PLAN INTERNATIONAL

Until we are all equal

The State of the World's Girls 2025

Let me be a child, not a wife

Girls' experiences of living through child marriage

The State of the World's Girls 2025

The State of the World's Girls report has been published annually since 2007. This year the report focuses on child marriage, providing fresh insight into the everyday lives of married girls and girls in unions, in their own words.

Definition: Child, Early and Forced Marriages and Unions (CEFMU). Plan International[1] defines CEFMU as any marriage or informal union, whether under civil, religious or customary law, with or without formal registration, where either one or both spouses are under the age of 18 and/or where the full and free informed consent of one or both of the parties has not been obtained.

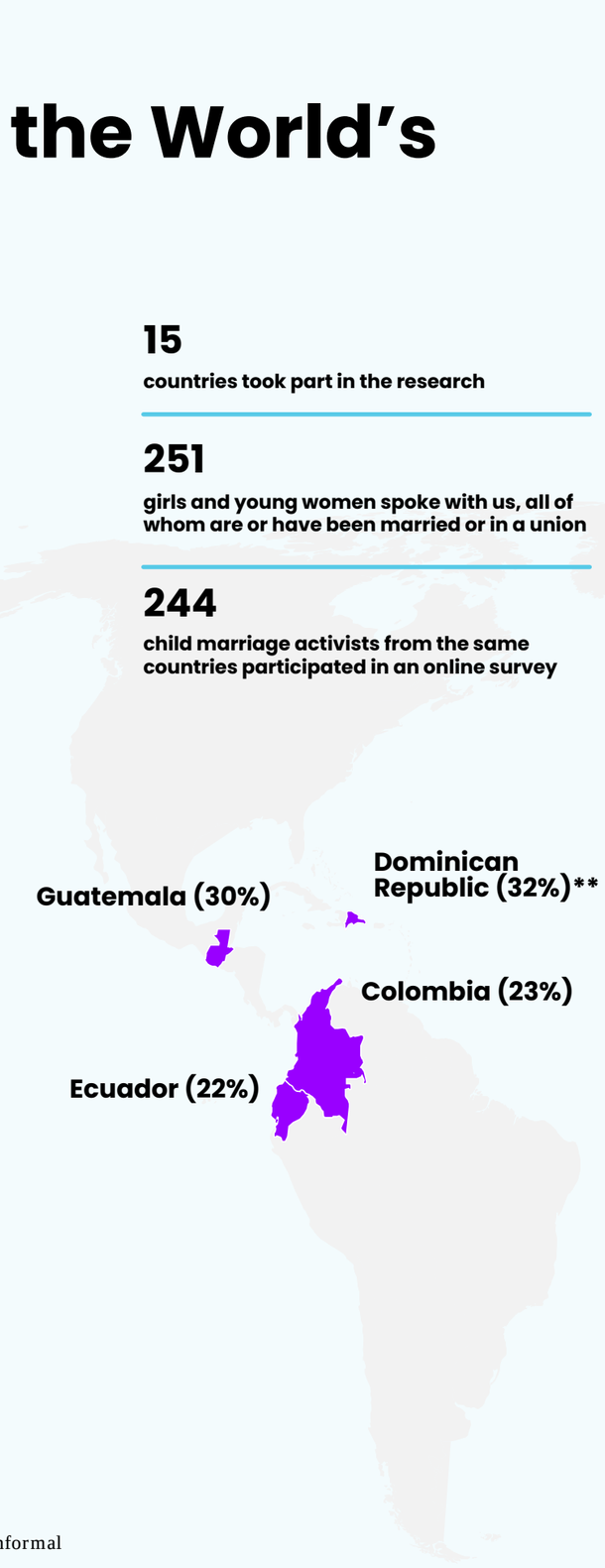
In this report when we refer to "child marriage" and to "married girls" we are using it as a catch all term for girls aged 15-24 who have been married or in a cohabiting union, at least once in their lives: their current marital status may not be married or in a union.

Content warning: Some experiences described by participants in this study contain references to incidences of physical and sexual violence, as well as other sensitive and potentially distressing themes. Please read with care and at your own discretion.

15
countries took part in the research

251
girls and young women spoke with us, all of whom are or have been married or in a union

244
child marriage activists from the same countries participated in an online survey



Cover photo: Girl, 18, from Guatemala. Entered an informal union when she was 17 © Plan International

The Study Countries

Latin America and the Caribbean:

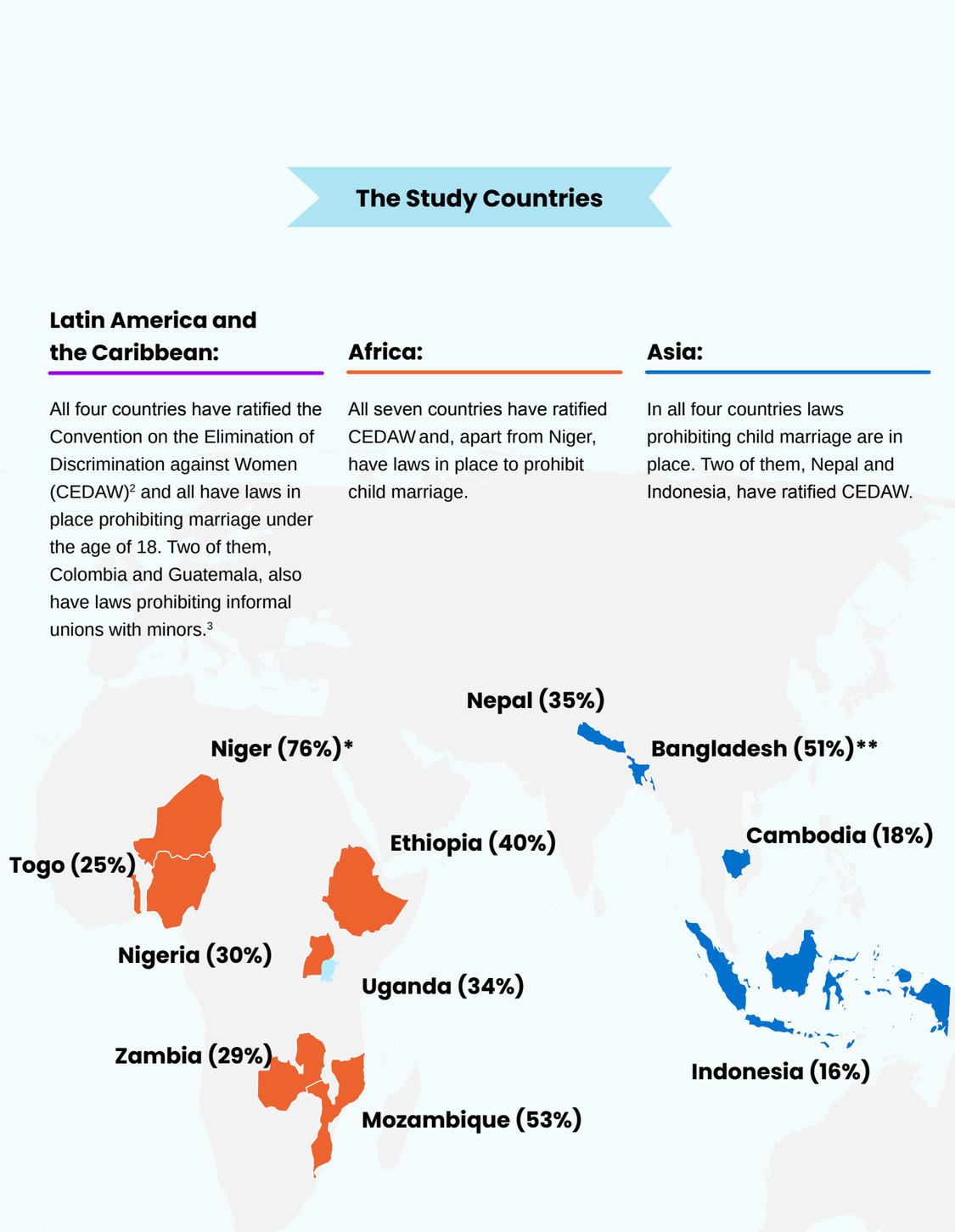
All four countries have ratified the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW)[2] and all have laws in place prohibiting marriage under the age of 18. Two of them, Colombia and Guatemala, also have laws prohibiting informal unions with minors.[3]

Africa:

All seven countries have ratified CEDAW and, apart from Niger, have laws in place to prohibit child marriage.

Asia:

In all four countries laws prohibiting child marriage are in place. Two of them, Nepal and Indonesia, have ratified CEDAW.



(%) = Per cent of women aged between 20-24 married or in unions under the age of 18

** = Highest in the region

* = Highest in the world

About this map: The boundaries and names shown and designations used on this map do not imply official endorsements or acceptance by Plan International.

Executive Summary

This year Plan International's annual State of the World's Girls report is focused on girls' experience of child marriage: a practice that despite large-scale policy action and legislative reform, remains widespread. The study comes from the experiences of survivors of child marriage – in their own words. It tells us that, at a time when there is a global pushback against girls' and women's rights, confronting the persistent rights violation that is child marriage is increasingly urgent.

The research is based on in-depth detailed conversations with 251 girls and young women – all of whom are, or had been, married or in a union – across 15 countries: Bangladesh, Cambodia, Indonesia, Nepal, Ethiopia, Mozambique, Uganda, Zambia, Colombia, Dominican Republic, Guatemala, Ecuador, Nigeria, Niger, and Togo.

We not only talked to girls with direct personal experience of child marriage we also conducted an online survey with 244 young child marriage activists from the same countries. Their perspectives include targeted suggestions for change.

Additionally, to ground these insights into a broader legal context we worked with the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), leveraging its Social Institutions and Gender Index (SIGI) to analyse existing legislation and policy frameworks in order to understand what support was needed to protect girls' rights and promote their wellbeing.

The married girls told us:*

* We have used percentages to present some key data of the 251 girls (the qualitative sample). These percentages give useful insights but should not be seen as representative, since the sample is qualitative and not statistically generalisable.

> **"Getting married before the age of 18 is not right. It disrupts education. Within a year or two of marriage, a child is born. At that time, I am still a child myself, and if I have a child, my education is disrupted, and it poses a risk to my health. How can I, being a child, raise another child?"** Farhana, 21, Bangladesh

Seven out of ten (70%) are married or in a union, more than one in four (28%) are divorced and one in 50 (2%) are widowed.

Almost half (45%) were married to a man five or more years older than they were, some to men more than 10 or 20 years older.

Six out of ten (63%) are not in employment, education or training (NEET).

One in six (17%) identified as marginalised.

Nearly three out of four (72%) have at least one child.

Nearly two out of five (38%) reported having no say in household decision-making.

One in eight (13%) disclosed that they had experienced intimate partner violence (IPV) or abuse.

One in four (25%) reported that they had no say in their decision to marry.

Over one in three (35%) dropped out of school directly following, or due to, their marriage.

The names of the children and young people in this report have been changed to ensure anonymity. Photos used in this report are not of research participants.

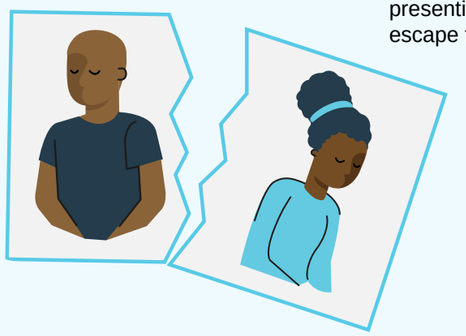
Key Findings

1

The vulnerability of girls within their marriages or unions is a key theme to emerge from our research. Marriage robs girls of their ability to make decisions and of their opportunities. The power imbalances within the relationship, partners are often much older, increases the risk of violence.

2

Among the girls we spoke with rates of divorce or separation are high. Divorce is rarely talked about in child marriage research and these findings point to the existence of an unrecognised group of still very young girls, who, having endured the trauma of an early marriage, are navigating the stigma of divorce. Many have no economically viable skills and no means of supporting themselves and, often, their children. They go from one difficult situation to another: a recurring theme across all countries was the community judgement, and financial challenges associated with separation.



