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Child marriage could be history by 2030, or last 300 more years



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By age 18 years, Lalitbai was a married mother of three children. She became a child bride when she was 13 years old. At age 32 years, Lalitbai was a widow and cast out of her extended family. With no money or education, she worked tirelessly as a day labourer, eventually starting her own small bakery. She now speaks openly, with neighbours and in local gatherings, about stopping child marriage. Lalitbai lives in India, the country with the largest number of child brides worldwide.¹ Yet India is also making progress in reducing child marriage. According to UNICEF's *Is an End to Child Marriage within Reach? Latest Trends and Future Prospects, 2023 Update*, released on May 3, 2023, since 2012, the percentage of young women aged 20–24 years who were married as children worldwide has fallen from 23% to 19%, and a substantial portion of this progress is driven by reductions in India.¹ In the past decade the prevalence of child marriage in this country has declined from 38% to 23%.²

UNICEF's report draws on nationally representative data from more than 100 countries, primarily collected through household surveys, including the Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys and the Demographic and Health Surveys, and provides current estimates of child marriage globally together with projections of possible future scenarios. The report shows that other populous countries are also propelling global reductions in child marriage, including Bangladesh and Ethiopia. Some countries with traditionally lower prevalence of child marriage, such as the Maldives and Rwanda, are heading towards elimination. As a result of such trends, 68 million child marriages have been averted globally in the past 25 years.¹

But progress is far from universal. UNICEF's analysis reveals only slight declines in child marriage in west

and central Africa, which is the region with the highest prevalence of child marriage.¹ There has been no change in Latin American and the Caribbean, which, if the current trajectory continues, would have the second highest prevalence of child marriage worldwide by 2030.¹ After steady progress between 1997 and 2012, the Middle East, north Africa, eastern Europe, and central Asia regions have all seen stagnation in reducing child marriage in the past decade.¹

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) call for the elimination of child marriage by 2030. Yet as UNICEF's analysis highlights, current reductions in child marriage are too slow, pushing achievement of that SDG target off by at least 300 years.¹ Moreover, the demographics going forward are not favourable. Countries in sub-Saharan Africa with the highest projected population growth have the highest levels of child marriage, meaning the number of marriages is expected to increase there.

UNICEF's report also warns that gains in reducing child marriage can be quickly lost, especially in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, conflicts, and climate-related crisis. The socioeconomic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic cut the estimated global number of averted cases of child marriage since 2020 by one quarter.¹ In general, each tenfold increase in conflict-related deaths means an estimated 7% increase in the prevalence of child marriage.¹ Similarly, a 10% change in rainfall due to climate change correlates with an estimated 1% increase in child marriage.¹

Concerningly, declining child marriage prevalence is concentrated among girls from wealthier households. Girls from the richest quintile are less likely to become child brides and are the first to benefit from progress

in averting child marriage, resulting in a widening gap in child marriage prevalence between rich and poor.¹ In south Asia, wealthier households had three times more averted cases of child marriages than poor households in the past 25 years.¹ If the rate of success in the richest quintile of south Asian families had been achieved globally, only 9% of girls would be married in childhood, far less than the current 19% worldwide prevalence of child marriage.¹ Further progress in reducing child marriage largely depends on reaching girls who are otherwise left behind, including girls from the poorest households living without the resources and opportunities of their wealthier peers.

With mounting challenges, and at the midpoint of the SDGs, concerted action to end child marriage is urgent. Progress will accelerate partly through high-level political commitment, so it was encouraging that the 2022 UN General Assembly resolution on child, early, and forced marriage called for tailored strategies that account for the COVID-19 fallout, climate change, and the increased vulnerability of girls in humanitarian settings.³ Additionally, in early 2023, four ministers from countries with a fifth of all child brides—Bangladesh, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ethiopia, and Nigeria—pledged to work for a world with no child marriages and endorsed a plan to move forward based on specific, evidence-based actions.⁴ Crucially, ending child marriage depends on enacting macroeconomic and social policies that stimulate societal transformations and advance gender equality, including through expanding access to jobs and education that encourage families to delay

marriage. Adoption of these policies by governments would make it possible to end child marriage by 2030. But progress must be 20 times faster than it is today,¹ an acceleration which is especially necessary in communities affected by worsening economic inequalities and in fragile states, where child marriage prevalence is twice the global average.⁵ In both settings families are likely to struggle with multifaceted insecurities, including financial hardship and failures in access to essential services, such as health care and education. Families under stress have diverse reasons for marrying girls, including to reduce household expenditures.

From the highest political echelons to the most marginalised communities, action, awareness, and commitment will determine if child marriage ends in 7 years or in centuries.

We all contributed to UNICEF's report² that is discussed in this Comment and declare no other competing interests.

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