

# ENDING CHILD, EARLY AND FORCED MARRIAGE IS CRUCIAL TO GENDER EQUALITY

*Girls Not Brides joins with feminist, women's rights and gender justice movements to advocate for a world where all girls are free to choose if, when and whom to marry, enjoy equal status with boys and men, and are able to achieve their full potential.*



PICTURED: Lucia, Maria and Eyleen participate in Rise Up's "Let Girls Lead" programme in Quetzaltenango, Guatemala. *Girls Not Brides/Arete/James Rodríguez*

Child, early and forced marriage (CEFM) violates girls' rights to health – including sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) – and education, increases the risk of gender-based violence (GBV) and compromises their economic and political participation.

Gender inequality means that women and girls are treated as second-class citizens, denied their human rights and systematically devalued on the basis of their sex. **CEFM is one expression of this gender inequality**, rooted in patriarchal social and cultural norms, and economic and political models that devalue and discriminate against girls. It is exacerbated by poverty, the impact of climate change and conflict.

## How will ending CEFM promote gender equality by 2030?

Until discrimination ends and girls – in all their diversity – are free to realise their rights, we will not achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Below, we explore and document how each of the six issues identified as critical to achieving gender equality in the Beijing +25 process link with CEFM.

In the Call to Action we urge state and non-state development actors to invest in comprehensive, multi-sectoral, rights-based approaches that address the structural drivers of CEFM and build positive norms to achieve gender equality and end CEFM.

## Six issues that must be addressed to end CEFM and promote gender equality

### 1. Gender-based violence

**“Girls married before 15 are almost 50% more likely to experience physical or sexual intimate partner violence than those married after 18.”<sup>1</sup>**

CEFM violates girls’ rights – denying them the capacity to realise the full range of their entitlements – and is internationally recognised as a form of GBV that can lead to physical, mental and sexual harm.<sup>2</sup>

Girls may choose to marry to avoid violent family settings, and parents may believe early marriage will protect their daughters from sexual violence and early pregnancy, or “resolve” real or perceived behaviours that threaten notions of “family” and “family honour.”<sup>3</sup> However, a girl married before 18 is more likely to suffer intimate partner violence throughout her life, particularly if her husband is much older.<sup>4</sup> CEFM has also been linked to femicide.<sup>5</sup>

Addressing the harmful gender norms that perpetuate unequal power relationships and limit girls’ agency and autonomy is essential to breaking these cycles of violence and helping girls choose if, when and whom to marry.

Rates of CEFM increase in humanitarian and post-disaster settings linked to higher rates of sexual and gender-based violence, gender-blind humanitarian planning, economic hardship, and the breakdown of pre-crisis services and networks.<sup>6</sup> Girls in camp settings or internally displaced – and possibly unaccompanied – are at greater risk of sexual exploitation, human trafficking and CEFM.<sup>7</sup>

### 2. Economic justice and rights

CEFM harms girls and women, and undermines their financial freedom. It contributes to losses in earnings of around 9% for women who married as children.<sup>8</sup>

The decision to marry before 18 is often economically driven and reinforced by patriarchal norms that devalue and commodify girls.<sup>9</sup> Girls who marry young – or without consent or choice – have little agency and voice in important life decisions,<sup>10</sup> and face multiple barriers to participating in the economy, with reduced opportunities to earn, study or gain economic independence.<sup>11</sup>

Unequal childcare responsibilities limit girls’ availability for paid work, and girls who marry young tend to have more children earlier.<sup>12</sup> Girls who miss out on school – or are forced to leave and/or marry due to unplanned pregnancy<sup>13</sup> – cannot compete for jobs on an equal footing. Many are forced into the unregulated informal economy.

Gender-blind budgets and fiscal policy, lack of protection in informal labour markets, weak social protection systems and services,<sup>14</sup> inequitable access to credit, and discriminatory practices around inheritance, land and property perpetuate the cycles of poverty that affect girls most.

Workplace harassment and gender exploitative recruitment and retention policies make barriers to girls’ economic agency worse. For many girls, CEFM is one amongst very few options available for economic subsistence.

Survival economics – practised when crisis hits and livelihoods and assets are lost – further increase CEFM rates.<sup>15</sup>

### 3. Bodily autonomy, sexual and reproductive health and rights

Control of girls’ sexuality and reproductive choices, and the notion that a girl’s “value” and her family’s “honour” are linked to her virginity, are symptomatic of deep-rooted discriminatory attitudes and norms that perpetuate gender inequality. Harmful gender norms increase levels of sexual violence, stigmatise and criminalise adolescent sexuality, value heteronormativity and block girls’ access to contraception, information and the SRHR<sup>16</sup> they need to make safe and informed choices.<sup>17</sup> CEFM is used as a protective – sometimes corrective – response to these threats, but actually perpetuates them.

