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**PROGRESS MADE TOWARDS ENDING CHILD, EARLY AND FORCED MARRIAGE IN INDIA**

A Joint Report by UNICEF and UNFPA

**Background**

India has made remarkable progress towards ending child marriage, with the prevalence of the practice steeply dropping from 49 per cent in 2001 to 23 per cent in 2021[[1]](#footnote-2). This progress is associated with improvements in female education, poverty reduction, the promotion of positive gender norms, and the strengthened capacity of social service, justice, and enforcement systems.

However, the decline rate is insufficient to eliminate the practice by 2030, as aimed by the Sustainable Development Goals. There were still about 1.5 million child marriages occurring annually in 2019-21.[[2]](#footnote-3) While 62.4 per cent of child marriages occur between 16- 17 years old, almost 11 per cent of all child brides are very young at under 13 years old. Additionally, while increasingly fewer women now marry before age 18, a majority still marry by age 21, indicating a transition from child marriage to early marriage.

The prevalence of child marriage in India varies significantly from one state to another, with eight states currently witnessing rates above the national average. UNICEF and UNFPA India implement the Global Programme to End Child Marriage (GPECM) in 15 States - the two agencies work closely with the government and a range of stakeholders to support multi-sectoral action to address child marriage and promote the empowerment of adolescent girls.

**Questions and answers**

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:***

Government flagship programs were delivered at national and subnational levels for adolescents and young people, especially girls. Through GPECM, these flagships received capacity-building support to enforce laws addressing child marriage, evidence-based gender advocacy, gender empowerment programs to support access to education, health services, and gender transformative programs aimed at enhancing the value of girl children and ending child marriage.

* 1. ***address the root causes of child, early and forced marriage, including social norms, gender inequalities and stereotypes.***

UNICEF and UNFPA supported interventions to address the major root causes of child, early and forced marriage, including girls’ dropping out of education, household poverty and harmful social norms of gender inequality.

