

# A Profile of Child Marriage in South Asia

**ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS:**

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**COVER PHOTO:**

Mosammat, age 16, was married at age 13 to a groom who was 30 years old. She now has a 14-month-old son and is pictured here eight months pregnant with her second child. In her home of Jamalpur, Bangladesh, 59 per cent of girls are married before age 18, and 22 per cent are married before age 15.



# 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



**Around one in four young women in South Asia were first married or in union before their 18th birthday.** The region is home to around 290 million child brides, accounting for 45 per cent of the global total.



**Levels of child marriage vary considerably across the region,** from over 50 per cent in Bangladesh to 2 per cent in the Maldives. Within countries there is further disparity: In Afghanistan, for example, there is a tenfold difference in prevalence across provinces.



**Child marriage is less common among boys in the region,** though it does occur. In Nepal, nearly 1 in 10 young men were married in childhood.



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



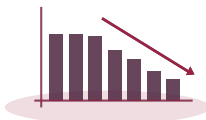
**Three in four child brides in the region give birth while they are still adolescents;** over a third give birth before they turn 18.



**The vast majority of child brides in South Asia are out of school.** In many places, marriage and schooling are viewed as incompatible.



**In some countries in South Asia, child brides are more likely to report that wife-beating is justified, and to experience such violence themselves.**

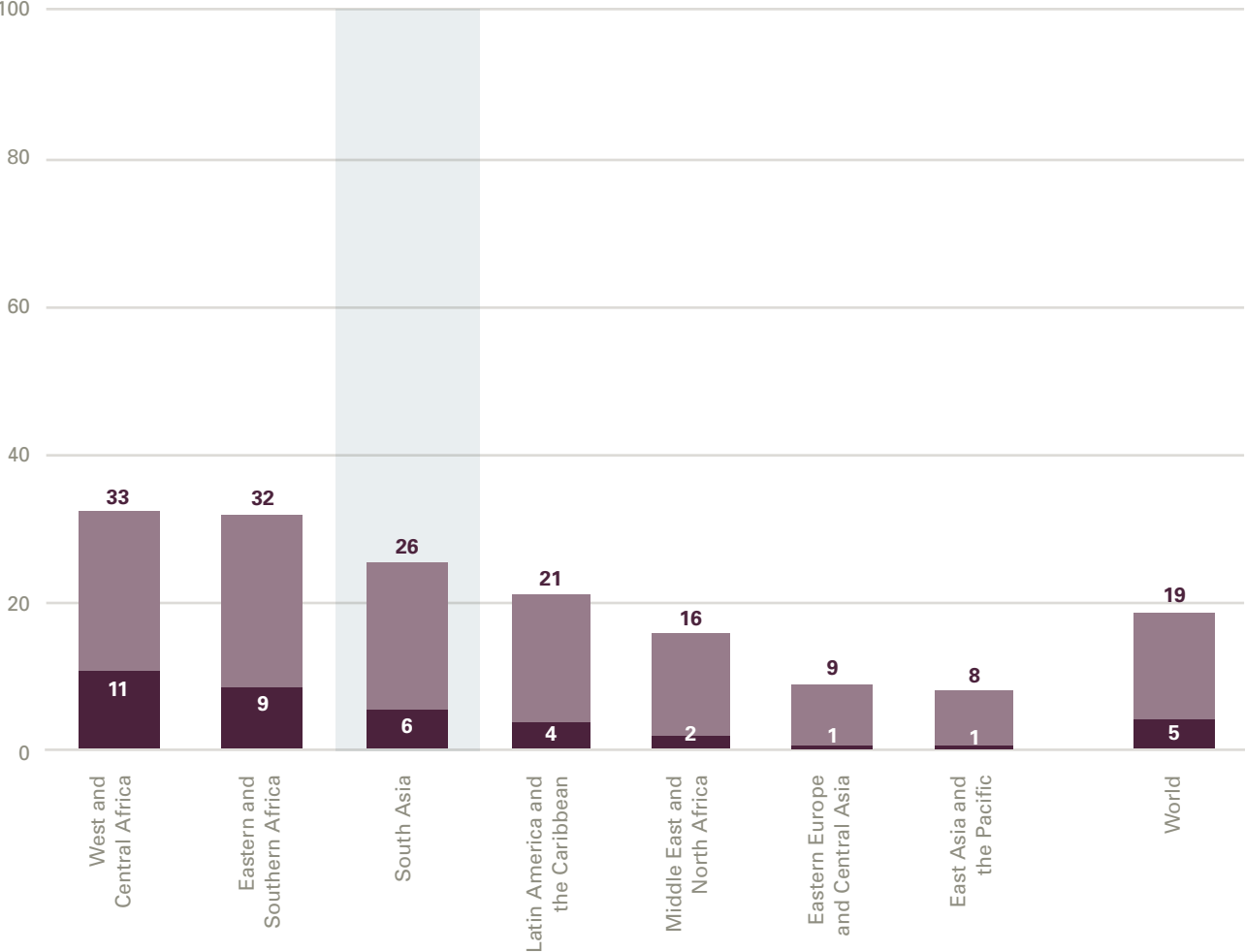


**South Asia leads the world in progress on reducing child marriage.**

Still, acceleration is required to meet the target of eliminating child marriage by 2030; compared to the last decade, the rate of decline would need to be seven times faster.



# Current state of child marriage



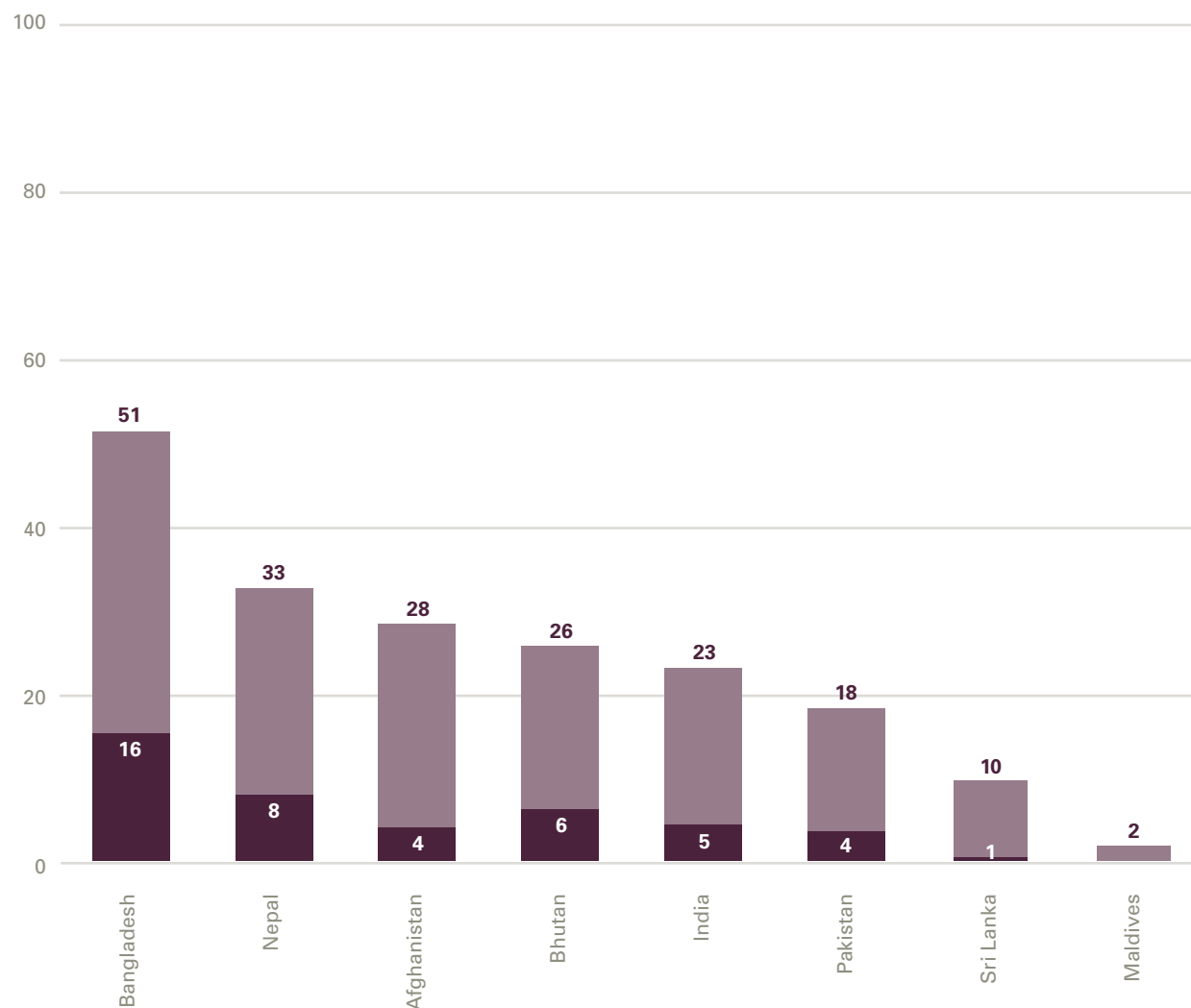
**Around one in four young women in South Asia were first married or in union before their 18th birthday**

