# Child Marriage in Malaysia

Child marriage robs children of their childhood and can result in serious long-term consequences on their lives and health. Malaysia upholds the principles of the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Sustainable Development Goals, which call for global action to end this harmful practice by 2030. The government of Malaysia is committed to addressing the factors of child marriage through the National Strategy Plan in Handling the Causes of Child Marriage (2020-2025), which is being monitored by a Steering Committee chaired by the Secretary General of The Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development.

## Definition

Child marriage refers to any formal marriage or informal union (where partners live as if married) between a child under the age of 18 and an adult or another child.[1]

## Global Estimates (2019)

**1 in 5** young women aged 20 to 24 years old married before their 18th birthday, compared to **1 in 30** young men.

**12 million girls** under 18 are married each year (**23 girls** every minute)[2]

## Malaysia Estimates

In Malaysia, at least **1,500** children marry every year (as of 2018).[3]

## Global Impact

- Married girls are more vulnerable to domestic violence.[4]
- Many married children suffer disrupted emotional and psychological development.

- Married children are less likely to remain in school, leading to a higher risk of sustained poverty.

- Complications during pregnancy and childbirth are the leading cause of death for girls between ages 15 and 19.[5]
- The infant mortality rate is higher for teenage mothers.

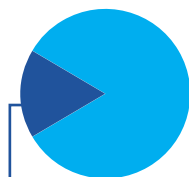## The Profile of Child Marriage in Malaysia in 2018[6]

Child marriage occurs:
- in urban and rural settings
- across all states in Malaysia
- throughout all ethnic and religious communities

Both boys and girls are affected by child marriage in Malaysia, but the impact on girls is greater. **90%** of children who were married in 2018 were girls.

**1,856** children were married in 2018.[7]

**17%** Non-Muslim

**83%** Muslim

State with the highest number of non-Muslim children married in 2018:
**Pahang 102 children**

State with the highest number of Muslim children married in 2018:
**Sabah 334 children**

### Children Who Were Married in 2018

| | Muslim | | Non-Muslim | | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Girls | Boys | Girls | Boys | |
| **Bumiputera** | 1,314 | 166 | 174 | 20 | **1,674 (90.19%)** |
| **Chinese** | 5 | 2 | 92 | 1 | **100 (5.39%)** |
| **Indian** | 3 | 0 | 17 | 0 | **20 (1.08%)** |
| **Others** | 50 | 2 | 10 | 0 | **62 (3.34%)** |
| **Total** | **1,372 (73.92%)** | **170 (9.16%)** | **293 (15.79%)** | **21 (1.13%)** | **1,856 (100%)** |

Percentages are based on a total of 1,856 children.

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1. UNICEF.
2. UNICEF; Girls Not Brides.
3. Based on 2007-2017 statistics from the Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development, Malaysia (MWFCD).
4. Kidman, Rachel, 'Child marriage and intimate partner violence: a comparative study of 34 countries', International Journal of Epidemiology, 12 October 2016, pp. 1-14.
5. WHO. Global Health Estimates (GHE), 2016.
6. Department of Statistics Malaysia (DOSM) as cited by MWFCD.
7. This is most likely an underestimation of the actual number of children as not all child marriages are registered or recorded.

## The National Strategy Plan in Handling the Causes of Child Marriage (2020-2025)

**6** factors

**7** objectives

**17** strategies

**58** programmes or actions

**61** ministries, agencies, state agencies, non-profit organisations and international bodies

### The Undocumented, Stateless, Refugee and Asylum-Seeking Children

The Action Plan on Ending Marriage under 18 Years in Sabah and UNICEF have identified that due to their lack of legal status and rights, these groups are at high risk of child marriage. Strategies to combat this are similar to those for other factors combined with additional actions: improving birth registration for all born in Malaysia, strengthening access to basic services as well as SRH, taking action to address trafficking of child brides, etc.

## 5 Factors That Cause or Enable Child Marriage

The National Strategy Plan focuses on five risk factors for child marriage, plus a sixth factor as a strategy to combat the lack of data on child marriage.

| Factor | Examples of strategies & action |
|---|---|
| **1** Low household income and poverty | • Provide a Child Grant scheme for B40 children under five.<br>• Implement technical and vocational education and training (TVET) for B40.<br>• Strengthen the social work profession. |
| **2** Lack of access to sexual and reproductive health (SRH) education and services, and inadequate parenting skills | • Promote LPPKN's myKafeTEEN app<br>• Conduct workshops on parenting skills on SRH.<br>• Introduce SRH modules for teachers, students, children out of school, and refugee and migrant children. |
| **3** Lack of access to education and poor school attendance | • Make secondary schooling (up to Form 5) compulsory for all children.<br>• Increase access to TVET.<br>• Subsidise associated costs of schooling (transport, school books, etc.). |
| **4** Social norms that condone child marriage and stigma | • Research and understand these social norms within different communities.<br>• Train social workers and teachers to prevent, identify and respond to child marriage, teenage pregnancy and other issues.<br>• Train judges, Chief Ministers and staff on child rights and changes to laws on child marriage.<br>• Develop and implement advocacy and communication plans with multisectoral government and NGO sectors. |
| **5** Laws that provide for marriage under the age of 18 | • Set minimum age of marriage at 18 for boys and girls in civil laws, Islamic family laws and customary laws.<br>• Research the possibility of amending other laws that enable/facilitate child marriage (i.e. Child Act 2001, Penal Code, Age of Majority Act 1971).<br>• Make registration of marriages with the National Registration Department compulsory. |

### The 6th Factor: Strategy on Addressing the Lack of Data on Child Marriage

Ensure and strengthen regular collection, analysis and public dissemination of data on child marriage, i.e. data disaggregation according to sex, age, disability, ethnicity, religion and state, of the child and spouse, and collection of other data (reasons for child marriage, etc.).

**More information**

• To see how you can play a role, please download the Executive Summary of the *National Strategy Plan in Handling the Causes of Child Marriage*, Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development https://bit.ly/3rVMtf3

• See also *Advocacy Brief: Towards Ending Child Marriage in Malaysia,* UNICEF Malaysia, 2020 and other resources at https://uni.cf/3qTdWh4