



Report of the Secretary General on progress towards ending child, early and forced marriage worldwide pursuant to General Assembly Resolution 69/156

Submission on behalf of *Girls Not Brides: The Global Partnership to End Child Marriage*
4 February 2016

Girls Not Brides is a global partnership of more than 550 civil society organisations from over 70 countries across Africa, Asia, the Middle East, Europe and the Americas, united by a commitment to end child marriage and enable girls to fulfil their potential. Members vary in size, location, and the type of work they do – from programme implementers and service providers working in their communities, to groups focused on research and advocacy – seeking to bring global, regional and national attention to this critical issue.

When *Girls Not Brides* was launched in 2011, child marriage was still considered taboo in many contexts. However, with international momentum increasing steadily, in September 2015 target 5.3, which calls for the elimination of child, early and forced marriage, was included in the Global Goals for Sustainable Development. While advances towards ending child, early and forced marriage in such a short timeframe have been impressive, it is critical that the international movement continues to broaden and deepen, shifting from awareness-raising and global pronouncements, to more substantive change in the lives of girls.

This submission, on behalf of the *Girls Not Brides* partnership, focuses on seven key recommendations the partnership would like to see addressed in the UN Secretary General's upcoming report, which will be crucial for making global progress towards ending child, early and forced marriage.¹ These recommendations include:

- 1. Implement target 5.3 of the Global Goals for Sustainable Development**
- 2. Develop a human rights-based, comprehensive response to ending child, early and forced marriage**
- 3. Ensure civil society organisations are key partners in ending child, early and forced marriage**
- 4. Address the root causes of child, early and forced marriage**
- 5. Identify hotspots for child, early and forced marriage and ensure they are reached**
- 6. Increase financing for initiatives which address child, early and forced marriage**
- 7. Strengthen national legal frameworks to prevent and address child, early and forced marriage in conformity with international law**

These recommendations are intended to complement the individual submissions of *Girls Not Brides* members towards the report.

¹ This submission has been drafted by the *Girls Not Brides* secretariat in close collaboration with the International Center for Research on Women, the International Women's Health Coalition, American Jewish World Service and other valuable members of the *Girls Not Brides* Global Advocacy Group, a group of *Girls Not Brides* member organisations who work towards common global advocacy goals for ending child marriage.

Key recommendations for the UN Secretary General's report

1. Implement target 5.3 of the Global Goals for Sustainable Development

Target 5.3 of the Global Goals for Sustainable Development commits countries to end child, early and forced marriage by the year 2030. Governments must then report progress on this target periodically. The inclusion of this target as part of the global development agenda presents an unprecedented opportunity to make progress towards ending the practice in countries with high prevalence rates. It will require the development and implementation of funded, cross-sectoral policies, programmes and plans to end the practice, which are developed and implemented with all ministries and stakeholders, including civil society, affected communities, and married and at-risk girls.

2. Develop a human rights-based, comprehensive response to ending child, early and forced marriage²

Laws, policies and resolutions alone are not enough to end child, early and forced marriage. It is an entrenched practice in many families, communities and societies where a girl's marriageability is often her best perceived asset and opportunity in life; ending it will require action by multiple actors at different levels, coordinated through a sufficiently resourced national strategy, action plan or similar country-wide initiative.

Such comprehensive national action includes: empowering girls with information about their rights and the skills with which to exercise them; addressing the broader context in which girls are married as children by encouraging families, communities and girls themselves to envision futures beyond marriage; tailoring services such as schools, health centres and legal services, among others, to the needs of adolescent girls; and ensuring these programmes are supported by strong laws and policies which are implemented, demonstrating government commitment to addressing the practice. Given that interventions to end long-held patterns of child, early and forced marriage will differ across cultural settings, it is also vital for governments to work closely with local civil society organisations to understand the specific contexts for designing and implementing child marriage interventions that work.

3. Ensure civil society organisations are key partners in ending child, early and forced marriage

The widespread and comprehensive work of *Girls Not Brides* members and others in the global movement to end child, early and forced marriage demonstrates the crucial role that civil society organisations play at the community and national levels. They have strong experience and deep understanding of local contexts and play a central role in designing and implementing programmes that empower adolescent girls, engage parents and other vital community gatekeepers and decision-makers. It is crucial that civil society organisations are involved in the process of developing and implementing national strategies and action plans to end child, early and forced marriage. They also play an important role in holding governments accountable to their

² For guidance on what a comprehensive response to child marriage would involve, please refer to the *Girls Not Brides* Theory of Change and their report on "Lessons Learned from Selected National Initiatives to End Child Marriage" which have been submitted as supporting documentation and can be found in the Annex of this submission.

commitments and should be part of the monitoring and evaluation of the effectiveness of national strategies.

