

Ending Child Marriage

A profile of progress in India

unicef 

for every child





Child marriage in the global development agenda

Child marriage is a violation of human rights. Every child has the right to be protected from this harmful practice, which has devastating consequences for individuals and for society. Child marriage is now firmly on the global development agenda, most prominently through its inclusion in Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) target 5.3, which aims to eliminate the practice by 2030. Although indicator 5.3.1 measures child marriage among girls, the practice occurs among boys as well. Regardless of gender, marriage before adulthood is a breach of children's rights.



SDG: 5 
Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls

TARGET 5.3

Eliminate all harmful practices, such as child, early and forced marriage and female genital mutilation

INDICATOR 5.3.1

Proportion of women aged 20 to 24 years who were married or in a union before age 15 and before age 18

Key facts



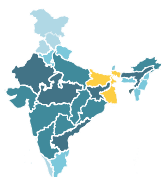
One in three of the world's child brides live in India. Of the country's 223 million child brides, 102 million were married before turning 15.



Over half of Indian child brides live in five states: Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, West Bengal, Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh. Uttar Pradesh is home to the largest population of child brides, with 36 million.



Approximately one in four young women in India were married or in union before their 18th birthday.



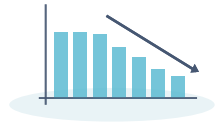
The prevalence of child marriage varies across states and union territories in India. Over 40 per cent of young women were married before turning 18 in Bihar and West Bengal, compared to less than 5 per cent in Lakshadweep.



A girl's risk of child marriage depends on certain background characteristics. Girls who live in rural areas or come from poorer households are at greater risk, and a higher proportion of child brides are found among those with little or no education.



The majority of young women who married in childhood gave birth as adolescents. Child brides go on to have larger families compared to women who marry later.



The practice of child marriage is less common today than in previous generations. There is evidence of accelerating progress over the last decade.



India's progress is strong compared to other countries in South Asia. Nonetheless, if child marriage is to be eliminated by 2030, additional efforts will be required.



Child marriage is less common among boys than girls, and the practice among boys could be eliminated by 2030 if progress is accelerated.



Current state of child marriage among girls

▶ India is home to 223 million child brides

One in three of the world's child brides live in India. Of the country's **223** million child brides, 102 million were married before turning 15

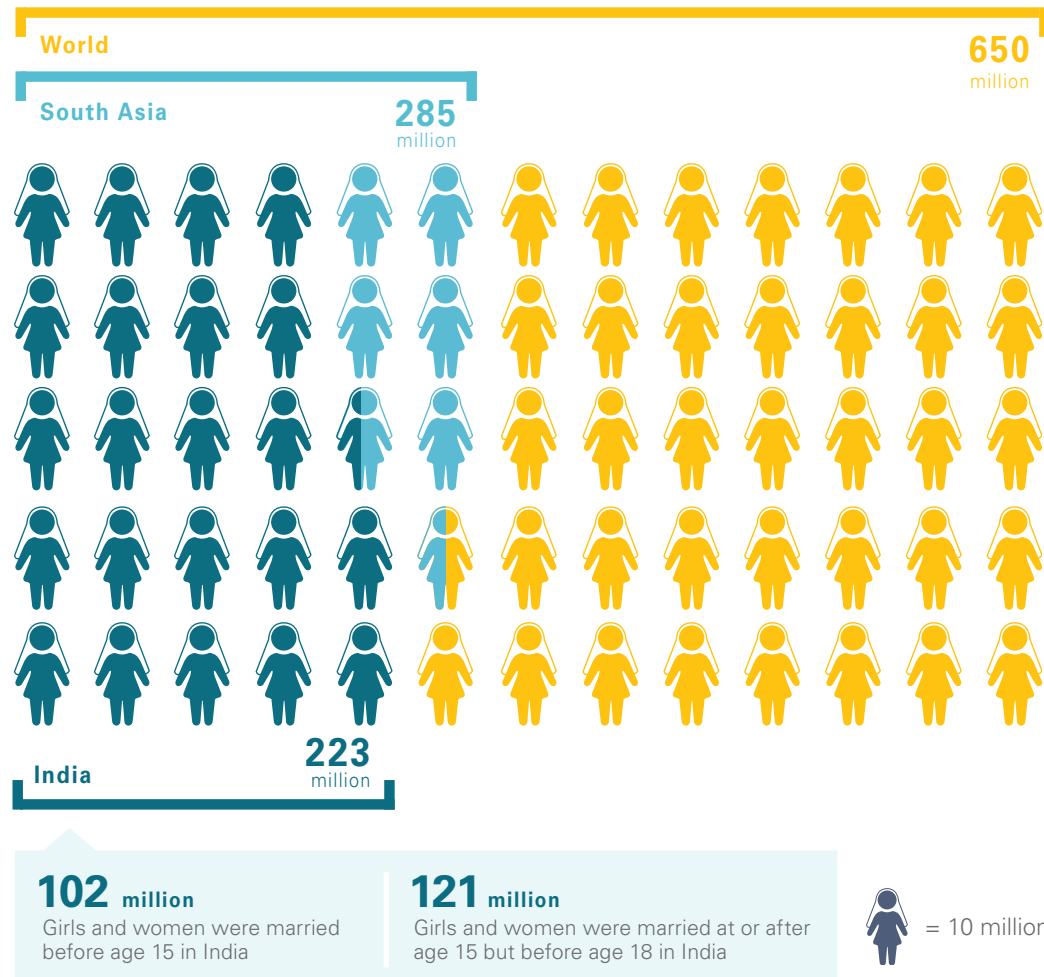


FIG. 1 Number of girls and women who were first married or in union before age 18, India, South Asia and the world

NOTE: Due to rounding, individual figures may not add up to total.

Over **half** of Indian child brides live in **five states**: Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, West Bengal, Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh. Uttar Pradesh is home to the largest population of child brides, with 36 million

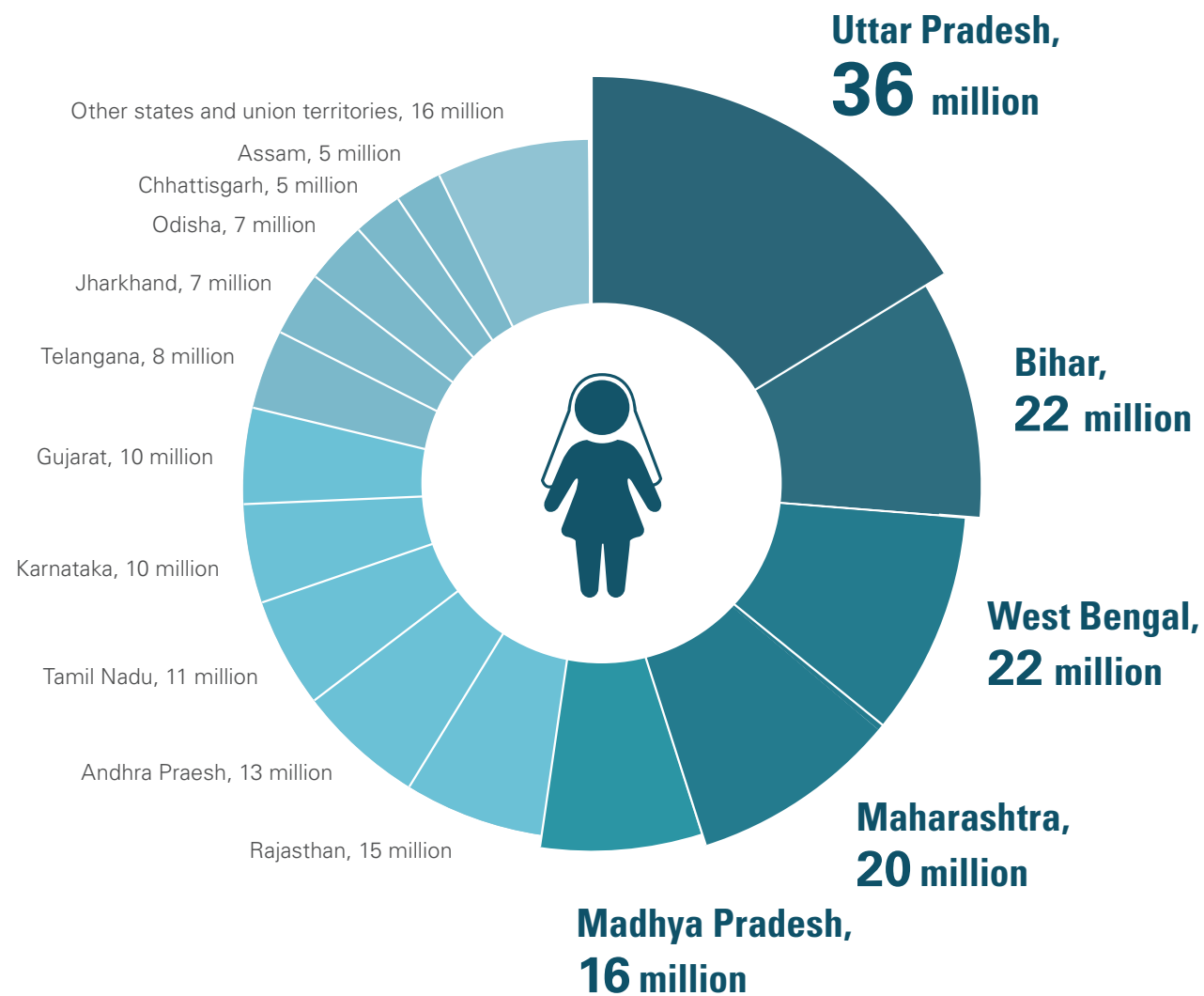


FIG. 2 Number of girls and women who were first married or in union before age 18, by state

NOTE: Geographical boundaries follow the National Family Health Survey, 2015-2016. State populations are estimated using data from the Census of India 2011 and the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division, 2017.

