

A young girl wearing a pink hijab and a pink patterned shirt is smiling and looking towards the camera. She is in a science classroom, with various glassware and equipment visible on a table in front of her. The background shows a window with a view of a building and greenery.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION ABOUT CHILD MARRIAGE

This information can be used to create a presentation or fact sheets for students. While much of the content should be accessible for children from the age of 11-12, some may be more appropriate for older children or children who have had basic human rights education, or sexual and reproductive health education.

WHAT IS CHILD MARRIAGE?

Child marriage is a formal or an informal union where one or both people are under the age of 18.

Child marriage is much more likely to happen to girls than to boys. The latest estimates from UNICEF suggest that 19% of women and 3% of men aged 20-24 were married as children. An estimated 640 million women alive today were married before their 18th birthday, compared to 115 million men.

Worldwide, the figures suggest child marriage is reducing slowly: in the last decade, the rate of child marriage has reduced from 23% to 19%. However, the global data hides the reality for millions of girls. This reduction has happened mostly due to massive decreases in South Asia, where child marriage has dropped from 46% to 26% in the last decade, and also greater decreases in most of the world for wealthier girls compared to poorer girls.

For girls from the poorest households in sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America, child marriage is increasing.

Child marriage is a violation of rights and a form of violence against girls (or gender-based violence). Forced child marriage is internationally classified as modern slavery.

WHERE IN THE WORLD DOES CHILD MARRIAGE HAPPEN?

Child marriage happens in almost every country in the world, and across all religions, cultures, and ethnicities.

The highest rates of child marriage occur in West and Central Africa, where an average of 32% of 20-24 year old women got married when they were children, and East and Central Africa at 30%.*

**UNICEF calculates the rate of child marriage by assessing the percentage of women aged 20 to 24 years who got married before age 18, as this means that there is no longer any possibility of them having a child marriage (as they are now all adults), and they are more likely to be open about the age at which they got married. This information comes from national surveys.*

REGION	Girls married by the age of 18 (%)	Girls married by the age of 15 (%)
West and Central Africa	32	11
Eastern and Southern Africa	30	8
South Asia	26	6
Latin America and Caribbean	21	4
Middle East and North Africa	17	3
Eastern Europe and Central Asia	9	1
East Asia and Pacific	8	1
WORLD	19	4

These are the ten countries with the highest percentages of child marriage, based on the latest available data.

COUNTRY	Girls married by the age of 18 (%)	Girls married by the age of 15 (%)	Latest available data
Niger	76	28	2012
Central African Republic	61	26	2018-2019
Chad	61	24	2019
Mali	54	16	2018
Mozambique	53	17	2015
South Sudan	52	9	2010
Burkina Faso	51	9	2015
Bangladesh	51	16	2019
Guinea	47	17	2018
Somalia	45	8	2006

Due to the size of the population, India is the country with the highest number of child marriages, with almost 27 million women and children impacted. India is home to a third of all women worldwide who were married as children.

It's also important to understand that there can be enormous differences in the rates of child marriage within a country. Girls who live in cities and towns are less likely to get married as children compared to girls who live in rural or remote areas. Although the global rate of child marriage is 19%, the global rural rate is 27% compared to 14% in cities and towns (or 'urban' areas). In sub-Saharan Africa, which is the region which has the highest prevalence of child marriage at 31%, the difference between rural and urban areas is enormous: 17% of girls in urban areas are married as children, compared to 40% of girls in rural areas.

IS CHILD MARRIAGE LEGAL?

Internationally, all countries which have signed up to the United Nations' Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women have committed to raise the minimum age for marriage to 18.

Most countries have a legal age of marriage, and often this is set at 18. However, there are usually legal exceptions to this which allow some marriages at younger ages, sometimes with no absolute minimum age:

- Consent of a parent or guardian
- Consent of the government or a judge
- Pregnancy: if a girl under the age of 18 is pregnant, some national laws permit marriage between the parents of the unborn baby
- Legal recognition of customary, religious, or traditional practices: for example, marrying girls off once they start menstruating, betrothing children to join families or to maintain family or community relations
- Legal exceptions to protect men from rape charges: in a handful of countries, girls who have been raped can be legally forced to marry their rapist, allowing the rapist to avoid a criminal charge.

