



The State of the World's Girls 2025

Until we are all equal



Technical Report

Let me be a child, not a wife

Girls' experiences of living through child marriage

Acknowledgements

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Abbreviations

ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
CAWI	computer assisted
CEFMU	child, early and forced marriages and unions
CSE	comprehensive sexuality education
CSW	Commission on Status of Women
IDG	International Day of the Girl
IPV	intimate partner violence
ITE	Electronic Information and Transactions
MoH	Ministry of Health
NEET	not in education, employment or training
NGO	non-governmental organisation
OECD	Overseas Development Institute
SAIEVAC	South Asia Initiative to End Violence Against Children
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
SIGI	Social Institutions and Gender Index
SMS	short message service
SRH	sexual reproductive health
SRHR	sexual reproductive health and rights
SOTWG	State of the World's Girls
TIP	Trafficking in Persons
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
VAWG	violence against women and girls

Key definitions

Child, early and forced marriages and unions (CEFMU): Plan Internationalⁱ defines CEFMU as any marriage or informal union, whether under civil, religious or customary law, with or without formal registration, where either one or both spouses are under the age of 18, because the full and free informed consent of one or both of the parties has not been obtained. CEFMU is a complex practice and the correct terminology must be used to represent the heterogeneity and nuances of the practice. For the purposes of this report, “child marriage” and “CEFMU” will be used interchangeably, in which “child marriage” acts as an umbrella term to include informal unions and child marriages.¹

Comprehensive sexuality education (CSE): Plan International defines comprehensive sexuality education as the initiative to enable children and young people to gain knowledge, and develop the skills they need to make conscious, healthy and respectful choices about relationships and sexuality. CSE should be accessible both in and out of school, and be

ⁱ Plan International strongly condemns the practice of child, early and forced marriage and unions, and calls for the prohibition of the practice under national and customary law, and for the full and effective enforcement of these laws. In line with the Committee on the Rights of the Child General Comment No. 4, Plan International believes that the minimum age for marriage should be 18 and that this should apply equally to both girls and boys, regardless of any provisions concerning parental or judicial consent.

provided in a way that is non-judgemental, non-discriminatory, scientifically accurate, accessible, inclusive, rights-based, promotes gender equality and is adapted to the age of the child, adolescent or young person.²

Dalit: This term is used in South Asia, particularly in India and Nepal, to refer to communities that have been historically marginalised and subjected to social exclusion and discrimination under the Hindu caste system. The term means “oppressed” or “broken” in Sanskrit and is often used by members of these communities as a form of self-identification and resistance. Dalits were previously referred to as “Untouchables”, a term now considered derogatory. Although caste-based discrimination is legally prohibited in many countries, Dalit communities continue to face significant social, economic and political marginalisation. The term is both a social identifier and a political assertion of dignity, rights and equality.

Ever-married: In this report, the term refers to girls and women aged 15 to 24 who are or who have been married or in a cohabiting union, at least once in their lives although their current marital status may not be “married” or in a union.³

This definition differs slightly from the broader literature, where “ever-married” typically refers only to individuals who have previously been married at least once and does not necessarily include those who are currently married. Our usage is intentionally broader to reflect the lived realities of girls with current or past experiences of CEFMU.

In this report when we refer to “ever-married girls” this is inclusive of girls and young women who have been married or in a cohabiting union.

Intimate partner violence (IPV): Plan International defines this as one of the most common forms of violence against women and includes physical, sexual and emotional abuse and controlling behaviours by an intimate partner or ex-partner.⁴ Intimate partner violence occurs in all settings and among all socioeconomic, religious and cultural groups. The overwhelming global burden of IPV is borne by women and girls.

Marginalisation: A person or group of people experiencing marginality will face social and structural exclusion through economic, political and physical means. This is pertinent to understanding the experiences of ever-married girls. The Child Marriage Research to Action Network⁵ notes: “All girls and women face structural gender inequalities that marginalise them and put them at risk of gender-based violence, including child marriage. Within this broader structural and institutional context of gender inequality, some girls and women face additional discrimination, exclusion and invisibility.”⁶

Not in education, employment, or training (NEET): This represents the population of young people who are not in education, employment or training – and who thereby face risks of social and economic inclusion.⁷

Sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR): Sexual and reproductive health concerns the physical, mental and social wellbeing in all matters relating to sexuality and the reproductive system. This is based upon access to accurate information and the safe, effective, affordable and acceptable contraception methods. SRHR relates to being able to have a satisfying and safe sex life, the capability to reproduce and the freedom to decide if, when, and how often to do so.⁸

Unions: Plan International uses “unions” to refer to informal marriages or free unions that are particularly common in Latin America and the Caribbean (but also increasingly happening in other parts of the world), and which are to all intents and purposes equivalent to formal marriage, although without the legal status of a marriage. These unions are often not formalised by the state or religious authorities, making it difficult to account for them and collect sufficient data on the issue. Several different terms are used to name and describe these unions, including consensual or self-initiated union, early union and cohabitation.⁹

Executive summary

The 2025 edition of the *State of the World's Girls* (SOTWG) report presents a comprehensive analysis of the lived realities of girls in child marriages or unions, across 15 countries. The majority of research to date has been on the prevention of child, early and forced marriage or unions (CEFMU), but there is comparatively little on the lived experiences, rights and needs of girls who are already in marriages or unions – which is the focus of this research.

The report draws on qualitative interviews and focus group discussions with 251 girls across 15 countries (Bangladesh, Cambodia, Indonesia, Nepal, Ethiopia, Mozambique, Uganda, Zambia, Colombia, Dominican Republic, Guatemala, Ecuador, Nigeria, Niger and Togo) and an online survey with 244 young child marriage activists from the same countries. The girls are or have previously been married or in unions – and are described in the report by the term “ever-married”. Plan International has also partnered with the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) to conduct a legal analysis using their Social Institutions and Gender Index (SIGI) to understand the broader legal landscape concerning CEFMU.

The report is set within a broader global context marked by intersecting crises, such as conflict, climate change, shrinking civic space and rising anti-rights movements that collectively exacerbate gender-based vulnerabilities. These dynamics have intensified the conditions under which child marriage persists, often as a perceived coping mechanism in the face of economic and social instability. However, the persistence of child marriage is not solely attributable to crisis conditions; it is deeply rooted in discriminatory social and gender norms and weak legal frameworks.

The SIGI legal analysis highlights that although progress is being made, gaps persist in legal protections related to household responsibilities, reproductive autonomy, violence against women and girls, and divorce rights. Despite international and national commitments, many countries still allow exceptions to the minimum marriage age. This undermines protections for children, especially girls. Customary, traditional and religious laws often contradict statutory protections, limiting the effectiveness of legal reforms. Strong political will is essential to accelerate change. Legal advancements must be accompanied by a comprehensive, society-wide effort to challenge discriminatory norms, strengthen the alignment of informal legal systems with statutory provisions and invest in the capacity of institutions to enforce laws effectively.

In line with the 2023 SIGI legal data analysis, 32 per cent of child marriage activists also identified the absence or weak enforcement of legal protections as a major barrier for girls in marriages or unions. Some 55 per cent recognised customary and religious beliefs as primary obstacles to the implementation of protective legislation.

Economic hardship, often intensified by conflict and climate change, was identified as the most pressing and pervasive cause of child marriage across all study contexts. Generally, factors such as parental permission, ceremonies facilitated by religious and traditional leaders, and bribes to officials and authorities, influenced how these relationships were seen as being formalised in the eyes of girls, their families and their communities. Because of these circumstances, girls were found to be entering into marriages sometimes without their consent or being put into relationships where they have no legal or social protections. Another key contributing factor to child marriage are cultural beliefs surrounding female sexuality, which emphasise the need to protect a girl's perceived purity.

A key theme emerging from the research is the vulnerability of girls within their marriages or unions. They face significant barriers to education, healthcare, economic empowerment and legal protection. Girls who are already marginalised, whether due to disability, caste, poverty or geographic isolation, face layered and intersecting vulnerabilities that both contribute to and are intensified by child marriage. In contexts such as Nepal, caste-based discrimination further exacerbates these challenges. Dalit girls report being denied access to aid, vocational training, and even basic legal documentation. This systemic exclusion from both state and community support structures severely limits their ability to claim their rights or access critical services, leaving them further isolated and at risk.

Girls are frequently subjected to the authority of significantly older spouses and their extended families, often resulting in experiences of violence. Among the girls we spoke with, 13 per cent disclosed experiencing intimate partner violence or abuse. Among the 27 girls who disclosed experiencing violence, 85 per cent were married to men who were at least five years their senior.

Education is rarely prioritised for ever-married girls. A majority are not in education, employment or training, and very few girls have been able to continue their education post-marriage. Norms dictate that marriage marks the end of schooling, with social and familial expectations reinforcing that education is unnecessary for married women. Girls identified a clear connection between early marriage and disrupted educational attainment. Key barriers for them included community and school-related stigma in relation to pregnancy; challenges in managing household responsibilities; and the need for their husband's permission to continue schooling. However, in our survey, the activists ranked awareness programmes (44%) highest even above financial supports (26%) as enabling girls' re-entry to education. The high ranking for awareness programmes suggests that changing mindsets and shifting social norms are seen by the activists as the foundational step to enabling such re-entry above all other options.

Once married, girls are predominantly confined to domestic roles, with limited social interaction or leisure. Many reported feelings of isolation, anxiety and emotional distress and did not have access to mental health services.

“I see that I don't have anyone to confide in, that's why it hurts me so much and I suffer until at some point the pain stops.” – Bomo,ⁱⁱ 18, Togo

ⁱⁱ All participants' names used in this report are pseudonyms to protect their anonymity.

Social norms largely restrict ever-married girls from pursuing income-generating work. Husbands and in-laws often discourage employment, viewing a woman's place as being in the home. Even when girls express a desire to work, opportunities are scarce and permission is rarely granted, which reinforces dependence on male family members. While a few girls had some control over income from agriculture or informal work, most reported that men controlled finances. Income generation was seen as supplementary to the girls' main role as caregivers. Even when husbands are economically unstable and cannot provide consistently, norms regarding males as breadwinners and gender roles at home do not change – highlighting that economic necessity alone is not enough to shift norms.

Strong gender norms persist, whereby girls are expected to marry young and become mothers early. Many girls face pressure to conceive soon after marriage, with reproductive decisions typically controlled by male partners or in-laws.

Overwhelmingly, girls told us that they are spending their time on childcare (especially if they had left their marriages and were now single mothers) and on their household chores. Many girls get by with the support of their parents (if they are separated), or with help from their husbands. Although girls recognise the heavy burden of domestic work, most accept it as their expected role due to prevailing gender norms. Consequently, the lack of childcare support is seen as a personal challenge that they must manage alone. However, services such as childcare assistance are viewed as helpful.

Married girls reported minimal agency in decisions related to education, sexual and reproductive health (SRH), mobility and financial matters. While some girls were able to exercise limited agency in minor household matters, their influence over significant choices remained constrained. SRHR decision-making varied among participants. However, most girls felt that they needed their husband's approval before accessing contraception, reflecting deeply rooted gender norms that limit female autonomy in matters of sexual health. While several girls were able to obtain contraception with their husband's consent, a few chose to do so in secret, highlighting both the barriers to – and girls' resilience in – navigating SRHR choices.

59% of activists reported that girls are excluded from decisions regarding their own reproductive health

Many girls expressed fear or reluctance to challenge their husbands' authority. Among the 79 girls who reported having no say in household decision-making, nearly half (45%) were married to men at least five years older. This suggests a potential link between significant age disparities in marriage and reduced agency within the household, highlighting how power imbalances may further limit girls' participation in decisions that affect their daily lives and futures. Girls who were engaged in education or employment were more likely to report having a say in household decisions, with 57 per cent indicating some level of agency, compared to just 42 per cent among those not in school or work. In addition to greater decision-making power, girls in education or employment also reported higher levels of access to formal services, suggesting that participation in these spheres may enhance both autonomy and support networks.

The report also identifies emerging trends such as the role of digital platforms in facilitating child marriages. Social media has become a new pathway into unions, often bypassing traditional familial arrangements but parents then later insist on marriage to preserve family honour. Digital engagement introduces new avenues for exploitation. Girls are presented with marriage as a means of escape from hardship. This shift underscores the need for updated strategies that address both offline and online dimensions of child marriage.

The study revealed a significant rate of divorce or separation, with 28 per cent of girls having exited their unions. Taking such a decision often requires considerable resilience from the girls. Across countries, girls consistently described the immense difficulty of withdrawing from marriage, particularly when they lack the skills, education or financial means to support themselves and their children independently. Parental and family support were critical for enabling the girls to leave early or abusive marriages, by providing financial aid, emotional backing and, in some cases, enabling their re-entry into education. However, in many instances stigma, community judgement and financial insecurity were consistently cited as barriers to leaving marital relationships. Many girls reported being looked down upon or ostracised for leaving marriages or unions – “They are frowned upon in the community,” according to Adama, 21, from Niger.

The personal accounts in the research align with findings from the SIGI analysis, which highlight the lack of legal protections for girls seeking divorce. In many contexts, girls are not legally empowered to initiate divorce proceedings, nor are they protected from legal consequences if they remarry. Our findings offer new insights into how girls are often left vulnerable, dependent on the goodwill of former partners or the discretion of local officials. The absence of supportive legal frameworks for alimony, custody or safe exit from marriage intersects with cultural norms that stigmatise divorced girls and women, leaving them with few viable options.

Overall, across the 15 countries, the girls’ testimony was strikingly similar, while their experiences were comprehensively backed up by the observations of the child marriage activists. The following calls to action outline coordinated actions for governments, civil society, donors, educators, media, community leaders and other stakeholders to prevent and respond to CEFMU; to uphold the rights of ever-married and at-risk girls; and to ensure they have the opportunities, services and support needed to build the futures they choose.

- **Invest in and scale up programmes that address the harmful social beliefs, practices and expectations that drive child marriage.**
- **Ensure that married girls and girls at risk of child marriage know their rights, have access to the services they need, and can build the future they choose.**
- **Target support for the most marginalised and hardest-to-reach married girls, including girls living in conflict and climate emergencies, and girls living in extreme poverty.**
- **Implement and resource strong laws and policies to prevent child marriage and ensure support and access to justice for married girls.**
- **Elevate and fund the work of girl leaders and their movements in their initiatives to end child marriage.**

The voices of the 251 ever-married girls and 244 activists featured in this study cut through statistics and policy debates to expose the everyday realities of child marriage. These realities are shaped by intersecting crises, entrenched gender norms and gaps in legal and institutional protection. While the contexts vary, the patterns are strikingly consistent: early marriage strips girls of educational opportunities, limits their autonomy, and compounds cycles of poverty and inequality.

Yet, these same voices also point to pathways for change. From shifting harmful norms and investing in girl-led movements, to strengthening legal frameworks and ensuring access to essential services, the solutions are clear and achievable with sustained political will and coordinated action. Ending CEFMU and safeguarding the rights of those already in unions demands a whole-of-society effort that listens to girls, dismantles the barriers they face, and invests in their futures.

1. Introduction

“I was a child. How was I supposed to take care of [my] child?”

- Alinafwe,ⁱⁱⁱ 21, Zambia

1.1 Research rationale

In 2025, progress on gender equality is being threatened by the increasing power of anti-rights ideologies and actions. In what UNICEF calls a “polycrisis”,¹⁰ impacts of conflict, climate change, reduced funding towards civic actors and rising anti-rights movements are amplifying the global rollback on girls’ rights. In particular, these global-level crises are converging to drive child marriage across the world,¹¹ although evidence on this remains minimal. Underlying discriminatory social and gender norms around girls’ value, their roles and family honour make child marriage an available and acceptable coping mechanism in the face of intensifying hardship and crisis. As a result, despite large-scale policy action and legislative reform towards addressing child marriage, the practice remains highly prevalent in some countries.¹² In others, another challenge to girls’ rights is the continuing pattern of girls entering into unions – i.e., informal marriages that are essentially equivalent to marriage although without its legal status.

Globally between 2015 and 2023,^{iv} almost 650 million girls and women aged 20 to 24 have been married or in a cohabiting union before the age of 18.¹³ Despite this alarmingly large number, there is surprisingly little evidence on what happens to girls who are already in marriages and unions, and on the ways to support them. The *State of the World’s Girls* (SOTWG) report is released every year to mark the International Day of the Girl (IDG), to amplify the voices of girls and to understand the ever-changing realities of girls worldwide. Since 2007, the SOTWG reports have covered a myriad of topics, many of which have intersected with the issue of child, early and forced marriages and unions^v (CEFMU). In this 2025 report, Plan International is putting the spotlight on child marriage to call attention to a

ⁱⁱⁱ All participants’ names used in this report are pseudonyms to protect their anonymity.

^{iv} The absolute number of girls married under the age of 18, sometimes referred to as the burden of child marriage, refers to the total number of girls and women of all ages who were first married or in a union before the age of 18. The prevalence today is calculated on the basis of the latest available data for each country, within the period 2015 to 2023.

^v CEFMU is a complex practice, and the correct terminology must be used to represent the heterogeneity and nuances of the practice. For the purposes of this report, “child marriage” and “CEFMU” will be used interchangeably, in the sense that “child marriage” acts as an umbrella term to include informal unions and early marriage.

topic that grows in urgency each year given the sheer numbers of girls and young women who continue to be affected, and the consequent impacts on their rights and opportunities.

The persistence of child marriage is well documented and the broad drivers for child marriage are often the focus of interventions. Among organisations and practitioners working to end child marriage, there is a tendency to disengage from girls once they are married – precisely at the point when they may need the most support. The voices of the almost 650 million girls who are in this situation around the world are not being heard. These girls are referred to as “ever-married” girls – a term that includes girls aged 15 to 24 who have experienced marriage or a union, regardless of their current marital status.^{vi} We are not learning from them what are the best approaches to support girls who are married or trying to escape marriage, and to prevent further child marriages.

Usually, the SOTWG report speaks with the broad demographic of girls about a generalisable experience such as living in conflict, or misinformation online. This year the report conducted original research with the particular demographic of ever-married girls about their general experiences and their rights and needs.

This report is a platform for ever-married girls to share their stories – particularly around their agency and decision-making once in the marriage, their educational journeys, and the social and gender norms that led girls and their families to pursue CEFMU. The aim is to build a fresh evidence base that will improve targeted support for ever-married girls. This research covers a range of ever-married girls’ experiences to understand the commonalities and diversity of their lived experiences: from those living with marginalities, divorced girls and young women, to girls in cohabiting unions.

“I was married off young. I wasn’t allowed to study or progress in life – I was deprived of everything. But I won’t let that happen to my daughter. I want her to have a bright future, and that only happens when she studies and gets a job. Early marriage only leads to a dark future.”

– Juna, 24, Nepal

1.2 Research scope

This year’s SOTWG report is unique. We are amplifying the voices of ever-married girls to gain original insights into their lives and the particular risks they may face. This is key for learning how to safeguard their rights in the face of persistent discriminatory social and gender norms and “polycrises”. By putting the spotlight on the voices of ever-married girls, we are building an evidence base for sustainable interventions that respond to the realities of girls’ lives and the evolving systems that shape them.

We have spoken to 251 girls and young women aged 15 to 24 who are or were in a child, early or forced marriage or union (CEFMU), in 15 countries: Bangladesh, Cambodia, Indonesia, Nepal, Ethiopia, Mozambique, Uganda, Zambia, Colombia, Dominican Republic, Guatemala,

^{vi} Girls and young women aged 15–24 who have ever been married or in a cohabiting union – whether they are currently married, separated, divorced, or no longer in a union – are the focus population of this report. For brevity, we use the term *ever-married girls* to refer to all girls who have experienced marriage or a union, regardless of their current marital status. Where we know specifically that the girls are in unions and not formally married, we refer to them as *girls in unions*.

Ecuador, Nigeria, Niger and Togo. Further evidence is needed on the lives and contexts of girls who are often “hard to reach” (such as girls in humanitarian or crisis settings, girls who dropped out of school and are isolated at home, girls in geographically isolated areas, or those who are socially marginalised due to their gender, disability, sexual orientation).

By engaging with ever-married girls, SOTWG research can establish how we can effectively support these girls who are harder to reach and have been missed by child marriage interventions to date. In particular, this research is interested in amplifying the voices and stories of girls from different types of marriages and unions – such as legally registered marriages, marriages recognised in religious practices, or cohabiting unions that are not formally recognised – as well as girls who are divorced or separated. This research also recognises that many of these girls are living with intersecting marginalities like having a disability, being conflict-affected (e.g. refugees, displaced persons), being in an ethnic or religious minority, living in poverty. These girls form a subsection of the sample of ever-married girls whom we spoke with.

This report presents original research into ever-married girls’ everyday lives. A particular focus is on girls’ access to and experiences of education and sexual and reproductive health services, and their agency and decision-making. In addition, further aspects of investigation include livelihoods and income, aspirations and experiences of relationship power dynamics and intimate partner violence (IPV). With this evidence, the report looks at the complex relationship of social and gender norms, gender roles within child marriage, interpersonal power, content and enforcement of laws, educational journeys, norms around the control of girls’ sexuality, and financial autonomy. It also considers how all these intersect to cause ever-married girls to be left behind – excluded from education, economic opportunities, health services and decision-making spaces that are critical to their wellbeing and future.

We also heard from activists and advocates who are working on child marriage worldwide, to provide more detail on the wider context of ever-married girls’ experiences and to collect information around the measures that the activists believe are required to support the girls. In fact, 244 child marriage activists from the same 15 countries responded to our survey. They told us about key actions towards safeguarding the rights of ever-married girls.

We collaborated with the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Development Centre in the research. Their Social Institutions and Gender Index (SIGI) is an invaluable tool to understand the degree of gender-based discrimination in social institutions, notably legal frameworks, social norms and practices. Leveraging the OECD SIGI 2023 legal database (henceforth referred to as SIGI legal data), our original research is thus grounded in a thorough analysis of the national legal frameworks that determine the lives of ever-married girls so as to understand: the legal gaps that allow the practice of CEFMU to exist and continue; the legal rights concerning household responsibilities; restrictions on reproductive autonomy; the extent to which girls are protected from violence; and the means to achieve equal rights in divorce and child custody. This research makes a clear call for targeted and impactful service provision and financing towards supporting ever-married girls to exercise their rights and meet their needs.

Across the topics investigated, the report draws comparisons and differences in the drivers and impacts of child marriage across regions. To hear directly from ever-married girls is an under-researched aspect of child marriage. With this unique lens, the report provides recommendations to increase the impact of what the sector is already doing on child marriage.

We partnered with Girls Not Brides: [The Global Partnership to End Child Marriage](#) as technical experts in the child marriage sector, to strengthen our call to action towards supporting ever-married girls.

Plan International seeks to support all girls and young women, whatever their circumstance, and urges the sector to recognise that girls and young women are not past the point of support once they are in marriages or unions. Ever-married girls give us invaluable insights into the drivers they have experienced, which will feed into how we can bolster efforts to prevent child marriage.

“My husband was dominant because I was too young. Whenever I would suggest anything, he would think it was not reasonable.”

– Kajuga, 24, Uganda

1.3 Research aims and questions

The research aims to explore the complexities of the lives and contexts of ever-married girls – these girls are understood to be “hard-to-reach” in child marriage action. The research questions are:

- 1. What are ever-married girls’ everyday experiences across livelihoods and income, sexual and reproductive health and rights, education, household decision-making and agency?**
- 2. In what ways does existing legislation, service provision and policy on CEFMU support ever-married girls? How are these measures implemented to be inclusive of ever-married girls who are living with marginalities?**
- 3. What support do girls in marriages or unions need to promote and safeguard their rights?**

To answer these questions, we relied on a mix of methods, including a literature review, a secondary analysis, online surveying and qualitative data collection.

The rapid literature review explores definitions, global prevalence and impacts on ever-married girls. The literature review covers a range of areas including evaluating legislative measures, services and community-based interventions. Country profiles of the 15 nations provide detailed insights into child marriage prevalence, legislative frameworks and policy inclusivity, with case studies highlighting effective practices. The SIGI legal data analysis explores the key legal frameworks that relate to ever-married girls’ experiences: how laws are bypassed, rights within the household and over reproductive autonomy, protection from violence, and the right to divorce.

To complement the main findings, a set of personas is included to illustrate the lived experiences of adolescent girls and young women in child marriages across Plan International’s four Regional Hubs: (1) the Americas, (2) Asia-Pacific, (3) the Middle East, Eastern and Southern Africa, and (4) West and Central Africa. These personas are intended to humanise the data, offering a synthesised understanding of how structural inequalities and social norms intersect in different contexts. They also serve as a bridge to the main findings.

The literature review, the OECD analysis and the survey findings taken together serve to illuminate the social norms, and the legal and institutional contexts that shape ever-married

girls' experiences. These components identify what works and what is not working in the national and international legal frameworks, available services and financing mechanisms that should support this population.

“In my opinion, getting married at 12 isn’t right because how can you take care of yourself and your husband when a girl is still a child.”

– Folade, 18, Niger

2. Methodology

This research aims to show the circumstances of girls experiencing CEFMU, particularly how this varies across regions. We spoke with girls in three to four countries across each of Plan International’s Regional Hubs.^{vii} Two broad factors determined the country selection in this year’s study. Firstly, we contacted Regional Offices and country offices to determine their interest and capacity for participation in the study. Secondly, we looked at child marriage prevalence rates and existing legislative frameworks.

Table 1: Country selection^{viii}

Regional Hub	Country selected for participation	Interest in the region
Asia-Pacific	Bangladesh	60% of the girls married under 18 are in the Asia-Pacific region, with high incidence of CEFMU in rural and remote communities. Evidence will be used to support <i>Time to Act! Storming the Norms</i> , Plan International’s regional research on CEFMU.
	Cambodia	
	Indonesia	
	Nepal	
Middle East, Eastern and Southern Africa	Ethiopia	Evidence will be used to support Plan International’s 18+ Ending Child Marriage Programme in Eastern and Southern Africa.
	Mozambique	
	Uganda	
	Zambia	
Latin American and the Caribbean	Colombia	High incidence of informal unions (some voluntary) yet the lived experiences, support needs and long-term outcomes for girls in these unions remain under-researched.
	Dominican Republic	
	Guatemala	
	Ecuador	
	Nigeria	

^{vii} We have four Regional Hubs: Latin America and the Caribbean (located in Panama City), Asia-Pacific (located in Bangkok), the Middle East, Eastern and Southern Africa (located in Nairobi), and in West and Central Africa (located in Dakar).

^{viii} We have colour-coded the countries by region in the report: countries in Asia-Pacific are orange; those in the Middle East and Southern Africa are light blue; Latin America and the Caribbean are pink; and West and Central Africa are purple.

West and Central Africa	Niger	Under-researched communities, with particularly high incidence in Niger.
	Togo	

As with each iteration of the SOTWG research, we adjust the methodology to meet the needs of the research theme.

This analysis adopts a comprehensive scoping review approach, rather than a systematic review, to examine financing policies, service provision and legislative implementation on CEFMU across the study countries. It will focus on how these provisions help ever-married girls to exercise their rights, particularly among groups who face intersecting forms of marginalisation. A scoping review is appropriate for mapping the breadth and depth of available evidence on inclusivity in CEFMU, particularly where data may be heterogeneous or limited. The 2024 Asia Girls Leadership Report¹⁴ will serve as a reference model for compiling secondary data on legislation. Additionally, the profiles will be contextualised using data from the Child Marriage Data Portal,¹⁵ offering insights into child marriage prevalence globally and in the study countries.

2.1 OECD SIGI analysis

Distinct to this year's research, Plan International Global Hub and the OECD collaborated to produce a unique secondary analysis for the SOTWG report. The OECD's 2023 Social Institutions and Gender Index (SIGI) serves as a wide and robust evidence base on gender-based discrimination in social institutions, including a unique primary dataset on legal frameworks.^{16,17} The latter is key to grounding the ever-married girls' and activists' insights in the broader legal landscape concerning CEFMU. Plan International and the OECD worked together on an analytical framework that features the SIGI legal data. This was done with the objective of measuring the level of gender-based discrimination embedded in formal and informal legal frameworks, with a focus on thematic areas that reflect key dimensions and experiences of girls and young women in CEFMU. Plan International and the OECD selected the following thematic areas for in-depth analysis: child marriage; household responsibilities; reproductive autonomy; protection from violence; and divorce rights. The framework relies on the OECD's scoring framework which seeks to quantify the extent of discrimination at country and regional level in order to put forward a comparative analysis of the 15 countries and their regions.

2.2 Qualitative data collection

Qualitative data collection was conducted in each of the 15 countries listed in Table 1. We spoke with ever-married girls aged 15 to 24; this is the age range of girls who would be predominantly targeted in current or recent CEFMU interventions. We asked for data collectors to ensure the inclusion of participants who self-identified as marginalised. An effect of the qualitative findings is that they help to amplify the voices and experiences of marginalised girls, although the findings are not necessarily representative of the population of all married disabled girls, for example.

Steps to sample this population included purposeful and snowball sampling from child marriage programming in participating offices. We aimed to speak to 10 to 15 girls in each country who would be purposefully selected based on the following criteria:

- To interview at least 15 girls and young women aged 15 to 24, in which the participants aged 18 to 24 had got married or entered into unions when aged 17 or under.
- To be as diverse and inclusive as possible, so include girls in marriages or unions who are marginalised (e.g. disability, ethnicity, geography).
- To include girls who have been married but are no longer in the marriage.
- To include a mix of mothers and participants without children.

We actively sought to be inclusive of all kinds of marriages and unions. In the interview (or the focus group discussion (FGD)) tool, the questions were flexible so as to include a range of experiences – i.e. whether the participant had a husband or cohabiting partner, if their marriage was formally recognised, recognised by their faith, or not formally recognised.

Subjects in the interview included, but were not limited to:

- What would help them to stay in school (for ever-married girls) and to pursue employment opportunities – what would support them to do this.
- Reflections on service provision and relevant law/prohibitions they are aware of, including what comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) they have received and level of access to sexual and reproductive health services.
- Gender norms and expectations for ever-married girls, including childcare.
- Why they entered the marriage or union (with a consideration for when these are voluntary decisions).

Ethical approaches were considered. There was no direct questioning about whether participants hold a marginalised identity, but the questions allowed the participants to discuss their experiences of marginalisation if they chose.

Non-direct lines of questioning and research activities were used, so that the participants could meaningfully engage with the research in a way that avoids extraction, including a vignette concerning a case of a local girl in a difficult marriage. Two researchers (often including a safeguarding adviser) were present, at least one of whom was female.

We primarily sought to speak with the girls through in-depth individual interviews, so that researchers could unpack the girls' responses closely and understand the deeper context of their histories where necessary. However, we recognised that time and resource constraints in the respondent communities would be limited, and so suggested that the participating Plan International offices could do focus groups as optional alternatives to individual interviews. An interview tool and a similar FGD tool was created, in which the participating Plan International office could advise on whether interviews or FGDs would be more contextually appropriate for the girls.

Interviews were conducted from March to April 2025 and often lasted up to two hours each. Interviews were conducted in the local languages of the girls' geographical areas and were all audio-recorded. Interviews were face-to-face in all countries except for Ecuador^{ix} where they were conducted and recorded online.

^{ix} In Ecuador, interviews were conducted online owing to political and social challenges, partly because it was an election year.

We spoke with 251 girls and young women in interviews or focus groups across 15 countries.^x

Table 2: Number of qualitative participants per country

Country	Number of participants ^{xi}
Bangladesh	5% (13)
Cambodia	6% 15
Indonesia	5% (14)
Nepal	8% (20)
Ethiopia	8% (19)
Mozambique	15% (37) ^{xii}
Uganda	5% (12)
Zambia	6% (15)
Colombia	8% (20) ^{xiii}
Dominican Republic	4% (11) ^{xiv}
Guatemala	2% (5)
Ecuador	2% (4)
Nigeria	6% (15)
Niger	16% (39)
Togo	5% (12)
Total	251

Table 3: Marital status of qualitative participants

Marital status	Percentage of participants ^{xv} (n=208)
Married	62% (129)
In union	8% (16)
Divorced	28% (59)
Widowed	2% (4)

^x Although 60 per cent of the world's married girls are located in the Asia-Pacific region (according the 2023 UNICEF data), we did not seek to have a proportionately representative sample, but rather a sample across countries that would amplify the voices of girls across regions and to understand their different contexts and experiences.

^{xi} Each participant was engaged in the research through an in-depth interview, except in Mozambique, Colombia and the Dominican Republic where some FGDs were also conducted.

^{xii} 15 participants were engaged through in-depth interviews and 22 were engaged through two FGDs.

^{xiii} Participants in Colombia engaged in two FGDs.

^{xiv} Four participants in the Dominican Republic engaged in in-depth interviews, and seven engaged in FGDs.

^{xv} We do not have the data for all 251 participants, so totals for Tables 2–7 exclude the participants where these data are not logged.

Table 4: Number of children of qualitative participants

Number of children	Percentage of participants (n=201)
0	22% (44)
1	48% (96)
2	25% (51)
3	3% (7)
4	1% (3)

Table 5: Age of qualitative participants

Age of participant	Percentage of participants (n=208)
15	1% (3)
16	5% (10)
17	13% (26)
18	13% (27)
19	16% (33)
20	13% (28)
21	8% (17)
22	10% (21)
23	8% (16)
24	13% (27)

Table 6: Location of qualitative participants

Geography of participants	Percentage of participants (n=176)
Rural	57% (100)
Urban	35% (61)
Mixed	9% (15)

Table 7: Number of qualitative participants who self-identify as marginalised

Participants who identify as belonging to a marginalised identity group ^{xvi}	Percentage of participants (n=220)
Yes	17% (37)
No	71% (157)
Unknown	12% (26)

The recordings of the interviews were transcribed, translated and quality-checked by the participating offices' teams and consultants or by the Global Hub Research Team.

A broad analytical framework for both the qualitative and quantitative data was developed before the analysis. This included a "primary" codebook based on key themes and used as a means of organising the data into categories to structure the argument.

A team of four consultants using Dedoose software coded the raw data using deductive coding, based on the codebook. However, inductive coding was also applied as the codebook was revised when new themes emerged through the coding, so that codes were added, deleted or changed. Regular check-ins with coding consultants ensured consistency of the coding, as well as offering the opportunity to share any safeguarding or data quality concerns which the project manager then cross-checked with the relevant office.

This analytical stage included logging descriptors to each raw data file concerning characteristics like country, marital status, age, number of children, whether the participant identifies as marginalised, and geography. Disaggregating the study cohort according to these characteristics was key to recording the diversity of the participants. The coding consultant team also prepared Country Reports for us, where they (1) logged key statistics about each girl who was part of the research, such as if the girl was not in education, employment or training (NEET), or if the girl reported that she had no say in the decision to marry; and (2) briefed on the key themes that arose across a country according to the broad parent codes. Doing this supported how the Global Hub Research Team would synthesise emerging patterns in the data and identify country differences.

Please note that the names and identifying information concerning the participants in this report have been changed or replaced with pseudonyms, to ensure anonymity.

Presenting qualitative findings through regional audience personas

To communicate complex qualitative findings in a compelling and accessible way, we developed regional audience personas. Each persona is a composite, reflecting common patterns and regional specificities rather than any one individual's story. They are based on patterns emerging from interviews, focus group discussions and participatory research with ever-married girls. These personas serve to illustrate the diversity of lived experiences and challenges across different regions. Note that these profiles are illustrative, not prescriptive. They highlight shared themes rather than representing any single individual or community, as

^{xvi} This statistic has been pulled from the girls who answered a question on whether they identify as an ethnic or religious minority, as coming from a particular caste, or as living with a disability.

local contexts and individual experiences vary widely. As such, these personas are not intended to be statistically representative of all girls in their respective regions.

2.3 Survey

2.3.1 Overview

Between April and May 2025, an online survey was conducted with 244 young child marriage activists from 15 countries (see Table 8 for breakdown by country). The broad goal of the survey was to gather insights from activists working to prevent and respond to child marriage. The small-scale survey was designed to complement qualitative interviews and focus group discussions by centring the voices of those who interact directly with ever-married girls and are on the frontlines of change.

Table 8: Survey sample breakdown by country

Country	n	%
Bangladesh	12	5%
Cambodia	14	6%
Colombia	28	11%
Dominican Republic	4	2%
Ecuador	20	8%
Ethiopia	8	3%
Guatemala	16	7%
Indonesia	24	10%
Mozambique	4	2%
Nepal	21	9%
Niger	12	5%
Nigeria	20	8%
Togo	25	10%
Uganda	22	9%
Zambia	14	6%
Total	244	100%

To ensure accessibility, the online survey was distributed by Geopoll via email and telecommunications platforms such as WhatsApp and Telegram. This approach allowed for flexible participation, especially in contexts where formal email use is limited or where activists are more responsive to mobile-based communication. The survey was made available in the national languages of the respective countries, and translations were quality-assured by country offices to ensure cultural and linguistic accuracy. This helped to improve comprehension, reduce response bias and support more accurate expression. While the sample was not random, it was diverse in geography, age and experience, reflecting a range of activist voices.

The survey included closed-ended questions (e.g., Likert scales, multiple choice). Topics covered included:

- perceptions of legal frameworks and enforcement;
- access to services for girls in early unions;

- community attitudes and resistance;
- perceptions of strategies to support ever-married girls.

2.3.2 Survey design

Questionnaire scripting and hosting

Questionnaire content and translations were developed by Plan International. GeoPoll was responsible for scripting and securely hosting the survey using its proprietary survey platform. The platform supported complex skip logic, branching, multi-language localisation and response validation. The tool was optimised for mobile and low-bandwidth environments to ensure maximum accessibility across diverse handset types. All scripts underwent internal quality assurance testing, including logic flow, compatibility and responsiveness checks prior to launch.

Sampling and recruitment

To participate in the survey, individuals were required to meet three key criteria:

1. They must be between the ages of 15 and 24.
2. They must self-identify as an activist working on child marriage issues – whether through community engagement, peer education, advocacy or involvement in youth-led or civil society initiatives.
3. They must have access to a digital device.

These criteria ensured that the survey captured the perspectives of young people with direct experience and active involvement in efforts to address child marriage in their communities.

To recruit activists, the survey employed a purposive, network-driven sampling strategy. With statistical representativeness not possible or practical due to the nature of the target audience, the goal was to purposively reach a few key individuals with direct, practical experience in child marriage prevention or response, particularly those embedded in community-level activism, youth leadership or advocacy networks.

Recruitment was led by country offices, which shared the survey through their existing networks, such as:

- youth advisory panels and youth-led organisations;
- local NGOs and community-based groups;
- advocacy coalitions and thematic working groups.

In some cases, country teams reached out to known activists, especially young women who had previously participated in programming or influencing. These individuals were then encouraged to share the survey with peers, creating a snowball effect that expanded reach while maintaining relevance to the topic.

Mode of survey deployment

The survey employed two data collection modalities:

- **SMS-Based Web Survey:** GeoPoll initially deployed SMS invitations with unique survey links to respondents. This allowed GeoPoll to tap into respondents with only basic mobile phones and no stable internet access. However, due to technical

challenges with delivery confirmation and inconsistent network-level delivery by mobile operators, this mode yielded only 20 completed responses.

- **Computer-Assisted Web Interviewing (CAWI):** Following challenges with SMS delivery, Plan International and GeoPoll transitioned to a CAWI deployment model. GeoPoll generated reusable country-specific links which Plan International's country offices distributed directly to respondents via established outreach channels. This improved participation and minimised reliance on mobile carriers. Delivery yielded 224 completed responses.

2.4 Real Choices, Real Lives: CEFMU case studies

We supplement our original research findings with case studies taken from Plan International's *Real Choices, Real Lives* study. *Real Choices, Real Lives* is a qualitative and longitudinal research study that has been following a cohort of more than 100 girls in nine countries^{xvii} around the world from their birth in 2006 until they turned 18 in 2024. Through annual in-depth interviews with the girls and their caregivers, the study explores the girls' daily realities, attitudes and aspirations for the future. *Real Choices, Real Lives* has a distinct commitment to understanding the root causes of gender inequality by asking questions about beliefs, values and expectations which aim to uncover how gendered social norms and behaviours are created and sustained or shift over time.

By 2024, some of the *Real Choices, Real Lives* cohort girls had married or were in informal unions. Like their peers around the world, their experiences are diverse and illustrate the critical impact that CEFMU has on girls' education, health, decision-making autonomy, unpaid care responsibilities and opportunities. These case studies, situated within SOTWG study countries, serve to triangulate what the ever-married girls have told us during this research, bringing depth through an understanding of their life histories.

2.5 Ethics and safeguarding

We received global-level ethics approval from the Research Ethics Committee at the UK-based global affairs think tank ODI Global. A full safeguarding risk assessment was conducted in collaboration with each participating office's focal point staff and relevant safeguarding advisers to identify potential risks and mitigation measures for all data collection methods. A key element of Plan International's ethical approach is to ensure that the experiences and contributions of participants are listened to and addressed. In-country ethics approval was received by the following countries: Indonesia, Uganda, Zambia and Niger.

2.5.1 Qualitative data collection

Informed consent and assent were obtained from all participants. We recognised, however, that there would be situations where ever-married girls under the age of 18 would need the consent of their older husband as the closest "adult caregiver". This was a situation we sought to avoid. We directly asked researchers who were seeking consent from adult caregivers not to seek consent from husbands due to the power imbalance this may cause. We were instead able to obtain ethical approval for girls in these situations to be considered as "emancipated minors" who could provide consent for themselves. For those participants under 18 who had

^{xvii} Benin, Brazil, Cambodia, Dominican Republic, El Salvador, the Philippines, Togo, Uganda and Vietnam

separated from their husband, and were living with a caregiver such as a parent or grandparent, we would ask to obtain caregiver consent for these girls.

We recognise that participants may feel a level of power imbalance with the data collector as a representative of Plan International. Participants were often reminded that they are able to opt out of the research if they experienced discomfort, with no negative consequences.

Participants, and parents/guardians where relevant, were informed about what participation would involve. They were told that participation was voluntary, that consent could be withdrawn and how the research would be used. Verbal consent was also given to record the interviews. We recognised that the participant's inclusion in the research may be seen negatively by their husbands. We wanted to ensure that girls would do what they felt most comfortable and safe with. Therefore:

- (1) If participants felt more comfortable about their husband knowing about the research, they could inform their husband but Plan International asked that the participant be alone with the researchers (at least one female) to conduct the interview and that the husband be aware that the data would be anonymised.
- (2) If participants did not want their husband to know about the research, they were told to inform a trusted adult, who is not their husband or the adults who arranged the marriage, about the participation. We then asked the participant to provide the trusted adult's contact information in the case that their husband finds out about the research.

Anonymity and confidentiality were ensured throughout the data collection, analysis and write-up process, and robust data security was ensured. All data collectors have signed the Plan International safeguarding children and young people policy.

Participating office staff either conducted the interviews/FGDs themselves or used an existing pool of experienced data collectors. In line with Plan International's ethics and safeguarding procedures, all staff and consultants conducting the interviews/FGDs completed safeguarding courses and were briefed on safeguarding and referral processes. Country staff involved in the data collection also attended a training session which covered the research tools and ethics and safeguarding matters, so that they could effectively train data collectors to meet the same global standard.

Participants shared a range of sensitive information, so it was necessary to initiate safeguarding procedures. As is core to Plan International's safeguarding policy and best practice, all efforts were made to provide follow-up support based on participants' disclosures, which involved referral to relevant local Plan International safeguarding leads and local services, and access to comprehensive case management services.

2.5.2 Survey

Ethical and safeguarding protocols were embedded throughout the quantitative research process:

- Informed consent was obtained before participation. Respondents were provided with clear information about the purpose of the survey, how their data would be used, and their right to withdraw at any time.

- The survey was anonymous by default, and no identifying information was collected unless participants voluntarily offered it for follow-up.
- Questions were designed to avoid distress or personal disclosure, and participants were reminded that they could skip any question.
- Data were stored securely and were anonymised during analysis and reporting to protect privacy and confidentiality.

In addition, all respondents were presented with a clear and explicit consent statement at the start of the survey. The data were kept safe by using trusted security methods – both while being transferred from the respondents' device to Geopoll's servers and during storage. Respondents could opt out at any time without penalty. As an added ethical safeguard, Plan International requested that respondents be granted the option to retroactively withdraw their data from analysis, and this option was fully integrated into the survey workflow.

To uphold the highest standards of data accuracy and quality, Plan International employed a multi-tiered assurance process throughout survey implementation. Plan International and GeoPoll conducted thorough internal quality assurance testing on the programmed scripts, including verification of skip patterns, logic flows and compatibility across device types. During live data collection, the survey platform enforced real-time validations to ensure response consistency, such as numeric range checks, appropriate text formats and required question completion. After data collection, a rigorous cleaning and validation protocol was applied. Only data that met the quality assurance criteria were included in the final dataset provided to Plan International.

2.6 Strengths and limitations of the data collection

This study has benefited from triangulating qualitative data, survey findings and large-scale quantitative analysis to understand the complex landscape of ever-married girls' experiences and needs. We have integrated the survey findings into the qualitative data to offer data and statistical analyses as well as rich, in-depth insights by ever-married girls themselves. By integrating the methods, we have ensured the validity of the findings across separate study populations. The SIGI analysis sits alongside these data, to supplement our findings and provide breadth and generalisability to a small-scale study.

We recognise, however, that limitations have arisen from a study of this scale and on this sensitive topic.

2.6.1 SIGI legal data and analysis

While the SIGI aims to identify root causes of discrimination against girls and women across key social institutions – such as legal systems, social norms and practices – there are some constraints in the context of analysing experiences of girls in CEFMU.

The SIGI database is not designed to assess solely CEFMU. Data on informal unions remain limited as not all questions systematically assess whether there are legal differences for women and girls in informal unions versus registered marriages across the SIGI indicators included in this report. Moreover, collecting data on informal laws at the global level has proved challenging as these laws are often undocumented. For more information on the SIGI methodology, please refer to the section [Legal Frameworks on child marriage](#) or the [SIGI 2023 Methodology](#).