India **ranks fourth** among the eight South Asian countries in terms of child marriage prevalence

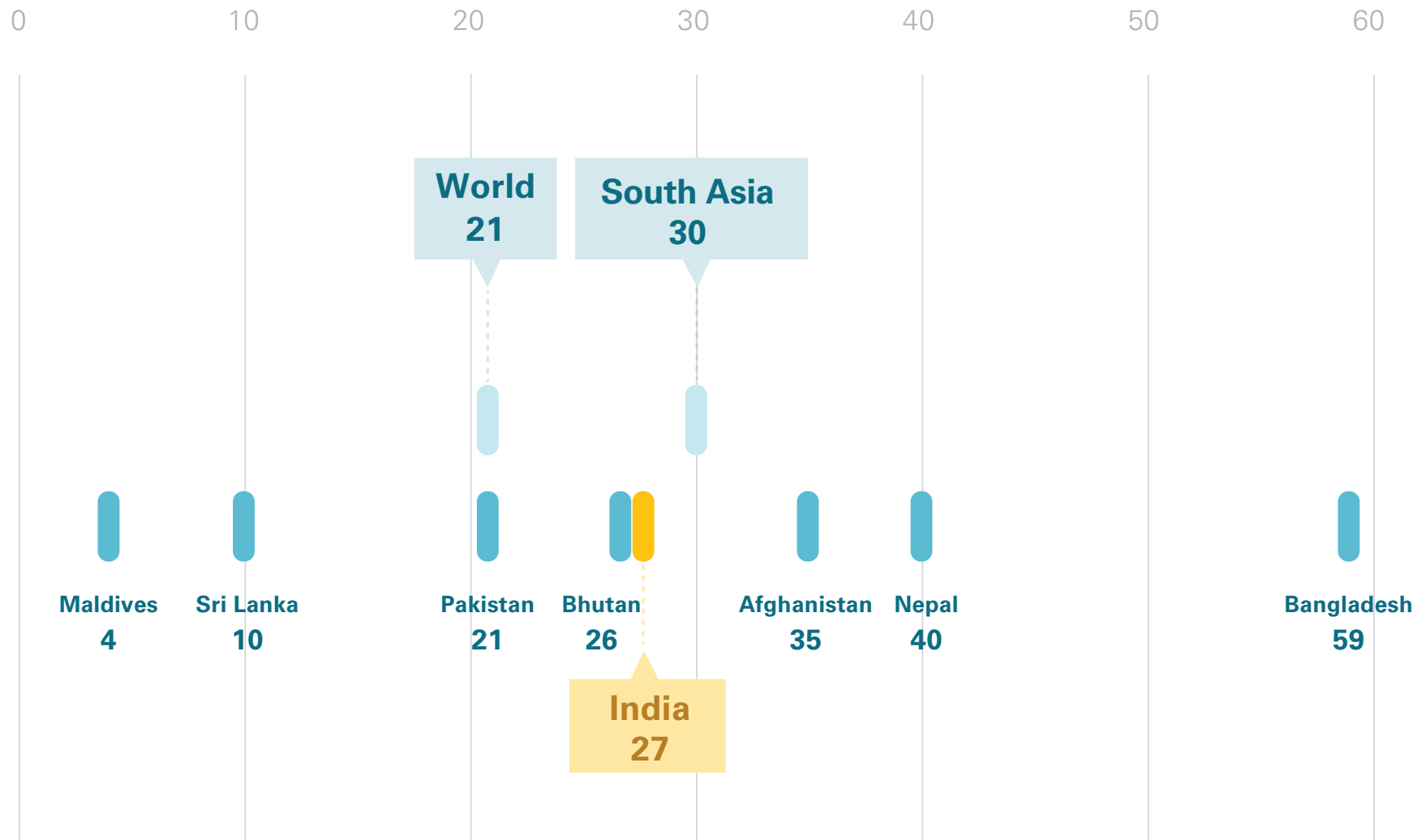


FIG. 3 Percentage of women aged 20 to 24 years who were first married or in union before age 18, countries in South Asia and regional and world averages



Levels vary across India: More than 40 per cent of young women were married in childhood in Bihar (43 per cent) and West Bengal (42 per cent) compared to 2 per cent in Lakshadweep

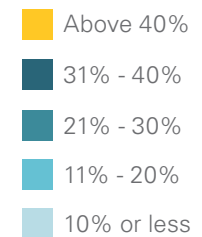


FIG. 4 Percentage of women aged 20 to 24 years who were first married or in union before age 18, by state or union territory

NOTE: This map does not reflect a position by UNICEF on the legal status of any country or territory or the delimitation of any frontiers.



Girls most at risk of child marriage

Child brides in India are more likely to live in **poor** households, have **less education** and reside in **rural** areas

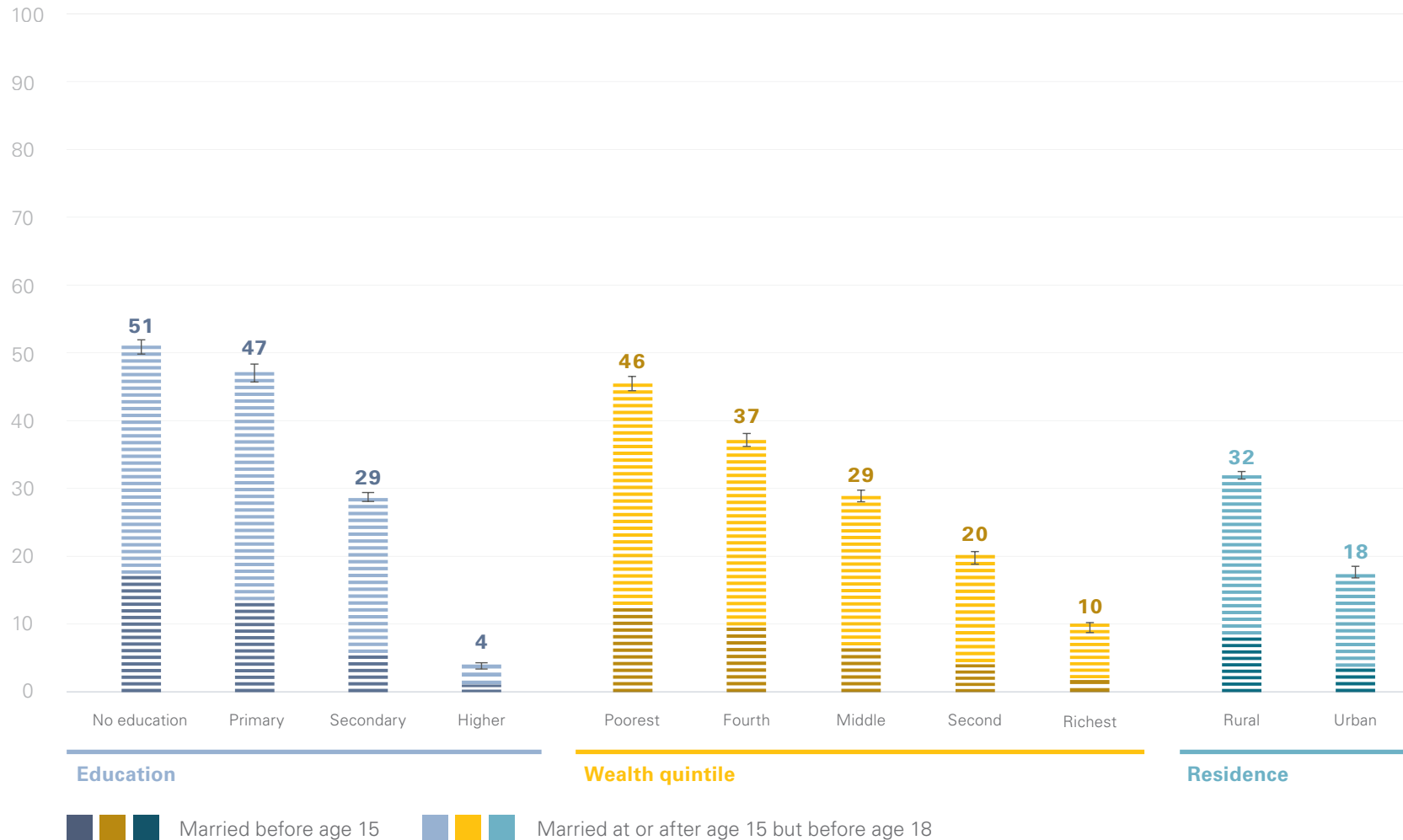
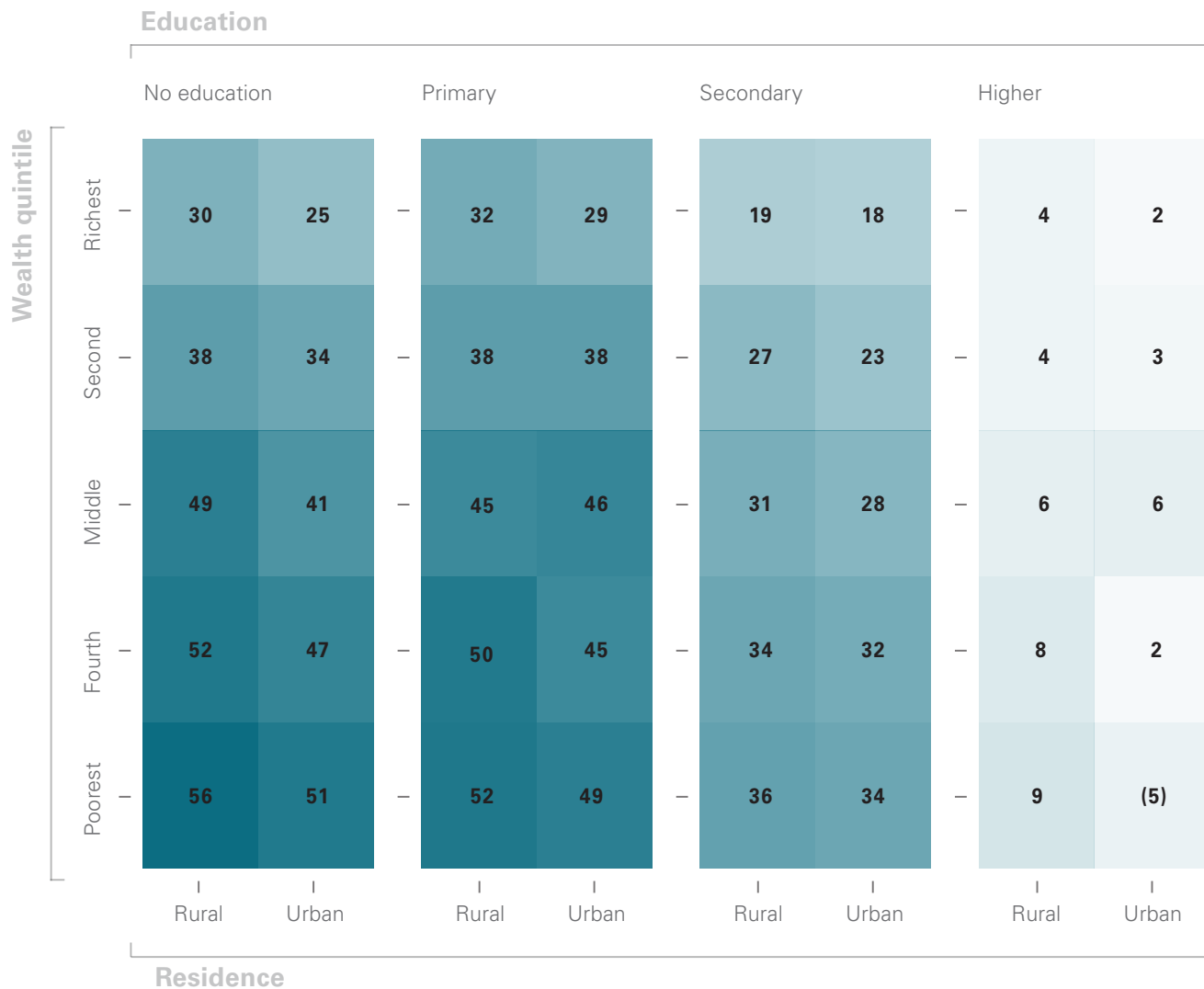


