



Plan International, Inc.

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

Geneva, February 2016

I. Introduction

1. Plan International has developed this paper to inform the forthcoming report by the United Nations Secretary-General on progress towards ending child, early and forced marriage worldwide, which will be submitted before the end of the General Assembly's seventieth session in September 2016 (pursuant to General Assembly resolution A/RES/69/156). This submission draws heavily on Plan International's research experience working directly with governments, children, families, communities, civil society organisations (CSOs) and coalitions to prevent and respond to child, early and forced marriage. It provides examples of best practices, which Plan International has employed to tackle the issue of child, early and forced marriage and also provides a series of recommendations to States and other relevant actors at all levels. This submission is particularly relevant in light of the recently adopted Sustainable Development Goals, and as States develop their national plans to implement the commitments made within this framework.
2. Founded in 1937, Plan International is one of the oldest and largest children's development organisations in the world. Plan International is an international, non-profit, child-centred, rights-based organisation that works without religious, political or governmental affiliation in 52 developing countries across Africa, Asia and the Americas to promote child rights and gender equality. In 2015, Plan facilitated and implemented programmes, including in collaboration with partners, reaching 100.5 million children in more than 85,200 communities. Plan International is running the world's biggest girls' rights campaign, '*Because I am a Girl*'.

II. Plan International's experience in tackling child, early and forced marriage: Good practices and recommendations

3. Plan International is currently implementing child, early and forced marriage programming in all regions in which it works, including in the following countries: Bangladesh, Cambodia, Ethiopia, Guatemala, Indonesia, Malawi, Mali, Mozambique, Niger, Nepal, Pakistan, Senegal, Tanzania, Togo, Zambia and Zimbabwe.
4. Plan International believes that in order to be transformative and effective, interventions against child, early and forced marriage must be multi-sectoral and include different approaches. As child, early and forced marriage is driven by or is the

outcome of multifaceted issues and challenges, the approach to end it must likewise be multipronged, engaging all relevant sectors including education, health, sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) and economic empowerment/poverty reduction, with child protection and gender equality providing the foundation for all interventions. At its root, gender inequality and the norms that perpetuate it are the main causes, as well as consequences, of child marriage.

5. Recognising the complex and multiple causes of child, early and forced marriage, Plan International has developed a global programme model called '*18+: Ending Child Marriage*', as part of its Because I am a Girl Global Girls Innovation Programme. The 18+ Programme model is based on a review of the drivers of child marriage across regions and builds on key principles and priorities that are scalable as well as on evidence gained through our gender-transformative work and experiences from all regions in which Plan International works.
6. The 18+ Programme is innovative in its multi-level and holistic approach. It is amongst the very few worldwide interventions that have been designed to reach a large number of adolescents and children on the issue of child marriage. It works at three levels:
 - Firstly, it mobilises girls so that they have the capabilities to determine their own futures, especially choices about if, when and whom they marry. The programme model's evidence-based and child-centred multi-level approach empowers girls with the information, skills, and services they need to be healthy, educated and safe, helping them make a successful transition to adulthood.
 - Secondly, the programme aims to transform gender norms and practices that drive child marriages through social movement-building. This includes working with and engaging men and boys.
 - Thirdly, the 18+ Programme seeks to facilitate and enable a legal and policy environment that protects girls from child marriage. It drives policy change across national and sub-regional government and legal systems. The programme model engages not only with children, both girls and boys but also with their families, the wider community, civil society, government and local authorities. The programme model increases awareness, mobilises communities and individuals, and creates long-term partnerships.

Plan International's child marriage programmes generate an evidence base on successful, scalable models to combat child marriage.

A number of good practices and recommendations clustered around the three levels of interventions mentioned above are listed below.

A. Individual level: Empowered girls

7. It is essential to strengthen a girl's agency and assets, as well as her decision-making ability so that she is empowered to choose what she wants in life. Programme interventions should target both married girls and those at risk of being forced into marriage, which require differentiated strategies.

8. It is possible that by addressing sensitive topics with social, cultural and religious significance, there can be a **backlash from community members**. To mitigate against this, Plan International supports girls to identify potential risks and harms, including physical, sexual and emotional harms which they might face when speaking-up for their rights – and advises them on how to use safety planning mechanisms to assess such risks and avoid harm.
9. The power to make decisions surrounding marriage often rests with families and traditional leaders in communities – and not with the girls and young women themselves. Plan International aims to equip girls and young women with the knowledge, confidence and skills to increase their influence in their own lives. Yet, given the power imbalances in communities, it is very important to assess realistically where girls may most safely and effectively create change. Broader community change needs a longer-term, multi-level process of community engagement as well as the development of an enabling environment. It is important to assess the extent of the enabling environment in a given context and help girls to craft their plans accordingly in order to minimize potential backlash and maximize their ability to expand their influence.

