



Accelerating Efforts to End Child Marriage

By Rachel Vogelstein and Jennifer Klein



IGP Institute of
Global Politics
WOMEN'S INITIATIVE

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This report was produced by the Institute of Global Politics (IGP) Women’s Initiative at Columbia University’s School of International and Public Affairs (SIPA) under the guidance of our Global Child Marriage Advisory Group, a distinguished group of leaders and experts on child marriage from the Global North and Global South. Over the past six months, members of this advisory group have participated in meetings, reviewed drafts, and shared research and insights from their work. The report has been enhanced considerably by their expertise. The views expressed herein and any errors are our own.

A special acknowledgment is extended to Secretary Hillary Rodham Clinton, IGP Faculty Advisory Board chair; Keren Yarhi-Milo, dean of SIPA; Secretary Jacob Lew, IGP faculty policy director; and Christina Shelby, IGP executive director, for their support of this project. We are grateful to Kehinde Ajayi, Gabriela Smarrelli, and Radhika Nagesh from the Center for Global Development for their partnership in developing the economic analysis featured in Section III of this report, and to Girls Not Brides, the Girls First Fund, and Publish What You Fund for sharing their research. We extend our deep appreciation to Michelle Wisson Clements, Lara van Kouterik, and Claudia Cappa for their valuable feedback. We are also grateful to Andrea Vidal Becker for her excellent research assistance and to Lauren Hoffman and Chelsea Tabachnik for their terrific work in the production of this report. We extend our deep gratitude to Stephanie Sinclair and Too Young to Wed for permission to feature their photography in this report. We want to thank Sydney Ireland, Grace Manning, Emily Grip, Lionel Beehner, and Two by Sixteen for their assistance. This report was made possible by the generous support of Sheryl Sandberg, Project Founder.

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Cover: Thirty-two-year-old Mohammad Hasamur Rahman with his new wife, 15-year-old Nasoin Akhter, in Manikganj, Bangladesh.
Credit: Allison Joyce / Getty / Too Young to Wed

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COLUMBIA IGP CHILD MARRIAGE ADVISORY COUNCIL

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Founder, Lean In

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FOREWORD

Every year, 12 million girls are married before their 18th birthdays—and many far younger than that. These are young women who should be pursuing their education in school, building skills, and imagining wide open futures. Instead, every child marriage derails a life of possibilities.

The global community confronted this issue in a new way when the story of Nujood Ali captured international attention in 2008. At 9 years old, she became the first child bride in Yemen to successfully obtain a divorce. Her courage was extraordinary—but her age was tragically ordinary.

Even after her unprecedented escape from her early marriage, Nujood struggled to go back to school and support herself. Her mental health suffered. It was heartbreaking and laid bare a painful truth: A girl forced into marriage doesn't only lose her childhood. She loses years of education, economic opportunity, and autonomy. She will spend her life navigating consequences she never chose.

The world loses her potential, too. We rarely talk about child marriage in economic terms, but we should. In addition to the concrete costs in lost productivity and higher health expenditures, child marriage forecloses the ingenuity and ideas each girl might have brought to the world—an incalculable squandering.

That's why one of us, as Secretary of State, made ending child marriage a commitment within our focus on women and girls in foreign policy. The State Department expanded our tracking of child marriage in annual human rights reports to call it out as the human rights violation that it is and strengthen accountability. We also invested in humanitarian and foreign assistance programs to support girls' education, health care, and safety from gender-based violence, which help combat the scourge of child marriage.

Ending child marriage is not only a moral or human rights imperative—it is a strategic one. It's especially important that we understand that in a time when pro-natalist agendas take on increasing visibility around the world. We must make it clear: Child marriage should not be excused or supported as a means to advancing demographic agendas. Ending child marriage isn't a peripheral social challenge. It's core to economic development. As this report makes clear, it's a smart investment in long-term growth and development. The math is unambiguous: Every year we delay action, we permanently limit girls' education, health, and lifetime opportunity, and burden societies with avoidable deaths of young mothers and babies. And countries bear those losses for generations.

Child marriage remains one of the most urgent, preventable violations of the rights of women and girls. And addressing it matters for our global economic future as much as our moral leadership. This report offers clear evidence for the impact of addressing child marriage, and actions governments can take to prevent it. In these pages, you'll find practical policy strategies to move from commitment to implementation.

The world failed Nujood and countless children like her in the years since. But we can take action for every girl that comes after. A world in which every child has the opportunity to grow up safe and loved and full of hope for their future is a world in which girls can reach their full potentials.



Secretary Hillary Rodham Clinton

67th Secretary of State and former Senator from New York; Professor of International and Public Affairs and Institute of Global Politics Faculty Advisory Board Chair, Columbia SIPA



Sheryl Sandberg

Founder, Lean In

LETTERS FROM ADVISORY COUNCIL COCHAIRS

During the 16 years that I have been working on ending child marriage, there has been a lot of progress. Child marriage rates have fallen; we have learned much about the causes and solutions; many governments and donors have made commitments; and the issue is firmly on the international development agenda. Yet child marriage still happens to one in every five girls worldwide, with a huge impact on their education, health, and safety.

As you read this important report, I encourage you to keep three things in mind:

We all benefit from a world without child marriage: During a period of turbulent change and declining aid, we see that governments, donors, and media are shifting their focus from issues of development and rights to economics, trade, and defense. Yet, as this report adeptly reminds us, girls' rights are linked to economic prosperity. What happens to girls affects their children, families, communities, and countries. Investing in girls and ending child marriage can generate a great return on investment, making it a smart and critical focus for today's world.

Girls deserve much more: Ending child marriage is at its heart not about economics, but about people who deserve opportunities, happiness, safety, and the right to choose if, when, and whom to marry. I will never forget the girl I met on a learning visit to northern Ethiopia in 2011. Not sure about her exact age due to the lack of a birth certificate, she told me she had been married between the ages of 5 and 7—which was the age of my daughters at the time. It struck me deeply that this could have been my daughters' destiny if they had been born somewhere else. I strongly believe that geography, the place where you are born, should neither determine your destiny nor limit your opportunities in life. Now, 15 years later, there are many girls and women whose stories stay with me, whose leadership inspires me, and who reinforce my commitment to work on this issue.

We all have a role to play: Ending child marriage requires the action of many: girls and young people, families, communities, governments, traditional and religious leaders, multilateral and regional agencies, donors, researchers, civil society members, and others. Everyone has a role to play—and we are more effective when we work together.

I hope that this report will inspire you to make your contribution to let girls be girls, and not brides.



Mabel van Oranje, Netherlands

*Cofounder of Girls First Fund, Girls Not Brides, and VOW for Girls
Co-chair, Columbia IGP Child Marriage Advisory Council*

My journey as a child rights activist began with the painful reality of watching my younger sister married at just 11 years old. That moment changed me forever. I knew that no child should be robbed of her childhood, her education, or her dreams. Out of that conviction, I joined the “I Will Marry When I Want” campaign, a grassroots movement that helped raise Malawi’s legal marriage age from 15 to 18 in 2015. This change was not just about numbers in a law; it meant thousands of girls could remain in school, pursue their aspirations, and be protected from cycles of poverty and abuse.

Yet the struggle did not end there. Today, through the Foundation for Girls Leadership, I continue to create safe spaces where adolescents and young people can speak boldly, lead fearlessly, and champion lasting change. My commitment remains strong because I know that laws alone are not enough; we must transform the social norms and structures that hold girls back.

I dream of a world where every girl grows up free from violence and discrimination, where her voice is valued, her choices respected, and her leadership embraced. A world where courage is contagious, and where young people are not just participants in change but the architects of a more just and equal future. This is the vision that guides me, and it is the hope I carry into every space I enter.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Memory Banda". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Memory Banda, Malawi

Malawian children’s rights advocate

Cochair, Columbia IGP Child Marriage Advisory Council

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Accelerating Efforts to End Child Marriage

Now is the time to end child marriage.

Child marriage is an attack on human dignity and fundamental rights—including the right to bodily autonomy, health, education, and economic opportunity.¹ Child marriage infringes on girls' freedom to make the consequential life decision of whom to marry independently and consensually. It also robs girls of their basic right to decide when and with whom they engage in sexual activity. The detrimental effects of child marriage—which include poor health, reduced educational attainment, and intimate partner violence—undermine prosperity and justice in communities and countries.²

Although there has been progress in reducing the incidence of child marriage, prevalence rates

remain high. Today, there are 640 million women who were married as children; more than 200 million of those women were married under the age of 15.³ The worldwide prevalence of child marriage has decreased steadily since 1997, falling from approximately 25 percent of girls married under age 18 (almost one in four) to 19 percent in 2022 (about one in five)—averting nearly 70 million child marriages in the last 25 years.⁴ But this progress is far from sufficient, as estimates show approximately 12 million girls are still married before the age of 18 each year.⁵ Failure to accelerate the pace of change will result in hundreds of millions of child marriages over the next two decades.

In addition to outlining the human costs of child marriage, this report includes a new analysis produced by the Center for Global Development that demonstrates the significant global cost of inaction: losses of up to \$175 billion per year, or almost \$2.5 trillion by 2040, from lost productivity and increased health risks.⁶ The cost of inaction on child marriage far exceeds the amount of funding needed to reduce this practice.



“No parents should see their daughter in despair, and no woman should experience this injustice.”

Shirin Musa, Director of Femmes for Freedom and a leading advocate against child marriage, forced marriage and marital captivity.

Child marriage historically has been driven by interconnected factors: poverty, gender inequality in education and opportunity, high fertility, chronic instability, and lack of legal protections, with either no laws or weak implementation of the law.⁷

For much of the world’s population, there has been rapid and significant progress on three fronts, producing what some economists have termed revolutions: the schooling revolution, in which the gender gap in education has narrowed, with girls now lagging behind boys in a minority of countries; the demographic revolution, in which the average fertility of women and girls has decreased dramatically; and the poverty reduction revolution, in which the proportion of people living in extreme poverty has plummeted.⁸ These profound shifts set the stage for accelerated progress on child marriage—but such progress is achievable only with the continued commitment and leadership of governments, multilateral organizations, philanthropy, and civil society.

This report comes at a pivotal moment. Recent challenges—including significant cuts in humanitarian and development assistance and the waning global commitment to women’s human rights—may slow or even reverse progress, jeopardizing any chance of eliminating child marriage globally.⁹ Resources devoted to the reduction of child marriage are scarce, and, if anything, getting scarcer. Sustaining progress in the wake of limited resources requires a targeted strategy—doubling down on approaches with high return on investment.



“I had a lot of questions as I was growing up. I asked myself, “Why can’t a girl have her own choices? Why should she be a second-class citizen in our own society? Why can’t she just choose on her own?”

Memory Banda, a Malawian children’s rights activist who witnessed child marriage firsthand; her sister was married at age 11.

Based on strong evidence of the most effective interventions to reduce child marriage, this report recommends prioritizing three critical pillars: (1) investing in girls' education; (2) promoting health services to reduce adolescent pregnancy; and (3) shifting norms that perpetuate this practice.

