



Until we are all equal

Living in a world free from child marriage

Programme brief: Plan
International's model
for ending child, early,
forced marriage and
unions (CEFMU)



What is the problem?

Child marriage remains one of the worst child rights violations and the most entrenched forms of gender inequality worldwide. Over 640 million women and girls alive today were married in childhood. UNICEF data shows that around 12 million girls are married before the age of 18¹ each year. Though significant progress has been made, including 25 million child marriages averted in the past decade, gains are uneven across regions.

Evidence shows that the burden is shifting; Sub-Saharan Africa now accounts for 1 in 3 of the world's child brides, up from 1 in 5 a decade ago². West and Central Africa are home to 7 of 10 countries with the highest prevalence of child marriage, linked to female genital cutting. South Asia has largest absolute number of married girls under 18 years globally while in Latin America and the Caribbean informal unions are increasing and prevalence is projected to become the second highest globally by 2030.

Ten of the countries with the highest child marriage rates are classified as fragile. Climate change, displacement, conflict and funding constraints are increasing risk and making girls more vulnerable. With 18 million displaced girls under age 18 and more living in crisis affected settings, child marriage is also an urgent humanitarian issue.

Child marriage is driven by multiple intersecting factors including poverty and economic insecurity, harmful gender norms, adolescent pregnancy, Female Genital Mutilation, humanitarian crises, trafficking and digital exploitation among others. These drivers disproportionately affects adolescent girls limiting girls' education, economic participation, bodily autonomy and hindering them from reaching their full potential.

¹ United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF). (2023). Is an end to child marriage within reach? Latest trends and future prospects: 2023 update. UNICEF

² Ibid

³ UNFPA, Child Marriage – Frequently Asked Questions

Plan International's Global CEFMU Programme Model

Plan International has consolidated over two decades of experience, research and learning across Africa, Asia and Latin America into a single, coherent global framework to prevent and respond to child marriage. CEFMU Programme Model is a unified gender transformative approach for prevention and response at scale.

This model builds on flagship regional initiatives, translating proven approaches from the 18+ programme in Southern Africa, the Time to Act initiative in Asia Pacific, MUITF in the Americas and regional programming in West Africa into a coherent global framework.

Overall Goal

To achieve a world in which girls and young women live free from child marriage and its consequences. Girls and Young Women are protected and able to make decisions about their education, employment and Sexual Reproductive Health and Rights

Who The Model Serves

The model prioritises;

- ✔ Girls at risk of child marriage (ages 10-17 years)
- ✔ Married and ever-married girls + young women (ages 10–24 years).

This lifecycle approach is intended to mitigate child marriage risk which accelerates sharply between ages 15-17 years³ and also reach ever married girls recognising that marriage often increases vulnerability for girls and create unique barriers e.g. protection, autonomy and SRHR access.

What Makes This Model Distinct?

- ✔ **Gender-transformative**
The model tackles root causes and harmful gender norms that sustain child marriage, including control over girls sexuality, fear of family dishonour, protection narratives and unequal power dynamics.
- ✔ **Girls Centred**
Girls' voices, leadership, and agency are at the centre of programming, with focus on building their knowledge, skills, confidence and power to make decision for their lives and act together with other to influence change in their communities.
- ✔ **Multi-sectoral**
Interventions integrate work across Protection, Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights, Education and Early Childhood Development as well as Economic Empowerment thematic areas.
- ✔ **Multi-Levels**
The model operates across individual, family, community, institutional, and policy levels; recognising that sustainable change requires systematic transformation.
- ✔ **Evidence-Driven**
Built on programme experience, global best practice, systematic reviews and research, the model prioritises strategies proven to reduce prevalence and strengthen girls' outcomes.



In Bulawayo, Zimbabwe, girls are using digital art to challenge harmful traditions and reclaim their futures © Plan International

How Change Happens

The model has three mutually reinforcing building blocks which work across multiple socio-ecological levels. Each building block is accompanied by a suite of interventions which utilise gender transformative strategies and global best practice. All recommended strategies seek to address the root causes of the issues and accelerate change in the lives of girls and young women.