Plan International has adopted a range of strategies in our programme work to address these issues. Successful strategies include:

10. Increasing girls' access to education and retention in schools by removing barriers, including gender-based barriers.

It is important to ensure that all girls are able to access and complete a quality primary and secondary education which also covers life skills and comprehensive sexuality education to help them build competencies which promote individual empowerment and wellbeing which is crucial to success in life. All girls should be able to receive a quality education that promotes non-discrimination, gender equality and human rights in a safe and supportive environment. Several measures can make it easier for girls to access education, including reducing costs associated with school (such as fees, textbooks, and uniforms), improving the quality of educational experience through increased numbers of female teachers, developing a gender-sensitive curriculum, and improving school infrastructure (such as safe, private and sanitary washrooms, running water, safe roads, and lighting of the routes to and from school).

Drop-out rates for girls who are married young or who become pregnant are exponentially higher than for girls who are not married or pregnant. Helping these girls re-enter the education system is critical and can be achieved through the provision of alternative and informal learning opportunities, distance / remote learning opportunities as well as additional support such as child care for mothers during school time. All these measures enable married girls to continue their education.

Example from Malawi: Mother groups

The empowerment and use of mother groups has been very effective in sensitising communities on girls' rights as well as on the school re-admission policy for adolescent mothers. They have also been successful in reintegrating girls who had

dropped out of school due to early marriage or teenage pregnancy and supporting those girls with learning materials and personal hygiene supplies. The mother groups have also introduced a reporting mechanism which enables girls to report cases of sexual or physical abuse. In addition, they have improved the learning environment for girls through the construction of washrooms and toilet facilities and the provision of buckets, cloth wrappers and sanitary pads (which are made using locally available materials) to provide them with greater privacy, comfort and hygiene during menstruation.

Example from Zimbabwe: Getting girls back in school¹

Plan International's 'Building Skills for Life' Programme prepares out-of-school girls for re-entry into the education system so they can transition to and complete secondary school. The programme pays for school fees and provides girls with education materials. In addition to supporting the government's 'Second Chance Education Policy', the programme also improves the quality of education in schools by introducing adolescent sexual reproductive health education, girls' empowerment clubs and improving school-based child protection systems. The majority of girls in this programme have re-entered the formal education system and many have performed well academically. These girls act as mentors for younger girls, encouraging them to stay in school and avoid marrying young.

11. Building girls' self-esteem and agency through formal and informal education.

It is important to create safe spaces for girls and develop social networks through girls' empowerment clubs, as well as through the promotion of girls' leadership and political participation. These initiatives encourage and equip girls to be powerful agents of change.

Plan International furthermore believes that all girls and boys should be able to receive quality, comprehensive sexuality education, in both formal and informal education settings that is non-discriminatory, non-judgmental, rights-based and gender-transformative, enabling them to make informed decisions about their health and fully realise their sexual and reproductive rights. Young girls and boys, including married and unmarried adolescents, should have equal and universal access to comprehensive, quality sexual reproductive health and rights information and services, free from stigma, discrimination and coercion, including during conflicts and disasters. This should include information on, and access to quality, affordable, gender-sensitive and youth-friendly services relating to menstrual hygiene, family planning and contraception, perinatal care, and the prevention, care and treatment for sexually-transmitted infections including HIV. Access to such services should be free from any restrictions around age and spousal and/or parental consent.

¹ Plan International and Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development Canada (2014), *Field practitioners' toolkit: Responsive program strategies for ending child marriage in Zimbabwe*.

Example from Bangladesh: Safe spaces

In Bangladesh, safe spaces named ‘Girls forums/Youth forums/Children forums’ have been established at the community level to provide life skills, livelihood trainings and sexual reproductive health and rights education for school girls as well as married girls through peer-to-peer education. These groups also serve as an information hub for girls, providing access to gender sensitive materials as well as an opportunity for the girls to discuss and share their thoughts and concerns about the issues affecting their lives. This space also arranges for experts to give talks to and provide further information to the girls on a range of issues including health, education, local government, youth employment and economic opportunities. Self –defence training has also been provided to enhance the girls’ self-confidence and ability to protect themselves from potentially threatening situations in the community or en route to school.

