



Report of the African  
Union Champion on

# Ending Child Marriage in Africa

2025

A Transformative Agenda  
to Ending Child Marriage



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“

**Let them be birds,  
eggs do not have soup...**

*African Proverb*



# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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This report stands as a testament to collective commitment and shared purpose. Its development was made possible through the dedicated efforts and invaluable contributions of numerous individuals and institutions, to whom we express our profound gratitude.

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Together, you have not merely contributed to a document; you have kindled hope for millions of girls, turning resolve into reality. Your collective legacy will echo through generations of liberated futures of girls on the continent. This report is a product of our collective conviction that ending child marriages is both an urgent imperative and an achievable goal.

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# ACRONYMS

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ACERWC	African Committee of Experts on the Rights and Welfare of the Child
ACRWC	African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child
ACHPR	African Commission on Human and People's Rights
APRM	African Peer Review Mechanism
AU	African Union
AUC	African Union Commission
CDF	Constituency Development Fund
CEVAWG	Convention on the Elimination of Violence Against Women and Girls
CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women
DHS	Demographic and Health Survey
DRM	Domestic Resource Mobilisation
EAC	East African Community
ECM	Ending Child marriages
ECCAS	Economic Community of Central African States
ECOWAS	Economic Community of West African States
FBO	Faith Based Organisation
FGM	Female Genital Mutilation
GBV	Gender Based Violence
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GEWEL	Girls' Education and Women's Empowerment and Livelihood Project
HHSD	Department of Health, Humanitarian Affairs and Social Development
ICESCR	International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights
MICS	Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey
PHP	Prevention of Harmful Practices
REC	Regional Economic Community
SDG	Sustainable Development Goals
SADC	Southern African Development Community
TRL	Traditional and Religious Leaders
UMA	Union of the Arab Maghreb
UN	United Nations
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund

# FOREWORD

**H.E. Hakainde Hichilema**

**AU Champion on Ending Child Marriage in Africa**

Across Africa, the promise of childhood is still too often cut short. Despite decades of progress, the practice of child marriages continues to cast a long shadow over the lives of millions of young girls, depriving them of their rights, their potential, and their futures. As the African Union Champion on Ending Child marriages, and on behalf of the Republic of Zambia, I am deeply honoured to present this report, as a strategic blueprint and an urgent call to action to eradicate one of the continent's most persistent violations of human rights.

The African Union has long recognised that the elimination of child marriages is not only a moral imperative, but also a prerequisite for the realisation of Africa's aspirations for Agenda 2063. This is not an optional endeavour; it is a fundamental obligation for all Member States, rooted in our regional, continental and international commitments to protect the rights of the child, achieve gender equality, and foster inclusive social and economic development.

The path to ending child marriages is neither straightforward nor short. It demands unwavering resolve, innovative strategies, and the courage to confront deeply rooted social norms. In Zambia, we are leading from the front, translating political will into concrete action. We have strengthened our legislative framework, launched nationwide campaigns to keep girls in school, and are integrating child marriages prevention into our national development and strategic plans. We are demonstrating that progress is possible when leadership is committed and accountable.

This report is both a testament to the progress made and a sober reflection on the road ahead. It lays bare the reality that, while significant strides have been achieved, in law, policy, and advocacy, these have not yet fully bridged the gap between aspiration and reality. Too many girls remain at risk, despite the reduction in prevalence of child marriages in some Member States, including my own country Zambia's that dropped from 29 percent recorded in 2018 to 23.9 percent in 2024.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, this report must serve as a clarion call for a whole-of-society approach.



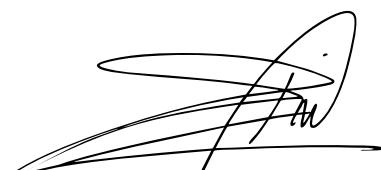
<sup>1</sup> Zambia Demographic Health Survey (2024)

Governments alone cannot solve this crisis. We call upon traditional and religious leaders, the private sector, civil society, media, communities, families, girls and boys to become champions in their own spheres of influence. Every sector has a critical role to play in changing mindsets and creating protective environments for our children.

Critically, our ambitions must be matched by adequate resources. We must dramatically scale up investment in proven solutions: girls' education, adolescent health services, social protection programmes for vulnerable families, and community-led initiatives. I urge my fellow leaders, international partners, and financial institutions to prioritise and increase funding for this cause. Without dedicated and scaled-up resources, our declarations will remain mere words on paper.

We are at a crossroads. The decisions we make today will shape the destiny of generations to come. It is incumbent upon us to meet this moment with urgency and unity. We must invest in girls, safeguard their rights, and create environments where their voices are heard, and their dreams can take root. This report provides a roadmap for action. It highlights the need for context-specific, holistic approaches that harness the power of education, economic opportunity, legal reform, and cultural transformation, including harnessing male agency in the drive against harmful practices such as child marriages. It calls for robust partnerships at every level, from the grassroots to the highest echelons of government, and a shared determination to ensure that no child is left behind.

Let us rise together to fulfil the vision of an Africa where every girl is free to chart her own course, unbound by the constraints of child marriages. This is our shared responsibility, our collective legacy, and our binding obligation to the future.



**H.E. Hakainde Hichilema**  
AU Champion on Ending Child Marriage in Africa

# PREFACE

**H.E. Amb. Amma A. Twum-Amoah**

**AU Commissioner for Health, Humanitarian Affairs and Social Development.**

The African Union stands at a pivotal moment in its collective commitment to safeguard the rights, dignity, and life prospects of all children across the continent. Child marriage remains one of the most persistent and systemic violations of the rights of the girl child, continuing to undermine health outcomes, educational attainment, economic participation, and the broader human development agenda in Africa. This report provides a rigorous assessment of prevailing trends, gaps, and responses, while documenting the policy, institutional, and community-level efforts underway to accelerate transformative change.



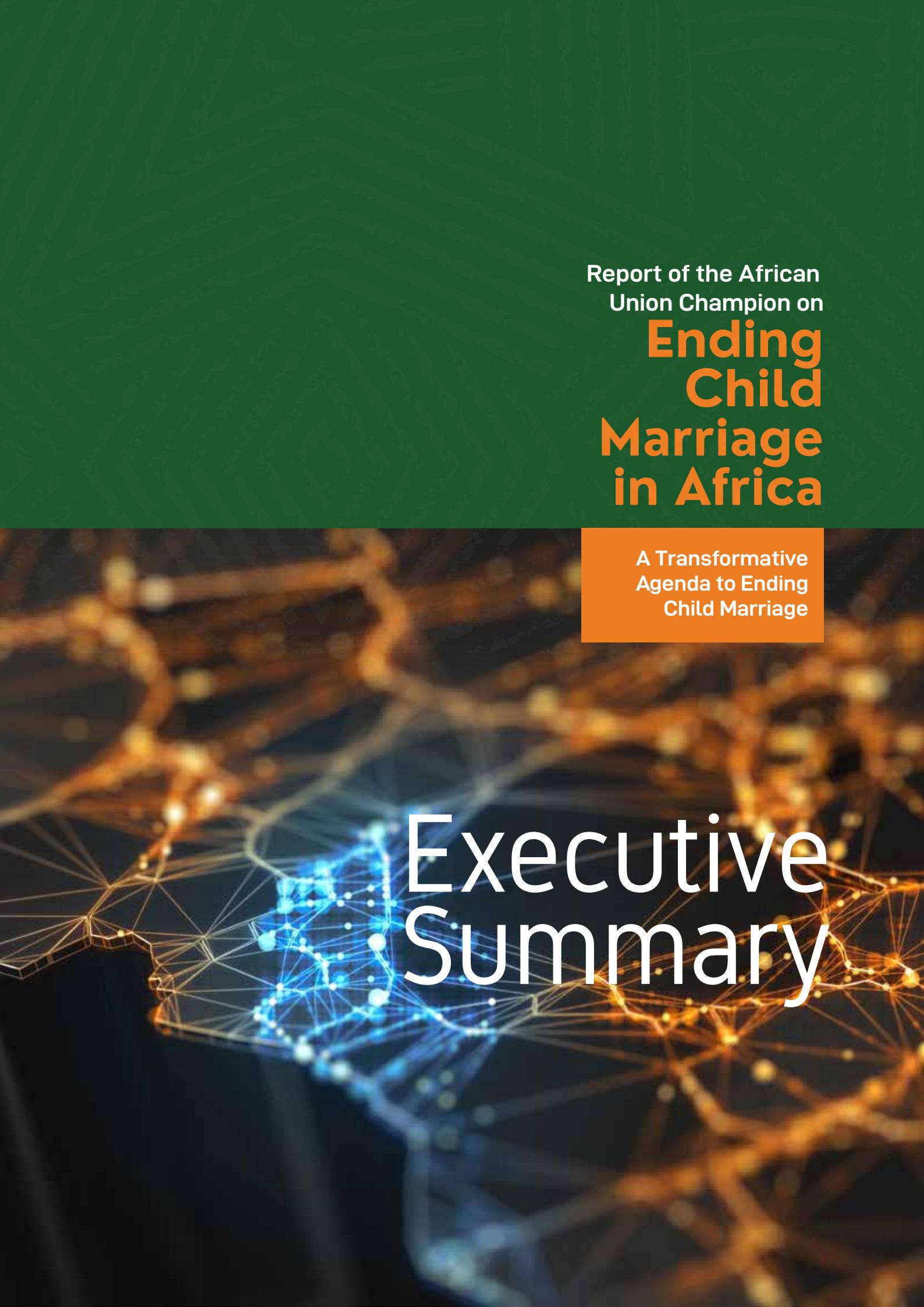
The vision articulated by the African Union is one in which every girl is able to exercise her full rights, free from harmful practices that constrain her opportunities and predetermine her life trajectory. This vision is firmly grounded in international and regional human rights standards, the principles of equality and non-discrimination, and the conviction that the effective implementation of AU Agenda 2063 is contingent upon the full inclusion and empowerment of girls and young women.

Notwithstanding notable progress achieved through continental initiatives, normative frameworks, and the sustained engagement of Member States and partners, the prevalence of child marriage remains unacceptably high. As this report demonstrates, the practice is sustained by a complex nexus of structural drivers, including poverty, gender inequality, harmful social norms, insecurity, displacement and limited access to quality education and essential services. While key legal and policy instruments, such as the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa (Maputo Protocol), and the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, provide a robust normative foundation, accelerated and coordinated implementation remains imperative.

The AU acknowledges the sustained leadership and commitment demonstrated by Member States, traditional and religious authorities, civil society organisations, youth movements and development partners in advancing this agenda. Their collective action continues to generate critical momentum, foster innovation, and elevate the voices of those most affected. This report is intended to serve both as a policy reference and a call to action, reinforcing the urgency of collective responsibility and shared accountability. With renewed political will, evidence-based interventions, and strengthened partnerships, Africa can decisively end child marriages and realise a future in which every girl is empowered to thrive and contribute fully to the continent's development.

**H.E. Amb. Amma A. Twum-Amoah**

*AU Commissioner for Health, Humanitarian Affairs and Social Development.*



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# Executive Summary

## A. Introduction and Context

This is a report by H.E. President Hakainde Hichilema (AU Champion on Ending Child marriages in Africa. The continent accounts for 1 in 3 child marriages globally; with the exponential population growth, projected to reach nearly 50 percent of the world's child brides by 2050. Progress to ending child marriages must be 20 times faster to meet the SDG target of ending child marriages by 2030. Over 30 million girls in Africa are married before 18 years, with highest prevalence in West and Central Africa, and the Sahel.

*Progress to ending child marriages must be 20 times faster to meet the SDG target of ending child marriages by 2030.*



## B. Leading from the Front: Zambia's Progress as AU Champion on Ending Child Marriages in Africa

- i. **Prevalence Reduction:** Reduced child marriages prevalence from 29 percent (2018) to 23.9 percent (2024).
- ii. **Legal reforms:** Promulgated a raft of laws to curb child marriages: the Children's Code Act (2022), the Marriages Amendment Act (2023), the Matrimonial Causes Act (2024), all prohibit child marriages.
- iii. **Policy actions:** Instituted a Free Education Policy, Re-entry Policy for adolescent mothers, National Strategy on Ending Child marriages (2026–2030) and the Male Engagement Strategy.
- iv. **Cross-sector coordination:** Continuously done with traditional leaders, civil society, and international partners.



## C. Strategic Pathways for AU Member States in Ending Child marriages

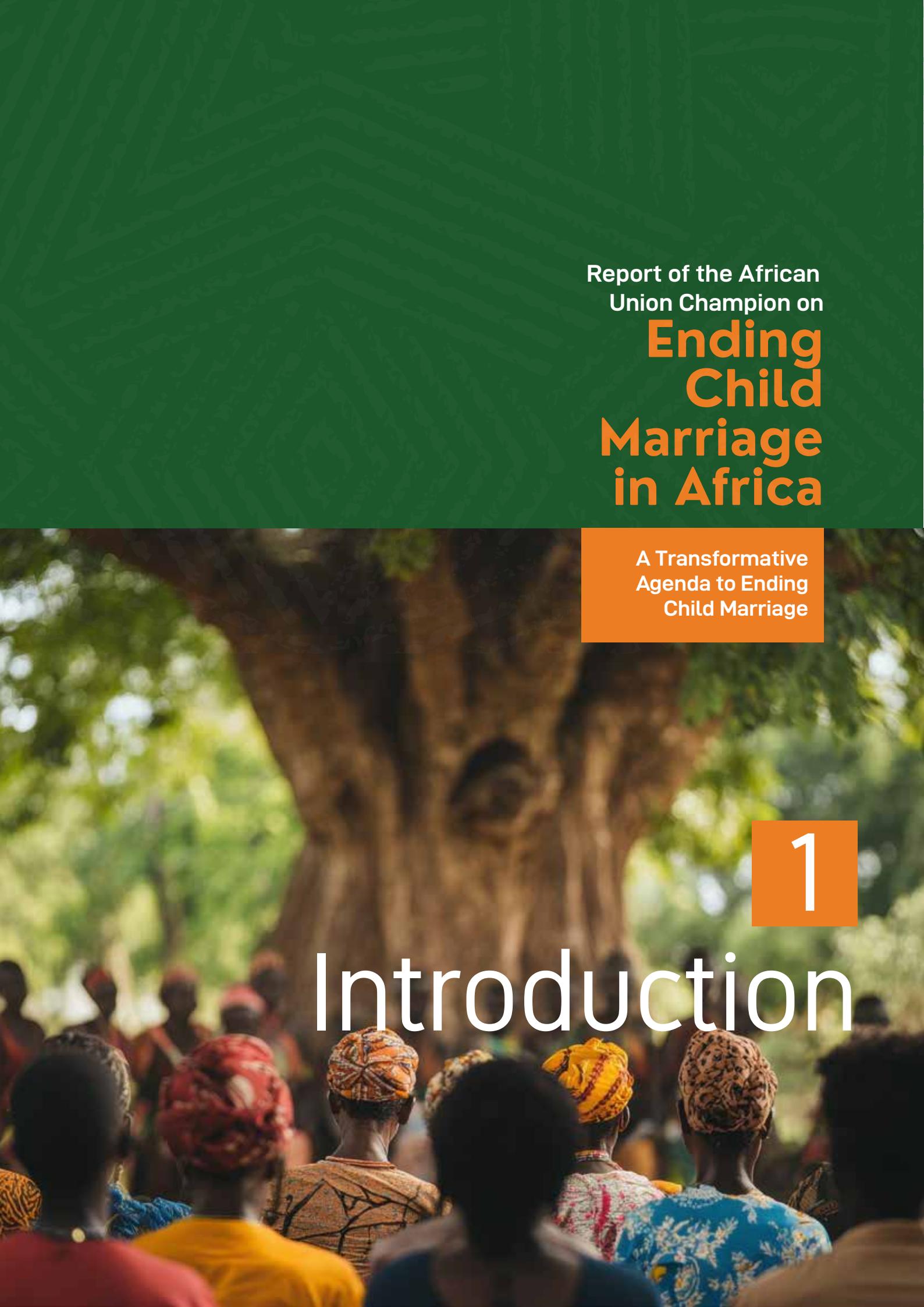
- i. **Adopt a Whole-of-Society Approach:** Engage all sectors: government, traditional and religious leaders, civil society, private sector, media, youth, and survivors.
- ii. **Strengthen & Harmonise Laws:** Set minimum marriages age at 18 years without exceptions. Align statutory, customary, and religious laws.
- iii. **Ensure Accountability & Enforcement:** Establish child rights observatories, train judiciary and law enforcement, and create reporting mechanisms.
- iv. **Invest in Girls' Education & Economic Empowerment:** Increase education funding to at least 4–6 percent of GDP. Scale up cash transfer programmes, vocational training, and scholarships for girls.
- v. **Integrate Child marriages into Climate & Humanitarian Action:** Include child protection in climate adaptation and humanitarian response plans.
- vi. **Leverage Technology for Prevention & Reporting:** Deploy digital tools for awareness, real-time reporting, age verification, and case management.
- vii. **Mobilise Domestic Resources:** Develop and fund costed national action plans to ensure sustainable financing.



- viii. **Strengthen Regional Collaboration:** Work through Regional Economic Communities (RECs) to harmonise laws, share data, and coordinate cross-border responses.
- ix. **Amplify Survivor Voices & Engage Men & Boys:** Include survivors in policy design. Promote male engagement in ending harmful practices.
- x. **Invest in Data & Research:** Fund real-time monitoring, predictive analytics, and studies on the economic cost of child marriages.

## **D. Conclusion**

Ending child marriages requires political courage, sustained domestic investment, and collective action. AU Member States must move beyond policy statements to implementation, enforcement, and accountability, ensuring every girl can live free, educated, and empowered. Achieving lasting change requires a transformative approach that not only mobilises all segments of society but also places survivors' voices and leadership at the forefront. Sustainable progress can be realised when domestic resources are harnessed to empower survivors as agents of change working also with families traditional and religious leaders within their communities.



