

## Child marriage in Eastern Europe and Central Asia: regional overview



Early or child marriage is the union, whether official or not, of two persons, at least one of whom is under 18 years of age.<sup>1</sup> By virtue of their age, child spouses are considered to be incapable of giving full consent, meaning that child marriages should be considered a violation of human rights and the rights of the child. Child marriage is a gendered phenomenon that affects girls and boys in different ways. Overall, the number of boys in child marriages around the world is significantly lower than that of girls, and married girls are vulnerable to other forms of gender-based violence and discrimination within marriage. They also often experience complications during pregnancy and childbirth, as their bodies are not ready for childbearing. The right of girls to be protected from child marriage is upheld in various international instruments, including the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), both of which call for countries to legislate a minimum marriage age of 18. But despite this legal protection, each year, thousands of girls are married before their 18th birthday.

This report provides a brief overview of child marriage in the following countries and territories: Albania, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kosovo (UNSC 1244),<sup>2</sup> the Kyrgyz Republic, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Serbia, Tajikistan, Turkey, Ukraine, and Uzbekistan. It accompanies a set of fact sheets and executive summaries that provide more detailed information on the issue in each country. These country fact sheets are designed to provide a 'snapshot' of child marriage in this region, and are based on small-scale, rapid qualitative research carried out in two to three districts in each country or territory. Researchers carried out semi-structured interviews with girls and women (and some men) who married before the age of 18, as well as with national and local state officials, experts in women's and children's rights from the NGO sector, and professionals working in health and education. In some countries, focus groups were also held, in communities where child marriage is practised.

As this qualitative research involved a limited number of participants, and only covered a small number of districts in each country, the results cannot be taken as representative. Rather, they provide a preliminary insight into child marriage practices in this region, focusing principally on the factors driving child marriage, and its region-specific impacts. It is hoped that they will stimulate interest in the issue of child marriage in this region, as well as forming the basis for future studies.

*Child marriage is an extremely complex issue. It is driven by – and perpetuates – the lack of value placed on girls' education and future role in society, beyond domestic labour and child rearing. Intersecting with social exclusion, 'tradition', poverty, and other factors such as geographical isolation or the presence of violent conflict, early marriage of girls embodies and maintains a cycle of gender discrimination and women's marginalisation.*



## A snapshot of child marriage in this region

Today, child marriage continues to be practised across the region covered in this report. Rates are lower than in Africa or South Asia, although, as the fact sheets show, there is a lack of concrete information as to exactly how many children entered a marriage or union each year in every country, because official statistics only record registered marriages (and most child marriages are unregistered). Data collected as part of demographic and household surveys (DHS) and / or multiple indicator cluster surveys (MICS) provides valuable information about the actual prevalence of child marriage, as these surveys include questions on whether respondents are living in marital union (even if not officially married). However, in many cases, this data may be a few years out of date; in addition, MICS data is often drawn from a relatively small population sample, and neither type of survey routinely includes data on men in relation to marriage and reproduction, making it difficult to gather information about child marriage affecting boys, or about the extent to which girls are disproportionately affected by the practice.

Bearing in mind these limitations, the data that is available indicate considerable variation in the prevalence of child marriage across this region. Rates of officially registered marriages involving girls aged 15-19 were highest in Albania (27.2 per cent<sup>3</sup>), Turkey (23 per cent<sup>4</sup>), and Kyrgyzstan (19.1 per cent<sup>5</sup>), and lowest in Kazakhstan (0.9 per cent<sup>6</sup>), Ukraine (2.2 per cent<sup>7</sup>), and Serbia (5.9 per cent<sup>8</sup>). Among certain minority groups, principally Roma in South East Europe and Ukraine, rates of child marriage are known to be much higher than among the general population. For instance, MICS data from Serbia indicate that among Roma in that country, 44 per cent of girls aged 15-19 were married or in union, of whom 14 per cent had married before the age of 15.<sup>9</sup>

Some secondary research on this region indicates that in the former Soviet republics in Central Asia and the Caucasus, rates of child marriage have increased since the collapse of the Soviet Union in the 1990s, as has the number of girls in the 15-19 age group becoming pregnant and giving birth, a proxy

variable for the number of girls in child marriages.<sup>10</sup> Determining whether this is actually the case would require access to comprehensive statistical data on this issue, which, as discussed above, would be difficult to come by. But experts interviewed for this research in Albania, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan felt that child marriage had become a much more significant problem since the collapse of communist regimes in their countries, while in Kosovo, experts noted that there had been a 'peak' in child marriages during the 1990s, as a result of the conflict that took place in this period. By contrast, data cited in the country fact sheets for Armenia and Ukraine appear to indicate that rates of child marriage have been falling since the 1990s, although in Ukraine, the adolescent birth rate has remained high. Across the region, the researchers found that there was considerable variation in rates of child marriage within countries, but that overall, girls living in rural areas and in lower wealth quintiles were more likely to be married before their 18<sup>th</sup> birthday.

