



# **Research Report**

General Assembly 3

Debating the rising number of child marriages in  
LEDCs

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Child marriage, an issue that affects millions of children each year, is increasingly recognized as a critical issue in Less Economically Developed Countries (LEDCs). Despite growing awareness and international efforts to reduce it, the occurrence of child marriages remains alarmingly high in many regions, often driven by poverty, traditional norms, gender inequality, and lack of access to education. The implications of child marriage are profound: it restricts the lives and potential of young girls, putting them at higher risk of domestic violence, health complications, and socioeconomic disadvantages. In recent years, advocacy groups and governments have initiated debates and policy reforms aimed at addressing the root causes of child marriage, seeking to protect the rights of children and empower communities. Yet, this deeply ingrained issue presents significant challenges, as progress requires not only legal action but also shifts in cultural attitudes and economic conditions. As we examine the complexities of this debate, it becomes clear that tackling child marriage is essential to fostering sustainable development, gender equality, and the wellbeing of future generations in LEDCs.

The effects of child marriage are clear and damaging. For young girls, early marriage often means dropping out of school, which limits their job prospects and chances of financial independence. Without education, they remain stuck in cycles of poverty that affect whole communities. Health risks are also high: early pregnancies can lead to dangerous childbirth complications, and child brides face higher rates of domestic violence and mental health issues.

For communities and countries, child marriage slows growth. Without educated women contributing to the workforce, economies suffer, and social inequalities deepen. This harmful practice not only harms individual lives but also holds back entire societies.

## **Definitions of Key Terms**

### **Child marriage**

Child marriage refers to any formal marriage or informal union between a child under the age of 18 and an adult or another child.

## **Dowry**

A dowry is money, property, or valuable items that a bride's family gives to the groom or his family when the couple gets married. In some cultures, dowries are traditional and are seen as a way for the bride's family to contribute to the new marriage.

## **Gender inequality**

Gender inequality refers to the unequal treatment and opportunities experienced by individuals based on their gender.

## **LEDC:**

Some countries have less developed economies than others. These are referred to as less economically developed countries (LEDCs) or developing countries.

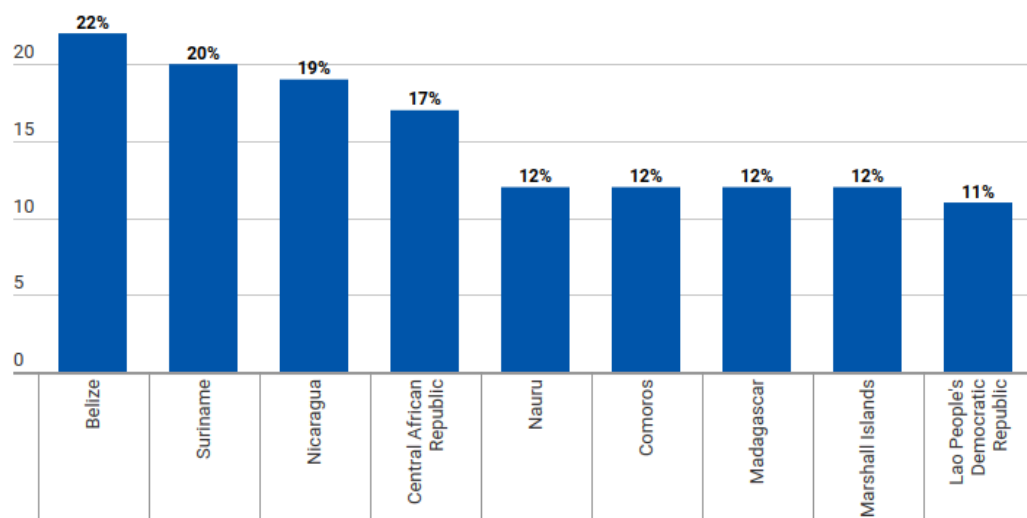
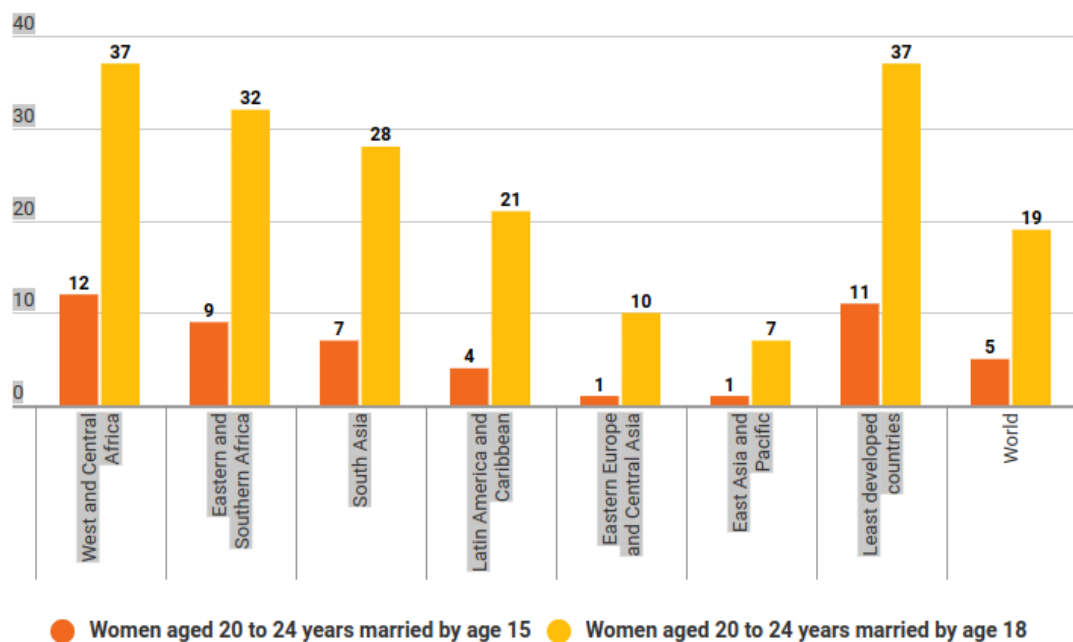
## **General overview**

