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### **Promotion and protection of the rights of children: promotion and protection of the rights of children**

## **Issue of child, early and forced marriage**

### **Report of the Secretary-General\*\***

#### *Summary*

The present report is submitted pursuant to General Assembly resolution [77/202](#) of 15 December 2022 on child, early and forced marriage. Covering the period from June 2022 to June 2024, it builds on the previous report of the Secretary-General on the same subject ([A/77/282](#)), providing an update on progress made towards ending child, early and forced marriage.

In the present report, the Secretary-General highlights gaps and promising practices with regard to the elimination of child, early and forced marriage. The report contains recommendations on human rights-based measures aimed at addressing the root causes of child, early and forced marriage, eliminating this harmful practice and supporting survivors.

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\* [A/79/150](#).

\*\* The present report was submitted to the conference services for processing after the deadline for technical reasons beyond the control of the submitting office.



## I. Introduction

1. In its resolution [77/202](#) of 15 December 2022, the General Assembly took note with appreciation of the report of the Secretary-General on the issue of child, early and forced marriage ([A/77/282](#)) and expressed concern that progress had been uneven across regions, both between and within countries, towards ending child, early and forced marriage. Consequently, the General Assembly requested the Secretary-General to submit to it a comprehensive report, on the basis of evidence, before the end of its seventy-eighth session, on progress towards ending child, early and forced marriage worldwide, as well as best practices for programmes aimed at ending the practice and supporting already married girls and women affected by this practice, including girls' and women's empowerment programmes, gaps in funding, research and data collection, using information provided by Member States, United Nations bodies, agencies, funds and programmes, civil society and other relevant stakeholders.

2. In this connection, two calls for inputs in the form of notes verbales were sent, on 27 April 2023 and on 13 March 2024, requesting information from Member States, United Nations bodies, agencies, funds and programmes, civil society and other relevant stakeholders. As of the end of June 2024, 65 responses had been received from 23 Member States,<sup>1</sup> 10 United Nations entities<sup>2</sup> and 26 civil society organizations.<sup>3</sup> The present report is informed by those submissions, which are available on the website of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights,<sup>4</sup> by informal consultations held with United Nations entities and civil society and by additional research.

3. An estimated 640 million girls and women alive today were married in childhood and 12 million girls per year are married, according to the most recent global data of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF).<sup>5</sup> The share of young women who married in childhood declined from an estimated 21 per cent in 2018 to 19 per cent in 2023.<sup>6</sup> Despite global advances, the reduction of the incidence of child marriage is too slow to meet the target of eliminating this harmful practice by 2030 in line with Sustainable Development Goal 5. At the current rate, it will take another 300 years for child marriage to be eliminated.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Albania, Argentina, Austria, Azerbaijan, Bahrain, Benin, Canada, Cuba, Ecuador, El Salvador, Italy, Lebanon, Lithuania, Norway, Mexico, Saudi Arabia, Slovenia, Spain, Syrian Arabic Republic, Togo, Uzbekistan and Zambia, as well as the State of Palestine.

<sup>2</sup> The International Organization for Migration; the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) office in India (joint submission); the UNICEF Regional Office for South Asia; and the UNICEF offices in Burkina Faso, Ethiopia, Ghana, Mozambique, the Niger and Zambia.

<sup>3</sup> Anti-Slavery Australia, "Novi put" Association, CARE International, Child, Early and Forced Marriage and Unions and Sexuality Working Group, Centre d'études sur le leadership et la promotion des droits humains, Centre for Child Law, Otaharin Centre for Integrative Inclusion of Roma Men and Women, Centre for Social Justice (Pakistan), Child Marriage Free India, Committee for Justice and Nazra for Feminist Studies, Equality Now, Fundación Entreculturas, Girls Not Brides: The Global Partnership to End Child Marriage, Inter-Religious Council of Ethiopia, Ipas Bolivia, Jubilee Campaign, Kenya Workers Right and Harmonization Program, Lutheran World Federation (Kenya/Somalia), Lutheran World Federation (South Sudan), Maat for Peace, Plan International, Right Here Right Now Kenya Coalition, Soroptimist International, Spotlight Initiative, and University of Nottingham and University of Birmingham.

<sup>4</sup> Available at [www.ohchr.org/en/calls-for-input/2024/call-inputs-inform-report-secretary-general-progress-towards-ending-child](https://www.ohchr.org/en/calls-for-input/2024/call-inputs-inform-report-secretary-general-progress-towards-ending-child).

<sup>5</sup> UNICEF, "Is an end to child marriage within reach? Latest trends and future prospects: 2023 update", 5 May 2023.

<sup>6</sup> UNICEF, "Global polycrisis creating uphill battle to end child marriage", 3 May 2023.

<sup>7</sup> UNICEF, "Is an end to child marriage within reach?", May 2023, p. 3.

## II. Developments at the international level

4. The decline of child, early and forced marriage is uneven around the world owing to differing cultural, economic, legal, educational and political contexts. Although specific drivers may vary by context, child marriage is consistently rooted in gender inequality and fuelled by poverty, harmful social norms, insecurity and barriers to education. In contexts where premarital sexuality is taboo, virginity is closely tied to purity and family honour, contraception is scarce, or abortion services are restricted, adolescent pregnancy contributes significantly to child marriage.<sup>8</sup>

5. During the reporting period, United Nations entities and human rights mechanisms, as well as civil society, maintained a sharper focus on the issue of child, early and forced marriage.

### A. General Assembly

6. In its resolution [77/193](#), the General Assembly expressed deep concern that women and girls are often disproportionately affected by the adverse impacts of climate change, among others, which may exacerbate existing structural inequalities, as well as the incidence of child, early and forced marriage.

