**Plan International, Inc.**

**SUBMISSION TO THE REPORT OF THE UNITED NATIONS SECRETARY-GENERAL ON PROGRESS TOWARDS ENDING CHILD, EARLY AND FORCED MARRIAGE WORLDWIDE**

Plan International has developed this submission to inform the forthcoming report by the United Nations Secretary-General on child, early and forced marriage pursuant to General Assembly Resolution 71/175. Due to the page limit, this submission will only highlight new research, programming and influencing work undertaken by Plan International since our last submission to the previous Secretary-General report in February 2016, which contains elements and recommendations that are still valid today.[[1]](#footnote-1)

1. **INTRODUCTION**

[Plan International](https://plan-international.org/), Inc. is an independent non-governmental organisation and is in Special Consultative Status with ECOSOC. Founded in 1937, Plan International is one of the oldest and largest children’s rights organisations in the world. We strive to advance children’s rights and equality for girls in both development and humanitarian contexts. Working with children and young people in more than 70 countries around the world, we tackle the root causes of inequality faced by children, especially girls. The elimination of harmful practices, including child marriage, is one of Plan International’s priorities as outlined in our new Global Strategy 2017-2022 - “[*100 million reasons*](https://plan-international.org/100-million-girls)*”* - which aims to transform the lives of 100 million girls so they can learn, lead, decide and thrive.

Child, early and forced marriage (CEFM) remains a prevalent global issue and is a grave violation of children’s human rights, with particularly adverse effects on girls. CEFM forces girls into adulthood prematurely and has a negative impact on all areas of their lives, violating their sexual and reproductive health and rights, curtailing their education, limiting their autonomy and exposing them to an increased risk of violence.

Research carried out by Plan International and partners has shown that the underlying factors that contribute to CEFM are complex and interrelated. They vary within and between countries and depend on individual circumstances and social contexts. Plan International believes that in order to be gender transformative and effective, interventions against CEFM must be holistic, multi-sectorial and multi-level. Recognising the complex and multiple causes of CEFM, Plan International continues to work within their global programme model known as “*18+: Ending Child, Early and Forced Marriage*”. This functions on three levels: 1) to challenge and change harmful gender norms, attitudes, practices and behaviours that hinder girls’ empowerment and how they are valued; 2) to build social and economic resources for and with adolescent girls and establish safety nets needed in times of economic or environmental crisis; 3) to influence international and national laws, policies, frameworks, and investments so that girls’ rights are recognised and fulfilled**.**

1. **LEGAL AND POLICY DEVELOPMENTS**

**Improved legislations and policies**

Work at the system level is crucial in influencing structures to create an enabling environment to protect girls from child, early and forced marriage. Legislation not only provides a structure for legal protection but also the normative framework, leadership, guidance and legitimacy for policy-makers and civil society to tackle the financial, social, cultural and religious drivers of child marriage. **It is crucial that States ratify all relevant instruments related to securing political, social and cultural rights for girls and withdraw all reservations made to international human rights instruments that are pertinent to child, early and forced marriage**.

Aligning national laws governing the minimum age of marriage with international human rights standards is an important first step in the process of eliminating CEFM. **All countries should specify a minimum age of marriage of 18 for both men and women, without exception**. While many countries today recognise 18 as the legal age of marriage for girls, “close to 100 million girls globally are not legally protected against child marriage when considering exceptions that allow marriage at a young age with parental or judicial consent.”[[2]](#footnote-2) We have witnessed positive developments in this area with several countries having improved their laws and removed exceptions over the past few years. Some examples are provided in the box below.

*The Southern Africa Development Commission Parliamentary Forum (SADC-PF) has adopted the Model Law on Eradicating Child Marriage and Protecting Children Already in Marriage.*

Plan International and other partners supported the adoption of the Model Law on child marriage, requiring Member States to harmonise their national laws to prevent child marriage in a comprehensive manner. The Model Law on Eradicating Child Marriage and Protecting Children Already in Marriage will provide guidance to parliamentarians, policymakers, and other stakeholders in SADC countries as they develop comprehensive national legislations to curb the practice and protect children already in marriage. The purpose of the model law is already bearing results (see Malawi example below) as countries are currently engaged in processes to reform and harmonise legal provisions with a view to outlaw CEFM.

