Submission for the UN Secretary General report on progress towards ending child, early and forced marriage, responding to the OHCHR's Guiding Questions

This submission is prepared by *Girls Not Brides: The Global Partnership to End Child Marriage.* It has a threefold structure. First, it provides a short overview of *Girls Not Brides*' mission and work. Second, it answers some of the key "Guiding Questions" for stakeholders, issued by the OHCHR, for the preparation of the UN Secretary-General (UNSG) upcoming report on progress towards ending child, early and forced marriage. Third, it provides a short list of recommendations of key aspects to be included in the UNSG' report.

I.   INTRODUCTION

Girls Not Brides is a global partnership of more than 1,400 civil society organisations from over 100 countries committed to ending child marriage and ensuring girls can reach their full potential. *Girls Not Brides: The Global Partnership to End Child Marriage* is a catalyser for civil society action to end child, early and forced marriages and unions (CEFMU) and plays an important convening, capacity building and advocacy role. Many *Girls Not Brides* member organisations work collectively to accelerate progress to end CEFMU at the national and state level by forming National Partnerships/Coalitions.

To effectively end CEFMU, *Girls Not Brides* and member organisations work towards increased and strategic financial investment to implement multi-sectoral, multi-level and multi-stakeholder measures, targeting adolescent girls as the main impact group. During adolescence, girls face significant social, physical, and psychological changes influenced by gender norms. Adolescence represents a critical period of opportunity for interventions to counter poverty, inequality, and shape positive development trajectories, ultimately benefiting adolescents, their future as adults, and their potential children.

As a movement builder, *Girls Not Brides* attaches particular importance to research, to equip member organisations, practitioners and policy-makers with the latest evidence on best practice to end CEFMU and ensure related advocacy is evidence-based. As such, *Girls Not Brides* produces periodic thematic briefs, fact sheets, infographics, manuals, reports, toolkits, and other materials to promote learning and action to end CEFMU. The Child Marriage Research to Action Network (CRANK) is a flagship joint initiative of *Girls Not Brides: The Global Partnership to End Child Marriage* and the UNFPA-UNICEF Global Programme to End Child Marriage, working on a coordinated global research agenda on CEFMU to encourage the uptake of research by policy makers and practitioners. The latest publications can be accessed at: www.girlsnotbrides.org/learning-resources/child-marriage-research-action-network/

II.   RESPONSES TO THE GUIDING QUESTIONS

1.   What efforts have been made or are planned to address the recommendations of the latest report of the Secretary-General on the issue of child, early and forced marriage (A/77/282)? Please, provide information, inter alia, on measures to:

b)   Ensure access to education, decent work, social protection, health services, including sexual and reproductive health, for girls and women who are affected or at risk, who are already married or in informal unions, who have fled such a marriage or union, whose marriage has dissolved, and widowed girls or women who were married as girls

<u>Access to education</u>

Keeping girls in school – especially secondary school – is one of the best ways of delaying marriage.[1] On average, the likelihood of a girl marrying as a child is six percentage points less for every additional year she stays in secondary education.[2] Governments must therefore work across sectors to guarantee access to 12 years of free, quality, compulsory and gender-transformative primary and secondary education for girls at risk of child marriage and married girls, removing all school fees and levies. In light of this, the UN Secretary General should call on UN member states to support the development of a new Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child, explicitly recognising the right of all children to at least one year of free pre-primary education and free secondary education.[3]

The Every Adolescent Girl Empowered and Resilient (EAGER) programme in Sierra Leone[4] (led by the International Rescue Committee, completed in March 2023) provided literacy, numeracy, financial literacy, and life skills training for over 32,000 adolescent girls aged 10 to 19 with little or no formal education. Once girls completed the learning component of the programme, they worked on "empowerment plans" and received small grants to carry out their plans. Girls interviewed had more positive views of the future, and their general horizons had been expanded. However, despite in-depth work with communities to shift norms, these are slow to change: "for many beneficiaries, these outcomes primarily enable them to more effectively manage their lives within inequitable gender roles, without transforming culturally entrenched gender norms" (EAGER Midline).[5]

Following crises, girls are more likely to experience violence and exploitation, deeper income losses, be forced into early marriage as a coping mechanism, become pregnant, and, consequently, drop out of school. Following COVID-19 related school closures, Bangladesh, Benin, Ethiopia, Ghana, Pakistan, and Uganda implemented advocacy campaigns for girls' re-enrolment.[6] Other incentives

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[1] *Girls Not Brides,* Girls Education and Child Marriage thematic brief, 2022.

