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Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF)

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TOPICS

1. Challenging child marriage in Sub Saharan Africa
2. Improving the access to formal education for children in rural areas of LEDCs

CHAIRS

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Introduction

Throughout the world marriage is regarded as a moment of celebration and a milestone in adult life. Although this applies in most cases, there are those that do not experience marriage in this kind of way. Every year 12 million girls are married forcibly before they reach the age of 18, which is a human rights violation that undermines the health and prospects of girls, in particular. They account for the vast majority of those who experience child, early and forced marriage (CEFM), a practice which has been going on for centuries. Boys are affected by child marriage too, although in a far more limited capacity which shows that gender inequality is a direct cause for CEFM. This early union, often to much older individuals, has enormous implications on the lives these girls will be facing, undermining their future and denying their fundamental rights. They are robbed of their childhood and their personal freedom with no opportunity to develop and become an empowered and self-confident woman with an education, their physical and mental well-being compromised, confined to a life of limited opportunities. In addition the community is affected, which can have an impact on global development as CEFM makes families vulnerable to a cycle of poverty, lasting for generations. Child marriage is a violation of human rights, because free and full consent cannot be given as one or both partners are immature and can't make educated decisions on their chosen partner and what the implications of this decision will bring. Furthermore, governments are either not able to enforce existing laws or rectify violations in regards to marriage, which are often explained by the fact that they undermine the culture and religious traditions of the country.

Globally, the incidence of child marriage has been in decline, dropping by almost 11% in 26 years.

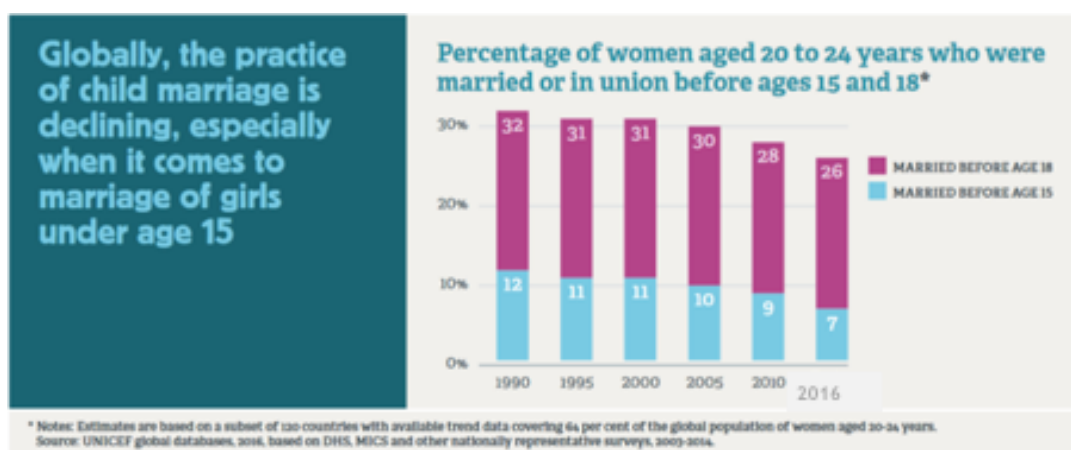


fig. 1

The most progress has been made in South Asia, where a girl's risk of being married as a child has dropped from 50 per cent to 30 per cent. Progress has been slower in Sub-Saharan Africa, with Niger, Central African Republic and Chad having the highest prevalence rate of upwards of 65%. Especially the increased population growth, poverty, conflict and the risk of natural disasters will see more girls in danger of being victims of child marriage. This has

become one of the main areas of concern, where progress has to be accelerated in order to reach the goal of ending the practice by 2030. The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals state this under target 5.3, “Eliminate harmful practices, such as child, early and forced marriage (CEFM) and female genital mutilation”, under goal 5, “Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls”. Further, if these targets are not reached, more than 150 million girls will marry before their 18th birthday by the year 2030.

