

A photograph of a woman with dark hair, wearing a colorful patterned sling, carrying a young child. The child is wearing a light blue shirt and a white mesh hat. The woman is looking off to the side with a serious expression. The background is a blurred outdoor setting with greenery and a body of water.

# *Vows of* **POVERTY**

26 Countries Where Child Marriage  
Eclipses Girls' Education

**A Snapshot of  
Causes, Solutions  
and Ways to Help.**





# Vows of POVERTY

- “I Heard Them Talking About Marriage”** ..... 1
- Causes of Child Marriage** ..... 5
- Barriers to Education** ..... 9
- 26 Countries Where Child Marriage Rates Exceed Those for Secondary Girls’ Education** ..... 13
- Finding Solutions to Child Marriage** ..... 25
- Overcoming Barriers to Education** ..... 35
- Ways You Can Help** ..... 41

**Cover photo:** A girl carries a young child through a rice field in rural Vatomandry District, Madagascar. As in many other countries, education, poverty and early marriage are highly linked in Madagascar, where nearly 70 percent of girls with no education marry early compared with 28 percent of those with secondary education.

*Unless otherwise indicated, the photographs in this report are representative in nature and should not imply that their subjects are or were child brides or that they are not enrolled in school.*



## “I Heard Them Talking About Marriage”

Jobeda Begum returned from school one day in rural northeastern Bangladesh to hear a disturbing conversation. “I came home and saw a group of people there. I had no clue they were coming,” she said. “I heard them talking about marriage.”

Surely they can’t be talking about me, she thought. Marriage would mean having to move in with the husband’s family and, likely, away from the school where she was a top student. Besides, Jobeda was only 15.

But the very next day Jobeda was forced to marry. And, unfortunately, she was far from alone. Every 2 seconds, a girl under 18 years of age is forced into marriage somewhere in the world.

Stories like Jobeda’s unfold at this astonishing rate in spite of the 1948 United Nations Declaration of Human Rights asserting that marriage should be “entered only with the free and full consent of the intending spouses.” In spite of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the Declaration on Elimination of Discrimination Against Women, the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child.

In spite of numerous official mandates vowing to address child marriage, millions of girls annually wed before their 18th birthday. Many before their 15th. Others before their 10th or 8th or 6th — in spite of the fact that marriage, all too often, leads to the end of their education, their childhoods, and, sometimes, their lives.

Although child marriage rates have nominally declined worldwide, that matters little to the 39,000 girls<sup>1</sup> like Jobeda who wed *every day*, with little or no choice in when or whom they will marry.

For most of them, “for better or worse” becomes overwhelmingly worse; “for richer, for poorer,” most persistently poorer. The repercussions of early marriage are complex and severe. And they endure. From higher maternal mortality rates to domestic violence and a greater risk of rape or HIV infection,<sup>2</sup> child brides shoulder unspeakable physical burdens. Yet the damage doesn’t stop there.

Early forced marriage often means early forced withdrawal from school too.

Jobeda was confident that wouldn’t happen to her. After all, her father and father-in-law had promised she could resume her education after marriage.

She relished studying her country’s official language, Bangla. She loved Islamic history and social studies too.

So much so that, upon learning she had missed two exams around her wedding period, she sneaked away from her new in-laws’ home, back to her village and took one of the year-end tests. She passed the exam and impressed her teachers so much that they came looking for her in her new village, insisting she take the second exam as well. Her father and father-in-law agreed they should honor their word and permitted her to take the next exam, one that would allow her to continue in school.

Jobeda was moving forward.

Then she returned to her in-laws’ home and heard a decidedly different voice: her mother-in-law’s.

“I got a bride for my son so she would work in the house, not go to school,” Jobeda recalls her mother-in-law saying.

## “Marriage and premature pregnancy prides millions of girls out of school and into a world of diminished opportunity.”

**GORDON BROWN**  
U.N. special envoy on education

Jobeda’s father-in-law changed his mind. So did her father.

Jobeda dropped out.

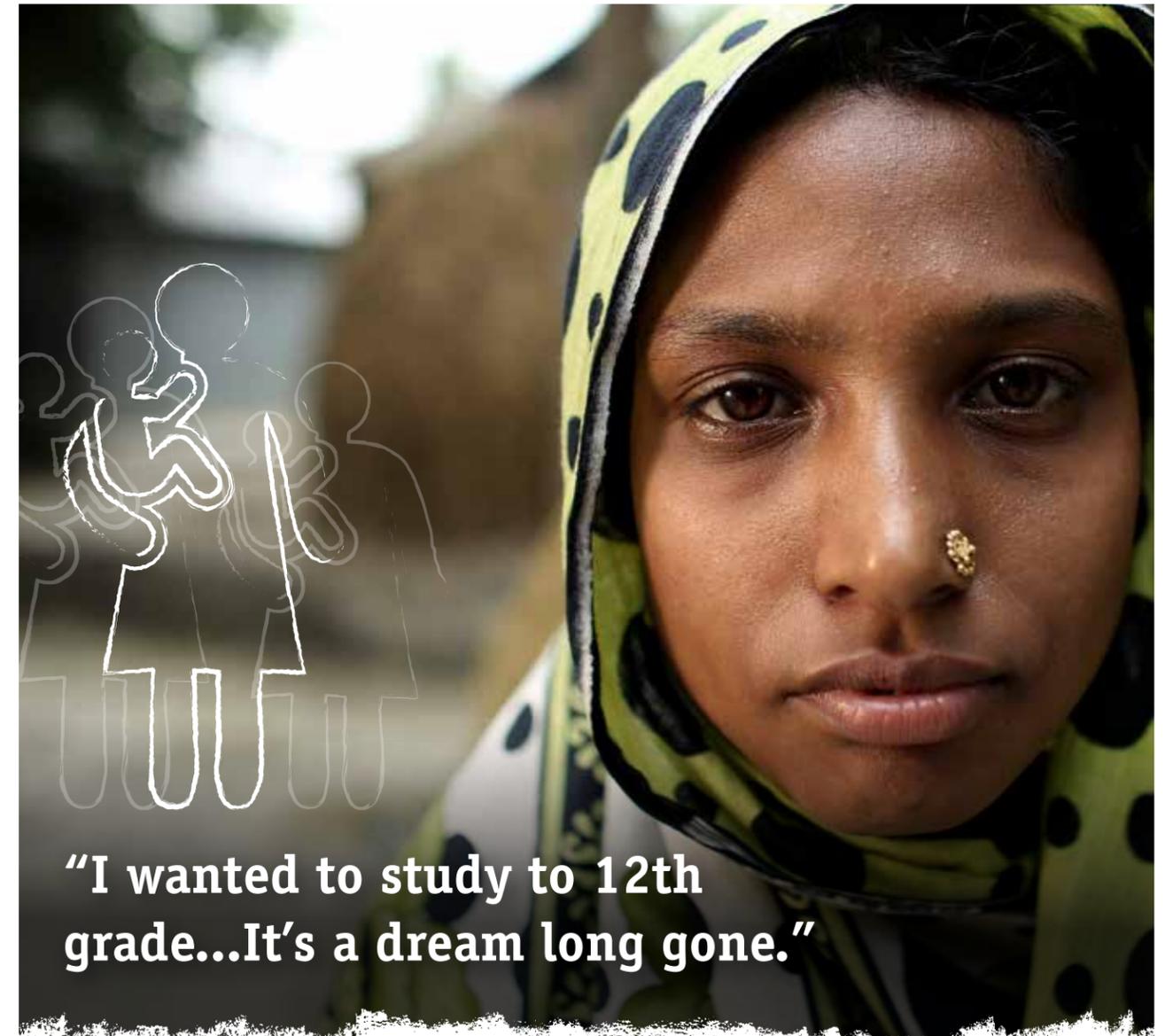
Unfortunately Jobeda’s story is not unique in Bangladesh, where nearly two-thirds of girls are married before age 18 and only half go to secondary school.<sup>3</sup> In fact CARE has found that Bangladesh is 1 of 26 countries in the world where girls are more likely to marry before age 18 than to enroll in secondary school. We list those countries beginning on page 14, in order from those with the smallest such gap to those with the largest.

Uneducated girls tend to have fewer employable, income-generating skills. So their withdrawal from school all but clinches their poverty fate.

“Marriage and premature pregnancy prides millions of girls out of school and into a world of diminished opportunity,” Gordon Brown, U.N. special envoy on education and former U.K. prime minister, writes in “Out of Wedlock, into School: Combating Child Marriage through Education.” “Denied the chance to realize their potential through education, many of these girls will be condemned to lives blighted by poverty, illiteracy and powerlessness.”

And with that lost potential, said U.S. President Barack Obama in a speech earlier this year to the African Union, so goes a more promising future for girls, for their families, communities, nations and world.

“When girls cannot go to school and grow up not knowing how to read or write, that denies the world future women



engineers, future women doctors, future women business owners, future women presidents,” he said. “That sets us all back.”

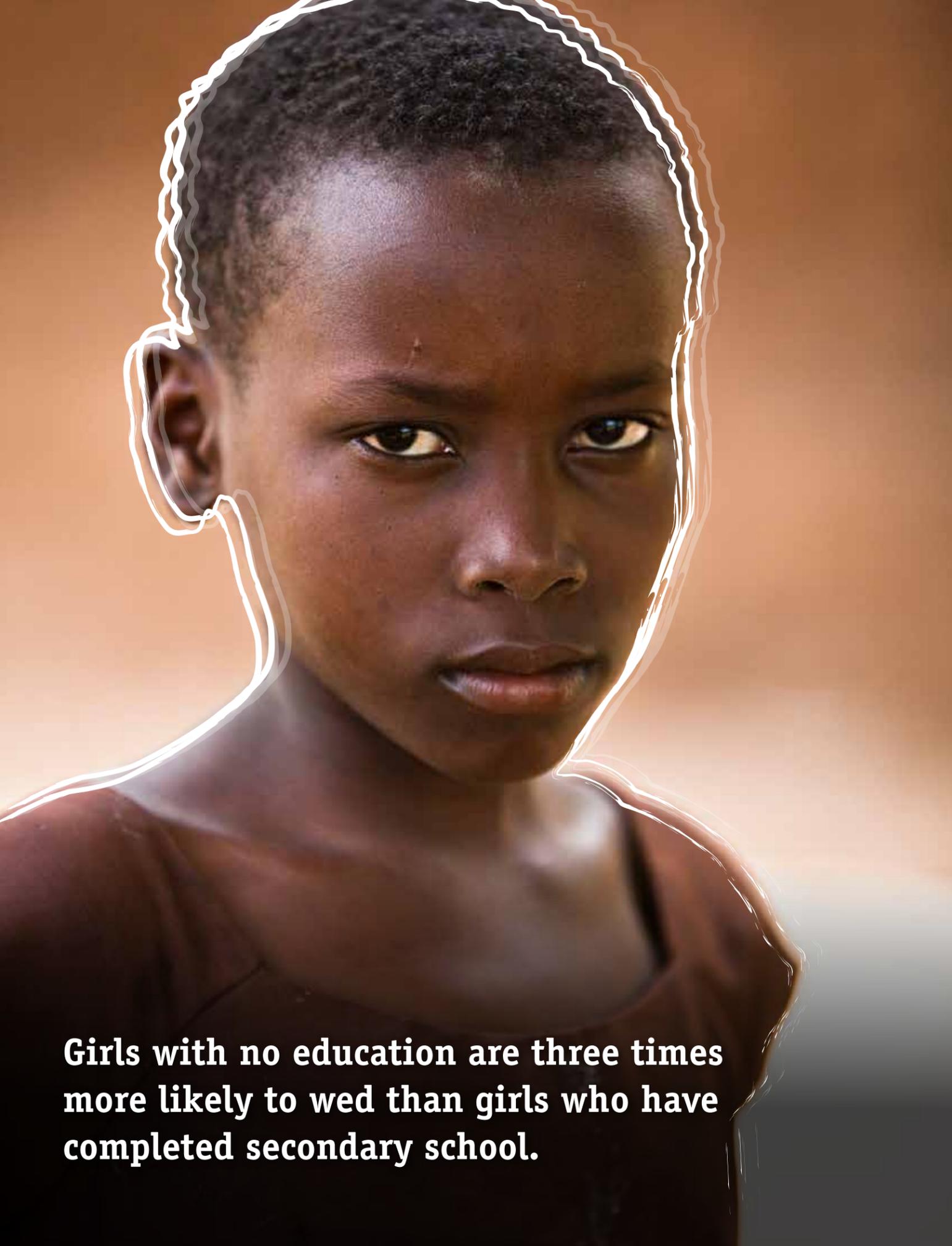
Girls with no education are three times more likely to wed than girls who have completed secondary school.<sup>4</sup> In parts of the developing world the ratio soars to 6:1.<sup>5</sup> Marrying early too often closes the book on education — and slams the door on a girl’s right to learn.