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# Introduction

Notwithstanding the concerted efforts that have been put at the continental level such as the Campaign to Ending Child marriages in Africa, child marriages remains one of the most pervasive violations of children's rights across Africa, undermining the continent's aspirations for inclusive development, gender equality, and intergenerational justice. Globally, the burden of child marriages is increasingly shifting towards Africa, as progress across the continent lags other regions. Currently, Africa accounts for one in three of all child marriages worldwide, and projections indicate that, by 2050, nearly half of all child brides will be African. At present, over 30 million girls in Africa are married before the age of 18, with the continent recording some of the slowest declines in child marriages rates globally.<sup>2</sup>

At the heart of Africa's struggle against child marriages lies a complex web of socio-economic, cultural, and political forces, each reinforcing the other and rendering progress both urgent and elusive. Child marriages, alongside adolescent pregnancy and childbirth, continues to be a grave concern across Africa, jeopardising the rights and wellbeing of millions of adolescent girls. The continent is home to approximately 130 million child brides, with particularly high rates in sub-Saharan Africa, where one in three girls marries before the age of 18, and the practice is most concentrated in West and Central Africa, which account for seven of the ten countries with the highest prevalence globally.<sup>3</sup> As can be deciphered from Figure 1, despite modest progress in reducing child marriages over the past decade, Africa remains off track to achieve the Sustainable Development Goal target of eliminating this harmful practice by 2030.<sup>4</sup>

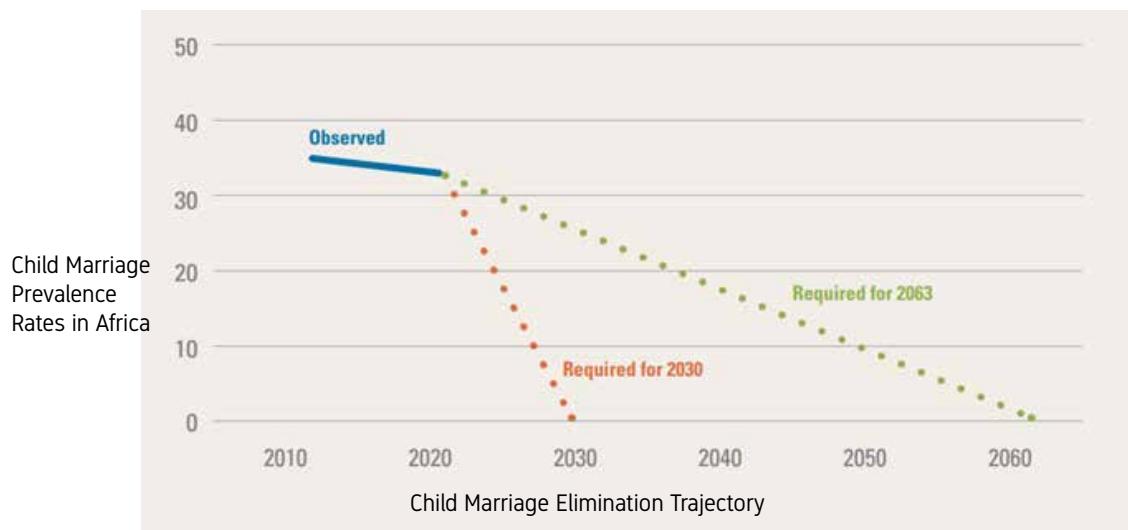


Figure 1: Percentage of women aged 20 to 24 years who were first married or in union before age 18, observed and required for elimination

Source: <https://data.unicef.org/resources/harmful-practices-in-africa/>

<sup>2</sup> United Nations Children's Fund. (2022). *Towards Ending Harmful Practices in Africa: A statistical overview of child marriage and female genital mutilation*. UNICEF, New York.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

The persistence of child marriages, despite decades of international and continental commitments, signals not only the tenacity of tradition but also the depth of poverty and insecurity that continue to shape household decisions. The convergence of crises, be they economic downturns, climate disasters, or conflict, exposes already vulnerable communities to further hardship, narrowing choices and amplifying the perceived necessity of child marriages as a means of survival.

Further, despite notable advancements in legal frameworks and policy commitments through the near universal ratification of the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACRWC),<sup>5</sup> the Maputo Protocol, the AU Convention on the Elimination of Violence Against Women and Girls, and the many African countries that have come up with laws prohibiting child marriages, the reality remains stark: millions of girls across the continent are still subjected to child marriages before reaching the age of 18 years. Sustainable Development Goal 5.3, which African Member States have committed to, aims to “eliminate all harmful practices, such as child, early and forced marriages and female genital mutilations”.<sup>6</sup> These legal and policy instruments, while crucial in setting standards and guiding national efforts, have not fully translated into practical change at the grassroots level in terms of empowerment of the children in these marriages as well as corresponding prosecutions. Although governments and civil society organisations have made strides in awareness-raising and community mobilisation, the gap between policy and practice persists. As a result, the rights, potential, and futures of countless young girls continue to be compromised and at risk, signalling the urgent need for more robust, context-sensitive interventions that bridge this divide and accelerate progress toward the elimination of child marriages in Africa.

While child marriages is recognised as a violation of children’s rights, its persistence is frequently rationalised by families as a means of safeguarding girls, affording them perceived social, economic, or physical security in precarious circumstances. In this context, the convergence of compounding crises, such as disrupted access to education, poverty, recurrent economic shocks, public health emergencies, and protracted conflict resulting in forced internal displacement, migration and refugees status intensify vulnerabilities and constrain household choices, often to the detriment of adolescent girls. These dynamics highlight the importance of understanding the multifaceted and context-specific drivers of child marriages. Although the trajectory of such crises is often unpredictable, systematic analysis of historical patterns provides valuable insight into their likely consequences, enabling policymakers to anticipate and mitigate the adverse impacts on girls at risk of early marriages.

<sup>5</sup> As of December 2025, 51 AU Member States have ratified the African Children’s Charter.

<sup>6</sup> Girls Not Brides. (2022). Child marriages and the SDGs. <https://www.girlsnottbrides.org/learning-resources/child-marriage-and-sdgs/> [Accessed 16 September 2025].

Such dynamics are further complicated by the uneven access and distribution of resources and opportunities. In regions where educational infrastructure is sparse or underfunded, and where legal protections are inconsistently enforced, families may perceive marriages as the sole viable path for their daughters. The resulting disparities between countries and communities, reflect the need for solutions that are not only comprehensive but also deeply contextualised.

As shall be elucidated in this report, empowering women and girls emerges as both an ethical imperative and a strategic necessity. Programmes that invest in girls' education, health, and economic agency have demonstrated transformative potential, delaying marriages and opening avenues for realisation of full potential.

Yet, such initiatives must also reckon with the realities of gender inequality, entrenched social and cultural norms, and the fragility of legal frameworks. Community engagement, coupled with robust multi-sectoral policy reform, stands as a pillar of lasting change, an approach that recognises the agency of those most affected while challenging the structures that sustain harmful practices. Technological innovation too, offers new possibilities. Mobile platforms can extend access to education and support services into remote areas, while digital advocacy campaigns reshape public perceptions and rally collective action. Harnessing these tools, alongside evidence-based research and advocacy, can enrich the knowledge base and galvanise demand for policies that protect and empower girls.

*Programmes that invest in girls' education, health, and economic agency have demonstrated transformative potential, delaying marriages and opening avenues for self-determination.*



Ultimately, the challenge of ending child marriages in Africa is not simply one of accelerating incremental progress, but of nurturing the conditions for generational transformation. Every policy, every community initiative, and every international partnership must converge on a singular vision: a continent where girls are free to realise their full potential, unburdened by premature and unwanted obligations. Without such a concerted effort, Africa risks not only perpetuating cycles of intergenerational poverty and inequality, but also forfeiting the promise of its youngest citizens.



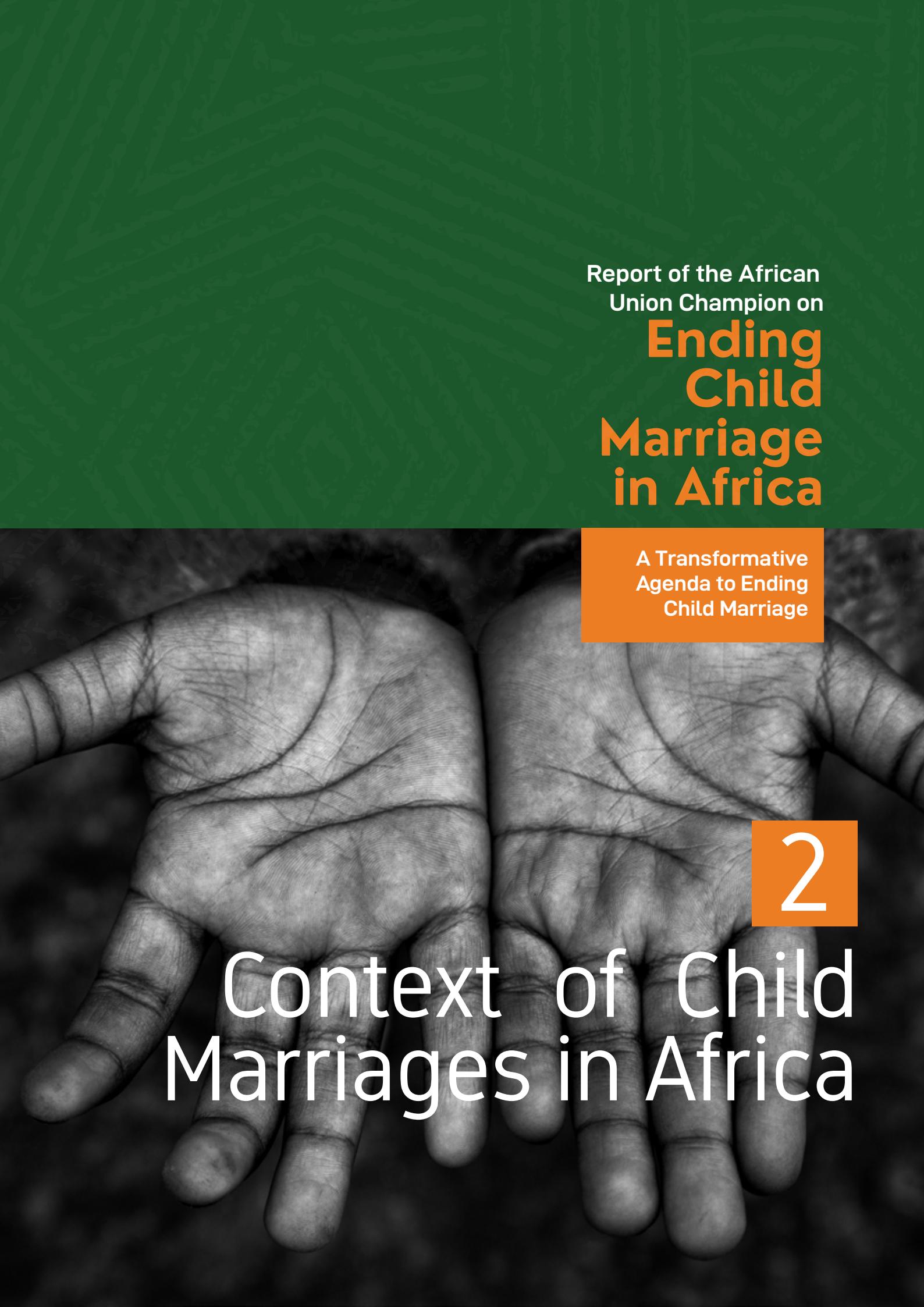
This report, commissioned by the AU Champion on Ending Child marriages, explores emerging threats, systemic barriers, and transformative pathways for AU Member States to prevent and respond to the scourge of child marriages on the continent. The report seeks to elevate the issue of child marriages to the forefront of continental policy agendas by encouraging Heads of State and Government to fully implement the commitments made toward ending this practice. Using transformative lenses, the report posits that the journey to ending child marriages in Africa must transcend the limitations of alterity, where interventions are seen as external, imposed, or the responsibility of a select few, and instead embrace a whole-of-society approach. This transformation is crucial not only to protect individual rights but also to harness the collective strengths and capacities of communities, civil societies, community, traditional and religious leaders, families, and governments themselves.



*The journey to ending child marriages in Africa must transcend the limitations of alterity, where interventions are seen as external, imposed, or the responsibility of a select few. Instead, embrace a holistic, whole-of-society approach.*

Through its analysis and recommendations, the report mobilises support not only within national governments but also among all other stakeholders, fostering a united front against child marriages. The report also delves deeper into the pressing issues that threaten progress, including persistent crises such as conflict, climate change, economic instability, and shifting demographic trends.

It critically examines the systemic barriers, ranging from entrenched gender norms and poverty to weak legal enforcement, that hinder efforts to eliminate child marriages. The report ends by outlining transformative pathways that AU Member States can pursue, highlighting the need for integrated, context-specific strategies that combine legal, educational, economic, and sociocultural interventions to drive sustainable change and secure a brighter future for Africa's girls.



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# Context of Child Marriages in Africa

Over the past 25 years, global efforts have averted an estimated 68 million child marriages, signalling progress in combating this harmful practice.<sup>7</sup> However, still one in five girls worldwide marries in childhood and current trends indicate that no region is on track to meet the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) target of eliminating child marriages by 2030. Overall, progress would need to be 20 times faster to reach the SDG target.<sup>8</sup>



Africa faces unique challenges in its efforts to end child marriages. The practice is more common than elsewhere in the world, with relatively slow progress. In addition, rapid population growth on the continent will put an increasing number of girls at risk each year. Already, an increase is evident: 25 years ago, Africa was home to 15 percent of the world's child brides, a share that has already grown to 35 percent today. If trends of the past decade continue, by 2030 this share will grow to 41 percent.<sup>9</sup>

Africa remains a critical concern as the continent with the highest prevalence of child marriages. As can be deciphered from the hotspot map in Figure 2, levels of child marriages vary substantially across the continent: the practice is least common in Northern Africa (13 percent of women aged 20 to 24 were first married or in union before age 18), while Western and Central Africa are home to higher levels (32 percent and 33 percent, respectively). The prevalence peaks in the Sahel, where over half of girls marry in childhood, and where some states and provinces have levels of child marriages above 80 percent.<sup>10</sup> The amount of progress achieved is also uneven across subregions: Eastern Africa has seen the greatest progress, with the prevalence declining from 48 percent to 31 percent over the past 25 years, driven by great progress in Ethiopia and Kenya.

<sup>7</sup> UNICEF Is an End to Child marriages Within Reach? Latest trends and future prospects 2023 update [https://www.unicefusa.org/sites/default/files/2023-05/Is\\_on\\_End\\_to\\_Child\\_Marriages\\_Within\\_Reach.pdf](https://www.unicefusa.org/sites/default/files/2023-05/Is_on_End_to_Child_Marriages_Within_Reach.pdf) [Accessed 2 September 2025].

<sup>8</sup> UNICEF Is an End to Child marriages Within Reach? Latest trends and future prospects 2023 update [https://www.unicefusa.org/sites/default/files/2023-05/Is\\_on\\_End\\_to\\_Child\\_Marriages\\_Within\\_Reach.pdf](https://www.unicefusa.org/sites/default/files/2023-05/Is_on_End_to_Child_Marriages_Within_Reach.pdf) [Accessed 2 September 2025].

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> <https://data.unicef.org/resources/child-marriages-in-the-sahel-brochure/> [Accessed 2 September 2025].

Western Africa has seen more persistent levels, with a slower overall decline and several countries with stagnant levels.<sup>11</sup> Disparities across the continent underscore the urgent need for targeted contextualised interventions in the region.

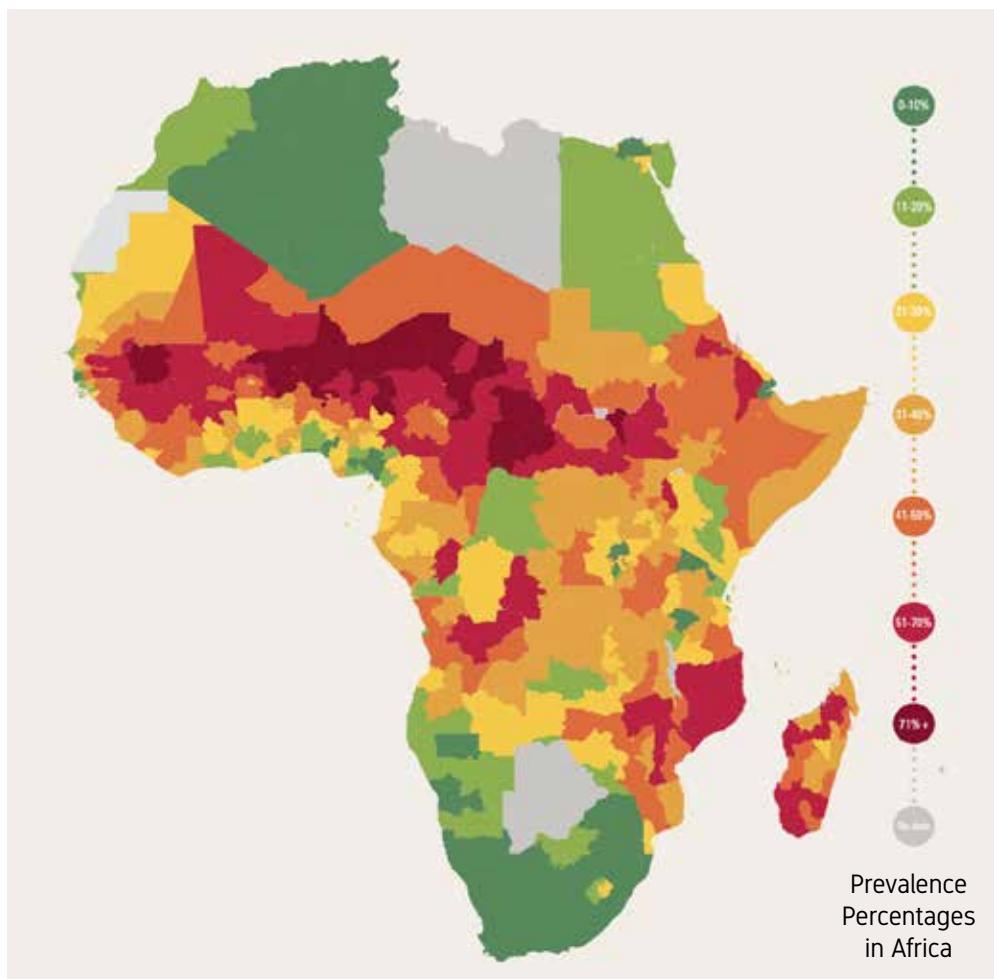


Figure 2: Percentage of Child marriages Prevalence in Africa

Source: UNICEF, Towards Ending Harmful Practices in Africa: A statistical overview of child marriages and female genital mutilation, 2022.