■ Married at or after age 15 but before age 18  
 ■ Married before age 15

**FIG. 1** Percentage of women aged 20 to 24 years who were first married or in union before ages 15 and 18

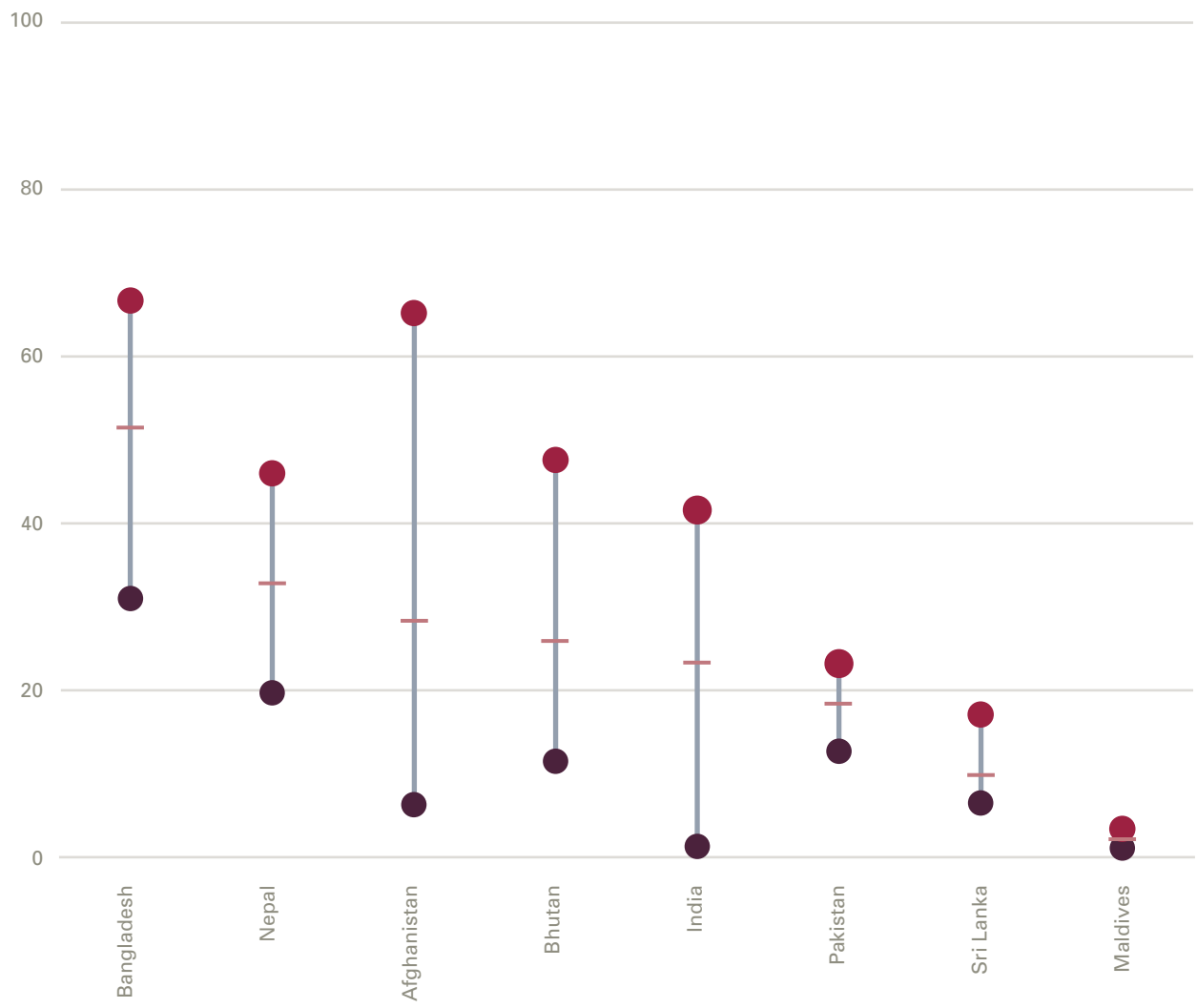
**Levels of child marriage vary considerably across the region, from over 50 per cent in Bangladesh to 2 per cent in the Maldives**

■ Married at or after age 15 but before age 18  
 ■ Married before age 15



**FIG. 2a** Percentage of women aged 20 to 24 years who were first married or in union before ages 15 and 18



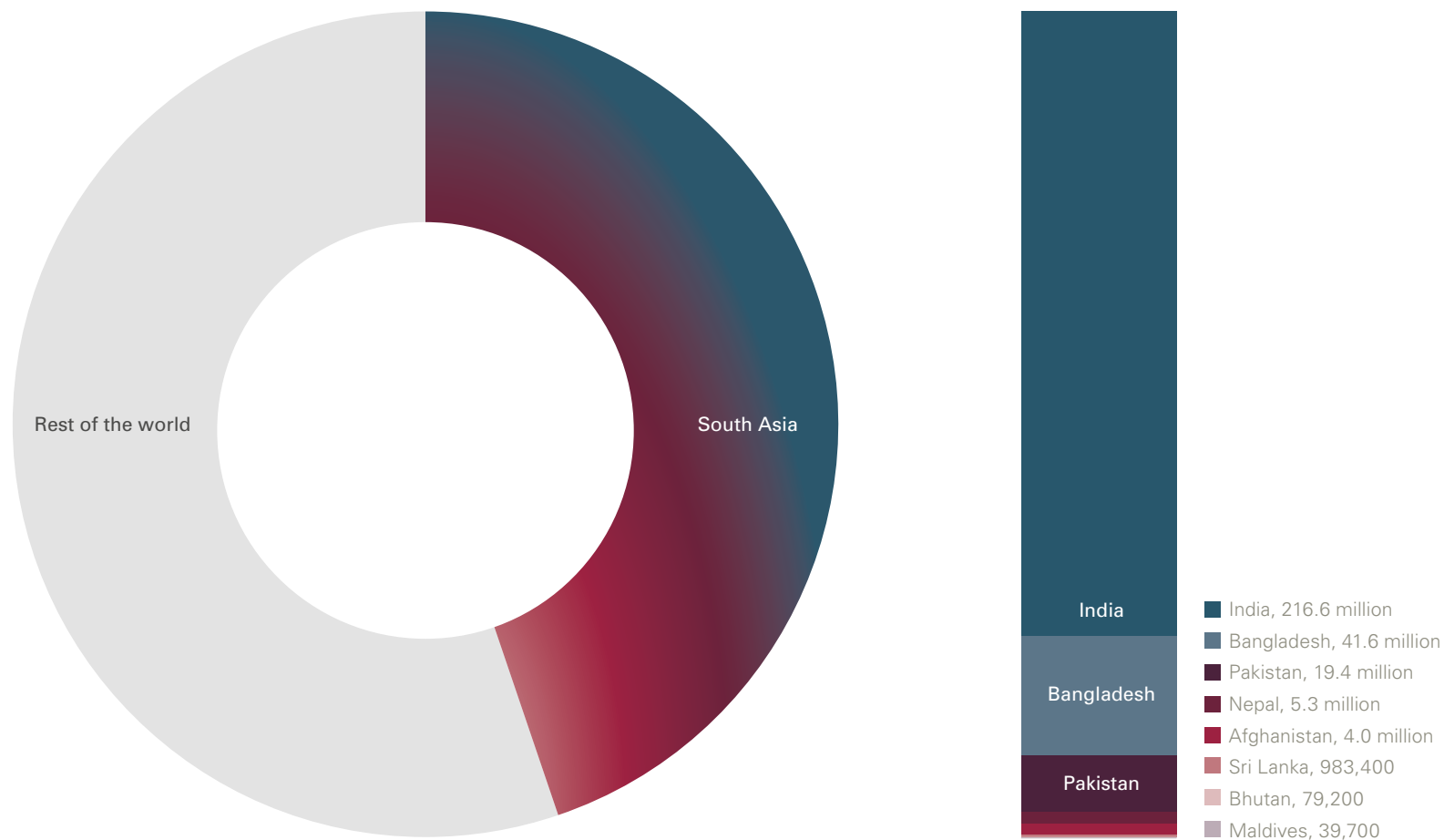


**Within countries there is further disparity: In Afghanistan, for example, there is a tenfold difference in prevalence across provinces**

- Region with the highest prevalence
- National prevalence
- Region with the lowest prevalence

