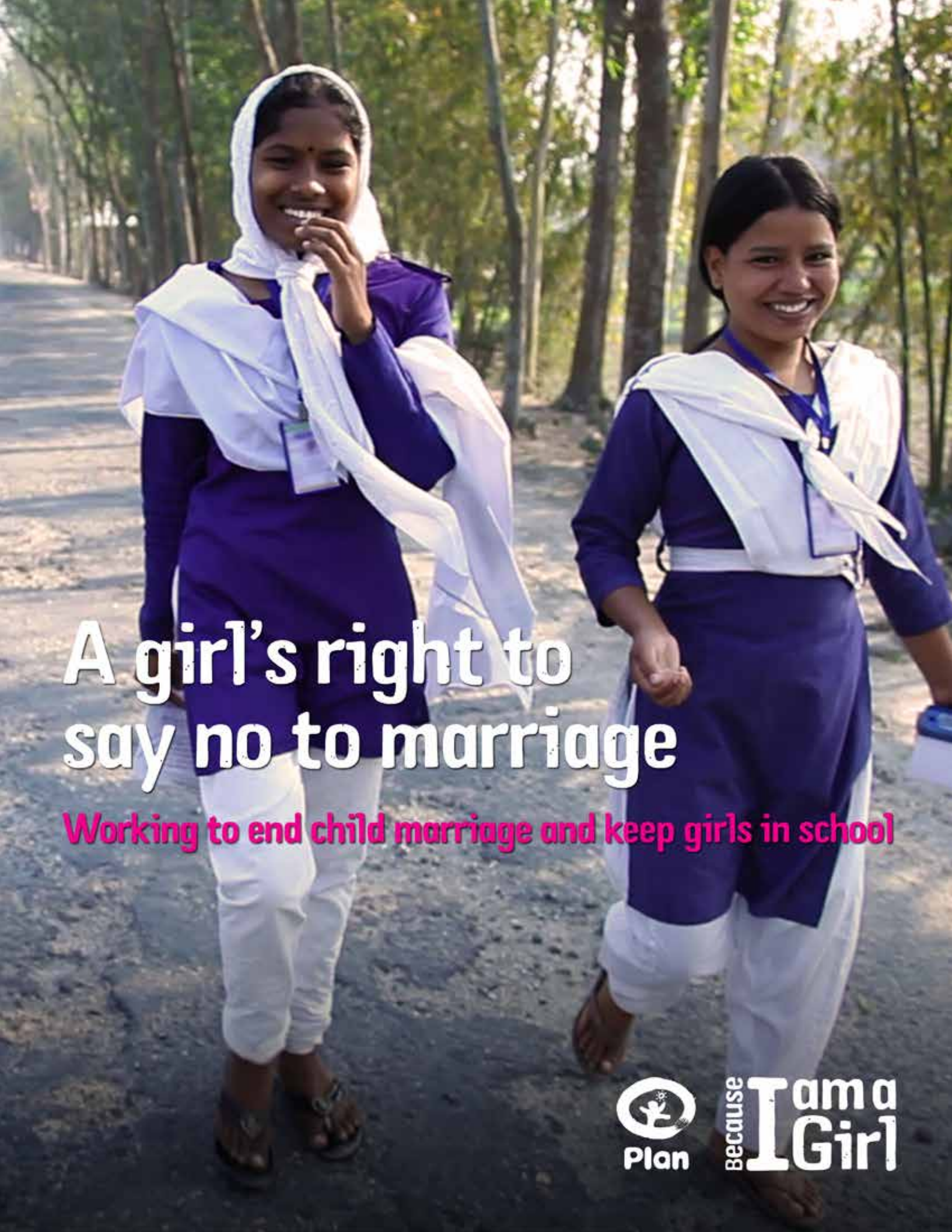


A girl's right to say no to marriage

Working to end child marriage and keep girls in school

Plan

Because I am a Girl

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This report draws on Plan's own research and programming experience, as well as on a wide range of national and international studies, reports and initiatives on child marriage, its causes and consequences. The report has drawn on data from the UNFPA, based on Demographic and Health Surveys and Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys, completed between 2000 and 2010, and UNICEF statistical information.

This report was written by Anthony Davis (Plan International), Claire Postles (consultant, Education for Change) and Giorgiana Rosa (Plan International).

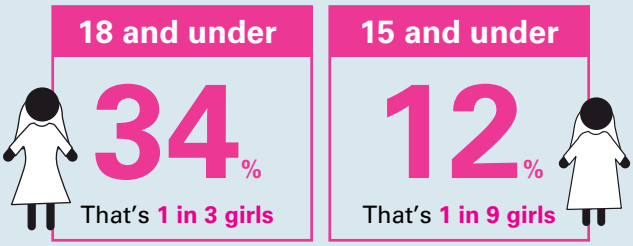
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Acronyms

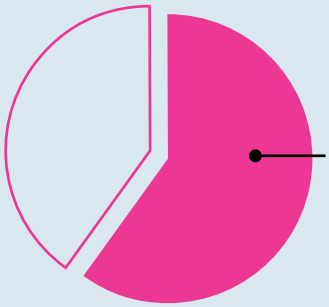
ACMI	Asia Child Marriage Initiative
CEDAW	Committee on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women
CHOGM	Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting
CRC	UN Convention on the Rights of the Child
DHS	Demographic and Health Surveys
FCO	Foreign & Commonwealth Office
FGM/C	Female genital mutilation/cutting
FMU	Forced Marriage Unit
ICRW	International Centre for Research on Women
MICS	Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys
SRSG	Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General
UK	United Kingdom
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
WHO	World Health Organization



39,000 girls under 18 are married every day



The percentage of girls married in developing countries [21]



more than **60%**

of women are married by 18 in the four countries where child marriage is most common [22]

More than 140 million girls will become child brides by 2020, if current rates of child marriage continue

Executive Summary

Child marriage is a violation of children's human rights. Despite being prohibited by international human rights law and many national laws, child marriage continues to rob millions of girls around the world of their childhood. It forces them out of education and into a life of poor prospects, with increased risk of violence, abuse, ill health or early death. While boys are also married as children, child marriage affects girls in greater numbers and with consequences which can be devastating for their health and well-being.

A global problem

One in three girls in the developing world will be married by her eighteenth birthday.[1] If nothing is done to stop current trends, more than 140 million girls will be married as children by 2020. That's **14 million every year** or nearly **39,000 girls married every day.**[2]

Underpinning child marriage is a combination of poverty, gender inequality and a lack of protection for children's rights. These drivers are frequently compounded by limited access to quality educational and employment opportunities and reinforced by entrenched social norms.

Poverty and geography: drivers of child marriage

Girls from the poorest 20 per cent of households are over three times more likely to marry before they are 18 than those from the richest homes.[3]
In developing countries, girls in rural areas are twice as likely to be married by 18 as those in urban areas.[4]

There is a growing international consensus on the severe impact which child marriage has on children's rights and that it often constitutes a barrier to realising girls' right to education. It is also clear that education is key to delaying marriage, to giving girls more choices and opportunities, and enabling them to develop their full potential.

More education = delayed child marriage



63%

with no education



20%

with secondary education or higher

The percentage of girls married by 18, by level of education [23]

In this report, Plan is calling for urgent, concerted and integrated action at local, national and international levels to enable millions of girls to avoid child marriage, stay in school and benefit from a quality education.

The toll on health and well-being

Child marriage is a public health issue as well as a human rights violation. Girls married early are more likely to experience violence, abuse and forced sexual relations. They are more vulnerable to sexually transmitted infections (including HIV) and have reduced levels of sexual and reproductive health.[5]

Early pregnancy is one of the most dangerous causes and consequences of child marriage. Girls who become pregnant at a young age face higher risks of maternal mortality and morbidity.[6] Pregnancy during the first years after puberty increases the risk of miscarriage, obstructed labour, post-partum haemorrhage, pregnancy-related hypertension and lifelong debilitating conditions such as obstetric fistula.[7]

Maternal and infant mortality

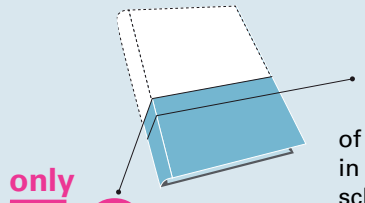
Every year, nearly 13.7 million 15- to19-year-old girls in the developing world give birth while married.[8] Complications in pregnancy and childbirth are the leading cause of mortality for girls aged 15 to 19 in developing countries.[9] **Infant deaths are 50 per cent higher among babies born to mothers under 20 than among those born to women in their twenties.**[10]

Babies born to adolescent mothers are more likely to be stillborn, premature, underweight and at increased risk of dying in infancy due to the mother's young age. This risk is compounded by a lack of access to comprehensive sexual and reproductive health information and services.[11]

Child marriage also means that children are often vulnerable and socially isolated from their own family and friends, with little or no support for dealing with marriage, parenthood, domestic and family duties.

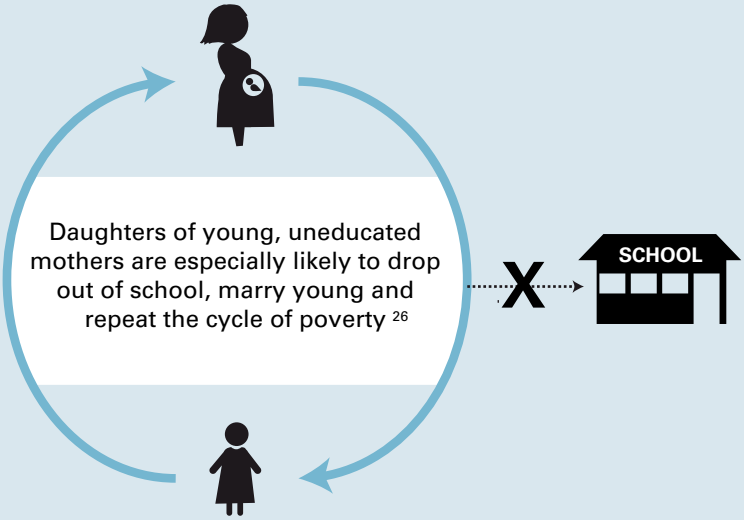
Girls with no education are three times more likely to marry before 18 than those with a secondary or higher education

Poverty drives girls out of school



only **43%** of girls in Africa enrol in lower secondary school [24]

only **50%** of girls in all low-income countries enrol in lower secondary school [25]



Prevention through education

Education is widely considered to be one of the most important factors in delaying the age of marriage for girls.[12] In developing countries, evidence shows that the more education a girl receives, the less likely she is to be married before the age of 18 and the more likely she is to delay pregnancy and childbirth.[13]

Education is key to ending child marriage

Girls with no education are three times as likely to marry by 18 as those with a secondary or higher education.[14] Nearly **70 per cent of girls with no education were married by the age of 18** in the 25 countries with the highest prevalence of child marriage.[15]

All girls have a right to a quality education – one which does not reinforce gender stereotypes, but which is relevant to their needs and aspirations and promotes gender equality and human rights. Learning in a safe and supportive environment enables girls to develop the skills, knowledge and confidence to claim their rights. It gives them the chance to reach their full potential and to assert their autonomy, helping them to make free and informed decisions about their life, including whether, when and who to marry, along with decisions affecting their sexual and reproductive health.

Yet, in low-income countries, only 50 per cent of girls are enrolled in lower secondary school, with 39 per cent enrol in secondary school.[16] Social, domestic and economic pressures too often force adolescent girls out of secondary school. The costs associated with schooling increase – and girls are thought ready for marriage, child-bearing and domestic duties. They drop out at the very time when education could guide them through the vulnerable period of adolescence.[17]

Child marriage costs lives



50,000

The number of teenagers who die of pregnancy and birth complications every year [27]

National laws discriminate against girls



146
countries



105
countries

The number of countries where marriage before 18 is legal with parental consent, per sex[28]

Marriage, pregnancy and school drop-out

Marriage and pregnancy have been identified as some of the key factors forcing girls to leave school. Girls often lack basic literacy and numeracy skills because they have to drop out. **Each year of marriage before adulthood reduces a girl's literacy by 5.6 percentage points.**[18]

Plan wants to draw attention to the barriers stopping many girls from realising their right to quality education, which, in turn, increases their risk of marrying too young. Financial barriers and harmful gender norms can drive parents to prioritise sons' education over that of daughters' – often on the assumption that girls will marry soon anyway. Many parents also fear for their daughters' safety in school. The onset of puberty makes girls more vulnerable to sexual violence, harassment and abuse by teachers, staff and other pupils.[19] Poor teaching and unsupportive environments make girls less likely to pass critical examinations needed to access higher levels of education.[20]

Plan's *Because I am a Girl* campaign aims to ensure that girls receive a quality primary education and can transition to, and successfully complete, secondary school. It seeks to enable girls to have more choices in life, to allow them to play an active role in their community and to break intergenerational cycles of poverty, insecurity and ill health.

Child marriage is a serious human rights violation, not just a development issue

Recommendations for action

Plan has a long history of working directly with children, families and communities to change attitudes and behaviours which foster child marriage, yet we know that, in order to tackle a global human rights issue, we need to also work with partners at a national, regional and international level to generate the political will and targeted resources to support governments to deliver national action plans to eliminate child marriage.

Plan is therefore calling on national governments, with the support of donors and civil society, to:

1. **Ensure that national legislation prohibits child marriage and makes 18 the minimum age for marriage for both boys and girls**
   This should be accompanied by both enforcement of legislation and strengthened birth and marriage registration systems.

2. **Ensure girls' access to quality primary and secondary education**
   All girls should be able to receive a quality education which promotes non-discrimination, gender equality and human rights in a safe and supportive environment.

3. **Engage and mobilise parents, teachers and community leaders**
   Awareness-raising activities should promote education and dialogue to change social norms and attitudes which perpetuate child marriage. Programmes should also promote the role which men and boys can play in ending child marriage and other harmful practices.

4. **Provide comprehensive sexual and reproduction health information and services**
   Safe, comprehensive, age-appropriate sexual and reproductive health information and services should be accessible to all adolescents.

5. **Recognise and promote participation of children in decisions affecting them**
   Girls and boys should be engaged as key participants in ending child marriage. Opportunities should be created to allow them to make their voices heard and be key agents of change within their communities.