2.6.2 Qualitative data collection

Generally, enquiries about experiences of child marriage in the population are likely to produce a number of possible inaccuracies:

- We have used percentages to present some key data of the qualitative sample (e.g. % of married girls, divorced girls, NEET girls etc.) A limitation of this approach is that while percentages provide a useful snapshot of the sample, they may give an impression of representativeness or generalisability which is not the case. The sample of 251 ever-married girls is qualitative in nature and not designed to be statistically representative of all ever-married girls in the 15 countries studied. Presenting proportions risks over-quantifying narratives that are deeply contextual.
- Although interviews were meant to be conducted alone with the researchers, they were often still conducted in the general vicinity of other household members. The presence of the husband and/or in-laws, even if not within earshot, could mean that the participant does not speak with full openness about her experiences, especially if negative.
- As expected, many girls across several countries do not have a registered birth certificate (or similar registration). A number of girls were therefore not sure what age they are now or when they married, so their inclusion in the study criteria was based on their guesses of their age.
- Though speculative, it could be possible that girls may report their age at marriage to be slightly older, so as to avoid trouble with authorities.
- We originally hoped to speak with ever-married young people who identify as LGBTIQ+ but who are in a forced, heteronormative marriage. This was with the intention of understanding how they experience social exclusion. But we appreciate their hesitation in outing themselves to data collectors or being involved in the research.

We appreciate our colleagues in one country office who shared their insights on potential limitations to data quality, which could likely be a factor in other locations too:

- Some girls who were divorced were highly reserved in their responses, because of the stigma and reprisals they suffer from the community for being divorced women.
- Very few frank answers were received on questions related to premature unions and pregnancy, because of the fear of consequences that may arise after the interviews.

Data collection teams across countries also shared that, during the sampling phase, it was possible that community leaders could have influenced the girls to provide only limited information on the subject, owing to political pressures.

In addition, the interviews will have gone through a number of phases of translation: from the tool written in English being translated directly into local language or from French/Spanish then into local language, then, upon transcription, translated back into English. The original meaning of some concepts that the participants mentioned during the interview might have been lost in translation. The interviews that were translated back into English were cross-checked with the interview language for quality and sense-making.

2.6.3 Survey

The dual-mode mobile web approach, leveraging both SMS and CAWI methods, offered significant advantages for reaching respondents across diverse geographies and digital

access levels. The SMS-based outreach allowed for initial contact with populations that primarily rely on basic mobile phones and may not consistently access the internet, while the CAWI deployment enabled higher completion rates in digitally connected environments through direct distribution by Plan International's country offices. The flexible methodology minimised reliance on mobile network operators while preserving accessibility. Additionally, the mobile web format was highly cost-efficient, eliminating the need for enumerators or call centres, and facilitated rapid deployment across 15 countries. The digital nature of the approach also supported timely monitoring and centralised data management, improving data security and consistency across regions.

While the survey provided valuable insights, a few considerations should be acknowledged:

- **Non-random sampling:** The purposive and network-based recruitment strategy means that findings cannot be generalised to all activists or regions. The sample reflects those who were reachable and willing to participate, which may skew towards more connected or digitally literate individuals.
- **Digital access barriers:** The online format may have excluded activists in areas with limited internet access, low digital literacy or language barriers. While attempts were made to be more inclusive, there is likely to be underrepresentation of voices from more remote or marginalised communities.
- **Language and translation:** Although efforts were made to provide the survey in multiple languages,^{xviii} not all respondents may have been equally comfortable in expressing themselves in the language in which their survey was provided.
- **Self-selection bias:** Activists who chose to respond may have had particularly strong views or experiences, which could influence the overall tone of the findings.
- **Completion rates:** While the SMS mode theoretically expanded reach to feature phone users, practical challenges around message delivery confirmation, inconsistent mobile network coverage, and potential filtering by telecom carriers limited its effectiveness. Additionally, because the CAWI method relied on distribution by Plan International's country offices, response rates were contingent upon local outreach capacity and follow-up, potentially introducing non-response bias.

3. Literature review

3.1 Introduction

Child, early and forced marriage and unions remain a pervasive global issue, disproportionately affecting girls and entrenching gender inequality. These practices are recognised as violations of fundamental human rights. They severely limit girls' rights to education, health, bodily autonomy, political participation and decent work, while also curtailing their freedom from violence.¹⁸ Child marriage exacerbates issues like unintended pregnancies, maternal mortality and heightened vulnerability to violence, which are often intensified by legal loopholes and unregistered marriages and unions.¹⁹

According to the 2023 OECD SIGI legal database:

^{xviii} Respondents had the option of completing the survey in one of the following languages: Bahasa; Bangla; English; French; Khmer; Nepali; Portuguese; Spanish.

- In 17 per cent of countries (30 out of 178), the minimum legal age of marriage for women is below 18 years or there is no minimum legal age at all. For men this is the case in 8 per cent of countries (16 out of 178). Provisions were found allowing marriages for girls as young as ten years old (in Sudan).
- Among the 148 countries that set 18 years or more as the minimum legal age of marriage, almost 75 per cent (109 out of 148) have exceptions in place allowing marriages below the country's standard minimum age.
- The consequences of violating laws that protect against CEFMU are often extremely limited. They enable the voiding or annulment of the marriage but provide no other remedies for victims and survivors.

Globally, approximately 12 million girls are married each year before reaching the age of 18 but this varies significantly by region:^{xix, 20}

- **West and Central Africa:**^{xx} 37 per cent of women aged 20 to 24 were married or in a union before the age of 18, and 12 per cent before the age of 15.
- **Eastern and Southern Africa:**^{xxi} 32 per cent of women aged 20 to 24 were married or in a union before the age of 18, and 9 per cent before the age of 15.
- **South Asia:**^{xxii} 28 per cent of women aged 20 to 24 were married or in a union before the age of 18, and 7 per cent before the age of 15.
- **Latin America and the Caribbean:**^{xxiii} 21 per cent of women aged 20 to 24 were married or in a union before the age of 18, and 4 per cent before the age of 15.

Encouragingly, the rates of child marriage have declined from 23 per cent to 19 per cent over the past decade,²¹ reflecting some progress towards its eradication. Many countries continue to make strides in their legislation on combating CEFMU ([see section: Child Marriage: Legal Exceptions persist](#) in SIGI legal analysis). However, progress is uneven. Nearly half of married girls and boys live in South Asia (45%) with the next largest share in sub-Saharan Africa (20%), followed by East Asia and the Pacific (15%).²² It is also important to note that while less common, child marriage also affects boys. However, girls remain disproportionately affected, with one in five young women globally aged 20 to 24 years being married or in a union before their 18th birthday, compared to one in 30 young men.²³ As such, reducing child marriage requires comprehensive strategies, including legal reforms, education and community engagement (which is inclusive of men and boys), to address underlying causes, protect children's rights and support girls' agency in making decisions about their lives.

While legal frameworks play a key role in preventing child marriage in the first place, they must also address the rights, responsibilities and opportunities of girls who are already in unions. Greater efforts are needed to prevent CEFMU from occurring but also to support ever-married girls to overcome the challenges they face. This review does not explore the drivers of CEFMU which are already well established in the literature. Extensive research has identified poverty, gender inequality, lack of access to education, unintended adolescent pregnancies, harmful

^{xix} The prevalence rates are taken from UNICEF global databases (based on District Health Surveys (DHS), Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys (MICS) and other national surveys). Data references are between 2015 and 2023.

^{xx} Based on 22 countries with a population coverage of 96 per cent of the regional population of women aged 20-24 years.

^{xxi} Based on 17 countries with a population coverage of 87 per cent of the regional population of women aged 20-24 years.

^{xxii} Based on seven countries with a population coverage of 100 per cent of the regional population of women aged 20-24 years.

^{xxiii} Based on 18 countries with a population coverage of 58 per cent of the regional population of women aged 20-24 years.

social norms and insecurity as key contributing factors to the practice. For a comprehensive understanding of these drivers, readers are referred to Mathur *et al.* (2003),²⁴ Nour (2006),²⁵ and Malhotra *et al.* (2011),²⁶ as well as key institutional reports including UNICEF (2014),²⁷ UNFPA (2012),²⁸ the World Bank and ICRW (2017),²⁹ and Girls Not Brides.³⁰ Instead, this review focuses on the legal, institutional and normative frameworks that shape the experiences and rights of girls who are already in unions, with particular attention to the 15 study countries across Africa, Asia and Latin America and the Caribbean.

The review begins with OECD SIGI legal analysis which measures gender-based discrimination in social institutions across 178 countries (see Box 1). It is the primary analytical tool used in this review to examine key thematic areas including legal protections, household responsibilities, reproductive autonomy, protection from violence and divorce rights.

The review also examines the broader social norms and political dynamics that shape the lived experiences of ever-married girls. This report highlights the urgent need for inclusive strategies that support girls who are already in marriages and unions.

To ground the analysis in real-world contexts, detailed country profiles for each of the 15 study countries are included. These profiles provide a snapshot of national prevalence rates, legal frameworks and implementation challenges, alongside insights into civic space, political dynamics and service provision. By highlighting both common patterns and country-specific nuances, the profiles aim to inform targeted interventions and policy responses. They also underscore the importance of tailoring strategies to local realities, particularly for marginalised groups such as rural, displaced and indigenous girls.

3.2 Legal frameworks on child marriage: Insights from the OECD Social Institutions and Gender Index


3.2.1 Laws and norms determine gender equality outcomes

Leveraging the SIGI legal data (see Box 1), this section analyses the extent to which countries' legal frameworks protect children, particularly girls, from being married early and how the laws in place protect their rights during marriage. The analysis focuses on the following areas governed by formal and informal laws: marriage, household responsibilities, reproductive rights, protection from gender-based violence and divorce rights.

Box 1. The Social Institutions and Gender Index ³¹

Since 2009, the OECD's Social Institutions and Gender Index (SIGI) has provided a comprehensive measure of gender equality gaps in social institutions. The SIGI looks at the gaps that legislation, attitudes and practices create between women and men in terms of rights, justice and empowerment opportunities. It is one of the official data sources for the Sustainable Development Goal Indicator 5.1.1. on "whether or not legal frameworks are in place to promote, enforce and monitor equality and non-discrimination on the basis of sex".

The SIGI builds on a framework of four dimensions which cover the major socioeconomic areas that affect women and girls throughout their lifetime (see below). Each dimension consists of four indicators which are built with underlying variables that capture gender-based discrimination in laws, attitudes and practices. The OECD relies on existing secondary data for the attitudinal and practice variables but conducts a primary data collection for the legal variables. The last edition of the SIGI, published in 2023, covered 179 countries.

				
4 Dimensions	Discrimination in the family	Restricted physical integrity	Restricted access to productive and financial resources	Restricted civil liberties
16 Indicators	Child marriage	Violence against women	Access to land assets	Citizenship rights
	Household responsibilities	Female genital mutilation	Access to non-land assets	Freedom of movement
	Divorce	Missing women	Access to financial services	Political voice
	Inheritance	Reproductive autonomy	Workplace rights	Access to justice

Laws are key instruments in combating harmful practices and promoting equal rights and opportunities. To identify persisting gender-based discrimination and shortcomings in countries' legal frameworks, the OECD developed a coding framework that is applied to SIGI legal data spanning all major socioeconomic areas where girls and women may face discrimination throughout their lives (Box 1). The legal information pertaining to one specific indicator, for example child marriage or household responsibilities, is classified into five levels (0, 25, 50, 75 and 100) which reveal the degree of gender-based discrimination in the respective formal and informal laws. A score of 0 means that women and men enjoy equal rights and protection whereas a score of 100 indicates that legal frameworks fully discriminate against women's rights.

Table 9: SIGI scoring methodology for legal data

Score	Level of discrimination	Concept
0	None	The law provides women with the same rights as men, without legal exceptions, and the law applies to all groups of women. There are no informal laws (uncodified customary, traditional or religious laws/rules) that create different rights or abilities between men and women.

25	Low	The law provides women with the same rights as men, without legal exceptions, and the law applies to all groups of women. However, some informal laws (uncodified customary, traditional or religious laws/rules) create different rights or abilities between men and women.
50	Medium	The law provides women with the same rights as men. However, exceptions exist, or the law does not apply to all groups of women, regardless of religion, ethnicity, race, class or geographic region.
75	High	The law restricts some of the rights of women.
100	Very high	The law fully discriminates against women's rights.

Note: Customary, religious or indigenous laws play a vital role in many communities or societies. When these laws are not codified, the SIGI methodology refers to these laws as informal laws. This, however, does not deny their importance. In fact, many countries have codified their customary or religious laws which are often recognised under the constitution. In countries where this is the case, the SIGI methodology treats these codified customary, religious or indigenous laws as formal laws which are consequently assessed alongside other statutory laws.

Legal frameworks are fundamental for regulating societies. Beyond the statutory laws, uncodified (or informal) laws and social norms hold an important sway on people's behaviours and expectations. Across the world and over time, patriarchal values have shaped the various social institutions such as legal systems, social norms and practices that govern people's lives, to the extent that laws and norms risk undermining women's rights and opportunities. SIGI legal data reveal that gender-based discrimination that is embedded in countries' social institutions remains at the heart of inequalities that girls and women face throughout their lifetimes.³² Child marriage is one of these socially accepted practices, bearing disastrous consequences for those concerned – particularly in the case of forced marriages. The fact that child marriage disproportionately affects girls reflects once more the gendered nature of the laws and norms in place.^{xxiv,33}

Table 10 offers an overview of child marriage prevalence, the presence of parallel legal systems and levels of legal discrimination across five domains: child marriage, household responsibilities, reproductive autonomy, violence against women and girls (VAWG), and divorce rights – for the 15 countries of the report.

^{xxiv} In 2023, 2 per cent of boys aged 15 to 19 years and 13 per cent of girls of the same age were or had previously been married (global average).

Table 10: Legal frameworks and child marriage: An overview across 15 countries

Countries	Parallel legal system	Girl marriage prevalence rates (%)	Legal Discrimination Scores				
			Child Marriage	Household Responsibilities	Reproductive Autonomy	VAWG	Divorce Rights
Bangladesh	Yes	51					
Cambodia	No	19					
Indonesia	Yes	6					
Nepal	No	33					
Colombia	Yes	23					
Dominican Republic	No	31					
Ecuador	Yes	22					
Guatemala	Yes	29					
Ethiopia	Yes	40					
Mozambique	Yes	53					
Uganda	Yes	34					
Zambia	Yes	29					
Niger	Yes	76					
Nigeria	Yes	30					
Togo	Yes	25					

Legend: The colour shades for legal discrimination scores indicate different levels of legal discrimination in the respective thematic area. Legal scores can take the values 0, 25, 50, 75 and 100, where 0 indicates no discrimination and 100 denotes full discrimination. For the detailed legal analysis and scoring methodology, please refer to the subsequent sections of this report.

No discrimination (0)	Low (25)	Medium (50)	High (75)	Very high (100)
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Note: This figure is intended as a high-level visual summary to support rapid comparison across countries and legal domains. Under the SIGI Methodology, **parallel legal systems** may include personal law systems, in which jurisdiction is bestowed on religious or customary governance/court systems by the state; indigenous systems of justice recognised by the state; alternative dispute procedures; and informal systems of community justice which are not officially sanctioned by the state. The displayed **child marriage rates for girls** indicate the share of women aged 20 to 24 who were married or in a union before the age of 18. All child marriage prevalence figures are sourced from the UNICEF child marriage data portal, except for Indonesia.³⁴ For Indonesia, the figure is based on the 2024 Indonesia Socio-Economic Survey (SUSENAS) by Statistics Indonesia (BPS), as it provides the most recent and nationally representative data available. The indicator definition remains consistent with the UNICEF portal.³⁵

3.2.2 Child marriage: legal exceptions persist

Legal frameworks are essential for preventing child marriage. Global human rights frameworks urge state parties to amend marriage laws to ensure that marriage can only be contracted with the free and full consent of adult spouses – i.e. not when those involved are below the age of 18 years. This minimum age standard is reinforced by key international instruments, including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (1979), the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), and the UN Human Rights Council Resolution No. 53/23 on child, early and forced marriage. These principles are further supported by Joint General Recommendation No. 31 (CEDAW) / General Comment No. 18 (CRC), which outline measures to eliminate harmful practices like child marriage. CRC General Comments Nos. 4 and 20 also emphasise adolescents' evolving capacities, calling for protection from harm alongside support for their autonomy. Broader human rights instruments (including the UDHR (Art. 16), ICCPR (Art. 23), and ICESCR (Art. 12 and 13)) affirm the right to free and full consent in marriage, education and health, which are all critical to safeguarding married adolescents.

SIGI legal data has shown that many countries, particularly in Africa, have reformed their national laws over the past five years in order to set 18 years as the minimum legal age of marriage. Nevertheless, exceptions to the minimum legal age of marriage and informal laws persist, creating an environment where child marriage continues to be tolerated and practised.

The legal scores for child marriage in the 15 study countries reveal that girls and boys are not fully protected against the harmful practice (Figure 1). But there is some good news: all focus countries except for Niger set 18 years (or above) as the minimum legal age for marriage and all countries except for **Ecuador** and **Zambia** specifically prohibit forced marriages. In Niger, the minimum legal age of marriage is 18 years for boys but 15 years for girls. **Bangladesh** also has distinct minimum legal ages, with 18 years for boys and 21 years for girls. In **Indonesia**, **Nepal** and **Zambia**^{xxv} the same minimum legal age applies to boys and girls but is set above 18 years (19, 20 and 21 years respectively).

However, in two-thirds of the countries, the minimum legal age can be circumvented with the consent of a parent, legal guardian or judge (indicated by a score of 50). Only in the **Dominican Republic**, **Ecuador**, **Guatemala**, **Mozambique** and **Nepal** does the law not allow for any exceptions to the minimum legal age of marriage. The situation in **Zambia** is unique as a 2023 amendment to the Marriage Act (Law No.13 of 2023) declares any marriage involving a child under the age of 18 as void, including in customary marriages. However, those aged 18 to 21 still require parental consent to contract a marriage.

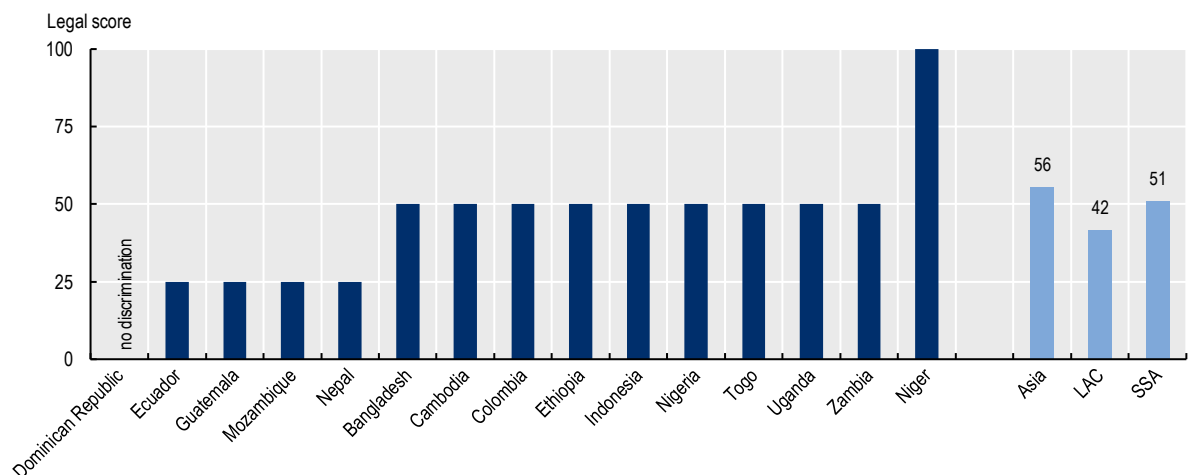
For instance, the **Dominican Republic** amended its Civil Code accordingly in 2021 and despite a score of 0 which indicates the absence of formal or informal legal discrimination, child marriage persists in the country.^{xxvi} This shows how social and cultural change may lag behind the new legal status quo; it also points towards challenges in law enforcement. **Nepal** provides a similarly instructive illustration that laws alone cannot reduce CEFMU rates. Between 2007 and 2022, the proportion of women aged 20 to 24 who were married before the

^{xxv} Act No.13 of 2023 amends Zambia's Marriage Act by prohibiting any marriage where at least one of the spouses would be under the age of 18 (Section 3, Act No. 13/2023, amending Section 22 of the Marriage Act). This also holds true for any marriage contracted under customary law (Section 4, Act No. 13/2023). However, Act No. 13 of 2023 does not amend Section 17 of the Marriage Act which stipulates that parental consent is needed when one of the spouses is below the age of 21. Under the SIGI Methodology, the legal minimum age of marriage refers to when a woman or man can enter into marriage legally without special consent.

^{xxvi} In 2023, 31 per cent of young women aged 20 to 24 years old were married before the age of 18 in the Dominican Republic.

age of 18 declined steadily from 50 per cent to 35 per cent.³⁶ In 2017, **Nepal** enacted a law raising the minimum legal age of marriage to 20 for both men and women, without exceptions. While this legal reform aligned with international standards, the data suggests that child marriage rates had already been declining prior to the law's introduction. Moreover, the rate of decline slowed slightly after 2017, indicating that while legislation may have supported the trend, broader social, educational and economic factors likely played a more influential role in reducing child marriage rates.

Figure 1: Legal scores for child marriage



Note: The SIGI legal database does not cover informal unions. LAC refers to Latin America and the Caribbean; SSA refers to sub-Saharan Africa. The legal scoring for child marriage is as follows:

0: Child marriage is illegal for both women and men and the legal age of marriage is the same for women and men, without any legal exception. There are no informal laws (customary, traditional or religious laws/rules) that allow or encourage child marriage for girls. || **25:** Child marriage is illegal for both women and men, without any legal exception. However, some informal laws (customary, traditional or religious laws/rules) allow or encourage girl child marriage. || **50:** Child marriage is illegal for both women and men. However, legal exceptions exist for some groups of women or with the consent of certain persons (e.g. parents, legal guardians or judge). || **75:** Child marriage is legal for both women and men, or there is no legal age of marriage specified. || **100:** Child marriage is legal for women whereas the legal age of marriage of men is 18 or above.^{37,38}

Finally, legal exceptions can also exist for certain groups within the countries' populations. This is particularly the case in countries with dual or plural legal systems. For instance, in several African and Asian countries, different laws apply to different groups of the population, based on their religion, residence or adherence to customary laws. For instance, in five of the 15 focus countries,^{xxvii} the statutory minimum legal age of marriage does not apply to the entire population; and in seven countries^{xxviii} certain groups of the population are subject to different laws, creating differences in women's and men's respective rights to enter into marriage.

Overall, weak law enforcement and discriminatory informal laws can significantly inhibit the prevention of and fight against child marriage. For instance, while legal frameworks in 12 out of the 15 countries set forth that it is illegal to facilitate child marriage, not all of these countries establish legal sanctions in case of non-compliance with the law.^{xxix} Moreover, informal laws (see Box 2) tolerate or encourage the practice of child marriage in nearly all the countries,

^{xxvii} Ethiopia, Niger, Nigeria, Uganda and Zambia.

^{xxviii} Bangladesh, Ethiopia, Indonesia, Niger, Nigeria, Uganda and Zambia.

^{xxix} There is no specific legal provision in Colombia, Ecuador and Togo that criminalises the facilitation of child marriage. Cambodia, the Dominican Republic, Nepal and Niger outlaw the facilitation of child marriage, but the law does not provide for sanctions in case of non-compliance with the law.

which creates a tension with the written laws in place. This indicates the need for better accountability and referral mechanisms for child marriages that take place outside the state-based legal frameworks while tackling the underlying root causes of child marriage – including discriminatory social and gender norms, and structural factors such as poverty, access to education and reproductive healthcare.³⁹

Box 2. Informal laws and how the OECD assesses these⁴⁰

In the context of the OECD's Social Institutions and Gender Index, the term "informal laws" refers to uncodified or unwritten customary, traditional or religious laws/rules, which describe mechanisms that operate outside the formal legal system of state-based laws. It is important to recognise the significant role that these laws play in communities that abide by them. Informal legal systems can vary from one community to another and can change over time in response to external factors. As is the case with state-based laws, some informal laws may reflect unequal power dynamics within a given community with adverse consequences on women and girls and other vulnerable groups.

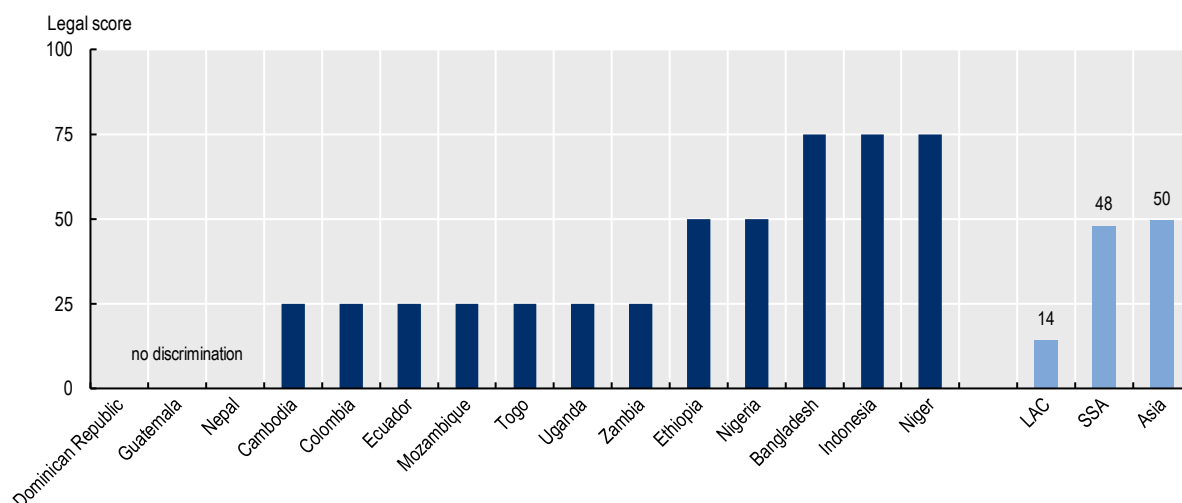
Documenting the existence of informal laws is challenging, given their unwritten or uncodified nature. For the SIGI 2023 legal data collection, only reliable and high-quality sources were accepted, which include recent reports from international and women's rights organisations – including CEDAW Periodic Reports, Concluding Observations on those reports, and CEDAW Shadow Reports – as well as research and academic articles. Other sources such as newspaper articles were not considered reliable enough to attest to the existence of specific informal laws. In general, the OECD recognises that potential data biases may stem from the absence of quality sources in certain countries.

3.2.3 Household responsibilities: equal rights on paper and in practice?

Despite progress and efforts to end child marriage, many girls get married or enter into informal unions before the age of 18. Once married, legal frameworks also affect girls' daily lives as they regulate spouses' respective rights and obligations. In other words, married girls' wellbeing, safety and opportunities partially depend on laws that govern their access to education, healthcare and bodily autonomy but also define household responsibilities, child custody rights, protection from domestic violence, reproductive rights and eventually divorce.

SIGI legal data show that in two-thirds of the focus countries, women and men have equal rights regarding decision-making in the household and over child custody (indicated by a score of 0 or 25). Considering the regional average scores, the data reveal that legal discrimination regarding women's and men's household responsibilities is more common in Asia and sub-Saharan Africa compared to Latin America and the Caribbean (Figure 2). For instance, in five of the focus countries located in Africa and Asia, the statutory law is not gender equal or does not apply to all parts of the population.

Figure 2: Legal scores for household responsibilities



Note: LAC refers to Latin America and the Caribbean; SSA refers to sub-Saharan Africa. The legal scoring for household responsibilities is as follows:

0: Women have the same legal rights as men to be “head of household” or “head of family” (or the law does not make any reference to these concepts) and to be legal guardians of their children during marriage or in informal unions. There are no informal laws (customary, traditional or religious laws/rules) that create different rights or abilities regarding being recognised as the head of household, being the legal guardians of children nor choosing where to live. || **25:** Women have the same legal rights as men to be “head of household” or “head of family” (or the law does not make any reference to these concepts) and to be legal guardians of their children during marriage or in informal unions. However, some informal laws (customary, traditional or religious laws/rules) create different rights or abilities regarding being recognised as the head of household, being the legal guardians of children or choosing where to live. || **50:** Women have the same legal rights as men to be “head of household” or “head of family” (or the law does not make any reference to these concepts) and to be legal guardians of their children during marriage or in informal unions. However, legal exceptions exist for some groups of women. || **75:** Women do not have the same legal rights as men to be either “head of household” or “head of family” or to be legal guardians of their children during marriage or in informal unions. || **100:** Women neither have the same legal rights as men to be “head of household” or “head of family” nor to be legal guardians of their children during marriage or in informal unions.^{41,42}

Under patriarchal systems, more decision-making power is typically granted to male spouses, establishing the man as head of the family or household. SIGI legal data show that this remains the case in only two countries – **Niger** and **Indonesia** – where the respective laws stipulate that the husband shall be the head of the household and in the case of Indonesia, also requires women to obey their husbands.^{xxx} Further legal gaps persist. In Ethiopia, Niger, Nigeria and Indonesia legal exceptions or pluralistic legal systems can create inequalities across different population groups. In **Ethiopia**, for instance, the regional states must update their family laws in conformity with the Revised Family Code Proclamation (2000) which stipulates equal rights at the national level. However, two federal regions (Afar and Somali) have not completed this process. In **Nigeria**, the Muslim population is subject to Islamic law which maintains the man as head of household. While one may argue that minors should not have the same rights to be the head of household as adults, granting spouses equal rights is crucial so that they can take important decisions throughout the course of their lives and marriage – including on where the family should live. In all countries, except for **Indonesia**, **Nepal** and **Niger**, married

^{xxx} Article 213 of the Civil Code in Niger designates the man as head of household, granting the woman only the same right when the man is not able fulfil his function due to absence or other reasons that would render him incapable of expressing his will. In Indonesia, Article 31 of the Law on Marriage establishes the husband as head of the family and sets the wife’s role to that of a housewife.

women have the same rights as men to choose the couple's or family's place of residence. In these three countries, however, this right is granted exclusively to the husband.

Another key pillar of household responsibilities is childcare. While women are typically expected to care for the children, the laws in all focus countries grant women and men the same rights to be legal guardians of children. However, in about one-third of the countries,^{xxxix} informal laws create differences in men's and women's abilities and rights to be the children's legal guardian.

SIGI legal data show that in most focus countries spouses enjoy equal rights and responsibilities within the household. But as indicated above, informal laws can undermine the egalitarian statutory laws in practices, often reflecting discriminatory gender norms and roles that limit women's agency within the family or household. SIGI legal data show that informal laws persist in seven out of these ten countries (indicated by a score of 25). Specifically, informal laws undermine women's ability to be the head of household in all but four countries^{xxxix} and limit married women's ability to decide where to live in **Indonesia**, **Mozambique**, **Nigeria**, **Uganda** and **Zambia**.

3.2.4 Reproductive autonomy: restrictive laws can harm girls' and women's health

Unequal power dynamics tend to characterise child marriages. Evidence shows that significant age gaps can aggravate girls' already limited agency and autonomy within the couple, which ultimately undermines their decision-making power including over reproductive choices. In that regard, laws can be instrumental in safeguarding girls' and women's reproductive rights such as their right to access to information (including comprehensive sexuality education), safe and affordable contraceptive methods, quality healthcare services and the right to reproductive autonomy, including the right to safe and legal abortion.

Globally, unsafe abortions are a leading but preventable cause of numerous hospitalisations and maternal deaths every year.^{43,44} Evidence shows that regardless of the legal frameworks in place, a similar share of girls and women terminate unwanted pregnancies. But the data also show that the more restrictive the laws in place, the higher the share of unsafe abortions. In more than two-thirds of the focus countries (indicated by a score of 50 or higher), girls and women face significant restrictions regarding their reproductive rights (Figure 3). Analysis at the global level reveals important regional differences, with a disproportionately high share of women in Latin America and the Caribbean, and in Africa facing restrictive laws. Among the 15 focus countries, no clear regional pattern can be distinguished.

In four countries,^{xxxix} women have access to safe and legal abortion with no restrictions, whereas in one country (the **Dominican Republic**), abortion is prohibited and criminalised under all circumstances – even when it would be required to save the pregnant woman's life. In the remaining countries, a woman's access to safe abortion is contingent on specific circumstances. In **Ethiopia** and **Togo**, women can access safe and legal abortion when necessary to preserve the pregnant woman's life or in the case of rape, statutory rape or incest. Data show that, overall, women's access to abortion following rape remains highly restricted, however.^{xxxiv} The CEDAW recommends enshrining in law women's right to safe

^{xxxix} Bangladesh, Indonesia, Niger, Nigeria, Uganda and Zambia.

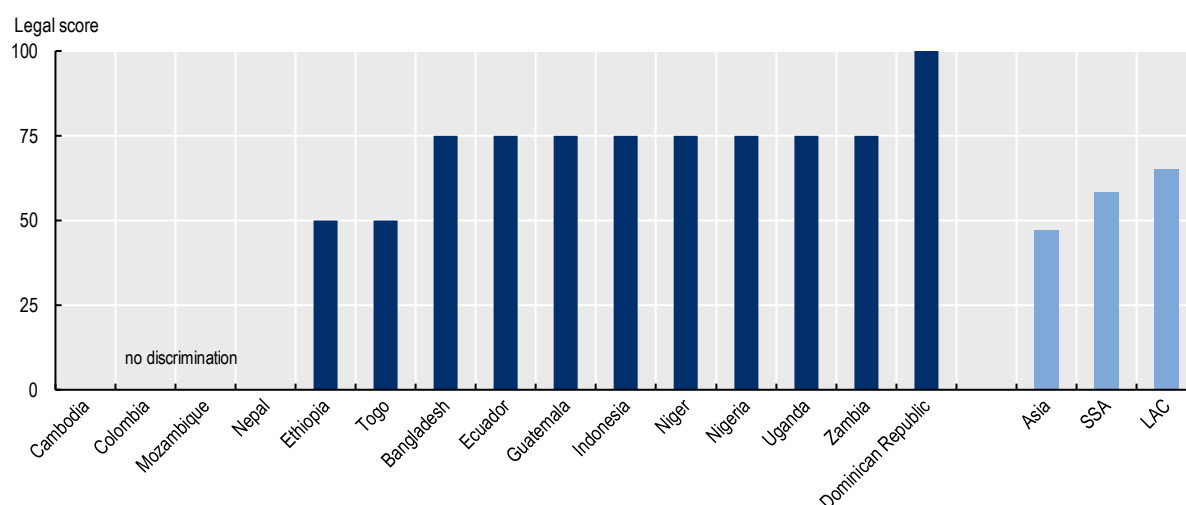
^{xxxix} Dominican Republic, Ethiopia, Guatemala and Nepal.

^{xxxix} Cambodia, Colombia, Mozambique and Nepal.

^{xxxiv} Abortion in the case of rape or statutory rape is not permitted in Bangladesh, the Dominican Republic, Guatemala, Niger, Nigeria, Uganda and Zambia.

abortion following rape or incest given the detrimental consequences such pregnancies can have, including, but not only, on their mental health and socioeconomic situations.

Figure 3: Legal scores for reproductive autonomy



Note: LAC refers to Latin America and the Caribbean; SSA refers to sub-Saharan Africa. The legal scoring for reproductive autonomy is as follows:

0: The law protects women's right to a legal and safe abortion and does not require the approval of the father of the foetus to seek a legal abortion. || **25:** The law protects women's right to a legal and safe abortion. However, the law requires the approval of the father of the foetus to seek a legal abortion. || **50:** The law protects women's right to a legal and safe abortion when it is essential to save the woman's life and when the pregnancy is the result of rape, statutory rape and incest. However, the law does not protect women's right to a legal and safe abortion in one or more of the following circumstances: to preserve the mother's mental or physical health, for social and economic reasons, or in case of foetal impairment. || **75:** The law does not protect women's right to a legal and safe abortion in one or more of the following circumstances: when it is essential to save the woman's life or when pregnancy is the result of rape, statutory rape or incest. || **100:** The law does not provide women with the right to a legal and safe abortion under any circumstance.^{45,46}

From SIGI legal data, a mixed picture emerges in terms of girls' and women's access to comprehensive sexuality education (CSE). At the global level, most countries report that sexuality education is part of their national school curricula, yet there are differences in comprehensiveness – particularly regarding topics such as sexual orientation, gender identity, power hierarchies and abortion. In seven out of the 15 countries,^{xxxv} comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) is a mandatory part of the national school curriculum. Data show that particularly in Africa and Asia, access to CSE remains limited although those regions account for the majority of the world's young people. Finally, to reach all children and adolescents – including married girls who often stop attending school once married – CSE needs to be available not just in schools.⁴⁷

Nor is there any clear regional pattern regarding the legally enshrined right to affordable contraception and family planning services. This could be explained by the fact that since the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development, family planning and particularly access to contraception have been a cornerstone of many development programmes.⁴⁸ Consequently, countries have adopted policies and laws to guarantee the right to reproductive health and family planning. Among the 15 countries, all but the **Dominican**

^{xxxv} Cambodia, Colombia, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Guatemala, Togo and Zambia.

Republic have a national action plan that stipulates universal access to family planning services, and seven countries^{xxxvi} provide for free or subsidised access to contraception.

3.2.5 Violence against women and girls: more comprehensive laws needed

Research from different settings across the world finds that child marriage is associated with a higher risk of intimate partner violence.^{49,50,51} While laws alone will not eradicate child marriage or violence against women, comprehensive legal frameworks that protect women and girls from all forms of violence constitute a vital step towards putting an end to impunity and societal acceptance of violence.⁵² SIGI legal data show that none of the 15 countries has such comprehensive legal frameworks in place, and that the strength of the current legislation varies across countries. For instance, countries with a score of 75 do not prohibit at least one specific form of violence;^{xxxvii} those with a score of 50 have legal gaps around domestic violence or marital rape;^{xxxviii} and countries with a score of 25 do not comprehensively protect girls and women from all types of domestic violence or in all places where sexual harassment can occur^{xxxix} (Figure 4).

Married girls face a heightened risk of experiencing one or multiple forms of domestic violence – i.e., physical, sexual, psychological and economic abuse. Two-thirds of the countries have comprehensive laws on domestic violence, defining and criminalising all forms of this abuse. Legal gaps persist mainly with respect to economic abuse which is not covered in five African and Latin American and Caribbean focus countries.^{xl} While all countries except for **Niger** and **Ethiopia** criminalise sexual domestic abuse, the legal frameworks on rape could be strengthened. For instance, only in seven countries^{xli} is the definition of rape consent-based. Moreover, not all countries specifically criminalise marital rape, leaving married girls insufficiently protected.^{xlii} Finally, femicide is only recognised as a crime per se in **Mozambique**, **Colombia**, **Ecuador** and **Guatemala**.

^{xxxvi} Colombia, Ecuador, Guatemala, Nepal, Niger, Uganda and Zambia.

^{xxxvii} In Guatemala, sexual harassment is not prohibited and in Niger and Togo, the law does not criminalise domestic violence.

^{xxxviii} In Cambodia, Nigeria, and Zambia, informal laws reduce penalties for domestic violence; and marital rape is not explicitly covered by the law in Bangladesh, Cambodia, Ethiopia, Nigeria, Uganda and Zambia.

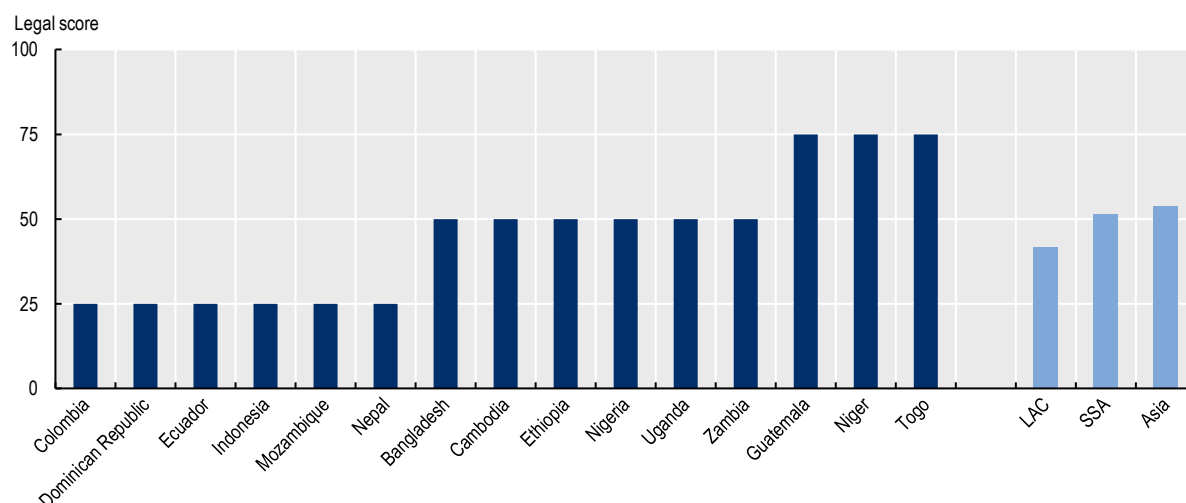
^{xxxix} Domestic violence legislation in the Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Ethiopia, Niger and Togo does not cover all types of domestic violence. In 11 countries, sexual harassment laws do not extend to all places where this type of abuse can occur. The only four countries that cover all places – i.e. the workplace, educational establishments, public and online spaces – are Indonesia, Niger, Togo and Uganda.

^{xl} Domestic violence legislation in the Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Ethiopia and Togo does not cover economic abuse. In Niger, domestic violence is not prohibited at all.

^{xli} Cambodia, the Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Ethiopia, Guatemala, Indonesia and Togo.

^{xlii} The laws in Bangladesh, Cambodia, Ethiopia, Nigeria, Uganda and Zambia do not specifically criminalise marital rape.

Figure 4: Legal scores for violence against women and girls



Note: LAC refers to Latin America and the Caribbean; SSA refers to sub-Saharan Africa. The legal scoring for violence against women and girls is as follows:

0: The law protects women from the following forms of violence: honour crimes, intimate partner violence, rape and sexual harassment. There are no legal exceptions that reduce penalties for domestic violence and the law recognises marital rape. The law is comprehensive (e.g., regarding specific provisions, all types of violence covered and all places covered). || **25:** The law protects women from the following forms of violence: honour crimes, intimate partner violence, rape and sexual harassment. There are no legal exceptions that reduce penalties for domestic violence and the law recognises marital rape. However, the approach is not fully comprehensive (e.g., lack of specific provisions, not all types of violence covered or not all places covered). || **50:** The law protects women from the following forms of violence: honour crimes, intimate partner violence, rape and sexual harassment. However, legal exceptions reduce penalties for domestic violence, or the law does not recognise marital rape. || **75:** The law protects women from some but not all of the following forms of violence: honour crime, intimate partner violence, rape and sexual harassment. || **100:** The law does not protect women from any of the following forms of violence: intimate partner violence, rape and sexual harassment.

Globally, countries have recognised the fundamental importance of strengthening laws to protect girls and women as well as other minority groups from gender-based violence – but more efforts are needed. Two-thirds of the focus countries have a law, policy or national action plan in place that prioritises the coordination of services and mechanisms for survivors of violence against women and girls. Focus countries that lack such instruments are mainly located in Africa.^{xliii,xliv} However, when taking a global perspective, Africa stands out as a continent where a small number of countries have extremely comprehensive laws and strategies in place, whereas other African countries have yet to catch up.⁵³

3.2.6 Divorce rights: not an option for some women

The right to divorce protects individuals from being trapped in harmful, unhappy or abusive marriages. Yet, in many countries, women and men do not have the same divorce rights. Among the 15 focus countries, only three^{xlv} grant all women and men equal rights that permit them to initiate or finalise a divorce or annulment and to retain child custody. The regional averages and country analysis reveal that challenges persist mainly in African and Asian countries. In African countries, the most important challenge is to guarantee that all groups of the population enjoy the same divorce rights regardless of custom, residence or religion, whereas in Asia, existing laws remain inherently unequal (Figure 5).

^{xliii} The Dominican Republic, Ethiopia, Niger, Togo and Zambia.

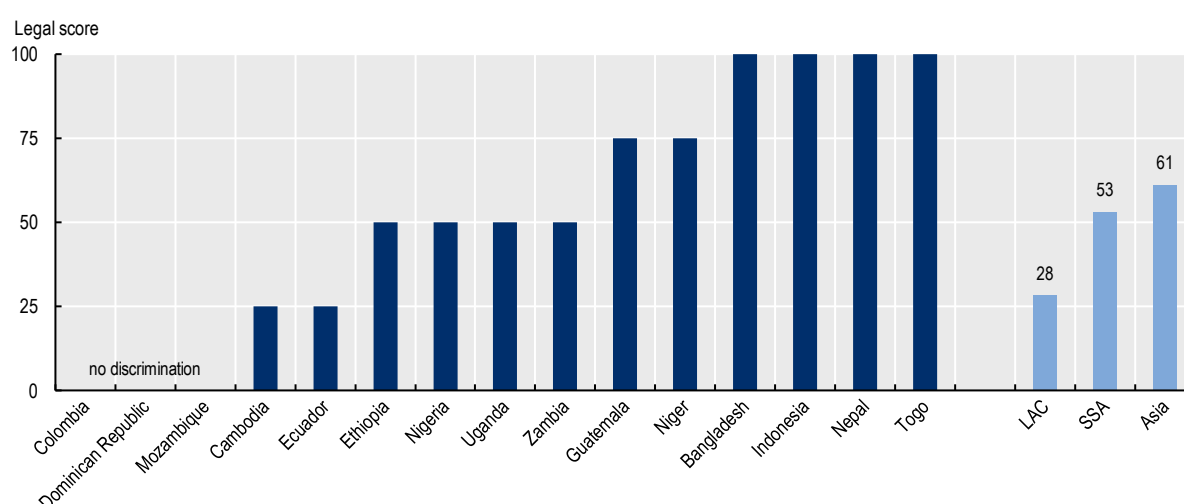
^{xliv} The Dominican Republic, Ethiopia, Niger, Togo and Zambia.

