

*United Nations International Children's Emergency  
Fund (UNICEF)*



*Child marriage present in  
developing countries:  
securing the welfare and  
human rights of children*

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**Strength in diversity**  
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## *I. INTRODUCTION*

The United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF), was established in 1946 after WWII concluded. It is a branch of the General Assembly (GA) of the United Nations. Its main objective is "to help children and young people whose lives and futures were at risk, no matter what role their country played in the war" (UNICEF, 2022). The main office is located in New York, and it takes action in over 190 countries (UNICEF, 2022).

During the 1980s, UNICEF assisted the U.N. Commission on Human Rights in the drafting of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (History Editors, 2020). To protect the health of children, this committee conducted campaigns against tuberculosis, yaws, leprosy, and malaria; made provisions for environmental sanitation; encouraged maternal and child health care education, among others (The Nobel Prize, n.d). Within its actions, this organization takes a life-cycle approach, recognizing the particular importance of early childhood and adolescent development (IDA, n.d). The committee focuses on the most disadvantaged children, including those living in fragile contexts, those with disabilities, those affected by rapid urbanization, and those affected by environmental degradation (IDA, n.d). It is an organization that works through donations, it has government support to be able to complete its mission.

Child Marriage is a fundamental violation of human rights. It is defined as "Child marriage refers to any formal marriage or informal union between a child under the age of 18 and an adult or another child" (UNICEF, 2022). Child Marriage represents the inequality that exists in society and how most of the time women's rights are violated, creating a lack of expression but also problems for girls, both as pregnancies at young ages and psychological and physical violence. Liberty rights are violated due to child marriage causing a girl's entire choice to be made by her father or guardian. The economic factors of the countries are one of the reasons why the problem exists since families prefer to commit their daughters to take care of them, to be able to not pay anymore for them, and make the husband take care of all the economical responsibilities of the girl (UNICEF, 2022).

According to UNICEF "The right to 'free and full' consent to marriage is recognized in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which states that consent

cannot be ‘free and full’ when one of the parties involved is not sufficiently mature to make an informed decision about a life partner” (UNICEF 2022). Unfortunately, child Marriage is most prominent in developing nations. As a result, it is often overlooked as a major problem in modern society, of the number of rights violated at the time of child marriage, but also because girls stop studying due to child marriage, despite its integral importance in the matter of maintaining human dignity and respecting the aforementioned Universal Declaration of Human Rights. “Child marriage often compromises a girl’s development by resulting in early pregnancy and social isolation, interrupting her schooling, limiting her opportunities for career and vocational advancement, and placing her at increased risk of domestic violence” (UNICEF, 2022).

## ***II. HISTORY OF THE PROBLEM***

During the 1800s “The age at which children were married varied but tended to be around nine, ten or eleven years old, and past the legal age for contracting a marriage. However, children as young as two were taken to church and helped to recite vows of future consent” (MANAGING EDITOR, 2018).

Marriage is something that over the years has been considered an act of commitment between two families and social status. Child marriage has been around for many years, and in the 19th century it had a strong impact on society since the marriage had an impact on the economic aspect that created an impact on the way a family decided to educate their children and also because how they stop having economic problems was giving in to marry their daughters so this way they stopped maintaining there, and it was the reason why it persisted, but also because of the strong beliefs in God and the union between a man and a woman (Cook, n.d).

“A number of human rights instruments lay down norms to be applied to marriage, covering issues of age, consent, equality within marriage, and the personal and property rights of women”, this law was implemented by the OHCHR (Umemoto, 2001). “In international law, the issue of child marriage was first addressed in the 1962 Convention on Consent to Marriage, Minimum Age for Marriage and Registration of Marriages” (Ebetürk, 2021). This treaty was one of the first possible solutions to solve

this problem, but only 16 countries signed it, which caused the treaty not to have that much of an impact (General Assembly resolution, 1964).

“In 1979, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women stated that child marriage is illegal” (Nour, 2009). This treatise was created to show the areas in which women are not treated the same as men, but also to show the big problem which women face with early marriage. Such as pregnancy at young ages, physical violence, and leaving school.

