



# The Hague International Model United Nations

**Forum:** General Assembly 3

**Issue:** Addressing early and forced marriage and its implications on the rights of women and children

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## Introduction

Early and forced marriages are two practices that often overlap with each other, placing children around the world at an immense risk. A union that occurs when one or both of the spouses is under the age of 18 is considered an early marriage. Therefore, they enter a marriage without having the legal capacity to give full consent.

Today, close to 650 million women were and currently are victims of child marriages, and this number continues to rise every year by an additional 12 million girls.<sup>1</sup>



Source: <https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/articles/8-child-marriage-myths-bust-international-womens-day-2017/><sup>2</sup>

While the number of child brides grows at an alarming rate, the number of child grooms is equally important to account for, with over 115 million boys getting married before their 18th birthday.<sup>3</sup>

As a consequence of poverty, cultural and social norms, gender inequality and a limited access to education, child marriage continues to be an issue that threatens our world.

Building on the traditional reasons for early marriages, ongoing humanitarian crises and economic problems combine to make young children even more vulnerable today. While it may be seen as a survival strategy, it is often overlooked that poverty cycles will only worsen by depriving children of their rights to safety, education, and autonomy. Furthermore, girls are exposed to domestic abuse, maternal deaths and childbirth before they have developed emotional and physical maturity, and thus, undermining legal frameworks created by the UN and state agencies.

## Definition of Key Terms

### Early Marriage

Early marriage refers to a union when one or both of the spouses is under the age of 18.

### Forced Marriage

Forced marriage is a union without the full, free and informed consent of one or both parties. Child marriage is considered to be a form of forced marriage.

### Plural Legal System

A country or nation in which two or more legal systems exist.

## Background Information

Early and forced marriage continues to be a persistent global problem despite decades of work put into legal protection and international advocacy. The practice is difficult to eradicate through such measures alone since it is deeply ingrained in social and economic livelihoods.

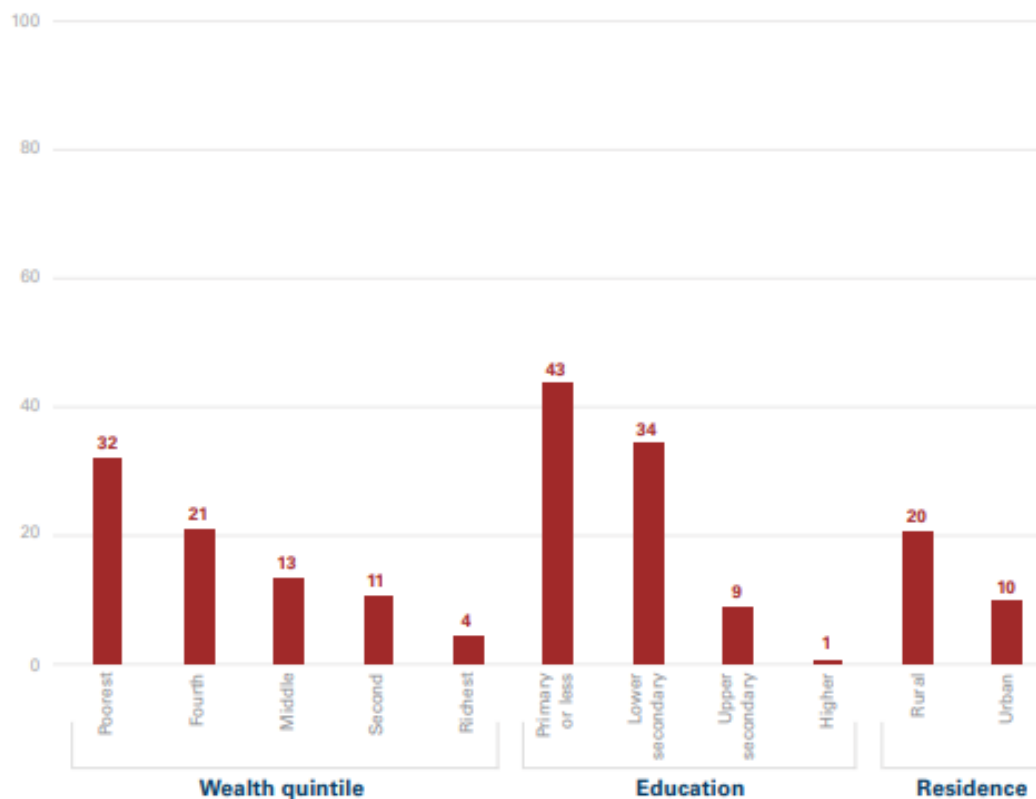
### Socioeconomic Factors and Access to Education

