

AN INTERSECTIONAL APPROACH TO CHILD MARRIAGE

Every year, 12 million girls marry before the age of 18.¹ Child marriage^a is more common among girls and adolescents who come from poor households, have lower levels of education and who live in rural areas. However, child marriage policy and programming often do not reach the girls who have been most marginalised. This brief uses an intersectional approach to explore the factors that increase a girl's individual risk of child marriage, and advocates for an inclusive approach to child marriage prevention and response efforts that leaves no one behind.



PICTURED: A group of girls rehearse a musical performance at the Mariposa Centre, Cabarete, Dominican Republic. Photo: Girls Not Brides/Fran Afonso

Key messages

- Multiple aspects of girls' social and political identities – including gender, age, disability, sexuality, class, race, ethnicity, caste and citizenship – intersect and create unique experiences of discrimination and privilege. Intersectionality^b is a framework for understanding these factors and how they impact on child marriage.
- Intersectional programming and advocacy seek to include girls who are most at risk of child marriage – and girls who are already married – by considering the dynamics of exclusion and discrimination that impact their lives.
- Guaranteeing equal rights for all girls – including those at risk of child marriage and already married – means ensuring that policies and programmes to address child marriage include those living in high-prevalence and marginalised contexts.
- Girls from populations most at risk of child marriage must be included in the design, implementation and monitoring and evaluation of advocacy and programming to end the practice.
- The Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) to end child marriage by 2030 will not be reached without delivering on [Principle 2](#): “leave no one behind”. This means ending inequality, discrimination and exclusion.

^aIn this brief, the term “child marriage” to refer to all forms of child, early, and forced marriage and unions where at least one party is under the age of 18.

^bThe term “intersectionality” was coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989 as a lens for understanding how different forms of inequality often work together and exacerbate each other.

The issue

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted gender inequality and social exclusion around the world. It has exacerbated existing inequalities and shown that not all girls are equally affected by crises, despite being entitled to the same rights. SDG Principle 2 calls for inclusivity, which in turn means understanding how power inequalities and marginalisation contribute to child marriage in specific contexts.

Intersectionality provides a framework to look at how inequities experienced by individuals and groups are shaped by unequal power dynamics at every level and through time, including between individuals, in and between families and communities, and in the governments that create and implement laws and policies and provide services.

This brief outlines the concept of intersectionality and why it should be used to understand child marriage. It includes recommendations on how to take an intersectional approach to child marriage programming, policy and research.

An intersectional approach to programming and advocacy to end child marriage

Intersectionality is a tool for analysing, understanding and responding to the ways social and political identities intersect, and how these intersections create unique experiences of discrimination and privilege.

It highlights the differences between people in the same groups who may otherwise have been considered the same,² and brings attention to the factors that lead to some people being marginalised. It demonstrates how these factors work together, reinforcing or weakening each other.

Using an intersectional approach to programming and advocacy to end child marriage means:

- Assessing how different identities and social positions intersect and impact on girls' rights, opportunities and risk of child marriage.
- Going beyond the individual drivers of child marriage to consider all the disadvantages that limit girls' opportunities.
- Identifying which girls are disproportionately at risk of child marriage, and using research, analysis, programming and evaluation to understand the complex contexts in which they live and are marginalised.
- Understanding how laws, policies, programmes and services affect girls in different and context-specific ways.
- Ensuring that all individuals and communities can meaningfully participate in – and benefit from – programming and advocacy related to child marriage.

- Directing resources, initiatives and programmes to the most marginalised groups of girls who are most at risk of child marriage or who are already married.

Child marriage risk factors are interconnected

This section gives an overview of the different aspects of a girl's identity and status which increase her risk of child marriage, and how these different aspects intersect to create unique experiences of oppression and discrimination. Two key drivers of child marriage are gender inequality and poverty.

Gender and poverty

Gender inequality is the root cause of child marriage. However, all girls experience gender inequality differently, depending on how their gender intersects with other factors like disability, sexual orientation, class, age, ethnicity and caste. These intersections create unique experiences of exclusion and marginalisation, which impact on girls' risks and experiences of child marriage.

The intersectional approach helps to highlight the connections between girls' social identities beyond their gender – including those that are often less visible or prioritised, like age or migration status – and the multi-layered nature of risk and exclusion.

Poverty is also a key factor in child marriage risk. In most contexts, girls from poorer households are more likely to experience child marriage. If they also belong to a group that has been marginalised – like certain Indigenous communities^c or castes – they face additional discrimination and exclusion in, for example, access to schools and services.

Girls Not Brides: The Global Partnership to End Child Marriage has developed a conceptual framework to explain how different aspects of girls' identities intersect with broader structural and global factors and increase their risk of child marriage. The framework shows how factors that shape and influence social identities operate at different levels – including at global (eg, climate change), structural (eg, laws and policies, provision of services), community and family (eg, poverty and income, rurality), and individual levels.

