

A Profile of Child Marriage

in East Asia
and the Pacific



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Division of Data, Analytics, Planning and
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COVER PHOTO:

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Nicole, a 17-year-old in the Philippines, is
photographed in a school where she was
sheltering with her husband and infant in the
aftermath of a typhoon.



A 17-year-old in the Lao People's
Democratic Republic holds her 1-year-
old son. She never attended school
and was married at age 15.

Foreword

Child marriage continues to haunt the lives of millions of girls across East Asia and the Pacific. It is a violation of their rights, a barrier to their education and often a precursor to a life of hardship. Today, 1 in 13 young women in this region married before turning 18. That's 93 million child brides – 93 million stories of lost potential, curtailed dreams and futures interrupted by early marriage.

This report shines a light on the pervasive issue of child marriage in East Asia and the Pacific. The data reveal that child marriage is most prevalent among the most vulnerable: girls who are poor, girls who are less educated, and girls who live in rural and hard-to-reach areas. Across the region, girls from the poorest families are eight times more likely to marry before age 18 than their wealthier peers. In some communities, particularly among the poorest, child marriage is becoming more common, not less.

This is unacceptable.

The impact of child marriage on girls is devastating. Girls who marry are more likely to drop out of school, experience early and frequent pregnancies, and be subjected to domestic violence. These are not just statistics; they represent the real lives of girls who, through no fault of their own, are trapped in cycles of poverty, vulnerability and inequality.

We cannot stand by and allow this to continue. We need to redouble our efforts, reassess our strategies and increase our investments. We need to do more than just react to the problem; we need to prevent it at its very roots. This means tackling the poverty, lack of education and deeply ingrained gender inequalities that fuel child marriage. It means creating opportunities for girls to stay in school, empowering them with knowledge and skills, and giving families alternatives to early marriage.

Ending child marriage is one of the smartest investments we can make. When girls are allowed to grow up and pursue their dreams, everyone benefits. They are more likely to lift themselves and their families out of poverty, contribute to the economy, and raise healthier, better-educated children. The ripple effects are immense, extending through families, communities and entire societies and economies.

We must act now to catalyse that positive ripple effect. The stakes are too high to delay. Governments, civil society, communities and international partners all have a role to play. We need to work together, with urgency and determination, to end child marriage in East Asia and the Pacific. Let us commit to a future where every girl can grow up free from the threat of child marriage, where she can choose her own path, and where she can fulfil her true potential.

June Kunugi

Regional Director

UNICEF East Asia and the Pacific

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



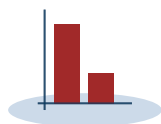
Sarina,* a 17-year-old in Malaysia, was married at age 15. Her husband, who is one year older, is a fisherman. Sarina managed to continue attending school after marrying, but ultimately could not afford the fees and needed to drop out. She lives with her parents, her husband and her 1-year-old son.

*Name changed for privacy.

Key facts



One in 13 young women in East Asia and the Pacific were first married or in union before their 18th birthday. The region is home to 93 million child brides, accounting for 14 per cent of the global total.



Levels of child marriage vary considerably across the region, with the highest levels observed in Oceania.



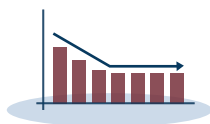
Child brides in East Asia and the Pacific tend to live in poor households, have low levels of education, and reside in rural areas.



More than 8 in 10 child brides in East Asia and the Pacific give birth while they are still adolescents; close to half give birth before they turn 18.



The vast majority of child brides in the region are out of school. Married girls are five times more likely to be out of school than their unmarried peers.



While child marriage has remained less common in East Asia and the Pacific than elsewhere in the world, progress in the region has stalled.



East Asia and the Pacific is not on track to eliminate child marriage by 2030; meeting the target would require an acceleration beyond the progress seen in the best-performing countries in the region.

Current state of child marriage

In East Asia and the Pacific, 8 per cent of young women were first married or in union before their 18th birthday; within the region, levels are highest in Oceania

NOTES: In this publication, data for East Asia and the Pacific reflect the set of countries outlined by the mandate of UNICEF's East Asia and the Pacific Regional Office. Thus, aggregate values may differ from those included in other UNICEF publications that are based on a geographic classification of countries. The three subregions of East Asia and the Pacific presented here (Eastern Asia, Oceania and South-Eastern Asia) are defined according to the classification used by the United Nations Statistics Division for reporting on the SDGs.