The forms that child marriage takes and the factors driving it vary from country to country, but across this region, certain trends and factors driving child marriage are evident. These include: the perpetuation of gender inequality; long periods of social and economic upheaval, rising poverty, and, in some places, violent conflict; the emergence of strong traditional views on women's place in society, often closely linked to assertion of religious and ethnic identities; the social and economic marginalisation of certain ethnic or social groups practising child marriage; and poor implementation of existing legislation. In terms of what child marriage looks like in the region, the picture is one of widespread coercion into early marriage, domestic drudgery and gender-based violence within marriage, and social exclusion.

## Key drivers, trends, and impacts

Child marriage is an extremely complex issue, influenced by – and influencing – the social and economic conditions in a given national context, as well as cultural, social, and religious attitudes to gender roles, sexuality, and the appropriate age for childbearing. In any analysis of the issue, it can

be difficult to disentangle cause from effect, and the trends that are driving the practice from those that are being perpetuated by it. At the heart of the issue, though, is gender discrimination. Child marriage in this region as elsewhere in the world is an unmistakably gendered phenomenon. It is driven by – and perpetuates – the lack of value placed on girls' education and future role in society, beyond domestic labour and child rearing. Intersecting with social exclusion, 'tradition', poverty, and other factors such as geographical isolation or the presence of violent conflict, early marriage of girls embodies and maintains a cycle of gender discrimination and women's marginalisation.

### Persistence of traditional gender roles

Overwhelmingly, support for early marriage as recounted in the country fact sheets was expressed in terms of upholding traditional gender roles. Across this region, child marriage is driven by – and perpetuates – the lack of value placed on girls' education and potential professional fulfilment, the links made between controlling girls' and women's sexuality and wider family and community 'honour', the perception that women's roles should be confined to marriage, domestic labour, and child rearing, and the often unquestioned assumption that a 'good wife' is an obedient, servile spouse. Among some of the communities that practise child marriage in this region (particularly Roma in Ukraine and South East Europe, and minority groups in Armenia, Georgia, and Kazakhstan), child marriage is seen as an important aspect of cultural identity, which makes it very difficult for women and girls to resist the practice. In addition, as noted by experts interviewed for this research in Albania, patriarchal norms within the family mean that mothers are not able to protect their daughters from child marriage, even if they wish to do so.

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Child spouses and women's rights experts interviewed for this research in Albania, Armenia, and Georgia talked of how girls in some communities are told from early childhood that they will marry, and that learning how to cook and clean and be a good wife are more important than getting an education. In Azerbaijan, Ukraine, and Uzbekistan, respondents spoke of marriage and childbearing as being a women's destiny and main accomplishment in life. The importance of ensuring that girls did not lose their virginity (which could bring shame on her family and community) prior to marriage was cited as a key reason for child marriage in the fact sheets for Turkey, and for all of the Central Asian and South Caucasus countries, as well as in relation to child marriage within Roma populations in Ukraine and the South East European countries. This argument is also used to justify removing a girl from school, where she might come into contact with boys.

Another key factor driving early marriages is the idea that a female child spouse will be obedient and subservient, and therefore make a 'good' wife. In South East Europe, respondents interviewed for this research reported that marrying a young girl off to a man already resident abroad is seen as a good way of ensuring her economic security. Meanwhile, men who have migrated abroad often return 'home' in order to find a young wife, believing that a young girl from 'home' will be obedient and accept traditional gender roles.

