THE POWER OF EDUCATION
TO END CHILD MARRIAGE

unicef

for every child

MARRIAGE AND SCHOOLING: USUALLY DIVERGING PATHWAYS

Child marriage is a violation of human rights that limits girls in reaching their full potential. This harmful practice is closely associated with deprivations in education, health, access to resources and empowerment. Chief among these deprivations is the exit from schooling that typically accompanies the marriage of a child.

In many countries, marriage and schooling are viewed as incompatible, and decisions about removing a girl from school and marrying her off at a young age are often made at the same time. These decisions are influenced by the perceived value of education and the availability of employment opportunities for educated girls. Better quality and higher education may make the returns on investment in girls more readily apparent and justifiable to both parents and society.

Access to quality education and decent work are also critical to breaking the cycle of poverty and the intergenerational transmission of child marriage, since girls from more educated and wealthier households are less likely to marry in childhood.

As the world rallies to accelerate progress against child marriage, understanding what drives change in how people think about the practice – and act – is key to its elimination.
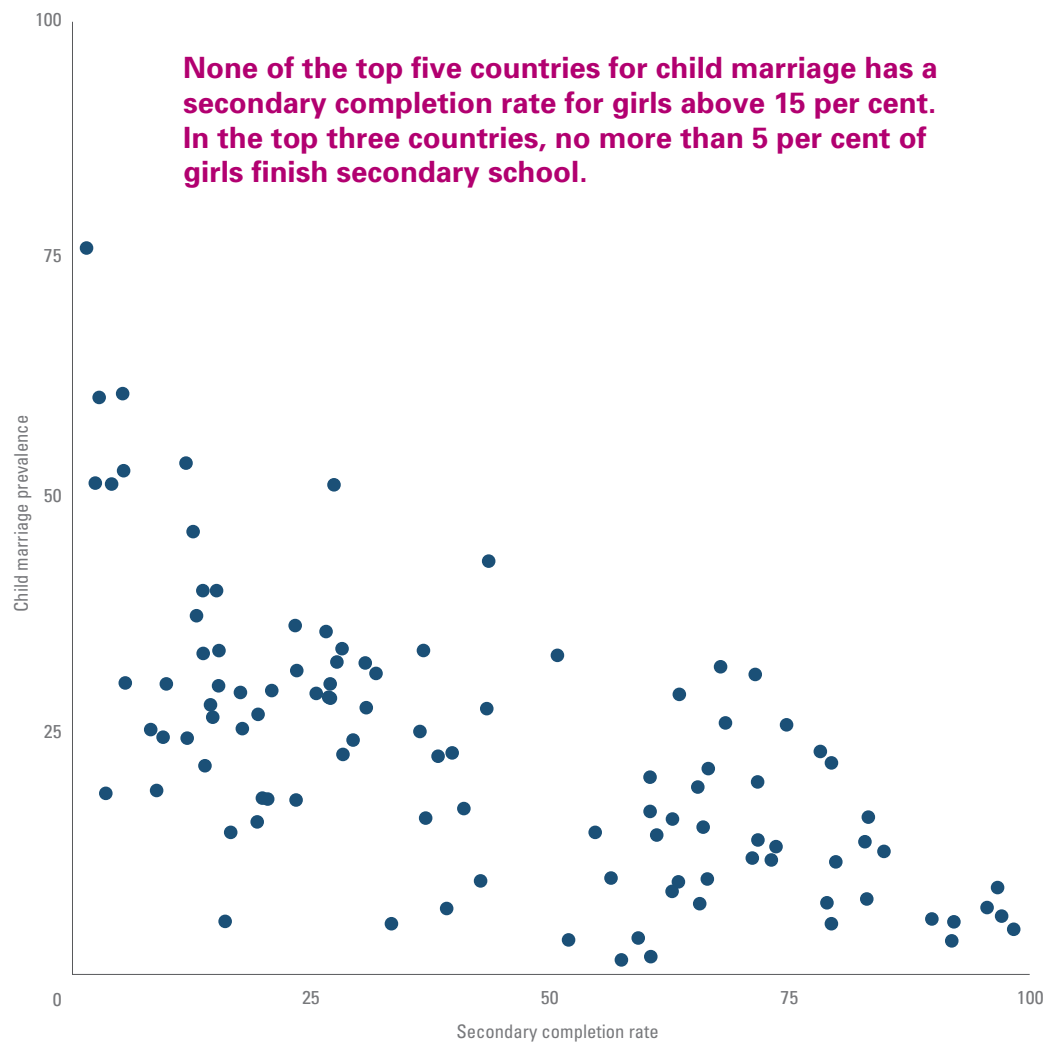
This publication uses data to illustrate how child marriage and schooling are related, showing the likelihood of child marriage among populations with different levels of education, as well as the educational status of girls who are child brides today.