Focusing on Africa is imperative due to the intersecting vulnerabilities that perpetuate child marriages. Child marriage often compromises a girl's development by resulting in early pregnancy and social isolation, interrupting her schooling, limiting her opportunities for career and vocational advancement and placing her at risk of domestic violence. Furthermore, child marriages significantly escalate risks for the girls, since spousal age differences create power imbalances, economic dependency, and social isolation, all of which increase the likelihood of enduring intimate partner violence and abuse.<sup>12</sup>

As shall be elaborated in the next section, climate shocks, conflict, and economic instability, particularly in the Sahel and Horn of Africa, are exacerbating drivers of child marriages as families resort to it as a coping mechanism.<sup>13</sup> Prioritising the elimination of child marriages in Africa is essential not only for the wellbeing of millions of girls, but also for advancing the continent's development, ensuring gender equality, and breaking intergenerational cycles of disadvantage and poverty. By prioritising the eradication of child marriages across the continent, societies stand to gain, not only in safeguarding the rights of girls, but also through far-reaching social, economic, and political benefits, unlocking human potential, fostering inclusive growth, and strengthening the foundation for stable, equitable governance.

## **2.1 African Union Commission (AUC) Response to Child Marriages**

In view of the prevalence of child marriages on the continent, the AUC has instituted a raft of measures, ranging from normative, policy, institutional and resource frameworks to respond and prevent child marriages. In line with the aspirations of AU Agenda 2063 and the ACRWC, the AUC has provided normative direction and outlines a suite of strategic interventions to support Member States in accelerating the elimination of child marriages. This comprehensive approach recognises that ending this harmful practice requires not only legal and policy reform, but also sustained advocacy, community mobilisation, and multi-stakeholder partnerships. During the reporting period, the AUC utilised the below operational mechanisms in Member States and across the continent, leveraging its full repertoire of available tools and platforms to drive coordinated national action and galvanise a continent-wide movement for change.

### ***2.1.1 Providing Normative Direction and Policy Guidance***

The AUC establishes a clear normative framework by aligning Member States' efforts with international and continental human rights standards, notably through the dissemination and implementation of legal instruments like the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACRWC) and the recently adopted AU Convention on the Elimination of Violence Against Women and Girls, as well as the development of model laws, technical guidance notes, strategic frameworks and policy guidelines. Among these strategic tools, the Accountability Framework on the Elimination of Harmful Practices stands out as essential for ensuring that commitments translate into tangible outcomes, as it enables systematic monitoring, evaluation, and reporting by Member States.

Further, the soon to be adopted AU Model Law on Online Safety is vital in protecting children from digital exploitation and abuse, which are increasingly linked to child marriages, through cross border trafficking of girls. It is important to establish and invest in robust legal safeguards and promoting a safer online environment across Africa. This harmonises national legislation, sets minimum standards, and holds Member States accountable, while urging them to domesticate these frameworks, allocate sufficient budgets, and report on progress.

The AUC provides comprehensive policy guidance and technical support to eradicate child marriages across Africa through promoting legal reforms, reinforcing minimum ages for marriages, and advancing gender equality,

### *2.1.2 Support to the AU Champion on Ending Child Marriages:*

To raise the profile and political urgency of ending child marriages, the AU appointed the President of the Republic of Zambia as champion. He has been using his influence to shift public opinion, advocate at the highest levels for political and financial commitments as well as keep child marriage eradication central to Africa's development agenda. His leadership mobilises support, resources, and partnerships, ensuring the issue remains a top continental priority. This report is a product of his sterling work.

### *2.1.3 Country Monitoring Missions*

The Commission, in collaboration with the African Committee of Experts on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACERWC), deploys multi-stakeholder monitoring missions to Member States, to assess progress, identify obstacles, and recommend actionable steps. Through these country missions, the AU reviews legal frameworks, budgets, and social programmes, producing practical recommendations and roadmaps for accelerated action, which the AUC help implement. In addition, these missions are designed to foster the effective implementation of Child marriages Campaign interventions and to ramp up support for the campaign among diverse stakeholders across the country.

By engaging with governments, civil society, and communities, these missions promote accountability, share best practices, and address implementation gaps to advance the elimination of child marriages.

#### *2.1.4 Capacity Building of Stakeholders and Rights' Holders*

To drive sustainable change, the AUC delivers targeted capacity-building for government officials, parliamentarians, traditional and religious leaders, as well as civil society to strengthen prevention and response to child marriages. Simultaneously, the AUC empowers children, especially girls, by equipping them with awareness of their rights, leadership skills, and advocacy tools so they can actively influence their communities. These initiatives enhance stakeholder expertise and ensure children meaningfully participate in decisions affecting their lives. The establishment of the African Union Child Participation Platform is one poignant example where young people get to connect with the AU mechanisms on relevant issues.

#### *2.1.5 Continental Platforms for Intergenerational Dialogue and Child Engagement*

Through platforms such as the AU Child Participation Platform and the African Girls Summit<sup>14</sup>, the AUC ensures the inclusion of those most affected by child marriages. Often, the intergenerational dialogues brings together elders, policymakers, and youth to challenge harmful norms and co-create innovative solutions and provide recommendations for policy makers on issues affecting them and their peers. The engagements allow children and adolescents to directly engage with AU HHSD Secretariat working on projects of Ending Harmful Practices and Child Protection, AU organs and policymakers, traditional and religious leaders ensuring interventions reflect their experiences and fostering shared ownership of Africa's future.

#### *2.1.6 Engagement with Traditional and Religious Leaders*

Traditional and religious leaders play a vital role in transforming social norms around child marriages. They hold revered positions within their communities, serving as custodians of culture and moral authority. Their endorsement and advocacy are vital for challenging entrenched norms and fostering collective action towards the elimination of child marriages. The AUC engages these leaders as allies to reconcile cultural and religious values with children's rights, encouraging them to advocate against child marriages and other harmful practices as well as promote girls' education safety, well being and protecting adolescent mothers from violation and abuse within their communities. By partnering with these influential figures, the AUC fosters community ownership and drives sustainable change from within.



## 2.2 Leading from the front: The AU Champion's initiatives in Zambia

The AU Champion's leadership in ending child marriages is operationalised through Zambia's integrated governance, legal harmonisation and results-based policy implementation framework. Under the leadership of H.E. President Hakainde Hichilema, Zambia has institutionalised the Common African Position on Ending Child marriages, as endorsed by AU Assembly Decision (Assembly/AU/Dec.642-664(XXIX)), by embedding continental commitments into national laws, strategies, financing mechanisms and accountability systems.

Within the continental coordination architecture, the AU Champion provides political stewardship, normative leadership and strategic advocacy to drive Member State compliance, multi-sectoral convergence and sustainable financing for the prevention of and response to child marriages. Zambia's domestic reforms therefore function as a proof-of-concept model for translating AU commitments into nationally measurable outcomes.

Between 2018 and 2024, the prevalence of child marriages in Zambia declined from 29 percent to 23.9 percent<sup>15</sup>, reflecting the combined effects of strengthened social protection, expanded access to education, legal deterrence and gender-responsive governance. A major institutional milestone was the establishment of the Gender Division under the Office of the President, through Gazette Notice No. 1123 of 2021, which provides centralised oversight of:

- i. Gender and Anti-Gender-Based Violence (GBV) programming
- ii. Gender equity and equality
- iii. Gender rights protection
- iv. National Gender Policy implementation
- v. Women's economic empowerment

This institutional anchoring ensures whole-of-government coordination and direct executive oversight of the elimination of child marriages. The Anti-GBV Act No. 1 of 2011, which classifies child marriages as a form of gender-based violence, provides the rights-based normative foundation for state intervention.

### *2.2.1 Advancement of the Legal Framework Governing Issues of Children and Gender*

Zambia has implemented a comprehensive legal harmonisation process to eliminate normative and jurisdictional loopholes that previously enabled child marriages. Key statutory instruments include:

- a) Children's Code Act No. 12 of 2022, which criminalises child marriages and establishes child-specific offences relating to sexual exploitation, abuse and unlawful sexual activity.
- b) Marriages (Amendment) Act No. 13 of 2023, invalidates all child marriages, customary, statutory or religious, and aligns marriages law with the constitutional definition of a child as any person below 18 years.
- c) Matrimonial Causes (Amendment) Act No. 6 of 2024, ensures legal coherence by rendering void any marriages in which one or both parties are children.

Ongoing reforms to the Anti-GBV Act No. 1 of 2011 and the Penal Code are strengthening the criminal justice response to harmful practices, including through alignment with the AU Convention on Ending Violence Against Women and Girls (CEVAWG).

Together with the Education Act No. 23 of 2011, which criminalises sexual relations with learners, Zambia's legal regime now constitutes a zero-tolerance statutory environment in which child marriages have no legal recognition under any legal system.

### *2.2.2 Improved the Policy Framework Governing Issues of Children and Gender in Zambia*

In addition to these legislative initiatives, the Zambian Government has established a multi-layered policy architecture that addresses both the immediate and structural drivers of child marriages inclusive of the following:-

- a) National Gender Policy (2023):** Aligned to the National Development Plans and the SDGs, the Policy provides a results-oriented framework for advancing gender equality, women's economic participation and coordinated sectoral action. It operationalises the prevention of child marriages by strengthening girls' access to education, health services, economic resources and decision-making.
- b) Re-Entry Policy (1997):** Protects adolescent mothers' right to education, reducing school dropout and mitigating child marriages as a post-pregnancy coping mechanism.

**c) Free Sanitary Wear Programme:** Improves school attendance and retention among adolescent girls, reducing education-related vulnerability to child marriages.

**d) Constituency Development Fund (CDF):** The increase from K1.8 million to over K32 million per constituency has enabled school construction, furniture provision and education bursaries, directly reducing poverty-driven child marriages by improving access to education.

**e) Free Education Policy (2022):** Eliminates tuition fees from pre-school to secondary level, resulting in large-scale re-enrolment of previously excluded children, thereby reducing exposure to child marriages.

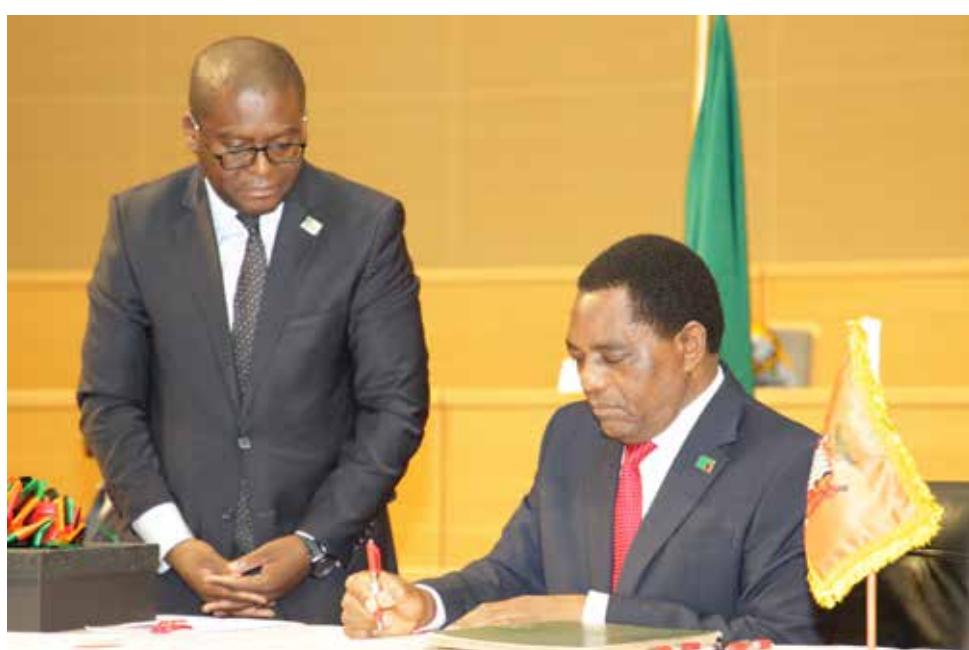
**f) GEWEL Programme and Social Cash Transfer:** These poverty-targeted interventions strengthen household income security and sustain school participation, particularly for girls in high-risk contexts for child marriages.

**g) National Strategy on Ending Child marriages (2026 – 2030):** The second generation strategy is structured around five outcome pillars:

- i. Integrated child-centred service delivery
- ii. Transformation of harmful social and gender norms
- iii. Sustainable domestic and partner financing
- iv. Strengthened coordination, monitoring and accountability
- v. Institutional and service-delivery capacity building

Complementary instruments, including the National Youth Policy (2024), National Social Protection Policy (2025) and the National Policy on Human Trafficking (2022), further reinforce prevention and protection against child marriages. Zambia also operates a dedicated anti-trafficking department, including for trafficking linked to child marriages.

In 2025, the development of a Male Engagement Strategy expanded prevention programming to include boys and men as agents of change in eliminating child marriages.



H.E. Hakainde Hichilema, President of the Republic of Zambia and AU Champion

### ***2.2.3 Strengthened Coordination and Collaboration Mechanisms***

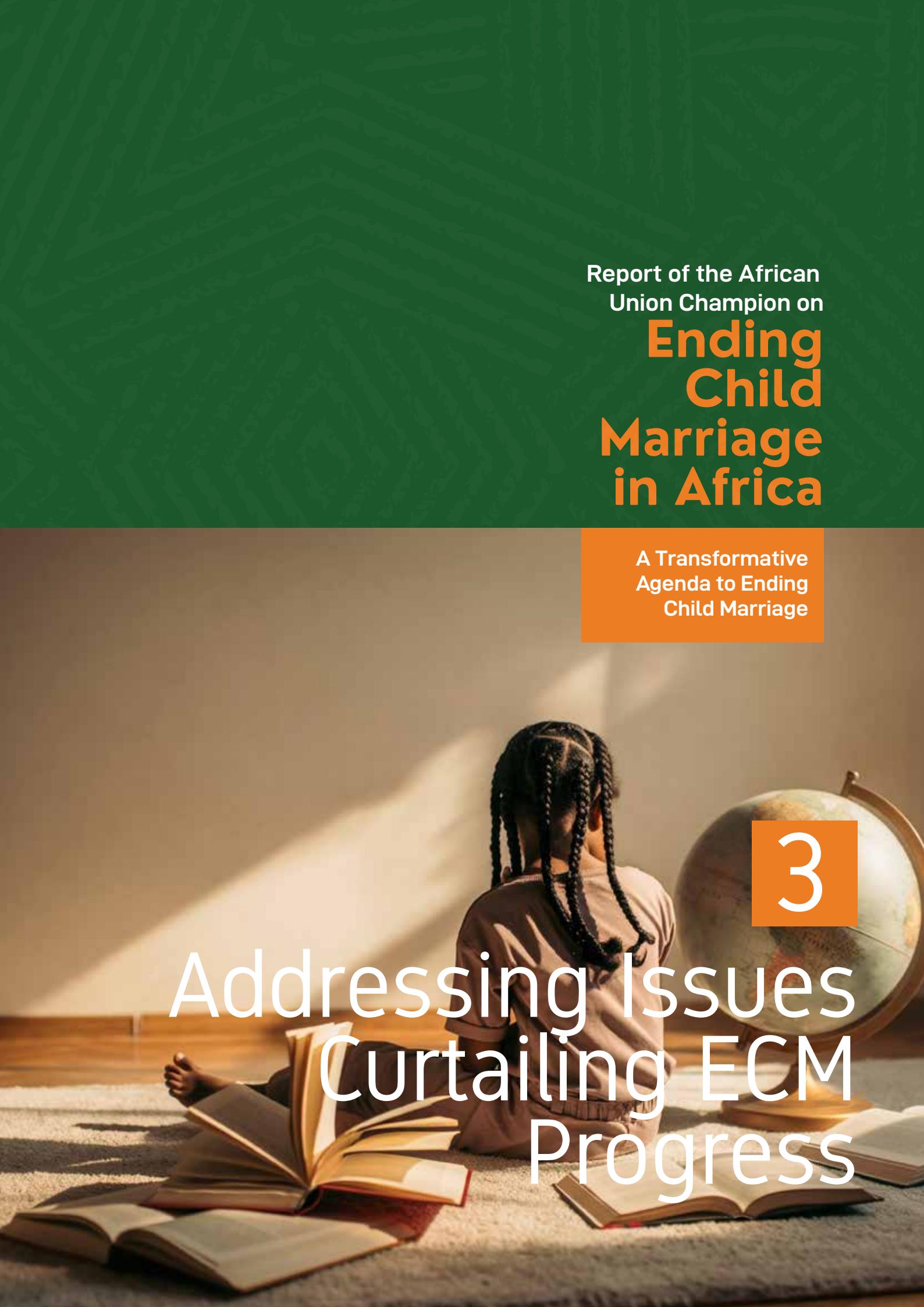
Zambia applies a whole-of-government and whole-of-society coordination model for addressing child marriages, linking state institutions with traditional and religious leaders, civil society, the private sector and development partners, including the EU, World Bank, Canada, Ireland, Sweden, UNICEF, UNFPA, UNDP, UNESCO, UN Women, IOM, Plan International, World Vision, Save the Children and the CSO Network on Ending Child marriages (CSO-N-ECM).

Delivery platforms include the Global Programme on Ending Child marriages, the GRZ-UN Joint Programme, Natwapane and the Spotlight Initiative 2.0. Cultural resetting, community mobilisation and youth-focused communication campaigns reinforce behaviour change at scale. High-level political oversight is maintained through quarterly Presidential coordination meetings, institutionalising performance review, policy coherence and partner accountability.

### ***2.2.4 Championing the Elimination of Child Marriages on International Platforms***

Through the leadership of the AU Champion, Zambia provides sustained continental and global advocacy on child marriages. In partnership with Canada, Zambia has co-led the UN General Assembly Resolution on Ending Child, Early and Forced Marriages (CEFM) for more than a decade. The sixth resolution, adopted on 18 November 2024, secured 123 co-sponsors, demonstrating strong cross-regional political commitment.

Zambia also convenes annual UNGA side events to disseminate evidence, promote best practices and strengthen global accountability, positioning the AU Champion as a central driver of normative convergence and international mobilisation to eliminate child marriages.