3

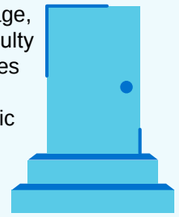
One of the study's more surprising findings was how many girls talked about marrying for love. Social media, which helps facilitate relationships outside parental control, is a key factor in this. Often, however, the situation is more complicated with parents pressurising their daughters to marry or formalise relationships with boyfriends in order to preserve the girl's reputation and the family's honour.

4

Child marriage is increasingly shaped by digital relationships where girls may feel empowered, perceiving their marriages to be based on love. They are choosing their partner, not their parents yet they remain vulnerable. The technology does not change the behaviour. Online, older men may still exploit girls' emotional and economic vulnerabilities, presenting marriage as an escape from hardship.

5

A number of girls in the study identified as marginalised.[4] Location, caste, disability, social isolation all contributed to a sense of being an outcast and girls confirmed that intersecting identities led to greater discrimination. Marginalised girls were more vulnerable to entering into marriage, had additional difficulty in assessing services and were often in very tough economic circumstances.



6

Although nearly all 15 study countries prohibit child marriage these laws fail both to protect girls from marriage or to uphold their rights within it.

7

Longstanding gender norms which prioritise the role of wife and mother and prize fertility and obedience, are found in many families and communities. These, supported often by informal laws, are more powerful than national legislation.

55% of the activists surveyed identified customary and religious beliefs as key factors undermining the effectiveness of laws and policies aimed at preventing child marriage.

8

Combined with entrenched social and gender norms, the most pressing cause of child marriage is poverty. In a global environment where funding is constantly under threat the alleviation of poverty remains a key factor in upholding girls' rights.

9

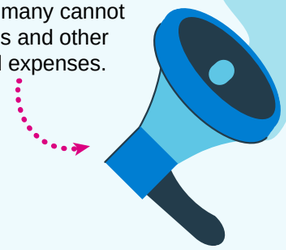
Once married, girls are largely isolated at home. Many talked about the impact of this on their mental health: they are living with strangers, often overwhelmed by their new responsibilities, and many are lonely.

10

It is clear from the data that overall decision-making power for married girls, whether with regards to education, sexual and reproductive health and rights, girls' mobility, or large and small financial matters, is minimal and **some girls told us they felt intimidated to challenge their husbands' authority.**

11

Few of the girls we spoke with continued their education though many would have liked to. Education is often considered unnecessary for married girls and barriers include lack of time and money. Childcare and domestic chores dominate their lives and many cannot afford fees and other additional expenses.



12

Girls married for different reasons but in most cases free and informed consent was absent. Girls are expected to marry early, to adapt quickly to household duties, and to be subservient to their husbands and in-laws, including over the pressure to bear children.

60% of child marriage activists identify deep-rooted cultural and societal expectations as the primary driver behind child marriage.

13

Not a single interviewee said they would want their own children to enter a child marriage or union.

Child marriage activists ranked awareness programmes - aimed at both girls and their families - as one of the top priorities, in terms of keeping married girls in school.

14

Access to contraception is a contentious issue for many married girls. Pregnancy is a key driver of child marriage and once married, many experience pressure to start or continue child-bearing. By and large, the husband or partner has control over family planning decisions, with little input from the girl who is denied agency and bodily autonomy.

Calls to Action

Overall, across the 15 countries, the girls' testimonies were strikingly similar and their experiences were comprehensively backed up by the observations of the child marriage activists.

Emerging from the research are practical suggestions from married girls which they say would transform their lives:

Governments, NGOs and community leaders must:

- Invest in and scale up programmes that address the harmful social beliefs, practices and expectations that drive child marriage.
- Ensure that married girls and girls at risk of child marriage know their rights, have access to the services they need, and build the future they choose.
- Target support for the most marginalised and hardest to reach married girls, including girls living in crisis and conflict, and girls living in extreme poverty.
- Implement and resource strong laws and policies to prevent child marriage and ensure support and access to justice for married girls.
- Elevate and fund the work of girl leaders and their movements in their initiatives to end child marriage.

Girl, 18 from Ethiopia with her four month old child © Plan International

> **“We must fight for our rights until all girls are free to enjoy their childhood and build their lives in safety.”** Sumaiya, 21, Bangladesh

After preventing her own child marriage, a young women now works to raise awareness of the issue in her community in Bangladesh. © Plan International

Foreword

Sumaiya, 21, is from Bangladesh. She is a survivor of child marriage and is now living with her parents again and working in an ice cream factory.

I was married at 14. My parents are poor, with five children, and I am the eldest daughter. We struggled and my parents saw my marriage as the only way forward. I was so unhappy and, seeing this, my parents managed to arrange my divorce. Now I have a job and can help my family. Providing work and training for girls and young women is so important: it helps protect them from being pushed into marriage – I would like to shield other girls from what happened to me. I work hard but my life is so much better than it used to be.

I married too young and because of the trauma I suffered I have been told I may struggle to have children. That is my dream, though, to have a family and I am hopeful it will come true. And, when I do have children, I will make them understand what they must do. If it is a girl, I will ask her to get higher education and get married only after she becomes an independent adult. And if it is a boy, I will ask him to be a human being so that he does not ruin any girl’s life.

I am rebuilding my life, and for me, like many of the girls whom we hear in this report, it is a hard thing to do. But in this report, there is hope, lots of good ideas and practical suggestions from girls and young women like me about how to stop child marriage, and how to help the girls who struggle within it.

Contents

Preface

Reena Ghelani, Chief Executive Officer
Plan International

Every girl has the right to a childhood, to safety, and to decide her own future. Yet, around the world, 650 million girls have been married before they were ready.

This report highlights the voices of girls whose lives were shaped by decisions made without them. Their stories speak of dreams interrupted, of being pulled from school into motherhood, housework, and silence. But they also speak of strength. Of girls and young women who are reclaiming their voices and demanding change.

By listening to them – truly listening – we begin to understand what child marriage really costs, and what it will take to end it.

This report is not just a collection of stories. It is a call to action: to shift the harmful norms that allow child marriage to persist, and to build a world where every girl is free to choose her own path.

Girl, 18, from Bangladesh who was married at 14 and a mother by 15. After joining the Stop the Stigma programme, she is determined to shape her own future.
© Plan International

Introduction

This year's State of the World's Girls report is focused on child marriage. It is based uniquely on the testimony and experiences of married girls whose voices are often missing from policy discussions, and from the many research studies which have been conducted around this issue. This new study is grounded in Plan International's extensive programme and advocacy work on child marriage. It is in direct response to the current situation, where the global rollback of girls' and women's rights means it is increasingly important to identify where girls' rights are most at risk, and how they can be safeguarded.

Child marriage is a far-reaching rights violation. It is driven by poverty and long-established gender norms and is proving extremely difficult to tackle. It is exploitative, a direct threat to the health and wellbeing of girls all over the world. It robs them of their childhood, limits their opportunities, traps them in often unequal partnerships that make them vulnerable to physical and emotional abuse, and, despite large-scale policy action and legislative reform, remains widespread.

> **"[I got married] because of what he [my husband] promised me, I trusted him, and I love him. I need better living conditions because my family lives in poverty and does not have enough money to pay for our needs… I therefore believed that if I got married, I could provide for my family… The opposite is actually true; by marrying young, I hurt them instead."** Simegn, 19, Ethiopia

This report is not just about the issue of child marriage. It is focused forensically on the experiences of the girls who live with it – often at great cost to their physical and mental health, their safety, their economic prospects, and their future opportunities. We know that child marriage persists due to the interplay of inequitable gender norms, poverty, and wide-ranging issues around weak enforcement of legislation, poor economic prospects for girls, and natural and humanitarian disasters.[5] We know too that pregnancy, deemed to dishonour the girl's family, often forces girls into marriage. In the absence of sexual and reproductive health services there is often no other choice available.

12 million girls are married before the age of 18 each year – one every three seconds. 480,000 are under 15[6]

Our findings are based on 15 countries worldwide and in all 15, except Niger, there are laws in place which forbid marriage under 18, not always successfully. There is a large gap between what is legally allowed and what actually happens in girls' lives. Here, the major influences are the gendered social norms endorsed by families and communities for generations. Across the seven focus countries in Africa, at least one in four women were married before the age of 18 – with rates rising to one in two in Mozambique and an alarming three in four in Niger.

As the girls taking part in the study talk to us, we begin to understand the price they are paying: we hear about their relationships with husbands and in-laws, often characterised by violence, about the domestic drudgery of their daily lives, the difficulty of staying in school, the loss of control over all aspects of their lives, including if and when to have children. For numerous girls, policy and legal reforms restricting child marriage have meant very little – many are still trapped. One story we heard consistently was about the difficulties of divorce, about the lack of money and skills, of safe places to be, that can keep them in abusive relationships.

With much of the emphasis around child marriage focused on stopping it, girls, once married or in a relationship, tend to disappear. They mustn't be allowed to. As the current rollback of rights and the backlash against gender equality gathers momentum, action to prevent child marriage, and protect girls from its consequences, is becoming increasingly urgent.[7]

Girls in Cambodia learn to raise awareness about child marriage through journalism © Plan International

The married girls we spoke with, and the child marriage activists, emphasised the importance of raising awareness of the social and gender norms that govern their lives, and make child marriage so intractable an issue. The situation of married girls, and what leads up to it, is too often ignored, categorised as “normal,” built into the fabric of their families and communities for generations. Their voices give us the opportunity to help put this right.

The research is unique in its multi-layered approach. It is youth-centred, based on evidence, from the married girls themselves and from young activists working to prevent and respond to child marriage. This personal testimony is contrasted with an analysis of a policy and legislative landscape which is largely failing to bring about real change.

By making visible the rights and needs of a much-neglected, and often isolated, section of society the study provides a compelling evidence base for governments, NGOs, and policymakers to take effective action that is relevant to the realities of girls’ lives.

> **“Bring awareness programmes in our society. I want to learn first so I can do something for my society. Then people will also understand the importance of educating girls. Otherwise, if no one knows, daughters will continue to be deprived of education and get married at a young age.”** Juna, 24, Nepal

The research sought to address three key questions:

- What are married girls’ and girls in unions’ everyday experiences across livelihoods and income, health, education, household decision-making, and agency?
- In what ways does existing legislation, service provision and policy on child marriage support married girls? And how are these measures implemented to be inclusive of marginalised married girls?
- What support do girls in marriages or unions need to promote and safeguard their rights?

Through the Preventing Child, Early and Forced Marriage project in Nepal, girls are staying in school and building brighter futures © Plan International

Methodology[8]

Interviews and focus groups

We spoke with 201 girls in interviews, and 50 who took part in focus groups, across 15 countries: Bangladesh, Cambodia, Indonesia, Nepal, Ethiopia, Mozambique, Uganda, Zambia, Colombia, Dominican Republic, Guatemala, Ecuador, Nigeria, Niger, Togo. The approach was participatory and inclusive, shaped by those in Plan's Country Offices with relevant on the ground experience.

Survey:

Conducted with 244 young child marriage activists from the same 15 countries. The survey was designed to complement qualitative interviews and focus group discussions, by centring the voices of those who interface directly with married girls and are on the frontlines of change.

OECD SIGI Analysis:

Since 2009, the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development's (OECD's) Social Institutions and Gender Index (SIGI) has provided a comprehensive measure of gender equality gaps in social institutions. The SIGI looks at the gaps that legislation, attitudes and practices create between women and men in terms of rights, justice and empowerment opportunities. For this study Plan International has partnered with the OECD to conduct a fresh analysis of this dataset: an understanding of the broader legal landscape around child marriage which serves to ground the married girls' and activists' insights.

Ethics and Safeguarding:

We received global level ethics approval from the Research Ethics Committee at the UK-based global affairs think tank ODI. In-country ethics approval was also received from the following countries: Indonesia, Uganda, Zambia, and Niger.

Informed consent and assent were obtained from all participants, with parental consent where appropriate. Anonymity and confidentiality were ensured throughout the data collection, analysis and write-up process, and robust data security was ensured. All data collectors have signed the Plan International safeguarding children and young people policy.

Please note, all names of girls and young women participating in this report have been changed to ensure anonymity.