### Forced and coerced marriage

Early marriages often take place in environments marked by emotional pressure applied by the immediate and extended family, and threats and even violence in the event of non-compliance; in cases of abduction for forced marriage, the marriage itself is an act of violence, and may be accompanied by sexual, physical, and psychological violence.<sup>11</sup>

In each of the country fact sheets, examples are given of child spouses who were married against their will, or who married in situations that amount to coercion. This is particularly evident in the case studies from Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, the Kyrgyz Republic, Tajikistan, Turkey, and Uzbekistan, where a pattern emerges of child marriages being arranged by parents with girls being given little or no say in the matter, including in regard to the choice of spouse. In cases of coerced child marriage, girls are taken out of school and married off quickly, to become, in the words of one Kyrgyz respondent, ‘someone else’s problem’. While the marriage may not necessarily involve physical force, the girl is pressured into accepting its inevitability, and it may realistically appear to be the only option available, as this extract from an interview carried out with a child spouse in the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia illustrates:

*“I was 14 when the matchmakers came to our house, it was all arranged by my grandmother, and when my mother asked me if I wanted to get married with that boy, I just remained silent. They didn’t marry me with force, I just didn’t know what to say.”*

Three of the country fact sheets – on Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and the Kyrgyz Republic – also include examples of girls being abducted for forced marriage, while people interviewed for the Georgia and Armenia fact sheets said that bride kidnapping had been a significant issue in the Soviet period and the 1990s, but was now rare. Fear that girls will be abducted can also drive child marriage, as parents marry off their daughters to protect them from kidnapping. The research conducted in Albania found that among Roma parents, this was a factor in decisions to marry girls early.

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## Exploitation and violence in the household

In all of the Central Asian countries, as well as in Albania, Azerbaijan, Turkey, among some Roma communities in other parts of South East Europe and in Ukraine, and among ethnic and religious minorities in Armenia and Georgia, this research showed that child marriage for girls typically involves moving to live with the husband’s family.<sup>12</sup> This often means assuming the lowest position in the family, and taking on a large burden of unpaid domestic (and sometimes agricultural) labour and care responsibilities not just towards the husband, but also towards other family members. Child spouses interviewed in Armenia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Serbia, and Turkey all talked of the huge burden of household labour they had to assume, of having to serve other members of the family, and of having their views and voices within the household ignored. In some of the cases included in the Kazakhstan, Kosovo, and Serbia fact sheets, the husband’s family had paid a bride price, and some of the child spouses interviewed spoke of feeling that they had been ‘sold’ to their husband’s family. Child spouses interviewed for the Kazakhstan, Kosovo, Kyrgyz Republic, and Uzbekistan fact sheets spoke of the total lack of control that they had over their own bodies and over sexual contact, further enhancing the climate of exploitation within these relationships.

Domestic violence came up in many of the interviews with both child spouses and child rights and women’s rights experts. Child spouses recounted physical and psychological violence at the hands of husbands (and mothers-in-law, and other members of the husband’s family, in the Azerbaijan, Central Asia, and Turkey studies), and how difficult it was to find and access help and support. In addition, the fact that many child spouses are denied access to education, and are stopped from working by their husband’s families, means that child spouses who are trying to leave an abusive relationship have very limited options, as they are often not in a position to support themselves. The significant age

gap that often exists between an older husband and a female child spouse and the abusive and unequal power dynamics that this engenders is thought to be a contributing factor to high rates of domestic violence in child marriages, according to large-scale studies into the practice.<sup>13</sup> Child marriage itself can be seen as a form of gender-based violence towards girls, depriving them of the right to control over their own bodies, the right to freedom of choice, and the right to freedom of movement. In addition, it all too often locks married girls into a vicious cycle of sexual, physical, psychological, and emotional violence from which it is extremely difficult for them to escape, as this extract from an interview with a representative of a women's NGO in Uzbekistan indicates:

*“We’ve been approached by girls who have been driven to the edge. They phone or sneak out to us when their mothers-in-law and husbands are not aware. We try to help them if it’s possible, by sending them to crisis centres. But then she lives there for a short time – and then what? Back to her parents? But how will she earn money?”*

### Unregistered marriages

As the research for the country fact sheets accompanying this report found, the bulk of child marriages go unregistered with the authorities, or are only registered once the younger spouse has reached the age of 18. The fact that so few child marriages are registered with the authorities compounds the difficulties faced in attempting to estimate prevalence rates. It also leaves married girls very vulnerable, as they have no legally recognised rights.

