

GIRLS' EDUCATION AND CHILD MARRIAGE

Keeping all girls in school is one of the best ways of preventing child marriage.^a At the same time, child marriage remains a significant barrier to girls' access to quality education. Whatever the reason for a girl dropping out of school, once married it is often very difficult for her to return. In this brief, we explore the key facts, two-way impacts, common drivers and solutions on education and child marriage.



PICTURED: Kavita with her friends at school in Rajasthan, India. She wants to complete her education before living with her husband. Photo: Girls Not Brides/Allison Joyce

Child marriage is a human rights violation. Its drivers are complex and vary according to the context. They include gender inequality, poverty, social norms that discriminate against girls, customary or religious laws that condone the practice, and an inadequate legislative framework and/or civil registration system. The relationship between child marriage and girls' education works both ways, and decisions around them are complex and influenced by a variety of factors. For example, a girl may drop out of school for an unrelated reason and then find marriage is one of the only options open to her; or the decision for her to get married may force her to drop out of school.

Key facts

- **Keeping girls in school – especially secondary school – is one of the best ways of delaying marriage.** On average, the likelihood of a girl marrying as a child is six percentage points less for every additional year she stays in secondary education.¹
- **Access to education affects the timing of marriage more than marriage affects access to education.** That is, rather than dropping out of school to get married, most girls drop out of school and *then* get married.
- **Education is one of the most powerful drivers of gender equality** because it can empower individuals and lead to the transformation of discriminatory gender norms.²
- **School closures, the economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, reduced civil society space due to lockdown measures, and humanitarian crises related to climate change and conflict** threaten decades of progress made towards gender equality, placing many girls at heightened exposure to gender-based violence (GBV), sexual exploitation, adolescent pregnancy and child marriage.³
- **With reduced poverty and increased female labour force participation** – particularly in stable and highly skilled jobs – more girls can stay in school and avoid child marriage.

^aWe use the term “child marriage” to refer to all forms of child, early and forced marriage and unions where at least one party is under the age of 18. In this, we include all girls and adolescents affected by the practice – whether in formal or informal unions – and acknowledge the culturally-specific understandings of childhood and development, and the complex relationship between age, consent and force.

Uneven progress

Over the past 25 years, there has been huge progress in preventing child marriage and improving girls' access to education. Fewer girls are getting married or becoming mothers, and more girls are enrolling in school and completing primary and lower secondary education. However, this progress has been uneven and far from equitable. Girls in the poorest countries and from the most marginalised households – like those in rural areas, from Indigenous communities, or in fragile or humanitarian contexts – are much more likely to drop out of school or marry before age 18. Unless we accelerate and scale up progress, we will not reach the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) targets on child marriage, girls' education or gender equality.

Progress on child marriage

- **1 in 5** girls are married before age 18 today,⁴ compared to 1 in 4 in 2004.⁵ Progress has been greatest amongst those from wealthier backgrounds.⁶
- **25 million** child marriages have been avoided since 2011.⁷
- **19%** of girls around the world today still marry before the age of 18 and 5% before the age of 15.⁸
- **36%** of girls in the world's lowest-income countries and **35%** in the world's most fragile contexts marry before 18, almost double the global average.⁹

Progress on girls' education

- **180 million** more girls and adolescents have enrolled in primary and secondary school since 1995, and their learning outcomes have improved.¹⁰
- **244 million** children and youth are out of school today; the number is increasing in West, Central, East and Southern Africa.¹¹
- The gender parity index in primary and secondary education increased to an **equal number** of girls and boys enrolling in 2018, up from about 90 girls enrolled for every 100 boys in 1995.¹²
- Girls are still significantly **less likely than boys to enrol** in education in many low-income countries.¹³
- **¾** of primary-school-age children who may never go to school are girls.¹⁴
- In at least **20 countries** – mostly in West, Central, East and Southern Africa – hardly any adolescent girls from poor, rural contexts complete upper secondary school. **1 in 4** young women cannot read or write.¹⁵
- Only **1 in 10** Indigenous adolescent girls completes secondary school in Latin America.¹⁶
- **8%** of States have laws restricting the right to education of pregnant and parenting girls.¹⁷