Soon after dropping out of school, young bride Jobeda — only a child herself — was having a baby. This is a danger-

ous proposition in places such as rural Bangladesh, where high-quality maternal health services are often hard to find. In fact, globally, child brides like Jobeda are 28 percent more likely to die in child birth than women in their 20s.<sup>6</sup>

Over the span of a year or so, Jobeda’s teenage life had been turned upside down. She was married — and a mother.

“I wanted to study to 12th grade,” Jobeda said. “I wanted to be a teacher. That was back then. It’s gone now. It’s a dream long gone.”



**Girls with no education are three times more likely to wed than girls who have completed secondary school.**



## Causes Of Child Marriage

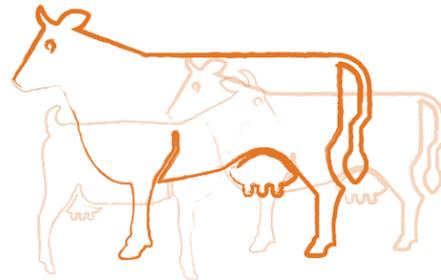
Child marriage doesn't limit itself to a particular culture, region or religion. It is global, and its reasons are many and complex. One common, cross-cutting issue is gender inequality — the second-class status assigned to girls and women in many societies. And one contributing factor that similarly transcends culture, region and religion is poverty, whose many expressions lead to, and intersect with, the practice. Addressing the root causes of child marriage is necessary if families, communities, nations and the world hope to end it for good and for all.

**Gender discrimination:** Child marriage is a product of social and cultural norms that devalue women and girls and discriminate against them, often limiting their roles to the domestic realm and thus preventing them from accessing educational, vocational or economic opportunities outside the household. According to a United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) report,<sup>7</sup> such discrimination "often manifests itself in the form of domestic violence; marital rape; deprivation of food; a lack of access to information, education and healthcare; and to general impediments to mobility." Child marriage is both a cause and a consequence of the most severe form of gender discrimination. Just as devaluing women and girls leads to early marriage, so does the child bride's lack of power and voice result in further gender-based discrimination, the report says.

**Poverty and economic insecurity:** Many parents genuinely believe that marriage will secure a daughter's future and that it is in her best interests to marry early. Alternatively girls may be viewed as an economic burden, as a commodity, or as a means for settling familial debts or disputes, or securing social, economic or political alliances. And girls themselves sometimes make the careful decision to marry early in hopes of leaving poverty behind them. Child marriage indirectly promotes poverty, however, as it often means that girls who marry young likely will not be properly educated, gain the needed skills to make informed decisions or take part in the workforce. "When I conceived, I was poor," said child-bride and child-mother Ambia Begum of Bangladesh. "Now I'm more poor."



**Dowry or bride-price:** These long-standing customs, in which money or gifts such as livestock change hands, can sometimes create powerful incentives for parents to marry off their daughters young. In Bangladesh, where the dowry price increases as girls get older or educated, poor families obligated to cover that cost find strong incentive in marrying off their daughters early.



**Cultural or religious customs:** Deeply rooted cultural or religious customs often lead parents to marry their daughters early. In places such as India, where inter-caste marriages are stigmatized, delaying a daughter's marriage, parents fear, can jeopardize the chances of finding a good match for her later.



**Controlling or "protecting" the girl's sexuality:** In certain cultures, marrying a girl young — and thus presumably protecting her virginity — is thought to protect her honor and, by virtue of that, the family's. If the girl's reputation is compromised through premarital sexual activity, the family may be socially stigmatized, and the girl may find it difficult to find anyone willing to marry her later. In other situations, families think that marrying their daughters early mitigates the risk of their being sexually harassed or raped by strangers, a cruel irony given that child brides are three times more likely to be raped by their husbands.<sup>8</sup>



**Inadequate laws:** Many countries have laws against child marriage before age 18, yet those laws often are not enforced. In India, for example, laws forbidding child marriage date to 1929. Yet, with every other Indian girl getting married early, it is home to more child brides than any other country in the world.<sup>9</sup> In 2009 Afghanistan passed a law enabling the Shiite minority to impose its own form of family law — including permitting

child marriage. In spite of its 2003 Child Rights Act, which raised to 18 the minimum age for its daughters to marry, Nigeria administers three different legal systems imposing different rules for child marriage. Some laws regarding child marriage allow for exceptions, such as permission from the parents, whose decisions and actions may be governed more by local custom and tradition.



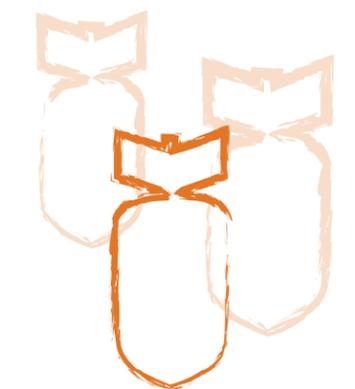
**Kidnapping and trafficking:** Some poor families are tempted to sell their girls into marriage because the transaction enables large sums of money to change hands. Many of those sold into marriage, often into the hands of wealthy, older men in other countries, face a dreadful fate of marital rape, other violence and further subjugation. In some parts of the world, men engage in bride kidnapping, a practice in which a man abducts the woman he wishes to marry, or perhaps groups of girls that he then sells into marriage as has been recently reported in Nigeria. These victim-brides become powerless to their husband-captor and often have no legal recourse. Malta's criminal code, for example, offers immunity to a kidnapper if he will marry the girl he has abducted. In other places, such as some parts of Ethiopia and central Asia, abducting a girl is viewed as a socially acceptable way for a man to gain a wife.



**Climate:** In some places external forces, such as climate change, feed a family's poverty and fuel the urgency parents feel to protect their daughters and sons. Losing their crops to floods or their homes to land erosion, families can rush to marry off their daughters early before they are displaced or before their economic situation deteriorates further. In the drought-plagued Horn of Africa in 2011-2012, the phenomenon of "drought brides" emerged whereby families would marry off a daughter in order to feed and save the other children.



**War and conflict:** Girls often are among the first casualties of war, with kidnapping, rape and trafficking among the frequent dangers. These very real or perceived threats often lead parents to settle for a lesser evil: marrying their daughter to a man they hope will protect her. In other cases parents may have no say at all about the marriage of their girls. With girls seen as the spoils of war they can be abducted from their families, married to a victor in the conflict or sold to another man for profit. A [CARE report](#) on child marriage in the Syrian refugee context found an alarming increase in the percentage of child brides among Syrian refugees in Jordan, more than double from 12 percent in 2011 to more than 30 percent in 2014.<sup>10</sup>



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are 28% more  
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## Barriers to Education

For so many girls around the world, getting to school is as easy as boarding a school bus or walking a few blocks on a straight sidewalk. But not for millions of their counterparts living in dangerous environments, oppressed by conflict, poverty and by social norms that limit — or even eliminate — their access to education. Parents with meager means often face impossible decisions about their daughters' lives, leading too often to marriage because they cannot feed or clothe them. With no income and little opportunity to earn it, even girls themselves sometimes choose early marriage in the hope of escaping poverty's relentless grip. Undergirding all barriers, however, lies one persistent, destructive theme: the devaluation of girls.

**Gender inequalities:** Underlying gender inequalities limit girls' opportunities, often denying them the education that is rightfully theirs as mandated by the U.N. Universal Declaration on Human Rights. In many cases, when economics and workloads force them to choose, parents will often send their sons to school before their daughters and will allocate money to cover school fees, uniforms and supplies for their sons before their daughters. Families also may protect study and/or play time for boys, while girls are more likely tasked with household chores, which keep them out of, or make them late to, school in which case they either miss lessons or are denied entry altogether. Girls are less likely than boys to be registered at birth, and the absence of a birth certificate can make school enrollment difficult if not impossible.

**Lack of personal and school safety:** Girls can be kidnapped or raped on the way to school — and even at school by teachers and fellow students. More often they are teased or harassed on the way to school or while in school, and that can discourage them from pursuing their education. Even if violence is not an active threat, girls face other personal safety issues, such as a lack of gender-segregated bathrooms with running water and sanitary pads. Lacking appropriate sanitary facilities, girls are likely to miss up to a week of school each month.

**Domestic work:** In the developing world, children often are engaged in family duties that distract from their schooling. Domestic work for girls, such as cooking, cleaning and fetching water, is critical to a family's economic and daily survival. However, an imbalance of time between boys and girls dedicated to these duties results in lost educational opportunities and progress. "From the time the girl wakes up, she has to light a fire, draw some water [from a well or creek]; if there is some breakfast, she has to prepare it. . . . A boy simply wakes up, washes himself, takes the breakfast and off he goes," says a rural community member in Malawi. As a result of disproportionate domestic workloads, girls often arrive late to school or miss class altogether. This work cannot be made up later in the evening, because many of these communities lack electricity, which prevents study outside of sunlit hours.

**Language:** Imagine going to school and not understanding the teacher's language. For many indigenous and ethnic minority students around the world, this is an everyday challenge and a significant barrier to educational progress. When teachers effectively communicate across multiple languages, and when schools establish bilingual and intercultural models of teaching in classrooms, students thrive and their parents become more engaged. CARE programs in Peru and Cambodia have shown that parental support for education increases with bilingual classrooms. Understandably, when parents can comprehend what their children are learning, they are more involved in the education process. Worldwide, parental engagement is a strong indicator for success in school.

**School safety and violence:** It's no surprise that when schools are not safe, students do not attend. Violence in schools is a common problem that can stem from teachers or the students themselves. When CARE staff asked

students in a remote northern region of Bangladesh which problem most affected their ability to attend school over the previous month, most students mentioned violence in their community. Students are both keen observers of, and often entangled in, cycles of violence that obstruct their development and educational opportunities. Girls are particularly vulnerable. In a CARE study in Malawi sexual abuse of adolescent schoolgirls was found to be shockingly common. Perpetuated by teachers and fellow students, this abuse flourished in silence. Qualitative interviews revealed that girls often agreed to engage in sexual behaviors with teachers or other elders for much-needed money or passing grades. As a result parents withdrew their daughters from school, or girls withdrew themselves, in an effort to avoid harassment, statutory rape and sexual misconduct.

**Shortage of female teachers:** In geographically remote and undesirable areas, finding teachers — particularly female teachers — is a constant challenge. Married female teachers often lack the support or permission from their husbands to work in these areas. And single female teachers often struggle to win their parents' support for relocating to remote areas. Generally, schools can find it difficult to recruit teachers, especially female teachers, to dangerous or otherwise undesirable communities or schools. Sometimes cultural or religious leanings insist that female students be taught by female teachers. A shortage of women teachers often means parents will not enroll or send their daughters to school — and it means female students will miss the value of exposure to a positive female role model.

