

ENDING CHILD MARRIAGE

Progress and prospects



© UNICEF/BANA2013-01082/Kiron

unite for
children

unicef 

THE CURRENT SITUATION

Worldwide, more than 700 million women alive today were married before their 18th birthday. More than one in three (about 250 million) entered into union before age 15.

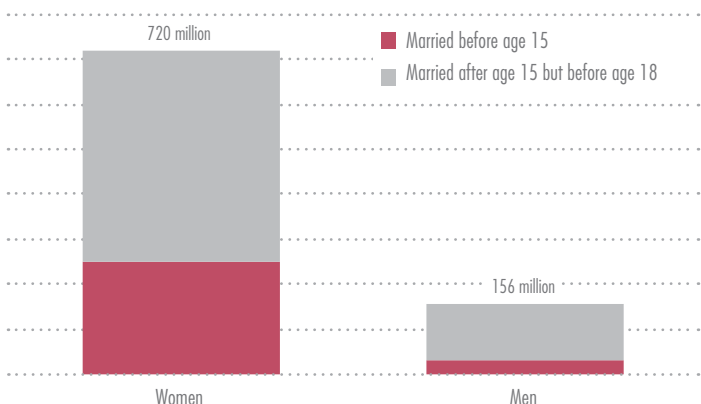
Boys are also married as children, but girls are disproportionately affected. In Niger, for instance, 77 per cent of women aged 20 to 49 were married before age 18 in contrast to 5 per cent of men in the same age group. Even in countries where child marriage is less common, the same gender differences are found. In the Republic of Moldova, for example, 15 per cent of women aged 20 to 49 were married before age 18 compared to 2 per cent of men. Furthermore, girls are often married to considerably older men. In Mauritania and Nigeria, more than half of adolescent girls

aged 15 to 19 who are currently married have husbands who are 10 or more years older than they are. Child marriage is a manifestation of gender inequality, reflecting social norms that perpetuate discrimination against girls.

Child marriage among girls is most common in South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa, and the 10 countries with the highest rates are found in these two regions. Niger has the highest overall prevalence of child marriage in the world. However, Bangladesh has the highest rate of marriage involving girls under age 15. South Asia is home to almost half (42 per cent) of all child brides worldwide; India alone accounts for one third of the global total.

Child marriage affects girls in far greater numbers than boys

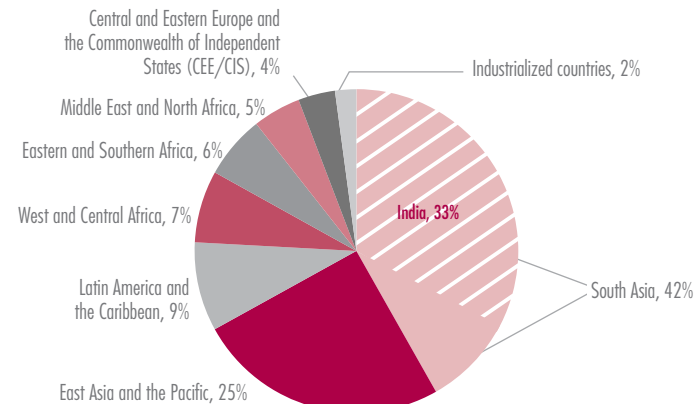
Number of women and men aged 18 years and older who were married or in union before ages 15 and 18



Note: Estimates are based on a subset of countries covering around 50 per cent of the global population of women and men aged 18 years and older.

Almost half of all child brides worldwide live in South Asia; 1 in 3 are in India

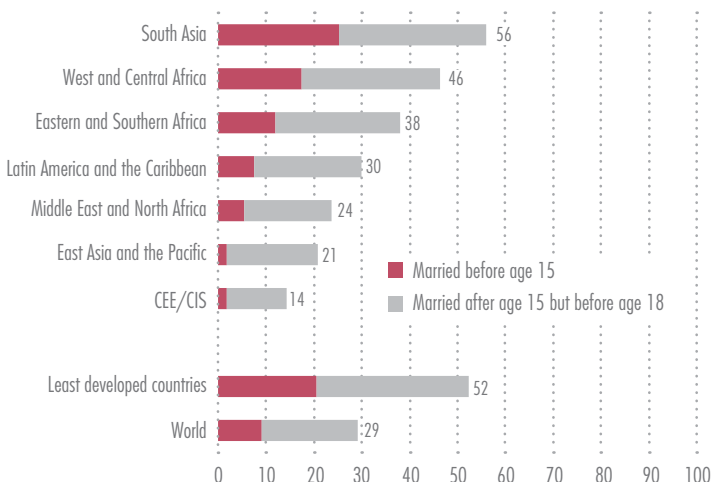
Percentage distribution of women aged 18 years and older who were married or in union before age 18, by region



Note: Estimates are based on a subset of countries covering around 50 per cent of the global population of women aged 18 years and older.

