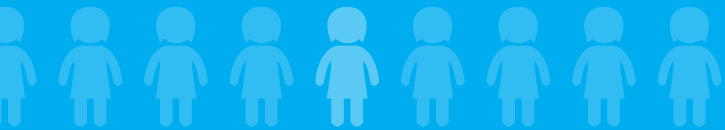




COVID-19 A threat to progress against child marriage



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COVID-19

A threat to progress against child marriage



Over the next decade,
up to **10 million**
more girls will be
at risk of becoming
child brides as a result
of the pandemic

THREATENING A GENERATION OF PROGRESS, ALTERING THE LIVES OF A GENERATION OF GIRLS

Every year, millions of girls around the world are married before their 18th birthday.

This harmful practice denies girls the opportunity to develop to their full potential, with far-reaching ripple effects. Girls who marry are not only robbed of their childhood. They are often socially isolated – cut off from family and friends – and discouraged or prohibited from attending school or finding a job. The pressure to become pregnant once married can be intense, even though girls' young bodies are not yet ready to give birth. Nor are girls usually equipped with the skills and maturity they need to become good mothers. Child marriage has detrimental effects not only on girls and their families. It erodes the well-being and prosperity of whole societies, for generations.

While child marriage is an age-old tradition, the practice is becoming less common. Over the past decade, the proportion of young women globally who were married as children decreased by 15 per cent, from nearly 1 in 4 to 1 in 5. This means that, over the last 10 years, the marriages of some 25 million girls have been averted.

This remarkable accomplishment is now under threat. Over the next decade, up to 10 million more girls will be at risk of child marriage as a result of COVID-19.

The COVID-19 pandemic is profoundly affecting the everyday lives of girls: their physical and mental health, their education, and the economic circumstances of their families and communities. Changes like these put girls at higher risk of becoming child brides, according to empirical literature and theory on the drivers of child marriage as well as anecdotal evidence from a number of countries.

The risk of child marriage increases through various pathways, including economic shocks, school closures and interruptions in services. It is well known, for example, that economic insecurity can lead to child marriage as a way to relieve financial pressure on a family. This is consistent with the notion of child marriage as a coping mechanism in times of economic fragility and uncertainty, including conflicts, food crises and disasters. The evidence is also clear that education is a protective factor against child marriage. Families tend to make decisions about a girl's education and marriage in parallel.¹ Thus, school closures such as those triggered by COVID-19 may, in effect, push girls towards marriage since school is no longer an option. The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted school systems globally and widened educational inequalities by shrinking opportunities for many vulnerable children and adolescents – such as those living in poor or remote rural areas,

girls, refugees, those with disabilities, and those who are forcibly displaced – to continue their education. Finally, as health-care workers struggle to keep ahead of the disease, other 'non-essential' services have been disrupted. These include reproductive health services, which have a direct impact on teenage pregnancy and subsequent marriage. Awareness campaigns and community dialogues on the harmful effects of child marriage have also been curtailed, creating a dangerous vacuum.

One year into the pandemic, urgent action is needed to prevent and mitigate the toll of COVID-19 on children and their families. The actual number of girls who have been married since the beginning of the crisis is unknown, since most marriages are not registered. Moreover, many girls live with a partner in an informal union. That said, pre-COVID data can be used to predict the impact of the crisis on child marriage in the near future. Such projections can be made by examining existing patterns and demographics of child marriage as well as historical information on the effects of educational disruption, economic shocks and programme efficacy on this harmful practice. These estimates can bring into focus the need for a COVID-19 response strategy that extends beyond health and prioritizes a broader set of rights.

Child marriage and the global development agenda

The importance of ending child marriage has been recognized by the international community through its inclusion in Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5: Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls. Target 5.3 seeks to end child, early and forced marriage by 2030.

Child marriage also hinders the realization of many other SDGs, especially those related to education and health.

The world made a commitment to end this harmful practice, and the pandemic is making this global target harder to reach.



