UNFPA-UNICEF GLOBAL PROGRAMME TO END CHILD MARRIAGE

YEMEN

COUNTRY PROFILE
The country context

Yemen is home to 4 million child brides. Of these, 1.4 million married before age 15. According to data from the Yemen Demographic and Health Survey (DHS) from 2013, almost a third (32 per cent) of all young women aged 20–24 had been married before age 18, and 9 per cent before age 15. Despite a reduction in child marriage prevalence from 58 per cent in 1988, analysis by UNICEF based on the latest DHS shows that the speed of progress is not enough to meet the ambitious Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) target of eliminating child marriage by 2030: If the observed progress over the past 25 years continues, child marriage prevalence will still be at 21 per cent at the end of this decade, and if the slightly accelerated observed progress over the past 10 years is doubled, 9 per cent of all girls will still be married in childhood by 2030.¹

Over the past decade, the proportion of young women globally who were married as children decreased by 15 per cent, from nearly 1 in 4 to 1 in 5 girls becoming child brides. This means that, over the last 10 years, the marriages of some 25 million girls have been averted. However, this remarkable accomplishment is now under threat. Over the next decade, up to 10 million more girls around the world will be at risk of child marriage as a result of COVID-19, putting the total number of girls at risk by 2030 at 110 million girls.² And some countries also grapple with other pressing challenges, putting girls at a further increased risk. One such country is Yemen.

Girls in Yemen struggle not only with the harmful practice of child marriage, but also with female genital mutilation (FGM). Among women aged 18–49, a third (33.2 per cent) have experienced child marriage ‘only’, while 8 per cent of all women in this age group have experienced both child marriage and FGM.³ These data are from 2013 and the conflict in Yemen, which broke out in 2015 and is still ongoing, has exacerbated risk factors for child marriage. About 3 million people are internally displaced in the country, and a recent study commissioned by Johns Hopkins University and the Women’s Refugee Commission for the Global Programme shows that the prevalence of child marriage among girls is higher among internally displaced persons, with about one in five displaced girls aged 10–19 currently married, compared with one in eight in the adjacent host community. Displacement was seen by the respondents in the study as the main reason for growing economic insecurity among families, and internally displaced respondents noted that their economic instability made them more inclined than their host counterparts to relieve financial burden by marrying off their daughters.⁴
Poverty and economic insecurity are primary risk factors for child marriage. As a result of the direct and indirect effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, UNICEF data indicate that an estimated 117 million children globally could have been pushed into monetary poverty in 2020 alone. Border closures and lockdowns are driving these effects. A COVID-19 impact study conducted in July 2020 in Yemen found that 47 per cent of respondents in five governorates experienced a drop in income of half or more during the pandemic, 24 per cent experienced a complete loss of income, and 40 per cent of respondents who had a job before COVID-19 had lost it. In Yemen, home to the world’s worst humanitarian crisis even before COVID-19, a rapid assessment conducted in October 2020 found that the economic impact of the pandemic had led poor families to adopt negative coping mechanisms, such as marrying their daughters to obtain bride wealth (mahr). At the same time, men find it cheaper to marry girls during this time of heightened poverty, as desperate families become more willing to marry off their daughters, allegedly to protect them from hunger. Further, border closures significantly increased the cost of basic essential items, thereby exacerbating risk factors that contribute to child marriage in the country.

In addition to increased poverty and economic insecurity, boys and girls are more likely to marry early if they are out of school, especially when they lack the ability to study remotely. The Malala Fund estimates that 20 million more secondary school-age girls globally may be lost from school systems after the first COVID-19 wave. In Yemen, 2 million children were already out of school before the pandemic. Subsequent school closures in both the north and the south have worsened the country’s learning crisis, especially since distance and e-learning options are not possible for most students, given adolescents’ limited access to new technologies and the internet. The risk of marriage in childhood in Yemen for girls with no education or only primary education is 3.5 times higher than for girls with secondary or higher education, pointing to the potential impact of girls being out of school due to the conflict and the pandemic.

