# Child Marriage

Latest trends and future prospects

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Child marriage is an egregious violation of every child's right to reach her or his full potential. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) enshrine a target to eliminate this practice by 2030.

The practice of child marriage has continued to decline around the world. Based on the latest data available from each country, 21 per cent of young women (aged 20 to 24) were married as children. This represents a decrease from 25 per cent 10 years ago, driven predominantly by progress in India.

This reduction also marks an acceleration of trends. An estimated 25 million child marriages have been prevented due to progress during the past decade. Of these, 7 million were expected based on the prior trends and 18 million were due to an acceleration of progress.

Still, approximately 650 million girls and women alive today were married before their 18th birthday.

As the designated custodian agency for monitoring progress towards reaching this target, UNICEF is responsible for generating periodic global estimates of child marriage. These estimates are produced primarily from nationally representative household surveys, and for a minority of countries, from census data. The estimates in this document supersede those in previous publications, as they rely on new data for a number of countries. These include India and Ethiopia, which have recently seen a decline in the prevalence of child marriage, and China, for which data were previously not available in UNICEF's global databases. These updates have enabled a refinement of the estimation of the magnitude of the practice worldwide, at a slightly lower level than estimated in previous years.

The practice of child marriage has continued to decline around the world. During the past decade, the proportion of young women who were married as children **decreased by 15 per cent**, from 1 in 4 (25%) to approximately 1 in 5 (21%).
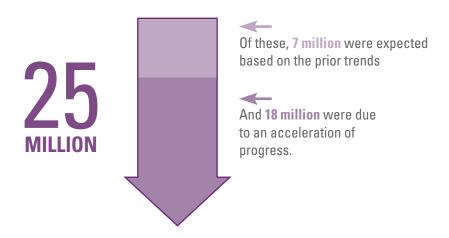
## South Asia is still home to the largest number of child brides, followed by sub-Saharan Africa

Global distribution of the number of women first married or in union before age 18, by region

| South Asia 285 million, 44% | Sub-Saharan Africa 115 million, 18% | | | | Other Regions 80 million, 12% |

**East Asia and Pacific** 75 million, 12%

**Middle East and North Africa** 35 million, 5%

**Latin America and Caribbean** 60 million, 9%

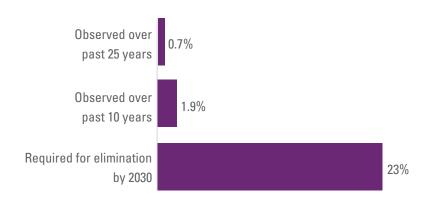**NOTE:** Due to rounding, individual figures may not add up to the global total.

The global number of child brides is now estimated at **650 million**, including girls under age 18 who have already married, and adult women who married in childhood.

## 25 million child marriages have been prevented due to progress in the past decade

# 25 MILLION

← Of these, **7 million** were expected based on the prior trends

← And **18 million** were due to an acceleration of progress.

## Yet a substantial acceleration would be required in order to eliminate the practice by 2030

Average annual rate of reduction in the prevalence of child marriage, observed and required

Observed over past 25 years — 0.7%

Observed over past 10 years — 1.9%

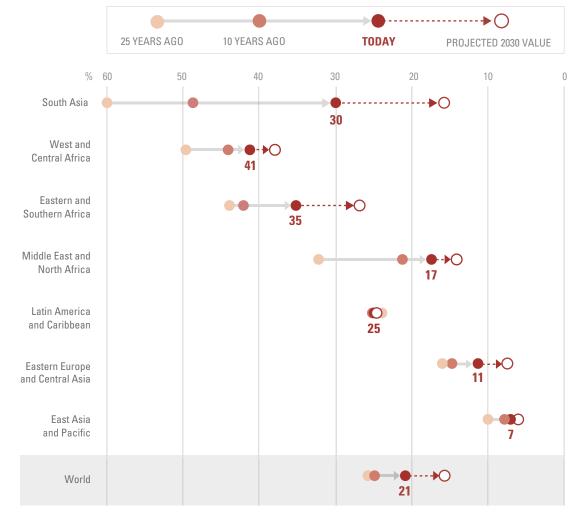Required for elimination by 2030 — 23%

Distinct trends in the practice of child marriage are evident across geographical regions, though variations exist within regions and even within countries.

