



## Child marriage: information sheet

When a young girl becomes a bride, the consequences are lifelong – for the girl, for her children and for her nation. The common thread in child, early and forced marriage is that the girl herself has no say. She is robbed of her rights and her childhood. Her life options vanish.

Child marriage undermines efforts to reduce global poverty and to build a world that is more equal. Ending the practice will help to accelerate efforts to achieve a safe, healthy and prosperous future for girls around the world.

### Who? How many?

- An estimated **15 million girls** are married every year before they reach 18.<sup>i</sup>
- Over 700 million alive today were married as children.<sup>ii</sup>
- **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.<sup>iii</sup>
- While boys are sometimes subjected to early marriage, **girls are disproportionately affected** and form the vast majority of the victims of child marriage. [Download this infographic](#) for more information.

### Where?

Child marriage occurs **around the world**; it cuts across countries, cultures and ethnicities.

- 46% of girls under 18 are married in South Asia; 37% in sub-Saharan Africa; 29% in Latin America and the Caribbean; 18% in the Middle East and North Africa; 16% in East Asia and the Pacific<sup>iv</sup>. Child marriage happens in some communities in Europe and North America too.
- Visit: [Where does child marriage happen?](#)

### Why?

- **Poverty:** Where poverty is acute, parents may feel that giving a daughter in marriage will reduce family expenses by ensuring they have one less person to feed, clothe and educate. In communities where a dowry or 'bride price' is paid, it is often welcome income for poor families.
- **Security:** Many parents marry off their daughters young because they feel it is in her best interest, often to ensure her safety in areas where girls are at high risk of physical or sexual assault. Early marriage does not, however, provide a safe alternative for girls.
- **Tradition:** The practice of child marriage has been rooted in the traditions of many communities for generations and remains largely unchallenged. It happens across religious groups, although no religion formally endorses child marriage.
- **Gender inequality:** In many communities where child marriage is practiced, girls are not valued as much as boys – they are seen as a burden.

## A major challenge for development

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**Child marriage often means the end of education for girls.** It is closely linked to girls dropping out of school, denying 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.

- Over sixty per cent of child brides in developing countries have had no formal education.<sup>v</sup>

**Child marriage can have devastating consequences for a girl's health.** Neither physically or emotionally ready to give birth, child brides face higher risk of death in childbirth and are vulnerable to pregnancy-related injuries such as obstetric fistula. They are likely to experience early and frequent pregnancies.

- Girls under 15 are **five times more likely to die in childbirth** than women aged 20-24<sup>vi</sup>.
- Complications in pregnancy and childbirth are consistently among the leading causes of death in girls aged 15-19 in low- and middle-income countries<sup>vii</sup>.
- 90% of adolescent pregnancies in the developing world are to girls who are *already* married.<sup>viii</sup>

- Stillbirths and newborn deaths are 50% higher in mothers younger than 20 years than in women who give birth later.<sup>ix</sup> Child brides are also more likely to have babies with low birth weight.<sup>x</sup>

**Child marriage traps girls and their families in a cycle of poverty.** Girls who marry young do not receive the educational and economic opportunities that help lift them and their families out of poverty.

- Girls from poor families are nearly twice as likely to marry before 18 as girls from wealthier families<sup>xi</sup>.

### **A human rights violation**

Child marriage violates girls' basic rights to health, education, to live in safety and to choose when and whom they marry. Child marriage puts women and girls at particular risk of sexual, physical and psychological violence throughout their lives.

- *"Marriage shall be entered into only with the free and full consent of the intending spouses"* (Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948).
- Girls who marry before the age of 18 are more likely to experience violence within marriage than girls who marry later.<sup>xii</sup>
- Girls who are married before 18 are more likely to report that their first sexual experience was forced.
- Child brides are more likely to believe that a man is sometimes justified in beating his wife than women who marry later<sup>xiii</sup>.

### **What can be done?**

Ending child marriage will help to accelerate efforts to achieve a safe, healthy and prosperous future for girls around the world. Visit: [How can we end child marriage?](#)

### **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.

**Empowering girls**, by offering them opportunities to gain skills and education, providing support networks and creating 'safe spaces' where girls can gather and meet outside the home, can help girls to assert their right to choose when they marry.

**Support and protect girls who are already married** by providing them with options for re-entry into schooling, sexual and reproductive health information and services, livelihood skills and opportunities, and providing safe spaces and support networks for them to discuss the challenges they face at home.

**Enact, enforce, and raise public awareness of legislation that sets a minimum legal age for marriage** (of at least 18 for both boys and girls, in line with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child), and remove loopholes. Governments in countries where child marriage is prevalent should also strengthen birth and marriage registration systems.

**Incorporate a focus on child marriage prevention and mitigation into existing development policies and programming.** Governments – and donors – should ensure that child marriage prevention and mitigation is included within existing health, education, poverty reduction and child protection work.

**Speak out to change community attitudes and engage advocates for change:** Laws alone won't end child marriage. To change attitudes and social norms that result in harm to girls, engage and mobilise members of the community including boys, girls, parents, families, and religious and traditional leaders.

### **Girls Not Brides**

*Girls Not Brides* is a global partnership of more than 450 civil society organisations committed to ending child marriage. Find out more: [www.GirlsNotBrides.org](http://www.GirlsNotBrides.org). On Twitter: [@GirlsNotBrides](https://twitter.com/GirlsNotBrides)

### **Media contact:**

Mallary Gelb, Head of Communications, [media@GirlsNotBrides.org](mailto:media@GirlsNotBrides.org), +447500864871

### **End notes**

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- <sup>i</sup> UNICEF, *Ending Child Marriage: Progress and Prospects*, 2014
- <sup>ii</sup> UNICEF, *Ending Child Marriage: Progress and Prospects*, 2014
- <sup>iii</sup> UNICEF, *Progress for Children: A report card on adolescents*, 2012
- <sup>iv</sup> UNICEF, *State of the World's Children*, 2015
- <sup>v</sup> United Nations Population Fund, *Marrying Too Young: End Child Marriage*, 2012
- <sup>vi</sup> UNFPA, *State of the World Population*, 2005
- <sup>vii</sup> WHO, Report by the Secretariat: *Early marriages, adolescent and young pregnancies*, 16 March 2012
- <sup>viii</sup> UN Inter-agency Group for Child Mortality Estimation, 2011
- <sup>ix</sup> WHO *Guidelines on preventing early pregnancy and poor reproductive outcomes in adolescents in developing countries*, 2011; Chandra-Mouli V, Camacho AV, Michaud PA, *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 2013
- <sup>x</sup> Martin, J.A., Hamilton, B.E., Sutton P.D., et al., 2003
- <sup>xi</sup> International Center for Research on Women, *How to End Child Marriage: Action Strategies for Prevention and Protection*, 2007
- <sup>xii</sup> Kishor, S. & Johnson, K., *Profiling Domestic Violence – A Multi-Country Study*, ORC Macro, Calverton, Maryland, 2004
- <sup>xiii</sup> UNICEF, *Early Marriage: A Harmful Traditional Practice*, 2005