Yemeni culture restricts movement of girls more than that of boys, leaving girls with even less access to services of any kind during lockdown. The most vulnerable girls in Yemen are unlikely to be reached via any remote communication modality. Movement restrictions in Yemen have prevented many internally displaced, refugee and migrant adolescent girls from accessing services that are not available in their settlements, putting them at greater protection and health risks, including being exposed to child marriage.

More in-depth data collection and evidence generation was delayed due to COVID-19 in 2020 and will continue in 2021 – to give a deeper understanding of the prevalence and drivers of child marriage in the country.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Key highlights</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Over 2,400 adolescent girls</strong> were reached through life-skills and literacy classes, to provide information and basic health, financial and legal skills; and to build their self-esteem and self-confidence.</td>
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<td><strong>Over 17,000</strong> girls, boys, women and men were reached with awareness-raising activities on GBV and child marriage to instil social and behaviour change.</td>
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<td>Vocational training and cash support were provided to <strong>194</strong> vulnerable out-of-school girls, while <strong>88</strong> girls returned to school after dropping out earlier.</td>
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<td>Capacity-building of <strong>33 social workers</strong> on remote GBV and child protection case management <strong>ensured continued access to services for girls</strong> during the pandemic.</td>
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<td>Over <strong>3,300 adolescent girls</strong> who are survivors of child marriage were supported with medical, psychosocial and counselling sessions, and with legal representation as a result of improved and structured case management systems and referral pathways.</td>
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</table>
2020 Achievements

In 2020, a total of 2,457 adolescent girls, either survivors of or at risk of child marriage, were reached with life-skills and literacy courses delivered in schools and safe spaces.

Despite challenges related to COVID-19, the skilling and empowerment orientation of the programme was scaled up from 17 to 31 districts during the year, including Sa‘ada District where authorities had previously shown reluctance to programme implementation.

Some 10 per cent of the adolescent girls who had received life-skills training (including before the pandemic) were supported to lead peer-to-peer awareness-raising activities within their communities, on issues around gender norms and child marriage.

Providing intensive support to marginalized girls

Results from a Global Programme-commissioned review that assessed child marriage evaluations published from 2000 to 2019 suggest that targeted interventions that enhance girls’ human capital (e.g., schooling, life-skills, livelihood and gender rights training) and their employment opportunities are the most successful channel for delaying their marriage among programmes evaluated to date. The Global Programme in Yemen therefore continues to invest in providing adolescent girls with knowledge of their rights and equipping them with skills necessary to exercise their choices.

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In addition to equipping the adolescents with skills covering different learning dimensions (cognitive, instrumental, individual and social), the courses increased adolescent girls’ knowledge on, for example, their human rights, the negative impacts of child marriage on girls (related to health, education, etc.), and risks related to early pregnancy. This integrated approach seeks to offer a chance to the adolescent girl not only to gain new skills but also to be elevated from a perceived liability to a productive, strong and self-sufficient woman, capable of making informed choices about her sexual and reproductive health, rights and well-being. The literacy courses offered to out-of-school adolescents have also contributed to them regaining their self-esteem. At least 88 girls who were enrolled in literacy and catch-up classes supported by the programme felt confident enough to return to formal education during the year, with the aim of completing secondary school.

Some 10 per cent of the adolescent girls who had received life-skills training (including before the pandemic) were supported to lead peer-to-peer awareness-raising activities within their communities, on issues around gender norms and child marriage.
The peer-to-peer approach has been instrumental in keeping adolescents informed during COVID-19, when other activities have been suspended due to restrictions on movement and closures of schools and safe spaces, and given that remote learning is a challenge in the context of Yemen.

Despite schools being closed during the pandemic and challenges with establishing remote learning modalities, 105 adolescent girls were directly supported to be able to return to school following school reopening in October. UNFPA and UNICEF, together with partners, continue to work on identifying and supporting out-of-school girls to return to and remain in education.

Challenges, lessons learned and next steps

As it was for many countries around the world, 2020 was challenging in terms of ensuring the continuation of implementation of programmes addressing child marriage in Yemen. Lockdowns, closures of schools and other learning facilities, and of social services delivery points, and a decrease by 80 per cent of the government workforce, led to a suspension of main programme activities, including life-skills and literacy classes and economic empowerment components.