FIG. 5 Percentage of women aged 20 to 24 years who were first married or in union before ages 15 and 18, by education, wealth quintile and residence



The largest disparities in the prevalence of child marriage are found across women with **different levels of education**

FIG. 6 Percentage of women aged 20 to 24 years who were first married or in union before age 18, by education, wealth quintile and residence

NOTE: The value in parentheses is based on 25-49 unweighted cases.

Smaller disparities in child marriage prevalence are found across women from different **religious groups** and **castes/tribes**

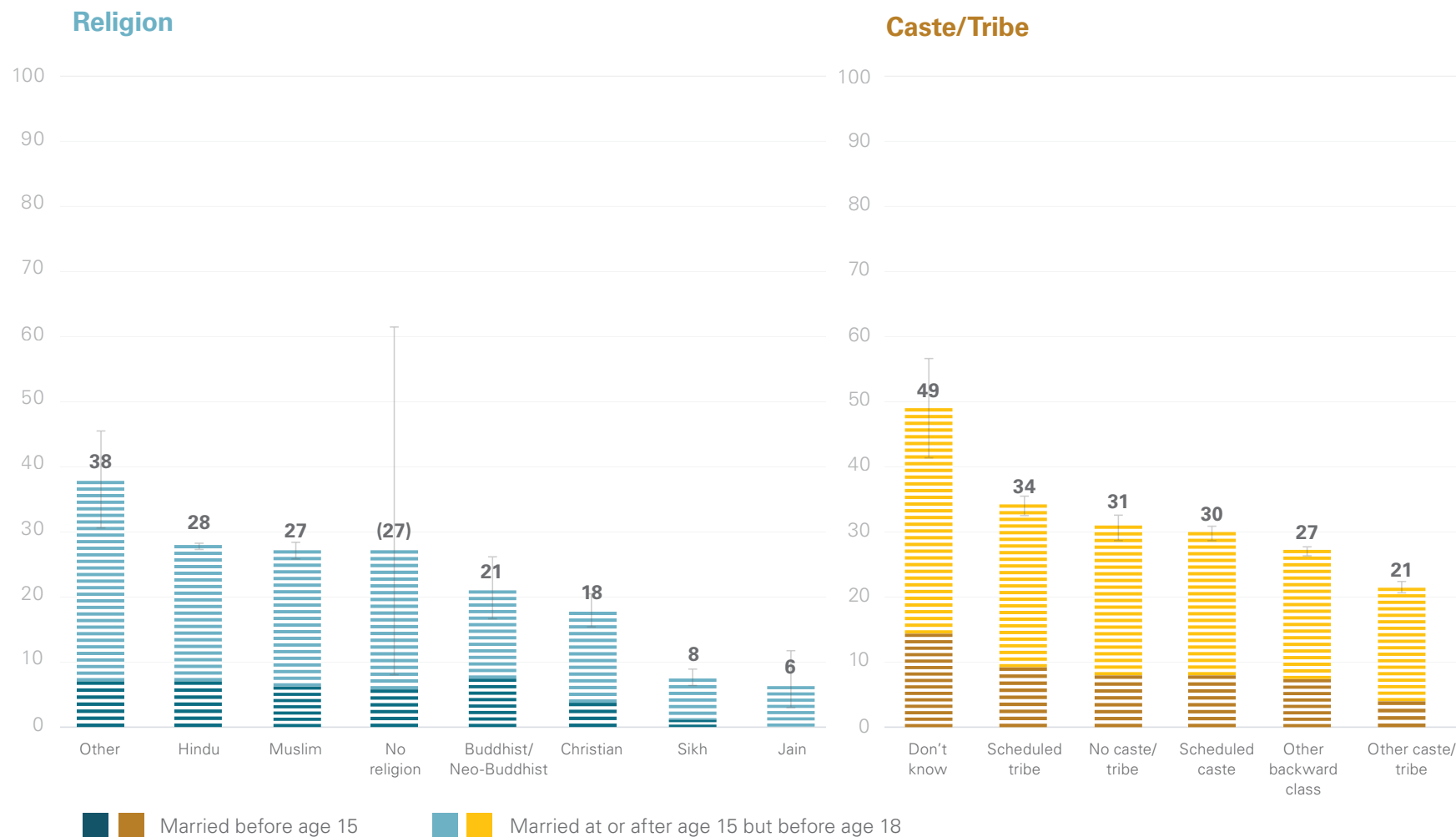
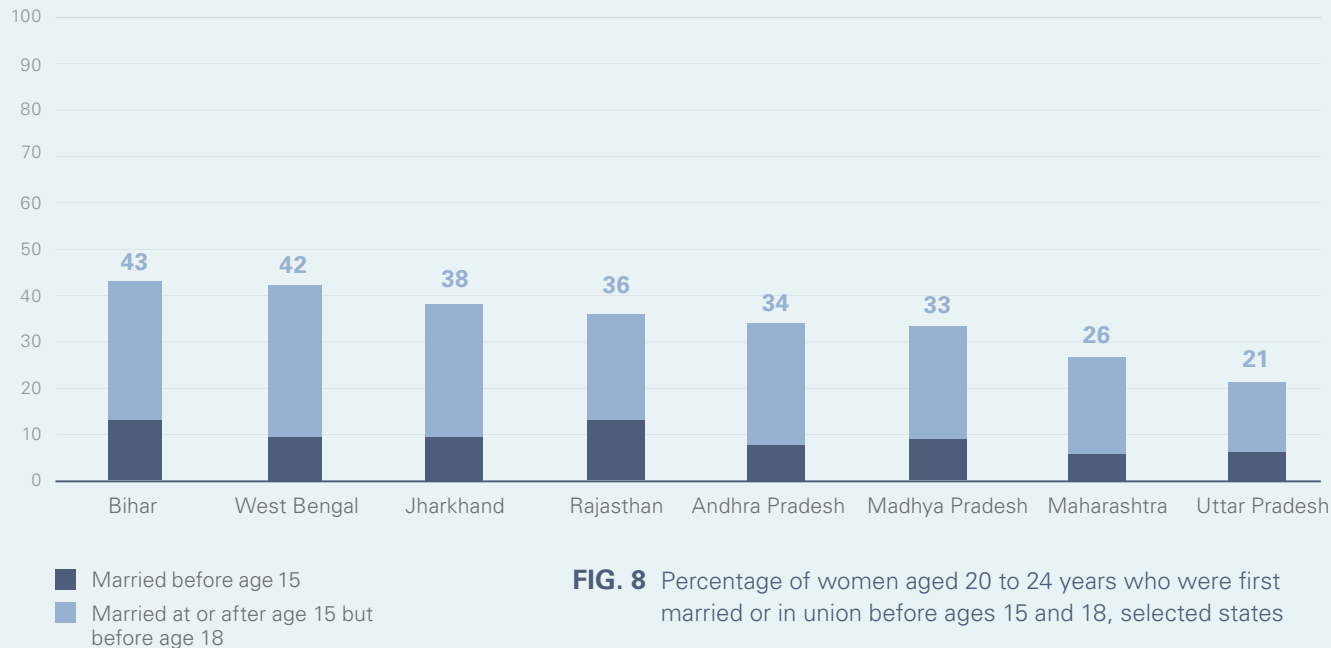


