



Vows of POVERTY

26 Countries Where Child Marriage Eclipses Girls' Education



Imagine growing up in a place where, as a child, you're more likely to walk down the aisle than into a secondary school classroom.

That's the sad reality for girls in the following 26 countries, where data reveal they have a greater chance of getting married before age 18 than enrolling in secondary school, let alone completing it. For them, "for better or worse" becomes overwhelmingly worse. "For richer, for poorer" is decidedly poorer. They are, in essence, being forced to take vows of poverty. As a result, their countries are saddled with a devastating deficit in opportunities for girls. We count down these 26 countries from those with the smallest such deficit to those with the largest. In some of these places, communities are making great strides in delaying marriage for girls and opening more doors to quality education. They offer hope — and may not be on this list much longer. Other countries, however, show little progress. They are home to some of the most difficult living circumstances on earth, especially for girls. [Read our full report at care.org/vowsofpoverty](#) to learn more about the causes of child marriage, the barriers to girls' education and the steps you can take to help shorten — and one day eliminate — this list.

#26 Tanzania

#25 Afghanistan

40% of girls married before 18
33% of girls enrolled in secondary school

Afghanistan makes this list in spite of 2009 legislation that criminalized forced marriage. Human Rights Watch says an estimated **2,000 Afghan women and girls attempt suicide each year by setting themselves on fire**, acts often linked to domestic violence and/or forced marriage. Families struggling to cover school costs often send their sons to school before their daughters. And a CARE analysis of more than 1,000 attacks on schools between 2006 and 2008 found that girls' education was targeted more than boys'. It's no wonder that **girls are outnumbered in school three to one by boys**.

- #24 Sierra Leone
- #23 Côte d'Ivoire
- #22 Madagascar
- #21 Equatorial Guinea



#20 Bangladesh

65% of girls married before 18
51% of girls enrolled in secondary school

Bangladesh has the highest child marriage rate outside of sub-Saharan Africa, and about 30 percent of its girls are married at 15 or younger. Driving much of the problem are poverty, social norms that devalue girls and lax enforcement of laws forbidding child marriage. **Violent weather exacerbated by climate change in some parts of the country can drive even more girls to marry early**. As some poor families lose their farms to floods and mudslides, they marry their girls early to limit the number of mouths to feed and, in their view, ensure a more stable future for their daughters.

- #19 Mauritania
- #18 Senegal
- #17 Guinea-Bissau
- #16 Eritrea



#15 Uganda

40% of girls married before 18
22% of girls enrolled in secondary school

Uganda's experience is a case study in the strong, yet complex, ties between child marriage, poverty and school dropout rates. In Uganda, education appears to play a big role in protecting girls from the dangers of early marriage and childbirth. For example, **two-thirds of unschooled girls in Uganda are married at age 18 or younger, while about only one in seven girls who have completed secondary education is married young**.

#14 Nigeria

#13 Malawi

50% of girls married before 18
30% of girls enrolled in secondary school

Girls in Malawi are encouraged by local customs to engage in sex at an early age, so many drop out of school after they get pregnant. A Johns Hopkins University report describes a custom in which **men have sex with girls as part of a rite of passage so they can determine whether the girls are "really grown up."** But these harmful traditions are now meeting fierce resistance — sometimes from the girls themselves — renewing hope that the tide is turning against child marriage. **Under pressure from a girl-led movement, parliament this year adopted a new law raising the age of marriage to 18.**

#12 Liberia

#11 Mali

55% of girls married before 18
32% of girls enrolled in secondary school

Because many teenage girls suffer female genital mutilation and then are forced to marry early, girls are doubly devalued in Mali. A traditional cultural belief is that cutting girls in this way makes them more desirable for marriage because they will be more likely to obey their husbands. Marriage, often to older men, can end any hope of living freely or of breaking a cycle of poverty and violence. Adolescent girls in rural Mali have long journeyed to the capital of Bamako, many seeking employment as domestic servants. Few ever return to a classroom. To make matters worse, armed conflict that broke out in northern Mali in 2012 subjected more girls to violence and created another barrier to education.

- #10 Angola
- #9 Guinea



#8 Ethiopia

41% of girls married before 18
11% of girls enrolled in secondary school

Because many Ethiopian girls start school late, they often marry before completing primary school. Few return to the classroom. The problem is particularly acute in the Amhara region of northern Ethiopia, where in spite of successful government-led efforts, **one-third of girls still marry by age 15.** Other **efforts to improve sexual and reproductive health for married and widowed teens show promise.** A project called TESFA reached more than 5,000 girls who reported increases in school attendance and felt more valued at home and in their communities. During the project — which also engaged gatekeepers such as fathers, husbands, in-laws and religious leaders — communities stopped at least 180 child marriages.

