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IS AN END TO CHILD MARRIAGE WITHIN REACH?

Latest trends and future prospects
2023 update



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Division of Data, Analytics, Planning and
Monitoring, May 2023

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Acknowledgements

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The report was edited by Lois Jensen
and designed by Era Porth (independent
consultants).

Suggested citation

United Nations Children's Fund, *Is an End to
Child Marriage within Reach? Latest trends
and future prospects. 2023 update*, UNICEF,
New York, 2023.

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The practice of child marriage has continued to decline globally. Today, one in five young women aged 20 to 24 years were married as children versus nearly one in four 10 years ago.

Global progress has been driven predominantly by a decline in India, though this country is still home to the largest number of child brides worldwide. Progress is also evident in other contexts, including in populous countries where the practice has historically been common, such as Bangladesh and Ethiopia, as well as in smaller countries with lower levels of child marriage that are moving closer to elimination, such as Maldives and Rwanda. The experiences of these countries illustrate that progress is possible in a variety of settings. Still, they tend to share common threads, including improvements in economic development, poverty reduction, access to employment and educational attainment at the secondary level.¹

While some parts of the world have seen progress, others have stalled. West and Central Africa, the region with the highest prevalence

of child marriage, has made little progress over the last 25 years. Many countries in the region, particularly those in the Sahel, have experienced ongoing crises that exacerbate vulnerabilities for girls. Another region with lagging progress is Latin America and the Caribbean. In this part of the world, large gaps across socioeconomic groups illustrate that the practice is entrenched among the poor.

This year marks the halfway point to the deadline for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals, and when it comes to ending child marriage, a number of challenges loom large. Despite global advances, reductions are not fast enough to meet the target of eliminating the practice by 2030. In fact, at the current rate, it will take another 300 years until child marriage is eliminated.

Looking ahead, expected demographic trends pose an uphill battle, since populations are growing most rapidly in areas where child marriage is common. Lastly, the breadth of challenges encompassed in the 'polycrisis' of today's world elevates the risk of child marriage: Public-health crises, armed conflicts and climate change all contribute to a more precarious world in which families may seek 'refuge' for their girls in child marriage.



CURRENT LEVELS

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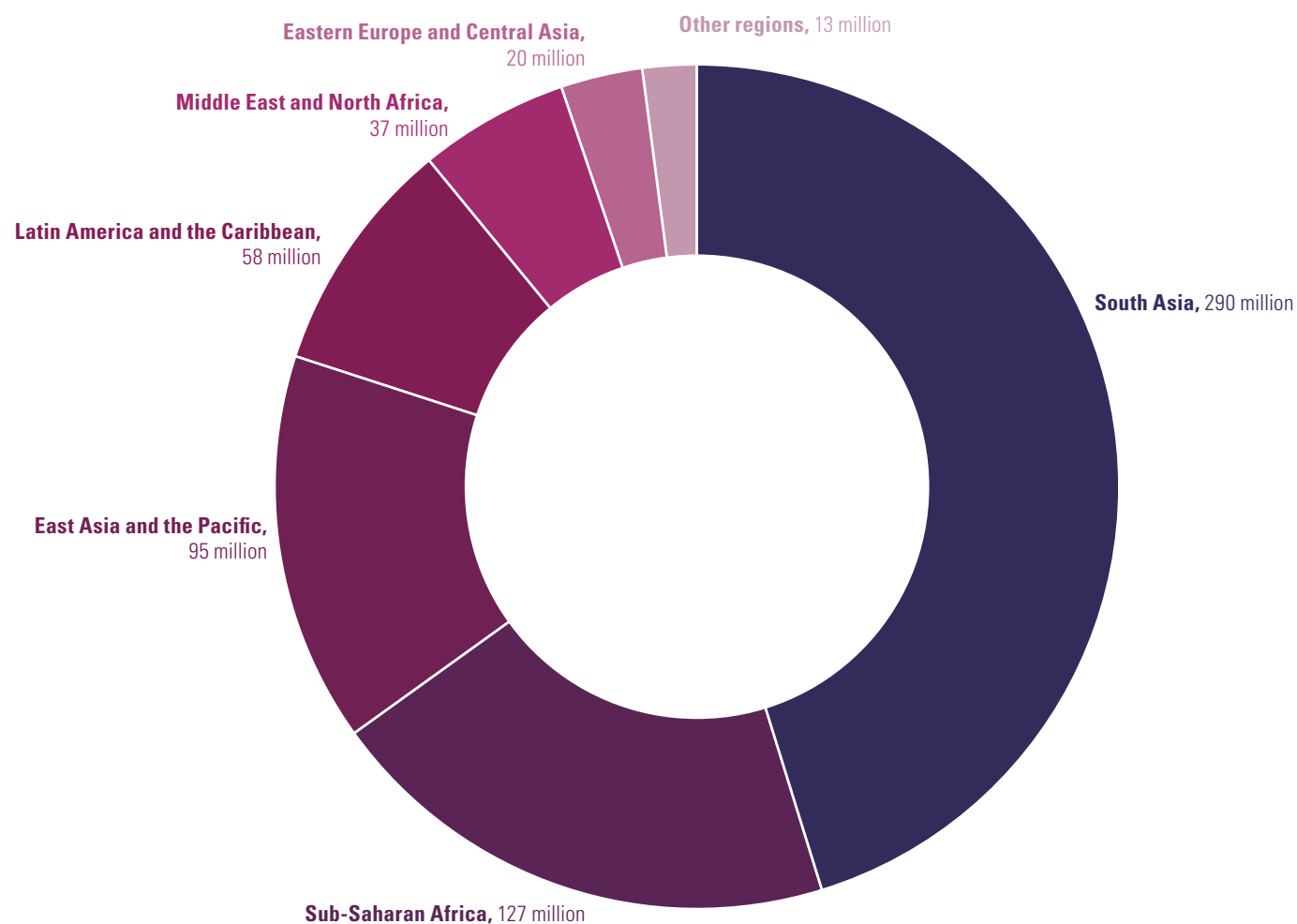


Figure 1 Global distribution of the number of girls and women first married or in union before age 18, by region

Note: See 'Measuring child marriage' on page 7 for details on the calculation of this indicator.