[2] Wodon, Q., et al., Missed Opportunities: The High Cost of Not Educating Girls, 2018, Washington DC: World Bank.

[3] Negotiations on a resolution to establish a working group to begin drafting the new Optional Protocol, led by Luxembourg, Sierra Leone and Dominican Republic, will take place at the Human Rights Council in Geneva in June 2024. See: https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/03/18/global-momentum-builds-toward-free-education-all-children, https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/articles/were-calling-for-expanded-rights-to-free-education-to-prevent-child-marriage-join-us/.

[4] See: https://girlseducationchallenge.org/projects/project/every-adolescent-girl-empowered-and-resilient-eager/

[5] The Girls' Education Challenge, Tackling child marriage through education, 2024, p. 8.

[6] World Bank, Guide for Learning Recovery and Acceleration, 2022.

such as scholarships and adaptations for young mothers have also shown success in bringing back girls to school after shocks.[7]

The Excelling Against the Odds project in Ethiopia,[8] run by ChildHope UK, set up girls' clubs in project schools and developed school-based safeguarding reporting mechanisms, called Letter-Link Boxes, so that girls and boys can anonymously report any safeguarding concerns or threats of traditional harmful practices. In the clubs, girls built their life skills and self-esteem, and were able to discuss the impact of inequitable gender norms, and how to challenge them. They could also discuss protection issues and how to report them.[9]

Useful resources:

- *Girls Not Brides*, 2022, "Thematic Brief: Girls' Education and Child Marriage": https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/documents/1821/Girls_education_and_child_marriage_brief_Sept_2022.pdf

Sexual and reproductive health and rights

A robust body of evidence highlights the positive connections between increased girls' education and better sexual and reproductive health (SRH) outcomes, such as delayed marriage, higher contraceptive use, postponed age at first birth, and greater utilisation of health services. [10] For instance, in a study across 15 countries in Asia and Africa, girls who completed secondary education demonstrated greater knowledge of HIV/AIDS compared to those with only primary education. [11]

Comprehensive sexuality education (CSE)[12] equips both girls and boys with accurate information about SRH, including issues around consent. CSE therefore plays a crucial role in preventing sexual and gender-based violence (GBV), leading to fewer unintended pregnancies and sexually transmitted infections.[13] For example, the Holistic Education for Youth (HEY!) Programme, which introduce discussions on gender and power early on and in line with young people's evolving capacities, have shown to positively impact sexual and reproductive health and rights outcomes.[14]

Given the power imbalance experienced by girls in relation to decisions made around their own health, it is crucial to engage boys, husbands or partners, in-laws, parents, and the broader community in shifting gender-inequitable social norms related to adolescent sexuality and the use of contraception and other SRH services, including through context-sensitive programmes. Recent findings demonstrate that girls' clubs involving parents and other family and community members

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[7] World Bank, Nigeria: A financial incentive scheme is bringing girls back to school, 2023.

[8] ChildHope UK, Excelling Against the Odds, 2021.

[9] The Girls' Education Challenge, Tackling child marriage through education, 2024, p. 9.

[10] Svanemyr J, et. al., *Creating an Enabling Environment for Adolescent Sexual and Reproductive Health: A Framework and Promising Approaches*, *Journal of Adolescent Health*, Volume 56, Issue 1, Supplement, January 2015, Pages S7–S14.

[11] Wodon, Q., A. N. Onagoruwa, and A. Savadogo, *Economic Impacts of Child Marriage: Women's Decision Making & Selected Other Impacts Impacts*, Washington, DC: The World Bank and International Center for Research on Women, 2017.

[12] UNESCO defines CSE as "a curriculum-based process of teaching and learning about the cognitive, emotional, physical and social aspects of sexuality. It aims to equip children and young people with knowledge, skills, attitudes and values that will empower them to: realize their health, well-being and dignity; develop respectful social and sexual relationships; consider how their choices affect their own well-being and that of others."

[13] UNESCO, *Comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) country profiles*, 2023.