*Successful advocacy to harmonise the Malawi Republican Constitution with the Marriage Divorce and Family Relations Act, 2015 on age of marriage*

In February 2017, the Malawian Parliament amended the Republican Constitution to criminalise all marriages with partners below the age of 18, removing the previous discrepancy between the Constitution and the Marriage Divorce and Family Relations Act. Before the amendment, section 23 of the Malawi’s Constitution had permitted the marriage of girls over the age of 16 with parental consent. The provision subjected children between the ages of 16 to 18 to exploitation and CEFM, even though this directly conflicted with section 14 of the Marriage, Divorce and Family Relations Act of 2015, which specifies a minimum age of marriage at 18. While the recent amendment is a victory for child-rights advocates, more work remains to be done to ensure that the change is fully implemented and enforced, including through appropriate by-laws.

*Examples from Central America*: *Minimum age raised and exceptions removed*

Through building on the successful law change in Guatemala in 2015, Plan International and other partners have advocated to raise the minimum age of marriage in several countries in Central America. In 2017, both Honduras and El Salvador approved raising the minimum age of marriage to 18 and removed all exceptions permitting marriage under the legal age. However, despite the increasing number of national law changes within the region, the difficulty remains at an implementation and enforcement level, particularly in poorer and rural areas where the traditions and cultures in communities continue to reinforce the practice of CEFM.[[3]](#footnote-3)

In addition to laws and policies relating to the age of marriage, it is also important to **look more broadly at and address other legal and policy issues that have a direct bearing on CEFM, such as education and sexual and reproductive health and rights, inheritance, and land rights**.

**Need to strengthen enforcement and monitoring systems**

Despite improvements to strengthen national legal frameworks and the harmonisation of laws, there remains a disparity between policy formulation and implementation on the ground. **Continued work to implement and adequately resource laws and policies is necessary. Collaboration and partnership with all duty bearers at relevant levels is needed to influence the adoption and implementation of national action plans and strategies to prevent and address CEFM in conformity with international law**.[[4]](#footnote-4) While legal protection alone will not eliminate the practice of child marriage, enacting and enforcing national legislation that prohibits the practice and gives national law precedence over conflicting customary, traditional or religious laws, provides a necessary platform for successful interventions.

Here it is also important to note that oftentimes CEFM take place through informal ceremonies, which are not registered, or informal unions that are common in Latin America and the Caribbean for example. Furthermore, the lack of proper age verification mechanisms and adequate birth registration systems in some countries remains an obstacle to ending CEFM, as it is often difficult to ascertain the age of a person to be married. These challenges have made child marriages invisible and are driving the practice underground. Plan International has supported work in this area[[5]](#footnote-5) and **urges** **States to continue to put in place comprehensive, effective and rights-based civil registration and vital statistics systems, including birth and marriage registration processes**.

Plan InternationalBangladesh, in collaboration with the Governance Innovation Unit and Access to Information project of the Prime Minister’s Office, has implemented targeted training programmes for marriage registrars and matchmakers to educate them about the new law stipulating 18 as the minimum age of marriage for girls and the legal requirements they must fulfil in order to carry out their business. Simple mobile phone technology has been used to support registrars and matchmakers to verify ages of brides and grooms by tapping into a database containing information on births, school enrolments and national identities.  The same technology also allows registrars to register marriages immediately thus enhancing the protection of girls.

1. **GOOD PRACTICES ON CHALLENGING HARMFUL SOCIAL NORMS AND BUILDING GIRLS’ AGENCY AND ASSETS**

**Girls’ empowerment**

It is essential to continue to strengthen girls’ agency and assets and to build on initiatives already in place, which encourage and equip girls to be agents of change. It is also important to strengthen their decision-making abilities, and increase their skills, knowledge and confidence so that they are able to influence decisions about their own lives. Interventions should target both married girls and those at risk of CEFM. Plan International has adopted a range of strategies to support this empowerment. Some examples are provided below.

