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INDIA: Generational change in India: How might raising the legal age of marriage from 18 to 21 change the lives of girls?

By Aarushi Khanna

Equal Measures 2030 (04.12.2020) - <https://bit.ly/3lXN6jS> - India is home to the highest number of child brides in the world. UNICEF estimates that almost half of the child marriages in the world happen in South Asia, 1-in-3 of which are in India[1]. The existing legal framework sets the minimum legal age of marriage for girls in India at 18 which the current political leadership is considering revising to 21. An announcement in this regard was recently made by the Indian Prime Minister in August 2020. Women's rights organisations and gender equality advocates have expressed their apprehension about the proposed change in the law.

Decisions around marriage in India are governed by a complex set of compounding factors: poverty; dowry where the younger the bride, the lower the dowry expectation; a way to protect the family honour; a means to prevent rape and pre-marital sex; and perceptions around labour and productivity[2]. All these factors serve as obstacles to conforming to the child marriage law. This is also the reason families consider education for young girls as less of a priority and more of a futile investment since girl's productive capacities are often believed to benefit her marital family. The practise of early marriage is often justified by parents and guardians as a means of securing girls' future and protecting them from the risk of physical and sexual violence. The law in its current form is also used by parents and community members to control and punish girls from choosing their own partner. In reality, it is a means of exercising control over young women's bodily autonomy.

Though declining, the practise of child marriage is clearly rampant in India. Even 40 years after the enactment of the current Child Marriage Prohibition Act, the number of young women to be married under 18 remains extremely high, 1-in-4 [3]. The proportion of women aged 20–24 who were married before age 18 was 50% in 1992–93, 47% in 2005–06 and only saw a noticeable dip of 19% between 2005 and 2015[4]. Increased access to education, increased literacy of mothers, and government investment were contributing factors that have enabled this impressive dip in the last decade. India’s progress has been strong but not fast enough to eliminate the practise by 2030.

So why is the government looking to revise the age of marriage law?

Two reasons:

- To achieve better maternal health outcomes: Early marriage in India is linked to early pregnancy and the subsequent increased risk of maternal mortality. The government is of the view that increasing age at marriage would delay age at first pregnancy and would lead to better maternal and child health outcomes.
- The other compelling argument supports demographics: Delaying age of marriage is linked to delaying age at pregnancies and likely to reduce the overall number of pregnancies[5].

Sahaj, our partner in India is of the view that this approach is rather simplistic and removed from the ground reality. Improved maternal and child health outcomes rely on financial stability, good nutrition, and level of education and not just the age at pregnancy. Being part of the national and state level advocacy on the issue, Sahaj believes that the conversation needs to focus on factors that enable young women to be empowered to make informed decisions. Over the last decade India has seen a decline in both child marriage and fertility, these shifts have not been an outcome of legislative changes but a result of investment and interventions in health, education, skilling, and financial inclusion. The government must be cognizant of these factors and recognise that a legal intervention at this point is unnecessary.

“In my opinion changing the age at marriage won’t lead to a reduction in maternal mortality. The real cause for that is the lack of and poor quality of maternal health services available.” 18 years old, peer educator, Vadodara, Gujarat.

So, what can the government do? Here is a list of other areas that the government might focus on to eliminate this harmful practice by 2030.

- Invest in improving education outcomes for girls. At the current pace of change an estimated 68% of girls ages 20–24 will have completed secondary education by 2030[6]. All barriers that lead to increased dropouts by girls must be identified and addressed to ensure that every girl completes secondary education by 2030.
- Improve access to comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) to promote bodily autonomy, increased decision making and healthy sexual behaviours and activities that are linked to a decrease in risky behaviour and contribute to eliminating harmful practices. School closures due to Covid-19 are further hindering the delivery of CSE and reproductive health information.
- Invest more to ensure universal access to quality contraception, maternal health services, and safe abortion services. India’s progress on meeting contraception needs of married women only improved by 6.9% between 2008 and 2018[7]. Reproductive health services have been severely impacted by Covid-19 and are likely to impact progress on contraceptive access across India.
- Create job opportunities. The pandemic triggered a migration crisis in India. The announcement of the lockdown resulted in massive job losses of daily wage laborers who had migrated to large cities for work. It is estimated that over 10.6 million

migrant workers returned to their home state with no further income prospects [8]. In such times of socio-economic uncertainty, migrant parents with young daughters are marrying them off early to secure their future and ensure their well-being.

- Listen to girls and keep their interest at the centre of all policy and programme. Covid-19 has led to major disruption in the education system with the closure of schools and their lives, increasing risk of early marriage and other harmful practices. When Sahaj spoke to young women in different parts of Vadodara (Gujarat) about their thoughts on proposed change in law they said....

"Its my appeal to the government to change the education system, improve the quality of teaching in government schools, provide compulsory computer training, provide scholarships and vocational training to start businesses and work so girls are not a financial burden on their family and can negotiate life decisions." 21 years old, Vadodara, Gujarat.

"India has committed to eliminating the practice of child marriage by 2030 as a part of the Sustainable Development Agenda. Covid-19 is adding another layer of complexity, there is a fear that years of progress made on the issue may rescind. The children's helpline in India has already reported a 17% increase in distress calls related to early marriage in June-July this year compared to 2019[8]. In this context India must prioritise improving access to education, quality sexual and reproductive health and nutrition while empowering young women and girls."

**Members of the Sahaj team include Hemal Shah, Nilangi Sardeshpande, Rashmi Deshpande, Renu Khanna, Vaishali Zararia

Footnotes:

- [1] <https://www.unicef.org/india/what-we-do/end-childmarriage#:~:text=While%20the%20prevalence%20of%20girls,the%20prevalence%20of%20the%20practice>.
- [2] <https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/child-marriage/india/>
- [3] <https://www.unicef.org/india/media/1176/file/Ending-Child-Marriage.pdf>
- [4] National Family Health Survey — 2,3,4 estimates <http://rchiips.org/nfhs/>
- [5] <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/government-may-relook-age-of-marriage-for-women/article32364889.ece>
- [6] Equal Measures 2020 Data hub <https://data.em2030.org/2020-index-projections/data-explorer-by-country/>.
- [7] Sahaj Bending the Curve Factsheet, 2020 <http://www.sahaj.org.in/factsheets.php>
- [8] https://www.business-standard.com/article/current-affairs/struggling-to-find-work-under-mgnregs-bihar-migrants-head-back-to-cities-120101900238_1.html
- [9] <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-54186709>

INDIA: India's Covid crisis sees rise in child marriage and trafficking

India's coronavirus lockdown has had an adverse impact on children, pushing up incidents of child marriage and child labour, reports the BBC's Divya Arya.

BBC (18.09.2020) - <https://bbc.in/2FWHNT5> - Thirteen-year-old Rani has just won her first battle in life. Her parents tried to force her to marry this summer, but Rani reached out for help and managed to stop the wedding.

Rani (not her real name) was in the eighth grade when India's federal government suddenly imposed a lockdown in March, shuttering everything from schools to businesses to stop the spread of coronavirus.

Within a month, Rani's father, who was battling tuberculosis, found her a match. Rani was not happy. "I don't understand why everyone is in a rush to marry girls," she said. "They don't understand that it is important to go to school, start earning and be independent."

It is illegal for girls under the age of 18 to marry in India. But the country is home to the largest number of child brides in the world, accounting for a third of the global total, according to UNICEF. The charity estimates that at least 1.5 million girls under 18 get married here each year.

This year might be worse. Childline, a children's helpline, has reported a 17% increase in distress calls related to early marriage of girls in June and July this year compared to 2019.

Millions lost their jobs during the prolonged lockdown from the end of March to early June. Many of them included India's informal and unprotected workers, who, have been pushed deeper into poverty.

According to the government, more than 10 million of these workers, many of them young men, returned to their hometowns and villages during the lockdown because of loss of work. So parents of young girls - worried for their safety and anxious about their future prospects - are marrying their daughters off to ensure their wellbeing.

Another reason is that parents are expected to pay for big weddings, but covid restrictions have limited the size of weddings.

So parents who have received offers of marriage this year have been quick to take them up, according to Manisha Biraris, the assistant commissioner for Women and Child Welfare in Maharashtra state.

"It was easier, cheaper and they could get away with inviting very few people."

Although the country began reopening in June, many jobs have not returned and the economy is still struggling. Schools are still shut, leaving vulnerable adolescents at home.

Schools have been agents of change in India, especially in poor communities like the eastern state of Odisha, where Rani lives. They are a space where girls can reach out to teachers and friends for help when facing pressure to marry from their family.

But with schools closed, a crucial safety net is gone.

"In extremely poor communities, girls are already not encouraged to study. Once they leave school it's hard to convince families to get them back in," said Smita Khanjow from Action Aid, which has been working on UNICEF's special program on child marriage in the five most-affected states.

Rani's close school friend was married off early this year, she said. But Rani said she was able to stop her wedding after she called the emergency national helpline for children, Childline. Along with the help of a local NGO and the police, staff at Childline were able to stop the ceremony.

But Rani's troubles didn't end there. Her father passed away soon after.

"I want to go back to school when it reopens, and now I need to work harder as my father is no more," she said. "It is my responsibility to help my mother run the household."

The situation has been dire for boys too. According to Ms Khanjow, from Action Aid. She and her colleagues are increasingly coming across cases of teenage boys being pushed into working in factories to support their families

In India, it is a criminal offense to employ a child for work. But according to the last census, in 2011, 10 million of India's 260 million children were found to be child labourers.

It's not an easy decision for families. Four months into the lockdown, Pankaj Lal gave in to a trafficker's offer for his 13-year-old son. He had five children to feed but almost no earnings from pulling his rickshaw.

Mr Lal agreed to send his son more than a 1,000km (690 miles) from his native Bihar state to Rajasthan to work in a bangle manufacturing factory for 5,000 rupees (\$68; £52) per month. That is a substantial sum for a family struggling to survive.

Mr Lal broke down as he described his decision to send his son so far away.

"My children had not eaten for two days," he said. "I volunteered myself to the trafficker, but he said nimble fingers were needed for this work and I was of no use to him. I had almost no choice but to send my son away."

Despite restrictions on transport and movement, traffickers were able to tap into their powerful nexus to move children across state lines using new routes and luxury buses. Suresh Kumar, who runs NGO Centre Direct, says a crisis is waiting to happen. He has been rescuing child labourers from traffickers for more than 25 years.

"The number of children we have rescued has more than doubled from last year. Villages have emptied out and the past months have seen the traffickers grow stronger and make use of the lockdown which has stretched authorities and the police," he said.

Childline, however, reported a drop in distress calls related to child labour. Activists say this could be because children give in to their parents cry for help.

The government has taken steps to stop trafficking, including passing a more stringent law, and asking states to strengthen and expand anti-human trafficking in the wake of the lockdown.

States have also been asked to spread awareness about trafficking, and keep shelters for women and children accessible even during the pandemic.

But, activists say, most traffickers get away with paying fines because they are connected to powerful people. Mr Kumar said families rarely report trafficking, and those that do register police complaints are threatened.

Mr Lal 's family got lucky - the bus carrying his son was stopped while on its way and the children inside were rescued. His son is now quarantining in a child care centre in Rajasthan and will return home soon.

"It was a moment of weakness," he said. "I will never send my child to work again even if it means we have to survive on morsels."

SOMALIA: Uproar after Somali lawmaker presents bill to legalise child marriage

By Abdi Sheikh

Reuters (20.08.2020) - <https://reut.rs/34sZ9ko> - Hafsa was married off at 13 by her father to a man who paid \$100. She and her mother say she was beaten and raped for two years before they convinced him to divorce her.

"The man just slept with me, beating me always," she said, sitting by her mother, who clutches her daughter tightly. "I regretted I was born."

There is no law mandating a minimum age for marriage in Somalia. A bill introduced in parliament this month by a presidential ally caused a storm of criticism from lawmakers when they realised it would legalise marriage at puberty - as early as 10 for some girls.

Data from a government survey this year shows that nearly a third of girls are married before their 18th birthday - just under half of those before the age of 15.

"Some families marry off their daughters to reduce their economic burden or earn income. Others may do so because they believe it will secure their daughters' futures or protect them," said Dheepa Pandian, a spokeswoman from UNICEF, the United Nations' Children's Fund.

Political turmoil in Somalia - the prime minister was sacked last month and elections due this year will likely be delayed - means it is unclear when parliament might vote on the bill. The Horn of Africa nation is also battling an Islamist insurgency.

Many lawmakers, like legislator and human rights activist Sahra Omar Malin, reject the bill.

"Our constitution is based on Islam. It says the age of maturity is 18, this is the right age for voting or for a girl to marry," she said.

Deputy speaker Abdiweli Mudeey, who presented the bill, did not return calls seeking comment but told lawmakers that it had been reviewed by clerics and "this bill ... is the correct one based on Islam."

Nadifa Hussein, who runs three camps in the capital for families fleeing violence, shelters many abused and abandoned child brides.

"Most women here were married at 13 and are divorced by the time they are 20," Hussein said. "They have no one to feed them."

Among them is Sirad, a shy 16-year-old with two children. Her husband has left, but if he comes back she must welcome him, she said sadly.

"Who else wants me?" she asked, covering her face. "If you are thrown into a well and can't come out, the only option is to try to swim."

BANGLADESH: Bangladesh's child marriage problem is the world's human trafficking crisis

Why fixing the second issue isn't possible without addressing the first.

By Corinne Redfern

Foreign Policy (08.11.2019) - <https://bit.ly/36VwNxI> - First Papiya was forced into marriage at 12 years old. Then she was trafficked into sexual slavery.

Her story isn't unusual. It's echoed by tens of thousands of girls in Bangladesh, highlighting a link between child marriage and sex trafficking that should be impossible to ignore. The country with the highest rate of marriage involving girls under the age of 15 in the world, and where 150,000 to 200,000 children and young women have been trafficked into prostitution, the two forms of abuse are tightly intertwined. Traffickers prey on the vulnerable, and child marriage is what makes girls like Papiya vulnerable in the first place.

But international donors, policymakers, and even the U.S. State Department have failed to recognize this chain of exploitation, and that's slowing down efforts to address it.

Since March 2017, I have interviewed over 400 women trapped behind the walls of four brothels in Bangladesh, in an investigation that was funded by the nonprofit organization Girls Not Brides. Marriage is illegal for girls under the age of 18 (and boys under 21) in Bangladesh under the 1929 Child Marriage Restraint Act, although the law allows girls under 18 to marry under "special circumstances"—without establishing a minimum age limit, or clarifying what those circumstances must be. Half of the girls I spoke with told me that they had been married before the age of 18 and believed they had been trafficked into sexual slavery as a direct result.

Yet for all the obvious overlap, trafficking and child marriage in Bangladesh are viewed independently of one another by the U.S. State Department—and initiatives to end both are kept separate as a result. While child marriage is largely approached by nonprofit organizations through a lens of legislative lobbying and education as prevention, counter-trafficking efforts center on rescue, rehabilitation, and prosecution. Projects that work to prevent trafficking focus on unmarried girls who are still in school.

Approximately 52 percent of girls in Bangladesh are lost in the chasm between child marriage prevention and trafficking rehabilitation: coerced into marriage as children and left without the support they need to protect themselves and safely break out.

Papiya was still trapped in a brothel in the village of Kandipara when I first met her in March 2017. She told me how she fled her in-laws' house barefoot in the middle of the night, leaving her sandals by the door so that the slap of their soles on the stairs didn't wake her 22-year-old husband. As the sun rose, she spotted a rickshaw driver sleeping by the side of the road and begged him for help. He agreed with a smile, she remembered. Then he drove Papiya to a brothel and sold her for more money than he'd usually make in a month.

Now 17, Papiya has been trapped in one of Bangladesh's 11 government-registered, legal brothel villages ever since. Each one enslaves up to 3,000 women and underage girls in sexual servitude that can see them raped up to 11 or 12 times a day. Abdulla al-Mamun, the director of child protection and child rights governance at Service Civil International Bangladesh, says he receives reports of four or five children being trafficked to the country's largest brothel every month.

Reporting from inside these brothels never gets easier. As lines of men jostle through the entry gates and policemen patrol the brothel streets for signs of drugs or disorder, Papiya and her friends lie on their beds in windowless metal cells and self-harm in a last-ditch attempt at temporary escape.

None of the girls came here consensually. For some, it was their husbands who sold them to the brothels—each man opting to free himself from the constraining role of babysitter in a marriage in which his child wife might feasibly sleep with a teddy bear, and earning about 300,000 taka, \$3,500, in the process. But the majority of the girls shared the same story: like Papiya, they also refused to accept the life of sexual violence and abuse that they found themselves forced into in the name of marriage, and they were willing to risk their lives to escape it.

A few were picked up by traffickers as they attempted to make their way home. Others, like Rupa, Sony, Jinuk, crossed sunken rice fields and railway lines, only to find themselves rejected by their families for the social shame that accompanies a daughter who flees a life of exploitation. Within days, alone at a bus stop or a train station, each girl was approached by a man or woman proffering help and a place to stay for the night. They were drugged and sold to the brothel before they could understand what was going on.

Despite such widespread evidence of child marriage as a precursor to sex trafficking, the connection is consistently overlooked. The Bangladesh National Women Lawyers Association has been working to provide legal assistance and shelter to abused women across Bangladesh since 1979, but staff say they have found themselves struggling to make international donors understand the crossover between underage marriage and modern-day slavery. Funding for their anti-trafficking work has increased since 2017, but little support comes for cases that involve domestic violence or girls who need to flee their marriage.

“It is hard to make our donors see that these problems are all linked,” said Towhida Khondker, the director of the lawyers association. “They are all forms of violence, and one can quickly lead to another.”

One agency with the influence to effect change is the U.S. State Department’s Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons. Were they to take child marriage into consideration when assessing human trafficking in Bangladesh, local nonprofit organizations believe countertrafficking initiatives would likely be expanded to target the country’s most defenseless demographic: underage brides.

Since 2001, the United States has purported to hold foreign—often low- and middle-income—countries accountable for failing to adequately implement countertrafficking measures set out by the U.S. Trafficking Victims Protection Act, as established in 2000. It does so through the means of the Trafficking In Persons (TIP) Report—a controversial but vastly influential lengthy annual assessment of the response to trafficking in 187 countries, ranking them across four tiers: Tier 1 being the most successful at countertrafficking efforts, followed by Tier 2, Tier 2 Watch List, and finally Tier 3.

Countries considered not to be making sufficient efforts to combat trafficking are classified within Tier 3 and are subject to sanctions on U.S. aid to their governments, which are theoretically restricted to activities that are unrelated to human trafficking and its root causes. The U.S. State Department is then required by law to work with them to develop a more effective countertrafficking strategy going forward.

This year’s report, released in June, saw 21 countries fall within Tier 3, including China, Belarus and South Sudan. For the third year in a row, Bangladesh was assigned Tier 2 Watch List status—a ranking explained in part by researchers as a repercussion of the

sudden influx of over a million Rohingya refugees since 2016, and accompanied by 13 recommendations for improvement.

In 18 years of research and assessment, there has never been any mention of child marriage in Bangladesh's TIP profile. Yet the State Department is clearly aware of the implications that early marriage can have on a girl's safety: in this year's report, they referenced child marriage as a contributing factor to girls' vulnerability to sexual exploitation and trafficking in both Syria and Iraq.

Human rights advocates say that if the State Department viewed child marriage in Bangladesh as a form of trafficking or an enabler of trafficking, then it's possible that the country would have received different recommendations, or even a different grade. Were that the case, the incentives for the Bangladeshi government to end child marriage and develop comprehensive child protection legislation would be considerable.

"The Bangladeshi government takes the TIP report very seriously," said Liesbeth Zonneveld, the chief of Winrock International's Counter Trafficking-In-Persons Project, adding that both Bangladesh's secretary of home Affairs and foreign secretary have already shown a demonstrable commitment to implementing the State Department's 2019 recommendations. Zonneveld doesn't know why the United States refuses to consider child marriage as a form of trafficking and to include it in the TIP report accordingly. "The U.S. says there are 25 million global victims of human trafficking, whereas most of us would include forced marriage in that and say there are 40 million," she said.

Funding for programs that address child marriage as a root cause of trafficking would also be easier to access, said Talinay Strehl, the program manager for the Dutch anti-trafficking nonprofit Free a Girl. "Our donors respect the information included in the TIP Report," she said. "If we were able to show them that child marriage was referenced, it would probably be easier to get financial support for prevention projects that work with victims of child marriage." Free a Girl does not currently run any anti-trafficking projects that target girls forced into early marriage, but Strehl acknowledges that they're a high-risk demographic. "Right now, we just don't have the resources," she said.

Until the U.S. State Department acknowledges the role of child marriage in rates of trafficking in Bangladesh, and organizations on the ground are able to incorporate the victims of child marriage into their countertrafficking efforts, those working with trafficking survivors say girls growing up across Bangladesh will remain trapped at an alarming impasse: stay with your husband and endure sexual violence in the name of marriage, or run away and risk being sold into sexual slavery without hope of escape.

TANZANIA: Tanzanian court upholds a law banning child marriage

By Bukola Adebayo

CNN (23.10.2019) - <https://cnn.it/34qUa0I> - Tanzania's Supreme Court of Appeal on Wednesday upheld an earlier ruling banning parents from marrying off girls as young as 15.

A high court ruling in 2016 had declared "unconstitutional" sections of Tanzania's marriage act that allowed the practice. It also directed the government to raise the legal age of marriage to 18 years within a year.

That judgment followed a legal challenge by children's rights activists, who argued that the existing law had pushed many girls into underage marriages.

But Tanzania's attorney general launched an appeal -- one of its claims was that child marriage could protect unmarried girls who get pregnant.

The Supreme Court of Appeal dismissed the attorney general's appeal on Wednesday and asked Tanzania's government to respect the previous ruling, according to court documents seen by CNN.

With two out of five girls being married off before their 18th birthday, Tanzania has one of the highest rates of child marriage in the world, according to UN estimates.

Children's rights campaigners said local advocacy groups must continue to mount pressure on government to implement the ruling.

"We welcome the news, but the marriage act needs to be amended to reflect the court's judgment that the minimum age of marriage in Tanzania should be 18 for both boys and girls," said Jean-Paul Murunga from campaign group Equality Now said.

PAKISTAN: PTI lawmakers reject child marriage bill

PTI's MNAs left standing committee meeting at the time of voting on bill

By Zubair Qureshi

Gulf News (25.08.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2maMyy7> - Citizens of Pakistan have criticised Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf's (PTI) Members of the National Assembly (MNAs) for rejecting a bill banning underage marriages.

The bill was rejected by voting in a meeting of the National Assembly's Standing Committee on Law & Justice held on August 21.

PTI MNA Riaz Fatyana was in the chair while another MNA of the party Dr Ramesh Kumar was the mover of the bill.

Opposition to a bill — which was passed by the Sindh Assembly in 2014 and was widely accepted in society — came from PTI and the Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam-Fazl (JUI-F) parliamentarians while Pakistan People's Party MNAs and Dr Kumar voted in its favour.

In May, Dr Kumar presented the bill in the National Assembly. The bill seeks to set the minimum marriageable age in Pakistan at 18.

The bill, however, drew uproar from the party's own MNAs and also from the JUI-F and the Speaker National Assembly Asad Qaiser had to refer it to the National Assembly Committee on Law and Justice.

Silent opposition

While talking to Gulf News, Dr Kumar said in Wednesday's Standing Committee meeting it was decided that the bill should be passed or rejected through voting.

"When the voting was about to begin, I noticed the PTI MNAs started leaving the committee one by one. I asked them not to leave as we needed votes for the approval of the bill in

the standing committee but unfortunately they left and those opposing the bill were in majority," said a disappointed Dr Kumar.

In this way they showed their silent opposition to the bill, he added.

Even within the cabinet, ministers are divided on the bill. Human Rights Minister Dr Shireen Mazari argued in support of the bill and asked the chair to refer it to the committee concerned, while Religious Affairs Minister Noorul Haq Qadri and Parliamentary Affairs Minister Ali Mohammad Khan spoke against it.

Chairperson of National Council on Status of Women Khawar Mumtaz at a report launch on Friday said the members who opposed the bill needed to understand the sensitivity of the issue. How can we expect children to take decision on marriage at that tender age, she asked.

Valerie Khan, a women's rights activist, said it was irresponsible, ill-informed and disappointing for elected representatives who claim to protect the most vulnerable to reject the bill while supporting an agenda of development in the country.

This act of the parliamentarians rejecting a ban on child marriages amounts to supporting bigotry and darkness, she added.

Iftikhar Mubarik, executive director of Search For Justice, an NGO working to strengthen child rights and protection work in Pakistan, said it is very strange that any child below the 18 years is not eligible to vote, obtain a Computerised National Identity Card or driving license but can be married before that age, and the law is protecting this.

Article 25 of the Constitution of Pakistan states that all citizens are equal before law and there shall be no discrimination on the basis of sex alone. Is the discrepancy among boys and girls only with reference to marriage is not contradicting the constitution, asked Mubarik.

In Pakistan, the practice of marrying off young girls is common, particularly in low-income families but action cannot be taken against offenders.

SOUTH SUDAN: Court annuls child marriage of 16-year-old in landmark case

South Sudan has one of the highest rates of child marriage in the world.

By Hellen Toby

Global Citizen (09.07.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2NZbXIH> - A court in South Sudan has annulled a child marriage, in a rare legal case that activists say could signal a turning point for women's rights in the conservative country.

The marriage of a 16-year-old girl, the daughter of a cattle herdsman, to a 28-year-old man was deemed illegal by a court in Kapoeta late last month, the southern state's information minister Simon Karlo said this week.

Despite the legal age of marriage being 18, more than 50% of South Sudanese girls are wed before their 18th birthday, according to the United Nations children's agency UNICEF.

Poverty, climate change, low levels of literacy and gender inequality in education have fuelled child marriage in the country for years.

But activists said last month's ruling, the first of its kind in South Sudan's eight-year history, could set a precedent for other girls in the country wishing to end marriages entered into at a young age.

"Child marriage is common in Kapoeta because the communities are cattle keepers and so they use their daughters for wealth," Karlo told the Thomson Reuters Foundation by phone.

"It is indeed the first time for a court here [in South Sudan] to take on such a case."

The girl's father, uncle and groom were each sentenced to three years in prison after arranging the marriage.

It involved paying a dowry of 60 cows to the bride's family, according to Steward Women, the advocacy group that provided the girl with legal assistance.

The ruling against the three men was later overturned at the request of the girl and on the condition of a written "commitment" from the men pledging not to force her into marriage again.

"As a way of harmonizing the statutory law and customary law, the sentence was suspended and the girl was put under the protection of a guardian," said Josephine Chandiru, executive director of Steward Women which offers legal advice to victims of sexual and gender-based violence.

"This was a historical moment ... The judge opened a gateway for us to use it as a precedent in future child marriage cases."

South Sudan has the seventh highest prevalence of child marriage in the world, according to UNICEF's head of child protection, Jean Leiby.

"Already the fact that this issue came to court is a step forward in South Sudan," Leiby said.

He called for improvements in the education of children and their parents as a way to combat child marriage.

"In many places in the country, many people do not know the modern laws," he said. "So in line with that, sometimes you cannot blame the community for some actions because they don't know."

AFRICA: African Development Bank President attends historic African Union summit, decries child marriage

AfricaNews.com (08.07.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2NIuWHk> - The president of the African Development Bank, Akinwumi Adesina joined continental leaders in Niger for an African Union summit which saw the official launch of the African Continental Free Trade Area agreement – the world's largest free trade area since the formation of the World Trade Organization.

The agreement, ratified in April, will cover a market of 1.2 billion people and an estimated gross domestic product (GDP) of \$2.5 trillion, across all 55 member States of the African Union.

The Bank has been central in shaping the AfCFTA agreement, setting its strategy and format and approving a \$4.8 million grant to the AU for the establishing of the Secretariat and to accelerate its roll out. Nigeria made history at the summit by becoming the 54th African country to sign up.

Commending all the parties involved for bringing this historic agreement to fruition, President of Niger, Mahamadou Issoufou said: "The time has come to translate words into actions. The continent has waited for far too long, and we are glad this historic moment for the people of Africa is being witnessed in Niger."

His comments were echoed by AU President, Abdel Fattah al-Sissi and AU Chairperson, Moussa Faki Mahamat who both stressed the need to celebrate the strides the continent has made.

"An old dream has come true. The founding fathers must be proud," said Faki.

Whilst in Niamey, Adesina also participated in a high-level panel on combatting child marriage, organized on the sidelines of the summit by the First Ladies of West African Economic Community states and Niger's first lady Dr. Lala Malika Mahamadou Issoufou.

The panel, themed: "*Combatting child marriage and promoting girls' education and retention in schools*", heard testimonies from young girls as well as from Niger's traditional chiefs, who committed to support the recommendations of the meeting.

"It is totally unacceptable that in Africa some people would block the future of girls. Fundamentally, we have to protect girls, help them achieve and perform." Adesina said.

Highlighting the need to urgently address "this plague which jeopardizes the future of girls in Africa," Adesina urged participants to prioritise the inclusion of women. "Women are the backbone of the African economy and of the African communities," Adesina stated.

President Issoufou also reaffirmed his government's commitment to supporting the First ladies.

"Keeping girls in school is one of the best ways to end child marriage. Like men, an educated girl will contribute to her community's transformation," the President said.

Rounding off the conversation Niger's First Lady described the issue as a "critical priority."

"It is not just a West Africa issue, but an issue for the entire region. So all of us must come together – public, non-governmental institutions, religions leaders, communities, families, and schools – for a sustained multi-stakeholder approach to combat early marriage and promote girls' education," Malika Mahamadou Issoufou concluded.

LEBANON: Refugee girls in Beirut 'face sexual violence, forced marriage'

More than half the refugee girls living in Lebanon's capital face sexual violence and harassment regularly, report says.

Al Jazeera (18.06.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2ZuKqzt> - More than half of the girls living as refugees in Beirut have reported that they face sexual violence and sexual harassment with alarming regularity, new research by Plan International, a development and humanitarian organisation, has revealed.

Based on surveys of 400 girls aged between 10 and 19, the study on Tuesday described the multiple threats of abuse girls faced growing up in Lebanon's capital city.

Close to 70 percent of those surveyed reported feeling unsafe if they travelled around the city alone during the day, while nearly 90 percent said they feared for their safety at night.

Girls spoke of being harassed or chased by men and boys, while others expressed concern about being kidnapped or raped.

"We're too afraid [to go out alone]. There are always drunk men who harass us and even the ones who aren't drunk harass us," an 18-year-old Syrian girl from Burj al-Barajneh, in the Beirut suburbs, told the researchers.

Ten percent of girls surveyed reported being married or engaged - a practice becoming increasingly common, according to Plan International.

"Some girls, their parents oblige them to leave school to get married. My friends all got married and now they have kids," a 13-year-old Syrian girl in Burj al-Barajneh said.

The report, launched in the run-up to World Refugee Day on June 20, called on governments, the United Nations and civil society actors in Lebanon to take action to support refugee girls.

"Adolescent girls rarely get their voices heard, and during humanitarian crises, this neglect only becomes exacerbated," Colin Lee, Plan International's regional programme director for the Middle East, said.

"Child marriage is on the rise because parents are so fearful for their daughters' safety. Few girls are able to go to school for the same reason, and far too many report desperate feelings of isolation because of the restrictions placed on their freedom of movement by their parents."

Plummeting school attendance

Lebanon hosts the largest number of refugees per capita in the world, which includes a recent influx of 1.5 million fleeing the Syrian war, as well as Palestinian families who have been in the country since 1948.

In April 2019, the UN's refugee agency (UNHCR) estimated that in Beirut alone there were 239,005 registered refugees - just under 11 percent of the total population.

Despite the negative environment, the report noted that many refugee girls remain optimistic and ambitious about their future.

"The importance girls placed on getting an education is obvious," Lee said. "Many girls expressed a desire to become a lawyer, a doctor, or an engineer."

"But what was even more striking was the fact that they didn't just believe that education would benefit them directly. They also saw it as a way to support and enhance the resilience of their community and broader society as a whole."

However, school attendance among girls aged 14 or older plummeted, according to the report.

Eighty percent of 10 to 14-year-olds regularly attend school, compared with just 39 percent of 15 to 19-year-olds.

"It is clear from these findings that while teenage girls have unique vulnerabilities, they also have huge potential. As humanitarian actors, it is not only our duty to provide programmes that protect adolescent girls, but also to make it possible for them to have the same opportunities as girls in other parts of the world whose lives have not been disrupted by war," Lee said.

MEXICO: Decree bans marriage for children under 18, eliminates exceptions

Some states previously allowed girls as young as 14 to marry

Mexico News Daily (05.06.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2EV3XkW> - A decree published on Tuesday by the federal government banned marriage for children under 18 in 31 out of 32 states.

The decree annulled certain laws that allowed local authorities and families to provide exceptions or consent for child marriages.

Exceptions to the ban can still be granted in Baja California.

The National System for Protection of Children and Adolescents (Sipinna) celebrated the decree, saying it will help protect the rights of children.

"This will help promote a cultural change to eradicate forced marriages," read a statement by the organization.

Since its creation in 2015, Sipinna has been advocating for a ban on child marriage, making alliances with international and national civil society organizations.

As of 2016, marriage was legal for boys as young as 16 and girls as young as 14 in 24 states. In some of the 18 states where child marriage was banned, the law contained provisions for families or local authorities to grant exceptions.

Almost 1.3 million child marriages take place in Mexico every year, making it one of the 10 countries with the highest number of cases. According to Save the Children, one in every five Mexican women get married before their 18th birthday, 73% of whom do not finish school. Child marriages also put women and girls at higher risks of physical and sexual violence.

But pressure has been mounting to ban child marriage in recent years. In March, the Supreme Court upheld a ban on the practice in Aguascalientes from a challenge to its constitutionality. On May 1, the Chamber of Deputies approved a measure to ban child marriage at the federal level with near unanimity.

IRAN: 1500 cases of child marriage in one province only

Radio Farda (31.05.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2KvEnGE> - Figures from Iran suggest child-marriage is rampant in the country, with girls younger than 14 forced to take husbands.

The practice is most prevalent in rural areas with no age-limit on the age of the men that the girls may be forced to suffer as a spouse.

More than 1,500 cases of child marriage have been registered in the province of Hamedan, western Iran, a local-judiciary authority has revealed.

Saeed Golestani, the area's crime-prevention deputy, said 1,596 underage girls were pushed into marriages during the Iranian-calendar year ending 20 March 2018.

He added the coercion of girls was encouraged to anchor boys to their hometowns.

"Villagers of Hamedan," he said, "believe that when the boys come of age, they leave their places of birth in search of a job and become reluctant to marry their fellow villagers."

Golestani added that girls who reached the age of 15 were more difficult to force into marriages as they were considered too old.

Shari'a courts can permit girls aged under 15 to marry, with the demand that the marriage be registered – in many cases, parents did not wait for a court ruling to give away their daughters, only registering the marriage years later, the deputy said.

There is no upper limit on the age that a girl's husband might be.

Golestani's announcement followed news reports of 1,400 girls aged under-14 having been married in Zanjan province, with 1,054 girls in northern Khorasan.

In April, the Zanjan governor-general's office estimated that 36,000 underage girls were forced into marriages across Iran, though only Zanjan, Hamedan and Khorasan have released figures.

There are no signs that the phenomenon is on the decline.

A bill to stop child marriages was recently blocked in the Majles, Iran's parliament, by legislators who included women.

Iran's Civil Code allows underaged girls' to be forced into marriages by fathers who have a court permit.

Ironically, children as young as 13 can be married in Iran while they have to wait until the age of 18 before they can vote or drive cars.

The story of Raha, an 11-year old girl forced to marry a 50-year old man led to heated debate in February. The man already has a wife and seven children. He paid around \$1,500 to Raha's parents to marry her.

After strong public outcry the government intervened and transferred Raha to a care center.

The ultraconservative ayatollahs insist that a girl can be allowed to marry once she reaches puberty, while there are some dissenting clerics who condemn child marriage as "illegitimate and against religious principles".

Ayatollah Bayat Zanjani told ILNA news website in February, "Since marrying underage children is unfair, it is illegitimate".

But a 99-year old ultraconservative ayatollah announced, "Setting a legal age for girls to marry is against religious regulations since only fathers have the right to decide when to give away their daughters, regardless of their age."

BANGLADESH/MALAYSIA: Rohingya women, girls being trafficked to Malaysia for marriage

Al Jazeera reveals how refugees in Bangladesh camps are vulnerable to proposals from single Rohingya men in Malaysia.