^{xlv} Colombia, the Dominican Republic and Mozambique.

Legal provisions regulating under which circumstances or with which requirements a spouse can file for and finalise a divorce or annulment create different rights for women and men in **Bangladesh**, **Guatemala**, **Indonesia**, **Nepal**, **Niger** and **Togo**. For instance, the grounds upon which a woman or man can file for divorce can differ and, in some cases, women must also respect a waiting period before they can remarry after a divorce – a provision that rarely exists for men. Moreover, many countries make exceptions to the general law governing divorce (e.g. the civil code or marriage law) based on religion, or they adopt a pluralistic system where divorce is regulated by the respective religious laws observed by parts of the population. This is notably the case in several African and Asian countries^{xlvi} where the law on divorce does not apply to all groups of women.

Finally, informal laws undermine women's divorce rights in about half of the focus countries.^{xlvii} Evidence from **Uganda** shows, for instance, that under certain customary regimes, it is accepted for a husband to divorce his wife when she cannot give birth to a male child, and in **Zambia** evidence attests to the application of informal, customary laws when the more egalitarian state law should be followed.

Figure 5: Legal scores for divorce rights



Note: LAC refers to Latin America and the Caribbean; SSA refers to sub-Saharan Africa. The legal scoring for divorce is as follows:

0: All women and men have the same rights to initiate or file for a divorce, to finalise a divorce or an annulment, and to retain child custody following a divorce. There are no informal laws (customary, traditional or religious laws/rules) that create different rights or abilities regarding initiating a divorce or being the legal guardians of children after a divorce. || **25:** All women and men have the same rights to initiate or file for a divorce, to finalise a divorce or an annulment, and to retain child custody following a divorce. However, some informal laws (customary, traditional or religious laws/rules) create different rights or abilities regarding initiating a divorce or being the legal guardians of children after a divorce. || **50:** Women have the same rights as men to initiate or file for a divorce, to finalise a divorce or an annulment, and to retain child custody following a divorce. However, legal exceptions exist for some groups of women. || **75:** Women do not have the same rights as men in at least one of the following aspects: initiate or file for a divorce; finalise a divorce or annulment; retain child custody following a divorce. || **100:** Women do not have the same rights as men to initiate or file for a divorce and/or to finalise a divorce or an annulment. In addition, women do not have the same rights as men to retain child custody following a divorce.^{54,55}

Differences by gender regarding the right to child custody following divorce are less common, but persist in the legal provisions of **Bangladesh**, **Indonesia**, **Nepal** and **Togo**. In these

^{xlvi} Bangladesh, Ethiopia, Indonesia, Niger, Nigeria, Uganda and Zambia.

^{xlvii} Bangladesh, Cambodia, Indonesia, Nepal, Nigeria, Uganda and Zambia.

countries, the law is more favourable to the mother, granting her priority to child custody following divorce – but only depending on the age of the children.^{xlviii} Differences in men’s and women’s custody rights are also sometimes conditioned on the sex of the child or in cases when the mother wants to remarry. Again, beyond the existing statutory laws, informal laws can create differences in women’s and men’s ability to obtain child custody following divorce. SIGI legal data show that this is the case in eight out of the 15 countries.^{xlix}

3.2.7 Concluding insights from the OECD Social Institutions and Gender Index

Legal gaps and discriminatory informal laws not only stand in the way of ending and preventing child marriage in the 15 focus countries but they also affect married girls’ rights and wellbeing during and after marriage. Even in countries with strong legal frameworks, law enforcement can remain a challenge. It is thus crucial to strengthen systems along with providing information and support to girls and young women so that they can exercise their rights. Moreover, persisting discriminatory norms and informal laws must be addressed as these can limit girls’ and women’s access to justice in general^l or with respect to specific issues such as household responsibilities or divorce, as discussed in this section.

Regarding the focus countries of this report, the data show that each country faces unique challenges. Annex B provides an overview of the legal scores across the five thematic areas assessed in this section. The number of focus countries covered by this report is limited in order to draw conclusions for regional patterns. More in-depth analyses by the OECD based on the 2023 SIGI legal data provide specific insights on the state of gender-based discrimination in social institutions, for instance, in South-East Asia or the Middle East and North Africa.^{56,57}

SIGI legal data show that while change is happening, progress remains too slow and the speed of legal versus social changes may not always be in sync. Strong political will is key to bring about the necessary reforms and policies, ensuring that legal reforms are supported by a whole-of-society approach that seeks to transform the underlying discriminatory norms or informal laws, and invests in capacity building to strengthen law enforcement.

3.3 Impacts of CEFMU and the support needs of married girls

Ever-married girls are disproportionately affected by limited access to education and diminished decision-making power.⁵⁸ These intersecting vulnerabilities not only curtail the girls’ potential as individuals but they also form significant barriers to broader social and economic development at national level.

3.3.1 Education

Child marriage significantly limits education for ever-married girls. Fewer than one in five married girls remain in school after marriage. They face barriers like social stigma, prejudiced school policies and societal expectations to become a homemaker and mother.⁵⁹ In South

^{xlviii} In Bangladesh, the father is considered the natural guardian of the child, whereas the mother has the priority right to child custody. Following divorce, the mother retains child custody of a son until the age of seven, and of a daughter until she has reached puberty. In Indonesia, for populations following Islamic law, the mother has the priority right to child custody. In Nepal, the mother gains child custody for children under the age of five. She also retains child custody for children aged above five years except if she remarries. In Togo, child custody goes to the mother when the children are aged below seven years unless the court decides otherwise.

^{xlix} Bangladesh, Cambodia, Ecuador, Indonesia, Niger, Nigeria, Uganda and Zambia.

^l SIGI legal data show that informal laws limit women’s access to justice in Bangladesh, Cambodia, Nepal and Nigeria.

Asia and sub-Saharan Africa, marriage and schooling are often viewed as incompatible due to cultural expectations and gender norms, meaning that most married girls are out of school.⁶⁰

Even where legal pathways for re-entry to education exist – as in **Uganda** – married or divorced girls often face social stigma and logistical barriers, including lack of childcare and poor transport infrastructure, that prevent them from returning to school.⁶¹ These practical barriers exacerbate existing inequalities and limit long-term opportunities for married and divorced adolescents.

Some countries have begun to reverse negative policies. **Togo** (in 2022) and **Niger** (in 2019) repealed bans on pregnant students and young mothers in school.⁶² **Niger**'s policy mandates that girls can return to school 40 days after childbirth, except in cases deemed “force majeure”.⁶³ These “exceptional circumstances” are not detailed, and the ambiguity of the clause has led to inconsistent implementation. There is also weak enforcement and monitoring of the law, with some schools in rural areas still denying re-entry to affected girls or failing to provide support for girls to return.⁶⁴ However, while countries like **Togo**, **Mozambique** and **Ethiopia** have removed school bans or highly restrictive policies in recent years, they are yet to enact an enabling legal and policy framework that comprehensively supports pregnant and parenting girls to enjoy their right to education.

Education re-entry programmes exist in some contexts, such as **Uganda**, but these are underutilised due to societal norms whereby girls are expected to prioritise motherhood and marriage above education and personal development.⁶⁵ In **Bangladesh** and **Nepal**, married girls face intense stigma in schools, while the absence of policies to facilitate their reintegration exacerbates the situation.⁶⁶ This educational exclusion perpetuates poverty and restricts opportunities for married adolescents who drop out of school.

Conditional cash transfer programmes that incentivise school attendance or re-entry for young mothers have demonstrated success in some pilot contexts, although broader implementation is needed.⁶⁷ Expanding and integrating these supports into national strategies is essential to address the complex and intersecting needs of ever-married girls.

3.3.2 Health and sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR)

Ever-married girls face a range of challenges that undermine their health and autonomy. These challenges include heightened risks of maternal mortality, obstetric fistula, and other adverse health outcomes due to early and often unintended pregnancies.^{68,69} In communities where premarital sex and adolescent pregnancies are heavily stigmatised, some girls who become pregnant choose to marry the fathers of their children as a strategy to avoid social stigma and to gain acceptance.⁷⁰ This decision is driven more by the desire to mitigate shame and restore social standing than by personal readiness or choice.⁷¹ In the 15 study countries, stigma and discrimination frequently deter ever-married girls from seeking contraception or maternal care. Ever-married girls are often expected or are under pressure to bear children soon after marriage, with little say in whether or when to become mothers. Despite this, they are frequently excluded from key SRHR services such as contraception and safe abortion, further compounding the risks to their health and autonomy.⁷² Ever-married girls often have minimal decision-making power due to unequal relationship dynamics, particularly in cases where significant age gaps exist. Although some married girls report greater empowerment in accessing sexual and reproductive health (SRH) services, this rarely extends

to broader aspects of their lives, as many continue to face constraints on mobility, education and employment.^{73,74}

A lack of CSE further exacerbates these challenges. Without access to accurate and age-appropriate information, adolescent girls are more vulnerable to unintended pregnancies, sexually transmitted infections and coercive relationships.^{75,76} Health systems in many countries fail to provide adolescent-responsive services, and sexuality education is often absent or poorly implemented.

Stigmatising attitudes and judgements of health workers also discourage ever-married and pregnant adolescents from seeking care.⁷⁷ In many settings, health workers lack training in adolescent-friendly approaches and may hold moralistic attitudes that shame young girls who are seeking contraception or maternal services. This undermines trust and deters adolescents from accessing essential care.

Societal and familial pressures further undermine their autonomy. In sub-Saharan Africa, South and Southeast Asia, and parts of Latin America and the Caribbean, many countries have legal frameworks and societal norms that require women to obtain their husband's consent to access SRH services, which reinforces their dependency.⁷⁸ These consent requirements are often embedded in national laws or reinforced by customary and religious practices, even where formal legal barriers may not exist. Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) Indicator 5.6.1 shows that in many countries, a significant proportion of women aged 15 to 49 are unable to make their own informed decisions about sexual relations, contraception use and reproductive healthcare.⁷⁹ The opinion of the husband or partner in the decision-making process is a key factor that affects women's decision-making. Men's support plays a key role in women's access to contraception and reproductive health services. In rural areas, extended family, especially mothers-in-law, are also an important influence on the decision-making processes.⁸⁰ Gender norms discourage women from independent decision-making, expecting them to be submissive and passive in sexual relations, to fulfil reproductive obligations and to obey their husbands' decisions.⁸¹

Few countries prioritise services tailored to the needs of ever-married girls, creating gaps in healthcare and childcare provision. For example, **Mozambique** and **Zambia** lack formal childcare services tailored to adolescent mothers, while **Ecuador** and **Guatemala** rely on sporadic NGO-led programmes. Similarly, SRHR services in countries like **Colombia** are underfunded and often inaccessible for minors (as many require adult authorisation), leaving ever-married adolescents without essential family planning resources.

Despite these challenges, some support mechanisms show promise. Community-based interventions that engage families and promote gender-equitable norms, such as dialogue sessions or male involvement initiatives, have shown positive impacts but remain limited in scale.⁸² Digital platforms, especially mobile health (mHealth) tools, are increasingly used to deliver SRHR information to adolescents and could be adapted to meet the unique needs of ever-married girls.⁸³

3.3.3 Legal and economic exclusion

Ever-married girls are often deprived of fundamental rights, including to health, legal protection and freedom from violence.⁸⁴ Many marriages are illegal or unregistered, leaving girls without legal protections for property, spousal maintenance or inheritance.⁸⁵ In unregistered or informal marriages, ever-married girls who are mothers face significant legal barriers when asserting custody or claiming child support. For example, in **Nigeria**, customary laws often grant fathers primary custody and decision-making authority, disadvantaging married girls who are mothers in custody disputes.⁸⁶

Legal gaps weaken girls' full protection from child marriage and gender-based violence as well as their access to equal rights within marriage. Pluralistic legal systems can contribute to further inequalities when equality principles are not respected in one or more of the laws that apply to certain parts of the population. This can hinder ever-married girls who are mothers from securing legal custody or financial support, making it even more difficult for them to leave a marriage.

Legal protection services are often inaccessible or unknown to ever-married girls, particularly in cases of intimate partner violence or custody disputes. Ever-married girls are often invisible and confined to the home, and thus are often left out of economic empowerment initiatives such as vocational training or livelihood programmes. This leaves them financially dependent, vulnerable and left further behind.⁸⁷ The lack of data disaggregated by age and marital status compounds the problem, as it hampers the design and evaluation of effective interventions for this group.

3.3.4 Mental health and psychosocial support

Ever-married girls often experience social isolation and limited interaction with peers or limited access to the workforce. Combined with heightened risks of intimate partner violence, such isolation contributes to increased levels of depression, anxiety and other psychosocial challenges.^{88,89}

Despite these risks, mental health services tailored to ever-married girls are extremely limited, especially in rural areas. However, even where services do exist, stigma, lack of awareness and restricted mobility often prevent ever-married girls from seeking help. The invisibility of ever-married girls within health systems and data frameworks exacerbates the situation, leaving girls' psychosocial needs unmet.

To address these complex issues, comprehensive strategies are essential. These include legal reform to protect the rights of married girls,⁹⁰ increased access to education,⁹¹ and robust community support systems.⁹² Psychosocial interventions, such as peer support groups, mobile counselling services and community-based mental health programmes, play a critical role in mitigating the long-term effects of child marriage and in promoting wellbeing.⁹³

3.4 Social norms and institutional barriers

3.4.1 Marginalisation and contextual vulnerabilities

Achieving the SDG Target 5.3 to end child marriage by 2030 remains a considerable challenge, particularly in high-prevalence regions with marginalised, rural, displaced and crisis-affected communities. These vulnerabilities, whether singly or when intersecting, limit the overall impact of global efforts and contribute to persistent child marriage rates, despite legal and policy reforms.

Girls from marginalised communities, including those with disabilities, those living in humanitarian crises, or those affected by displacement and climate disasters, face heightened risks of child marriage. In such contexts, families may resort to child marriage as a perceived protective or economic coping mechanism. In 2022, eight out of ten countries with the highest rates of child marriage were experiencing humanitarian crises.⁹⁴ In [Ethiopia](#), local data shows that child marriage increased by 119 per cent in drought-affected regions between January

and April 2022 compared to the same period in 2021.⁹⁵ Similarly, in conflict zones, weakened social structures and increased economic hardship contribute to spikes in child marriage rates, with girls in conflict-affected regions being 20 per cent more likely to marry early than those in more stable areas.⁹⁶

Despite crisis situations having such an impact on the lived realities of many girls, crises such as climate disasters or conflicts are often overlooked in mainstream child marriage frameworks and national strategies. Research, such as the Girls Not Brides 2024 spotlight on crisis contexts, highlights how intersecting factors like statelessness, ethnicity and disability further marginalise girls in emergencies.⁹⁷ Inclusive, targeted interventions are essential to address these inequities. Yet programming and policy responses rarely integrate these intersecting dimensions in a sustained or systemic way. Programmes that apply an intersectional analysis, engage communities to challenge harmful norms, and tailor services to the specific needs of girls have proven effective in both preventing child marriage and supporting married girls.⁹⁸

Integrating humanitarian response frameworks with child marriage prevention and support strategies is essential. This includes ensuring that emergency education, SRHR and protection services are inclusive of ever-married girls and are responsive to the unique risks they face in crisis settings.

3.4.2 Norms shaping ever-married girls' lives

Efforts to shift social norms around child marriage often prioritise prevention, with insufficient attention paid to responding to the needs of ever-married girls.⁹⁹ Ever-married girls are not only affected by the norms that led to their child marriage, such as beliefs around preserving family honour, controlling female sexuality and viewing girls primarily as future wives and mothers but they also face persistent stigma once married (see section [4.2 Gender roles and responsibilities once in a child marriage](#) for original findings supporting this). These norms, embedded in family, community and institutional structures, continue to shape girls' post-marriage experiences, especially in relation to schooling, healthcare and social inclusion.

Ever-married girls often encounter exclusion and judgement in schools, where they may be seen as poor role models, and in clinics, where they face discrimination when seeking SRH services.¹⁰⁰ In many contexts, the norm that marriage equates to adulthood deprives them of adolescent-responsive care and protection. Not only do families and community leaders uphold these norms but so too do educators, health providers and even legal systems. Implementation gaps are often reinforced by the assumption that marriage marks the end of a girl's potential for education, autonomy or personal development.

Some ever-married girls challenge these norms by delaying pregnancy, seeking employment, or attempting to return to school but this can lead to backlash. In many communities, defying the expectations tied to marriage is viewed as shameful or disobedient, resulting in further social isolation or even violence. The norm that an ever-married girl must bear children soon after marriage, for example, is deeply entrenched in many societies. Girls who deviate from this face scrutiny from their in-laws and sometimes from health workers and neighbours. Such punitive attitudes illustrate how deeply the norms governing ever-married girls' lives are policed, especially those that relate to gender roles, sexuality and reproductive expectations. Girls who attempt to leave marriages (whether due to abuse, neglect or personal choice) often

face intense stigma which can deter them from seeking support or asserting their rights (see [section 4.1.6 Withdrawing from child marriages or unions](#) for original findings supporting this). In many cases, girls are pressured to remain in harmful unions to maintain the household unit.

3.4.3 Addressing norms through community and systems change

At the same time, shifts are emerging. In some communities, exposure to education, media and peer-led initiatives is helping families and leaders re-evaluate traditional expectations. For example, programmes such as [Ethiopia's](#) Berhane Hewan have successfully delayed marriage and increased access to SRHR, yet they lack comprehensive strategies to support ever-married adolescents in continuing their education or accessing healthcare.¹⁰¹ Similarly, campaigns in [Nepal](#) and [Nigeria](#) engage religious and cultural leaders to discourage child marriage, but they do not fully address reintegration pathways for ever-married girls.^{102,103}

Social norms also deeply influence law-making and public policy. For example, many states include exceptions to the legal minimum age of marriage due to prevailing social expectations around girls' roles, family honour and the control of girls' sexuality. Such norms foster a reluctance to establish a clear and unequivocal minimum age of marriage, reflecting the powerful grip of societal attitudes on legislative processes.

In some contexts, efforts to raise the legal age of marriage have been accompanied by lobbying to align the age of sexual consent with the age of marriage. While often framed as protective, this alignment can restrict adolescents' access to SRH services, creating a tension between protection and rights that must be carefully navigated.

Furthermore, in many countries there remains limited state and public understanding, or recognition of the harm caused to girls by child marriage, despite its classification as a harmful practice under the SDGs. This lack of awareness presents a critical opportunity for legislative advocacy to educate policy makers and the public on the physical, psychological and social damages that child marriage inflicts.

Public awareness campaigns led by state institutions can challenge entrenched social norms, while social protection measures, such as cash transfer schemes, help to mitigate the economic pressures that often drive child marriage. For example, [Uganda's](#) Go Back to School campaign is one such example, but its framing still places responsibility on girls rather than addressing systemic barriers or social stigma.¹⁰⁴ In [Nepal](#), efforts to designate wards and municipalities as Child Marriage Free zones, in coordination with local government and community Champions of Change, demonstrate how government sensitisation and local engagement can support this cause.

NGOs are crucial in complementing government efforts and often lead interventions in marginalised communities, filling gaps left by underfunded public systems. They typically have strong grassroots connections, deep understanding of local contexts and close ties to communities where they can build trust and tailor their programmes to specific cultural and social needs. Key organisations like Girls Not Brides facilitate community dialogues to challenge discriminatory norms and practices while advocating for inclusive policies that prioritise ever-married girls. Likewise, Plan International's work under the regional Time to Act!

Programme and Storming the Norms digital campaign are focusing on transforming gender norms and strengthening health, protection and education systems across countries.¹⁰⁵

Transforming deep-seated gender norms requires intentional work with families and communities where support systems from family and community are key for enabling girls to leave abusive marriages). Gender norms that position girls primarily as wives or mothers are deeply entrenched, but they are not fixed. Transforming these norms requires sustained, long-term engagement with families and communities.

International donors and private sector actors amplify the reach and scalability of these interventions. Agencies such as UNICEF and UNFPA fund large-scale programmes like Nepal's Educate the Girl Child, ensuring resources are available to sustain programmatic efforts. Partnerships between local organisations and global donors are especially critical in resource-limited settings, where sustained investment is essential to long-term impact.

Community engagement remains a cornerstone of behaviour change and is central to shifting social norms and fostering inclusivity. Peer-led initiatives, such as gender clubs in [Zambia](#), provide safe, empowering spaces for girls to voice concerns and challenge harmful practices. Simultaneously, engaging religious and cultural leaders as allies can help to champion new positive norms from within, making behaviour change more meaningful and sustainable.

3.5 Political resistance: rollback on rights and rising conservatism

While many countries have made legislative and policy strides to address child marriage, recent global developments reveal a concerning rollback on gender equality and SRHR.¹⁰⁶ This regression is not isolated but is part of a broader trend of rising reactionary, ultra-conservative or far-right influences that are increasingly shaping government agendas. These influences are constraining progress on gender equity and rights for ever-married girls, not simply through a return to traditional values, but via a more deliberate and coordinated pushback against inclusion and rights-based approaches. These actors often draw on entrenched social norms and patriarchal power structures to justify restrictions, reinforcing narratives that challenge fundamental rights and freedoms.

At the 69th session of the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW69) in March 2025, member states removed references to sexual and reproductive health rights from the final political declaration. This omission, influenced by negotiations led by the US,¹⁰⁷ undermines international commitments to gender equality and the elimination of child marriage. It also aligns with the agenda of the Geneva Consensus Declaration, which promotes a restrictive interpretation of SRHR under the guise of national sovereignty and traditional family values. These developments illustrate how coordinated efforts are reshaping global norms, often leveraging existing social and political tensions to challenge established rights frameworks.

Such legal regressions are often driven by organised ultra-conservative and religious movements that frame opposition to SRHR and gender equality as part of a defence of cultural or moral values.¹⁰⁸ In Indonesia, for example, certain interpretations of Islamic conservatism have influenced policies on sexuality education and women's autonomy. In parts of Africa, patriarchal family codes shaped by a combination of religious doctrine and colonial-era legal frameworks continue to entrench systems that permit or fail to penalise early and forced unions. It is important to recognise that these positions reflect specific, often fundamentalist interpretations, and do not represent the full spectrum of religious thought.

In some contexts, these forces have contributed to the rollback of SRHR information and services, and have weakened the political will to invest in programmes that support the reintegration and empowerment of adolescent mothers and ever-married girls. In donor countries, declining commitment to rights-based development has accompanied broader democratic erosion, limiting political will for CEFMU response efforts and obstructing holistic approaches that integrate legal protections, social services and community-driven prevention strategies. In many implementing countries, political expediency also plays a significant role. Elected officials may hesitate to advance or enforce policies and laws related to SRHR and gender equality due to concerns about backlash from traditionalist or religious constituencies, which could affect their electoral prospects.

Meanwhile, many nationalist and religious movements across various regions actively reject global rights frameworks. They position themselves against international norms that promote gender equality and SRHR protections, while continuing to reinforce policies sustaining child marriage, often framing this as efforts to preserve cultural or ideological traditions. This resistance combined with economic instability redirects priorities away from legal safeguards and behaviour change initiatives, further weakening efforts to dismantle harmful norms and support vulnerable girls.

Many progressive religious leaders and communities are key allies in advancing gender equality and challenging harmful practices, and their engagement is essential to building inclusive and rights-based approaches. Despite resistance from activists and communities that are working to counter regressions, political fragmentation and strategic disinformation continue to deepen harmful norms.

3.6 CEFMU contexts of the 15 countries

3.6.1 Introduction to the study countries

The 15 study countries included in this review represent diverse geographical, cultural and socioeconomic contexts where child marriage remains prevalent. These nations span regions with some of the highest rates of child marriage globally, including South/South-East Asia, sub-Saharan Africa, and parts of Latin America. In South Asia, the South Asian Initiative to End Violence Against Children (SAIEVAC) has committed to ending child marriage as a regional priority, reinforcing national efforts. Countries like **Niger** and **Bangladesh** have some of the highest global rates, while others, such as **Indonesia** and **Colombia**, exhibit regional disparities. All study countries exhibit long-standing social and gender norms and economic challenges that perpetuate the practice.

Each country's profile integrates an analysis of child marriage prevalence rates, legislative frameworks and socioeconomic measures supporting ever-married girls, as well as the inclusivity of policies and services, particularly for marginalised groups that include girls at risk of child marriage. By examining these contexts, the review highlights both commonalities and unique challenges faced by ever-married girls, offering a comprehensive understanding of effective strategies and gaps in addressing child marriage.

3.6.2 Country profiles

Africa

Ethiopia

Overall political and rights context

Ethiopia's civic space is classified as "repressed" by CIVICUS,ⁱⁱ with severe restrictions on freedom of expression, assembly and association.¹⁰⁹ Freedom House scores Ethiopia (in 2024) as 22/100 (not free), citing ethnic conflict, internet shutdowns and political crackdowns.¹¹⁰ This environment limits civil society's ability to effectively monitor and respond to rights violations like CEFMU. Despite commitments to gender equality treaties, implementation is hindered by political instability, conflict and resource constraints.

Prevalence of CEFMU

- 40% of women aged 20–24 years were married or in a union before 18 years; 14% before 15 years.¹¹¹
- 5% of men aged 20–24 years were married or in a union before 18 years.¹¹²
- 17% of girls aged 15–19 years have been or are still married, divorced, widowed or in an informal union, compared to 1% of boys of the same age.¹¹³
- 2023 adolescent birth rate: 70 births per 1,000 girls aged 15–19.¹¹⁴
- National rates of CEFMU have declined but regional hotspots persist: Amhara and Afar regions exceed 50%. These are regions also marred by conflict.
- Key drivers: poverty, gender and cultural norms and low education.¹¹⁵

Legal frameworks addressing CEFMU

Law/Policy	Description
Revised Family Code (2000)	Sets the minimum legal age for marriage at 18 for both sexes. No legal exceptions are permitted, aligning with international standards (Art. 7). Marriages involving individuals below this age are considered invalid. The code also outlines conditions under which a marriage can be annulled, including underage marriage and cases where consent was obtained through deceit or coercion (Art 33).
Criminal Code (2004)	Penalises child marriage (liable to three to seven years' imprisonment) (Art. 649)

Remaining challenges

- All regional governments, except in the Afar and Somali regions, have updated or enacted regional family laws in accordance with the federal law (the revised family code).
- Enforcement of child marriage laws are weak, especially in rural areas where customary and religious marriages bypass the formal legal system. Low awareness and cultural acceptance contribute to underreporting, with no available data on convictions, making the law's real impact difficult to measure.
- Despite legal provisions, informal or traditional marriages involving minors remain widespread in rural and pastoralist communities, where civil registration is rare and enforcement is weak.
- Despite efforts to reach marginalised groups, deep-rooted social norms, gender inequality and logistical challenges continue to limit the full impact of interventions in marginalised and remote communities.
- Budget constraints and overlapping mandates limit the efficiency of the Ministry of Women and Social National Costed Roadmap (2020-2024) on child marriage.¹¹⁶

Mozambique

Overall political and rights context

ⁱⁱ CIVICUS is a global alliance of civil society organisations and activists working to strengthen citizen action and civil society throughout the world.

Mozambique's civic space is rated as "repressed" by CIVICUS, with civil society facing surveillance, bureaucratic obstacles and threats. Freedom House scores Mozambique as 22/100 (not free), citing political intimidation, media restrictions and weak rule of law. Despite formal gender equality and child protection commitments, implementation is undermined by corruption, poor enforcement and regional disparities in governance and service delivery, particularly in rural and underserved areas.

Prevalence of CEFMU

- One of the highest child marriage rates in the world.
- 53% of women aged 20–24 years were married or in a union before 18 years; 17% before 15 years.¹¹⁷
- 10% of men aged 20–24 years were married or in a union before 18 years.¹¹⁸
- 41% of girls aged 15–19 years have been or are still married, divorced, widowed or in an informal union, compared to 9% of boys of the same age.¹¹⁹
- 2023 adolescent birth rate: 153 births per 1,000 girls aged 15–19.¹²⁰
- While national rates have declined particularly in urban areas, rates remain high in rural provinces in the northern and central regions. Cabo Delgado and Nampula provinces have rates exceeding 60%.¹²¹
- In the province of Niassa, almost 1 in 4 women (24%) were married by the age of 15.¹²²
- Key drivers: poverty, social norms, gender inequality, and limited access to education and SRH services.

Legal frameworks addressing CEFMU

Law/policy	Description
Law to Prevent and Combat Premature Unions (Law No. 19/2019)	Sets the minimum legal age of marriage at 18, with no exceptions (Art. 3) for both girls and boys. It criminalises premature unions and imposes severe penalties on adults who marry or enter into unions with children.
Family Law (Law No. 22/2019)	This revised law no longer contains provisions allowing for marriage under 18 with parental consent. It aligns with Law No. 19/2019 by reinforcing 18 as the minimum age for marriage.
Penal Code (2014)	Criminalises forced marriage and prescribes penalties for engaging in or facilitating child marriage.
General Education Law (2018)	Guarantees inclusive and non-discriminatory access to education. In December 2018, the government repealed a decree that forced pregnant students to attend evening classes, removing a significant barrier to education for pregnant girls and young mothers.

Remaining challenges

- Despite these interventions, conflict displacement, harmful social norms and rural poverty continue to restrict progress, especially in northern and central provinces.
- Implementation of the Law to Prevent and Combat Premature Unions (Law No. 19/2019), has faced challenges due to inconsistencies in the revised Family Law (Law No. 22/2019). While Articles 22 and 32 of the Family Law also set the minimum age at 18, Article 28 introduces a potential exception for religious marriages involving minors, and Article 34 references the lack of parental consent in such cases. These provisions create legal ambiguity and complicate enforcement efforts.
- The 2014 Penal Code implementation suffers from underreporting, meaning detailed information on the subsequent conviction rates is limited. A 2017 Human Rights Watch report found no recorded convictions, and recent conviction data is lacking, underscoring the gap between law and practice.
- Customary and religious marriages are still widely practised, especially in rural areas. While the revised Family Law (Law No. 22/2019) formally recognises and codifies these forms of marriage, including granting them equal legal status to civil marriages when legal requirements are met, traditional marriages often occur outside the state's regulatory reach, which can perpetuate early unions and complicate enforcement of minimum age laws.

- Political instability and ongoing conflict in northern Mozambique (Cabo Delgado) limit programme reach and community engagement.
- Mozambique lacks a policy that outlines measures to guarantee the right to education for students who are pregnant or are mothers.
- Budgetary and logistical constraints have hampered full implementation of the government's roadmap on ending child marriage.

Niger

Overall political and rights context

Niger's civic space is rated as "repressed" by CIVICUS, with civil society facing surveillance, threats and bureaucratic hurdles.¹²³ Freedom House scores Niger as 30/100 (not free); the 2023 military coup further eroded civil liberties and dissolved democratic institutions.¹²⁴ Despite ratifying key gender and child rights treaties, implementation is inconsistent, hindered by corruption, lack of enforcement mechanisms and regional disparities in governance and service provision.

Prevalence of CEFMU

- Niger holds the highest child marriage rate in the world, particularly prevalent in rural areas.¹²⁵
- 76% of women aged 20–24 years were married or in a union before 18 years; 28% before 15 years.¹²⁶
- 6% of men aged 20–24 years were married or in a union before 18.¹²⁷
- 66% of girls aged 15–19 years have been or are still married, divorced, widowed or in an informal union, compared to 9% of boys of the same age.¹²⁸
- 2023 adolescent birth rate: 145 births per 1,000 girls aged 15–19.¹²⁹
- Key drivers: poverty, gender inequality and cultural traditions.¹³⁰

Legal frameworks addressing CEFMU

Law/Policy	Description
Civil Code (2005)	The legal minimum age for marriage in Niger is 15 for girls and 18 for boys (Art. 144). Marriages contracted below the legal age can be contested and annulled by the minor or their legal representatives. Judges can annul such unions although practical obstacles often impede this legal remedy.
Joint Order No. 335 (2019)	This policy allows married and/or pregnant students to continue their studies and return after childbirth. It stipulates that a student must return to school within 40 days after giving birth, unless there are exceptional circumstances.
Penal Code (2003)	Criminalises the abduction of minors under 18 for marriage, punishable by one to five years' imprisonment and a fine (Art. 258). If the minor is married to the abductor, prosecution is possible upon request by a legally entitled complainant.

Remaining challenges

- Despite legal provisions, customary and religious marriages are prevalent, especially in rural regions. These traditional practices often occur outside the formal legal system, perpetuating child marriages. Customary and religious practices often permit marriages at even younger ages, leading to inconsistencies in enforcement of the 2005 Civil Code.
- Enforcement remains weak, with cultural acceptance, underreporting and the dominance of customary practices contributing to ongoing violations of children's rights. Efforts to reform the law face resistance from some religious and social groups.
- As a result, even though the law provides mechanisms to annul child marriages, the prevalence of customary practices and limited access to formal judicial systems hinder the effective annulment of such unions.
- Nomadic and rural communities face extreme barriers to accessing support due to geographic isolation and deeply entrenched cultural practices.

- Factors such as conflict displacement, entrenched social norms and rural poverty continue to impede progress, especially in remote areas.

Nigeria

Overall political and rights context

Nigeria's civic space is rated "repressed" by CIVICUS, with activists and journalists facing surveillance, harassment and violence, especially when addressing sensitive issues like corruption, security and harmful traditional practices like CEFMU.¹³¹ Freedom House scores Nigeria 30/100 (not free), citing political interference, media censorship and suppression of dissent.¹³² Ongoing conflicts, including the Boko Haram insurgency and intercommunal violence, alongside government crackdowns severely limit civil society's ability to combat rights violations. Despite ratifying key gender and child rights treaties, enforcement is weak due to corruption, legal pluralism and disparities in governance and service delivery across Nigeria.

Prevalence of CEFMU

- 30% of women aged 20–24 years were married or in a union before 18 years; 12% before 15 years.¹³³
- 2% of men aged 20–24 years were married or in a union before 18.¹³⁴
- 12% of girls aged 15–19 years have been or are still married, divorced, widowed or in an informal union, compared to 0.3% of boys of the same age.¹³⁵
- 2023 adolescent birth rate: 86 births per 1,000 girls aged 15–19.¹³⁶
- CEFMU disproportionately affects girls from poor, rural families and is particularly prevalent in northern Nigeria.
- The highest levels of child marriage are in the northwest and northeast zones, where over half (52% and 51.1%, respectively) of young women aged 20–24 were married as children.¹³⁷
- Bauchi State stands out with the most severe situation, as 73.8% of women in this age group entered marriage before their 18th birthday, often in polygynous relationships and frequently with spouses at least a decade older.¹³⁸
- Key drivers: poverty, social and gender norms.

Legal frameworks addressing CEFMU

Law/Policy	Description
Marriage Act (1990)	Sets the minimum legal age for marriage at 21 years for both sexes. Individuals are able to marry before this with written consent from their parents/guardians. This act does not apply to customary or Islamic marriages, as the Federal Government of Nigeria, by virtue of Section 61, Part I of the Second Schedule to the Constitution, lacks the authority to regulate such marriages.
Child Rights Act (2003)	<p>The minimum legal age for marriage is at 18 for both sexes (Section 15 (5)); implementation varies across the country. In northern states, where Sharia law is practised, marriage can legally occur from the age of 12. The Child Rights Act of 2003, specifically Section 15(5), guarantees that pregnant schoolgirls have the right to continue their education after giving birth, depending on their individual capacity. Section 23 of the Act criminalises child marriage and betrothal, imposing penalties such as a fine of ₦500,000 (approximately US\$312), up to five years in prison, or both.</p> <p>All Nigerian states have domesticated the Child Rights Act, often referred to as the Child Protection Law in northern states. But many of these states do not explicitly prohibit or criminalise child marriage due to prevailing cultural and social norms, though they may criminalise withdrawing children from school. A constitutional conflict further complicates the issue. Section 29(4)(b) of the Constitution states:</p> <p>(a) Any citizen of Nigeria who has attained the age of 18 is of full age;</p>

	<p>(b) Any woman who is married shall be deemed to be of full age.</p> <p>This provision creates a significant challenge in the context of child marriage, as subsection (b) effectively deems a married girl to be “of full age” regardless of her actual age. When read alongside Section 1(3) – which asserts that the constitution overrides any other law that is inconsistent with it – this has led to legal ambiguity. It raises concerns that the constitution may implicitly legitimise child marriage, particularly in cases where the marriage is not considered forced, thereby undermining the protective intent of the Child Rights Act.</p>
Violence Against Persons (Prohibition) Act (2015)	Criminalises forced marriage as a form of violence, with penalties including imprisonment or fines. Although it is a federal law, its enforcement depends on state adoption; only Kano State has not domesticated it. However, the extent to which states address child marriage varies, leading to uneven implementation.
Matrimonial Causes Act (1970, as amended)	Provides grounds for nullity of marriage and judicial separation, including where consent was obtained by fraud, duress or mistaken identity relevant in cases of forced marriage.
The Constitution of Nigeria (1999)	Section 29(4)(b) suggests a girl is considered of full age once married, regardless of her actual age. Efforts to amend this section have faced resistance, hindering the push for a uniform minimum marriage age. Additionally, Section 61 of the Constitution limits national authority over cultural and Islamic marriages, giving individual states sole power to legislate on such matters. As a result, even national laws like the Child Rights Act cannot fully prohibit child marriage under customary or Islamic practices, highlighting the need to amend Section 61 to enable broader enforcement.
Remaining challenges	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • While these laws set minimum marriage ages and criminalise forced unions, their impact is limited by inconsistent state-level adoption and enforcement, especially in northern regions.¹³⁹ • Cultural acceptance, lack of awareness, resistance from traditional and religious leaders, and weak legal systems hinder implementation and prosecution, with little data available on convictions.¹⁴⁰ • Nomadic and rural communities face significant barriers to accessing support due to geographic isolation and deeply entrenched cultural practices. • Factors such as conflict displacement, entrenched social norms and rural poverty continue to impede progress, especially in remote areas. 	

Togo

Overall political and rights context

Togo's civic space is graded “repressed” by CIVICUS, with restrictions on freedom of expression, assembly, and recent crackdowns on journalists.¹⁴¹ Freedom House scores Togo 41/100 (partly free), citing limited political pluralism, opposition activities and press constraints.¹⁴² Despite ratifying key gender and child rights treaties, implementation remains uneven amid broader civil liberty challenges.

Prevalence of CEFMU

- 25% of women aged 20–24 years were married or in a union before 18 years; 6% before 15 years.¹⁴³
- 3% of men aged 20–24 years were married or in a union before 18.¹⁴⁴
- 11% of girls aged 15–19 years have been or are still married, divorced, widowed or in an informal union, compared to 0.9% of boys of the same age.¹⁴⁵
- 2023 adolescent birth rate: 77 births per 1,000 girls aged 15–19.¹⁴⁶
- Early unions often involve significantly older men and lead to early pregnancies, school dropout, and limited life opportunities.¹⁴⁷
- The practice is more prevalent in rural areas, particularly in the Savanes and Kara regions.¹⁴⁸
- Key drivers: poverty, low education rates, social norms and traditional customs.¹⁴⁹

Legal frameworks addressing CEFMU	
Law/Policy	Description
Constitution of Togo (1992)	Togo's constitution guarantees equal rights for men and women, but enforcement of laws protecting children from child marriage is inconsistent, particularly in rural areas.
Children's Code (2007)	Sets the minimum legal age for marriage at 18 (Art. 267). However, a court may grant an exception for individuals aged 16 or older on serious grounds. The code also prohibits parents and guardians from promising children in marriage and requires the free and informed consent of both spouses.
Code des Personnes et de la Famille (2012)	Sets the minimum legal age for marriage at 18 for both girls and boys, without exception (Art. 43). A marriage can be annulled if it was contracted without the free and informed consent of both parties, or if one of the parties was under the legal age and no judicial exemption was granted (Art. 44–47).
Penal Code (2015)	Criminalises child marriage and includes penalties for individuals facilitating such marriages, including imprisonment and fines (Art. 341).
Remaining challenges	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Legal frameworks exist but conflict with customary norms and religious practices, and limited awareness of laws among communities impede progress. Civil registration systems remain weak in rural areas, allowing for earlier marriages despite not being recognised by civil law. Prosecutions under the penal code remain low due to underreporting and social acceptance of CEFMU. SRHR services are improving but remain underfunded and services are not age- or gender responsive. Law No. 2022-020 on the protection of learners against violence, and national policies focus on girls' education but provide limited targeted support for married adolescents. 	

Uganda

Overall political and rights context	
Despite Uganda ratifying key gender equality treaties, which obligate Uganda to eliminate discrimination, promote women's rights, and address harmful practices like child marriage, implementation is undermined by patriarchal norms, legal pluralism and uneven enforcement. ⁱⁱⁱ	
Prevalence of CEFMU	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 34% of women aged 20–24 years were married or in a union before the age of 18; 7% before 15 years.¹⁵⁰ 6% of men aged 20–24 years were married or in a union before 18.¹⁵¹ 20% of girls aged 15–19 years have been or are still married, divorced, widowed or in an informal union, compared to 2% of boys of the same age.¹⁵² 2023 adolescent birth rate: 107 births per 1,000 girls aged 15–19.¹⁵³ Child marriage rates have declined from 45% in 1991 to 34% in 2016. Yet the practice remains prevalent, especially in rural areas and among poorer households.¹⁵⁴ 54.4% of girls from the poorest households marry before 18, compared to 17.4% from the richest.¹⁵⁵ 	
Legal frameworks addressing CEFMU	
Law/Policy	Description

ⁱⁱⁱ It is not possible to include Civicus and Freedom House scores for Uganda due to contextual considerations.

Constitution of Uganda (1995)	Sets the minimum legal age for marriage at 18 years for girls and boys and guarantees equal rights in marriage and family life. ¹⁵⁶ Article 31 also prohibits forced marriages.
Children (Amendment) Act (2016)	Defines child marriage as any union involving a person below 18 years, whether formal or informal. Sets the minimum legal age for marriage at 18 and prohibits all forms of child marriage, including customary and informal unions. Such marriages are considered void ab initio (invalid from the outset). ¹⁵⁷
Customary Marriage Act (1904)	Governs marriages conducted under customary rites. Recognises customary marriages but requires registration with local authorities for legal validity.
Marriage Act (2014)	Provides a framework for civil marriages, including procedures for notice, consent, solemnisation and registration to ensure legality.
Hindu Marriage and Divorce Act (1961)	Regulates Hindu marriages in Uganda, outlining conditions for consent, prohibited relationships, required ceremonies and grounds for divorce in accordance with Hindu customs.
Remaining challenges	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • However, enforcement of child marriage laws is inconsistent, and customary practices often override statutory laws, allowing child marriages to persist, particularly in rural areas where customary practices dominate. There is a need for stronger monitoring, awareness campaigns and harmonisation of laws to effectively combat child marriage. • SRHR outreach programmes provide family planning services, although coverage is inconsistent in rural regions. • Refugees and internally displaced girls face heightened risks and limited access to social services. 	

Zambia

Overall political and rights context	
Zambia's civic space is scored as "narrowed" by CIVICUS, with ongoing restrictions on assembly, media and opposition despite democratic progress. ¹⁵⁸ Freedom House scores it 53/100 (partly free): while elections are held, opposition parties still face legal and political barriers. ¹⁵⁹ Zambia has ratified key gender equality treaties, but enforcement is uneven due to traditional norms and implementation challenges.	
Prevalence of CEFMU	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 29% of women aged 20–24 years were married or in a union before the age of 18; 5% before age 15.¹⁶⁰ • 3% of men aged 20–24 years were married or in a union before 18.¹⁶¹ • 15% of girls aged 15–19 years have been or are still married, divorced, widowed or in an informal union, compared to 1% of boys of the same age.¹⁶² • 2023 adolescent birth rate: 116 births per 1,000 girls aged 15–19.¹⁶³ • Child marriage rates have declined in the last two decades from 42% in 2002 to 29% in 2018.¹⁶⁴ • Child marriage is especially widespread in eastern and northern rural provinces.¹⁶⁵ 	
Legal frameworks addressing CEFMU	
Law/Policy	Description
Children's Code Act (Law No. 12/2022)	Establishes the minimum legal age for marriage at 18 years (Art. 8), explicitly prohibiting child marriage in all its forms, including customary and informal unions (Art. 263). It criminalises any arrangement, betrothal or practice that results in the marriage of a child, with penalties outlined in Art. 263(2), including imprisonment for up to seven years or a fine, or both. The Act aligns with international legal standards and includes significant child protection measures: it introduces child-friendly justice procedures (Art. 274), mandates accessible and confidential mechanisms for reporting abuse or harmful practices (Art. 275) and promotes coordination among social welfare agencies for a more integrated child protection system (Art. 276).

Marriage (Amendment) Act (Law No.13/2023)	Amends the Marriage Act (1964) to set a uniform minimum age of 18 for marriage, with no exceptions, aligning with the Children's Code Act. However, Section 17 of the principal Act still requires parental consent for individuals under the age of 21, creating a potential area of legal ambiguity despite the minimum age being 18. ¹⁶⁶
Penal Code (Amendment) Act (Law No. 15/2005)	Conducting child marriage is not explicitly criminalised under the Penal Code. Instead, it focuses on defilement, which is defined as engaging in sexual intercourse with a child under the age of 16, regardless of consent. It carries a mandatory minimum sentence of 15 years' imprisonment. This provision can, in theory, apply to sexual relations within the situation of child marriage, if the girl is under 16.
Education Act (Law No.23/2011)	Reinforces school re-entry policy of 1997, allowing pregnant girls and young mothers to return to school. While the Act prohibits discrimination and affirms the right to education, it does not explicitly detail re-entry procedures. ¹⁶⁷

Remaining challenges

- Rural girls face systemic barriers such as poverty, gender norms and geographic isolation. Efforts to engage traditional leadership and integrate services at the community level are crucial, but coverage and consistency remain limited.
- Zambia's parallel legal system – statutory and customary – creates loopholes that allow underage marriages to persist, particularly in rural communities where traditional authorities hold considerable influence. While legal reforms such as the Child Code and the amended Marriage Act are promising, customary norms continue to override statutory protections, and data on enforcement is scarce. Stronger monitoring, awareness campaigns and harmonisation of laws are needed.
- Defilement laws are rarely enforced against spouses in customary or informal child marriages, due to social norms, legal ambiguity and reluctance to interfere with traditional practices. A 2018 retrospective study revealed that between 2010 and 2012, only 13% of reported defilement cases resulted in convictions. The study highlighted challenges such as the lack of forensic evidence and reliance on victim testimony as factors contributing to low conviction rates.¹⁶⁸
- Implementation of the Education Act remains inconsistent due to stigma, school policy barriers and inadequate support services.