**FIG. 2b** Percentage of women aged 20 to 24 years who were first married or in union before age 18

**South Asia is home to around 290 million child brides, accounting for 45 per cent of the global total**

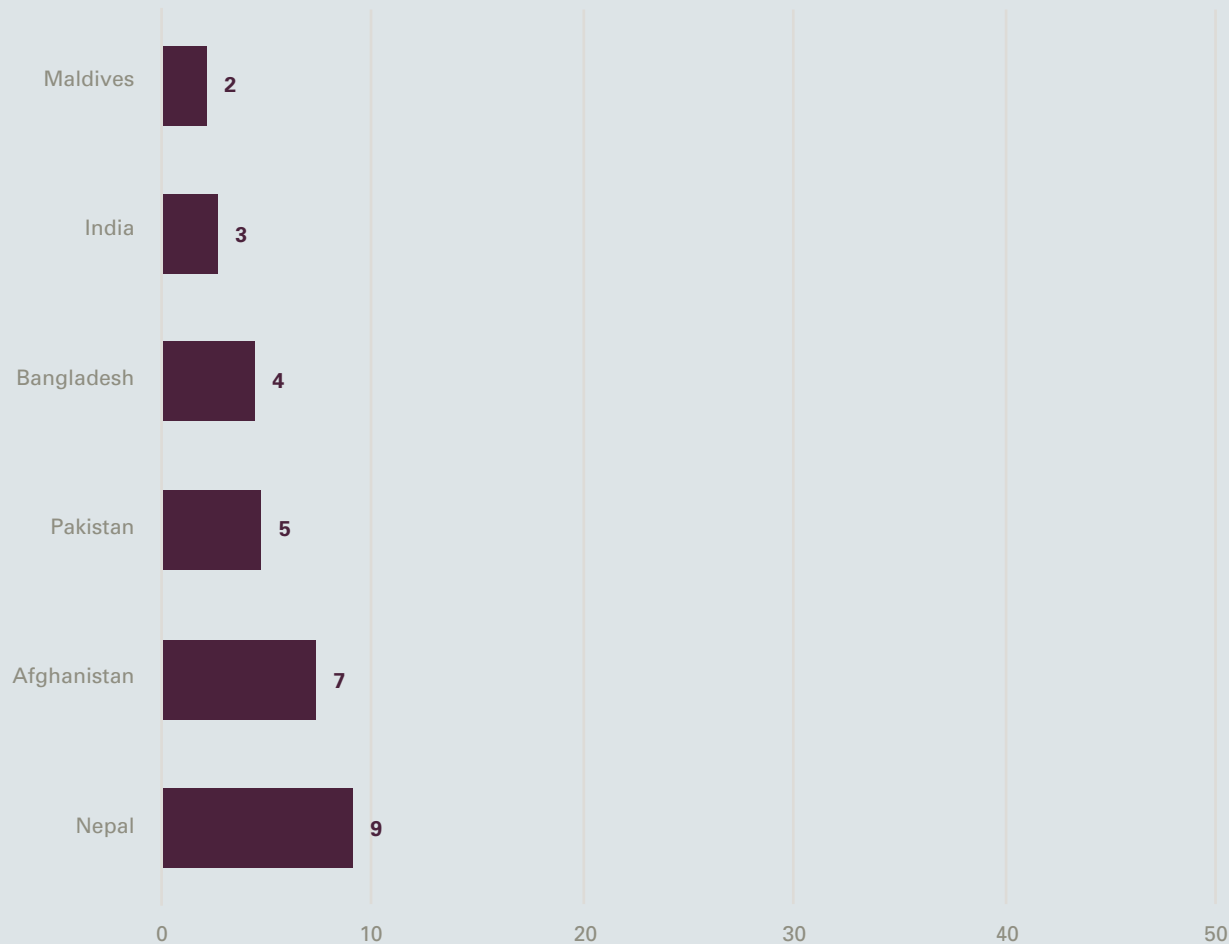


**FIG. 3** Number of girls and women who were first married or in union before age 18

**NOTE:** See 'Technical notes' on page 27 for details on the calculation of burden numbers.

## Child marriage is less common among boys in the region, though it does occur

In Nepal, nearly 1 in 10 young men were married in childhood



**FIG. 4** Percentage of men aged 20 to 24 years who were first married or in union before age 18

**NOTES:** Data for Afghanistan and Bangladesh are from an older source than the data shown elsewhere in the publication for child marriage among females, since comparable data were not collected from males in the most recent sources. Data for Bhutan and Sri Lanka are unavailable for this indicator.

Child marriage is a rights violation for both boys and girls. Though little research has been done on outcomes for child grooms, marriage places boys in an adult role for which they may not be prepared.

Countries in South Asia are among those where the practice occurs. Four of the six countries with data have levels above the global average (3 per cent).

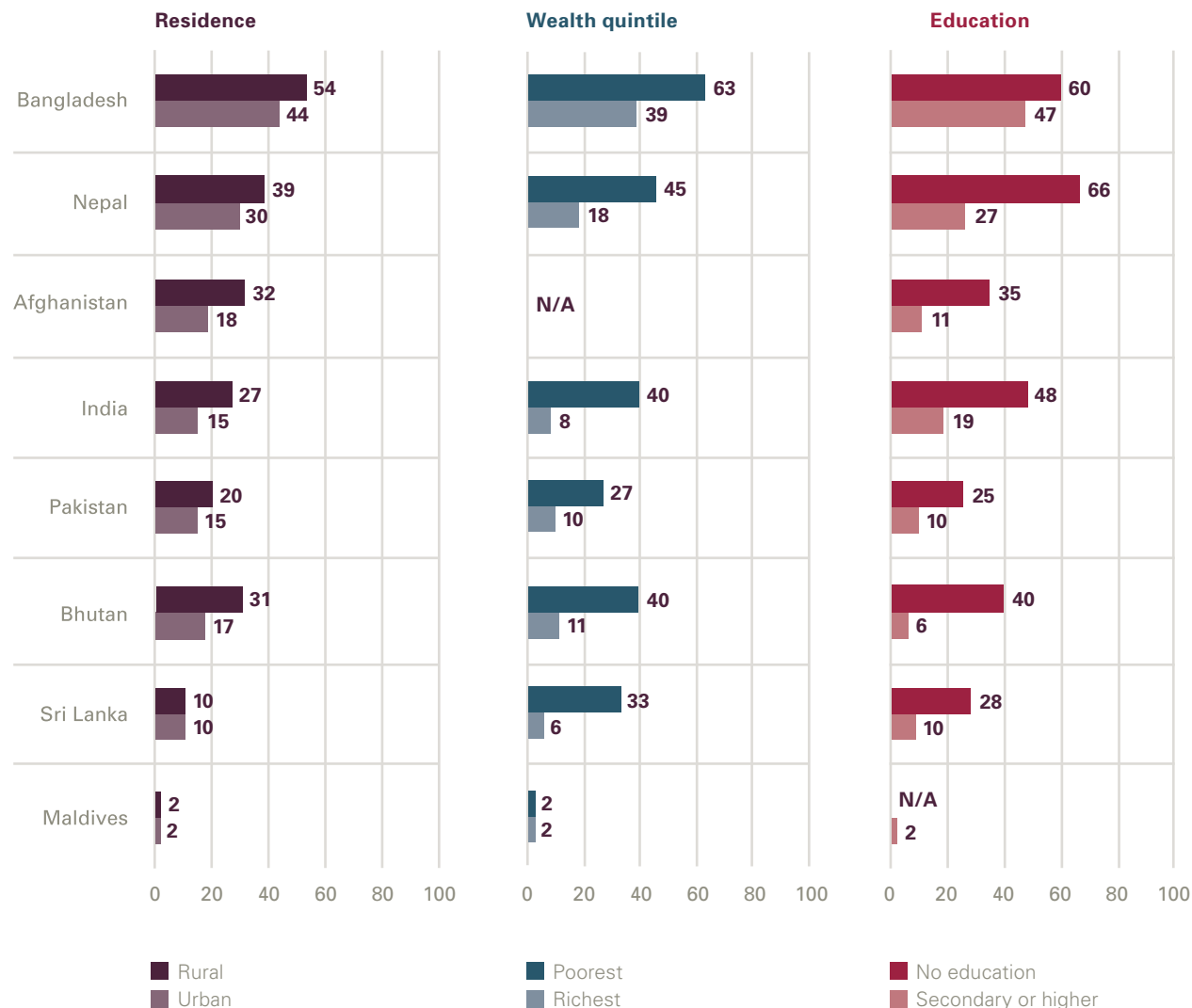
The practice is generally concentrated among boys from the poorest families. In most countries with data, it has become less common over the last few decades.

# Girls most at risk of child marriage

**Child brides in South Asia 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 age 18, by education, wealth quintile and residence

**NOTES:** Estimates by wealth quintile were not available for Afghanistan. Rural estimates for Sri Lanka include both the rural and estate populations. The 'no education' category for Sri Lanka represents the value among the group with primary education, as there was an insufficient number of cases in the 'no education' group to produce an estimate. Data for the 'no education' category for the Maldives are suppressed due to an insufficient number of cases to perform the analysis.





# Characteristics of unions

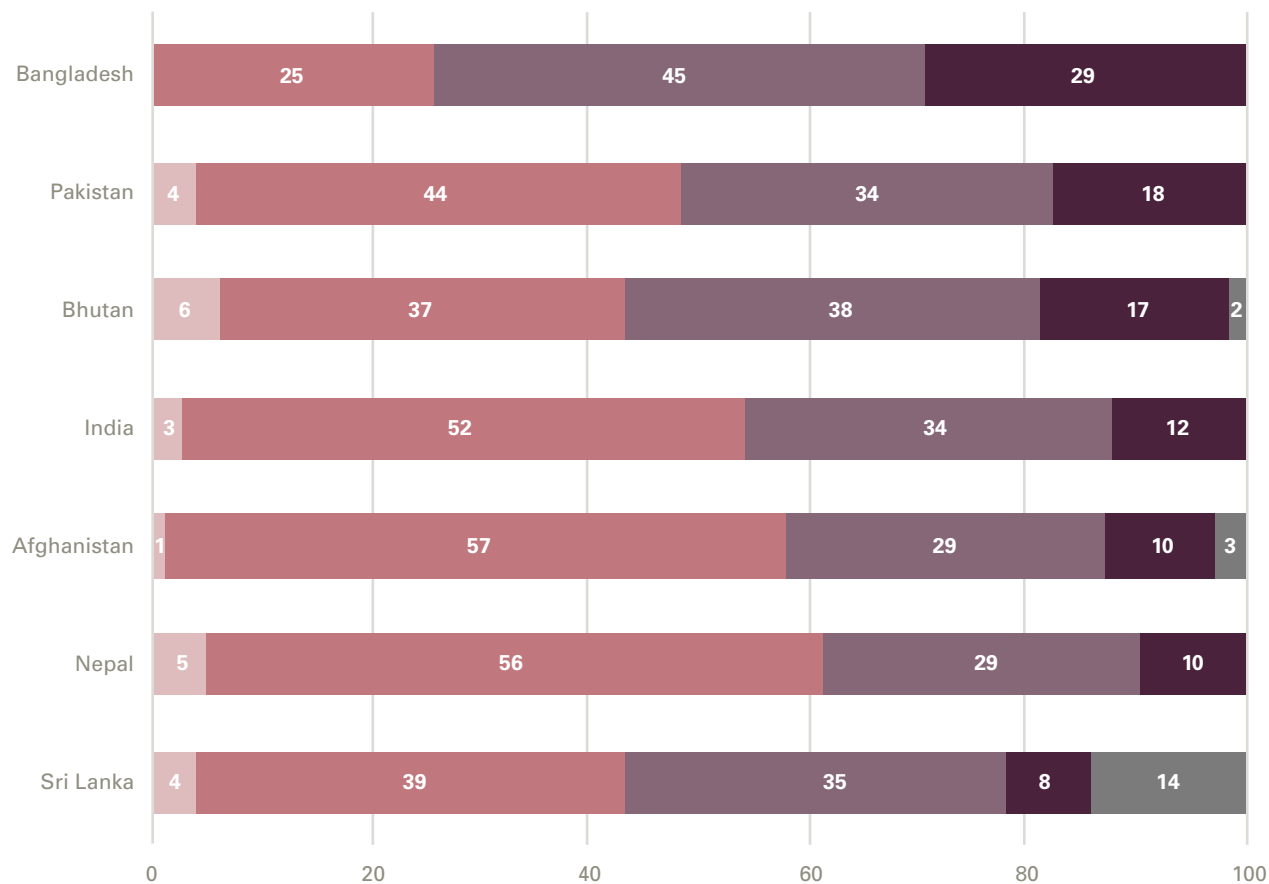
## SPOUSAL AGE GAP

**Many child brides marry someone within five years of their own age**

However, some are in marriages with large age gaps: In Bangladesh, 3 in 10 child brides are married to men who are at least 10 years older