* + 1. **High drop-out rate of female students:** Education levels in India are strongly linked to the prevalence of child marriage. Girls who are in school are less likely to marry before the age of 18. Thus, interventions that bring out-of-school girls back into the classroom provide them with opportunities to acquire life skills and empower girls to exercise their agency. In 2023, 2.3 million marginalised adolescent girls were supported to enrol and remain in education, achieved by technical support to the state governments and successful advocacy to ensure adolescents are back in school after COVID-19.
    2. **Household poverty in rural areas**: In 2023, 5 million girls in 8 states were provided with cash transfers and other social protection schemes to prevent child marriage and continue their education.
    3. **Harmful masculinities**: In 2023, 5.9 million males participated in gender transformative programs promoting positive masculinities and gender equality. Additionally, 9.2 million community members and 1.2 million local stakeholders participated in dialogue and consensus-building on alternatives to child marriage and gender equality. UNICEF and UNFPA have piloted the work with men and boys in 7 states, integrating the interventions in educational institutes, youth platforms and within hard-to-reach areas like the tea gardens in Assam.
    4. **Son preference and underscored value of girls:** In some parts of India, girls are often perceived as an economic burden, which exacerbates child marriage. The Sex Ratio at Birth (SRB) is 907 female births per 1,000 male births, which reflects pre-birth discrimination manifested through gender-biased sex selection and post-birth discrimination against girls.[[3]](#footnote-4) To address the issue, UNICEF and UNFPA extended technical support to flagship government programmes that promote girls' empowerment at the national and sub-national levels. For example, In 2022, UNICEF supported the ministry in developing an operational guideline for Beti Bachao and Beti Padhao (BBBP), translating the manual into multiple regional languages and providing capacity-building support to state and district-level officials to operationalise them. In 2023, UNFPA partnered with Girls Count, a national civil society-led coalition of over 400 civil society organisations, activists and community-based organisations committed to enhancing the overall value of women and girls and addressing India's adverse child sex ratios.
  1. ***ensure access to education, decent work, social protection, and 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;*** 
     1. ***Access to Life Skills* Education**:5.7 million girls were engaged in gender-transformative life skills and comprehensive sexuality education programmes that build their knowledge, skills, and awareness of their rights (including sexual and reproductive health and rights) and connect them to services in 2023.
     2. **Ensuring access to health services**: The Government of India’s School Health and Wellness Programme (SHWP) supports health promotion, including providing gender-sensitive Life Skill Education (LSE) through schools. This was further supported by UNICEF and UNFPA in the state roll out. In 2023, UNFPA trained 18,000 teachers as “Health and Wellness Ambassadors” under the School Health and Wellness Programme[[4]](#footnote-5) across 26,000 schools spanning 33 districts in five states. Also, jointly, UNFPA and UNICEF contributed to the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare's draft Menstrual Hygiene Policy aimed at promoting menstruating individuals' health, well-being, and empowerment. Both agencies supported interventions in states to promote increased awareness, dispel stigma, and enable expanded access to hygienic menstrual products at scale.
  2. ***guarantee protection measures, remedies and support services for victims;***
     1. **Capacity building of police on preventing and responding to gender-based violence (GBV):** In Rajasthan, UNFPA supported the establishment of a Gender Cell in the Rajasthan Police Academy provided technical assistance to the academy towards strengthening police response to GBV and harmful practices of child marriage. In 2023, 800 police personnel were trained in gender-responsive policing.
     2. **Capacity building to implement GBV-related laws and policies**: In 2023, UNFPA undertook capacity-building initiatives to enhance the implementation of laws and policies addressing GBV. UNFPA undertook capacity building support for Protection Officers (across all 30 districts of Odisha), Child Development Project Officers and officials of the Department of Women and Child Development , Government of Odisha, to strengthen the implementation of laws and policies addressing GBV. Additionally, in partnership with the Department of Health, Chhattisgarh and Madhya Pradesh, Governments of Rajasthan, Odisha, and Bihar. UNFPA trained 512 health professionals, including Medical Officers and staff nurses, to improve health sector’s response to GBV. UNFPA trained 65 Administrative and Judicial Officers on GBV faced by women in the workplace. In the four UNFPA focus states (Bihar, Odisha, Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan), 407 Child Marriage Prohibition Officers were trained to implement the law prohibiting child marriage.
     3. **Supporting Adolescent-Friendly Health Clinics (AFHCs)**: In 2023, UNFPA's technical guidance led to equipping 769 AFHCs across four focal states, benefiting over 1.1 million adolescents (of which 598,173 were girls). 43,788 adolescents accessed a toll-free helpline to seek guidance on issues relevant to young people, including mental health and psychosocial support. UNFPA led the development of an innovative resource package for the National Adolescent Health Programme, facilitating quarterly Adolescent Health and Wellness Days in community settings. This initiative engaged communities and key stakeholders on adolescent health topics. Further, 6095 staff nurses, counsellors, master trainers, Auxiliary Nurse and Midwives, Medical Officers were trained on client responsive and rights-based service delivery and 11981 Accredited Social Health Activists workers were oriented on promoting modern contraceptives in the community. In Chhattisgarh, UNICEF, in collaboration with the health department, strengthened 11 Adolescent Friendly Health Clinics (AFHCs) in 3 districts to serve the specific needs of adolescents. UNICEF supported the development of communication tools, advocated with district stakeholders to increase the number of AFHCs, built capacity for AFHC staff, and strengthened monitoring mechanisms. As a result, 53 counselling sessions were conducted regarding teenage pregnancy, and over 37 adolescent pregnancy cases were provided with counselling services.
  3. ***implement child- and gender-responsive budgeting to support effective measures to eradicate child, early and forced marriage.*** 
     1. **Technical support for gender-responsive budgeting**: In Maharashtra, UNICEF and UN Women supported the Department of Finance in creating the Gender and Child Budget Statement 2023, which analyses the budget plan and expenditure status for women and children’s schemes. Also, in Odisha, UNICEF assisted the DWCD to allocate INR 12,168,000 for meetings at the district, block & GP levels to monitor and implement child marriage prevention plans. These multi-sectoral plans focus on empowering adolescent girls, engaging with men and boys and changing harmful social norms.
     2. **Advocacy for increase of State health budget in family planning**, **adolescent health and GBV**: In 2023, UNFPA’s state level advocacy in Rajasthan on the inclusion of new strategies or scaling up of existing interventions in the National Health Mission’s Program Implementation Plan (budgeted plan) led to an increase of 32.21% in budgetary allocation between 2021-22 (INR 12,37.54 lakhs) and 2025-26 (INR 16,362.71 lakhs) in Family Planning; a significant increase of 67% in budgetary allocation between 2021-22 (INR 1581.33 lakhs) and 2025-26 (INR 2636.74 lakhs) in adolescent health and, for the first time, an amount of INR 47 lakhs has been approved for GBV.

