

**Committee:** Social Cultural and Humanitarian 1

**Topic:** The question of child brides

**Chair:** Adamantia Alevra

**School:** Athens College-Psychico (HAEF)

---

## Summary

Every 2 seconds, a girl is married before 18. There is a strong correlation between girls getting married before the age of 18 and them being denied of their right to health, choice, education and a life free from violence. Child brides are often pressured into motherhood putting them at risk of death or injury at childbirth. Girls who give birth before 15 are 5 times more likely to die in childbirth than women aged 20-24. Their right to choice is also denied as child brides have little or no say in if, when and whom they marry. As the Declaration of Human Rights states: "Marriage shall be entered into only with the free and full consent of the intending spouses". A girl who marries before 18 is more likely to experience physical, sexual and psychological abuse throughout her life. Girls are deprived of their right to education as after marriage, child brides usually drop out of school if they were in school at all.

Child marriage is on a basic level driven by poverty and gender inequality. However, there are country-specific drivers behind child marriage. In many countries, traditional customs, gender norms, family practices, religion and the level of education of different individuals are significant factors causing child marriage.

In 2019 the highest percentages of child marriage are in Niger where 76% of young women are married before their 18<sup>th</sup> birthday. Following Niger, in the Central African Republic the percentage of women married before 18 is 68% and in Chad 67%. In sub-Saharan Africa the percentage of child brides is 38%. However, it must be noted that the phenomenon of child marriage is not prevalent only in developing countries but also in the developed world in countries such as the United States.

Yet, there are cases in which child marriage has been prevented or even stopped comparatively to prior years. In fact, 25 million child marriages have been prevented in the past 10 years thanks to fruitful progress. South Asia had the largest decline in the prevalence of child marriage during, from 49% to 30%. In countries of the developed world such as the US, state legislators aim at banning child marriage, marriage below the age of 18, with no exception.

But, if progress does not accelerate holistically there will be more than 150 million additional child brides by 2030.

## Definition of Key Terms

**Child:** The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child defines child as "a human being below the age of 18 years unless under the law applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier".

**Child brides:** According to UNICEF child marriage is defined as a marriage of a girl or boy before the age of 18 and refers to both formal marriages and informal unions in which children under the age of 18 live with partner as if married. Child marriage affects both girls and boys, but it affects girls disproportionately, especially in South Asia.

## Background Information

Throughout history until the 20th century the practice of child marriage was a commonly acceptable one. As the average life expectancy was up to 40-45 years of age in those earlier years, child marriage was the solution to faster reproduction. Young girls were often married as soon as or even prior to reaching puberty. Following the industrial revolution and especially in mid 20th century, countries began to develop thereby allowing women to receive education, voting and other rights and starting to enter the workforce. In addition, their economic conditions improved, and there were massive increases in average life expectancy due to advanced medical practices. In these countries, the practice of child marriages began to be questioned and the number of child brides started to decrease. Soon, child brides nearly disappeared in most of the developed economies of the world. In many other countries of the world, however, child marriages continue to occur regardless of global campaigns and resistance against this act.

### Reasons for Child Marriage

Over the years, economic, political, social and religious reasons among other have been the trigger for child marriage. Poverty is one of the main drivers of child marriage. Child brides are more likely to be poor and to remain poor. Where poverty is acute, giving a daughter in marriage allows parents to reduce their expenses: one less person to feed, clothe and educate. Families sometimes marry their daughters at a younger age because economic problems such as the system of dowry prevailing in many countries where parents of girls have to bestow hefty sums of money or expensive goods and ornaments to the in-laws' families of their daughters have forced parents to marry off their young girls. Indeed, the high demand of young girls in the marriage market have helped parents marry off their girl child to an older man, often receiving money in return, allowing them to overcome the burdens of dowry and even economically benefiting from the process. Several cases of foreign raids and invasions where the attackers have raped and kidnapped unmarried girls as booty, have also led societies to protect their girls by the process of child marriage. For example, in India, about 1,000 years back, a series of Muslim invasions resulted in unmarried girls being raped and carried away by the Muslim invaders. This forced India to adopt child marriage to protect its girls. In some societies, religious and social stigma exists regarding the marriageable age of girls which forces the parents to allow their child to be married young to

overcome social stigma. Establishing political and financial relations between families is also carried out via marriage of young girls thereby reinforcing the process in many parts of the world.