Top 20 countries with the highest prevalence rates of child marriage

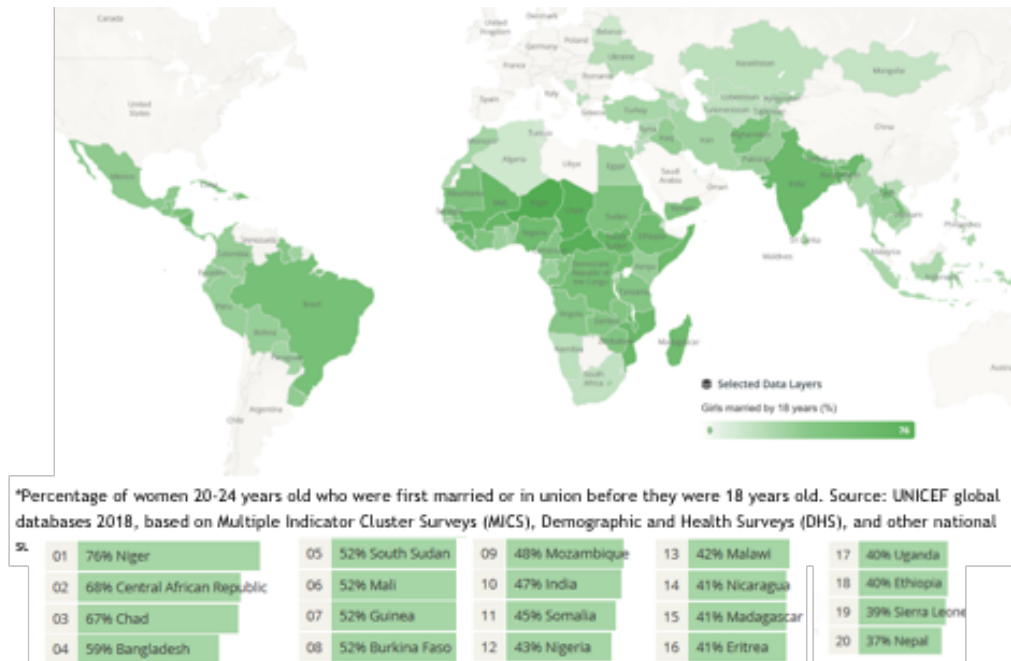


Fig. 2

Background

Many factors contribute to the occurrence of child marriage. Stemming from cultural norms and traditions it is a practice performed all around the world, reflecting the stereotypical role women are supposed to play in the family. Girls are raised for a lifetime of confinement to the household and an early marriage. A common notion is that a girl who menstruates can bear children and should therefore be married, especially because early marriage extends a woman’s reproductive span which in return contributes to a large family size. In addition dowries are lowered and bride prices are increased, the younger the girl is. This is primarily desired as it is the only source of wealth, social status and security for the family and functions as the unit of economic production, especially in areas where poverty is acute and child mortality rates are high. In addition, parents are anxious that their daughter might get pregnant outside of marriage, which is why tradition has set up practices to “protect” girls from unsanctioned sexual activity, as intercourse is seen differently during marriage, and protect their much prized “honour” in this case their virginity. The main practice is early marriage, although Female Genital Mutilation is a widespread custom too to prevent sex before marriage and out-of-wedlock children. Moreover marriage is a strategy of economic survival as it forms relationships between families that can now depend on and support each other by sharing resources, food and capital. Child marriage increases dramatically during humanitarian emergencies, driven by social and economic pressure and the danger for the girl’s safety. Marrying girls off early therefore provides stability and the necessary

protection. It also relieves the parents from an economic burden as girls are not considered viable wage earners. Furthermore protection and security is guaranteed for the entire family when girls are married to people in power, for example militia members, in times of conflict. These fragile conditions marriage is used as a guise to lure girls into prostitution and trafficking.

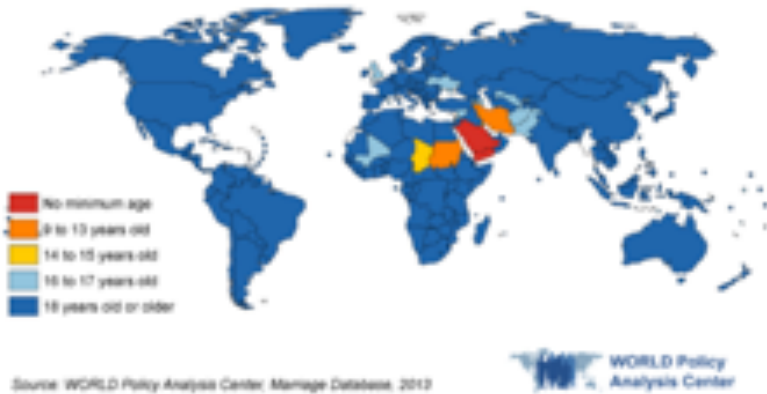
Despite many stating that an early union is a way to protect girls, the marital choices by parents are made with little regard to the personal implications children will have to face. Their childhood is cut short, leaving them with no opportunity to develop a full sense of self-hood, confidence or identity. Without gaining the confidence to express their opinions, they cannot make their voices heard in their community and create change. The idea of an independent sense of self that girls develop during childhood is seen as undesirable; instead they are conditioned into the appropriate subservient behaviour through which they are easier controlled by their husband and in-laws. That parents don't see the need to pay for an education for their daughters, has resulted in many girls not receiving an education at all or having their education cut short when they are married off, as they will resume a life confined to the house to cook, clean and raise children anyway. Fears of possible sexual activity and harassment and insecure journeys to and from school add to the attendance of schools being discouraged for girls. This way their prospects and potential are undermined, trapping them in poverty with no way to escape.