*Champion of Change Programme Initiative*

Plan International`s *Champions of Change* programme first piloted in 2012 continues to be implemented globally.[[6]](#footnote-6) It is a community-wide strategy to engage boys and empower girls to challenge harmful social norms and promote gender equality. It uses a gender-synchronised approach, which supports children and young people to actively examine and reflect how rigid gender norms and power imbalances are present in their own lives. The programme has developed a comprehensive set of curricula for both girls and boys. It has proved effective because: 1) it uses a peer-to-peer model, helping young people feel invested and take ownership of the subject; 2) it explicitly fosters a youth-led social movement that challenges social norms and gains society-wide support for gender equality and girls’ rights; 3) it also promotes inter-generational dialogue and community-level advocacy on gender equality.

*Youth clubs in Malawi, Zambia and Zimbabwe*

Plan International has supported the training of youth and the creation of youth clubs with the aim to transform boys and men into champions of change for gender equality. These groups create ‘safe spaces’ for young adolescents aged between 18 and 24 where they can deliberate on their sexuality, sexual and reproductive health rights (SRHR), gender equality, factors that create gender power imbalances and different dynamics of gender based violence. These safe spaces have enabled victims of sexual violence to obtain help and are redefining gender equality in the community.

*Regional School of Political Empowerment and Leadership for Adolescent Girls and Young Indigenous Women in Latin America*

Plan International, in partnership with the Commission for Children and Youth of the Continental Liaison of Indigenous Women are creating spaces, which provide training in leadership and political empowerment for indigenous adolescent girls and young women in Latin America, so they can regain control of their bodies and actively participate in decisions that affect their lives. This programme aims to address exclusion and discrimination, which is preventing indigenous girls and young women from feeling able to take up leadership roles and to participate politically.

**Sexual reproductive health and rights, and education**

It remains critical to continue to support access to both formal and informal inclusive quality education for girls to ensure that they are able to fulfil their potential. Poor quality education, the hidden costs of secondary education, as well as harmful gender norms, which place a lower value on girls and see them as solely future wives and mothers discourage many parents from ensuring that their daughters continue their education and increase the risk of CEFM. **All girls should be able to receive and complete quality primary and secondary education that promotes non-discrimination, gender equality and human rights in a safe and supportive environment**.

It is important that this education also covers life skills and **comprehensive sexuality education (CSE),** addressing harmful gender norms and building the knowledge and skills necessary to enable girls to make informed decisions about their lives and bodies, and fully realise their sexual and reproductive health and rights. Plan International recognises that adolescent pregnancy can be a driver for, or a consequence of CEFM and therefore **urges States to ensure the availability and accessibility of gender responsive sexual reproductive health information, goods and services for girls and young women, including access to modern methods of contraception.**

In *Bangladesh*, Plan International through its *Generation Breakthrough* programme, and in partnership with the Ministry of Education and UNFPA, has been piloting CSE in schools targeting predominantly adolescents aged 10-14 years. The CSE programme aims to create gender equitable attitudes, build life skills and improve knowledge of sexual and reproductive health and rights. CSE has so far been successful in reducing sexual harassment within schools and increasing adolescents’ awareness of their rights.

In *Malawi*, community leaders and initiators are being trained on adolescent sexual and reproductive health and rights, in order to ensure that as gatekeepers they are promoting positive new norms to change attitudes and behaviours around SRHR and the value of young women and girls. Previously cultural practices had been the main contributor to sexual violence and other harmful practices, however through interventions and community assistance, the prevalence of harmful cultural practices has decreased and several child marriages have been nullified.

Education initiatives, which support financial literacy, entrepreneurship, provide start-up capital and mentoring further develops girls’ independence. This is particularly important for girls rescued from CEFM, who have been highly dependent on their spouses’ and families’ income and who have not had access to formal or non-formal education, training and/or employment. Understanding the aforementioned dynamics, Plan International has supported the development of the Village Savings and Loans Associations (VSLA), which represent a key approach to targeting primarily girls at risk of CEFM and those already married. This initiative aims to get girls back into school through the provision of scholarships.