[14] Diana Pacheco-Montoya and Erin Murphy-Graham, *Fostering Critical Thinking as a Life Skill to Prevent Child Marriage in Honduras: The Case of Holistic Education for Youth (HEY!)*, 2022.

are more likely to result in behaviour changes – such as reductions in violence and child marriage – rather than just shifts in attitudes.[15]

Safe space programmes for out-of-school girls provide an alternative environment to learn about sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR). Research has shown that these spaces can lead to a variety of positive SRHR outcomes, including reducing gender-inequitable norms and the acceptance of GBV. They also serve to increase girls' knowledge and use of SRH services, including contraception, HIV testing and treatment, as well as maternal health and first-time parent support services.[16]

Useful resources:

- *Girls Not Brides,* Child Marriage and Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights, 2018, https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/documents/873/PO47765-Girls-Not-Brides-5.-Child-Marriage-and-SRHR-lr.pdf

Economic interventions to address CEFMU

Implementing interventions to improve girls' economic empowerment, their financial literacy, access to savings, employment skills and prospects is key to expand alternatives to marriage before age 18 and prevent adolescent pregnancy, child marriage and support married girls.[17]

In 2011, the WHO published a set of guidelines on preventing early pregnancy and poor reproductive outcomes in adolescents.[18] In 2023, UNFPA and the WHO commissioned a review of the evidence to update these guidelines, including a focus on effective interventions, promising practice and recommendations to prevent child marriage and support married girls. The guidelines are organised around seven core themes: cash transfers, economic empowerment, education, girls' empowerment, the law, meaningful youth engagement and social norms. Within this comprehensive approach, social protection – especially cash transfer programmes – can play a role in mitigating some of the economic and social drivers of child marriage in both development and humanitarian contexts.

As recent evidence suggests, economic empowerment interventions, particularly those that focus on girls' education and transition to work, can reduce child marriage at scale and over short time periods.[19] This is shown in evidence from girl-focused interventions in Bangladesh,[20] Liberia,[21]

[15] Marcus, R., et. al., *GAGE Rigorous Review Girls' clubs, life skills programmes and girls' wellbeing outcomes*, 2017.

[16] Erulkar, A., & Muthengi, E., *Evaluation of Berhane Hewan: A Program to Delay Child Marriage in Rural Ethiopia*, International Perspectives on Sexual and Reproductive Health , 35 (1), 2009.

[17] *Girls Not Brides,* Research Spotlight: Economic empowerment interventions to address child marriage, 2024.

[18] WHO, 2021, Preventing early pregnancy and poor reproductive outcomes among adolescents in developing countries.

[19] Girls Not Brides, UNICEF, UNFPA and Population Council, 2024, Research Spotlight: Economic empowerment interventions to address child marriage

[20] Amin, S., Saha, J. S. and Ahmed, J. A., Skills-building programs to reduce child marriage in Bangladesh: A randomized controlled trial, Journal of Adolescent Health, 63:3, 2018; Heath, R. and Mobarak, M., Manufacturing growth and the lives of Bangladeshi women, International Perspectives on Sexual and Reproductive Health, 35:1, 2015; and Shahnaz, R. and Karim, R., Providing microfinance and social space to empower adolescent girls: An evaluation of BRAC's ELA Centres, Esocialsciences.Com, Working Papers, 2008.

[21] Özler, B., Hallman, K., Guimond, M.-F., Kelvin, E. A., Rogers, M., and Karnley, E., Girl Empower – A gender-transformative mentoring and cash transfer intervention to promote adolescent wellbeing: Impact findings from a cluster-radomized controlled trial in Liberia, SSM – Population Health, 10, 2020.

Uganda,[22] and in India.[23] A household-level intervention in rural Ethiopia[24] showed delayed marriage among younger adolescents, but increased child marriage prevalence among older adolescent girls aged 15 to 19.

Livelihood skills – including financial literacy – help reduce child marriage and increase adolescent girls' employment, access to and/or control over resources, and/or their economic autonomy. In Bangladesh, girls in communities exposed to the economic empowerment arm of the BAKILA programme – which offered 144 hours of life-skills and livelihood training – were 23% less likely to marry before age 18 than the control group.[25]

Access to economic opportunities can lead adolescent girls to stay in school and delay marriage. In Bangladesh, one study found that girls exposed to the garment sector[26] – which requires workers to have basic literacy and numeracy – stayed in school (especially when younger) and postponed marriage to work in factories. Girls in this group were 0.3 percentage points less likely to marry than girls in the control group.[27]

The visibility of economic opportunities for adolescent girls and women is important in delaying marriage. Evidence from girl-focused programming in India shows female leadership influences adolescent girls' educational attainment, and career and marriage aspirations. This seems to be a role model effect, as there was no evidence of changes in young women's labour market opportunities.[28]

Useful resources:

- *Girls Not Brides*, UNFPA, UNICEF, Population Council, 2024, Research Spotlight: Economic empowerment interventions to address child marriage, https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/documents/2110/CRANK_Research_Spotlight_Economic_empowerment.pdf
- *Girls Not Brides*, 2021, How cash transfers can contribute to ending child marriage (prepared by Nicholas Mathers), https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/documents/1655/How_cash_transfers_can_contribute_to_ending_child_marriage.pdf

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[22] Bandiera, O., Buehren, N., Burgess, R., Goldstein, M., Gulesci, S., Rasul, I., and Sulaiman, M, Women's empowerment in action: Evidence from a randomized control trial in Africa, American Economic Journal: Applied Economics, 12:1, 2020.

