

CHILD MARRIAGE AND EARLY UNION

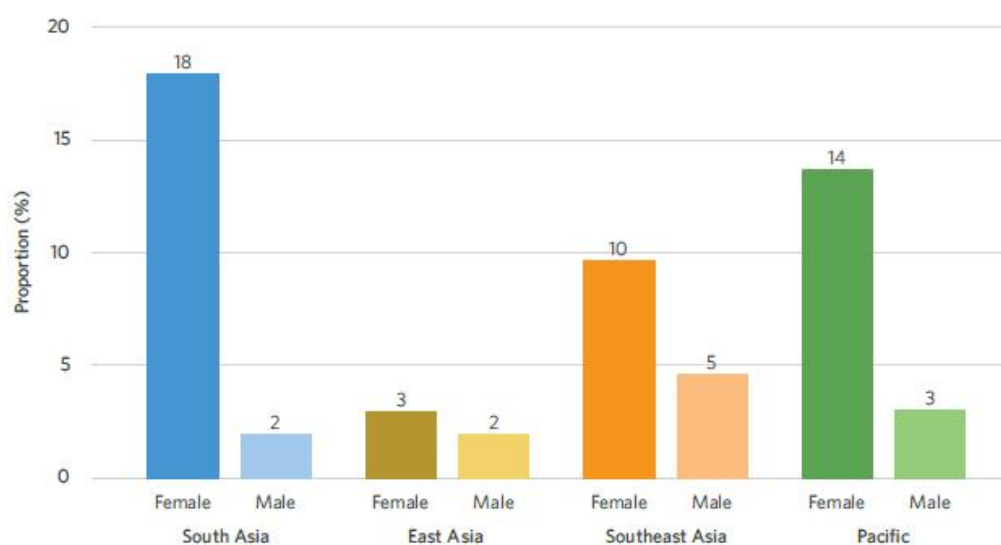
Twenty-three million adolescents aged 15-19 years are currently married or in union. Over 80% are girls, 15 million of whom live in South Asia. Across the region, 1 in 8 adolescent girls aged 15-19 years, and 1 in 50 boys, are currently married or in union (figure 9). Child marriage and early union (formal or informal, before the age of 18 years) is common throughout much of the region, with the highest prevalence in South Asia and some Pacific countries (table 2 and figure 10).

Over the last two decades, there has been a significant decline in child marriage in South Asia, particularly in India where the prevalence of marriage by age 18 has fallen by around half since 2000 (figure 11) – however it remains the country with the largest number of women and girls married by 18 due to the large population. Despite progress, rates of child marriage remain very high in South Asia, most notably in Bangladesh, Nepal and Afghanistan where the prevalence of marriage by 18 is substantially higher than the sub-regional estimate.

**Almost 27 million women
aged 20-24 years were married
or in union by age 18 (excluding China):
23 million of whom live in South Asia**

While there has been progress in reducing traditional child marriage in some South Asian countries, the prevalence of child marriage and/ or early union has not declined significantly in Southeast Asia and the Pacific. In Thailand, the Philippines and Papua New Guinea, the prevalence of child marriage and/or early union has increased by more than 10% over the last two decades and rates have largely stalled in other countries. As the pattern of unions in these countries may be less formal and/or peer-led, it is likely that child marriage programmes focusing on marriage laws/ policies or targeting parental attitudes towards child marriage are unlikely to be successful.

