Breaking Vows:
Early and Forced Marriage and Girls’ Education
Executive Summary
“My father made the decision to marry me off and I was not given any say at all. In fact, I did not even know about my marriage. It wasn’t until a woman came to my home, giving me money and a dress, and said, ‘you are now my daughter,’ that I realised what was happening. I was shocked, but my sisters advised me to stay silent.”

Sabina, Pakistan¹

“I was so sad when my friend Limya who was studying seventh grade was suddenly married. She cried a lot. Though her parents promised her that she could continue her studies after marriage, it did not happen. There are many girls in my area who drop out from school due to early marriage.”

Noha, 16, Sudan²

“I was forced to leave school in order to get married. I was very young then. I was divorced after eight months of my marriage. I wish other girls don’t suffer like me.”

Madina, 14, Sudan³

Plan UK’s Because I am a Girl campaign aims to ensure millions more girls in the world’s poorest countries can access a quality education. An education that will contribute towards breaking the cycle of poverty for generations to come.

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One in every three girls in the developing world is married by the age of 18. One in seven marries before they reach the age of 15. In countries like Niger, Chad, Mali, Bangladesh, Guinea and the Central African Republic (CAR), the rate of early and forced marriage is 60 per cent and over. It is particularly high in South Asia (46 per cent) and in sub-Saharan Africa (38 per cent).

Early and forced marriage is a practice embedded in many cultures and traditions and is most prevalent where poverty, birth and death rates are high, there is greater incidence of conflict and civil strife and lower levels of overall development, including schooling, employment and healthcare.

Although the average age at first marriage is gradually increasing worldwide, the pace of change is slow. In Nepal, Guinea and Bangladesh, for instance, the average age at first marriage for girls still remains below 18.

Early and forced marriage discriminates against girls and abuses their rights on an unimaginable scale. In this report, Plan UK calls upon the UK Government to increase its efforts to end early and forced marriage through enhanced cooperation across Whitehall, an increase in Department for International Development (DFID) programming in developing countries, and by using its influence to push for effective international policy and action. We believe that implementing the recommendations set out here will enable the Government to meet its existing commitments and will ensure that:

- Early and forced marriage is raised up the international agenda to strengthen global commitment to girls’ rights.
- All countries ensure girls have legal protection from early and forced marriage and actively prosecute perpetrators.
- Funding is increased for programmes that encourage families and communities to prioritise girls’ education over marriage.
- Government and donors invest in the support services for girls wanting to escape marriage.
- Increased scrutiny strengthens monitoring and reporting of global early and forced marriage.

Plan UK believes that improving education and school retention for girls in the poorest countries plays a crucial role in eliminating early and forced marriage. Educated girls are more likely to have the skills, knowledge and confidence to claim their rights. Supporting girls to enrol in school and benefit from free, compulsory basic education (a minimum of nine years), in an environment that supports them to realise their rights, enables them to broaden their choices in life. This in turn works towards achieving the Education for All and Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).
Prevalence of Early Marriage around the world

Per cent of women aged 20 - 24 married by age 18

- Less than 10 per cent
- 10 - 24 per cent
- 25 - 49 per cent
- 50 per cent or more
- No data available

Countries with the highest proportion of Early Marriage

- Niger: 75 per cent
- Chad: 72 per cent
- Mali: 71 per cent
- Bangladesh: 66 per cent
- Guinea: 63 per cent
- Central African Republic: 61 per cent
- Mozambique: 52 per cent
- Nepal: 51 per cent
- Malawi: 50 per cent

As a signatory to key international human rights treaties, a vocal supporter of girls’ and women’s rights and the third largest bilateral donor to basic education, the UK is uniquely placed to champion girls’ right to remain in education and to enable them to choose when and whom they marry.
The issue is already gathering attention across Whitehall and a reduction in early and forced marriage will provide a vital catalyst to achieving existing Government commitments to advance human rights and development goals.

DFID, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO), and the Home Office (HO) have all pledged to work on aspects of early and forced marriage or are already doing so:

DFID is globally recognised for its commitment to girls’ rights as a result of its work to increase girls’ educational opportunities, reduce maternal mortality and delay the age at which girls first become pregnant, all of which depend on a reduction in early and forced marriage.

• The FCO’s Forced Marriage Unit (FMU) works with governments around the world to ensure the safe return of young UK nationals taken abroad to marry, and the FCO and the Home Office have pledged to work together to extend similar services to non-UK nationals.

• In November 2010 the Home Office Parliamentary under Secretary of State for Equalities and Criminal Information was appointed Ministerial Champion for tackling violence against women and girls overseas. The post-holder is required to actively encourage the FCO, DFID, the Ministry of Defence (MoD) and other relevant ministries to use their influence in their domestic, European Union (EU) and international engagements to drive forward efforts on violence against women and girls.

