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Promotion and protection of the rights of children: promotion and protection of the rights of children

Issue of child, early and forced marriage

Report of the Secretary-General

Summary

The present report is submitted pursuant to General Assembly resolution [73/153](#) of 8 January 2019 on child, early and forced marriage and builds on the previous report of the Secretary-General on the same subject ([A/73/257](#)).

The present report contains an overview of progress made towards ending child, early and forced marriage worldwide. It also includes promising experiences with programmes aimed at ending those practices and supporting already married girls and women affected by the practices. It covers the period from June 2018 to May 2020.

* [A/75/150](#).



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I. Introduction

1. In its resolution [73/153](#) of 8 January 2019 on child, early and forced marriage, the General Assembly took note with appreciation of the previous report of the Secretary-General ([A/73/257](#)) and requested the Secretary-General to submit a comprehensive report, before the end of its seventy-fourth session, on progress towards ending child, early and forced marriage worldwide, best practices for programmes aimed at ending that practice and supporting already married girls and women affected by the practice.

2. A note verbale was sent on 17 October 2019, requesting information from Member States and other stakeholders. As at 31 May 2020, 29 responses had been received from Member States,¹ 1 from an Observer State,² 5 from national human rights institutions,³ 1 from a regional organization⁴ and 4 from United Nations bodies and civil society organizations.⁵ The present report is based on those submissions, available in full on the website of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, as well as on recent research.⁶

3. According to the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), in the past decade, 25 million child marriages have been prevented globally thanks to the increased rate of girls’ education, the proactive investment of governments in adolescent girls and the raising of the public’s awareness of the harms and illegality of child marriage.⁷ However, globally, the total number of married girls is estimated to be 12 million per year. The prevalence rate of child, early and forced marriage remain high, in particular in some regions, such as sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia, which represent 18 per cent and 44 per cent, respectively, of the global burden. A marked reduction in the prevalence rate was recorded in South Asia, however, the prevalence in Latin America and the Caribbean has remained stagnant for 25 years. No region is on track to eliminate child, early and forced marriage by 2030, as set out in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.⁸

4. Furthermore, coronavirus disease (COVID-19) has transformed the lives of children and families across the globe, negatively affecting efforts towards ending child, early and forced marriage and unions. Reports are emerging from Africa and Asia in particular of an increase in the number of early or child marriages. Such marriages are likely linked to negative coping strategies aimed at decreasing families’ economic burdens as economic hardships related to the pandemic deepen. Also contributing to the increase are school closures, which have affected 1.6 billion learners globally, approximately 91 per cent of the world’s enrolled students,⁹

¹ Member States included Armenia, Bangladesh, Benin, Brazil, Bulgaria, Canada, Ecuador, Egypt, El Salvador, Greece, Honduras, Iraq, Ireland, Italy, Malta, Norway, Paraguay, Portugal, Senegal, Serbia, Slovenia, South Africa, Sweden, Switzerland, the Syrian Arab Republic, Togo, Tunisia, Turkey and Ukraine.

² State of Palestine.

³ National human rights institutions from the following countries submitted information: Argentina, Denmark, India, Mexico and Serbia.

⁴ The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

⁵ Plan International, Southall Black Sisters, United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) Ethiopia and UNICEF headquarters.

⁶ See www.ohchr.org/EN/Issues/Women/WRGS/Pages/Documentation.aspx.

⁷ UNICEF, “Fast facts: 10 facts illustrating why we must #EndChildMarriage”, press release, 11 February 2019. Available at www.unicef.org/eca/press-releases/fast-facts-10-facts-illustrating-why-we-must-endchildmarriage.

⁸ UNICEF, “Child marriage: latest trends and future prospects”, July 2018. Available at <https://data.unicef.org/resources/child-marriage-latest-trends-and-future-prospects/>.

⁹ www.unicef-irc.org/publications/1090-promising-practices-for-equitable-remote-learning-emerging-lessons-from-covid.html.

potentially triggering higher rates of school dropout, which, in turn, may increase the risk of child, early and forced marriage and unions, as well as adolescent pregnancy. In addition, lockdown measures result in the shrinking of peer support networks, such as access to safe spaces and protection services, for married girls, which may increase their social isolation and vulnerability.¹⁰ The pandemic has further increased the family care responsibilities of girls, in particular those who are married. The additional burden can prevent them from continuing or completing their education and obtaining access to sexual and reproductive health services, hence hampering their rights and future economic opportunities.

5. The submissions received from various entities seem to indicate that already married girls and women continue to be particularly disadvantaged. In many countries, legislation, policies and programmatic interventions to address child, early and forced marriage are rarely focused on the distinctive needs of that group. They tend to be socially isolated and have lower levels of education and limited access to health information and legal protection in marriage. As a result, their skills and leverage to navigate marital problems are diminished.

II. Developments at the international and regional levels

6. During the reporting period, United Nations mechanisms and regional programmes or organs continued to pay increased attention to the issue of child, early and forced marriage at the international and regional levels, resulting in political commitments and the adoption of new policies and programmes. Marking 25 years since the landmark International Conference on Population and Development, held in Cairo, the Nairobi Summit of 2019 received more than 400 commitments from Heads of State and Government to ending harmful practices, nearly a quarter of which explicitly included actions involving ending child, early and forced marriage and unions.

7. In its resolution [73/153](#) on child, early and forced marriage, the General Assembly recognized the need to support girls and women who had been subjected to child, early and forced marriage, as well as their children, and underscored the importance of removing structural barriers that prevented their access to services that responded to their specific needs. In the same resolution, the Assembly called upon States, with the participation of relevant stakeholders, to develop and implement holistic, comprehensive and coordinated responses and strategies to prevent and eliminate child, early and forced marriage, to support girls and women who were affected or at risk, who had fled such a marriage or whose marriage had dissolved, and widowed girls or women who had been married as girls. Many other General Assembly and Human Rights Council resolutions have addressed the issue of child, early and forced marriage in relation to a number of issues, including development, rural life, disability and maternal mortality.¹¹ The Council considered the issue of child, early and forced marriage in humanitarian settings at its forty-first session (see [A/HRC/41/19](#)).