**Early marriage and early pregnancy:** When a girl marries, her childhood and education effectively end as she begins a sexual relationship with her mate that often is soon followed by her first child. Even if her husband is amenable to her continuing her education, the physical demands of childbirth on a girl result in a greater risk of death<sup>11</sup> and also lifelong medical problems such as fistula. In many cases girls drop out of school immediately after they get pregnant, whether they are married or not, and in some instances they are expelled. In places such as western Nepal married girls are expected to move in with the husband's family and shoulder home chores. There is no time for school. Marriage becomes a nearly insurmountable barrier to education.

**School costs:** School fees, uniforms and supplies often prove cost-prohibitive for poor families. And when resources are limited, parents will usually cover these costs



for their sons before they will their daughters. Indirect, or opportunity, costs also factor in as families with limited means often cannot afford the lost income that results from sending their daughters to school. Parents often reason that time spent learning is time not spent working and contributing to the household finances.

**Hunger, malnutrition and/or illness:** Girls in many environments may not be properly nourished, particularly if their countries or regions have endured open conflict and natural disasters. With poverty so pervasive and food supplies so short in many conflict-riddled countries, girls — and boys too for that matter — may simply be too weak to attend school. Or they may suffer from acute hunger, making it not only difficult for them to get through each day physically, but nearly impossible for them to concentrate. Girls also are more likely to be tasked with caring for sick parents or other family members.

**War and conflict:** Girls who live in countries at war or in conflict are often the most vulnerable members of their societies, being raped, abducted or made into sexual slaves.

Many of these countries can barely keep girls — and boys — safe, much less in school. For example, more than 25,000 reported cases of rape were reported in the Democratic Republic of Congo in 2005 alone,<sup>12</sup> even when internal conflict and external warfare had supposedly ebbed. Many were girls abducted en route to school. Thus, families in the Democratic Republic of Congo and other countries in conflict pull them out of school, if one even still exists, to try to keep them safe. Schools in war zones are many times damaged, destroyed or closed, and their teachers can be displaced or absent because of safety concerns.

**Distance to schools:** Because many of the countries with low education rates are among the world's poorest, it is no surprise that schools are few and distances to reach them are far. With a lack of transportation, the threat of abuse and a gnawing hunger, even a strong appetite for learning can be weakened by a long walk to school. In some communities, secondary school boarding facilities are available in cases of particularly long distances, but poor families often are less likely to cover that expense for their daughters.



In November 2014 the United Nations General Assembly adopted the first substantive resolution on child marriage. Co-sponsored by 116 countries, it recognizes child marriage as a human-rights abuse against women and girls.



## 26 Countries Where Child Marriage Rates Exceed Those for Girls' Secondary Education

Following is a list of the 26 countries where girls are more likely to be married before age 18 than to be enrolled in secondary school.

We specify secondary education because, although many countries have closed or nearly closed their gender gaps in primary education, they still face significant gaps in secondary education. Also, secondary school typically coincides with the onset of adolescence, when girls become more vulnerable to a host of gender-related expectations and risks from domestic work and sexual coercion to violence, pregnancy and marriage. We rank these countries in a countdown from the country with the smallest gap between its child marriage rate and its net secondary enrollment rate to the country with the largest gap.

To determine this list we drew child-marriage data primarily from UNICEF and net secondary enrollment figures from the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). Where data were not available from those sources we used country-level databases or derived estimates using similar data. For the purposes of this list we defined “child marriage” as marriage of girls younger than 18 and have used the term interchangeably with “early marriage” and “forced marriage.” (Note: Although boys also are subjected to early marriage in parts of the world — see CARE’s report [Dads Too Soon: The Child Grooms of Nepal](#) — girls are disproportionately affected and make up the overwhelming majority of children who are married.) For the net enrollment rate we used UNESCO’s definition of total number of students in the theoretical age group for a given level of education enrolled in that level, expressed as a percentage of the total population in that age group. Net enrollment rate should not be confused with gross enrollment rate or with attendance rate, as mere enrollment in school doesn’t necessarily mean that the enrolled children attend on a regular basis.

Some of the countries on this list are making great strides in delaying marriage for girls and opening more doors to quality education. They offer hope and may not be on lists like this much longer.

It should be noted that a country’s absence from this list doesn’t necessarily earn the nation a passing grade for

secondary enrollment rates or child marriage. India, for example, has lowered its child marriage rates overall, but, because of its large population, it still is home to one-third of all child brides in the world.<sup>13</sup> With a child marriage rate of 47 percent, it is spared from the list only because of its slightly higher secondary-school-enrollment rate.

Several countries escaped this list by only a few percentage points. Cameroon’s child marriage and secondary enrollment rates are 38 percent and 38.7 percent, respectively.<sup>14</sup> And the rates were exactly the same, at 39 percent, in the Democratic Republic of the Congo.<sup>15</sup> Yemen missed this list by fewer than 2 percentage points,<sup>16</sup> and that’s based on data collected before civil war broke out in March, limiting people’s ability to access water and food, let alone schools.

Other countries, meanwhile, are putting more distance between themselves and this list. El Salvador, for example, has increased its net enrollment rate for girls by 20 percentage points since 2000.<sup>17</sup> Nepal, meanwhile, reduced its child marriage rate one-fifth from 2006 to 2011<sup>18</sup> (though it remains high at 43 percent<sup>19</sup>) while increasing secondary school enrollment for girls from 44 percent in 2007 to 62 percent in 2014.<sup>20</sup>

But there remain 26 countries where child marriage trumps girls secondary education, saddling them with a devastating deficit in opportunities for girls. Here we count them down, from countries with the smallest such deficit to those with the largest.

## #26 Tanzania

37% of girls married before 18  
33% of girls enrolled in secondary school

Lack of legal protections to prohibit child marriage and an educational system that discriminates against girls are just two of the reasons that Tanzania has a large number of child brides. Although boys cannot legally wed in Tanzania until they are 18, girls can legally marry at 15 with consent from parents or guardians.<sup>21</sup> Many schools impose mandatory pregnancy testing. The government in mainland Tanzania allows schools to expel or exclude married students or students who commit offenses “against morality,” widely interpreted to include pregnancy.<sup>22</sup> Passing scores on government-mandated scholastic tests are required for students to move into secondary school.<sup>23</sup> Failing them often leaves girls vulnerable to early marriage. There is hope, however, that Tanzania may not be on such a list for long. The Tanzanian government is reviewing laws and rules that tolerate early marriage. Child and education advocates also are pushing the country to criminalize marital rape and other violence.

## #25 Afghanistan

40% of girls married before 18  
33% of girls enrolled in secondary school

Afghanistan makes this list in spite of landmark 2009 legislation that, among other things, criminalized forced marriage. Early marriage yields higher maternal mortality rates in the country. Human Rights Watch says an estimated 2,000 Afghan women and girls attempt suicide each year by setting themselves on fire, acts often linked to domestic violence and/or forced marriage. Violence on a national scale — the country has been devastated by a quarter-century of war — compels some families to marry off their daughters early, believing it will promote stability for them amid the civil unrest. Education often takes a back seat, despite an Afghanistan constitution declaring girls’ education a human right. Boys outnumber girls in school 3 to 1. Families struggling to cover school costs often send their sons to school before their daughters. Even those with the means sometimes fear for their daughters’ safety. A [CARE analysis](#) of more than 1,000 attacks on schools between 2006 and 2008 found that girls’ education was targeted more than boys.<sup>24</sup>

## #24 Sierra Leone

44% of girls married before 18  
36% of girls enrolled in secondary school

Although Sierra Leone has a long way to go in protecting girls from early marriage, the country has made impressive gains since a civil war ended there in 2002. The child-marriage rate dropped significantly, from 56 percent in 2006 to 44 percent in 2010.<sup>25</sup> And from 2005 to 2007, the average age at which girls married increased from 15 to 17. This was the biggest gain among all West African nations.<sup>26</sup>

## #23 Côte d’Ivoire

33% of girls married before 18  
25% of girls enrolled in secondary school\*

One in three girls in Côte d’Ivoire is married by age 18.<sup>27</sup> The rate in some regions of the country nearly doubles that.<sup>28</sup> When married, girls in Côte d’Ivoire are highly unlikely to have access to birth control with only about 9 percent using contraception. This leads to girls giving birth early as well as close spacing of children, which in turn can lead to maternal death, low birth weights and further poverty.<sup>29</sup> \*Corresponds to Cycle II of secondary school, typically ages 15 to 18.

## #22 Madagascar

41% of girls married before 18  
31% of girls enrolled in secondary school

Almost two-thirds of girls in some regions of Madagascar are married at or before age 18, significantly higher than the national rate. Education, poverty and early marriage are highly linked here.<sup>30</sup> About 68 percent of those with no education are likely to be married compared with 28 percent of those with secondary education.<sup>31</sup> And the country’s poorest girls are twice as likely to be married as are those from the richest households, according to Girls Not Brides, a global coalition of more than 500 organizations committed to ending child marriage.

**Bangladesh has the highest child marriage rate outside of sub-Saharan Africa, and about 30 percent of girls in the South Asian country are married at 15 or younger.**

## #21 Equatorial Guinea

30% of girls married before 18  
19% of girls enrolled in secondary school

The numbers in Equatorial Guinea tell only part of the story of child brides in this country of half a million people. The country's low secondary school enrollment rate, with fewer than 1 in 5 girls going to secondary school, shows the devastating effect of gender discrimination in Equatorial Guinea.<sup>32</sup> Girls as young as 10 are married to men as old as 70 and also into marriages with several other wives and rampant physical and sexual abuse.<sup>33</sup> Almost 1 in 10 of girls is married before age 15. Lack of opportunity for women in professional jobs is a persistent problem.<sup>34</sup> The average female in Equatorial Guinea receives only one-fifth the education of the average male, with women having little control over any aspect of their lives.

## #20 Bangladesh

65% of girls married before 18  
51% of girls enrolled in secondary school

Bangladesh has the highest child marriage rate outside of sub-Saharan Africa, and about 30 percent of girls in the South Asian country are married at 15 or younger.<sup>35</sup> Severe poverty drives much of the problem, as do social norms that devalue girls and lax enforcement of laws forbidding child marriage. Violent weather exacerbated by climate change in some parts of the country drives even more girls to marry early. Poor families lose their farms to floods and mudslides, leading them to marry their girls early to limit the number of mouths to feed and, in their view, ensure a more stable future for their daughters.<sup>36</sup> The country's leadership has sent mixed signals on child marriage, as Bangladesh has made a long-term commitment to eliminate the practice by 2041 while parts of the government have proposed, for now, lowering from 18 to 16 the minimum age at which girls can marry with parental or court consent.<sup>37</sup> Some communities are trying new approaches to tackling the problem, including the 90 villages in CARE's Tipping Point project, which identifies the root causes of child marriage in poor, isolated communities and develops innovative strategies for addressing them. It is named for the "tipping point" of lasting change that can come as family members and community leaders become aware of — and support — girls' dreams of education, jobs and greater self-reliance.

## #19 Mauritania

34% of girls married before 18  
20% of girls enrolled in secondary school

Long prevalent in rural parts of the country, child marriage has become a profitable urban enterprise for poor families and traffickers selling young daughters into marriage beyond Mauritania's borders, often into the hands and homes of wealthy, older men in the Gulf States.<sup>38</sup> Back home, with no law forbidding it, young brides-to-be are often force-fed in a practice known as *gavage*, or "fattening up."<sup>39</sup> Beliefs hold that the heavier a girl is, the more likely she comes from an affluent family, and, thus, the more attractive she becomes to a would-be husband, according to a report from Equality Now. Traditionally, families achieved *gavage* by force-feeding their daughters food, but modern-day practices include appetite-inducing tablets, the report says. The results can be just as horrendous as the practice itself: heart failure, diabetes and reproductive health problems.