The highest rates of child marriage are found in South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa

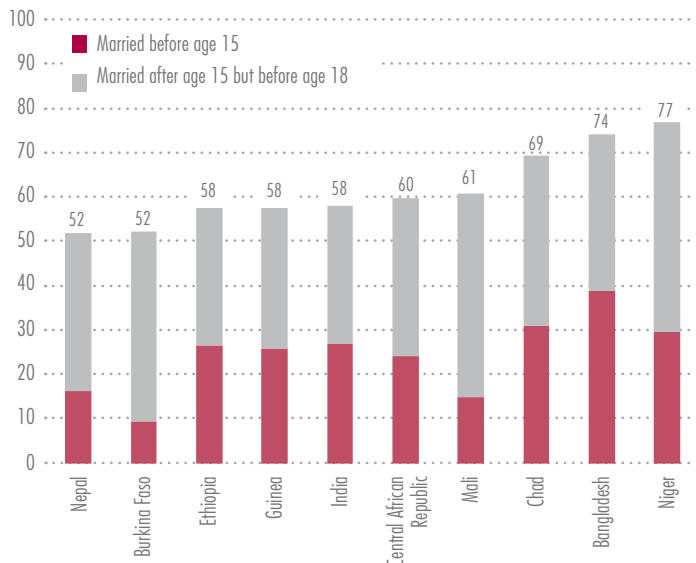
Percentage of women aged 20 to 49 years who were married or in union before ages 15 and 18, by region



Note: Estimates are based on a subset of countries covering around 50 per cent of the global population of women aged 20 to 49 years. Regional estimates represent data covering at least 50 per cent of the regional population. Data coverage is below 50 per cent for East Asia and the Pacific region due to the lack of comparable data on child marriage for China in UNICEF global databases.

The 10 countries with the highest rates of child marriage

Percentage of women aged 20 to 49 years who were married or in union before ages 15 and 18, in the 10 countries with the highest prevalence of child marriage



GIRLS MOST AT RISK

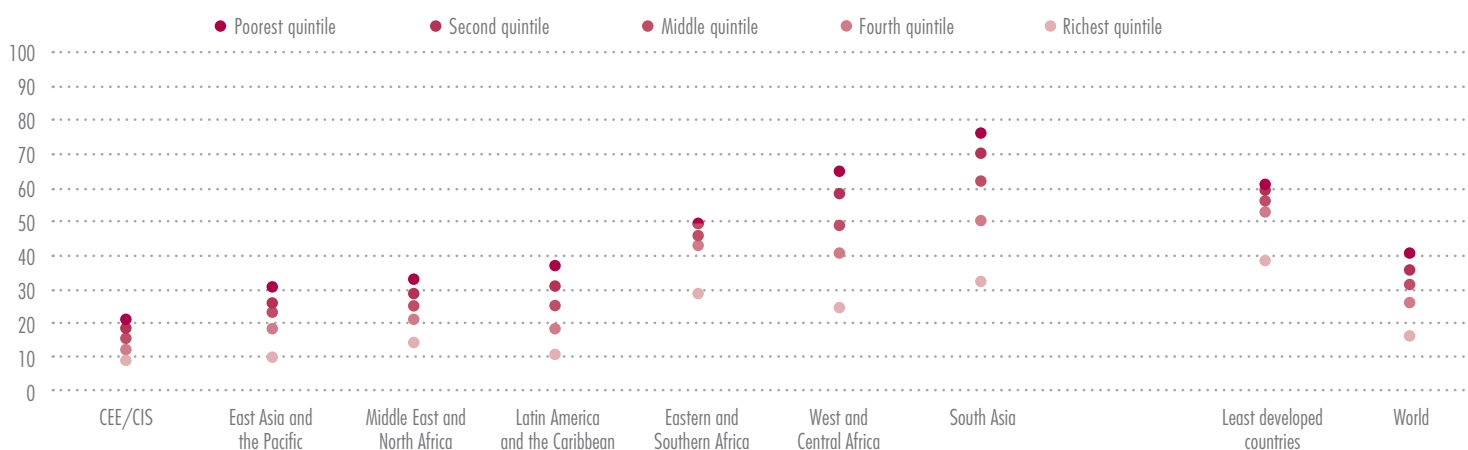
Not all girls face the same risk of becoming child brides, even within countries. In Ethiopia, the rate of child marriage is three times higher in the northern region of Amhara (75 per cent) than in the capital city of Addis Ababa (26 per cent). Child marriage is also more common among certain population groups. In Serbia, for example, 8 per cent of women overall were married as children; however, the share is more than half (54 per cent) among women in Roma communities.

There is also a substantial gap in the prevalence of child marriage between the poorest and richest. Females in the poorest quintile are 2.5 times more likely to marry in childhood than those living in the wealthiest quintile. This disparity is particularly pronounced in certain countries. In India, the

median age at first marriage is 19.7 years for women in the richest quintile compared to 15.4 for the poorest women. The same pattern is also observed in the Dominican Republic, where at least half of the poorest women entered into their first marriage or union at about age 17 compared to age 21 among the richest women. Across all regions, girls who live in rural areas are more likely to become child brides than their urban counterparts. This difference is especially striking in some countries in West and Central Africa and in Latin American and the Caribbean, where the prevalence of child marriage in rural areas is about twice the level found in urban areas.