¹⁰ UNICEF, “Technical note on COVID-19 and harmful practices”, April 2020. Available at www.unicef.org/documents/technical-note-covid-19-and-harmful-practices.

¹¹ See General Assembly resolution [74/133](#) on the rights of the child, [74/134](#) on the girl child, [74/235](#) on women in development and [74/126](#) on improvement of the situation of women and girls in rural areas; and Human Rights Council resolutions [38/1](#) and [41/6](#) on elimination of all forms of discrimination against women and girls; [39/10](#) on preventable maternal mortality and morbidity and human rights in humanitarian settings; [40/14](#) on rights of the child: empowering children with disabilities for the enjoyment of their human rights, including through inclusive education; and [41/8](#) on consequences of child, early and forced marriage.

8. United Nations human rights mechanisms have provided further guidance in relation to child, early and forced marriage. In 2018, the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, in its general recommendation No. 37 (2018) on the gender-related dimensions of disaster risk reduction in the context of climate change, highlighted that early and/or forced marriage was more likely to occur during and following disasters. It therefore recommended that training on early and forced marriage be made available to all personnel involved in disaster response activities and that mechanisms be established, within local and regional disaster management plans, to prevent, monitor and address the practice (CEDAW/C/GC/37, paras. 5 and 57 (b)). In 2019, the Committee on the Rights of the Child, in its general comment No. 24 (2019) on children's rights in the child justice system, acknowledged that, when under the control of non-State armed groups, including terrorist groups, children may become victims of multiple forms of violations, including child marriage (CRC/C/GC/24, para. 98).

9. Special procedures of the Human Rights Council have called for the adoption of comprehensive awareness-raising campaigns to challenge cultural attitudes legitimizing early marriage and introduce mechanisms to register all marriages, especially in rural, remote and indigenous areas (A/HRC/41/42/Add.2, para. 79 (b)).

10. At the regional level, the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA)-UNICEF Global Programme to Accelerate Action to End Child Marriage supported the development of a regional accountability framework of action to end child marriage to strengthen, guide and accelerate joint programming, advocacy and results in the Middle East and North African region. In Asia, the Global Programme supported the implementation and monitoring of the first five-year regional action plan on child marriage and promoted the use of civil registration to end the practice. In Eastern and Southern Africa, the Global Programme supported the drawing up of subregional and regional model laws on child marriage, including to protect children already in marriage. In the Latin American and Caribbean region, the United Nations partnered with national and regional actors to support the establishment of the Aliadas multi-stakeholder platform to end child marriage and unions.

11. Other regional efforts include a review of the African Union campaign to end child marriage (2014–2018), which led to the development of a new strategy for the period 2019–2023. According to the review, a key strength of the campaign was the space that it created for African leaders to make high-level political commitments to ending child marriage. The campaign also helped to advance normative and policy frameworks through the adoption of a common African position on the campaign itself. The review recommended that efforts be dedicated to improving its conceptual framework, supporting a smaller number of countries and monitoring and evaluating programmes.¹² In Europe, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe adopted, on 28 June 2018, resolution 2233 (2018) on forced marriage in Europe, which called upon member States to, inter alia, include the fight against forced marriage in their national policies and practices, as well as set up specific bodies to address the issue. The resolution also called for public awareness-raising to combat forced marriage and support the initiatives of non-governmental organizations, as well as enhancing the empowerment of women and girls by guaranteeing their access to education and to the labour market. In addition, the national parliaments of Member States were encouraged to support action to prevent forced marriage at the national level and through their international cooperation activities.¹³

¹² UNICEF, "Review of the African Union campaign to end child marriage 2014–2018". Available at www.unicef.org/protection/files/Summary_Review_of_the_AU_Campaign_to_End_Child_Marriage.pdf.

¹³ See <http://assembly.coe.int/nw/xml/XRef/Xref-XML2HTML-en.asp?fileid=25016&lang=en>.

III. Legislative measures, policies and action plans

12. During the reporting period, several States adopted legislative and policy measures to raise the minimum age of marriage. In July 2019, the Parliament of Mozambique passed a bill setting that age at 18 years and eliminating an existing loophole in family law that allowed children to marry at 16 years with the consent of their parents.¹⁴ In Mexico, an amendment to the Federal Civil Code provided that, as of June 2019, the minimum age for marriage should be 18 years, hence derogating from the previous framework that established the minimum age for marriage as 14 years for girls and 16 years for boys. The new provision, furthermore, allows no exception to the applicability of the minimum age.¹⁵

13. Legislation to criminalize child, early and forced marriage was also adopted in the reporting period. In Ireland, a new criminal offence of forced marriage was introduced as part of the Domestic Violence Act 2018 on 1 January 2019.¹⁶ Similarly, in Nepal, the Children's Act, which criminalizes child marriage, was enacted in September 2018.¹⁷

14. Efforts towards addressing inconsistencies among applicable bodies of law concerning child, early and forced marriage were undertaken by the UNFPA-UNICEF Global Programme to Accelerate Action to End Child Marriage. The Programme supported, for example, comparative reviews of civil and common law with customary law in Nepal and Sierra Leone.¹⁸ Between November 2018 and January 2019, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland held an open consultation in England and Wales seeking views on how to strengthen its response to child, early and forced marriage, including the proposal of a mandatory duty to report forced marriage for some professionals, such as those working in social care, education, the police and health care.¹⁹

15. In several countries, judicial actors, through their decisions, enforced a ban on child, early and forced marriage. In October 2019, the Supreme Court of Appeal of Tanzania upheld a 2016 ruling that had banned parents from marrying off girls as young as 14 years.²⁰ Similarly, in Mexico, the Supreme Court of Justice ruled against a claim challenging the prohibition of child marriage in the state of Aguascalientes and validated the legal reforms by the local Congress that established 18 years as the minimum age of marriage.²¹

16. States reported on legislative initiatives that had the potential to strengthen preventive interventions and to protect girls and women affected by child, early and forced marriage. In South Africa, a report by the Law Reform Commission on the practice of *ukuthwala*, through which girls and women are abducted and forced into marriage, proposed legislative reforms, which, if adopted, would give courts the

¹⁴ Submission of Plan International.