PATHWAYS THROUGH WHICH COVID-19 INCREASES THE RISK OF CHILD MARRIAGE

School closures due to COVID-19 have left over a billion students out of school, disrupting daily life, educational attainment and learning outcomes.² Girls may drop out entirely or be less likely to re-enrol when schools reopen.³ School closures can also affect how children use their time. Girls may spend more time at home and unsupervised, which could increase their exposure to sexual activity, sexual violence and unwanted pregnancy. Less time in school may also cause families to perceive lower returns to girls' education.⁴

Social distancing requirements, business closures and travel restrictions associated with COVID-19 have all led to a drop in economic activity, the loss of livelihoods, and household poverty.⁵ The resulting economic insecurity may limit the ability of parents to provide for their children.⁶ Households tend to respond to economic insecurity in two ways: cutting spending (such as education costs) and cutting household size. Both can lead to child marriage.⁷

In fact, child marriage can be a boon to a household's income in communities where a bride price is paid by the groom's family to the

bride's family.⁸ In settings where the bride's family is expected to offer a dowry to the groom's household, the effects may vary. One possibility is that families may marry off their daughters at an earlier age because dowries tend to be lower for younger girls.⁹ Empirical research, however, suggests the opposite may be true – that economic shocks could lead to reductions in child marriage since girls' families cannot afford dowries.¹⁰


Worsening household income may cause some adolescents living in especially difficult circumstances to view child marriage as the best option available to them.¹¹ In worst-case scenarios, poverty could force girls to resort to transactional sex as a risk-coping mechanism, which could lead to increased vulnerability to sexual exploitation, unplanned pregnancy and arranged marriage.¹²

Girls face other constraints as well. Pandemic-related travel restrictions and social distancing can make it difficult for girls and women to access health care, along with programmes and services that aim to protect them from child marriage as well as sexual and gender-

based violence. Disruptions in such services can create difficulties in accessing modern contraception, resulting in unintended pregnancy and subsequent child marriage.¹³ During lockdown, girls and women may also face barriers to engaging with the formal justice system, which can be used as a last-ditch effort to block an illegal marriage.¹⁴ At the same time, the pandemic can inhibit enforcement of the legal minimum age at marriage.

Finally, the death of a parent can also increase the likelihood that a female orphan will be married off, since family members may find it hard to support her.¹⁵ This is not considered a major pathway, however, since death from COVID-19 is most common among older individuals – those who are grandparents rather than parents.

The overall impact of these five pathways on child marriage depends on the extent to which restrictions on movement and economic activity, school closures, and social distancing rules are enforced. It also depends on the fragility or resilience of a country's economy and the availability of social protection programmes.