[23] Jensen, R., Do labour market opportunities affect young women's work and family decisions? Experimental evidence from India" The Quarterly Journal of Economics, 127, 2012; and Kanesathasan, A., Cardinal, L. J., Pearson, E., Das Gupta, S. D., Mukherjee, S., Malhotra, A., Catalyzing change: Improving youth sexual and reproductive health through DISHA, an integrated program in India, International Center for Research on Women, 2008.

[24] Erulkar, A. S. and Muthengi, E., Evaluation of Berhane Hewan: A program to delay child marriage in rural Ethiopia, International Perspectives on Sexual and Reproductive Health, 35:1, 2009.

[25] Amin, S., Saha, J. S. and Ahmed, J. A., Skills-building programs to reduce child marriage in Bangladesh: A randomized controlled trial, Journal of Adolescent Health, 63:3, 2018.

[26] Exposure is understood as having a garment factory within commuting distance from where the girls lived.

[27] Heath, R. and Mobarak, M., Manufacturing growth and the lives of Bangladeshi women, International Perspectives on Sexual and Reproductive Health, 35:1, 2015.

[28] Beaman, L., Duflo, E., Pande, R. and Topalova, P., Female leadership raises aspirations and educational attainment for girls: A policy experiment in India, Science, 335:6068, 2012.

2. What prevention mechanisms have proved effective to eradicate child, early and forced marriage? Please include examples of promising practices and challenges encountered on engaging family members, religious, traditional and community leaders, in raising awareness about, and countering child, early and forced marriage.

Changing social norms that perpetuate gender inequality and harmful gender stereotypes is crucial to empowering girls and women and reducing child, early and forced marriages and unions. In Malawi, Theatre for a Change (TfaC) worked on the Team Girl Malawi[29] project to develop scenario-based interactive radio programming that addressed the causes of child marriage. Their success in averting and delaying child marriage was down to developing storylines that ran for extended periods with characters that communities could relate to and identify themselves. Village chiefs, parents and children all called in to share their experiences of reducing, averting and delaying child marriage. The use of 'real and live' cases was instrumental in the programme's success. Community surveys and safeguarding referrals routinely state the radio programme's influence in supporting decision-making.[30]

A case study from Msichana Empowerment Kuria, a young women-led, community-based organisation in Kuria East, Migori County, Kenya, highlights the importance of integrated programming to ensure a comprehensive response to prevent child marriage as well as FGM/C. Successful approaches include supporting girls to stay in school, supporting access to justice, empowering girls, engaging communities, and building effective partnerships. It also highlights the importance of long-term funding for community-based organisations to support social change, as they understand best the local context and the needs of the girls they serve.[31]

Initiatives to engage men and boys to achieve gender equality and to respect and protect women's and girl's human rights, for example through organisations and networks such as MenEngage,[32] is key to ending child marriage, including through prevention. Other promising practices include Project UMANG by ICRW Asia in Jharkhand, India,[33] and the CARE Tipping Point Impact evaluation in Nepal[34] and Bangladesh.[35]

Girls Not Brides is part of the African Union Technical Working Group for the African Union Campaign to End Child Marriage.[36] The campaign is based on advocacy, monitoring and evaluation, and the facilitation of technical assistance and capacity building. The campaign has two phases: the first phase ran from 2014 to 2017, and the second phase from 2018 to 2023 (country monitoring visit, regional AU Godwill Ambassador, positive masculinity champion etc).

[29] See: https://girlseducationchallenge.org/projects/project/team-girl-malawi/
[30] The Girls' Education Challenge, Tackling child marriage through education, 2024, p. 6.
[31] *Girls Not Brides,* Successfully addressing FGM/C and child marriage: the case of Msichana Empowerment Kuria, Kenya, 2021.
[32] See: https://menengageafrica.org/reer/
[33] See: https://www.icrw.org/projects/umang-2/
[34] CARE, Impact Evaluation Summary of Tipping Point Nepal, 2022.
[35] CARE, Impact Evaluation Summary of Tipping Point Bangladesh, 2022.
[36] See: https://www.aucecma.org/.