### B. Human Rights Council

7. In July 2023, at its fifty-third session, the Human Rights Council adopted its resolution [53/23](#), its sixth on child, early and forced marriage, with a specific focus on ending and preventing forced marriage. In the resolution, the Council requested the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights to prepare concise and action-oriented guidelines as a set of orientations for States on the effective application of a human rights-based approach to the development and implementation of laws, policies and programmes to prevent and eliminate child, early and forced marriage, including through open, transparent and inclusive consultation with States and with the participation of United Nations agencies, funds and programmes, civil society organizations and other appropriate stakeholders, and to submit the guidelines in a comprehensive report to the Council at its fifty-ninth session, in June 2025.

### C. Human rights treaty bodies

8. During the reporting period, the human rights treaty bodies urged States to address all forms of child and forced marriage or union, including through abduction, and to improve data collection and analysis. They recommended conducting awareness campaigns about the harms of child marriage, the enforcement of minimum age laws and the establishment of support mechanisms for victims, while addressing disparities between rural and urban areas and discriminatory attitudes in customary justice systems.

9. In its recent concluding observations and jurisprudence, the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women urged States to address extended forms of child and forced unions, including through abduction. In one case, it decided that the State authorities had failed to act immediately and diligently in the search for the victim following her abduction in a context of domestic violence and informal union.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Child Marriage Research to Action Network, “Evidence review: child marriage interventions and research from 2020 to 2022”, January 2023, p. 12.

<sup>9</sup> See [CEDAW/C/83/D/153/2020](#).

10. Concerned about the allocation of sufficient resources and the adoption of a child rights monitoring framework to systematize the monitoring and analysis of data on children, the Committee on the Rights of the Child recommended that Bulgaria improve the collection, quality and analysis of data on child marriages.<sup>10</sup> The Committee pointed out the issue of abduction of girls for the purpose of forced marriage (*ukuthwala*) in South Africa, recommending that the State concerned develop awareness-raising campaigns and programmes on the harmful effects of child and forced marriage on the physical and mental health and well-being of girls, targeting households, local authorities, religious leaders, and judges and prosecutors. The Committee also reminded States to establish mechanisms to detect, protect and provide necessary services and support to victims of child and forced marriage and de facto unions. It recommended the establishment of protection schemes for victims and survivors and underlined the need to address the persistent disparities between rural and urban areas.<sup>11</sup>

11. The Committee against Torture recommended that Ethiopia strengthen targeted measures to address discriminatory attitudes at the community level, including among actors in customary justice systems, to ensure the implementation of national efforts to end child marriage.<sup>12</sup> The Committee also recommended that Malawi strictly enforce the legislation concerning the minimum age of marriage and clearly indicate that child marriages have no legal effect and constitute a harmful practice.<sup>13</sup>

#### D. Special procedures of the Human Rights Council

12. During the reporting period, special procedures mandate holders raised the issue of child, early and forced marriage within the scope of their mandates, showing the profound ramifications and human rights violations embedded in the practice. A communication issued during the reporting period included reference to the heightened risk of being forcibly married for women and girl refugees, asylum-seekers or those from a minority background, including unaccompanied and separated children.<sup>14</sup> In response to allegations of trafficking for the purposes of forced marriage, sexual exploitation, forced labour and domestic servitude, another communication was issued, in which the vulnerability of women and girls living in poverty and rural areas in particular was underlined.<sup>15</sup> In a joint communication, United Nations experts warned against the repeated, widespread and credible allegations of trafficking in persons, including children, in particular for the purposes of sexual slavery and sexual exploitation, child marriage, child labour and recruitment and use of children in combat roles and in support roles, by the Rapid Support Forces in the context of the conflict in the Sudan.<sup>16</sup>

13. Following its visit to Kyrgyzstan in April 2022, the Working Group on discrimination against women and girls reiterated in its report that freedom of religion and belief cannot be used to justify discrimination against women and girls.<sup>17</sup> Experts noted that viewing culture and belief as immutable hinders the full realization and development of women's and girls' human rights. Members of the Working Group were concerned that women married through a religious ceremony and without civil marriage registration could be excluded from the safeguards guaranteed in national

<sup>10</sup> [CRC/C/BGR/CO/6-7](#), para. 10(b).

<sup>11</sup> [CRC/C/ZAF/CO/3-6](#), para. 27(c).

<sup>12</sup> [CAT/C/ETH/CO/2](#), para. 27.

<sup>13</sup> [CAT/C/MWI/CO/1](#), para. 32.

<sup>14</sup> See joint communication No. TUR 1/2023.

<sup>15</sup> See joint communication No. CHN 3/2024.

<sup>16</sup> See joint communication No. SDN 1/2024.

<sup>17</sup> [A/HRC/53/39/Add.1](#), para. 51.

legislation and denied any rights or protections upon dissolution of the union.<sup>18</sup> The Working Group also noted the importance of education for girls and young women at all levels as a basis for their empowerment and that of the family.<sup>19</sup> Experts highlighted the need to financially support low-income families, noting that precarious socioeconomic conditions exacerbate the persistence of child marriage.<sup>20</sup>

14. In his report following his visit to Sri Lanka in November–December 2021, the Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of slavery, including its causes and consequences, stated that forced marriage is a contemporary form of slavery and, in the context of Sri Lanka, generally a cause and consequence of poverty, school dropout, teenage pregnancy and other factors.<sup>21</sup>

15. In her report following her visit to South Sudan in December 2022, the Special Rapporteur on trafficking in persons, especially women and children, highlighted that trafficking in persons, including for the purpose of child labour and child marriage, is a serious human rights violation and a serious crime that undermines and threatens the fragile processes of State-building and peacebuilding.<sup>22</sup>

## E. Universal periodic review

16. During the reporting period, the issue of child, early and forced marriage was addressed in recommendations stemming from the universal periodic review process. The recommendations reflected the importance of adopting a human rights-based approach to effectively eliminate the harmful practice of child, early and forced marriage, often linked to concerns about violence against and exploitation of women and about child abuse, exploitation, trafficking and violence.<sup>23</sup> In the recommendations, there was an emphasis on the importance of conducting nationwide awareness-raising campaigns and education programmes that address the negative implications of the harmful practice in order to strengthen the implementation of existing laws.<sup>24</sup> Member States also highlighted in their recommendations the need to pay attention to vulnerable adolescents, girls and women, in particular in rural areas, where the prevalence of child marriage is usually higher than in urban areas.

