

Position Paper:
End Child, Early and Forced Marriage

2nd Global Ministerial on Ending Violence Against Children
Manila, Philippines | 18–19 November 2026

ChildFund believes a rights-based, community-led, systemic approach is required to end child, early and forced marriage globally.

Overview

Child, early and forced marriage (CEFM) is a harmful gender-based practice and a serious human rights violation that disproportionately affects girls and women. It encompasses both marriages where at least one party is under 18, and unions entered without full, free and informed consent.[1] Child marriage is a manifestation of gender inequality and a major barrier to girls' education, health, safety, economic participation and agency.

650 million
Girls and women alive today were married before turning 18.
UNFPA-UNICEF, 2025

1 in 5
Young women globally married before age 18.
UNICEF, 2023

45%
of the world's child brides are in South Asia.
UNICEF, 2025

Child marriage is a result of poverty, deep rooted gender inequality, harmful social practices, and unequal access to education. In spite of progress made globally, the scale of the problem is enormous with millions of girls still denied an education and opportunity to decide their futures. The number of women alive today who were married in childhood also reflects generations of lost opportunities. The consequences of child marriage extend beyond the individual girl. UNICEF data shows around three in four child brides give birth during adolescence, increasing their health vulnerability. Child marriage also increases incidences of violence, economic dependence, reinforcing cycles of intergenerational poverty, and gender inequality.

ChildFund's integrated approach

ChildFund's approach to ending child marriage combines awareness-raising efforts with working directly with governments, communities, and children and youth themselves to strengthen the protective environment around girls. This includes working with children, youth, caregivers, schools and community leaders to support children, particularly girls, to develop important life skills, have access to educational opportunities, create spaces and mechanisms for children to influence and make decisions affecting their lives and imagine pathways beyond marriage. Ending child marriage means making sure that girls and all children have the ability to have a say in important matters affecting their lives such as staying in school and accessing higher education, learning new skills, playing sports, developing a career aspiration and making decisions about their own future.

INDIA

SWABHIMAN PROGRAM

Across Udaipur district in the state of Rajasthan, ChildFund India has provided more than 2,000 girls with scholarships, training on socioemotional learning and livelihood skills, as well as equipment and trainings to support their engagement in sports.

BOLIVIA

GOVERNMENT ENGAGEMENT

ChildFund Bolivia is actively collaborating with national authorities to support the full and effective implementation of the national law prohibiting child marriage. ChildFund is also contributing to the review of legislation that would address forced cohabitation, a related form of violence facing children in the country.

SIERRA LEONE

LEGISLATIVE ADVOCACY

In partnership with Joining Forces, ChildFund Sierra Leone contributed to the passage of the Prevention of Child Marriage Act 2024, a multi-faceted approach meant to address the critical root causes of child marriage in the country. As part of this effort, ChildFund actively participated in consultative meetings, technical working groups, and coordination meetings through the Ministry of Gender and Children's Affairs.

ZAMBIA

COMMUNITY AND FAITH-BASED ADVOCACY

Through engagement with religious and community leaders, ChildFund Zambia is supporting public advocacy against child marriage and raising awareness among congregations about its harmful consequences for girls. Some of the traditional leaders have taken concrete steps to declare their chiefdoms as child-marriage-free zones and introduced penalties for parents who marry off their children early. ChildFund aims to encourage more traditional leaders to adopt similar commitments and actions.

THE GAMBIA

GIRLS EMPOWERMENT PROGRAM

ChildFund Gambia has undertaken several initiatives through the Girls' Platform, strengthening their agency ensuring well-being and protection. Key efforts include building girls' capacity on sexual and reproductive health, online safety, the importance of girls' education, school retention, child marriage and teenage pregnancy. The Platform has also mobilized young people through school outreach program to mark the International Day of the Girl Child and the 16 Days of Activism Against Gender-Based Violence. The Girls' Platform has produced 10,000 sanitary pads distributed to 2000 girls across 20 schools, reducing menstrual-related barriers and continued school attendance and retention.

Governments commit to end child, early and forced marriage

The first Global Ministerial Conference for Ending Violence Against Children (EVAC) wresulted in several governments turning their commitments to ending child marriage into concrete promises for action.

The government of Benin pledged to adopt and implement a budgeted national program to end child marriage, while the Central African Republic and Niger committed to implement their respective child marriage national strategies and action plans by 2027. The government of Chad committed to taking forward its existing roadmap, while Nigeria set out an ambitious target of rolling out costed action plans across 18 states by 2028, and reducing child marriage prevalence from 30% to 25% by 2030. The Democratic Republic of Congo pledged to expand free secondary education, with the aim of reducing marital unions by 25%, while the Dominican Republic committed to investing in its National Strategy for Comprehensive Sexuality Education. The governments of Ghana, Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania and Zambia pledged to challenge the harmful social, gender and cultural norms that continue to put children at risk.

Several financial commitments were made to invest in initiatives working to end violence against children and address CEFM. Children's Investment Fund Foundation (CIFF) announced a $125 million investment over the next five years towards initiatives that protect children from harm, including work to end child marriage in India and Africa. Baroness Chapman, the United Kingdom's Minister for Latin America within the Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO), announced £5 million of new funding towards supporting grassroots organizations ending child marriage.

ChildFund is committed to ending child, early and forced marriage by ensuring all children, including girls, have access to education and opportunities to develop life and livelihoods skills and are able to build confidence and make important decisions that will impact their lives. We will also mobilize communities to challenge harmful gender norms and directly engage in efforts to implement laws and strengthen child protection systems, while partnering with governments, civil society and young people to create safe and supportive environments.



ChildFund's position and call to action

ChildFund urges governments for sustained actions, stronger public systems, and accountability to ensure every girl grows up free from child marriage and is able to make decisions about their own future.

Stronger laws and effective implementation: As of 2025, just 26% of countries have established 18 as the minimum age of marriage without exceptions. Governments must establish 18 years as the minimum age of marriage for both girls and boys without any exceptions; strengthen universal birth and marriage registrations; and implement effective child protection systems and coordinated response to reduce the risks of child, early and forced marriage.

Invest in girls' education and opportunities: Sustained investment in scholarships, financial assistance for vulnerable families and also access to life skills, digital literacy and vocational trainings, all of which are pathways to economic independence. Ensure continuation or returning to education for adolescent mothers, recognizing marriage is not the end of learning and aspiration.

Strengthen Child Protection Systems: Invest in accessible, coordinated child protection systems that include community-based protection systems and referral pathways. A system that effectively coordinates between school, community, social welfare institutions, law enforcement and protection authorities. Girls must have access to confidential, non-judgmental safe survivor services.

Recognize girls as agents of change: Establish mechanisms for meaningful, safe and inclusive engagement of young people in policy discussion programs and national action plans to end child marriage. That includes supporting girl-led groups and youth-led organizations.

Adequate financing, accountability mechanisms: Allocate dedicated resources to implement national strategies and action plans, establishing clear targets and strong monitoring mechanisms. A coordinated action across ministry of health, education, social protection, gender equality, and child protection to address multiple drivers of child marriage. Regular reporting mechanisms ensuring engagement of civil society organizations as strategic partners in accelerating progress towards ending child, early and forced marriage.

In alignment with ChildFund's locally led development model, ending child marriage will require a combination of interventions that complement and reinforce one another. Grounded in rights, agency, choices, aspirations and leadership, the approach creates an enabling environment where all children, including girls, are supported, empowered and protected to make decisions for their lives and futures.

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