Ending Child Marriage
A profile of progress in India

2023 update

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for every child

This publication builds on the analysis published in 2019 under the title *Ending Child Marriage: A profile of progress in India*, which featured data from the National Family Health Survey (NFHS) 2015-2016. This edition has been updated to reflect the findings of the NFHS 2019-2021.

While many patterns in the practice of child marriage remain the same, this update illustrates the continued progress against child marriage in the intervening years, as well as a new calculation of the impact of the practice at the population level, taking into account the latest demographic trends.

Child marriage in the global development agenda

Child marriage is a violation of human rights. Every child has the right to be protected from this harmful practice, which has devastating consequences for individuals and for society. Child marriage is now firmly on the global development agenda, most prominently through its inclusion in Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) target 5.3, which aims to eliminate the practice by 2030. Although indicator 5.3.1 measures child marriage among girls, the practice occurs among boys as well. Regardless of gender, marriage before adulthood is a breach of children's rights.

SDG: 5

Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls

TARGET 5.3

Eliminate all harmful practices, such as child, early and forced marriage and female genital mutilation

INDICATOR 5.3.1

Proportion of women aged 20 to 24 years who were married or in a union before age 15 and before age 18

Key facts

Child marriage is becoming less common in India, but the country still accounts for one in three of the world's child brides. Child brides include girls under 18 who are already married, as well as women of all ages who first married in childhood.

Over half of the girls and women in India who married in childhood live in five states: Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, West Bengal, Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh. Uttar Pradesh is home to the largest number.

Nearly one in four young women in India (23 per cent) were married or in union before their 18th birthday.

The prevalence of child marriage varies across states and union territories in India. At least 40 per cent of young women were married before turning 18 in West Bengal, Bihar and Tripura, compared to 1 per cent in Lakshadweep.

A girl's risk of child marriage depends on certain background characteristics. Girls who live in rural areas or come from poorer households are at greater risk, and a higher proportion of child brides are found among those with little or no education.

The majority of young women who married in childhood gave birth as adolescents.

Child brides face challenges in continuing their education. Fewer than 2 in 10 married girls remain in school.
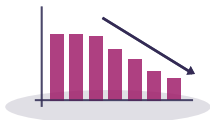
The practice of child marriage is less common today than in previous generations. Evidence shows accelerating progress over the last 15 years.

India's progress is strong compared to other countries in South Asia. Nonetheless, if child marriage is to be eliminated by 2030, additional efforts will be required.

Current state of child marriage among girls

▶ One in three of the world's child brides live in India

India, 34%

Rest of South Asia, 11%
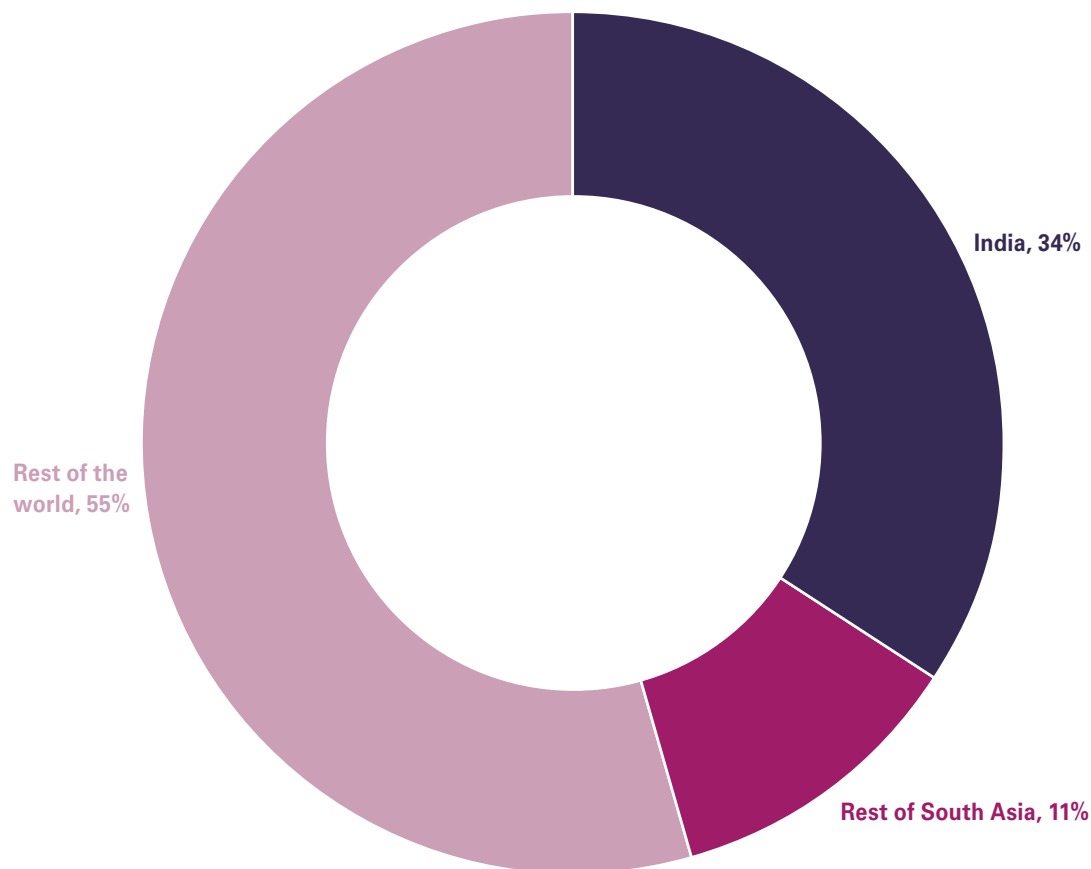
Rest of the world, 55%

India is home to the largest total number of girls and women who married in childhood

FIG. 1 Number of girls and women who were first married or in union before age 18, India, South Asia and rest of the world

The country's total number of child brides includes many women who married decades ago and are now adults

10	70+ years
14	60–69 years
18	50–59 years
20	40–49 years
20	30–39 years
14	20–29 years
3	<20 years

Child marriage has **lifelong consequences** for girls and their families, with reverberations that span generations.

Thus, even women who were child brides many years ago are included in measures of the total impact of the practice on society.

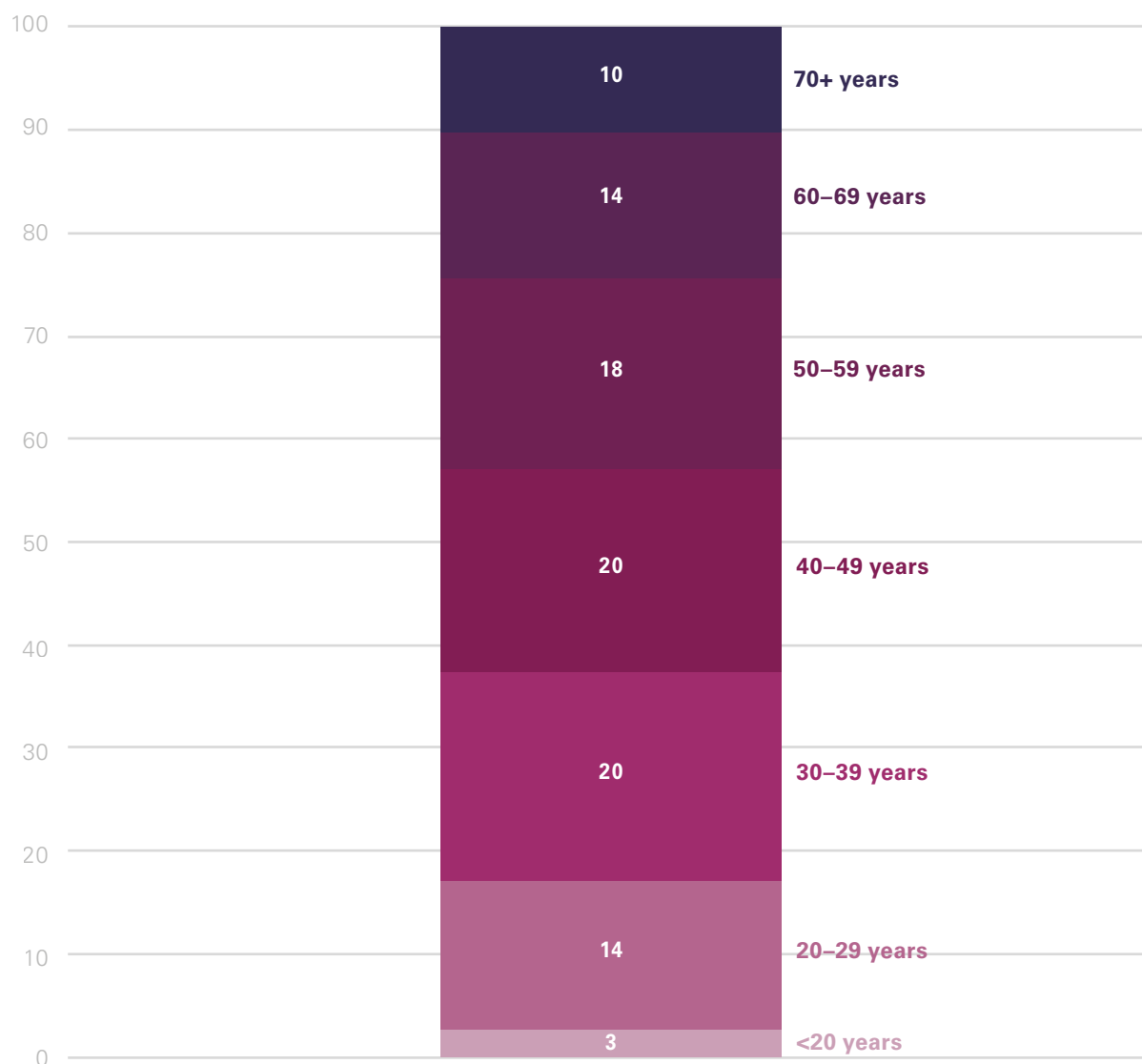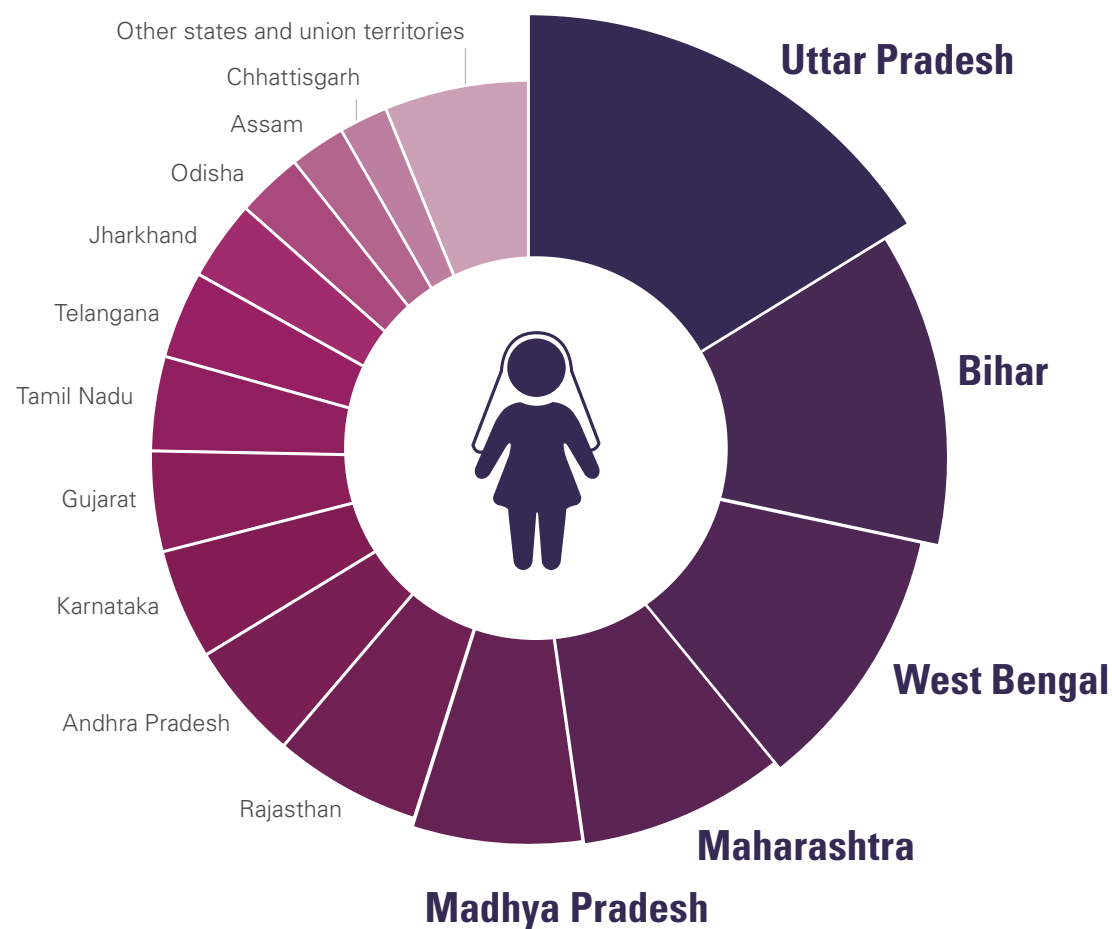**FIG. 2** Percentage distribution of the number of girls and women who were first married or in union before age 18, by current age

