Key Results for Children

REACHING OUT TO PARTNERS IN THE TIME OF COVID-19

REDUCING CHILD MARRIAGE
Girls in West and Central Africa (WCA) face the highest risk of marrying or entering in union prior to reaching 18 years old in the world. On average, **four in 10 young women** in the region were married or in union before age 18, and **15 per cent** before the age of 15. The region has also **the highest rate of teenage pregnancy in the world (28 per cent)**. Encouraging progress has been made in recent years in a growing number of countries in the region, where child marriage has been addressed as a part of the national development strategy. However, the COVID-19 pandemic is putting such gains at a high risk, both in terms of the regional momentum built towards ending child marriage and the programmatic efforts to reduce child marriage.

In this context, the response to the COVID-19 crisis is presenting a unique opportunity to **strengthen, accelerate or scale up proven interventions in reducing child marriage in the WCA region**. Notably, it is critical to accelerate efforts to protect girls from child marriage by tapping into the multi-sectoral COVID-19 response in the **education, health and social protection sectors** to mitigate long-term impacts on their health, well-being and development.

**The challenge**

Emerging evidence shows that the ongoing crisis is **disproportionately affecting women and girls**, particularly among the poorest and most socially marginalized groups. Loss of household income and COVID-19-related temporary school closures mean that **education** is becoming increasingly unaffordable and inaccessible. **Elevated household poverty**, coupled with a prolonged absence from schools, is exposing girls to a **higher risk of being forced into marriage** or becoming pregnant prior to their 18th birthday.

In particular, in a region where 41 million children (including 28 million girls) were already out of school prior to the pandemic, school closures and other COVID-19 restrictive measures have further disrupted learning for **more than 128 million children and adolescents**, even if temporarily. This will have long-term impacts on girls’ future, particularly those living in poorer and rural areas, **exacerbating the intergenerational cycle of poverty**.

If re-opening of schools is not handled well, a significant proportion of children may end up being out of school permanently. Communities and families or children themselves may resort to negative coping mechanisms, such as **unsafe migration or economic and sexual exploitation**, or **child marriage and adolescent pregnancy**.
Expected results and the sustainable approach

In the WCA region, six countries are engaged in the Key Result for Children on reducing child marriage (KRC#6) with the expected result: By 2021, the KRC aims to prevent 3 million girls from being married as children or adolescents. Key strategies across the five pillars include following multi-sectoral interventions using education and social protection platforms:

**Pillar 1: Supporting girls at risk of being married or already married or in union:**
- Support girls to stay learning in school through primary and lower secondary education
- Improve the quality of education for adolescent girls at non-formal, primary or secondary schools
- Enable access for adolescent girls to life skills programmes, including on reproductive health, nutrition and protection information

**Pillar 2: Community engagement**
- Ensure households demonstrate positive attitudes and behaviours toward investing in and supporting adolescent girls
- Link adolescent girls and self-organized youth groups to provide opportunities to share their voice, express themselves and participate in social actions in their communities as “agents of change.”

**Pillar 3: Provision of quality services**
- Improve reach, access and quality of cost-effective essential social services (multi-sectoral) to meet the needs of adolescent girls

**Pillar 4: Policy development and enforcement**
- Support governments at national and sub-national levels towards policy reform in favour of adolescent girls and gender equality
- Help governments develop and implement costed national plans to address child marriage through sectoral interventions and/or child marriage-specific plans

**Pillar 5: Data and evidence**
- Promote the use of data and evidence for policies and programming with the potential to enable the abandonment of child marriage.
During the COVID-19 pandemic, UNICEF is working with governments and other partners to deliver adjusted programmatic interventions to keep up the momentum and continuous progress towards the KRC#6, through:

- Advocating for governments’ and partners’ investments in inclusive gender-responsive distance learning such as through radio broadcasts, which incorporate key messages on ending child marriage
- Implementing revised child marriage-related community engagement strategies that are sensitive and responsive to preventing further COVID-19 transmission (e.g. face-to-face sensitization with smaller groups facilitated by local actors, social media, and raising awareness through radio, TV and SMS messages via U-report, etc)
- Integrating gender-responsive social protection interventions into the national COVID-19 response and recovery plans to not only prevent the most vulnerable households from falling into extreme poverty but also promote girls’ education as a protective measure against child marriage
- Generating evidence on COVID-19’s impacts on child marriage through the lens of increased household financial stress and decreased education opportunities for adolescent girls
- Expanding opportunities for girls out of school, including through youth entrepreneurship, innovation and small business development.