¹⁵ Submission of Mexico.

¹⁶ Submission of Ireland.

¹⁷ Submission of UNICEF.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Consultation document available at www.gov.uk/government/consultations/preventing-and-tackling-forced-marriage.

²⁰ Submission of Plan International.

²¹ Submission of National Human Rights Commission of Mexico.

competence to prevent and nullify forced and child marriage.²² Similarly, a bill on the prohibition of child marriage was drafted in Sierra Leone.²³

17. Beyond enacting and amending national legislation, during the reporting period, several States put in place comprehensive strategies to combat child, early and forced marriage. For example, Ethiopia, Ghana, India, Mozambique, the Niger and Uganda developed national policies and guidelines and undertook capacity-building initiatives to promote more gender- and child-sensitive health and protection services, including for girls subjected to child, early and forced marriage.²⁴ In Zambia, UNFPA and UNICEF are supporting the implementation of a multisectoral programme in the districts of Senanga and Katete with the aim of addressing the root causes of child marriage. The work involves supporting schools in preventing children from dropping out, promoting menstrual hygiene management, strengthening the role of health centres in improving sexual and reproductive health and working with radio stations and theatre groups to create a space for local dialogue on supporting youth. Social workers also play an important role in addressing cases of child, early and forced marriage when they are encountered, prioritizing the safety, well-being, empowerment and learning of the children involved.²⁵ Ethiopia launched its five-year national road map to end child marriage and female genital mutilation, which is costed nationally. Likewise, in Belize, a consultative process led to the drafting of a national road map to end child marriage and early unions. In Peru, a regional plan to tackle gender-based violence in 2020–2030 in the Amazon Loreto region was developed to address, inter alia, child marriage.

18. Serbia established the National Coalition for Ending Child Marriages in February 2019 with the goals of preventing and eradicating child marriage through coordinated and comprehensive action by all responsible institutions, civil society organizations, independent bodies, media and individuals.²⁶ The Coalition’s activities include public advocacy for the suppression and prevention of child marriage, improving the legislative framework and strengthening the capacities of service providers.²⁷ In El Salvador, the legislative and programmatic measures adopted to eradicate child, early and forced marriage are integrated into the National and Intersectoral Strategy for Preventing Pregnancy in Girls and Adolescents (2017–2027), which provides for interventions involving families, State institutions and society at large.²⁸ In Malta, the National Children’s Policy, adopted in November 2017, contributes to the development and implementation of holistic, comprehensive and coordinated responses and strategies to prevent and eliminate child, early and forced marriage. The policy promotes a holistic approach focusing on the physical, psychological and socioeconomic development and well-being of children, putting forth 110 actions.²⁹

19. Some States developed policies and actions targeting communities with higher rates of child, early and forced marriage. In Serbia, where early unions and child marriage are prevalent in Roma communities, the Government adopted specific

²² Submission of South Africa. See also South African Law Commission, “Project 138: the practice of Ukuthwala”, discussion paper 132 (Pretoria, 2015). Available at www.justice.gov.za/salrc/dpapers/dp132-Ukuthwala.pdf.

²³ Submission of UNICEF.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA)-UNICEF Global Programme to Accelerate Action to End Child Marriage: Voices of Change, “Strengthening legal and policy frameworks” (n.p., June 2019). Available at <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/GP%202019%20Human%20Interest%20Stories%20Catalogue.pdf>.

²⁶ Submission of Serbia.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Submission of El Salvador.

²⁹ Submission of Malta.

actions to foster prevention and increase the protection of those at risk.³⁰ In Armenia, where forced marriage affects the Yezidi community in particular, the Ministry of Health carries out educational activities in the communities to prevent the early marriage of girls.³¹ In Slovenia, the Government adopted a national programme of measures for Roma for the period 2017–2021 that promotes social protection from child, early and forced marriage.³² In Cambodia, the Ministry of Women’s Affairs adopted in 2019 an action plan to address child marriage in indigenous groups in Ratanakiri province, which has the highest rate of child marriage and adolescent pregnancy in the country. The plan is based on the collection and analysis of existing data on child marriage and adolescent pregnancy.³³

IV. Empowerment of girls at risk and already married girls

20. Child, early and forced marriage is a multi-causal phenomenon. Social exclusion and poverty expose children, in particular girls, to an increased risk of child, early and forced marriage. Patriarchal traditions and unequal gender norms that limit girls’ and women’s ability to express themselves and exercise their choices also result in a higher risk for girls of being subjected to child, early and forced marriage. Moreover, girls’ limited access to education and participation in the economic and social life of their communities may increase their odds of being married at a young age. The submissions received acknowledges the importance of interventions seeking to strengthen the agency of girls at risk, as well as that of those who were already married. Effective strategies were reportedly those that enhanced girls’ decision-making ability and capacity to assert their rights and increase their skills, knowledge and confidence to influence decisions regarding their own lives. The importance of encouraging and equipping adolescent girls and boys with the tools necessary to become agents of change in tackling child, early and forced marriage was also highlighted in the submissions. To be able to overcome the social exclusion and poverty that expose them to child marriage, girls need to be equipped with the skills and competencies necessary to assert their rights and make autonomous and informed decisions and choices regarding their own lives.

