

Forum: Special Conference on Children (SCC)

Issue: The question of child brides

Specialist Chair: Amadea Hofmann

Introduction

Despite national laws and international agreements, child marriage remains a momentous threat to children's' human rights. According to UNFPA, "one in three girls in low and middle-income countries (excluding China) will marry before the age of 18". Due to population growth in regions where child marriage is more prevalent, the total number of child marriages is projected to increase by 2030 (Marrying Too Young 6).

Although boys are also married as children, girls are disproportionately affected; child marriage is a manifestation of gender inequality, reflecting social norms that perpetuate discrimination against girls. Child marriage directly threatens girls' lives and health, simultaneously limiting their future prospects. The majority of child brides are not physically or mentally ready to be married. Additionally, there is a lot of pressure for child brides to become pregnant while still adolescents, increasing the risk of complications in pregnancy or childbirth. These complications are the leading cause of death among older adolescent girls. Consequently, girls are often forced to drop out of school so that they can assume household responsibilities. This is a denial of their right to education and also contributes to worse health and economic outcomes and also poverty cycle.

Ending child marriage will help break the intergenerational cycle of poverty by allowing girls and women to participate more fully in society.

Definition of Key Terms

- 1. Alimony:** A husband's or wife's provision for a spouse after separation or divorce. In the case of child marriage, women cannot demand alimony from their husband because the marriage is not legal.
- 2. Best interests of the child:** According to Article 3 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child: "In all actions concerning children, whether undertaken by public or private social welfare institutions, courts of law, administrative authorities or legislative bodies, the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration".
- 3. Betrothal in the cradle:** An oral contract that is made between families, when their children are still infants, to marry them off to each other in the future.
- 4. Birth control:** Women married at a very early age face a higher risk of being infected by sexually transmitted diseases, as they do not have sufficient knowledge and experience. Additionally, they do not have the power to decide when or how many children to have.
- 5. Bride kidnapping:** A tradition of forced marriage, where men abduct a woman and detain her. The woman, now dishonored, is forcibly married because she is made to believe that she has no other choice than marriage.

6. **Child marriage:** The legal or customary union between two people, of whom one or both spouses is below the age of 18.
7. **Domestic violence:** Violent or aggressive behaviour within the home, typically involving the violent abuse of a spouse. The risk of physical and sexual violence is higher in child marriages.
8. **Dowry:** An amount of property or money brought by a bride to her husband on their marriage, often acting as a financial burden on impoverished families.
9. **Forced marriage:** Compulsion to marry, by means of violence, insistence, intimidation, terrorisation, emotional pressure, and threats.
10. **Forms of abuse:** There are emotional, physical and sexual forms of child abuse.
11. **Non-formal education:** Education given to those who have not benefited from formal education in various fields, including reading, writing, and professional training. Many women who were married off at an early age and were once deprived of education opportunities can benefit from non-formal learning.
12. **Notification obligation:** Whoever witnesses any kind of child abuse, including child marriage, has the obligation to notify the relevant authorities.
13. **Peer education:** Unofficial or scheduled educational events that aim at the development of young people, through sharing knowledge, attitudes and skills.
14. **Right to choose:** All people have the right to choose freely the person they are going to marry. In child marriages, the majority of women are not the ones who “choose” but rather the ones who “are chosen”.

Background Information

Child marriage is a complex issue, primarily rooted in poverty and gender inequality. The general causes are poverty, insecurity, and cultural practices/tradition. Gender inequality is the overarching factor in all of these causes; patriarchal values and the desire to control female sexuality goes unquestioned in a lot of cultures.

More than half of girls from the poorest families in the developing world are married as children. Impoverished families view marrying their daughter at a young age as a way to ease economic hardship, by transferring this “burden” to her husband’s family. It allows the bride’s parents to reduce family expenses because they have one person less to supply for. Some see investing in their son’s education as a more worthwhile investment. In some cases, marriage of a daughter is a way to repay debts, manage disputes, or settle social,

economic and political alliances. Additionally, younger brides typically command smaller dowries and can even produce extra income, creating an incentive for parents.