CEFM negatively impacts the health and well-being of girls, women and their children. Complications in pregnancy and childbirth are consistently among the leading causes of death for 15- to 19-year-old girls globally.<sup>18</sup> Up to 11% of maternal deaths are related to abortions, and adolescent girls are more likely to delay seeking help and go to unsafe providers.<sup>19</sup> CEFM can also increase girls’ vulnerability to HIV infection.<sup>20</sup> Children born of child brides face greater health risks, and even death.<sup>21</sup>

This can be prevented by ensuring adolescent girls are informed and aware of their sexuality, rights and health, and can access the services they need to make safe and informed choices regarding sex, marriage, and if and when to have children.<sup>22</sup> A rights-based, stigma-free approach to comprehensive sexuality education and SRHR and services – focused on informed consent, pleasure, choice and access – is essential to supporting the rights and agency of all adolescent girls and young people in an incremental, age- and developmentally-appropriate way.<sup>23</sup>



PICTURED: Kavita at home in Terai, Nepal. After receiving a marriage proposal, Kavita was able to delay her marriage so she could finish her education. *Girls Not Brides*/Thom Pierce



## Six issues that must be addressed to end CEFM and promote gender equality

### 4. Feminist action on climate justice

Climate crisis and natural disasters deepen insecurity and poverty,<sup>24</sup> threatening girls' access to school and SRHR<sup>25</sup> and putting them at greater risk of adolescent pregnancy, sexual and gender-based violence, CEFM<sup>26</sup> and human trafficking.<sup>27</sup>

Those most affected by climate change also live in some of the poorest parts of the world.<sup>28</sup> Girls from farming or fishing communities reliant on environmental stability for their food and livelihoods, or from other precarious settings – such as informal urban settlements or those vulnerable to loss of land or habitat through logging and mining – are at high risk of CEFM. Natural disasters and the climate crisis – and the resulting food insecurity and livelihood loss – can push marginalised and vulnerable families to make drastic decisions to ensure their survival, including marrying their daughters before 18.<sup>29</sup>

Growing evidence<sup>30</sup> documents the link between CEFM – and other forms of GBV – and diminishing natural resources due to climate change. CEFM is used to reinforce existing privileges and power imbalances over access to – and control over – resources.

**“Girls take men [as their husbands] as their only hope of survival.”**

Hotline operator discussing the impact of Cyclone Idai in Malawi<sup>31</sup>

### 5. Technology and innovation for gender equality

Technology can help to end CEFM and advance gender equality, but can also reinforce discrimination and surveillance to suppress girls' agency and women's rights.<sup>32</sup>

Digital marketplaces can be used to sell girls and traffic child brides from resource-poor communities.<sup>33</sup> While the age-appropriate and education-led monitoring of girls' access to digital content may be justified – given the potential for abuse, cyber bullying and sexual exploitation – it can also limit a girl's agency and autonomy and be used for surveillance.<sup>34</sup> Efforts to end CEFM and advance gender equality therefore need to focus on the harmful gender norms that put girls in situations of vulnerability online.

Technology can also help to end CEFM and advance gender equality. Mobile technology can connect those affected by GBV with support and services, help them access education, safely navigate public spaces and galvanise support for at-risk girls.<sup>35</sup> An image sent around the world can rapidly amplify the experiences of girls and inspire, advocate and counter misogynist narratives and stereotypes.

Mobile technology also connects girls to SRHR, money transfers and market information. Mobile apps that alert authorities and civil society organisations (CSOs) to forced marriages – or that verify the age of a bride and groom – help slow rates of child marriage.<sup>36</sup>

Technology can be effective as part of a comprehensive approach to tackling the root causes of CEFM and gender inequality, adding value only when used alongside other methods.<sup>37</sup>

### 6. Feminist movements and leadership

**“Being deliberate, grounded and guided by collective action is the only way to deliver for women and girls. It is the surest way for Africa to emancipate her girls from violations such as child, early and forced marriages.”**

FEMNET<sup>38</sup>

CEFM is rooted in gender inequality and discriminatory patriarchal norms: ending CEFM means learning from – and joining with – feminist movements and their allies to collectively challenge structures of inequality and discriminatory social norms,<sup>39</sup> and forming solidarity networks to provide protection and support in the face of backlash. The four pathways to ending child marriage outlined in *Girls Not Brides'* Theory of Change<sup>40</sup> – girls' agency, mobilisation of families and communities, gender sensitive services, and laws and policies – are the building blocks for many feminist organisations working to transform the gendered status quo that denies girls and women autonomy and agency.

