




GIRLS
GET EQUAL

TIME TO **ACT!** 
LOUDER THAN
WORDS

Collection of testimonies on
preventing and ending child, early
and forced marriage in Asia Pacific



Louder than Words: Collection of testimonies on preventing and ending child, early and forced marriage in Asia Pacific

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Many of the names of the protagonists in the following stories were changed to comply with Plan International's guidelines.

For more information in Asia Pacific on Child Marriage prevention projects, please **[refer to this link](#)**.

For more information on our regional platform **Time to Act!**, regarding accelerated efforts to end child, early and forced marriage in Asia-Pacific, please see: **[Plan International | Time to Act – Let's Go Digital! \(plan-international.org\)](http://plan-international.org)**

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Ms. Bhagyashri Dengle

Plan International Executive Director Asia Pacific
and Gender Transformative Policy and Practice

REWRITING LIFE STORIES: GIRLS ACTIONS TO END CHILD MARRIAGE SPEAK LOUDER THAN WORDS

When a girl is born, in many corners of the Asia-Pacific region her life story is dotted with numerous questions even before it really gets started. Will she survive her first birthday? If she does, will she grow up well-nourished and healthy? Will she be able to attend school to learn? Later, when she begins to sense her uniqueness, will she be safe from abuse and given a chance to explore life's rich opportunities, ones matching her unique talents and interests? Or will her story be over-shadowed by the dark clouds of patriarchy every step of the way? Will the fabric of her life narrative be torn abruptly if she ends up getting married off at a tender age? Will her story turn into sequences of grim chapters marked by servitude, lack of voice and choice, with no options to look forward to?

Child, early and forced marriage turn the lives of millions of girls into dark and uninviting scenarios. Young lives are lived with a little or no prospect of a bright future and few chances for hopes to be fulfilled. Girls' innate and acquired talents gradually wither away and disintegrate in dungeons of exclusion and isolation. But it doesn't have to be this way. The course of each and every story can be reversed to flow towards a powerful transformation. As this collection of testimonies reveal, tales of tragedy can also become tales of survival and triumph.

It is my immense pleasure to introduce you to this collection of vibrant testimonies which recount true stories about harm being prevented or undone, reversed through the actions that helped girls thrive. From rural Cambodia to remote areas of Vietnam, from radio waves in Bangladesh to youth forums in India and Indonesia, from digital platforms to regional policy forums – girls are taking their lives back into their own hands. This collection, like a radiant necklace of many shimmering beads, re-ignites a spark of hope, with each story shining through with a promise of hope and justice.

Each of these stories of grassroots redemption speaks louder than words. These are stories of actions that have led to many small yet significant victories in this perpetual battle of right against might. As we're exploring these accounts of struggle, familiarity emerges of well-known settings, characters, plots and tensions – it's how a story resolves and ends that we need to influence.

I wholeheartedly invite you to immerse yourself in these humble and glorious testimonies of girls' restless courage, creativity and determination to transform their lives and their communities. Join us and be a part of the movement leading to change we want to see, the change that transforms the lives of girls and societies, where girls are.

With warm wishes,

Bhagyashri

INTRODUCTION

Child, Early and Forced Marriage (CEFM) is a harmful practice and global human rights issue disproportionately affecting girls. The girls most at risk are often those hardest to reach because they come from poor families, marginalized groups, or rural areas. Child marriage frequently leads to serious negative consequences, denying millions of girls the opportunity to fulfil their potential.

The scale of the problem of child marriage is enormous. By 2030, globally more than 800 million women may have suffered the consequences of child marriage, up from more than 650 million today.

The challenge of stamping out child marriage is particularly acute in the Asia-Pacific, where despite steady progress in many countries to reduce CEFM, the practice remains widespread. One region – South Asia – is home to the largest absolute number of child brides, accounting for more than 40 percent of the global total. While in the

last decade the risk of a girl marrying has declined in South Asia by more than one third,¹ it is the region with the highest rate of CEFM, impacting 45 percent of girls. Throughout South Asia, over 12 million girls under 18 are married each year, translating into 23 marriages every minute or one girl every two seconds.²

In Southeast Asia, CEFM rates are significantly high but fluctuate across the region. 35 percent of women aged between 20 and 24 were married in Lao PDR before the age of 18, compared with 11 percent in Vietnam. The prevalence rates further vary between Cambodia at 19 percent, Indonesia 16 percent, Myanmar 16 percent, the Philippines 15 percent, and Thailand 23 percent.

Elsewhere in the region, CEFM rates are also significantly high, with notable differences between countries. In the Pacific region, about 8 percent of girls are married by 15 and about 26 percent of girls are married by 18. The region falls right after South Asia in terms of global prevalence.

(1) <https://data.unicef.org/resources/towards-ending-child-marriage/>

(2) UNICEF, Child marriage database, 2020 (as cited by Girls Not Brides, Available at: <https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/about-child-marriage/#sources>)

ROOT CAUSES OF CHILD MARRIAGE IN ASIA-PACIFIC

The factors driving CEFM vary by country, sometimes even by region of the country or by community. However, in many places, this practice is closely linked with low levels of economic development. Overwhelmingly, child brides come from impoverished communities. But poverty doesn't tell the whole story. Child marriage remains pervasive for so many of the region's girls because of a combination of factors including poverty, lack of education and job opportunities, society's views on girls' roles, weak legal frameworks and their enforcement, insecurity in the face of conflict, and the effect of harmful customs and tradition.

A gendered imbalance of power rooted in gender inequality, which results in gender-based discrimination and exclusion, is a major underlying cause of CEFM across Asia-Pacific. This results in girls not having access to realizing their rights or having the same opportunities, protection, or resources as boys do.

In areas and situations of conflict and instability, displaced families often view early marriage as a means of protecting their daughter from anticipated hardship and harm. It is often the fear of rape and sexual violence, of unwanted pregnancies, of subsequent family shame and dishonor, of homelessness and hunger or starvation that leads to CEFM in the humanitarian crisis contexts.



TIME TO **ACT!** IN ASIA-PACIFIC

Lately, the global momentum towards ending child marriage has never been stronger. Recent resolutions have emanated from the United Nations General Assembly and the Human Rights Council urging countries to increase investments in eliminating this harmful practice.

At the country level, understanding commonalities while paying attention to specifics is the key to preventing and reducing CEFM rates. Because so many of the drivers are interlinked and interconnected, interventions that address CEFM require multi-faceted approaches which tackle root causes and drivers at different levels and from various angles.

Plan International's regional work in Asia-Pacific reflects proven effective strategies to eliminate CEFM, as well as to prevent and reduce adolescent pregnancies in Asia-Pacific. Key priorities are: strengthening youth activism, engagement and involvement to eliminate CEFM in Asia, engaging traditional and religious leaders, campaigning to prevent and end CEFM, the use of digital technology, cyber platforms and online solutions, as well as promoting accessible and quality gender-responsive services.

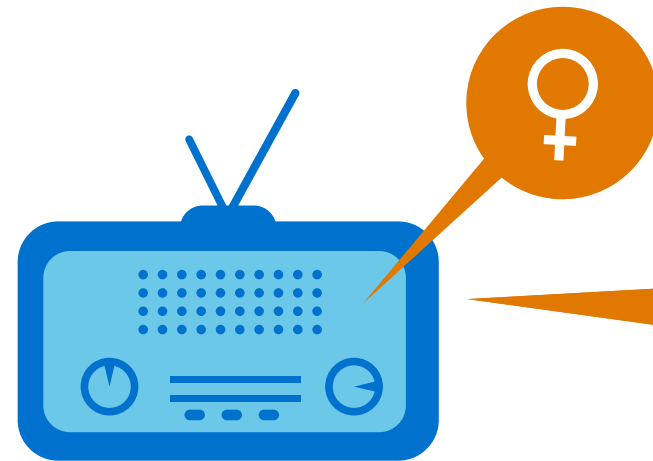
In the wake of the global pandemic, the interventions in Asia-Pacific have been guided by the **TIME TO ACT! COVID-19** and **GIRLS IN ASIA-PACIFIC** Strategic Framework, which reflects the regional ambition to see CEFM reduced in Asia Pacific by 50 percent in the next five years, leading towards its eventual elimination by 2030, in line with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

This framework implies increased investment in four areas, including continuous education, economic empowerment, protection from violence and sexual reproductive health and rights, further reinforced by girls-led youth activism.



TIME TO ACT! IN BANGLADESH

ON THE AIRWAVES AND IN COMMUNITIES: THE TWO YOUNG ACTIVISTS CREATING SOCIAL CHANGE



How is Bangladesh home to the third-largest prevalence of child marriage in the world, even though child marriage has significantly dropped in the last 40 years?

Why are there still loopholes where a court can allow child marriage in “special cases”?

Why does more access to education for girls mean lower child-marriage prevalence?

And what is being done to give girls more opportunities to shape their own lives and futures?



ON THE AIRWAVES

Those, and many more, are some of the questions being raised and tackled each day over the radio by Happy, a 23-year-old female radio journalist from Bangladesh’s Kurigram district. Since the start of the pandemic, when she was prevented from conducting her usual door-to-door grassroots community activism, this second-year post-graduate student has been hosting a **widely popular show at her local community radio station, Radio Chilmari**, where she shares news and awareness messages on preventing child marriage and advocates against this harmful practice.

Happy’s work is having an effect. Besides recently winning a “Joyeeta” public service award for social development and women’s empowerment from the Government of Bangladesh, Happy has been using this platform to prevent new cases of child marriage. While the numbers of child marriage went up during the pandemic in Bangladesh, **cases in Chilmari, where her show broadcasts, have declined**. Locals attribute some of this success to Happy’s show, as well as her more recent efforts to educate parents and local administrators of the risks and perils of child marriage.

This radio show is just one part of **Building Better Futures for Girls**, launched in 2017 by Plan International Bangladesh and supported by the Swedish International Development Agency.

Since the start of the pandemic, youth groups supported by Plan International Bangladesh, as part of **Building Better Futures for Girls**, have been playing a vital role educating the public about public safety and the importance of vaccines. Working at the district level, youth groups are engaging different stakeholders through mask distributions, advocacy and public information campaigns, including Happy's radio show.

IN COMMUNITIES

Beyond the airwaves, Plan International Bangladesh is also inspiring other girls to become advocates in preventing and stopping child marriage. Through the Combatting Early Marriage in Bangladesh project supported by Global Affairs of Canada and Plan International Bangladesh, boys and girls alike are getting the support to help combat child marriage and reduce the vulnerability of adolescents, particularly girls. The project builds-up the agency of girls and boys and provides a supportive social environment to help people make a difference in their communities.

One such beneficiary of the project is Sweeti Akter, a student from Kathalia Upazila, Jhalakathi district, and an active member of the **Combatting Early Marriage in Bangladesh** project. Her experiences witnessing the suffering of her two older sisters after

their young marriages made a lasting impression on her. Attending the project's courtyard meetings and karate classes, Sweeti learned about the numerous dangers resulting from child marriage and discovered ways to feel empowered to make a difference. Subsequently equipped with a bicycle donated by the project to travel between villages, Sweeti has become a passionate and influential advocate and vocal promoter of issues relating to child marriage and girls' health.

"At first, the villagers didn't take my initiative very well. They didn't use to pay attention to my words. But I didn't lose hope. I have been continuing advocating against child marriage whenever I get some free time in between my study," says Sweeti.

Her goal is to make her community totally free of child marriage, yet she sees endemic poverty as a substantial barrier. Sweeti and her family receive financial support from the Combatting Early Marriage in Bangladesh project, enough to allow Sweeti's mother to open a shop selling hygiene products for girls. With less pressure on Sweeti to contribute to the family, she is free to spread the essential messages learned in her training and continue her education.

The Combatting Early Marriage in Bangladesh project is essential in communities like Sweeti's. It not only educates girls, boys, and adults on the dangers of child marriage, but it looks at individual situations and increases the capacity of everyone to make a change.

**"I HAVE BEEN CONTINUING
ADVOCATING AGAINST CHILD
MARRIAGE WHENEVER I GET
SOME FREE TIME IN BETWEEN
MY STUDY"**



Girls witnessing other girls like themselves fighting against these outdated social norms can spawn countless more moments of bravery to help end child marriage in Bangladesh.

COLLABORATING FOR THE FUTURE

Both the **Building Better Futures for Girls and Combatting Early Marriage in Bangladesh** projects ensure that girls and adults alike are working together to ensure child, early and forced marriage continues to decrease in Bangladesh. The importance of this collaboration brings collective change and provides a new form of thinking for anyone thinking of putting girls in a perilous position. What's more, girls witnessing other girls like themselves fighting against these outdated social norms can spawn countless more moments of bravery to help end child marriage in Bangladesh.

That is why Sweeti's infectious spirit shines on as she pursues her dream to make her community in Jhalakathi child marriage-free. And why Happy can feel inspired that collaborations are helping to improve the future for girls in Chilmari.





COMBATTING EARLY MARRIAGE IN BANGLADESH

The **Combating Early Marriage in Bangladesh** project aims to combat child, early, and forced marriage and reduce the vulnerability of adolescents, particularly girls in Bangladesh. This is implemented by addressing the root causes of CEFM, including economic challenges at the household level, social norms that perpetuate gender inequality and discrimination, and lack of a strong governance mechanism to prevent and protect children from violations of their rights.

The agency of boys and girls in and out of school is strengthened by creating a supportive social environment and improving their personal, social, and financial assets. This can include grants for families to alleviate financial worries, educational school programs to improve knowledge on girls' rights and sexual health, and the promotion of peer-to-peer support to empower them to make correct decisions.

The project also aims to tackle cultural norms more deliberately by working within the community to increase the ability of men and women to act and engage and support girls to remain in school and delay marriage – often through courtyard meetings.

TIME TO ACT! IN BANGLADESH

CHAMPION FATHERS: BRINGING CHILD MARRIAGE TO AN END IN RURAL BANGLADESH



During a weekly Friday prayer service in a mosque in the Kurigram district, a group of men huddled around were earnestly listening to one man. Normally conversation can veer from faith, work, daily life to sport quite easily. Yet, on this day, the topic of the conversation had seldom been approached: ending child marriage.

The man told his listening friends, family, and peers: *"In Islam, we have an obligation to educate all men and women. If you allow child marriage, you are not following this obligation."*

For several years, Maulana MD. Abdur Razzak has been campaigning against child marriage in his ward, a part of a city equivalent to a municipality, in rural Bangladesh. Along with dissuading the men in his mosque to marry-off their own daughters, he has been facilitating sessions in his community and counselling people against child marriage. His community, a Newashi union in Nageshwari Upazila, Kurigram, is now child marriage free. He is a **Champion Father**.

"I became a Champion Father because I did not give my daughter away for marriage at 18," he said.

The **Building Better Future for Girls** project also supports Champion Fathers and Mothers to increase awareness of child, early and forced marriage related risks and harms, and help identify, report, and respond to cases in their communities. They are becoming true advocates in the fight against child marriage. Through courtyard meetings, Plan International Bangladesh identifies mothers and fathers who seem able to take on the role of champions within their communities. Just like influential community member Abdur Razzak. They are trained about the causes and consequences of child marriage, as well as the importance of birth registration and keeping girls in school.

**"I BECAME A CHAMPION
FATHER BECAUSE I DID NOT
GIVE MY DAUGHTER AWAY
FOR MARRIAGE AT 18"**



They are also given information about Bangladeshi law, government education initiatives and child marriage prevention strategies, which empowers them to intervene when a child marriage could be taking place.

This has helped Abdur Razzak advise countless parents in his community against marrying their daughters off and ensuring his ward is child marriage free. He was even able to discourage one of his relatives who had arranged the marriage of his 15-year-old daughter.

“I went and told him that the government is giving everything for free for girls’ education. You only need to send her to school. Don’t marry her off,” he said. “I stopped that marriage.”

“IN ISLAM, WE HAVE AN OBLIGATION TO EDUCATE ALL MEN AND WOMEN”



As a result, she was able to marry when she wanted, and all the family are now living happily.

Child, early and forced marriage cannot be stopped by the tireless and admirable levels of activism by girls alone. To ensure key messages fully reach those still in support of child marriage, gender equality needs to be advocated by as many community stakeholders as possible. By campaigning to end child, early and forced marriage, Champion Fathers and Mothers play an important role in **challenging harmful and discriminatory gender-based stereotypes** which see women and girls as inferior and reduce them to roles as mothers and caregivers. In this way, they also support wider efforts to eradicate gender inequality.

Just as Abdur Razzak has been doing for several years.

“I feel if I continue to work in this way, one day no child marriage will exist in society.”

BUILDING BETTER FUTURES FOR GIRLS

Working within local communities and with local government and administrative officials, the **Building Better Futures for Girls** project seeks to address three key issues under the broader child rights realization: the right to identity, protection, and participation, in order to prevent and reduce incidence of child marriage while also challenging harmful gender stereotypes.

