

WHAT IS CHILD MARRIAGE?

Child marriage refers to any formal marriage or informal union between a child under the age of 18 and an adult, or another child.

It can affect all genders, but it is often the result of entrenched gender inequality, meaning that girls are disproportionately affected by the practice. Child marriage robs girls and boys of their childhood and threatens their well-being, and it is a violation of human rights.

Key Facts

- Child marriage is illegal in England and Wales
- No-one under the age of 18 in England and Wales can enter into a marriage or civil partnership, including with parental/judicial consent
- Under the Marriage and Civil Partnership (Minimum Age) Act 2022 it is a criminal offence to do anything intended to cause a child to marry before they turn 18
- Globally, an estimated 650 million girls and 115 million boys were married as children
- 12 million girls are married before the age of 18 each year
- Child marriage can happen regardless of ethnicity, culture, religion, disability, age, gender or sexuality

Why Does Child Marriage Happen?

- Child marriage is often an expression of gender inequality. Patriarchal systems place limits on female sexuality and reproductive choices. They control how girls behave, dress, where she goes and if, who and when she marries.
- In many places, girls who have relationships or become pregnant outside of marriage are shamed for bringing dishonour on their family, or stopped from going to school
- Some parents see child marriage as a way to protect their daughters' and their families 'honour' and their perception/position in their community, but this is still a form of abuse
- Relatively little is known about the drivers of child marriage for boys, but research has shown that it may be driven through norms that create societal pressure to marry as soon as economic independence and the ability to support a family is achieved.
- It may also be driven by family pressure to conform, where the child may be LGBTQ+ or be questioning their sexuality

Signs and Indicators

Education

- Truancy or extended absence
- Removed from school
- Surveillance by siblings
- Reports of discussion of intended marriage and/or potential suitors for the child or a sibling
- Prevented from going on to higher education
- Announcement of engagement to a stranger
- Decline in behaviour

Health

- Self-harm or attempted suicide
- Eating disorders
- Depression
- Isolation
- Subjected to or at risk of HBA, female genital mutilation (FGM) or any other harmful practice, as this can be a precursor to child marriage

Police Involvement

- Reported missing by family
- Reports of domestic abuse
- Threats to kill
- Reported for offences (e.g. shoplifting or substance misuse)

Family History

- Siblings forced to marry
- Child marriage of a sibling
- Self-harm or suicide of sibling
- Siblings subjected to or at risk of HBA, FGM or any other harmful practice
- Death of a parent
- Family disputes
- Running away from home

Impacts of Child Marriage

- Loss of right to a childhood
- Loss of access to education
- Loss of freedom/right to choice
- Increased risk of contracting sexually transmitted infections
- Higher risk of intimate partner violence
- Child sexual abuse/sexual abuse
- Adolescent pregnancy
- Risk of death through complications arising from adolescent pregnancy
- Physical health problems
- Mental health problems
- Risk of suicide

Child Marriage and the Law

There is no universally accepted definition of the word 'child,' and as such there is no universally accepted definition of child marriage.

The Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) defines a child as a "human being below the age of eighteen years unless under the law applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier."

Different nations allow their citizens to attain majority (reach the age of legal adulthood) at different ages, and some allow majority to be attained upon marriage, which creates a loophole that can be exploited.

In the UK the following legislation can protect individuals against child marriage:

- Marriage and Civil Partnership (Minimum Age) Act 2022: Protects children from child marriage by raising the age of marriage and civil partnership to 18 in England and Wales and came into effect on 27th February 2023. This means that 16 to 17-year-olds are no longer able to marry or enter a civil partnership under any circumstances, including with parental or judicial consent
- In Scotland the age of marriage and civil partnership is 16, which campaigners have been seeking to change. Currently the Forced Marriage etc. (Protection and Jurisdiction) (Scotland) Act 2011 defines a forced marriage as a marriage conducted without the full and free consent of both parties, and where "force" is a factor. It is important to note that in the case of children and young people under 16, and some adults, full and free consent cannot be given
- Forced Marriage (Civil Protection) Act 2007: Protects individuals from forced marriage, which is often linked to child marriage

For more information on forced marriage, please read our [forced marriage factsheet](#).

Responding to Risk of Child Marriage

Where someone discloses fear, risk or threat of a child marriage, professionals in all agencies should:

- Take the disclosure seriously and act on it
- Refer to Adult or Children's Social Care and the Police promptly
- Always follow your organisational policy and other relevant local/national policies and procedures
- Follow the ONE CHANCE RULE at all times. We believe that there might be only one chance to speak to someone who may be at risk or under threat a potential victim, and, therefore, just one chance to prevent a forced marriage
- Hold an emergency strategy/professional meeting with relevant agencies, (this should be immediately or within no less than 24 hours)

UNDER NO CIRCUMSTANCES

- Let the family, community or social network know about the disclosure
- Speak to the person at risk in front of family members or within the family home
- Approach the family, any member of the community or attempt mediation
- Use members of the community to interpret
- Accidentally give out information which might jeopardise the person's safety

Caution is required about how information is shared, recorded, and safeguarded within the organisation. Information should only be shared on a need-to-know basis.

We will end 'honour'-based abuse and harmful practices

Helpline: **0800 107 0726**

10am - 4pm, Monday to Friday

    **SaveraUK**

To make a professional referral to Savera UK, complete our online form: saverauk.co.uk/get-help/referrals-for-professionals/

If you are an individual who needs help or advice, complete this form: saverauk.co.uk/savera-uk-individual-referral-form/

In an emergency, please call 999.