



A Profile of Child Marriage

in the Middle East
and North Africa

unicef 

for every child

KEY FACTS

about child marriage

Child marriage is a violation of human rights. Every child in the Middle East and North Africa has the right to be protected from this harmful practice, which has devastating consequences for girls and for society. Child marriage is now firmly on the global development agenda, most prominently through its inclusion in Sustainable Development Goal target 5.3, to eliminate the practice by 2030.



**The world is home to
650 million child brides**

including currently married girls and women who were first married in childhood.

Levels vary geographically, with the highest risk in sub-Saharan Africa, followed by South Asia and then Latin America and the Caribbean. The prevalence in the Middle East and North Africa is near the global average, and higher than in regions such as East Asia and the Pacific or Eastern Europe and Central Asia.

Around one in five young women



in the Middle East and North Africa were married **before their 18th birthday**

**1 in 25
before their
15th birthday**

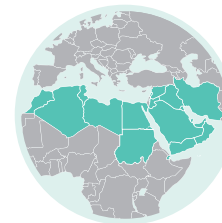
The Middle East and North Africa is home to

**nearly 40 million
child brides**

including currently married girls and women who were first married in childhood.

A girl's risk of child marriage depends on where she is from.

Girls who live in rural areas or are from poorer households have a higher risk, and a higher proportion of child brides are found among those with less education.



In recent years, there have been

**700,000
child brides
each year**

in the Middle East and North Africa.

The region is making progress.

In the past 25 years, the prevalence has dropped from one in three to one in five. Yet progress appears to have stalled in the past decade.

In order to meet the SDG target of elimination by 2030, **substantial acceleration will be required.**

NOTE: Please see Technical Notes on page 7 for calculation details.

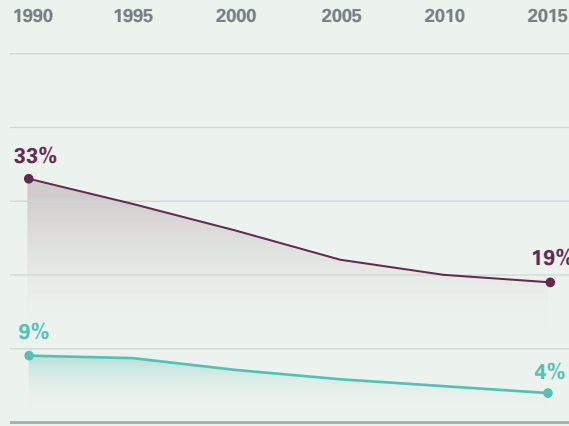


Child marriage has become less common in the Middle East and North Africa over the past 25 years, though progress appears to have stalled in the past decade

The prevalence of child marriage has dropped from one in three to one in five over the past 25 years

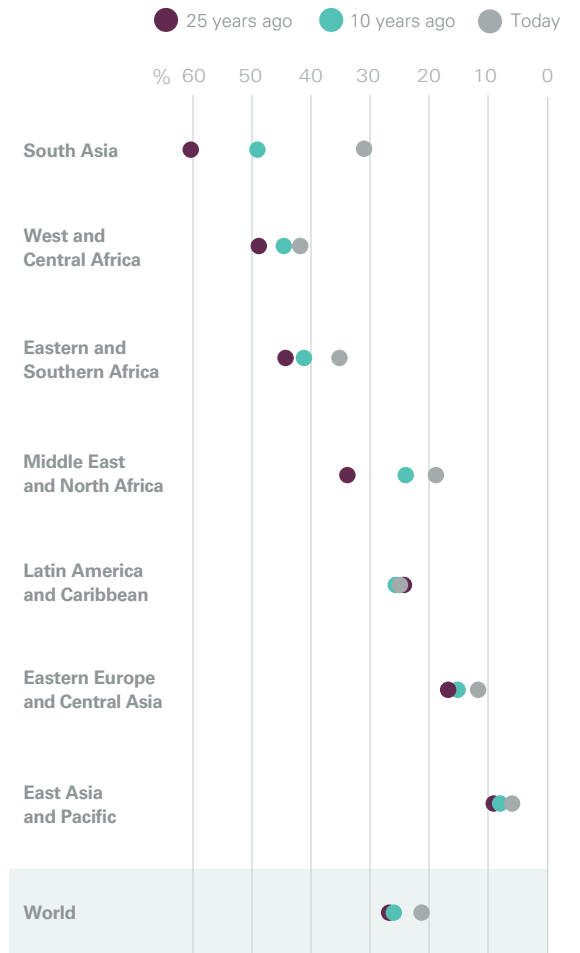
FIG. 1 Percentage of women aged 20 to 24 years who were first married or in union before age 15 and before age 18