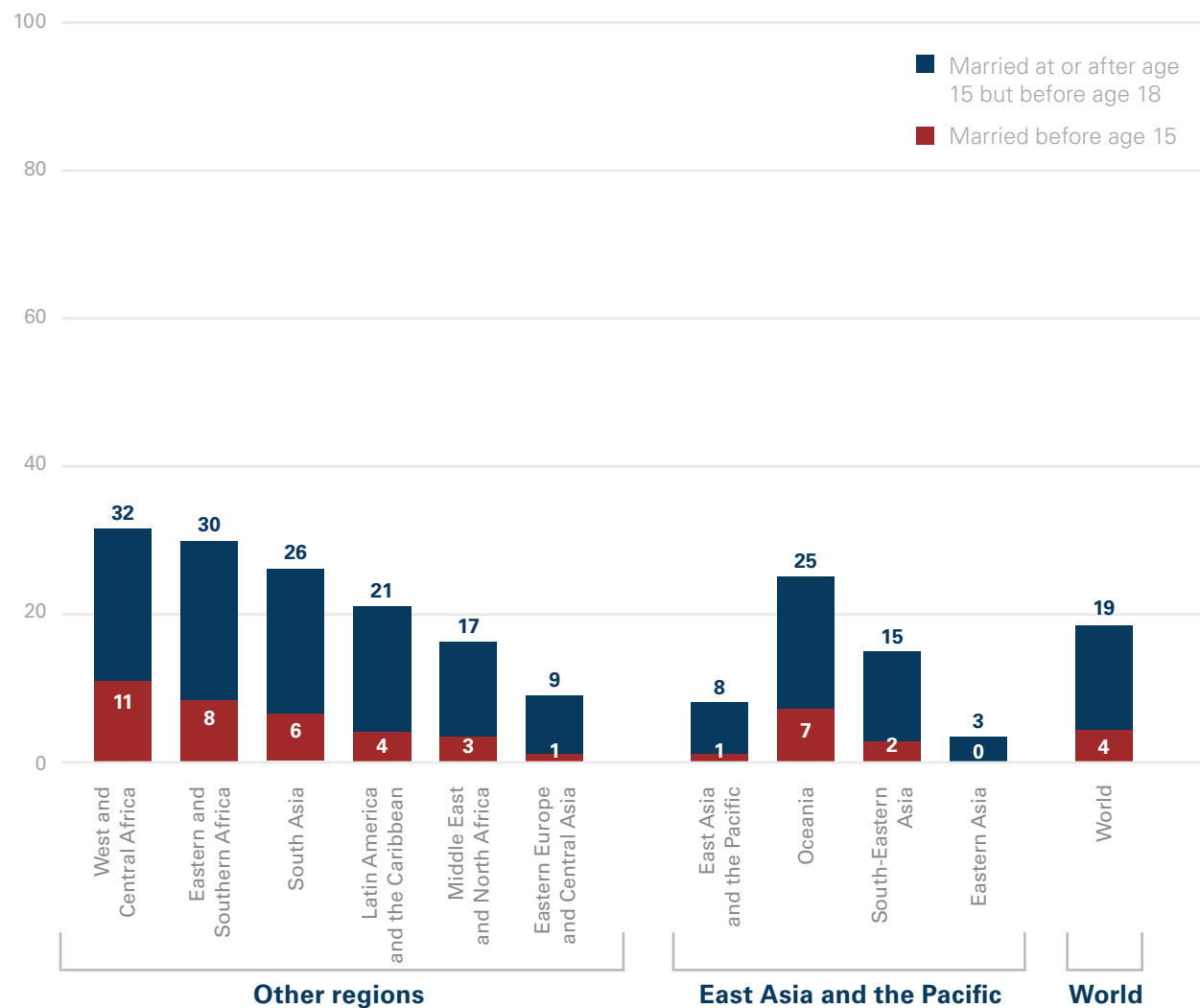
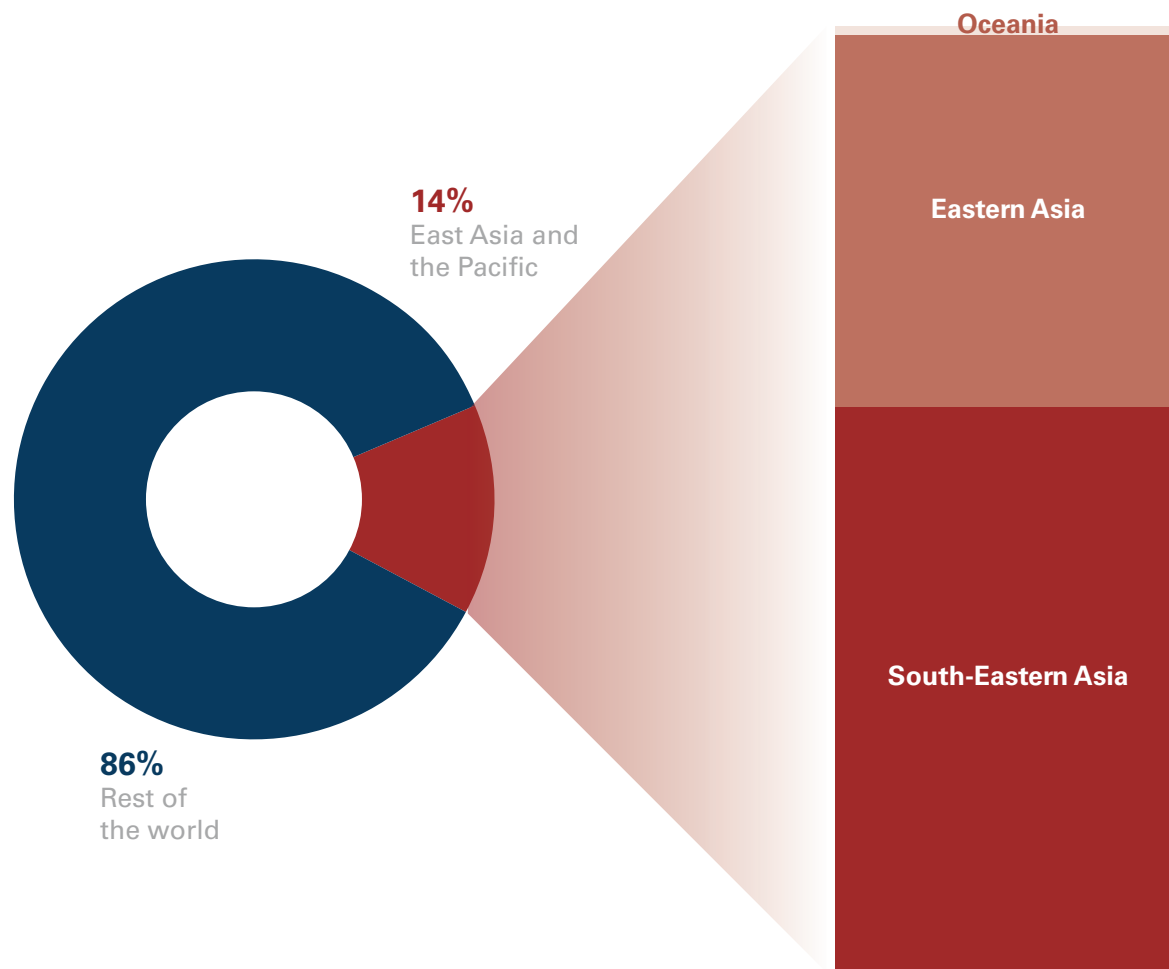


FIG. 1 Percentage of women aged 20 to 24 years who were first married or in union before ages 15 and 18



East Asia and the Pacific is home to 93 million child brides, accounting for 14 per cent of the global total

NOTE: The total value presented here may differ from values for East Asia and the Pacific published elsewhere, due to differences in the definition of the region.

FIG. 2 Number of girls and women who were first married or in union before age 18

Girls most at risk of child marriage

Child brides in East Asia and the Pacific tend to live in poor households, have less education and reside in rural areas

NOTES: Aggregates are based on the subset of countries with available data for all groups of the given dimension. This includes 17 countries with data by residence, 16 countries with data by wealth quintile, and 15 countries with data by level of education. Overall levels of child marriage shown here differ from the regional total shown in Figure 1 due to the more limited availability of disaggregated data.