FIG. 7 Percentage of women aged 20 to 24 years who were first married or in union before ages 15 and 18, by religion and caste/tribe

NOTE: Only categories with 25 or more unweighted cases are presented. The value in parentheses is based on 25-49 unweighted cases. "Scheduled castes" and "scheduled tribes" are officially designated groups by the Indian Government, referring to the most disadvantaged socio-economic groups in India.



The states featured on this page have the highest prevalence of child marriage in the country (Bihar, West Bengal, Jharkhand, Rajasthan and Andhra Pradesh), the largest population of child brides (Bihar, West Bengal, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra and Uttar Pradesh) or both (Bihar, West Bengal).

FIG. 8 Percentage of women aged 20 to 24 years who were first married or in union before ages 15 and 18, selected states



FIG. 9 Percentage of women aged 20 to 24 years who were first married or in union before age 18, by education, wealth quintile and residence, selected states



Early childbearing among child brides

▶ Marrying in childhood has repercussions on a woman's age at first birth and her family size

The majority of young women who married during childhood gave birth before they completed adolescence

- Gave birth before age 18
- Gave birth at or after age 18 but before age 20

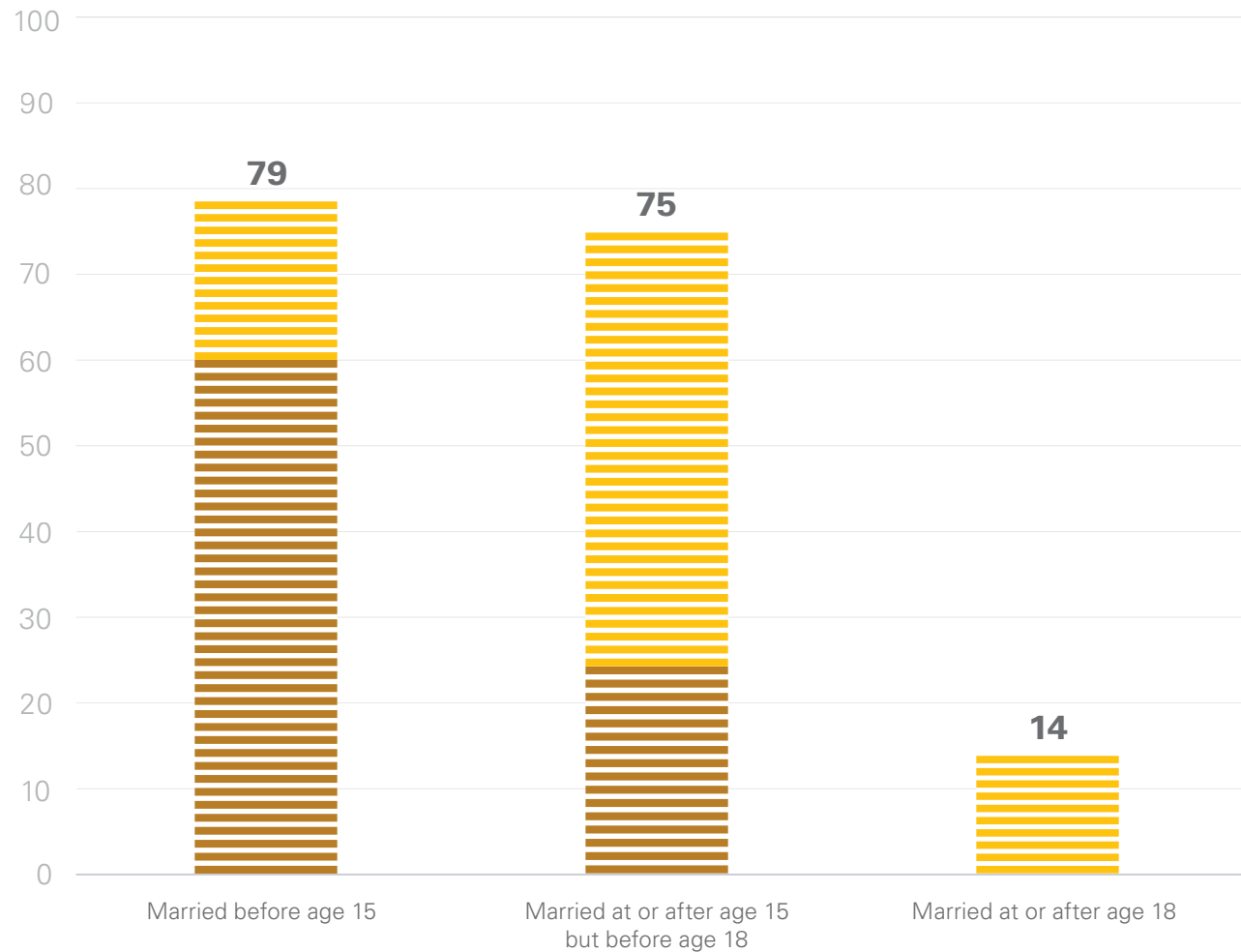


FIG. 10 Percentage of ever-married women aged 20 to 24 years who gave birth before ages 18 and 20, by age at marriage

Child brides have many children to care for at a young age, and also go on to have larger families compared to women who marry later

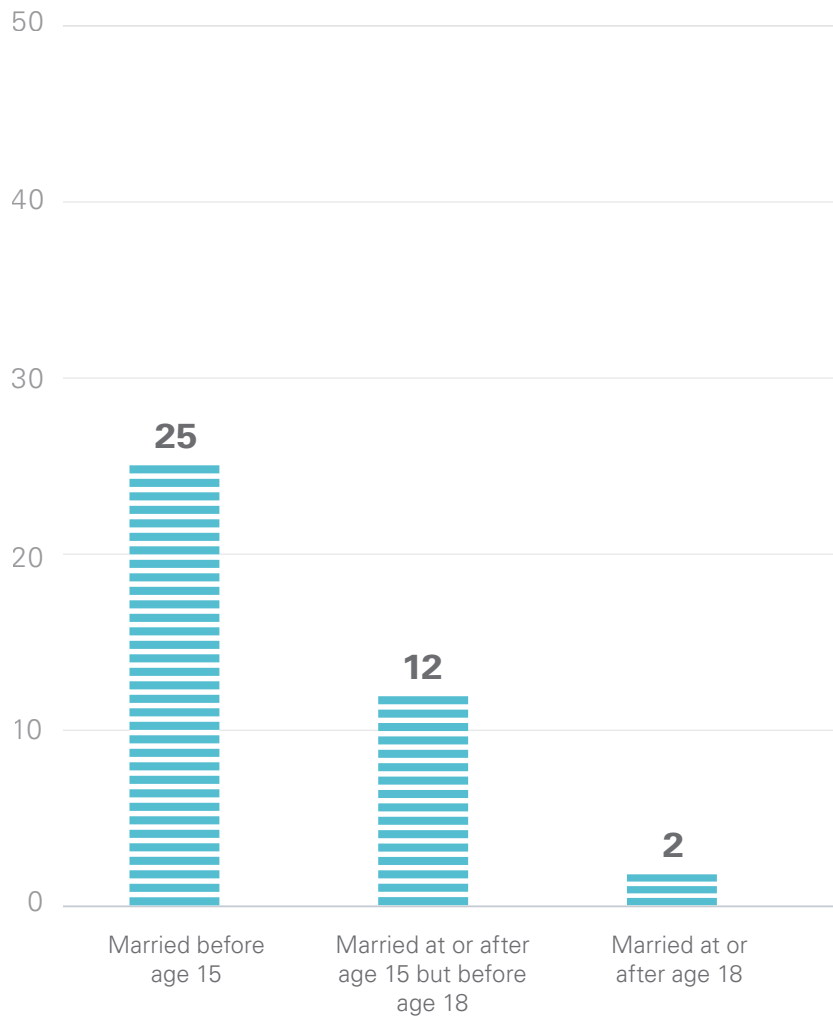
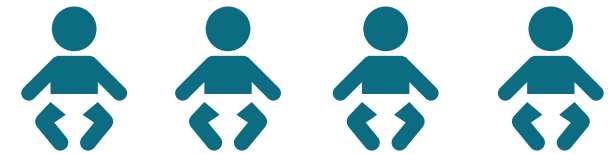
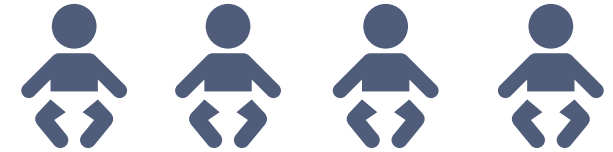