## #18 Senegal

33% of girls married before 18  
18% of girls enrolled in secondary school

The quest for a younger bride is a driver of child marriage in Senegal with as many as 30 percent of unions in the country's rural areas considered polygamous.<sup>40</sup> Typically, each bride needs to be younger than the previous bride, causing the groom to look for younger girls for each union. Once a girl is married in Senegal she is much more likely to stop attending school, because her household and farm chores — to say nothing of her sexual and maternal duties — will prevent her from going to school.<sup>41</sup> Senegal is one of a few West African countries whose child marriage rate has continued to climb in recent years, according to the United Nations Population Fund.<sup>42</sup>

## #17 Guinea-Bissau

22% of girls married before 18  
6% of girls enrolled in secondary school

Although Guinea-Bissau, one of the poorest countries in the world, ranks 10th on this list, conditions for girls are even worse than the numbers reveal. Girls as young as 13 are frequently forced to marry much older men under threat of violence or death.<sup>43</sup> Those who help them escape have been killed. In addition half of girls between ages 6 and 14 have suffered female genital mutilation,<sup>44</sup> a long-standing cultural practice that remains prevalent despite an official ban in Guinea-Bissau and a U.N. declaration in 2012 that the practice is a human rights abuse.

## #16 Eritrea

41% of girls married before 18  
23% of girls enrolled in secondary school

Nearly half of Eritrea's girls are married by 18, and that number could jump to nearly 60 percent over the next 15 years, according to the United Nations Population Fund.<sup>45</sup> That is because only 2.4 percent of Eritrean girls use contraception.<sup>46</sup> The shortage of contraception leads, in turn, to a higher birth rate. Contraception is not as available to girls as it is to women, creating yet another barrier in the struggle to protect girls from the effects of child marriage. Many girls marry before they even know what sex is, and they have not had the opportunity to learn about birth control.<sup>47</sup> Fortunately the country's struggle for independence in the early 1990s could make a difference.<sup>48</sup> During that time, the Eritrean People's Liberation Front sought social transformation around women's issues and successfully pushed for legislation that abolished forced marriages, child marriages and dowries.

## #15 Uganda

40% of girls married before 18  
22% of girls enrolled in secondary school

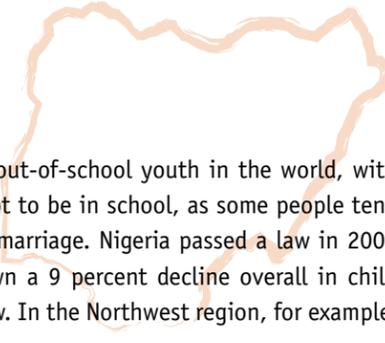
Uganda's experience is a case study in the strong yet complex ties between child marriage, poverty and school dropout rates. In Uganda education appears to play a big role in protecting girls from the dangers of early marriage and childbirth. For example, two-thirds of unschooled girls in Uganda are married at age 18 or younger, while about only 1 in 7 girls who have completed secondary education is married young.<sup>49</sup> That said, early marriage is not the biggest driver of school drop-out for girls in parts of Uganda, according to report from the International Center for Research on Women (ICRW). Of the girls in West Nile districts of Adjumani and Arua who dropped out of school, 41 percent cited a lack of funds as their primary reason for doing so.<sup>50</sup>

**Girls in Malawi are encouraged by local customs to engage in sex at an early age, so many marry and drop out of school after they get pregnant.**

**#14**

### **Nigeria**

43% of girls married before 18  
23% of girls enrolled in secondary school<sup>51</sup>

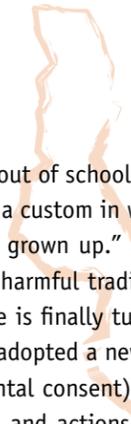


Lack of education is a major problem for Nigeria, which has the highest number of out-of-school youth in the world, with more than 10 million children not in school.<sup>52</sup> Girls are much more likely than boys not to be in school, as some people tend to devalue education for girls. Instead they are much more likely to be prepared for marriage. Nigeria passed a law in 2003 making it illegal for children younger than 18 to marry,<sup>53</sup> and the country has shown a 9 percent decline overall in child marriage since then. Most of Nigeria's 36 states, however, have failed to enforce the law. In the Northwest region, for example, nearly 76 percent of girls are married by 18.<sup>54</sup>

**#13**

### **Malawi**

50% of girls married before 18  
30% of girls enrolled in secondary school

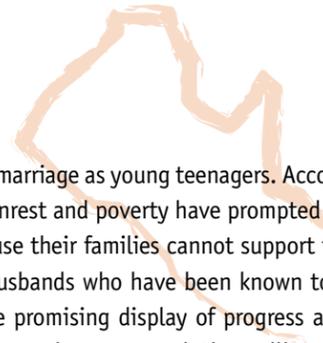


Girls in Malawi are encouraged by local customs to engage in sex at an early age, so many marry and drop out of school after they get pregnant.<sup>55</sup> A report by the Johns Hopkins University Bloomberg School of Public Health describes a custom in which men have sex with girls as part of a rite of passage so they can determine whether the girls are "really grown up." Other girls are forced to attend initiation camps where they are taught how to please men sexually. But these harmful traditions are now meeting fierce resistance — sometimes from the girls themselves — renewing hope that the tide is finally turning against child marriage.<sup>56</sup> Under pressure from a girl-led movement, the Malawi parliament earlier this year adopted a new law raising the age of marriage to 18 (though the Constitution still allows children to marry at 15 with parental consent). And advocates, many of them girls, say they won't be satisfied until communities demonstrate that attitudes and actions have actually changed, not just the law.

**#12**

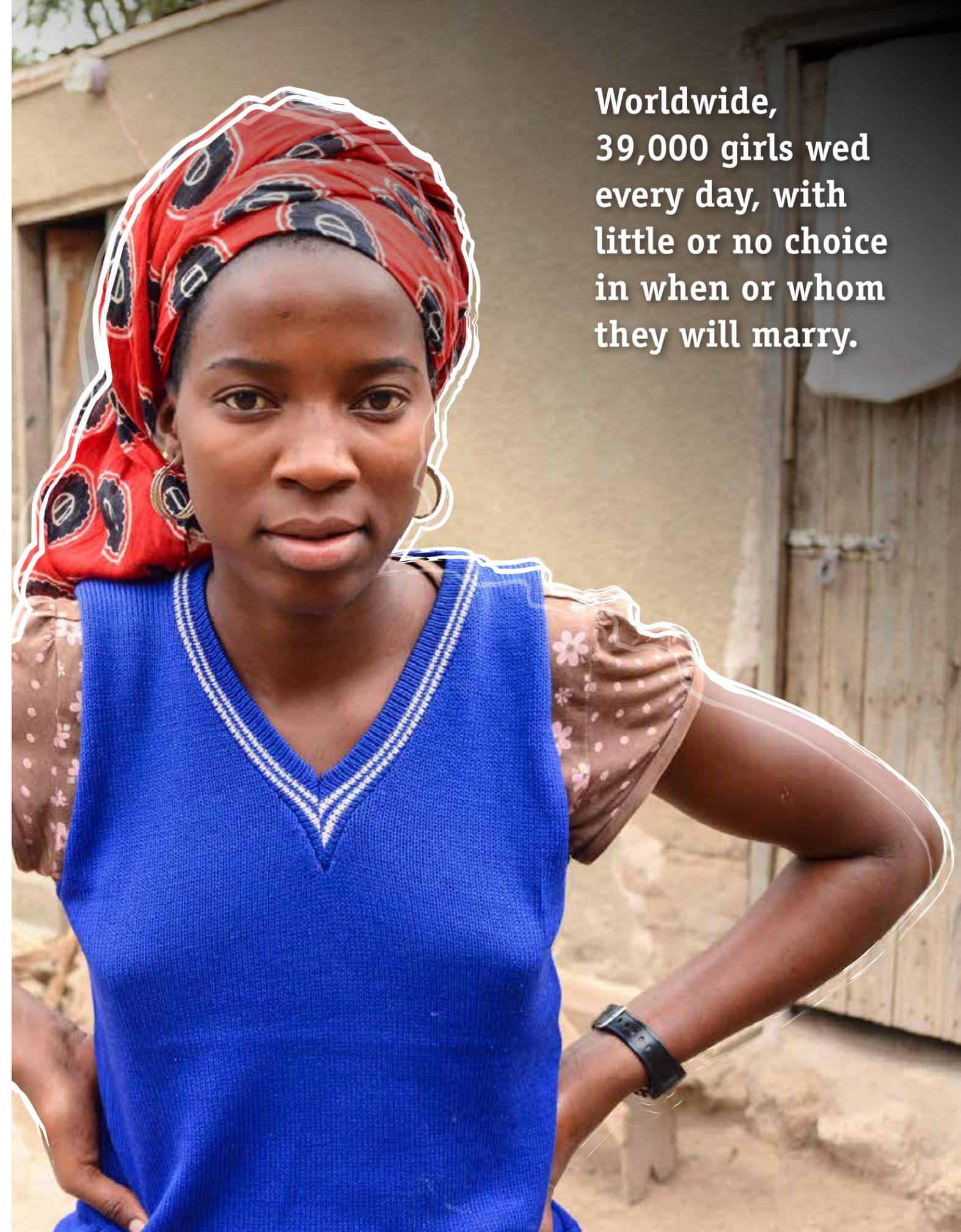
### **Liberia**

38% of girls married before 18  
15% of girls enrolled in secondary school



Liberia is one of the most perilous places in the world for girls, many of whom are forced into marriage as young teenagers. According to a 2012 report by the Foundation for Women's Health, Research and Development,<sup>57</sup> civil unrest and poverty have prompted many Liberian parents to choose marriage for their girls, some of whom turn to prostitution because their families cannot support them. Once married, the report states, many work in the home and in the fields for demanding husbands who have been known to lock them in their homes or beat them if they do not give in to their husbands' wishes. In one promising display of progress a local child-rights group called the Children Youth Advisory Board this year presented to authorities a six-count resolution calling for an end to child marriage in Liberia. Among other measures, the resolution calls for a commitment from religious leaders to end the practice and for political leaders to increase government funding to support girls' education, including vocational training.

**Worldwide,  
39,000 girls wed  
every day, with  
little or no choice  
in when or whom  
they will marry.**



**#11****Mali**

55% of girls married before 18  
32% of girls enrolled in secondary school

Because many teenage girls suffer female genital mutilation and then are forced to marry early, girls are doubly devalued in Mali.<sup>58</sup> A traditional cultural belief is that cutting girls in this way makes them more desirable for marriage because they will be more likely to obey their husbands.<sup>59</sup> Marriage, often to older men, can end any hope of living freely or of breaking a cycle of poverty and violence. Adolescent girls in rural Mali have long journeyed to the capital of Bamako, many seeking employment as domestic servants. They are often beaten or even raped. Some never see a cent; the hope of adventure and opportunity amounts to little more than slave labor. Few ever return to a classroom. To make matters worse armed conflict that broke out in northern Mali in 2012 subjected more girls to violence and created another barrier to education.

