What do the new data tell us?

UNICEF is releasing new data today (6 March 2018) that points to a reduction in the levels of child marriage globally. According to the new data, in the last 10 years there has been a 15 per cent decline in the prevalence of child marriage, measured as the proportion of women (aged 20-24 years) who were first married or in union before age 18. The proportion has dropped from 1 in 4 women (25 per cent) to approximately 1 in 5 (21 per cent).

Other key data points:
- Globally, the total number of girls married in childhood is an estimated 12 million per year.
- Worldwide, there are an estimated 650 million girls and women alive today that were married as children.
- South Asia has witnessed the largest decline, where a girl’s risk of marrying before her 18th birthday has dropped from nearly 50 per cent to 30 per cent in the last ten years.

Where do the new data come from?

The global estimates rely on data in the UNICEF global databases, comprised of nationally representative data on child marriage for over 120 countries, beginning from the 1980s through to today. The data for countries are primarily from nationally representative household surveys, like the UNICEF-support Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys and the USAID-supported Demographic and Health Surveys, and to a lesser extent from administrative data. All national estimates undergo a technical review of data quality before being accepted into the database.

Demographic data, which contribute to the calculation of the number of girls and women affected, are from the United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division (2017). *World Population Prospects: The 2017 Revision*, DVD Edition.

How do you measure child marriage prevalence?

The prevalence of child marriage is measured as the percentage of women who were first married or in union before age 18, and relies on data from respondents’ self-reported age at first marriage or union. The standard indicator for child marriage is measured among women aged 20-24 years, which is the first demographic five-year cohort to have completed exposure to the risk of marrying in childhood (i.e. the first cohort in which all women are 18 years or older). This same indicator is included in the Sustainable Development Goal framework, as indicator 5.3.2 which falls under Goal 5 on gender equality.

While measuring child marriage among girls under age 18 is also possible, it underestimates the true extent of the practice as some girls who are not yet married may do so before they reach adulthood.

To calculate the number of girls and women who married in childhood, the prevalence of the practice among all women aged 18 and older, as well as girls under age 18 who are currently married or in union, are combined with demographic data to produce the present estimate of the total number of girls and women affected.

Is the new data reliable?

The reliability of estimates of child marriage from nationally representative household surveys with robust data collection methodologies are generally strong, as the measure relies on a straightforward, well-tested set of questions, which respondents are typically well-equipped to
answer. Data quality may be adversely affected among populations which generally do not know their exact ages or have difficulty recalling events in the past to precise dates. While it is possible for responses to be subject to social desirability biases, such anomalies can typically be detected when a country’s results from multiple sources are interpreted together.

How much of the revision from previous numbers is a result of real declines, and how much from better data?

UNICEF’s estimation of the global prevalence and burden of child marriage at any given time is based on the most recent reliable data available from countries around the world. When more data become available, the estimates become more precise. Currently the global estimate takes into account data from 1071 countries with recent data, representing over 75 per cent of the global population.

In the current iteration of this estimation exercise, the precision of the global estimate was improved by the availability of new data for a number of populous countries, including India and Ethiopia. This new data was particularly important for India, as there had been a prolonged gap in data availability, decreasing the reliability of the regional estimates for South Asia. The new data allowed for a downward revision of the previous estimate.

Nonetheless, the latest estimates show not only a downward revision but also a real, substantial declines in the practice. The data show that the declines achieved in the past ten years have resulted in 25 million fewer girls being married in childhood than we would have expected without such decline.

Based on this new data, which countries have seen reductions and at what rates?

Around 80 per cent of the countries with data have experienced a decline in the prevalence of child marriage within the past 25 years, and most have seen some acceleration of progress within the past 10 years. The countries with substantial declines in the past decade include those which had relatively high levels of the practice, like Ethiopia which has seen a decline from around 60 per cent to around 40 per cent in the past decade, and India which has seen a decline from nearly 50 per cent to 27 per cent in the past decade. Other countries which began with lower levels of child marriage have nonetheless seen strong proportional declines – Rwanda for example has brought the prevalence below 10 per cent within the past decade.