— Before age 18 — Before age 15



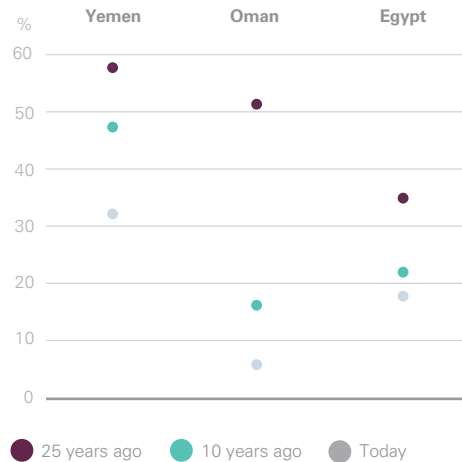
Progress towards reducing child marriage in the Middle East and North Africa has been strong compared to the rest of the world, though other regions have accelerated progress in recent years

FIG. 4 Percentage of women aged 20 to 24 years who were first married or in union before age 18, by region



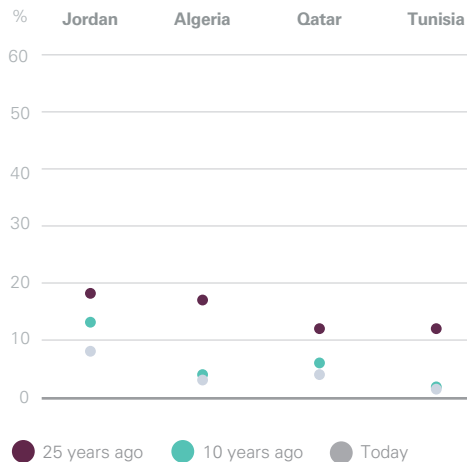
A number of countries in the region have made great strides in reducing child marriage in the past generation

FIG. 2 Percentage of women aged 20 to 24 years who were first married or in union before age 18, in countries with the most progress in the past 25 years



Some countries that began with relatively low prevalence of child marriage have continued to bring levels down, to below 10 per cent