FIGURE 9. PROPORTION OF ADOLESCENTS AGED 15-19 YEARS WHO ARE CURRENTLY MARRIED OR IN UNION



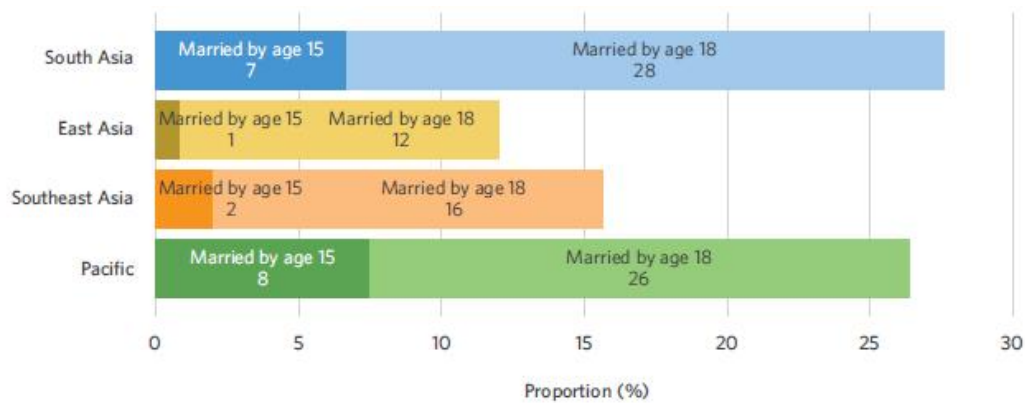
Source: DHS, MICS, UNPD²⁹¹

TABLE 2. TOTAL NUMBER AND PROPORTION OF WOMEN AGED 20-24 YEARS WHO WERE MARRIED / IN UNION BY 18

Region	Country	Proportion (%)	Total number
South Asia	Afghanistan	35	641,712
	Bangladesh	59	4,381,522
	Bhutan	26	9,100
	India	25	14,501,707
	Iran	17	483,990
	Maldives	2	352
	Nepal	40	662,020
	Pakistan	18	1,820,667
	Sri Lanka	10	73,696
East Asia	Mongolia	12	14,040
Southeast Asia	Cambodia	19	142,080
	Indonesia	16	1,780,612
	Lao PDR	33	112,815
	Myanmar	16	380,320
	The Philippines	17	807,840
	Thailand	23	548,550
	Timor-Leste	15	9,387
	Viet Nam	11	383,020
Pacific	Kiribati	20	1,015
	Marshall Islands	26	656
	Nauru	27	127
	Papua New Guinea	27	108,381
	Samoa	11	864
	Solomon Islands	21	5,964
	Tonga	6	280
	Tuvalu	10	51
	Vanuatu	21	2,782