Life-skills are perceived by many communities and authorities in Yemen as a ‘western’ idea aimed at changing the culture of the country and the relationships between children and elders. Girls’ empowerment programmes are therefore seen as providing adolescent girls with ‘weapons’ to challenge their families and to become disrespectful. This perception of the content and aim of the life-skills programme has continued to negatively affect the acceptance of the interventions in more conservative locations in the country, therefore hampering programme scale-up to these areas. However, in locations where possible, UNFPA and UNICEF continue to invest in sensitizing communities through key influencers and local leaders for greater acceptance of the programme – as was the case, for example, in Sa’ada District in 2020.

In 2021, the programme will continue to work on strengthening referral systems with the education sector, including a campaign on ‘back to learning’ to ensure girls’ access to education.

Enhancing the family and community environment

To promote a supportive and gender-equal environment, as an important aspect of grounding changes in behaviours within the community, the programme in enhancing the knowledge of community members around the negative impacts of child marriage, specifically targeting community leaders and key influencers as gatekeepers for change. In a context where there is a lack of government-led strategy or action plan to end child marriage, partnerships with local women, child and youth organizations have proven to be a better approach to promoting and instilling change led by communities themselves. The programme is therefore working with, and constantly building the capacities of, partners at the governorate and district levels, focusing on gender-based violence (GBV) case management to enhance the provision of services to girls and their families.

UNFPA and UNICEF design interventions with an improved human rights situation in mind, while making sure that all issues are dealt with in a culturally sensitive way. The programme raises awareness on child marriage by engaging community leaders, parents, men and boys for broad support to the issue, and aims to get commitments from the communities that they will continue to work to uphold the rights of girls.

Changes in behaviour around child marriage and gender equality are still not perceptible on a wide scale in Yemen. However, since the inception of the Global Programme within targeted districts, families, traditional and community leaders, and other influencers have demonstrated more gender-equitable attitudes and support for girls’ rights and against child marriage. The number of community leaders who now help convince parents to avoid child marriage and support actions undertaken by child marriage survivors – to either obtain a divorce or to be granted custody over their children – has increased.

Khadija is 19 years old, divorced and mother of two children. She lost custody of her children after her divorce and had not been seen them for months when she joined the life-skills training in her community in January 2020.

“I felt so empowered by the life-skills training that I received, that I found the necessary courage to engage with my ex-husband on shared custody.”

With the legal support that she received through the programme and thanks to counselling from social workers, Khadija is now able to have her children stay with her every weekend.

“I thought I would never see my children again! I feel like my life is back, and I cannot thank this programme enough!”
children – has increased. Even though the observed changes remain on a community level, the social norms and behaviour change interventions have contributed to the prevention of hundreds of child marriages.

During 2020, the programme continued to engage adolescent boys in life-skills classes – combining skills development with information on human rights, GBV and child marriage as in the classes for girls. Overall, 604 boys were supported by the Global Programme throughout the year. Engaging adolescent boys on child marriage has helped shift mentalities of child marriage being considered a ‘girl issue’ to an issue that concerns everyone. Even though is it to a smaller extent, child marriage affects boys too in the context of Yemen, as some families resort to marrying off their sons to prevent them from being recruited by armed forces and groups. The manual used for the boys’ life-skills sessions is the same as that used for girls; however, practical exercises are adapted to speak to the targeted group. The programme is currently working with an international consultant to review the manual and integrate more specific content for girls and boys, keeping in mind the gender-transformative approach of the programme. For boys, the updated manual will, for example, include topics around positive masculinities and gender roles.

The target of engaging community members on issues related to child marriage, to support a conducive environment for the empowerment of girls and for the elimination of the harmful practice, was exceeded in 2020 in Yemen. Despite challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic regarding the implementation of some programme components, the pandemic at the same time offered a unique opportunity to increase awareness-raising activities on GBV and child marriage. Through remote psychosocial support and family counselling, partners of the Global Programme and partners from the GBV sub-cluster were able to sensitize 17,529 women, men, girls and boys on GBV risks, including child marriage, during the year.

