



THEIR TIME IS NOW

Eliminating Child, Early and Forced
Marriage in Asia

Plan International Asia Regional Office, 2018

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ENDING CHILD MARRIAGE IS CRITICAL TO ACHIEVING AT LEAST HALF OF THE SDGs

These goals cannot be realized sequentially or in isolation, they are mutually reinforcing. For CEFM to be eliminated by 2030, we need to act now across a wide spectrum of interventions to ensure that everyone is growing together, that girls' rights are brought to the forefront and that no one is left behind.

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FOREWORD

Child marriage perpetuates poverty, inequality and insecurity and is an obstacle to global development. It is a harmful practice that affects millions of children, predominantly girls, every year. The practice is slowly declining but progress has been uneven across regions and countries, particularly in Asia.

Over 190 countries have adopted the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and committed to ending child marriage by 2030. For girls who are forced to marry early, the time to end it is now.

We need to understand and address the challenges that perpetuate this harmful practice in the Asia region. Given the populations of some Asian countries, the number of girls affected by CEFM is vast. In India nearly 16 million adolescents marry between the ages of 15 and 19, while in Bangladesh this is the reality for 2.5 million adolescents and for more than 1.2 million adolescents in Pakistan and Indonesia.

In Asia, we need to recommit ourselves to the cause of eliminating child, early and forced marriage in all its forms. Plan International commits itself to act with urgency, partnering with governments, academic institutions, civil society, private sector businesses, and many others to ensure this ambition becomes a reality for Asia's girls and boys. The time to end child marriage across Asia is now.



Senait Gebregziabher,
Regional Director
Plan International Asia Regional Office

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Plan International would like to acknowledge and thank GreeneWorks for the extensive research that they undertook on CEFM in the 14 countries in Asia upon which this summary report is based.

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ABOUT THIS REPORT

On behalf of Plan International, GreeneWorks undertook extensive research on the prevalence of CEFM in Bangladesh, Cambodia, China, India, Indonesia, Laos, Myanmar, Nepal, Pakistan, the Philippines, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Timor-Leste and Vietnam in 2017. This report is a summary of that 2017 research together with Plan International's analysis of the data. It provides a snapshot of CEFM in Asia and consolidates evidence that governments, universities, civil society organizations, and Plan International have generated over the past ten to fifteen years in the 14 countries that make up Plan International's Asia region. It analyses recent evidence on the prevalence, causes, trends, drivers and impact of CEFM; and outlines actions that must be taken to tackle CEFM in Asia and the strong commitment needed from stakeholders at multiple levels. The full technical report, from which this summary report is derived, is available at www.plan-international.org/asia/their-time-is-now-report/technical-report



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Child, early and forced marriage (CEFM) is commonly acknowledged across Asia as a violation of children's rights. The Convention on the Rights of the Child recommends 18 as the minimum age for marriage and, more recently, Target 5.3 of Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5, commits all United Nations member states to eliminate child marriage by 2030. This is an important tool to drive action, hold governments to account for their commitments to girls, and to track progress on ending child marriage globally. More importantly if child marriage is not eliminated by 2030, eight of the other SDGs simply cannot be realized.¹ And conversely, if these eight goals are not realized, it will be significantly more difficult to eradicate child marriage and near impossible to keep it from reappearing. The drivers of child marriage include poverty, low educational attainment, a lack of access to employment opportunities and gender equality; these are all addressed in the SDGs.

There is now broad international consensus about the harmful impact of child marriage on the lives of girls and their children, families, communities and countries. Many governments and civil society organizations have taken steps to respond to the problem and to address the drivers of CEFM. Plan International's efforts to finally end child, early and forced marriage are a key commitment of our work to improve the lives of girls and to ensure that the Global Agenda of 2030, with its health and development outcomes, can be realized. Our approach to ending child marriage in Asia recognizes the complex nature of the problem, and the socio-cultural and structural factors underpinning the practice.

For a host of reasons, child marriage continues to rob millions of girls across Asia of their childhoods. It forces them out of education and into a life of poor prospects, with increased risks of violence, abuse, ill health or early death. While boys are also married as children, child marriage affects girls in greater numbers and with consequences that can be devastating for their health and well-being. In other parts of the world child marriage has decreased significantly below the age of 15 but progress has been uneven and this is evident in the Asia region. Bangladesh, at least, continues to have considerable proportions of young women marrying before the age of 15.² In addition, there seems to be an East and South Asian pattern, with age at marriage slow to go beyond 18 in South Asia, while it has increased to 19 and into the early 20s in East Asia.

The countries included in this report – Bangladesh, Cambodia, China, India, Indonesia, Laos, Myanmar, Nepal, Pakistan, the Philippines, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Timor-Leste, and Vietnam – vary quite significantly in terms of the availability of data and how child marriage is measured and defined, resulting in inconsistencies across country settings. Data on child marriage tend to emphasize the experiences of 15-19-year-old girls; little is known about children aged 10-14. The same is true of the transition to marriage of boys, who are an important early-marrying group in some of the countries in Asia, most notably Nepal.

While there are specific factors that perpetuate child marriage in countries in Asia, common patterns are found. Households typically make decisions about girls' schooling and marriage jointly, not sequentially, and education tends to lose out. Accordingly, lower levels of education are found among women who marry in childhood. Poverty is a significant factor that drives and results from child marriage. The prevalence of child marriage correlates with levels of household wealth – greater wealth is associated with lower levels of child marriage.³ Geographic location also affects early marriage with girls from rural areas marrying at an earlier age than their urban counterparts.

Girls are subject to deep-rooted customs, norms and traditions that assign them a lower status in society. Gender inequality means that girls do not enjoy the same rights, resources, opportunities or protection as boys. Child brides are often unable to effectively negotiate safer sex, leaving them vulnerable to sexually transmitted infections, including HIV, along with early pregnancy. The pressure to become pregnant once married can be intense, and child brides typically end up having many children to care for while still young. Child brides are also less likely to receive proper medical care while pregnant. This burden of care often leads to girls who marry early being socially isolated – cut off from family and friends and other sources of support – with limited opportunities to continue their education or seek employment.

Enforcing legislation prohibiting child marriage can be complex, particularly in countries that have established plural legal systems and where marriages are also conducted under customary, traditional or religious laws. This is evident in most of the 14 countries where Plan International works in Asia. In addition, even in settings where supportive legislation has been passed, the failure to allocate sufficient resources to end child marriage remains a barrier. Gender inequality also exists within legislation; the majority of countries where there is a significant disparity in the minimum age at marriage for males and females are in Asia.

The report concludes with some preliminary recommendations, based on the Asia region desk review that forms the basis of this report, of the multi-sectoral response that is urgently needed from Asian governments, donors and their civil society partners. Further research into promising programmatic approaches based on primary research and interviews with practitioners will be published at a later date as Phase II in this series of three reports. Some common themes that emerge include the need to strengthen laws on child marriage prevention and to ensure robust birth and marriage registration systems. Greater synergy and harmonization among various policies is also needed to ensure the development of an overall framework that supports the eradication of child marriage. In addition, numerous studies have concluded that education results in delayed marriage in Asia. It also leads to improved income-generating opportunities for families because educated girls are much more likely to enter the labour market. Prevailing cultural and traditional norms highlight the need to engage with religious leaders and awareness raising trainings should target community leaders, parents, adolescents and other key stakeholders. Studies also suggest that child marriage might be reduced by addressing the financial motivations behind it for impoverished or indebted families.

Ending child, early and forced marriage will help break the intergenerational cycle of poverty by allowing girls and women to participate more fully in society. Empowered and educated girls are also better able to nourish and care for their children, leading to healthier, smaller families. When girls are allowed to be girls, everybody wins. However, this cannot be achieved without the commitment of stakeholders from all sectors to drive change to end this practice in the region.

ACTION NEEDED TO TACKLE CHILD, EARLY AND FORCED MARRIAGE ACROSS ASIA

- Strengthen regional and national programmes and policies to address all SDGs, including SDG 5, with equal urgency
- Develop and implement effective legislation to prohibit and discourage child marriage
- Strengthen civil registration and vital statistics systems
- Improve girls' access to quality primary and secondary education
- Support economic and livelihood opportunities for young people, especially girls
- Provide age-appropriate sexual and reproductive health and rights information and services
- Engage and work with parents, teachers, community leaders and faith-based organizations
- Support boys and girls who are already married
- Involve girls and boys in decision-making processes that affect them

1. A SNAPSHOT OF CHILD, EARLY AND FORCED MARRIAGE IN ASIA



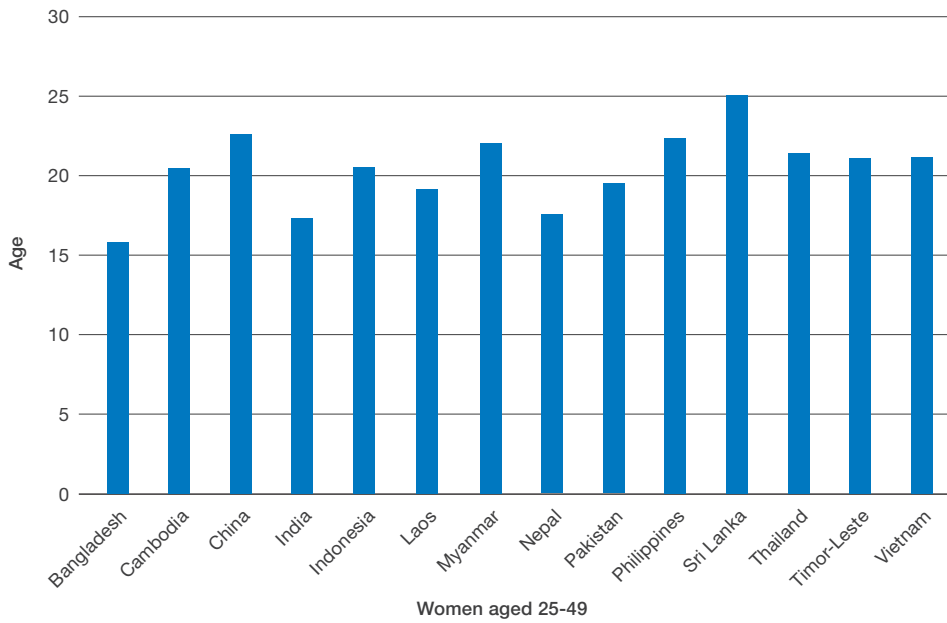
A snapshot of the regional issues

- In other parts of the world child marriage has decreased significantly below the age of 15. Bangladesh, at least, continues to have considerable proportions of young women marrying before this age. There seems to be an East and South Asian pattern, with age at marriage slow to go beyond 18 in South Asia, while it has increased to 19 and into the early 20s in East Asia.
- Levels of child marriage in Asia vary dramatically between countries, ranging from around 70 percent among young women in Bangladesh to just over 10 percent among young women in Vietnam; and from approximately 5 percent among young men in Timor-Leste, Vietnam and Indonesia to just under 20 percent among young men in Nepal.
- Unlike other parts of the world, such as Africa and Latin America, the percentage of young boys who marry as children is significant. There are as many as 156 million men living in the region today who married as children. Nepal and Laos rank among the top countries where at least 10 percent of boys marry as children.
- Marriage in the region tends to precede sexual activity, especially for young women; this is especially the case in the South Asian countries of Pakistan, Nepal, Bangladesh and India. The fear of a girl becoming sexually active or pregnant before marriage is one of the key drivers of early marriage in Asia.