1) Investing in girls' education. Education has proven to be highly effective in reducing child marriage. Ensuring that adolescent girls can stay in school is critical, as is improving the quality of education to equip girls with skills and training that create future employment opportunities.

2) Promoting health services to reduce adolescent pregnancy. Investments that improve access to reproductive health education and services are critical to child marriage prevention efforts, given the link between adolescent pregnancy and child marriage.

3) Shifting norms. Regressive social norms fuel child marriage. While passing legal prohibitions is important, without broader and deeper changes in social and cultural attitudes, laws alone are not enough. Shifting norms that reinforce and perpetuate child marriage, even where strong laws exist prohibiting it, is critical to ending this practice.

These three strategic pillars are likely to work best when governments, multilateral organizations, philanthropies, and civil society coordinate their efforts within specific nations. Focusing these efforts on high-burden, high-prevalence countries offers the most effective pathway to ending child marriage at scale.

Addressing child marriage is a moral imperative. It is also a strategic imperative we cannot afford to overlook, which will help improve the health, education, and economic prosperity of entire communities and nations.



The wedding of 16-year-old Anita in Kagati village, just outside Kathmandu Valley, Nepal. Credit: Stephanie Sinclair / Too Young to Wed

SECTION I

Background



Thirteen-year-old Khadeej Shuai Saeed was married in Al Sherefia AlJunoubiya village, near Harad, Yemen. Credit: Abbie Trayler-Smith / Panos / Too Young to Wed

PREVALENCE

Child marriage is a human rights violation that harms millions of girls in every region of the world, particularly in the Global South, and is an abuse that crosses borders, cultures, and religions. The global prevalence of child marriage has dropped steadily over the past 25 years, decreasing from 25 percent of girls married under the age of 18 to 19 percent, thereby averting nearly 70 million child marriages.¹⁰ However, progress has been uneven across regions and concentrated among richer households.¹¹ Furthermore, in some regions, including sub-Saharan Africa, the rate of progress is being outpaced by rapid population growth.¹²

South Asia is home to the largest number of girls and women who were married as children, with nearly half of all child brides—nearly 300 million—based in this region.¹³ India alone accounts for one-third of the world’s child brides, with over 220 million girls and women alive who were married or in union before the age of 18, closely followed by Bangladesh, which has the highest prevalence rates in the region, with 51 percent of girls married or in union before the age of 18.¹⁴ Despite its high rates of child marriage, South Asia has made significant progress reducing prevalence of this harmful practice: In the last two decades, the likelihood of a South Asian girl marrying in childhood dropped by nearly half, from 50 percent in 2004 to 26 percent in 2024.¹⁵ Rapid progress in India as well as Bangladesh, Nepal, and Pakistan is associated with legal reform and awareness-raising campaigns, investment in girls’ educational participation and attainment, reductions in poverty, and actions taken to combat the sociocultural drivers of child marriage in local communities.¹⁶

Sub-Saharan Africa is home to the second-largest share of child brides, accounting for 20 percent of the global total, with more than 125 million girls and women—or one in three—currently alive who were married before the age of 18.¹⁷ Niger has the highest child marriage prevalence rate in the world, with 76 percent of girls married before the age of 18, with the Central African Republic and Chad following closely at 61 percent respectively.¹⁸ Notwithstanding the global trend of declining child marriage prevalence, the relative share of the world’s child brides in sub-Saharan Africa grew from 15 percent to 35 percent over the past 25 years, and estimates suggest that if the population continues to grow, this share will increase to 41 percent by 2030.¹⁹ Nonetheless, certain countries in the region have made progress in reducing child marriage: For example, Ethiopia has decreased prevalence from more than 60 percent in 2001 to 40 percent in 2016, due in part to economic support for chronically food-insecure households, increases in girls’ education, and awareness-raising efforts.²⁰ Furthermore, Sierra Leone reduced child marriage prevalence from 51 percent in 1999 to 30 percent in 2019 and recently enacted the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act 2024, which harmonized the country’s laws to mandate 18 years old as the minimum legal age of marriage, and was supported by high-level government officials, including the country’s president and first lady.²¹

Latin America and the Caribbean are home to nearly 60 million children and women currently alive who were married or in an informal union by 18, with prevalence rates that have remained largely unchanged over the past two decades.²² Due to this stagnation, this region is expected to have the second-highest prevalence of child marriages worldwide, after sub-Saharan Africa, by 2030.²³ Brazil has the highest burden of girls and women married by 18 in the region, at over 20 million.²⁴

However, a growing number of Latin American and Caribbean countries have taken steps to prohibit this practice: Mexico, home to over 10 million child brides, enacted a nearly nationwide ban in 2019, and other countries have followed suit—such as Colombia, which passed a ban in 2024 following a 17-year campaign by community activists, as well as Bolivia, which recently raised the minimum legal age for marriage to 18 years old.²⁵

The Middle East and North Africa regions are home to an estimated 37 million child brides, a number that is likely underinclusive, given insufficient data collection by a number of countries in the region, including Saudi Arabia.²⁶ Some countries in the region have made significant strides in tackling child marriage in recent years: In Egypt, for example, rates have steadily fallen, from 27 percent in 1996 to 16 percent in 2021, in part due to increased education among women.²⁷ Even a country like Yemen, with one of the highest prevalence rates in the region at 30 percent, decreased incidence by nearly 20 percentage points between 1998 and 2013, in part by adding female teachers in rural areas and deploying conditional cash transfer programs, which helped keep girls in school.²⁸ However, other countries in the region have experienced increases in child marriage prevalence: In Iraq, for example, rates increased between 2003 and 2018, peaking at 28 percent, and in 2024, the Iraqi Parliament proposed an amendment to its personal status law to permit child marriage for girls as young as 9.²⁹

While prevalence is higher in developing countries, child marriage is a global practice that also occurs in high-income countries. For example, a study by Unchained At Last found that nearly 315,000 minors were legally married in the United States between 2000 and 2021, and a study of data from the American Community Survey found that rates were highest among immigrant children.³⁰ In the United Kingdom, in 2021 alone, the government’s Forced Marriage Unit provided advice or support in 118 cases involving survivors who were under 18, and the courts have ordered 3,343 forced marriage protection orders since their introduction in 2008.³¹ And in Canada, a study from McGill University estimated that over 3,600 marriage certificates were issued to children under the age of 18 between 2000 and 2018.³² These numbers confirm that the practice of child marriage is a global challenge.



COUNTRY SNAPSHOT

BRAZIL

Brazil is notable for having the highest absolute number of child marriages in Latin America and the Caribbean and the sixth highest in burden globally.³³ Although recent data are severely lacking, in 2006, 22 million women and girls were married as children.³⁴ This high prevalence rate has remained stagnant for decades, hovering at

COUNTRY SNAPSHOT: BRAZIL (continued)

26 percent since the 1980s, with rates exceeding 30 percent in the North and Central-West regions.³⁵

Poverty is a critical driver of child marriage in Brazil, with early marriage or unions more likely for low-income girls.³⁶ Underlying social norms also fuel child marriage prevalence rates in Brazil, including family fears about sexual violence, unintended pregnancy, and single motherhood.³⁷ The high value many Brazilian men place on marrying young girls also contributes to high prevalence rates: The age gap between child brides and their spouses remains significant, with more than 20 percent married to partners who are at least 10 years older.³⁸ Two-thirds of Brazilian girls who are married as children are out of school, as compared to only 13 percent of their unmarried peers; adolescent birth rates are also high, with 57 percent of child brides giving birth before age 18.³⁹

In 2019, following a campaign by local NGOs and advocacy organizations, the Brazilian government strengthened its child marriage law to remove exceptions and prohibit the marriage of minors under the age of 16, who were previously permitted to marry in the event of pregnancy or to avoid a criminal sentence for statutory rape.⁴⁰ However, enforcement and implementation is a challenge, and the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights has expressed concern that judicial decisions could exempt offenders of sexual violence cases involving adolescents under 14 years old in the event of subsequent marital cohabitation, or the birth of a child as a result of sexual violence.⁴¹ More effort is needed from the Brazilian government and international donors to reduce child marriage prevalence rates.

CAUSES

While the causes of child marriage vary by context, evidence shows that girls with overlapping vulnerabilities—such as those who come from rural, less educated, impoverished, or minority households—are at higher risk.⁴² Across regions, primary drivers of this practice include poverty, instability, lack of education and economic opportunity, insufficient access to sexual and reproductive health care, and social and cultural norms that perpetuate gender inequality.⁴³

Poverty is widely recognized as a significant determinant of child marriage. Globally, data confirm that women and girls with greater means tend to marry later; more than half of girls from the poorest households in the developing world are married before the age of 18.⁴⁴ Families living in poverty may

marry their daughters off as children for a variety of economic reasons, including to reduce their financial burdens and settle debts or resolve disputes between families.⁴⁵ In cultures that employ the practice of dowry (the payment of money or property by the bride's family to the groom) or bride price (the payment of money or property by the groom to the bride's family), youth is often prioritized, which incentivizes early marriages.⁴⁶

Regional or national instability—including conflict, displacement, natural disaster, and the destabilizing effects of climate change—increase the risk of child marriage.⁴⁷ The link between child marriage and conflict is strong: ACLED's 2024 Global Conflict Index shows that many countries with a high burden of child marriage—including Ethiopia, Pakistan, Somalia, and South Sudan—are also ranked highly for extreme or high levels of conflict.⁴⁸ Conflict and crisis situations increase the risk of early marriage by disrupting education, increasing economic instability, and eroding social support systems.⁴⁹ Fragile governments may lack the ability to enforce laws and policies or provide security, which puts girls at greater risk of child marriage; furthermore, in conflict settings, families often marry their daughters in an attempt to protect them from conflict-related sexual violence.⁵⁰ Conflict-induced migration is also a risk factor: Data from humanitarian settings across the Middle East and South Asia found that displaced girls are at a 30 percent increased likelihood of child marriage.⁵¹

Girls' lack of access to education and economic opportunity also fuels the practice of child marriage.⁵² Low-quality education and low employment prospects after graduation disincentivize families from pursuing girls' education beyond primary school.⁵³ In addition, poor infrastructure, poverty, and the risk of sexual assault often discourage girls from attending school or cause them to drop out.⁵⁴ Furthermore, social norms keep education out of reach for girls, particularly in poor and rural settings, as families with scarce resources deprioritize sending their daughters to school.⁵⁵ Although the gender gap in primary schooling has virtually closed on a global level, in certain regions and countries, girls are still less likely than boys to attend secondary school, despite the importance of girls' secondary education for child marriage prevention.⁵⁶ And even in settings where education is accessible for women and girls, employment opportunities for women may be scarce or discouraged by societal norms.⁵⁷