Fewer than 40 countries set 18 as the legal age of marriage with absolutely no exceptions:

- Africa: 11 countries
- Asia: 9 countries
- Europe: 8 countries*
- Latin America and the Caribbean: 8 countries
- North America: 0 countries

In the list of countries with the highest rates of child marriage above, only one country has no exceptions to 18 as the legal age of marriage, which is Mozambique, although the law only changed to end all exceptions in 2019. In Niger, where 3 in 4 girls are married by the age of 18, the legal age of marriage for girls is 15, but parents or guardians can give consent for girls younger than 15 to marry. The law also recognises customary marriages, and most marriages in Niger are conducted under customary law.

Even in countries where the law states that 18 is the minimum legal age for marriage with no exceptions, governments have to commit to implementing the law and punishments for those who break the law, as well as easily accessible, child-friendly protection mechanisms for children who are vulnerable to child marriage. A law alone is not enough to end child marriage.

Knowing what's happening in different countries is important because national governments have a responsibility to deliver children's rights, and understanding the scale of the challenge in a country helps people to campaign for the laws and policies which can end child marriage. However, it's also important to understand that there are factors within and across country borders that can also drive child marriage.

RESOURCE: SEE OUR LIST OF COUNTRIES WITH HIGH RATES OF CHILD MARRIAGE AND THEIR LAWS
childmarriage.world/laws

WHY DOES CHILD MARRIAGE HAPPEN?

There are several different reasons child marriage still happens, which usually overlap with each other. They can also differ depending on where a girl lives.

Here we focus on four of the biggest causes of child marriage, all of which overlap.

GENDER INEQUALITY

The most important factor which enables child marriage is gender inequality: discrimination against women and girls usually based on the differences between genders, like physical and biological differences, and differences in development and ways of thinking. Gender inequality is also driven by cultural and societal beliefs that girls are inferior or less valuable than boys.

Gender inequality persists because most societies are dominated by men: for example, Presidents or Prime Ministers, elected officials, government officials, medical professionals, heads of businesses, community, and religious leaders are more likely to be men than women. This usually results in male or 'patriarchal' values and perceptions dominating how societies operate. For example, public services can be built without specifically taking into account the needs of women and girls, usually because the people in charge of services are men. A simple example of this is sanitation in schools: if a school does not have safe or functional toilets, this makes girls less likely to go to school, particularly once they start menstruating.

Some specific ways in which gender inequality drives child marriage:

- In many communities, particularly poorer and rural communities, families often believe that boys will generate income, or get jobs with higher wages than girls, and that girls are more dependent on their families, and their role is to become wives and mothers. This belief leads to boys being more likely to be enrolled in school, or to families keeping their sons in school for more years than their daughters. (This particularly happens when there are financial barriers to going to school, such as school fees, or the cost of school materials and uniforms.) Families will then marry off their daughters when they believe they are of 'marrying' age - which might be based on physical reasons such as menstruation or puberty, or on religious, cultural, or traditional ages for marriage.
- Gender inequality and patriarchal values can lead to girls' behaviours being controlled by the men in her family or community. This could include controlling how a girl dresses, limiting where she can go or how often she can leave the house, and determining who a girl marries, and when.
- Control, as well as religious, cultural, and traditional beliefs, also apply to a girl's sexuality and virginity. In many societies, girls having sexual relationships before marriage is perceived to be shameful or dishonourable, and families in these societies will marry their daughters off quickly to avoid them 'bringing shame' upon the family. In such societies, men are far less likely to marry a girl who is not a virgin or 'pure', which often means she will remain at home and become a perceived burden to her own family.
- Although there are a handful of countries where child marriage takes place between two children, cultural and traditional child marriages are usually driven by gender inequality. For example, in countries where men marry more than one wife (polygamous marriage), young girls are sought to become second or third wives. Cultural or traditional marriages usually see girls married off when they reach puberty or have started menstruating, predominantly to adult men.

