



Action on Child
Early and Forced Marriage

POLICY BRIEF: EMERGING EVIDENCE FOR THE NEXUS BETWEEN CLIMATE CHANGE AND CHILD MARRIAGE

Findings based on an International Expert
Group Meeting convened by
Action on Child, Early and Forced Marriage



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1. Aims of this policy brief

This policy brief aims to raise awareness of the nexus between climate change and child marriage through sharing emerging evidence from academics, investigative journalists, programmatic leaders from humanitarian organisations and others covering areas in Bangladesh, Mozambique, Indonesia, India, Kenya, Ethiopia, Tanzania and Malawi. It is also an urgent call to action to all stakeholders to address this emerging global issue.

2. Executive summary

Since 2015, States have committed to meet the targets of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) including SDG 13 on climate change and its impacts, SDG 5 on gender equality, which includes ending child marriage by 2030, and target 16.2 to end abuse, exploitation, trafficking and all forms of violence against and torture of children.

Climate change is having a devastating impact on the environment and people's lives and livelihoods, but its impacts are not gender neutral, with vulnerable groups such as women and girls disproportionately affected. Adverse climatic events contribute to poverty, food insecurity, displacement, disrupted education, gender discrimination and safety concerns regarding the sexual abuse and exploitation of girls which would harm girls and threaten family honour. The scientific and technological framing of climate change discourse has largely ignored its negative gendered dimensions including an increase in child marriage which has cascading detrimental outcomes for the health and well-being of girls. Emerging evidence suggests that the indirect effects of climate change are increasing child marriage among vulnerable communities in complex ways by exacerbating pre-existing drivers.

The lives of climate change-related child brides have already been documented in Malawi and Mozambique where girls have been married off for a bride price of as little as \$35 as a coping strategy in response to the dire economic circumstances of families. This trend is only predicted to increase as already vulnerable families are pushed deeper into poverty due to the loss of agriculture-reliant livelihoods and displacement. Any increases in child marriage undermine the United Nations' (UN) efforts to eradicate the practice which is considered a violation of human rights and a barrier to achieving gender equality. Urgent action is needed from all stakeholders - Member States, UN entities, civil society, parliamentarians, health workers, local communities, educators and faith based leaders and communities to address this issue. Based on a virtual International Expert Group Meeting which convened world experts, the following actionable policy recommendations emerged: uphold and promote a child rights and human rights centered approach in all policies, implement and enforce legal reforms which consider girls' climate-related vulnerabilities, develop climate resilient communities by investing in climate-resilient livelihoods, social protection and early warning systems, prioritize girls' access to education even during crises, integrate gender, child marriage and child protection measures into climate change adaptation and mitigation strategies, address social norms through awareness raising and community empowerment to challenge harmful customs around child marriage and invest in research to better understand and address the nexus between climate change, gender and child protection, including child marriage.

3. Introduction

Child marriage – a barrier to achieving gender equality

Child marriage refers to a marriage in which at least one of the spouses is aged under 18. Target 5.3 of Goal 5 on Gender Equality in the UN SDGs aims to eliminate child marriage, seen as a violation of human rights and a barrier to achieving gender equality. Despite global efforts to eliminate the practice, 12 million girls a year still enter child marriage. [1] Although the practice also affect boys, girls are disproportionately affected as they are less valued than boys in some societies. Child marriage is already known to increase in times of economic hardship and in response to threats of gender based violence such as seen during conflict, disasters and the COVID 19 pandemic. Now child marriage is emerging as an issue in response to climate change. In families with limited resources, boys' education is often prioritised whereas girls are usually the first to be taken out of school and married early. This denies girls their childhood and an opportunity for educational attainment. Education becomes replaced by adult responsibilities including domestic chores, child bearing and caring for family members. Early pregnancies can result in birth complications, affecting child and maternal health and the power imbalance due to the age difference between the spouses can increase girls' risk of domestic violence. These and other negative effects drive the global need to end child marriage.

The climate change context

Climate change is one of the biggest global threats facing humanity. Its adverse effects on weather patterns is already negatively impacting agricultural practices for millions, resulting in food insecurity, loss of livelihood, increased poverty and displacement. While climate change affects both men and women, it disproportionately affects marginalized communities and amplifies the existing vulnerabilities of, and discrimination against women and girls. Faced with existential threats from climate change, some families feel they have little choice but to resort to child marriage as a short-term coping strategy.

