

**Committee: Human Rights Committee**

**Issue: Addressing the prevention of child marriage**

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## **I. Introduction**

According to the International Center for Research of Women (ICRW), one third of girls in the developing world are married before the age of 18. While 1 in 9 are married before the age of 15. Child Marriage is a formal marriage or informal union entered into by an individual before the age of 18, and is a widespread problem across the world that has many unfortunate consequences. Child marriage is not just an ethical problem, there are many health risks included such as child brides often have a higher risk of contracting STDs because their male partners have more sexual experience. A study by the ICRW found that, female brides under the age of 18 are more likely to experience domestic violence and show signs symptomatic of sexual abuse and post-traumatic stress.

The practice of child marriage is prohibited by several international conventions. Such as, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination of Women (CEDAW) created by the United Nations General Assembly and states: “that the betrothal and the marriage of a child shall have no legal effect,”. Furthermore, the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child established by the African Union restricts child marriage and the betrothal of girls and boys.

Child marriage is heavily prevalent in South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa and the relevancy of child marriage in a country is influenced by the poverty and the enforcement of laws in the country. Additionally, the lack of education is a leading cause for child marriage as in most communities where child marriage is prevalent, it is usually normalized. The international community needs to come together, enforce more efficient laws, in order to protect and educate young boys and girls and their communities as a whole.

## **II. Definition of Key Terms**

### **a) Sexual Health:**

According to the World Health Organization, sexual health is defined as a state of physical, mental and social wellbeing involving sexuality. Furthermore, being free from diseases, illness or other harmful actions is also related to sexuality. This indicates that individuals have safe, healthy, and respectful sexual experiences and relationships.

### **b) Age of Consent:**

The minimum age at which a person is considered to legally consent to sexual activity. The Age of Consent varies from country to country however most countries set the age of consent between the age of 14 to 18. The age at which a person can be legally married differs from the age of consent in most jurisdictions.

### c) Marriageable Age:

The age at which an individual with accordance to the law is able to marry. Similar to the age of consent, the marriageable age differs in each country. In various countries, the marriageable age for women is lower than it is for men. Most countries allow marriage at a younger age with parental or judicial approval.



### d) Gender Equality:

Gender equality refers to the state at which individuals have equal opportunities and access to resources regardless of gender. This also includes equal economic participation and decision making, and the acceptance of all other genders. This achieved through improving the quality of life for people of all genders without sacrificing the gains for either.

## III. General Overview

### a) Child Marriage and UN documents

#### i) Universal Declaration of Human Rights

Article 16 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states: “(1) Men and women of full age, without any limitation due to race, nationality or religion, have the right to marry and to found a family. They are entitled to equal rights as to marriage, during marriage and at its

dissolution. (2) Marriage shall be entered into only with the free and full consent of the intending spouses.”

### **ii) Convention on the Rights of the Child**

See this convention for information on the rights set forth for all children worldwide.

## **b) Sexual Health**

It has been found that there is a very high risk of underage marriage compromising the sexual health of the child involved. The physical and mental risks that come with child marriage are severe and threaten the child’s happiness, well-being, and even life.

### **i. Domestic Abuse and STDs**

Studies by the ICRW report that women who marry under the age of 18 are more likely to experience physical and sexual abuse at the hands of their husbands and are also at a higher risk of contracting STDs. This is also supported by the NCBI (National Center for Biotechnology Information) who ran a study showing that in Kenya and Zambia married girls are 50 and 59 percent (respectively) more likely to contract HIV than single girls.

### **ii. Risks of Childbirth**

Childbirth always comes with certain risks, but for a girl these risks are far more severe. Because of their smaller pelvises, young girls simply aren’t ready to bear children, and girls between the ages of 10-14 are 5-7 times more likely to die during childbirth than fully grown women (NCBI). Furthermore, there is a 60 percent higher infant mortality rate for mothers under 18, showing that underage pregnancy not only endangers the mother but also the child.

### **iii. Mental Health**

Underage marriage can not only affect a person’s physical health, but even more prevalently affects their mental health. A paper released by the scientific journal *Pediatrics* reported that children engaged in underage marriage saw a higher risk of experiencing anxiety, depression, and bipolar disorder than those who married as adults. They also face higher risk of alcohol and drug addictions. The main author of the paper, Dr. Yann Le Strat, states that “With a 41 percent increased risk of mental disorder, child marriage should be considered a major psychological trauma.” Additionally, the same UNICEF report that states women who marry younger are more likely to experience physical abuse also reports that they are “more likely to believe that a husband might sometimes be justified in beating his wife.” All these reports inform that in many cases child marriage leads to lasting psychological conditions such as depression and lowered perception of self-worth.

