

Beijing Platform for Action + 30 - The Girl Child

The 1995 Beijing Platform for Action¹ emphasized the need, summarized in 9 strategic objectives, to eliminate all barriers hindering girls from realizing their potential. This Girl Child report focuses on three areas: mental health, child brides and child widows.

1. Girls' Mental Health

In 2023, a WHO report² revealed disappointing findings: girls in 44 countries across Europe and Central Asia reported lower levels of mental well-being than boys. Mental health challenges can deprive girls of their human rights, e.g., the right to education, the right to life. It is therefore essential that the role of mental health care for girls receives proper acknowledgement within both international and national agendas.

a) Gaps and Challenges

In 2024, simultaneous global crises pose a dire threat to the girl child's mental health. Emerging from the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, which saw a surge in mental health disorders, girls now confront additional cost of living and climate crises. As a result, 30% of girls in one country report having seriously **considered suicide**³. In another country, 17-year-old girls are twice as likely than their male counterparts to suffer from mental health conditions, access to state health support is hindered by **extensive waiting times**⁴. Throughout Europe, refugee girls face amplified mental health risks yet encounter significant obstacles in **accessing necessary services**.⁵ This issue is particularly pressing in light of on-going **wars**.⁶

¹ UN Women, "Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action Beijing+5 Political Declaration and Outcome," 1995, https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/Headquarters/Attachments/Sections/CSW/PFA_E_Final_WEB.pdf.

² Euronews, "Girls Have Worse Mental Health than Boys in Europe, WHO Says," euronews (Euronews.com, October 10, 2023), <https://www.euronews.com/health/2023/10/10/girls-have-worse-mental-health-than-boys-in-europe-who-says>.

³ Elizabeth Englander and Meghan K. McCoy, "Analysis: There's a Mental Health Crisis among Teen Girls. Here Are Some Ways to Support Them," PBS NewsHour, February 24, 2023, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/health/analysis-theres-a-mental-health-crisis-among-teen-girls-here-are-some-ways-to-support-them>.

⁴ Children's Commissioner, "Children's Mental Health Services 2022-23," Children's Commissioner for England, March 14, 2024, <https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/resource/childrens-mental-health-services-2022-23/v>

⁵ World Health Organisation, "Mental Health of Refugees and Migrants: Risk and Protective Factors and Access to Care.," 2023, <https://iris.who.int/bitstream/handle/10665/373279/9789240081840-eng.pdf?sequence=1>.

⁶ Plan International, "Girls in the Shadow of War: Ukraine's Hidden Mental Health Crisis," Plan International, 2024, <https://plan-international.org/case-studies/girls-shadow-war-ukraines-hidden-mental-health-crisis/>.

b) Accomplishments

Proactive measures⁷ are vital to support the wellbeing of girls, particularly those facing racial discrimination, socio-economic challenges, or heightened mental health risks. The Ontario Native Women's Association⁸ offers essential services to combat the disproportionate impact of systemic discrimination on Indigenous girls' wellbeing. School-based wellbeing initiatives⁹ including inclusive sports opportunities for girls reduce social isolation and ensure equal access to mental health support, regardless of socio-economic background. Across Europe, the "Let's Talk about Children" initiative¹⁰ advocates for positive parenting approaches to break the cycle of intergenerational mental health issues.

2 . Child Brides and Widows (619)

UNICEF defines child marriage¹¹ as formal marriage or informal union with a person under 18, widely recognised as the age a person becomes an adult and receives full civil rights. Underage marriage violates the rights of children and should be recognised as a form of slavery. Girls forcibly married may become servants, sex slaves, suffer violations of their rights to education and health, and suffer from physical and psychological violence.

According to the UN¹², the marriage of minors is associated with increased:

- exposure to domestic violence
- school dropout rates, leading to loss of autonomy and limited career opportunities
- risk of contracting sexually transmitted diseases¹³
- increased anxiety from isolation from family, friends and social life
- risk of maternal and infant mortality from early pregnancy.

⁷ World Health Organization, "World Mental Health Report: Transforming Mental Health for All," www.who.int (World Health Organization, June 16, 2022), <https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789240049338>.

⁸ Ontario Native Women's Association, "Programs & Services," ONWA, n.d., <https://www.onwa.ca/services>.

⁹ Marta Bruce, "Preserving a Treasure: Children's Mental Health - Eurocities," Eurocities - Home, January 9, 2023, <https://eurocities.eu/stories/preserving-the-treasure-of-children-mental-health/>.

¹⁰ Mieli, "Let's Talk about Children in Europe," MIELI, 2023, <https://mieli.fi/en/mielis-projects/lets-talk-about-children-in-europe/#:~:text=Let>.

¹¹ UNICEF, "Child Marriage," Unicef.org (UNICEF, 2023), <https://www.unicef.org/protection/child-marriage>.

¹² UNICEF, "Child Marriage," Unicef.org (UNICEF, 2023), <https://www.unicef.org/protection/child-marriage>.

