

Research Spotlight:

How to ensure efforts to address child marriage reach the most marginalised girls



March 2023



PICTURED: Valerie, 15, chats with a member of the UNICEF team in Dedougou, Burkina Faso. She had wanted to get married, but with more information now believes it is better to wait.
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This Research Spotlight summarises the latest research and evidence related to child marriage programming in hard-to-reach contexts – like conflict settings – and targeting girls who have been the most marginalised. It includes key takeaways from featured studies, highlights current evidence gaps and under-researched geographical areas, and draws attention to where more research is needed.

Key terms

Marginalisation: Treatment of a person, group or concept as insignificant or peripheral. All girls and women face structural gender inequalities that marginalise them and put them at risk of gender-based violence, including child marriage. Within this broader structural and institutional context of gender inequality, some girls and women face additional discrimination, exclusion and invisibility. *Girls Not Brides* uses the term, “girls who have been marginalised” rather than the term “marginalised girls” in recognition of the structural inequalities that lead to marginalisation.

Leaving no one behind: This concept is central to the Sustainable Development Goals and is underpinned by the principles of inclusion, non-discrimination, equality and equity. It means addressing the structural causes of inequality and marginalisation, while prioritising the rights and needs of the most marginalised individuals and communities. It calls for explicit and proactive rights-based efforts to ensure the most marginalised populations are included from the start.

Inclusive programming: Programming that is open and accessible to people of varying identities, including people from groups who have been marginalised.

Ever-married girls: Girls who have been married, but who are now separated, divorced or widowed.

1. Rationale for focus

Clear commitments to reaching the most marginalised groups and individuals have been made in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). However, child marriage remains most prevalent among girls from the poorest backgrounds, from rural areas, with limited access to education and (in some contexts) those from minority groups.¹

While over the past 10 years child marriage has declined by close to 15% – amounting to about 25 million fewer marriages² – around 650 million girls and women around the world are still affected by this harmful practice. Furthermore, progress has mostly benefited girls who come from the wealthiest backgrounds, while in many regions of the world, including West and Central Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean, and Eastern and Southern Africa, child marriage has actually become more common among girls from the poorest backgrounds.³ It is clear therefore that not only is inclusive child marriage programming the ethically required course of action, reaching girls who have been most marginalised and excluded from development efforts will be critical if we are to meet the SDG target of ending child marriage by 2030.

It is unclear whether current interventions are reaching the most marginalised girls, and the evidence on how best to reach and include them is also limited. So, this Research Spotlight focuses on implementation considerations in efforts to address child marriage through the lens of reaching the most marginalised. It complements the [previous Spotlight](#) which focused on the “what” of multisectoral, multi-level approaches, by moving on to consider the “how”. Specifically, how to ensure that child marriage interventions reach the most marginalised girls, including married girls, ever-married girls, those in humanitarian contexts, girls with disabilities, persons who are LGBTQIA+, and those in countries and sub-national contexts with high child marriage prevalence that have been neglected by research and investment.

The next section presents learnings from studies published between 2020 and 2022 that contribute to the knowledge base on how to do inclusive child marriage programming that effectively reaches girls who have to date often been excluded. Studies are grouped by thematic areas of work, and include a mix of programme evaluations and context analyses that provide relevant learnings.



PICTURED: Rosetta, 17, at her home in Abim district, Uganda. After becoming pregnant, she left school and began working to meet her and her children's basic needs. She is now a trained peer advocate, working with Trailblazers Mentoring Foundation to promote school re-entry for pregnant girls and young mothers. She wants to complete school to become a nurse. Photo: ©UNICEF/UN07579/

2. Supporting married, ever-married, and unmarried adolescent girls to gain skills and income generating opportunities through safe space and empowerment programming

In contexts of marginalisation, poor formal education, instability or crisis, safe space or girls' empowerment programming can support girls to build their agency and develop the foundational, transferable, technical and vocational skills needed for income generation.

