

Together to #ENDviolence

Global Policy Briefing

Key Messages

End child, early and
forced marriage

2030 Policy Objectives

End child, early and forced marriage. Every government should enact an enabling legal and policy framework to end child, early and forced marriage (CEFM) as part of efforts to support girls to fulfil their potential in all aspects of their lives and end violence against children. Any legal change to address CEFM must be accompanied by a comprehensive approach supported by laws, policies and programmes that put the autonomy and the rights of girls at the centre in order to promote gender equality and children's rights, and protect women and girls against discrimination in both law and practice.

KEY MESSAGES

- Child marriage is a global issue. It is rooted in gender inequality and further exacerbated by poverty, social norms and insecurity, and has devastating consequences all over the world. It is not limited by region, country or religion.
- Girls who formally marry or cohabit before the age of 18 have lower life chances, are at higher risk of poor maternal health outcomes and experience more poverty than girls who are not married. Ending child marriage will improve the health of millions of girls and their children.
- Globally, the rates of child marriage are slowly declining, but progress isn't happening fast enough and is uneven. The most marginalised girls – those in rural, poor or humanitarian settings – are also the most vulnerable to child marriage.
- The COVID-19 pandemic has had an impact on child marriage. Even before the pandemic, change needed to happen 17 times faster for us to meet the Sustainable Development Goal target 5.3 of ending child marriage by 2030. Because of the pandemic – and the resulting disruptions to education, health care, economies and child marriage prevention programming – 10 million more girls are expected to marry as children this decade, on top of the 100 million girls who were already at-risk before COVID-19 began to spread.
- Laws alone are not enough to end CEFM, but they can play an important role alongside a wider range of interventions. All legal reform must be accompanied by policies and programmes that transform social norms and address the drivers of CEFM.
- Ending child marriage and guaranteeing girls' rights means a fairer, more secure and prosperous future for us all.

KEY STATISTICS

- Every year, 12 million girls are married before the age of 18.
- More than 650 million women alive today already suffer the direct consequences of child marriage.
- Nearly 40 per cent of girls in the world's poorest countries are married as children, twice the global average.
- The 10 countries with the highest child marriage prevalence rates are either fragile or extremely fragile states.¹
- Child marriage increases in fragile settings. For example, in South Sudan, child marriage was 40 per cent higher in conflict affected areas than the national pre-conflict average.

¹As of 2021, the countries with the highest prevalence of child marriage are Niger, Central African Republic, Chad, Mali, Mozambique, Burkina Faso, South Sudan, Bangladesh, Guinea, and Nigeria

- Globally, the proportion of girls marrying as children has decreased by 15 per cent over the last decade. Today, fewer than one in five girls marry before the age of 18, down from around one in four in 2010. Due to COVID-19, however, these gains are now under threat.
- Before COVID-19 began in early 2020, 100 million girls were projected to marry by 2030. As a result of the pandemic, an additional 10 million girls are expected to marry between now and 2030.

WHY AND WHY NOW?

More than 650 million women alive today are already affected by the negative consequences of child marriage. Globally, the rates of child marriage are slowly declining, but progress isn't happening fast enough. If pre-pandemic trends continue, 100 million more girls will be married by 2030. This figure may increase by a further 10 million girls as a result of the pandemic.

Child marriage is a human rights violation that threatens girls' rights to health, education and opportunity. Girls who formally marry or cohabit as if married before the age of 18 are more likely to have early pregnancies, experience dangerous complications in pregnancy and childbirth, acquire HIV, and experience domestic violence. Ending child marriage will improve the health of millions of girls and their children.

When a girl gets married she is often expected to drop out of school to look after the home, children and extended family. This can also make it difficult for married girls, pregnant girls and young mothers to return to school. When they marry as children, girls miss out on developing the skills, knowledge and confidence they need to make informed decisions, negotiate, access paid employment and live independent lives. With little access to education and economic opportunities, girls and their families are more likely to live in poverty. While child marriage is influenced by poverty, culture and tradition, gender inequality is at the root of this practice.