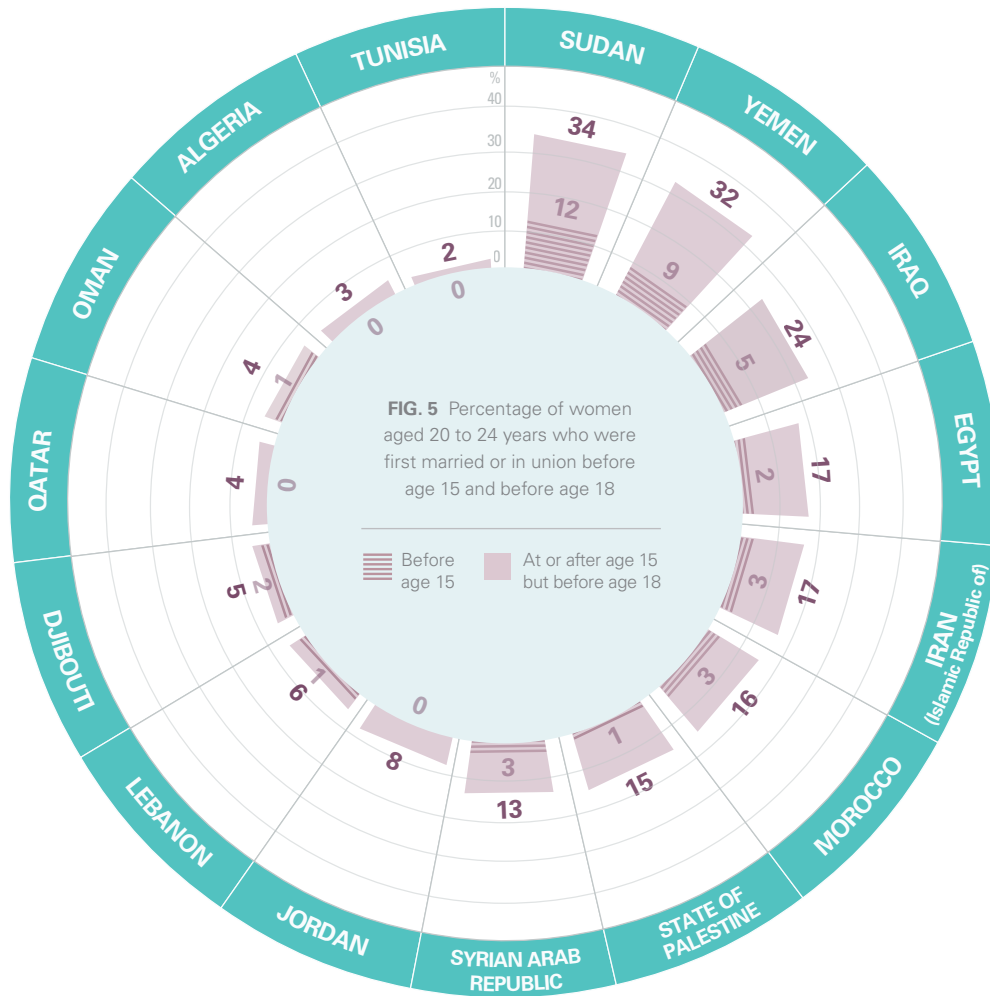
FIG. 3 Percentage of women aged 20 to 24 years who were first married or in union before age 18, in countries with low prevalence of child marriage and continued progress



PRESENT

Around one in five young women in the Middle East and North Africa were married before their 18th birthday

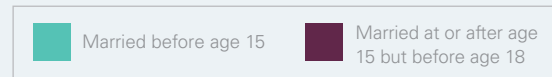
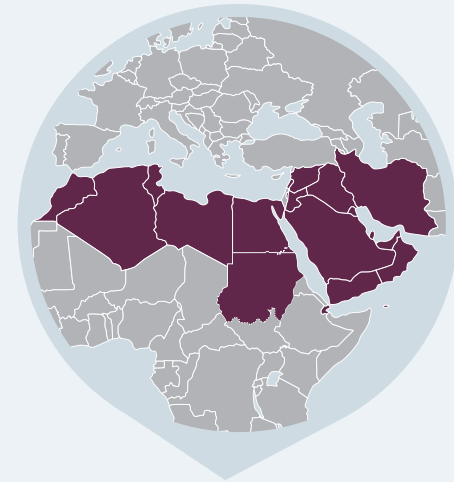
The prevalence of child marriage varies within the region, from a high of one in three in the Sudan and Yemen, to a low of 1 in 50 in Tunisia



The Middle East and North Africa is home to

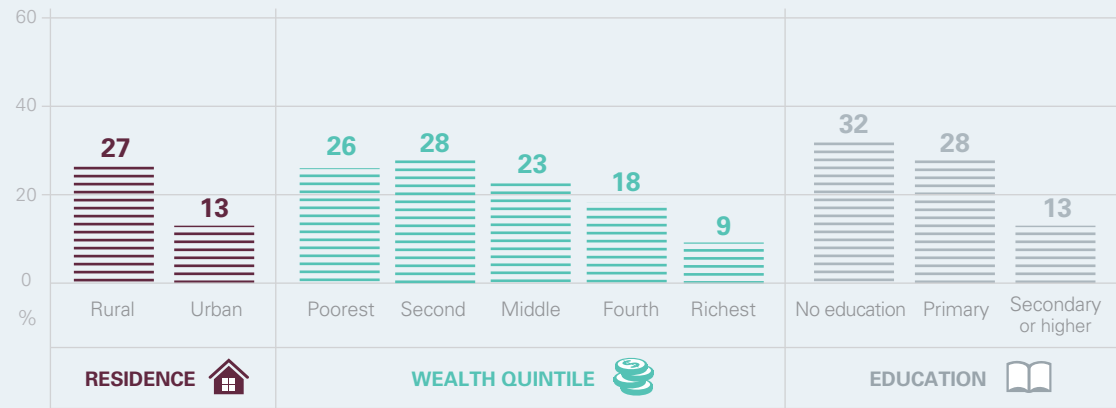
nearly 40 million child brides

including currently married girls and women who were first married in childhood.



