

DISMUN VIII

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Introduction

Child marriage is one of the most serious human rights violations in the 21st century. It is defined as the union between two people established before the age of 18. While there are many reasons this abusive practice continues, it is most closely associated with poverty, gender inequality, deeply rooted social norms, weak legal systems, and humanitarian crises. Although some boys do marry before the age of 18, the majority of those affected by child marriage are girls. In many cases, early marriage is influenced by cultural, economic, or familial pressures rather than an individual's free will. After marriage, girls often face reduced access to education, health services, and social support. They may also face increased risks of isolation, violence, and exploitation.

The United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development calls on the international community to "eliminate all harmful practices, such as child, early and forced marriage, and female genital mutilation" (Target 5.3). Achieving Target 5.3 is critical to overall progress on a range of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs): quality education (Goal 4), health and well-being (Goal 3), gender equality (Goal 5), no poverty (Goal 1), decent work and economic growth (Goal 8), reduced inequalities (Goal 10), and peaceful, just and inclusive societies (Goal 16). With respect to loss of education, increased levels of adolescent pregnancies, constrained youth employment, limited women's participation in the economy, and increased rates of violence, child marriage can halt the trajectory of nations' development and the transition of human capital across generations.

For many years, the international community has looked for all-encompassing ways to halt child marriage, led by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and its

affiliated organizations. The central question guiding this investigation is: How can governments, civil society, the international community, and impacted communities collaborate to eradicate child marriage and protect children's rights and futures around the world?

With the world half-way to the deadline in 2030, the world is losing ground, burdened with crises that have slowed it much. The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted education, exacerbated financial pressure in households, reduced access to protective services and in many instances made early marriage ever more likely. Protracted conflicts, and increasingly climate-related disasters, contribute further to stagnation. All without deliberated, urgent, equity-centred action, we will likely fall far short of SDG 5.3. There are high stakes, because beyond moral imperatives to end child marriage, it is just sound investment yielding returns in regards to health, education, labour market participation, demographic transition, and ideally poverty alleviation.

Definition of Key Terms

Adolescent

An individual growing from a child to an adult, usually ages 10–19. This stage can be subdivided into early (10–14), middle (15–17) and late (18–19) adolescence.

Age of Consent

The age at which an individual may consent to have sex. Each country has laws that specify the legal age of consent, which is frequently not the same as the minimum marriage age, therefore exposing gaps in protections for young people.

Age of Majority / Legal Capacity

The age (usually 18, but may vary) when they are fully entitled to the full rights and responsibilities of a legal adult (for example to marry without parental consent). In some countries, it is possible for young people to be married with approval from community or social institutions, which undermines some of the protective measures against early marriage.

Birth Registration

An official record of a child's birth that establishes age and identity. It creates a mechanism for the enforcement of marriage laws, especially when combined with other legal instruments. It also opens up advocacy and verifiable service access for youth and prevents exploitative child marriage, including children with underage identification.

Bride Price / Bridewealth & Dowry

Exchange of property/liabilities made between the families of the couple at marriage—the groom's family pays the bride price to the bride's family; the bride's family pays their daughter dowry to the groom; these forms of exchange can pressure families to marry their underage children, or induce couples to marry despite some grievous health or social problems, and objectify girls and couples as market-driven assets.

Child, Early and Forced Marriage (CEFM) / Child Marriage

Any marriage in which one partner is under the age of 18, and that takes place prior to either/multiple parties feeling readily prepared (or knowledgeable) to marry and/or without their consent; and all child marriages are deemed "forced".

Consent (Free and Full)

A free and informed commitment to marry. Consent is invalidated by force, coercion or a lack of capacity. "Arranged" or "proxy" marriages for minors do not meet this standard.

Customary, Religious & Statutory Law (Plural Legal Systems)

In many nations, marriage laws exist in multiple forms (i.e., civil, religious and traditional). Allowances for lower ages under religious and/or customary laws can undermine protective measures. Align all three forms of law to set age 18 minimum.

Early Union / Informal Union

Living together as a couple without registering their union, in a legal or religious sense. These unions carry similar risks to early marriage, such as school drop-out and early pregnancy.

Gender-Based Violence (GBV)

Any harmful act committed against an individual's gender—this can be in the form of physical, emotional and or sexual acts. Child marriage is a form of GBV and increases the risk

and incidence of other acts of violence.

Intimate Partner Violence (IPV)

Abuse inflicted by a partner that causes physical, sexual, or emotional harm. Child brides are at greater risk by virtue of power imbalances and social isolation.