**Partner is:**

- Younger
- 0 to 4 years older
- 5 to 9 years older
- 10+ years older
- Unknown/ missing age

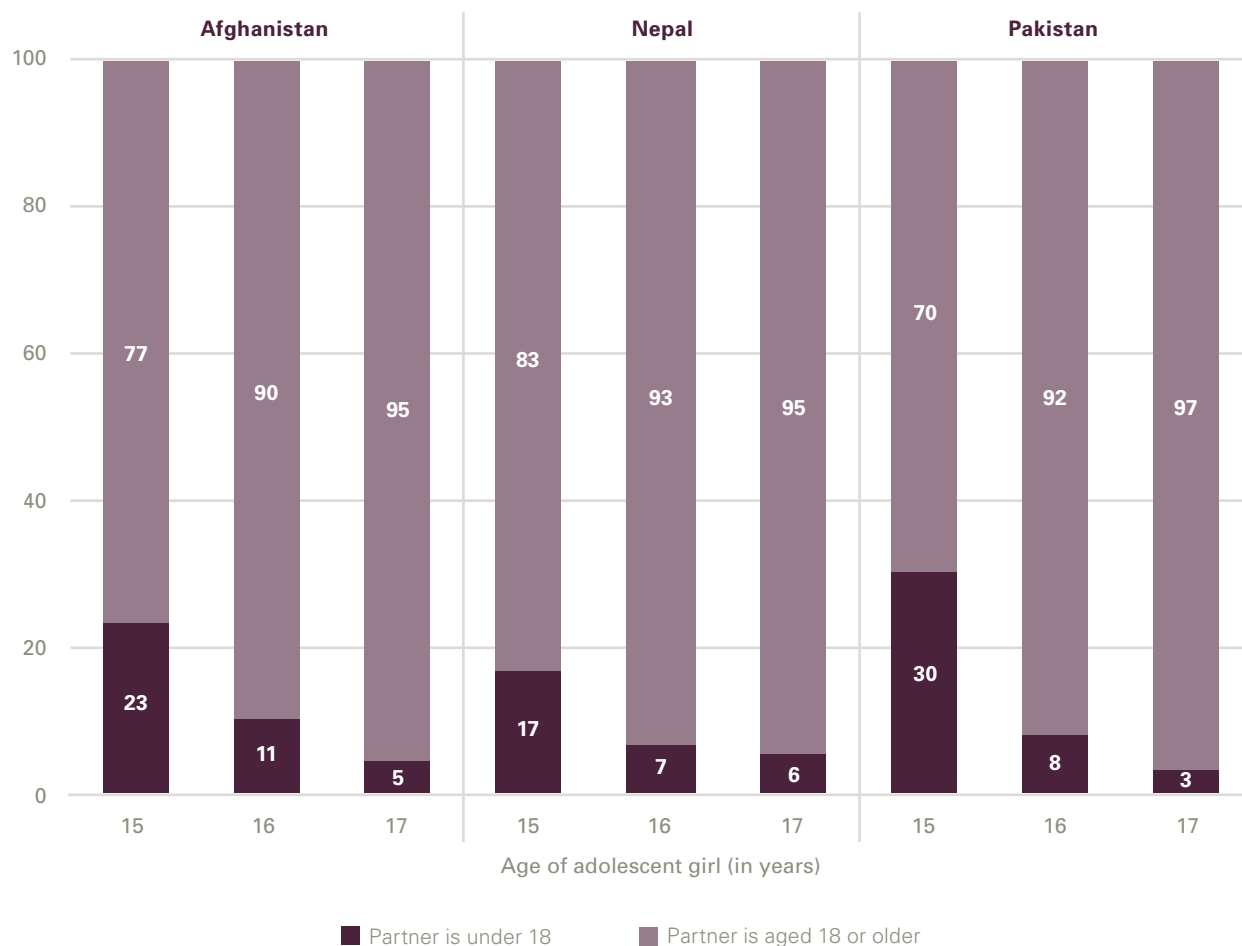


**FIG. 6** Percentage distribution of currently married women aged 20 to 24 years who were first married or in union before age 18, by the age gap between the women and their partners

**NOTES:** Data for the Maldives are suppressed due to an insufficient number of cases to perform the analysis. Some values do not add up to 100 per cent due to rounding.

## CHILD BRIDES AND CHILD GROOMS

In countries where child marriage among boys is also common, up to 30 per cent of young brides are married to boys who are also under age 18



**FIG. 7** Percentage distribution of currently married adolescent girls aged 15 to 17 years, by age of the girl and age of the partner

**NOTES:** This chart features the three countries in which at least 5 per cent of men aged 20 to 24 years were married or in union before age 18. Some values do not add up to 100 per cent due to rounding.

### Types of unions:

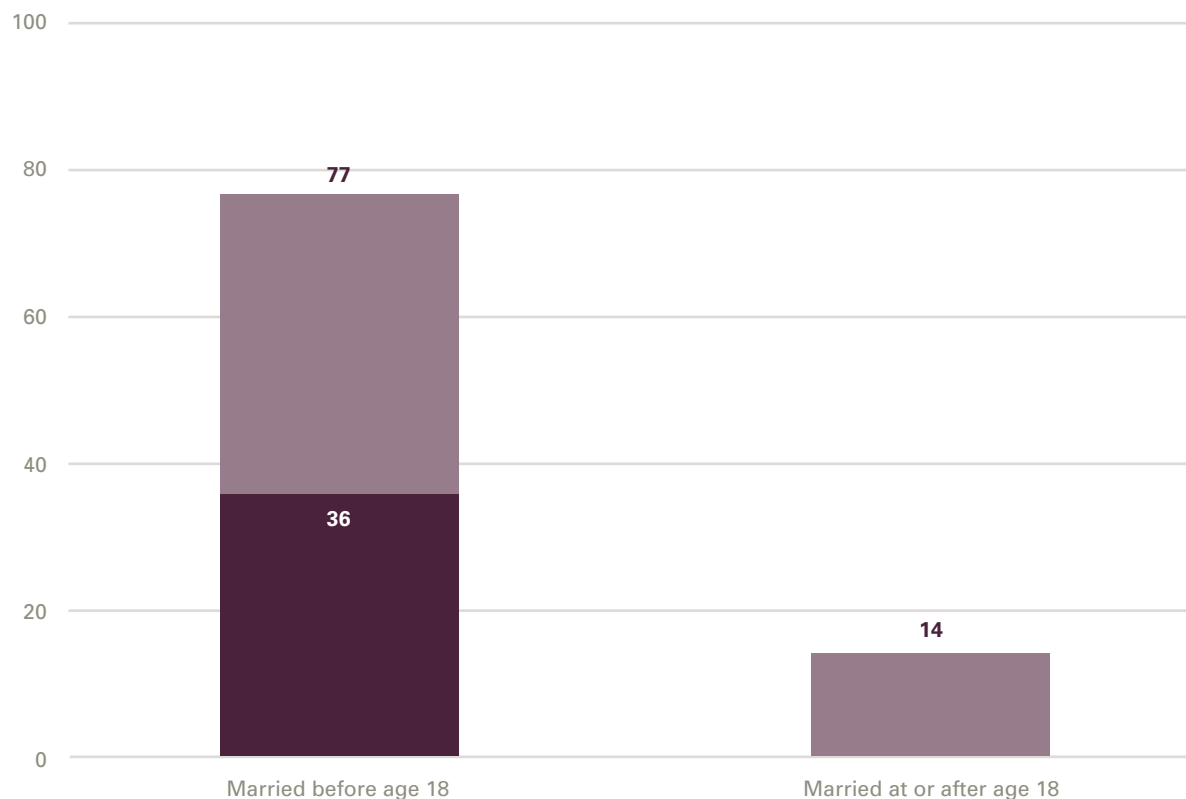
In South Asia, most child marriages are formal marriages. Informal unions among minors, in which partners live together as if married, are also included in the definition of child marriage but are exceedingly rare in this region.