The **Better Futures** project adopts a multi-pronged strategy, deploying several key approaches designed to be mutually reinforcing. These approaches support the same broader strategy for change, building knowledge and awareness of child, early and forced marriage, in particular among girls and boys. This is especially important because it equips young people with the knowledge and information to make informed decisions about their lives and futures.

A strong focus of this project entails working with and within communities. For example, **Building Better Futures for Girls** has been playing a vital role in identifying child marriage rates in Kurigram, even during lockdown. The project leaders carry out activities that challenge gender stereotypes and shift attitudes so that people, especially those with power and influence, support delaying marriage. The project is also providing education on gender equality and sexual and reproductive health and rights to girls and boys enrolled in schools. As well as out-of-school children and young adolescents to ensure no one is left behind. This links to the establishment of Youth Forums, girl-friendly action plans in schools, and increased usage of a national hotline for reporting suspected or imminent cases of child marriage. Education and awareness-raising among parents and community leaders is also important, including the wide network of Champion Fathers and Mothers.



THE IMPACT OF CHILD MARRIAGE IN BANGLADESH

Bangladesh's Child Marriage Prevalence Ranking.¹

1ST

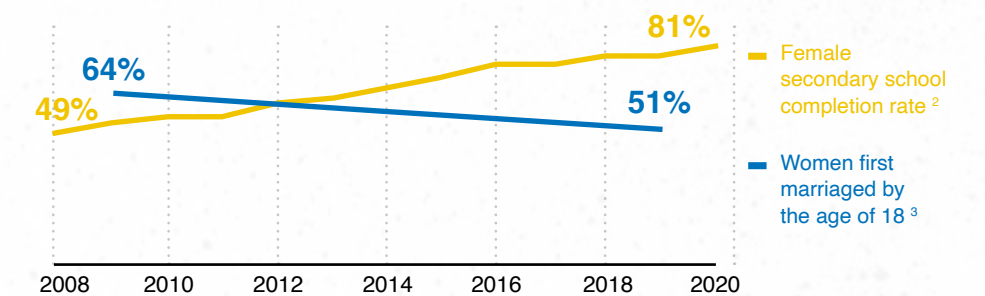
Asia-Pacific Region



8TH

World

Educating girls, ending child marriage.



Women first married by the age of 18 has decreased by 13% from 2009 to 2019, while female secondary school enrollment has increased by over 32% from 2008 to 2020.

(1) (August 2021). UNICEF. UNICEF global databases. Available at <https://data.unicef.org/resources/dataset/child-marriage/> (accessed 20 January 2022).

(2) (2020). UNICEF. *Ending Child Marriage: A profile of progress in Bangladesh*.

(3) (2021). World Bank. *World Development Indicators*. Available at <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SE.SEC.ENRR.FE?locations=BD> (accessed 20 January 2022).

TIME TO ACT! IN CAMBODIA



BREAKING THE LINK: GIRLS DISRUPTING THE CYCLE OF CHILD MARRIAGE AND POVERTY IN CAMBODIA



Picture this: you are a girl preparing to be married young. The other girls in your village are either married off or waiting. Then you switch on the radio or look online and see a girl just like you reporting that things can be different!

“My stories were in the media and girls started talking about gender equality and child marriage more,” said Kerry, 18, who received journalism training and media equipment from Plan International Cambodia.



THE ROVING REPORTERS ASKING THE RIGHT QUESTIONS

Recently, Plan International Cambodia launched a project to **train girls to produce and broadcast stories about child marriage**. Soon after, teenagers started making noise.

So far, the project **Reduction of Early Child Marriage and Adolescent Pregnancy for Indigenous Young Women in Ratanakiri Province**, has trained 10 girls and young women to cover topics on child, early and forced marriages through youth-led journalism. Working in partnership with the Cambodian Center for Independent Media, the girls have produced stories, interviews, and social media posts that **tell the story of child marriage** and dropping out of school from a unique vantage point: young girls themselves.

“I worked with Plan International staff to produce a report on child and early forced marriages, early adolescent pregnancies, and dropouts from school,” said Kerry.

The project is an example of how traditional information campaigns in the media can be

revitalized by incorporating the voices and perspectives of people that had no voice before.

Along with their own stories, the girls conducted an interview with a deputy district governor in Ratanakiri Province, a young indigenous woman and role model who had to escape an early marriage herself before she could thrive. Testimonials like this and the one from Kerry are important, because when it comes to campaigns to end child and early forced marriage **certain messengers are more effective than others**. Indeed, studies have shown that messages from other girls or from female authorities were most effective overall.

The girls have also interviewed other representatives of local authorities, including officials from the Provincial Department of Education, Youth and Sports. In their stories, the girl reporters prod authorities to reveal the extent of and actions taken by the department to curb the dropout rate for vulnerable girls so they can continue their studies at least until grade nine.



A NEW GENERATION OF EDUCATORS AGAINST CHILD MARRIAGE

As the **number of girls in Cambodia being married** off in their childhood years remains **persistently high**, almost one in five girls are married before their 18th birthday, the approach taken by Plan International Cambodia is showing increasing results.

Along with highlighting the issue through information campaigns in Ratanakiri Province, Plan International also offers vocational skills training and supports the implementation of **New Generation**, a project that delivers classes on adolescent sexual reproductive health and rights and teaches teens to be peer-to-peer educators.

One recent graduate of **New Generation** is 18-year-old Phon, who had felt the pressures of being an unmarried girl in her village firsthand.

“Because of customs and traditions in my village there is pressure to marry early. People think they need to get married so there are more hands to help on the farm and parents worry that if a young woman is unmarried, she will become a spinster and a burden,” said Phon.

So moved by what she learned, upon her return to her native village, she told her parents she would not marry the man they had selected for her.

“They didn’t understand the dangers of child marriage and wanted to continue the traditions and norms of our community,” she said. *“Due*

to the classes, I was able to tell them about my job opportunities if I stayed in school and not get married. Fortunately, they eventually listened.”

Now, Phon can continue her education and go to college, planning to pursue a job as a social worker after graduation. And she acts as a peer-to-peer educator in her community to inform others on sexual health and the pitfalls of child marriage.

“I want all young people in my community to be self-aware. I want people to know the negative effects child marriage has on people and how education gives you better prospects for your future and a healthier life. I hope to become a social worker so more youths can become influential citizens in our community,” she said.

“I want people to know the negative effects child marriage has on people and how education gives you better prospects for your future and a healthier life”

NOISEMAKERS

Within Ratanakiri province, sharing information has become key to combatting child marriage. Girls are making noise and creating a change. These days, many girls like Phon can confidently inform their peers about sexual health and the benefits of resisting child marriage.

And Kerry and her fellow reporters now know how to effectively report on child marriage and broadcast their messages across the province.

“I am so grateful to Plan International Cambodia for giving me the opportunity to learn about journalism and broadcast important messages to fight child marriage. I still have a lot to learn about broadcasting, but I am more determined than ever to improve and inform as many people as possible,” said Kerry.



TIME TO ACT! IN CAMBODIA

A WINDOW OF OPPORTUNITY
FOR CAMBODIAN GIRLS TRAPPED
BY CHILD MARRIAGE



Imagine, for a moment, that you're a bright young girl with dreams of getting an education and someday starting a business. You have a work ethic that drives you to arrive at school early, ready to study hard and learn. Afterward, the same forces drive you to toil into the evening on the farm your family works.

But one day your family can no longer afford to send you to school. And this leads to getting married far too young. Now, your business dreams are no more, and the future is unclear.

That's what happened to Lean, a 20-year-old girl from a rural commune in Ratanakiri province. By third grade Lean had dropped out of school. By 14 she was already married. Lean's story is overwhelmingly common in rural Cambodia, where forced marriage as a response to economic challenges remains embedded in the culture.

But now, a project called the **Skill Development and Employment to Reduce Early Child Marriage**, supported by Plan International Cambodia, is offering Cambodian girls glimmers of hope for a different and better life. Available for those who have no formal skills or training, this three-year-old project is demonstrating that **teaching girls' new skills is one of the best investments a family and a country can make.**

The project offers a variety of different skills training in Ratanakiri's Provincial Training Center. Lean received training on make-up and cosmetics.



During the training, she could not hide her positivity about the future: *“I was so happy when I learned I was accepted into this project. It has changed my life. I’m really excited to return to my commune and let other girls know how this training can change their life.”*

“My family is poor, so my parents did not have enough money to support my studies and forced me to quit school after sixth grade. No one in my family has ever finished primary school”

What makes the project viable for most of the girls like Lean is the daily food allowances and support they receive to complete the training. Participants are offered accommodation and the roughly \$2.5 food allowance each day is enough, so that girls are not anxious about having to find work after class. Lean also received funds so that her husband could travel with her to the school.

The support to attend training certainly helped Amping, a 19-year-old girl from Ratanakiri province who also participated in vocational training for sewing. The allowance helped her to continue training without disruption, and Plan International Cambodia supported her father’s travel so he could accompany her to the training.

“My family is poor, so my parents did not have enough money to support my studies and forced me to quit school after sixth grade. No one in my family has ever finished primary school,” she said.

What the project reveals is that training and educating young women who were unable to complete school can be vital in development efforts. Girls who receive an education are able to earn more, better able to protect themselves and their families, have greater confidence, decide when and how to have safer pregnancies, and are less likely to marry young. They are more likely to ensure that when they start their own families their sons and daughters finish school, giving them a chance to avoid a life of poverty.



“I’M REALLY EXCITED TO RETURN TO MY COMMUNE AND LET OTHER GIRLS KNOW HOW THIS TRAINING CAN CHANGE THEIR LIFE”

“I am going to start my small business by using my vocational skills training in order to generate income to support my family beyond farming activities”

By teaching girls skills like sewing and bookkeeping, the project is helping them acquire locally in-demand talents that help them find a job capable of better supporting them and their families.

These days, Amping is really excited about the future after her training. She wants to inspire others in her village to persevere and take any special opportunities that can come their way. She hopes to be a role model to other young girls in her village so they too can get a better life, even if they are poor.

“I am going to start my small business by using my vocational skills training in order to generate income to support my family beyond farming activities,” Amping said.

When her training ended, Lean also returned to her village. Rather than returning to farming, she used some of the skills she learned with Plan International Cambodia and opened a beauty salon earning the equivalent of between \$7.50 to \$12.50 a day, about three or four times what she earned through farming.

“I tell everyone in my village, but especially the girls: a better life is possible through education,” said Lean.

THE IMPACT OF CHILD MARRIAGE IN CAMBODIA

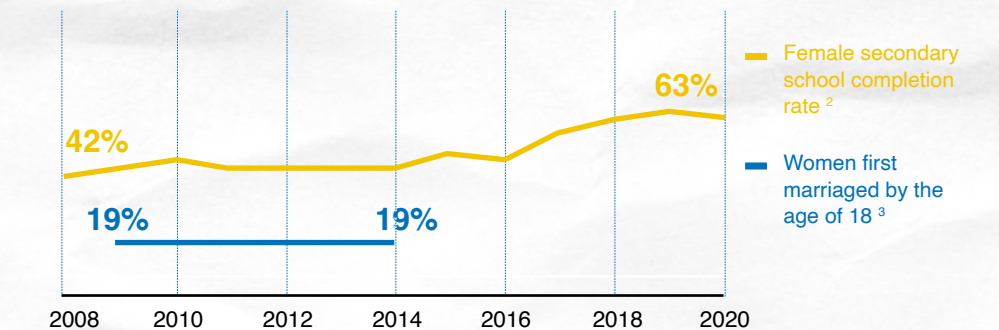
Cambodia's Child Marriage Prevalence Ranking.¹

13TH
Asia-Pacific Region



74TH
World

Educating girls, ending child marriage.



Women first married by the age of 18 has remained consistent from 2009 to 2014, while female secondary school completion rate has increased by 21% from 2008 to 2020.

(1) (August 2021). UNICEF. *UNICEF global databases*. Available at <https://data.unicef.org/resources/dataset/child-marriage/> (accessed 20 January 2022).

(2) (2018). UNICEF Cambodia and Division of Data, Research and Policy. *Statistical Profile of Child Protection in Cambodia*.

(3) (2021). World Bank. *World Development Indicators*. Available at <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SE.SEC.CMPT.LO.FE.ZS?locations=KH> (accessed 20 January 2022).



TIME TO ACT! IN INDIA



**NEVER GIVE UP:
THE YOUNG WOMAN WHO WON'T
QUIT UNTIL CHILD MARRIAGE IS
ELIMINATED IN INDIA**



*“The changemaker never stops,
the journey is unstoppable.”*
Shakina, India.

Inside a large, crowded classroom, a young female youth advocate is telling teenage girls that their lives can be different. She is letting them know their lives do not have to start and end with an underaged marriage or early pregnancy; they can be just as equal as their male classmates; that they too can continue their education and have a brighter future.



**“CHILD MARRIAGE IS A
VIOLATION OF GIRLS’
RIGHTS WHICH ENDANGERS THE
LIFE AND HEALTH OF A GIRL”**

This youth advocate, Shakina, fortunately had a different start in life to many girls in India. From birth, she has always been told she can be anything she wants. Her parents have taught her that all girls are equal, and her grandfather encouraged her every day that being an independent woman is possible.

For many girls in India, it is a very different story. **Over 15 million women were married before the age of 18 in India – the highest number in the world – The percentage of girls married before 18-years-old nationally is 23% or approximately one in four.**

Authorities fear the situation has gotten even worse due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Forced migration, lack of work, and deepening inequality are pushing many families to marry off their daughters as a way to lessen financial burdens and conform to social traditions.

Growing up in on the southeast coast, Shakina observed girls suffering from gender-based violence, including child marriage and domestic abuse, often. She saw many of her female classmates remain at home due to persistent oppressive gender norms while their brothers freely went to school.

“Child marriage is a violation of girls’ rights which endangers the life and health of a girl,” she said.

Owing to the steady footing her family gave her, these harmful gender norms forced onto many of her friends did not sit right with her. **She vowed to become a changemaker in Indian society** and have her voice heard to end these harmful practices across the world.



HER UNSTOPPABLE JOURNEY TO CREATE CHANGE

Sticking to her word, Shakina has been a gender-rights activist and championing against child marriage for over three years. Her messages have reached millions of people worldwide.

“As an activist, my concern for society, especially for girls and young women, lies in my heart and mind all the time. I’m engaged in advocacy. We all know little effort can make a huge change in society,” she said. *“It’s high time we prevent all discrimination against women. **No cries of girls should be ever heard. Only the smiles are to be seen on every face.**”*

Through Plan International India’s **Girls Advocacy Alliance**, Shakina became part of a growing network of youth advocates who are empowered through gender transformative communication tools, a key focus of which are to develop skills in communicating with authority figures. The **Girls Advocacy Alliance** also provides tools and resources to young activists to get the messages across to other young

people, their parents, religious leaders, local authorities, and decision-makers.

Equipped with the training, knowhow and newly found communication tools, Shakina has been on an unstoppable journey to campaign against ending child marriage and promote a gender equal society.

“I go door to door, area to area, colleges, schools, orphanages and more places to raise my voice against social issues in the country, and also to create awareness among people to know more and be aware of their rights and responsibilities,” she said.

Her calendar every day is full of commitments. Her list of achievements is endless. This dedication to gender equality has taken her voice from her coastal town to countless destinations. With her fellow advocates, she has stood in front of and questioned many national party leaders about the security of women and girls in India. She has attended a multitude of

forums and various panel discussions, including working with the corporate sector to promote job-oriented vocational training courses for underprivileged women and girls.

“The best thing is that all our coordination with companies were successful, and they immediately accepted to offer the things that we wanted and what we requested,” she said.

“As an activist, my concern for society, especially for girls and young women, lies in my heart and mind all the time. I’m engaged in advocacy. We all know little effort can make a huge change in society”

Perhaps her most emotive and impactful work has been within the classrooms of schools and universities. There, Shakina and her **Girls Advocacy Alliance** partners are able to connect with other youths, and create awareness on child marriages, child trafficking and domestic violence to students.

“I took the pledge of being a changemaker for my nation, and I was given a chance to be a youth advocate. I came forward to get my fellow youth friends to know more, learn more and do more for the nation,” she said.

At one Urdu school, she and her fellow **Girls Advocacy Alliance** members met students who were married and pregnant in their teens. She and her fellow members listened to past experiences where students had to help deliver their classmates’ babies due to a lack of services and support.