Report of the African  
Union Champion on  
**Ending  
Child  
Marriage  
in Africa**

A Transformative  
Agenda to Ending  
Child Marriage

3

# Addressing Issues Curtailing ECM Progress

A constellation of emerging issues continue to undermine progress toward eradicating child marriages in Africa, frequently intersecting with structural inequalities, entrenched sociocultural norms, and persistent governance gaps. These challenges are far from uniform, manifesting uniquely across the continent's five regions and demanding tailored, multisectoral and multi-pronged strategies. The pathways to addressing some of these issues are not linear; rather, it requires a synergised approach that integrates legal reform with community mobilisation, educational advancement with economic security, and high-level political will with the meaningful participation of adolescent girls themselves. Sustainable transformation hinges on cross-sectoral coordination and robust partnerships that prioritise girls' agency and voices. By adopting such a comprehensive framework, stakeholders can move decisively beyond piecemeal mitigation to fundamentally transform the systems that sustain this harmful practice.

### 3.1 Polycrises that Accentuate Child Marriages

Addressing the complex interplay of polycrises is crucial to effectively tackling the persistent challenge of child marriages across Africa. Multiple and overlapping crises, ranging from climate shocks to conflict and global pandemics, intensify the risks faced by vulnerable girls and undermine progress towards eradication. Without targeted, coordinated interventions that consider these compounding factors, efforts to end child marriages will remain fragmented and insufficient.

#### 3.1.1 Child marriages and the Climate Change Nexus

Climate shocks and gradual climate change experienced early in life have far-reaching consequences on health, education and livelihood opportunities, livelihoods, productivity, and asset accumulation into adulthood, disproportionately affecting women and girls who are heavily reliant on nature-based livelihoods.<sup>16</sup> Disruptions to food production, social safety nets, and household economies, exacerbated by the increasing frequency and intensity of climate shocks, undermine household income and limit investments in healthcare, education, and nutrition, thereby perpetuating intergenerational disadvantage. Notably, climate shocks have been statistically linked to adverse outcomes: a 10 percent deviation from typical rainfall correlates with a one percent increase in child marriages rates,<sup>17</sup> and in one southern African nation, girls comprised 70 percent of children withdrawn from school following droughts.<sup>18</sup> The destruction wrought by single climate events can erase decades of human capital investment, as evidenced by the flooding in southern Africa that destroyed over 500 schools built in the preceding 20 years.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Deininger, Franziska, Andrea Woodhouse, Anne T. Kuriakose, Ana Gren, and Sundas Liaqat. (2023). "Placing Gender Equality at the Center of Climate Action." World Bank Group.

<sup>17</sup> UNICEF. (2023). *Is an End to Child marriages Within Reach? Latest trends and future prospects 2023 update* [https://www.unicefusa.org/sites/default/files/2023-05/Is\\_on\\_End\\_to\\_Child\\_Marriages\\_Within\\_Reach.pdf](https://www.unicefusa.org/sites/default/files/2023-05/Is_on_End_to_Child_Marriages_Within_Reach.pdf) [Accessed 2 September 2025].

<sup>18</sup> Babugura, Anges A. (2008). "Vulnerability of Children and Youth in Drought Disasters: A Case Study of Botswana." *Children, Youth and Environments* 18 (1): 126–157

<sup>19</sup> Baez, Javier, Alejandro de la Fuente, and Indhira Vanessa Santos. (2010). "Do Natural Disasters Affect Human Capital? An Assessment Based on Existing Empirical Evidence." *SSRN Electronic Journal*. <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.1672172>.

*Climate change functions as a structural accelerator of child marriages, particularly in regions with low adaptive capacity.*



In pastoralist communities across Eastern Africa, recurrent droughts have severely depleted livestock holdings, thereby increasing reliance on bridewealth derived from child marriages, while advancing desertification in the Sahel and prolonged drought conditions across Northern Africa have similarly entrenched child marriages as an economic coping mechanism.<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, climate-induced displacement fractures social networks and traditional protection systems, leaving girls more exposed to abduction, exploitation, and child marriages. A concerning emergent trend is that of 'climate orphans', children left without parental care due to extreme weather events, who face heightened vulnerability to child marriages, as communities may perceive such unions as essential for the orphans' survival and security.<sup>21</sup> These phenomena underscore how climate-induced crises destabilise households and erode protective social structures, amplifying the risk of harmful practices for the most vulnerable girls.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>20</sup> World Bank Group How To Protect, Build, And Use Human Capital To Address Climate Change [https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/server/api/core/bitstreams/5f8a582c-48c2-4c5a-a25d-75c22463d6d5/content?gl=11e9veje\\_gcl\\_aU'MT4k40DcyNDU4Nj4xNzIxMjI2NzQ2](https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/server/api/core/bitstreams/5f8a582c-48c2-4c5a-a25d-75c22463d6d5/content?gl=11e9veje_gcl_aU'MT4k40DcyNDU4Nj4xNzIxMjI2NzQ2) [Accessed 2 September 2025].

<sup>21</sup> Cas, A. G., Frankenberg, E., Sunastini, W., & Thomas, D. (2014). The impact of parental death on child well-being: Evidence from the Indian Ocean tsunami. *Demography*, 51(2), 437-457. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13524-014-0279-8>

<sup>22</sup> World Bank Group How To Protect, Build, And Use Human Capital To Address Climate Change [https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/server/api/core/bitstreams/5f8a582c-48c2-4c5a-a25d-75c22463d6d5/content?gl=11e9veje\\_gcl\\_aU'MT4k40DcyNDU4Nj4xNzIxMjI2NzQ2](https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/server/api/core/bitstreams/5f8a582c-48c2-4c5a-a25d-75c22463d6d5/content?gl=11e9veje_gcl_aU'MT4k40DcyNDU4Nj4xNzIxMjI2NzQ2)

### 3.1.2 Child Marriages and Conflict Settings

Girls residing in conflict-affected areas face a significantly heightened risk of child marriages, with fragile states reporting a prevalence twice the global average.<sup>23</sup> Evidence indicates that crises, including natural disasters and armed conflicts, increase girls' vulnerability to child marriages, sexual exploitation, and abuse, particularly in Africa, where nine of the ten countries with the highest rates are considered fragile or extremely fragile.<sup>24</sup> The impacts of conflict, such as rape, torture, and forced prostitution disguised as "marriages," serve as weapons of war, eroding family and community structures, while recent data show a marked rise in grave violations against children, with sexual violence against girls increasing by 35 percent in 2024.<sup>25</sup> Thousands of girls have been abducted for forced recruitment and sexual slavery, and ongoing attacks on schools and hospitals impede access to education and health services, compounding their vulnerabilities.

Historical data reveal a direct relationship between conflict deaths and child marriages, as every tenfold increase in conflict fatalities correlates with a seven percent rise in child marriages prevalence.<sup>26</sup> Regional examples across Africa illustrate the crisis: in the Sahel, prolonged conflicts and mass displacement have normalised child marriages in communities and IDP camps, where families marry daughters to combatants or powerful men for perceived safety. In the Horn of Africa, instability has driven families to child marriages as a coping strategy to reduce dependents or secure assets through bride price amidst economic collapse. Northern Africa's post-conflict fragmentation and weakened rule of law have undermined statutory protections, allowing child marriages to persist, while Southern Africa's economic fragility and political uncertainty have led families to use child marriages as a survival tool. Humanitarian crises further threaten progress by disrupting interventions, with rises in child marriages linked to insecurity, violence (including GBV), school closures, breakdowns in social and health services (including SRHR), poverty, and weakened support networks.<sup>27</sup> Families may resort to child marriages to ease financial burdens, obtain bridewealth, mitigate stigma from pregnancy outside marriages, or protect girls' safety and family honour, as seen during the El Niño-induced drought of 2016 in southern Africa.<sup>28</sup>

The correlation between fragility and child marriages is clear, as weak state institutions and diverted resources impede child protection, highlighting the necessity of integrating child protection services, age-verification mechanisms, and targeted prevention programmes into all humanitarian, peacebuilding, and reconstruction efforts to address this pervasive vulnerability.

<sup>23</sup> United Nations Children's Fund (2021). Towards Ending Child marriages: Global trends and profiles of progress, UNICEF, New York, 2021.

<sup>24</sup> <https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/Child-marriages-in-humanitarian-settings.pdf> [Accessed 2 September 2025].

<sup>25</sup> Report of the Secretary-General Children and armed conflict. (2025). A/79/878-S/2025/247 <https://docs.un.org/en/S/2025/247> [Accessed 17 September 2025].

<sup>26</sup> United Nations Children's Fund, Is an End to Child marriages within Reach? Latest trends and future prospects, 2023 update, UNICEF, New York, 2023. [https://www.unicefusa.org/sites/default/files/2023-05/Is\\_an\\_End\\_to\\_Child\\_Marriages\\_Within\\_Reach.pdf](https://www.unicefusa.org/sites/default/files/2023-05/Is_an_End_to_Child_Marriages_Within_Reach.pdf) [Accessed 22 September 2025].

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> CARE. (2016). Hope dries up? Women and Girls coping with Drought and Climate Change in Mozambique. [https://careclimatechange.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/El\\_Nino\\_Mozambique\\_Report\\_final.pdf](https://careclimatechange.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/El_Nino_Mozambique_Report_final.pdf) [Accessed 20 August 2025].



### 3.1.3 The Domino Effect of COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic has seriously undermined efforts to eliminate child marriages in Africa, deepening existing vulnerabilities and disrupting hard-won progress. In 2020, global child marriages rates experienced their most significant increase in 25 years, with reported rates more than doubling between March and December compared to the previous year. Contributing factors included lockdowns, widespread school closures, and worsening economic hardship, which pushed many families into deeper poverty and increased the use of child marriages as a coping strategy.<sup>29</sup> Girls were disproportionately affected, often removed from school and forced into early unions to ease household financial burdens or due to heightened domestic pressures. It has been estimated that an additional 10 million girls are now at risk of child marriages by 2030 as a result of the pandemic.<sup>30</sup> Moreover, COVID-19 restrictions hindered the delivery of prevention programmes, community outreach, and policy advocacy, thereby weakening vital support systems that would normally protect girls from early marriages. The pandemic also led to diminished access to education, healthcare, sexual and reproductive health information, and social support networks, collectively undermining strategies to end child marriages and making the Sustainable Development Goal of eradicating child marriages by 2030 increasingly unattainable.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>29</sup> UNICEF. (2022). *Research spotlight: child marriages in humanitarian settings and challenging gender norms to end child marriages*.  
<sup>30</sup> UNICEF Unmasking vulnerabilities: The impact of COVID-19 on the determinants of child marriages in South Asia <https://www.unicef.org/rosa/reports/unmask-ing-vulnerabilities> [Accessed 20 August 2025].  
<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

## 3.2 Insufficient Investment in Education

Public investment in education is critical to retaining girls in school, a factor that significantly influences their future economic opportunities and the delay of early marriages. Despite broad consensus on education's transformative power, many AU Member States allocate insufficient public funds to education, resulting in systemic barriers such as overcrowded classrooms, inadequate learning materials, and a shortage of qualified teachers.<sup>32</sup> The continent of Africa is characterised by some of the world's lowest rates of public education spending relative to GDP, with many nations failing to meet the international benchmark of 4–6 percent of GDP.<sup>33</sup> These deficiencies disproportionately affect girls, who face additional challenges including unsafe school environments and a lack of gender-sensitive facilities, contributing to high dropout rates. Nearly 33 million girls of primary and lower secondary school age in Africa are out of school, many unable to return due to financial constraints and entrenched social norms favouring boys' education.<sup>34</sup>

Robust public investment is indispensable for creating quality, inclusive, and gender-responsive education systems capable of retaining girls and equipping them with skills for future success.<sup>35</sup> Empirical evidence underscores that each additional year of schooling can increase a girl's lifetime earnings by up to 20 percent, simultaneously reducing her risk of early marriage and improving health outcomes for herself and her offspring.<sup>36</sup>



*Schooling can increase a girl's lifetime earnings by up to 20 percent, simultaneously reducing her risk of early marriage and improving health outcomes for herself and her offspring.*

<sup>32</sup> UNESCO. (2021). *Global education monitoring report 2021/2: Non-state actors in education: Who chooses? Who loses?* United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation.

<sup>33</sup> UNESCO. (2021). *Global education monitoring report 2021/2: Non-state actors in education: Who chooses? Who loses?* United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation.

<sup>34</sup> UNICEF. (2021). *The state of the world's children: Adolescents, education and empowerment.* UNICEF. <https://www.unicef.org/reports/state-worlds-children-2021> [Accessed 22 September 2025].

<sup>35</sup> Global Partnership for Education. (2021). *Investing in girls' education: Evidence and policy guidance.* <https://www.globalpartnership.org> [Accessed 22 September 2025].

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

However, without targeted funding for gender-sensitive infrastructure, teacher training, and scholarship programmes, millions of girls remain vulnerable to dropping out and being pushed into child marriages or exploitative labour.<sup>37</sup>

Remaining in school delays the age of marriages by providing girls with alternative aspirations, enhancing their bargaining power within households, and legally and socially re-categorising them as children and students rather than brides.<sup>38</sup> The causal pathway is clear: girls who stay in school are less likely to marry as children. For instance, a study found that across 18 countries, women with no education were significantly more likely to marry before the age of 18 compared to those with secondary or higher education.<sup>39</sup> This delay in marriages is intrinsically linked to improved health outcomes, including lower rates of adolescent pregnancy, reduced maternal and infant mortality, and better overall child health. Hence, comprehensive, well-resourced education policies are essential, not only for achieving gender parity but also for disrupting cycles of poverty and harmful practices that hinder Africa's broader development goals.

### 3.3 Addressing Poverty

Poverty remains the foremost driver of child marriages across Africa, intricately linked to economic vulnerability and limited household resources. Many families facing acute financial hardships view the early marriages of their daughters as a coping mechanism to reduce economic burdens and secure their livelihoods, sometimes perceiving girls as economic liabilities. This dynamic is starkly illustrated by the fact that nearly 40 percent of girls in the world's poorest countries are married as children, a figure double the global average. While some AU Member States have implemented cash transfer programmes for addressing poverty, these are often limited in scope, coverage, and funding, failing to provide the robust and reliable economic safety net required to dismantle the financial incentives for child marriages. The absence of comprehensive social safety nets and economic empowerment programmes limits families' alternatives, perpetuating the risk that girls will be withdrawn from school and married off at an early age to alleviate fiscal strains.

Consequently, addressing child marriages fundamentally requires strategies that directly target poverty through economic empowerment. Programmes that provide cash transfers conditional on girls' school attendance, support adolescent girls' vocational training, and facilitate livelihood opportunities for vulnerable families have demonstrated significant success in reducing child marriages rates by altering its economic calculus.<sup>40</sup>

<sup>37</sup> UNICEF. (2021). *The state of the world's children: Adolescents, education and empowerment*. UNICEF. <https://www.unicef.org/reports/state-worlds-children-2021> [Accessed 22 September 2025].

<sup>38</sup> Psaki, S. R., McCarthy, K. J., & Mensch, B. S. (2018). *Measuring gender equality in education: Lessons from trends in 43 countries*. *Population and Development Review*, 44(1), 117-142. <https://doi.org/10.1111/padr.12121> [Accessed 22 September 2025].

<sup>39</sup> Wodon, Q., Male, C., Nayihouba, A., Onagoruwa, A., Savadogo, A., Yedan, A., ... & Petroni, S. (2018). *Economic impacts of child marriages: Global synthesis report*. The World Bank and International Center for Research on Women. <https://www.icrw.org/publications/economic-impacts-child-marriages/> [Accessed 22 September 2025].

<sup>40</sup> Wodon, Q., Male, C., Nayihouba, A., Onagoruwa, A., Savadogo, A., Yedan, A., ... & Petroni, S. (2022). *Economic impacts of child marriages: A review of the literature*. The World Bank. <https://doi.org/10.1596/1813-9450-10233> [Accessed 20 August 2025].

Prioritising and financing economic empowerment is therefore not merely a social policy but an essential investment to break the cycle of poverty and its most pernicious outcomes, including child marriages. Evidence shows that improved household economic resilience and targeted financial support enhance girls' ability to remain in school and delay marriages, thereby changing both immediate and intergenerational outcomes.<sup>42</sup> However, despite the proven efficacy of such approaches, investment by African Union.

Member States in scalable, nationally funded social protection and economic empowerment programmes remains critically low. Many initiatives are heavily reliant on unpredictable donor funding and are not integrated into long-term national budgets, reflecting a lamentable gap between policy rhetoric and fiscal commitment, thereby undermining the continent's ability to meet its Agenda 2063 and Sustainable Development Goals' commitments. To accelerate progress in ending child marriages, robust policies must prioritise expanding domestic resource mobilisation for social protection that directly empowers girls and their families, enabling sustainable shifts away from poverty-driven harmful practices.

### 3.4 Africa's Demographic Transitions and ECM



*Child marriage is more common in parts of the continent that are growing rapidly compared with areas where child marriage is rare. This means an increasing number of girls will be at risk of becoming child brides.*

The distribution of the global population is shifting, with more than half of global growth between now and 2050 likely to occur in Africa. This growth is projected to double the continent's population by 2050.<sup>42</sup> At the same time, low fertility rates in parts of the world such as Europe and China will lead to shrinking populations in coming years.<sup>43</sup> These trends have important implications for girls in the future. Child marriage is more common in parts of the continent that are growing rapidly. This means an increasing number of girls will be at risk of becoming child brides.

This dynamic is particularly acute in Africa, where the pace of population growth outperforms the pace of preventing and reducing child marriages. The impact is already becoming evident: 25 years ago, Africa was home to 15 percent of the world's child brides. Of the most recently married girls, this share has already grown to 35 percent. If trends of the past decade continue, by 2030 this share will grow to 41 percent.<sup>44</sup>

### 3.5 Extra-territoriality of Child Marriages

The colonial borders in Africa often divided communities with shared cultures and traditions, resulting in porous boundaries where people move freely across countries. This fluid movement makes it particularly challenging to regulate issues like child marriages, which frequently transcend national borders. To effectively combat child marriages, especially in border regions, cross-border collaboration is essential. States need to harmonise their laws and policies concerning child marriages, ensuring that legal protections and interventions are consistent and effective as individuals move between jurisdictions. Disparities in legislation can create loopholes that are exploited, allowing child marriages to persist in border communities. Regional Economic Communities (RECs) and mechanisms play a crucial role in standardising approaches, fostering cooperation, and facilitating shared learning among countries facing similar challenges. By promoting joint strategies and enabling the extraterritorial application of child protection laws, countries can strengthen their defences against child marriages and better support at-risk children regardless of where they reside or travel.