### **Shift in the Acceptance of Society**

Over the last few decades, child marriage has been made illegal in many countries across the world. The UN has recognized this process as a violation of children's basic human rights. Data also supports the claim that a number of countries supporting child marriage have been weakened economically due to the absence of an educated female workforce in the country. In most of the developed countries of the world today, child marriage is no longer a dangerous threat to the well-being of the child. With women acquiring equal rights as men in these countries, the need to seek the protection of a male figure is no longer needed. Educated women aspiring to achieve their own careers and financial sustainment are also no longer a "burden" to their families in these countries. Awareness is also spreading to the developing world where education of young girls is leading to female empowerment towards fighting for their rights and towards protesting against child marriage as a whole.

While the UN classifies any marriage below the age of 18 as child marriage, in some countries such as Scotland the minimum age of marriage is 16 and marriage does not require parental consent. Some parents use these legal loopholes to force the marriages of their children who are aged 16 or 17. While some argue, that this instance still is an illegal and harmful practice for children even in ages close to the age of 18, other suggest that the children themselves choose to marry young and the fact that it is legal makes it acceptable and sensible. Even this case, however, is classified by the UN as child marriage.

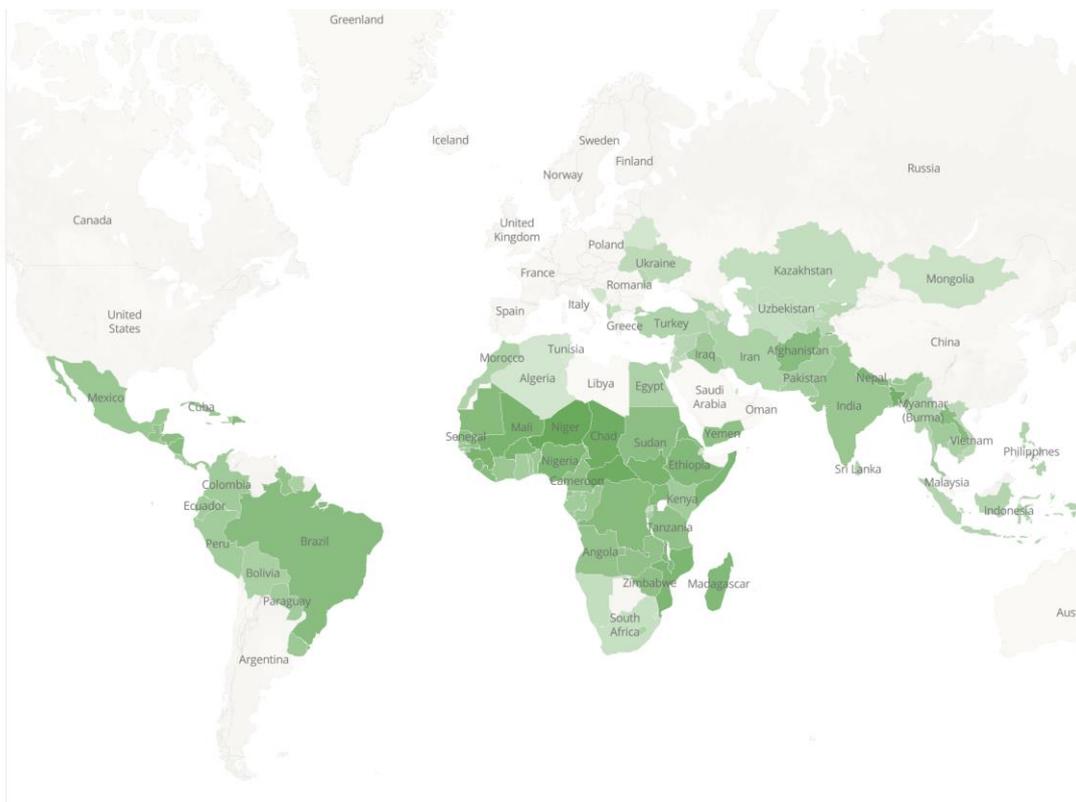
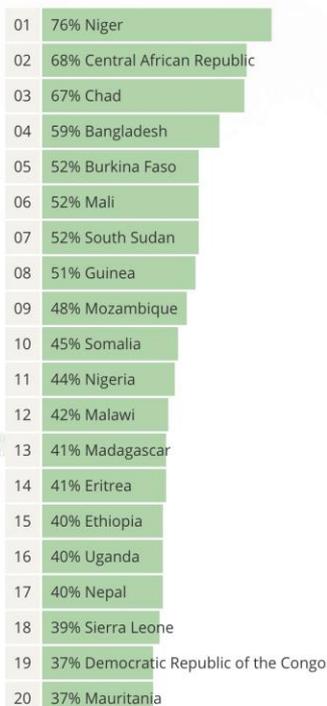
While child marriage is comparatively more prevalent in the developing world, the risks of the practice are just as real for the cases of child marriages that do occur in the developed world. UNICEF supports that changing societal norms and viewpoint will serve as an important leap towards eliminating child marriage even in cases below the age of 18 in countries where its legal. "It's important to have legislation on child marriage on the books, but the law in and of itself is not going to change people's minds," says Mark Engman, UNICEF Managing Director, Public Policy and Advocacy. "We have to convince people that stopping child marriage is the right thing to do. You do that by letting them know, 'Hey, you think you're helping your kids by letting them get married early, but you're not. It always, always, always ends up hurting the kids.' UNICEF calls that approach changing social norms: address the culture, beliefs and traditions that make parents and communities think child marriage is the right thing to do. UNICEF works with communities to convince them that child marriage is not okay: It hurts their girls and violates their rights. "This is an example of how we can take a global position and apply it locally to improve the lives of children in our own country," says Engman.