Challenges, lessons learned and next steps
Child marriage is deeply embedded in the culture of Yemen; therefore, it takes holistic and integrated efforts to address its root causes. While empowering adolescent girls, boys should not be left out. At the same time, families’ socioeconomic empowerment should be granted more importance, given the economic factors driving the practice. UNFPA and UNICEF have learned through programme implementation that the programme has been most successful in terms of acceptance and impact in locations where adolescent girls have also been supported with vocational training and with small grants to start income-generating activities, beyond life skills and community awareness.

Due to COVID-19 restrictions, the Men2Men network activities, where men are engaged on social and gender norms, could not take place in 2020.
THE STORY OF NASSAR

Today, Nassar is a 19-year-old girl living in Ibb in Yemen, and mother of a child. One day, when she was in fourth grade, she heard the sound of wedding music from her house when she came back from school. In her mind, Nassar thought this must be her brother’s wedding, but suddenly her father came out of the house, approached her and said, “prepare for your wedding ceremony”.

Nassar was shocked, and could not understand what was happening around her, feeling too young to resist as her father and mother insisted on her being married off. “I got married at age 13 without any basic rights or even supplies for the bride. I lived with my husband, who deprived me not only of my life, but also of everything. He treated me cruelly, beat me and insulted me every day.” Nassar recalls.

Under these harsh circumstances, Nassar also gave birth to a child. Due to the circumstances, she developed a psychological disorder and started to lack confidence in people around her. However, she decided to run away and fled to her brother’s house in the city where she decided to live without her husband and her son.

At her brother’s house, Nassar was introduced to one of the girls from the services that the Yemen Women Union provides through the Global Programme, and she asked her for help. Thanks to this, Nassar was able to receive legal and psychosocial support and life-skills training. She also decided to continue with her education by enrolling in literacy classes, and participated in livelihood training, focusing on learning how to sew.

Being one of the most outstanding students in the group, and feeling more empowered than before, Nassar’s mental health stabilized as she had become free from her abusive marital restrictions. As her husband has refused to divorce her, the case has now been taken to court. In the meantime, Nassar has been able to move on with her life and regain her confidence in those around her, setting new ambitions and goals for herself and her life.

Strengthening systems

In line with the global vision, the programme in Yemen aims to strengthen referral pathways between different sectors, such as education and health, to improve adolescent girls’ access to services in programme areas. This work became especially important during 2020, and in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, to ensure that continuity of and access to services for girls was upheld.

Capacity-building of 33 social workers on remote GBV and child protection case management, and on standard operating procedures (SOPs) during COVID-19, has strengthened and improved cross-sectoral referral mechanisms and ensured continued access to services for girls during the pandemic – preserving the safety and security of those seeking services. Further, mappings of GBV services have been regularly updated to ensure that appropriate services that meet the needs of survivors are available and referral pathways known by all service providers. As a result of this improved and structured case management system and referral pathways, 3,365 adolescent girls were provided with multisectoral services in 2020, including health, psychosocial and legal support.

Challenges, lessons learned and next steps

Delivering services through remote modalities has been challenging during COVID-19, especially in terms of safeguarding the confidentiality of beneficiaries while maintaining their sense of safety and trust in the system. Remote delivery was also challenged by the lack of network coverage in hard-to-reach locations, where survivors in need of services often reside.
A lesson from the year is that good coordination among actors is key when faced with an unpredictable crisis. During COVID-19, coordination among service providers helped to ensure continuity of services where possible. The regular updating of the gender-based services mapping was instrumental in making sure that gaps were filled and that services were available to those in need. A key lesson was also that, sometimes, survivors’ resourcefulness and resilience might have more impact on their lives than the service itself.

In 2021, the capacity-building of case workers will continue, taking a strengthened and scaled-up approach, including through support to the referral system between child protection and GBV services, and between the work of the two sub-clusters in the humanitarian response (child protection and GBV).

**Addressing poverty**

Strengthening the social protection component for adolescent girls and their families is also being progressively integrated into the programme strategy as UNICEF seeks to increase analysis of the emergency cash transfer programme in Yemen and its impact on reducing negative coping mechanisms such as child marriage among the targeted families.

Vocational training was provided to 194 vulnerable out-of-school adolescent girls by the Global Programme in 2020, focusing on incense manufacturing, hairdressing and tailoring - topics chosen on the basis of a market survey. The training also included basic courses on how to manage finances. At the end of the training period, the girls were supported with a small grant to equip themselves with materials and resources required to start their business, such as buying a sewing machine. This training and the grant helped girls to regain control of their lives and support their families economically.

