



ACERWC
African Committee of Experts on
the Rights and Welfare of the Child



THEMATIC REPORT

OF THE AFRICAN COMMITTEE OF EXPERTS ON THE
RIGHTS AND WELFARE OF THE CHILD ON HARMFUL
PRACTICES AFFECTING CHILDREN IN AFRICA

SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In collaboration with



A just world for all women and girls



BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

The African Committee of Experts on the Rights and Welfare of the Child decided to undertake a study on harmful practices affecting children at the 43rd Ordinary Session held from 15 to 25 April 2024. The study was conducted with support from Equality Now, and the Committee adopted the Thematic Report on Harmful Practices Affecting Children in Africa at the 46th Ordinary Session, held from 26 November to 06 December 2025. The report focuses specifically on female genital mutilation (FGM) and child marriage. Despite decades of advocacy, legal reform, and regional campaigns, FGM and child marriage remain widespread in many parts of the continent. The persistence is linked to deeply entrenched sociocultural norms and economic vulnerability, often compounded by weak accountability and limited access to justice for survivors. The resurgence of debates around decriminalising FGM in some countries further underscores the need for sustained vigilance and advocacy.

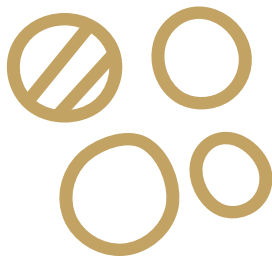
The report adopts a regional case-study approach, selecting countries from the Central, East, North, Southern, and West Africa, namely, Republic of Chad, Republic of Cameroon, Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, Federal Republic of Somalia, Republic of Sudan, Arab Republic of Egypt, Republic of Malawi, Republic of Zimbabwe, Federal Republic of Nigeria, and the Republic of Mali. The report analyses the prevalence and impact of FGM and child marriage and identifies emerging risks and persisting challenges that undermine elimination efforts. It also assesses alignment of country level legislation and policy with the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (the Charter), the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa (Maputo Protocol), and Joint General Comments of the ACERWC and the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights on FGM and Ending Child Marriage. The report further considers the contribution of continental initiatives and concludes with key recommendations.

KEY FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

ASSESSMENT OF SELECTED FOCUS COUNTRIES

Across the selected countries, the study finds that harmful practices persist in diverse legal and social contexts yet share common drivers and implementation gaps.

- Although legal prohibitions exist in most countries, enforcement remains inconsistent. Weak civil registration systems, particularly in rural areas, continue to enable underage marriage and conceal FGM, as observed in contexts such as Cameroon and Nigeria, where legal protections exist with limited enforcement capacity.
- The coexistence of statutory, customary, and religious legal systems further affects the protection of girls. In countries such as Nigeria, Somalia, and Sudan, customary marriage practices and personal status laws continue to influence marriage decisions and undermine the practical application of statutory safeguards.
- Conflict and displacement also significantly increase vulnerability. In Sudan and Chad, humanitarian crises have weakened institutional protection systems and contributed to the prevalence of child marriage.
- The study also finds that legal reform can produce measurable progress when accompanied by implementation measures. Constitutional and legislative reforms in Malawi and Zimbabwe, as well as National Action Plans like those in Ethiopia, demonstrate that aligning laws with the minimum marriage age of 18 may contribute to declining prevalence when supported by monitoring and community engagement.
- Social norms remain a central driver, but community engagement initiatives show encouraging results. Efforts involving traditional leaders, youth advocates, and religious actors in countries such as Egypt, Ethiopia, and Nigeria indicate growing public awareness and expanding opportunities for prevention.



ASSESSMENT OF REGIONAL AND CONTINENTAL INITIATIVES ADDRESSING HARMFUL PRACTICES

Continental and regional mechanisms have played an important role in shaping national responses and strengthening accountability.