NOTE: Figures do not add up to 100 per cent due to rounding.

Uttar Pradesh

Bihar

West Bengal

Maharashtra

Madhya Pradesh

Rajasthan

Andhra Pradesh

Karnataka

Gujarat

Tamil Nadu

Telangana

Jharkhand

Odisha

Assam

Chhattisgarh

Other states and union territories

Five states account for over half of the girls and women in India who married in childhood: Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, West Bengal, Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh

FIG. 3 Number of girls and women who were first married or in union before age 18, by state or union territory

NOTES: Geographical boundaries follow the National Family Health Survey, 2019-2021. State populations are estimated using data from the Census of India 2011 (projections to 2021) and the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division, 2022.

India ranks fifth among the eight South Asian countries in terms of child marriage prevalence

World 19

South Asia 28

Maldives 2

Sri Lanka 10

Pakistan 18

Bhutan 26

Afghanistan 28

Nepal 33

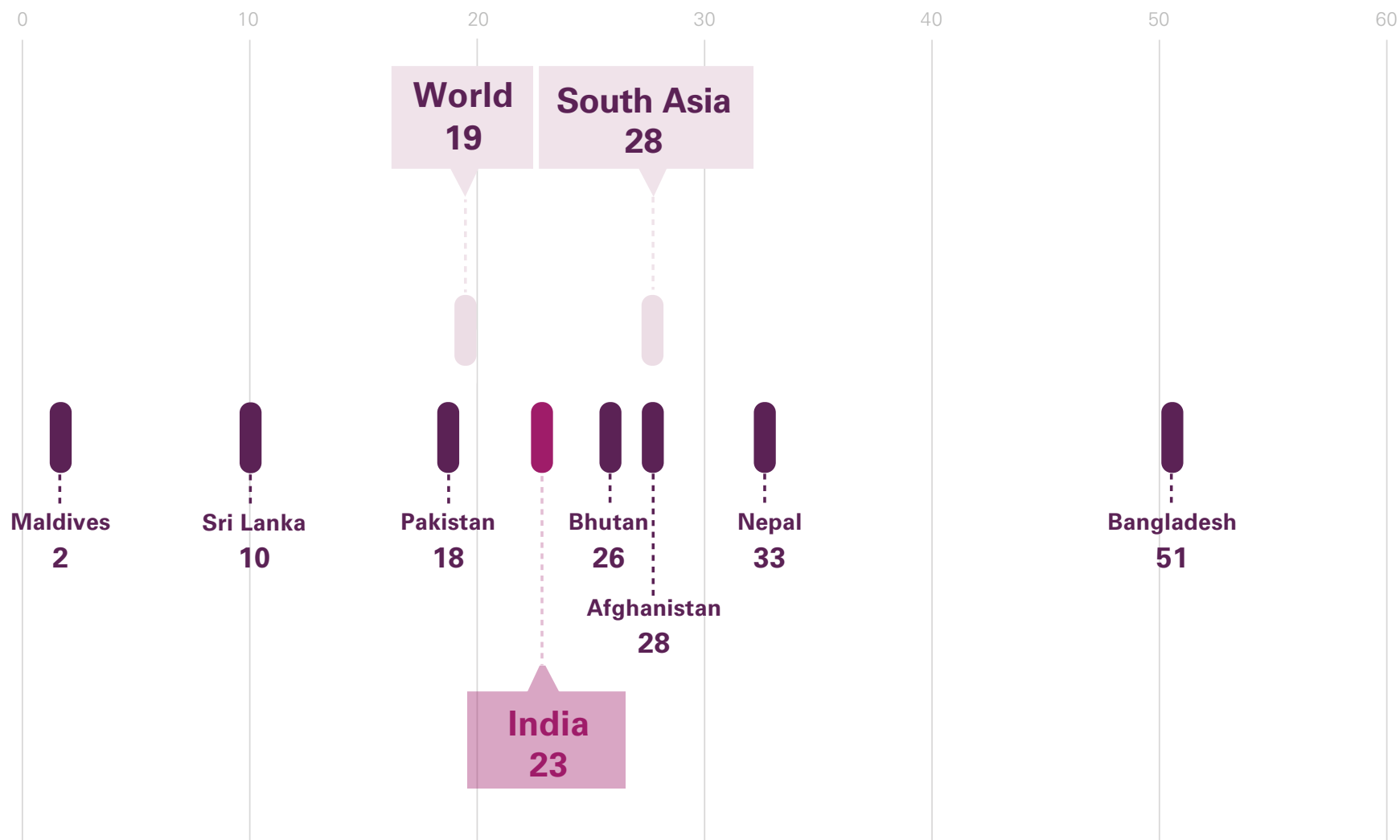**Bangladesh 51**

India 23

FIG. 4 Percentage of women aged 20 to 24 years who were first married or in union before age 18, countries in South Asia and regional and world averages

Levels vary across India: At least 40 per cent of young women were married in childhood in West Bengal (42 per cent), Bihar (41 per cent) and Tripura (40 per cent), compared to 1 per cent in Lakshadweep
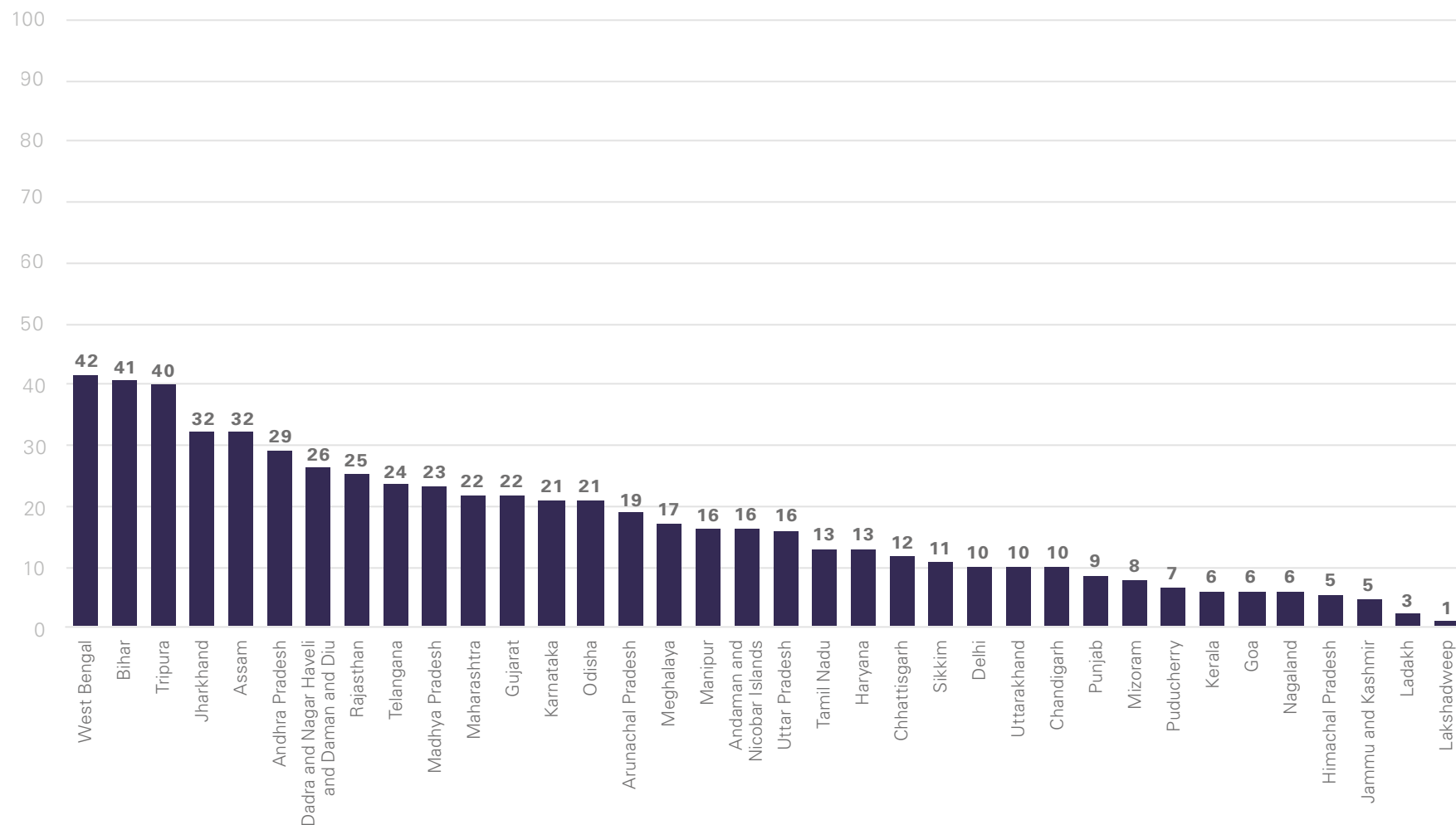
FIG. 5 Percentage of women aged 20 to 24 years who were first married or in union before age 18, by state or union territory