In every region, the poor are most at risk of child marriage

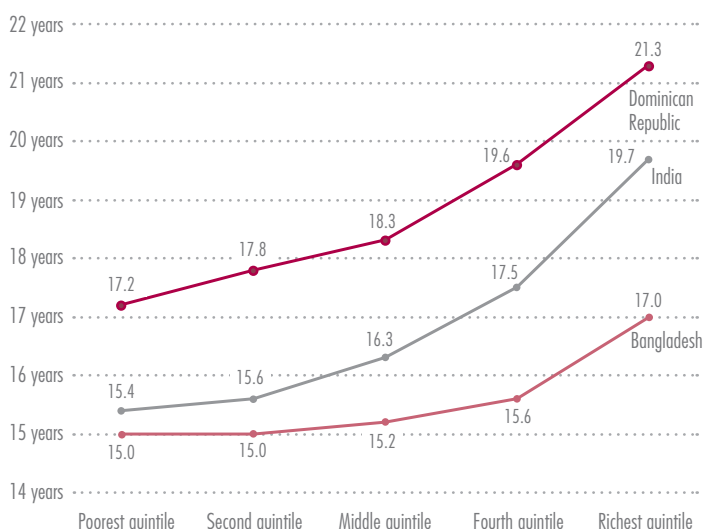
Percentage of women aged 20 to 49 years who were married or in union before age 18, by wealth quintile and by region



Note: Estimates are based on a subset of countries covering around 50 per cent of the global population of women aged 20 to 49 years. Regional estimates represent data covering at least 50 per cent of the regional population. Data coverage is below 50 per cent for East Asia and the Pacific and Latin America and the Caribbean.

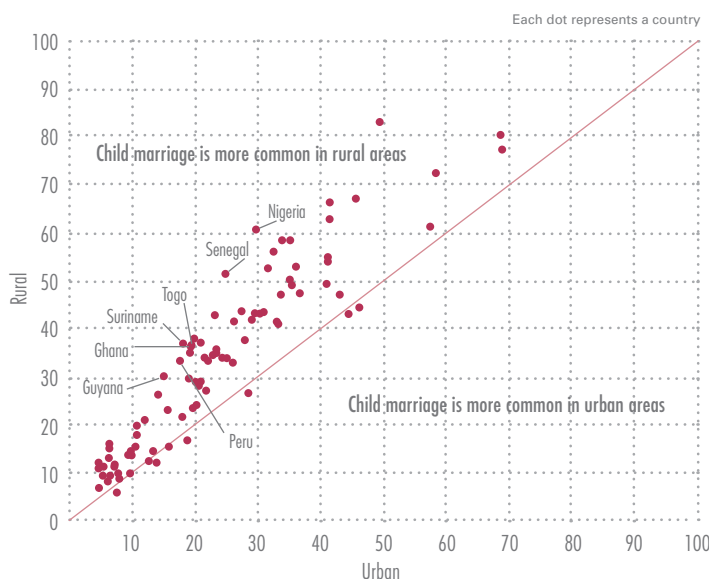
In the Dominican Republic and India, the wealthiest women marry about four years later than the poorest women

Median age at first marriage or union among women aged 25 to 49 years, by wealth quintile, in selected countries



Child marriage is most common in rural areas

Percentage of women aged 20 to 49 years who were married or in union before age 18, by place of residence



LIFELONG – SOMETIMES INTERGENERATIONAL – CONSEQUENCES

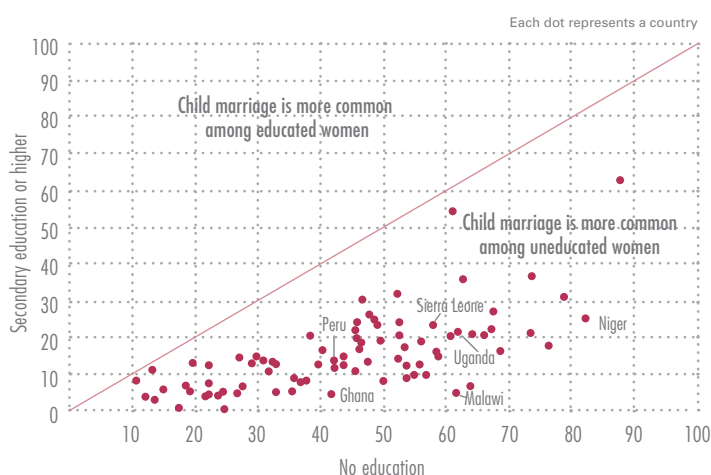
Girls who marry are not only denied their childhood. They are often socially isolated – cut off from family and friends and other sources of support – with limited opportunities for education and employment. Households typically make decisions about girls' schooling and marriage jointly, not sequentially, and education tends to lose out. Accordingly, lower levels of education are found among women who married in childhood. In Malawi, for instance, nearly two thirds of women with no formal education were child brides compared to 5 per cent of women who attended secondary school or higher levels of education.

Child brides are often unable to effectively negotiate safer sex, leaving themselves vulnerable to sexually transmitted infections, including HIV, along with early pregnancy. The

pressure to become pregnant once married can be intense, and child brides typically end up having many children to care for while still young. In Nepal, for example, over one third of women aged 20 to 24 who married before their 15th birthday had three or more children compared to 1 per cent of women who married as adults. Child brides are also less likely to receive proper medical care while pregnant. In countries including Bangladesh, Ethiopia, Nepal and Niger, women who married as adults were at least twice as likely to have delivered their most recent baby in a health facility compared to women who married before age 15. This, along with the fact that girls are not physically mature enough to give birth, places both mothers and their babies at risk.