¹³ Ettie Bailey-King, "Three Things You Need to Know: Child Marriage and HIV," Girls Not Brides, December 1, 2018, <https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/articles/child-marriage-and-hiv/#:~:text=In%20many%20contexts%2C%20early%20sexual>.

The UN [SDG Goal 5.3](#)¹⁴: “Eliminate all harmful practices, such as child, early and forced marriage...” means **bringing child marriages to zero by 2030**. Ending child marriage will allow more girls to complete their education, delay motherhood, find paid work, and fulfil their potential. To eliminate child marriage by 2030, **progress must be twelve times faster**¹⁵ than current course and speed.

Child widows. Girls who have suffered both child marriage and widowhood before age 18 are a neglected group of vulnerable children. They experience multiple human rights violations as a result of their premature marriage and widowhood, poverty and lack of education. UN Women reports that [at least 1.36 million of the approximately 258 million widows globally are child widows](#)¹⁶; the true number is likely higher due to under-reporting.

a) Gaps and Challenges

The key gaps are:

- **Lack of Statistics:** [Most countries do not keep statistics on child widows. Mohinder Watson Report](#)
- **Disaggregated data:** There is a lack of detailed data with regard to child brides and widows.

The key challenges are:

- **Laws are not enough:** While many countries have laws against child marriage, enforcement is often weak, [with exceptions made for parental or administrative consent](#). Additionally, new legislation is not effectively communicated to the general population, particularly in rural or remote areas, leaving many unaware of their rights. Without knowledge of these laws, child widows and those forced into marriage struggle to access justice or claim their inheritance.

¹⁴ United States Government, “Indicator 5.3.1 - Goal -,” U.S. National Statistics for the U.N. Sustainable Development Goals., 2024, <https://sdg.data.gov/5-3-1/>.

¹⁵ UNICEF Data, “Ending Child Marriage: Progress and Prospects,” *YouTube*, September 27, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TfGyoG6Ru9g>.

¹⁶ UN Women, “Explainer: What You Should Know about Widowhood.,” Unwomen.org, June 21, 2021, <https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2021/6/explainer-what-you-should-know-about-widowhood#:~:text=At%20least%201.36%20million%20of>.

- **Widowed Mothers:** [Armed conflicts and pandemics](#)¹⁷ leave mothers widowed. As a result, they are more likely to have their children married underage due to financial pressures.
- **Exploitation Risks:** With limited education and financial support, child brides and widows are at higher risk of sexual and economic exploitation.
- **Financial Barriers:** Child widows often do not have access to a bank account and are neglected by state support programs meant for adult widows.
- **Cultural Traditions:** Cultural practices such as '[widow inheritance](#)'¹⁸ may force child widows into situations of domestic servitude, sexual slavery or leave them homeless.

b) Accomplishments

In March 2022, the United Nations General Assembly adopted a [resolution to uphold the rights of widows](#)¹⁹.

The minimum permitted age of marriage varies throughout the UNECE region. However, various countries as of 2024 have enforced legislation raising the age of marriage to age 18.^{20, 21, 22}

Recommendations

Girls' Mental Health: Implement preventative healthcare measures which address intergenerational and systemic factors impacting the girl child's mental health.

¹⁷ <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/5050/hidden-lives-of-child-widows/>

¹⁸ Heather Rainey, "The Right of the Child: The Intersectional Dilemma of Widowed Children," Widows for Peace through Democracy, May 2022, <https://www.widowsforpeace.org/all-news/widowed-children/>.

¹⁹ National Alliance of Women's Organisations (NAWO), "UN Adopts Resolution on Rights of Widows," NAWO, March 18, 2022, <https://nawo.org.uk/news/un-adopts-resolution-on-rights-of-widows/>.

²⁰ Irina Belikova, "At What Age Can You Legally Get Married in Europe?," euronews (Euronews.com, March 1, 2023), <https://www.euronews.com/2023/03/01/at-what-age-can-you-legally-get-married-in-europe>.

²¹ Unchained at Last, "Child Marriage in the U.S.," Unchained At Last, 2024, <https://www.unchainedatlast.org/child-marriage-in-the-u-s/>.

²² Girls Not Brides, "Child Marriage Atlas," Girls Not Brides, 2024, <https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/learning-resources/child-marriage-atlas/atlas/>.

Child Brides: Adopt and enforce legislation [fixing the age of marriage at 18 or older](#)²³ in order to ensure accountability of those responsible for arranging underage marriages.

Child Widows: Participate in continued international cooperation, legal reform, higher education, economic empowerment and social support to improve the lives of child widows and protect their rights, using [Mohinder Watson's Practical Guidance for Supporting Child Widows](#)²⁴ as guidance.

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²³ Girls Not Brides, “The Case for a Minimum Age of Marriage of 18,” Girls Not Brides, December 2017, <https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/documents/709/Why-a-minimum-age-of-marriage-of-18.pdf>.

²⁴ Mohinder Watson, “PRACTICAL GUIDANCE for SUPPORTING CHILD WIDOWS SUMMARY REPORT,” June 23, 2019, http://actiononchildearlyandforcedmarriage.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/SummaryReport_ChildWidowsNeedsandSupport_23.6.2019_mail.pdf.