The Protection of Child Brides

Topic Background
Child marriage - a union or marriage under the age of 18 - has been proven to have a disproportionate impact on women.¹ In 2018, 40% of women living in the developing world were married before or at the age of 18.² At its core, child marriage is a human rights violation. When girls are married before the age of 18, they are far less likely to receive an education, increases the risk of violence in a marriage and takes away young girl’s ability to make crucial decisions about their sexual health.³ The fundamental issue when girls are married under the age of 18, is that their focus pivots to the household, and potential children that often follows. This prohibits girls from continuing their education or practical training to join the workforce, often times condemning them to a life of child bearing and house work, leaving them financially dependent on men for household income.

650 million women alive are estimated to have been married before the age of 18.⁴ In 2018, the global rate of women married under 18 was 21%, nearly half of that in the developing world.⁵ It is clear to the international community that this issue disproportionately impacts women in the developing world for a variety of social and economic reasons. Socially, girls are not considered the potential wage earners that men are. This means that when access to education is poor and families must choose who to send to school, boys are prioritized.⁶ Social norms that dictate men stay with their families while women leave to be with their husbands also encourage the prioritization of men. It is a better investment for a family to educate boys. When girls are no

longer in school, they are far more likely to be married off. Economically, girls are often seen as a burden in the developing world. For families in extreme poverty, marrying a girl off serves 3 key financial benefits- one less mouth to feed, one less education to fund, and the income of a dowry payment.

A primary aspect of this problem is the impact it has on young girls health. Many child brides lack access to sexual and reproductive education. While many communities believe that being married young prevents women from being sexually active with multiple partners, hence combating HIV and AIDS, this is not the case. Due to the young age of child brides participating in unprotected sex, HIV and AIDS is a large concern. In Nations such as Ethiopia and Nigeria, the rate of prevalence for HIV and AIDS is almost double among girls married before the age of 18. Furthermore, the underdevelopment of teenage bodies often leaves girls inadapt for pregnancy when they are first married as a child bride. However, this rarely stops girls from becoming pregnant quickly after they are married, leading to complications in pregnancy and childbirth being the leading cause of death globally among adolescent girls.

Another key element of this issue is the development cost of child brides. Research in 2017 proved that the abundance of child brides negatively impacts the economies of developing countries. Ending child marriage would result in a savings of 4 trillion by the year 2030.

Creating further protection for child brides is fundamental to continuing development internationally. Without empowering and uplifting the millions of girls trapped in a cycle of poverty and poor health by child marriages, communities will never be able to close the

---

development gap economically. Addressing social norms and lack of quality education in developing countries are among the barriers to overcome this international issue.

**Past UN Action**
On November 20th, 1989, The United Nations adopted the Convention on the Right of the Child. In the last 30 years, this document has been considered the most ratified human rights treaty in the world. Article 19 of this convention recommends the minimum age of marriage be set at 18. Yet in 2016, 117 countries that stipulate the age of marriage is 18 still had exceptions to the rule that allowed girls to be married before this.

Since 2015, the issue of child brides has been on the forefront of the international stage in light of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The issue of child brides greatly impacts SDGs number one, two, three, four and eight. However SDG number 5, gender inequality, is perhaps the most relevant for this issue. Gender inequality is the root of the child bride issue. The inequality of women in society preludes the way girls are valued and often promotes a discriminatory view of a woman’s worth and role in society. SDG 5, target number 3 addresses the ending of all harmful practices, such as child marriage, as well as 5.6.1 which aims to allow women by 2030 to make more informed decisions when it comes to their sexual health.

The United Nations Children’s Fund, or UNICEF, are the major United Nations body addressing the issue of child brides. The primary belief of this organization is that:

> "Ending Child Marriage will help break the intergenerational cycle of poverty by allowing girls and women to participate more fully in society. Empowered and educated girls are better able to nourish and care for their children, leading to healthier, smaller families. When girls are allowed to be girls, everybody wins."

This organization works specifically to collect current and accurate data on the prevalence of child brides. UNICEF pairs with other organs of the United Nations to implement specific programs meant to address the prevalence of child brides. In 2016, UNICEF paired with the UNFPA or United Nations Population Fund to launch a global program addressing the 12 nations

---

16 “These are the countries where child marriage is legal.” The World Economic Forum. [https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2016/09/these-are-the-countries-where-child-marriage-is-legal/](https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2016/09/these-are-the-countries-where-child-marriage-is-legal/)
with the highest rates of child marriage, including Burkina Faso, India and Yemen. This program works with local communities to educate both men and women on the impacts of child brides to development, as well as advocating for stricter laws at both the national and international level.

Most recently, the United Nations General Assembly agreed on a third resolution addressing child marriage and the rights of child brides. Resolution A/C.3/73/L.22/Rev.1, led by Canada and Zambia was co-sponsored by 114 member states. This most recent addition to the series of resolutions that addresses child marriages, talks specifically about the utilization of local religious and traditional leaders as a method of empowering women in their communities.

Non-Governmental organizations, or NGO’s also play a large role in the protection of child brides. Girls not Brides is an NGO created in 2011 to focus on the issue of child brides alone. They are a contributing member to many UN forums on this issue, such as the Commission on the Status of Women. The organization is committed to raising awareness on child brides and the harmful implications this practice has on the economic and social development of societies.

Possible Solutions
Solving the issue of child brides is a multifaceted issue that includes working with local, national and international organizations and law makers. Delegates must ensure they address the three primary issues of this topic in their resolutions, including the underlying gender inequality in societies, the need for quality sexual education and job training, and the empowerment of the international community to develop strong laws and treaties to protect child brides.

International solutions to this issue include the continual rallying of key politicians and UN agencies to continue pushing this issue to the forefront of the international agenda. Resolutions such as that agreed upon in 2018 have proved to be an empowering force for local community leaders, working in conjunction with UN organizations such as UNICEF and UNFPA. On a regional level, groups such as the African bloc and Asia/ the Pacific are disproportionately impacted by this issue. When thinking of solutions, it is imperative to understand the additional resources that need to be poured into these regions. Social norms such as men living with their families and women moving in with their husbands heavily impede development in these societies. Working with local leaders to help address these norms, as well as NGOs such as Girls not Brides, gives UN agencies legitimacy in these regions to address the core inequality that the issue of child brides stems from.

Nationally and locally, it is key to work with nations in developing quality education strategies. This includes additional curriculum on safe sexual policies from a young age in local schools. Furthermore, bringing in resources and access to birth control and other protection methods is key to solving the high rates of HIV and AIDS among young brides.

Delegates must approach this topic with a strong understanding of the impact it has on the world. When countries and communities leave their women vulnerable to the consequences of child brides, such as poor health and lack of education, they are continuing to hold their societies back. Ending child marriage is integral to the ability of nations to develop. By protecting girls from being married young, we allow women to be educated and contribute to the workforce. This means when they do eventually give birth, they are able to better provide for their families, offering both mother and child a higher quality of life, and most importantly breaking the intergenerational cycle of poverty and inequality.

**Further Research**
- UNICEF - Preventing Child Marriage
- Sustainable Development Goal #5 - Gender Inequality
- Convention on the Rights of the Child
- Resolution A/C.3/73/L.22/Rev.1
- Girls not Brides - NGO

**Worksheet Questions**
1. What is the recommended age of marriage by the Convention on the Rights of the Child?
2. What percentage of children 18 or under are married internationally? What is that number in the developing world?
3. What other UN group is UNICEF working with to address the issue of child brides? What are they focusing on?
4. What is the name of the most recent resolution on child brides?
5. What sustainable development goal is most related to the issue of child brides?