### **c) Reasons for Child Marriage**

For the most part underage marriages are based on tradition and money, often times completely ignoring the needs and desires of the child.

#### **i) Tradition**

Child marriage stems from a time where the life expectancy was much shorter and the knowledge of medical risks was much lower. Still, communities, in countries such as Niger or Chad, continue this practice out of tradition and without looking at the evidence that speaks against it. In the words of Graca Machel “Harmful traditions, such as the practice of marrying girls at a tender age, continue to prevail and those who are willing to protect these practices often do so in the name of tradition. I am comforted by the knowledge that because tradition is man-made, it can change. In face, harmful traditions must change!”

#### **ii) Poverty**

Poverty is a main contributor to child marriage. Statistics show that child marriage is more prevalent in poorer, less developed countries. By marrying their girls off young to older men, the parents wish to secure the child a future without poverty, in which they will be taken care of. This also lowers the economic burden on the household of the parents. In cases like this, where child marriage is fuelled by poverty, the choice to participate in this practice doesn't come from conviction but rather from desperation.



### **IV. Major Parties Involved and their Views:**

#### **a) Girls Not Brides (GNB):**

Girls Not Brides is an international NGO with the mission to end child marriage throughout the world. The NGO started as a collaboration for organizations to work together and currently they are a global partnership of more than 800 civil society organizations from over 95 countries with the dream to abolish child marriage. GNB believes for governments to take action to address child marriage

in their country and they are doing this by advocating for effective responses, demand accountability, and sharing evidence and data. GNB is also researching and bringing awareness of the negatives effects that Child Marriage has on girls, families and on the said country.

**b) United Nations:**

The United Nations Human Rights Council most recently adopted a resolution that calls upon states to take specific actions to address child marriage in their countries. In 2013 they adopted a another resolution, that recognises child marriage as human rights violation.

The United Nation Population Fund promotes programmes and legislations designed to end child marriage and also supporting the needs of married girls particularly in family planning and maternal health.

Additionally, the United Nations General Assembly has created and adopted several international conventions that forbid child marriage such as, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Convention on the Rights of the Child, and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women.

**c) Niger:**

Niger is a country in West Africa that has the highest rate of child marriage.

According to GNB, 3 out of 4 girls marry before their 18th birthday in Niger and in a few regions the rates are even higher. The world bank estimates that ending child marriage could save the country more than \$25 billion dollars. The legal age of marriage is 15 but most recently a law has been proposed to increase the legal age to 18.

The government has taken incentives to end child marriage. In 2016, the Ministry for the Promotion of Women and Child Protection set up a national committee to coordinate actions which aims to end child marriage in Niger.

## **V. Relevant United Nations Documents & Other Sources**

**a) UN Documents**

- **Universal Declaration of Human Rights, December 10, 1948,**

Created by the United Nations General Assembly, it consists of 30 articles stating the rights of an individual. It states that “men and women past the age of 18 are entitled to equal rights as to marriage, during marriage and at its dissolution,”, and that “Marriage shall be entered into with consent of both parties,”.

- **Convention on Consent to Marriage, Minimum Age for Marriage and Registration of Marriages, 9 December 1964,**

Created by the United Nations General Assembly, this treaty defines the standards of marriage and ratified by 71 countries. The convention states

that no marriage can be entered legally without the consent of both parties. It also entails for countries to establish a minimum age of marriage and for states to ensure the registration of marriage.

- **Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination of Women, 3 September 1981,**

An international treaty adopted by the United Nations and ratified by 183 countries. It states that “the betrothal and the marriage of a child shall have no legal effect, and all necessary action, including legislation, should be taken to specify a minimum age for marriage and to make the registration of marriages in an official registry compulsory”. It was recommended to make the minimum age of marriage 18.

**b) Other Sources,**

- **African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, July 01, 1990,**

Created by the Organisation of African Unity (OAU), the goal of this document is to set out rights and define universal principles and norms for the status of children in Africa. It prohibits child marriage and the betrothal of girls and boys.

## **VI. Questions to Consider**

*A series of questions in bullet points to help the delegates think about what they are might do, how they'd do it, why they'd do it, etc.*

How does child marriage differ in more and less developed countries? Why?

How does poverty affect child marriage?

How can raising awareness of this issue help prevent it?

What type of policies does your have country have regarding child marriage?

What policies has your country implemented?

Is child marriage a widespread issue in your country?

Should there be a global minimum age for marriage? Or should it be country-based?

## **VII. Conclusion**

15 million girls are victims of child marriage every year. Their sexual, physical, and mental health is put at risk, and in many cases harmed. The two primary reasons for this dangerous, outdated practice are claims of “tradition” and desperation stemming from poverty. It is time that

the nations of the world come together to combat this issue, and protect the millions of girls that have, are, and will be affected by this.

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