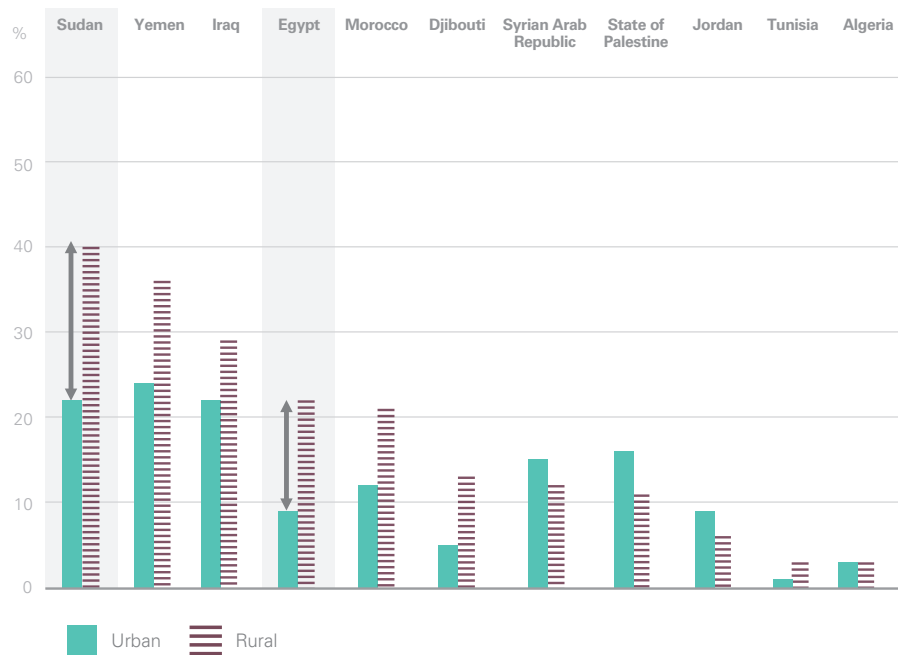
Child brides in the region are more likely to live in rural areas, to come from poor households, and to have received less education

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



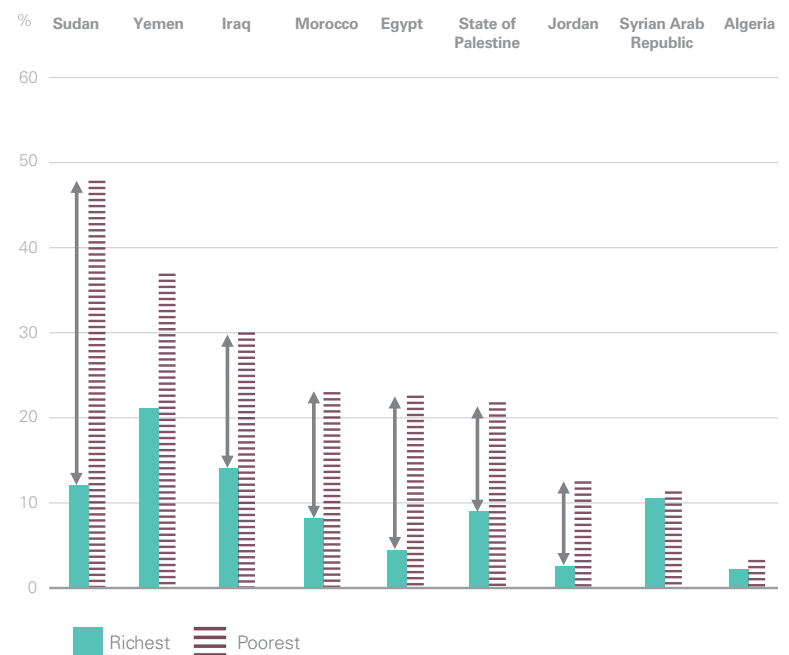
Many countries show disparities in child marriage between urban and rural populations; the largest such disparities are found in the Sudan and Egypt