Shakina could not just sit there and listen: *“We didn’t want the system to be repeated. We shared Child Helpline numbers and our mobile numbers to offer help from our side, because it’s our duty to protect our people.”*



REACHING OUT TO MILLIONS

Inspired to change the lives of fellow girls in her community, Shakina is leaving no stone unturned to prevent early and child marriage in her community. She discusses the issues impacting girls with community members, and spreads awareness via different platforms, including radio and social media. Her popularity on social media helps her reach out to millions of her followers every day – through various video clips, interviews, and campaigns.

“Digital platforms play a key role by creating awareness among people of all age groups,” she said. *“My voice has reached millions of people on social media. Using social media hashtags, I’ve reached many powerful departments, organizations, police and politicians who really came forward to help me in preventing child marriages.”*

Shakina’s work is not without its troubles. As a public voice, she frequently faces backlash from those not ready to change, but, as ever, she continues to fight for what she believes in.

“I’m working hard to vanish social evils, struggling daily, hearing harsh comments, social bullying, but here I am, still surviving and voicing for impoverished girls and young women,” she said.

In her activism against child marriage, Shakina’s voice has reached millions of people throughout India and the world. She often speaks out at various regional and global forums, highlighting the incredible work she has been doing and raising awareness of further work needed in the fight against child marriage and other forms of gender-based discrimination. She even represented India as a Youth Advocate at the UN’s 2020 High-Level Political Forum for Sustainable Development.

“It was a great platform to meet with great people like the UN State Secretary and other Youth Advocates. It was worth listening to the many questions, answers, and suggestions to ensure countries have an equal place for all genders. I met with Youth Advocates from Bangladesh, Uganda, and many other countries and

made new friends, which gave me a lot of encouragement,” she said.

Whether it be campaigning on the streets, using her influential social media platforms, or going on the radio to advocate for girls across India, Shakina is a young woman with the drive and passion to end child marriage. And there are no signs of this stopping.

“It may be night or day we, the young changemakers, will strive hard to help the people at anytime and anywhere,” she said. *“Our dream is to help people to help themselves, and to raise our voice and hands going forward against harmful social issues that are creating terror in each and every citizen of the nation. I really want to thank Plan International for giving me this great platform to help people and become their voice.”*

TIME TO ACT! IN INDIA



THE YOUNG VOICES DEFYING CHILD MARRIAGE IN INDIA



“For parents, getting their daughters married off as soon as they can is the easiest option. It involves the least hassle. For girls, this means a dead end.”

Along with Shakina, there have been 494 other female youth advocates who were offered the tools and training to empower other girls and influence important figures in the fight against child marriage, child trafficking and other forms of violence against girls and women.

Each one of these 495 youth advocates has a story to tell. The Girls Advocacy Alliance goes beyond the numbers and lays within the personal testimonies of fearless leaders throughout the country, whose own experiences and actions show that even small changes can make a big difference. Girls like Divya, Sravani and Sangeetha.

SANGEETHA: STANDING UP AGAINST HER OWN CHILD MARRIAGE AND COUNTLESS OTHERS

Several years ago, Sangeetha was a shy girl who worried every day about being forced into a child marriage. Today, it could not be more different. She is a leader, an advocate, and an advisor to all girls in her community looking for an alternative future free from child marriage, teenage pregnancy, and without education.

Sangeetha lives with her widowed father, sister, and grandparents in a remote village in India's Telangana state. Traditions and customs abided by her family, and the meager income from farming made her vulnerable to child marriage.



GROWING UP AROUND CHILD MARRIAGE

“It’s common in my community for girls to be married off by the time they are 16 or 17. Many girls I grew up with in the village are already married and some have even become mothers,” she said.

She feared for her own future and potential child marriage as she saw the negative impacts it had on the lives of married girls in her community.

“They all tell me how difficult life is for them. From dropping out of school to facing challenges with husband and in-laws, and the burden of early motherhood – to name a few. But they had no choice in their marriage. The decision was made for them.”

Life for girls in the area is not easy. Even if they can avoid an early marriage and further their studies, the nearest college is miles away and their long daily commute can involve harassment by boys and men. The fear of dishonor to the family also brings further pressures.

“For parents, getting their daughters married off as soon as they can is the easiest option. It involves the least hassle. For girls, this means a dead end,” she said.



THE INESCAPABLE PROPOSAL

Inevitably, at 15, with pressure from her grandparents, her father raised her most-feared topic: getting married.

“I burst into tears. I cried for days in protest, and he eventually backed off. I was allowed to continue my A levels, even though my grandparents were opposed to it,” she said.

However, she knew a day would soon come when her resistance against her grandparents and father’s pressure would not be enough. She needed to find her own solution, so she joined Plan International India’s Girls Advocacy Alliance initiative.

*“By becoming part of the **Girls Advocacy Alliance**, I gained much more knowledge about the true scale of child marriage harmful impact – from consequences on girls’ health to their ability to have a career and be economically independent,”* she said. *“I also gained confidence on how I can protect myself and stand up for my own rights.”*

So, when the unavoidable happened once more, and her father pushed for marriage again, she was better equipped and ready.

“Even though he was more adamant than before, I was able to explain to him how early marriage would damage my chances in life and that I wanted to become a nurse and have a career,” she said.

She was able to bring up her **Girls Advocacy Alliance** teachings: *“I wasn’t going to compromise my future for anything and told my father if he forced me, I would inform the local government official. And if that didn’t work, I would report him to the police.”*



THE PRESSURES ON A FATHER IN RURAL INDIA

Sangeetha’s father also faces his own pressures. As a single parent, Anjaiah struggles to make ends meet on his farm. The financial obligations of having daughters, considering the cost of dowries and continuing education, and the intense expectations from his neighbors to adhere to social norms can take its toll.

“People in the village don’t miss any chance to remind me that I have two daughters to get married off. They tell me the more Sangeetha gets educated, the higher it would cost for her dowry,” said Anjaiah.

Yet, Sangeetha’s resolve and sheer will made her determined she would not sacrifice her own aspirations for the sake of constraining traditional norms and customs.

“This time there were no tears. I instead used my voice and confidence to defend my rights. I realized that change must start at home. I took the lead and prevented my own marriage,” she said.

Anjaiah fortunately listened: *“I am under a lot of pressure from my parents and community members to get Sangeetha married. However, I am committed to support my daughter’s wishes to complete her degree. Initially, I was a bit reluctant, but I was convinced by her determination.”*

By being equipped with the right knowledge to confront her father, Sangeetha was able to do the once unthinkable and change the set-in-stone viewpoints of a traditional father.

“At first, my father was surprised by my confidence and my conviction to go to any length to avoid my early marriage. After initial reluctance, he came around to the idea that it’s in my best interest to complete my science degree and have a career,” she said.

And now, Anjaiah is an ally for her two daughters and sees the real potential in them.

“Sangeetha’s confidence and resolve totally changed my perceptions of what girls can and cannot do. I will now do my best to fulfil their ambition of both my daughters”

“Sangeetha’s confidence and resolve totally changed my perceptions of what girls can and cannot do. I will now do my best to fulfil the ambition of both my daughters,” he said.

The pressures Sangeetha felt are no more. These days she is seen as a leader in her community. Girls seek her out for advice on various gender equality issues, and she regularly speaks at colleges and local events to raise awareness on child marriage.

DIVYA: TAKING GIRLS' EDUCATION INTO HER OWN HANDS

When Divya was younger, while taking the 20km journey to school every day, she often wondered why few girls from her village were not joining her. So, she wanted to help. She volunteered for a government scheme in the region, offering to give extra lessons to those girls who cannot get to school. She was told outright this was not something a woman could do on her own.

"For the first time I realized that, as a woman, you are not really taken seriously. This made me even more determined to improve the education of young girls, despite the obvious resistance," she said.



A CRAFTY RUSE

Since then, she has been coming up with unique and crafty ways to get girls educated and keep them away from child marriage. It first began with reading and writing. To help more girls from her village into school, Divya secretly teaches them how to read and write.

"I visit the girls at home, where I give them a bit of tuition in reading and writing," she said. "Then I say to the parents that their daughter must be quite clever because she can already read and write. Just imagine if she went to school!"

So far, seven little girls are in school due to Divya's unique tactics. She wants to show parents the potential of their daughters so these girls can get the education they are entitled to. Little by little, she is making small steps to empower girls and release their inner confidence and belief.

"The first time I saw them they were very shy, but now they are not afraid to stand up for themselves," she said.

However, she was aware that there was more that needed to be done. Through a girls' education program, she came across Plan International India's Girl Advocacy Alliance.

As a youth advocate for the **Girls Advocacy Alliance**, Divya joined a youth lobbying group fighting to attain equal rights and opportunities for girls and young women. Together with other girls, she received training to influence decision-makers and challenge deep-rooted gender misconceptions.

She has since stopped five child marriages in her village by directly pressuring their parents.

"My main focus when doing all this is to explain the potential health risks of a child marriage," she said. "Malnutrition and infant disability are common among babies born to very young mothers because their bodies are just not ready for childbirth. I also caution

the parents about the likelihood of their daughters being subjected to abuse in the marriage."

"Malnutrition and infant disability are common among babies born to very young mothers because their bodies are just not ready for childbirth. I also caution the parents about the likelihood of their daughters being subjected to abuse in the marriage"

THE BENEFITS OF A SUPPORTIVE FAMILY

Divya's own motivation can be seen in the people supporting her. Her love for education is never stifled in her family. Her two sisters and herself always have the backing of supportive parents who are acutely aware of what a lack of education can do to your future.

"My parents never received an education. They are illiterate but smart enough to realize that education is the key to a child's future. They are happy, but their lack of education severely limits them in terms of economic and social development," she said.

Divya once dreamed of becoming a teacher. Now, this is a realistic goal. With the support of her family, her passion for education, and the knowledge she has gained through the **Girls Advocacy Alliance**, she is determined to continue her amazing work and one day be a teacher of change for the young women in her class.



"AFTER I WAS BORN MY MOTHER COULDN'T HAVE ANY MORE CHILDREN. MY FATHER WANTED TO SELL ME, BUT MY MOTHER WAS HAVING NONE OF IT AND SO SHE LEFT HIM"

SRAVANI: THE FUTURE POLICE OFFICER DETERMINED TO STAMP OUT CHILD MARRIAGE AND TRAFFICKING

Sravani, aged 19, did not have the best start to her life. From her first moments in the world, she was subjected to the harrowing gender norms and traditions that follow many girls' lives in her village.

"After I was born my mother couldn't have any more children. My father wanted to sell me, but my mother was having none of it and so she left him," she said.

Yet, despite these initial obstacles, Sravani is now a changemaker who has prevented ten cases of attempted child marriage and helped 50 children get back to school.

Like so many other Indian girls, Sravani was rejected by her father when she was born, simply because he wanted a son. A son means no dowry, no apparent risk of harassment and more financial security. Historical traditions and norms in India have often made having only daughters a problem for fathers.

Fortunately for Sravani, her mother would reject this. She took Sravani away from danger and escaped the marriage, renting a piece of land to farm, which financed Sravani's schooling. However, just before high school, her mother had a serious accident from which it would take her two years to recover. As a result, Sravani had to find work and leave school.

THE NUMBERS DON'T LIE

Shravani got herself a job with the local council, working on the census that was being carried out at the time.

Interestingly, this is where her activism began. Constantly looking at statistics, she became aware of some shocking findings.

*"I learned that **out of the 108 girls in my village, only 20 went to school. The other 88 were either at home or working,**" she said.*

Once her mother recovered, Shravani was able to go back to school. It was around this time the **Girls Advocacy Alliance** came to her village, and her discovery in her old job compelled her to join. There, she learned how to exert influence to stop child marriages and get children back into school – notions Shravani once knew nothing about.

As soon as she hears about a potential child marriage, she immediately visits the family, accompanied by the mayor and school principal, to convince them otherwise.

"Many Indian girls seem to be in a hurry to get married because it means they get to wear a nice dress and be pampered. But somebody has to tell them that life after

the wedding is no bed of roses. And their parents need to be informed of the negative aspects associated with a child marriage," she said.

Armed with skills and communication tools from the **Girls Advocacy Alliance**, she convinces her community members by narrating the experiences of her cousin.

"My cousin wanted to be a professor, but her dreams were shattered when she was married off at the tender age of 12. She had to leave school and was forced to stay home and obey her husband and in-laws," she said. *"She became pregnant three times, but each time she miscarried as she was young. Had she been allowed to finish school, she would have been able to earn her own living and carve out an independent life for herself."*

Unfortunately, these tales are all too familiar in her village. Her work is never done. Yet, the combination of her straight-talking, relative information, and personalized stories have made an impact.



"I LEARNED THAT OUT OF THE 108 GIRLS IN MY VILLAGE, ONLY 20 WENT TO SCHOOL. THE OTHER 88 WERE EITHER AT HOME OR WORKING"



THE FUTURE'S BRIGHT FOR SRAVANI

Her experiences with the **Girls Advocacy Alliance** have given her a steady footing for the future. She wants to do more for girls and become a police officer. Poor law enforcement is often a big factor that allows for child marriages and illegal trafficking to slip through the system. One of her goals as a police officer is to end child trafficking.

"It robs you of your life and it is the worst thing that could happen to you," she said.

Perhaps it is not surprising. If it were not for her mother's own will and determination to leave her father, she could have been a victim of trafficking herself.

"That's what motivates me to do this. And I am not the only one; there is a whole generation out there yearning for change."



THE GIRLS ADVOCACY ALLIANCE

Completed in 2020, after four years of implementation, The **Girls Advocacy Alliance** placed girls at the forefront in the fight against child, early and forced marriage, with astonishing results.

495 youth advocates were given special training sessions to learn how to influence religious leaders, members of the community and local authorities to reduce child marriage, child trafficking and other inter-related forms of violence against girls and women. The project was simultaneously striving to make education for girls more accessible.

The **Girls Advocacy Alliance** created opportunities for girls to engage with people in positions of power within their communities and help everyone better understand what perpetuates child, early and forced marriage and its detrimental consequences. It pushed parents and community leaders to let girls get educated and not become victims of child marriage. And it empowered young women to continue their activism and improve the lives of many in their communities.

Girls and youths play a central role in supporting Plan International's vision of a world in which children's rights are respected and protected, and where girls are empowered to lead and treated equally and without discrimination. The **Girls Advocacy Alliance**, and many other projects, follow Plan International's core strategy when fighting for girls and young women's rights: **to empower girls and provide the right tools and knowledge to prevent and reduce child marriage and child trafficking in their communities.**



THE IMPACT OF CHILD MARRIAGE IN INDIA

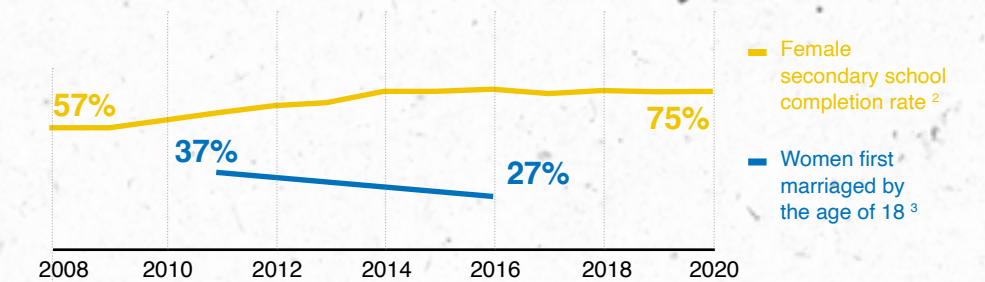
India's Child Marriage Prevalence Ranking.¹

5TH
Asia-Pacific
Region



47TH
World

Educating girls, ending child marriage.



Women first married by the age of 18 has decreased by more than 10% from 2011 to 2016, while female secondary school enrollment has increased by over 18% from 2008 to 2020.

(1) (August 2021). UNICEF. *UNICEF global databases*. Available at <https://data.unicef.org/resources/dataset/child-marriage/> (accessed 20 January 2022).

(2) (2018). UNICEF. *Ending Child Marriage: A profile of progress in India*.

(3) (2021). World Bank. *World Development Indicators*. Available at <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SE.SEC.ENRR.FE?locations=IN> (accessed 20 January 2022).

TIME TO **ACT!** IN INDONESIA

THE MESSENGER MATTERS: INDONESIA'S RELIGIOUS LEADERS AND GIRLS PREVENTING CHILD MARRIAGE

Within many mosques across Indonesia, local religious leaders are taking the lead in the fight against child marriage, using their influence to inspire positive change among the fathers, young men, and boys.

Indonesia

Since the launch of Yayasan Plan International Indonesia's Yes I Do project, it is a cause supported by an increasing number of mullahs, Sunni Muslim mosque leaders, who have lately grown alarmed by the psychological and health toll child marriage takes on girls. In a country with among the **highest number of child marriages in the world**, it is essential that advocates against child marriage are using their positions to influence change among the men who may contribute to it. **Traditional sources of authority are more effective** at promoting campaigns, and messages from religious leaders – considered the gatekeepers of traditions – have been found to be particularly effective.

