

Poverty Is One Of The Main Drivers Of Child Marriage

BY WIKI IMPACT TEAM | Written on 16 November 2020

Updated on 22 March 2021 with data from [UNICEF](#); 20 May 2021 with infographics designed by Ann Ng.

Fact-checked by [Kai Ye Ong](#) - She is currently pursuing a Master in Actuarial Management at The Business School.

This article is a 'work in progress'. All statistics and facts mentioned are based on existing studies. When new research comes to light, this article will be updated.

Currently at: Level 2

Level 1: Independent secondary research (desk research) and fact-checked by 1 person.

Level 2: Updated with info from new secondary research and fact-checked by 2 people.

Level 3: Contributions from academic researchers or credible practitioners with reliable data.

Level 4: Article revised based on primary research findings by Wiki Impact and reviewed by 2 people.



Child Marriages In Malaysia And Around The World

What were you doing on your 18th birthday? Planning a party with friends or a getaway perhaps? For a majority of girls around the world, their 18th birthday is a significant milestone of stepping into adulthood and a chapter closer to independent living.

Sadly, this isn't the case for a whopping 650 million girls worldwide who end up being married even before they turn 18 years old^[1].

According to Unicef, an estimated 12 million young girls under the age of 18 get married every year^[2]. This is roughly 32,876 girls a day, or 23 girls every minute. The South Asian region accounts for nearly 30% of the total number of child marriages.

Globally around
21% of young women
were married before
their 18th birthday.

21%



650,000,000

650 million girls and
women alive today were
married as children.



12

million girls
under 18
are married
each year.

Source: Unicef (2020). [Child Marriage Around the World](#)



By definition child marriage is any formal marriage or informal union between one or both parties before the age of 18 years old^[2]. The broad definition is used due to the issue being so complex.

However, the occurrence is simply wrong. The United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women and the Committee on the Rights of the Child have stated that child marriage is **“considered to be a form of forced marriage, given that one and/or both parties have not expressed full, free and informed consent”^[2].**

Overall, the stigma of child marriage is usually laced with religious opinions, cultural debates, social norms and tradition. It occurs in all races and religions, where both young boys and girls can fall victim.



Globally, whilst every 1 in 5 young women aged 20 - 24 years old are married before their 18th birthday, every 1 in 30 young boys are also wedded^[2].

Various interlinking factors could lead to the occurrence of child marriage. Several of these factors hit closer to home than one might first think.

DEFINITION

Child marriage refers to any formal marriage or informal union (where partners live as if married) between a child under the age of 18 and an adult or another child.^a

Global Estimates (2019)



1 in 5 young women aged 20 to 24 years old married before their 18th birthday, compared to **1 in 30** young men.



12 million girls under 18

are married each year
(23 girls every minute)^b



In Malaysia, at least **1,500** children marry every year (as of 2018).^c

a UNICEF.

b UNICEF; Girls Not Brides.

c Based on 2007-2017 statistics from the Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development, Malaysia (MWFCDD).

Source: [Unicef \(2021\). Child Marriage in Malaysia - Advocacy Brief](#)

