**Plan International, Inc.**

**SUBMISSION TO THE REPORT OF THE UNITED NATIONS SECRETARY-GENERAL ON PROGRESS TOWARDS ENDING CHILD, EARLY AND FORCED MARRIAGE WORLDWIDE**

Plan International has developed this submission to inform the forthcoming report by the United Nations Secretary-General on child, early and forced marriage (CEFM) pursuant to General Assembly Resolution 71/167. Due to the word limit, this submission will only highlight some new research, programming and influencing work undertaken by Plan International since our last submission to the previous Secretary-General report in November 2019, which contains elements and recommendations that are still valid today.

1. **INTRODUCTION**

[Plan International](https://plan-international.org/), Inc. is an independent non-governmental organisation and is in Special Consultative Status with ECOSOC. Founded in 1937, Plan International is one of the oldest and largest children’s rights organisations in the world. We strive to advance children’s rights and equality for girls in both development and humanitarian contexts. Working with children and young people in more than 75 countries around the world, we tackle the root causes of inequality faced by children, especially girls. Plan International believes that in order to be gender transformative and effective, interventions against child, early and forced marriage and unions (CEFMU) must be holistic, multi-sectorial and multi-level. Recognising the complex and multiple causes of CEFMU, Plan International continues to work within its global approach known as “*18+: Ending Child, Early and Forced Marriage*” focusing on three levels, individual (empowering girls), collective (mobilising families and communities) and systemic (creating an enabling legal environment) in more than 35 countries. 18+ works with entire communities, including men and boys, to model positive gender norms. It supports children and young people, as well as parents, community leaders and governments, to identify, understand and collectively work to end CEFMU. Crucially, it ensures that children – particularly girls – are involved in the process and feel empowered to claim their rights.

1. **LEGAL AND POLICY DEVELOPMENTS**

Plan International reiterates the position expressed in the previous submission, regarding the importance of ratification by States of international human rights treaties that promote the protection of children against all forms of violence and harmful practices, including CEFMU. This includes the need to establish and fully implement laws which set the minimum age of marriage at 18 years for men and women without exception, regardless of parental, judicial, or religious consent.

However, laws governing the age of sexual consent should be determined separately to that of the minimum age of marriage. Plan International research has shown that raising the age of sexual consent to the minimum age of marriage is detrimental to children’s rights given that this stigmatises or criminalises sexual activity prior to marriage, denies adolescents’ agency, gives contradictory messaging about sexual consent, and upholds the idea of the need to promote sexual purity, particularly of girls, until they are married. This in itself can be a driver of CEFMU as well as a barrier to accessing sexual and reproductive health services.[[1]](#footnote-1) Plan International supports laws that recognise children, adolescents and young people as rights holders with evolving capacities and maturity to make decisions about their own health, including their sexual and reproductive health and rights.

Plan International also advocates for the promulgation of laws that create or facilitate birth and marriage registration processes, including through the use of civil registration and vital statistics systems. This is a key step for preventing CEFMU by providing a means of verifying the age of parties to a marriage.[[2]](#footnote-2)

**Examples of positive developments**

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| *Developments in Indonesia*  In Indonesia, the House of Representatives has ratified Law No 16/2019 that increased the minimum age of marriage to 19 years for both men and women.  *Developments in Colombia*  Currently the Colombian Civil Law sets the minimum age of marriage at 18 years unless parental consent is given. However, in late 2021, the Colombian Congress presented two bills that seek to abrogate any exception for allowing CEFMU. If the bills are passed, only women and men over 18 years old could get married and all marriages that had been celebrated involving children under 18 years old will be annulled. The bills still need to be approved in four debates in the Parliament that are expected to take place this year.  *Developments in Jordan*  Engagement with sharia courts in the Za’atari refugee camp in Jordan changed the process of registering marriages, addressing issues of statelessness and undocumented children of Syrian origin, which can have a significant impact in addressing social norms regarding child, early and forced marriage. |

1. **THE SITUATION OF MARRIED GIRLS**

CEFMU is a human rights violation addressed in several human rights conventions and international agreements.[[3]](#footnote-3) Despite strong progress made in the implementation of legislation on the issue, this harmful practice remains widespread. According to UNICEF, the total number of girls married in childhood stands at 12 million per year.[[4]](#footnote-4) CEFMU has several impacts on the safety and well-being of girls: married girls are less likely to continue or return to education; more likely to experience high levels of physical, psychological, and to suffer from sexual violence at the hands of their partners, as well as be denied of economic resources and mobility. CEFMU also increases the chances of early or unplanned pregnancy, significantly affecting the health and development of adolescent girls.