**Challenges, lessons learned and next steps**

In 2021, the programme aims to create stronger linkages with and leverage the emergency cash transfer system in Yemen, which benefits over 1.4 million of the most vulnerable households.

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**Partnerships and working as one**

In 2020, the Global Programme engaged 304 partners across regional and country offices - an increase from 249 partners in 2019. In Yemen, the programme works with six local non-governmental organizations, three of which are youth-led, showing the importance of adolescent participation in programming and policymaking to end child marriage.

Building on the joint collaboration that has been in place since the inception of the Global Programme in Yemen, UNFPA and UNICEF continue to work closely together to enhance the impact of the programme, with the support of their regional offices. For example, in 2020 the two organizations initiated a coordinated review of the life-skills manual, with the purpose of adapting it to different learning paths, for different target audiences (girls and boys), and to integrate a gender-transformative approach into the session delivery structure.

Currently, UNFPA and UNICEF are jointly present in 4 out of 31 districts in Yemen. In 2021, they will continue to increase the number of areas where the programme is jointly implemented, along with the overall coverage of the programme, while leveraging the comparative advantage of each organization. Even if the two organizations are not present in the same areas or are not working with the same partners, the strategy of the programme is to harmonize the approach used to deliver interventions, to ensure that quality interventions are in place for girls, their families and the communities, whatever the location and implementing organization.
### Summary of output indicator performance (2020)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Indicator</th>
<th>Target</th>
<th>Result</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Indicator 1111: Number of adolescent girls (aged 10–19) who actively participated in life-skills or comprehensive sexuality education interventions in programme areas</td>
<td>1,170</td>
<td>2,457</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indicator 1121: Number of girls (aged 10–19) supported by the programme to enrol and/or remain in primary or secondary school</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indicator 1121: Number of boys and men actively participating in group education/dialogues that address harmful masculinities and gender norms</td>
<td>570</td>
<td>604</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indicator 1211: Number of individuals (boys, girls, women and men) who participated in group education/dialogue sessions on consequences of and alternatives to child marriage, the rights of adolescent girls, and gender equality</td>
<td>28,668</td>
<td>17,529</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indicator 1221: Number of individuals (boys, girls, women and men) reached by mass media (traditional and social media) messaging on child marriage, the rights of adolescent girls, and gender equality</td>
<td>5,000</td>
<td>5,560</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indicator 1222: Number of local actors (e.g., traditional, religious and community leaders) with meaningful participation in dialogues and consensus-building to end child marriage</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>143</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indicator 1231: Number of civil society organizations newly mobilized by the Global Programme in support of challenging social norms and promoting gender equality</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indicator 2121: Number of primary/secondary/non-formal schools in programme areas providing quality gender-friendly education that meets minimum standards</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indicator 2131: Number of service delivery points in programme areas providing quality adolescent-responsive services (health, child protection/gender-based violence) that meet minimum standards</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indicator 2211: Number of partnerships (both formal and informal) established to deliver adolescent-responsive social protection, poverty reduction, and economic empowerment programmes and services</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indicator 3111: Number of policies or legal instruments addressing child marriage drafted, proposed or adopted at national and subnational levels with Global Programme support</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
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<tr>
<td>Indicator 3211: Number of pieces of evidence and knowledge generated that focus on what works to end child marriage</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
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<tr>
<td>Indicator 3212: Number of pieces of evidence and knowledge generated that apply a gender analysis</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
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<tr>
<td>Indicator 3221: Number of South-South cooperation activities (conferences, expert visits, peer consultations, study tours, communities of practice) supported</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N/A, not applicable.
ENDNOTES

1 Analysis by UNICEF’s Data and Analytics section based on the 2013 Yemen Demographic and Health Survey.


9 ‘Battling the Perfect Storm’.


11 ‘Battling the Perfect Storm’.

UNFPA-UNICEF
GLOBAL PROGRAMME
TO END CHILD MARRIAGE

ACT NOW:
Accelerating gender equality
by eliminating child marriage
in a pandemic