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Combating child marriage in LEDCs



**RESEARCH
REPORT**

Recommended by:



Mayra Kalaora

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Forum: Human Rights Council

Issue: Combatting child marriage in LEDCs

Student Officer: Mayra Kalaora

Introduction

Child marriage is marriage that occurs before the age of 18. It is a fundamental violation of human rights as it damages one's rights to health, education, choice, and a freedom from violence – all rights preserved in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Although child marriage is more widespread among girls than boys, it is nevertheless a violation of human rights for both sexes. This report's main focus will be on the child marriage of girls due to the aforementioned information regarding the predominance of the practice among the said gender. There are many factors that contribute to the prevalence of child marriage, ranging from poverty and social norms to religion and a lack of proper legislative framework to ban the practice. The drivers for child marriage and its nature vary across communities, regions and countries; this indicates how child marriage is a deeply rooted, complex issue that needs to be solved via extensive consideration of multiple factors that will further be explored in the report.

Definition of Key Terms

Child Marriage: UNICEF defines child marriage 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 a partner as if married.” It is considered as a form of violence against children.

Less Economically Developed Countries (LEDCs): Also referred to as “developing countries”, LEDCs exhibit the lowest living standards and socioeconomic development, ranking among the lowest in the Human Development Index.

Dowry: Property or a sum of money given by the bride's family to that of the groom's in the event of a marriage.

Bride price: Property or a sum of money given by the groom's family to that of the bride's in the event of a marriage.

General Overview

A Brief History of Child Marriage

Until the 20th century, child marriages considered as normal almost all around the globe. An important factor in this situation was the average life expectancy of 40-45 years, compelling people to reproduce as early as possible. Religion also played a role: many religions defined a girl's eligibility to marry as the point where she reached puberty – her first instance of menstruation. For example, Hindu vedic scriptures decreed the age of a girl's marriage to be adulthood, identified by the scriptures as three years after the girl had entered puberty. In the 20th century, however, as countries increasingly developed, the concept of child marriage began to be

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questioned. Today, although most developed countries have eradicated child marriage, it is still a great issue in many LEDCs.

Causes of Child Marriage

Poverty and Insecurity

More than 50% of girls that come from families struggling with poverty in developing countries are forced into marriage as children. Families, and even sometimes girls themselves, believe that marriage will bring them economic security due to a newfound assistance from the husband's side. There are some cases in which the marriage of a daughter is considered as a means to pay back debts, handle conflict, or form economic/social alliances.

The age-old practice of paying a dowry still prevails at some developing countries – many families face hardships in gathering the money to pay to the groom's family when giving off their daughter, so they exhibit a tendency to betroth their daughters as soon as they rushedly earn a sufficient sum of money, which causes a girl to marry quite early.

Paying a brideprice is also still in practice in many LEDCs: some cultures even go so far as to increase the price as the age of the bride decreases. As a consequence, many families get the incentive of essentially putting their daughters up for auction at concerningly young ages to relieve themselves of the economic hardships that poverty imposes.

Many LEDCs face a lack of security, often in the form of violence. Parents sometimes believe that it is in the best interest of their daughter to place her under the control and security of a husband so that she is protected from any harassment, sexual assault, or physical violence.

Gender Inequality

In many cultures, girls are not held equal to boys and are considered an economic burden to their family as the family would consider a son to be more worthy of monetary support. Hence, marrying one's daughter off as early as possible would relieve the family of budgetary constrictions and transfer the burden on the husband's family.

There is also the issue of the protection of a girl's sexuality and virginity: many cultures consider a girl's virginity to be paramount when it comes to a family's honor. In such cultures, girls who lose their virginity or become pregnant before marriage are believed to bring dishonor to the family. To avoid such an occurrence, families may choose to force their children into marriage.

Traditions and Lack of Education

A simple reason for child marriage still occurring is the fact that it has been passed down from generation to generation. Such harmful traditions may even give rise to others; for example, child marriage is usually subsequent to the practice of female genital mutilation, considered as a „rite of passage to womanhood“.



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When a community faces a lack of education, members of the community fail to question their traditions and the harmful effects they may possess, thus continuing their damaging practices for years.

Major Parties Involved and Their Views

The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)

UNICEF works all around the world to ensure that the lives and rights of children and adolescents are protected. UNICEF regularly researches child marriage and produces reports on the status of the issue in various countries; the organization refers to child marriage as “a fundamental violation of human rights”.

Girls Not Brides

Girls Not Brides is non-governmental organization (NGO) that is in collaboration with more than 1000 civil society organizations around the globe with the aim of eradicating child marriage and providing assistance to girls in need.