Furthermore, lack of access to sexual and reproductive health care contributes to increased child marriages.⁵⁸ Provision of comprehensive sexuality education is far from universal, and even in nations where it is required, it is more likely to be delivered in secondary school, which fails to reach child brides who lack access to secondary education.⁵⁹ Without comprehensive sexuality education and access to contraception, girls are at risk of adolescent pregnancy, and are often married in instances of teen pregnancy to mitigate the perceived dishonor of pregnancy outside of wedlock: Indeed, as of 2015, 76 percent of first births to girls under the age of 18 globally took place within the context of child marriage.⁶⁰ Furthermore, adolescent mothers are often forced to drop out of school due to caregiving responsibilities, stigma, or even school bans, thereby exacerbating the negative effects of child marriage and early pregnancy.⁶¹

Social and cultural norms are also major drivers of child marriage. At its core, the practice of child marriage, which disproportionately affects girls, perpetuates their low status and is rooted in gender inequality, reinforcing traditional gender hierarchies and restricting their autonomy, decision-making

power, and educational and economic potential.⁶² In communities where education for girls is not valued or where strong gender norms discourage women from working, girls tend to be at a higher risk for child marriage.⁶³ And in many cultures, child marriage is linked to the practice of female genital mutilation and cutting (FGM/C), which is often performed on girls and is seen as a sign of readiness for marriage.⁶⁴



COUNTRY SNAPSHOT

EGYPT

Egypt is an example of a country in which child marriage prevalence rates remain high, but political will to tackle child marriage has increased. Over the last several decades, the rate of child marriage in Egypt has decreased, dropping from 27 percent in 1996 to 16 percent in 2021, in part due to increases in education levels among girls and women.⁶⁵ However, still today, more than seven million Egyptian women and girls were married under the age of 18, making it the country with the 13th highest overall burden of child marriage.⁶⁶

Child marriage in Egypt is most acute in the poorest households, in rural communities, and among the least educated girls.⁶⁷ Entrenched patriarchal social norms and gender inequality are strong drivers of child marriage in Egypt, in which marriage decision-making authority is held by fathers or male guardians.⁶⁸ Although child marriage was banned in 2008, enforcement and compliance is still weak, and some criticize the lack of criminal penalties.⁶⁹ Notwithstanding this law, many families arrange religious ceremonies to marry their daughters and delay registration of these marriages until girls reach maturity.⁷⁰ The illicit trade of transactional or temporary marriages to circumvent trafficking laws and Islamic law is also common.⁷¹ Furthermore, there is a 92 percent prevalence rate of FGM/C, which is perceived to indicate a girl's readiness to marry.⁷²

The Egyptian government has taken several steps over the last decade to reduce the prevalence of child marriage. In 2014, the government drafted a five-year National Strategy for Prevention of Early Marriage, signaling a high-level commitment to address this issue.⁷³ And the National Council for Childhood and Motherhood Ending Violence Against Children in Egypt National Strategic Framework was published in 2018, emphasizing the importance of addressing child marriage.⁷⁴

COUNTRY SNAPSHOT: EGYPT (continued)

More recently, in 2022, the Ministry of Social Solidarity developed the Combatting Child Marriage campaign to raise awareness of the negative consequences of child marriage and the various rights of children, especially girls.⁷⁵ The same year, the first lady of Egypt sponsored the National Girls' Empowerment Initiative — Dawwie, a model of large-scale, public social norms programming designed to address the root causes of gender inequality and raise awareness of child marriage and FGM/C.⁷⁶ The Egyptian government, in partnership with the World Bank, has also invested in cash transfer and social protection programs that include schooling for girls and awareness-raising campaigns to combat early marriage and FGM/C.⁷⁷ However, continued investment and implementation is needed to close the gap between law and practice and fulfill the political commitments that have been made.

IMPLICATIONS

Child marriage has long been considered a violation of fundamental human rights, and the moral case against this practice—which truncates girls' childhood, puts them at risk of sexual violence and early childbearing, and reduces their earning power, among other factors—is strong. However, in addition to the moral implications of this practice, child marriage has a range of negative effects on the education, economic potential, and health of girls and their children, which in turn undermine economic development, prosperity, and stability, perpetuating an intergenerational cycle of poverty that becomes difficult to break.

First, child marriage harms education, often forcing girls to drop out of school early so that they can perform duties in the home and raise children.⁷⁸ Globally, 87 percent of married adolescent girls ages 15–17 are not in school.⁷⁹ Girls who drop out of secondary school are at much higher risk of becoming married, and every year that a girl marries early reduces her likelihood of completing secondary school.⁸⁰ Rates of child marriage are particularly high in countries where there is neither compulsory nor free education, which disproportionately affects girls in societies where girls' education is not valued; in addition, limited postgraduate economic pathways further circumscribe girls' access to education, thereby reducing future earning potential.⁸¹ And when girls are less likely to be educated, so are their children: A study on the effects of educational inequality in sub-Saharan Africa found that girls who are born to child brides are up to 11 percent less likely to attend school themselves—as are 9 percent of boys.⁸²

Child marriage also undermines economic development. Women who marry as children have, on average, earnings that are 9 percent lower than if they had married later.⁸³ For example, evidence from Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, and Tunisia found that women who were child brides were more likely to work in low-paying occupations or to be outside of the labor market altogether.⁸⁴ When women's economic potential is cut short by child marriage, it affects the economic security not only of women and their families, but also entire economies: One study found that barriers to girls' education, such as child marriage, cost countries between \$15 trillion and \$30 trillion in lost lifetime productivity and earnings.⁸⁵

Child marriage also has negative health implications for girls and women, including complications due to early pregnancy and childbearing.⁸⁶ Adolescent pregnancy is highly risky: Compared with women married between the ages of 20 and 24, mothers between the ages of 10 and 19 face higher health risks.⁸⁷ Furthermore, the health implications of adolescent childbearing are intergenerational, as children born to adolescent mothers face higher risks of low birthweight, preterm birth, and severe neonatal condition.⁸⁸ Child brides also suffer from a high prevalence of mental health issues, including depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder, and suicidal thoughts.⁸⁹

Furthermore, child marriage is linked to physical, sexual, and emotional abuse.⁹⁰ Girls married as children are more likely to experience physical or sexual intimate partner violence than those who are married as adults.⁹¹ The practice of FGM/C, considered a form of violence against women and girls, is also associated with child marriage, and in some regions elevates the risk that a girl will be married early.⁹² In Egypt, for example, where child marriage is prevalent, 92 percent of women have undergone FGM/C.⁹³

The practice of child marriage is also associated with instability. One report indicates that most of the nations with the highest prevalence of child marriage are either fragile states or at increased risk of natural disaster.⁹⁴ Research shows that parents in conflict-affected states or in humanitarian crises often marry their daughters in an effort to preserve resources or as an attempt to protect them against sexual violence; however, the prevalence of this practice in war-ravaged or drought-stricken nations exacerbates poverty, poor health, and illiteracy, thereby jeopardizing stability and security.⁹⁵ Furthermore, a World Bank report found that girls are two and a half times more likely to be out of school if they live in conflict-affected countries—thereby increasing the risk of child marriage—with adolescent girls nearly 90 percent more likely to be out of secondary school than their counterparts who live in stable countries.⁹⁶

LEGAL FRAMEWORK

Child marriage has long been considered a human rights violation under international law. International legal instruments, including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Convention on Consent to Marriage, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, and the Convention on the Rights of the Child have been interpreted to establish 18 as the minimum age of marriage and underscore that consent is essential to valid marriages.⁹⁷

Child marriage has also been recognized as a human rights violation in regional agreements. In 2014, governments in the South Asia Association for Regional Cooperation adopted the Regional Action Plan to End Child Marriage and issued the Kathmandu Call for Action to End Child Marriage in Asia, which called on governments to support specific targets to end child marriage, enforce legal prohibitions, and promote accountability.⁹⁸ In 2015, the African Union adopted the African Common Position to End Child Marriage and launched the Campaign to End Child Marriage in Africa, building on the Maputo Protocol on the Rights of Women in Africa to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights, which set the minimum age of marriage at 18.⁹⁹ And in 2016, Latin American and Caribbean governments adopted the Montevideo Strategy on the Implementation of the Regional Gender Agenda, which recognizes freedom from child, early, and forced marriage as essential to the right to live without violence and discrimination.¹⁰⁰ Regional agreements to end child marriage have proven to be catalytic: For example, as of 2024, several member states of the Southern African Development Community Parliamentary Forum, which established a Model Law on Eradicating Child Marriage and Protecting Children Already in Marriage, have enacted child marriage prohibitions, including the Democratic Republic of Congo, Malawi, Mauritius, Mozambique, Zambia, and Zimbabwe.¹⁰¹

Thanks to the efforts of civil society advocates, a growing number of countries have adopted or strengthened national laws to raise the minimum age of marriage over the past decade.¹⁰² However, child marriage is still legally permissible in a staggering number of countries around the world: In 2023, 57 percent of countries still allowed exceptions to an established minimum age of marriage at 18, and 18 percent explicitly permitted marriage in childhood.¹⁰³ Furthermore, while minimum age of marriage laws are a powerful tool for condemning child marriage, the effectiveness of these laws is undermined by weak enforcement and exceptions in informal legal systems.¹⁰⁴ For example, in Guatemala, a study found that civil officers continued to register marriages under the legal age because they had not been trained properly to enforce a 2017 law that established 18 as the minimum age without exceptions; in Kenya, application of customary or religious law has proven to undermine adherence to legal prohibitions on child marriage.¹⁰⁵

While national legal frameworks pertaining to child marriage have largely focused on the minimum age of marriage, promoting legal gender equality in other areas is also essential to protect girls from child marriage. For example, repealing discriminatory laws related to property rights, inheritance, and asset ownership can help eliminate the financial incentives for child marriage.¹⁰⁶ Moreover, removing marital rape exemptions—including provisions that pardon rapists who subsequently marry their victims—can help hold perpetrators of this crime accountable.¹⁰⁷ Finally, anti-trafficking laws can be used to prosecute instances where girls are trafficked for marriage.¹⁰⁸



COUNTRY SNAPSHOT

GUATEMALA

Informal unions are exceedingly common in Latin America and the Caribbean, including in countries like Guatemala, which has a child marriage prevalence rate of 30 percent and is one of the few countries in the region to experience a generational decline from 40 percent in the 1990s.¹⁰⁹ Indigenous and rural women in Guatemala are at particularly high risk of child marriage: More than half of girls ages 13–17 in rural Guatemala reported being out of school in 2023, which is linked to marriage under age 18.¹¹⁰

Social norms are a significant driver of child marriage in Guatemala.¹¹¹ Negative attitudes about girls' autonomy, as well as limited sexual and reproductive health services, render girls vulnerable to being married as children.¹¹² Gender-based violence is another contributing factor: Surveys show that girls in many Latin American and Caribbean countries, including Guatemala, flee violent households and often attempt to establish autonomy and control over their own lives through marriage, only to expose themselves to risks of further violence within a union.¹¹³