Early and forced marriages are most commonly shaped by the social and economic environments in which families live. With a combination of poverty, gender norms and educational barriers, circumstances are created in which such marriages are viewed as practical or even a necessary choice.

#### *Economic Insecurity and Poverty*

One significant cause of early and forced marriages remains poverty. In households facing

economic hardship, child marriage is seen to be a way to reduce the daily cost of living. Oftentimes, marrying off a daughter is viewed to be a strategy to ease financial burdens or secure short-term benefits by shifting the financial responsibility of the bride to the husband's family. According to UNICEF, girls from the poorest households in the region of East Asia and the Pacific are eight times more likely to marry than girls from wealthier families,<sup>4</sup> and in some regions, this gap may be even



**FIG. 3** Percentage of women aged 20 to 24 years who were first married or in union before age 18, by wealth quintile, education and residence

wider.

Source: [https://data.unicef.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/11/UNICEF\\_Child-Marriage\\_East-Asia-Pacific\\_11\\_20-HR.pdf](https://data.unicef.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/11/UNICEF_Child-Marriage_East-Asia-Pacific_11_20-HR.pdf)

The practice of dowries and bridewealth systems further enforces this system. In many cultures, especially in South Asia, it is believed that marrying a daughter at a younger age reduces dowry costs, since a dowry cost is dependent on a girl's age or educational level. In other parts of the world, where bridewealth is more common, such as Sub-Saharan Africa, the money given from the husband's family can offer instant financial relief. Such economic incentives create situations where young girls are often seen as financial assets rather than people with rights and autonomy, and these incentives are further exacerbated during crises such as COVID-19, where financial insecurity increases.

Although these decisions are most often made in response to immediate survival needs, they end up ultimately contributing to generational poverty, a long-term economic trap that reinforces

inequality.

### *Social Norms*

In many societies, early marriages aren't only a personal or familial decision, but a practice enforced socially in a community. Some families believe that marrying their daughter at a young age preserves family honour and maintains their social standing within the community. These social norms strongly influence how a community defines one's life and gender norms, which are passed down through generations, ultimately becoming the 'proper and responsible' path a girl should take.

### *Barriers to education*

Tied to socioeconomic factors is the limited access to education, both a cause and a consequence of early and forced marriage. Girls who are out of school are 3 times more likely to be married before the age of 18, as compared to girls who receive secondary or higher education.<sup>5</sup> In many low-income families, limited financial resources mean girls are given lower priority in education and that marriage is a more viable option. Moreover, crises and displacement further reduce educational access. Once married, girls are rarely able to return to school, and oftentimes, this repeats to their children.

### *Health and Psychological Impacts*

Early and forced marriage has profound consequences on the physical, mental and emotional well-being of women and children. Apart from the violation of personal autonomy, this practice exposes girls to various health risks. Furthermore, the lack of consent in these unions increases the risk of domestic violence and psychological distress.