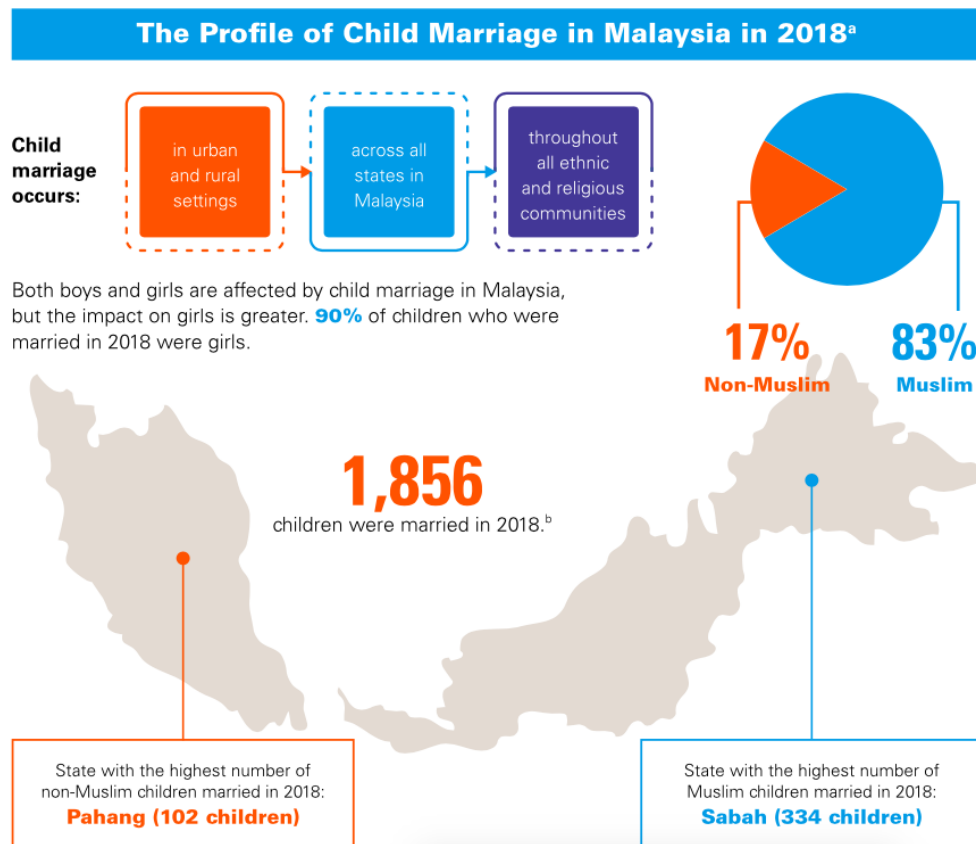
Malaysia is no stranger to the topic of child marriage. In fact as global trends regarding the practise go down, Malaysia's numbers just keep rising^[2]. It was reported that between 2007 and 2017 approximately 15,000 cases were recorded in Malaysia, with child marriage occurring in all communities across the country^[2].



According to the Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development, Malaysia (MWFCDD), at least 1,500 children marry every year.

In Malaysia, child marriages have always been a hot topic laced with both religious and cultural debate. Needless to say, it is not a small issue. Applications for child marriages came from both the muslim and non-muslim communittees.

Between 2013-2018 alone there were over 9,500 cases compromising of over 5,000 from the Muslim community^[4] and over 3,000 cases from the non-Muslim families^[5].



Source: [Unicef \(2021\), Child Marriage in Malaysia - Advocacy Brief](#)

However, in 2018, the highest numbers of registered Muslim child marriages were from Sabah (334), Pahang (177), Johor (167) and Selangor (163). The highest figures of non-Muslim child marriages that year were, in fact, from Pahang (102), followed by Sarawak (55), Perak (35), Johor (35) and Selangor (20). **Pahang overtook Sarawak with an increased number of child marriages^[2].**

Affecting thousands of Malaysians nationwide, its impacts transcends religion, ethnicity and geographical factors. As such, these categorisations are important to note as typically child marriages are seen as an act strongly connected to religious beliefs, however cultures and traditions are also strong influencers to this practice.

How easy it is for a child to get married in Malaysia?

It is important to note that there has been a decrease in the number of Muslim marriages in recent years, however on the flipside, **there has been about 20% annual increase of non-Muslim marriages from 2015- 2018**^[5]. Thanks to various “loopholes” in the dual legal system of Syariah and civil law, Malaysia permits 5 child marriages per day^[7]. Whilst officially both laws dictates the legal minimum age of marriage is 18 years old for both genders, both civil and Syariah laws provide enough room for ‘special cases’

The Law Reform (Marriage and Divorce) Act 1976 puts the minimum age for marriage at 18 years old but girls can marry at 16 years of age after obtaining a licence from their state’s chief minister^[6]. Non-muslim children cannot marry below the age of 16.