Setting the Scene

It is clear from our review of the available literature that child marriage limits girls' rights to education, health, bodily autonomy, political participation, and decent work, and puts them at greater risk of violence and abuse.[9] Public services, including healthcare, education and legal aid, frequently fail to support married girls.[10] Child marriage also affects boys, though not to the same extent:

Globally one in five young women aged 20 to 24 years old were married before their 18th birthday, and one in 30 young men.[11]

While laws setting the minimum age of marriage at 18 do exist at national and international levels, better enforcement is needed, as is increased determination to shift the long-accepted social norms that normalise child marriage. This is essential, not only to prevent child marriage, but to also provide protection and support for girls who are married or in informal unions.

The 2023 OECD SIGI database reveals:

- In 17 per cent of countries (30 out of 178), the minimum legal age for girls is below 18, whereas for men this is the case in eight per cent of countries. In Sudan provisions were found allowing marriages for girls as young as ten.
- Among the 148 countries that set 18 years or more as the minimum legal age of marriage, almost 75 per cent have exceptions in place allowing marriages below the country's standard minimum age.
- The consequences of violating laws protecting against child marriage are often extremely limited. It may be possible to annul the marriage, but laws provide no other remedies for victims and survivors, nor is punitive action taken against perpetrators.

Despite all this there has been some important headway in reducing child marriage over the past decade and, globally, rates have declined from 22 per cent to 19 per cent.[12] However, this progress is uneven and fragile: rates are rising in conflict settings, for example, as conflicts also are on the increase.[13] In addition, the recent and growing rollback of girls' and women's rights threatens to stall or even reverse hard-won gains. For instance, during the 69th session of the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW69) in March 2025, member states removed references to sexual and reproductive health rights from the final political declaration – a significant setback for girls' rights globally.[14]

What are the impacts of child marriage on girls' lives and opportunities?

Study after study reveals the extent to which married girls and those in informal unions are disadvantaged: they are disproportionately affected by limited access to education, diminished decision-making power, and exclusion from legal protections. This not only curtails their individual potential but also poses significant barriers to broader social and economic development.

- They are often deprived of fundamental rights, including sexual and reproductive health and rights, equality, and freedom from violence.[15] Gaps in the law, and informal laws that may be in conflict with national law, mean that girls are not properly protected from child marriage and gender-based violence.

- They face a range of challenges, including adverse health outcomes,[16] higher risks of intimate partner violence,[17] and limited access to mental health support.[18] Moreover, social isolation and the inability to interact freely with peers or participate in the workforce further exacerbate psychological distress and other psychosocial challenges.[19]

- Fewer than one in five married girls remain in school after marriage.[20]

- Many marriages are illegal or unregistered, leaving girls without legal protections for property, spousal maintenance, or inheritance.[21] In unregistered or informal marriages, young mothers face significant legal barriers when asserting custody or claiming child support which make it even more difficult to leave a marriage. Informal unions are on the rise with the risk that child marriage will be harder to track and the practice become less visible.

- Marginalised girls have an even greater struggle to access legal aid and public services.[22] In some countries pluralistic legal systems can make things worse, as these laws do not always treat all sections of the population equally.[23]

- Girls often have minimal decision-making power due to unequal relationship dynamics, particularly in cases where significant age gaps exist. This imbalance restricts girls' ability to negotiate on critical issues such as sex and contraception, increasing the likelihood of unintended pregnancies at a young age, which heightens the risk of maternal mortality and morbidity.[24]

It is clear that not only are laws against child marriage not working but that, once married, girls struggle to get an education, gain skills, stay healthy or retain any autonomy over their lives. They are also more vulnerable to intimate partner violence which can include sexual, physical and emotional abuse and controlling behaviours. Despite well-meaning efforts, progress to stop child marriage is limited, and little is done to protect and provide for the married girls involved.

The girls we spoke with back this up, adding new and detailed insights into their daily lives, and into the economic and social factors that led them into marriage. Their voices guide the next section of the report: illuminating the challenges they face, suggesting what support they need and helping us understand why the issue of child marriage is proving so intransigent.

> **"I did not know anything, I was still underage. When my mom asked me if I wanted to get married. I also immediately wanted to, there was no thought of how to live it later. Without thinking about what the future would be, what a household would be. I did not think much about the marriage. When I lived it, I just realised that being married is difficult. It only lasted two years."** Amelya, 23, Indonesia (married at 16)

Girl, 15, from Indonesia, who educates students at her school about child marriage © Plan International

What We Have Learned

The research has painted a complex, and often disturbing, picture of girls' lives, gathered in from three different sources:

- the experiences and opinions of the girls we spoke with
- the knowledge and awareness of the child marriage activists
- the policy and legislative landscape which creates the enabling or disabling environment in which married girls live and activists campaign.

Across the different countries girls' and young women's reactions to, and descriptions of, child marriage have much in common. There are some regional differences – girls in Latin America, for example, are more likely to be in informal unions, and in West and Central Africa the age disparity between the girl and her husband is often more pronounced. Additionally, girls' individual experiences are by no means uniform: a variety of elements, determined by location, economic circumstances and family dynamics, come into play.

Girls everywhere described their vulnerability, their lack of protection from both national laws and their own communities and they explained why. They talk a lot about poverty, about societal pressure to conform to established gender roles, and they talk about love. Love at 14, 15 or 16 pushing them, often under parental pressure, towards a lifetime commitment they are not prepared for. They talk too about the role of social media – a new development in forming relationships which brings both risk and romance.

Not all marriages are perceived by the girls themselves as forced. But even for those seeing marriage as a choice, the everyday reality of what they have taken on – housework, childcare, having less choice and little agency – can come as a shock. And for many there is an even darker side.

1. Intimidation and Abuse: "He would turn violent on me..."

The vulnerability of girls within their marriages is a key theme to emerge from our research. Still children, they are dominated by their, often older, partner and his family and for too many this leads to violence.

Champions of Change participants in Nepal gain skills to challenge harmful traditions and promote girls' empowerment © Plan International

> **"(He) used to intimidate me, and whenever I tried to speak up, he would beat me. I kept quiet because I feared the consequences."** Bupe, 19, Zambia

More than eight out of ten (85 per cent) of the girls who reported experiencing violence within their marriages, were married to men who were at least five years older.

At just 13, Binita was coerced into sexual relationships by her then 24-year-old husband. Although she managed to escape the marriage, she knows that not many girls can. Binita explains that violence is widespread and the pressure on girls to endure it is intense. Girls and young women are taught that family honour is more important than they are.

> **"She's forced to stay, even if she's beaten or unhappy – because our society says a girl must protect her family's honour. That's why many girls stay even if they suffer a lot."** Binita, 19, Nepal

But violence is widespread, Esneya from Zambia, now divorced and living with her mother and brother, got pregnant and married at 16. Her 19-year-old husband was also abusive:

> **"He would leave home for days and when he returned, he would turn violent on me."** Esneya, 20, Zambia

For some this abuse was seen as "normal", an expected part of marriage and was reported by girls across a number of countries: Ethiopia, Mozambique, Zambia, Nigeria, Togo, Dominican Republic, Guatemala, Cambodia, Nepal, and Indonesia.

Across these different countries, girls bravely shared with us their experiences of mistreatment and control within their unions, and discussed how hard it is to get support:

- intimate partner violence is not taken seriously enough in their communities,
- they are financially dependent on their husbands or partners,
- there is a general lack of information about local legal services.

Everywhere support systems for girls were minimal, and many were expected to endure difficulties to maintain family unity.

In Maradi, Niger, the women of Akula da Kyau ('take good care') are saying no to child marriage and yes to girls' education, ensuring their daughter's dreams have a chance to grow. © Plan International

In contexts where formal support systems – such as legal aid, shelters, or psychosocial services – are limited or inaccessible, girls experiencing violence often rely on informal support systems, including family members, friends, and community networks. These informal systems are expected to provide emotional, practical, and sometimes protective support. It is not always forthcoming. Mwansa, from Zambia, describes experiencing severe physical violence from her former husband, who was more than five years older than her, and asking her mother for help.

> **"I went to my mother's house and asked if I could leave the marriage and stay with her, but she refused, telling me I had chosen this path and needed to endure. I continued living with my husband, but the abuse continued. It eventually escalated to threats of death. One day, he even grabbed a knife and threatened to kill me. I went back to my mother again, and this time she agreed to let me come home."**
> Mwansa, 19, Zambia.

Chikondi, also from Zambia, emphasised the reluctance of some married girls to report intimate partner violence, insisting that it should not be left entirely to them.

> **"Victims do not have the courage to report their cases because they are afraid of community backlash. There should be a platform where someone can report on the victim's behalf."** Chikondi, 20, Zambia

Everywhere girls describe the situations they find themselves in as desperate. None more so than girls who identify as marginalised: who are living with disability, are socially or geographically isolated, belong to a different caste or ethnicity, or are seen in any way as outcasts. These girls are particularly vulnerable to the negative impacts of child marriage – as well as making them more susceptible to entering into, or being forced into, child marriage in the first place.

Across many countries girls describe the impact that being socially isolated, or geographically remote has on their lives: those living with physical or psychological disability struggle to access the quality of education or health services that they need and often cannot afford to pay for them. Girls like Guedi are preyed upon.

> **"I was stressed because my mom is sick and we are isolated from the community because my mom had uncontrolled urine and stool and I feel that I would get some relief from my stress if I got married."**
> Guedi, 24, Ethiopia

Guedi's description of her life is harrowing and it is easy to understand why marriage might present a solution. Although her individual experiences are unique to her, she is certainly not alone: some variation of this fragility, as well as an amazing amount of resilience, plays out across all the girls' testaments.

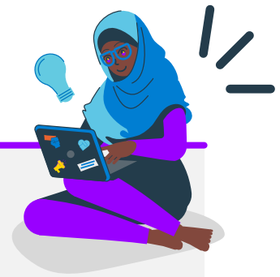
2. Getting round the laws: "most of them accept it…"

Another issue that comes across loud and clear from our conversations, backing up the data in the SIGI analysis,[25] is that the laws prohibiting child marriage are largely ineffectual in terms of protecting girls. They are easily circumvented and, without greater focus on addressing the gender norms that drive child marriage, laws will remain inadequate to bring about change. Girls everywhere told us how, though their marriages were not legally registered in the eyes of the state, they were solemnised, or their unions were formalised, in the eyes of their communities and families, and this was accepted.

> **"Some parents do not accept it [child marriage], most of them accept it, and some even change their daughter's age to make it seem like she is over 18. The leaders usually say in meetings that it is wrong, but whenever there is a union, they agree and testify."** Ruba, Mozambique, 20

In two thirds of the study countries, the minimum legal age of 18 could be legally circumvented and in many the law was ignored. Generally, factors such as parental permission, ceremonies facilitated by religious and traditional leaders, and officials turning a blind eye, played into how these relationships were validated. Consequently, girls were entering into marriages, or being put into relationships, where they had no legal or social protections.

Girl, 19, from Ecuador who became pregnant at 17 and has been supported by a community girls' group © Plan International



Insights from activists

Why don't the laws work?

The child marriage activists' perspective on the legal situation was very much in line with the experiences of the girls we spoke to: customary and religious norms, which drive gender inequality and see the role of girls and young woman as primarily domestic and inferior to their male counterparts, significantly undermine the implementation of national legal frameworks intended to prevent and respond to child marriage.

55 per cent of the activists surveyed identified customary and religious beliefs as key factors undermining the effectiveness of formal laws and policies aimed at preventing child marriage.

Only nine per cent of activists believed that these formal laws and policies can be effectively implemented in contexts where customary or religious norms are dominant.

They were clear that the gulf between law and community norms, combined with the lack of funding and political will, presents a significant barrier to legal enforcement. Even where protective legislation exists, its impact is limited.

> **"Initially, the [name of marriage registrar office] didn't want to perform the marriage because he saw that I was too young. Later, they either gave him money or talked to him, and he agreed to conduct the marriage. There was a gap of about 6-7 months before I turned 18, and he said it would be fine."** Farhana, 21, Bangladesh

It is evident that formal legal frameworks that would prohibit child marriage do not always "reach" girls whose communities seem to adhere to informal rules and traditional norms. There is no mention either of perpetrators being held to account – in many cases the violation of the law is clearly not even recognised as such.