As Figure 3 illustrates, the Sahel region stands out globally for recording some of the highest rates of child marriages. The map provides a stark visual of a transboundary issue, demonstrating that significant proportions of women aged 20 to 24 were married or entered a union before reaching the age of 18, irrespective of national borders. This pattern underscores that child marriages in the Sahel is not confined to any single country but is instead a widespread phenomenon that cuts across the region's diverse communities.

<sup>42</sup> United Nations, 'Global Issues: Population', United Nations, New York,

<sup>43</sup> United Nations, 'Global Issues: Population', United Nations, New York, <https://www.un.org/en/global-issues/population#:~:text=More%20than%20half%20of%20global,projected%20to%20double%20by%202050> [Accessed 28 August 2025].

<sup>44</sup> United Nations Children's Fund. (2023). *Is an End to Child marriage within Reach? Latest trends and future prospects. 2023 update*, UNICEF, New York, 2023. [https://www.unicefusa.org/sites/default/files/2023-05/Is\\_an\\_End\\_to\\_Child\\_Marriage\\_Within\\_Reach.pdf](https://www.unicefusa.org/sites/default/files/2023-05/Is_an_End_to_Child_Marriage_Within_Reach.pdf) [Accessed 22 September 2025].

The data depicted in Figure 3 reveals that, in several Sahelian countries, more than half of women in this age group experienced child marriages. Such prevalence rates far exceed the global average and highlight the deep-rooted nature of this practice in the region. The map's transboundary perspective also brings to light the impact of porous borders and shared cultural norms, which facilitate the persistence of child marriages across neighbouring countries.

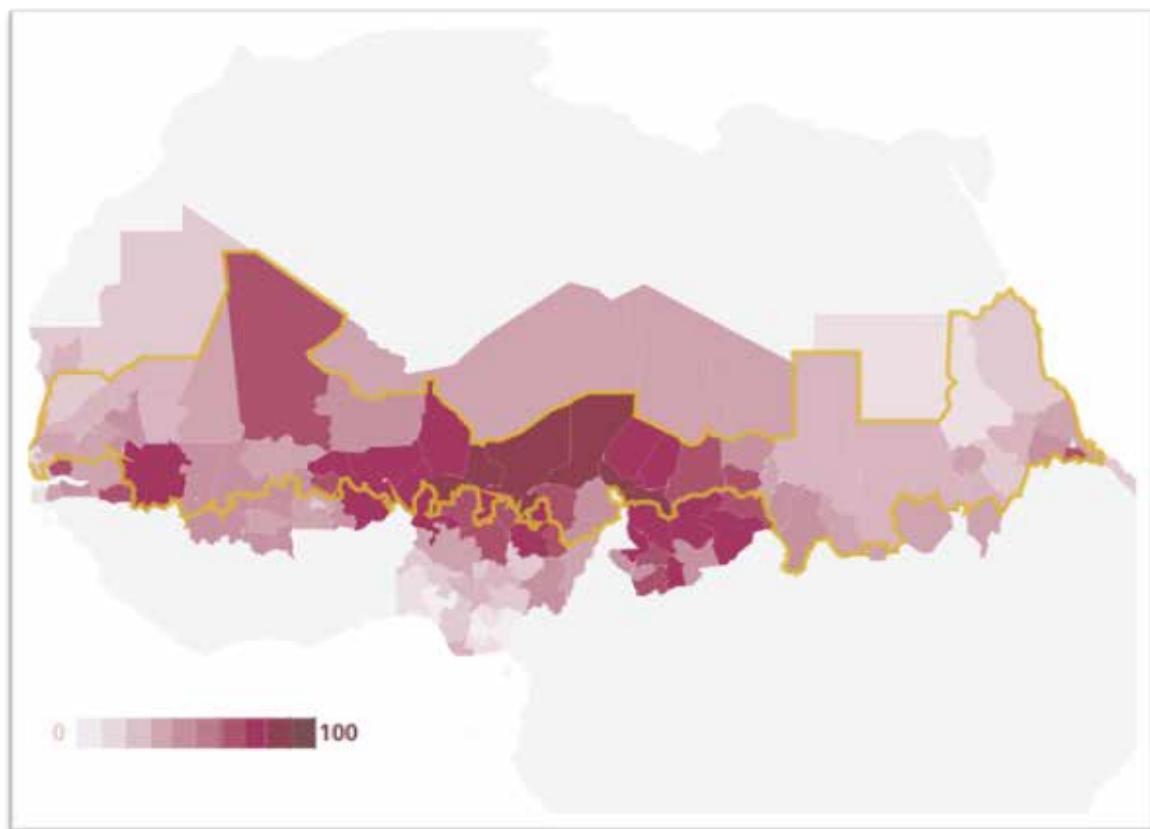


Figure 3: Percentage of women married before turning 18 years across the Sahel Region

Source: UNICEF, <https://data.unicef.org/resources/child-marriages-in-the-sahel-brochure/>

### 3.6 The Rise of the Anti-human Rights Movements

The rise of a global, coordinated push-back against women's and girls' rights and gender equality is threatening to undo decades of progress across several areas,<sup>45</sup> including addressing violence against women and girls, and sexual and reproductive health. Progress has stagnated or regressed in certain regions due to evolving political and religious ideologies, the rise of anti-human rights movements, and the consequences of economic crises, instability, and conflict. In Africa, this resistance is evident through objections to proposed legislative reforms aimed at ending child marriages, as well as raising the age of consent. In some of the countries, there have been efforts to repeal FGM prohibition laws. This demonstrates that there have been clear attempts to repeal legislations that protect the rights of women and girls, including their right to health.

Additionally, persistent opposition to comprehensive sexuality education, coupled with institutional resistance to the provision of sexual and reproductive health services for adolescents, young persons, and unmarried individuals, continues to undermine prevention and response frameworks. Furthermore, the reorganisation of gender ministries in certain countries may result in the deprioritising efforts to address ending child marriages. This could adversely affect the capacity of countries to implement national action plans and policies aimed at eradicating the practice.<sup>46</sup>

### 3.7 Digital Exploitation and Online Grooming

The digital revolution has significantly reshaped Africa's social environment, offering vast opportunities for education, connectivity, and empowerment. However, this transformation has simultaneously exposed adolescent girls across various regions to new vulnerabilities, including online grooming, trafficking, and coerced marriages facilitated through digital platforms. In Northern Africa, digital channels have been exploited to promote practices like "temporary marriages" under religious pretexts, targeting girls with promises of financial support. West African regions face rising incidents of online grooming, where perpetrators lure girls into exploitative relationships that lead to forced marriages. Similarly, East Africa contends with the misuse of digital platforms, particularly in urban informal settlements, where girls are targeted through deceptive romantic or employment opportunities.

<sup>45</sup> Lopa Banerjee. (2024, March 13). "Looking to the sun: pushing forward for gender equality." SDG Action

<sup>46</sup> Global Platform for Action to End FGM/C (2022). Progress Report on FGM/C. <https://www.endfgm.eu/content/documents/reports/2022-Progress-Report-on-FG-MC.pdf> [30 September 2025].

Central Africa experience challenges due to weak cyber regulations which allow trafficking networks to arrange cross-border unions via online tools, evading legal oversight. Even Southern Africa, with its more developed digital infrastructure, confronts the spread of exploitative online relationships involving minors, often blurring the lines between transactional sex and child marriages. These patterns illustrate how insufficient digital governance exacerbates risks for girls, fuelling the persistence of child marriages and its ties to online exploitation.



*This cyber governance gap correlates strongly with the rise in child marriages facilitated and concealed through online platforms. Without enforceable laws on data protection, social media regulation, and child online safety, girls remain vulnerable to manipulation and exploitation enabled by digital tools.*

The widespread lack of robust cyber governance and regulatory frameworks across many African regions has allowed digital threats to proliferate largely unchecked, extending beyond the capacities of traditional legal systems. This cyber governance gap correlates strongly with the rise in child marriages facilitated and concealed through online platforms. Without enforceable laws on data protection, social media regulation, and child online safety, girls remain vulnerable to manipulation and exploitation enabled by digital tools. Addressing these risks demands a coordinated continental effort led by the African Union to develop comprehensive, rights-based protocols on child online protection that can adapt to evolving technologies. Regional Economic Communities are crucial in harmonising cyber laws and promoting cross-border intelligence sharing to disrupt trafficking and coercive marriages networks. Investing in widespread digital literacy campaigns will empower girls throughout the continent to navigate online spaces safely, serving as a critical defence against digital exploitation and its role in perpetuating child marriages.

### 3.8 Urbanisation and Informal Settlements

While Africa is the least urbanised continent in the world, it is however in overdrive to urbanise at the rate of 3.5 percent per year over the last two decades, which is expected to continue up to 2050.<sup>47</sup> The continent's rapid urbanisation trajectory has created new challenges for child protection. While cities offer opportunities for education and employment, they also host informal settlements where poverty, exclusion, and weak governance converge to perpetuate child marriages. In East Africa, slum communities report rising child marriages rates driven by school dropout, economic hardship, and lack of enforcement. Girls in these settings often face pressure to marry early to manage adolescent sexuality or secure financial support. In Southern Africa, peri-urban settlements show similar trends, with informal economies and weak social services contributing to the normalisation of child marriages.

In West Africa, urban migration has led to overcrowded informal settlements where traditional norms persist, and child marriages is used to regulate adolescent behaviour.<sup>48</sup> In Central Africa, urban sprawl has created zones of exclusion where girls face pressure to marry early due to economic hardship and lack of access to education. Even in Northern Africa's urban centres, informal housing areas see child marriages as a way to "secure" girls in the absence of formal employment or schooling pathways.<sup>49</sup> These dynamics call for a reimagining of urban child protection systems. Member States across the continent must invest in child protection units within urban planning departments, deploy geospatial data to identify hotspots, and ensure that informal settlements are not excluded from national child protection strategies.

<sup>47</sup> Chibwana, M. W. (2021). *Towards a transformative child rights discourse in Africa: A reflexive study*. *African Human Rights Law Journal*, 21(1), 126-148.

<sup>48</sup> UNFPA. (2022). *State of World Population 2022: Seeing the Unseen—The Case for Action in the Neglected Crisis of Unintended Pregnancy*. United Nations Population Fund, New York, USA.

<sup>49</sup> UN-Habitat. (2021). *Cities and Pandemics: Towards a More Just, Green and Healthy Future*. United Nations Human Settlements Programme, Nairobi, Kenya.



Report of the African  
Union Champion on

# Ending Child Marriage in Africa

A Transformative  
Agenda to Ending  
Child Marriage

4

## Strategic Pathways for AU Member States

Toward Transformative  
Action on ECM

While AU Member States can be commended for their efforts in curbing the scourge of child marriages, these efforts can be said to be inadequate in dismantling the culturally embedded prejudicial views and stereotyping of the role of the girl child and women in society. The prevalence of child marriages is still significantly high on the continent at an average of 28 percent. The Member States' efforts have been progressive at instituting the normative guidance, but not at addressing the multiple layers of child abuse, exploitation and rights violations which succour the perpetuation of the practice.

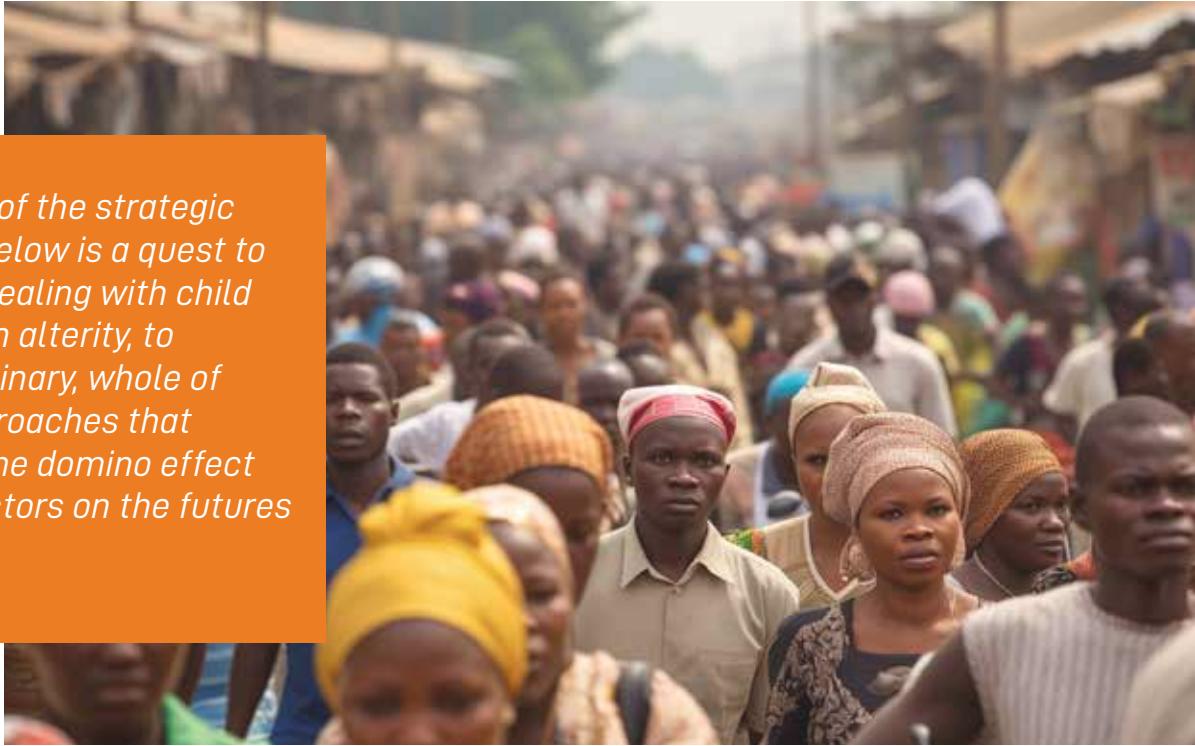
## 4.1 From Alterity to Whole of Society Approach

Ending child marriages in Africa requires more than normative alignment, it demands a recalibration of governance systems, multisectoral innovation, and sustained political commitment. At the core of the strategic pathways below is a quest to shift from dealing with child marriages in alterity, to transdisciplinary, whole of society approaches that recognise the domino effect of other sectors on the futures of the girls.<sup>50</sup> It requires shifting from viewing ECM as an isolated problem affecting only certain individuals or communities to adopting a whole-of-society approach that engages all sectors and stakeholders.

This comprehensive framework recognises that child marriages is deeply embedded in social norms, gender inequalities, economic vulnerabilities, and community structures. It calls for coordinated efforts that include empowering girls with education and life skills, mobilising families and community leaders to challenge harmful traditions, strengthening legal frameworks, and involving government, civil society, religious institutions, and private sectors in a collective response. Ultimately, a whole-of-society approach fosters shared responsibility, ensuring that prevention and response efforts are inclusive, culturally sensitive, and sustainable across communities.

To achieve this shift from alterity, the AU Champion on Ending Child marriages is uniquely positioned to catalyse this transformation by guiding Member States toward integrated, context-sensitive, and forward-looking strategies. The following pathways offer a blueprint for action, grounded in continental frameworks and emerging evidence.

<sup>50</sup> Chibwana, M. W. (2021). *Towards a transformative child rights discourse in Africa: A reflexive study*. African Human Rights Law Journal, 21(1), 126-148.



*At the core of the strategic pathways below is a quest to shift from dealing with child marriages in alterity, to transdisciplinary, whole of society approaches that recognise the domino effect of other sectors on the futures of the girls.*

## 4.2 Strengthening Normative Coherence

Legal harmonisation remains a foundational pillar in the fight against child marriages. While most AU Member States have ratified the relevant instruments as noted previously, significant inconsistencies persist in domestic legislation. In several jurisdictions, exceptions to the minimum age of marriage, often based on parental consent, customary law, or religious norms, continue to undermine child protection efforts. To address this, Member States must undertake comprehensive legal reforms that unequivocally establish 18 years as the minimum age of marriage, without exceptions. This requires not only statutory amendments but also the harmonisation of civil, customary, and religious legal systems. Moreover, accountability must be institutionalised through mechanisms such as national child rights observatories, judicial review bodies, and integration into the AU's African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM), ACERWC and the African Commission on Human and People's Rights (ACHPR). These platforms can monitor compliance, facilitate cross-country learning, and ensure that legal commitments translate into tangible protections for children.

## 4.3 Ensuring Accountability and Enforceability of the Laws

The mere existence of robust laws and policies is insufficient if these frameworks are not fully implemented and actively enforced. Ensuring accountability begins with the establishment of clear mechanisms to monitor and evaluate the application of child marriages laws at national and local levels. Dedicated oversight bodies, such as national child rights observatories, independent judicial committees, and ombudspersons should be empowered to track cases, report violations, and recommend corrective action.

Effective enforcement also requires adequately resourced child protection systems, including well-trained law enforcement officers, social workers, and judiciary personnel who are sensitised to the specific vulnerabilities of girls at risk of child marriages. This must be complemented by ongoing capacity-building for customary and religious leaders, who often wield significant influence over community practices and the interpretation of marriages norms. Furthermore, accountability should be strengthened through transparent reporting and grievance redressal mechanisms. This includes establishing child-friendly avenues for reporting violations and ensuring that survivors have access to legal aid and psychosocial support.

## 4.4 Leveraging Innovative Financing Including Domestic Resources for ECM

Ending child marriages in Africa requires more than external funders' goodwill, it demands sustained, strategic, and locally financed action. Domestic resource mobilisation (DRM) offers African states the opportunity to institutionalise child marriages eradication within their respective national development agendas, ensuring that interventions are resilient, scalable, and grounded in the lived realities of their populations. It marks a decisive shift from donor-dependent interventions to nationally owned, contextually grounded solutions. While external funding has historically catalysed efforts to combat child marriages, its volatility and alignment with shifting donor priorities render it insufficient for long-term impact. In contrast, DRM, through mechanisms such as taxation, budget reallocation, and improved fiscal governance, anchors the fight against child marriages within the core development agenda of the state, fostering national ownership, political commitment, and institutional stability.