Transcending norms: gender transformative approaches in women and girls' safe space in humanitarian settings

In 2021 UNFPA published a [review](#) of its safe space programming in eight countries in the Arab States Region,^a which found that while safe spaces were primarily designed to promote psychosocial wellbeing, girls and women in the region were most interested in accessing vocational training and economic support. This is likely due to the high levels of unemployment and economic hardship experienced by communities and refugees in these areas.⁴

Key results:

- **Some of the safe spaces reviewed had impacts beyond the individual level** and can have gender-transformative impact on the relationships and dynamics within and among families, and in the broader community.
- However, **the impact of gender transformative approaches can vary** significantly among safe spaces due to various individual, interpersonal and communal factors:
 - In Syria and on the West Bank, women reported that their husbands and other male family members, initially supportive of safe space programming, **began to restrict adolescent participation when activities were at odds with traditional gender norms** around the role of women in and outside of the house.
 - **Community-level norms also play a role in limiting the types of skills building opportunities girls and women choose**, as non-traditional activities for women may be frowned upon. Many girls and women participating in safe space programming in the region were divorced, separated or widowed and already facing social stigma and isolation due to their marital status. They were therefore even more reluctant to choose activities that go against social norms.
 - **Adolescent girls and women who do choose non-traditional training (like, for example, carpentry or plumbing) may find it difficult to gain employment** because of normative expectations that men are better suited to this kind of work.

Key takeaway:

- **For safe space programming with income generating objectives to be gender transformative, interventions must go beyond the safe space itself and link to social norms change interventions.** Specifically, interventions need to strategically promote safe spaces to family members and community leaders, assess real and perceived risk to new, different, or non-traditional vocational training, provide small grants and tailored start-up kits, and promote referrals and partnerships with livelihood economic empowerment programmes.

a. The eight countries were: Jordan, Iraq, Lebanon, Palestine, Turkey, Turkey Cross-Border, Syria and Sudan

Sibling Support for Adolescents in Emergencies (SSAGE)

The need to pair safe space programming with social norms change interventions in the wider community was also the key learning from the 2022 evaluation of the [Sibling Support for Adolescents in Emergencies \(SSAGE\) programme](#) implemented in Maiduguri state, Northeast Nigeria.⁵ The programme took a whole-family approach to shifting attitudes around adolescent girls' agency and the acceptability of violence at the household level in emergency contexts.

Key takeaways:

- **Through addressing whole family units in synchronised gender transformative curricula**, SSAGE reported shifts towards more egalitarian familial relationships, decreased violence perpetration, decreased acceptability of violence and reduced stigmatisation of girls who had experienced violence.
- **Engaging families and communities outside of safe space interventions means programmes are more likely to attract and sustain girls' participation** in the spaces, to reduce backlash from husbands and family members, and to ensure girls are able to apply their learning and skills in their everyday lives.

TESFA

Similarly, a [2022 peer-reviewed article](#) on the 2018 study of the CARE's TESFA programme in Ethiopia found that where girls' empowerment interventions promote group solidarity amongst adolescent girls while also linking into community structures and traditions, there is potential to shift harmful practices around child marriage in a way that is both scalable and sustainable.⁶ The TESFA programme targeted 5,000 married adolescent girls between 2010 and 2013 with a combination of reproductive health and financial savings-focused interventions.

Key results:

- **At endline, participants reported increased use of contraception and institutional delivery**,^b increased confidence of girls' negotiating and asserting their rights.
- **The programme created a critical mass of young married women who could challenge norms around child marriage for younger girls**. All peer groups reported advocacy and action taken by members towards delaying marriage of young girls.
- **Four years post-tesfa, 88% of groups continued to meet without assistance from CARE**, with new groups formed, including by girls not involved in the original programme.
- Success factors included:
 - **The strength of solidarity and safety created within the peer groups**, based on peer-facilitated reflective dialogues rather than peer-based learning as is more common.
 - **A culturally relevant curriculum**, developed in consultation with Ethiopian female health workers.
 - **The transition of TESFA's Village Savings and Loan Association model to the traditional Ethiopian Equb model**^c for saving and borrowing of money.
 - **The holistic approach to community engagement**, through the formation of "Social Analysis and Action" groups involving village elders, religious leaders, community health workers, mothers-in-law, and – critically – husbands.