## F. United Nations entities

17. The Global Programme to Accelerate Action to End Child Marriage, led jointly by the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and UNICEF, entered its third phase (2024–2030), supporting adolescent girls in the enjoyment of their childhood, free from the risk of child marriage, and in experiencing healthier, safer and more empowered life transitions, including making informed choices about their education, livelihoods, sexuality, relationships, marriage and childbearing.<sup>25</sup> The Programme engaged with various regional actors, including the African Union and the League of Arab States; with regional economic commissions, such as the Economic Community of West African States and the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia;

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., para. 54.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., para. 37.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., para. 55.

<sup>21</sup> [A/HRC/51/26/Add.1](#), para. 33.

<sup>22</sup> [A/HRC/53/28/Add.2](#), para. 94.

<sup>23</sup> See, for example: [A/HRC/55/7](#), para. 116.99; [A/HRC/55/5](#), para. 132.120; [A/HRC/55/16](#), para. 32.240; and [A/HRC/55/16](#), para. 35.252.

<sup>24</sup> See, for example: [A/HRC/54/8](#), para. 135.197; [A/HRC/54/8](#), para. 135.204; [A/HRC/55/5](#), para. 132.242; and [A/HRC/55/16](#), para. 35.114.

<sup>25</sup> UNFPA and UNICEF, *Phase III Programme Document (2024–2030): UNFPA-UNICEF Global Programme to End Child Marriage* (2023).

and other regional mechanisms, such as the Southern African Development Community (SADC) and the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation.<sup>26</sup>

18. Under the UNICEF Adolescent Girls Programme Strategy, 2022–2025, there is an emphasis on collaboration with communities, Governments and partners to create an enabling environment for adolescent girls to thrive, promoting gender equality and addressing barriers that hinder their development and opportunities.<sup>27</sup> In collaboration with the Office of Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Violence against Children, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime and UNICEF, the International Organization for Migration continued to support awareness-raising and capacity-building efforts related to countering trafficking in persons, including for the purpose of forced marriage, at the regional and country levels.

19. The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights engaged with national, regional and international civil society organizations and national human rights institutions, States and other United Nations entities to keep track of the progress and challenges to end harmful practices globally, with a focus on female genital mutilation and child, early and forced marriage. This engagement enabled the Office to build a repository of good practices, lessons learned and challenges, and to create a list of contacts and potential partners from across regions.

## G. Civil society organizations

20. The civil society organization Girls Not Brides: The Global Partnership to End Child Marriage, comprising over 1,400 member organizations, continued to develop initiatives that support and catalyse the end of child marriage.<sup>28</sup> The Child Marriage Research to Action Network – a joint initiative of Girls Not Brides, UNFPA and UNICEF – continued to provide a platform for a coordinated global research agenda on the practice of child, early and forced marriage, and to encourage the uptake of research by policymakers and practitioners.

## III. Drivers of child, early and forced marriage

21. Although both girls and boys are affected by the practice of child marriage, girls are disproportionately affected. Girls subjected to child marriage are often denied educational opportunities, which perpetuates cycles of exploitation, abuse, poverty and financial dependence (see A/75/262). The physical and psychological impact of such practice is profound, with young brides facing higher risks of gender-based violence, such as domestic violence and sexual violence, including rape, leading to severe health complications, including maternal mortality and morbidity as a result of early pregnancies, as well as to mental health issues such as low self-esteem, anxiety, depression and suicidal ideation.<sup>29</sup> Moreover, forced marriage strips women and girls of their autonomy and agency, reinforcing patriarchal norms that devalue the empowerment and human rights of women and girls. As such, child, early and forced marriage not only violates the fundamental human rights of women and girls and stifles their potential, but also hinders broader societal progress by perpetuating harmful social norms and practices.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p. 35.

<sup>27</sup> UNICEF, “Building back equal, with and for adolescent girls: a programme strategy for UNICEF 2022–2025”, June 2023, p. 3.

<sup>28</sup> Girls Not Brides, “2023 impact: working together to make the world a safer and more equitable place for girls and women”, 2023.

<sup>29</sup> See <https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/learning-resources/child-marriage-research-action-network/crank-quarterly-research-meetings/symposium-action-mental-health-child-marriage/>.

22. In the submissions for the present report, there was an emphasis on the need to consider the issue of abductions or bride kidnapping with the same lens as child, early and forced marriage,<sup>30</sup> noting that the international legal framework recognizes both practices as serious human rights violations involving coercion, violating the principles of consent and autonomy.<sup>31</sup> Also noted was the need for stronger enforcement of laws on child and forced marriage, enhanced support for victims and survivors and improved prevention measures.

23. The factors contributing to child, early and forced marriage may vary between communities and countries. Such factors include armed conflict, pushback on the rights of women and girls, shrinking civic space, and vulnerabilities related to climate change, poverty, food insecurity, the digital divide and social media depictions of marriage.