21. In Egypt, the National Girls’ Empowerment Initiative, launched in 2018 and entitled “Dawwie”, promotes conversations among girls, boys and communities and, through storytelling, is aimed at reshaping social expectations and reinforcing the perceived value of girls’ rights and welfare.³⁴ In India, adolescents are involved in the Ladli Samman campaign, which consists of the mapping of social and economic vulnerabilities and linking them to social protection schemes and counselling support. Champions and change-makers are to receive awards at the end of the campaign.³⁵ Plan International’s Girls Get Equal campaign, launched in 2018 in Asia, prioritizes the power, voice and leadership of girls and young women and supports them in speaking up and advocate their rights, including by promoting youth-led activism with regard to child, early and forced marriage.³⁶ In West Africa, another Plan International project to strengthen the advocacy capacities of youth organizations

³⁰ Submission of Serbia.

³¹ Submission of Armenia.

³² Submission of Slovenia.

³³ Submission of ASEAN.

³⁴ Submission of Egypt.

³⁵ Submission of India. See also www.unfpa.org/resources/global-programme-accelerate-action-end-child-marriage-country-profiles-2018.

³⁶ Plan International, Girls Get Equal campaign. Available at <https://plan-international.org/girls-get-equal>.

resulted in, inter alia, the prohibition of child marriage in Guinea.³⁷ UNICEF reported a programme through which adolescents in Nepal were able to influence the plans of 62 local governments to include activities addressing child marriage. In Ghana and Nepal, adolescents, including married girls, participated in the development of national strategies for ending child marriage, as well as related policies.³⁸

22. Increasing access to high-quality and safe schooling has been identified as a critical empowering strategy for ending child marriage. For girls living in rural or remote areas, physical inaccessibility to schools increases their risk of entering into child, early and forced marriage; and, in particular for already married girls, hinders their ability to learn and develop their full potential. It is crucial that efforts towards increasing the rate of girls enrolled in primary and secondary school be not only framed as a preventive strategy to delay the age of marriage but also targeted towards girls and adolescents who are already married. Interventions aimed at encouraging and supporting already married girls to continue and complete their education in formal or informal settings and through remote or vocational training programmes are critical to provide them with the tools to be able to participate in economic and public life and, ultimately, become better able to make autonomous decisions, shifting power dynamics within their families and communities.

23. Some countries are developing holistic programmes to increase girls' enrolment and retention in the formal secondary education system and in alternative non-formal education, which reduce their risks to be married. In Rwanda, the Girls Safe School project built the personal, social and material assets of girls in order to reduce barriers to obtaining access to high-quality education. Using a multilevel and holistic approach, the project included the provision of vocational training, the distribution of livestock, the construction of latrines, the distribution of menstrual hygiene kits and the holding of awareness-raising meetings for girls to increase their knowledge of sexual and reproductive health and rights and gender-based violence.³⁹

24. The empowerment of girls at risk and that of already married women and girls can also be promoted by ensuring their access to economic assets and by strengthening their financial independence and their livelihood and entrepreneurship skills. Perceptions of women as individuals with no economic opportunities within families and communities in certain contexts have a significant impact on decisions related to child, early and forced marriage. Families suffering from financial instability are more likely to regard daughters as an economic burden, in particular when unable to finance a daughter's education, and consequently justify their early marriage. To combat this practice and provide incentives to families for sending girls to school, Egypt, with the support of the World Bank, adopted the Takaful cash transfer programme, which provides monthly income to 1.5 million poor households, conditional on 80 per cent school attendance, as well as medical check-ups for mothers and young children.⁴⁰ In India, the UNFPA-UNICEF Global Programme to Accelerate Action to End Child Marriage supported the Kanyashree Prakalpa

³⁷ www.plan-international.fr/news/2018-08-28-le-club-des-jeunes-filles-leaders-de-guinee-se-bat-contre-les-mariages-forces.

³⁸ Submission of UNICEF.

³⁹ Plan International (2019), "18+ Ending Child Marriage and Teen Pregnancy in Eastern and Southern Africa: Learning for Change". Available at <https://plan-international.org/publications/ending-child-marriage-resa>.

⁴⁰ UNICEF Middle East and North Africa Regional Office, "Child Marriage in the Middle East and North Africa: Egypt Country Brief" (Amman, 2017), available at www.unicef.org/mena/media/1796/file/MENA-CMReport-Egypt-Brief.pdf.

programme of West Bengal through conditional cash transfers to encourage their continued education and prevent child marriage.⁴¹

25. In other contexts, girls are being trained in the management of personal finances and are benefiting from microfinancing projects and savings and loan schemes, which contribute to their economic empowerment. Being financially literate provides girls with increased autonomy from their families and empowers them to make decisions about their future. In this regard, the Women's Mission in Ecuador approved in November 2018 an initiative to promote the economic rights and empowerment of women and girls in order to strengthen their autonomy.⁴²

26. Another way to promote girls' empowerment is through enhancing their social assets. This can be done, inter alia, through the creation of safe spaces where girls and women at risk of, or affected by, child, early and forced marriage can connect with peers, mentors, teachers and community leaders, express their aspirations and concerns and participate in decisions that affect their lives. Safe spaces can be instrumental in building girls' agency and voice and giving them the opportunity to create a peer support network. Often these spaces offer services for adolescent and adult mothers. In Ghana, for example, the UNFPA-UNICEF Global Programme to Accelerate Action to End Child Marriage set up safe spaces for marginalized girls and provided them with life skills training and information on adolescent sexual and reproductive health.⁴³ The Global Programme has reported on the role of churches in Sierra Leone, which set up 100 safe spaces in 2017, serving 3,000 adolescent girls in communities with a high prevalence of child marriage and adolescent pregnancy. Each safe space served some 30 girls 10 to 19 years of age, offering them an opportunity to improve their skills and self-esteem, meet friends and mentors, learn about the services that they can gain access to in their communities and seek help with any issue related to gender-based violence that they or their friends might face.⁴⁴ In the United Kingdom, a London-based safe space helps women survivors to connect with others, share their experiences of gender-based violence and forced marriage and learn about their rights.⁴⁵