3.   What kind of approaches and tools have been used to collect disaggregated data on child, early and forced marriages, as well as informal unions?

The Uganda Government, through the Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development, developed "OVCIMS", an information management system that captures and disaggregates data on child marriage across the country (data is usually provided by CSOs, and the local government), and each financial year reports are published on available data. The system also possesses a service provider directory to benefit girls that may be trapped in marriage. This appears to have been effective for local government districts (sub regions) that can access digital technology; however, it remains a challenge to track data from inaccessible regions.[37] Key findings from the recently published Uganda Demographic Health Survey (UDHS) 2022 further show that adolescent pregnancy is a key determinant of child marriage.[38]

Youth-led research under the *Girls Not Brides* Education Out Loud-funded project in Niger and Burkina Faso positioned young researchers as key stakeholders in the generation, analysis, and dissemination of data to provide decision-makers with evidence-based recommendations to end child marriage and promote girls' education. The Youth-Led Research component played a significant role in fostering grassroots insights and youth engagement. In particular, it reflected concerns and priorities relevant to an age group most concerned by challenges around girls' education and child marriage and creating a culture of accountability and credibility.[39] By supporting young researchers with affiliation to an established research institute, this particular project allowed them to have access to technical support throughout their research, and after endorsement of their research, the young researchers will be able to use their findings to inform their evidence-based advocacy – both elements will be key to shifting approaches to research and its use for strategic advocacy.

Household surveys, such as Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS) or Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys (MICS), often include modules specifically designed to capture data on marriage and union status, including age at marriage and consent. Additionally, in 2019, UNICEF launched MICS Plus to leverage on mobile phone penetration to collect population based data.[40] UN Women's Women Count Programme works with National Statistics Offices to create an enabling environment for production and use of statistics, specifically statistics related to gender equality and women's empowerment.[41] Conversation around Citizen Generated Data is also on the rise[42], for example in Kenya[43] and Uganda[44], which is particularly useful as a method to fill data gaps relating to the achievement of the SDGs and specifically SDG target 5.3 on ending child marriage.[45]

In Mexico, the 2021 National Survey on the Dynamics of Household Relationships (ENDIREH), at its fifth edition since 2003, reports on the situation of violence against women in the country. It is generated by the National Institute of Statistics and Geography (INEGI), within the framework of the

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[37] See: http://ovcmis.mglsd.go.ug/
[38] UBOS, UNFPA, UNICEF, WHO, Uganda Demographic Health Survey (UDHS) 2022: Key Findings, 2022
[39] *Girls Not Brides,* 2023 Impact Report, 2023, p. 19.
[40] See: https://mics.unicef.org/mics-plus/methodology-and-use
[41] See: https://data.unwomen.org/women-count
[42] See for example: https://www.civicus.org/index.php/media-center/resources/toolkits/civicus-resources/citizen-generated-data; https://www.data4sdgs.org/; IISD, Citizen-Generated Data: Data by people, for people, 2022.
[43] See: https://new.knbs.or.ke/citizen-generated-data/
[44] UN Women, Be Like Uganda – CGD Brief, 2023.
[45] See for example: UN Women, Citizen Generated Data Toolkit, 2021.

National Subsystem of Information on Government, Public Security and Justice (SNIGSPIJ). The ENDIREH 2021 provides information on the experiences of physical, economic, sexual, psychological and patrimonial violence that women aged 15 and over have faced in the family, school, work, community and intimate partner environments. It also presents data on the aggressors and the places where the aggressions occurred, as well as additional variables that allow for the analysis of violence against women in Mexico.[46] According to this data, 66% of women aged 20 to 24 who were married or in a union before the age of 18 had their first child between the ages of 13 and 17, compared to 6% of women in this age range who were married or in a union when they were older. If all women aged 15 and older in Mexico were sampled, 65% of those who were married or in a union before age 18 had their first child between the ages of 13 and 17 and 27% between the ages of 18 and 20. In contrast, only 3% of those who married or were in a union after age 18 had children between the ages of 13 and 17; 31% between the ages of 18 and 20; and 47% aged 21 or older.

In Guatemala, the Mesa a Favor de las Niñas y Adolescentes (*Girls Not Brides* National Partnership) undertook a study on public investment in girls and adolescents in Guatemala between 2020 and 2022. This study sought to analyse how girls and adolescents live in Guatemala based on the compilation of information provided by the Central Administration (Ministries and Secretariats), Decentralized and Autonomous entities, and Social Security System. This helped produce evidence on the coverage rates and/or deprivation of rights related to health, food security, SRH, education, migration and sexual violence, which can be used to directly address the linkage between investment in girls and adolescents and CEFMU and the importance of having more information, particularly data around unions.[47]

4.   Have digital technologies and tools been used to address child, early and forced marriage? If so, please share promising practices, challenges and possible solutions.