### **Remaining Presence of Child Brides Today**

While child marriage has been greatly limited in most parts of today's world, it is still highly present in some developing countries of Africa, South, West and Southeast Asia, South America, and Oceania. According to a 2015 UNICEF report, countries with the highest rates of child brides included Niger (76%), the Central African Republic (68%), and Chad (67%) at the top three positions. Other countries with high rates of child marriage include Bangladesh (65%), Mali (55%), Guinea (52%), South Sudan (52%), Burkina Faso (52%), Malawi (50%), and Mozambique (48%).

India continues to have extremely high rates of child marriage as well, reaching in excess of 50% in many rural parts of the country.

**Top 20 countries with the highest prevalence rates of child marriage\***



*Countries with the highest prevalence rate of child marriage*

## Major Countries and Organizations Involved

### Girls Not Brides NGO

A major organization involved in combatting the increasing number of child brides is the NGO “Girls not Brides”.

Comprising of more than 1000 civil society organizations from over 95 countries *Girls Not Brides* is an international partnership devoted to ending child marriage and enabling girls to fulfil their abilities. Members are based throughout Asia, Europe, the Middle East, Africa, and the Americas.

The organization pinpoints community engagement as the basis for social change. Members of *Girls Not Brides* act at local, national and global levels in their effort to tackle the question child brides.

Specifically, *Girls Not Brides* works towards:

- Raising awareness of the consequences of child marriage by encouraging open, inclusive and informed discussion at the community, local, national and international level;
- Facilitating learning and coordination between organisations working to end child marriage;
- Mobilising all necessary financial, policy, and other support to end child marriage.

## **Niger**

76% of girls in Niger are married before their 18th birthday and 28% are married before the age of 15.

According to UNICEF, Niger has the highest prevalence rate of child marriage in the world and the 14th highest absolute number of child brides – 676,000.

One of the key drivers of child marriage in Niger is the extensive poverty plaguing the country.

Marrying girls off to wealthy men in Niger, therefore, seems to fulfill the hope of increasing the economic and social prosperity of the family, states UNICEF.

Niger has committed to eliminate child, early and forced marriage by 2030 in line with target 5.3 of the Sustainable Development Goals.