Girl, 13, who advocates for girls' rights in the Dominican Republic, where child marriage is banned, but informal unions continue © Plan International

3. The reasons why: "they just decide to go (into marriage) because of the challenges they are facing…"

The reasons child marriage persists, despite new laws, are complex and multi-faceted and come as no surprise. Many of the key drivers have been identified by earlier research but the detail is important: hearing the reasons entirely from the perspective of the girls and young women involved can help put in place essential support systems and preventative policies.

While important contextual differences exist across the 15 countries, girls described broadly similar reasons for why child marriage persists.

- **Poverty,** looking for financial stability, often from an older husband, was the most common reason.
- **Love,** cited by girls who were in a relationship, often carried out largely online, or sometimes at school. However, it was often familial pressure that led to marriage: parents, worried that an extended courtship would bring shame on the family, were determined to formalise the relationship.
- **Coercion,** some girls described their marriages as being entirely forced upon them: it is what is expected of them.
- **Unplanned pregnancy** was frequently described as a reason to marry or co-habit.
- **Escape from an abusive home** environment was also cited.

Additionally, there are examples in the girls' testimony of how sexual violence might also lead to forced marriage: where a girl who had been raped or abused was compelled into marriage with the perpetrator.

The majority of child marriage activists held deep-rooted cultural and societal expectations responsible for the continuing prevalence of child marriage across the focus countries. It is just "normal" – gendered expectations still govern girls' lives.

> **"Although there has been some improvement, a significant number of parents still believe that girls should prioritise marriage and motherhood over education, while men are expected to be educated and provide for the family."** Abrhet, 24, Ethiopia

13-year-old girl in Ethiopia who was forced into marriage by drought and poverty @ Plan International

Girl, 17, from Togo who is doing a sewing apprenticeship to earn an income © Plan International

Poverty

The most pressing immediate cause of child marriage was poverty. Economic instability, exacerbated often by conflict and climate change, was a factor everywhere. Girls looked for economic support from a partner in order to lessen the burden on their family. In Cambodia, poverty pushed many girls into relationships which developed quickly with some resulting in unplanned pregnancies. Parents would then become involved and would encourage marriage. It is not seen as unusual: many of the girls' mothers, sisters, other female relatives and friends had also married as children. These unions, though recognised by the community, typically lacked formal legal registration.

In many cases it is older men exploiting younger girls who are trapped in poverty: they, and their families, are looking for a way out. In Nigeria girls told us they feel they are "economic burdens" on their families and so they pursue the financial stability of marriage over education. Brenda, in Colombia, suggests that parents accept the early unions to relieve their economic burden:

> **"Some parents accept this situation, almost as if to eliminate their responsibility for having their children at home."** Brenda, 23, Colombia

In Togo, girls typically entered, or were coerced into, marriages, between the ages of 13 and 17, generally with much older husbands, also to relieve family poverty. This is also the case in Uganda, where girls enter into marriages due to economic hardship combined sometimes with abusive home environments:

> **"I used to not get some necessities from home which is why I decided to leave … my life somehow changed because I realised that I was suffering a lot…most of the girls are marrying men that are not of their age. They just decide to go because of the challenges they are facing in their lives."** Dembe, 23, Uganda

Girl, 16, from Bangladesh who participates in a programme tackling harmful traditions associated with menstruation and child marriage © Plan International

For many getting married has not provided the solutions they hoped for: they remain poor, often in even more difficult circumstances than before.

Love and marriage

One of the study's more surprising findings was how many girls talked about marrying for love. Social media, which facilitates forming relationships outside parental control, is a key factor in this. In Asia and Latin America, girls consistently reported meeting their future husbands on social media platforms. Cheata, a 16-year-old from rural Cambodia, met her husband through Facebook: "He sent a friend request, then I accepted." In Indonesia, 16-year-old Adinda also found her husband on Facebook, noting that their relationship began when they "exchanged WhatsApp numbers". Likewise, 22-year-old Xiomara from Ecuador told us: "we met through social networks." Child marriage is no longer only a traditional practice rooted in family arrangements. It is increasingly shaped by digital relationships where girls may feel empowered yet remain vulnerable.

> **"Nowadays, most relationships start online, with fewer happening within the community."** Lopa, 20, Bangladesh

Meeting on Facebook or elsewhere online, without any parental oversight does not reduce risk. If anything, it may heighten exposure to manipulation and coercion. Girls are often "choosing" to marry under the illusion of love and security offered by much older partners: mirroring the power imbalance inherent in the more traditional arranged marriage. The technology does not change the behaviour: online, older men may still exploit girls' emotional and economic vulnerabilities. This move, from marriages arranged by families to those originating on digital media, requires new forms of intervention and a greater awareness of the complex issues underlying girls' new sense of agency.

One of these complexities is an overlap between what girls perceive as love marriages and marrying as per parental expectation to avoid familial shame – parents become anxious to formalise unions to protect their daughter's reputation and their own. In Bangladesh, several girls felt pressure to marry their boyfriends: it was expected of them but they were also in love.

> **"Nowadays, most marriages happen through relationships rather than family arrangements. Families are less involved, and relationships lead to more marriages. Parents fear losing their honour and, out of concern, force their daughters to marry before they turn 18. It's because of us that they feel compelled to do so. In the past, parents wanted to arrange marriages, but daughters didn't want to marry early. Now, it's the daughters who want to marry at a young age."** Farhana, 21, Bangladesh

The role of social media is a new and crucial element in girls seeing their relationships as love marriages, but however initiated, they are also about adhering to traditional values. In many communities, teenage girls having sexual relationships outside marriage is frowned on: encouraging child marriage helps the community and the family stay in control.

On the whole, across the 15 countries, girls are valued for their role as a wife and mother over their personal ambitions or educational and career achievements. Even when marrying for love, girls are subsiding into established gender roles as, normally subservient, partners, mothers and domestic labourers. Many express regret and all of them reject child marriage for their own children.

Coercion

(!) One in four girls (25 per cent) had no say in the decision to marry.

Coercion comes in different forms: community norms and expectations can trap girls into marriage but power is also asserted in more frightening ways.

> **"There's a girl I know whose parents got money to have her go into marriage, and she was collected from her parents' home by force. She did not want to get married."** Chikondi, 22, Zambia

Sarita, in Nepal, was forced into marriage when multiple drunk men, including her now husband, came into her home one night. She and her boyfriend had been in a relationship for six months and these men said she was bringing shame to her family.

> **"[My husband and I] used to talk a lot on the phone. After my Grade 11 exams, I told him I wouldn't get married… They came drunk, broke the door and entered. I got married because of the shame it would cause in the village."** Sarita, 24, Nepal

Sarita wanted to marry her boyfriend, but not until she was 20 or 21. She reports that, despite how the marriage began, the relationship itself does not have issues. Rubi, also in Nepal, feels trapped, telling us that her husband emotionally blackmailed her parents into accepting a marriage she did not want with a man she did not know.

> **"He began insisting to my parents, saying, Let me marry your daughter, or I'll kill myself. Because of this pressure, my parents agreed to the marriage when I was just 16… my parents didn't ask me whether I wanted to get married. They didn't try to understand how I felt. Instead, they started accusing me, saying, Why don't you want to get married? Do you like some other boy? I replied, I don't like anyone. I just don't want to get married so young—I want to continue my studies. But my parents didn't listen to me."** Rubi, 19, Nepal

In Niger, not only do girls get married to escape family pressure and the stigma of being unwed, but there is an underlying anxiety about girls' sexuality getting out of control. Virginity is prized: Hadiza says that the common reason for marrying off girls under the age of 18 is "so that they keep calm and go to their husbands as virgins," while Saran expresses a similar sentiment:

> **"There are girls who can't stay still, and follow men, [and so] are given in marriage for their safety."** Saran, 21, Niger

Girl, 17, from Nepal with her painting depicting the dangers of child marriage © Plan International

This anxiety about girls being out of control is not confined to Niger:

> **"Regardless of who a person is, parents want their daughter to marry at the age of 15 because they believe that if they can't control their daughter's sexual behaviour, she will indulge in it. Consequently, it is common in our community to marry girls at the age of 15."** Foziya, 18, Ethiopia

In Cambodia as well, community expectation drives early marriage. It has been "normal" for generations and is hard to resist. Girls are seen as ready for unions upon menstruation. Living with a man without undergoing traditional rites is stigmatised, and the disapproval intensifies if a girl has children before these rites take place.

Julia, in Guatemala, got pregnant at 14 and was pressured into an informal marriage though has since separated and is continuing her education. Patricia, too, was married off at 15 to an older man. Informal unions, often with older men, are common and reflect a broader normalisation of early cohabitation arrangements. Girls often describe their entering into unions at a young age as coercive.

Examples of coercion, sometimes subtle, sometimes blatant, exist across the regions:

Girl, 17, from Ecuador, who campaigns in her community to end violence, teenage pregnancy and early marriage © Plan International

Alinafwe, in Zambia, reported how she was exploited by the uncle she lived with.

> **"He would hide my uniform sometimes in order to avoid me going to school and instead I would have to tend to his field. Then our neighbour approached my uncle telling him they wanted me to marry their son. This marriage was done without the consent of my parents. I was 13 years and my husband was 25 years. My parents did not know I was married off."** Alinafwe, 21, Zambia

In Indonesia, Dila was married at 15 to a 20-year-old – a forced marriage facilitated by her sister. Her husband was physically and verbally abusive. They separated after three days.

> **"There were people who told bad stories about me to my husband. Well, then he believed it, then he was told by his family to divorce me. That was why he wanted to [divorce me]. I said, "Why don't you take me home when [I didn't consent to the marriage]"** Dila, 16, Indonesia

Out of the 27 girls who told us they had experienced physical, emotional, or sexual violence in their marriage, 11 also reported they had no say in the decision to marry.

Girls are expected to marry early, to adapt quickly to household duties, and to be subservient to their husbands and in-laws, including over the pressure to bear children. Even when they insisted they were marrying for love, girls were venturing into the unknown, and in most cases free and informed consent was absent. The pressures girls were often put under before marrying, or entering into a union, continues to characterise their relationships.

> **"People say once you're married, you have to follow your husband's path."** Chitrakala, 24, Nepal

Girls see child marriage as a community expectation but also as one where they receive judgement. They feel pressured to enter into marriages – be it due to economic necessity, pregnancy, or to preserve family honour. Once in these marriages they feel the community in general is still judging them: they married too young, they are neglecting their education, or should not be pursuing education, they should not be using contraception. Girls are trapped by community pressure whatever they do.

Young woman, 24, who is part of a new generation of indigenous young women in Ecuador who are rejecting early marriage © Plan International

Insights from activists

Why, despite all the campaigning, does child marriage still persist?

The research with activists reinforces the views and experiences of the interviewees: girls are doing what is expected of them.

- 60 per cent of child marriage activists identify deep-rooted cultural and societal expectations as the primary driver behind child marriage.
- 45 per cent of activists perceive pregnancy to be among the main drivers of child marriage.
- 40 per cent cite financial hardship as a contributing factor.
- 33 per cent point to weak enforcement of existing child marriage laws.
- 54 per cent of activists believe that child marriage has become more widespread in the last decade.

This is worrying and needs addressing. Although formal data on global rates of marriage indicate that they are dropping, the sense on the ground, that child marriage is more prevalent, cannot be ignored. A number of girls told us that they married at the same age or younger than their parents, and there is a growing concern among activists that, despite legal advances and advocacy work, some of the underlying norms, facilitated by the current global roll back of girls' and women's rights, are gaining in influence. The practice may also be going underground, formal registered marriage being replaced by informal unions, masking the true prevalence.

Children in Nepal meet as part of a school club raising awareness on child marriage © Plan International

4. What next? Girls' experiences of married life

> **"I see that I don't have anyone to confide in, that's why it hurts me so much and I suffer."** Bomo, 18, Togo

Participants get married for a number of reasons but once married or in a union what is the impact on girls' everyday lives and future aspirations? How do they spend their time? Is their potential drowned in domestic detail? How can they be heard and supported? This is an underexplored area in child marriage research.

We have looked closely at everyday lives – at the role married girls play in their households. Girls talked about their access, or lack of it, to education, and to sexual and reproductive health information and services. They discussed their loneliness, the power dynamics in their relationships – who decides what – their aspirations for the future and described what happens when the relationship breaks down.