The impact of child marriage on girls' education

Married girls face many practical barriers to education, including the unequal division of household and caring responsibilities, stigma, forced exclusion from school and gender norms that keep them at home. Child marriage often results in adolescent pregnancy, and this too results in girls dropping out or being excluded from school because of national laws, a lack of support for re-enrolment and stigma.¹⁸ Child marriage is more likely to take place in settings where girls' educational opportunities are limited.¹⁹ The younger the age at marriage, the greater the impact.²⁰ Once married, a girl is very unlikely to remain in or return to school.

Evidence from around the world

- Up to **30%** of girls who drop out of school did so because of child marriage or adolescent pregnancy, according to parents in 15 countries.²¹
- Only **2.4%** of girls aged 15-19 are married *and* in school, according to a global study.²²
- **21%** of adolescents – mostly girls – in Nigeria and **10%** in Sierra Leone are kept away from education by marriage and pregnancy.²³

The impact of girls' educational opportunities on child marriage

The protective impact of education is greatest at secondary level. The more years a girl spends in education, the greater the reduction in the risk of child marriage.²⁴ Secondary education is a much stronger and more consistent protection against child marriage than primary school education. Transition to – and completion of – secondary school needs to be the focus for investment and action. Yet, universal, quality primary education is also essential, as the route to secondary education and a space to foster positive gender norms.

The most marginalised girls are most at risk of being excluded from education. Girls from poor, rural, conflict and crisis settings and other marginalised groups will not progress to secondary education unless they a) have a quality primary education and b) barriers in the transition to secondary education – such as school fees, distance to school, safety and entrance exams – are reduced. Mutually reinforcing forms of discrimination further decrease access to education for many girls. For example, 95.5% of children with disabilities in Nigeria are out of school.²⁵

The effect of girls' education is intergenerational. The education of girls in one generation can delay marriage in their daughters' generation. Although relative educational mobility has risen in recent decades, the number of years a girl spends in school is still more aligned to her parents' education – especially her mothers' – than boys'. Educated women are more likely to invest in the health and education of their children as they are more likely to value schooling and be aware of the rates of return on education. As a result, their children have better nutrition, higher immunisation rates, increased enrolment in school and improved school performance.²⁶

Evidence from around the world

- **In Nepal**, women with the School Leaving Certificate (SLC) and above marry at 22.4 years of age on average. They are the only group of women to marry above the legal minimum age. Women with no education marry 4.6 years earlier than women with SLC and above.
- **In Ethiopia**, one study shows that girls whose mothers are educated are two times less likely to marry under age 18 than girls whose mothers are uneducated. The same pattern is not found in relation to fathers' education, so this is probably a role model effect.²⁷

It makes economic sense for countries to educate girls and end child marriage. As well as being the right thing to do for girls and women, the potential societal and economic benefits of educating girls and ending child marriage are huge.

Education improves health and livelihoods, contributes to social stability and drives economic growth. One additional year of schooling can increase a woman's earnings by up to 20%.²⁸ Countries can lose more than US\$1 billion a year by failing to educate girls to the same level as boys.²⁹

The societal and economic benefits of ending child marriage include lowering population growth rates, increasing per capita Gross Domestic Product (GDP), reducing child mortality, increasing women's earnings, and interrupting intergenerational cycles of poverty and disadvantage.³⁰

What Girls Not Brides member organisations are doing:

- **SERniña** in Guatemala runs workshops in schools for youth from disadvantaged backgrounds. The workshops focus on building self-esteem, challenging gender norms and expectations, forming healthy relationships and living a life based on values.
- **Dynamic Youth Development Organisation** in Nigeria is working with traditional and religious leaders, parents and guardians, encouraging them to support girls' access to education and to end child marriage.
- **Pro Sport Development** in India worked with Girls Not Brides to organise a two-day national consultation on **how to use sport to address gender-based discrimination** in India.