The interplay of these factors impacts girls' individual lives, creating contexts that may put them at risk of child marriage, limit their rights and slow progress towards ending child marriage.

^cIn this brief, we capitalise "Indigenous" to recognise the existence of global, regional and national Indigenous rights movements. However, we also acknowledge that there is significant diversity amongst Indigenous peoples, and that they usually prefer to self-identify with their specific community name. Our aim is not to mask this diversity, but to draw on the strength of this identity to advocate for a differential approach to ending child marriage that takes ethnicity into account.

Conceptual framework showing how girls' identities intersect with community, structural and global factors to increase their risk of child marriage



Individual-level factors that increase girls' risk of child marriage

Individual-level identities – including disability, sexuality or belonging to a population group that has been marginalised – intersect with gender norms and poverty and can increase a girl's risk of child marriage.

Disability

- Gender norms that discriminate against girls can combine with myths, beliefs and stigma around disability to deepen the existing exclusion and marginalisation of girls.
- In patriarchal societies – that is, societies where men hold most power, and norms and structures limit women's opportunities – where most women are not economically independent, girls with disabilities are put at greater risk of child marriage because they already have fewer options for economic independence.³

- Health services, social protection services and education – which may already have limited availability in rural areas – are more difficult for girls with disabilities to access. Remote areas where these services are available often lack the skilled personnel, specialised materials and infrastructure to respond effectively to girls with disabilities.⁴
- The link between child marriage and disability is poorly documented, meaning these girls are rarely made visible or prioritised.

Sexual orientation and gender identity

- There is limited research into how sexual orientation and gender identity intersect with other individual characteristics to impact on child marriage.
- Sexual orientation is a key driver of exclusion, oppression, stigmatisation and violence in many regions of the world. Restrictive criminal, customary or religious laws and norms around LGBTQI+ people mean they are often marginalised.

- In the Dominican Republic, 83% of young LGBTIQ+ people reported in a recent study that they had entered early unions primarily to escape tension in their family homes caused by their sexual orientation or gender identity. They face stigma and discrimination, are at greater risk of unplanned pregnancy, mental health challenges, and sexual and reproductive health complications. They also have limited access to sexual and reproductive health services.⁵ This increases their risk of child marriage and unions.

Community-level factors that increase girls' risk of child marriage

A girl's status in her community also intersects with the individual factors that put her at risk of child marriage.

Ethnicity and caste

- Girls from Indigenous groups and communities of African descent are at highest risk of child marriage in Latin America and Caribbean,⁶ which contributes to school dropout and higher levels of illiteracy among girls from these communities.⁷ Poverty, rurality – that is, living in rural or remote settings – and restrictive gender norms put girls from these groups at higher risk of child marriage.⁸ Child marriage in Indigenous communities is also associated with girls' lower educational and socio-economic levels⁹ that are the legacy of colonialism, slavery and racism in the region.
- In South Asia, the same structural inequalities that put some girls at greater risk are more severe for certain castes.⁴ Women belonging to Scheduled Tribes are the most socio-economically marginalised, with low literacy, low access to health care – especially reproductive health care – and lower rates of antenatal care visits.¹⁰ Women from these communities are more likely to marry early, give birth before age 18 and have higher fertility rates than other groups.
- In West, Central, East and Southern Africa, religion and ethnicity are closely linked, and intersect with geographical location (though they can also cross borders). Different ethnic groups reflect different norms, beliefs and values around child marriage and gender equality.¹¹

Traditions and rites

- In some countries in West, Central, East and Southern Africa, child marriage is closely linked to initiation rites and customary or traditional practices, like paying a bride price. In bride price contexts, the groom's family pays the bride's family ahead of a marriage. Bride price can be an economic incentive, a way of consolidating family relations, sealing deals over land or property, or settling disputes.¹⁵ In times of crisis, men that cannot

Dowry in South Asia: The intersection of poverty, gender inequality and caste

Dowry is a common practice in South Asia. In dowry contexts, the bride's family pays money to the groom's family before the marriage. The practice is deeply rooted in gender norms that discriminate against girls, as family honour is passed on through the girl's virginity and chastity.

In some areas, dowry is lower for younger girls,¹² so households experiencing poverty are more likely to marry their daughters when they are still young.¹³

Lower caste communities are more likely to live in poverty and are therefore more likely to experience challenges in paying dowry. This means they are also more likely to marry daughters earlier.¹⁴

Financial hardships – which can be exacerbated by caste – are therefore an important factor determining the choice of a husband and age of marriage for a girl.

pay the bride price may delay marriage.¹⁶ Find out more in our brief on [child marriage and cash transfers](#).