Example from Tanzania: Sports Clubs

In Tanzania, girls’ football clubs are being used to empower adolescent girls in 5 target wards. Each of these clubs is comprised of 30 girls and there are currently a total of 26 girls clubs. Through these clubs, girls are not only being empowered to play football, but Plan International has also created a football drill manual that imparts key messages on child marriage and FGM and which is being delivered by trained coaches with the support of Tanzania Football Federation and Tackle Africa.

Example from Ecuador: “Letter and Dreams of Girls”

This project encourages girls to identify and write down their dreams and goals in life, as well as the barriers they feel they face in achieving them. The goal of the project is not only to help adolescent girls see prospects for themselves beyond early pregnancy and marriage, but also to reposition and reaffirm the importance of girls and their rights in the community through their testimonies.

12. Developing girls’ life-skills and economic empowerment.

Education that supports financial literacy, female entrepreneurship, the provision of start-up capital, and female mentoring programmes encourages girls to become independent and realise their full potential. The development of life-skills is crucial to empowering girls to make informed decisions about their lives. This is particularly important for child brides who are highly dependent on their spouses and families and not in education, training or employment.

Example from Tanzania: Life-skills training and economic empowerment

In Tanzania, girls (aged 15-24), particularly those out of school and at risk of being forced into marriage, have been equipped with marketable trade and soap making skills. Plan International has worked together with the Small Industries Development

Organisation (SIDO) in this project and taught girls livelihood skills and entrepreneurship with a view to enabling them to open and run a business.

B. Family and community level: Building a social movement for change

13. The main objective of Plan International's programme interventions at the family and community level is to facilitate the building of a social movement that will transform the environment in which girls live, including by changing existing gender norms and practices that drive child, early and forced marriage. The specific activities at this level are geared towards increasing awareness on causes and consequences of child, early and forced marriage, changing harmful attitudes and discriminatory norms, facilitating intergenerational dialogue, developing skills and building the capacity of key gatekeepers, and inspiring and strengthening the ability of families, communities, and traditional and religious leaders to take action towards preventing and combating child, early and forced marriage. Plan International has adopted a range of strategies in its programmes accordingly. Successful strategies include:
14. **Raising awareness of the negative impacts of child, early and forced marriage and/or positive outcomes of delayed age of marriage among the general public.** Using multi-media as a strategic communication tool is an effective way of prompting public debate and generating community support for shifts in social norms and practices. A wide array of media can be used to engage, inform and raise awareness including TV, radio, press and theatre.

Engaging media to raise awareness about child, early and forced marriage

In Zimbabwe, Plan International adopted a multi-pronged media and advocacy campaign aimed at sensitising 2 million people of the negative impacts of child, early and forced marriage. The campaign strategy included inter alia radio programmes, a national conference, air time on television, a short film, and the use of social media. Road shows were used to reach a wider audience to garner support for the movement to end child, early and forced marriage. Participation of local celebrities drew in large crowds, especially in rural areas. Interactive activities such as quizzes, dances and music appealed to all, including those hard to reach, such as young people and men, who commonly sent their wives to attend meetings on their behalf.

In Pakistan, Plan International organised 107 interactive theatre and art shows in target communities to create awareness on child marriage, gender-based violence, poverty, and health hazards. Moreover, sensitisation workshops with media representatives at district and provincial level have been organised to maintain public awareness.

15. **Engaging, educating and mobilising parents and communities, including men and boys.**

A girl's choice over if, who and when to marry is all too often in the hands of parents and guardians. These choices can be guided by dominant family and community expectations, norms and beliefs. Plan International believes that it is important to see

child, early and forced marriage not as an issue concerning only young women and girls. Engaging, educating and mobilising parents and communities, including men and boys, are crucial steps in changing negative social norms and practices.

Boys and men can play a powerful role in ending the practice, particularly as men often occupy positions of power in families and communities. As fathers, brothers, husbands, community and religious leaders, or politicians, men hold many of the decision-making roles that allow the practice to continue. Challenging dominant norms of masculinity, and promoting positive masculinity and gender equality are also necessary to ensure that men and boys become strong advocates for combating child marriage and for changing attitudes and behaviours in communities and society at large.