To address these harms, Guatemala enacted legal reforms on child marriage and violence against women, in alignment with its obligations under the regional Inter-American Convention on the Prevention, Punishment, and Eradication of Violence against Women, known as the Convention of Belém do Pará, adopted in 1994.¹¹⁴ In 2008, Guatemala enacted a law on femicide and included forced marriage as a form of violence against women.¹¹⁵ In 2009, a new law against sexual violence and human trafficking expanded the definition of trafficking to include the recruitment of minors for forced marriage or pregnancy with criminal penalties and a fine.¹¹⁶ In 2015, Guatemala raised the age of marriage to 18 and two years later abolished all exceptions to this new law.¹¹⁷ In addition to legal reform, Guatemala has elevated child marriage on the political agenda, pledging support for the SDG target to end child marriage by 2030 and supporting the first resolution on child marriage in 2013 at the UN Human Rights Council.¹¹⁸ Internally, the Presidential Secretariat for Women of Guatemala has taken a leading role, supporting implementation of a Roadmap for the Prevention of Early Unions and Girl/Teenage Pregnancies, which is focused on coordinating local municipalities to address child marriage, as well as the National Plan for Preventing Adolescent Pregnancy, and the National Plan for the Prevention and Eradication of Violence Against Women, both of which mention child marriage.¹¹⁹ More data collection is needed to measure progress on this agenda and promote accountability for government commitments and targets.¹²⁰



SECTION II

Current Landscape

Arti, 14, was married to a 21-year-old man during wedding festivities in India. She later became pregnant, suffered a miscarriage, and died by suicide. Credit: Saumya Khandelwal / Too Young to Wed

The worldwide prevalence of child marriage has decreased steadily since 2012, falling from approximately 23 percent of girls married under age 18 to 19 percent in 2022—demonstrating that progress is possible.¹²¹ Indeed, over the past 25 years, almost 70 million child marriages have been averted.¹²² These improvements have followed the establishment of multilateral commitments to end child marriage, including in the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) framework, which included the first global time-bound target to eliminate child marriage by 2030; funding commitments by donor governments, including Canada, the Netherlands, Norway, and the United Kingdom, as well as philanthropies, such as the Children’s Investment Fund Foundation, the Ford Foundation, the Gates Foundation, the Kendeda Fund, and the Packard Foundation; global advocacy and awareness efforts led by The Elders, Girls First Fund, Girls Not Brides, Too Young to Wed, UNFPA, UNICEF, VOW for Girls, and others; and most importantly, the leadership and tireless efforts of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), community leaders, and advocates at the local level.¹²³

However, contemporary global challenges—including the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, increase in conflict, growing implications of climate change, and significant reduction in development assistance globally—risk slowing this progress. Furthermore, rising backlash against gender equality worldwide threatens to reverse hard-won gains in defense of girls’ and women’s human rights, including those related to child marriage.

EFFECTS OF COVID-19

The global disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic had a demonstrable effect on international, regional, and local efforts to end child marriage. UNICEF estimated in 2021 that over the next decade, up to 10 million more girls will be at risk of becoming child brides as a result of the pandemic.¹²⁴ Field reports confirmed COVID-19-related interruption of school-based interventions, community engagement efforts, adolescent and youth-friendly sexual and reproductive health services, and monitoring and evaluation efforts.¹²⁵ While many organizations and governments were able to transition to online programs, girls in more remote settings were left out, putting them at heightened risk of child marriage.¹²⁶

The effects of this interruption of child marriage prevention efforts during the COVID-19 pandemic are stark. In low- and middle-income countries, unintended adolescent pregnancy and school dropout resulting from educational and health closures increased significantly during the pandemic—in some cases by more than 20 percent.¹²⁷ In South Asia, for example, an estimated 4.5 million girls were expected to leave school permanently, putting them at higher risk of child marriage.¹²⁸ In India, data show that girls faced an increased likelihood of being trafficked online or groomed for child marriage during the pandemic.¹²⁹ Factors such as increased financial difficulty, the death of a parent, and interruptions in social services also fueled a rise in child marriage.¹³⁰ Institutions that protect girls against the practice—such as the justice system, the health care system, and civil society organizations—were shuttered or upended across a number of countries, thereby negatively affecting the implementation of interventions targeted at preventing and reducing child marriage and FGM/C.¹³¹

RIISING CONFLICT AND CRISES

The increase in conflict and crisis also fuels the prevalence of child marriage globally. For example, child marriage rates in conflict-affected countries such as Sudan and Yemen are some of the highest in the region—and in both countries, prevalence rates increased by 20 percent at the onset of conflict.¹³² Furthermore, global displacement numbers due to conflict are the highest on record, and with dwindling international support for resettlement and humanitarian aid, the risks of girls being married as children in an attempt to preserve resources in impoverished settings is high.¹³³ Evidence shows that girls who are refugees, asylum seekers, and internally displaced persons are more vulnerable to being married as children, in part due to the lack of social and financial supports.¹³⁴ For example, researchers found an increase in child marriage among Syrian refugee populations, even among those in secondary countries of refuge, such as Lebanon and Turkey.¹³⁵

Moreover, the growing crisis of climate change threatens to exacerbate the drivers of child marriage. Evidence shows that climate change amplifies conditions that are associated with child marriage, including economic instability, disrupted education, displacement, and sexual violence.¹³⁶ One estimate found that for every 10 percent change in rainfall due to climate change, child marriage increases by 1 percent.¹³⁷ National and local data also confirm a relationship between extreme weather events and child marriage: In Bangladesh, for example, a recent study revealed a 39 percent increase in child marriage due to disasters induced by climate change.¹³⁸

REDUCTION IN RESOURCES

Amid rising global challenges that threaten to reverse recent progress on child marriage, the funding to address this issue has sharply contracted. Since 2019, official development assistance (ODA) and philanthropic funding supporting projects with a primary objective of ending child marriage has declined.¹³⁹ In recent months, this reduction in funding has dramatically accelerated, with several donor governments reducing their foreign assistance budgets and shifting away from a focus on gender equality.¹⁴⁰ Most significantly, in 2025, the United States froze most foreign assistance and eviscerated the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), which previously helped provide \$2.6 billion in federal aid to advance women’s rights and gender equality around the world, including programs to help end child marriage.¹⁴¹ Furthermore, the previous Dutch government, pursuing a “Netherlands first” approach to foreign aid, pledged to substantially reduce foreign assistance, focusing cuts on women’s and girls’ rights, among other issues.¹⁴² A number of other donor countries, such as Canada, Germany, and the United Kingdom, have removed billions from their aid budgets, including programs focused on a variety of women’s rights issues.¹⁴³ Moreover, a number of philanthropic donors who funded work to end child marriage have shifted priorities or sunsetted, such as the Kendeda Fund.¹⁴⁴

Cuts to foreign aid threaten not only bilateral but also multilateral efforts to eradicate child marriage.¹⁴⁵ The UNICEF-UNFPA Global Programme to End Child Marriage estimated in November 2025 that it reached four million fewer girls in 2025 than in 2024 due to global funding cuts.¹⁴⁶ Child marriage programming by UNICEF, UNFPA, Girls First Fund grantee partners, and other local organizations reportedly has been severely reduced or eliminated across multiple countries.¹⁴⁷ And a May 2025 UN Women report found that among 411 women-led and women’s rights organizations operating in crisis areas, 90 percent had already been affected by funding cuts.¹⁴⁸ These reductions severely compromise the effort to eradicate child marriage by 2030 and beyond.

REGRESSION ON GENDER EQUALITY

Backlash against efforts to protect and promote the rights of women and girls—including freedom from child marriage—is growing around the world.¹⁴⁹ In 2024, nearly one-quarter of countries reported regression on women’s rights and gender equality; this includes attacks on provisions that prohibit child marriage or reduce its likelihood.¹⁵⁰ For example, in Iraq, the Parliament recently proposed an amendment to its personal status law that would permit child marriage for girls as young as age 9.¹⁵¹ In The Gambia, legislators forced a vote on a proposal to reverse a ban on FGM/C—a practice that can precede child marriage and signal the “marriageability” of young girls—with lawmakers ultimately rejecting this reversal by a narrow margin.¹⁵² And in Afghanistan, where the Taliban has stripped girls and women of their rights to education, employment, and freedom of movement, this campaign of repression has already led to an increase in child marriage as families grapple with having fewer options for their daughters.¹⁵³

Furthermore, a rising number of authoritarian-leaning and populist regimes have dismantled government bodies focused on advancing the rights of women and girls, thereby undermining efforts to address the practice of child marriage and ecosystem in which it proliferates.¹⁵⁴ For example, in Argentina, the Ministry of Women, Genders and Diversity was eliminated, and the country’s teen pregnancy prevention program was cut by nearly two-thirds.¹⁵⁵ In Turkey, the Ministry for Women and Family Affairs was dissolved and replaced by the Ministry of Family and Social Policies, signaling a shift away from protecting the rights of women and girls.¹⁵⁶ And in the United States, the Office of Global Women’s Issues was eliminated, along with many references to the rights of women and girls in the US Department of State’s annual human rights reports.¹⁵⁷ This backlash has sapped not only resources but also political will in support of efforts to eliminate child marriage and advance gender equality worldwide.¹⁵⁸ In addition, increased support for so-called pro-natalist policies threatens to undermine efforts to reduce adolescent pregnancy and child marriage, despite evidence that they increase the likelihood of both maternal and child mortality.



COUNTRY SNAPSHOT

INDONESIA

Indonesia has made significant progress in reducing its burden of child marriage through government investment and civil society advocacy. Since 1992, the prevalence rate has dropped from 33 percent to 16 percent in 2017—one of the largest reductions in East Asia and the Pacific.¹⁵⁹ However, at last estimate, there were still over 32 million Indonesian women and girls who were married as children.¹⁶⁰

Child marriage in Indonesia has deep cultural, customary, and religious roots, particularly in rural areas, where illiteracy and poverty rates are high.¹⁶¹ For example, many communities believe that the onset of menstruation signifies maturity sufficient for marriage; furthermore, in some areas, women who are unmarried by the age of 20 are ostracized.¹⁶² Families with overlapping vulnerabilities sometimes choose to send their daughters to Islamic boarding schools called *pesantren* to reduce their financial burden and educate their daughters; however, these religious institutions often promote, facilitate, and formally register children for marriage.¹⁶³

Due to sustained advocacy by community-based organizations and survivors, ending child marriage has become a higher priority for the Indonesian government.¹⁶⁴ In 2019, Indonesia raised the minimum age for marriage for girls to 19 to align with the minimum age for boys, though parental permission is still needed until age 21.¹⁶⁵ However, parents can still ask religious courts and local officials to authorize early marriages of girls, with no minimum age in such instances.¹⁶⁶ In addition, in 2020, the government of Indonesia released its first National Strategy on the Prevention of Child Marriage, with the goal of reducing child marriage to 9 percent by 2024 and 7 percent by 2030.¹⁶⁷

Importantly, the National Strategy specifically calls on the Ministry of Religious Affairs to work with *pesantren* to prevent child marriages, through training for religious leaders, improved services for already married girls, and increasing community awareness of the laws governing this practice.¹⁶⁸ In 2024, several Indonesian ministries—including the Ministry of Women’s Empowerment and Child Protection—released the “Practical Guide for Implementing the National Strategy to Prevent Child Marriage in Regions,” emphasizing the importance of multi-stakeholder efforts.¹⁶⁹ More resources are needed to implement the National Strategy and address drivers of child marriage.