THE WISE MESSENGER

Take Haji Nur Rohmat, a religious leader in rural Indonesia, who is using poetry as part of a campaign to end this harmful practice. The work of Haji Nur is part of Yayasan Plan International Indonesia's community engagement effort. He is not alone in his efforts to prevent and stop child marriage. Lately, dozens of other religious leaders have been advocating against it.



“Children are a gift from God, so their physical and mental integrity should be respected as best as possible,” said Haji Nur.

This mullah feels so strongly about this topic, that sometimes he feels compelled to issue regulations. But more often this religious figure tries to shape decisions by his congregation using easily understandable poetry, proverbs, and figures of speech. His chief goal is to convey major ideas that may break with tradition without confusing his listeners.

In Indonesia, **poverty is among the key factors** which perpetuate child, early, and forced marriage. Girls from poor families, particularly those living in rural areas or with low levels of education, are especially vulnerable. However, child marriage is also prevalent in areas with relatively high levels of income, indicating that societal and cultural attitudes and norms also play a significant role in perpetuating the practice.

In the last decade, Indonesia has taken steps to reduce and eliminate child marriages, including **raising the minimum age of marriage for women to 19-years-old**, making child marriage prevention a national priority, and launching national awareness-raising campaigns. However, progress remains slow – the practice has decreased by just 3.5 percent in the last ten years. If the country is to achieve the SDGs and eliminate this harmful practice once and for all, much more needs to be done.

Establishing Community Based Child Protection Mechanisms within local communities and making them functional is another central component of the **Yes I Do** project. The key to this has been securing support from parents and community gatekeepers, such as holding **community discussions**. Through such efforts Yayasan Plan International Indonesia has helped establish 12 Child Protection Mechanisms, run and led by a network of **local change agents** – including girls and young women – who facilitate community discussions, respond to cases, and assist victims.

“Children are a gift from God, so their physical and mental integrity should be respected as best as possible”





THE YOUNG MESSENGER

At 19, Suci is the youngest female community-based child protection mechanism leader in her area. She has witnessed the devastating impacts that child marriage has had on her community. Before joining she had no notion of the power her voice and actions could have. Now she is an essential driver of change in her village. She advocates for child protection regulation at the village level, which includes efforts that have established a “community declaration against child marriage” with support from the village government.

“As the young leader of the child protection mechanism in my village, I see the great potential of youth engagement and active participation in this community group. Nowadays, girls and boys could decide by themselves to get married, without parents forcing them to.”

Such efforts are leading to positive results. So far, 175 cases of violence against children have been reported to the child protection mechanism, of which 111 were cases of child marriage. In 22 of these cases, the marriages were cancelled. These figures indicate the potential of the community groups to prevent and stop child marriage.

THE MESSENGER MATTERS

That’s what makes the creative efforts of Haji Nur, Suci and **Yes I Do** so important. Social change is also within the unheralded work being done within communities to change the minds of those who may consider putting a girl in a perilous position. Many religious young activists and other influential leaders within the community can be the catalyst for this positive change. **Yes I Do** has spawned hundreds of social change efforts indicating that Indonesian society is becoming more progressive in addressing child marriage.

“My major ideas are to remind parents they have an obligation to protect the rights of children. The abuse and forced marriage of children constitutes a violation,” said Haji Nur. *“My congregation thinks deeply about progress, so the way I communicate is welcome because I try to give a sufficient understanding of the advantages and disadvantages of anything that may seem contentious.”*



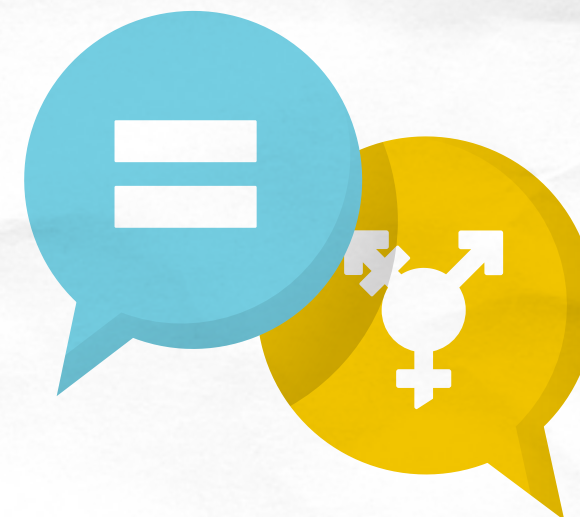
YES I DO

Yes I Do operated across three locations in Indonesia. A strong emphasis was placed on sexual and reproductive health and rights and the project aimed to equip adolescent girls and boys with the knowledge and information to make informed decisions about their bodies, lives, and futures. Another feature of the project was strong community engagement, including the creation of Community Based Child Protection Mechanisms, as well as efforts to influence governments at the district and national level.



TIME TO ACT! IN INDONESIA

HELPING TEENAGERS GET THE RIGHT ANSWERS ABOUT SEXUAL HEALTH AND CHILD MARRIAGE



In northern Lombok, classrooms are changing. In many schools, teenagers can be seen openly discussing and asking questions to teachers that were once considered taboo.

Among the usual topics of school, music, and the latest gossip, students are also meeting to talk over issues like child marriage and early pregnancy, parenthood, reproductive health and the roles and responsibilities of boys and girls. Questions like “Is it ok for a girl to get married young?” are confidently asked and answered. As debate typically ensues, one thing is clear: these are no ordinary meetings of teenagers.

Instead, many teenagers have been meeting regularly as part of the **Let’s Talk** program, an **information-sharing forum among peers** created and supported by Yayasan Plan International Indonesia. While many young boys and girls might ordinarily be embarrassed to discuss such subjects in the open, **Let’s Talk** allows teens to debate sensitive topics that are on their mind in a productive and informative peer counseling group.

Government partners in both the City of Mataram and District of North Lombok have supported the implementation of this program, believing in the potential **Let's Talk** has for adolescents to learn from each other.

"I hope that teenagers in Mataram and North Lombok have a better understanding of the negatives effects of child marriage and are able to choose a better and healthier life," said Dr. H. Lalu Fatwir Uzali, S.Pd., M. Pd, Head of Mataram's Health Office, at the launch of the **Let's Talk** program.

One participant in this project and peer educator, Bela, said: *"I feel happier because I know more and get all the positive knowledge I didn't learn before. I also started to understand the difference between positive and negative behavior that might impact my life, especially avoiding risky behaviors and rejecting the practice of child marriage."*

Let's Talk's objective is to **empower youths, particularly vulnerable girls**

aged 13-18 affected by COVID-19, to make informed decisions about their sexual and reproductive health, contributing to the prevention of risky behavior and child marriage, in the West Nusa Tenggara Province. The initiative is premised on the idea that peer pressure can be used as a positive force since teenagers listen closely to their peers. The project's ultimate goal is to help teenagers reach their full potential.

Significantly, **Let's Talk** is not just for girls. Teenage boys and girls are encouraged to learn from each other. They openly discuss the causes and impacts of child marriage and motivate themselves to make the best decisions regarding sexual and reproductive health rights. As well as prevention of child marriage during the COVID-19 pandemic.

"After taking on the role as a peer educator, the change I felt was knowing the parts of my reproductive organs, knowing what child marriage is, the dangers of it, how to avoid child marriage and help others to do the same," said I Dewa, a peer educator boy.



"I HOPE THAT TEENAGERS IN MATARAM AND NORTH LOMBOK HAVE A BETTER UNDERSTANDING OF THE NEGATIVES EFFECTS OF CHILD MARRIAGE AND ARE ABLE TO CHOOSE A BETTER AND HEALTHIER LIFE"

THE SCHOOL LEADING BY EXAMPLE

Support from all areas of the community is paramount when fighting child marriage. To effectively implement Let's Talk, it was essential to get teachers, principals, and parents involved.

One such junior high school in Lombok is leading the way. In the school, every year there are students who become victims of child marriage. Like many schools in the area, it welcomes students with various social problems such as poverty, divorce, domestic violence, neglect, drugs, and teenage pregnancy – factors that often lead to child marriage. Yet, it has been a beacon of change

School Principal H.Suraji had observed these links to child marriage for a long time. His great concern for his students led him to directly involve himself with Let's Talk. He ensures every single student in the school participates, and he is actively in dialogue with parents to dissuade them from marrying off their children.

“First and foremost, it is important that all students take care of each other, and that teachers are motivating their students to do this. Before I retire, there should be no more child marriage at this school,” said Suraji. *“Let's Talk has brought immediate results. Students, especially peer educators, have increased their confidence and are opening up! I can see they will be this generation's success stories.”*

Child marriage and adolescent pregnancy is a serious problem in Indonesia. **More than 2,000 cases of teen pregnancy were recorded in North Lombok in 2019 alone.** 805 child marriage dispensation requests occurred in this area in 2020, a **59 percent increase from 2019** when 332 child marriage dispensation requests were registered.

The causes of this, especially in rural areas like North Lombok, are diverse, including poverty and cultural norms. But there's another factor at play: the limited access of teens to sexual and reproductive health information and facilities. This situation has worsened owing to COVID-19, since health facilities are stretched, and others health services have moved online.



By removing the shame and stigma from talking about sexual health and child marriage, Yayasan Plan International Indonesia believes the project has created collaboration between diverse people and a positive change in the lives and health of young people.

“Now I know more about the impact of child marriage, maintaining a healthy body, using social media well, living a healthier life, maintaining healthy friendships, and staying away from negative comments and content on social media,” said Arkenzy, one of the female Let's Talk peer educators. *“I am giving more care to my body, and I will continue to advise my friends not to engage in risky behaviors and not to get married when they are still children.”*

“I AM GIVING MORE CARE TO MY BODY, AND I WILL CONTINUE TO ADVISE MY FRIENDS NOT TO ENGAGE IN RISKY BEHAVIORS AND NOT TO GET MARRIED WHEN THEY ARE STILL CHILDREN”



LET'S TALK

Yayasan Plan International Indonesia developed the **Let's Talk** initiative to create a group of youth educators who would be able to train their peers on topics like adolescent pregnancy, child marriage, drug abuse and gender-based violence. Uneven access to sexual and reproductive health information and services was identified as barriers preventing girls from leading healthy lives. Through a gender-sensitive environment, young people and children, boys and girls, can access information and services supporting their sexual and reproductive health rights, enabling them to make the right decisions for their futures.

In North Lombok, **Let's Talk** is strongly supported by diverse community stakeholders, including the Mayor of Mataram, the Office of Education and Culture in West Nusa Tenggara province (NTB), the Health Office NTB, the Office of Women's Empowerment, Child Protection, Population Control and Family Planning NTB, NTB Children's Forum, City of Mataram, and NTB Child Protection Agency.

THE IMPACT OF CHILD MARRIAGE IN INDONESIA

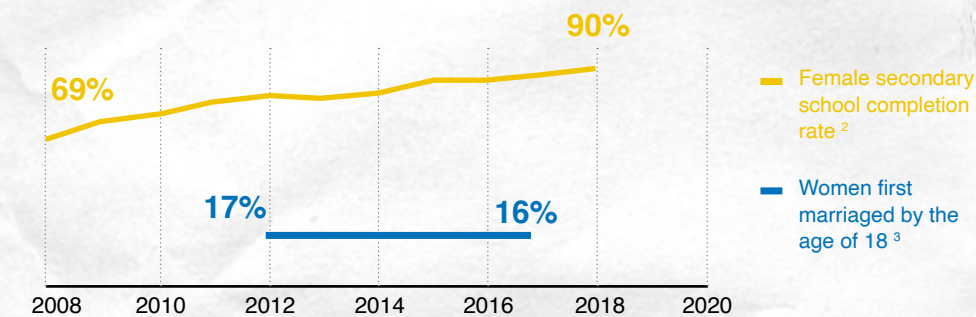
Indonesia's Child Marriage Prevalence Ranking.¹

17TH
Asia-Pacific
Region



83TH
World

Educating girls, ending child marriage.



Women first married by the age of 18 has decreased by 1% from 2012 to 2017, while female secondary school enrollment has increased by over 20% from 2008 to 2018.

(1) (August 2021). UNICEF. *UNICEF global databases*. Available at <https://data.unicef.org/resources/dataset/child-marriage/> (accessed 20 January 2022).

(2) (2018). UNICEF. *Towards Ending Child Marriage: Global trends and profiles of progress*.

(3) (2021). World Bank. *World Development Indicators*. Available at <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SE.SEC.ENRR.FE?locations=ID> (accessed 20 January 2022).



TIME TO ACT! IN LAOS



REMOVING BARRIERS TO GET GIRLS EDUCATED IN LAO PDR



With a heavy bag of rice on her head and a pile of books bulging out of her bag – 11-year-old Khai’s classmates are always surprised to see the smile beaming from her face as she happily and clumsily skips the long journey to school. Yet Khai does not mind; her education journey used to be much more troublesome than carrying something heavy.

In the past, she only dreamed of completing secondary school. Each day after school, she returned to her farmhouse in the mountains of northern Laos, where she studied, hoping to continue school and imagining a future very different from her mother or grandmother.

But as her family’s economic pressures grew, her worst fears began to materialize.

“I almost cried when I heard that my parents could not afford my secondary education and might take me out of school. I knew that my parents did not want to do so, but they had no choice,” said Khai.

Then she found hope. Thanks to a scholarship scheme by Plan International Laos, her fears were averted, and she could continue her studies. And now she skips happily to school every day.

Yet, for many other girls, routes back to education after drop-out due to poverty can be much more strenuous, and often lead to an early or forced marriage. Throughout rural Laos, there is a strong correlation between child marriage and lack of access to education: **Nearly 60 percent of women aged 20-24 with no education were married before the age of 18, compared to 16 percent** who completed secondary education.

That is why Plan International Laos puts education, including comprehensive sexuality education, at the forefront of its actions against child marriage. Thanks to collaborations with northern communities – including community leaders, parents, teachers, school heads, local governmental organizations – some of the obstacles to young girls’ education are starting to diminish, and child marriage is gradually decreasing.



STUDENT CLUBS: A SAFE SPACE TO COUNTER CHILD MARRIAGE

Driving this change is the creation of numerous student clubs in secondary schools in Laos' rural north – facilitated by the Ministry of Education and Sports in partnership with Plan International Laos. A safe space for collaboration and empowerment, these clubs allow young people, including boys, to discuss and learn about girls' rights, including the negative impacts of child marriage, gender equality, sexual reproductive health, and the importance of education.

"The student club activities helped me to understand sexual and reproductive health and rights. I now know why girls and women menstruate and when it is too young to get married," said Vanissa, a 12-year-old student club member. *"So, I think I will make the decision myself when I am ready for marriage, but not now!"*

The project is having an impact. In Vannisa's school, the **dropout rate has decreased from 11 percent in 2018 to seven percent in 2021**. Such impacts are reflected

throughout the northern region, with reduced marriages and increased attendances at many schools. Students and teachers alike attribute these positive trends to the student clubs.

"They have learnt about their rights, especially their right to education. Some of my female students now come to me and share their problems, and we are able to find a solution. This is the great change in our school," said Simone, a 28-year-old teacher and facilitator at a student club.

Young women say the clubs offer them insights into how to better prepare for their futures.

"Before the club, I didn't know much about girls' rights. My dream was to get married and have a child after completing lower secondary school this year, but now it's changed," said Kaenthong, a 14-year-old student club member. *"I know girls have a right to education and can have the opportunity to get a well-paid job."*



SCHOLARSHIPS TO HELP GIRLS STAY IN SCHOOL

These clubs have been the driver in giving girls previously unattainable perspectives. But in many communities, access to education and inequality remains commonplace and the most-pressing concern.

"It's common for parents to encourage their first child, in particular girls, to sacrifice their education to look after their siblings and contribute to the family income," explains a northern province village chief.

Improving access to education for many people in more rural and ethnic communities is essential to ensure girls can expand their minds and learn about their rights.

"When a family is poor, the parents think the only option is to marry their daughter off, even though her education should come first," said Tamon, a 15-year-old female student club member.

Hence, the scholarships are helping poorer students stay in school. Working together with parents, teachers, village authorities, and the district education bureau, children from families unable to cover education costs are getting the help they need. Last year, Plan International Laos provided 767 scholarships to adolescent girls and 11 to adolescent boys across Northern Laos, just like Khai.

Khai's mother is appreciative of the support her daughter received.

"If Khai hadn't received these learning materials, I am afraid that she would also have been taken out of school to work in the fields with us, because going to secondary school costs us even more than primary school," 11-year-old Houm.

Another scholarship recipient, hopes news of the financial assistance reaches other girls.

