

KEY POINTS

- Today, 1 out of 6 Filipina girls are married before they are 18 years old.
- Child marriage is a human rights violation that disrupts the development and growth of young girls, leading to teenage pregnancy, lower educational attainment and employability, higher risk of domestic violence.
- Key action points: 1) Ensure evidence-based policy formulation and programmatic interventions for both prevention and mitigation of child marriage; 2) Empower adolescent girls and place them at the center of programming efforts; 3) Pursue transformational change in social norms for eliminating child marriage, also by engaging men/boys, parents and community leaders.

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#GirlsNotBrides:

Ending Child Marriage in the Philippines

The United Nations defines child marriage as any formal marriage or informal union where one or both of the parties are under 18 years of age. Child marriage is a violation of human rights as embodied in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), and Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), all of which the Philippines has either signed or ratified. Child marriage compromises the development of girls and results in early pregnancy and social isolation, with little education and poor vocational training, reinforcing the gendered nature of poverty. Most child marriages are also forced marriages, where the consent of the child is not considered before the consummation of the union. While some boys are affected by child marriage, the issue impacts girls in far larger numbers and with more intensity.¹

Human Rights Violation and Hindrance to Sustainable Growth

The global Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) has a specific target (5.3) aiming at eliminating child marriage along with other harmful practices. Indeed, 'half of the entire SDGs will not be achieved without significant progress on child marriage, including those related to poverty, health, education, nutrition, food security, economic growth and reduction of inequality, including gender inequality.'²

More than 700 million girls and women alive today were married as children. 21% of young women aged 20 to 24 were married before they were 18, down from 25% a decade ago. There has been a small increase in the pace of decline of child marriage globally (driven largely by South Asia) but the decrease is nowhere near the rate required to eliminate this harmful practice by 2030 in line with the SDG target. Global progress would need to be 12 times over the rates of decline tracked over the past decade in order to eliminate child marriage.³

While the practice of child marriage has slowly been declining, particularly for girls under age 15, more concerted efforts are needed to accelerate the pace of change. If there is no reduction in child marriage, up to 280 million more girls alive today are at risk of becoming brides before they turn 18. The effects of population growth mean that this number will approach 320 million by 2050. If current trends continue, the total number of women alive that were married in childhood will grow from more than 700 million today to almost 1 billion women and girls by 2030.⁴

Social Determinants of Child Marriage

Many global studies have illuminated the complex nature of the issue of Child, Early and Forced Marriage (CEFM). Across countries, poverty, lack of education, cultural practices, and insecurity fuel and sustain this patriarchal practice; these vary from one community to the next and the practice may look different across regions and countries. Major socio-cultural factors driving child marriage include:

Economic reasons: Girls are either seen as an economic burden or valued as a capital for their exchange value in terms of goods, money or livestock.

Control over sexuality: Child marriage is often regarded as necessary for controlling girls' sexuality which is directly linked to family honor and status.

Custom and tradition: Where child marriage is prevalent, there is strong social pressure on families to either conform or face ridicule, disapproval or family shame. In those areas, some of the female child survivors of sexual violence are married off to the perpetrators, to protect the 'family honor'. Local perceptions regarding an ideal age of marriage are tied to economic factors such as dowries, bride price, et cetera.

Security: Situations of insecurity and acute poverty, including those due to natural disasters and armed conflicts, can prompt parents to resort to child marriage as a protective mechanism or survival strategy. In many cases, in the eyes of these parents, marrying their daughters even under 18 is a way to secure a better future for their daughters.

Child Marriage in the Philippines

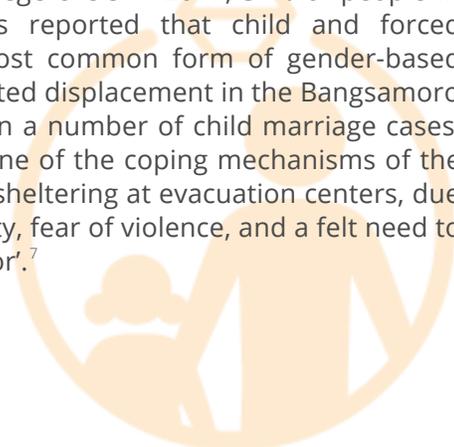
In alignment with its commitment to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child which the Philippines ratified in 1990, the Philippine Family Code sets the marriageable age at 18 years. And yet, 1 out of 6 (16.5%) young women aged 20-24 married before they became 18 (NDHS, 2017).

