

Survivor-advocate declaration to end child marriage

We are survivor-advocates from across Africa and Asia who have personally experienced the devastating impact of child marriage. Together, we carry the voices of thousands of women and girls whose stories are too often silenced.

We have united to share our lived expertise on the changes urgently needed to end child marriage and deliver a strong, multi-layered support system for survivors that acknowledges our trauma and empowers us to thrive. No more girls should have to endure what we have been or are still going through. The need is urgent, and the solutions are within reach. The time to act is now.

Changes needed to prevent child marriage so girls can have safer and more empowered futures:

Deliver the right to free, quality, safe, and accessible education for every girl up to the age of 18.

- Special attention and investment must be made for girls living in rural or remote communities, as well as targeted programmes for girls who have previously dropped out of school to catch up.
- Education must include vocational training, economic and life skills, as well as age-appropriate sexual and reproductive health education, so girls can make informed choices and protect their bodily autonomy.
- Efforts must be made to reduce the digital divide to enable equal access to information, training, and expression, and for girls to have safe physical and digital spaces to connect, learn, and share.

Empower communities to actively engage in child marriage prevention and challenge harmful gender norms:

- Grassroots groups, community-based organisations, and activists who know their communities best must be directly collaborated with to hold awareness activities in schools, religious spaces, and local gatherings that reach both children and adults.
- Large-scale awareness campaigns on girls' rights, against gender stereotypes, and on ending harmful dowry practices should be delivered in engaging, relatable formats such as using music, drama, roadshows, or posters and involve diverse stakeholders such as community leaders, traditional and faith leaders, as well as boys and men as allies.
- Girls themselves should be actively involved in decision-making that concerns them, through clubs, forums, or youth councils, empowering them to be agents of change.

Establish and enforce laws that set the legal age of marriage at 18 for both girls and boys, without exceptions.

- Governments must invest in training local officials, police, and judges to enforce these laws consistently and sensitively, as well as implement accessible, confidential, and child-friendly ways to report threats of child marriage without fear of retaliation.
- Laws against other forms of violence against girls, such as sexual and gender-based violence, should be strengthened and enforced.
- Awareness of the law and its consequences must be increased across various stakeholders, especially parents.

Eradicate extreme poverty to reduce the financial pressure on vulnerable families that can drive child marriage.

- Implement targeted economic support to marginalized families, such as conditional cash transfers linked to girls' school attendance.

Changes and support structures needed for survivors of child marriage to heal and rebuild their lives:

Survivors must be actively supported to return to their communities, education, and/or employment without stigma or discrimination.

- Access to financial aid such as scholarships, seed-funding, entrepreneurship grants, and job-placement programmes should be made available for survivors to continue their education, reignite their goals, and help achieve financial independence.
- Schools and workplaces should deliver anti-bullying, professional reintegration, and programmes to avoid exclusion or stigmatization, and communities must ensure survivors are treated with dignity.
- Second-chance educational programmes, vocational training, and income-generating activities should be tailored for survivors, such as flexible schedules and childcare support for young mothers.

Survivors must have access to free, ongoing, safe, and confidential health and psychosocial support to address their emotional wounds.

- Long-term counselling and other mental health services, such as peer-led support groups, should be free or subsidized and delivered by professionals trained in trauma and gender-based violence.
- All service providers - from doctors and teachers to police officers and social workers—should be trained to recognize signs of trauma, respond with compassion, and avoid re-traumatizing survivors.
- Non-judgmental access to sexual and reproductive healthcare should be guaranteed for survivors, including care for those who have experienced early pregnancy and childbirth.

Survivors must receive free legal aid and other material support to enable access to justice.

- Legal aid must extend to rectifying all impacts of child marriage, including annulments, divorces, and custody battles.
- Survivors and witnesses must have their safety protected during all legal proceedings.

Survivor-led support and advocacy programmes must be fully funded and institutionally supported.

- Community support networks provide crucial understanding, solidarity, and shared strength that offer long-term impact, and should involve women leaders, peers, and trained mentors.
- Platforms for survivors to lead advocacy against child marriage and share their lived experience should be established; their voices are powerful and must be heard.

We urge decision-makers at all levels to listen to our recommendations. Every child bride represents not only a child stripped of her childhood, education, and future, but lost potential for her family, her country, and the world.

Signed:

A.M, *Zimbabwe*

Ahumuza Martha, *Uganda*

Bhumi, *India*

Doreen Mugabiirwe, *Uganda*

Glodie Mikohe, *Democratic Republic of Congo*

Grace Nalumbwe, *Zambia*

Kumah Naomi Elorm, *Ghana*

Mariatu Koroma, *Sierra Leone*

Nisha D, *India*

Nisha R, *India*

Njavwa Nakamba, *Zambia*

Rabina Risidev, *Nepal*

Rami Kumari Ram, *Nepal*

Rukman, *India*

Ruvimbo Topodzi, *Zambia*

Salrica Mary Conteh, *Sierra Leone*

Samantha Chidodo, *Zimbabwe*

Sugana, *India*