In Azerbaijan, Central Asia, and Turkey child marriages are usually solemnised by an Islamic ceremony, while in Armenia and Georgia, they are often performed in an Orthodox church. Interestingly, this does not appear to be the case in Muslim or Christian communities in South East Europe, although among Roma communities, this research found that

child marriages are often sanctioned by way of a community celebration. In the country fact sheets for all four Central Asian countries and for Azerbaijan, the authors make a link between increased religious practice since these countries became independent following the collapse of the Soviet Union and increased rates of child marriage in the same period. But analysis of the contexts in which child marriages are taking place in these countries would indicate that religion is just one of many factors driving the practice in the region.

Poverty and ongoing economic uncertainty (since these countries became independent in 1991), violent conflict (or the legacy of violent conflict), high rates of migration, and the decreasing value attached to education are all pressing social issues in these countries, and all are factors that are helping to drive child marriage. For instance, in Tajikistan, in the 1990s, rates of child marriage went up during the civil war, while today, child marriage is linked to high rates of male migration (itself an outcome of poverty and economic uncertainty); a lack of young men means that parents are desperate to marry their daughters off to the ‘first man who offers’, to make sure that she marries at all. In the Kyrgyz Republic, poverty and decreasing importance attached to education (which is seen as being of poor quality and bringing few future economic benefits) means that each year, fewer girls and boys are completing school; in the case of girls, this is pushing adolescent girls into early marriage.

It is more constructive, perhaps, to see the increasing role of religion in these societies as providing an enabling environment for child marriages. The option of holding a religious ceremony provides a way of legitimating child marriages, which cannot be registered with the state. Laws or official decrees that have been adopted in some of the countries covered in this study (Tajikistan, Turkey, and Uzbekistan) making it illegal for religious ceremonies to be carried out without proof that a civil ceremony has been performed appear to have little impact.

### Lack of value placed on girls’ education

The lack of value placed on girls’ education, and how this helps to perpetuate the practice of early marriage (as well as increasing girl child spouses’ vulnerability within marriages) is an issue that has emerged for



every single country covered in this research. Parents often justify removing girls from school – or never sending them in the first place – on the grounds that their destiny is to marry into another family and raise children, so schooling is a wasted investment. But it is not always the case that children drop out of school in order to marry: the Azerbaijan, Kosovo, and Serbia fact sheets include examples of girls dropping out of school after they were married, while the Georgia fact sheet notes that some girls who are engaged are ‘allowed’ to continue schooling by their future husband and in-laws.

In the Kyrgyz Republic and among Roma populations in Ukraine and South East Europe, it is noted that rates of school drop-out are also high among boys; in fact, in the Kyrgyz Republic, school drop-out rates are higher for adolescent boys than for adolescent girls. Experts interviewed for the Kosovo fact sheet stated that among Roma, child marriage is sometimes cited as a reason for boys dropping out of school, in order to seek work to provide for their new families. These examples point to the need to provide appropriate educational support to girls and boys who want to continue schooling after they have married or got engaged.

### Poverty and social exclusion

In every single country studied, poverty emerges as one of the factors driving child marriage, although in the cases of Azerbaijan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan, the authors specifically point out that child marriages occur in wealthy families as well as those living in poverty, and that in these cases, tradition and the need to secure a good ‘match’ are far more important. In Armenia, Georgia, and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, experts noted that poverty was a key risk factor for girls to be pushed into early marriage, while those interviewed in Albania, Kazakhstan, and Turkey pointed to the

view held in some families that marrying a daughter off early reduces the number of mouths to feed, and means the family receives a bride price.

Closely linked to poverty is social exclusion. Rates of early marriage in South East Europe and Ukraine are significantly higher among Roma, who constitute the most marginalised and impoverished ethnic group within Europe as a whole. A similar trend was noted in Kazakhstan, Armenia, and Georgia, where rates of child marriage are highest among certain marginalised ethnic and religious minorities. Among Roma in Europe, lack of identity documents, high school-dropout rates, overcrowding, and poor access to services are all features of the social marginalisation that this population faces, as well as being factors which drive

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child marriage, and which are a consequence of the practice. In addition, the hostility and discrimination that Roma face from the majority population foster a world view on their part that sees protecting Roma culture and identity as extremely important. This can take the form of upholding traditions such as child marriage as integral to Roma identity, as well as the importance placed on female virginity as a marker of family and community honour. In Georgia, girls growing up in isolated minority communities that are not integrated into wider Georgian society reported seeing marriage as their only option, partly because they were not able to speak Georgian well enough to pursue their studies or a career. For girls belonging to the Yezidi group in Armenia, social isolation is compounded by geographical isolation, as Yezidi communities spend long periods of time in the mountains.