Asia

Bangladesh

Overall political and rights context

Bangladesh is classified as “repressed” by CIVICUS, with civil society and media facing harassment, surveillance and censorship.¹⁶⁹ Freedom House scores it 39/100 (partly free), citing political restrictions, judicial independence and digital laws that stifle dissent.¹⁷⁰ This environment undermines civil society's capacity to effectively address rights issues such as CEFMU. Despite gender equality commitments, enforcement is weak due to political considerations, social and gender norms, and resource-related barriers, limiting efforts to combat CEFMU.

Prevalence of CEFMU

- Bangladesh has the highest child marriage rate in Asia.¹⁷¹
- 51% of women aged 20–24 years were married or in a union before the age of 18; 17% before age 15.^{iii,172}
- 4% of men aged 20–24 years were married or in a union before 18.¹⁷³
- 33% of girls aged 15–19 years have been or are still married, divorced, widowed or in an informal union, compared to 2% of boys of the same age.¹⁷⁴
- 2023 adolescent birth rate: 73 births per 1,000 girls aged 15–19.¹⁷⁵

ⁱⁱⁱ Child Marriage Data source for Bangladesh is from 2018 Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS).

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> National rates of CEFMU are declining, but regional hotspots persist, particularly in districts like Rajshahi.¹⁷⁶ Key drivers: poverty, entrenched gender norms, dowry practices and limited access to secondary education especially for girls, and low education access. 	
Legal frameworks addressing CEFMU	
<i>Law/Policy</i>	<i>Description</i>
Child Marriage Restraint Act (CMRA) (2017)	Sets the legal marriage age at 18 for girls and 21 for boys. However, the law includes a special provision allowing exceptions under undefined “special circumstances”, creating a legal loophole (Section 19).
Birth and Death Registration Act (2004)	Requires both the bride and groom to present birth certificates for marriage registration, aiming to support age verification and prevent child marriage. This requirement was strengthened through subsequent amendments.
Remaining challenges	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Legal frameworks largely focus on the prevention of child marriage through criminalisation. There are, however, fewer services or facilities in place to provide long-term support for survivors of IPV or for ever-married girls who attempt to leave the marriage. The CMRA makes no room for child marriage to be annulled at the request of the minor. Instead, the minor is required to dissolve the marriage under personal laws (i.e. laws that refer to rules and practices governed by religious customs and state-level legislation regarding matters such as marriage, divorce, child custody), which are often discriminatory and inaccessible. Under Muslim personal law, a girl may seek dissolution of a marriage entered into when she was under the age of 18, although this is only on the basis that the marriage has not been consummated, and the marriage must be repudiated by the age of 19.³ Marginalised groups, such as Rohingya refugees, face higher risks of CEFMU due to displacement and limited access to resources. Insufficient budget, unclear mandates and weak monitoring systems hinder the effectiveness of child marriage prevention committees. 	

Cambodia

Overall political and rights context
<p>Cambodia’s civic space is classified as “repressed” by CIVICUS, with civil society and media facing harassment, surveillance and censorship.¹⁷⁷ These restrictions significantly hinder the efforts of civil society to address issues like CEFMU. Freedom House scores it 23/100 (not free), citing political repression, intimidation of opposition and suppression of dissent.¹⁷⁸ These dynamics undermine the rule of law and limit the capacity of civil society to advocate for gender equality and child protection. Despite gender equality laws and treaty commitments, enforcement is weak due to structural inequalities and limited access to justice, especially for rural and indigenous girls.</p>
Prevalence of CEFMU
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 18% of women aged 20–24 years were married or in a union before the age of 18; 2% before age 15.^{liv, 179} 3% of men aged 20–24 years were married or in a union before 18.¹⁸⁰ 16% of girls aged 15–19 years have been or are still married, divorced, widowed or in an informal union, compared to 3% of boys of the same age.¹⁸¹ 2023 adolescent birth rate: 47 births per 1,000 girls aged 15–19.¹⁸² Child marriage is most prevalent in rural, remote areas with high ethnic minority populations, including the Ratana Kiri (36%) and Mondul Kiri provinces (36%).^{183, 184} Key drivers: poverty, gender norms, cultural practices and education barriers.

^{liv} Note the data source from the Child Marriage Data Portal for Cambodia is the 2021-2022 District Health Information Survey (DHS).

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A recent rise in teenage pregnancies – partly attributed to mobile phone access, increased adolescent mobility and lack of SRH awareness – has contributed to continued early unions. 	
Legal Frameworks addressing CEFMU	
Law/Policy	Description
Civil Code (2007)	Sets the minimum legal age for marriage at 18; however, it allows marriage at 16 with parental consent, creating a legal loophole that permits underage marriage (Book 5, Art. 950).
Law on the Prevention of Domestic Violence and Protection of Victims (2005)	Offers protection to victims of domestic violence, including girls in early or forced unions (Art. 2,8,10).
Juvenile Justice Law (2016)	Establishes legal protections for children in conflict with the law and promotes rehabilitation (Art 4,6,7).
Remaining challenges	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ethnic minorities in remote northeastern areas face significant barriers to accessing education and health services due to geographic isolation, language barriers and discrimination. These factors contribute to higher vulnerability to child marriage and limited access to protective services. An emerging challenge is the intersection of child marriage and trafficking in persons. For example, in Cambodia, there has been a surge in the number of women and girls, some in their early teens being trafficked to China for forced or arranged marriages, particularly since 2016, and this has been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.¹⁸⁵ This highlights the need to consider cross-border dynamics and the distinct vulnerabilities of trafficked married girls, who are often uprooted and lack access to community-level support systems. Issues with implementation of the Civil Code, as some people bribe local authorities to alter the age of the girl to enable her to marry underage.¹⁸⁶ Enforcement of the Law on Prevention of Domestic Violence remains limited in rural areas. Cultural acceptance of child marriage in some communities and lack of awareness about rights among adolescents hinder prevention efforts. Limited birth registration in rural areas complicates enforcement of the minimum marriage age. While the Juvenile Justice Law includes general protection principles, implementation mechanisms for girls in informal unions are weak. 	

Indonesia

Overall political and rights context	
<p>Indonesia is rated as “obstructed” by CIVICUS, meaning that civic space is under pressure. While civil society is active and relatively diverse, there are increasing limitations on freedom of expression and assembly. Freedom House scores Indonesia as “partly free” (2024), citing constraints on political rights, media freedom, and minority rights. Indonesia is a signatory to the CEDAW and has adopted the ASEAN Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women and Children. However, implementation is threatened by decentralisation, religious conservatism and inadequate local enforcement mechanisms.</p>	
Prevalence of CEFMU	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 6% of women aged 20–24 years were married or in a union before the age of 18; 0.5% before age 15.¹⁸⁷ 1% of men aged 20–24 years were married or in a union before 18.¹⁸⁸ 9% of girls aged 15–19 years have been or are still married, divorced, widowed or in an informal union, compared to 2% of boys of the same age.¹⁸⁹ 2023 adolescent birth rate: 26 births per 1,000 girls aged 15–19.¹⁹⁰ 	

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • CEFMU rates have declined nationally but remain high in rural areas, namely, West Nusa Tenggara (15%), South Papua (14%), West Sulawesi (11%), West Kalimantan (11%), and Central Kalimantan (10%).¹⁹¹ • Key drivers: low rates of education, poverty, unequal gender norms as well as cultural systems of family honour and religion. 	
Legal frameworks addressing CEFMU	
Law/Policy	Description
Marriage Law (Law No. 1/1974, as amended by Law No. 16/2019)	Raises the minimum legal age of marriage to 19 years for both girls and boys, aligning with international standards. Judicial exceptions are still allowed under certain conditions (Art. 7).
Child Protection Law (Law No. 23/2002, as amended by Law No. 35/2014)	Defines anyone under 18 as a child and prohibits harmful traditional practices. The law obligates state and community to protect children from forced marriage (Art. 13, 26, 59).
Presidential Regulation (No. 59/2017)	Enforces SDGs domestically, with child marriage prevention as a key gender equality target (Annex, Goal 5).
Remaining challenges	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Local governments have varying levels of commitment and capacity to enforce national policies, leading to fragmented implementation. • Rising digital harassment of girls can contribute to school dropout and vulnerability to child marriage, yet legal protections are weak. • In many areas, customary and religious marriages occur outside the civil registry, complicating enforcement and monitoring. • The Marriage Law often has no influence over religious courts or local authorities who can marry girls without minimum age requirements. Data from the Religious Courts (<i>Badilag</i>) of the Supreme Court of Indonesia, throughout 2022, showed the number of applications for marriage dispensation submitted to religious courts in all regions of Indonesia reached 52,059 applications.¹⁹² This figure has increased compared to 24,865 requests in 2019.¹⁹³ 	

Nepal

Overall political and rights context
Nepal's CIVICUS civic space rating is "obstructed", due to growing restrictions on freedoms of expression and assembly. Laws such as the Public Security Act have been used to limit dissent. ¹⁹⁴ Freedom House (2024) scores Nepal as 62/100 (partly free), citing ongoing constraints on political rights and press freedom. Marginalised groups, including women and ethnic minorities, experience discrimination, which restricts civil society's effectiveness in addressing issues like CEFMU. ¹⁹⁵ Nepal has ratified CEDAW without reservations and is party to the CRC and the Maputo Protocol's regional equivalents. The country has made legal reforms to improve women's rights and combat harmful practices, but challenges persist due to traditional customs, gaps in enforcement and regional disparities in governance.
Prevalence of CEFMU
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 35% of women aged 20–24 years were married or in a union before the age of 18; 6% before age 15.^{iv,196} • 7% of men aged 20–24 years were married or in a union before 18.¹⁹⁷ • 19% of girls aged 15–19 years have been or are still married, divorced, widowed or in an informal union, compared to 5% of boys of the same age.¹⁹⁸

^{iv} Data source for Nepal on the Child Marriage Portal is the 2022 District Health Information Survey (DHS).

- 29% of adolescents aged 15–19 are currently married.¹⁹⁹
- 2023 adolescent birth rate: 67 births per 1,000 girls aged 15–19.²⁰⁰
- Highest rates of child marriage for girls are found in the provinces of Madhesh Province (53%) Karnali (48%), and Sudurpashchim (45%).²⁰¹
- Key drivers: lack of education, increase of “love marriages” driven by poverty and social norms.²⁰²

Legal frameworks addressing CEFMU

Law/Policy	Description
Civil Code (Law No. 37/2017)	Prohibits marriage under 20 for both men and women, with or without parental consent. It criminalises child marriage, with penalties for those who arrange, facilitate or participate in such marriages (Part 4, Chapter on Marriage).
Constitution of Nepal (2015)	Guarantees the rights of children, including protection from child marriage and other harmful practices (Art. 39). Ensures equality and non-discrimination, which supports efforts to combat gender-based practices like CEFMU (Art. 18).
Local Government Operation Act (Law No.14/2017)	Empowers local governments to take action against child marriage and implement child protection mechanisms at the community level (Sect. 11, 53).
Children’s Act (Law No. 1/2018)	Reinforces the rights of children and prohibits harmful practices, including child marriage. It mandates the protection of children from all forms of abuse, exploitation and harmful traditional practices (Sect. 66, 68).

Remaining challenges

- Despite strong legal frameworks, enforcement of these remains inconsistent, especially in rural and remote areas.
- Deep-rooted patriarchal beliefs and traditional customs often override legal provisions.
- Community acceptance of child marriage as a norm makes it difficult to report or prevent.
- Girls and families often lack awareness of their rights or access to legal aid.
- Cross-border migration, especially to India, increases risks of trafficking and forced unions. Nepali girls are increasingly trafficked to India, China and South Korea, being lured into fake or forced marriages, highlighting the need for coordinated regional responses.²⁰³
- An emerging challenge is the increasing trend of self-initiated marriages among adolescents, including those close in age, which may occur without adequate access to comprehensive information on SRHR, on bodily autonomy, or support in envisioning future aspirations. These relationships are often influenced by social media and peer dynamics.
- Dalit and indigenous girls face higher risks of CEFMU due to caste-based exclusion, geographic isolation and under-resourced services. Dalit girls are often pushed into child marriage for economic survival, while traditional norms and language barriers limit indigenous girls’ access to protection and awareness.

Latin America and the Caribbean

Colombia

Overall political and rights context

Colombia’s civic space is rated as “narrowed” by CIVICUS, with civil society and media facing threats, violence and excessive force during protests, especially those working on human rights, indigenous issues and gender equality. Freedom House scores it 62/100 (partly free), citing political violence, corruption and intimidation that weaken democratic freedoms. These dynamics hinder sustained advocacy and enforcement of gender equality and child protection laws, including those targeting CEFMU. Despite strong gender equality commitments, insecurity and weak enforcement hinder efforts to prevent CEFMU and protect vulnerable groups.

Prevalence of CEFMU

- 23% of women aged 20–24 years were married or in a union before the age of 18; 5% before age 15.^{lvi,204}
- 7% of men aged 20–24 years were married or in a union before 18.²⁰⁵
- 16% of girls aged 15–19 years have been or are still married, divorced, widowed or in an informal union, compared to 4% of boys of the same age.²⁰⁶
- 2023 adolescent birth rate: 59 births per 1,000 girls aged 15–19.²⁰⁷
- Modest decline in child marriage rates over the past two decades but informal unions remain widespread, especially in rural and indigenous communities. These unions often escape legal oversight.
- Child marriage is more prevalent in rural areas (39.6%) compared to urban areas (18.8%).
- 43.3% of girls from the poorest households marry before 18, compared to 3.9% from the wealthiest.
- 62.6% of girls with no schooling marry before 18, versus 20.4% with secondary or higher education.
- Key drivers: poverty, adolescent pregnancies, armed conflict and traditional gender norms.

Legal frameworks addressing CEFMU

Law/Policy	Description
Colombian Civil Code (Law No.57/1887, amended 2024)	Previously allowed marriage from age 14 with parental consent (Art. 117). The 2024 amendment removed this provision, aligning the Civil Code with international standards by setting the minimum legal age for marriage at 18. Also provides grounds for annulment such as lack of consent or coercion (Art. 154–156).
Law on the Prohibition of Child Marriage (Law No. 2447/2025)	Enacted in February 2025, this law raised the legal marriage age to 18 without exceptions, banning informal unions involving minors and closing a 137-year-old loophole. ²⁰⁸ It also mandates the creation of a national programme to prevent child marriage and support adolescent development.
National Comprehensive Programme for Life Projects (Law. No. 2447/2025)	The law mandates the creation of the programme aimed at preventing child marriage and supporting adolescents' development. ²⁰⁹
Ministry of Education Re-entry Policy (2023)	Permits pregnant and parenting girls to return to school. However, stigma, poverty and inadequate school infrastructure often prevent effective reintegration. ²¹⁰
Statutory Rape Law (Law No. 1236/ 2008).	Classifies any sexual activity with a child under 14 as statutory rape, regardless of consent or marital status punishable by imprisonment (Art. 208A, Penal Code).

Remaining challenges

- Informal or *de facto* unions are not clearly regulated under Colombian law, creating significant challenges in legal protection and enforcement, especially for girls under 18.
- Statutory Rape Law enforcement remains weak, especially in informal unions, due to low prosecution rates and social and gender norms that discourage reporting.
- School re-entry policies and support programmes for adolescent mothers are in place but face barriers like poverty and poor implementation.
- While divorce and separation are legally available, access remains limited for adolescent girls due to procedural, financial and social barriers.
- Afro-Colombian and indigenous girls face systemic discrimination, significantly limiting their access to education and health services. Low legal literacy reduces their ability to claim rights or seek redress in cases of child marriage or abuse.

^{lvi} Note the data source for Colombia is the 2015 District Health Information Survey (DHS) on the child marriage portal.

- Colombia's decades-long armed conflict and the presence of armed groups in certain regions contribute to insecurity, displacement and poverty – conditions that heighten the risk of early unions, especially among girls in conflict zones.
- Lack of disaggregated data and weak monitoring systems hinder evidence-based policy-making and make it difficult to track progress on CEFMU reduction, particularly in informal unions.

Dominican Republic

Overall political and rights context

The Dominican Republic's civic space is rated as "obstructed" by CIVICUS, with civil society and media facing harassment, surveillance and censorship. These restrictions hinder the effectiveness of civil society efforts to address issues such as CEFMU. Freedom House scores it 68/100 (partly free), citing corruption, police abuse and discrimination against Dominicans of Haitian descent and Haitian migrants, as well as against LGBTIQ+ people.²¹¹ Despite ratifying key gender equality treaties and banning child marriage, enforcement challenges hinder efforts to address CEFMU and related issues.

Prevalence of CEFMU

- Highest prevalence of CEFMU in the Latin American and Caribbean region.²¹²
- 32% of women aged 20–24 years were married or in a union before the age of 18; 9% before 15.²¹³
- 8% of men aged 20–24 years were married or in a union before 18.²¹⁴
- 28% of girls aged 15–19 years have been or are still married, divorced, widowed or in an informal union, compared to 4% of boys of the same age.²¹⁵
- 2023 adolescent birth rate: 53 births per 1,000 girls aged 15–19.²¹⁶
- A 2019 survey revealed that 57% of women surveyed reported being a union or married as teenagers.²¹⁷
- Key drivers: poverty, limited access to education and harmful gender norms.

Legal frameworks addressing CEFMU

Law/Policy	Description
Law that Modifies and Repeals Various Provisions of the Civil Code and Law No. 659 on Civil Status (Law 1-21/2021)	Sets the minimum legal age for marriage at 18 for both girls and boys, with no exceptions. Repeals all prior legal provisions that permitted marriage under 18 with parental or judicial consent.
Amendments to Civil Code (2021)	Introduced alongside Law No. 1-21, these amendments reinforce the absolute prohibition of child marriage and include protective measures for children against violence, abuse and exploitation. They align the Civil Code with international child protection standards.

Remaining challenges

- Cohabitation and informal unions remain prevalent but are difficult to monitor as they are often unreported or not registered in any official capacity.
- Girls of Haitian descent face heightened risks due to socioeconomic exclusion and legal discrimination.

Ecuador

Overall political and rights context

Ecuador's civic space is rated as "obstructed" by CIVICUS, with civil society and media facing threats and restrictions. Activists particularly those working on human rights, indigenous rights and gender equality face threats and stigmatisation. This limits critical reporting and hinders advocacy efforts, including those related to CEFMU. Freedom House scores it 65/100 (partly free), noting democratic institutions but challenges like corruption, insecurity and harassment of activists. Despite strong gender equality laws, enforcement gaps and insecurity hinder efforts to protect girls from early unions and gender-based violence.

Prevalence of CEFMU

- 22% of women aged 20–24 years were married or in a union before 18; 4% before 15 years.^{218,lvii}
- 16% of girls aged 15–19 years have been or are still married, divorced, widowed or in an informal union, compared to 7% of boys of the same age.²¹⁹
- 2023 adolescent birth rate: 56 births per 1,000 girls aged 15–19.²²⁰
- Nearly 25% of mothers under 18 years of age live in early and forced unions or are married.
- In Manabí, 36.7% of mothers between the ages of 10 and 17 are unmarried or married. In Esmeraldas and Guayas, one in four mothers under 18 reported being married or in a union; in Sucumbíos 17.3% do so, and in Chimborazo less than 10%.
- Key drivers: adolescent pregnancies, poverty, gender-based violence and control over female sexuality.

Legal frameworks addressing CEFMU

Law/Policy	Description
Civil Code (2005, as amended)	Prohibits marriage to minors under 18 years, even with the consent of their parents or guardians (Art. 83). Marriage is only permitted for those who have reached the age of majority (18 years). Parts of the Civil Code were amended by Resolution No. 10-18-CN of the Constitutional Court in 2019, which recognised same-sex marriage and required civil law reforms to ensure equal treatment.
Organic Code for Children and Adolescents (Law No. 2003-100)	Reinforces the prohibition of child marriage and outlines protections for children and adolescents from abuse, exploitation and harmful practices. Emphasises the best interests of the child in all legal and administrative decisions (Art. 11,67, 78).
Comprehensive Organic Law to Prevent and Eradicate Violence Against Women (Law No. 2018-001)	Recognises early and forced unions as forms of gender-based violence. Mandates the state to implement preventive, protective and reparative measures to address VAWG (Art. 5,10,16).

Remaining challenges

- Despite its prohibition, child marriage continues and is socially accepted. According to official data, in one in every five births registered by adolescent mothers, the mothers were in a free union, *de facto* union or married.²²¹
- Indigenous communities in Ecuador face systemic discrimination and lack of access to justice and health services, which exacerbates early and forced marriages/unions among indigenous girls. Indigenous girls' experience is often influenced by traditional norms that may condone early unions.²²²
- It remains difficult to challenge gender stereotypes such as women being caregivers who should remain at home.

^{lvii} While this statistic is widely cited, it is important to distinguish between marriages (legally recognised by the state) and informal unions (which are not legally formalised). Marriage before 18 is illegal in Ecuador; thus, most of these cases refer to informal unions rather than legal marriages.

Guatemala

Overall political and rights context

Guatemala's civic space is rated as "obstructed" by CIVICUS, with civil society, media and the judiciary facing harassment, exile and legal threats.²²³ Freedom House scores it 46/100 (partly free), citing corruption, political interference and intimidation during and after the 2023 election.²²⁴ Despite gender equality commitments, systemic barriers and weak protections leave women, especially indigenous women, vulnerable to violence and discrimination.

Prevalence of CEFMU

- 30% of women aged 20–24 years were married or in a union before 18; 6% before 15.²²⁵
- 10% of men aged 20–24 years were married or in a union before 18.²²⁶
- 18% of girls aged 15–19 years have been or are still married, divorced, widowed or in an informal union, compared to 6% of boys of the same age.²²⁷
- 2023 adolescent birth rate: 68 births per 1,000 girls aged 15–19.²²⁸
- Most unions are informal where male partners are on average five years older than girls and adolescents. These unions are not registered, which makes them difficult to track.²²⁹
- Key drivers: low education levels, poverty, adolescent pregnancies and gang violence.

Legal frameworks addressing CEFMU

Law/Policy	Description
Civil Code (Decree No. 106/1963; reformed by Decree No. 8/2015 and Decree No. 13/2017)	In 2015, Guatemala established 18 as the minimum legal age for marriage but allowed an exception for minors aged 16 and older with judicial authorisation. It also prohibited the legal recognition of common-law unions involving minors. This exception was repealed in 2017, confirming 18 as the absolute minimum age for marriage without exceptions (Art. 81, 82).
Law Against Sexual Violence, Exploitation, and Trafficking in Persons (Decree No.9/2009)	Criminalises forced marriage and unions involving minors as forms of sexual violence and exploitation. Provides legal mechanisms for protection and prosecution (Art. 3,7,13).
Law for the Comprehensive Protection of Children and Adolescents (PINA Law) (Decree. No. 27/2003)	Reinforces the rights of children and adolescents, including protection from harmful norms. Emphasises the best interests of the child in all legal and administrative decisions (Art. 3,47,59).
Penal Code Reforms (Decree No.9/2017)	Repealed provisions that previously allowed perpetrators of sexual violence to avoid punishment by marrying their victims. Strengthened penalties for crimes involving sexual abuse and exploitation of minors (Art. 173, 175, 181).

Remaining challenges

- Informal unions remain low on the agenda for law and policy makers, partly because they are difficult to address through legal measures.²³⁰
- Although formal child marriage is now illegal, informal or *de facto* unions remain widespread, especially in rural and indigenous communities. These unions often go unregistered and are socially accepted, making them difficult to monitor or regulate.
- Deep-rooted patriarchal and traditional beliefs continue to support early unions as a norm, especially in Mayan communities. These norms often override legal standards, particularly when families view early unions as a way to protect girls or manage poverty.
- There is insufficient data collection on informal unions and enforcement outcomes, which hampers the ability to track progress and hold institutions accountable.

3.7 Concluding insights of the literature review

Despite notable progress on legal reforms and programmatic interventions across the 15 study countries, child, early and forced marriages and unions remain deeply entrenched and persist as significant barriers to gender equality and adolescent girls' rights. This literature review has highlighted that while many countries have aligned their legal frameworks with international standards on minimum marriage ages, implementation remains challenging and is often undermined by customary, religious and informal legal systems. Even where laws prohibit marriage under 18, informal or *de facto* unions are particularly common in countries like Guatemala, the Dominican Republic, Colombia and Ecuador, and continue to occur outside the reach of legal protections. These unions are often socially accepted and unregistered, making them difficult to monitor or regulate. As a result, girls in such unions often have fewer legal protections and rights compared to those who are formally married, leaving them more vulnerable to exploitation, abuse and lack of access to services. These systems continue to legitimise early unions, particularly in rural and marginalised communities, where enforcement is weak and awareness of legal protections is limited.

Moreover, the review underscores a critical gap in support for girls who are already married or in informal unions (ever-married girls). National strategies overwhelmingly focus on prevention, with limited investment in services that address the complex needs of ever-married girls, such as legal aid, psychosocial support, education re-entry, SRHR information and services, and childcare. This leaves many girls invisible within policy frameworks and excluded from empowerment and protection initiatives. Anecdotal insights from government representatives suggest that some reluctance to provide services stems from a concern that doing so may appear to legitimise or condone child marriage. Additionally, the review highlights significant problems with divorce laws, which often fail to protect the rights and welfare of girls who are seeking to exit marriages, leaving them legally and socially vulnerable. Such legal barriers compound the erosion of personal freedom and decision-making power of ever-married girls, who are frequently isolated, lack autonomy and face pressure to remain in coercive or abusive relationships.

The review also reveals significant research and data gaps. Much of the available data is outdated, with some country statistics from various key child marriage portals dating back to 2012–2017. In addition, the lack of disaggregated data by type of union, age and marital status makes it difficult to assess current trends or design targeted interventions. Marginalised groups, including indigenous, rural, displaced and disabled girls are frequently underrepresented in national data systems and strategies.

While evidence on the drivers and impacts of CEFMU is growing, the lived experiences of ever-married girls, particularly those from marginalised backgrounds, remain underexplored. Few interventions have been rigorously evaluated for their long-term impact, scalability or cost-effectiveness, limiting the evidence base for effective, context-specific responses.

Finally, the rollback on rights and rising conservatism in some regions pose threats to progress. Political resistance, ideological pushback and shrinking civic space are undermining commitments to gender equality and SRHR. In some countries, legal reforms are being diluted or reversed, and funding for services that support married girls is declining. These trends risk entrenching harmful norms and further marginalising the very girls most in need of support.

The literature review has underscored the systemic gaps in legal protections, service provision and data collection that continue to leave ever-married girls behind. These structural shortcomings are not just theoretical but manifest in the everyday lives of girls across diverse contexts. Deeply entrenched gender norms such as those that prioritise female submissiveness, restrict mobility and link girls' value to marriage and motherhood play a central role in sustaining these gaps. They shape societal expectations, influence institutional responses, and often dictate whether girls can access support or exercise autonomy. To move

beyond policy analysis and understand the real-world implications of CEFMU, the next section turns to the voices of girls themselves. Their lived experiences offer a vital lens through which to examine how laws, norms and institutional responses shape their realities, and provide critical insights into the risks, needs and aspirations of those most affected.

4. Findings from interviews and surveys

Across the 15 study countries, 251 ever-married girls have bravely spoken about the circumstances that led to them being in a child, early or forced marriage or union, and about their lived realities since then. Some 70 per cent^{lviii} of these girls are currently in marriages or unions, while 28 per cent have withdrawn from a marriage or union, and 2 per cent are widowed. They have explained the particular risks and needs that ever-married girls experience, and the ways in which certain factors may aggravate rights violations against them.

Content warning: Some experiences described by participants in this study contain references to incidences of physical and sexual violence, as well as other sensitive and potentially distressing themes. Please read with care and at your own discretion.

4.1 Social and gender norms relating to child, early and forced marriage or unions

Key messages

- Many girls enter marriages and unions not out of free choice, but due to poverty, coercion, family pressure or restrictive gender norms. Relationships often mask unequal power dynamics and limited autonomy for girls, especially in marriages to older men. Despite legal protections, customary and religious norms frequently override laws, perpetuating child marriage as a coping mechanism and means of controlling girls' sexuality.
- Social media is reshaping child marriage, with girls meeting partners online and bypassing traditional family arrangements. While this offers a sense of choice, risks like age gaps, coercion and early responsibilities persist.
- Girls explained the various drivers for entering into their marriages and unions, and how their marriages or unions were officiated or formalised by their communities and families. Most girls' marriages were not legally registered by the state. A few girls said that, upon turning 18, they then registered their marriage.
- Deep-rooted gender norms, economic pressures and family honour continue to drive CEFMU, forcing girls to prioritise marriage over education. Despite reported declines globally, child marriage activists and the girls we spoke with suggest the practice persists and in some areas is even intensifying.

^{lviii} Throughout this section, we have used percentages to present some key data of the qualitative sample (e.g. % of married girls, divorced girls, NEET girls etc.) The sample of 251 ever-married girls is qualitative in nature and not designed to be statistically representative of all ever-married girls in the 15 countries studied.

- Girls spoke about the prevalence and normalisation of intimate partner violence in child marriages and unions, with some girls sharing their experiences.
- A notable portion of the cohort had withdrawn from their marriage or union. They described the factors that allowed for them to leave and the challenges they faced.
- Several girls spoke about the social and structural marginalities they live with, which deepened the impacts of CEFMU and also potentially influenced the circumstances that led to them being in a child marriage.

“Some parents do not accept it; others, most of them accept it, and some even change their daughter's age to make it seem like she is over 18. The leaders usually say in meetings that it is wrong, but whenever there is a union, they agree and testify.”

- Ruba,^{lix} 20, Mozambique

4.1.1 Relationship background and circumstances of the child marriage or union

Girls explained the drivers for entering into their marriages and unions, with similar reasons arising across countries. Most common was seeking financial stability (often from an older husband). Others included: relationships based on love (with husbands of a similar age); relationships based on the girl's perception of love (with husbands who were five years older or more) and in which either parents or the husband emotionally coerced the girl to some extent; parents' request to avoid shame on the family due to pregnancy or casual dating; forced marriage; running away from home; and sexual violence.

In fact, 45 per cent^{lx} of girls reported being married to partners who were at least five years older than themselves. The highest concentrations of such age-disparate marriages were reported in Indonesia and Ethiopia, with 17 and 15 cases respectively.

Seeking financial stability

As recognised in the literature, child marriage is a common coping mechanism in contexts with discriminatory social and gender norms, when faced with economic hardship.

In **Nigeria**, economic and cultural pressures lead girls into marriage. For some participants in **Nigeria**, they feel that their marital status has positively impacted their socioeconomic means. For example, Salamatu reported feeling a “status uplift”. Rejoice (19) got married at the request of her parents, due to poverty. Hope (24) got married at 17 to be looked after: “I married at that age because I was not living with my parents and I could not take care of myself”.

Similarly in **Uganda**, girls enter into marriages due to economic hardship. Dembe (23) explained: “I used to not get some necessities from home which is why I decided to leave ... my life somehow changed because I realised that I was suffering a lot”. Abusive home environments were also mentioned by Nakimera and Afiya. The latter said her mother could not provide for her and “she never liked me and this used to make me feel bad”. A close overlap exists between marrying for financial stability and as a way to leave their homes behind. Dembe (23) said: “most of the girls are marrying men that are not of their age. They

^{lix} All participants' names used in this report are pseudonyms to protect their anonymity.

^{lx} 93 out of 208 girls who were part of the research.

just decide to go because of the challenges they are facing in their lives. Girls are getting married to men who are over 18 and the age difference is always [about] five years.”

Overall in **Uganda**, marriages were mostly self-initiated yet driven by circumstances beyond the participants’ control. Marriage thus is more of a necessity than a fully autonomous decision. Judith for instance, chose marriage due to a difficult home life: “no one asked me, but I was forced by circumstances”.

In **Zambia** similar views were heard. Wongani (23) described that she was unhappy with her parents – including a mother who was often shouting at her – and now she lives happily.

In **Togo**, participants typically entered into marriages between the ages of 13 and 17, often under coercion or being forced by family members or neighbours, who stood to benefit from the arrangement economically or through social gain. Husbands were often much older than these girls. Bomo (18) met her spouse while working far from home in a rural locale. She worked in exploitative labour as a domestic servant following her mother’s death, which led to pregnancy and an early union. Girls are internalising their household’s economic pressures and feel responsibility at a young age to enter into marriages to alleviate poverty but ultimately remain in difficult situations.

Relationships that girls perceive to be based on “love” or dating

There is a notable overlap between what girls perceive to be love marriages and marrying in line with parental expectations to avoid familial shame. In **Bangladesh**, several girls who entered into romantic relationships felt compelled to marry their partners, not solely out of personal desire, but because their families expected it. Kajol (17) married at either 14 or 15, after dating her husband (three to four years older than her) for about a year: “I was in a relationship with my husband, and after informing my family, they arranged the marriage”. Farhana (21) explains the recent convergence of love and arranged marriages:

Nowadays, most marriages happen through relationships rather than family arrangements. Families are less involved, and relationships lead to more marriages. Parents fear losing their honour and, out of concern, force their daughters to marry before they turn 18. It's because of us that they feel compelled to do so. In the past, parents wanted to arrange marriages, but daughters didn't want to marry early. Now, it's the daughters who want to marry at a young age.

In Bangladesh, girls may be able to choose whom to marry, but not when to marry them or have the option to delay it into later adulthood. Girls are referring to a particular social norm whereby they must self-police their sexuality and feel the weight of their parents’ honour on their shoulders. This social norm is based on a fear of girls having sex and becoming pregnant, which would bring shame and stigma to the family, and so coercion into marriage is a means to avoid this series of possibilities. Possibly a new type of arranged marriage is emerging from this pattern. Girls might be meeting their partner of their own free will, but they then face pressure to make a choice to marry or cohabit with someone at a formative age with potentially lifelong negative impacts.

They believe these relationships count as love marriages, but as they are children, it is likely that instead girls are compelled to play into gender norms around controlling their sexuality at a young age. In this way, girls appear to be retaining the idea that they must adhere to traditional values about protecting female sexuality, signalling a stagnation in gender equality progress.

Many such relationships have ended in divorce, with girls returning to live with their families. While some participants described emotional attachment or hopefulness at the beginning of their marriage or union, most expressed regret or dissatisfaction due to the burdens, emotional distress and imbalanced power dynamics that characterised these relationships. Simegn (Ethiopia) was 13 when she married her husband, who was then aged 19. Simegn's story is one where we can see how older boys prey on adolescent girls who are looking to better their circumstances:

[I got married] because of what he promised me. I trusted him, and I love him. I need better living conditions because my family lives in poverty and does not have enough money to pay for our needs... I therefore believed that if I got married, I could provide for my family...The opposite is actually true; by marrying young, I hurt them instead.

In Mozambique, 11 out of 14 girls whom we spoke with entered into marriages or unions with a partner who was five or more years older. Girls were generally between the ages of 15 and 18, having been driven into relationships due to financial hardship, pregnancy or family pressure. Some girls were in long-term relationships with older men, some of whom were ten or more years their senior, and got married while in their mid-teens.

Parental involvement to avoid the shame of casual dating or unintended pregnancy

In Cambodia and Nepal, parental requests played a central role in shaping girls' relationships and child marriages, several of which were formed through social media, especially Facebook. These relationships developed at pace, with some girls experiencing unintended pregnancies. Parents would become involved in the situation and would encourage formalising the relationships into unions by conducting traditional "initiation rites". Parental consent or initiation was usually involved, especially in the case of underage unions. These relationships typically lacked formal legal registration, although community and religious recognition was common.

Lyda (23), in Cambodia, was 16 when she married her husband who was 19 at the time:

After meeting each other's parents, and since we had both dropped out of school and had jobs, our parents decided that we should get married... but since my mother-in-law didn't have enough money, we just celebrated a simple initiation rite. My mother also agreed since our family are both from disadvantage[d] background.

Like many girls across the study cohort, Ekaete (16) in Nigeria got married in 2024 following an unintended pregnancy, to her then 24-year-old husband. She had dropped out of school the year before. She specifies that her husband is still due to pay her father the bride price.

Julia (24) from Guatemala became pregnant at 14 and was pressured into marrying but later left the relationship to continue her education. Informal unions, often with significantly older men, are common. They reflect a broader normalisation of early cohabitation arrangements outside formal marriage. Overall, girls in Guatemala settle into early informal unions with their partners when they have an (unintended) pregnancy. Their partners tend to be about two to three years older. However, Katia (21) has been with her husband (48) for seven years; she says they met because "we just started talking". They have children aged 2 and 4 years old.

In Niger, girls get married to avoid the stigma of being unwed, which they feel comes from familial pressure. Hadiza says that the common reason for marrying off girls under the age of 18 is "so that they keep calm and go to their husbands as virgins". Saran articulates a similar

sentiment that child marriage occurs as “there are girls who can’t stay still and follow men, [and so] are given in marriage for their safety”. In this way, a key factor that leads to girls being married underage is around their familial unit controlling their sexuality, which underpins the themes across other countries too.

Multiple girls demonstrated that they have been influenced by elders in their families and communities that child marriage is a way for girls to feel more grown up. Nita (17), in **Cambodia**, discusses entering marriage with a boy of her age as a way to assume responsibilities that she didn’t have before:

I simply decided to end my single life. I wanted to have a family of my own and change myself. As the elders say, when we are single, we tend to make mistakes and engage in reckless activities. After getting married, I realised they were right. I gave up many things after marriage, and now, my only focus is my family.

This is a notable example of how girls internalise social and gender norms that expect girls to prioritise their identity to become wives and mothers.

Marriages initiated through force or coercion

A quarter of the girls had no say in the decision to marry. Girls painted a picture of the different ways in which they were subjected to forced marriage by their families and/or community members. Often, the girls’ much older husband would initiate the forced marriage. Zainab in **Nigeria** married at 18 to a 40-year-old. She faced family pressure to marry as her father noted that her younger sisters had already married before she had.

Foziya (18), in **Ethiopia**, spoke about how she was defiant when originally faced with the prospect of forced marriage, but got married for ‘love’ instead: “When I turned 15, my parents wanted me to get married to someone [I didn’t know]. After I rejected their proposal, I married the person I loved. My spouse sent elders to my parents, and they approved of my marriage”. Foziya was initially resistant to the arrangement to marry the person she loved but nonetheless did so, demonstrating that she ultimately conformed to the social and gender norm in her community of marrying girls early. She explains this as a means of parents controlling their daughter’s sexuality: “Regardless of who a person is, parents want their daughter to marry at the age of 15 because they believe that if they can’t control their daughter’s sexual behaviour, she will indulge in it. Consequently, it is common in our community to marry girls at the age of 15.”

Bouchira (20) in **Togo** described more traditional ideas around arranged and forced marriages:

In our country girls do not choose their husbands. It is from childhood that they choose our suitor... I was not happy, it was forced. I did not agree. I did not know where to go and who to turn to because I did not see any member of my father's family.

Comments from Folade (18), in **Niger**, suggest that the onset of menstruation can lead to forced marriage as a means to control girls’ sexuality: “I got married when I was 12, after the marriage was sealed or it was officially a marriage. The reasons are just because it's our tradition for girls to start menstruating.”

Some girls in **Indonesia** are on their second marriage. Ariya and Amelya have both remarried since their first marriages which were forced. Ariya first had an arranged marriage at 15, since the family did not have the money for her studies. The marriage only lasted about three

months. After observing a customary waiting period known as *idah*,^{lxi} she then remarried although she was still only 15 years old. Her first husband was her age and a school peer, but her current husband is six years older, and works in Jakarta. She credits her first husband with being more attentive. Amelya (23), was wed at 16 in a forced marriage to a 28-year-old, whom she divorced after two years:

I did not know anything, I was still underage. When my mom asked me if I wanted to get married, I also immediately wanted to. There was no thought of how to live it later – without thinking about what the future would be, what a household would be. I did not think much about the marriage. When I lived it, I just realised that being married is difficult. It only lasted two years. So, I do not think about it long enough.

She married again at 18 to her current husband. Amelya says she feels more respected in her current marriage – her first husband did not work, and she felt like she was looking after him – while her second husband shares his income and the household duties and childcare.

Alinafwe (21) in [Zambia](#) lived with her uncle, but her uncle did not want her to go to school, preferring her to work for him instead:

He would hide my uniform sometimes in order to avoid me going to school and instead I would have to tend to his field. Then our neighbour approached my uncle telling him they wanted me to marry their son. This marriage was done without the consent of my parents. I was 13 years and my husband was 25 years. My parents did not know I was married off.

Alinafwe has since left this marriage, during which she had a child, and returned to her mother. She is not in school or employment. According to Chikondi (22), also in [Zambia](#), some parents lead their daughters into marriage. “There’s a girl I know whose parents got money to have her go into marriage, and she was collected from her parents’ home by force. She did not want to get married.”

Sarita (24), in [Nepal](#), described being forced into marriage after several drunk men from the community – including her husband – came into her home one night, where she was alone. They forced her to marry her husband with whom she had been in a relationship for six months.

[My husband and I] used to talk a lot on the phone. After my Grade 11 exams, I told him I wouldn't get married... They came drunk, broke the door and entered. I got married because of the shame it would cause in the village.

Sarita said she had wanted to wait to marry her husband at the age of 20 or 21. Sarita reports that there are no issues with her relationship currently. However, Rubi (19), also in [Nepal](#), told how her husband coerced her parents into allowing her to marry against her wishes.

The reason I had to get married at 16 was because my husband, who I eventually married, saw me for the first time and started liking me from that moment. He began insisting to my parents, saying, ‘Let me marry your daughter, or I’ll kill myself’. Because of this pressure, my parents agreed to the marriage when I was just 16... my parents didn’t ask me whether I wanted to get married. They didn’t try to understand how I felt. Instead, they started accusing me, saying, ‘Why don’t you want to get married? Do you like some other boy?’ I replied, ‘I don’t like anyone. I just don’t want to get married so young – I want to continue my studies’. But my parents didn’t listen to me and forced me into marriage.

Rubi told us that she had several years of difficulty and no communication from her husband, but now they have a child: “My husband sometimes goes to India for work, and when he is

^{lxi} *Idah* is a certain period of time that a woman who is divorced or has been abandoned by her husband must wait before considering a new marriage.

away, I have to manage all the responsibilities on my own. When he is at home, he helps with the responsibilities, but I have to manage everything in his absence.” She left school directly after her marriage, and now spends her time on household duties and childcare. Rubi’s story is striking; she entered into her marriage under extreme emotional coercion and blackmail, and under these conditions she has had to process the experience to now see it as normal.

In **Indonesia**, girls’ marriages are driven by a mix of familial pressures, economic constraints, and mutual familial agreement. Dila (16) married at 15 to a then 20-year-old through a forced marriage facilitated by her sister. The couple promptly separated after three days of marriage, during which he was physically abusive to her and also verbally abusive in front of his family. Dila says this arose because, following the Islamic ceremony, “there were people who told bad stories about me to my husband. Well, then he believed it, then he was told by his family to divorce me. That was why he wanted to [divorce me]. I said, ‘Why don’t you take me home when [I didn’t consent to the marriage]’. Dila now lives with her parents and sister. She had left school two years ago.

Box 3. Insights from activists: The interplay of legal protections and customary and religious norms in child marriage contexts

Findings from both qualitative interviews and activist perspectives indicate that social norms significantly undermine the implementation of legal frameworks intended to prevent and respond to CEFMU. Many marriages are informal and not legally registered, because normative expectations around marriage only require familial and community approval, which often take precedence over formal legal procedures. As discussed in the SIGI legal analysis, all focus countries except for Niger set 18 years (or above) as the minimum legal age for marriage. However, in two-thirds of the countries, the minimum legal age can be circumvented with the consent of a parent, legal guardian or judge. This dynamic reflects a broader pattern in which community practices can override national laws and contribute to child marriages. Thus, while formal laws are important instruments in preventing and responding to child marriages, they are not the only factor influencing if, when and who a girl marries.

According to surveyed activists, 55 per cent identified customary and religious beliefs as key factors undermining the effectiveness of laws and policies aimed at preventing child marriage. These belief systems often legitimise the practice within communities, making legal enforcement challenging. In contrast, only 9 per cent of activists believed that such laws can be effectively implemented in contexts where customary or religious norms are dominant. This disconnect between laws and community norms presents a significant barrier to legal enforcement. Even where protective legislation exists, its impact is limited.

4.1.2 Digital technologies and child marriage

Across multiple contexts, social media plays a growing role in shaping how girls enter marriage and unions. What was once primarily a family-arranged practice is increasingly becoming a process facilitated by digital technology. Girls now frequently meet partners online – often through social media platforms – and move quickly into relationships. This shift is changing the landscape of child marriage, both how it unfolds and who is involved in decision-making. This evolution not only begins to reframe child marriage as an agentic practice but also underscores the urgent need for tailored interventions.

Changing pathways into marriages and unions

Girls consistently reported meeting their future husbands through social media. Cheata, 16, from rural **Cambodia**, met her husband through Facebook: “He sent a friend request, then I accepted”. In Indonesia, Adinda (16) also found her husband on Facebook, noting that their relationship began where they “exchanged WhatsApp numbers”. Similarly, in **Ecuador**, 22-year-old Xiomara recounted: “we met through social networks”.

Traditionally, families have arranged marriages, with girls playing a passive role. Today, some girls bypass intermediaries entirely, handling courtship through social media before ever involving their families. Parental involvement is often minimal or purely reactive, with girls informing their parents only after a relationship is already well established.