Sensitisation of parents and families

*As part of Plan International's programme in **Bangladesh**, parents and in-laws of both unmarried and married girls are sensitised by health workers and female members of elected bodies at the local level through various activities, including plays, road drama, rallies, human chains and day observations on the consequences of child marriage and early pregnancy.*

*In **Malawi**, parents have signed anti-early marriage forms as a result of dialogue initiated by Plan International, proclaiming that they will not force or encourage any of their children to marry before the age of 18.*

Engagement of men and boys

*In **Zambia**, Plan International has facilitated community dialogue sessions which have made it possible to engage men and boys in structured discussions that stimulate reflection on societal norms and their own attitudes regarding masculinity and femininity.*

*At the **global level**, Plan International has developed an innovative and comprehensive curriculum to engage boys and empower girls, called 'Champions of Change'. This programme, to be used in Plan's projects in countries, seeks to support both girls and boys to become catalysts for change in their communities. Separate curricula have been developed for girls and boys, with the boys' curriculum aiming to help boys recognise themselves as part of the cycle of gender inequality, and to recognise their own privileges and advantages.*

16. Identify, support and engage religious and traditional leaders.

Religious and traditional leaders are the custodians of religious beliefs and traditional values which might contribute to practices such as child, early and forced marriage. However, given their influential positions, religious and traditional leaders can be key agents of change and powerful allies in generating mass support to end child, early and forced marriage among the members of their respective congregations or communities. Plan International has successfully engaged with religious and traditional leaders in various countries.

Engagement of religious and traditional leaders

*In **Zimbabwe**, Plan International organised a meeting on child marriage with the National Chiefs Council in 2014. The Council is a strategic partner which brings together representation from 272 traditional chiefs from different provinces, which have access to a significant number of chiefs across the country. The meeting served as a platform to gain recognition of child marriage as problematic and to lobby for a commitment to address this issue in the context of customary law. As a result of the meeting, the Chief's Council committed to address child marriage and drew up a communiqué to articulate this commitment to the public.*

*As part of the 18+ Programme in **Malawi**, traditional and religious leaders have been trained and empowered on how they can take an active role in ensuring that their communities do not send children into early marriage. Following awareness-raising on child-related laws, traditional leaders have established decrees and by-laws in areas targeted by Plan International's projects that guide communities in the prevention and elimination of child marriages.*

*Plan International's 18+ Programme has also facilitated peer exchange and learning process for chiefs from the **Southern African Development Community (SADC)**, which provided an opportunity for the SADC council of chiefs to draft a declaration upon which to hold each other to account.*

17. Support children's and youth participation and advocacy.

Plan International supports child participation and children's organisations in creating awareness on children's rights, including child, early and forced marriage and its negative consequences. Safe spaces, forums and support networks can be created to provide girls and boys with information, life-skills training and the opportunities to form new connections and friendships within their community. By building their skills and knowledge of their rights, as well as reducing social and economic isolation, girls and boys can be empowered to act as agents of change within their communities. They are then able to act and advocate for themselves and on behalf of others.

'Champions of Change'

Through the 'Champions of Change' programme, Plan International seeks to catalyse a youth-led social movement that challenges existing social norms and gains society-wide support for gender equality and girls' rights. The 'Champions of Change' model provides a blueprint for building the 'Because I am a Girl' movement from the bottom up. As a first step, girls and boys build their own safe spaces where they can unpack gender inequality and visualise change. As a second step, children work together to involve their peers and ultimately to engage duty bearers with their demands. This model presents consistent strategies to bring about change at the individual, collective and society-wide levels, and to build momentum at community, national and regional levels on gender equality and girls' rights.

18. Facilitate and support community action plans to end child marriage.

In several countries, Plan International has supported the development of community action plans, which have led to concrete commitments and change in attitudes towards child marriage.