## A. Armed conflict

24. In conflict-affected settings, girls are at a higher risk of being married owing to a complex interplay of economic hardship, weakened social structures and increased vulnerability resulting from displacement and insecurity.<sup>32</sup> In the context of conflict, child, early and forced marriage can constitute a form of conflict-related sexual violence and its considerations must be integrated into prevention strategies in conflict- and crisis-affected settings.<sup>33</sup>

25. Conflict often results in economic instability, loss of livelihoods and increased poverty. Families may marry off their daughters to reduce the number of dependants they need to support or to receive a dowry, thus alleviating their financial burdens. For every 10-fold increase in conflict-related deaths, there is a 7 per cent increase in the number of child marriages. Families living through conflict may also feel a heightened sense of insecurity, fear of sexual violence and threats to “family honour”, and financial hardship and infrastructure failures, including interruptions to girls’ schooling. As a result, girls living in fragile settings are twice as likely to become child brides as the global average.<sup>34</sup> However, in the context of crises and emergencies, such as conflicts, data on national averages do not capture trends in child marriage prevalence at the subnational level, where rates are likely to be much higher in certain regions.<sup>35</sup> Research has highlighted the need to pay further attention to displaced populations in order to better plan and budget for operations that open up and maintain girls’ access to services and support.<sup>36</sup> Armed conflicts also result in a higher number of child widows<sup>37</sup> who, upon the death of their husbands, can be evicted from their homes and left destitute, some bound by cultural traditions never to remarry.<sup>38</sup>

<sup>30</sup> Submissions by the Centre for Child Law and the Jubilee Campaign. The issue was also raised during consultations held on 17 and 18 April 2024.

<sup>31</sup> Relevant instruments include the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, which mandates States parties to take all appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination against women in all matters relating to marriage and family relations, explicitly addressing the need for free and full consent to marriage (art. 16); and the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which protects children from all forms of physical or mental violence, injury or abuse, including abductions for forced marriage (art. 19).

<sup>32</sup> [A/HRC/41/19](#), para. 14.

<sup>33</sup> Girls Not Brides, “Preventing conflict-related sexual violence is possible and requires urgent action”, June 2023, p. 3.

<sup>34</sup> UNICEF, “Is an end to child marriage within reach?”, p. 19.

<sup>35</sup> [A/HRC/50/44](#), para. 5.

<sup>36</sup> Child Marriage Research to Action Network, “CRANK research meeting: child marriage in conflict- and crisis-affected settings – learning from the latest evidence”, 20 June 2023.

<sup>37</sup> A child widow refers to a young girl subjected to both child marriage and widowhood before the age of 18 years.

<sup>38</sup> Action on Child, Early and Forced Marriage, “Millions of child widows forgotten, invisible and vulnerable”, 9 July 2018.



26. In the context of conflict-driven trafficking, violent extremism and transnational organized crime, armed groups can impose forced marriage on women and girls, which may be part of a policy of mass rape and forced pregnancy.<sup>39</sup> The likelihood of sexual violence in child and forced marriages or unions presents heightened political and security challenges for survivors and children born of rape. Abducted women and girls are frequently stigmatized and rejected by their families and communities upon their return. The children of these forced marriages are also frequently stigmatized, discriminated against, abused, abandoned by family members and denied basic rights and access to services, such as health care and education.<sup>40</sup>

## B. Pushback on women's rights and gender equality

27. The global pushback against gender equality affects efforts to end child marriage. Examples of such pushbacks include resistance against legislation to ban child marriage and calls to raise the minimum age of marriage, as well as an increase in legislation that criminalizes consensual adolescent sexuality and hinders their autonomy and protection, making it harder for girls to seek justice and escape from abusive situations.<sup>41</sup> Pushback can reinforce harmful cultural norms and practices in societies where early marriage is viewed as a way to control girls' and women's sexuality and ensure "family honour", and restrictions on women's rights can further entrench those beliefs.<sup>42</sup> According to Anti-Slavery Australia, harmful gender norms remain one of the main drivers of child, early and forced marriage, placing women, girls and persons of diverse sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression and sex characteristics at greater risk. According to the Human Dignity Trust, lesbian, bisexual and transgender women often face severe pressure and violence, including assaults and forced marriages when their sexual orientation is revealed.<sup>43</sup>

28. Rollbacks on women's and girls' rights include opposition to the provision of the full range of sexual and reproductive health services, including contraception, abortion and post-abortion care for adolescent girls; and resistance to the provision of comprehensive sexuality education for adolescents in and out of school.<sup>44</sup> Attacks on women's and girls' sexual and reproductive health rights have significant repercussions, notably by limiting access to contraceptives and reproductive health care. Such attacks increase the risk of maternal and child mortality<sup>45</sup> and heighten risks of mental health disorders associated with unwanted pregnancy.<sup>46</sup>

## C. Shrinking civic space

29. The backlash against gender equality is happening against the backdrop of an increasingly threatening environment for human rights defenders, as civic space is both shrinking and increasingly moving online.<sup>47</sup> In several countries, there has been a rise

<sup>39</sup> A/HRC/52/50, para. 15.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., para. 41.

<sup>41</sup> UNICEF, "Is an end to child marriage within reach?"

<sup>42</sup> UNFPA and UNICEF, *Phase III Programme Document (2024–2030)*.

<sup>43</sup> Humanity Dignity Trust, *Breaking the Silence: Criminalisation of Lesbians and Bisexual Women and its Impacts* (2016), p. 4.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> UNFPA and UNICEF, *Phase III Programme Document (2024–2030)*.

<sup>46</sup> See <https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/learning-resources/child-marriage-research-action-network/crank-quarterly-research-meetings/symposium-action-mental-health-child-marriage/>.

<sup>47</sup> Plan International, "Turning the world around: girls and young women leading the fight for equality – the state of the world's girls", September 2023, p. 4.



in xenophobic and anti-gender narratives in the political space.<sup>48</sup> In some contexts, it has become increasingly difficult to raise awareness about harmful practices, such as child, early and forced marriage, as well as of sexual and reproductive health and rights and the rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people, including in schools.<sup>49</sup> In a number of countries, ministries of education have restricted discussion on certain topics, thereby negatively shaping the social and political debate and favouring anti-rights narratives, to the detriment of activism led by women and girls.<sup>50</sup>

## D. Climate change

30. Climate change, biodiversity loss, environmental degradation and natural hazards all exacerbate poverty and food insecurity, leading families to resort to child marriage as a coping mechanism for economic survival. Such issues lead to the disruption of education and community structures, increased displacement of populations and political instability and heightened vulnerability of girls to gender-based violence, including early and forced marriage or union (see Human Rights Council resolution 53/23).