"I hope this scholarship will help convince my parents and people in my village that education is important and necessary for

all children, and find a way to support their education," she said.

The factors pushing young girls to child marriage and drop out of school remain multi-faceted and complicated in Northern Laos. On top of lack of regard for girls' education, tradition continues to dictate that girls and women are responsible for all the housework, and domestic violence and early marriage are accepted as the norm. Additionally, unpredictable rainfall due to climate change leaves many families with a weak harvest and little to pay for their children's school needs. Coupled with a lack of close secondary schools for many rural villages, families living in poverty can often not afford to support their children's education, which affects girls the most.

The obstacles are numerous and crippling for girls. However, by improving access to schools and the environments when girls get there, some of the factors pushing them out of school and into marriage are now beginning to shift, and optimism can be seen radiating from girls freely able to go to school.

With the student club in full effect in Kaenthong's school and reaching both boys and girls, she feels confident and ready to learn: *"Both boys and girls know more about their rights, and girls are bold enough to stand up for themselves. I know that change takes time, and it won't happen quickly, but I am happy with this progress."*

Laos



77

THE IMPACT OF CHILD MARRIAGE IN LAOS

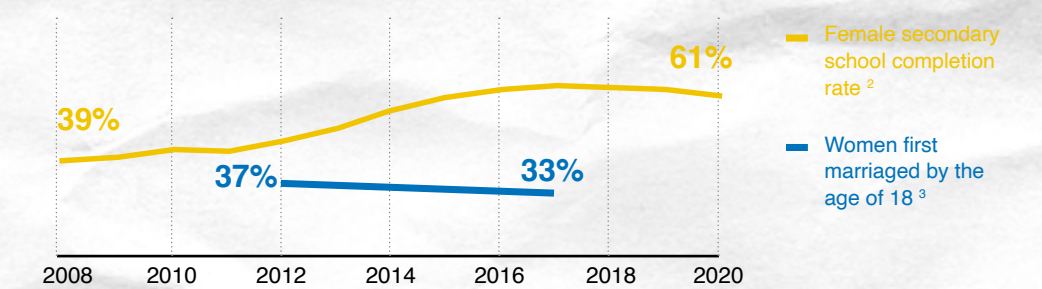
Laos's Child Marriage Prevalence Ranking.¹

3RD
Asia-Pacific
Region



27TH
World

Educating girls, ending child marriage.



Women first married by the age of 18 has decreased by 4% from 2012 to 2017, while female secondary school enrollment has increased by almost 22% from 2008 to 2020.

(1) (August 2021). UNICEF. *UNICEF global databases*. Available at <https://data.unicef.org/resources/dataset/child-marriage/> (accessed 20 January 2022).

(2) (2012). Ministry of Health/Lao, and Lao Statistics Bureau. *Lao Social Indicator Survey 2011-12*, (2018). Lao Statistics Bureau, and UNICEF. *Lao Social Indicator Survey II 2017, Survey Findings Report*.

(3) (2021). World Bank. *World Development Indicators*. Available at <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SE.SEC.ENRR.FE?locations=LA> (accessed 20 January 2022).

TIME TO ACT! IN NEPAL



SPEAKING OUT: YOUNG FORCES AND VOICES DEFY CHILD MARRIAGE IN NEPAL



“If I had been married so young, it would have been like a suicide. I might have gotten pregnant and giving birth would have been risky both for my physical and mental health. If I was married, I’d have to obey my in-laws and my fate would depend on them. My life might have been dark and lonely,”

When Laxmi was 16, her parents told her that they had found her a husband. Instead of feeling happiness, she ran out of her house and found other members of a Children’s Club program promoting public health, education and expanded opportunities to help eliminate child, early and forced marriage. In this club, she was able to explain how she was not ready for marriage and was given the confidence to stop it. Now, Laxmi is still unmarried and motivated to help other girls liberate themselves from their child marriage.

In past and present Nepal, running out on parents might be considered behavior to shake the foundations of the family. The practice of **child marriage remains persistently and stubbornly common**. Every day throughout Nepal, dozens of girls from vulnerable communities are married off early and against their will. Thirty-seven percent of girls marry before the age of 18, and 10 percent before the age of 15, making **Nepal the country with the third-highest rate of child marriage in South Asia**.

“WE HAVE BEEN ABLE TO STOP FOUR CHILD MARRIAGE ATTEMPTED CASES IN OUR COMMUNITY”



Thanks to the Children's Club supported by Plan International Nepal, displays of autonomy by young girls like Laxmi are becoming increasingly widespread across the country. The project takes a holistic approach to identifying and **addressing the root causes of this harmful tradition** and identifying opportunities for change. At the Children's Club, girls can meet regularly to discuss child rights, sexual and reproductive health, and the negative aspects of child marriage.

As elsewhere, the negative consequences of early marriage in Nepal can be extreme. Early marriage often puts an end to a girl's childhood. Many girls are forced to abandon school. Married children become parents far too soon with potentially dire consequences to their and their family's health, including sometimes death, due to early pregnancy. Many child brides face a heightened risk of domestic violence too.



FIGHTING A TWO-STEP MARRIAGE TRADITION

Such challenges were experienced firsthand by Poonam, who was forced to marry an older man when she was only 13-years old. In Poonam's community, marriages happen in two stages. First, there is a marriage ceremony. This is followed sometime later by a ceremony called a Gauna, marking the moment when the bride goes to live with her husband and in-laws. Gaunas are common in communities where children are married prior to puberty.

Yet, the first of these ceremonies is not an engagement. It is more like a marriage and can be as difficult to dissolve. Children who have been married off and are awaiting their Gauna often describe their entire childhood as being altered by the knowledge that they are already married, as Gaunas frequently occur while girls are still far too young for marriage.

Joining the Plan International Nepal supported Adolescent Club has been transformational for Poonam.



“My motivation is to teach children from a young age that child marriage is unacceptable and they should reject any such proposals”

“Now I am president of the Adolescent Girls Club and my life has completely changed. I started to advocate against child marriage. I became confident and my self-esteem increased. I had the opportunity to take part in various activities like training, workshops and traveling to other districts representing my club,” said Poonam. *“We have been able to stop four child marriage attempted cases in our community.”*

Poonam’s story was complex. For years she’s been the subject of gossip and criticism from her community who didn’t understand why she continued to pursue her education instead of settling down with her husband.

Although Poonam is married and her in-laws have tried to take her to their home on numerous occasions, each time she’d quickly return home. *“My husband wants me to stop my studies as he and his family cannot afford it, so my father has paid my admission fee for grade 12, which I have now completed. Since then, I rarely go to my in-laws. They do not care about me and the progress I am making.”*

In the case of Laxmi, facilitators from the Children’s Club put her in touch with a local non-profit, one of Plan International Nepal’s implementation partner organizations in Nepal. Representatives from the organization then visited Laxmi’s parents to persuade them not to go through with the wedding.

Laxmi remains grateful for her freedom and wants to ensure that all girls have the same access to information and support that she did.

“We have to empower girls. If more girls are aware of their rights, their situation would be better.”

And, thanks to Plan International Nepal’s interventions, now 21-year-old Poonam continues to study to become a teacher.

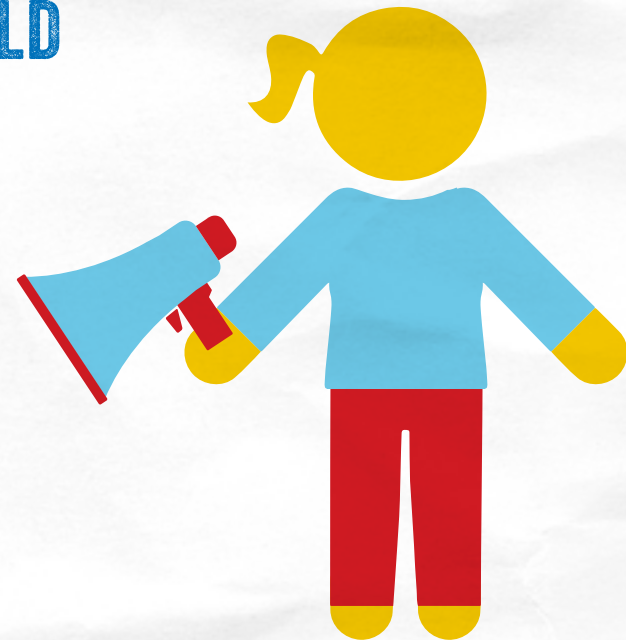
“My motivation is to teach children from a young age that child marriage is unacceptable and they should reject any such proposals.”



TIME TO ACT! IN NEPAL



**A PERFORMANCE TO
REMEMBER:
THE FEMALE YOUTH CLUB
MEMBER USING HER PASSION
TO WARN AGAINST CHILD
MARRIAGE**



In a rural eastern-Nepal village, a young woman can be seen leading a street performance to enthralled children and locals stopped in their tracks. At first, the entertaining performance may not seem clearly understood. Yet, after a while, the narrative she is weaving becomes apparent: it is a tale of warning against child marriage and gender-based discrimination and violence. As she creatively informs and entertains her audience all in one act, most can agree: this is not your usual amateur street performance.

The young performer is 19-year-old Sabina, who has been another success story from the Youth Clubs facilitated by Plan International Nepal's project. As with many other girls across rural areas of Nepal, Sabina has grown in confidence under the safe environment of the club. She has been able to freely discuss gender equality, sexual and reproductive health, and the negative aspects of child marriage with her peers, while gaining the courage to put her concerns into her passion for performing.

"I am a girl with big dreams," she said. "But the road isn't always safe and easy."



In countries like Nepal, ending child marriage has been a slow process. In Nepal, a child bride is often just that, a child, sometimes even a pre-teen. And rather than a willing marriage, weddings are often a transaction among poor families. Girl brides are valuable workers, capable of cooking meals, caring for livestock, or working the field.

Such a fate could have awaited Sabina.

"I overheard the whispers of my parents, that my dowry becomes more expensive by the day. Because we don't have a lot," she said. "They said I'm a burden to my family. They said I must allow the hands of a strange man to greet me, so my parents can live worry free."



Those overheard conversations left Sabina to wonder about her future: *"Is this all it means to be a girl? That is not my dream. My dream is to stay in school so I'll have skills that will help my family find a better way to make a living."*

But the youth club that was set up in her village helped to divert her path and look towards her dreams.

"The people at Plan International told me what I need to know to fight for my dreams," she said.

Now she is a facilitator in the club, and ensures it is a refuge for young adults and children who may have been looking towards a darker future.

"THE PEOPLE AT PLAN INTERNATIONAL TOLD ME WHAT I NEED TO KNOW TO FIGHT FOR MY DREAMS"



“After being exposed to different projects and activities where children can discuss, participate and share their ideas about issues that children, especially girls, have to face, I found a positive strength within myself to stand up and try to make a difference,” she says.

At the children’s clubs, Sabina and her friends meet regularly. Discussions are led by girls and center on the concerns of girls. The clubs are playful, hence Sabina’s creative output, even though the topics discussed deal with pain and suffering.

Guided by facilitators like Sabina, topics that might have been avoided in the past, like child rights, sexual and reproductive health, and child marriage, are revealed as occasions for resilience rather than resignation.

Sabina also advocates for child marriage free communities and 100 per cent school enrolment among children.

“It’s tragic what girls have to face. I want girls to know their rights, so together, we can change our destiny,” she said.

Sabina’s commitment to her cause has been successful in stopping a number of child marriages in her community. She is a key ally in the fight for girls’ rights, organizing community activities, and advocating at a national level. She was recently unanimously selected to lead the children’s club network in her community.

“By working together, we can unlock the power of girls, and we will not stop until all girls are seen, listened to, and valued,” she said. “We can make a wave of change, not only in our lives but for others in the community as well. Our voices might be little now, but little by little, little becomes a lot.”



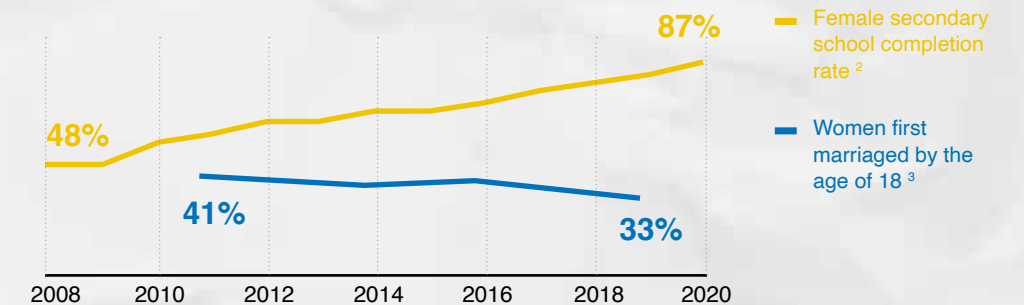
**“IT’S TRAGIC WHAT
GIRLS HAVE TO FACE.
I WANT GIRLS TO
KNOW THEIR RIGHTS,
SO TOGETHER, WE
CAN CHANGE OUR
DESTINY”**

THE IMPACT OF CHILD MARRIAGE IN NEPAL

Nepal’s Child Marriage Prevalence Ranking.¹



Educating girls, ending child marriage.



Women first married by the age of 18 has decreased by almost 8% from 2011 to 2019, while female secondary school enrollment has increased by over 38% from 2008 to 2020.

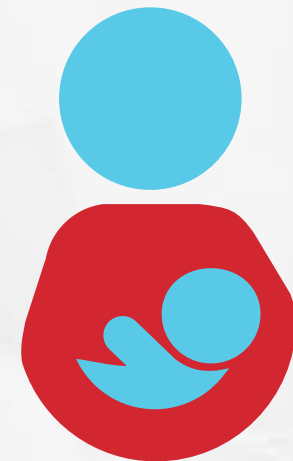
(1) (August 2021). UNICEF. *UNICEF global databases*. Available at <https://data.unicef.org/resources/dataset/child-marriage/> (accessed 20 January 2022).

(2) (2012). MOH/Nepal, New ERA/Nepal, and ICF. *Nepal Demographic and Health Survey 2011*; (2015). Central Bureau of Statistics. *Nepal Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey 2014*; (2017). MOH/Nepal, New ERA/Nepal, and ICF. *Nepal Demographic and Health Survey 2016*; (2020). Central Bureau of Statistics. *Nepal Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey 2019, Survey Findings Report*.

(3) (2021). World Bank. *World Development Indicators*. Available at <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SE.SEC.ENRR.FE?locations=NP> (accessed 20 January 2022).

TIME TO **ACT!** IN THE PHILIPPINES

**FROM CHILD BRIDE TO BUDDING
ENTREPRENEUR: THE FEMALE
YOUTH CLUB MEMBER USING
HER PASSION TO WARN AGAINST
CHILD MARRIAGE**



"I got married at 15 and this was the reason why I quit school. A year later I became a mother. Now I have my own business." Kate, 18- years-old, The Philippines.

As Kate locks the shutters on her convenience store after another successful day, the past worries of how to support her family and turbulent times can feel like a distant memory, echoes from a different life.

Kate was married at 15 after falling pregnant, becoming a mother at just 16. Being forced into marriage when she was still a child brought sudden strains and pains to Kate and her husband. She quit school and started a family. She lived at the edge of poverty. But then things brightened. Through workshops, training and grants, Plan International Philippines helped Kate become an entrepreneur. Now she dreams of one day graduating from college.

Because of a lack of comprehensive sexuality education in secondary schools throughout the Philippines, many girls and boys like Kate and her husband are unaware of the challenges they will face when they marry.

**"BEING A MOTHER AT 16,
I REALIZED THAT LIFE IS
REALLY DIFFICULT"**



While the **legal age of marriage in the Philippines is 18, reports suggest 2 percent of women aged 25-49 are married by the time they reach 15.**

Due to traditional gender stereotypes and roles, girls in many communities are often forced to marry young, leave school and begin a life of work, motherhood, and domesticity.

This was true in Kate's coastal community, where many young women marry and fall pregnant far too early. Families rely on fishing and farming as the main source of income, education and the wellbeing of girls are often not deemed as a priority.

School dropout is an issue that affects all adolescents regardless of sex. Yet, a study by Plan International Philippines suggests most married girls are forced to discontinue their studies because of feelings of embarrassment and shame – especially among those girls whose child marriages were not voluntary – or because of their new responsibilities as wives and mothers. A lack of financial resources can also push girls to drop out of school early.

“Being a mother at 16, I realized that life is really difficult,” said Kate. “I have had to redirect my life and take one step at a time for our family. Having my own family at such an early age has changed me.”

Having to rely materially on her husband's family left Kate feeling remorseful and guilty when she couldn't provide for her own child's needs.