The Home Office, FCO and DFID must work together to co-ordinate enforcement of international treaties and laws, directly at home and via their overseas development assistance, and indirectly via peer pressure and international and bilateral advocacy. An integrated, coherent approach to addressing early and forced marriage is essential if joint working is to have a tangible impact.

“I got an opportunity to attend a camp on the issue of child marriage, child rights and child labour. Having participated in the meeting as well, I encouraged my older sister to attend the camp and group meetings. My father was bent upon fixing up my sister’s wedding this year. When my sister and I shared what we learnt about the implications of early marriage with him, he changed his mind with an assurance to wait until my sister was 18 years old. We sisters are extremely delighted with this decision!”

Ranjana, 13, India74
Current departmental commitments and action on early and forced marriage

Department for International Development

The first pillar of DFID’s Choices for Women Framework for Results for improving reproductive, maternal and newborn health (December 2010), is to empower women and girls to make healthy reproductive choices, as part of which the Department has pledged to work towards ‘locally-led social change of norms that constrain women’s choice, control over resources and body (e.g. early marriage, Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting (FGM/C), violence, cultural preferences for sons).’

DFID’s recently issued Strategic Vision for Girls and Women (March 2011) outlines plans to support efforts in 17 countries to eliminate child marriage and create an environment that enables girls and women to realise their rights, including work to strengthen legal frameworks and ‘the implementation of laws that enable women and girls to own, inherit and control productive assets, realise reproductive rights, and provide protection from violence, FGM, early marriage and other harmful traditional practices.’

Both strategies repeatedly emphasise the importance of girls’ education beyond the primary level, with the Strategic Vision pledging that DFID will ‘increase the numbers of girls in primary and secondary school in all 23 country programmes where we give support to education, and will assist girls to stay in school beyond primary level to ensure they get the full benefits from education which will transform their lives and opportunities.’

Foreign and Commonwealth Office and Home Office

The new UK Action Plan on ending violence against women and girls commits the FCO and Home Office to working together to improve the international - including EU - response to forced marriage. It contains a pledge to ‘build links with partners/governments overseas to encourage them to adopt a co-ordinated response to forced marriage’ with the aim of ensuring that nationals of their countries are afforded similar assistance, both in their country of residence and overseas, to that given to UK nationals by the Forced Marriage Unit.

In addition, the Action Plan commits the Home office to leading efforts to enhance the UK’s international leadership on tackling violence against women and girls overseas.

Forced Marriage Unit

Sitting within the FCO, the Forced Marriage Unit commits to work with embassy staff abroad to rescue those who may have been held captive, raped, forced into a marriage or into having an abortion, and in the UK to assist those at risk of or undergoing forced marriage, as well as professionals working in the social, educational and health sectors. The work of the FMU will benefit from improved child protection systems within developing countries, but also by education efforts in communities to which UK nationals are likely to be taken to convince them to turn their backs on the practice.
We recommend the UK Government prioritise the following actions:

1. Cross-Whitehall and DFID co-ordination

Tackling early and forced marriage effectively requires a cross-sectoral response, co-ordinated between Whitehall, DFID’s Human Development Group, and with DFID’s health and education teams working closely together. The Government should:

- Develop cross-Whitehall coordination on early and forced marriage through the establishment of a central action plan and indicators to ensure that DFID, the Home Office, the FCO, the Government Equalities Office, and the Departments for Education and Health collaborate to strengthen their response to early and forced marriage in the UK and internationally.

- Improve joint working on early and forced marriage and girls’ education within DFID’s Human Development Group, ensuring that Education, Maternal Mortality, Nutrition, Equity and Rights and HIV and AIDS teams initiate and strengthen cooperation to tackle early and forced marriage with the help of centralised monitoring systems to promote coordination and coherent policy-making.

- Ensure DFID’s proposed Girls’ Education Challenge initiative addresses early and forced marriage and gives priority to creating an environment that promotes the realisation of girls’ rights.

- Mandate DFID’s Education and Health cadres at country level to raise early and forced marriage in policy dialogue via bilateral processes and sector monitoring and review mechanisms. Ensure co-ordination of efforts between embassies, high commissions and DFID country offices.

- Enable young women’s voices to inform DFID programmes and policy by seeking their input into their design, monitoring and evaluation.
2. Bilateral programmes

Policy and advocacy dialogue around the issue of early and forced marriage must be understood in relation to gender inequality. Responding to the issue should become part of DFID’s policy on education and violence against women and girls, and not be limited to health, including HIV, nutrition and maternal mortality agendas. Interventions, which address complex and negative socio-cultural norms, attitudes and behaviours, will be most successful. Work to tackle early and forced marriage should be built on a foundation of support for girls’ education and DFID should:

- Create and encourage the conditions necessary in partner countries for the education of girls and women through political leadership, advocacy and targeted Official Development Assistance (ODA).