Child marriage free zones and community awareness-raising campaigns

*In **Bangladesh**, one district (Lalmonirhat), one sub district (in Dinajpur) and 27 unions have been declared as “child marriage-free zones” by the Government of Bangladesh as a result of a process facilitated by Plan International Bangladesh that involved the local government, young people and religious representatives. The declaration of child marriage-free zones is an expression of intent, and does not mean that there are no more child marriages, but it significantly increases vigilance and will contribute to further eliminate child marriage in the coming years.*

*In **Malawi**, Plan International initiated a door-to-door campaign to both reduce the prevalence of child marriage and mitigate its many harmful effects. The campaign targeted girls between 9 to 18 years of age, as well as individual families. Community-based organisations, young mothers, mother groups, parents, and traditional leaders took the lead in this campaign by promoting behaviour change to shift norms that perpetuate child marriages. The participation of teen or young mothers proved to be an effective way of engaging with girls and individual families to promote greater understanding of the challenges associate with child marriage, and enabled them to make a decision to commit to school. Following discussions with girls and parents at family level, both parties made written commitments not to enter into child marriage.*

19. Strengthen protection and support mechanisms at all levels.

Comprehensive, strong and sustainable child protection systems are important to prevent and respond to child rights violations such as child, early and forced marriage. In its programmes, Plan International has supported the creation and/or strengthening of child protection mechanisms, including child protection committees in schools and communities, hotlines and child-friendly reporting mechanisms.

Child protection groups

*In **Bangladesh**, Plan International has established a number of child protection groups, in which community leaders have played a vital role in sensitising the families of girls that are most vulnerable to child marriage, and linked them with social safety net schemes. Hotline numbers have been introduced which girls can use to register their concerns and complaints and seek support against child marriage or violence.*

*In **Mozambique**, Plan International has trained the police protection unit network to build its capacity to prevent and respond to child, early and forced marriages. Child-friendly reporting mechanisms have also been strengthened through the establishment of child helplines.*

C. Policy and legal level: Creating an enabling legal and policy environment to protect girls from child, early and forced marriage

20. Work at the system level is also crucial to influence structures and create an enabling environment to protect girls from child, early and forced marriage. To be successful, this needs to be done in collaboration and partnership with relevant duty bearers at multiple levels from local to national levels, to sub-regional, regional and global levels.

Below are some recommendations and good practices from Plan International's programme experience at this level.

21. It is essential that governments **adopt, implement and adequately resource comprehensive national plans to prevent and respond to all forms of violence, including child marriage**. Public policy and programmatic interventions should take a holistic approach that supports and promotes children's rights, raises awareness of the dangers of child marriage and enables and empowers individuals and communities to address the economic drivers, as well as the social, cultural and religious norms and attitudes that perpetuate it.
22. **Strengthen national legal frameworks to prevent and address child, early, and forced marriage in conformity with international law.**

Legislation not only provides a framework 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.

National legislation establishing a **minimum age of marriage** is a critical step in the process of eliminating the practice of child, early and forced marriage. Plan International believes that governments should take immediate steps to strengthen, harmonise, implement, and enforce laws governing the minimum age for marriage in line with international human rights standards, i.e. stipulating a minimum age of marriage at 18 for both men and women with no exceptions.

23. In addition to laws and policies relating to the age of marriage, it is also important to look at other legal and policy issues that have a direct bearing on child, early and forced marriage, such as education and sexual and reproductive health and rights, inheritance, and land rights. In its regional 18+ Programme in Southern Africa, Plan International has conducted such comprehensive advocacy activities to change laws and policies. This work has been supported through creating spaces for girls to share their stories and experiences on effects of child marriage with policy makers. This has contributed in galvanising champions at the institutional level to influence the legal environment and obtain support at the highest level. Girls have participated in significant events and engaged with Heads of States, including the Day of the African Child in 2015, the Ending Child Marriage Symposium in Zambia, and the African Girls Summit, all focusing on ending child marriage.

Example from Guatemala: Successful advocacy to change legal age of marriage²

*On 5 November 2015, the National Congress of Guatemala approved a law establishing 18 as the minimum age of marriage for women and men. The previous law had allowed girls to get married at 14 and boys at 16. Between 2009 and 2013 more than **80,000 girls** were married before the age of 18.*

This legal reform was the result of 3 years of intense advocacy efforts from Plan International Guatemala and other civil society partners. To devise the joint strategy and coordinate advocacy activities, Plan International Guatemala facilitated the creation of a group called 'Mesa en favor de las Niñas y Adolescentes', which works in favour of girls' rights. This group is made up of several civil society organisations.

Activities included raising awareness, legislative review and assessment of national and international laws in favour of girls, targeted advocacy to win the support of key influential actors, and a number of strategic high level meetings and consultations.

One of the biggest challenges was to persuade a large group of legislators who opposed the proposed modification on the ground of the cultural norms of some indigenous populations which, they claimed, permitted this type of union.

Based on careful investigation, the advocacy group was able to build a solid case and rebut these arguments, including by involving an expert indigenous specialist who cited Mayan laws which made clear that a woman cannot be forced to marry.

