Child Marriage
Girls face discrimination and violence every day across the world, and few challenges to them are more damaging than early marriage.

Child marriage has adverse effects for the child and for society as a whole. While boys are affected by child marriage, this is an issue that impacts girls in far larger numbers and with more intensity. Child marriage is defined as a marriage of a girl or boy before the age of 18 and refers to both formal marriages and informal unions in which children under the age of 18 live with an unmarried partner.

Child marriage denies a girl of her childhood, disrupts her education, limits her opportunities, increases her risk of violence and abuse, jeopardizes her health and therefore constitutes an obstacle to the achievement of nearly every Millennium Development Goal (MDG) and the development of vibrant communities.

International Day of the Girl Child
The International Day of the Girl Child focuses attention on the need to address the challenges confronting girls’ and to promote girls’ empowerment and the fulfillment of their rights.

For the inaugural day, United Nations (UN) agencies are joining together to focus on preventing child marriage, which is a fundamental human rights violation and impacts all aspects of a girl’s life.

| Percentage of women aged 20-24 who were first married or in union by age 18 |
|---------------------------------|---|
| South Asia                      | 46 |
| Sub-Saharan Africa              | 37 |
| Latin America and Caribbean     | 29 |
| East Asia Pacific               | 18 |
| Middle East and North Africa    | 17 |
| CEE/CIS                         | 11 |
| World                           | 34 |

Key Facts and Figures
- Globally, almost 400 million women aged 20-49 – or 41 per cent of the total population of women of this age – were married or entered into union while they were children.
- Although the proportion of child brides has generally decreased over the last 30 years, in some regions child marriage remains common even amongst the youngest generations, particularly in rural areas and those living in extreme poverty.
- Among young women worldwide aged 20-24, around 1 in 3 – approximately 70 million – were married as children, and around 11 per cent – nearly 23 million – entered into marriage or union before they reached 15 years of age.

Strategic Approach
In partnership with governments, civil society, and UN Agencies, Funds and Programmes, UNICEF has laid the groundwork in a number of countries to tackle the issue through both local level social and economic change efforts and national policy legal reforms.

To date, 55 Countries are parties to the Convention on Consent to Marriage, Minimum Age for Marriage, and Registration of Marriages. In 1994, the UN Committee on the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women issued a nonbinding recommendation that countries adopt a minimum age for marriage of 18 years for both sexes.
Yet, the marriage laws of developing countries vary widely. To date, 113 countries have established 18 years as the minimum age for girls while 147 countries have established 18 years for boys.

Child marriage is already a focus of UNICEF’s work: as per the 2011 annual reports, 34 country offices – representing all regions – reported specific activities to address child marriage, and an additional 24 countries mentioned it as a concern for their country. At country level and globally, UNICEF is helping to develop stronger programmes and policies based on a deeper understanding of how to identify and address social norms as well as the economic and structural realities that perpetuate child marriage.

**UNICEF Actions**

- Enact and enforce appropriate legislation to increase the minimum age of marriage for girls to 18 and raise public awareness about child marriage as a violation of girls’ human rights.
- Improve access to good quality primary and secondary education, ensuring that gender gaps in schooling are eliminated.
- Mobilize girls, boys, parents, leaders, and champions to change gender-adverse social norms, including: discrimination, low value of girls, and religious and cultural justifications while also promoting girls’ rights and life opportunities.
- Support already married girls by providing them with options for schooling, sexual and reproductive health services, livelihoods skills and recourse from violence in the home.
- Enhance economic opportunities, including cash transfers tied to social services such as health, nutrition, education and protection to counter the economic incentives of continuing child marriage.

**Illustrative Results**

**In India**, UNICEF supported the passage of the Child Marriage Prohibition Act of 2006. UNICEF has championed the development and implementation of a national strategy on child marriage, based on the completion of on-going studies and reviews, and on existing interventions. Significant progress has been made at the state level in the development of state action plans in the high prevalence areas of Karnataka, Rajasthan, Tamil Nadu, West Bengal. Further, there is an emerging dynamic of communities agreeing to end child marriage following community-wide movements in which girls clubs – supported by UNICEF – have been important actors of change.

**In Senegal**, UNICEF has promoted community empowerment programmes, resulting in public declarations in over 5,000 villages to announce their intention to abandon the practice of child marriage.

**In Uganda** modern communication technology and social media provide a platform for innovation, giving a greater voice to young people and girls and boys. Through UNICEF’s U-Report, the power of SMS messaging is used by adolescents to spread the word on a particular issue and gather input from their friends and networks to inform policy decisions.

Engaging adolescents and young people in the discussion is critical for the abandonment of child marriage. Through meaningful participation, adolescents develop the tools they need to make decisions that affect their lives and to break vicious cycles, including gender discrimination and violence, passed down from one generation to the next.

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Senegal, 2007: A girl lists on the blackboard, in French, her right to education, health and peace, in Kabiline I Primary School in the village of Kabiline.