I asked my parents if I could go to Siem Pang [region in **Cambodia**] to meet my boyfriend, and they allowed me to go. – Cheata, 16, **Cambodia**

Such accounts illustrate that social media platforms have become active facilitators of child marriages. For some girls, this represents a form of agency and evolving capacity because they are choosing partners of a similar age rather than being married off by their families. Yet this apparent autonomy is complicated by the power imbalances and vulnerabilities inherent in child marriages, particularly where the husband is older. Study Insights 1 and 2 illustrate, respectively, the possibilities and the vulnerabilities that come with technology.

Vulnerabilities arising in tech-enabled marriages and unions

Evidence suggests that although girls are exercising agency by initiating relationships and choosing partners, these same interactions may introduce new vulnerabilities. Many girls receive attention and promises of support from older partners. In **Cambodia**, Chantha (16) explained her motivation: “Maybe he [the older husband] can help his wife to live well – have an easy life”.

Yet this optimism often masks the power imbalances that come with wide age gaps. For instance, 16-year-old Lima in **Cambodia** married a 23-year-old man whom she met on Facebook after less than a year of messaging. In **Nepal**, Binita (18) reflected that those who meet digitally and then get married “must have some kind of problem at home... some say they’re suffering at home, so they get married”. These accounts indicate that older men may exploit girls’ emotional and economic vulnerabilities, presenting marriage as an escape from hardship.

The initiation process for a relationship has, for some, shifted online and away from parental or community reach. Lopa (20) from **Bangladesh** observes: “nowadays, most relationships start online, with fewer happening within the community”. This decline in parental oversight does not reduce the risks; if anything, the lack of adult guidance may heighten exposure to manipulation and coercion. Moreover, girls choosing to marry may be influenced by the illusion of love and security offered by much older partners – demonstrating how long-standing gender norms and economic insecurities are finding new expression in the digital age.

Amelya (23), from **Indonesia**, offers a critical perspective on how social media is perceived by families, particularly parents:

Many people are afraid, especially parents. Parents nowadays see the interaction of children already on social media, so parents are afraid, seeing children, moreover,

frequently hanging out at night, getting pregnant, so they get carried away with negative things.

Parents' fears about girls' online activity and social interactions are centred around girls' sexuality and family honour or reputation, reinforcing the norm that girls must be protected and controlled. Social media is a space that has amplified the social and gender norm over protecting girls' sexuality, held by parents. The following case studies illustrate how digital platforms are reshaping the pathways into child marriage, revealing both shifts in agency and the persistence of structural vulnerabilities.

Box 4. Study Insights 1: Building personal and emotionally significant connections online

Location: Indonesia

Respondent: Ariya, 24, married, one child, no marginalised status

This case study highlights the evolving nature of child marriage through the perspective of a young woman who has experienced two different unions – one arranged traditionally, and one emerging from social media.

Her first marriage, at age 15, followed a familiar pattern:

“The first one was matched to me when I was in school, and when I left school, I was married.”

The arrangement was swift and externally managed. Ariya was married within a week of leaving school, without time to form a personal connection with her husband or to consider the implications of the decision. The process was transactional, driven by others, not by her.

In stark contrast, her second marriage, also at age 15 (her husband was 21 at the time), unfolded on her own terms and at her own pace, after being initiated through digital contact:

“The second one took a little longer. The problem is that it's from social media, so I have to check it out.”

Unlike the first marriage, she exercised caution, taking the time to evaluate the relationship. What began as online messaging developed into what she described as a friendship, eventually deepening into something more emotionally meaningful:

“Like a friendship, that's how we got to be soul mates.”

This case illustrates the increasing role of digital platforms in shaping young girls' decisions around marriage. Her second union, though still early, felt personal and emotionally significant. Social media provided her with space to choose, to build connection and to feel in control of the process. However, the story also invites critical reflection. While the digital pathway offered more time and perceived autonomy, the underlying issue of child marriage remains. The respondent was still navigating adult relationships at a young age, without the full emotional maturity and security that should accompany such life-changing decisions.

Implications

This dual-marriage narrative marks a significant shift: from externally arranged, immediate unions to digitally initiated, self-directed relationships. Yet even as the process becomes more agentic, the structural vulnerabilities remain.

Box 5. Study Insights 2: Digital beginnings, familiar endings

Location: Cambodia

Respondent: Chantha, 16, married, one child, of marginalised status

At 14 years old, Chantha began using a mobile phone and soon after connected with a young man through Facebook. What started as digital conversations quickly turned into a romantic relationship. “**I knew him through Facebook**”, she said, while noting that’s where they fell in love with each other and then got married.

By the time she was 15, Chantha was married. Chantha’s husband was approximately 22 years old at the time of marriage, an age gap of around seven years. Her husband, now having completed school, works as a farmer. Now 16, Chantha is the mother of a five-month-old baby girl and has been married for about a year.

Despite the seemingly agentic nature of her relationship initiated by Chantha herself through Facebook, the structural dynamics remain familiar: early motherhood, limited education and restricted livelihood options.

Implications

Chantha’s story exemplifies how digital platforms are reshaping the pathways into child marriage. Her experience was not arranged by parents but initiated by her own online engagement, presenting a modern image of digital connections. Yet this shift masks the persistence of vulnerabilities: the significant age difference, her young age at marriage and motherhood, and the rapid transition into adult responsibilities all raise concerns.

This case illustrates how child marriage is changing in form, though not necessarily in consequence. While the route to marriage may be increasingly self-initiated, the risks of child marriages especially for girls remain stark.

The accounts shared in this section (4.1.2) underscore the need for new strategies that address not only the risks of forced or arranged child marriages, but also the emerging realities of digital courtship and the blurred line between choice and coercion. The evolving face of child marriage demands updated approaches to digital education, protection and support.

4.1.3 Routes into illegal marriages and unions

Across countries, we found out how girls entered into marriages and unions where the existing legal framework would not permit this. Generally, factors such as parental permission, rites ceremonies facilitated by religious and traditional leaders, and bribes to officials or authorities, contributed to formalising these relationships as far as girls, their families and their communities were concerned. In such circumstances, girls were entering into marriages

sometimes without their consent or being put in relationships that meant they had no legal or social protections.

In **Nigeria**, marriages were rarely legally registered as religious, and cultural ceremonies instead were mostly prevalent. Halima (20) shared that she "did not even know about registered marriage". Some girls felt that because their marriages fell under Sharia Law their marriage was legal. Others recognise that their communities' alignment with Sharia Law contends with national laws and so their marriages are or were illegal.

In **Niger**, marriages were commonly arranged by parents and formalised through cultural practices such as dowry payments and community ceremonies. Most girls got married due to an agreement made by their parents and often without the girl's consent. This also occurs in **Zambia**. Chikondi, in Zambia, says that their village chief is opposed to child marriage, but parents allow marriages to go on in defiance of the chief. Girls in **Zambia** say that they recognise the distinction between faith-based marriage, official marriages and having no recognition of the union.

My church didn't recognise my marriage, though most marriages in my community are recognised by churches. The difference between church-recognised marriages and legal marriages is that the latter provides a marriage certificate. Faith-based marriages also don't allow one to marry someone outside of their faith. – Chanda, 17, **Zambia**

Yes, being recognised by faith but not legally registered makes a difference. Faith-based marriages are seen as better because the couples tend to treat each other better, as they fear what church members might think if they don't live harmoniously. There's a sense of accountability to the church community, and they often worry about how they will be perceived. – Mwansa, 19, **Zambia**

Mwansa's testimony is key to understanding how community pressures on faith-based marriages can ensure some stability for the girl in her marriage. However, this same pressure will prevent a girl from leaving her marriage should it become abusive, for fear of judgement.

Hadija (20), in **Uganda**, shared her personal experience of being in a non-registered marriage. She explained how, in her community, it was considered shameful to be in a non-registered marriage, and that people in the community disrespect her. She said:

Even in receiving services, for example, when you are pregnant and you have gone to get antenatal [care] and by coincidence you meet up with a family member or a friend, as for me I feel ashamed of myself of what they might be thinking of me... The difference, madam, is that those in registered marriages earn more respect in the community than those in non-registered marriages.

Hadija offers a key insight: that shame and stigma for non-registered child marriages are so strong that it affects her experiences with obtaining essential public services.

Sieley (24), in **Ethiopia**, felt that she had support from her community for her then-non-registered marriage: "Our marriage wasn't legally registered at the time, and it was entirely based on the will of both families, with support from the community and religious leaders. However, after a couple of years, when I turned 18, we officially registered the marriage." In contrast to Hadija in Uganda whose community disapproved of her child marriage, Sieley's

community acknowledged that her marriage took place while she was still a minor, yet accepted it. This illustrates how in some contexts, child marriage is recognised as a clandestine practice but is still allowed to take place, whereas in other contexts it is met with resistance or disapproval.

In **Bangladesh**, familial and community approval would often override legal requirements for marriage. Pushpa (18) told us that she was aware that her marriage was illegal but married her husband (of the same age) for love. According to the girls, illegal marriages such as this would be arranged through traditional ceremonies without registering. This would sometimes be done with the help of officials who looked the other way.

Initially, the [name of marriage registry office] didn't want to perform the marriage because he saw that I was too young. Later, they either gave him money or talked to him, and he agreed to conduct the marriage. There was a gap of about six to seven months before I turned 18, and he said it would be fine. – Farhana, 21, **Bangladesh**

Pushpa, however, married without a religious figurehead: “Instead, someone from our community who is knowledgeable about all the religious rules and traditions conducts the marriage, similar to a priest”.

As the SIGI legal data also revealed, formal legal frameworks that would prohibit child marriage do not always “reach” or have weight for girls and communities who seem to adhere to informal rules and traditional norms. We did not hear from any girls about their older husbands, parents, relatives or community officials receiving any punitive action for facilitating the marriage.

4.1.4 Marriage and union norms and perceptions of CEFMU prevalence in the community

Across the girls we spoke with, there was a recurring pattern in their communities: girls are expected to marry and become wives and mothers over their personal ambitions or educational and career achievements. Key in this, according to the girls, is a gender norm for them to marry young rather than delay marriage. This is evidenced by how girls who were dating were then pressured to marry to preserve family honour and protect the girl's sexuality.

Once married, girls are expected to quickly adapt to household duties, to be subservient to their husbands and in-laws (though there is some variation to this), and to bear children. Were they to resist these traditional gender norms, girls would face stigma and judgement from the community in general – although girls said that it is recognised this is relaxing in their countries.

In **Cambodia**, unions were normalised for the girls as many of their mothers, sisters, other female relatives and friends married early too. Girls were seen as being ready for unions upon starting menstruation and were expected to be obedient and take on domestic and caregiving roles. Living with a man without undergoing traditional rites is stigmatised, and the disapproval intensifies if a girl has children before the cultural marriage is officiated.

Girls see child marriage as a social expectation but also as one where they are judged. They feel pressured to enter into marriages – be it to preserve family honour, to mitigate pregnancy, to cope with economic necessity. But once in these marriages, they feel the community in general is judging them across various domains of life at any one time – often for neglecting their education, or still wishing to pursue education, or for being married too young (seen in

the judgements of healthcare workers, for example), or for wishing to use contraception. Girls are forced to face community pressure whether they enter into marriages or not.

Girls have mixed views on whether child marriage rates are decreasing or increasing. However, generally they realise that child marriage is illegal in their contexts.

A notable trend in **Bangladesh** is that girls feel that the prevalence rate is unchanging but that the reasons for marriage are changing. Most respondents are saying that girls are entering more love relationships, which then turn into arranged marriages at the request of parents who do not want the courtship period to continue without marriage so as to preserve the girl's or the family's honour. This is an interesting insight, given that national rates of CEFMU are officially in decline as was observed in the literature. It is also possible that the girls' belief that child marriage prevalence is unchanged reflects how the practice is persisting in the "hotspot" communities where the girls live.

Fatchima (19), in **Niger**, also perceives that fewer arranged marriages are happening. According to Hadiza (22), also in **Niger**, and Arbeht (24), in **Ethiopia**, girls are marrying later as they are taking time to be in a relationship before marriage. These are notable findings in conjunction with the earlier findings about parental pressure to marry when girls are casually dating: without parental influence, girls are able to date without entering into a child marriage or union. But parental intolerance of girls' dating, and their fears over the potential exposure to men and boys in a romantic setting escalate the girls' relationships into marriage.

In **Togo**, girls are mixed on trends and prevalence, though mostly they think child marriage more common than before – reinforcing what was found in the literature. Roofashin believes that girls marry earlier now, but that the trend has shifted to girls marrying boys who are closer in age and out of their own free will. Similarly, Blandine (22) says that "girls now marry faster than in our parents' time". This idea is supplemented by Bomo (18): "[CEFMU is occurring because of] lack of parental support and for a desire to have what other girls have [i.e. marriage]". Ladfa meanwhile believes that parents still influence the decision so that the girl can obtain some financial benefit – and that these marriages are to much older men.

In **Ecuador**, it is believed that CEFMU prevalence rates are no different than in previous generations, but that girls are more likely to pursue love marriages while in school, and that they then leave school upon becoming pregnant. It is a common gender norm for girls to leave school upon marriage, so girls are not judged for this. Yet if a girl were to stay in school, this is not looked down upon either. Regarding parental expectations, Xiomara (22) observed: "Some parents support, some no longer support continuing to study". This adheres to the findings in the literature – that early, unintended pregnancy is driving child marriage – and key actions must involve quality SRHR information and service access, as well as norms change around girls' sexuality as requiring protection.

Child marriage and early unions prevalent in respondent communities are perceived as both a social norm and a necessary measure to preserve family honour. They are also seen as a way to reduce economic burdens or to protect girls from premarital relationships. In **Colombia**, Brenda (23) suggests that parents accept the early unions, because their children will leave the home and relieve their economic burden: "Some parents accept this situation, almost as if to eliminate their responsibility for having their children at home".

In a similar way, in **Nigeria**, girls spoke of feeling that they were "economic burdens" on their families. So they pursue the financial stability of marriage over education, whereas boys are

expected to become educated, gainfully employed and provide financially for their future families.

Box 6. Insights from activists: changing child marriage norms

The majority of child marriage activists (54%) believe that child marriage has become more widespread in their communities in the past decade, signalling a growing concern among activists that, despite legal advances and advocacy work, some of the underlying norms may be intensifying the problem. Almost two-thirds (60%) of activists identify deep-rooted social expectations as the primary driver behind rising prevalence of child marriage. As the girls and young women we spoke with have highlighted, these expectations include traditional gender roles such as girls and young women often being expected to grow up to be wives and mothers rather than pursue education or a career. From an early age, girls' "proper" role is seen as homemaking and childrearing. These social expectations may also include fear of stigma or shame if girls remain unmarried at a certain age. Closely linked to this is the idea that families marry off pregnant girls to manage stigma or protect honour, which is why pregnancy is perceived to be among the main drivers of child marriage (45%). Economic pressures play a critical role too, with 40 per cent of activists citing financial hardship as a contributing factor, and one-third (33%) pointing to weak enforcement of existing child marriage laws.

As observed in the literature, formal data on global rates of marriage show it is in decline. Yet, on the ground there is a sense that child marriage is more prevalent. Some girls in the study cohort said that they married at the same age or younger than their parents did. Their testimony could also suggest that the practice is going underground. Those close to the practice are perhaps seeing its true prevalence, while the formal narrative may not be uncovering the totality of occurrences due to it being illegal.

In conjunction with the views of activists, this possible pattern would pose a key threat to gender equality progress worldwide. It signals that we cannot be complacent and must constantly interrogate what is the reality for girls and young women even when reported rates might be falling.

4.1.5 Intimate partner violence in the community and as experienced by the girl

We sought to understand how participants reflect on pressured household dynamics. We shared a fictional story concerning a young woman who married before the age of 18 who wished to remain in education, despite opposition from her partner and his parents, whom she lives with. A follow-up to the story included a situation where the husband became abusive (shouting at her), prompting further reflection from the girls interviewed. Many girls thought that the girl should seek to leave the marriage and stay in education. They believed that particularly in cases of abuse, the community would not judge her harshly. Participants identified potential sources of support for such scenarios, like parents, local authorities and community leaders, as well as legal services should they wish to access divorce.

This story-based approach allowed us to indirectly explore girls' perceptions about intimate partner violence (IPV) in their communities. In fact, 13 per cent of girls disclosed experiencing IPV or abuse.^{lxii} Girls in a number of countries reported having experienced physical, emotional

^{lxii} This analysis draws on qualitative data from interviews and focus groups with 251 girls across 15 countries. While the findings offer valuable insights, the sample is not representative and should not be generalised. The actual prevalence of child

or sexual violence in their marriage: Ethiopia, Mozambique, Zambia, Nigeria, Togo, Dominican Republic, Guatemala, Cambodia, Nepal, Indonesia. It is important to note that since we did not ask about IPV directly, disclosures emerged only when girls chose to relate their own experiences to the fictional scenario. This limitation, stemming from the indirect nature of the inquiry and the potential hesitancy to disclose sensitive experiences, is important as the number of girls who reported IPV may not reflect the full extent of its prevalence. Across countries, girls acknowledged that IPV does occur within their communities, although it is rarely openly acknowledged and addressed; this may have further added to a context where they did not want to discuss their personal experiences of IPV openly.

Binita (18), in Nepal, faced strong pressure from her new, then-husband to engage in sexual relations but was able to flee the situation early in the marriage. He was 24 and she was 13 at the time. Binita describes that abuse is common, particularly in arranged marriages where a girl is married to a groom on the false pretence that his family is good or financially strong. She described that in such situations “she’s forced to stay, even if she’s beaten or unhappy – because our society says a girl must protect her family’s honour. That’s why many girls stay even if they suffer a lot”. This demonstrates the strong culture of silence around gender-based violence for ever-married girls. Binita said that she promptly left for her parents’ house after six days, during which the husband’s sister-in-law also emotionally bullied her. She said that her husband then lived at her uncle’s house for one to two years, against her wishes, to convince her and her family to return to the marriage, but her parents refused also. Her parents ensured that she never left school. This is a notable finding in that Binita’s parents initially saw child marriage as advantageous, but did not condone violence.

Imana (22), in Indonesia, became pregnant at 17 and was in a union with her now husband who was 23 at the time. She told us that her husband was abusive, he left her community for three months, but he returned to her and the community. He was accepted due to the influence of his family and traditional leaders. She says that they are better and she would not leave because they are officially married, have a house and their children.

Risk factors of experiencing violence in marriage

Among the 27 girls who said they had experienced physical, emotional or sexual violence in their marriage, 11 of these also reported that they had no say in the decision to marry. These findings and the stories of these girls highlight the interplay of forced child marriage and distressing marital conditions. Key in this report is understanding the opportunities and events in these girls’ everyday lives where their agency and power can be improved.

Among the 27 girls who reported experiencing violence within their marriages, a striking 85 per cent (23 out of 27) were married to men who were at least five years older. In contrast, only 11 per cent (3 out of 27) of the girls who experienced violence were married to partners closer to their age. This significant disparity suggests a link between large age gaps in marriage and the likelihood of experiencing violence. This highlights that when young girls are married to significantly older men, the power imbalance may increase their vulnerability to abuse. These relationships often place girls in subordinate roles, where they may lack the agency or support to challenge harmful dynamics.

marriage and related experiences may be higher due to the well-documented issue of underreporting in studies on violence against women and girls (VAWG). Additionally, many interviews were conducted within the household setting, which may have limited participants’ ability to speak freely. Some respondents may also view violence or coercion as private matters, further influencing disclosure.

Bupe (19), in **Zambia**, was married at 15 to her then 23-year-old husband. She is now divorced and has a son. Her husband approached her in the market, groomed her over a period of time with a phone and by providing for her, and then got her pregnant. Her parents requested that the couple marry and upon marriage the husband stopped providing for their household, although he would not let her take on work as he accused her of cheating on him. Bupe could not discuss family planning needs or other key decisions with her ex-husband, as he “used to intimidate me, and whenever I tried to speak up, he would beat me. I kept quiet because I feared the consequences”. Bupe is one of a number of girls who experienced IPV and had a severe lack of agency and mobility after being groomed by an older man into marriage.

The lack of legal frameworks in **Zambia** – and generally across the study countries and the Africa region – means that girls like Bupe have little recourse when they face economic abuse, as well as physical and sexual violence in a relationship. The girls we have heard from all live in countries with no comprehensive legal frameworks to protect women and girls from all forms of violence; their stories demonstrate that nuance is needed to provide adequate justice for these girls, including recognising when girls have been groomed.

Support systems for girls experiencing violence

Across countries, girls described challenges to seeking support due to dismissive ideas about IPV, economic dependency and a lack of information about local legal services. Support systems for girls experiencing violence were minimal, and many were expected to endure difficulties to maintain family unity. Regarding the fictional story we discussed with participants, the general feeling was that there should be mediation led by the parents and medical treatment, but recognition that legal assistance to facilitate divorce may be necessary. In **Niger**, a notable pattern emerged in participants’ responses to our fictional story: girls suggested getting the parents involved to mediate the issue but IPV support or services to facilitate separation were not mentioned by girls. In **Togo**, girls too were unclear on specific IPV services, instead turning to healthcare providers. Urban participants however (such as Esther) accessed NGOs (ATAREKAD) and state programmes (WEZOU), while rural girls like Dagan relied on familial support.

A number of girls were unsure what support or services the girl in the story could access in the scenario of IPV that was outlined. Some girls suggested that the girl in the story must accept her circumstances:

“People say once you’re married, you have to follow your husband’s path.” – Chitrakala, 24, **Nepal**

“Her husband is generating income for their survival; therefore, I give an advice for her to emphasise on household responsibility.” – Zebiba, 22, **Ethiopia**

“Yes, you have to tolerate it [being abused]. If things don’t work out, you have to listen to what they say.” – Amuna, 23, **Nepal**

In contexts where formal support systems – such as legal aid, shelters or psychosocial services – are limited or inaccessible, individuals who experience violence often rely on informal support systems, including family members, friends and community networks. These informal systems are typically the first point of contact during periods of distress and are expected to provide emotional, practical and sometimes protective support.

However, qualitative data from interviews with adolescent girls in [Zambia](#) suggests that these informal systems may not always function effectively. Mwansa, a 19-year-old participant, described experiencing severe physical violence from her former husband, who was more than five years older. When she sought refuge with her mother, she was initially advised to remain in the marriage, reflecting a broader social norm that views violence as a normal matter to be endured rather than addressed. Only after the violence escalated further did her mother agree to provide support:

I went to my mother's house and asked if I could leave the marriage and stay with her. But she refused, telling me I had chosen this path and needed to endure. I continued living with my husband, but the abuse continued. It eventually escalated to threats of death. One day, he even grabbed a knife and threatened to kill me. I went back to my mother again, and this time she agreed to let me come home.

This case illustrates how intergenerational attitudes towards IPV – often shaped by social and gender norms and lived experiences – can limit the effectiveness of informal support systems. When such norms normalise violence, victims may be discouraged from seeking help, which leaves them trapped in cycles of abuse. Chikondi (20), also in [Zambia](#), emphasised the reluctance of victims to report IPV due to fear of community backlash. She advocated for mechanisms that allow third-party reporting, highlighting the need for more accessible and anonymous pathways to access support: “Victims do not have the courage to report their cases because they are afraid of community backlash. There should be a platform where someone can report on the victim's behalf.”

In light of earlier findings that laws and policies do not permeate girls' lives, or are far too removed from their day-to-day realities, there must be mechanisms closer to girls that they can access, such as survivor-focused community-based protection mechanisms.

4.1.6 Withdrawing from child marriages or unions

A number of girls across the study have either actively left their marriages or unions (28%) and ultimately returned to their parents or elder relatives – or their husbands/partners have left them. Some of these girls have children. Across the countries, girls share that withdrawing from marriage is hard when they have no economically viable skills and no means to support themselves and their children. A recurring theme across all countries was the stigma, community judgement and financial challenges associated with withdrawing from child marriages and unions.

Enabling factors for withdrawing from a marriage or union

Most of the girls who left their marriages or unions describe that being able to return to their parents or elder relatives' home has been vital for their post-marital life. These girls benefit from being accommodated by these relatives, having financial support and childcare where needed. Close support networks are thereby key for ensuring that the girl is supported following a separation.

This is the situation in [Zambia](#), for example, where girls were able to leave their marriages with the support of their parents and could also re-enter school with their support. Esneya (20) said that she got married at 16 because of pregnancy, but this led to her being in a violent marriage with her husband who was 19 at the time: “Whenever he sold produce, he would leave home for days and when he returned, he would turn violent on me. I only married

because I fell pregnant.” She divorced two years ago, and now lives with her mother and brother. Her mother’s influence appears to have been central to rebuilding Esneya’s life after the IPV: “My mother encouraged me [to] leave my marriage because of the violence I was facing, took me in and encouraged me to return to school when I left my marriage.” Esneya left school upon marriage, and returned after the divorce but she failed her exams and left. She hopes to return again.

Fate (18), in [Ethiopia](#) was forced into marriage at 14, during which time she had a child while aged 15. Her then-husband verbally and physically abused her. Fate was able to leave this marriage, because her ex-husband insulted her father over the phone, and told him he wanted to leave the marriage. Fate was able to leave because of having her parents’ support and their recognition of her difficult circumstances. With this, it can be seen how parents who initiate a marriage – thinking the girl or family will be better off – then learn it is not a safe solution for her.

Similarly, Binita (18) in [Nepal](#) described her forced marriage at around 13 years old. She sought to leave her husband as he was abusive and an alcoholic but faced difficulty in doing so until her parents supported her; they didn’t approve of him drinking alcohol and they brought her back home. Binita told us about the difficulties of separating when in an unofficial union. Her ex-husband threatened her with legal action which was officiated by a village chairperson:

There’s no proof [of separation]. There was just a piece of paper. It stated that if I remarried, he could take legal action against me, but if he remarried, I couldn’t do anything. That paper was made in his village. I tore it up because it was unfair. I said either write it equally for both or don’t write it at all.

Binita’s actions demonstrate how girls in such difficult situations can still be defiant. Binita and Esneya’s stories reveal that parents generally do not tolerate their daughters being in situations of IPV, indicating they are key parts of a girl’s support system if she wishes to escape.

Separating from an unofficial union can, however, be an enabling factor too. In [Zambia](#), the fact that marriages under 18 are not recognised means that no paperwork is needed for a divorce. Depending on the context, therefore, informal unions can make it both easier and harder to leave a relationship.

Barriers to withdrawing from a marriage or union

Key barriers that prevent girls from being able to safely leave a marriage include poor legal access and the pervasive, and often internalised, norms that ever-married girls should not expose marital issues and should stay in the marriage at all costs, for fear of being seen as selfish or a failure. In [Togo](#), community attitudes discourage girls from leaving a marriage, even in cases of violence or dissatisfaction. Girls who separate are labelled as promiscuous or uneducated and are often excluded from social and educational spaces.

Girls in [Nepal](#) told similar stories that divorce or separation is extremely rare and is stigmatised, with the preference in favour of maintaining the household unit. There is little awareness of legal options. In [Ethiopia](#), limited awareness and access to divorce services mean that community and religious mediation is the main solution for withdrawing from a marriage. In [Ecuador](#), Xiomara believes that she does not have support for a legal divorce.

Girls in **Indonesia** explain the logistics of obtaining a divorce. Based on her sister's experience, Adinda (15) explains that if it is only the woman who wants a divorce, "she will be scolded by the *pambayung* [traditional leader], she will be called a dissident". Yet, if a man wants a divorce, it can happen immediately. "If a woman says divorce a hundred times, she cannot if her husband does not want to," according to Adinda. Dila obtained a divorce: her husband's family asked for the dowry back but instead Dila's family paid back only the bride price, which is lower.

Girls explained how wives are expected to keep the household together, even at the cost of enduring silence and abuse. Where wives cannot initiate divorce, their husbands are not sanctioned for breaking marital norms. Men are not expected to take custody of children and there is no sanction when they fail to provide for them, even though children are considered as legally belonging to the father.

In **Cambodia**, girls told how they can only register their marriages at 18, which means that divorce is only possible if it is registered as they can claim financial support with the marriage certificate as evidence.

In **Guatemala**, Julia and Katia both suggest that leaving a union is increasingly accepted, though not without stigma. Julia faced judgement for her decision but she prioritised her wellbeing. Katia views separation as possible with sufficient support.

Impacts of leaving a marriage and union

Girls shared how those who have left their marriages were judged by their communities. "They are frowned upon in the community", according to Adama (21) in **Niger**. Ariya (24) in Indonesia warned that her community "think she's a bad person" for getting divorced.

Where girls have left marriages in which they were not permitted to work, they now find themselves needing to generate an income, either to be independent or to contribute to their parents' household. A lot of girls spoke of the difficulty they faced in trying to find work when they have limited employable skills or means to generate an income.

I know some girls [who were financially independent after leaving marriage] but generally speaking they even financially struggle more because they are not capable of doing things and taking care of themselves. For a teenage girl who has no experience in the real work, living alone could be a nightmare. – Kedja, 24, **Ethiopia**

Once outside a marriage or union, participants still face constraints on autonomy, especially when living back in parental homes. Where participants do manage their own finances, it is often in conditions of economic insecurity.

Girls did not speak of experiences with co-parenting with their ex-husbands. However, a number of girls did say that they have sole custody of their children despite wishing for financial support from their ex-husbands/partners which they do not receive. Victoria (19), in **Guatemala**, told us that the father of her child does not recognise the baby as his and despite being reported to the courts for custody payments, nothing has come of it. She says that she is supported financially by her parents.

Fate (18), in **Ethiopia** told how she left her abusive, forced marriage of two years to return to her father. Yet, her then-husband took away her nine-month-old baby. Fate explained her physical pain of needing to breastfeed, but not being able to find her child at the time. Now, Fate lives with her cousin who is also divorced. Her child, who is now four, lives with his

paternal grandparents in a different area, which she sometimes travels to. She was able to bring him to live with her for a period but was required to return him. “I want to live with my son, but my ex-husband denied it,” she said. She describes that her ex-husband has since married and divorced two other women.

Girls’ testimonies echo what the SIGI legal data revealed concerning divorce rights: that many girls do not enjoy the same rights as their husbands to initiate or file for divorce. Moreover, the research has shown that they are often insufficiently protected from any kind of litigation should they remarry. New insights from the research show how girls are often at the whim of their former partners or local officials. Minimal laws to support married girls to leave marriages or to obtain alimony or custody payments interact with existing social and gender norms that stigmatise divorcees, which ultimately reinforces the likelihood of girls remaining trapped in harmful relationships and limits their access to justice and autonomy. These challenges are even more pronounced for girls in informal unions, who often fall entirely outside the scope of legal protections. Without formal recognition of their relationships, they are left with little recourse to claim rights to divorce, alimony or custody, rendering them especially vulnerable to exploitation and abandonment.

In **Uganda**, there were positive shifts in agency for girls that came from leaving the marriage. Zesiro described gaining some autonomy since separating from her husband, in that when necessary, she could “go to the hospital without asking anyone”.

“Divorce [does] not hamper you from achieving your dream, divorced girls can return to her education, work on business and lead another life. Therefore, I want to encourage divorced girls not to be hopeless, therefore tomorrow is another day.”

– Fate, 18, Ethiopia

4.1.7 Ever-married girls living with marginalities

Among the girls we spoke with, 17 per cent^{lxiii} of the cohort identified as marginalised. The research showed how their social and structural marginality deepened the impacts of child marriage, and potentially influenced the circumstances that led to being in a child marriage. Guedi (24), in **Ethiopia**, explained that she lives with psychological and mental distress. She grew up as a caregiver for her mother with fistula, which led them to being isolated from the community “because of the bad smell associated with [her mother’s illness]”. She and her mother begged on the streets for a period before Guedi worked in a mill. An older man (aged 26) asked her mother if he could marry Guedi, then aged 17. Guedi accepted to escape the distress. “I was stressed because my mom is sick and we are isolated from the community because my mom had uncontrolled urine and stool, and I feel that I [get] relief from my stress if I get married”. She has since remarried and now sells shoes in the market twice a week, on top of childcare, which she says is not enough to supplement her husband’s income.

Roukiya (18), in **Togo**, has a physical disability. She says that the age difference in her marriage has an impact on their relationship dynamics, as the man is older and makes decisions on her behalf. She told us that she was coerced into the marriage aged 16 and says

^{lxiii} That is, 37 out of 220 girls we were able to track this for.

that any money she would make would be taken by her husband. Her husband is a wheelchair user, and works in the informal gambling sector, but cannot generate enough money to meet the household's needs. She cannot receive any financial support from the government, because this is unavailable or inaccessible to her.

Across countries, girls said that being socially isolated, as well as being physically remote and rural, has meant that they are not receiving the quality health services that they need and they are often required to pay out of pocket. Dembe (23), in Uganda, who has physical difficulties with her hand, says that lack of financial resources means that she would not be able to access a hospital if she needed to. Esneya in [Zambia](#), who has visual impairment, noted a similar problem: "I went to the hospital but I could not get spectacles as I did not have the money for them".

Health systems in these girls' communities seemingly do not make targeted approaches to make them more physically or financially accessible. For ever-married girls these barriers are often intensified. Marriage can restrict their mobility, reduce their control over household finances, and limit their ability to seek healthcare independently, especially in situations where husbands or in-laws control decision-making. For girls like Guedi (24) in Ethiopia, who are ever-married, the expectation to manage reproductive health needs without adequate support or autonomy further entrenches their vulnerability:

I am not satisfied on the service of reproductive health; the service providers are good to me but the available service and the medication are not available in the hospital. Usually they send me to [the pharmacy] to buy medication, and I am not capable to buy medications [there] because they are expensive.

Girls also described the barriers they faced in attending school with a physical disability. Their accounts indicate that they require an education that allows for remote, digital or flexible options. Maria (17), in [Ecuador](#), left school upon becoming pregnant with the intention to re-enter, but she became chronically ill following her pregnancy. This left her with limited mobility and the doctor advised her that the bumpy road to travel to her school would be dangerous for her. She told us about how this meant she had to miss almost two years of school, and that she felt embarrassed to return. Yeshiareg (22), in [Ethiopia](#), faced difficulty in participating at school due to having immobility in her hand: "my challenge is my hand, I can't write properly".

Like Yeshiareg, Manita (22), in [Nepal](#), lived with mobility issues in her hands which affected her daily tasks. She is a Dalit and was able to receive medical treatment which has alleviated these symptoms. Manita believes that in her community, aid that is meant for those in need is taken by wealthy people who make false promises about redistributing it. Rubi (19) is also a Dalit in [Nepal](#). She described a similar phenomenon where people from other castes would take the aid that reaches their community, such as food and water, preventing Rubi and other girls from marginalised communities from receiving support. Mandira (20), also a Dalit, says that the lack of citizenship documentation has prevented her from receiving post-natal support. As a result, she received less than she should have –10,000 rupees instead of 12,000 rupees and food aid:

Since I didn't have citizenship, and the child's birth wasn't registered, we could [not] have rice, eggs, and many such benefits... But you need both parents' citizenship and

the child's birth certificate. We didn't have that, so we didn't get it [food aid and benefits].

For girls who are marginalised in **Nepal**, their limited education, poverty and remote locations mean that they are unable to enter the job market and opportunities in their areas are limited too. Roshani (22), in **Nepal**, who is a Dalit, says that there are no job or income opportunities available, but she would like to learn sewing and machine operation skills to broaden her employability. Sumana and Binita, who both are Dalits, express views that skills and training support is disproportionately directed towards individuals from other castes, while they as Dalit women, feel overlooked. This disparity highlights not only caste-based exclusion but also the intersectional nature of their marginalisation.

Girls have bravely shared a variety of experiences that are particular to living with social and structural marginality. It is clear that action to support ever-married girls' rights must recognise the ways in which these girls have lived through exclusion that likely influenced their paths into child marriage, and further compounds its negative impacts.

4.2 Gender roles and responsibilities once in a child marriage

Key messages

- Girls enter marriage with little SRHR knowledge and face intense pressure to prove their value through childbearing, often from husbands or in-laws. Fertility is closely tied to girls' social worth, leaving those who delay childbearing or who struggle to conceive vulnerable to stigma.
- Upon marriage, girls are expected to shoulder unpaid household labour and childcare as their sole duty, reinforcing norms that value them primarily as wives and mothers. This entrenched gender division of labour limits their education, economic opportunities and decision-making power.
- Husbands and in-laws often discourage employment, viewing a woman's place as being in the home.
- Education is rarely prioritised for ever-married girls. Norms dictate that marriage marks the end of schooling, with social and familial expectations reinforcing that education and work are unnecessary for ever-married girls.
- Girls spoke about how being in a child marriage affected their mental wellbeing: how they felt lonely, under pressure and stressed about managing a household – and regretful.

"I have no responsibilities except for one: washing my husband's clothes and serving his meals."

– Kajol, 17, Bangladesh

4.3.4 Access to services and documentation

A number of girls expressed the difficulties they experienced in not being nationally registered or documented in their marriage or union, or having any valid proof of identity. This can be due to a lack of socioeconomic access or being a minor. This had consequences for girls who are living with marginalities, and is in itself a cause of marginalisation in that it prevents access to key public services.

In **Nepal**, Kabita (22) said that, as she is not in a registered marriage nor does she have national identity documentation, she cannot access any benefits or assistance:

Some people have received citizenship and property allocations from the government, but we haven't received anything because we don't have citizenship or marriage registration. Those who have their marriages registered get all kinds of benefits, but we get nothing.

Manita (22), also in **Nepal**, has had a similar experience – as she has no legal documentation, she cannot provide proof of her eligibility for services. Madhu notes that she had to register her citizenship in order to register her child's birth and so could receive child allowance.

This issue of access to national identity documentation is also the case for girls in **Cambodia**. Lyda (23) said that, as she had not received her national identity card (which a Cambodian citizen is eligible for from the age of 15), she cannot legally register her marriage which she feels restricts the services she can access, such as social welfare. For Fitri, 19, in **Indonesia**, her marriage is not legally registered (but is recognised under Islamic tradition). She was able to use social assistance for her pregnancy as she is still recognised under her parent's 'family card' (proof of citizenship) rather than her husband's.

Girls in **Togo** in unregistered unions also said that not having a civil registered marriage affects the services they can access. As Dagan's marriage is not registered, she believes she cannot receive social support services. Esther (24) mentioned the lack of health and financial care if the marriage is not registered: "It can affect, for example, on the financial side if you are not married in the civil registry, you cannot benefit from the health insurance of the National Institute of Health Insurance, there are other things too". Bomo feels the difference more on a social level: "There is a difference because those who have registered in the civil registers are more valuable than us. They are more respected."

4.2.1 SRHR norms and knowledge in the community and child marriage

Across the countries, girls had very limited knowledge on sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) before marriage. This ultimately is a key factor that led to many girls entering unions due to early and unintended pregnancy. Discussions around menstruation, sex or contraception were taboo, and information was often fragmented or incorrect. Once married, some girls gained knowledge through peers or health workers, but access to reliable, quality information about SRHR remained inconsistent and often inadequate for informed decision-making.

Girls had mixed views on the extent to which their community puts pressure on girls to have children. Notwithstanding this, across countries generally girls are under significant pressure to have a child once married, if they have not already had one. The basis for this pressure is the way a girl's value is tied to her fertility. In **Nepal**, **Zambia**, **Colombia** and **Ethiopia**, the pressure to have children starts a few months after marriage. Roshani (22) and Sunita (19), both in **Nepal**, and Isabella in **Colombia** all note that the pressures of childbearing lead to verbal abuse and aggression from their partners. Musonda (18), in **Zambia**, explains that childbearing expectations "often come from their husbands, who may be influenced by their friends, or from in-laws". In **Bangladesh**, some girls described extreme pressure from the

husband and in-laws, while others said that the pressure is delayed until a while after marriage, or when the girl is older.

There is less pressure on girls to have children in **Cambodia**, according to Chantha (16) and Lima (16). Particularly where girls are under 18, they are recognised by the community as not being biologically ready. Yet Nita (17) says that her community believes “that having children at a young age is good because it becomes harder to conceive and give birth as we get older”, and she believes that not having children will end a relationship. Riya says people will gossip if a girl is not pregnant soon after marriage. Linda (17) said she had a child so young as it was her husband’s will. Reaksmey suggests that the pressure comes from in-laws, who will threaten to kick a girl out of the home.

Among the girls we spoke with, 44 do not have children. It was not strongly apparent that girls were actively defying the norm, but that they are either using contraception with the view to become pregnant later, or their husband lives away, or their marriage/union did not last long enough to have children.

In **Uganda**, almost all the participants emphasised that ever-married girls face overwhelming pressure to bear children. Some participants resisted, such as Judith, who used contraception in secret.

On dealing with issues of conceiving, Sieley (24), in **Ethiopia**, suggested: “I think the first priority would be to visit spiritual places and cleanse with holy water in order to seek mercy from God”. Sieley’s words indicate that knowledge around childbearing is closely tied with faith in her context, rather than seeking out health services.

In **Nigeria**, girls were mixed about whether they feel pressure from community members to have children. Some say that the community or relatives do not pressure girls, because children come by God’s will. Other girls note that contraception is viewed negatively by other generations: “Based on our parents’ perspective, they see [contraception] as something not appropriate because it’s brought by foreign (white man) but for us it ok. It is something that will bring you rest in your life,” according to Asmau (19).

In **Togo**, pressure to have children is strong. “If you get married and you don’t give birth to children, they laugh at you and they think you, a woman, you are useless,” says Tatiana (21), who further explains community judgement: “Yes, [people in the community will say] that she is sterile. Others will say that she took her uterus to make money or that she was cursed.” In general, girls say that there is a pressure to have children from within the family too: “the in-laws will yell at you” (Bomo, 18). If conception does not happen then the husband is likely to take a second wife. Similarly in **Niger**, the in-laws, rather than the girl’s husband, are considered the main source of pressure on a girl to have children. Fati (20) says that girls can be chased or hounded over this.

In **Guatemala**, girls are not pressured to bear children but rather feel that upon becoming pregnant, they are forced to marry.

In the **Dominican Republic**, Cendy says that, in practice, minors cannot use contraceptive methods such as implants, as they are considered too young, but they can use condoms, for which parental permission is required at a clinic.

These are key insights in the context of the literature concerning rising reactionary, conservative and religious influences on national-level SRHR discourse and frameworks.

Action on social norms and behaviour change must recognise the norms around reproductive autonomy and sexuality that the ever-married girls live under, to adequately address the rollback in girls' rights.

I didn't have a child for a few years, and my family used to constantly say things like, 'You still haven't had a baby. Are you barren? You'll stay barren your whole life.' They used to put a lot of pressure on me. – Manita, 22, **Nepal**

4.2.2 Childcare and unpaid household labour

Girls told us that, upon entering marriage and unions, they were expected – regardless of their age – to take up responsibility for unpaid household labour and childcare, often without support. Some girls across regions did say however, that their mothers-in-law help them with the housework. Across the cohort of girls in **Niger**, their daily routines mostly consisted of unpaid care work. All **Niger** participants handled household duties; none mentioned male involvement.

These responsibilities are accepted as their duty; they recognise that it is their sole responsibility to manage their household and childcare tasks. The girls show strongly rooted expectations around a gendered division of labour. This closely ties to norms about girls' value in society, that is, primarily as wives and mothers. This 'duty' significantly limits their time and capacity to pursue education or income-generating activities. Many girls get by with the financial support of their parents if they are separated, or from their husbands.

Notably, some girls wished their husbands were more involved. Masiko in **Uganda** said she wished for more household labour support from her husband when all her children are sick. Yet a few girls were like Nasiche (21, **Uganda**) who does not wish for a change in labour division as her husband is the "head of the household".

In **Guatemala** girls overwhelmingly said that they spend almost all their time on childcare – especially as single mothers – and on their household chores.

Elsewhere in the region, some variation exists. In **Ecuador**, girls do most of the care work, with some support from their husband or mothers. Girls in the **Dominican Republic** take up the majority of childcare and household labour, though some girls say that their male partners would take up a few specific tasks during the week.

As was signalled in the SIGI legal data, the girls' stories reveal how their experiences do not align with statutory laws that mostly assume equal gender rights for women's and men's decision-making in the household and over child custody. Pervasive discriminatory gender

and social norms are also governing household roles and marriage dynamics. See Box 7 for how a girl from the Latin American and Caribbean region may experience challenges with unpaid household labour.^{lxiv}

Box 7. Persona A: Full-time unpaid carer, no time for school

Camila is a 17-year-old girl in a rural community in the Latin American and Caribbean region. She entered an informal union at 16 after discovering she was pregnant. Her parents accepted the early union in part to lighten their financial burden. Shortly afterwards, Camila dropped out of school because teachers and family members insisted that she focus on domestic duties. Although she wants to pursue higher education and get a skilled job, but she struggles to find flexible learning options. Her partner's income from informal work is unstable, and she carries out nearly all the childcare and household labour herself. While Camila knows about maternal health from occasional outreach, her access to healthcare is restricted. Camila's biggest aspiration is to resume her education and build her own income so she can provide a better future for her child.

Key characteristics

Age: 17

Location: Rural community in Latin America and the Caribbean (reflecting conditions across Colombia, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Guatemala)

Marital status: Informal union at 16

Education level: Dropped out of Grade 10 (age 14) due to pregnancy

Household role: Primary caregiver and responsible for domestic chores

Influencers

- **Teachers and school staff** who initially pressured her to leave school post-pregnancy. Their attitudes shape whether she feels welcome to return to school.
- **Peers (young mothers)** who returned to school or found work and serve as informal mentors.
- **Local employers or vocational trainers** who can be potential enablers of skills development.

Key challenges

Low educational attainment, social judgement of her, and isolation experienced as a young mother, economic uncertainty.

Core needs

Flexible mother-friendly education and skills training, childcare and peer support networks, protection and legal awareness in unions

Aspirations

- Re-enrol in and complete secondary education
- Create a better future for her child

^{lxiv} For details on the scope of the personas, see section 2.2.

Box 8. A case study from the Real Choices, Real Lives cohort: Ayomide, Togo

Ayomide was 15 when she dropped out of school when her father became unable to afford the school fees; she had not yet finished her primary school education. Not long after dropping out of school, Ayomide moved in with her boyfriend whom she married before her 16th birthday. The couple had a baby within a year of marriage, shortly after Ayomide turned 17. Later that year, her husband took a second wife who gave birth to a baby in early 2024.