Plan International Guatemala is now looking at activities to raise awareness of the new decree and ensure that it is fully implemented.

24. Plan International is currently exploring the feasibility of **developing a Child Marriage Legal and Policy Database**. This database will develop a comprehensive assessment of laws and policies which prohibit and/or perpetuate the practice of child, early and forced marriage. It will also be a tool to track progress and influence positive legal and policy change. By tracking the progress of countries over 15 years (in line with the Sustainable Development Goals implementation framework), the database will enable the identification of gaps in existing legal and policy frameworks as well as weaknesses in the implementation and enforcement of relevant laws and policies. This data will provide a valuable source of information to local, regional and global actors to assist them in influencing legal and policy reform and empowering them to hold governments to account for their commitments under the Sustainable Development Goals and other international, regional and national human rights laws. By providing a broad assessment of accountability measures, it will also serve as an essential tool to complement gender transformative programming, such as the 18+ projects in southern Africa, Latin America, West Africa and Asia.

² See blog at: <https://plan-international.org/blog/2015/11/no-more-girl-brides-guatemala>

Development of SADC model law on child marriage

The 18+ Programme on ending child marriages in Southern Africa, together with UNFPA and other partners, has been supporting the SADC Parliamentary Forum in the development of SADC model law on child marriage. This development came into light following a series of sessions of the SADC PF in 2014 and 2015³, which resolved that concerted efforts were required to eradicate child marriage in the SADC region. These meetings resulted in the adoption of a six-step road map towards the development of a model law that would contribute towards ending child marriage.

To effectively combat child marriage in the SADC region, countries need comprehensive legislation on child marriage. Such legislation must address the key drivers and impact of child marriage, ensure adequate financing for the enforcement and monitoring of the law, increase awareness of the law and provide adequate training to stakeholders. Currently, there is no country in the SADC region that has enacted comprehensive legislation on child marriage.

The draft model law is currently undergoing consultations and it is being planned for tabling for possible adoption at the SADC Parliamentary Forum plenary session in June 2016.

25. Work with journalists to raise the profile of the issue and generate an informed debate.

Ensuring that journalists understand the issue of child, early and forced marriage and are able to report impartially and accurately, is critical to ensuring that there are informed public debates on the issue that galvanise support and awareness for the need for policy and legal change.

Working with the media

*Through its partnership with PANOS and as part of the 18+ Programme, Plan International has been engaging journalists in countries of the **Southern African Development Community (SADC)** to create interest and to enhance their understanding of child marriage and related issues. A sub-regional training for journalists on child marriages was conducted, which challenged journalists to reflect on their reporting regarding child marriage and to reposition their role in ending the harmful practice. Media briefs have also been produced for four out of five participating countries with the aim of cascading the media engagement to local and community levels. As a result, media coverage of child marriage and related issues has increased in the participating countries and international media has reported on positive interventions on the ground.*

*In **Bangladesh**, Plan International has provided training to 929 journalists of mainstream media to broadcast a campaign and news related to child marriage with a view to sensitising the public on causes and consequences of child marriage. The training also raised awareness on ethics regarding the collection of information in this*

³ The SADC PF 35th Plenary Session held in Mauritius in June 2014 and the SADC Regional Parliamentary Dialogue on Child Marriage Law in February 2015, convened jointly with the Human and Social Development and Special Programme of SADC PF, the Association of European Parliamentarians with Africa (AWEPA) and Plan International.

context and the protection of the confidentiality of survivors. Following the training, 134 journalists have been recognised for their gender sensitive reporting and among them, three journalists received a national award for their reporting on gender-based violence and child marriage.

26. Strengthen enforcement and monitoring systems.

Weak enforcement, lenient penalties and inconsistent programmes safeguarding girls from child marriage reduce the effectiveness of legal frameworks in many countries. Limited implementation machinery, poor coordination and convergence amongst various stakeholders, and limited awareness of national legislation are some of the reasons for the limited impact of legislation in many countries.

In some countries, the legal systems at national and district levels do not have sufficient resources, including trained staff, to ensure the implementation of existing laws. This is especially the case in rural communities, where many child, early and forced marriages occur and where children may have to travel significant distances unaccompanied to access justice.⁴

Example from Malawi: Mobile legal clinics

In Malawi, many cases relating to child, early and forced marriage are not brought before the courts due to the travel costs associated with bringing witnesses from rural areas to the court.