- The African Union Campaign to End Child Marriage has encouraged Member States to adopt strategies, legal reforms, and awareness initiatives. Countries such as Zambia, Burkina Faso, and Nigeria developed National Action Plans and expanded legislative protections following engagement with the Campaign.
- The African Union Saleema Initiative on Eliminating FGM promotes abandonment of FGM through positive messaging, community dialogue, and youth engagement alongside legal measures. Originating in Sudan, it supported community declarations, girl-led clubs, and youth advocacy and inspired similar campaigns in countries like Egypt and Nigeria.
- The African Union Accountability Framework on the Elimination of Harmful Practices provides tools for monitoring, reporting, and reviewing progress across Member States. It has the potential to offer a meaningful accountability mechanism.
- Regional economic support legal harmonisation and cross-border cooperation, examples include the ECOWAS Child Policy, the SADC Model Law on Eradicating Child Marriage and the EAC Child Protection Policy.
- High-level political leadership has reinforced these initiatives
- First Ladies have supported national campaigns and advocacy. For example, Sierra Leone's 'Hands Off Our Girls' campaign contributed to legislation criminalising child marriage, while First Ladies in Niger, Burkina Faso, Benin, Liberia, and Nigeria have publicly promoted action against FGM and child marriage.
- The AU Goodwill Ambassador and Presidential Champions mobilised political commitment and youth engagement. The ACERWC Special Rapporteur on Child Marriage and Other Harmful Practices has also intervened in national legislative processes, including in The Gambia and Sierra Leone, helping preserve protective legal frameworks and promote implementation of the Joint General Comments.

EMERGING TRENDS AND CHALLENGES

The study finds that a changing social, economic, and political environment increasingly shapes harmful practices. Progress toward elimination is occurring alongside new pressures that weaken protection systems and heighten vulnerability for girls. Conflict, economic instability, climate shocks, and social backlash are interacting to reinforce existing drivers of FGM and child marriage rather than replace them.

- In fragile and humanitarian settings, the breakdown of social, legal, and educational protection systems increases reliance on child marriage as a perceived protection mechanism and limits prevention and reporting.
- Poverty, food insecurity, and displacement linked to environmental shocks are contributing to increased vulnerability to child marriage and, in some contexts, earlier initiation of FGM.
- Legal gains remain fragile, with attempts to weaken prohibitions, restrictive interpretations of religion, and the medicalisation of FGM undermining implementation and accountability.
- Economic pressures and funding constraints are limiting prevention, education, and social protection programmes that previously acted as protective factors.
- Digital platforms support awareness-raising and education, but are also used in some contexts to conceal or facilitate harmful practices.



KEY RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE STUDY

1. Ensure comprehensive legal reform and harmonisation :

Member States should harmonise statutory, customary, and religious laws with the normative standards established under the African Union. They should strengthen enforcement to ensure proportionate penalties and child-sensitive access to justice, while also adopting measures that go beyond criminalisation to include prevention, protection, and survivor support.

2. Invest in coordinated, multi-sectoral implementation:

Member States should implement coordinated national strategies to eliminate harmful practices, involving the health, education, justice, and social protection sectors and supported by adequate institutional capacity and resources.

3. Promote community engagement and social norm change :

Member States should address the social norms that sustain FGM and child marriage by supporting community-led change processes, engaging traditional and religious leaders, and promoting locally grounded awareness initiatives centred on the rights and dignity of girls.

4. Strengthen accountability, data, and monitoring systems :

Member States should improve data collection, monitoring, and reporting mechanisms, and also empower national institutions and civil society to track progress, identify violations, and support compliance with regional child rights obligations.

5. **Sustain political will and allocate adequate resources:**

Member States should demonstrate sustained political leadership and domestic investment by institutionalising implementation responsibilities, allocating adequate resources, and maintaining accountability through national and regional monitoring processes.

6. **Empower girls and young women as agents of change :**

Girls and young women should be recognised as active partners in prevention efforts. Member States should promote meaningful participation in decision-making and support education and empowerment initiatives that strengthen autonomy, rights awareness, and foster long-term social change.



For an Africa fit for Children



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