**#10****Angola**

36% of girls married before 18<sup>60</sup>  
12% of girls enrolled in secondary school

A 27-year civil war ravaged Angola until 2002, and girls bore the brunt of the violence. The country still deals with the aftermath of the unrest, which includes land mines and more than 1 million orphaned children.<sup>61</sup> Many of those orphans, particularly girls, have found themselves head of their household, which leaves them no time for school.<sup>62</sup> Girls often must fend for themselves, and that can mean marrying an older man who they think will take care of them. Early marriage also is seen as a way to avoid rape, trafficking and other violence.<sup>63</sup>

**#9****Guinea**

52% of girls married before 18  
23% of girls enrolled in secondary school

The child-marriage rate in Guinea is much higher than the 37 percent regional average for sub-Saharan Africa. The link between education and age of marriage is impossible to ignore: 73 percent of girls with no education are married by age 18, compared with 27 percent of girls with secondary education. The percentage of child brides has changed little over the past 15 years with girls from poor families most likely to marry young.<sup>64</sup> Fewer than 1 in 10 girls who marry in Guinea use contraception, virtually ensuring that the trend will continue until changes are made to empower girls and keep them in school.<sup>65</sup>

**#8****Ethiopia**

41% of girls married before 18  
11% of girls enrolled in secondary school

Ethiopia's secondary-school-enrollment rate ranks fifth lowest in the world.<sup>66</sup> Because many Ethiopian girls start school late, they often marry before completing primary school. Very few young brides return to the classroom.<sup>67</sup> The problem is particularly acute in the Amhara region of northern Ethiopia, where one-third of the girls are married by age 15.<sup>68</sup> But recent efforts to improve sexual and reproductive outcomes for married and widowed teens show promise. A project called TESFA, for example, reached more than 5,000 girls with not only improved health but with education and financial literacy skills. The girls reported increases in school attendance and felt more valued in their households and communities. The hope is that they will grow into confident, healthy mothers who stand up to child marriage in their own families. During the project — which also engaged gatekeepers such as fathers, husbands, in-laws and religious leaders — communities stopped at least 180 child marriages.

**#7****Mozambique**

48% of girls married before 18  
18% of girls enrolled in secondary school

Mozambique is one of the poorest countries in the world, and a high rate of child marriage only worsens several health and social indicators of the struggling nation. Its average life expectancy is only 50.<sup>69</sup> Maternal mortality in Mozambique is one of the highest in the world as are its rates of HIV infection among young people.<sup>70</sup> Girls sometimes serve as currency, with impoverished families marrying them off in exchange for livestock. Even if girls do enroll in school, malnutrition sometimes hinders their ability to learn, especially during the hungry season before harvest.<sup>71</sup> Too many girls in Mozambique find themselves trapped in a cycle of poor childhood health, early marriage and early childbirth.

**#6****Burkina Faso**

52% of girls married before 18  
20% of girls enrolled in secondary school

Poverty and child marriage are linked in Burkina Faso in two persistent ways: Poverty leads parents to marry off their young daughters to older men.<sup>72</sup> And girls often must withdraw from school to take on their newly assigned duties, including having children.<sup>73</sup> Only about 8 percent of child brides use contraception, which would allow them to space their pregnancies and, consequently, mitigate health risks for both baby and mom.<sup>74</sup> Although child-marriage rates are high throughout the country, they soar in the northern Sahel region to an astonishing 86 percent.<sup>75</sup>

**#5****Somalia**

45% of girls married before 18  
5% of girls enrolled in secondary school<sup>76</sup>

Conflict and civil war in this east African nation lead to instability for all, but the girls of Somalia often pay the highest price for the chaos and poverty. Even before decades of conflict began, girls in parts of Somalia were treated as field hands and subjected to sexual and other types of violence.<sup>77</sup> Parents who might otherwise value education choose to keep their daughters at home to protect them from violence or marry them to an older man who they hope will protect and provide for them. Another barrier to school attendance is a lack of sanitary towels, according to UNICEF, which can lead to embarrassment and a lack of confidence, resulting in poor class performance, poor transition to the next level, sporadic school attendance and high dropout rates.<sup>78</sup> A low representation of female teachers can deter parents from enrolling or sending their daughters to school. In Somaliland, an autonomous region of Somalia, women make up a paltry 2 percent of teachers in some schools.

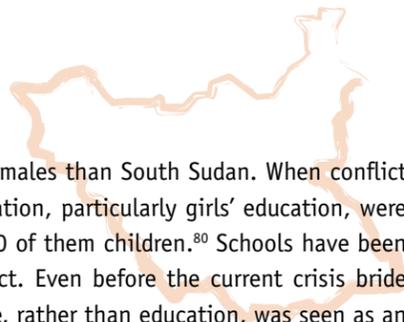
**Conflict and civil war in this east African nation lead to instability for all, but the girls of Somalia often pay the highest price for the chaos and poverty.**

#4

### South Sudan

52% of girls married before 18  
1% of girls enrolled in secondary school<sup>79</sup>

Few places in the world are more dangerous or disempowering to young, growing females than South Sudan. When conflict engulfed the new nation in December 2013, many of the small gains made in education, particularly girls' education, were lost in violence that has left more than 2 million South Sudanese displaced, 800,000 of them children.<sup>80</sup> Schools have been destroyed, and both girls and boys were forcibly recruited by parties to the conflict. Even before the current crisis bride price had long been a corner stone of the economy, and a girl's prospects in marriage, rather than education, was seen as an important economic asset by her family, particularly in rural areas.<sup>81</sup> With few opportunities for learning, South Sudanese girls face long odds in developing skills to help protect themselves and their families and to keep their children safe and healthy.<sup>82</sup> Even so, aggressive tactics, such as providing cash grants and rations of cereal and cooking oil, are helping some families keep their daughters in school.

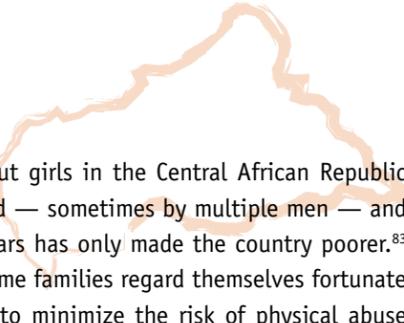


#3

### Central African Republic

68% of girls married before 18  
10% of girls enrolled in secondary school

War and conflict in this land-locked, unstable country make life difficult for all. But girls in the Central African Republic pay a particularly high price. They are stolen as wives, beaten into submission, raped — sometimes by multiple men — and soon find themselves pregnant slaves. In addition widespread flooding in recent years has only made the country poorer.<sup>83</sup> Faced with the prospect of having their daughters kidnapped, beaten and raped,<sup>84</sup> some families regard themselves fortunate if they can find men who will marry their daughters. They see marriage as a way to minimize the risk of physical abuse and starvation.<sup>85</sup>

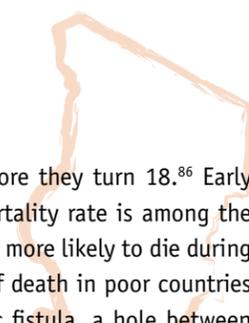


#2

### Chad

68% of girls married before 18  
5% of girls enrolled in secondary school

Girls in Chad are 13 times more likely to enter a marriage than a secondary school classroom before they turn 18.<sup>86</sup> Early marriage not only hampers their access to school but can lead to their death. Chad's maternal mortality rate is among the world's highest with 1,200 maternal deaths per 100,000 births.<sup>87</sup> Girls younger than 15 are 28 percent more likely to die during childbirth than women in their 20s.<sup>88</sup> In fact pregnancy-related complications are a leading cause of death in poor countries among girls 15 to 19. Many also suffer a painful, life-threatening and socially alienating obstetric fistula, a hole between the vagina and one or more internal organs, developed over many days of obstructed labor.<sup>89</sup> As many as three-quarters of childbirths in some particularly poor regions in Chad result in a fistula, according to the Fistula Foundation.



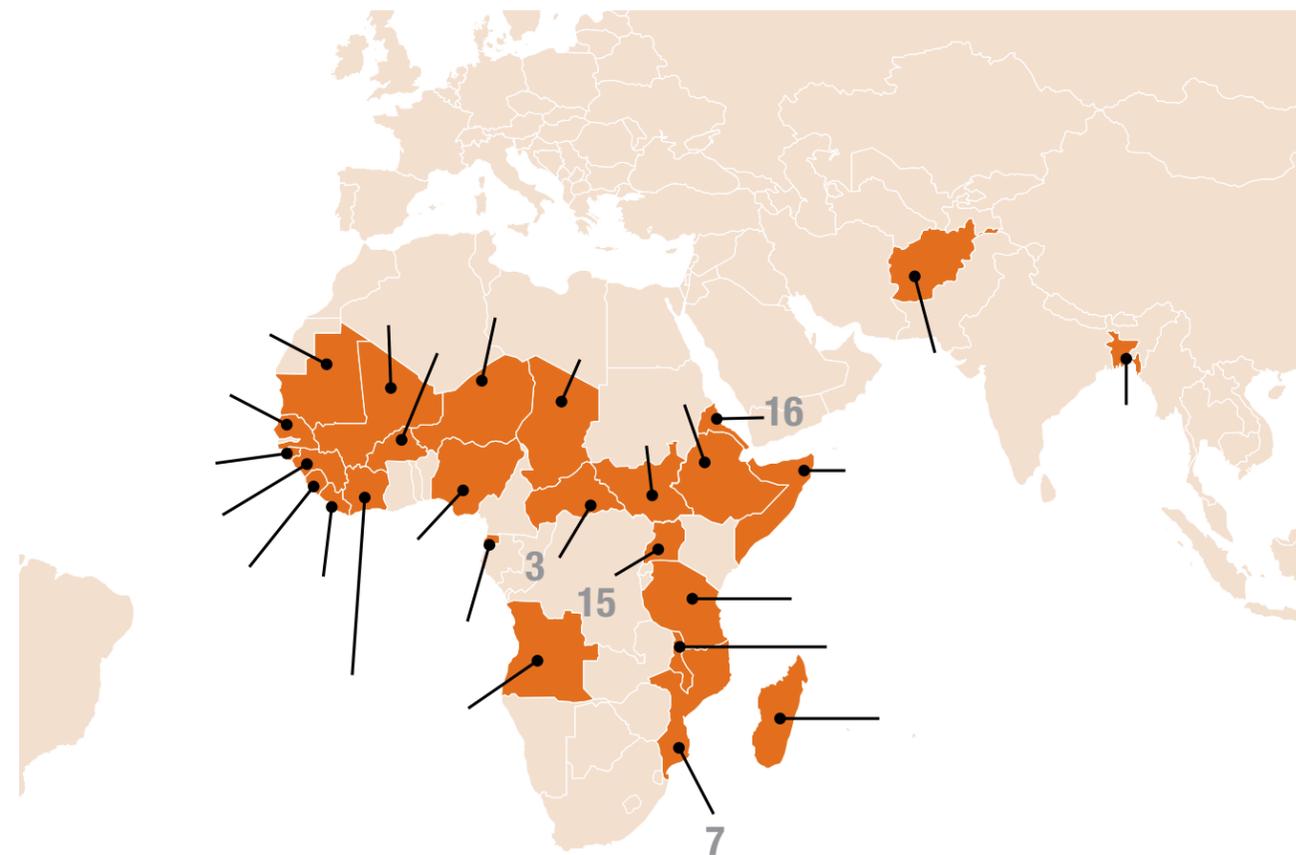
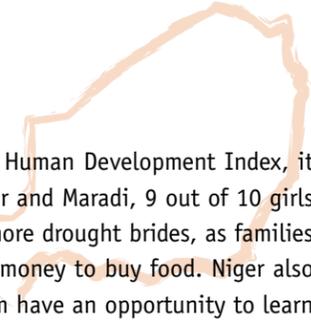
**Early marriage not only hampers their access to school but can lead to their death. Chad's maternal mortality rate is among the world's highest with 1,200 maternal deaths per 100,000 births.**