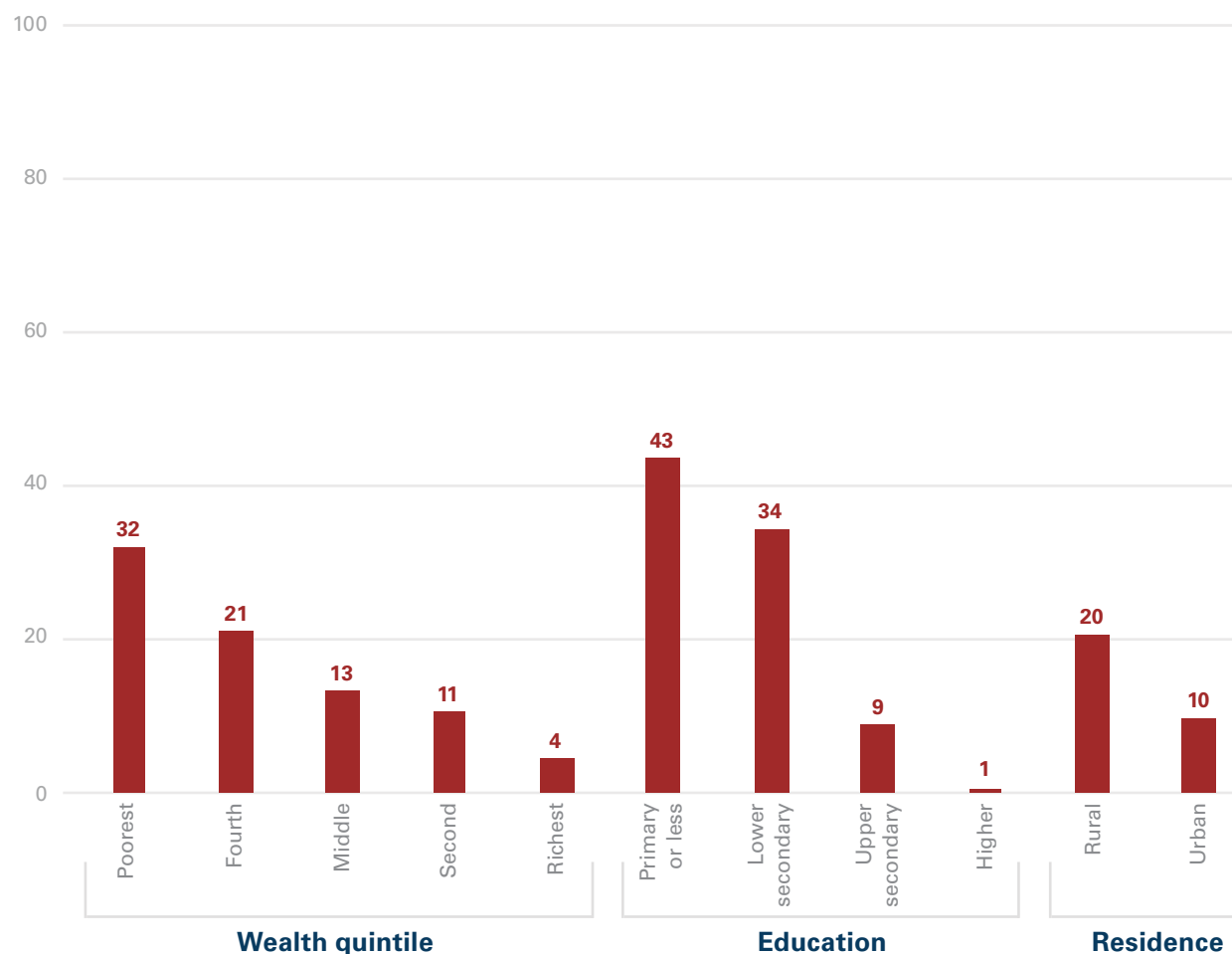


FIG. 3 Percentage of women aged 20 to 24 years who were first married or in union before age 18, by wealth quintile, education and residence



Sukanya, a 20-year-old in Thailand, is pictured with her two children, aged 3 years (left) and 3 months (right). Sukanya and her husband earn a living by renting a plot of land to grow strawberries.

Lives of child brides

More than 8 in 10 child brides in East Asia and the Pacific give birth while they are still adolescents; close to half give birth before they turn 18

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

NOTE: See 'Technical notes' on page 21 for details on population coverage for indicators in the 'Lives of child brides' section of this report.