After the implementation created by the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, in 1989 the Convention on the Rights of the Child decreed illegal child marriage for those under the age of 18 years old (Nour, 2009). Although the law was implemented, many countries adapted it to the traditions of each country, thus making the age implemented by the Convention on the Rights of the Child, was not respected and the same in all countries.

Civil society began to take action on the issue in the early 90s as a part of the international women’s movement. This movement culminated in 1995 with the Fourth World Conference on Women (Ebetürk, I. 2021). That causes a fall of 40 percent in child marriage mainly in Africa (Walker, J. 2013). The legislation established that there should be a minimum age of 18 years old in Africa to be able to get married.

### *III. CURRENT SITUATION*

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, child marriage was a problem that in some areas of the world was better controlled compared to others that continued to increase because of the laws that each country has, and the way they are interpreted. “In the last ten years, the proportion of young women globally who were married as children had decreased by 15 percent, from nearly 1 in 4 to 1 in 5, the equivalent of some 25 million marriages averted, again that is now under threat” (UNICEF, 2021).

The COVID-19 pandemic caused an impact and increased the percentage of child marriage in five countries, them being: Bangladesh, Ethiopia, Brazil, Nigeria, and India. “The total number of excess child marriages in these five countries could range from 3.5 million to 4.9 million in the unmitigated scenario and from 1.8 million to 2.7

million in the mitigated scenario” (ScienceDirect, 2021). Due to the COVID-19 pandemic many schools closed, parents died, and there were many economical crises in the international community.

The COVID-19 pandemic caused international foundations and programs against child marriage to face issues with eradicating the problem due to family and economic situations, the lack of resources in the countries, and the lockdown. In countries of Eastern and Southern Africa, the problem increased due to the pandemic since it was shown that the number of child marriages, violence, and child pregnancies increased due to the lockdown and the life with lack of resources. “In Mozambique, calls to the Child Helpline showed that children made 16,244 calls from January to April 2020 which was double the number of calls made during the same period in 2019”, these calls were mainly due to child marriage cases, however, some dealt with domestic violence as well (UNFPA, 2020).

Due to the pandemic child marriage increased in countries that were economically affected by the pandemic. This created a sense that cases of child marriage in developing countries will increase and that the problem had to be controlled. This caused the expectation that this problem was already null, and will increase more years to eradicate the issue.

Currently, not only do women suffer from child marriage but there are also cases in which men suffer from it. “While boys and girls who marry in childhood do not face the same risks and consequences due to biological and social differences, the practice is nonetheless a rights violation for children of both sexes. Similar to child brides, child grooms are forced to take on adult responsibilities for which they may not be prepared” (UNICEF, 2022). Regardless of sex, child marriage is a fundamental human rights violation; although the numbers for child marriage in men are not as jarring as in women, it stands at a worrying 115 million men and boys married before the age of 18.

“Worldwide, more than 650 million women alive today were married as children. Every year, at least 12 million girls are married before they reach the age of 18” (OHCHR, 2022). This causes the number of domestic violence, pregnancy in minors, and lack of education to increase in developing countries.

Child marriage not only causes pregnancy or lack of education for women, but it also creates a need to escape, which exposes children to danger. It may also extend the probability to which girls from a young age are exposed to any type of harm due to domestic violence or quality of life. Child marriage is causing a high number of women to die due to the young age at which they marry (OCHA, 2021).

“South Asia sees 2,000 child marriage-related deaths every year (or six every day), followed by East Asia and the Pacific with 650 deaths (or two every day), and Latin American and the Caribbean, with 560 annual deaths (or nearly two a day)” (OCHA, 2021). This means that problems are caused in the social and economic development of the countries, but also causing problems for the lives of the country's youth.

“Among girls growing up in South Asia, 30% experience early marriage, compared with 25% in Latin America and the Caribbean. Rates are 17% in the Middle East and North Africa, and 11% in Eastern Europe and Central Asia” (Plan International, n.d). These numbers make it that much more difficult for NGOs and UNICEF to end the problem globally. Also creating a high increase in the lack of human rights of women.

Since child marriage is a pressing issue in the international community, various conventions have been arranged to help solve the problem. In terms of committees, the one that holds the most importance on the matter is the Committee on the Rights of the Child. As it pertains to international agreements related to child marriage there is the Convention on Consent to Marriage, Minimum Age for Marriage and Registration of Marriages, the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, and the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and People's Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa (UNICEF, 2022).