At what age do children marry?

In 2017, the median age at marriage was above 20 in 10 of the 14 countries, with the exception of Bangladesh, India, Nepal and Pakistan. Median age at marriage was highest in Sri Lanka at 25, and nearly a decade lower, at 15.8, in Bangladesh.

Figure 1. Median age at first marriage in Asia



Sources: Recent Demographic and Health Survey (DHS) or Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS) by country, 2009-2016; China National Census 2010.



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Where was child marriage most prevalent?

Child marriage by age 15 was highest in Bangladesh at 18 percent. While some actors claim child marriage in East and Southeast Asia is negligible in comparison, the fact is that more than one in three women in Laos and one in five women in Thailand were married by the age of 18.

Table 1 illustrates the variability in child marriage rates across the 14 countries. In Bangladesh, India, Laos and Nepal more than 4 percent of girls married before the age of 15, and the rates were high in the first two countries at 18 percent.

Child marriage in Bangladesh, Nepal, India and Pakistan occurred at a slightly older age range, but still below 18 years. Between 1991 and 2007, the overall prevalence of marriage of adolescents under 18 years decreased, largely as a consequence of fewer marriages of girls under 15 years. Demographic and Health Survey (DHS) data show that there has been little change in the prevalence of marriage at ages 16 and 17.

Table 1. Percentage of girls currently aged 20-24 who married before the age of 15, and before the age of 18

Country	Among women aged 20-24	
	married < 15	married < 18
Bangladesh	18%	52%
Cambodia	2%	19%
China	N/A*	N/A*
India	18%	47%
Indonesia	N/A*	14%
Laos	9%	35%
Myanmar	N/A*	N/A*
Nepal	10%	37%
Pakistan	3%	27%
Philippines	2%	15%
Sri Lanka	2%	12%
Thailand	4%	22%
Timor-Leste	3%	19%
Vietnam	1%	11%

More than one in three women in Laos and one in five women in Thailand were married by the age of 18.⁴

Sources: Demographic and Health Survey (DHS) or Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS) by country, 2009-2016; www.girlsnotbrides.org/where-does-it-happen. Retrieved from Girls Not Brides website on July 15, 2017.

Data are not available for China, Indonesia and Laos in this data source.

Do boys and girls marry at the same age?

While the percentage of boys married as adolescents was not insignificant, girls were married in adolescence at far higher rates than boys across Asia. Bangladesh stood out for the especially large gender disparity in the percentages married as children. The Philippines and Vietnam showed some of the smallest gaps between girls and boys in the timing of marriage (Table 2).

Table 2. Percentage of boys married by age 18 among ever-married men aged 25-49

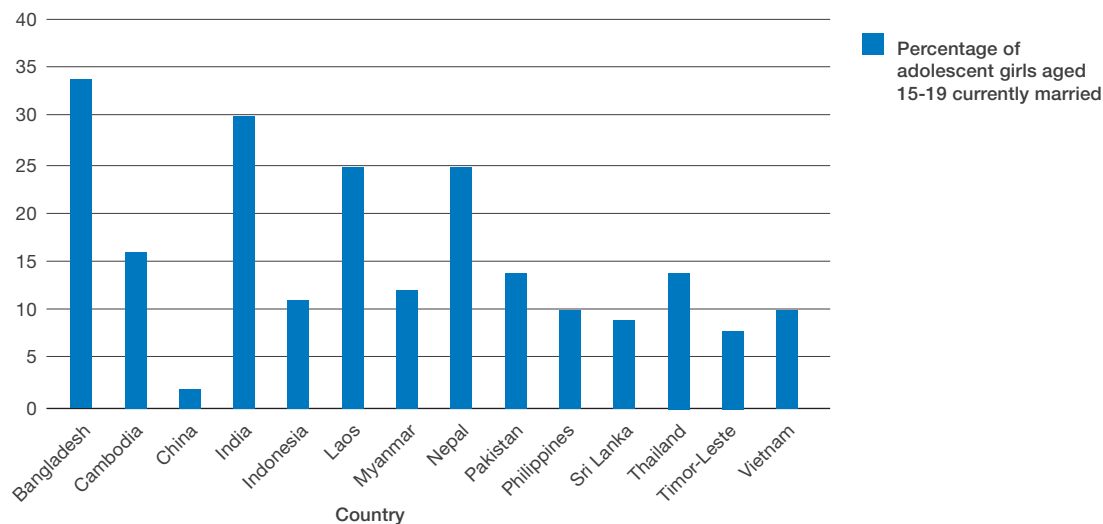
Country	Percentage of boys married by age 18
Bangladesh	6.3
Cambodia	8.5
India	11.9
Indonesia	4.9
Laos	14.6
Myanmar	7.1
Nepal	19.1
Pakistan	8.7
Philippines	5.4
Thailand	8.0
Timor-Leste	4.8
Vietnam	4.9

Sources: ICF International; DHS and MICS by country, 2009-2016. Laos age range 20-49; Thailand age range 20-24. Data are not available for China and Sri Lanka in this data source.

Are girls marrying later?

The percentage of adolescent girls currently aged 15 to 19 who were married is suggestive of trends among the youngest of this group towards a somewhat older age at marriage. Marriage among adolescent girls between 15 to 19 exceeded 10 percent in all countries except China, Sri Lanka and Timor-Leste (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. Percentage of adolescent girls aged 15-19 currently married



Sources: ICF International; DHS and MICS by country, 2009-2016; China Population Survey, 2012.

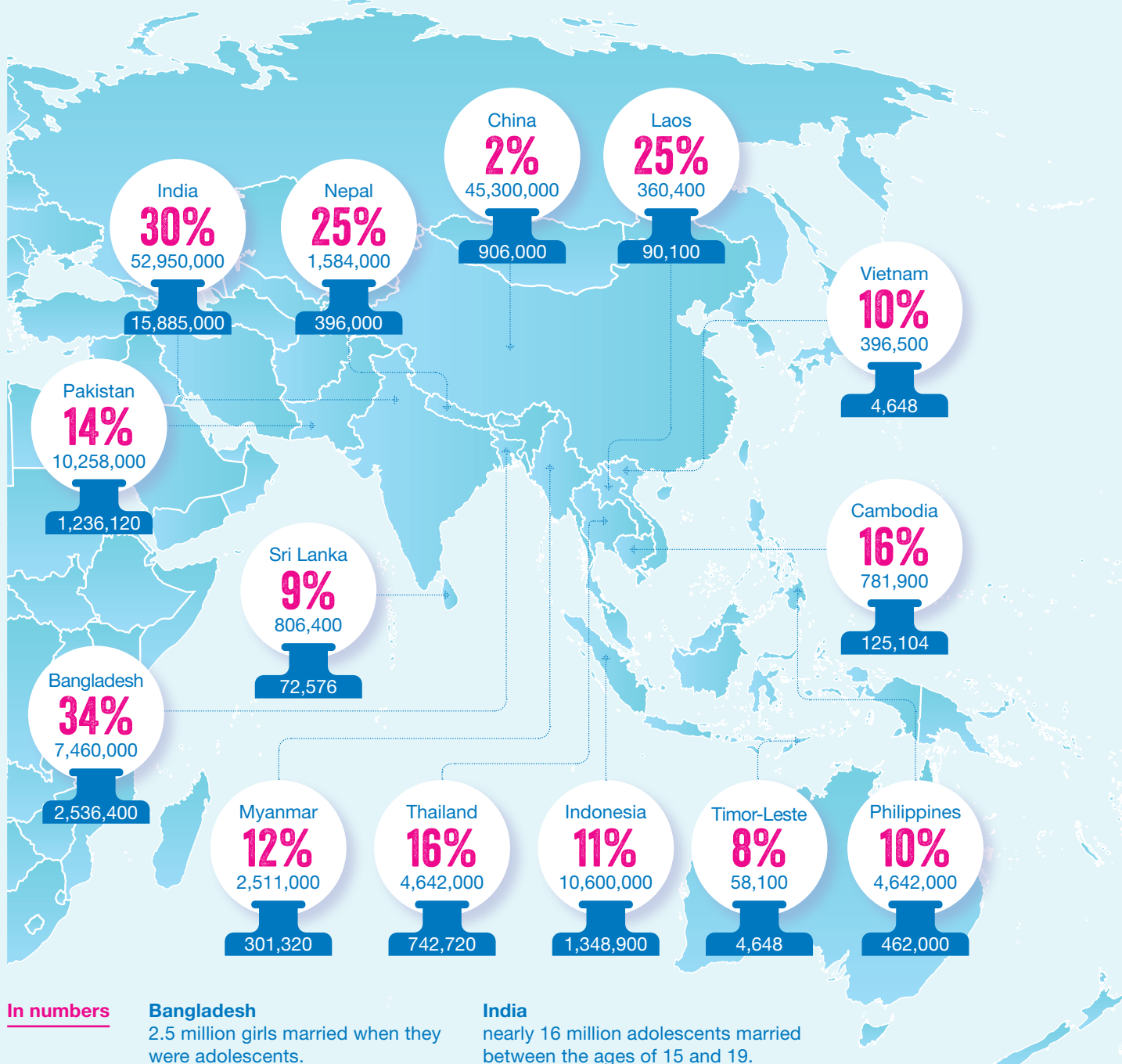


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In which countries are the greatest numbers of girls affected by child marriage?

It is important to consider not only the percentage of the population of girls who marry as children but the actual numbers of girls affected. The percentage of women aged 20 to 24 who married between the ages of 15 and 19, along with the total population of 20 to 24-year-olds and the number of 20 to 24-year-olds who married between the ages of 15 and 19 in each country is shown at Table 3.