31. Analysis of historical data confirms the association between climate-related risks and child marriage:<sup>51</sup> a 10 per cent change in rainfall as a result of climate change is associated with a 1 per cent increase in the level of child marriage.<sup>52</sup> In sub-Saharan Africa, between 1994 and 2013, instances of child marriage were observed to have risen following weather-related income shocks.<sup>53</sup>

## E. Poverty and food insecurity

32. Compounding crises contribute to precarious situations in which families may resort to child, early and forced marriage as a negative coping mechanism for reducing food insecurity and easing their financial burdens.<sup>54</sup> Families may also consider such marriages to be a protective measure for their daughters, including as protection from sexual violence. Nevertheless, evidence demonstrates that child marriage, in addition to being a human rights violation, is not an effective way to protect girls, and that it can have serious negative consequences for their health, education and well-being.<sup>55</sup>

33. Child, early and forced marriage is not only a consequence but also a cause of food insecurity and malnutrition; women and girls who marry young experience higher rates of anaemia and malnutrition than those who marry later in life, with their children suffering the consequences, such as low birth weight, poor nutritional status and stunting.<sup>56</sup>

<sup>48</sup> Haley McEwen and Lata Narayanaswamy, “The international anti-gender movement: understanding the rise of anti-gender discourses in the context of development, human rights and social protection”, Working Paper, No. 2023-06 (Geneva, United Nations Research Institute for Social Development, 2023), p. 1.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., p. 6.

<sup>50</sup> Plan International, “Turning the world around”, p. 33.

<sup>51</sup> See also: Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, general recommendation No. 37 (2018).

<sup>52</sup> UNICEF, “Is an end to child marriage within reach?”, p. 19.

<sup>53</sup> World Economic Forum, “How does child marriage hinder gender equality?”, 24 August 2023.

<sup>54</sup> UNICEF, “Is an end to child marriage within reach?”, pp. 3 and 19.

<sup>55</sup> Girls Not Brides, “Despite significant progress, we need to go 20 times faster to end child marriage by 2030, shows new data”, 11 May 2023.

<sup>56</sup> Girls Not Brides and the International Centre for Research of Women, “Taking action to address child marriage: the role of different sectors”, Brief 6, March 2016, p. 1.

## **F. Digital gender divide and influence of media**

34. Of the estimated 2.6 billion people currently digitally unconnected, the majority are women and girls. For example, in low-income countries, only 19 per cent of women were using the Internet in 2020.<sup>57</sup> Owing to the digital gender divide, women and girls who belong to marginalized groups, such as rural populations and with lower socioeconomic status, are far less likely to be able to leverage the opportunities offered by the evolving platform economy in terms of education, job opportunities and online services. The lack of equal access, ownership and use of digital technologies by women and girls also limits their development of digital skills and, in turn, their ability to access information, including on their rights.<sup>58</sup>

35. According to the submissions received, the way marriage is presented in mass and social media could contribute to child and early marriages. Social media platforms may contribute to the perception of child marriage as a path to social mobility, thereby influencing girls to imitate married classmates in order to gain similar validation.<sup>59</sup> Girls may have a desire for the social and material advantages of marriage, as represented in the media, but have limited knowledge of the reality and what is expected from them when they marry.<sup>60</sup>

## **IV. Measures by States to prevent and address child, early and forced marriage**

36. During the reporting period, States took some steps to align national legislation with international human rights standards; raise awareness of gender equality, dismantling social norms and gender stereotypes underlying the practice of child, early and forced marriage; support women's and girls' access to education; remove barriers to their economic participation; provide protection and support services to survivors; engage with various stakeholders, including at the community level; and reinforce the capacities of public actors to prevent and address the harmful practice of child, early and forced marriage.

### **A. National laws and jurisprudence**

37. In the past decade, Chad, Costa Rica, Ecuador, the Gambia, Germany, Guatemala, Indonesia, Kyrgyzstan, Malawi, Malaysia, Mexico, Nepal, the Kingdom of the Netherlands, Norway, Panama, the Philippines, Saudi Arabia, Sierra Leone, Trinidad and Tobago, Zambia and Zimbabwe, among others, have raised the minimum age of marriage to 18 years or have removed exemptions, in line with international

<sup>57</sup> International Telecommunication Union, "Bridging the gender divide", November 2023.

<sup>58</sup> United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN-Women), *Innovation and Technological Change, and Education in the Digital Age for Achieving Gender Equality and the Empowerment of all Women and Girls: Expert guidance and substantive inputs to preparations for the 67th Session of the Commission on the Status of Women* (2023), p. 19.

<sup>59</sup> Girls Not Brides, "Knowledge is power: youth-led research to address power dynamics in knowledge and advocacy processes to end child marriage and promote girls' education in West Africa", July 2024, p. 15.

<sup>60</sup> Some researchers have found that mass media exposure, together with the place of residence, wealth and education status are determining factors in early marriage. See Gita Naik and others, "Adolescent marriage a violation of sexual and reproductive health rights: trend, spatial variation and covariate analysis from national family health survey", *Clinical Epidemiology and Global Health*, vol. 25 (January–February 2024).

human rights standards.<sup>61</sup> In the United States of America, since 2022, six states have passed laws raising the minimum age of marriage to 18 years, without exceptions.<sup>62</sup>

38. Raising awareness of the negative impacts of child marriage and engaging with communities has been key in increasing the minimum age of marriage for girls to 18 years. For instance, in Kyrgyzstan, the State engaged government agencies, civil society organizations and religious or traditional leaders in national debates so as to overcome strong resistance to increasing the minimum age of marriage and to garner political support. In Trinidad and Tobago, the Ministry of Gender, Youth and Child Development hosted televised public discussions involving women influencers from various religious backgrounds on the issue of child, early and forced marriage.<sup>63</sup>

39. There have been some encouraging developments in jurisprudence by national courts. According to the submission by Equality Now, in Uganda, in February 2023, the Constitutional Court held that the provisions of the Customary Marriage Act, the Hindu Marriage and Divorce Act and the Marriage and Divorce of Mohammedans Act were in contradiction to the minimum age of marriage of 18 years set out in article 31 of the Constitution of Uganda.