1. ***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.***

The Ministry of Women and Child Development launched *Mission Vatsalya* and *Mission Shakti* for women's and girls’ empowerment and addressing child protection across the life cycle continuum. *Beti Bachao Beti Padhao*, the flagship scheme under Mission Shakti, places a strong impetus on the value of the girl child and has an emphasis on improving sex ratio at birth, ending child marriage and continuity of education for girls, among other issues. The scheme, which was earlier operational in 405 districts, was expanded to all 785 districts in the country.

Promising practices

* 1. **Political commitment to Child Marriage Free Villages:** States, through district and village actions, have continued to push against child marriage. In Odisha, 14,329 villages out of 51,313 were declared child marriage-free villages with the technical support of UNICEF. The critical role of political commitment and government ownership is evident, and the government adopted the declaration of child marriage-free villages as a best practice.

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* 1. **Operationalized child marriage legislation enforcement in key governmental departments:** The MoWCD, through flagship programmes (Beti Bachao Beti Padhao and Mission Shakti), stimulated the development of legal frameworks towards ending child marriage.With UNICEF’s technical support, theAndhra Pradesh State government developed a comprehensive framework for reducing child marriages and strengthening legislation enforcement. This initiative became central to the state’s SDG efforts, monitored monthly by the Chief Secretary with all District Collectors, resulting in targeted interventions in seven high-burden districts.
  2. **Strengthened local governance systems to address child marriage: The** Ministry of Panchayati Raj, Government of India, continued to strengthen the local self-governance systems (Panchayats) at the village level to address GBV and child marriage. UNICEF supports the ministry to scale up child friendly Panchayats in multiple states, and UNFPA's advocacy for 'Girl-Friendly Gram Panchayats' (GFGP) piloted in Rajasthan State resulted in a state-wide scale-up of the initiative
  3. **Engagement with religious, traditional, and community leaders** significantly grew in 15 states, from 878,594 leaders in 2021 to 1.2 million leaders in 2023. Many states continue to nurture coalitions and forums of faith based and traditional leaders at the district and state level. One significant win in Odisha was the prohibition of child marriages in temples and other religious festivals, which was undertaken by the state administration and supported by faith leaders. Similarly, engagement with faith and traditional leaders has led to the prevention of child marriages. In collaboration with Odisha Theological Christian Colleges, UNFPA engaged over 100 faith-based Christian leaders to advocate for women's rights and combat harmful practices. In Maharashtra, UNICEF provided technical support to 12 districts and undertook mass awareness programs to publicise messages on child marriage, the need to prevent child marriages and generate demand to address barriers to education and other learning opportunities for girls. A total of 10 million people (339,6542 men, 299,2066 women, 1,802,613 boys and 1,826,718 girls) were reached through these programs, and it led to resolutions by local governance systems for mentioning the age of the bride and groom on the wedding invitation cards. Village level child protection committees taking a greater role in identifying and intervening in cases of child marriage.
  4. **Evidence-based policy advocacy**: UNICEF India country office has significantly expanded its evidence-based advocacy efforts for the girl child cash PLUS interventions, initially engaging in eight states—West Bengal, Madhya Pradesh, Bihar, and Jharkhand, Karnataka, Rajasthan, Maharashtra, and Uttar Pradesh, covering over 12 million girls. Key advocacy areas include addressing life cycle vulnerabilities, establishing support networks like Adolescent Girls Clubs and Mothers Groups, facilitating exposure to public institutions, providing health and nutrition counselling, raising awareness on menstrual hygiene, and promoting leadership and life skills through sports and other initiatives. A recent review across eight states demonstrated that implementing a life cycle approach in programs significantly enhances their impact, encouraging more extended participation from girls and their families—from birth until they are 19 years or older. This strategy, including cash assistance, has effectively kept girls in school longer, decreasing early marriage rates and fostering