

How ending child marriage is critical to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals

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Each year 15 million girls are married as children, perpetuating vicious cycles of poverty, inequality and insecurity which sustain the practice and act as an obstacle to global development.ⁱ Child marriage is a global problem that cuts across countries, cultures, religions and ethnicities. It exists in every region around the world, from Africa to Asia, the Middle East to Latin America, and in some communities in Europe and North America. If there is no reduction in child marriage, the global number of women married as children will reach 1.2 billion by 2050.ⁱⁱ

A lack of attention to child marriage undermined the achievement of six of the eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) between 2000 to 2015. Since then, the international community has learned a lot. We have learned that child marriage is a core development and human rights issue, which hinders the achievement of many other development goals. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) - which define global development priorities between now and 2030 - include target 5.3, 'Eliminate all harmful practices, such as child, early and forced marriage and female genital mutilations' (under Goal 5 'Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls').

Target 5.3 is critical in terms of garnering action and monitoring progress on reducing child marriage globally. But fully half of the SDGs will not be achieved without significant progress on child marriage, including those related to poverty, health, education, nutrition, food security, economic growth and reduction of inequality, and other manifestations of gender inequality. Likewise, there are a number of related targets in the SDGs that are not hindered by the existence of child marriage, but achievement of these targets is critical to ending child marriage.

Without ending child marriage, we won't achieve eight of the 16 SDGs

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOAL	LINK TO CHILD MARRIAGE
Goal 1 – No poverty	<i>Child marriage is linked to higher household poverty and perpetuates cycles of poverty across generations</i>
Goal 2 – Zero hunger	<i>Child brides and their children are more likely to be malnourished</i>
Goal 3 – Good health and wellbeing	<i>Child marriage leads to a range of harmful health consequences, including higher rates of maternal and infant mortality and morbidity</i>
Goal 4 – Quality education	<i>Child marriage is a barrier to girls' education</i>
Goal 5 – Gender equality	<i>Ending child marriage will help achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls</i>
Goal 8 – Economic Growth	<i>Women who marry as children are less likely to participate in the workforce, which undermines economic growth. Child marriage hinders progress towards ending modern forms of slavery and child exploitation</i>
Goal 10 – Reduce inequalities	<i>Child marriage affects poor, rural and disadvantaged populations disproportionately, and creates cycles of poverty that reinforce inequality</i>
Goal 16 – Peace, justice and strong institutions	<i>We will not end violence against children (target 16.2) without ending child marriage</i>

GOAL 1 – NO POVERTY: Child marriage is linked to higher household poverty, and perpetuates cycles of poverty across generations

As both a driver and consequence of poverty, it is crucial to address child marriage to reduce global poverty. Child marriage is most common in the world's poorest countries and the poorest households. Girls from poor families are two and a half times more likely to marry before 18 as girls from wealthier families, and girls who marry young are more than twice as likely to be poor and remain poor.ⁱⁱⁱ Child marriage can also have an impact on girls' and women's labour-force participation. Girls married early are more likely to be out of school, which leads to lower participation in the labour market and lower earnings over time. Married girls who do participate in the formal labour market typically face a double labour burden of household duties in addition to formal work.^{iv}

Overall, once married, girls' access to education and economic opportunities shrinks, keeping them from building a prosperous future for themselves, their communities and countries. Likewise, as child marriage is often exacerbated by poverty, programmes that provide families with income-generation opportunities or financial support have the potential to protect girls from child marriage if they are part of broader efforts to shift social norms such as those around gender roles and stereotypes, which sustain the practice.

GOAL 2 – ZERO HUNGER: Child brides and their children are more likely to be malnourished

Food insecurity and malnutrition can be both causes and consequences of child marriage. Families with limited food resources may marry their daughters in an attempt to have one less mouth to feed. Child brides are more likely to have early and frequent pregnancies, which can be devastating for girls under the age of 15 and their children. Child brides usually experience higher rates of malnutrition than girls who marry later in life.^v Babies born to girls under the age of 15 are at higher risk of dying before their fifth birthday. They are also more likely to have low birth weight, suffer from poor nutrition, and experience stunting.