# Lives of child brides

## EARLY CHILDBEARING

Three in four child brides in the region give birth while they are still adolescents; over a third give birth before they turn 18

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



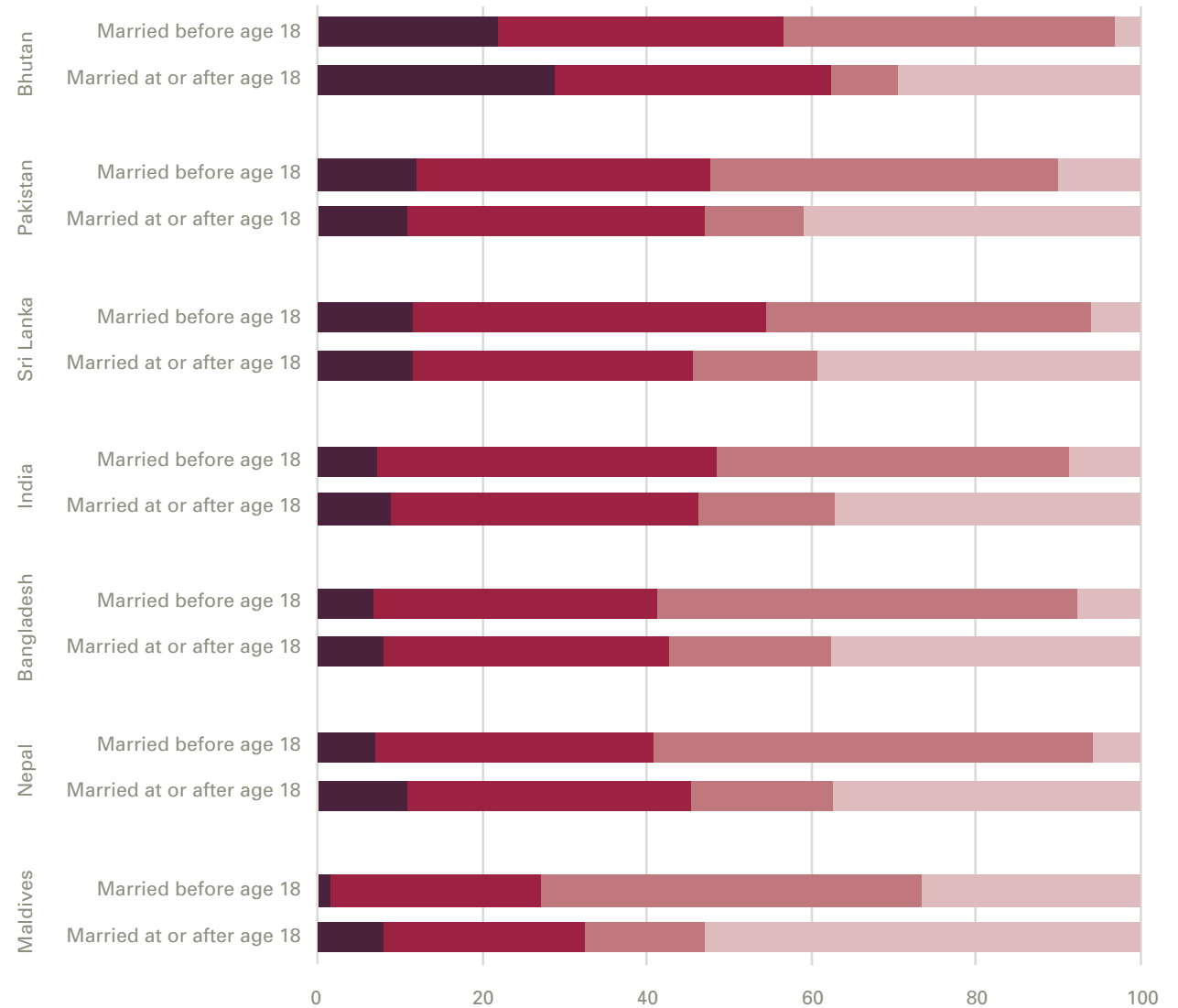
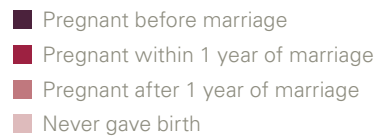
**FIG. 8** Percentage of ever-married women aged 20 to 24 years who gave birth before ages 18 and 20, by age at marriage

**NOTES:** Values for South Asia are based on data from seven of the eight countries in the region. Data are unavailable for Afghanistan.



## Pregnancy before marriage is rare in most of South Asia, including among child brides

That said, child brides are more likely than their peers who marry later to begin childbearing within the first years of marriage



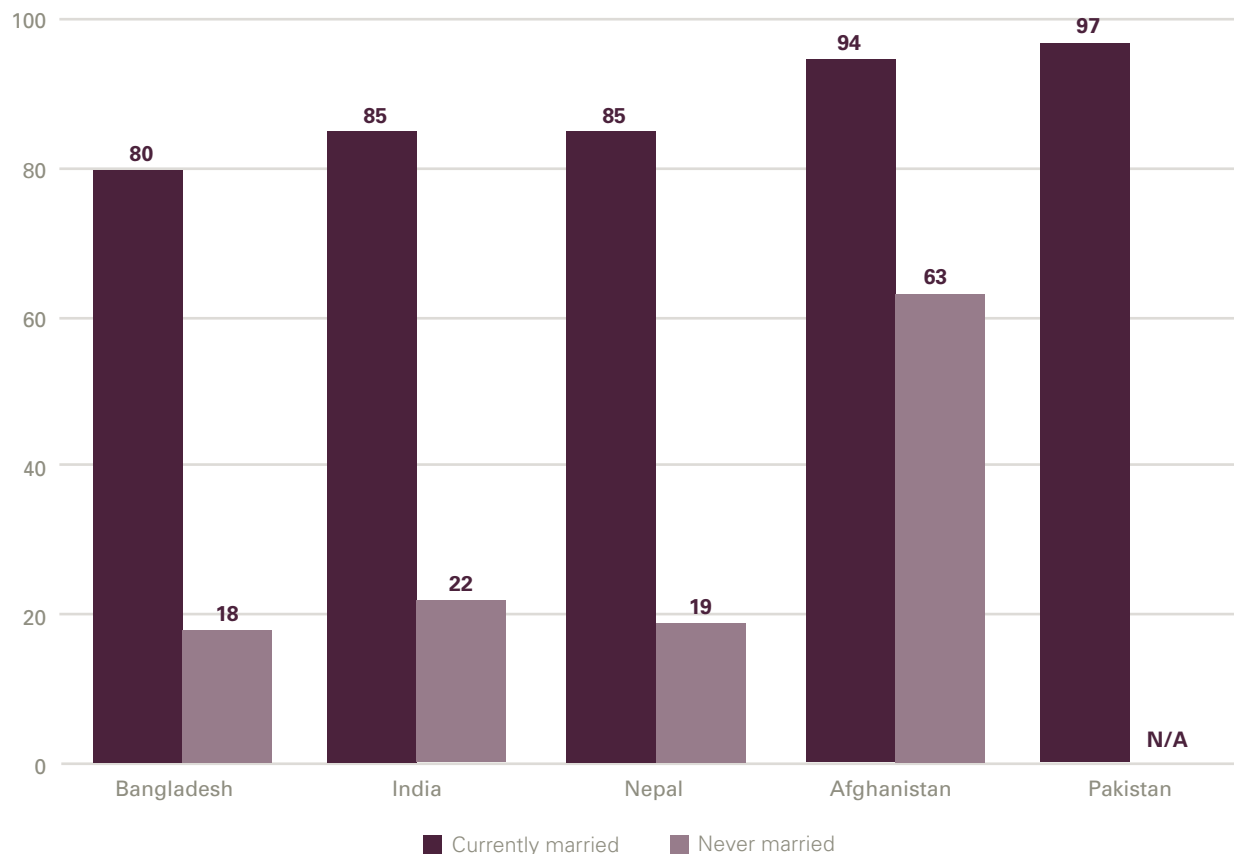
**FIG. 9** Percentage distribution of ever-married women aged 20 to 24 years by timing of pregnancy and marriage

**NOTE:** Data are unavailable for Afghanistan.

## EDUCATION

### The vast majority of child brides in South Asia are out of school

In Bangladesh, India and Nepal, child brides are four times more likely to be out of school than their unmarried peers



**FIG. 10** Percentage of girls aged 15 to 17 years who are out of school, by marital status

**NOTES:** Data are unavailable for Bhutan and Sri Lanka. Data for the Maldives are suppressed due to an insufficient number of cases to perform the analysis. Data for never-married girls in Pakistan are unavailable. Data for Afghanistan are unlikely to fully represent the current situation given changes in girls' access to education that occurred after these data were collected.

