



Guidance Note | 2024

Partnering with women-led organizations to address child marriage in South Asia

UNICEF Regional Office for South Asia (ROSA)

P.O. Box 5815, Lekhnath Marg, Kathmandu, Nepal

Tel: +977-1-4417082

Email: rosa@unicef.org

Website: www.unicef.org/rosa

Girls Not Brides

Seventh Floor, 65 Leadenhall Street, London EC3A 2AD, United Kingdom

Email: info@GirlsNotBrides.org

Website: www.girlsnotbrides.org

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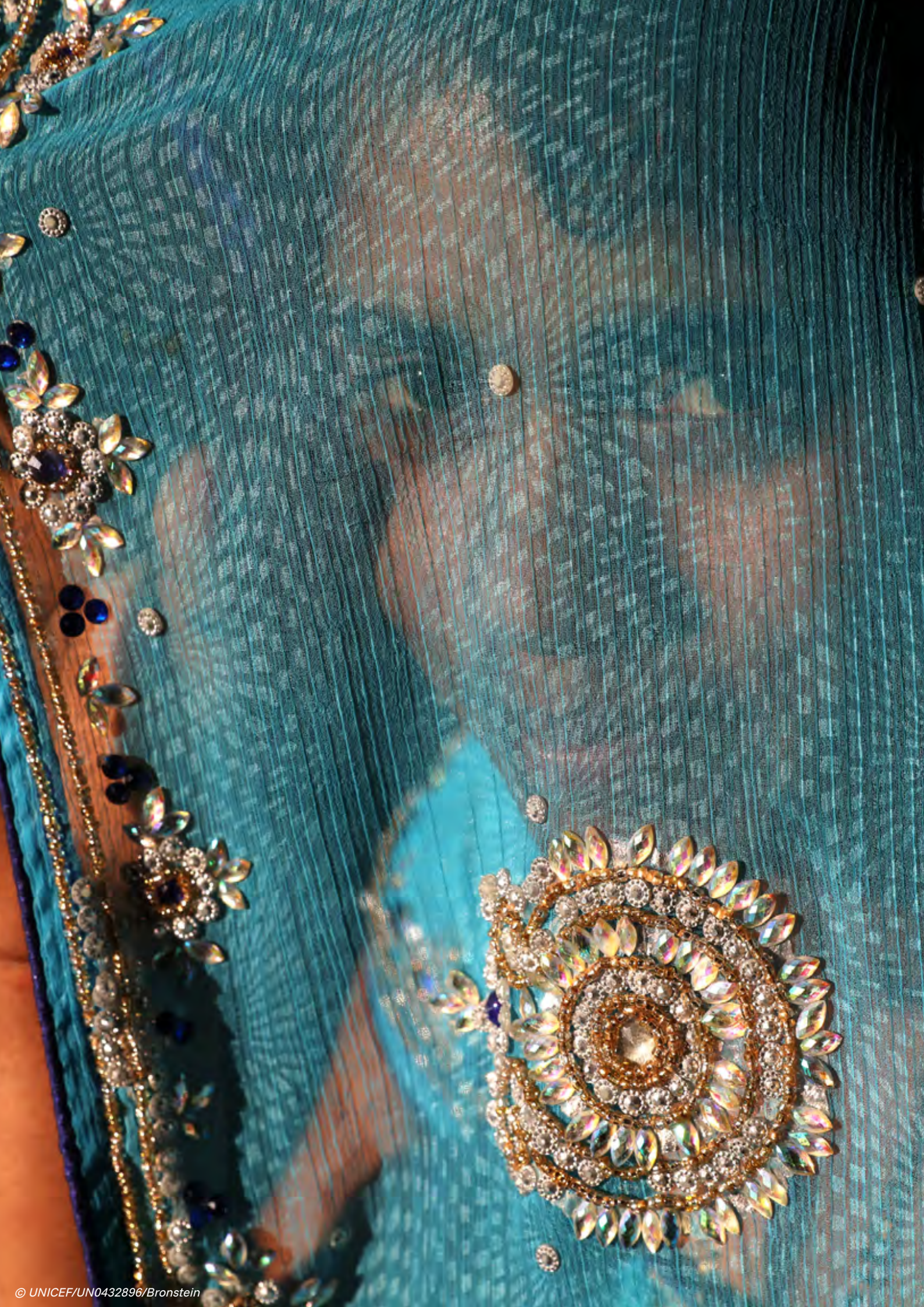
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Background