**AN ESTIMATED
640 MILLION
GIRLS AND
WOMEN ALIVE
TODAY WERE
MARRIED IN
CHILDHOOD**

Nearly half of child brides live in South Asia (45 per cent) with the next largest share in sub-Saharan Africa (20 per cent), followed by East Asia and the Pacific (15 per cent) and Latin America and the Caribbean (9 per cent)

INDIA ALONE ACCOUNTS FOR ONE THIRD OF THE WORLD'S CHILD BRIDES

This share is equal to the next 10 countries combined, which account for a further third. The remaining third are spread across the world's other 190+ countries

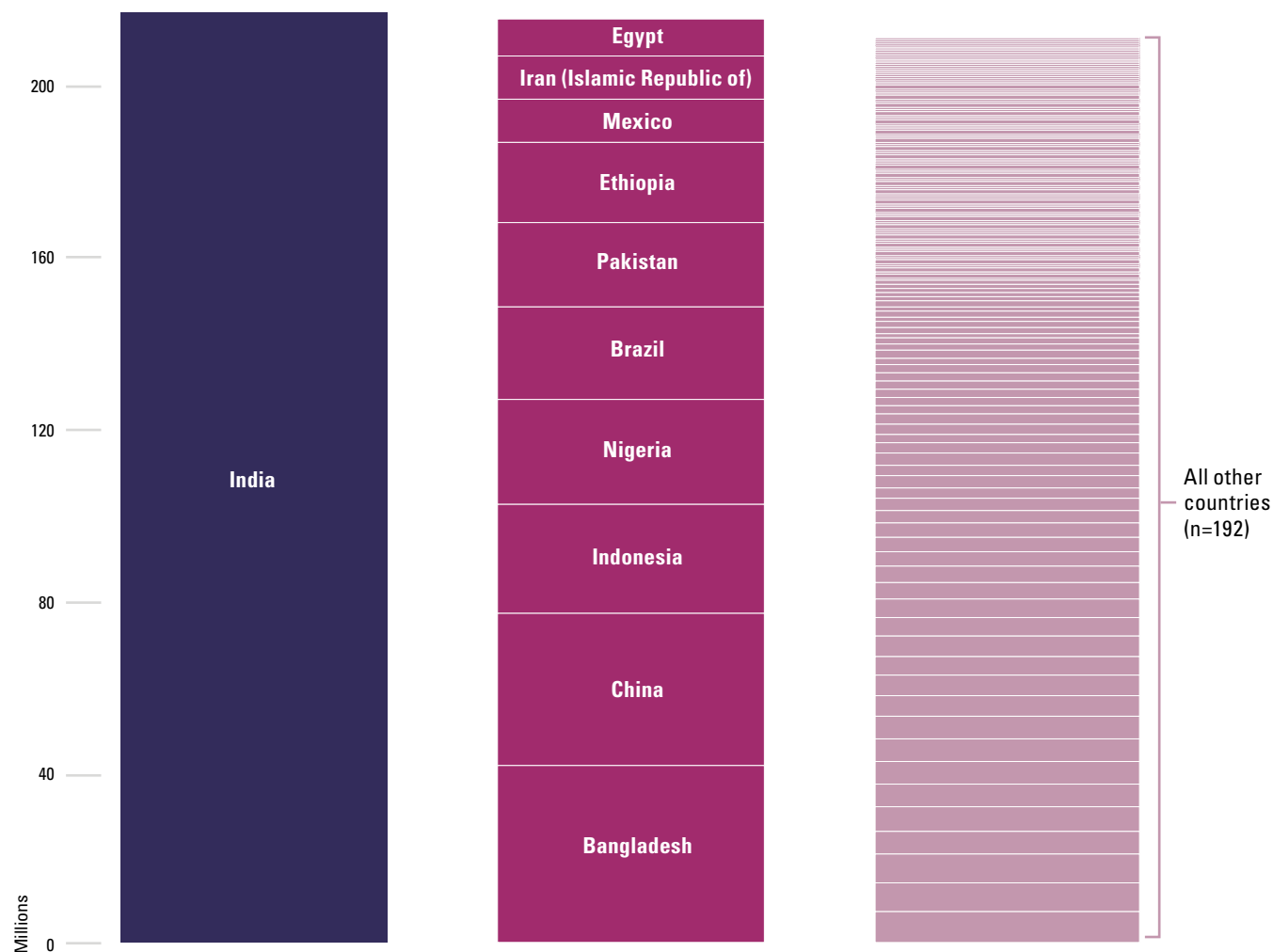


Figure 2 Number of girls and women first married or in union before age 18, by country

Note: See 'Measuring child marriage' on page 7 for details on the calculation of this indicator.

MEASURING CHILD MARRIAGE

Global monitoring of child marriage relies on the use of a standard measure of its **prevalence**. The use of a common definition allows for meaningful comparisons of how widespread the practice is across contexts, among different populations and over time. The standard measure of prevalence is the percentage of women aged 20 to 24 years who were first married or in union before age 18. This is also the indicator used to monitor progress towards Sustainable Development Goal target 5.3 on the elimination of harmful practices.

The indicator comprises both a definition of child marriage and a reference group among whom the definition is applied. This standard indicator uses a commonly accepted definition of child marriage that includes formal marriage and informal unions before the age of 18.

The use of the reference group of women aged 20 to 24 years is not fundamental to the definition of child marriage, but it does offer some benefits over alternative indicator formulations. Compared to prevalence measures among girls currently under age 18, the use of this reference group has the benefit of indicating complete prevalence – that is, all women in the group have lived through the period in which they were at risk of child marriage; thus, this cohort bears no further risk of marrying in childhood. On the other hand, compared to prevalence measures among all women of reproductive age (20 to 49 years, for example), this reference group offers a more current estimate of prevalence since young women turned 18 more recently than older women.

Still, when using the standard indicator, there is a time lag between the moment at which

child marriages occur and when they show up in the data: Prevalence estimates reflect child marriages that occurred at least two years and as many as six or more years prior to the reported year. For this reason, the impact of recent changes, such as those arising from the COVID-19 pandemic, is not expected to be evident yet in reporting that relies on the standard indicator shown in Figures 5, 6 and 7. To minimize the effect of the time lag between the time of the marriage and the data collection, the number of child marriages per year may be used. In the case of the pandemic, it is also necessary to use statistical modelling since complete data on occurrences of child marriage since 2020 are not yet broadly available (see Figures 4 and 8).