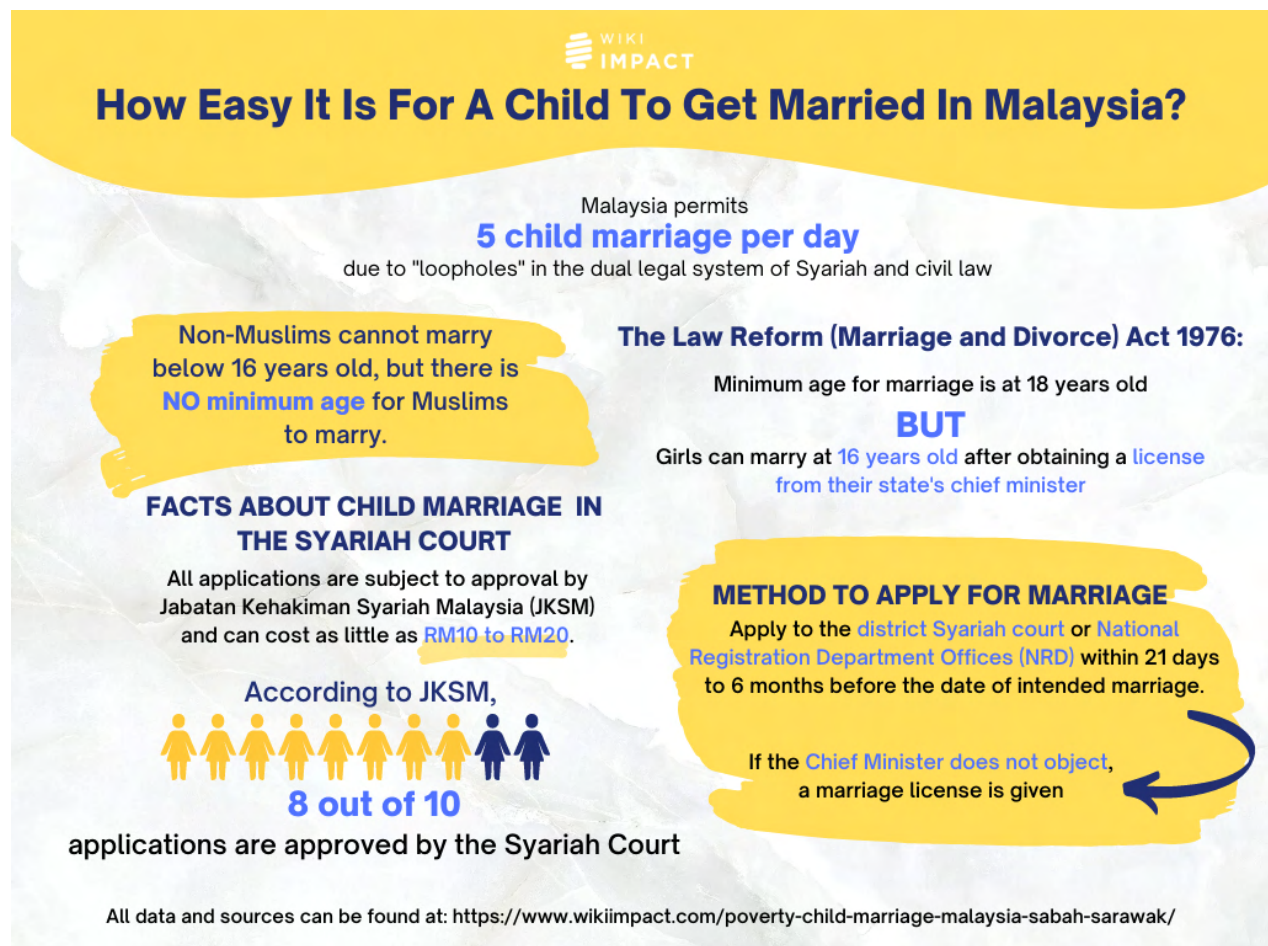


Image designed by: [Ann Ng](#)

Syariah courts on the other hand, states that the boys are permitted to marry at the age of 18, whereas for girls, it is at 16 years old. Similarly to civil court, the Syariah court are able to grant consent to those below the marriageable age. There is no minimum age for muslims to marry^[8].

Anyone interested in applying for an early marriage simply has to apply to their respective district Syariah court or National Registration Department Offices (NRD) within the timeframe of 21 days to 6 months before the date of the intended marriage.



If there are no objections by the Chief Minister, then your marriage license will be given. All applications for child marriages are subject to approval and [can cost as little as RM10 to RM20](#)^[9].

Majority of child marriages are consented by both parties involved. Regardless of whether both proposed partners are children or only one, every case is different. Some cases include children who had found love and wished to 'make the commitment' to their partners without having to wait until their 18th birthday.

Some applications were because parents of the parties involved, were worried about their children practising premarital intercourse and other negative social influences like alcohol misuse, deemed marriage as the appropriate solution to keep them out of trouble.

