Guerrero, Mexico, May 2021.

A woman carries a child in the street. In this part of Guerrero, an ancestral practice allows girls to be sold as brides, for prices ranging from $2,000 to $18,000 to other men in the region. Once married, girls are forced to work by their spousal family, including on farms and as domestic servants. Many also experience sexual abuse. While the practice still occurs, many Indigenous people are calling for it to end as it creates a cycle of abuse for girls and poverty for men. Photo credit: Pedro Pardo/AFP via Getty Images.

Understanding forced and child marriage

The ability to freely choose who, when, and whether to marry is an essential human right,[1] yet forced marriages still occur in almost every country. Globally, an estimated 22 million people were living in a forced marriage on any given day in 2021.[2]

This estimate is conservative. UNICEF estimates there are 650 million women and girls who were married before the age of 18.[3] While men and boys are also forced to marry, women and girls remain disproportionately at-risk and account for 68 per cent of all people forced to marry.[4] While almost two-thirds of all forced marriages occur in the Asia and the Pacific region, the highest prevalence of forced marriage is in the Arab States.[5] Despite this, forced marriage risks are present in all countries and are often exacerbated for members of marginalised groups.[6]

Family, survival, and social value

While actors such as traffickers, marriage brokers,[7] and armed groups[8] can be involved in forced marriages, they are often a family matter. Seventy-three per cent of people in a forced marriage were forced to marry by their parents, with a further 16 per cent forced by other relatives. Over half (53 per cent) were coerced through emotional abuse and threats, including the threat of estrangement from family members and of self-harm by parents.[9]

Complex and intersecting factors increase the risk of forced and child marriage. These factors include gender biases, harmful cultural practices, poverty, sexuality, gender identity, socio-political instability, conflict, climate change, irregular migration, and a lack of access to education and employment, among many others.[10] Geography also plays a large role in magnifying risk, as inequalities within and between countries can impact vulnerability to exploitation.[11] Broadly, these risks are a function of survival needs or social value, although in practice these drivers are often intertwined.

When basic needs are threatened, struggling families may turn to negative coping mechanisms to survive. Forced and child marriages are seen as practices that can reduce the economic burden on a household living in extreme poverty,[12] protect vulnerable (and typically female) family members from sexual violence,[13] ensure access to critical and limited resources,[14] and provide certainty for a child's future in times of crisis.[15] Shocks spur risk as they exacerbate existing inequalities. Conflict can directly result in forced marriages, including where women and girls are abducted and forced to marry fighters.[16] For people fleeing crises, risks can arise while on the move or in refugee camps.[17] Among displaced populations, and in the absence of other opportunities, marriage can be seen as the best option to provide future security. At times, children themselves have made the decision to marry: for example, some Syrian refugee girls living in Lebanon have reportedly chosen marriage to escape poverty and abuse.[18] Further, protracted instability can increase risk of forced and child marriage long after the initial ceremony and can entrench vulnerability across generations.[19]

Social values dictate when and for whom vulnerability to forced and child marriages increases. The risk of being forced to marry is typically higher for people who belong to multiple marginalised groups, based on sex assigned at birth, sexual preferences, gender identity, ability status, and belonging to a religious or ethnic minority group.[20] Women and girls are disproportionately affected due to widespread gender biases that devalue girls from conception and throughout their lifetime.[21] These biases are reflected in deeply entrenched patriarchal norms surrounding female purity, pre-marital sex, and traditional roles that keep women and girls out of work and the schoolroom, and limit them to roles of wives, mothers, and homemakers.[22] In some communities, reaching menarche signals a girl is "ready" for marriage.[23]

Patriarchal gender roles also influence access to resources in the home. Parents who are unable to afford to send all of their children to school will prioritise the education of sons over daughters due to beliefs that boys have a greater future earning potential, while daughters are destined for another family.[24] Globally, one out of every four adolescent girls aged between 15 to 19 years are neither in education, employment nor training, as compared to one-tenth of boys of the same age.[25] However, these gender roles also influence boys' risk of child marriage. While they are valued as economic contributors, and when resources are scarce, typically receive greater resources including access to food and schooling,[26] an early start into economic independence can make boys more vulnerable.[27] Much like norms that dictate girls' physical maturity is a sign that they are "ready" for marriage, boys who enter the workforce and fill the role of "family provider" at a younger age face greater risks of child marriage.[28]

"I was in love with another girl and got married … my mother refused and forced me into a traditional marriage."