To report on the practice of child marriage, we can also use the **burden**, or the total number of girls and women who married as children. These numbers are shown in Figures 1, 2 and 3. While the prevalence provides the latest estimate of the risk of child marriage, the burden illustrates the magnitude of its impact on society. While child marriage occurs during adolescence, the impact of the practice can last a lifetime. Marrying early can alter the trajectory of a girl's life by cutting short her education and stifling her earning opportunities, by encouraging an early entry into motherhood, and by socially isolating her in the context of an adult relationship in which she may not be empowered to advocate for her rights. Thus, the total count of child brides includes those under age 18 who are currently married as well as women of all ages who were first married as children.

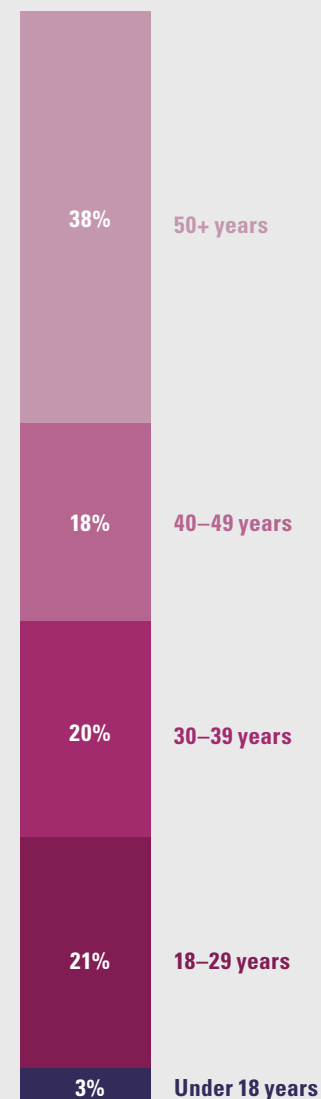
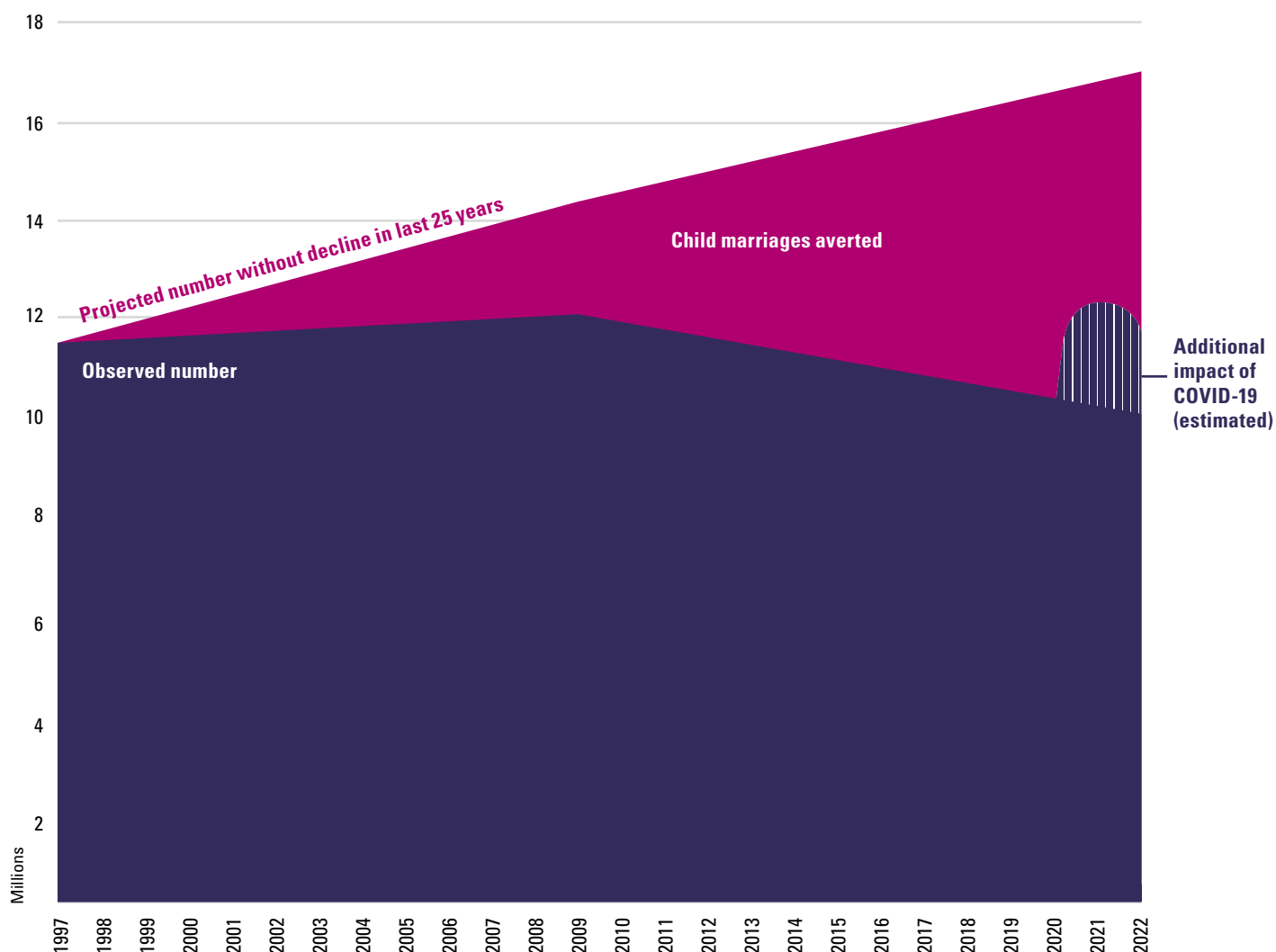


Figure 3 Global distribution of the number of girls and women first married or in union before age 18, by current age



GENERATIONAL TRENDS

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**IN THE PAST
25 YEARS,
68 MILLION
CHILD
MARRIAGES
HAVE BEEN
AVERTED**

Although the full impact of the pandemic is yet to be measured, modelled estimates show an increased risk beginning in 2020, offsetting the declining trend. In 2022, an estimated 12 million girls became child brides

Figure 4 Number of girls under age 18 married per year, observed and projected

Note: The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic is not yet captured by available survey data on child marriage (see 'Measuring child marriage' on page 7).