Even high-profile cases of child marriage whereby young girls are married off to much older men are done with mutual agreement. For example, the 14 year old bride marrying her religious tuition teacher in 2010^[10] and the recent case of an 11 year old tying the knot with a 41 year old man from Kelantan in 2018^[11].



Source: The Star (2018). [41-year-old Malaysian weds 11-year-old girl in Thailand](#)

Of course, there are those that resort to early marriage in fear of social shaming. As it occurs in almost every ethnic community and religion in Malaysia, religion and culture are not the main reason these children are married. There is, however, a common thread among all underage marriages – most of them are socially vulnerable. Marriage is often a ‘quick fix’ to unplanned pregnancies. But in some unfortunate instances, marriage is done to cover up the tragedy of rape. In 2012, a 12 year old bride fell victim to gang rape and married her 19 year old rapist four months after the crime^[12].

In 2013, a 40 year old restaurant owner took a 12 year old girl as his second wife after he was charged for statutory rape, in the hopes of avoiding prosecution^[13]. This union, again, was approved by the girl’s father in the Sharia Court. The victim’s father was reported to have said, *“It is best for her that they get married . . . What else can I do?”*



According to Jabatan Kehakiman Syariah Malaysia (JKSM) statistics, 8 out of 10 applications are approved by the Syariah Court^[14].

The chances of getting marriage applications approved are still very high regardless of the age of the applicants.

Child Brides Are More Likely To Be Poor

According to the UNICEF's "Advocacy Brief: Towards Ending Child Marriage in Malaysia", there are countless determinants that are directly and indirectly connected to child marriage. Many of which are interlaced with each other. These factors include:

- The lack of a standardized minimum age of marriage, and laws that allow and facilitate child marriage;
- The lack of access to sexual and reproductive health (SRH) information and services;
- The low household income and poverty;
- The lack of access to education and poor school attendance;
- Social and cultural norms that allow and perpetuate traditional practices of child marriage;
- The lack of parental awareness and understanding of SRH (leading to parents' inability to communicate with children effectively on these issues to better guide and protect them);
- The the lack of legal status and rights of undocumented, stateless, refugee and asylum-seeking communities^[2].



The World Bank identified that globally, girls with poorer economic backgrounds were more likely to marry early^[15]. Those faced with economic difficulties find that marrying their child off as one burden lifted; one less mouth to feed.

Low household income has been identified as a common driver of child marriage across Malaysian communities. A family's economic standing may influence the decision of what age the daughter is to be married off after school. As Malaysian Law (Act 550) only dictates that education up to primary 6 is mandatory, marrying off happens quite young.

In Muslim culture, it is often customary that the bride's family be provided with dowry upon marriage^[3]. This provides economic incentive to financially struggling families to marry off their daughters. In some parts of the world, the younger the bride, the higher the dowry that the groom's

family must pay, which influences families to marry off their daughters as soon as possible in order to earn a higher bride price^[3].

