Quality education for girls: key to ending child marriage
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One in every three girls in developing countries is married by the age of 18.¹
One in seven is married before the age of 15.²

Child marriage – a violation of human rights
Child marriage is a harmful practice detrimental to the enjoyment of children’s rights. It has devastating consequences for the health and full development of children such as regarding family planning, education and economic development. Girls who marry early have their first children at a younger age - between 25-50% of girls become mothers before the age of 18. Poverty is a multifaceted factor that both drives and results from child marriage across the globe.

It is important that child marriage is not treated just as a “women’s issue”. Child marriage affects both boys and girls, but affects girls disproportionately. In addition, boys and men also have a powerful role to play in ending child marriage, particularly as men make up most of the decision-making roles that allow the practice to continue: fathers, community and religious leaders and politicians.

The importance of quality basic education for girls
It is widely recognised that girls’ education is one of the most effective means of development not only for girls themselves but also for their communities and wider society. Better education for girls improves maternal health, reduces child mortality, improves nutrition within the home, and increases the potential workforce and opportunities for economic growth. Girls who complete secondary education marry later, reduce their vulnerability to diseases such as HIV/AIDS and have fewer, healthier children.

Therefore it is crucial that girls can enroll in school and benefit from free, compulsory quality basic education (a minimum of nine years), in an environment which is free from violence, supports them to realise their rights and enables them to broaden their choices in life.

However, there are numerous barriers that prevent girls, particularly adolescent girls, from attending school. Child marriage and early pregnancy are important factors in girls’ dropout rates as well as stimulating a generational cycle of female vulnerability and poverty.

Financial costs also remain a huge barrier, and in poor families girls are more likely than boys to miss out on education. Costs for secondary education are often three to five times higher than those for primary education. Barriers within the school environments include gender based violence, lack of availability of basic facilities and the persistence of approaches and expectations as well as formal and informal education policies and schooling materials which reinforce discriminatory gendered norms. Gender-based violence in schools is also an important barrier to girls’ completion of secondary education.

The UN Secretary-General’s agenda on “Education First” defines child marriage as the key barrier to education, with greater impact and consequences for girls.³

World Bank Education Strategy 2020:
When an education system fails to deliver learning, the failure is most severe for poor and disadvantaged children and young people. Learning gaps are most obvious when those children and youth do not enroll in school at all, but they also happen more insidiously, when disadvantaged students attend school but learn little because the schools they attend are of such poor quality.
Plan calls upon the European Commission (EC) and EU Delegations to prioritise and scale up programmes on delaying/ending child marriage and fostering quality education for girls.

- The EC needs to commit to and implement gender aware and gender transformative programmes which mobilise boys, girls, parents, teachers and leaders to change harmful social norms, promote children's rights and create opportunities for them. These programmes need to address the root causes underlying child marriage, including gender discrimination, low value of children (in particular girls), poverty, or religious and cultural justifications.

- The EC is strongly called upon to finance programmes which provide children with access to sexual and reproductive health knowledge and services, as well as raise awareness as of the prevalence of sexual violence, and practices of child marriage. Girls who are already married should receive particular support by providing them with options for schooling, sexual and reproductive health services, livelihoods skills, opportunities and recourse from violence at home.

- Plan emphasises the importance that the EC scales up programmes which improve access to good quality basic (nine years of) education but also its completion, ensuring that gender gaps in schooling are eliminated. This is backed up in the European Consensus on Development outlining that particular attention should be devoted to promoting girls’ education and safety in schools. Coordinated efforts are needed on the key bottlenecks to girls’ education, such as violence free schools and the transition to secondary education. This must include gender-sensitive budget allocations for education, including specific allocations for girls’ education, and financing formulas that prioritise need.

- The EC should invest in increased data, disaggregated by sex, on the most marginalised groups to ensure that governments and education partners have the evidence and knowledge to identify and respond to these groups’ educational needs, and monitor progress against equity-based targets. Essential to this process is gender-disaggregated data collection on marginalised groups to provide an on-going basis for identification and monitoring of excluded children, and appropriate response to needs in policy and resources. As noted in the Court of Auditors special report No 12, the indicators used by the EC have an appropriate focus on the Millennium Development Goals, although insufficient attention is paid to indicators for education quality.

- The EC is asked also to finance more programmes on youth economic empowerment, especially for girls, to delay child marriage. Research shows that when jobs are available to girls, both daughters and parents become interested in delaying marriage.

- The EC should invest in programmes for girls and boys who are already married by providing them with options for schooling, sexual and reproductive health information and services, livelihoods skills, opportunities, and
recourse from violence in all settings. These programmes should strengthen sexual and reproductive health education within schools and access to sexual and reproductive health services.

- The EC is called upon to strengthen the community-based approach to child protection systems in its programmes. Strong child protection systems are key to prevention of gender-based violence in schools. ECHO also needs to recognise that child marriage tends to increase in the context of humanitarian crises (the phenomenon of “emergency marriage”) and that child protection systems are key to keep girls in schools and free from violence and abuse.

- As outlined in the Council Conclusions on EU Guidelines on Violence against Women and Girls and Combating all Forms of Discrimination, birth registration is a key initiative for ending child marriage. The EC therefore needs to commit to and implement programmes which support civil registration systems, including birth registration, in order to gather vital statistics for planning and programming.