Common drivers of child marriage and poor educational outcomes for girls

The decisions leading a girl to leave school or get married are often made at the same time and are influenced by many of the same factors. Work to end child marriage and keep girls in school needs to address these shared underlying factors.

Inequality and harmful gender norms

Child marriage and the lack of educational opportunities for girls are rooted in gender inequality and the belief that girls and women are inferior to boys and men. This inequality denies girls and women their human rights and leads to a preference for the education of boys, child marriage and early pregnancy, and sexual and gender-based violence. It also limits girls' sexual and reproductive health and rights, restricts their movement, and contributes to the unequal distribution of unpaid care and domestic work. Globally, girls aged 10-14 years spend 50% more time than boys on unpaid household chores, which can take a toll on their learn.³¹

Ethnic and cultural discrimination in schools is also a major obstacle to equal access to education. In Latin America, for example, Indigenous girls face unwelcoming environments in schools, discrimination based on sex, violence, and sometimes sexual abuse, all of which contribute to poor school performance and increased school dropout.³²

Education is one of the most powerful drivers of gender equality. It helps girls to build a range of skills and prepare for the labour market, and develop self-confidence and communications skills. It can also expose individuals to new ideas about gender through curricula and school practices, and to stereotype-defying role models and peers. Where large numbers of girls attend school, this can contribute to shifts in norms on female mobility and the acceptability of girls' education, and to changing community-level perceptions of girls and young women.

However, because schools tend to reflect wider society, **discriminatory norms and practices are often replicated in schools** unless there is a conscious effort to challenge them. Gender bias in teaching materials, different expectations of girls and boys, and the gendered assignment of chores can all perpetuate discriminatory gender norms and undermine educational outcomes. In contrast, a gender-transformative school environment and curriculum can empower girls and boys to become active members of their communities and challenge these norms.³³



PICTURED: Melody leads a "Let Girls Lead" programme workshop in Chimaltenango, Guatemala. Photo: Girls Not Brides/James Rodríguez/Arete

Poverty

Poverty is an important driver of child marriage and girls' lack of education. Progress on child marriage has been fastest in the richest communities and in regions that have made most progress on improving girls' education.³⁴ Meanwhile, child marriage has increased among girls from the poorest households. In Nigeria, 35% of children and adolescents from the poorest families complete primary and 15% secondary education, compared to 97% and 88% of those from the wealthiest socio-economic groups.³⁵

Economic pressures – combined with gender norms that place less value on girls' education – can lead to girls dropping out of school to take on work or care responsibilities at greater rates than boys. In the countries with the fewest available resources and most inequality, funding for accessible, affordable, quality education systems is often lacking, and families bear many of the costs – both direct (school fees at secondary level) and indirect (uniforms, books, exams and transport costs).

Such costs are a barrier for many, with girls more likely to be taken out of school than their brothers when families struggle to pay. Children living in poor and rural areas are also more likely to be affected by factors like a lack of adequate schools and transport.

What *Girls Not Brides* member organisations are doing:

- [Milaan Foundation](#) in India worked with *Girls Not Brides* to support girl leaders from its Girl Icons programme to conduct surveys on access to government social welfare schemes, structural barriers to girls' education, and the socio-economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on girls' education, child marriage and GBV in Uttar Pradesh.
- [Kakenya's Dream](#) in Kenya runs a Network for Excellence support programme for the 200 girls who have graduated from their boarding schools. They offer mentorship, tutoring, financial support and essential resources for girls in secondary and tertiary education programmes.
- [Parental Care Liberia](#) provides scholarships for underserved girls, girls at risk of child marriage and married girls.

Lack of sexual and reproductive health care and education, and adolescent pregnancy

Adolescent pregnancy is strongly correlated with school dropout and exclusion for adolescent girls in many regions. In parts of West, Central, East and Southern Africa and Latin America, unintended pregnancy is a significant cause of school dropout. Across all regions, higher educational attainment is associated with lower rates of adolescent pregnancy.

Parents' fear of adolescent pregnancy – often driven by norms linking girls' virginity with family honour – plays a strong role in school dropout and early marriage, as they think that going to school may allow girls to engage in sexual relationships or make them more vulnerable to sexual exploitation.