FIG. 11 Percentage of ever-married women aged 20 to 24 years who have had 3 or more children, by age at marriage



Married before age 15



Married at or after age 15 but before age 18



Married at or after age 18

FIG. 12 Median number of children of ever-married women aged 45 to 49 years, by age at marriage

Many states show disparities in early childbearing between child brides and non-child brides; the greatest differences are found in West Bengal among the key states

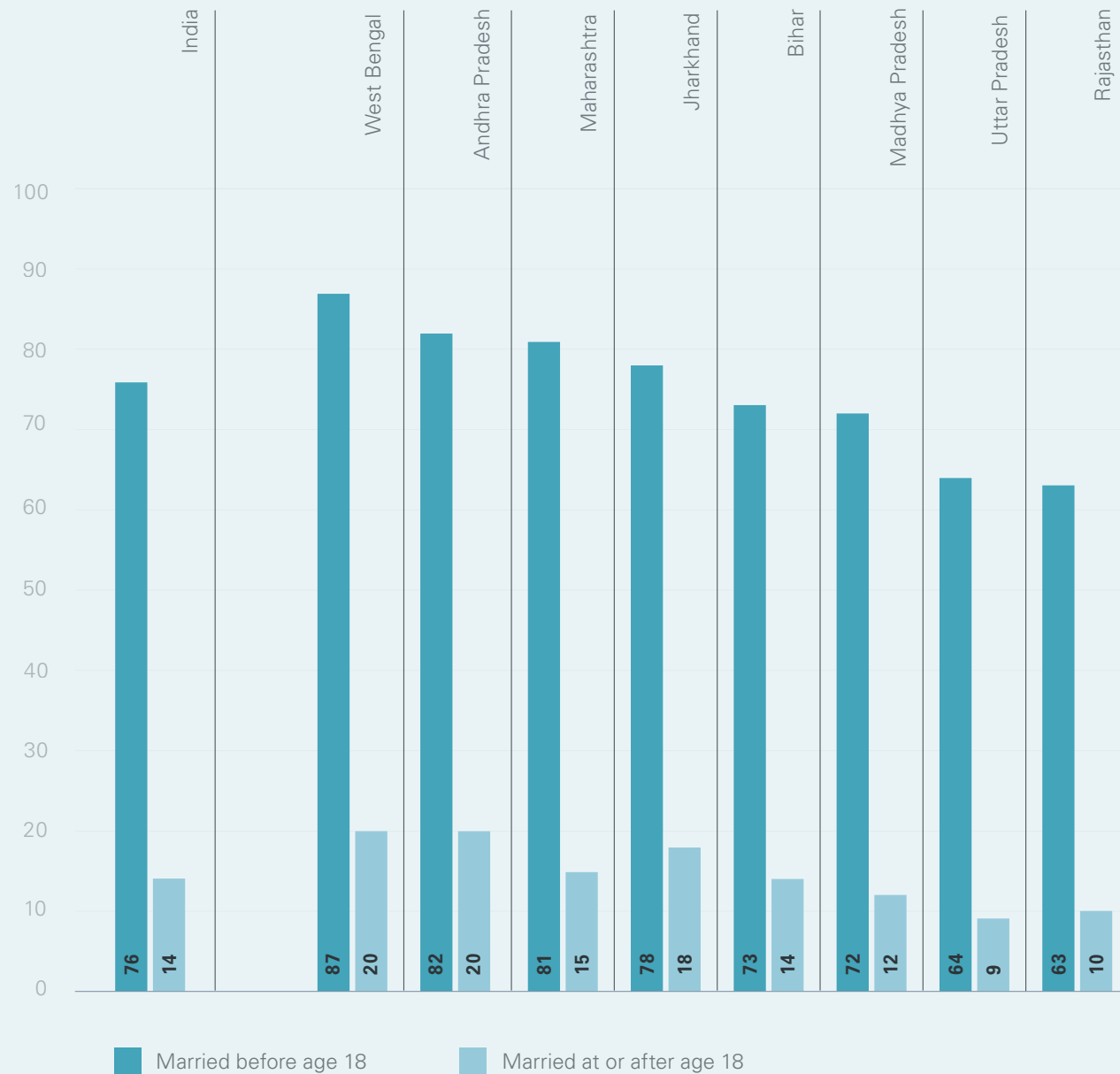


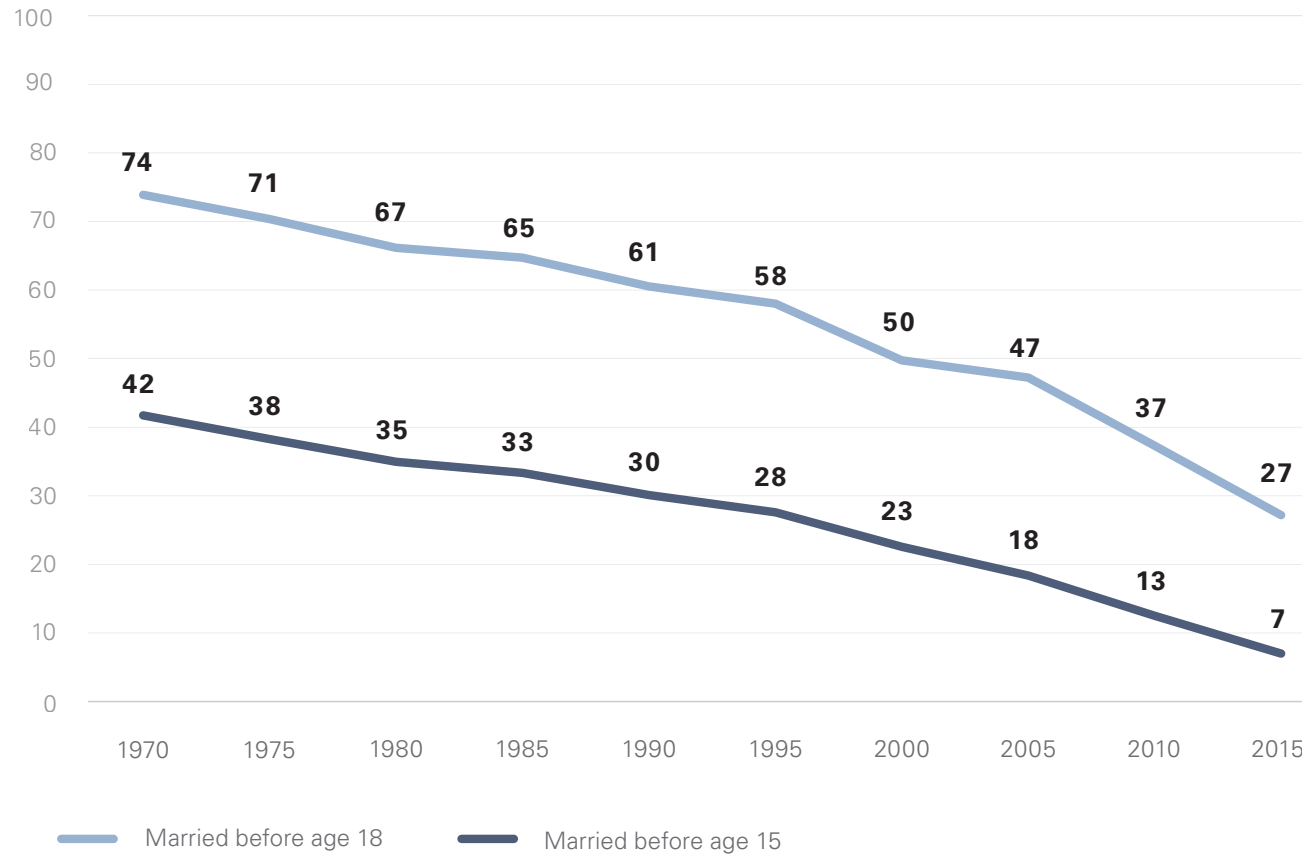
FIG. 13 Percentage of ever-married women aged 20 to 24 years who gave birth before age 20 by age at marriage, India and selected states





Generational trends in reducing child marriage

The practice of child marriage in India is less common today than in prior generations



Over the last decade, progress has been accelerating

FIG. 14 Percentage of women aged 20 to 24 years who were first married or in union before ages 15 and 18

NOTE: This trend analysis is based on the prevalence of child marriage across age cohorts, as measured in the National Family Health Survey (NFHS) 1992-1993, 1997-1998, 2005-2006 and 2015-2016. See technical notes for details.