In **South Asia**, a girl's risk of marrying in childhood has declined by more than a third, from nearly 50 per cent a decade ago to 30 per cent today, largely driven by great strides in reducing the prevalence of child marriage in India. Nonetheless, South Asia remains home to the largest total number of child brides, with more than 40 per cent of the global burden. This is due both to the legacy of how common child marriage was in previous generations and to the region's large population.

Increasingly, however, the global burden of child marriage is shifting from South Asia to sub-Saharan Africa. In **sub-Saharan Africa**, levels of child marriage have declined at a modest rate. In **West and Central Africa** in particular, the region with the highest prevalence of child marriage, progress has been among the slowest in the world. At the same time, population growth threatens to result in an ever-higher number of child brides in sub-Saharan Africa during the coming years.

## Despite a marked reduction in child marriage, especially in South Asia, no region is on track to eliminate the practice by 2030

Percentage of women aged 20—24 years who were first married or in union before age 18, by region



Legend:
- 25 YEARS AGO
- 10 YEARS AGO
- **TODAY**
- PROJECTED 2030 VALUE

| Region | Today value |
|---|---|
| South Asia | 30 |
| West and Central Africa | 41 |
| Eastern and Southern Africa | 35 |
| Middle East and North Africa | 17 |
| Latin America and Caribbean | 25 |
| Eastern Europe and Central Asia | 11 |
| East Asia and Pacific | 7 |
| World | 21 |

**NOTE:** Projected values are calculated on the basis of observed trends over the past ten years. For further details on the data, see the Technical Notes page.
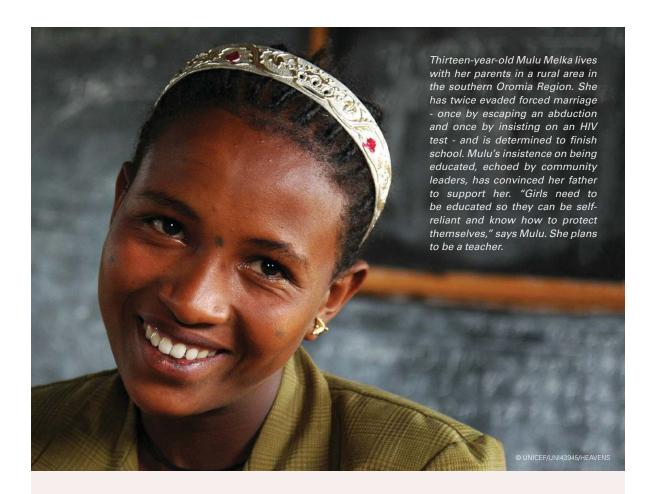
Of the most recently married child brides globally, close to 1 in 3 are now in sub-Saharan Africa, compared to 25 years ago when the proportion was 1 in 7.

Yet progress is possible. In Ethiopia, once among the top five countries for child marriage in sub-Saharan Africa, the prevalence has dropped by a third during the past 10 years.

In the **Middle East and North Africa**, substantial progress in reducing the prevalence of child marriage has occurred over the past 25 years. Within the past 10 years, however, this progress appears to have slowed.

In **Latin America and the Caribbean**, there is no evidence of progress, with levels of child marriage as high as they were 25 years ago. Levels of child marriage remain low in **East Asia and the Pacific** and in **Eastern Europe and Central Asia**, though girls from disadvantaged populations are still at risk.

While the global reduction in child marriage is to be celebrated, no region is on track to meet the SDG target of eliminating this harmful practice by 2030.



*Thirteen-year-old Mulu Melka lives with her parents in a rural area in the southern Oromia Region. She has twice evaded forced marriage - once by escaping an abduction and once by insisting on an HIV test - and is determined to finish school. Mulu's insistence on being educated, echoed by community leaders, has convinced her father to support her. "Girls need to be educated so they can be self-reliant and know how to protect themselves," says Mulu. She plans to be a teacher.*

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In order to meet the target of elimination by 2030, global progress would need to be 12 times faster than the rate observed over the past decade.

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# TECHNICAL NOTES

## Data sources

UNICEF global databases include child marriage estimates for 125 countries, primarily from nationally representative household surveys such as the Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS) and Demographic and Health Survey (DHS). Of these, 106 countries have estimates that are recent enough (2010 to 2016) to be included in the present analysis. These countries represent 63 per cent of the global population. *(For a summary of data availability by region, see the table on the next page.)*

Demographic data are from the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs Population Division, *World Population Prospects: The 2017 revision* (DVD Edition).