By mobilising domestic financial resources, African governments can assume the role of primary architects rather than peripheral implementers of child marriages eradication strategies. This transition enables the design and execution of culturally resonant, locally responsive interventions that are embedded within broader national frameworks for poverty reduction, education, and gender equality. DRM also facilitates the scaling of multi-sectoral approaches that address the structural drivers of child marriages, including gendered poverty, limited access to education, and weak legal enforcement.<sup>51</sup>

DRM strengthens the capacity of governments to engage communities in transformative dialogue, invest in inclusive education infrastructure, and expand economic opportunities for girls and their families. These investments not only reduce vulnerability to early marriages but also advance the broader goals of gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls.

A critical component of effective national strategies to end child marriages is the development of costed national action plans. Such plans provide a transparent, evidence-based framework that details the specific interventions required, their associated costs, and the anticipated outcomes. By having costed national plans on ending child marriages, governments and stakeholders can ensure that investments are commensurate with the scale of the challenge and avoid tokenistic or symbolic gestures that lack real impact.



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Costed national action plans facilitate prioritisation, enable rigorous monitoring of spending versus results, and foster accountability by linking resource allocation directly to measurable progress. Ultimately, this approach not only strengthens advocacy for sustained funding but also ensures that every investment is strategically directed toward interventions proven to make a difference.

## 4.5 Strengthening Agency of Survivors and Rights Holders

Crucially, elevating the voices and lived experiences of survivors must be at the heart of efforts to eradicate child marriages. Survivors bring invaluable perspectives that can shape more responsive laws, policies, and interventions. Civil society organisations and national human rights institutions serve as vital platforms for amplifying these voices, facilitating testimony, supporting advocacy, and ensuring survivor-led accountability. By creating safe spaces for survivors to participate meaningfully in policy dialogues and monitoring, these bodies not only hold governments accountable but also foster policies that reflect the realities on the ground. In championing survivor engagement, Member States can transform legal commitments into tangible protections, ensuring that the path to eliminating child marriages is both inclusive and truly transformative.

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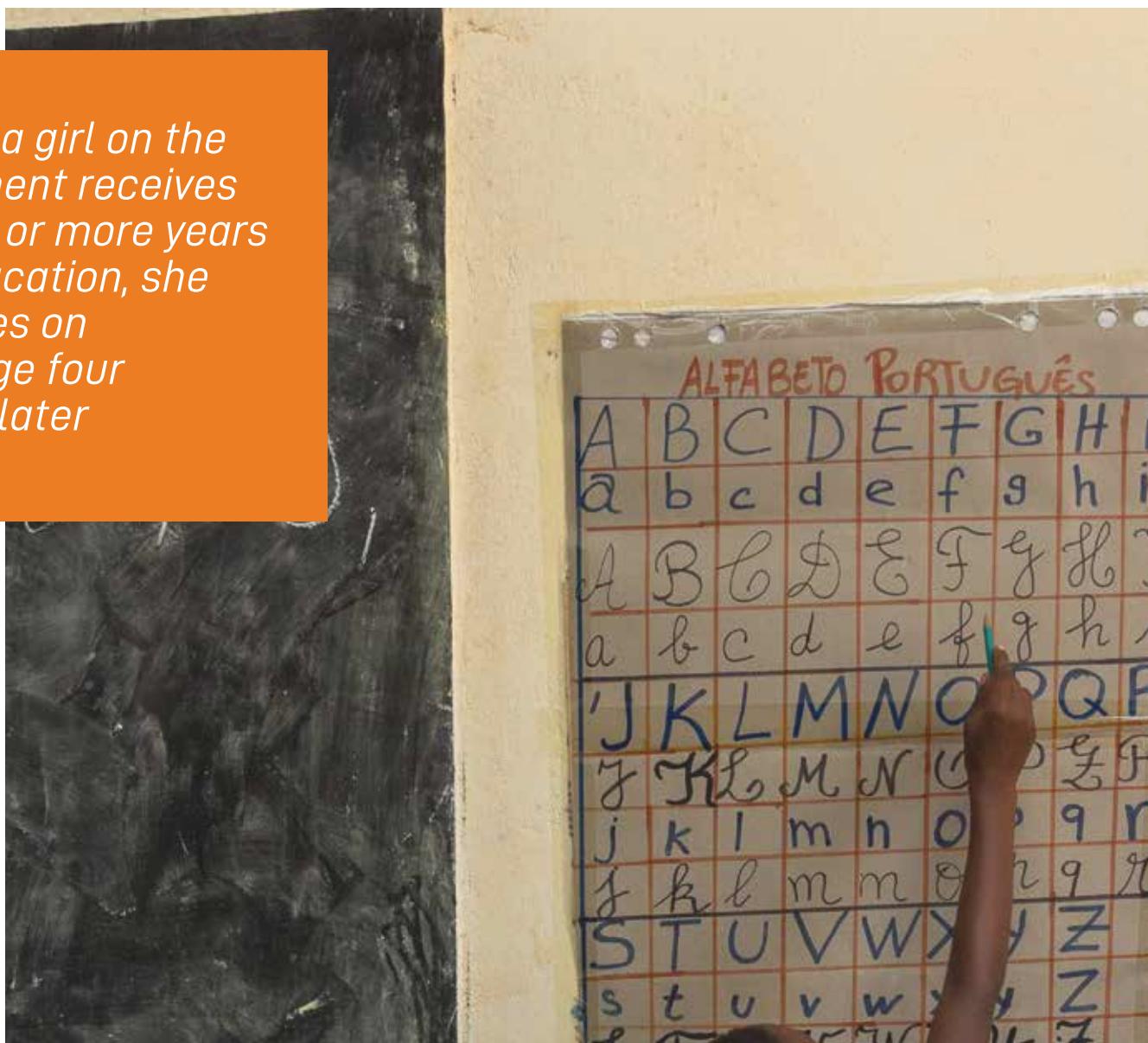


## 4.6 Education Opportunities for All Girls

Education opportunities for all girls are a fundamental and transformative component in the effort to prevent child marriages and empower girls to fulfil their full potential. Education acts as a powerful tool by equipping girls with knowledge, skills, and critical thinking that enable them to make informed decisions about their lives, including the timing of marriages and childbirth. Education can also be one of the most powerful tools to enable girls to avoid child marriages and fulfil their potential.

When a girl on the continent receives seven or more years of education, she marries on average four years later.<sup>52</sup> This delay in marriages has profound benefits not only for the girls themselves but also for their families and communities.

*When a girl on the continent receives seven or more years of education, she marries on average four years later*



Prolonged education enhances girls' exposure to health information, economic opportunities, and social networks, which collectively reduce their vulnerability to child marriages. More education increases girls' aspirations for careers and personal growth, fostering independence and a greater control over life choices. It also challenges harmful gender stereotypes and norms that perpetuate the acceptance of early marriages, by promoting gender equality and human rights awareness. The delay in marriages translates into better health outcomes, including reduced risks of early childbearing complications and maternal mortality, and improved educational outcomes for the girls' future children.

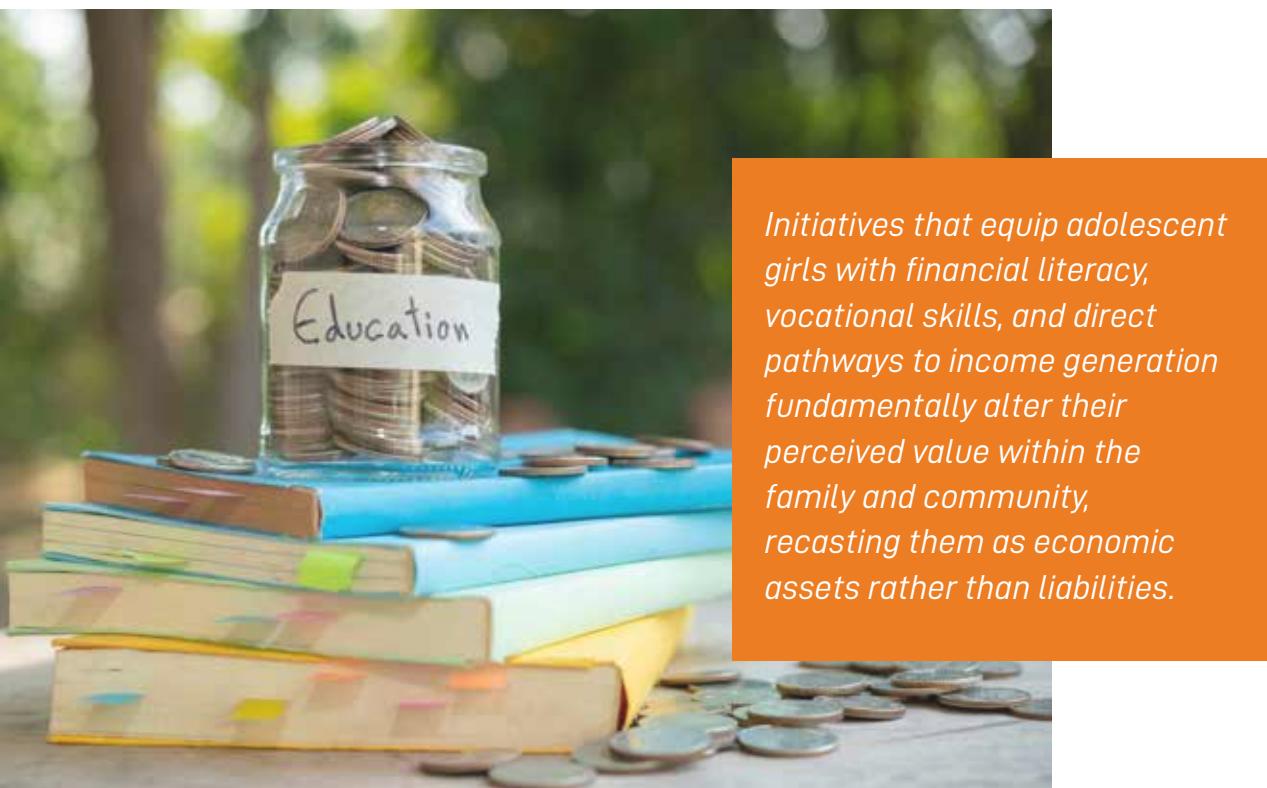
Moreover, education creates a ripple effect by contributing to the economic development of communities and countries. Educated girls and women tend to earn higher incomes, have fewer but healthier children, and actively participate in social and political life. Ensuring that all girls have access to quality education is therefore a critical preventive strategy against child marriages and a foundational investment in sustainable development, gender equality, and the realisation of human rights.

However, education alone is insufficient if it is not accompanied by clear pathways to secure, gainful employment. Evidence shows that when girls advance in education without corresponding access to labour market opportunities, the risk of becoming more educated but still vulnerable to child marriages persists, underscoring the need for integrated strategies that link schooling with economic prospects.

*Ensuring that all girls have access to quality education is therefore a critical preventive strategy against child marriages and a foundational investment in sustainable development, gender equality, and the realisation of human rights.*

## 4.7 Strengthening Household Economies Through Transformative Social Protection

As alluded to earlier, there is a correlation between poverty and child marriages. Poverty remains the single most differentiating factor in the prevalence of child marriages, often outweighing other social or cultural determinants in both urban and rural contexts. Girls from the poorest households are three times as likely to get married before age 18 as girls from the richest households.<sup>53</sup> In view of this, economic empowerment initiatives represent a critical preventive strategy against child marriages by directly targeting one of its most pervasive root causes: economic insecurity. When families face poverty and perceive daughters as financial burdens, child marriage is often adopted as a coping mechanism to secure a bride price or reduce household expenses.



*Initiatives that equip adolescent girls with financial literacy, vocational skills, and direct pathways to income generation fundamentally alter their perceived value within the family and community, recasting them as economic assets rather than liabilities.*

Programmes that economically empower families, such as cash transfers, microloan schemes for caregivers, and livelihood training, alleviate this immediate financial pressure, thereby diminishing the economic incentive to marry off a child. Concurrently, initiatives that equip adolescent girls with financial literacy, vocational skills, and direct pathways to income generation fundamentally alter their perceived value within the family and community, recasting them as economic assets rather than liabilities. This dual approach not only provides families with tangible alternatives but also fosters an environment where a girl's future is re-envisioned around education and economic autonomy, making child marriage an unacceptable choice rather than a financial necessity.



## 4.8 Integrating Child marriages into Climate and Humanitarian Frameworks

As has been opined earlier, the intersection of child marriages with climate change and humanitarian crises is increasingly evident across Africa. Climate-induced displacement, food insecurity, and environmental degradation have intensified vulnerabilities, particularly among pastoralist and agrarian communities. Similarly, conflict and fragility have eroded protective systems, leaving girls exposed to child marriages as a perceived form of security. To respond effectively, AU Member States must embed child marriages prevention into climate adaptation strategies and humanitarian response frameworks. The AU Climate Change and Resilience Strategy provides a critical entry point for integrating gendered and age-specific vulnerabilities into national and regional planning. This includes developing early warning systems, safeguarding education continuity during displacement, and ensuring that humanitarian actors are trained to identify and prevent child marriages in crisis contexts.

## 4.9 Leveraging Technology for ECM

Harnessing technology offers a transformative pathway to combat child marriages in Africa and enforce accountability for violations. Digital platforms can serve as powerful tools for disseminating information and raising awareness about the dangers and illegality of child marriages, reaching communities even in remote areas. Mobile applications and SMS-based reporting systems enable anonymous, real-time alerts of child marriages cases, empowering girls, families, and community members to seek intervention safely.

Mobile-based platforms and applications can also be deployed to educate communities on the harms of the practice and the legal rights of girls, while also providing confidential channels for at-risk girls and community members to report impending marriages directly to local authorities and child protection services. Further, governments and civil society organisations can deploy online databases to monitor the incidence of child marriages, track progress on prevention efforts, and facilitate inter-agency collaboration.

Additionally, secure digital registries for birth and marriages records can help verify ages and prove violations, while case management software can allow civil society organisations and government agencies to track reported incidents, monitor the enforcement of laws, and hold perpetrators and complicit officials accountable through transparent data that exposes gaps in implementation. To reinforce accountability, technology can support transparent documentation of violations, streamline case management, and enable the prosecution of offenders through digital evidence trails. By integrating digital literacy initiatives and cyber safety campaigns, stakeholders can equip girls with the skills to navigate online spaces securely, report exploitation, and access critical support services. Ultimately, leveraging technology, paired with strong regulatory frameworks, can both help prevent child marriages and guarantee justice for those affected, advancing the protection and empowerment of girls across Africa.

## **4.10 Investing in Urban Child Protection Systems**

Urbanisation trajectory has outpaced the development of inclusive child protection systems. Informal settlements, often characterised by poverty, exclusion, and weak governance, have become hotspots for child marriages, particularly where access to education and social services is limited. To address this, AU Member States must reimagine urban governance through a child rights lens. This includes establishing child protection units within urban planning departments, integrating child marriages prevention into municipal development plans, and deploying geospatial data to identify and target high-risk zones. Innovative tools such as digital dashboards and predictive analytics can enhance real-time monitoring and resource allocation, ensuring that urban interventions are both responsive and equitable.

## **4.11 Investing in Research for Empirical Interventions**

The imperative to invest in research to strengthen the knowledge base for ending child marriages cannot be overstated. It is the fundamental bedrock upon which all effective policy and intervention must be built. While the moral and economic case for eradication of child marriages is clear, strategic, evidence-based action requires a deep, granular, and dynamic understanding of the phenomenon. The research should go further in making countries understand the cost of child marriages to national economies and development trajectories of Africa. Current data often suffer from significant limitations, relying on retrospective self-reporting in large-scale surveys like the Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS), which, while valuable, can lag years behind real-time realities and fail to capture nuanced localised drivers. Investing in research is therefore not an academic exercise but a practical necessity to close critical data gaps, move from reactive to predictive models, and ensure accountability for results.



*The research should go further in making countries understand the cost of child marriages to national economies and development trajectories of Africa.*

The development and deployment of innovative monitoring tools are a primary output of this research investment. This entails moving beyond traditional survey methods to harness the power of technology for real-time data collection and analysis. For instance, the research should explore the creation of integrated data platforms that fuse traditional survey data with non-traditional indicators such as satellite imagery to identify regions with high poverty or low school density, mobile phone penetration rates, real-time analytics platforms, or even anonymised social media trend analysis, to create predictive risk models that identify emerging hotspots before crises occur, allowing for rapid and adaptive responses.

Ultimately, this robust, research-driven knowledge base is what transforms well-intentioned efforts into precisely targeted and accountable interventions. It allows policymakers and funders to move from asking “What is the general prevalence?” to answering critical strategic questions: “Which specific villages in this district are experiencing a sudden increase in risk due to a drought?” or “Which protective law is most frequently unenforced in this region?”.

By meticulously measuring progress through tools such as periodic score cards, stakeholders can be held accountable. Resources can be channelled to where they are most needed, successful interventions can be scaled based on evidence of their efficacy, and failing policies can be promptly recalibrated. In essence, strategic investment in research for monitoring and evaluation is the crucial mechanism that ensures the fight against child marriages is not only passionate but also intelligent, efficient, and ultimately successful.

## 4.12 Collaboration with Regional Economic Communities

To effectively combat the transnational challenge of cross-border child marriages and enhance child protection, African nations must leverage the strategic capacity of Regional Economic Communities (RECs).<sup>54</sup> Some of these RECs have made a lot of progress in assuming their obligations as regional duty bearers for child protection. ECOWAS, for example, adopted a Child Policy and Strategic Action Plan, which explicitly calls for the elimination of child marriages and FGM across Member States. The other RECs are at different stages of capacity in addressing cross border violations. RECs are critical for establishing joint monitoring systems and interoperable data platforms, enabling Member States to share intelligence on trafficking and emerging hotspots, coordinate cross-border interventions, and ensure accountability across jurisdictions. This foundational cooperation prevents children from falling through the cracks created by national borders.



Beyond legal and data-driven mechanisms, RECs provide a vital platform for launching large-scale normative change and strengthening frontline systems. They can orchestrate transnational advocacy campaigns that target shared cultural drivers of child marriages and directly engage often-marginalised border communities. By pooling resources and coordinating technical assistance, RECs can build the capacity of law enforcement, judicial officials, and social workers in vulnerable regions to manage cross-border cases effectively. Crucially, they can also develop protocols for safe migration that prioritise child protection, establishing rapid response teams and referral systems to safeguard children on the move. Ultimately, this robust regional cooperation fosters a continent-wide culture of accountability and solidarity, ensuring that a child's right to protection is upheld regardless of geographic location.

