

Understanding Child Marriage and Child Widowhood

Copyright Mohinder Watson. Geneva, 2021.

Child marriage, in which one or both spouses are under the age of 18, occurs in over 100 countries and is most frequent in Sub-Saharan Africa and Southeast Asia. Although the rates of child marriage worldwide are declining, this progress has been slow and uneven. In Niger, for example, 75 percent of girls are still married before the age of 18, and despite falling rates of child marriage in India, 1 in 3 child brides still live there.

Many factors can contribute to child marriage including:

- **Economic necessity** – The bride price can be up to four times the annual income of a family and therefore used as a coping strategy during disasters, floods, conflict, the COVID-19 pandemic, etc.
- **Lack of education** – A lack of education means that some communities are unaware of the harms of child marriage.
- **Preference for younger girls** – Potential in-laws may view younger girls as easier to manipulate and therefore prefer child marriages.
- **Few viable alternatives to marriage** – Especially in rural communities, girls can have no few alternatives to marriage in the form of educational or job prospects.
- **Traditional division of labour** – Gender roles which view men as the sole breadwinners of the family make it more difficult for girls to access education and put them at higher risk for child marriage.
- **Fear of sexual abuse** – Families may believe that marriage can help protect girls from sexual assault and abuse.
- **Family honour** – In many cultures, girls are expected to be virgins at marriage, so that the earlier they marry, the less risk of family shame and dishonour.
- **Myths** – Harmful myths can perpetuate child marriage, such as that menstruating girls who are unmarried and at home bring back luck to the family.

Child marriage is a violation of human rights that adversely affected child and maternal health and denies girls their childhood and education with significant economic repercussions.

What are we doing to end child marriage?

- Enacting legislation to prevent child marriage
- Encouraging harmonisation of legal systems (e.g., international, national, religious, customary)

- Changing social norms
- Educating girls to keep them in school and out of marriage
- Registering all births and marriages
- Empowering girls to know and exercise their human rights
- Providing life skills training, confidence building, and leadership skills
- Building support networks and safe spaces for girls
- Enlisting local champions, religious leaders, respected elders, teachers, and influencers
- Demonstrating benefits of educating girls and preventing child marriage to communities
- Educating local communities through street theatre, cartoons, films, and TV ads
- Addressing poverty through cash transfer schemes to help families keep girls in school

Despite the clear link between child marriage and child widows, there is far less awareness of the latter. In 1996, Margaret Owen of Widows for Peace through Democracy (WPD), wrote “Despite the clear link between child marriage and child widows, the major UN agencies have not picked up on the plight of child widows.” In 2018 and 2019, Action on Child, Early and Forced Marriage published two major reports on child widows which have been recognized by the International Committee of the Red Cross as among the few examples of rigorous research on the topic. We estimated that there are at least 1,300,000 child widows although the figure is likely much higher. Child brides become widows upon the death of their husband, often as the result of armed conflict, dangerous working conditions, and significant age gaps between the child bride and her husband. As widows, they are at greater risk of poverty, can be denied their inheritance rights, and may be subjected to stigmatization or harmful traditional practices such as widow cleansing.

Recommendations on child and adult widows from Action and Child Early and Forced Marriage Reports:

- Address the intersectional discrimination faced by widows of all ages.
- Recognize that widowhood occurs at all ages, including children and must be viewed through a life course perspective.
- Bring child widows and widows to the top of the UN agenda.
- Gather data disaggregated by sex, age and marital status.

- Strengthen inheritance, land and property laws to protect widows.
- Implement national laws to protect the human rights of child widows and strengthen their protection under international instruments.
- Ensure compulsory birth, death, and marriage registrations.
- Empower women and girls to become independent through education, vocational training, access to credit, social security and collectives.
- Introduce a CEDAW General Recommendation on Widows.

Most of this work comes from my unpublished Masters thesis on child marriage, our reports on child widows and the many presentations I have given around the world.