6. **Ensure support and protection for children who are already married,**
   including by providing health care and psycho-social support and educational opportunities.

Plan is calling on the international community to:

1. Work together to adopt, by 2015 at the latest, **a UN General Assembly resolution to address child marriage as a violation of children's rights**.

2. **Ensure that child marriage is consistently raised as a human rights issue** at the international level.

3. **Support governments to develop and implement national action plans** to end child marriage, through financial support, technical assistance and programme delivery.

4. Support governments to **ensure that all girls are able to transition to, and complete, a quality secondary education**.

5. Support further research **to improve data collection and monitoring and evaluation** on the drivers and consequences of child marriage.

6. Ensure that the **post-2015 development framework includes a focus on ending child marriage,** and on **quality education for all children, among its objectives**.

Committed to ending child marriage

Plan's report draws on our own primary research, as well as a wide range of international and national studies on child marriage. Plan urges commitment from the international community and national governments to end child marriage, so that girls can be free to realise their right to education.



Tweet me

Child marriage impacts on girls' rights to education, health and protection from violence #bcimagirl #endchildmarriage



Child marriage is a violation of children's human rights. It has devastating impacts on the lives of children, particularly girls

Introduction

"I have to confess that I was simply not aware of the scale and impact of child marriage... I thought I had a pretty good idea of the human rights landscape on this precious earth we share. What I have realised is that these girls are invisible and voiceless, making them some of the most vulnerable, disempowered people on our planet."

Archbishop Desmond Tutu[29]

Child marriage is a violation of children's human rights. It has devastating impacts on the lives of children, particularly girls.

These impacts are physical, psychological and emotional as well as social and economic. Girls who are married as children are unlikely to be in school, are often treated as adult women and are generally burdened with the roles and responsibilities of adults – regardless of their age. They are more likely to become pregnant early, to be subject to violence and abuse and to be denied an education, with potentially life-threatening consequences.

The underlying factors that contribute to child marriage are complex and interrelated. They vary within and between countries depending on individual circumstances and social contexts. However, there are some key common factors that drive and perpetuate the practice. Underpinning child marriage is a combination of poverty, gender inequality, and lack of protection of children's rights, as well as a lack of educational and employment opportunities, reinforced by deeply entrenched social and cultural norms.

Child marriage is most prevalent in places where birth and death rates are high, where there is greater incidence of conflict and civil strife, and where there are lower levels of overall development, including education, employment and health care. It is especially prevalent in rural areas.[34]

Those most affected are among the most vulnerable and powerless: they are young, rural, uneducated, poor and female – and their voices are rarely heard.

One in three girls in the developing world is married by her eighteenth birthday.[30]

If current trends continue, more than 140 million girls will be married as children in the decade leading up to 2020. That's 14 million every year or nearly 39,000 girls married every day.[31]

Girls with no education are three times as likely to marry by 18 as those with a secondary or higher education.[32]

But in low-income countries, only 39 per cent of girls are enrolled in secondary school.[33]

Prevention through education

Ensuring that girls remain in school is one of the key factors in preventing child marriage. UNICEF research in 42 countries has found a clear relationship between attendance in primary school and a decreased likelihood of child marriage. In Senegal, women who went to primary school were less likely to be married by 18: among those who did not receive schooling, 36 per cent were wed by 18, compared to 20 per cent who did get a primary education. The impact of attendance in secondary school is even greater: women with a secondary school education were 92 per cent less likely to be married by 18 than women who had only attended primary school.[35]

Plan's *Because I am a Girl* campaign aims to ensure that girls can receive a quality primary education and can transition to, and successfully complete, secondary school. It aims to ensure that they can learn in a safe and supportive environment, which helps them develop to their full potential. This is central to realising girls' right to education, to give them more choices and

opportunities in life, to allow them to play an active role in their communities and to break intergenerational cycles of poverty, insecurity and ill health.

Girls who receive a quality education are more likely to develop the skills, knowledge, authority and confidence to claim their rights. Their education, attained in an environment that supports their rights, enables them to develop to their full potential and to broaden and assert their choices in life. They are then better equipped to make free and informed decisions about when, whether and whom to marry. Plan's campaign aims to tackle the barriers that prevent them from accessing and completing a quality education – including child marriage and gender-based violence in and around schools.

This report highlights the urgent need to eliminate child marriage. It aims to draw international attention to child marriage as a global problem that presents a major barrier to millions of girls realising their right to education, with devastating impacts on their survival, health and development.

Plan calls on governments and the international community to:

- Improve girls' access to, and experience of, quality primary and secondary education as one of the best means to end child marriage, and to enable girls to have choices and opportunities and develop their full potential.
- Take concerted action to develop and implement integrated and comprehensive action plans, with the participation of girls and boys, their families and communities, to end child marriage.
- Shine a spotlight on child marriage as a human rights and a development issue and press for urgent action at the national and international levels, including at the UN Human Rights Council, the UN General Assembly and in the post-2015 development framework.

Child marriage and boys

While the focus of this report is primarily on the devastating impact of child marriage on girls and girls' education, we know that boys are also affected. In 105 countries, boys can marry with parental consent under the age of 18; in 23 countries boys can marry under the age of 15 with parental consent.[36] Although the consequences are often far graver for girls, boys under the age of 18 are also physiologically, socially and cognitively too young for marriage.[37]

For boys, child marriage can also shut down opportunities to go to school, can have profound psychological consequences, and is no less a violation of their rights. It can have wide-ranging implications for boys as they have to deal with the pressure of being the main provider for the family, and with the responsibilities of parenthood, when they are still children themselves.[38] However, further data collection and research is required to explore the prevalence and impact of child marriage on boys and men.

It is important that child marriage is not treated just as an issue specific to young women and girls. As well as being affected directly by child marriage, boys and men can also play a powerful role in ending the practice, particularly as men often occupy positions of power in families and communities. As fathers, brothers, husbands, community and religious leaders, and politicians, men hold many of the decision-making roles that allow the practice to continue.[39] Plan's research has shown that in South Asia, parents are more likely to listen to their sons than their daughters.[40] In some of the communities where Plan works, our programmes have identified advocates – both boys and girls – who have recognised the negative impact that the practice is having on their friends, families and communities and have taken action to prevent it.



Defining child marriage

The 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights stipulates that marriage should take place between spouses of 'full age' and with the 'free and full' consent of both parties.

According to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), a child is defined as 'every human being below the age of 18 years unless, under the law applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier' (Article 1).

While the CRC does not specify a minimum age for marriage, the CRC Committee has recommended that 'States Parties review and, where necessary, reform their legislation and practice to increase the minimum age for marriage with and without parental consent to 18 years, for both boys and girls'.[41]

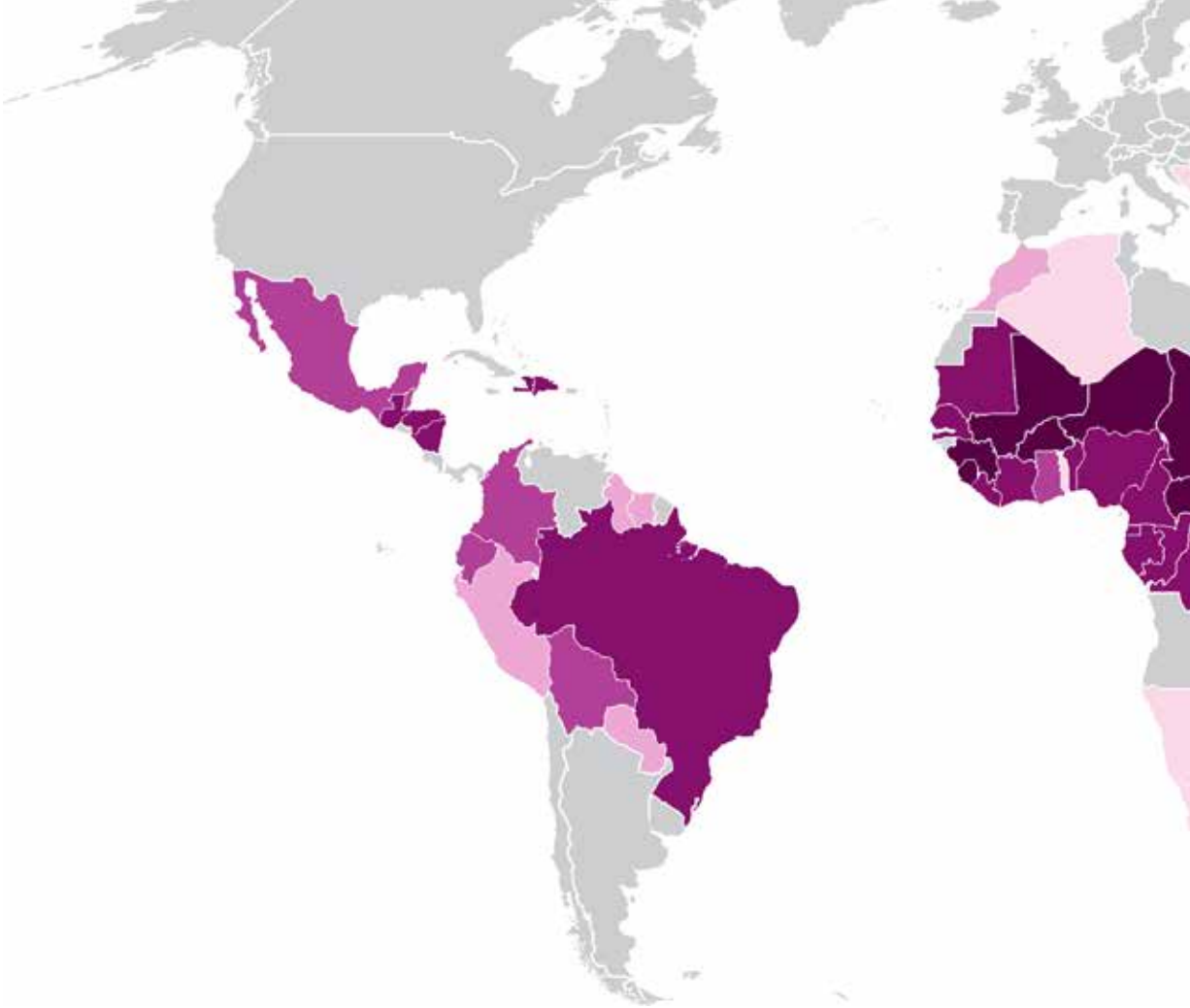
In its General Recommendation 21, the Committee on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) stated that marriage before the age of 18 should not be permitted as children do not have the 'full maturity and capacity to act'.

The 1990 African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child requires States Parties to prohibit child marriage and to adopt legislation that sets the minimum age of marriage at 18.

The minimum age of 18 is considered appropriate to ensure that children are able to give their free and full consent to marry, and have the necessary maturity – physical, emotional and psychological – to enter into marriage. Only at the age of 18 are boys and girls considered mentally and physically developed enough for the responsibilities and consequences of marriage.[42]

'Child marriage' is often used interchangeably with other terms. These include 'early and forced marriage' and 'child and forced marriage'. These terms are often used to emphasise the fact that children are not considered able – due to their age – to give their free, full and informed consent to marriage, and are often subject to marriage under coercion, duress and even violence.

For Plan, and for the purposes of this report, 'child marriage' is defined as any marriage – whether under civil, religious or customary law, and with or without formal registration – where either one or both spouses are children under the age of 18.



Child marriage: a global problem

One in three girls (34 per cent) in the developing world (excluding China) is married by the age of 18. One in nine girls (12 per cent) marries before the age of 15.[43] Despite declines in the prevalence of child marriage in some countries (there has been at least a 20 per cent reduction in Ethiopia and Nepal over a five-year period, for example),[44] global prevalence figures have remained relatively constant over the last 10 years.

Data from 2000 to 2011 shows that more than 60 per cent of women aged 20 to 24 years in countries with the highest prevalence of child marriage were married by the age of 18: Niger (75 per cent), Chad (72 per cent), Bangladesh (66 per cent), Guinea (63 per cent) and the Central African Republic (61 per cent). In 41 countries, nearly a third of girls – sometimes more – were married by 18.[45]

Child marriage is most common in South Asia and West and Central Africa, where 46 per cent and 41 per cent of girls become child brides, respectively. Among girls growing up in Latin America and the Caribbean, 29 per cent experience child marriage, compared with 18 per cent in East Asia and the Pacific, 15 per cent in the Arab States, and 11 per cent in Eastern Europe and Central Asia.[46]

