



The State of the World's Girls 2025

Until we are all equal



Executive Summary

# Let me be a child, not a wife

Girls' experiences of living through child marriage

For a full breakdown of research findings go to: [plan-international.org/child-not-wife](https://plan-international.org/child-not-wife)



This year Plan International's annual State of the World's Girls report is focused on girls' experience of child marriage: a practice that despite large-scale policy action and legislative reform, remains widespread. The study comes from the experiences of survivors of child marriage in their own words. It tells us that, at a time when there is a global pushback against girls' and women's rights, confronting the persistent rights violation that is child marriage is increasingly urgent.

The research is based on in-depth detailed conversations with 251 girls and young women – all of whom are, or had been, married or in a union – across 15 countries: Bangladesh, Cambodia, Indonesia, Nepal, Ethiopia, Mozambique, Uganda, Zambia, Colombia, Dominican Republic, Guatemala, Ecuador, Nigeria, Niger, and Togo.

We not only talked to girls with direct personal experience of child marriage, we also conducted an online survey with 244 young child marriage activists from the same countries. Their perspectives include targeted suggestions for change. Additionally, to ground these insights into a broader legal context we worked with the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development leveraging its Social Institutions and Gender Index to analyse existing legislation and policy frameworks in order to understand what support was needed to protect girls' rights and promote their wellbeing.

“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

Much of the work around child marriage is focused on stopping it. Budgeting for child marriage interventions disproportionately favours prevention, with minimal allocations for direct support. Girls, once married or in a relationship, tend to disappear. Our research is seeking to change this. This report is not just about the issue of child marriage but is focused forensically on the experiences of the girls who live with it – often at great cost to their mental health, their economic prospects and their future opportunities.

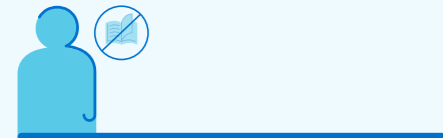
Gathering evidence from the girls themselves, and from young activists working to prevent and respond to child marriage, will not only help to make visible the rights and needs of a much-neglected section of society but point the way to sustainable change in girls' lives.

“[I got married] because of what he [my husband] 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.” Simegn, 19, Ethiopia

## The married girls told us:\*



Seven out of ten (70%) are married or in a union, more than one in four (28%) are divorced and one in 50 (2%) are widowed.



Six out of ten (63%) are not in employment, education or training.



Nearly two out of five (38%) reported having no say in household decision-making.



Almost half (45%) were married to a man five or more years older than they were, some to men more than 10 or 20 years older.



Over a third (35%) dropped out of school directly following, or due to, their marriage.



Nearly three out of four (72%) have at least one child.



One in four (25%) reported that they had no say in their decision to marry.



One in six (17%) identified as marginalised.<sup>1</sup>



One in eight (13%) disclosed that they had experienced intimate partner violence or abuse.

! The names of the children and young people in this report have been changed to ensure anonymity. Photos used in this report are not of research participants.

Cover photo: Girl, 18, from Guatemala, who entered an informal union when she was 17 © Plan International

\* We have used percentages to present some key data of the 251 girls (the qualitative sample). These percentages give useful insights but should not be seen as representative, since the sample is qualitative and not statistically generalisable.

# Key Findings

1

**The vulnerability of girls within their marriages or unions is a key theme** to emerge from our research. Marriage robs girls of their ability to make decisions and of their opportunities. The power imbalances within the relationship, partners are often much older, increases the risk of violence.

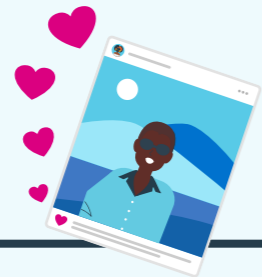
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**Among the girls we spoke with, rates of divorce or separation are high.** Divorce is rarely talked about in child marriage research and these findings point to the existence of an unrecognised group of still very young girls, who, having endured the trauma of an early marriage, are navigating the stigma of divorce. Many have no economically viable skills and no means of supporting themselves and, often, their children. They go from one difficult situation to another: a recurring theme across all countries was the community judgement, and financial challenges associated with separation.



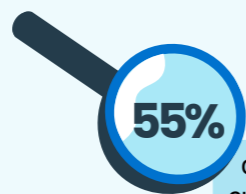
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**One of the study's more surprising findings was how many girls talked about marrying for love.** Social media, which helps facilitate relationships outside parental control, is a key factor in this. Often, however, the situation is more complicated with parents pressuring their daughters to marry or formalise relationships with boyfriends in order to preserve the girl's reputation and the family's honour.



