Where We Stand Position Paper:
Child, Early and Forced Marriage and Unions

Approved December 2024

Position Summary:

- Child, Early and Forced Marriage and Unions (CEFMU) involves marriages or unions where at least one party is under the age of 18 or has not provided full and informed consent. The practice disproportionately affects girls and violates their fundamental human rights, limiting their educational, economic, and health prospects and perpetuating cycles of poverty and inequality.
- Driven by social, economic, and cultural factors, CEFMU is a result of deeply rooted gender inequalities, poverty, and lack of access to education.
- CEFMU has severe physical, mental, and social consequences for girls, including early pregnancy, school dropout, and lifelong health complications. These impacts restrict girls' full participation in society and reinforce structural gender inequalities.
- Ending CEFMU requires a comprehensive, multi-sectoral approach. Governments, civil society, and international bodies must collaborate to promote gender equality, strengthen legal protections, and ensure access to quality education and economic opportunities for girls. Achieving these goals is essential to fulfilling international commitments, particularly Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5.

Where things stand...

Child, Early and Forced Marriage (CEFM) is defined by the United Nations (UN) as a marriage where at least one party is under the age of 18, or where one or both parties have not given their full and informed consent due to coercion, social pressure, or fear of consequences. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) categorises child marriage as a violation of children's rights, emphasising that children under the age of 18 are unable to give their full consent to marriage. The UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) further defines forced marriage as one occurring without the free, full, and informed consent of at least one of the parties, which may occur irrespective of age.

Within this framework, child marriages are generally those involving children under 13, while early marriages include adolescents (13-17 years) or occur prematurely within a given social context. Forced child and early marriages reflect the absence of free

consent, with force or coercion often tied to pressures related to poverty, migration status, or restricted access to sexual and reproductive health services.

This position paper also addresses the concept of *Unions* – referring to informal, often unregistered relationships where children and adolescents, particularly girls, are forced into cohabiting relationships without legal recognition. These unions are prevalent in regions where formal marriage laws are weakly enforced and where adolescents' autonomy may be constrained upon sexual maturity.

Often grouped under the term "Child, Early, and Forced Marriage and Unions" (CEFMU), informal unions have been acknowledged in the UN General Assembly (UNGA) Resolution on CEFM since 2018; however, the needs of girls in such unions are yet to be sufficiently addressed and accounted for. Although not formally recognised as marriages, informal unions often involve the same coercion, lack of consent, and detrimental impacts, making them equally harmful to the development and well-being of young girls and children. In regions where formal marriage laws may not be strictly enforced, informal unions leave girls without legal protection, further exacerbating their vulnerability to exploitation.

The causes of CEFMU are diverse and deeply rooted in social, cultural, and economic inequalities. Gender inequality is central to CEFMU, with entrenched patriarchal norms devaluing girls and viewing them as economic liabilities, or as objects whose worth is tied to marriage. Poverty further drives this practice, with families resorting to early marriage to alleviate financial burdens or secure dowries. In times of crisis, such as natural disasters or armed conflict, early marriage often becomes a survival mechanism, exposing vulnerable girls to even higher risks. Lack of education is a key factor, as girls who are out of school are more likely to be married early, limiting their future opportunities. Long-standing social traditions that reinforce the acceptance of CEFMU, combined with inadequate legal protections and enforcement, perpetuate the practice across generations. Addressing these root causes requires a coordinated approach that tackles the drivers of gender inequality, poverty, and lack of education.

The global prevalence of CEFMU has led to widespread negative impacts on individuals and communities. Globally, CEFMU has affected an estimated 650 million women and girls who were married before the age of 18. Moreover, CEFMU is especially prevalent in West and Central Africa, where nearly 40 per cent of girls are married before the age of 18, followed by Eastern and Southern Africa (32 per cent) and South Asia (28 per cent).

The consequences of CEFMU are often severe, impacting physical, sexual and reproductive, as well as psychological health of affected women and girls. For instance, girls forced into early marriage or unions face heightened risks of early pregnancy, as well as maternal and infant mortality. As a result, their education is often cut short, restricting their future economic opportunities and leaving them trapped in long-term

cycles of poverty. The psychological toll is also significant, with many girls experiencing anxiety, depression, and trauma, which further limits their ability to pursue education or employment.

The broader social and economic consequences of CEFMU are also damaging. By limiting the participation of women and girls in education, the workforce, and public life, CEFMU reinforces structural gender inequalities. This has significant economic costs as it stifles development and productivity. It is estimated that the global economic loss due to missed education and reduced lifetime productivity could amount to as much as USD 30 trillion. Socially, CEFMU sustains cycles of poverty, normalises exploitation and violence against all women and girls, and restricts the full participation of all women and girls in societal and economic spheres. This perpetuates inequality across generations, making the eradication of CEFMU essential for achieving broader social and economic development goals.

Global progress toward addressing CEFMU has been driven by key international frameworks and commitments. Since 2014, UNGA has passed several resolutions on CEFM, and subsequently on CEFMU, consistently calling for accelerated action to end the practice. This was reinforced in 2015 with the inclusion of CEFM in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), specifically through Target 5.3, which calls for the elimination of all harmful practices, including CEFM, by 2030. The UNGA resolution on CEFM has been reviewed biennially since 2014, with the concept of 'Unions' being acknowledged in 2018. More recently, in 2022, UNGA adopted its fourth resolution on CEFM, which emphasised the need to address and monitor the rise in child marriages due to factors relating to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Other important frameworks include the CRC and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), both of which emphasise the protection of all children and women's rights to marry with full, informed consent. Additionally, regional agreements such as the Maputo Protocol and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACRWC) have made significant contributions toward addressing CEFMU in African nations. These frameworks provide a strong legal basis for global and regional efforts, mandating state parties to enact legislation, raise the legal age of marriage, and eliminate harmful practices.