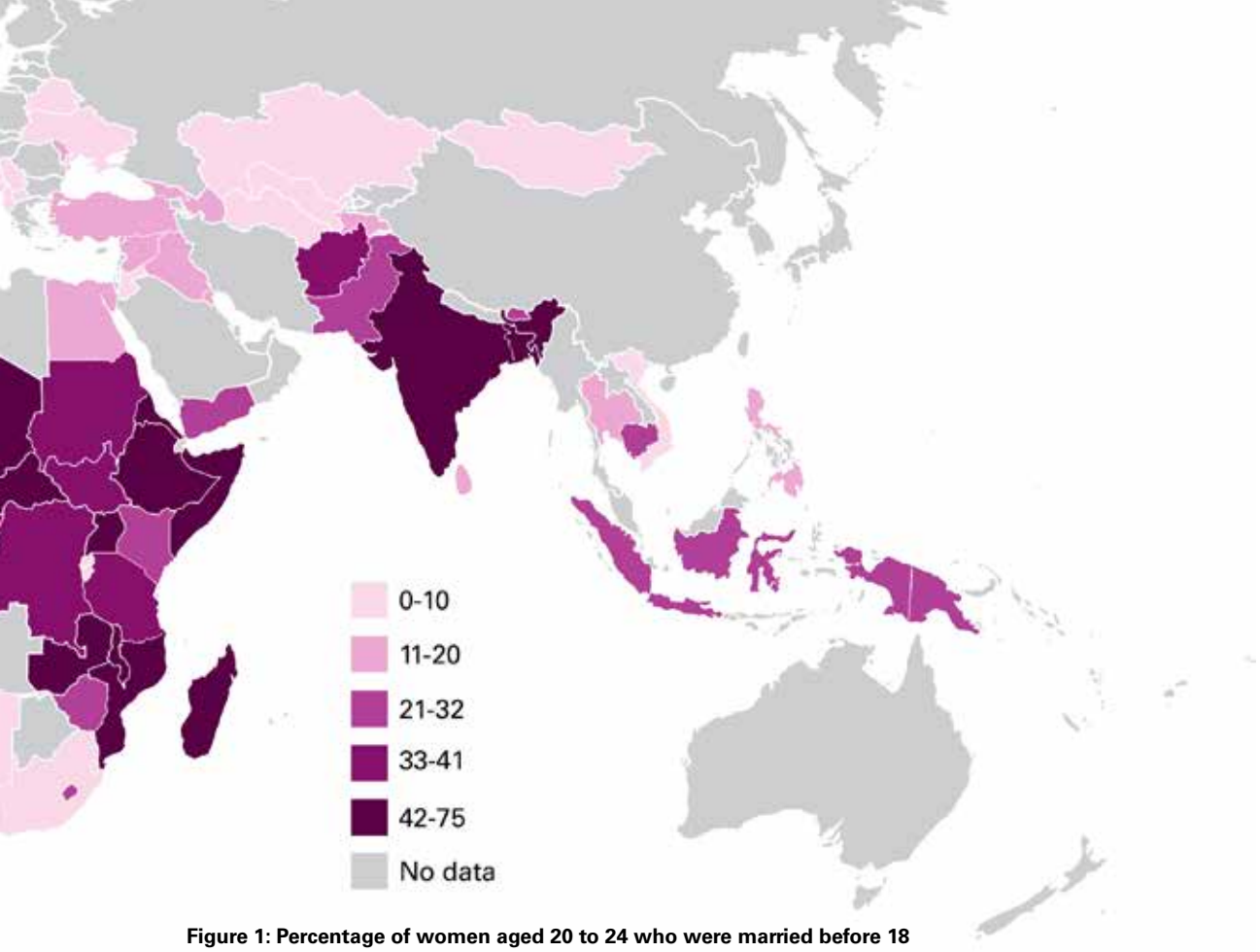


Figure 1: Percentage of women aged 20 to 24 who were married before 18
Source: UN Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS), Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys (MICS) and other national surveys (2000–2010)

Aggregate figures mask variations within and across regions and countries. In sub-Saharan Africa, for example, only 5.4 per cent of girls in Djibouti marry by 18, compared with 74.5 per cent in Niger. Similarly, nearly 18 per cent of girls in Paraguay are child brides, compared with 40.6 per cent of girls in Nicaragua.[47]

Where you are born within a country also has an impact on child marriage. In developing countries, girls in rural areas are twice as likely to be married by 18 compared with girls in urban areas (around 50 per cent compared with 23 per cent).[48] As Table 1 demonstrates, girls born in rural areas of highest prevalence countries are, on average, over one-and-a-half times more likely to be married before the age of 18 than their urban counterparts (57.9 per cent compared with 36 per cent).

As this report details, levels of education also have a significant impact on the likelihood of child marriage.



Image from Plan's film *I'll Take It From Here*

Tackling child and forced marriage in the UK: the Forced Marriage Unit

The United Kingdom (UK) government estimates that between 5,000 and 8,000 people are at risk of forced marriage in England each year.[49] In response to the problem, in 2005 the UK government created a dedicated Forced Marriage Unit (FMU), a cross-departmental initiative between the Home Office and Foreign & Commonwealth Office (FCO).

The FMU works with its overseas embassy staff to rescue those who may have been held captive, raped, or forced into a marriage. In the UK, it seeks to assist those who are at risk of or are being subjected to forced marriage, as well as providing support and outreach to professionals working in the social, educational and health sectors, and to practitioners handling cases of child and forced marriages.

In 2012, the FMU gave advice or support related to a possible forced marriage in 1,485 cases.[50] Where the age was known, 35 per cent of calls were from children aged 17 and below (13 per cent under the age of 15 years) – the youngest at just two years of age. Of the 1,485 cases, 82 per cent involved women and girls and 18 per cent involved men and boys. The FMU handled cases involving 60 different countries, including Pakistan (47.1 per cent), Bangladesh (11 per cent), India (8 per cent), Afghanistan (2.1 per cent), Somalia (1.2 per cent), Turkey (1.1 per cent) and Iraq (1 per cent).

In 2012, the UK government announced plans to fully criminalise forced marriage in the UK and a Bill is expected to go before Parliament in the 2013/14 legislative session. The UK government has committed to tackling forced marriage through its 2012–2015 Forced Marriage Action Plan, which draws together work from the FCO, the Home Office and other partners across government. It includes wide-ranging commitments under two overarching objectives: tackling the drivers of forced marriage and improving the quality of support provided to victims.

Plan UK continues to be a strong supporter of UK cross-government action to scale up programmes and policy dialogue to end child marriage. In December 2011, Plan UK launched *The Right to Say No*, the first-ever UK school resource on ending child marriage. The lesson pack includes an animated film based on the story of a 16-year-old British girl whose family tried to force her into marriage. The resource was well received across central and local government, by schools, and in the teaching profession.

	% of women 20-24 years old who were married or in a union by age 18			Women 20-24 years old who were married or in a union by age 18, by education level (%)			Women 20-24 years old who were married or in a union by age 18, by household wealth	
Country	Total	Rural	Urban	No education	Primary	Secondary or higher	Poorest 20%	Richest 20%
Niger	74.5	83.5	42.1	81.2	62.7	17.2	80.5	47.5
Chad	71.5	73.9	65.4	78.3	67.1	37.0	67.3	66.5
Bangladesh	66.2	70.3	53.3	82.0	80.4	57.2	83.2	46.3
Guinea	63.1	74.9	44.5	72.7	47.9	27.3	78.9	45.7
Central African Republic	60.6	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Mali	55.0	76.5	60.4	77.0	64.3	37.9	72.6	57.7
Mozambique	51.8	65.5	40.6	67.2	56.6	11.5	69.8	32.1
Malawi	49.6	54.4	31.0	65.6	62.2	16.4	59.8	25.7
Burkina Faso	47.8	61.2	26.8	59.8	41.5	3.0	60.6	25.6
Madagascar	48.2	51.0	35.4	67.9	52.9	27.6	65.4	31.9
Sierra Leone	47.9	61.1	30.4	64.2	51.8	12.1	61.8	23.1
Eritrea	47.0	59.8	30.5	64.1	53.3	12.0	46.4	20.6
India	47.4	56.2	29.3	76.5	61.8	27.2	75.3	16.3
Uganda	46.3	51.8	26.9	66.8	58.4	13.8	61.8	26.3
Somalia	45.3	52.4	35.2	51.7	41.0	11.2	43.7	27.9
Nicaragua	40.6	55.1	36.4	69.1	62.5	25.2	-	-
Zambia	41.6	53.3	26.2	64.8	57.5	17.1	63.2	13.0
Ethiopia	41.2	49.0	21.7	62.9	37.5	10.3	59.2	22.0
Nepal	40.7	42.9	26.9	71.7	56.7	22.9	61.8	17.0
Dominican Republic	39.6	50.1	35.6	56.4	75.3	27.5	64.2	21.2
Afghanistan	39.0	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Democratic Republic Of Congo	39.0	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Honduras	38.8	32.5	45.8	62.9	51.4	18.9	52.2	19.3
Nigeria	39.4	49.8	21.6	82.1	53.8	12.5	70.8	10.6
Liberia	37.9	48.6	24.9	56.3	42.3	17.3	56.9	17.7
Average	48.8	57.9	36.0	68.2	56.3	21.1	64.5	29.2

Table 1: Top 25 countries with the highest rates of child marriage, with background characteristics. Source: UNFPA database using household surveys completed between 2000 and 2010 (DHS and MICS) and UNICEF database (www.childinfo.org)

A serious violation of human rights

Child marriage is a serious violation of human rights. It infringes the rights, enshrined in the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), to:

- survival, health and development;
- protection from violence, abuse and exploitation;
- education – with particularly devastating effect on girls' schooling; and
- full participation in family, cultural and social life – including participating in decisions that affect them.

There is a longstanding legal framework of international conventions that prohibit child marriage. Both the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and CEDAW specifically stipulate that marriage should require free and full consent. CEDAW, which is ratified by 186 countries,[51] explicitly states that "the betrothal and marriage of a child shall have no legal effect" (Article 16.2).[52]

A minimum age of marriage at 18 for girls and boys is recommended by the committees of both CEDAW and the CRC.[53] The latter draws attention to the impacts of child marriage on the right to sexual and reproductive health in its General Comment No. 4.[54] It has also stated its concern that children who marry, especially girls, often have to leave their education and are marginalised from social activities.

Of the 10 countries with the highest rates of child marriage,[55] nine are in sub-Saharan Africa. All have either signed or ratified the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, which clearly prohibits marriage of children under 18 (Article 21.1). Other international standards, as they relate to child marriage, are outlined page 22.



Recognition as a human rights issue

There is growing recognition of child marriage as a human rights issue and of its role in hindering progress towards the Millennium Development Goals. This is reflected in a series of international initiatives that build on existing international human rights standards. It is also seen in growing momentum from UN bodies and civil society organisations to raise the issue at the international level, including through global movements such as *Girls Not Brides – The Global Partnership to End Child Marriage*, of which Plan is an active member.

The UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, through his *Global Education First Initiative*, has recognised child marriage as a barrier to the right to education,[56] as has the UN Special Envoy for Global Education,[57] Gordon Brown, in his 2012 report *Out of wedlock, into school*.[58]

Significantly, the UN chose child marriage as the theme for 11 October, the first ever International Day of the Girl Child, recognising it as a fundamental human rights violation that impacts all aspects of a girl's life. The Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General (SRSG) on Violence against Children, Marta Santos Pais, has also drawn attention to child marriage as a harmful practice which particularly affects the most excluded groups in society and which makes girls especially vulnerable to violence and abuse.[59] Her study, *Protecting children from harmful practices in plural legal systems*, which was supported by Plan International, highlights key interventions necessary to protect children from harmful practices, including child marriage.[60]

On the occasion of the 2012 International Day of the Girl Child, the CRC and CEDAW committees, with the Special Rapporteur on Contemporary forms of slavery, the Special Rapporteur on the Sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography, the UN SRSG on Violence Against Children, and the UN Special Rapporteur on violence against women issued a joint statement condemning forced child marriage. The practice, they said, forces girls to suffer domestic servitude, sexual slavery and from violations to their right to health, education, non-discrimination and freedom from physical, psychological and sexual violence.[61] Child marriage has also been raised as a serious human rights issue as part of the Universal Periodic Review of States Parties, in the Human Rights Council - a mechanism to periodically examine and help improve the human rights record of all UN member states.

There is also recognition in the European Union[62] and the Commonwealth, where at the 2011 Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM), states agreed to consider measures to address child marriage.[63] In 2005, Council of Europe Resolution 1468 stressed the need to take the necessary legislative measures to prohibit child marriage by making 18 the minimum marriageable age.

The Agreed Conclusions[64] from the 57th session (March 2013) of the UN Commission on the Status of Women call for measures to end "child, early, and forced marriage" through legislative processes to increase the minimum ages of marriage and through programmes aimed at transforming behaviours, including through educating and empowering girls and their caregivers.

Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948)

Article 16.1: Men and women of full age, without any limitation due to race, nationality or religion, have the right to marry and to found a family. They are entitled to equal rights as to marriage, during marriage and at its dissolution.

Article 16.2: Marriage shall be entered into only with the free and full consent of the intending spouses.

This right to consent to marriage is re-affirmed in the Convention of Consent to Marriage, Minimum Age for Marriage and Registration of Marriage (1964, **Article 1**); the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1966, **Article 23**); and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1966, **Article 10.1**).

Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (1979)

Article 16.1(b): States Parties shall take all appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination against women in all matters relating to marriage and family relations and in particular shall ensure, on a basis of equality of men and women: The same right freely to choose a spouse and to enter into marriage only with their free and full consent.

Article 16.2: The betrothal and the marriage of a child shall have no legal effect, and all necessary action, including legislation, shall be taken to specify a minimum age for marriage and to make the registration of marriages in an official registry compulsory.

United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989)

The Committee on the Convention on the Rights of the Child, in its General Comment No. 4, strongly recommends that States Parties review and, where necessary, reform their legislation and practice to increase the minimum age for marriage with and without parental consent to 18 years, for both girls and boys.

The Committee has also stressed that in setting the minimum age of marriage, States must adhere to the entire Convention and its general principles, including the principles of non-discrimination (**Article 2**), the principles of the best interests of the child as the primary consideration (**Article 3**), the right to life and maximum survival and development (**Article 6**) and the respect of children's evolving capacities (**Article 5**).

Child marriage also violates the right to freedom from all forms of violence, the right to health and education, and to participate in decisions which affect their rights, as set out in the following articles of the CRC:

Article 12.1: States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.

Article 19.1: States Parties shall take all appropriate legislative, administrative, social and educational measures to protect the child from all forms of physical or mental violence, injury or abuse, neglect or negligent treatment, maltreatment or exploitation, including sexual abuse, while in the care of parent(s), legal guardian(s) or any other person who has the care of the child.

Article 24.1: States Parties recognize the right of the child to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of health and to facilities for the treatment of illness and rehabilitation of health. States Parties shall strive to ensure that no child is deprived of his or her right of access to such health care services.

Article 24.3: States Parties shall take all effective and appropriate measures with a view to abolishing traditional practices prejudicial to the health of children.

Article 28.1: States Parties recognize the right of the child to education, and with a view to achieving this right progressively and on the basis of equal opportunity, they shall, in particular:

(a) Make primary education compulsory and available free to all;

(b) Encourage the development of different forms of secondary education, including general and vocational education, make them available and accessible to every child, and take appropriate measures such as the introduction of free education and offering financial assistance in case of need.

The African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (1990)

Article 21: Child marriage and the betrothal of girls and boys shall be prohibited, and effective action including legislation shall be taken to specify the minimum age of marriage to be eighteen years and make registration of all marriages in an official registry compulsory.