Ayomide's decision to leave home to marry her husband was not supported by her family. Her relationship with her father became fractured when he failed to support Ayomide to complete her education. In 2021, when she was 15, she expressed a sense of being abandoned by her family:

"[My father] doesn't take care of me properly... he says he doesn't have enough money to look after me [...] Sometimes it's like I have swapped fathers. It makes me cry when I think of his behaviour toward me."

Following her marriage, the relationship with her family became more strained. Ayomide shared that she felt that she was no longer able to rely on them for support. In 2024, Ayomide's aunt expressed her disapproval about Ayomide's life choices – particularly her polygamous marriage:

"The husband has taken a second wife, and I heard the other day that she has given birth. They're all children, they've just got married and he's going to have another [wife] and they're all living together." – Ayomide's aunt, 2024, Togo

As a result of her increasing feeling of isolation, her aunt shared that she was concerned about Ayomide's mental health. She said that Ayomide was fighting with her husband and her in-laws, was stealing money from her in-laws, and on the whole was *"not happy"*. Ayomide herself shared feelings of dissatisfaction with her life. She had hoped that her husband would support her to return to school or to enrol in an apprenticeship, but the arrival of a second wife meant that he did not have the funds. Instead, she said she was left *"doing nothing"*.

"After the birth, I was supposed to be looking for something to do but nothing, I'm here doing nothing. That's what makes me think [...] All my friends are learning trades and I'm here." – Ayomide, age 18 (2024), Togo

In 2024, Ayomide reported that she did 22 hours of unpaid care work per day* – the most of any participant in the *Real Choices, Real Lives* cohort. Twelve hours of her day were spent taking care of her daughter and a further ten hours were spent cooking, cleaning and performing other domestic responsibilities. Ayomide also worked on her mother-in-law's market stall and spent an hour per day on leisure activities. All of her daily tasks were conducted simultaneously alongside caregiving or chores. Ayomide expressed concern that her significant care responsibilities meant that she did not have time to learn a trade and become economically independent.

"I want to have more time to look for money and also to chat with friends and give each other advice." – Ayomide, age 18 (2024), Togo

Like the girls we have spoken with in 2025, Ayomide was expected to do household duties, with obligations to her in-laws, and childcare above all else. We have learnt from Ayomide that informal support systems are key for married girls' personal wellbeing and to safeguard their rights to education. Ayomide's story demonstrates that formal support is needed too, such as accessible childcare or education grants, so that Ayomide would be able to spend more time on skills development, income-generating activities and leisure.

* Simultaneous activities were counted separately. For example, if a girl reported conducting one hour of childcare while simultaneously spending one hour cooking, this would be counted as two hours of unpaid care work.

4.2.3 Gender norms regarding ever-married girls' income and livelihoods

Social norms largely restrict ever-married girls from pursuing income-generating work. Husbands and in-laws often discourage employment, viewing a woman's place as in the home. Economic dependency on their husbands, who are the primary earners, is a common theme. Most girls expressed a desire to work, but they often faced constraints due to their responsibilities at home. Even when girls express a desire to work, opportunities are scarce and permission is rarely granted, reinforcing dependence on male family members. In a number of countries, girls said that their husbands would be open to them working but there was no childcare support available for the girl to be able to take up this option.

Most girls in the **Dominican Republic** do not work, relying instead on their male partners. Yet girls say that their husbands have unstable incomes – like Cendy's husband who sometimes gets paid as a barber. There is a recurring pattern across countries: girls must financially rely on their husbands due to gender norms, yet their husbands struggle to be economically resilient because livelihoods and job opportunities are scarce.

A similar situation exists for girls in **Uganda**. Most participants relied on their husbands or on informal work, although opportunities were limited. This informal work ranged from tailoring, selling clothes at the market, working at a salon, and farming. Coping strategies included borrowing from family and neighbours or taking on *ad hoc* agricultural work, such as digging for others.

Tailoring work is good for women as it allows them to earn from home. Besides, my husband doesn't allow women to go out of the house. If someone is allowed to work outside, the timing must be right, and they should be able to manage household chores as well. – Lopa, 20, **Bangladesh**

Here, Lopa suggests that ever-married girls' freedom to work is extremely limited by social expectations and whether a girl can get out of the home.

Chanda (17), in **Zambia**, says that she used to depend on her ex-husband's income while married, although she could make decisions regarding the money he earned. We learnt how many girls who are no longer in their marriage or union are unable to earn incomes as they are mostly low-skilled. Some are also busy with childcare duties. Now divorced, Chanda depends on her mother's income of farming and selling baked goods. Other divorced girls depend on older female relatives in particular: Hadiza (22, **Niger**) depends upon her mother's income; Aniebiet (20, **Nigeria**) depends on her older sister's tailoring business; Roofashin (17, **Togo**) helps her aunt to sell garments and earns some income this way. Generally, girls who are divorced say that they are often borrowing from family, friends and neighbours.

Sieley (24), from **Ethiopia**, is divorced and runs a small kiosk that she must rent. She covers expenses but feels that it is not enough. Other girls tell us that their mothers gave them the support to start their own businesses as divorced young women: Kabiite (21, **Uganda**) also runs a small grocery stall, which she was able to start due to capital from her mother; Mwansa (19, **Zambia**) has a tomato-selling business; as has Fate (18, **Ethiopia**). Putri (17) from **Indonesia**, and Chisenga (18) from **Zambia** are both divorced young women who are supported by parents.

While it is known that gender norms restrict girls' economic participation, the research demonstrates how deeply entrenched these norms are, ranging from permission-based access to be able to work to household labour expectations. Even when husbands are economically unstable and cannot provide consistently, norms do not shift. This highlights that economic necessity alone is not enough to cause norm change.

A notable insight from the data is that divorced girls often have more financial agency than married girls, with divorced girls' stories reflecting resilience and entrepreneurship in the face of hardship. They rely on mothers or older family members for financial support but they are able to utilise their funds to best support their needs – which was not the case when they were with their husbands. This potentially challenges assumptions that marriage provides stability. Divorce although stigmatising can open up space for increased agency for girls. From the above data, we see that mothers and other female family members often act as enablers for girls' economic independence, highlighting the potential of women-led economic community networks in supporting girls, post-marriage.

4.2.4 Community views on ever-married girls' education

Most community members don't support married girls to attend school. They think if girls are getting married, they have to stay home, give birth and [take] care of their husband and children. – Guedi, 24, **Ethiopia**

Girls have mixed views on community expectations around girls' education. Some say that these expectations encourage education but if a married girl leaves schooling, they don't judge; others say that education for girls is not valued. For Babita in **Bangladesh**, the community accepts ever-married girls' education but her husband and in-laws do not. There are mixed opinions from participants about whether people in their community think ever-married girls should continue their education once married. Overall, girls say that to continue studying is seen as abandoning the responsibility of working in the home and caring that girls assume upon marriage.

Some people think, 'She is married, what's the use of studying?'. Many families struggle financially and cannot afford education. ...Most people say positive things, but some question, 'She is married and still studying? What's the point?'. People often can't tolerate others' progress and will always have something to say. – Pushpa, 18, **Bangladesh**

In the **Dominican Republic**, participants think that girls should do what they can to stay in education upon marriage but they realise the difficulty in doing so with community judgement and childcare commitments. On what her neighbours think of young wives, Fernanda (15) says: "most of them talk a lot and say [she's] too young to get married, that [a] girl has to sit down and study."

It seems that once a girl gets married, community acceptance of girls' education changes, as they are expected to prioritise other responsibilities. They are stigmatised for wanting to continue education as opposed to taking care of the household. Julia (24) in **Guatemala** notes the judgement brought on girls for continuing education: "There are some people who don't like that we as mothers continue studying, but there are others who support this because we don't all have the same right to be at home and so on, but we have to watch over our dreams."

Julia adds that men often manipulate girls and try to limit their education. This tension is especially pronounced in rural areas, where married girls face compounded barriers to accessing education. Fate (18) in **Ethiopia** highlights:

In our community, leaving school is common for married girls. It is because of the double responsibility; that is attending school and managing household chores. In urban areas married girls can attend school.

Fate's observation underscores how geographic location intersects with child marriage to affect girls' opportunities. Urban areas can offer more flexibility and support, while rural norms and workloads often act as barriers to education.

In many communities in **Togo**, formal education is not seen as appropriate for ever-married girls. However, vocational training in fields like hairdressing or sewing is more acceptable and viewed as a viable path to independence. Several participants aspire to pursue such training, but lack the financial means or institutional support to enrol in apprenticeships.

Friddaous (21) says there are mixed views on whether a girl remains in school after marriage, as some parents will value or devalue education. For pregnant girls, the shame of pregnancy stops them from attending. Community views seemed to be mixed too, as Esther (24) notes:

...others think yes, others think no. Those who think no mean that you are married, you must stay at home and manage the things of the home. Those who say yes, say that women always have the right to education regardless of their situation.

...if you are married, you can no longer continue school unless your husband tells you to continue and you have to wake up and do the housework before going to school. – Dagan, 17, **Togo**

These findings about community norms substantiate what is known about the ways in which ever-married girls' education is highly influenced by social stigma and discrimination. The girls provide further insights on how this plays out at an interpersonal level from husbands, in-laws, and the school community.

4.2.5 Mental health impacts of CEFMU

Across the countries, a picture emerges of how the circumstances of a marriage or union and the everyday dynamics of the relationship can lead to severe mental health impacts for the girls and young women in this study. Girls spoke of sadness and social anxiety arising when feeling shamed for entering a marriage. Roofashin (17) in **Togo** said: "My life has changed. It's not like it used to be, because I was married. In front of my friends, when I approach them, they laugh at me because I have been married."

Loneliness

A number of girls told us about their experiences of loneliness. Victoria (19) in **Guatemala** tells of how her childcare responsibilities means that she is unable to leave the home and is often bored: "Before, I could go out with my friends and colleagues... Because of my baby, I can't go out". Kabita (22), in **Nepal** also says that there is no one to help or talk to when she is taking care of her child and home.

Bomo (18), in **Togo**, cohabited for some months and became pregnant. But her partner left her and cut off contact, and now she lives with her grandparents. Although accommodated and financially supported by her grandparents, Bomo has no emotional support system. “I see that I don’t have anyone to confide in, that’s why it hurts me so much and I suffer until at some point the pain stops,” she says.

Sumana (20), in **Nepal**, explains that she is sad and “suffering now” because she is living in difficult circumstances: facing an abusive relationship with her in-laws while her husband works abroad. She finds comfort in the belief that she will have a better life in the future.

Worry about household responsibilities

Girls talk about their intense stress and worries as young wives and mothers. Chantha (16), in **Cambodia**, says that she worries now about things that she did not have to worry about before:

Well, before I got married, there are many things to enjoy, no need to think a lot, no need to think about what kind of job I need to do. I only think about something fun and enjoyable. But after I got married, I need to think about work, my daughter, so on and on.

This suggests how girls cannot enjoy their childhoods, and how young women may regret having lost years of their childhoods to marriage.

Girls like Nejat (17, **Ethiopia**), Manita (22, **Nepal**), and Rosalina (19, **Mozambique**) describe the uptick in responsibilities once they got married.

After marriage, I had to stand on my own feet and take responsibility for running the household. My in-laws are not very understanding people, so all the household responsibilities fell on me. If they were more understanding, maybe I wouldn’t have had to carry the entire burden. Before marriage, I just lived off my parents’ earnings, gathered grass for the goats, played with friends, and had no idea how hard managing a household would be. I only learned by observing others after marriage. – Manita, 22, **Nepal**

Married life was more difficult because I had a lot of responsibilities and was treated very badly. – Rosalina, 19, **Mozambique**

After being married, I had to overcome every obstacle that I didn’t think I would... I don’t share [this stress] with anyone else. I regret getting married so young. – Nejat, 17, **Ethiopia**

The girls’ testimonies demonstrate the negative mental health impacts of the gender norm that expects girls to be managers of the household and carry the weight of unpaid care work. Girls may feel that they are in unfamiliar territory with this sudden expectation on their shoulders, which is worse if the household is not making ends meet, leading to them feeling worried.

Kabita (22), in **Nepal**, detailed the long-term health issues that she has been living with since the birth of her daughter two months ago. As well as the physical pain she describes, she worries how her children can be provided for should complications arise:

When the children are not well, there’s no money, and I worry about how to get them treated. I had a surgery to give birth to my daughter, and I often think about what I

would do if any complications arise. That causes me a lot of concern. There's only one person earning in the house, and treatment is very expensive. The surgery cost 70,000 rupees [approx US\$500]. A lot of money has already been spent, and I constantly worry about all of that. – Kabita, 22, Nepal

Regret

Many girls across the countries express regret at being in a child marriage or union, as Ladfa (19) in **Togo**, observes: “Since my [marriage], the suffering has worsened. I thought I would find happiness with the man but I think I was wrong and I regret it”.

Babita (15), in Bangladesh, and Nasiche (21), in **Uganda**, demonstrate how a number of girls ruminate over their past lives and hopes:

“I had many dreams before marriage, but now I cannot fulfil them.” (Babita)

“I feel bad because I am missing a lot of things since I did not complete school.” (Nasiche)

The girls are reflecting on the lost experiences of their childhood; girls didn't speak directly about missing play and leisure extensively, but they spoke about missing out on time with friends and a childhood where they could enjoy learning and take the opportunity to build skills early. Patricia (19), in Guatemala, said that being married at 15 meant that she did not enjoy her youth, having spent it with a husband and in-laws who treat her poorly.

Simegn (19), in **Ethiopia**, outlines the feelings of regret she experiences about her child marriage:

Oh my goodness, I regret it. I believe I hurt myself and made myself less valuable than others. Getting married at the age of 13 is one of the biggest mistakes I have ever made, and I will never be able to forgive myself for it. I feel ill when I go back and consider it; I should have died instead of getting married young.

Simegn's husband left her and her daughter, which caused her difficulties in making ends meet. Luckily, her aunt was able to accommodate her and could care for Simegn's daughter so that Simegn could have her living expenses covered and attend school. This underlines the importance of strong personal networks to mitigate the stresses faced by ever-married girls.

Positive feelings

Girls, however, did speak about the positive mental health impacts of leaving difficult marriages. In **Zambia**, Esneya (20) said that she is “happier now that I am out of my marriage”. Chikondi (22) describes that she is now financially independent, having left her husband who “would drink all the money and we would stay hungry”. The increase in agency, freedoms and the ability to generate income and have financial autonomy all combine to support a girl who had experienced hardship – and sometimes abuse – in her previous child marriage or union.

Strikingly, a number of girls were satisfied with being in a child marriage – and an overwhelming number of these girls were from **Niger**. This signals that, in this context, the gender norms of CEFMU are pervasive and strongly internalised by girls. It is likely that this feeling can be attributed to the high prevalence rates of child marriage in **Niger** (76%), and as the only country in the dataset where the legal age of marriage is not 18 or above. Poverty,

social and gender norms, and crises in the country all intersect to drive CEFMU. A number of girls talked about being married aged 17 or under as “perfect” (Siti, 24), “a real blessing” (Adama, 21), a good idea (Mariama, Nafissatou, Zouera) or even the best thing to happen to them (Saran and Oumou).

Elsewhere, Katia (21) in **Guatemala** says that marrying young is “something good” and both Dembe (23) and Kibibi (20) in **Uganda** describe feeling positive because they were well-treated by their husbands. Kibibi spoke positively about her husband’s support, saying “my husband provides me with everything I need”.

4.3 Access to and control over resources and services

Key messages

- Nearly two-thirds (63%) of girls are NEET and 35 per cent of girls dropped out of school directly following or due to their marriage. This is often due to a combination of factors including community stigma (especially if pregnant), difficulty balancing household responsibilities, expectations that girls look after the home once married, financial barriers and needing their husband’s permission to study.
- Changing social norms through awareness is the foundational step to enabling ever-married girls’ re-entry into education.
- Regarding their experiences with SRHR services and healthcare providers, many girls described having received contraception or antenatal care, although they faced barriers such as distance, stigma or lack of permission to utilise the services openly.
- Lack of legal documentation and marriage registration excludes ever-married girls from essential public services, deepening their marginalisation and limiting access to social protection, healthcare and legal rights.
- Income support was another service that we directly asked girls about. We found there was very little evidence of formal support being available to ever-married girls to access decent work opportunities.

“After getting married, it became difficult for me to continue attending school because my husband didn’t allow me to go. Additionally, I am solely responsible for managing household tasks and responsibilities. On top of that, I became engaged in a small business to contribute to our household income, as my husband was not supporting me financially. For these reasons, I no longer attend school.”

– Zeynaba, 20, Ethiopia

4.3.1 Ever-married girls’ education journeys

Almost two-thirds (63%) of the girls we spoke with were not in education, employment or training (NEET). We also learnt about girls who were NEET prior to being in a child, early or forced marriage or union, and about girls who became NEET following their marriage or union.

Girls who were NEET before marriage or unions

Reasmey (19) in **Cambodia** had left school in Grade 9 (age 14) to pursue work, farming potatoes. Anwuli, Adaku and Kadida – among other girls in **Niger** – had never been to school and had married before 18. Zeinabou became a seamstress before her marriage at 15.

Most participants in **Nigeria** were already not attending school prior to their marriage due to economic constraints (school fees, transport costs, food). Similarly, most girls we spoke with

were not in school in **Togo**, where many say that they were in school before getting married, because they preferred to learn a trade. Julia (24), in **Guatemala**, had not attended school for eight years due to financial constraints.

Girls who dropped out because of CEFMU

Across the countries, the same reasons arose for girls no longer being in school or educational training following marriage: dropout due to financial reasons, early pregnancy, domestic and childcare responsibilities once married, and lack of permission from husbands or in-laws. Some girls mentioned feeling embarrassed and facing stigma from the school community, especially if pregnant. Many internalised these barriers as part of their expected role post-marriage. For example, in **Cambodia**, school dropout would closely follow marriage, or the girls were already not attending school prior to marriage, due to economic reasons or domestic responsibilities in their parental home.

In **Nigeria**, Mama and Ummi mentioned that their husbands did not allow them to go to school, reflecting prevailing expectations from husbands. Zainab mentioned how childcare and pregnancy responsibilities made it difficult to balance attending school. Although Zainab's husband allowed her to attend school, she could not keep up with her education, and she now has a business. Yet, Zainab's marital household is still struggling financially.

In **Bangladesh**, in-laws commonly created a barrier for girls' education.

I am not studying currently. I got married when I was in 9th grade, so I had to stop my studies. I had spoken about continuing my studies at my in-law's place, but they said that after marriage, girls don't need to study. – Payel, 19, Bangladesh

A number of girls in **Colombia** who were no longer in school spoke about the barriers they faced, particularly around social stigma.

I managed to finish last year, but then a teacher told me I couldn't continue because I was pregnant. I was doing well in all my classes, but he made me fail the year. – Francia, **Colombia**

You start to think and say how embarrassing it would be to come back and repeat the year and see the classmates who were a year older. I mean, I was embarrassed. – Maria, 17, **Ecuador**

In **Guatemala**, it has been three years since Leonor (19) attended school, as she dropped out due to pregnancy. This was also the case for Rebeca (20) who left five years ago and Josefine (15) who left a year ago. Victoria (19) left as her partner did not allow her to go to school, so she dropped out at age 14.

In **Uganda**, key reasons were pregnancy and childcare as well as having internalised stigma as a young wife attending school. For instance, Afiya (21) felt that she was now mature and had to focus on her family. Economic constraints severely hindered girls in **Uganda**. Most participants lacked the financial means to continue their education. For example, Dembe sometimes absconds from her vocational hairstyling programme due to financial difficulties.

In **Ethiopia**, only Yeshiareg (22) was currently enrolled in education, while the other girls had dropped out following their marriages. These girls cited the financial constraints of college and physical distances as key challenges, as well as the expectation that "girls belong in the home", as Miliete (21) put it.

Pregnancy and financial constraints interact with girls' school dropout in **Togo**. Dagan dropped out of fourth grade upon becoming pregnant, as did Tatiana who got her Brevet d'Études du Premier Cycle (BEPC) qualification and then left after becoming pregnant and as her mother could not afford it. Bouchira attended Koranic school, having been taken out of public school at the age of 10, and then was married at age 13, when her schooling ended.

In **Niger**, marriage, social stigma, financial constraints and cultural expectations were common reasons for leaving or not starting school. Multiple girls say that the community looks down upon girls who continue education while married. Ginika feels too old to return to education and Ezicihi says she left before getting married as her parents could not afford the school fees.

Across these examples, girls have signalled that, even though they were in education, they still remained vulnerable to CEFMU – indicating the complexity of the factors driving girls into such situations.

Girls who are in school or training

Within the cohort, a small number of girls were able to continue schooling post-marriage, often due to exceptional personal determination or support from progressive family members. These cases were rare, and even where schooling continued, the girls faced logistical and social challenges.

Fernanda in the **Dominican Republic** is still going to school, even with two children. She missed a year and then returned. But she recognises that some girls feel ashamed and do not return. Fernanda says she goes on Saturdays because she cannot go on weekdays due to her childcare responsibilities.

It's not normal. Most of them [married girls] stop going to school ... I would say that maybe they feel ashamed, because they got married underage, that's why they don't want to go to school anymore. – Sofia, 22, **Dominican Republic**

In **Colombia** too, some girls were able to pursue their education through flexible ways of working: night school, short vocational courses, studying from home, and studying part-time in the mornings were options these girls shared with us. Yet, the girls often felt isolated at school, facing direct comments from educators about leaving. They said that it was an uphill struggle to stay the course. They said that social support was key to motivating them to stay.

Several times at school and at home, I've been told that I should stop studying and go to my husband's house, or that I should focus on taking care of him, especially at night or on weekends. But I don't want to do that. I want to finish my studies in the morning.
– Irma, 16, **Colombia**

Girls like Halima in Nigeria were enrolled in Islamic school, which highlights the significance of education from a religious institution over secular education in some communities.

In **Nepal**, only a handful of girls were still attending school, as poverty and caste discrimination were highly determinant in their ability to attend school. A very small number of girls in **Cambodia** were continuing education while married. Lima (16) said that a local school would not allow married students to continue, so married girls chose to hide their marital status.

In **Indonesia**, the girls who were enrolled in education were still attending school through online means, which was cheaper for them overall.

Education after a marriage and union ends

In **Zambia**, the girls who are still attending school or training are able to do so with the support of their mothers. Bupe (20) is able to attend school following her divorce thanks to her mother's financial support. She can attend tuition in the afternoon to balance her household chores. Wongani (23) is married and is supported to attend school through childcare support from her mother, but she seeks funding for school supplies for herself.

Kafula (22), also in **Zambia**, explained how she re-entered education following divorce:

It took almost four years before I returned to school. During that time, some people, like my mum's stepmother, started telling me I was wasting my time, but I didn't listen to her. I currently even encourage my classmates to stay in school. Some people tell me that I'm too old for my grade, but I don't let that discourage me. I'm happy to be back in school, and I continue to encourage my schoolmates not to marry young.

This is similar to Blandine (22) in **Togo**. Blandine briefly pursued a Level 2 apprenticeship in sewing with financial support from her brother and her employer, who "took her in as her own child", easing Blandine's financial burden.

In **Mozambique**, very few ever-married girls were still in education, although some participants had resumed schooling post-divorce. A key factor that prevailed among the Mozambican girls was that once they left school, re-entry was marred with feeling the social judgement of others and a lack of institutional support. Yet resuming education was possible if they could balance studies with domestic duties, often with help from family.

Box 9. A case study from the Real Choices, Real Lives cohort: Griselda, Dominican Republic

Griselda was 13 when she got married. In late 2019, she met a man on social media through a friend and began dating him without her family's knowledge. Although he was older than her – he was aged 20 at the time – Griselda said he “looks younger” (2021). In January 2020, Griselda discovered she was pregnant and the couple secretly married. Her older sister reported:

“She left secretly, after everybody had gone to bed, she left the house and went off with him... we found out later, we went out looking for her and we found out that she'd got married.” – Griselda's sister, 2021, Dominican Republic

Griselda's actions were not uncommon among girls in her community, with her sister reporting that “almost all” young girls in the area were already married or in informal unions (2021).

Griselda left school the year she became pregnant, and for five months lived in a nearby city with her brother-in-law and her husband to be closer to medical facilities. Griselda initially did not mind that she had failed the eighth grade, but after giving birth she regretted the decision to leave school. She and her husband returned to their hometown, where they moved in with her husband's parents – and Griselda re-enrolled in the eighth grade, this time in remote learning.

Transitioning back into education after nearly a year away was challenging, not least because remote learning depended on reliable technologies – which were not always easy to come by.

“My mobile phone is broken, so I started late, on the computer, I'm very late [...] I have to catch up, because I'm so far behind.” – Griselda, age 15 (2021), Dominican Republic

Another key challenge was childcare. Griselda shared that she was sometimes able to leave her son with a friend of her husband when she did her school work, but was often disrupted because her son was teething and crying for his mother.

Despite the challenges, Griselda was resolute in her decision to complete her education:

“I don't want to fall behind, I want to get ahead, to make something of my life. That's my concern, I want to get ahead.” – Griselda, age 15 (2021), Dominican Republic

By the age of 18, Griselda had completed all of the compulsory years of education for children in the Dominican Republic (grades 1-8) and was enrolled in her second year of Prepara, a blended learning high school diploma offered in the Dominican Republic that is delivered through a combination of face-to-face classes and remote learning. Griselda attended classes from 7am to 12pm on Sundays, balancing this against part-time work in a bank on weekdays, and caring for her son. Although her schedule was busy, Griselda was determined to earn her high school diploma and enter university to study medicine.

Supported by her husband, who hadn't completed high school but wished to earn his diploma after Griselda graduated, and by her in-laws who helped with childcare, Griselda credited her family with her ability to complete her education. Significantly, Griselda also noted how much easier things were now that her son attended preschool, and thought it would be helpful if there were more free childcare options. She also noted the critical enabling factor of the Prepara being free, implying that she would be otherwise unable to continue with her education.

Griselda reminds us that re-entry to education for married girls is a large hurdle to overcome – as girls begin schooling again at a disadvantage. Griselda's story demonstrates the key factors that support married girls' re-entry into education, which SOTWG have also identified: an informal support system in the family for moral support and childcare, flexible schooling hours, and where possible, remote learning with quality equipment.

4.3.2 Activities and services to support girls in attending school

Many girls say they would wish to return to school should they have the financial resources, childcare and personal support to do so. Girls also said that they need support at the institutional level to support re-entry after a period of dropout.

Bring awareness programmes in our society. I want to learn first so I can do something for my society. Then people will also understand the importance of educating girls. Otherwise, if no one knows, daughters will continue to be deprived of education and get married at a young age. – Juna, 24, **Nepal**

Many participants in **Togo** suggested community norms change, NGO intervention and public awareness campaigns as ways to support re-entry to education.

Box 10. Insights from activists: supporting ever-married girls to continue or re-enter education

Child marriage activists surveyed identified several key strategies to support ever-married girls in returning to or continuing their education. The data reveal a strong emphasis on both awareness and financial support, with a clear hierarchy of priorities. Awareness programmes – aimed at both girls and their families – emerged as the top priority, with 44 per cent of activists ranking it first. This highlights a belief among activists that changing mindsets and reinforcing the value of education is foundational to girls' re-engagement in education. Without community and familial support, girls may face significant social barriers to returning to school.

Conditional cash grants, including scholarships, were the second most prioritised method of supporting girls' education, with 26 per cent ranking it as the highest priority. This suggests that financial support is seen as a steady and necessary enabler of education. Tailored vocational or skills training came next, with 18 per cent ranking it highest. While not the first step, these programmes are viewed as important for keeping girls engaged and for offering practical, future-focused learning paths. This is a notable insight as many girls in the cohort also expressed a desire for vocational training and skills development. Support by schools – such as transportation, flexible schedules and childcare – was the least prioritised overall, with only 11 per cent of activists deeming it the most important way of supporting girls' education. This may reflect a perception that such support, while valuable, is only effective once broader societal and financial barriers are addressed.

The girls' views match both the activists' opinions and the literature review findings. As the activists highlight awareness programmes as ranking highest (44%) even above financial supports (26%), this suggests that changing mindsets and shifting social norms is seen by them as the foundational step to enabling re-entry into education. It suggests that without community and familial buy-in, even well-funded programmes could fail. The emphasis on norm changes as a pre-requisite was less commonly found in the literature review, where norm change was often depicted as a parallel or secondary intervention. Much of the literature review highlights financial and institutional barriers (for example, lack of school fees, lack of childcare) as key for ever-married girls being able to attend school.

4.3.3 Interactions with SRHR services

Access to SRHR information varied, but was generally limited, and was shaped by early school dropout and gaps in access to reliable information. Girls did not report using these services before marriage. Across several countries, it is recognised that it can be shameful to utilise sexual and reproductive health services if not married. Many girls reported receiving contraception or antenatal care, but many were unaware of available services or faced barriers such as distance, stigma or lack of permission. Information was often not tailored to their needs.

In **Ecuador**, Maria (17) said she heard from family planning outreach work in her community and that she was given family planning guidance for the future: “they told us about methods, that is, whether it was the pills, the injection, the implant or the condom. The gynaecologist even told us which option we wanted to go for, that is, she gave us a choice and explained to us how each one of them would be used.”

In **Guatemala**, infrastructure and access to services such as healthcare, clean water and employment are limited. Health services are typically accessed only during pregnancy or for child illness, and even then, cultural attitudes may restrict usage. Victoria says some girls hide their relationships but some don't. Julia, however, has used antenatal and postnatal services and did not hide her status. Overall girls in **Guatemala** had little interaction with SRHR services or information providers.

This is similar to **Nigeria**. Some participants (for example, Hakuri and Mama) described good, life-saving experiences they had had with their local clinics. However, despite the availability of SRHR services, some participants, like Akaete, felt that the services were insufficient or were limited by stigma and judgement. Other participants, (such as Mama and Arnabe), said that the service availability is better than for their parents' generation although for some (Salamat and Halima) it was described as worse.

Some girls have faced stigmatising attitudes from these services. Bupe (23), in **Zambia**, discusses the stigma she faced when receiving healthcare for her early pregnancy:

I received antenatal care, although the health workers would scold me for getting pregnant at such a young age. After childbirth, I continued to receive support from the health workers, but the criticism was discouraging at times.

Regarding contraception use, some girls said that these are readily available but others have said that service providers – as well as older relatives – discourage young women from using contraception with warnings about impacts on their long-term fertility and general health. Roofashin (17), in **Togo**, said that contraception is not advised until you have had several children already.

In **Bangladesh**, contraception use was strong among ever-married girls. Disclosure of marital status was not an issue, but may be for unmarried girls instead.

I didn't have to hide my age to receive services. I had my child at the age of 16 and received all the necessary services. However, when I became pregnant, the clinic advised that having a child at such a young age was not ideal. – Lopa, 20, **Bangladesh**

In **Togo**, access was better for ever-married girls. Esther said that she “received help from [the] WEZOU programme”, a major government health initiative to support pregnant women and newborns. Being in an unregistered union barred girls from accessing health and legal

rights. Girls said that the uptake of sexual health services is low in their communities and they are generally unaware of where to source such information. Bouchira (20) says that she hides her marital status because she feels ashamed, although she says the services have allowed her to understand pregnancy better.

In **Ethiopia**, 18-year-old Fate's interactions with SRHR services are representative of a number of girls across countries: that is, antenatal services were her first engagement with SRH services. She became pregnant without contraception, as she was not informed about it. But she did later get advice: "I was advised by health workers during delivery time of my first birth. Therefore, I visited the health centre and received the injection type of contraception that prevent pregnancy for three months."

Box 11. Insights from activists: adequately meeting ever-married girls' health needs

Child marriage activists surveyed identified several key strategies to address the health needs of girls in marriages or unions. The data reveal a strong emphasis on improving access to healthcare and health education. Free or low-cost healthcare services emerged as the top priority, with 35 per cent of respondents ranking it first. This reflects the recognition that access to basic health services is essential for ever-married girls, many of whom face financial and systemic barriers to care. Access to comprehensive health education by trained teachers or healthcare professionals – including comprehensive sexuality education – for the girls themselves was also deemed important, with 26 per cent ranking it as a priority. The data highlights that activists see education as a consistent and critical component of empowering girls to understand and manage their own health. Training for health service providers on the specific issues faced by ever-married girls was also considered a priority area for supporting girls' health needs. Overall, the findings suggest that activists prioritise direct access to care and knowledge, followed by system-level improvements and individual support services.

4.3.5 Ability to pursue livelihoods and generate income

Across the countries, very little evidence was found of formal support being available to ever-married adolescent girls for income generation. Many girls suggested an interest in pursuing tailoring, sewing or small business activities but they lacked access to training or financial assistance.

These interests are common, low-paying ventures for women in contexts with restrictive social and gender norms. The fact that many girls mentioned similar interests suggests how many of the participants have internalised social expectations of what constitutes women's work.

Friddaous (21), is learning to sew and recognises this is rare for a girl in **Niger** in her position: "I am learning to sew, some girls in my case do nothing. They have dropped out of school and are not learning a trade, it is their parents who take care of them."

In **Togo**, girls – who mostly are out of school – are interested in learning a trade but they do not have the ability to do so due to financial constraints and community expectations about staying in the home, even in cases where their husband cannot find work himself. Girls in Togo show that even when girls are motivated, community norms and financial barriers prevent them from accessing training. Girls also asked for simple access to resources, including a basic sewing machine.

In **Ethiopia**, decent work opportunities were rare. Most girls and their male partners rely on informal, low-paying jobs. Girls said that local markets were facing difficulties following the war. These post-conflict market disruptions demonstrate how ever-married girls in fragile contexts face compounded barriers to economic participation.

Patricia in **Guatemala** said there were no opportunities for girls in unions like her, “because the husbands are the ones responsible for financially supporting the household, and for this reason, the girls stop studying”. Her words highlight how gendered expectations remove girls from education and economic participation.

These girls’ experiences demonstrate how economic marginalisation is influenced by gender norms that prioritise male breadwinners and restrict girls’ autonomy. See Box 12 for how a girl from the Middle East, Eastern and Southern Africa region may experience livelihood challenges.

Box 12. Persona B: Married without support, working without security

Amina is an 18-year-old girl from a rural community in the Middle East, Eastern and Southern Africa region. At 16, she entered an unregistered marriage with a 25-year-old man. She believed marriage would improve her family's financial situation, but reality proved to be different. When her husband failed to provide financial support, Amina ran a small market stall, like many local girls' informal work. But regional instability meant that she could not sustain her work. Although she knows about contraception, her husband insists on making those decisions. While Amina has thought about divorce, community and religious leaders mediate any marital disputes, and formal divorce services are scarce. The unofficial nature of her marriage also means that there is no marriage certificate, which limits her legal protection or entitlement to social services. Amina's greatest aspiration is to establish a stable source of income through work.

Key characteristics

Age: 18

Location: Rural community in East Africa (reflecting conditions across Ethiopia, Uganda, Zambia, Mozambique)

Marital status: Entered a marriage at 16 (ceremonial but unregistered)

Education level: Dropped out of Grade 8 (age 13) following marriage

Household role: Unpaid domestic care work; looking for paid work

Influencers

- **Community and religious leaders** who mediate marital disputes but discourage formal divorce.
- **In-laws** who disapprove of married girls attending school or doing work.
- **Local market vendors** who can provide occasional informal work.

Key challenges

Unregistered marriage, unstable livelihoods, lack of employment opportunities, limited knowledge of divorce rights.

Core needs

Flexible skills training, livelihood support and access to legal information and safe separation options.

Aspirations

To run a small business.

Girls in education and employment report better access to formal services

Among the 131 girls who are not in education or employment, only 64 per cent (84 girls) accessed sexual and reproductive health services. Just 37 per cent (48 girls) accessed other formal support services such as counselling or legal aid. In contrast, a higher proportion of the 72 girls in education accessed both SRHR services (71%) and other formal services (50%). This suggests a strong link between education and employment and awareness of and access

to essential services. Pamela (18), in Ecuador, has finished high school and is enrolling into college, and she lives with her husband, newborn baby and parents. Pamela spoke with us with a breadth of knowledge about the services she is entitled to and expects to receive, from the “1,000-day bonus” to the wellbeing counsellors at school. For the girls who are in the NEET category, it is clear how they have fallen even further through the net, and have less access to other formal services.

Box 13. Insights from activists: ensuring ever-married girls’ right to decent job opportunities

Activists working to improve and support the livelihoods of ever-married girls identified a clear set of priorities to enhance their economic empowerment. The data reveals a strong consensus around the importance of equipping girls with the tools and environments necessary to improve their economic empowerment. Foremost among these priorities is the provision of market-relevant skills and recognised certifications, with 39 per cent of activists ranking this as the highest priority.

Supportive employment policies – such as access to childcare, flexible working hours and safe work environments – emerged as the second most critical area. These were ranked first by 30 per cent of respondents, underscoring a need for structural changes that accommodate the unique needs of ever-married girls. Without such policies, even the most skilled individuals may find it difficult to sustain employment. Financial empowerment tools, including micro-loans, savings programmes and financial literacy training, were seen as important but less urgent, with 19 per cent ranking these as the number one priority. This suggests that while financial tools are valuable, they may be most effective when paired with foundational skills and supportive work environments. Finally, creating opportunities for girls to connect with employers was ranked as the least urgent intervention, with only 12 per cent considering it a priority. This finding may reflect a belief that employer engagement is only impactful once girls are adequately prepared and supported to enter the workforce.

The evidence above suggests that activists advocate for a layered approach to supporting ever-married girls’ income, starting with skill-building, followed by enabling policies and then financial support and networking.

4.4 Patterns of power and decision-making

Key messages

- Significant age gaps in marriage often reinforce power imbalances, limiting girls’ autonomy and decision-making – especially in contexts where older husbands exert control over household, financial and reproductive choices.
- Girls’ ability to participate in household decision-making is closely tied to their access to education and employment – without these, many face restricted autonomy, especially in matters of health, finances and mobility.
- Girls’ financial dependence on their husbands (who often control household income and spending) limits their autonomy and reinforces unequal power dynamics, especially when permission is required for even basic purchases.
- Girls’ sexual and reproductive health decisions are often controlled by husbands and in-laws, with many girls forced to seek permission (or resort to secrecy) to access

contraception, highlighting deeply entrenched gender norms that undermine bodily autonomy.

- Girls aspired to re-enter education or start a business – and hoped that their children would not enter into a child marriage.

“Even when girls express a desire to work, opportunities are scarce and permission is rarely granted, reinforcing dependence on male family members.”

– Esneya, 20, Zambia

4.4.1 Power imbalances and age difference

A significant age gap between the girl and her husband appeared to correlate with stronger power imbalances within the couple. This was seen in several countries, particularly **Bangladesh**, **Ethiopia** and **Nigeria**. Girls with older husbands expect to be well taken care of but several girls reported that these relationships lead to limited autonomy and abuse, with older husbands holding decision-making authority.

In **Cambodia**, girls felt that older husbands are mature and can help to provide for their families better. But in **Zambia**, there was a pattern of girls saying that their husbands would provide for them or entice them into the relationship prior to the marriage, but upon marriage the husbands would usually stop providing and their behaviour became violent and controlling.

Girls like Abrhet (16) in **Ethiopia** reported having limited autonomy, which she attributed to their age differences: “Of course my husband has more exposure than I did when I was a teenager at the time, and most decisions made when he was present were dominated by him”. Also in Ethiopia, Fate (18) described how her former husband would decide everything, even “small things like the type of dishes prepared for lunch and dinner... He is the one who collected all supplies required for home from the market, and give it to me at home. I don’t have the freedom to go outside.” Fate’s ex-husband would be abusive if she defied his decisions.

Informal unions in Latin American and Caribbean countries often were with similar-aged partners, such as between school friends. In **Ecuador**, girls generally make decisions in their household equally with their partners – both those who are of a similar age and those whose partners are older.

See Box 14 for how a girl from West and Central Africa may experience challenges resulting from a wide age gap between her and her partner.

Box 14. Persona C: Age gap, power gap

Abla is a 16-year-old girl from a rural community in West and Central Africa who was forced into marriage at 15 to a much older man. Her marriage was arranged without her consent, driven by family financial pressures and social expectations. After marriage, she faced intense pressure to conceive. As a married girl, Abla has slightly better access to certain services compared to her unmarried peers, and her marital status grants her more social legitimacy in the eyes of her community. However, these services are often limited, associated with stigma from health workers or physically difficult to access especially in rural areas. Abla briefly began sewing training, her first step towards economic independence, but she had to stop due to lack of funds. Despite these constraints, Abla dreams of resuming her training, gaining financial independence and building a better future for her child. Her journey is shaped by restrictive gender norms, limited access to education and health services, and a lack of legal protection due to her unregistered marriage.

Key characteristics

Age: 16

Location: Rural community in West and Central Africa (reflecting conditions across Niger, Nigeria, Togo)

Marital status: Forced into unregistered marriage at 16 to a much older man

Education level: Dropped out prior to marriage due to poverty

Household role: Full-time caregiver for children and in-laws

Influencers

- **Community leaders** who enforce social expectations including stigma against divorce or education post-marriage.
- **In-laws** who often exert more pressure than husband around control of household decisions.
- **Healthcare providers** who can provide information or support.

Key challenges

Lack of marriage documentation, economic instability, and minimal opportunities for skills development

Core needs

Access to vocational training, financial support, legal recognition and protection

Aspirations

- To learn a trade, get a job and become financially stable.
- For her daughters to avoid child marriage and pursue education or careers.

With these insights from the cohort, we found that age disparities in marriage are closely linked to diminished agency for girls within the household

Among the 79 girls who reported having no say in household decision-making, nearly half – 46 per cent – were married to men who were at least five years older. In comparison, 32 per

cent of girls were married to partners closer to their age. This evidence suggests that when girls are married to significantly older men, the power imbalance is often more pronounced. Older spouses may hold greater social, economic and emotional authority, which can limit the younger partner's ability to participate equally in decisions that affect her or household life. While a lack of decision-making power is not exclusive to marriages with large age gaps, the data suggests that age is a contributing factor that shapes patterns of control and autonomy.

Fatey (24), in [Ethiopia](#), recently divorced from her ex-husband. She had married at 14 without consenting. Her then husband was 20 at the time. He was in charge of everything during the marriage, but now she is independent in taking decisions and looking after her two children. She explained that her husband would often change his mind on her usage of contraceptives, despite her desire to use them. This indicates how when decisions are delegated to the older husband these often go against the interests of the girl.

As established in the SIGI legal data, girls' SRHR decision-making and autonomy is subject to restrictive laws that impede girls' access to safe abortions, affordable contraception and family planning services, and comprehensive CSE. The girls we spoke with added to our understanding of the restrictions that girls face: the ways that patronising and male-dominant dynamics in age gaps are normalised to undermine girls' agency and decision-making power.

4.4.2 Household decision-making

Decision-making dynamics varied, with some participants feeling that they did have a voice in household matters, while others indicated that their husbands dominate these decisions. These choices particularly pertained to small purchases, larger financial matters, girls' SRHR, and girls' mobility. Notably, some of these decisions would also come down to the husband's family. Decision-making power for ever-married girls was minimal and some girls said that they felt too intimidated to challenge their husbands' authority on some matters. Some girls exercised agency in minor household matters but generally lacked influence over significant decisions.

For example, in [Nepal](#) and [Ethiopia](#), girls would manage the daily home life while their husbands controlled finances and made bigger decisions on the household, including whether the girl was to be in education or on contraception.

Alinafwe (21), in [Zambia](#), has left her marriage and says that she is better off now regarding decision-making: "I was told what to do and not to do in my marriage, but now I am able to make my own decisions." Other girls in [Zambia](#) – Thokozani, Maiwase and Musonda – said that their husbands would also lead on decisions around family planning and money, but they could talk with their husbands about these decisions.

The study cohort reinforces the SIGI legal data findings, where men are seen in law as the head of the household, a status that is also upheld by social and gender norms. Girls said that they would feel able to take part in more equal decision-making if they were able to be financially independent, have help from their husband or family with childcare, or have support on household tasks.

Girls' roles in education or employment shape household decision-making

Among girls who are in school or working, 57 per cent report having a say in household decision-making. In contrast, only 42 per cent of girls who are not in education or employment report the same. This difference underscores how access to education and work can serve as powerful enablers of agency for girls.

As the interviews with girls highlight, those who are not in education or employment are more likely to be confined to traditional domestic roles, where decision-making power is often concentrated among older family members or male partners. The story of Ayomide in **Togo** (Box 8), from the Real Choices, Real Lives study, is an archetype of how a disproportionate load of household duties, with little informal support, closely interplays with her inability to pursue decent work opportunities. As they are unable to bring an income into the household, girls like Ayomide are restricted in their overall agency and mobility outside the home.

Their lack of exposure to external environments may limit their confidence, their access to information, and their perceived value in household discussions. In contrast, girls who are in school or earning an income are more likely to be seen – and to see themselves – as contributors, which may shift household dynamics. In this regard, education and employment act as levers of empowerment. They may provide girls with knowledge and networks to engage in both public and private spheres. Madhu (19), in **Nepal**, explained that she learnt about contraceptives from school before dropping out, and so was able to take part in informed decision-making on family planning with her late husband. This further demonstrates how participation in education – in particular comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) – can endow a girl with the means to make purposeful decisions about her bodily autonomy. Promoting access to gender-transformative education (including CSE) and safe, dignified work opportunities is therefore essential to ensuring that girls have more agency in the household.

The girls we spoke with who are not in education, employment or training are mostly spending their time on household tasks and minimal income-generating activities, like Hakuri (19), in **Nigeria**. She told us that if she were to get a job and make money, she would be able to contribute to household funds and would have broader scope for decision-making.

These are important findings for child marriage action: targeted approaches to support ever-married girls' education, employment or training could have positive impacts on their overall agency in the home.

Box 15. Insights from activists: understanding ever-married girls' decision-making and agency

Child marriage activists surveyed identified several specific ways in which girls in marriages or unions face challenges in household decision-making. These findings closely align with qualitative accounts shared by girls in the interviews and focus group discussions.