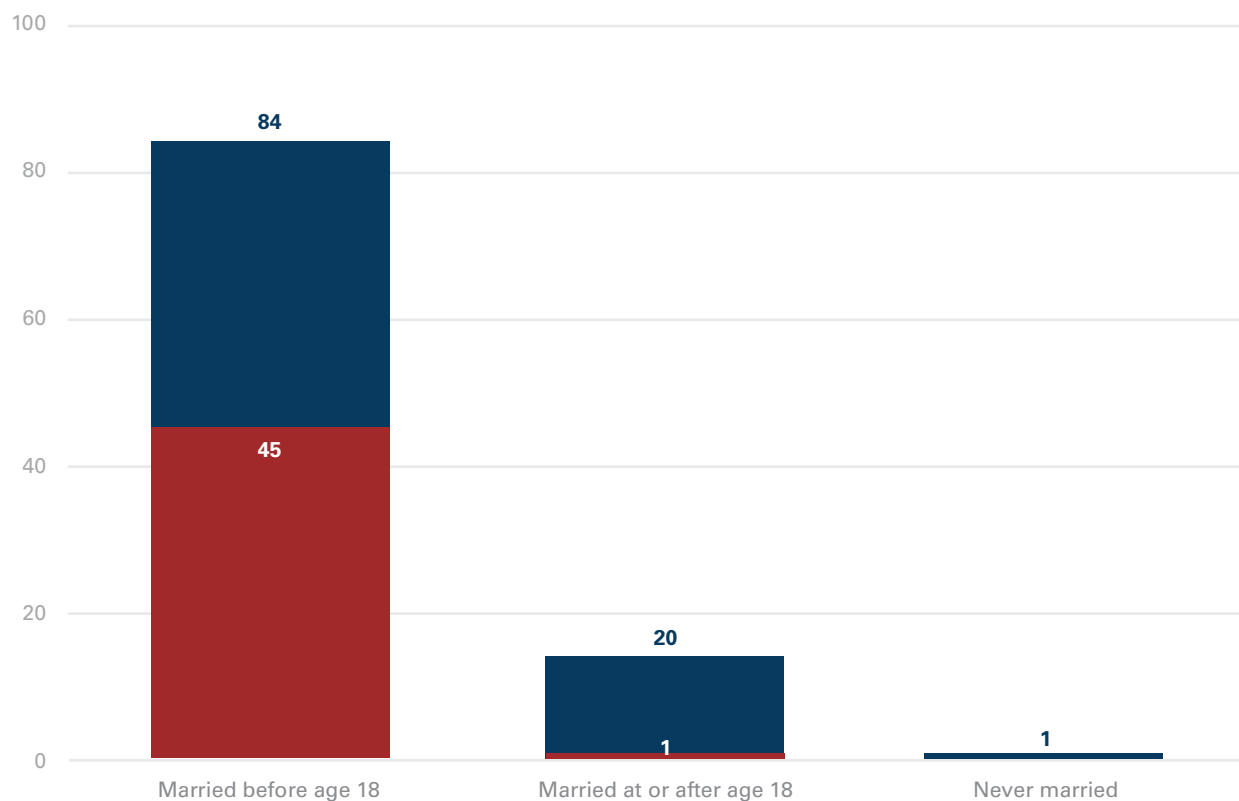
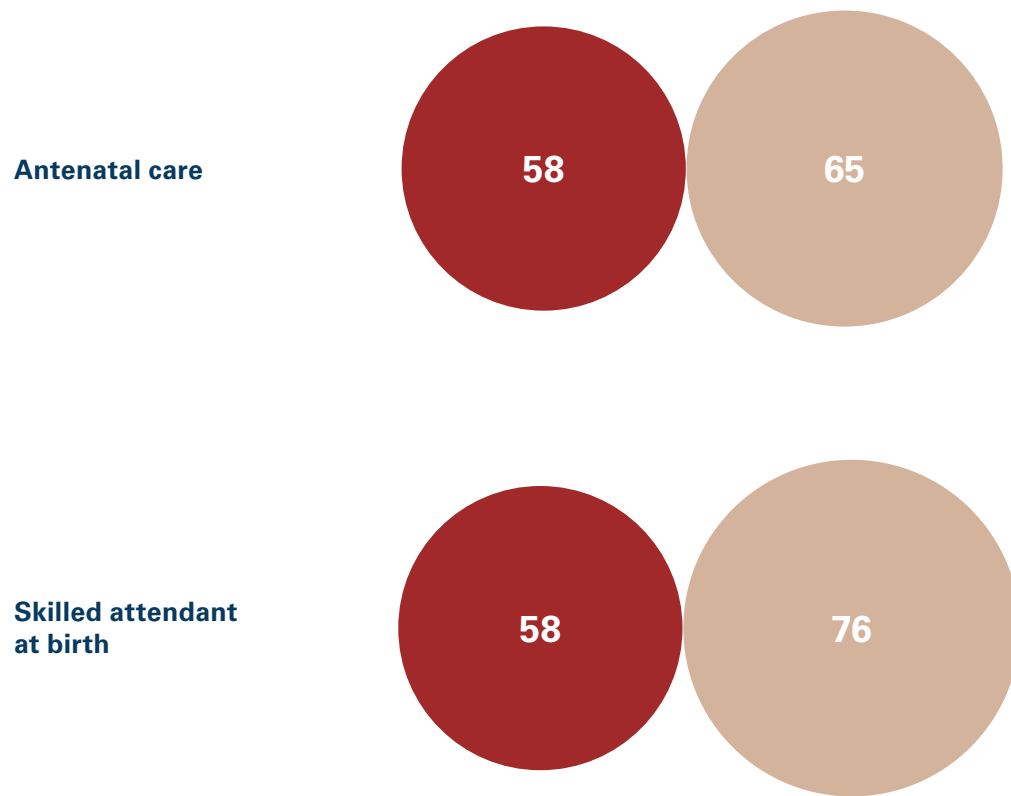


FIG.4 Percentage of ever-married women aged 20 to 24 years who gave birth before ages 18 and 20, by age at marriage



When child brides become pregnant, they are less likely to receive antenatal care and skilled attendance at birth than their peers who marry as adults

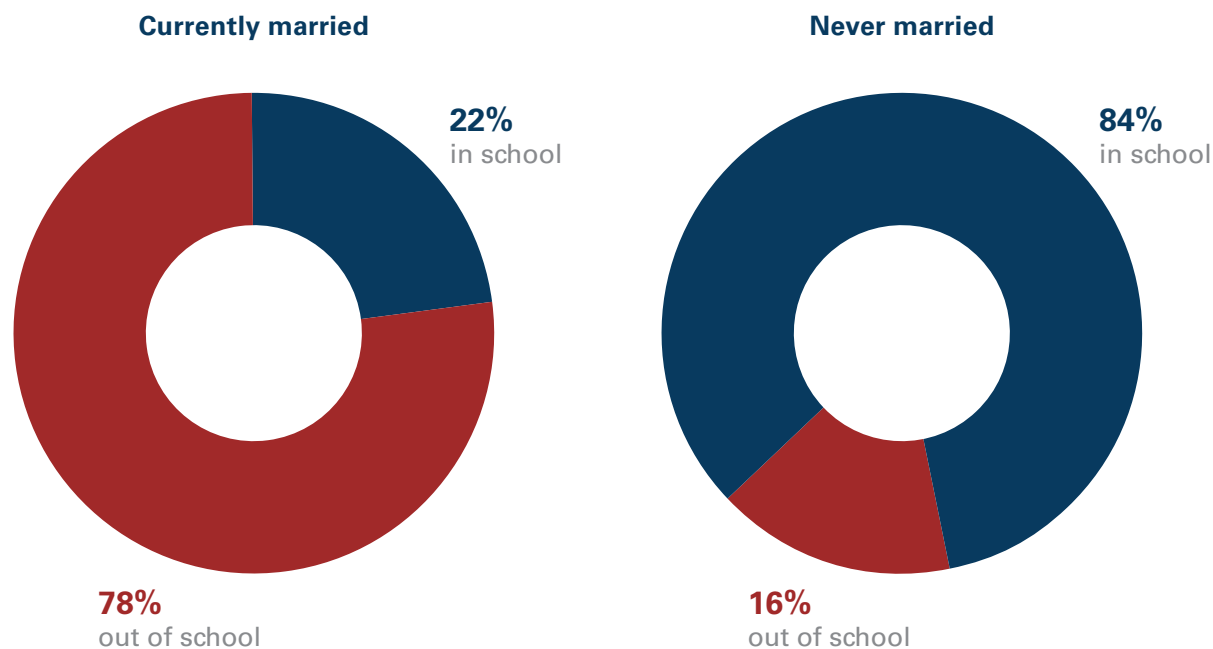
- Married before age 18
- Married at or after age 18

NOTE: See 'Technical notes' on page 21 for details on population coverage for indicators in the 'Lives of child brides' section of this report.