Underlying causes of child marriage

The factors that drive child marriage are complex, dynamic and vary from context to context. They often intersect to rob many girls of their childhood, their right to go to school and their chance to determine and secure their own future.

Factors, such as lack of education, the lower value placed on girls' education, school drop-out, gender-based violence (including sexual violence) and early pregnancy, can be both causes and consequences of child marriage. For example, girls can drop out or be forced out of school directly as a result of pregnancy or marriage, particularly when the school system does not permit re-entry or does not provide support for married or pregnant girls and new mothers to remain in school. Conversely, unmarried girls who drop out of school before they transition to secondary education are more vulnerable to marriage because there are often few other options available to them.

Gender inequality

In many societies, women and girls are subject to deep-rooted norms, attitudes and behaviours that assign them a lower status than men and boys within the household, the community and in society at large. These beliefs deny girls their rights and stifle their ability to play an equal role at home and in the community.

> "There are still biased attitudes towards girls' education and some parents still believe that girls' education has no value and they [girls] cannot succeed even when educated."
>
> **Father, Ethiopia**[65]

Prevalent gender norms generally work to the disadvantage of females of all ages – notwithstanding the fact that gender roles can differ between cultures and generations, and can vary in relation to other factors such as economic status, age, class, ethnicity, caste, sexuality, religion, HIV status or disability.

Entrenched assumptions that girls will undertake domestic roles, rather than economically productive roles or roles as leaders within their community, are prevalent. The assumptions about a woman's place in the home and her principal role as caregiver, wife and mother, are often not only shared by parents but by teachers and pupils, including girls themselves.

Parents, teachers and students – including girls – often have lower expectations of girls' academic abilities, which can mean that less value and attention is paid to girls' educational achievements and needs. This reinforces assumptions that a 'good marriage' is the most important way to ensure a girl's future security and prosperity.[66]

Challenges in legislation and enforcement

National legislation establishing a minimum age of marriage at 18 is a critical step in the process of eliminating the practice of child marriage. Legislation not only provides a framework for legal protection, but also leadership, guidance and legitimacy for policy-makers and activists to tackle the financial, social and cultural drivers behind child marriage.

However, enforcing legislation prohibiting child marriage can be complex, particularly in countries that have established plural legal systems and where marriages are also conducted under customary, traditional or religious laws.[67] For example, in Sierra Leone, the Child Rights Act, which prohibits marriage under the age of 18, is contradicted by the Customary Marriage Act, which

"What if there is law? We do not see the laws working. Till now I have not seen the police arrest anyone because of child marriage. So, people are not scared of the law."

Child bride, Bangladesh[72]

permits marriage below the age of 18 where there is parental consent.[68] Research conducted for Plan found that in Sierra Leone, formal law was deemed less relevant by many people than customary law which is rooted in local tradition, centred on the authority of customary chiefs, and covers 85 per cent of the population.[69]

Many developing countries face serious economic and social barriers to monitoring and applying legislation that prohibits child marriage. In some countries, the legal system at national and district levels does not have sufficient resources, including trained staff, to ensure the implementation of existing laws. This is particularly the case in rural communities, where many child marriages occur and where children may have to travel significant distances alone to access justice.[70]

Lack of awareness and failure to enforce legislation also mean that some families who arrange marriage for their young daughters are unaware that they are breaking the law.[71] Many children are often unaware of their human rights or legal protections; they are concerned about the repercussions of reporting their parents or caregivers for forcing them to marry; or they cannot access formal legal systems for a variety of reasons. In many cases, child marriages are not formally registered, making it difficult to enforce existing child protection legislation.

Negligible and inconsistent implementation of penalties also adds to the failure to enforce legislation. In Bangladesh, for example, marriage contracts require the confirmation of age and of a woman's consent, but marriage registrars rarely seek such consent or make efforts to determine the bride's age.[73] Prosecutions are seldom brought against perpetrators of child marriage and judicial authorities can be reluctant to pursue the issue. This contributes to a belief that such marriages are acceptable and that punishment is unlikely.

Gender inequality within legislation

In many countries, the minimum age for marriage (particularly for marriages with parental consent) is lower for girls than for boys. Figure 2[74] shows that, as of 2010, girls under the age of 18 were allowed to marry with parental consent in 146 countries. Girls under the age of 15 were allowed to marry with parental consent in 52 countries. In contrast, boys were legally allowed to marry with parental consent under the age of 18 in 105 countries; and in just 23 countries under the age of 15.

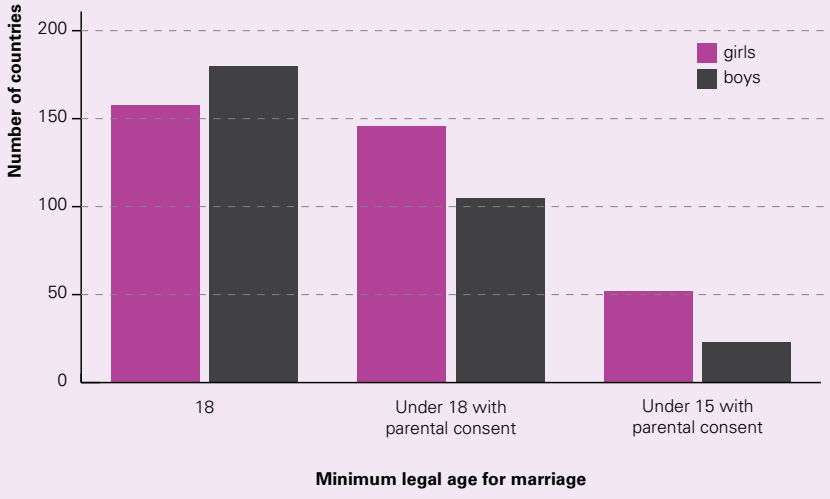


Figure 2: Global inequality in minimum legal age for marriage. Source: UNFPA 2012 [75]

Among 10 of the countries with highest rates of child marriage, five have laws allowing girls to marry at an earlier age than boys. For example, in Niger, where 75 per cent of women aged 20 to 24 years were married by the age of 18, the law allows girls to marry at 15 while boys must be 18 – either with or without parental consent. In Bangladesh, where two-thirds of women aged 20 to 24 years were married before 18, the minimum age for girls to marry without consent is 18, while it is 21 for boys.[76]

Legislation which allows for a lower minimum age for girls is inconsistent with the CRC's principles and standards and represents a blatant discrimination against girls. Unequal legislation governing the minimum age for marriage effectively enshrines gender inequality within law, contributing to an institutional and social acceptance that girls can marry at an earlier age than boys.[77] The Committee on the Rights of the Child has consistently raised this as a matter of concern in its concluding observations to States Parties and has stressed the need to raise the minimum age of marriage to 18 for both boys and girls.

Social norms, customs and traditions

Traditional and patriarchal beliefs towards gender roles, rooted in social, cultural or religious customs, can insulate and perpetuate the practice of child marriage. Research conducted by Plan in West, Southern and East Africa has shown that social norms and beliefs often determine marriage and childbearing as the main life path for girls. In some contexts, entrenched attitudes and beliefs about the expected roles of males and females, combined with a lack of viable educational and employment opportunities for young women, can mean that many parents see little benefit in educating their daughters.[78]

In many of the countries where child marriage is prevalent, other harmful practices such as female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C) are also practised. In Kenyan Maasai communities, girls, some as young as seven, are considered mature after FGM/C has been performed and are quickly married in order to obtain a dowry.[79] In some communities, men refuse to marry girls or women who have not undergone FGM/C. In Sierra Leone, a girl's initiation includes learning how to take on the responsibilities of being a wife.[80]

Parents are also prompted to arrange early marriage for daughters due to a perceived need to preserve girls' pre-marital virginity and to protect her and her family from the risk of shame or dishonour attached to the "immoral" or "inappropriate" behaviour of sex outside marriage.[81] For example, in Malaysia, child marriage has popular support as a way of avoiding *Maksiat* or sexual immorality.[82] If a girl becomes pregnant outside marriage, the stigma can lead families to view her rights and well-being as secondary to the preservation of family honour. Child marriage is also used to punish or control girls who rebel against family or communities' expectations.[83]

A qualitative study carried out by Plan and the International Centre for Research on Women (ICRW) sought to understand some of the reasons behind the persistently high rates of child marriage in three countries in Asia (Bangladesh, India and Nepal). Tradition and the role of the family were significant factors underlying child marriage. There were strong beliefs that parents were responsible for their daughters' marriage and for protecting their chastity until marriage. Child marriage was seen as an important way to fulfil this duty, while delaying marriage was seen as a failure to do so.[84]

"Sometimes the girls face eve-teasing when they walk on the roads; a boy constantly follows a beautiful girl of a poor family. They do not disturb girls of influential families, but the poor families marry off the girl because of security [concerns]."

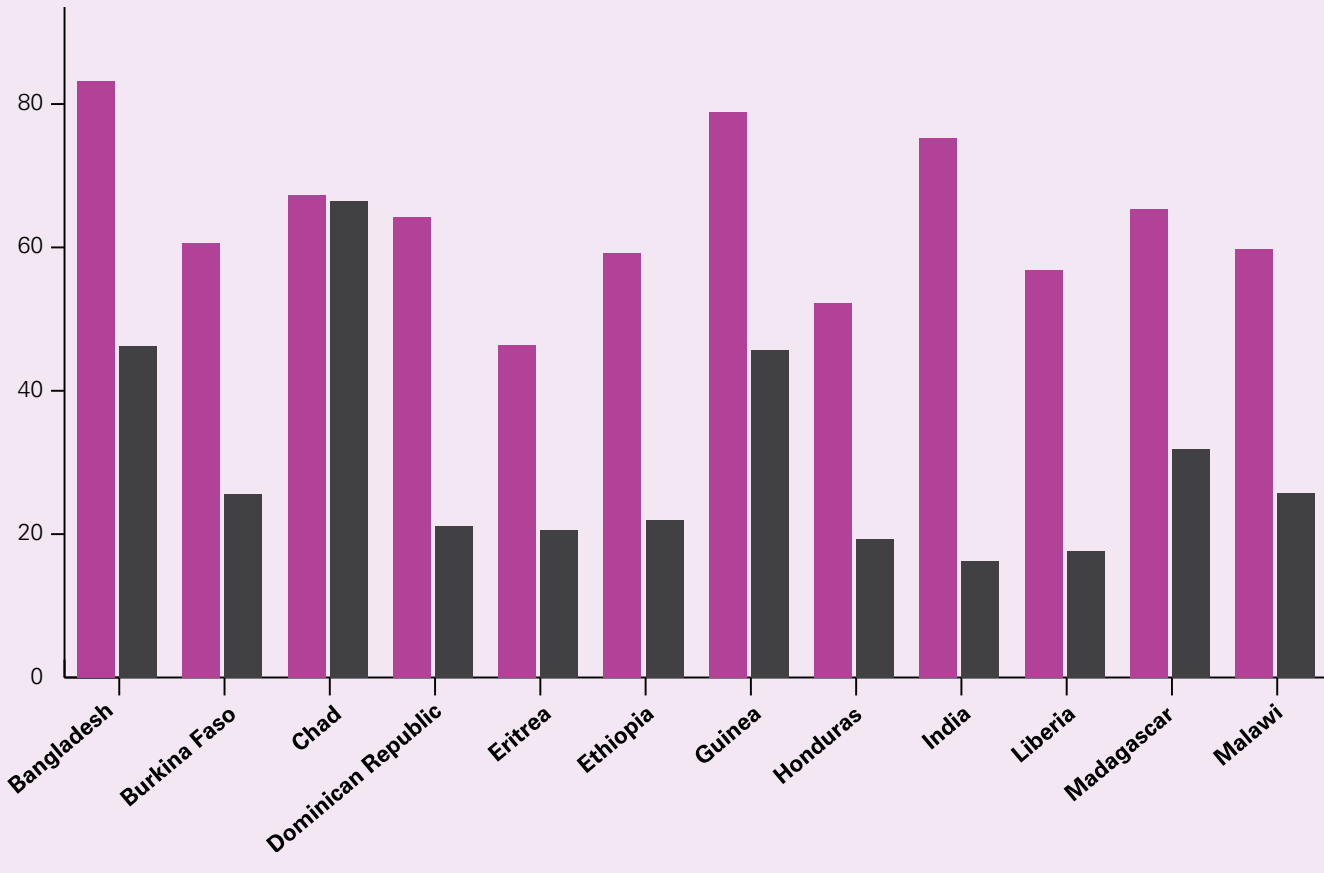
School teacher, Bangladesh[86]

It is important to note that parents' decisions to have their daughters married at an early age are often motivated by a wish to do what they believe is best for them. In communities where there are few educational, economic or professional opportunities for women, marriage can seem the best available option to secure their livelihood and financial security.

This motivation can also arise out of concerns for girls' physical safety, including their vulnerability to sexual assault and abuse in and around school. Some parents express fears that increased exposure to men and boys in school makes girls more likely to be at risk of sexual violence and to engage in pre-marital sex.[85] Some therefore view marriage as the best way to protect girls from pre-marital sex, early pregnancy, sexual violence, and HIV infection.

Child marriages can be seen as a means to consolidate relations between families or settle disputes or deals over land and property. In Pakistan, for example, girls can be exchanged between families to strengthen familial ties or offered as appeasement for a wrong done to one family, tribe or clan by another.[87] Dowry or bride-price systems, whereby gifts or money are exchanged for a bride, can offer powerful financial incentives for families to consider child marriage.[88]

In Guatemala, child marriage is more common in rural Mayan communities, who are among the poorest, most disadvantaged of Guatemala's indigenous communities. They have high rates of early school drop-out, illiteracy and limited life opportunities. Almost 40 per cent of Mayan girls are married by the age of 18. Mayan ancestral practices emphasise the importance of family to maintain community cohesion and stability. As such, girls are married early in order to reproduce and ensure family security.[89]



Poverty and scarce economic opportunities

Poverty is a significant factor that both drives and results from child marriage. The practice is frequently fuelled by poor socio-economic conditions, although it is often portrayed primarily as cultural and traditional. The prevalence of child marriage correlates with levels of household wealth – as wealth increases, child marriage gradually declines.