Many adolescent mothers do not return to school after giving birth because their school excludes them, they lack childcare options, their families do not let them or they feel unable to face the stigma and judgement of their classmates and teachers. Some countries ban pregnant adolescents from returning to school. Other countries have adopted re-entry policies and strategies but are not implementing them fully.

In our 2020 survey, pregnant adolescents' right to education was identified by *Girls Not Brides* member organisations as one of the most important issues affecting adolescent girls' access to – and retention in – education.³⁶

Evidence from around the world

- Global prevalence of adolescent pregnancy declined by **1/3** between 1995 and 2020.³⁷
- **14%** of 20-24-year-old women globally had given birth before age 18 in 2019, rising to **25%** in West, Central, Eastern and Southern Africa.³⁸
- Girls often drop out of school because of pregnancy. In Kenya an estimated **13,000** girls drop out of school every year due to pregnancy.³⁹ From March to June 2020, adolescent pregnancy **tripled** in Turkana county, Kenya, due to COVID-related school closures, as compared to 2019.⁴⁰



PICTURED: Young people take part in a Youth Voices Against Child Marriage event in Jakarta, Indonesia. Photo: *Girls Not Brides*/Graham Crouch

What *Girls Not Brides* member organisations are doing:

- **Equality Now** worked with civil-society organisations in Tanzania and Sierra Leone to file legal cases challenging discriminatory policies banning pregnant girls from attending school. In Sierra Leone the government has now lifted the ban.⁴¹ In Tanzania the government announced that girls would be offered an alternative path to education, through Folk Development Colleges, but they still cannot go back to regular schools.⁴²
- **Association Solidarité et Actions pour le Développement Durable** in Congo Brazzaville carries out awareness-raising activities for parents and community leaders to encourage them to address the stigmatisation of pregnant adolescents and support child protection and girls' education.
- **Child Rights Development Foundation** in Uganda is advocating for Hoima district local government to allocate 5% of the education budget to sexuality education in schools by the end of 2021.
- **Fundación Mexicana para la Planeación Familiar** in Mexico promotes access to sexual and reproductive health services for adolescent girls and women, as well as access to services for those who have experienced GBV.

School-related gender-based violence

In many countries, girls still do not have equal access to free, good-quality and safe education. School-related GBV is widespread, violates children's and adolescents' rights, and is a significant barrier for girls' – particularly adolescent girls' – access to and participation in education.⁴³ For those who continue their studies after these experiences, low achievement is common, as they try to avoid attention from teachers and peers.⁴⁴ It makes adolescent girls' transition to secondary school particularly difficult.

A lack of separate sanitation facilities for girls – in all their diversity – increases the risk of school-related GBV, leading to girls' loss of interest in school, disrupted studies and early school leaving. The economic impact of COVID-19 has exacerbated this situation as girls and adolescents from the poorest families are forced to prioritise other basic needs over safe menstrual products.

A lack of local secondary schools means that adolescent girls often face a **long and sometimes dangerous journey to school.** This can also increase families' reluctance to let them attend.



PICTURED: Monica, from South Sudan, would like to become a doctor. Photo: "Supporting girls' education" by Oxfam East Africa is licensed under CC BY 2.0

Evidence from around the world

- **246 million** girls and boys experience some form of school-related violence every year; girls are disproportionately affected by sexual and gender-based violence.⁴⁵
- **55%** of girls in Honduras reported not attending school due to physical violence perpetrated by teachers, while **22%** of female students in Malawi reported missing school due to unwanted sexual experiences.⁴⁶
- More than **1 in 4 girls** involved in a study across Africa, Asia and Latin America reported never or seldom feeling safe travelling to or from school.⁴⁷
- A significant proportion of gender non-conforming students experience school violence based on sexual orientation and gender identity. LGBTQI students report a higher level of violence than their non-LGBTQI peers.⁴⁸
- More than **1 in 5** primary schools around the world had no separate basic sanitation facilities for girls – in all their diversity – in 2018.⁴⁹
- **335 million** girls and adolescents attend schools lacking menstrual hygiene facilities.⁵⁰
- **10%** of girls and adolescents in West, Central, East and Southern Africa miss school during menstruation due to a lack of facilities and materials such as sanitary pads.⁵¹