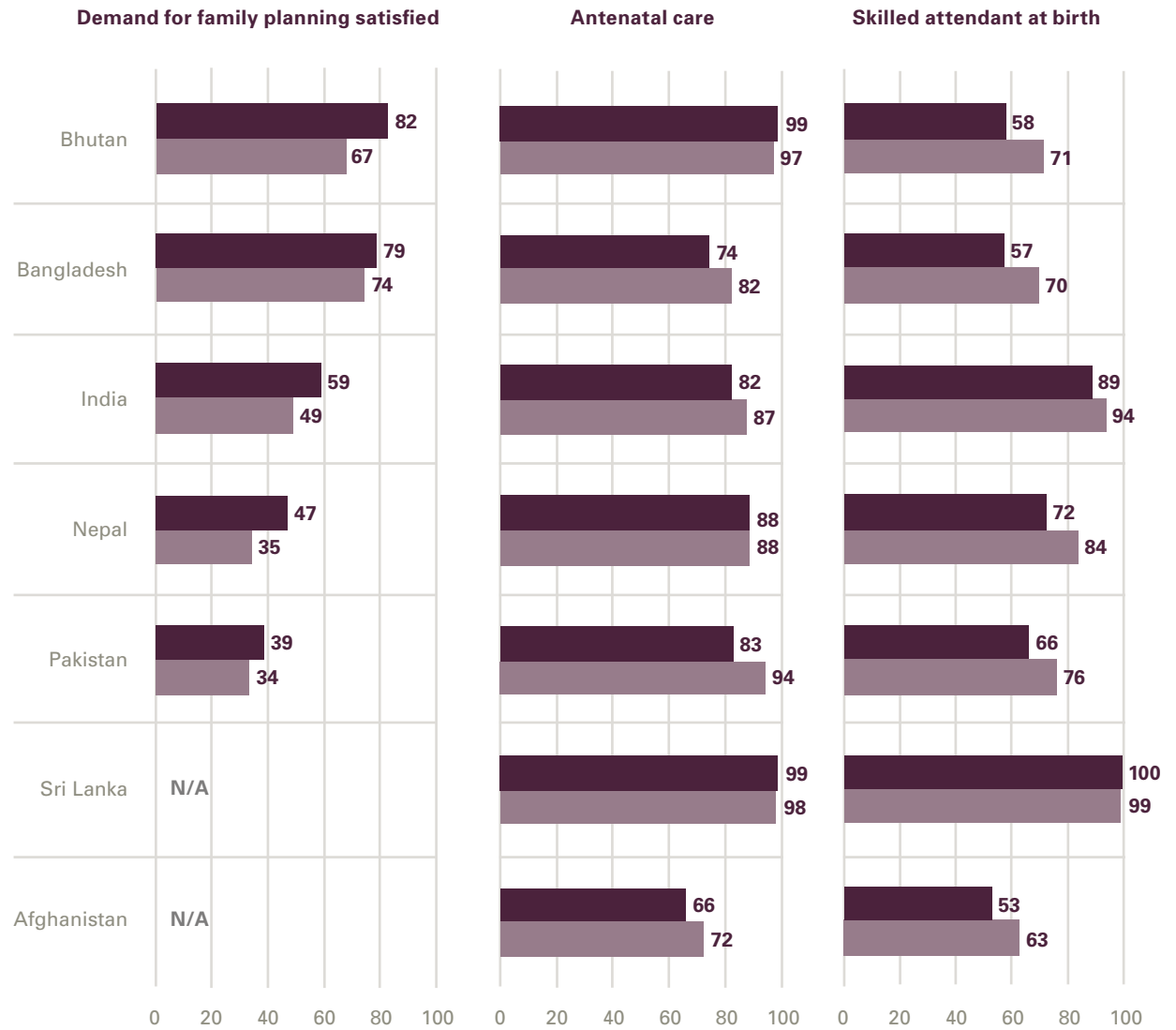
In many countries, marriage and schooling are viewed as incompatible, and decisions about removing a girl from school and marrying her off at a young age are often made at the same time. These decisions are influenced by the perceived value of education and the availability of employment opportunities for educated girls. Better quality and higher education may make the returns on investment in girls more readily apparent and justifiable to both parents and society.

While the relationship between education and child marriage has been clearly established, the mechanism of this relationship is complex, and causality is not straightforward. The analysis here is not intended to establish causality, but rather to illustrate the magnitude of the disparities between advantaged and disadvantaged groups.

# REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH

Access to reproductive health services varies across countries; in some countries, child brides are somewhat less likely to have a skilled attendant at birth

Married before age 18  
 Married at or after age 18



**FIG. 11** Percentage of ever-married women aged 20 to 24 years whose demand for family planning is satisfied by a modern method, who received antenatal care from a skilled provider during their last pregnancy, and who had a skilled attendant during their last birth

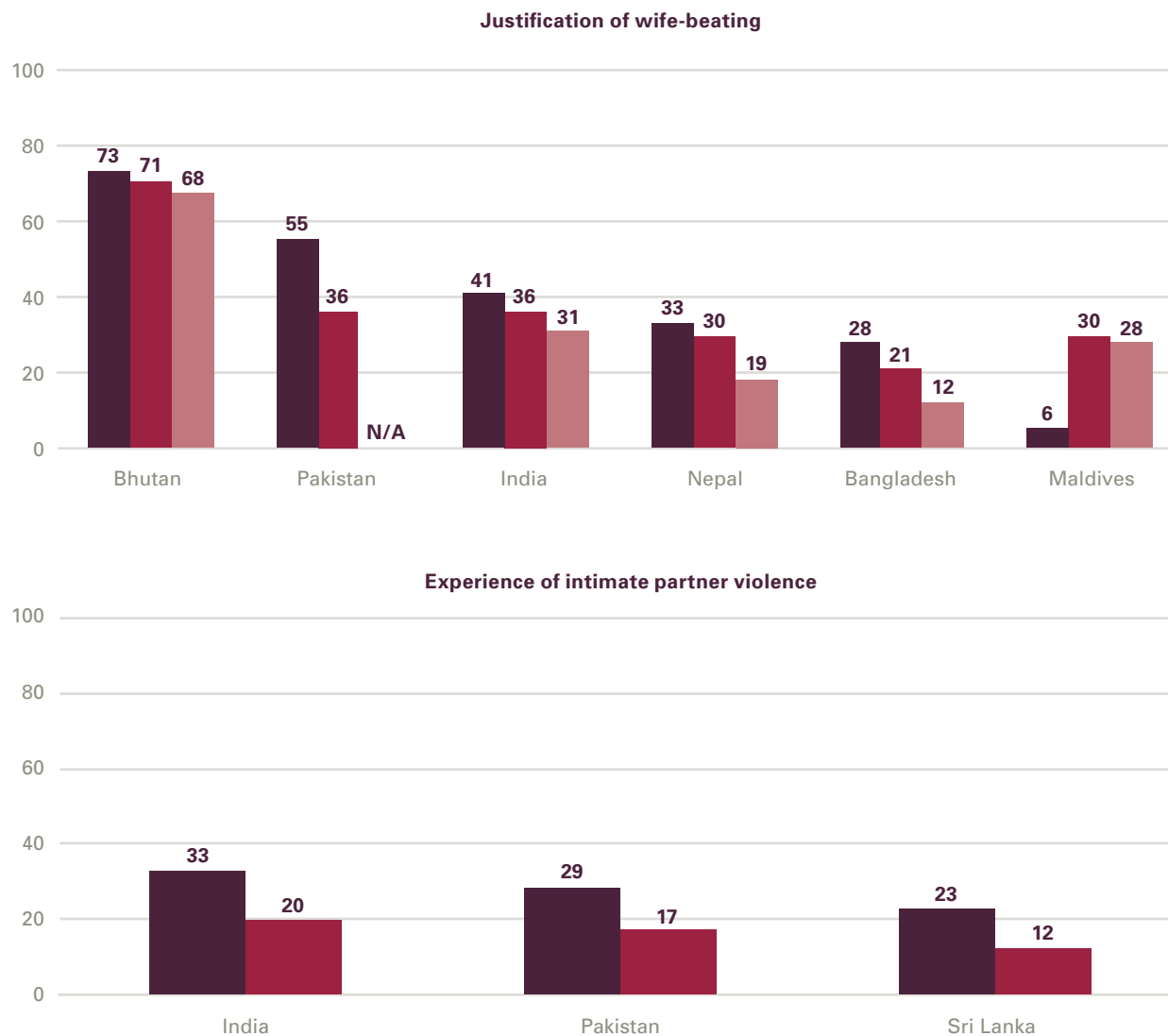
**NOTES:** Data on demand for family planning satisfied are unavailable for Afghanistan and Sri Lanka. Data for the Maldives are suppressed due to an insufficient number of cases to perform the analysis.

# VIOLENCE

**In Pakistan, India, Nepal and Bangladesh, child brides are more likely to report that wife-beating is justified**

In India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka, child brides are also more likely to experience such violence themselves

