



## THE SDGs AND CHILD MARRIAGE

Unless we end child marriage, we will not achieve at least *nine* of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).



Child marriage<sup>a</sup> is a global issue that cuts across countries, cultures and religions. Around 650 million girls and women alive today were married before age 18.

**Unless we accelerate our efforts, 150 million more girls will marry or enter a union by 2030,<sup>1</sup> and it will take another 300 years to end the practice.<sup>2</sup>**

Adopted in 2015, the 17 SDGs set out global development priorities up to 2030. They are a universal call to action to end poverty, protect the planet and ensure that all people can enjoy peace and prosperity. They are comprehensive, interrelated and centred on the realisation of human rights.

Goal 5 of the SDGs focuses on gender equality and includes a target to end child marriage by 2030.

But the consequences of not achieving this target reach beyond Goal 5. **Unless we make significant progress on ending child marriage, we will fall short on at least nine of the SDGs**, including those related to poverty, food security, health, education, gender equality, economic growth, climate action, and peace and justice.

<sup>a</sup>In this brief, we use 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.

## WHAT NEEDS TO HAPPEN?

### Governments must:

1. **Prioritise** child marriage within the 2030 Agenda to achieve real, long-term change. We will not end child marriage by 2030 unless action is scaled up.
2. **Ensure** that all reporting on the progress of the SDGs includes meaningful involvement from civil society, including community-based organisations, young people and women's collectives at the national, regional and global levels.
3. **Commit** to action by developing costed national and regional action plans to address child marriage that work across sectors and across the development and humanitarian nexus.

# WHICH SDGS ARE AT RISK IF WE DON'T END CHILD MARRIAGE, AND WHY?



**Child marriage is both a driver and consequence of poverty.** It is most common in the countries and households with the lowest and most insecure incomes – including those affected by conflict and crisis – and perpetuates the cycle of poverty across generations. Taking girls out of school when they marry or enter a union limits their opportunity to earn an income: women who marry before age 18 lose about 9% of earnings.<sup>3</sup>

When girls have the skills and opportunities to secure paid employment and to develop their abilities, and when supported by comprehensive social protection systems, they can delay marriage, support themselves and their families, and break the cycle of poverty.



**Food insecurity and malnutrition can be a cause and consequence of child marriage.** Girls and women are more likely to experience food insecurity,<sup>4</sup> and they – and their families – may see child marriage as a way to save or access limited supplies, particularly during conflict and crisis. Babies born to girls under age 15 are more likely to have low birth weight, suffer from poor nutrition, experience stunting and are at higher risk of dying before age five.

Addressing child marriage and increasing girls' and women's access to productive resources will contribute to progress on better nutrition and food security for adolescent girls and their children.



**90% of adolescent births take place within the context of marriage, and complications related to adolescent pregnancy and childbirth are among the leading causes of death for 15- to 19-year-old girls worldwide.** The children of married girls face greater health risks, and even death.<sup>5</sup> Girls who marry before age 15 are 50% more likely to experience physical or sexual intimate partner violence.<sup>6</sup> Child marriage is also associated with poor mental health outcomes, including emotional distress, depression and feelings of isolation.

By preventing child marriage and improving adolescent girls' access to comprehensive sexuality education and essential services – including child protection, gender-based violence (GBV), mental health and sexual and reproductive health and rights – we can dramatically improve health and wellbeing outcomes for millions of girls and children worldwide.



**Girls who are already out of school are more likely to marry before age 18.** Marriage also usually means an end to formal education for girls, as they take on more household responsibilities, childbearing and parenthood. They may also face stigma, forced exclusion from school and gendered social norms that keep them at home. Girls – including married girls – in conflict- and crisis-affected settings face additional barriers to education, including increased fear of sexual and gender-based violence at or on the way to school, trafficking and violent attempts to repress their education.

Education is a powerful way to prevent child marriage and promote gender equality. It can offer protection, access to caring adults and peers, and an opportunity for girls to gain the knowledge, skills and power they need to challenge discriminatory gender norms and determine their own futures.



**Child marriage is rooted in gender inequality and the belief that girls are worth less than boys.** It is recognised as a form of GBV and often violates their rights to health and education, and compromises their economic and political participation. Gender equality is an effective indicator of overall progress towards a fairer world, which we will not achieve without ending child marriage.

Addressing child marriage can be an entry point to address broader gender inequality and violence. By addressing harmful practices and discriminatory social norms, we can ensure the voices and decisions of girls and women are as valued as those of boys and men.

Goal 5 includes the target to end child marriage:

**SDG 5.3: 'Eliminate all harmful practices, such as child, early and forced marriage and female genital mutilation'**

## 8 DECENT WORK AND ECONOMIC GROWTH



**Girls who marry young – or without consent or choice – have little decision-making power.** They also face multiple barriers to participating in the economy, with greater caring responsibilities and reduced opportunities to study, earn or gain economic independence; many are forced into the unregulated informal economy. Child marriage keeps young people from contributing to the growth of greener, more equitable economies, and costs the world trillions of dollars.

