



Webinar: Ending child marriage in the time of COVID-19: What role for parliaments?

8 February 2022, 14:00 – 15:30 CET

REPORT

Speakers (in order of appearance)

Ms. Nankali Maksud, Coordinator, UNFPA-UNICEF Global Programme to End Child Marriage
Ms. Matilda Branson, Policy and Advocacy Manager, Girls Not Brides: The Global Partnership to End Child Marriage
Mr. Sanjay Jaiswal, Member of the IPU Advisory Group on Health, Member of Parliament, India
Mr. Christopher Kalila, Member of Parliament, Zambia
Ms. Martha Lucía Micher, Senator, Mexico
Mr. Venkatraman Chandra-Mouli, Scientist, Adolescent Sexual and Reproductive Health, Department of Sexual and Reproductive Health and Research, World Health Organization (WHO)/United Nations Special Research Programme in Human Reproduction (HRP)

Moderator

Ms. Kareen Jabre, Director of Programmes, Inter-Parliamentary Union

Introduction

Child, early and forced marriage is a global problem, with an estimated 12 million girls marrying before the age of 18 every year. There has been a strong global drive to end child marriage, and numbers have declined in recent years. However, the COVID-19 pandemic is adversely affecting child marriage prevention programmes and increasing poverty and inequality, which are known drivers of child marriage. The aim of the webinar held on 8 February 2022 was to share information about the current state of child marriage globally, and discuss tangible actions that parliamentarians are taking to address the problem in the time of COVID-19.

The event was attended by close to 200 participants from 68 countries, including parliamentarians, parliamentary staff, government officials, civil society representatives and United Nations representatives.

Presentations from the UNFPA-UNICEF Global Programme to End Child Marriage and Girls Not Brides provided an overview of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on child marriage and how parliamentarians could engage within this challenging context. A panel discussion with parliamentarians from India, Mexico and Zambia provided country-specific examples of the impact of the pandemic on the lives of children and adolescents, particularly adolescent girls, and the redressive action taken by parliaments. Several other participants added their own countries' experiences. Closing remarks from WHO reflected on the current positive momentum, despite many challenges.

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic

The presentations highlighted the fact that 650 million girls and women alive today globally were married before their 18th birthday, meaning that one in five young women globally had married in childhood. This constituted a violation of human rights and a risk to health. Although child marriage had been declining

globally in the last decade, COVID-19 risked increasing the number of child brides by 10-13 million girls in the next ten years. While children and adolescents had been less affected by the direct effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, its indirect impact on their lives had been – and continued to be – substantial. Their education had been impacted by school closures and lockdowns. Access to services, including sexual and reproductive health services, and availability of contraception and information about it had been disrupted, while the risks of gender-based violence had increased, leading to growing numbers of adolescent pregnancies, among other problems. Economic shocks – in particular those affecting workers in the informal sector – had further increased inequalities and poverty, with girls and boys being married off by their families in response to financial insecurity. Countries were conducting assessments and studies to understand the full impact of the pandemic. Data shared by panellists showed worrying trends in school drop-outs, adolescent pregnancies and child marriage in various forms.

In light of that situation, the participants in the webinar called for renewed commitment and action. They reiterated that child marriage was central to development strategies, as failing to end child marriage would prevent the achievement of at least half of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030.

A comprehensive approach to ending child marriage

Participants in the webinar stressed the importance of legal reform, with a number of countries having introduced or strengthened legislation to raise the legal age of marriage, protect children and adolescents, and amend civil codes to sanction officials involved in child marriages. The key message was that raising the legal age of marriage was insufficient on its own and needed to be accompanied by a robust legal framework in a number of related sectors such as health, education and social protection, as well as law enforcement measures. Different legal systems, including religious and customary law, also needed to be harmonized on the issue.