This next section examines married life and girls' experiences of it with regard to: mental health, divorce, education, sexual and reproductive health and rights, health, power imbalances and decision-making.

The psychological impact of child marriage: "I am missing a lot of things…"

Many girls talked about the impact of the everyday circumstances of their marriage on their mental health: they are lonely, unable to go out, and often with no-one to confide in.

Across countries girls, once married, shoulder the burden of household duties. These domestic responsibilities are overwhelming and leave little time for anything else.

> **"Well, before I got married, there are many things to enjoy, no need to think a lot, no need to think about what kind of job I need to do, I only think about something fun and enjoyable. But after I got married, I need to think about work, my daughter, so on and on."** Chanta, 16, Cambodia

There is also the stress of living with strangers, their husband's family, who can be unhelpful and sometimes abusive.

> **"After marriage, I had to stand on my own feet and take responsibility for running the household. My in-laws are not very understanding people, so all the household responsibilities fell on me. If they were more understanding, maybe I wouldn't have had to carry the entire burden…I had no idea how hard managing a household would be."** Manita, 22, Nepal

Girls' isolation is intensified when marriage marks the end of school, and when there is no work or training available to them. The demands of domestic work mean that their time for friends and leisure activities is limited, and they are defined by their household responsibilities. They are still children, and the mental health impacts of all this are often not acknowledged, leaving girls to struggle alone. Many recognise how limited their lives have become and articulate how much they regret getting married so young.

> **"Since my [marriage] the suffering has worsened. I thought I would find happiness with the man but I think I was wrong and I regret it."** Ladfa, 19, Togo

Togo

Real Choices, Real Lives: Ayomide, Togo[26]

Ayomide participated in our Real Choices, Real Lives research following girls' lives from birth to 18.

Ayomide was 15 and still in primary education when she dropped out of school due to her father's inability to afford the school fees. She felt abandoned.

> **"[My father] doesn't take care of me properly… he says he doesn't have enough money to look after me… Sometimes it's like I have swapped fathers. It makes me cry when I think of his behaviour toward me."** Ayomide, age 15, Togo 2021

Not long afterwards, she moved in with her boyfriend whom she married before her 16th birthday. The couple had a baby within a year of marriage, shortly after Ayomide turned 17. Later that year, her husband took a second wife who gave birth to a baby in early 2024.

Ayomide's decision to leave home to marry was not supported by her family and the relationship became even more strained. Ayomide felt that she was no longer able to rely on them for support.

** Simultaneous activities were counted individually. For example, if a girl reported conducting 1 hour of childcare while simultaneously spending 1 hour cooking, this would be counted as 2 hours of unpaid care work

Three generations of women in Togo © Plan International/Izla Bethdavid

In 2024, her aunt expressed her disapproval about Ayomide's life choices – particularly her polygamous marriage:

> **"The husband has taken a second wife, and I heard the other day that she has given birth. They're all children, they've just got married and he's going to have another [wife] and they're all living together."** Ayomide's aunt, Togo, 2024

Despite her disapproval her aunt expressed concern that Ayomide was becoming increasingly isolated and she was worried about her mental health. Ayomide was obviously not happy. She had hoped that her husband would support her to return to school or to enrol in an apprenticeship, but the arrival of a second wife meant that he did not have the money.

> **"After the birth, I was supposed to be looking for something to do but nothing, I'm here doing nothing. That's what makes me think… All my friends are learning trades and I'm here."** Ayomide, 18, Togo, 2024

In 2024, Ayomide reported that she conducted 22 hours of unpaid care work per day.** Twelve hours of her day were spent taking care of her daughter and alongside this, a staggering example of multi-tasking, a further 10 hours were spent cooking, cleaning and carrying out other domestic responsibilities. Ayomide also worked on her mother-in-law's market stall.

Like many of the girls we spoke with, Ayomide is expected to prioritise household work, childcare, and duties to in-laws. Her well-being and her right to education are secondary. Her story shows that while support from family and friends, lacking in her case, is vital, so too, is formal support. Accessible childcare and education grants would free up time for learning, earning, and leisure, increasing her opportunities and her happiness.

> **"I want to have more time to look for money and also to chat with friends and give each other advice."** Ayomide, 18, Togo, 2024

Taken from the Out of Time report
https://plan-international.org/publications/out-of-time/

Separation and divorce: "she will be called a dissident…"

Over a quarter (28 per cent) of girls in the study have left their unions

There is little data on separation or divorce in the wider literature but over a quarter of the girls we spoke to had left their partners, mostly returning to their parents. It is a step that takes a lot of courage and determination. Some of them have children, and it is hard to leave a relationship when they often have no economically viable skills and no means of supporting themselves.

A recurring theme across all countries was the stigma, community judgement, and financial challenges associated with separation. In some communities, however, though difficulties remain, attitudes are shifting. Fate, from Ethiopia, is optimistic:

> **"Divorce does not hamper you from achieving your dream, divorced girls can return to their education, work on business and lead another life. Therefore, I want to encourage divorced girls not to be hopeless, tomorrow is another day."** Fate, 18, Ethiopia

Post-union, many girls still face constraints on autonomy, especially in parental homes. Where they do manage their own finances, it is often in conditions of economic insecurity.

Young child marriage activist, 24, who works with youth to challenge child marriage © Plan International

> **"I know some girls [financially independent after leaving marriage] but generally speaking they struggle financially even more because they are not capable of doing things and taking care of themselves, for a teenage girl who has no experience in the real world living alone could be a nightmare."** Kedja, 24, Ethiopia,

In Uganda, there were positive shifts and Zesiro describes the autonomy she gained since separating from her ex-husband as does Alinafwe in Zambia:

> **"I was told what to do and not to do in my marriage, but now I am able to make my own decisions."** Alinafwe, 21, Zambia

In many communities, however, the stigma is hard to overcome and divorce is unacceptable. In Togo, community attitudes discourage leaving a marriage, even in cases of violence. Girls who separate are labelled as promiscuous or uneducated and are often socially excluded. Similarly, in Nepal, where both divorce or separation are extremely rare, and stigmatised in favour of maintaining the household unit. Across the 15 countries there is little awareness anywhere of the legal options available.

Girls recognise that parents are key to ensuring there is support following a separation. Chanda, 17, Zambia, says she used to depend on her ex-husband's earnings while married, and is now dependant on her mother's income from farming and selling baked goods. Other girls tell us their mothers supported them to start their own businesses: Kabiite, 21, Uganda, runs a small grocery stall, which she was able to start due to capital from her mother, Mwansa, 19, Zambia, has a tomato selling business, as does Fate, 18, Ethiopia. Putri, 17, from Indonesia and Chisenga, 18, from Zambia are both supported by parents. Other divorced girls depend on older female relatives, and generally, girls are borrowing from family, friends, and neighbours.

> **"Currently, I am living with my family and relying on their support, as my ex-husband is not providing any assistance. I am interested in starting work to support myself and my child. For example, I would like to open a coffee house or café, as I have the skills needed to run such a business."** Zeynaba, 20, Ethiopia

Providing they have support, despite the challenges they face, divorced girls often experience more economic autonomy than married ones.

Getting divorced, however, is not easy. Girls in Indonesia discussed the logistics of getting a divorce, with Adinda explaining, based on her sister's experience, what happens if it is only the woman who wants one.

> **"She will be scolded by the pambayung [traditional leader], she will be called a dissident…Yet, if a man wants a divorce, it can happen immediately. If a woman says divorce a hundred times, she cannot if her husband does not want to."** Adinda, 15, Indonesia

A girl in Cambodia who was married at 17. Now 21, she has since divorced and trained as a stylist to support her child and siblings. © Plan International

Binita in Nepal, who was forced into marriage at 13, struggled to leave her abusive, alcoholic husband. She eventually succeeded with her parents' support. Binita's problems did not end there – nor did her determination.

> **"There's no proof [of separation]. There was just a piece of paper. It stated that if I remarried, he could take legal action against me, but if he remarried, I couldn't do anything. That paper was made in his village. I tore it up because it was unfair. I said either write it equally for both or don't write it at all."** Binita, 15, Nepal

Gender equality does not apply to divorce. Men can divorce and remarry, but for women and girls everything is a struggle.

Girls' testimonies point to a very real need for financial, educational, and psychological support for divorced girls whose needs are rarely highlighted or catered for. Currently the data indicates that they are dependent on having families, usually mothers, who have the will, resources, and skills to help them. They are not all so lucky. We can see from the stories they tell, how the minimal laws to support married girls to leave marriages, or obtain alimony or custody payments, interact negatively with existing cultural norms that stigmatise divorcees. Raising awareness of the situation of divorced girls, providing skills training and financial support is an area that needs investigating.

> **"When you are a housewife, you barely have money so if you leave the marriage for example with your children what would you feed them with?... therefore, in this case I stay in the marriage for my children."** Kabiite, 21, Uganda

Education: "Some question what's the point?"

Education is important to many of the girls, they recognise that it can help them build a better future, but community support for married girls' continuing in education is described as mixed.

> **"Some people think, She is married, what's the use of studying? Many families struggle financially and cannot afford education... Most people say positive things, but some question, She is married and still studying? What's the point?"** Pushpa, 18, Bangladesh

Members of the Girl Engage programme in Niger who advocate for an end to child marriage © Plan International

Generally, girls say that to continue studying is seen as abandoning your primary responsibility for working in the home and caring for the family.

> **"Yes, people will tell her she doesn't take care of her house, she can't juggle marriage and school."** Zaynab, 23, Niger

In the Dominican Republic, participants think that girls should do what they can to stay in education upon marriage but recognise that childcare commitments and community judgement can make this difficult. Fernanda, 15, comments: "most of them talk a lot and say [a girl is] too young to get married, that girl has to sit down and study." But, here and elsewhere, this does not necessarily translate into support for married girls' education.

> **"I managed to finish last year, but then a teacher told me I couldn't continue because I was pregnant. I was doing well in all my classes, but he made me fail the year."** Francia, 17, Colombia

Once a girl gets married, gender norms dictate that her education is rarely a priority. Girls are criticised for wanting to study instead of taking care of the household. Julia in Guatemala says that men often manipulate girls and try to limit their education, adding:

> **"There are some people who don't like that we as mothers continue studying, but there are others who support this because we don't all have the same right to be at home and so on, but we have to watch over our dreams."** Julia, 24, Guatemala

That is harder to do in some areas than others:

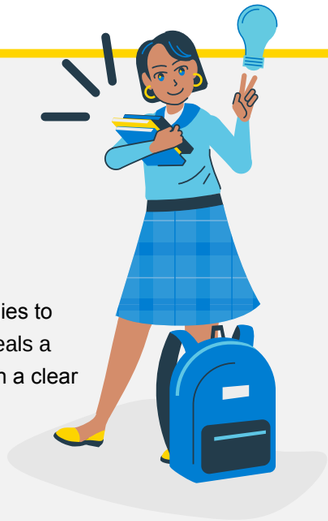
> **"In our community, leaving school is common for married girls. It is because of the double responsibility; that is attending school and managing household chores. In urban areas married girls can attend school."** Fate, 18, Ethiopia

It is also harder for some girls than others: particularly those living with disability. Maria, 17, Ecuador, left school upon becoming pregnant with the intention of returning, but, following her pregnancy, she became chronically ill. This left her with limited mobility and the doctor advised her that the bumpy road to her school would be dangerous for her. She had to miss almost two years of education.

In many Togo communities, while formal education is not seen as appropriate for married girls, vocational training in fields like hairdressing or sewing is more acceptable. Several participants want to pursue this but lack the financial means or institutional support to enrol in apprenticeships. Similarly in Nepal, where girls looking for training opportunities, also find themselves trapped in domestic duties. Roshani, 22, says that she would like to learn sewing and machine operation skills to broaden her employability but there are no opportunities available to her. Sumana and Binita both say that others are receiving training support which is not accessible to them as Dalits.[27]

> **"You start to think and say how embarrassing it would be to come back and repeat the year and see the classmates who were a year older. I mean, I was embarrassed."**
> Maria, 17, Ecuador

A young woman, 22. works in her tailoring shop in Nepal ©Plan International



Insights from activists

What support do married girls need to continue or re-enter education?