### *Maternal Health Risks and Early Pregnancy*

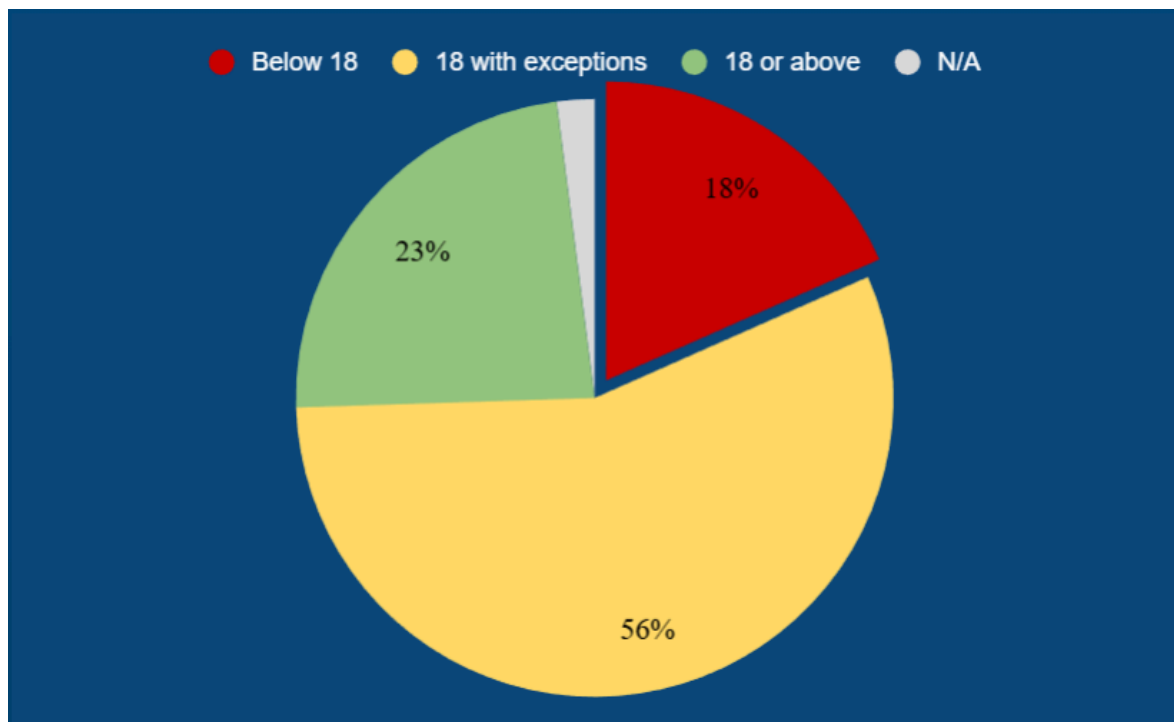
Early pregnancy, which presents serious health risks to the developing bodies of young girls, is one of the most crucial consequences of early marriage. An estimated half a million girls give birth between the ages of 10 to 14, and are 5 times more likely to die during childbirth as compared to women in their 20s.<sup>6</sup> Young girls face higher maternal mortality rates due to a range of factors, including physical complications, delayed prenatal care and insufficient access to healthcare. Early pregnancy also has severe consequences for infants. Babies born to adolescent mothers are 50% more likely to be stillborn or die in their first few weeks of life as compared to babies born to adult mothers.<sup>7</sup>

### *Domestic Violence and Loss of Bodily Autonomy*

Apart from the health risks that come with early pregnancy, girls also face elevated levels of physical and mental trauma that come from domestic violence. Given how common power disparities are in child marriages, girls who marry young are more likely to encounter partner violence than those who marry later, mainly because young girls would be betrothed to older men. As a cause of such union, girls often face anxiety, depression and trauma due to isolation and oppression.

### Legal Frameworks and Enforcement Gaps

While most countries have put laws in place to prevent early and forced marriage, there still remain significant gaps in enforcement. Even if the minimum age of marriage is set at 18, most countries allow exceptions to this age, hence undermining the safeguards that were put in place.



Source: <https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/key-data-girls-and-womens-right-education>

A key challenge is the existence of multiple legal systems within a nation; a plural legal system. Across Sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia and the Middle East, different laws, such as customary, civil and religious laws, function simultaneously, and more often than not, they end up contradicting formal legislation. Local authorities may often favour cultural norms over legal obligations, hence leaving enforcement ineffective. Furthermore, nearly 150 million children under 5 are unregistered,<sup>8</sup> further complicating the enforcement of legal protections due to ineffective registration procedures.