Girls most at risk of child marriage

▶ A girl's risk of child marriage depends on certain background characteristics

Child brides in India are more likely to live in poor households, have less education and reside in rural areas
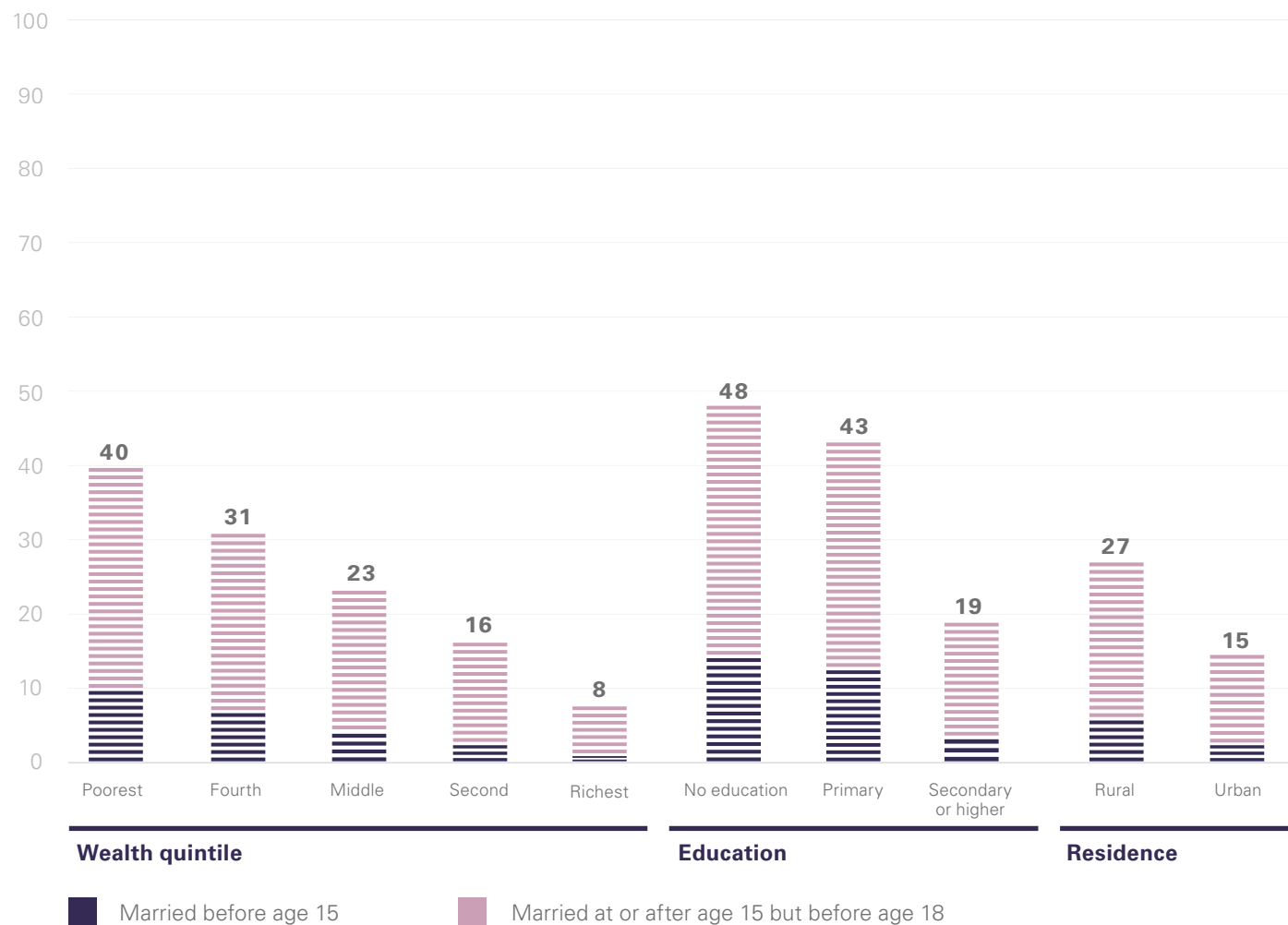

FIG. 6 Percentage of women aged 20 to 24 years who were first married or in union before ages 15 and 18, by wealth quintile, education and residence

Education

	No education		Primary		Secondary		Higher	
	Rural	Urban	Rural	Urban	Rural	Urban	Rural	Urban
Richest	23	24	33	25	17	15	3	2
Second	38	29	33	32	25	22	3	3
Middle	42	39	41	38	29	28	5	4
Fourth	48	50	45	48	32	32	7	3
Poorest	53	63	49	51	36	36	5	3

Wealth quintile

Residence

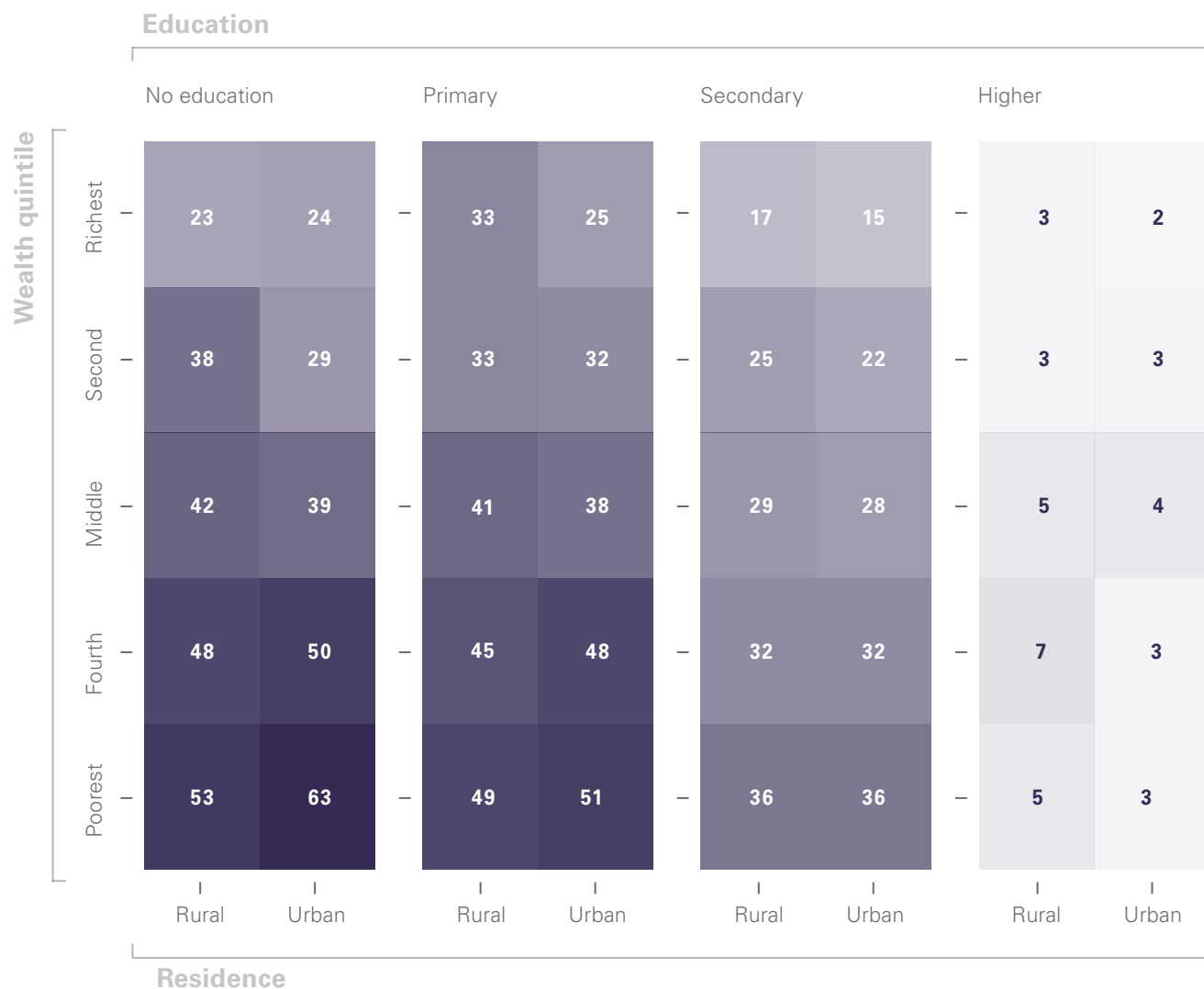The largest disparities in the prevalence of child marriage are found among women with different levels of education

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

Disparities in child marriage prevalence are less significant across most religious groups and classes that are socioeconomically disadvantaged

Religion

Caste/tribal affiliation

- Married before age 15
- Married at or after age 15 but before age 18

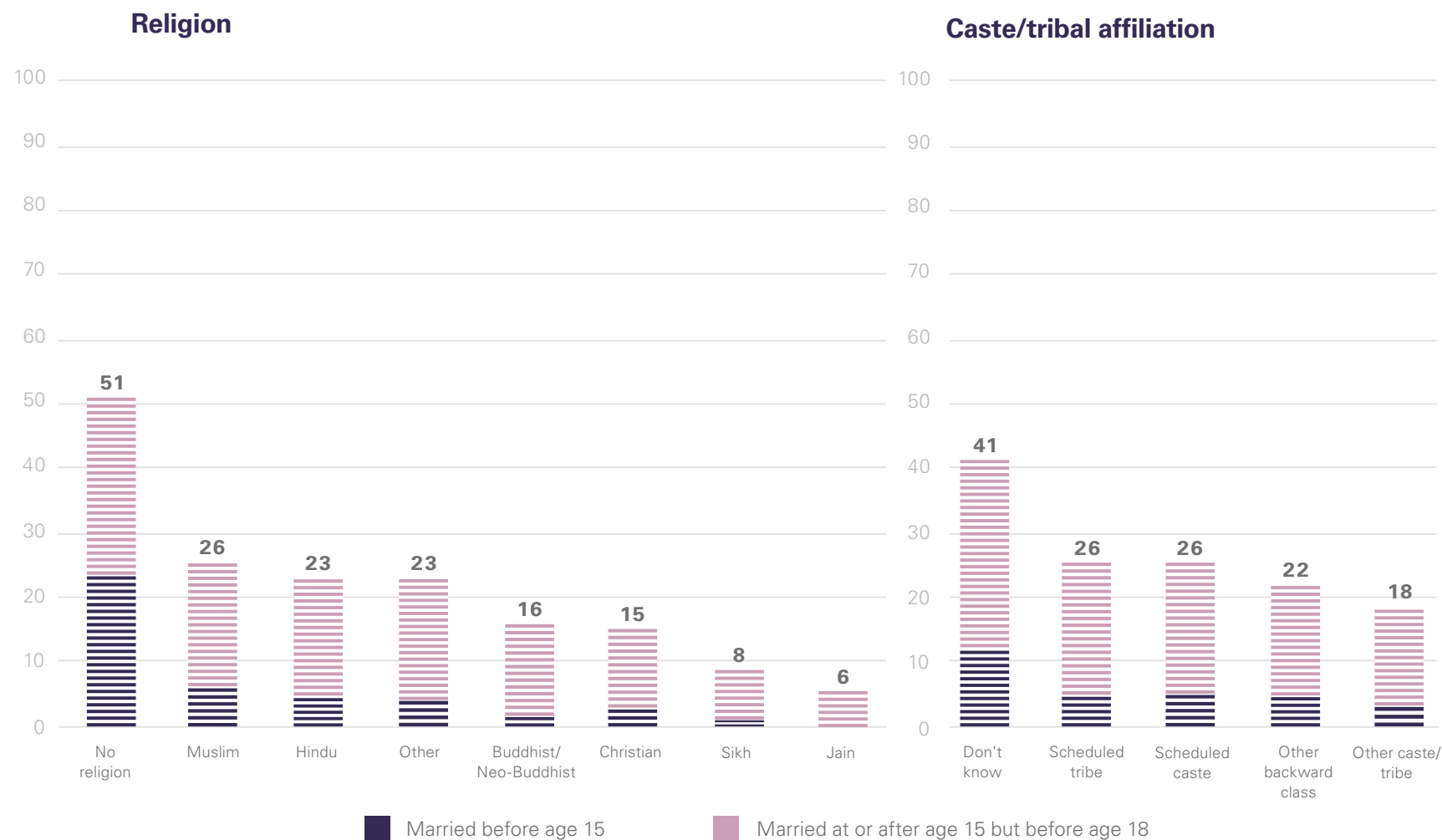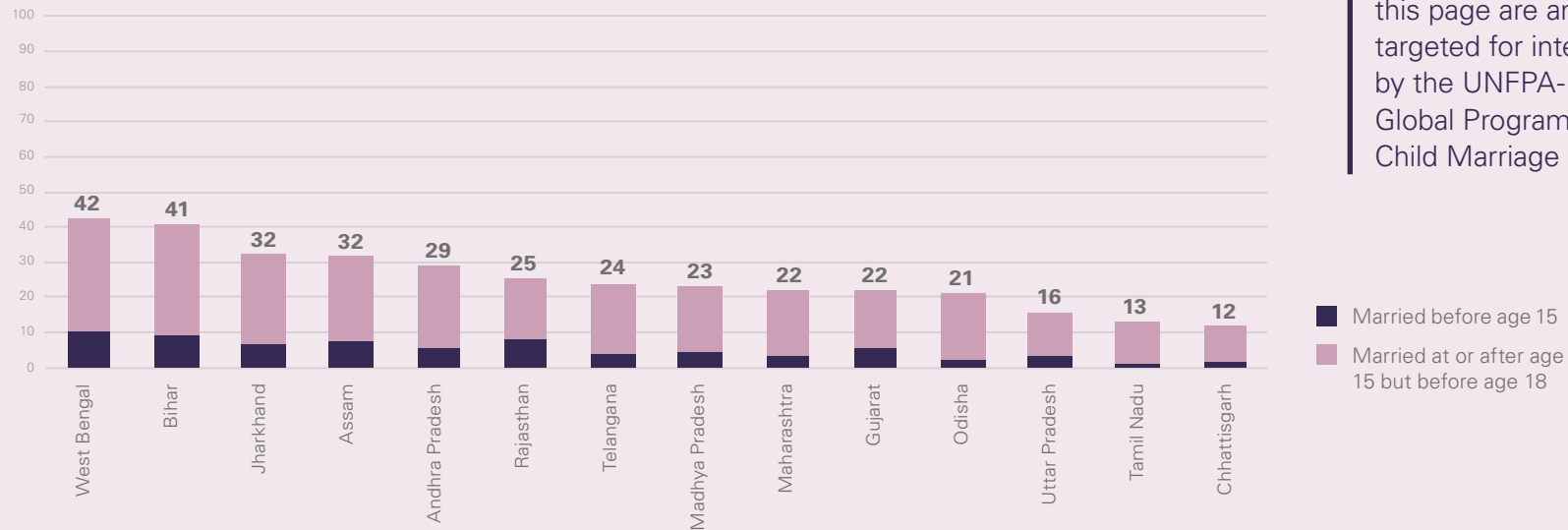**FIG. 8** Percentage of women aged 20 to 24 years who were first married or in union before ages 15 and 18, by religion and caste/tribal affiliation