When the girls are married, they usually live with the groom's side of the family, facing isolation from their family, friends and community. Often working in slave like conditions for their in-laws, they are put under additional pressure to produce a large number of children, which violates their right to decide when to engage in sexual relations and the right to decide if and when they want to bear children, as they are not in control of their own body. They cannot resist intercourse anymore and cannot negotiate safe or consensual sex as they have to obey their husband, which has profound physical, emotional and psychological impacts resulting from trauma and pain created by domestic and especially sexual violence which is a risk factor to getting HIV. These traumas are regarded as "unavoidable parts of life" that are endured silently, with no support from the community. Globally 50% of girls that marry before the age of 18 are more likely to face violence from their partner, something 44% believe to be normal and justified.

The risks that come with an early pregnancy are especially high, dying during childbirth, premature labour; complications during delivery, high infant mortality rates are some of them. Furthermore the young mother is put at risk of suffering serious injuries, infections and in the worst case even disabilities, especially if her body has not fully developed and is not ready to bear a child. The immaturity and lack of education of these young mothers undermines their capacity to nurture, due to the fact that there is a widespread resistance to sexual education because of the fear of promiscuity and there are no sexual or reproductive health services and facilities accessible.

Although most countries have laws in place that set a legal age to marry, usually being 18 years, many people do not adhere to these, especially if exceptions are included which many take advantage of to marry their children young. These exceptions may allow child marriage if parental consent is given or that religious laws overrule customary law. This makes it very hard for policy-makers, citizens and non-profit organizations to establish whether their country is meeting global standards and international agreements.

What is the minimum legal age of marriage for girls?



What is the minimum legal age of marriage for girls when all exceptions are taken into account?

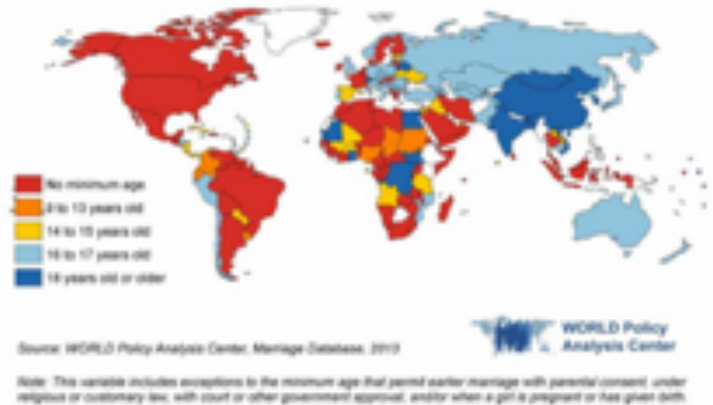


fig. 3

Major Member States Involved

Niger

Niger has the highest prevalence rate of child marriage in the world and the 14th highest absolute number of child brides – 676,000 and 76% of girls in Niger are married before the age of 18. According to a World Bank study in 2017 ending child marriage in Niger could save the country more than US\$ 25 billion by 2030. Niger has taken some steps in ending CEFM, by for example committing to target 5.3 of the sustainable development goals and stating in its 2018 National Voluntary Review at the High Level Political Forum that there have been changes in the rates of child marriage and legislative reform related. It is a focus country of the UNICEF-UNFPA Global Programme to Accelerate Action to End Child Marriage and launched the African Union Campaign to End Child Marriage in 2014. Although these steps have been taken child marriage and gender issues still remain more of a taboo topic and are highly politicised. Also many initiatives are blocked by religious leaders or social groups.