Building Block 1

Girls at risk of CEFMU and married girls are capable of determining their own futures, especially choices about whether, when and whom to marry:

- ! Rights literacy and awareness of CEFMU
- ! Girls' empowerment, life skills and peer-based interventions
- ! Comprehensive Sexuality Education
- ! Support formal and non-formal education
- ! Skills development & pathways for employment
- ! Safe spaces for girls and young women
- ! Amplify girls' collective action and movements

Building Block 2

Engage parents/caregivers to norm change:

- ! Financial assistance for families with girls at risk
- ! Engage husbands/partners to support married girls
- ! Men and boys are allies to end CEFMU
- ! Work with community leaders to end CEFMU
- ! Support community groups to develop community action plans*
- ! Social behavior change communication on CEFMU

Building Block 3

Laws, policies, and service providers protect girls from CEFMU and support married girls:

- ! Advocate for enforcement of legal and policy reform
- ! Lobby for gender responsive public budgeting
- ! Support services and civil society to scale national CEFMU programmes
- ! Strengthen provision of education, SRHR, protection and GBV services as well as social protection schemes
- ! Engage private sector to invest in education and decent work for married girls
- ! Promote participation of girls in policy, programme design and budget tracking across sectors
- ! Strengthen child protection case management and CEFMU in emergencies

Designed for Scale and Adaptability

The programme model is modular and designed to be adaptable to meet the needs of girls at risk and married girls depending on available time, resources and expertise. Countries may;

- ✓ Fully adopt the integrated model
- ✓ Adapt selected building blocks based on context
- ✓ Integrate components into existing sector programmes

The model is applicable across development, humanitarian and peace nexus to address crisis specific barriers. In crisis, emphasis may prioritise protection, case management and service access. In protracted responses and stable contexts, longer term norm transformation and systems strengthening may be scaled. This flexibility ensures relevance across ever changing environments.

Careful consideration should be made regarding the combination of interventions selected to ensure that they build on and reinforce each other. Not all interventions may be appropriate or feasible in a given context.



Kakoly, 18, raises awareness in community about the harms of child marriage, Bangladesh © Plan International / Emdadul Islam Bitu

Examples of Impact Across Regions



17-year-old Saratou trained as a tailor as part of the Bunkasar Diya Mata project, Niger © Plan International

West Africa

- ➔ The Break Free! Initiative supports youth-led radio shows, savings groups, intergenerational dialogues, and gender equality training for boys and men to address social drivers of child marriage.
- ➔ In Niger, the Bunkasar Diya Mata project delivers vocational skills training in 50 villages, helping out-of-school girls gain independence through trades such as tailoring and catering.
- ➔ In Mali, the “A Child, Not a Wife” project supports savings and loan associations that enable families to keep girls in school, reducing the economic incentives for early marriage.
- ➔ In Senegal, the GirlEngage project integrates economic empowerment, father-daughter dialogues, and community conversations to ensure girls are active participants in shaping their futures.
- ➔ In Ghana, Plan supports community-based youth mobilisation using street plays, public rallies and radio programme for advocacy, community awareness raising, and peer education.

Southern Africa and MENA

- ➔ The 18+ Centre of Excellence on Ending Child Marriage and Teen Pregnancy is a hub for shared services supporting programme innovation, advocacy and technical expertise.
- ➔ Promising influencing wins within regional mechanisms such as the African Union strengthening legal frameworks, public financing and accountability mechanisms.
- ➔ In Zambia, Plan organizes targeted dialogue sessions with men, boys, religious and traditional leaders to demystify cultural practices and co-create solutions to end child marriage.
- ➔ In Malawi, Plan supports adolescent girls leadership to advocate against CEFMU resulting in over 760 child marriages were annulled and 4,000 girls re-enrolled in school.
- ➔ In Ethiopia Plan provides food, hygiene kits, and education scholarships to meet immediate needs crisis-affected girls and supported income generating activities for their families.



Abeba raises awareness in community of the harmful consequences of early marriage © Plan International

Asia-Pacific: Time to Act

- ➔ 27 projects implemented (2018 – 2025) across 13 offices, worth 71 million euro.
- ➔ In Nepal, project areas reported 10%-35% reduction in prevalence compared to 3% national reduction.
- ➔ The “Girls Protect” project reduced prevalence from 58% to 23% in targeted areas
- ➔ Storming the Norms digital campaign focusing on transforming gender norms through digital activism
- ➔ Time to Act! is equipping girls with leadership and advocacy skills while strengthening health, protection and education systems across countries.

Americas and the Caribbean

- ➔ EMPODERAR (“Empower”) initiative addresses informal unions in conjunction with teenage pregnancy.
- ➔ In Guatemala and Colombia, Plan supports gender transformative child protection in communities, working with girls to understand their rights, and influence decision-makers.
- ➔ The Girls Reality Observatory is a virtual platform that compiles official data on the situation of girls across 13 countries to inform policy processes and advocacy.

Impact Evidence & Learning

Evidence from impact assessments, learning reviews and research over the years shows;



Impact is strongest when empowerment, gender norm changes and systems strengthening occur simultaneously.



Child marriage interventions achieve impact when they mobilise communities to transform norms around girls' sexuality, family honour and protection narratives.



Tailored support for married and ever married girls including education re-entry and economic empowerment pathways as well as access to services strengthen programme outcomes.