#7 Mozambique

48% of girls married before 18
18% of girls enrolled in secondary school

Mozambique's life expectancy is only 50. Maternal mortality is among the highest in the world, as are its rates of HIV infection among young people. Girls sometimes serve as currency, with impoverished families marrying them off in exchange for livestock. **Even if girls do enroll in school, malnutrition sometimes hinders their ability to learn, especially during the "hungry season" before harvest.** Too many girls in Mozambique find themselves trapped in a cycle of poor childhood health, early marriage and early childbirth.

#6 Burkina Faso

#5 Somalia

45% of girls married before 18
5% of girls enrolled in secondary school

Conflict and civil war in this east African nation lead to instability for all, but girls often pay the highest price. Parents who might otherwise value education sometimes keep their daughters home to protect them from violence — or marry them to an older man they hope will protect and provide for them. **Another barrier to school attendance is a lack of sanitary towels**, according to UNICEF, which can lead to embarrassment and a lack of confidence, resulting in poor class performance, poor transition to the next level, sporadic school attendance and high dropout rates.

- #4 South Sudan
- #3 Central African Rep.
- #2 Chad



#1 Niger

76% of girls married before 18
10% of girls enrolled in secondary school

Niger has the highest percentage of child brides in the world. And according to the U.N.'s Human Development Index, it is the world's least-developed country. This is no coincidence. In some regions, such as Zinder and Maradi, 9 out of 10 girls marry before age 18. A harsh climate exacerbates the problem. **Less rain often means more "drought brides,"** as families pursue early marriage as a survival strategy, seeking one less mouth to feed and bride price money to buy food. Niger also has one of the globe's highest population growth rates — girls who drop out of school seldom have an opportunity to learn about sexual and reproductive health. **Only 4.4 percent of girls age 15 to 19 have access to or use contraception.** Women in Niger are, however, banding together to reverse some of these trends. Many are starting businesses through Village Savings and Loan Associations that form the foundation of a national movement called *Mata Masu Dubara* (Women on the Move), converting the women's financial power into political power. **The hope is that as women gain a greater voice in their homes and communities, they can break the cycle of child marriage and poverty while giving more girls an opportunity to attend school and, one day, attain a better future.**

Take a stand with girls and against the forces driving them into marriage and out of school.

Act Now

President Obama and First Lady Michelle Obama are championing efforts to help adolescent girls around the globe attend and complete school through the Let Girls Learn initiative. **Visit [care.org/vowsofpoverty](#) to thank First Lady Michelle Obama for advocating an end to child marriage as a path to keeping more girls in school.** And encourage her to support the timely release and implementation of a strong inter-agency Adolescent Girls Strategy that complements Let Girls Learn, so that all girls, regardless of where they are born, can reach their full potential.

Why Now?

An Adolescent Girl Strategy is essential to assuring that the U.S. does its part in putting the world on track to meet the U.N. Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), enacted last month in an effort to end global poverty, confront climate change and close equality gaps by 2030. Specifically, SDG #5 to "Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls" must include ambitious and rights-based indicators that allow for U.N. member states to adequately track the progress, policies and programs that address child marriage, girls' education, reproductive health and violence. Only then can we be sure that the SDGs are truly keeping the rights and needs of adolescent girls at the center.

To determine our list we drew child-marriage data primarily from UNICEF and net secondary enrollment figures from the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). For those countries where data were missing, we consulted other sources: The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (Angola), UNICEF, "State of the World's Children" report (Nigeria), United Nations Population Fund (Somalia), United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (South Sudan). **Complete citations appear in the full Vows of Poverty report, which can be downloaded at [care.org/vowsofpoverty](#).** Unless otherwise indicated, the photographs in this report are representative in nature and should not imply that their subjects are or were child brides or that they are not enrolled in school.



Every 2 seconds, a girl younger than 18 is forced into marriage somewhere in the world.



Girls with no education are three times more likely to wed early than girls who have completed secondary school.



“I wanted to study to 12th grade... It’s a dream long gone.”



A girl’s income-earning potential increases by 20 percent for every school year she completes beyond fourth grade.



Child brides are 28% more likely to die in childbirth than women in their 20s.



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