Following the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent lockdowns, many organisations used digital technologies and tools to adapt their ways of working, including those in the *Girls Not Brides* membership. For example, the Centre for Social Concern and Development (CESOCODE) in Malawi had to adapt their work to end child marriage as a result of the pandemic. This included finding new ways to communicate with girls at risk of child marriage, such as through a Bluetooth mobile-to-mobile messaging service, podcast, and social media, ensuring that girls still had access to support.[48]

Other organisations also use digital technologies as a positive tool to address issues around child marriage and to reduce the risk and incidence of this harmful practice. For example, Akili Dada uses social media (WhatsApp) chatbots to impart SRHR information to girls and young women.[49] In Kenya, Mtoto News is a digital and media platform using technology to make children visible and to shed light on child-related issues, including in relation to CEFMU, by developing and sharing news, information and resources through a child-led process.[50] In Niger, the training of youth activists led to the organisation of a digital campaign focused on promoting girls' education and ending GBV.[51]

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[46] ENDIREH, Encuesta Nacional sobre la Dinámica de las Relaciones en los Hogares: Principales Resultados, 2021.

[47] Mesa Niña, Study of Public Investment Directed to Girls and Adolescents in Guatemala between 2020 and 2022, 2024.

[48] *Girls Not Brides,* The "new normal" – how technology is helping CESOCODE prevent child marriage during COVID-19, 2020.

[49] See: https://www.akilidada.org/learning-impact

[50] See: https://www.mtotonews.com/

[51] *Girls Not Brides,* 2023 Impact Report, 2023, p. 9.

Plan International have published a dedicated report providing examples of promising practices, challenges and recommendations around using digital technology to end child, early and forced marriage and reduce adolescent pregnancy in the Asia-Pacific region.[52] UNICEF have also undertaken a study of the key technology-driven and technology-enabled interventions to address child marriage and FGM/C across 13 countries in Africa and Asia, including assessing the technological landscape within which they are implemented.[53]

5.   Are digitalized birth and marriage registration systems being used in your country, requiring mandatory registration of all births and marriages, including childbirths at home and marriages under customary and religious laws? Do these digitalized registration systems allow to verify digitally birth certificates, before registering any marriage?

Efforts are being made through agencies such as UNICEF, WHO, the Economic Commission for Africa (ECA)[54] and the World Bank[55] to work with national governments to ensure effective Civil Registration and Vital Statistics (CRVS) systems through means of technology.[56] In India, the Registration of Birth and Deaths (Amendment) Act 2023[57] introduced, inter alia, the digitalisation of all reported births and marriage registrations, requiring States in India to register births on the Centre's Civil Registration System (CRS) portal.[58]

6.   What other innovative strategies have been used to address child, early and forced marriage, as well as informal unions and collect data on this practice in your country?

Gender-transformative approaches (GTA) are critical to accelerate progress to address child marriage by targeting the root causes of gender inequities, strengthening positive norms and promoting gender equality, creating an enabling environment for girls and women to exercise their rights and agency. Action to undergo gender-transformative journeys has been taken by *Girls Not Brides* National Partnerships in Nigeria[59] and Mozambique[60], whose experiences also informed a 7-step guide for civil society organisations on how they can use gender-transformative collective action to address child marriage and advance girls' rights.[61]

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[52] Plan International, Let's Go Digital! Using digital technology to end child, early and forced marriage and reduce adolescent pregnancy, 2021.
[53] UNICEF, Review of technology-based interventions to address child marriage and female genital mutilation, 2023.
[54] ECA, Securing legal identity for all Africans is key to sustainable development, 2024.
[55] World Bank, Global Civil Registration and Vital Statistics Scaling Up Investment Plan 2015-2024, 2014.
[56] This is supported by the work of The Centre of Excellence for CRVS Systems at the global level: https://crvssystems.ca/about-us
[57] Ministry of Law and Justice, Government of India, Registration of Birth and Deaths (Amendment) Act 2023
[58] The Hindu, All reported births, deaths to be digitally registered from October 1, 2023.
[59] *Girls Not Brides,* Gender-transformative collective action to end child marriage and advance girls' rights: The experience of the Coalition of Civil Society to End Child Marriage in Nigeria, 2023.
[60] *Girls Not Brides,* Gender-transformative collective action to end child marriage and advance girls' rights: The experience of Coligação para Eliminação dos Casamentos Prematuros, the Girls Not Brides National Partnership to End Child Marriage in Mozambique, 2023.
[61] *Girls Not Brides*, How civil society organisations can use gender-transformative collective action to address child marriage and advance girls' rights: A 7-step guide, 2023.

