



# GIRLS NOT BRIDES

The Global Partnership  
to End Child Marriage

## Child Marriage and Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting

### Key messages

- Child marriage and FGM/C are reflections of gender inequality and expressions of norms and traditions in which families and communities seek to protect girls from social and economic risks.
- It is important that in places where they co-exist, child marriage and FGM/C are tackled in an integrated way so that programmes take account of the shared drivers and the links between them.

### What are the similarities between child marriage and FGM/C?

- FGM/C and child marriage are both human rights violations. They are harmful traditional practices.
- In many places where child marriage is prevalent, so too is FGM/C. 2 out of 3 women affected by FGM/C live in just 4 countries: **Egypt, Ethiopia, Nigeria and Sudan**<sup>1</sup> which also have some of the highest child marriage rates in the world.<sup>2</sup>
- Both practices reflect social norms that govern behaviour in a community which is often linked to fear around **controlling women and girls' sexuality, maintaining cultural and religious traditions**, and to a lack of economic opportunities.<sup>3</sup>
- **Neither child marriage nor FGM/C is endorsed by any religion** yet many communities interpret their faith differently and use these practices as a mark of religious identity.
- Both harmful traditional practices have **devastating consequences for the health, education and equality of women and girls**. Where both practices take place together, the consequences can be even graver. Women who marry early and/or undergo FGM/C are more likely to be subjected to other forms of gender-based violence.
- **Parents may believe that they are acting in the best interests of their daughters** by making them undergo these harmful traditional practices, as they think that this will secure a better future for them, including better marriage prospects, social status and maintenance of family honour and respect.
- **Tackling FGM/C and child marriage effectively requires working with families and communities** to address the underlying social norms and exploring the harmful consequences of these practices. It also requires strengthening formal child protection systems and legal frameworks, as well as the informal support and networks that exist within communities.
- **In Ethiopia there are signs of significant reductions in the rates of both practices**. Change is attributed to Ethiopia's strong legal and policy framework as well as the government's focus on improving girls' education, health care and employment opportunities.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Evidence to End FGM/C: Research to Help Women Thrive, *A State of the Art Synthesis on FGM/C: What do we know now?*, August 2016

<sup>2</sup> NB: Ethiopia, Nigeria and Sudan are all in the top 20 countries with the highest prevalence rates of child marriage. Data from 2013 also shows that in Indonesia, 49% of girls under 12 years have been cut (as cited in *A State of the Art Synthesis on FGM/C*). Indonesia is also in the top ten countries for the highest absolute numbers of child marriage.

<sup>3</sup> World Vision, *Untying the Knot: Exploring Early Marriage in Fragile States*, 2013

<sup>4</sup> Young Lives, *Policy brief 21. Child marriage and FGM/: Evidence from Ethiopia*, 2014 and ODI, *Surprising Trends in Child Marriage in Ethiopia*, 2016

## What are the differences between both harmful traditional practices?

- The scale at which both practices occur is different:
  - UNICEF estimate that approximately **15 million girls are married every year** before they reach 18 years and 720 million women alive today were married as children.<sup>5</sup>
  - While the exact number of girls and women who have undergone FGM/C is not known, it is estimated that **at least 200 million women and girls have been subjected to FGM/C** in over 30 countries.<sup>6</sup>
- Whereas **child marriage occurs around the world**, and cuts across countries, cultures, religions and ethnicities, **FGM/C is most prevalent in Africa** and some countries in Asia and the Middle East. Increasingly women and girls from diaspora communities are also affected by FGM/C.
- In many parts of the world where child marriage is practiced, FGM/C is not prevalent, however, where FGM/C is conducted, it often leads to child marriage.

## How are FGM/C and child marriage linked?

- FGM/C is sometimes seen as a **precursor or prerequisite for a girl to marry**. This relationship is however context specific.<sup>7</sup> The latest research for example shows that girls in many regions are increasingly undergoing FGM/C at a younger age with most cut before the age of 5.<sup>8</sup> This may suggest that in many cases it is not an immediate precursor to marriage but that the practice is still considered important for her social status and marriage prospects later in life.
- There is often a **social obligation to conform to FGM/C** and a widespread belief that if the practice is not conducted, girls will not get suitable marriage partners.<sup>9</sup>
- The dynamic between child marriage and FGM/C is such that, where both share the same drivers and where one harmful practice is successfully eradicated, the other may be retained to take its place.<sup>10</sup> It is therefore imperative that campaigns and programmes on FGM/C tackle child marriage, and vice versa.

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<sup>5</sup> UNICEF, *Ending Child Marriage: Progress and Prospects*, 2014

<sup>6</sup> UNICEF *Brochure on FGMC*, 2016 available at

[http://www.unicef.org/media/files/FGMC\\_2016\\_brochure\\_final\\_UNICEF\\_SPREAD\(2\).pdf](http://www.unicef.org/media/files/FGMC_2016_brochure_final_UNICEF_SPREAD(2).pdf). Note: while UNICEF only measure the existence of FGM/C through MICS/DHS in 30 countries, there are reports from civil society organisations of it happening in far more.

<sup>7</sup>World Vision, *Every Child Free From Fear*, 2014

<sup>8</sup> Evidence to End FGM/C: Research to Help Women Thrive, *A State of the Art Synthesis on FGM/C: What do we know now?*, August 2016

<sup>9</sup> UNICEF, *Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting: A statistical overview and exploration of the dynamics of change*, 2013

<sup>10</sup> World Vision, *Exploring the Links: Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting and Early Marriage*, 2014