To address these issues, Plan International Malawi's Programme Unit in Mzuzu, with the assistance of Mzuzu Child Justice Court and the entire district child protection committee, introduced legal mobile clinics with a mobile child justice court. The mobile legal clinics work by taking the child justice court to the community; providing free legal counselling to teen mothers and girls who have been exposed to violence; enforcing laws that protect women and girls and punish perpetrators; providing protection orders and other legal safety mechanisms for survivors; and monitoring perpetrators' compliance with court-ordered rehabilitation.

The mobile court has contributed to reducing the sexual exploitation of children by reducing societal tolerance of sexual exploitation of children; preventing children from entering into sexual exploitation; creating strong, enforceable legislative environments to protect children from sexual exploitation; and ensuring that children who are sexually exploited have access to a range of services.

27. Lack of awareness of and a failure to enforce legislation also mean that some families who arrange a marriage for their young daughters are unaware that they are breaking the law. Many children are often unaware of their human rights or legal protections. In many cases, marriages are not formally registered and/or the age of the child is often difficult to ascertain, making it difficult to enforce existing child protection legislation.

⁴ Allard K. Lowenstein International Human Rights Clinic, Yale Law School, and Plan International UK (2013), *Before their time: Challenges to implementing the prohibition against child marriage in Sierra Leone.*

In order to help combat child marriage, governments should put in place **comprehensive, effective and rights-based civil registration and vital statistics systems, including birth and marriage registration**, that are consistent with human rights standards and principles.

Example from Bangladesh: Birth registration as a means to reduce child marriage

A significant contributing factor to high prevalence rates of child marriage in Bangladesh – as in many other countries – is that children are not registered at birth. This makes it difficult to enforce the legal age of marriage. Plan International Bangladesh has been working with the Government of Bangladesh and UNICEF to register birth data online, particularly in rural areas, as a means of reducing child, early and forced marriage. Since 2005, more than eight million birth certificates have been issued across five districts. As part of its programme to stop child marriage, Plan International is close to achieving 100 per cent online birth registration in all of its working areas.

28. Enforcing legislation can also be complex, particularly in countries that have established plural legal systems and where marriages are also conducted under customary, traditional or religious laws.⁵
29. While legal protection alone will not eliminate the practice of child marriage, enacting and enforcing national legislation that prohibits the practice and provides for national law to take precedence over conflicting customary, traditional or religious laws, provides a necessary platform for successful interventions. Plan International believes that in order to support the effective implementation and enforcement of national legislation and related policies, national governments should strengthen the capacity and training of key institutions and officials, including the judiciary, child protection services, law enforcement officers and other policy-makers and service providers. Comprehensive, strong, sustainable and adequately resourced national child protection systems should be established and strengthened in order to prevent and respond to violence, including child marriage, in all settings. Any enforcement of legislation should be consistent with the Convention on the Rights of the Child and ensure the centrality of the best interests of the child and equality for the girl child.
30. To monitor States' compliance with their treaty obligations, Plan International uses international human rights mechanisms, including the Universal Periodic Review (UPR), CRC and CEDAW, to raise issues related to gender inequality and harmful practices, including child, early and forced marriage.

⁵ The Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General (SRSG) on Violence against Children and Plan International (2012), *Protecting children from harmful practices in plural legal systems*.

31. International level recommendations:

- a) States **should withdraw reservations** made to international human rights instruments that are pertinent to child, early and forced marriage.
- b) States should use the UPR process and other international and regional human rights mechanisms in a systematic manner to, inter alia: raise the importance of **ratifying relevant international and regional treaties**, including the CRC and CEDAW, and their Optional Protocols; raise **issues related to gender inequality and harmful practices**, including child, early and forced marriage and; highlight the **importance of establishing comprehensive, effective and rights-based civil registration and vital statistics systems**.
- c) States should be called upon to **follow-up on and implement** international and regional recommendations, such as, for example, recommendations stemming from UN resolutions, reports or reviews. The biennial UN resolutions of the UN General Assembly and the Human Rights Council addressing child, early and forced marriage constitute important opportunities to highlight and strengthen international commitments to end the practice.
- d) States should implement **all interrelated gender-transformative targets of the Global Sustainable Development Goals (SDG)** and regularly report on progress, including by using existing human rights monitoring mechanisms. The establishment of comprehensive, effective and rights-based civil registration and vital statistics systems will be essential to measure this progress.
- e) Civil society organisations should **actively use the regional and international human rights mechanisms**, including country specific and thematic mechanisms, to raise child, early and forced marriage as a violation of many human rights.
- f) Civil society organisations should **actively monitor States' implementation of recommendations** issued by the human rights treaty bodies, the UPR and other relevant international, regional and national human rights mechanisms in regard to child, early and forced marriage and remind States of their obligations.