27. Several countries have implemented programmes which facilitate the participation of at-risk or already married girls in decision-making, enabling them to contribute to the adoption of measures necessary for their protection against violence. Senegal developed guidelines entitled "Persevering in Dialogue" to promote youth participatory dialogue in child protection at the community level.⁴⁶ In Togo, the Children's Advisory Council, represented at the national, regional and prefectural levels, was set up as a channel for authorities, partners and civil society to discuss child protection issues. It carries out awareness-raising activities that also function as an alert system.⁴⁷ In Malta, the Child Participation Assessment Tool is aimed at improving their participation in various sectors.⁴⁸

28. Many girls, in particular those in dire contexts or remote areas, do not have access to information about available sexual and reproductive health services that are user-friendly and free from judgment and/or male supervision. This may lead to early and unintended pregnancies and sexually transmitted infections. Research has highlighted the need to ground programmes in local contexts, recognize girls as

⁴¹ See www.unfpa.org/resources/technical-note-scaling-efforts-end-child-marriage-global-programme-approach.

⁴² Submission of Ecuador.

⁴³ Submission of UNICEF.

⁴⁴ Voices of Change, "Ending child marriage and teenage pregnancy in Sierra Leone".

⁴⁵ See www.childreassoc.org.uk/news-and-blogs/our-blog/early-intervention-funding-faces-70-cut.

⁴⁶ Submission of Senegal.

⁴⁷ Submission of Togo.

⁴⁸ Submission of Malta.

agents of change, meaningfully engage men and boys in developing positive masculinity and provide comprehensive sexuality education to enable girls to make informed decisions about their lives and bodies and fully realize their sexual and reproductive health and rights.⁴⁹ In this regard, in Mozambique, a Government-led sexual and reproductive health and rights initiative, Rapariga Biz, reached some 100,000 girls and young women, many of whom have been affected by child, early and forced marriage and through this initiative were able to gain access to information on contraceptives.⁵⁰

29. Countries and other stakeholders have also undertaken efforts towards addressing the specific needs of girls and women affected by child, early and forced marriage. In India, the Institute of Health Management contributed to empowering several dozens of married girls. They had the opportunity to obtain access to health, educational, economic and legal support.⁵¹ Another programme reported by UNICEF refers to more than 1,500 adolescent girls trained as digital champions (*sathis*) who had produced 103 short videos covering positive stories of resistance to, or avoidance of, child marriage. A study on the Population Council Programme in Ethiopia concluded that engaging both wives and husbands could result in incremental improvements to the health and well-being of girls who had married early.⁵²

30. Effective interventions to end child, early and forced marriage are inclusive and engage relevant stakeholders at all levels, with a special emphasis on the engagement of girls, women, boys and men from affected communities. Interventions also require the active participation and support of local leaders and the mobilization of families. Establishing or strengthening existing partnerships with relevant stakeholders, institutions, organizations and social networks, such as religious and traditional leaders, practitioners and civil society, can help to build bridges between constituencies.⁵³

31. Submissions highlight how local leaders have made important contributions to ending child marriage, in particular by speaking out against the practice and encouraging communities to embrace different social norms. The engagement and strengthening of community structures to support child protection have led progressively to improved support mechanisms for married girls and increased reporting rates of child marriage to the authorities.⁵⁴ In contexts in which child marriage is widely accepted, the need to include the entire community in child marriage interventions has been considered critical. In Uganda, cultural and religious leaders are involved in campaigns in which they speak to their constituents and disseminate messages against child, early and forced marriage in their sermons and preaching. Many of them have become ambassadors with transformative influence in decision-making and norm-setting.⁵⁵

32. The role of community leaders is also prominent in humanitarian settings and for people on the move. A UNICEF study indicated that engagement with sharia courts in the Za'atari refugee camp in Jordan changed the process of registering marriages, addressing issues of statelessness and undocumented children of Syrian origin, which can have a significant impact in addressing social norms regarding

⁴⁹ Submission of Plan International.

⁵⁰ Voices of Change, "Adolescent girls claim right to family planning".

⁵¹ See www.girlsnotbrides.org/theory-of-change/#casestudies-empowering-adolescent-girls.

⁵² Helen Ketema and Annabel Erulkar, "Married adolescents and family planning in rural Ethiopia: understanding barriers and opportunities", *African Journal of Reproductive Health*, vol. 22, No. 4 (December 2018).

⁵³ CEDAW/C/GC/31-CRC/C/GC/18, para. 77.

⁵⁴ Voices of Change, "Ending child marriage and teenage pregnancy in Sierra Leone" and "In class again, after escape from an unwanted marriage".

⁵⁵ Voices of Change, "Hairdressing skill offers hope after child rape".

child, early and forced marriage.⁵⁶ In Lebanon, religious leaders played an important role in challenging and addressing social norms for child marriage by organizing dialogues and awareness-raising workshops.⁵⁷ Similarly, in October 2019, Plan International organized a workshop in Uganda at which 26 traditional leaders from Eastern and Southern Africa discussed strategies to end child, early and forced marriage.⁵⁸

33. Practitioners, including social workers, can make a significant contribution towards ending child marriage, in particular in contexts in which their role is acknowledged by their community. In Uganda, communities, with the assistance of parasocial workers, have been taking responsibility to protect children and adolescents from marrying at a young age, following dialogues and radio campaigns.⁵⁹ The parasocial workers were trained, and they are now able to identify, prevent, respond to and report to the relevant authorities cases of violence against children in their communities, including those involving child, early and forced marriage.

