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CHILD & FORCED MARRIAGE FACT SHEET

What is child marriage?

Child/Early marriage refers to any marriage of a child younger than 18 years old, in accordance to Article 1 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child. While child marriage affects both sexes, girls are disproportionately affected as they are the majority of the victims. Their overall development is compromised, leaving them socially isolated with little education, skills and opportunities for employment and self-realisation. This leaves child brides more vulnerable to poverty, a consequence of child marriage as well as a cause.

It is predicted by the UNFPA that worldwide 100 million girls are expected to marry in the next decade¹. In Africa, UNICEF estimate that 42 per cent of girls are married before the age of 18 and in some African countries the figure is much higher. Child marriage is often perceived as the only option for girls and is often seen by parents of young girls as a means of securing both their own and their daughter's future. Child marriage is an issue that cannot be solved in isolation as it results from a complexity of social, cultural and economic dimensions and widespread gender discrimination. The causes and consequences of child marriage are intrinsically linked, including girl's lack of autonomy and low levels of education, poor health status, poverty and overall low socioeconomic status.

Child Marriage and Forced marriage

A forced marriage is defined as a marriage "conducted without the valid consent of one or both parties and is a marriage in which duress – whether physical or emotional - is a factor"². FORWARD believes that *any* child marriage constitutes a forced marriage, in recognition that even if a child appears to give their consent, anyone under the age of 18 is not able to make a fully informed choice whether or not to marry. Child marriages must be viewed within a context of force and coercion, involving pressure and emotional blackmail and children that lack the choice or capacity to give their full consent.

Where does Child marriage occur?

Child marriage is a worldwide phenomenon but is most prevalent in Africa and Southern Asia and although its practice has decreased somewhat in recent decades, it remains common in, although not only confined to, rural areas and among the most poverty stricken³.

Why does child marriage occur?

Poverty and economic transactions are critical factors contributing to child marriage and a common reason why parents may encourage a child to marry. Where poverty is acute, a young girl may be regarded as an economic burden and her marriage to a much older – sometimes even elderly – man is believed to benefit the child and her family both financially and socially. In communities where child marriage is practiced marriage is regarded as a transaction, often representing a significant economic activity for a family. A daughter may be the only commodity a family has left to be traded and sometimes girls can be used as currency or to settle debts. In Africa the monetary value of bride price, or bride wealth, a sum, either in cash or kind, used to purchase a bride for her labour and fertility, is linked with marriage. In the context of poverty, the practice of paying bride price can encourage early marriage. Young girls, a resource with which their parents can attain greater wealth, are married off a young age, for the bride price and also as a way for parents to lessen their economic burdens.

Dominant notions of morality and honour are important factors encouraging the practice of child marriage. These are influenced great by the importance placed on maintaining 'family honour' and the high value placed on a girl's virginity. It is considered that shame would be cast on a family if a girl was not a virgin when she marries. Therefore, in order to ensure that a girl's virtue remains intact, girls may be married earlier, in order to ensure their virginity. Young girls may also be encouraged to marry older men, due to the perception that an older husband will be able to act as a guardian against behaviour deemed immoral and inappropriate.

¹ UNFPA, 2005, Child Marriage Fact Sheet, available at:

http://www.unfpa.org/swp/2005/presskit/factsheets/facts_child_marriage.htm#ftn2#ftn2

² Forced Marriage Unit, UK Foreign & Commonwealth Office, 2006, Forced Marriage: A Wrong Not a Right, available at:

<http://www.fco.gov.uk/Files/kfile/05062006%20Final%20FM%20Report%20NJA.pdf>

³ UNFPA, 2005, Child Marriage Fact Sheet, available at:

http://www.unfpa.org/swp/2005/presskit/factsheets/facts_child_marriage.htm#ftn2#ftn2

What are the consequences of Child marriage?

There are numerous detrimental consequences associated with Child marriage, with physical, developmental, psychological and social implications.

Physical consequences: When a child bride is married she is likely to be forced into sexual activity with her husband, and at an age where the bride is not physically and sexually mature this has severe health consequences. Child brides are likely to become pregnant at an early age and there is a strong correlation between the age of a mother and maternal mortality. Young mothers face higher risks during pregnancies including complications such as heavy bleeding, fistula, infection, anaemia, and eclampsia which contribute to higher mortality rates of both mother and child. At a young age a girl has not developed fully and her body may strain under the effort of child birth, which can result in obstructed labour and obstetric fistula. Obstetric fistula can also be caused by the early sexual relations associated with child marriage.

Child brides may also suffer vulnerability to HIV/AIDS. Young girls in Africa are at a considerably greater risk of infection than boys and a child bride's future husbands may already be infected from previous sexual encounters; a risk which is particularly acute for girls with older husbands⁴. The age disparity between a child bride and her husband, in addition to her low economic autonomy, further increases a girl's vulnerability to HIV/AIDS. It exacerbates the abilities of girls and women to make and negotiate sexual decisions, including whether or not to engage in sexual activity, issues relating to the use of contraception and condoms for protecting against HIV infection, and also their ability to demand fidelity from their husbands. There is also a clear link between Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) and child and early marriages. Communities who practice FGM are also more likely to practice child marriages and in some FGM practicing communities FGM is carried out at puberty and then marriages are arranged immediately afterwards. It is also common in FGM practicing communities for a man to refuse to marry a girl or woman who has not undergone FGM, or to demand that FGM is carried out before marriage.

Developmental consequences: Child Marriage has considerable implications for the social development of child brides, in terms of low levels of education, poor health and lack of agency and personal autonomy. Non-education of the girl child is a problem compounded by child marriage. Large numbers of the girls who drop out of school do so because of early marriage, leaving many women who married early illiterate. A lack of education means that young brides often lack knowledge about sexual relations, their bodies and reproduction, exacerbated by the cultural silence surrounding these subjects. This denies the girl the ability to make informed decisions about sexual relations, planning a family, and her health, yet another example of their lives in which they have no control. The cyclical nature of early marriage results in a likely low level of education and life skills, increased vulnerability to abuse and poor health, and therefore acute poverty.

Psychological and social consequences: It is a huge responsibility for a young girl to become a wife and mother and because girls are not adequately prepared for these roles this heavy burden has a serious impact on their psychological welfare, their perceptions of themselves and also their relationship. Women who marry early are more likely to suffer abuse and violence, with inevitable psychological as well as physical consequences. Early marriage has also been linked to wife abandonment and increased levels of divorce or separation⁵ and child brides also face the risk of being widowed by their husbands who are often considerably older. In these instances the wife is likely to suffer additional discrimination as in many cultures divorced, abandoned or widowed women suffer a loss of status, and may be ostracised by society and denied property rights.

International Human Rights Instruments and Child Marriage

Child marriage is a violation of human rights prohibited by a number of international instruments, including:

- *Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948*
- *Convention on Consent to Marriage, Minimum Age for Marriage and Registration of Marriages, 1964*
- *African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, 1990*
- *Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989*

⁴ UNICEF, 2006, Child Marriage, available at: <http://www.childinfo.org/areas/childmarriage/>

⁵ UNICEF, 2001, Early Marriage: Child Spouses, available at: <http://www.unicef-icdc.org/publications/pdf/digest7e.pdf#search=%22UNICEF%2C2001%2C%20Early%20Marriage%3A%20Child%20Spouses%22>