



Forum: Sustainable Development Goals 5

Issue: The issue of child marriages and child brides

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Introduction

The literal meaning of child marriages, according to UNICEF, is the marriage of a girl or boy before the age of 18, it refers to both formal marriages and informal unions in which children under the age of 18 live with a partner as if married. Research shows that there is a strong correlation between girls getting married before the age of 18 and being denied their right to basic forms of life. Most of the time, these marriages are forced too, which means these boys and girls are not even given the right to pick between who and when they want to get married and start this significant chapter of their life.

Child marriages affect both boys and girls, but it increasingly affects girls more. Additionally, child marriages take place all over the world, but it takes place in South Asia disproportionately. Bangladesh has the fourth highest rate in the world and Nepal has one the highest rates of child marriage for both boys and girls. India, by far, has the largest number of child brides in the world, around one third of the total. In South Asia, around 45% of women aged 20-24 years reported that they got married before the legal age (18 years old); almost one in five girls are married before the age of 15.

Child marriages are a result of economic problems within the family, as well as societal forces. When a family brings a daughter into their family, they are told that she should get married young otherwise no one would want her. These families in this circumstance are being pressured by their communities while they are already financially struggling to provide for their daughter(s). In these communities where child marriages take place, it is seen as a cultural norm and the practice is prevalent, girls are only seen as wives from the day they were born in these communities.

Child marriages create many problems for both the bride and the child of the bride. It restricts and ends a girl's childhood and education and it increases the risk of domestic abuse. She is put at a higher-risk of early and unsafe pregnancies and it minimises her pecuniary/job opportunities. Children of child brides are 60% more likely to die in their first year of life and families of child brides are more likely to be poverty-stricken and unhealthy. These child brides are five times more likely to die from early pregnancies and childbirth compared to women in their 20s and are at higher risk of HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases.



Definition of Key Terms

Child marriages

Child marriage is defined as a marriage of a girl or boy before the age of 18 and refers to both formal marriages and informal unions in which children under the age of 18 live with partner as if married.

Child bride

A very young bride, usually coerced or pressured into marriage with a much older man in a conservative culture.

Forced marriage

A marriage in which one or both of the parties is married without his or her consent or against his or her will.

Honour killing

The murder of a relative who is perceived to have brought dishonor upon the family.

Dowry

The practice where a bride's family provides assets to the groom's family as part of the marriage exchange.

Domestic violence

Violent or aggressive behaviour within the home, commonly involving abuse from a spouse or partner.

Background Information

Throughout history the practice of child marriage was commonly acceptable as the average life expectancy was up to 40-45 years of age in those earlier years. Girls were often married as soon as they reached puberty, sometimes even prior. Following the industrial revolution, countries began allowing women to receive the right to education, voting and to work. Additionally, as economic conditions improved there were massive increases in average life expectancy, due to advanced medical practices; the practice of child marriages were questioned and the number of child brides started to decrease rapidly, to the point where it almost disappeared. However, in many other countries of the world, child marriages continue to occur regardless of global campaigns and resistance against this act.



Motive for child marriages in the past

Child marriages took place for centuries. In former times, girls would become child brides as the life expectancy was very low due to inadequate medical care and poor economy. This was seen as a problem as women would not be able to reproduce many times and there was as much time to raise their kids. Women would be married off as soon as they hit puberty however men would marry later on as they were expected to be completely in charge of all household expenses, so they had to wait till they had a sufficient amount of income and wealth. Basically, fully mature and financially independent men would get married to adolescent girls who had to provide dowry so the men’s side would accept the proposal. Note that this practice was most popular before the industrial revolution, which was when healthcare and the economy grew.

Society’s change in perspective

Like previously mentioned, after the industrial revolution the global economy developed and healthcare became adequate and accessible. The life expectancy for everyone had considerably increased. This caused society to question and reject the idea of child marriages as there was no notable reason to practice it, it was even made illegal in many countries. Around this time women’s rights also started significantly increasing. However, in many rural areas, particularly in Africa, South America and South Asia, it was (and still is) significantly practiced.

Major Countries and Organizations Involved



Girls not brides provides this data for the top 20 countries with the highest absolute numbers of child marriage.