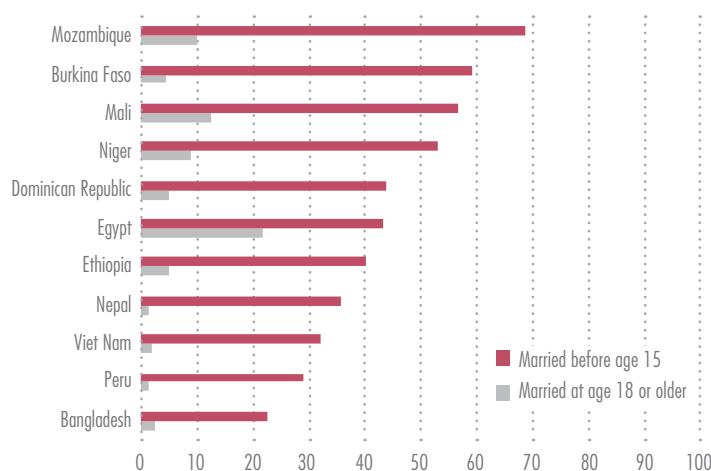
Child brides tend to have low levels of education

Percentage of women aged 20 to 49 years who were married or in union before age 18, by level of education



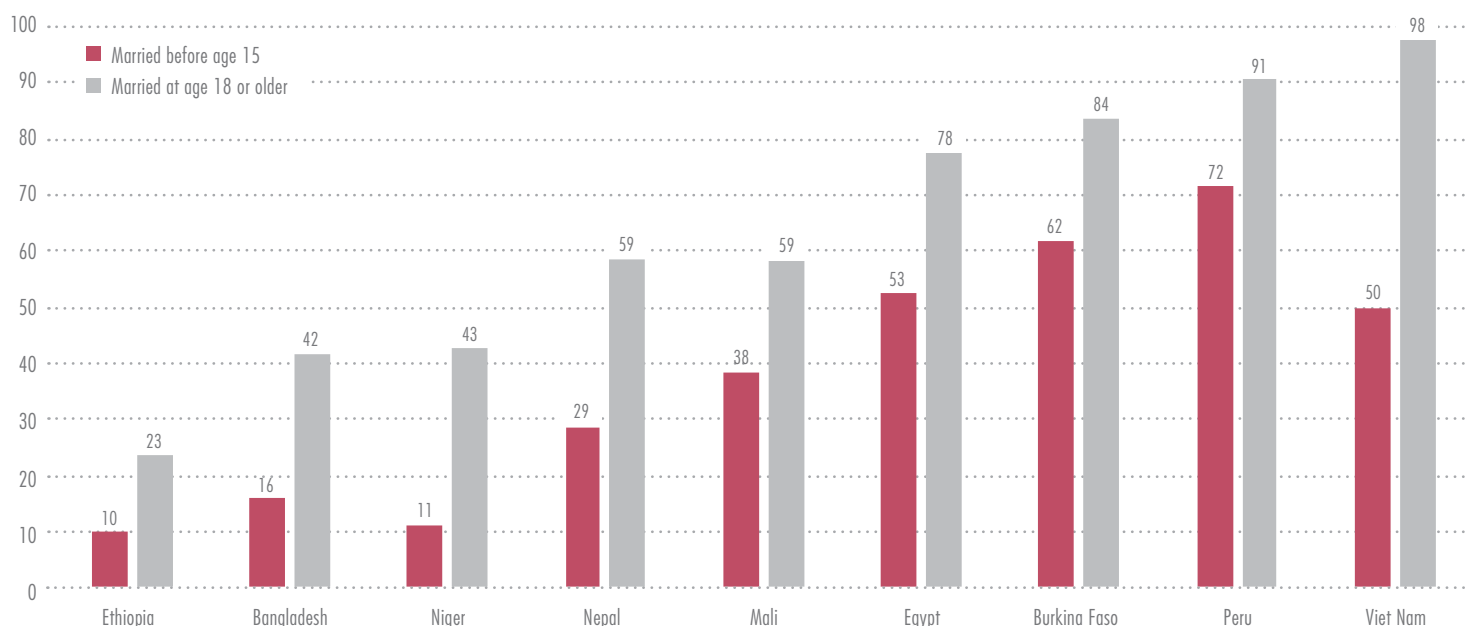
Child brides end up having many children to care for while still young

Percentage of women aged 20 to 24 years who have had three or more children, by age at first marriage or union, in selected countries



Child brides are less likely to receive medical care during pregnancy than women who married as adults

Percentage of women aged 20 to 24 years attended at least four times during pregnancy by any provider, by age at first marriage or union, in selected countries



PROGRESS TO DATE

The practice of child marriage is slowly declining. Progress is most dramatic when it comes to the marriage of girls under 15 years of age. Globally, 1 in 4 young women alive today were married in childhood versus 1 in 3 in the early 1980s. The proportion of young women who entered into marriage before age 15 declined from 12 per cent to 8 per cent over the same period.