35-year-old Egyptian male on his forced marriage at age 24

Harmful cultural practices, in turn, reinforce patriarchal social values and are closely linked to forced and child marriages. Norms that dictate heteronormativity can increase risks of forced marriage for LGBTQIA+ people, who may be coerced into heterosexual marriages by their families to "cure" them of their sexual orientation or gender identity.[29] Similarly, norms that pigeonhole men and boys into hyper-masculine roles mean that male victims of forced marriage may not seek help for fear of being seen as effeminate or offending family honour.[30] While less likely than females to be coerced into marriage through physical or sexual violence, nearly three-quarters of men and boys in forced marriages were coerced through threats or verbal abuse.[31]

Similarly, norms that prioritise chastity and sexual purity for women and girls increase risk of forced and child marriage. For example, female genital mutilation (FGM), which involves the cutting, injury, removal, or modification to female genitalia for non-medical purposes,[32] is seen as a rite of passage into adulthood and can act as a precursor to a girl child marriage.[33] FGM is performed on girls to promote chastity by reducing female sex drive.[34] Similarly, fears of social stigma and the threat of damage to familial honour can force women and girls to marry their kidnappers in countries across Africa, Asia and the Pacific, and Europe and Central Asia, regions where bride kidnapping occurs.[35] Of females living in a forced marriage on any given day in 2021, one in 10 had been forced through kidnapping or after being coerced to travel abroad.[36]

Breaking the cycle: A child marriage survivor's story

Sharon* never had the opportunity to go to school in Kenya, where she lived. From the age of six, she was working to support her family. Her parents told her that if she stopped working to attend school, as she wanted, then her siblings would go hungry. When Sharon was nine years old, her father forced her to undergo FGM. Sharon was married only two years later when she was just 11 years old.

Once Sharon was married, her family would receive her bride dowry. Her father was particularly excited to receive the dowry and would *"brag about it to the other elders who had many cows."* However, at the time, Sharon did not understand that she had been married — she believed that she was being sent to live with another family to help them with their chores.

At the beginning of her marriage, Sharon's new husband lived and worked away in Mombasa and so she spent most of her time with her kind and elderly mother-in-law who she called Grandmother (*Koko*). The situation changed when her husband returned from work, as not only was it clear that he was unwell, but Sharon was obliged to live with him: "I was afraid of him. I didn't want to live or sleep with him in the same bed. [B]ut they told me that as a wife I was supposed to live with my husband. It was then that the reality dawned on me that I was married."

They lived together for three years while grappling with her husband's mysterious illness. Despite trying, they never had children. One day when Sharon was fetching water from the river, she overheard her neighbours gossiping about her husband having "a disease with no medicine" and that he had given it to his wife. Sharon did not know what HIV or AIDS were, and her husband never discussed it. Shortly after he died, the village elders informed Sharon that she needed to have children, who according to local custom, would be given the name of her deceased husband. Sharon refused many times, but eventually was coerced into having sex with men from the village. It was only when she became pregnant and attended an antenatal clinic for the first time that Sharon was told she was HIV positive.

While *Koko* was alive, Sharon began taking antiretroviral medication and went on to have another two children to continue her husband's name. When *Koko* passed, there was no one to support Sharon, and she moved away to find work. However, as she became increasingly sick and had limited opportunities, she had to leave her children to go house-to-house begging for food. She was often abused by her neighbours. Despite her worsening health, Sharon continues to provide for her children as she wants to see them receive the education she missed out on.

"For now, though, I am very weak but have decided to be strong for my children. I want them not to blame me, but to blame my culture. A culture that oppresses women. A culture that forces women to marry men they don't choose. A culture which forces young girls to marry old men. A culture that does not ever listen to women and girls."

Not her real name

Region	Convention on Consent to Marriage, Minimum Age for Marriage and Registration of Marriages (%)	Forced marriage criminalised in national legislation (%)	Minimum legal age of marriage when all exceptions considered is 16 or older (%)	Minimum legal age of marriage when all exceptions considered is 18 or older (%)
Africa	24	18	29	18
Americas	34	22	59	28
Arab States	11	11	11	0
Asia and the Pacific	16	31	47	25
Europe and Central Asia	46	44	77	17
All countries	**30**	**28**	**51**	**20**

*Data current as of 31 August 2022

Pandemic-driven reversals

While the number of people living in a forced marriage increased since the 2017 Global Estimates, current figures only partially account for the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.[37] Prior to the spread of COVID-19, UNICEF estimated that one in five girls were married before the age of 18.[38] While a significant population, it is a reversal of previous trends, meaning there were 25 million fewer child marriages than estimated in the previous decade.[39] However, following the spread of COVID-19, UNICEF and UNFPA estimated an additional 10 million[40] to 13 million[41] girls will be married due to the impacts of the pandemic.