aspirations for economic independence. These outcomes have prompted UNICEF to advocate for strengthening the link between girl-child cash transfers and vocational training, which aligns with India's focus on women-led development highlighted at the G-20. The review also pointed out the role of cash transfers in lessening the 'Care Burden' on adolescent girls, identifying this as a crucial policy focus for UNICEF to help transform gender norms. In 2022, UNFPA and UNICEF developed analytical papers based on NFHS-V for India that were used in advocacy with the state government and policymakers for concerted action on addressing child marriage and empowering adolescent girls. In Rajasthan, UNFPA engaged 11,000 young people, including those from marginalised sections, in a series of 11 Yuva Samvad (Youth Dialogue) to capture their issues concerning education, life skills, health and others. The outcomes were translated into two significant documents. [First, a document outlining the aspirations of the youth, which was officially launched by the then Honourable Chief Minister of Rajasthan](https://drive.google.com/file/d/1HYlSR7Zn-zyt-c1ivo5b2Sd3K2Y9K-tZ/view?usp=drive_link). Second, a [draft Youth Policy](https://pinkcity.com/press-release/rajasthans-new-youth-policy-by-unfpa/#:~:text=The%20draft%20policy%2C%20prepared%20by,social%20justice%20and%20gender%20equality.) derived from these sessions was jointly submitted by UNFPA and UNICEF to the State Cabinet for approval.
  5. **Upgraded national cash transfer scheme:** UNICEF's efforts have significantly contributed to the upgrading and upscaling national cash transfer schemes. Key initiatives include the Kayashree Cash PLUS, which has expanded to other states, and Madhya Pradesh's Ladli-Laxmi-2.0, which now emphasizes education and skills training linked to scholarships for advanced studies. Uttar Pradesh has introduced a new scheme to address life cycle vulnerabilities, while Rajasthan and Karnataka are enhancing support for higher education. Additionally, sustained advocacy has broadened the scope of these programs. In Jharkhand, the Savitri Bai Phule Scheme, initially benefiting only two girls per family, was revised in 2023 to include all daughters, promoting education and reducing child marriage risks, which was a result of an Adolescent reporter’s interaction with the Chief Minister a programme supported by UNICEF.

Challenges

* 1. **Legal enforcement increasing vulnerability of married and pregnant girls**: In Assam, a law enforcement drive on child marriages in 2023 which was triggered by the high rates of teenage pregnancy (about 12%) and a 1% rise in child marriage rates from the previous survey led to mass arrests impacting vulnerable communities. The drive led to an increased commitment by the state to prevent child marriages but also is feared to have had implications in terms of reporting child marriages by community members and frontline workers and could have driven many married or pregnant girls who married before 18 years to forgo essential SRH services due to fears of legal consequences, increasing their vulnerability.
  2. **Adolescent sexuality**: There has been significant public debate about the unintended consequences of provisions in the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act that criminalizes consensual sexual relationships between adolescents, including love marriages and elopement. Evidence suggests a significant number of children under 18, especially boys, have been prosecuted on sexual violence charges in this context. The law commission report on this issue in 2023 highlighted one of these challenges and considered a few legislative options, including decriminalization or use of judicial discretion in sentencing in cases of consensual romantic relationships between adolescents or with an adolescent between the ages of 16 and 18 years. No legislation review, however, has been undertaken to address this issue.
  3. **Difficulties in engaging men and boys**: Efforts to engage men and boys in gender transformative programs are often hindered by their expectations of immediate, tangible benefits such as livelihood opportunities. Failure to meet these expectations can lead to reduced interest and participation, challenging the continuous involvement in discussions on gender, gender-based violence, and positive masculinities. Government flagship programmes like BBBP (Beti Bachao Beti Padhao have now integrated engaging with men and boys as a preventive strategy to promote gender equitable communities. However, there is a need for additional investments within government programmes or platforms to increase men’s and boys’ engagement to empower adolescent girls and promote gender equality in communities and institutions.