Why partner with UNICEF?

Child marriage is an essential element of Africa’s development and one of the key priorities of the African Union’s 2063 Agenda. To support this continental priority, UNICEF works with governments and partners to tackle child marriage as a child rights’ violation. UNICEF is uniquely positioned because of:

- A focus on the girls who are most at risk, promoting their education and mobilizing those who could influence their communities and society to provide them with more control over their own lives and prospects
- Strategies tackling child marriage through integrated programming across multiple sectors (e.g. education, child protection, health, social protection) with a focus on the most marginalized girls
- Long-standing work alongside governments and civil society organizations – critical for rapid scale-up of responses
- Advocacy work and a strong credibility with line ministries to secure engagement by high-level authorities – a decisive factor in bringing lasting change and sustainability in this area
- Drawing on robust evidence, informed by marginalized girls and boys, while empowering communities and strengthening child protection systems as a safeguard against child marriage
- Positioning as the inter-agency lead in risk communication and community engagement within the COVID-19 response – a key platform to integrate behavioural and social change messages, including on ending child marriage
Key Results for Children REDUCING CHILD MARRIAGE REACHING OUT TO PARTNERS IN THE TIME OF COVID-19

Value proposition

Addressing child marriage by investing in girls’ education, well-being and health allows us to mitigate the impacts of the COVID-19 crisis on women and girls. If we do not act now, these impacts could have a set of multifaceted, intergenerational negative effects – through violence, unintended pregnancy and limited access to education, health and economic prospects.

Key benefits that “zero child marriage” could bring:

• Breaking the intergenerational cycle of household poverty
• Increasing girls’ education and women’s participation in the political sphere and job market
• Improving the well-being of children and mothers because, if their mothers are educated, adolescent girls are less likely to fall pregnant prematurely, contributing to reduced maternal mortality linked to early pregnancy

KRC#6 Reducing child marriage: How can you support?

• Advocacy towards an improved legislative framework and increased domestic resource allocation to support the programmes for reducing child marriage
• Inclusive distance learning and promotion of girls’ secondary education
• Community engagement to ensure adolescents, parents, leaders and other community members are aware of the risk of child marriage and the importance of education during and beyond the pandemic.
• Gender-responsive social protection interventions such as grants or cash transfers
• Access to health, nutrition and protection/social welfare services adapted to adolescent girls’ needs
• National child protection system strengthening to ensure the quality of multi-sectoral services, including information management systems
• Promoting inclusive youth and adolescents’ participation as the agents of change for their communities
• Capacity development with adolescents to develop life skills, assets and resources necessary for them to be resilient against stress and vulnerabilities
• Evidence generation on the impact of COVID-19 on child marriage and adolescents’ girls in general.
Why we must invest in adolescent girls?

Investments in adolescent girls’ well-being and health bring a triple dividend of benefits – now (adolescence), into future adult life and for the next generation of children. This will keep them alive and healthy, so they can reach their full potential. It will also contribute to poverty reduction by stimulating economic productivity and growth, and creating more jobs, and is thus, cost-effective.

Researchers have estimated the costs and benefits of a package of 66 health care interventions – including sexual and reproductive health care, HIV prevention and treatment and improved nutrition – in 40 low- and middle-income countries. These services would cost only about $4.50 per capita per year (or $360 billion between 2015 and 2030). Such programmatic investments can have an unweighted mean benefit to cost ratio of more than 10.0 (benefits outweigh the costs ten-fold).

Financial needs 2020–2021

The total financial requirement for 2020–2021 to reach more than 470,000 adolescent girls with prevention and care interventions to address child marriage is US$5.96 million for six KRC#6-engaged countries, including regional-level technical support costs. For each country, the proportion of the budget (%) for Pillars 1-5 (see Page 2) is different, depending on country-level needs.

Furthermore, the budget has been increased for Pillars 1 and 2 in response to the COVID-19’s direct impacts on this KRC and associating programmatic areas.

KRC#6 Reducing child marriage: Financial requirement 2020-2021 by Pillar for 6 engaged countries

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<th>Country</th>
<th>Pillar 1</th>
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<th>Pillar 3</th>
<th>Pillar 4</th>
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ENDNOTES

1 UNICEF Global Databases, MICS/DHS 2010-2018  
2 Idem  
3 https://au.int/en/agenda2063  
5 https://www.everywomaneverychild.org/  
6 Idem to endnote 4.

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