Child marriage in South Asia

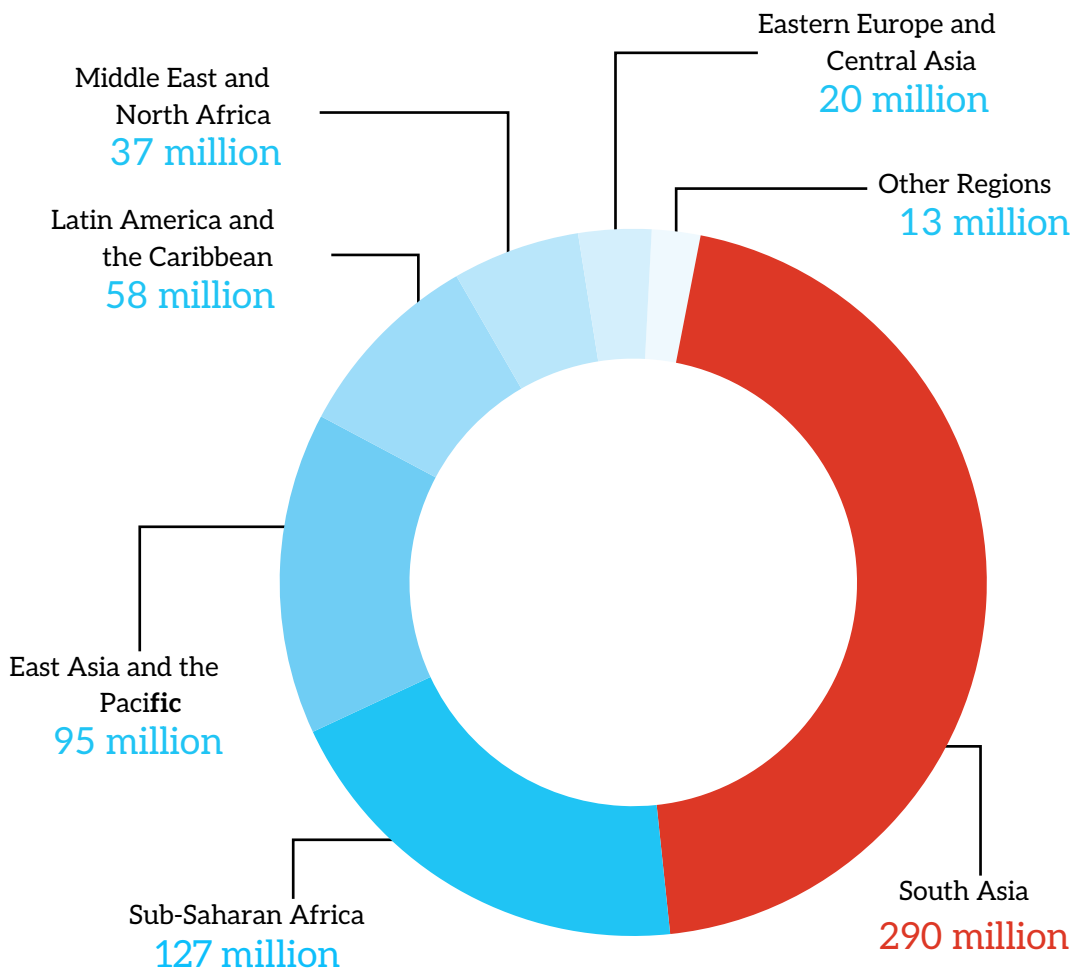
Child marriage, defined as the formal or informal union in which one or both parties are under the age of 18, is a violation of human rights.

Driven by Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5,¹ which calls for the elimination of child marriage, there is growing evidence, policy momentum and programmatic focus on reducing its prevalence.

South Asia is home to nearly a quarter of the global population. It is also home to the world's largest population of adolescents (aged 10–19 years), numbering 340 million.