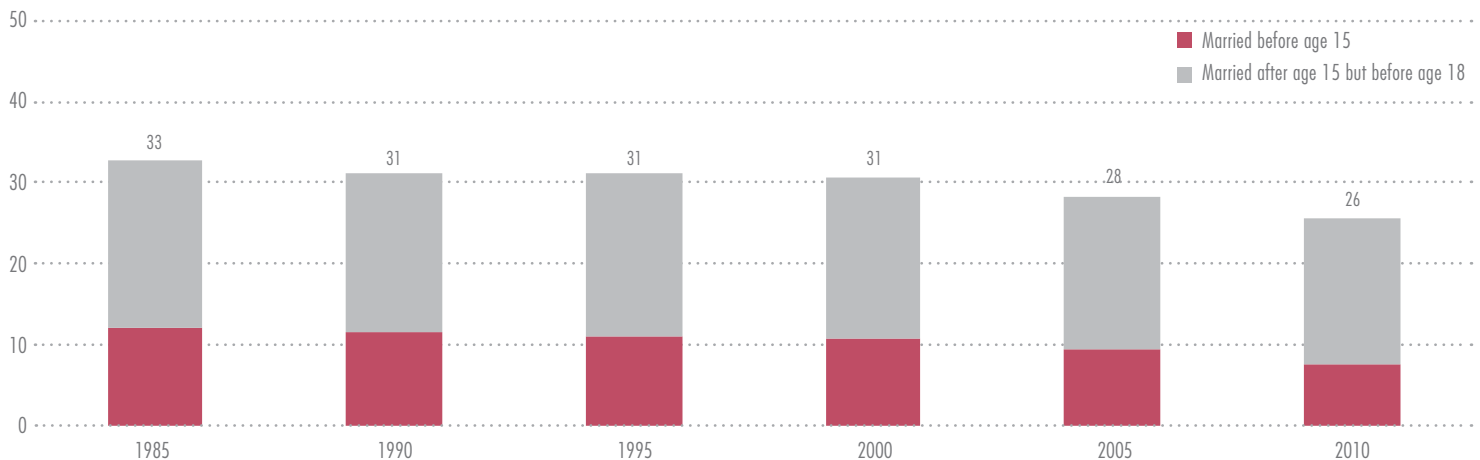
But progress has been uneven across regions and countries. In the Middle East and North Africa, the percentage of women married before age 18 has dropped by about half, from 34 per cent to 18 per cent, over the last three decades. In South Asia, the decline has been especially marked for marriages

involving girls under age 15, dropping from 32 per cent to 17 per cent; the marriage of girls under age 18, however, is still commonplace. Although rates of child marriage are lower overall in Latin America and the Caribbean, no significant change has been seen in the prevalence of child marriage.

In Indonesia and Morocco, the risk of marrying before age 18 is less than half of what it was three decades ago. In Ethiopia, women aged 20 to 24 are marrying about three years later than their counterparts three decades ago. However, in some countries where child marriage is common, including Burkina Faso and Niger, the median age at first marriage has not changed significantly.

Globally, the practice of child marriage is declining, especially when it comes to the marriage of girls under age 15

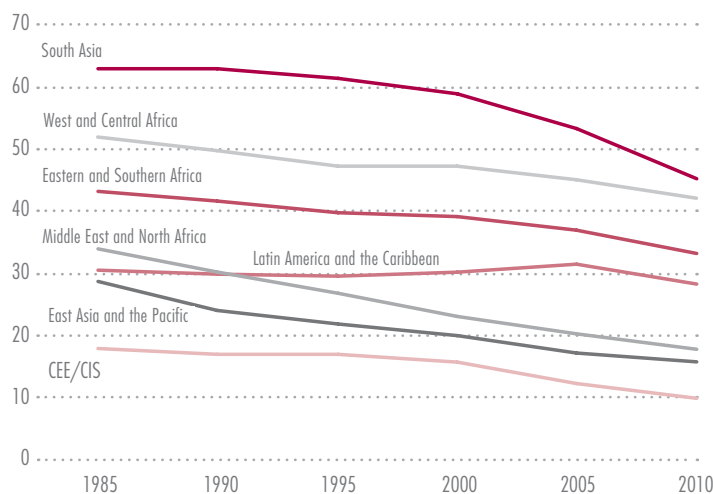
Percentage of women aged 20 to 24 years who were married or in union before ages 15 and 18



Note: Estimates are based on a subset of countries covering at least 50 per cent of the global population of women aged 20 to 24 years.