Girls from the poorest 40 per cent of households are much more likely to marry before they are 18 than girls from the richest homes. Analysis of UNFPA data across 78 developing countries shows that more than half (54 per cent) of girls in the poorest wealth quintile are child brides, compared to only 16 per cent of girls in the richest 20 per cent of households (see Figure 3).[91]

Families living in poverty are often faced with the decision to sacrifice the long-term benefits of educating their daughters for the immediate benefit of having one less mouth to feed or paying off a debt.

Similarly, a lack of adequate and safe employment opportunities for girls once they complete their education can mean that poor parents, forced to choose where to invest limited resources, often decide against educating girls. Their perception is that there will be little long-term benefit or use for their daughters' education. In these circumstances, marriage can be considered the only viable option to safeguard girls' futures and lighten the economic burden on families.

It is common for girls to accept their parents' decision to marry them in the hope that they can escape poverty. In one study of 36 villages in Niger, Plan found that the strongest argument girls themselves made in favour of marriage was that it would improve their economic situation and increase their social status.[92]

> "If my daughter gets married to a rich man or even a craftsman, he will take care of her. He will feed her and she will be well dressed. This will give me the opportunity to take care of the other siblings."
>
> **Mother, Egypt**[90]

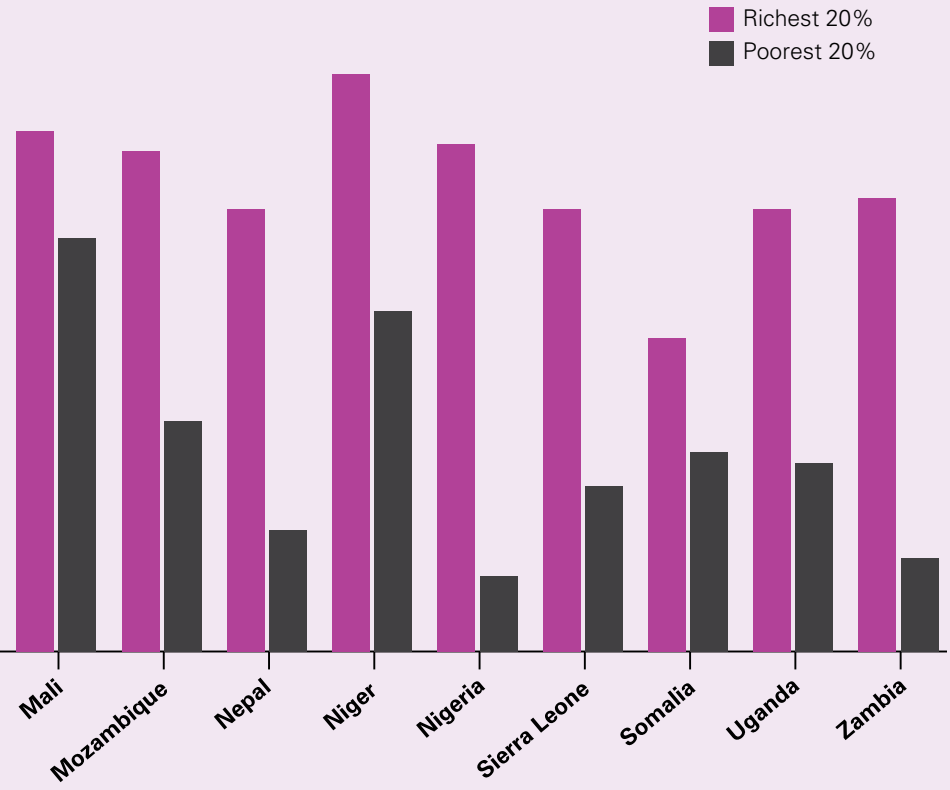


Figure 3: Percentage of women aged 20-24 married or in a union before age 18, by household wealth. Source: UNFPA database using household surveys (DHS and MICS, completed between 2000 and 2010) and UNICEF database (www.childinfo.org)

"There is a case whereby a young girl of primary six was impregnated by her own teacher. The pregnant girl had to go and live with her teacher who has now turned into her husband. This was a public shame to the teacher, pupils, the victim and her family. "

Mother, Uganda[93]

Poverty is also a contributing factor in girls' vulnerability to sexual exploitation and early pregnancy, which, in turn, can lead to child marriage. Driven by poverty, girls may engage in 'transactional' sex with teachers, school staff or other adults in exchange for money to support either themselves or their families. Vulnerability to sexual exploitation and violence and early and unintended pregnancy can lead to girls getting married as a result.

Building income and assets and helping families to gain resilience in order to cope with economic and other shocks can be an effective way of ensuring that children are protected from marriage.

Social protection programmes, which can take the form of cash and non-cash incentives, subsidies, loans and scholarships (including stipends, bursaries, fee waivers and funding for transport and books)[94] to families or girls, can be an effective way to help poor households manage risk without compromising their children's long-term security and well-being. A UNESCO evaluation of the impact on education of social protection programmes found positive effects on enrolment, attendance and educational attainment, particularly those targeting the poorest families and girls.[95]

Some of the social protection programmes which have had a positive impact on preventing child marriage have directly targeted the financial implications to families of schooling and delaying marriage. The provision of conditional and unconditional cash transfers, which increase economic security, to families who delay marrying their daughters until 18 have been effective in delaying marriage by reducing some of the economic and social pressures that give rise to the practice.[96]

The World Bank's Zomba Cash Transfer program in Malawi found that conditional and unconditional cash transfers had an impact on reducing the likelihood of being married, although unconditional cash transfers were more successful as they continued to support girls who had dropped out of school during the course of the programme. The scheme, which targeted school enrolment and attendance in Malawi has been shown to reduce the rate of child marriage by up to 40 per cent.[97] It also reduced school drop-out rates from 20 per cent to 11 per cent.[98]

The UK Department for International Development funded Berhane Hewan programme in Ethiopia provided families with school supplies to address the economic barriers to sending girls to school. In addition, families who kept girls unmarried for the duration of the two-year pilot were awarded a sheep or a goat valued at US$20-25 in a public ceremony. The Population Council found that girls aged 10-14 were one-tenth as likely to be married and three times more likely to be in school as a result.[99]

Crises, fragility and emergencies

There is emerging evidence that instability and insecurity, such as conflict or disasters caused by natural hazards, can increase the risk of marriage for young girls. Families may resort to marriage as a coping mechanism in order to support the survival or protection of girls themselves or their family. Plan research in Ethiopia and Bangladesh found that because climate risks such as droughts, flooding and food crises can exacerbate poverty levels, they also increase the risk of child marriage. In 2010, Plan International staff also reported increases in child marriage among the communities they were working with after the earthquake in Haiti and the floods in Pakistan.[101]

As a report from World Vision highlights, most of the 25 countries with the highest rates of child marriage are considered fragile states or at high risk of disasters.[102] The report identifies the fear of defying tradition, of malnutrition and hunger and of sexual violence as key factors that can contribute to increases of child marriage during a crisis or as a result of fragility.[103]

Increased food insecurity and household poverty, resulting from the shocks of conflict, disasters caused by natural hazards and slow-onset emergencies, has been linked to a rise in the rates of child marriage in some contexts. This is often as a result of parents seeing no other option but to marry their daughters to reduce the number of mouths to feed.[104] The dowry that comes from a marriage also increases a family's assets and enables them to buy food for the rest of the family.[105] It can also be seen as one of the best ways to protect the girl from similar shocks in the future.[106]

Adolescent girls face heightened risk of sexual violence during emergencies, and particularly in times of conflict. Parents can see marriage as protection for the girl herself and for the honour of the family. A 2013 report from the International Rescue Committee Commission on Syrian refugees highlights increasing reports of child marriages taking place in refugee camps as parents try to protect their daughters from the risk of being raped and to 'safeguard their honour' if they are sexually assaulted. The report also finds that the poverty faced by those living in the camps is driving parents to enter their children into marriage in order to pay rent or reduce household numbers.[107]

Despite this growing evidence, child protection issues continue to be under-prioritised and under-funded in emergencies and disasters, and governments, donors and civil society have been slow to prioritise research and data collection on the ways emergencies and disasters increase the vulnerability of children – especially girls – to child marriage, and to respond accordingly.

> "After cyclones, families think their condition is worse and send their daughters to get married. Almost 50 per cent of girls drop out of education because of early marriage. In very remote villages, it is probably more 70 to 75 per cent."
>
> **Young girl from Barguna, Bangladesh**[100]

Education: key to giving girls choices and opportunities

A quality education will give a child academic qualifications. But it offers far more besides. It is critical in helping children develop the skills, knowledge, confidence and abilities to make their own decisions, enjoy healthy and positive relationships, and make informed and positive choices about their health and well-being, and their lives.

Child marriage robs girls of their right to education. At the same time, education is widely considered to be one of the most important factors in delaying the age of marriage for girls.[108] Women with more education generally marry later and have fewer children during their teenage years, particularly if they reach secondary school.[109] Education also helps girls to have more autonomy in choosing a partner and to make free and informed decisions about marriage and sexual and reproductive health.

Less schooling equals earlier marriage: the figures

In developing countries, there is a clear correlation between levels of education and age at the time of marriage: the more education a girl has received, the less likely she is to have been married before the age of 18.[110] Of the 78 developing countries analysed by the UNFPA, girls with no education were more than three times as likely to marry or enter into union before the age of 18 as those with a secondary or higher education (63 per cent compared with 20 per cent). Girls with a primary education were more than twice as likely to marry or enter into union as those who had a secondary or higher education (45 per cent compared with 20 per cent).

Of the 25 countries with the highest prevalence rates of child marriage, 22 have data on the education levels for women who were married before their 18th birthday. On average, nearly half (49 per cent) of girls were married by the age of 18. Of those countries, an average of nearly 70 per cent of girls with no education were married by 18, compared with 56 per cent of girls who completed primary school, and 21 per cent of girls who had a secondary education or higher. In Mozambique, for example, 67 per cent of women aged 20 to 24 with no education and 57 per cent with primary education were married or in union at the age of 18, compared to only 12 per cent of women with secondary education or higher.[111]

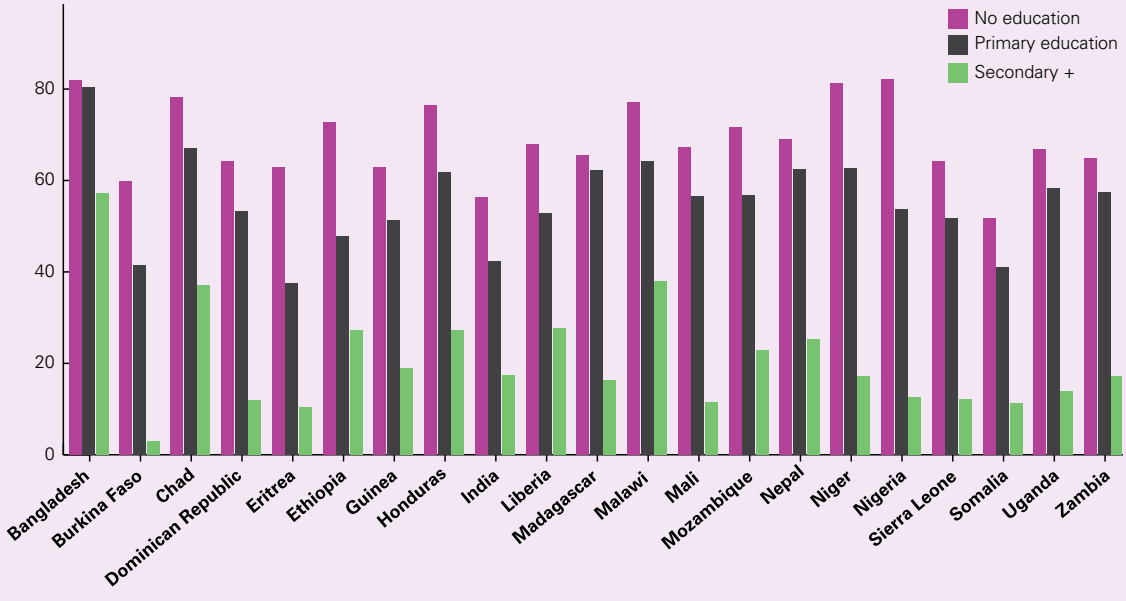


Figure 4: Percentage of women aged 20 to 24 married or in union before age 18, by education level. Source: UNFPA database using household surveys (DHS and MICS, completed between 2000 and 2010) and UNICEF database (www.childinfo.org)

While there are many reasons that cause girls to leave school, evidence points to child marriage as a factor prompting girls to drop out of school, particularly at the point of transition between primary and secondary school.[113] In research conducted by Plan in West Africa, 33 per cent of children surveyed in Senegal and 25 per cent in Mali identified marriage as a key factor in girls leaving school. Parents, teachers and children reported that marriage leads to significant domestic, social and economic pressures that force girls to abandon their education.[114]

Qualitative research conducted by Plan UK in nine countries found that child marriage and early pregnancy were cited as common reasons for girls not being able to continue in secondary school.[115] Researchers failed to find any girls who had returned to school once married. In focus group discussion in Mali, participants viewed marriage of girls aged 14 to 16 as the main barrier to girls' education. According to one male teacher who participated in the discussion: "*Early marriage is the main reason for girls to drop out. At primary school until 5th grade you see a large number of girls. But from 6th grade on you see the number of girls go down significantly.*"

Dropping out of school early means girls often lack even basic literacy and numeracy skills. A study of the impact of child marriage in Africa found that each year of marriage before adulthood reduces a girl's literacy by 5.6 percentage points.[116] A study in Bangladesh showed similar results, concluding that the postponement of marriage by one year between the ages of 11 and 16 raised educational attainment and adult literacy by 5.6 per cent per year.[117]

The negative impact of child marriage may also be felt by the next generation. The children of young mothers who have had no or little education are less likely to survive infancy, to have a good start to their education, to do well in school, or to continue beyond minimum levels of education. Daughters of uneducated mothers are especially likely to drop out of school, marry young, and begin the cycle of poverty again.[118] Conversely, research conducted in four districts in Indonesia suggests that educated parents are less likely to arrange early marriages and are more likely to promote continued education for their children, particularly parents with a secondary education.[119]

> " I did not go to school as my father saw it is no use to take a girl to school, so after FGM I was married off. My father had taken dowry thus forcing me to get married at the age of 12 years."
>
> **Child bride, Tanzania**[112]

The challenge of keeping girls in school

A major part of the fight to end child marriage is keeping girls in school. Adolescent girls face social, domestic and economic barriers that make their attendance at school unsustainable. This occurs particularly at secondary level when the costs associated with schooling increase. This is also the age at which girls are considered suitable for marriage, childbearing and increased domestic responsibilities. Girls often drop out of school at the very time when education could give them the much-needed skills and assets to empower them during the vulnerable period of adolescence.[120]

Only 50 per cent of girls in all low-income countries are enrolled in lower-secondary school.[121] This number reduces to 39 per cent in secondary school.[122] In sub-Saharan Africa, boys are more likely to complete primary education in 25 out of 43 countries with available data.[123] Despite progress on gender parity globally, girls account for 55 per cent of out-of-school children in South Asia, 65 per cent in West Asia and 79 per cent in North Africa.[124]

"In our community, we don't allow a girl to continue her education when she is married because of her responsibilities. She doesn't have any spare time to continue her education. Her in-laws and home should be her priority."