India's progress in the past decade is one of the strongest among countries in South Asia

Table 1. Average annual rate of reduction and current prevalence of child marriage, percentage of women aged 20 to 24 years who were first married or in union before age 18

	Average annual rate of reduction of child marriage (%)	Current prevalence of child marriage (%)
Maldives	21.2	4
India	5.5	27
Pakistan	4.5	21
Afghanistan	3.6	35
Nepal	2.7	40
Bhutan	2.6	26
Sri Lanka	2.4	10
Bangladesh	2.2	59

NOTE: Table includes all countries in South Asia with nationally representative data on child marriage. Countries are ranked from highest to lowest according to the 10-year rate of reduction. Caution is warranted in interpreting these rates, as in some cases the differences in prevalence in the last 10 years may not be significant.

Important advances have been made in reducing child marriage, including in high-prevalence and high-burden states

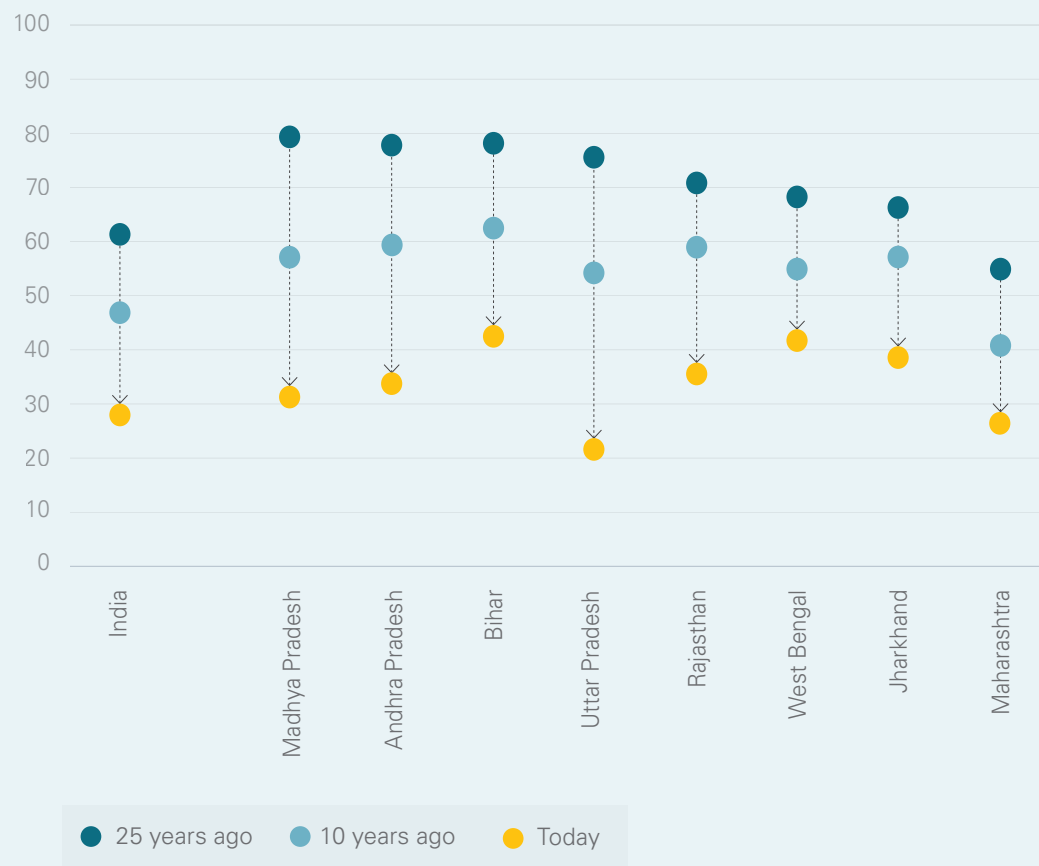
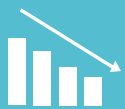


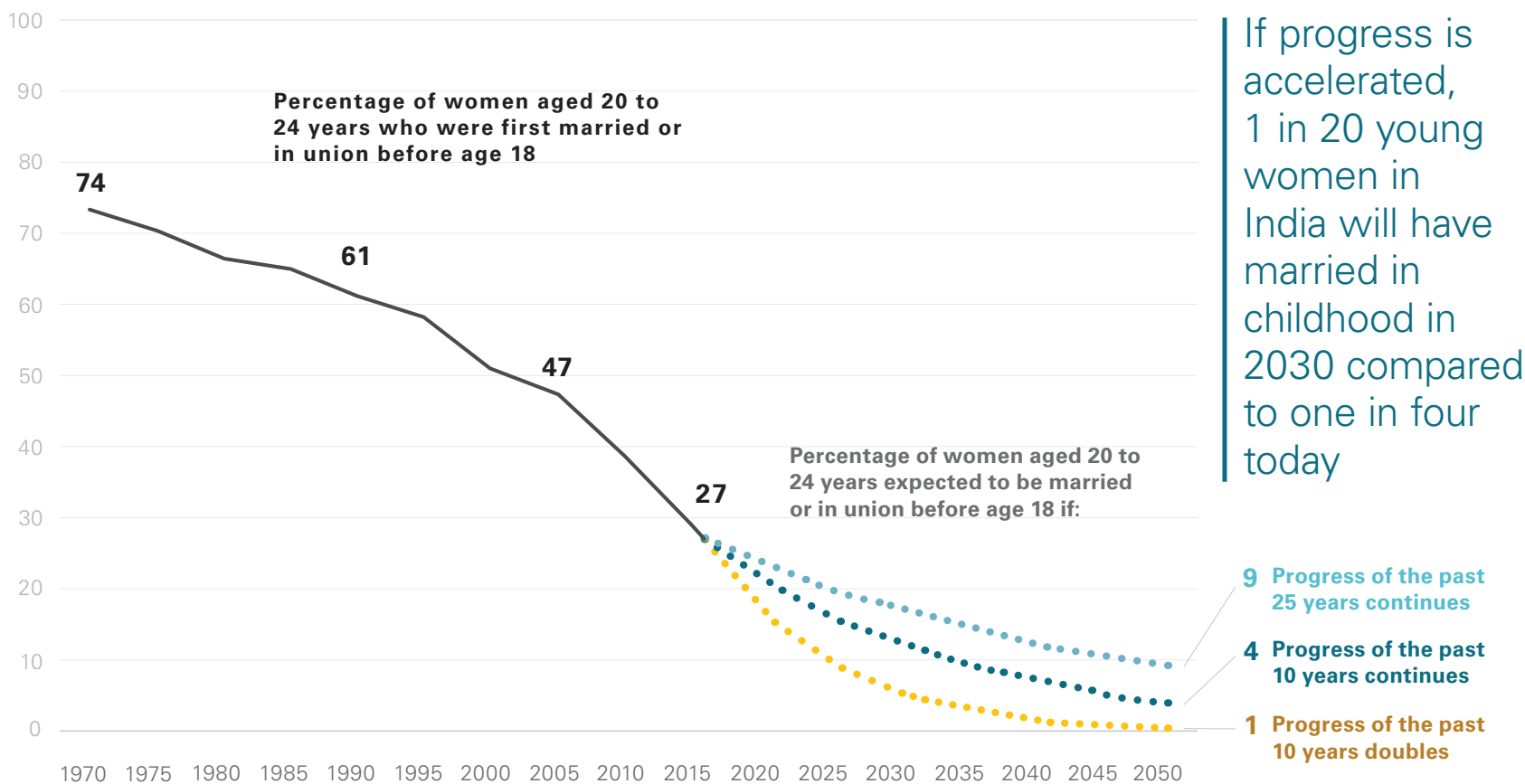
FIG. 15 Percentage of women aged 20 to 24 years who were first married or in union before age 18, selected states

NOTE: See technical notes for details on the calculation of trends at the state level.



Looking ahead towards elimination

Compared to the last 10 years, progress will need to be four times faster to eliminate child marriage by 2030



If progress is accelerated, 1 in 20 young women in India will have married in childhood in 2030 compared to one in four today

FIG. 16 Observed and projected percentage of women aged 20 to 24 years who were first married or in union before age 18

NOTE: See 'How to read the projections' on page 26.