FIG. 7 Percentage of women aged 20 to 24 years who were first married or in union before age 18, by residence



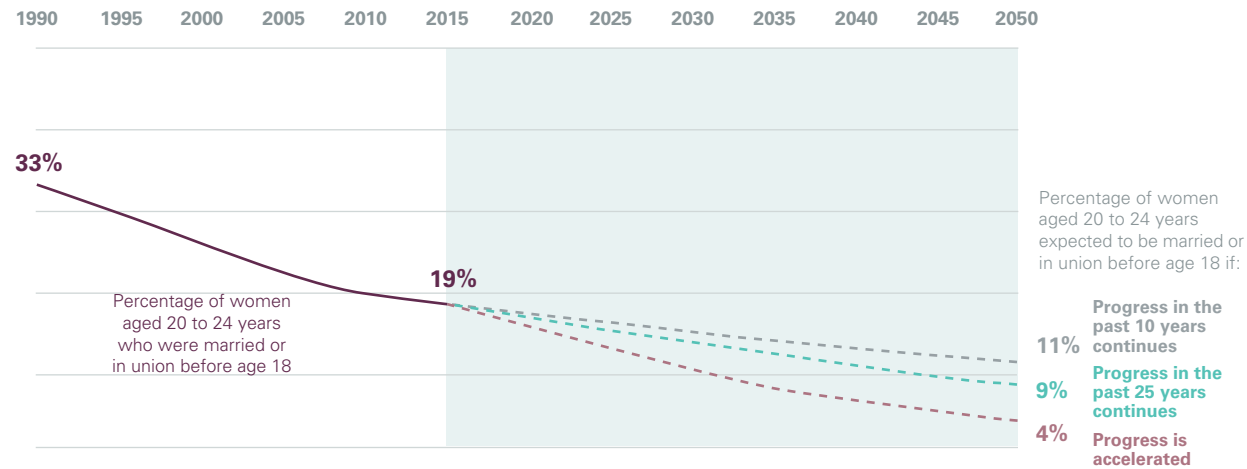
In all countries but Yemen, Syria and Algeria, women from the poorest households are at least twice as likely to have married in childhood as women from the richest households

FIG. 8 Percentage of women aged 20 to 24 years who were first married or in union before age 18, by wealth quintile



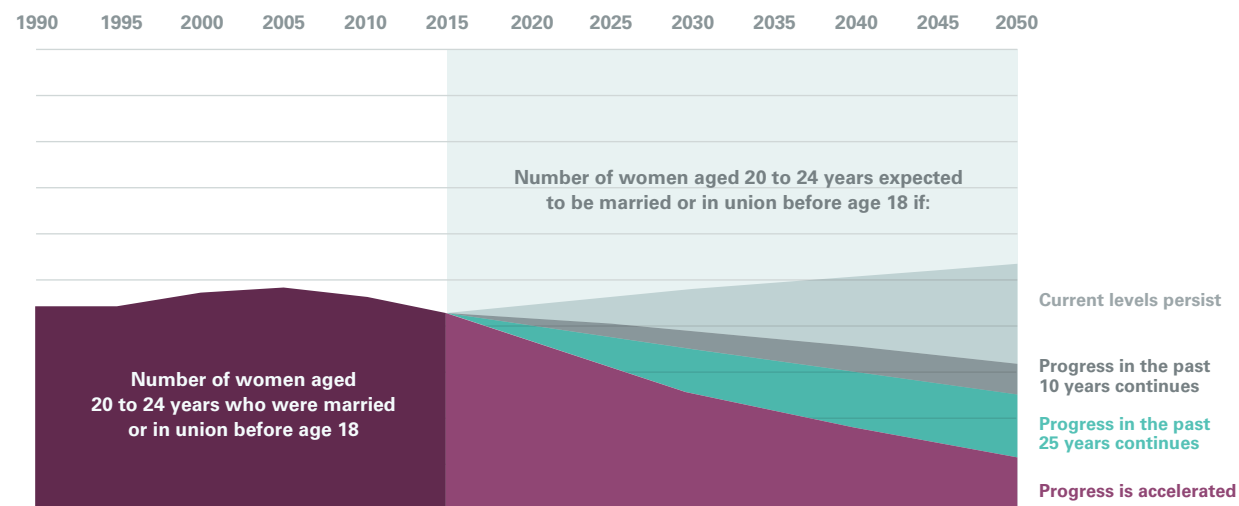
A continuation of the current rate of progress will not be sufficient to meet the Sustainable Development Goal target of eliminating child marriage by 2030

FIG. 9 Observed and projected prevalence of child marriage



The burden of child marriage could drop substantially in the coming decades if progress is accelerated

FIG. 10 Observed and projected burden of child marriage



NOTE: See technical notes on the opposite page for calculation details.