Key takeaways:

- **Pairing girl's empowerment interventions with engagement with husbands and the wider community has the potential to improve outcomes for married girls** and change norms around child marriage in way that is both scalable and sustainable
- **Married girls themselves can become effective community level advocates** against child marriage for younger generations.

b. An institutional delivery means giving birth to a child in a medical or health centre under the supervision of trained and competent health personnel

c. The tradition of Equb is an Ethiopian tradition where a group of relatives, friends, or people within specific communities agree to contribute a certain amount every month and take turns in taking in the amount collected

Child marriage in humanitarian settings in the Arab States Region synthesis report

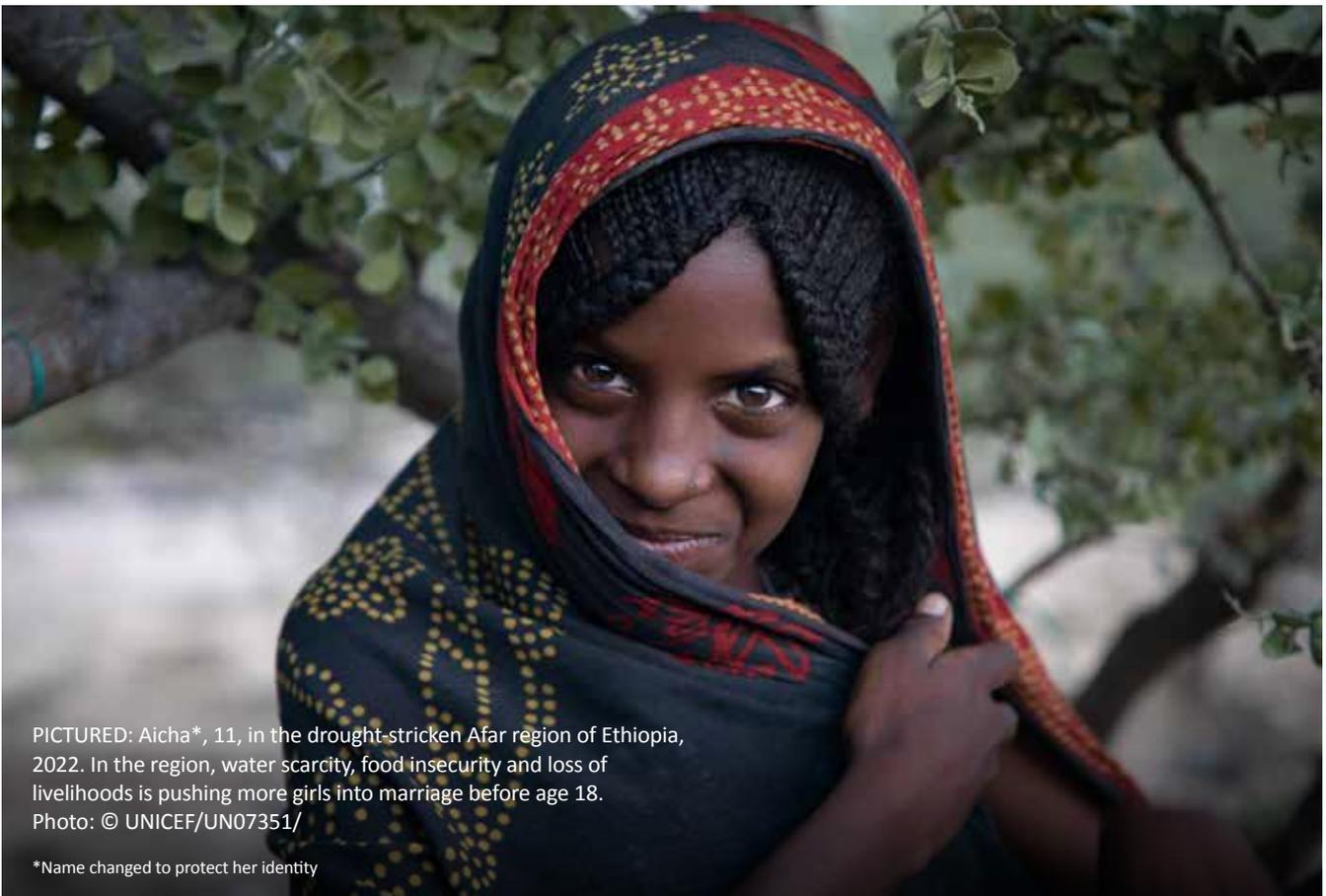
Another [report](#) on child marriage across the Arab States Region, this time by the Women's Refugee Commission and Johns Hopkins University under the UNFPA-UNICEF Global Programme to End Child Marriage, also highlights the importance of engaging boys and men in safe space programming in humanitarian contexts.⁷ The study sought to answer questions about the links between conflict and displacement, and how they affect norms and drivers around child marriage in Djibouti, Egypt, the Kurdistan region of Iraq and Yemen.