NOTES: Only categories with 25 or more unweighted cases are presented. 'Scheduled tribe', 'scheduled caste' and 'other backward class' are official designations used by the Government of India to refer to the country's most socioeconomically disadvantaged groups.

FIG. 9 Percentage of women aged 20 to 24 years who were first married or in union before ages 15 and 18, selected states

The states featured on this page are among those targeted for intervention by the UNFPA-UNICEF Global Programme to End Child Marriage

■ Married before age 15

■ Married at or after age 15 but before age 18
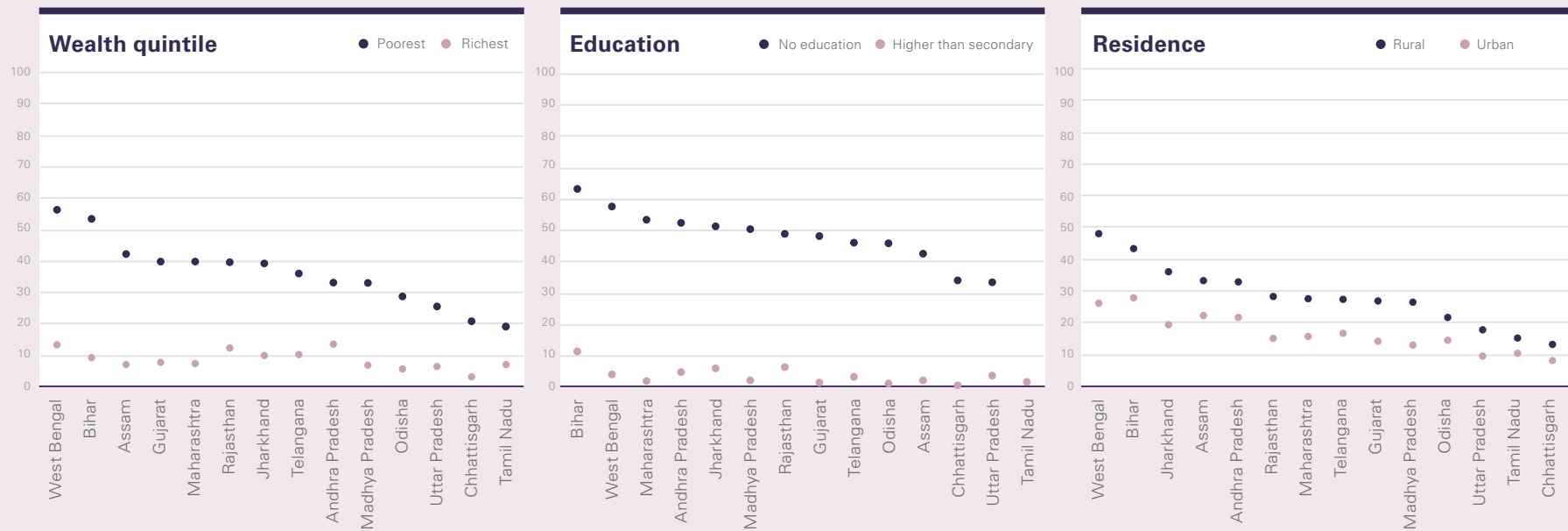
FIG. 10 Percentage of women aged 20 to 24 years who were first married or in union before age 18, by wealth quintile, education and residence, selected states

Lives of child brides
Early childbearing

The vast majority of young women who married during childhood gave birth before they completed adolescence

■ Gave birth before age 18

■ Gave birth at or after age 18 but before age 20

FIG. 11 Percentage of ever-married women aged 20 to 24 years who gave birth before ages 18 and 20, by age at marriage

Child brides
may have many
children to care for
at a young age

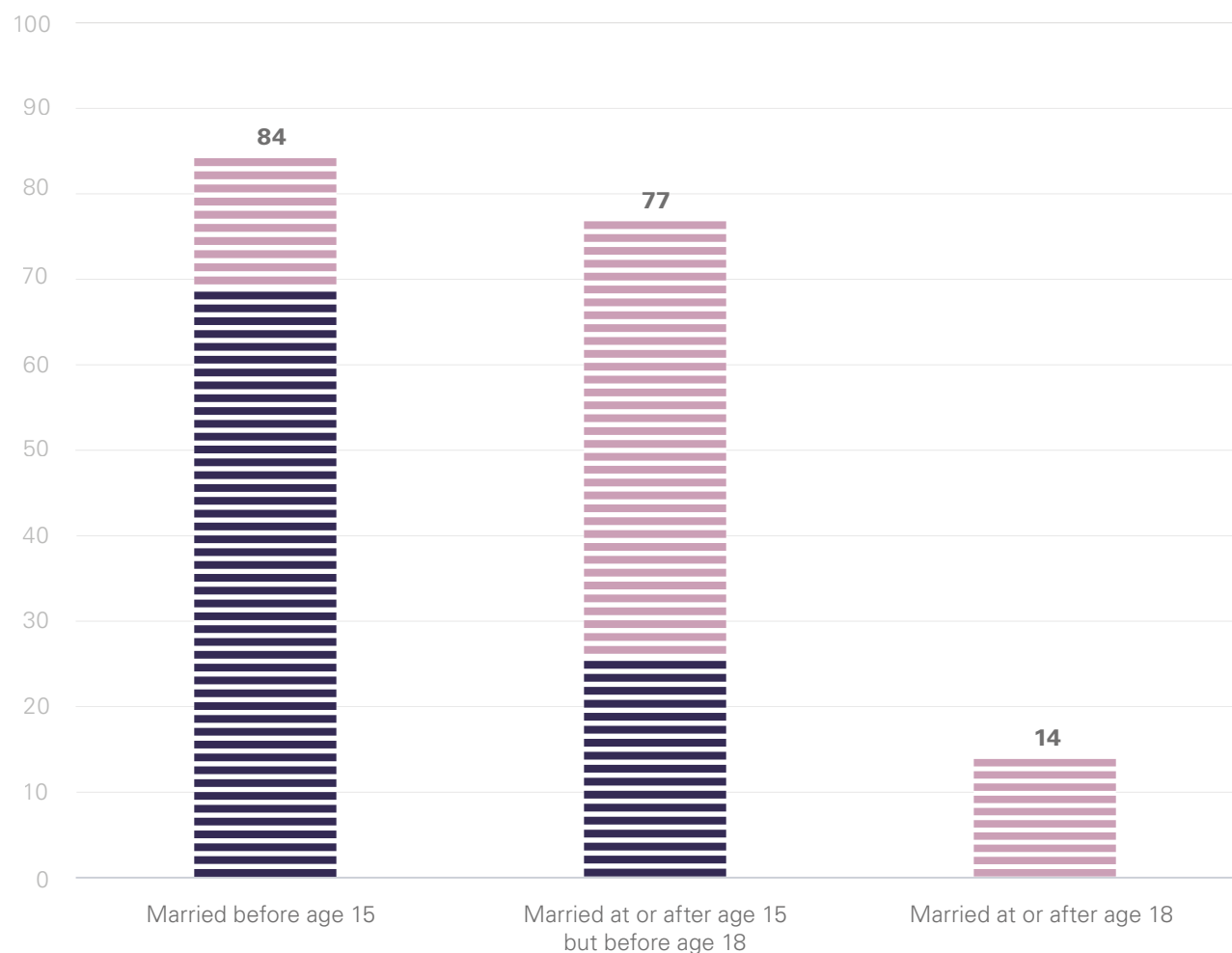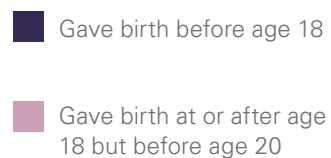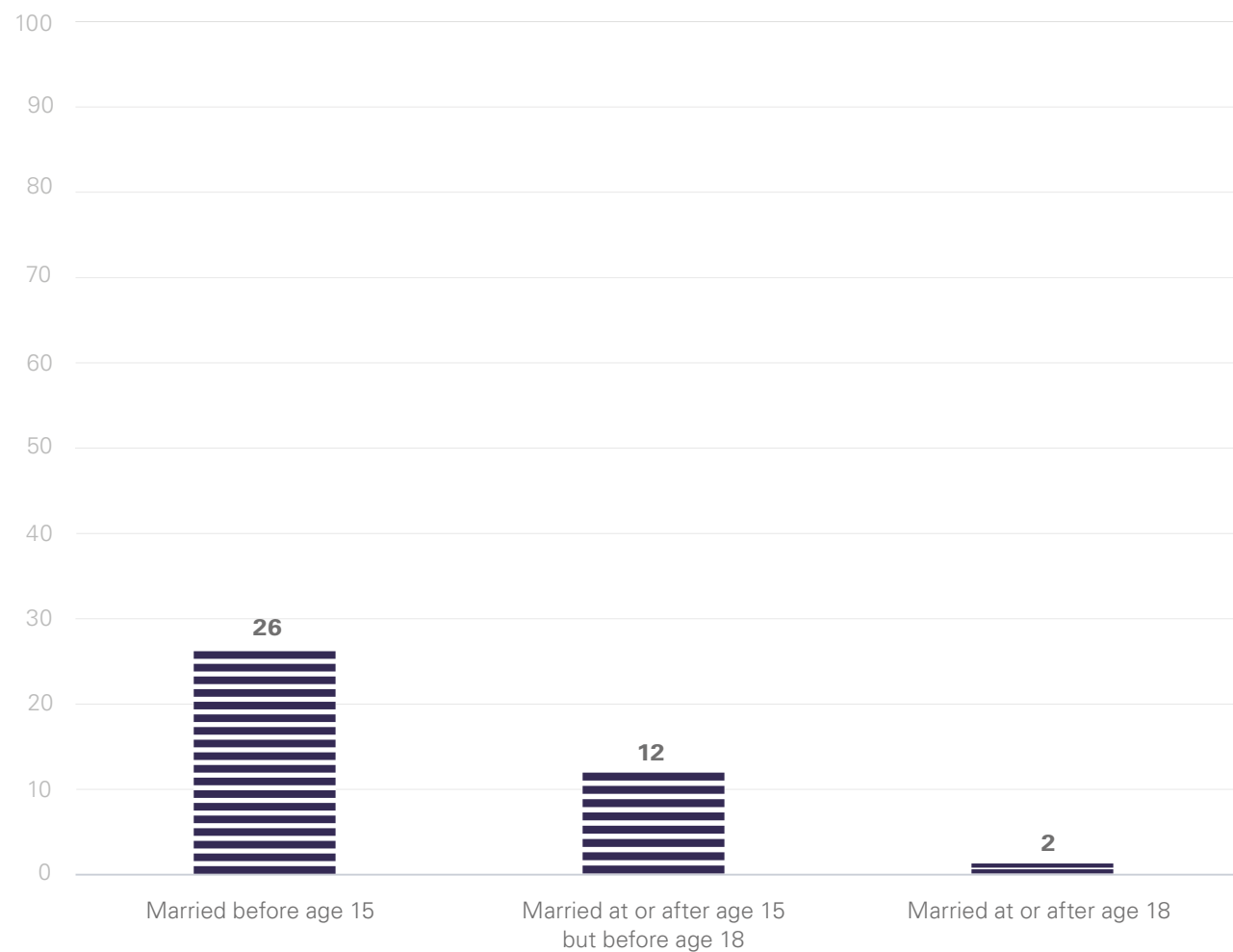**FIG. 12** Percentage of ever-married women aged 20 to 24 years who have had three or more children, by age at marriage