Once married, many of the child spouses interviewed recounted that their mobility was restricted, they were not allowed to work outside the home, they could not visit their family or friends, and that they

were very isolated. This was particularly the case where girl child spouses moved to live with their husband's family, as recounted in the research in Azerbaijan, Central Asia, and Turkey. This impacted negatively on their mental and emotional health, as well as increasing their vulnerability to violence and exploitation. It also means that many child spouses remain trapped in poverty, because of the limited opportunities that they have for generating their own income.

### Early pregnancy

Child spouses interviewed for the fact sheets recounted that decisions about the number and spacing of children were made by husbands and in-laws, influenced by societal expectations. For instance, the research in Central Asia and the South Caucasus found that couples were expected to produce a child within the first year of marriage, and / or keep trying until they had had a boy. Child spouses' access to reproductive health services may also be limited, either because of a lack of appropriate and accessible services, or because husbands and in-laws stop child spouses from attending clinics, or insist on accompanying them, as recounted in the fact sheets for Georgia, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan.

Lack of physical maturity means that pregnancy-related complications are a leading cause of deaths among girls age 15-19 in developing countries, and studies have shown that 15- to 19-year-old mothers are twice as likely to die in childbirth compared to mothers aged 20-24.<sup>14</sup> Global studies have shown that pregnancy and childbirth at an early age affects the health of infants as well, as babies of teenage mothers are more likely to be born prematurely and at low birth weight.<sup>15</sup> While this small-scale study does not provide reliable, quantitative data to indicate whether this is also the case in the countries covered by this research, several of the child spouses interviewed for these fact sheets reported that they had had health complications during or after their pregnancies, and / or that the baby had been very ill, or had died.

### Young people choosing to marry

The country fact sheets for Armenia, Georgia, Turkey, Ukraine, and the South East European countries all note that in some cases, child marriages occur when a young person under the age of 18 chooses to marry an older partner, or a young couple under the age of 18 decide to marry or live together; by contrast, the pattern in Azerbaijan and Central Asia is predominantly of arranged and coerced marriages. However, in the cases included in the fact sheets, the decision to enter into a marriage was often influenced by factors other than love and the desire to live together. Poverty and social exclusion again feature; one expert interviewed for the Bosnia and Herzegovina fact sheet explained how some young

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Roma couples choose to marry to provide themselves with a sense of security and a 'safe place'. The fact sheets also give examples of cases where social condemnation of premarital relationships (whether or not these involve sexual relations) push young couples into marrying; this was a pattern identified in Armenia and Georgia, and to a lesser extent Ukraine. Unplanned pregnancy is another reason cited in several of the South East Europe fact sheets, and in Georgia and Ukraine, itself often the result of lack of knowledge about sexual and reproductive health and lack of access to appropriate reproductive health services. Finally, in the Turkey and Georgia fact sheets, the authors note that adolescents experiencing an unhappy home life – for instance, domestic violence, orphanhood, or conflicts with parents or stepparents – may also see marriage as a way of escaping.

### Violent conflict

Violent conflict has been shown to be a 'trigger' to increased rates of child marriage, as parents seek to provide both physical and 'moral' protection to their daughters from the sexual violence that is so often a feature of violent conflict. This trend is noted in the fact sheets for Kosovo, the Kyrgyz Republic, and Tajikistan, all of which have recently experienced periods of violent conflict. In the Kosovo fact

sheet, one child spouse spoke of choosing to marry her boyfriend as she felt it was a way of protecting herself, while in Tajikistan, one girl spoke of how her parents had forced her to marry, to ensure that her reputation would not be damaged, were she to be raped. In the Kyrgyz Republic, women's and child rights experts interviewed for the research stated that rates of child marriage in the southern part of the country had significantly increased following inter-ethnic violence there in June 2010.

### **State failure to implement legislation**

The countries covered in this study all have some form of legislation in place to protect girls from child marriage. With the exception of Uzbekistan, where the minimum marriage age is 17 for women, and Turkey, where the minimum marriage age is 17 for women and men, all of the countries have amended their legislation to raise the minimum marriage age to 18 for women and men, in line with the standards set in the CRC and CEDAW. However, in every country, this minimum marriage age can be lowered by one or two years with parental permission and / or approval from a court or from local authorities. Kazakhstan, the Kyrgyz Republic, and Tajikistan have legislation in place criminalising child marriage, while Bosnia and Herzegovina, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, and Serbia all have laws criminalising marriage to an adolescent under the age of 16.<sup>16</sup> The remaining countries – Albania, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Ukraine, and Uzbekistan – do not appear to have any specific legislation criminalising child

marriage at present (although Albania, Azerbaijan, and Uzbekistan all have legislation criminalising forced marriage). In Turkey, there is no criminal legislation against child marriage, and forced marriage is covered under the civil code.