By Kaamil Ahmed

Al Jazeera (08.05.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2vJ8Qsp> - Senwara Begum travelled for two weeks by road and boat, over mountains and along rivers, guided only by a trafficker she feared, before she reached Malaysia to marry a man she had never met.

The journey was a blur of borders and landscapes unknown to her and it started in Bangladesh's Rohingya refugee camps, where she was born 23 years earlier and where there is increasing concern about the number of young women and girls being smuggled across borders to marry Rohingya men abroad.

The Kutupalong settlement in Cox's Bazar, from where the women are plucked, grew into the world's largest refugee site in 2017, after a Myanmar military operation described as "genocidal" by the UN targeted the majority-Muslim minority.

The overcrowded camp lacks security for women, who live in shelters composed of simple plastic sheeting on bamboo frames; there is little privacy.

According to Rohingya activists and rights groups, dozens of women are now regularly arriving in Malaysia to marry Rohingya men, reviving a form of transnational human trafficking that once moved thousands of Rohingya a year.

"We travelled by land, occasionally changing cars. We started in the camp and went up to the Indian border, then we headed to Malaysia. There were three of us: another woman and a man - the trafficker," Begum told Al Jazeera. "I didn't know the trafficker, so I was scared of being harassed by them. I've heard stories before about traffickers raping women, sexually harassing them and beating people, so I was scared."

The marriages and travel are often arranged by Rohingya men, previously smuggled into Malaysia themselves but usually unable to marry local women.

Without documentation, they are unable to travel back to Myanmar or the refugee camps in Bangladesh to get married, so send proposals through friends and relatives and make arrangements for marriages that do not involve much consent from the girls.

Several Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh described similar journeys taken by relatives and in-laws in the past year that involved road trips that could take months and passed through Myanmar's mountainous north.

Some of the trafficked women were among the remaining Rohingya families in Myanmar and had to enter Bangladesh, from where the traffickers operate, only to re-enter Myanmar at another point, one less militarised than their native Rakhine State.

Fortify Rights recently urged Malaysia to address child marriage, drawing on evidence from 11 interviews with child brides or their relatives in Bangladesh and Malaysia.

"One recent route documented by Fortify Rights is a complicated land route from Myanmar to Bangladesh, India, and then into Chin State in Myanmar and through the cities of Mandalay and Yangon, eventually crossing the Myanmar-Thailand border and later into Malaysia," said John Quinley, a researcher with Fortify Rights.

"Rohingya refugees in Cox's Bazar have few options. They cannot work and have no formal access to education. Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh fear forced repatriation or relocation to the island. All these push factors could lead to a real uptick in Rohingya families - including girls - moving to Malaysia, some for child marriage," said Quinley.

Until 2015, a network of human traffickers transported Rohingya to the jungles of southern Thailand, where the refugees were held for ransom before they could be smuggled into Malaysia, where many believed they could find more freedom to work and live than in Bangladesh or Myanmar.

That vast network has been dormant since Thailand uncovered 139 mass graves at some of the trafficking camps along the border with Malaysia.

Since the 2017 influx into Bangladesh, attempts by traffickers there to smuggle Rohingya by boat have been stopped by the Bangladeshi coastguard.

In the past year, however, there has been increased movement of Rohingya, mostly through long land routes from Bangladesh.

A Rohingya activist in Thailand, who requested anonymity, told Al Jazeera it is impossible to know exactly how many Rohingya are entering Malaysia, but that there is now a constant flow of people.

The activist showed this reporter photos of young women and girls who were arrested by Thai authorities in February, saying that they were caught in a safe house after neighbours reported them.

Al Jazeera will not publish these images, in order to protect the refugees' identities.

Hamida, 30, lives in the Bangladeshi refugee camps near Myanmar.

She said her Malaysia-based son arranged a marriage that brought a 15-year-old girl from Myanmar to Bangladesh, where the girl stayed with the family before travelling.

"She was scared about the journey but what could we do about it? It had all already been arranged," said Hamida.

"From Bangladesh, they went to the Indian border and had to walk for many days. Then, they got to Thailand and took buses and cars until they got to Malaysia," she said. "It took nearly three months and the girl became so skinny from the journey."

Hamida's son had been in Malaysia for several years when he organised the marriage through friends.

Begum's marriage was arranged through her brother Zakir Hossain, 29. He was already living in Malaysia and now shares a home with his 17-year-old wife - who he also brought to the Southeast Asian country from a refugee camp in Bangladesh, as well as Begum and her husband, in a Kuala Lumpur suburb.

He said Rohingya men take these measures to get married because they have no other options in Malaysia, where most work undocumented as labourers or in factories.

"We're scared about the traffickers but we can only leave it with God. We don't want to hire traffickers but we have no options," he said.

Chekufa, who has organised hundreds of Rohingya women across the camps into a network of volunteers, blamed economic challenges for the rise in trafficking and child brides.

"Many child marriages are happening because the monthly rations are not enough and there is no source of income," she said.

Concern over food rations was also reflected in a monthly report on the challenges faced by refugees produced in March by the NGOs Translators without Borders, Internews and BBC Media Action.

Refugees complained about smaller rations, saying they were often contaminated with rocks and other materials.

Chekufa said these worries have seen some families marry their female relatives off because it meant one less mouth to feed.

"We have to talk more to the parents to stop these early marriages. Sometimes, we have to promise them: 'We will try to support you with our own contribution, but please don't marry her before her time'."

Meanwhile, a combined lack of opportunity and security keeps many teenage girls locked inside their homes, with families saying they fear the attention women attract in the crowded camps.

Khaleda, 40, said her family received a proposal from a Rohingya man in Malaysia in 2018 to marry her 14-year-old daughter, but have not gone ahead with it because they cannot raise enough money.

Though these arranged marriages forgo the traditional dowry paid by the families of brides to men, in many cases they still pay half of the trafficking costs.

Khaleda says she would prefer to have her daughter married locally but would have to pay an expensive dowry.

The camps offer almost no education, so her daughter sits inside all day, where Khaleda believes it is safest for her.

In their dark shelter, the girl says little about the matter. Eventually, shyly, she admits she would prefer to stay with her parents.

"When the person came to us, my only thought was that I would follow what my parents tell me to do," she said.

Begum said she was aware of the risks but also feared a marriage in Bangladesh.

"In the camp, lives are difficult. Women don't have peaceful marriages. Men get married a few times and the women are not protected," she said, adding that several women have been abandoned by husbands who re-marry while others suffer domestic abuse.

She said the idea of living in Malaysia at least offered her the chance to escape the crowded camp she was born into, but she was still concerned.

"I was worried because I didn't what kind of man my husband would be. I was born in Bangladesh and he was born in Burma, so there could've been cultural differences. I didn't know whether he would be good or bad," she said.

Fortify Rights have documented cases of girls who have been abused by their husbands in Malaysia. Their research, conducted with the Rohingya Women's Development Network run by Rohingya refugee Sharifah Hossain, said many women were denied freedom to move, work or attend school.

"Some of the Rohingya child brides my colleagues and I at Fortify Rights have spoken with are in slavery-like conditions and in situations of domestic servitude," said Quinley. "A Rohingya girl told me she did not want to marry young but had no other choice."

Begum, who is six months pregnant, said accessing medical treatment can be difficult because they are not registered by the UN's refugee agency, UNHCR, and Malaysia is not a signatory to the 1951 refugee convention.

She has spent much of the past few months sat inside her home, scared to leave after being detained by immigration police who she says later released her after her husband raised money to pay them off.

"Here, you are not safe," she said. "I miss my mother a lot."

PAKISTAN/CHINA: Pakistani Christian girls trafficked to China as brides

By Kathy Gannon and Dake Kang

AP News (07.05.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2PSpNtD> - Muqadas Ashraf was just 16 when her parents married her off to a Chinese man who had come to Pakistan looking for a bride. Less than five months later, Muqadas is back in her home country, pregnant and seeking a divorce from a husband she says was abusive.

She is one of hundreds of poor Christian girls who have been trafficked to China in a market for brides that has swiftly grown in Pakistan since late last year, activists say. Brokers are aggressively seeking out girls for Chinese men, sometimes even cruising outside churches to ask for potential brides. They are being helped by Christian clerics paid to target impoverished parents in their congregation with promises of wealth in exchange for their daughters.

Parents receive several thousand dollars and are told that their new sons-in-law are wealthy Christian converts. The grooms turn out to be neither, according to several brides, their parents, an activist, pastors and government officials, all of whom spoke to The Associated Press. Once in China, the girls — most often married against their will — can find themselves isolated in remote rural regions, vulnerable to abuse, unable to communicate and reliant on a translation app even for a glass of water.

"This is human smuggling," said Ijaz Alam Augustine, the human rights and minorities minister in Pakistan's Punjab province, in an interview with the AP. "Greed is really responsible for these marriages ... I have met with some of these girls and they are very poor."

Augustine accused the Chinese government and its embassy in Pakistan of turning a blind eye to the practice by unquestioningly issuing visas and documents. The Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs denied that, saying China has zero tolerance for illegal transnational marriage agencies.

Human Rights Watch called on China and Pakistan to take action to end bride trafficking, warning in an April 26 statement of "increasing evidence that Pakistani women and girls are at risk of sexual slavery in China."

On Monday, Pakistan's Federal Investigation Agency arrested eight Chinese nationals and four Pakistanis in raids in Punjab province in connection with trafficking, Geo TV reported. It said the raids followed an undercover operation that included attending an arranged marriage.

The Chinese embassy said last month that China is cooperating with Pakistan to crack down on unlawful matchmaking centers, saying "both Chinese and Pakistani youths are victims of these illegal agents."

The Associated Press interviewed more than a dozen Christian Pakistani brides and would-be brides who fled before exchanging vows. All had similar accounts of a process involving brokers and members of the clergy, including describing houses where they were taken to see potential husbands and spend their wedding nights in Islamabad, the country's capital, and Lahore, the capital of Punjab province.

"It is all fraud and cheating. All the promises they make are fake," said Muqadas.

Supply and demand

In China, demand for foreign brides has mounted, a legacy of the one-child policy that skewed the country's gender balance toward males. Brides initially came largely from Vietnam, Laos and North Korea. Now men are looking further afield, said Mimi Vu, director of advocacy at Pacific Links, which helps trafficked Vietnamese women.

"It's purely supply and demand," she said. "It used to be, 'Is she light-skinned?' Now it's like, 'Is she female?'"

Pakistan seems to have come onto marriage brokers' radar late last year.

Saleem Iqbal, a Christian activist, said he first began to see significant numbers of marriage to Chinese men in October. Since then, an estimated 750 to 1,000 girls have been married off, he said.

Pakistan's small Christian community, centered in Punjab province, makes a vulnerable target. Numbering some 2.5 million in the country's overwhelmingly Muslim population of 200 million, Christians are among Pakistan's most deeply impoverished. They also have little political or social support.

Among all faiths in Pakistan, parents often decide a daughter's marriage partner. The deeply patriarchal society sees girls as less desirable than boys and as a burden because

the bride's family must pay a dowry and the cost of the wedding when they marry. A new bride is often mistreated by her husband and in-laws if her dowry is considered inadequate.

By contrast, potential Chinese grooms offer parents money and pay all wedding expenses.

Some of the grooms are from among the tens of thousands of Chinese in Pakistan working on infrastructure projects under Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative, a project that has further boosted ties between the two countries in recent years. Other grooms search directly from China through networks. They present themselves as Christian converts, but pastors complicit in the deals don't ask for any documentation.

They pay on average \$3,500 to \$5,000, including payments to parents, pastors and a broker, said Iqbal, who is also a journalist with a small Christian station, Isaac TV. Iqbal has gone to court to stop marriages and sheltered runaway brides, some as young as 13.

Muqadas' mother Nasreen said she was promised about \$5,000, which included the cost of the wedding and her daughter's wedding dress. "But I have not seen anything yet," she said.

"I really believed I was giving her a chance at a better life and also a better life for us," Nasreen said.

Priests and brokers

Dozens of priests are paid by brokers to find brides for Chinese men, said Augustine, the provincial minorities minister, who is Christian. Many are from the small evangelical churches that have proliferated in Pakistan.

Gujranwala, a city north of Lahore, has been a particular target of brokers, with more than 100 local Christian women and girls married off to Chinese in recent months, according to Iqbal.

The city has several mainly Christian neighborhoods, largely dirt poor with open sewers running along narrow slum streets. Tucked away in the alleys are numerous evangelical churches, small cement structures unrecognizable except for small crosses outside.

Pastor Munch Morris said he knows a group of pastors in his neighborhood who work with a private Chinese marriage broker. Among them, he said, is a fellow pastor at his church who tells his flock, "God is happy because these Chinese boys convert to Christianity. They are helping the poor Christian girls."

Morris opposes such marriages, calling them an insult. "We know these marriages are all for the sake of money."

Rizwan Rashid, a parishioner at the city's Roman Catholic St. John's Church, said that two weeks earlier, a car pulled up to him outside the church gates. Two Pakistani men and a Chinese woman inside asked him if he knew of any girls who want to marry a Chinese man.

"They told me her life would be great," he said. "Everything would be paid for by them."

They were willing to pay him to help, but he said the church's priest often warns his flock against such marriages, so he refused.

Brokers also troll brick kilns, where the poorest work essentially as slaves to pay off debts, and offer to pay off their workers' debts in exchange for daughters as brides.

Pakistani and Chinese brokers work together in the trade. One prominent broker in Gujranwala is a Pakistani known only as Robinson. He refused to talk to the AP, but his wife Razia told the AP that they make arrangements through a Chinese marriage bureau in Islamabad.

Muqadas and another young woman from the same neighborhood, Mahek Liaqat, said Robinson arranged their marriages, providing photos of potential grooms. Afterward, they each described being taken to the same, multi-story house in Islamabad, a sort of boarding house with bedrooms. There, each met her husband for the first time face-to-face and spent her wedding night.

Mahek, 19, said she stayed there with her husband for a month, during which she saw several other girls brought in. She attended several weddings performed in the basement.

Other brides told of meeting their husbands at a similar house in a posh neighborhood of Lahore.

Simbal Akmal, 18, was taken there by her parents. Two other Christian girls were already there in a large sitting room, picking grooms. Three Chinese men were presented to Simbal, and her father demanded she choose one. She told him she didn't want to marry, but he insisted, claiming "it was a matter of our honor," she said.

"He had already promised I would marry one," she said. "They just wanted money."

She married, but immediately fled. She was joined by her sister, who refused her parents' demands to marry a Chinese man. Both escaped to a refuge run by the activist, Iqbal.

In China

Muqadas said her husband had claimed to be a man of money, but when she arrived in China in early December, she found herself living "in a small house, just one room and a bedroom."

She said he rarely let her out of the house on her own. He forced her to undergo a battery of medical tests that later she found were attempts to determine why she was not yet pregnant. On Christmas Eve, when she pressed him to take her to church, he slapped her and broke her phone, she said.

"I don't have the words to tell you how difficult the last month there was," said Muqadas. "He threatened me."

Finally, he agreed to send her home after her family said they would go to the police.

Mahek said she hadn't wanted to get married, but her parents insisted. Her Chinese husband was possessive and refused to let her leave the house. "He was just terrible," she said.

In China, her husband, Li Tao, denied abusing Mahek. He said he was a Christian convert and worked for a state-owned Chinese company building roads and bridges when he met Mahek through a Pakistani matchmaker introduced by a Chinese friend.

He was taken by her at first sight, he said. "If you look at her and you see she's right for you, that's it, right?"

Li returned with Mahek last winter to his hometown of Chenlou, a village surrounded by wheat fields in coastal Jiangsu province. They moved into his mother's home, a one-story courtyard house.

After Malek's family reached out to their government for help to bring her back, the police showed up at Li's home and said they were told he was illegally confining a woman in his home.

He said it was Mahek who refused to go outside.

"I wouldn't force her into doing anything," Li said. "She just had to learn to adapt to a new environment. I wasn't asking her to change right away." Still, he bought plane tickets to take her back to Pakistan.

Others, however, are unable to come back.

Mahek's grandfather Idriis Masih said he contacted the parents of several other Pakistani girls whom Mahek had befriended through a phone app in China and who were desperate to return home. All the parents were poor and shrugged off his attempts to convince them to retrieve their daughters.

Each told him, "She is married now. It is her life," he said.

PAKISTAN: Senate passes bill to fix marriage age as 18 for girls

-Bill was sent to CII years ago where it remained untouched without any discussion

-Muslim countries that have declared 18 years as age of puberty include Bangladesh, Egypt, Turkey, Morocco, Oman, UAE, and even Saudi Arabia

Pakistan Today (29.04.2019). - <https://bit.ly/2vHECGb> - The Senate on Monday passed a bill to amend the Child Marriage Restraint Bill, 1929, to set the minimum age to be able to marry as 18 years.

Senator Sherry Rehman, who presented the bill, was met with heated remarks by senators belonging to Islamist parties.

Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam (JUI-F) Senator Ghafoor Haidri raised an objection saying that fixing the age as 18 years for nikah is inconsonant with shariah law, therefore, the bill should be sent to Council of Islamic Ideology (CII) for further discussion.

Similarly, Jamaat-e-Islami (JI) Senator Mushtaq Ahmad seconded Haideri's suggestion to send the bill to CII, saying that it is against article 2-A of the constitution and against sharia. He suggested reducing the age of puberty from 18 to 15 instead.

Senator Maulana Atta-ur-Rehman also opposed the bill on the grounds that the committee did not invite ulema for consultation.

Senator Maulana Faiz Muhammad said that the Senate is not a proper forum to discuss matters like this.

State Minister for Parliamentary Affairs Ali Muhammad Khan said that although the intent of the bill is noble, some issues require consultation as the country came into being in the name of Islam. "The Constitution binds us to make legislation in consonant with Islamic laws," he said.

However, Senator Raza Rabbani apprised the house that the bill was earlier sent to the CII; however, it remained there for years without any discussion on the matter.

He said that the Sindh Assembly has already passed the same bill and it was not challenged or opposed at any forum and added that the age of puberty of girls in all other Islamic countries is 18 years.

Federal Minister for Religious Affairs Noor-ul-Qadri said that a similar bill was sent to the CII in 2010 by former parliamentarians Marvi Memon and Atiya Anayatullah which was returned by the council with the observation that the age of puberty varies and cannot be fixed according to Fuqaha.

While urging the Senate chairman for voting on the bill, Sherry Rehman said that since the age of voting and eligibility for a national identity card (NIC) is 18, the age of puberty should also be fixed accordingly. "Muslim countries that have declared 18 years as the age of puberty include Bangladesh, Egypt, Turkey, Morocco, Oman, United Arab Emirates (UAE), and even the Saudi Arabia," she informed while adding that the age of puberty in Algeria is 19.

"We are not promoting western values but trying to save innocent lives. As many as 21 per cent of marriages in our country are child marriages. One Pakistani woman dies every 20 minutes due to childbirth at a young age," she said.

Leader of the house, Senator Shibli Faraz, favoured the bill saying he was part of the committee that deliberated on the bill and the CII never took a clear stance on the issue when their opinion was sought.

Senator Sassui Paliyo added the girls in Pakistan are exploited in the name of religion. She said that Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) was the first one who protected girls and gave them rights in the time when they were buried alive and since the country was created in the name of Islam we should follow his example of granting our girls the safety and life they deserve.

Senator Farooq H Naik said that Islamic jurisprudence allows a man to marry four women but it must be kept in mind that according to the Muslim Family Ordinance, 1961, a man must seek the consent of his first wife before entering a second marriage and if he does not do so then he will be punished but the marriage will not be invalidated.

Senator Mushahid Ullah said that such legislation would be very effective to ensure discipline in society and curb the exploitation of women.

Senator Taj Roohani said that even from a medical point of view, the age of puberty is 18 years; however, a few girls reach puberty earlier because of good nutrition and genes.

Winding up the debate on the bill, the Senate chairman sought voting and passed the bill with the opposition of five votes.

The Child Marriage Restraint (Amendment) Bill, 2018, which aims to "curb the menace of child marriage prevalent in the country and save women from exploitation", underage marriage can lead to imprisonment of up to three years, a fine of at least Rs100,000 or both.

IRAN: 4,000 child marriages registered just in North khorasan province in one year

Iran Human Rights Monitor (24.04.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2GEcY30> - More than 4,000 child marriages of girls between 10 to 19 years of age have been reported in North Khorasan Province, from March 2018 to March 2019.

Ali Zahedinia, the director of Iran's Census Organization in North Khorasan province said that the largest number of marriages has been registered for girls between 15 and 19 years old.

Admitting to just one aspect of this catastrophe he added, "In 1397, the marriages of 1,054 girls between 10 and 14 years old have been registered in North Khorasan province," the state-run IRNA news agency reported on April 20, 2019.

In remarks carried by the state-run ISNA news agency on April 16, 2019, Masihollah Soltani, an official in Zanjan's governorate, announced, "From 36,000 registered marriages for girls under 14 in Iran, 1,400 took place in Zanjan," adding, "Unfortunately, Zanjan ranks among the top provinces with regards to child marriages."

A woman member of the regime's parliament acknowledged in June 2018 that there are 24,000 young widows under 18 years of age in Iran, a consequence of rampant child marriages in the country.

Masoume Aghapour Alishahi, representative of the women's faction at the regime's parliament, considers cultural and economic poverty in villages as the main causes of child marriages in Iran, majority of which end up in divorce. She explains: "Unfortunately, due to the absence of high schools in villages, girls are unable to continue their education beyond the primary level; and are consequently forced by their parents to get married."

In early January, Parvaneh Salahshouri, head of the women's faction in the regime's parliament said that six per cent of Iranian girls get married between 10 and 14.

It came while the bill proposing to increase the marriage age for girls was turned down in December 2018, by the parliamentary Judicial Committee.

"We continue to see child marriages between 9 and 14 years of age... Some 6 per cent of those who get married are girls between 10 and 14," Salahshouri said.

Girl-child marriage, which is one of the examples of violence against women, has been institutionalized by the Iranian regime by setting the legal age of marriage at 13. According to the regime's officials and experts, some 180,000 early marriages take place in Iran every year and comprise 24 per cent of the total number of marriages.

A social expert revealed that at present, 41,000 early marriages under the age of 15 take place in Iran every year.

Only in 2017, the marriages of at least 37,000 Iranian girls between the ages of 10 and 14 have been registered. It has also been reported that there are 24,000 widows under 18, of which 15,000 are under the age of 15.

Another report published in Iranian media in 2017 said that 17% of girls in Iran married under the age of 18. The numbers did not include "temporary marriages", which is a spreading phenomenon in Iran.

Just in the past decade, close to 400,000 girls were forced to marry in Iran despite being under 15 years of age.

ZIMBABWE: Ending child marriages - layering approach the way to go

By Paidamoyo Chipunza

All Africa (24.04.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2DuyxBi> - A myriad of factors have been associated with child marriages in Zimbabwe, key among them being religious and cultural beliefs, poverty, lack of serious sex education in schools and inadequate knowledge on children's rights and other legal systems that support them.

Child marriage in itself has been identified as one of the impediments to girls' emancipation, a situation that limits their potential to excel in life.

In fact, research and statistics have shown that child marriages force girls to drop off school, increase their chances of acquiring HIV and AIDS, increase their chances of experiencing complications while giving birth and reduce their chances of gaining financial independence among other consequences, thus it is of paramount importance for the country to end this social ill.

Latest statistics from the United Nations Children's Fund reveal that 32 percent of girls in Zimbabwe are married before the age of 18 and four percent are married before their 15th birthday.

This is despite the fact that Zimbabwe has criminalised all marriages below the age of 18 (the 2016 Constitutional Court ruling).

The statistics further reveal that prevalence of child marriages is highest in Mashonaland Central, where 50 percent of children are married off before they reach the age of 18, followed by Mashonaland West whose figures stand at 42 percent, Masvingo 39 percent, Mashonaland East 36 percent, Midlands 31 percent, Manicaland 30 percent, Matabeleland North 27 percent, Harare 19 percent, Matabeleland South 18 percent and Bulawayo 10 percent.

Encounters with some children who were forced to marry early or who married early revealed that a number of factors contributed to their decision-making.

Isabel Munhenzva (not her real name), who has a moderate down syndrome disease is one such victim.

Her father works as a gardener in Harare where he earns RTGS\$200.

Her mother, who is a staunch believer of one of the apostolic sects, spends most of her time at church and has no source of income to complement her fathers' earnings.

Isabel's parents have three other minor children who live with their grandmother in rural Gutu.

Because of her condition, coupled with financial incapacitation and lack of knowledge on where to seek assistance, Isabel did not complete her primary education.

She dropped off school before completing her primary level education, after which she was impregnated at the age of 14 years.

"We would have wanted her to get married.

"If the person who impregnated her had agreed, it would have assisted us in a big way," said Isabel's father.

"What we now want is for the man to help us look after his son (Isabel's baby) through a maintenance fee," he added, without even realising that he was contributing to violation of his girl child's right to justice.

Asked if he made a police report against the perpetrator, Isabel's father insisted on getting a maintenance fee.

"I am not interested in getting him arrested because it does not give me anything," he said. "

"All I want is for him to pay a maintenance fee, and that is the route I am pursuing."

For Isabel's father, it is the monetary aspect that matters, maybe because of his poor financial background.

However, this case reveals even more complex issues associated with child marriages i.e her parents' level of ignorance on children's rights and implications of their violations, something that can be attributed to their own level of knowledge of these and other associated issues.

Isabel failed to complete primary education as she was impregnated -- possibly without her consent and her perpetrator was never brought to book -- possibly it was a relative or a close family friend whom the parents do not want to strain their relations with.

This case also presents a typical patriarchal society often associated with African traditions, that leave all decisions making to man.

For some reasons, Isabel's mother doesn't seem to have spoken against his husband's decision, possibly her religion also contributed to her reserved-kind-of-approach to the whole issue.

Throughout the conversation, her father keeps stamping his authority over his daughter in singular, not in plural as a family decision.

In as much as fathers usually have the final say in a family, empowered mothers are usually known of going out of their way in serving the interests of their daughters.

Maybe, Isabel's mother is one such woman requiring empowerment to enable her to realise what is good and what is bad for the future of both her daughter and her grandson.

Thus ending child, early and forced marriages requires concerted efforts from multiple stakeholders as Panos Institute Southern Africa put it across in their media brief on ending child marriages in Zimbabwe: Child marriage is a multi-faceted phenomenon that requires involvement of the physical, social, cultural and legal support from different stakeholders.

It needs a multi-sectoral approach in order to win the fight.

Zimbabwe is one of the 10 countries in Africa implementing the United States' President's Emergency Plan for Aids Relief (PEPFAR)'s DREAMS (Determined, Resilient, Empowered, AIDS-free, Mentored, Safe women) project, aimed at addressing exactly that challenge of fragmented approaches to solving challenges.

A recent research published in PloS One Journal titled: The DREAMS core package of interventions: A comprehensive approach to preventing HIV among adolescent girls and women noted that although individual interventions have shown promise, no single intervention has emerged that can avert the majority of new HIV infections, hence introduction of PEPFAR's "layering approach".

Authors of this journal attribute their conclusion to complex constellation of factors that place girls and young women at risk of contracting HIV.

"This underscores the need to develop comprehensive packages of social, economic and biomedical interventions to both reduce girls' vulnerability to HIV and increase their agency," wrote the authors.

Similarly, no single intervention can avert child, early and forced marriages.

In fact, there is need for a coordinated approach, offered as a whole package to intended beneficiaries for it to make meaningful impact.

Layering simply means providing multiple, but coordinated interventions to selected beneficiaries for maximum impact.

In the case of Isabel above, with the layering approach, she and her family could be beneficiaries of interventions that empower them to reduce their level of both poverty and knowledge, as well as assisting them with legal advice to seek justice.

The idea behind this layering of services is to ensure that there is no duplication of services and that there is effective impact on assistance rendered.

The Government of Zimbabwe has already acknowledged the success of this initiative and at some point showed commitment to replicating it across the country.

At the moment, the model is being used in selected districts funded by PEPFAR.

Should it be replicated nationally, it may go a long way in ending child marriages in Zimbabwe.

Zimbabwe is one of the countries that committed to ending child marriages by the end of 2020, which is just next year, under the Ministerial Commitment on comprehensive sexuality education and sexual and reproductive health services for adolescents and young people in Eastern and Southern Africa.

The country has also signed and ratified some regional and international instruments against child marriages, which include, but not limited to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child.

Towards the end of last year, a plan of action to end child marriages was also developed.

With such extraordinary commitment, the nation and the world await to see a reduction of the 32 percent of girls in Zimbabwe who are being married before they reach 18 years.

JORDAN: Parliament raises 'exceptional' marriage age to 16

The move has been welcomed by women's rights activists, who hope it is the first step to phasing out the law, which allows child marriage, altogether

By Taylor Luck

The National (09.04.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2Z0Ee2P> - Jordan's parliament has voted to raise the minimum age of marriage in "exceptional" cases from 15 to 16 in a move that has been seen as an important step towards reducing child marriage rates in the country.

The minimum age for marriage in Jordan is 18, however, in some cases, a judge can approve a marriage to a minor if a sharia committee deems it necessary and both parties consent.

On Monday, politicians passed a measure to raise the minimum age for marriage in these exceptional cases from 15 to 16.

Women's rights activists in Jordan welcomed the move as a first step towards eliminating the exception rule altogether.

"We understand that it does not seem like a big increase, but for us every additional day matters," Eval Abu Halaweh, director of the Mizan Law Group, a Jordanian NGO that provides legal assistance to vulnerable people, told The National. The organisation consulted with MPs on the change to the law.

In 2017, 13.4 per cent of all marriage contracts issued were for underaged brides, but only 0.4 per cent were for underaged grooms.

By at least reaching 16 before marrying, activists say children will have had the chance to complete Grade 10. A completion certificate is a requirement for teenagers who want to take up vocational training or menial jobs and allows them to take university entrance exams.

Under Jordanian law, underage marriage can only take place if the age difference between the bride and groom does not exceed 15 years, and if the groom can prove they are able to pay a dowry and financially support their wife.

A court committee must also confirm that the groom is not currently married and that the union would not mean the bride would not be forced to drop out of school or stop her studies.

MPs argued that lifting the age of the exception from 15 to 16 will help reduce the overall number of child marriages in Jordan.

"We would be open to keeping the exception in the law if the rate of child marriage was between 1 and 5 per cent," said Ms Halaweh.

"But with almost 14 per cent of all marriages in Jordan involving minors, this is becoming a standard and not an exception, and we must work gradually to phase it out."

Jordan's Iftaa Department, the highest religious authority, however, said in a statement to local press that certain "moral and social necessities" may require families to seek marriage for their daughter before she is 18. They said that getting rid of the law that allows these exceptions could lead to social "corruption" as girls who became pregnant out of wedlock would not be able to wed.

Politicians and community leaders argued that the marriages allow families to save face and prevent so-called honour crimes, when social stigma may force a family to take extreme measures, even going as far as to murder a loved one, to clear their reputation.

In statements to MPs and senators, women's rights groups urged the government to find additional measures to protect vulnerable minors.

Last week, watchdog Human Rights Watch urged Jordanian politicians to end the "abusive practice" of child marriage and seize the opportunity to enforce the minimum age of 18 without exception.

Jordan has witnessed a surge in child marriages over the past six years, in part due to the influx of 1.2 million Syrian refugees — the highest percentages of child marriages occur in northern governorates where there are large Syrian communities.

Many Syrian refugees come from rural areas where child marriage is more common and their displacement has also driven families to marry their daughters off to "protect their honour" while they are living in vulnerable circumstances.

INDIA: Analysis | What is forcing Indian women to stay at home?

Early marriage is not responsible for the low female labour force participation. Blame the male backlash effect for it.

By Punarjit Roychowdhury

The Hindustan Times (01.04.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2WCRHfm> - India has one of the lowest female labour force participation rates in the world. In 2017, only 27% of adult Indian women had a job or were actively looking for one. The comparable figure for the rest of world was 50%. Equally alarming is the fact that the earnings and wages of women who are employed are low. According to the Global Wage Report 2018-19, the hourly wages of women are 34% less than men in India, a disparity that is highest among 73 countries mentioned in the report. It is often suggested that a major reason for the poor labour market outcomes of Indian women is the high incidence of child marriage in India. Advocacy group ActionAid estimates around 33% child marriages in the world happen in India. The average age of marriage for women also continues to be significantly lower compared to that in many other developing countries such as countries such as Brazil, Chile, Kenya and Pakistan.

Early marriage hampers labour market prospects of women in two ways. First, it interrupts a woman's formal education, which negatively impacts her labour market outcomes. Second, early marriage leads to early motherhood. This causes younger brides to focus more on the home (raising children, for example), in turn, reducing their likelihood of participation and productivity in the labour market. In light of this, it is often proposed that one way to address the issue of dismal labour market prospects of Indian women is through policies that can potentially delay their marriage.

Can marriage delaying policies improve women's labour market prospects in India? I recently collaborated with Gaurav Dhamija (a doctoral student at the Shiv Nadar University) to examine this question.

Using nationally representative household data of close to 40,000 women from the Indian Human Development Survey 2012, I found that delaying the age of marriage for women does not lead to better labour market outcomes for them.

One possibility is that delaying the age for marriage does not lead to more education and lower fertility for Indian women. This, however, does not seem to be the case. Indeed, older brides in my sample, are more educated and have lower fertility (as measured by the number of children).

I believe that my results can be explained by what is known as the "male backlash" effect.

According to this theory, the more educated (and hence empowered) a woman, greater is her chance of facing domestic violence. This is because when gender roles and power relations are redefined, men resort to violence to reinstate a culturally prescribed norm of male dominance and female dependence. In fact, in a recent study published in *Population and Development Review*, based on data from the National Family Health Survey 2005-06, sociologist Abigail Weitzman finds unequivocal evidence of Indian women who are at least as educated as their husbands have a higher likelihood of experiencing frequent and severe intimate partner violence than women who are less educated than their spouses.

Since the theory of backlash effect predicts a positive relationship between violence and educational attainment of women, and because education increases with women's age at the time of marriage in my sample, it is reasonable to claim that older brides, as compared to younger brides, are likely to face more male backlash and be denied the freedom to work. This male backlash effect could nullify the positive effects of more education and lower fertility and, therefore, Indian women's labour market prospects.

These findings suggest that for improving labour market outcomes of Indian women, conventional policies that talk about delaying marriage and laws to prevent child marriage may not be sufficient. Such policies must be complemented by smart and effective interventions to curb the male backlash effect. For example, gender quotas in politics and the corporate sphere could be useful in reducing male backlash. These steps must be taken through coordinated efforts of the government, panchayats, and NGOs to ensure that outdated gender role and age role beliefs do not serve as impediments for women to enjoy the fruits of delayed marriage.

PAKISTAN: Young Christian girl aged 13 abducted and forced into Islamic marriage

Pakistan Christian Post (06.03.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2ul0kPr> - A young girl barely in her teens, Sadaf Amir also known as Sadaf Masih (13 yrs), of Cholistan, Wichra Bangla, Bahawalpur was abducted on 6 February 2019 by influential Muslims Maqbool Hussain, Mubashir Hussain Baloch and Azhir Hussain Baloch.

Following the kidnapping the perpetrators' family informed Sadaf's family she had been taken but promised, that that they would bring her back.

Wanting to believe them and fearing an altercation, Sadaf's family waited 8 days to hear whether the kidnappers would actually return their young daughter.

However instead the perpetrators returned to declare that the girl, who is not old enough to be legally married in Pakistan, was now not only "married" but had converted to Islam.

The kidnapper's malice became clear when they showed the distressed family a falsified marriage certificate with her age listed as 18-years-old.

In typical use of the blasphemy law against religious minorities, the offending Muslim family said they would employ their influence with local law enforcement authorities, if the family ever tried to contact the young girl again. Worse still, they warned the beleaguered Christian family that they would accuse them of harassing the newlyweds if they took any action.

With the threat of a FIR hanging over the heads of Christian families in the village, they were forcibly intimidated into backing away from the situation at that time.

The police have been derelict in their duty to bring the obviously underaged girl back to her family, even though a case has now been registered against the culprits with the assistance of CLAAS, a charity that helps with legal cases, following an order of the session court.

These heinous is widely known in the NGO and human rights community, as a Muslim charity called "The Movement Towards Solidary and Peace" raised the alarm with their rather conservative statistic of 1000 religious minority girls being kidnapped, raped and forced into Islamic marriage every year. ([click here](#))

These depraved abductions, rapes and forced conversions continue to occur despite legislation The Criminal Laws (Amendment) Act of 2016 being passed into law to protect religious minorities and children.