Improving the nutrition and food security of these young mothers, for instance with agricultural training to increase crop and animal production, can have lasting positive impacts on the health and well-being of girls and their families.^{vi}

GOAL 3 – GOOD HEALTH AND WELLBEING: Child marriage leads to a range of harmful health consequences, including higher rates of maternal and infant mortality and morbidity

Child marriage can have devastating effects on the health of girls and their children. Compared to women who marry later in life, child brides experience high rates of adverse sexual and reproductive health outcomes, gender-based violence, malnutrition, and increased morbidity and mortality. Child marriage can also be associated with poor mental health, including feelings of isolation, depression, and suicidal thoughts and behaviours, and can contribute to poor health outcomes for future generations.^{vii}

Child brides are under intense social pressure to prove their fertility and so child marriage is often followed by pregnancy.^{viii} However, early pregnancy increases risks for both the mother and her child. Each year, 70,000 adolescent girls in developing countries die of causes related to pregnancy and child birth,^{ix} and perinatal deaths are 50% higher among babies born to mothers under 20 years old than among those born to mothers aged 20–29 years.^x The HIV infection rate among married adolescent girls also tends to be higher than among their unmarried, sexually active peers.^{xi}

Delaying marriage can lead to delayed sexual initiation and first birth, reduced incidence of gender-based violence, increased spacing between births, reduced maternal morbidity, lower HIV infection rates, and fewer maternal and child deaths.^{xii}

GOAL 4 – INCLUSIVE AND EQUITABLE QUALITY EDUCATION: Child marriage is a barrier to girls' education

Child marriage is a significant barrier to girls' education – it undermines a girl's ability to attend school, acquire new skills and knowledge, and put existing ones to use. Girls tend to drop out of school during the preparatory time before marriage or shortly afterwards when their marital and domestic demands increase. In most cases child marriage means an end to formal education.

While child marriage is sometimes the reason for school dropout, out of school girls are also more likely to be married early and have children before they are ready. Girls with no education are three times as likely to marry by 18 as those with a secondary or higher education.^{xiii} Mothers who are illiterate are less likely to be knowledgeable about proper health and nutrition for themselves and their children than better educated mothers. Children of educated mothers have higher rates of immunisation and overall survival, as well as lower rates of stunting and wasting.

Education is one of the most powerful tools available to prevent and respond to child marriage. Girls who are in school are not only protected in many cases from child marriage, but gain the knowledge and skills necessary to succeed throughout their lives.^{xiv}

GOAL 5 – GENDER EQUALITY: Ending child marriage will help achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls

At its root, child marriage is perpetuated by structural gender inequality, including unequal power relations and discriminatory norms around girls' value, sexuality and role in society. Eliminating gender inequality and empowering young women requires the fulfilment of girls' basic needs and their rights such as the right to live free from violence and exploitation, the right to education, health, nutrition, which are undermined by child marriage.^{xv}

Child marriage is a strategic entry point to address gender inequality. Rates of child marriage are an effective indicator of overall progress toward gender equality. The indicator captures one of the most important life transitions for a girl. It signifies immediate and long term disempowerment, violation of rights, and is symptomatic of an entrenched harmful social norm.

Tackling child marriage is also an entry point to shift the norms and attitudes that perpetuate the marriage of girls, and make sure that the voice and decisions of girls and young women are as valued as those of boys and men.^{xvi}

GOAL 8 – ECONOMIC GROWTH: Women who married as children are less likely to participate in the workforce, which undermines economic growth.

When women are educated and healthy, they are more productive, thereby contributing to greater national productivity and higher Gross Domestic Product (GDP). Delaying marriage, keeping girls in school, and involving women in the formal labour market not only increases their individual income and economic empowerment, but can have ripple effects at the household, community, and national levels. When girls are able to go to school, learn the skills they need to secure a job, and have access to the same economic opportunities as boys, they will be better able to support themselves and their families and help to break the cycle of intergenerational poverty.

When women have economic decision-making power, they are also more likely than men to spend more money on food, housing, education for their children and income-generating activities, all of which reduce poverty levels and promote sustainable development.^{xvii} Child marriage also has an economic cost. A study

by UNICEF in Nepal found that the economic cost just from a labour market perspective due to child marriage was 3.87% of GDP.

The continued practice of child marriage around the world continues to impede global progress towards ending forced labour, modern slavery and human trafficking.