FIG. 5 Percentage of ever-married women aged 20 to 24 years who received antenatal care from a skilled provider during their last pregnancy and who had a skilled attendant during their last birth, by age at marriage

The vast majority of child brides in East Asia and the Pacific are out of school

Married girls are five times more likely to be out of school than their unmarried peers

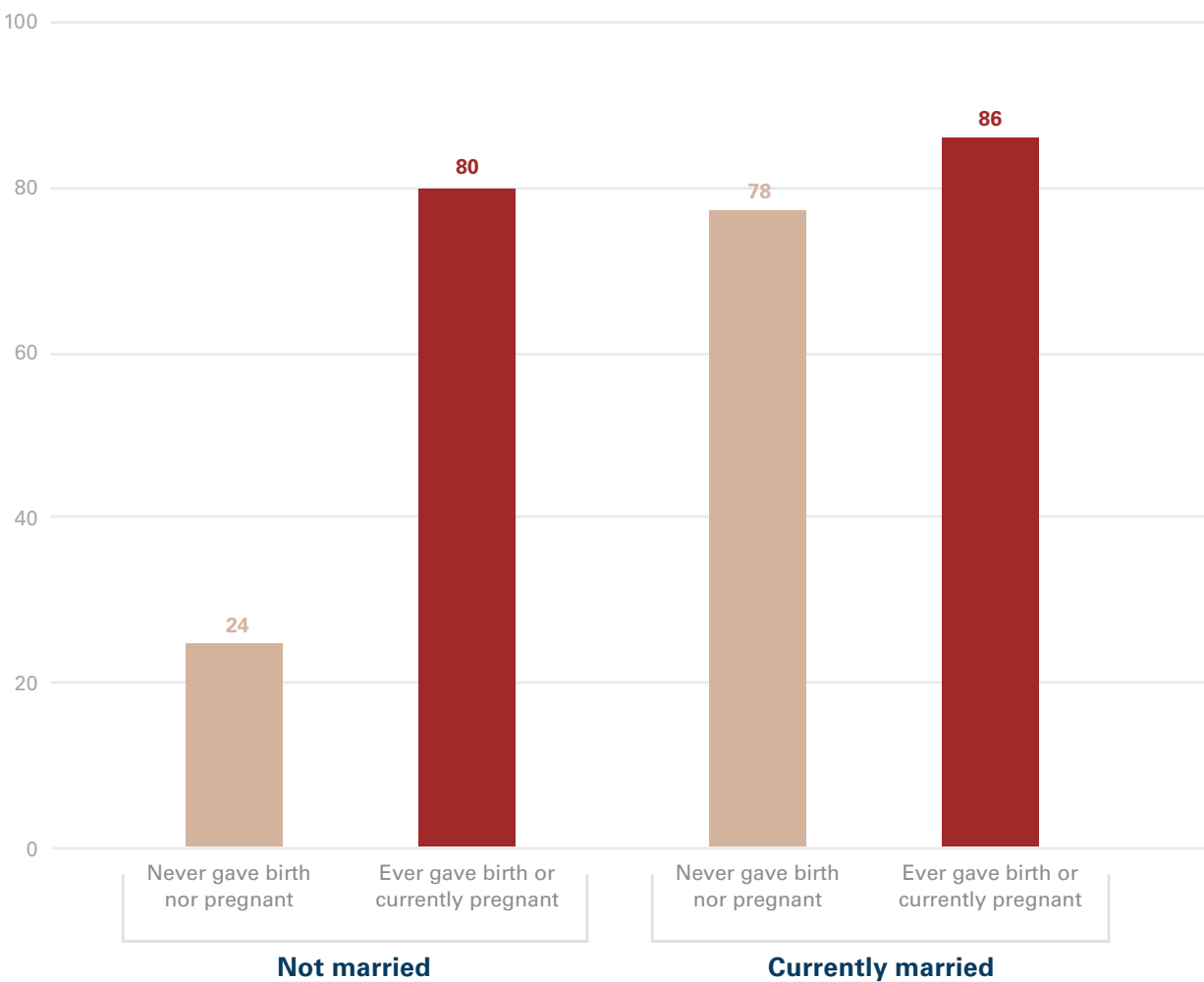


In many countries, marriage and schooling are viewed as incompatible, and decisions about removing a girl from school and marrying her off at a young age are often made at the same time. These decisions are influenced by the perceived value of education and the availability of employment opportunities for educated girls. Better quality and higher education may make the returns on investment in girls more readily apparent and justifiable to both parents and society.

While the relationship between education and child marriage has been clearly established, the mechanism of this relationship is complex, and causality is not straightforward. The analysis here is not intended to establish causality, but rather to illustrate the magnitude of the disparities between advantaged and disadvantaged groups.

NOTE: See 'Technical notes' on page 21 for details on population coverage for indicators in the 'Lives of child brides' section of this report.

FIG. 6 Percentage of girls aged 15 to 17 years who are out of school, by marital status



Among adolescent girls, both marriage and pregnancy present barriers to attending school

NOTES: Compared with Figure 6, this chart represents a larger population group, including adolescents aged 18 and 19, to allow a sufficient sample size for the calculation. It therefore reflects the experiences of girls who may have married and/or become pregnant during late adolescence, at age 18 or 19. See 'Technical notes' on page 21 for details on population coverage for indicators in the 'Lives of child brides' section of this report.