The Pakistani government has been disinclined to take action to help these young girls, and even when the marriage is clearly illegal, they fail to secure the girls a proper divorce. As in the case of another young girl Elisha (12) whose family sold themselves into slavery to pay for a lawyer to help them get her back.

The bullying by officials begins. with the police and follows families in this situation throughout the court system The anguish they experience is so great that instead of the culprits being charged all the pressure is exerted on the victim's families to get them to drop the case.

Legal authorities usually side with Muslim kidnappers and do not believe that the now supposedly Islamic wife's conversion was forced. The reality is that these young girls, are often threatened, and told their families will be harmed if they do not comply or agree to whatever they told to do. When they are interviewed in a civil court, they are found not to have adequate knowledge to be deemed a Muslim convert.

Wilson Chowdhry said: "Sadaf an extremely vulnerable Christian girl joins a long list of victims who have been kidnapped by prominent Muslim men who are sexual predators.

"One can only estimate the amount of violence and degradation this poor child has had to endure whilst in captivity. The graphic account provided by Australian on-line grooming victim Lara Hall suggests Sadaf is being subjected to on-tap sexual servitude.

"While the numbers of forced Islamic marriage victims in Pakistan increases the world stays silent on this debilitating social malaise. Young BPCA volunteer Hannah Chowdhry recently reported how the average age of these victims is 13 yrs and Sadaf is an example of that average.

"The world has learnt nothing from the terrible accounts of grooming that have taken place across the UK, from Pakistani origin Muslim men.

"This social malaise is not something that stems from British values imposed on the UK Pakistani community but is an undesirable export from the Pakistani homeland - one that elicited a comment from Sajid Javid UK Home Secretary that BPCA wishes had been stronger.

"Ignoring the problem only serves to foster resentment and creates societal schism - perhaps allocating a proportion of the huge amounts of foreign aid sent to Pakistan to tackling this despicable social deviance would serve great purpose across the globe.

"Muslims who feel any level of sensitivity about this practice should endeavour to end it, rather than social-media trolling of those who are simply reporting them. People should be more disturbed that this is happening, than by the fact they are being informed about it."

SOUTHEAST ASIA: ASEAN nations join hands to eliminate child, early, forced marriage

A forum on child, early, and forced marriage (CEFM) was held in Jakarta, Indonesia on March 6 by the ASEAN Secretariat in combination with the UN Children's Fund, UN Population Fund, and the Plan International.

Saigon Online (06.03.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2J6Yn3A> - The event was a dialogue of action and orientation among relevant parties including governments, policymakers, youth organisations, civil social organisations, and private sectors in ASEAN countries.

It offered an opportunity for delegates to discuss strategic plans and actions to empower girls and women as well as eliminate CEFM, in line with the ASEAN Community Vision 2025 and the Millennium Development Goals.

In his opening speech, Deputy General Secretary of ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community Kung Phoak stressed that CEFM is not only an issue for some countries in Southeast Asia, but also a major challenge for all ASEAN countries in ensuring the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and the ASEAN Community Vision 2025.

These problems stem from gender inequality and discrimination, long-standing customs and traditions, and a lack of education and opportunities for the poor, he said.

This situation has caused a wave of knock-on effects, hindering the progress of society by taking away the childhoods, right to an education, and opportunities for millions of children, especially girls, across Asia.

It also leads to greater risk of violence, abuse, poor health, or premature death, he added.

Solutions to this complex problem require the comprehensive coordination of many relevant parties and a determination to implement political commitments into sustainable and concrete actions.

Participants also pointed out evidence and data on the popularity of CEFM, highlighting challenges in addressing this issue, and calling for efforts and actions to promote gender equality and women empowerment, especially the elimination of CEFM in ASEAN countries.

USA: Utah lawmakers debate ban on child marriages

Public News Service (27.02.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2U6y3qZ> - A bill aimed at halting child marriages in Utah has been approved by a legislative committee and will advance to the full state House of Representatives.

House Bill 234 would ban all marriages in which one or both partners are younger than age 18. Currently, the minimum age to marry in Utah is 15. The bill's Rep. Angela Romero, D-Salt Lake City, told members of the House Judiciary Committee that the bill mainly is aimed at keeping young girls from getting married before they're ready.

"A girl who marries young - usually if you marry as a child," she said, "you're 80 percent more likely to have a divorce, you're 50 percent more likely to drop out of high school, and you're four times less likely to complete college."

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, Utah has the youngest average age of marriage in the country. In Romero's view, a child should "get to be a child," and she is particularly concerned about young girls being forced into marriages, often with much older men.

The bipartisan bill was amended to allow 16- and 17-year-olds to marry with the permission of a juvenile court judge.

There was emotional testimony in support of the bill. Heidi Clark said she was wed at 15 because of an unplanned pregnancy, but wasn't mature enough to handle the marriage, which she said became abusive.

"We don't allow adults to smoke until 19 in Utah, to protect our children. We don't allow adults to drink until 21 in Utah, to protect our children," she said. "Society can best be judged by how it treats and protects its most vulnerable members. Our children are vulnerable."

Another person who testified, LuAnn Cooper, said she's a former member of a polygamist group and was forced by her family to marry when she was still a child.

"I was married at 15 to my 23-year-old cousin/nephew because it was a culture that I was raised in and I believed that it was what God wants me to do, because that's what I was told," she said, "but I was also told that it was OK because it's legal to get married at 15 in Utah."

A proposed amendment to ban marriages when there is a large age gap between the participants was tabled in committee, but is likely to be added when the bill is considered by the full House.

The text of HB 234 is online at le.utah.gov.

YEMEN: Crisis forces families to take desperate measures to survive

Family marries off three-year-old child to buy food and shelter

ReliefWeb (26.02.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2XnSOAK> - Conflict, rising food prices and plummeting incomes in Yemen are forcing people to resort to desperate measures to stave off hunger, Oxfam said today. The warning comes as rich countries meet in Geneva to pledge aid for the humanitarian crisis in Yemen which has left almost ten million people one step away from famine. Since the escalation in conflict in 2015, food prices in Yemen have soared while household incomes have plummeted, pushing the costs of basic foods beyond the reach of many.

Oxfam spoke to families in Amran governorate in the North who, hungry and isolated after fleeing their homes, have been forced to marry off their daughters – in one case as young as three years old – to buy food and shelter to save the rest of the family. Although early marriage has long been a practice in Yemen, marrying off girls at such an early age in desperation to buy food is shocking.

Younger girls are usually spared consummating the marriage until they have reached 11 years old but before that are made to do household work in their husband's home. Nine-year-old Hanan used to go to school but since she was married, she has had to stop.

Hanan said: "My mother in law keeps beating me, and when I run away back to my father's house, my father beats me again for running away. I don't want to be married. I just want to go back to school." Hanan's parents, who also married off her three-year-old sister, said they knew marrying off their daughters at such a young age was wrong, but felt they had no choice because the dowry paid in return was the only way of keeping the rest of the family alive.

Oxfam's Yemen Country Director Muhsin Siddiquey said: "As this war has gone on, people's means of coping with devastating levels of hunger have become more and more desperate. They're being forced to take steps that blight their children's lives now and for decades to come. This is a direct result of a man-made humanitarian catastrophe caused by the conflict. The international community needs to do everything in its power to bring an end to the fighting and ensure people have the food, water and medicine they so desperately need."

Fighting has forced many families to flee to isolated areas that lack basic infrastructure with no schools, water networks, proper sewage disposal systems or health centres. Many of them are living in small tents or mud houses which offer little protection against sun, rain or freezing temperatures during winter nights. With no income and limited job opportunities, many families can't afford enough food and resort to skipping meals, eating only bread and tea, buying food on credit, or begging.

Yemeni families can number up to 15 people, including older members who need special care and medication, further increasing living expenses which are already unbearable.

In surveys late last year of people in Taiz, in southern Yemen, who had received assistance from Oxfam, 99 percent said the adults in the family had reduced how much they ate to give more food to their children and 98 percent had cut down the number of meals they were eating every day. More than half said they had borrowed food from friends or relatives. Almost two thirds of people said they had taken on debt. In almost all cases this was to buy food, medicine or water.

Just over a week ago, Yemen's internationally recognized government and the Houthis agreed on the first phase of a withdrawal from the key port city of Hudaydah, following talks between the parties in Sweden in December. Reaching the agreement has been slow and it's not yet clear what, if any, impact it will have.

Siddiquey said: "Donors meeting today in Geneva to pledge assistance to Yemen need to make sure there's enough funding to get vital food, water and medicine to meet people's basic needs. But only an end to the conflict can halt the downward spiral that is forcing people to take desperate measures. All warring parties and their backers need to fully commit to a nationwide ceasefire and take concrete steps towards a lasting peace."

IRAN: Abuse of 11-year-old child bride sees some lawmakers calling for reforms

Center for Human Rights in Iran (21.02.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2BXMmYa> - News of an 11-year-old girl in the Iranian city of Ilam being repeatedly raped after being illegally married off to a man four times her age has renewed protests by some members of Parliament against the law that allows child marriage.

The child, referred to by the pseudo name of "Raha" by media outlets, was placed in the care of the State Welfare Organization (SWO) following the intervention of a provincial prosecutor because the marriage had taken place without the approval of a local court as required by civil law.

But thousands of other child brides remain at grave risk in Iran, where there is no minimum marriageable age. For girls under the age of 13 and boys under the age of 15, families and husbands must obtain legal approval for the marriage.

In December 2018, the parliamentary Committee for Judicial and Legal Affairs rejected a bill to ban marriage for girls under the age of 13, prompting widespread condemnation from civil rights advocates.

According to UNICEF, 17 percent of girls in Iran are married before the age of 18 and three percent are married before the age of 15. This number only accounts for registered marriages. In July 2016, Mohammad Kazemi, a member of Parliament's Judicial and Legal Affairs Committee, referenced the "unofficial marriages" that go unregistered in Iran "especially in the border regions and deprived parts of the country."

"Uprooting the child marriage phenomenon requires a multi-dimensional effort in cultural, social and educational fields," a lawyer who focused on rights issues when they were based in Iran told the Center for Human Rights in Iran (CHRI).

"But the most immediate step has to be the government putting an end to the law that in effect permits physical and psychological violence against young girls," added the source who spoke on the condition of anonymity.

The Imam Ali Society (IAS), an Iran-based non-governmental charity that provides support to vulnerable women and children throughout the country, was the first to report the news about Raha being married off to a man who is "almost 50 years old."

"Raha was saved from becoming a slave under a law that does not prevent and punish child marriages," tweeted the organization on February 11, 2019 referring to the fact that Raha would not have been removed from the home if her family had obtained the necessary legal approvals.

"Figures show that just in 1395 [the Iranian year ending in March 2017], 1,289 marriages were registered of girls under the age of 14 to men over the age of 30," said another tweet. "In 112 of those cases, the marriages were under circumstances similar to Raha's, meaning the men were over the age of 40, and in six cases the men were over the age of 60!"

"Raha was lucky that her compatriots were able to hear her story. But what about the other children who are being traded far from public view?" asked IAS.

IAS group member Zahra Kahram said Raha's case was accidentally discovered during the implementation of a project aimed at providing medical and psychological checkups to women in a rural part of Ilam Province's Helilan region.

"The man has seven children from his first wife," said Kahram. "Raha has not reached puberty and yet he has been having intercourse with her every night. She has suffered much physical and mental harm and cries constantly."

"When the IAS looked into the marriage, we noticed that Raha had been forced to marry the man six months earlier in exchange for only 15 million tomans [approximately \$3,147 USD] paid to her family because of financial need."

Later inquiries revealed that the marriage had taken place without fulfilling requirements stipulated in Article 1041 of the Civil Code including getting the father's consent or the court's approval for girls getting married before the age 13.

Article 50 of Iran's Family Protection Law stipulates punishment of six months imprisonment for men who get married without the necessary legal approvals and six months jail time for the child's father or legal guardian.

It also states that if it is proven that sexual relations caused a girl's death or "permanent physical disability or illness," the man would have to pay blood money and receive a fifth- or fourth-degree prison sentence.

According to Islamic law, Diyah, known as "blood money" in English, is paid as financial compensation to the victim or heirs of a victim in cases of murder, bodily harm, or property damage

In response to inquiries by the IAS and the SWO, Raha was placed in state care and moved to an SWO safe house. Warrants were also issued for the arrest of her father and the man she was married to. The latter was reportedly arrested on February 11.

Growing condemnation of child marriages

Word of Raha's case led to renewed condemnation of the unlimited marriageable age in Iran.

Labor and Social Welfare Minister Mohammad Shariatmadari and a number of lawmakers condemned the case and criticized child marriages despite the taboo in Iran of openly criticizing politically sensitive state policies.

The day after Raha's case was reported, Ayatollah Asadollah Bayat Zanjani, a Shia theologian, also issued a fatwa stating that child marriage violates the principles of Islam.

"Getting married to children is an unjust act and because it's unjust it is not legitimate," he said.

There are several ayatollahs in Iran who can issue fatwas and Shia Muslims can choose which of these ayatollahs to follow as their point of reference for religious matters. That means a Shia Muslim could ignore Zanjani's fatwa if a different ayatollah has declared the opposite.

Zahra Saie, a member of the Parliamentary Committee for Social Affairs, also condemned child marriage after hearing about Raha's case.

"The studies we have carried out show that those who marry early have a higher divorce rate and naturally as a result suffer more," said Saie, a member of Parliament's Youth Faction. "Physiologically, the girls are more frail at that age."

She added: "In order to properly raise their children, today's mothers have to be educated and informed. Men and women have to be in a particular physical and mental condition in order for a successful family to take shape. Young girls and boys who get married don't have a full understanding of life. Islamic theology does not restrict marriage at a certain age but if we want successful families we have to see what is the right age for marriage."

Reacting to the prosecutor's decision to remove Raha from the man's home, attorney Ali Mojtahedzade tweeted: "When a public defender, despite legal shortcomings, steps in to deal with a child marriage in Ilam, it is an indication that society has become more sensitive and concerned about these issues regardless of the powerful opponents."

Journalist and political activist Reza Bahrami asked: "Those who are against banning child marriage, do they have anything to say about the tragic case of an 11-year-old child marrying a 50-year-old man in Ilam?"

Journalist Hedio Kimiaee commented: "The prosecutor in Ilam has said that families who violate Article 50 of the Family Protection Law will be prosecuted. So that means we do have a law but we are not enforcing it. What is being done for other Rahas who are quietly victimized?"

Legal efforts to ban marriages to girls under the age of 13

Although the Parliamentary Committee for Legal and Judicial Affairs rejected a proposal to confront child marriages, there is still a possibility that it will be debated on the legislative floor.

"The Women's Faction has asked the parliamentary leadership to include this proposal in the legislative process for further review so that we can look into various points of view and get the best results," said lawmaker Zahra Saie.

Masoumeh Ebtekar, Vice President for Women and Family Affairs, also announced that her office is drafting a bill to eliminate Article 1041's provision allowing the marriage of girls under the age of 13 and boys under the age of 15.

ZIMBABWE: UN Women, chiefs join hands to end child marriages

By Delphine Serumaga

The Herald (20.02.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2EjHn5E> - Zimbabwe is among countries with the highest prevalence of child marriages in Africa. Approximately one in three girls are married off before the age of 18.

According to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, forced and early marriage denies children their right to protection from harmful practices, abuse and exploitation, and takes away their right to develop to their fullest.

As one of the responses to the problem of child marriages, UN Women in Zimbabwe and the Chiefs' Council of Zimbabwe have formed a partnership to accelerate the end of child marriage in the country.

The partnership, agreed to in January 2019, resulted in the participation of three members of the Chiefs' Council, led by their president, Chief Fortune Charumbira, in high level meetings on "Transforming Traditions, Norms, Customs and Cultures to End Child Marriage and Female Genital Mutilation in Africa: Joining Hands with Traditional and Cultural Leaders" held on February 10-11, 2019 in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.

Hopefully, the work by UN Women and the Chiefs' Council in Zimbabwe will strengthen capacity of chiefs to influence legislative reform on child marriage and to tackle the issue in the communities within their jurisdiction.

The Addis Ababa meeting convened by UN Women was held in collaboration with the Government of the Republic of Zambia and the African Union Commission. The meeting brought together traditional and cultural leaders from over 15 African countries.

Others from Zimbabwe who attended are Chief Siansali from Binga, who is also the Provincial Chairperson of the Chiefs Provincial Assembly in Matabeleland North and Commissioner Chief Chikwizo from the Zimbabwe Gender Commission.

The meeting provided a platform for the renewal of commitments to end child marriage and female-genital mutilation in Africa.

On the side event of the AU Heads of State Summit, the meeting also sought to secure and renew commitments of Heads of State and Government and Traditional and Cultural Leaders to incorporate transformational approaches that effectively address socio-cultural barriers to end child marriage and female-genital mutilation in Africa by 2030.

The Council of Traditional Leaders of Africa (COTLA) was launched at the event in Addis Ababa. COTLA is a Pan-African platform of male and female traditional and cultural leaders, primarily set up to amplify and organise their voices and actions across Africa to transform culture and eliminate negative cultural practices that harm women and girls.

In their final communiqué, traditional leaders acknowledged the importance of the platform in enabling them to bring together their collective voices, influence, authority and action to redefining the leadership role of traditional leaders in the urgent efforts to fight child marriage and female-genital mutilation, which practices have no place in our societies.

Speaking in one of the dialogue sessions, Chief Charumbira expressed concern over criminals who hide behind cultural practices and perform gross human rights violations under the guise of culture.

He added that perpetrators must be brought to book and prosecuted and pledged the support of the Chiefs from Zimbabwe to the regional initiative to end child marriage and female-genital mutilation.

Going forward, the partnership in Zimbabwe will strengthen coordinated efforts to end child marriages at local, national and regional level.

MYANMAR/MALAYSIA: Rohingya refugees should follow local Syariah law in matters such as marriage

By Ian McIntyre

The Sun Daily (13.02.2019) - <https://goo.gl/EWwB69> - Rohingyas and other Muslim refugees residing in Malaysia should be subject to the same Syariah laws that the citizens of this country abide by.

Lawyer Habib Rahman Seeni Mohideen said this also included legislation on marriage. For instance, he said, the Syariah law in Malaysia prohibited marriage for individuals under 16 years of age unless an exemption was granted by the Syariah Court.

The marriage must also be conducted by a certified registrar or kadi who had been given full authority to perform the task by the respective state religious authorities, he explained.

The father of the 11-year-old Rohingya girl who gave consent to her marriage to a 21-year-old man was therefore committing an offence, Habib added.

The wedding was supposed to proceed last Wednesday but was stopped by two police officers who visited the family in the company of K. Sudhagaran Stanley Singh, the founder Lifebridge Learning Centre, a school for Rohingya children funded by civil societies.

The solemnisation of the marriage, at a house in Taman Perai, Butterworth, was to be conducted by a kadi from the Rohingya community. The family has since moved to Tasek Gelugor.

Stanley had earlier expressed disappointment with the girl's father Mohamed Somir Abdul Razak for going back on his promise to allow his daughter to resume schooling. The father had reportedly said that it was a sin to allow his daughter to continue going to school.

Both deputy chief ministers of Penang — Datuk Ahmad Zakiyuddin Abdul Rahman and Dr P. Ramasamy — have called on the authorities to provide a holistic solution to the problem faced by the family.

Zakiyuddin pointed out that the rule of law must apply in the case. "This is our only guide given the family's reluctance to allow the girl to continue schooling," he said.

Ramasamy said the people should not judge the family. "They are refugees and survival is their greatest priority," he said.

The father had cited financial problems as a reason for allowing his daughter to get married.

Stanley said the state government should not be lackadaisical over the latter. "The family has been living in Penang for the last 10 years. The girl was born here and in some countries she would already be a citizen," he added.

At the same time, he said, the family should be subject to Malaysian laws.

"Majority of the people in this country reject child marriages and they also do not condone children dropping out of school," he added.

Meanwhile in Kuala Lumpur, Myanmar Ethnic Rohingya Human Rights Organisation Malaysia (Merhrom) president Zahar Ahmad Ghnai unveiled identity cards for Rohingya refugees in Malaysia. The "I Am Rohingya" ID will be issued by Merhrom.

INDIA: Child marriage widespread in Bihar, Rajasthan and Bengal: Unicef report

The Unicef report said in Tamil Nadu and Kerala child marriage prevalence was below 20 per cent.

India Today (12.02.2019) - <https://goo.gl/PA6u59> - Although child marriages in India have declined, a few states like Bihar, West Bengal and Rajasthan continue to carry on with the harmful practice and there is nearly 40 per cent prevalence in these states, the Unicef said.

A new report 'Factsheet Child Marriages 2019' released by the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (Unicef) late on Monday stated that while in Tamil Nadu and Kerala child marriage prevalence was below 20 per cent, they were pockets of disparity concentrated in tribal communities and amongst particular castes, including the Scheduled Castes.

Child marriage threatens girls' lives, well-being and futures and if efforts were not accelerated, more than 150 million girls would be married off before their 18th birthday by 2030.

Improving rates of girl education, proactive government investments in adolescent girls, and strong public messages around the illegality of child marriage and the harm it causes were among the reasons for the shift, it pointed.

It also showed that the prevalence of girls getting married before 18 years of age in India has declined from 47 per cent in 2005-2006 to 27 per cent in 2015-2016.

"While the change is similar with all states showing a declining trend, the prevalence of child marriage continues to be high in some districts. The focus is on geographies that have high (50 per cent) and medium (between 20 per cent to 50 per cent) prevalence of child marriage," it said in a statement.

The report revealed that worldwide, an estimated 650 million girls and women alive were married before their 18th birthday and globally, the total number of girls married in childhood is estimated at 12 million per year.

"South Asia is home to the largest number of child brides with more than 40 per cent of the global burden (285 million or 44 per cent of the global total), followed by sub-Saharan Africa (115 million or 18 per cent globally)," it noted.

In Latin America and the Caribbean, there was no evidence of progress at all, with levels of child marriage as high as they were 25 years ago.

However, there is a silver lining as well, the report stated that the practice of child marriage has declined around the world.

In the past decade, the proportion of women who were married as children decreased by 15 per cent, from 1 in 4 (25 per cent) to approximately 1 in 5 (21 per cent), that's around 25 million child marriages that have been prevented.

In South Asia, a girl's risk of marrying in childhood has declined by more than a third, from nearly 50 per cent a decade ago to 30 per cent at present, largely driven by great strides in reducing the prevalence of child marriage in India.

The report mentioned that the global burden of child marriage is shifting from South Asia to Sub-Saharan Africa, due to both slower progress and a growing population. Of the most recently married child brides, close to 1 in 3 are now in sub-Saharan Africa, compared to 1 in 7, 25 years ago.

INDIA: Forced to marry 53-year-old man, minor attempts suicide, saved by villagers

The timely intervention by villagers prevented a 15-year-old girl from committing suicide by jumping off an overhead water tank to avoid her marriage to a 53-year-old man in Telangana's Yadadri Bhongir district on Monday.

By Srinivasa Rao Apparasu

Hindustan Times (12.02.2019) - <https://goo.gl/9mM6KM> - The timely intervention by villagers prevented a 15-year-old girl from committing suicide by jumping off an overhead water tank to avoid her marriage to a 53-year-old man in Telangana's Yadadri Bhongir district on Monday.

The incident occurred at Shivalal Thanda hamlet of Alair block. Noticing the girl climbing up the overhead tank, some villagers rushed to her even before she could reach the top and brought her down after pacifying her.

The villagers handed her over to the local Anganwadi teacher Manjula who, in turn, informed the Integrated Child Development Centre (ICDS) project officer Chandrakala and supervisor Uma Rani of the incident. They took her to the police station and lodged a complaint there.

According to Alair police, the girl, a class 10 student at a government school at Motakonduru, had been staying with her uncle Bhaskar for the last two years. Her parents died of illness after marrying off their first three daughters. For the last few months, her uncle Bhaskar had been pressuring her to marry 53-year-old Yadaiah of the same village. Yadaiah already has a wife and two children.

The girl was also not being allowed to attend school for the last few days. "Unable to bear the harassment, she escaped from the house and went to her relatives at Shivala Thanda on Monday where she attempted suicide," Alair sub-inspector Venkat Reddy said.

The police had filed a case against Bhaskar and his wife under the Prevention of Child Marriage Act.

Child Rights Association president P Achyuta Rao demanded stern action against the girl's uncle for forcing her to marry an aged man who was already married.

USA: Bill aims to put an end to 'child marriages' in Minnesota

By Briana Bierschbach

MPR News (12.02.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2GrCxft> - Kaohly Her was a teenager when an older man caught a glimpse of her at a community event. The next day, his family called her father to ask for her hand in marriage.

"I remember hearing my father say to the caller that he would only entertain the thought of us marrying after I graduated from college," Her said.

She did go to college, hours from her home, where she met a different man who became her husband. She got a degree in finance and last fall she ran for and won a seat in the Minnesota House. None of that would have happened if her father agreed to the man's marriage proposal, she said.

Now, Her, a St. Paul Democrat, is sponsoring a bill that would bar marriage by any minor in the state of Minnesota and require a proof of age. Under state law now 16- and 17-year-olds can get married with parental consent and approval from a judge in the county where they live. Her's proposal to change that was approved unanimously by the House Judiciary Committee on Tuesday.

"We cannot let a practice that reduces a girl's chance of success, happiness, security, and safety continue," she said. "We are the adults who know better, so we should protect our children."

There's no data collected on these marriages in Minnesota, so there's no information on how widespread the problem is, but it's a fairly common practice in the United States. Between 2000 and 2015, more 200,000 minors were legally married in the United States, according to a Frontline investigation. Nine in 10 of those minors were girls, and in many cases, they were married to men so much older that the age difference would usually constitute statutory rape, Her said.

In Minnesota, a child's parents or legal guardian must petition the courts in order for a minor to be married. Ashlynn Kendzior, an attorney with the group Gender Justice, said judges are given wide discretion and usually grant the marriage licences.

Kendzior supports Her's bill, in part, because the status of marriage changes how prosecutors can carry out sexual misconduct laws in the state. Minnesota has what are called "marital rape exceptions" in law, which prevent someone from being convicted of raping their spouses.

"Under Minnesota law, it is illegal to have sex with a 16-or 17-year-old child if you are more than four years older than that child and in a position of authority, however, that very same conduct is legal if the victim and the perpetrator are married," she said. "Even if the rape or other misconduct occurred prior to the marriage, most prosecutors will decline to prosecute because the marriage is seen as taking precedent."

Last year, two states passed laws that bar minors from getting married. Before changing its law, Florida allowed minor girls of any age to marry if they were pregnant.

"I know many people when they hear child marriage, they think it's a third world country problem, but I know many immigrant communities, and many mainstream communities, this is a problem," Rep. Hodan Hassan, DFL-Minneapolis, said.

The bill now heads for a vote in the House. Sen. Sandy Pappas, DFL-St. Paul, is carrying a companion bill.

WORLD: We have to stop blaming 'backward' culture for FGM and child marriage

These issues have received increased global attention. But simple attacks on 'tradition and culture' just fuel the backlash to women's rights.

Open Democracy (06.02.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2Sau0x7> - Campaigns to end female genital mutilation (FGM) and child marriage have received renewed support and funding from diverse global actors over the last five years. Despite commendable progress towards ending these harmful practices, challenges remain.

For instance, many countries with high rates of FGM and child marriage still do not have laws banning these practices, including Somalia, Sudan, Liberia, Mali and Sierra Leone. Even in countries with these laws, a backlash has hampered efforts to eliminate them. In the past year, religious freedom arguments have been invoked in US and Indian courts to defend the practice of FGM.

In January 2018, a Kenyan doctor filed a case seeking to legalise FGM, claiming that her country's ban on the practice since 2011 is unconstitutional. She argues that adult women in particular should be allowed to do what they want with their bodies and that banning FGM is tantamount to embracing Western culture and casting local practices as inferior. This case is ongoing.

Meanwhile, many in the West still seem to engage with FGM in particular as a 'white woman's burden', whereby African girls need to be rescued from 'backward culture.' Though not all communities in Africa practice FGM and are culture and tradition really the main drivers of such harmful practices?

Too often, culture and tradition are invoked to perpetuate human rights violations, as many shy away from attacking other peoples' cultures and traditions. This leaves fertile ground for abuses to continue unpunished.

At the same time, arguments resting on culture and tradition provide a moral ground for others to claim their actions are aimed at 'saving poor girls and women' from 'backward' cultural and traditional practices of their communities. This, of course, has neo-imperialist undertones.

What's too rarely acknowledged is that harmful practices like FGM and child marriage are deeply rooted in the unequal social and economic relationships between men and women: a system that subjugates women and girls, while privileging men and boys simply referred to as patriarchy.

Culture is not static. The cultures of diverse groups have changed over time, adapting and reforming certain hazardous aspects without giving up other harmless, positive and meaningful ones.

The global attention FGM and child marriage are now receiving will only transform unequal power relations between women and men if we apply the antidote to patriarchy: a human rights approach.

Harmful practices are violations of human rights to dignity and health, including sexual and reproductive health; personal security and physical integrity; and freedom from torture, and cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment. Girls subjected to them are often denied rights to education and forced to drop out of school, contributing further to women's social and economic powerlessness.

FGM and child marriage are forms of discrimination and violence against women under universal human rights. This perspective overcomes the perception that interventions to end harmful practices are 'neo-imperialist' attacks on particular cultures. It also places responsibility on governments who have duties to ensure the human rights of all persons in their jurisdictions.

Crucially, aims to challenge harmful practices must be situated firmly within the context of broader efforts to address the social and economic injustices women and girls face the world over. These must not be isolated single-issue struggles.

Adequate resources are needed for prevention, protection, and provision of services, as well as partnerships and prosecutions where required. Protection services can support high-risk girls, including through shelters or alternative care and telephone hotlines staffed by trained counsellors.

Education, information, life skills and livelihood training and health service programmes can meanwhile empower girls and women to assert their rights and make informed decisions. Public education and awareness-raising can transform underlying patriarchal social norms, attitudes and beliefs.

Laws and policies banning FGM and child marriage send an important, clear message that states will not condone harmful practices. States must guarantee girls and women equal protection under the law, including access to legal remedies and possible reparations, while strengthening the ability of state and non-governmental agencies to protect those at-risk.

Adequate resources and training for professionals in health, education, social work, judiciary, police and other sectors is vital to transmit accurate information about sexual and reproductive health, better implement legislation and punish perpetrators, and increase support for survivors to access remedies and services including medical, psychosocial and livelihood assistance.

States must be held to account on their international obligations to protect women and girls from all forms of violence and discrimination. Diverse groups must be targeted and mobilised to end harmful practices, including, but not limited to: women, men, boys and girls of all ages, traditional and religious leaders, civil society, health professionals, universities, media and practitioners.

In particular we must support those running prevention and protection programmes at the grassroots level where the transformation of social norms is critical to ending FGM and child marriage.

A joined-up, comprehensive approach, based on human rights is the only way we can challenge the patriarchal structures that are the key drivers of such harmful practices. A simple attack on culture and tradition only fuels the fire of the backlash to women's and girls' rights globally.

PAKISTAN: Set to raise minimum marriageable age to 18 after govt says it has no objections

A bill to raise the minimum marriageable age in Pakistan to 18 is destined for smooth sailing as the government has told the opposition senator who presented it that it has no objections.

Zaheer Ali Khan

SAMAA (30.01.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2G0x2gM> - Senator Sherry Rehman presented an amendment to the Child Marriage Restraint Act, 1929 that states that the minimum marriageable age in Pakistan is 16 during a meeting of the Senate Committee on Human Rights on Wednesday.

Senator Rehman proposed that the minimum age be raised to 18.

Chaired by Senator Mustafa Nawaz Khokar, the committee approved her amendment and Federal Human Rights Minister Shireen Mazari said the government has no objections to raising the minimum marriageable age.

She said the bill has been sent to the cabinet for approval and will be presented before parliament for final approval next month.

Senator Rehman is a member of the PPP, which has already raised the minimum marriageable age to 18 in Sindh. Incidents of child marriage are common in Pakistan, she told the committee.

Many women aren't ready even upon reaching the minimum age, she said, adding that Pakistan is ranked number two in child marriages in the world.

Senator Muzaffar Hussain Shah of the PML-F said the Islamic Ideology Council's opinion should be sought before the bill is put to parliament. However, his suggestion was opposed by Barrister Muhammad Ali Khan Saif of the MQM, who said there is no need to drag the Islamic Ideology Council into every matter.

Their opinion is not necessary for legislation, he argued.

Khokhar said that child marriage is a social issue in Pakistan. Passing this bill will send a good message from the Centre to the provinces, he said.

CHINA/INDIA: Asia's expanding illicit market: brides

By Tharanga Yakupitiyage

IPS News Agency (25.01.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2FYYgEM> - Paradoxically, the world's most populated countries are facing a population crisis: a woman shortage. And it's women who are paying a brutal price for it.

According to the World Health Organisation (WHO), the natural sex ratio at birth is approximately 105 boys to every 100 girls.

However, decades of gender discrimination, which favoured having boys over girls, has left India and China with 80 million more men than women.

“When women lack equal rights and patriarchy is deeply engrained, it is no surprise that parents choose to not to have daughters,” said Human Rights Watch’s (HRW) Senior Researcher in the Women’s Rights Division Heather Barr.

Now that there is a shortage of women doesn’t mean that women become more treasured or valued, she noted. Instead, there are very harmful consequences.

“[Women have] become a commodity which is in demand, so in demand that people will use violence to acquire it,” Barr told IPS.

“The stories we heard were really unbelievably shocking even after having spent many, many years on human rights issues,” she added.

The “bride shortage” has triggered trafficking as women are lured under false pretences and sold as brides.

Bordering China is Myanmar’s Kachin and northern Shan states which has seen iterations of conflicts over the last decade.

HRW found that traffickers often prey on women and girls in those regions, offering jobs in and transport to China. The women are then sold for 3,000 to 13,000 dollars to Chinese families struggling to find a bride for their sons.

Once purchased, women and girls are often locked in room and raped so that they can quickly provide a baby for the family.

Often times, women and girls are even sold by people they know—sometimes even by family members.

“The idea that there is a situation, a set of social pressures, a sense of lawlessness that is so extreme that it is causing people to sell their own relatives...it is shocking,” Barr said.

In India, bride trafficking has become common in the northern states such as Haryana which has only 830 girls to every 1,000 boys.

In a study, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) found in over 10,000 households, over 9,000 married women in Haryana were brought from other States.

Most of those women came from poor villages in Assam, West Bengal, and Bihar where their families, desperate for money, struck deals with traffickers. There are also cases of girls being resold to other people after living a married life for a few years.

According to the 2016 National Crimes Records Bureau, almost 34,000 were kidnapped or abducted for the purpose of marriage across India, half of whom were under the age of 18.

While the immediate consequences for women are clear, there may also be long-term consequences of the distorted sex ratio.

“Part of the reason that we should be worrying about it is that we simply don’t know what the long-term consequences of this are. We don’t know how this might change societies, but this is something that is going to have an effect through generations,” Barr told IPS,

highlighting the need for action including better prevention efforts and law enforcement on trafficking and violence against women.

But at the end of the day, governments must do more to address the root cause of the imbalance—gender discrimination.

Though sex-selective abortion is illegal in India, it is still a widespread practice in the country. In fact, approximately five to seven million sex-selective abortions are estimated to be carried out in the South Asian country every year.

China's now two-child policy may also continue to pose a threat to women and girls, as well as the future stability of the country's population.

"The most fundamental problem is gender inequality and most fundamental solution to this is that you have to change the dynamics in society that makes sons valued and daughters not valued," Barr concluded.

SAUDI ARABIA: The fine print of the child marriage ban

Freedom United (22.01.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2G9Sxu0> - Saudi Arabia is moving to ban child marriage, but activists warn that loopholes will continue to put children at risk of forced marriage.

The Shura Council, a top advisory body to the government, approved regulations to prohibit marriage for both girls and boys who are under 15-years-old. Minors who are under 18 will need approval from a special court to wed.

Both of these are significant changes for the country which, until now, has had no minimum age for marriage.

Yet the caveat on minors under 18 being allowed to wed with court approval means that the new regulations may not fully protect children from forced marriages, particularly if they are being coerced by their own families.

The South China Morning Post reports:

Council member Lina Almaeena said the approval by the council, which does not have legislative powers but can propose laws to the king and the cabinet, is a "great accomplishment" for the kingdom in protecting its young citizens.