Central African Republic

The Central African Republic has the second highest prevalence rate of child marriage in the world. 68% of girls are married before the age of 18 and 29% before they are 15. Instead of education levels and household wealth being the root cause, conflict that erupted in 2013 has made many families marry off their daughters in a bid to protect them from sexual violence. CAR too has committed to target 5.3 of the sustainable development goals.

Brazil

In Brazil 36% of girls marry before they reach the age of 18 and 11% marry before they turn 15. It has the fourth number of child brides worldwide – 3,034,000. One of the main reasons for CEFM is early pregnancy that forces young girls into marriage.

Bangladesh

59% of girls are married by the age of 18 and 22% are married before they reach their 15th birthday. In Bangladesh the number of child brides has exceeded 4 million the second highest number in the world and it has the fourth highest prevalence rate. CEFM is mainly driven by poverty, the low level of education and humanitarian conflicts have increased the incidence. The country is a member of the South Asian Initiative to End Violence against Children (SAIEVAC) which adopted a [regional action plan to end child marriage](#) from 2015-2018. In addition Bangladesh has made it compulsory to present a birth certificate at the time of marriage and parliament adopted the child marriage restraining act in 2017. The act was a cause for concern as it allowed marriage in 'special cases', which were not defined in any way causing a possible loophole. The country has been working on a national action plan to eliminate child marriage although progress has been stalled following backlash against recently implemented regressive laws.

India

India has the highest absolute number of child brides in the world-15,509,000. According to UNICEF a total of 47% of girls are married before they turn 18. There are lots of factors that contribute to CEFM in India; the main factors are poverty, that girls have a low level of education and that they are more seen as household labour. India is a member of the [South Asian Initiative to End Violence Against Children](#) and has launched cash incentives, adolescent empowerment programmes and raised awareness to encourage a behaviour change when faced with child marriage.

Past achievements

Labelled as a taboo topic in the past, child marriage has gained international recognition and has become an issue of international concern, becoming the subject of discussion in areas like the government, international organisations and with community leaders. Global effort has managed to prevent about 25 million child marriages in the last 10 years.

In addition, the United Nations General Assembly has passed three resolutions in the past five years to strengthen the efforts to prevent and eliminate the problem of child, early and forced marriage. A total of 116 countries sponsored the first resolution in 2013, although countries like Chad, Niger and Bangladesh with the highest prevalence rates worldwide did not sign it. They agreed for the first time on a set of global norms on how countries, international organisations and others should act, when faced with the problem of child marriage. It recognizes that CEFM is a practice that severely impairs girls and women's human rights and is a threat to their health, education, economic and social status. In addition it acknowledges that it is linked to deep-rooted gender inequalities, norms and stereotypes and is a barrier to development and perpetuates the cycle of poverty. Steps that are supposed to be taken when addressing the problem include enacting, enforcing and upholding laws and policies to end the practice. In addition holistic, comprehensive and coordinated responses and strategies in cooperation with stakeholders, including civil society should be developed and implemented. Furthermore the human rights of all women and girls, including their right to education are to be promoted and protected and have the control over and decide freely and responsibly on matters related to their sexuality.

The second UN resolution passed in December 2016 expands the first resolution by for instance acknowledging that several contexts exacerbate child marriage including poverty, insecurity, and lack of education. For the first time, the UN also recognises the incidence and risk of child marriage in armed conflict and [humanitarian emergencies](#). Additionally the resolution asks that UN member states take up roles and responsibilities in working to end CEFM, by for example including an update on their progress towards ending CEFM in their national reports to international treaty bodies, in the [universal periodic review](#), and in [national voluntary reviews](#) conducted through the [High-Level Political Forum](#) (HLFP) on sustainable development. Lastly it acknowledges progress made in ending child marriage by including target 5.3 in the sustainable development goals and other global initiatives.

The third and most recent UN resolution passed by the general assembly in November 2018 is co-sponsored by an additional 12 nations and calls on all UN member states to strengthen and accelerate their efforts to uphold international pressure to decrease CEFM. Most countries that were mainly affected by child marriage signed the resolution like Chad and Niger which did not sign the previous resolutions, although some did not co-sponsor it, like Saudi Arabia, Bangladesh and the Central African Republic. Three main aspects were highlighted, stating that humanitarian emergencies and situations of forced displacement can increase the incidence and risk of CEFM and that it is a 'harmful practice that violates, abuses or impairs human rights' and that gender inequality is a root cause of it. It also highlights the fact that it is a 'barrier to the empowerment of all women and girls' and that poverty, insecurity, early pregnancy and lack of education are factors behind CEFM. In addition new aspects were added expanding the discussion on child marriage. For the first time emphasis was put on the rights of married women and the important role that families, communities and religious, traditional and community leaders play in transforming negative social norms and confronting gender inequality was acknowledged.