#### *IV. UN ACTIONS*

The impact of child marriage on society has affected different aspects of society for many years. Child marriage causes a problem in society and makes countries decrease their growth rate in terms of social development. For that reason, the United

Nations (UN) has created long-term plans which involve programs and campaigns to solve the issue.

The UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the UN Population Fund (UNFPA), have created an initiative with funds to stop child marriage for millions of girls worldwide. This foundation has been implemented in Africa, Asia, and the Middle East to support girls from ages 12 to the majority of age. This is for underage women to be able to not become wives at a young age (United Nations, 2016). This implemented program is to help women to be able to live in a healthy environment, with the proper education and finish their studies, but it also helps the mental and physical health of women who lived through child marriage.

The program implemented by the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the UN Population Fund (UNFPA) in the year 2016 hopes that "By 2023, the program aims to have reached more than 14 million adolescent girls across 12 countries in Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia" (United Nations, 2020). This program works with the family, educational, government, and religious spheres so that this goal can be fulfilled. Since these are the factors that cause child marriage or have consequences on them for child marriage.

Sexual reproduction is an issue that this program also tries to eradicate by teaching young women since premature pregnancy is something that affects developing women deeply in physical and psychological terms. This relates to the second phase of the project, which is Generation Equality, which states that "focuses on issues facing women across multiple generations, with young women and girls at the center" (United Nations, 2020). Its objective is that families from the international community are taught about children's rights and women's rights as well.

The United Nations is aware of the negative impact and problem of child marriage. "Child marriage is a violation of the rights of girls and women. Girls who are married as children are more likely to be out of school, suffer domestic violence, contract HIV/AIDS, and die due to complications during pregnancy and childbirth" (United Nations, 2016). For this reason, it stipulates that by 2030, following this program, child marriage will have decreased in the countries and women will have the power to decide what to do.

## *V. POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS*

The United Nations has found the need to take action regarding the increase in cases of Child Marriage in developing countries due to the COVID-19 pandemic. According to studies that have taken place globally, the United Nations along with The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), designed some possible solutions to be able to decrease and some point ends the problem of Child Marriage in developing countries. These are the following solutions proposed in order to solve the issue:

01. Support the education programs that UNICEF has in some countries, and make more countries join the UNICEF-support network. In order to be able to work in more countries, UNICEF plans to support UNICEF, and increase the levels of education in each country (UNICEF, 2017).
  - a. According to UNICEF statistics, one of the main reasons why Child Marriage exists in developing countries is the lack of education that exists in each country. The support plan that UNICEF has created to increase the educational levels of the countries, would help to keep young people better informed so that Child Marriage is a problem that begins to decrease.
  - b. Identify developing countries that may be supported by an economic fund that will be created by the developing countries that are part of the UNICEF program so that they can work with the necessary resources in each country.
02. Work with the UNFPA–UNICEF Global Program to End Child Marriage. To be able to extend it in more countries, and which developing countries support it with economic resources (ReliefWeb, 2021).
  - a. UN took action on the problem of Child Marriage by working with UNICEF and UNFPA to create a program that was part of three phases so that it could be successful. The first phase was to join some countries

and be able to provide quality services to the girls of the country. The second phase was to create laws and join with the government of each country so that more power of choice could be given to the girls of the country. And finally, the last phase is about creating a long-term plan to be able to work in more countries and end child marriage (ReliefWeb, 2021).

- b. In order to make this program possible, the economic support of the countries is necessary so that in this way the program can be extended to more locations. Also, the creation of support campaigns and support networks so that the plan can be fulfilled in the long term.

03. Support existing NGOs that fight to be able to support ending and preventing children from child marriage. Some of the NGOs that do this work are: Forum for African Women Educationalists (FAWE), Girls Not Brides – Global, Humanium: Help the Children – Global, Save the Children – global, etc (Oison, C. 2013).

- a. There are NGOs that fight for the rights of children and that make sure that the important foundations that a child needs have them. For that reason, one way to End Child Marriage is to support these organizations in order to recover the rights that were stolen from children.
- b. An economic fund will be created by the countries that want to contribute so that these organizations can continue working all over the world to combat this problem.