"There were no marriage limitations before, so for this to be passed and prohibit marriage for a child under 15 is a huge accomplishment because you will be protecting young boys and girls," she said.

Heather Hamilton, deputy director of Girls Not Brides, said it is "encouraging" that the kingdom is setting age limits for marriage, but the rules are a "far cry" from protecting children under 18, who can still marry with court approval.

"Girls are still at risk of being forced into marriage if their parents can persuade a court to agree," she said in an emailed statement.

Arab News reported that the Shura Council approved the new policy with two-thirds of its members backing the changes.

Shura Council member Dr. Hoda Al-Helaissi said this step was important to protect the rights of children.

"The usual argument was that it took place in the days of the Prophet (Muhammad). But times have changed since the olden days, and we are not just talking about Islam. It was used as a bartering tool for (those in) poverty, where the fathers received dowries," she explained.

"Things are completely different now. The law gives them the possibility of an education and future."

PAKISTAN: Child marriage and the law

By Sherry Rehman

The International News (16.01.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2DBKwx6> - Pakistan's children are its future. Yet not only is this generation put to work in homes, fields and factories, they are also the silent objects of abuse and violence in ways that shock and stagger society.

Most vulnerable in this generation are the young girls and boys forced to be married off before they reach any minimum level of adulthood. Girls especially offal victim to such customs, with their bodies becoming the site of chilling exploitation through forced pregnancies and other predations including rape.

The task before us is very clear. We must do two things right away. The bill that has been introduced in the Senate recently has been through enough paths of compromise in the committee and at other forums like the Islamic Ideology Council, when Senator Sehar Kamran initially introduced it. The new amended bill to ban child marriage that I have laid before parliament has added key clauses after stakeholder consultations from the field.

Essentially, if it passes standing committees and votes in both the Senate and the National Assembly, the Child Marriage Restraint Bill will ban marriages before the age of 18. It will also clear the confusion about the definition and age of a child, which will also be 18, for the purposes of rights and obligations. This definition matters because children are forced into adulthood too early.

Right now, Pakistan's federal law is still based around an act passed in 1929, in which the British rulers of India had fixed the age of consent at 14. It was improved to 16 by the Muslim Family Laws Ordinance, 1961. After 2010, the prevention of child marriages became a provincial subject, although the Islamabad Capital Territory still fell under federal law, which continues to exercise an important framework reference for human rights obligations and precedence.

The view from the provinces, which also enforce their own laws, is patchy. Sindh is the only province so far to have passed a similar law, barring marriage until the age of 18. In Sindh, which provides a model law for the federation and other provinces, the law makes under-age marriages a cognizable and non-compoundable offence. This means that the police can take action on their own to arrest offenders upon any information, and no private justice deals can be made between families, communities or jirgas to bypass the law.

The Punjab Marriage Restraint Act, meanwhile, still allows girls to be married off at 16. The 2015 law allows the police to register a case to stop child marriages, but they are not

empowered to make arrests. Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan continue to be governed by a 1929 Act, like the federal law, which we seek to change.

The case for such a law is very clear. According to Unicef, 21 percent of girls in Pakistan are married under the age of 18. Three percent are married under the age of 15, but these are illusory statistics. In many cases the mapping of such practices on the ground is poor, especially in rural areas, so the reality may likely be worse. The social implications of early marriage are also well documented. Girls who marry too early or in early adolescence are more likely to drop out of school than others. As it is, 22.84 million children are out of school in Pakistan, which in itself is a staggering number. Thirty-two percent of primary school aged girls are not only out of school but drop out, so that by 9th grade only 13 percent remain in school, according to Human Rights Watch.

When girls are forced to marry at an early age, they are more likely to face domestic violence, and such marriages render them at risk for early pregnancies and malnutrition. It is no secret that the high rates of maternal and infant death in Pakistan have a close link to early marriage, and like other developing countries the leading cause of death for young girls is early pregnancy, usually between the ages of 15 and 18.

The above-ground statistics for Pakistan, like the tip of the iceberg, are chilling. Every 20 minutes a Pakistani woman dies from childbirth or complications in pregnancy. This in many parts is attributable to a shockingly large number of women, especially under-age girls, having little power or agency over their bodies, nutrition, or even the lives and care of the children they bear. This is also why infant mortality is such a statistic of shame: as of updated surveys, 64 infants die per 1000 live births, which puts Pakistan at the highest rate of infant mortality in Asia, worse than war-ravaged Afghanistan or even Yemen, according to the World Bank.

It is imperative then, that a changed model law must govern federal principles, as well as the provinces. The real challenge will lie in implementation, where the production of a CNIC should also be made mandatory for the registration of marriages, which carry on being recognised without the requisite identity documentation to support the marriage contract.

Pakistan must not use religion or custom or whataboutery to send this law for consultation to any committee outside parliament. At stake is the country's future, its children and its fundamental rights.

The writer is parliamentary leader of the PPP in the Senate. She has also served as Pakistan's ambassador to Washington.

ZIMBABWE: 'My dreams were destroyed': poverty costs child brides dear

Married off at 13, Maureen lost her education and her health. Her plight is common in a country racked by economic turmoil

By Nyasha Chingono

The Guardian (04.01.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2Sxp1m5> - The end of Maureen's days at a primary school in north-eastern Zimbabwe marked the beginning of her life as a wife.

At 13, the brightest student in her class in Mudzi, Mashonaland, she was married to a man three times her age.

Her father, a poor farmer, had promised to fund Maureen's secondary education but, when the time came, he could not raise the money. Marrying off his daughter was a quick fix. Maureen swiftly fell pregnant and was still 13 when she gave birth after spending hours in labour. The baby did not survive.

Three years on and Maureen is at Chinhoyi provincial hospital. She is among the scores of underage brides being cared for here who are suffering from obstetric fistula, caused by prolonged labour.

"I haven't forgiven my parents for doing this to me. I had a bright future but now they treat me like an outcast," says Maureen.

When my parents told me about the marriage I couldn't believe it, because they had always given me the impression that I was their most intelligent child and I would pursue my studies. The man was abusive, he called me names and beat me several times, especially after I lost my baby," she says. "My dreams were destroyed by that man."

Child marriage in Zimbabwe is often driven by poverty. Dowries offer a welcome, if brief, respite from penury in poor households struggling to weather a vicious economic crisis. The brides, though, are more likely to remain in a state of privation due to lack of personal development and education.

Although underage marriage is illegal and local organisations have been fighting against it as an economic transaction, the financial meltdown has worsened the situation. About one in every three girls in Zimbabwe is married before the age of 18, the legal age of consent.

According to campaign organisation Girls Not Brides, families see little worth in girls.

"In many communities, economic opportunities are severely limited, especially for girls and women. Families therefore see little value in educating their daughters and instead marry them off to fulfil the role of a wife and mother," says a Girls Not Brides spokesperson.

Zimbabwe is facing an acute shortage of cash and, as basic commodities disappear from the shelves, families' disposable income has been depleted.

Rights defenders say child marriage, outlawed by the Zimbabwean constitutional court in 2016, has spiralled in the rural areas that constitute 75% of the country.

Kresi, 16, from Masvingo, is another teenager whose future was jeopardised when she was married off to a cattle farmer in her village. Her family received a dowry of two cows and a few groceries in exchange for Kresi. She also suffers from obstetric fistula, a hole between the genital tract and bladder or rectum caused by lengthy or obstructed labour.

Women and girls who experience obstetric fistula suffer constant incontinence, shame, social segregation and further health problems. It is estimated that more than 2 million young women in Asia and sub-Saharan Africa live with the condition untreated.

"I felt cheap and abused. My mates are in high school doing well for themselves. [My family] had no business selling me off. Now I have this condition which I cannot control. No one has even come to see me in this hospital," Kresi says, sobbing.

Tendai, 14, of Bindura says her family gave her away in exchange for 100 Zimbabwean dollars (22p).

She was married to a man with three wives. As the youngest wife, Tendai is burdened with both child-bearing and work in the fields.

"I still want to go back to school. I just hope my husband can give me that chance. But as the youngest wife I have to do everything here at home," Tendai says.

She is bitter over her parent's decision to marry her off.

With a drought looming and disposable incomes depleted from galloping inflation, poor families are more likely to exchange their daughter for very little.

"In areas like Binga, Matabeleland, the dowry can be a goat, which is an insult to the value of the girl. In some instances families just leave their child at the man's house to lessen their own burden," says Grace Maunganidze, a local activist.

Another activist, Abigail Mutema, blames child marriages on the stronghold of a patriarchal society.

"Until women are emancipated, child marriages will never end. In some of the communities, girls as young as 16 are deemed too old, so they need to get married. There is nothing to do in the rural areas, so the easier route is to get married. Poverty plays a role in these child marriages," says Mutema.

"Older women have become perpetrators of these early child marriages. A woman is not complete without marriage, they say."

MYANMAR: Activists call for clear minimum marriage age in draft child rights law

By San Yamin Aung

The Irrawaddy (4.12.2018) - <https://bit.ly/2G0G1j4> - Women's rights advocates have raised concerns over the absence of a clearly defined minimum age of marriage in the proposed Child Rights Law currently before Parliament.

The draft bill submitted by the Ministry of Social Welfare, Relief and Resettlement states that the minimum age at which boys and girls can marry shall be defined by both existing laws and customary laws. (Customary law refers to the traditional laws observed by the country's various religions and ethnicities.) A provision of the draft adds that in order for the marriage to be legally registered, those being married must be at least 18 years of age.

The Lower House's Bill Committee last week suggested removing the second part regarding the minimum age being 18.

Lower House lawmaker U Kyaw Soe Linn, who is also a secretary of the Bill Committee, said in Parliament that stating a marriageable age in the Child Rights Law would create inconsistencies with the country's various customary laws. He cited the Myanmar Buddhist Women's Special Marriage Law, the Christian Marriage Act and other ethnic groups' traditions relating to marriage, which prescribe different age minimums for marriage.

The Lower House voted in favor of the committee's suggestion on Nov. 28.

Lawyer and Legal Clinic Myanmar director Ma Hla Hla Yee voiced concern that the omission of a clearly stated minimum legal age for marriage from the proposed Child Rights Law would encourage child marriage.

"It is the same as allowing boys and girls to marry before they are ready under the Child Rights Law," the lawyer said.

She said that as the proposed Child Rights Law is a special law on children, it will have an influence on the interpretation of other laws. For that reason, the omission of a stated marriageable age could allow some people who commit offenses against children to escape prosecution under the Penal Code's Article 375, she said.

Article 375 defines the minimum age at which an individual can legally consent to sex with an adult as 16. Whether consensual or not, any adult who engages in sex with a minor below this age is guilty of rape under the law.

Prominent women's rights advocate Ma May Sabe Phyu, who is also a director of the Gender Equality Network, said removing the legal age for marriage and legally permitting children to marry under different customs and traditions would be in violation of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), an international treaty that Myanmar signed in 1997.

As a signatory to the CEDAW, the government is obliged to enact laws that protect women and girls from being subject to harmful traditions and practices, Ma May Sabe Phyu said. The proposed Child Rights Law would do the exact opposite, she added.

Drafted by the ministry, the proposed Child Rights Law is a revision of the outdated 1993 Child Law. It would extend childhood status to the age of 18 in line with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), which the country signed in 1991, and provide improved protections for child rights and care.

"[Opponents of a defined age of marriage] would argue that we are seizing on one single issue in an otherwise perfect law. But that single issue is too important to ignore," Ma May Sabe Phyu said.

Legislation passed under a democratic government should comply with international conventions ratified by the country, she said.

During the Parliament session on Nov. 28, Lower House lawmaker Ma Aye Mya Mya Myo proposed a motion objecting to any omission of a minimum legal age for marriage in the legislation.

She pointed to the joint general recommendation made by the CEDAW and UN CRC committees in 2014. The committees called on the government to prevent and eliminate harmful practices frequently justified by invoking social or religious customs and values often embedded in patriarchal cultures and traditions.

"I would remind [lawmakers] that this is a special law for child rights," Ma Aye Mya Mya Myo said.

"Child marriage has many effects on girls' health, including underage pregnancy and maternal mortality," she added.

Her motion was defeated, however. A total of 320 lawmakers in the male-dominated Parliament rejected it, versus 33 lawmakers who supported it.

The bill will be submitted to the Upper House for further discussion.

Lawyer Ma Hla Hla Yee called for the establishment of a minimum legal age for marriage in the Child Rights Law to prevent early and forced marriage being justified as protected traditional customs.

"It is really important that a minimum legal age for marriage be restored when the legislation is debated in the Upper House," she said.

EUROPEAN UNION: Human Rights Without Frontiers debate on child marriage

EU Reporter (14.10.2018) - <https://bit.ly/2CTvNPh> - Welcome to the first of a series of EU Reporter discussion programmes, brought to you in partnership with Human Rights Without Frontiers.

Today we're looking at Child Marriage, defined as a marriage in which one or both of the people getting married is below the legal age of consent in that country. Of course, in nearly every case, it's the girl who is underage.

Talking about the issue are: Elisa Van Ruiten, a Gender Specialist at Human Rights Without Frontiers International; Mohinder Watson, who is a researcher and activist against child marriage, who escaped a forced marriage of her own as a teenager; and Emilio Puccio, the Coordinator of the European Parliament Intergroup on Children's Rights, which is a cross-party and cross-national group comprising over 90 MEPs and 25 child-focused organizations. The presenter is EU Reporter's Jim Gibbons.

Every day somewhere in the world, 39,000 young girls are married before they reach the age of majority; more than a third of them are younger than 15, according to the Council of Europe. We may be well into the 21st century but too many girls are still forced to live in a bygone age of male dominance. Human Rights Without Frontiers has just produced a report on women's rights and the Abrahamic faiths of Christianity, Islam and Judaism.

Watch the video here: https://youtu.be/wgOK0_XA6Vg

LEBANON: Women empowerment stories: Mervat

SB OverSeas - Mervat is one of the teachers at SB OverSeas, an organisation working to provide education and empowerment programs to refugees in Lebanon. She was also married at a young age, deprived of a childhood. In this story, you will learn about this woman who at the outbreak of the Syrian conflict, found herself in Lebanon where she sought means to find economic independence by learning how to sew leading her to teach classes at SB OverSeas' centres and this platform provided her with a means to help empower other women in her situation.

Mervat was married at the mere age of fourteen. Despite protestations, she found herself married against her will due to her grandfather's wishes. This marriage, along with many other early marriages, signaled an end to her education. Her own dreams were replaced by a child and a life of marriage. Mervat had always enjoyed working with her hands to create beautiful products but was restricted by the responsibilities she bore and was unable to pursue this dream.

Following the outbreak of the Syrian conflict, she found herself, along with her husband and children seeking refuge in Lebanon. In Beirut, she searched for a way to make a meagre earning by learning how to sew. Ignoring the comments of her family, she started classes with SB OverSeas in 2014. Her warm and welcoming personality, along with her natural talent for creating products meant she was a born teacher. Mervat started leading classes in our centre in Bukhara Ahla. With this, she was able to help other women in similar situations to create products that they could sell in local shops so they could gain a sense of financial independence.

Through this, she found a way to empower herself and use her experiences to empower other women. By teaching classes, she had a platform to talk to many of the young girls about her own experience of being married young. She hopes that she will be able to help those girls who are already married to not feel so alone by always being there to lend a listening ear, and those who are not married, to equip them with the tools to reject marriage.

[Read here about SB OverSeas' empowerment programs for refugee women in Lebanon.](#)

LEBANON: Life at thirteen years old – a future stolen



Painting by an SB OverSeas beneficiary in Lebanon

SB OverSeas (19.09.2018) - Amara was the girl in the front row of every class, hand always raised begging to answer the teacher's question. She had little inside jokes with her teachers in both English and in Arabic. The head of the organization saw in her a chance to show to the world how hard they had been working to make a difference. Amara was the 'difference' – the change SB OverSeas sought to make in the community. At 13 years old, she was intelligent, respectful, and gaining the skills she needed to be independent. Then she stopped coming to school.

There was no warning, no explanation, no compromise. She had always been in class, and if not in class, just outside the entrance playing games and running free. She adored the school and the staff admired her; it was unfathomable to think that she would just not show up, but everyone falls ill now and then. Or maybe she had to take care of her younger sister. Or maybe her mother was ill. Or maybe she went to join a relative in Germany. Or was it England? Any one of the rumors that started to float around during the early days of her absence would've been easier to swallow than the truth: Amara was getting married. Marriage in the shelter is always a party. It's pure happiness, dancing, the best food. It's the beautiful outfit, the laughter, feeling gorgeous. It's a slight glimmer of pre-war normalcy, a return to a time many of the children will never know, a time the adults will never forget. Growing up in the shelter, Amara dreamed of her day, her moment, dancing and crying tears of joy at the sight of her Prince Charming. She wanted to be "like a princess from the movies", but whenever someone asked which one, she'd shrug and say, "all of them!" She dreamed of her "pretty pink dress with all the sparkles" and her makeup rivaling that of a celebrity. On her wedding day she got everything she wanted. She was Jasmine, she was Cinderella, she was stuck.

Amara soon moved into her husband Ali's family home kilometers away from the shelter she'd come to love. Ali was 6 years older than her and possessed no real education. With a full-time job in Saida, he lived with his parents and was more than ready to consummate the marriage. Within days, her 13 year old innocence was invaded and conquered and replaced by new life. In a community where the thought of contraception and family planning are more foreign than a foreign language, her first painful night with him led to pregnancy. Her mother never wanted her to get married. She saw such beauty in Amara's mind that to her Amara was the future of Syria. Her father saw her marriage as a way out of a situation he still couldn't wrap his head around. He saw it as one less child to provide for, one less mouth to feed, and maybe even a better future than what he could provide her on his meager wage.

Amara's perception of the marriage at 13 didn't extend much farther beyond the wedding day itself. She didn't understand that she'd now be responsible for cooking and cleaning not only for her husband, but for both of his parents. She didn't understand that she'd rarely get to see the people that made her laugh and smile, that she'd never get to make silly faces at her favorite teacher again. She didn't understand that her immature body couldn't physically handle the pregnancy.

As her stomach grew each day, she grew weaker. She wasn't allowed out of the house much and was still expected to cook and clean like a maid. Her mother had never really taught her how to cook, or how to clean, and she had much difficulty figuring it out on her own. That's where the beatings from her husband started, not gradually, but suddenly, receiving blows from the fists of a now 20 year old man at the slightest mishap in her spousal duties. His parents didn't care. They never intervened, they encouraged and enabled. To them she deserved it. The girl that every volunteer used to see a light in, had that light extinguished by black and blue bruises and busted lips.

Less than a year before this, Amara used to sit outside with the girls playing with baby dolls, sometimes swinging them at the boys that would bother them, if necessary. She used to squeeze them and hug them close to her chest, wondering what it would be like to have one of her own. She wasn't a stranger to babies at the shelter. When her younger sister was still a baby Amara would often carry her outside to meet her friends. She played with the babies in the school and knew every trick to make them stop crying. Now she was crying in the hospital after receiving the news that she wouldn't be having a baby after all. Six months into her pregnancy, she suffered a miscarriage; a miscarriage at 14 years old. This worried Ali's family even more, as to them and to many in the community, a miscarriage meant something was wrong with her and that she'd never be able to bear children for them. She became ill afterwards and spent even more time in the house isolated. She stayed in bed for entire days, sick and barely able to stand on her own. The moment she gained some of her strength back, she was pregnant once more. During this pregnancy Ali decided that she wouldn't be allowed out of the house at all, and she obeyed him. Her parents were allowed over sometimes, which gave her a few hours of happiness a few times a week. The months passed and she was back in the hospital. This time, she gave birth to a beautiful baby girl with light brown eyes – Amina.

Now that she'd have the responsibility of cooking, cleaning, and taking care of Amina, Ali made the decision to have her spend more time at home learning how to be a housewife from her mother. Walking back into the shelter was hard for her. She felt alien in a place that was once her home. People stared, the new volunteers didn't even look twice at her as they never got the chance to know what an amazing girl she was. She was happy to be home though. She was delighted to hear how well her little sister was doing in school, and enjoyed being able to confide in her sister how much she regretted her marriage, but she always had to go home to Ali.

Her father was proud, and her mother wasn't as angry about it as she used to be. Amara herself was starting to get used to it, but she still wasn't happy with him. The time she got to spend at her family home became the world to her once more. She sat in the kitchen eating fruits, learning her mother's recipes, and even listening to the songs she liked to dance to but soon enough, her parents started to argue often. Although the arguing seemed to appear out of nowhere, it didn't take long for her to overhear: her father was making plans for her little sister to get married.

SB OverSeas is working to end child marriage. Read more about our advocacy [here](#). The artwork used for this post are created in our centres as part of our empowerment programs.

LEBANON: The Chief's Daughter



Written by Kevin Charbel, Project Manager in Saida, Lebanon

I still see her sometimes, walking through the maze of corridors in the shelter she lives in. Our eyes will meet for the briefest of moments as she smiles nervously before dropping her gaze, and passing me by silently. In that instant I feel the urge to reach out to her, to ask her how she's been and what she's up to, but I always hold back, because I know that any interaction between us carries a risk to her safety.

Sarah was married under duress three months ago, at the age of 14. For some time, she openly defied her father, the community's chief, resisting his attempts to marry her to another teenager. She wanted to stay in school, to keep learning and to be with her friends. Eventually though, her father grew tired of her refusals, resorting instead to beating her into submission. It didn't take long after that for Sarah to be engaged. When I found out what had happened I made sure she knew we could protect her and that we would defend

her right to choose, but by then, in her mind, the only thing worse than getting married to a stranger was to stay living with her father.

The once vibrant, cheeky student who would knock on my office door just to say hello disappeared from one day to another. Her marriage precludes her from continuing her education as she is now expected to prioritise domestic duties. This 14 year old girl is under pressure to learn to be a "good wife", meaning she must quickly master the skills to keep a clean home and satisfy her husband's appetite, as well as learn not to flinch when he makes sexual advances. Sarah's own desires and thoughts no longer matter; her position in society limited by the four walls of her modest home, where she is expected to remain while her husband is at work.

Child brides are often told that the more compliant and submissive they are, the easier the transition will be. They are the ones who must adapt, not their husband. They are the ones who must sacrifice, who must accept hardships and who must, all of a sudden, become women. Sarah's imagination and fiery stubbornness were once assets in the classroom, where they could be put to good use. Now these traits are a risk to her; she must lose this part of herself if she is to fit into the mould her father has set for her. She has no real choice in the matter, as if she were to end up discarded by her husband, she would not have the option to start again, she would be tainted.

Her friends, who are still in school, tell me that Sarah's father threatens her with more violence should she seek to continue contact with any of our staff members. If she is isolated there is much less risk of her rejecting her conditions and, as time goes on, the combination of aloneness and intimidation will numb Sarah into accepting a reality she would otherwise never have chosen for herself.

THAILAND: The dark secret of Thailand's child brides

Underage Muslim girls are regularly forced into marriage with Malaysian men, and the government turns a blind eye

By Hannah Ellis-Petersen

The Guardian (01.09.2018) - <https://bit.ly/2CdwwHI> - One day this summer, 11-year-old Ayu married 41-year-old Che Abdul Karim Che Hamid at a small pink mosque on the banks of the Golok river in the far south of Thailand. Earlier that morning, Che Abdul Karim and his soon-to-be child bride had travelled over the border from Malaysia into the Thai province of Narathiwat for the wedding. After a short ceremony at 11am and a trip to the Islamic Council offices to get their marriage certificate stamped, the couple crossed back over the border. Ayu was now Che Abdul Karim's third wife.

In Malaysia, where men can legally marry girls under 18 if they get Islamic sharia court approval, Ayu's case caused a national outcry in parliament and protests on the streets. But over the border in Thailand, where the controversial union took place, the response by the government and religious authorities has been notably muted.

Hashim Yusoff, the imam who married the couple, defended the arrangement: Ayu (not her real name) was "mature" he said, so the marriage was sah (legal under sharia law).

The imam did make Che Abdul Karim – himself an imam in a rural village – pledge not to have sexual relations with his young wife, but medical tests since are said to show that the 41-year-old did not keep his promise.

Ayu's father, Madroseh Romadsa, who was present at the wedding to give consent, said simply: "We have never done anything wrong. In Thailand, many people get married at early ages."

Since 2003, under Thailand's strict child protection laws, no one under 17 can marry, and sex with a minor is a prosecutable offence. However, in the southern provinces of Thailand – Narathiwat, Pattani and Yalla, which are majority Muslim – a legal loophole allows Muslim communities to apply Islamic law to family matters.

According to this law, there is no minimum age for marriage and, culturally, girls are deemed eligible as soon as they start menstruating. In this way, child marriage has continued as an unregulated norm and a solution to underage pregnancy and rape – with the Thai government appearing to turn a blind eye.

"Here, if a girl is not married by the time she is 16, it is already felt to be too late and that no one will want to marry her," said Amal Lateh, who lives in Thailand's Pattani province and was forced at 15 to marry a relative 10 years her senior.

The legal loophole has also created what Thai children's rights activist Anchana Heemmina described as the "big business of cross-border marriage" – Malaysian men crossing into southern Thailand to easily engage in underage or polygamous marriages for which getting approval in Malaysia would be impossible or a very lengthy process.

Mohammad Lazim runs one such business, helping arrange cross-border marriages for Malaysian men. He works with more than 50 bridegrooms a year, mainly wanting a second or third wife – but insists never with underage brides. He says that his business is tiny compared with some.

"People come from all over Malaysia to do this," he said. "Business is booming: instead of applying to a sharia court in Malaysia and answering all their difficult questions – a process that takes sometimes a year – the shortcut is to come to Thailand. Here there is no law."

The practice is also particularly lucrative for imams practising on the Thai side of the Golok river, who charge four times as much to conduct a marriage for a visiting Malaysian as they do for people from their own community. In Malaysia, Che Abdul Karim would have found it difficult or impossible to obtain permission to marry Ayu; in Thailand, he simply paid the imam 4,500 baht (£105), and it was done. He has since been fined 1,800 Ringgit (£340) in a sharia court in Malaysia after pleading guilty to polygamy and conducting the marriage without the court's permission.

Wannakanok Pohitaedaoh was forced into a violent marriage when young and now runs Luk Riang, a children's shelter in Narathiwat. She said: "The biggest problem with child marriage in Thailand is that nobody wants to talk about it – not the Islamic Council, not the imams and not the government. It has always been swept under the rug, and that's where they want it to stay."

Her opposition is deeply personal. Wannakanok, now 34, was just 13 when she was forced into marriage by her parents and says the experience "haunts my soul to this day".

"When he asked me to have sexual intercourse, I wasn't ready for it. I didn't even know really what that meant, so I refused, and then he raped me," she said, sobbing at the

memory. "He was very violent and every time he wanted to have intercourse, he would use violence. We were living at home, and my parents would hear me screaming.

"And it was the same for so many of my friends. Many of my friends who were 12 or 13 had been married to men who were a lot older than them, maybe in their 30s or 40s. But the girls were young like me and didn't want sex, so violence was very common. We had no idea about sex at that age."

Most of her friends were pregnant by 14. She still regularly hears similar cases to hers and Ayu's. One 13-year-old girl, Naa, had recently been staying at the Luk Riang shelter while her mother worked in Malaysia. "Her mother came to pick her up but soon after they married her to a 40-year-old as his second wife," said Wannakanok. "The family was very poor so she was a financial burden: it was easier to marry her off."

There are no official figures on child marriages in Thailand but data from the human rights commissioner of Thailand shows that, in 2016 alone, in the public hospitals of Narathiwat, 1,100 married teenage girls gave birth. This does not include the three other provinces where child marriage is condoned, or births in private clinics and at home.

But the Thai government appears reluctant to engage with the problem at a senior level, pushing responsibility back to the provincial Islamic councils. "This issue has never been raised in the Thai parliament," said Heemmina. "The government want to pretend it's not happening because they don't want to provoke the communities. They are protecting themselves."

Their reluctance, she added, is rooted in sensitivity over self-determination for Islamic communities in the deep south of Thailand. For 14 years, a civil war has been raging in Narathiwat, Pattani, Yalla and occasionally southern areas of Songkhla. Its roots lie in Thailand's annexation and conquest in 1909 of the Malay sultanate of Patani, which covered most of these provinces. A separatist movement formed in the 1950s exploded into all-out insurgency in 2004. Though the conflict has quietened in recent years, bombings and shootings are still common, and the fighting has cost almost 7,000 lives, 90% of them civilians.

As a result, policies imposed on the south from Bangkok are often a great cause of friction. The Thai government, which has thousands of troops stationed across the south, has little interest in stirring up tensions further by interfering in an issue deemed religiously sensitive.

Suraporn Prommul, governor of Narathiwat province, said he had recently met with the Islamic Council over the issue. However, the only change Ayu's case had prompted was an agreement that in future – in cases involving a young bride and a foreigner – the couple must go first to the provincial Islamic Council office to get married, so the committee can look closely into the case." There was no stipulation on how this would be enforced.

After the furore in Malaysia over Ayu's marriage, the girl and her family have this month returned to their native Thailand. Child rights activists fear the Thai government's apathy over the issue means Che Abdul Karim, who remains in Malaysia, will never be charged with child grooming and abuse. "I am scared this will be another case of child marriage legitimising paedophilia that is swept under the carpet," said Heemmina.

The impact on girls of marrying before the age of 18 is globally accepted as causing lasting emotional and physical damage, but also perpetuating the cycle of poverty. Girls in the southern Thai provinces are commonly taken out of school once they are married. Many find themselves divorced and with a child before they are even 18.

But Safei Chekalah, the president of the Islamic Council of Narathiwat, while emphasising that council "guidelines" advise that under-18s should not be married, and admitting that it is "not suitable" – still vehemently defended the practice: "I have to speak based on Islamic principle, and according to Islam, the father can give permission for the girl to get married as long as she has achieved physical maturity."

For the secretary of the Islamic Council, Abdul Razak Ali, whose own mother was just 13 when she married his 70-year-old father, allowing under-18s to marry was justified as a way to prevent "hideous" cases of adultery or illegitimacy. This also extended to forcing underage girls who are raped to marry their rapists.

Angkhana Neelapaijit, the human rights commissioner of Thailand, recounted a recent case of a 15-year-old who was raped in her village in the Yalla province. The girl was taken to a shelter but two days later the Islamic Council visited the girl to try to force her to marry her rapist. "They said it would be best for her," said Angkhana.

Even charities seem wary of taking action. Aiyub Chena, vice-president of Nusantara, an Islamic NGO working with deprived children in southern Thailand, defended child marriage, because it protects girls from being stigmatised if they are caught with a man.

"Adultery is wrong and sinful according to Islam but if they banned child marriage, I am worried that would make adultery acceptable," he said.

"You can change the law but that won't change the society here. It will mean unmarried girls who get pregnant will be outcasts, and their children will not be accepted because they are illegitimate."

Yet across the Islamic world there is a movement towards outlawing child marriage. Algeria, Oman, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Egypt, Morocco and Turkey have all set the minimum age for marriage at 18, and recently Indonesia prepared a presidential decree to close the legal loopholes that allow child marriage.

In a small village in Pattani's Sai Buri district, women spoke about how common forced underage marriage still is in southern Thailand. They described figures known as "facilitators" who would come to the village on behalf of men who are looking for a young wife.

Amal Lateh, who was forced into marriage at 15, said: "When the facilitators come to the houses, they don't ask the fathers directly – they will say things like, 'Do you have any lambs or baby goats you are selling?' Everyone understands what that means: it means they are looking for a virgin to marry. And then an arrangement will be made between the girl's father and the facilitator. The girl has no say."

Suranya Litae was 15 when she was forced by her father to marry a man 16 years her senior in order to help her family out financially. She spoke of her anger that the law did not protect girls from the trauma of underage marriage.

"I did not want to be married. I cried so much, and I wanted so much to run away," she said. "But my family needed the money from my dowry to build a house. At that time I felt so sad because getting married meant I had to abandon my studies."

Sadly, Suranya, stroked the head of her seven-year-old son, Afdon. "I dreamed of being teacher," she said. "But that didn't come true."

SOUTH AFRICA: Call for end to child marriages

A petition by close to 800 delegates to the Southern African Development Community's people's summit has called for an end to child marriages, among other issues.

By Ndanki Kahiurika

The Nambian (21.08.2018) - <https://bit.ly/2N842Ux> - The petition was handed over to the new SADC chairperson, President Hage Geingob, at the last session of the 38th summit of heads of state and government last weekend.

Before the official handover, the petition was read out by Sofonea Shale at Ausspannplatz's Augustino Neto Square after a march by the delegates from the Windhoek Showgrounds.

Compiled after various sessions held on the sidelines of the SADC summit on Thursday, the petition called on the heads of state to ensure that traditional and religious leaders as well as members of parliament play a role in ending child marriages in their communities.

"Efforts to address child marriages must focus on grassroots initiatives recognising that child marriages are more prevalent in rural areas," read the petition.

Although Namibia does not have statistics on child marriages, civilians have spoken out about its occurrence in rural areas, including the Zambezi and Kunene regions.

Critics have spoken out against the olufuko festival, (a female initiation ceremony prevalent in northern Namibia for girls from the age of 13, to prepare them for marriage) which they feel has led to the objectification of women and encourages child marriages.

Gender equality minister Doreen Sioka also spoke out against child marriages in March this year during International Women's Day celebrations at the Zambezi region's capital, Katima Mulilo.

New Era quoted constitutional law expert Eva Jhala as saying sub-Saharan African countries have the highest prevalence of child marriages in the world, with almost 40% of children in some SADC countries being married off before they reach 18 years.

During 2016, the SADC parliamentary forum was reported to have adopted a model law on eradicating child marriages and protecting children who are already in the marriage.

The petition furthermore called for sustainable youth economic empowerment programmes and the diversification of subsidies to support rural women, as well as enacting legislation to end violence against women.

According to the petition, the SADC heads of state should look at securing land rights for women, expedite the implementation of gender-sensitive land reform programmes, and support the United Nations declaration on the rights of villagers and other people living in rural areas.

Reactions on People's Summit

Human rights activists and chief of one of the /Khomaniin Traditional Authority factions, Rosa Namises, told The Namibian on the sidelines of the summit that she was happy about the summit as it serves as a platform where people can gather and exchange ideas.

A member of the Lesotho Rural Women's Assembly, Mamalefetsane Phakoe (52), said what stood out as most important for her is the call for funding towards agriculture.

Zambian nationals Eddie Musosa (28) and Misheck Muzungu (25) both felt that more could have been discussed on matters affecting the youth since it was the topic for the SADC summit.

Two other youngsters from Mozambique, Aida Nhavoto (29) and Elida Come (27) felt the people's summit served as a great platform to learn from one another on issues affecting SADC countries.

"It was an opportunity to amplify our work, and to network. I feel empowered, and I will share what I learnt when I get back home," said Nhavoto.

Her colleague, Come, said the issue of child marriages stood out the most for her as it is one of the headaches in their country.

UK: Government accused of inaction as number of British girls forced into marriages abroad has soared by a third since 2015

By Maya Oppenheim

The Independent (21.08.2018) - <https://ind.pn/2N199G0> - The number of girls being forced into marriage ahead of the summer holiday period has increased by more than a third in recent years, according to a leading charity which has accused the government of an abject failure to get to grips with the problem.

Karma Nirvana condemned the Home Office for shelving a campaign raising awareness of the practice, which sees girls taken abroad to be married off to strangers, in the "critical" run-up to the summer break – the time of the year when the problem is at its peak.

Speaking exclusively to The Independent, the national charity – which provides training to the police, NHS and social services – revealed it learned of 150 new cases of forced marriage from May to July, a rise of more than a third on the figure seen in the same period in 2015, when it received 99 new cases.

The charity also found cases of forced marriage soared by 40 per cent at the start of the school holidays this year, and revealed it was receiving reports of cases at a rate of two a day in July, more than double the average of 25 seen in the first four months of the year, with 44 cases reported in May and June.

And the figures do not reflect the full scale of the problem, as forced marriage continues to be starkly underreported – with the Home Office describing it as a "hidden crime".

Jasvinder Sanghera, CBE, founder and chief executive of the charity, warned thousands of girls would not be returning to school in September, having had their educations cut off and – in many cases – been left trapped in a cycle of poverty after falling victim to the offence.

Ms Sanghera, who set up the charity in 2008 after escaping a forced marriage by running away from home aged 16, demanded that sex within such unions be treated as rape.