Many parents marry their daughters young because they feel it is in her best interest, often to ensure her safety in areas where girls are at high risk of harassment and physical/sexual assault. Girls and women are often used as “weapons” of war in conflict, meaning they are abused or sold into prostitution under the guise of marriage. Therefore, girls are more vulnerable to child marriage in humanitarian crises, such as natural disasters.

In some communities, when girls start to menstruate, they become women in the eyes of the community. This makes marriage the natural next step towards giving a girl her status as wife and mother. Some traditions can have harmful practices linked, for example in southern Ethiopia, where child marriage is usually followed by female genital mutilation/cutting, which is considered a rite of passage to womanhood. The difficulty with traditional practices is that they often go unquestioned because they have been part of a community’s life and identity for a

Major Countries and Organizations Involved

UNICEF: An agency of the United Nations that specialises in supporting the implementation of child rights.

ECPAT International: An international network which organises the fight against child trafficking, with the aim of child prostitution, pornography and sexual intercourse.

Girls not Brides: A global network to end child marriage.

Law for the Protection of the Child: Regulations of the procedures and principles in relation to the protection of children and those who are inclined to criminality, guaranteeing their rights and welfare.

‘No to Child Brides’ Platform: It is a platform which was established by 63 civil society organisations and university departments from 14 provinces, aiming at raising awareness about child marriages.

Partnership Network for Preventing Violence Against the Child: This network has been established with the support of UNICEF. Its aim is to facilitate and support rights-based monitoring and advocacy activities for the prevention of violence against children, conducted by national and local civil society organisations, universities, and professional organizations advocating children rights in Turkey.

Committee on the Rights of the Child: A body of independent experts that monitors the implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child by states that have ratified the Convention.

Timeline of Events

1994: In a landmark international consensus, countries agreed on measures to eliminate child marriage, as well as to “strictly enforce laws to ensure that marriage is entered into only with the free and full consent of the intending spouses”.

11 October 2012: International Day of the Girl Child was declared by the UN.

Relevant UN Treaties and Events

Declaration of the Rights of the Child: The realisation of the need to establish the awareness that children have different physical, physiological, behavioural and psychological characteristics from adults, that they grow up and develop continuously, that childcare is a public issue, and that everyone should shoulder this responsibility with scientific approaches was endorsed by the United Nations General Assembly in 20 November 1959.

Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women: CEDAW, as it is abbreviated, is an international convention, prepared by the UN in 1981. The parties commit themselves to ensure elimination of discriminatory patterns and behaviours in all areas of life.

Convention on the Rights of the Child: It is a convention adopted by the UN in 1989 ensuring that national laws must be in accordance with this convention.

Previous Attempts to Solve the Issue

Ethiopia: Changing social norms and delaying marriage for girls

With the support of UNFPA in its first stage, *Berhane Hewan* was one of a number of programmes that supported girls to avoid child marriage by broadening their opportunities. It promoted: schooling, functional literacy, life skills, sexual and reproductive health, and HIV information and services for girls. Girls’ clubs served as platforms from which married and unmarried girls found social support, accessed mentors, and learned new skills. At the same time, the programme sensitized communities to the risks associated with child marriage and promoted alternatives to the practice.

Malawi: Confronting child marriage at the highest levels of government

UNFPA worked with Malawi's National Youth Council to launch an advocacy campaign aimed at parliamentarians, calling on their support to end the practice of child marriage. The effort resulted in the repeal of a law that would have established 16 as the legal age for marriage. Plans are under way to redraft the law and high-level commitment has been given to address inconsistencies in the laws related to the minimum age of marriage. The campaign also resulted in a UN Joint Programme on Adolescent Girls that supports governments and partners to target girls at risk of child marriage and early pregnancy. The programme, led by UNFPA, encompasses non-formal education, protection from violence, mentors for vulnerable girls, and access to sexual and reproductive health and HIV services.