This research found that the legislation that is in place to protect girls is rarely effectively implemented. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Serbia, and Tajikistan, the researchers found that courts often grant permission for children under 18 to marry, failing to conduct a proper assessment as to whether this is in the child's best interests. In Kazakhstan and the Kyrgyz Republic, legislation criminalising forced marriage is ineffective, as families are reluctant to bring cases. When ethnic minorities are involved, as it is the case for example in Ukraine and the South East European countries in regard to Roma, or in Georgia and Kazakhstan in regard to minority ethnic groups, the authorities often turn a blind eye to child marriages, on the grounds of not wanting to interfere in a 'cultural' matter. This reinforces the multiple forms of discrimination that girls from these minority groups face, on the grounds of their gender and their ethnic identity, makes it even harder for them to seek help if they wish to avoid early marriage or escape an abusive relationship, and further entrenches their marginalisation. Overall, this helps to create a climate of impunity in regard to child marriage, and also helps to perpetuate the idea that it is not really a serious problem.



## Conclusions

A person who marries later is more likely to stay in school, work, and reinvest income into her or his family, while a girl who marries later is more empowered to choose whether, when, and how many children to have. The benefits of investing in girls and their right to lead full and productive lives are clear, as is the damage that child marriage does to realising this goal. But child marriage is a highly complex phenomenon in this region as elsewhere, which results from – and serves to perpetuate – gender discrimination as it intersects with other forms of discrimination and marginalisation. It cannot be tackled through legislation alone. All of the countries covered in this report and the accompanying fact sheets have some form of laws in place to protect girls from child marriage, and yet the practice is prevalent throughout this region. What is needed is far greater engagement at the level of challenging people's attitudes both to child marriage, and to the status of women and girls more generally. Without this grassroots engagement, little will change, and across these countries, thousands of girls each year will continue to see their futures cut off by child marriage.

## Endnotes

- 1 A child is 'every human being below the age of eighteen years unless under the law applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier'. United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), available at: <http://www2.ohchr.org/english/law/crc.htm> (accessed 29 May 2012).
- 2 Throughout this document, we will hereafter use the descriptive 'Kosovo' for Kosovo under UNSC 1244.
- 3 INSTAT. Marriages classified by sex and age groups for the years 1990-2008, available at: [www.instat.gov.al](http://www.instat.gov.al) (accessed 18 June 2012).
- 4 TURKSTAT (2011) Marriage and Divorce Statistics 2010, Turkish Statistical Institute Printing Division, Ankara, p.18.
- 5 National Statistical Committee of the Kyrgyz Republic (2011). Statistical collection, 'Women and Men of the Kyrgyz Republic', p.55.
- 6 Agency of Statistics. Молодежь Казахстана [Youth of Kazakhstan]. Statistical compilation, 2010. [www.stat.kz](http://www.stat.kz) (accessed 12 August 2012).
- 7 Database of SSSU, Population Statistics. Available at: [http://database.ukrcensus.gov.ua/MULT/Dialog/statfile\\_c.asp](http://database.ukrcensus.gov.ua/MULT/Dialog/statfile_c.asp) (accessed 12 November 2013)
- 8 These figures are for the age group 16-18. Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia (2012), Saopštenje: Statistika stanovništva "Zaključeni i razvedeni brakovi u Republici Srbiji 2011" (Press release: The statistics of the population, 'Marriages and divorces in the Republic of Serbia'), (2012), available at: [http://webrzs.stat.gov.rs/WebSite/repository/documents/00/00/71/94/SN50\\_179\\_srb\\_2011.pdf](http://webrzs.stat.gov.rs/WebSite/repository/documents/00/00/71/94/SN50_179_srb_2011.pdf) (accessed on 23 July 2012).
- 9 UNICEF (2011b), op. cit.
- 10 The Advocates for Human Rights (n.d.) 'Forced and Child Marriage', [http://www.stopvaw.org/forced\\_and\\_child\\_marriage.html](http://www.stopvaw.org/forced_and_child_marriage.html) (accessed 12 July 2012). See individual country fact sheets for details of increasing adolescent fertility rates.
- 11 For instance, see Human Rights Watch (2006) 'Reconciled to violence: State Failure to Stop Domestic Abuse and Abduction of Women in Kyrgyzstan', New York: Human Rights Watch, p.22. This report notes that continued domestic violence is particularly prevalent in marriages that begin with abduction.
- 12 This is also the case in Kosovo.
- 13 UNICEF (2006) 'Early marriage, a harmful traditional practice. A statistical exploration', New York: UNICEF, p.2.
- 14 World Health Organization (2011) 'Preventing Early Pregnancy and Poor Reproductive Outcomes Among Adolescents in Developing Countries', Geneva: WHO, p. 9, available at: [http://whqlibdoc.who.int/publications/2011/9789241502214\\_eng.pdf](http://whqlibdoc.who.int/publications/2011/9789241502214_eng.pdf) (accessed on 18 May 2012); UNICEF (2006) 'Early marriage, a harmful traditional practice', p.2.
- 15 World Health Organization (2011) 'Preventing Early Pregnancy', p. 9.
- 16 Such legislation also exists in Kosovo.