FIG. 7 Percentage of girls aged 15 to 19 years who are out of school, by marital and pregnancy status

Generational trends

While child marriage has remained less common in East Asia and the Pacific than elsewhere in the world, progress in the region has stalled

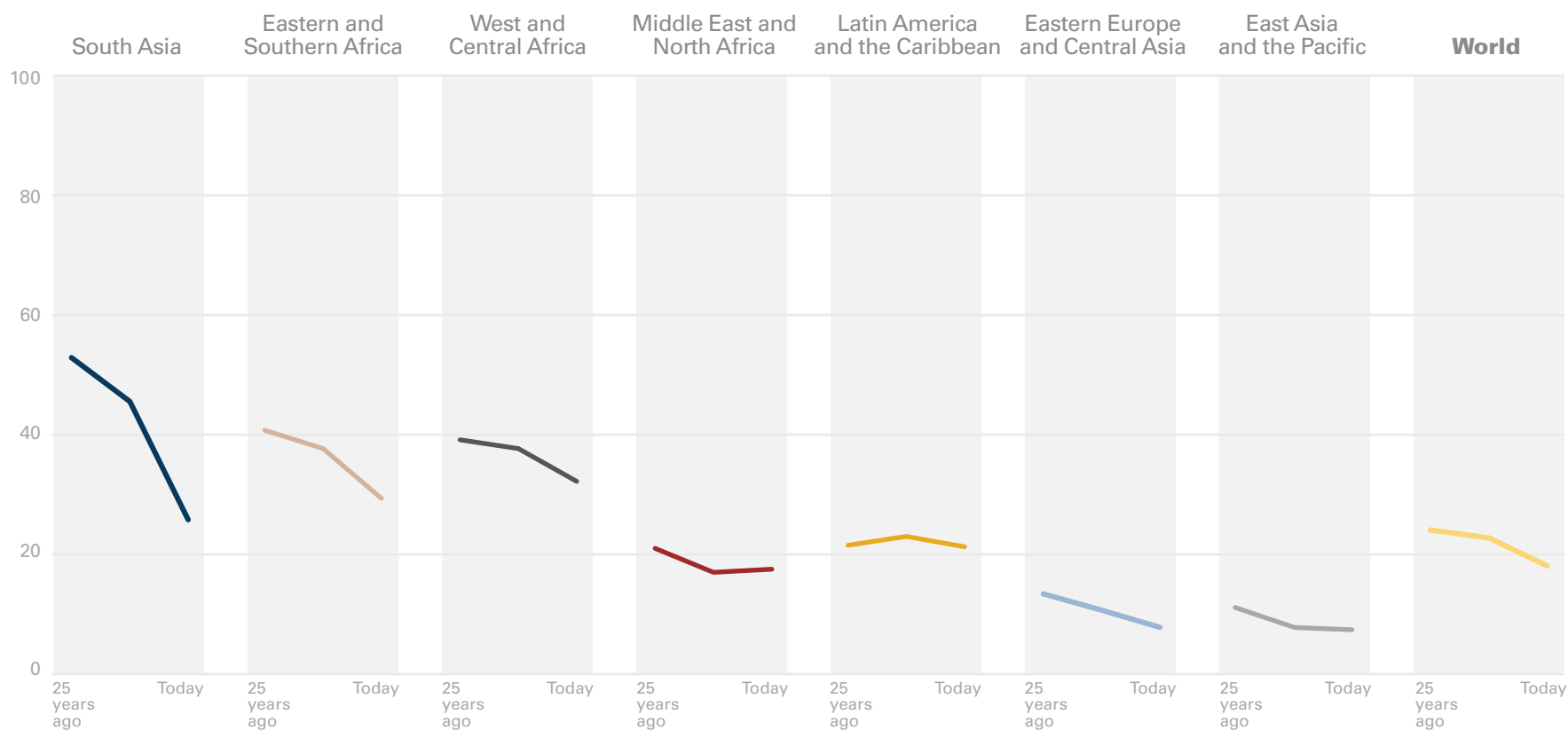


FIG. 8 Percentage of women aged 20 to 24 years who were first married or in union before age 18

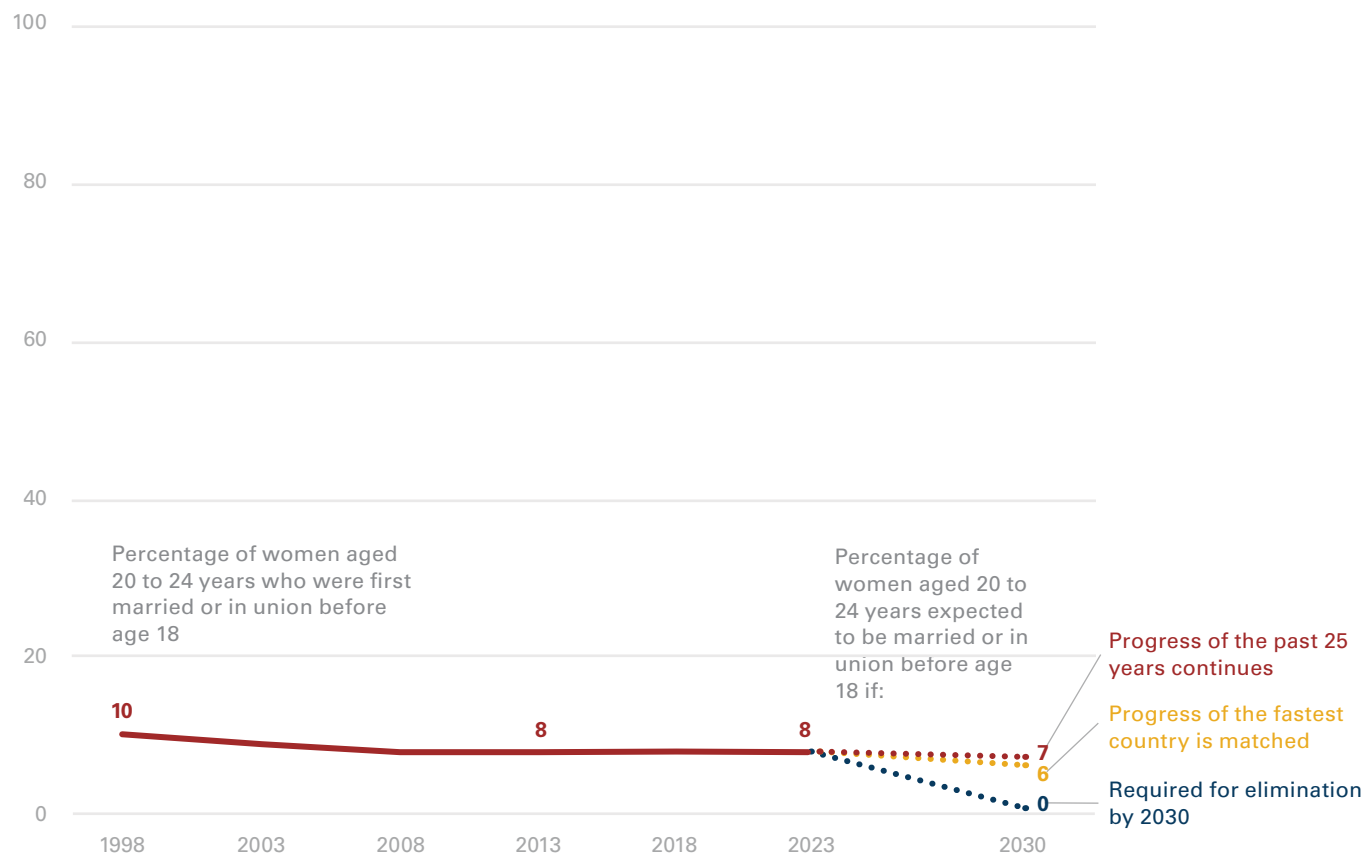
NOTE: See 'Technical notes' on page 21 for details on the calculation of trends.