III. New and suggested research

Since the last report of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights on '*Preventing and eliminating child, early and forced marriage*' in 2014, Plan International has conducted new national and regional research that gives new insights and looks in more details to specific issues and concerns.

32. In 2014, Plan International launched the **Hear Our Voices research report**⁶ which heard from over 7,000 young people across 11 countries. This report highlighted girls' concerns around challenges and barriers to equality in their lives. Only **38% of girls stated that they 'always' or 'often' decide if they marry**. 2 in 5 girls said that they 'always' or 'often' complete 9 years of school, and over half said that girls 'never' or 'seldom' decide if they become pregnant.

⁶ Plan International (2014), *Hear Our Voices: Do Adolescent Girls' Issues Really Matter?* <https://plan-international.org/hear-our-voices>

33. In 2014 and 2015, as part of our child marriage programmes in **Asia**, Plan International and Coram International undertook a [research study](#)⁷ in Pakistan, Bangladesh and Indonesia. The purpose of the research was to gather in-depth evidence on the root causes of child marriage practices. It focused on exploring social attitudes, values and norms concerning child marriage, and identifying the structural and environmental factors which influence them. In addition, the research informed the development of an index for measuring environmental factors associated with the acceptability of child marriage which will be used by Plan International to track progress and improve the effectiveness of our child marriage programming globally. The report makes a series of recommendations that are necessary to reduce levels of child marriage throughout Asia.
34. In **West Africa**, Plan International commissioned a [desk review](#)⁸ to investigate the causes and effects of child marriage, as well as existing efforts to reduce the practice in the four countries of Niger, Mali, Guinea and Burkina as well as the region of West Africa as a whole. The desk review revealed: a) limited information and data available on child marriage at national and sub-national levels; b) weak documentation of project approaches and strategies in the region and an almost complete absence of adequate monitoring and evaluation of the existing programmes. As a result, there are no rigorously assessed best practices or documented lessons learned upon which actors can build in the region. Plan International has now commissioned a follow-up qualitative research study in Mali, Niger and Senegal to fill gaps in understanding and explain localised processes and specificities of child marriage at the local level in each country. This will inform the localisation of Plan's 18+ programme model.
35. In **Latin America**, joint research⁹ with UNICEF in 2014 indicated that in some of the rural and urban field study scenarios, the period of adolescence was viewed as moveable, having less to do with particular age periods and biological changes than other important life events such as marriage and pregnancy, events which are seen as catalysing an automatic "leap" into adulthood, especially for women. A teenager who is married/in civil union or a teenager who has a child stops being a teenager and takes on the role of an adult woman, with the prestige, roles and reproductive and domestic responsibilities that this adult status carries. This role changes, replaces and takes precedence over the position and rights that the girl is entitled to as a teenager.
36. **Key areas for further research include:**
- a) **Self-initiated marriages.** It is important that this issue be researched further to understand the factors and circumstances that lead girls and boys to initiate their own marriage.

⁷ Plan International and Coram International (2015), *Getting the Evidence: Asia Child Marriage Initiative*. <https://plan-international.org/getting-evidence-asia-child-marriage-initiative>

⁸ Plan International Western Africa Regional Office (2015), *Child marriage in West Africa and Cameroon: A desk review*. <http://www.frauenrechte.de/online/images/downloads/fruehehen/Plan-WARO-Child-Marriage.pdf>

⁹ Plan International and UNICEF (2014), *Experiences and Accounts of pregnancy amongst adolescents*. http://www.unicef.org/lac/UNICEF_PLAN_pregnancy_amongst_adolescents_2015.pdf

- b) **Scaling up.** Further research is required to assess effectiveness of scaling up strategies and components of programme models to address child marriage.
- c) **Child marriage and disabilities.** How children (boys and girls) and youth with disabilities are affected by child marriage.
- d) Explore **links between girls' engagement in paid work and delaying marriage.**
- e) How does **transformative social norm change on gender equality** related to child marriage happen? What are the barriers?