CHILD MARRIAGE HAS **DECLINED** STEADILY IN SOUTH ASIA, BUT LITTLE PROGRESS HAS BEEN SEEN IN MANY OTHER PARTS OF THE WORLD

The global prevalence of child marriage has fallen from 23 per cent to 19 per cent in the last 10 years

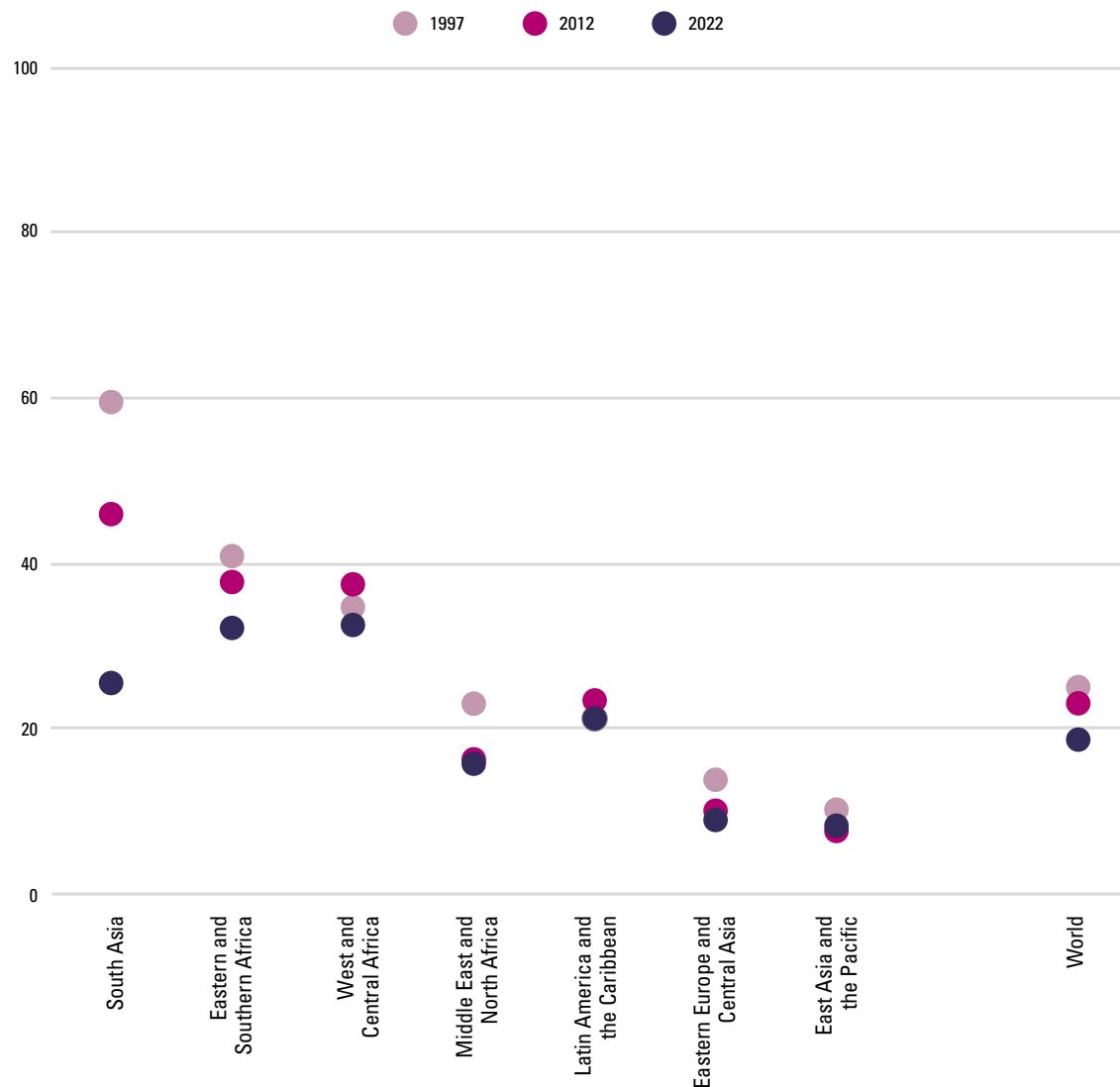


Figure 5 Percentage of women aged 20 to 24 years who were first married or in union before age 18, by region



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South Asia leads the world in reducing the prevalence of child marriage: In the last decade alone, a girl's likelihood of marrying in childhood has dropped by nearly half, from 46 per cent to 26 per cent. Of all child marriages averted in the past 25 years, 78 per cent were in South Asia. This progress is driven largely by India, although notable declines have also been seen in Bangladesh, Maldives and Pakistan. While reductions in child marriage were observed among those from richer and poorer households alike, girls from wealthier families have benefited more from these gains. If progress globally over the past 25 years had been as fast as that seen among those in the richest quintile of South Asia, 9 per cent of girls today would be child brides versus the current 19 per cent. Despite declines, the region is still home to the largest total number of child brides, due both to the legacy of an age-old practice and to the region's large population.

Sub-Saharan Africa is emerging as a region of considerable concern: Girls there now experience the highest risk of child marriage in the world, with one in three marrying before age 18. Levels vary across countries, although the practice is more concentrated in West and Central Africa, which is home to 7 of the 10 countries with the highest prevalence of child marriage in the world. While some decline in child

marriage has been seen in sub-Saharan Africa over the past 25 years, a closer look reveals that all of the advances have occurred among the richest families, with the region registering overall progress despite rising levels of child marriage among the poorest.

In the **Middle East and North Africa**, one in six young women are married before age 18. Most countries in this region have seen a decline in child marriage over the last 25 years, although progress overall is dampened by persistently high levels in Iraq. Still, the advances that have occurred have been more equitable than in other regions, with Egypt leading in reductions in child marriage among the poorest.

In **Latin America and the Caribbean**, where the practice most often takes the form of an informal union, progress has not been observed over the last 25 years. By 2030, the region is expected to become second to sub-Saharan Africa in terms of prevalence. Trends by wealth show a persistent divide between rich and poor, with early unions being a rare phenomenon among wealthier segments of society but resistant to change among the poorest.

Levels of child marriage in **Eastern Europe and Central Asia** and **East Asia and the Pacific** remain low but stagnant, with girls from disadvantaged populations still at risk.