Possible solutions

It has become evident, that in order to reduce and eventually eliminate the occurrence of child marriage, many challenges need to be tackled at once. Especially the sustainable development goals should be taken into account as they include many factors that contribute to CEFM. If the prevalence of child marriage remains at today's rate the incidence of child marriage will increase, eventually reaching an estimated 90 million in 2050. If the observed decline of today continues the prevalence rate for CEFM will decline gradually to about 56 million, although if progress is successfully accelerated an even steeper decline will be expected, probably reaching 36 million in 2050.

On one hand a complete education for all needs to be set as a priority to enable children to reach their full potential and change the way they perceive their roles in society. In addition the protection of the adolescent period should be enforced and the importance of a comprehensive sexual education should play an important part in every child's education. Furthermore, influencing the attitudes people have by sharing the benefits of a postponed marriage and the empowerment of women with people of influence, especially at local level, like politicians, religious and community leaders will change the way people think in terms of marriage and a woman's role in society.

Estimated global prevalence rate for three scenarios

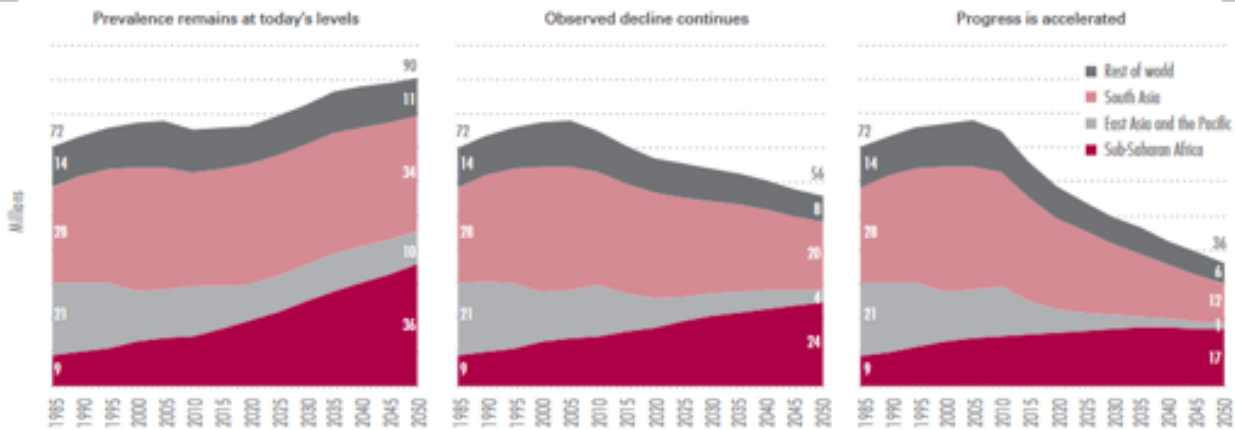


Fig. 4

Moreover, improving the economic situation of people will reduce poverty and the need for early marriages. That the government will have to take action by reviewing their current laws in light of internationally agreed human rights standards, especially on the topic of marriage, by enforcing laws and by creating a rights culture implemented by all governmental institutions. For example minimum-age laws and the requirement of official registration of births will be an effective way of providing proof of age for girls. In addition exceptions should be ruled out completely as these are one of the main causes of CEFM by offering an easy back door to this kind of legislation.

Also incentives should be offered to the population that gives them financial support to escape the poverty cycle on the condition that their daughters' marriage is postponed until they reach the age of 18, also ensuring that their education is continued as financial means are now available.

Expanding maternal and reproductive health services will provide girls, married or not, with maternal care, family planning advice and a sexual health education, for example on sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) and contraception methods.

Diplomatic pressure needs to be amplified in order for countries to be able to move CEFM from being a marginal issue to one that is a central development problem, by lending support to countries that have started fighting the problem, offer financial and technical support. In addition creating awareness around the issue should be amplified as child, early and forced marriage is still an on-going problem that needs to be addressed and requires urgent action as in the next years many children will still be forced to marry against their will.

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