



## Child marriage

**Child, Early, and Forced Marriage and Unions (CEFMU)** refers to the spectrum of marriages or informal unions where one or both parties are below the age of 18 or are forced into the union without their free and full consent. For **Plan International**, **all child marriages** are considered both **forced** and **early**. While terms like “early and forced marriage” can also apply to adults, the term “child marriage” will be used throughout the text to focus on the primary group they aim to protect: children under 18 who are forced into marriage without their consent. **See definitions on page 6.**

## Key numbers

Over the past 10 years, the number of young women married as children has dropped by 15%. However, in some regions, child marriage is increasing rapidly, mainly due to crises, displacement, and the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. Global progress is too slow to meet the goal of ending child marriage by 2030, as set by the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The numbers are quite alarming:



**12 million girls** or 1 in 5 girls are married before the age of 18 each year.<sup>1</sup>



In Sahel countries, **more than half of girls** are married as children.<sup>2</sup> In Niger, two girls out of three are married before age 18.<sup>3</sup>



Every **3 seconds** a girl gets married somewhere in the world.<sup>4</sup>



At the current pace, the world is at least **300 years away from ending child marriage** and more than **9 million girls** will still be married in the year 2030.<sup>5</sup>

# Drivers and root causes\*

**Marriages involving children or adolescents occur all over the world. It is not unique to one country, continent, group of peoples, religion or ethnicity. Girls and women face multiple forms of discrimination that drive child marriage. This discrimination is systemic, and is caused by several intertwined factors that reinforce each other:**

## Rigid gender norms promote control over girls' lives

- In many communities, **girls are expected to become wives and mothers** and start bearing children at an early age. Such expectations are linked to harmful gender norms, that justify **men's control of female sexuality and bodily autonomy**. Overall, this limits girls' agency, that is the ability to make her own decisions about her life, including when and whom to marry.
- In many communities, parents force girls into marriage to **avoid the shame of sex and pregnancy out of wedlock**. Alternatively, when girls become pregnant out of wedlock, they are pressured to marry early, **including when the pregnancy is a result of sexual assault**.
- The expectation that girls should marry early is so strong in some contexts, that **families who do not comply are socially sanctioned** by their community. These sanctions include gossip, harassment, exclusion, and even violence.
- Some communities **perceive girls to be ready for marriage at puberty**, when they develop breasts or when they have started menstruating.

## Child marriage is both a cause and consequence of school dropout

- Child marriage is correlated with low levels of secondary school retention for girls. Girls may drop out of school to get married, as some parents don't see the value in educating a girl, believing it is a waste of time and resources when she will eventually marry and gain lifelong security. In some dire contexts, the quality of education also plays a role in discouraging parents to invest on their daughters' education.
- Similarly, out of school girls are more at risk of child marriage as they have few economic opportunities without education.
- **Adolescent unplanned pregnancy** precipitates child marriage as pregnancy outside of marriage is stigmatised. Girls and young women who become pregnant or who are married may be **forced to leave school** due to policies in place or because of the stigma they face.<sup>6</sup>



## Child marriage is often an economic survival strategy for vulnerable families

- Child marriage is driven by economic vulnerability and exacerbated by scarce livelihood. Daughters are commonly married off as an **economic survival strategy** for poorer families. By marrying their daughters, families can reduce their expenses and, in some contexts, fetch bride price or a dowry. **Orphaned and separated girls in fragile contexts** face greater risks of early marriage as their caregivers (foster families, extended families) might see it difficult to meet their needs and decide to marry them off to alleviate the foster family's burden. Some girls in highly vulnerable households, for instance adolescent girls who are the caregivers of their siblings, can also seek marriage or relationships with older men to **cover basic needs**.

## The impacts of climate change

- The impacts of **climate change** can increase the risk of child marriage, as they affect people's livelihood and trigger displacements. This in turn impacts the ability of households to cover their most basic needs and accessing food, shelter and productive assets such as land livestock, tools & equipment. When such needs are not covered, households adopt negative coping mechanisms and strategies to survive, one of them being child marriage.
- Over the next decade, **up to 10 million more girls will be at risk of becoming child brides as a long-term consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic**. The risk of child marriage due to the pandemic increased through, among other things, economic shocks, school closures and interruptions in services. Additionally, the disruption of 'non-essential' services including reproductive health services had a direct impact on teenage pregnancy and subsequently on marriage.