The Middle East and North Africa has made the fastest progress in reducing child marriage

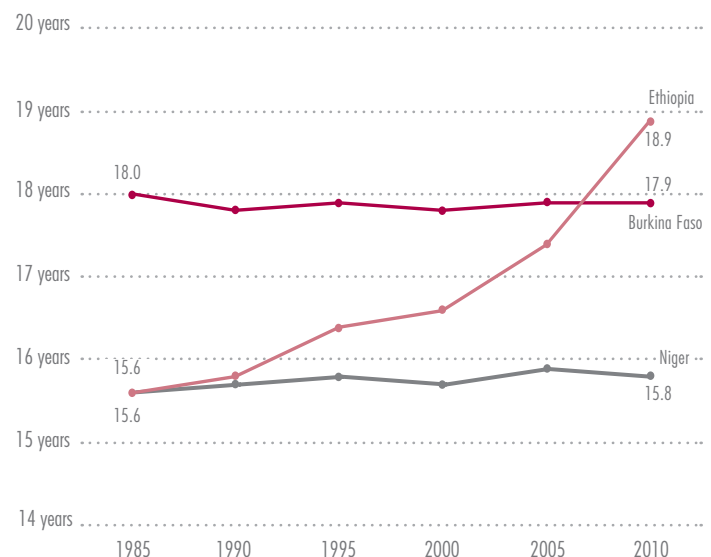
Percentage of women aged 20 to 24 years who were married or in union before age 18, by region



Note: Estimates are based on a subset of countries covering at least 50 per cent of the global population of women aged 20 to 24 years. Regional estimates represent data covering at least 50 per cent of the regional population. Data coverage is below 50 per cent for East Asia and the Pacific region due to the lack of comparable data on child marriage for China in UNICEF global databases.

In Ethiopia, young women are marrying later than their counterparts three decades ago

Median age at first marriage or union among women aged 20 to 24 years, in selected countries



PROSPECTS

But that was the past. What does the future hold for present and future generations of girls?

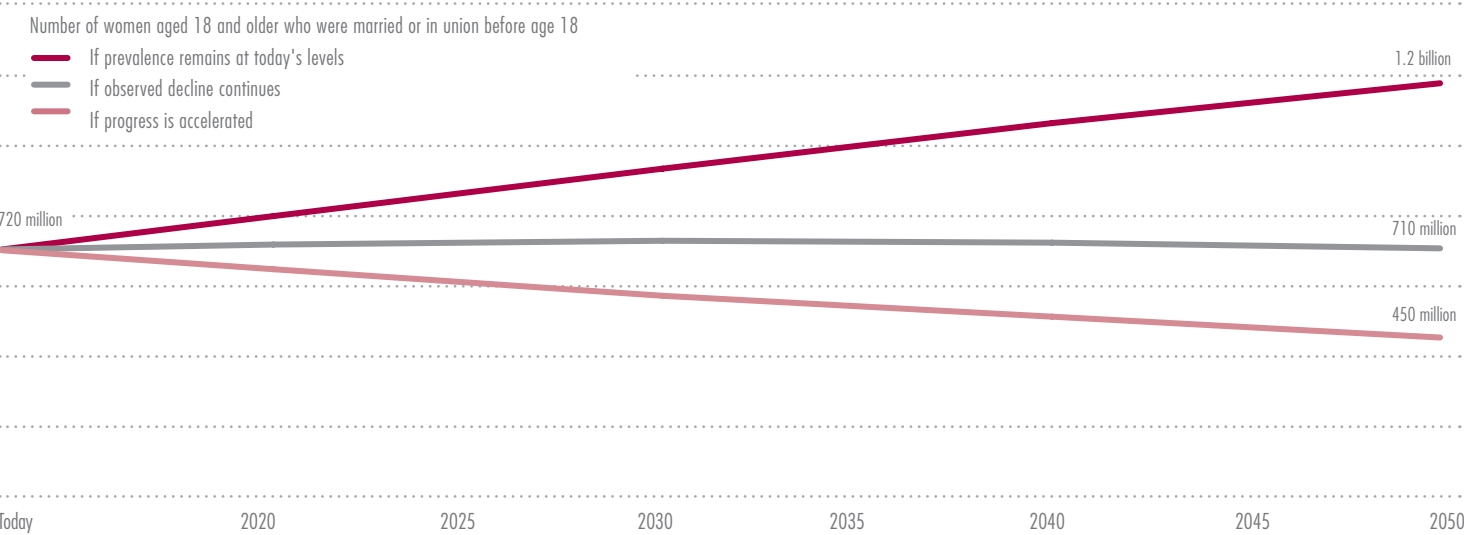
Of the world’s 1.1 billion girls, 22 million are already married. Hundreds of millions more are at risk, and the number will only grow as populations increase. Here are a couple of possible scenarios:

If there is no reduction in the practice of child marriage, up to 280 million girls alive today are at risk of becoming brides by the time they turn 18. Due to population growth, this number will approach 320 million by 2050. The total number of women married in childhood will grow from more than 700 million today to approximately 950 million by 2030, and

