

Two young girls are walking along a dirt path lined with trees. They are both wearing purple long-sleeved shirts and white trousers, with white scarves draped over their shoulders. The girl on the left is wearing a white headscarf and has her hand near her mouth as if laughing or talking. The girl on the right is smiling broadly. The background shows a row of trees and a clear sky.

A girl's right to say no to marriage

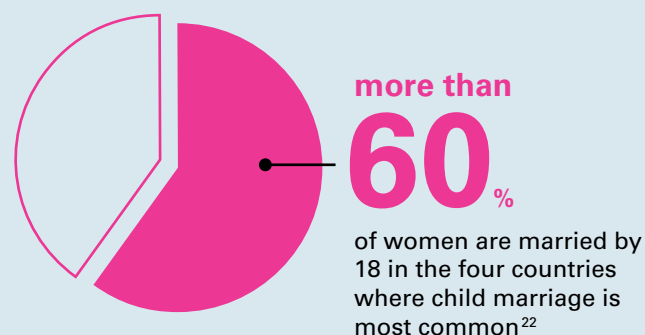
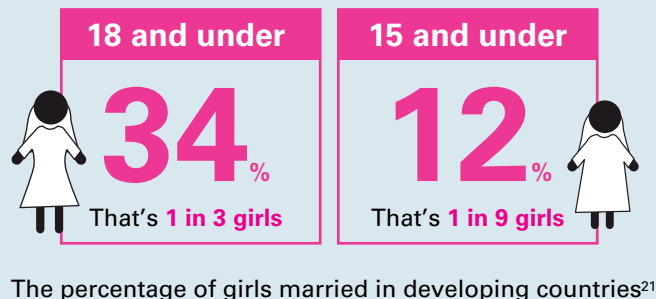
Working to end child marriage and keep girls in school

Executive summary



Because I am a Girl

39,000 girls under 18 are married every day



More than 140 million girls will become child brides by 2020, if current rates of child marriage continue

Executive Summary

Child marriage is a violation of children's human rights. Despite being prohibited by international human rights law and many national laws, child marriage continues to rob millions of girls around the world of their childhood. It forces them out of education and into a life of poor prospects, with increased risk of violence, abuse, ill health or early death. While boys are also married as children, child marriage affects girls in greater numbers and with consequences which can be devastating for their health and well-being.

A global problem

One in three girls in the developing world will be married by her eighteenth birthday.¹ If nothing is done to stop current trends, more than 140 million girls will be married as children by 2020. That's **14 million every year** or nearly **39,000 girls married every day**.²

Underpinning child marriage is a combination of poverty, gender inequality and a lack of protection for children's rights. These drivers are frequently compounded by limited access to quality educational and employment opportunities and reinforced by entrenched social norms.

Poverty and geography: drivers of child marriage

Girls from the poorest 20 per cent of households are over three times more likely to marry before they are 18 than those from the richest homes.³ In developing countries, girls in rural areas are twice as likely to be married by 18 as those in urban areas.⁴

There is a growing international consensus on the severe impact which child marriage has on children's rights and that it often constitutes a barrier to realising girls' right to education. It is also clear that education is key to delaying marriage, to giving girls more choices and opportunities, and enabling them to develop their full potential.

More education = delayed marriage



The percentage of girls married by 18, by level of education²³

In this report, Plan is calling for urgent, concerted and integrated action at local, national and international levels to enable millions of girls to avoid child marriage, stay in school and benefit from a quality education.

The toll on health and well-being

Child marriage is a public health issue as well as a human rights violation. Girls married early are more likely to experience violence, abuse and forced sexual relations. They are more vulnerable to sexually transmitted infections (including HIV) and have reduced levels of sexual and reproductive health.⁵

Early pregnancy is one of the most dangerous causes and consequences of child marriage. Girls who become pregnant at a young age face higher risks of maternal mortality and morbidity.⁶ Pregnancy during the first years after puberty increases the risk of miscarriage, obstructed labour, post-partum haemorrhage, pregnancy-related hypertension and lifelong debilitating conditions such as obstetric fistula.⁷