Key results:

- **Engaging married girls in all aspects of safe space programme design and implementation is critical**, particularly with regards to sexual and reproductive health (SRH) services. This is because complications from pregnancy, incorrect knowledge or taboos around contraception use, and disrupted support networks can all put married girls and young mothers at risk.
- **Fathers, male relatives and the boys and adolescents about to be married are most likely to be involved in decision-making around child marriage**, so engaging boys and men is critical.

Key takeaways:

- **Engaging girls in the design, implementation and monitoring of safe space programming in humanitarian contexts is important** to ensure that programmes are best designed to meet their needs.
- **As key decision-makers around child marriage, it is critical to engage boys and men.** Dispelling discriminatory beliefs about gender roles held by this group is key, as is involving them in the planning and implementation of safe space programming to ensure their support.



PICTURED: Aicha*, 11, in the drought-stricken Afar region of Ethiopia, 2022. In the region, water scarcity, food insecurity and loss of livelihoods is pushing more girls into marriage before age 18.
Photo: © UNICEF/UN07351/

*Name changed to protect her identity

3. Sexual and reproductive health and rights in crisis and conflict affected contexts

There is a growing body of evidence on promising practice for delivering flexible, context-based SRH services for adolescent girls in humanitarian settings. A 2021 evidence review highlights examples of promising practice for SRH delivery, including the use of mobile SRH clinics and camps, which typically remain in communities for up to four days and so can make contact with more marginalised adolescents.⁸

La Famille Ideale

MSI Reproductive Choices' programme [La Famille Ideale](#) is a successful example of this type of programming. It was piloted across eight mobile outreach teams in Burkina Faso in 2019-20, using a human-centred design to work with young women and key influencers (including husbands and in-laws) to improve SRH access for married adolescent girls.⁹

Key results:

- **During the pilot programme, the number of adolescents able to access contraception increased by 24%.**
- **The programme opened up conversations that helped participants to see how using contraception could play a role in the future of their family.**

Key takeaways:

- **Mobile clinics paired with community engagement can enable SRH programmes to reach married girls in the most marginalised areas.**
- **Building on local knowledge is key to success** in community dialogue interventions.

Yes I Do Alliance (YIDA)

The evaluation of the YIDA programme also presents useful learnings for SRH programming in marginalised contexts.¹⁰ YIDA ran a five-year holistic programme targeting young people from 15 to 24 years old in seven countries,^d with a combination of SRH, education and community engagement interventions.

Key results:

- **The programme achieved substantial reductions in child marriage and female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C) prevalence**, and improvements in early school leaving rates and access to SRH care. However, it did not achieve strong reductions in adolescent pregnancy.
- **The use of transactional sex to meet basic needs likely undermined reductions in adolescent pregnancy.**
- **In contexts where communities were struggling to meet basic needs** around food, water and sanitation, engagement with social norms related to sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) was not a community priority.

Key takeaways:

- **Programmes focusing on SRHR-related norms are unlikely to be successful in contexts where communities are struggling to meet basic needs.**
- **SRH interventions that overly focus on individual- and community-level norms may be limited in their impact** by the systemic, structural barriers that restrict girls from accessing appropriate health care.
- To overcome these challenges, **a comprehensive situation and baseline analysis should be undertaken** before the start of the programme to highlight any important gaps in the target groups' priorities, and any possible barriers to behaviour change.

d. The seven countries were: Ethiopia, Indonesia, Kenya, Malawi, Mozambique, Pakistan and Zambia

4. The importance of education in humanitarian contexts and for challenging social norms

Education programmes that encourage critical assessment of gender and sexual norms can be effective in challenging the desire to control female sexuality, which is often a root cause of child marriage.

