

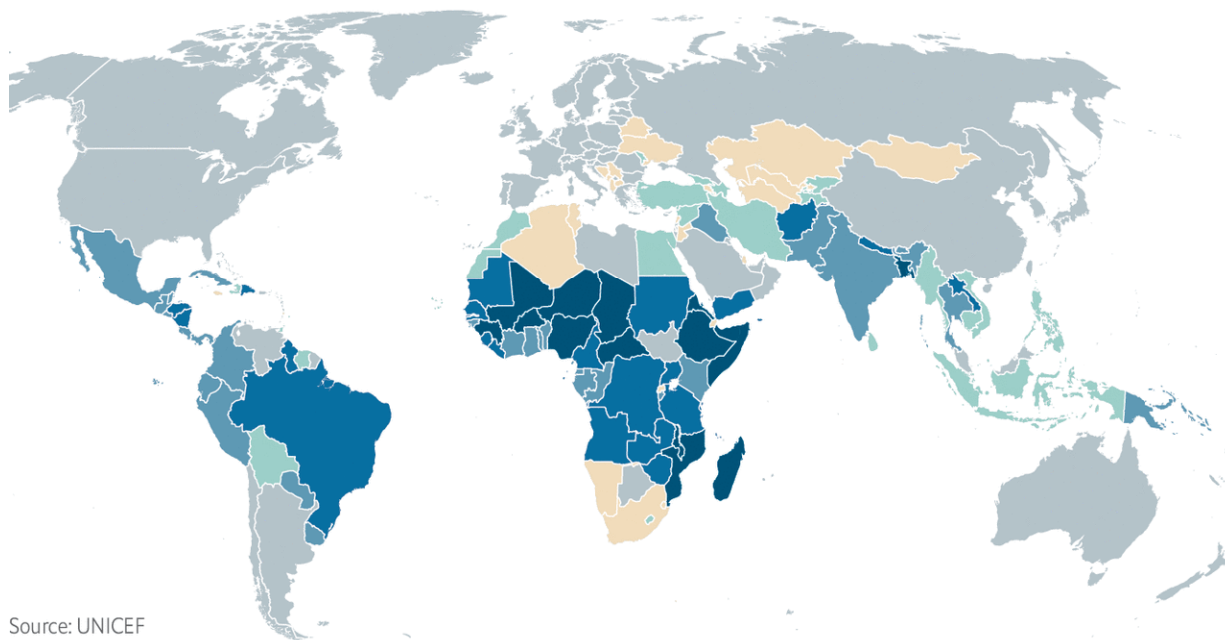
Daily chart - Indonesia has banned marriage for young girls | Graphic detail

Sep 26th 2019, <https://www.economist.com/graphic-detail/2019/09/26/indonesia-has-banned-marriage-for-young-girls>

Girlhood, interrupted

Women aged 20-24 who were married before age 18, 2010-17, %

No data 0 10 20 30 40



Source: UNICEF

The Economist

But many other countries tolerate or encourage it

ONE IN FIVE girls marries before reaching adulthood. One in twenty is wed before her fifteenth birthday. In Indonesia, which has the eighth-highest number of child brides in the world according to the UN, the phenomenon should soon be a thing of the past. This month the country's parliament raised the minimum age at which girls can marry from 16 to 19. Legislators were spurred to act after the Constitutional Court ruled in December that it was discriminatory to mandate a lower minimum age of marriage for girls than for boys.

This is good news. But on this measure, Indonesia is by no means the worst offender. According to UNICEF, the United Nations' children's agency, 14% of Indonesian women marry before they reach 18 years old. In Bangladesh the figure is 59%; in Niger it is 76%. Nineteen of the 20 countries where child marriage is most prevalent are in Africa (see map).

Families marry off their daughters at a young age in an attempt to make their lives more stable and secure. The conditions that tend to be associated with the practice include rigid gender norms, conflict and poverty. Education is perhaps the most important factor. A study of 15 countries by the World Bank found that girls without schooling are three times more likely to be married by age 18 than those with secondary education. But in many cultures, education for girls comes second to marriage and its associated duties.

Cutting a childhood short can have enormous costs. Girls who marry have an increased risk of sexual violence, poorer health and higher school drop-out rates. They are also less likely to participate in the labour force, which has significant economic costs. A paper published in 2015 found that child marriage cost Indonesia's economy 1.7% of GDP in 2014. The welfare benefit of ending the practice worldwide is estimated to be worth around \$22bn.

Indonesia's new policy is a big step towards ending child marriage. But in the context of controversial new revisions to the country's criminal code—which would criminalise extra-marital sex and endorse chauvinistic local by-laws—lawmakers will have to demonstrate that the new marriage age for girls is more than a token gesture towards gender equality. Indonesia's parliament could resolve to tackle the social and economic forces that make child marriage so common. Ensuring that girls complete their 12 years of compulsory schooling would be a start. Reducing unintended pregnancies by improving access to contraception and sexual-health education would also help. Giving girls more control over their bodies would allow them to exercise more sway over their future, including who they marry. That is worth saying yes to.