## Calculation of global figures

To assess the prevalence of child marriage, this analysis used SDG indicator 5.3.1 – the percentage of women aged 20 to 24 years who were first married or in union before age 18. This information is available from data collection instruments, primarily household surveys that ask respondents about their marital status and their age at first marriage or union. All references to 'marriage' include both formal marriages and informal unions in which women started living together with a partner as if married.

The current global estimate of the prevalence of child marriage, referred to as the level "today", is calculated on the basis of the latest available data for each country, within the span of 2010 to 2016. National values are not extrapolated to a common reference year.

The global 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.

The burden is calculated by applying the prevalence of child marriage for each age cohort from 18 to 49 years to the respective female population. Outside this range we do not have direct estimates of the prevalence, so the following assumptions are 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, the percentage of adolescents aged 15 to 19 currently married, and the proportion of marriages during adolescence that occur before age 18.

- **50+ years** – prevalence of women aged 45–49 years is used, unless otherwise noted.

The number of child marriages averted is calculated as the difference between the number of women married before age 18 during the previous 10 years and the number who would have been married if levels had remained steady at the prevalence 10 years ago. Further details on the estimation process, including a discussion of limitations, data quality issues and fluctuations in the global estimates over time, will be available in a forthcoming technical paper.

## Regional and country estimates

Each regional prevalence is calculated as a population-weighted average of the national values. Regional estimates are available according to the regional classification used for UNICEF reporting, as presented in this brief, as well as the regional classification used for SDG reporting, which is used for calculation of the global figures.

Global figures are calculated as a population-weighted average of the prevalence in each of the geographical regions. The SDG regional classification is used for this calculation because it is more granular than the UNICEF regional classification so allows for greater precision. In using this method, the prevalence in countries without data is implicitly assumed to be the same as the population-weighted average of other countries in the same region.

No data exist for Northern America or Australia and New Zealand, which are assumed to have the same prevalence as Europe, the region with the closest socio-economic profile.

Because the global burden is significantly affected by the values for India and China, special consideration was given to these countries in this round of estimates.

For India, the results from the most recent survey were evaluated in the context of results from prior surveys in order to validate the prevalence of child marriage for each age cohort as captured at multiple points in time. This analysis raised questions about comparability across surveys for some cohorts of women, and as a result, the estimates of child marriage took into account the results from all surveys since 1990. This is a deviation from the standard, as this step is not necessary when results are consistent across sources over time. These data are undergoing further analysis and will be the focus of a forthcoming publication on child marriage in India.

For China, internationally comparable and nationally representative data on child marriage prevalence have not been available historically. Previous global estimates implicitly assumed that child marriage in China was as common as in the rest of the region, although it is likely this was an overestimate. Following a desk review of census data for China from 1982 to 2015, estimates of related indicators were identified – including marital status of adolescents aged 15 to 19 years and the average age at first marriage over time. With this information, assumptions on the prevalence of child marriage across age cohorts were ascribed, taking into account the expected relationship between the related indicators with available data.

## Summary of data availability and population coverage

| SDG Region | Number of countries with data | Percentage of population represented |
|---|---|---|
| Southern Asia | 7 of 9 | 99% |
| South-Eastern Asia | 8 of 11 | 94% |
| Sub-Saharan Africa | 41 of 48 | 93% |
| Northern Africa | 4 of 6 | 82% |
| Western Asia | 8 of 18 | 70% |
| Central Asia | 4 of 5 | 52% |
| Latin America and the Caribbean | 22 of 37 | 52% |
| Oceania, excluding Australia and New Zealand | 4 of 15 | 11% |
| Europe | 7 of 44 | 10% |
| Eastern Asia | 1 of 5 | <1% |
| Australia and New Zealand | 0 of 2 | 0% |
| Northern America | 0 of 2 | 0% |
| **UNICEF Region** | | |
| Sub-Saharan Africa | 42 of 49 | 93% |
| Eastern and Southern Africa | 19 of 25 | 87% |
| West and Central Africa | 23 of 24 | 100% |
| Middle East and North Africa | 9 of 19 | 73% |
| South Asia | 6 of 8 | 99% |
| East Asia and Pacific | 13 of 33 | 33% |
| Latin America and Caribbean | 22 of 37 | 52% |
| Europe and Central Asia | 14 of 54 | 27% |
| Eastern Europe and Central Asia | 14 of 21 | 54% |
| Western Europe | 0 of 33 | 0% |
| North America | 0 of 2 | 0% |
| **World** | **106 of 202** | **63%** |

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