In order to meet the SDG target of eliminating child marriage by 2030, substantial acceleration will be required

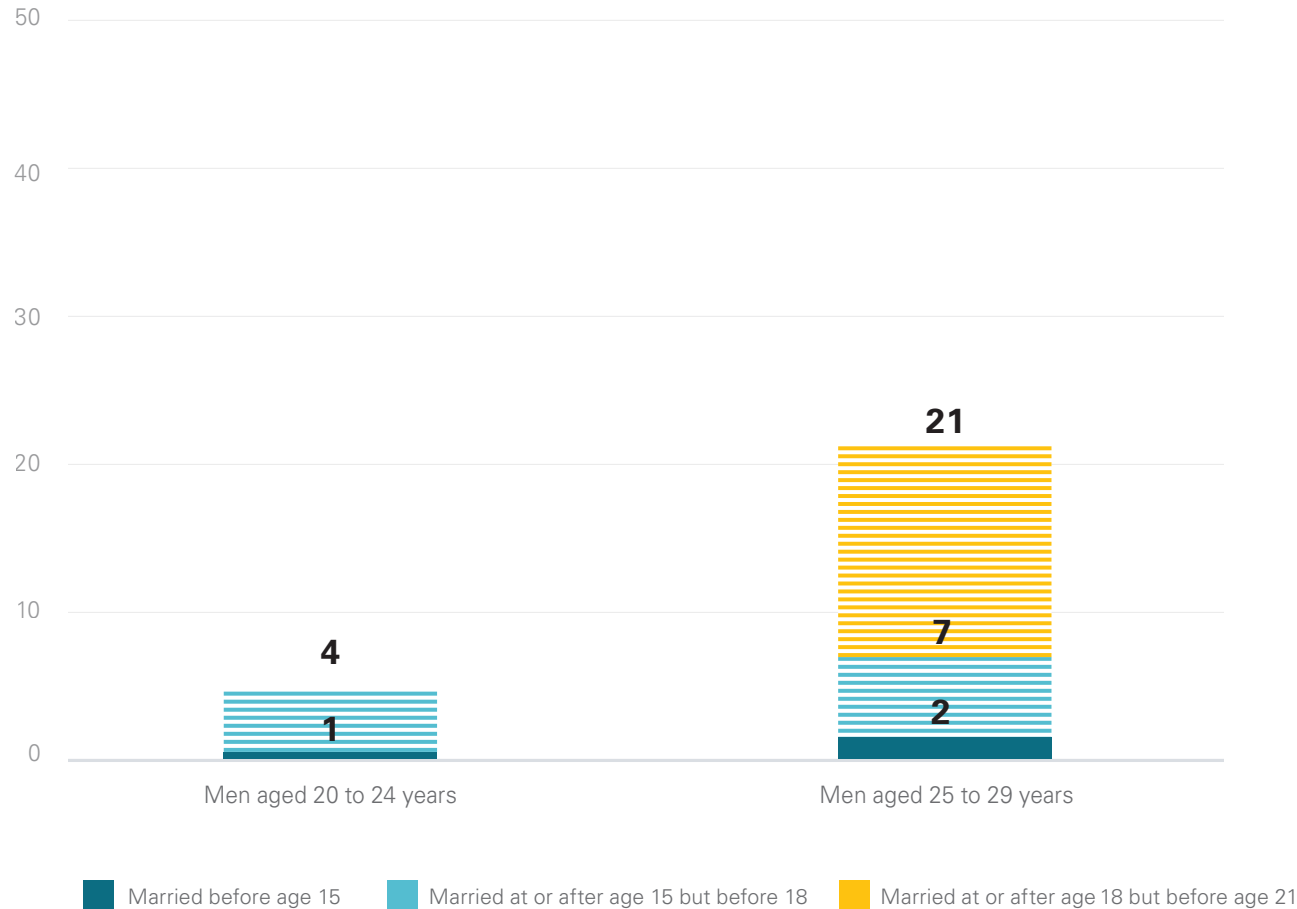


FIG. 17 Average annual rate of reduction (%) in the percentage of women aged 20 to 24 years who were first married or in union before age 18 observed and required for elimination, India and selected states



Child marriage among boys in India

▶ Child marriage among boys does occur in India, but at levels much lower than those seen in the past



Only 1 in 25 men were married before age 18, but one in five were married before the legal age of 21

FIG. 18 Percentage of men aged 20 to 24 years and 25 to 29 years who were first married or in union before ages 15, 18 and 21

The practice of child marriage among boys could be eliminated by 2030 if progress is accelerated

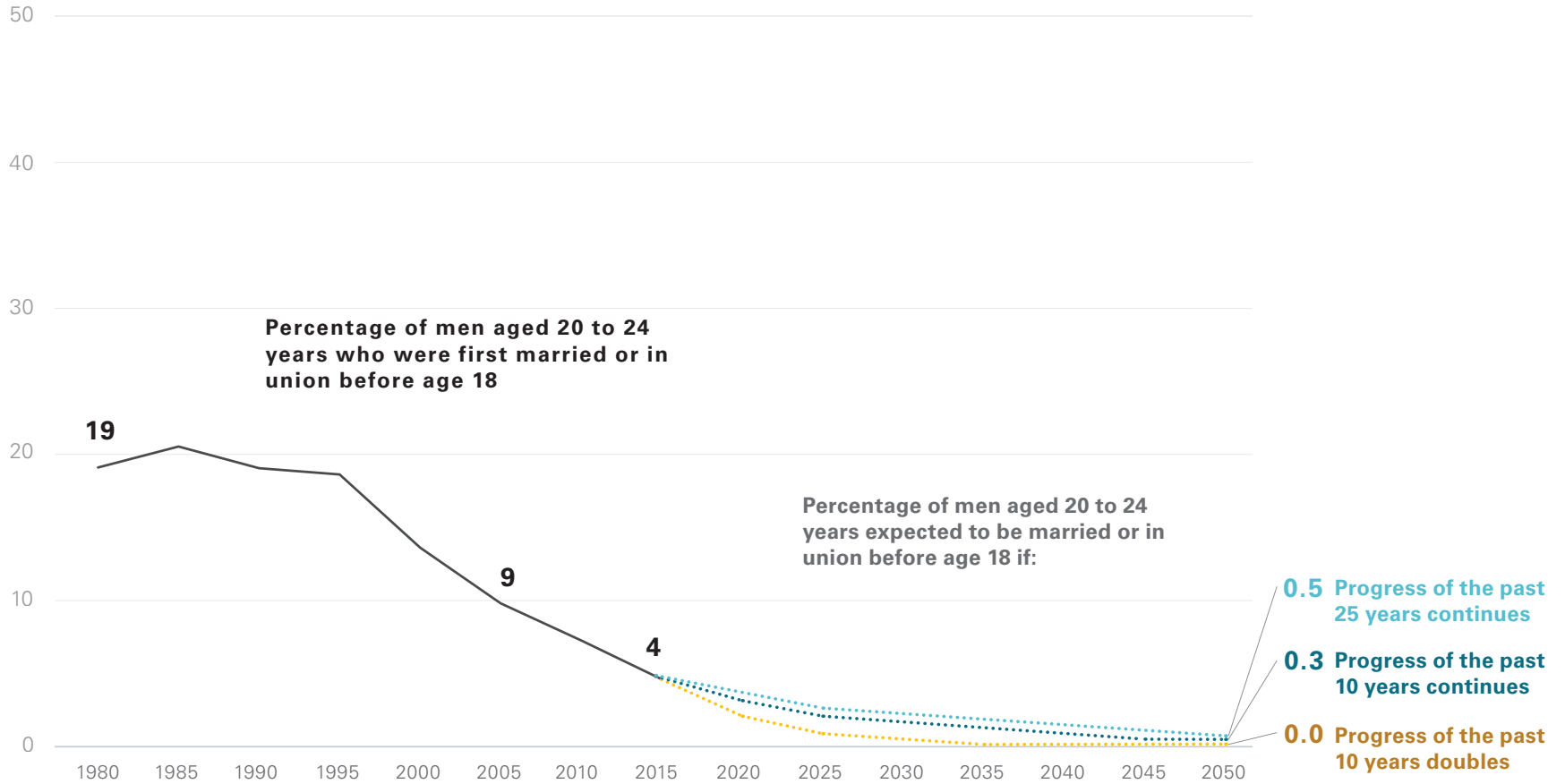


FIG. 19 Observed and projected percentage of men aged 20 to 24 years who were first married or in union before age 18

NOTE: See 'How to read the projections' on page 26.

Working to empower adolescents and end child marriage in India

Most girls and boys in India are excluded from decisions that determine the trajectory of their lives.

As they become adolescents and social and economic pressures mount, Indian girls are often deprived of the right to move freely and make choices about their work, education, marriage and social relationships. Often, they must drop out of school to perform household duties or informal, unskilled jobs. Many get married and become mothers when they are still children themselves. Child marriage in India provides glaring evidence of widespread gender inequality and discrimination in a young woman's journey to adulthood.

Enhancing the value of girls underpins the effective alleviation of social injustice. Education and economic independence play a critical role in delaying marriage and creating change in one generation.

UNICEF's work to end child marriage and empower adolescent girls and boys in India centres on **five key interventions**:

- Adolescents as agents of change
- Social mobilization among parents and within communities
- Investments in education for children both in and out of school
- Access to social protection programmes
- Linkages with skills and employment opportunities

To realize these goals, UNICEF collaborates with the Government of India and its relevant ministries at national, state and district level; with adolescents and parents in communities; and with civil society organizations, United Nations agencies and the private sector. The shared aim is to create a platform for

▶ India's 253 million adolescents should be active participants in their own path to adulthood

adolescent voices to be amplified, challenging gender norms and forging new socio-economic opportunities for young people as they become adults.

Access to education and opportunity

Many girls are lost in the transition to secondary school, prematurely called to the duties of adulthood. Keeping girls in school – and reaching those who are out of school, overage or failing to learn – is vital to the realization of their rights and in the fight against child marriage. But getting adolescent girls to the classroom isn't enough on its own. Schools must also provide a safe, secure learning environment and the right skills to prepare for life in the 'real world', alongside the know-how to confront vulnerable and demanding situations. Teaching life skills, financial literacy and management of the school-to-work transition (including through vocational training and career guidance) are focus areas. With the Ministry of Human Resource Development, UNICEF promotes girls' education through targeted curricula and teacher training programmes at schools across India, covering the trajectory from preschool to secondary school.