Table 3. Number of women aged 20-24 who married between ages 15 and 19



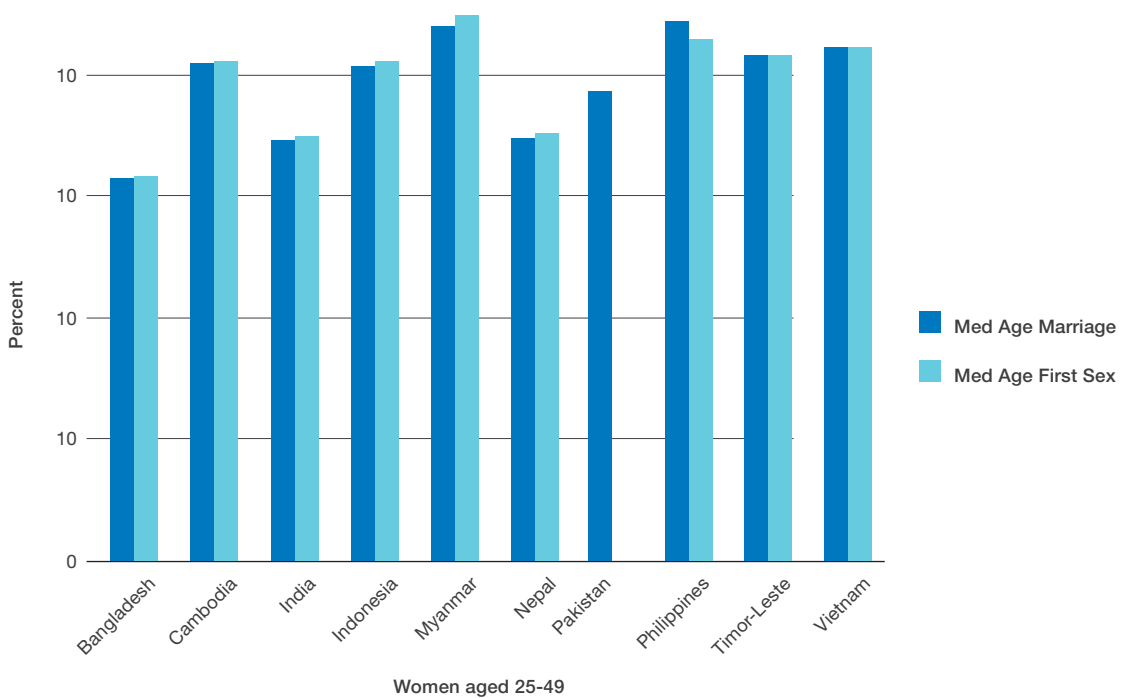
Sources: ICF International; DHS and MICS by country 2009-2016; U.S. Census Bureau. Retrieved from: www.census.gov.



At what age do girls have their first sexual experience?

Sexual debut before age 15 was more common in South and Southeast Asia than in East or Central Asia, where it was less than 1 percent of girls. Bangladesh and India stand out with 15 percent and 8 percent of girls aged 15 to 19, respectively, who have had sexual intercourse before the age of 15; in a context where sexual debut occurs almost exclusively within marriage in these countries. Median age at first sexual intercourse in South and Southeast Asia was generally higher than the median age at first marriage. Among countries with data on sexual initiation, only in the Philippines did a girl have her first sexual experience, on average, before marriage. But patterns are changing, and the fear of a daughter's exposure to sex before marriage is one of the key drivers of early marriage.

Figure 3. Median age at marriage and median age at first sex



Sources: ICF International; DHS and MICS by country, 2009-2016. Data are not available for China, Laos, Sri Lanka and Thailand in this data source.

2. WHAT ARE THE **DRIVERS** OF CHILD, EARLY AND FORCED MARRIAGE?

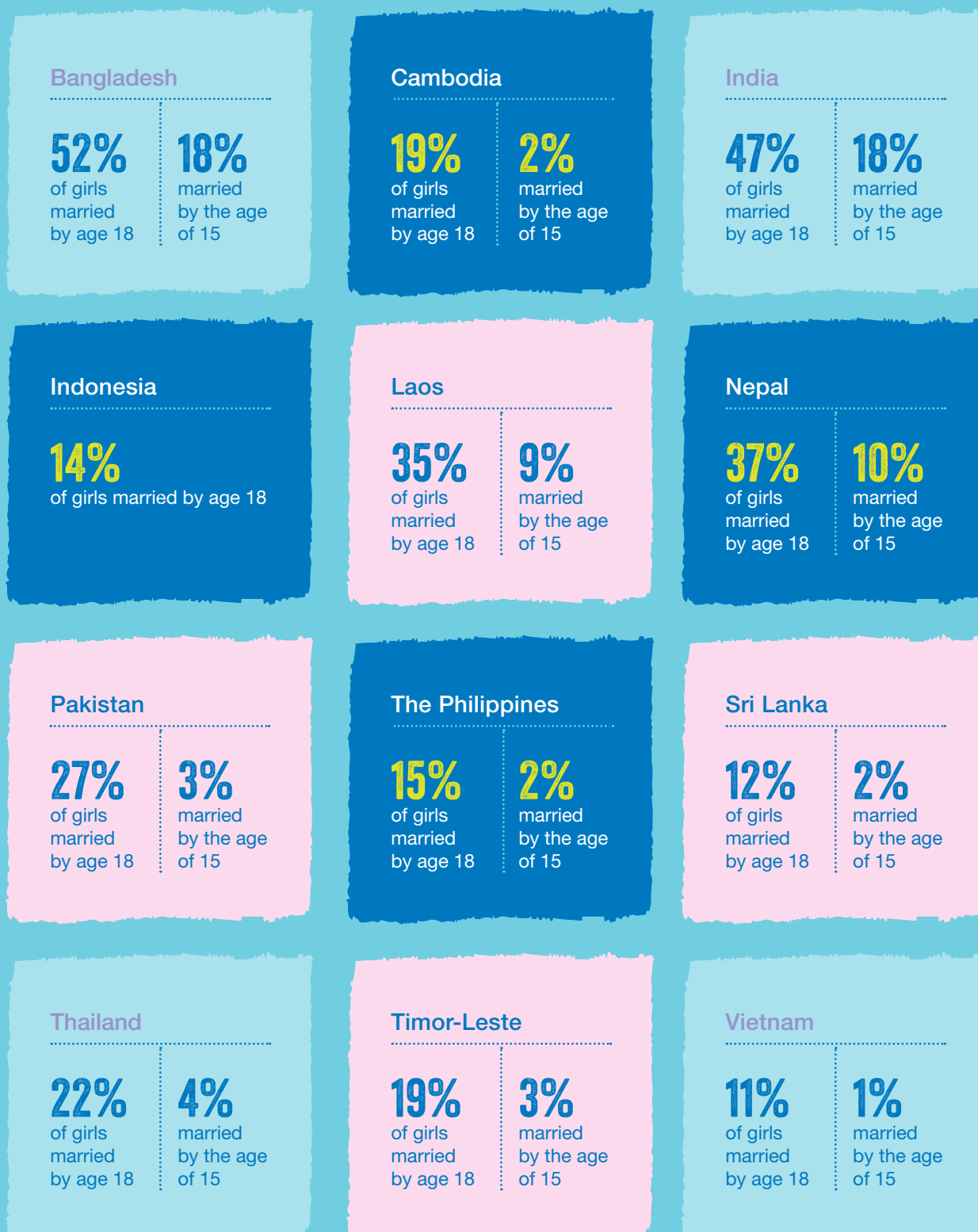
Child marriage across 14 Asian countries

The existence of data on child marriage and the validity of this data are an issue in the region. Few countries in the region have robust and reliable Management Information Systems and Civil Registration and Vital Statistics are often incomplete or inconsistent. As a consequence, it is not always possible to analyse the practice of child marriage, particularly as it relates to early sexual activity and pregnancy.

The profiles of the 14 countries use the 2009-2016 Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS), Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys (MICS) and data from the Girls Not Brides website (as accessed in 2017) to show the number of girls married by the ages of 18 and 15. Due to low levels of birth registration, this data likely underreports the number of child marriages in the region.



Figure 4. Girls married by the age of 18 and age 15 in Asia*



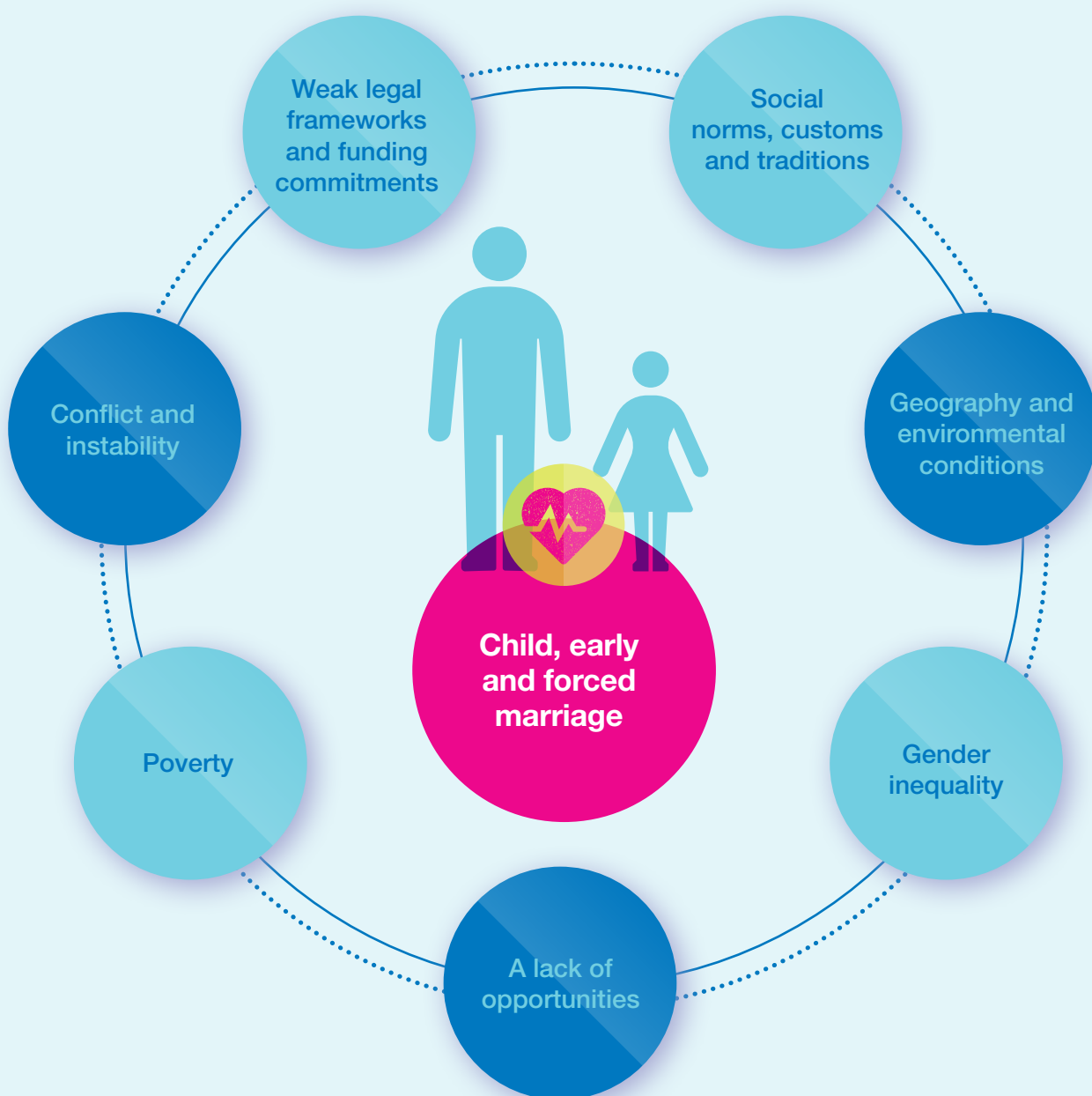
Sources: Demographic and Health Survey (DHS) or Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS) by country, 2009-2016; www.girlsnotbrides.org/where-does-it-happen. Retrieved from Girls Not Brides website on July 15, 2017.

