

Briefing Paper

Committee: UNICEF

Topic: The Question on Combating Child Marriage in Rural Communities

Chair: Shakir Moledina

School: Haberdashers' Elstree Schools

Summary

Child marriage remains a widespread human rights violation affecting millions of children globally, especially girls in rural areas. According to UNICEF, about 1 in 5 young women aged 20–24 years were married before age 18, compared with around 1 in 30 young men, showing the strong gender imbalance in this practice. In 2022, approximately 12 million girls worldwide became child brides, underscoring the scale of the issue.

Rural communities often see higher rates of early marriage due to poverty, limited education, social norms, and weak enforcement of minimum age laws. Child marriage harms education, health, and economic prospects, hindering sustainable development and violating children's rights. Addressing child marriage in rural areas requires coordinated efforts by governments, UNICEF, local organisations, and communities.

Child marriage is particularly concentrated in rural communities, where poverty, limited educational infrastructure, entrenched social norms, weak civil registration systems, and limited legal enforcement combine to sustain the practice.

More than 640 million women and girls alive today were married before age 18 — reflecting the cumulative, generational nature of the issue.

Ending child marriage is essential for achieving Sustainable Development Goal 5 (Gender Equality) and SDG 4 (Quality Education), yet progress remains uneven and fragile, particularly in rural Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia.

Definition of Key Terms

Child Marriage – A marriage or informal partnership where one or both individuals are under the age of 18.

Rural Communities – Areas located outside major cities, often with fewer schools, hospitals, and job opportunities.

Gender Inequality – Unequal treatment or expectations placed on individuals based on their gender, often affecting girls more severely.

Legal Enforcement – The process of making sure laws are followed and applied by authorities such as the police and courts.

Human Rights – Basic rights and freedoms that every person is entitled to, regardless of age, gender, or background.

Forced Marriage – A marriage conducted without the free and full consent of one or both parties.

Birth Registration – The official recording of a child's birth by the state, necessary to verify age and enforce minimum marriage laws.

Gender Norms – Socially constructed expectations regarding the roles and behaviours of men and women.

Background Information

Child marriage has existed for many years and is closely linked to poverty and tradition. In rural areas, families may marry off their children early because they cannot afford to keep them in school or believe marriage will provide security. In some cultures, early marriage is seen as normal or even expected, especially for girls.

Although many countries have laws setting the minimum age of marriage at 18, these laws are often poorly enforced in rural regions. Birth records may be missing, and local customs can be stronger than national laws. Children who marry early are more likely to drop out of school, face health risks during pregnancy, and remain trapped in poverty. This makes child marriage not only a social issue, but also a major barrier to development.

Child marriage is most prevalent in parts of Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia, where poverty and limited school access intersect with cultural traditions. Data show that globally more than half a billion women and girls alive today were married before age 18, reflecting the cumulative effect of the practice over generations.

Girls in rural regions are significantly more likely to marry early than those in urban areas. For example, in various world regions, the prevalence of child marriage before age 18 in rural areas ($\approx 27\%$) is more than double that in urban areas ($\approx 12\%$).

Country examples illustrate this variation:

- Niger has one of the highest rates worldwide: about 75 % of girls marry before they turn 18 and 28 % before age 15.
- Ethiopia sees 40 % of girls married before 18 and 14 % before age 15.
- Bangladesh had an estimated 65 % of girls married before age 18 (with around 29 % before age 15).
- Sudan reports 34 % of girls married before 18 and 12 % before 15.

These figures highlight both the prevalence and regional differences in child marriage.

Major Countries and Organizations Involved

Child marriage manifests differently across national contexts. While prevalence is geographically concentrated, the interaction between law, institutions, economic systems, and normative structures varies significantly. Understanding these variations is essential for designing realistic interventions.

Niger – In Niger, child marriage is deeply embedded in rural customary governance systems. Village chiefs and religious authorities retain significant influence over family decisions, often superseding state institutions in practical authority. In many rural districts, marriages are conducted through customary or religious ceremonies that are never formally registered, limiting state oversight.

Institutionally, rural civil registration systems remain weak, and enforcement mechanisms are thinly distributed outside urban centres. This creates a gap between statutory law and lived practice. In agrarian communities vulnerable to climate shocks, marriage can also function within household economic strategies tied to bride wealth and kinship alliances.

Organizations involved in Niger include:

- UNICEF Niger, which supports birth registration campaigns, adolescent girls' empowerment clubs, and rural education expansion.
- UNFPA Niger, focusing on sexual and reproductive health access and community norm change.
- The African Union Campaign to End Child Marriage, which provides regional political alignment.
- Local civil society groups that work through village-level dialogue programmes.

However, programming effectiveness is often limited by rural administrative capacity and resource constraints.

Bangladesh – In Bangladesh, child marriage persists despite economic growth and strong NGO presence. Rural marriage practices intersect with dowry systems, where financial obligations can increase as girls age or become more educated. This creates structural incentives that are distinct from bride price systems in parts of Africa.