It was the **COVID-19 pandemic that pushed her to make a change.** She decided she had to pursue education once more. She began by attending a workshop on community-based enterprise development conducted by Plan International Philippines' Reach Mindanao Project, part of the **Youth Economic Empowerment Program.** There, Kate learned about creating business proposals, managing finances, and running a small enterprise. Armed with new skills and inspired by the other young women in the workshop, Kate decided to put her new entrepreneurial skills to work and begin her own business.

“I have had to redirect my life and take one step at a time for our family. Having my own family at such an early age has changed me”

The project also provided **start-up capital** to help set up new businesses, enabling Kate to open a convenience store.

After only a few months, Kate's store thrived, and she has used her earnings to diversify and open two new businesses – selling fish and a nighttime street food stall.

“Now, I can provide for my family, and I am also starting to build my savings for the future of my baby and also for when I return to my schooling,” she said.

Through this support, Kate was able to realize her potential, worth and gain knowledge in how to create a secure future for her family. Despite her being married off as a child, she has been able to build her life for the better.

Although the successes of her businesses have provided her family with much desired financial security, education never falls far from her mind. She has learnt from her past and wants to empower herself further through education.

“I think I am still capable of studying,” says Kate, who is now 18. “I want to go back to school and pursue my dreams of graduating from college. Then I will work, while also running my business and giving back to my community.”



“I AM ALSO STARTING TO BUILD MY SAVINGS FOR THE FUTURE OF MY BABY AND ALSO FOR WHEN I RETURN TO MY SCHOOLING”

REACH MINDANAO

The Reach Mindanao Project, funded by the Reach Out to Asia Foundation, promoted inclusive education and flexible learning options. The goal was to strengthen the capabilities of young people by enriching their technical and vocational skills, so they could gain decent employment or start their own business. The project finished in January 2021.



THE IMPACT OF CHILD MARRIAGE IN THE PHILIPPINES

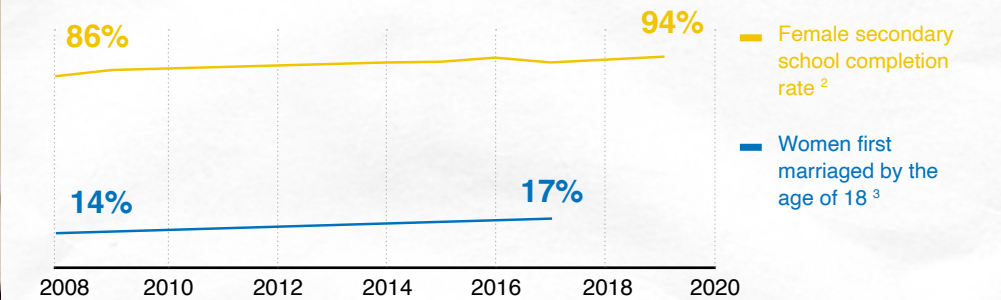
The Philippines's Child Marriage Prevalence Ranking.¹

16TH
Asia-Pacific
Region



81TH
World

Educating girls, ending child marriage.



Women first married by the age of 18 has increased by 2.3% from 2008 to 2017, while female secondary school enrollment has increased by over 8% from 2008 to 2019.

(1) (August 2021). UNICEF. *UNICEF global databases*. Available at <https://data.unicef.org/resources/dataset/child-marriage/> (accessed 20 January 2022).

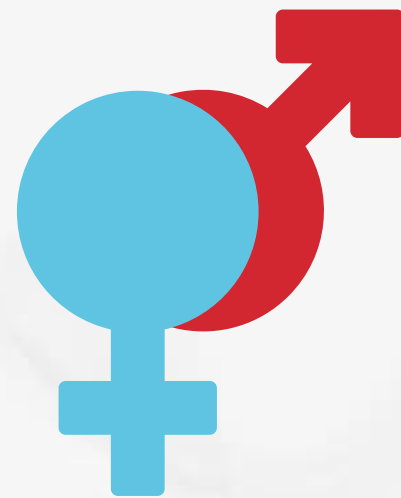
(2) (2018). Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA) and ICF. *Philippines National Demographic and Health Survey 2017*.

(3) (2021). World Bank. *World Development Indicators*. Available at <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SE.SEC.ENRR.FE?locations=PH> (accessed 20 January 2022).



TIME TO ACT! IN THAILAND

TAKING DOWN TEENAGE TABOOS: TALKING ABOUT SEX TO PREVENT AND REDUCE CHILD MARRIAGE



“I was empowered with the learning that as girls we can make our choices of our own and no one has the right to force us to do anything we do not like”

Huddled in a circle and deep in discussion, teenagers in northern Thailand are talking openly about the myths of sex, the dangers and risks of early pregnancy, marrying too young and how to put a condom on. They are animated, intrigued and keen to debate and learn about the taboos that are so often filtered within the classroom halls and family homes.

Among the most curious is Orn, a 16-year-old girl, leading the discussions and answering questions other teenagers have been bursting to know but were too scared to ask.

Usually, discussion on such topics would have been rare with any families and communities who believe talking about sex and pregnancy to teenagers is difficult.

THE POWER OF CONVERSATION

Yet, in northern Thailand, these awkward conversations are being turned around. Through training sessions and regular discussion groups held by Plan International Thailand’s **Teen Power for Better Life** project, young girls, mostly from rural parts of the country, confidently learn about topics like **conception, contraception, sexual and reproductive health, sexually transmitted diseases and pregnancy**. Through these lessons, girls are able to discover the links between early marriage, adolescent pregnancies and gender discrimination. Crucially, **Teen Power for Better Life** encourages everyone to take the lead and become inspirational youth leaders of change, like Orn.

“I am working with other volunteers to disseminate knowledge about sexual reproductive health and rights, focusing on raising awareness on child marriage among other children and youths,” said Orn. *“Now I feel more confident and prouder of myself, being able to help others.”*



“AFTER THE TRAINING, I REALIZED THAT IF I MARRIED EARLY, I MIGHT NOT BE ABLE TO FOLLOW MY DREAM TO BE A BUSINESSWOMAN. I WANT TO STUDY AND OBTAIN A DEGREE, NOT TO BE SOMEONE’S WIFE ONLY”

Until Orn joined Teen Power for Better Life, she believed, like most girls in her community, she was destined for early marriage and motherhood.

“I was empowered with the learning that as girls we can make our choices of our own and no one has the right to force us to do anything we do not like. I have learned more about sexual and reproductive health and rights. I am aware now that social norms influence practices leading to gender inequality in my community and child marriage.”

The reason so many girls in her village marry and have children at such a tender age mostly has to do with **economics and family pressure** to conform to traditionally accepted ways of life. Local officials, particularly in rural areas, are said to often turn a blind eye to this harmful practice.

“Every child has a right to dream, to study and to pursue their futures, not to be a wife or a mother at a young age,” said Orn.



THE POWER OF TRAINING

Teen Power for Better life’s training is beginning to have an impact. In March 2021, youth representatives participated in a network meeting for the project to discuss accessing sexual reproductive health information at the local level. In addition, representatives, particularly young women who participated in the training, presented **recommendations to government agencies** on National Youth Day, 20th September 2021. The common consensus was that more access to information on sexual and reproductive health was desperately needed – which had been limited owing to COVID-19. Female youth leaders are also working with a diverse set of stakeholders, from local administrative organizations to community development officers, to codify ideas to **improve the rights and quality of life for youths**. These grassroots efforts are gradually paying off, and some youth groups will receive state funding next year.

“After the training, I realized that if I married early, I might not be able to follow my dream to be a businesswoman. I want to study and obtain a degree, not to be someone’s wife only,” said Orn. “Girls in my village give up their lives because the community thinks you are a good person only if you obey your parents. But this causes suffering for many children.”

These days Orn continues her life as a youth leader for Teen Power for Better Life. She works alongside other volunteers delivering knowledge about sexual reproductive health and early marriage challenges.

“I hope that parents and society know that **child marriage is a social problem**. It has a negative effect on the life of a child. We need to stop tolerating child marriage, instead of supporting girls to complete their schooling and enroll in higher education to pursue their dreams better,” said Orn. “I want to raise my voice to governments and relevant organizations to invest in interventions to eliminate child, early and forced marriage.”

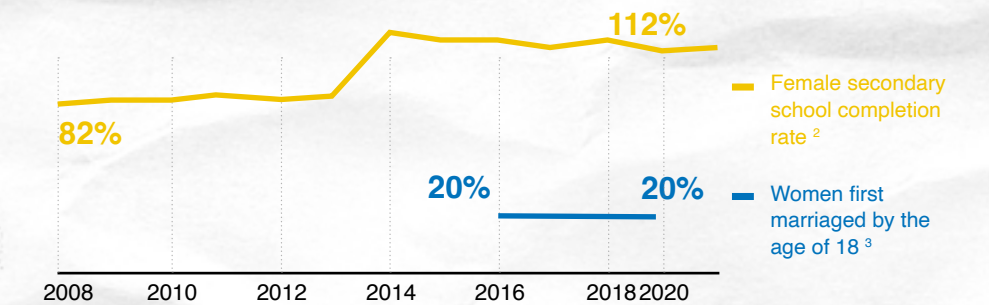


THE IMPACT OF CHILD MARRIAGE IN THAILAND

Thailand’s Child Marriage Prevalence Ranking.¹



Educating girls, ending child marriage.



Women first married by the age of 18 has increased by 0.1% from 2016 to 2019, while female secondary school enrollment has increased by over 30% from 2008 to 2020.

(1) (August 2021). UNICEF. *UNICEF global databases*. Available at <https://data.unicef.org/resources/dataset/child-marriage/> (accessed 20 January 2022).

(2) (2016). National Statistical Office, and UNICEF. *Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey 2016, Final report*; (2020). National Statistical Office of Thailand. *Thailand Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey 2019, Survey Findings Report*.

(3) (2021). World Bank. *World Development Indicators*. Available at <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SE.SEC.ENRR.FE?locations=TH> (accessed 20 January 2022).

TIME TO ACT! IN TIMOR-LESTE

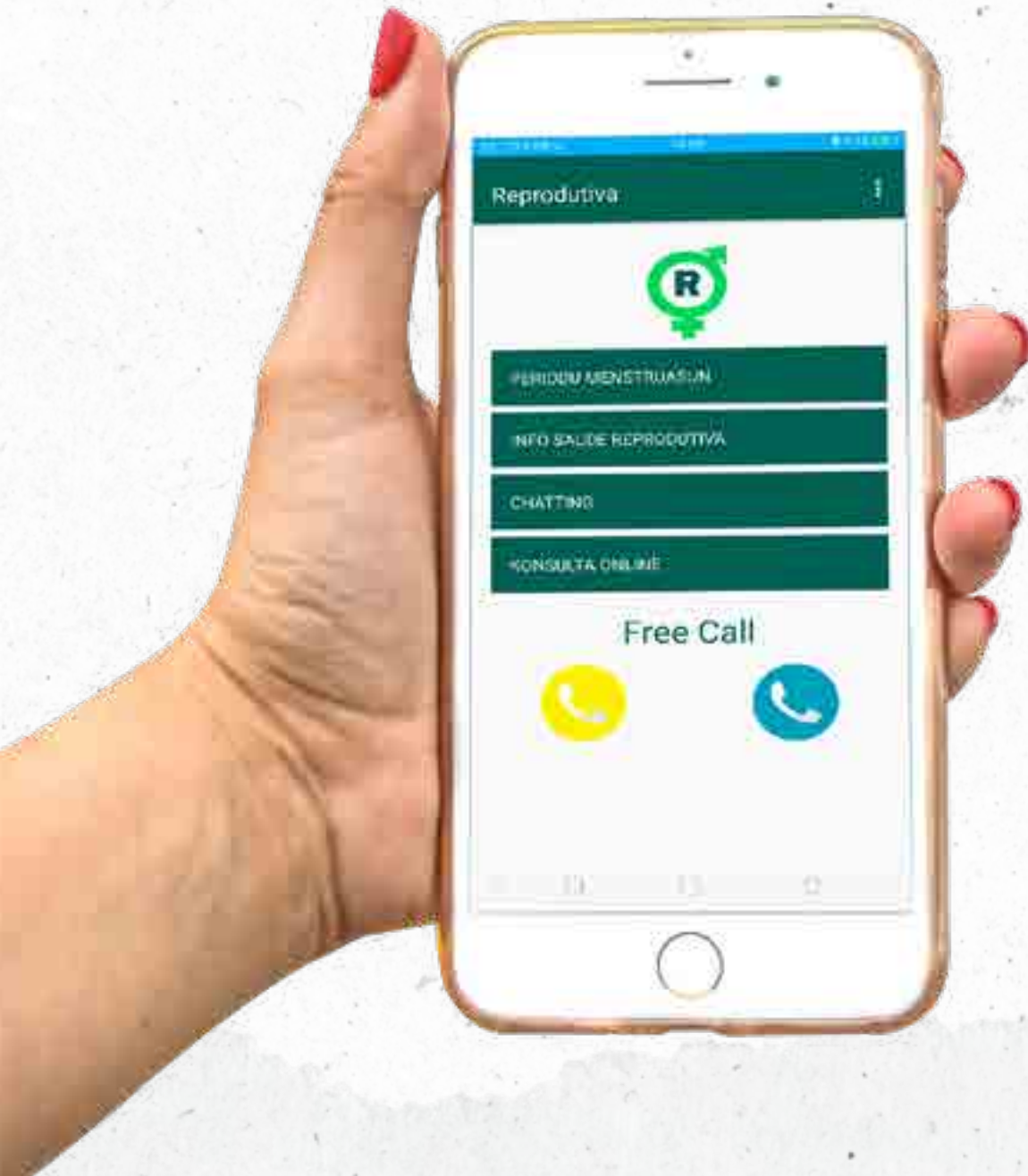
MYTHS AND EMBARRASSMENT DISMANTLED: TEENAGERS GETTING APPROPRIATE ANSWERS ABOUT SEXUAL AND REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH AND MARRIAGE IN TIMOR-LESTE



When 20-year-old Valeria was a teenager, she used to be confused about sexual and reproductive health. Looking for answers, she would consider going to ask a parent or teacher, but she resisted, knowing she was not allowed to talk about such things to an adult, or anyone else for that matter.

She would then go to her friends and timidly skirt around taboo questions to eventually find they were also confused. Still not fully informed, they would start to create their own attempted answers, listen to other bits of gossip about sex from their peers, and take more notice of the old fearful myths and stories their grandparents used to tell.





Like many other young men and women in Timor-Leste, Valeria's confusion regarding sexual and reproductive health and embarrassment when talking about it to others was ever-present in her adolescent life.

From being unable to ask the most obvious questions: What is ovulation? When will I get my next period? How are babies made? to debunking local myths: Can I wash my hair when I am on my period? They were waiting for answers to questions girls in other parts of the world could get at the drop of a hat.

Fortunately, since 2018, girls in Timor-Leste have found a new way to get those answers. **Reprodutiva**, an app providing young women with sexual and reproductive health information in a confidential and safe online environment, allows girls to skip past the awkward questioning and presumptions to find out essential answers about their bodies and their rights – just a fingertip away: directly on their phones.

“The App is important for me as a young person because I can access the information especially about reproductive and sexual health and understand it better,” said Valeria.

“The App is important for me as a young person because I can access the information especially about reproductive and sexual health and understand it better”

Often the most pressing concerns and confusion about sexual and reproductive health in Timor-Leste remain ignored due to stinging stigmas, conservative attitudes, and misinformation in their own language online.

Research on the decision-making pathways of young women in the Timor-Leste municipalities of Covalima, Aileu and Dili found young women and men wanting more sexual education and health services in the country. Many stated that improvements to these services would aid in reducing the high rates of adolescent pregnancy and early marriage in the country. Yet, attempts to break the taboo of sex education in Timor-Leste can often lead to controversy.

In light of this, Plan International Timor-Leste decided to debunk myths and misinformation and get to the source: the phones of teenagers.

By sharing comprehensive and clear information on sexual reproductive health in real time, the app breaks down traditional stigmas about girls' sexual health rights, squashes disinformation, and relieves many of the stresses, worries and uncertainties

that girls in Timor-Leste are faced with every day. Amongst its features, girls, and boys, can ask vital questions in their language and in real time, share tips in group chats, talk with experts and organize consultations and medical appointments.

Aside from the convenience and connectedness these apps provide in everyday life, they can also help protect and spread awareness about girls' rights. Phone usage is rising exponentially among youths in the developing world. Powerful technological innovations present new opportunities for teenagers, especially girls, to maneuver around the obstacles of a conservative society.

“It is a good app for youths, as we know that nowadays young people spend their time mostly on the internet. Through the existence of this app, youths can easily access information about reproductive health and know the truth,” said Valeria.