Many adolescents in South Asia, especially girls, are vulnerable to early marriage. About one in every four young women aged 20–24 is married when she is still a child.² South Asia is home to the highest number of child brides, accounting for 45% of the global total (see Figure 1). Within the region, however, the prevalence of child marriage varies significantly both across countries (with Bangladesh accounting for 50% of the region's total) and within countries.³

Figure 1: Nearly 45 per cent of the world's child brides are in South Asia



Source: UNICEF, A profile of child marriage in South Asia, 2023

Although child marriage affects children and adolescents of all genders, adolescent girls are disproportionately impacted. They also experience the greatest intergenerational impacts on their health, education and well-being.

Child marriage limits women's and girls' access to health including sexual and reproductive health and rights education, and economic and political participation. It limits their control over their own bodies including if, when and whom to marry, and increases their risk of experiencing gender-based violence.⁴ Additionally, child marriage disrupts girls' education,⁵ limits their psychosocial wellbeing and has profound global economic costs.⁶

Child marriage in South Asia typically occurs in poor and rural households, and the majority of child brides are cut off from education once married. Vulnerabilities are magnified by poverty, caste divisions, urban-rural distinctions, social and gender norms and humanitarian crises. Threats such as climate disasters, economic instability and the repercussions of the COVID-19 pandemic also make girls more likely to experience child marriage.

Rooted in gender inequality and patriarchal systems that place a lesser value on girls and women compared to men and boys, child marriage is a violation of basic human rights.

While South Asia countries have made significant progress in recent decades, in order to meet SDG 5.3 and eliminate child marriage by 2030, the rate of decline would need to be seven times faster.⁷

Addressing child marriage requires a gender-transformative approach to programming and policy-making. This means implementing programmes that operate within communities to rebalance power by transforming social norms, redistributing resources, enabling access to quality basic services and building agency for those facing gender-based discrimination. Such community-level efforts, if supported by multi-sectoral, evidence-informed and well-resourced legal and policy responses, can help to achieve the transformational social change required to address child marriage.



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Why partnering with women-led organizations is key to addressing child marriage

While cognisant of the distinctions inherent in the work of women-led organisations and that of feminist movements (discussed throughout this section), they share a deep understanding of the needs of women and girls in the communities where they work.

Their work is often born from communities themselves, and the members of these groups often have first-hand experience of the injustice their work seeks to change. By deploying context-specific strategies they can have lasting impacts on their communities, advance gender equality and work to end child marriage.

These organizations prioritize the needs and strategic priorities of girls and women in all their diversity to help them achieve their full potential. They are often among the first responders during conflicts or crises, which typically have disproportionate impacts on women and girls.

That is why effective, supportive partnerships with women-led organizations are essential to shift the balance towards transformational change.

What do women-led organizations do?

Women-led organizations are registered or informally organized groups⁸ that are led by a woman, whose boards, executives, staff and volunteers are over 50 per cent women and/or girls⁹ and that have a mandate to advance gender equality and women's/girls' rights and empowerment.¹⁰

Effective women-led organizations engage at the grassroots, in programme implementation and policy advocacy to:¹¹

- create an enabling environment by advocating for effective governance and equitable policies and addressing social norms
- improve women and girls' access to food (agriculture and food security)
- enhance access to services for women and girls, in all their diversities
- increase income generation initiatives targeting women and girls
- engage in change communication to advance gender equitable behaviours and beliefs
- engage in participatory learning and action, increasing the meaningful participation of women and girls

Many, though not all, women-led organizations are also involved in feminist movements. These movements comprise people with shared experiences of gender injustice who organize to build their collective power and leadership for gender equality. They work to address the root causes of gender discrimination, encourage women's leadership as thinkers, decision-makers and strategists, and deploy innovative strategies that build on and validate women's lived experiences.¹²

While the two can overlap, feminist organizations are distinct from women-led organizations in their recognition that patriarchy and gender-based discrimination and exclusion are among the most fundamental forms of inequality in society. Feminist organizations examine how power dynamics manifest in public and private spaces, and adopt intersectional approaches that recognize that patriarchal power does not operate in isolation.¹³



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What strategies do women-led organizations in South Asia use?