By ending child marriage and ensuring that adolescents – including those affected by climate crisis and conflict – have access to the education, information and services they need, they would be able to decide if, when and how many children to have, increase their educational attainment and compete for employment on a more equal footing. This would result in more inclusive economic production, enabling countries to make significant advances to alleviate poverty and invest in social justice and climate resilience.

## 10 REDUCED INEQUALITIES



**Child marriage prevalence varies within and between countries and regions.** It is most common among the populations that have been most marginalised – because of factors like their gender, age, race, class, ethnicity or location – including those affected by conflict and crisis. Girls from these populations face more barriers to accessing the services and resources they need, and are put at higher risk of being trafficked or exploited, often because their births or marriages are not legally registered. Most progress on child marriage has been among girls from the richest families, while prevalence has increased among those from the lowest-income households in most regions.<sup>7</sup>

Reducing inequalities means supporting the girls who have been most marginalised, employing intersectional and gender-transformative approaches that address the root causes of marginalisation and child marriage. Interventions must be girl-centred, cross-sectoral and act at multiple levels of a girls' interconnected environment to build their rights, agency and autonomy.

## 13 CLIMATE ACTION



**Climate-related disruptions to income and food security at the household and communal level put girls at particular risk of child marriage and other forms of GBV as families struggle to cope.** Recent data confirms this link: for every 10% change in rainfall due to climate change, child marriage increases 1%.<sup>8</sup> Child marriage can also impact on communities' ability to adapt to climate change, as it exacerbates gendered inequalities and risks, and limits educational opportunities.

Reducing climate vulnerability and building resilience under this Goal means working with those most at risk to ensure adaptation and mitigation actions are effective and equitable. This means prioritising support for the girls who have been most marginalised – those who are most at risk of child marriage during climate crisis, and those who are or have been married.

## 16 PEACE, JUSTICE AND STRONG INSTITUTIONS



**Child marriage is recognised as a human rights violation and a form of violence against women and girls.** Girls who marry before age 18 are at greater risk of sexual, physical and psychological violence throughout their lives; they are at particular risk from their partners and their partners' families. Child marriage is also more common during conflict and crisis – nine of the 10 countries with the highest child marriage prevalence are experiencing fragility,<sup>9</sup> and for every 10-fold increase in conflict deaths, child marriage increases 7%.<sup>10</sup>

Ending child marriage and violence against women and girls means investing in programmes that address the norms and beliefs that devalue and discriminate against girls and women. It means implementing strong legal and political frameworks that centre girls' rights and go beyond setting the minimum age of marriage at 18 to also ensure girls' access to education, health, child protection, justice and divorce services, especially during conflict and crisis.

## 17 PARTNERSHIPS FOR THE GOALS



**The SDGs champion the power of partnership and highlight the importance of bringing together multiple stakeholders to drive change.** Given the complexity and connections between child marriage and other development issues, work to end it and achieve the SDGs must be multisectoral and happen at the individual, community, service provision and policy levels – and we can only achieve transformation at this scale if we work together.

We need long-term, costed plans at the global, regional and national level to ensure adequate and large-scale implementation of effective child marriage interventions. Civil society is a key partner in developing these plans, supporting their implementation and holding governments accountable for their commitments.

# Reviewing the progress on achieving the SDGs

The High-Level Political Forum (HLPF) is the official mechanism for reviewing progress on the SDGs.

**Civil society has a critical role to play in achieving the SDGs, and in holding governments accountable for their commitments.** Meaningful civil society engagement, including community-based organisations and youth and women's collectives, is needed at every stage of the HLPF process, including national and regional consultations, and at global reviews. National follow-up mechanisms need to include civil society representatives. Civil society offers unique insights into the SDGs and plays an important role in holding governments accountable for their commitments, and in highlighting local challenges.

**Progress must be reported in a consistent and comprehensive method.** Country-level Voluntary National Reviews should use a standardised format to assess the progress of each Goal, including challenges and actions. By providing realistic and holistic reviews, we can better assess gaps and take action. All regions should introduce Peer Review Mechanisms to ensure collaborative, regionally-specific learning and sharing of promising practices on the implementation of the 2030 Agenda.

**Turning commitments into actions.** Governments must prioritise clear action and pathways through showing leadership in ending child marriage and implementing programmes that will ensure every girl can determine her future.



## References

<sup>1</sup>UNICEF, 2021, [Child marriage database](#).

<sup>2</sup>UNICEF, 2023, [Is an end to child marriage within reach?](#)

<sup>3</sup>ICRW and World Bank, 2017, [Economic impacts of child marriage](#).

<sup>4</sup>UN Women, 2022, [Progress on the Sustainable Development Goals: The gender snapshot 2022](#).

<sup>5</sup>UNFPA, 2015, [Girlhood, not motherhood: Preventing adolescent pregnancy](#).

<sup>6</sup>Kidman, R., 2017, "Child marriage and intimate partner violence: A comparative study of 34 countries," 2017, International Journal of Epidemiology, Vol 46, Issue 2, pp. 662–675.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid.

<sup>8</sup>UNICEF, 2023, op. cit.

<sup>9</sup>Council on Foreign Relations, 2014, [Working Paper: Fragile States, Fragile Lives](#).

<sup>10</sup>UNICEF, 2023, op. cit.

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