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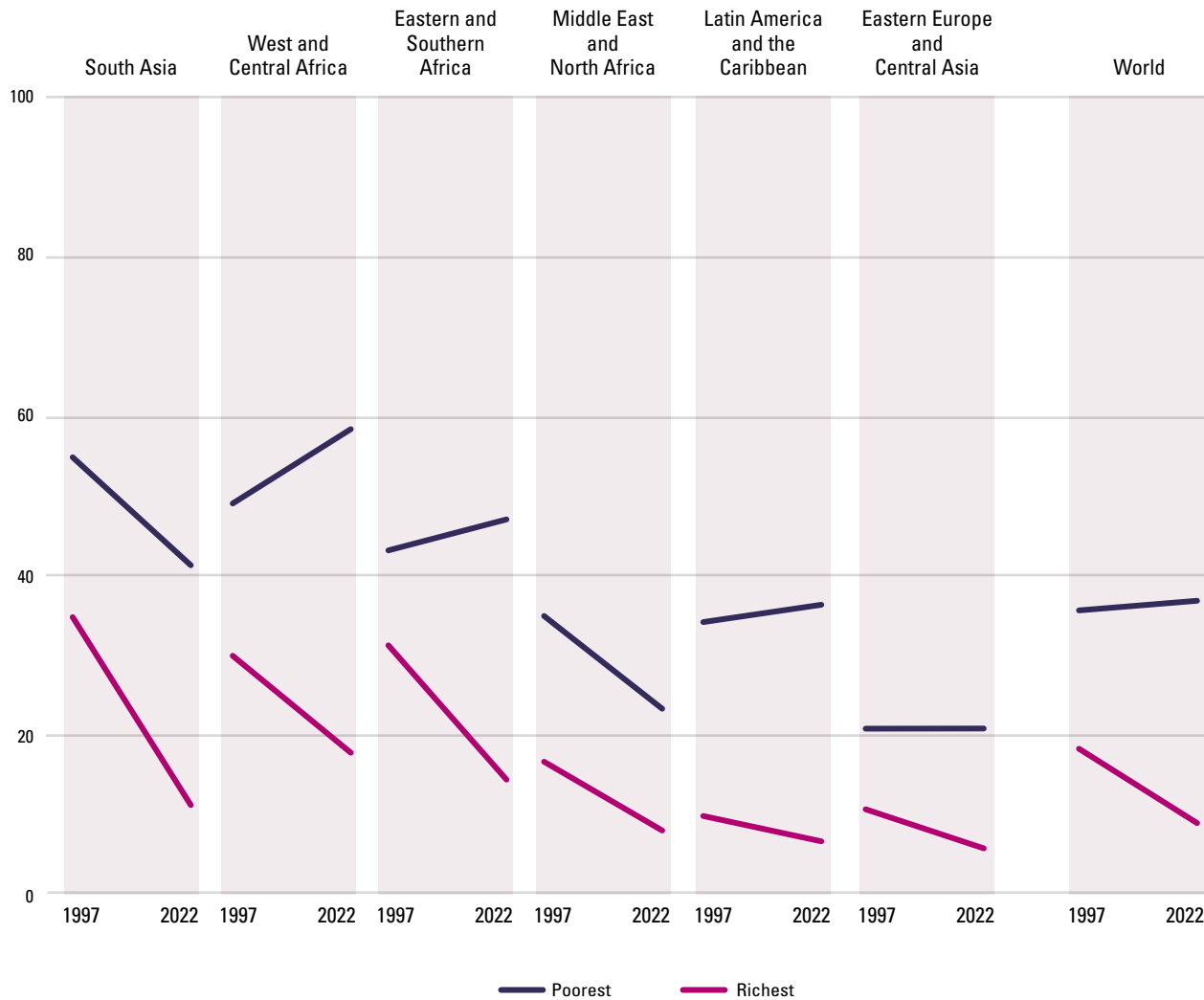


Figure 6 Percentage of women aged 20 to 24 years who were first married or in union before age 18, by region and by wealth quintile

**ACROSS ALL REGIONS,
PROGRESS IN
CHILD MARRIAGE
HAS PRIMARILY
BENEFITED
GIRLS FROM THE
RICHEST FAMILIES**

Girls from the richest households represent three times as many of the averted cases of child marriage as girls from the poorest households



LOOKING AHEAD TO ELIMINATING CHILD MARRIAGE

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DECLINES IN THE LEVEL OF CHILD MARRIAGE ARE NOT OCCURRING AT A FAST ENOUGH PACE TO REACH THE SDG TARGET OF **ELIMINATING THE PRACTICE BY 2030**