As CEFMU has been prioritised on the international agenda, governments and other stakeholders have focused their efforts mainly on prevention measures and reducing CEFMU rates in different contexts. However, it is important to ensure that this does not result in the exclusion of married girls or survivors of CEFMU from broader structures and systems which respond to their unique needs. This includes ensuring access to SRHR services, paths to complete their education, access to economic opportunities and access to justice, including the right to seek divorce or annulment of marriage.[[5]](#footnote-5)

A study conducted for Plan International[[6]](#footnote-6) evidenced the need for a multisectoral approach when addressing the particular needs of married girls, including awareness raising, provision of health services tailored for them, psychological support and SHRH services. In addition, as expressed in our previous submission, Plan International recognises that the practice of CEFM is grounded in harmful gender norms, including the control of female sexuality, and therefore urges States to ensure responses and interventions challenge the root causes of the practice, such as gender inequalities and harmful social norms**.**

In order to tackle the multiple negative outcomes that married girls face, they must be included in interventions and programmes which work to support them and promote their active participation in decision-making processes and as agents of change in their own lives and communities.[[7]](#footnote-7) Special considerations must also be made for girls and young women who have been supported to flee a child, early or forced marriage to ensure that they are able to reintegrate into their communities, access formal or informal education if they have stopped attending school, access the justice system as well as relevant health services, including mental health and psychosocial support.

Efforts to end CEFMU should also involve both a strong legal framework alongside the implementation of policies and programmes that address the root causes of CEFMU, protect and support survivors of CEFMU, and meaningfully engage families and communities, including men and boys. It is also essential to provide spaces for girls’ leadership, including married girls, to advocate against CEFMU, at local, national, and international levels. National frameworks and action plans should also ensure coordination between ministries and other actors, including around policies on education, social protection, SRHR, and combatting harmful gender norms, to ensure that combatting CEFMU is seen as a priority and a shared responsibility across sectors.

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| *Jordan*  In 2021, Plan International Jordan implemented a “Cash for Protection” project to support refugee and asylum-seeking girls in vulnerable conditions in host communities and the Azraq Syrian refugee camp. The selection criteria included those who were married young or at-risk of early marriage to support them to maintain their education and to provide them with decent means of living. As a result, the participants of the project and their families could meet their immediate protection needs through access to cash for protection services. This allowed them to access to referral mechanisms, and prevention and response services for child protection in the context of the COVID-19 Pandemic.  *Youth activism in Plan International’s West and Central Africa Regional Hub*  Plan International’s ‘Young Leaders against CEFMU’ project promotes the role of youth activists from Mali, Senegal and Guinea as leaders in challenging CEFMU. The project works with a group of youth activists to develop their advocacy skills and strengthen peer networks to conduct targeted advocacy. These young activists have engaged decision-makers at multiple levels – including community and religious leaders, school authorities and regional decision makers – to end CEFMU.  *Cameroon*  Plan International Cameroon supported girls and young women to advocate with parents and traditional leaders for the family reintegration of girls who had left forced early marriage. Additionally, a participatory action plan was developed with girls at risk of marriage and those who were already married to support them in addressing their concerns around issues like intimate partner violence, non-consensual sex, health matters related to pregnancy, right to education, and the marriage annulment process. This has enabled the girls in the community to: understand the causes and consequences of early/forced marriages, know the appropriate age for marriage, and make decisions about the age at which they can get married.  *Plan International Asia Pacific Regional Hub*  Plan International’s Regional Hub in Asia-Pacific (APAC) is integrating digital technologies in their programmatic and influencing approaches towards ending CEFM in the region. For example, in the Philippines, PI is trialling digital data collection methods as part of a participatory research project aimed at understanding key challenges faced by girls and young women living in remote communities. In Bangladesh, PI developed and piloted a mobile application to verify the age of a bride and groom in real time and support the digital registration of births and deaths. |

1. **CEFMU IN THE CONTEXT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC**