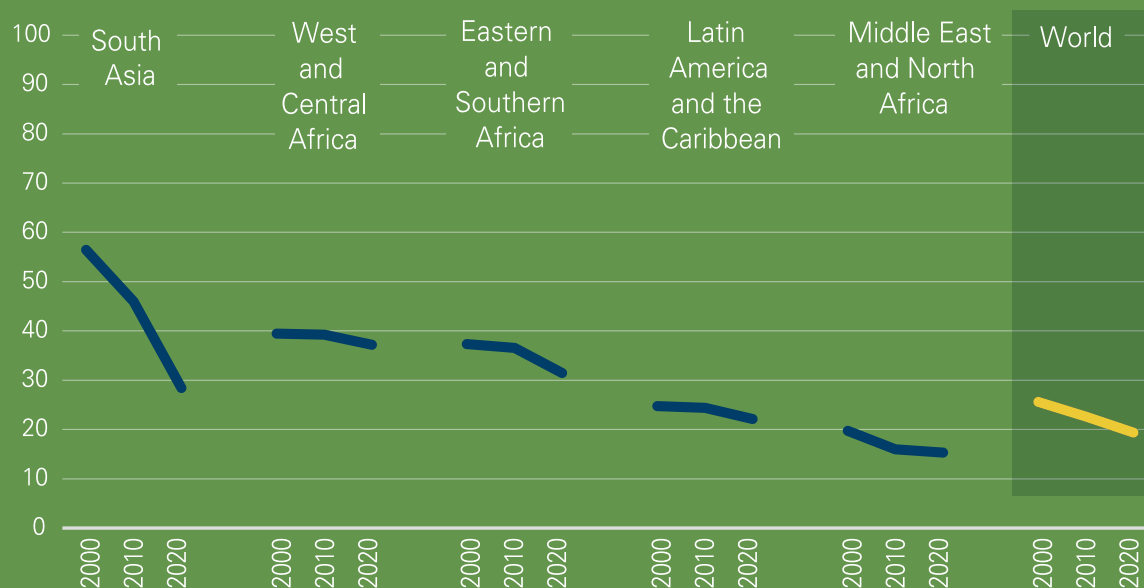


The COVID-19 pandemic is raising the risk of child marriage through five main pathways: 1) interrupted education, 2) economic shocks, 3) disruptions to programmes and services, 4) pregnancy and 5) death of a parent. While these five factors are likely to affect child marriage in all settings, additional contextual factors may also play a role. Such factors include the overall prevalence of child marriage; the amount and direction of marriage payments; gender and social norms; the availability of social protection and poverty alleviation programmes; and the presence of ongoing conflicts, forced migration and displacement.

PROGRESS AND PROSPECTS: WHAT THE DATA SAY

Over the last two decades, the practice of child marriage has declined significantly

Percentage of women aged 20 to 24 years who were first married or in union before age 18



Notes: Estimates are based on a subset of 98 countries covering 79 per cent of the global population of women aged 20 to 24 years. Regional estimates represent data covering at least 50 per cent of the regional population. Data coverage was insufficient to calculate regional estimates for East Asia and the Pacific, Europe and Central Asia, and North America.

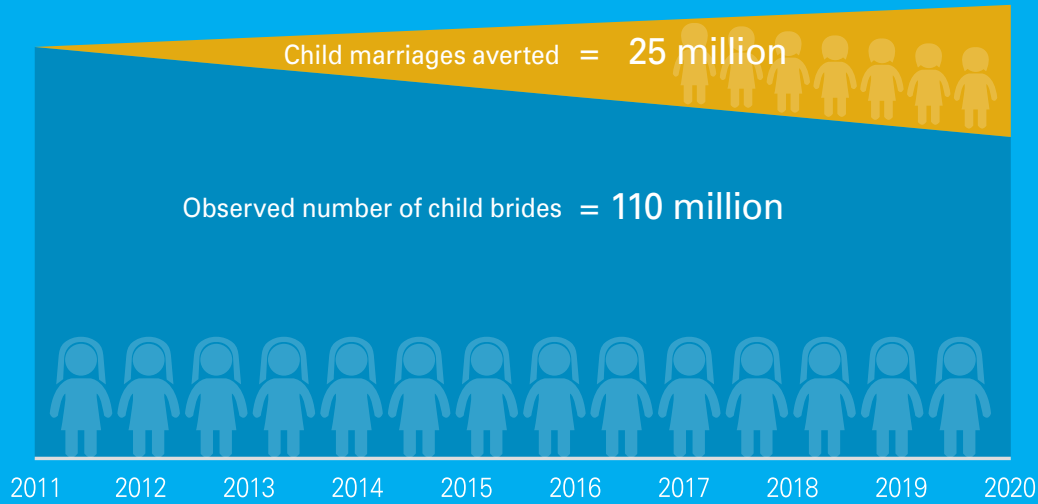
Worldwide, 650 million girls and women were married in childhood.

Five countries account for about half of this total number: India, Bangladesh, Nigeria, Ethiopia and Brazil.

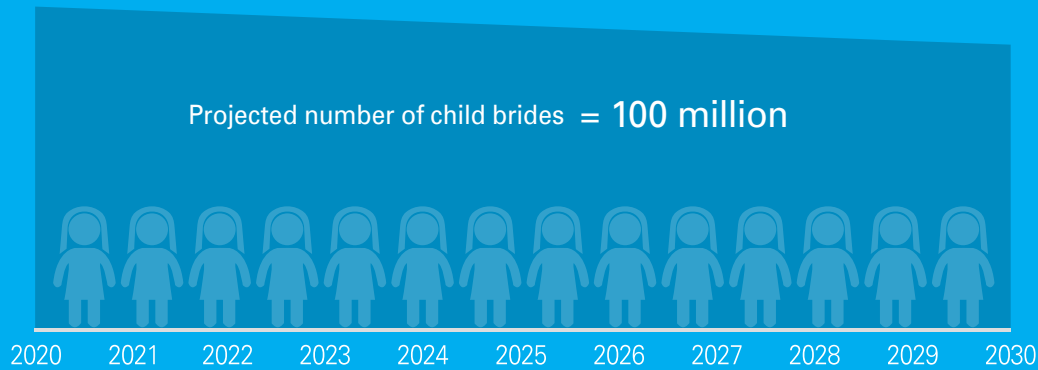
Global progress in ending child marriage to date has been stronger among wealthier segments of society, while the poorest girls have been largely left behind.