The logo of Girls Not Brides

Niger

Niger has the highest rate of child marriage in the world, with 76% of its underage female citizens married before their 18th birthday. In some regions, girls as young as 10 years old are subjected to forced marriage. The main driver of child marriage in Niger is gender equality: the belief that boys are superior to girls. It is also driven by poverty – Niger is one of the poorest countries in the world – as men tend to marry off their girls in hopes of increasing their family's wealth, especially in response to droughts that may harm a farmer's income. Like all countries with high rates of child marriage, Niger lacks sufficient education in many of its regions. In the light of this issue, Niger aims to eradicate child marriage by 2030, in line with target 5.3 of the Sustainable Development Goals.

Central African Republic (CAR)

CAR has the second highest rate (68%) of child marriage, although poverty and education are not the main drivers. Armed conflict is a common occurrence; families prefer to marry their girls off as a means of protecting them from violence. Moreover, some armed fighters engage in the act of bride kidnappings against underage girls. It is legal in the country for men to take up to 4 wives, with younger wives being considered as heightening a family's social status. Also, many refugees from CAR live in poor conditions, pushing families to marry their daughters off in exchange for money. CAR also aims to eliminate child marriage by 2030.

Chad

Chad is the runner-up to CAR in terms of child marriage rates, with a figure of 67% of girls being married before the age of 18 and 30% being married before the age of 15. Displacement is the main determinant of these statistics: Chad hosts a large number of refugees from neighboring countries in refugee camps, in many of which many girls are victims of sexual violence. Cultural norms usually force these girls into marrying their attacker as a means to preserve their honor. Other factors are polygamy, a lack of education, and the common practice of female genital mutilation – sometimes considered as a sign for a girl's readiness for marriage. Chad also aims to eradicate child marriage by 2030.

Timeline of Events

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December 11, 1946	UNICEF was founded
December 10, 1948	The Universal Declaration of Human Rights was ratified by the United Nations General Assembly
September 3, 1981	The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women became effective.
September 2, 1990	The Convention on the Rights of the Child came into effect.
2011	Girls Not Brides was founded.
2030	The target year for the Sustainable Development Goals to be reached, including Goal 5 (Gender Equality) and its Target 5.3 to “eliminate all harmful practices, such as child, early and forced marriage and female genital mutilations”.

Treaties and Events

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) This declaration recognizes the right to “free and full” consent marriage; consent cannot be “free and full” when at least one of the parties have not reached the maturity to make the decision of betrothal.

The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (1981) Article 16 of CEDAW states “The betrothal and the marriage of a child shall have no legal effect, and all necessary action, including legislation, shall be taken to specify a minimum age for marriage....”, rendering child marriage as internationally illegal.

Convention on the Rights of the Child (1990) - This convention does not mention child marriage directly; however, it touches emphasizes one’s freedom of expression, right to protection from abuse, and right to be protected from harmful traditional practices, all of which child marriage is against.

Evaluation of Previous Attempts to Resolve the Issue

The aforementioned treaties and events are all previous attempts to resolve the issue. There are also many organizations like UNICEF, Girls Not Brides etc. that work towards eradicating child marriage. However, these solutions are simply not enough for the following reasons: it is extremely challenging to change a deeply rooted culture such as child marriage; it is a tradition that has been going on for generations and is thus the norm. Furthermore, there is simply not enough funding going into research or financial aid. Poverty is the main driver for child marriage in many countries, and unless these regions receive sufficient economic support, this issue will not be solved easily. Another reason is that the parameters of child marriage and its validity are vaguely defined in the treaties above. For example, CEDAW leaves the decision on a minimum age for marriage to the signatory countries – a country could easily decide on a minimum age before 18. Furthermore, while the same article renders child marriage as illegitimate, it does not criminalize it, giving countries no incentive to act upon the issue.

Possible Solutions

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One needs to focus on the main causes of an issue when deciding on solutions so as to tackle the problem from the roots. This section of the report could serve as critical for delegates when coming up with resolutions. Possible solutions are as follows: legislative measures could be taken upon on a national level, encouraging countries to define a child as anyone under the age of 18, in accordance with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and further deem child marriage as illegal (perhaps go as far as to criminalize it). Moreover, Education is key for spreading awareness on the harmful consequences of child marriage. The education of girls should be encouraged; in support of this, further resources are needed. An extensive curriculum broadening the worldview of students could be designed, including classes such as but not limited to sex education, with volunteer teachers to enforce the system. As a secondary measure, access to the Internet in certain regions could be emphasized in order for its inhabitants to gather information about modern views on child marriage. Also, an NGO could be formed in order to collaborate with governments, and even with religious leaders, in order to encourage their citizens/followers to refrain from child marriage, thus utilizing powerful figures to bring about social and cultural shifts. These are only a few possible solutions; delegates are encouraged to conduct further research on the ascribed topic in order to come up with novel and effective solutions.

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