SECTION III

Cost of Inaction

Fati (not her real name) ran away from her home in Dosso, Niger, before she was forced into marriage. Credit: Tom Pilston / Panos / Too Young to Wed

The cost of inaction on child marriage is substantial. Although global rates have fallen from one in four to one in five young women over the past 25 years, researchers from the Center for Global Development (CGD) find that the continued prevalence of child marriage poses substantial economic costs stemming from a range of factors, including poor health, curtailed education, and reduced earnings.¹⁷⁰ All told, the economic costs of inaction on child marriage amount to a global total of up to \$175 billion each year.

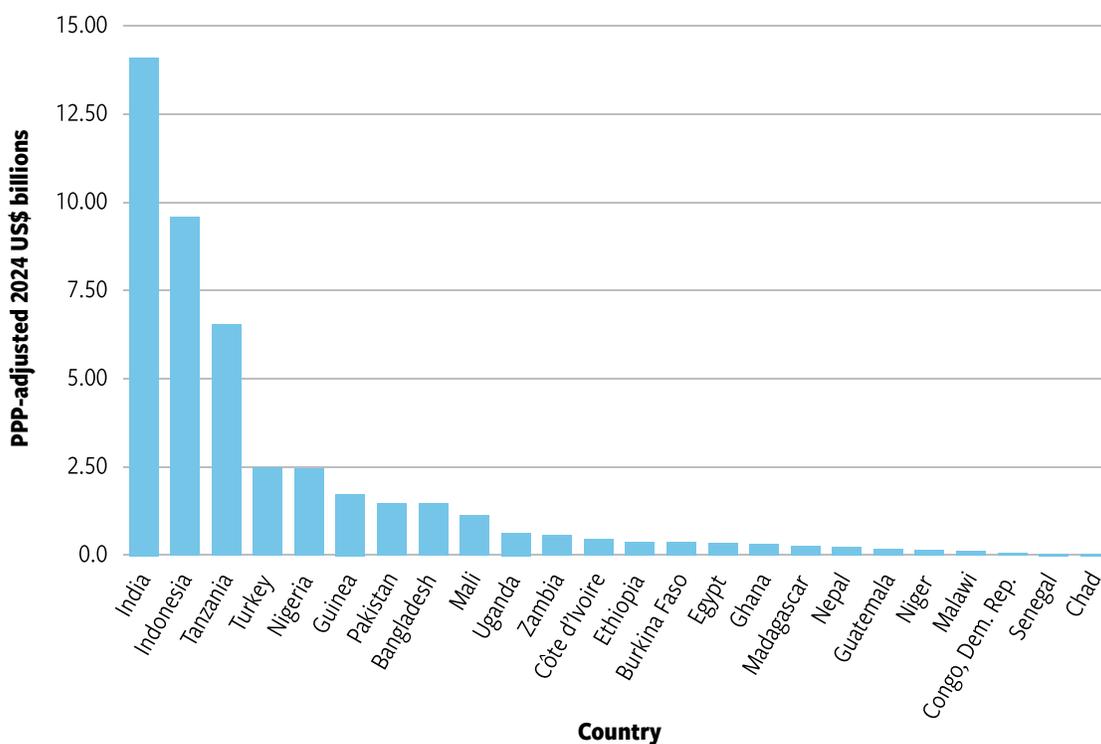
Child marriage is associated with a substantial increase in mortality risk, as compared to the risks faced by young unmarried mothers, as well as by mothers married as adults (see Appendix A, Table A2, for more details). After controlling for other factors, CGD found that child marriage causes between 100,000 and 190,000 deaths of children under age 5 annually, resulting in an estimated global economic cost of up to \$123 billion per year.¹⁷¹ Moreover, child marriage is associated with up to 14,000 maternal deaths a year, which imposes costs of up to \$6 billion per year, with additional costs arising from increases in the incidence of intimate partner violence and the likelihood of miscarriage that is endemic among child brides (Figure 1).¹⁷²

FIGURE 1: ESTIMATED DEATHS, DALYS LOST, AND ECONOMIC COSTS (PPP-ADJUSTED) DUE TO HEALTH IMPACTS OF CHILD MARRIAGE¹⁷³

		Under-5 mortality	Maternal mortality	Intimate Partner Violence	Miscarriage or abortion	Total
Deaths	more than	108,676	4,885	-	-	113,561
DALYs lost	more than	10,315.1	368.3	77.7	0.4	10,761.5
Economic costs (US\$ millions)	more than	72,943.4	2,074.1	793.1	5.9	75,816.5
Deaths	up to	190,651	14,655	-	-	205,306
DALYs lost	up to	17,925.6	1,104.4	77.8	0.4	19,108.2
Economic costs (US\$ millions)	up to	122,952.1	6,222.5	795.0	6.2	129,975.8

Furthermore, decreases in secondary school completion and corresponding loss of earnings due to child marriage cost economies up to \$45 billion in lost earnings per year, with the largest impact in India, Indonesia, Nigeria, Tanzania, and Turkey, given the size of each country’s population of child brides and the impact of child marriage on schooling in these countries (Figure 2).

FIGURE 2: ESTIMATED ECONOMIC COSTS OF CHILD MARRIAGE DUE TO EDUCATION IMPACTS ON EARNINGS (US\$ BILLIONS)



Despite the high economic cost of inaction on child marriage, only a fraction of global development assistance and philanthropic funding is allocated toward addressing this issue.¹⁷⁴ Researchers from Girls Not Brides, Girls First Fund, and Publish What you Fund find that between 2015 and 2023, total ODA was around \$1.5 trillion; however, over this period, only 0.025 percent of total ODA funding went to projects with a primary objective of ending child marriage (primary ECM funding), and 0.081 percent of total ODA went to projects addressing child marriage as one of several objectives or as a result indicator (secondary ECM funding).¹⁷⁵

Philanthropic funding comprised 23 percent of total primary ECM funding between 2015 and 2023, providing a substantial complement to ODA funding and a core source of support for efforts to address child marriage (Figure 3).



COUNTRY SNAPSHOT

MALAWI

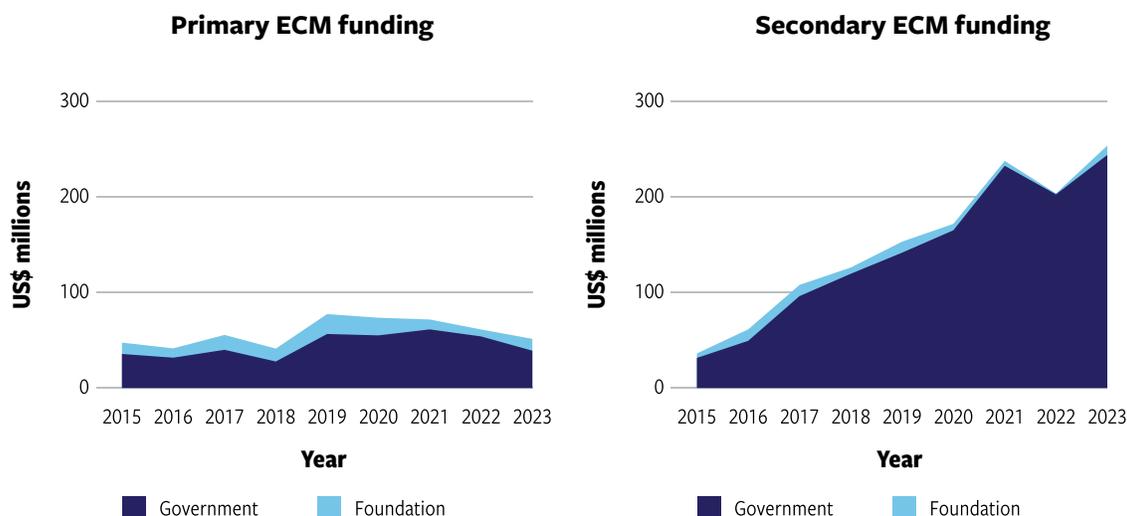
Malawi provides an example of a country that has renewed its political commitments to end the high prevalence of child marriage. Although Malawi has reduced child marriage in recent years, prevalence rates remain high: The country currently ranks 14th overall globally, with 38 percent of girls married as children, down from nearly 50 percent prior to 2010.¹⁷⁶ Today, there are 2.6 million women and girls in Malawi who were married under 18.¹⁷⁷

Child marriage in Malawi is linked to lack of educational opportunity for girls. In 2020, less than 13 percent of women over the age of 25 had completed at least secondary school; more than 50 percent of Malawian girls whose education stopped at or after primary school were married as children.¹⁷⁸ Girls from rural areas and poorer socio-economic groups are at higher risk of marrying early and thus bearing children at an earlier age: 96 percent of child brides in Malawi give birth before the age of 20.¹⁷⁹

To address the high prevalence of child marriage, community leaders have led a campaign to raise awareness about and reduce this practice.¹⁸⁰ In 2016, community advocates worked together with Plan International to coordinate a coalition of community, traditional, religious, and government stakeholders to present a petition to end child marriage before the First Lady of Malawi.¹⁸¹ Key advocates for a child marriage ban included the late Senior Chief Theresa Kachindamoto, a prominent traditional leader who helped make the case for legislative change.¹⁸² This campaign led the Malawian Parliament to adopt a constitutional amendment in 2017 that raised the minimum age of marriage from 15 to 18, for both girls and boys, eliminating a previous exception.¹⁸³

Since then, the Malawian government has taken steps to elevate this issue on the national agenda. In 2023, Malawian President Lazarus Chakwera announced a commitment to ensure legal protection against child marriage, working with the Minister of Justice and Minister of Gender to review and harmonize laws that are unaligned with the minimum age.¹⁸⁴ The government also renewed its National Strategy to End Child Marriage in 2024, with a target of reducing prevalence by 20 percent through evidence-based practices such as increasing school enrollment for girls, addressing gender norms, and strengthening implementation of legal protections.¹⁸⁵ Future progress depends on adequate resourcing of this national strategy and a reporting mechanism to track progress and promote accountability.