Women's focus group, Pakistan[125]

Among many communities that Plan works with, families often cite the cost burden associated with school as a reason for having to make tough choices about educating their children. Girls' education can be considered a lesser priority than boys'. Concerns about school safety, the quality of education and teaching, lack of separate sanitation facilities for girls, and the distances needed to travel to school also affect girls' chances of staying in school.

A recent baseline study on child marriage by Plan in Egypt showed that the primary reasons for school drop-out cited by community members, in addition to child marriage, were poor-quality schooling (primarily overcrowding and unqualified teachers), gender-based violence in schools and girls not learning the skills they needed for work. These factors together can reduce the incentive for girls to attend school and increase the viability of early marriage as a likely alternative.[126]

While poverty and costs are regularly cited as a barrier to keeping girls in school, Plan's experience is that many parents are already less likely to invest in their daughter's education because of an assumption that they will soon marry. In Mali, Senegal and Uganda, parents admitted that educating girls could sometimes be a disadvantage because of the delay it caused to a girl's marriage: *"Some parents attach more value to boys' education because of the pre-conceived idea that girls will be someone else's property when they get married,"* one father in Uganda said.[127]

Regardless of her age, once a girl is married, she is often considered an adult with adult responsibilities. This frequently means it is no longer considered appropriate or necessary for her to be in school – a place for children.[128] Few girls return to their education after marriage. In Nigeria, only 2 per cent of married 15- to 16-year-old girls are in school compared with 69 per cent of unmarried girls.[129] In South Asia, married girls must leave their own home for their husband's house, which may be in a different town or village. Similarly, customs in some conservative communities can require married women to adopt Purdah, a practice that means they are no longer allowed to go out in public or interact with men who are not close relatives. In some cases, girls who marry do continue to attend school, but usually not for long. In Ethiopia, for example, Plan has found that girls who remain in school after marriage usually drop out after becoming overburdened by domestic and parental responsibilities.[130]

In some contexts, girls are also required to leave school when they become pregnant or are married. Evidence points to schools in some countries having expulsion policies for girls who become pregnant, with some allowing girls to return to school, usually after 12 months, but not necessarily to the same school.[131] Even where schools do allow for re-entry, the policy is not always followed and in practice girls often do not return to school, due to administrative, social and economic barriers. Such policies can also affect boys. For example, in Malawi, girls who become pregnant and boys who impregnate a girl are asked to leave school and are allowed readmission one year after the birth, following a cumbersome process. This policy was found to be enforced more in relation to girls than boys, thereby disproportionately affecting them.[132]

Concerted efforts are needed to remove the various barriers girls face to continuing their education.[133] This includes addressing financial barriers, making schools safe, ensuring quality of teaching and ensuring that girls can continue their education and learn in a supportive environment.



Changing attitudes to girls' schooling in Kenya

Plan's 'End Girl Child Marriage' project, which ended in 2009, reached 53,000 girls and teenage mothers within Kenya's Kwale and Kinango districts and helped change attitudes to girls' schooling at a community level.

Since the project's inception, key actors such as teachers, chiefs and children's departments have reportedly shown an increased commitment to fighting child marriage and ensuring that girls remain in school to complete their education. In some schools in Kwale district, there was a noticeable reduction in teenage pregnancies and marriages. Girls were more confident in claiming their rights and reporting abuse. Parents increased their support for girls to study at home after school.

This was achieved by addressing cultural beliefs and negative attitudes towards girls, including low levels of awareness on child rights, through use of traditional performances and community radio, as well as sustained intergenerational dialogue. Plan supported child-facilitated forums, which raised awareness and contributed to positive changes in attitude towards girls' right to education, protection and participation. The dialogue, which focused on the rights of children, issues affecting them and actions for addressing them, took place between the children, parents (both men and women), elders and government officials (chiefs and children's department).

The development of life skills, through clubs in schools, was used to educate girls and boys about their rights, and provided them with the confidence to claim them. They built solidarity with their peers, helping them support and protect each other.

"The first signs that girls were engaging in transactional sex were their low levels of concentration in class. The next thing you see the girl being sent away from school. Once the girls get pregnant, that is the end of their education."

Male student, Uganda[139]

Safety: ensuring girls feel safe in school

Ensuring that schools are places where girls feel safe is key to continuing their education. Plan has documented the ways in which violence in and around schools – including sexual violence and abuse – is a barrier to girls' education in many countries.[134]

The onset of puberty makes girls more vulnerable to sexual violence, harassment, coercion and abuse at the hands of teachers, staff and other pupils. In some contexts teachers and school staff exploit their authority and power and demand sexual favours from girls in return for better grades.[135] Community-based research conducted by Plan in Africa shows this practice is widespread and widely acknowledged.[136]

Poverty can also lead to pressure on girls to engage in 'transactional' sex with teachers, staff or other adults as a way to financially support themselves and their education.[137] This can have a devastating impact on girls' education, as well as their health and well-being. In Kenya and Malawi, teachers and education officials reported that engaging in 'transactional' sex negatively affected girls' participation and performance in school as they tended to be more distracted and less able to concentrate in class. In Liberia, 47 per cent of parents questioned in research carried out by Plan, believed that transactional sex leads to girls dropping out of school.[138]

A study in rural Bangladesh reported that 45 per cent of girls aged 12 to 16 and 73 per cent of their parents considered stopping their education because of sexual harassment on the way to school.[140] Plan's own research in a rural district of Rajasthan, India, indicates that the insecurity of travel routes to middle and secondary schools in neighbouring villages act as a deterrent to both girls and their parents.[141]

As well as increasing the likelihood of girls dropping out of school, exposure to sexual violence can put girls at risk of early and unintended pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections (including HIV), often irrevocably reducing their chances to complete their education as the girls may either drop out of, or be excluded from, school.[142] Unintended pregnancies can also increase the chances of girls being forced into marriage.

Quality: ensuring girls learn in school

If girls are to aspire to a future of choice and opportunity, they need to benefit from a quality education and to have their education valued. Despite significant progress in increasing access to primary education, millions of girls and boys are failing to learn when in school. A lack of quality education has led to a 'learning crisis' where at least 250 million children are unable to read or count, even after spending four years in school.[144] In many countries girls are also less likely to transition to secondary school, are more likely to drop out and less likely to pass national examinations.[145] [146]

However, a quality education is not just about ensuring children learn the basics. For Plan, a quality education is one that is relevant to the needs and aspirations of girls and boys, which supports and promotes learning and develops children's personality, critical thinking skills, and full potential. It should enable girls and boys to be responsible and active citizens, and should be grounded in, and promote, non-discrimination, gender equality and the respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. Yet, all too often, schools themselves can undermine these goals when gender discrimination and stereotyping are perpetuated and reinforced by teachers, staff and other pupils.[147]

Teachers and students can share assumptions prevalent among parents and in the community that girls will marry rather than be in need of skills for future employment. These assumptions affect the standard of the education they receive. Girls may be treated differently to boys, subject to lower academic expectations and be expected to perform classroom chores such as such as sweeping and fetching water.[148] These chores take girls out of the classroom during class time, impacting on their learning and conveying a message to girls that they do not belong in school but in more domestic settings. Teachers can also give girls less attention and less access to learning materials than male peers because they believe boys to be more naturally intelligent and likely to succeed.[149] Girls' opportunity to learn at school can also be curtailed by their role in carrying out domestic chores at home, or by having to look after family members who are ill, thereby taking time away from their studies.

"It is observed that if a girl doesn't study and is sitting idle at home then she is married off quickly and if she studies, and does well in her exams then she is married off later."

Unmarried young woman, Bangladesh[143]

There is evidence that school teaching materials and curricula can also reinforce gender bias by representing boys and girls in stereotypical roles and occupations, sometimes depicting girls only in nurturing and domestic roles.[150]

Female teachers, who have the potential to challenge these stereotypes and be positive role models of success, professionalism and independence for adolescent boys and girls, are often missing from secondary school classrooms. Women teachers are commonly assigned to teach pre-primary or lower primary children – a position that both carries a lower status and exemplifies their "nurturing" role.[151] In sub-Saharan Africa, 76 per cent of pre-primary teachers are female, compared to just 30 per cent in secondary schools. In South Asia, 46 per cent of primary teachers are female, compared to 39 per cent at secondary school.[152]

For female teachers to be effective role models, they need to be adequately trained and supported, and they need also to occupy school management positions. Teachers and other staff (whether male or female) need training to ensure that they have proper knowledge of children's rights and gender equality, in order to prevent them perpetuating unequal gender relations in school.

School retention often depends on pupils passing gate-keeping examinations at the end of primary and secondary school, which allow them to access the next level of education. However, girls' learning may be held back by a number of school-based factors, resulting in their failure in these national examinations. Such inhibiting factors include teachers' attitudes and lower expectations of girls' ability, inadequately trained teachers, poor school infrastructure, and low quality methods of learning and assessment.[153]

Plan UK conducted a baseline study in nine different countries into girls' education in its programme areas in predominantly rural districts.[154] It found that boys were performing better than girls in national examinations in seven out of the eight countries with reliable data. In Kenya's end of primary school national exams, 29 per cent of girls achieved the national pass mark or above, compared with 50 per cent of boys; in Rwanda, just 38 per cent of primary exam passes were by girls; and in Tanzania 43 per cent of girls passed compared to 56 per cent of boys.[155] Failure to pass these exams can result in girls dropping out before they reach secondary school, thus increasing their vulnerability to child marriage.



Plan's Asia Child Marriage Initiative (ACMI)

As part of Plan's *Because I am a Girl* campaign, Plan Asia has developed the Asia Child Marriage Initiative (ACMI), aimed at preventing child marriage and mitigating the harmful consequences of the practice. It currently encompasses programming and research in India, Pakistan, Nepal, Bangladesh, Thailand, Vietnam, Philippines, Laos, Cambodia and Indonesia.

Across Asia, the percentage of women aged 20 to 24 years who were married by the age of 18 ranges from 66 per cent in Bangladesh to 10 per cent in Vietnam.[156] With almost one in five women married by the age of 15, South Asia South Asia is the region with the highest rates of child marriage in the world. It is also common in some South-East Asian countries: for example, 23 per cent of young women were married before 18 in Cambodia.

In order to understand the complexity and contexts behind child marriage, ACMI has undertaken qualitative research into the nature of the practice in different contexts. This helps shape responses in how best to address child marriage at the individual, family, community and national levels. ACMI uses Plan's Child-Centred Community Development and rights-based approach to bring together existing programmes and new activities to tackle child marriage.

These include:

- Working with community-based child protection mechanisms to intervene where girls are at risk of marriage and to respond to rights abuses among married girls and young women.
- Supporting girls' empowerment, life skills education, and peer educator training.
- Supporting community, youth and family mobilisation and campaigns, and advocacy networks and coalitions, including men's groups, to advocate on child rights and the negative effects of child marriage.
- Promoting universal birth registration, civil servant training in the application of marriage laws, and policy-based advocacy to close loopholes in marriage registration.
- Working with schools to support girls' access to secondary education, including training and curriculum support in preventing child marriage.

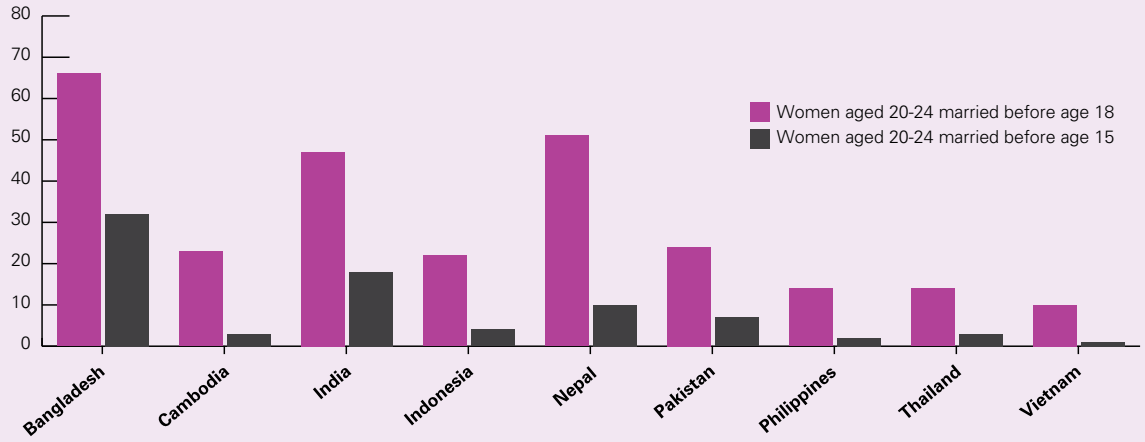


Figure 5: Rate of child marriage in ACMI countries[155]

ACMI: what works in preventing child marriage

The research conducted by ACMI has provided insights into how children can be empowered to address child marriage; the power of social conventions in sustaining child marriage; promising programme approaches; and the role of advocacy in changing policy and practice.