#1

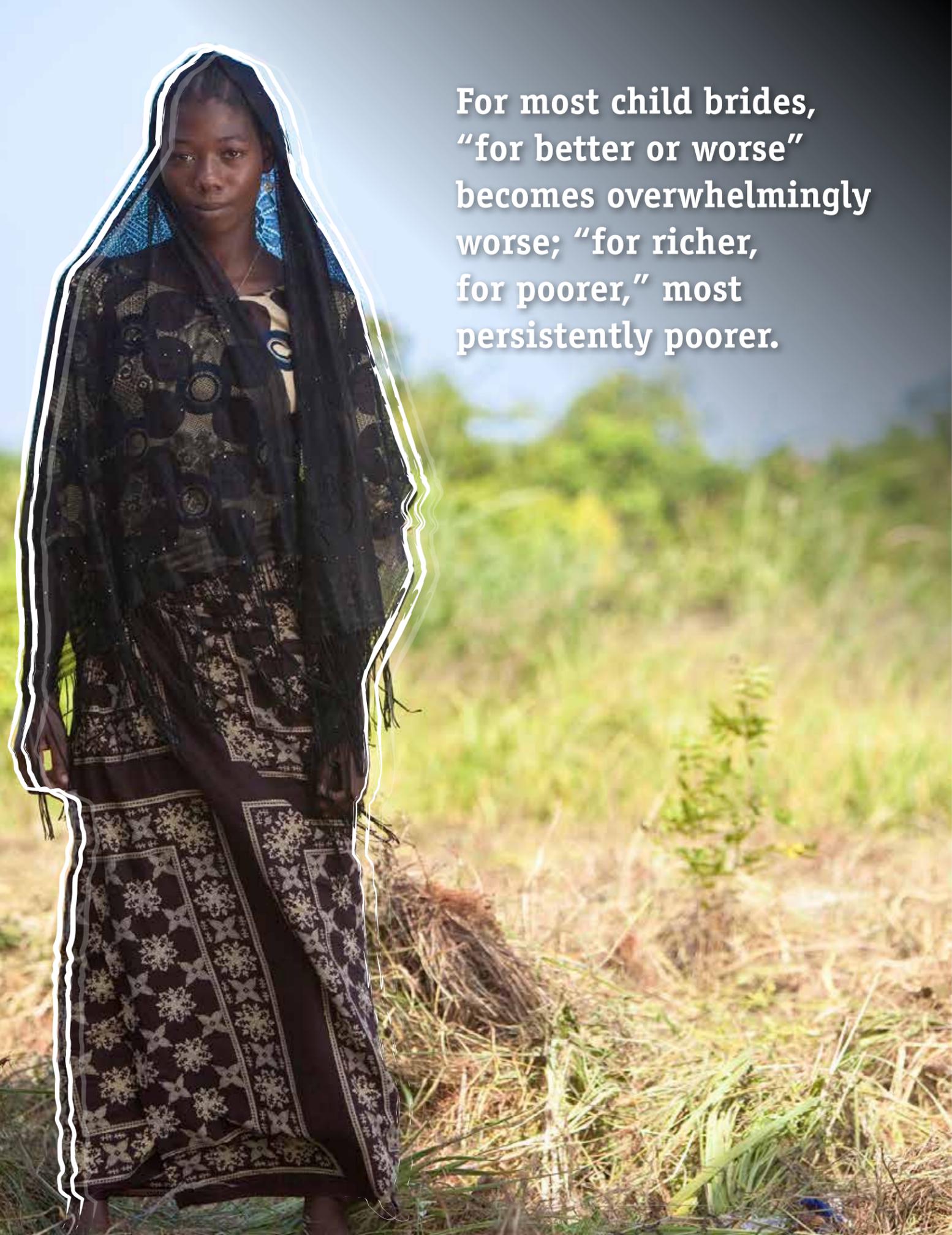
### Niger

76% of girls married before 18  
10% of girls enrolled in secondary school

Niger has the highest percentage of child brides in the world.<sup>90</sup> And, according to the U.N.'s Human Development Index, it is the world's least-developed country. This is no coincidence. In some regions, such as Zinder and Maradi, 9 out of 10 girls marry before age 18.<sup>91</sup> A harsh climate only exacerbates the problem. Less rain often means more drought brides, as families pursue early marriage as a survival strategy, seeking one less mouth to feed and bride-price money to buy food. Niger also has one of the globe's highest population growth rates — girls who drop out of school seldom have an opportunity to learn about sexual and reproductive health.<sup>92</sup> Only 4.4 percent of girls age 15 to 19 have access to or use contraception in Niger. And 535 mothers die for every 100,000 births, with each death plunging another family deeper into poverty. Women in Niger are, however, banding together to reverse some of these trends. Many are starting small businesses through Village Savings and Loan Associations that form the foundation of a national movement, called Mata Masu Dubara (Women on the Move), converting the women's increased financial power into political power. The hope is that, as women gain a greater voice in their homes and in their communities, they can break the cycle of child marriage and poverty while giving more girls an opportunity to go to school and, one day, deliver a better future.



Numbers on map correspond to numbers on the list.



For most child brides, “for better or worse” becomes overwhelmingly worse; “for richer, for poorer,” most persistently poorer.



## Finding Solutions to Child Marriage

**Building momentum against child marriage:** The dangers of child marriage have gained attention worldwide as advocates, organizations and governments raise awareness of, and work to end, this crushing practice. Though slow, progress occurs, even if such gains are not yet enough to keep pace with population growth. In fact, if future progress arrives at the same rate as past progress, the absolute number of child brides worldwide will go unchanged.

The world, however, is ambling forward on this issue.

“The tide is turning,” said anti-child marriage advocate Valerie Msoka, executive director of the Tanzanian Media Women’s Association. “It is gaining momentum from the village, community, national level; it’s now at the international stage and that means, with more players, there will be more action.”

Indeed, in November 2014, the U.N.'s General Assembly adopted the first substantive resolution on child marriage. Co-sponsored by 116 countries, the resolution recognized that child marriage is a human-rights abuse against women and girls and that it stems from deep-rooted inequalities, norms and stereotypes. According to the resolution the practice undervalues girls and their potential, threatening girls', women's and families' health, education and social status.

The action also confirmed the U.N. General Assembly's resolve to meaningfully address child marriage in the post-2015 U.N. development agenda, a major part of which are the U.N.'s Sustainable Development Goals for 2030. Specifically, Goal 5 includes ending child marriage. Just this year, the U.N. Human Rights Council passed a resolution condemning child marriage.

At the national level some governments have taken steps to limit child marriage and to enforce existing laws against it. Hosted by the U.K. government and UNICEF,

Girl Summit 2014 galvanized support from 43 nations that signed commitments to end the practice. Bangladesh, Tanzania, Burkina Faso, Mali, Yemen and Zambia all have recently launched legal reforms and campaigns to end child marriage. In some countries, police and girls' advocates have set up phone hotlines and safe houses for at-risk girls.

**"I always go by the African saying, which says, 'If you want to walk fast, walk alone. If you want to walk far, walk with others,'" said Msoka, the Tanzanian activist. "So, if a lot of us are there, we will walk far."**

## Child marriage vs. enrollment rates: Causation or correlation?

The relationship between early marriage and low education achievement is so strong that it's tempting to assume one to be a direct cause of the other. And, of course, in many cases child marriage is the most powerful force pushing girls out of school. But the truth is that the links between child marriage and girls education are complex and vary based on the local context. Although marriage might cause girls to drop out of school in some instances, the strongest force may be poverty, violence or family pressure in others. And it should be noted that some girls who marry before age 18 do stay in school while, conversely, many who drop out aren't married early.

One thing is clear however. Higher education is correlated with fewer early marriages and increased well-being. On average a girl with 7 years of education will marry 4 years later and have 2.2 fewer children. Her income-earning potential increases by 20 percent for every school year she completes beyond fourth grade. Also, a girl who completes her education is 3 times less likely to develop HIV. Schools can be safe places for children, and they demonstrate to a community that the girl is still considered a child. This promotes community norms that value girls' and education as a means to develop their skills for an economically empowered life.



**Nishi Moni, 13, is one of several teenaged girls in Bishnupur, Bangladesh, who may well avoid forced early marriage thanks to a local women's empowerment group called EKATA, which is looking out for the girls' welfare.**

Among other efforts, EKATA works to end child marriage by discussing with girls' parents the harmful effects of the practice and urging them not to force their young daughters into an unwanted, early marriage.

A wide range of groups, from the U.N. to grassroots organizations, are trying to walk together — and far — on girls' education as well. The Sustainable Development Goals, for instance, intend to provide school facilities that are safe, inclusive and gender-sensitive and to eliminate gender disparities that favor boys' learning over girls'.

In the United States, President Obama and First Lady Michelle Obama are championing efforts to help adolescent girls around the globe attend and complete school through the Let Girls Learn initiative. A key task of Let Girls Learn will be to encourage and support community-led solutions that reduce barriers between adolescent girls and their education, including the elimination of child marriage.

In South Sudan, which has the world's highest maternal mortality rate, cash grants provide incentives to parents to enroll or keep their daughters in school. In Senegal, where

the child marriage rate has continued to rise as husbands in polygamous unions seek a younger bride with each marriage, community and religious leaders have publicly declared that child marriage is wrong. In Togo government efforts have cracked down on trafficking, which contributes to forced marriage, and are re-enrolling abducted girls in school. Pakistan passed a law preventing anyone from marrying before age 18 and punishing those who facilitate or perform early marriages.

Whether the target is child marriage or low secondary-school-enrollment rates, overcoming deep-seated forces is difficult. But it's not impossible. Doing so requires a greater awareness on the part of parents and community leaders regarding the harmful effects of child marriage and the lasting benefits of educating girls. It means that families and communities must challenge and debunk long-standing gender norms that undermine opportunities for girls to thrive.



**“While these are problems of a global scale, the solutions must be local, driven by communities, families and girls themselves to change mindsets and break the cycles that perpetuate child marriage,” UNICEF Executive Director Anthony Lake has said about child marriage. “We can’t let the staggering numbers numb us — they must compel us to act.”**

**Delivering and measuring impact:** Better awareness around the harmful effects of child marriage and of a lack of education have spurred efforts to design, fund, implement and evaluate programs addressing these problems. Many of the same effective program strategies commonly appear in programs around the world.

A 2011 report<sup>93</sup> from ICRW reviewed 23 well-evaluated programs addressing child marriage globally and identified five main strategies for preventing child marriage:

- Empowering girls with information, skills and support networks
- Educating and mobilizing parents and community members
- Enhancing the accessibility and quality of formal schooling for girls
- Offering economic support and incentives for girls and their families
- Fostering an enabling legal and policy framework

Nearly 80 percent of the ICRW-reviewed programs focused on girls themselves: training, building skills, sharing

information, creating safe spaces and developing support networks. According to the report, titled “Solutions to End Child Marriage: What the Evidence Shows,”<sup>94</sup> “The main rationale behind this set of interventions is to equip young girls to better know themselves, their work and their options and to end their social and economic isolation, enabling them to act and advocate for themselves.

“A related rationale is that girls with more human and social capital will aspire to jobs and enterprises as alternatives to marriage. They will also be viewed differently by parents and community members, making it unacceptable to marry them at young ages and thus helping to change norms around child marriage.”

Changing those norms — as well as gender norms that limit roles for girls — strikes at the root of the problem.

The Maharashtra Life Skills Program in India, for example, teaches girls about health, nutrition, money management, the law, communication, negotiation and decision-making. In Afghanistan the Community-Based Rural Livelihoods Programme offers vocational- and livelihood-skills training that helps girls generate income. Other programs in places like Kenya and Nepal offer sexual- and reproductive-health training or facilitate awareness campaigns around child marriage, the importance of education and individual rights.