GOAL 10 – REDUCE INEQUALITIES: Child marriage affects poor, rural and disadvantaged populations disproportionately, and creates cycles of poverty that reinforce inequality

Child marriage tends to affect the most vulnerable populations, thus reinforcing inequalities across and within countries. A high prevalence of child marriage negatively affects economic, health and development outcomes of a country and perpetuates a cycle of violence and injustice, which in turn decreases a nation's capacity to sustain democracy and stability. Girls who are married as children are less empowered, have little decision-making power within their households and communities and are less likely to participate fully in society.^{xviii}

In all countries, child marriage rates vary across regions. In some areas, the prevalence of child marriage may be much higher than the national average. These “hot spots” are often found among some of the most disadvantaged and vulnerable populations in the country and include high numbers of girls who are most at risk of child marriage, married girls, and girls who are simply the hardest to reach. These girls are often the most vulnerable - out of school, working as child labourers, at higher risk of being trafficked or exploited, or do not legally exist, because their births and marriages were never registered so they cannot access government services.^{xix} Therefore reducing inequalities is critical in terms of ensuring these girls are not left behind in wide scale efforts to address child marriage in a country.

GOAL 16 – PEACE, JUSTICE AND STRONG INSTITUTIONS: We will not end violence against children (target 16.2) without ending child marriage

It is estimated that one in three women and girls experience violence in their lifetime.^{xx} Child marriage is a form of violence. In many cases parents feel it is in their daughter's best interest to marry at a young age: they might believe marriage will secure her future and protect her against physical or sexual assault. Yet, child marriage puts girls at particular risk of sexual, physical and psychological violence throughout their lives.

Girls who marry as children are particularly at risk of violence from their partners or their partners' families. They are consistently more likely to experience domestic violence by their partner than girls who marry later.^{xxi} The greater the age difference between girls and their husbands, the more likely they are to experience intimate partner violence.^{xxii} Forced sexual initiation and early pregnancy often have long lasting effects on the physical and mental health of child brides for years after.^{xxiii}

Ending child marriage and ending violence against children and women require addressing the root causes of violence, which include discriminatory gender norms that devalue girls and women. Investments in ending violence against children and gender-based violence can thus be leveraged to achieve goals in ending child marriage, and vice versa.

Ending child marriage also requires implementation of strong legal frameworks which set the minimum age of marriage at 18 and protect girls' rights. The continued lack of implementation of minimum age of marriage laws effectively undermines the rule of law. By supporting programmes which address child marriage, and ensuring implementation of legislation which establishes a minimum age of marriage, governments can address a widespread and systematic violation of the rule of law in their countries.

SDGs related to child marriage

Targets and goals *in italics* represent those that are important to ending child marriage, but for which child marriage is not necessarily a barrier to their attainment.

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOAL	TARGET
GOAL 1 – NO POVERTY	1.1 By 2030, eradicate extreme poverty for all people everywhere, currently measured as people living on less than \$1.25 a day
	1.2 By 2030, reduce at least by half the proportion of men, women and children of all ages living in poverty in all its dimensions according to national definitions
	<i>1.3 Implement nationally appropriate social protection systems and measures for all, including floors, and by 2030 achieve substantial coverage of the poor and the vulnerable</i>
GOAL 2 – ZERO HUNGER	2.1 By 2030, end hunger and ensure access by all people, in particular the poor and people in vulnerable situations, including infants, to safe, nutritious and sufficient food all year round
	2.2 By 2030, end all forms of malnutrition, including achieving, by 2025, the internationally agreed targets on stunting and wasting in children under 5 years of age, and address the nutritional needs of adolescent girls, pregnant and lactating women and older persons
GOAL 3 – GOOD HEALTH AND WELLBEING	3.1 By 2030, reduce the global maternal mortality ratio to less than 70 per 100,000 live births
	3.3 By 2030, end the epidemics of AIDS, tuberculosis, malaria and neglected tropical diseases and combat hepatitis, waterborne diseases and other communicable diseases
	<i>3.7 By 2030, ensure universal access to sexual and reproductive healthcare services, including for family planning, information and education, and the integration of reproductive health into national strategies and programmes</i>
	<i>3.8 Achieve universal health coverage, including financial risk protection, access to quality essential health-care services and access to safe, effective, quality and affordable essential medicines and vaccines for all</i>
GOAL 4 – QUALITY EDUCATION	4.1 By 2030, ensure that all girls and boys complete free, equitable and quality primary and secondary education leading to relevant and effective learning outcomes
	4.3 By 2030, ensure equal access for all women and men to affordable and quality technical, vocational and tertiary education, including university
	4.4 By 2030, substantially increase the number of youth and adults who have relevant skills, including technical and vocational skills, for employment, decent jobs and entrepreneurship
	4.5 By 2030, eliminate gender disparities in education and ensure equal access to all levels of education and vocational training for the vulnerable, including persons with disabilities, indigenous peoples and children in vulnerable situations
	4.6 By 2030, ensure that all youth and a substantial proportion of adults, both men and women, achieve literacy and numeracy
	<i>4A Build and upgrade education facilities that are child, disability and gender sensitive and provide safe, non-violent, inclusive and effective learning environments for all</i>
GOAL 5 – GENDER EQUALITY	5.1 End all forms of discrimination against all women and girls everywhere
	5.2 Eliminate all forms of violence against all women and girls in the public and private spheres, including trafficking and sexual and other types of exploitation