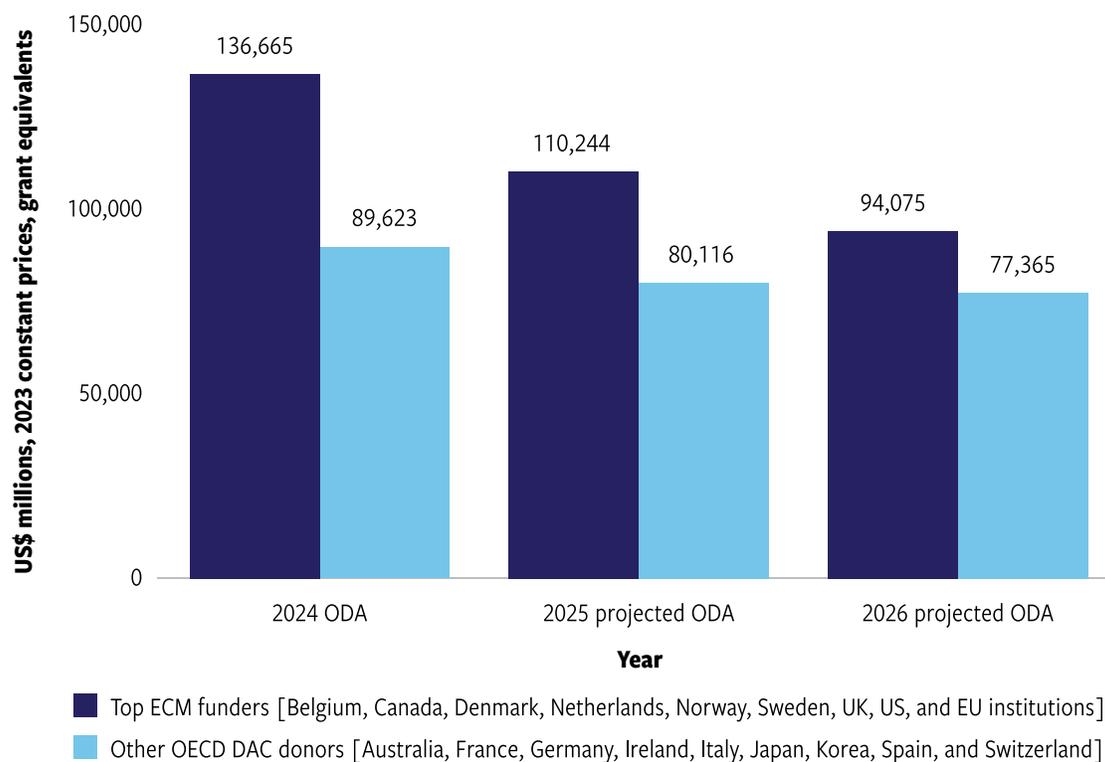
FIGURE 3: TRENDS IN GOVERNMENT AND FOUNDATION SPLIT OF ECM FUNDING (2015–2023)



Source: Data analysis by Publish What You Fund for “International Funding to End Child Marriage: Reviewing a Decade of Investment,” Girls Not Brides and Girls First Fund, March 2026, <https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/learning-resources/resource-centre/international-funding-end-child-marriage-2015-2024-report>.

The amount of funding that is primarily focused on addressing child marriage has been declining, from a high-water mark of \$76 million in 2019 to \$51 million in 2023.¹⁸⁶ Furthermore, given projected cuts from many of the top bilateral donors, funding focused on ending child marriage is likely to continue to decline (Figure 4). As part of overall cuts to ODA, many donors are shifting away from a focus on gender equality issues like child marriage, and some philanthropic funders, such as the Kendeda Fund, are winding down operations entirely.¹⁸⁷ SEEK—a global human development, social impact, and donor analytics consulting group—projects that while general ODA is likely to decline by 3 percent between 2023 and 2027, bilateral funding focused on gender equality issues, including child marriage, is likely to decline even more, at an estimated 5 percent in the same time period.¹⁸⁸

FIGURE 4: PROJECTED ODA CHANGES FOR THE 18 LARGEST OECD DAC DONORS¹⁸⁹



Source: Original figure for this report using data on top ECM funders from data analysis by Publish What You Fund for “International Funding to End Child Marriage: Reviewing a Decade of Investment,” Girls Not Brides and Girls First Fund, March 2026, <https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/learning-resources/resource-centre/international-funding-end-child-marriage-2015-2024-report>; and data on projected funding from Donor Tracker’s analysis of bilateral funding announcements, Kristin Laub et al., “The Budget Cuts Tracker,” Donor Tracker, July 4, 2025, <https://donortracker.org/publications/budget-cuts-tracker/>.

To avert the substantial cost of inaction on child marriage, more investment is needed. Recent levels of global funding primarily focused on ending child marriage—which amounts to an average of just over \$60 million per year—are drastically insufficient.¹⁹⁰ This rate of investment affords less than \$1 of funding a year for each of the over 70 million girls at risk of child marriage between 2025 and 2030 (see Appendix A, Table A8). While secondary ECM funding levels are higher, averaging around \$230 million per year, this still falls short of estimated required funding levels reported below. Furthermore, under projected funding cuts, the number of child marriages averted is likely to be even lower.

Increasing investment in efforts to avert child marriage would generate a substantial return on investment. For example, CGD’s analysis estimates that reducing the rate of child marriage from one girl in five to one girl in seven over the next five years—amounting to a 30 percent reduction in the rate of child marriage—would cost \$1.3 billion annually over this period. In contrast, the cost of inaction on child marriage amounts to up to \$175 billion per year—demonstrating that the cost of inaction likely far exceeds the level of funding required to dramatically reduce the incidence of child marriage or eradicate it entirely.¹⁹¹

While this report provides a global overview of the investment required to address child marriage, country-focused analyses are necessary to develop context-specific, locally appropriate interventions and to determine their varied implementation costs. A growing body of localized estimates show that investing in evidence-based, cost-effective interventions to end child marriage has the potential to generate returns ranging from 4 to 1 to over 20 to 1.¹⁹²

For example, researchers from the Accelerate Hub—a multi-university initiative to identify evidence-based interventions that improve children’s lives in resource-limited settings—have worked with local implementers, researchers, government officials, and other key stakeholders in Kenya and Nigeria to model the cost and impact of scaling up bundles of interventions to reduce child marriage and improve adolescent girls’ well-being, finding a 4-to-1 return in Kenya and 21-to-1 return in Nigeria.¹⁹³ Researchers from Victoria Institute of Strategic Economic Studies and Public Health Foundation of India have similarly modeled the positive effect of implementing a suite of interventions to reduce child marriage in India, finding an average benefit–cost ratio of 17.¹⁹⁴

Beyond having direct impact on child brides and their children, investments made to avert child marriage stand to generate broader returns for families, communities, and economies. Unlike targeted interventions such as medical therapies (e.g., deworming pills and antiretroviral therapy treatments) or commodities (such as bed nets or water filters) that can be delivered directly to individuals, evidence-based interventions designed to address child marriage often serve a broader population than girls at risk of child marriage.¹⁹⁵ For example, providing cash transfers to households can improve overall household consumption, shifting gender norms can impact multiple dimensions of gender equality within an entire community, and strengthening education systems can facilitate both boys’ and girls’ schooling.¹⁹⁶

In a resource-constrained environment, increasing funding for efforts to combat child marriage through domestic resource mobilization—in addition to official development assistance—will be critical to making progress. More data collection is needed on domestic funding to combat child marriage in order to create a baseline from which to grow.¹⁹⁷



COUNTRY SNAPSHOT

NIGER

Niger is a critical country in the fight against child marriage because it has the highest child marriage prevalence rate in the world, with more than three-quarters of women and girls married under the age of 18.¹⁹⁸ In some regions of Niger, the incidence of child marriage is even higher, such as in the cities of Maradi and Zinder, which had prevalence rates of 89 percent and 87 percent, respectively, in 2012; furthermore, the prevalence rate for girls married under the age of 15 is alarmingly high, at 28 percent.¹⁹⁹ At last estimate, 5.5 million women and girls in Niger had been married as children.²⁰⁰

Niger's underlying challenges in the areas of health, education, and economic development fuel the practice of child marriage.²⁰¹ Niger consistently ranks among the poorest countries in the world: In 2023, 52 percent of the population faced extreme poverty.²⁰² Lack of access to quality schooling remains significant: In 2021, 90 percent of children age 10 were unable to read at their age level, and completion rates were lower for girls than boys, increasing their susceptibility to child marriage.²⁰³ Indeed, prevalence rates of child marriage among girls in rural areas without access to schooling exceed 80 percent.²⁰⁴ Furthermore, Niger's geographic location in the Sahel renders it highly vulnerable to climate change, drought, and food insecurity, which fuels instability, another risk factor for child marriage.²⁰⁵

Social norms are an overwhelming driver for child marriage in Niger, even when taking into account the wider socioeconomic, security, and political challenges of the region.²⁰⁶ A study found that both women and men support early marriage, for differing reasons; women cited protection from harassment, among other concerns; men cited protection from ruined marital prospects; and both cited concerns about poverty to some extent.²⁰⁷ Cultural norms and religious practices supported by the law enable child marriage, such as the practice of *wahaya*, which allows for the purchase of one or more girls as wives.²⁰⁸

Multilateral partners have partnered with the government to try to stem the tide of child brides: For example, in 2018, the UNICEF-UNFPA Global Programme to End Child Marriage helped the Ministry for the Promotion of Women and the Protection of the Child create a national action plan on child marriage.²⁰⁹ However, the 2023 military coup, frozen donor support, and overall instability in Niger has stalled the country's efforts to advance this plan and other key development programs.²¹⁰



SECTION IV

Strategy for Progress

Girls raise their hands during a school lesson in Sierra Leone. Credit: Stephanie Sinclair / Too Young to Wed

After two decades of progress elevating the issue of child marriage on the international agenda, which resulted in a historic decline in global rates of child marriage from one in four girls to one in five today, we are at a crossroads.²¹¹ Given recent challenges—including the COVID-19 pandemic, increases in conflict and climate crises, significant reduction in development assistance, and rising backlash against gender equality worldwide—we are at risk of reversing gains in the international effort to end child marriage. The costs of this regression would be substantial—threatening not only the human rights of individual girls, but also broader national, regional, and international interests in economic prosperity and stability.

To ensure continued progress and avoid the significant cost of inaction on child marriage, a new strategy is needed to accelerate the pace of change—starting with the adoption of an ambitious target. Even in a resource-constrained environment, it is possible to reduce the global prevalence of child marriage from one in five to one in seven over the next five years with an investment of \$1.3 billion per year—thereby reducing prevalence by one-third and avoiding a cost of up to \$175 billion per year, generating a significant return on investment.

Meeting this target in the wake of global aid cuts will require a strategic and focused approach. This does not mean partners should abandon support for the broad range of programs that have been tested and help advance child marriage reduction. However, in a world of constrained funding and backlash against human rights, targeting resources will be critical to advancing progress. Based on strong evidence of the most effective interventions to reduce child marriage, this report recommends prioritizing three in particular: (1) investing in girls' education; (2) promoting health services to reduce adolescent pregnancy; and (3) shifting norms that perpetuate this practice.