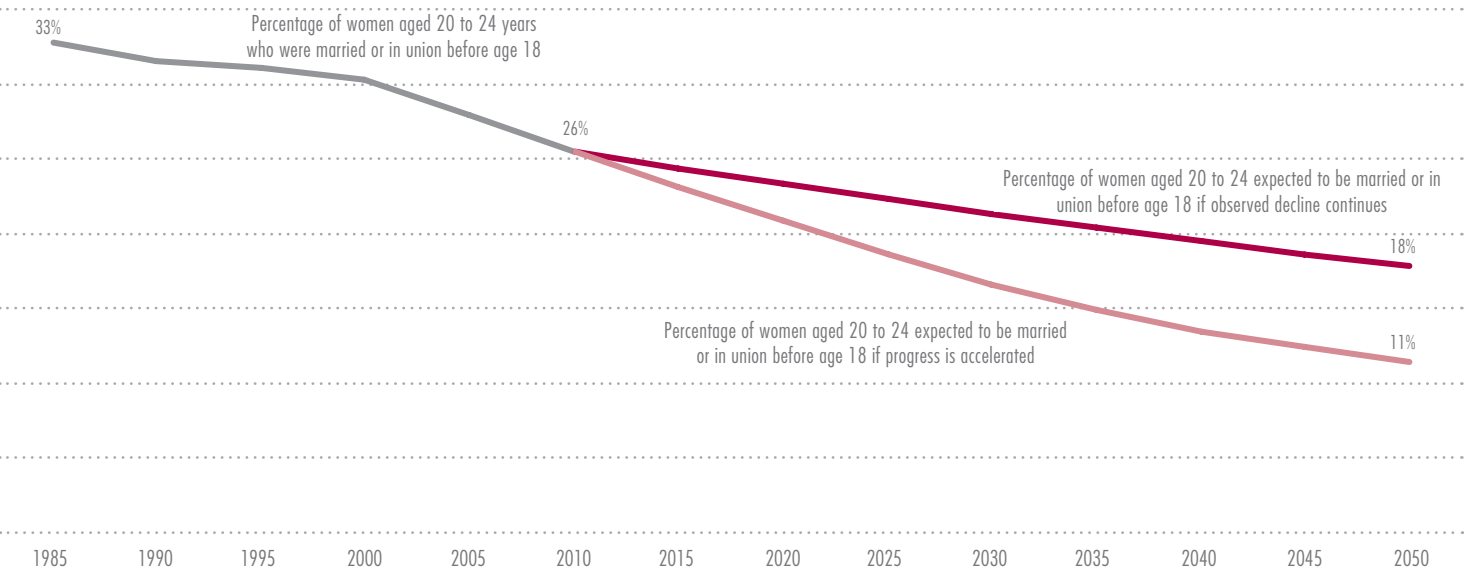
nearly 1.2 billion by 2050. The number of girls under age 18 married each year will grow from 15 million today to 16.5 million in 2030 to over 18 million in 2050.

However, we know that progress has occurred over the last three decades. If the current rate of progress is sustained, the proportion of women married as children will continue to decrease: from 33 per cent in 1985 to 22 per cent by 2030 and to 18 per cent by 2050. Despite gains, this rate of decline is barely fast enough to keep pace with population growth. Even if progress continues, the total number of women married as children will still be around 700 million in 2050, although nearly 490 million girls will have avoided early marriage.

Unless progress is accelerated, the global number of child brides will remain at least as high as it is today



If progress is accelerated, there will be 1 in 10 child brides in the world in 2050 compared to 1 in 4 today



To reduce the number to under 700 million, progress will need to accelerate. If the rate of decline seen over the past three decades is doubled, the total number of women who married as children would drop to approximately 570 million by 2030 and 450 million by 2050. We know such progress is possible since the rate of decline from 2000 is already faster than the average achieved over the past three decades.

Sub-Saharan Africa presents the most extreme scenario. Even if the current pace of progress is maintained, it will not be fast enough to offset population growth. The number of women married as children will double by 2050, and the region will surpass South Asia in having the largest number of child brides from the current level. In this region, even

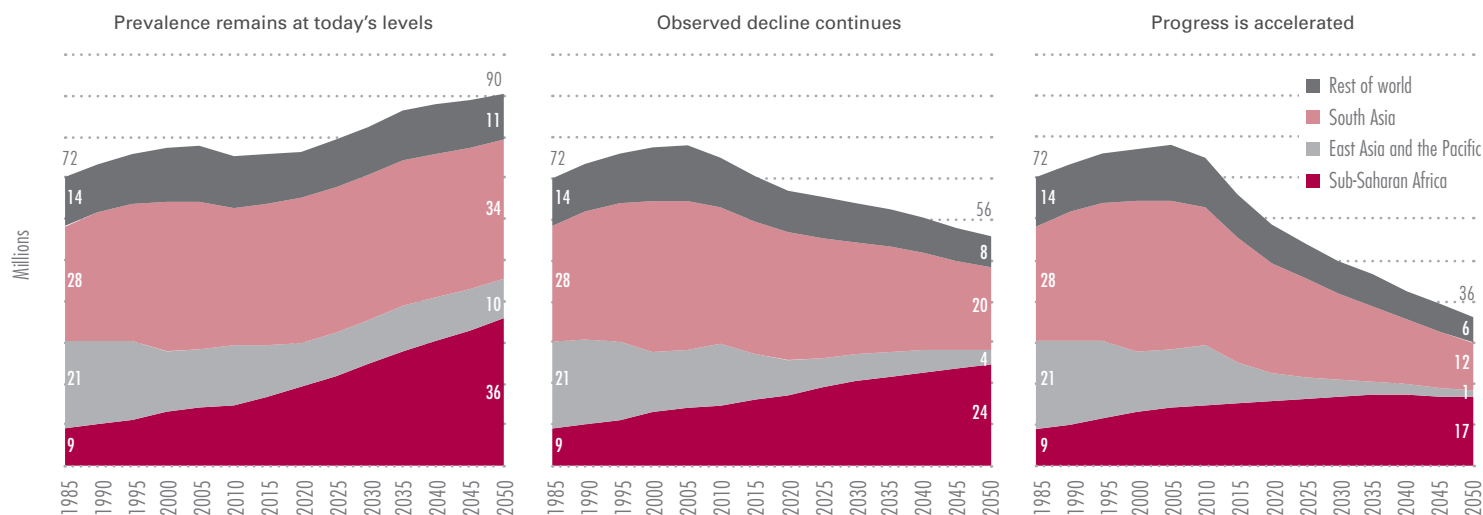
doubling the current rate of decline would not be enough to reduce the number of child brides.