4. Address the root causes of child, early and forced marriage

Child, early and forced marriage is a cross-cutting human rights issue affecting the rights of girls and women to health, education, equality, non-discrimination, and to live free from violence and exploitation, including slavery and servitude. Exacerbating factors include poverty, lack of education or economic opportunities, and weak institutions – all of which are heightened during times of disaster, and in conflict and fragile situations. Specific responses to the practice therefore need to be developed in such contexts. Despite these exacerbating factors, it is important to recognise that at its root child, early and forced marriage is perpetuated by structural inequalities and discrimination, including gender inequality, unequal power relations, gender norms and stereotypes, and control of sexuality, sexual choices and bodies, particularly for girls and women.

Girls Not Brides seeks to build a world where the marriage of girls is not only delayed to age 18, but where girls and women enjoy equal status with boys and men and are able to achieve their full potential in all aspects of their lives.³ It is when girls are able to acquire necessary skills, connections and capacities, that they can make genuine decisions about their bodies and lives, including marriage. Therefore, wider gender inequalities across society must be addressed in order to shift social norms and attitudes that perpetuate the marriage of girls, so that the voice and decisions of girls and young women are valued as equal to those of men and boys. It is vital to continue linking such work on girls' empowerment and gender equality across all sectors to ensure its sustainability on the development agenda in years to come.

5. Identify hotspots for child, early and forced marriage and ensure they are reached

Child, early and forced marriage is a global phenomenon and cuts across countries and regions. Regional variations within countries can be masked by national averages and risk missing some of the most marginalised and vulnerable populations. Therefore, specific hotspots within high-prevalence countries need to be identified so that governments can tailor and target their responses to reach the most marginalised and those at greatest risk of child, early and forced marriage. Solid measurement, evaluation and learning, including consistent data collection and disaggregation (at the minimum by location, age, sex and education level) is needed to identify those hotspots and vulnerable populations, and to assess progress and trends.

6. Increase financing for initiatives which address child, early and forced marriage

Significant change requires robust, long-term funding to support initiatives to prevent and respond to child, early and forced marriage, from both existing and new sources (including from national budgets, donor countries, and private donors such as foundations). Importantly, more funding is needed which is flexible, evidence-based and supported by agile funding delivery mechanisms. This helps to ensure funds reach community-based organisations working with girls, families and communities, as they are the ones best positioned to work with communities so as to create the behavioural and cultural changes necessary to end child, early and forced marriage.

³ For more information see Annex for *Girls Not Brides* "A Theory of Change on Child Marriage".

In addition, greater funding for initiatives which could have a major impact on child, early and forced marriage across sectors is needed. High-prevalence countries must allocate resources – both human and financial – to roll out targeted national strategies as well as specific policies on girls’ education, health and similar. This means adequate resourcing and cooperation across all government ministries (including justice, women, children, youth, education, health, social protection and security) in order to implement the necessary policies and programmes, as the practice affects all their areas of focus.

7. Strengthen national legal frameworks to prevent and address child, early, and forced marriage in conformity with international law

Crucial to preventing child, early and forced marriage and addressing gender inequality is the need to ensure the establishment of a strong comprehensive national legislative framework that has incorporated international legal standards and complies with international law. Countries should therefore continue to be urged to bring their national legal frameworks in line with international standards, including through adopting or amending legislation to set the minimum age for marriage for boys and girls at 18 with no exceptions for customary law, parental consent or judicial consent.

Additionally, enforcement is key. Countries should also be called upon to follow-up and implement international and regional recommendations, such as recommendations stemming from a UN human rights resolution, report or review. The biennial UN resolutions of the UN General Assembly and the Human Rights Council addressing child, early and forced marriage constitute important opportunities to highlight and strengthen international commitments to end the practice.

ANNEX 1:

Girls Not Brides: The Global Partnership to End Child Marriage, “Lessons Learned from Selected National Initiatives to End Child Marriage”, July 2015

<http://www.girlsnotbrides.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/Lessons-learned-from-national-strategies-Girls-Not-Brides-July-2015.pdf>

ANNEX 2:

Girls Not Brides: The Global Partnership to End Child Marriage, “A Theory of Change on Child Marriage”, July 2014

<http://www.girlsnotbrides.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/Girls-Not-Brides-Theory-of-Change-on-Child-Marriage.pdf>