Minimum Age of Marriage

The legal lowest age of marriage (international standard: min. of 18 for all). In some countries there are exceptions that increase enforcement challenges. Strong laws and implementation of birth registration are essential components.

Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) Target 5.3

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Background Information

Child marriage has longstanding historical and cultural significance based on ancient customs that perceived early marriage as a way to protect family honor, obtain economic security, or create political alliances. In agrarian societies, girls were sometimes viewed as an economic burden and marrying them at an early age was a way to lighten household responsibilities, but at the same time strengthen kinship. As the years went by, this practice became normalized and often codified as an acceptable practice for patriarchal systems supporting religion, tradition, and community obligations. As such, even as the world has progressed forward embracing human rights and norms that support gender equality, many of these deep rooted beliefs and practices continue to frame the concepts within communities, especially rural and marginalized communities.

While child marriage accelerated during the 20th and 21st centuries, external factors include colonial legal systems, socio-economic instability, and population growth either reinforced or hampered the modernization of child marriage. In many instances, the legal systems adopted during colonization, particularly in regions that allowed customary or religious practices to dictate change, did not protect children. In today's world, these challenges have been

made worse by globalization and economic inequality; for populations in a vulnerable condition, families tend to see marriage (be it voluntary or involuntary) as a safety measure or overall economic solution for their daughters, particularly during hardships.

The growing global recognition of child marriage as a serious human rights violation is relatively recent. In the late 20th century, the problem gained widespread attention, in large part due to attention from international organizations and survivors who brought attention to the harmful effects of child marriage. The problem is now understood not just as a violation of rights for individuals, but as the failure of a nation to fulfill its obligations in health, education, gender equality and other areas. According to UNICEF, evidence has shown that when child marriage is prevented, women have higher levels of education, improved maternal health, and more skills to participate in the workforce—all of which allow economies to grow and societies to be more equal.

In many ways, the fight against child marriage has changed the discussions of global human rights. Rather than treating the issue as a cultural problem, advocates have taken the position that child marriage is a violation of international law. This has resulted in various organizations, including the UN and UNICEF, convening nations of the world to strengthen legislation, ensure child protection, and fund programs that empower girls to resist child marriage. Campaigns such as "Girls Not Brides" have aligned grassroots movements worldwide and have been able to amplify local voices to spark legal reform in countries like Malawi and Nepal.

Key Issues

Poverty and Economic Insecurity

Poverty is a leading contributor to child marriage. Families struggling financially often see marrying their daughters as a way to improve their finances by decreasing the mouths needed to feed, and potentially receiving a dowry or bride price. Economic hardship often leads parents to believe that marrying their daughters off is a form of economic security for the girls, despite early marriage often sees girls remaining in cycles of poverty and dependency. Families living in poverty within the Global South often don't see or know of alternative ways of economic security. Oftentimes, the lack of education and job prospects leaves families in these

impoverished states with little knowledge or means to look for continuing options aside from child marriage (UNFPA, 2012).

Lack of Access to Education

Education is linked to the prevention of child marriage. Educated girls are more likely to continue their education than marry before they turn 18, as education provides them knowledge, confidence, and future opportunities. However, in many developing parts of the world, poverty, gender discrimination or armed conflict still creates barriers for girls to receive education. When education continues to be inaccessible or even unvalued, it is not surprising that families will continue to prioritize early marriage over education as a viable option.

Gender Inequality and Cultural Norms

Gender inequality is a fundamental driver of child marriage. In many contexts, girls are seen as having lower worth than boys and are expected to fall into the traditional familial roles of spouse or mother. Traditional cultural aspects placing emphasis on dowry systems and the value of girls "maintaining virginity before marriage due to cultural expectations" prior to marriage drives families to marry off daughters as soon as possible. These cultural issues pose serious barriers to reformation as they frequently overshadow international treaties and legislations.

Weak Legal Frameworks and Enforcement

Although the legal age of marriage is set at 18 in many countries, child marriage is frequently permitted to continue due to weak enforcement and legal loopholes. In certain places, exceptions are granted based on religious or customary law, or with parental approval. Despite national or international laws, these practices still exist due to a lack of community awareness and insufficient government oversight.