United Nations Children's Fund

In 2016, UNICEF (United Nations Children's Fund) and UNFPA (United Nations Population Fund) launched the Global Programme to End Child Marriage, which promotes the rights of young girls to avoid early marriage and pregnancy, and help them in achieving their aspirations through education, it reached around 7.9 vulnerable girls thought 2016 to 2019.

Girls not brides (NGO)

This international non-profit organization combats the increasing number of child brides and enables girls to fulfil their abilities. Girls not brides recognises that community engagement is the motive and base for change. Girls not brides work towards raising awareness of the consequences of child marriage through discussions at a local, national and international level. They look to mobilise all necessary financial support (other needed support also) to end child marriage. They have over 1000 civil society organizations from over 95 countries, members are based throughout Asia, Europe, the Middle East, Africa, and the Americas.

India

In India, 7% of girls are married by the age of 15, 27% are married by the age of 18 and have the highest absolute number of child brides globally. Accordingly, India has resolved to take out young and forced marriage by 2030 and settled upon the Convention on the Rights of the Child which sets the base period of marriage at 18 years old. India has set a National Action Plan to prevent child marriages in 2013, however it has not been finalised. Additionally, India is a member of the South Asian Initiative to End Violence Against Children and agreed to look upon recommendations to improve legal specifications against child marriage during the 2017 Universal Periodic Review.

Niger

Research from UNICEF has shown that 28% of girls are married by the age of 15, 76% are married by the age of 18 and that Niger has the highest prevalence rate of child marriage in the world and the 14th highest absolute number of child brides. Like India, Niger has committed to eliminate child and forced marriage by 2030 and has agreed upon the Convention on the Rights of the Child which sets the minimum age of marriage at 18 years of age. Additionally, in 2016, the Ministry established a national committee to coordinate actions intending to end child marriage in Niger.

Pakistan

It's been reported that under 3% of girls are married by the age of 15 in Pakistan, 21% are married before the age of 16 and Pakistan has the sixth highest number of absolute child brides in the world. Due to these astounding statistics, Pakistan has agreed upon the Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1990, which sets the minimum age of marriage to 18 years of age; and the Convention on the



Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, obligates to ensure free and full consent to marriage. Pakistan is a member of the South Asian Initiative to End Violence Against Children and focuses on eliminating gender disparity in education through Pakistan's National Education Policy.

Timeline of Events

Date	Description of Event
20th century	Beginning of the industrial revolution, the time where child marriages were less prevalent and were rejected
18th December 1979	Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women
20th November 1989	The Convention on the Rights of a Child
25th September 2013	First-ever resolution on child, early and forced marriage adopted at the Human Rights Council
1st July 2015	United Nations Human Rights Council adopted a resolution to strengthen efforts to prevent and eliminate child, early and forced marriage
22nd June 2017	Resolution adopted which recognises child marriage as a violation of human rights and calls for strengthened efforts to prevent and eliminate this practice and support married girls

Relevant UN Treaties and Events

- Convention on Consent to Marriage, Minimum Age for Marriage, and Registration of Marriages, 7 November 1962 **(A/RES/1763(XXVII))**
- Convention on the Rights of the Child, 20 November 1989 **(A/RES/44/25)**
- Preventing and eliminating child, early and forced marriage, 2 April 2014 **(A/HRC/26/22)**
- Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, 18 December 1979 **(A/RES/34/180)**
- Child, early and forced marriage, 18 December 2013 **(A/RES/68/148)**
- Strengthening efforts to prevent and eliminate child, early and forced marriage, 2 July 2015 **(A/HRC/RES/29/8)**



Previous Attempts to solve the Issue

Although most countries have laws against child marriages and a minimum age of marriage, civilians of the countries do not face the consequences for this illegal act. Laws should be made and amended to fittingly penalize these perpetrators.

Additionally, as many girls are being given their right to education, their communities will often reject them as being 'too modernised' or 'unfit for marriage'. Adolescent girls face disownment from their families or honour killings for many reasons, these being: pursuing an education, leaving their marriage due to abuse, rejecting 'important' proposals, etc. As NGOs work towards providing girls with the ability to do all of that, they do not ensure their safety from their angry communities after they do this. This causes more harm than good for most girls.

