

Berra Vatansever

Sarah Corder

English L9 YHP

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Outcomes of Child Marriage Among Girls

Abstract

Child marriage can be defined as a marriage that involves an individual who is younger than 18 years. Child marriages do not involve the free and informed consent of the underage individual involved in it as they can not express their fully informed consent to a marriage before the age of 18, therefore child marriages are considered a type of forced marriage and a human rights violation according to the Article 16 of Universal Declaration of Human Rights of the United Nations (UDHR) (“Universal Declaration”; “Child and Forced”). Not only is it a human rights violation and considered illegal according to the UDHR, but it also has a major negative impact on the victim’s physical and mental well-being and education, which are the main discussions of this research paper. The overarching factors that cause these events are the traditions, social norms, and poverty in underdeveloped and developing countries.

Key Words

Child Marriage, Child Brides, Early Marriage, Girls, Well-Being, Health, Education, Traditions, Social Norms

Introduction

Each year, 12 million girls who are yet to become 18 are being forced to marry to individuals who are older than their age (“The Burden”). According to the United Nations (UN), the fact that approximately 19% of all women aged 20-24 in the whole world were married

before the age of 18 indicates the cruciality of the need to find a long term solution for this issue ("Child Marriage." UNICEF DATA). The portion of women who were victims of a child marriage increases rapidly when only the least developed countries are taken into consideration. In the least developed countries, 37% of all women aged between 20-24 were married before the age of 18 ("Child Marriage." UNICEF DATA). Although, there is a decline in the rate of child marriages in the world compared to the past according to the data provided by Figure 1, there is still a significant number of victims to these marriages.

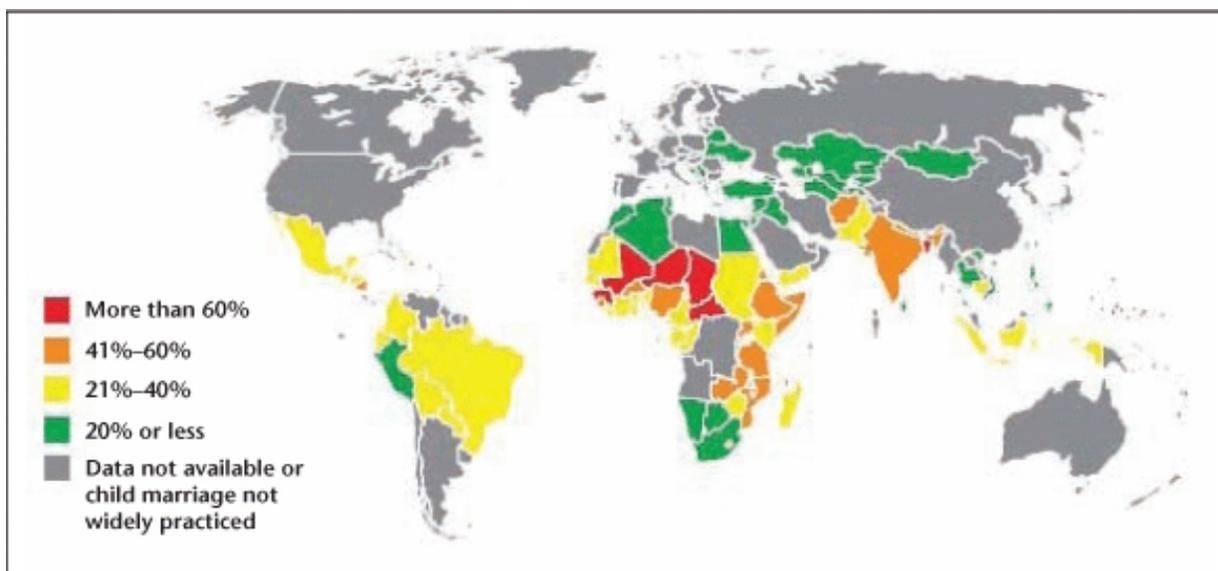


Figure 1 - Percentage of women aged 20-24 who were married or in union before age 18 (1987-2006) (Nour)

The reason child marriage is still an ongoing issue in today's world is that these marriages are often caused because of certain beliefs and traditions and economical struggles in the least developed regions where changing these traditions are extremely hard considering the poverty in said regions and the fact that it takes decades to change the cultural practices of a community ("The Burden" ; "Child Marriage Kills"). Hence, the problem of child marriage is vital to address in today's world immediately in order to come up with a plausible solution to this problem.