As of June 2018, the government is in the process of developing Niger's first National Action Plan to End Child Marriage.

The National Strategy on Prevention of Adolescent Pregnancies calls for a reduction in child marriages from 76.3% in 2012 to 60% in 2020.

## **Pakistan**

21% of girls in Pakistan are married before their 18th birthday and 3% are married before the age of 15.

According to UNICEF, Pakistan has the sixth highest number of absolute child brides in the world – 1,909,000.

Various factors have caused child marriage yet deeply entrenched patriarchal norms and tradition and the belief that girls who marry late are “deviating” from tradition, ensures the ensuing of the practice in the country.

Pakistan has committed to eliminate child, early and forced marriage by 2030 in line with target 5.3 of the Sustainable Development Goals.

Pakistan ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1990, which sets a minimum age of marriage of 18, and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in 1996, which obligates states to ensure free and full consent to marriage. However, it noted that this is subject to the provisions of the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan.

Pakistan's 2017-2025 National Education Policy focuses on eliminating gender disparity in education and encouraging families to send girls to school.

## Timeline of Events

Date	Description
Throughout history up to the 20 <sup>th</sup> century	Child marriages were the norm in most parts of the world
20 <sup>th</sup> century	Following the industrial revolution child marriage practices began to be questioned and stopped in many developed economies of the world yet persisted in underdeveloped countries.
2008-2009	Approximately 25% of women are married as children
2012	The first International Day of the Girl n October 11 -> aims at placing a focus on

preventing the rise of in number of child brides

2013

The U.N. Human Rights Council introduces child marriage on its agenda for action. The U.N. General Assembly declares child marriage to be an obstacle to development.

2015

The United Nations Population Fund estimates that 1 in 3 girls marry by age 18 and 1 in 9 marry by age 15. One target of the Sustainable Development Goals commits all countries to participate in ending child marriage.

2018

The number of women who marry as children is down to 1 in 5. Delaware and New Jersey become the first U.S. states to outlaw child marriage without exceptions.

2020 — 2030

This ten-year period serves as the Sustainable Development Goals' target date for all countries to end child marriage. If child marriage had continued at the 2015 rate, by 2030, there will be 960 million women alive who married as children.

## Relevant UN Treaties and Events

Child marriage violates treaties and conventions that signatories around the world are bound by, including:

- The Convention on the Rights of the Child
- The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against women
- The Protocol to the African Charter on Human and People's rights on the rights of women in Africa

On 15 November 2018, the United Nations General Assembly's 3<sup>rd</sup> Committee (UNGA) agreed a third resolution on child, early and forced marriage (CEFM). The resolution calls on UN Member States to strengthen and accelerate action to address child marriage, and makes important new contributions to the debate. This resolution was led by Canada and Zambia and has been co-sponsored by 126 member states.

In 2017, the Human Rights Council adopted a resolution to end child marriage in humanitarian settings. The resolution recognizes child marriage as a violation of human rights and calls for strengthened efforts to prevent and eliminate this harmful practice and to provide assistance to married girls especially in contexts that are humanitarian. This resolution has been co-sponsored by 85 countries, including those that have high rates of child brides.

## Previous Attempts to solve the Issue

- On March 2013, a new law was passed in the US that aims at ending child marriage. Indeed, in an effort to promote global efforts to stop child marriage the US Congress passed the Violence Against Women Reauthorisation Act, a law of great significance for girls and women in the United States, which includes provisions to prioritise the reductions of child marriage internationally. Indeed, it asks the US Secretary of State to “establish and implement a multi-year, multi-sectoral strategy to prevent child marriage”. Passed just one week ahead of the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women, the Act underpins the devotion of the US government in tackling child marriage, a practice that often has violent consequences for girls.

- World Vision Niger launched a child protection caravan in February 2019 in the village of Fissataou in Maradi in the presence of the Prefects of the Departments of Guidan Roudji and Dakoro, the Director of World Vision Niger, the ambassador of the Campaign "It Takes A World to end violence against children", various community leaders, among others. The caravan is aimed at raising awareness on child marriage and girl-child education among rural people in the regions of Maradi and Zinder. It ran over two weeks, covering six major villages including Fissataou, Kinti and Zakara in Maradi and Damagaram Takaya, Birni Kazoé and Alberkaram in Zinder.