Many states show stark disparities in early childbearing between girls who married as children and as adults

	India	Assam	West Bengal	Tamil Nadu	Andhra Pradesh	Maharashtra	Odisha	Bihar	Jharkhand	Telangana	Madhya Pradesh	Chhattisgarh	Uttar Pradesh	Gujarat	Rajasthan
Married before age 18	78	88	86	85	84	83	81	81	80	78	74	73	69	68	65
Married at or after age 18	14	16	20	17	17	13	13	19	20	17	12	13	9	10	9

Legend: ■ Married before age 18   ■ Married at or after age 18
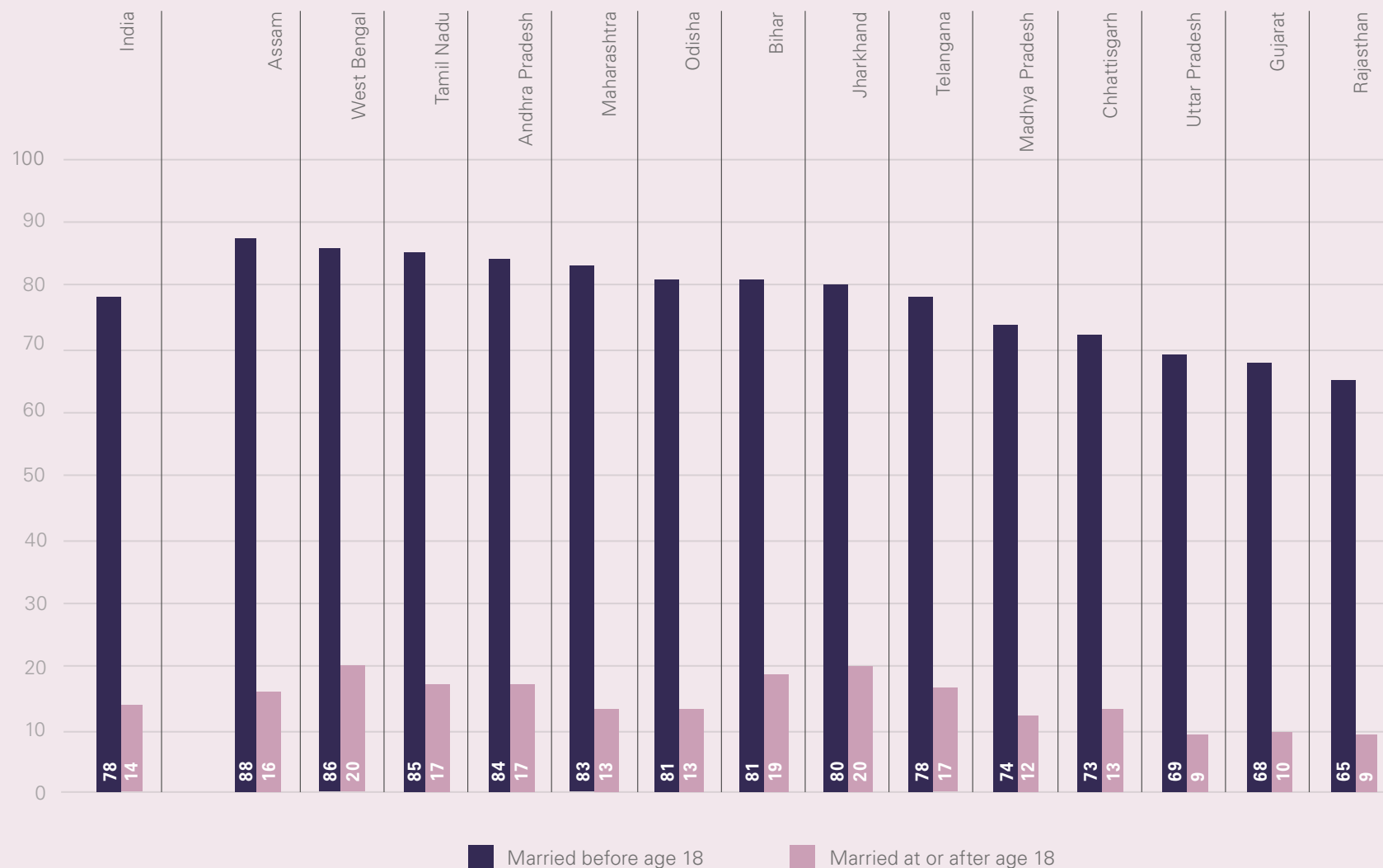
FIG. 13 Percentage of ever-married women aged 20 to 24 years who gave birth before age 20, by age at marriage, India and selected states

Child brides face challenges in continuing their education: While the majority of unmarried girls are in school, fewer than 2 in 10 married girls continue to attend

Currently married or in union

15

85

Never married or in union

22

78

■ In school ■ Out of school
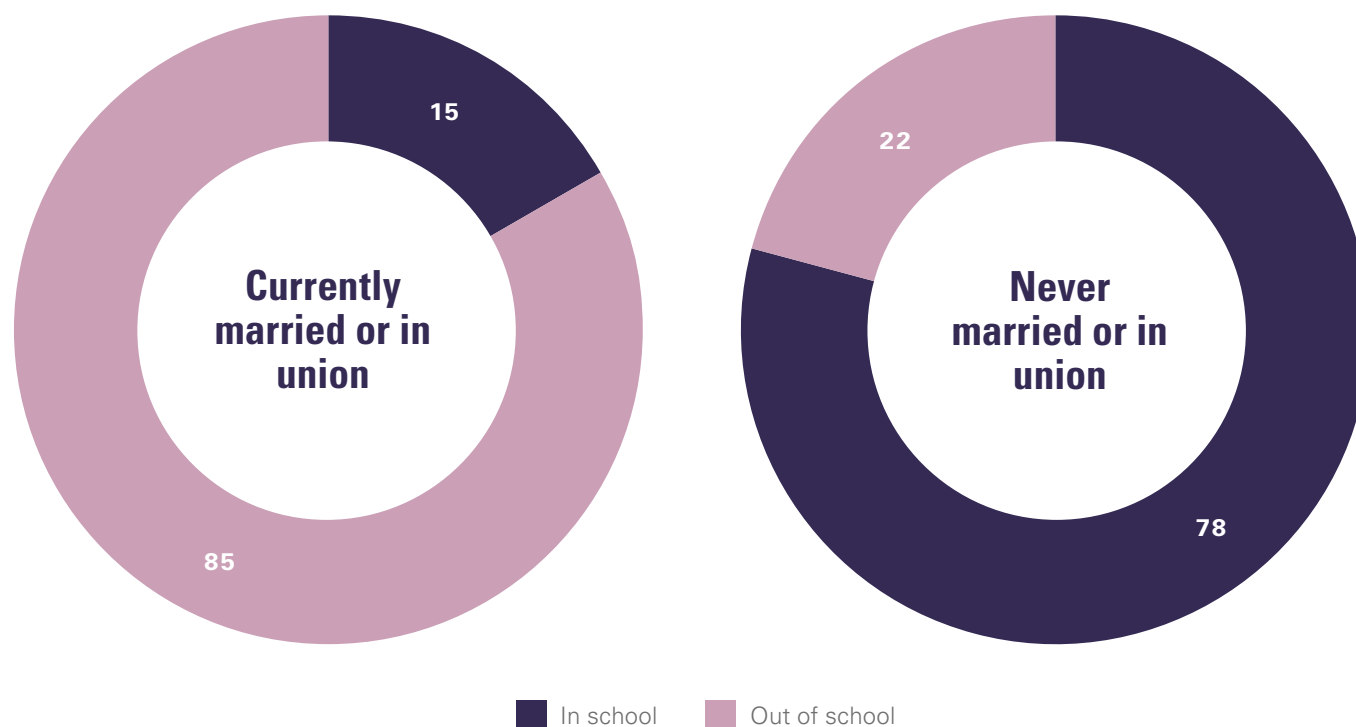
FIG. 14 Percentage distribution of girls aged 15 to 17 years by schooling status