What *Girls Not Brides* member organisations are doing:

- **Galkayo Education Centre for Peace and Development** in Somalia advocate for free sanitary kits to be part of essential packages in schools.
- **Girl Child Network** in Kenya advocate for gender-sensitive sanitation facilities in schools and for the supply of sanitary towels, underwear and other necessities for menstrual health management for girls and adolescents in school.
- **Raising Teenagers Uganda** provide girls and adolescents with reusable sanitary pads and support them to manage their periods with dignity. They also campaign to make menstrual products more affordable for all girls and women.
- **Youth Help Sierra Leone** is carrying out GBV and sexual harassment training in school, supporting secondary school adolescent girls and boys to set up clubs, empower their peers and say no to all forms of sexual violence.

Conflict, climate and crises

Child marriage is exacerbated in humanitarian crises.

When faced with economic hardship and increased violence, families may turn to child marriage to protect their daughters from sexual violence, rape and other forms of violence.⁵⁰

The climate crisis disproportionately affects countries in the Global South. More frequent and devastating droughts, floods, heatwaves and hurricanes put families at risk of further poverty, food and housing insecurity, and conflict. They have also severely limited families' access to essential services like education and health care.

Extreme drought in the Horn of Africa has tripled the number of children at risk of dropping out of school across Ethiopia, Kenya and Somalia in just three months in 2022. As a result, millions of adolescent girls are at greater risk of child protection issues, including female genital mutilation/cutting and child marriage.⁵¹

Crisis can result in extreme exclusion of girls from schools. Schools are often the target of direct attacks, and girls and adolescent girls are at particular risk of sexual violence, trafficking and violent attempts to repress their education. Girls – particularly adolescent girls – are less likely than boys to return to school following conflict because families fear sexual violence and general insecurity at or on the way to school and prioritise boys' school fees.⁵² Adolescent girls in Afghanistan have been excluded from secondary education since the regime changed in 2021.⁵³

Evidence from around the world

- The **10 countries** with the highest child marriage prevalence are currently considered fragile states.⁵⁴
- **4 of the 5 countries** with the largest gender gaps in education are affected by conflict.⁵⁵
- Adolescent girls are nearly **90% more likely** to be out of secondary school in countries affected by fragility and conflict.⁵⁶
- In these contexts, girls are also **2.5 times more likely** to be out of school than boys.⁵⁷
- Over **3,000 direct attacks** on schools documented over 2020-21.⁵⁸
- Over **2,400** students, teachers and education personnel injured, killed, abducted or threatened, and **2,300 arrested** or detained over 2020-21. In several countries, girls and women were specifically targeted due to their gender.⁵⁹
- **119% increase** in child marriage in parts of Ethiopia most affected by drought and food insecurity; 50% increase in GBV – including child marriage, domestic violence and sexual violence – in parts of Somaliland.⁶⁰

What Girls Not Brides member organisations are doing:

- In Lebanon, **Sawa Association for Development** offer Lebanese and refugee girls education services and vocational training to avoid child marriage.
- **Associação Moçambicana para o Desenvolvimento da Família** in Mozambique provides GBV prevention and response services in resettlement centres, with an emphasis on education. This includes mobile brigades, health and mental health services and awareness sessions for community leaders, out-of-school girls and their families.

COVID-19

The impact of the pandemic means we are less likely to achieve the SDG targets of ending child marriage and ensuring that all girls have access to 12 years of quality education by 2030. Key factors that could undo the progress made in recent years include:

- **Widespread school closures** during the COVID-19 response. From March 2020 to October 2021, schools were closed or partly closed for an average of 55% of instruction days.⁶¹
- **10 million more girls are expected to marry** before 2030 because of COVID-19, taking the total number to 110 million.⁶²
- **Girls from the most marginalised families** and communities have been disproportionately affected.
- Girls in many low- and middle-income countries **lack equal access to mobile phones and the internet**, so are at a disadvantage when learning shifts to distance and online formats.
- **Girls taking on more childcare and domestic chores** during the pandemic have less time to study.