Plan's model shows large scale impact on girls' empowerment when complimented by access to alternative pathways as well as family and community support.



Policy advocacy has massive potential for large scale change, especially when accompanied by public financing and accountability mechanisms.



Digital innovation, using digital tools and activism, can amplify youth voices against child marriage.



Young people perform play about the harmful practice of child marriage, Tanzania © Plan International



Strategic Partnership and Collective Action

Plan International works in partnership with governments, civil society, youth led organisations, UN Agencies and regional mechanisms among others.

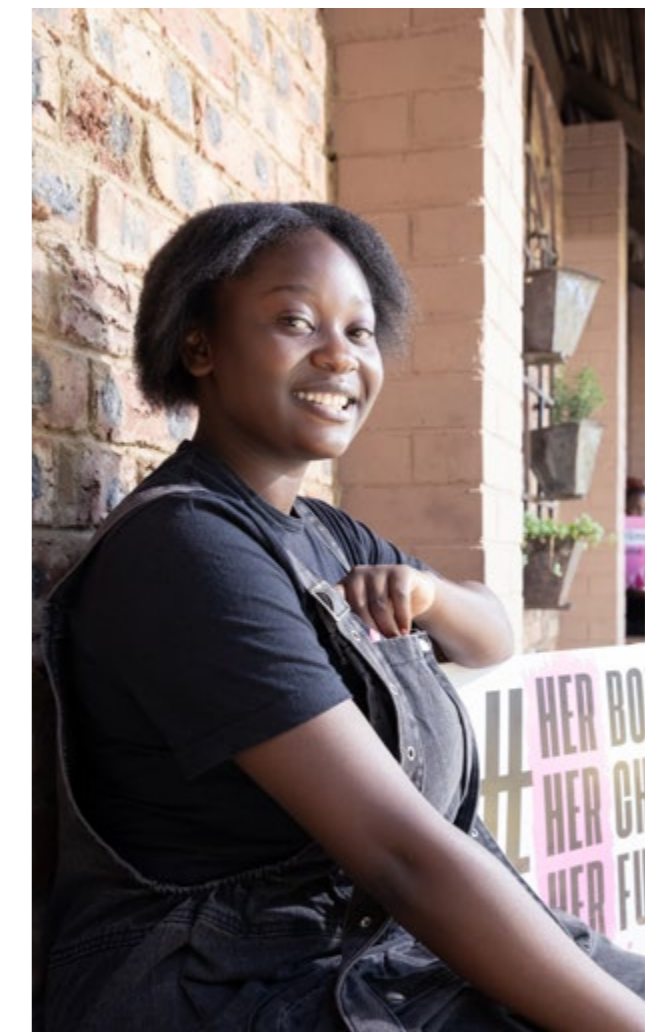
We welcome collaboration to;
Strengthen legal and policy frameworks
Pilot and scale integrated programming
Generate and share evidence

Now is the time for bold, collective action. Together we can ensure that every girl is free to learn, to lead, to decide and to thrive as a child, not as a bride.

Accelerating Progress

Ending child marriage is achievable but requires boldness, sustained commitment, and collective action at scale. Evidence from Plan International's Global Review of CEFMU Programming (2023), APAC Learning Review (2024) and "Status of the World's Girls" report (2025) suggest that investment in the following areas could accelerate progress towards eliminating child marriage;

- ➔ Scaling up integrated multi-level approaches to accelerate impact
- ➔ Expanding tailored support for married girls adapted for their unique needs and barriers
- ➔ Integrate digital safety and youth led digital activism to protect girls from online exploitation
- ➔ Prioritising high quality Comprehensive Sexuality Education to empower adolescent girls.
- ➔ Deepening engagement with men and boys to transform masculinities
- ➔ Addressing legal gaps, ensuring public budgets and accountability mechanisms are in place.
- ➔ Imbedding child marriage prevention and response in humanitarian action, supported by trained staff and adapted tools.



Chantelle, 20, campaigns for girls to have the right to choose their own futures, Zimbabwe © Plan International



Until we are all equal

About Plan International

Plan International is an independent development and humanitarian organization that advances children's rights and equality for girls. We believe in the power and potential of every child but know this is often suppressed by poverty, violence, exclusion and discrimination. And it is girls who are most affected.

Working together with children, young people, supporters and partners, we strive for a just world, tackling the root causes of the challenges girls and vulnerable children face. We support children's rights from birth until they reach adulthood and we enable children to prepare for and respond to crises and adversity. We drive changes in practice and policy at local, national and global levels using our reach, experience and knowledge. For over 85 years, we have rallied other determined optimists to transform the lives of all children in more than 80 countries.

We won't stop until we are all equal.

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Cover image: Despite set backs from early marriage, Kanada now owns her own repair shop and provides for her family, Cambodia © Plan International