Conflict, Crisis, and Humanitarian Emergencies

Child marriage rates often rise in conflict-affected areas or during humanitarian crises. In times of instability, families may see early marriage as a way to protect their daughters from heightened risks such as sexual violence or exploitation. Refugee and displaced populations, especially in places like Syria, Yemen, and parts of Sub-Saharan Africa, face higher rates of child marriage due to unstable living conditions, economic collapse, and loss of traditional social

structures (Klugman, 2022). Although intended as a protective measure, early marriage often expose girls to long-term harm, including interrupted education, health risks, and continued vulnerability.

Major Countries and Organisations Involved and Their Positions

United Nations (UN)

The United Nations is actively engaged in the effort to eliminate child, early and forced marriage (CEFM) through the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 5.3) and through initiatives of UNFPA and UNICEF that support countries in creating awareness of the issue, setting the minimum legal age for marriage to 18, and providing programs that support law reform and community-level interventions around CEFM.

United States

The United States supports international efforts to end child marriage through funding from USAID, and other foreign aid programs, including advocating for legal reforms and the empowerment of girls in all parts of the world. However, on the home front, child marriage continues to be legal in several states (with parental or judicial consent), which is the subject of domestic debate.

India

According to the American Jewish World Service (n.d.), India has one of the largest proportions of child brides, with approximately $\frac{1}{3}$ of all child marriages occurring there. However, there have been declines in child marriage in the past several decades owing in part to campaigns of the Indian government & ministries, such as 'Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao' (Save the Girl Child, Educate the Girl Child). The minimum legal age for marriage differs for men (21) and women (18). However, child marriage persists due to social & economic pressures, including dowry customs.

African Union (AU)

The African Union launched the 'Campaign to End Child Marriage in Africa', urging member states to not only raise the legal age of marriage to 18, but also encourage a birth

registration system, and importantly empower girls through education and health programs.

European Union (EU)

The European Union strongly opposes to child marriage and provides funding to established international organizations, NGOs, and others to finance programs to prevent child, early, and forced marriage. It pushes for stronger partnerships around the world, legal reform, and education for girls in countries of highest risk.

United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF)

UNICEF is one of the major actors in ending child marriage. It has partnered with the United Nations Population Fund to run the Global Programme to End Child Marriage in over a dozen countries where child marriage occurs at high prevalence. UNICEF implements an holistic approach to child marriage prevention, including policy reform, education access, birth registration, and healthcare access. It also empowers girls through community and social change programs, both commonly known as “girl-led interventions”.

Human Rights Watch (HRW)

Human Rights Watch is an NGO that documents abuses against children to publicize these violations to pressure governments to adopt stronger child protection laws and enforce existing laws on their books. HRW has written extensively about the links between child marriage and gender-based violence, economic exploitation, and barriers to education for girls while pushing for governments to close legal loopholes and conform to international legal standards.

World Health Organization (WHO)

WHO recognizes that child marriage creates serious health risks for girls such as early pregnancy, maternal mortality in childbirth, and increased mental health issues. WHO also creates guidelines for the health systems of governments around the world, tracks global health costs, and further includes prevention strategies in reproductive and sexual health programs.

United Nations Population Fund (UNPF)

The UNFPA's work includes actions to eliminate child marriage and harmful practice through sexual and reproductive health, gender equality and rights for girls, and the empowerment of young girls. As mentioned previously, it is co-leading the Global Programme to End Child Marriage with UNICEF hoping to raise awareness about the minimum age for marriage.

United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women)

The work of UN Women promotes awareness to eliminate harmful practices including child marriage, while also advocating for gender equality. UN Women works with governments to improve legal frameworks and partners globally to promote reforms about the inequities fostered by gender-based discrimination.

Timeline of Events

1962	The UN General Assembly adopts the Convention on Consent to Marriage, Minimum Age for Marriage and Registration, which also reflected support for governments to establish a legal protocol for minimum ages and ensure marriages are issued only by consent.
1979	The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) is formally adopted. This calls on all nations to end harmful practices such as child marriage.
2003	The Maputo Protocol, formulated by the African Union, proposes a minimum marriage age of 18 years, and encourages legal legislation across African countries.
2013	The UN Human Rights Council adopts a resolution to label child, early and forced marriage as a violation of human rights requiring urgent action.
2014	The Girl Summit in London, co-hosted by the UK and UNICEF, secures significant funding to end child marriage and FGM globally.
2015	The Sustainable Development Goals are adopted with Target 5.3 to eliminate child marriage and FGM by 2030.