Maternal and infant mortality

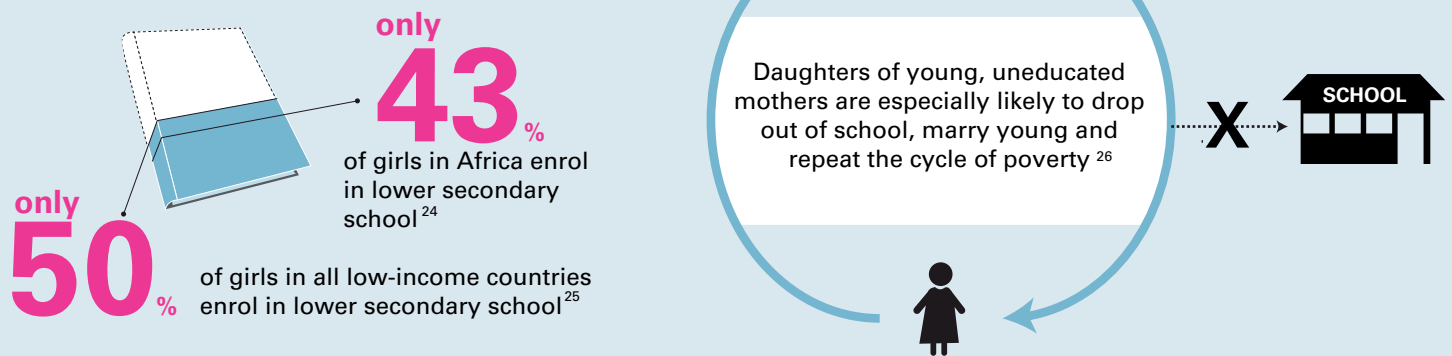
Every year, nearly 13.7 million 15- to 19-year-old girls in the developing world give birth while married.⁸ Complications in pregnancy and childbirth are the leading cause of mortality for girls aged 15 to 19 in developing countries.⁹ Infant deaths are 50 per cent higher among babies born to mothers under 20 than among those born to women in their twenties.¹⁰

Babies born to adolescent mothers are more likely to be stillborn, premature, underweight and at increased risk of dying in infancy due to the mother's young age. This risk is compounded by a lack of access to comprehensive sexual and reproductive health information and services.¹¹

Child marriage also means that children are often vulnerable and socially isolated from their own family and friends, with little or no support for dealing with marriage, parenthood, domestic and family duties.

Girls with no education are three times more likely to marry before 18 than those with a secondary or higher education

Poverty drives girls out of school



Prevention through education

Education is widely considered to be one of the most important factors in delaying the age of marriage for girls.¹² In developing countries, evidence shows that the more education a girl receives, the less likely she is to be married before the age of 18 and the more likely she is to delay pregnancy and childbirth.¹³

Education is key to ending child marriage

Girls with no education are three times as likely to marry by 18 as those with a secondary or higher education.¹⁴ Nearly 70 per cent of girls with no education were married by the age of 18 in the 25 countries with the highest prevalence of child marriage.¹⁵

All girls have a right to a quality education – one which does not reinforce gender stereotypes, but which is relevant to their needs and aspirations and promotes gender equality and human rights. Learning in a safe and supportive environment enables girls to develop the skills, knowledge and confidence to claim their rights. It gives them the chance to reach their full potential and to assert their autonomy, helping them to make free and informed decisions about their life, including whether, when and who to marry, along with decisions affecting their sexual and reproductive health.

Yet, in low-income countries, only 50 per cent of girls are enrolled in lower secondary school, with 39 per cent enrol in secondary school.¹⁶ Social, domestic and economic pressures too often force adolescent girls out of secondary school. The costs associated with schooling increase – and girls are thought ready for marriage, child-bearing and domestic duties. They drop out at the very time when education could guide them through the vulnerable period of adolescence.¹⁷

Child marriage costs lives



50,000

The number of teenagers who die of pregnancy and birth complications every year ²⁷

National laws discriminate against girls



146

countries



105

countries

The number of countries where marriage before 18 is legal with parental consent, per sex²⁸

Marriage, pregnancy and school drop-out

Marriage and pregnancy have been identified as some of the key factors forcing girls to leave school. Girls often lack basic literacy and numeracy skills because they have to drop out. **Each year of marriage before adulthood reduces a girl's literacy by 5.6 percentage points.**¹⁸