Many countries in which child marriage is common are facing population growth, making it difficult to reduce the number of child brides (even if the proportion is declining). Egypt and Bangladesh are both examples where, though the population has grown, progress has been strong enough that the number of child brides is beginning to decrease.

How did UNICEF calculate that 25 million child marriages have been prevented in the last decade?

This figure takes into account both the declining prevalence of child marriage in the past ten years, along with the demographic changes over the same period. In short, the value of 25 million is the difference between the actual number of child brides in the past ten years, compared to the number which hypothetically would have been child brides if no progress had been made over this period.

The actual number of child brides is calculated for each geographic region using the prevalence and population of a ten-year cohort of women who most recently completed exposure to the risk of marrying in childhood, e.g. those currently aged 18 to 27 years. The hypothetical number is calculated for each geographic region for the same cohort, assuming the prevalence

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1 Note countries for which the latest estimate is from earlier than 2010 are excluded from the analysis of current levels.
of child marriage from 10 years ago had remained constant. The actual and hypothetical numbers are each summed to create a global total, and the difference between them (25 million) is the number of child marriages which were averted thanks to progress over the last decade.

How did UNICEF calculate that 150 million girls could be married in childhood by 2030?

This figure takes into account the projected prevalence of child marriage in each region between today and 2030, along with demographic projections over the same period. On the basis of these, an annual number of child brides is calculated for each region, and summed to a global total, for each year from 2018 to 2030 (inclusive). This calculation assumes that within each region, the observed rate of decline will continue into the future at the same pace.

It is of course possible for the actual progress to be faster or slower, which would result in a different number of child brides.

UNICEF estimates that the total number of girls married in childhood is 12 million a year. What has this number reduced from?

The annual number of girls married in childhood is lower today than it was ten years ago, thanks to a reduction in the prevalence of child marriage (and globally a relatively steady number of girls at risk over this period, which is an important consideration since the number of child brides is dependent on both the prevalence and the population). The annual number of child brides a decade ago was around 14 million.

Note in the past UNICEF had published an estimate that stated the annual number of child brides was 15 million. The current estimate is a result of both a real reduction in the practice of child marriage and a downward revision of prior estimates due to the availability of new data which has increased the precision of our regional and global estimates.

UNICEF says that 12 million girls are married each year, yet there are 650 million girls and women alive today that were married as children. How do these two data points relate?

The total number of girls and women married in childhood is much higher (650 million) than the annual number of child brides (12 million) because the former includes both girls under age 18 who are already married as well as women of all ages who were married in childhood. We include the adult women in this figure because though they are no longer children, they may continue to experience the detrimental effects of having married in childhood, for example through curtailed education and employment opportunities, decreased earning potential, and less bargaining power within their households.

Why are there large discrepancies between South Asia and the rest of the world in reducing child marriage, for example in Sub-Saharan Africa where less progress has been made?

Globally, and in nearly all geographic regions of the world, the prevalence of child marriage is declining. In some regions the progress is faster than others – South Asia, for example, has seen the strongest declines in the past ten years. There has also been progress in reducing the prevalence in Sub-Saharan Africa, though at a slower rate of decline. Sub-Saharan Africa also faces the unique challenge of a sharply increasing population, putting a larger number of girls at risk even as the proportion slowly declines. On the other hand, Latin America and the Caribbean has seen no evidence of decline, with a steady prevalence for at least the past twenty-five years.
We are seeing larger declines in South Asia because policy shifts and social and economic changes that help reduce child marriage rates started earlier in countries like India and Bangladesh than in many parts of sub-Saharan Africa, especially West Africa. These have included laws and policies for 18 as a minimum age, a lot of public awareness campaigns and action by advocates for girls’ and women’s rights, and many government policies that have supported girls’ education, and financial and social options for women and girls.

There are countries in Sub-Saharan Africa also that have been ahead of the game, for example Ethiopia, where the prevalence has declined from around 60 per cent to around 40 per cent in the last ten years. Other countries have recognized the problem more forcefully in the last five to ten years — Zambia, Uganda, Mozambique for example have all started to give it policy importance.

How has UNICEF reduced child marriage in India?