It is important for any country to have a minimum age of marriage, as this legally protects children from abuse, harm, violence and exploitation. Laws to address child marriage should be part of a comprehensive legal and policy framework that addresses its root causes, including gender inequality. This framework should include issues such as:

- Marriage and divorce (including registration and solemnisation of marriages, alimony and custody of children).
- Harmful practices such as dowry, bride price, polygamy and female genital mutilation/cutting.
- Property and inheritance.
- Sexual and gender-based violence (including identification of girls at risk in schools and other community spaces and marital rape).
- Child labour and abuse.
- Trafficking, including sex trafficking and international marriage brokering.
- Access to education, healthcare and social securities.
- Mandatory birth and marriage registration (including registration of all marriages, including civil, religious and customary unions as a means to track marriages and age of marriage).

In many countries, there are legal provisions which allow exceptions to the minimum age of marriage. These loopholes can undermine the efficacy of legal protections for girls. Examples include marriage upon parental consent or authorisation of the court, or where customary or religious laws that set lower minimum ages of marriage take precedence over national law.

However, while an important milestone, laws alone are not enough to end child marriage. In many contexts, the law is used to punish as opposed to seeking justice and redress. This can mean more emphasis is placed on stopping a marriage from happening, rather than protecting girls who choose not to marry or who have been married. Too often, governments use laws to respond to social issues without also putting in place the policies and programmes needed to support social change and address the drivers of the practice.

Only focusing on the legal prohibition of child marriage may drive the practice underground and beyond the reach of the law. In some countries, the intense focus on anti-child marriage laws diverts attention away from complementary and holistic approaches to engage families and communities, and support for health, sexuality, education and support services for girls. Any implementation of child marriage laws should be based in consultation with civil society organisations – including the participation of youth and adolescents – to put girls’ rights at the centre and complement and support community-based efforts to change the social and gender norms which drive child marriage. This holistic approach to ending child marriage is supported in the Human Rights Council Resolution on Child, Early and Forced Marriage in 2019.

Ending child marriage and guaranteeing girls’ rights means a fairer, more secure and prosperous future for us all.

HOW?

1. Scale up what works

To have a meaningful impact on the numbers of girls that marry every year, child marriage programming must be taken to scale. This should be led by governments, with strong partnerships with – and accountability sought by – civil society, and supported by targeted development assistance and domestic resource mobilisation. Governments and other stakeholders should:

- Securing free, quality education for all girls for 12 years or more.
- Guarantee access for all girls – regardless of age or marital status – to the full range of youth-friendly health, sexual and reproductive health care services, including safe abortion.
- Ensure that policies and plans to mitigate and respond to humanitarian situations reflect the specific needs of girls and women in crisis.

2. Transform social norms

A world without child marriage would be a more gender-equal world. This means transforming harmful social norms that restrict and repress girls and women and reduce their life chances.

Governments and donors should:

- Fund and support long-term social norms transformation.
- Invest in social norms programming that focuses on all who influence attitudes that result in child marriage.
- Ensure community mobilisation programming is led by frontline workers from those communities where child marriage occurs.

3. Support civil society movements to drive change

To accelerate progress towards gender equality, the movement to end child marriage needs to be diverse and inclusive, and be able to effectively advocate for an end to child marriage as part of the broader campaign for girls' and women's rights and ending violence against children.

Governments and donors should:

- Increase funding for movements, collective action and individual civil society organisations, and ensure it is multiyear and flexible.
- Invest in learning and evidence around what works to end child marriage and to advance girls' rights and agency.

4. Put girls at the centre

Girls are active, engaged and powerful individuals who best understand the realities of their lives. To accelerate progress towards ending child marriage, girls and young people must be at the centre of finding solutions and shaping their futures.

Governments and donors should:

- Invest in programmes that build the life skills and confidence of girls.
- Integrate girls into the design and development of programmes that aim to influence their lives.
- Profile girls and young people in programmes, media and communications to create positive role models.

Support and Resources available

UNICEF, 2021, [Child marriage database](#)

UNICEF, 2021, [Covid –10, A threat to progress on child marriage](#)

UNFPA, 2020, Interim Technical Note, Information as of 27 April 2020: [Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Family Planning and Ending Gender-based Violence, Female Genital Mutilation and Child Marriage](#)

UNFPA, 2020, [UNFPA projections predict calamitous impact on women's health as COVID-19 pandemic continues](#)

OECD, 2020, [States of Fragility](#)

Marsh, M., and Blake, M., 2019, ["Where is the Money?" IRC and VOICE](#)

Buchanan, E., 2019, ["Born to be married – Addressing early and forced marriage in Nyal, South Sudan," Oxfam](#)

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Solutions Summit Series



secretariat@end-violence.org

end-violence.org

633 Third Avenue, Floor 25, New York, NY 10017

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