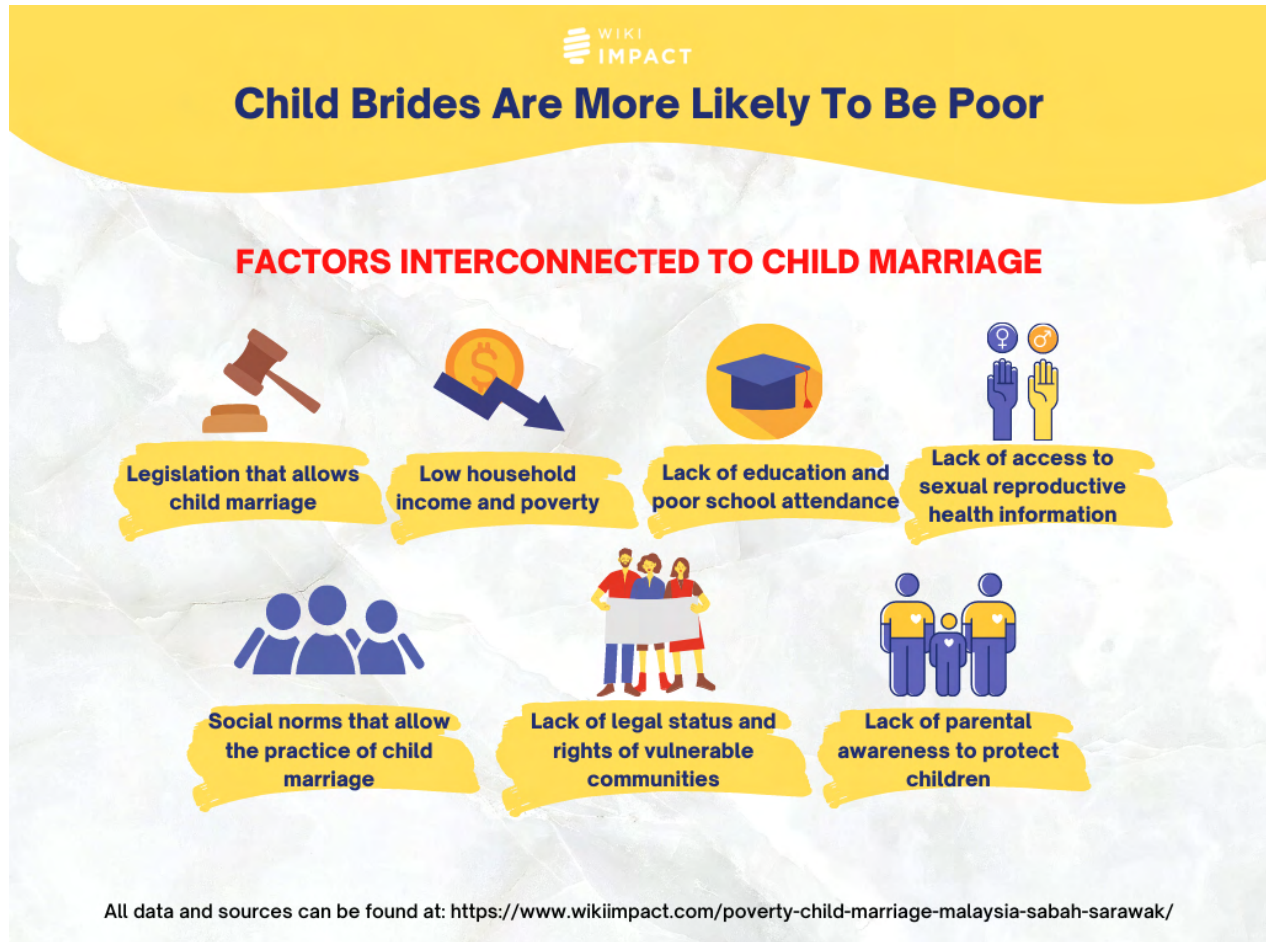


Image designed by: [Ann Ng](#)

A study by UNICEF found that poverty was a driver of child marriage for participants of every ethnicity^[3]. Unable to continue paying for their children's education, parents from low-income households choose for their children to be married.

Marriage Is Not A Solution To Escape From Poverty

Unfortunately, many still struggle with economic difficulties post marriage. These instances are not isolated to a particular country or region, but consistent with trends on a global scale. An example would be a case study in the neighbouring country of Indonesia^[16]. The table below indicates the economic status of each marital couple as well as their living situations.



Source: [Global Village Space](#) (2020)

Table 2
Overview of Participants

Participant	Gender	Age		Place to Stay		Economy Status	Marital Status
		At present	At first marriage	Location	House status		
LI	F	19 yo	15 yo	Indramayu	Rent house; live with her husband and children	Poor	Divorce and Remarried
SI	F	19 yo	18 yo	Indramayu	Living with parents	Poor	Divorce
NI	F	21 yo	18 yo	Indramayu	Living with parents	Poor	Marriage
YJ	F	18 yo	16 yo	East Jakarta	Rent house; live with her husband and children	Poor	Marriage
AM	F	18 yo	17 yo	Bekasi	Living with parents	Poor	Marriage
DM	F	17 yo	16 yo	Bekasi	Living with parents	Poor	Divorce
SM	F	15 yo	13 yo	Bekasi	Living with parents	Poor	Marriage
HM	P	18 yo	17 yo	Bekasi	Rent house; live with her husband	Rich	Marriage

Source: [Anima Indonesia Psychological Journal](#) (2018)