*Empowering girls through Village Savings and Loans Associations in Malawi*

The *Yes I Do* project trained 64 adolescents in two districts using the VSLA model as a tool of self-initiated economic empowerment. The target population for these interventions were married girls and girls at risk of CEFM and early pregnancy. The VSLA model is a sustainable means of boosting social capital and minimizing the culture of handouts. It tailors banking systems of savings and loans to the economic conditions of the members to minimise economic exploitation. The young adolescents were trained in the model and were advised to specifically target adolescents who have either been married as children and/or are child mothers to join the groups.

**Interventions at family and community level**

Plan International acknowledges that the power to make decisions surrounding marriage often rests on a myriad of actors that surround the lives of girls, particularly families and community leaders. Given their influential positions, these leaders and authority figures have been identified as key agents of change. One of the key pillars in Plan International’s approach to ending CEFM is direct engagement with communities and influential agents of change, in particular traditional and religious leaders, to alter social norms, behaviours and harmful practices that drive CEFM, both at national and sub-regional levels. Plan International continues to support and equip these leaders and the broader community with the knowledge to help facilitate processes of social norm change.

Plan International’s *18+ programme in Southern and Eastern Africa* implemented an exchange visit between traditional leaders from Malawi, Kenya, Tanzania, Zambia and Zimbabwe to share and learn from their work on taking an active role in ending CEFM in their communities. In addition, in *South Sudan*, the *Women and Girls for Change* project, conducted training for women leaders and gender advocates in targeted communities. The goal of this training was to transform communities’ norms and behaviours by advancing positive deviance.

In *Sudan*, Plan International, in collaboration with the Association of European Parliamentarians with Africa (AWEPA), supported female parliamentarians to participate in Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) conferences to exchange experiences on legal reform and enforcement with female parliamentarians from Egypt, Kenya, Ethiopia and Senegal, as well as other organisations and UN agencies in the region. At the national level, there is also continued work to abandon FGM and CEFM through engagement and capacity building for community action groups, religious leaders, legislators and Sudanese women parliamentarians.

1. **RESEARCH DEVELOPMENTS**

Since Plan International’s last submission on progress towards ending CEFM worldwide in 2016, we have continued with and conducted new national and regional research. This process has given Plan International new insights into CEFM and effective ways of tackling the harmful practice.

**National-level research on prevalence and drivers of child, early and forced marriage**

In Bangladesh, research has been undertaken through the *IMPOWER* project to look at using positive deviance to delay the age of marriage. The key findings from this research demonstrate that there are key assets and strategies that girls have used to overcome the drivers of early marriage.[[7]](#footnote-7) These include, analytical thinking, negotiation and bargaining strategies, stipend support, supportive male family members, parental aspirations and exposure to role models to name a few. Included are social, personal, material and financial assets, showing that all four types of assets have played a critical role in enabling them to overcome CEFM drivers in their lives.[[8]](#footnote-8)

**Multi-country research on child, early and forced marriage**

In January 2017, Plan International published a qualitative research study “*Family Honour and Shattered Dreams: Girl Brides in Mali, Niger and Senegal*”[[9]](#footnote-9) highlighting the local processes, specificities and driving factors of child marriage in the three West African countries. The research found that protection, family, honour and the risk of shame are the driving factors behind child, early and forced marriage in this region. Furthermore the chronological age of the girl is often of little importance to the practice of child marriage – readiness for marriage is determined by signs of puberty, regardless of age. In light of this, the research concluded that criminalisation and strong legalistic approaches towards child marriage are unlikely to produce positive results and instead risk alienating communities and driving the practice of CEFM underground.[[10]](#footnote-10)