In the section below, overviews of how women-led organisations are leading efforts to eliminate child marriage in South Asia are discussed, as well as highlighting case studies of specific interventions

1. They build adolescent and youth agency and leadership

Women-led organizations work with adolescent girls and young women, often through forming groups or collectives to increase their knowledge, skills and assets, and support their decision-making power, choice and control of their futures. They create safe spaces to learn life skills, access services, share challenges, seek support and build solidarity. Safe spaces established and run by such organizations are platforms for girls and young women to learn income-generating skills, such as digital, financial and interpersonal skills; access services; share their challenges; seek support and build solidarity. These spaces help girls and young women reflect on their lives, unpack the social norms that tend to determine their life trajectories and build aspirations.

Women-led organizations support adolescent girls and young women to build communication skills to help them negotiate with their families to pursue their aspirations. Increasingly, women-led organizations enable successful partnerships and offer programmatic, policy, governance and resourcing support to organizations led by adolescent girls and youth.¹⁴ This said, the mechanisms guiding the successful partnership of more experienced women-led organisations with more nascent girl-and youth-led groups in communities is an expanding and interesting area of work, requiring additional evidence and research.

Women-led organizations are increasingly also creating safe spaces for adolescent boys and young men. In addition to building skills similar to those for girls, these spaces help unpack violence experienced by adolescent boys and young men, create allyship and initiate conversations on positive masculinities to address social norms and gender stereotypes.

These organizations engage with families to build trust and to better understand parental and family values about the agency of adolescent girls and young women which often shape their decisions regarding their daughters' education, employment, marriage and mobility. This helps to promote inter-generational dialogues and develop girls' agency.

In parallel, women-led organizations collaborate with governments to build and foster public systems that are responsive to adolescents and their needs. The recognition of these organizations as experts in their contexts positions them to advocate with governments for solutions to address the challenges faced by adolescent girls, including child marriage.

Women-led organizations operate in very different social, economic and political contexts across South Asia. Yet, some challenges surpass national borders and require region-wide and transnational solutions, such as embracing and advocating for the recognition of adolescents and youth as individuals to meaningfully build their agency and leadership.



Women's Cooperatives, Nepal

Women's cooperatives empower women and girls in both rural and urban areas by enhancing their socio-economic status through self-governance and financial services. They encourage women and girls to join and participate in savings schemes, financial literacy classes, skill development training, and awareness programs and offer low-interest credit for income-generating activities. In several districts, they collaborate with the UNFPA-UNICEF Global Programme to Eradicate Child Marriage to support at-risk girls by integrating them into their network and helping them start small businesses and become entrepreneurs. Some cooperatives have implemented Rupantaran, a social and financial skills training package for vulnerable girls in their communities using their resources.

2. They engage with influencers to transform social norms

Women-led organizations mobilize and engage with gatekeepers within communities, such as parents, in-laws, men and boys, as well as influencers, such as religious and community leaders, to create an environment in which girls and women can thrive.

For example, working with young married men is an effective entry point to change norms and advocate for the agency and well-being of married adolescents and young women. Engaging with religious leaders to commit publicly to address child marriage, including a refusal to perform child marriages, participate in campaigns and build their own capacity to raise awareness about the harmful consequences of child marriage have been effective in shifting community norms.¹⁵ Initiating discussions with them in places of worship helps to build relationships and includes them in conversations on child marriage in the community. However, such engagement can be time-intensive and risks backlash, and needs support for the safety and well-being of staff and volunteers.

Women-led organisations also actively engage with frontline workers who play an important role in enabling girls to access information and services across health, nutrition and safety.



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3. They inspire girls and connect them with role models and mentors

Women leaders are role models and mentors for girls and young women, inspiring them to pursue their aspirations, build life skills, engage in income-generating activities and navigate societal pressure to marry early. Such mentorship can help break the cycle of intergenerational poverty and child marriage.