Vulnerability has increased around the world in the aftermath of the pandemic, and particularly in Asia and the Pacific, Africa, and the Americas, where there are already higher risks of forced and child marriage.[42] Not only has the level of extreme global poverty risen for the first time in 20 years[43] as a result of increased global unemployment, job losses,[44] and increased indebtedness,[45] but food insecurity[46] and gender-based violence have also increased as a direct result of COVID-19 and related mitigation measures.[47] For example, a greater number of women and girls have been exposed to sexual, physical, and psychological abuse from family members and intimate partners because of lockdown restrictions,[48] thereby increasing their risk of forced and child marriage. Additionally, 24 of 26 Protection Clusters — coordinated groups of humanitarian organisations working to meet the diverse needs of people affected by crises — reported an increase in gender-based violence since the pandemic began.[49] This reflects broader global trends as rates of violence against women increased since the pandemic,[50] corresponding with a lack of access to social services[51] and the impact of stay-at-home orders confining victims to spaces with their abusers.[52]

Efforts to prevent the spread of the virus have also created barriers to services, including identification mechanisms.[53] Public health measures reduced the ability of grassroots and service delivery organisations to undertake their work, resulting in the closure of services or reduced budgets to support vulnerable people and survivors of forced marriage. For example, in Niger and Kenya, safe houses were closed, creating a gap in the protection of girls at risk of gender-based violence.[54] In Morocco, at-risk individuals were reluctant to access services due to fears of contracting COVID-19.[55] Further research on the impact of COVID-19 on risks to forced marriage among marginalised groups is urgently required, including on delivery of services for hard-to-reach populations.

Ending forced and child marriages

A strong, multifaceted global approach is needed to end forced and child marriage and achieve the SDG targets, in particular SDG 8.7 on the eradication of modern slavery, SDG 5.3 on eliminating child, early, and forced marriage and female genital mutilations, and SDG 16.2 to end abuse, exploitation, trafficking, and all forms of violence against children. This will require norms change across national, community, and household levels to ensure that harmful norms that perpetuate risk are dismantled. It will also require empowering vulnerable communities to be resilient in the wake of shocks that spur risk of forced marriage.

Globally, there are insufficient legal protections against forced and child marriage. Most countries have not ratified the UN Convention on Consent to Marriage, Marriage Age for Marriage, and Registration of Marriages, nor fully criminalised forced marriage in national legislation. Further, only 35 countries have set a minimum age of marriage at

18 without exception (Table 2). Harmful attitudes and practices that increase women's and girls' risk of forced and child marriage remain entrenched in laws around the world. Examples are legal loopholes that exonerate rapists from punishment if they marry their victim,[56] customary laws that allow widowed women to be inherited by a male relative of their deceased husband,[57] laws that leave women or their children stateless or those that do not allow women to hold or inherit land and property.[58]

While important, legislation alone will not end forced and child marriages.[59] For example, it was found that legislation banning child marriage and imposing fines for non-compliance in Malawi drove the practice underground and led to methods such as marriage hiding or marriage withdrawal, which involves parents or community members intervening to forcibly return a married girl to her natal home, being used to avoid fines.[60] Legal protections must be diversified beyond criminalising forced marriages. Such measures should include civil protection orders that are independent of other legal proceedings.[61] To ensure protection measures are trauma-informed and put survivors at the centre, survivors must be able to choose which solution best suits their needs as not all wish to pursue criminal actions, particularly when it can involve bringing an action against family members.[62]

Programs to reduce child marriage should target underlying drivers such as poverty and the lack of alternatives to child marriage.[63] Interventions are also needed at the community and household levels to challenge social norms that create risk of forced marriage. These interventions should involve a range of advocates, including faith and community leaders, and must also combat harmful understandings of masculinity that silence and shame male victims[64] and prevent them from seeking assistance.

"My parents though I was old enough for marriage and I needed to marry to reduce the family burden."