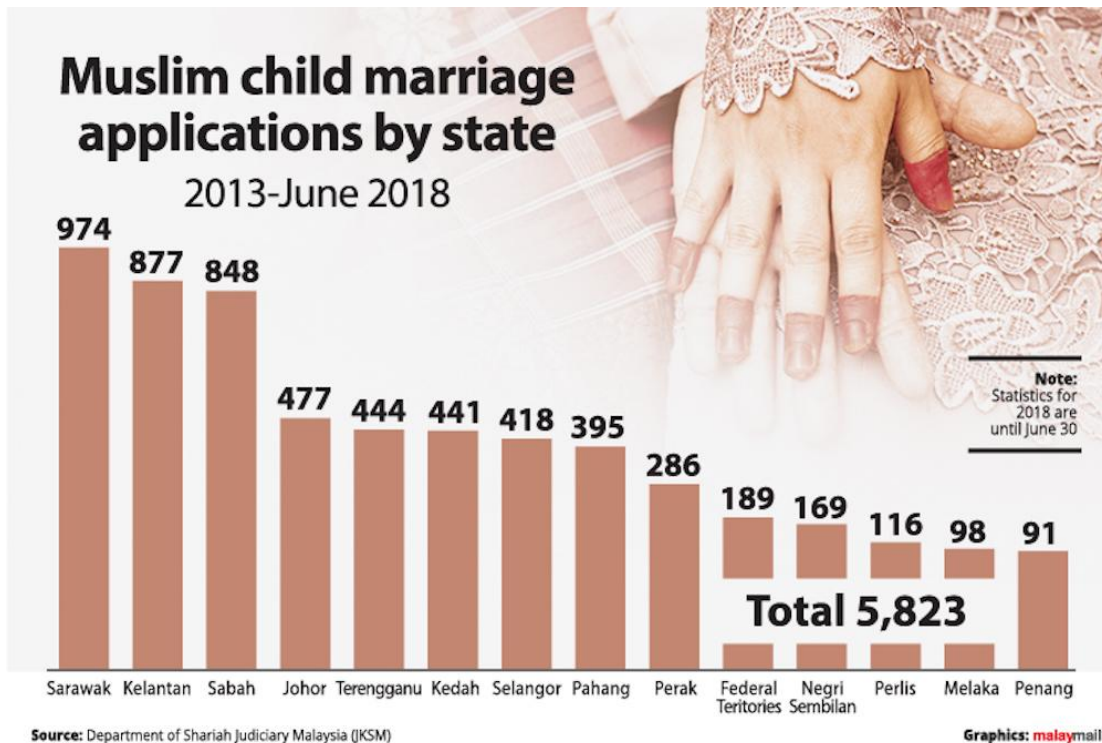
From the table it is observed that poverty is still prevalent among people who marry young. The study found that children who marry young are highly unlikely to continue school, thus reducing their chances of getting proper employment in the future^[16]. Lack of access to proper education and awareness is not only makes a child more prone to the practise of child marriage, but also keeps them trapped in a cycle of poverty. One community that comes to mind are the refugee communities in Malaysia. As they are without proper documentation, thousands go without a basic education and find it difficult to secure a job. One of their few alternatives is to marry into a financially stable family.

Many of them are also not financially independent and still need to rely on their parents for financial support. **Despite the promise of a 'better future', marriage is not a golden ticket.**

Child Marriage In Various States & The Reasons Why

A closer look at Malaysia's statistics, revealed that Sarawak recorded the highest number of child marriages in the country between 2013 - 2018. The state was followed by Kelantan and Sabah for

muslim marriages, and Johor and Selangor for non-muslim marriages. A study in 2020 looked at the reasons behind child marriage in the state where the occurrence is most prominent^[17].



Source: Malay Mail (2018) [Child Marriage: Why It Is Still a Problem in 2018](#)

The study found that several participants had left school as early as 12 years old due to family financial constraints. Some of them left voluntarily seeing their family's struggle, but others were explicitly told by their parents to stop school.

“ I did not finish studying because we only lived a simple life; my parents were unemployed, my brothers worked but were not so rich, and then I decided to quit school when I was in Form 1 (at 13 years old). After I left, I wanted to continue, but then I pitied my parents, so I didn't. My parents were okay with me quitting school; they didn't really care. Then, my marriage was arranged by our parents when I was 16 years old. - Candidate No13. Married at 16 years old (Malay)



Source: Human Rights Watch

Other participants stated that their main reason for getting married early was to help reduce the financial burden on their parents. Their logic was that by getting married early, there would be fewer members in the family for their parents to take care of.