- Draw upon the aid budget to invest in mechanisms to prevent early and forced marriage and offer protection and support services for girls at risk, including help for families, psycho-social support, child protection resources and legal assistance. Work with partner governments to develop in-country support networks for women and girls who seek to escape from early or forced marriages.


- Work with development partners to strengthen the enforcement of birth registration and implement laws governing the minimum age for marriage, and incorporate measures to prevent early and forced marriage into other government sector initiatives, such as health, education, employment and domestic wealth creation. In tandem, strengthen laws compelling families to keep boys and girls in school and enforcing a compulsory education age and build the capacity of schools to report cases of marriage before the legal age.

- Ensure bilateral programmes incorporate work with power brokers on the need to toughen or enforce legislation on violence against women and girls. Develop training for law enforcement agencies on gender equality and human rights.

- Seek accountability for the provision of compulsory, free education for girls. At community level, build an understanding and acceptance of girls’ rights among caregivers.

- Fund and publicise existing good practice by civil society and women’s organisations on early and forced marriage and the promotion of girl’s voices in advocacy for their rights and the building of girl-friendly governance and accountability mechanisms.

- Invest in strengthening the evidence base on the relationship between early and forced marriage and girls’ education and the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals and the collection of age and sex disaggregated data. In particular, fund research into the role of education in preventing or delaying early and forced marriage.

- Ensure early and forced marriage interventions are included in planned piloting of new approaches to prevent violence against women and girls.
3. Multilateral relationships and international influence

DFID expertise and advocacy on education and early and forced marriage should be shared through engagement with key multilaterals such as the World Bank, the EC and UNICEF. We urge the UK government to honour its commitments as a signatory to international human rights frameworks to lead action to bring early and forced marriage to an end and increase girls’ access to education. In particular, we call on the Government to:

- Influence partner governments to improve enforcement of international human rights instruments - in particular CEDAW and the Beijing Platform For Action (Strategic Objective L1) - and regional frameworks - in particular the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child.

- Lobby UN Women to address early and forced marriage as a priority issue and work in partnership with other UN agencies, in particular UNICEF.

- Take advantage of international lobbying opportunities to leverage influence that leads to action against early and forced marriage. In particular, raise the issue at Fast Track Initiative Board and Partnership meetings, in EC education dialogue, at upcoming Commonwealth Heads Of Government Meetings, UN MDG Summits, and UN Economic and Social Council meetings.

- Support young women affected by early and forced marriage to have their voices heard and acted upon at the international level through mechanisms such as UN Women.

- Lobby the UN Human Rights Council Working Group on Discrimination Against Women in Law and in Practice to conduct a global scrutiny of laws impacting on early and forced marriage and identify ways to co-operate with states to fulfill their commitments.

“Now I’m 19 and have two children. I suffer a lot. I ask other young girls who aren’t yet victims of child marriage to remain vigilant and to speak out against such an old-fashioned practice. At the time, I didn’t have any information on NGOs which fight against this sort of thing.”

Marie, 19, Benin75

“In our village, a young girl of 15 years old was forced into marriage. We investigated the case and then reported it to the police officer in charge of child protection in our area. Appropriate action was taken and finally, the girl was freed. Sadly she later felt that she could not resume her classes at school because she felt very ashamed.”

Léocadie, 16, member of her local youth committee, Benin76
Plan works around the world to reduce rates of early and forced marriage and increase girls’ access to their rights. Our aims are:

- To reduce the social pressure that motivates families to favour early marriage by working with boys, girls, men, women and their communities to change attitudes, beliefs and behaviours about the practice.

- To provide educational opportunities for all girls through formal schooling and alternative or vocational training.

- To build girls’ leadership skills through empowerment and building of socio-economic capabilities as well as to facilitate the creation of social networks for girls and increase their participation in political and civic action.

- To train and support community leaders and organisations to design and carry out advocacy and awareness activities that promote and protect the rights of girls.
Plan is a global children’s charity. We work with children in the world’s poorest countries to help them build a better future. A future you would want for all children, your family and friends. For over 70 years we’ve been taking action and standing up for every child’s right to fulfil their potential by:

- giving children a healthy start in life, including access to safe drinking water
- securing the education of girls and boys
- working with communities to prepare for and survive disasters
- inspiring children to take a lead in decisions that affect their lives
- enabling families to earn a living and plan for their children’s future.

We do what’s needed, where it’s needed most. We do what you would do.

With your support children, families and entire communities have the power to move themselves from a life of poverty to a future with opportunity.

the Plan: to end early and forced marriage

To find out more, visit;

www.becauseiamagirl.org