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

National Family Health Surveys are used to capture long-term national trends, including key indicators such as the child marriage prevalence rate. In collaborative programmes with national and state entities, UNICEF and UNFPA are strengthening the Management Information System (MIS) to capture the most authentic data directly from the field and programme interventions.

* 1. **School dropout track system**: In Maharashtra, 12 districts developed systems to track drop-out girls and girls transitioning from the 7th/8th standard into secondary schools to address gaps in school-based data, which is supported by UNICEF. Data is reviewed bi-monthly to identify and counsel such girls and their families to continue their education. In Parbhani district, 4,882 girls were identified at high risk of child marriage, linking 1,800 to support services for migrant families and re-enrolment in schools.
  2. **Strengthening MIS on Adolescent Health Programme**: In Bihar, where the state government is developing a mobile app and web-based dashboard, UNFPA provided technical support through the– “Comprehensive Adolescent Health Programme” that captures information on various adolescent health programs in schools and health facilities; UNFPA in Rajasthan piloted MIS to report the progress of transactions of School Health and Wellness Programme (SHWP) sessions in schools and in the absence of MIS for reporting on the SHWP, Odisha developed a mobile application to collect report and piloted in one district of the State. In Rajasthan, UNFPA supported the Directorate of Women Empowerment towards hosting the developed MIS on the government server.

1. ***Have digital technologies and tools been used to address child, early and forced marriage? If so, please share promising practices, challenges and possible solutions.*** 
   1. ***Reaching out* to adolescents from marginalised communities** State entities continue to roll out digital tools aimed at adolescent empowerment. In Rajasthan, to leverage digital technology, UNFPA supported the piloting of ‘e-pankh model sites’ in five schools, aiming to promote infotainment, facilitate online LSE sessions, and offer online counselling to adolescent girls from marginalised communities. In Madhya Pradesh, the Umang Kishor Helpline for adolescents provides information and resources related to life skills and comprehensive sexuality education.
   2. **Chatbot to access SRHR information**: To expand access to SRHR information, the National Health Mission and the Department of Public Health and Family Welfare, Government of Madhya Prades launched the ‘Just Ask Khul ke Pucho’ chatbot in collaboration with UNFPA. Within just four months, the chatbot garnered 23,000 users. The most commonly enquired topics were related to physical changes during puberty, safe sex, menstruation, pregnancy and family planning.
   3. **Job-relevant skills training digital platform**: Passport to Earning (P2E)[[5]](#footnote-6), launched in 2022 in partnership with UNICEF and YuWaah[[6]](#footnote-7), provides young people aged 15–24 with free, world-class, job-relevant skills training and positions them for employment opportunities. In India, Passport to Earning has already certified 1 million youth with digital & financial skills in its first year, successfully scaling up to 8 states in 2023.
   4. **Learning mobile app for rights-based issues and 21st-century skills**: in Odisha state, collaboration with state entities on the “Advika” App, developed by Microsoft and scaled by UNICEF, offers adolescents customized learning pathways in nutrition, GBV, and child rights, integrated with vital 21st-century skills, including critical thinking, conflict management and digital literacy. Along with gaining awareness about their rights and related laws, the app aims to empower adolescents to take action on issues affecting their lives by leveraging those skills.
   5. **Use of assistive technology for empowering disabled children** - A [Disability Innovation and Experience Lab](https://india.unfpa.org/en/news/harnessing-power-tech-challenge-disabilities) was established in partnership with the Department of Social Security and Empowerment of Persons with Disability, Odisha, at Integrated Infrastructure Centre, Jatni. The lab is equipped with state-of-the-art Assistive Technology for empowering children with disability through LSE sessions. In 2023, the lab hosted the first summer camp for disabled children and is supporting the development of a transformative LSE curriculum for special schools.