Almost a quarter of all girls in Timor-Leste have a child before turning 20. These high teenage pregnancy rates are exacerbated by a lack of knowledge and understanding

of how their bodies work, early pregnancy, child marriage, reproduction and access to contraception.

To help combat this, the app lets girls track their periods, which can raise awareness of early pregnancy and provide support and information in the event of this. This feature also improves school attendance, as many absences are due to a lack of understanding of menstrual cycles.

“It helps me a lot, especially with information about reproductive health. I can know more about myself either physically or psychologically,” said Valeria.

A simple app has the ability to transform lives and help children, especially girls, realize their right to protection, safety and education.

So far, Reproductiva has over 1,000 users, and collaboration ensures information on sexual and reproductive health rights is constantly expanding and updating.

Lack of understanding about their bodies and sexual health can shatter a teenager’s confidence and lead to early pregnancy and child marriage. With the app, it is hoped adolescents throughout the country will feel more informed and secure in their decision-making. Just like Valeria.

“If I wasn’t involved in this project, I might have still been staying with my old self that used to be shy exploring this issue. I might have accessed the wrong information, and I also might not have been confident to talk about what reproductive health is.”

“It helps me a lot, especially with information about reproductive health. I can know more about myself either physically or psychologically”

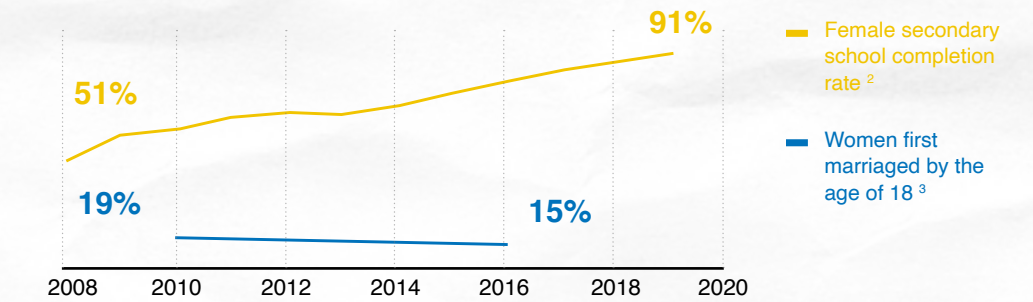


THE IMPACT OF CHILD MARRIAGE IN TIMOR-LESTE

Timor-Leste’s Child Marriage Prevalence Ranking.¹



Educating girls, ending child marriage.

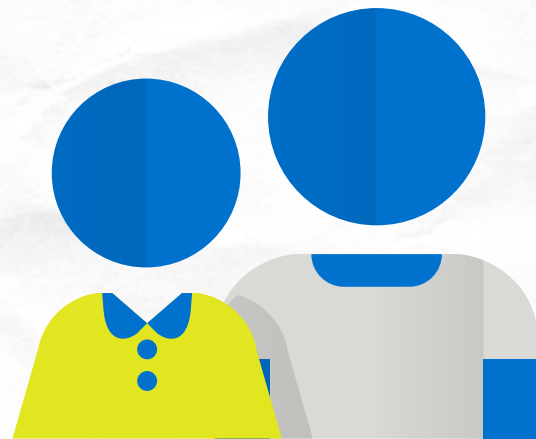


Women first married by the age of 18 has decreased by 4% from 2010 to 2016, while female secondary school enrollment has increased by over 39% from 2008 to 2019.

(1) (August 2021). UNICEF. *UNICEF global databases*. Available at <https://data.unicef.org/resources/dataset/child-marriage/> (accessed 20 January 2022).
 (2) (2017). General Directorate of Statistics Timor-Leste, Ministry of Finance Timor-Leste, and ICF. *Timor-Leste Demographic and Health Survey 2009-2010; Timor-Leste Demographic and Health Survey 2016*.
 (3) (2021). World Bank. *World Development Indicators*. Available at <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SE.SEC.ENRR.FE?locations=TL> (accessed 20 January 2022).

TIME TO ACT! IN VIETNAM

THE FUTURE IS NOT WRITTEN:
THE YOUNG HUSBAND AND
WIFE COMMITTEE MEMBERS
BREAKING THE CYCLE OF CHILD
MARRIAGE



At 17, Mai and Lua fell in love. In many societies, first love is a milestone in life, one of many steps along the trajectory of growing up and growing wiser.

"I was so impressed by Mai when I met her at school, she was the tallest girl in school, lively and loved to sing," said Lua.

For them, a young couple in a borderline mountainous area of North Vietnam, social norms and traditions meant first love also equated to an abrupt, immediate marriage.

Child marriage is common among Vietnam's poorer ethnic minorities who tend to live in remote areas. Most are unaware of the challenges under-age newlyweds face. Usually, in Mai and Lua's village, **girls get married between 14-15 years old**, sometimes even earlier.

Mai and Lua managed to resist marriage until age 17. However, inevitable pressure from their families and the community, name-calling and ostracization, and a future already mapped out for girls like Mai would soon be enough to compel them into a hasty marriage.

"MAI AND HER CLUB HAVE TAUGHT ME THAT THERE SHOULD BE MORE INVESTMENT IN GIRLS, RATHER THAN JUST BOYS"



THE CONSEQUENCES OF EARLY MARRIAGE

As Mai's in-laws believe only the male should continue studying, she was **forced to drop out of school** and move in with them. Her life changed. Her new routines centered on housework and helping her husband's family with their farm. Soon after marriage, Mai **gave birth to the first of their two daughters**.

Getting married so early and having two daughters meant that she and her husband weren't able to live on their own. As members of Lua's family household, Mai **has to rely on his family for everything** in life, including decisions on their own personal life. Even decisions about whether to change hairstyles required permission.

"I felt completely helpless. It was a total barrier for me, and I didn't think I could change anything."



THE CLUBS AND COMMITTEES PROVIDING SUPPORT

While the pressures of traditions and roles in her community were taking its toll, Mai found solace in the ongoing support Plan International Vietnam provides for their community. She became a member of the Girls Club in her village, where they can safely tell their own stories and learn how they can break down barriers and discourage their own imposed early marriages.

Mai shares her Girls Club experiences with Lua, and this has given him valuable insights into the power that girls can have in the world.

"Mai and her club have taught me that there should be more investment in girls, rather than just boys. They have a lot more opportunities than girls and it isn't fair. These girls have the potential to do amazing things too," said Lua. *"As men, we can be a great source of support for girls and women. We can make meaningful contributions to the work girls are doing to feel empowered."*

Through the Girls Club, Mai was elected as a member of **the National Youth Advisory Committee**. And Lua, who also became a member, offers unparalleled support to her every day.

"I admire my wife's passion for the community as well as her non-stop energy, she inspires and encourages me every day," said Lua.

The National Youth Advisory Committee, established in 2019, informs and educates people on a national level about child marriage and gender equality. Lua and Mai represent youths from Ha Giang province in national discourse with their peer advocates.

Mai and Lua are working hard to bring what they have learnt from the **Committee** to their village.

"We are the only couple as part of the Committee. We are able to share our own unique stories and experiences. Due to

what we have learnt, my wife and I are now advocates in our community against child, early and forced marriage," said Lua.

Youth Advisory Council members are ambassadors, influencers, and advisors of meaningful youth engagement at Plan International Vietnam. Designed to positively incorporate youth voices and help build the capacity of youth voices, they give a platform for young people to feel empowered and steer the conversation to what matters most.

Through these committees, Lua has learned that supporting his wife helps alleviate the daily pressures she receives from his family.

"I admire my wife's passion for the community as well as her non-stop energy, she inspires and encourages me every day"

MAI THE MENTOR

Today, Mai continues to act as a mentor for her community, using the experiences of her past to deter girls from making decisions on marriage when they are too young to do so. Through the girls clubs, she encourages them to never give up on their dreams and to not be influenced by other people's hurtful words.

"For the first time in years, I have a goal. I want to make a contribution, even a small one, to change the future of my two daughters. I will try my best to send them to school, teach them to dream and grow wings to fly." said Mai.

Her husband, as ever, supports her in this. Mai's love and drive give Lua optimism for a better future for his daughters and other girls in the community.

"With support from husbands and family, girls and women can do great things," said Lua. *"I hope my daughters will be like Mai, confident and brave. And I hope we can create conditions for our children to always be happy."*



TIME TO ACT! IN VIETNAM



THE LIGHT WEB:
THE ONLINE PLATFORM
KEEPING GIRLS AWAY
FROM THE DARK WEB AND
PREVENTING CHILD MARRIAGE

As the global pandemic continues to force people to stay in their homes, most have channeled their attention to the online realm, where they may find solace and social interaction to alleviate their isolation. Yet the internet is also a vast space where limited restrictions exist, and limitless web surfing can exacerbate the dangers lurking in dark corners of the web, especially for young people in places like Vietnam.

Many young people in Vietnam's rural communities lack the digital awareness and literacy to navigate the complex online space. Accepting a chat request from a stranger or a thoughtless click on an unknown link can start the journey from curiosity to online trafficking, abuse, or child marriage.



DIGITAL SPACES: THE GOOD AND THE BAD

In Mai's village, she has seen the dangers that digital spaces can bring firsthand.

"In my village, many boys and girls make friends online and fall in love virtually. Then they meet each other outside, get pregnant, and drop out from school at age 14 or 15. It's become very common now."

Alarming, **ten million more girls are at risk of child marriage worldwide within the next decade due to the pandemic.** Digital interactions will certainly contribute to this trend.



"I think communications about child marriage elimination in old style like posters and banners no longer work. As youth, we are keen on technology. Why don't we create a game where you can choose to get or not to get married early and see the consequences from there?"

Online spaces have evolved the potential risks of child marriage and various forms of abuse for children and young people. For example, a boy from another province makes friends with a girl online; they meet without the girl's parent's knowledge and go back to the boy's house. Once the parents find out, it is already too late to do anything – the silent acceptance of the tradition in the area means inaction is common.

But, as internet connectivity improves in rural areas, digital technology and online platforms can also be a springboard for

solutions in children's and young people's lives. They can access information and learn lessons and good practices regarding the rights of girls in today's world, moving away from more traditional forms of communication.

"I think communications about child marriage elimination in old style like posters and banners no longer work. As youth, we are keen on technology. Why don't we create a game where you can choose to get or not to get married early and see the consequences from there?" said 15-year-old Toi.

Fortunately, Toi and many other youths fighting against child marriage have been listened to. This is the focus of Plan International Vietnam's project, to use online spaces and educate young people to be protected online from abuse, trafficking and early and forced marriage.

Operating in rural communities of four provinces in Vietnam, the project's overarching objective is for ethnic minority young people (aged 10 to 24) to **use digital spaces to understand and claim their rights**, access support services, and raise their voice towards policymakers.



DIGITAL SKILLS TO HELP YOUNG PEOPLE PROTECT THEMSELVES FROM EARLY AND FORCED MARRIAGE

15-year-old Tho, from Northern Vietnam, and her classmates would certainly benefit from **EMPoWR**. In her school, most have smartphones and are resisting urges from parents and teachers to ban them until they are adults.

“Even with many risks, smartphones are a crucial part of how we girls learn about the outside world,” she said.

However, the risks are there. In Tho’s class alone, three girls have entered an early marriage after first meeting online. Tho tries to remain vigilant when surfing the web.

“I use social media to chat and make friends with people all over Vietnam. But I friend request girls more so than boys because I know the dangers of getting lured into human trafficking,” she said.

Yet, despite her awareness, a lack of confidence and ability to confront a potential child marriage situation leaves her and her classmates feeling helpless.

“When my friends and I find out another girl is chatting with a boy in another province, we try to warn them off and keep an eye on them to see if they’re skipping school to meet the boy. But we don’t dare to try to stop it or to tell parents or teachers.”

Due to common experiences like Tho’s, improving digital literacy levels and online safety skills is a top priority of the project. Through specially developed training packages and educational videos, both online and face-to-face, it is hoped more and more will understand the potential risks and pitfalls in the digital world. As well as the creation of a new platform to advise and inform on the dangers of child marriage.

This platform – the **Girls’ Rights Platform** – encourages dialogue, information, and exchange on girls and women’s rights issues. It helps protect ethnic minority girls, boys, and young women and men from the risks of child marriage – Tho can now direct her friends in danger of child marriage to the platform.





The platform is uniquely designed to be ‘data light,’ meaning it can be accessed in remote areas where internet connectivity is not as strong. Essential information shared on the platform will be handed out as an infographic leaflet to those without internet.

Hue, 18 years old, believes the platform can be advantageous for girls in remote communities, like her Huc commune in the Huong Hoa district.

“Girls will be able to learn about their rights, adolescent reproductive health, professional career orientation, access to decent jobs and other topics to help them continue education and avoid early marriage and adolescent pregnancies.”

After one year, the platform has proved to be a valuable tool, not just for raising awareness of child, early, forced marriage and human trafficking, but also issues such as education opportunities, economic empowerment, and safe migration – which all contribute to preventing child marriage.

More than **two-thirds of the Vietnamese population are active internet users**. As the digital world begins to dominate the lives of the Vietnamese youth, it is important that they are better equipped with the tools to protect themselves and advocate for greater protection.

Thoughts echoed by Hue: *“Information means a lot and they help us access solutions and opportunities. Small and simple steps can take us far and help us live our dreams.”*

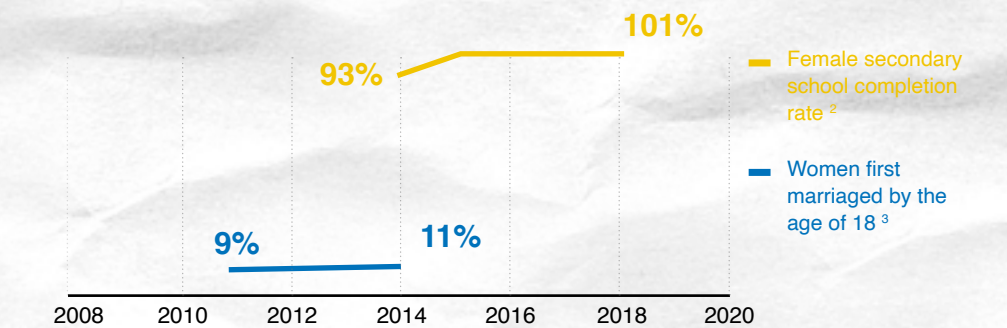
“Girls will be able to learn about their rights, adolescent reproductive health, professional career orientation, access to decent jobs and other topics to help them continue education and avoid early marriage and adolescent pregnancies”

THE IMPACT OF CHILD MARRIAGE IN VIETNAM

Vietnam’s Child Marriage Prevalence Ranking.¹



Educating girls, ending child marriage.



Women first married by the age of 18 has increased by 1.3% from 2011 to 2014, while female secondary school completion rate has increased by over 7% from 2014 to 2018.

(1) (August 2021). UNICEF. *UNICEF global databases*. Available at <https://data.unicef.org/resources/dataset/child-marriage/> (accessed 20 January 2022).

(2) (2015). General Statistical Office and UNICEF. *Vietnam Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey 2011, Final Report; Vietnam Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey 2014, Final Report*.

(3) (2021). World Bank. *World Development Indicators*. Available at <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SE.SEC.CMPT.LO.FE.ZS?locations=VN> (accessed 20 January 2022).

TIME TO **ACT!** IN ASIA-PACIFIC

**FROM WORDS TO ACTIONS:
YOUTH ACTIVISTS CALLING FOR
AN END TO CHILD MARRIAGE IN
ASIA PACIFIC**



“The dress of freedom is not tight. It doesn’t prevent us from soaring towards the right. The dress of freedom is for everyone. It does not leave you, me or anyone. We need to start sewing today and tomorrow’s freedom. Because everyone should have their own dress of freedom”

Closing her statement at the third regional ASEAN forum: **Towards a Child Marriage Free Southeast Asia**, on the 17th of November 2021, Kenia shared her empowering poem on gender equality to the online audience of delegates, government officials, the ASEAN dignitaries and other stakeholders.

For the last three years, young men and women, like Kenia, have been taking center stage to give first-hand accounts of their own experiences and activism in preventing and stopping child marriage. All the while urging the influential decision-makers to take decisive action in ending it – once and for all.

With aims to build upon the regional work so far in eliminating child, early and forced marriage, the forum’s spotlight would once again find itself shining most on the moving and inspirational testimonies from the young activists, inspiring the audience to take action.





KENIA, THE PHILIPPINES

In her moving speech, 17-year-old activist and creative performer Kenia detailed her understanding of what root causes align to make child marriage a common and negative experience in her community. As was the case in the other regional testimonies, social norms and traditions coupled with issues of poverty were top of the list.

“Child marriage is difficult to eliminate because it has been part of our reality for many years. Mangyan girls and boys (a group of indigenous people from northwest Philippines) grow up in a community where as soon as they hit puberty they are expected to be married off in a matter of weeks and months.”