Innovative intervention programmes for already-married girls and adolescent mothers have also been undertaken by the Uganda Youth and Adolescents Health Forum (UYAHF) through the organisation of young mothers' forums (YMF). These YMFs facilitate young mothers, mothers-to-be and at-risk adolescent girls to come together in a youth-friendly safe space to share their experiences and engage in dialogues. The YMFs also act as a knowledge-sharing platform for girls to learn about SRHR, as well as maternal and child health, with the objective of promoting access to these services. [62]

In the humanitarian context, CARE's TESFA programme in Ethiopia demonstrates an innovative approach to improving the economic, sexual, and reproductive health outcomes of married adolescent girls by incorporating peer-support activities into wider multisectoral programming. The outcome of the programme found that these peer groups not only fostered a greater sense of safety and support amongst the girls through reflective dialogues but were also self-sustaining. This project was also noteworthy for its integration of CARE's Village Savings and Loan Association (VSLA) model into the traditional community model, and for engaging multiple stakeholders at the community level and empowering local women to shift attitudes around the acceptability of child marriage, with potential positive repercussions for generations to come.[63]

The design and implementation of gender responsive budgets is key to realising girls' and women's human rights and gender equality. This is also recognised in this year's Commission on the Status of Women Agreed Conclusions. Governments must mobilise domestic resources by increasing financing in ordinary budgets using gender-budgeting tools; adopting measures such as subsidies, aid, development cooperation, cash transfers, and gender sensitive loans and financing; and creating mechanisms for budget accountability. They must also address fiscal biases against girls and women through the allocation of budgets to reduce intersectional socioeconomic inequalities and the adoption of tax justice measures.[64] Evidence-based cash transfers programmes to protect girls at risk of child marriage are particularly effective strategies for preventing and reducing child marriage; governments should therefore incorporate cash transfers into national strategies to end child marriage.[65]

[62] UYAHF, Position paper on the state of safe motherhood among young mothers in Butalejja and Mbale districts, 2022.
[63] Chowdhary. P., Mekuria, F., Tewahido, D., Gulema, H., Derni, R., Edmeades, J., Building sustainable and scalable peer-based programming: promising approaches from TESFA in Ethiopia, Reproductive Health, 2022.
[64] Working Group on discrimination against women and girls, A/HRC/53/39, Gendered inequalities of poverty: feminist and human rights-based approaches, 2023, p. 20.
[65] Girls Not Brides, How cash transfers can contribute to ending child marriage: thematic brief, 2021.

III.   *GIRLS NOT BRIDES'* KEY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE UNSG REPORT

Girls Not Brides recommends taking into consideration the following aspects for the UNSG report:

1. **Flag situations of concern, where regressive legislative changes threaten the progress made in advancing girls' rights and reducing child, early and forced marriages and unions, such as the current legislative proposal in The Gambia to reverse the ban on FGM/C, and urge Governments to respect the principle of progressive realisation of economic and social rights and the principle of non-retrogression regarding the respect, protection and fulfilment of these rights**. FGM/C is often linked to marriageability and may precede child marriage. Both practices reflect social norms linked to controlling girls' and women's sexuality and maintaining cultural and religious traditions.

Useful resources**:**
*   Girls Not Brides thematic brief on child marriage and FGM/C: https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/documents/1550/Girls_Not_Brides-Child_marriage_and_FGMC.pdf

2. **Make informal forced unions, their causes, consequences and solutions visible.** The often informal nature of early unions – characterised by cohabitation as if married, without legal registration – contrasts with more formal practices. National prevalence data on CEFM often shows a partial picture; in many countries, data from the national marriage registry agency does not include informal unions. The lack of visibility of these unions means girls' and women's needs are not considered in policy and programming, making it harder for them to access support services.