- Married before age 18
- Married at or after age 18
- Never married

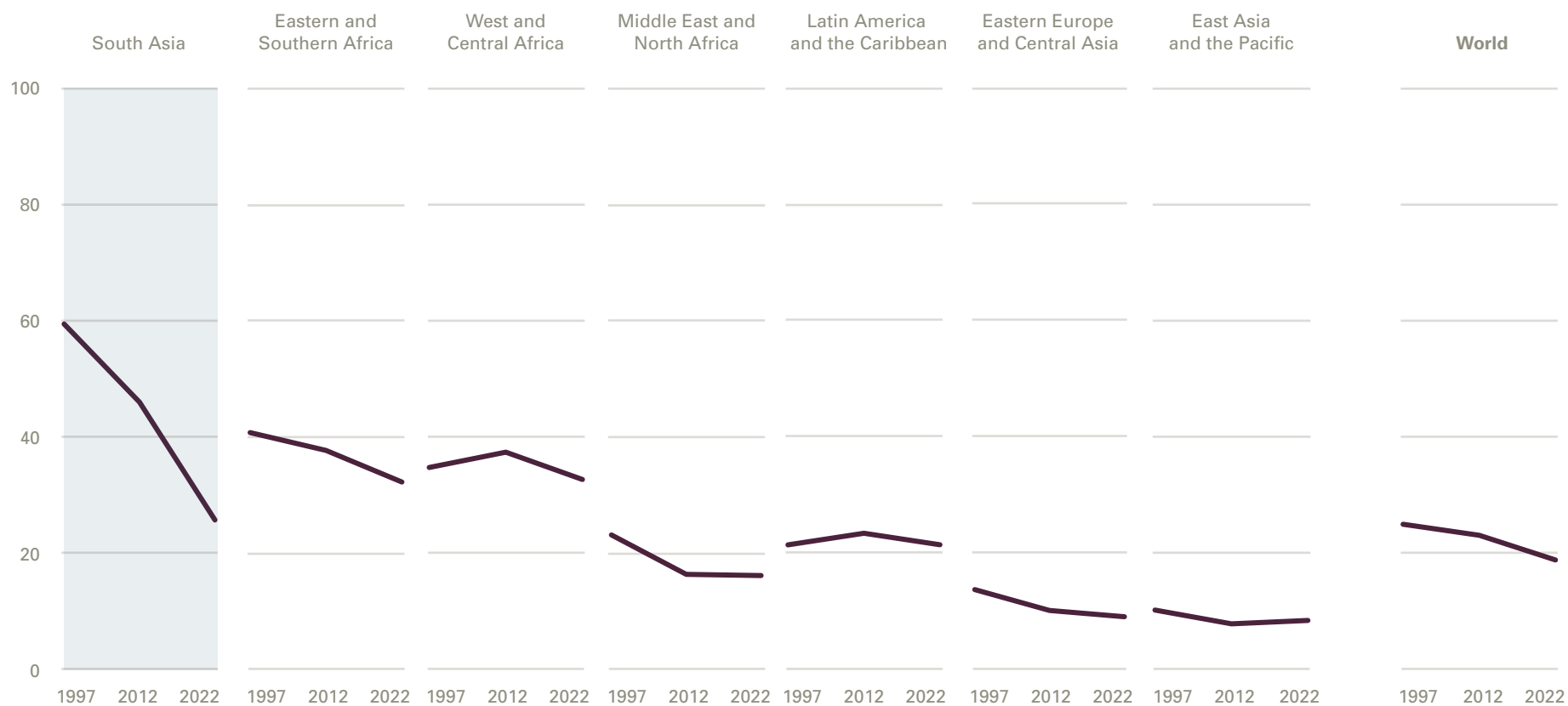


**FIG. 12** Percentage of women aged 20 to 24 years who believe wife-beating is justified and percentage of women aged 20 to 24 years who have experienced intimate partner violence in the past 12 months

**NOTES:** Data on justification of wife-beating are unavailable for Afghanistan and Sri Lanka, and for never-married women in Pakistan. In Bhutan, the difference in levels of justification of wife-beating across groups of women is not statistically significant. Data on intimate partner violence are unavailable for Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan and Nepal. Data on intimate partner violence in the Maldives are suppressed due to an insufficient number of cases to perform the analysis.

# Generational trends

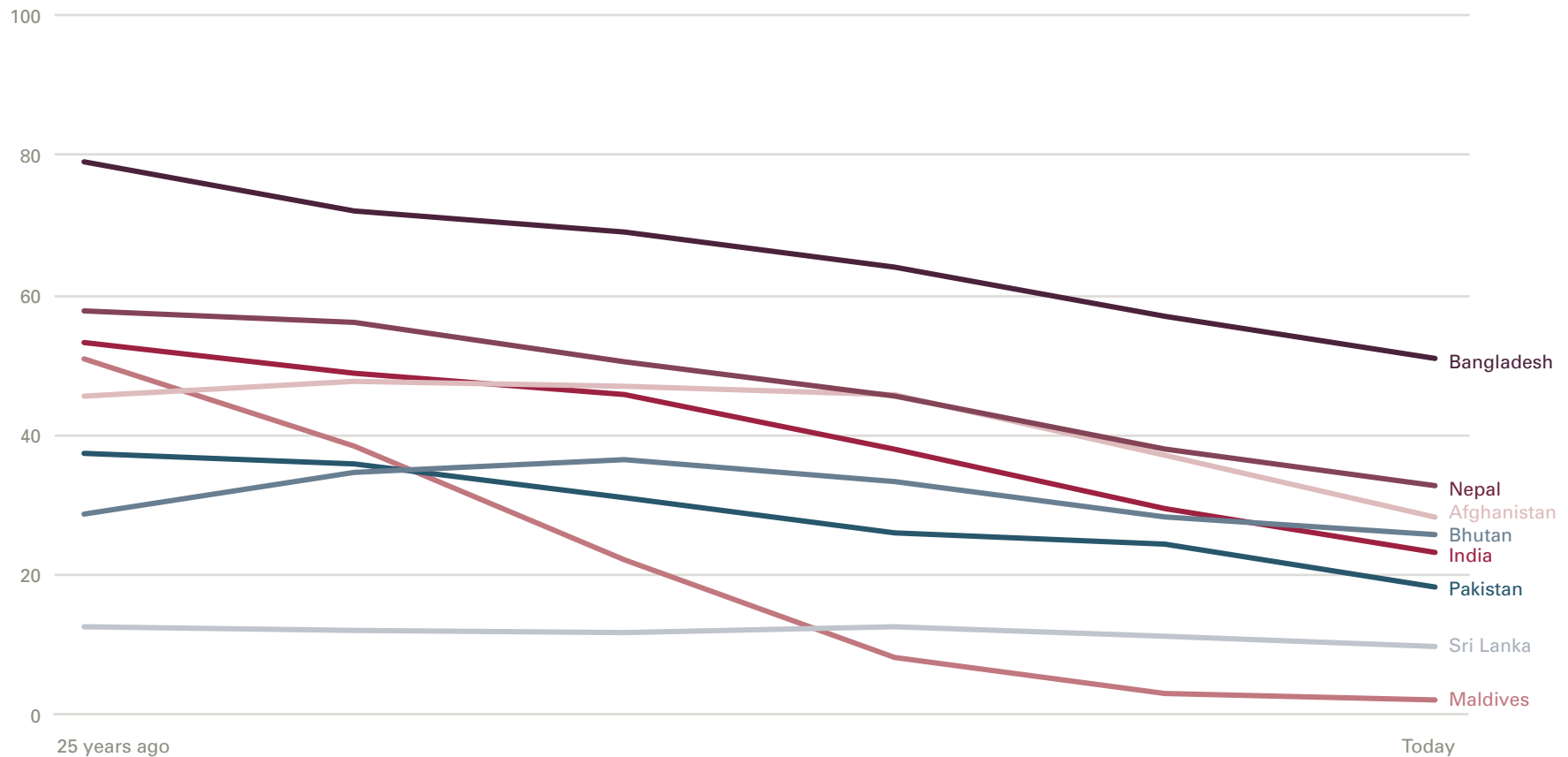
## South Asia leads the world in progress on reducing child marriage



**FIG. 13** Percentage of women aged 20 to 24 years who were first married or in union before age 18

## While India has driven the region's overall progress, most countries have seen reductions in child marriage, and the Maldives is nearing elimination of the practice

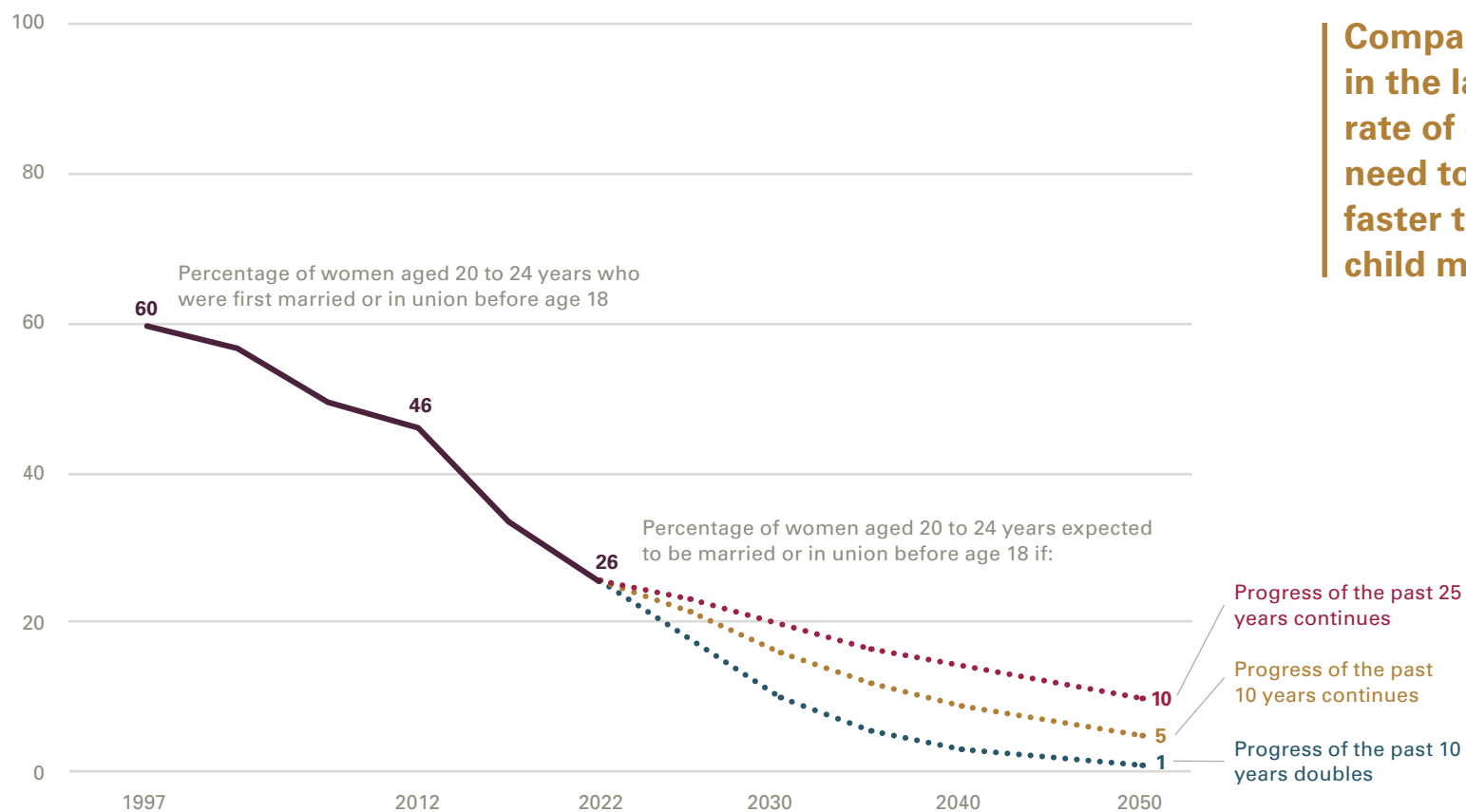
In Bhutan and Sri Lanka, however, child marriage remains as common today as it was 25 years ago