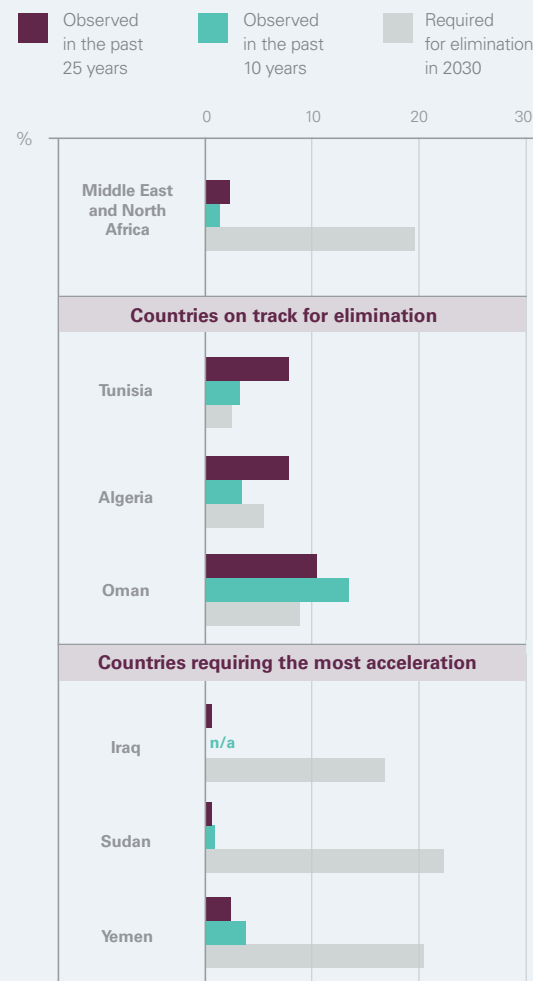
How to read the projections

The figures to the left show how the scale of the practice of child marriage has changed since 1990, as well as a selection of scenarios that could occur in the future. Figure 9 shows how the percentage of young women married in childhood has changed and could continue to change through 2050, while Figure 10 shows the numbers of women affected, which take into account both the prevalence of child marriage and the observed and expected changes in population.

The projections build on the existing trends to show the expected values if progress from the past 25 years were to continue (in turquoise), or if progress from the past 10 years were to continue (in grey). It is clear that there has been slower progress in the past 10 years, making this the less ambitious of the two scenarios. There is also a more ambitious scenario shown (in purple), which projects an acceleration of progress, namely twice the progress observed over the past 25 years.

In order to reach the SDG target of eliminating child marriage by 2030, the rate of progress would need to be **ten times faster** for the region overall. However, for some countries, **elimination is already within reach**

FIG. 11 Average annual rate of reduction (%) in the percentage of women aged 20 to 24 years who were married or in union before age 18, observed and required for elimination



NOTE: n/a indicates no reduction was observed in the corresponding period.

TECHNICAL NOTES

NOTES: To assess the prevalence of child marriage, this analysis used SDG indicator 5.3.1 – the percentage of women aged 20 to 24 years who were first married or in union before age 18. All references to ‘marriage’ or ‘child brides’ include both formal marriages and informal unions in which women started living together with a partner as if married. The number of child brides is defined as the number of girls under age 18 who have already married plus the number of adult women who were married before age 18.

Aggregate regional estimates for the Middle East and North Africa are based on 12 countries with comparable available data from 2010 to 2015, covering 77 per cent of the female population in the region. For several countries, the latest nationally representative estimates of child marriage prevalence are several years old, and thus do not capture any recent changes that may have occurred in the practice of child marriage during recent years. This includes countries in the region that are experiencing conflict and/or humanitarian crises, the effects of which are not represented in this analysis. When new data are available, the results in the brochure will be updated accordingly.