There are a wide number of other factors which allow child marriage to continue happening, and these always overlap with gender inequality, and usually with each other.

POVERTY

Poverty is an enormous factor in child marriage. Worldwide, the rate of child marriage among the wealthiest families is 9%, compared to 32% among the poorest. The biggest gap is in sub-Saharan Africa, where 12% of girls from the wealthiest families get married as children, compared to 49% of the poorest - or 1 in every 2 girls being married off.

In the poorest households in most of the world, child marriage is also decreasing at a slower rate compared to the wealthiest households. Predominantly in sub-Saharan Africa, but also in Latin America, child marriage among poorer families has been increasing in the past decade.

Some specific examples of how poverty drives child marriage:

- Poorer families cannot always afford to send all of their children to school, often because there are cost barriers such as school fees, or the cost of school materials and uniforms. As such, gender inequality comes into action and sons will be chosen to go to school over daughters. Daughters are expected to become wives and mothers, so instead of sending them to school, they get married off early to 'secure' their futures. It also means that the family's expenses will reduce, as the girl will go to live with her husband and his family.
- Sometimes, the financial needs of a family can be directly improved by a child marriage, because in many traditional marriages a dowry is still paid. This is an amount of money gifted from one family to another on the occasion of a marriage between the two families. Depending on the religion, culture, or tradition, this can be either the price a bride's family pays, or the price the groom or his family pays. Traditions in which the bride's family pays can lead to particularly young girls being married off, as the price that needs to be paid by her family is lower if she is young and has little or no education.

When girls are married off early and do not complete their education, the cycle of poverty continues, as the girl is far less likely to be able to get decent work later in life. Her daughters are also likely to be vulnerable to child marriage.

ABSENCE OR POOR IMPLEMENTATION OF LAWS AND GOVERNMENT SYSTEMS

There are several ways that the government can make laws which prevent child marriage. The simplest way is a law which makes the minimum age of 18 for marriage, without any exceptions such as lower ages with parental consent, or lower ages because of cultural, religious, or traditional marriage. Although most countries have a legal age of marriage of 18, in practice most countries have these types of exceptions to the rules. Fewer than 40 countries have set 18 as the legal age of marriage with no exceptions.

Not all laws to prevent child marriage have to be specific to child marriage.

- In many countries, legal registration is a requirement when someone is born, gets married, and when they die. If a child is registered at birth, then it becomes a lot easier to check a child's age when they get married. If a marriage has to be registered, and the country has a law which prevents marriage below the age of 18, child marriages will not be recognised or they can be declared illegal.
- Laws which ensure children have to be enrolled in education can also prevent child marriage. If the law states that girls and boys must be in school, ideally for 12 years of education, girls are much less likely to be married off as children. Also, the more education a girl has, the more likely she is to understand her rights and prevent her own child marriage.
- Laws which protect girls from sexual abuse can also stop child marriage. If a country has a legal age of consent (the age at which a person can give their own consent for sexual relations) with no exceptions, sexual intercourse with a girl below this age would be classified as rape regardless of her marital status. Another law which would provide protection for both women and girls would be to make sex without consent within a marriage a crime (known as 'marital rape'), regardless of the age of the woman.

Unfortunately, even when laws exist, these laws may not be upheld. This is more likely to happen in poorer countries, and in rural or remote parts of countries. For example, when a government does not have enough money for there to be enough public workers - such as police officers, judges, registration officers, or teachers - or to build schools, police stations, or registration offices, then it is very difficult to implement the country's laws and policies. Rural and remote areas, and areas which are impacted by climate disaster, usually have less access to these public workers and services.

If laws do exist, many communities and families - including their children - might not know about them. This is especially the case when laws are newly created. Governments must spend money to ensure these laws are communicated and understood by all communities, including children.

INSTABILITY: CONFLICT AND CLIMATE DISASTER

Child marriage is more likely to happen to girls who live in areas which are affected by war and conflict, or areas which are vulnerable to climate disaster impacts. Gender inequality and violence including sexual violence against girls become more acute in such situations, and child marriage is believed to be a way to protect girls from physical and sexual violence.