She said the Home Office had planned an awareness campaign ahead of the summer holidays but decided to drop it at the last minute, postponing it until later in the year, a strategy she said was "missing the point".

She said the pre-summer holidays campaign had been running for the past few years and would have seen the Forced Marriage Unit work with police and local authorities to raise awareness of the problem. She explained the campaign would have used social media and disseminated posters, literature and information about helplines with the objective of increasing the number of victims coming forward and raising public understanding.

"It was wholly irresponsible of the government to drop a campaign devoted to awareness, pre-summer holidays. This is the most critical time of year," she told The Independent.

"There will be thousands of children across Britain that are now being prepared for engagements and forced marriages in Britain and [who] will be taken out of this country over the summer break. The family use the opportunity of this long holiday to marry them off."

Young girls are often told they are going back to their country of origin to visit family, and remain unaware of what is happening until they arrive.

GUATEMALA: Child marriage persists despite ban, experts say

By Anastasia Moloney

Thomson Reuters Foundation (13.08.2018) - <https://tmsnrt.rs/2Mqu9cJ> - A year after Guatemala banned child marriage, girls are getting married in rural indigenous communities that are unaware of the ban and see the practice as acceptable, experts said on Monday.

Guatemala outlawed child marriage in August 2017, making it illegal for anyone under age 18 to wed under any circumstances.

No data exists to show how many girls have married since then, but anecdotal evidence gathered by groups working with rural indigenous communities suggests the practice persists.

Nearly a third of girls in Guatemala are currently married by 18, and many girls live with partners in informal unions.

Many of Guatemala's poor Mayan indigenous communities, where child marriage is most common, remain unaware of the outright ban, experts and advocates say.

"From what we've been hearing in the communities is that not much has changed since the law was passed," said Emma Puig, head of gender equality in Latin America at the children's charity Plan International.

"The big challenge is working on changing mindsets, social norms that find it normal to see a girl under 18 living with a man who most of the time could be her grandfather," she told the Thomson Reuters Foundation.

Driven by poverty and cultural traditions in a country with one of the highest rates of child malnutrition in Latin America, indigenous girls are often married off so families have one less mouth to feed.

According to rights group Women's Justice Initiative (WJI), in the village of Chuiquel alone in western Guatemala at least 30 girls, most aged 15 and 16, have been reported to be in informal unions since the marriage ban.

WJI hosts workshops in isolated communities led by local Mayan women who spread the message about the marriage ban and educate girls about their rights.

"It's key for girls to know they have other options and can do other things than just thinking their only option is to get married and have children," said Viviana Patal, a lawyer at WJI.

"The impact of the workshops among families has been to question and re-think the importance of study and sending their daughters to school, the idea that going to school can be a tool to having a better quality of life."

While rates of child marriage have been slowly declining worldwide, each year 12 million girls are married before age 18, according to campaign group Girls Not Brides.

Latin America is the only region not to have seen a significant drop in child marriage in the past three decades, with the highest prevalence in Nicaragua, the Dominican Republic and Brazil.

Most Latin American countries ban marriage until age 18, but many make exceptions with permission of parents or a judge.

Getting boys and young men to question traditional gender roles and what it means to be a man is key to the solution, Patal said.

"Young men have social pressures too. They feel if I don't have a wife and children then I'm not a man," Patal said.

Child marriage typically deprives girls of education, keeps them in poverty and puts them at risk of domestic and sexual violence, experts say.

"Girls are trapped in a life of violence for the rest of the lives," said Alejandra Colom, Guatemala country director for the Population Council, a U.S.-based research charity.

An under-age bride's first pregnancy is in fact the product of rape but "this is rape that is condoned because it happens under a union that is accepted by the community," she said.

BRUNEI: UNICEF again urges Brunei to raise the minimum age of marriage to 18

Brunei is a sovereign state located on the north coast of the island of Borneo in Southeast Asia.



BRUNEI SCHOOLGIRLS – WUNRN Photo

WUNRN (06.08.2018) <https://thescoop.co/2018/08/06/brunei-urged-to-raise-minimum-age-of-marriage/> – The United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) has once again urged Brunei to raise the minimum age of marriage to 18, in light of the Malaysian government saying it will take steps to eradicate child marriage.



Marianne Clark-Hattingh, UNICEF's Special Representative to Brunei, speaks to media at the ASEAN Children's Forum on Aug 6, 2018. Photo: Rasidah Hj Abu Bakar/The Scoop

By Ain Bandial

UNICEF Special Representative Clark-Hattingh stressed that marriage was not a solution to social issues such as teen pregnancy, and that access to "age-appropriate information" on reproductive health could prevent girls becoming pregnant when they are not ready to be mothers.

"Given poverty and teen pregnancy, we need to address the root causes and not see marriage as the solution. It really is an infringement of the child's rights, it stops the opportunity to go to school and it isolates the child. And if you look at the statistics, those marriages don't last."

Under Brunei's Marriage Act, which applies to non-Muslims, both parties must be at least 14 years old to enter into a marriage. The Chinese Marriage Act states that a female must be at least 15, and is silent on the minimum age for a male. Meanwhile, the Islamic Family Law Order does not expressly define a minimum age of marriage for Muslims.

Reviewing Brunei's last periodic report on child rights in 2016, the UN expressed hope that the age of marriage for all children would be unified at 18, regardless of ethnicity or religious affiliation.

In its written response to the UN, the Brunei government said it had no immediate plans to raise the minimum age of marriage, explaining that Islamic law as well as the diverse religious and cultural backgrounds of people living in the country must be taken into consideration.

The state added that consent of both parties, as well as parents' consent, is necessary for minors to enter a marriage. And in the case of Muslim marriage, permission from a Syariah judge is also needed.

In a previous report, UNICEF said that debate on the minimum age of marriage does not have to be framed as a "clash of cultures", and that countries with dual legal systems, like Brunei and Malaysia, can align both civil and Islamic legislation.

The Malaysian government in July said it was moving to raise the minimum age of marriage to 18, following public outcry over a 41-year-old Malaysian man who recently married an 11-year-old girl in Kelantan. The Islamic Religious Council of Selangor also said it will amend its Islamic Family Law to raise the minimum age of marriage to 18 for both Muslim men and women.

Statistics on child marriage in Brunei are hard to come by: the last available statistics dated 2010 show that were 225 Muslim marriages recorded that year where at least one party was under 18.

AFGHANISTAN: Child marriage declines but remains high - Report

"In 78 per cent of households, fathers are the main decision makers on issues related to marriage.....Getting all girls into school is a key element in reducing child marriage, and it is important to convince parents, especially fathers to send, and keep their daughters in school."

By Pajhwok

Reliefweb (29.07.2018) - <https://bit.ly/2vCAozd> - The Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs, Martyrs and Disabled (MoLSAMD) and UNICEF have launched the first-ever study on child marriage in Afghanistan.

"This study is unique, as it looks at child marriage from various angles, providing a comprehensive picture of this practice," says, Minister of Social Affairs, Martyrs and Disabled Faizullah Zaki.

He slammed child marriage as an appalling violation of human rights that robbed children of their education, health and childhood. The minister urged parents to work together with the government to end child marriage.

Finalised under the leadership of MoLSAMD, the study shows the security situation, poverty, deeply embedded beliefs and social norms put girls at a disadvantage.

It says attention is often focused on the health-related impact of child marriage, with a limited understanding of the impact on education, nutrition and girls'/women's participation in economic development.

Although there has been a reduction in child marriage in Afghanistan, it remains high. The unwanted practice, the study indicates, has dropped by 10 per cent over a span of five years.

UNICEF Representative Adele Khodr said: "We commend the relentless efforts of the government to reduce this practice and their strong commitment to child rights."

However, she added: "Yet, further consolidated action is needed by the different actors in **society** to put an end to this practice and reach the goal of ending child marriage by 2030."

In 42 per cent of households at least, the study says, one member of the family got married before the age of 18. Yet, significant regional disparities exist, varying from 21 per cent of households in Ghor to 66 per cent in Paktia having at least one member who got married before the age of 18.

The study was carried out in five provinces -- Bamyán, Kandahar, Paktia, Ghor and Badghis -- representing urban, semi-urban and rural areas.

It highlights multiple factors behind child marriage, complementing already existing studies. In 78 per cent of households, fathers are the main decision makers on issues related to marriage.

As many as 55.7 per cent of respondents agreed girls and boys must be consulted.

Khodr called for ending child marriage to break the inter-generational cycle of poverty and give girls and women opportunities to engage and participate fully in their society.

"Getting all girls into school is a key element in reducing child marriage, and it is important to convince parents, especially fathers to send, and keep their daughters in school."

Direct Link to Full 92-Page 2018 Report:

<https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/UNICEF-MoLSAMD-afg-report-Child-Marriage-in-Afghanistan.pdf>

Executive summary

<https://reliefweb.int/report/afghanistan/child-marriage-afghanistan-changing-narrative>

TURKEY: Refugee child marriages drive adolescent pregnancies underground

UNFPA (26.07.2018) – <https://bit.ly/2OR9PyM> - "Even today, we saw a 17 year old who is pregnant and already has a child," said midwife Neval, sitting in the Devtesti Centre, a women's and girls' safe space in Sanliurfa, Turkey.

Some 475,000 Syrian refugees have sought safe haven in the desert city, about an hour's drive from the Syrian border. Many are mired in poverty and struggling to rebuild their lives. Some have resorted to marrying off their underage daughters.

These girls are at high risk of becoming pregnant early – even before their bodies are ready. "Sometimes we see girls who are 14 or 15 who are pregnant," Neval said.

"We pay special attention to pregnant teens," she added. "We ask them to come more frequently. They are more fragile."

Vulnerable, Malnourished

Child marriage is both a harmful traditional practice and an economic coping mechanism for parents straining to care for their children.

The practice is closely linked to teen pregnancy; in developing countries, nine out of 10 births to adolescent girls take place within a marriage or union.

These pregnancies can be dangerous. Globally, complications of pregnancy and childbirth are the leading cause of death for girls aged 15 to 19.

And it is often the most vulnerable girls – those who are poorly educated, deeply impoverished, without knowledge of their human rights – who are most at risk of child marriage.

Their health is commonly neglected until they become pregnant, said Huda, a long-time midwife working at the Hayati Harrani Centre. The centre is one of four UNFPA-operated women's and girls' safe spaces in Sanliurfa funded by European Union Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations (ECHO).

"Among child brides, the number one problem we see is malnutrition," she explained. "These girls don't go to the doctor regularly. Their condition is usually first detected at their appointment with the midwife after they are pregnant."

Malnourishment – including anaemia – increases risks for both pregnant girls and their developing fetuses.

Going Underground

Studies show that child marriage is increasing among some Syrian refugee communities.

It is hard to know just how pervasive the phenomenon is among refugees in Turkey, however. Many marriages are unregistered.

And midwives say fear is driving child marriages – and the resulting pregnancies – underground.

They, and other staff at the women's and girls' centres, are required to report marriages among girls under 16 to the Turkish authorities.

"We see three to four [child brides] per month," Huda told UNFPA. "We know the number is higher, but they don't want to get caught so they don't show up in the health centre."

"Before, we had many patients who were children," Neval explained. "In the last few months, there has been a visible decline because they have to fill out a form with their age. Word got around, and pregnant girls are afraid to come."

But without proper maternal health care, pregnant girls face even greater risks.

"Many don't give birth in public health facilities. They may go to private hospitals, but I don't know how they manage to pay for this. Some probably give birth at home," said Huda.

The four women's and girls' centres in Sanliurfa are part of UNFPA's support to the Ministry of Health as it addresses the refugee crisis.

The centres, run together with Harran University, provide more than sexual and reproductive health services to refugees. They also offer counselling, information on health and human rights, language classes and other services. Many of the staff members are themselves Syrian refugees.

When staff do encounter child brides, they direct the girls to social workers. "Aside from seeing the midwife or doctor for check-ups, these girls are referred for social services, also provided at the centre," Huda said.

Health outreach workers, called health mediators, also frequently discover child brides when visiting refugee families. "UNFPA's health mediators often learn about child brides and check on them," said Fatima Al Hamad, a health mediator at Hayati Harrani.

They inform the girls about their rights – including the right to marry a person of their choice, with full consent and without coercion or fear – and encourage them to visit the women's and girls' centres for services and information. Pregnant teens are also urged to seek proper maternal care.

But health workers say they worry about all the girls they simply cannot reach.

"They need special attention," Huda said, "but our hands are tied because so few come FOR CARE."

SWEDEN: Struggles over child marriage

By Nathalie Rothschild

Politico.eu (23.07.2018) - <https://politi.co/2021Nlt> - A row over how to deal with child marriage among immigrants has inflamed political debate ahead of a general election in Sweden, where migration continues to divide public opinion and the far right is riding high in the polls.

A tug-of-war between the ruling Social Democrat-Green Party coalition and the opposition over the government's role in managing or eradicating the practice — which predominantly affects young girls, and in some cases boys, from immigrant backgrounds — is emblematic of a broader struggle to find a balance between efforts to integrate a large number of new immigrants and preserve a Swedish way of life.

"Sweden has been bad at providing people who come here with clear information about how our system works, about this society's views on children's rights, gender equality, family policies, and parents' and guardians' responsibilities," said Juno Blom, who is running for parliament on behalf of the opposition Liberal Party.

"While we insist that Sweden protects children's rights and that we promote a child-centered approach to children's welfare, we have allowed children of foreign backgrounds to live as married women with older men," said Blom, who also acts as Sweden's national coordinator to counter honor-based violence and oppression.

Although Sweden is known for its commitment to child welfare, it is failing to extend those same protections to its immigrant population, activists and lawmakers say. Opponents accuse the government of being overly cautious in order to avoid being seen as culturally insensitive.

Official data suggests child marriages are relatively rare among Sweden's newly arrived immigrant population. A 2016 report by the Swedish Migration Agency only identified 132 underage asylum seekers who stated they were married when they arrived in Sweden. Most came from Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq and applied for asylum in Sweden after August 1, 2015, at the height of the refugee crisis that brought 163,000 asylum seekers to Sweden in just a year.

But the real number is probably higher, authorities caution, as many cases likely go unreported.

Pamphlet panned

Although Sweden in 1973 banned marriages in which one or both parties is underage, it was possible under some circumstances to get special dispensation. The previous center-right government tightened the law in 2014, amid growing awareness of the prevalence of so-called honor-related oppression — including forced marriage — among some immigrant communities.

Still, marriages between underaged partners are recognized — and not annulled — if carried out abroad. The government has come under pressure to close that legal loophole

and invalidate all marriages that involve minors. But it declined to vote for a proposal — put forward by parliament’s committee on civil affairs this spring — that would do so, saying it was formulating its own plan to tighten existing laws.

The government’s proposal — which it finally put forward in May — would mean Sweden does not recognize marriages carried out abroad where one or both parties were under 18. It would also require spouses who are over 18 when they arrive in Sweden (but married when they were underage) to renew their vows in order to be legally recognized as married. However, critics say it is unclear how authorities would enforce the rule in practice.

A government pamphlet issued by its National Board of Health and Welfare and targeted at adults with underage spouses also drew fierce criticism, including from Cabinet ministers, for treating the issue too lightly and not clearly communicating that child marriage is against both Swedish law and cultural norms.

The government says it now has a clear and firm position.

“There is no retroactivity in Swedish legislation but our stance is that we should not recognize marriages where either of the parties is a child or was a child when he or she got married,” said the minister for children, Lena Hallengren, a Social Democrat.

“That would run counter to the international commitments Sweden has made to ensure that children are entitled to their childhood.”

But for some, such statements are too little, too late.

The far-right Sweden Democrats, who have been climbing steadily in the polls in recent months, have seized on the issue. In a video posted on the party’s Facebook page, leader Jimmie Åkesson hit out at the government, saying: “I don’t know what there is to think about. It is, frankly, totally sick that one can’t just simply say no to something as bizarre as grown men having the right to marry children.”

Åkesson held up the much-maligned pamphlet and called on those responsible for producing it to be fired or resign. “There’s an election on September 9,” Åkesson reminded viewers.

Opposition’s opportunity

In June, three weeks after the government finally presented its proposed legal amendment, the Liberal Party presented its own list of proposed measures to tackle honor-based oppression, which party leader Jan Björklund called “the greatest challenge to equality” in Sweden.

The proposals included travel bans for families suspected of planning to bring their daughters abroad to marry them off or to have them undergo female genital mutilation. Under the Liberals’ proposal, authorities would also be able to confiscate families’ passports and make parents attend meetings with social services. They also proposed tougher punishments for those found guilty of forced marriage, as well as the extradition of foreigners convicted of crimes with honor motives.

“What irks me is that we treat young people and children with foreign backgrounds differently from those with roots in Sweden,” Blom said, recalling a case in which a 19-year-old Afghan girl was allegedly murdered by a much older husband less than a year after she arrived in Sweden from Iran in September 2015.

Her husband was eventually found in Iran in May and extradited to Sweden in June.

The case, Blom said, got “relatively little attention in the media” and did not spark much political reaction. “If a Swedish teenager had been found murdered and buried, my guess is it would have caused outrage.”

The phenomenon of underage marriages predates the major influx of asylum seekers in 2015, but has become harder to ignore as a result of the higher numbers of new arrivals, according to Blom.

“We saw an upswing in calls to our national support hotline, which professionals like social workers can dial to get advice on how to deal with honor-based oppression,” Blom said, referring to the 2015 influx. “The social workers who called us had met girls who were married to men and who were placed in their municipalities. They didn’t know what to do with them.”

Legal loopholes

A number of young women born and raised in Sweden are also at risk of being exploited as a result of the legal loophole that allows underage marriages carried out abroad to be recognized in Sweden.

The national unit against honor crimes, headed by Blom, last year launched a campaign to encourage young people to contact Swedish authorities after it found that girls were being sent to their parents’ home countries over their summer holidays to be married to older men.

“People see young girls as their sons’ tickets to Europe,” said Zubeyde Demirörs, a 45-year-old social worker who runs a shelter for victims of honor-based violence and oppression.

Demirörs has personal experience of the issues she works on. She was 15 years old and had just finished ninth grade — the last year of compulsory schooling in Sweden — when her parents took her to their hometown in Turkey to marry a man 22 years her senior with whom she would have three children.

“We had a large extended family in Stockholm but unlike them my parents, siblings and I did not live in an immigrant-dense area and so my parents were concerned that my sisters and I would become assimilated,” Demirörs said. “The idea was that if we got engaged, we would be somehow tied to our roots and could also avoid suspicious looks from the rest of the community.”

It took her 16 years to leave her husband, she said. “When I left him, I was alone,” she recalled. “Practically the whole family turned against me and there was little support to seek from Swedish society at the time.”

Demirörs’ case is far from unique, she said: “In my work, I hear similar stories every day.”

When it comes to forced marriage, the summer is the worst period of the year, said Demirörs.

“This time of year my phone just doesn’t stop ringing. May, June, July — that’s when many girls are taken back to their parents’ home countries, mostly to rural parts of the Middle East and Africa.”

Demirörs fears the government’s proposed new law would not make much difference.

“Over the years, I’ve seen legal amendments, I’ve seen campaigns ... And still, we keep coming back to square one. Now we have new challenges, with a large number of people coming to Sweden from societies where honor culture is the norm.”

Sweden, she said, needs to take proper responsibility for the immigrants it takes in. That involves extending the same protection and rights to all children, regardless of whether they are ethnically Swedish or not.

“But our politicians are cowardly,” she said. “They are afraid of taking a principled stance on these issues for fear of being labeled culturally insensitive.”

“It’s different in our neighboring countries. In Denmark and Norway, they’re not afraid of being called racists. And over the years many girls — and boys — in Sweden have suffered for that cowardice.”

LEBANON: A lost childhood – Syrian refugees in Lebanon



Painting by an SB OverSeas beneficiary in Lebanon

By Jade-Leigh Tenwick, Communications and Development Officer at SB OverSeas

This story is part of our child marriage series which aims to highlight this increasingly prevalent practice amongst the refugee community in Lebanon.

SB Overseas (31.05.2018) - This article tells the story of Ream, an eighteen year old who attends one of our SB OverSeas centre. SB OverSeas has three centres in Lebanon where we run education and empowerment programs.

Ream left Syria at the age of twelve shortly after the outbreak of the Syrian conflict. A conflict which led her not only to lose her home, but also her childhood and education.

Ream, along with her family, followed the same path as many other Syrians escaping the conflict to Lebanon. She was enthusiastic to start her life in Lebanon and continue her

education. She dreamed of being a human rights lawyer, giving a voice to those who had none.

This dream did not last long. Registration requirements and safety concerns of her family thwarted her educational opportunities.

Left at home. Without routine. The monotony and the hopelessness of the situation began to erode at the once happy and ambitious child. Her mental health deteriorated. Her mother charged her with more responsibility in the household in a bid to lift her out of her depression. This was her existence for two years.

At the age of fourteen, Ream was told about her impending marriage to a family friend. This was her chance to start a new life. Excited for the wedding day, she dreamed about wearing her white dress. After an idyllic day, she was filled of hope for a new life with her husband. A husband nearly double her age.

This story follows the same narrative as the other stories we have heard. Cracks began to appear and her feelings of hope shrunk. They were unable to register the marriage as Ream was too young. This legal status had consequences for her the child she was bearing. Without legal status, the child would be born statelessness - a life without clear rights or legal status.

Their problems also extended to the husband's family. Living in a small space caused tensions to heighten. She tried to ease this by shouldering more household responsibilities. This included not only household chores, but walking to retrieve water. Overwhelmed by the responsibilities and pregnancy, she would often find herself in tears.

With problems escalating, she felt more and more overwhelmed and asked for a divorce so she could return to her family. Her husband refused. He threatened her stating he would not register the marriage, renounce their child and marry another woman. The ramifications of these actions were sufficient to convince her to stay.

Things did not get better. Her husband began to beat her, sometimes daily, and she worried about the physical affect of the trauma on her unborn child. She fled her family to seek their support. Yet, they were not as supportive as she had hoped. With over 70% of Syrian refugees living below the poverty line in Lebanon, food is scare and hunger is rife. They told her to forget about her old family and to return to her new one.

Ream had to choose either to be vulnerable and alone on the streets or to return to her husband. She chose the latter. With her baby born, she had not only herself to worry about, but another human. With another mouth to feed, she was often hungry, barely able to provide for her child.

Her health deteriorated and her husband decided took her back to the family visiting her sporadically. After three months, her family decided it was time for her to fend for herself. Left out on the street, she begged her husband to look after her and her son. He rented a small room for her. This came at a cost. He appeared to only visit her when he wanted to have a target for his anger and frustration.

Her family realising the extent of the situation, took her back in. After three years of limbo, Ream is now trying to rebuild her life and find the girl who once dreamed of being a human rights lawyer. She comes to SB OverSeas centre four times a week and attends our courses. At our centre, she also speaks of her story with the other girls to raise awareness of her and many other girls' experiences with child marriage.

UK: Forced marriage: Mother jailed for four-and-a-half years

A mother who forced her daughter to marry a relative almost twice her age has been sentenced to four-and-a-half years in prison.

BBC (23.05.2018) <https://bbc.in/2LrdL7E> - The woman from Birmingham, who is in her 40s, duped the then 17-year-old into going to Pakistan in September 2016 to wed the man.

The girl became pregnant by him when she was 13 and he was 29, which her mother saw as a "marriage contract".

The case is the first successful prosecution of its type.

Sentencing the mother at Birmingham Crown Court, Judge Patrick Thomas QC said the victim had been "sold for her passport".

Neither the mother nor daughter can be identified for legal reasons.

Jurors had heard the daughter, now aged 19, was fooled into travelling to Pakistan on the promise of getting an iPhone for her 18th birthday.

'Cruelly deceived'

When the plan to marry her to the relative 16 years her senior was revealed, the girl protested. In response her mother threatened to burn her passport and assaulted her.

"It takes no imagination to understand the terror she must have felt", the judge said.

"You had cruelly deceived her. She was frightened, alone, held against her will, being forced into a marriage she dreaded.

"You must have known that was her state of mind. Yet for your own purposes, you drove the marriage through."

Prosecutor Deborah Gould read a victim statement to the court in which the girl said she was proud of herself for coming forward and wanted other young women who found themselves in similar situations to ask for help.

The court heard how the wedding was the defendant's idea. The victim's father, who is divorced from her mother, eventually found out and told social services and police.

The mother was found guilty on Tuesday of two counts of forced marriage and a count of perjury after she lied to the High Court about the incident.

The man the victim went on to marry, took her virginity while she was 13 when the "marriage contract" was made.

She was then forced to have an abortion upon her return to the UK.

The court was told this amounted to "significant trauma" which "fundamentally affected" her.

The new offence of forced marriage came into effect in June 2014, but prosecutions have been rare.

In June 2015, a man was jailed at Merthyr Crown Court for offences including forcing a woman into marrying him, while there is at least one other live case in the courts.

UK: More than 1,000 cases of forced marriage in UK last year, report says

Official unit says issue is hidden crime and figures may not reflect full scale of abuse

By Nadia Khomami

The Guardian (10.05.2018) - <https://bit.ly/2rzmyeQ> - Nearly 1,200 possible forced marriage cases were flagged up to a specialist service last year, figures show.

Of the 1,196 reports handled by the government's Forced Marriage Unit (FMU), more than a quarter involved victims below the age of 18, while one in five related to male victims.

The total number of cases registered in 2017 was down by 19% on the previous year, but officials said the fall did not represent a decrease in prevalence of forced marriage in the UK.

Forcing someone to marry against their will is a criminal offence that carries a maximum sentence of seven years. A forced marriage is defined as one in which one or both spouses do not consent to the union, and violence, threats or any other form of coercion are involved.

Established in 2005, the FMU is jointly run by the Home Office and the Foreign Office. Since 2012, the facility has provided support in 1,200 to 1,400 cases a year.

But a report published by the two departments on Thursday stressed that the statistics only represented cases reported to the unit, adding: "Forced marriage is a hidden crime, and these figures may not reflect the full scale of the abuse."

The figures show 355 cases involved victims below 18 years of age, including 186 relating to victims aged 15 or younger.

While the majority (78%) of reports logged in 2017 related to female victims, 256, or 21%, involved male victims. "This demonstrates that men can also be forced into marriage," the report said.

It emphasised that forced marriage is not a problem specific to one country or culture, noting that the unit has handled cases relating to more than 90 nations across Asia, the Middle East, Africa, Europe and North America.

In 2017, the FMU dealt with cases relating to 65 "focus" countries. This could be the country where the forced marriage is due to take place, or the country that the spouse is currently residing in, or both.

The four countries with the highest number of cases last year were Pakistan (439 cases), Bangladesh (129), Somalia (91) and India (82).

In 120 instances there was no overseas element, with the potential or actual forced marriage taking place entirely within the UK.

A spokesperson for the children's charity NSPCC said the figures echoed reports to Childline, "with children as young as 13 contacting us worried about being forced into marriage yet fearing they will be cut out of their community if they refuse".

The charity said forced marriage was a form of child abuse and the secretive nature of it made it difficult to grasp the true scale of the problem.

"The worry and fears children face in this situation can also lead them to self harm, to run away from home putting them at risk of further abuse, or even to contemplate taking their own lives," the spokesperson said.

Girls as young as 13 have contacted Childline about being forced into marriage, with 205 counselling sessions on the issue in 2016-17, a 12% increase from 2015-16. There were 6,099 visits to the Childline forced marriage page in the same year.

"We would urge anyone worried about a child to speak up before it is too late, so that we can get help and prevent them being bound into something they would never ask for," the spokesperson said.

LEBANON: No choice left for a girl but to marry



Painting by an SB Overseas beneficiary in Lebanon

SB Overseas (04.05.2018) - No one escapes war unchanged. Who can lose the past and the future at once without bearing a scar? The young and old are marked, though for most, these marks take invisible forms.

Nadine wishes hers were less apparent. The burns on her hands, neck, and face tell of her loss before she can say a word. She never meant to carry her village's story this way, to become to her community an unmistakable reminder of their suffering, but she did not get to choose.

When war came to Syria, it did not take long for the bombing to reach even her quiet village. If she ever manages someday to forget what the explosions sounded like, she will not forget what they felt like on her skin.

Her family fled to Lebanon four years ago, settling reluctantly in the skeleton of an unfinished and abandoned building where they live again amongst their neighbors from their hometown in Syria—now amid garbage and dust instead of sweet air and green fields. Their small rooms are stifling in the summer and bitterly cold in the winter, but they rarely leave the shelter, feeling out of place in the rest of the city.

Nadine began attending school, where she was confident and talkative in class. This education allowed her to make progress in Arabic, English, math, and science and to quickly make up for years of school she had missed since leaving her village, where her school had been bombed. She excelled in her schoolwork and was placed in the most advanced classes. Besides academics, Nadine and other girls her age took art lessons at school with a Syrian artist who encouraged them to express themselves: their experience as young girls, their ambitions, and their country, thus building on their self-worth.

She told her friends and teachers that she did not want to be married at an early age, as some of her peers were doing. School was important to her, and she planned to finish her education before getting married. She would marry after completing university, she said.

But there was a boy who lived in the same shelter whom Nadine liked, and this worried her parents. They were afraid that he would propose marriage and that she would find herself trapped in conditions like these for the rest of her life: between the dirty walls of a dark building in a city that was not hers, a country that did not want her.

When Nadine's parents remembered her grandfather's hope from her childhood that she would marry a certain man from her village, they acted quickly. He was still living in Syria. Within days, they sent Nadine away to marry him. She was fourteen.

Nadine returned to an area that was still unsafe, plagued by the same war that she had fled, the same bombs that once had almost taken her life.

And piece by piece, her own life and childhood continued to be stolen from her.

When her husband saw her burns, he refused to marry her. He had been told that they were less noticeable. Eventually, his mother forced him to marry Nadine because she had already moved back to Syria to accept his offer. They had no wedding.

Nadine's friends feel sorry for her because they have heard of the couple's problems. They wonder if her husband will marry another woman, or if she will soon be divorced, but her grandfather lives nearby in Syria and would not want to allow her to give up on a marriage he requested. Everyone who lives in her family's shelter knows that Nadine and her husband do not love each other, and that she will soon be expected to have children. But she is only a girl herself.

And so, again, without a choice, and this time in a way that is not so outwardly evident, Nadine has become a keeper of her country's sorrow.

INDONESIA: Viral photo prompts Indonesian government moves toward banning child marriage



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Photo Source: Thomson Reuters Foundation

A photo of two young teenagers trying to register their marriage on the island of Sulawesi has been shared widely online since last week

By Beh Lih Yi

Thomson Reuters Foundation (24.04.2018) - <https://tmsnrt.rs/2vEUtIa> - Indonesia is moving towards a ban on child marriage, officials said on Tuesday after a photo of a teenage couple who tried to tie the knot went viral on social media.

Indonesia, the world's most populous Muslim nation, is among 10 countries with the highest number of girls marrying before they turn 18, according to campaign group Girls Not Brides.

A photo of a 15-year-old boy and a girl, 14, trying to register their marriage on the island of Sulawesi has been shared widely online since last week, sparking renewed pressure on the government to end such underage unions.

President Joko Widodo has agreed to sign a decree that would ban child marriage, a spokeswoman at the Women Empowerment and Child Protection Ministry told the Thomson Reuters Foundation.

No other details were available immediately, but the spokeswoman said public dialogues on the matter would be held.

The ministry has been pressing the government to raise the minimum age for marriage to 20 for girls, and 22 for boys.

Under Indonesian laws, girls can marry at the age of 16, and 19 for boys if parents give their consent. Girls can be married at an even younger age if religious courts agree.

Women's rights campaigners said a ban is long overdue.

"Child marriage is a form of sexual violence," said Ninik Rahayu, one of the female Islamic clerics who jointly issued an unprecedented fatwa against child marriage last year.

A fatwa, or religious edict, is influential among Muslims although it is not legally binding.

"Child marriage has reached an emergency level in Indonesia. If we don't take action quick enough, it will destroy the future of our children," Rahayu told the Thomson Reuters Foundation.

Andreas Harsono from campaign group Human Rights Watch said the Indonesian government's pledge is "bold" but action must be taken without delay.

Campaigners say poverty and tradition continue to drive underage marriage in Indonesia, a sprawling archipelago in Southeast Asia with a population of 250 million people.

One in four girls marry before they turn 18 in Indonesia, according to the United Nations' children agency, UNICEF. On average over 3,500 Indonesian girls are married off every day.

Globally, 12 million girls become child brides each year, the Girls Not Brides group says, exposing them to greater risks of exploitation, sexual violence, domestic abuse and death in childbirth.

LEBANON: A better tomorrow, 'Bukhra Ahla'

Part of the child marriage story series.



Painting by an SB OverSeas beneficiary in Lebanon

Written by Jade-Leigh Tenwick, Communications and Development Officer at SB OverSeas

SB OverSeas (18.04.2018) - Lamis is a seventeen year old girl. A seventeen year old girl who is called 'the divorced woman'. Yet she is barely a woman. Born a year post millennium, she enjoyed her childhood in Syria which was spent going to school and playing with her friends. This all changed in 2012 when the Syrian war broke out. Her family, along with many other Syrian' families fled their country as the conflict intensified and she found herself at eleven years old seeking refuge in Lebanon, a country where 1 in 4 people is a refugee.

Due to the harsh residency policy in Lebanon,¹ Lamis and her family were often moving from place to place and this constant upheaval prevented her from attending school. With over three-quarters of Syrians in Lebanon living below the poverty line,² there has been an increase in the rate of child marriage as it is viewed as the only viable way to provide protection for girls.

Lamis' family were no exception. Struggling to provide security and food for the family, they viewed marriage as a way to secure Lamis' future. Therefore, when a 22 year old boy from the neighborhood asked for permission from her family for Lamis to be his wife, they accepted, telling her it would be like a fairytale. Not having any experience of marriage or what would be expected of her, she went along with this agreement.

Shortly after the wedding, cracks began to appear. Her husband had different preconceptions as to what it meant to be married. These preconceptions were not ones that she could live up to. He and his family, started to punish her for this by beating her, sometimes until she bled. She could not understand what she had done wrong and experienced this abuse for six months before securing a divorce and escaping to her family.

However, her problems did not end here. Divorce in her community, like most communities, carries along with it a stigma. People on the street called her the 'divorced woman' and refused to acknowledge her by her name. She became an outcast and her family began to fear for her safety warning her not to be on the streets alone.

We know of this story as Lamis is one of students at our SB OverSeas school. Despite the difficulties in coming to our school due to street harassment, she attends our classes as she wants to have a better future. She talks openly with others at the school of her experience and encourages them to make their own decision telling them that she wishes she was not married so young as she feels chained by the stigma. She hopes that her message will empower other girls to make their own decision and chose education instead of marriage as a means of security. For herself, she hopes that education will be the key to unlocking a better future and having, like the name of our centre, a better tomorrow: 'Bukhra Ahla'.

Lamis is just one of the many girls at our schools who have been affected by child marriage. SB OverSeas works to prevent the practice of child marriage by providing access to education for 1,400 refugee children in Lebanon and by economically empowering women and girls through our vocational courses, as well as our self-development courses.

¹Over 70% of Syrian refugees in Lebanon do not have legal residency:
<http://www.unhcr.org/news/briefing/2018/1/5a548d174/survey-finds-syrian-refugees-lebanon-poorer-vulnerable-2017.html>

²<http://www.unhcr.org/news/briefing/2018/1/5a548d174/survey-finds-syrian-refugees-lebanon-poorer-vulnerable-2017.html>

EU: European Parliament Committee urges end to child marriage

EU should act against the unlawful practice globally – and at home

HRW.org (16.04.2018) - <https://bit.ly/2HovyNH> - The European Union could do more to help end child marriage, and members of the European Parliament are working for it to do just that.

On Thursday, the parliament's Women's Rights and Gender Equality Committee adopted an opinion calling for the EU's diplomatic arm to develop a clear strategy and dedicate funds to eradicating child and forced marriage by 2030.

This could not be more timely. Under the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, countries around the world pledged to end child marriage – any marriage in which one or both spouses are under age 18 – by 2030.

Achieving this will be difficult. Child marriage occurs in every region of the world, in staggering numbers. About 15 million girls under 18 marry each year – one every two seconds. Every seven seconds, a girl under 15 marries. Most girls marry men over age 18 – in some cases, much older.

Research shows that child marriage is severely harmful. Married children often drop out of school and are locked in poverty as a result. Married girls often quickly become pregnant, and early pregnancy involves serious health risks – including death – for girls and their babies. Girls who marry are at higher risk of domestic violence than women who marry as adults.