**Research on child marriage and children with disabilities**

Research has been carried out in both Nepal and Ethiopia looking into the factors, which contribute to the practice of CEFM and the impact this has on children with disabilities.[[11]](#footnote-11) The studies found that contrary to social beliefs and stigma surrounding disability and marriage, marriage among children with disabilities is an existing practice. While the driving cause of child marriage remains similar for children with and without disabilities (e.g. poverty, social norms, and gender relations), the vulnerabilities a child faces are further compounded due to the disability and the disability intensifies the consequences and impact of marriage.[[12]](#footnote-12)

1. **CONCLUSIONS**

Throughout this submission, Plan International has highlighted some good practices and several areas in need of further attention and action by States and other stakeholders working on the eradication of child, early and forced marriage. Plan International believes that the recommendations in their previous submission to the Secretary-General’s report on CEFM in 2016 also remain prominent and valid.[[13]](#footnote-13) Furthermore, **Plan International urges relevant actors to actively use regional and international human rights mechanisms to hold States to account, and encourages States to implement all recommendations made (for example from UPR, CRC and CEDAW), particularly those which impact on the advancement of girls rights and child, early, and forced marriage**.

Since the previous submission on CEFM, Plan International also wishes to highlight four areas requiring further attention and the development of appropriate policies, strategies and programmes to address:

* The need to adapt child marriage strategies to address the complexities arising from urbanisation and in humanitarian/fragile contexts.
* The prevalence of informal unions and informal marriage ceremonies without registration, which is making child marriage invisible.
* The lack of comprehensive support systems for girls who are currently married or have been rescued from marriage to enable them to rehabilitate into society and to realise their full potential.
* The interplay between child, early and forced marriage and the control of female sexuality.

1. Plan International, 2016, *Submission to the Report of the United Nations Secretary-General on Progress towards Ending Child, Early and Forced Marriage Worldwide*, attached to this submission. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Quentin Wodon, Paula Tavares, Oliver Fiala, Alexis Le Nestour and Lisa Wise, 2017, *Ending Child Marriage: Child Marriage Laws and their Limitations.* [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. <https://plan-international.org/blog/2015/11/no-more-girl-brides-guatemala> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. For further details, refer to Plan International`s 2016, *Submission to the Report of the United Nations Secretary-General on Progress towards Ending Child, Early and Forced Marriage Worldwide*. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Most recently Plan International has developed a document for States to guide them in innovative practices for birth registrations. Plan International, 2017,[*Innovations in Birth Registration*](https://plan-international.org/publications/innovations-birth-registration)*.* [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Countries include Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, Malawi, Zambia, and Zimbabwe. See: <https://plan-international.org/youth-activism/men-champions-of-change>. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. In Ethiopia and Tanzania research was also undertaken by Plan International to establish early drivers of marriage and identify any protective factors. Further information can be provided on request. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Plan International Bangladesh, 2017, *Positive Deviance in Delaying the Age of Marriage*. Further information can be provided upon request. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Plan International, 2017, [*Family Honour and Shattered Dreams: Girl Brides in Mali, Niger and Senegal*](https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/Plan_Family-honour-and-shattered-dreams_Web.pdf)*.* [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Plan International is currently undertaking research in eight countries in Latin America and the Caribbean looking in particular at the driving factors of informal marriages and unions that do not involve an official ceremony. The prevalence of these unions remains high across these countries and is often not recognised as early marriage among the population. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Further information can be provided upon request. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Plan International, 2017, [*Uncovered Realities: Exploring Experiences of Child Marriage among Children with Disabilities*](https://www.google.ch/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=1&ved=0ahUKEwjUtJGu3J3XAhXB16QKHfhsA2cQFggmMAA&url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.ohchr.org%2FDocuments%2FIssues%2FDisability%2FReproductiveHealthRights%2FNGOS%2FPlanInternationalNorwayChildMarriageandDisabilityReport.docx&usg=AOvVaw2pAHCESr3GZY7VT2fIFnq5). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. For further details, refer to Plan International, 2016, *Submission to the Report of the United Nations Secretary-General on Progress towards Ending Child, Early and Forced Marriage Worldwide*. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)