

# **WORLD: Want gender equality? Let's start with ending child marriages**

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Each Oct. 11th the global community pauses to recognize and celebrate the International Day of the Girl Child. However, girls continue to face unique challenges simply for being young and female.

The mere fact that they are born female often results in a devastating series of consequences, which inhibit girls from attaining gender parity, equal protection under the law, the free exercise of their human rights and the ability to realize their full potential.

The 2018 theme, “With Her: A Skilled GirlForce,” aims to ensure girls have the skills necessary to attain financial viability. One major obstacle preventing girls from achieving these goals is child marriage.

Worldwide, around 15 million – or one in three – girls are annually subject to child marriage, often forced or coerced. Married minors are more likely to experience poverty, domestic violence, lack of access to education, sexual abuse and emotional and physical health challenges. Child marriage frequently leads to adolescent pregnancy and childbirth, which pose dramatic risks due to a girl's biological immaturity. Moreover, pregnancy is the leading cause of death of girls aged 15-18. Those that survive often grapple with pre-birth complications, fistulas, stillbirth and other physical ramifications to themselves and their children.

Child marriage is recognized as a human rights violation under international law because it adversely affects the rights of girls and women. It bars them from being able to consent to marriage, receive an education, have healthcare and live without fear or exploitation. These rights are explicitly enumerated under the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women and other international instruments.

Decades of advocacy culminated when the United Nations (UN) Human Rights Council adopted its first substantive resolution distinguishing child/forced marriage as a human rights abuse in 2015. The international community has since committed to eliminating child marriage by 2030 per the UN Sustainable Development Goals.

While the practice is prevalent in countries such as Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Chad and Niger, a lack of laws and law enforcement ensure its existence across social, economic, religious and geographical spectrums. Even in the United States, 24 states have no statutory minimum age for minor unions and 48 states provide for judicial and/or parental exceptions to child marriage restrictions.

In Afghanistan, well over half of all Afghan women are married before 18. Afghan law, however, prohibits marriage before 16 for girls and 18 for boys, although a court or girl's father may consent to her marriage at 15. Despite this law, the deeply entrenched patriarchal attitudes and attendant transactional perspectives towards marriage often give rise to the deployment of child marriage as a bartering mechanism, frequently before the child brides hit puberty.

The practice of "badal" results in the exchange of daughters between two families for marriage, while "ba'ad" involves marrying off a girl to pay a debt, bring peace, or serve as recompense for murder, sexual assault, or other perceived

crimes/wrongs committed by one family or community against another.

Poverty, insecurity, gender discrimination, lack of access to health care and education are the key drivers of child marriage. Poor families, particularly in rural areas, sell their daughters to wealthier families in exchange for large dowries, often to men who are significantly older and have additional wives.

The practice of child engagement, wherein two families commit a son and daughter to each other for marriage, remains rampant. Rates of child marriage increase dramatically in internally-displaced person and refugee returnee camps, where extreme financial hardship, illiteracy and lack of educational and economic opportunities are even more common.

Child brides are most often unwittingly thrust into arranged marriages. The power dynamics of these marriages, particularly with significant age disparity, render girls vulnerable to physical, sexual and psychological abuse from their husbands and families. In order to escape these challenges, many brides run away from home, subjecting themselves to imprisonment for committing "moral crimes," while others choose suicide.

Women's full participation in decision-making and society is imperative to eliminating gender inequality, discrimination, violence and poverty. Restricting child marriage is a critical first step to ensuring girls can continue their education, freely exercise their rights, effectively participate in political, social and economic life and enter the "GirlForce."

Governments must both enact and enforce appropriate laws, devoid of discriminatory legal loopholes, to unleash the cultural change necessary to achieve the gender equality goal of the UN's Sustainable Development Agenda and give girls the opportunities they deserve.