The Child Marriage Restraint Act in 1929 was established as a conclusion of pressure by social reform groups and individuals who campaigned against the unpleasant consequences of child marriage. However, this act failed. The reason it failed was because the offence was hardly reported to the authorities since the act prohibited complaints after a whole year of marriage. Officers also required a warrant to arrest offenders, which took time and would not always come through, and there was a very small amount of successful prosecution.

Possible Solutions

Many countries still do not have an appropriate minimum age of marriage, amendments to laws must be made to raise the minimum age to 18 for both boys and girls. Countries need to also amend and make laws prohibiting forced marriage, putting sanctions against perpetrators and make it compulsory to register all marriages.

Like mentioned in the previous section, girls face harsh consequences from their communities for simply practicing their rights in marriage and education. NGOs and other organisations that assist girls in practicing their rights should also ensure that after they take these brave steps, they are protected from the harm and anger of their family and/or their community.

Governments and the UN should encourage and assist adolescent girls should to attain a good-quality education, where they learn about the consequences of child marriage and should be learned to take their own decisions regarding marriage. It should be a requirement for schools to educate young girls and boys properly on child and early marriage. This education should be age-appropriate, relevant to the place and religion of the kids, and girls should be made aware of their rights in a marriage.



Research and data on child and early marriage should be updated and improved, so the organisations resolving and dealing with this issue are better aware of the situation regarding child marriages. Government officials in developing countries should be well aware of the legal procedures regarding child and early marriage and social service workers and people those in the healthcare field should know what to do when they are confronted with this issue.

Laws should be adopted to ban the practice of dowry, like done in Pakistan. Countries should also carry out awareness-raising among officials about the legal prohibition on dowry and assist in conceiving a response for violations of this law.

Governments should support girls and women in setting up enterprises. They can provide 'mentors' that can assist girls in developing skills to establish businesses. This way women will become financially independent, and in the case of rejection within the community they won't suffer economically.

Guiding Questions

1. What are the prevailing customs, moral rules and social norms about why and when a girl's marriage should take place?
2. Under what circumstances is marriage of a girl deemed to be necessary, desirable, acceptable, or unacceptable?
3. What is considered to be the 'ideal age' of marriage? What is considered to be 'too early' and 'too late'?
4. What factors are most important to the timing of marriage? (economic stress, education, whether she is contributing income to the household, pre-marital pregnancy, experience or threat of sexual violence, the social status of the potential husband, etc.)
5. Do girls' ideas about marriage, and wishes concerning choice and timing of marriage, differ from the community's? If so, how?
6. Is there a difference between the age girls say they would like / would have liked to be married and actual practices?
7. Who are the stakeholders in sustaining child marriage?
8. Who are the main decision-makers in child marriage?
9. How can we most effectively intervene to change attitudes and individual and collective patterns of behaviour about child marriage?
10. Is your delegation affected by child marriages?
11. Has your delegation taken any steps to eradicate child marriages? If so, what?



Bibliography

“About child marriage” *Girls not brides*

<https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/about-child-marriage/>

“The Facts on Child Marriage” *International Women's Health Coalition*

<https://iwhc.org/resources/facts-child-marriage/>

“Child marriage” *UNICEF*

<https://www.unicef.org/rosa/what-we-do/child-protection/child-marriage>

“Child marriage data” *UNICEF*

<https://data.unicef.org/topic/child-protection/child-marriage/>

“Atlas” *Girls not brides*

<https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/where-does-it-happen/atlas/>

Appendix or Appendices

1. https://www.planinternational.be/sites/default/files/2017-09/acmi_research_report_2015_lowres_pdf.pdf - This will give you further insight on child marriages and an extensive description and evaluations of the issue as a whole.
2. <https://www.unfpa.org/child-marriage-frequently-asked-questions> - This answers all common questions regarding child marriage.
3. <https://plan-international.org/7-child-marriage-stories> - This shows you seven different, yet similar, stories of women who suffered through child marriages and why it's a concerning issue.