As a result of this progress, 25 million child marriages have been averted over the last decade



According to pre-COVID projections, 100 million girls will still become child brides over the next decade – a far cry from the global goal of ending child marriage by 2030



Notes: The upper figure compares the estimated number of 18-year-old girls who were married in childhood in the last decade (blue) with the number who would have been married in childhood if the prevalence of child marriage had remained constant at the level seen 10 years ago (yellow). The projected numbers in the lower figure extrapolate these trends through 2030. Data shown through 2020 were collected before the COVID-19 pandemic began, meaning the estimates do not reflect the possible impact of the crisis.



Quantifying the impact of COVID-19 along five pathways

Interrupted education¹⁶

- School closures increase marriage risk by 25% per year
- Closures result in a loss of 0.6 learning-adjusted years of schooling per child
- Some girls (2%) will never return to school, and will continue to face a higher marriage risk throughout childhood

Pregnancy¹⁸

- The increased risk of marriage due to pregnancy is accounted for through the impact of school closure and dropout

Death of a parent

- Death of a parent is expected to have little direct impact on the risk of child marriage, largely due to the relative rarity of death among age groups that are most likely to be parents

Economic shocks¹⁷

- In countries where bride price is common, loss of household income increases the probability of marriage by 3%
- In countries where dowry is common, the impact ranges from a decreased risk of 4% to an increased risk of 1%

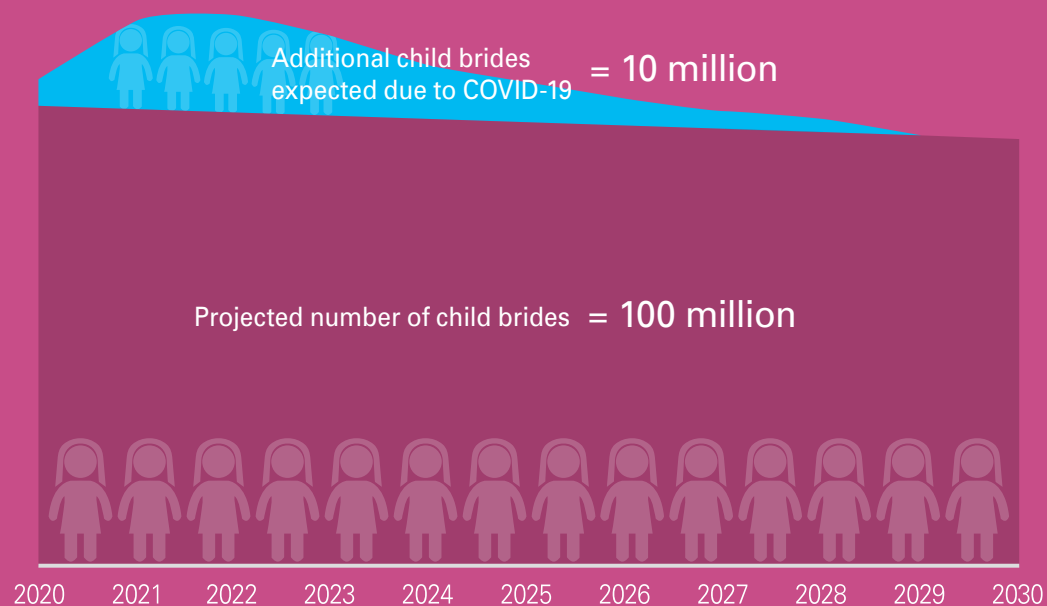
Disruptions to programmes and services¹⁹

- Delayed programmes to prevent child marriage are estimated to result in a one-year loss of gains from such programmes
- Mobilization of effective programming, widely applied, could reduce risk by 33% in the mitigation scenario





As a result of the pandemic, up to 10 million more girls are at risk of becoming child brides by 2030



Note: See page 28 for further details on methods and interpretation.

Most child marriages due to COVID-19 are expected to occur in the near term among older girls.

However, the impact of the pandemic is likely to be felt for at least the next decade, also raising the risk of early marriage for girls who are now young.