PICTURED: Girls take part in a drama session with the International Rescue Committee in Lebanon. Photo: Girls Not Brides/ Thom Pierce

Recommendations

To change the lives of countless girls through increasing access to education – ensuring they have the skills to flourish, reducing their risk of child marriage – we need governments to invest in getting girls into school, keeping girls in school, and making sure that school is a safe place to be.

We call on governments to:

Work across sectors to guarantee access to 12 years of quality gender-transformative education for girls at risk of child marriage and married girls.

- **Guarantee access to 12 years of free and compulsory primary and secondary education** for all girls and boys, removing all school fees and levies.
- **Ensure donor governments dedicate increased resources to education** – particularly girls' education – working towards the goal of 0.7% of GDP on overseas aid, with 20% of this spent on education.
- **Ensure domestic financing for education receives at least 4-6% of GDP** and/or constitutes at least 15-20% of public expenditure.
- **Ensure domestic financing for education is spent equitably, effectively and efficiently** to ensure gender equality in education and incorporating strategies to address child marriage and support girls at risk of marriage and married girls.
- **Design gender-responsive education systems and cross-sector plans** that acknowledge the two-way link between child marriage and girls' education, and address the rights of girls at risk of child marriage and married girls, promoting the active participation of girls in the design of education plans and programmes.
- **Collect, analyse and use better quality data** on barriers to education for marginalised girls and on the impact of education policies, plans and funding on child marriage and adolescent pregnancy.

Challenge drivers of child marriage through the creation of inclusive girl-friendly schools free from violence.

- **Ensure that schools are free from violence**, introducing measures to prevent violence and protect girls, establishing confidential reporting mechanisms, training teachers to recognise and report abuse, and providing safe spaces for girls and adolescent girls – especially those at risk of child marriage and married girls.
- **Support a gender-transformative school environment and curriculum**, developing gender-transformative teaching and learning materials, promoting role models for girls – including female teachers and education leaders – and encouraging girls to study science, technology, engineering and maths subjects.
- **Provide safe, private toilets and sanitation facilities** and products for all girls to manage their menstrual hygiene in school.
- **Ensure the provision of age-appropriate comprehensive sexuality education**, including on responsible sexual behaviour, the prevention of early pregnancy, information about where and how to access sexual and reproductive health services in and out of schools and linked to broader discussions of gender and power.

- **End discriminatory policies and practices that exclude pregnant girls, married girls and young mothers** from school, implement re-entry policies to support young mothers to return to school, and fund national strategies that support the re-engagement of young women in education after pregnancy.
- **Support community sensitisation** to ensure that parents, leaders and other community members are aware of the importance of girls' education and of delaying marriage.

Ensure girls at risk of child marriage and married girls have continued and safe access to quality education in humanitarian and crisis situations

- **Ensure that education sector plans and budgets anticipate risks** and respond to the needs of adolescent girls in crisis situations, including girls at risk of marriage and married girls.
- **Ensure adolescent girls are considered and consulted in each cluster's humanitarian prevention and response programmes** – especially education, protection, health, camp coordination and management, water and sanitation, and shelter – to ensure a comprehensive and multisectoral response. Specifically, promote greater coordination between the protection and education clusters to identify girls at risk of child marriage and of early school leaving.
- **Ensure all girls – including pregnant girls, married girls and young mothers – have equal opportunities** to access their right to education in all crisis contexts.
- **Endorse and implement the Safe schools declaration** and ensure that schools in conflict zones – and the routes to and from them – are protected and free from violence.
- **Support the provision of medical and psychosocial assistance** to survivors of attacks on education, taking into account the specific needs and experiences of adolescent girls.

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Girls Not Brides is a global partnership made up of more than 1,600 civil society organisations from over 100 countries committed to ending child marriage and ensure girls can reach their full potential.

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