Women-led organizations identify successful role models, including women with non-traditional careers, such as police officers, entrepreneurs and lawyers, and arrange mentoring sessions with them. This strategy is especially effective when role models belong to the same community as girls, due to similarities in context, challenges and lived experiences. Inter-generational dialogues, in the form of two-way mentorship can foster personal and professional connections between adolescent girls and their mentors, which can, in turn, weaken the appeal of child marriage and empower girls to resist the practice.

Another effective strategy is to arrange exposure visits and interactions with role models from outside girls' communities. Such interactions expand girls' worldviews, build confidence and are an incremental change towards independent mobility.

4. They use holistic approaches that centre the needs of adolescent girls

Women-led organizations use a range of strategies that are responsive to the diverse needs of girls and young women, including access to education and learning opportunities, sexual and reproductive health services and information, economic empowerment initiatives, legal support and community mobilization.

Women-led organizations are leaders in responding to the needs of married girls, who are often overlooked in programmes on child marriage. Having recognized the insufficiency of singular approaches to address child marriage and the wider community and familial norms endorsing the practice, such organizations apply multi-pronged and holistic approaches to tackle pressures to marry girls off early.



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Naripokko, Bangladesh

Naripokko is dedicated to transforming the social landscape for women. This membership-based organization is guided by the principle of “my body is my right” and advocates for women’s autonomy in decisions around marriage, raising awareness amongst diverse stakeholders, from adolescents to local governments. Through leadership development programmes, organizational capacity-building and advocacy, ranging from campaigns against child marriage and gender-based violence to legal reform, Naripokko is committed to advancing gender equality and women’s empowerment in Bangladesh.



Bedari, Pakistan

Bedari is a civil society organization founded by a group of Pakistani women to realize the rights and enhance the dignity of women and girls. In partnership with the Commonwealth of Learning, Canada, Bedari has rolled out the GIRLS Inspire project in Punjab province, using art, theatre and immersive educational sessions to communicate messages about child marriage and girls’ rights. As part of its holistic programming, Bedari offers self-growth workshops to empower young girls while simultaneously transforming societal attitudes.

5. They collect evidence, shape policies and strengthen movements to end child marriage

Women-led organizations seek to shape the development and implementation of laws and policies on child marriage and its related issues, such as education, economic empowerment, gender-based violence and access to reproductive health services and education. Using innovative and participatory methods, they collect evidence from those most affected by gender-based discrimination, bringing together qualitative narratives, impactful case studies, and girl-led research that highlights voices from the grassroots. Their work provides critical evidence that informs responsive programmes and policies.

These organizations often form collectives or join existing ones. Through their collective efforts, they convene to share learning and expertise, build a common influencing strategy and develop messages tailored to diverse stakeholders. This helps deepen solidarity between actors and strengthens the movement to end child marriage.



National Coalition for Girls' Rights (NCGR), Nepal

NCGR promotes and protects girls' rights by influencing government policy, raising public awareness through campaigns, and providing training to empower girls and local communities. NCGR advocates for legal reforms through research-based policy advocacy, especially on child marriage, gender-based violence and access to education. The coalition collaborates with national and international partners including government, and works towards a society where girls are empowered and protected, and are equipped with the tools to thrive.

6. They prioritize the needs of women and girls during humanitarian crises

In crisis settings, risks of gender-based violence and food and economic insecurity increase. Access to basic education, health and nutrition services are also affected. Existing social and gender norms are exacerbated by stress and uncertainty and compounded by the breakdown of individual, customary and formal support systems. In such contexts, child marriage may be seen as a means to cope, to ensure girls' security or to reduce the economic burden on the family.¹⁶

Women-led organizations work with government and other actors to ensure relief and aid reach women and girls, and that their needs are at the heart of policy response on recovery, rehabilitation and resilience-building.

With their strong roots within communities, they mobilize during crises to deliver essential services, such as health care, education and psychosocial support to women and girls by creating physical or virtual safe spaces. They enhance coordination among international agencies, governments and local communities. By holding humanitarian actors accountable for gender-sensitive policies and practices, these organizations ensure that responses are inclusive, equitable and effective.