Holistic Education for Youth

The [Bayan Association's Holistic Education for Youth's \(HEY!\) Programme](#) was a school-based participatory education approach piloted in rural areas of Honduras with large Indigenous, Garifuna Afro-Caribbean populations.¹¹ The programme used a feminist, reflective methodology to engage students, parents, community members and teachers in creating, pilot testing and implementing an education model and materials. It included the development of two educational guides for students and a "parents' schools" curriculum, all of which critically addressed gender norms, child marriage and informal unions, biological and psychosocial changes during adolescence, sexual development, romantic relationships, and decision-making around sex.

Key findings:

- The programme reported a **38% reduction in cases of child marriage and a 13% reduction in cases of adolescent pregnancy** between 2017 and 2019.
- The programme is notable not only for its success and its explicit focus on adolescent sexuality, but for taking place in **a region where research on and investment in child marriage interventions to date have been limited.**

Key takeaway:

- **Even in socially conservative, rural settings, feminist participatory approaches to education can be effective** in reducing child marriage and adolescent pregnancy.

Child marriage in humanitarian crises report

The [Child marriage in humanitarian crises](#) report conducted in refugee settlements in Uganda and Jordan in 2021 highlights how addressing barriers to education for girls in humanitarian settings is both a priority for displaced girls and a likely critical protector against the heightened risk of child marriage in these settings.¹²

Key findings:

- Across the 280 married and unmarried girls aged 10 to 17, and 67 caregivers who were involved in the study, **education was cited as the highest priority solution to prevent and respond to child marriage** in their communities.
- **Practical barriers to enrolling and keeping girls in school** included the cost of school fees, uniforms and material; distance to schools; and protection concerns.

Key takeaway:

- **Providing girls and their caregivers with cash assistance to overcome barriers to education may be critical in emergency settings.**

5. The importance of engaging girls from marginalised groups, including married girls, ever married girls, LGBTQIA+ girls and girls living with disabilities

To date, very little research has been conducted on the intersecting risks to child marriage faced by girls living with disabilities or those who are LGBTQIA+.

Comunidad de Lesbianas Inclusivas Dominicanas (Colesdom)

One of the very few studies which explicitly looks at the experience of child marriage among LGBTQIA+ youth was conducted by the Colesdom in the Dominican Republic.¹³

Key findings:

- **For some LGBTQIA+ young people, child marriage was used as a means of escaping violence** and exclusion at home due to their gender nonconformity.
- According to the limited evidence, **gender nonconformity appears to increase the risk of child marriage in some contexts**, and requires further research.

Key takeaways:

- The study made the following recommendations to reach young LGBTQIA+ people and ensure their needs are met:
 - **Tailored support should be offered to LGBTQIA+ adolescents to continue their education**, addressing the specific risks they face.
 - **Culturally appropriate education sessions** to address and shift conscious and unconscious stigma around LGBTQIA+ individuals should be provided at the community level, and in schools.
 - **National labour legislation** should be reformed to penalise discrimination against LGBTQIA+ people in the workplace.
 - **SRH care providers should be trained** on gender diversity to reduce barriers to accessing health care.
 - **Parents and guardians who force their children or dependents out of their home because of their sexuality or gender identity should be penalised.**

Circumscribed lives: Separated, divorced, and widowed female youth in South Sudan and the Kurdistan region of Iraq

A 2022 **study** by Tufts University and Save the Children on the experiences of girls displaced by conflict in South Sudan and the Kurdistan area of Iraq shows provides some valuable insight into the vulnerabilities faced by ever married girls and girls living with disabilities in crisis contexts.¹⁴

Key findings:

- **There was a strong association between being divorced, widowed or married and poor mental health outcomes.** This is closely related to exclusion from education and social networks, lack of decision-making power, exploitation and abuse.
- **Displaced girls living with disabilities have difficulties accessing education**, are often harassed, may feel they are a burden to their families and have fewer quality marriage prospects.
- **In conflict settings, child marriage can often lead to abusive relationships** and divorce or separation, which can create further vulnerabilities for ever-married adolescent girls.
- The study has proven **that inclusion of ever married girls in humanitarian programming is possible through outreach** through word of mouth and engagement with community leaders and outreach workers.