UNICEF is a strong and supportive partner in the effort to accelerate the goal to end child marriage, but it requires many partners and organizations to effect change. UNICEF has partnered with Government and researchers to analyze data and identify districts and communities where child marriage rates have been high. UNICEF has been an important convener to connect the government with NGOs, helping to make sure that programmes meet the needs of the girls and families in those communities. UNICEF has also supported media and social media campaigns, and helped bring the voice of young people — girls especially — to help change the message about child marriage. UNICEF has also supported state governments to design and implement cash transfer programmes that help poor families send their daughters to school.

What is UNICEF doing to end child marriage in regions where more progress needs to be made, for example, sub-Saharan Africa?

UNICEF and UNFPA partnered with the African Union to launch the first ever campaign to end child marriage in Africa in 2014. Since the African Union campaign inception, 19 African countries (Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Chad, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Ghana, Liberia, Kenya, Madagascar, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Sudan, The Gambia, Uganda, and Zimbabwe) have launched national commitments to end child marriage.

In addition, UNICEF took part in the 692nd African Union Peace and Security Council meeting held on 13 June 2017, which dedicated an open session to the theme: "Ending Child Marriages", highlighting the issue of child marriage in humanitarian situations.

UNICEF also supported the development of the African Common Position on the AU Campaign to End Child Marriage in Africa.

At country level, through the UNFPA-UNICEF Global Programme to Accelerate Action to End Child Marriage (a partnership with the European Union, DFID, the Dutch Government and Global Affairs Canada), support is provided to adolescent girls (ages 10-19) at risk of child marriage or already in union, in eight selected countries: Burkina Faso, Ethiopia, Ghana, Mozambique, Niger, Sierra Leone, Uganda and Zambia. The programme focuses on enabling girls at risk of child marriage to choose and direct their own futures, supporting households in demonstrating positive attitudes towards adolescent girls, and strengthening the systems that deliver services to adolescent girls. It also seeks to ensure laws and policies protect and promote adolescent girls' rights, and highlight the importance of using robust data to inform policies relating to adolescent girls.

UNICEF says that 150 million girls are still likely to marry by 2030. With so many girls still at risk, should we really be celebrating?
The projected number of child brides by 2030 is a stark reminder that although progress has been made, more needs to be done before the practice will be eliminated. Increasing the age at marriage at the population level typically occurs slowly, as a long-term demographic shift rather than a rapid change in practices. This underscores that the commitment in the Sustainable Development Goals to eliminate harmful practices like child marriage by 2030 is an ambitious target which would require intensive efforts to achieve.

Nonetheless, there is good reason to celebrate the fact that 25 million girls didn’t get married in the last 10 years. That is 25 million childhoods preserved, 25 million girls who have a better chance in life than they would have had otherwise. That is a big accomplishment! But indeed, we have to accelerate our efforts if we are to do even better for the current and upcoming generation of girls. We cannot let them down.

**CHILD MARRIAGE IN GENERAL**

**What is child marriage?**

UNICEF, and the rest of the United Nations refer to child marriage as any marriage where at least one of the parties is under 18 years of age.

**What impact does child marriage have on girls?**

A girl who is married as a child is more likely to be out of school, and experience domestic violence. She is more likely to have children when she herself is still a child, and is far more likely to die due to complications during pregnancy and childbirth. These consequences impact the girl directly, but also her family and community.

**Where are the majority of child brides in the world?**

Currently the largest share of child brides is in South Asia, reflecting both the large population and the reality that although great progress has been made, child marriage is still relatively common in the region. However, the geographic profile of child marriage is changing, and the burden is shifting to Sub-Saharan Africa. This is because the population of girls in Sub-Saharan Africa is increasing, and the prevalence of the practice is not declining fast enough to offset this population growth. Without accelerated progress, the number of child brides in Sub-Saharan Africa is expected to increase in the coming years.

**Are boys ever married as children?**

Yes. Though child marriage is about five times more common among girls than boys, globally around 4 per cent of boys are married or in union before age 18. While the practice is likely to have different drivers and consequences for boys than girls, nonetheless it is a rights violation for both sexes, and puts children in adult roles for which they may not be sufficiently prepared.