The solidarity emerging from Plan-backed children's groups and community-based organisations has empowered some girls to oppose the marriages being planned for them. With strong support, girls are able to act and advocate for themselves and on behalf of others. They are better able to negotiate with their parents or guardians on key decisions, such as when and whom to marry.

The findings showed that staying in school until at least class 10 can prevent a girl from marrying too soon. Parents' motivations for educating their daughters play a key role in determining how long they stay in school. In Bangladesh, parents said that their respect for children's rights to education has increased due to the awareness-building activities of Plan and its partners. In India, residential camps open to both married and unmarried girls are helping girls continue their education. Village outreach by team members builds trust in the programme and convinces families to send their daughters to the residential camps. In another project, placement of girls as teachers in pre-primary schools provides them with exposure to work, personal income, and the opportunity to challenge traditional stereotypes of women being limited to housework.

The toll on girls' health and well-being

Child marriage is a public health issue as well as a violation of children's rights. Marrying too young, or being forced to marry against their will, has devastating consequences on girls' lives – particularly on their health and well-being.

Girls who are married early are more likely to:

- Experience violence, abuse and forced sexual relations.
- Be more vulnerable to sexually transmitted infections (including HIV).
- Have reduced levels of sexual and reproductive health.[158]
- Become pregnant at a young age with much higher risks of maternal and infant mortality and morbidity.

Child marriage can mean that children are disconnected from their parents and close relatives. They are left isolated and vulnerable, without the necessary support for dealing with marriage, parenthood, domestic duties and raising a family.

Sexual and reproductive health and rights

Girls who are married at a young age are especially vulnerable to sexual and reproductive ill health, with potentially life-threatening consequences.

Boys and girls in many parts of the world have little knowledge or information about family planning, contraception, or HIV prevention and treatment, due to a lack of accessible, comprehensive sexual and reproductive health and rights information and services. For example, only 24 per cent of young women aged 15 to 24 in developing regions have comprehensive and correct knowledge of HIV/AIDS and how to prevent it.[159]

Young people, especially girls, often lack the knowledge, confidence, freedom and means to negotiate sexual relations, including safe sex and condom use. In many countries, laws prohibit children from accessing sexual and reproductive health services without parental or spousal consent until they reach the age of 18, thus denying adolescents access to those services.[160] Where girls do have knowledge of sexual and reproductive health services, their age and sex often present barriers to accessing them due to social stigma and age-inappropriate provision.

Child marriage often increases the domestic responsibilities placed on girls, thereby exacerbating their social marginalisation, removing support systems and reducing the likelihood that they will access sexual and reproductive health services and information. The pressure on girls to have children very

early on in a marriage may also contribute to a decision not to access family planning services.[161] Even if they have access to such services, many married girls lack the confidence or negotiating power to use them.[162] Where girls do attempt to use family planning methods, married girls are more likely to use traditional over modern contraceptive methods.[163]

Globally, young women account for 64 per cent of all young people (15 to 24 years old) who are living with HIV.[164] This means that girls are more likely to engage in unprotected sex, are less likely to have access to relevant information and services, or lack the power to protect themselves.[165] However, evidence suggests that married girls are at increased risk, due to their heightened sexual exposure within a union. They may be unable to negotiate decisions on sexual activity, including condom use, with their husband, particularly if married to older men who may be infected as a result of previous sexual partners. Population Council research conducted in rural Nyanza, Kenya, found that the HIV prevalence rate among married adolescent girls is almost twice that of girls aged 15 to 19 nationwide.[166]

Rights to Choose – South Sudan

Plan has been running the Rights to Choose project in South Sudan since 2010. The project aims to reduce child marriage through programmes aimed at increasing girls' access to education, as well as supporting girls who are already married to continue with their education. The project also aims to increase knowledge and awareness among girls and boys about harmful practices, such as child marriage, through children's clubs in schools.



Plan South Sudan has also carried out mass public awareness campaigns which aim to promote changes in parents' and community members' behaviour and attitudes. The awareness campaign focuses on the harmful effects of child marriage for girls; the importance of educating girls and engaging them in fulfilling their rights; the importance of access to safe education, particularly for girls; and the need for child mothers to continue with their education.

One female participant said: *"I have gained a lot of information from the training and believe that such training will help many adolescent girls to improve their health looking at the areas of STI/HIV AIDS as well as girls' education."*

Maternal and newborn mortality and morbidity

Early pregnancy is linked to child marriage as one of its causes and one of its most dangerous consequences. Social norms and expectations mean that childbearing tends to follow soon after marriage. Girls who become pregnant at a young age face much greater risk of maternal mortality and morbidity, as the statistics show:[167]

- Every year, nearly 13.7 million 15-19 year old girls in the developing world give birth while married.[168]
- Girls between the ages of 10 and 14 are five times more likely to die during pregnancy and birth compared to women aged 20 to 24.[169]
- Complications in pregnancy and childbirth are the leading cause of mortality for girls aged 15 to 19 in developing countries.[170] Girls aged 15 to 19 are twice as likely as those over 20 to die in childbirth or pregnancy.[171]

Evidence shows that pregnancy during the first few years after puberty carries an increased risk of miscarriage, obstructed labour, postpartum haemorrhage, pregnancy-related hypertension and conditions such as obstetric fistula, a lifelong debilitating condition that affects more than two million women in developing countries.[172] Early onset of childbearing also means women and girls are more vulnerable to other negative maternal health outcomes due to frequent childbirth, unplanned pregnancy and unsafe abortion.[173]

Early pregnancy and childbearing also contribute to higher infant mortality rates. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), perinatal deaths are 50 per cent higher among babies born to mothers who are under 20 years old, than among those born to mothers aged between 20 and 29 years.[174]

The babies of adolescent mothers are more likely to be stillborn, premature, under-weight and at increased risk of dying in infancy due to the mother's young age, and due to weak or inaccessible health care systems. In developing countries, many births are not attended by trained health professionals and there is little access to emergency obstetric care, particularly in remote and rural areas.

Due to their age and inexperience, adolescent mothers are also likely to use poor feeding practices, less sound baby care, such as vaccinations, and are more likely to have stunted or wasted children, compared to older mothers.[175]



Violence, abuse and forced sexual relations

Girls married at a young age are often at more risk of domestic violence, abuse and forced sexual relations. Their age and lack of education, combined with their status and lack of autonomy and decision-making power within the home, can make them more vulnerable to violence and abuse.[177] Such violence is likely to continue into adulthood.

> "I think the reason that men are cruel to their wives is because some of them pay so many cows as dowry… when a girl gets married the parents tell her that she should not come back… Thus the husband beats her because he knows she doesn't have any place to go."
>
> **Child bride, Tanzania**[176]

According to a WHO study, married girls aged between 15 and 19 are more likely to experience domestic violence than older married women.[178] Child marriage is often characterised by a wide age gap between the spouses, and girls who marry before the age of 18 are more likely to be married to men who are significantly older. This carries additional risks for girls: they are less able to negotiate with their husband, make decisions within the household and protect their own health and well-being.[179] Studies show that the younger a girl is when she first has sex, the more likely it is that she faces violence.[180]

In some cases, married girls may be abandoned for second wives if they do not bear children. If they are divorced by their husbands, or if they are widowed, they may be rejected by their family and their in-laws, shunned by society, denied property rights and left to fend for themselves.[181]

Psychological and emotional impacts

While there is little research on the psychological impact of child marriage on girls, and even less on boys, it is clear that the practice poses significant risks to the psychological as well as physical health and well-being of girls and women. Being deprived of an appropriate childhood and adolescence; being burdened with roles and responsibilities for which they are physically, psychologically and emotionally unprepared; having their personal liberty curtailed; being removed from their families and friends: all this can leave children in early marriages isolated and vulnerable, and lead to post-traumatic stress and depression.[182]

Research conducted by Plan in Pakistan[183] found that the often total disconnect from parents and close relatives can have a devastating psychological effect. One interviewee, when asked how much contact she had with her family replied:

"I never see them. My in-laws did not allow me to visit them. Even when my brother was ill they would not allow me to see him. When he died, I went home and when I saw his face I fainted. The neighbours helped me and took me to a doctor. I was in hospital for four days after that."

A study of child marriage in the United States also found that child brides were more likely to suffer from a 41 per cent increased risk of psychiatric disorders, including depression, anxiety and bipolar disorders.[184] However, there remains a significant gap in research into the impact of child marriage on the psychological well-being of boys and girls.



Action needed to end child marriage

Another 100 million girls will be married by 2020 if urgent action is not taken on child marriage and current trends continue.[185] That is another 100 million girls and young women placed at increased risk of poverty, illiteracy, violence and abuse, ill health, maternal death and disability. As this report has shown, the causes of child marriage are complex and interrelated, and its effects on children, girls especially, are severe.

Mapping child marriage levels, causes and consequences within countries and regions will be essential for the design and implementation of national-level frameworks and programme design, as well as tracking progress in reducing child marriage. This undertaking will have to recognise that the drivers and prevalence of child marriage vary within and across countries and communities.

Given the complex and interlinked causes and consequences of child marriage, the most effective policy and programme interventions are those that take a holistic approach: supporting and promoting children's rights, enabling girls to stay in school and receive a quality education, addressing economic insecurity, building capacity, and enabling and empowering individuals and communities to act to address the social and cultural norms and attitudes which result in child marriage.[186] Plan's experience, which is supported by research from the International Centre for Research on Women, has shown that the strongest programme interventions foster information, skills and networks for girls in combination with community mobilisation.[187]

Preventing another generation of child brides is part of the response needed, but more must also be done to address and support the unique needs of those girls and boys who are already married.

National-level action to end child marriage

Increase access and completion of quality primary and secondary education

Getting and keeping girls in school, and ensuring they receive a quality primary and secondary education may be one of the best ways to foster later consensual marriage. It will also contribute to delayed sexual initiation, lower rates of HIV infection, reduced maternal mortality and morbidities, and greater gender equality.[188] Emphasis should be placed on increased access, quality and governance in education with a clear commitment to gender equality. Schools should be safe, accessible and inspiring for girls, and education must be relevant to their needs and aspirations.

Support should also be provided to ensure that teaching styles and curricula are relevant to girls' needs, emphasise their abilities, equip them with skills to find decent work and manage their finances, and include quality, comprehensive, age-appropriate sexual and reproductive health and rights education.[189] Educational materials, curricula and teaching methodologies should also promote gender equality and challenge negative gender stereotypes. Teachers and other school staff should also have the necessary skills and training on children's rights and gender equality as well as in identifying and responding to cases of child marriage.

Support economic and livelihood opportunities

Improving the economic status of girls and their families can play a role in reducing child marriage by reducing the financial motivations for child marriage. Interventions could include providing livelihood opportunities for unmarried girls during adolescence, particularly once they have finished education, or incentives to girls and their families to delay marriage and remain in school.

The provision of age-appropriate income-generating opportunities could be accompanied by the provision of special vocational and livelihood training, particularly in non-traditional sectors, directed at increasing girls' access to improved earning opportunities.

Social protection policies, which could be linked to educational enrolment and attendance or commitments not to marry before the age of 18, can also help to reduce the economic incentives associated with marriage.

Create an enabling environment for change

A girl's choice over if, who and when to marry is all too often in the hands of parents and guardians. These choices can be guided by dominant family and community expectations, norms and beliefs. Therefore, engaging, educating and mobilising parents and communities are crucial steps in changing negative social norms and practices. They can help create environments which are more supportive of parents' decisions not to marry their daughters at an early age and which enable girls' own decision-making.

Responses can include engaging in dialogue with parents and traditional and religious leaders to identify steps to reduce child marriage, as well as supporting awareness-raising and public education programmes at the national and community level. Group and community education programmes could focus on the negative gender norms that give rise to child marriage. These programmes would also raise awareness of existing domestic and international laws prohibiting child marriage, the dangers and negative impacts of child marriage, the economic and livelihood alternatives to marriage, and the benefits of keeping girls in school.

Safe spaces, forums and support networks can be created to provide girls and boys with information, life skills training and the opportunities to form new connections and friendships within the community. Enhancing skills and knowledge, as well as reducing social and economic isolation, can empower girls and boys to act as change agents within their communities. They are then able to act and advocate for themselves and on behalf of others. This can give them the confidence and ability to negotiate key decisions with their parents or guardians.



Engaging communities through dialogue

As part of Plan UK's current Building Skills for Life multi-country programme, funded by the Department for International Development, child marriage is identified as a critical issue preventing girls from completing basic education in seven focus countries (Mali, Pakistan, Sierra Leone, Rwanda, Kenya, Malawi and Zimbabwe). Plan and its partners facilitate community-level dialogue in the context of girls' right to education, addressing child marriage along with other harmful practices.

Programme workers engage with community leaders to support attitude and behaviour change – using peer educators, community health workers, teachers, community advocates, theatre, story-telling and art. In Pakistan, Plan works with religious leaders to change attitudes and provides non-formal education in the community as a means to delay marriage and help girls to complete basic education.

Communities must be engaged in a culturally sensitive way. In Sierra Leone, for example, a framing of the child marriage debate around children's rights, rather than on the health and well-being of the child, has prompted some rural communities to resist messages about child marriage.[190] Also, the use of the language of rights without a discussion of the duties that parents owe their children, and vice versa, reduces the likelihood that people in rural communities will respond to advocacy messages aimed at preventing child marriage. Without this discussion, parents are concerned that they are being prevented from doing what they believe is in the best interests of their children.

Prevention through participation

Through 75 years' work with children, Plan has learned that one of the best ways to tackle child marriage is by supporting girls and boys to advocate for their rights. This means providing them with the information, skills and networks that enable them to make the case for girls' rights, through individual and collective action, supported by wider community mobilisation.

In 2012, Plan trained 149,686 community members in child protection and child rights, alongside 35,625 staff from our partner organisations.[191] We support girls and boys to gain confidence and life skills through Plan-supported children's clubs. In Bangladesh, Nepal and India, Plan and its partners are promoting community-based organisations and children's groups to promote awareness of child rights and child marriage. In these clubs, children are encouraged to discuss their rights and to participate effectively in making decisions with their parents and others on issues that affect their lives, including child marriage.