V. Protection measures and support services

34. The effective protection of girls at risk of child, early and forced marriage and of already married girls requires strengthening the provision of gender-sensitive and user-friendly medical, psychological and legal support services. In Sierra Leone, for example, measures have been taken to ensure user-friendly health-care facilities. The Government renovated and upgraded 11 community health centres and health posts to include separate and confidential spaces for the provision of services to adolescents and youth, including girls at risk of being married or already married.⁶⁰ Similarly, Ukraine indicated that 16 social services centres operate in the country to provide temporary shelter and financial assistance to families with children in difficult life circumstances, including adolescent mothers.⁶¹

35. The effectiveness of child, early and forced marriage programming depends on the capacity of services providers and other stakeholders. Cambodia, for example, designed a programme to strengthen the capacity of social service providers who deal with girls and boys affected by child marriage in identifying and responding to health needs, including mental health, and understanding basic notions of the internal legal framework. The programme intends to guarantee quality services and efficient and timely response to the needs of married children.⁶² A UNICEF report suggests that standard operating procedures for child marriage cases could be ineffective, in particular in the case of married girls, where workers feel powerless to change the situation for a number of reasons, including the family's or community's position on child marriage. In such cases, it has proved useful to expand training on how to ensure access to services to child brides to community workers.⁶³ In addition to human resources and capacity, challenges relating to organizational effectiveness and programme funding were also identified as a barrier to responsive services. Strong

⁵⁶ UNICEF Middle East and North Africa Regional Office, "Child marriage in the Middle East and North Africa", sect. 3.3.1., (Amman, 2017), available at www.unicef.org/mena/media/1786/file/MENA-ChildMarriageInMENA-Report.pdf.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Submission of Plan International.

⁵⁹ Voices of Change, "Hairdressing skill offers hope after child rape".

⁶⁰ Submission of UNICEF.

⁶¹ Submission of Ukraine.

⁶² Submission of ASEAN.

⁶³ UNICEF Middle East and North Africa Regional Office, "Child marriage in the Middle East and North Africa", sect. 3.4.4.

linkages and partnerships need to be established between civil society and donors to ensure that at-risk and already married girls have access to the needed services.

36. Protective measures also refer to alert systems and reporting channels, which must be accessible by girls and include a wide range of actors, such as education workers, health-care providers, community workers and law enforcement officers, from a variety of disciplines. Several submissions indicated that countries offered helplines to promote the access of children at risk of marriage, or already married, to protection services. Although, in most cases, helplines have a broader scope (they are generally aimed at children or women at risk of violence), they are an important tool to detect cases of child, early and forced marriage and to initiate referral pathways to protection services. In Togo, as part of the response to violence against children and efforts to combat child marriage, a toll-free helpline was established for the early detection of cases. The helpline contributed to the early identification of girls affected by child marriage, who benefited from social reintegration and psychosocial support projects. Greece set up a national toll-free helpline to tackle violence against children with the involvement of specialized social workers and psychologists. The helpline is available nationwide, 24 hours a day, 365 days a year, through calls, email and social media.⁶⁴ In Turkey, a “183” social support line is a psychological, legal and economic advisory hotline for women and children who are at risk of violence and who need support and assistance.⁶⁵ In Yemen, the standard operating procedures for case management were updated with the support of the UNPFA-UNICEF Global Programme to Accelerate Action to End Child Marriage. The update is expected to improve coordination and increase the number of referrals of child protection cases between schools and social workers, including in response to child marriage.

37. Some submissions reported on efforts made by countries to ensure appropriate protective safety and security measures for victims of gender-based violence, including child marriage, through temporary shelters with specialized services. In Armenia, for example, children victims of violence are directed to the Children’s Support Centre, where a multidisciplinary team composed of a psychologist, a teacher, a social worker and a police officer provides the necessary support.⁶⁶ According to the Danish Institute for Human Rights, a department under the municipality of Copenhagen providing assistance and guidance in the area of forced marriage and other form of violence and social control had received 19 inquiries on forced marriage of a total of 840 inquires. In 14 of the inquiries, there had been threats of forced marriage, and in one case, the individual had been forced into a contract of marriage. Of those who feared or were threatened with forced marriage, 11 were between the ages of 11 and 17 years, whereas 8 persons were older than 18 years of age.⁶⁷

VI. Funding and research on programmes

38. Some submissions highlighted efforts towards ensuring funding for child marriage-related prevention programmes. In September 2018, the Government of Sweden initiated a project throughout its consulates abroad to strengthen its efforts regarding family conflict issues, with a special focus on child and forced marriage. The Government declared the intention to make the project permanent as from 2020.

39. Some countries have showed their commitment to ending child, early and forced marriage by earmarking part of the national budget to related programmes. In 2018,

⁶⁴ Submission of Greece.

⁶⁵ Submission of Turkey.

⁶⁶ Submission of Armenia.

⁶⁷ Submission of Danish Institute for Human Rights.