- Child marriage is linked to female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C) in some communities in Africa⁸, as it marks the transition from girl to womanhood and can be a pre-requisite for marriage.¹⁷ Child marriage and FGM/C share some drivers: poverty – as girls who are cut may command a higher bride price – and the desire to control female sexuality.¹⁸ Find out more in our brief on [child marriage and FGM/C](#).
- Campaigns against FGM/C can increase child marriage. Girls who are not cut may be perceived as having a higher libido, so the community or even the girls themselves may choose to marry earlier to avoid the perceived risk of premarital sex. For example, in Senegal, public declarations against FGM/C created the perception that girls who are not cut were more likely to be promiscuous. To avoid pre-marital sex, girls from some communities were married at a younger age.¹⁹

Structural-level factors that increase girls' risk of child marriage

The structural factors that impact on girls' risk of child marriage include education, income and occupational opportunities; health care and social protection mechanisms; and humanitarian crises and displacement.

Education, income and occupational opportunities

- Educational level is strongly associated with child marriage: on average, the likelihood of a girl marrying as a child is six percentage points less for every additional year she stays in secondary education.²⁰

⁴Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes – sometimes called “Dalit” – are legal caste categories and refer to populations from the most disadvantaged strata in some South Asian societies (Prakash et al., 2019, pg. 2).

⁸FGM/C is practiced the world over, but the links with child marriage are only well-documented in Africa. The most invasive form of FGM/C is called [infibulation](#).

- Dominant gender norms in some regions require girls to prepare for their roles as wife and mother from a young age,²¹ so their education is not thought to be important. Girls might also lack educational ambition due to the way they are socialised, and because they have to carry out household chores alongside their schooling.²²
- Paid labour opportunities may be limited in rural areas, meaning the return on investment in girls' education – in terms of an increase in income after schooling – is also limited in these contexts²³ and child marriage may be considered the only viable option.²⁴
- Girls in rural areas are less likely to have access to affordable education and are therefore more likely to be excluded and marry early. Combined with higher levels of poverty and the importance put on girls' reproductive role in rural communities, this increases girls' risk of child marriage in these contexts.

Health care and social protection mechanisms

- Access to appropriate health care – including to contraception, information about sexual and reproductive health and rights, and maternal health care – is often more limited in rural areas. This increases the risk of adolescent pregnancy, which in many regions is a key driver of child marriage.²⁵
- When appropriate social protection mechanisms to protect girls from – and respond to cases of – sexual violence are not in place or adequately implemented, these girls are further marginalised. This reflects gender norms that do not take gender-based violence (GBV) seriously, and results in inadequate responses.
- These disadvantages further intersect with gender norms that discriminate against girls and more conservative attitudes to marriage in rural areas,²⁶ creating additional barriers for girls to access health services tailored to their needs and increasing the risk of child marriage.^{27,28}

Humanitarian crises and displacement

- Humanitarian crises – including those resulting from conflict, climate shocks and natural disasters – can aggravate existing conditions of poverty, insecurity or inequality that put girls at risk of child marriage. The 10 countries with the highest rates of child marriage^f are all among those considered most vulnerable to natural disasters and most frequently found on indexes of failed states.²⁹
- Displacement disrupts social networks and family and community protection mechanisms; increases economic, physical and sexual insecurity; and pushes parents into marrying their daughters – and sometimes their sons – to cope with economic hardship and/or to “protect” them from increased violence, including sexual violence.

^fThese countries are: Burkina Faso, Bangladesh, Chad, Central African Republic, Guinea, Malawi, Mali, Mozambique, Niger, Nigeria and South Sudan, according to UNICEF's 2021 [Child marriage database](#).

Global-level factors that increase girls' risk of child marriage

There are many global factors – which girls often have little influence over – that affect girls' lives and can increase their risk of child marriage.

Climate change

Climate change is a global issue, but its impacts are uneven. In Bangladesh – one of the most environmentally vulnerable regions of the world and a hotspot of climate change impacts – some families cope with the economic instability and loss of income created by environmental shocks (such as heat waves) by accelerating the marriage of daughters or accepting less desirable marriage proposals.³⁰

Climate shocks in areas where households rely on agriculture for their income or subsistence can create shocks that impact on child marriage, as household poverty and insecurity are widely recognised drivers of child marriage. Climate change can also drive displacement, disruption of service provision and education, and school dropout, all of which contribute to child marriage.