* Data were not available for China and Myanmar in this data source.

The underlying causes of child, early and forced marriage

The factors that drive child marriage are complex, dynamic, inter-related and vary from country to country in Asia. Poverty is a significant factor that both drives and results from child marriage. The prevalence of child marriage correlates with levels of household wealth – as wealth increases, child marriage gradually decreases. Across the 14 countries, girls from poorer families are more vulnerable to child marriage. This is particular evident in remote geographical areas where families perceive that they have limited options. Traditional assigned gender roles, together with prevailing cultural norms place little value on a woman’s education and her role outside the household. Gender-based violence and early pregnancy can be both causes and consequences of child marriage. In areas of conflict, displaced families often view early marriage as a means of protecting their daughter. Child marriage is exacerbated and perpetuated by plural legal systems that endorse the practice with limited resources to enforce legislation prohibiting it. These factors intersect to rob many girls of their childhood, their right to go to school, and their chance to determine and secure their own future.

Figure 5. The drivers of child, early and forced marriage



CEFM and the Sustainable Development Goals

Eliminating many of the factors that drive CEFM are specifically addressed in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG); a universal call to action to end poverty, protect the planet and ensure that all people enjoy peace and prosperity. Eliminating child marriage is a specific target under SDG 5. As illustrated below the goals are interconnected – often the key to success on one SDG involves tackling issues more commonly associated with another, and this is particularly true to achieve the target of eliminating child marriage.

5 GENDER EQUALITY



Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls

In society in many societies, women are subject to deep-rooted customs, norms and traditions that assign them a lower status in society. Gender inequality means that girls do not enjoy the same rights, resources, opportunities or protection as boys. Through child marriage, girls and women are systematically deprived of educational, financial and social resources. Gender inequitable norms are supported by other factors and conditions in girls' lives, including economic opportunities, access to services and even geography.

One factor at the intersection of gender inequality and child marriage is the constructed societal norm where it is assumed that girls will undertake domestic roles, rather than economic productive roles or roles as leaders within their communities. There is an assumption that girls should be good wives and mothers, focusing on others and putting their own well-being and personal development in second place. In a male-dominated society like Pakistan, girls and women are largely confined within the walls of their own home, with the intention of keeping them safe and protecting their dignity as good sisters, daughters, wives and mothers.

An area where there is limited research in the area of gender inequality is the role of men in marriage and in early marriage in particular; and what motivates and attracts them to marry young girls. In some countries, the distorted sex ratio at birth due to son preference means that many men who have reached the age of marriage cannot find marriage partners of their own age and this may have some bearing on the practice – but more research is needed.

BANGLADESH HAD THE HIGHEST PERCENTAGE OF GIRLS WHO MARRIED AS CHILDREN IN ASIA AND THE FIFTH HIGHEST IN THE WORLD. FOR GIRLS UNDER THE AGE OF 15, THE RATE OF CHILD MARRIAGE WAS THE HIGHEST IN THE WORLD.⁵



Poverty is a significant factor that drives and results from child marriage. The prevalence of child marriage correlates with levels of household wealth – as wealth increases, child marriage gradually decreases. Across the 14 countries, girls from poorer families were more vulnerable to child marriage. In Laos, the age at marriage was nearly three years younger among the poorest households.⁶ In Timor-Leste 26 percent of 15 to 19-year-olds from the poorest households were currently married compared to 2.3 per cent of those from the richest households who married by the age of 18. In India, the median age at first marriage was 19.7 years for females in the wealthiest households compared to 15.4 years in the poorest households.

Girls also dropped out of school earlier, often because of the costs associated with education; limited family resources were more likely to be spent on boys' education.⁸ If a girl was not attending school, parents were more likely to marry her as it meant one less mouth to feed. In Southeast Asia, the dowry or "bride price" was also a relevant factor as it is lower for a younger bride.

IN NEPAL NEARLY A THIRD OF ADOLESCENT GIRLS LEFT SCHOOL TO MARRY.⁷

Table 4. Median age at first marriage by wealth quintile

Median age at first marriage [women]: 25-49 years						
Wealth quintile						
Country	Survey	Lowest	Second	Middle	Fourth	Highest
Bangladesh	2014 DHS	15.2	15.4	15.7	15.8	17.3
India	2005-06 DHS	16.3	16.4	16.9	17.8	19.8
Indonesia	2012 DHS	19.1	19.4	19.7	20.6	22.6
Cambodia	2014 DHS	20.3	20.0	20.2	20.4	21.6
Myanmar	2015-16 DHS	19.8	20.7	22.1	22.9	
Nepal	2011 DHS	17.0	17.1	17.0	17.5	19.1
Philippines	2013 DHS	19.8	20.9	21.9	23.4	
Pakistan	2012-13 DHS	17.8	18.6	19.2	20.2	22.1
Timor-Leste	2009-10 DHS	20.9	20.8	20.7	20.5	21.3

Sources: ICF International, 2015. The DHS Program STATcompiler www.statcompiler.com, accessed July 15, 2017. Data are not available for China, Laos, Sri Lanka, Thailand and Vietnam in this data source.

4 QUALITY EDUCATION



Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all

8 DECENT WORK AND ECONOMIC GROWTH



Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic, full and productive employment and decent work for all

The lack of opportunities for child brides is self-perpetuated by societal norms and customs that do not place a high value on a girl's education. In Laos, 45 percent of adolescents with no education between the ages of 15 and 19 were married.⁹ In Myanmar 19 per cent of adolescents who had never been to school had begun childbearing.¹⁰ Without an education, adolescent girls cannot find employment, and this is exacerbated by societal norms that place little value on women's contributions from outside the home. Many families cannot envisage a life for their daughters that

does not involve early marriage. In rural areas, access to education may be lacking, in part due to gender inequalities that do not allow girls the mobility to go to school in the next village. In the absence of access to education and economic opportunities, particularly in poor rural settings, it is challenging to raise awareness about the harmful effects of early marriage. In such settings, child marriage is often seen by community members as a viable way to safeguard a girl's future given the lack of any other options.

16 PEACE, JUSTICE AND STRONG INSTITUTIONS



Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels

Early marriage is often perceived by families as a protective measure and is used as a coping method in times of natural disaster, conflict and instability, particularly as there tends to be a breakdown in community structures and an increase in gender-based violence in humanitarian settings. Often families are living in cramped conditions in internally-displaced persons camps, with little privacy or ability to earn a livelihood. Fear of rape and sexual violence, of unwanted pregnancies, of family shame and dishonour, of homelessness and hunger or starvation were all

reported by parents and children as legitimate reasons for early marriage (Women's Refugee Commission, 2016).¹¹ Poverty, weak legislative frameworks and enforcement mechanisms, harmful traditional practices, gender discrimination and a lack of alternative opportunities for girls (especially education) are all major drivers of early marriage that are sharpened by the fear and anxiety symptomatic of fragile contexts. As a result, parents resort to early marriage as a protection against both real and perceived risks.

13 CLIMATE ACTION



Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts

Many marriages are driven by environmentally induced poverty. Environmental conditions and climate change place added additional economic pressures on families to marry their daughters early; this is seen among poor families in the remote mountainous regions of Nepal. Bangladesh's high vulnerability to natural disasters pushes families into poverty and drives decisions to marry daughters early. In such instances marriages are expedited by environmental pressures while the dowry is lower or waived altogether for very young girls.

Data from the 14 countries clearly illustrate the rural/urban disparities in the rates of child marriage.

In Laos twice as many adolescent girls married before the age of 18 in rural areas.¹² In Nepal, almost 93 percent of 15 to 24-year-olds living in rural areas were married.¹³ This perhaps, once again, highlights the more limited educational facilities and economic opportunities in these areas. In India there was a striking disparity between states; the percentage of married adolescents varied widely from over 50 percent in Andhra Pradesh and Bihar to less than 7 percent in Goa and Mizoram.¹⁴ In Nepal's geographically isolated areas, parents are influenced to marry their daughters when potential grooms present themselves, as they are uncertain of when another opportunity will arise.

Social norms, customs and traditions



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Traditional and patriarchal beliefs towards gender roles, rooted in social, cultural or religious customs can insulate and perpetuate the practice of child marriage. In patriarchal societies women and adolescents lack the ability to make choices about their sexuality. Despite its importance, however, development interventions aimed at addressing gender inequality and girls and women's rights and empowerment have largely remained silent on sexuality. To address child marriage, it is critical to address sexuality, and with it, the patterns of male dominance and female subordination that define sexual relations within the context of child, early and forced marriage.

Social norms shape how sexuality is viewed, expressed, experienced and constrained. Parents are prompted to arrange early marriages for their daughters due to a perceived need to preserve girls' pre-marital virginity and to protect her and her family from the risk of shame or dishonour attached to "inappropriate" behaviour outside of marriage. There is also a fear of sexual assaults. As discussed above, parents' decisions to have their daughters married at an early age is often motivated by a wish to do what is best for them, particularly in communities where there are few educational or economic opportunities for women.

Discriminatory social norms that value girls primarily in terms of their reproductive capacities are critical to understanding early marriage. Expectations for girls to give birth are fundamental to the pressures to marry them early.

Adolescent pregnancy



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Adolescent pregnancy plays an important role in driving child marriage in Asia. In Indonesia, for example, in the scoping survey conducted for the Yes I Do project in December 2016, seven out of ten child marriages in Indonesia were as a result of a girl becoming pregnant.