Sally,* in Papua New Guinea, was forced to marry at age 15 because her parents needed the money. She faced abuse from her husband and is raising her daughter alone without support from the father.

*Name changed for privacy.

Looking ahead to 2030



The region is not on track to eliminate child marriage by 2030; meeting this target would require an acceleration beyond the progress seen in the best-performing countries in the region

FIG. 9 Percentage of women aged 20 to 24 years who were first married or in union before age 18, observed and projected

NOTE: See 'How to read the projections' on page 21.

With slow progress across the region, all subregions of East Asia and the Pacific would require a substantial acceleration to meet the pace required to eliminate child marriage by 2030

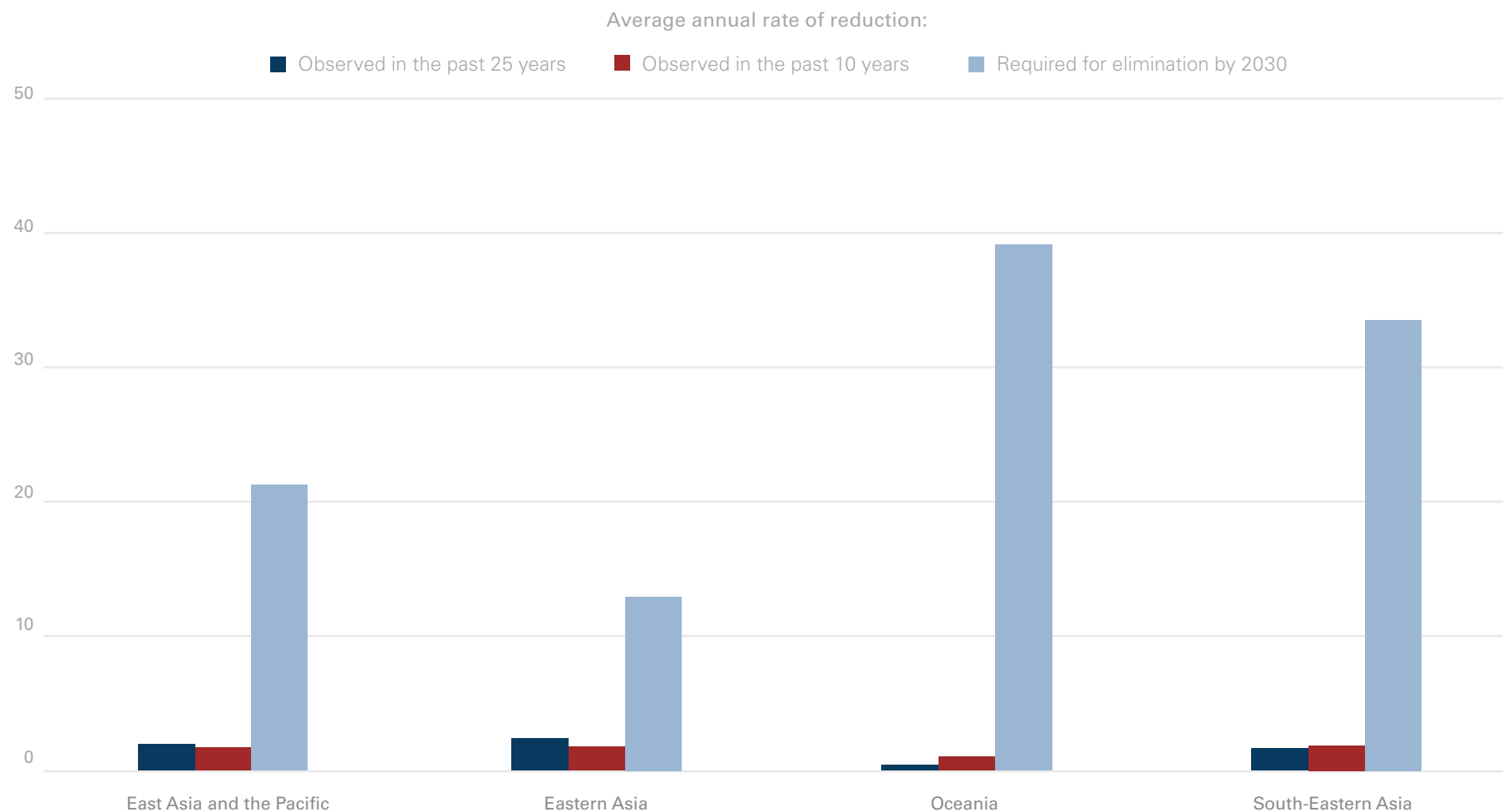


FIG. 10 Average annual rate of reduction (%) in the percentage of women aged 20 to 24 years who were first married or in union before age 18, observed and required for elimination

NOTE: See 'Technical notes' on page 21 for more details on interpreting the average annual rate of reduction. For statistical purposes, the elimination of child marriage is defined as a prevalence of below 1 per cent.

Additional findings on child marriage throughout the region

Understanding the scope and characteristics of the practice of child marriage is possible thanks to investments by national governments in high-quality data collection at the population level. The statistics presented in this report are a broad summary of such data throughout the East Asia and Pacific region.

To investigate further the risks of child marriage and circumstances of married girls, and to make comparisons across locations and over time, standardized data are essential. In this region, the availability of comparable data across countries is uneven, and coverage for some indicators is limited.

Yet, even if incomplete, these data can provide country- and region-specific insights about the conditions of the relevant populations. In this section, we present a brief summary of findings on topics for which data coverage was limited to a smaller number of countries or subregions.

Characteristics of unions

In **South-Eastern Asia**, most married girls have a spouse within five years of their own age, and the majority are in formal marriages. The Philippines and Thailand show a somewhat different pattern: While most couples are still close in age, the vast majority are living together in informal unions. Large age gaps between child brides and their spouses are more common in **Oceania**, where over 1 in 4 child brides marry someone at least 10 years older.