Source: DHS and MICS

FIGURE 10. PROPORTION OF WOMEN AGED 20-24 YEARS MARRIED/IN UNION BY AGE 15 AND 18

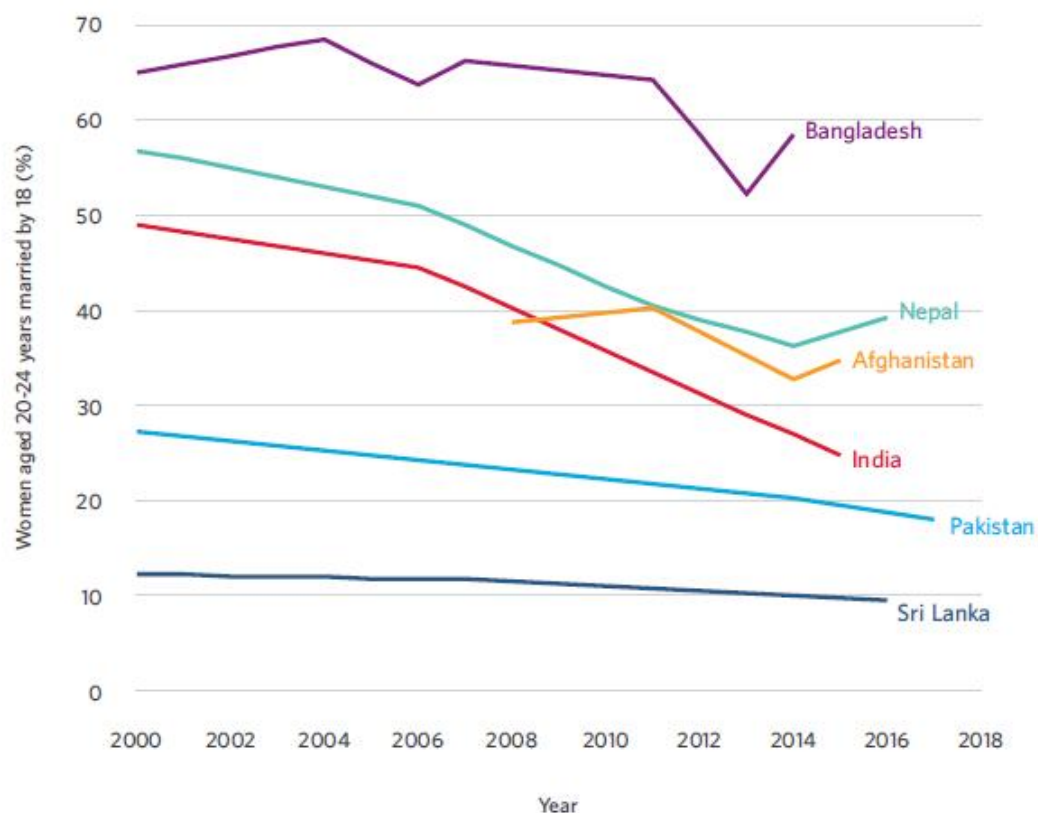


Note: East Asia estimate is for Mongolia only

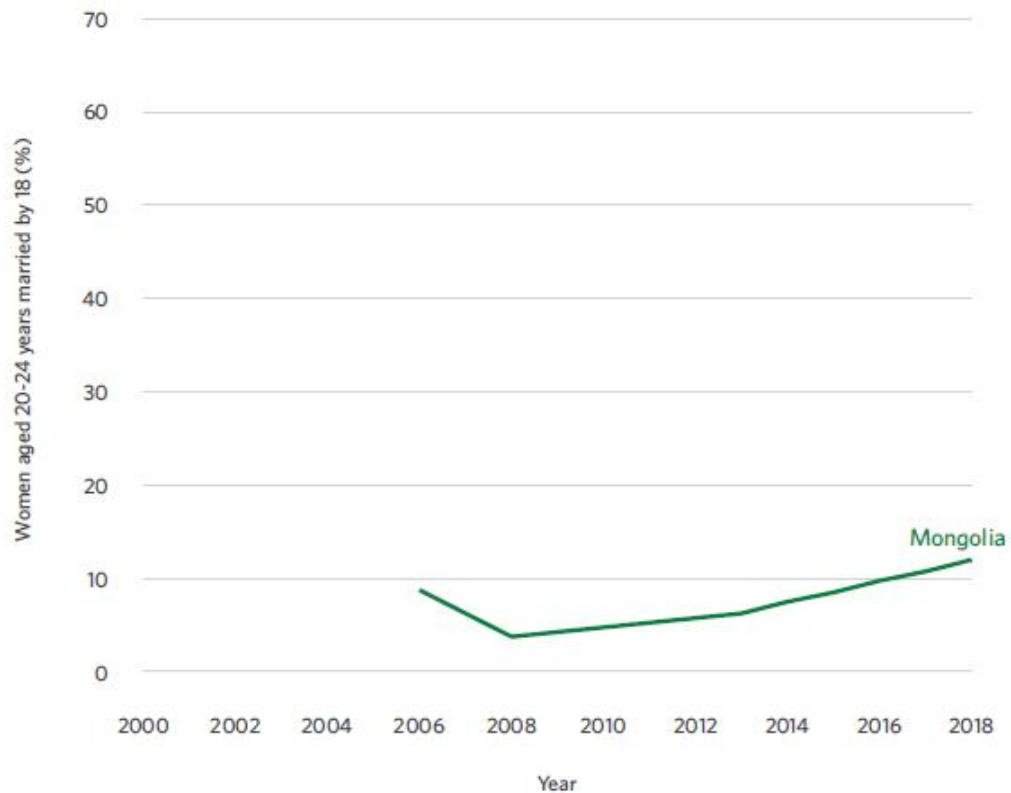
Source: DHS and MICS

FIGURE 11. PROPORTION OF WOMEN AGED 20-24 YEARS MARRIED/IN UNION BY AGE 15 AND 18, 2000 to 2018

South Asia

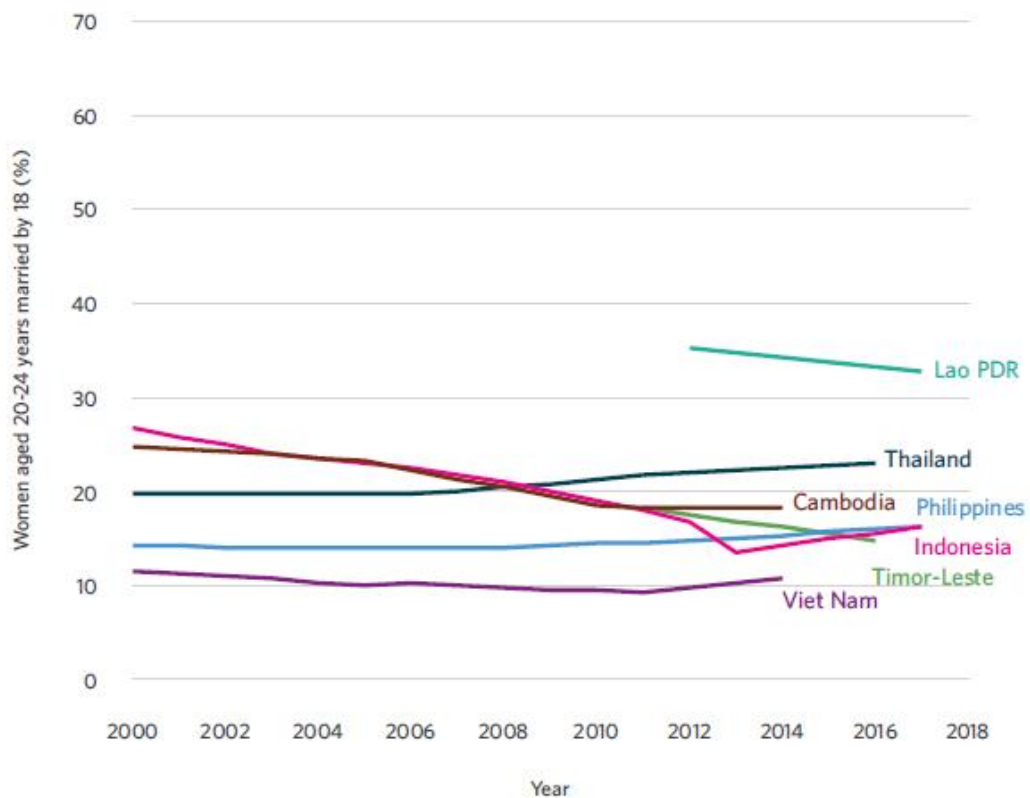


East Asia



Source: DHS and MICS

Southeast Asia



Source: DHS and MICS



In all countries, girls living in rural areas, those with less education, and girls from poorer households are more likely to be married or in union. Socio-cultural and religious norms and entrenched gender inequality are critical drivers of traditional arranged child marriage. Many of these determinants are common across the region,, however, there is growing understanding that there is considerable diversity in the context and forms of child marriage and early union. While much of the policy focus has been on traditional child marriage (typically arranged or forced), there is increasing recognition that not all early unions are non-consensual or formal. A recent review conducted by UNFPA and UNICEF identified three main typologies of child marriage and early union (noting that these may overlap and exist concurrently within countries): traditional child marriage, love unions, and circumstantial child marriage (box 3).

In Southeast Asia in particular, there is evidence that adolescents are increasingly entering consensual formal or less formal (cohabiting) unions with peers. In the context of changing sociocultural and gender norms, girls' increasing agency with respect to their own sexuality, and young people's increasing experience of dating and premarital sexual activity, young couples may decide to marry or cohabit (in some contexts referred to as 'informal marriage') as part of their early intimate relationships. Where community attitudes towards adolescent premarital sexual activity remain conservative, young couples may enter a more formal union or marriage as a way of legitimising a relationship and avoiding stigma. There are also indications that 'love marriages' between young people are becoming increasingly more common in South Asia. While national-level data describing the prevalence of different child marriage typologies are scarce, a recent household survey in Nepal reported that 23% of women had entered self-arranged 'love

marriages’.