Overall, progress would need to be 20 times faster to reach the SDG target

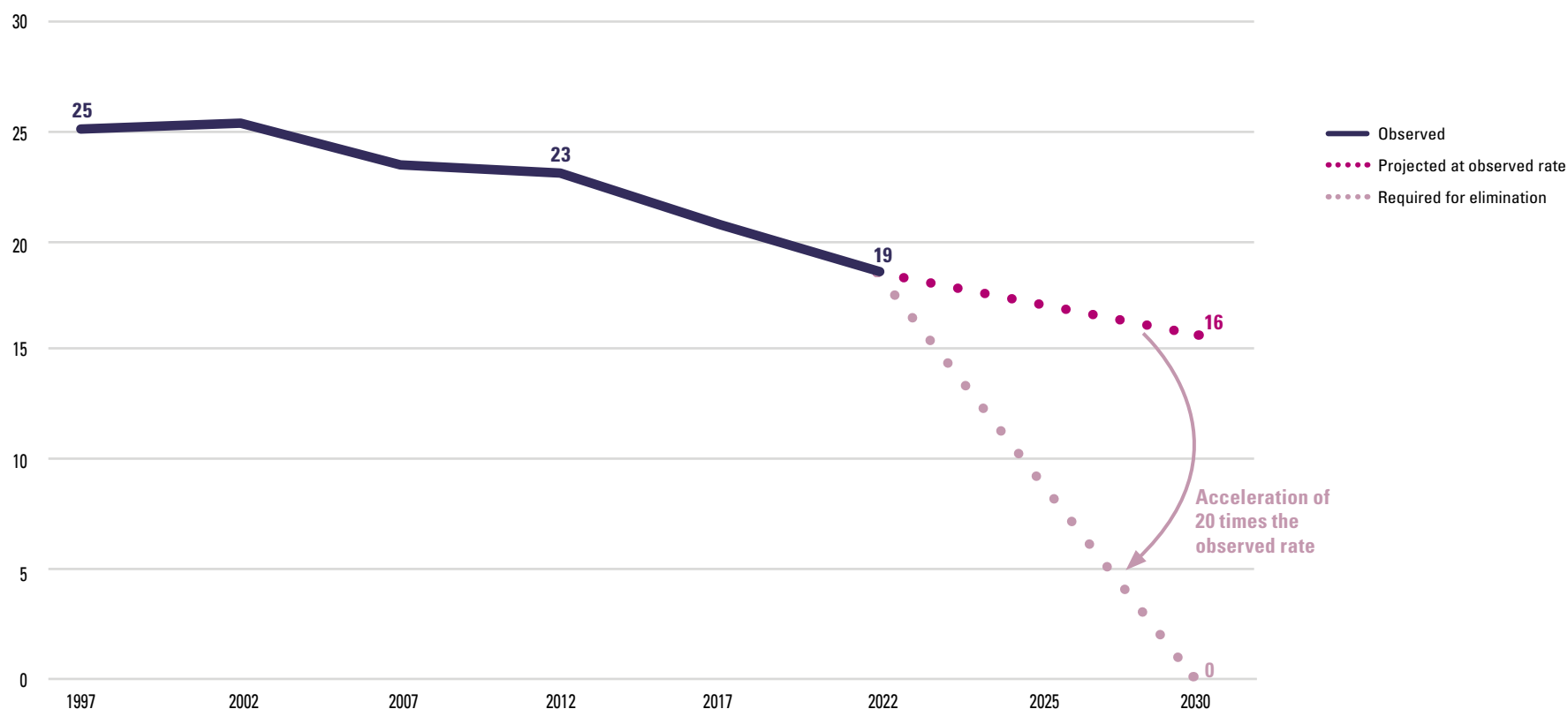


Figure 7 Observed and projected percentage of women aged 20 to 24 years who were first married or in union before age 18

Note: See 'Technical notes' on page 25 for details on the calculation of projections.

**AT THE CURRENT
PACE OF PROGRESS,
OVER 9 MILLION GIRLS
WILL STILL MARRY IN
THE YEAR 2030, WITH
A GROWING SHARE IN
SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA**

In contrast to the global trend, sub-Saharan Africa is projected to see a growing relative share as well as a steadily increasing absolute number of child brides

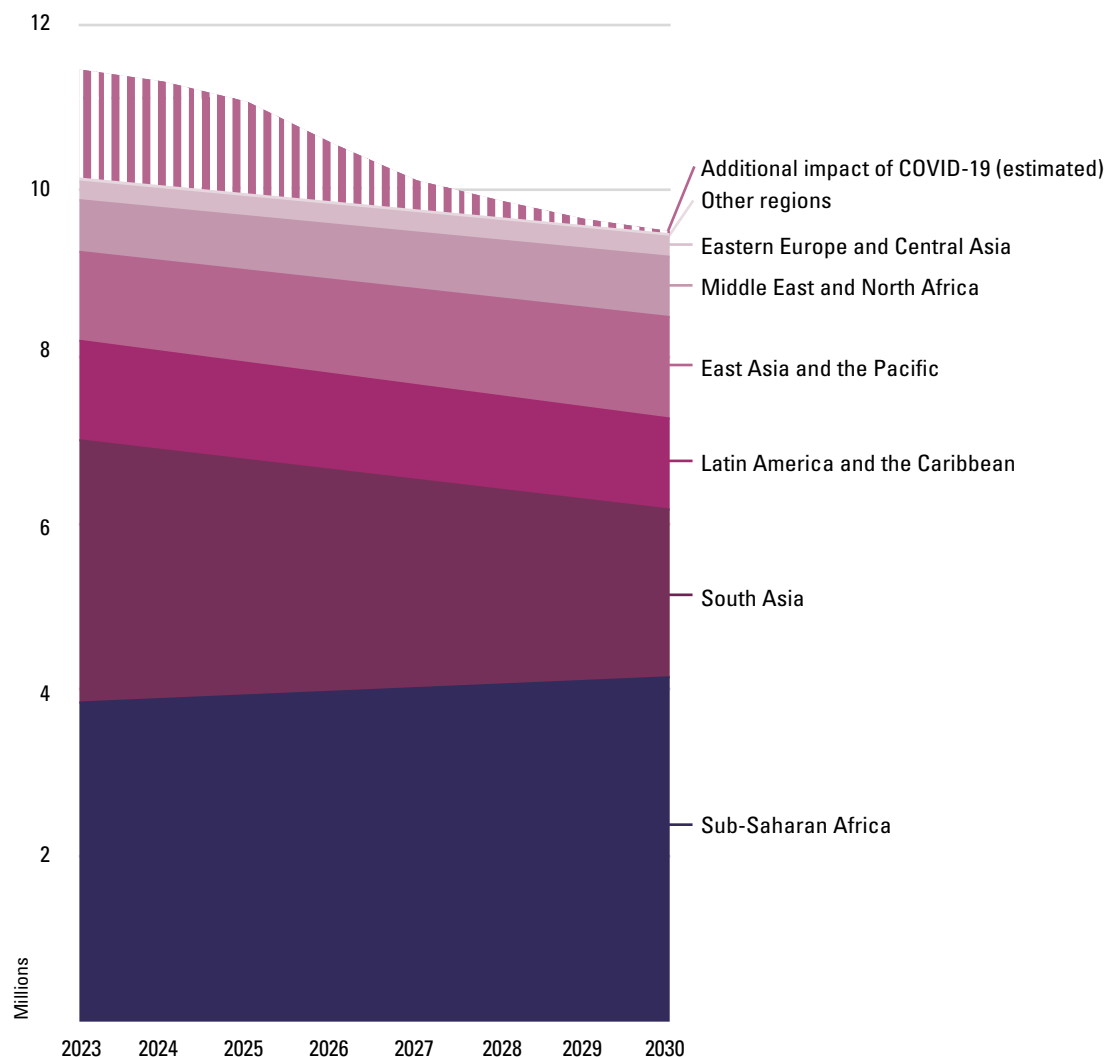


Figure 8 Projected number of girls under age 18 married per year, by region

Note: See 'Technical notes' on page 25 for details on the calculation of projections.