Child marriage activists surveyed identified several key strategies to support married girls to continue their education. The data reveals a strong emphasis on both awareness and financial support, with a clear hierarchy of priorities.

- 44 per cent of respondents ranked awareness programmes – aimed at both girls and their families – as the top priority,
- 26 per cent of activists ranked conditional cash grants, including scholarships as the highest priority,
- 18 per cent selected tailored vocational or skills training,
- 11 per cent selected support from school – such as transportation, flexible schedules, and childcare.

The emphasis on awareness programmes highlights a widespread belief that changing mindsets and reinforcing the value of education is foundational to re-engagement. Without community and familial support, girls may face significant social barriers to returning to school which no amount of financial support, though this has a role to play, will be able to overcome.

Members of the Champions of Change project in Mozambique who are raising awareness about teenage pregnancy and child marriage © Plan International

Teenage girls in the Dominican Republic who participate in a programme preventing teenage pregnancy and child marriage
© Plan International

Dominican Republic

Real Choices, Real Lives: Griselda, Dominican Republic

Griselda participated in our Real Choices, Real Lives research following girls from birth to age 18.

Griselda was 13 when she got married. She met her husband – seven years her senior – on social media and began dating him without her family's knowledge. In January 2020, Griselda discovered she was pregnant and married in secret.

> **"She left secretly, after everybody had gone to bed, she left the house and went off with him… we went out looking for her and we found out that she'd got married."**
> Griselda's sister, Dominican Republic, 2021

Griselda left school the year she became pregnant, but after giving birth she regretted the decision to leave school. She and her husband moved in with her husband's parents and Griselda re-enrolled in the eighth grade, this time in remote learning. Getting back into education after nearly a year away was challenging, not least because remote learning depends on reliable technologies – not always easy to come by.

> **"My mobile phone is broken, so I started late, on the computer, I'm very late… I have to catch up, because I'm so far behind."** Griselda, 15, Dominican Republic, 2021

Another key issue was childcare. Griselda was sometimes able to leave her son with a friend of her husband when she did her school work, but was often disrupted because he was teething and howling for his mother.

Griselda persevered, and by the age of 18, she had completed all of the compulsory years of education for children in the Dominican Republic. She was enrolled in her second year of Prepara, a blended learning high school diploma delivered through a combination of face-to-face classes and remote learning. Griselda attended classes from 7am to 12pm on Sundays, combining this with part time work in a bank on weekdays, and caring for her son. Although her schedule was busy, she is determined to earn her high school diploma and enter university to study medicine.

> **"I don't want to fall behind, I want to get ahead, to make something of my life."** Griselda, 15, Dominican Republic, 2021

Griselda credits her family with her ability to complete her education: she was supported throughout by her husband, and by her in-laws who helped with childcare. She is finding it much easier now that her son attends pre-school, and thinks it would be helpful if there were more free childcare options. She also emphasised the importance of Prepara being free, implying that it would otherwise have been impossible to continue with her education.

Griselda reminds us that, for married girls, re-entry into education is a huge hurdle to overcome. Her exceptional determination carried her through but she could not have done it alone. Her story demonstrates the key factors that need to be in place: an informal support system in the family providing both encouragement and childcare, flexible schooling hours, free courses and – where possible – remote learning with quality equipment.

Taken from the Out of Time report
https://plan-international.org/publications/out-of-time/

Sexual and reproductive health and rights: "I only married because I fell pregnant…"

Girls access to contraception in particular, and reproductive health care generally, is another key factor that determines the trajectory of their married lives. Comprehensive sexuality education is often missing from school curricula and most girls had very limited sexual and reproductive health knowledge before marriage. Not surprisingly, pregnancy is one of the key drivers of child marriage. Once married, there is a lot of pressure on girls to have children and, in many relationships, contraception is a contentious issue. It is not always easily accessible and girls' ability to use contraception and plan their families is largely in the remit of husbands or, in some cases, mothers-in-law:

> **"As for the family planning service, we must first inform our husbands before going there. Even the service provider tells us this."** Yacine, 22, Niger

In general girls feel they have to seek their husband's approval before using contraception. This was reported in Nepal, and in Bangladesh, though contraception is available, married girls must comply if their in-laws demand a grandchild. Similarly, in the Dominican Republic where Ariana, 17, says that her husband wanted a child so she had to give him one. Some girls, like Samiyah in Indonesia, hide their use of birth control.

> **"Yes, [my husband] said not to use birth control…he wants to have children every four years. But I am the one who is tired, the one who takes care of us. I want to be on birth control. I don't want more children yet. Raise the two first."**
> Samiyah, 23, Indonesia

In Nepal, Zambia and Ethiopia the pressure to have children can start a few months after marriage. Many note that this leads to verbal abuse and aggression from their families and partners.

> **"I didn't have a child for a few years, and my family used to constantly say things like, 'You still haven't had a baby. Are you barren? You'll stay barren your whole life.' They used to put a lot of pressure on me."** Manita, 22, Nepal

In Cambodia, girls report mixed reactions with some stating that, under 18, girls are recognised by the community as not being biologically ready. Others are not so sure, some communities believe:

> **"…that having children at a young age is good because it becomes harder to conceive and give birth as we get older."**
> Nita, 17, Cambodia

In Uganda, almost all participants emphasised that married girls face overwhelming pressure to bear children though some resist:

> **"My husband doesn't allow me to use family planning. However, I use it without telling him. We can never decide together on this topic."** Judith, 23, Uganda

A teenage mother with her two-year-old daughter in Uganda
© Plan International

In Nigeria, some girls say that the community or relatives do not put pressure on girls as children are by God's will. Others note that contraception is seen negatively.

> **"Based on our parents' perspective, they see [contraception] as something not appropriate because it's brought by foreign [white men] but for us, it's ok, it is something that will bring you rest in your life."** Asmau, 19, Nigeria.

In Togo, childbearing pressure is strong:

> **"If you get married and you don't give birth to children, they laugh at you and they think you, [as] a woman, you are useless… [people in the community will say] that she is sterile, others will say that she took her uterus to make money or that she was cursed."**
> Tatiana, 21, Togo

In Guatemala, girls are not pressured to bear children but rather feel the pressure that, upon pregnancy, they are forced to marry. Yet Patricia, 19, who was married at 15, points out that contraceptive usage is looked upon negatively and many would prefer that girls have children.

In Cambodia and Colombia, girls have more autonomy: family planning decisions were often made independently or with little partner input, though in some cases, partner resistance is still occurring.

Nearly three out of four (71 per cent) of girls still in education accessed sexual and reproductive health services

Overall, our research indicates that educational and employment opportunities can unlock better access to sexual and reproductive health services and give girls greater control over their bodies and their lives. For those not in education, or working, access is more problematic.

Young mother and her baby in Ethiopia
© Plan International

These key insights from the girls themselves back up findings from the literature concerning the increase in reactionary, conservative and religious influence which, particularly with regard to sexual and reproductive health and rights, is shaping attitudes and legal frameworks. This needs to be recognised and challenged. Unplanned pregnancies that lead to largely unwanted, and illegal, marriages or unions, and the lack of any decision-making input into how many children to have and when to have them, represent an unacceptable violation of girls' rights.

Health matters: "I did not have the money…"

It is not just sexual and reproductive health services that are out of reach for many, access to health care generally, is also an issue. Marginalised girls, particularly those living with a disability, struggle to obtain the quality of health services that they need, and often cannot afford to pay for.

Dembe, 23, Uganda, who has physical difficulties with her hand, says that her lack of financial resources means she would not be able to access a hospital if she needed one. This was also the case for Esneya in Zambia who is visually impaired:

> **"I went to the hospital but I could not get spectacles as I did not have the money for them."** Esneya, 20, Zambia

Health systems in these girls' communities are not reaching those most in need of them and make little effort to be physically or financially accessible:

> **"…the service providers are good to me but the service and the medication are not available in the hospital. Usually they send me to [the pharmacy] to buy medication, and I am not capable to buy medications [there] because they are expensive."**
> Guedi, 24, Ethiopia

Power and inequality: "permission is rarely granted…"

Traditional gender roles require women and girls to be submissive and passive in sexual relations, fulfil reproductive obligations and obey their husbands. Most areas of their lives – going to school, family planning, shopping, working outside the home – are governed by their husbands and sometimes his family.

> **"…my husband doesn't allow women to go out of the house. If someone is allowed to work outside, the timing must be right, and they should be able to manage household chores as well."** Lopa, Bangladesh, 20

The power imbalances implicit in child marriage where husbands are often older and the child wife or partner may well be living with his family, are compounded by generational gender norms and by the girl's lack of both education and financial autonomy.

> **"Even when girls express a desire to work, opportunities are scarce and permission is rarely granted, reinforcing dependence on male family members."** Esneya, 20, Zambia

As the bread-winners, husbands are very much in control of the family finances. A lack of any financial independence and, in many cases, little life outside the home has a devastating effect on girls' agency. In Niger, wives generally need their husband's permission to gain access to his money: Amina is able to access her husband's money to support herself, but requires his permission, Bintou too must wait for permission before making a purchase that could "cause problems between us."

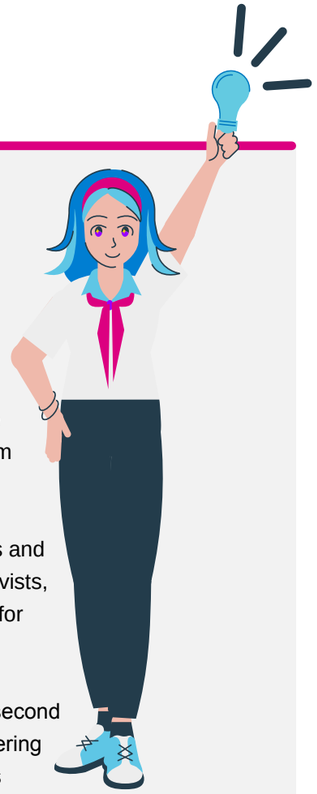
For Sofia, in the Dominican Republic, the husband earns the money and the wife only receives money to buy specific things like groceries, and she has to request permission. Similarly, for Nakry in Cambodia and Shetu in Bangladesh whose husband's control over her financial decision-making extends to small scale grocery shopping:

> **"My husband gives me 3000 to 4000 BDT [approx. $25- $33] to pay for the groceries. If I need more money, I have to explain why I need it and what I will use it for."**
> Shetu, 21, Bangladesh

These examples give us an indication of the inequality that characterises most marital relationships, and the level of control that girls face on an everyday basis. Only in Ecuador, were all girls generally making household decisions equally with their husbands.

It is clear from the data that overall decision-making power for married girls, whether with regards to contraception, girls' mobility, or large and small financial matters, is minimal and some girls told us they felt intimated to challenge their husbands' authority. They also told us that they would feel more confident to take part in decision making if they were less financially dependent, had help from their husbands and families with childcare, and some support with household tasks. All of which would promote equality within their relationships.

Members of a group who lead awareness campaigns to break taboos and defend girls' sexual and reproductive rights in Niger © Plan International



Insights from activists

How can girls become equal partners?

Child marriage activists had several priority strategies to strengthen girls' ability to participate in household decisions. These respond to the challenges outlined in the previous section and align with feedback from girls themselves.

- 36 per cent of respondents prioritised ensuring awareness of rights and access to legal support services. This was the top priority from activists, emphasising that legal knowledge and protection are foundational for girls to assert their rights within the household.
- 27 per cent cited building life skills and confidence which was the second most prioritised approach. This reflects a strong belief that empowering girls with communication, negotiation, and decision-making skills is essential for shifting power dynamics at home.
- 25 per cent advocated educating and involving husbands, in-laws, and community leaders. Engaging those who hold influence in the household and community is seen as key to improving girls' agency and decision making within the household.

Girl, 17, from Indonesia, who is part of a children's project raising awareness on child marriage © Plan International/ Lintang Hakim

5. Looking Ahead: "I won't let my child make the same mistake…"

Despite the challenges they face many girls are refusing to let go of their dreams and ambitions. They want to either return to education or to have the means to start their own businesses.

> **"I want to move forward in five to ten years to become a teacher and help other girls in the education system."** Halima, 20, Nigeria

Many express regret, and are determined their children's lives will be different.