04. Create a law in which all countries must be a part in which it is implemented that the age to be able to marry is 18 years and older. “The most widely accepted definition for a child is anyone under the age of 18, in line with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child”, if a world law is created is implemented that the age to be able to marry is from 18 years old, that will

create that the problem decreases since the age determined by UNICEF in which one stops being a child is at 18 years (Girls Not Brides, 2022).

- a. Child marriage often leads to domestic violence, early pregnancy, and psychological problems. A child is not mature enough to be a husband or a wife. For this reason, the age at which one ceases to be a child legally for UNICEF is 18 years old. This means that the young people have already finished their basic studies and have enough maturity and knowledge to be able to get married (Girls Not Brides, 2022).
- b. It is necessary that both developing and developing countries be part of this law so that in this way age is created worldwide at which someone can marry. Since there have already been laws that implement an age but they change depending on the country. For that reason now law is created worldwide in which it is not considered a crime to be able to marry.

## ***VI. COUNTRIES INVOLVED***

### **1. Federative Republic of Brazil**

Brazil is the country in Latin America with the most cases of child marriage and also a high percentage makes the problem one that is difficult to control worldwide. Due to the economic problems suffered by many girls in Brazil, they choose to marry at a young age, causing them to suffer from domestic violence and pregnancies at a young age. Considering also that the age allowed to marry is 16 years with the permission of the parent or guardian (Migiro, G. 2020). “According to the government census, more than 877,000 wives between 20 and 24 years old were married before their fifteenth birthday” (Migiro, G. 2020). The lack of education and security makes the number of child marriages increase since getting married ensures a more stable life (Feser, M. 2017). “36% of Brazilian girls are married before their 18th birthday and 11% are married before the age of 15” (Plan International, 2019). The laws of Brazil have changed because society required that the age of marriage be 18 years, but that did not prevent it from continuing to allow marriage at younger ages. The high number

of marriages means that there is a high number of girls who do not attend school and that increases the numbers of lack of education in the country. Due to the lack of resources that exist in some areas of the country, families make their daughters marry at young ages so that in this way they are no longer an extra expense to the family. A factor that makes child marriage stronger in Brazil is pregnancy at a young age since in order not to disrespect their families, women are engaged and end up getting married so that dishonor does not exist (Girls Not Brides, 2022). Brazil is a country that lacks family education and empowerment for women to be able to make their point of view known, due to the circumstances of lack of resources in which a large number of the population lives, which is a trigger for child marriage in the country.

## 2. Republic of India

India is the country that suffers from the highest number of child marriages, due to the high population and also to the standard of living of the people of the country. “India’s urban areas are experiencing sharp increases in child marriage, while rural areas are on the decline” (Feser, M. 2017). India is affected by the lifestyle and the religion in which people believe. Something normal for them is to see a couple of young women and an adult man since they consider that the role of the woman is to serve the man (Plan International, n.d). “More than 40% of the world’s child marriages take place in India. Almost half of all girls here marry before the age of 18 years; 47% of women aged 20 to 24 were married before age 18” (Plan International, n.d). The lack of education, as in other developing countries with a high level of child marriage, is a cause of child marriage and because of religion and the way people live in the country, people consider that it is not necessary for women to go to school. “The legal age of marriage for girls is 18 years and for boys, it is 21 years. The law mandates punitive measures against all who perform, permit, or promote child marriage” (Plan International, n.d), it is a way for the government to control the problem and stop it from increasing, but the lack of documentation means that the problem does not stop, since many of the girls are not registered, which causes their age to be unknown. The lack of rights that women have in the country

detonates the problem since “The decision to marry the girls is usually made by the girl’s father or other male members of the family, either through seeking marriage alliances or organizing the marriages” (Plan International, n.d). India is a country in which, due to the mentality of society and its customs, women do not have valid points of view, creating that they depend on the decisions of men, making child marriage something that is controlled between families and that if there is legal permission of the parent or guardian, for that reason the problem does not end.