EDUCATION OPENS ⇑ ⇓ ⇒ DOORS.

None of the top five countries for child marriage has a secondary completion rate for girls above 15 per cent. In the top three countries, no more than 5 per cent of girls finish secondary school.

Child marriage prevalence

Secondary completion rate

FIGURE 1 Percentage of women aged 20 to 24 years who were first married or in union before age 18 (child marriage prevalence) and percentage of the cohort of girls 3 to 5 years older than the intended age for the last grade of upper secondary education who have completed secondary education (secondary completion rate)

Note: Each dot represents a country.

CHILD MARRIAGE IS MOST COMMON IN COUNTRIES WHERE GIRLS HAVE THE LEAST EDUCATION

THE GIRLS MOST AT RISK OF BECOMING CHILD BRIDES ARE THOSE WITH LITTLE OR NO EDUCATION

Even in countries where the practice is very common, girls with at least a secondary education are often spared early marriage

- ● No education
- ● Primary education
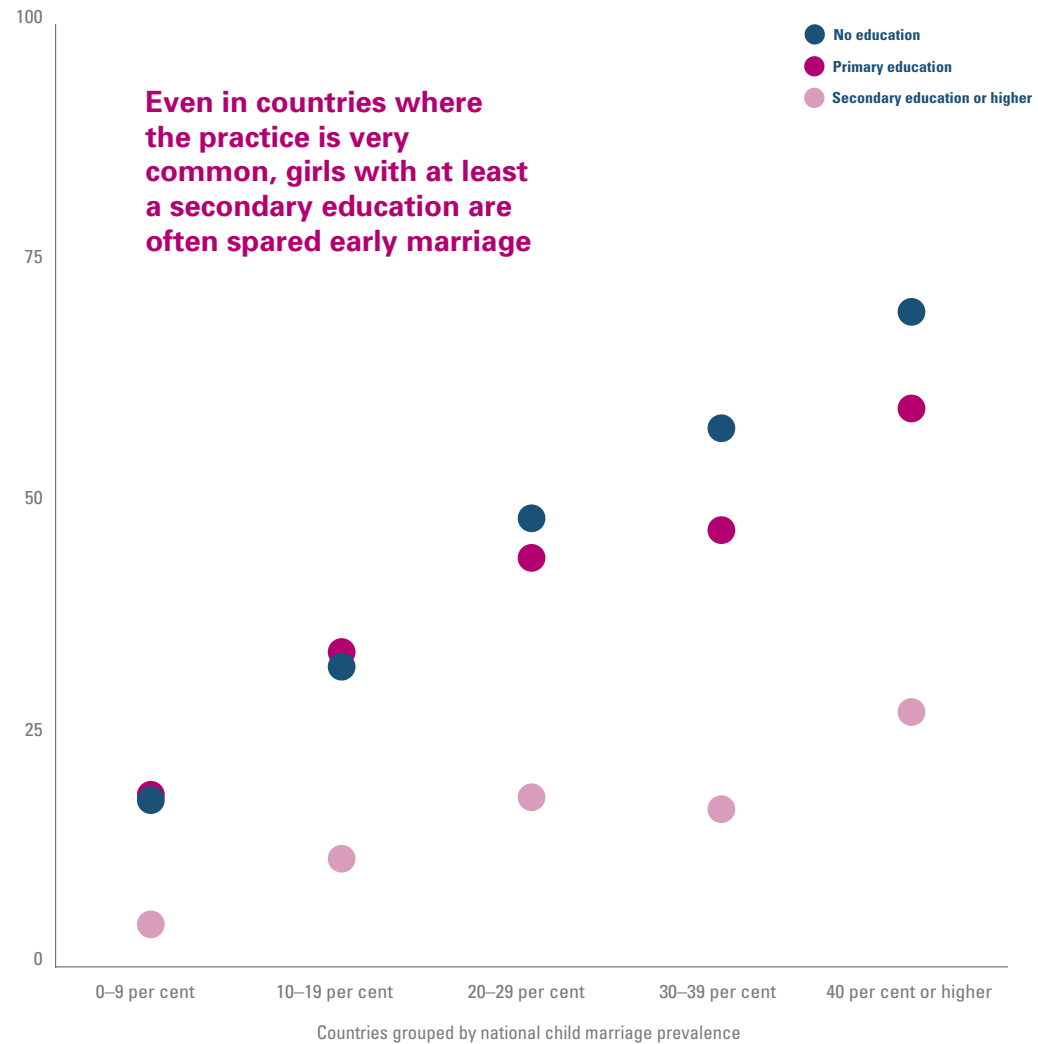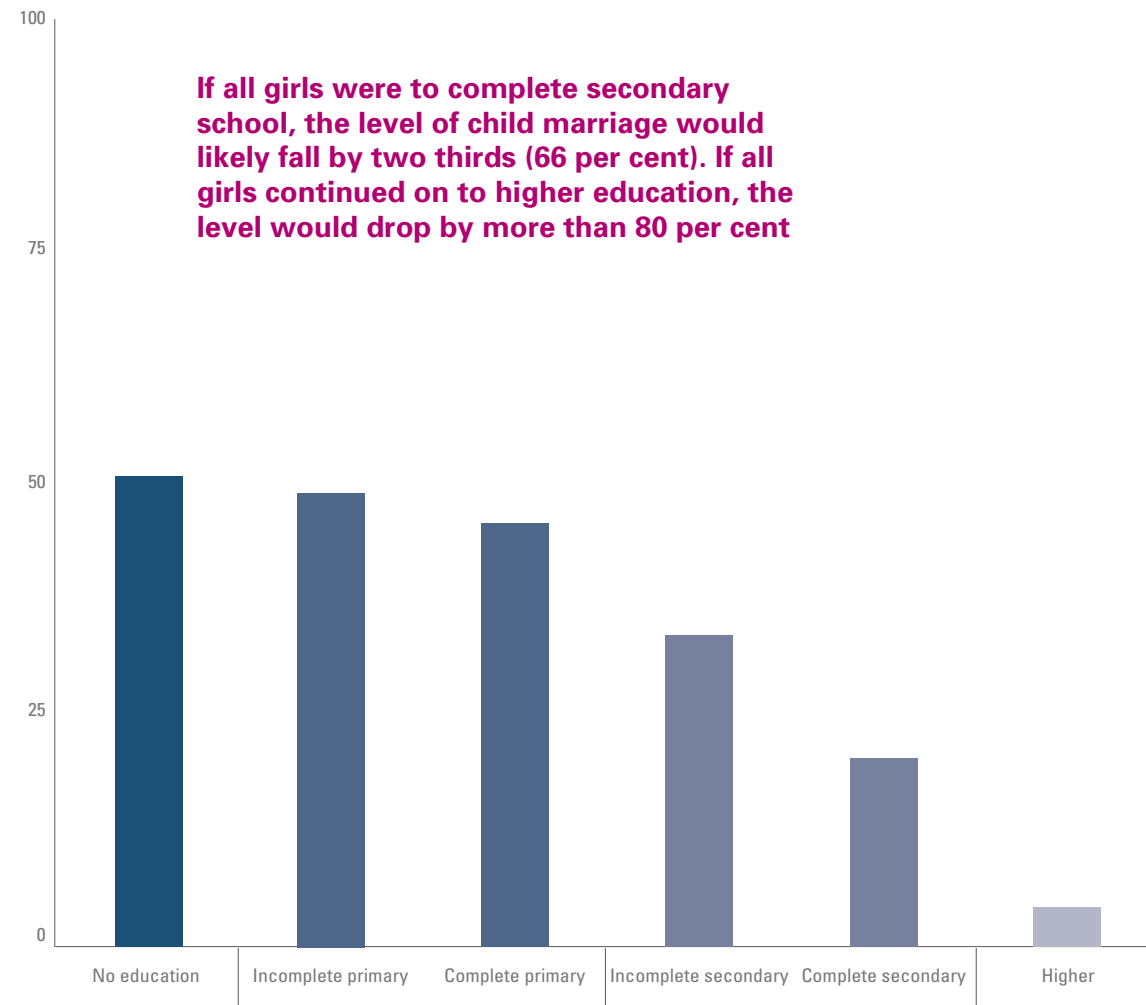- ● Secondary education or higher