Women's Rehabilitation Centre (WOREC), Nepal

WOREC's SNEHA initiative centres youth leadership to end child marriage in disaster-affected settings. Established following the 2022 earthquake in Sudur-Paschim province, SNEHA sets up women-friendly spaces to deliver critical services such as psychosocial support, referrals, food, shelter and essential supplies. They are also places where women and girls can express themselves freely, experience dignity and safety, and build resilience. By focusing on youth leadership, SNEHA empowers young girls and boys to identify pressing community issues and set advocacy agendas.

Youth advocates with SNEHA have identified child marriage as a major risk and youth facilitators work to raise awareness and refer child marriage cases to legal bodies like judicial committees and the police.

7. They are changing the narrative

These organizations bring forth progressive visions rooted in gender equality and girls' and women's rights. They amplify the diverse voices of young people – including on sensitive issues, such as sexuality, mobility, consent and agency – which often push the boundaries of conventional approaches to addressing child marriage. By systematically highlighting these narratives, they inform policy and programming and seek to impact the acceptability of challenges to child marriages.



National Young Voices Group, India

The National Young Voices Group brings together nearly 100 diverse civil society organisations across India. It seeks to actively bring young people in their diversity to discuss on issues affecting their lives. Centering the voices of young people, this group advocates for solutions ranging age to agency in addressing the issue of child marriage.

This group amplifies young people's call for access to quality education, menstrual health, vocational training and safe employment. It stresses the importance of comprehensive sexuality education, preventive and protective mechanisms to address violence and financial support for vulnerable families.

As members of the National Young Voices Group, women-led organisations and feminist movements play a key role in deepening the understanding on the root causes of child marriage from an intersectional lens. They nuance the discourse by helping to draw linkages with larger structural inequalities, gender-based violence, and restrictive norms as they impact young people's aspirations, agency and bodily autonomy.

Resourcing women-led organizations to address child marriage

Women-led organizations and feminist movements are natural and strategic allies of stakeholders devising and implementing gender-transformative and sustainable approaches to ending child marriage in South Asia. By leveraging their expertise, community trust and commitment to gender equality, significant progress is possible towards a future where every girl has the opportunity to fulfill her potential free from the harmful effects of child marriage.

Despite their critical role in programme and policy, women-led organizations remain severely under-resourced. The Women's Peace and Humanitarian Fund has found that, globally, 90.7 per cent of women-led organizations and organizations working on women's rights feel that their existence is at risk due to lack of institutional or core funding.¹⁸

Feminist and women-led organizations and networks have long argued for stronger partnerships and more core and flexible funding, and have made concrete recommendations on how international organizations, bilateral and multilateral funders and philanthropic foundations¹⁹ can resource their work and create a feminist funding ecosystem. The Feminist Movement and Leadership Action Coalition of the Generation Equality Forum has called for the annual growth rate of funding from all sectors committed to women-led and feminist movements, organizations and funds, including those led by trans, intersex, and non-binary people, to be doubled globally by 2026.²⁰

This sustained advocacy has led to growing recognition by the United Nations, donors and international non-governmental organizations of the role that women-led organizations play due to their deep expertise in working within and with communities. They are increasingly seen as key partners under the wider rubric of localization, which aims to invest in and empower local actors.²¹

This is also recognized in the Grand Bargain²² to tackle the needs of people in crises. This calls for increased and intentional investment in the capacity, delivery and leadership of local responders "making principled action as local as possible and as international as necessary". Indeed, with the intimate links between child marriage and crises, it is crucial to ensure that the local expertise of women and youth-led organizations receives respect and investment.

In South Asia, the third phase of the Global Programme to End Child Marriage²³ has identified partnerships between the United Nations and women-led organizations as a key shift needed to eradicate child marriage in the region. The programme commits to involving national women-led organizations and to engaging with regional and global advocacy initiatives to rebalance power and bring transformative change in the lives of girls and women.



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Operating conditions and civic space in South Asia

Insufficient and unsustainable international financing flows, alongside domestic austerity measures, are making it less likely that public funds will be invested in ways that protect and advance gender equality.²⁴ Furthermore, the foundations of democracies around the world are at risk because of rising economic inequality, societal and political polarisation, and the closing of civic space. The civic space in which civil society organizations can organize, operate and participate in South Asia ranges from obstructed to repressed to closed.²⁵

A recent analysis in Bangladesh, Nepal and Sri Lanka suggests that civic space is growing less vibrant, civil society less able to act collectively and subnational civic spaces are expanding and shrinking at the same time.²⁶ It also notes that spaces for engagement and creativity remain active.