Norway allocated about \$209,000 to a mentoring scheme for young people subjected to gender-based violence and forced marriage.⁶⁸ In Switzerland, the Confederation is supporting the Service against Forced Marriages with a total of SwF 800,000 for four years (2018–2021). The Service provides training and implements awareness-raising campaigns.⁶⁹ Lastly, in Brazil, the National Secretariat for the Rights of Children and Adolescents of the Ministry of Women, Family and Human Rights formalized a contribution agreement with the United Nations Development Programme and UNFPA to address the rights of adolescents and young people who are engaged in an early union.⁷⁰

40. Since my previous report, a series of research projects has been conducted on various aspects related to child, early and forced marriage. Plan International commissioned a national research study in Guinea-Bissau to explore the perceptions of community members, including married and unmarried girls and government and civil society stakeholders, regarding the causes of child marriage and opportunities to address them. The researchers found that, although parental fear of unmarried girls becoming pregnant remains a key driver of child marriage, parents in some communities are more open-minded with regard to the sexuality of adolescents, pointing to clear opportunities for interventions. In other research, undertaken by Plan International and UNFPA in Latin America and the Caribbean, it was found that informal unions, which are common throughout the region, tended to be disadvantageous to women because the women were more vulnerable in cases of separation or of the migration of their partners. The findings also indicated that informal unions were used as a way to escape poverty and avoid domestic violence and for parents to control the sexuality of their daughters, in particular those who had become sexually active during adolescence. However, such unions can exacerbate poverty and gender-based violence at the hands of partners, who often do not permit girls to work, study or go out alone.⁷¹ A third research project, on emerging interventions with the potential to prevent, reduce and eliminate child, early and forced marriage, was conducted by Plan International in Asia. The project found that the most effective strategies for eliminating child marriage included gender-transformative approaches, youth participation, the creation of safe spaces for girls, cross-generational dialogue, the engagement of men and boys and using sports, arts and entertainment.⁷²

41. The UNICEF-UNFPA Global Programme to Accelerate Action to End Child Marriage partnered with the University of California San Diego to produce three publications, on strengthening the evidence base in support of behaviour and social change interventions to end child marriage; associations between village-level norms on marital age and marital choice outcomes among adolescent wives in the rural Niger; and longitudinal analysis of the effects of parent-child relationships on child and early marriage in Ethiopia, India, Peru and Viet Nam. The publications informed the development of national road maps to end child marriage in Ethiopia and the Niger

⁶⁸ Submission of Norway.

⁶⁹ Submission of Switzerland.

⁷⁰ Submission of Brazil.

⁷¹ Conducted in the following countries: Bolivia, Brazil, Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua and Peru. Plan International and UNFPA, “A hidden reality for adolescent girls: child, early and forced marriages and unions in Latin America and the Caribbean” (Panamá, 2019), available at <https://plan-international.org/latin-america/child-marriage-report>. See also UNICEF country profiles, available at www.unicef.org/lac/en/reports/profile-child-marriage-and-early-unions.

⁷² Plan International, (2019) “Time to act!: accelerating efforts to end child, early and forced marriage in Asia”, available at <https://plan-international.org/publications/time-to-act-child-marriage-asia>.

and are informing the establishment of communication for development strategies at the regional and country levels.⁷³

VII. Data collection

42. The regular and comprehensive collection, analysis, dissemination and use of quantitative and qualitative data are key to evaluating the impact and effectiveness of programmes and monitoring progress towards, and obstacles to, the elimination of child and forced marriage. The submissions received for the period covered by the present report show some progress in efforts towards collecting the data.

43. Since 2011, Togo has collected administrative data on child protection, thereby allowing for the annual development of a child protection scorecard that takes into account various themes, including violence against girls in all its forms. Drawing upon those data, in 2019, the Government developed a national protocol for the holistic care of victims of violence against women and children, including forced marriage. It also undertook a new survey on gender-based violence in the country.⁷⁴ In Benin, the Ministry of Social Affairs and Microfinance, with the Observatory of the Family, Women and Children, jointly developed a database for the collection of sectoral data on the themes relating to “the family, the wife and children”.⁷⁵

44. In Serbia, the Law on Central Population Register, which will enter into force on 1 September 2020, is expected to upgrade records on marriages.⁷⁶ To date, data on child marriage are collected through Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys, which monitor numerous Sustainable Development Goals indicators and which are currently in their sixth edition. Sweden established indicators in follow-up to Goal 5, introducing an indicator on “honour-based” violence and oppression, which can include forced marriage.⁷⁷

VIII. Conclusions and recommendations

45. In the past decade, there has been a marked increase in efforts towards preventing child, early and forced marriage. While such efforts have yielded some results, the global prevalence of the practice remains at an unacceptably high level. To eliminate child marriage by the globally agreed 2030 date, as set out in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, progress will need to be 12 times faster than the rate observed in the past decade.⁷⁸ As evidence on the effects of COVID-19 emerges, efforts are needed to support innovative approaches to strengthen the resilience of communities and systems and to reduce negative outcomes on children and adolescent girls.

46. Information received from States and other actors shows that there are promising efforts towards preventing child, early and forced marriage and protecting married girls and women in all regions. Holistic programmes aimed at tackling the issue of child marriage in cross-sectional and multidisciplinary manners continue to be implemented and are being expanded, drawing on lessons learned and additional research.

⁷³ Submission of UNICEF.

⁷⁴ Submission of Togo.

⁷⁵ Submission of Benin.

⁷⁶ Submission of Serbia.

⁷⁷ Submission of Sweden.

⁷⁸ UNICEF, “Child marriage: latest trends and future prospects”.

47. The most recent evidence suggests that a number of approaches are particularly effective in the elimination of child and forced marriage. These include gender-transformative interventions, youth participation, the creation of safe spaces for girls, intergenerational dialogue, the engagement of women, men and boys and using sports, the arts and entertainment. At the same time, the contributions received point to a number of persisting challenges and gaps, including with regard to attaining scale in programming and increasing attention and measures to support already married women and girls.

