

## Ending child, early and forced marriage

Despite commitments at international, regional and national levels, child, early and forced marriage remain widespread across the world, curtailing the human rights of girls and women and hindering poverty reduction and development. Within the EU itself, forced marriage also remains a concern.

### Definition, prevalence and impacts

**Forced marriage** has been [defined](#) by the United Nations (UN) as any marriage which occurs without the full and free consent of one or both of the parties and/or where one or both of the parties is/are unable to end or leave the marriage, including as a result of duress or intense social or family pressure. It can take [various forms](#), including **child/early marriage**, involving a person aged under 18. [Estimates](#) from the UN Children's Fund (Unicef) suggest that around 1 in 4 women worldwide were married before the age of 18, and over 1 in 3 of these before the age of 15, with the highest rates of child and early marriage in South Asia and across Africa. Girls and women are disproportionately vulnerable to child, early and forced marriage, including in the [EU](#), and the consequences can be [devastating](#) for individuals, contributing to curtailing [education](#) and increasing [health risks and abuse](#), including [honour killings](#). By maintaining a cycle of poverty, the impact on families and societies can also be lasting and [inter-generational](#).

### International law and human rights standards

Free and informed consent of both parties to a marriage is stipulated in numerous [legal instruments](#) at international, regional and national levels. Of the EU Member States, 23 have [signed](#) and 11 also ratified the Council of Europe [Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence](#) (Istanbul Convention), which recognises forced marriage as a human-rights violation and form of gender-based violence and goes [further](#) than earlier standards in requiring it to be a criminal offence. In December 2013, the UN Human Rights Council unanimously adopted its first ever [resolution on child, early and forced marriage](#), sponsored by 107 states, including all 28 EU Member States and certain countries with high rates of child marriage. UN consultations have [emphasised](#) the importance of including a [target](#) of ending child, early and forced marriage as a measure of gender equality in the emerging post-2015 development framework, to which the [EU](#) is currently contributing.

### EU action

A 2014 [study](#) concludes that forced marriage is a concern in some Member States. As family law falls mainly within their remit, they are addressing it in different ways. In external affairs, the 2012-14 [EU Human Rights Strategy](#) identified preventing child marriage as a priority for Member States and the [European External Action Service](#). This commitment was reaffirmed in the 2015-19 [Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy](#), with one of its targets addressing child, early and forced marriage. In development cooperation, the objectives of the EU's 2010-15 [Gender Action Plan](#) included ensuring that gender equality is systematically on the agenda for dialogue with partner countries, and mainstreamed across all policy areas and programmes. However, whilst gender equality was to be a priority or significant objective of at least 75% of all new EU-funded development projects, by 2014, only [28%](#) of new EU proposals satisfied this criterion. [Internal reviews](#) and [external critiques](#) conclude that [progress](#) has been slow and uneven. [Recommendations](#) for improvement include extending gender mainstreaming beyond traditional sectors such as education and health to all other policy areas, particularly [trade](#), boosting leadership and analytical capacity on gender, and better indicators to measure actual performance. The European Parliament has taken a [strong position](#) on combating all types of discrimination and violence against women, including forced marriage, and has [urged](#) the Commission to promote national ratification and launch the procedure for the EU's accession to the Istanbul Convention, a step being [pursued](#) by the current Commissioner responsible for gender equality.