The consequences of 1 in 6 Filipino girls marrying before 18:

While some boys are affected by child marriage too, the issue affects girls' lives far more intensely as manifested often in poorer health and education outcomes, reduced employability, and higher risks to abuse and violence. Analysis from the Commission on Population and Development (POPCOM) of Region XII shows that child marriage is both a result and a cause of the perpetuation of a cycle of gendered poverty:

- Many adolescent brides are exposed to early and frequently repeated pregnancies and childbirths before they become physically mature and psychologically ready for responsible motherhood. Evidence shows that adolescent mothers between the ages of 15 and 19 are twice as likely to die of pregnancy and experience childbirth complications than women between the ages of 20 and 24.
- The children of teen mothers are at greater risk of stunting and underweight and even at significantly higher risk of early child death compared with those with mothers who gave birth in their 20s.
- In many cases, the greatest obstacles to girls' education are child marriage, pregnancy, and domestic chores which lead them to drop out of school and lose vocational chances.
- In addition, child brides are more likely to experience domestic violence. Data from 2017 Philippines National Demographic and Health Survey (NDHS) indicate that 26.4% of married women aged 15-19 years old reported experiencing physical, sexual or emotional violence.⁵

Studies cite the complex interplay of armed conflict, displacement, and poverty as drivers of child marriage. During the Marawi siege crisis in 2017, 31% of people in the evacuation sites reported that child and forced marriage are the most common form of gender-based violence.⁶ The protracted displacement in the Bangsamoro region has resulted in a number of child marriage cases, as it appears to be one of the coping mechanisms of the families temporarily sheltering at evacuation centers, due to economic instability, fear of violence, and a felt need to maintain 'family honor'.⁷





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In addition, child marriage and early childbirths have significant implications on the economic well-being of not only the young mothers themselves but the entire country. Since child marriage leads the girls to have children earlier and more children over their lifetime, it affects their educational attainment negatively, thereby curtailing future opportunities for them to compete for well-paying jobs. The costs related to earnings losses for women married as children are high. The gains in earnings and productivity that would have been observed today if women had not married early for a core set of 15 countries are estimated at \$26 billion.⁸

Strategies for Ending Child Marriage

The SDG Target 5.3 aims at eliminating all harmful practices including child marriage. Indeed many other development goals and targets enshrined in the SDGs, PDP and AmBisyon Natin 2040 will not be achieved without making significant progress on addressing child marriage. Devising sustainable and structural solutions will be needed to address the difficult conditions that resource-poor communities face, enabling them to eliminate and eradicate child marriage as a solution to their socio-economic problems.

UNFPA Philippines has developed a broad, multi-sectoral approach to help accelerate efforts by national and regional governments' interventions

to end child marriage. In pursuit of the eradication of child marriage as a long-term goal, UNFPA's strategic objectives support legal and policy framework, mobilize resources and share knowledge that accelerate actions to enhance investments in both preventing child marriage and supporting married adolescent girls. UNFPA also provides support in engaging key actors – including young people as agents of change – in catalyzing shifts towards positive gender norms; and improving the data and evidence base.

The Global Programme to Accelerate Action to End Child Marriage, a joint effort by UNFPA and UNICEF in 12 countries, has demonstrated the following five strategies are proven effective towards ending child marriage.