These marriages can be traumatic experiences in different aspects for a child who is incapable of being a mother and a wife at such a young age. The most common outcomes of child marriage can be categorized in three categories: the effects of the marriage on the children's physical health, mental health and education. This research paper focuses on all these three categories and elaborates on how child marriage can impact a child's life.

Physical Health

Child marriage possesses a great risk to a girl's physical health, in fact, these outcomes may even cause the death of the child bride. More than 22,000 girls lose their lives on a yearly basis due to child marriages ("Child Marriage Kills"). These child marriage related deaths mostly take place in regions such as West and Central Africa (9600 deaths), South Asia (2000 deaths), East Asia and the Pacific (650 deaths), Latin American and the Caribbean (560 deaths) ("Child Marriage Kills").

One of the reasons that cause said deaths as a result of child marriages is the spread of Sexually Transmitted Diseases (STDs) due to the unprotected and uneducated sexual intercourse after child marriages (Nour). The unprotected sexual intercourse that is the reason for these infections is caused by the efforts of the girls to prove their fertility to their husbands due to the region's culture and social norms ("Child Marriage and HIV"). The fact that child brides are often married to older men who have had multiple sexual intercourses in their life or were polygamous increases the risk of STD infections such as HIV, herpes simplex virus type 2, gonorrhea, and chlamydia along with diseases such as human papillomavirus transmission and cervical cancer ("Child Marriage and HIV" ; Nour). For instance, in Zambia, married girls are 59% more likely to become infected with HIV (Nour). Furthermore, the lower levels of education of the individuals and the lack of access to Sexual and Reproductive Health Service

(SRH) are other factors that contribute to the continuation of unprotected sexual intercourse in child marriages. Only 30% of the girls on the globe has comprehensive knowledge on HIV and HIV protection. Hence, undermining the child brides ability to use safe sex practices (“Child Marriage and HIV”). As a result, these children don’t know where to go and what to do in case they get infected by the disease.

Moreover, having sexual intercourse at such a young age when the body hasn’t been developed enough may have many consequences. Many girls experience physical pain after the sexual intercourse due to their undeveloped sexual organs, and the consequences of the sexual intercourse may even reach death for the individual (“Child Marriage and its Impacts”) . For instance, an 8-year-old girl in Yemen has suffered from bleeding and uterine rupture after the intercourse with a man four times her age after the wedding day, which later caused her death (“Child bride”).

Another risk of having sexual intercourse at such a young age comes with the possibility of getting pregnant after that intercourse. In fact, giving birth is one of the overarching reasons that causes a teenager mother’s death (“Child Marriage Kills”). For example, “pregnant girls under the age of 19 have a significantly higher malaria density than pregnant women over the age of 19” (Nour). Considering the fact, that girl and women patients with malaria lose their lives 50% of the time, it is safe to say that pregnancy at a very early age can increase the risk of death during pregnancy due to fatal sicknesses such as aforementioned malaria.

Furthermore, due to the immaturity of pelvis and birth canal in young girls, complications during pregnancy cause the death of many child brides. Unfortunately, child brides and their families have little to no information on sexual education and the process of birth and pregnancy, therefore, they risk both the girl's and her offspring’s life. For instance:

“Pregnant girls aged 15 to 19 are twice as likely to die in childbirth as women in their 20s and girls under the age of 15 are five to seven times more likely to die during childbirth” (Ahmed 9)

These deaths are mainly caused by the underdeveloped sexual organs, but can occur in many ways. For example, girls from 10 years to 15 years have undeveloped pelvises, therefore are not equipped for childbearing. Hence, they have an 88% risk of having obstetric fistula, which is a hole between the birth canal and bladder and/or rectum in women (Nour). Unfortunately, as the earlier age groups often have more and unwanted pregnancies and have little to no access to health facilities, they are often forced to carry the child and give birth which may result in their death as mentioned before (“Child Marriage Kills”).