Lives of child brides
Empowerment

Among key measures of empowerment, including productive assets, agency and mobility, child brides do not have substantially different outcomes than their unmarried peers or those who married later
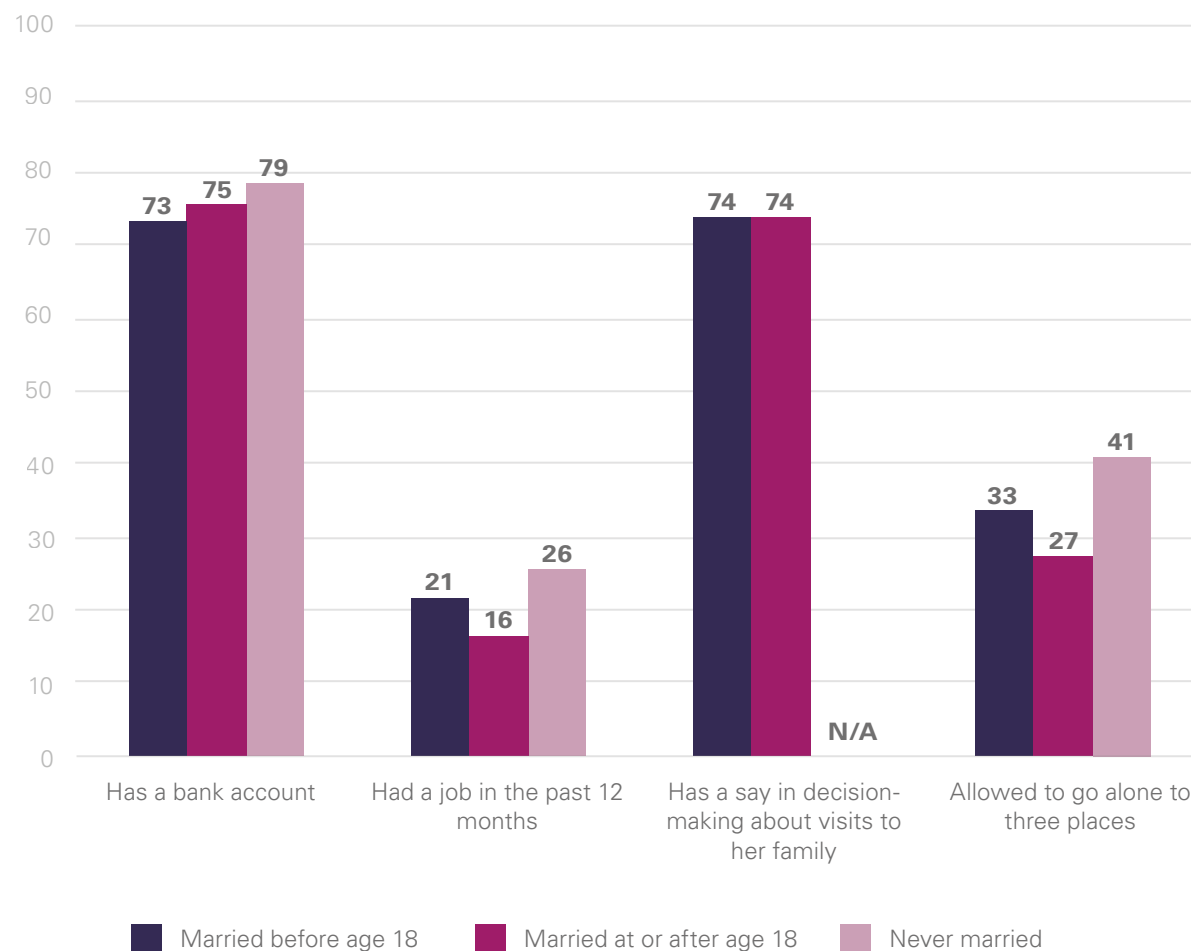
FIG. 15 Percentage of women aged 20 to 24 years who have an account at a bank or other financial institution, who have had a job in the past 12 months, who usually decide (alone or with their spouses) about visits to the women's families, and who are allowed to go alone to three specified places
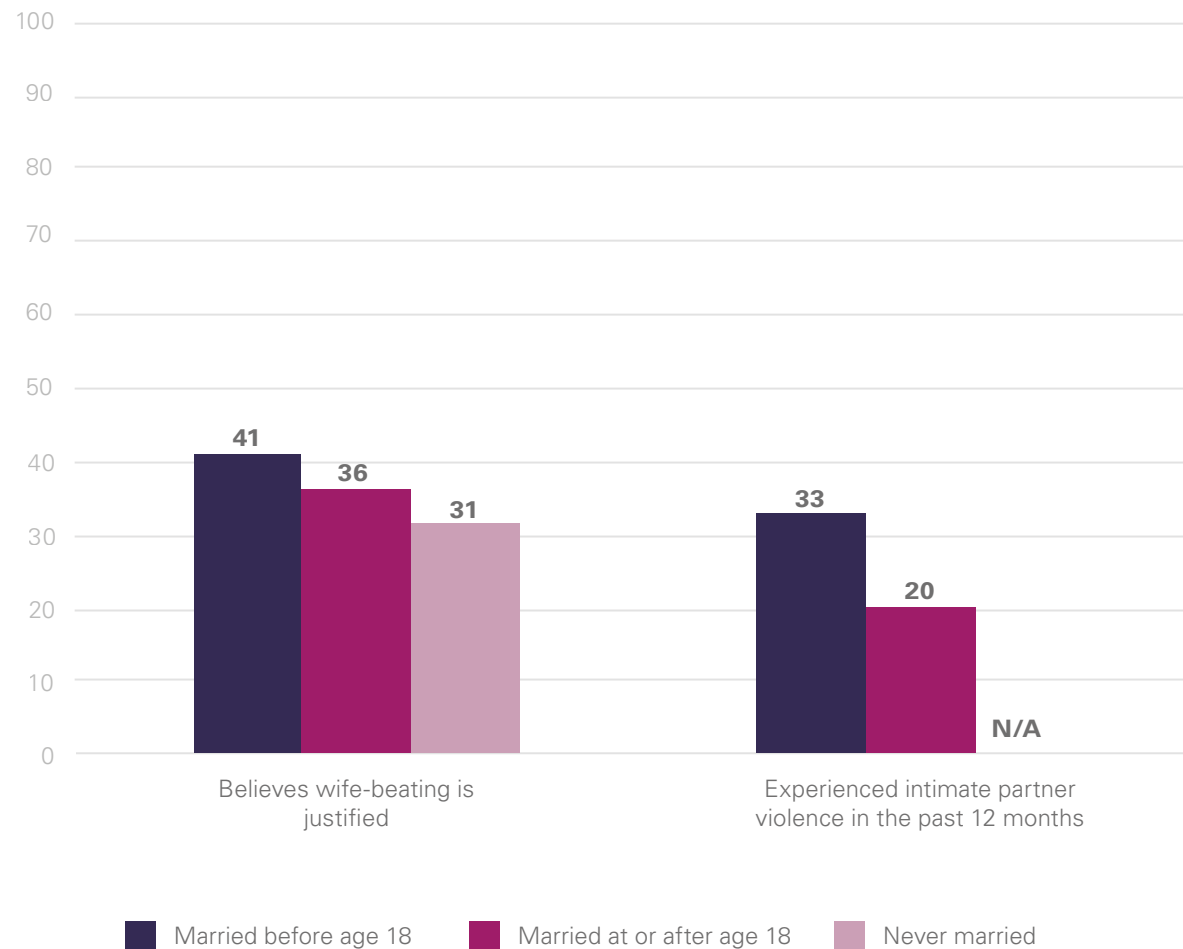
Child brides are more likely to report that wife-beating is justified, and to experience such violence themselves

FIG. 16 Percentage of women aged 20 to 24 years who believe wife-beating is justified, and percentage who have experienced intimate partner violence in the past 12 months

Generational trends in reducing child marriage

▶ The practice of child marriage in India is less common today than in prior generations

Progress has accelerated within the last 15 years

Married before age 18 (pink line): 74 (1971), 70 (1976), 66 (1981), 65 (1986), 58 (1991), 53 (1996), 49 (2001), 46 (2006), 38 (2011), 29 (2016), 23 (2021)

Married before age 15 (dark line): 38 (1971), 36 (1976), 33 (1981), 31 (1986), 25 (1991), 22 (1996), 21 (2001), 17 (2006), 13 (2011), 8 (2016), 5 (2021)

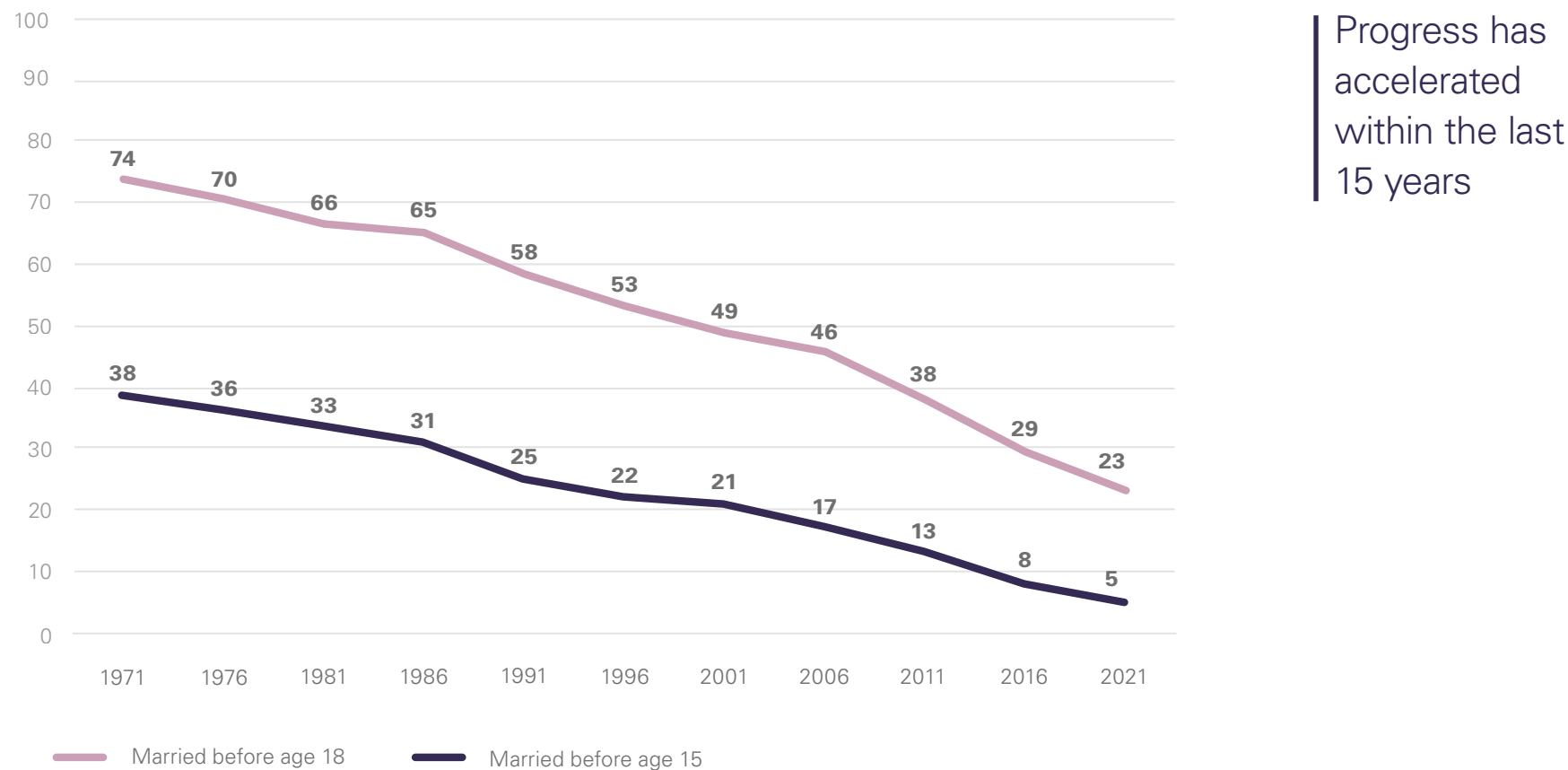— Married before age 18   — Married before age 15

FIG. 17 Percentage of women aged 20 to 24 years who were first married or in union before ages 15 and 18

NOTES: This trend analysis is based on the prevalence of child marriage across age cohorts, as measured in the National Family Health Survey 1992-1993, 1997-1998, 2005-2006, 2015-2016 and 2019-2021. See technical notes for details.

India's progress in the past decade is one of the strongest among countries in South Asia

Table 1. Percentage of women aged 20 to 24 years who were first married or in union before age 18 (prevalence of child marriage) and average annual rate of reduction (%) in the prevalence of child marriage

	Prevalence of child marriage (%)	Average annual rate of reduction of child marriage (%)
Maldives	2	13.4
India	**23**	**4.9**
Afghanistan	28	4.8
Pakistan	18	3.5
Bhutan	26	2.6
Sri Lanka	10	2.4
Bangladesh	51	2.1
Nepal	33	1.7

NOTES: This table includes all countries in South Asia with nationally representative data on child marriage. Countries are ranked from highest to lowest according to the 10-year rate of reduction. Caution is warranted in interpreting these rates, as in some cases the differences in prevalence in the last 10 years may not be significant.