The estimates presented in this brochure reflect the set of countries outlined by the mandate of UNICEF’s Middle East and North Africa Regional Office. For this reason, regional estimates may differ from those included in other UNICEF publications that are based on a geographical classification of countries in a particular region.

Global estimates are based on a subset of 106 countries with comparable available data from 2010 to 2017, covering 63 per cent of the female population. Regional estimates represent data

covering at least 50 per cent of the female population. Projected values based on a continuation of observed progress apply the average annual rate of reduction observed in the past 25 years and observed in the past 10 years. The acceleration scenario assumes a doubling of the observed annual rate of reduction during the past 25 years. For statistical purposes, ‘elimination’ is defined here as a child marriage prevalence of below 1 per cent.

Countries featured in Figure 2 are those with the largest absolute change in the prevalence of child marriage over the past 25 years, based on data from 2010 or later. Countries featured in Figure 3 are based on the same criteria, among countries which had a starting prevalence below 20 per cent.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT: This data brief was prepared by the Data and Analytics Section of UNICEF with inputs from the Middle East and North Africa Regional Office.

DATA SOURCES: UNICEF global databases, 2018, based on Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys, Demographic and Health Surveys and other nationally representative surveys, 2004 to 2017. For detailed source information by country, see <data.unicef.org>. Demographic data are from: United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division, *World Population Prospects: The 2017 Revision*, DVD Edition.

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PROTECTING EVERY CHILD AND ADOLESCENT FROM CHILD MARRIAGE

To strengthen the response to child marriage in the Middle East and North Africa and support countries to eliminate the practice, UNICEF collaborated with the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and partners to develop and adopt the Regional Accountability Framework of Action to End Child Marriage in the Arab States/Middle East and North Africa (RAF). This process built on the UNFPA-UNICEF Global Programme to Accelerate Action to End Child Marriage.

The RAF's purpose is to realize the rights of adolescents and young girls and to accelerate at-scale efforts to contribute to their well-being, participation, protection and empowerment. The framework embodies a commitment to action by the United Nations, civil society and academic actors working to end child marriage in the region. By mitigating the impact of conflict and humanitarian crises on the prevalence of child marriage, while simultaneously addressing underlying drivers of the practice, it facilitates the UNFPA-UNICEF leadership role in ending child marriage, including in humanitarian settings.

UNICEF, UNFPA and the RAF consortium of partners are committed to accelerating progress with government and other partners, focusing on the following strategies for action:

- **Empower and strengthen girls' voices and agency through education, health services, life skills and economic opportunities.**

Ensure collaboration across sectors – in particular, health, education, social policy/protection and child protection – to establish safe and empowering environments for girls at home, in school and in the community through existing delivery platforms. This includes ensuring girls' access to quality education, increasing school attendance, capitalizing on life skills initiatives, and building on youth participation and engagement platforms.

- **Engage with communities to change social norms and behaviours.**

Changing social norms that promote child marriage is key to preventing this harmful practice at scale. Economic and social inequities and social and cultural norms that condone child marriage are drivers that must be addressed through continued investment in behaviour change interventions.

- **Promote and scale up cross-sectoral engagement.**

Ensure and build cross-sectoral technical capacities among stakeholders and support cross-sectoral programming at the community and institutional levels to address child

marriage. Diversify entry points to bolster prevention and response as an opportunity to expand and scale up interventions with a focus on health, education, child protection and social protection.

- **Strengthen legal and policy frameworks.**

Harness and leverage political will to ensure that laws preventing and addressing child marriage are adequately enforced, and align legal frameworks with international standards on child marriage, while removing legal loopholes and exceptions. This includes continuing to promote and support the development of costed, well-coordinated and effectively implemented national action plans to end child marriage.

- **Support evidence generation.**

Ensure that information gaps are closed by coordinating research on child marriage through the established Regional Research Reference Group. Strengthen monitoring and evaluation of child marriage interventions through provision of training, guidance and tools, and increase the availability of national and subnational representative data on child marriage, including in humanitarian settings.

UNICEF

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