

*I would like to make **4 broad reflections on the potential role that civil registration and vital statistics (CRVS) systems have in contributing to the protection and promotion of children's rights. I will specifically focus on legal identity for all children through birth registration and the prevention and end to child marriage.***

**1. First, a strong civil registration and vital statistics system is Necessary, But Not Sufficient**

*While CRVS is a critical part of the solution, it comes in **after** the decision to marry has already been made. Most child marriages never reach civil registration—because they happen informally, quietly, and far from state oversight.*

*The first line of action must be at the **individual, household and community level**, where child marriage is initiated, accepted, and often celebrated. This means working with girls and boys, parents and families, local leaders, and grassroots structures to shift norms, create a shared sense of accountability, and prevent child marriage before it happens.*

*CRVS can support prevention—but it cannot lead it.*

*CRVS reform must therefore not be done in isolation without also:*

- *Legal reform,*
- *Empowerment of girls, boys, women and men and families,*
- *Access to education, and*
- *Strong social protection systems.*

*It takes a whole ecosystem to prevent and end child marriage—CRVS helps anchor it in legal identity and accountability.*

**2. Second, a well-functioning CRVS system helps prevent child marriage by:**

- *Providing legal proof of age through birth registration, making it harder to falsify or conceal a child's age at marriage;*
- *Requiring formal registration of all marriages, allowing authorities to enforce minimum age laws; and*
- *Generating vital statistics that highlight the impact of harmful practices—such as higher rates of maternal and child mortality linked to child brides themselves having children.*

*When civil registration systems are built to include everyone, they become powerful tools for prevention—making children legally visible and enabling enforcement of age-related protections.*

*Without registration, child marriages are more likely to go untracked, unchallenged, and unaddressed.*

**3. Third, what does it take – CRVS Transformation for Prevention**

**i. Reaching Informal and Customary Marriages**

*Most child marriages happen outside the formal system—in religious or customary settings. CRVS systems must be transformed to capture these unions through:*

- *Legal frameworks that recognize and regulate non-civil marriages,*
- *Formal partnerships with traditional and religious leaders to report marriages, and*
- *Community mobilization to build trust in the protective power of registration.*

*If marriage events remain outside the CRVS system, so will the girls and boys we're trying to protect.*

**ii. Interoperability Across Sectors and Systems and related challenges**

*Preventing child marriage depends on our ability to connect the dots—between birth, marriage, identity, and protection systems. But in most countries, these systems are built and managed separately.*

1. **No legal mandate for cross-sector data exchange blocks age verification**  
*In many countries, birth and marriage registration are governed by different laws and managed by separate ministries. Without legal provisions that explicitly allow these systems to exchange personal data, registrars cannot access birth records to verify age during marriage registration—even when the technology exists.*

*If the law doesn't authorize data sharing between systems, we cannot verify age, enforce minimum age laws, or protect children from child marriage.*

2. **Weak institutional coordination leaves child marriages unregistered**  
*Marriage registration involves multiple actors—civil registrars, local governments, religious*

leaders, and customary authorities. But in many countries, there are no formal coordination mechanisms or clearly defined roles across these institutions. As a result, marriages conducted outside the civil system—where most child marriages occur—are not reported or recorded.

*If institutions aren't linked by clear mandates and workflows, child marriages will continue to occur off the radar and beyond the reach of the law.*

3. **Siloed and disconnected systems block early warning and response**  
Marriage and birth registration systems are often developed separately—using incompatible platforms, paper-based processes, or offline tools. Without digital integration and real-time data exchange, registrars cannot access birth records to verify age or flag underage marriages.

*If systems can't exchange information in real time, we can't intervene when a child is at risk.*

4. **Inconsistent classification of unions leads to under-reporting of child marriage**  
Even when a child is in a union, systems may label it as “cohabitation,” “informal union,” or “customary arrangement” instead of recognizing it as marriage. These terms obscure the legal implications—especially when systems don't flag such unions as harmful or illegal when they involve a minor.

*If child unions are misclassified or ignored across systems, we fail to identify them as child marriage—and we miss the chance to protect the child.*

5. *In many settings, couples must present a birth certificate to register a marriage. But if one or both parties were never registered at birth, the process stops there. Many simply abandon the process altogether—leaving both the marriage and prior birth unregistered.*

*When systems aren't designed to work together, they exclude the very people most in need of protection—and child marriage continues unchecked.*

*Ultimately, we need **person-centered CRVS systems** that link life events to a unique individual. This enables real-time validation of birth records at the point of marriage and flags underage applicants automatically—before harm occurs.*

#### **4. My fourth point is around Enablers: Digitalization and Decentralization**

*To deliver on this vision, countries must:*

- **Digitalise CRVS systems** to allow secure, real-time data sharing and automated age verification; and
- **Decentralize services** so registration is accessible where people live—including in the most marginalized regions.

*Because if the system can't reach girls and boys where they are, it can't protect them.*

1. **In conclusion, 32 per cent of approximately 70 million girls and young women in West and Central Africa married as children.**

*Across West and Central Africa, birth registration remains overall low (yet with important sub-regional variations, as Western African for example is making good acceleration). Marriage registration is often informal (with most unregistered). Yet momentum is building—more countries are integrating marriage into CRVS reforms and linking it to legal identity.*

*At UNICEF, we remain committed to supporting governments in using CRVS as a rights-based, preventive system. We —governments, Regional Economic Commissions (including the AUC, ECOWAS, ECCAS), civil society, traditional leaders, girls and women's networks, human rights mechanisms —notably the Committees on the Rights of the Child and the ACERWC, UN agencies and other partners—must work together:*

- **So that every child is registered at birth,**
- **Every marriage is formally recorded,**
- **And no child is forced into marriage and all children have legal visibility or protection.**

*Because legal identity is the first step toward protection—and the foundation for justice.  
Thank you*