In Sri Lanka, although young women are better educated and have greater professional engagement and mobility than many of their peers in the region, they are vulnerable to non-consensual relationships with men; and the unintended consequences of pregnancy that generates family pressure for girls to marry.

Early marriage is often a result of an attempt to conform to norms that dictate that girls who engage in sex should be married, rather than any traditional practices. It mirrors norms in Timor-Leste where if a girl becomes pregnant there is strong pressure for her to marry.

Customs and traditions that “legitimize” child, early and forced marriage



Religious factors

Different religions prevail in the Asia region and the beliefs and rituals of each play out in divergent ways in marriage patterns. Primarily religion guides mate selection and reflects group identity. Religion is cited as a key driver of early marriage in India, Pakistan and Nepal. In Nepal the importance of caste forces families to accept available spouses, as the pool of eligible partners may be limited, particularly in remote rural areas.

Arranged and forced marriages

In Bangladesh, most child marriages are arranged with girls having no say as to whether, when and to whom they will marry. Pakistan has one of the highest rates of consanguineous marriages in the Asia region.¹⁵ Such marriages are preferred and take place when the bride is a child. Early and forced marriages, including treating women as chattels to settle disputes and resolve debts, continue in Pakistan, despite the 2011 Prevention of Anti-Women Practices Amendment Act that criminalizes these acts. In the Philippines, child and enforced marriages leave girls vulnerable to exploitative marriage schemes. In a 2013 visit to the Philippines, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on trafficking in persons stated that child and forced marriage in the Philippines was closely linked to the trafficking and sale of children. Girls and young women are trafficked domestically and internationally for domestic work and sexual exploitation, and mail-order bride services and “sponsorship” play an important role in supporting and concealing this exploitation.

Early marriage is deeply rooted in cultural traditions, and as such there may be a perception that as a tradition, it should not be questioned.

Weak legal frameworks and funding commitments



National legislation establishing a minimum age of marriage of 18 is a critical step in the process of eliminating the practice of CEFM. Legislation provides a framework for legal protection and guidance and legitimacy for policy-makers and activists to tackle the financial, social and cultural drivers behind child marriage.

Enforcing legislation prohibiting child marriage can be complex, particularly in countries that have established plural legal systems and where marriages are also conducted under customary, traditional or religious laws. This is evident in most of the 14 countries where Plan International works in Asia (see Figure 6). In addition, even in settings where supportive legislation has been passed, the failure to allocate sufficient resources to end child marriage remains a barrier.

In Indonesia a 2002 Law on Child Protection makes parents accountable for preventing underage marriages. Nonetheless, like Bangladesh, Indonesia is governed by religious and traditional laws as well as statutory laws and these traditional laws and customs have led in some areas to a mean age at marriage below the age of 15. As in India, a diverse system of cultures and traditions that govern decision-making in everyday life in Indonesia impact on the average age of marriage across the country. The minimum age of marriage varies locally according to the *adat* traditions, with a mean age of marriage as low as 14.8 for girls and 16.7 for boys in the Bugis region.

A lack of awareness and failure to enforce legislation also means that some families who arrange marriages for their young daughters are unaware that they are breaking the law. In Nepal, while there is an awareness of the legal age of marriage, confusion remains about whether children under 18 can actually marry. In Bangladesh, government inaction and complicity by local officials allows child marriage to continue unchecked. The province of Sindh, Pakistan, passed the Child Marriage Restraint Act of 2014, becoming the first province to do so. The Act criminalizes marriages to children under the age of 16, although prosecutions to date have been limited. The Punjab provincial assembly passed a law in March 2015 increasing the penalties for parents and clerics who assisted in marriages between children, although the law left unchanged the legal minimum age for girls to marry at 16. The Prohibition of Child Marriage Act of 2006 in India establishes punishments for those who do not prevent child marriage and includes a right to the annulment of child marriages, but the Act relies on families to report violations, so it is in itself self-defeating.

Figure 6. Summary of marriage legislation in the Asia region

14

COUNTRIES

■ ■ ■ BANGLADESH

Although a law specifying 18 as the legal age of marriage has been in effect since 1929, religiously-based “personal” law, which does not adhere to statutory requirements, prevails. In 2017, Parliament passed the Child Marriage Restraint Act 2017, now awaiting Presidential approval. The new Act allows marriages for girls under 18 in “special cases” or for “the greater good of the adolescent” but does not define what makes child marriage acceptable in these “special cases”.

■ ■ ■ CAMBODIA

The legal age of marriage is 18 but Article 5 of the Law on Marriage and Family (1989) allows for the marriage of children upon the consent of their parents or guardians if the girl becomes pregnant.

■ ■ ■ CHINA

The legal age at marriage is 20 years for women and 22 years for men.

■ ■ ■ INDIA

The Prohibition of Child Marriage Act of 2006 sets the minimum legal age of marriage at 18 for females and 21 for males.

■ ■ ■ INDONESIA

The legal age at marriage in Indonesia was established by the Law on Marriage of 1974 as 21, but the true permitted minimum age is 16 for girls and 19 for boys, with parental consent required when either party is under the age of 21 years (18+ Coalition, 2016).

■ ■ ■ LAOS

The legal age to marry is 18 for both males and females, but the Family Law of 1990 states that the age can be lowered to 15 “in special and necessary cases”.



MYANMAR

The World Policy Analysis Data Center does not provide a legal or minimum age at marriage for Myanmar.

NEPAL

The legal age of marriage is 18 with a guardian's consent, and 20 without such consent.

PAKISTAN

The national legal minimum age for marriage is 16 years, with or without parental consent (except in Sindh province where the legal age of marriage is 18 years for boys and 16 years for girls).

THE PHILIPPINES

The legal minimum age for marriage for both sexes is 18; anyone below 21 must have parental consent. Under Muslim customary law, Muslim boys may marry at 15 and Muslim girls may marry when they reach puberty.

SRI LANKA

The legal age of marriage for non-Muslims is 18. There is no minimum age of marriage for Muslims.

THAILAND

The minimum legal age for marriage for both sexes is 17 years; anyone younger than 20 years requires parental consent to marry. A court may grant permission for children between 15 and 16 years to marry.

TIMOR-LESTE

According to law, a marriage cannot be registered until the younger spouse is at least age 16, but the civil code recognizes cultural, religious and civil marriages. Underage couples cannot officially marry but are married *de facto* once they have children together.

VIETNAM

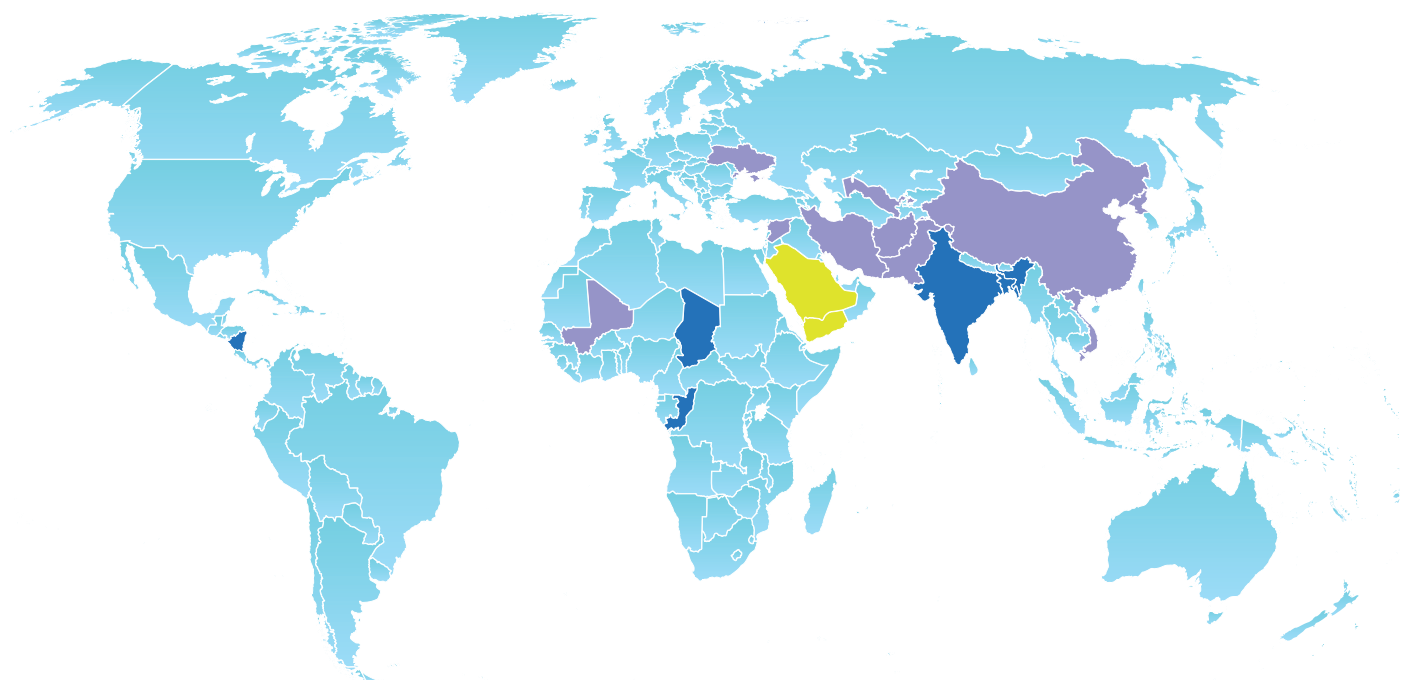
The legal age of marriage is 18 for girls and 20 for boys.

Gender inequality within legislation

In some countries, the minimum age for marriage, particularly for marriages with parental consent, is lower for girls than for boys.

The map below (Figure 7) shows the gender disparities in the minimum age at marriage for boys and girls (Arthur et al, 2014). Of note is the concentration of countries where girls are permitted to marry at least one year before boys in the Asia region, with India and Bangladesh's marriage legislation allowing girls to marry three to four years earlier than boys. Significantly, there are no countries where the minimum age for marriage is lower for boys than for girls.

Figure 7. Gender disparity in minimum age at marriage laws



Source: Arthur et al, 2014: Analysis of data from World Policy Analysis Center, Child Marriage Database, 2013.

- No minimum age for girls and boys
- Girls can be married 3 to 4 years younger than boys
- Girls can be married 1 to 2 years younger than boys
- No difference in minimum age

The above laws encapsulate the normative expectation that girls should marry earlier than boys. The majority of countries where there is a significant disparity in the minimum age at marriage for males and females are in Asia. This is associated with community perceptions about women who marry at older ages, perceptions that women primarily should have a domestic role, and lower expectations for women's roles outside the home.