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOAL	TARGET
	<p>5.3 Eliminate all harmful practices, such as child, early and forced marriage and female genital mutilation</p> <p>5.6 Ensure universal access to sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights as agreed in accordance with the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development and the Beijing Platform for Action and the outcome documents of their review conferences</p> <p>5.1 End all forms of discrimination against all women and girls everywhere</p> <p>5.2 Eliminate all forms of violence against all women and girls in the public and private spheres, including trafficking and sexual and other types of exploitation</p>
GOAL 6 – CLEAN WATER AND SANITATION	<i>6.2 By 2030, achieve access to adequate and equitable sanitation and hygiene for all and end open defecation, paying special attention to the needs of women and girls and those in vulnerable situations</i>
GOAL 8 – ECONOMIC GROWTH	<p>8.1 Sustain per capita economic growth in accordance with national circumstances and, in particular, at least 7 per cent gross domestic product growth per annum in the least developed countries</p> <p>8.5 By 2030, achieve full and productive employment and decent work for all women and men, including for young people and persons with disabilities, and equal pay for work of equal value</p> <p>8.6 By 2020, substantially reduce the proportion of youth not in employment, education or training</p> <p>8.7 Take immediate and effective measures to eradicate forced labour, end modern slavery and human trafficking and secure the prohibition and elimination of the worst forms of child labour, including recruitment and use of child soldiers, and by 2025 end child labour in all its forms</p> <p><i>8.8 Protect labour rights and promote safe and secure working environments for all workers, including migrant workers, in particular women migrants, and those in precarious employment</i></p>
GOAL 10 – REDUCE INEQUALITIES	<p>10.1 By 2030, progressively achieve and sustain income growth of the bottom 40 per cent of the population at a rate higher than the national average</p> <p>10.2 By 2030, empower and promote the social, economic and political inclusion of all, irrespective of age, sex, disability, race, ethnicity, origin, religion or economic or other status</p> <p><i>10.3 Ensure equal opportunity and reduce inequalities of outcome, including by eliminating discriminatory laws, policies and practices and promoting appropriate legislation, policies and action in this regard</i></p> <p><i>10.4 Adopt policies, especially fiscal, wage and social protection policies, and progressively achieve greater equality</i></p>
GOAL 11 – SUSTAINABLE CITIES AND COMMUNITIES	<p><i>11.1 By 2030, ensure access for all to adequate, safe and affordable housing and basic services and upgrade slums</i></p> <p><i>11.2 By 2030, provide access to safe, affordable, accessible and sustainable transport systems for all, improving road safety, notably by expanding public transport, with special attention to the needs of those in vulnerable situations, women, children, persons with disabilities and older persons</i></p>
GOAL 13 – CLIMATE ACTION	<p><i>13.1 Strengthen resilience and adaptive capacity to climate-related hazards and natural disasters in all countries</i></p> <p><i>13.2 Integrate climate change measures into national policies, strategies and planning</i></p>

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOAL	TARGET
	<i>13.3 Improve education, awareness-raising and human and institutional capacity on climate change mitigation, adaptation, impact reduction and early warning</i>
GOAL 16 – PEACE, JUSTICE AND STRONG INSTITUTIONS	16.1 Significantly reduce all forms of violence and related death rates everywhere
	16.2 End abuse, exploitation, trafficking and all forms of violence against and torture of children
	<i>16.3 Promote the rule of law at the national and international levels and ensure equal access to justice for all</i>
	16.7 Ensure responsive, inclusive, participatory and representative decision-making at all levels
	<i>16.9 By 2030, provide legal identity for all, including birth registration</i>

ⁱ UNICEF, *State of the World's Children*, 2016

ⁱⁱ UNICEF, *State of the World's Children*, 2016

ⁱⁱⁱ UNICEF, *Ending child marriage: progress and prospects*, 2014, p.3

^{iv} All data and statistics on child marriage and poverty are cited from the 2016 *Girls Not Brides* and ICRW briefs, *Taking action to address child marriage: the role of different sectors*. For more information on child marriage and poverty see: <http://www.girlsnotbrides.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/4.-Addressing-child-marriage-Econ-growth.pdf>