\* If you are looking for country-specific information about our partner countries, we invite you to have a look at the [country reports on the State of Girls Rights](#)

## Inadequate laws and policies fail to protect girls from child marriage

- **Weak legislations** are still in place across the world; this refers to legislations that either do not set 18 as the minimum age for marriage, or include **loopholes for child marriage** related to parental consent or customary laws.
- Policy frameworks often **lack the necessary budget and the political will** to enable girls' and women's empowerment and realisation of their right to education, health, property and adequate standards of living.
- The **lack of age appropriate and gender responsive sexual health education and services**, including safe abortion (where legal) and contraceptive services, is also central to understand the absence of a protective framework to child marriage.

## Consequences on girls' and women's rights



Child marriage is a harmful practice and a **violation of children's rights and the rights of girls and women**, as well as a fundamental impediment to human development. Child marriage further exacerbates the vulnerability of girls in all dimensions of their lives.

- Compared to other age groups, adolescents who are married or in a union, have both the lowest use of contraception and the highest level of **unmet needs for family planning**.<sup>7</sup> Girls who marry before adulthood are at **greater risk of intimate partner violence and forced sexual intercourse, and are more likely to describe their first sexual experience as forced** compared to those who marry at age 18 years or older.<sup>8</sup>
- Child brides are also **less likely to receive medical care** during pregnancy than women who marry as adults. For example, in Vietnam, 98% of women aged 20 to 24 who were married as adults, saw a healthcare provider at least four times during pregnancy, compared to 50% of those who married before the age of 15.<sup>9</sup>
- In low- and middle-income countries, approximately **90% of births to adolescent mothers occur within marriage**;<sup>10</sup> however the number varies across regions.



**Niger:** At 15, Fanta, bravely broke off the forced marriage she was pressured into



## Child marriage increases in humanitarian settings

The highest child marriage rates are found in fragile states and countries facing important humanitarian crises. Humanitarian settings can include a wide range of situations before, during, and after disasters, conflicts and epidemics.

Humanitarian crises lead to a breakdown of social institutions and structures and exacerbate gender inequalities, poverty, insecurity, and lack of access to services such as education or sexual and reproductive health. Families who have lost income might marry off their daughters to ease the financial burden. In humanitarian contexts where physical and sexual violence increases, child marriage is paradoxically seen as a way to

protect girls – who were often unaware of the high risks of violence that happen within marriage. During conflict, girls face a higher risk of being abducted by armed groups and forced to marry fighters. Child marriage is also more prevalent among those internally displaced and refugees.

Despite this acute vulnerability, child marriages in humanitarian settings are often overlooked. This is partly because girls are among the most overlooked groups in humanitarian action, but also because of the structural underfunding of programmes tackling gender based violence, and more specifically, child marriage.

# Common misconceptions

## Misconception 1:

“Girls are sold-off by their parents and caregivers.”

**Why is it false or misleading:** child marriage is a complex issue, with many intertwined factors, that go beyond parents’ individual decisions. Parents and caregivers, wherever they live, want what’s best for their children. However, social norms, at community level, put high pressure on behaviours and practices. Such norms are rooted in patriarchal ideas which centre around controlling girls’ sexuality often determining when and whom a girl should marry. As a result, parents might feel they have no choice given the circumstances, or think they’re doing the best for their daughters. Ignoring the root causes of child marriage, or attacking the value system of people who practice it, will only alienate girls and their parents.

**Why is it harmful:** this misconception depicts parents and caregivers from low-income countries as not caring for their children and can feed racist and colonial bias.

## Misconception 2:

“This is a way to receive money and is driven only by poverty.”

**Why is it false or misleading:** child marriage is a complex issue. While it is indeed correlated with poverty, and exacerbated by external threats that put pressure on families’ livelihood, child marriage is also deeply rooted in unequal distributions of power which undervalue girls. Poverty, lack of livelihood and external threats exacerbate the phenomenon.

**Why is it harmful:** reducing child marriage to poverty is harmful oversimplifies a complex issue. While poverty can be a factor, child marriage is driven by many intersecting factors. Focusing only on poverty ignores the broader context, including power dynamics, restrictive gender norms, limited access to services which all contribute to child marriage. This narrow view can lead to

ineffective solutions that don’t address the root causes or protect vulnerable girls.