2021	UNICEF reported that up to 650 million women were married as children, which necessitates renewed and concerted efforts at the global level.
2022	The Global Progress Report indicates that COVID-19 has had a hindering impact on global progress for girls potentially, putting millions at risk of marriage.
2023	UN Member State ministers agree to sign the “Leaders in Ending Child Marriage” commitment, recognizing that 640 million girls are across the globe are still affected by this harmful practice.
2024	The US Senate introduced the Child Marriage Prevention Act of 2024 (S. 4990), with proposals for needing federal action: a national commission, state grants to prevent child marriage, a model state ban, and closing visa loopholes.
2024	Sierra Leone passed the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act, criminalizing marriage under the age of 18 and imposing penalties of prison and/or fines.

Important, Relevant Documents

Name of the Document	Date of Publication	Description of the Document
Universal Declaration of Human Rights	10 December 1948	A UN foundational document affirming everyone's equal rights to be free from harmful practices like child marriage with respect to the right to free and full consent in marriage.
Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW)	18 December 1979	An international treaty that obliges states to eliminate discrimination against women, in particular, harmful practices like child marriage and guarantee equality to women in all aspects of life.
Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)	20 November 1989	An international treaty declaring the rights of all children below the age of 18, providing particular protections against victims of early marriage as well as harmful practices that exploit children and jeopardize their safety, health, and development.
Convention on	7 November 1962	Sets minimum age and requirements for

Consent to Marriage, Minimum Age for Marriage and Registration of Marriages		marriage and requires free, full, and informed consent for marriage; the goal is to eliminate the incidence of child and forced marriage.
UN Human Rights Council Resolution on Child, Early and Forced Marriage (A/HRC/24/L.34)	27 September 2013	One of the first resolutions to formally recognize child marriage as a human rights violation in principle and calling on states to instigate measures to prevent child marriage.
UN General Assembly Resolution on Child, Early and Forced Marriage (A/RES/69/156)	18 December 2014	Reiterates that child marriage is a human rights violation and urges the international community to take action globally to eliminate it, and aligns with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals.
Report of the UN Secretary-General on Child, Early and Forced Marriage (A/76/156)	16 July 2021	A comprehensive report that assesses the global status of child marriage; discusses the roadblocks and best practices of eliminating child marriage; researches evidence and applicable recommendations to governments (much like a child marriage paper).
UN General Assembly Resolution on Child, Early and Forced Marriage (A/RES/76/132)	16 December 2021	A report to reignite previous commitments of measurable and enforceable minimum age of marriage laws, gender equality at school and home, protect vulnerable girls, provide transition programs to reduce girls' school dropout rate.

Previous Attempted Solutions:

Community-Based Awareness Campaigns

Organizations such as Girls Not Brides, Save the Children, and Plan International have facilitated grassroots campaigns intended to alter social norms around child marriage. These campaigns often include religious leaders, parents, and local community influencers to involve communities and advocate for awareness of the harmful impacts of child marriage.

By addressing cultural attitudes with communities, these campaigns have been successful in some local contexts. For example, the Berhane Hewan program in Ethiopia was successful in

lowering the rates of child marriage in specific areas, “directly reaching a total of 11,264 married and unmarried adolescent girls through different interventions” (UNFPA, 2022). The program focused on raising awareness and providing families with the financial support to keep their daughters in school (as well as demonstrating the benefits of investing in girls). The challenge is scaling these initiatives into larger programs. Awareness by itself is insufficient to alter behavior when poverty and economic instability are major motivating factors. These campaigns struggle to have a lasting effect in the absence of complementary initiatives like infrastructure for education or financial support.

Educational and Economic Incentive Programs

Several governments and international organizations have implemented programs that encourage families to delay marriage by offering scholarships, financial aid, or vocational training. Often, the economic insecurity linked to child marriage is countered by directly alleviating families' economic insecurity while empowering girls. Programs like India's Dhanalakshmi Scheme and Kanyashree Prakalpa provide financial support for families to keep girls in school until they are 18 years old. Likewise, programs intended to provide free education, cited as successful implementations, have also provided health and life skills training to groups of adolescent girls in countries including Bangladesh and Kenya.

All auspicious indicators of these programs suggest a decline in child marriage, since they address one of the root causes addressed previously—economic insecurity—and empower girls in the process. The Kanyashree Prakalpa scheme in India has reached millions of girls, and included positive measurable outcomes of early marriages declining (UNICEF, 2024). However, these programs often run into politically unsustainable funding situations, and there usually is not the political will to maintain a program as costly. In addition, as indicated with geographic and social conditions previously, for rural areas where quality schooling isn't accessible, financial incentives cannot keep girls in school.