Nepal: Helping girls help themselves—and other girls

Nepal has conducted a series of advocacy efforts to empower adolescents and young girls in all 75 districts to mobilize their out-of-school peers. Resource centres were set up by local women's cooperatives in which adolescent girls could interact with their peers and other stakeholders and could participate in learning opportunities. In all, more than 5,000 adolescent girls in 18 districts participated in two months of training in reproductive health, focusing also on life skills. It was an engaging way for adolescent girls to learn about the changes taking place in their bodies, enhance their self-confidence and self-reliance, and consider their options in regards to education, work, legal rights, marriage, childbearing, family relations and community involvement. Many of the girls initiated dialogues with their parents concerning the risks associated with child marriage and sought support from others in their community. The project also honed the girls' problem-solving, decision-making and negotiation skills, and helped them establish supportive relationships with their peers. Following these "Choose your Future" trainings, girls spoke out against child marriage and, in several cases, were actually able to persuade parents to stop planned weddings or to refer their cases to paralegal committees. Girls also organized programmes to encourage parents to send their daughters to school.

Pakistan: Targeting child marriage and obstetric fistula

In 2006, UNFPA launched a fistula repair project as part of an overall programme to improve maternal health. A principal component of this four year project consists of seminars targeted at community members and healthcare professionals that explain, in a culturally-appropriate manner, the direct links between child marriage, early pregnancy and fistula. In a further effort to create awareness, the project also runs workshops to sensitize media personnel about women's rights, child marriage, and fistula prevention and treatment. More recently, in Punjab province, UNFPA supported the formulation of a youth policy that addresses child marriage and early pregnancy. Youth networks have also raised awareness in their communities about the dangers of child marriage.

Possible Solutions

1. Existing laws against child marriage should be enforced, especially when girls at risk of child marriage, or who are already married, seek protection and justice
2. The legal age of marriage should be raised to 18 everywhere
3. Government, civil society, and other partners must work together to ensure girls have access to education, health information and services, and life-skills training

4. Offer alternatives to marriage by providing safe spaces and services to girls, and work with communities to change norms around child marriage
5. Invest in research to understand how to adapt solutions to the local context
6. Married girls need reproductive health services to help them avoid early pregnancy
7. Child marriage is caused by factors - poverty, gender inequality, insecurity - that worsen in times of crisis
 - a. To offer a long term solution to child marriage, humanitarian and development efforts must complement each other
8. Those who are already pregnant need access to appropriate care throughout pregnancy, childbirth and in the postpartum period
 - . They should be supported, if they choose, in returning to formal or non-formal school
9. Child marriage should be adequately addressed in humanitarian settings
 - . Involve girls at risk and married girls from the beginning and make sure programmes meet their needs
 - a. Incorporate child marriage as a key issue into other aspects of a humanitarian response

Bibliography

Works Cited

- "Child Marriage: An Overview." *United Nations Population Fund*, www.unfpa.org/child-marriage. Accessed 9 Aug. 2018.
- Child Marriage in Humanitarian Settings*. Oct. 2017. *Girls Not Brides*, www.girlsnotbrides.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/Child-marriage-in-humanitarian-settings.pdf. Accessed 9 Aug. 2018.
- Dogan, Selen. "Child Marriage Key Concepts and Glossary." *Ilgin Yorulmaz*, 6 July 2017, ilginyorulmaz.com/2017/07/06/child-marriage-key-concepts-and-glossary/. Accessed 9 Aug. 2018.
- Ending Child Marriage: Progress and Prospects*. New York, 2014. *United Nations Children's Fund*, www.unicef.org/media/files/Child_Marriage_Report_7_17_LR..pdf. Accessed 9 Aug. 2018.
- "How Can We End Child Marriage?" *Girls Not Brides*, 2018, www.girlsnotbrides.org/how-can-we-end-child-marriage/. Accessed 9 Aug. 2018.
- Marrying Too Young: End Child Marriage*. 2012. *United Nations Population Fund*, www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/MarryingTooYoung.pdf.
- "Why Does Child Marriage Happen?" *Girls Not Brides*, 2018, www.girlsnotbrides.org/why-does-it-happen/. Accessed 9 Aug. 2018.