In Nepal Plan has set up around 1,500 clubs providing life skills classes, including education on the dangers of child marriage. In Bangladesh, Plan supports adolescent girls and boys to act as surveillance groups to check on peers who face the risk of being married by their parents. The girls discuss issues affecting them with friends and peers. In some cases they act as pressure groups in delaying the age of marriage through negotiation with elders.

The solidarity emerging from these groups has empowered some girls to oppose the marriages being planned for them and assert their rights to select a partner, continue their education, or pursue career goals:

"My parents tried to marry me off several times before I became 18. But I was determined. When the groom's side would come to see me, I never used to stay at home... When it happened several times, my father asked me why I was doing this. Then I made my father understand what can happen to a girl if she is married at a young age. And I also told my father that I want to study... After that my father understood... He tells everyone that I will marry my daughter off after she passes the BA."

Unmarried girl, Bangladesh[192]

Strengthen national legislative frameworks and protection mechanisms

While legal protection alone will not eliminate the practice of child marriage, enacting and enforcing national legislation that prohibits child marriage provides a necessary platform for successful interventions. National governments should develop, strengthen and implement laws governing the minimum age for marriage in line with international human rights standards. This not only provides a framework for protection, but also provides guidance and legitimacy for policy-makers and community activists when tackling some of the financial, social and cultural drivers behind the practice. The enforcement of birth and marriage registration should also be prioritised in order to support the effective implementation of national legislation prohibiting child marriage.

In order to support the effective implementation and enforcement of national legislation and related policies, national governments should strengthen the capacity and training of key institutions and officials, including the judiciary, child protection services, law enforcement officers and other policy-makers and service providers. School and community-based protection mechanisms should be established and strengthened in order to support the implementation of the law at the community and school levels.

Increase access to comprehensive sexual and reproductive health and rights services

Governments and donors should strive to ensure universal access to quality, comprehensive and age-appropriate sexual and reproductive health information and services for all young people, including married and unmarried adolescents and those at risk of child marriage. These should include access to family planning and contraceptive services, information and rights-awareness, as well as specialist services and care, including psycho-social care. The integration of non-formal education on issues such as sexual and reproductive health and rights into programming can also support changes in norms and attitudes around marriage for girls and help to delay first pregnancy.

Supporting the enforcement of laws on marriage age through birth registration

Although the law in Bangladesh sets a legal minimum age of 18 for girls to marry, the country has the highest rate of child marriage in South Asia and the third highest globally. A significant contributing factor to high prevalence rates in Bangladesh – as in many other countries – is that children are not registered at birth. This makes it difficult to enforce the legal age of marriage.

Plan has been working with the government of Bangladesh and UNICEF to register birth data online, particularly in rural areas, as a means of reducing child marriage. The secure online process prevents forgery and identity fraud. It enables marriage registrars to confirm the age of boys and girls prior to marriage.

Plan has also been working with local authorities and communities, with the active participation of children, to raise awareness of the importance of universal birth registration and the harm caused by child marriage. Since 2005, more than eight million birth certificates have been issued across five districts. As part of its programme to stop child marriage, Plan is close to achieving 100 per cent online birth registration in all of its working areas.



18+: tackling child marriage in Malawi, Mozambique, Zambia and Zimbabwe

More than half of girls in Mozambique and almost half in Malawi and Zambia will be married as children, before they are 18 years of age. Almost a third of all girls in Zimbabwe face a similar risk.

By working at all levels, including through strategic communication messaging, with legislative frameworks, local governance structures and with girls themselves, Plan's 18+ programme aims to significantly reduce and eventually eliminate child marriage. Working holistically, recognising and targeting the spheres of influence that surround a girl and the complex circumstances that lead to child marriage, is the best way of achieving substantial and sustainable results.

Plan aims to change people's attitudes towards child marriage, create an enabling environment that recognises and protects girls' rights, and build girls' resilience and agency so they may challenge and resist this harmful practice.

18+ has the following objectives:

- To protect girls from child marriage.
- To develop and strengthen mechanisms to ensure that children, especially girls, stay in school and complete their education.
- To create a girl-led movement against child marriage.
- To establish partnerships with local and international NGOs and regional bodies to cooperate on research and planning, policy engagement, communication, education, and resource mobilisation.

It will aim to:

- Raise awareness of the magnitude and effects of child marriage among all stakeholders.
- Encourage girls' direct participation in advocacy aimed at ending child marriage.
- Reform legal and public policy aimed at eliminating child marriage, including changing the legal age of marriage to 18 years for both girls and boys.
- Improve national child protection mechanisms to respond to child marriages.
- Transform attitudes in order to challenge the social norms that perpetuate child marriage.
- Carry out educational reforms that will encourage girls to enrol, stay, progress and complete a quality basic education, including working with community and family members.

International action to end child marriage

Plan has a long history of working directly with rights holders, duty bearers and traditional power holders to change attitudes and behaviours that give rise to child marriage. We work at the regional, national and community level, with partners that oppose and will act against child marriage. These include: regional bodies; government ministries and service providers; civil society organisations; traditional and religious leaders; boys and girls themselves. We understand that interventions at each of these levels are critical components of an integrated approach.

Yet we recognise that for our global Because I am a Girl campaign to succeed, we also have to work at the international level to generate political will and concrete action, raise child marriage as a critical human rights issue within the UN system, and work with partners to support the development of frameworks and action plans to eliminate child marriage. For this reason, we are calling on UN member states to work together to adopt a UN General Assembly Resolution on child marriage by 2015. We also want the elimination of child marriage to be included as a target or indicator in the post-2015 global development framework.

Engaging religious and traditional leaders to end child marriage

In many of the places where child marriage is most prevalent, religion and tradition exerts a powerful influence over communities. It is often used to insulate and sanction child marriage practices. Religious, spiritual and traditional leaders are respected and powerful voices in many communities where Plan works.

Engaging and supporting these leaders to be strong advocates can be crucial in eliminating harmful practices such as child marriage. By speaking out against child marriage and identifying and championing community-led strategies for ending the practice, they can create environments where parents who decide not to marry their daughters early are supported.[193]

Plan works with religious leaders such as the Sultan of Dosso, one of only four sultans (the highest level of traditional leader) in Niger. He explains why he supports Plan's work to end child marriage.



" Our role as traditional [customary] leaders is managing the customs of the communities. Management really implies development, and development means training, education, health. For me, the issue of girls' education is paramount.

" I'm 88 years old, and ever since my medical training, I have understood that marrying a young girl early at the age of 11, 12 – something that our customs allow – that a girl that age is not physically mature. She may unfortunately get pregnant, and this often ends up with surgical intervention, or with fistula. That's frequent. So it's normal that I should attempt to explain this very serious phenomenon to my population, which leaves little girls physically challenged for life. It's not only a loss for us in terms of development, but it's also a huge loss for the girl. These girls are physically and psychologically scarred for life.

" As soon as one learns, in villages or in schools, of a case of child marriage, we are notified. I have my village chiefs, my customary chiefs who try to stop it. If they can't solve the problem, they come to me. That's when I summon the parents and all concerned to dissuade them. Our work is mainly dissuasion, raising awareness and explanation.

" I've always said that Plan Niger does remarkable work in the Dosso region. We, like you, work to train (educate) villages. You are also trying to educate people, like us, so we complete each other. You're giving me support that I am taking with both hands." [194]

Recommendations for action

Action to eliminate child marriage must involve strong commitment and concerted action by stakeholders at multiple levels: international, regional, national, community, family and individual. Given its multiple causes and consequences, ending child marriage will require a cross-sectoral and coordinated approach to prevention and response. This requires collaboration and partnership between relevant government departments (such as education and health care), law enforcement agencies, the judiciary, child protection services, human rights bodies, women's groups, community-based organisations, religious and traditional leaders, civil society organisations and communities.

Public policy and programmatic interventions should take a holistic approach that supports and promotes children's rights, and enables and empowers individuals and communities to address the social, economic, cultural and religious norms and attitudes which perpetuate child marriage. Governments should adopt and implement national frameworks to end child marriage and ensure that all girls are able to realise their right to education.

National action needed

Governments, with the support of donors and civil society, should:

1. Develop and implement effective legislation

- Undertake a **comprehensive legislative review** to ensure that domestic legislation prohibiting child marriage, whether in statutory, customary or religious laws, is in full conformity with international human rights standards.
- **Ensure national legislation that guarantees 18 as the minimum legal age of marriage for both boys and girls, with or without parental consent.** Legislation must be consistent with the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women and other regional and international human rights standards.
- **Strengthen local and national monitoring and enforcement mechanisms.** This includes establishing a comprehensive protective environment for children through the effective combination of a national child protection system and community-based child protection mechanisms. These must be accessible to all children, including those from the most marginalised groups.
- **Raise awareness of legislation and legal safeguards to ensure effective implementation.** Effective implementation of legislation must involve systematic efforts to raise awareness of legislation, of the rights of women and children, and the causes and consequences of child marriage among law enforcement officials, the judiciary and customary law-makers, public officials, teachers and school staff, community members, child protection practitioners, service providers, parents and caregivers as well as children and adolescents.
- **Allocate appropriate technical, financial and human resources for, and strengthen the capacity of, key actors in eliminating child marriage.** These include school authorities, health providers, relevant government departments, the justice system, child protection services, law enforcement agencies, civil society, families, caregivers and communities.

- Ensure the **effective civil registration of births and marriages** to enable the relevant authorities to identify, prevent and respond to cases of child marriage.
- **Withdraw reservations** made to international human rights instruments which are pertinent to child marriage.
- **Ratify the three Optional Protocols to the Convention on the Rights of the Child** and ensure their full implementation.

2. Improve girls' access to, and experience of, quality primary and secondary education

- Take the necessary measures to **ensure that all girls, without discrimination, have access to quality education** that is relevant to their needs, rights and aspirations and which enables them to develop their knowledge, life skills, abilities and full potential.
- Ensure that **education promotes non-discrimination, gender equality and human rights**, that curricula and teaching methods are free from gender bias, discrimination and stereotyping. This also requires providing teachers and school staff with the necessary training, resources and support – including on children's rights and gender equality – and ensuring that they encourage equal opportunities for girls while not promoting or condoning gender stereotyping in schools.
- **Tackle all forms of violence against children, including gender-based violence, in and around schools,** including by increasing safety on school premises, and ensuring effective codes of conduct and child-friendly reporting and support mechanisms to respond to such violence.
- Include comprehensive, age-appropriate **sexual and reproductive health and rights education in the national curricula**.
- Provide opportunities for girls and women to access **vocational training and develop skills** to enable them to secure their livelihood.

3. Engage and mobilise parents, teachers, religious leaders and community members

- **Carry out awareness-raising activities and promote education and dialogue** as effective tools for changing social norms, attitudes and practices to create environments where boys and girls are able to complete their education and to make autonomous and informed choices and decisions on marriage and childbearing.
- **Create programmes that include working with men and boys,** including traditional, religious and community leaders and teachers to reinforce the positive role that men and boys can play in tackling child marriage and other harmful practices by raising awareness within their families, among their peers and throughout the community.
- **Promote engagement with families, caregivers and community members that is culturally sensitive** and that highlights the negative consequences of child marriage on girls' education and their health and well-being. Engagement with communities and with parents and caregivers should avoid stigmatising parents for a practice that they believe is in their child's best interests.
- **Work with civil society organisations to create safe spaces, forums and support networks** for girls and boys with information, life skills training and opportunities to deepen existing, and form new, connections and friendships within the community. Through these networks, work to ensure children's participation and ownership in platforms for creating awareness, as peer educators and advocates, about the negative consequences of child marriage.

4. Provide comprehensive sexual and reproductive health and rights information and services

- Ensure access to **safe, comprehensive and age-appropriate sexual and reproductive health information and services** – including contraception, family planning and psycho-social support – for both married and unmarried adolescents.
- Provide **quality reproductive and maternal health services** for all adolescent girls, including emergency obstetric care, quality ante-natal and post-natal care and infant care and support.

5. Support economic and livelihood opportunities

- **Provide appropriate financial incentives** such as scholarships, cash transfers, social protection and subsidies to increase families' economic security and address the economic drivers of child marriage.

6. Support girls and boys who are already married

- Provide support systems for children and youth who are married, including those who experience violence and abuse within marriage. Such systems must include access to legal support, health care and psycho-social support, effective child protection services, and outreach services such as sexual and reproductive health, life skills and vocational training.
- Ensure that **girls and boys are not excluded from school on the grounds of marriage, pregnancy and parenthood**, and that girls in particular are supported to return to school and complete their education after marriage and childbirth.

7. Recognise and promote the participation of girls and boys in decisions that affect them

- **Work with girls and boys as key participants** in developing solutions to eliminate child marriage.
- **Create opportunities and support girls and boys to have their voices heard** and to participate meaningfully in local, national and international debates and initiatives to end child marriage – including policy reform and protection and monitoring processes.

International action needed

Collective action is needed by international development organisations, UN agencies, human rights institutions, governments and civil society:

1. Member states of the United Nations should work together to adopt, by 2015 at the latest, **a UN General Assembly resolution to address child marriage as a violation of children's rights**.

2. **Consistently raise child marriage as a human rights issue within the UN Human Rights Council and in the UN human rights monitoring bodies**, including in the Universal Periodic Review process, in order to promote standard-setting and dialogue on child marriage as a human rights issue at the international level.

3. UN agencies and civil society organisations should support governments **to develop, adopt and implement national-level frameworks and action plans to end child marriage through financial support, technical assistance and programme delivery**. Action plans should be consistent with international human rights standards and aligned with the recommendations set out in this report.

4. Support governments to take the necessary measures to **ensure that all girls are able to transition to, and complete, a quality secondary education**.

5. Support further research to **improve data collection and monitoring and evaluation on the drivers and consequences of child marriage**, including the ways in which emergencies and disasters caused by natural hazards increase the vulnerability of children – especially girls – to child marriage.

6. Invest in efforts to **increase and strengthen child protection in emergencies and disasters** – including in first-phase response – so as to protect children from harm and abuse, including the possible risks of child marriage.

7. Ensure that the **post-2015 development framework includes ending child marriage among its objectives**.

8. Ensure that the **post-2015 development framework includes a specific goal on quality education for all children**.

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