- Plan welcomes the European External Action Service’s and EU Member States’ commitment in its human rights strategy to strongly promote, by the end of 2014, the prevention of early and forced marriages affecting children and to campaign on harmful traditional practices. In that respect this campaign should be a public awareness raising campaign to counter child marriage and early pregnancy ensuring the inclusion of men and boys. The campaign should also support national prioritisation of the issue, and supporting existing CSO networks to make the campaigns sustainable.

- The EC and EEAS is asked to further invest in capacity building on basic education and health of the EU delegations. As outlined in the Court of Auditors special report No 12, education expertise is not optimally assigned and developed in Delegations, which reduces the EC’s ability to maintain sector dialogue in education.

- Plan welcomes the fact that the EU defined in its Council Conclusions on EU Guidelines on Violence against Women and Girls and Combating all Forms of Discrimination against them that a reference to women’s rights is to be included in all the mandates of the EU’s special representatives and envoys. This should be complemented by a reference also to child rights.

Plan calls upon the European Union (EU) to show strong political leadership on ending child marriage and fostering quality basic education for girls at the global level.

- The EEAS, EC and the European Parliament need to show strong political leadership in raising child marriage as a key barrier to girls’ education in policy dialogue at the EU and global level and in securing commitments and action plans to end child marriage. This political dialogue should also involve civil society and support processes that enable girls and boys to have their voices heard and meaningfully engage in this dialogue.

- The EU urgently has to ensure that the Council Conclusions on the Post-2015 Development Framework include a strong commitment to quality basic education, going beyond access to primary education and focusing on the successful completion of at least nine years of quality education. Until recently, child marriage had been a hidden crisis, although it affects millions of women and girls all over the world and presents a significant barrier to achieving the Millennium Development Goals.

In 2010, girls under the age of 18 were allowed to marry with consent in 146 countries (including the United Kingdom); girls under the age of 15 were allowed to marry with consent in 52 countries. In contrast, boys were legally allowed to marry in 105 countries under the age of 18 with consent and just 15 countries under the age of 15. The inequality in the legal minimum age for marriage enshrines in law the idea that it is acceptable for girls to marry at an earlier age than boys.

- The EEAS and EC have a key role to play in enacting and enforcing appropriate legislation in its partner countries to increase the minimum age of marriage for both boys and girls to 18 and raise public awareness about child marriage as a violation of human rights. The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child routinely recommends to States to set their minimum age of marriage at 18 for both boys and girls.

- The EU committed in its EU Plan of Action on Gender Equality and Women’s Empowerment in Development to strengthen EU support to partner countries in combating gender-based violence and all forms of discrimination against women and girls. In that respect the EU is asked to foster the establishment of national policy frameworks for addressing violence against women and girls in and through education, outlining roles and responsibilities,
accountability and ways of monitoring processes and to fund programmes which help develop and strengthen legislation to eliminate gender-based violence. This should also include teacher codes of conduct with zero tolerance for gender-based violence within schools, clear actions for violations and strong reporting mechanisms. Plan calls on the EU’s promise to remind States of their dual responsibility to prevent and respond to violence against women and girls.11

- The European Parliament should include in its political dialogues with the ACP parliamentarians (ACP-EU JPA) the reform of administrative laws to ensure pregnancy and motherhood does not exclude girls from continuing their education.

- EU member states must actively engage in the work to end child marriage and bring this important topic to the attention of the Human Rights Council.

Because I am a Girl: About the campaign

Plan’s Because I am a Girl campaign seeks to ensure that girls are protected from child marriage by ensuring millions of girls complete at least nine years of quality education, which includes a full cycle of primary education and at least three years of secondary school. We understand that girls face many obstacles to staying in school, particularly during adolescence. But we also know that out-of-school girls are extremely vulnerable and often have few options other than to marry before they are physically, mentally or socially ready – the consequences of which are devastating, not only for the girls themselves, but for the next generation of children.

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Endnotes
3 For Plan, ‘child marriage’ is defined as any marriage – whether under civil, religious or customary law, and with or without formal registration – where either one or both spouses are children under the age of 18.
4 Ibid., p.23 (Figure 34).
5 Education First, The UN Secretary-General’s Global Initiative on Education: http://www.globaleducationfirst.org/. Other barriers include financial costs, school environment and gender based violence and gender norms in wider society.
6 European Consensus on Development, 2006, Page 1
7 i.e. the practice of marrying off children during humanitarian crises/emergencies; the fact that there are more child marriages taking place in the wake of armed conflicts; UNHCR is lacking guidance for adolescent girls; Peace keeping forces should also be trained on child protection and on child marriage risks/prevention.
8 EU Strategic Framework and Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy
9 European Court of Auditors report: EU Development Assistance for basic education in Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia, 2010
10 The right to ‘free and full’ consent to a marriage is recognised in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) prohibits child marriage. In 1994, the UN Committee on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women issued a recommendation that countries adopt a minimum age for marriage of 18 years for both sexes
11 Council Conclusions on EU guidelines on violence against women and girls and combating all forms of discrimination against them