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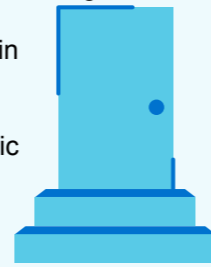
**Child marriage is increasingly shaped by digital relationships** where girls may feel empowered, perceiving their marriages to be based on love. They are choosing their partner, not their parents yet they remain vulnerable. The technology does not change the behaviour. Online, older men may still exploit girls' emotional and economic vulnerabilities, presenting marriage as an escape from hardship.



55% of the activists surveyed identified customary and religious beliefs as key factors undermining the effectiveness of laws and policies aimed at preventing child marriage.

5

**A number of girls in the study identified as marginalised.** Location, caste, disability, social isolation all contributed to a sense of being an outcast and girls confirmed that intersecting identities led to greater discrimination. Marginalised girls were more vulnerable to entering into marriage, had additional difficulty in assessing services and were often in very tough economic circumstances.



6

**Although nearly all 15 study countries prohibit child marriage these laws fail both to protect girls from marriage or to uphold their rights within it.**



7

**Longstanding gender norms which prioritise the role of wife and mother and prize fertility and obedience,** are found in many families and communities. These, supported often by informal laws, are more powerful than national legislation.

8

**Combined with entrenched social and gender norms, the most pressing cause of child marriage is poverty.** In a global environment where funding is constantly under threat the alleviation of poverty remains a key factor in upholding girls' rights.

9

**Once married, girls are largely isolated at home.** Many talked about the impact of this on their mental health: they are living with strangers, often overwhelmed by their new responsibilities, and many are lonely.



10

It is clear from the data that overall decision-making power for married girls, whether with regards to education, sexual and reproductive health and rights, girls' mobility, or large and small financial matters, is minimal and **some girls told us they felt intimidated to challenge their husbands' authority.**



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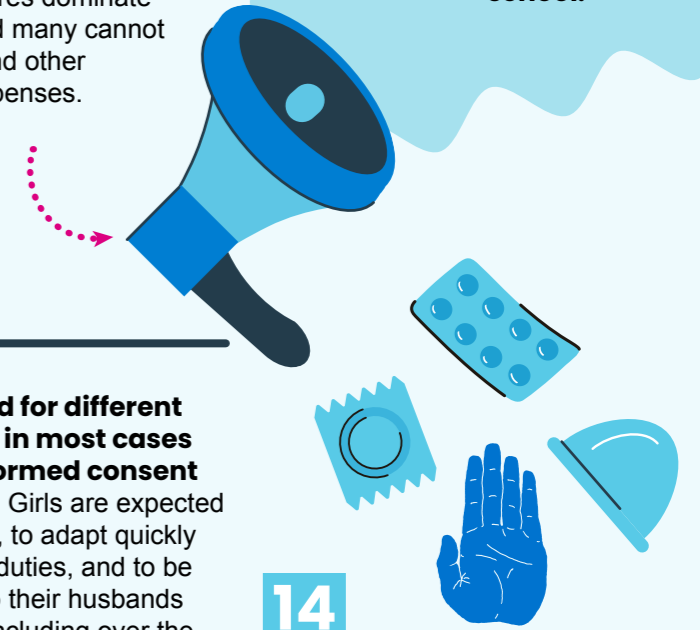
**Few of the girls we spoke with continued their education though many would have liked to.** Education is often considered unnecessary for married girls and barriers include lack of time and money. Childcare and domestic chores dominate their lives and many cannot afford fees and other additional expenses.



**Child marriage activists ranked awareness programmes - aimed at both girls and their families - as one of the top priorities, in terms of keeping married girls in school.**

12

**Girls married for different reasons but in most cases free and informed consent was absent.** Girls are expected to marry early, to adapt quickly to household duties, and to be subservient to their husbands and in-laws, including over the pressure to bear children.



14

**Access to contraception is a contentious issue for many married girls.** Pregnancy is a key driver of child marriage and once married, many experience pressure to start or continue child-bearing. By and large, the husband or partner has control over family planning decisions, with little input from the girl who is denied agency and bodily autonomy.

13

**Not a single interviewee** said they would want their own children to enter a child marriage or union.





## Calls to Action



**Overall, across the 15 countries, the girls' testimonies were strikingly similar and their experiences were comprehensively backed up by the observations of the child marriage activists.**

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Emerging from the research are practical suggestions from married girls which they say would transform their lives:



### **Governments, NGOs and community leaders must:**

- ✓ 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 build the future they choose.
- ✓ Target support for the most marginalised and hardest to reach married girls, including girls living in crisis and conflict, 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.