The report shows that, amidst rapidly changing political and operating conditions, the impulse to survive pushes civil society organizations to limit the scale, focus and visibility of activities on politically sensitive or contentious issues. While many are making strategic shifts to constructively engage with government development agendas on education, health and women's rights, sustainable and transformational change is unlikely without engaging with issues of accountability and transparency. Increased competition for limited resources has also had negative impacts on solidarity and collective action, yet the report finds that civil society organizations are adapting and innovating to stay true to their vision.²⁷

The shrinking space for civic action in South Asia makes gender-transformative work in already patriarchal contexts even more challenging. The success of women-led organizations and feminist movements in addressing child marriage depends not only on the resources available to them, but in the way they are resourced.



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Call to action

Partnerships with women-led organizations must move beyond standalone projects towards holistic, multi-sectoral alliances, including non-governmental and civil society organizations, United Nations agencies, governments, donors and academia, grounded in shared feminist principles, ensuring that these partnerships are neither extractive nor instrumentalizing.

Women-led organizations must not shoulder the burdens and risks of tackling deep-rooted socially constructed inequalities alone.

For this reason, it is essential to:

» **Invest in multi-sectoral work to address child marriage**

Gender-transformational change is possible if United Nations agencies including UNICEF, governments, donors and partners pool funding across key sectors, such as education, health and nutrition, economic opportunities and protection. This will unlock resources at scale, share risks, enhance sustainability, reduce management burdens, expand funding relationships, reduce competition for resources and increase collaboration.²⁸

» **Invest in organizations, not projects**

To achieve the transformational change required to end child marriage, women-led organizations need funding that is long-term, flexible and diversified and that covers core expenses. United Nations agencies, multilaterals and donors should move beyond funding short-term projects towards building sustainability and resilience of women-led organizations. With resources to strengthen operations, safeguarding, financial management and compliance, these organizations gain much-needed stability. Investments in organizational leadership, strategic thinking and horizon-scanning equip them to become agile and make strategic shifts in programming with changing circumstances. Capacity-building and training involving the United Nations and academia facilitate knowledge-sharing between women-led organizations in South Asia and beyond are instrumental in translating strategic vision to action.

» **Switch to flexible and long-term funding**

Restricted and earmarked funds limit the scope for innovation and efforts to develop sustainable projects that could be passed onto local communities. Women-led organizations highlight the need for flexible, multi-year funding that empowers them to harness their knowledge and experience and design contextually appropriate interventions.

» **Share learnings and best practices widely**

Donors should invest in supporting women-led organizations to integrate their learning and best practices on addressing child marriage distilled from evaluations, stocktakes and internal reviews. These hold great importance and should be shared with the wider ecosystem of women-led networks, United Nations agencies, donors, civil society organizations, government and communities. Sharing essential information across the ecosystem has the potential to amplify results and enable change at scale while acknowledging the depth of work needed for this.

» **Invest in collective action to address child marriage, especially when led by women-led organizations**

Collective action enables simultaneously engaging with diverse stakeholders, government and private donors to consolidate learning, and thereby contributes to accountability and change at scale. In increasingly challenging times, with growing backlash against initiatives that seek to rebalance power and promote gender equality, investing in collective action is key to building a constructive and united response, without compromising personal safety. Global Partnerships such as Girls Not Brides has a key role to play in providing human, technical and financial support to strengthen collective action by its members at national and sub-national levels

» **Use eligibility criteria and funding mechanisms that are fit for purpose**

Most donors are geared to fund larger organizations with robust policies, systems and funding thresholds. This excludes many women-led organizations which typically have limited human resources and smaller budgets. Offering a broader range of funding channels, from small to large grants, funding organizational policy development and allowing for re-granting, can significantly contribute to the long-term sustainability of such organizations.²⁹ Reducing the burden of proposal development, such as allowing submissions online or offline and in different formats and languages, can help to prevent the exclusion of organizations that work with the most remote and marginalized communities in South Asia.