Because marriage fundamentally alters the course of a girl's life, the full effect of the pandemic on human development will play out over a generation.

However, this is not a foregone conclusion

The opportunity to mitigate the impact of the pandemic and prevent additional child marriages is at hand.

Effective programming measures, applied at scale, could delay the age at first marriage and lower the risk of marrying in childhood.

Such measures could reduce the additional number of child brides by half, bringing the total impact of COVID-19 down to 5 million additional child brides.²⁰



UPHOLDING GIRLS' RIGHTS DURING THE PANDEMIC AND BEYOND

COVID-19 makes the Sustainable Development Goal target of eliminating child marriage by 2030 further out of reach.

Even before the COVID-19 outbreak, child marriage was all too common. It affects the majority of girls in many countries, while in others, the most vulnerable among them. The pandemic has intensified this risk, but it has also reaffirmed what we already knew: For millions of girls around the world, marriage is seen as the only realistic prospect. For girls living in fragile situations, early marriage remains a lingering risk, easily triggered by the smallest of social and economic shocks.

The COVID-19 pandemic is likely to increase the level of child marriage over the coming years through acute and chronic effects on the well-being of girls and their families. Though the full impact of the pandemic is still highly uncertain, there are actions we can take now to protect girls that will also yield lasting benefits. They include creating a protective legal and policy framework, addressing social and behavioural change, ensuring the continuity of services, and making the right socioeconomic policy choices for girls and their families. Safe reopening of schools and girls' access to reproductive health services are paramount. So, too, are further adapting and strengthening child protection systems and social services, along with social protection measures, such as cash transfers. For low-income families in particular, these interventions are fundamental to helping them meet basic needs without resorting to child marriage.

The social and cultural complexity of the practice of child marriage and the unique character of the current crisis make it clear that there are no simple answers. Past experience shows, however, that integrating child marriage concerns across broader interventions aimed at facilitating access to reproductive health, education, social protection and employment opportunities makes a critical difference.

In the short term, programmes need to be adjusted to incorporate child marriage prevention alongside other initiatives aimed at curbing the spread of the virus and the social and economic repercussions of the pandemic. Many countries have worked to ensure that programming and service delivery continue through the crisis, and have adapted programmes to respond to new emerging risks. In fact, the pandemic has opened up new possibilities for scaling up programmes rapidly through remote delivery. Additional studies will be needed to evaluate the impact and effectiveness of such interventions. However, it is also likely that, as a result, services will become more agile and resilient in future crises.

Over the medium and long term, numerous measures can be taken to address the consequences of COVID-19 on child marriage. Because the impact of the pandemic is likely to be felt for at least the next decade, there is ample opportunity to prevent early marriages, especially among girls who are now young. At the same time, interventions will be needed to improve the well-being and prospects of married girls, which is equally important. The following sections provide a direction for moving forward.



High Naval Authority
EXPERIENCED NAVIGATION

SOFT FLOW BOYS
TEAM SPIRIT



Enact comprehensive social protection measures

Social protection programmes and poverty alleviation strategies are central to preventing child marriage and improving the economic and social conditions that make girls more vulnerable. Evidence suggests that conditional cash transfers are the most successful intervention for improving girls' retention or progress in school and delaying child marriage. Cash or in-kind transfers with delayed marriage as a condition have as much as a 50 per cent success rate in forestalling child marriage.²¹

Substantial efforts have been made by countries to mitigate the effects of COVID-19 on economic insecurity. Globally, 215 countries and territories have planned or implemented 1,414 social protection measures in response to the crisis.²² These include social assistance, social insurance and active labour market programmes. As of February 2021, the Government of Nigeria, for example, had channelled a portion of its gross domestic product to current health-related capital spending and public works programmes to support populations most vulnerable to the impacts of the virus. The Government also extended coverage of a conditional cash transfer programme, increased the social register by one million households and introduced a broader economic stimulus plan.²³

In the early stages of the pandemic response, the Government of India increased spending on social protection and health care to provide in-kind support (including food and cooking gas) and cash transfers to lower-income households. Wages were bolstered and employment offered

to low-wage labourers, insurance coverage was provided to workers in the health-care sector, and the health-care infrastructure was strengthened.²⁴ Such economic policies can protect girls from marriage by lowering families' incentive to marry off their daughters,²⁵ and changing how households use coping strategies, such as the marriage of a daughter, to reduce economic pressure.²⁶