Legal Reforms and International Treaties

Over the past decades, many countries have introduced legal frameworks to ban child marriage, often aligning with international agreements such as the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against

Women (CEDAW). Many countries have set 18 years old as the minimum legal age for marriage and have established criminal penalties for forced or unregistered marriages. In addition, UNICEF and UNFPA have partnered with national governments in a series of steps to implement the reform and monitor enforcement.

While legal reform and laws are a critical first step, they have not met with the same outcomes everywhere. Advances in reducing rates of child marriage reported in countries as varied as Malawi, Nepal, evidence the inverse correlation between legal bans in combination with educational campaigns or other awareness initiatives, work. In many other instances, weak enforcement, loopholes in the law, and the continued role of customary or religious laws have made the legal reform ineffective. Where legal bans includes provisions for parent or judicial consent (e.g. Bangladesh, and India), child marriage temporary stayed trend of child marriage or the complicated family or religious stake in supporting continuing practices. However, there remain strong principles based on established legal reforms, and not entirely successful long-term, stopping child marriage.

Possible Solutions

Strengthening and Enforcing Legal Frameworks

One of the most direct approaches to preventing child marriage is by strengthening national laws and enforcing them. Governments can align the minimum age of marriage laws with international conventions, such as the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which recommends 18 as the minimum age for marriage. Encouraging countries to adopt and implement such laws requires a multifaceted strategy. International and domestic pressure from development partners and human rights organizations may stimulate legal reform by linking trade agreements, foreign assistance, and reputation to policies that prevent child marriage. Specialized child protection units, training officials like law enforcement, and campaigns for legal awareness in the community can all further support the enforcement of those laws. Most importantly, laws must be supported by resources and infrastructure to ensure their impact reaches even the most rural or marginalized communities.

A stronger legal framework creates a deterrent effect, and makes it more difficult for influenced family members or community leaders to arrange for marriages of girls under the law.

Legal enforcement also offers girls an ability to seek protection from practitioners of child marriages whenever their human rights come under attack. However, in many areas, laws alone cannot change socially-accepted behaviors. This is because a lot of these behaviors are based on deeply rooted cultural practices or economic roles. Without adequate community engagement and economic alternatives, strict laws could push the practice underground, making it more complex and dangerous to track, let alone prevent.

Expanding Access to Education and Life Skills Programs

Investing in high quality and accessible education for girls is one of the most powerful long-term strategies against child marriage worldwide. Governments and NGOs can focus on improvements to existing educational infrastructure, provide scholarships to improve education affordability, and include life skills and reproductive health education in the school curriculum. In addition to investments in formal education, programs linking education pathways and vocational programming are effective to help girls and families make tangible benefits of delaying marriage.

Education equips girls with knowledge, self-confidence and economic opportunities, which reduces families' expectation that early marriage is in their best interests. Higher levels of female education in communities had lower rates of child marriage. However, it is also important to keep in mind that creating an acceptable quality education system in rural or conflict-associated areas is costly and logistically challenging. Quality education investments require long-term investment and collaboration between government and international organizations which can be economically and politically unstable and unsustainable.

Economic Empowerment and Social Protection Programs

To tackle the economic drivers of child marriage, governments and NGOs may offer families conditional cash transfers, micro finance opportunities or direct incentives for families to give delay child marriage. Social protection programs could also offer vocational training for women, financial literacy programs and job creation programs, so girls and their families have an sustainable alternative to child marriage.

Economic incentives are an immediate relief to families facing financial stress and help dissuade the family from the perceived need to marry off their daughters. Programs such as these have already been successful in countries like India and Bangladesh to lower the marriage rate.

However, such initiatives are expensive to provide long term and have high risk of misuse and corruption in the absence of monitoring. In some instances, families interpret financial economic incentives as being one-time gifts instead as a viable long-term option to obtain freedom from poverty.

Emergency Interventions in Conflict and Crisis Zones

Humanitarian responses in crisis situations must facilitate the protection of children from early marriage, this may include promoting safe spaces for girls, providing psychosocial support, and ensuring access to education and healthcare in emergencies.

The interventions serve to protect girls who are at an escalated level of vulnerability in crisis situations, preventing marriage as a coping strategy. Despite this prevention, humanitarian resources are often overstretched, and child protection initiatives may be deprioritized as individuals become distracted by pressing, immediate survival needs, such as food, shelter and medical relief.

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