*Girls Not Brides* has played a catalytic role in supporting civil society voices to come together to promote the rights of girls and women, and ensure the needs of adolescent girls are not overlooked. Collective action and advocacy by civil society helped put child marriage on the global development agenda and led to a target on CEFM being included in the SDGs.

# CALL TO ACTION

We must invest in solutions that influence every area of a girl's life, and that reflect her context and needs if we are to accelerate action to end child, early and forced marriage (CEFM) and deliver on global commitments to achieve gender equality. We must drive change at multiple levels – from the individual to the global – working across sectors as a collective movement.

We call on state and non-state development actors to:

**1. Address discriminatory gender norms and stereotypes that devalue girls and erode their rights, freedoms and agency, including if, when and whom to marry.**

- Increase investment in the community-level work of civil society organisations (CSOs) promoting gender-transformative programmes that engage with girls, families, communities, leaders, decision makers and opinion shapers to transform harmful patriarchal social norms and increase girls' voice, choice and agency.

**2. Support the right of all girls to live free from gender-based violence (GBV), coercion and control that violates their rights and limits their political, social, economic and sexual freedom.**

- Abolish punitive laws that stigmatise or criminalise adolescent sexuality.
- Ensure training is provided for service providers, teachers and public officials to respect the voice, choice and agency of girls.
- Increase investment in services to prevent and respond to GBV.
- Advocate for an end to formal and customary laws and practices that discriminate against girls; publicly celebrate role models who promote girls' rights; ensure girls' equal access to justice; and end impunity.

**3. Guarantee all girls – regardless of age, marital status or parental consent – the sexual and reproductive health products, services, advice and information they need to make safe and informed choices.**

- Ensure girls' access to the full range of affordable, quality, stigma-free sexual and reproductive health services, including investment and training for comprehensive, youth-friendly services and referral pathways that respect the autonomy and dignity of adolescents.
- Mainstream comprehensive sexuality education in formal and non-formal education spaces, going beyond biology to support girls, boys and young people in learning about respectful relationships, gender equality and diversity, consent, and sexual pleasure.

**4. Support girls' economic empowerment, removing barriers to their economic participation and their agency, creating viable alternatives to CEFM.**

- Ensure that laws and policies relating to inheritance, property or access to credit are not discriminatory or linked to marital status.
- Invest in state-funded quality childcare and sex-segregated WASH facilities, and training and education to meet employment needs.
- Invest in gender-responsive budgets and fiscal policies, and equitable social protection systems and services.
- Support girls' collective action to propose alternatives to the corporate models and behaviours that marginalise them, perpetuate gender inequality and aggravate inequality.

**5. Support feminist action on climate justice, including highlighting the link between CEFM and climate change vulnerability.**

- Prioritise investment in places with high rates of CEFM and vulnerability to climate change, and monitor the latter's effects on girls.
- Invest in programmes and organisations that build girls' resilience, social and economic assets, food security and livelihood options to meet their – and their families' – basic needs, and mitigate against the use of CEFM as a survival mechanism during natural disasters.
- Support girls' participation in disaster risk reduction assessments and planning, climate change policymaking, environmental impact assessments, and audits. This will help address the additional risks of GBV – including CEFM – during natural disasters and humanitarian crises.

**6. Make technology and innovation work for girls, gender equality and an end to CEFM.**

- Adopt international human rights laws to ensure safe online spaces and platforms for girls, activists, champions and the collective movement speaking out against CEFM and campaigning for gender equality.
- Invest in technology and innovation to expand access to education and health services and information.

**7. Support feminist movement-building and leadership to end CEFM.**

- Guarantee the right to safety, dignity and freedom of expression and organisation of human rights defenders, activists, advocates and girls.
- Invest in core, flexible, multi-year and sustained funding for CSOs.
- Invest in girls and youth-led organisations, and support their inclusion in decision making and planning to lift structural and systemic barriers and end CEFM and achieve gender equality.
- Support and champion the individual agency and collective action of girls, including those at risk of, and in, child marriages.

**8. Develop a robust accountability framework and measure progress towards achieving these recommendations.**

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**Girls Not Brides is a global partnership made up of more than 1,400 civil society organisations from over 100 countries united by a commitment to work in partnership to end child marriage and enable girls to fulfil their potential.**

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