Enhancing income security through cash transfers and other job benefits is important given that 55 per cent of the world's population are unprotected by social protection benefits.²⁷ However, cash transfers alone and temporary relief measures are insufficient to prevent child marriages related to the pandemic. Universal and comprehensive social protection measures are needed. Preventing additional child marriages in the context of COVID-19 would also require countries to close gaps in the coverage of social protection schemes, with particular attention to families of workers in the informal sector.²⁸



Safeguard every child's access to education

The United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) estimates that nearly 24 million children and adolescents, including 11 million girls and young women, may drop out of school due to the pandemic's economic impact.²⁹ Not attending school or dropping out is associated with increased risks of teenage pregnancy and child marriage. So it is important to identify actions to ensure the continuity of learning while schools are closed and a safe return when schools reopen, especially for children in the poorest countries and from deprived communities. Examples of such actions include:

- **Monitor remote learning access and use data to support school re-entry, and improve services for students.** In Côte d'Ivoire, for example, the Ministry of Education, with assistance from UNICEF, is implementing a real-time monitoring system that focuses on tracking potential challenges that girls experience as they return to school. Other countries are conducting research to understand gaps in remote learning access and outcomes and to provide targeted support for marginalized populations, including girls of all ages.
- **Involve caregivers and maintain regular communication among teachers, learners and caregivers.** This can help keep learners motivated and engaged during school closures and possibly prevent girls from dropping out. Tools for reaching out to students, parents and the community have included messaging apps in Ethiopia, a social messaging channel in Nigeria to obtain quick feedback from children about their experiences with remote learning, and guides for parents in the United Republic of Tanzania on how to monitor and supervise their children's education, especially for those who lack digital tools.³⁰
- **Provide conditional cash or in-kind support for girls' schooling.** A systematic review of which interventions work best to prevent child marriage showed that asset or cash transfers conditional on staying in school and/or delaying

child marriage were the most effective: 9 out of 10 high- to medium-quality intervention studies showed positive results.³¹

- **Implement back-to-school campaigns and remedial 'catch-up learning' programmes.** These activities may encourage families to send children back to school in the short to medium term.³² Such measures should be accompanied by training and support for teachers in new modes of education delivery, as well as improvements in the quality of education, so that schooling is seen as a worthwhile pursuit. Current COVID-19 remediation plans include major teacher hiring (in Italy and Mozambique); distribution of study materials (Mozambique); remedial education through free summer school, night classes or an extended school year (Belgium, France, the Philippines and the state of Maryland in the United States); and monitoring student learning (France).³³
- **Establish mentoring programmes for girls.** Evidence suggests that mentoring programmes help strengthen skills, expand social networks, and improve self-esteem, self-efficacy and economic empowerment, all of which are protective assets that adolescent girls and young women need to reach their full potential.³⁴ A good mentoring programme with female mentors can make the difference between a girl staying in school or dropping out.



Guarantee that health and social services for girls are funded and available

As COVID-19 infections overwhelm health systems and countries divert resources from routine health services to fight the pandemic, adolescent girls may face reduced access to sexual and reproductive health information and services. With this comes an elevated risk for unintended pregnancy. For some adolescent girls, such pregnancies occur within the context of marriage, while for others, they may create pressure to marry. Access to health care and care-seeking behaviour during the pandemic may be further reduced by restrictions on movement, increased responsibilities for the care of sick relatives, and fear of COVID-19 infection.

To mitigate the effects of the crisis on adolescent girls' access to sexual and reproductive health services, the following interventions need to be prioritized:

- **Consider the sexual and reproductive health needs of adolescent girls during the COVID-19 response.** All adolescent girls must be granted access to sexual and reproductive health information and services, regardless of their marital status. Adolescent girls (and boys) should continue to have access to comprehensive sexuality education and referrals to sexual and reproductive health services as part of distance learning, using radio or online platforms while schools are closed and physical distancing policies are in place.³⁵
- **Remove access barriers to sexual and reproductive health services.** This can be done through telehealth services for remote consultations. Channels may be developed for virtual consultations through helplines, radio and mobile phones.³⁶ This includes the removal of restrictive consent requirements, waiting periods and other onerous policies for adolescents accessing such services.
- **Address the specific needs of adolescent girls in violence prevention and response.** This includes providing messages on elevated risks for specific age groups and ensuring the safety of girls in shelters or other institutions.
- **Expand health insurance support.** This has been carried out in 21 countries in response to the crisis.³⁷ Since the pandemic is likely to have a negative effect on the provision of sexual and reproductive health services, it is critical to prioritize these services in basic benefits packages offered by health insurance programmes.