CEFMU is a critical issue in all contexts, but in times of crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic, risks to girls are exacerbated, threatening decades of progress that has been made on CEFMU. Although the practice of CEFMU remained common in pre-covid times, with UNICEF projecting that 100 million girls would be married by 2030, the proportion of young women globally who were married as children had decreased by 15%, from nearly 1 in 4 to 1 in 5 over the last two decades. However, due to the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is now projected that over the next decade there will be 110 million new cases of CEFMU, significant threatening the achievement of the global goal of ending CEFMU as set out in the 2030 Agenda.[[8]](#footnote-8)

The COVID-19 pandemic is exacerbating existing gender and social inequalities, therefore heightening the risks of CEFMU. Adolescent girls are now at increased risk of unintended pregnancy, economic shocks that lead to poverty, and widespread school closures. They are also impacted by the disruption to or breakdown of protection and health services, including essential SRHR services and referral mechanisms.[[9]](#footnote-9) Socio-economic conditions caused by the pandemic are driving families to marry off their daughters in order to obtain a dowry or to reduce the number of dependents within the household.[[10]](#footnote-10)

Lockdowns and school closures have also increased the incidences of sexual violence and adolescent pregnancies, as girls spend much more time at home. In addition, the number of COVID 19 infections are overwhelming health systems and in response, countries are diverting resources from routine health services to fight the pandemic. As a result, adolescents and girls face further challenges in accessing sexual and reproductive health information and services which lead to an elevated risk in unintended adolescent pregnancies.[[11]](#footnote-11) In fact, UNFPA predictions show that a 6-month COVID-19 lockdown could deny 47 million women access to modern contraceptives – leading to 7 million unintended pregnancies.[[12]](#footnote-12) For example, between April 2020 and March 2021, South Africa saw a 60% increase in adolescent pregnancies, where more than 23,000 girls under 18 years old gave birth, of which 934 were under the age of 14, compared to 14,577 girls in the same period a year earlier.[[13]](#footnote-13)

The breakdown of community social support networks and health services, intensifies families’ and communities’ desire to control girls’ sexuality in the name of protecting their “honour”. Plan International research in Africa has shown that in communities where strong traditional gender and social norms dominate, marriage is often viewed as a means to protect girls and their families from the shame and social stigma that can result from adolescent pregnancy or experiencing sexual violence. Inevitably, this forces many girls into marriage or unions.[[14]](#footnote-14)

Understanding the prevalence of CEFMU during the COVID-19 pandemic is further challenged by the impact of physical distancing measures on civil registration systems, such as marriage and birth registration. This in turn lead to more cases of CEFMU happening under the radar owing to the disruption of data collection on incidence of CEFMU.[[15]](#footnote-15) During lockdown, girls and women may also face barriers to engaging with the formal justice system, which can be used as a last-ditch effort to block an illegal marriage.[[16]](#footnote-16)

To tackle CEFMU during crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic, it must be considered a priority for governments, donors, and other stakeholders, to continue funding preventive and protective mechanisms that support girls and adolescent at risk of, or already in child marriages. It is also required to have a multisectoral approach that ensures efficient and effective linkages with and coordination between relevant sectors such as protection (including GBV, child protection and wider protection), health, education, social protection, mental health, and psychosocial support (MHPSS), and justice sectors. Stakeholders should undertake CEFMU risk assessments using a gender and child rights analysis to address girl’s immediate needs as well as contextual drivers and long-term consequences of CEFMU.[[17]](#footnote-17)

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| *Jordan*  Given the fact that the COVID-19 pandemic has curtailed access to social and health services in Jordan, especially sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) and GBV services, with a disproportionate impact on women, adolescent girls and youth, several response measures were taken by Plan and other organizations; including 1) assessing the extent to which the COVID-19 outbreak affects adolescent girls and young women, both Jordanians and Syrians and other nationalities, in refugee camps and host communities looking at GBV/SRHR risks; and 2) the provision of youth-friendly services via digital platforms such as WhatsApp, and Zoom. These virtual services were generally well received by young women and girls.  *Vietnam*  As the world was imposing lockdowns, children and young people increased their use of social media and online platforms. For this reason, Plan International Vietnam, developed an online platform – the Girls' Rights Platform (GRP) – to encourage dialogue, information, and exchange on girls and women’s rights. In addition to being a tool to promote dialogue, the GRP is also designed to help to protect ethnic minority girls, boys, and young women from CEFMU. Plan International actively engaged with these groups to promote participation in online discussions through online games, quizzes, competitions with prizes, awards, and a certificate for the most active users. |