> **"No, I won't let my child make the same mistake. I will explain that education is important now. Even if my child wants to get married, I won't allow it. I will try to make them understand as much as possible. Even if they fall in love, I won't permit marriage."** Farhana, 21, Bangladesh

In Mozambique, participants have clear objectives for the future, including completing their education and pursuing careers such as nursing or business ownership. All oppose child marriage and hope for greater autonomy and opportunity for girls.

In some countries, aspirations are limited by the constraints of their current lives. In Bangladesh, few express aspirations beyond being good wives or mothers. Those who do hope for education or employment often doubt these goals are attainable.

In Ecuador, Maria names a number of professions she is interested in – dentistry, criminology, graphic design – and says she is weighing them up against the cost and time taken to train. Pamela wants a career in agriculture or neonatology, she does not see herself having more children and wants her daughter to have a better life.

In the Dominican Republic, Fernanda wants to be an engineer, and Mariana a nurse – she is now in college studying for her nursing degree. Other girls also want to finish studying and they all want their children to be educated. Their aspirations and dreams are powerful. But pushback against progress strives to keep women and girls at home, 'in their place,' and too often change is too slow, and too small.

Throughout Plan International's research on girls' rights – whether for the annual State of the World's Girls Report or the longitudinal Real Choices, Real Lives study – the desire by mothers and grandmothers that their children, often with particular reference to daughters, have a better life, is recurrent across generations. It is reflected in the current research. But across nearly 20 years, and despite campaigns and legislation, attitudes to child marriage, and to gender roles, remain more static than they should. Despite everything, the girls we spoke with remain hopeful for themselves and their children. They must not be let down.

> **"I want to be very financially independent and for my children to have a better life and to continue their studies until they work one day and then talk about marriage…"** Ezichi (married at 17) Niger

Promising Practice:

Helping to bring about change

Plan International's global programme to end child, early and forced marriage and unions (CEFMU) puts girls at the centre of a bold, rights-based approach to dismantle the root causes of this harmful practice and ensure that girls are able to delay marriage within communities that champion girls' rights and equality for all.

Ending child marriage is an urgent problem that requires concrete investment. Plan International's global programme model works across the regions to both prevent child marriage and support already-married girls and those who are separated or divorced.

The programme model is gender-transformative, multi-level, and grounded in over a decade of programmatic experience and advocacy actions. It works to shift harmful gender norms, expand girls' agency, and strengthen systems that protect their rights. The programme tackles both prevention and response, and uses targeted strategies to:

change norms and behaviours that drive child marriage and limit the protection, education, employment and sexual and reproductive health and rights of married and ever-married girls and young women;

strengthen assets and safety nets for girls at-risk and their families, to prevent child marriage and assist married and ever-married girls to claim their rights;

strengthen legislation, policy, and services that consider the needs of at-risk girls.

We have a tried and tested range of interventions, tools, and approaches that can be applied in different combinations depending on the local or national situation and need.

One of these targeted interventions is Time to Act:[28] a toolkit to empower youth activists to combat child marriage.

It works on the principle that young people must be involved in efforts to end child marriage, and that their education and empowerment are vitally important.

The Time to Act toolkit engages and empowers young people, raising awareness of child marriage within their communities and protecting the girls who live with it. Legal and policy change have not been sufficient to end child marriage, activism by young people at community level needs to be part of the fight.

Click here to download the The Time To Act toolkit

Specific action areas are outlined in the acronym *it's time*

Influence – advocate for changes to laws and policies.

Transform – challenge harmful traditions and practices that impede gender equality

Services – improve access to quality services for girls

Take Charge – empower girls through leadership and activism

Intervene – protect girls from violence

Money – provide skills and opportunities for economic empowerment

Education – ensure girls' access to education.

Examining legal frameworks on child marriage

Insights from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's Social Institutions and Gender Index

The primary research for the 2025 State of the World's Girls report is based on individual girls' testimony – facilitating a deep dive into the everyday experiences of married girls normally hidden from view. These experiences, and those of the youth activists who contributed to the research, need to be set into context. In order to do this a comprehensive investigation into the policy and legislative environment in the 15 research countries was carried out by the OECD – the full analysis can be found in the longer technical report.[29] It provides a wider framework, across five key areas, examining the links and disconnects between lived experiences, the informal and social norms that hold an important sway on people's behaviour, and the crucial legal structures that are fundamental for regulating societies.

Data from the Social Institutions and Gender Index (SIGI) 2023 reveal that gender-based discrimination, embedded in countries' social institutions, remains at the heart of the inequality that girls and women face throughout their lifetimes. Child marriage is an example of this and though the practice is often socially accepted it can bring disastrous consequences for those concerned.

Child marriage: legal exceptions persist

Legal frameworks are essential in preventing child marriage. Many countries, particularly in Africa have reformed their national laws over the past five years in order to set 18 years as the minimum legal age of marriage. Nevertheless, exceptions to the minimum legal age of marriage, and informal laws,[30] persist, creating an environment where child marriage continues to be tolerated and practised.

In two thirds of the study countries, the minimum legal age can be circumvented with the consent of a parent, legal guardian or judge. Only in the Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Guatemala, Mozambique and Nepal does the law not allow for any exceptions. However, even in the Dominican Republic where, on paper, there is no formal or informal legal discrimination, child marriage persists.[31]

- Overall, weak law enforcement and discriminatory informal laws can significantly inhibit the fight against child marriage.

- In 12 out the 15 countries legal frameworks set forth that it is illegal to facilitate child marriage, but not all of these countries establish legal sanctions in case of non-compliance with the law.[32]

In nearly all countries, informal laws allow the practice of child marriage undermining national legal frameworks.

Household responsibilities: equal rights on paper but also in practice?

Once married, legal frameworks also affect girls' daily lives: girls' well-being, safety and opportunities partially depend on laws that govern their access to education and healthcare but also define household responsibilities, child custody rights, protection from domestic violence, reproductive rights, and divorce.

- Data show that in two thirds of the focus countries, women and men have equal rights regarding decision-making in the household, and in all focus countries they have the same rights to be their children's legal guardians.

- Legal discrimination, regarding women's and men's household responsibilities, is more common in Asia and sub-Saharan Africa compared to Latin America and the Caribbean.

- In five of the 11 focus countries located in Africa and Asia, the statutory law on household responsibilities is not gender equal or does not apply to all parts of the population.

Whatever the statutory law lays down, in practice, informal laws can undermine the egalitarian statutory laws. This is often a reflection of discriminatory gender norms and roles that limit women's agency within the family or household. The OECD's SIGI 2023 legal data show that informal laws persist in seven out of the 10 countries where statutory law is non-discriminatory, undermining women's ability to be head of household in all but four countries[33] and limiting married women's ability to decide where to live in Indonesia, Mozambique, Nigeria, Uganda and Zambia. Moreover, in about one third of the study countries,[34] informal laws create differences in men's and women's abilities and rights to be children's legal guardian.

Reproductive autonomy: restrictive laws can be a threat to girls' and women's health

Unequal power dynamics tend to characterise child marriages. Evidence shows that significant age gaps can aggravate girls' already limited agency and autonomy within the couple, ultimately undermining their decision-making power including over reproductive choices. In that regard, laws can be instrumental in safeguarding girls' and women's reproductive rights such as the right to access information, safe and affordable contraceptive methods, quality healthcare services and the right to reproductive autonomy, including the right to safe and legal abortion.

- In over two thirds of the focus countries girls and women face important restrictions regarding their reproductive rights.

- In four countries[35] women have access to safe and legal abortion without any restrictions, whereas in one country, the Dominican Republic, abortion is prohibited and criminalised under all circumstances – even when it would be required to save the pregnant woman's life. In the remaining countries, woman's access to safe abortion is contingent on specific circumstances. Data also shows, that overall, women's access to abortion following rape remains highly restricted.[36]

SIGI 2023 legal data further draw a mixed picture in terms of girls' and women's access to comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) and family planning services.

In seven out of the 15 countries[37] CSE is a mandatory part of the national school curriculum. However, worldwide data show that access remains limited, particularly in Africa and Asia: although it is in those regions where the world's youth is predominantly living.

- Among the 15 countries, all but the Dominican Republic have a national action plan that stipulates universal access to family planning services and seven countries[38] provide for free or subsidised access to contraception.

Violence against women and girls: more comprehensive laws are needed

Research from different settings across the world finds that child marriage is associated with a higher risk of intimate partner violence.[39] While laws alone will not eradicate child marriage nor violence against women, comprehensive legal frameworks that protect women and girls from all forms of violence constitute a vital step in putting an end to impunity and societal acceptance of violence. SIGI 2023 legal data show that none of the 15 countries have such comprehensive legal frameworks in place, and that the strength of the current legislation varies across countries

- Despite the absence of comprehensive legal frameworks protecting women and girls, two thirds of the countries do have comprehensive laws on domestic violence, defining and criminalising all forms of this particular abuse. Legal gaps persist mainly with respect to economic abuse which is not covered in five African and Latin American and Caribbean focus countries.[40]

- While all countries, except for Niger and Ethiopia, criminalise sexual domestic abuse, the legal frameworks on rape could be further strengthened. For instance, only in seven countries[41] is the definition of rape consent based. Moreover, not all countries specifically criminalise marital rape, leaving married girls insufficiently protected.[42]

- Femicide is only recognised as a crime per se in Mozambique, Colombia, Ecuador and Guatemala.

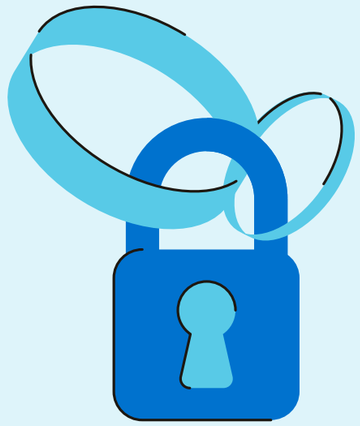
- Two thirds of the focus countries have a law, policy or national action plan in place that prioritises the coordination of services and mechanisms for survivors of violence against women and girls. Focus countries lacking such instruments are mainly located in Africa.[43]

When taking a global perspective, Africa stands out as a continent where a small number of countries have extremely comprehensive laws and strategies in place, whereas others have yet to catch up.

Divorce rights: not an option for some women?

In many countries, women and men do not have the same divorce rights.

- Among the 15 focus countries, only three[44] grant all women and men equal rights that permit them to initiate or finalise a divorce or annulment and retain child custody. The regional averages and country analysis reveal that challenges persist mainly in African and Asian countries.



Legal provisions regulating under which circumstances, or with which requirements, a spouse can file for and finalise a divorce or annulment create different rights for women and men in Bangladesh, Guatemala, Indonesia, Nepal, Niger and Togo. Moreover, many countries make exceptions to the general law governing divorce, e.g. the civil code or marriage law, based on religion, or adopt a pluralistic system from the onset where divorce is regulated by the respective religious laws observed by parts of the population. This is notably the case in several African and Asian countries[45] where the law on divorce does not apply to all groups of women.

- Informal laws undermine women's divorce rights in about half of the focus countries.[46] They can create differences in women's and men's ability to obtain child custody following divorce, which is the case in eight out of the 15 countries.[47]

In Summary

Legal gaps and discriminatory informal laws not only stand in the way of ending and preventing child marriage in the 15 focus countries, but also affect married girls' rights and well-being during marriage. Persisting discriminatory norms, and informal and religious laws, also limit girls' and women's access to justice and these must be addressed.[48]

Regarding the focus countries of this report, the data show that each one faces unique challenges. An overview of the legal realities across five key areas of married girls' lives indicates that none of the 15 countries are as gender equal as the formal laws in place might suggest.

Conclusion

This year's State of the World's Girls report has looked closely at child marriage, concentrating on the detail of girls' everyday lives, and on the reasons why the practice of child marriage has proved so persistent. As a result, there is the hope that, informed by the girls we talked with, a better understanding of their circumstances will lead to real and sustained improvement in their daily lives and future opportunities. The attitudes, and harmful gender norms, that girls talk about, governing community acceptance of both child marriage and how it is practised, must be made unacceptable, not countenanced as normal.

Overall, the research saw striking commonalities across countries and regions. And the experiences of the girls who talked to us were comprehensively backed up by the observations of the child marriage activists. The latter also had clear suggestions and practical priorities for the changes that would, if implemented, fundamentally change the lives of married girls.

64% of child marriage activists identified access to health services as the top global priority.

44% of activists highlighted the importance of continuing education for married girls.

39% identified skills development with market-relevant skills and certification as a key enabler of girls' economic empowerment alongside supportive employment policies.

30% identified access to legal protection to maintain girls' rights in the marriage and when leaving it.

Girl, 14, from Nigeria who was able to avoid child marriage at 12 and return to education, with the support of a child help desk at her school © Plan International

Young mother, 21, from Bangladesh who is learning about sexual and reproductive health and family planning in a women's group © Plan International

Everyone discussed raising awareness of the social and gender norms that dominate girls' lives and perpetuate gender inequality. Married girls are rarely recognised as a vulnerable population who require targeted interventions. Their invisibility and lack of agency in the public sphere spills over into their home lives, aggravated by the age disparity between the partners. Girls are mostly at the will of their, often much older, husbands or their in-laws, with limited decision-making power in household matters, finances, and family planning. Girls with some independence outside the home report having a greater chance of being more powerful within it. Going to school or work also reduces the loneliness that so many describe, combating stress, and bringing hope for the future.

! 76 per cent of child marriage activists identified the lack of local services and programmes as the most pressing barrier that weakens or reduces support for married girls

! 52 per cent cited deep-rooted traditional beliefs and gender norms.

With 28 per cent of girls in the study identifying as divorced or separated – a testament to their bravery – this year's State of the World's Girls report has also been able to provide rare insight into a largely overlooked population. Girls told us about the uncertain legal procedures that they went through to obtain a divorce and that key to their ability to leave is personal support, mainly from mothers and female relatives, who finance them as they develop skills or re-enter education. We learnt too that customs and religious tradition puts huge barriers in the way of girls' equal rights to divorce. They need to be supported to access justice and utilise the statutory laws, which are in place but are not invoked, allowing informal law to control girls' lives and limit their rights.

Girls in unions, whose rights are even more circumscribed than those of formally married girls, must also be given access to legal redress and to information, so that they are protected in the event of violence or when withdrawing from a relationship – including custody rights. We have also learnt how marginality – whether due to disability, location, or caste – further aggravates the limited agency of married girls, particularly their right to access public services like education and health care. In Nepal, Mandira, 20, who is from the Dalit caste, says that she was unable to get citizenship ID, which meant that she was not entitled to much of the post-natal support available:

> **"I didn't have citizenship, and the child's birth wasn't registered – we could have had rice, eggs, and many such benefits... But you need both parents' citizenship and the child's birth certificate. We didn't have that, so we didn't get it."** Mandira, 20, Nepal

Activists constantly emphasised the importance of raising awareness of the issues girls face:

- changing attitudes to gender roles in the household,
- and to girls' sexuality,
- protecting girls from the predatory behaviour of older men,
- dissuading parents/relatives/neighbours from facilitating child marriages,
- emphasising the importance of girls' education and skills training, especially for pregnant girls and young mothers,
- enabling them as decision-makers and listening to their voices, all emerge from the research as crucially important.

Financial and emotional support allows girls to leave marriages and have a home to return to and psychosocial support helps limit the damage inflicted by abuse and violence.

> **"I was married off young. I wasn't allowed to study or progress in life – I was deprived of everything. But I won't let that happen to my daughter. I want her to have a bright future, and that only happens when she studies and gets a job. Early marriage only leads to a dark future."**
> Juna, 24, Nepal

Combining robust enforcement, targeted budgeting, and community engagement would go a long way to preventing child marriage and to protecting and promoting the rights of married girls. Although statutory legal frameworks are in place across the countries, they often remain ineffectual – far removed from the everyday experiences of girls and their communities. In order to support girls, safeguard their rights and meet their needs, it is these experiences that must be fully recognised to bring about enduring change.

Young Cambodian woman, who married at 17, with her six-year-old daughter © Plan International/ Thomas Cristofoletti

Recommendations

The recommendations that follow outline key pathways to tackling the social norms that promote child marriage, govern girls' lives, stand in the way of gender equality and block girls' opportunities for health and happiness. The recommendations are based on insights and suggestions from the girls and the activists taking part in the research.

The recommendations are centred around five key themes:

1. **Invest in and scale up programmes that address the harmful social beliefs, practices and expectations that drive child marriage.**
2. **Ensure that married girls and girls at risk of child marriage know their rights, have access to the services they need, and build the future they choose.**
3. **Target support for the most marginalised and hardest to reach married girls, including girls living in crisis and conflict, and girls living in extreme poverty.**
4. **Implement and resource strong laws and policies to prevent child marriage and ensure support and access to justice for married girls.**
5. **Elevate and fund the work of girl leaders and their movements in their initiatives to end child marriage.**

Governments, NGOs, community leaders, donors, media and educators must ensure a multi-sectoral and coordinated approach to the prevention of and response to child marriage and work together to:

Change harmful social and gender norms:

- Raise awareness of the issue of child marriage, using examples of successful social norm interventions, and running national and local campaigns to encourage dialogue about the issue. Families, religious and community leaders need to be encouraged to challenge harmful social norms, reject child marriage, and assist girls in accessing services, support and education.
- Use media to amplify experiences and calls for change from married girls and shift public perceptions around their agency and potential.
- Design multimedia in collaboration with NGOs and young people to promote norm change through 'edutainment' including videos, radio shows, music and drama.
- Promote gender equality at home, domestic duties should not be just for girls. Encourage family members to decrease girls' household chores so that they have the time and energy to take up education and training opportunities.
- Expand digital and media literacy programmes to equip adolescent girls with the skills to safely navigate online spaces, critically engage with harmful gender and social narratives, including those that normalise child marriage and build their capacity to advocate for their rights and challenge pressures to marry.

Provide accessible services

- Provide accessible sexual and reproductive health services and comprehensive sex education to both girls at risk of child marriage and girls within marriages.
- Ensure stigma-and-judgement-free access to SRHR services, including contraception, safe and legal abortion, and pre-and-post-natal care.
- Remove barriers to married girls' education by providing flexible learning opportunities and positive encouragement, working with families to emphasise the importance of girls' education. Provide scholarships or bursaries for disadvantaged married girls.
- Create and fund skills and vocational training for girls to empower them financially and prevent child marriage as a solution to family poverty.
- Work with employers to support skills training and connect girls to emerging sectors such as the digital and green economies, paving the way into decent work.

Focus on the most marginalised

- Be aware of the risks faced by girls in humanitarian settings and take steps to ensure that existing child marriage programmes are maintained in times of crisis and are integrated into all aspects of emergency preparedness plans.
- Develop programmes which actively address the specific needs of married girls facing intersecting forms of exclusion, including those with disabilities, from ethnic or religious minorities, or with refugee or migrant status.
- Build emotional, psychological, and practical capacity by providing psychosocial support and mentoring, training girls in youth-led action, and campaigning to breakdown the social norms that are a barrier to gender equality and a driver of child marriage.
- Acknowledge the psychosocial impacts of child marriage – loneliness, anxiety, fear of violence – by providing safe spaces with free and confidential mental health support which is accessible at community level.

Design and enforce laws

- Ensure a multi-sectoral and coordinated approach to the prevention and response of child marriage, including setting minimum legal age of marriage at 18, without exceptions, in line with international human rights standards.
- Reform and enforce comprehensive laws against gender-based violence, including intimate partner violence and marital rape, and ensure that there are safe spaces and legal support available for survivors of violence.

Support girl leaders and their movements

- Take targeted action to ensure that girls and young women and their movements are meaningfully and safely engaged in decision-making spaces, so that their rights and needs are acknowledged and their voices heard.

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Endnotes

1 Plan International strongly condemns the practice of child, early and forced marriage and calls for the prohibition of the practice under national and customary law, and for the full and effective enforcement of these laws. In line with the Committee on the Rights of the Child General Comment No. 4, Plan International believes that the minimum age for marriage should be 18 and that this should apply equally to both men and women, regardless of any provisions concerning parental or judicial consent.

2 CEDAW, an international treaty adopted by the UN in 1979, often described as a bill of rights for women

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4 Identifying as marginalised stems from the girls answering a question on whether they identify as an ethnic or religious minority, from a particular caste, or were living with a disability.

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13 United Nations, 2020. A new era of conflict and violence. [online] United Nations. Available at: https://www.un.org/en/un75/new-era-conflict-and-violence [Accessed 7 Aug. 2025].

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16 Ibid.

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24 Ibid.

25 See Section 3.2 'Legal frameworks on child marriage: Insights from the OECD's Social Institutions and Gender Index' in Technical Version of this report. Available at: https://plan-international.org/publications/girls-experiences-child-marriage/

26 Our original research findings were supplemented with case studies taken from Plan International's Real Choices, Real Lives study. Real Choices, Real Lives is a qualitative and longitudinal research study that has been following a cohort of more than 100 girls in nine countries around the world from their birth in 2006 until they turned 18 in 2024.

27 Dalit, term used to refer to any member of a wide range of social groups that were historically marginalised in Hindu caste society.

28 Toolkit can be found at: https://plan-international.org/asia-pacific/publications/time-to-act-toolkit-for-practitioners/

29 See Section 3.2 'Legal frameworks on child marriage: Insights from the OECD's Social Institutions and Gender Index' in Technical Version of this report. Available at: https://plan-international.org/publications/girls-experiences-child-marriage/

30 The term informal laws refers to uncodified or unwritten customary, traditional or religious laws/rules, which describe mechanisms that operate outside the formal legal system of state-based laws.

31 In 2023, 31% of girls aged 20 to 24 years old were married before the age of 18 in the Dominican Republic (OECD Development Centre/OECD, 2023[3]).

32 There is no specific legal provision in Colombia, Ecuador and Togo that criminalises the facilitation of child marriage. Cambodia, the Dominican Republic, Nepal and Niger outlaw the facilitation of child marriage, but the law does not provide for sanctions in case of non-compliance with the law.

33 Dominican Republic, Ethiopia, Guatemala and Nepal.

34 Bangladesh, Indonesia, Niger, Nigeria, Uganda and Zambia.

35 Cambodia, Colombia, Mozambique, and Nepal.

36 Abortion in the case of rape or statutory rape is not permitted in Bangladesh, the Dominican Republic, Guatemala, Niger, Nigeria, Uganda, and Zambia.

37 Cambodia, Colombia, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Guatemala, Togo and Zambia.

38 Colombia, Ecuador, Guatemala, Nepal, Niger, Uganda and Zambia.

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40 Domestic violence legislation in the Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Ethiopia, and Togo does not cover domestic abuse. In Niger, domestic violence is not prohibited at all.

41 Cambodia, the Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Ethiopia, Guatemala, Indonesia and Togo.

42 The laws in Bangladesh, Cambodia, Ethiopia, Nigeria, Uganda and Zambia do not specifically criminalise marital rape.

43 The Dominican Republic, Ethiopia, Niger, Togo, and Zambia.

44 Colombia, the Dominican Republic and Mozambique.

45 Bangladesh, Ethiopia, Indonesia, Niger, Nigeria, Uganda and Zambia.

46 Bangladesh, Cambodia, Indonesia, Nepal, Nigeria, Uganda and Zambia.

47 Bangladesh, Cambodia, Ecuador, Indonesia, Niger, Nigeria, Uganda, and Zambia.

48 SIGI legal data show that informal laws limit women's access to justice in Bangladesh, Cambodia, Nepal and Nigeria.

Until we are all equal

Until we are all equal

About Plan International

Plan International is an independent development and humanitarian organisation that advances children's rights and equality for girls. We believe in the power and potential of every child but know this is often suppressed by poverty, violence, exclusion and discrimination. And it is girls who are most affected.

Working together with children, young people, supporters and partners, we strive for a just world, tackling the root causes of the challenges girls and vulnerable children face. We support children's rights from birth until they reach adulthood and we enable children to prepare for and respond to crises and adversity. We drive changes in practice and policy at local, national and global levels using our reach, experience and knowledge. For over 85 years, we have rallied other determined optimists to transform the lives of all children in more than 80 countries.

We won't stop until we are all equal.

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