RAISING OUR AMBITIONS

Through the Sustainable Development Goals, the world committed to ending child marriage by 2030. This obligation extends to the 10 million girls whose futures are now in jeopardy along with the 100 million girls at risk of becoming child brides before the pandemic began.

Protecting all girls from early marriage will require extensive outreach, targeting those directly affected by the pandemic as well as those who were similarly disadvantaged before it began. Actions to ensure a safe return to school, for example, will need to seek out girls whose education was disrupted by COVID-19 as well as those who were previously out of school. New modalities of delivering sexual and reproductive health information and services will need to

reach girls already in contact with the health-care system as well as those who have never had access. This principle, broadly applied, could expand the reach of COVID-19 mitigation measures to create a situation that is far better than the one before.

But this sphere of action must also go deeper. It will need to address the key drivers of gender inequality – including harmful social norms – and the discriminatory laws that allow it to persist. It will mean tackling the uneven distribution of resources between men and women, including through targeted investments in women’s economic opportunities.

Embracing this more ambitious approach would send an important signal: that the world intends to uphold every girl’s right to develop to her full potential and make good on its promise to end child marriage.



TECHNICAL NOTES

To assess the prevalence of child marriage, this analysis used SDG indicator 5.3.1 – the proportion of women aged 20 to 24 years who were first married or in union before age 18. All references to ‘marriage’ or ‘child brides’ include both formal marriages and informal unions, in which women started living with a partner as if married before age 18. The total number of girls and women worldwide who were married in childhood (650 million) is defined as the number of girls under age 18 who have already married plus the number of adult women who were married before age 18. The annual number of girls married in childhood, observed and projected, is defined as the number of girls aged 18 years who were first married or in union before their 18th birthday. This is intended as a proxy for the annual number of child marriages.

The projected number of additional child marriages that are likely to occur due to COVID-19 was produced based on a modelling exercise that reviewed the baseline trend in incidence, prevalence and number of child marriages, and estimated the impact of the pandemic on top of these trends. A review of empirical and theoretical literature informed estimations of the five pathways through which an elevated risk of child marriage due to COVID-19 is possible, drawing from evidence on the impacts of previous crises, including disease outbreaks, natural disasters and extreme weather events, conflicts and famine. The direction and magnitude of these impacts were projected using a Markov model to simulate the combined effect of these pathways. The initial analysis focused on five countries

that are home to half of all child marriages globally; assuming similar patterns hold, the global estimates presented in this publication are double the values for these five countries. Estimates were produced for both an unmitigated scenario as well as a mitigated scenario in which effective programming is scaled up in response to the pandemic. In addition, for countries in which dowry is common, both standard and sensitivity analyses were conducted, simulating a range of possible impacts of economic pressure on the likelihood of child marriage in these contexts. The publication features the upper level of the range of estimates (10 million child marriages), versus the lower level of the range (7 million child marriages). In the modelling exercise, these marriages are estimated to occur over the period 2020-2028. For display, the distribution of these marriages is converted to an annual number of 18-year-old girls married in childhood for ease of comparison with baseline estimates.

Data on the prevalence of child marriage are drawn from UNICEF global databases, 2021, based on Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys, Demographic and Health Surveys and other nationally representative surveys. Demographic data are from the United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division, *World Population Prospects 2019*, Online edition, 2019.

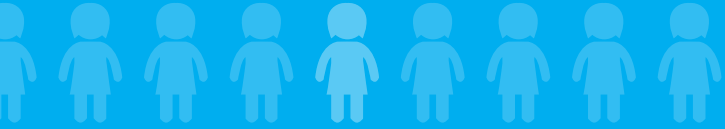
For further details on the analysis and detailed source information by country, see <data.unicef.org>.

GIRLS NEED TO
STUDY DON'T MARRY
THEM OFF



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