    Children and adolescent girls enter informal unions – by force or (seemingly) by choice – for complex, varied, inter-related reasons, so laws, policies and programmes need to be part of a gender-transformative, comprehensive approach to child marriage that does no harm and actively promotes girls' enjoyment of their rights. One of the reasons why a large proportion of girls are in informal unions in many contexts is because formal marriage would not be recognised by religious, customary, or State authorities because it is outlawed to various degrees. For example, a national ban on marriage under age 18 in Mexico led to a reduction in formal marriages and a similar-sized increase in informal unions.[66] The fear of criminal penalties drives child marriage underground – into secrecy and/or informality – where girls' rights and agency are less visible and more difficult to protect. Girls in such unions face greater barriers to services, support, and justice – for example, they may not attend antenatal checks while pregnant, and are less likely to register the birth of a baby.[67] In some geographies – including Latin America and the Caribbean, and Eastern Europe – informal unions where at least one party is under the age of 18 are much more common than formal, registered child marriages. For example, in Guatemala, informal unions are

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[66] Bellés-Obrero, C. and Lombardi, M., 2019, *Will you marry me, later? Age of marriage laws and child marriage in Mexico*
[67] Boyden, J., Pankhurst, A. and Tafere, Y., 2012, "Child protection and harmful traditional practices: Female early marriage and genital modification in Ethiopia", *Development in Practice*, Vol: 22:4, 510-522; Kamal Elden, N. M. and Mosleh, H., 2015, "Impact of change in law on child marriage in Egypt A study in two Egyptian governorates", *The Egyptian Journal of Community Medicine*, Vol 33:4; and OECD, 2023, *Social Institutions and Gender Index 2023 global report: Gender equality in times of crisis*

much more common than registered marriages. Only 20% of girls aged 15 to 17 who are currently in a union are legally married. Almost 65% are in an informal union. In Bolivia, about four times as many girls aged 15 to 17 cohabit in informal unions than are legally married. In Honduras, Colombia, Panama, and Peru, less than 10% of girls aged 15 to 17 who are in a union are legally married.[68] Significant levels of informal cohabiting unions are also present in the African context. For example, in Angola, an estimated 83% of the children in child marriages are in informal unions while only 10% are formally married.[69]

Useful resources:
- *Girls Not Brides*, Child, early and forced marriages and unions in Latin America and Caribbean, 2020, https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/documents/947/Child-early-and-forced-marriages-and-unions-in-LAC.pdf.
- *Girls Not Brides*, 2024, *The impact of the law on child marriage and girls' rights*.

3. **Consider the impact of the law on child marriage and girls' rights**. Laws play a central role in our collective work to address child marriage, but can have negative consequences for girls if not embedded in gender-transformative, rights-based approaches that go beyond setting a legal minimum age of marriage. Understanding the law's potential and its limitations in relation to gender equality and child marriage will help to focus advocacy on the realistic prospects of legal reform and implementation, and the role it plays in broader gender-transformative approaches.

Criminalisation and punitive approaches to child marriage can have unintended – and negative – consequences for adolescent girls, their families and children. These approaches are not a substitute for addressing the structural and normative drivers of child marriage, like gender inequality and poverty.

Laws alone cannot end child marriage, but they are an important part of context-specific, gender-transformative approaches to promote girls' human rights. They should be accompanied by investment in gender-equitable public services; employment; action on poverty, climate and conflict; and the transformation of discriminatory social norms, attitudes and behaviours.

Beyond age of marriage, legal reform should create an ecosystem of harmonised laws to support girls' rights and access to justice. Such laws should be intersectional and inclusive, considering the way girls' social and political identities – like gender, age, class, sexuality, race, ethnicity, caste, disability and citizenship – intersect to put them at risk. Laws should respond to the unique experiences and needs of ever-married girls and support their access to divorce, justice, child protection and gender-based violence (GBV) services.

The principle of "evolving capacities" is central to the recognition of adolescent girls' status as rights holders. Across contexts, their capacities to make and act on their decisions have not been legally recognised in the context of marriage/unions and sexuality. The age of

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[68] UNICEF, 2019, Perfil del matrimonio infantil y las uniones tempranas en América Latina y el Caribe.
[69] UNICEF, Child marriage in Eastern and Southern Africa: A statistical overview and reflections on ending the practice, June 2022

marriage and the age of sexual consent should be treated differently and not be combined in law.

Useful resources:

- *Girls Not Brides, The impact of the law on child marriage and girls' rights,* 2024, https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/documents/2141/Impact_of_the_law_on_child_marriage_yftBMdQ.pdf

4. **Underline the importance and integration of the ending child, early and forced marriage and unions agenda in the context of the 30th anniversary of the ICPD Programme of Action; the upcoming Summit of the Future, particularly regarding the Pact for the Future and the Declaration on Future Generations; and the upcoming 30th anniversary of the Beijing Programme of Action**.