The most frequently cited challenge reported by 59 per cent of activists was girls being excluded from decisions about their own health and reproductive choices. This includes limited access to reproductive healthcare and no say in whether, when or with whom to have children. This lack of control over the girl's own body is one of the clearest and most harmful expressions of their broader lack of agency within the household.

Another major concern, cited by 41 per cent of respondents, was the pressure on girls to take on all household chores and childcare responsibilities without any input over how these duties are divided. This reflects deeply entrenched gender norms that assign domestic labour to girls while denying them a voice in how their time and energy are used.

Activists also highlighted the impact of social pressure, with 26 per cent noting that girls are expected to prioritise family needs over their own aspirations. This pressure reinforces their

role and limits their ability to make decisions in their own interests. Other areas of exclusion include decisions about education – both their own and their children’s (25%) – as well as household budgeting and financial planning (24%), and matters related to family assets or inheritance (22%).

How best to support ever-married girls’ household decision-making and agency?

Child marriage activists identified several priority strategies to strengthen girls’ ability to participate in household decisions – findings that directly respond to the challenges outlined in the previous section and align with qualitative accounts from girls.

The most frequently prioritised strategy was ensuring girls’ awareness of rights and access to legal support services, with 36 per cent of respondents ranking it first. In this context, activists are in part emphasising that legal knowledge and protection are foundational for girls to assert their rights within the household. Building life skills and confidence was the second most prioritised approach, with 27 per cent ranking it first. This reflects a strong belief that empowering girls with communication, negotiation and decision-making skills is essential for shifting power dynamics at home.

Educating and involving husbands, in-laws and community leaders was also seen as critical, with 25 per cent ranking it first. This suggests that promoting shared decision-making and engaging those who hold influence in the household and community are key tenets of improving girls’ agency and decision-making within the household.

4.4.3 Financial decision-making

Girls’ husbands are often the sole income earner in the household, which leads to primary financial control resting with husbands and/or the father-in-law (patriarch of the house). Many participants are able to dip into their husband’s household income for small, regular payments, such as for grocery shopping and supplies for their children, although participants often defer to their husbands for larger financial decisions.

In **Niger**, girls had mixed accounts of whether they could access their husband’s money – with his permission – or not at all. Amina is able to access her husband’s money to support herself, but requires his permission to do so. Bintou must wait for her husband’s permission before making a purchase that could “cause problems between us”. Logo also needs her husband’s permission for purchases.

Sofia, in the **Dominican Republic**, has a husband who earns the money, so she will only receive money from him to buy specific things, as requested.

Shetu (21), in **Bangladesh**, described how her husband’s control over her financial decision-making extends to the small-scale grocery shopping: “My husband gives me 3,000 to 4,000 BDT [approx. US\$25 to US\$33] for the grocery. If I need more money, I have to explain why I need it and what I will use it for.” Similarly, Nakry (22), in **Cambodia**, must ask her husband about all food purchases, as he will be upset with her if she buys anything he does not want. These examples give an indication of the level of intimidation that girls face in their relationship dynamics on an everyday basis. While Nakry depends on her husband for work as she cares for the children, Shetu herself works and so has some mobility outside the home but she must still seek permission from her husband.

As regards financial decision-making after leaving a marriage, Zeynaba in **Ethiopia** says that she has had to rely on her family. “Currently, I am living with my family and relying on their support, as my ex-husband is not providing any assistance. I am interested in starting work to support myself and my child. For example, I would like to open a coffee house or café, as I have the skills needed to run such a business”. Zeynaba’s ex-husband approached her parents with a marriage proposal that they accepted without Zeynaba’s consent, but her husband was often on drugs and was abusive.

Financial support, behaviour change from husbands and help from husbands on household labour are key factors that would alleviate the disproportionate share of household tasks that girls shoulder, and would bolster ever-married girls’ financial independence.

4.4.4 SRHR decision-making and pregnancy planning

Decision-making around sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) – such as contraception use and spacing between pregnancies – is varied among the girls, although generally they feel compelled to seek their husband’s approval prior to obtaining contraception. This is common normative behaviour in many communities: that married women cannot use contraception without their husband’s approval, based on the belief that a girl’s or woman’s body is not her own.

Girls’ limited bodily autonomy stems from gender norms around seeking to control girls’ sexuality and to ensure their roles as mothers. In **Nepal**, girls had to seek their husband’s permission or input before using contraception. In **Bangladesh**, ever-married girls were seeking to use contraception (which is available) but they ultimately must comply if their in-laws demand a grandchild. Ariana (17), in the **Dominican Republic**, said that she didn’t have a say in her marriage about family planning, that her husband wanted a child so she had to comply.

Some girls hid their use of contraception from their husbands. Samiyah (23), in **Indonesia**, is one such example of this: “Yes, [my husband] said not to use birth control. I stopped after my second child turned four years old. He wants to have children every four years. But I am the one who is tired, the one who takes care of us. I want to be on birth control. I don’t have want more children yet. Raise the two first.”

Fate (18), in **Ethiopia**, explained how she was able to receive an injectable contraceptive (active for three months) from a health centre when her baby was six months old, which she was satisfied with. Sadly, upon telling her husband of this, he physically assaulted her. Now, she hides her contraception use:

I hide from him because it was not recommended by our religion to limit the number of children. Without consulting anyone I visited health centre, because the healthcare provider advised me during by delivery as I should have to space the birth.

Judith in **Uganda** also hides contraception use: “My husband doesn’t allow me to use family planning, however I use it without telling him. We can never decide together on this topic”. This is also the case in **Zambia**, where it is widely expected for a husband to decide on the wife’s contraception use, but couples often disagree, due to the idea that contraception promotes adultery. As a result, secrecy becomes a form of power for this cohort of girls when faced with limited options, albeit a risky one.

If you [receive contraception] without informing your husband and he learns afterwards, he will consider you unfaithful. – Roukiya, 18, **Togo**

Girls in **Cambodia** and **Colombia** appeared to have relatively more agency over their SRHR. In Cambodia girls make decisions about their SRHR without the input of their husbands, to an extent. In Colombia, girls made SRHR decisions often independently or with minimal partner input – although some girls said that partner resistance is still occurring. See Box 16 for how a girl from the Asia-Pacific region may experience challenges with SRHR decision-making.

Box 16. Persona D: Her body, their rules

Amara is a 16-year-old girl from a small rural community in the Asia-Pacific region who was married informally at 15 without legal registration. She dropped out of Grade 9 at age 14 and now lives with her husband's family, where her mother-in-law enforces the belief that married girls shouldn't continue their education. Amara is under pressure to prove her fertility quickly, but she worries about the health risks of early pregnancy. Although contraception exists locally, she lacks permission to access it. Economically dependent and socially isolated, Amara's main aspiration is to learn a skill.

Key characteristics

- **Age:** 16
- **Location:** Rural village in the Asia-Pacific region (combining factors common across Bangladesh, Cambodia, Indonesia, Nepal)
- **Marital status:** Informally married at 16 (underage, no official registration)
- **Education level:** Dropped out of Grade 9 (age 14) immediately after marriage
- **Household role:** Live-in daughter-in-law; responsible for caregiving

Influencers

- **Mother-in-law** who enforces the norm that married girls shouldn't continue schooling and insists that Amara focus on domestic duties.
- **Husband** who restricts visits to healthcare services and use of contraceptives.
- **Local clinic staff and community health volunteers** who provide free advice.

Key challenges

Low skills and education, pressures for early childbirth, restricted autonomy, and lack of legal documentation like identity card

Core needs

An accessible healthcare clinic, skill development opportunities and access to legal documents

Aspirations

- To learn a trade such as tailoring or embroidery to earn income from home.
- To register her marriage so her family can access social welfare benefits.

4.4.5 Aspirations for the future

Across the countries, girls wished either to return to education or to have the means to start their own businesses. Many girls expressed regret for the path that led them into child marriage and wished differently for their children's futures. In **Nigeria**, due to feelings of regret and hardship, all participants acknowledged that they did not want their children to follow similar paths by entering child marriages.

For example, in **Mozambique**, girls expressed strong aspirations for the future, including completing their education and pursuing careers such as nursing or business ownership. All the girls in **Mozambique** opposed child marriage and hoped for greater autonomy and opportunity for girls.

In some countries, aspirations were limited by the constraints of their current lives. In **Bangladesh**, few expressed aspirations beyond being good wives or mothers, suggesting the strong internalisation of patriarchal gender norms that comes with child marriage. Those who did hope for education or employment often doubted that these goals were attainable.

In **Indonesia**, Adinda wanted to work abroad to earn independently but is unable to do so due to family expectations: "I want to go abroad, to Saudi, but my husband and my father will not let me." Gender norms that subordinate wives and mothers, meaning that they need patriarchal or elders' permission to be mobile and work, are preventing girls from achieving economic empowerment.

In **Ecuador**, Maria named a number of professions she is interested in – dentistry, criminology, graphic design – and says she is weighing these against the cost and time needed to train. Pamela wants a career in agriculture or neonatology; she doesn't see herself having more children and wishes for her daughter to have a better life.

In the **Dominican Republic**, girls are fervent in what they want for their futures – Fernanda wants to be an engineer, and Mariana wants to be a nurse (she is in college studying for her nursing degree).

Other girls across the countries shared their wish to finish studying, and generally all the girls wanted their children to be educated.

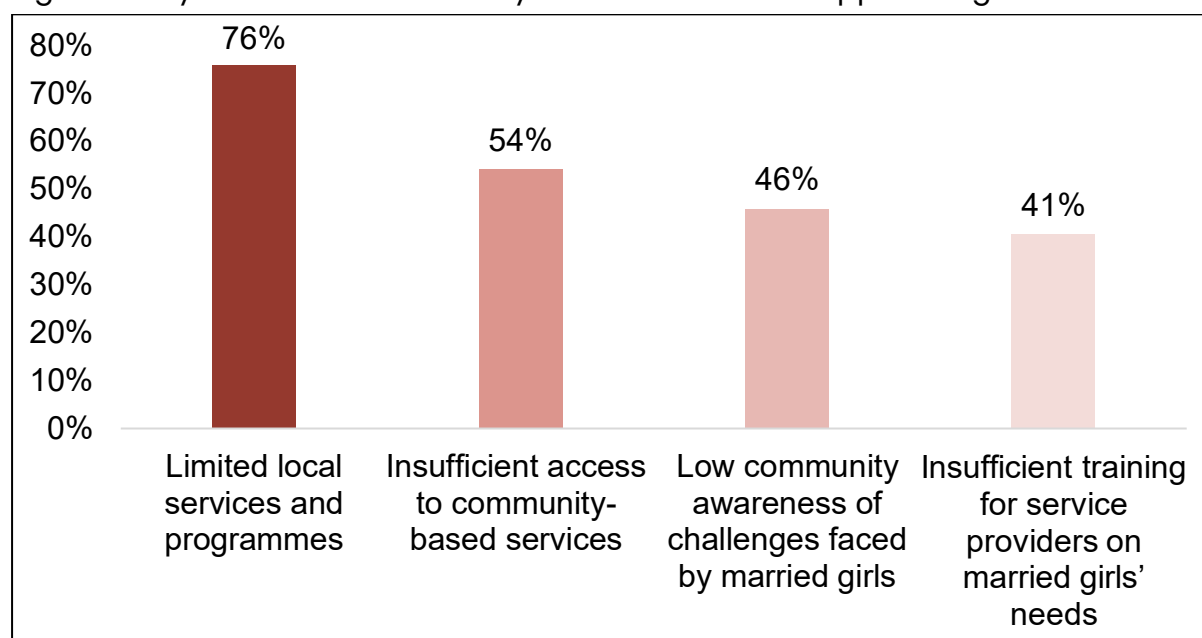
No, I won't allow marriage before the age of 18. Because we made that mistake, I won't let my child make the same mistake. I will explain that education is important now. Even if my child wants to get married, I won't allow it. I will try to make them understand as much as possible. Even if they fall in love, I won't permit marriage. – Farhana, 21, Bangladesh

4.5 Barriers to supporting girls in marriages and unions: data from the activists' survey

4.5.1 Community-level barriers that weaken support for ever-married girls

Community-level support for ever-married girls faces significant challenges, according to child marriage activists. A striking 72 per cent of respondents to the survey of child activists identified the lack of local services and programmes as the most pressing barrier. More than half (54%) pointed to limited access to community-based services, ranging from healthcare to vocational training, that was designed to meet the unique needs of ever-married girls. Nearly half (46%) cited low community awareness of the specific challenges these girls face, while 41 per cent highlighted the lack of training for service providers on how to respond effectively.

Figure 6: Key barriers at community level that weaken support for girls



Base: n=244

These findings reveal four interlocking community-level obstacles:

1. **Service availability:** With three out of four activists naming limited local programming, many ever-married girls simply have no nearby resources to turn to.
2. **Accessibility:** Even where services exist, more than half of respondents say that these are not designed or located in ways that ever-married girls can use them.
3. **Awareness gaps:** Community leaders and families often lack understanding of ever-married girls' unique needs, which dampens support.
4. **Provider capacity:** Without specialised training, service providers may struggle to offer the right care and guidance.

4.5.2 Country-level barriers that weaken support for ever-married girls

At the national level, child marriage activists identified several structural and systemic barriers that hinder effective support for girls in marriages or informal unions (see Figure 7).

Persistence of deep-rooted social and gender norms was identified by 52 per cent of child marriage activists as a key barrier that weakens or reduces support for girls. These socio-cultural frameworks continue to shape behaviours leading to child marriage, often reinforcing its acceptability and limiting the perceived need for targeted support for girls in marriages or unions.

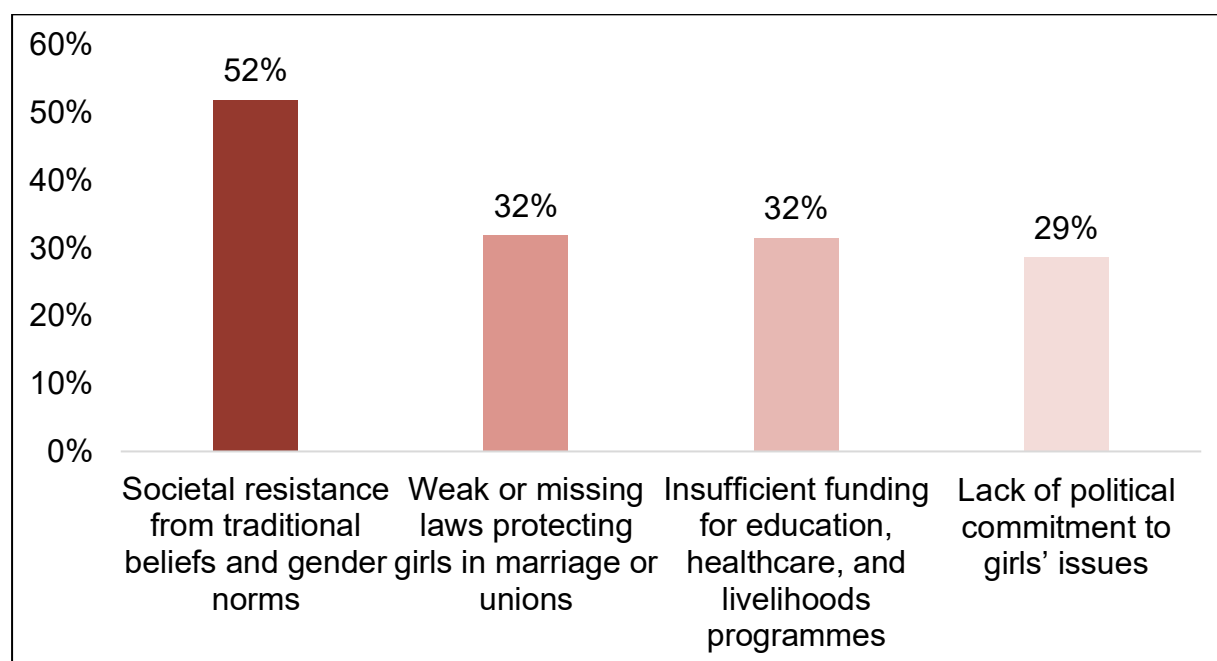
These norms not only contribute to the continuation of child marriage but also create an environment in which interventions – whether legal, educational or health-related – are less likely to be accepted or sustained. In many cases, families and communities prioritise adherence to tradition over compliance with national laws or policies, particularly when those laws are perceived as conflicting with cultural or religious values. The implication is that addressing child marriage requires more than policy reform; it demands sustained efforts to shift the underlying social norms that normalise the practice. This can include engaging community leaders, parents and young people in dialogue, promoting alternative narratives around girlhood and marriage, and investing in long-term social and behaviour change strategies that foster more progressive gender norms and promote gender equality.

The absence or weak enforcement of legal protections was identified as a major barrier for girls in marriages or unions by 32 per cent of activists. Evidenced by the primary research findings and SIGI legal data analysis, in many contexts, laws intended to prevent child marriage or protect the rights of ever-married girls either do not exist, are inconsistently applied, or are undermined by customary and religious practices that hold greater authority at the community level. These parallel systems often override statutory law, making it difficult for girls to access justice or assert their rights. Even where national laws set a minimum age for marriage or prohibit forced unions, enforcement is often weak, particularly in rural or marginalised areas where customary norms dominate. In this regard, legal reform alone is insufficient. Without mechanisms to ensure implementation, accountability and community-level alignment, legal protections remain largely symbolic.

Insufficient funding for essential services, including education, healthcare and livelihood programmes was identified by 32 per cent of activists as a major barrier at the country level that was weakening and reducing support for girls. This is a notable insight especially in a context where there is no or limited dedicated funding for CEFMU prevention and response across government and donor budgets. These budgetary constraints have the potential to significantly weaken national efforts to provide comprehensive support to ever-married girls, with effects more strongly felt in rural or underserved areas. Notably, 29 per cent of activists cite a lack of political will as a critical barrier. Without strong leadership and sustained commitment from policy makers, even well-designed policies and programmes are unlikely to be implemented effectively at scale.

Together, these findings underscore the need for a multi-sectoral approach that addresses not only legal and policy gaps but also the socio-cultural and financing gaps that struggle to prevent child marriage and limit support for girls already in such conditions.

Figure 7: Key barriers at country level that weaken support for girls



Base: *n*=244

4.5.3 Activists' opinions on the three biggest priorities today globally for supporting ever-married girls

Activists expressed their opinions regarding what they viewed as the top global priorities for supporting girls in marriages or informal unions. Their responses highlight a strong emphasis on service provision and legal protection.

Access to health services was identified by 64 per cent of child marriage activists as the top global priority. Activists emphasised the need for comprehensive, age and gender-responsive healthcare that includes SRH services, maternal care and mental health support. This priority reflects the lived experiences of many girls in marriages or unions, where early and unintended pregnancy is often a driver of marriage, and violence is a common consequence. Wider research findings also reveal that girls in unions frequently face significant barriers to accessing SRH services, including stigma, lack of confidentiality and limited availability of responsive care. In many cases, girls are unaware of their health rights or are unable to seek care without permission from a spouse or family member. As such, investing in health services (in particular, SRH services) that are tailored to the needs of ever-married girls is both a humanitarian and strategic imperative for improving outcomes across multiple dimensions of their lives.

The second most frequently mentioned priority was continuing education for ever-married girls, highlighted by 44 per cent of activists. This emphasis aligns with broader findings throughout the research, where the value of education consistently emerges as a protective factor against early and forced marriage, as well as a key enabler of girls' agency within unions. In contexts where girls can remain in or return to school, they are more likely to access services, assert their rights and envision alternative futures. As such, investing in education for ever-married girls is not only a rights-based imperative but also a strategic intervention with far-reaching social and economic benefits.

The third most frequently cited priority was access to legal protection, identified by 30 per cent of activists. This finding emphasises the need for strong legal frameworks that uphold the rights of girls in marriages or unions and provide accessible, responsive pathways to justice. This priority is reinforced by the qualitative findings, which show that girls often struggle to access legal protection and justice, particularly in cases involving domestic violence, or the denial of basic rights such as education, mobility or healthcare. In many instances, girls are unaware of their legal rights, face stigma when attempting to report abuse, or encounter systems that are unresponsive or inaccessible, along with practical barriers such as cost and distance. Without accessible and effective legal mechanisms, girls in unions remain vulnerable to ongoing harm with limited recourse. Strengthening legal protections is therefore not only a matter of compliance with international human rights standards but also a practical necessity for ensuring that girls can live free from violence and exercise their rights within and beyond marriage.

There are notable areas of convergence and divergence between what activists identify as priorities for supporting girls in marriages or unions, and what the girls themselves express as their most pressing issues.

Convergence: SRH and education

Both activists and girls, through their experiences, strongly emphasise the importance of strengthening access and functioning of health services. Girls' lived experiences – marked by early pregnancies, violence and significant barriers to care – underscore the urgency of this issue. Activists' prioritisation of health reflects these realities, reinforcing that health is a foundational concern. Girls often face stigma, lack of confidentiality and limited autonomy in seeking care, which makes age and gender responsive health services a critical intervention.

Education is another area of strong alignment. Activists view continued education as a protective and empowering factor, while girls frequently express a desire to return to school and regret having had to leave. Evidence shows that girls who remain in education are more likely to access formal services and assert their rights, making education not only a personal aspiration but also a pathway to broader empowerment.

Divergence: Legal protection and economic empowerment

Legal protection ranks among the top three priorities for activists, who stress the need for strong frameworks to uphold girls' rights and provide access to justice. However, this issue is mentioned less frequently by the girls themselves. This gap may reflect limited awareness, trust or access to legal systems. For many girls, legal mechanisms may seem distant or ineffective for addressing their immediate challenges, especially in contexts where justice systems are overridden by customary and religious laws.

Additionally, girls often highlight income generation and securing a better future for their children as key priorities areas that activists mention less frequently. This suggests that while activists tend to focus on systemic and rights-based interventions, girls are more concerned with day-to-day survival. Their priorities reflect a pragmatic outlook shaped by immediate needs and responsibilities.

6. Concluding insights

The *State of the World's Girls* research in 2025 has provided original and fresh findings for the CEFMU sphere. By talking with ever-married girls themselves, as well as activists in these settings, we have built a locally relevant knowledge base, from the experiences and unique insights of girls, young women and activists across 15 countries.

The original findings have brought colour and nuance to what we know from the literature: about the invisibility, judgement and exclusion of ever-married girls in public and private spaces.

Girls are expected to become wives and mothers early, often before finishing school, whether because of gender norms around protecting girls' sexuality, or to seek economic stability when other options fail, or from coercion of the adults around them. We found that when a girl is coerced into a relationship with an older husband – be it for what she believes is love or at parental request – the girl is more likely to be subject to violence. Ultimately, an age gap in a child marriage or union increases the power imbalance and the likelihood of intimate partner violence.

Husbands seemingly hold majority decision-making power in the household. But there is also a web of influence surrounding the husband – primarily stemming from his family – that is holding the norm of male decision-making firmly in place. This norm interconnects with the gendered view that education is unnecessary for ever-married girls as they are expected not to work, as men do the providing. Such long-standing gender norms, we have learnt, play a key role in limiting an ever-married girl's agency. On a broader scale, when combined with the recent rollback of progress in gender equality and rising pro-natalist ideologies, these norms pose a serious threat to girls' agency, autonomy and rights.

Girls face unenviable dilemmas even on the threshold of entering child marriage. They are often pressured by their families to marry young, yet are stigmatised by some peers and community members for doing so. Once married they face judgement or pressure in every direction. They are judged by their in-laws for not conceiving, yet scolded by healthcare workers if they become pregnant too early. They may need to contribute to household income but are criticised if their focus shifts from household labour or childcare. If they divorce, they are seen as failing to keep their family together, but face shame if they try to rebuild their lives and re-enter education. Social and gender norms around CEFMU are deeply conflicting. There is no “right” way to follow them and girls are trapped in a cycle of impossible expectation.

The profile of the ever-married girl is changing. Many girls are marrying their peers. Child marriage is no longer only a traditional practice rooted in family arrangements. It is increasingly shaped by digital relationships where girls may feel empowered yet remain vulnerable. Understanding this shift is crucial. Without acknowledging the role of technology, responses to child marriage risk missing the very spaces where it is now taking shape. Girls' experiences show both the possibilities and dangers that come with technology-facilitated marriage decisions, and programming must evolve to keep pace with these changes.

Across the countries, girls have shared with us the complex terrain they must navigate: interpersonal and community expectations, lack of power within their households, and their own critical needs for education and independent livelihood opportunities, as well as quality SRH information and decision-making. Ever-married girls are being denied services – whether because their teachers ask them to leave school or because they cannot formally register for

welfare support. We learnt from girls that being in education or employment brings a higher likelihood of access to other formal services, meaning delivery or service provision must include targeted approaches for NEET ever-married girls.

Norm change interventions must be accelerated to challenge the economic conditions that motivate CEFMU and make them acceptable. This includes action from authorities and financial support to households to prevent girls going into a marriage for a bride price or economic survival. Our original research has grounded in real life what we have learnt from SIGI legal data findings. Most notably, it has shown the ways in which formal legal frameworks that would prohibit child marriage are failing to penetrate girls' communities which adhere to informal laws.

“Although there has been some improvement, a significant number of parents still believe that girls should prioritise marriage and motherhood over education, while men are expected to be educated and provide for the family.”

– Abrhet, 24, Ethiopia

6.1 Regional trends

The drivers and impacts of CEFMU have manifested in particular ways in each region.

Girls in Bangladesh, Cambodia, Indonesia and Nepal often marry for love – sometimes facilitated online – following a period of being groomed, or after being coerced by their parents to marry the person they are dating. These girls have shared how their mobility is then limited by their husbands and in-laws. Girls in this region shared how their rights have been curtailed by being in informal unions, since they cannot register for welfare or certain service provisions.

In Niger, Nigeria and Togo, girls said that it is rare for an ever-married girl to still be in school. For girls in this region, IPV is normalised, suggesting that mediation is the preferred option over leaving, which is likely to be influenced by the difficulties and stigma that girls face when leaving a marriage in this region. Many ever-married girls in Togo echoed what Ayomide shared in the Real Choices, Real Lives study: that ever-married girls have long been out of school, lack employable skills, and are burdened by household and childcare duties. Our own research confirms these patterns, highlighting how these constraints severely limit girls' opportunities and agency.

Ethiopia, Mozambique, Uganda and Zambia had the highest shares of divorced girls in the study. Girls in these countries spoke about the independence they gained upon leaving their marriage or union. They described how their marriages and unions were marked by limited decision-making and intimidation, factors that interplay with the NEET status that applies to most girls in this region.

Distinct across Colombia, the Dominican Republic, Ecuador and Guatemala was that girls were in informal unions, often due to early, unintended pregnancies. Most girls were no longer with their original cohabiting partner and were in need of support to re-enter education or access decent work. We learnt from Griselda in the Dominican Republic – from the Real Choices, Real Lives study – that it is possible to re-enter school after dropping out, but only through a number of factors coming together.

Overall, this research saw striking commonalities across countries and regions. Girls told us that being married or in a union is fairly normalised in their communities due to the prevalence of social norms. Despite the persistence of early marriages and unions, these girls and young women are still not formally recognised as a vulnerable population that requires particular mechanisms to re-enter education, and access healthcare and legal information. Their lack of agency and mobility in the public sphere has spillovers into their home lives. Girls are mostly at the will of their husbands or in-laws, with limited decision-making power in household matters, finances and pregnancy planning. In particular, we found that limited agency within the home was characterised by an age-gap marriage and girls who are NEET.

The recurring pattern from both the primary and secondary research is one in which (i) legal frameworks are ineffective because they are not reaching girls' communities; and (ii) a complex interplay of social and gender norms, economic crises and technical access are driving the prevalence and impacts of being in a child marriage or union.

6.2 Recognising ever-married girls with particular needs

With 28 per cent of the girls in the study identifying as divorced or separated, this year's *State of the World's Girls* report has provided unique insights into this overlooked population. Acquiring the ability to leave a marriage or to rebuild a life afterwards represents a significant step towards greater agency for ever-married girls. Clearly there is a hidden but sizeable number of "divorced" survivors of child marriage who have unique needs owing to the trauma they are likely to have experienced as well as the stigma associated with leaving a marriage, and likely additional responsibilities such as childcare. Girls spoke about the unclear legal procedures that they went through to obtain their divorce. Their accounts suggested that key to their ability to leave a marriage is having a personal support system to finance them as they develop skills or re-enter education. As recognised in the SIGI legal data, girls' equal rights to divorce are undermined by customary and religious traditions. Girls need to be holistically supported to access justice and to utilise statutory laws in order to circumvent customary laws.

Girls in informal unions or cohabiting relationships told us that they face challenges accessing social support, as their relationships often lack formal registration. This issue was especially prevalent in Nepal and Indonesia, where marriage registration is closely linked to citizenship documentation. Girls in unions also need stronger legal access and information, including on custody rights, so that they are protected in the event of violence or when withdrawing from a marriage.

Living with marginality further aggravates the limited agency of ever-married girls, particularly their right to access public services like education and healthcare. Girls facing social exclusion, like Dalit girls in Nepal, must be actively reached by a multi-sectoral approach that supports their right to registration and access to essential documentation. For girls who live with physical disability and chronic illness, provisions are needed like reliable technology to allow for remote learning and more accessible welfare support. Ever-married girls are already invisible in much CEFMU policy and in empowerment and protection initiatives. Action and legislation must be inclusive of ever-married girls with marginalities, ensuring that initiatives towards accessing legal aid, psychosocial support, education re-entry and childcare support recognise the compounded barriers these girls face.

6.3 Approaches to support girls

From the existing literature, the SIGI legal data and the insights from the activists, we see a clear, urgent need to address service gaps and legal inconsistencies. A holistic approach is required that combines robust enforcement, targeted budgeting and community engagement. A key factor is a greater focus on norm change – such as a gender transformative approach to policy-making, investment and capacity-building.

By aligning national policies with international standards, governments can enhance protections for ever-married girls and ensure they receive the education, healthcare and legal support needed to break cycles of poverty and disempowerment. A comprehensive framework for addressing the needs of ever-married girls is essential to prevent anti-rights actors from exploiting weaknesses in the progress towards gender equality.

All the focus countries suffer from failing to have a comprehensive legal framework to uphold ever-married girls' rights around household decision-making, reproductive autonomy, protection from violence, and equality in divorce and child custody. Statutory legal frameworks exist across the countries – yet these frameworks are far removed from the girls and their communities. Many of the girls' communities are governed by customary, religious or other traditional systems. Reforming these systems to break down gender and social norms could be a strong path towards safeguarding ever-married girls' rights. This could also include codifying these systems as countries such as South Africa or Sri Lanka have done, and/or defining the legal status of these systems in relation to the statutory laws so as to provide girls with the required protections when needed.

Ever-married girls and child marriage activists have offered the blueprints that we must follow to adequately support girls to safeguard their rights and meet their needs.

Girls have spoken about the restrictive norms they live under that led to their marriages and unions and that continue to curtail their rights. Activists have confirmed that the persistence of deep-rooted norms is the key barrier that is hindering progress for ever-married girls.

Key actions are needed around norm and behaviour change to prevent CEFMU. In particular, this means:

- addressing the need to 'protect' girls' sexuality;
- preventing predatory behaviours from older men towards young girls;
- deterring parents, relatives and neighbours from facilitating forced marriages; and,
- as contraception is seen negatively particularly by husbands, finding clear entry points for all young people to be educated about SRH, including for those out of school.

Broad attitudinal shifts at the community level are needed regarding the status of girls in marriages and unions. This should target husbands and their families so that they no longer pressure ever-married girls over household management; so that girls take part in household decision-making; and so that girls have the freedom and resources to choose to pursue education or livelihood opportunities on their own accord.

Girls described the ways in which informal support systems are key for safeguarding their rights:

- by encouraging re-entry into school and by easing the burden of girls' household tasks;
- by enabling girls to be active in their family planning decisions, including reproductive autonomy to access contraception on their own terms;
- by empowering girls to leave marriages through having a home to return to and being financially supported; and
- by offering psychosocial support when experiencing violence.

Ever-married girls told us about their unique position when re-entering school. From a rights perspective, childhood is typically envisaged as being at school and engaging in play, while a normative perspective of being a wife is to take care of the home, childcare and make a financial contribution (if permitted). This means that ever-married girls who re-enter school are at a difficult intersection of these two sets of assumptions. As such, the girls must navigate schooling with marital duties, meaning that girls are pulled across their different responsibilities. Programmes need to account for and design around this reality for ever-married girls.

A clear need exists for strengthened legislative frameworks: to prevent men from grooming girls; to hold community officials accountable who register illegal marriages or perform ceremonies; and for outreach programmes for girls to understand their rights and how to access legal systems.

Ultimately, formal support for ever-married girls' particular needs must be strengthened: to educate and train healthcare providers to eliminate stigma and misinformation about contraception. In recognition of the unique challenges faced by ever-married girls, school authorities should be urged to create welcoming environments for their re-entry. This includes offering remedial classes and providing cash grants for tuition costs. Additionally, training and financial support should be made available to help girls to pursue aspirations of becoming business owners – a goal voiced by many.

“Getting married before the age of 18 is not right. It disrupts education. Within a year or two of marriage, a child is born. At that time, I am still a child myself, and if I have a child, my education is disrupted, and it poses a risk to my health. How can I, being a child, raise another child?”

– Farhana, 21, Bangladesh

7. Recommendations

The recommendations that follow outline key pathways to tackling the social and gender norms that promote CEFMU, govern girls' lives, stand in the way of gender equality and block girls' opportunities for health and happiness. The recommendations are based on insights and suggestions from the girls and the activists taking part in the research and are centred around five key themes:

- **Invest in and scale up programmes that address the harmful social beliefs, practices and expectations that drive child marriage.**
- **Ensure that ever-married girls and girls at risk of child marriage know their rights, have access to the services they need, and can build the future they choose.**

- **Target support for the most marginalised and hardest-to-reach ever-married girls, including girls living in conflict and climate emergencies, and girls living in extreme poverty.**
- **Implement and resource strong laws and policies to prevent child marriage and to ensure support and access to justice for ever-married girls.**
- **Elevate and fund the work of girl leaders and their movements in their initiatives to end child marriage.**

Governments, NGOs, community leaders, donors, media and educators must ensure a multi-sectoral and coordinated approach to the prevention of and response to CEFMU. To this end, they should work together on the following pathways of action:

Change harmful social and gender norms

- **Governments should design, implement, monitor and evaluate** gender transformative programming that shifts harmful social and gender norms and addresses the root causes of CEFMU, including the patriarchal control of girls' sexuality. These programmes should be rights-based, grounded in evidence and the local context, and should place girls at the centre. They should also empower girls to form safe, consensual relationships, enjoy healthy adolescent relationships free from the expectation of marriage, and challenge stigma, violence and misinformation related to adolescent sexuality as well as SRHR.
- **Governments should adopt a gender transformative approach** to curriculum, pedagogy and classroom management to challenge the norms driving CEFMU, while delivering safe, stigma-free vocational training. Targeted scholarships or bursaries for disadvantaged ever-married girls should be provided to support their continued education and skills development.
- **Governments should recognise comprehensive sexuality education (CSE)** as an essential component in eradicating CEFMU and ensure universal access to CSE for all children, adolescents and young people both in and out of school. Governments, working with other development actors should develop, fund and implement strategies to prevent unintended adolescent pregnancy – recognising that this is both a cause and a consequence of CEFMU. **NGOs and CSOs should mobilise families and communities** to support the empowerment of ever-married girls by creating safe spaces for mentorship and peer support and promoting acceptance of ever-married girls' participation in education, livelihoods and public life to protect their rights and aspirations.
- **NGOs and CSOs should deepen and scale up work** on transforming masculinities and engaging men and boys as allies to actively challenge the patriarchal norms and power dynamics that sustain CEFMU.
- **NGOs, community leaders and media should raise awareness** of the lived realities of ever-married girls and challenge harmful norms – including those that justify GBV as discipline. Families and community leaders should be encouraged to reject CEFMU and to support ever-married girls in accessing the services they need. These efforts should frame harmful practices as inconsistent with community values of fairness, dignity and wellbeing.

- **NGOs and community leaders should run rights and legal literacy campaigns** for girls, their families and communities on their legal rights and available protection services
- **NGOs and CSOs should expand digital and media literacy programmes** to equip adolescent girls with the skills to safely navigate online spaces, critically engage with harmful gender and social narratives, including those that normalise CEFMU, and build their capacity to advocate for their rights and challenge pressures to marry.
- **Media actors should design multimedia** in collaboration with NGOs and young people to promote norms change through “edutainment”, including videos, radio shows, music and drama
- **All stakeholders should raise awareness** of the issue of CEFMU. Media should be used to amplify experiences and calls for change from ever-married girls and shift public perceptions around their agency and potential.

Provide accessible services

- **Governments need to ensure that all girls** can access and complete primary and secondary education. Governments should remove any restrictions and develop retention strategies – particularly for expecting mothers – by implementing inclusive strategies such as catch-up and literacy education, flexible learning options and life skills programmes as well as adequate childcare.
- **Governments and the judiciary should ensure that ever-married girls have access to the legal mechanisms** and support that are required for them to be granted a divorce or annulment of their marriage.
- **Governments and policymakers should ensure gender responsive public budgeting** that prioritises cross-sectoral investments in girls’ empowerment, including access to 12 years of safe, free and quality formal and non-formal education, age and gender responsive healthcare and SRHR information and services, safe livelihoods, legal support and protection mechanisms for girls at risk of or affected by marriage or informal unions.
- **Governments, NGOs and civil society should implement cash transfer programmes** as part of social protection systems to address CEFMU sustainably and at scale and provide financial support to ever-married girls.
- **Governments, NGOs and civil society need to support strengthening of local child protection** and social support systems that provide psychosocial support services and ensure ever-married girls and marginalised girls are included.
- **Governments and donors need to provide financial support to sustained,** locally led, gender transformative interventions that tackle the underlying drivers of CEFMU with gender norm change, education, SRHR and protection from violence as priority investment areas.
- **Governments, together with development and humanitarian actors, including donors, civil society and the private sector must ensure a multi-sectoral and coordinated approach** to the prevention and response of CEFMU to include legal assistance, protection services and welfare, healthcare, SRHR, psychosocial support and educational services.
- **NGOs and civil society should design and deliver tailored vocational, entrepreneurship and financial inclusion** programmes for ever-married girls.

- **NGOs and civil society can work with all service providers** to recognise the mental health impacts of CEFMU and ensure that ever-married or at-risk girls have access to safe, free and confidential psychosocial support.
- **NGOs and civil society need to work with government** to deliver commitments on CSE in adolescent-responsive ways.
- **NGOs and civil society need to strengthen work with community and religious leaders** to create and enforce protective by-laws aligned with national laws and human rights frameworks and to uphold the legal age of marriage.
- **Educators should raise legal awareness**, manage protection cases and refer ever-married girls to appropriate social and legal services.
- **Educators need to integrate anti-stigma and non-discrimination provisions** into school codes of conduct and teacher training programmes to ensure that ever-married girls, pregnant girls and parenting learners are treated with dignity, respect and have equal opportunity to learn.

Focus on the most marginalised

- **Governments must establish and invest in national youth economic empowerment programmes** that provide ever-married girls and girls in hard-to-reach areas with access to flexible and inclusive learning. These should include non-formal education – such as community-based or skills training, livelihoods opportunities and financial services.
- **Governments and NGOs should ensure that child marriage is included as a key child protection** and gender-based violence concern in humanitarian needs assessments and response plans that translate into targeted programme actions for girls and their families.
- **Governments and policymakers should engage the private sector** to adopt inclusive hiring practices and develop workplace policies that guarantee safe and equitable environments for young people, including ever-married girls, across both formal and informal employment settings.
- **NGOs and civil society need to actively address the needs of ever-married girls** facing intersecting forms of exclusion, including disability, minority, refugee or migrant status, ensuring equitable access to SRHR, legal protections and psychosocial support, and closing gaps in mainstream CEFMU interventions.
- **Donors need to increase investment** in programmes to support ever-married girls, as well as other marginalised girls who are most at risk of CEFMU including indigenous girls, rural girls, girls with disabilities and girls living in poverty to ensure that no one is left behind.
- **All stakeholders should prioritise and adequately fund efforts to address CEFMU in humanitarian and fragile settings**, recognising the highest rates of CEFMU are across humanitarian contexts.
- **All stakeholders need to invest in disaggregated data collection** (including by age, gender, disability, ethnicity) and formative research to better understand the lives of ever-married girls and use established tools such as SIGI to identify persisting gaps, design evidence-based policies and programmes and monitor progress.

Design and enforce laws

- **Governments should ensure the adoption of national legislation** which is in conformity with international human rights standards and sets the minimum legal age of marriage at 18 for all genders, without exceptions. National legislation should override any conflicting customary, traditional or religious provisions regarding the age of marriage.
- **Governments should ensure the effective implementation** of national legislation by monitoring progress against national action plans to prevent and respond to CEFMU. Efforts must also include strengthening civil registration and vital statistics systems in order to achieve universal, compulsory, accessible and free birth and marriage registration.
- **Governments should determine age of sexual consent laws** separately to the minimum age of marriage to ensure that adolescents who are engaging in consensual sex with those of a similar age are not stigmatised or criminalised. The age of consent should also be the same for all adolescents regardless of gender or sexuality.
- **Governments should criminalise non-consensual sex** within and outside formal and informal marriages and unions, and remove legal exceptions that exclude husbands from being charged with sexual violence against their wives. Laws which allow perpetrators of sexual violence to escape prosecution if they marry the survivor must also be revoked.
- **Governments must provide capacity-building training** to law enforcement agencies, judges and prosecutors as well as community leaders and healthcare providers with regard to implementing and enforcing legislation regarding CEFMU with an age and gender lens. Barriers to justice should also be eliminated to permit survivors to seek redress, free from fear of intimidation or abuse.
- **Governments and policymakers should enact and reform laws and policies** (including informal, religious or customary laws) to ensure equal rights for girls and women in all their diversity to make decisions about their lives, including in areas such as the family, marriage, divorce, child custody, inheritance, property, decent work, economic opportunities, SRHR, education and participation in policy-making. They should ensure the meaningful engagement of girls, including ever-married and marginalised girls, in shaping these legal and policy reforms.
- **Regional inter-governmental bodies should strengthen** accountability of national-level coordination and establish robust oversight mechanisms to monitor progress towards implementation of regional commitments and global frameworks to eliminate CEFMU.
- **NGOs and civil society should advocate** for and hold governments to account for commitments and legal obligations to end CEFMU and to support ever-married girls.

Support girl leaders and their movements

- **Governments and policymakers must protect civic space** to ensure that girls, youth activists and women's rights organisations can safely advocate for change without fear of harassment, criminalisation or reprisals, and establish protection mechanisms for frontline activists who face backlash from families, communities or state or non-state actors for challenging norms and working to end CEFMU.

- **NGOs and CSOs should build the leadership, communication and decision-making skills** of ever-married girls and at-risk girls, helping them to regain confidence and agency in their lives. Safe spaces should be created for girls to share experiences and build solidarity. Civil society and NGOs should design peer-led initiatives to address CEFMU and support re-entry into education.
- **NGOs and civil society need to create safe spaces and platforms** for ever-married girls to engage in leadership, advocacy and collective action, including training and support for youth-led campaigns on CEFMU.
- **Donors need to expand multi-year, flexible and unrestricted funding** to girl-led, youth-led and community-led organisations, to support long-term gender and social norm change on CEFMU at the community level.