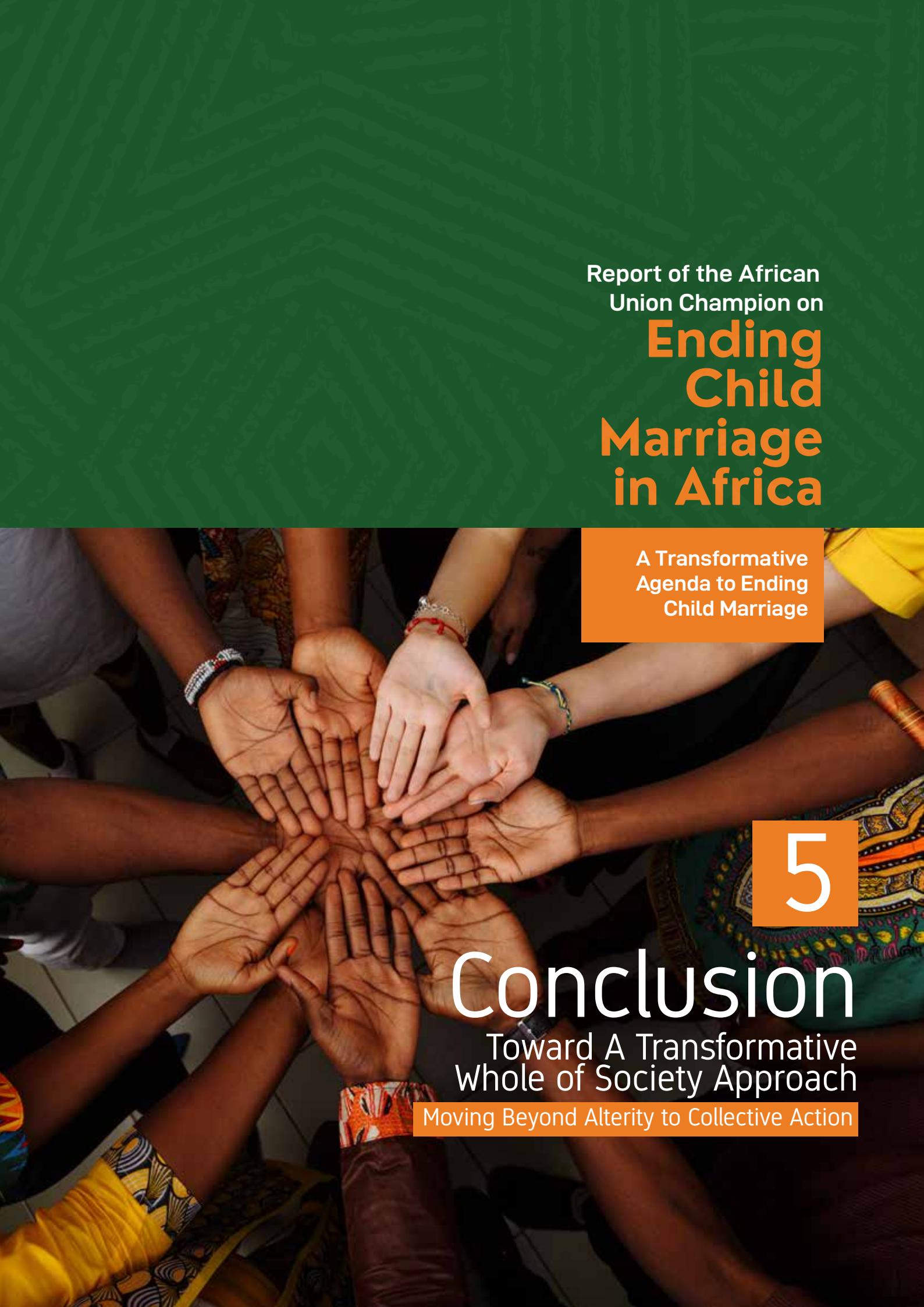
#### **4.13 Mobilising Champions at all Levels for Political and Social Leadership**

Social and political champions play a pivotal role in galvanising public will and mobilising resources towards the eradication of child marriages. Their visible support helps to legitimise and sustain policy reforms, while inspiring communities and institutions to take collective action. By leveraging their influence, champions can also break the silence around sensitive issues, challenge harmful norms, and foster an enabling environment for lasting change. These champions remain a decisive factor in accelerating progress. The AU Champion, alongside First Ladies' initiatives and youth-led movements, have demonstrated the power of high-level advocacy in shifting norms and mobilising resources. However, sustained impact requires institutionalisation. Child marriages must be elevated as a political and developmental priority across AU platforms, including the Assembly of Heads of State and Government, the Pan-African Parliament, and the AU Commission.

#### **4.14 Engagement with Traditional and Religious Leaders**

Traditional, religious, and community leaders (TRLs) hold a pivotal position as cultural gatekeepers and influencers within their societies, making their engagement essential to ending child marriages. When TRLs are approached as partners rather than adversaries, their authority can be leveraged to shift social norms and enforce protective practices at the grassroots level.

In Niger, for example, collaborative initiatives involving TRLs have led to the enactment of community bylaws and locally driven campaigns, resulting in notable reductions in child marriage rates. State and government mechanisms can work synergistically with TRLs by formalising their involvement through supportive legislation and co-developing monitoring frameworks, thereby ensuring interventions are both locally resonant and legally robust. It is imperative that AU governments recognise and institutionalise partnerships with TRLs, as their endorsement and active participation are critical to the AU champion perspective, driving sustainable change, fostering community ownership, and ensuring the long-term success of child marriage eradication efforts across the continent.



Report of the African  
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**Ending  
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5

# Conclusion

Toward A Transformative  
Whole of Society Approach

Moving Beyond Alterity to Collective Action

The journey to eradicate child marriages in Africa must transcend the limitations of alterity, where interventions are seen as external, imposed, or the responsibility of a select few, and instead embrace a holistic, whole-of-society approach. This transformation is imperative not only to protect individual rights but also to harness the collective strengths and capacities of communities, civil society, traditional and religious leaders, families, and governments themselves. When every sector of society is engaged, child marriage becomes not just a distant problem to be addressed by outsiders, but a shared challenge and responsibility rooted in local realities and aspirations



*Prevention must become the primary lens through which interventions are designed, funded, and evaluated. This means investing in robust systems for early identification of risks, fostering sustained community dialogue, promoting positive social norms, and building economic and educational opportunities that address the root causes of vulnerability.*

A decisive shift is needed, from merely documenting prevalence and responding to crises, to proactively preventing child marriages before it occurs. Prevention must become the primary lens through which interventions are designed, funded, and evaluated. This means investing in robust systems for early identification of risks, fostering sustained community dialogue, promoting positive social norms, and building economic and educational opportunities that address the root causes of vulnerability. By focusing on prevention, societies can break the intergenerational cycle of harm, empowering girls, safeguarding their futures, and transforming the prospects of entire communities.

Equally vital is the commitment to contextually relevant interventions. Effective strategies must be tailored to the specific cultural, social, and economic contexts where child marriages occur. One-size-fits-all solutions are insufficient and risk perpetuating cycles of marginalisation. Instead, the design and implementation of policies must draw upon the lived experiences, wisdom, and aspirations of local actors. This ensures interventions are not only relevant and sustainable but are owned by those they seek to serve.

In embracing a whole-of-society approach, prioritising prevention, and tailoring interventions to local contexts, Africa stands to reap transformative benefits. Further, facilitating peer-to-peer shared learning among Member States is essential, as it enables the direct exchange of best practices, lessons learnt, and innovative approaches to tackling child marriages, further strengthening collective capacity and fostering regional solidarity. Not only will child marriages rates decline, but broader gains in gender equality, social cohesion, and economic development will follow. This is how the fight against child marriages moves from isolated, reactive efforts to a sustained, intelligent, and collective movement, one that truly secures the rights, dignity, health, and potential of every child.

The mobilisation of champions at every level—grassroots, national, regional, and continental is essential for sustaining political momentum and embedding the fight against child marriages within diverse ecosystems. Champions are needed not only among political leaders, but also within civil society, youth movements, and community structures, ensuring that advocacy and action permeate all layers of society. Looking ahead to 2026 and beyond, Zambia intends to continue its leadership by spearheading a coalition of champion ambassadors at the Addis Ababa level, further strengthening the political momentum behind the Champions' initiatives and providing robust support to the AU Commission in driving this agenda at the highest political platforms. This collaborative approach strengthens advocacy, unites efforts across Member States, and amplifies the collective voice required to secure lasting change for children across Africa.

Transformative change requires African nations to translate political commitment into concrete investment and actions. The implementation of fully costed national action plans, backed by decisive domestic resourcing, serves as the definitive litmus test for this commitment. Only through such sustained funding can strategies transcend paper to become practice, safeguarding girls' futures and driving measurable progress. When governments dedicate their national resources and transparently outline the pathway to ending child marriages, they send an unequivocal signal: the protection and empowerment of every girl is a non-negotiable national priority.

# ANNEX

## *Overview of Legal Instruments and Policy Provisions Addressing Child Marriage in AU Member States*

The matrix below provides a legally grounded overview of the status of child marriage legislation across African Union (AU) Member States. The first column identifies Member States, followed by their ratification status of the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACRWC). Subsequent columns detail the relevant national laws, statutory provisions, and policy instruments addressing child marriage, including the legally prescribed minimum age of marriage. The matrix demonstrates that all AU Member States have enacted at least one legal instrument aimed at regulating or prohibiting child marriage.

**Disclaimer:** In light of the evolving nature of national legal frameworks and ongoing legislative reforms, amendments or modifications to the laws referenced may have occurred since the preparation of this report. No exhaustive verification of such legal updates was undertaken at the time of publication. The information presented has been drawn from the following sources:

- i. The Child Marriage Data Portal. Available: [here](#).
- ii. African Union Commission (2018) Marriage Laws In Africa: A Compendium From 55 African Union Member States. Available [here](#).
- iii. SADC Parliamentary Forum, Model Law On Eradicating Child Marriage And Protecting Children Already In Marriage. Available [here](#).
- iv. ACPF (2013) Child Marriage: The International/Regional Legal Framework. Available [here](#).

Member States	Has Member State Ratified The ACRWC?	Relevant Laws and Provisions on Ending Child Marriages	Age of Marriage as Stipulated in Relevant Laws and Provisions
Algeria	Yes	Under the Algeria Family Code, "Code de la Famille, 2005": Art. 7. (Modified) Marriage capacity is deemed valid at 19 years of age for both men and women. However, the judge may grant an exemption of age for a reason of interest or in case of necessity, when the aptitude for marriage of both parties is established. (...)	19 Years of Age (Boys and Girls)  Exemption: To be granted by judge in case of necessity.
Angola	Yes	Under the Angola Family Code, "Código da Família, 1988": Art. 24.1. Only persons over the age of 18 may marry... Art. 24.2 provides that authorisation may be granted to marry a man who has reached 16 and a woman who has reached 15, when, considering the circumstances of the case and taking into account the interests of the minors, marriage is the best solution. Art. 24.3. The authorisation referred to in the previous number shall be granted by the parents, guardians or by whom the minor is responsible and may be supplied by the court, after hearing the advice of the Family Council (...)	18 years (Boys and Girls)  Exemption: 15 years for girls and 16 years for boys granted by the Civil Court
Benin	Yes	Under the Benin Child Code, "Le Code de L'Enfant au Bénin, Chapitre II "Des Conditions De Fo Du Mariage" 2007: Art. 123. Marriage may only be contracted between a man who is at least eighteen (18) years old and a woman who is at least eighteen (18) years of ages, except where age is waived for cause by order of the presiding judge of the court, of the first instance at the request of the public prosecutor. Art. 120. A minor under the age of eighteen (18) cannot marry without the consent of the person who exercises parental authority over him.	18 Years of Age (Boys and Girls)  Exemption: A minor under the age of 18 will require consent of the person who exercises parental authority over him.
Botswana	Yes	Under the Botswana Marriage Act 18, 2001: Sec. 14. No insane person who is incapable of giving consent to a marriage and no person below the age of 18 years may marry. Sec. 15. No minor or person below the age of 21 years not being a widower or widow may marry without the consent in writing of his or her parents or guardians (...).	21 Years of Age (Boys and Girls)  Exemption: None

Member States	Has Member State Ratified The ACRWC?	Relevant Laws and Provisions on Ending Child Marriages	Age of Marriage as Stipulated in Relevant Laws and Provisions
Burkina Faso	Yes	<p>Under the Burkina Faso Code of Persons and The Family, "Code des Personnes et de la Famille au Burkina Faso, Titre II, Chapitre I, Section 1, "Des Conditions De Fond Du Mariage" 1989: Art. 238. Marriage can only be contracted between a man over the age of twenty (20) and a woman over seventeen (17) years of age, unless the civil court grants a serious age exemption. The age exemption cannot be granted under any circumstances for a man under the age of eighteen (18) and a woman under the age of fifteen (15).</p>	<p>117 years for girls and 20 years for boys. Exemption: 15 years for girls and 18 years for boys granted by civil court,</p>
Burundi	Yes	<p>Under the Burundi Person and Family Code, "Du Code Des Personnes et Famille, 1993", Titre VI, Section I: Art. 88. The man before twenty-one (21) and the woman before the age of eighteen (18) cannot contract a marriage. Nevertheless, the provincial governor may grant exemption of age for serious reasons.</p>	<p>21 Years of Age for Boys 18 Years of Age for Girls Exemption: May be granted by the provincial governor for serious reasons.</p>
Cabo Verde	Yes	<p>Under the Cape Verde Civil Code, "República De Cape Vede: Código Civil", 1997, Section V, Subsection I, Division II: Art. 133o . The courts may authorise a minor under age 16 to marry, based on a substantiated request by him or his legal representative. (Minors) A minor is a person who has not yet completed eighteen years of age.</p>	<p>18 Years of Age (Boys and Girls) Exemption: Under 16 Years of Age, authorised by the civil court after a request by him or his legal representative</p>
Cameroon	Yes	<p>Under the Cameroon Order Organizing the Civil Status, "Portant Organisation de l'état civil et dispositions relatives à l'état personnes physiques", 1981 in Ordinance No 81/002, Titre V, Chapitre III: Art. 49. The marriage certificate shall specify the following: (...) -The consent of each spouse: parental consent in case of minor children; (...). (1) If the girl is a minor of 15 years old or the boy of 18 years old, unless for serious reasons a waiver has been granted by the courts</p>	<p>18 Years of Age for Boys 15 Years of Age for Girls Exemption: Through parental consent... )</p>
Central Africa Republic	Yes	<p>Under the Central African Republic Family Code, "Code de la famille", 1998: Art. 209. No one may marry before the age of 18, except where the State Prosecutor has dispensed with age on serious grounds at the request of the person concerned. Art. 214. No person may contract marriage before the age of 18.</p>	<p>18 Years of Age (Boys and Girls) Exemption: May be granted by state prosecutor on serious grounds</p>

Member States	Has Member State Ratified The ACRWC?	Relevant Laws and Provisions on Ending Child Marriages	Age of Marriage as Stipulated in Relevant Laws and Provisions
Chad	Yes	The enactment of Law N029/ PR/2015 of 21st July 2015, ratifying Ordinance N006/ PR/2015 of 14th March 2015, outlawed child marriage and set the minimum legal age of marriage at 18 years old for boys and girls. The ordinance also establishes accountability measures as adults who partake in the marriage of a minor are punishable with 5 to 10 years imprisonment, in addition to fines of 500,000 to 5 million francs	18 Years of Age (Boys and Girls)  Exemption: None
Comoros	Yes	Under the Comoros Family Code, "Code de la famille", 2005: Titre II, Chapitre II, Section II: Art. 14. A man and woman before the age of eighteen (18) cannot contract marriage. Art. 15. it is open to the competent judge who must celebrate the marriage to grant age exemptions for serious and legitimate reasons, when there is mutual consent of the future spouses.	18 Years of Age (Boys and Girls)  Exemption: Competent judge of the court to grant age exemption for serious and legitimate reasons.
Congo Brazzaville	Yes	Under the Congo Brazzaville Family Code, "Code de la famille", 1984: Art. 128. The man before 21 years old and the woman before 18 years old cannot contract marriage. Nevertheless, the Public Prosecutor at the District or District People's Court may grant age exemptions for serious reasons.	21 Years of Age for Boys 18 Years of Age for Girls  Exemption: May be granted by the Public Prosecutor for serious reasons.
Cote d'Ivoire	Yes	Under the Cote d'Ivoire Marriage act, "Loi relative au mariage" 1983, Law N 83-800: Art. 1. (New) The man before twenty years old and the woman before eighteen years old cannot contract marriage. Nevertheless, the Public Prosecutor may grant exemptions for serious reasons	20 Years of Age for Boys 18 Years of Age for Girls  Exemption: May be granted by the Public Prosecutor for serious reasons.
Democratic Republic of the Congo	Yes	Under the Democratic Republic of Congo Law on Child Protection, "Loi portant protection de L'Enfant" Law No. 04-2010; Art. 1 (age): Under this law, a child refers to any human being under the age of eighteen years and who has not yet reached the age of majority by a special provision.	18 Years of Age (Boys and Girls).  Exemption: None

Member States	Has Member State Ratified The ACRWC?	Relevant Laws and Provisions on Ending Child Marriages	Age of Marriage as Stipulated in Relevant Laws and Provisions
Djibouti	Yes	Under the Djibouti Family Law, "Code de la Famille" 2002; Titre Deux, Chapitre II: Art. 13. The two future spouses must not be in one of the cases of impediment provided by law. The future spouses must be 18 years old to marry. Art. 14. The marriage of minors who have not reached the legal age of majority is subject to the consent of their guardians. (...)	18 Years of Age (Boys and Girls)  Exemption: For marriage below 18 years, consent may be obtained from the guardians.
Egypt	Yes	Under the Egyptian Child Law, 2008; Annex: Art. 31-bis. The marriage contract shall not be registered for those who did not reach eighteen years of age. (...) Without prejudice to any criminal penalty stipulated in any other law, anyone who registers a marriage that violates provisions of this article shall receive disciplinary punishment	18 Years of Age (Boys and Girls).  Exemption: None
Equatorial Guinea	Yes	Under the Equatorial Guinea Civil Code, 2011: Art. 46. Those who cannot get married are: 1. The non-emancipated minors. (...) Art. 315. The oldest age begins at 18 years of age. For the calculation of the years of coming of age, the day of birth will be included in full.	18 Years of Age (Boys and Girls).  Exemption: None
Eritrea	Yes	Under the Transitional Civil Code of Eritrea (TCCE), as amended by Article 46 of Proclamation 1/1991: Art. 581. No contract of marriage shall be valid if either of the parties is under eighteen years of age. Art. 309. (1) For an underage person to marry, he/she must voluntarily agree and get the permission from his/her parents	18 Years of Age (Boys and Girls)  Exemption: For below 18 years, permission should be obtained from parents.
Ethiopia	Yes	Under the Ethiopian Revised Family Code, Proclamation No. 213/2000, 2000, Chapter 1, Section 1: Art. 7. (Age) 1. Neither a man nor a woman who has not attained the full age of eighteen years shall conclude a marriage. Art. 7. (Age) (...) Notwithstanding the provisions of Sub-Article (1) of this Article, the Minister of Justice may, on the application of the future spouses, or the parents or guardian of one of them, for serious cause, grant dispensation of not more than two years.	18 Years of Age (Boys and Girls)  Exemption: the Minister of Justice and parents may grant exemption for marriage at 16 years for serious reasons.