This is the biggest part of the RR. The General Overview should provide in depth information about the topic, a description of its history, the current status and the consequences on specific areas/countries/cultures/organizations.

## **What the issue is about:**

The rising number of child marriage in Less Economically Developed Countries (LEDCs) is an urgent humanitarian and social concern. Although child marriage is defined as a formal or informal partnership before the age of 18, Even though international organizations and governments around the world strongly oppose child marriage, it is still common in many areas, especially in South Asia, sub-Saharan Africa, parts of Latin America, and the Middle East. Even with laws aimed at reducing it, child marriage continues to affect millions of children every year, often keeping them in cycles of poverty, poor health, and few opportunities.

Child marriage is a topic about both boys and girls. But it is much more common for girls than for boys. This is mainly because of gender norms and expectations. Traditional beliefs often dictate that girls should marry early and take on domestic roles, while boys are generally encouraged to pursue education or work to support a family. These expectations push girls into marriage sooner, as their role is often linked with being wives and mothers rather than continuing their education or careers. In the sources below you can see how common female child marriage is in certain parts of the world, and where child marriage is most common for men.



[Download data](#)

Source: UNICEF global databases, 2022.

## **Causes for child marriage**

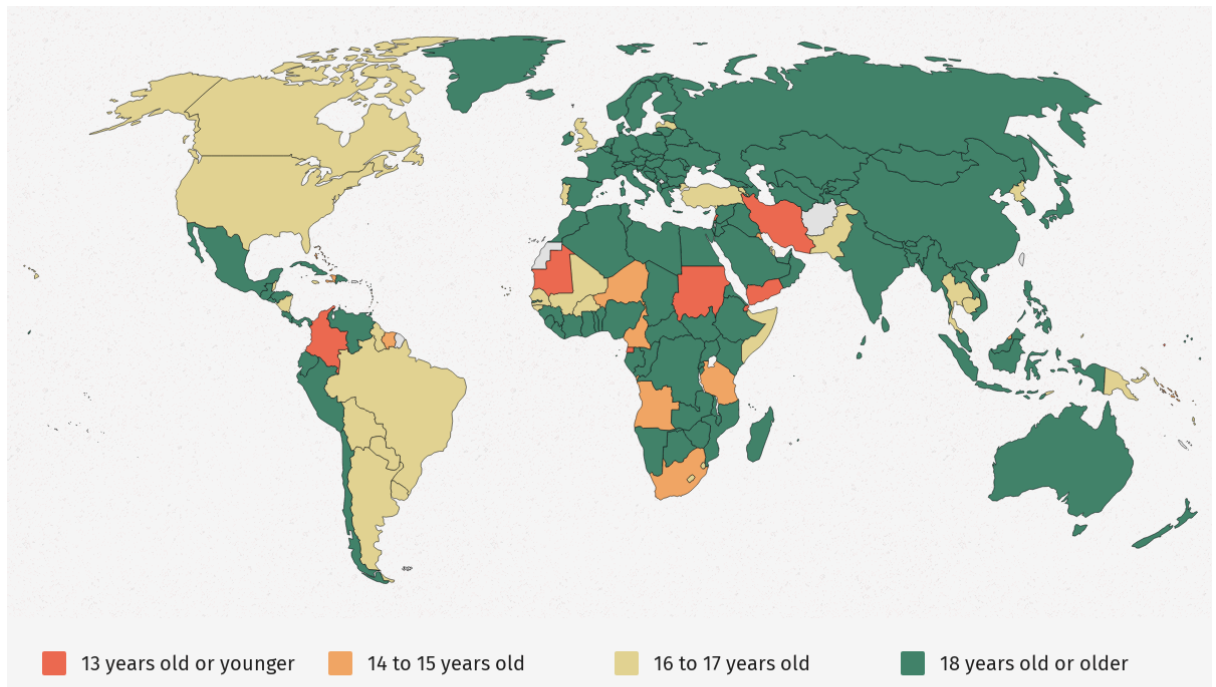
There are many reasons why child marriage still exists to this day. The reasons why child marriage continues in LEDCs are complicated but connected. Poverty is a major cause, with many families struggling to meet their basic needs. In places where money is scarce, marrying off daughters can reduce the family's financial burden. Sometimes, dowries or bride prices give the family a quick financial benefit, this makes it very tempting for them to marry off their daughters at a young age. These money pressures are made worse by a lack of education and limited job opportunities, especially for girls, who may face social expectations that push them toward marriage and household duties instead of school. Because they have fewer opportunities, their children are also born into families with limited opportunities. As a result, the cycle continues.