Legal reform has been undermined by exception clauses, which create discretionary space for local authorities. In rural districts, enforcement depends heavily on local administrators and magistrates, whose willingness to intervene varies.

Bangladesh has one of the most developed NGO sectors globally. Key actors include:

- BRAC, which runs large-scale girls' education and empowerment initiatives.
- UNICEF Bangladesh, which supports adolescent clubs and legal awareness campaigns.

- UNFPA Bangladesh, focusing on reproductive health and prevention programming.
- Community-based women's organisations working to monitor underage marriage cases.

Bangladesh demonstrates that strong civil society presence improves awareness but does not automatically dismantle economic and normative incentives.

Ethiopia – Ethiopia has seen regional progress where federal and local government coordination has strengthened enforcement and education access. The decentralised governance structure means that implementation varies significantly between regions.

In areas where secondary schooling expanded and local prosecutors actively enforced age requirements, reductions occurred. However, in remote pastoralist regions, enforcement and service delivery remain limited.

Organisations active in Ethiopia include:

- UNICEF Ethiopia, supporting rural education access and social norm change.
- UNFPA Ethiopia, focusing on adolescent health.
- Regional bureaus of Women and Social Affairs, which implement child protection policies.
- Faith-based organisations working with elders to reinterpret norms around early marriage.

Ethiopia illustrates how subnational governance capacity directly shapes outcomes.

South Sudan – In South Sudan, child marriage is intertwined with fragility and displacement. Customary courts operate alongside weak formal judicial systems. Bride wealth systems remain economically central in rural cattle-based economies.

Conflict has weakened state enforcement and disrupted schooling infrastructure. In displacement settings, humanitarian agencies often substitute for state institutions.

Organisations operating in South Sudan include:

- UNICEF South Sudan, integrating child marriage prevention into humanitarian programming.
- UNFPA, providing protection services and reproductive health support.
- International NGOs such as Save the Children, which operate safe spaces for girls.
- Local women's networks advocating against forced and early marriage.

However, programming faces severe security and access constraints.

South Africa (Case Study) – South Africa provides a critical comparative case demonstrating how institutional strength mediates outcomes. Despite rural poverty in provinces such as Eastern Cape and KwaZulu-Natal, child marriage prevalence remains substantially lower than in high-prevalence states.

Several institutional factors distinguish South Africa:

1. Robust Legal Framework – Constitutional protections and statutory law clearly regulate minimum marriage age, including within customary marriage systems.
2. Civil Registration Systems – Birth registration coverage is significantly higher, limiting age ambiguity.
3. Social Protection Grants – Child support grants provide alternative economic safety nets, reducing the economic rationale for early marriage.
4. Child Protection Infrastructure – Social workers and family courts are more accessible relative to many low-income states.

Importantly, research in South Africa highlights variation across cultural groups in early union formation, suggesting that norms – not only income – influence behaviour. In some communities, early cohabitation may occur without formal marriage, reflecting shifting social norms rather than traditional child marriage structures.

Key organisations involved include:

- South Africa's Department of Social Development, which administers child protection and social grants.
- Commission for Gender Equality, monitoring compliance with constitutional protections.
- UNICEF South Africa, supporting adolescent development programmes.
- Community-based organisations addressing gender-based violence and early unions.

South Africa demonstrates that where institutional enforcement, social protection, and education systems are comparatively strong, poverty does not automatically translate into widespread child marriage.

International and Multilateral Organisations

Beyond country-level actors, several international organisations shape the global response:

- UNICEF coordinates global monitoring, supports national programming, and integrates prevention into child protection systems.
- UNFPA addresses reproductive health, adolescent empowerment, and gender equality.
- The World Bank supports education and social protection financing mechanisms.
- The African Union provides regional political frameworks.
- Girls Not Brides (Global Partnership) connects civil society actors across countries to coordinate advocacy.

These organisations differ in mandate: UNICEF focuses on child protection systems, UNFPA on reproductive health and empowerment, and the World Bank on structural financing mechanisms. Coordination challenges sometimes arise due to overlapping programming areas.

Timeline of Events (Relevant UN Treaties)

1948 – Universal Declaration of Human Rights establishes that marriage requires free and full consent.

1979 – CEDAW calls for elimination of discrimination in marriage and family relations.

1989 – Convention on the Rights of the Child recognises children’s right to protection from harmful practices.

1994 – International Conference on Population and Development links early marriage to maternal health and reproductive risks.

2000 – Millennium Development Goals indirectly target related issues such as girls’ education and maternal mortality.

2012 – First UN General Assembly resolution specifically addressing child, early and forced marriage.

2014 – Girl Summit increases international political visibility.

2015 – Sustainable Development Goals include Target 5.3 to eliminate child marriage by 2030.

2018 – African Union strengthens regional coordination to end child marriage.