Important advances have been made in reducing child marriage, including in high-prevalence and high-burden states
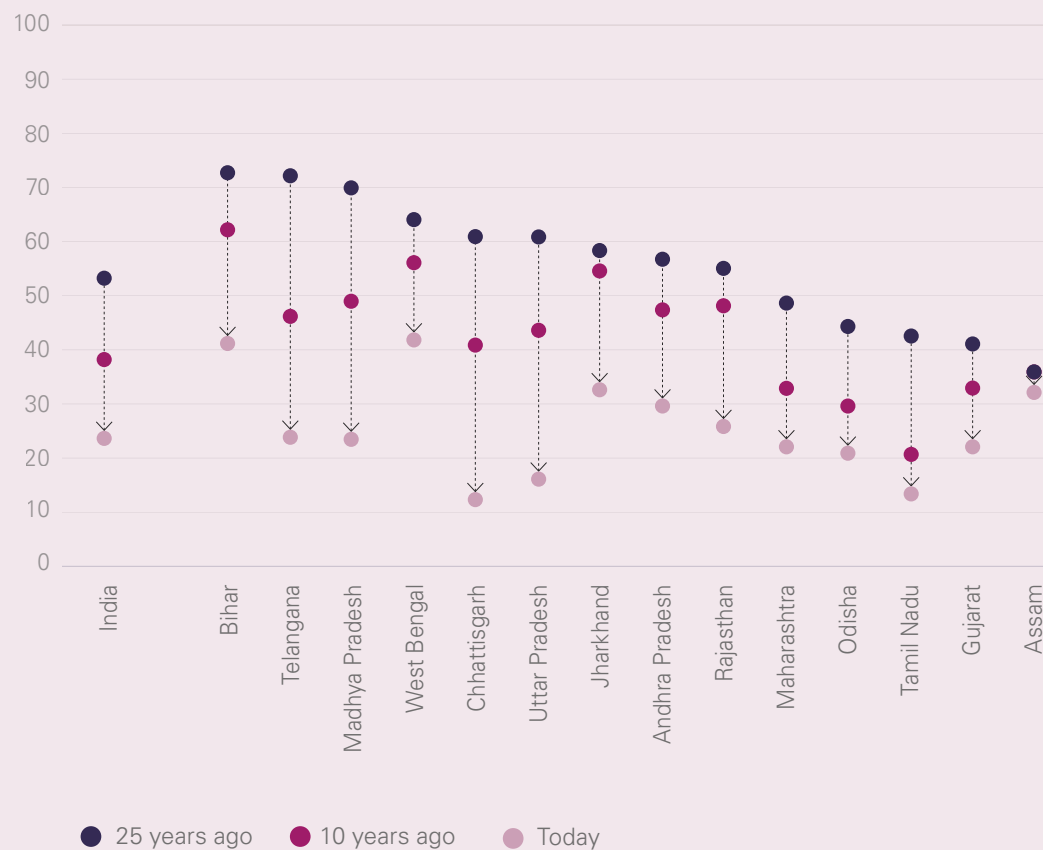

FIG. 18 Percentage of women aged 20 to 24 years who were first married or in union before age 18, selected states

NOTE: See technical notes for details on the calculation of trends at the state level.

Looking ahead towards elimination

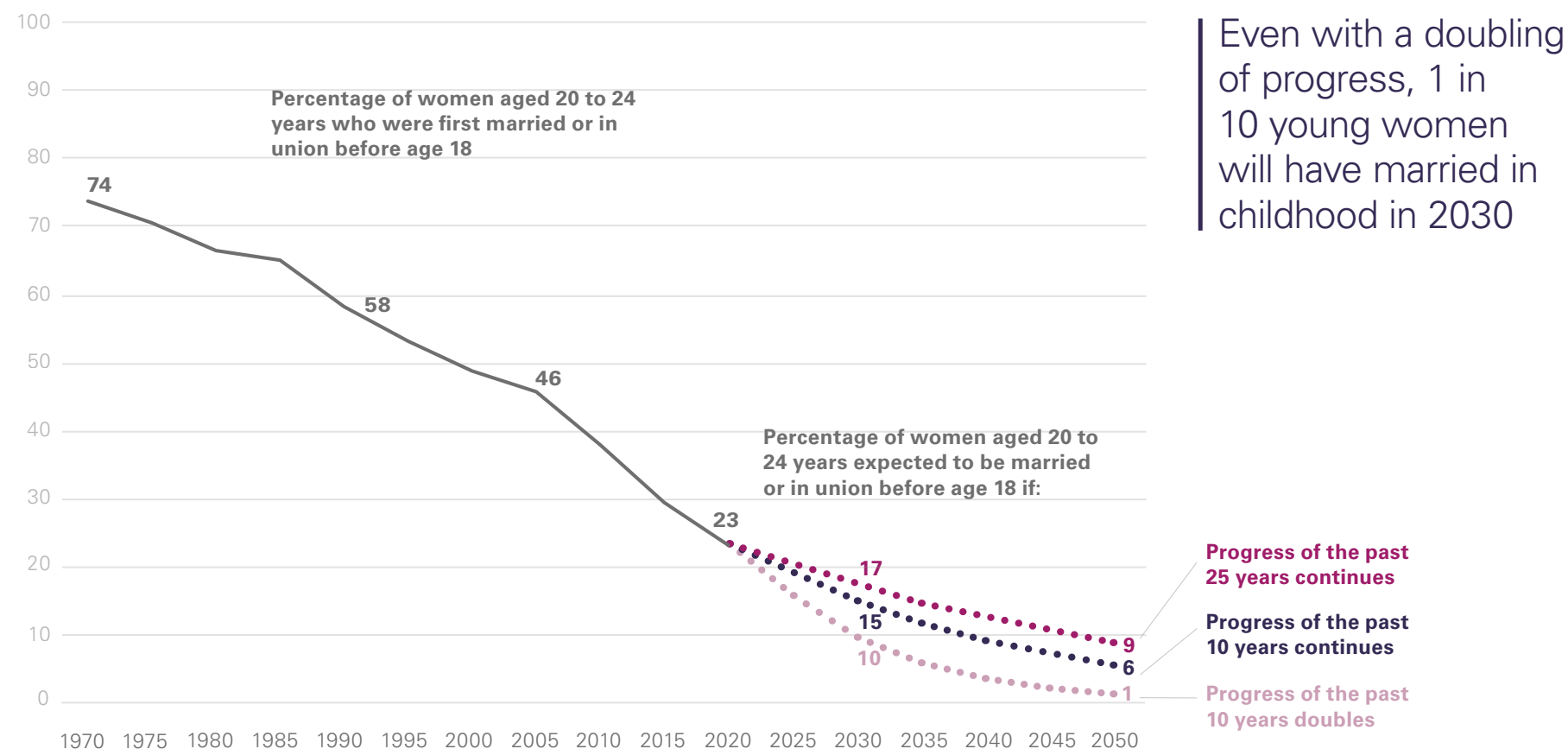▶ Ending child marriage by 2030 would require additional acceleration

Even with a doubling of progress, 1 in 10 young women will have married in childhood in 2030

Percentage of women aged 20 to 24 years who were first married or in union before age 18

74

58

46

Percentage of women aged 20 to 24 years expected to be married or in union before age 18 if:

23

17

15

10

9

6

1

Progress of the past 25 years continues

Progress of the past 10 years continues

Progress of the past 10 years doubles

1970 1975 1980 1985 1990 1995 2000 2005 2010 2015 2020 2025 2030 2035 2040 2045 2050
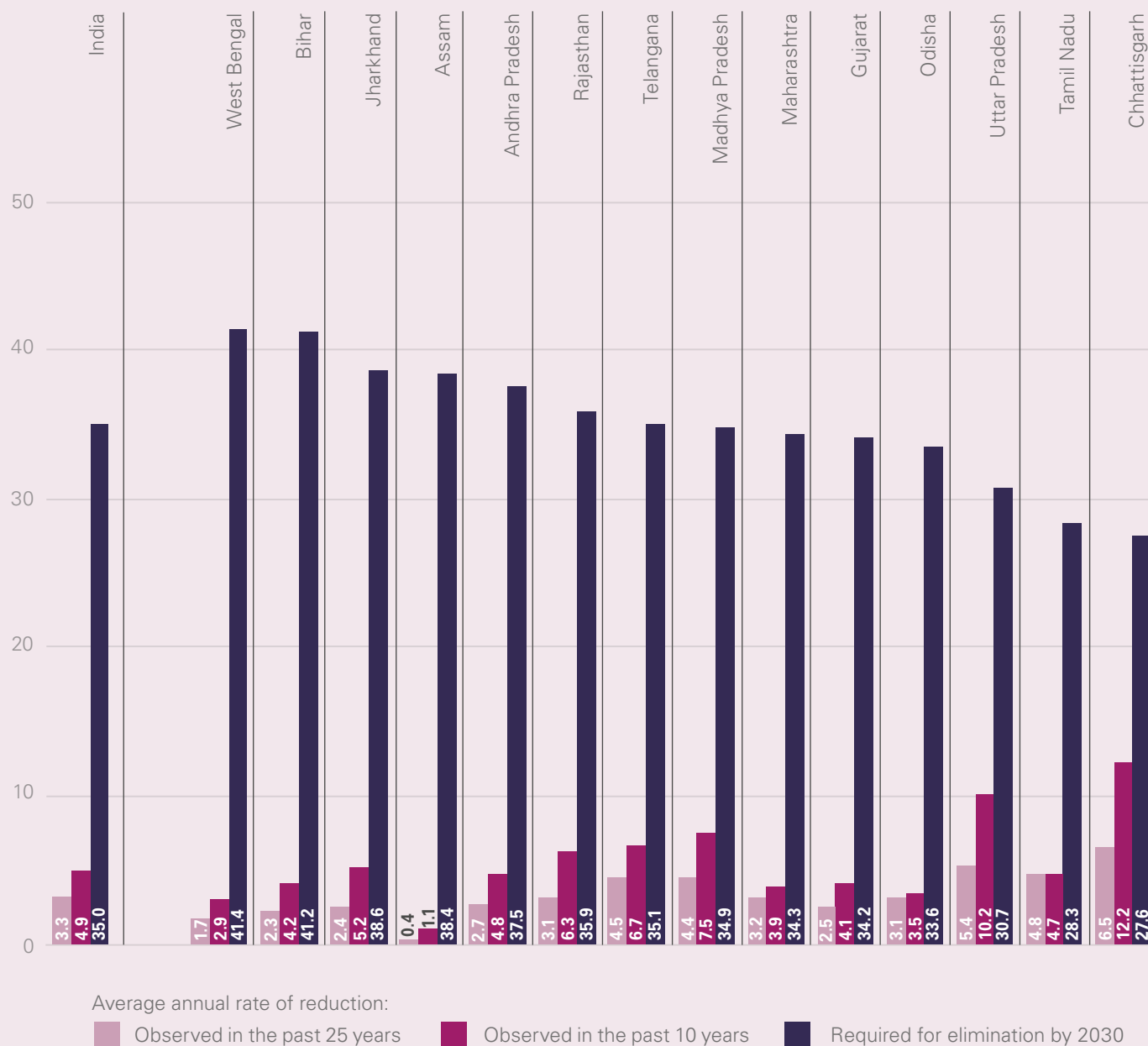
FIG. 19 Observed and projected percentage of women aged 20 to 24 years who were first married or in union before age 18

NOTE: See 'How to read the projections' on page 29.