“ Because we had a difficult life, we got married and the husband will pay for everything. So, we have an open mind, we won’t burden our parents too much (by getting married) because I have five siblings. So, my parents had fewer burdens and could send my younger siblings to school. I, too, after I got married, could help my siblings. I bought them clothes, trousers and a little food. At the end of the month, I sent them money too. I got married, and my parents’ lives got easier. - Candidate No.07, Married at 14 years old (Iban)

Unfortunately, these short term economic “solutions” to ease the burden on families have long term negative impacts on the children that are married off. This mindset of marrying young is found not

only in rural regions, but urban domains as well. At the end of the day, child marriages set the stage for other social problems to take root. Those of which are not related to geographic location, urban or rural demographic.

This was latter proved when Sarawak did not hold it's title for long, as in 2018, the highest number for registered muslim child marriages were from the Sabah with a total of 334 cases. Followed by Pahang, Johor and Selangor. Pahang also had the highest figures for non-muslim child marriages^[2] followed by Sarawak, Perak and Johor.

From these numbers alone, a mix of both urban and rural dominant states can be observed. Thus proving that geographic location is not a determining factor. That being said, only the state of Selangor has amended its laws accordingly^[2].

Poverty Perpetuates When Children Get Married

The “better life” that many are promised is often laced with deprivation of education, social mobility and economic opportunities. The longer a child is married, the lesser chance there is for her to continue her studies^[2].



Only 4 out of 140 participants in a study carried out by UNICEF returned to school^[3].



Source: Malaysiakini (2018). [Examining Key Drivers Of Child Marriage](#)

Generally, those that marry young tend to drop out of school early and permanently. Thus affecting their chances of getting better jobs and a higher standard of living that can come with a better education. This traps the individual in the cycle of poverty.

For some, those that marry early are more prone to teenage pregnancy, as well as other health consequences. These include potential complications during and after pregnancy and labour. This is usually caused by the mother's body simply being unable to cope^[2].

Since a young girl's body is still developing there are also risks of higher infant mortality and the possibility of contracting sexually transmitted diseases at a young age^[2]. With the responsibility of raising a baby, school becomes a passing interest. The needs of the infant are prioritized, making it near impossible to get back on the right track.

Few child brides have decision making powers within their own marital households, and in the rare cases where they are allowed to work, they only participate in lower labour force careers or small household businesses and low earning power^[18]. These ladies also have less control over their household assets.

Subsequently, when these young brides become young mothers, their children will also be raised in a low-income background, thus passing on the cycle of poverty to the next generation.

Let Children Be Children

Since an uproar in 2018, caused by the union of an 11 year old girl marrying a 41 year old man^[11], the Malaysian government has placed a long term National Strategic Plan in handling the causes of child marriage to be implemented between 2020 - 2025^[19]. The plan consists of short, medium and long term programmes involving the federal and state government agencies, targeting all factors regarding child marriage. The state of Sabah has expressed its commitment to the cause as well. In 2019, the state had begun its own action plan to combat the practise.



Source: The Star (2018). [Child Marriage Is No Happily Ever After](#)

Countless NGOs are fighting to ban the occurrence of child marriages and boost the minimum age to 18 years old making it a mandatory requirement for all marriage applications. Organisations such as the [Association of Women Lawyers \(AWL\)](#) are fighting against all forms of child sex crimes

and putting forward motions to tightening laws on the matter. Dr Rashed Mustafa, UNICEF Representative to Malaysia and Special Representative to Brunei Darussalam, stated,



Child marriage is a global problem, and a protection threat that denies children a chance to learn, play, grow and develop to their full potential. Child marriage also exposes children to particular risks and threats to their well-being, including exploitation and abuse, as well as health risks posed by early pregnancy and childbirth.^[2]



Source: Agencia EFE (2018). [Activists deliver petition calling for end to child marriage in Malaysia](#)

Sisters of Islam hosted a public forum in 2016 discussing the matter with all stakeholders, each representative highlighting their concerns with Malaysia's current standing regarding child marriage^[20].

Debates of implementing sex education in the Malaysian education syllabus are on-going. It is of utmost importance that children gain the general awareness and education about their bodies, sexuality and rights in a safe and monitored environment like the school classroom.

Changing the Course of Children's Lives

The most important preventative measure that can be taken to address this issue is to raise awareness on its severity. The hush-hush mentality of Asians needs to be changed and open discussions need to be held.