3. WHAT ARE THE **CONSEQUENCES** OF CHILD, EARLY AND FORCED MARRIAGE?

Child marriage is not specific to one region, culture or religion and there is no one cause, but the consequences are the same. For adolescent girls married before the age of 18, being a child bride changes the course of their lives. Girls are more likely to experience poverty, violence and early pregnancy, threatening their lives and their health. It limits their future prospects, denying them access to education and opportunities to gain skilled employment, and prevents them from participating in society.

Eliminating child marriage needs to be achieved by all United Nations member states by 2030 to realize SDG 5: To achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls. The specific drivers of CEFM including, but not limited to, poverty, health, education, nutrition, food security, reduced inequalities and economic growth are targets of other SDGs. Child, early and forced marriage cannot and will not be eliminated if member states focus specifically on this goal. The key to success of achieving one SDG involves tackling issues more commonly associated with others, and this is particularly true to achieve the target of eliminating child marriage.



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Figure 8. The inter-relationship of SDGs with SDG 5 to eliminate child early and forced marriage

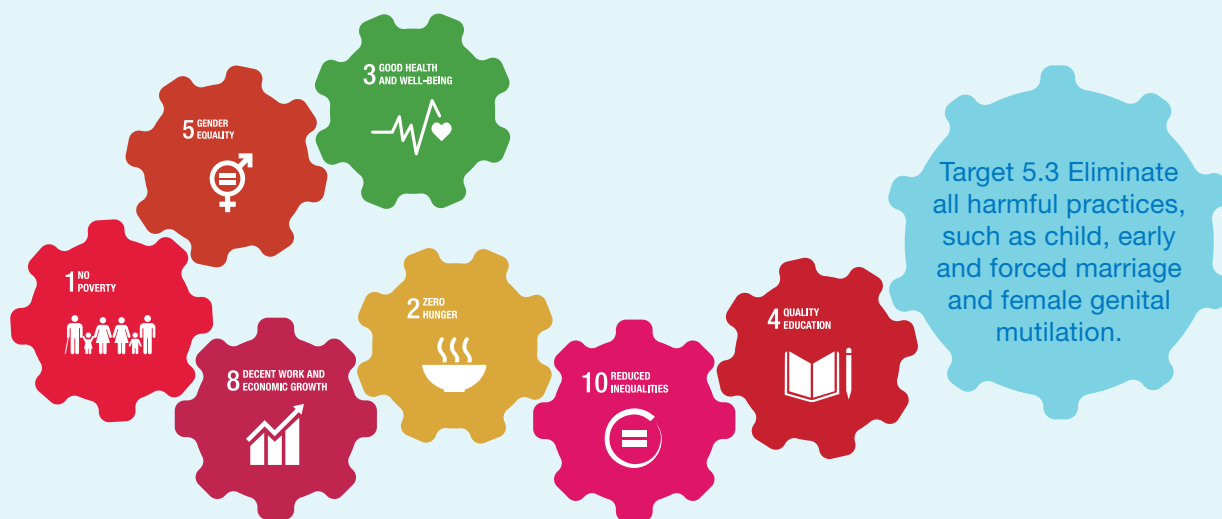
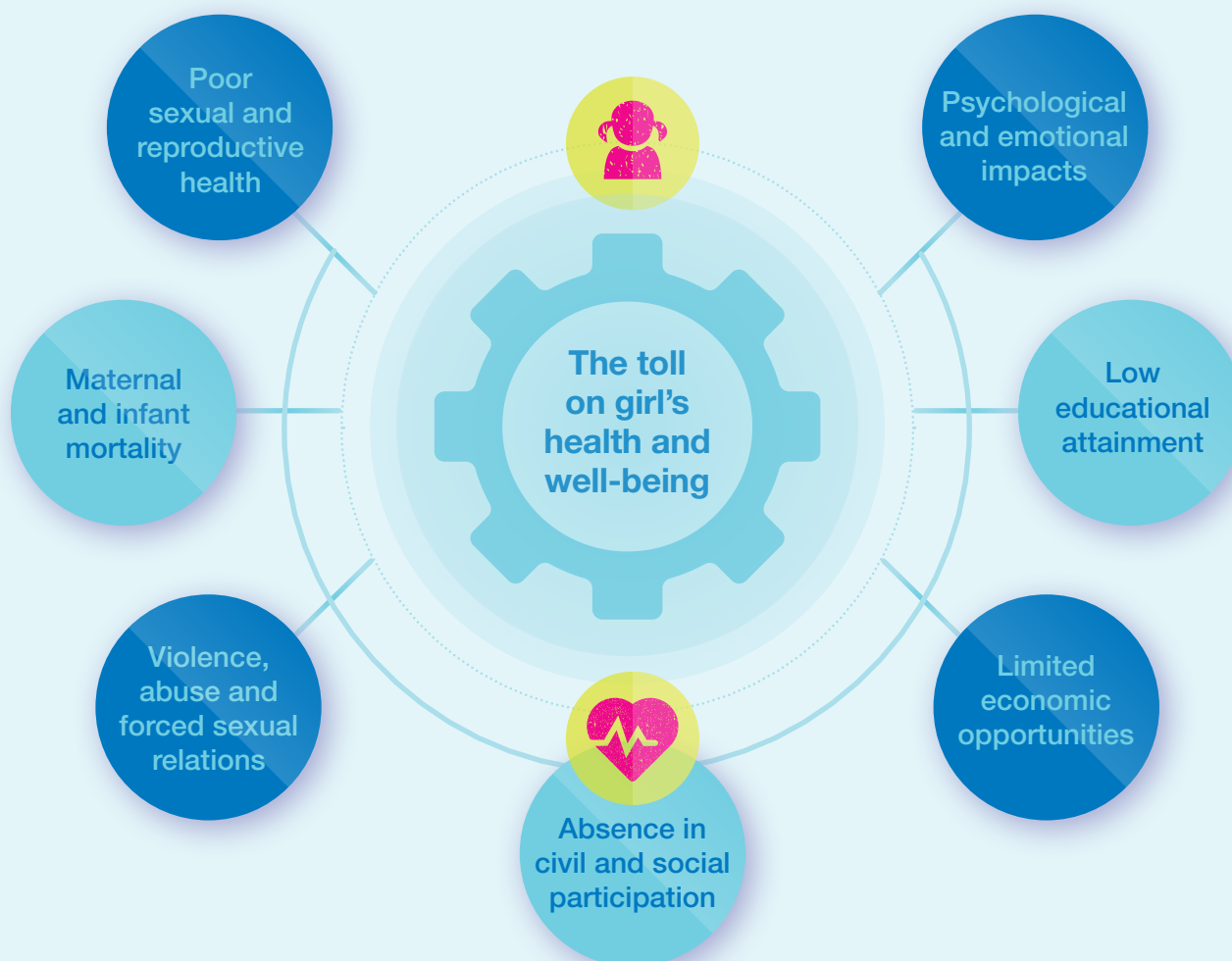


Figure 9. The interrelated consequences of child, early and enforced marriage



Girls who marry early are more likely to:

- ⌘ Have reduced levels of sexual and reproductive health
- ⌘ Experience violence, abuse and forced sexual relations
- ⌘ Suffer from poor mental health
- ⌘ Become pregnant at an early age
- ⌘ Be isolated without any support systems
- ⌘ Have low levels of education
- ⌘ Have low levels of participation in the labour force



Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages

The pressure on girls to have children very early on in marriage may contribute to their decision not to access family planning services. In addition, young brides lack the ability to negotiate safer sex, the use of contraception or birth spacing, particularly as the dynamics of child marriage may mean that their spouse is significantly older than them, reinforcing the dominate and subordinate roles that are at play within child marriage. In Bangladesh, 20.5 per cent of 15-19-year-old married girls had a spouse who was ten years their senior.¹⁶ In Nepal, the unmet need for

family planning was highest among married women aged 15 to 19 at 35 percent,¹⁷ while in Timor-Leste it was 27 percent among the same age group.¹⁸ In the Philippines, the 2012 Responsible Parenthood and Reproductive Health Act, as amended by the Supreme Court in 2014, allows practitioners to deny reproductive health services based on personal or religious beliefs, and requires spousal consent for women to obtain reproductive healthcare and parental consent for minors to obtain reproductive healthcare.

Given the low levels of education of child brides and their lack of access to age-appropriate health services, it is little wonder that early marriage often leads to pregnancy and childbearing before the age of 18. In Bangladesh, nearly one in four women (24.4 percent) aged 20-24 had at least one live birth before the age of 18.¹⁹ In Laos, 47 percent of 15-19-year-olds already had at least one child, while the average age at first birth among 15 to 19-year-olds was very low at 16.6 years.²¹ In Nepal, by age 19, a third of Nepalese adolescents had begun childbearing and 30 percent had experienced a live birth while 5 percent were pregnant.²² The picture of early childbirth in the Asia region is quite bleak.

Early pregnancy is one of the most dangerous consequences of child marriage, particularly when the mother is very young. Births before the age of 15 are quite rare in all Asian countries with the exception of Bangladesh, where 4.4 percent of girls aged 15 to 19 gave birth by the age of 15.²³

IN BANGLADESH, NEARLY ONE IN FOUR WOMEN GAVE BIRTH BEFORE THE AGE OF 18.²⁰



© Plan International/Michael Rhebergen

Maternal and infant mortality

In 2013, complications of pregnancy and childbirth were the second leading cause of death among 15 to 19-year-old girls globally, with nearly 70,000 deaths annually (UNFPA, 2013). In most of the 14 countries in Asia where Plan International works, young adolescents who give birth at an early age have low levels of education and tend to live in areas where access to health services is poor.

Reducing maternal mortality rates, neonatal rates, preventing unintended pregnancies and reducing adolescent childbearing are key targets of Sustainable Development Goal 3. Maternal mortality rates (MMR) are high in Asia, particularly in Southeast Asia, and higher among young adolescents who give birth at an early age.

In Laos, the MMR was higher among adolescents aged 15 to 19 at 190 per 100,000 live births compared to 178 per 100,000 live births for women aged 20-24.²⁴ Maternal mortality was extremely high in Timor-Leste at 215 deaths per 100,000 live births (see table 5), where less than one in four mothers under 20 delivered their child in a health facility and only 33 percent of infants were delivered by a skilled birth attendant.²⁵

In Indonesia, a judicial challenge to the Marriage Law was filed by an NGO coalition in 2014, identifying the minimum age of marriage (16 with parental consent) as a significant contributing factor to the maternal mortality ratio; the challenge was rejected. The data clearly illustrate that adolescents who give birth at an early age face a much greater risk of maternal mortality, particularly young girls from poorer households and in poorer regions.