In a few countries in the region, child marriage among boys is more common than the global average (3 per cent), including the Marshall Islands and the Lao People's Democratic Republic, where at least 1 in 10 young men were married in childhood. On the other hand, boys rarely marry in childhood in **Eastern Asia** (<1 per cent). Though little research has been done on outcomes for child grooms, marriage places boys in an adult role for which they may not be prepared.

In countries where child marriage among boys is more common, there is often a larger share of couples in which both spouses are children. Such households may face unique challenges in navigating the responsibilities of adulthood.



In Kiribati, Tuata had her first child at age 13, and at age 15 is expecting her second child. She has trouble accessing antenatal care because her options for transportation to the clinic are limited and expensive, and it is challenging to walk that distance in the heat.

Lives of child brides

While early childbearing is closely linked to child marriage, pregnancy does not appear to be a predominant driver of the practice in **South-Eastern Asia** and **Oceania**, as only 1 in 4 child brides are pregnant before marriage. Rather, childbearing is more common within the first few years of marriage.

In a limited number of countries with data in **South-Eastern Asia** and **Oceania**, key measures of empowerment show mixed results for child brides. They are less likely than their unmarried and later-married peers to have a bank account, and less likely than their never-married peers to be employed. However, the majority have decision-making power within their households, at similar levels to their peers who married later.

Intimate partner violence is another concern for girls who marry early, and data for a selection of countries throughout the region show that attitudes towards such violence vary greatly. In the small number of countries with available data on experiences of violence, it is evident that many child brides are subjected to such violence themselves, as are their peers who marry later.

Ending child marriage in East Asia and the Pacific: The programmatic response

The evidence shows that child marriage in East Asia and the Pacific is widely prevalent, concentrated among the poorest, least educated and most marginalized girls, with stalled progress putting the 2030 target out of reach. Catalysing durable change requires a targeted and multifaceted programming framework as outlined below:

1. A girl-centred approach

A girl-centred approach is essential to the success of the programme. Girls are actively engaged throughout the programme process – from design to evaluation. They should have a role in the development of educational materials, support services and advocacy campaigns to ensure that their voices are reflected and their needs addressed. This involvement not only makes the programme more relevant and effective, but also empowers girls by giving them a stake in shaping their futures. Continuous feedback from girls helps refine and improve the programme, making it more responsive to their evolving needs and experiences.

2. A multisectoral, multilevel and multiyear response

Ending child marriage requires sustained programming that spans multiple sectors and targets various levels of society. This comprehensive approach integrates efforts across education, health, child protection, justice and social services to address the complex drivers of child marriage. A long-term commitment is necessary to create sustainable change, ensuring that interventions have an impact at various levels – from local communities to national policies. By coordinating across sectors and levels, the programme can create a cohesive strategy that supports girls throughout their educational and personal development, ultimately reducing child marriage rates over time.

3. Gender-transformative programming

The programme is designed in such a way that it is gender-transformative – challenging and changing harmful gender norms that perpetuate child marriage. Awareness-raising activities and training encourage healthy questioning of traditional gender roles and empower adolescents to make informed decisions about their lives, including sexual and reproductive

choices. Additionally, programming promotes within communities a shift in cultural attitudes towards gender and supports gender equality. By transforming gender norms, the programme helps create an environment where girls can access education and opportunities without the constraints of early marriage.

4. Targeted interventions for marginalized girls

Given the widening disparities in child marriage based on education and economic status, targeted interventions are vital to reach the most marginalized and at-risk girls, particularly those in rural and remote areas with limited resources. Achieving this requires tailored support such as scholarships, learning materials and transportation assistance to ensure that these girls can access and stay in school. Outreach strategies are developed to specifically address the unique challenges faced by marginalized girls, ensuring that interventions are designed to meet their needs. This focus will help bridge the gaps and provide equitable opportunities for education and personal development.

5. Evidence-based advocacy

Effective advocacy, backed up by solid evidence, is essential to support the programme's goals and drive policy change. This requires regular data collection and analysis to determine child marriage rates, school attendance and other relevant indicators to assess the programme's impact and identify areas for improvement. Advocacy is also needed for supportive policies at both national and regional levels, using evidence to demonstrate the need for continued investment and reform. By leveraging data and evidence, advocacy efforts can build support for the programme and drive long-term change in addressing child marriage.

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’ include formal marriages and informal unions in which women started living together with their partners as if married. ‘Childhood’ refers to the period from birth until the 18th birthday. ‘Adolescence’ refers to the period from 10 to 19 years.

Confidence intervals are not shown in this publication. Caution is therefore warranted in interpreting the results since apparent differences among groups may not be significant. Key message titles were developed taking into account confidence intervals. Thus, in cases where the title indicates a difference among groups, it has been confirmed as statistically significant.

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 2015 to 2023. 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.

Due to more limited data availability, analysis on disaggregated levels of child marriage (Figure 3) and ‘Lives of child brides’ (Figures 4 to 7) rely on data from a smaller subset of countries than the overall prevalence and burden estimates. Estimates shown in these figures represent data from at least 50 per cent of the population of East Asia and the Pacific (excluding China), and include data from at least one country in each of the three sub-regions. Findings on indicators for which some data were available but did not meet this threshold are presented on pages 18 to 19.

Trends in the prevalence of child marriage are based on the prevalence of the practice across age cohorts. Trends were calculated taking into account data from all available surveys, when possible. 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 to the respective female population. For each country, prevalence from the trend analysis is applied for each age cohort of women from 18 to 49 years to the respective female population. Outside these ages, direct estimates of the 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 years currently married
- 50+ years – prevalence of women aged 45 to 49 years is used, unless otherwise noted.

For countries with an extended trend line available, which takes into account data from all historical surveys, direct prevalence estimates are available for women over 50 years of age. For these countries, assumptions are only employed for older groups of women, again relying on the prevalence in the eldest five-year age cohort for which an estimate exists.

Data sources

Data are drawn from UNICEF global databases, 2025, 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.

How to read the projections

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 first married or in union before age 18, over the past 25 years and over the past 10 years. Given limited progress at the aggregate level in the region, an acceleration scenario illustrates how the trajectory could look if the region matched the pace of the country with the fastest observed progress, which is Tuvalu.

Figure 9 shows how the scale of the practice of child marriage has changed since the 1990s, as well as various scenarios that could occur in the future. Figure 10 shows progress in terms of the rate of reduction that has 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 SDGs.



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