- In 2022, Save the Children published research which found that girls living in conflict areas are 20% more likely to be in child marriages compared to girls living in peaceful areas.
- Of the ten countries with the highest rates of child marriage, seven of them are classified as being unstable due to violence and conflict, and are also vulnerable to climate disaster impacts. The other three are classified as being either unstable or vulnerable to climate disaster impacts.

- Of the fifty countries with the highest rates of child marriage, 44% are classified as unstable, and 60% are vulnerable to climate disaster impacts. 30% are classified as both.

When a country or area is 'unstable' due to conflict and climate disaster impacts, protections for girls are less likely to be accessible, such as schools, policing, or other forms of public service. Non-government organisations and charities which support women and girls may be less likely to work in these areas, or to prioritise violence against girls.



WHAT ARE THE IMPACTS OF CHILD MARRIAGE?

Child marriage denies girls many of their basic human rights, and it puts their health, education, and wellbeing at risk.

1. If girls who are married are in school, child marriage usually ends their formal education.

Families can also stop girls' schooling when they are planning or arranging a marriage, as it is believed to be pointless for her to continue her education. Not going to school limits girls' ability to understand their rights or to learn about the law, and stops the development of their learning and skills.

- When girls do not understand their rights and have no awareness of the law, it is much more difficult for them to speak up or prevent further violations of her rights.
- If a girl has limited education, she is much less likely to be able to get decent work in adulthood.
- A lack of education limits girls' independence and freedom, and can prevent her from being able to protect herself and her children well into adulthood. For example, if a girl who has been married as a child learns about her rights later in life, she and her children will already have become financially dependent on her husband. If she is subjected to violence or abuse by her husband, she may be scared of taking action to protect herself and her children.

2. When a girl enters a marriage, she usually ends up working long hours undertaking many household chores. This is likely to be child labour.

Married girls usually leave their own family and go to live with their husband and his family, and the expectation will be that she must undertake chores such as cleaning and cooking. However, undertaking too many hours of work in the household is called domestic servitude, which means that child marriage effectively makes many married girls child labourers.

3. In societies where child marriage occurs, physical violence against women and girls by their husbands is more likely to happen.

This is because of the power dynamics between a girl and a husband who is usually an adult, and likely to be much older than her. In such societies and communities, violence by a husband against his spouse - of any age - is more likely to be believed to be 'acceptable'.

4. Child marriage and power dynamics also make girls vulnerable to sexual abuse and rape.

Many child marriages occur when a girl is below the legal age of consent for sexual relations, which would mean that a husband having sex with a wife under this age is rape. However, many countries do not recognise rape if it occurs inside a marriage, and very few countries make it illegal to have sexual relations with a child regardless of her marriage status.

5. Girls in child marriages with adult men are less likely to be able to plan when they can have children or to protect themselves against diseases which can be transmitted by sexual relations.

This kind of protection is known as contraception. Even if a married girl knows about different forms of contraception, she is less likely to be able to get access to it. There are lots of reasons for this.

- Lack of education: girls who have had little education are less likely to understand or know about contraception.
- Power dynamics: if a girl understands contraception, she may be prevented from using it by her husband. She may also be unable to go out and get contraceptives herself.
- Traditional beliefs around child marriage: if a girl has been married off in the belief that a girl's role is to become a wife and mother, there is likely to be an expectation that she begins to have children soon after she becomes a wife. Adult men who marry girls may have chosen to do so because they want to have a lot of children, and believe that the younger a girl starts to have children, the more children she is able to have in her lifetime.

- Lack of availability: in lots of poorer countries, contraception is difficult to access, for example due to cost, lack of healthcare facilities which provide contraceptives, or the government not making contraceptives available even if there are healthcare facilities. In low- and middle-income countries, 26% of married girls (aged 15-19) who want contraception cannot get access to it for these reasons.

6. When a married girl becomes pregnant, her health is put at risk, as her body may not yet be developed enough to cope with the strain of pregnancy.

This creates a higher chance of health complications, and even death as a result of early childbirth or complications related to childbirth. Early childbirth also risks the health and survival of the baby.