The EU has a key role to play. The EU and many of its member states contribute significant amounts of aid to countries with high rates of child marriage. Donors can provide critical assistance for legal and policy reform in these countries. They can also help provide the support – access to education, sexual and reproductive health information and services, economic security, and social empowerment – girls need to escape child marriage.

There is also work for the EU to do at home. A number of EU member states still permit child marriage. Several countries – the Netherlands, Germany, and Sweden – have banned child marriage (and non-EU Norway is considering doing so). But others – including Austria, Belgium, Italy, Spain, and the United Kingdom, to name a few – have laws allowing children younger than 18 to marry under some circumstances.

The European Parliament's committee is on the right path to push the EU on this issue. The Foreign Affairs committee and the full parliament should not only adopt this opinion, but ultimately deliver a resolution calling on EU member states to take concerted action. Girls' lives depend on it.

IRAQ: Will Iraq abolish 'marry your rapist' law?

Tunisia, Jordan and Lebanon scrapped similar articles last year

Gulf News Iraq (31.03.2018) - <https://bit.ly/2q5woEy> - Iraqi women are ramping up pressure to abolish a law that lets rapists off the hook if they marry their victims, after Tunisia, Jordan and Lebanon scrapped similar articles last year.

Activists plan to demonstrate and use billboards to condemn the controversial law ahead of May parliamentary elections in the predominately Shiite Muslim, conservative society.

"We want to say to the Iraqi government – give women justice," Rasha Khalid, a lawyer and member of Baghdad Women's Association, a local rights group, told the Thomson Reuters Foundation by phone from the capital.

"Iraq has to keep up with its surrounding neighbours like Tunisia and Lebanon and other countries that abolished this law." Egypt repealed its law in 1999, and Morocco overhauled its law in 2014 following the suicide of a 16-year-old girl and the attempted suicide of a 15-year-old, both of whom were forced to marry their rapists.

Khalid wants to raise awareness so that voters can demand change going into the polls, as Iraq struggles to recover from a three-year war with Islamic State militants.

Intisar Al Jubory, who has pushed for the amendment to be put on parliament's agenda, said "mass pressure" is needed.

"The repeal of this article preserves the dignity of women victims (against) the greatest humanitarian crime of rape," the female parliamentarian said in a statement.

Women are often forced to marry their rapist to protect family honour and avoid societal shame, said Suad Abu-Dayyeh, Middle East consultant for the rights group Equality Now, urging reform to end the "re-victimisation" of women.

"It is a clear violation of their rights," she said by phone, adding that the law rewards men for committing rape.

"I was under constant stress, unhappy, feeling disgusted," Sabiha, a 32-year-old Iraqi woman who was pressured into marrying her rapist, a relative, told Equality Now.

"I took every opportunity to initiate fights with him until I forced him to leave me."

LEBANON: Education and Empowerment to #GiveHope to young girls



Painting by an SB OverSeas beneficiary in Lebanon

As written by Zuzana, a volunteer at SB OverSeas in Lebanon. SB OverSeas is currently working to provide education in Lebanon for 1,400 refugee children. This story shows how education and empowerment is an important tool in preventing child marriage from the perspective of those in the ground in Lebanon. Find out more about the work SB OverSeas does here: <http://sboverseas.org>

SB OverSeas (29.03.2018) - Before the war began, child marriage in Syria was on the decline. But this progress has become a mere memory during the past seven years of conflict as marriage for young girls has become for some, the only promise of protection and economic stability.

Parents who find themselves as refugees in a new country, as outsiders living in harsh and overcrowded conditions, are often more inclined towards immediate solutions, struggling to see or be persuaded by the long-term consequences of seeking or accepting marriage for their young daughters. And their children, whose lives were yesterday defined by going to school, playing, dancing and laughing with their friends, are today characterised by the load they carry—the weight of others’ expectations, responsibility and punishment for circumstances out of their own control. Child brides are left as onlookers, cut off suddenly and prematurely from their own childhoods and from the world of their friends.

Grandparents once had a particularly influential position in deciding when a parent or child asked for marriage; in many cases, they argued against their granddaughter's marriage and for her right to learn and play. But the war has broken communities and separated generations, meaning that many are making decisions without the trusted voices of older family members, religious elders, and other senior authorities.

Teachers are often amongst the first to witness the drastic shift in young girls' lives when they marry. They are saddened by every empty desk, where their former students once explored their ambitions and worked towards creating their own futures.

Ahmed, himself a Syrian refugee, teaches maths, Arabic, and English in an educational center hosting students from rural Syria, where the practice of child marriage had not completely diminished even before the war. When telling his experience over the past year, he expressed disappointment at the number of students he had seen forced to trade their school days for marriage and at the lack of understanding of the costs. For these girls, getting married means isolation in small, dark rooms of an unfinished shelter: their new home.

"They are not ready for this. They are the victims," Ahmed said. Ultimately, parents make the final decision about the proposed marriage, a decision for which the girls are not accountable, he explained.

Aisha, who a psychologist in the same center, adds that girls marrying at a young age, often as young as thirteen, are especially vulnerable to emotional and physical abuse. They are unprepared for the traumas that may accompany marriage, she said, including miscarriage, loss of childhood and divorce. A young divorced girl may face mistreatment for the rest of her life because of the stigma associated to the latter in her community. This stigma may keep her from regaining normalcy: a childhood and an education.

Ahmed, as a father, has been able to speak with some of the students' fathers, who are normally the family's decision makers. From his experience, several fathers are open to discussion and reconsideration. Aisha leads awareness and empowerment sessions with young girls at the center teaching them about healthy relationships, self-worth and goals for the future. She also encourages mothers to help their daughters feel comfortable talking about their fears and dreams. One mother in the community now takes her daughter for daily walks. During this time together they talk about anything and everything, thus breaking harmful taboos.

Only education and long-term engagement within a community that has lost critical support systems can shift today's trends in child marriage. Ahmed and Aisha's strategy to bring their community closer and building trusting relationships is a long-term one; it is careful, and it is effective. Their work has allowed lasting change for girls and their families. They hope not only to preserve the future of this generation, but to place the power of decision in their hands—hands that will one day rebuild their country.

LEBANON: Sherine's Story, a story of child marriage



Painting by an SB OverSeas beneficiary in Lebanon

As written by Raisa Elhadi, who is currently volunteering with SB Overseas in Lebanon

SB OverSeas 522.03.2018) - This is a story of a girl named Sherine, but her name could be Amina, or Amal, or Sara, or any one of hundreds, even thousands of names of girls with almost the same story. Girls whose futures have been wrested from their control over and over again in so many different ways and who, somehow, still manage to feel hope and passion and optimism for a different, better life than their own. Sherine is only one of those girls.

Sherine's family, like so many others, came to Lebanon seeking safety from violence. As a thirteen year old, Sherine had studied up until the fifth grade in Syria. Growing up she had aspirations of becoming a doctor, a dream only reinforced by the sight of all the violence she saw around her during the war. Sherine thought her family's stay in Lebanon would be brief, and she would soon return to Syria to complete her studies and fulfill her dream.

Shortly after their arrival in Lebanon, Sherine's mother asked her what she thought about getting married. There was a young man from the family's town back in Syria who was interested in taking Sherine as a wife.

"It's up to you," Sherine shrugged, ambivalent. Marriage didn't seem like a very big deal to her. How different could it be from the wedding games she played with her friends in her yard in Syria or in the streets of Shatila?

So Sherine's family decided to wed her to the man from their town, and Sherine went along with it, unaware of the gravity of the union she was about to undertake. Within a month of fleeing to Lebanon, Sherine, still just thirteen years old, married a twenty-five year old man she barely knew.

Her ambivalence didn't last long. From the very beginning, Sherine's marriage darkened her life like a cloud. Rather than spending time with her parents and siblings, playing in the streets with her friends, or studying, Sherine spent her days cleaning and cooking for her husband. The only times she left the house were to fetch groceries and household supplies from the market, or on rare visits to her family's house. Real marriage was nothing like a game. Instead, it was full of responsibilities and obligations that took up all her time and energy, crushing her youth and depleting the reading and academic skills she had built up in school.

Sherine's family had tried to explain, before her wedding, the physical expectations that would befall Sherine as a wife. But Sherine had been a child, naive and unaware, and she hadn't understood. Her wedding night came as a nasty shock.

Things got worse over time. Sherine's housewife skills fell short, and that angered her husband. When he came home to an empty table or messy house, his temper swelled, and he began hitting her as punishment. Jealousy festered, and he forbade Sherine to put on makeup and forced her to wear long, loose abayas. Before long, Sherine's husband was intervening in every part of her life. She spent her days trying to appease him, afraid of his anger and violence, fading to a quiet shadow of who she once was.

When her husband's anger was especially bad, she would flee to her family's house for comfort and safety. She asked her family to help her divorce her husband, but her mother tried to placate her instead.

"No marriage is ever perfect in the beginning," she said. "Just be patient, and you'll get used to him and begin to accept him."

One day during a particularly fiery bout of rage, Sherine's husband smashed the furnace in the kitchen. In his anger, he beat her and swore divorce upon her. Through her fear and pain, she felt a wash of relief and hope that maybe she could escape and go back to her life before. But as refugees, their marriage wasn't registered, and both their union and their divorce were bound only through words. Soon after the fight, her husband took her back, and the nightmare resumed.

Sherine tried to be patient, but her marriage wore her down. Her husband's anger carried into the bedroom, where he was rough and brutish with her. Evenings soon became a nightmare that was nearly too horrible for Sherine to bear. When she escaped to her family's house, she begged them for a divorce.

Finally her family agreed, and they managed to register her marriage with the court so that her divorce could be officially recognised. Sherine's nightmare was over, and she returned to live with her family. But she didn't want any other girls to be put through what she had experienced.

She began to spread the word among her friends and peers about the true meaning of marriage. As a young teenager, Sherine had agreed to marriage blindly, without any understanding the responsibilities and realities of married life. She advised other girls never to accept early marriage, and revealed the details of what marriage could be like. She hoped that with the necessary knowledge and insight, other girls would be more aware than she was and would be able to protect themselves and, ultimately, their futures.

LEBANON: Chasing a childhood in Shatila



Painting by an SB OverSeas beneficiary in Lebanon

HRWF editor's note: HRWF is working with SB Overseas to address the issue of child marriage in refugee camps. Education is essential to keeping girls out of marriage. The story below is about Majeda, a Syrian girl living in a camp. It highlights the importance of education in protecting girls from marriage but also in giving a glimmer of happiness and hope to displaced youth.

Written by Maria Polland, SB Overseas

SB OverSeas (08.02.2018) - Originally from Syria, Majeda, her mother, and five siblings left their native village Dayr Hafir in search of a stable life. The conflict between ISIL and other groups fighting for power had forced the family to cross the mountain chain on the Syrian Lebanese border whereby the family entered Lebanese territory. In the year it had taken for the family to reach Lebanese soil, their father was lost, never to be heard of again. Majeda, her mother, and her siblings arrived in Lebanon in 2017 after a year of transitory, living to escape conflict.

Finally, the family reached the [Shatila refugee camp](#) situated on the outskirts of Lebanon's capital along with thousands of other Syrian refugees. Majeda is 11 years old and her brother Mohamad is 10; they are the only able providers for the family. The eldest girl, considered to be at a vulnerable age, is not allowed to work alone in the streets, while their mother must look after the smallest children. Majeda and Mohamad therefore spend their days selling tissues in the streets – a [common sight in Beyrouth](#).

Majeda is embarrassed that she must work and does not want people to know that each morning she wakes up at 7 am to sell tissue for 1000 LL per parcel (0,50 €). The tissues

come in packs of six for 5000 LL, allowing her to keep a 1000 LL profit. She brings her seven year old brother with her because it is unsafe for her to sell tissues alone. The two spend hours on the street talking and playing "Hazura." Majeda would say, "Something is green, and when it's opened it is pink and black." Her brother would think for a while until finally shouting the correct answer, "Watermelon!" She walks the same route in Shatila every day until it gets dark, with a three-hour break when she comes to Bukra Ahla for school. Majeda is careful to stay away from areas she does not know and only walks where her mother tells her it is safe. Majeda says that she feels safe and protected around her mother; a testament to her mother's strength through an unimaginable situation, guiding her six children alone through war-torn Syria.

Shatila is famous for its crime, violence, and abuse, to the dismay of its vulnerable inhabitants. During Ramadan last July, when the family was only just beginning to settle in Lebanon, Majeda went ask for leftover fruits and vegetables from the shops. For the neediest families, spoiled fruits and vegetables that are unfit for sale are essential to their survival. That day, Majeda and her brother set out, and the owner agreed to give them left overs. He told Majeda to follow him alone to the backroom where the old fruits were stored. When they entered the room, the man grabbed Majeda and tried to harass and touch her. She began to scream and ran away with her brother.

As time progressed after the incident, Majeda began to recoil and fear others. When her mother took her to see a medical organisation in Shatila, she was advised to followed up with psychologist. Unfortunately, the family cannot afford this expense and volunteer psychologists are not enough. Majeda, therefore, continues to sell tissues on the streets with her brother while avoiding the street where the shop owner who attempted to assault her is still selling fruits and vegetables.

Every day, Majeda goes straight from work to school. School is her favourite part of the day because during these hours Majeda can relax and have fun. She is among Bukra Ahla's brightest students; her voice carries over the others as she shouts correct answers in class. In her notebook, she records words in Arabic and English so she can study them later. She is excited to learn and be helpful to the other students around her. Her favorite subjects are Arabic and math. She enjoys Arabic because she wants to learn how to read and write in her native language. She enjoys math class because it constantly works mind. She says she does not like it when her brain is "off", she likes to always be thinking. She is able to listen to instructions in class and then explain to her peers. Not only is Majeda a joy to have in class, her ability to lead in class discussions is encouraging to her peers, and it promotes their learning as well. Majeda must continue her education because there is no doubt that she will succeed if the circumstances allow it. Her education is key to bettering her life, as well as her family's.

When Majeda has free time after dinner, she likes to play with her siblings and her barbies. She has a baby doll whom she has named Amina, given to her by her favorite teacher, Estaz Abdullah. Majeda named Amina after her favorite doll she left in Syria. Amina has a pink dress and long black hair and is still in Majeda's house in the countryside of Aleppo. Majeda misses her house in Syria, specifically her roof where should could play with Amina. In Syria, Majeda's father worked, she went to school, and played with her toys and her siblings at home. Majeda studied in grades 1 and 2 in her village.

In Syria, Majeda was a child. In Lebanon, Majeda is obligated to act years beyond her age. After all that she's endured in her young life, Majeda is strong, caring, smart, and enthusiastic. She deserves much more than she has been given.

GAMBIA: With newfound democracy, Gambia faces resurgence in FGM and child marriage

Some Gambians are returning to harmful practices that the former president had banned during his 22 years of autocratic rule

By Nellie Peyton and Lamin Jahateh

Thomson Reuters Foundation (26.01.2018) - <http://tmsnrt.rs/2GF70go> - Wearing a long black veil with her newly circumcised daughter on her lap, Aminata Njie vehemently gives her justification for having the two-year-old cut.

"Female circumcision is our religion and tradition," says the tall, frail mother of five from her one-bedroom home.

"If Gambia is a democracy now, why should anyone stop us from practicing our religion and tradition?"

One year after Gambia's iron-fisted leader Yahya Jammeh flew into exile, residents of the tiny West African nation are enjoying newfound freedoms under president Adama Barrow, who ousted Jammeh with a shock election win.

But to the dismay of human rights activists, some are also returning to harmful practices that the former president - in a rare display of progressive values - had banned during his 22 years of autocratic rule.

Three weeks ago, Njie, whose named has been changed to protect her from prosecution, travelled across the river to her husband's village to have her youngest daughter circumcised.

Female circumcision, or female genital mutilation (FGM), involves the partial or total removal of the female genitalia and can cause fatal health problems, health experts say.

Jammeh instated steep fines and jail sentences for those taking part in the ancient ritual, which many Gambians believe is a requirement of Islam, in 2015.

"Before the ban, all my three daughters were circumcised. By the time I had this one, the ban was in force and no one was doing it here," said Njie, who lives down a dirt road in the working-class outskirts of the capital Banjul.

"Now that (Jammeh) left we are free to do it because Barrow does not ban it and he is going to remove the law," she said.

In fact, the law against FGM is still in effect and there are no plans to remove it, information minister Demba Jawo told the Thomson Reuters Foundation by phone.

"We are convinced that FGM has serious health implications for women and girls. If anything, this government would be even more rigorous in enforcing the ban," Jawo said.

But many people have been misinformed, rights groups say.

"If you go into communities they tell you that the law went with the former president," said Lisa Camara of the Gambian rights group Safe Hands for Girls.

The same is true of Jammeh's 2016 law against child marriage. "It's taken us back to square one," she said.

Culture of fear

No data has been collected on FGM or child marriage since they were outlawed, the U.N. children's agency UNICEF said, so there is no evidence to prove the laws were respected under Jammeh or that they are now being widely broken.

Before the bans, about 75 percent of girls in Gambia were cut and 30 percent married before the age of 18, UNICEF says.

Laws against traditional practices often go unheeded in African countries where local chiefs and religious leaders can wield more influence than the central government, experts say.

But Jammeh, who had a reputation for imprisoning and torturing perceived opponents, was so widely feared that people tended to obey him, several Gambians said.

"Most people at first thought it was a joke," 20-year-old medical student Haddy Bittaye said of the FGM ban.

They soon realised it was serious when a grandmother was arrested for allegedly cutting a young girl who died, said Bittaye, a youth activist.

The penalty for engaging in FGM is set as 50,000 Gambian dalasi (\$1,050) or 3 years in prison or both, according to the government, but there have been no prosecutions to date.

"The law has done a lot," said Bittaye. "Nowadays (FGM) is not that common because people are aware, and because of the fines attached to the law."

Yet other campaigners said the law has merely driven the practice underground. It is performed earlier now - on babies as young as one week old - to avoid detection, said Isatou Jeng, of local rights group Girls' Agenda.

"People said the law was forced on them," said Jeng, an FGM survivor herself who travelled around the country last year on an awareness-raising campaign.

In villages, people said Barrow had promised them he would repeal the law, she said, likely a misconception that came from the president's pledges to reform Jammeh-era legislation.

The new government needs to do more to make its position clear, said Jeng.

President Barrow has not spoken publicly against FGM or child marriage, but the vice president and other members of his administration have condemned them, said Neneh Touray, a representative in the ministry of women's affairs.

"It takes time to put things in order. I know with time (Barrow) will make his pronouncement," Touray said.

Others said the government may be intentionally leaving room for ambiguity, since the laws are so unpopular.

"Politically, I think they're trying to be very careful not to lose votes," said Camara of Safe Hands for Girls.

New generation

Campaigners from the government, the United Nations and local rights groups have launched national information campaigns to teach Gambians that Jammeh's laws are still in effect.

Billboards along the highway in the rundown seaside capital say "Stop FGM" with pictures of smiling girls.

The target is not the traditional cutters, but the younger generation. "The idea is that we are targeting a generation in hopes that they will be the agents of change," said UNICEF's Fatou Jah.

Camara, whose organisation works primarily with young people in schools, said she thinks when their generation has children they will see a large decline in FGM and child marriage.

But for other campaigners and survivors, the setbacks caused by the political transition have been disheartening.

"It's a practice that you have laid down your life for, and at some point you think it's almost coming to an end but now you are drawn back, steps back to where you have been before," said Jeng of the Girls' Agenda.

"That hurts a lot," Jeng said.

LEBANON: A cup of tea served by child brides



Written by Veronica Lari, edited by Soizic Le Leslé Fauvelle – SB OverSeas

SB OverSeas (26.01.2018) - It was the beginning of this past fall when Louma Albik went on her regular trip to Lebanon to visit SB OverSeas centres and assess the needs of the families, mostly Syrian, living in refugee camps. At SB OverSeas, the role of Chairwoman is not limited to managing the organisation from the Brussels headquarter. Frequent visits to Lebanon are a priority for SB OverSeas to facilitate coordination between the Brussels staff and the team on the ground. This enables the organisation to understand the real living conditions of refugee families and adapt programmes accordingly. SB OverSeas enjoys an authentic bond with the refugee community thanks to years of heart felt support and exchange. This gives the organisation an exclusive insight into the reality of its beneficiaries, allowing harsh personal stories and cultural dilemmas to emerge.

On a crisp sunny day of September, Louma arrived in the mountainous city of Aarsal, close to her native Syria. Located in North-Eastern Lebanon, between the Anti-Lebanon mountains, the town hosts tents as far as the eye can see for more than 60,000 refugees. The area is remote and arid, with no trees growing on its slopes. Political tensions are high, with frequent outbreaks between government forces and ISIL fighters. When combat broke out in the summer, SB OverSeas closed its centre until the violence died down in September. The re-opening offered Louma the occasion to re-evaluate the security situation of the area in person and take into consideration the needs of the 320 children enrolled in SB OverSeas' Aarsal school.

As she arrived, one member of the community offered Louma to accompany her on a visit around the camp. Walking close to his own tent, he invited his guest to enter and have a cup of tea. Once inside, three young girls approached, offering Louma tea and fruits. They were aged 11, 12 and 13. The man proudly explained Louma that the three young girls were sisters married to each of his three sons. The boys were aged between 15 and 17, already working in the construction sector, manufacturing bricks from the surrounding mountains' stones. Smiling, the man explained that marrying the girls to his sons ensured them a better future and protection. He would continue to send them to the SB OverSeas school, they would be happy. At the same time, he expected them to become good wives and mothers, which was already the case for the oldest.

In Louma's head, a flow of thoughts started turning and spinning around. The casual way in which he described his new enlarged family stunned Louma to silence. She did not know how to react to her host, who had behaved so kindly and was full of good intentions. She became aware of the difference in perspectives due to the dramatic situation in which the family lived, and she tried to understand the nature of his choice. Louma asked an educator how these six children were married so young. The answer came from poverty, from the solitude of the encompassing area and the lack of opportunities. The boys accepted to get married to find in their wives a new friend and a person to lighten up difficult days.

A feeling of confusion invaded Louma. Her own principles could not let her accept the justifications for those marriages, but understanding the daily struggles of the camp was equally out of reach. She left the camp few hours later, but the experience could not leave her heart. Since then, Louma has been working to address the issue of early marriage, trying to understand the causes and complexity of the phenomenon, and seeking ways to raise awareness and prevent such a [detrimental practice](#).

The rate of early marriage has increased drastically in response to the poverty and vulnerability of Syrian families in the face of the crisis. In every aspect of its activities, SB OverSeas is committed to protecting children and young women's rights by bridging the education gap caused by the war and by raising awareness on the impact of early marriage on Syrian refugees.

Learn more about SB OverSeas at: <http://sboverseas.org>

LEBANON: A firsthand account of child marriage in a Lebanese refugee camp

She got married for protection. She escaped for survival.



Painting by an SB OverSeas beneficiary in Lebanon

By Kevin Charbel, SB OverSeas

SB OverSeas (11.01.2018) - When the bombing started, at first people were paralysed by fear and uncertainty, having never experienced something of that kind before. Then the school was hit while children were attending classes inside.

Sarah, along with the majority of the village's parents, decided that it was necessary to seek refuge elsewhere in order to survive. She left for a camp on the Turkish/Syrian border with her six children, planning to have her husband follow shortly. She'd heard that families would be safe there.

Months passed without any news until eventually she was informed that her husband had been arrested on his way to meet her and hadn't been seen or heard of since. Her situation becoming unsustainable without him, she was forced to undertake a second perilous journey to a camp in Saida, southern Lebanon where she was aware that some members of her community had found safety.

Nour, Sarah's daughter, was 8 when they settled in the camp where she would spend the next four years growing up, spending her time minding her younger siblings while Sarah went to work. Living conditions are difficult there, most families residing inside a huge, five-story concrete shell of a building that was one day meant to be a university.

The grey unplastered walls of the camp tend to stifle the natural curiosity and imagination that children are born with, but Nour never lost it. She continued to exude light and energy,

cultivating social links indiscriminately within her community. These attributes, coupled with her precocious nature, is what Sarah believes to be the reason that her neighbours and friends started to whisper doubts about Nour's morality and virginity.

A family without a male protector in this context is vulnerable to many forms of attack, especially if their standing in the community is threatened. Sarah did not see it as normal for Nour to be married so early, particularly as she herself had married at 20 years old, but she saw no other option to guarantee the protection of her daughter and the rest of her children. With a heavy heart, she made it known that she was looking for a husband for Nour, which almost immediately drew the attention of a woman from a community close by who proposed her son as a suitor. Nour was introduced to the 18 year-old construction worker the next day and, a few hours later, agreed to marry him.

One of the most difficult moments in Sarah's life was explaining to her 12 year-old daughter what to expect on her wedding night. To explain that her husband would want to get close to her and to not push him away if he kissed her. That he would teach her how to be a wife to him.

The ceremony was carried out quietly and without legal documentation as Nour's age prevented any official recognition. The cleric who administered the ceremony was careful to remind the families that they should not discuss his involvement.

Nour moved in with her husband's family after the wedding, some ten kilometres away from Sarah. She regularly called to say that she was unhappy and didn't like how her husband and his family treated her. She was allowed to visit her mother only very rarely, but she took every opportunity to express her discontent, her sadness and loneliness. Eventually, after four months had gone by, Nour turned up alone at her mother's doorstep, explaining that she had run away from her husband and no longer wanted to go back. Sarah contacted the husband's family to find out what had happened; she was told that Nour was not welcome back as they were frustrated with her childishness and ineptitude for household duties.

The divorce was finalised a week later. Nour is now back at home with Sarah and her brothers, but all she wants is to be left alone, refusing to leave her home. The light that was in her eyes has been replaced by dullness, her energy replaced by apathy.

When asked about her daughter's future, Sarah cannot hold back the tears. She hastens to explain that she regrets having ever made her child go through such an ordeal and that she just hopes that Nour can get back to being herself again one day.

Learn more about SB OverSeas at: <http://sboverseas.org>

LEBANON: Poverty for Syrian refugees could push children to marry and work

The Gulf Today (10.01.2018) - <http://bit.ly/2EsiYb6> - BEIRUT: Nearly seven years into Syria's civil war, Syrian refugees in neighbouring Lebanon are becoming poorer, leaving children at risk of child labour and early marriage, aid organisations said on Tuesday.

A recent survey by the United Nations children's agency UNICEF, UN's World Food Programme, and refugee agency, UNHCR showed that Syrian refugees in Lebanon are more vulnerable now than they have been since the beginning of the crisis.

Struggling to survive, more than three quarters of the refugees in Lebanon now live on less than \$4 per day, according to the survey which was based on data collected last year.

"The situation for Syrian refugees in Lebanon is actually getting worse - they are getting poorer. They are barely staying afloat," Scott Craig, UNHCR spokesman in Lebanon, told the Thomson Reuters Foundation.

Around 1.5 million refugees who fled Syria's violence account for a quarter of Lebanon's population.

The Lebanese government has long avoided setting up official refugee camps. So, many Syrians live in tented settlements, languishing in poverty and facing restrictions on legal residence or work.

"Child labour and early marriage are direct consequences of poverty," Tanya Chapuisat, UNICEF spokeswoman in Lebanon said in a statement to the Thomson Reuters Foundation.

"We fear this (poverty) will lead to more children being married away or becoming breadwinners instead of attending school," she said.

According to UNICEF, 5 percent of Syrian refugee children between 5-17 are working, and one in five Syrian girls and women aged between 15 and 25 is married.

Mike Bruce, a spokesman for the Norwegian Refugee Council, said without sufficient humanitarian aid and proper work Syrian families would increasingly fall into debt and more could turn to "negative coping mechanisms" like child labour and marriage.

Cold winter temperatures in Lebanon would also hurt refugees, he said.

"Refugees are less and less able to deal with each shock that they face and severe weather could be one of those shocks," said Bruce.

SYRIA: Poverty for Syrian refugees could push children to marry and work

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IRAQ: Parliament rejects marriage for 8-year-old girls

Amendments would have instated discriminatory laws on family matters

HRW (17.12.2017) - <http://bit.ly/2AYnilb> - Iraq's parliament has rejected proposed amendments to Iraq's Personal Status Law (PSL) that would allow religious judges to impose discriminatory law on family matters, Human Rights Watch said today.

The amendments would have covered areas including inheritance and divorce, and, by giving powers to impose family laws to certain religious communities, would have allowed girls to be married as young as age 8 under some of these laws. The head of the women's rights committee in parliament rejected the initiative in mid-November, blocking the bill. However, two leading women's rights organizations say that some parliament members have threatened to continue to push for the amendments to secure votes in some parts of the country in the May 2018 parliamentary elections.

"Parliament's women's rights committee has made a great contribution to Iraqi society in rejecting this effort to scuttle Iraq's family law protections," said Belkis Wille, senior Iraq researcher at Human Rights Watch. "Threats by lawmakers to dismantle protections under the current law and restore discriminatory laws would be devastating to women's rights."

Parliament members from several Shia Islamic parties, spearheaded by the Fadhila Party, to which the justice minister belongs, proposed the amendments on November 1. The proposed amendments would enshrine Shia and Sunni religious establishment control over marriage-related matters and require courts to make exceptions to existing legal protections.

Hanaa Edwar, founder and general secretary of Al-Amal Association, a leading Iraqi human rights organization, and a member of the Human Rights Watch Middle East Advisory Committee, said the members also threatened to continue to push for the amendments unless the women's rights committee dropped key protections in a domestic violence bill pending before parliament since 2015.

"The proposed amendments seek to establish sectarianism and undermine the principle of citizenship and national identity of Iraq," Edwar told Human Rights Watch. "The amendments would violate key rights enshrined in Iraq's constitution and laws, and would treat women as inferior to men."

The current law applies to everyone regardless of their religious affiliation, and is administered by Iraq's secular court system. The proposed amendments instead would require the secular courts to apply religious law on marriage, divorce, and inheritance. The amendments also recommend – but do not require – establishing specialized Personal Status Courts, headed by religious judges, to adjudicate family law issues.

The current law sets the legal age for marriage at 18, but allows a judge to permit girls as young as 15 to be married in "urgent" cases. According to a 2016 The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) report, 5 percent of Iraqi children are married by age 15, and 24 percent by age 18. According to a women's rights lawyer, this is because many families arrange marriages through religious marriage contracts outside the legal system, though they are illegal.

The amendments also would undermine protections for divorced women. Under the current law, if a husband requests a divorce, the wife has the right to remain in their marital home for three years at the husband's expense and to receive two years of maintenance and the current value of her dowry. If a wife requests a divorce, a judge can award her some of these benefits depending on the circumstances.

Because religious law offers fewer protections, under the proposed amendments, women would have lost many of these protections. For example, under the Jaafari Shia school of law, the woman has no right to the marital home, maintenance, or her dowry and children remain living with her for only two years, regardless of their age, during which she is not allowed to remarry.

Women would also lose some inheritance rights. Even under existing law, daughters inherit a lower proportion of a parent's wealth than sons. But under some religious laws, daughters would inherit even less and if the family has no son to inherit the agricultural land, it would revert to the state.

"The current personal status law was drafted by taking the most rights-upholding aspects of the different sects in Iraq," Yanar Mohammed, president of the Organization of Women's Freedom in Iraq, told Human Rights Watch. "The push for these amendments is part of a political game linked to the upcoming May 2018 parliamentary elections."

She said that while the driving forces behind these amendments came from a group of Shia Islamic parties, she feared that some Sunni members of parliament would also support them to give the clergy more authority over daily life. This is the second attempt in recent years to introduce discriminatory religious personal status laws. In February 2014 the Council of Ministers approved a draft law, the "Jaafari Personal Status Law," which would have covered Iraq's Shia citizens and residents, prohibited them from marrying non-Muslims, effectively legalized marital rape, prevented women from leaving the house without their husbands' permission, and allowed girls younger than 9 to be married with a parent's approval. After pressure from local human rights activists, parliament did not move the bill forward.

These new proposed amendments violate the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), which Iraq ratified in 1986, by giving fewer rights to women and girls on the basis of their gender. They also violate the Convention on Rights of the Child, which Iraq ratified in 1994, by legalizing child marriage, putting girls at risk of forced and early marriage and susceptible to sexual abuse, and not requiring decisions about children in divorce cases to be made in the best interests of the child. The draft amendments appear to violate the International Covenants on Civil and Political Rights and on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights by granting fewer rights to certain people on the basis of their religion.

The draft amendments also starkly contrast with article 14 of Iraq's constitution, which prohibits "discrimination and distinction between Iraqis" and guarantees the equality of all Iraqis "without distinction to religion, faith, nationality, sex, opinion, economic or social status." Article 13 of Iraq's constitution stipulates that it is the "supreme law" in Iraq and that "no law that contradicts this Constitution shall be enacted."

The CEDAW committee, the body of international experts who review state compliance with CEDAW, concluded in 2013 that, "identity-based personal status laws and customs perpetuate discrimination against women and that the preservation of multiple legal systems is in itself discriminatory against women."

In its 2013 review, the CEDAW committee has previously recommended that Iraq repeal discriminatory legal exceptions to the minimum age of marriage for girls. It said that legal exceptions to the minimum age of marriage should be granted only in exceptional cases and authorized by a competent court for both girls and boys, and only in cases in which they are at least 16 and give their express consent.

"While lawmakers may have failed this time around, the threat of these terrible amendments still looms, and is being used as leverage to try to whittle away at key human rights protections in the domestic violence law," Wille said. "Iraqi parliamentarians should reject these efforts to reverse the progress Iraqi society has made in creating laws that protect all of its citizens."

SAUDI ARABIA: Pushes for stricter rules on under-18 marriage

Girl's consent, court's approval and medical reports required in underage marriages

By Habib Toumi

Gulf News (10.12.2017) - <http://bit.ly/2DUDDJ8> - Manama: The consent of the girl and her mother and the approval of the court are among the requirements in case of an under-18 marriage, according to a recent recommendation by an ad-hoc inter-ministerial committee set up to look into the marriage of minors in Saudi Arabia.

The committee said that the age of majority is 18 and all marriage contracts below that age must fulfill a list of requirements that include banning the health ministry from conducting premarital checkups for underage would-be brides without the approval of a judge.

No marriage contract can be drawn for underage girls outside the court and violators should be punished severely, the committee said in its recommendations, Saudi daily Okaz reported on Sunday.

A judge looking into an application for underage marriage should summon the girl and hear directly from her that she was consenting to get married. He should also make sure the marriage does not pose any risks to her life. The judge should also listen to the girl's mother, the committee said.

The application should include medical reports from state doctors and experts about the physical and mental state of the girl to ensure there are no abuses.

A social expert designated by the court should provide a report about the psychological compatibility of the two future spouses.

The regulations recommended by the committee also require the judge to order the girl to join a programme for preparing girls about to get married that offers psychological training and a greater knowledge of family responsibilities following the marriage.

According to the committee, the same regulations should apply to non-Saudi girls under 18 living in Saudi Arabia. Marriages of underage non-Saudi girls contracted outside Saudi Arabia do not have to come under the regulations.

The committee requested the justice ministry to include the regulations in its online marriage contracts, and the culture and information ministry to promote awareness programmes about the negative psychological and social aspects of underage marriages.

The committee said the Islamic affairs ministry should recommend to mosque imams and preachers to urge parents to show care, honesty and a sense of responsibility towards their daughters by highlighting the importance of the girl's consent to get married.

The daughters should be made fully aware that they cannot be forced into marriage and that they should choose their future husbands carefully, the committee said.

In 2013, Saudi Arabia set 16 as the minimum age of marriage for girls as it introduced new regulations in a bid to curb child marriages mainly in the conservative areas of the vast kingdom where minors are often forced by their fathers to marry much older men.

Lawyers and human rights activists have often been at loggerheads over a minimum marriage age with conservative scholars.

Proponents of a minimum age argue there is a crucial need to educate families culturally and socially, and specify that the core of the problem lies at the ignorance of many families and at the outdated customs and traditions that are still prevailing mainly in rural areas.

Those who support early marriages argue that its advantages include preventing deviation in adolescence and having a fully functional family.

Several members of the Shura (Consultative) Council have been pushing for banning completely the marriage of girls under 15 and for the consent of courts for under 18 marriages.

IRAQ: Nine-year-old girls in Iraq could be forced to marry under new Muslim laws

The bill includes provisions that would legalise marital rape and child marriage and ban Muslims from marrying non-Muslims.

By Isabelle Gerretsen

International Business Times (14.11.2017) - <http://bit.ly/2z1Dy3X> - Human rights activists are warning that a new Iraqi law could legalise marriage for children as young as nine and set women's rights back 50 years.