There is also evidence, particularly from Southeast Asia, that a significant proportion of adolescent pregnancies occur before marriage; particularly so in the Philippines (31%), Viet Nam and Lao PDR (23%, see Figure 26). For births in girls under 18, the proportion of pregnancies that occurred before marriage is even higher, with Philippines and Vietnam 32%, Lao 24%, Indonesia 23%, Timor 20% and Cambodia 9%.²⁹ Pregnancy (often unintended) in these settings often leads to circumstantial child marriage or more formal ‘love marriage’ to avoid social sanctions associated with premarital pregnancy and/or sexual activity in conservative settings.

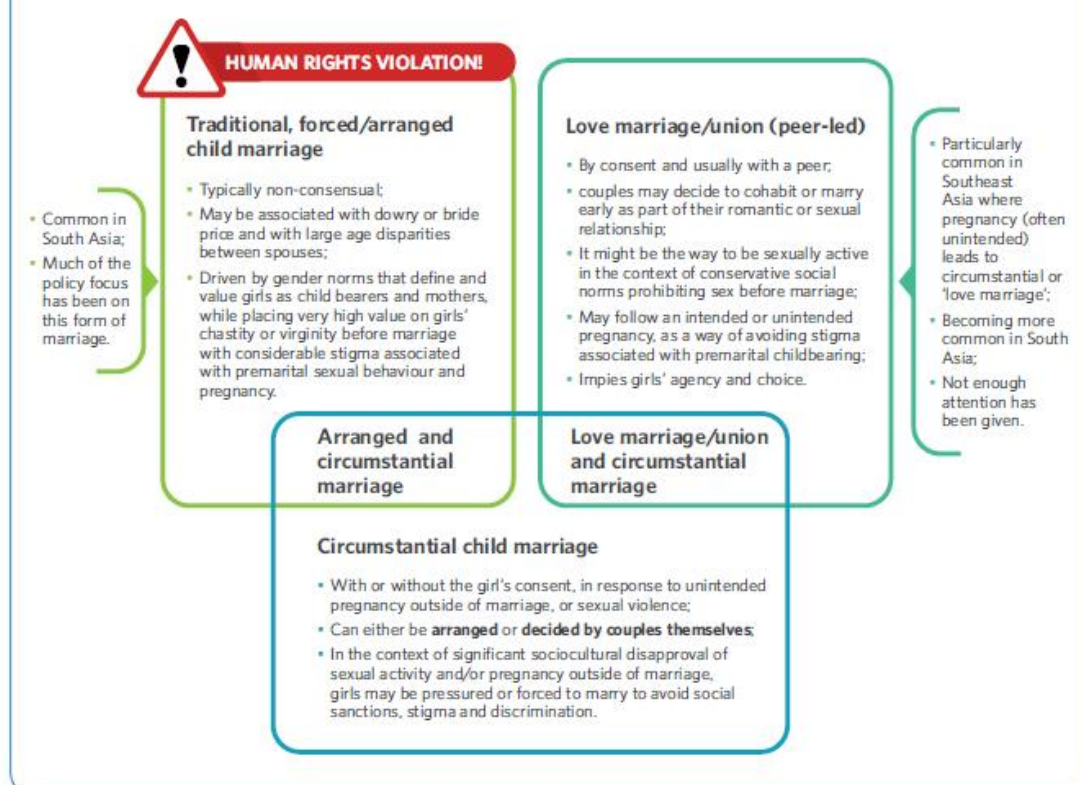
“
I have talked to them, and
they told me to get married when
they heard that I was pregnant.
Many families demand their
daughters not to have sex before
marriage. They can love
but they cannot have sex.
”

(Young female student, Viet Nam)



© UNFPA/Lao PDR

BOX 3. CHILD MARRIAGE AND EARLY UNION TYPOLOGIES



Source: UNFPA/UNICEF*

Traditional or forced child marriage is a human rights violation, with significant health, gender and socioeconomic consequences, particularly for girls. It is associated with an increased risk of early pregnancy and gender-based violence, and is a key driver of girls' low educational attainment and diminished socioeconomic opportunities. **Circumstantial child marriage also reflects a failure to ensure the SRH and rights of adolescents**, particularly where marriages are coerced or non-consensual. However, consensual early peer unions (informal or formal) imply agency on the part of young people. They, therefore, do not necessarily represent a breach of young people's rights in the same way as forced / non-consensual child marriage. While the specific drivers and impacts of early consensual unions are less well understood and require further research, it is clear that in the context of conservative sociocultural norms and poor access to comprehensive sexuality education and SRH services, these early unions can lead to unintended adolescent pregnancies with consequences for the health and well-being of girls and their children.