Enhancing access to, and the quality of, formal schooling for girls was another leading strategy that ICRW found yielded positive results. That is not surprising, perhaps, when one considers that girls with secondary schooling are up to 6 times less likely to become child brides than girls who have little or no education.



From Ethiopia and Egypt to Malawi, Bangladesh and Nepal, organizations and communities are joining hands to support girls' enrollment in school, improving school curricula to include life skills, sexual and reproductive health and gender sensitivity. They are building and improving schools, hiring more female teachers and offering scholarships, fee subsidies and the uniforms and supplies necessary for girls to enroll in and attend school.

In the Amhara region of Ethiopia CARE has worked in partnership with ICRW and the Nike Foundation to start breaking the cycle of child marriage. Called TESFA, which means "hope" in Amharic, the program engaged 5,000 already-married adolescent girls as well as gatekeepers including fathers, husbands, in-laws and religious leaders.

Through improvements in girls' education, health, business and financial literacy, attitudes about girls began to change. Communities stopped at least 180 child marriages. And, more importantly, child brides who are often exploited by their husbands and in-laws started amplifying their voices and advocating for themselves.

The hope is that they will grow into healthy, confident mothers who will stand up to child marriage with the support of their own families and communities.

A TESFA evaluation found significant improvements in the lives of married adolescent girl participants, including:

- Better communication between the young wives and their husbands
- Less gender-based violence
- Improved mental health among participating girls
- Increased investment in productive economic assets
- Improved knowledge and use of sexual and reproductive health services, including family planning
- Strengthened supportive relationships among family and neighbors



## Child Advocate: Memory Banda

Only 18 years old, Memory Banda championed a successful national campaign that culminated in landmark legislation that outlawed child marriage in Malawi. She works with girl leaders to ensure that village chiefs ban child marriage, end sexual initiation practices, enable girls to finish school and live safe from violence.

Memory became an advocate for girls after her younger sister was forced into marriage — and got pregnant — at the age of 11. She is now a college student in Malawi. Below is an excerpt from her speech at TEDWomen earlier this year. Watch: [https://www.ted.com/speakers/memory\\_banda](https://www.ted.com/speakers/memory_banda)

*Every day girls' lives are being wasted away. This is high time for leaders to honor their commitment. In honoring this commitment it means keeping girls' issues at heart every time. We don't have to be subjected as second. [Leaders] have to know that women . . . are not just women; we are not just girls. We are extraordinary. We can do more. . . .*

*Girls' voices and women's voices are beautiful, but we cannot do this alone. Male advocates, they have to jump in, to step in and work together. It's a collective work. What we need is what girls elsewhere need: good education, and, above all, not to marry whilst age 11.*

*I know that, together, we can transform the legal, the cultural and political framework that denies girls of their rights. I am standing here today and declaring that we can end child marriage in a generation. This is the moment where a girl and [another] girl, and millions of girls worldwide, will be able to say, 'I will marry when I want.'*



Through CARE's Tipping Point project, 90 villages in Bangladesh and 16 areas of Nepal are working to end child marriage with local solutions, learning and advocacy. Its aim is to reach a tipping point of sustainable change that will prevent and mitigate child marriage. Tipping Point's focus reaches beyond formal policies — such as laws imposing a minimum age for marriage — and addresses social and cultural institutions driving gender discrimination and promoting child marriage.

### Tipping Point

Based on Tipping Point research, following are some insights about key drivers of child marriage in communities in which CARE is working in Bangladesh and Nepal.

- The marriage process is a complex set of steps and exchanges involving families, neighbors, business interests and government people, each with a specific interest and influence in the process. The voices and decision-making power of the girls themselves are minimized, against the authority of fathers and brothers. Girls who try to choose their spouse can find themselves excluded from society.
- Given expectations for girls to marry and live with their in-laws (and not engage in work outside the household), girls are not viewed as having future careers. Marriage is seen as an end point, and along with that thinking comes the calculation to invest in dowry rather than other options such as education. From a community perspective, worries over dowry and views toward girls as economic burdens can lead to decisions for earlier marriage. This is especially applicable for poorer families, since dowry prices are lower for younger girls.
- Social pressures around family honor are key drivers for early marriage. Families want to secure their daughter's future and to mitigate perceived threats to her character if she remains unmarried for too long after reaching puberty. Also at play is fear of a daughter's compromising her family's honor through relationships with boys. There is a general notion among adults that, once a girl reaches puberty, any interaction with the opposite sex involves some degree of sexuality.

## Tipping Point strategies

Child marriage is largely upheld by the collective belief of community members, religious leaders, extended family members, neighbors, and other influential actors. There is recognition among parents and community members of the risks and harms associated with early marriage in terms of undermining the health and well-being of girls and their children. However, for parents in particular, the perceived risks of marrying a girl young are outweighed by the perceived benefits in terms of lower dowry, family respect, avoiding risk of love affairs, finding an acceptable match and alleviating the family's economic burdens.



**Increase girls' awareness of gender and individual rights and build the confidence, skills and supportive relationships necessary to make progressive choices in their lives.**

In Bangladesh, the Tipping Point team has established 90 "Fun Centers" where girls and boys can learn about their rights, build awareness on a variety of issues and develop their leadership skills. Decorated by teenagers in the community, the centers are a place to play games, read books and hold art competitions. As of May 2015 nearly 4,000 children were involved in the fun-center groups.



**Explore and challenge harmful social norms influencing marriage practices (including dowry expectations, negative perceptions about girls' potential and links between sexual purity and family honor) to support girls' rights and choices on marriage.**

Tipping Point works with local forum theatre groups that perform street dramas about issues relating to child marriage, gender, and sexual and reproductive health.

**Build support among parents and guardians for the voices, opinions and aspirations of adolescent girls.**

**Collaborate with community groups, networks and organizations at the local and national levels to promote advocacy and action for girls.**



**Promote staff reflection and support for values, practices and actions that discourage oppression (based on gender, caste, religion and other group identities) in their own lives.**

In Bangladesh CARE supports community-based meetings known as Elimination of Violence against Women Forums, which are made up of parents, local officials, educators and community leaders. The forums provide a place and space for reflection, story-sharing and discussion of child marriage. The exchanges often lead to concrete action and opportunities for more innovative community engagement.



## Embracing the Future in Nepal

### Priyanka Harijan: Top of the Class, with Police-Chief Dreams

Above her bed, amid Diwali garlands, Priyanka Harijan has arranged three pictures much like a shrine. The first is of Priyanka Chopra, a Bollywood actress who shares not only Priyanka's first name but the charisma that has made her a leader at school in a rice-farming area of western Nepal. The second picture is of Lakshmi, the Hindu goddess of wealth and prosperity who has watched Priyanka study late into the night and bring home many perfect test scores. The third picture features Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, a Dalit like Priyanka, who overcame discrimination to write the Constitution of neighboring India and serve as its first minister of law. Priyanka shares his perseverance and determination, qualities that, 3 years ago, made her a favorite of teachers and the principal at Priyanka's primary school. They knew she was something special.

But that didn't necessarily mean she would go to secondary school.

Most girls in Priyanka's home Rupandehi district are forced to marry before their 18<sup>th</sup> birthdays, some as young as 7 or 8. Many are poor, marginalized Dalits. The pressure from neighbors and family to marry children young is intense. A love marriage can be an enormous stigma. And parents of girls face dowry prices that increase as their daughters grow older).

Priyanka's father, Bharat Prasad Harijan, knew very well the path for girls who marry early. They move in with their husbands' families to help cook, fetch water and sweep cow dung. There is no time for school. But Harijan was raising two sons and another daughter as well. "I could not afford school tuition for all of them," he said. "It was too expensive."

**"I could not afford school tuition for all of them, it was too expensive."**

**BHARAT PRASAD HARIJAN, Priyanka's father**

That's when leaders of Chunauti — a child-marriage prevention project implemented by CARE and funded by the U.S. Agency for International Development — came to the family with an offer. They would put 18,000 Nepali rupees — or roughly U.S. \$180 — into a bank account for the family, which would not be accessible until Priyanka turned 18, and only if she remained unmarried until then.

Under Chunauti, which provided the families of 220 girls with various forms of financial aid, communities also formed child-marriage eradication committees that developed local strategies for combating the problem. This led to anti-child marriage billboards and street dramas depicting the costs of early marriage and the benefits of waiting.

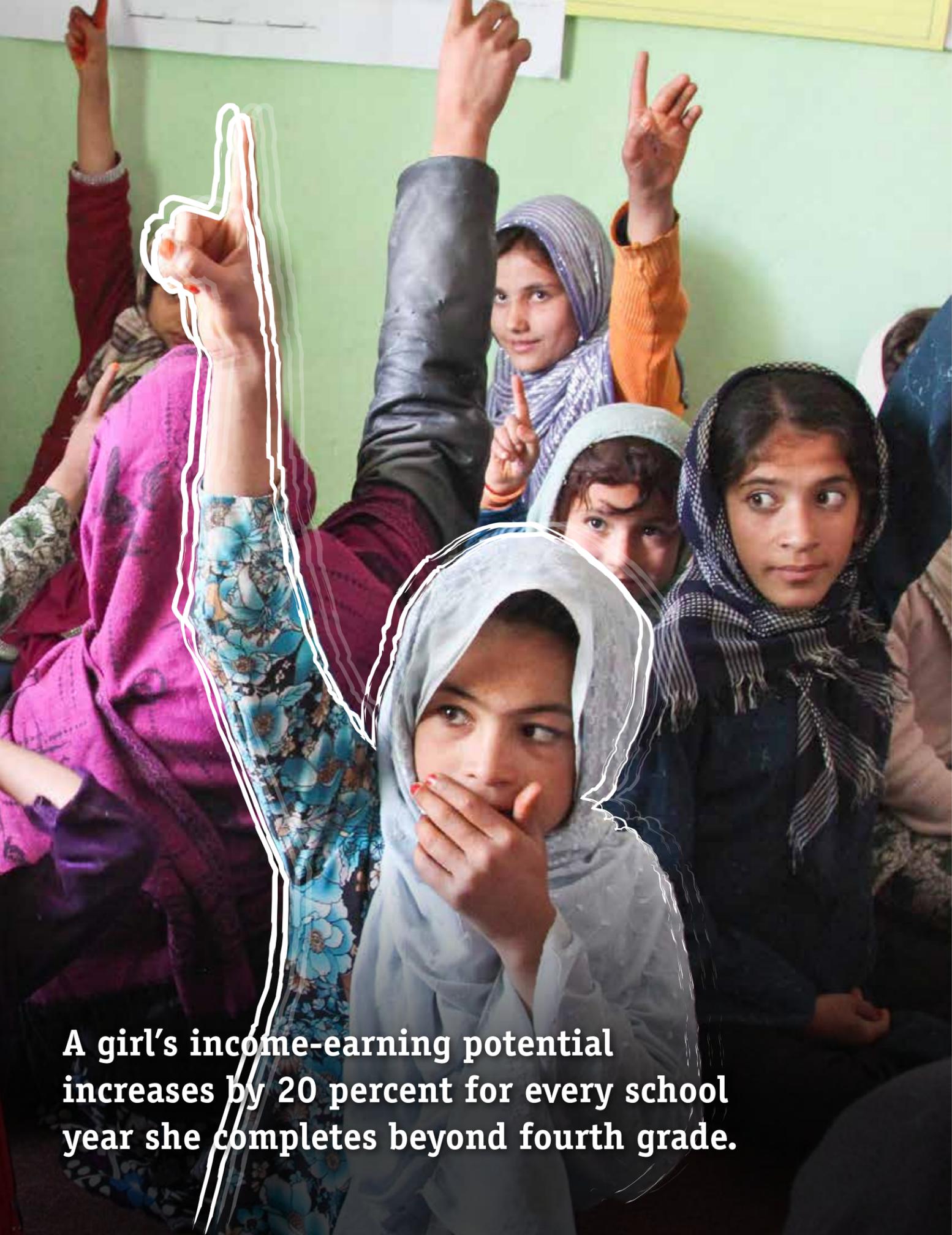
Girls at Priyanka's school received 6,000 rupees (\$60) to start what they dubbed the Buddha Girls Club. They elected Priyanka president. "We bought sports materials for badminton, volleyball, skipping rope and hula hoop," Priyanka said. The club acted as a support group for girls around issues such as marriage and dowry, even as several girls in the group were forced by their families to wed. Priyanka was not one of them. She completed 10<sup>th</sup> grade with the top marks in her class. Her father said the family gets to withdraw interest on the deferred payment, enough to pay for school supplies such as notebooks, pencils and uniforms. And he has taken on additional jobs as a farm laborer to help fund college preparatory classes for Priyanka. She wakes up each morning at 4:00 a.m. to attend them.