In Africa, Nigeria is expected to have the largest absolute number of child brides. The country has seen a decline in child marriage of about 1 per cent per year over the past three decades. At this pace, the total number of child brides is expected to double by 2050.

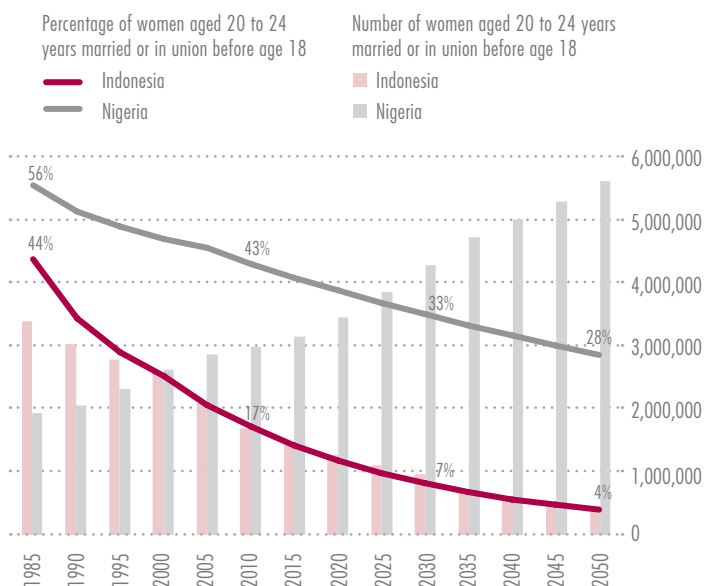
In contrast to global trends, some countries have experienced stagnant or even increasing levels of child marriage. In Burkina Faso, prevalence has remained constant at around 50 per cent for the past three decades. If this persists, the number of child brides will increase substantially in the coming years as the population expands.

Sub-Saharan Africa will have the largest number and global share of child brides by 2050

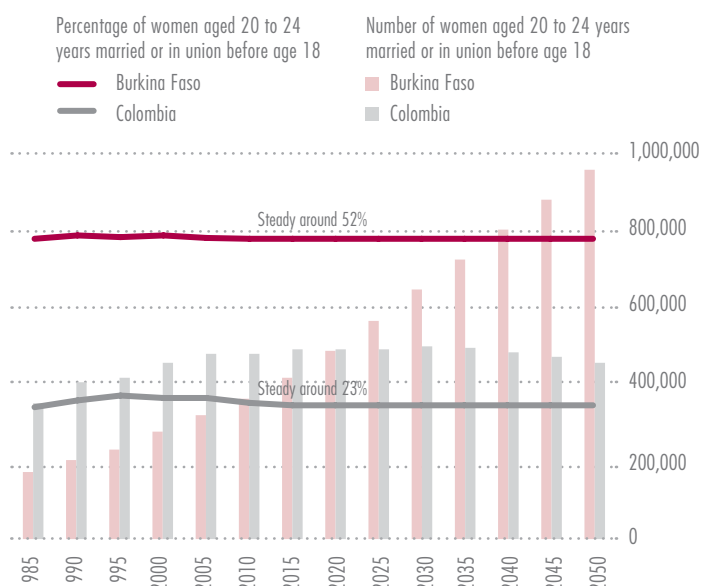
Number of women aged 20 to 24 years who were married or in union before age 18, according to three scenarios



In Nigeria, a continued decline in child marriage will not be enough to offset population growth, in contrast to Indonesia



Due to rapid population growth, the number of child brides in Burkina Faso will increase dramatically, unlike Colombia



Ending child marriage will help break the intergenerational cycle of poverty by allowing girls and women to participate more fully in society. Empowered and educated girls are better able to nourish and care for their children, leading to healthier, smaller families. When girls are allowed to be girls, everybody wins.

UNICEF

Data and Analytics Section
Division of Policy and Research
3 United Nations Plaza
New York, NY 10017, USA

Telephone: +1 212 326 7000

E-mail: data@unicef.org
data.unicef.org

Data sources: UNICEF global databases, 2014, based on Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS), Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys (MICS) and other nationally representative surveys, 2005-2013. Population data are from: United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division, *World Population Prospects: The 2012 revision*, CD-ROM edition, United Nations, New York, 2013.

Suggested citation: United Nations Children's Fund, *Ending Child Marriage: Progress and prospects*, UNICEF, New York, 2014.