Traditional beliefs and cultural expectations also play a big role in keeping child marriage common. In some communities, marriage is seen as a way to protect young girls, keeping their "honor" safe and shielding them from social shame or possible harm. Families in more traditional communities may feel pressured to marry off their daughters early to fit in with local standards or to avoid risks. In places where child marriage has been a custom for a long time, parents may think they are doing what's best for their children, even though this practice limits the child's freedom and future opportunities.

Gender inequality makes child marriage an even bigger issue, as society often expects girls to prioritize marriage and motherhood over education and personal growth. As a result, young girls are pushed into domestic roles at an early age and have little chance to pursue their dreams beyond family life. Child marriage limits girls' choices and exposes them to many physical, emotional, and social challenges that can affect them for the rest of their lives.

Another important factor is that in many places, there is no minimum legal age for marriage. Without this law, it's not illegal for children to be married, allowing the practice to continue. Setting a minimum age for marriage would make it much less likely for children below that age to be married, giving them basic legal

protection against early marriage. The source below shows the minimum legal age for marriage (with parental consent) in the world.



### **The consequences of child marriage**

The consequences of child marriage are serious, especially for young girls, who face major health risks from early pregnancies. Complications from pregnancy are the leading cause of death for girls aged 15-19 worldwide, as many young brides are not physically ready for childbirth. Early marriage also raises the chances of domestic violence and gender-based violence, as young brides often find themselves in vulnerable situations with few legal or social protections. These health and safety risks make it even harder for girls to pursue education, become financially independent, and secure a better future.

Educational barriers are another major consequence of child marriage. Girls who marry young often have to drop out of school, closing off opportunities for learning and career advancement. Without an education, young brides struggle to find good jobs, which keeps them trapped in poverty and dependence. When many girls leave school to marry, entire communities miss out on the benefits of having educated women contributing to the workforce. Therefore, child marriage

harms not only individual girls but also the overall social and economic development of their communities.