Understanding the nexus between climate change and child marriage

Evidence of the link between climate change and child marriage is slowly emerging, although this connection may not seem immediately obvious since child marriage is an indirect consequence of climate change, rather than a direct one. However, this nexus is complex, under-researched and to date few policy makers have joined the dots to make this important link. Moreover, countries most affected by climate change are unlikely to be monitoring and reporting this issue. Nonetheless, sufficient evidence already exists of climate change related child brides living in Malawi, Mozambique and other countries which warrants taking this issue seriously. Girls are being married in exchange for a bride price as little as \$35 indicating the dire levels of poverty families are experiencing. Thus, although an increase in child marriage due to climate change is still framed as a future possibility, in reality, it is already happening in many countries.

[1] UNICEF. Is an end to child marriage within reach? Latest trends and future prospects 2023 update.

Relationship between climate change vulnerability and child marriage

Data compiled from the Climate Change Risk Index and UNICEF country reports by *Action on Child, Early and Forced Marriage* in January 2022 showed that eight of the top ten countries most vulnerable to climate change also had high rates of child marriage from 20% in Bolivia to 76% in Niger.

Table 1: Countries' ranking to climate change risk[1] and their respective rates of child marriage [2]

Ranking in Climate Risk Index (based on actual events in 2019)	Countries ranked most at risk of climate change	Percentage girls married/in union before age 18 (UNICEF country reports)
1	Mozambique	53%
2	Zimbabwe	34%
3	Bahamas	-
4	Japan	-
5	Malawi	42%
6	Islamic Republic of Afghanistan	28%
7	India	27%
8	South Sudan	52%
9	Niger	76%
10	Bolivia	20%

To better understand the link between climate change and child marriage *Action on Child Early and Forced Marriage* convened a virtual International Expert Group Meeting. This aimed to bring together experts to share and consolidate the existing body of evidence from different disciplines, sources and countries including Bangladesh, Mozambique, Indonesia, India, Kenya, Ethiopia, Tanzania and Malawi.

4. Drivers and consequences of child marriage in climate-affected contexts

Child marriage is common in some parts of the world, most often driven by poverty, gender inequality, low levels of education and cultural norms. However, these baseline rates of child marriage can increase when families are exposed to additional economic shocks or instability, such as during conflict, natural disasters and the COVID 19 pandemic. Climate change has now also been shown to be a risk factor for increased child marriage. Pathways through which climate change can increase child marriage include:

- **Amplifying existing economic stress** due to crop failure, loss of livelihoods, and resource scarcity, pushing vulnerable families deeper into poverty, most without savings and social protection and hence resort to child marriage as a coping strategy which can also help reduce the size of the family.
- **Heightening security concerns** including the fear of sexual violence or exploitation of girls during displacement when families may be on the move or living in temporary shelters where protection for women and children may be minimal. Child marriage is seen to mitigate this risk and also avoids any negative perceptions of family honour.
- **Increasing risk of homelessness** in areas prone to climate change such as coastal flood plains and river banks which may prompt parents to arrange marriages early to secure a better future for the daughters' away from such environmental stressors.

[1] Global ClimateRisk Index 2021. <https://www.preventionweb.net/publication/global-climate-risk-index-2021>

[2] UNICEF child marriage country profiles accessed January 2022.. <https://data.unicef.org/resources/child-marriage-country-profiles/>

- **Disrupting girls' education** due to school closures where infrastructure is damaged or destroyed. In the absence of schooling, girl child marriage is the default life course. Girls with lower levels of education are generally at a higher risk of child marriage.
- **Intensifying gender discrimination** whereby boys' education is prioritized, whereas girls are often the first to be taken out of school and married early.
- **Incentivising child marriage due to bride price and dowry considerations.** The marriage of a girl in some sub Saharan African countries will generate a bride price income for the bride's family. In other countries such as India, girls' families may be persuaded to marry girls early in return for a reduced dowry payment to the groom. Regardless of the direction of the financial flow involved, ultimately, the outcome for young girls is the same – early marriage in response to economic stress.