Standing up against these long-standing norms, Kenia told the forum how she started her advocacy in 2017 as part of the Radio Show **Bidang Bulilit** (Small Children Are Stars). Supported by Plan International Philippines since 1999, the show talks about gender issues and rights. Kenia has been able to use the platform to share her poetry and call for awareness and action.

“I know what will happen next. I have seen it. After that fairytale-like wedding, the nightmare of a lifetime follows: early pregnancies, dropping out of school, abuses and violence at home, burden of homemaking and care work, and unemployment”

“Up to this day, I take part in discussing and developing a local policy in prohibiting “Kasal Katipunan” or traditional wedding ceremonies of Mangyans. Kasal Katipunan enables early marriage among young girls, as well as contributes to the increasing rate of adolescent pregnancy in our area,” she said.

She described how her involvement led to her joining a youth group campaigning nationally against child marriage.

“Eventually, I became one of the many advocates who call to end child, early and forced marriage which led to the swift passage of the Prohibition of Child Marriage bills in the Philippine legislative chambers,” she said.

Above all, her statement repeatedly highlighted the importance needed to be placed on investment in education. How indigenous communities, like the Mangyans, place marriage above education, believing it will ultimately detach them from poverty. Yet, as her own experiences prove, it turns out to be the opposite.

“I know what will happen next. I have seen it. After that fairytale-like wedding, the nightmare of a lifetime follows: early pregnancies, dropping out of school, abuses and violence at home, burden of homemaking and care work, and unemployment,” she said.

Kenia also explained how the COVID-19 pandemic worsened the situation, with incidences of abuse in remote areas where indigenous people live left unreported.

“Because of the economic hardships the pandemic caused, girls were pushed to marry at a young age to escape the financial burden in a hope for a better life. Online classes left girls in our communities frustrated. Unstable internet connections, especially in secluded areas, forced girls to drop out,” she said.

TIME TO ACT!

Yet these further obstacles in fighting child marriage have not deterred Kenia, making her more determined to stamp out this damaging practice. She repeatedly called for governments to do more in policy and law and to work with others in order to do this, and to eradicate cultures and traditions that harm girls and young women.

“We must educate the youth on sexual and reproductive health and rights, including their parents. Improve access to reproductive health services so that young people will be better informed and guided,” she said. *“Girls and all children and young people from indigenous communities must be included in decision-making. Our voices must be part of discussions and we should have a platform to tell our stories. Our realities.”*

To get those voices heard, she wants other youths to join her in the fight against child marriage.

“Our voices and representation are powerful tools that can amplify the voices of the unheard. We have proven this. I personally use my social media platform in spreading knowledge on the issue. I share their stories through my poems. Stories that speak truth and reality,” she said.

Throughout her testimony, it was clear the young advocates fighting against child marriage need a bigger platform to help eradicate this harmful practice. She concluded by urging the online audience to empower them to achieve this.

“To our leaders, let us optimize our power within. Let this power reach those who need it the most, specifically those who are often left powerless. We, the young people, cannot wait to see how you will continue to use your power to effect change like what you have done today and be someone’s hero,” she said. *“Work with us in getting our freedom from child, early and forced marriage.”*

“We must educate the youth on sexual and reproductive health and rights, including their parents. Improve access to reproductive health services so that young people will be better informed and guided”

“EVENTUALLY, I BECAME ONE OF THE MANY ADVOCATES WHO CALL TO END CHILD, EARLY AND FORCED MARRIAGE WHICH LED TO THE SWIFT PASSAGE OF THE PROHIBITION OF CHILD MARRIAGE BILLS IN THE PHILIPPINE LEGISLATIVE CHAMBERS”



TIEN, VIETNAM

Throughout the regional testimonies, speakers repeatedly described how the different Children's Clubs and Youth Forums, supported by Plan International, are providing opportunities to understand the causes more, learn and collaborate with others. Boys and girls alike are working together to end child marriage and create a gender-equal society. Just like 20-year-old Tien, a young man from Lai Chau Province, a Northern mountainous area in Vietnam.

"Around 5 years ago, child, early and forced marriage was a very common practice in my village. If a girl was not married before 18 years old, everyone in the community would think her or her family had a problem," he said. **"When Plan International came to our village, I could witness changes in people's behavior, especially among younger generations who are more open to absorb and accept new perspectives."**



After actively advocating to fight the issue for some years, Tien was selected as the head of his **Champions of Change Club**, where they organize monthly meetings for members to share their experiences, advise each other when their parents force them to get married, and host community events. These events inform people of the negative consequences early marriage can bring to the entire family and community.

"We didn't just talk in general. We had young married couples joining us and sharing their own stories. We discussed equal education and worked together on new livelihood models like raising local goats, planting and growing local rice, etc. to prove that there are different opportunities better than getting married early. I understand that our activities are small, but I believe that effort from the grassroot level can always make a difference," he said.

TIME TO ACT!

As a young man advocating for the rights of females, Tien is a firm believer in the power of the collective. He emphasized the

importance of involving others to change the social norms and prejudices that form part of the root causes of child marriage.

"I always believe that ending child marriage is not the sole responsibilities of girls and women, but boys and men are also key factors to make a change," he said. *"If both boys and girls work together to persuade their parents, their collective power could win."*

He finished his speech by calling on people to join him and his friends; to learn and grow and understand there are many opportunities for boys and girls beyond child marriage; to break through the damaging social norms and gender stereotypes.

"Child, early and forced marriage has a negative impact on all of us, no matter what our gender is. Let's believe in collective power, so both girls and boys can eliminate this issue. We have many opportunities waiting for us out there, don't be tied down by social norms and prejudices!"



RIA, INDONESIA

24-year-old Ria, from South Kalimantan Indonesia, has been an activist against child marriage since 2017. Her empowering speech explained how her life exposed her to the magnitude of problems confronting girls, making her determined to equip herself with the knowledge to help confront this situation head-on.

“I don’t want any other girls ever to experience what my mom had been through,” she said.

She detailed how writing in a scientific journal exposed her to even more of the impact’s child marriage has in Asia.

“That only made me understand this problem better, and it urged me to contribute to preventing child marriage, by actively participating in community-based activities related to broader child rights issues,” she said. *“I learned that child marriage has been disproportionately affecting girls’ lives, which inspired me to focus more on girls’ rights and gender equality.”*

As a result, she formed Girl Up, which focuses on child marriage prevention in her community and gender equality.

“We visit schools to conduct workshops on child marriage related issues and its prevention, including sexual reproductive health and rights, and leadership capacity strengthening to raise awareness about the worst impacts of child marriage,” she said.

Her tireless work and knowledge were apparent to the listening audience; she streamed off research point after research point that highlighted the devastating impact child marriage has had in her area.

“More than 2.500 children were registered in the marriage administration in South Kalimantan from 2017-2020, and it is a fact that it causes harmful impacts for the children and their community life. More than 30% of domestic violence cases were found. More than 40% of girls dropped out of school. They lost their opportunity to improve their skills and capacities,

and the most dramatic was 24% of the divorce rate, which was caused by early and forced marriage,” she said.

As with other speakers at the regional forum, she explained how the COVID-19 pandemic has worsened the situation.

“Girls could not go to school and ended up being stuck at home. They did not have any more choices to survive in the face of economic problems caused by the pandemic situation. Their parents felt the urge to marry them off to ease their economic burden,” said Ria.

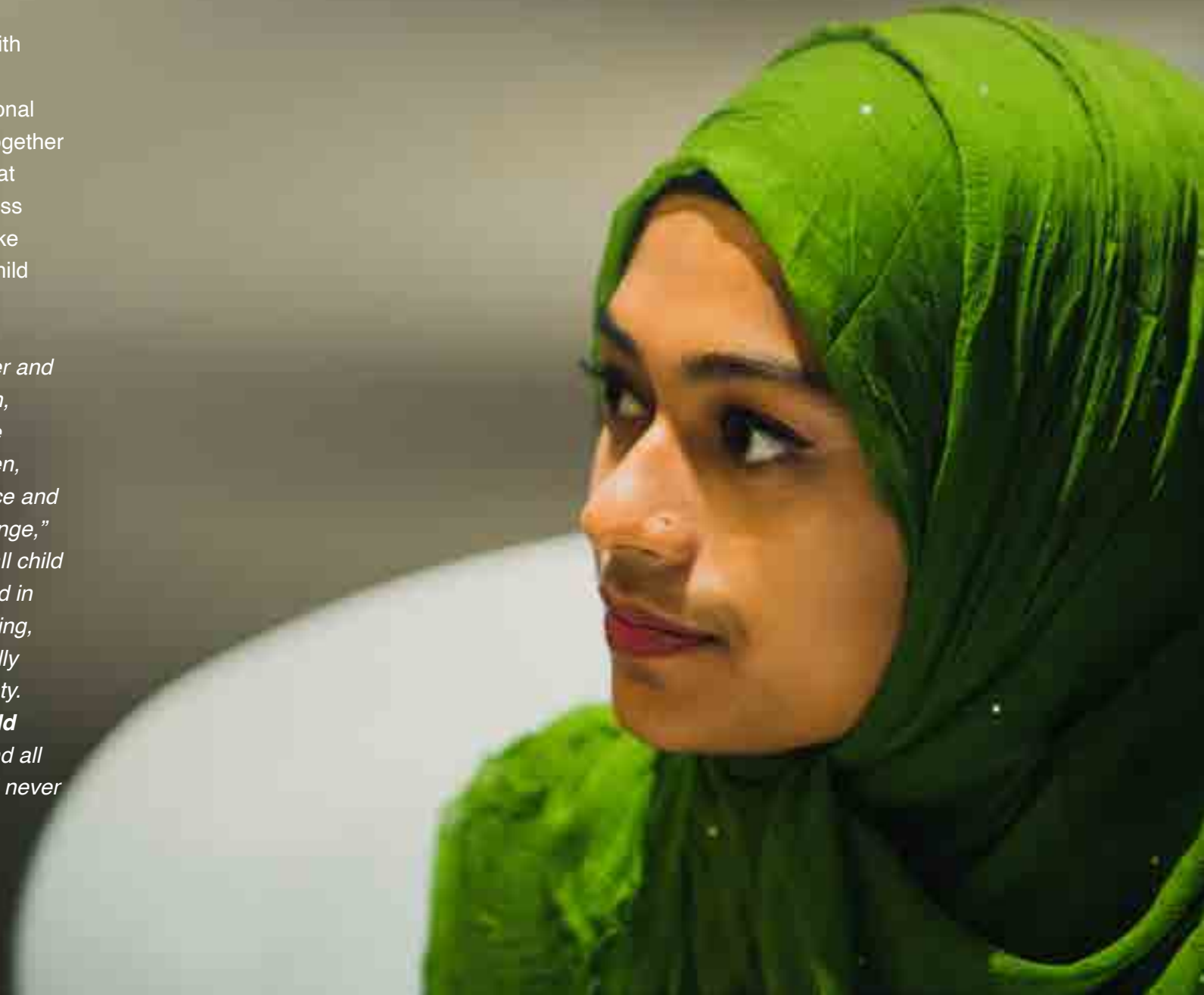
This is what inspired Ria to launch another project, Amplify Her, providing girls in the local area with basic digital and technology skills and scholarships to adapt to the online world.

*“We genuinely think by encouraging them to do positive and productive activities, **it will help them to think beyond marriage** as the only option for their future,”* said Ria.

TIME TO ACT!

Ria ended her inspiring testimony with hope and calls for stakeholders to collaborate more. She believes national and local governments must work together to ensure policies are implemented at the ground level. And countries across the Southeast Asia region should take inspiration from each other to end child marriage.

“All stakeholders must work together and collaborate and not work in isolation, especially in their efforts to optimize children’s capacity to ensure children, and girls in particular, have resilience and they can become the agents of change,” she said. *“We have to ensure that all child marriage programs are implemented in grassroots areas with good monitoring, evaluating, so they could strategically improve the awareness of the society. **I strongly believe we can end child marriage.** Women, girls, youths, and all have a brighter future that we could never imagine before.”*



RIZQI, INDONESIA

Perhaps the prevailing messages from 22-year-old Rizqi's testimony inspired the male audience members the most. He told the audience how, since a young boy, he has been an ally to girls and an activist against child marriage.

"I am a young activist and can boldly say that I am a feminist who has been actively advocating for the fulfillment of child rights in Indonesia, particularly for marginalized girls living in rural areas. Boys and men are part of the solution too," he said.

From the Bogor district, where cases of sexual abuse towards girls and young women are reported to be very high, his testimony's purpose was to highlight the inaction of boys and men in the fight against child marriage.

"The issue is very close to my heart as my friends, mostly girls, have often been victims. Living such a reality, I decided to take real action by establishing three major children and youth group platforms

to actively participate in promoting and claiming child rights," he said.

Through these groups – The Children's Forum, The Student's Form and The Adolescent Alliance – he told the audience how he runs intensive peer-to-peer dialogue among children and youth on issues such as violence against children, including sexual violence, and leads child-led research on child marriage – in partnership with Plan International Indonesia.

His list of advocacy and action is endless. Most need to take a deep breath before listing Rizqi's activism against child marriage. As well as the three platforms, he has been part of the National Movement for Girls rights and Gender Equality, focusing on the strong engagement of boys and young men. Something he feels is clearly lacking.

"Based on my reflection, many tactics in eliminating child marriage are mostly targeting girls as they are predominantly

the victims, while boys and young men have not been engaged as part of the solution," he said.

He explained how more work needs to be done in actively engaging boys and men to become advocates for girls, especially in predominantly male dominated cultures.

"Boys and men are the critical actors to change continuous norms and behaviors in patriarchal culture, like Indonesia, where men are seen as the ultimate decision-makers to decide whether or not to get married. In the forums that I have joined on gender equality, the numbers of men are still low," he said.

"Based on my reflection, many tactics in eliminating child marriage are mostly targeting girls as they are predominantly the victims, while boys and young men have not been engaged as part of the solution"

TIME TO ACT!

Despite these worries, Rizqi's optimism shined through. He believes change can happen as long as there are welcoming environments for boys in groups like the Youth Coalition for Girls and more opportunities to learn about gender equality, challenge gender stereotypes, and discover the dangers of child marriage in their everyday lives.

"Having boys and men with gender sensitive-behavior will create more opportunities to promote more equal relation with girls, preventing risky behaviors such as child pregnancy that usually lead to child marriage," he said. *"Engaging boys and men in eliminating child marriage basically shows that this is not only the job of women and girls."*

And Rizqi's closing remarks were a reminder to the influential audience to take immediate action and think outside the box when it comes to creating allies in the elimination of child, early and forced marriage.

"Boy's and men's engagement is critical to address gender inequality issues that are the root cause of child marriage. Therefore, I am calling for all ASEAN leaders to invest in creating more platforms to involve and engage more boys and men, and to enable them to advocate for gender equality and eliminating child marriage."





TOWARDS A CHILD MARRIAGE FREE SOUTHEAST ASIA - REGIONAL FORUM

The third regional forum on eliminating child, early and forced marriage – **Towards a Child Marriage Free Southeast Asia** – was held via video conference, due to pandemic restrictions, on the 17th of November 2021. The forum was organized by the ASEAN Commission on the Promotion and Protection of the Rights of Women and Children and Plan International, with support from the ASEAN secretariat. The forum used current data and evidence on the prevalence of child marriage to highlight the unique challenges and potentials of girls and society to eliminate child marriage, and how to accelerate the attainment of gender equity and girls' empowerment. Above all, the forum's goals were to build upon the progress and recommendations made in the first two forums and to complement global efforts being made to accelerate the elimination of child marriage by 2030, in relation to the Sustainable Development Goals.

The overall purpose of the forum was to ensure continuity of dialogue among the multiple stakeholders in ASEAN, and exchange views and good practices to drive the agenda forward. With a special focus given to the emerging and ongoing challenges and crises particularly escalated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

CALL TO ACTION

Girls-led solutions and actions to end child, early and forced marriage are making a difference across Asia-Pacific.

THEIR TIME IS NOW

TIME TO ENJOY

their childhood and youth, to learn and get educated!

THE TIME IS NOW

TIME TO ACT

and get girls equal!

THE TIME IS NOW

TIME TO JOIN US

in supporting girls and boys to end child marriage!

Donate to end child marriage in Asia-Pacific!



LOUDER THAN
WORDS

This Collection features testimonies on breakthroughs and successes in preventing and stopping child, early and forced marriage across the Asia-Pacific region. The Collection further contributes to Plan International efforts to build evidence on effective practice, proving that ending child marriage is possible. It is aimed to inspire practitioners and key stakeholders to step up their action and eliminate this harmful practice for good.

Time to Act – End Child Marriage!