Where things need to go...

Ending CEFMU requires a comprehensive, multi-sectoral approach that addresses the complex root causes of this pervasive and harmful practice. This begins with ensuring that all girls have access to safe, quality, lifelong education and are empowered with knowledge about their rights. Governments and civil society must work together to implement comprehensive community-based programmes that challenge harmful

gender norms and traditions. Promoting gender equality and addressing patriarchal structures is essential to transforming social attitudes and preventing CEFMU.

In addition to community-level interventions, legal reforms and strong enforcement mechanisms must be established and supported globally. It is crucial that UN efforts to address CEFMU are made legally binding for signatory countries, requiring them to integrate provisions into their national laws and policies. Countries should raise the minimum age of marriage to 18 without exceptions and ensure accountability for violations. Strengthening birth registration systems can further protect children from being forced into informal unions, while reliable data collection systems will help monitor progress and refine interventions.

Furthermore, adhering to key international frameworks such as the CRC, CEDAW and SDG Target 5.3 is essential for ensuring that global efforts are aligned and that nations are held accountable for their commitments. These frameworks provide a clear roadmap for eliminating harmful practices like CEFMU, but they must be supported by long-term strategies and adequate resources. Collaborative efforts from governments, civil society, donor agencies, and the private sector are critical to scaling up proven interventions and ensuring that every girl can reach her full potential.

Fundamental Action:

It is essential that all stakeholders, including all UN Member States, local authorities, businesses, and more, address the specific vulnerabilities of all women and girls living in crisis contexts. UN Member States and other legislative bodies should:

- Invest in education and community-based programmes that challenge social norms, accepted cultural practices, and patriarchal systems. Communities and individuals must be empowered to recognise and report instances of CEFMU. Young women and girls must be made aware of the dangers of CEFMU, including the impact on their physical, mental, sexual and reproductive health;

- Emphasis must be placed on actively engaging men and boys as allies in challenging harmful norms and stereotypes that perpetuate CEFMU, fostering awareness of its impacts and encouraging advocacy for gender equality;

- Address the economic drivers and other vulnerabilities that may lead to the exploitation of women and girls through practices like CEFMU;

- Establish and rigorously enforce legal frameworks that set the minimum age of marriage at 18 and harmonise national laws (including customary laws) with

international treaties, including CEDAW, CRC, and SDG commitments;

- Strengthen capacities of response teams in crisis settings, including areas of internal displacement and refugee flows, to better identify and protect potential victims and ensure the safety and security all young women and girls, including girls with disabilities, refugees, and indigenous communities;

- Recognise CEFMU as a form of violence against all women and girls, and a fundamental violation of their human rights;

- Ensure an integrated approach to address CEFMU as form of human trafficking that considers the interplay between drivers and specific vulnerabilities, placing greater emphasis on rights-based, survivor-centred, participatory, and gender and age-responsive interventions that address these drivers; and

- Ensure a comprehensive approach to addressing CEFMU, by coordinating legal, health, and education systems to prevent its occurrence and support survivors. This requires reforms across sectors, creating a protective framework that upholds the rights of girls and addresses the interconnected drivers of CEFMU.

Additional Action:

- Encourage further research into the root causes, social drivers, and impacts of CEFMU. Ensure that findings from these studies inform evidence-based policymaking and programme development;

- Foster partnerships between governments, civil society, and the private sector to develop innovative solutions aimed at eliminating CEFMU. Promote the sharing of best practices and resources among key stakeholders;

- Ensure data collection efforts include tools and methodologies to collect disaggregated data by gender, age, marital status, and include information on other factors such as but not limited to disability, race, sexual orientation, to better inform targeted interventions;

- Leverage technology to improve monitoring, reporting, and response to cases of CEFMU. Support the development of digital tools that empower all girls with access to information about their rights and protection services; and

- Invest in long-term, survivor-centred support services, including trauma counselling, legal assistance, and safe shelters. These services should be tailored to survivors unique needs, particularly in rural and underserved areas.

Where Soroptimist International Stands:

Soroptimist International recognises the devastating global impact of CEFMU, which continues to violate the human rights of millions of girls and young women. Soroptimist International is committed to creating a world where CEFMU no longer threatens the lives and futures of young women and girls, and will continue to:

- **Educate** communities, including community leaders, parents, and men and boys to understand their role in preventing CEFMU. This includes raising awareness about the dangers and long-term impacts of CEFMU on all girls' health, education, and future opportunities.

- **Empower** all women and girls through access to education and vocational training, ensuring they gain fully knowledge about their rights, and the skills necessary to pursue self-sustaining futures and avoid vulnerability to exploitation, especially in crisis situations.

- **Enable** the meaningful participation of survivors, communities, and grassroots organisations in efforts to end CEFMU, ensuring that interventions are rights-based, inclusive, and gender-responsive.

Sources:

- United Nations General Assembly (2022) Resolution on Child, Early and Forced Marriage. Available at: https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/3999506?ln=en&v=pdf (Accessed: November 2024).

- United Nations (1989), Convention on the Rights of the Child. Available at: https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-rights-child (Accessed: November 2024).

- United Nations (1979) *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW).* Available at: https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-elimination-all-forms-discrimination-against-women (Accessed: November 2024).

- UNICEF (2021) *Ending Child Marriage: A Profile of Progress and Challenges in the United Nations Context*. Available at: https://www.unicef.org/reports/ending-child-marriage (Accessed: November 2024).