**Challenges**:

* + - * 1. There is a need to standardize technology-driven systems for gathering, tracking, and monitoring data for the effective implementation of programmes.

1. In Odisha, despite the commencement of transacting LSE sessions under the SHWP, formal reporting has yet to be streamlined through an MIS, which is crucial to facilitate the timely collection and reporting of data. While formal reporting is set to begin since the operationalization of the MIS by the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, for the interim period, UNFPA piloted a mobile-based reporting app in 2023 and trained 100 Ambassadors for its testing in Sundargarh district.
2. It is difficult for adolescents living in far-flung areas with no or poor internet access to use mobile Apps. However, when attending physical weekly sessions, they have directly, through offline methods, been provided the same information and knowledge by the facilitators in their communities.

1. ***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?***
   1. **In India, the Registration of Births and Deaths Act** of 1969 mandates registration for births and deaths only; marriage registration is not included. However, the act was amended in 2023, enabling digitization and allowing individuals to request a search by the Registrar for entries in birth and death registers and obtain either an extract or a birth/death certificate electronically or through other means.
   2. **Digitalized and universal birth Registration in India**: Between 2005-06 and 2019-21, India’s birth registration for children under six significantly improved from 31.9% to 89.1%, driven by digitalization, capacity building, and legal reforms. However, reaching the poor, rural, younger, and socially disadvantaged communities remain challenging. UNICEF supports the Government of India in establishing universal, digital, inclusive, and shockproof Civil Registration and Vital Statistics (CRVS) systems.
   3. **Localized marriage registration system with lower penetration rates:** Although no centralized marriage registration system exists, many states have locally enacted legislation to mandate marriage registration. The Rajasthan Compulsory Registration of Marriages Act was passed in 2009, providing compulsory marriage registration. Since 2014, over 2 million marriages have been registered, significantly increasing from 61,544 in 2016 to 399,649 in 2022, with UNICEF’s support to strengthen the local CRVS system. However, the uptake of marriage registration remains low due to perceived low utility and complex procedures. UNICEF is helping to simplify the system by upgrading technology, training stakeholders, and boosting community awareness.
2. ***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?***
   1. **Intervention track system development**: With West Bengal state, UNICEF, in cooperation with ActionAid, supported the Government in developing the Child Marriage Reporting and Tracking Portal (CMRTS) to record child marriage prevention interventions at district, sub-division and block levels. The government was also provided with the reporting format and operational manual, and their Child Marriage Prohibition Officers were trained to use the portal to facilitate quality child marriage intervention tracking and reporting.
   2. **Engaging men and boys**: UNFPA supported the conceptualising and implementing of dedicated interventions (viz. Formation of youth clubs in collaboration with Nehru Yuva Kendra Sanghatans at the gram panchayat level in Rajasthan, Purush Samwads (community dialogues with men) in Bihar, a dedicated module on positive masculinities (Ujjwal) was rolled out in the state of Madhya Pradesh. UNICEF supported a pilot intervention on positive masculinity in Rajasthan, which included a campaign, *Ghar ka Kaam Sab ka Kaam* (Household work is everyone’s work), focussed on breaking gender stereotypical roles, especially around household chores, has been scaled up as part of the calendar of activities to be undertaken by adolescent collectives in nearly 29, 000 Government schools. In Assam, UNICEF’s advocacy led to engagement with men and boys as a key prevention approach in the notified Gender Based Violence SoP

1. National Family Health Survey, NFHS -5 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Ibid [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. Sample Registration System, published by the Office of the Registrar General of India (2018-20) [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. Government of India’s School Health and Wellness Programme supports health promotion including provision of gender sensitive life skills education through schools. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. The detail of Passport to Earning (P2E) is available at <https://www.generationunlimited.org/passport-earning> [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. YuWaah is Public-Private-Youth partnerships platform for empowering young people in India. The detail is available at <https://yuwaah.org/> [↑](#footnote-ref-7)