## B. National policies, programmes and budgets

40. According to civil society studies, funding for policies and programmes addressing child, early and forced marriage and unions is insufficient.<sup>64</sup> National strategies and action plans seem insufficiently budgeted, making their implementation difficult and limiting their outcomes, according to the submission by Girls Not Brides. Increased and strategic financial investment is needed to implement multisectoral and multilevel measures to address child marriage, targeting adolescent girls in particular.

41. Although progress at the global level is uneven and underfunded, a number of States have taken steps to address child, early and forced marriage and unions. For example, in Ethiopia, the National Costed Roadmap to End Child Marriage and Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting (2020–2024) is under implementation across the country. In March 2024, Slovenia adopted the National Programme for the Prevention of Domestic Violence and Violence against Women (2024–2029), which included measures to further strengthen inter-institutional cooperation in order to protect adolescents from early and forced marriages, with a focus on Roma communities. In 2022, Uzbekistan adopted the National Programme for the Advancement of Women in All Spheres of Economic, Political and Social Life (2022–2026) to address the obstacles faced by women and girls in exercising their right to education, such as traditional beliefs about gender roles in the family, early marriage, pregnancy and care responsibilities.

42. In 2022, Canada adopted the National Action Plan to End Gender-Based Violence, supported by an investment of US\$393.6 million over five years to support provinces and territories in their efforts to implement it in their jurisdictions. Lebanon is also working on developing a national action plan on child marriage for the period 2023–2030. According to Girls Not Brides, in Malawi, the Government is in the process of finalizing the new national strategy on ending child marriage, securing financial support for its implementation, harmonizing laws and domesticating the

<sup>61</sup> UN-Women and others, *Legislating and Enforcing the Minimum Age of Marriage: A Comparative Study of Experiences and Lessons Learned in Ending the Legalization of Child Marriage* (New York, UN-Women, 2023), p. 20.

<sup>62</sup> Submission by Equality Now. Child marriage remains legal in 38 states.

<sup>63</sup> UN-Women and others, *Legislating and Enforcing the Minimum Age of Marriage*, p. 62.

<sup>64</sup> Megan Devonald, Silvia Guglielmi and Nicola Jones, *Investing in adolescent girls. Key changes in the bilateral donor funding landscape: 2021 update* (London, Adolescent Girls Investment Plan, Gender and Adolescent Global Evidence, and Plan International, 2023), p. 11.

Model Law on Eradicating Child Marriage and Protecting Children Already in Marriage of SADC.

43. Uzbekistan adopted an action plan to increase women's social and political activity and access to decent jobs, promote their entrepreneurial skills to enhance their economic participation, and address social inequalities and poverty.

44. In 2024, Austria planned the regional expansion of specialized counselling facilities providing support for girls and women affected by, or at risk of, forced marriage. An emergency shelter in Vienna offers a safe space through security measures, including a secret address, and provides multilingual counselling and round-the-clock care and support.

45. Since 2021, cash transfers to girls in schools, as well as financial support for poor households, have contributed to girls' retention in the education system in Togo. According to a joint submission by UNICEF and UNFPA India, 5 million girls and their families in eight states of India have been provided with cash transfers and other social protection schemes to prevent child marriage and enable the girls to continue their education.

46. In the development of the first action plan under the National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children (2022–2032), Australia included specific consultations with victims and survivors, in line with its cross-cutting principle to put victims and survivors at the centre of its national policies and interventions. According to Anti-Slavery Australia, it also created the National Lived Experience Advisory Council to amplify the voices of people experiencing domestic, family and sexual violence, including child, early and forced marriage.

47. Since 2008, Mexico has earmarked funds in the federal budget to guarantee resources for the prevention and eradication of child, early and forced marriage, with an increase in expenditures from 2022 to 2023.

### **C. Education and awareness-raising campaigns**

48. Several States have carried out education and awareness-raising campaigns on gender equality and the risks associated with child, early and forced marriage.

49. In 2021, the Government of Mexico created a working group to address the situation of the sale of girls for the purpose of forced marriage or early union, which has oriented its actions towards the provision of comprehensive sexuality education for girls and adolescents under 15 years and initiatives aimed at encouraging pregnant girls and adolescents or mothers under the age of 15 to stay in school.

50. With the support of UNICEF and UNFPA, as part of the Global Programme to Accelerate Action to End Child Marriage, Zambia has engaged boys in programmes on developing healthy relationships with others, including women and girls, through sport.

51. Some contributions received for the report highlighted initiatives targeting influential community actors, including religious leaders, school authorities and local decision makers. In the north of Benin, village or neighbourhood watch committees, community relays and school clubs composed of village residents, including local leaders, have been set up since 2019. They provide training, raise awareness and visit people's homes to curb the practice of child marriage. Each year, villages are assessed with a view to being certified as "free of child marriage" villages. During the reporting period, the Committee on Religious Affairs in Uzbekistan conducted preventive activities and individual talks among girls and women in mahallas on the topic of child marriage. During Friday prayers in all mosques, worshippers were regularly informed that early marriages and marriages between close relatives are contrary to the canons of the religion of Islam.