## Misconception 3:

“Child marriage is a religious problem.”

**Why is it false or misleading:** child marriage happens to girls of any and all faith, as it is deeply embedded in gender inequalities and restrictive social norms that devalue and restrict women and girls’ decision making. In many cases, religion is actually used to justify gender inequality.

**Why is it harmful:** it simplifies the issue and reduces a complex problem to one factor. This conception can also feed racist and colonial biases and takes the root cause of child marriage out of frame. In addition, programmes rely on the support of religious leaders to promote protective norms to tackle child marriage. Religious leaders often have a role to play: they can check that the bride and the groom are both above 18 before a religious wedding, promote progressive interpretation of religious texts, and help people understand that their religion does not condone child marriage.

## Misconception 4:

“Married girls are completely helpless.”

**Why is it false or misleading:** child marriage is a human rights violation and should be eradicated. But it is important to recognize that it is not too late to empower married girls, and to support them in becoming advocates for ending the practice. Child marriage is a critical milestone in the lives of married girls, but they should not be defined only by this feature.

**Why is it harmful:** it depicts married girls in a negative, restrictive and deterministic way. They can be more than married girls. Programmes look at how married girls can be supported to access education, economic opportunities, leadership, services. It is possible to set-up programmes that ensure married girls lead healthy and empowered lives, by promoting alternative roles for girls beyond marriage, providing access to education, economic and leadership opportunities.



# Key terms<sup>11</sup>

**Child marriage and union** is a formal marriage or informal union in which at least one of the parties is under 18 years of age.

**Early marriage and union** refers to formal marriages or informal unions involving a person aged below 18, even in countries where the legal age of adulthood is lower or can be attained through marriage. Early marriage can also include spouses that are older than 18 but are unable to consent to marriage due to factors such as their level of

physical, emotional, sexual and psychosocial development, or a lack of information regarding the person's life options.

**Forced marriage and union** is any formal marriage or informal union which occurs without the full and free consent of one or both parties and/or where one or both parties is/are unable to end or leave the relationship, including as a result of duress or intense social or family pressure.

## All these marriages and unions of children are considered early or forced:

- Unlawful marriage of children
- Lawful marriage of children
- Marriage of children to much older adults
- Marriage of children to spouses of their own age
- Marriage of children by force
- Marriage of children who initiate the marriage
- Marriage of children following sexual assault and/or rape
- Marriage of children who are pregnant and/or who have dependent children
- Engagement of children at a young age (when the actual marriage does not happen until the child is an older adolescent or adult)
- Marriage of children with or without marriage certificate and/or formal recognition by authorities
- Marriage of children religiously or traditionally (including when families have exchanged dowry, but no official ceremony took place)

**Vietnam:** 15 year old Dung advocates for ending child marriage in her community



# Plan International's response

**Child, early and forced marriage is a complex and multifaceted issue, with links across many thematic areas such as protection from violence, sexual and reproductive rights and health, education, economic empowerment, early childhood development, and the rights of girls to be involved in decisions about their lives.**

## Advocating against child marriage

Plan International Policy Brief published in 2020 clarified our global strategy and set the overarching policy position on preventing and responding to child, early and forced marriages and unions globally. Plan International's position is clear: "Countries should set a minimum age of marriage of 18 and require the free, full and informed consent of both parties, **this should apply to both girls and boys, and there should be no exceptions, including any requiring parental, spousal or judicial consent (...)** Action to eliminate child, early and forced marriages and unions must involve **strong commitment, funding and concerted action by stakeholders at multiple levels, including individual, family, community, national, regional, and international**, including strategies to address harmful gender norms which continue to drive the practice".

## Promising programmatic approaches

Given its multiple causes and consequences, ending child marriage requires a multi-sectoral and coordinated approach to prevention and response. Key actors within communities must be meaningfully engaged and supported to lead efforts to tackle the practice, including girls themselves, parents, traditional and religious and community leaders, teachers, media outlets, boys and men, and young women role models and activists.

In humanitarian settings, Plan International's work to end child marriage falls under the child protection thematic area, where Plan International targets children and adolescents (as well as their families). Our work on child marriage build on this expertise and knowledge to **support children and adolescents already married or at risk of marriage. We also work with families to explore better alternatives for their future.** This is in line with our approach to working with child and adolescent survivors of sexual and gender-based violence, as well as our broader approach to child protection.