## Possible Solutions

Solutions to the question of child brides can be provided from a variety of actors in the political stage ranging from individuals, to governments to intergovernmental organizations.

On the part of individuals solutions to the issue could be found by:

Ensuring that teachers are trained to identify and report child marriages.

Encouraging community leaders in undeveloped or rural areas to support alternative roles for girls beyond marriage.

On the part of the governments and government officials:

Proposing that governments adopt and implement laws and policies to prevent child marriage and support married girls through stricter regulation such as ensuring that law enforcement officials register children at birth and check the ages of the bride and groom before marriage.

Ensuring educational centres are built for young girls and women

Providing economic support and financial and job incentives to young girls and their families to prevent children from marrying for reasons of poverty or other economical restraints

On the part of NGOs such as Human Rights Bodies:

Organizing campaigns and programmes to assist in holding governments accountable for setting and implementing laws to end child marriage and promote gender equality.

Creating safe space programmes which offer a varied curriculum covering life skills, reproductive health and financial literacy will provide girls with an opportunity to build their skills, learn and meet new friends, mentors in an informal setting and learn about the services they can access in their community.

Establishing educational foundations in local areas to raise awareness to females and the population as a whole.

## Bibliography

- Calderwood, Imogen. "Girl, 5, Was Forced to Marry a 22-Year-Old Man in Pakistan." *Global Citizen*, 28 July 2017, [www.globalcitizen.org/en/content/five-year-old-girl-marriage-pakistan/](http://www.globalcitizen.org/en/content/five-year-old-girl-marriage-pakistan/)
- "Child Marriage around the World." *UNICEF*, 8 Feb. 2019, [www.unicef.org/stories/child-marriage-around-world](http://www.unicef.org/stories/child-marriage-around-world)
- "Child Marriage – a Violation of Human Rights." *UNICEF Montenegro*, 23 Feb. 2018, [www.unicef.org/montenegro/en/stories/child-marriage-violation-human-rights](http://www.unicef.org/montenegro/en/stories/child-marriage-violation-human-rights)
- "Child Marriage: Facts, FAQs, and How to Help End It." *World Vision*, 29 Mar. 2019, [www.worldvision.org/child-protection-news-stories/child-marriage-facts](http://www.worldvision.org/child-protection-news-stories/child-marriage-facts)
- "Child Marriage." *Human Rights Watch*, [www.hrw.org/topic/womens-rights/child-marriage](http://www.hrw.org/topic/womens-rights/child-marriage)
- Ferguson, Sarah. "What You Need To Know About Child Marriage In The U.S." *Forbes*, Forbes Magazine, 29 Oct. 2018, [www.forbes.com/sites/unicefusa/2018/10/29/what-you-need-to-know-about-child-marriage-in-the-us-1/#5194565b5689](http://www.forbes.com/sites/unicefusa/2018/10/29/what-you-need-to-know-about-child-marriage-in-the-us-1/#5194565b5689).
- Girls Not Brides. "Human Rights Council Adopts 2017 Resolution to End Child Marriage in Humanitarian Settings." *Girls Not Brides*, 19 July 2017, [www.girlsnotbrides.org/human-rights-council-adopts-2017-resolution-end-child-marriage-humanitarian-settings/](http://www.girlsnotbrides.org/human-rights-council-adopts-2017-resolution-end-child-marriage-humanitarian-settings/)
- Girls Not Brides. "Human Rights and Justice." *Girls Not Brides*, [www.girlsnotbrides.org/themes/human-rights-and-justice/](http://www.girlsnotbrides.org/themes/human-rights-and-justice/)
- Nag, Oishimaya Sen. "Child Marriage - Rationale, Historical Views, And Consequences." *WorldAtlas*, 30 May 2016, [www.worldatlas.com/articles/child-marriage-rationale-historical-views-and-consequences.html](http://www.worldatlas.com/articles/child-marriage-rationale-historical-views-and-consequences.html).