1. **Empower** adolescent girls who are at risk of child marriage, or who are already married, with knowledge about their rights and consequences of child marriage, and with skills to express their views and exercise their choices.
2. **Educate** and **mobilize** families, communities and leaders to invest in adolescent girls, also by engaging men and boys, against child marriage.
3. **Strengthen** the accessibility, quality and responsiveness of services for adolescent girls in key sectors especially education, health, child and social protection.
4. **Foster** national laws and policies that protect and promote the rights of adolescent girls.
5. **Generate** and **use** robust data and evidence to inform programs and policies relating to adolescent girls

In addition, child marriage is both a symptom and a result of deep-seated gender inequalities and restrictive gender norm. Thus, it is crucial to employ a gender-transformative approach that fosters critical examination of inequalities and gender roles, norms, and dynamics; promotes the relative position of women, girls, and marginalized group; and transforms the underlying social structures, policies and social norms that perpetuate and legitimize gender inequalities.

Case Study

Successful country experiences in gender-transformative approach in addressing child marriage in their communities

 A study in Brazil on the drivers of child marriage lifted the importance of engaging fathers of adolescent girls in programmes to prevent child marriage and promote girls' education and protection.⁹

 A multi-country study from South Asia on the causes and consequences of child marriage recommends greater macroeconomic investment in girls' education and overall poverty reduction programmes to address the prevalence of child marriage at scale, thus reinforcing the need to implement approaches at various levels in the socio-ecology.¹⁰

Ensure linkages to support economic empowerment for adolescent girls and their families to enhance the sustainability of decisions to delay marriage. Poor families should be provided with financial support to keep girls in school. Further research should be carried out to explore the correlation between child marriage and education. Employment opportunities should be created for girls after completing education. Women-friendly, local income-generating activities should be increased so that girls can become financially empowered and thereby delay arranged marriage as a coping mechanism. Special attention should be given to girls coming from families with disability, female-headed families, families without working or wage-earning adults, and families from hard-to-reach areas.

Preempt an inter-generational cycle of child marriage and poverty. In addition to enhancing aforementioned measures for the 'prevention' of child marriage, support to married adolescents as 'mitigation' measures should also be scaled up so that, for instance, those girls who dropped out from school because of marriage and child-bearing can come back on track of continued education and skills development.

Involve boys and men in activities designed towards the transformation of gendered power relations. Programs for gender equality that creatively engage boys and men are required. This, in turn, would support them to recognize issues of masculinity, which are harmful for themselves and their relationships, as well as the privilege and power they wield in society. Such engagement would enable them to become change agents for gender equality.

Ultimately, UNFPA promotes the rights and well-being of all adolescents. UNFPA supports the government in introducing legislation and interventions that recognize the right of adolescents to express their own views on all matters of concern to them and be responsible for decisions affecting them. All laws, policies and programs that aim to prevent child marriage should not in any way; either directly or indirectly; disadvantage, stigmatize, or penalize adolescents. Policies should promote adolescent-centered investments that address the root causes of child marriage.

Recommendations

Such a gender-responsive, whole system-wide approach would also include the following components:

Consolidate and strengthen the evidence base and knowledge management on child marriage. Available data indicate that child marriage seems to be more common in some areas in the Philippines. However, there is not enough available disaggregated data that can inform programs and policies at the LGU level. National and regional governments through the Philippines Statistics Authority (PSA) and other regulatory/coordination bodies such as the Philippine Commission on Women and Commission on Bangsamoro Women need to build and maintain data systems that will contribute to building evidence on child marriage prevalence to understand trends and monitor progress towards its elimination.

CALL TO ACTION

The UNFPA welcomes the passage of national legislation and policies for eradicating child, early and forced marriage for the best interests of the girl child. It will aid the realization of a global commitment to ensure that girls and boys fully enjoy their childhood free from the negative consequences of marriage; and that they experience **healthier**, **safer** and more **empowered** life transitions while in control of their own destiny.

The passage of such national laws will contribute to the fulfillment of the Philippines' commitment to international agreements ratified by the Senate and will call for the strengthened nationwide implementation of the Provisions of the Family Code of the Philippines (EO 209) and the Magna Carta of Women (RA 9710) setting 18 years old as the legal age of marriage.

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