Early pregnancy and childbirth also contribute to higher infant mortality rates: those children who die before their first birthday. In Cambodia there has been an increase in adolescent fertility in recent years and neonatal mortality was highest among young women who were less than 20 years of age at birth.²⁶ In Timor-Leste, neonatal, infant and child mortality were all highest for children of mothers less than 20 years of age at the time of birth compared to all other age groups.²⁷ In the Philippines, infant mortality among children whose mothers were under the age of 20 was about 30 percent higher than for mothers aged 20 to 39.²⁸



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Table 5. Sexual and reproductive health indicators among adolescents

Country	% of adolescents who have begun childbearing*	MMR/100,000 live births	IMR/1,000 live births	% of 15-19-year-olds with unmet contraceptive needs
Bangladesh	30.8	176	38	17
Cambodia	12.0	161	26	16
China		27	11	
India	16.0	174	40	27
Indonesia	9.5	126	30	7
Laos		197	55	
Myanmar	5.9	178	61	
Nepal	16.7	258	33	42
Pakistan	7.9	178	67	15
Philippines	10.1	114	22	29
Sri Lanka		30	8	
Thailand		20	10	6
Timor-Leste	7.2	215	45	27
Vietnam	3.4	34	15	

*Adolescents who are pregnant or have given birth.

Sources: ICF International, 2015. The DHS Program, accessed 15/7/2017; Guttmacher Institute, 2017.

MMR: Maternal Mortality Ratio: Deaths per 100,000 live births.

IMR: Infant Mortality Rate. Deaths of infant in first year of life.

Unmet need for contraception: A woman wants to prevent or delay a birth by two years but is not using contraception.

Due to their age and inexperience, young mothers are likely to use poor feeding practices and are more likely to have stunted or wasted children, and the data clearly illustrates this. In Bangladesh, children under 12 months born to mothers aged 15 to 17 had a 44 percent lower height for their age score than children born to mothers aged 18 to 25.²⁹ In Cambodia, 14 percent of infants born to mothers under age 20 were small or very small.³⁰ In Timor-Leste more than 50 percent of all children were stunted.³¹



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5 GENDER EQUALITY



Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls

16 PEACE, JUSTICE AND STRONG INSTITUTIONS



Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels

Girls married at a young age are often more at risk of domestic violence, abuse and forced sexual relations. The irony of this is not lost given that many parents marry their daughters at an early age with the intention of protecting them. Their age and lack of education, combined with their status within the home and the absence of any support systems, makes them vulnerable to abuse. More alarmingly young married girls seem to think that this abuse by their husbands is justified.

Physical or sexual violence committed by a husband or partner was very high in Bangladesh.³² In Cambodia, 46 percent of young adolescents aged 15 to 19 believed that their husband was justified in beating them.³³ In India, the earlier a girl married, the more likely she was to experience intimate partner violence.³⁴ In Laos, 56 percent of adolescents aged 15 to 19 believed that their husband had the right to beat them, most commonly for neglecting the children (44.2 per cent) or for going out without telling him (28.9 percent).³⁵ The turbulent history of Timor-Leste appears to have contributed to a normalization of violence in all its forms, and gender-based violence is very common. Violence in marriage has repercussions for mental and physical health, confidence, autonomy and other indicators of social well-being. Sustainable Development Goal 5 is explicit in its target to: “End all forms of discrimination against all women and girls everywhere”.

GIRLS MARRIED AT A YOUNG AGE ARE OFTEN MORE AT RISK OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE, ABUSE AND FORCED SEXUAL RELATIONS. THE IRONY OF THIS IS NOT LOST GIVEN THAT MANY PARENTS MARRY THEIR DAUGHTERS AT AN EARLY AGE WITH THE INTENTION OF PROTECTING THEM.

Table 6. Percentage of married women aged 15-19 who have experienced physical or sexual violence by their husband

Country	Percentage of married adolescents aged 15-19 who have experienced physical or sexual violence by their husband
Bangladesh	47.3
Cambodia	7.1
Indonesia	30.6
Myanmar	24.0
Nepal	21.4
The Philippines	16.5
Timor-Leste	29.8

Source: DHS by country, 2009-2016.

Psychological and emotional impact

Although there is little research on the psychological impacts of child marriage, it is clear that the practice poses significant risks to the psychological as well as the physical health and well-being of young girls. Being deprived of their childhood and adolescence, burdened with roles and responsibilities for which they are psychologically and emotionally unprepared, and being removed from their families and friends leave children in early marriages isolated and vulnerable, which can lead to depression and mental health issues.

Of those women who had experienced physical or sexual violence, as shown at Table 6, the majority of women in Cambodia, 77.7 percent; Myanmar, 67.5 percent; Nepal, 70.6 percent; and the Philippines, 76.8 percent stated that they were afraid of their husbands “most of the time”. This data was available only from the Demographic and Health Surveys conducted in these countries.

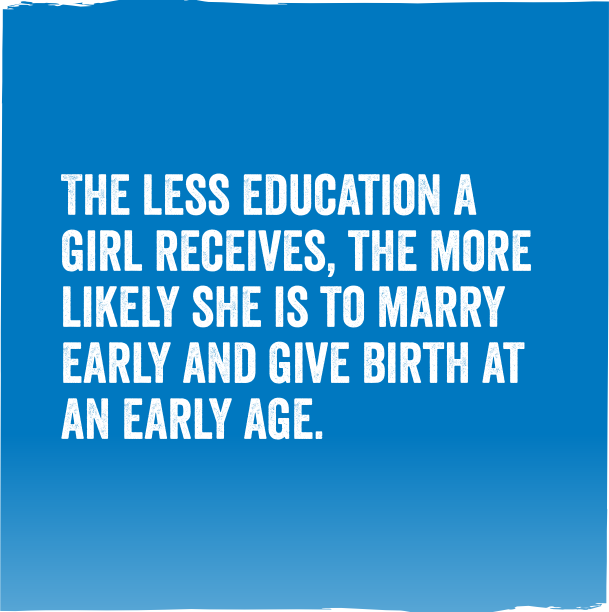
Low educational attainment

There is a clear correlation between levels of education and age at marriage. It is both a cause and a consequence of child marriage. While there are many reasons that cause girls to leave school, evidence points to child marriage as a factor prompting girls to drop out of school, particularly during the transition from primary to secondary education. The less education a girl receives, the more likely she is to marry early and give birth at an early age.

In Laos, women with no education (18.2 percent) married four years earlier than those with post-secondary education (22.7 percent).³⁶ Girls with no education had much higher birth rates (190) than those with lower secondary and above educational attainment (85 and below).³⁷ In Myanmar, girls with secondary or higher education were less likely to be married than those with only primary education;³⁸ the same was true in Thailand.³⁹ Again, in Nepal, adolescent childbearing was highest among young women with no education, 32.6 percent, as compared to 7.2 percent of those with secondary or higher education.⁴⁰ The data illustrate a very clear pattern.

The negative impact of child marriage may also be felt by the next generation. The children of young mothers who have had little or no education are less likely to survive infancy, to have a good start in education, to do well in school, and to continue beyond the minimum level of education.⁴¹ In this way the vicious intergenerational cycle of early marriage is perpetuated.

While the evidence is very limited, child marriage can have a negative effect on boys’ schooling as well. In general, however, boys are not required to leave school as consistently as girls when they marry.



THE LESS EDUCATION A GIRL RECEIVES, THE MORE LIKELY SHE IS TO MARRY EARLY AND GIVE BIRTH AT AN EARLY AGE.

Limited economic opportunities

Limited economic opportunities for girls who marry at an early age are often viewed through the lens of their low levels of education but it is more complex. Adolescents begin childbearing at an early age and societal norms dictate that their primary role is as caregivers in the home. Many societies in Asia place little value on women's contributions from outside the home. In many of the countries in which Plan International works in Asia, labour force participation is far lower for females than males, particularly in rural areas where employment opportunities are scarce. Gender inequalities and the burden of care that young married girls assume mean that they lack the mobility to move to areas where there are better prospects of employment. Where adolescents are working it is mainly in unskilled manual labour, as in Cambodia where 54 percent of 15 to 19-year-olds were employed.⁴² Of concern is that the populations of some Asian countries are very young. In Laos 32 percent of the total population are under the age of 15.⁴³ In Timor-Leste 45 percent of the population is under this age.⁴⁴ Myanmar also has a very young population with 29 percent of the population below fourteen years of age.⁴⁵ These shifts in the age structure of populations create what is known as a "demographic dividend" – a window of opportunity to increase economic growth if investments are made in education and employment opportunities for young people. Conversely, it also means that there are a significant number of girls who are at risk of child marriage.

LIMITED ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITIES FOR GIRLS WHO MARRY AT AN EARLY AGE ARE OFTEN VIEWED THROUGH THE LENS OF THEIR LOW LEVELS OF EDUCATION BUT IT IS MORE COMPLEX.

Participation in society

Child marriage with its associations of a lack of education, economic engagement, exposure to violence, mobility constraints imposed by gender inequities, a burden of care of looking after families, and isolation from any support network contributes to reducing young women's empowerment. The consequences of early marriage, which are reinforced by societal norms about

the roles of women, are that women do not engage in activities that will positively shape their communities or participate in civic activities that will contribute to the development of their country. In essence, child brides are disempowered, invisible and lack any ownership of their lives.



4. THE WAY FORWARD TO END CHILD, EARLY AND FORCED MARRIAGE IN ASIA

What are the solutions?

Below are some preliminary recommendations, based on the Asia region desk review that forms the basis of this report, of the multi-sectoral response that is needed to eliminate CEFM. Further research into promising programmatic approaches based on primary research and interviews with practitioners will be published at a later date as Phase II in this series of three reports

Actions to tackle child, early and forced marriage (CEFM) in Asia require the strong commitment of stakeholders at many levels. Given the multiple causes and consequences of the practice, ending CEFM necessitates a multi-stakeholder approach. As discussed above eliminating child marriage is a specific

target under SDG 5 but the drivers of CEFM require tackling issues associated with other SDGs. The target to eliminate child marriage under SDG 5 cannot be the sole focus of programmatic interventions, a more holistic approach is needed. In addition, while there are common factors that drive CEFM across the 14 countries in Asia, there are also factors specific to each country. For example, religious practices are a key driver of child marriage in Pakistan and Bangladesh, whereas girls from families in remote areas of Nepal are married at an early age because their parents see it as the only option to safeguard their future; in such an environment, emphasizing the harms of CEFM is futile.