TARGET SUPPORT FOR CATALYTIC INTERVENTIONS

Over the last decade, a growing body of evidence has helped identify best practices to prevent and address child marriage.²¹² While there is not one single intervention that will eradicate this human rights abuse, combining high-impact interventions—including education, reproductive health care, and norm change programs—has proven catalytic across country contexts.²¹³ To accelerate progress, governments, multilateral organizations, philanthropic organizations, the private sector, and civil society should coordinate investment in a package of catalytic interventions deemed most effective to address this practice.

EDUCATION

First, we should double down on investment in girls' education, which shifts the perceived value of girls and is highly effective in reducing child marriage prevalence rates.²¹⁴ According to the WORLD Policy Analysis Center, tuition-free secondary school has been shown to reduce the probability of both marriage and childbearing before the age of 18.²¹⁵ This is true across regions: In Niger, for example,

a middle school scholarship program that provided girls with education and practical support, such as transportation, housing, and supplies, reduced the risk of child marriage by 49 percent.²¹⁶ Furthermore, evidence shows that girls' education not only delays marriage, but also addresses the drivers of this practice, including by delaying sexual debut and pregnancy, improving health, and strengthening girls' agency—thereby making child marriage less likely.²¹⁷ In Bangladesh, for example, a program that offered life skills education for adolescents both reduced child marriage and increased use of reproductive health services, including teen pregnancy prevention.²¹⁸

Successful programs to provide education for girls can include cash and in-kind transfers to support girls' schooling, targeted life skills programs that build proficiency in areas such as digital and financial literacy, and programs that remove barriers or increase access to schooling for girls.²¹⁹ Use of conditional financial incentives can be particularly effective at keeping girls in school and reducing the risk of child marriage.²²⁰ In India, for example, a conditional cash transfer program for girls' education launched by the Punjab government increased the probability of girls completing secondary school and decreased the probability of early marriage.²²¹ In Malawi, a conditional cash transfer program in the Zomba district improved girls' primary school completion and lowered the risk of marriage even two years after the program ended.²²²

Furthermore, formal and informal vocational training that equips girls and young women with specific job skills helps delay marriage while contributing to wider societal benefits.²²³ Reviews of life skills and livelihoods training initiatives show positive results in preventing child marriage: For example, a Bangladeshi program that provided girls with training on livelihoods, computer skills, financial literacy, and rights resulted in reduced child marriage rates, even over a relatively brief 18-month period.²²⁴ Furthermore, in Uganda, equipping girls with vocational training and life skills translated to income-generating activities and helped reduce the incidence of child marriage.²²⁵

HEALTH

Second, we should invest in efforts to improve access to reproductive health education and services, which is critical to child marriage prevention efforts, given the link between adolescent pregnancy and child marriage.²²⁶ Health education and access to services, including contraception, help delay pregnancy by increasing girls' agency; as a result, girls are less likely to get pregnant and be married as children—particularly in places where fears about teen pregnancy drive community support for child marriage—and therefore are less likely to die or face complications in childbirth.²²⁷

In addition, comprehensive sexuality education has been shown to prevent child marriage by delaying sexual debut and increasing use of family planning, which has profound effects on the health and well-being of girls.²²⁸ In Ethiopia, for example, girls participating in the government's Health Extension Programme had lower risk of marriage in adolescence and higher literacy and numeracy outcomes.²²⁹ Another reproductive health program implemented in Indonesia, Kenya, Malawi, Mozambique, Pakistan, and Zambia substantially reduced both child marriage and prevalence of FGM/C, which can be a precondition to marriage for girls.²³⁰

Furthermore, comprehensive sexuality education and health services for men and boys are also important in efforts to combat adolescent pregnancy and reduce child marriage. Recent evidence suggests that programs targeted at male populations can play an important role in decreasing demand and prevalence rates.²³¹



COUNTRY SNAPSHOT

PAKISTAN

Pakistan demonstrates how child marriage prevalence varies at the local level. While national prevalence has dropped from 40 percent in the 1990s to 18 percent in 2018, in provinces like Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, rates are closer to 30–40 percent, respectively.²³² Furthermore, even within provinces, rates can differ substantially: in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, for example, child marriage prevalence in the Lakki Marwat district is at 34 percent, while in Buner it is as high as 60 percent.²³³

Many factors contribute to the prevalence of child marriage in Pakistan, including poverty, limited household resources, religious traditions, and gender norms.²³⁴ Pakistani girls are often married at young ages to reduce financial pressures on parents or avoid payment of higher dowries that are standard for those married at older ages.²³⁵ In addition, under a practice called *swara*, in some communities girls are married to resolve disputes or debts; although this practice was declared un-Islamic and unconstitutional by the Federal Shariat Court of Pakistan in 2021, enforcement in rural communities disenfranchised from the justice system remains a challenge.²³⁶ Furthermore, cultural norms that privilege the chastity of young girls drive some families to marry their daughters as children, and some Pakistani girls cite a desire to marry early in order to escape familial pressures.²³⁷

The national Pakistani government has not prioritized ending child marriage, which remains legal.²³⁸ However, efforts at the regional and local levels demonstrate that progress is possible even in the absence of national frameworks. In 2013, Sindh banned child marriage and prohibited solemnizing or enabling child marriage, a law that was upheld in 2022 following a challenge under the Federal Shariat Court, which held that establishing a minimum age for marriage is consistent with Islam.²³⁹ In May 2025,

COUNTRY SNAPSHOT: PAKISTAN (continued)

Islamabad followed suit, setting the minimum age of marriage at 18 for both girls and boys, despite intense opposition from religious factions; the law repeals the outdated Child Marriage Restraint Act of 1929 and criminalizes any attempt by adults and religious authorities to facilitate or force children into marriage, with up to seven years in prison possible.²⁴⁰ Other regions, including Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Punjab, have considered legislative prohibitions on child marriage, which continue to be supported by civil society actors.²⁴¹ Government officials and advocates should leverage the progress made in cities to advance promising models in other regions.

NORMS

Third, we need to support efforts to shift regressive social norms that fuel child marriage—particularly in a moment of rising backlash against gender equality. This starts with using the expressive power of government condemnation by enacting legal prohibitions on child marriage. Still today, only 51 countries—amounting to 27 percent of the world’s nations—have adequate legal protections against child marriage.²⁴² And even where legal prohibitions do exist, they are often circumvented, including through failure to register marriages until girls become legal adults or through increases in informal unions.²⁴³ Given staggeringly high child marriage prevalence rates even in countries with strong laws on the books—for example, in India and Ethiopia—legal prohibitions alone are insufficient to overcome community norms on this practice.

Support for interventions aimed at shifting social norms that ascribe low value to girls and are associated with child marriage is critical to reducing this practice. This includes engagement with community and religious leaders, who help shape and preserve community norms.²⁴⁴ Though more study is needed, several norm change initiatives have proven to be highly effective: For example, one program in Bangladesh, India, and Nepal that deployed media messages to challenge traditional gender norms significantly decreased child marriage prevalence among adolescent girls.²⁴⁵ Furthermore, the engagement of men and boys is critical to shifting norms on child marriage: Young men in particular can be strong allies in efforts to end this practice, given their own frustration with the economic and social power afforded to older men who are married to girls and women in younger age cohorts.²⁴⁶ In addition, effectively addressing social norms related to marriage and consent requires the inclusion and participation of men and boys of all ages, in their roles as fathers, brothers, spouses, and partners.²⁴⁷

Given that the factors fueling child marriage differ significantly across and within borders, the effectiveness of education, health, and norm change interventions depends on context; however,

evidence confirms that combining proven interventions can have significant returns.²⁴⁸ For example, researchers with the Accelerate Hub modeled a core set of evidence-based and cost-efficient interventions, including education, life skills training, and health services.²⁴⁹ This approach—which was used in Kenya’s Social and Economic Inclusion Project, a partnership between the Kenyan government and the World Bank—showed the potential of a sixfold return on investment in reducing child marriage.²⁵⁰

Furthermore, Accelerate Hub’s modeling in Nigeria of the Pathways to Choice program—which combined mentorship, life skills education, and support for schooling or vocational training—found that girls were about five times as likely to remain unmarried and almost seven times as likely to stay in school as their peers.²⁵¹ An updated analysis in 2025 projected a potential 76 percent reduction in girls’ marriage and 42 percent fewer adolescent pregnancies among out-of-school girls with an investment of only \$123 per girl.²⁵² To accelerate the pace of change and maximize return on investment, partners should support a suite of catalytic interventions that advance girls’ education, improve access to health information and services, and shift harmful social norms.



COUNTRY SNAPSHOT

SIERRA LEONE

Sierra Leone is a country where momentum to end child marriage is building. Child marriage has affected over one million Sierra Leonean girls and women as of 2019, with just under a third of whom were married below the age of 15.²⁵³ However, the prevalence of child marriage has declined from more than half of all girls in the 1990s to 30 percent in 2019, and the average age at first marriage has increased to 20.²⁵⁴ This is in part due to girls’ secondary school enrollment, which jumped from 38 percent in 2015 to 74 percent in 2021.²⁵⁵

In Sierra Leone, factors that contribute to child marriage include parental and societal pressures to marry, poverty and financial hardship, and limited opportunities for girls to establish their own livelihoods.²⁵⁶ Rates are highest among the impoverished, the rural, and the poorly educated.²⁵⁷ Child marriage is closely linked to early childbearing—with 65 percent of child brides becoming mothers before age 18, and 90 percent before the age of 20; this, in turn, affects girls’ educational opportunities, with 87 percent of married girls out of school, compared with just 16 percent of their unmarried peers.²⁵⁸

COUNTRY SNAPSHOT: SIERRA LEONE (continued)

Intimate partner violence also plagues child brides in Sierra Leone, with a staggering 63 percent experiencing violence over the past year.²⁵⁹ Furthermore, in 2019, 61 percent of women and girls ages 15–19 had been circumcised—a procedure that is culturally tied to beliefs around women’s status and family honor, and to prepare girls for marriage—as compared with 95 percent of women ages 45–49.²⁶⁰

To meet these challenges, the government has committed to bring down the rate of child marriage.²⁶¹ Since 2018, Sierra Leone’s First Lady, H.E. Dr. Fatima Maada Bio, has led the “Hands Off Our Girls” campaign, and the government has adopted the National Strategy for the Reduction of Adolescent Pregnancy and Child Marriage.²⁶² These efforts fueled momentum for change, leading to the enactment of the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act 2024, which harmonized the country’s minimum legal age of marriage laws to mandate 18 years old as the minimum legal age of marriage, and which includes penalties for offenders, along with legal protections for survivors.²⁶³ In 2020, President Julius Maada Bio and Education Minister David Moinina Sengeh lifted a decade-long ban against school attendance by pregnant girls and teenage mothers.²⁶⁴ Furthermore, over the last few years, Sierra Leone’s government has focused on expenditure on education, which in 2024 was 20 percent—as compared with the global average of 3–4 percent.²⁶⁵ And, to equip girls with knowledge about the harms of early marriage, pregnancy, and childbearing, the government also included comprehensive sexuality education in its basic education curriculum framework.²⁶⁶

The government updated its national strategy on child marriage in 2025, demonstrating continued investment in this issue and committing to monitoring and reporting on progress.²⁶⁷ Officials in Sierra Leone are also partnering with multilateral organizations to support their fight against child marriage.²⁶⁸ The UNFPA-UNICEF Global Programme to End Child Marriage is working with the Ministers of Gender and Children’s Affairs, Social Welfare and Basic and Senior Secondary Education, the Ministry of Health, the Office of the First Lady, and other leaders to bolster awareness raising efforts, assist with implementation and enforcement of the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act 2024, and provide programmatic support.²⁶⁹

COORDINATE INVESTMENT IN FOCUS COUNTRIES

In a resource-constrained environment, we should also maximize returns by coordinating investment in high-burden, high-prevalence countries, which offers the most effective pathway to ending child marriage at scale. Research confirms that programs to reduce child marriage are most cost-effective when targeted in areas where rates of child marriage are highest.²⁷⁰ Furthermore, as the funding landscape contracts, it is more important than ever to streamline investments and coalesce around a select group of focus countries. Over the last 15 years, investors in efforts to end child marriage have targeted a wide spread of countries across Africa and South Asia.²⁷¹ However, to address the decrease in resources and threat of backsliding on this issue—as well as continue to prove the case that progress is possible—donors should coinvest in a selected group of focus countries with the highest burden and prevalence rates.