There are few organizations that are actively advocating for the rights of children, as many of them cannot stand up for themselves. Below are just to name a few that have spoken out on the matter.

- [Sabah Women's Action-Resources Group \(SAWO\)](#)
- [PACOS Trust \(Partners of Community Organizations in Sabah\)](#)
- [Childline Malaysia](#)
- [Pasukan Pelindung WP](#)
- [Women's Aid Organisation \(WAO\)](#)
- [Association of Women Lawyers \(AWL\)](#)
- [Yayasan Chow Kit](#)
- [Educational, Welfare and Research Foundation \(EWRF\)](#)
- [Malaysian Advocates for Child Health \(MACH\)](#)
- [The Fed of Reproductive Health Associations Malaysia \(FRHAM\)](#)
- [Malaysian Child Welfare Council \(MKKM\)](#)
- [Geutanyoe Foundation and Projek Layang Layang](#)
- [Challenges Foundation, National Early Intervention Council \(NECIC\)](#)
- [Voice of the Children \(VOC\)](#)
- [Refuge for the Refugees, Malaysian Child Resource Institute \(MCRI\)](#)
- [Reproductive Health Association Kelantan \(ReHAK\)](#)

REFERENCES:

1. UNICEF. (2020). Child Marriage Aorund the World. [Link.](#)
2. UNICEF. (2021). Advocacy Brief: Towards Ending Child Marriage in Malaysia. [Link.](#)
3. UNICEF. (2018). Child Marriage in Malaysia. [Link.](#)
4. A. Hakim. (2019). How Msia's Complex Laws Put Child Marriage Ban At A Standstill. [Link.](#)
5. A. Tang. (2019). Non-Muslim child marriages on the rise. [Link.](#)
6. Easy Law. (2009). Law Reform (Marriage and Divorce) Act 1976. [Link.](#)
7. A. Adilah. (2018). How Malaysia's legal system allows child marriage, five cases daily. [Link.](#)
8. Syariah Government. (2003). Islamic Family Law (State of Selangor) Enactment 2003. [Link.](#)
9. I. S. A. Shuaib. & R. Law. (2010). Marriage is my right, says 14-year-old Maya. [Link.](#)
10. R. Tan. (2018). 41-year-old Malaysian weds 11-year-old girl in Thailand. [Link.](#)
11. M. A. Sani. (2013). Married off because she was raped. Astro Awani. [Link](#)
12. K. Hodal. (2013). Malaysian Rape Accused Marries 13-year-old Alleged Victim. The Guardian. [Link.](#)
13. O. K. Hin. (2017). Child Marriages in Malaysia: Reality, Resistance and Recourse. Penang Institute. [Link.](#)
14. World Bank. (2017). Economic Impact of Child Marriage: Global Synthesis Report (Conference Edition). [Link.](#)
15. Iustitiani, N. S. D., & Ajisuksmo, C. R. P. (2018). Supporting Factors and Consequences of Child Marriage. ANIMA Indonesian Psychological Journal, 33(2), 100. [Link.](#)
16. A. Kohno, M. Dahlui, N. Daliana N. Farid, R. Safii & T. Nakayama. (2020). Why girls get married early in Sarawak, Malaysia - an exploratory qualitative study. BMC Women's Health. [Link.](#)
17. Parsons, J., Edmeades, J., Kes, A., Petroni, S., Sexton, M., & Wodon, Q. (2015). Economic Impacts of Child Marriage: A Review of the Literature. Review of Faith and International Affairs, 13(3), 12–22. [Link.](#)

-
18. Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development. (2020). Executive Summary: National Strategy Plan in Handling the Causes of Child Marriage. [Link](#).
 19. Asian-Pacific Resource and Research Centre for Women Arrow. (2018). National Report: Child Marriage: Its Relationship with Religion, Culture and Patriarchy. [Link](#).



ABOUT WIKI IMPACT

Wiki Impact is an open research platform for the changemaker in all of us. We are a collaborative platform to make evidence-based research readily available to changemakers to drive greater social impact in Malaysia. We believe that significant and sustainable change can happen when paired with comprehensive, clear, and compelling data.

This whitepaper was put together based on a few shorts that we have written on our website. If you have additional data related to this topic or other social issues in Malaysia, please get in touch with us. For more facts and stories, visit www.wikiimpact.com.