Thus the indirect impacts of climate change can interweave in complex ways to increase girls' risk of child marriage with long-term negative consequences for their education, well-being and life prospects.

5. Insights from case studies shared during the International Expert Group Meeting

The full report of the virtual International Expert Group Meeting on the nexus between climate change and child marriage showcases emerging evidence including case studies, a few of which are highlighted here.

In Indonesia researchers showed how economic hardship from loss and damage from climate change is linked to child marriage. Each \$75 worth of loss and damage incurred by a family increased the likelihood of child marriage by 4%. Also the larger the family, the greater the risk of girl child marriage. Early warning systems can help reduce loss and damage and thereby act as a protective factor against child marriage.

In disaster prone areas of Bangladesh researchers found climate-induced economic hardship and risk of displacement could influence a family's decision to marry daughters at an early age to keep them safe and to secure their future away from disaster prone areas. The fear of sexual violence and trafficking of girls could also drive child marriage. During climate crises parents may become separated from their children or families may be living in temporary shelters where security and protection from traffickers may be minimal.

Journalists from the Brides of the Sun project documented stories of families forced to marry their daughters just to survive in Mozambique and Malawi. These marriages were driven by the bride price paid to the girl's family, often as little as \$35 showing the desperate economic situation of families.

World Vision International's evaluation of their programs in 24 countries showed a clear link between climate change and child marriage. The concept of 'intentionality' was developed meaning deliberate actions would be taken to bring together climate change and child protection policies including child marriage.

Conclusions

Evidence linking climate change and child marriage is steadily increasing as more policy makers recognise this important connection. The lives of climate change related brides have already been documented in Malawi, Mozambique, Bangladesh and other locations. World Vision International's evaluations of their environmental and child protection programs in 24 countries also support the link between climate change and child marriage. A recent UNFPA commissioned scoping review on the evidence for the link between climate change and child marriage and Save the Children's Global Girlhood Report published in October 2023 are consistent with the findings of the virtual International Expert Group Meeting on which this brief is based. Therefore the time to act is now. Policies and programs addressing the causes of child marriage must recognize these additional climate change related risks in locations prone to extreme weather events. Investments in vulnerable locations together with social protection can help build climate resilient livelihoods and communities, allowing families to overcome short-term economic shocks and avoid resorting to early marriage as a coping strategy. As we approach the mid-point of the SDG 2030 Agenda, the 30th Anniversary of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action and COP 28, a shift in thinking is needed to address the gendered impacts of climate change and to ensure that gender-responsive strategies are integrated into climate change and mitigation policies to protect women and girls and other vulnerable groups.

6. Key policy recommendations

- 1. Legal Reforms:** Enact, strengthen and enforce laws and policies that prohibit child marriage, consider girls' climate-related vulnerabilities and protect the rights of girls.
- 2. Climate resilient education systems:** Develop climate-resilient educational infrastructure and systems that prioritize girls' access to education even during climate crises, conflict, disasters and pandemics.
- 3. Integrate gender-responsive climate policies:** Promote and integrate gender-responsive climate adaptation and mitigation strategies that address the unique needs and perspectives of girls and women, including child marriage vulnerabilities, trafficking and risk of gender based violence.
- 4. Invest in climate resilient communities:** Support climate-affected communities by investing in climate-resilient infrastructure, agriculture, and water resources to limit impacts of climate change on livelihoods.
- 5. Address social norms through changing mindsets:** Raise awareness and empower communities to challenge harmful gender norms around child marriage in the context of climate change. Engage men and boys as key allies in changing attitudes and behaviours around child marriage.
- 6. Adopt a child rights and human rights approach:** Support, empower and protect the rights of disproportionately affected groups including women and girls.
- 7. Increase research funding:** Allocate resources for research on the intersection between climate change and gender, including harmful gender norms, gender based violence and child marriage.

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Disclaimer: the views expressed in the policy brief are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of the contributors to the expert group meeting.

Link to full report 'Exploring the nexus between climate change and child marriage: What does the evidence tell us?'
http://actiononchildearlyandforcedmarriage.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/Expert-Group-Report-on-Climate-change-and-child-marriage-14.05_FINAL-2.pdf

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