Key takeaways:

- On the basis of the limited evidence, **disability appears affect decisions related to marriage in some contexts**, but more evidence is needed to better understand how and to what extent in different contexts.
- The study authors recommended that humanitarian organisations **tailor programmes to meet the specific needs of ever-married girls**. Humanitarian organisations should work with supportive community and religious leaders to promote positive changes in social norms for female youth who are separated and divorced.
- Specifically, **programmes should aim to increase access to education, livelihoods and safe public space, offer psychiatric consultation, and work to reduce the stigma** and victim blaming often experienced by girls who are divorced, widowed and/or victims of domestic abuse or those who have experienced violence in their home setting.

Lastly, married girls have historically been overlooked by child marriage programming, with the focus to date being on child marriage prevention. There is increasing recognition that the narrative that all child marriage is forced marriage ignores the agency of girls who for a variety of reasons choose to marry or enter a union before they are 18.

A 2021 study in Niger found that girls themselves may not view delaying marriage as a desirable option, due to norms around pressure to marry and women's economic reliance on men.¹⁵ It is therefore important to base empowerment programmes in particular on a realistic assessment of these factors, and for these programmes to consider what acceptable alternatives to marriage already exist, and whether delaying marriage is the right option for all girls within each context.

6. Discussion:

These recent studies contribute to the overall knowledge base for inclusive child marriage programming that explicitly seeks to reach girls who have been marginalised in different contexts. A common learning that emerges from the limited number of evaluations available is that interventions aimed at building girls' skills, including agency and access to education, health care and income earning opportunities in marginalised contexts are more likely to be successful if paired with engagement with the wider community around social norms. This appears to be the case across sectors, and applies to education, health and safe space and empowerment programming.

Engaging male relatives, in particular husbands, also emerges as a common critical success factor. Overall, however, the evidence for how best to do inclusive child marriage programming remains limited and more research is needed.

The evidence around the intersecting factors that put girls from minority or otherwise marginalised groups at risk of child marriage remains a particularly under-researched area. There is still very little known about how girls living with disabilities, LGBTQIA+ girls, and – to a lesser extent – girls from ethnic and religious minorities may or may not experience increased risks of child marriage in different contexts. Programmes that specifically aim to include married girls continue to be limited as a proportion of child marriage programming.

As is the case with much of the evidence base on child marriage, recent evidence about inclusive child marriage programming largely neglects the Latin America and the Caribbean region, with the exception of the Bayan Associations Hey! education programme.

To further strengthen the evidence base, we recommend that future child marriage research should:

- **Focus on assessing the effectiveness of child marriage interventions**, particularly in humanitarian settings where evaluations are very limited and most girls have experienced marginalisation.
- **Situate all research and evaluations alongside what we already know**, so it is clear how the evidence base is being advanced, drawing on the questions for implementation research set out in the Global Programme Phase II Research Strategy.¹⁶

Some key questions for consideration in future programme design and evaluations could be:

- What are the most effective ways of including marginalised or excluded groups in programme designs, to ensure programmes meet the specific needs and rights of these groups?

- What kind of programming is most effective for reaching girls living with disabilities and LGBTQIA+ girls?
 - What kind of programming is most effective to support the needs of girls who are separated, divorced and/or widowed and/or have experienced intimate partner violence?
 - What are the most effective ways to engage with boys and men about the role and position of girls and women in their families and society?
 - What is the impact of working more closely with women service providers in the local communities with regards to programme inclusivity?
 - How can economic interventions best help improve household security and delay marriage and pregnancy, including within the context of the ongoing pandemic?
 - Should empowerment programmes necessarily be paired with a cash transfer or economic support component of some kind?
 - What is the significance of the age and gender of cash transfer recipients, and the age and gender of children in the household, particularly focusing on whether female-headed households are more or less likely to be supportive of delaying marriage in different contexts.
 - What are the best strategies for changing deeply ingrained social norms and attitudes related to adolescent sexuality and use of contraception?
 - How can positive social norms change be scaled, strengthened and sustained over time?
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7. New tools and toolkits related to working with and for marginalised groups

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The Child Marriage Research to Action Network (the CRANK) is a joint initiative of *Girls Not Brides: The Global Partnership to End Child Marriage* and the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) - United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) Global Programme to End Child Marriage.