Not only the victim girls’ lives are on the line, also their babies will be affected by the pregnancy at such an early age. The infant mortality rate increases by 60% when the mother is younger than 18 years (Nour). In addition, the child brides are 35% to 55% more likely to give birth to a low-birthweight baby, which makes the infants more vulnerable (Nour). These consequences for the infants are all caused by “young mothers’ poor nutrition, physical and emotional immaturity, lack of access to social and reproductive services, and higher risk for infectious diseases” (Nour).

In addition to the risks of being pregnant at such a young age poses, the child brides have a high chance of facing domestic violence, which also puts their lives at a high risk (Nour). UNICEF considers child marriage as a type of violence against children (“Child Brides” Unicef). Furthermore, according to a joint press release by UNFPA, UNICEF, WHO, UN Women, the United Nations Foundation, World Vision, Girls Not Brides, Every Woman Every Child, World YWCA and The Partnership for Maternal, New born and Child Health “Even though some

parents believe early marriage will protect their daughters from sexual violence, the reverse is often true” (Ahmed 8). This emphasizes the domestic sexual violence the brides face after marrying to older men who are capable of using violence against them considering their age and social status (Ahmed 8).

Mental Health

Child marriage does not only impact the physical health of the girl, it also has a vast impact on the girl’s mental health. The brides are frequently expected to perform the duties of a mother and a wife, which is defined by the social norms (“Haryana: India’s”). As the young mother is not emotionally and physically developed to perform duties such as taking care of a baby, doing household chores, living with a husband who possibly never cares about the girl and uses violence against her or moving to a house in which she has no family. Such responsibilities make the young victim of a child marriage feel overwhelmed and fall into depression (Nour). Especially, the isolation and the domestic abuse these child brides faces leaves persistent scars on the victim’s mental health and well-being (Nour). Moreover, there are other factors that make the situation even worse, such as the fact that the young bride having almost no control about her life choices (“Child Marriage and its Impacts”). As a result, they can neither plan their family nor make decisions on their healthcare, which is a direct cause for aforementioned physical health issues. This inability of the girl making her own choices is mostly caused by the fact that the husband has more power in the family and is superior to the girl according to the social norms and considering their age (“Child Marriage and its Impacts”). Furthermore, according to the same social norms, the brides are often expected and even forced to prove their fertility by giving birth to a male baby which makes them feel even more overwhelmed as they have no control on the gender of the baby they are going to give birth to (Ahmad 8). These expectations may cause

the victims to feel worthless because the expectations they need to fulfill are not under their control, in fact, inappropriate for their age (“Child Marriage and its Impacts”).

Pregnancy is a huge responsibility to undertake and is not something a minor should be facing while they are completing their development. Hence, being forced to take this responsibility is a struggle that most child brides are forced to face. Forced pregnancy has massive impact on the mental well-being of the young individual along with many physical outcomes which reinforces these problems that affect their mental health. As the brides are unable to defend themselves against their husbands, they are forced to do as their husband pleases (“Child Marriage and its Impacts”). As a result of this toxic relationship, they might feel isolated from the world because even the people closest to them such as their husband does not listen to them. The feeling of isolation increases as they are deprived of the communication that they would have had in their school and in their normal family with their parents (“Child Marriage: A Violation”). The isolation in the household they are living in also contributes to this hopelessness and causes child brides to have depression and other mental illnesses (Nour ; "Child Marriage." Unicef).

Because of the duties they are expected to fulfill at home, they need to adapt to their new surroundings in order to survive ("Child Marriage." Unicef). This takes their childhood away from them, not letting them grow up like their peers and isolating them from their friends and family (“Child Marriage." UNICEF DATA). Furthermore, the fact that their childhood is taken away from them also causes their dreams to be taken away from them, leaving them in nothing but despair. Many girls prioritize their dreams more than their marriage, therefore forcing them to marry will also force them to lose the meaning of their life and send them to a prison they will never escape (“Haryana: India's”).