Member States	Has Member State Ratified The ACRWC?	Relevant Laws and Provisions on Ending Child Marriages	Age of Marriage as Stipulated in Relevant Laws and Provisions
Gabon	Yes	Under the Gabon Civil Code, 1995: Art. 203. A man, before the age of eighteen, and a woman, before the age of fifteen, cannot contract a marriage. Nevertheless, the President of the Republic or, failing that, the President of the Supreme Court, may grant age exemptions for serious reasons	18 Years of Age for Boys 15 Years of Age for Girls  Exemption: Granted by the President of the Supreme Court for serious reasons.
Gambia	Yes	Under the Gambia Children's Act, 2005, Part IV Heading A: ( Interpretation) Section 2. (1) "In this Act, unless the context otherwise requires – "child" means a person under the age of eighteen years;"(Prohibition of child marriage	18 Years of Age (Boys and Girls).  Exemption: None
Ghana	Yes	Under the Ghana Children's Act, 1998 (ACT 560): (Right to refuse betrothal and marriage) Section 14. 1. No person shall force a child: a) To be betrothed; b) To be the subject of a dowry transaction; or c) To be married The minimum age of marriage or whatever kind shall be eighteen years.	18 Years of Age (Boys and Girls).  Exemption: None
Guinea	Yes	Under the Guinea Child Code, "Code de L'Enfant Guineen (ACT 560)" 2008, Titre II, Chapitre III: Art. 268. The child is automatically emancipated by marriage. Boys and girls un- der 18 cannot marry. Nevertheless, the President of the Republic, upon report of the Minister of Justice, may, by decree, grant age exemptions for serious reasons. (...)	18 Years of Age (Boys and Girls)  Exemption: May be granted upon the report of the Minister of Justice for serious reasons.
Guinea-Bissau	Yes	Articles 1 and 2 of Act No. 5/76, of May, led to the fixing of the marriageable age at 17 years for both sexes.	17 years of age (Boys and Girls)  Exemption: None
Kenya	Yes	Under the Kenya Marriage Act, 2014 (No. 4 of 2014, Rev. 2016): Part I, Sec. 2. (Interpretation) "In this Act, unless the context otherwise requires – "child" means an individual who has not attained the age of eighteen (18) years	18 Years of Age (Boys and Girls).  Exemption: None

Member States	Has Member State Ratified The ACRWC?	Relevant Laws and Provisions on Ending Child Marriages	Age of Marriage as Stipulated in Relevant Laws and Provisions
Lesotho	Yes	<p>Under the Lesotho Marriage Act, 1974: 25. (1) No marriage officer shall solemnize a marriage between parties of whom one or both are minors unless the consent of the party or parties which is legally required for the purpose of contracting the marriage has been granted and furnished to him in writing: - Provided that for purposes of this subsection a minor does not include a person, who is under the age of twenty-one years and who has previously contracted a valid marriage which has been dissolved by death or divorce.</p>	<p>21 Years of Age (Boys and Girls)</p> <p>Exemption: 16 Years of Age for girls and 18 Years of Age for boys with written permission from Minister.</p>
Liberia	Yes	<p>Under the Liberia Children's Law of 2011: Art. I, Sec. 3. (Definitions) In this law, unless the context otherwise requires - - "child" shall mean any person below the age of eighteen (18) years;</p>	<p>18 Years of Age (Boys and Girls).</p> <p>Exemption: None</p>
Libya	Yes	<p>Under the Law No. (10) of 1984 on the provisions concerning marriage, divorce and their effects: Art. 6.</p> <p>a) The eligibility of marriage requires reason and maturity.</p> <p>b) The eligibility of marriage shall be completed by the age of twenty (20).</p> <p>c) The court may authorise marriage prior to reaching that age for the benefit or necessity of which it shall be accessed after the consent of the guardian. (...)</p>	<p>20 Years of Age (Boys and Girls)</p> <p>Exemption: With the consent of Guardian.</p>
Madagascar	Yes	<p>Under the Madagascar Law Relating to Marriage and Matrimony, "LOI No 2007-022 of 2007 relative au mariage et aux régimes matrimoniaux", 2008, Chapitre II: Art. 3. The marital age is set at 18 years. However, before this age and for serious reasons, without prejudice to the criminal prosecution for offences against morals, the President of the Court of First Instance may authorize the marriage upon request of the father and mother, or the person who exercises the authority over the child and with the consent of the child.</p>	<p>18 Years of Age (Boys and Girls)</p> <p>Exemption: Upon request by father, mother, or guardians and with consent of minor.</p>

Member States	Has Member State Ratified The ACRWC?	Relevant Laws and Provisions on Ending Child Marriages	Age of Marriage as Stipulated in Relevant Laws and Provisions
Malawi	Yes	Under the Malawi Marriage, Divorce and Family Relations Bill, 2015, Part III: No. 14. Subject to section 22 of the Constitution, two persons of the opposite sex who are both not below the age of eighteen years, and are sound of mind, may enter into marriage with each other	18 Years of Age (Boys and Girls). Exemption: None
Mali	Yes	Under the Mali Person and the Family Code Act, "LOI No 2011-087, Portant Code Des Personnes et de la Famille", 2011, Livre II, Titre II, Chapitre I, Section I: Art. 281. The minimum age for marriage is eighteen years for men and sixteen for women.	18 Years of Age for boys 16 Years of Age for girls Exemption: By civil court for serious reasons
Mauritania	Yes	Under the Mauritania Personal Status Code, "Loi Portant Code Du Statut Personnel", 2001, 'Loi No 2001-052': Article 6. The capacity to marry is fulfilled for any reasoned person who has reached the age of 18.	18 Years of Age (Boys and Girls). Exemption: None
Mauritius	Yes	Under the Mauritius Civil Code, 1990: Art. 144. No one can marry before the age of eighteen. Art. 145. Nevertheless, a minor aged 18 but over the age of 16 years may enter into marriage with the consent of his father and mother or of both who exercise exclusive parental authority. (...)	18 Years of Age (Boys and Girls) Exemption: With parental consent.
Morocco	No	Under the Moroccan Family Code, "Code de la Famille" 2004: Art. 19. Marital capacity is acquired for the boy and the girl enjoying their marital faculties, at eighteen Gregorian years of age. Art. 20. The Family Affairs Judge in charge of the marriage may authorize the marriage of the boy and the girl before the age of matrimonial capacity envisaged in article 19 above, by reasoned decision specifying the interest and the reasons justifying the marriage. He will have heard, beforehand, the parents of the minor or his legal representative. (...) The judge's decision authorizing the marriage of a minor is not subject to appeal.	18 Years of Age (Boys and Girls) Exemption: Authority of the Family Affairs Judge

Member States	Has Member State Ratified The ACRWC?	Relevant Laws and Provisions on Ending Child Marriages	Age of Marriage as Stipulated in Relevant Laws and Provisions
Mozambique	Yes	<p>Under the Mozambique Family Law, "Lai de Família, Lei n.o 10/2004" 2004, Title II, Chapter II: Art. 19. (Ineffectiveness of the promise) (...) (2) The promise of marriage is null if any of the prospective couples is under 18 years. Art. 30. (Impediments) states that:</p> <p>2. A woman or man who is over sixteen (16) years of age may marry, in cases of exception, when circumstances of recognised public or family interest occur, and there is consent of parents or legal representatives.</p>	<p>18 Years of Age (Boys and Girls)</p> <p>Exemption: In recognised special circumstances with parental or legal representative consent.</p>
Namibia	Yes	<p>Under the Namibia Married Persons Equality Act, 1996, (Act 1 of 1996), {amendment the 1961 Marriage Act}, Part V: (Amendment of section 26 of Marriage Act, 1961, as substituted by section 6 of Act 5 of 1987) Section 24. (1) No boy or girl under the age of 18 years shall be capable of contracting a valid marriage except with the written permission of the Minister or any staff member in the Public Service authorized thereto by the Minister, which he or she may grant in any particular case in which he or she considers such marriage desirable. (...)</p>	<p>18 Years of Age (Boys and Girls)</p> <p>Exemption: With written permission of the Minister or any staff member in the Public Service authorized by the Minister).</p>
Niger	Yes	<p>Under the Niger Civil Code, 2005, Title 5, Chapter 1: Art. 144. The man before 18 years old, the woman before fifteen years old cannot contract marriage. Art. 145. Nevertheless, it is open to the executive of the Republic to grant age exemptions for serious reasons</p>	<p>18 Years of Age for Boys 15 Years of Age for Girls</p> <p>Exemption: May be granted for minors with parental consent.</p>
Nigeria	Yes	<p>Under the Nigerian Child Rights Act, 2003, Part III: Sec. 21. No person under the age of 18 years is capable of contracting a valid marriage and accordingly a marriage so contracted is null and void with no legal effect whatsoever. The Nigerian Child Right law (on minimum age) is not enforceable outside the FCT as it is not in the component States of the Federation.<sup>11</sup></p> <p>As of March 2013, only 23 of Nigeria's 36 states have adopted the Act. As a result, state laws on the minimum age of marriage vary. (18 – 21 years old in the south, 12 to 15 years old in the North, depending on region).</p>	<p>18 Years of Age (Boys and Girls)</p> <p>Exemptions: Regional laws take precedence.</p>

Member States	Has Member State Ratified The ACRWC?	Relevant Laws and Provisions on Ending Child Marriages	Age of Marriage as Stipulated in Relevant Laws and Provisions
Rwanda	Yes	Under the Rwanda Civil Code, 1988, Part XXIV: Article 171. The man and the woman, before twenty-one years old, cannot contract a marriage. Nevertheless, before the age of 21, for serious reasons, the Minister of Justice or his delegate may grant an age exemption 31 , provided the person involved is 18 years old	21 Years of Age (Boys and Girls). Exemptions: None
Saharawi Arab Democratic Republic	Yes	The country ratified the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child in July 2024.	In line with the provisions of the African Children's Charter
Sao Tome and Principe	Yes	Under the São Tomé and Príncipe Judicial Family Institution Regulation, "Regula Juridicamente as Instituições de Família" Act No. 2/77, 1977: Article 3. (1) A woman and a man over 18 years of age may freely marry.	18 Years of Age (Boys and Girls) Exemption: By President of Regional Courts for serious reasons, 14 Years of Age for girls, 16 Years of Age for boys with legal or parental authorisation.
Senegal	Yes	Under the Senegal Family Code, "Code de la Famille" 1989: Article 109. (Parental Consent) A minor cannot enter into marriage without the consent of the person exercising parental authority over him. (...)	18 Years of Age for Boys 16 Years of Age for Girls Exemption: By President of Regional court for serious reason
Seychelles	Yes	A child under the age of 18 requires parental consent in order to marry. In addition, no boy under the age of 18 years and no girl under the age of 15 may contract a civil marriage without the permission of a designated government official, currently the Minister (Civil Status Act, sect. 40 - repealed).	18 Years of Age for Boys 15 Years of Age for Girls Exception: With the permission of a designated government official.
Sierra Leone	Yes	Under the Sierra Leone Child Rights Act, 2007, Part III: Section 34. 1) The minimum age of marriage of whatever kind shall be eighteen years	18 Years of Age (Boys and Girls). Exemption: None
Somalia	Yes	Under the Somali First Book on Marriage and Divorce, "Libro Primo Matrimonio e Divorzio", 1978, Chapter V: No. 16. (Minimum age limits) Anyone can freely contract marriage at the age of 18 (44 c.c.).	18 Years of Age (Boys and Girls) Exemption: By Judge in cases of absolute necessity.

Member States	Has Member State Ratified The ACRWC?	Relevant Laws and Provisions on Ending Child Marriages	Age of Marriage as Stipulated in Relevant Laws and Provisions
South Africa	Yes	<p>Marriage Act 25, 1961: No. 26. (Prohibition of marriage of persons under certain age) (1) No boy under the age of 18 years and no girl under the age of 15 years shall be capable of contracting a valid marriage except with the written permission of the Minister or any officer in the public service authorized thereto by him, which he may grant in any particular case in which he considers such marriage desirable: Provided that such permission shall not relieve the parties to the proposed marriage from the obligation to comply with all other requirements prescribed by law: (...)</p>	<p>18 Years of Age for Boys 15 Years of Age for Girls</p> <p>Exemption: With written permission of Minister or any officer in the public service.</p>
South Sudan	No	<p>Under the South Sudan Child Act, 2008, chapter 1: Sec. 5. (Interpretation) In this Act, unless the context otherwise requires, the following words and expression shall have the meanings assigned to them respectively: (...) "child" means a human being under the age of eighteen years; (...)</p>	<p>18 Years of Age (Boys and Girls).</p> <p>Exemption: None</p>
Sudan	Yes	<p>Under the Sudan Personal Status Law of Muslims, 1991: Article 34 provides that a guardian can give a woman in marriage once she has reached puberty, under the conditions that she consents to the husband and to the dowry. Article 10 provides that a 10- year-old can be married by his guardian with permission of the judge, such permission is based on the considerations of advantage and good reason, provided that the husband is suitable, and the dowry equals that of the girl's peers. Under the Sudan Marriage of Non-Muslims Act of 1926; Article 10. The competent court may invalidate a marriage entered into under the Act by a male under 15 years of age or a female under 13 years of age.</p>	<p>Exemptions: 10 Years of Age with permission of judge; 15 Years of Age for Non-Muslim boys 13 Years of Age for Non-Muslim girls</p>
eSwatini	Yes	<p>Under the eSwatini Children Protection and Welfare Act, 2012, Part 1; No. 2. In this Act, unless the context otherwise requires - "Child" means - (a) a person under the age of eighteen years.</p>	<p>18 Years of Age (Boys and Girls).</p> <p>Exemptions: None</p>

Member States	Has Member State Ratified The ACRWC?	Relevant Laws and Provisions on Ending Child Marriages	Age of Marriage as Stipulated in Relevant Laws and Provisions
Tanzania	Yes	<p>Under the Tanzania Law of Marriage Act, 1971, Part II (b) Restrictions on Marriage: No. 13.</p> <p>1) No person shall marry who, being male, has not attained the apparent age of eighteen years or, being female, has not attained the apparent age of fifteen years.</p> <p>2) Notwithstanding the provision in subsection (1), the court shall, in its discretion, have power, on application, to give leave for a marriage where the parties are, or either of them is, below the ages prescribed in subsection (1) if –</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) Each party has attained the age of fourteen years; and</li> <li>b) The court is satisfied that there are special circumstances which make the proposed marriage desirable.</li> </ul>	<p>18 Years of Age for Boys 15 Years of Age for Girls</p> <p>Exemption: 14 Years of Age with permission of court and parental or guardian consent</p>
Togo	Yes	<p>Under the Togo Code of the Child, "Code de L'Enfant", Loi No 2007-01" 2007: Art. 2. Under this Code, a child means any human being under the age of eighteen years. The term minor takes the same meaning as that of child. Art. 267. Child marriage is prohibited. The age of majority is set at eighteen (18) years of age. However, the President of the court of first instance may grant exemptions to children of both sexes above sixteen (16) years for serious reasons.</p>	<p>18 Years of Age (Boys and Girls)</p> <p>Exemptions: 16 Years of Age with parental or guardian authorisation and for serious reason.</p>
Tunisia	No	<p>Under the Tunisia Personal Status Code, "Code de Statut Personnel", 2007: Art. 5 (Modified by De-cree No. 64-1 of February 1964, ratified by Law No. 64-1 of April 1964 and by Law No. 2007-32 of 2007...)</p> <p>Art. 6 (Amended by Law No. 93-74 of July 1993) The marriage of a minor is subject to the consent of his guardian and his mother. (...)</p>	<p>18 Years of Age (Boys and Girls)</p> <p>Exemption: By judge for serious reason.</p>
Uganda	Yes	<p>Under the Constitution of the Republic of Uganda, 1995, Chapter 4: Article 31. (Rights of the family)</p>	<p>18 Years of Age (Boys and Girls).</p> <p>Exemption: None</p>

Member States	Has Member State Ratified The ACRWC?	Relevant Laws and Provisions on Ending Child Marriages	Age of Marriage as Stipulated in Relevant Laws and Provisions
Zambia	Yes	On December 22, 2023, the Zambian Parliament passed the Marriage (Amendment) Act of 2023, which legally aligned the minimum age of marriage with the Constitution and the Children's Code Act of 2022.	18 Years of Age (Boys and Girls)  Exemption: None
Zimbabwe	Yes	With effect from 20 January 2016, the Constitutional Court ruled that "no person may enter into any marriage, including an unregistered customary law union or any other union including one arising out of religion or religious rite, before attaining the age of 18 years". (Mudzuru and Tsapodzi v Minister of Justice, Legal and Parliamentary Affairs, Minister of Women Affairs, Gender and Community Development and the Attorney General CCZ 12/2015)	18 Years of Age (Boys and Girls)  Exemption: None



African  
Union



# Report of the African Union Champion on **Ending Child Marriage in Africa**

A Transformative Agenda  
to Ending Child Marriage

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