Recognizing the many ways in which women-led organizations may be resourced by their donors will enable resourcing models that include funding, mentorship, capacity development, network-building and entrepreneurship training, and will move towards holistic partnerships between donors and grantee.³⁰

» **Ensure transparency and accountability in funding**

Amidst the broader emphasis on transparency and accountability, funding accountability may be strengthened by fostering regular communication between women-led organizations, partner organizations and donors on commitments on ending child marriage, including cross-sectoral work. Such communications should be designed to accommodate the capacity of women-led organizations, including those in remote and marginalized communities, to engage and utilize them effectively.

» **Use inclusive and participatory processes to design theories of change, programmes and impact measurement**

Through co-creation with women-led organizations key actors can ensure that their theories of change around child marriage reflect ground realities. Including women-led organizations in programme design and implementation will lead to solutions that are empowering for all those impacted by child marriage.

Taking inspiration from feminist approaches to monitoring, evaluation and learning can help to shape and design participatory impact measurement and reporting. The principles of participatory monitoring, evaluation and learning can be effectively applied while designing indicators, defining success, being intentional about including marginalized voices, capturing incremental change and devising indicators that reflect challenges to programmes to end child marriage, such as political context, changing operating conditions and backlash from gatekeepers.



» **Build local capacity to build on local expertise**

Involving women-led organizations in designing their own capacity development supports them to build on their expertise in local socio-political contexts. Such organizations can enhance the effectiveness of their programming and advocacy against child marriage, including for children experiencing multiple forms of marginalization, through technical support that deepens their use of gender-transformative and intersectional approaches, evidence generation, evidence-based programming and advocacy. UNICEF and its partners can also build the capacity of these organizations to communicate their impacts effectively to communities, government, donors and the media.

» **Create safe spaces for sharing perspectives and learnings**

Platforms for learning and exchange among women-led organizations, feminist movements and their stakeholders facilitate the sharing of best practices, challenges and innovations in addressing child marriage. These are safe spaces in which diverse viewpoints are appreciated and synergies are identified to develop collective strategies that strengthen the movement against child marriage, while avoiding duplication of effort and sharing risk.

» **Facilitate participation in decision-making spaces**

Women-led organizations and feminist movements play a critical role in addressing child marriage and navigating civic spaces in South Asia. Their work must be made visible, and they must be supported to participate in debates around evidence generation and analysis, contribute to policymaking and policy implementation. By encouraging dialogue between these organizations and policymakers, UNICEF and other donors can nurture mutual trust to achieve policy change that has the potential to be truly gender-transformative.

» **Bring women-led organizations into networks in other sectors**

The participation of women-led organizations in sectors and networks connected to the prevention of child marriage, such as education, sexual and reproductive health and rights, economic empowerment, humanitarian action and violence against children, are beneficial both for the networks and for the organizations themselves. Once these synergies are established, organizations can leverage their unique strengths through mutual referrals and multi-sectoral collaboration and by collectively influencing and raising awareness on the needs of women and girls.



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- 6 Wodon, Quentin, et al., Economic impacts of child marriage: Global synthesis report, Washington, DC: The World Bank and International Center for Research on Women.
- 7 UNICEF, A profile of child marriage in South Asia.
- 8 Many of these groups are unregistered, either due to obstacles encountered with legal registration (such as a requirement to possess an office address or to have audited financials), or in order to maintain a low profile due to security issues.
- 9 In exceptional crises, where it is difficult or unsafe for women/girls to take up public positions, organizations where women make up less than 50 per cent of positions may also be categorized as women-led, as long as they have a mandate to advance gender equality and women’s and/or girls’ rights and empowerment.
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Guidance Note

Partnering with women-led organizations to address child marriage in South Asia



UNICEF Regional Office for South Asia (ROSA)
P.O. Box 5815, Lekhnath Marg,
Kathmandu, Nepal
www.unicef.org/rosa



Girls Not Brides
Seventh Floor, 65 Leadenhall Street,
London EC3A 2AD, United Kingdom
www.girlsnotbrides.org