1. **RESEARCH DEVELOPMENTS**

Since Plan International’s previous submission to the Secretary General on progress towards ending CEFMU worldwide in 2019, we have undertaken several pieces of national and regional research on this issue which have provided new insights into the drivers of the practice and effective ways of tackling CEFMU. Examples of this research can be found below:

**Under Siege: Impact of COVID-19 on Girls in Africa – Plan International and African Child Policy Forum, 2020**

This study analysis the gender dimensions of COVID-19 in Africa, with a thematic focus on the impact of the pandemic on girls across an array of issues, including abuse, exploitation, exclusion from basic services, hunger and poverty.[[18]](#footnote-18)   
**Child, Early and Forced Marriage and Unions Policy Brief – Plan International, 2020**

This report draws on research conducted by Plan and others, and programmatic practice, and includes case studies for our work globally to. 1) Guide our programme and influencing work on CEFMU from local to global and; 2) Provide an overview of and general recommendations on CEFMU on key topical issues, including CEFMU in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, the link between adolescent pregnancy and CEFMU, CEFMU and the age of consent and the criminalisation of CEFMU.[[19]](#footnote-19)

**“Time to Act – Let’s Go Digital!” – Plan International Asia Pacific Region, 2021**

The pandemic has pushed social and economic life online, as individuals, governments, and organisations increase their dependency on digital technologies. This presents a critical opportunity for those working on CEFMU elimination to effectively harness digital technologies in their efforts to reverse the alarming increase in cases. Drawing on different insights, the report develops a series of recommendations about how development actors, governments, and donors working to prevent, reduce and eliminate CEFMU can most effectively leverage digital technologies to reach scale and generate impact. The recommendations focus on optimizing digital technology development processes; forming the right partnerships; and effectively aligning the digital technologies for scale, sustainability, and replicability.[[20]](#footnote-20)

**CEFMU in Humanitarian Crises: Girls and Parents Speak Out on Risk and Protective Factors, Decision-Making, and Solutions – Plan International, Save the Children and University of California, 2021**

Plan International, Save the Children and the Human Rights Centre at the University of California partnered on a long-term research initiative to strengthen CEFMU prevention and response in humanitarian settings. The report analysis the service and support needs of married, pregnant, parenting, and divorced girls, as well as strategies and solutions for supporting them. The research findings will be used by Plan International and Save the Children to inform the design of a new intervention to prevent CEFMU in humanitarian contexts, which will be piloted and evaluated in Phase 3 of the research initiative, which is planned in 2022.[[21]](#footnote-21)

**The impact of COVID-19 on women and girl’s rights and sexual and reproductive health- Plan International Jordan, UNFPA Jordan country program and the Institute for Family Health (IFH), 2020**

Plan International Jordan, in coordination with UNFPA Jordan country program and the Institute for Family Health (IFH), conducted a study to measure the impact of COVID-19 on gender-based violence and sexual and reproductive health and rights among adolescent girls and young women in Jordan. The study included a review of literature on the gendered dimensions of infectious disease outbreaks, with a particular focus on the impacts of pandemics on gender-based violence and sexual and reproductive health, as well as surveys and interviews with more than 400 respondents.[[22]](#footnote-22)

1. **CONCLUSION**

Plan International believes that the recommendations in our previous submission to the Secretary-General’s on child, early and forced marriage in 2019 remain valid.[[23]](#footnote-23) In addition, Plan International also recommends the following actions in order to prevent, respond to and end CEFMU which specifically address the themes of this year’s report to the UNSG.