Beyond legislation, countries had to tackle the persisting root causes of child marriage, which not only included poverty and inequality, but also cultural gender norms and harmful practices affecting girls' and boys' rights and well-being. Creating opportunities for education and empowering young people was central to that goal. Parliamentarians played an important role in allocating resources for the implementation of policies and programmes to improve information, education and access to services. Gender-responsive budgeting, public financing and accountability, along with increased participation of children and youth, were also identified as useful approaches.

Doing more together

The participants in the webinar made clear that child marriage could not be ended by one actor alone. A whole-of-government approach was required, bringing together executive, legislative and judicial powers. Parliamentarians were encouraged to join forces with influential community members such as religious leaders and civil society organizations to reach the most marginalized girls who were at highest risk of child marriage, as well as those who had already been married.

Partnerships could further improve monitoring of child marriage by complementing quantitative data with qualitative information and capturing sub-national differences masked by national averages. Existing review mechanisms, such as the Voluntary National Reviews of implementation of the SDGs and the 4th Cycle of the Human Rights Council's Universal Periodic Review, could be used to both learn more about countries' progress, challenges and opportunities in addressing child marriage, and to promote political change.

Participants shared interesting initiatives at the regional level, in particular the Model Law on Child Marriage of the Southern African Development Community (SADC) and various parliamentary initiatives in Central America, which were helping to set national agendas and shape multi-sectoral, comprehensive approaches to eradicate child marriage.

The IPU, WHO, the HRP, the UNFPA-UNICEF Global Programme to End Child Marriage and Girls Not Brides will continue to promote exchanges and work with stakeholders to accelerate progress for a better future for girls and boys worldwide.

Resources

The meeting documents are available on the IPU website at: www.ipu.org/event/ending-child-marriage-in-time-covid-19-what-role-parliaments.

Resources on adolescent health and well-being:

- WHO's work on adolescent health and well-being: www.who.int/health-topics/adolescent-health#tab=tab_1
- Technical note on adolescent girl-responsive systems: www.unicef.org/documents/adolescent-girl-responsive-systems
- Technical note on effective programming approaches to leaving no one behind: www.unicef.org/documents/leaving-no-one-behind
- Power to Girls campaign: www.girlsnotbrides.org/take-action/power-to-girls-campaign/

General resources on child marriage:

- Child marriage atlas: atlas.girlsnotbrides.org/map/
- Seven-step guide to strengthening legislation, policy and public financing to end child marriage: www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/resource-pdf/GP-2020-Brief-Legislation-Policy-and-Finance.pdf
- Special research supplement in the Journal of Adolescent Health on the diversity and complexity of child marriage: [www.jahonline.org/issue/S1054-139X\(21\)X0013-4](http://www.jahonline.org/issue/S1054-139X(21)X0013-4)
- Technical note on scaling up efforts to end child marriage: www.unicef.org/media/68381/file/GP-2020-TechnicalNote-Scaling-up-in-the-Global-Programme.pdf
- Learning resources from Girls Not Brides on child marriage in the context of COVID-19: www.girlsnotbrides.org/learning-resources/child-marriage-and-covid-19/

Resources for parliamentarians and on child marriage legislation:

- Toolkit on the role of parliamentarians in ending child marriage: www.girlsnotbrides.org/learning-resources/resource-centre/the-role-of-parliamentarians-in-ending-child-marriage/
- Brief on child marriage laws and their limitations: thedocs.worldbank.org/en/doc/134161519943385981-0050022017/original/WBL2017ChildMarriageLaws.pdf
- Technical note on child marriage and the law: www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/resource-pdf/Child-marriage-the-law-2020.pdf
- Comic series to understand the SADC Model Law on Eradicating Child Marriage: esaro.unfpa.org/en/publications/what-sadc-model-law-all-about?page=4
- Guide to using the SADC Model Law: esaro.unfpa.org/en/publications/guide-using-sadc-model-law-eradicating-child-marriage-and-protecting-children-already
- Video on promoting the SADC Model Law through parliamentary action: www.youtube.com/watch?v=PScTmM5RyXw