## Major Countries and Organisations Involved

### UN and International Involvement

The United Nations, and its respective agencies, including the UN Children’s Fund (UNICEF), the UN Population Fund (UNFPA) and UN Women, are actively working to prevent child marriage, working alongside NGOs and governments to strengthen legal protections and raise awareness on harmful societal norms.

- Convention on the Rights of the Child, 20 November 1989 (**A/RES/44/25**)
- Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, 188 December 1979 (**A/RES/34/180**)
- Convention on Consent to Marriage, Minimum Age for Marriage and Registration of Marriages, 7 November 1962 (**A/RES/1763(XVII)**)
- Resolution on Child, Early and Forced Marriage, 18 December 2014(**A/RES/69/156**)

### African Union (AU)

The African Union plays an essential role in combating early and forced marriage, seeing as they have some of the highest rates of child marriage. In their efforts to protect girls, the AU has supported national action plans and coordinated regional efforts, whilst emphasising accountability and enforcement mechanisms. This can be seen through some of their key efforts, including the Campaign to End Child Marriage in 2014.

### European Union (EU)

While child marriage itself is not a common occurrence within the EU, the European Union still plays a vital role due to its work in combating early and forced marriage internationally. Through significant support in funding for large-scale international initiatives, the EU has not only helped to promote gender equality and reforms, but it has also taken steps towards eliminating the causes of early marriage.

## Timeline of Events

Date	Description of event
December 10th, 1948	The Universal Declaration of Human Rights was adopted by all Member States.
December 10th, 1962	The Convention on Consent to Marriage, Minimum Age for Marriage and Registration of Marriages was signed at the UN headquarters in New York.
December 18th, 1979	The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women was adopted.

September 5th, 1994	The International Conference on Population and Development, where the Programme of Action came into action.
May 29th, 2014	A campaign to End Child Marriage was launched by the African Union.
March 15th, 2016	Launch of the Global Programme to End Child Marriage by UNFPA-UNICEF

## Previous Attempts to Solve the Issue

In most of the previous attempts to address early and forced marriage, the main focus was on improving national legislation and community programs. The UN has established multiple treaties, including CEDAW and CRC, and issues numerous resolutions calling for the condemnation of early and forced marriage through a minimum age of marriage. Different initiatives, such as the UNFPA-UNICEF Programme to End Child Marriage, which aims to provide educational, social and health services, have also been implemented. Apart from the UN, NGOs such as Girls Not Brides have pushed for reforms and public awareness. Additionally, regional bodies, such as the African Union and South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation(SAARC), have also worked towards abolishing this practice through multi-country strategies. Yet, the progress remains slow due to a lack of direct address to the causes of early and forced marriage.

## Possible Solutions

### Expanding Quality Education and Eliminating Barriers

To decrease the rates of child marriage, methods to improve the likelihood of girls retaining in school should be considered. Work towards providing safe and accessible schooling for girls currently in school and former brides should be encouraged. Raising awareness on the issue and addressing its social causes can also help create environments where child marriages are discouraged and education is encouraged.

### Economic Empowerment and Poverty Reduction

Targeted financial aid, such as scholarships for girls, can enable families to retain girls in school. By providing alternatives to child marriage, such as skills training, the root problem of economic hardship can be alleviated, since a family's income can be strengthened.

### Improving Mental and Physical Health.

Health services specifically for reproductive and maternal care can help to limit the physical



dangers of early pregnancy. The psychological effects of child marriage can be lessened by setting up facilities in local communities that provide victims with counselling and medical support. In more remote places, such facilities can be made mobile to send health units for essential services.

## Strengthening Legal Frameworks and Enforcement Mechanisms

Enforcing a minimum age of 18 without exceptions is a crucial rule that nations should enact. Governments can also adopt required age verification and psychiatric screening before marriage to ensure that all weddings that occur are with consent, and not minors. In order to help reduce enforcement gaps, local authorities can work to improve birth registrations.

## Endnotes

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