* Member States must adopt national legislation which is in conformity with international human rights standards to support the prevention of CEFMU, including setting the minimum age of marriage at 18 for any party to a marriage, regardless of gender, without exception. Countries should ensure that national laws to this effect take precedence over any conflicting provisions under customary, religious and traditional law.
* Governments, together with development and humanitarian actors, including donors and actors within civil society and the private sector, must ensure a multi-sectoral and coordinated approach is taken to prevention and response to CEFMU. This must include ensuring efficient and effective linkages with and coordination between relevant sectors such as protection (including GBV, child protection and wider protection), health, education, social protection, mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS), as well as justice sectors. Stakeholders must ensure that these support systems and mechanisms are adequately funded and accessible for girls and women who have been married as children or against their will, and that services take into account the unique needs and requirement of married girls.
* All actors involved in the development and implementation of CEFMU programming must undertake comprehensive assessments using a gender and child rights analysis, to address root causes, drivers and consequences of CEFMU. Girls and young women should be actively engaged in the analysis
* All stakeholders engaged in programming on CEFMU, including States, donors, and civil society, should meaningfully involve and partner with young people, particularly girls and young women in the interventions focused on tackling CEFMU, recognizing their power to be agents of change in tackling CEFMU.
* Governments should ensure continued investment in and prioritisation of efforts to eliminate harmful practices such as CEFMU within COVID -19 response and recovery plans, including continued support to survivors and married girls, and the adaptation of interventions to minimise the impact of disruptions to ongoing programmes and services which support girls at risk of marriage or married girls.
* Governments must ensure that any lockdown restrictions on movement do not prevent girls and women from accessing sexual and reproductive health services or protection services. This includes keeping clinics, health facilities, and safe spaces open and accessible, and ensuring that those who need services can leave home and obtain them. Alternative channels for the delivery of services to girls, such as through remote provision, should be considered.
* **From:** Suarez, Maria Paula <MariaPaula.Suarez@plan-international.org>  
  **Sent:** 15 February 2022 23:49  
  **To:** OHCHR-Registry <ohchr-registry@un.org>  
  **Cc:** Caroline Ouaffo Wafang <caroline.ouaffowafang@un.org>; Shepherd, Joanna <Joanna.Shepherd@plan-international.org>; Dorian Hall [PLAN-INTERNATIONAL] <dorian.hall@plan-international.org>  
  **Subject:** Plan International Submission - Child, Early and Forced Marriage
* Dear Caroline and OHCHR team,
* On behalf of Plan International, I am attaching the submission to inform the forthcoming report by the United Nations Secretary-General on child, early and forced marriage (CEFM) pursuant to General Assembly Resolution 71/167.
* Should you need any further information, please do not hesitate to contact me.
* Best regards,

* **Maria Paula Suarez –**Policy and Advocacy Officer– Protection from Violence
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1. PLAN INTERNATIONAL. Child, Early and Force Marriage and Unions, Policy Brief. October 2021. Pag. 19. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. PLAN INTERNATIONAL. Child, Early and Force Marriage and Unions, Policy Brief. October 2021. Pag. 11 and UNICEF. <https://www.unicef.org/stories/what-birth-registration-and-why-does-it-matter> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, Convention on the Rights of the Child (frequently addressed by the Committee on the Rights of the Child), Convention on Consent to Marriage, Minimum Age for Marriage and Registration of Marriages, the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child and the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and People’s Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. [Child marriage - UNICEF DATA](https://data.unicef.org/topic/child-protection/child-marriage/) [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. PLAN INTERNATIONAL. Child, Early and Force Marriage and Unions, Policy Brief. October 2021. Pag. 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. The report can be accessed here [Child\_marriage\_in\_humanitarian\_crises\_report\_2021.pdf (berkeley.edu)](https://humanrights.berkeley.edu/sites/default/files/publications/child_marriage_in_humanitarian_crises_report_2021.pdf) [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
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8. UNICEF. COVID-19 A threat to progress against child marriage. 2021 Available at: [COVID-19: A threat to progress against child marriage - UNICEF DATA](https://data.unicef.org/resources/covid-19-a-threat-to-progress-against-child-marriage/) [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
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13. [Teen pregnancies in South Africa jump 60% during COVID-19 pandemic - South Africa | ReliefWeb](https://reliefweb.int/report/south-africa/teen-pregnancies-south-africa-jump-60-during-covid-19-pandemic#:~:text=Pretoria%2C%20South%20Africa%2C%2024%20August,of%20both%20mothers%20and%20babies.) [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
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19. The report can be accessed in the following link: [Under Seige: Impact of COVID-19 on Girls in Africa | Plan International (plan-international.org)](https://plan-international.org/publications/under-seige-impacts-covid19-african-girls) [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. The report is accessible from the following link: [Time to Act - Let's Go Digital! | Plan International (plan-international.org)](https://plan-international.org/publications/lets-go-digital) [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. The report can be accessed here [\*child\_marriage\_in\_humanitarian\_crises\_report\_2021.pdf (berkeley.edu)](https://humanrights.berkeley.edu/sites/default/files/publications/child_marriage_in_humanitarian_crises_report_2021.pdf) [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. <https://plan-international.org/publications/impacts-covid-19-girls-rights-and-reproductive-health> [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. For further details, refer to Plan International, 2019, Submission to the Report of the United Nations Secretary-General on Progress towards Ending Child, Early and Forced Marriage Worldwide. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)