AT THE CURRENT PACE, THE WORLD IS AT LEAST 300 YEARS AWAY FROM ENDING CHILD MARRIAGE

The global target cannot be achieved until child marriage is eliminated in all parts of the world. Yet even in regions where progress has lagged, there are promising examples of improvement

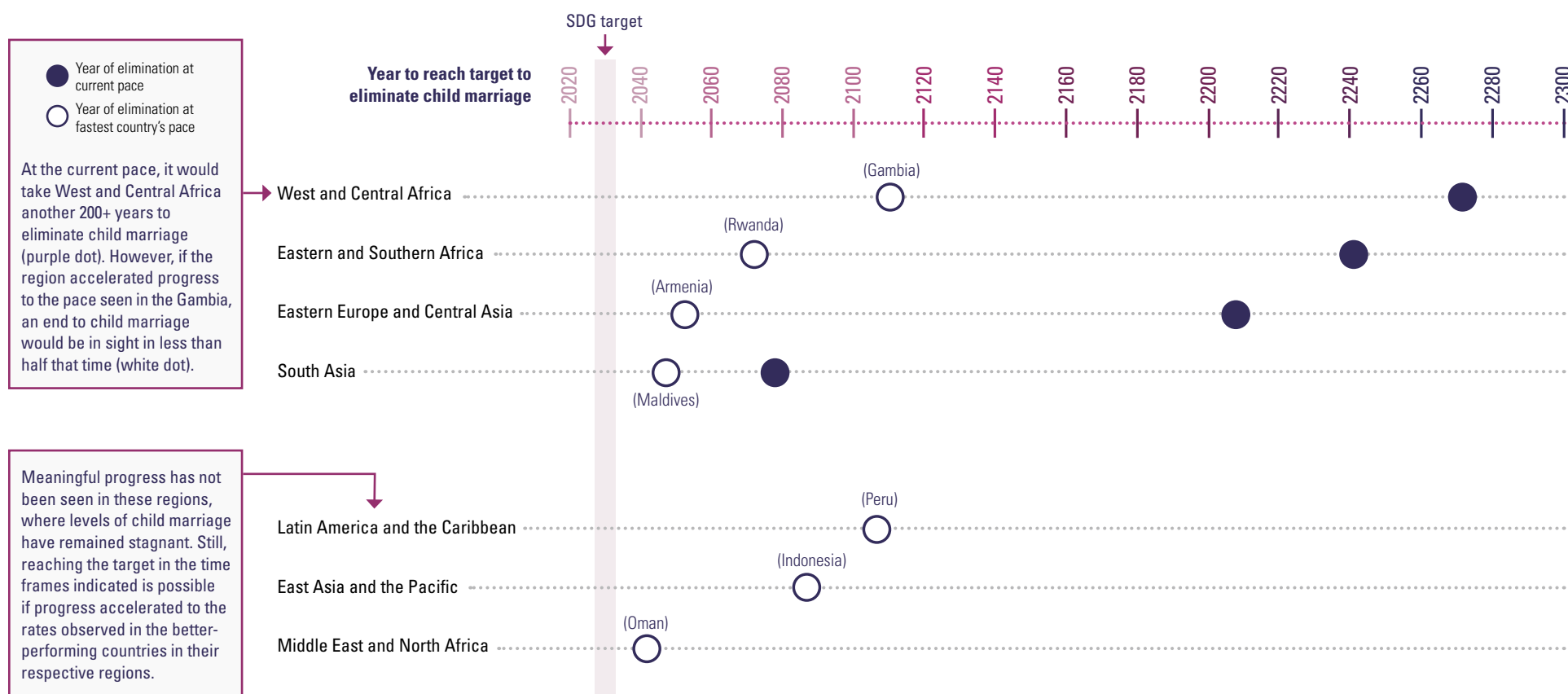


Figure 9 Projected time to reach the SDG target of eliminating child marriage, at observed pace of the region and at the pace of a country with a faster decline than the regional average

Note: See 'Technical notes' on page 25 for details on the calculation of projections.

WEATHERING THE IMPACT OF CRISIS

Although child marriage is a clear violation of children's rights, it is often seen by families as a 'protective' measure for girls, providing financial, social or even physical protection. Viewed in this light, ongoing and overlapping crises create risky conditions for girls in several ways, through channels of impact such as interrupted education and income shocks caused by a public-health crisis, a protracted conflict or a natural disaster, or several of these at once. While such crises tend to be unpredictable, it is possible to learn from the past to understand the potential magnitude of their impact.



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10 MILLION CHILD BRIDES DUE TO COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic provides just one example of how crises can have a ripple effect. Disruption to daily life through **school closures**, the pressures of **income shocks** and **economic uncertainty** and even **mortality among parents** has created a higher-risk environment for girls. While the full impact of the pandemic is yet to be measured, it is estimated that an additional 10 million girls will become child brides by 2030 because of pandemic impacts like these, illustrating that gains in preventing child marriage can be reversed in times of public-health emergencies.²

10-FOLD INCREASE IN CONFLICT DEATHS → 7 PER CENT INCREASE IN CHILD MARRIAGE

Girls living in areas affected by conflict also face an elevated risk of child marriage. In total, the prevalence of child marriage in fragile states is twice the global average.³ Families living through conflict may feel a heightened sense of **insecurity**, **fear of sexual violence** and **threats to family honour**, as well as **financial hardship** and **infrastructure failures** including interruptions to girls' schooling. All of these have been cited as reasons for an increase in child marriage in conflict settings.^{4,5,6} Historical data bear this out, showing a positive association between conflict deaths and child marriage: Every tenfold increase in conflict deaths is associated with a 7 per cent rise in the prevalence of child marriage. Thus, ongoing conflicts around the world have the potential to halt and even reverse progress towards eliminating child marriage, putting thousands more girls at risk.

10 PER CENT CHANGE IN RAINFALL DUE TO CLIMATE CHANGE → 1 PER CENT INCREASE IN CHILD MARRIAGE

The impacts of climate change can also foster conditions of increased vulnerability. Extreme weather events can **disrupt sources of income**, exacerbate **food insecurity**, and incur **costs for rebuilding and recovery**. In the face of these pressures, families may choose child marriage for their daughters to relieve their financial burden.^{7,8,9} Climate impacts such as drought can also put a **strain on communal resources**, which can drive **conflict**, **violence** and **displacement** – conditions that increase the vulnerability of girls.^{10,11,12} As is the case in pandemics and conflicts, extreme weather events associated with climate change can also lead to **loss of life**, leaving behind girls who, as orphans, may face a higher risk of marriage.¹³ Analysis of historical data confirms the association between climate-related events and child marriage: Defining the intensity of climate shocks as unexpectedly high or low levels of rainfall, a 10 per cent deviation in either direction is associated with a 1 per cent increase in levels of child marriage.