In order to meet the SDG target of eliminating child marriage by 2030, substantial acceleration will be required

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

Average annual rate of reduction:
- Observed in the past 25 years
- Observed in the past 10 years
- Required for elimination by 2030

Child marriage among boys in India

▶ Child marriage among boys does occur in India, but it is rare

> While marriage before age 18 is uncommon for boys, 18 per cent of men married before the legal age of 21

■ Married before age 15
■ Married at or after age 15 but before age 18
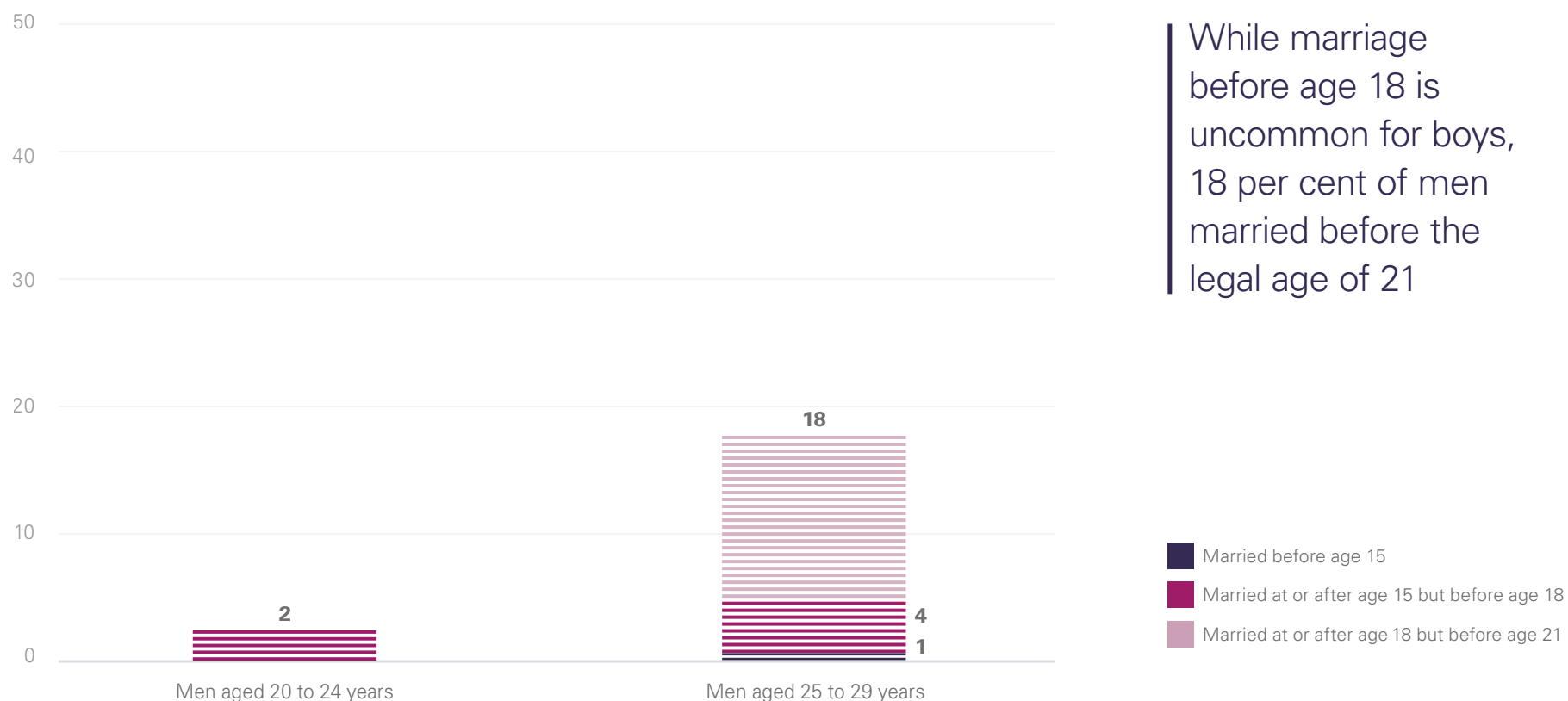■ Married at or after age 18 but before age 21

FIG. 21 Percentage of men aged 20 to 24 years and 25 to 29 years who were first married or in union before ages 15, 18 and 21

Ending child marriage in India: The programmatic response

India has made remarkable progress towards ending child marriage. The prevalence of the practice has declined steeply over the last two decades – from 49 per cent in 2001 to 23 per cent in 2021. This progress is associated with improvements in female education, a reduction in poverty and fertility, the promotion of positive gender norms, and the strengthened capacity of social service, justice and enforcement systems, among other factors.

Despite advancements on many fronts, the rate of decline in child marriage in India is not sufficient to reach the target of eliminating the practice by 2030, as set out in the Sustainable Development Goals. In response, various strategic approaches are bringing together programmatic and analytical work on gender and adolescent empowerment, multidimensional poverty reduction, the strengthening of child protection systems and education for adolescent girls, and the promotion of social and behaviour change to address prevailing gender norms.[1] UNICEF India is privileged to work in support of these national efforts, led by the Ministry of Women and Child Development in collaboration with other ministries and institutions at the national and state level.

Concerted efforts to end child marriage and promote adolescent empowerment are being undertaken in 14 states by the Government of India with support from UNICEF and UNFPA (the UN Population Fund) through the Global Programme to End Child Marriage. The programme uses robust data to inform the planning and management of comprehensive interventions to empower adolescents, especially girls. At the same time, it is working to improve their socioeconomic status by promoting shifts in entrenched gender attitudes and practices, addressing the underlying conditions that encourage child marriage, and advocating for laws and policies that protect girls' rights.

As indicated in this report, educational attainment levels in India are strongly linked to the prevalence of child marriage. Girls who are in school are less likely to marry before the age of 18. Moreover, educated girls are more likely to demonstrate increased agency, participate in marriage-related decisions, be aware of their rights and entitlements, and possess livelihood skills.[2] Thus, interventions that bring out-of-school girls back into the classroom, provide them with opportunities to acquire life skills, and ultimately empower girls to exercise their agency have been implemented in India.

Child marriage is also correlated with household poverty and living in rural areas. As this analysis shows, girls from poor rural households are more likely to marry before the age of 18 than their wealthier urban peers. Thus, reaching the most marginalized girls, their families and communities via cash transfer and social protection schemes, buttressed by strong systems, has been one of the priorities in addressing two key drivers of child marriage – poverty and insecurity.

Through the Global Programme to End Child Marriage, millions of adolescent girls have gained access to educational opportunities, life skills and social protection schemes. Since 2019, information and services for health, especially reproductive health, have reached 17 million adolescent girls, along with information on life skills and child marriage. In 2021, over 150,000 adolescents (half of whom were girls) in 15 states were provided with life skills packages and career guidance platforms to ensure the continuity of their education and to help them transition from school to work.

To further accelerate the decline of child marriage, communities have been mobilized to promote the transformation of harmful gender norms and foster social and behaviour change, especially in states with the highest prevalence of child marriage (West Bengal, Bihar, Tripura, Jharkhand and Assam). In 2021, 13 million community members were equipped with the vital information they need to spearhead action against child marriage and promote adolescent empowerment. This was facilitated by more than 300,000 frontline workers, self-help groups and local governance bodies, who have received training on preventing child marriage and communicating to adolescents in an effective way.

Going forward, the Global Programme in India will actively adopt equity-focused and gender transformative programme approaches in its work to address child marriage and mitigate some of the adverse impacts of COVID-19. It will also expand its support to girls transitioning from school to work, promote meaningful engagement with men and boys for gender equity, and advance action for greater adolescent empowerment and participation.

Technical notes

To assess the prevalence of child marriage, this analysis used SDG indicator 5.3.1 – the proportion of women aged 20 to 24 years who were married or in union before age 15 and before age 18. All references to 'marriage' or 'child brides' include formal marriages and informal unions in which women started living with a partner as if married, as well as all marriages that occurred in childhood, regardless of whether or not the *gauna* ceremony (which is associated with the consummation of marriage) was performed. 'Childhood' refers to the period from birth until the 18th birthday. 'Adolescence' refers to ages 10 to 19.

Key message titles were developed taking into account confidence intervals. Thus, in cases where the title indicates that there is a difference among demographic groups or states and union territories, it has been confirmed as statistically significant.

Trends in the national prevalence of child marriage presented in Figures 17 and 19 were calculated taking into account data from India's National Family Health Survey (NFHS) 1992-1993, 1997-1998, 2005-2006, 2015-2016 and 2019-2021, based on the prevalence of child marriage across age cohorts.

The burden of child marriage 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, calculated by applying the prevalence of child marriage for each age cohort. At the national level, the adjusted prevalence from the trend analysis is applied for each age cohort of women from 18 to 74 years to the respective female population; at the state level, the prevalence of child marriage based on the NFHS 2019-2021 is applied for the age cohort 18 to 49 years to the respective female population. Outside these ages, direct estimates of prevalence were not available, so the following assumptions were made:

- 0-9 years – all are assumed to be unmarried
- 10-17 years – indirect estimates are produced using related indicators, including the percentage of girls married before age 15 and the percentage of adolescents aged 15 to 17 currently married
- 75+ years at the national level – prevalence of of child marriage among women aged 70 to 74 years is used
- 50+ years at the state and union territory level – prevalence of child marriage among women aged 45 to 49 years in each state and union territory is used.

Data at the state and union territory level represent geographical boundaries as of NFHS 2019-2021. The trend analysis for states and union territories, as presented in Figures 18 and 20, is based on an age cohort analysis from the NFHS 2019-2021. Given that estimates in this survey for some cohorts of women fall well below the adjusted trend line (calculated as described in the third paragraph of this note), the values for '25 years ago' were adjusted using a factor that brings the state-level estimates in line with the adjusted national estimate.

Data sources

India data are from the National Family Health Surveys 1992-1993, 1997-1998, 2005-2006, 2015-2016 and 2019-2021 (NFHS 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5). Data for other countries are from UNICEF global databases, 2022, 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 Government of India, Ministry of Home Affairs, Office of the Registrar General & Census Commissioner, Census of India, 2011 and the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division, *World Population Prospects 2022*, Online Edition.

Endnotes

1 United Nations Population Fund and United Nations Children's Fund, *Phase II Programme Document 2020–2023: UNFPA-UNICEF Global Programme to End Child Marriage*, UNFPA and UNICEF, New York, 2019.

2 Jejeebhoy, S.J., *Ending Child Marriage in India: Drivers and strategies*, United Nations Children's Fund, New Delhi, 2019.

How to read the projections
pages 24 and 25

Projected values based on a continuation of observed progress apply the average annual rate of reduction in the prevalence of child marriage, or the percentage of women aged 20 to 24 years first married or in union before age 18, over the past 25 years and over the past 10 years. The acceleration scenario assumes a doubling of the observed annual rate of reduction over the past 10 years.

Figure 19 shows how the scale of the practice of child marriage has changed since around 1970, as well as various scenarios that could occur in the future, shown by the percentage of young women aged 20 to 24 years married in childhood. Figure 20 shows progress in terms of the rates of reduction that have been observed and the rates that would be required to meet elimination targets. For statistical purposes, 'elimination' is defined here as a child marriage prevalence of less than 1 per cent.

The observed average annual rates of reduction (AARRs) quantify the rate of progress in the prevalence of child marriage over each period. A higher AARR indicates faster progress. Required AARRs are calculated to illustrate the rate necessary to eliminate child marriage by 2030 and achieve target 5.3 of the Sustainable Development Goals.

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