Addressing child marriage requires a multi-faceted approach that includes legal action, cultural change, and economic support. As global attention increasingly focuses on sustainable development, it is clear that reducing child marriage is vital for promoting gender equality, economic growth, and better health outcomes in less economically developed countries.

### **The history of child marriage**

Child marriage has a long history and was once common across many cultures. In ancient times, societies like Egypt, Greece, and Rome often married girls as young as 12 or 13 to ensure family lines continued. Marriages were arranged for practical reasons, such as building alliances between families or tribes.

During the medieval period, child marriage remained widespread, especially among noble families in Europe, where young girls were married to secure family connections. In poorer families, daughters were often married young to ensure their financial security. Religion also played a role, as many believed that girls were ready for marriage as soon as they reached puberty.

In the colonial period, child marriage continued in regions like South Asia, the Middle East, and Africa, where it was valued as a way to honor and protect girls. However, in the 19th and early 20th centuries, views on child marriage began to change in Europe and North America. As more girls gained access to education, people began to see child marriage as harmful.

In the 19th century, reformers started pushing for minimum marriage ages, arguing that girls should be allowed to grow up and be educated. The first laws were passed, though they were not always enforced. After World War II, human rights movements brought more attention to child marriage, and the United Nations began advocating for an end to the practice. Important agreements like the 1979 Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against

Women (CEDAW) and the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) called for a minimum marriage age.

Today, most countries have set a minimum age for marriage, usually around 18. But in some places, child marriage still happens due to parental consent or traditional customs. While child marriage was once accepted, it is now widely seen as harmful and a violation of children's rights.

### **Major parties involved**

NGO's

UNICEF together with UNFPA: They launched a global programme to tackle child marriage in 12 of the most high-prevalence or high-burden countries: Bangladesh, Burkina Faso, Ethiopia, Ghana, India, Mozambique, Nepal, Niger, Sierra Leone, Uganda, Yemen and Zambia. They launched it in 2016

**CDPDJ:** The Commission des droits de la personne et des droits de la jeunesse (English: "Human Rights and Youth Rights Commission") An organisation that strives for the rights of youths.

**WHO:** Child marriage bring risks to the health of the children. this is why the World Health Organisation is involved.

**CRC:** the Rights of Child called for a minimum legal marrying age.



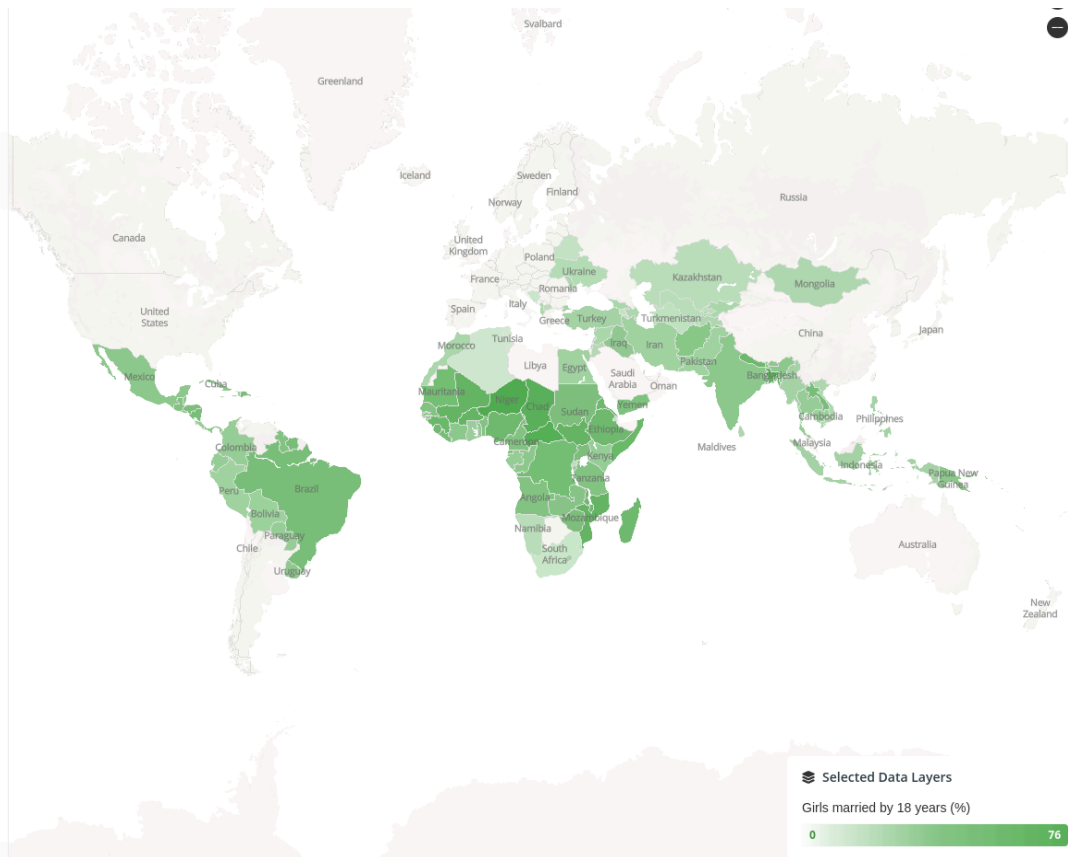
## Countries:

Under 18 Prevalence Under 18 Burden

Top 20 countries with the highest prevalence rates of child marriage\*

01	76% Niger
02	61% Central African Republic
03	61% Chad
04	54% Mali
05	53% Mozambique
06	51% Burkina Faso
07	52% South Sudan
08	51% Bangladesh
09	47% Guinea
10	45% Somalia
11	41% Eritrea
12	40% Ethiopia
13	39% Madagascar
14	38% Malawi
15	37% Mauritania
16	36% Suriname
17	35% Nicaragua
18	35% Nepal
19	34% Sudan
20	34% Uganda

\*Percentage of women 20-24 years old who were first married or in union before they were 18 years old. Source: UNICEF global databases 2020, based on Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys (MICS), Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS), and other national surveys.



## Timeline of Key Events

### 1498: Portuguese Exploration

As Portugal explored and colonized new lands, child marriage practices spread to places like Brazil and Africa. These customs reinforced the idea that girls should marry young for the benefit of their families.

### 1700s: Colonial India

In India, child marriage became more common during British colonial rule, often linked to traditions like dowry. Many girls were married soon after they reached puberty, reflecting local customs that prioritized early marriage for social stability.

### 1830s - 1840s: Reform Movements Begin

In the United States and Britain, social reform movements began to advocate for women's rights in the early 19th century. Activists started to highlight the dangers of child marriage and called for laws to set a minimum age for marriage.

### **1891: Age of Consent Act in India**

The British government passed the "Age of Consent Act," making it illegal for girls under 12 to marry. This law was one of the first efforts to fight child marriage, although it faced strong cultural resistance and was not well enforced.

### **1929: Child Marriage Restraint Act in India**

India introduced the Child Marriage Restraint Act, setting the minimum age for marriage at 14 for girls and 18 for boys. While this law aimed to reduce child marriages, it was still not enforced well and faced challenges from local customs.

### **1945: Formation of the United Nations**

After World War II, the United Nations was created, focusing on human rights and protecting women and children. The UN began addressing child marriage, marking a shift towards global awareness of this issue.

### **1979: CEDAW Adoption**

The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) was adopted by the UN. This agreement urged countries to eliminate discrimination against women and set minimum ages for marriage, marking an important step towards addressing child marriage.

### **1989: CRC Adoption**

The Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) was adopted, reinforcing the need to protect children from forced marriage and calling for a minimum legal age for marriage. This strengthened international commitment to this issue.

### **2000: International Development Goals**

The UN's Millennium Development Goals included a focus on gender equality and empowering women, which indirectly addressed child marriage as a barrier to progress. This increased awareness and advocacy efforts worldwide.

### **2011: Global Initiative to End Child Marriage**

The United Nations launched a global initiative to end child marriage, calling for action from governments and organizations. This initiative aimed to raise awareness and provide support for the education and empowerment of girls.

### **2015: Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)**

The UN adopted the Sustainable Development Goals, including a specific target to end child marriage by 2030. This global commitment showed strong recognition of the need to eliminate child marriage to achieve broader development goals.