48. The submissions reveal that, during the reporting period, an increased number of countries have legislated a minimum legal age of marriage at 18 years, in order to prevent child, early and forced marriage. Worryingly, however, the legislation of numerous States continues to provide for exceptions to the minimum age of marriage, such as parental, judicial or religious consent. According to mapping by the World Policy Analysis Center, in 2019, some 48 per cent of countries allowed child marriage below the legal age with parental consent.⁷⁹

49. Discriminatory provisions affecting married girls are still present in several legislative frameworks, in the form of unequal grounds for access to divorce between men and women, guardianship requirements for women and default legal custody of children in favour of men in the event of divorce.⁸⁰ Similarly, while interventions to prevent the marriage of girls are numerous, initiatives to provide support to already married girls and women who were married as children are less frequent. Of the initiatives reported on educational and economic support, few specifically target girls and women subjected to child and forced marriage. Submissions received often highlight a focus on the prevention of violence, but they rarely mention other benefits for already married girls.

50. To further enhance their effectiveness, the adoption of national legislation and strategies to eradicate child marriage ought to be complemented by the adoption of comprehensive policies. Legislative measures alone often prove insufficient, in particular for girls from the poorest and most marginalized backgrounds and in the contexts of weak judicial systems and where access to justice is limited.⁸¹ In such contexts, it is hence particularly important that national legislation and strategies be complemented by policies and programmes that address the root causes of child, early and forced marriage.

51. Regarding access to education, most submissions specified measures taken to ensure attendance of primary school. However, in order to prevent child, early and forced marriage, an enabling policy and an environment in support of families and communities are needed for girls to make the transition to at least secondary school.

52. Cultural perceptions and harmful social norms around marriage remain a challenge. Engaging religious leaders and social workers has proven to be an effective way to address such perceptions and social norms at the community level. They can also be important agents for overcoming the obstacles that girls face owing to mobility restrictions and the inaccessibility of adequate

⁷⁹ See www.worldpolicycenter.org/policies/are-there-exceptions-to-the-general-legal-minimum-age-of-marriage-for-girls/is-there-an-exception-to-the-general-legal-minimum-age-of-marriage-for-girls-who-marry-under-religious-or-customary-law.

⁸⁰ See, for example, CEDAW/C/NGA/CO/7-8, CEDAW/C/JOR/CO/6, CEDAW/C/NPL/CO/6 and CEDAW/C/AFG/CO/3.

⁸¹ Submission of Plan International.

information and services, which, in some contexts, can exacerbate the isolation experienced by girls subjected to child, early and forced marriage.⁸²

53. Another recurring challenge is the lack of disaggregated data. For entities to better identify high-risk and disadvantaged groups, information needs to be disaggregated by sex, age, geographical location, socioeconomic status, education level and other factors. The absence of disaggregated data affects the ability of States and other actors to develop targeted policies and interventions to address the practice. The present report not only highlights the progress made but also demonstrates the need for a step change in gathering disaggregated data, in particular on the situation of already married girls. There continues to be a lack of research on already married girls whose husbands have left to fight or seek refuge internally or across borders, or who have been detained or disappeared. According to Save the Children, conflict and disaster may contribute to the widowing of already married girls, who are among the most vulnerable widows.⁸³

54. Informal unions pose a challenge for data collection and programmatic response. Informal unions involving children, although often beyond the administrative purview of authorities, have the same harmful consequences as formal child marriage. The practice of informal unions may create loopholes that allow perpetrators to avoid legal consequences in instances in which child marriage has been prohibited. Their informal nature affects girls' access to support services.⁸⁴

55. Recalling the recommendations contained in the previous reports on the issue, in particular the need to scale up efforts and implement them at the required pace, I recommend the following actions to Member States and other relevant stakeholders:

(a) Ensure a comprehensive approach to legislation to address child marriage, including by setting the minimum age for marriage at 18 years;

(b) Take legislative measures to remove any discriminatory provision in which child marriage is condoned or encouraged, as well as discriminatory legislation relating to, inter alia, inheritance, nationality, labour, access to credit, legal standing and access to sexual and reproductive health services. Such provisions compound the situation of married girls and women, perpetuating their exclusion and violence against them;

(c) Develop evidence-based, comprehensive, multisectoral strategies and action plans to end child, early and forced marriage and to address the specific situation of married girls and women. The plans should be developed with the free and meaningful participation of affected girls, adolescent girls, women and communities. The strategies should include measures to promote access to education, sexual and reproductive health information and services, economic opportunities and the participation of girls and women in decision-making process within their communities. Increased programmatic interventions, research and funds should be considered to promote already married girls' access to education up to the completion of the secondary level, as well as to employment and vocational training;

⁸² UNICEF Middle East and North Africa Regional Office, "Child marriage in the Middle East and North Africa".

⁸³ See https://blog.savethechildren.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/F_STC_union_online_dec19.pdf.

⁸⁴ Submission of Plan International.

- (d) **Strengthen and facilitate access to protective mechanisms and services for girls and women at risk and for already married girls and women, including legal services, safe accommodation and psychosocial support;**
- (e) **Ensure that girls engaged in informal unions enjoy the same level of protection and assistance as girls in child marriages, including through extending the reach of existing programmes and services;**
- (f) **Promote consistent data collection systems and statistics on child, early and forced marriage and informal unions, including in humanitarian settings and in contexts of infectious diseases such as COVID-19;**
- (g) **Enhance the role of and collaboration between national human rights institutions, national statistical institutions and other monitoring and reporting frameworks to better track and consistently report on child, early and forced marriage;**
- (h) **Ensure that life-saving support, including safe spaces and shelters, as well as diverse and accessible reporting mechanisms, are available in the context of the pandemic;**
- (i) **Ensure that COVID-19 recovery measures are transformative and promote inclusive, gender-equal and sustainable economies and societies. Measures should address inequality, exclusion and poverty, which are among the root causes of child, early and forced marriage.⁸⁵**

⁸⁵ See www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Women/COVID-19_and_Womens_Human_Rights.pdf.