30
Eritrea	13	41
Ethiopia	16	41
Gabon	6	22
Gambia	7	36
Ghana	5	21
Guinea	21	52
Guinea-Bissau	7	22
Kenya	6	26
Lesotho	2	19
Liberia	11	38
Libya	–	–
Madagascar	12	41
Malawi	12	50
Mali	15	55
Mauritania	14	34
Mauritius	–	–
Morocco	3	16
Mozambique	14	48
Namibia	2	9
Niger	28	76
Nigeria	17	43
Rwanda	1	8
Sao Tome and Principe	5	34
Senegal	12	33
Seychelles	–	–
Sierra Leone	18	44
Somalia	8	45
South Africa	1	6
South Sudan	9	52
Sudan	7	33
Swaziland	1	7
Togo	6	25
Tunisia	0	2
Uganda	10	40
United Republic of Tanzania	7	37
Zambia	9	42
Zimbabwe	4	31

State of Child Marriage in Africa

Source: UNICEF, 2014. State of the World's Children 2015: Reimagine the future. Statistical table 9: Child protection

Endnotes

1. UNICEF, 2014. The State of the World's Children 2015: Reimagine the future.
 2. UNFPA, 2012. Marrying too Young: End Child Marriage.
 3. UNICEF, 2014. Ending child marriage: Progress and prospects.
 4. UNICEF, 2014. Ending child marriage: Progress and prospects.
 5. For more information, see the AU campaign's website: <http://pages.au.int/cecm>
 6. Mrs Fatima Delladj-Sebaa (from Algeria), a member of the African Committee of Experts on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACERWC), was appointed as the AU Special Rapporteur on child marriage on 10 October 2014. For more information, see: <http://sa.au.int/en/content/appointment-special-rapporteur-child-marriage>
 7. Mrs Nyaradzayi Gumbonzvanda (from Zimbabwe), General Secretary of the World YWCA. For more information, see: <http://www.worldywca.org/YWCA-News/World-YWCA-and-Member-Associations-News/World-YWCA-General-Secretary-Named-Goodwill-Ambassador-of-the-AU-Campaign-to-End-Child-Marriage-in-Africa>
 8. To read the declaration: http://srsg.violenceagainstchildren.org/sites/default/files/political_declarations/ACERWC-Declaration-on-Ending-Child-Marriage-in-Africa.pdf
 10. View the Girls Not Brides Theory of Change on Child Marriage at <http://www.girlsnotbrides.org/child-marriage-theory-of-change/>
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Girls Not Brides

The Global Partnership to End Child Marriage

Girls Not Brides is a global partnership of more than 400 civil society organisations, including a large number in Africa, working to address child marriage. Members of *Girls Not Brides* are united by a commitment to end child marriage and enable girls to fulfil their potential.

Together *Girls Not Brides* members are working to bring child marriage to global attention, to build an understanding of what it will take to end child marriage and are calling for the laws, policies and programmes to be put in place that will make a difference in the life of millions of girls.

Girls Not Brides and its members believe that we can be more effective working together than working alone. We aim to raise our collective voice to shatter the silence that has long surrounded the issue of child marriage and to draw attention to its harmful impact.

Together, we aim to give a voice to girls at risk of child marriage, to defend their rights to health and education, and to give them the opportunities they need to fulfil their potential.

We also aim to support children who are or have been victims of child marriage, to increase awareness of the scale and impact of child marriage, and to mobilise the support and resources needed to end child marriage.



Play your part!

To find out more about efforts to end child marriage across Africa or how you can be part of this growing regional movement:

- Visit www.GirlsNotBrides.org/child-marriage-africa or
- Contact info@GirlsNotBrides.org
- Follow @GirlsNotBrides on Twitter
- Join us on Facebook at www.Facebook.com/GirlsNotBrides