## Recommendations

### LEGISLATION

- Raise the legal minimum marriage age to 18 for women and men, in line with the standards set in the CRC and CEDAW, in all countries where this has not yet been done.
- Harmonise criminal and civil legislation relating to child marriage, ensure that national legislation reflects international obligations, and introduce penalties for perpetrators of underage marriage, including parents, community authorities, and religious leaders.
- Provide training to law enforcement officials and court officials to improve the implementation of existing legislation to protect girls from child marriage.

### SEXUAL AND REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH

- Recognise that child marriage is a serious human rights violation which has a complex impact on girls' health and the overall course of their lives.
- Improve overall provision of reproductive health services through targeted programmes focusing on girls at risk of child marriage or involved in child marriage, particularly in rural areas.
- Ensure that reproductive health providers are trained to provide accessible, confidential, and sensitive support to adolescent girls.
- Ensure that it is as easy as possible for married girls to access reproductive health services independently of their husbands or other family members.
- Make reproductive health services more accessible to members of marginalised minority groups, for instance through working with dedicated social mediators from these communities.
- Ensure that reproductive health services are an integral part of the coordinated multi-sectoral response to gender-based violence, and that tailored services for adolescent girls are established.

- Provide targeted support to married girls who are or may be vulnerable to sexual, physical, or psychological violence, including ensuring effective referral paths to safe houses, crisis centres, and other support services that are accessible and welcoming to adolescents.

### CHILD PROTECTION

- Recognise that child marriage is a child protection issue.
- Establish multi-sector child protection mechanisms, and ensure that these are provided with adequate resources and properly trained staff.
- Provide training to social workers, medical staff, and teachers to enable them to recognise girls at risk of child marriage, and to support those who are already married in accessing services and support.
- Provide targeted support to married girls who are or may be vulnerable to domestic violence, including ensuring that shelters, crisis centres, and other support services are accessible and welcoming to adolescents.

### EDUCATION

- Promote the importance of girls' education, providing incentives to encourage 'at risk' communities to send their daughters to school. If appropriate, ensure that penalties for failure to send children to school are enforced.
- Address the discrimination that children from marginalised ethnic and social groups may face at school, in order to encourage school completion among these groups.
- Provide support to married girls (and boys) to enable them to continue and complete their schooling.
- Incorporate information about the negative health and economic impacts of child marriage into the school curriculum.

- Incorporate culturally and age-appropriate sex education, and education on sexual and reproductive health, into the school curriculum.

#### **DATA COLLECTION**

- Incorporate questions on age at marriage into national household surveys and censuses, specifying that this includes unregistered religious marriages and cohabitation.
- Ensure that all data are disaggregated by age and gender.

#### **WORKING WITH COMMUNITIES and POLICY MAKERS**

- Introduce mechanisms to monitor the implementation of legal provisions related to marriage age and compliance with CEDAW and the CRC.
- Develop policy- and community-level educational campaigns about the negative health and economic impacts of child marriage.
- Raise awareness among civil society, the media, faith-based organisations, individual community gatekeepers, religious leaders, and parents about the consequences of child marriage for girls, families, and society in general..



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*Delivering a world where every pregnancy is wanted, every  
birth is safe and every young person's potential is fulfilled*