- A 2022 UN report found that 74% of girls who have their first child when they are 14 years old or younger also have a second child while they are still children, and 48% of girls who have their first baby when they are aged 15-17 have a second baby while they are still children. Having multiple births when a girl is still a child puts significant strain on her body, and increases her risk of health complications.

7. If a girl's husband has a disease or virus which can be transmitted through sexual relations, a lack of access to contraceptives like condoms makes her very likely to get the disease herself.

This includes the HIV virus, and in many countries this virus can still be fatal. Other diseases can make women unable to become pregnant, such as chlamydia or gonorrhoea.

8. When girls are married and are denied their rights, especially to education, their ability to ensure their own children receive their rights is limited.

HOW CAN WE END CHILD MARRIAGE?

There are many causes of child marriage which need to be tackled to completely end child marriage and ensure every girl enjoys their rights to grow up in freedom, without fear of violence, and to go to school.

Everyone has a role to play in ending child marriage, from governments to non-governmental organisations, to local communities - including school communities.

GOVERNMENT ACTIONS

Because so many of the root causes of child marriage are to do with gender inequality and poverty, and because many of the causes overlap, governments are in the strongest position to tackle them.

1. Governments can make sure the law has a complete ban on child marriage (marriage below the age of 18), without any exceptions.

These exceptions usually include allowing marriages for younger girls if parents or guardians have given consent, or legally recognising underage marriages which have taken place through tradition, religion, or custom.

- If these laws are created or already exist in a country, then the government should also make sure that the laws are implemented, and that children who are at risk of getting married have ways to report it or prevent it.

2. Governments can also make laws which enable girls to go to school and complete their education.

- Make it compulsory for all children to be in school until the age of 18
- Make sure that girls can access a good quality school, which has safe travel routes and functional toilets
- Get rid of any school fees or additional school costs so that all the children in a family can go to school.

3. Governments can make sure other public services exist which can stop families being forced to marry off their children.

Governments can also take away the barriers which might prevent families from sending their children to school instead.

- Social protection - money given by the government directly to families to ensure they have enough money to survive.
- Free healthcare, so that there is no financial burden on families where there is sickness or injury.
- Access to decent jobs in local communities for parents and other adult family members.

4. In countries where there is a high rate of child marriage, governments should also implement some specific actions.

- Have a government minister or other senior member of government who is responsible for ending child marriage
- Allocate a budget to specifically tackle child marriage
- Have a national plan or strategy which targets children who are the most vulnerable to child marriage, such as children from poorer households and in rural or remote locations.

COMMUNITY ACTIONS

Communities have an important role in ending child marriage, because they can ask governments to change their policies and laws, and governments are accountable to their citizens. This makes it vital to raise awareness among their friends, families, and neighbours - and in countries where there are high rates of child marriage, communities can prevent it happening in their locality.

It can be difficult to raise the issue of child marriage in countries where there are high rates, but it's really important to try to have conversations about it. People may not be aware of all the harmful effects of child marriage - and it's always possible to change somebody's mind.

1. Learn more about child marriage in your area and encourage friends and family to join you.

If your country has a high rate of child marriage, or if your country allows child marriage, it is likely that there are non-governmental organisations which organise awareness events for schools and communities, and particularly in areas where children are most vulnerable to child marriage.

2. Speak to your community leaders and local politicians and ask what they are doing to end child marriage.

Every country has signed up to the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals, and when they did this, they agreed to end child marriage by 2030. Get in touch with local politicians, community leaders, or other leading figures in your community, and ask them what they are doing to end child marriage. Prepare your own list of things you think they should be doing, and try to establish an ongoing dialogue with them to make sure they stick to any promises they make.

- If you organise an event with a local politician, you can invite the media to report on it.

3. Take the Child Marriage Free World Pledge and end child marriage in your community.

Some communities in countries with high rates of child marriage have agreed to become 'child marriage free'. This means that everyone works together to make sure no child marriages take place in the community, and that every child goes to school. If you can arrange a meeting with your local leaders, you could raise this possibility. It might help if you have the support of friends, family, and other community members, which you can demonstrate to leaders by making a petition. You can start by encouraging your community to take the Child Marriage Free World Pledge.