TABLE 1: COUNTRIES WITH HIGHEST INCIDENCE OF CHILD MARRIAGE BY ABSOLUTE BURDEN AND PREVALENCE RATES²⁷²

Top 15 (Burden Under 18)		Top 15 (Prevalence Under 18)	
India	222.4 million	Niger	76%
Bangladesh	43.4 million	Central African Republic	61%
China	36.7 million	Chad	61%
Indonesia	32.1 million	Mali	54%
Nigeria	23.7 million	South Sudan	52%
Brazil	21.9 million	Bangladesh	51%
Pakistan	20.5 million	Burkina Faso	51%
Ethiopia	19.9 million	Mozambique	48%
Iran	10.4 million	Guinea	47%
Mexico	10.4 million	Somalia	45%
Democratic Republic of Congo	8 million	Eritrea	41%
Turkey	8 million	Ethiopia	40%
Egypt	7.1 million	Madagascar	39%
Tanzania	6.4 million	Malawi	38%
Thailand	6 million	Mauritania	37%

Source: Data from the Child Marriage Data Portal.

In addition, it is important to consider political will in selecting focus countries. Recent analyses confirm that governments are essential partners in implementing large-scale programming to prevent and reduce child marriage.²⁷³ For example, government-supported efforts in Ethiopia, India, and Kenya demonstrate that scaling education, anti-poverty, health, and social protection programming with the support of governments contributes significantly to the elimination of child marriage.²⁷⁴ Countries that have demonstrated political will either through government commitments made by high-level leaders or effective advocacy campaigns by civil society leaders should be included as focus countries.

One marker of political will is the adoption of national strategies or action plans to end child marriage. These initiatives are emerging as an important mechanism for governments to set targets for child marriage reduction; coordinate action across agencies; and develop large-scale, multi-sectoral programming that is proven to be effective in reducing prevalence rates.²⁷⁵ Development of these strategies can also promote political commitment, community consultation, financial investment, and accountability.²⁷⁶

A critical element to ensure the success of national strategies is the inclusion of a sustainable funding strategy. Several countries have budgeted the cost of implementation, rising from 7 nations in 2018 to 33 in 2023; however, unless these strategies are fully funded, they risk becoming rhetorical commitments.²⁷⁷ In addition to fully funding national strategies to end child marriage, implementation and robust monitoring and evaluation are essential. Several countries have recently adopted implementation plans: For example, in Burkina Faso, the government adopted an implementation effort with coordination among 13 ministries, financial partners, and civil society.²⁷⁸ In Uganda, the government committed to collaborating with district-level leaders to help local officials plan implementation.²⁷⁹ And Indonesia's 2020–2024 National Strategy to End Child Marriage prioritized working closely with religious leaders to build buy-in and awareness in communities.²⁸⁰

MOBILIZE GLOBAL LEADERSHIP

Given the significant cost of inaction on child marriage and the slow pace of change, it is critical to educate and mobilize leaders around the world in order to help elevate this issue on the international agenda. To build support for and ensure effective implementation of this strategy, we propose creating a global network of champions to end child marriage from both the Global South and the Global North. This network should be composed of officials from governments, multilateral organizations, philanthropic organizations, the private sector, and civil society, who can effectively press for the \$1.3 billion in resources needed to achieve a reduction of child marriage prevalence from one in five girls globally to one in seven over the next five years. Sustained, high-level advocacy can also help promote domestic resource mobilization, which will be critical to combine with ODA in a challenging fiscal environment.



COUNTRY SNAPSHOT

UNITED STATES

The United States demonstrates that even in countries where girls have strong access to education and employment opportunities, child marriage persists. Although prevalence rates are much lower in the United States than across Latin America and the Caribbean, the Middle East, sub-Saharan Africa, and South Asia, nearly 315,000 minors were legally married in the United States between 2000 and 2021.²⁸¹ The 10 states with the highest incidence of child marriage are Alabama, Idaho, Kentucky, Mississippi, Nevada, Tennessee, Texas, Utah, West Virginia, and Wyoming.²⁸²

The harmful effects of child marriage last well beyond adolescence, as girls married as children in the United States are 31 percent more likely to live in poverty as adults.²⁸³ A 2011 study found that women married before age 18 were also at 43 percent higher risk of developing major depressive disorder, and a 2010 study found that child brides in the US were 50 percent more likely to drop out of high school and four times less likely to complete college.²⁸⁴ Although rates have trended downward for the past 15 years, prevalence rose by 3.8 percent in 2021 following COVID-19, reflecting the global reversal of progress during the pandemic.²⁸⁵

In line with global trends, girls in the United States are far more likely to marry as children than boys, with 86 percent of child marriages between 2000 and 2021 affecting girls marrying men who were an average of more than four years older.²⁸⁶ Given these age gaps, more than 66,000 of child brides in the United States were not legally old enough to provide consent to sexual relations with their spouses.²⁸⁷ Outside marriage, this would be considered a sex crime. While the majority of US minors who were married as children were 16 or 17, some married as young as 10.²⁸⁸ Data from the American Community Survey 2010–2014 found that rates are highest among immigrant communities, though child marriage is not exclusive to these populations.²⁸⁹

There is no federal law banning child marriage in the United States. Instead, laws governing child marriage in the United States are governed under a state-by-state patchwork.²⁹⁰ Until 2018, child marriage was legally permissible in all 50 states.²⁹¹ According to advocacy groups Equality Now and Unchained at Last, child marriage is currently legal in 34 out of 50 states, and 4 states—California, Mississippi, New Mexico, and Oklahoma—do not set a minimum age of marriage.²⁹² Federal legislation to ban child marriage nationally has been introduced in the US Congress, but it has yet to gain traction.²⁹³

COUNTRY SNAPSHOT: UNITED STATES (continued)

In the absence of a federal ban to prohibit this practice, advocates continue to push for state-level bans.²⁹⁴ Community leaders are also pushing for federal data collection on state-by-state prevalence to track progress.²⁹⁵ More work is needed to pass a child marriage ban at the national level, implement systems to accurately track and report on registered child marriages, and further invest in services to support already married girls.

CONCLUSION

The global community has made great strides toward reducing child marriage, but this progress is at risk—and the continued cost of inaction is high. Accelerating progress toward dramatically reducing child marriage demands a new strategy, including by increasing resources for catalytic interventions—such as investing in girls’ education, promoting reproductive health education and services, and addressing harmful social and cultural norms—and coordinating investment in high-prevalence, high-burden focus countries. It will also require the sustained and coordinated commitment of global champions from governments, multilateral organizations, philanthropic organizations, the private sector, and civil society to press the international community to prioritize this issue.

Through coordinated and strategic action, the international community can accelerate progress and improve the lives of girls and women who have been subjected to this human rights violation for far too long. A focused strategy can also help reduce the significant costs of this human rights abuse—and generate a return on investment that will benefit entire families, communities, and economies for generations to come.

ENDNOTES

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

RACHEL VOGELSTEIN

Rachel Vogelstein is an associate professor of professional practice, director of the Institute of Global Politics Women's Initiative, and co-director of the Human Rights, Gender, and Equity concentration at SIPA. Vogelstein is an expert on domestic and global policy to advance gender equality. Most recently, she served in the Biden administration as special assistant to the president and deputy director of the White House Gender Policy Council and special advisor on gender at the White House National Security Council, leading efforts on health and reproductive rights, economic security, democracy and political participation, gender-based violence, and education and humanitarian relief, among other issues. During the Obama administration, Vogelstein served on the White House Council on Women and Girls and as an official in the secretary's Office of Global Women's Issues at the US State Department, where she developed a landmark foreign policy agenda for women's empowerment. Previously, she was the Douglas Dillon Senior Fellow and Director of the Women and Foreign Policy Program at the Council on Foreign Relations. She is the author of *Awakening: #MeToo and the Global Fight for Women's Rights*, which was recognized by the *New York Times* for capturing the global impact of the #MeToo movement. A graduate of Columbia's Barnard College and Georgetown University Law Center, Vogelstein began her career working on reproductive rights at the National Women's Law Center and ACLU Reproductive Freedom Project, and has taught classes on women's rights in the US and globally at Georgetown Law and Yale Law School. She has served on the boards of the National Women's History Museum and Planned Parenthood Global and is a member of the Leadership Coalition for Women in National Security.

JENNIFER KLEIN

Jennifer Klein is a professor of professional practice and director of the Institute of Global Politics Women's Initiative at SIPA. Previously, Klein was assistant to the president and director of the White House Gender Policy Council in the Biden administration. Klein advised President Biden and Vice President Harris on issues including women's health, gender-based violence, women's economic security, and human rights. During the Obama administration, Klein served as a deputy and senior advisor in the Office of Global Women's Issues at the Department of State. During the Clinton administration, she worked at the White House in a dual appointment as First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton's senior domestic policy advisor and a special assistant to the president on the Domestic Policy Council. A graduate of Brown University and Columbia Law School, Klein began her career at Simpson Thacher & Bartlett. She has taught domestic and global gender policy at the Georgetown University Law Center, as a senior visiting fellow in international and public affairs at the Watson Institute at Brown University, and as a visiting fellow at the Center for Global Legal Challenges at Yale Law School. She is currently a member of the board of the National Women's Law Center, and previously served on a number of non-profit boards, including for the Brown University School of Public Health, International Center for Research on Women, and Global Institute for Women's Leadership Advisory Council at King's College London.



IGP Institute of
Global Politics
WOMEN'S INITIATIVE

International Affairs Building
420 West 118th Street
New York, NY 10027

212-853-4720
igp.sipa.columbia.edu/our-work/initiatives/womens-initiative
igp@sipa.columbia.edu