52. El Salvador and Togo developed interventions aimed at supporting parents in developing child rights-centred parenting skills by training households on how to ensure positive discipline, teach about sexuality, prevent sexual violence and communicate effectively with adolescents.

53. Following the publication in 2016 of a handbook on harmful practices, including child marriage, intended for civil servants, Slovenia carried out training on the handbook for government officials in 2022 and 2023. Building on the development and dissemination of online and digital platforms to communicate with the population during the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic, Mexico has used social networks and digital platforms to disseminate information about the rights of children and adolescents.

54. Ecuador invested in digital technology-driven programmes to increase outreach, sustainability and efficiency, while reducing the costs of programme delivery. In 2022, the Government developed a website entitled “Sexuality without mysteries” to reach adolescents and young people and to provide them with clear information and scientific evidence about, for example, sexual and reproductive health and violence prevention so that they can fully exercise their rights, especially their sexual and reproductive rights.

55. Social media campaigns have been launched at the global level, such as #EndChildMarriage in 2014 and #HandsOffOurGirls in 2018, as well as at the national level, such as #NotBefore18 in Morocco and #GirlDefendersAlliance in the Philippines. In Malawi, civil society organizations have organized a text message campaign that targeted parliamentarians.<sup>65</sup>

## **V. Human rights-based strategies to prevent and address child, early and forced marriage**

56. International human rights law and the work of the United Nations human rights mechanisms, including the human rights treaty bodies and special procedures, can provide a framework for devising comprehensive legal and policy measures that address the root causes of the practice of child, early and forced marriage, including gender inequality and gender-based discrimination, create alternatives to child marriage for girls and advance the rights of women and girls. Drawing upon the submissions received, some key elements of human rights-based strategies to prevent and address the harmful practice of child, early and forced marriage are outlined in this section.

57. Comprehensive legal and policy measures are key to set and enforce minimum marriage age laws, promote gender equality while challenging harmful social and cultural norms, enhance access to education, tackle poverty and provide support services, such as legal aid and health care, especially for at-risk girls.

### **A. Guaranteeing the right to education and other economic, social and cultural rights**

58. Guaranteeing girls’ rights can help them resist pressure to marry early. The right to education is crucial in eliminating child and forced marriage, as it empowers girls with knowledge and skills, delays marriage and childbirth and enhances economic opportunities, thereby breaking cycles of poverty and gender inequality that often led to early marriages. Education equips girls with the knowledge to advocate their rights, creating a positive ripple effect for future generations.

<sup>65</sup> UN-Women and others, *Legislating and Enforcing the Minimum Age of Marriage*, p. 63.

59. Based on the submissions received, addressing unequal, restrictive and oppressive gender norms and power dynamics by delivering comprehensive sexuality education to girls and boys can help overcome the stigma and shame that exists around adolescent girls' sexuality and contribute to their empowerment in making informed decisions. From 2018 to 2023, a project aimed at the prevention of child marriages, conducted in four provinces of Türkiye by UNFPA and the Sabanci Foundation, has trained women as health mediators to visit households and shops and raise awareness about the health risks of child marriages, in particular with regard to sexual and reproductive health. These health mediators reached more than 4,300 households and 170 local businesses.<sup>66</sup>

60. Adolescent girls face significant social, physical and psychological changes influenced by gender norms,<sup>67</sup> so targeted interventions in this period are critical. According to the submission by Girls not Brides, the Every Adolescent Girl Empowered and Resilient programme in Sierra Leone, led by the International Rescue Committee and completed in March 2023, provided training in literacy, numeracy, financial literacy and life skills for over 32,000 adolescent girls aged 10 to 19 with little or no formal education.

61. In addition to measures focusing on girls' education, addressing child, early and forced marriage requires increasing women's access to decent work opportunities and reducing poverty, which is one of the drivers of child marriage. In Kenya, Uganda and Zambia, CARE International has been helping to enhance financial literacy, skills training and market linkages for women and girls since 2021. Providing an income or assistance to family businesses contributes to the reduction of economic pressure to marry early and shifts perceptions about girls' roles. State cash transfers that are part of social protection systems<sup>68</sup> have proved to effectively encourage girls to stay in school, especially when such transfers are conditional on school attendance and no marriage before the age of 18 years, serving as an incentive for the poorest households to avoid penalties.

## **B. Dismantling discriminatory gender and social norms**

62. Given the power imbalance experienced by girls in relation to decisions made regarding their own bodies and health, it is crucial to engage boys, husbands or partners, in-laws, parents and the broader family and community in shifting gender norms related to adolescent sexuality and the use of contraception and other sexual and reproductive health services. Organizations and networks, such as the MenEngage Alliance, play a key role, including through prevention. Other promising examples include the Umang project of the International Centre for Research on Women in India and the CARE "Tipping Point" evaluations in Nepal and Bangladesh, which included initiatives focused on capacity-building for men and boys to reflect on masculinity-related norms, actions for gender equality at home and in the community and training on positive role models for change.

## **C. Engaging with community and religious leaders**

63. According to the submissions received, working with socially accepted authorities, including school leadership, religious leaders and community members, proved key in challenging harmful gender norms regarding girls' education and

<sup>66</sup> Office of UNFPA in Türkiye, "Prevention of child marriages project: health mediators model", 17 November 2023.

<sup>67</sup> Devonald, Guglielmi and Jones, *Investing in Adolescent Girls*, p. 1.

<sup>68</sup> Child Marriage Research to Action Network, "Research spotlight: economic empowerment interventions to address child marriage", March 2024, p. 3.

acceptable roles in society, and to initiate and lead discussions on the negative consequences of child, early and forced marriage.