Neoliberal economic policies

Policies – like structural adjustment policies – which cut state spending and deregulate labour markets are associated with increased poverty, reduced access to education and health care, and unstable, informal employment, particularly among women and marginalised communities. This indirectly increases the risk of child marriage for girls in those communities.³¹

The COVID-19 pandemic

The pandemic has exacerbated pre-existing drivers of child marriage – like poverty and limited access to education – and has disrupted child marriage prevention programming.³² Responses to the pandemic – including lockdowns and school closures – have impacted on girls' education, access to health care – including contraception and abortion – and livelihoods, particularly for those in precarious or informal employment.³³ UNICEF estimates that an additional 10 million girls will marry before the age of 18 by 2030 because of the pandemic.³⁴



PICTURED: Ghazal, a Syrian living in Lebanon, with her husband and two children. Ghazal was married at 13 and is carving a different path for her younger sister and daughter. Photo: *Girls Not Brides*/Thom Pierce

Recommendations for policy and programming

Individual, community, structural and global factors can all contribute to a girl's risk of child marriage. Taking an intersectional approach will help ensure all girls are considered in child marriage policy and programming. The following questions should be asked at the stage of policy or programme design:

- Which girls and women in the focus community have been most marginalised and why?
- What needs and priorities do they have?
- Which key demographic characteristics shape experiences of marginalisation in this community/region? Beyond gender, consider race, ethnicity, caste, religion, citizenship, age and ability.
- What social and economic opportunities are available to different groups in the community?
- Which groups have the lowest and the highest levels of public representation and why?
- What laws, policies, organisational practices, and social norms limit the opportunities of different groups?
- What opportunities facilitate the advancement of different groups?
- What initiatives would address the needs of the groups that have been most marginalised or discriminated against?

The following recommendations are designed to support policymakers, practitioners and researchers in applying an intersectional approach to child marriage initiatives. They can be applied once the girls most at risk of child marriage have been identified using the questions above.

Recommendations for policy makers

- Place social identities at the centre of actions to address child marriage. Intersectionality should be used to transform public policies to work towards a more equitable and inclusive society for all.
- Analyse how laws, policies and services affect girls in different and context-specific ways.
- Ensure the design and evaluation of public policies related to child marriage – including gender equality, education, adolescent health and child protection – consider their differential impacts on different population groups.

Recommendations for advocates

- Put girls who have been marginalised at the centre of collective advocacy efforts to address child marriage by creating – and amplifying – platforms for them to share their experiences.
- Ensure the movement to end child marriage includes diverse organisations, including youth-led, women-led, LGBTQI+ led, and community-based organisations.

- Advocate for and engage in approaches to transform social norms, including community dialogue and mass media campaigns that challenge discriminatory attitudes towards marginalised groups, and that transform social and gender norms more broadly.
- Ensure that advocacy forums include safe spaces and that safeguarding policies are in place to respond to any risk related to young and at-risk people publicly sharing their experiences.

Recommendations for programming

- Identify the girls most at risk of child marriage – and those who are already married – at the design stage and ensure the programme reaches them; allocate specific funding to meet this objective.
- Spend time developing context-specific solutions in collaboration with the girls and social groups experiencing discrimination.
- Include representatives from focus populations in the implementation and monitoring and evaluation stages to ensure adaptability and accountability.
- Address stigma and discrimination against groups that have been marginalised, including girls with disabilities, LGBTQI+ people and those who come from stigmatised ethnic groups.
- Include community sensitisation on adolescent sexual and reproductive health and rights.
- Consider and plan how to respond to potential backlash and/or resistance from more privileged community members who may see change as a threat.
- Ensure that programme evaluations assess the differential impacts on different marginalised and at-risk groups, both in terms of positive effects and unintended consequences.

Recommendations for researchers

- Collect data on girls that is disaggregated by age, ethnicity, caste, income level and other identities relevant to the context.
- Collect qualitative data about girls' experiences by listening to girls.
- Recognise the diversity of forms of knowledge, including evidence from community-based organisations and oral testimony.
- Ask questions about power and marginalisation when working with local partner organisations and marginalised communities.
- Conduct country-level context analyses to identify the groups most at risk of child marriage, the factors that increase risk for individual girls, and to understand individual experiences of oppression and exclusion.
- Conduct research that identifies and explains sub-national variations in child marriage prevalence, including identifying country-level factors that are of particular importance at the local level.

- Review how child marriage has been dealt with by national governments in the past and how policies related to it are formulated, to get an account of how oppressions and power (im)balances are institutionalised.
- Conduct research to assess the impact of global-level policies and crises – including neoliberalism and the COVID-19 pandemic – on existing disadvantages and

inequalities that are especially felt by the populations who have been most marginalised, and how this is associated with increased risk of child marriage.

- Conduct research to understand the indirect impact of climate change on child marriage through its effects on poverty and access to education and health care.

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Girls Not Brides is a global partnership made up of more than 1,500 civil society organisations from over 100 countries committed to ending child marriage and ensuring girls can reach their full potential.



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