Plan wants to draw attention to the barriers stopping many girls from realising their right to quality education, which, in turn, increases their risk of marrying too young. Financial barriers and harmful gender norms can drive parents to prioritise sons' education over that of daughters' – often on the assumption that girls will marry soon anyway. Many parents also fear for their daughters' safety in school. The onset of puberty makes girls more vulnerable to sexual violence, harassment and abuse by teachers, staff and other pupils.¹⁹ Poor teaching and unsupportive environments make girls less likely to pass critical examinations needed to access higher levels of education.²⁰

Plan's *Because I am a Girl* campaign aims to ensure that girls receive a quality primary education and can transition to, and successfully complete, secondary school. It seeks to enable girls to have more choices in life, to allow them to play an active role in their community and to break intergenerational cycles of poverty, insecurity and ill health.

Child marriage is a serious human rights violation, not just a development issue

Recommendations for action

Plan has a long history of working directly with children, families and communities to change attitudes and behaviours which foster child marriage, yet we know that, in order to tackle a global human rights issue, we need to also work with partners at a national, regional and international level to generate the political will and targeted resources to support governments to deliver national action plans to eliminate child marriage.

Plan is therefore calling on national governments, with the support of donors and civil society, to:

1. Ensure that national legislation prohibits child marriage and makes 18 the minimum age for marriage for both boys and girls

This should be accompanied by both enforcement of legislation and strengthened birth and marriage registration systems.

2. Ensure girls' access to quality primary and secondary education

All girls should be able to receive a quality education which promotes non-discrimination, gender equality and human rights in a safe and supportive environment.

3. Engage and mobilise parents, teachers and community leaders

Awareness-raising activities should promote education and dialogue to change social norms and attitudes which perpetuate child marriage. Programmes should also promote the role which men and boys can play in ending child marriage and other harmful practices.

4. Provide comprehensive sexual and reproduction health information and services

Safe, comprehensive, age-appropriate sexual and reproductive health information and services should be accessible to all adolescents.

5. Recognise and promote participation of children in decisions affecting them

Girls and boys should be engaged as key participants in ending child marriage. Opportunities should be created to allow them to make their voices heard and be key agents of change within their communities.

6. Ensure support and protection for children who are already married

– including by providing health care and psycho-social support and educational opportunities.



Tweet me

**Child marriage impacts on girls' rights
to education, health and protection from
violence #bcimagirl #endchildmarriage**

Plan is calling on the international community to:

1. Work together to adopt, by 2015 at the latest, a **UN General Assembly resolution to address child marriage as a violation of children's rights**.
2. **Ensure that child marriage is consistently raised as a human rights issue** at the international level.
3. **Support governments to develop and implement national action plans** to end child marriage, through financial support, technical assistance and programme delivery.
4. Support governments to **ensure that all girls are able to transition to, and complete, a quality secondary education**.
5. Support further research **to improve data collection and monitoring and evaluation** on the drivers and consequences of child marriage.
6. Ensure that the **post-2015 development framework includes a focus on ending child marriage, and on quality education for all children, among its objectives**.

Committed to ending child marriage

Plan's report draws on our own primary research, as well as a wide range of international and national studies on child marriage. Plan urges commitment from the international community and national governments to end child marriage, so that girls can be free to realise their right to education.

**For a full copy
of the report**

go to:
[plan-international.org/
girls/ChildMarriageReport](http://plan-international.org/girls/ChildMarriageReport)

or contact us:
[publishing@plan-
international.org](mailto:publishing@plan-international.org)

Endnotes

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Because I am a Girl is Plan's global initiative to end gender inequality, promote girls' rights and lift millions of girls out of poverty. We aim to support girls to get the education, skills and support they need to transform their lives and the world around them. Plan's 75 years' experience has shown that real change can take place when girls are valued. We are working with girls, communities, traditional leaders, governments, global institutions and the private sector to address the barriers which prevent girls from completing their education. Supporting girls' education is the right, fair and smart thing to do. It is one of the single best investments we can make to help end poverty for generations to come.

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