64. In Ethiopia, for example, facilitating community conversations and intergenerational dialogues was also key to leveraging the strengths, perspectives and influence of all age groups by promoting understanding, mutual respect and collaboration, according to UNICEF Ethiopia. In 2023, localized community dialogues in targeted districts in Mozambique proved effective in motivating community members to renounce and abandon the harmful practice. According to the office of UNICEF in Mozambique, the success of those dialogues is gauged by the number of community leaders who publicly pledged to eradicate the harmful customs associated with child marriage and adopt a zero-tolerance stance against those who partake in such acts. According to CARE International, in Nigeria, initiating and leading discussions with communities led to positive results, as illustrated by an increased number of girls finishing school and a significant drop in the number of girls getting married at an early age.

#### **D. Ensuring meaningful participation of affected communities and supporting survivors**

65. A human rights-based strategy includes consultation with, and the meaningful participation of, individuals and communities in developing and implementing policies and programmes that affect them, including children. Such an approach leads to solutions that are relevant and effective, as they are informed by the real needs and experiences of those most affected. In Canada, for example, the use of Indigenous-led approaches is a pillar of the National Action Plan to End Gender-Based Violence, which seeks to address the intersectional needs of diverse communities and populations.

66. An example of an innovative intervention programme for already married girls and adolescent mothers, with meaningful participation at its core, is the Uganda Youth and Adolescents Health Forum. According to Girls not Brides, the Forum provides a space for young mothers, mothers-to-be and at-risk adolescent girls to come together, receive support, share their experiences and engage in dialogue. The Forum takes into account that married adolescent girls and girls who are already mothers have unique needs, which health care, education and social services systems are often not well equipped to meet.<sup>69</sup>

#### **E. Using data to devise effective measures**

67. In some of the submissions received, it was highlighted that even when general data on child, early and forced marriage are available, fostering subnational data collection and intentionally using data that capture the complex and varied experiences of those affected leads to more effective, inclusive and equitable solutions and allows for better targeting of those in need of support. An example of a promising practice is the research conducted on forced early unions and teenage pregnancy, and their links to sexual violence and suicide conducted at the northern border of Ecuador. The research, conducted in 2020, was qualitative and focused on a high-risk population, utilizing three methodological tools: focus groups, in-depth group and individual interviews with social actors and civil society representatives, and case studies based on the life stories of adolescents from three provinces and seven cantons. The study led to the development of support systems for victims,

<sup>69</sup> Girls Not Brides, “Supporting married girls, adolescent mothers and girls who are pregnant”, December 2021, p. 1.



including legal, psychological and educational services, as well as effective prevention measures.

## **VI. Conclusions and recommendations**

68. The drivers and factors that exacerbate child, early and forced marriage vary globally owing to different cultural, economic, legal, educational and political contexts. Nevertheless, this harmful practice is consistently rooted in gender inequality and patriarchal social norms. It disproportionately affects women and girls, exposing them to severe physical and psychological harm, violating their human rights and impeding societal progress.

69. The Secretary-General acknowledges the important steps that have been taken by a number of Member States and other actors to eradicate the harmful practice of child, early and forced marriage, further to his previous reports on the topic. However, the pace of progress remains a cause for significant concern. He recommends that Member States, in collaboration with relevant stakeholders, recommit to the elimination of the harmful practice by 2030, in line with Sustainable Development Goal target 5.3, and commit, also in collaboration with relevant stakeholders, to redouble their efforts and use human rights-based strategies:

(a) To effectively address root causes and drivers of child, early and forced marriage in order to prevent this harmful practice, including through comprehensive legal and policy measures, and provide comprehensive support to survivors;

(b) To adopt a human rights-based approach and centre initiatives around women and girls, emphasizing their agency and supporting their activism, promoting the consultation and active participation of individuals and communities in the development and implementation of these initiatives, while systematically prioritizing the needs and perspectives of survivors;

(c) To challenge anti-gender narratives and expand civic space by raising awareness and engaging stakeholders at the community level, with a view to changing social norms and gender stereotypes that perpetuate the practice of child, early and forced marriage, as well as informal unions and abductions;

(d) To implement nationwide campaigns and educational programmes to highlight the harmful impact of child, early and forced marriage and strengthen the enforcement of existing laws;

(e) To ensure that schools are free from violence and support a gender-transformative curriculum, which includes age-appropriate health services and information, including on sexual and reproductive health, as well as human rights education, education about relationships, consent and gender equality for all children, formulating and implementing specific policies aimed at addressing the unique needs and challenges faced by adolescent girls;

(f) To eliminate all discriminatory laws and practices that prevent already married girls, pregnant girls and child widows from accessing their right to leave a marriage, including through annulment or divorce, while guaranteeing their right to property, access to justice, child protection and gender-based violence services and remedies;

(g) To ensure that national policies and programmes consider the intersecting forms of discrimination and situations of vulnerability faced by different groups of girls and women at all stages of their lives;

- (h) To develop interventions to enhance women's and girls' economic, social and cultural rights, including the right to education, decent work and social security, thereby providing viable economic alternatives to marriage before the age of 18;
  - (i) To use available fiscal space to fund initiatives and programmes that respond effectively to girls' gender-specific needs and challenges;
  - (j) To prioritize international financial support that has gender equality at its core in order to support efforts to end child, early and forced marriage or union, with a focus on community engagement;
  - (k) To eliminate the gender digital gap and develop and enhance digital engagement strategies to prevent and address child, early and forced marriage;
  - (l) To collect data on child, early and forced marriage in a human rights compliant manner, to use available data to inform measures aimed at combating child, early and forced marriage, in particular with regard to marginalized groups and remote areas, and to establish or enhance monitoring mechanisms to monitor their implementation;
  - (m) To effectively address child, early and forced marriage in conflict and humanitarian settings, including climate-related disasters, and to develop strategies to mitigate such impact as part of the efforts to identify and eliminate conflict-related sexual violence;
  - (n) To ensure girls at risk of child marriage and already married girls in conflict and humanitarian settings have continued and safe access to quality education and that relevant plans and budgets anticipate risks and respond to the needs of girls in such settings.
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