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

**NOTE:** See 'Technical notes' on page 27 for details on the calculation of trends.

# Looking ahead to 2030



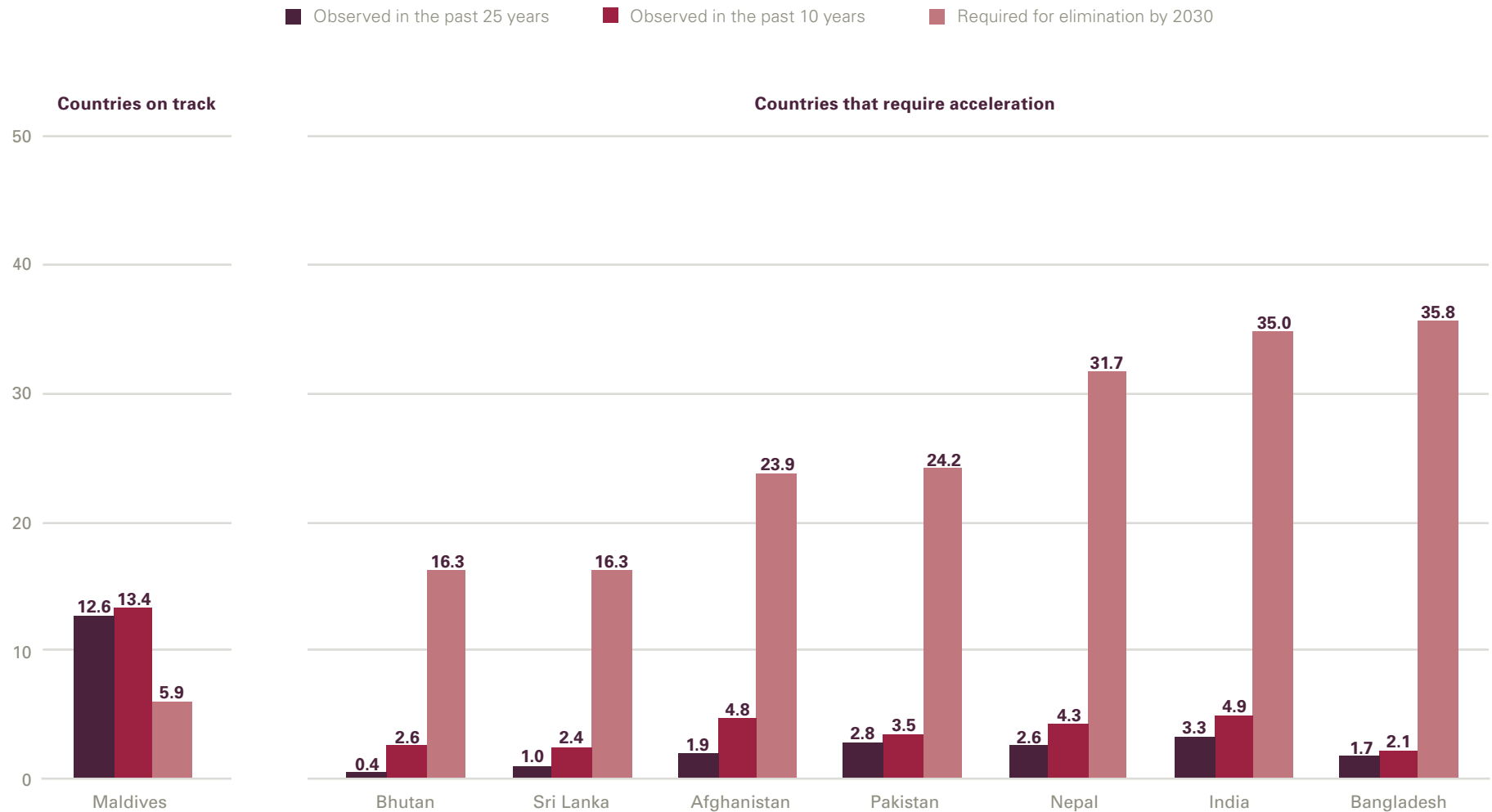
**Compared to progress in the last decade, the rate of decline would need to be seven times faster to eliminate child marriage by 2030**

**FIG. 15** Percentage of women aged 20 to 24 years who were first married or in union before age 18, observed and projected

**NOTE:** See 'How to read the projections' on page 27.

## While the rate of progress has quickened in the past decade, all countries but the Maldives would require further acceleration to eliminate child marriage by 2030

In Bangladesh, progress would need to be 17 times faster to meet the target



**FIG. 16** 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

**NOTE:** See 'How to read the projections' on page 27.





# Ending child marriage in South Asia: The programmatic response

**South Asia is the region with the highest number of child brides, accounting for 45 per cent of the global total. Recent decades have seen remarkable progress in reducing child marriage in this region. Still, the combined impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, economic shocks, conflict and climate change threatens to erode these hard-won gains. Reaching the global SDG target to end child marriage by 2030 will only be possible if progress to eliminate this harmful practice is accelerated.**

**UNICEF and the UN Population Fund (UNFPA) are working together to achieve this goal, as part of the Global Programme to End Child Marriage. The two UN agencies are leveraging resources and evidence to strengthen evidence-based programmes and bring them to scale.**

**UNICEF and its partners in South Asia are committed to ending child marriage by focusing on the following strategies:**

**Empowering adolescent girls and transforming gender norms.** Girls are being trained to strengthen their communication and negotiating skills. Safe spaces are being created, along with support networks and referral services, all of which contribute to enhancing girls' confidence, abilities and opportunities. Through a range of programmes at the community level that promote gender-transformative life skills and comprehensive sexuality education, girls are being empowered to exercise their agency and life choices.

**Engaging families and communities, including men and boys.** The objective: to promote positive social norms and behaviours. Community-level actions, including 'child marriage free' villages and districts, are showing success in reducing the practice. Engaging influential community members, such as religious leaders, is also helping to positively change how girls are valued by their families and communities. At the same time, engaging boys through school-based programmes and extracurricular activities and clubs is working to shape gender-equitable norms for both girls and boys.

**Strengthening laws, policies and services.** This includes the reform of laws and policies that discriminate against girls, including those that allow differences between males and females in the legal age of marriage. Other interventions aim to ensure that adolescent girls have access to a complete secondary education and the skills they need to transition to work, that financial barriers to education are removed, and that families and communities understand the need to invest in girls. Evidence in the region shows a consistent positive association between the number of years in school and a girl's age at marriage. Access to social protection, particularly cash transfers, is proving a critical strategy to counter poverty and strengthen resiliency to humanitarian and economic shocks.

**Generating and using robust data and evidence.** Programmes in this area are focusing on what works to reduce child marriage. Evidence-based policy advocacy and programme design support the replication and scaling up of good practices and strengthen investment in policies and programmes. In addition, evidence is being generated to understand the impact of COVID-19 and humanitarian crises on progress to eliminate child marriage. Finally, disaggregated data are helping UNICEF and its partners improve the targeting of programmes to particularly vulnerable groups, where special efforts may be required to jumpstart progress.

## Technical notes

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 15 and before age 18. All references to ‘marriage’ include formal marriages and informal unions in which women started living together with their partners as if married. Data for India reflect all marriages that occurred in childhood, regardless of whether or not the *gauna* ceremony (which is associated with the consummation of marriage) was performed. ‘Childhood’ refers to the period from birth until the 18th birthday. ‘Adolescence’ refers to ages 10 to 19.

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

The current global and regional estimates of the prevalence of child marriage, referred to as the levels ‘today’, are calculated on the basis of the latest available data for each country, within the span of 2016 to 2022. Regional estimates for the Middle East and North Africa include data from the period 2014 to 2022 due to the unavailability of more recent data. Regional estimates represent data covering at least 50 per cent of the regional population. Data coverage was insufficient to calculate regional estimates for North America and Western Europe.

Trends in the prevalence of child marriage are based on the prevalence of child marriage across age cohorts. Trends were calculated taking into account data from all available surveys, when possible.

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 to the respective female population. For each country, prevalence from the trend analysis is applied for each age cohort of women from 18 to 49 years to the respective female population. Outside these ages, direct estimates of the prevalence were not available, so the following assumptions were 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 years currently married
- 50+ years – prevalence of women aged 45 to 49 years is used, unless otherwise noted.

For countries with an extended trend line available, which takes into account data from all historical surveys, direct prevalence estimates are available for women above 50 years. For these countries, assumptions are only employed for older groups of women, again relying on the prevalence in the eldest five-year age cohort for which an estimate exists.

## Data sources

Data are drawn from the UNICEF global databases, 2023, based on Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys, Demographic and Health Surveys and other nationally representative surveys. For detailed source information by country, see <data.unicef.org>. Demographic data are from the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division, *World Population Prospects 2022*, Online Edition.

## How to read the projections pages 23 and 24

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.

Figure 15 shows how the scale of the practice of child marriage has changed since around 1997, as well as various scenarios that could occur in the future, shown by the percentage of young women married in childhood. Figure 16 shows progress in terms of the rate of reduction that has been observed and the rates that would be required to meet elimination targets. For statistical purposes, ‘elimination’ is defined here as a child marriage prevalence of less than 1 per cent.

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.



**For information on the data in this brochure:**

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