

# Executive summary

Child marriage remains a prevalent global practice, with around one in five girls marrying before the age of 18 in 2022.<sup>1</sup> A considerable variation can also be seen across countries. Child marriage has been shown to have lifetime consequences for girls in terms of poor educational, health and economic outcomes, depriving them of their basic rights and leaving the next generation at a disadvantage. The issue has been aggravated by the COVID-19 pandemic and demands effective and conscious intervention, especially in the poorest countries that exhibit the highest rates of child marriage.<sup>2</sup> Despite a declining trend in child marriage, the current rate in the Arab region remains sizeable, with a wide variation across countries.<sup>3</sup> While the prevalence of child marriage across the Arab region has dropped from one in three to one in five females, progress has stagnated over the recent decade.<sup>4</sup> A growing volume of studies are increasingly demonstrating the negative effects of child marriage on a variety of developmental outcomes;<sup>5</sup> however, concerted efforts and resources to neutralize the practice remain inadequate across the Arab region. To stimulate greater efforts towards eliminating child marriage, the present study underlines the economic costs of child marriage and the key mechanisms for a number of Arab countries. The report offers essential insights into the economic consequences (cost of inaction) if child marriage is neglected in Arab countries. It serves as valuable material for advocacy efforts, aiming to draw governments' attention to this pressing problem.

Economic costs are channelled through demographic, social and health implications generated as a consequence of child marriage. Demographic implications comprise unwanted pregnancies and unsafe abortions that alter future population growth, mother and child survival, and reproduction. Social

implications comprise the loss of educational attainment by girls who are married as children, which eventually harms the exercise of their basic rights, agency, decision-making ability, earning prospects, community support and empowerment in general. Health implications include adolescent pregnancies and births, and the high fertility and maternal morbidity and mortality rates for women marrying early. These implications, endured by girls who marry as children, might be direct or indirect, as well as monetary or non-monetary, for individuals and households and cumulated at the State level.

The Phase I report, developed by ESCWA, UNFPA ASRO, UNICEF MENARO and UN-Women (2023) and entitled "The cost of child marriage over the life cycle of girls and women: evidence from Egypt, Iraq, Jordan and Tunisia",<sup>6</sup> studied the costs of child marriage borne by women and girls in the Arab region. Building on the earlier report, Phase II of the study extends the findings to measure the "economic costs of child marriage" for 13 of the 22 Arab countries for which the relevant data is available. The study aims to report the economic costs of child marriage in terms of the percentage of gross domestic product (GDP) loss for Arab countries. It also theoretically discusses the multiple ways in which child marriage affects women and girls at the individual level with repercussions on their families and thereby the State.

Building on earlier work<sup>7</sup> and following a more robust procedure, the present report utilizes a wider spectrum of demographic, health, education and economic input indicators in the costing exercise, utilizing a life course perspective to project the economic cost of child marriage in the Arab region up to 2050 with the base year of 2001. It covers the entire productive timeline of a girl who married at the age of 15 around the year 2000. The data for

input indicators was compiled from multiple sources, primarily nationally representative household surveys, including the Demographic and Health Survey, the Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey and the Labour Force Survey.

Overall findings suggest that the percentage of GDP lost due to child marriage across 13 Arab countries in 2021 was 3.2 per cent and is expected to be 3 per cent in 2050. The cumulative GDP loss is anticipated to stand at around \$3 trillion between 2021 and 2050. Regionally, in 2021, Algeria, the State of Palestine, the Sudan and Tunisia showed more than 4 per cent of GDP loss attributable to child marriage, while Qatar and the Syrian Arab Republic lost the lowest GDP (less than 1 per cent). Between 2021 and 2050, Algeria, Jordan, the State of Palestine, the Sudan, and Tunisia are estimated to lose the highest cumulative GDP attributable to child marriage if current child marriage rates persist.

It is important to note that the economic cost of child marriage not only depends on the rates of child marriage but also on the differences in demographic and socioeconomic outcomes between females married below 18 years of age and those married at 18 and above. Therefore, Algeria, Jordan and Tunisia will incur greater economic costs attributable to child marriage because they have greater fertility and educational differences across females married below 18 years of age than those married at 18 and above. On the other hand, countries like Iraq and Mauritania have higher child marriage prevalence rates, but the relative differences in fertility rates and educational levels between those married below 18 years of age and those married at 18 and above are not as high as in Algeria,

Jordan and Tunisia, thus incurring lesser economic costs that are attributable to child marriage.

Our estimate (3.2 per cent in 2021 for the Arab region) is higher than earlier studies<sup>8</sup> covering emerging and developing countries (1 per cent) and South Asia, the Middle East and Africa (1.4 per cent). There could be two reasons for this discrepancy: (1) the difference in the geographical coverage across all three studies; or (2) the difference in the procedure of estimation and the number of input indicators considered for the model. The current study is more comprehensive in terms of indicators inputted for the model. However, the total GDP estimates across the 13 Arab countries from this study are in tune with the World Bank estimates for the respective countries.

In terms of policy implications, the present study highlights that the extent of child marriage significantly contributes to the failure of States in achieving their economic potential. The variations in the economic cost of child marriage, measured by GDP loss, within the Arab region stem from two key factors: the prevalence of child marriage and the effectiveness of countries' health-care and socioeconomic systems. It is imperative for Arab countries to take action in preventing child marriage and mitigating the associated demographic, health and economic impacts. By addressing critical channels such as promoting family planning and maternal and child health care to reduce high fertility and child mortality rates, ensuring access to education for girls before and after marriage, and creating flexible labour market opportunities to encourage women's participation in economic activities, countries can avert economic losses.