^v UNICEF, *Hidden in Plain Sight: A Statistical Analysis of Violence Against Children*. UNICEF, New York, 2014. Available at: http://files.unicef.org/publications/files/Hidden_in_plain_sight_statistical_analysis_EN_3_Sept_2014.pdf

^{vi} All data and statistics on child marriage, food insecurity and nutrition are cited from the 2016 *Girls Not Brides* and ICRW briefs, *Taking action to address child marriage: the role of different sectors*. For more information on child marriage, food insecurity and nutrition see: <http://www.girlsnotbrides.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/6.-Addressing-child-marriage-Food-Security-and-Nutrition.pdf>

^{vii} Gage, A.J. *Association of Child Marriage With Suicidal Thoughts and Attempts Among Adolescent Girls in Ethiopia*. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 2013, 52:654–6. DOI: 10.1016/j.jadohealth.2012.12.007; Rasool, I.A., Payton, J.L., *Tongues of fire: women's suicide and self-injury by burns in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq*. *Social Review*, 2014, 62(2):237–54. DOI: 10.1111/1467-954X.12153

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

^{ix} UNFPA, *Motherhood in Childhood: Facing the challenge of adolescent pregnancy*, State of World Population, 2013

^x WHO, *Guidelines on preventing early pregnancy and poor reproductive outcomes in adolescents in developing countries*, 2011; Chandra-Mouli, V., Camacho, A.V. & Michaud P.A., *WHO guidelines on preventing early pregnancy and poor reproductive outcomes among adolescents in developing countries*, *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 2013

^{xi} UNAIDS, *Focus on location and population*. Geneva: UNAIDS, 2015

^{xii} All data and statistics on child marriage and health are cited from the 2016 *Girls Not Brides* and ICRW briefs, *Taking action to address child marriage: the role of different sectors*. For more information on child marriage and health see: <http://www.girlsnotbrides.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/1.-Addressing-child-marriage-Health.pdf>

^{xiii} UNFPA, *Marrying Too Young: End Child Marriage*, 2012

^{xiv} All data and statistics on child marriage and education are cited from the 2016 *Girls Not Brides* and ICRW briefs, *Taking action to address child marriage: the role of different sectors*. For more information on child marriage and education see: <http://www.girlsnotbrides.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/2.-Addressing-child-marriage-Education.pdf>

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

^{xvi} All data and statistics on child marriage and gender equality are cited from the 2016 *Girls Not Brides* and ICRW briefs, *Taking action to address child marriage: the role of different sectors*. For more information on child marriage and gender equality see: <http://www.girlsnotbrides.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/3.-Addressing-child-marriage-Democracy-Rights-Governance.pdf>

^{xvii} All data and statistics on child marriage and economic growth are cited from the 2016 *Girls Not Brides* and ICRW briefs, *Taking action to address child marriage: the role of different sectors*. For more information on child marriage and economic growth see: <http://www.girlsnotbrides.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/4.-Addressing-child-marriage-Econ-growth.pdf>

^{xviii} All data and statistics on child marriage and reducing inequalities are cited from the 2016 *Girls Not Brides* and ICRW briefs, *Taking action to address child marriage: the role of different sectors*. For more information on child marriage and reducing inequalities see: <http://www.girlsnotbrides.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/3.-Addressing-child-marriage-Democracy-Rights-Governance.pdf>

^{xix} Girls Not Brides, *Lessons Learned from Select National Initiatives to End Child Marriage*, 2015, p. 14. Available from:

<http://www.girlsnotbrides.org/reports-and-publications/lessons-learned-from-selected-national-initiatives-to-end-child-marriage/>

^{xx} WHO, *Global and regional estimates of violence against women: Prevalence and health effects of intimate partner violence and non-partner sexual violence*, 2013. Available from: http://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/10665/85239/1/9789241564625_eng.pdf

^{xxi} Kishor, S. & Johnson, K., *Profiling Domestic Violence – A Multi-Country Study*, ORC Macro, Calverton, Maryland, 2004

^{xxii} UNICEF, *Hidden in Plain Sight: A Statistical Analysis of Violence against Children*, 2014

^{xxiii} All data and statistics on child marriage as a form of violence are cited from the 2016 *Girls Not Brides* and ICRW briefs, *Taking action to address child marriage: the role of different sectors*. For more information on child marriage as a form of violence see: <http://www.girlsnotbrides.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/8.-Addressing-child-marriage-GBV.pdf>