Education

Research shows that a significant amount of child brides have never been to school in many developing and underdeveloped countries ("Child Marriage." Unicef). Moreover, the ones who have been to school usually drop out after marriage or giving birth ("The Burden"). Those girls need to overcome obstacles by running away from their homes just to go to school, which is often impossible considering that they are living like they are held hostage by their husbands ("Child Marriage Kills"). The fact that they are not let to go to school prevents them for fulfilling their dreams or getting basic education, which also contributes to the mental health issues they have ("Haryana: India's").

Figure 2 - (Early Marriage)

TABLE 3: Girls aged 15–19 currently in union												
Country	Year	Total	Urban	Rural	No education	Primary education	Secondary education	Higher education	Poorest 20%	Second quintile	Middle quintile	Fourth quintile
Bangladesh	1999	46.6	28	53.2	64.6	57.6	36.5	15.9	61.8	55.1	52.8	44.6
Benin	2001	23.3	13.4	32.1	36.9	14.8	3.9	0.9	43.2	34.6	34.3	16.2
Bolivia	1998	10.5	7.8	18.9	46.4	23.3	6.9	0	22.8	18.5	12.5	7.2
Brazil	1996	13.8	12.2	20.6	52.5	22.6	10.5	0	27.5	14.8	11.8	10
Burkina Faso	1999	33.8	14.2	39.2	39.2	22.3	6.4	–	42	41.9	30.8	37.4
Cambodia	2000	12.1	8.7	13	18.7	11.5	8.5	0	14.3	12.1	14.1	12.7
Cameroon	1998	33.6	21.7	41.1	64.4	36	18.6	22	53.5	39.9	38.9	25.8
Central African Republic	1995	39	33.7	44	47.6	33.5	33.5	–	39.9	47.7	42	37.6
Chad	1997	46.7	42.9	47.8	51.7	39.9	19.3	–	34.6	46.8	52.6	49.6
Colombia	2000	14.4	12	22.1	45.5	25.7	11.7	2.1	25.7	22.6	16.2	6.2
Comoros	1996	10.2	9.8	10.4	15.4	9.3	4	–	12.6	16.9	9.2	8.9
Côte d'Ivoire	1998	23.9	15.1	31.2	33.6	18.8	4.9	0	41.8	37.8	30.8	19.2
Dominican Republic	2002	22.4	19.9	27.7	62.2	32.7	13.9	10.3	41	29.7	25.3	13.8
Egypt	2000	11.6	6.8	15.4	23.4	23	7.8	1.3	12.8	15.6	12.8	11.8
Eritrea	2002	29	9.9	45.1	60.6	27.2	9.1	0	37.9	43.5	49.1	20.2
Ethiopia	2000	23.2	9.8	27	30.4	12.4	11.1	–	20	29.3	31.8	26.9
Gabon	2000	18.1	16.5	25.8	48.8	19.9	15.8	0	25.9	28.2	12.9	21.5
Ghana	2003	12	6.2	18.9	32	15.8	6.7	0	25.1	20.2	13.1	8
Guatemala	1999	23.8	19.6	26.7	42.1	30	8.4	0	38.5	34.9	27.5	17.1
Guinea	1999	43.9	28.4	54.8	55.1	22.9	13.2	0	57.3	63.9	50.4	41.2
Haiti	2000	16.1	13	19.2	42.6	15.4	11.3	–	18.5	17.4	21.1	18.6
India	1999	33.8	17.3	40.4	60.2	38.5	20.3	7.1	51.9	51.3	38.5	25.7
Indonesia	2002	14	10.2	17.4	14.6	26.8	9.7	0.4	16.3	19.4	13.6	14.2
Kazakhstan	1999	8	7.9	8.1	0	0	8.5	4.4	10.3	9.1	7.7	6.4
Kenya	2003	17.9	19.7	17.5	49.7	19.1	5.1	0	23.3	18.6	14.2	16.3
Kyrgyzstan	1997	12.3	8.1	14.1	0	34.3	12.7	8.8	13.3	12	12.4	17.9
Madagascar	1997	27.9	17.9	32	48.3	25.9	15.3	0	40.3	40.9	29.4	22.6
Malawi	2000	32.6	64.7	81.8	87.1	84.4	49.2	18.3	85.8	77.8	81.9	79.1
Mali	2001	45.9	30.9	56.5	54.2	34.2	14.6	6.8	58.1	59.3	63	44.5
Mozambique	1997	45	24.9	52.7	58.5	41.9	9.7	0	66	49.3	43.7	45
Namibia	2000	5	4.3	5.3	21.8	7.1	2.3	–	9.1	3.5	4.2	7.4
Nepal	2001	39.8	15.8	43.5	58	39.7	23	13.4	52.7	45.5	47.2	40.7
Nicaragua	2000	22.3	17.9	29.4	45.2	27.8	16	5	35.8	27.6	22.7	18.2
Niger	1998	59.9	23.9	70.3	68.6	40.3	7.6	–	62.7	73.5	72.1	61.5
Nigeria	2003	31.7	18.9	38.3	77.4	27.6	6.8	3	46.7	43.3	37.4	27.2
Peru	2000	10.3	6.7	18.6	32	22.3	7.4	1.1	23.5	16.6	8.5	7.9
Philippines	1998	8.4	5.4	12.5	30.9	18.9	6.7	4.1	21.7	15.5	7.6	5.1
Rwanda	2001	6.6	4.9	7	13	5.7	3.7	–	7.5	7.5	9.2	5.4
Senegal	1997	27.8	12.2	41.2	40.9	14.3	6	0	51.6	43.5	28.7	18.1
South Africa	1998	3.2	1.3	5.4	9.4	5	2.8	0	3.8	6.1	3.8	1.6
Tanzania, United Republic of	1999	25	17.5	27.3	43.8	20.8	9.7	–	29.4	27.3	29.1	23.6
Togo	1998	19.1	9.5	26.6	39.2	14.5	4.1	0	40.6	28.5	24.1	15
Turkmenistan	2001	5.3	5.2	5.3	0	7.4	5.3	0	4.8	6.6	4.7	6
Uganda	2000	28.9	17.7	31.6	61.4	30.3	12.7	23.4	47.1	41.2	29.1	19.7
Viet Nam	2002	4.1	1.5	4.8	7.7	11.5	2.7	–	5.6	6.7	4.9	1.8
Yemen	1997	25.7	17.1	29.4	35	22.4	12	13.6	36.9	28.2	27.9	25.6
Zambia	2002	24.2	17.7	28.9	45.7	28.3	12	0	32.7	32.1	28.3	24.4
Zimbabwe	1999	21.7	18.4	23.5	39.9	3.8	16	0	28.3	20.1	22.8	24.4