Conflict in Ethiopia

Ethiopia recorded outstanding progress in reducing child marriage up until 2016, the latest year for which data are available. Since then, intense conflict has put this progress at risk of not only slowing, but potentially moving in reverse.

Historically, conflicts of this magnitude have been associated with an increased risk of child marriage for girls. For each year of continuing conflict at this intensity, we would expect to see a 15 per cent rise in the prevalence of child marriage.¹⁴

This means that for each year of conflict, progress towards eliminating child marriage would be set back by four years. Progress is further threatened by drought conditions in the country, which could exacerbate risks for girls. The true magnitude of the impact will be seen when conditions allow for safe data collection in the coming years.

Flooding in Pakistan

Pakistan has also made significant strides in reducing child marriage, halving prevalence over the past two decades. Yet this country has suffered greatly from the impacts of climate change. Intense flooding in 2022 was one such example of an extreme weather event driven by climate change.

Evidence shows that extreme weather events like this are correlated with an increased risk of child marriage. In a year with an event of this severity, we would expect to see an 18 per cent increase in the prevalence of child marriage, equivalent to erasing five years of progress.¹⁵

A SHIFTING GLOBAL BURDEN

The distribution of the global population is shifting, with more than half of global growth between now and 2050 likely to occur in Africa. Growth is expected to be particularly fast in sub-Saharan Africa, where the population is projected to double by 2050.¹⁶ At the same time, low fertility rates in parts of the world such as Europe and China will lead to shrinking populations in coming years.¹⁷

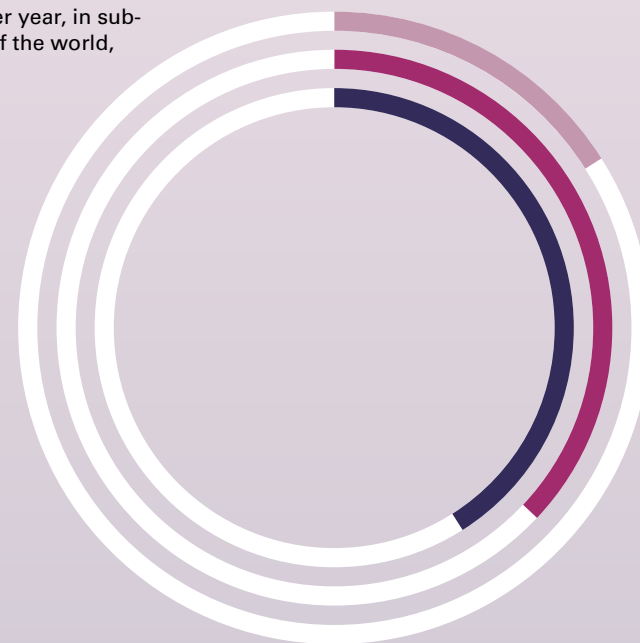
These trends have important implications for girls in the future: Child marriage is more common in parts of the world that are growing rapidly compared with areas where child marriage is rare. This means an increasing number of girls will be at risk of becoming child brides. This dynamic is particularly acute in sub-Saharan Africa, where progress in reducing child marriage has lagged and is being outpaced by population growth.

The impact is already becoming evident: 25 years ago, sub-Saharan Africa was home to **15 per cent** of the world's child brides. Of the most recently married girls, this share has already grown to **35 per cent**. If trends of the past decade continue, by 2030 this share will grow to **41 per cent**.

Figure 10 Distribution of the number of girls under age 18 married per year, in sub-Saharan Africa and the rest of the world, observed and projected

Sub-Saharan Africa:

- 25 years ago
- Today
- 2030
- Rest of the world





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"Not only am I helping girls to not enter into child marriage, but I am also studying hard. I want to be a doctor when I grow up so I can continue helping people, but I will never stop working to end child marriage. It is my passion; it is my calling."

– Adolescent girl in Oromia, Ethiopia

ENDING CHILD MARRIAGE
is an ambitious global target, and as the data here illustrate, it is not within easy reach by 2030. To spare girls from this violation of their rights, efforts to accelerate progress must be redoubled.



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Ending child marriage is an obligation, necessary to secure the rights of girls around the world.



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"I am a refugee without wanting to be. I am young, and I want training and a profession. I want to seize opportunities. I believe I will succeed. As a nomadic girl, I grew up in a restrictive environment. I don't want to be stuck inside or the victim of an early marriage. My motto is 'Know how to dare'."

– Adolescent girl in M'Berra refugee camp, Mauritania



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TECHNICAL NOTES

For details on the measures used in this publication for prevalence and burden of child marriage, please see 'Measuring child marriage' on page 7.

The current global and regional estimates of the prevalence of child marriage, referred to as the levels 'today', are calculated on the basis of the latest available data for each country, within the span of 2016 to 2022. Global estimates include data from 103 countries representing 78 per cent of the world's population. Regional estimates for the Middle East and North Africa include data from the period 2014 to 2022 due to the unavailability of more recent data. Regional estimates represent data covering at least 50 per cent of the regional population. Data coverage was insufficient to calculate regional estimates for North America and Western Europe, and regional estimates by wealth for East Asia and the Pacific.

The number of child marriages per year is estimated by applying the prevalence of child marriage among young women aged 18 years old to the single-year population of 18-year-old women. The number of child marriages averted in the past 25 years is calculated by comparing the observed burden of child marriage with the number of marriages that would have occurred if the prevalence had not declined during this period.

Projected values based on a continuation of observed progress, as shown in Figures 7, 8 and 9, apply the average annual rate of reduction in the prevalence of child marriage over the past 10 years. For statistical purposes, 'elimination' of child marriage is defined here as a prevalence of less than 1 per cent.

Estimates of the impact of conflict and climate shocks on levels of child marriage rely on a regression analysis of historical levels of child marriage compared to the selected variables of the respective crises. To account for the complicated dynamics through which the crises and the associated pathways affect child marriage, we use distributed lag regression models. Moreover, to choose from the potentially large number of explanatory variables, we rely on model selection techniques to trim down the parameter space. The calculations of these elasticities take into account 1,637 observations on the prevalence of child marriage from 139 countries, as well as global georeferenced data on conflict deaths and high-resolution gridded precipitation data.

DATA SOURCES

Data are drawn from the UNICEF global databases, 2023, based on Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys, Demographic and Health Surveys and other nationally representative surveys. For detailed source information by country, see <data.unicef.org>. Demographic data are from the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division, *World Population Prospects 2022*, Online Edition.

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