

South Asia has world's highest number of child brides, says UN

There are 290 million child brides in the region, accounting for 45 percent of the global total, UNICEF says.



UNICEF says families were pushed by financial strains during the pandemic to marry their daughters young [File: Prakash Hatvalne/AP]

South Asia is home to the highest number of child brides in the world as increased financial pressures and school closures due to COVID-19 forced families to marry off their young daughters, according to new estimates released by UNICEF.

There were 290 million child brides in the region, accounting for 45 percent of the global total, the children's agency of the United Nations said on Wednesday (April 19, 2023), calling for more efforts to end the practice.

"The fact that South Asia has the highest child marriage burden in the world is nothing short of tragic," Noala Skinner, UNICEF's regional director for South Asia, said in a statement.

"Child marriage locks girls out of learning, puts their health and wellbeing at risk and compromises their future. Every girl who gets married as a child is one girl too many."

A new study by the agency that also included interviews and discussions across 16 locations in Bangladesh, India and Nepal found that many parents [saw marriage as the best option](#) for daughters who had limited options to study during COVID lockdowns.

The legal age of marriage for females is 20 in Nepal, 18 in India, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh and 16 in Afghanistan. It is 16 in Pakistan except for Sindh province, where the minimum age is 18.

The UN study also found that families were pushed by financial strains during the pandemic to marry their daughters young in order to reduce costs at home.

The agency said potential solutions identified in discussions include enacting social protection measures to counter poverty, protecting every child's right to education, ensuring an adequate framework to enforce the law and making more efforts to address social norms.

“We must do more and strengthen partnerships to empower girls through education, including comprehensive sexuality education, and equipping them with skills, while supporting communities to come together to end this deeply rooted practice,” said Björn Andersson, Asia-Pacific regional director of the United Nations Population Fund. –

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