FIGURE 2 Percentage of women aged 20 to 24 years who were first married or in union before age 18 (child marriage prevalence), by level of education

Notes: Analysis based on a subset of 77 countries with available data on age at marriage and educational attainment. Together, these countries account for 81 per cent of the world's child brides. Prevalence by education level is calculated as a population-weighted average within each group of countries.

Countries grouped by national child marriage prevalence

If all girls were to complete secondary school, the level of child marriage would likely fall by two thirds (66 per cent). If all girls continued on to higher education, the level would drop by more than 80 per cent

Chart y-axis: 0, 25, 50, 75, 100

Categories: No education, Incomplete primary, Complete primary, Incomplete secondary, Complete secondary, Higher

FIGURE 3 Percentage of women aged 20 to 24 years who were first married or in union before age 18, by level of education, in countries where child marriage is concentrated

Notes: Analysis based on a subset of 15 countries where child marriage is concentrated. Together, these countries account for 63 per cent of the world's child brides and span East Asia and the Pacific, Latin America and the Caribbean, the Middle East and North Africa, South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa. See Technical notes for further details on interpretation.

EVERY YEAR OF SCHOOLING MATTERS

BUT ADVANCING THROUGH SECONDARY SCHOOL IS ESPECIALLY PROTECTIVE

GIRLS NEED TO STUDY DON'T MARRY THEM OFF

87% out of school **13%** in school

FIGURE 4 Percentage distribution of adolescent girls aged 15 to 17 years currently married or in union, by schooling status

Notes: Analysis based on 67 countries with available data on the marital status and school attendance of adolescent girls. Together, these countries account for 78 per cent of the world's child brides.

WHEN GIRLS MARRY, THEY RARELY REMAIN IN SCHOOL

THE PATH TO A BRIGHTER FUTURE

To end child marriage, girls and their families must see a better, more advantageous path. Education, which is widely recognized as the most significant factor in delaying the age of marriage for girls, can offer this alternative.

Quality education, particularly at the secondary-school level, confers knowledge, builds skills and can empower girls to successfully transition to employment. However, to be most protective against child marriage, education must be paired with a robust labour market offering reliable employment. What's more, societies must be receptive to the notion of working women and ensure that families are covered by adequate social protection benefits. Finally, it is essential that married girls are not left behind, and that targeted programmes support child brides in continuing their education.

Technical notes
The analysis featured in this publication is descriptive in nature, illustrating the association between child marriage and education. While it has been clearly established, across countries and over time, that child marriage is most common among those with the least education, the mechanism of this relationship is complex, and causality is not straightforward. The analysis here is not intended to establish causality, but rather to illustrate the magnitude of the disparities between advantaged and disadvantaged groups, and to imagine the gains that could be achieved if all girls had the fulfillment of rights of their most advantaged peers.

To assess the prevalence of child marriage in Figures 1 to 3, this analysis used SDG indicator 5.3.1 – the percentage of women aged 20 to 24 years who were first married or in union before age 18. All references to 'marriage' include both formal marriages and informal unions in which women started living together with a partner as if married. The analysis of adolescent girls' marital status shown in Figure 4 is based on the current marital status of girls aged 15 to 17 years. Data on married girls under age 15 are unavailable.

The levels of education shown in Figures 2 and 3 refer to the highest level of education attained by women aged 20 to 24 years. Data on the timing of marriage vis-à-vis women's exit from schooling are unavailable, and causality in either direction should not be inferred from this descriptive analysis.

Confidence intervals are not shown in this publication. Caution is therefore warranted in interpreting the results since apparent differences among groups may not be significant. All messages were developed in light of the confidence intervals, so where a difference among groups is mentioned in the text, it has been confirmed as statistically significant.

Data sources
UNICEF global databases, 2022, based on Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS), Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys (MICS) and other nationally representative surveys, 2010–2021. For detailed source information by country, please see <data.unicef.org>. Demographic data are from the United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division. *World Population Prospects 2022*, online edition.