8. Annexes

Annex A: Personas of girls in marriages and/or unions

Note on Personas

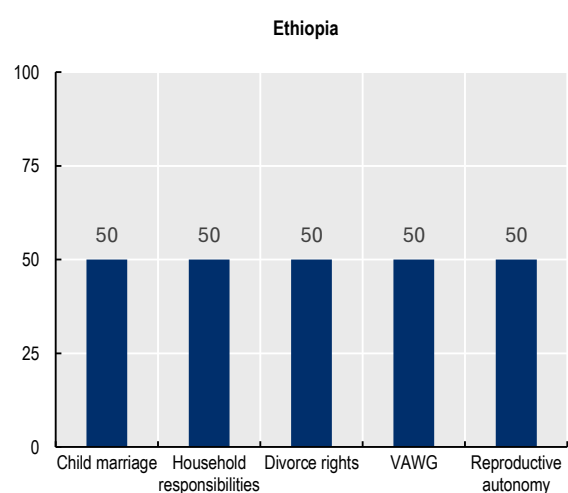
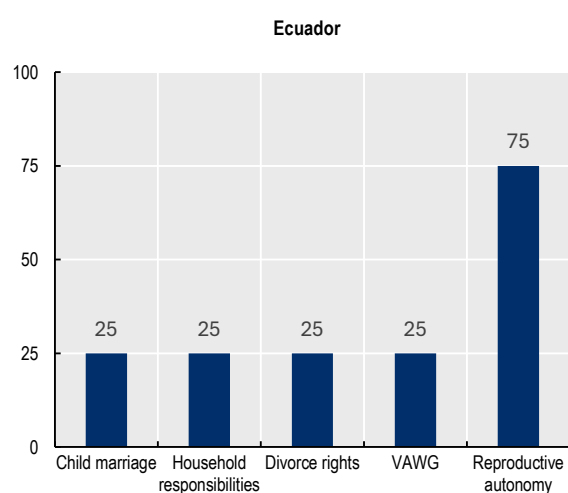
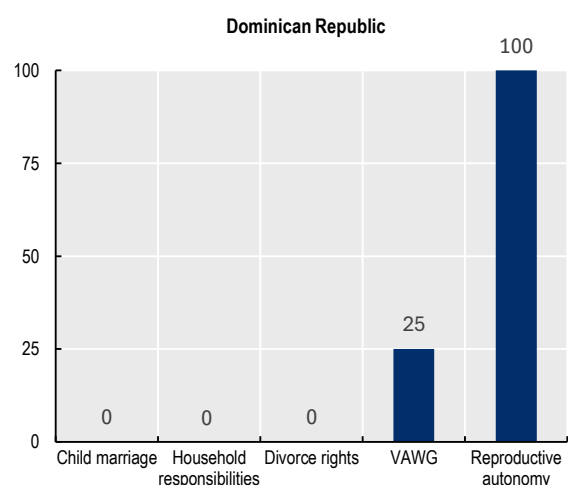
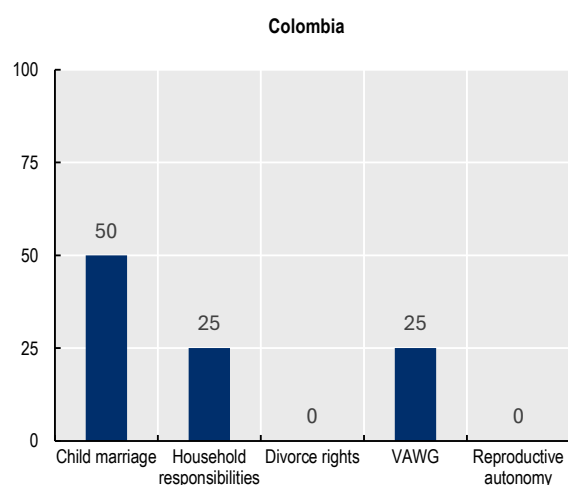
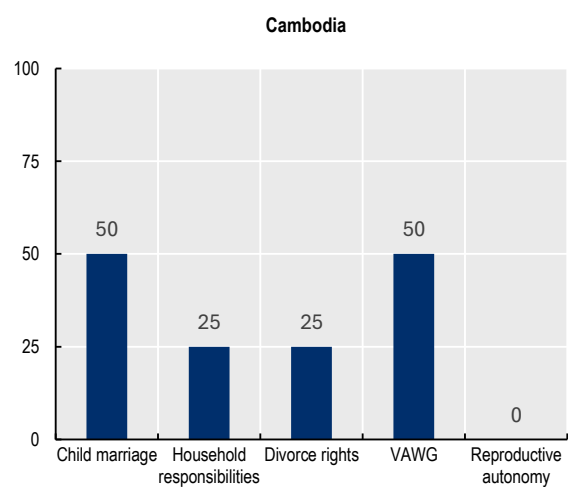
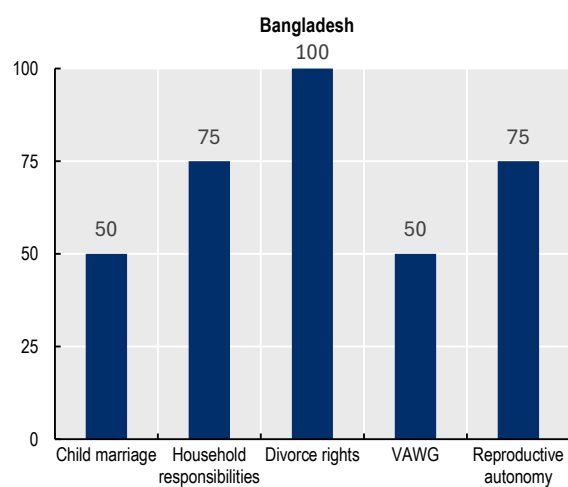
The personas presented in the report - Amara (APAC), Amina (MEESA), Camila (ROA), and Bomo (WACA) - are composite profiles developed to illustrate the lived experiences of adolescent girls and young women navigating child marriages, motherhood, and limited access to education, health, and economic opportunities. Note that these profiles are illustrative, not prescriptive. They highlight shared themes rather than representing any single individual or community with local contexts and individual experiences varying widely. As such, **these personas are not intended to be statistically representative of all girls in their respective regions**. Rather, they are narrative tools that synthesize qualitative insights from interviews and focus groups. They are designed to summarize common experiences, challenges, and aspirations of girls navigating child marriage, motherhood, and limited access to education, health, and economic opportunities.

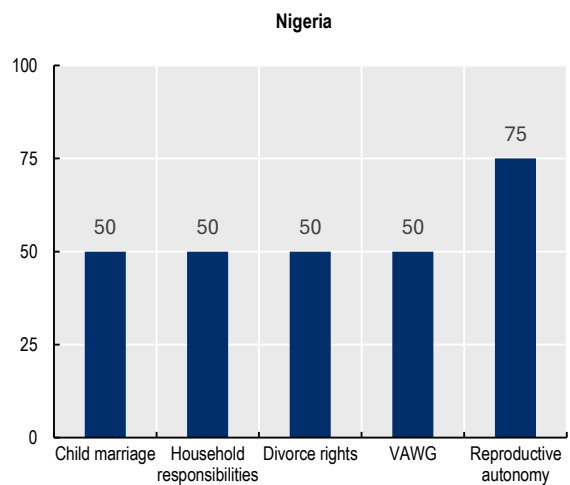
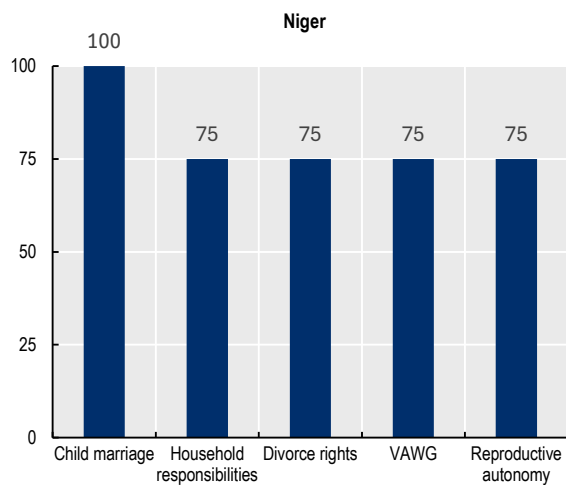
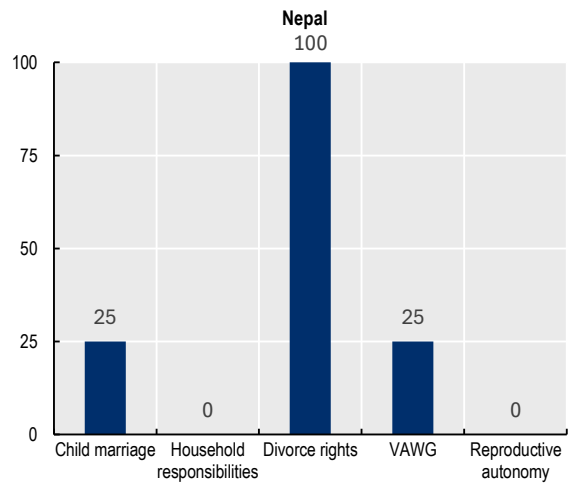
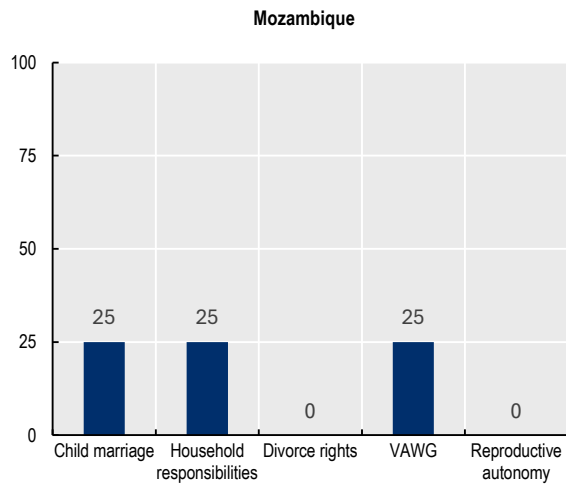
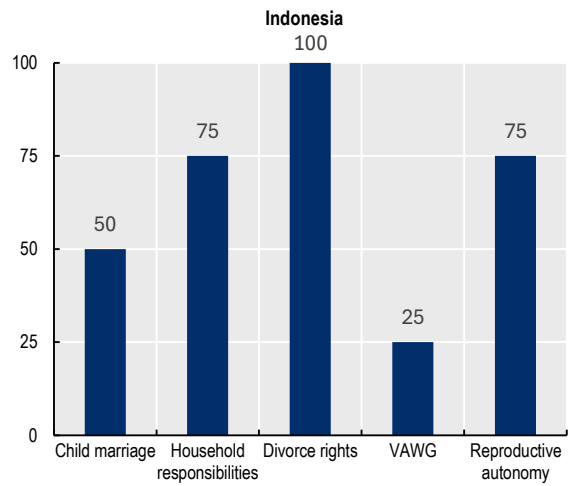
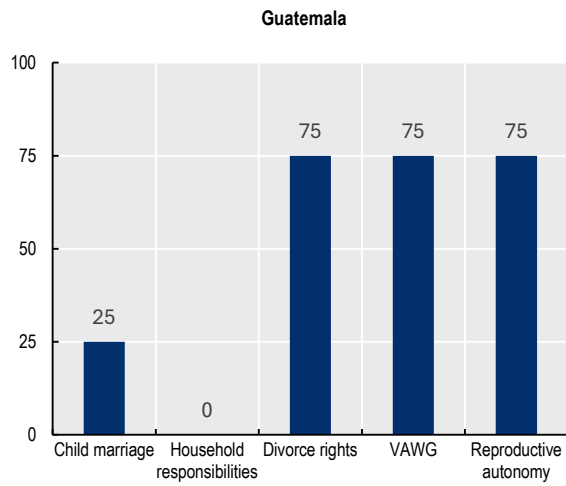
While many of the challenges girls face is **shared across regions** - such as early and informal nature of marriages, interrupted education, minimal skills development, limited reproductive autonomy, and economic dependence - here are also **important regional differences** that shape how these challenges are experienced:

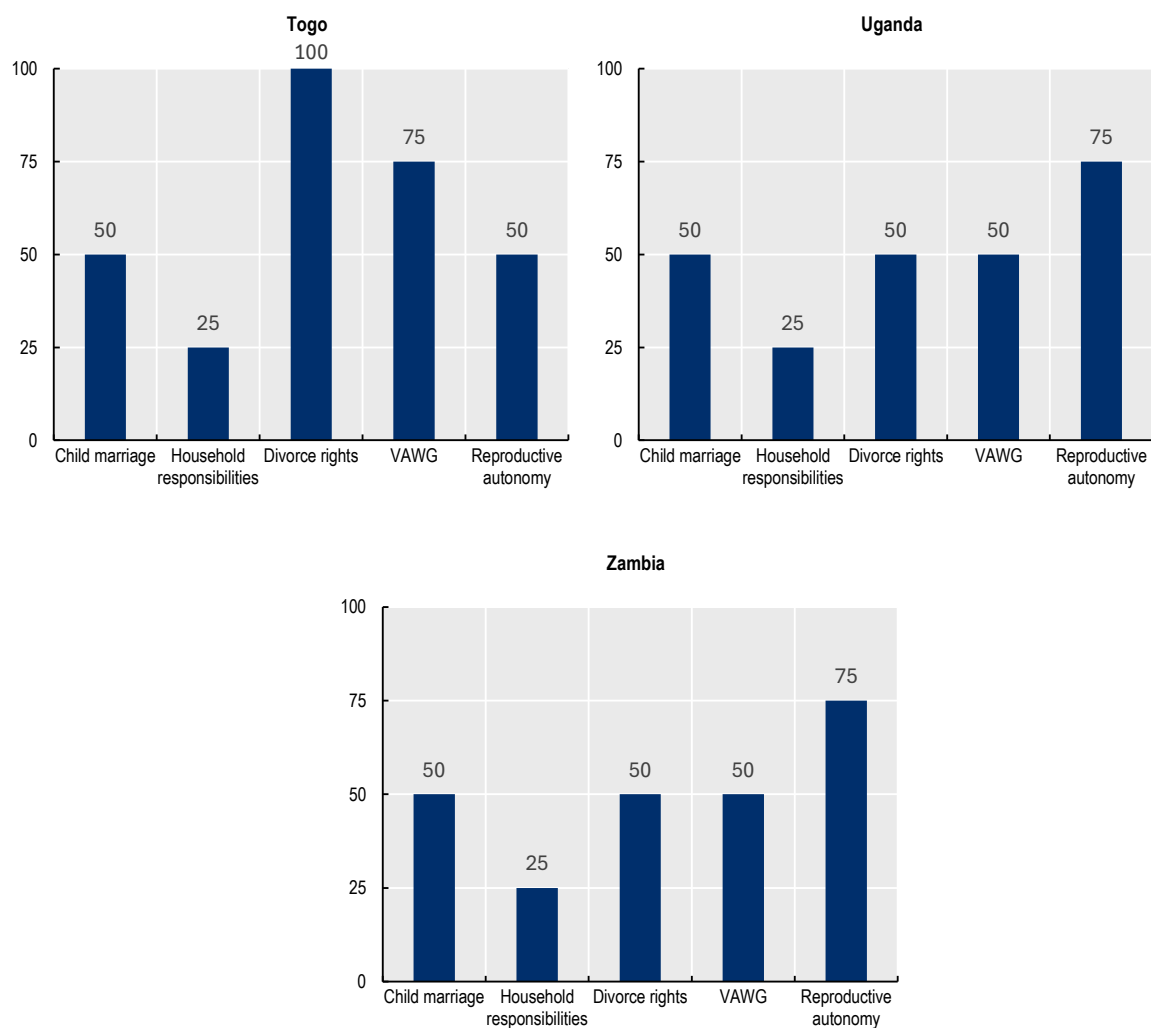
- In **West and Central Africa**, girls like Bomo are often forced into marriage with much older men, and while marriage may slightly improve access to services, these remain limited and hard to reach. The age imbalance between the couple is more pronounced in the region which leads to power imbalances and impacts girls' agency. Social pressure to prove fertility is intense, and in-laws often exert more control than husbands.
- In the **Asia-Pacific region**, girls like Amara face strong household-level restrictions, especially from in-laws who discourage education. While health services may exist locally, they are often inaccessible without family permission. Legal invisibility (e.g., lack of ID or marriage registration) also compounds exclusion.

- In the **Middle East, and Eastern and South Africa**, girls like Amina may enter child marriages hoping for economic stability, only to find themselves unsupported and looking into informal work. Regional instability makes it difficult to sustain livelihoods. The absence of legal protections, along with limited knowledge of separation procedures and rights is a key challenge for those wanting to exit harmful relationships.
- In the **Americas**, girls like Camila often enter unions due to pregnancy and face stigma when trying to return to school. Health services are more sensitive compared to other regions and girls have aspiration for higher skilled jobs.

Annex B: SIGI legal scores by country and indicators







Note: A score of 0 indicates that women and men enjoy equal rights and protection whereas a score of 100 indicates that legal frameworks fully discriminate against women's rights.

Annex C: Country Profiles – Further Information

Africa

Ethiopia

Comprehensive measures to reduce CEFMU

Education & Empowerment

- **UNICEF and UNFPA's** global programme supported 64,000+ girls since 2016 via life skills, health information and school supplies.²³¹
- **The Ministry of Women and Children in Ethiopia and UNICEF** have established girls' clubs/safe spaces in schools and communities to promote mentoring and confidence-building for married girls and those at risk.²³²

Community Engagement

- **The Ethiopian Government and NGOs** support the community conversations approach which engages religious/traditional leaders to challenge norms on CEFMU
- **UNICEF's** 2023 Social and Behaviour Change survey revealed stronger public awareness and opposition to child marriage in Ethiopia. For example, 93% understood drivers and impacts of CEFMU.²³³

Health & Protection

- Ministry of Women Children and Youth, UNICEF Ethiopia, 2019, Ministry of Health, 2021: Aims to expand adolescent and youth-friendly health services across 1200 health centres; offering counselling, family planning and STI testing.²³⁴
- AWSAD, UNFPA: and partners provide safe houses which provide counselling, medical support, and training courses.²³⁵

Policy & National Strategy Impacts

National Costed Roadmap by Ministry of Women & Social Affairs (2020–2024):

- Focuses on prevention, service provision and accountability
- Reached 350,000+ girls since adoption.²³⁶

Mozambique

Comprehensive measures to reduce CEFMU

Education & Empowerment

- Mozambique is a priority country under the UNICEF–UNFPA Global Programme to End Child Marriage, a 15-year, multi-country initiative supporting girls with education, life skills, and community engagement.
- The UNICEF–UNFPA Global Programme to End Child Marriage has reached thousands of girls with life skills, health information, school supplies, and community dialogue, reaching over 4,500 girls through a mentorship on life-skills and SRHR education.²³⁷
- Programmes such as Rapariga Biz deliver CSE, mentoring, and vocational training to adolescent girls, including those married and in-unions. Over 750,000 girls have been reached since 2016.²³⁸

Community Engagement

- Community dialogue sessions involving traditional and religious leaders to help shift harmful norms around child marriage. Programmes like Rapariga Biz include community leader engagement, male engagement and parental education components.²³⁹
- Child Protection Committees in rural districts identify girls at risk and support survivors through referral mechanisms.²⁴⁰

Health & Protection Services

- Mozambique's Adolescent-Friendly Health Services (SAAJ) offer contraceptive access, HIV/STI testing, and counselling for married and unmarried adolescents. The network has expanded to over 700 facilities.²⁴¹
- SMS BIZ (2015) provides a vital service: free, text-based counselling accessible to any young person with a mobile phone. They cover a wide range of inquiries that mirror the pressing issues facing Mozambican youth today, including HIV, pregnancy, cholera, menstruation, and child marriage.²⁴²
- Mobile clinics reach remote communities with tailored reproductive services, counselling, and support, especially in remote or hard-to-reach areas.²⁴³

- There are few dedicated shelters for child marriage survivors, but some GBV referral centres offer temporary shelter, psychosocial counselling, and legal aid, especially in conflict-affected northern regions.²⁴⁴

Policy & National Strategy Impacts

National Strategy to Prevent and Combat Child Marriage (2016–2019)

- First formal strategic framework by the government to address child marriage.
- Focused on awareness-raising, legal reform, education, and health service access.

National Roadmap on Ending Child Marriage coordinated by Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Action (2018-2023)

- Designed as a follow up and expansion of previous strategy
- Provides a longer-term, costed, multisectoral framework
- Emphasises prevention, protection, and enforcement, and includes monitoring and evaluation mechanisms.

Other

- The Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Action, with UNICEF and the International Child Development Programme, runs the **Acompanhamento Familiar** cash transfer programme in **Nampula** to reduce poverty and improve child wellbeing.²⁴⁵
- With UNICEF's support, the Ministry is also developing a new National Action Plan for Children III (PNAC), focused on ending child marriage. The plan has been approved by the Council of Ministers and shared with key stakeholders.

Niger

Comprehensive measures to reduce CEFMU

Education and Empowerment

- Illiminani Programme, launched by the Government of Niger in collaboration with UNFPA aims to delay child marriage and pregnancy among adolescent girls. It offers lessons on life skills and reproductive health in safe spaces within refugee camps. To date, the programme has enabled over 150,000 adolescent girls to acquire knowledge and skills to say no to child marriage and develop their full potential.²⁴⁶
- The IMAGINE project by CARE provides married and unmarried adolescent girls with education on reproductive health, business skills, and life skills. It also offers vocational training in areas such as small livestock rearing and cowpea processing, aiming to empower girls economically and socially.²⁴⁷
- UNFPA's Adolescent Girl Initiative establishes safe spaces for vulnerable girls aged 10-19, offered an eight-month programme designed to delay child marriage and prevent adolescent pregnancy. The programme provides a supportive environment where girls can learn and develop skills.²⁴⁸
- The O3 Programme led by UNESCO, aims to improve the well-being of adolescents by promoting CSE and SRHR through its integration in school curricula. It focuses on reducing early pregnancies, HIV, and gender-based violence through school-based education, teacher training, and community engagement.²⁴⁹
- **African Girls Summit** in Niamey fostered collaboration with girl-led organisations to strengthen efforts in empowering girls. These groups led advocacy campaigns and community mobilisation activities aimed at ending child marriage and gender-based violence.²⁵⁰

Community Actions

- Village Child Protection Committees supported by UNICEF, Save the Children International and other INGOs, promote positive practices within communities, engage in dialogues to prevent child

marriages, and assist girls in returning to school. Through community engagement, several villages have made public declarations to abandon the practice of child marriage.²⁵¹

- Initiatives like the Girls' Safe Spaces provide platforms for adolescent girls to meet with mentors and peers, share experiences, build self-confidence, and access information on various topics, including reproductive health. These groups have been instrumental in preventing child marriages and supporting girls' education.²⁵²
- The Husbands' School (École des Maris) is a community-based initiative designed to engage men in promoting maternal and reproductive health. Recognising that men often make key household decisions, especially in rural areas, the programme educates husbands on topics such as family planning, prenatal care, safe childbirth, and the prevention of child marriage. This initiative is supported by Niger's Ministry of Public Health in collaboration with partners like UNFPA and UNICEF.²⁵³

Health and Protection Services

- Adolescent-Friendly Health Services implemented by the MoH with support from international partners provide reproductive health services tailored to adolescents. The UNFPA-UNICEF Global Programme supports adolescent girls in accessing SRH services, although access remains limited, particularly for married girls.²⁵⁴
- Reaching Married Adolescents (RMA) Programme (2016-2018), promoted modern contraceptive use and enhances reproductive autonomy among married adolescent girls. Involves community members, including religious leaders, in dialogues to address gender dynamics affecting reproductive health. Engages both wives and husbands through household visits and small group discussions. Has shown increased contraceptive uptake and greater negotiation capacity among married girls.²⁵⁵
- The Spotlight Initiative, focuses on addressing harmful practices such as child marriage and gender-based violence by strengthening legal frameworks, enhancing institutional responses, and empowering civil society organizations. Through targeted investments, the programme supports the development of policies, provides services to survivors, and promotes gender equality. Implemented in collaboration with national partners, the Spotlight Initiative works to create sustainable change by engaging communities and promoting positive social norms:

Policy & National Strategy Impacts

The National Strategy for Accelerating the Education and Training of Girls and Women in Niger (SNAEFFFF) is a comprehensive policy framework (2020-2030)

- Aims to enhance access, retention, and success for girls and women across all educational levels. The strategy addresses systemic barriers such as child marriage, gender-based violence, and socio-cultural norms that hinder female education.²⁵⁶
- SNAEFFFF is integrated into Niger's broader education sector plans and aligns with international commitments to gender equality and inclusive education.²⁵⁷

National Action Plan (NAP) to End Child Marriage (2018)

- The initiative received both technical guidance and financial backing from the UNICEF-UNFPA Global Programme. Despite its launch, by 2020 there was limited information available regarding how effectively the plan had been put into action.

Nigeria

Comprehensive measures to reduce CEFMU

Education and Empowerment

- Nigeria is a focus country of the UNICEF-UNFPA Global Programme aimed at accelerating action to end child marriage by promoting policies and programmes that empower girls.
- The World Bank's AGILE (Adolescent Girls Initiative for Learning and Empowerment) Programme aims to improve secondary education opportunities, increasing the enrolment and retention rates for adolescent girls in targeted states by addressing barriers such as school infrastructure, safety, and affordability.²⁵⁸

- The Centre for Girls Education (CGE) has established mentored "safe spaces" where married and unmarried adolescent girls receive education on life skills, literacy, and reproductive health, empowering them to make informed decisions.^{259,260}
- Young pearl Foundation's 'Back2School' Programme enables married and unmarried girls to return to education, advocating for their rights within rural communities.²⁶¹

Community Actions

- Christian Aid's Collective Action for Adolescent Girls collaborates with faith and community leaders to transform attitudes about girls' rights, aiming to support girls to stay in school and reduce child marriages.²⁶²

Health and Protection Services

- Mercy Corps' ENGINE Programme (Educating Nigerian Girls in New Enterprises) worked with community members to develop culturally appropriate ways of delivering sexual and reproductive health curricula under the title "Hygiene and Health" to more than 21,000 girls.²⁶³
- **Adolescent Girls Initiative in Northern Nigeria** (supported by UNFPA) teaches vulnerable girls about their rights, bodies, and health, aiming to improve their social, economic, and health well-being.²⁶⁴
- Efforts are being made to provide reproductive health services tailored to adolescents, although access remains limited, particularly for married girls in rural areas.

Policy & National Strategy Impacts

National Strategy to End Child Marriage developed by the Federal Ministry of Women Affairs and Social Development with support from UNFPA & Save the Children (2016-2021)

- Outlines a framework to end child marriage through legal reform, education, and empowerment programmes, a new draft has been developed with active involvement from stakeholders and is awaiting to be presented at the Federal Executive Council.²⁶⁵

Togo

Comprehensive measures to reduce CEFMU

Education and Empowerment

- PASNEEG (Projet d'Autonomisation Sociale des Filles) is a UNFPA-supported project that delivers life skills, literacy, and vocational training to adolescent girls.
- The World Bank's PAQEEB (Projet d'amélioration de la qualité et de l'équité de l'éducation de base) aims to eliminate obstacles to girls' education.
- UNICEF Education Projects provide scholarships and support for re-enrolment of married or at-risk girls.
- Plan International Togo runs Girls Empowerment Clubs providing life skills, mentoring, and reproductive health education.

Community Actions

- Local NGOs facilitate discussions with community and traditional leaders to combat harmful practices.

Health and Protection Services

- UNFPA supported Adolescent-Friendly Health Services offer family planning, prenatal care, and support for married adolescents.
- Youth Centres supported by local government and NGOs to offer counselling, education, and safe spaces.

Policy & National Strategy Impacts

National Strategy to End Child Marriage by the Ministry of Social Action & UNICEF (2020–2024)

- Aims to delay marriage until the age of 18 by empowering girls, engaging communities, and improving access to education and protection services.

Uganda

Comprehensive measures to reduce CEFMU

Education and Empowerment

- Policies like Go Back to School promote re-entry into education for married girls and adolescent mothers.
- Universal Secondary Education (USE) implemented in 2007 has increased access to secondary education, especially for girls from poor households, contributing to a decline in child marriage rates.
- The Empowerment and Livelihood for Adolescents (ELA) programme provides life skills training, vocational education, and microfinance opportunities to adolescent girls, enhancing their economic independence and reducing vulnerability to child marriage.²⁶⁶

Community Actions

- SAFE Spaces Initiative operate in various districts, this initiative works with traditional leaders and adolescent girls, including married ones, to provide literacy, livelihood, and gender equity training.

Health and Protection Services

- Mobile Clinics and Outreach Programmes provide antenatal care, maternal health services, and psychosocial support to married adolescents in rural areas.
- Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA) operates shelters offering safe spaces, trauma counselling, legal aid, and medical assistance to survivors of child marriage and gender-based violence.

Policy & National Strategy Impacts

Adolescent Health Strategy (2022–2026)

- This strategy focuses on improving access to adolescent-friendly health services, including sexual and reproductive health, to support young mothers and prevent early pregnancies.

National Strategy to End Child Marriage and Teenage Pregnancy (2022–2027)

- This strategy aims to eliminate child marriage and teenage pregnancies by addressing legal, social, and economic factors contributing to these practices.²⁶⁷

Zambia

Comprehensive measures to reduce CEFMU

Education and Empowerment

- Population Council's Adolescent Girls Empowerment Programme (AGEP) builds social, health, and economic assets for vulnerable adolescent girls through safe spaces, life skills training, financial literacy, and access to health services, including for married and out-of-school girls.²⁶⁸
- CAMFED Agriculture Guide Programme trains young women in climate-smart agricultural techniques. These programmes not only provide vocational skills but also promote sustainable livelihoods, enabling adolescent girls and young women to contribute economically to their communities and reduce their vulnerability to child marriage.²⁶⁹
- Zambia is a champion country in the joint UN initiative “Education Plus”, which promotes free secondary education, access to SRHR services, and gender equality to empower adolescent girls and prevent child marriage and HIV.²⁷⁰
- USAID funded DREAMS supports adolescent girls with education, mentorship, and health services aimed at reducing HIV risk and promoting resilience and empowerment among young women, especially in high-risk communities.²⁷¹

Community Actions

- Child Marriage-Free Zones established in districts like Chisamba have led to local by-laws prohibiting child marriage. Traditional leaders play a pivotal role by leveraging their authority to change community perceptions and norms and enforce these by-laws.²⁷²
- Child Protection Committees were established across various communities to tackle child marriage and other child rights violations. Between 2018 and 2020, these committees reported 848 cases of child rights violations, leading to the retrieval of 506 girls from child marriages. Additionally, 315 of these girls were supported in returning to school through community initiatives and parental engagement.²⁷³

- The RISE project focuses on measuring the impact of economic support and community dialogue on early childbearing rates in rural Zambia. By providing economic assistance to girls and their families and facilitating community discussions on sexual and reproductive health.²⁷⁴
- The SAFE Spaces Initiative in Luapula and Northern provinces works with traditional leaders and adolescent girls (including married ones) to provide literacy, livelihood, and gender equity training

Health and Protection Services

- Mobile clinics and outreach programs provide antenatal, maternal, and psychosocial services to married adolescents in rural zones.
- Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA) operates shelters offering safe spaces, trauma counselling, legal aid, and medical assistance to survivors. They focus on empowering women and girls to break free from abuse and rebuild their lives.²⁷⁵
- Youth-friendly corners (YFCs) across Zambia offer SRHR information, services, and peer counselling in rural health facilities and aim to address stigma and access issues for marginalised adolescents.

Policy & National Strategy Impacts

National Strategy on Ending Child Marriage (2016–2021)

- Outlined goals to empower girls and engage communities. Evaluations showed modest improvements, especially in awareness and school re-enrolment rates.²⁷⁶

The Adolescent Health Strategy (2022-2026)

- Outlines a comprehensive roadmap to improve health outcomes for adolescents across the country.
- Emphasises equitable access to adolescent-responsive health services, including sexual and reproductive health, HIV prevention, mental health care, and nutrition. The plan prioritises gender-responsive and rights-based approaches, focusing on vulnerable groups such as married adolescents, young mothers, and out-of-school youth.
- It promotes youth participation, integration of services across health, education, and social sectors, and the expansion of youth-friendly health corners and mobile outreach, especially in rural and underserved areas.

Asia

Bangladesh

Comprehensive measures to reduce CEFMU

Education & Empowerment

- UNFPA-UNICEF Global Programme (since 2016) reached over 300,000 adolescent girls with life skills and comprehensive sexuality education.²⁷⁷

Community Engagement

- Initiatives like the “Empower Girls through Education and Skill” programme provide safe spaces for girls to discuss challenges, receive mentorship, and build skills, aiming to shift community norms around child marriage.²⁷⁸

Health & Protection

- Child protection committees established at national, district, upazila, and union levels, these committees comprise government officials, local representatives, and NGO members. Their roles include monitoring and taking action against child marriages

Policy & National Strategy Impacts

National Action to Eng Child Marriage (2018-2030)

- Outlines strategic actions across sectors to prevent child marriage, support married adolescents, and strengthen legal frameworks.²⁷⁹

National Adolescent Health Strategy (2017–2030):

- Refers to child marriage as a form of violence against adolescents and proposes measures to reduce its impact on survivors and raise awareness.²⁸⁰

Cambodia

Comprehensive measures to reduce CEFMU

Education & Empowerment

- NGOs such as Room to Read Cambodia and This Life Cambodia offer educational re-entry and retention programs for out-of-school girls, including those married early.
- Vocational training programmes provide life skills education are provided to adolescent girls, helping to build economic independence and reduce vulnerability to child marriage and unions

Community Engagement

- Initiatives like Girls Not Brides Cambodia and youth-led community dialogues work with local leaders and parents to shift social norms around child marriage.
- In the north-eastern provinces, Plan International Cambodia created employment for opportunities for adolescent girls and increase financial independent as deterrent against CEFMU. Plan International Cambodia also empowers adolescent girls' confident to fight against negative social and gender norms and harmful practices.

Health & Protection

- Youth-friendly health services and mobile SRH clinics serve high-risk provinces, offering contraception, counselling, and antenatal care.
- The Ministry of Women's Affairs and NGOs collaborate to run helplines and shelters for girls escaping early or forced unions.
- CARE Cambodia's *Chat! Contraception* programme, launched in 2015, uses interactive sessions, soap-opera-style videos, and a mobile app to educate garment factory workers about sexual and reproductive health.

Policy & National Strategy Impacts

The Prevention of Child Marriage and Adolescent Pregnancy action plan (2017-2021)

- Piloted in Ratana Kiri region, focusing on SRHR education, access to contraception, and legal awareness.

Indonesia

Comprehensive measures to reduce CEFMU

Education & Empowerment

- RISE Indonesia has examined how local education policies can reduce dropout and child marriage risks. Findings have influenced local interventions, especially in areas with high CEFMU prevalence.²⁸¹

Community Engagement

- The BERANI Project (Better Reproductive Health and Rights for All Adolescents in Indonesia) works with religious leaders, parents, and local officials to change social norms around child marriage.²⁸²
- Fatwas and religious endorsements have supported delaying marriage, with the Indonesian Ulama Council (MUI) issuing guidance encouraging later marriage.²⁸³
- Indonesia also implements several other initiatives such as "Generasi Emas Bangsa Bebas Perkawinan Usia Anak" (GEMA CITA), YES I Do, and Bloom, which focus on empowering adolescents and preventing child marriage through education, advocacy, and community-based interventions.

Health & Protection

- Adolescent-Friendly Health Services (AFHS) exist in many provinces, offering confidential services including reproductive health counselling and STI screening.²⁸⁴
- Partnerships with women's shelters and legal aid organisations provide support for girls escaping child marriage or abuse.²⁸⁵
- PKSAI (Child Social Welfare Information System) supported by the Ministry of Social Affairs and UNICEF enables local governments to identify and assist children at risk of violence or child

marriage. Through referral mechanisms, children are connected to services including education and psychosocial support.²⁸⁶

Policy & National Strategy Impacts

Ministry of Women Empowerment and Child Protection's National Strategy Prevention of Child Marriage (2020-2024)

- Focuses on strengthening data systems, increased community awareness, expanding health and education services and enhancing legal frameworks and enforcement.
- An evaluation of the National Strategy for the Prevention of Child Marriage (Stranas PPA) was completed in early 2025.²⁸⁷

Nepal

Comprehensive measures to reduce CEFMU

Education & Empowerment

- Programmes like Educate the Girl Child provide financial support to encourage schooling and provincial initiatives such as Samriddha Pradeshka lagi Aatmanirbhar Chhori in Koshi and Mukhya Mantri Beti Bachau, Beti Padhau in Madhesh support girls' education and empowerment to reduce child marriage.
- In Bagmati, Gandaki, and Lumbini, provincial budgets and strategies have been mobilised to declare child marriage-free zones and strengthen community-based interventions.
- Karnali's Bank Khata Chhoriko, Suraksha Jeevan Bhariko and Sudurpaschim's Sanai Chhu Ma, Badhna Deu campaigns link financial incentives and awareness campaigns to delay marriage.
- In early 2025, the Child Marriage Free Nepal campaign involves stakeholders across seven provinces pledging to end Child Marriage in 2030 through awareness raising actions alongside increased implementation of the law and practical support for families to register in social programmes.²⁸⁸
- Many local governments have allocated budgets to support girls' education, while organisations like Plan International, World Vision, and UNFPA deliver life skills packages to in- and out-of-school girls.²⁸⁹

Community Engagement

- UNFPA also works with their parents, community members and religious leaders to create an encouraging environment.²⁹⁰
- Save the Children's parent-focused unit in the *Choices, Voices and Promises* curriculum in Nepal uses advertising techniques to craft aspirational messages encouraging parents to support positive outcomes in their daughters' marriages.
- Provincial campaigns such as Koshi's Community Mobilisation Programme to End Child Marriage and Sudurpaschim's peer education and parenting initiatives further strengthen local engagement and accountability.

Health & Protection

- UNFPA supports young girls who are already married, to help them plan their pregnancies and is working with the Government of Nepal to improve access to sexual and reproductive health information, services and education for young people.²⁹¹
- Provinces like Lumbini and Gandaki have integrated child protection and rehabilitation into their anti-child marriage strategies, ensuring that girls at risk or already affected receive the necessary support.
- Provinces like Lumbini and Gandaki have integrated child protection and rehabilitation into their anti-child marriage strategies, ensuring that girls at risk or already affected receive the necessary support.

Policy & National Strategy Impacts

National Strategy on Ending Child Marriage (2016-2030)

- Focuses on empowering girls through education and life skills, strengthening legal frameworks and enforcement, promoting community engagement and behaviour change and improving access to

SRHR services. Provincial governments have aligned with this strategy through tailored programmes, operating procedures, and budget allocations, reinforcing a nationwide commitment to ending child marriage by 2030.

Latin America and the Caribbean

Colombia

Comprehensive measures to reduce CEFMU

Education & Empowerment

- The UNFPA–UNICEF Global Programme has provided life skills, SRHR education, and vocational training to adolescent girls in high-risk areas such as La Guajira, Chocó, and the Amazon.
- Save the Children Colombia has implemented community-based educational programmes for out-of-school married adolescents.

Community Engagement

- Local initiatives in Indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities involve intergenerational dialogue, youth advocacy groups, and cultural education to challenge harmful traditional practices.²⁹²
- Community surveillance networks in areas like Cauca and Putumayo monitor cases of child marriage and domestic violence.²⁹³

Health & Protection

- Over 50 adolescent-friendly health service centres have been set up nationwide, providing SRHR counselling, contraceptives, and GBV services.
- Mobile health brigades in remote areas offer access to sexual and reproductive healthcare for married girls and young mothers.²⁹⁴
- Government-supported shelters and civil society organisations provide temporary housing, legal aid, and counselling for survivors of child marriage, abuse, or abandonment.
- The Instituto Colombiano de Bienestar Familiar (ICBF) is the leading child protection agency and plays a central role in psychosocial care for adolescent mothers and survivors of GBV but there is a further need for inter-agency coordination, monitoring mechanism and financing to scale interventions.

Policy & National Strategy Impacts

National Policy for the Comprehensive Development of Adolescents and Youth (2023)

- Includes protective measures for early-married adolescents.²⁹⁵

Gender Equality Plan (2021-2025)

- Outlines strategies to reduce early unions, improve education access, and strengthen legal protections.²⁹⁶

Dominican Republic

Comprehensive measures to reduce CEFMU

Education & Empowerment

- The “Creceer Contenta” (Grow Happy) programme, implemented in provinces with high adolescent pregnancy rates, combines life skills, reproductive health education, and mentorship for at-risk girls.²⁹⁷
- Girls’ clubs and youth leadership camps coordinated by Plan International and UNICEF have been rolled out nationwide to build confidence, promote peer support, and delay early unions.²⁹⁸

Community Engagement

- The National Council for Children and Adolescents (CONANI) partners with local NGOs to conduct community dialogues and awareness campaigns on the harms of early unions and adolescent pregnancy.²⁹⁹

Health & Protection

- The Ministry of Public Health and Social Assistance (MISPAS) and the National Health Service (SNS), with support from UNFPA and CONANI, have implemented programs to improve access to adolescent-friendly sexual and reproductive health services.³⁰⁰ These include confidential counselling, contraception, and maternal health care tailored to the needs of adolescent girl.

Policy & National Strategy Impacts

*National Plan to Reduce Adolescent Pregnancies (2019-2023)*³⁰¹

- Includes its objectives awareness-raising with families and communities to challenge norms around child marriage, and calls for legal reforms to prohibit early unions and address poverty and inequality.³⁰²

Ecuador

Comprehensive measures to reduce CEFMU

Education & Empowerment

- SRHR for adolescents has not improved especially in rural and indigenous communities. Plan International Ecuador has an agreement with Memorandum of Understanding with the Ministry of Education to implement different projects which involve SRHR for adolescents and women in different communities.

Community Engagement

- UNFPA Ecuador, in collaboration with local governments and civil society, has supported community-based dialogues and training sessions aimed at transforming gender norms and preventing adolescent pregnancy and early unions.³⁰³

Health & Protection

- Adolescent-friendly health services in remote areas through mobile clinics, aiming to increase access to contraception and counselling³⁰⁴
- Ecuador is one of the countries where the Spotlight Initiative (a global, multi-year partnership between the European Union and the United Nations) is supporting efforts to end all forms of sexual and gender-based violence and harmful practices against women and girls.³⁰⁵

Policy & National Strategy Impacts

National Strategy for Comprehensive Sexuality Education (ENEIS).

- Applied on a mandatory basis nationwide in all educational institutions of fiscal, fiscal-commissioned, municipal and private support.³⁰⁶

National Intersectoral Strategy for the Prevention of Pregnancy in Girls and Adolescents (ENIPLA)

- While focused on adolescent pregnancy, it also targets early unions as a contributing factor.
- Promotes comprehensive sexuality education, access to health services, and community engagement.

Guatemala

Comprehensive measures to reduce CEFMU

Education & Empowerment

- Rise Up's "Let Girls Lead" programme, in partnership with the "Asociación Pro-Bienestar de la Familia de Guatemala" (APROFAM) trained adolescent girls in advocacy and leadership, enabling them to engage directly with lawmakers to push for legal reforms and promote girls' rights.³⁰⁷
- Local mentoring initiatives have empowered married adolescents to return to school and delay subsequent pregnancies.

Community Engagement

- Girls Not Brides and La Mesa a Favor de las Niñas y Adolescentes coordinate community-based campaigns and dialogues to challenge harmful norms and raise awareness about the effects of early unions.³⁰⁸

Health & Protection

- The Spotlight Initiative in Guatemala supports integrated protection systems for girls at risk of gender-based violence and early unions, with a focus on legal aid, psychosocial support, and community-based protection.³⁰⁹

Annex D: Promising Programmatic Innovations and Trends

Across the 15 study countries, a growing number of governments are integrating child marriage prevention and support into broader adolescent health, education, and gender equality strategies. While many of these interventions are not new, recent innovations in delivery models, targeting, and integration with social protection systems are showing promising results. Key interventions from government, Plan International and other agencies include:

Mobile and community-based SRHR services

Countries such as Ethiopia, Mozambique, and Guatemala are expanding adolescent-friendly health services through mobile clinics, adolescent health corners, and integrated SRHR outreach.

- In Ethiopia, the Health Extension Programme deploys trained female health workers to rural communities, offering contraceptive counselling, maternal care, and referrals. This model is scalable due to its integration into the national health system and its focus on community trust.³¹⁰
- In Mozambique, mobile clinics reach remote areas with SRHR services, including antenatal care and HIV testing, tailored for adolescents.³¹¹ These approaches reduce geographic and social barriers, especially for married girls who are often excluded from facility-based services.
- In Cambodia, CARE's Chat! Contraception programme combines in-person sessions, mobile app quizzes, and soap-opera-style videos to educate garment factory workers on SRHR. Since 2015, it has reached over 25,000 workers, halved unwanted pregnancies, and doubled modern contraception use.³¹²

School re-entry policies with wraparound support

While re-entry policies have existed in countries like Uganda, recent efforts are expanding their scope:

- Uganda's "Go Back to School" campaign now includes community sensitisation, teacher training, and peer support groups to reduce stigma.³¹³ However, gaps remain in childcare provision, which is essential for young mothers to return to school. This is an area where further innovation is needed.

Conditional cash transfers (CCTs) linked to education and SRHR outcomes

CCTs are increasingly used to delay marriage and support school retention:

- Indonesia's PKH programme provides cash to low-income families conditional on school attendance and health check-ups for children and pregnant women.³¹⁴
- Zambia's Girls' Education and Women's Empowerment and Livelihoods (GEWEL) programme targets adolescent girls with financial support and life skills training, helping them stay in school and delay marriage. Over 28,000 girls have benefited as of 2022.³¹⁵

Safe spaces and mentorship programmes

Programmes like Plan International's girls' clubs and the Girls' Education

Challenge offer safe, supportive environments for girls to build confidence, learn about their rights, and access services.

- These initiatives are often community-based and peer-led, making them adaptable and scalable.
- In contexts where girls face isolation post-marriage, these spaces provide critical psychosocial support and pathways to re-engage with education or livelihoods.

Norm change and community engagement

Shifting harmful social norms remains central to sustainable change.

- Programmes like Rapariga Biz in **Mozambique** and Let Girls Lead in **Guatemala** use multi-sectoral approaches to empower girls and engage families, schools, and service providers.^{316,317}
- Husbands' schools in **Niger** and faith leader dialogues in **Nigeria** have helped shift entrenched gender norms and increase male accountability.
- In **Colombia**, community surveillance networks have improved local accountability and reporting of early unions.
- In **Nepal**, Save the Children's Choices, Voices and Promises curriculum uses advertising-inspired messaging to encourage parents to support positive marriage outcomes for their daughters.³¹⁸
- Tools like CARE's Social Norms Analysis Plot (SNAP) and Plan International's Child Marriage Acceptability Index help measure shifts in gender norms and attitudes.³¹⁹
- Plan International's Champions of Change programme, active in 41 countries, aims to advance gender equality through youth engagement. The programme aims to empower girls and engage boys to identify and challenge harmful, negative masculinities that perpetuate discrimination and inequality.³²⁰ Champions of Change youth leaders highlighted how regular peer support and community events help challenge the social norms and prejudices that drive child marriage.³²¹
- The TESFA programme in **Ethiopia** is a strong example of scalable good practice, combining peer-led education, economic empowerment, and community dialogue to address the unique challenges faced by married adolescent girls. Its success seen in improved savings, health, communication, and reduced gender-based violence—led to TESFA+, which integrates the model into government systems and community groups, reaching over 5,000 girls to date.³²²
- Sammanit Jeevan is a scalable, intergenerational model that effectively reduces intimate partner violence and improves young married women's economic empowerment through gender norm transformation and women-led income-generating activities. Its success in rural **Nepal** is demonstrated by reduced IPV, increased earnings, and improved gender attitudes shows strong potential for adaptation in similar contexts.³²³
- One programme that has found positive effects is the multi-pronged 'Improving Sexual and Reproductive Health of Young People by increasing the Age at Marriage and Delaying the First Pregnancy', carried out from 2009 to 2013 in 18 sites across **Bangladesh**, India and **Nepal**. The randomised controlled trial

(RCT) found that access to media messages that challenged gender norms had significantly decreased child marriage among adolescent girls in the programme.

Policy and budgetary commitments

Some countries are demonstrating political will through legal and financial reforms:

- In **Indonesia**, new regulations on sexual violence were adopted in 2022, and the 2024–2029 National Development Plan includes child protection indicators.
- The government has expanded child protection units to 65% of districts, reaching over 42,000 children and caregivers with mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) and response services.
- These efforts reflect a growing commitment to institutionalising protection and support for girls.

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