They are calling on Iraqi ministers to withdraw a draft of the Jafaari Personal Status Law which would allow Muslim clerics to have control over marriage contracts.

The legislation is based on the Shia principles of the Jaafari school of jurisprudence, which was founded by the sixth Shia Imam, Jaafar al-Sadiq.

The 2014 version of the bill, which was approved by Iraq's Council of Ministers, includes provisions that would legalise marital rape, ban Muslims from marrying non-Muslims and allow nine-year-old children to marry.

On 1 November, Iraq's Council of Representatives voted in principle to approve the amendment and the bill was signed by 40 parliamentarians. Iraq's elections will be held in May next year.

The law, which would cover the 36 million Shia citizens living in Iraq, would have a "catastrophic" impact on women's rights, according to Suad Abu-Dayyeh, Middle East consultant for the advocacy group Equality Now.

"We are outraged," she told The Guardian. "We will be supporting women in Iraq by issuing alerts about the bill. We are also writing letters to the speaker of [parliament] and the president."

Activists from civil society organisations gathered in the Iraqi city of Sulaymaniyah on Sunday (12 November) to present a petition against the bill.

"This new bill to amend the Personal Status Law will authorize religious men to enforce illegal marriages and force girls under 18 to live with their in-laws. This is a setback to the achievements Iraqi women made and struggled for half a century ago," the petition read. If the law is approved by the Iraqi parliament, it "would be a disastrous and discriminatory step backward for Iraq's women and girls," according to Joe Stork, deputy Middle East and North Africa director at Human Rights Watch (HRW).

"This personal status law would only entrench Iraq's divisions while the government claims to support equal rights for all," he said. "It flies in the faces of the Iraqi government's legal commitments to protect women's and girls' rights."

The United Nations in Iraq has also condemned the bill. "I call upon the Council of Representatives to seize this opportunity...to conduct a wider consultation on the draft

amendments in a participatory manner to recommit to and ensure the full respect, protection and fulfillment of women and girls' rights in Iraq in relation to matrimonial and other matters," said Jan Kubis, the special representative to Iraq of the UN Secretary-General.

TURKEY: Marriage law a blow to women's rights, say activists

Bill allowing Muslim clerics to conduct civil marriages passed despite protests amid fears it could lead to more child brides

By Kareem Shaheen and Gokce Saracoglu

The Guardian (14.11.2017) - <http://bit.ly/2AHputJ> - Activists and opposition politicians in Turkey have rounded on a law that allows Muslim clerics to conduct civil marriages, describing it as a blow to women's rights and secularism and part of an ongoing effort to impose religious values on a polarised society.

The law allowing "mufti" marriages was passed by parliament and Turkey's president, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, then published in the country's official gazette on Friday, despite protests by civil society activists and opposition lawmakers. Last month, Erdoğan declared the bill would be passed "whether you like it or not".

"Women's rights are going to decline," said Nazan Moroğlu, an expert on gender law and a lecturer at Yeditepe University. "Everything that has been pushed on to women in this land has been done in the name of religion."

Muftis are clerics empowered with issuing religious opinions on matters of day-to-day life. Previously, only state officers in branches of the family affairs directorate were able to conduct marriages.

A requirement has also been added that prohibits individuals who carried out "immoral acts" before marriage from becoming Turkish citizens.

Many people in Turkey, a Muslim-majority country, conduct religious ceremonies in addition to civil marriages, as do Syrian refugees who tie the knot in the country, and see it as a religious obligation. Other Middle Eastern countries do not allow civil marriages because of religious restrictions on Muslim women marrying non-Muslim men, but often recognise marriages performed abroad. Many couples in the region often travel to Cyprus or Turkey to conduct such marriages.

Supporters of the law point out that it does not change the requirements for a legal civil marriage. They say it does not create a loophole that allows child marriages or polygamy, and simply makes it more convenient for citizens who are religiously observant.

Opponents contend that the law is an unnecessary distraction in a country still reeling from the aftermath of a coup attempt last year and enduring an ongoing crackdown on dissidents under a 16-month long state of emergency. They say it is part of a broader campaign by the government to impose conservative Islamic values on a divided society.

Critics point to other recent changes that they say are indicative of an attempt to establish the dominance of Sunni Islam in a republic created on secular principles. They cite changes

to the school curriculum that have ended the practice of teaching evolution in high school and introduced a state-sponsored explanation of the concept of jihad.

They also fear the government is turning a blind eye to other dangerous trends that are harmful to women's rights, such as child marriage. The Turkish legal system sets the minimum marriage age at 17, with some exceptions for girls aged 16, with an estimated 232,000 such marriages conducted in the past four years. Women's rights campaigners estimate that a third of all marriages in Turkey include girls under the age of 18.

"From the way this draft law was prepared without the participation of sides who will be affected, such as muftis or women's groups, it is a sign of an enforcement of an idea," said Selina Doğan, an opposition MP in Istanbul, who pointed out that women campaigning against the law in front of parliament were pepper sprayed. "One man [Erdoğan] has the power and a change to a political Islamist regime is planned."

Efforts to change long-established family legal principles in Turkey have emerged as a lightning rod in the battle between Islamists and secularists. A parliamentary commission established in 2016 by the ruling Justice and Development (AK) party to study the causes for high divorce rates introduced a series of recommendations last year that were seen as a backward step on women's equality and an attempt to impose conservative family values.

Among the recommendations was a widely condemned proposal that would have granted amnesty to some men convicted of child sex assault if they marry their victims. The recommendation was tabled as a bill late last year then withdrawn after widespread protests.

Other proposals included introducing mediation by religious scholars in divorce cases and changes to the penal code that would decriminalise the practice of couples living in a religious marriage without a civil one registered with the state.

"This is another trick by Erdoğan to polarise society and consolidate his 50% base and nothing else," said Engin Altay, a politician with the largest opposition party. "While Turkey is burning with mountains of problems they are bringing this up just to separate his base [from his opponents] with unfounded discussion."

IRAQ: Girls in Iraq 'could be married at nine' if draft law is approved

It's part of proposed legislation that would see religious courts restored.

By Chris Harris

EuroNews (12.11.2017) - <http://bit.ly/2yvO9j8> - Iraq has moved a step closer to allowing girls as young as nine to marry, human rights campaigners have claimed.

The proposal is part of a draft law recently approved by 40 MPs that would see the restoration of religious courts, says Equality Now (EN).

Government courts have, since 1959, ruled on such matters, setting the official age of marriage to 18, although a judge can allow it at 15.

But the proposed legislation – which will have to be approved by a full parliament to go ahead – would instead see religious courts decide.

“The nine-year-old thing comes from the different interpretations of the wife of the Prophet Muhammad,” said Suad Abu-Dayyeh, EN’s Middle East consultant.

“Some interpretations say she was married at the age of nine. That is why some religious sects in Iraq are following that.”

UNICEF says one-in-five girls are married as children in Iraq and that the practice often sees them abandon education and fall pregnant. If the mother is under 18 when she gives birth her infant’s risk of dying in the first year is 60% higher. Underage marriage also puts the girl at greater vulnerability to domestic violence, the NGO says.

“Iraqi women are outraged,” Abu-Dayyeh told Euronews. “We’re very concerned and it will affect all women’s issues in their daily lives.

“I think we will see an explosion of child marriage in Iraq if it’s passed. It’s not logical, we’re in 2017 and we’re still going backwards in terms of women’s rights.”

Any move from government to religious courts could also see changes to laws regarding divorce, custody and inheritance, as well as marriage, added Abu-Dayyeh.

“Some religious sects say women should not inherit real estate and custody of a child, in cases of divorce, should be with the man, not the women,” she said.

The UN Assistance Mission for Iraq has urged a consultation to “ensure the protection and respect for women’s rights”.

Abu-Dayyeh said no date had yet been set for a vote on the draft law.

IRAQ: Iraq’s marriage and family rights are under threat

By Haifa Zangana

Middle East Monitor (08.11.2017) - <http://bit.ly/2iiEhDr> - For the third time since the occupation of Iraq in 2003, the National Personal Status Law number 188 of 1959, which is still on the statute book, is at risk of being amended despite the fact that it is one of the best pieces of Arab legislation. The first time that this was planned was in December 2003, when Abdul Aziz Al-Hakim, leader of the Shia Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq, served as the President of the Governing Council for a month while under US occupation.

One of his “achievements” was issuing Resolution 137 to abolish the National Personal Status Law and refer all women’s and family affairs, in every aspect, from the civil courts to Islamic jurists, each according to their own doctrine. This was the first step towards institutionalising family sectarianism. The resolution stipulated that Islamic law be implemented with regards to marriage, engagement, eligibility, proof of marriage, prohibitions, marriage of non-Muslims, women’s marital rights — such as dowry, support, divorce, separation, Iddah (waiting period for divorcees and widows), nursing, custody, allowances and inheritance — and all other personal affairs, and that they be implemented based on the stipulations of one’s doctrine.

Al-Hakim also ordered that the law be put into effect immediately, forgetting that he was simply an employee of the occupation. After women's rights organisations protested and a number of the "occupation's feminists" — who were promised 40 per cent of the political seats — resorted to Paul Bremer, the American head of the occupation authority, he intervened and forced the Council to freeze the resolution.

The second occasion was more detailed. The Shia Islamic Virtue Party, represented by Justice Minister Hassan Al-Shammari, proposed the Ja'afari draft law to the cabinet on 27 October 2013. The cabinet approved the draft, but the law wasn't passed due to the strong opposition that was not limited to feminists this time, but included large segments of society, as well as human rights organisations within Iraq and abroad. It also included opposition from international organisations such as Human Rights Watch.

The draft bill consisted of articles that many believed paved the way for Daesh's actions still to come, including lowering the female marriage age to 9 and male marriage age to 15, or younger with the guardian's consent; legalising polygamy; and providing practical guidance for dividing time amongst four wives. This also included an article prohibiting Muslim men from permanently marrying a non-Muslim, meaning it gave men the right to temporary marriage; this is usually performed by a cleric who approves its duration, which may range from minutes to years. A specific amount is paid to the woman, while the cleric is paid a fee. According to one of the articles, women were to be deprived of financial support if a man's needs were not met due to her being too old or too young.

The latest proposal to amend the law comes from the same people, but in a smarter version than its predecessors, as the precise details that provoked such anger, such as determining the age of child marriage, have been omitted. Instead, they are calling for a general enactment that will legalise all the amendments made in the past.

Parliament voted on the amendment on 31 October; it took just a few minutes to get approval. According to the Speaker of the Iraqi Parliament, Salim Al-Jabouri: "We discussed this issue, and there is no need to hear those who support and those who oppose, as we have heard both views."

The only objection was the lack of a quorum, to which Al-Jabouri said: "What is the objection? Count those who are present. You are already here; don't leave, vote while you are all here, as we have already discussed the issue. I will repeat the previous points and remind you that this was already completely discussed."

This shows us the voting process on legislation that aims to change the life of Iraqi citizens and the composition of family and society. Look at the so-called "parliament" that was allegedly formed in the kind of "democratic" manner seen especially in third world countries and governed directly or indirectly by a handful of hired employees.

The vote on the proposed amendments is facing protests and objections from women's rights organisations, as on previous occasions. Demonstrations against the changes are being organised, as well as social media campaigns, with the participation of several parliamentarians. The objection to these changes is that a duly-amended National Personal Status Law would violate the constitutional provisions that "preserve women's dignity, maintain the human rights of citizens, and preserve their national identity", despite the fact that everyone knows the constitution's sectarianism and weakness.

What are the proposed amendments? The two main changes are related to allowing Muslims to submit a request to the specialised Personal Status Court to implement Islamic law in personal affairs based on their own doctrinal affiliation, and the obligation of the court to "adhere to the rulings issued by the Shia Endowment Bureau and Sunni Endowment Diwan, depending on the husband's doctrine." The Shia Endowment Bureau is

also obliged to answer the court's requests for clarifications, according to the established Shia jurisprudence and fatwas of the scholars. In the absence of an established jurisprudence, the court will refer back to the supreme religious reference to which most Iraqi Shia traditionally go to in Najaf. Meanwhile, the Sunni Endowment Diwan must answer to the court based on established Sunni jurisprudence.

In other words, and very briefly, what is being proposed is the transfer of the decision-making powers regarding personal status, which is the essence and foundation of personal freedoms, from the civil court, in accordance with law 188, to the clerics, with varying degrees of understanding, jurisprudence and reference, and passing them from one party to another, requesting "clarification". This will also result in the imposition of the domination and establishment of abhorrent sectarianism that targets family unity, especially by determining the family doctrine based on that of the husband.

The new amendment proposal avoided the trap of stating the legally binding details and is similar to the employment of the concept of "Taqiya", meaning "prudence", whereby one takes the precaution of exhibiting or saying something other than what is practiced. This disrupted the opposition campaign, especially in terms of using the slogan of underage marriage, which is not actually explicitly mentioned in the new proposal, but which carries the possibility of indirect and direct harm to women, families and society.

It is enough to recount the sectarian parties' governance, and the experience of living in the shadow of the religious "clerics" and their association with politicians to whom is attributed financial, religious and moral corruption over the past 14 years, for us to understand the magnitude of anger and panic caused by such legislation. If passed, this would authorise them to make life-changing decisions that affect the lives and freedoms of everyone, especially women. Regardless of whether their turbans are white or black, the mentality is much more dangerous and deeper than at first appears and, as such, deserves to be fought against by all.

USA: Child marriage persists

HRWF (25.10.2017) - Child, early, and forced marriage are forms of gender-based violence that pose serious threats to the rights of girls and women. People often think of child marriage as occurring only in developing or Muslim-majority countries, but it is also found in North America and Europe. As BBC reports, child marriage is a problem in the United States, where [Girls Not Brides reports](#) that between 2000-2010, 248,000 girls were married to adult men.

Video: <http://hrwf.eu/usa-child-marriage-persists-throughout-europe-and-north-america/>

Also see HRWF's recent report on [Child Marriage and Religion](#)

INDIA: Sex with minor wife is rape, rules Supreme Court

Exception clause to the heinous offence of rape allows a man to have sex with his wife who is not aged below 15.

By Krishnadas Rajagopal

The Hindu (11.10.2017) - <http://bit.ly/2yaPrRw> - The Supreme Court on Wednesday held that a man will be punished for rape if he is found to be guilty of having sexual intercourse with his minor wife.

A Bench of Justices Madan B. Lokur and Deepak Gupta read down exception 2 to Section 375 (rape) of the Indian Penal Code (IPC).

The exception clause to the heinous offence of rape allows a man to have sex with his wife who is not aged below 15.

Verdict ends disparity

With this verdict, the court has ended the disparity between this exception to Section 375, which allows a husband to have sexual relationship with his 15-year-old wife, and the definition of 'child' in recent laws such as the Protection of **Children** from Sexual Offences Act, 2012, which includes any person below the age of 18.

The verdict also ends tacit acceptance of the exception clause in the IPC provided to child marriages, which was declared illegal and is a punishable offence, though a social reality especially in rural parts of the country.

The court had agreed with NGO Independent Thought, which filed the petition challenging the exception, on how when sexual intercourse with a minor aged below 18 with or without her consent amounts to rape under IPC, it is not so once she is married.

The NGO had argued that the exception was a violation of the fundamental right to life and equality of minors.

The judgment, though the Bench had said time and again that it did not want to delve into the issue of marital rape, now inevitably opens a window for law on marital rape.

The court had questioned the reason for Parliament to create an exception in the penal law declaring that sexual intercourse by a man with his minor wife is not rape.

It had asked the reason behind such an exception in the IPC when the age of consent was 18 years for "all purposes".

"We do not want to go into the aspect of marital rape. That is for Parliament to see if they want to increase or decrease the age of consent. But once Parliament decided that we have fixed 18 years as the age of consent, can they carve out an exception like this," a Bench of Justices Madan B Lokur and Deepak Gupta had asked the Centre during the hearings.

"When you [government] recognise the age of consent to be 18 years for all purposes, then why this exception," it had asked.

The government counsel had defended the exemption as something Parliament had given due thought and consideration about.

During the hearing, the Bench referred to the aspect of child **marriage** and said that despite there being law that held it illegal, the practice was still going on.

"Whether or not it [child marriage] is a social reality, for 70 years we have not been able to remove it," the Bench had observed.

CANADA: B.C. prosecutor urges 'strong message' in sentencing for child bride case

The Globe and Mail (30.06.2017) - <https://tgam.ca/2sBR233> - A special prosecutor has asked a judge to send a strong message of denunciation in sentencing a man and woman who took a 13-year-old girl over the U.S. border to marry the now-imprisoned leader of a polygamous sect.

Peter Wilson told a B.C. Supreme Court judge in Cranbrook on Friday that Brandon Blackmore should serve a jail sentence of 12 to 18 months, while Gail Blackmore deserves a six to 12 month sentence.

The former husband and wife were convicted earlier this year on a charge of taking a child under the age of 16 out of Canada for sexual purposes.

The trial heard that in 2004, the girl was secreted into the United States to marry Warren Jeffs, the prophet of the Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, who is serving a life sentence for assaulting two of his child brides.

Wilson acknowledged that it's an unusual case and there's no volume of Canadian law to assist Justice Paul Pearlman in reaching an appropriate sentence.

But he said the sentence must deter other members of the secluded community.

"Deterrence might have particular importance in this case because other persons who could potentially commit the offence are, I would say, a very, narrow group," Wilson said. "The likely group of potential offenders is probably small and could very well be limited to other adherents of the FLDS as it's being espoused by Mr. Jeffs."

Wilson said Brandon Blackmore is more culpable than Gail Blackmore, but both were present at the wedding of the girl and knew what would happen. He said the teen and many women in that church live cloistered lives.

"The fact that the victim was 13 ... had spent her whole life in Bountiful, and was not what I would call a worldly person, which I submit would have rendered her more vulnerable."

Pearlman scheduled sentencing for Aug. 11.

The young woman, whose name is protected by a publication ban, was sitting in the front row of the courtroom.

Brandon Blackmore's lawyer said his client, who is 71, was ex-communicated in 2012 and has no contact with any of the members of his former church.

John Gustafson said his client has begun to have some insight about his actions, but was "taught his whole life that Warren Jeffs was God's representative on earth."

He asked for a conditional sentence, a form of house arrest, for his client.

"He is not in a position, even if he wanted to, to commit these acts again," Gustafson said.

Gail Blackmore, 60, declined to say anything during sentencing but Joe Doyle, a lawyer appointed as a friend of the court, spoke on her behalf.

Doyle said the woman should not be painted with the “polygamist brush.” He said she is less culpable because women in the church are taught to have “absolute obedience” to the male head of the household.

“It is now 13 years later. Mr. Jeffs is in jail for the rest of his life,” said Doyle.

“She doesn’t have a husband who’s going to order her to do anything. There’s no need for individual deterrence for Mrs. Blackmore.”

James Oler, a former leader in the polygamous community of Bountiful, was acquitted of the same charge after the judge ruled there wasn’t proof he crossed the border with a 15-year-old girl.

Wilson is asking British Columbia’s Court of Appeal to overturn his acquittal or order a new trial.

USA: 11 Years Old, a Mom, and Pushed to Marry Her Rapist in Florida

By Nicholas Kristof

The New York Times (26.05.2017) - <http://nyti.ms/2r1Z8fL> - When she was a scrawny 11-year-old, Sherry Johnson found out one day that she was about to be married to a 20-year-old member of her church who had raped her.

“It was forced on me,” she recalls. She had become pregnant, she says, and child welfare authorities were investigating — so her family and church officials decided the simplest way to avoid a messy criminal case was to organize a wedding.

“My mom asked me if I wanted to get married, and I said, ‘I don’t know, what is marriage, how do I act like a wife?’” Johnson remembers today, many years later. “She said, ‘Well, I guess you’re just going to get married.’”

So she was. A government clerk in Tampa, Fla., refused to marry an 11-year-old, even though this was legal in the state, so the wedding party went to nearby Pinellas County, where the clerk issued a marriage license. The license (which I’ve examined) lists her birth date, so officials were aware of her age.

Not surprisingly, the marriage didn’t work out — two-thirds of marriages of underage girls don’t last, one study found — but it did interrupt Johnson’s attendance at elementary school. Today she is campaigning for a state law to curb underage marriages, part of a nationwide movement to end child marriage in America. Meanwhile, children 16 and under are still being married in Florida at a rate of one every few days.

You’re thinking: “Child marriage? That’s what happens in Bangladesh or Tanzania, not America!”

In fact, more than 167,000 young people age 17 and under married in 38 states between 2000 and 2010, according to a search of available marriage license data by a group called Unchained at Last, which aims to ban child marriage. The search turned up cases of 12-year-old girls married in Alaska, Louisiana and South Carolina, while other states simply had categories of “14 and younger.”

Unchained at Last was not able to get data for the other states. But it extrapolated that in the entire country, there were almost 250,000 child marriages between 2000 and 2010. Some backing for that estimate comes from the U.S. Census Bureau, which says that at least 57,800 Americans age 15 to 17 reported being in marriages in 2014.

Among the states with the highest rates of child marriages were Arkansas, Idaho and Kentucky. The number of child marriages has been falling, but every state in America still allows underage girls to marry, typically with the consent of parents, a judge or both. Twenty-seven states do not even set a minimum age by statute, according to the Tahirih Justice Center's Forced Marriage Initiative.

A great majority of the child marriages involve girls and adult men. Such a sexual relationship would often violate statutory rape laws, but marriage sometimes makes it legal.

In New Hampshire, a girl scout named Cassandra Levesque learned that girls in her state could marry at 13. So she set out to change the law.

A legislator sponsored Cassandra's bill to raise the age to 18, and researchers found that two 15-year-olds had recently married in New Hampshire, along with one 13-year-old. But politicians resisted the initiative.

"We're asking the Legislature to repeal a law that's been on the books for over a century, that's been working without difficulty, on the basis of a request from a minor doing a Girl Scout project," scoffed one state representative, David Bates. In March the Republican-led House voted to kill the bill, leaving the minimum age at 13. (Legislators seem willing to marry off girls like Cassandra, but not to listen to them!)

New Jersey lawmakers passed a bill that would make their state the first in the country to ban marriages of people under 18, but Gov. Chris Christie this month blocked the legislation. New York legislators are considering a bill backed by Gov. Andrew Cuomo to raise the age to 17, from the current minimum, 14.

Opponents worry that raising the age will lead to out-of-wedlock births, and they note that many underage marriages are consensual.

Globally, a girl marries before the age of 15 every seven seconds, according to estimates by Save the Children. As in Africa and Asia, the reasons for such marriages in the U.S. are often cultural or religious; the American families follow conservative Christian, Muslim or Jewish traditions, and judges sometimes feel that they shouldn't intrude on other cultures.

Johnson, the former 11-year-old unwitting bride who is now fighting for Florida to set a minimum marriage age (there is none now), says that her family attended a conservative Pentecostal church and that other girls of a similar age periodically also married. Often, she says, this was to hide rapes by church elders.

She says she was raped by both a minister and a parishioner and gave birth to a daughter when she was just 10 (the birth certificate confirms that). A judge approved the marriage to end the rape investigation, she says, telling her, "What we want is for you to get married."

"It was a terrible life," Johnson recalls, recounting her years as a child raising children. She missed school and remembers spending her days changing diapers, arguing with her husband and struggling to pay expenses. She ended up with pregnancy after pregnancy — nine children in all — while her husband periodically abandoned her.

"They took the handcuffs from handcuffing him," she says, referring to the risk he faced of arrest for rape, "to handcuffing me, by marrying me without me knowing what I was doing."

"You can't get a job, you can't get a car, you can't get a license, you can't sign a lease," she adds, "so why allow someone to marry when they're still so young?"

Those are precisely the reasons marriages for even 17-year-olds are problematic, according to Fraidy Reiss, who founded Unchained at Last to fight forced marriage and child marriage. Bullied by their parents into marriage, she says, girls may feel powerless to object — and fearful of telling a judge that they don't want to wed. If they try to flee an abusive marriage, they are turned away from shelters and may be treated as simple runaways.

Some judges and clerks intervene on behalf of young girls; others do not. Reiss says one clerk told a 16-year-old bride: "Don't cry. This is supposed to be the happiest day of your life."

"For almost all of them," says Reiss, "marriage means rape on their wedding night and thereafter." Reiss, now 42, says she was forced into a marriage at age 19 by her ultra-Orthodox Jewish family.

Lyndsy Duet, now a school counselor in Texas, told me that she was forced into a marriage at 17 after enduring a series of rapes beginning when she was 14, by a young man her conservative Christian family had taken into the house. Confused, shamed and helpless, she didn't speak up — but her rapist did.

"He asked my parents if he could marry me," Duet remembers. "My mom was crying, she was so happy."

Duet felt powerless to resist her parents' pressure — and it was eight years before she could flee what she says was a violent marriage. Once, she says, her husband threatened her with a chain saw, and it was only when she went to college on her own and proved a brilliant student (she graduated first in her class) that she was able to escape.

"Most girls who reach out to us love their families," Reiss says, "and their primary concern is that they don't want their families to get into trouble."

The United States has denounced child marriage in other countries as a "human rights abuse that contributes to economic hardship," in the words of a State Department document published last year.

Let's listen to ourselves. State legislators must understand that child marriage is devastating in Niger and Afghanistan — and also in New York and Florida. It's past time to end child marriage right here at home.

MEXICO: Study finds sex trafficking and child marriages linked

By Sebastien Malo

Reuters (11.05.2017) - <http://tmsnrt.rs/2q8HXJH> - Girls being trafficked for sex in northern Mexico often have been forced into exploitation as under-age child brides by their husbands, a study showed on Thursday.

Three out of four girls trafficked in the region were married at a young age, mostly before age 16, according to Mexican and U.S. researchers in a yet-unpublished study.

Human trafficking is believed to be the fastest-growing criminal industry in Mexico, and three-quarters of its victims are sexually exploited women and girls, according to Women United Against Trafficking, an activist group.

Under a 2012 anti-trafficking law, those convicted of the crime can spend up to 30 years in prison.

Nevertheless, nearly 380,000 people are believed to be enslaved in Mexico, according to the 2016 Global Slavery Index published by rights group Walk Free Foundation.

The researchers interviewed 603 women working in the sex industry in the Mexican cities of Tijuana and Ciudad Juarez, both along the border with the United States.

Most said they had been trafficked as under-age brides, often by their husbands, said Jay Silverman, the study's lead author and a professor of medicine at the University of California, San Diego.

In about half the cases, the brides were pregnant, so healthcare workers could play a critical role in thwarting sex trafficking, the researchers said.

"Within being provided pregnancy-related care, there's the opportunity of interviewing that girl to understand her situation," Silverman told the Thomson Reuters Foundation.

"We can support and assist those girls to reduce the likelihood that they will become trafficked," he said.

Under a 2014 law, the minimum age for marriage in Mexico is 18 but girls can marry at age 14 and boys at age 16 with parental consent.

The researchers include members of the United States-Mexico Border Health Commission, a joint effort launched in 2000 by the two nations' governments to improve health and quality of life along the border.

They also came from Mexican economic institutions, and one was a medical doctor.

INDONESIA: Female clerics declare fatwa on child marriage

By Beh Lih Yi

Reuters (27.04.2017) - <http://tmsnrt.rs/2p7RDne> - Female clerics on Thursday issued an unprecedented fatwa against child marriage in Indonesia in a bid to stop young girls becoming brides in the world's most populous Muslim country.

The fatwa - which is influential among Muslims but not legally binding - came at the end of an extraordinary three-day conference of female Islamic clerics: a rare example of women assuming a lead role in religious affairs in this mostly-Muslim country.

"Maternal mortality is very high in Indonesia. We - as female clerics - can play a role on the issue of child marriage," conference organiser Ninik Rahayu told the Thomson Reuters Foundation.

"Female clerics know the issues and obstacles women face, we can take action and not just wait for the government to protect these children," she said by phone from Cirebon in the West Java province, where the congress was held.

Indonesia has one of the worst records for under-age marriage - its high number of child brides puts it among the top 10 countries worldwide - and it is common for girls to marry before they turn 18.

Thursday's fatwa, or religious edict, called underage marriage "harmful" and said its prevention was mandatory.

Fallout of early wedlock

One in six Indonesian girls marry before they turn 18, equal to 340,000 girls a year, according to the United Nations children's agency UNICEF. About 50,000 wed before they turn 15.

A government report last year showed almost a quarter of married women aged 20-24 had entered wedlock when they were under 18.

The Southeast Asian nation has a population of 250 million.

Under Indonesian laws, the minimum age of marriage for girls is 16, and 19 for boys.

In issuing the fatwa, the women clerics cited studies saying many Indonesian child brides could not continue their studies once wed and half their marriages ended in divorce.

They urged the government to raise the minimum marriage age for girls to 18, a demand activists have sought for years.

Early marriage not only makes it more likely that girls will quit school, campaigners say it also increases the risks of exploitation, sexual violence, domestic abuse and death in childbirth.

About 300 participants took part in the congress, which included Indonesian women clerics and women leaders from Afghanistan, Pakistan and Malaysia. Organisers billed the three-day conference as the first meeting of its kind in the world.

The congress also issued two other fatwa against environmental destruction and sexual violence, which the clerics said are against Islamic teaching and fundamental human rights.

WORLD: Child marriages: MEPs discuss how to put an end to this scourge

One in every three girls in developing countries is married before turning 18, and one in nine before 15. Child marriages limit future prospects as children are usually forced to drop out of school. Girls also face dangerous complications from pregnancy and childbirth, the leading causes of death among adolescent girls in developing countries. They are also at great risk from suffering abuse. On 11 April Parliament's women's rights and human rights subcommittee discussed the issue with experts.

European Parliament News (12.04.2017) - <http://bit.ly/2p4VAq4> - Child marriage affects both girls and boys, but girls are most at risk, representing 82% of the children married. The child marriage rate is slowly declining worldwide, but population growth will increase the number of people living with the consequences of a child marriage: 950 million by 2030 (compared to 700 million today).

Child marriages occur on all continents but the highest rates are found in South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa. The three countries with the highest rates of child marriage are Niger (77% of women are married before the age of 18), Bangladesh (74%) and Chad (69%). In a [resolution](#) adopted in plenary last week, MEPs called on the Bangladesh government to close the loopholes in their legislation on child marriages, allowing exemptions to the minimum age of 18 for women and 21 for men.

The factors driving child marriages

the causes of child marriages include poverty, gender inequality and parent's fear for their children's security. Anna Maria Corazza Bildt, a Swedish member of the EPP group, said she had spoken to parents in refugee camps who saw marriage as the best way to provide their children with a future.

A [recent study](#) among Syrian refugees in Lebanon found that 24% of refugee girls between 15 and 17 were already married. Estimates indicate that child marriage rates are four times higher among Syrian refugees than among Syrians before the conflict.

How to tackle it

Experts and MEPs stressed the importance of working directly with the children and the communities to change social norms, guarantee access to health, education and legal services and ensure a strong and legal framework.

"Parliaments everywhere should adopt laws to protect children and in particular not deny girls of their dignity and ability to make fundamental choices in their own lives," said Pier Antonio Panzeri, an Italian member of the S&D group, chair of the human rights subcommittee and co-chair of the hearing.

Professor Benyam Dawit Mezmur, chair of the UN committee on children's rights, stressed the importance of the role of regional organisations, while and Fredrik Malmberg, the Swedish ombudsman for children, called on EU countries to end double standards for asylum seekers. "Our legislation and our institutions should provide equal protection from all children," he said.

Ms Vilija BLINKEVIČIŪTĖ (S&D, LT), Chair of the Committee on Women's Rights and Gender Equality and co-chair of the hearing remained that child and early marriage can be significantly lowered by education and economic empowerment for women.

"Tackling child marriage gives us an entry point to address a whole range of other issues," said Lakshmi Sundaram, executive director of the non-governmental organisation Girls not Brides. She said child marriages could hold back other development efforts, "such as ending violence against women, keeping children in school, or getting rid of HIV/Aids".

GEORGIA: Child brides

WUNRN Newsletter (12.04.2017) - <http://www.wunrn.com> - Although the legal age of marriage in the country of Georgia in the Caucasus is 18, there is a long-standing tradition of girls marrying before then. The United Nations Population Fund has estimated that at least 17 percent of girls there get married before the age of 18. There are many reasons that these marriages still take place, including long-standing tradition, the will of the girl's parents and even kidnapping by a suitor.



Maca, 17, married at 16, is mother of a 6-month-old child and is now again pregnant. Like most of the young brides, she became pregnant immediately after getting married. Pankisi Gorge, Georgia. (Myriam Meloni)

Italian photographer Myriam Meloni, along with journalist Elena Ledda, took a journey to Georgia to meet some of these child brides. There, they encountered girls like Samaia, engaged at 16 to a man she had only seen once in her life. After marriage, many of these girls stop going to school because it is thought that education isn't needed for someone whose primary duties in life include bearing children and keeping house.

Georgia is trying to comply with human rights protection requirements from the European Union by abolishing provisions that allow child marriage. Until recently, there was a provision that allowed such marriages in "special circumstances" with the consent of a court. That was struck down in January. But tradition is strong in this country where having romantic relationships before marriage is taboo and traditional gender roles still reign supreme. So the marriages continue.

The existing data in Georgia, shows that up to 17 percent of Georgian women were married before the age of 18.

TANZANIA: National survey on child marriage

[Full 2017 study in English \(192 pages\)](#)

[Summary in English \(32 pages\)](#)

[Link to full study & summary in Swahili](#)

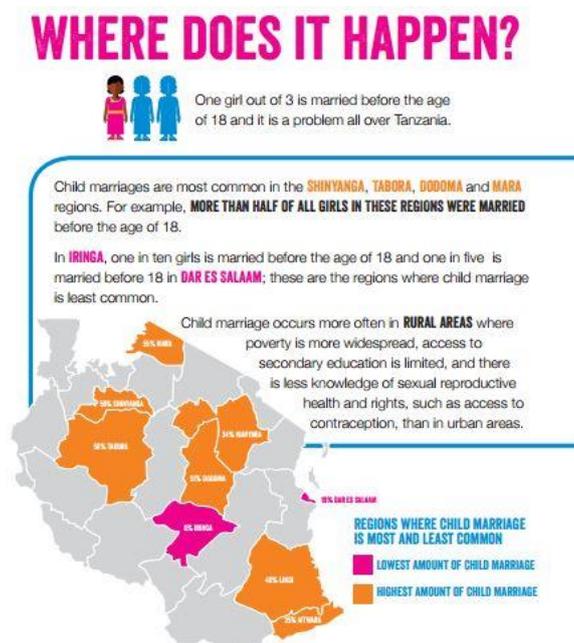
Girls Not Brides (04.04.2017) - <http://bit.ly/2pQK7NO> - Child marriage can look different from one country to the next. Without context-specific data, it is difficult to design interventions that will effectively tackle the practice.

To better understand why child marriage happens in Tanzania and how best to tackle it, the Ministry of Health, Community Development, Gender, Elderly and Children (MOHCDGEC) there conducted a national survey with the support of several Girls Not Brides members: Children's Dignity Forum, Plan International and FORWARD. They have released their findings and recommendations. Here is what we learned.

Not all girls are equally affected by child marriage

According to the survey, 37% of girls in Tanzania are married before their 18th birthday. This is based on the percentage of women aged 20-24 years old who were married before they were 18 years old. But not all girls face the same level of risk.

Some regions have higher rates than others, with Shinyanga and Tabora having rates of up to 59% and 58% while Dar es Salaam and Iringa have rates as low as 19% and 8%. Girls who live in rural areas and/or come from a poor family are also much more likely to be married early.



Child marriage is usually driven by poverty

While there are many drivers of child marriage in Tanzania, poverty is by far the biggest factor. Poor families who are unable to pay school fees or take care of their children often resort to marriage, seeing it as a form of economic and social protection. The bride price that parents receive upon marriage – often paid in cattle and cash – is also seen as a strategy to reduce poverty.

...But Gender is always a factor

From a very young age, girls in some regions are raised to perform traditional gender roles as mothers, wives and caregivers. As a result, they often have limited economic value to the household, except the bride price they bring when they marry. Boys, on the other hand are seen as an investment in the family's future.

Fear of dishonour and teenage pregnancies also drive child marriage

Parents worry about the shame, and financial burden, that an unwanted pregnancy brings to the family. In many cases, girls are made to marry the men who got them pregnant, whether they want to or not.

Girls are often tested for pregnancy in schools and expelled if they test positive. Once out of school, they are more likely to be married. There is a real concern that, with the recent increase in teen pregnancies (from 23% in 2010 to 27% in 2016), child marriage rates could rise too.