Child marriage and early union overwhelmingly affect adolescent girls. However, available data indicate that around 6% of boys in East- Southeast-Asia/the Pacific and 4% in South Asia were married by 18 years, with the highest prevalence in Lao PDR (11%), Nepal (10%)[†] and Afghanistan (7%). While less is understood about drivers and impacts on boys compared with girls, child marriage can also lead to early fatherhood and limited education and employment opportunities for boys.

Strategies to address child marriage and associated harms

There are some shared drivers of child marriage and early union across this region, and therefore some common actions needed to address early marriage and associated poor outcomes for girls. However, greater consideration of the context-specific pathways and influences on child marriage and early union is required, recognizing that not all unions are forced or arranged. Policy and programmatic responses to consensual peer unions, and circumstantial marriages, need to be different to those focused on traditional child marriage. Effective approaches must consider girls' agency, the context of adolescents' intimate relationships, and their SRH information and service needs to enable healthy and informed decision-making. These approaches must also support girls' choices with respect to their own sexuality and relationships, while empowering them to avoid potential poor health and other outcomes associated with early union. Strategies must also address the underlying sociocultural and gender norms that drive traditional forms of child marriage, as well as conservative norms that contribute to circumstantial marriage and poor SRH outcomes within early peer unions. To do so effectively, there is a need for further research in the region to better understand the context of early unions and related outcomes.

Recent studies of interventions to reduce child marriage in this region are limited, and primarily focused on South Asia in settings of a high prevalence of traditional (arranged) child marriage. Studies in Bangladesh and India have demonstrated that multi-component interventions combining comprehensive sexuality education, life-

skills training, and community-based approaches (mobilization, mass media address sociocultural norms) can improve girls' secondary school entry, participation and completion, and some have demonstrated a reduction in child marriage and early pregnancy.

While there are knowledge gaps, it is clear that investment and coordination are required across sectors, reflecting the complex and interrelated drivers of child marriage and early union. A summary of key UNICEF and UNFPA strategies, current initiatives in the region, and global evidence of effective approaches, is provided in box 4.



BOX 4. KEY STRATEGIES TO ADDRESS CHILD MARRIAGE AND ASSOCIATED HARMS

- **Supportive legislative environment:**
 - o Enact legislation that prohibits forced marriage, and remove cultural, religious and other exemptions that allow non-consensual marriage before the age of 18 for both girls and boys
 - o Ensure marriage legislation and its enforcement recognises and respects the agency of young people of similar age, for adolescents aged 16 or 17 years, to consent to marriage if a competent authority determines it is in their best interest, on legitimate and exceptional grounds on a case by case basis. (CEDAW/C/GC/31-CRC/C/GC/18)
 - o Ensure age of consent to sex is set at an age that recognises many young people commence sex during adolescence, so that consensual sexual activity between adolescents who are similar in age is not criminalised (CRC GC20)
- **Address the key drivers of child marriage and early union:**
 - o Educate and mobilise families, communities and leaders to address harmful cultural, religious and gender norms
 - o Undertake poverty reduction, and provide incentives / economic support to girls and families most at risk of child marriage
 - o Increase girls' access to secondary education
 - o Improve young people's access to comprehensive sexuality education
 - o Improve young people's access to SRH services, including contraceptive services to prevent unintended pregnancy
 - o Provide life-skills training and livelihood / employment opportunities for girls
- **Improve support for married girls:**
 - o Legal and other supports for married girls seeking protection or justice
 - o Improve access to SRH information and services, including to prevent early pregnancy and address gender-based violence within marriage
 - o Support return to, or continuation of, education
 - o Provide life-skills training and livelihood / employment opportunities