2020-2022 – COVID-19 pandemic disrupts schooling globally, increasing projected child marriages.

2023-Present – Ongoing conflicts in Sudan and the Sahel region exacerbate rural instability and vulnerability.

Previous Attempts to Solve the Issue

Legal Reform

Many countries have introduced laws setting the minimum age of marriage at 18. For example, India’s Prohibition of Child Marriage Act (2006) made child marriage illegal nationwide. However, in rural areas the law has had limited impact because marriages often take place through informal religious or customary ceremonies that are not registered with the state. Local police are frequently reluctant to intervene in family matters, and weak birth registration systems make it difficult to prove a child’s age. As a result, prosecutions remain rare in rural districts despite the existence of strong national legislation.

Similarly, Bangladesh maintains a legal marriage age of 18 for girls, yet rural child marriage remains common. A 2017 legal amendment allowing marriage under “special circumstances” has

been criticised by UNICEF and human rights organisations for weakening enforcement, particularly in rural areas where oversight is limited and exceptions are easily exploited.

Education-Based Interventions

Education programmes have been one of the most effective tools where properly implemented. In Ethiopia, UNICEF-supported initiatives encouraging girls' school attendance contributed to declines in child marriage in some regions. However, these programmes often failed to reach rural girls because secondary schools were located far from villages, increasing travel costs and safety concerns. Families in isolated areas frequently withdrew girls from school despite awareness campaigns, showing that education policies fail when infrastructure barriers are not addressed.

In Niger, efforts to promote girls' education have struggled due to extremely low rural secondary school availability. In many villages, primary education is the highest level accessible, making marriage the only socially accepted option for adolescent girls once schooling ends.

Economic Incentives

Cash transfer and scholarship programmes have been used to reduce poverty-driven child marriage. In Bangladesh, stipend programmes for girls' secondary education helped delay marriage while payments were active. However, studies found that once financial support ended, marriage rates often increased again, highlighting the limitations of short-term or donor-dependent funding models.

In Malawi, similar cash transfer schemes reduced child marriage temporarily, but long-term impact was limited when programmes lacked sustainability or were not combined with education and community engagement.

Community Engagement

Community dialogue programmes involving religious and traditional leaders have shown mixed results. In Ethiopia, engagement with elders helped reduce child marriage in some rural communities by reframing education as compatible with cultural values. However, in other regions, initiatives failed where leaders viewed child marriage as a long-standing tradition or feared social backlash for opposing it.

In South Sudan, community-based programmes have struggled due to conflict, displacement, and economic instability, which reinforce reliance on marriage as a survival strategy despite awareness campaigns.

Possible Solutions

Improving access to education should involve not only school expansion but also safe transport, boarding facilities, and linkage to employment pathways. However, high capital costs and norm resistance may limit impact if education does not translate into perceived economic returns.

Strengthening legal enforcement requires investment in birth registration systems and rural judicial presence. Yet enforcement risks backlash if perceived as external interference and may remain ineffective without community legitimacy.

Providing sustainable economic support must move beyond short-term transfers. Integrated livelihood programmes for parents, long-term conditional support tied to education, and diversification of rural income sources may reduce reliance on marriage as risk management. However, such models require fiscal sustainability and governance transparency.

Expanding community-led norm change initiatives must directly engage male elders, fathers, and customary leaders. Norm transformation strategies should acknowledge honour structures rather than dismiss them. However, change is slow, politically sensitive, and uneven.

Conflict-sensitive programming is essential in fragile contexts. Integrating child marriage prevention into humanitarian responses, maintaining schooling during displacement, and strengthening protection services for girls can mitigate crisis-driven increases. Yet instability severely constrains implementation capacity.

Improving data collection and disaggregation at rural district level would enable targeted interventions. However, underreporting and weak civil registration systems limit data reliability.

Useful Links

1. **UNICEF – Child Marriage Overview**
<https://www.unicef.org/protection/child-marriage>
2. **Save the Children – Ending Child Marriage**
<https://www.savethechildren.net/ending-child-marriage>
3. **Save the Children – Child Marriage Facts and Impact**
<https://www.savethechildren.org.uk/what-we-do/global-issues-hub/child-marriage>
4. **Plan International – Child Marriage Information**
<https://plan-international.org/srhr/child-marriage-early-forced/>
5. **Plan International UK – About Child Marriage**
<https://plan-uk.org/our-work/protection-from-violence/child-marriage>
6. **Girls Not Brides – Learning Resources & Global Partnership**
<https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/about-child-marriage/> [Wikipedia](#)
7. **Girls Not Brides – Child Protection & Child Marriage PDF (overview)**
https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/documents/1514/Child_protection_and_child_marriage_EN_G.pdf [Girls Not Brides](#)
8. **World Vision UK – Ending Child Marriage by 2030 (report)**
<https://www.worldvision.org.uk/about/publications/ending-child-marriage-by-2030/>