ACTION NEEDED TO TACKLE CHILD, EARLY AND FORCED MARRIAGE ACROSS ASIA

- Strengthen regional and national programmes and policies to address all SDGs, including SDG 5, with equal urgency
- Develop and implement effective legislation to prohibit and discourage child marriage
- Strengthen civil registration and vital statistics systems
- Improve girls' access to quality primary and secondary education
- Support economic and livelihood opportunities for young people, especially girls
- Provide age-appropriate sexual and reproductive health and rights information and services
- Engage and work with parents, teachers, community leaders and faith-based organizations
- Support boys and girls who are already married
- Involve girls and boys in decision-making processes that affect them

Recommendations for governments and donors

01

Review existing legislation

Numerous laws and policies can influence child marriage, directly and indirectly, including minimum age at marriage laws, education policies, child protection guidelines, gender equality-related laws and policies and public safety. In the Asia region there is currently no cross-country consistency or universal metric to measure the effectiveness of these laws and in certain countries they are non-existent.

Governments, with the support of donors and civil society, should undertake a comprehensive legislative review to ensure that domestic legislation prohibiting child marriage, whether in statutory, customary or religious law, is in full conformity with international human rights standards and the country's commitment to SDG 5.3.

At the same time, it's important to recognize the limitations of isolated legal/legislative approaches. Strictly legal responses to child marriage have backfired in a number of countries and a highly punitive approach can have unintended negative consequences for girls and their families.

02**Amend legislative frameworks that allow marriage age discrimination based on sex**

A number of countries in Asia have conflicting laws around age, marriage and sex that need to be urgently reconciled. In Indonesia, for example, the 1974 Marriage Law permits women and men to marry at 21 but allows girls to marry at 16 and boys to marry at 19 with parental permission. Parents can also ask religious courts or local officials to authorize marriages of girls even earlier, with no minimum age in such cases. The legal framework, therefore, directly contributes to supporting child marriage. In most of the countries in Asia where Plan International works, customary, traditional or religious laws take precedence over statutory legislation, and exceptions giving parents the right to approve marriages further perpetuates the practice. Legislation in all countries in Asia must be consistent with regional and international instruments and standards on the minimum age at marriage.

03**Harmonize legislative provisions across intersecting bodies of law**

Laws against child marriage must be harmonized with other provisions including those on property rights, gender-based violence, divorce, annulment, marital rape, dowry, birth registration, and citizenship. Given that dowry often rises with a girl's age, a campaign is urgently needed in those countries where the practice still persists to eliminate it.

04**Accompany legislative reform efforts with community-based awareness-raising activities**

Effective implementation of legislation must go hand in hand with systematic efforts to raise awareness of such legislation, the rights of women and children, and the consequences for those who choose to ignore the legislation. In Nepal, for example, although families are aware of the age at marriage, they are unclear as to whether a girl under 18 can marry with parental consent, and often act illegally unintentionally.

05**Strengthen monitoring and enforcement mechanisms at all levels**

It is clear from the research reviewed for this report that there is often a lack of enforcement mechanisms to prevent child, early and forced marriage even when there are laws against it. The province of Sindh, Pakistan, for example, has passed the Child Marriage Restraint Act 2014 by criminalizing marriages to children under the age of 16, but prosecutions to date have been limited. In addition to reviewing and amending legislation, governments in Asia need to ensure that officials charged with enforcing the laws understand the importance of these laws and have the skill and resources needed to do so.

Protection mechanisms at the national and community level for those at risk of early marriage will also need to be established and supported by national and local governments. They will need to be accessible by all children wherever they live and whatever their class, religious affiliation or ethnicity.

06**Invest in robust civil registration and vital statistics systems (CRVS)**

The registration of births is inconsistent across the 14 countries in the Asia region, and a report by Plan Australia in 2014 reported that in Indonesia nine out of ten child marriages involved girls and boys who did not have birth certificates. It is far too easy to misrepresent girls' ages, or for local authorities to look the other way when marriages are entered into. Strengthening civil registration and vital statistics systems makes it easier to enforce child marriage legislation and allows for the determination of a girls' age at marriage. Civil registration and vital statistic systems also enable the development of targeted programmes for girls who are already married.

07**Encourage and adopt multi-sectoral policies and programmes to address the conditions that support gender disparity**

Nepal has a new National Strategy to End Child Marriage as part of its commitment to meet the Sustainable Development Goal to end child marriage by 2030. In a country where girls are still considered an economic burden, a multi-sectoral approach, which includes addressing poverty, caste, gender-based violence, and cultural norms is necessary and shows promise. Other countries in Asia could benefit from adopting a similar approach.

08**Improve girls' access to quality education**

Education is key to giving girls choices and opportunities. This is the specific focus of SDG 4: To ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all. The more education a girl completes, the less likely she is to be married at an early age. It is imperative that programmes to eliminate child marriage include a component that tackles the prevailing norm where parents place a higher value on educating boys than girls. Girls must have access to quality education, without discrimination, which enables them to develop their knowledge, life skills and realize their full potential. Specific attention should be paid to the transition period between primary and secondary education when many girls drop out of school; one of the reasons for this is to marry.

09**Prioritize girls' economic empowerment**

Girls in Asia are often economically marginalized; they have no income of their own and are dependent on their husband. As mentioned in this report, families often view child marriage as the only option to safeguard their child's future. Initiatives such as supporting savings groups for women that boost their security, resilience and well-being should be implemented. If child marriage is to be eliminated, then alternatives to the practice must be presented to girls and their families.

10**Provide age-appropriate sexual and reproductive health and rights information and services**

Adolescent girls who become pregnant are often pressured to marry so it is essential to ensure that adolescents have access to safe and age-appropriate sexual and reproductive health information and services, including contraception, family planning and psychosocial support. This will allow them to make a safe transition from childhood into adolescence. This may seem like a controversial and high-risk strategy but unless the sexual behaviour of adolescents is addressed from a gender-equitable perspective, any progress in tackling child marriage may stagnate. A dialogue on the social norms and perspectives about adolescents and their sexual behaviour needs to be opened, otherwise this subject will always remain a taboo.

In addition, given the high maternal and infant mortality rates in Asia among those who marry and give birth at an early age, quality reproductive health services should be provided for all adolescent girls, including emergency obstetric care, antenatal and postnatal care, and infant care and support.

11**Prioritize economic stability for families at risk of child marriage**

Income generation strategies should be developed for girls and their families. This leverages economic support to delay child marriage while also creating shifts in social norms in terms of the appropriate age of marriage. Vulnerable girls living in the poorest households, especially in rural areas, should be specifically targeted as they experience the highest rates of child marriage. Financial incentives could include educational scholarships; social protection; and subsidies to increase families' economic security, particularly in those regions frequently subject to natural disasters such as Bangladesh. Poverty is one of the drivers of child marriage – marrying a girl at an early age means one less mouth to feed.

Recommendations for civil society actors partnering in the effort to end CEFM

01

Engage and mobilize parents, teachers and community members

Culturally sensitive engagement should be undertaken with parents, teachers, and community members to change social norms to create an environment where both boys and girls are able to complete their education and to make informed choices and decisions on marriage and childbearing. Any dialogue should highlight the negative consequences of child marriage on a girl's education, as well as their health and well-being. Caution, however, should also be exercised given that many families see child marriage as the only option to safeguard their child's future, and any such dialogue should avoid stigmatizing parents for a practice that they believe is in their child's best interests.

02

Include men and boys

Traditional and community leaders and men and boys should be included in any programme activities. The role that they can play in tackling child marriage in their communities through awareness-raising activities should be emphasized. Engagement with men and boys is fundamental in tackling child marriage; they often have the power and decision-making resources that are so central to maintaining the status quo. Men and boys must also be included so that efforts to challenge patriarchal social norms are sustainable.

03

Work with faith-based leaders to delay the age of marriage

Faith-based leaders are often viewed as the "gatekeepers" of their communities and they have considerable influence. They can use their place of worship as a forum to tackle child marriage. In Thailand, Islamic committees have joined government agencies to raise awareness and prevent child marriage under Islamic traditions.

04

Invest in disseminating strategic public communication

Everyone, from community members to policy-makers should have comprehensive information about the realities of child marriage in their country, and the laws that exist to eliminate it. The media should be mobilized so that it works in a concerted fashion to fight child marriage, building a communications strategy across each country that focuses on context-specific customs and norms.

Building broad public awareness and support to end child marriage is important to the sustainability of short-term interventions to eliminate child marriage. Edutainment approaches have already been adopted in some countries in Asia; in India the Population Foundation broadcast a television series that challenged the discrimination women faced. Street dramas, girls' clubs and radio have also been effective communication methods to challenge discriminatory norms.

05

Promote education about the rights of adolescent girls and social networking

As adolescent girls who marry early often lack any support systems and are often isolated, establishing safe places where adolescents can learn a skill and develop social networks as well as participate in civic life are critical. Such safe places allow girls to meet girls, socialize, and acquire skills. They can learn about their rights to avoid child marriage as well as receive education about the dangers of early pregnancy and childbirth.

06

Empower girls to advocate on their own behalf

No one can be more powerful advocates on the topic of child marriage than girls themselves. Programmes should involve girls and boys to develop solutions to eliminate child marriage. Opportunities should be created to support girls to have their voices heard and to participate meaningfully in local, national and international debates and initiatives to end child marriage – including policy reform and protection and monitoring processes. To work towards eliminating child marriage, girls and boys must be involved in decision-making processes that affect their lives.

07**Encourage local civic participatory mechanisms for women and girls**

Women and girls' voices should contribute to improved policies and programmes. Mechanisms should be established that support women and girls in advocating for their interests and rights as development actors and community members. When women and girls assume leadership positions, they can advocate to eliminate gender disparities in educational attainment and economic participation.

Recommendation for governments, civil society partners and all actors engaged in the effort to eliminate CEFM**01****Prioritize the elimination of CEFM and the SDGs that address the drivers of CEFM in regional frameworks, policies and action plans**

Regional instruments play an important role in encouraging and supporting national action, including national action to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Target 5.3 of Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5, commits all United Nations member states to eliminate child marriage by 2030. This is an important tool to drive action, hold governments to account for their commitments to girls, and to track progress on ending child marriage globally. But CEFM cannot be tackled in isolation; the SDGs must be addressed holistically. The key to the success of achieving one SDG involves tackling issues more commonly associated with others, and this is particularly true to achieve the target of eliminating child marriage. Governments and donors must ensure that there is an equal programmatic and policy focus to ensure that all of the SDGs are met.

Programmes to end child, early and forced marriage must address the causes as well as the symptoms. Ascertaining whether the programmatic agenda tackles the full range of causes is one valuable way of cross-checking the effectiveness of our programme approaches.



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