### **2020: Continued Advocacy and Challenges**

Despite progress in laws, child marriage remains common in many parts of the world due to cultural practices and economic pressures. Organizations continue to work on education and legal reforms to protect the rights of girls and combat child marriage.

## Previous attempts to solve the issue

Even though many efforts have been made to stop child marriage, some solutions have not worked as expected. Here are some key approaches that haven't been successful:

### 1. Laws with Poor Enforcement

Many countries have passed laws to set a legal minimum age for marriage, like India's Child Marriage Restraint Act. However, these laws often fail because they are not enforced properly. Many families still marry off girls before the legal age, and there are not enough resources to monitor or punish these actions.

### 2. Education Programs Without Enough Support

Increasing education for girls has been shown to reduce child marriage, but many education programs have not worked well. Some schools lack enough teachers, safe transportation, or proper facilities, making it difficult for girls to stay in school. If girls don't feel safe or don't see a future with good jobs, families may still choose to marry them off.

### 3. Financial Help Without Long-Term Plans

Some programs have given families money to keep their daughters in school, but these efforts have not always worked long-term. If financial help stops or isn't steady, families might go back to marrying their daughters off because of money problems, making these programs less effective.

### 4. Ignoring the Root Causes

Many efforts have focused on surface-level issues without addressing the deeper reasons for child marriage, such as poverty, gender inequality, or lack of healthcare. Without tackling these problems, other efforts are not enough. For example, just offering education without providing jobs or economic opportunities for girls might not prevent them from being married off early.

## Possible solutions

### 1. Strengthening and Expanding Legal Frameworks

Although many countries have laws that set a minimum age for marriage, these laws are often not well enforced. A possible solution could be creating stronger and clearer laws, such as:

- **Universal Minimum Marriage Age Laws:** Countries could agree to a global minimum marriage age, making sure that all nations follow a similar standard and enforce it consistently.

- **Stricter Penalties for Violating Marriage Laws:** Governments could create harsher penalties for families and religious leaders who perform child marriages, treating it as a serious crime.
- **Legal Support for Child Brides:** There should be services that help child brides who want to leave their marriages. This could include free legal advice, counseling, and a simple way for them to annul their marriage.

## **2. Empowering Communities Through Education and Cultural Change**

Education has been shown to reduce child marriage, but it needs to be combined with community-based efforts. Some ideas include:

- **Community-Led Education Campaigns:** Local leaders, including elders, teachers, and religious figures, could be trained to spread the message about the dangers of child marriage. These leaders can play an important role in changing the attitudes of their communities.
- **Involving Boys and Men:** Instead of only focusing on girls, programs could also involve boys and men, teaching them about gender equality and healthy relationships. This could help change the way people think about marriage and women's rights.

## **3. Providing Economic Support and Alternatives**

Poverty often drives families to marry off their daughters early. To help with this, solutions could include:

- **Conditional Cash Transfers:** Governments could offer money to families to keep their daughters in school, helping to cover costs like school fees, uniforms, and transportation. This financial support could make it less likely for families to marry off their daughters.
- **Microloans and Job Training for Women:** Offering small loans to women and families to start businesses could help improve their economic situation. Programs that teach girls skills, such as sewing, farming, or technology, would give them other ways to make money, making early marriage less necessary.
- **Job Opportunities for Girls:** Efforts could be made to create more job opportunities for girls who have finished their education. This might include promoting fields that are accessible to women, such as tech, agriculture, and hospitality.

## **4. Strengthening International Cooperation**

Countries and international organizations need to work together to address child marriage. Some ways to do this include:

- **International Monitoring and Reporting:** A global body could be set up to track child marriage rates and report on progress made in different countries. This would ensure transparency and encourage governments to take stronger action.
- **Increased Funding for Programs:** More investment is needed to fund education, healthcare, and legal reforms in countries where child marriage is common. International organizations and donors could play an important role in providing this funding.
- **Global Advocacy and Pressure:** International pressure could encourage governments to strengthen laws and policies against child marriage. Countries with high rates of child marriage could face diplomatic pressure to act.

### Further Readings

1. <https://data.unicef.org/topic/child-protection/child-marriage/>
2. <https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/learning-resources/child-marriage-atlas/atlas/>
3. <https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/about-child-marriage/>

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