### 3. The People’s Republic of Bangladesh

Bangladesh is a country that has a high number of child marriages. They have 3,931,000 registered cases, but it is also a country that is making the numbers decrease since there are consequences for adults who marry a minor (Feser, M. 2017). One of the reasons that make the problem diminish is the mentality of society since child marriage is not considered to be some type of violence or lack of rights for children (UNICEF. 2017). “Over 50 percent of Bangladeshi women who are now in their mid-20s were married before they turned 18. Nearly 18 percent were below 15 years of age” (UNICEF. 2017). The society of the country considers that women should maintain the honor of the family for that reason they marry older men and that they are considered important, or for the simple factor that the man can support the woman financially is one of the reasons for them to get married, since the lack of resources in the country makes families marry off their daughters so that they no longer have to spend on them (UNICEF. 2017). That the marriage occurs at such a young age makes women want to escape and seek another kind of life since they suffer from psychological and physical abuse, and also if they were allowed to study they have to leave if their partner says so (Plan International. 2013). But the government of Bangladesh works with UNICEF to create a National Plan of Action which creates a political level in which the country fights to end the problem and be able to give girls the right to choose what to do with their lives and that education is something that never lacks (UNICEF. 2017).

#### 4. The Federal Republic of Nigeria

Nigeria is one of the countries with the highest number of child marriages. “Nigeria’s Constitution does not specify a minimum age for marriage, but The Child’s Rights Act of 2003 set the minimum at 18. However, only 23 of Nigeria’s 36 states enforce the Act” (Feser, M. 2017), this creates a division of the law in the country which makes it impossible to carry out the law or comply 100% throughout the country. The lack of all kinds of resources as well as education is a trigger in the country for the existence of child marriage and for the lack of education on marriage in families. Child marriage has created a problem for the country of Nigeria since, due to marriage, pregnancies increase, making the the population larger and the resources of the country less (Itumoh, E. June. 26, 2020). Imo and Kano state that their beliefs and way of thinking make it very difficult to be a girl and not have to get married at a young age, as many girls suffer from domestic violence which makes the girls find marriage as an escape (Human Rights Watch, 2022). “Human Rights Watch found that married girls in Imo and Kano states are denied their fundamental rights to education, a safe dwelling, and freedom from violence, and often do not have access to adequate health care” (Human Rights Watch, 2022), thus creating an impact in the way the country works, and making more impossible to end with the problem. That marriage is so normalized in the population makes women try to escape, causing psychological and physical problems. Lack of self-choice and education about marriage and pregnancy makes girls subject to what their parents want them to do, causing them to be wives at a young age (Human Rights Watch, 2022).

#### 5. The Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia

In Ethiopia, child marriage is something that is very frequent and normalized, specifically among family members, since it is something that is very normal in their culture. “One in every five girls is married before they turn 18” (Feser, M. 2017). The determined age of marriage in the country is 18 years, but the lack of

personal information about the girls makes it impossible to know exactly if the law is being followed in most cases or not, since many of the cases of marriage to young people are due to kidnappings that took place in the country (Feser, M. 2017). In some areas of the country, child marriage continues to increase as in other areas the number of cases decreases. Religion is something that makes the problem increase, since in society women are only seen as wives and mothers, which means that if she is a young woman, she is no longer as pure as she is no longer as good. option to be a wife. But society also forbids girls from having enough education to be successful since they consider that this is not their role in society, thus making girls forced from very young ages to be wives and to maintain their place in society. the house and do what their husbands say (Jones, N., Emirie, G., Tefera, B., Presler-Marshall, E. 2016). “Just 12% of married girls between the ages of 15 and 19 attend school” (Feser, M. 2017). The lack of education and the role that women play in society makes the problem increase since child marriage is normalized in society. But the Ethiopian government is still fighting to be able to decrease the problem by 2025 and create programs to help girls in areas without resources so that they can have an education and which helps prevent child marriage (Feser, M. 2017).

6. The United States of America
7. French Republic
8. Russian Federation
9. People’s Republic of China
10. The United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland
11. Republic of Albania
12. Oriental Republic of Uruguay
13. Islamic Republic of Iran
14. Republic of Indonesia

15. Mexico
16. Republic of the Niger
17. Islamic Republic of Mauritania
18. Republic of Colombia
19. Dominion of Canada
20. Republic of Turkey
21. Swiss Confederation
22. Kingdom of Sweden
23. Kingdom of Norway
24. The Republic of Singapore
25. The Republic of South Korea
26. Federal Republic of Germany

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