Nigerian female on her forced marriage at age 15

"I had to leave the situation or be killed. I know I can never return home because I am considered a dead person for breaking the culture and bringing shame to the families. According to my father, I am dead."

Afghan female survivor of three forced marriages.[65]

Ensuring adolescent girls have access to education is essential: when a girl receives an education, her earning potential increases by almost 12 per cent per year of schooling, helping to alleviate household poverty.[66] However, current estimates predict that 20 million adolescent girls will never return to the classroom when schools reopen after the pandemic.[67] To ensure girls enter and return to the schoolroom, multi-generational behaviour change campaigns that specifically target heads of family must be delivered together with education and poverty alleviation measures.[68] Additionally, new pathways to education and employment must be opened for already-married girls to return to school and for adult women to be economically empowered.[69] This is critically important in the wake of learning losses caused by COVID-19, which saw 1.6 billion students around the world having their learning disrupted,[70] left 129 million girls out of school in 2020,[71] and led to a higher rates of teen pregnancy in lower and lower-middle income countries.[72]

In addition to enhancing access to education, reducing the risks of exploitation faced by vulnerable groups, such as people living in crisis situations, will require efforts to combat forced marriage to be embedded, prioritised, and adequately resourced within broader humanitarian actions.[73] This should be context-specific, so as to enhance effectiveness in addressing risk factors for the impacted population, and will require coordinated and comprehensive action across all appropriately trained[74] stakeholders from the beginning of a crisis through to recovery.[75] In the aftermath of COVID-19, it is clear that existing institutions must be "future-proofed" to better respond to crises.[76] This will require strengthening institutions that support the most vulnerable people, including social services and welfare,[77] as well as enhancing access to sexual and reproductive health services[78] and dismantling legal frameworks that embed norms which create risks to forced and child marriage.

Promising Practices to end forced and child marriage

There were 38 evaluations of programs that aimed to combat forced or child marriage in the Promising Practices Database, which covered 32 countries, with the majority delivered in countries in Asia and the Pacific, followed by Africa. Most programs were targeted to females and most often focused on adolescent and child girls. Only one program solely targeted adults who were forced to marry. Interventions commonly included some aspect of risk-based prevention or service delivery and included activities such as preventative education, awareness-raising campaigns, training for service providers, community groups, and conditional cash transfers. Conditional and unconditional cash transfers, specifically, have had some success in delaying the age of first marriage and to improve educational outcomes for girls.[79] While some reliable lessons can be learned from this subset of evaluations, there is a clear need for stronger methodologies and pre – and post-implementation analyses to make more effective decisions about what works.

Effective programs included preventative education, community or support groups, and training for service providers. Among the programs evaluated was the Tostan Community Empowerment Program (CEP), which has reported promising impacts in Somalia and Senegal.[80] The CEP is a community-led program that aims to transform harmful gender norms and empower women and girls to become leaders in their communities and be able to make their own decisions regarding health, education, and finances, promoting better life outcomes for themselves, their families, and future generations.[81] In Senegal, the program was linked with changed attitudes towards forced and child marriage among community leaders and other participants, as well as a subsequent decline in child marriages within the community.[82] Similar results were identified in Somalia, where changes in attitudes led to the abandonment of FGM and forced and child marriage.[83]

Recommendations for governments

1 Enshrine a suite of trauma-informed and survivor-centred measures in legislation, and ensure these measures are available for survivors of forced and child marriage. It should include criminalising the act of marrying someone who does not consent, regardless of their age, and civil protections that protect the individual from marriage without having to penalise the perpetrators, who are often family members.

2 Ensure the minimum legal age of marriage is set at 18 years of age without exception, including in customary and religious laws.

3 Conduct community-driven attitude change campaigns to subvert harmful patriarchal norms that subjugate women and girls and confine men to rigid stereotypes of masculinity, all of which work to increase their risk of forced and child marriage.

4 Amend gender discriminatory nationality laws including those that prevent the denial, loss, or deprivation of nationality on discriminatory grounds. Grant protection status to stateless migrants, facilitate their naturalisation, and ensure all infants are registered at birth to prevent statelessness.

5 Increase access to primary and secondary school education for all children and particularly girls, which may include the removal of school fees, provision of cash or in-kind transfers, and raising awareness among families of the benefits of educating girls. These programs should focus on those most at risk of not receiving an education, such as girls in conflict zones, people with disabilities, or those from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds.