



UN WOMEN

Topic:

Implementing measures to end child marriage: Strengthening community-led initiatives and engaging religious/traditional leaders to shift social norms.

Chairs:

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Committee Background:

The United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women is the United Nations entity dedicated to gender equality and the empowerment of women. It was established in 2010 by the United Nations General Assembly through Resolution 64/289. The creation of UN Women resulted from the consolidation of four existing bodies within the UN (United Nations) system: the Division for the Advancement of Women (DAW), the International Research and Training Institute for the Advancement of Women (INSTRAW), the Office of the Special Advisor on Gender Issues (OSAGI), and the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM). The merger aimed to strengthen institutional capacity, centralize mandates, and provide a unified agency with greater political authority and operational effectiveness.

UN Women began operations in January 2011. As the primary UN body for gender equality, it works with Member States, civil society organizations, other UN agencies, and local governments to design and implement policies that promote women's rights. The organization plays a key role in supporting the implementation of international frameworks such as CEDAW and the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, and it contributes to global monitoring of Sustainable Development Goal 5.

Since its establishment, UN Women has produced significant results at both global and national levels. It has supported governments in developing gender-responsive legislation, expanded data and research on violence against women, coordinated international campaigns such as HeForShe, and provided technical and financial support to women's rights movements. The entity has also strengthened the integration of gender perspectives in peacekeeping operations and humanitarian responses, ensuring that women's protection and participation remain central in crises.

UN Women's overarching objectives include eliminating discrimination against women, ensuring their full participation in political, economic, and social spheres, and supporting states in creating long-term strategies that advance gender equality and the empowerment of women.

Background information on the topic:

Child marriage is recognized internationally as a human rights violation and a harmful traditional practice. It affects millions of children each year, particularly girls, and remains prevalent in regions facing persistent gender inequality, lack of resources, and limited access to education. According to UNICEF, more than 640 million women alive today were married before the age of 18, and an estimated 12 million girls enter early or forced unions annually. These figures highlight both the scale and the persistence of the issue despite decades of global advocacy and legal reforms.

Child marriage occurs in formal and informal forms, including legally registered marriages, traditional ceremonies, and unregistered cohabitation arrangements that



function as marital unions. While the practice exists across diverse cultural, economic, and religious contexts, it is most common in South Asia, Sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East, and parts of Latin America. In many communities, the practice is reinforced by perceptions of social obligation, beliefs about protecting girls' honor, or the expectation that marriage is the most secure path for a girl's future.

Beyond its immediate impact, child marriage has long-term consequences for the well-being and development of those affected. Girls who marry early often face early pregnancies, higher risks of maternal mortality, increased exposure to domestic and sexual violence, and severe restrictions on their access to education and economic independence. As a result, child marriage contributes directly to cycles of lack of resources, inequality, and limited social mobility, making it a barrier to national development as well as to the fulfillment of international human rights standards.

Causes and consequences

Causes

- Economic lack and insecurity: Families may see marriage as a way to reduce financial burden.
- Limited access to education: Girls out of school are more vulnerable to early marriage.
- Gender inequality and patriarchal norms: Women and girls are often valued less, and marriage is seen as their primary role.
- Cultural and religious traditions: Practices are often justified as “custom” or “protection.”
- Weak enforcement of national laws: Even when 18 is the legal minimum age, enforcement is inconsistent.

Consequences

- School dropouts and reduced educational and economic opportunities.
- Increased domestic and sexual violence.
- Health risks due to early pregnancies, including maternal and child mortality.
- Long-term cycles of low economic resources and inequality.

Problematic and importance of the topic

Although many countries have established 18 as the legal minimum age for marriage, enforcement remains weak and unequal. In numerous regions, traditional customs and religious interpretations hold more social legitimacy than national laws, leading families to view early marriage as a social necessity. Communities may pressure parents to marry their daughters early to avoid stigma, reduce economic burdens, or



preserve family honor. These deeply rooted expectations allow harmful practices to persist despite legislative progress.

The complexity of this issue lies in its intersection with a lack of economic resources, limited educational opportunities, and entrenched gender norms. Effective solutions require more than legal reforms; they demand transformative, community-centered approaches that challenge long-standing beliefs and expand opportunities for girls. Addressing the conditions that sustain child marriage is essential for securing gender equality, protecting human rights, and fostering sustainable development. Eliminating child marriage directly improves educational outcomes, economic participation, public health indicators, and overall societal stability. It is therefore both a moral imperative and a key development priority for nations worldwide.

Timeline

- 1979 CEDAW: Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW): Identifies discrimination against women, including harmful practices such as child marriage. Encouraged legal reforms, elimination of discriminatory customs, and national protections for women and girls.
- 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC): Recognizes children's rights to be protected from harmful traditions. Required states to implement legal, social, and educational measures to prevent early marriage.
- 1994–1995 Cairo Conference & Beijing Platform: Classified child marriage as a priority for global gender equality and development. Recommended expanding education for girls, improving reproductive health services, and creating community-based initiatives.
- 2000 Millennium Development Goals (MDGs): Connected the reduction of child marriage with improved girls' education and gender equality. Promoted investments in education, reduction of economic inequality, and gender-responsive policies.
- 2015 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs): SDG 5.3 establishes the target to eliminate child marriage by 2030. Called for stronger legal frameworks, enforcement mechanisms, and multisectoral national strategies.
- 2016 United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA)–United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) Global Programme: Expanded interventions in high-prevalence countries. Implemented programs aimed at empowering girls, engaging community leaders, and promoting long-term social norm change.

Position of Major Nations



India

Acknowledges child marriage as a major national issue and is committed to reducing it, though enforcement remains inconsistent. One of the highest absolute numbers of child brides globally; cultural and rural pressures remain strong.

Bangladesh

Officially committed to ending child marriage but still has one of the highest prevalence rates in the world. Lack of resources, climate vulnerability, and social stigma are key drivers.

Pakistan

Supports reform but struggles with religious and provincial resistance. Laws differ by province; rural areas have significantly higher rates.

Nigeria

Supports international action but faces major cultural and religious barriers. Strong regional divides very high rates in the north, lower in the south.

Ethiopia

Actively working to reduce child marriage through national programs. Progress has been seen in some regions, but rural communities remain vulnerable.

Niger

Recognizes the urgency but lacks resources to fully address it. The highest child marriage rate in the world (around 75% of girls married before 18).

Mali

Open to international support; internal instability limits progress. Conflict and weak legal structures worsen early marriage rates.

Sudan

Recent reforms show progress, but traditional practices continue. Child marriage increases in humanitarian and displacement contexts.

South Sudan

Request strong international assistance. Some communities use marriage for economic exchange, worsening vulnerability.



Somalia

Cooperative but limited by legal weaknesses and strong religious influence. Statelessness and conflict amplify the issue.

Mozambique

National plans are in place to reduce child marriage. Socioeconomic hardship and limited education access are primary causes.

Zambia

Actively implementing community-based prevention strategies. Recognized for successful local programs that reduce early marriage.

Indonesia

Recently raised the minimum marriage age and supported prevention efforts. Some regions still allow religious exceptions.

Nepal

Strong legal commitment, but cultural traditions remain barriers. Early marriage is linked to caste norms and rural economic deprivation.

Afghanistan

Severely limited, the current government restricts girls' rights. One of the highest-risk environments for girls due to Taliban policies.

Yemen

Supports change but is unable to be implemented due to the war. Families often resort to early marriage for economic survival.

Saudi Arabia

Recent reforms restrict child marriage. Marriage under 18 is still possible with judicial approval.

Egypt

Actively combating child marriage through legal and educational campaigns. Informal (unregistered) marriages remain a major challenge.

Kenya



Strongly committed to eliminating child marriage. Progress achieved through community-driven initiatives.

Uganda

Supports international cooperation but struggles with enforcement. High prevalence in rural and conflict-affected regions.

Brazil

Recognizes child marriage as a harmful practice. “Informal unions” involving minors are common, especially in rural areas.

Mexico

Legally prohibits child marriage and supports global anti-child marriage agendas. Some states still experience informal early unions linked to socioeconomic hardship.

United Kingdom

Strong pro-abolition stance; actively advocates for global prevention. Has reformed laws to strengthen protection against under-18 marriages.

United States

Supports global efforts, though child marriage remains legal in some states with exceptions. Leads funding initiatives but is still working on domestic reforms.

Canada

Strongly against child marriage; actively funds global eradication initiatives. Works with UN agencies, especially in humanitarian contexts.

Definition of Key Terms

1. Child Marriage

A formal or informal union in which at least one of the parties is under the age of 18. It is considered a human rights violation and a harmful traditional practice.

2. Forced Marriage

A marriage in which one or both parties have not given their free and full consent. Many child marriages qualify as forced due to a lack of maturity and autonomy.



3. Early Union / Informal Union

A domestic partnership in which minors cohabit without legal registration. These unions often bypass marriage laws but still carry the same risks as child marriage.

4. Gender Inequality

A social condition in which individuals are treated differently based on their gender, limiting women's and girls' opportunities, rights, and empowerment.

5. Patriarchal Norms

Social and cultural beliefs that prioritize male authority and restrict women's freedom contribute to the acceptance of child marriage.

6. Harmful Traditional Practices

Cultural, social, or religious customs that negatively affect the well-being or rights of individuals, including child marriage, FGM, and forced unions.

7. CEDAW (Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women)

A 1979 UN treaty that identifies discrimination against women, including harmful practices such as child marriage, as violations of human rights.

8. CRC (Convention on the Rights of the Child)

A 1989 UN treaty recognizing children's rights to protect themselves from harmful practices and ensuring their physical, mental, and social development.

9. SDG 5.3

A target under Sustainable Development Goal 5 that aims to eliminate all harmful practices, including child, early, and forced marriage, by 2030.

10. Minimum Legal Age of Marriage

The legally established age at which individuals are allowed to marry. Most countries set it at 18, but enforcement varies significantly.

11. Dowry / Bride Price

Payments or gifts exchanged during marriage arrangements, which in some regions incentivize early marriage due to economic pressures.

12. Community-Based Interventions



Programs led by local communities to shift cultural norms, raise awareness, and prevent early marriage from within society.

13. Legal Enforcement Mechanisms

Systems that ensure laws are implemented effectively, including reporting mechanisms, penalties, monitoring, and coordination between institutions.

14. Empowerment of Girls

Efforts that improve girls' education, autonomy, economic opportunities, and decision-making power, reducing vulnerability to early marriage.

15. Human Rights Violation

An act that infringes upon universally recognized rights. Child marriage violates rights related to health, development, education, and autonomy.

Guiding questions

1. What economic, cultural, and social factors continue to fuel child marriage?
2. How can community-led initiatives shift harmful norms from within?
3. What approaches best engage traditional and religious leaders in eliminating this practice?
4. How can countries enforce laws without provoking cultural backlash?
5. Which strategies should be prioritized in a UN resolution to ensure long-term, sustainable impact?

Delegation list:

Afghanistan
Bangladesh
Brazil
Burkina Faso
Canada
Central African Republic
Chad
Colombia
Egypt
Ethiopia
India
Indonesia



Mexico
Mozambique
Nepal
Niger
Nigeria
Pakistan
Saudi Arabia
Somalia
South Sudan
Sudan
United Kingdom
United States
Yemen

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