Building competencies at schools forges a better entry to the workplace. UNICEF works with adolescents to provide information on career choices and market opportunities. UNICEF is also identifying learning opportunities and packages for girls and boys who have dropped out or never been to school, including alternative and flexible education.

Recognizing that cash alone is not sufficient to reduce the interrelated social and economic risks that girls face, UNICEF is strengthening existing government cash transfer schemes for girls and developing new ones.

To achieve better outcomes, the concept of ‘plus or complementary services’ has been introduced, which entails options such as counselling for parents, career counselling, access to information on choices and aspirations, and linkages to skills training and market opportunities.

To date, UNICEF’s programme to end child marriage and promote adolescent empowerment has reached 5 million girls and boys across 13 target states.

Adolescents as agents of change

Supporting adolescent girls and boys as agents of change is core to UNICEF’s framework of action. UNICEF’s work enables young members of society to identify the challenges affecting their lives, build and implement evidence-based solutions, and evaluate their effectiveness. When adolescent voices are amplified in the public domain, they can influence policies and programmes concerning them.

UNICEF-facilitated adolescent groups at the community level and school-based adolescent platforms provide an opportunity for individual and community concerns to be voiced, offering a safe environment to find the solutions. During intergenerational dialogues, girls and boys join community leaders and parents to discuss topics like child marriage and related issues such as early pregnancy, health and nutrition, and the value of education. They discuss making informed choices, realizing aspirations and creating equal opportunities. They explore the ways in which community members can fulfil young people’s right to participation. These interactions are paving the way for long-term systemic change in the gender dynamic and the end of harmful social norms such as child marriage.

Adolescents are their own best advocates. UNICEF is supporting the development of adolescent-friendly planning, governance and accountability mechanisms, which are vital to a successful transition to adulthood.

Through multimedia platforms and key influencers, young voices and stories of change have been amplified to give greater visibility to the adolescent agenda, reaching more than 25 million people.

Right to protection and care

UNICEF’s efforts have resulted in realizable, practical government-led action plans and the leveraging of state- and national-level child protection initiatives – such as Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao (‘Save the daughter, Educate the Daughter’) and the Scheme for Adolescent Girls – that share the goal of ending child marriage and promoting adolescent empowerment. Relevant social and behavioural change communication has reached 1.9 million parents and community members across 13 target states.

Advocacy within UNICEF and with Government has led to enhanced convergence across the education, health and nutrition, social policy and communication sectors and has increased accountability and visibility of adolescent and child marriage-related issues and initiatives. UNICEF’s current larger-scale, district model has been developed in 13 states and relies on large government programmes, using non-governmental organizations as intermediaries and tapping on amplifiers such as the media, private sector, and digital and technical communication tools.

Strategic partnerships and constituency building

UNICEF plays a crucial role in convening critical stakeholders around a platform that addresses multiple deprivations and supports adolescent girls and boys to build skills for life and livelihoods. Large-scale, multi-state technical partnerships with state government and district administrations have been established to work with adolescents, parents, community structures and front-line workers. To widen the discourse around child marriage, UNICEF partners with civil society organizations, academic institutes, the private sector, other United Nations agencies, volunteer groups, youth networks, the media and the World Bank.

UNICEF’s overall aim is to enable social policies that foster an environment that protects children from child marriage, child labour, civil strife and other harmful experiences that limit their ability to realize their full potential. To bring this change, UNICEF will focus on service and system improvements; advocacy, constituency building and partnerships; and evidence generation.

Technical note

To assess the prevalence of child marriage, this analysis used SDG Indicator 5.3.1 – the proportion of women aged 20 to 24 who were married or in union before age 18. The proportion of women aged 20 to 24 who married before age 15 is also presented to show how early child marriage happens to girls. All reference to ‘marriage’ or ‘child brides’ includes formal marriages and informal unions in which women started living with a partner as if married, as well as all marriages that occurred in childhood, regardless of whether or not the *gauna* ceremony (which is associated with the consummation of marriage) was performed.

Key message titles were developed taking into account confidence intervals. Thus, in cases where the title indicates that there is a difference among demographic groups or states and union territories, it has been confirmed as statistically significant.

Trends in the national prevalence of child marriage presented in figures 14, 16 and 19 were calculated taking into account data from India’s National Family Health Survey (NFHS) 1992-1993, 1997-1998, 2005-2006 and 2015-2016, based on the prevalence of child marriage across age cohorts. Trends prior to 2010 are based on the 1992-1993, 1997-1998 and 2005-2006 surveys, while trends in or after 2010 are based on the 2015-2016 survey. The most recent NFHS is excluded in the trends prior to 2010 since the analysis raised questions about comparability across surveys for some cohorts of women. This is a deviation from the standard, as this adjustment is not necessary when results are consistent across sources over time. Calculations of the average annual rate of reduction over the last 25 years in Table 1 and Figure 17 relied on this adjusted analysis across surveys.

The burden of child marriage is defined as the number of girls under age 18 who have already married plus the number of adult women who were married before age 18, calculated by applying the prevalence of child marriage for each age cohort. At the national level, the adjusted prevalence from the trend analysis is applied for each age cohort across surveys from 18 to 69 years to the respective female population; at the state level, the prevalence of child marriage based on the NFHS 2015-2016 is applied for the age cohort 18 to 49 years to the respective female population. Outside this range, direct estimates of the prevalence were not available so the following assumptions are made:

- 0-9 years – all are assumed to be unmarried
- 10-17 years – indirect estimates are produced using related indicators, including the percentage of girls married before age 15 and the percentage of adolescents aged 15 to 17 currently married
- 70+ years at the national level – prevalence of women aged 65 to 69 is used
- 50+ years at the state and union territory level – prevalence of women aged 45 to 49 in each state and union territory is used

Projected values based on a continuation of observed progress apply the average annual rate of reduction in the prevalence of child marriage, or the percentage of women aged 20 to 24 first married or in union before 18, over the past 25 years and over the past 10 years. The acceleration scenario assumes a doubling of the observed annual rate of reduction over the past 10 years. For statistical purposes, ‘elimination’ is defined here as a child marriage prevalence of less than 1 per cent. ‘Childhood’ refers to the period from birth until the 18th birthday. ‘Adolescence’ refers to ages 10 to 19.

Data at the state and union territory level represent geographical boundaries as of NFHS 2015-2016. In the case of Jharkhand, formed in 2000, the estimates represent the risk over time of women who currently live in the geographical area which is now Jharkhand. The trend analysis for states and union territories, as presented in Figures 15 and 17, are based on an age cohort analysis from the NFHS 2015-2016. The value for ‘25 years ago’ was adjusted using a factor consistent with the adjustment for the underestimation of child marriage prevalence among the oldest cohort of women at the national level, as described in the third paragraph of this note.

Data sources

India data are from the National Family Health Surveys 1992-1993, 1997-1998, 2005-2006 and 2015-2016 (NFHS 1, 2, 3 and 4). Data for other countries are from UNICEF global databases, 2018, based on Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys, Demographic and Health Surveys and other nationally representative surveys, 2004 to 2018. For detailed source information by country, see <data.unicef.org>. Demographic data are from Government of India, Ministry of Home Affairs, Office of the Registrar General & Census Commissioner, Census of India, 2011 and United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs Population Division, ‘World Population Prospects: The 2017 Revision’, DVD edition.

How to read the projections pages 20, 21 and 23

Figures 16 and 19 show how the scale of the practice of child marriage has changed since 1970, as well as various scenarios that could occur in the future. Figure 16 shows how the percentage of young women married in childhood has changed and could continue to change through 2050, and Figure 19 shows the same for young men. Figure 17 shows progress in terms of the rate of reduction that has been observed and the rates that would be required to meet elimination targets.

The projection scenarios build on existing trends. They show expected values if progress from the past 25 years were to continue (in light blue), or if progress from the past 10 years were to continue (in dark blue). Progress appears to have accelerated over the past 10 years, making this the more ambitious of the two scenarios. A third scenario (in yellow) illustrates what could happen if the rate observed over the past 10 years were to double.

The observed average annual rates of reduction (AARRs) quantify the rate of progress in the prevalence of child marriage over each period. A higher AARR indicates faster progress. Required AARRs are calculated to illustrate the rate necessary to eliminate child marriage by 2030 and achieve target 5.3 of the Sustainable Development Goals.

**ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS:**

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PHOTO CREDITS:

Cover: © UNICEF/UNI77781/Khemka
Snehlata (in glasses) explains the harmful effects of child marriage to women in Agolai Village, Jodhpur District, Rajasthan State. Two girls (seated in foreground) are dressed as a groom and bride to help illustrate a point. Snehlata is a *precheta*, a community educator and women's advocate. *Prechetas* work with *sathins* (grassroots-level women's advocates), *anganwadis* (village-level health centres), auxiliary nurse midwives, health activists and teachers to promote awareness of domestic violence, child marriage, physical and sexual exploitation, and other issues affecting women. Goga Devi (sitting, in blue) is a *sathin*. *Sathins* and *prechetas* are part of the local government's development programme for women.

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