– Indicates data are not available.

As it is clear to see from the table above, in most countries, the higher the education the girls have, the lower the rate of married girls. Therefore, as the girls are let to have more education, they also have the opportunity to focus on stuff other than marriage and fulfill their dreams.

In addition, the lack of education which is a result of a child marriage causes the child brides to believe that the life they are living is the social norm. Hence, when they have a child, they have the tendency to force their child to also marry at a young age and live the life they lived and continue the cycle of child marriages (“Haryana: India's”).

Conclusion

Child marriages are an issue in this world that should not be overlooked due to their nearly undetectable nature. It is an undeniable fact that the child marriages leave vast impacts on its victims, on the aspects of their mental well-being, physical well-being and education (Nour). These negative outcomes of the child marriages may be the cause of death for many victims. Child marriages, which are often caused by a variety of factors such as but not limited to the social norms in the society and poverty, are often overlooked, therefore, the victims of these marriages are common in underdeveloped or developing countries (Nour). Although there are significant attempts aiming to solve this problem, the practice of child marriage still remains to be a particular issue in said regions (“Child Marriage”). In addition, the continuation of such marriages remains to be a creator of a ground for the further continuation of child marriages as more victims accept these types of marriages as norms and due to the victims’ lack of education caused by the issue, the victims tend to encourage or force their following generation to continue the practice (“Haryana: India's”). Overall, said issue remains to be a problem which requires significant amount of attention to solve.

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