Overall, successful projects to prevent and respond to child marriage should pay attention to norms, individual level skills and agency and legal frameworks.

- It is crucial to **challenge harmful social and gender norms** to ensure that girls and young women have autonomy over their bodies and their sexual and reproductive health and rights. Plan International

believes **intergenerational dialogue** which engages communities, can be transformative in addressing patriarchal and social norms which lead to child marriage.

- Plan International **strengthens girls' agency and ability to make autonomous and informed decisions** about their sexual and reproductive health through trainings and peer support groups. We see comprehensive sexuality as key to inclusive, quality education, as it ensures that children, adolescents and young people gain knowledge, explore empowering and protective values and attitudes, and develop the skills they need to make conscious, healthy and respectful choices about relationships and sexuality. Education, more broadly, can be a powerful strategy for delaying unintended adolescent pregnancy and early childbirth. Ensuring girls' access to quality education and removing discriminatory barriers that prevent pregnant girls and young mothers from completing their education is essential in delaying the age of marriage and offering girls with empowering alternatives to marriage, no matter their age.
- In humanitarian contexts, including contexts affected by climate-induced disasters and pandemics, Plan International facilitates a **comprehensive case management** that links adolescents and girls to multisectoral services, to prevent and respond to gender based violence, including child marriage. Child-friendly spaces and adolescent girls' safe spaces in humanitarian settings also play an important role in identifying girls at risk, preventing and responding to violence, including cases of child marriage.
- **Poverty reduction, including via access to education and economic empowerment**, is instrumental in ending child marriage. Child marriage becomes a less attractive option when other income alternatives are available to girls and their families.
- Finally, Plan International conducts **capacity strengthening and advocacy** activities to ensure that child marriage is prevented and addressed at all levels. At the service provision stage, this means that health and education services meet the specific needs of girls and adolescents. At the policymaking and budgeting levels, we support girls-led initiatives to ensure that girls themselves can raise their voices against child marriage.

**Malawi:** Chief Kukada is working with her community to end child marriage



## References

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- <sup>2</sup> UNICEF. [Child marriage in the Sahel](#)
- <sup>3</sup> UNFPA-UNICEF-global Programme to End Child Marriage. [Niger Country profile](#)
- <sup>4</sup> Girls not Brides, key fact: [Where it happens – Girls Not Brides](#)
- <sup>5</sup> [SDG5 Gender equality report](#)
- <sup>6</sup> Human Rights Watch (2018). [Leave No Girl Behind in Africa: Discrimination in Education against Pregnancy Girls and Adolescent Mothers](#)
- <sup>7</sup> UNFPA (2013). [State of the World Population 2013: Motherhood in Childhood](#)
- <sup>8</sup> Starrs, Ann et al (2018). [Accelerate progress – sexual and reproductive health and rights for all: report of the Guttmacher-Lancet Commission](#)
- <sup>9</sup> UNICEF (2014). [Ending Child Marriage: Progress and prospects](#)
- <sup>10</sup> WHO (2018). [Adolescent pregnancy factsheet](#)
- <sup>11</sup> Emilie Lowe et al. (2017). The Development of Global Responses to Child, Early and Forced Marriages

### About Plan International Belgium

Plan International Belgium is an independent humanitarian and development organisation founded in 1983, which defends children’s rights and the equality of girls. We believe in the power and potential of every child. But this potential is often stifled by poverty, violence, exclusion, and discrimination. And it is girls who are most affected. Working with children, young people, our supporters, and our partners, we strive to create a just world by tackling the root causes of the problems faced by girls and all vulnerable children. In more than 80 countries, we defend girls’ rights from birth to adulthood. So that every girl can feel safe. So that she can tell the world who she is and what she wants. So that she can fulfil her dreams. Until every girl is free.

### About Gender Equality Essentials

Gender Equality Essentials are a collection of concise, informative guides designed to shed light on the critical issues impacting girls’ rights and gender equality globally. Each guide provides an overview of a specific theme, ranging from girls’ education and child marriage to girls’ leadership and beyond. By providing these resources, we aim to empower peers, advocates, policymakers, and our broad community with the knowledge and tools necessary to drive meaningful change.

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