At a national level the child marriage rate has dropped in Nepal, though it remains at 43 percent because the practice is common in rural areas such as Priyanka's. Net secondary school enrollment for girls in Nepal, meanwhile, has climbed steadily from 44 percent in 2007 to 62 percent in 2014, according to U.N. data. Again, rural areas lag behind.

But students such as Priyanka offer hope as they grow into shining examples of what happens when girls stay in school. "I won't get married until I'm 30," Priyanka said in a defiant voice. She wants to be a police chief when she grows up, assuring authorities are more responsive to the needs of women and girls and enforcing laws such as the one that sets 18 as the minimum age of marriage in Nepal.

Priyanka hopped on her bike and headed down the dirt road toward school. She pedaled hard, with purpose.





**A girl's income-earning potential increases by 20 percent for every school year she completes beyond fourth grade.**



## Overcoming Barriers to Education

Education is one of the most effective tools for lifting individuals, families and communities out of poverty. The key lies not merely in enrolling girls but in ensuring that they attend, that they access quality learning and that they finish the education that they started.

CARE recognizes that gender norms and practices play a pivotal role in defining whether and how girls access their rights and participate fully in their communities. As such, CARE's work in and through education seeks to influence the underlying social issues and norms that govern community structures, perceptions and practices to promote gender equity.

Social inequalities limit female students' access to school. Through its own programming, CARE works on multiple levels to uncover and address them, engaging parents, teachers, community members, leaders and the students to raise awareness and develop solutions. Some methods include:

- Conducting workshops that develop student skills in leadership, self-esteem and assertiveness

- Engaging men and boys to promote more equitable attitudes and behaviors toward women and girls
- Advocating for the adoption and implementation of policies around school-related gender-based violence

**In El Salvador, the national government passed laws that forbid sexual abuse and harassment of school children — a widespread problem that leads many parents to keep their children out of school. CARE has worked with parents, children’s groups and other partners to disseminate information on the new education laws and establish mechanisms in schools and communities to monitor teacher behavior and register complaints.**

In some parts of the world — Honduras, for instance — girls carry 6 times the domestic workload as boys. CARE works with households and communities to counter these disproportions. In Cambodia, village support committees promote a balanced approach to household chores so that both girls and boys can attend school. The important objective is not only to address the gender imbalances that manifest through disproportionate workloads but also to ensure that both boys and girls have protected time for study without jeopardizing their family’s already-precarious financial footing.

If uneven domestic workloads don’t keep girls out of the classroom, other factors such as hunger and malnutrition prevent them — and boys — from focusing on their lessons.

But multi-faceted programs like the U.S. government-funded food-security program in Haiti called Kore Lavi effectively address those issues, in part by integrating better nutrition and hygiene into the lives and lunches of school children.

“Before, they couldn’t concentrate on learning, because they were so sick,” school principal Joseph Arnold said of his students before Kore Lavi launched in 2013. “Now you can see that they are physically healthy, and we know that the food they are eating is clean.” The kids are not merely clean and well fed, however: They’ve increased their appetite for learning, too.

Like hunger, language also can obstruct students’ path to education — but focused efforts can help clear those communications channels.

In Cambodia, for example, where many students don’t speak the language of their teacher, CARE created a bilingual educational curriculum that gave teachers the tools and training to teach students in both the national and local languages.



### What happens when girls stay in school?



**Wages rise 20 percent for every year beyond 4th grade that a girl remains in school.<sup>95</sup>**



**49 percent fewer child deaths in families where women have a secondary education.<sup>96</sup>**

## Speaking up for education in Cambodia

Sreyhung is 12 years old and on track to be the first person in her family to complete her education. Before CARE began work to bring bilingual classrooms to her village in the province of Ratanakiri, Cambodia, the village school taught students only in Kumai, the national language of Cambodia. Yet Sreyhung, her family and her friends only spoke a local language, Tampun. As a result both of Sreyhung’s older sisters dropped out of school.

With the new bilingual classrooms and teachers in her village, Sreyhung now plans to become the first graduate in her family and a teacher herself. She even gathers her friends in the mornings before class to make sure they all go to school together. According to one teacher in Cambodia, “When there was only the national Khmer language in class, I saw that many students would not go to school. . . . The Khmer language made students afraid and shy. . . . When students better understand the lesson, they continue to study and are more successful in their education, because their foundation is strong.”



### “Only if we all work together”

Breaking down these barriers and addressing the underlying issues that breed them empower girls in ways that open new doors for them, their families, their communities — and beyond.

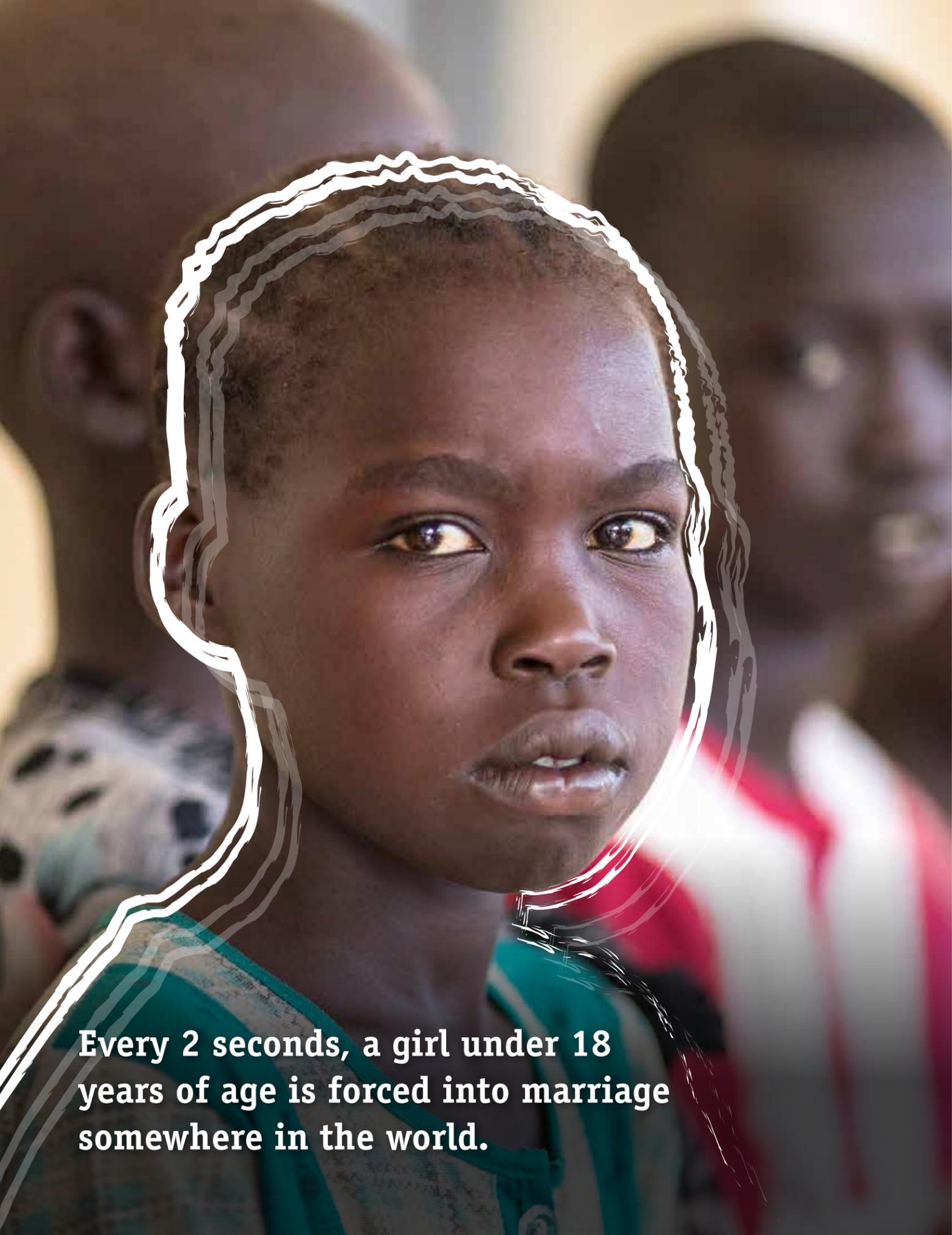
“The single best indicator of whether a nation will succeed,” Obama told the African Union, “is how it treats its women. If you want your country to grow and succeed, you have to empower your women.”

And, of course, your girls.

In spite of that truth, a toxic blend of circumstances still leads tens of thousands of girls into marriage every day, often consigning them to lives of poverty, trauma, early and frequent childbirths, sexual violence and, sometimes, early deaths. As bleak as that picture may appear, as daunting as the statistics that paint it, change can and

does happen. Visibility around these issues is higher than ever. Individuals and groups are mobilizing and advocating for change that keeps girls in school and out of marriage. Governments are passing and enforcing laws that counter or eliminate some of the forces driving girls toward their wedding and away from their graduation. And that progress affirms another vital truth: Deeply entrenched social norms and customs can change. They *do* change. But that change requires many hands, many people, many voices.

Jobeda, whose story led this report, is one of those voices. She and her husband say they’re committed to breaking the cycle of child marriage and letting their own children complete their educations. But they’re looking for support in their families, in their village, throughout Bangladesh and beyond. “It doesn’t work for me as one person to try to stop child marriage,” Jobeda says. “Only if we all work together does it work.”



Every 2 seconds, a girl under 18 years of age is forced into marriage somewhere in the world.



## Ways You Can Help

Act now to stand *with* girls like Jobeda and *against* the forces driving them into marriage and out of school.

### ACT NOW

President Obama and First Lady Michelle Obama are championing efforts to help adolescent girls around the globe attend and complete school through the Let Girls Learn initiative. Visit [CARE.org/vowsofpoverty](https://www.care.org/vowsofpoverty) to thank First Lady Michelle Obama for advocating an end to child marriage as a path to keeping more girls in school. And encourage her to support the timely release and implementation of a **strong inter-agency Adolescent Girl Strategy** that complements Let Girls Learn, **so that all girls, regardless of where they are born, can reach their full potential.**

### WHY NOW?

An **Adolescent Girl Strategy** is essential to assuring that the U.S. does its part in putting the world on track to meet the U.N. Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), enacted last month in an effort to end global poverty, confront climate change and close equality gaps by 2030. Specifically, SDG #5 to “*Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls*” must include ambitious and rights-based indicators that allow for U.N. member states to adequately track the progress, policies and programs that address child marriage, girls’ education, reproductive health and violence. Only then can we be sure that the SDGs are truly **keeping the rights and needs of adolescent girls at the center.**



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