Girls are not fully protected by the law

Tanzania's Law of Marriage Act (1971) is different for boys and girls. It allows girls to be married at 15 years old whereas boys have to be 18. Both boys and girls can marry at 14 with a court's permission. In June 2016, Tanzania's high court ruled this to be unconstitutional but the law has yet to be amended.

Bribery and corruption are also an issue. There have been various cases of parents bribing government officials who may be likely to report a case of child marriage.

What is needed to end child marriage in Tanzania?

- Reform and harmonise conflicting laws, such as the Law of Marriage Act of 1971. Make it clear that marriage is only for those 18 and above. Ensure the legislation is enforced.
- Educate community members about the adverse effects of child marriage. Develop strategies to end poverty so families don't see marriage as a coping mechanism.
- Strengthen education and learning environments for girls in rural and urban areas. Invest in quality education, and offer reliable transport to school. Encourage married children and teenage mothers to return to school.
- Teach sexual and reproductive health education in schools and communities. Girls and boys need to know and understand what consent means and how to protect themselves, if they do decide to have sex.
- Fund and implement the National Plan of Action to End Violence Against Women and Children in Tanzania (2017/18-2021/22) across the country. Ensure that all relevant Government ministries such as education and health are involved in tackling child marriage together in collaboration with civil society organisations, UN agencies, community leaders and other stakeholders.

LEBANON: Engaging male caregivers to end early marriage

Training modules to accompany programs with adolescent girls

Women's Refugee Commission and Danish Refugee Council (03.2018) - <https://bit.ly/2RVnXbe>

Why engage male caregivers?

Male caregivers, especially fathers, have a profound influence in the lives of girls. Whether positive, negative or lacking, male caregivers exert considerable impact on girls' development and opportunities. As a result, targeted programming for girls should identify

opportunities to strategically engage fathers in being champions for their daughters' safety and well-being. Research affirms that engaging male caregivers matters; when fathers adopt more equitable viewpoints about their daughters and when they become more positively involved in their lives, this involvement is associated with increased school participation and achievement and with elevated self-esteem. Therefore, when engaged, male caregivers can become champions for girls' participation in formal education and non-formal educational programming that can build their capacities and mitigate their risks, including risk of child marriage. This work should complement, not detract, from an intentional and equitable focus on adolescent girls.

Read the full 69-page report: <https://bit.ly/2RVnXbe>

WORLD: Jasvinder Sanghera: I ran away to escape a forced marriage

Jasvinder Sanghera was locked in a room by her parents when she was 16, when she refused to marry the man they had chosen for her. Here she describes how she escaped with the help of a secret boyfriend - but lost all contact with her family as a result.

BBC Magazine (24.02.2017) - <http://bbc.in/2kUpCSe> - Growing up we had no freedom whatsoever. Everything was watched, monitored and controlled. We understood that we had to be careful how we behaved so as not to shame the family.

I'm one of seven sisters and there's only one younger than me so I'd watched my sisters having to be married at very young ages - as young as 15.

They would disappear to become a wife and go to India, come back, not go back to school and then go into these marriages and be physically and psychologically abused. And my impression of marriage was that this is what happens to you - you get married, you get beaten up, and then you're told to stay there.

My parents were Sikh and Sikhism was born on the foundation of compassion and equality of men and women, and yet here we have women who were treated very differently. My brother was allowed total freedom of expression. He was also allowed to choose who he wanted to marry. But the women were treated differently and that was reinforced within the communities. It's gone unchallenged and it's deeply ingrained.

I don't think I was smarter. I just don't know what it was within me. My mother used to say: "You were born upside down, you were different from birth."

Maybe she helped me out by saying that, because it made me question a number of things, and then when I was shown the photograph of this man, as a 14-year-old, knowing that I'd been promised to him from the age of eight and being expected to contemplate marriage, I looked at this picture thinking: "Well he's shorter than me and he's very much older than me and I don't want this."

And it was as simple as that.

But within our family dynamic we were taught to be silent.

Saying no to the marriage meant my family took me out of education and they held me a prisoner in my own home.

I was 15 and I was locked in this room and literally I was not allowed to leave the room until I agreed to the marriage. It was padlocked on the outside and I had to knock on the door to go the toilet and they brought food to the door.

My mother was the very person who enforced the rules. People don't think of women as the gatekeepers to an honour system.

So in the end I said yes, purely to plan my escape. And it was as simple as that, because then I had freedom of movement.

The only friends we were allowed had to be from an Indian community as well. And my best friend, who was Indian, it was her brother who helped me in the end.

He became my secret boyfriend. He saved some money and said, "I want to be with you and I'll help you to escape." He would come to the house at night and stand in the garden and we would secretly mouth things to each other through the window.

One day he dressed up as a woman and went into a shoe shop and pretended he was shopping. He handed me a note which said, "I'll be at the back of the house at this time - look out of the window." So I did, and he mouthed for me to pack my wardrobe and I lowered two cases down using sheets tied together, and flushed the toilets so my mother wouldn't hear.

And then one day I was at home with my dad, who was at home because he worked nights, and the front door was open, and I just ran out.

I ran all the way, a good three-and-a-half miles, to where my boyfriend worked and hid behind a wall and waited for him to come out. He went and got my cases and then picked me up in his Ford Escort and got me to close my eyes and put my finger on a map, and it landed on Newcastle.

I sat in the footwell of the car all the way so no-one would see me and then when I saw the Tyne bridge I was absolutely amazed by it because I had never been anywhere outside Derby.

My parents reported me missing to the police and it was the police officer who told me I had to ring home to let them know I was safe and well.

My mother answered the phone and I said: "Mom, it's me. You know, I want to come home but I don't want to marry that stranger."

Her response has stayed with me for the rest of my life. She said: "You either come back and marry who we say, or from this day forward you are now dead in our eyes."

It was only later on when things settled down that I begin to think, "I've done it but where's my family? I want my family." I was missing them terribly. You feel like a dead person walking.

My boyfriend used to drive me to my hometown at 3am just so I could see my dad walking home from the foundry.

What changed how I felt was the death of my sister, Robina. She was taken out of school at 15 for nine months, married to a man in India, and then came back and put in the same

year as me and nobody questioned this at all. But he treated her terribly and when her son was around six months old she severed the relationship.

She then married for love and my parents agreed to it because he was Indian - Sikh and from the same caste as us. She again suffered domestic abuse but my parents made it clear that because she had chosen him she had a duty, doubly, to make it work.

She went to see a local community leader - they have a lot of power, my parents would have seen his word as the word of God - and he told her: "You need to think of your husband's temper like a pan of milk - when it boils it rises to the top and a woman's role is to blow it to cool it down."

When she was 25 she set herself on fire and she died. When she was - I say - driven to commit suicide, that was the turning point for me.

I've learned to live my life with no expectations of family whatsoever. I've never had a birthday card in 35 years and neither have my children. For my children it's a total blank on their mother's side when it comes to family. I've got nephews and nieces that I'll never meet because all of my siblings sided with my parents.

I have actually stipulated in my will that I do not want any of my estranged family to be at my funeral because I know the hypocrisy that exists within them. They will want to show their face, but if they couldn't show it when I was alive, I'm not going to give them that privilege when I'm gone.

I have three children - Natasha who's 31, Anna who's 22 and Jordan who's 19.

You almost live vicariously through your children because you want them to have everything you never had.

My daughter married an Asian man and I was worried - I didn't want this family to take it out on her that her mother was disowned and had run away from home. But thankfully for me my fears were completely unfounded because here was an Indian family that did the exact opposite of what my family did.

Starting a charity, Karma Nirvana, in 1993 from my kitchen table allowed me for the first time to start talking about my personal experiences and what had happened to my sister. My family wanted us to never speak about Robina again.

Sometimes at Christmas my children would meet these different women at the dinner table - survivors disowned by their family - and they had no idea who would be the next person at our table, but they understood why.

The charity will be 25 years old next year. We have helped make forced marriage a criminal offence, we have a helpline funded by the government which takes 750 calls a month - 58% of callers are victims and the others are professionals calling about a victim.

We do risk assessments, offer refuge and help plan escapes.

We still don't have enough responses from professionals and we've got to try to increase the reporting, but we're getting there. This is abuse, not part of culture where we make excuses - cultural acceptance does not mean accepting the unacceptable. Abuse is abuse.

I'm a grandmother now - my daughter's expecting her second child in March. And you know when I look at them I think to myself, 'they're never going to inherit that legacy of abuse because of that decision I made when I was 16.'

And that really makes me feel a lot stronger.

Other reading:

[U.N. General Assembly adopts resolution to end child, early, and forced marriage worldwide](#)

IRAQ: Sunni women tell of ISIS detention, torture

Describe forced marriage, rape

HRW (20.02.2017) - <http://bit.ly/2lmQjxL> - Fighters from the Islamic State (also known as ISIS) are arbitrarily detaining, ill-treating, torturing, and forcibly marrying Sunni Arab women and girls in areas under their control in Iraq, Human Rights Watch said today.

Although accounts of gender-based violence have emerged from areas under ISIS control, these are the first cases against Sunni Arab women in Iraq that Human Rights Watch has been able to document. Researchers interviewed six women in Kirkuk, to which they had escaped from the town of Hawija, 125 kilometers south of Mosul and still under ISIS control. Human Rights Watch and others have extensively documented similar abuses by ISIS fighters against Yezidi women.

“Little is known about sexual abuse against Sunni Arab women living under ISIS rule,” said Lama Fakih, deputy Middle East director at Human Rights Watch. “We hope that the international community and local authorities will do all they can to give this group of victims the support they need.”

In January 2017, Human Rights Watch interviewed four women who said they had been detained by ISIS in 2016, for periods between three days and a month. Another woman said an ISIS fighter, her cousin, forced her to marry him and then raped her. A sixth woman said that ISIS fighters destroyed her home as punishment after her husband escaped ISIS and tried to forcibly marry her. Five of the six women said that ISIS fighters beat them.

One woman said that in April 2016, she tried to escape Hawija with her three children and a large group of other families. ISIS fighters captured the group and held 50 of the women from the group in an abandoned house. The woman said that over the next month, one fighter raped her daily in front of her children. She suspected that many of the other women held with her were also being raped.

Experts from four international organizations, including two medical organizations, working with survivors of sexual assault in northern Iraq told Human Rights Watch it is difficult to assess the prevalence of ISIS’ gender-based violence against women who have fled territory under their control. They said that victims and their families remain silent to avoid stigmatization and harm to the woman or girl’s reputation.

One foreign aid worker said she had seen cases mostly of forced marriage and rape, but she believed that very few of the victims in the displaced communities she works with have come forward. She said some women try to hide the incident from their own families out of fear they will be stigmatized or punished by their relatives or community. Babies born of rape or forced marriage may also face stigma, she said. Their long-term psychosocial support and medical treatment are particular concerns, she said. Another aid provider for an international organization providing services at three camps for people displaced from ISIS-controlled territory said their staff had documented 50 cases of women and girls who

suffered psychological and physical violence at the hands of ISIS and to whom the organization was providing support.

Several local and international organizations are providing support to victims of gender-based violence. However, not enough is being done to tackle the stigma around sexual violence, and there is a lack of awareness about appropriate services and psychosocial or mental health support, medical professionals and service providers in Kirkuk said. Available services continue to be outstripped by needs, they said.

A psychiatrist at an international organization providing psychosocial support in one of the larger displaced people's camps in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq said that too little has been done to inform men about how to support female victims of gender-based violence. She said that very often, male relatives will forbid women from getting counseling and vocational training, even if the women want the services.

The women interviewed are all patients at the Kirkuk Center, where a staff of 12 provides psychological and behavioral counseling to women and children. Dr. Abd al-Karim Kalyfa, who runs the center, said in January that the center was at that time treating 30 patients, 15 of them children, suffering from trauma related to their experiences living under ISIS. In 2016, he said, his center treated about 400 patients who had come from ISIS-held territory. ISIS fighters had raped at least two of his current patients, he said. He knew of one other organization in the Kirkuk area providing services to victims of sexual assault but said there was far too little support available to provide needed mental health care to displaced people who had lived under ISIS.

Another medical professional in Kirkuk who is providing social support to women and children who have been traumatized by their experience under ISIS said that services provided by the federal government focus on pharmacological treatment, not on psychosocial therapy and counseling.

A program manager at an international organization providing services in one of the larger displaced people's camps in northern Iraq said that the group has been able to create effective safe spaces and start vocational projects for women. But it has not yet been able to provide more long-term psychosocial support and other services for survivors of gender-based violence, because it is struggling to find female staff with the needed language skills, experience, and professional qualifications.

The Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), together with United Nations agencies and other international humanitarian groups, have struggled to provide the survivors of violence against Yazidi women who escaped ISIS with post-rape care and psychosocial support.

Providing adequate mental health care and psychosocial support is a complex and long-term challenge. The KRG government, Iraqi central government, UN agencies, and others involved need to put in place a coordinated response, based on an assessment of the needs and the most pressing priorities. The groups should identify key barriers to making care and services accessible, available, and voluntary, and determine the potential cost. Such coordination efforts should include the World Health Organization (WHO) and representatives of the survivors.

WHO has said that mental health services and psychosocial support are essential components of comprehensive care for survivors of sexual violence. It has also stated that people with mental health conditions and their communities should help develop these services and that those responsible for providing services should strengthen existing resources and make them available in a nondiscriminatory fashion to all.

"ISIS victims of gender-based violence suffer the consequences of their abuse long after they have managed to escape." Fakhri said. "Their care and rehabilitation requires a multifaceted response, with authorities providing the needed medical and psychosocial support and working to stamp out stigma around sexual violence within the wider community."

The Kirkuk-based National Institute for Human Rights helped Human Rights Watch by identifying the interviewees and setting up and hosting the interviews. All interviews were conducted with full and informed consent, in Arabic without translation. We took measures to respect the privacy of survivors and conducted interviews in as private a setting as possible. In all cases, Human Rights Watch took steps to minimize re-traumatization of survivors, stopping interviews if they caused distress. In order to protect victims and witnesses, individual names and other identifying information have been modified or withheld.

Suad

Suad, 21, is from a village near Hawija. She said that her cousin, who is one year older than her, joined ISIS when its fighters took over the city in 2014. Their families had intended that they marry, but once he became an ISIS fighter, Suad said, she and her parents informed him that they no longer wanted the union to take place. But on a morning in January 2016, he arrived at her home with his brother and cousin and demanded that Suad marry him or he would kill her parents. Her family acquiesced to this threat, and her cousin took her to his home where he forced her to marry him and raped her. She became pregnant. After eight months, Suad said, she escaped in the middle of the night and fled with her parents to Kirkuk. She gave birth a month later, but the baby boy died four days later, she said.

Fawzia

Fawzia, 45, is from Daquq but was living in Hawija when, in early 2015, ISIS fighters approached her husband and asked him to act as a spy in their neighborhood. He refused and was detained for 10 days beginning on February 7, 2016, in a village outside the city, escaping immediately after he was released. Fawzia said that three ISIS fighters occupied her house for three days during this period, put her two children under house arrest, and forced them to stay in one room. She said that she saw ISIS fighters bring a different girl each day to the adjacent room for about an hour. She said she was able to see the girls when the door to her room was open. She estimated that they were about 16 and said she heard them crying through the wall. She believed the fighters had sexually assaulted the girls.

After the three days, Fawzia said she told the fighters to stop bringing girls to her house. One of them hit her with his hand and the butt of his gun, and said that their leader would come and marry her. They also warned her that if she tried to escape to Kirkuk, ISIS operatives in the city would find and kill her. On the fourth morning, during the 5 a.m. prayer, when all the ISIS fighters were at the local mosque, Fawzia fled with her children to Kirkuk. She broke down into tears as she completed her story:

When I arrived at the first Peshmerga checkpoint, I was so scared that they [ISIS] would find out I had escaped that I didn't register myself. I am so scared here in Kirkuk that I have spent the last year staying inside my relatives' house. I don't even leave to go to the store, and if I must leave, I spend the whole time looking over my shoulder. They might know where I live and come kill me.

Mariam

Mariam, 25, said that in March 2016, her husband fled Hawija, fearing possible execution because he was a former policeman. Three days later, she said, about 20 ISIS fighters found her at home with her daughter and dragged them outside, hitting her head and shoulders. The ISIS fighters blew up her home, forcing her to watch as punishment for her husband's escape. She moved in with her brother-in-law, she said, but within a few days two ISIS fighters arrived and told her she was an apostate because her husband fled, but that she was still young and had to marry one of them. She agreed, telling them to come the following day, and went into hiding that night. Over the next three months, Mariam said, she moved repeatedly. She unsuccessfully tried to escape the area three times but finally fled with her 3-year-old daughter to Kirkuk.

Hanan

Hanan, 26, said she tried to escape from Hawija on April 21, 2016, with her children and about 50 women and four men from several Sunni families. Her husband had fled several weeks earlier. She said ISIS fighters arrested the group in Qayyarah, 65 kilometers north, and took them to an abandoned house, where they locked the women and their children in a room. On the first day, Hanan said, an ISIS guard took her and her daughter, 8, and sons, 6 and 3, to a separate room. ISIS fighters told her she was an apostate because her husband had fled ISIS-controlled territory and that she needed to remarry the local ISIS leader. She said, "Kill me, because I refuse to do that."

The fighters blindfolded her, beat her with plastic cables, and suspended her by her arms for some time – she could not estimate how long – in front of her children. Then they took her down, took off the blindfold, and one of the fighters raped her in front of her children:

The same guy raped me every day for the next month without a blindfold, always in front of my children. My daughter suffers from an intellectual disability so she doesn't really understand what she saw, but my older son brings it up often. I don't know what to do.

She said that the other women were taken out of the communal room, sometimes daily, other times less often, and that one of them, from Hajj Ali who had an 11-month-old daughter, had told her that another fighter was raping her and that he was going to force her to marry him. She suspected that all the other women were being raped as well.

A month after she was captured, Hanan's father was able to locate her and gave ISIS a car and paid US\$500 for her release, she said. He was forced to sign a document stating that if she escaped ISIS-controlled territory, he would be killed. The ISIS fighter who had been raping her said he wanted to marry her, but she and her father refused, she said. In January 2017, she said, she escaped with the rest of her family to Kirkuk. She said she did not know what happened to the other women, but heard from the woman from Hajj Ali's family that she had been forced to marry her rapist.

Karima

Karima, 17, said she fled Hawija toward Kirkuk with 16 family members in June 2016. As they left Hawija, an ISIS sniper shot her mother in the neck, killing her. Most of her family members escaped but ISIS fighters captured Karima and her brothers, ages 6, 11, and 13, and held them in an abandoned home near Hawija without food and with very little water. They were interrogated about their father, a former Iraqi policeman who was able to flee earlier. Her captors hit her and her 13-year-old brother once each with a gun butt to the shoulder during an interrogation, she said. After three days, they were released and escaped to Kirkuk.

Aisha

Aisha, 25, said she tried to escape Hawija in October 2016 with her family and two other families. While they were waiting for smugglers to show them a safe route, she said, ISIS fighters appeared and opened fire on them, shooting her 6-year-old son in his back. She said that the men in the group escaped, but the ISIS fighters rounded up all five women, hitting Aisha with gun butt on her shoulder. The ISIS fighters took her son to a Hawija hospital and locked up the women in a room in an abandoned house about a 30-minute drive away.

She said that three female ISIS guards came and lashed each woman 65 times with a thin cane, saying that if they even winced, they would get more lashes. Aisha said ISIS held her for 12 days and was only released after her family paid about US\$2,000. The other women were still there, and she does not know what happened to them.

She rushed to the hospital and found her son, who had survived four operations, and finally escaped Kirkuk with her son. She showed Human Rights Watch her son's wounds.

USA: Child marriage is legal in New York – but this bill aims to stop it

By Meghan Werft

Global Citizen (15.02.2017) - <http://gblctzn.me/2mkBfOC> - Just a few years ago in the state of New York, a 14-year-old girl legally married a 26-year-old man.

It was, without question, child marriage — an issue that the United Nations says is a flagrant human rights violation. But marriage at the age of 14 is legal in New York and many other states in the US, provided the parents and a court give their permission.

One lawmaker in New York is hoping to change that law and make it impossible for children to get married at an age that makes them vulnerable to sexual abuse and domestic violence.

Amy Paulin, Democratic Assemblywoman for New York's 88th District, introduced a bill to the New York State Assembly that would prohibit marriage under the age of 17 and require court permission for marriages of anyone under 18.

"I can't even begin to imagine the physical, psychological and emotional traumas these children have suffered," said Paulin. "We must safeguard the health, safety and welfare of our children, who are the future of our society."

Paulin introduced the bill following a campaign by child rights activists who released a stunt video of a child marriage in Times Square last year that, amassed 15 million views on YouTube and shocked New Yorkers. The sad reality is that child marriage does occur in New York and throughout the US, legally.

Nearly 4,000 teenagers were married, legally, in New York between 2000 and 2010 according to Human Rights Watch. Not far from the video above, an astonishing 84% of child marriages in New York were between girls under 18, and adult men.

Laws have been slow to change partly because of outdated belief that marriage can be a solution to teen pregnancy, or fear of infringing on religious freedoms. However, young

marriages have higher rates of divorce, cases of poverty, and negatively impact girls' mental health and access to education — to name just a few counterarguments.

“Child pregnancy should trigger alarm bells, not wedding bells,” said Marlena Hartz, spokesperson for the Tahirih Justice Center, a legal council group that advocates for eliminating parental permission clauses that allow child marriage in the US.

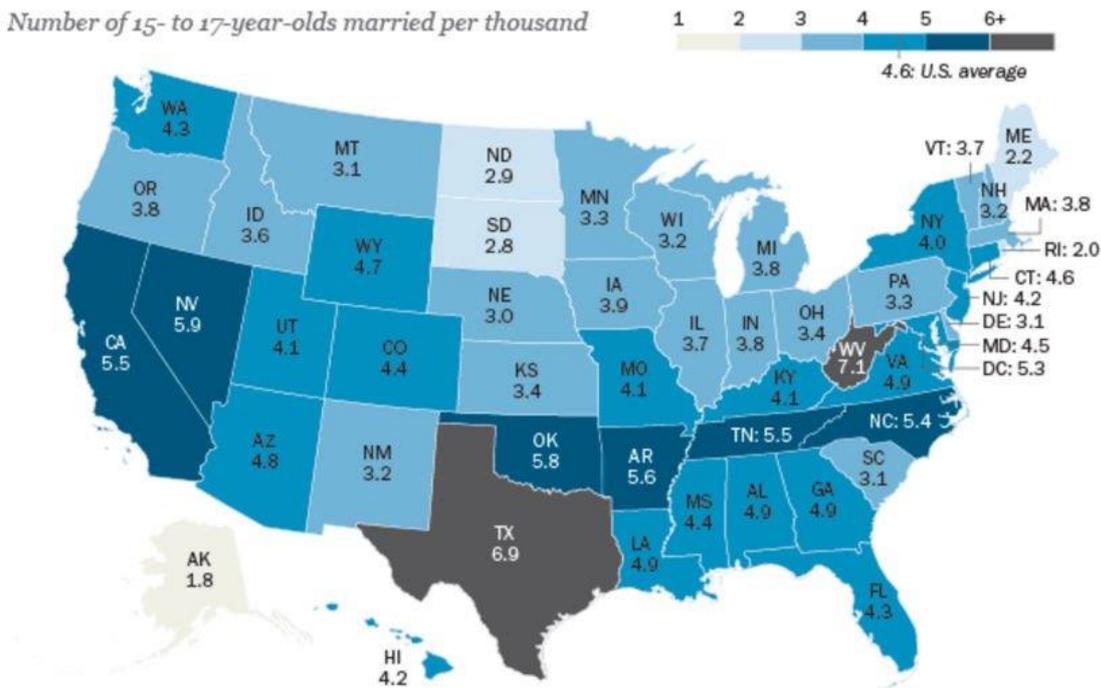
New York is one of five states, including Alaska, New Hampshire, Massachusetts, North Carolina, that allow child marriage via parental loopholes for children as young as 14.

Though rare, child marriage is much more common than you might think in the US, especially in Southern states. In West Virginia and Texas, 7 out of 1,000 youth age 15-17 are married.

In New York, four of every 1,000 teens between the ages of 15 and 17 are married, according to Pew Research Center. Girls are also more likely to be married at a young age than boys in the US.

Child marriage is more common in the southern United States

Number of 15- to 17-year-olds married per thousand



Note: Marriage rates for 2014 are five-year estimates that include data collected from 2010-2014. Respondents who are separated, divorced, or widowed are not counted as “married” but are included in the total population of 15- to 17-year-olds. Source: Pew Research Center analysis of American Community Survey data (2014 five-year estimates)

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

In the vast majority of states - 44 of them - the legal marriage age with parental permission is 16 years old. But in the states that have exceptions, the age can be much, much lower.

In New Hampshire and Massachusetts, kids can get married as soon as they turn 13.

In Virginia girls can be married at 13 if they are pregnant. There were four cases of marriage of 13-year-olds and 24 cases of legal marriage of 14-year-olds in the state

between 2004-2014 according to Maribeth Brewster, a spokesperson for the Virginia Department of Health.

"I think that we can't know what all the stories are behind those statistics, but I can tell you that when you have someone, an adolescent that young, there is a greater likelihood that the parents are coercing them to get married and it is not of their own free will," said Jeanne Smoot, a senior council for TJS.

As Smoot points out, at 14, a child is very much still a minor incapable of making their own decisions, and it is the responsibility of the law to step in and stand up for the rights of all vulnerable children.

Tanzania, the Gambia, and Zimbabwe have all taken steps to close loopholes in child marriage in the law in recent years. It's time for the US to follow suit.

Fortunately, New York lawmakers are now one step closer to protecting young girls and boys that, with hope, will spark change across the US.

WORLD: The legal age you can get married around the world, mapped

Around the world, children are taken from their families and married off against their will, often at the behest of their families.

Indy100.com (January 2017) - <http://bit.ly/2juD7r5> - Despite many nations introducing legal minimum ages for marriages, many have exemptions when "parental consent is given", undermining national legislation.

Often there is inequality when it comes to the age at which girls and boys are respectively allowed to be married off.

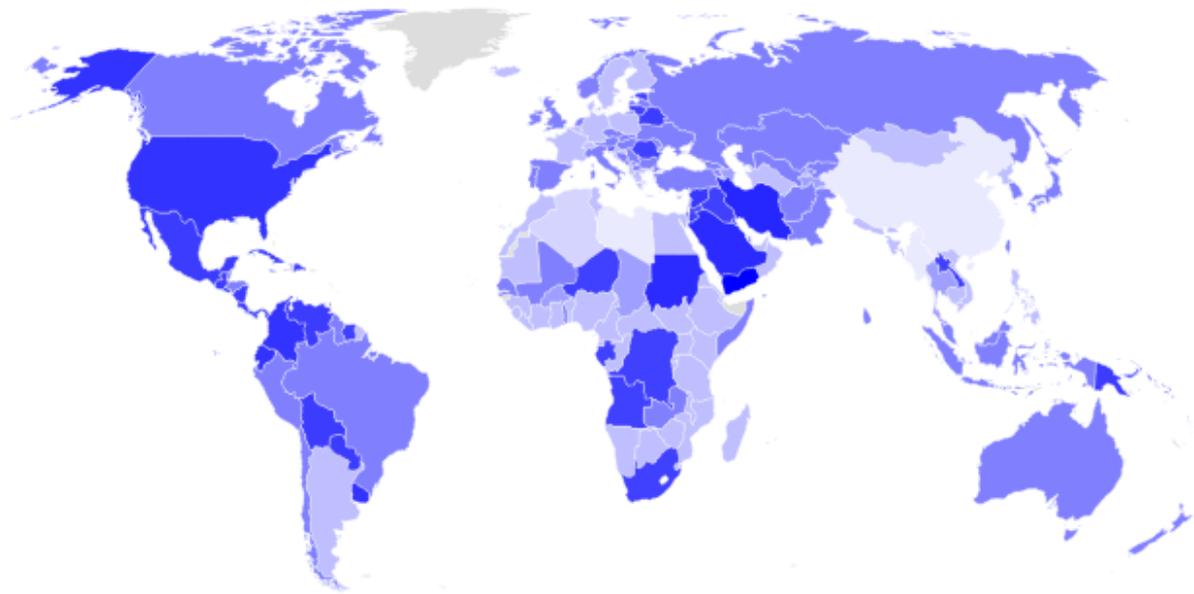
Girls Not Brides is a campaign group committed to ending child marriage in the world.

Using their data, compiled from 2015 with updates from 2016, indy100 has created this series of maps.

Isis-controlled territory in Iraq and Syria has not been featured on these maps, but the age of marriage consent differs within those territories.

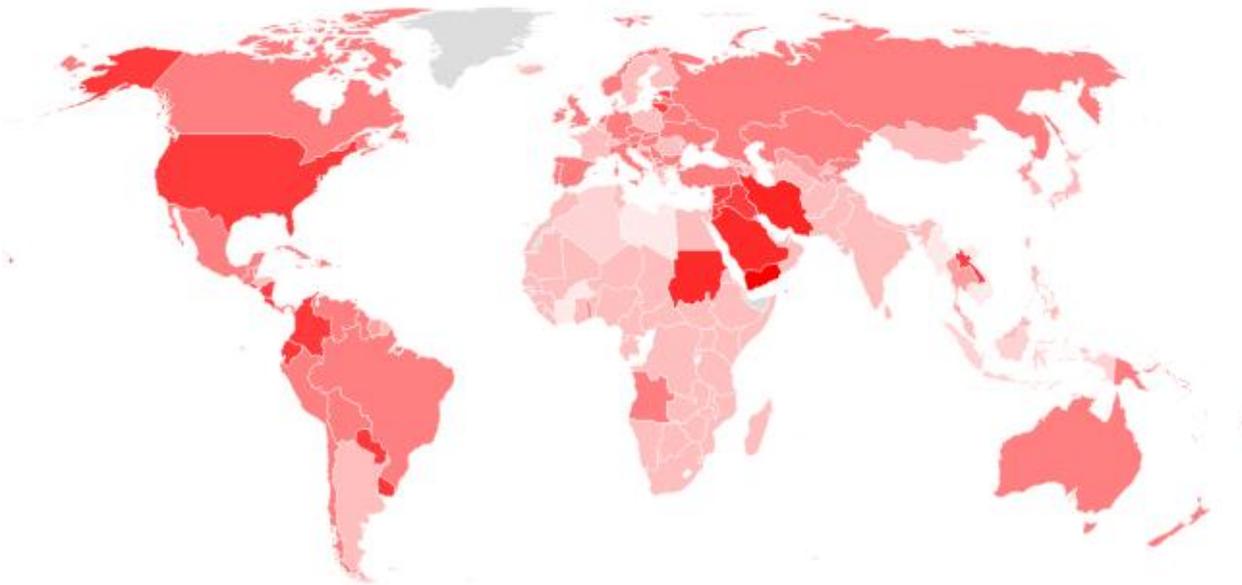
Women and girls

Legal age of marriage (with parental consent).



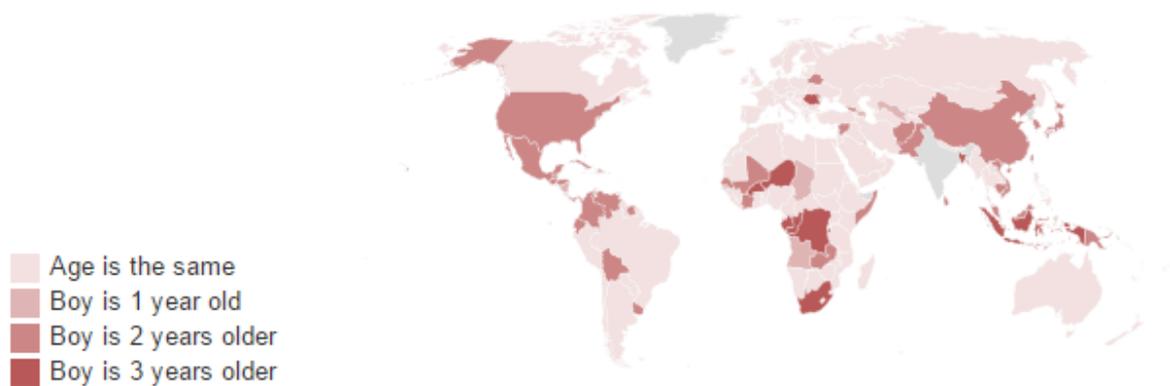
Men and boys

Legal age of marriage (with parental consent).



Age gaps

Age differences (gender) for legal marriage with parental consent.



NB. In North Korea and India, the age for girls is older than boys, by 1 and 3 years respectively.

Raising the age in 2016

In July 2016 Tanzania's high court ruled that the country's Law of Marriages Act must be revised to eliminate inequality between the minimum marriage ages for boys and girls.

Both are now set at 18.

The decision followed a tightening of marriage laws, introducing tougher punishments for men who marry school girls or impregnate them.

In January 2017 Georgia will bring both ages to 18, following the abolition of an exemption in the George Civil Code that allowed for adolescents to marry "in special circumstances".

The 2013 constitution of Zimbabwe rules that the age for both genders must be 18, yet the Marriage Act contravenes this, stipulating 16 for girls. Two former child brides Loveness and Ruvimbo, along with ROOTS, a constituent member of Girls Not Brides, lobbied the country's supreme court. In 2016, the court ruled that the Marriage Act was unconstitutional.

Proposed laws

Legislation has been proposed in Malaysia that will increase the minimum age to 18 for Muslim girls.

Gambia is set to outlaw marriage by any person under 18 with a 20 year prison sentence for those involved, and 10 years for anyone who had knowledge about the marriage but did not attempt to prevent it. The legislation is expected to reach Gambia's National Assembly by July 2017.

Reducing the age

In late November the cabinet of Bangladesh proposed to lower the legal marriage age 'to preserve a girl's honour'.

According to Human Rights Watch, 52 per cent of girls in Bangladesh marry before they 18, and 18 per cent before they turn 15.

While the draft legislation sets the age for girls at 18, it also contains provisions for marriage below age 18 being permitted in "special circumstances, such as accidental or unlawful pregnancy."

Human Rights Watch claims that the draft does not set any minimum age for such “exceptional” marriages.

Girls Not Brides in 2017

The current Girls Not Brides strategy will end in 2016. A spokesperson for Girls Not Brides told indy100 about their plans for the coming 12 months:

“Our efforts are going to be focused on supporting our members re: implementing national strategies aimed at ending child marriage (or working with different government ministries to develop one), securing funding for the sector, advocating for different sectors (especially health, education and humanitarian responses) to embed child marriage into programming.”

LEBANON: New study finds child marriage rising among most vulnerable Syrian refugees

United Nations Population Fund (31.01.2017) - <http://bit.ly/2jSY0s7> - An alarming rise in child marriages has been seen among the most vulnerable Syrian refugee populations in Lebanon, according to a newly completed survey conducted by UNFPA, the American University of Beirut and Sawa for Development and Aid.

The survey covered some 2,400 refugee women and girls living in Western Bekaa, and found that more than a third of those surveyed between the ages of 20 and 24 had been married before reaching age 18.

Among refugee girls currently between ages 15 and 17, some 24 per cent are married.

Before the devastating conflict erupted in Syria, child marriage was significantly less common among Syrians. Estimates vary, but some show [child marriage](#) rates to be four times higher among Syrian refugees today than among Syrians before the crisis. This indicates that displacement, instability and poverty are driving the underage marriages.

Even some of the data collectors, who were selected from the community being surveyed, are struggling with the pressure to marry off their daughters.

“I am convinced that no girl should get married before the age of 18. But when it comes to reality, it is different,” said Iman*, a Syrian refugee who was one of the data collectors.

She explained that, as a widow and the sole breadwinner for her family, she has trouble supporting her three children and ageing father.

“For this, reason my cousin, out of his good heart, wanted to help out by getting engaged to my daughter and supporting us financially,” she said.

Her daughter is 15.

Awareness needed

The survey was conducted in August and September 2016 in Bar Elias, Kab Elias and Marj, areas in Western Bekaa selected because of their large refugee populations and high levels of vulnerability.

The survey showed that school enrolment declined among girls as they aged. At age 9, over 70 per cent of surveyed girls were enrolled in school; at age 16, less than 17 per cent were. Girls with less education are more vulnerable to becoming child brides, [reports have indicated](#).

Among all surveyed women aged 20 to 24, nearly 35 per cent were married before reaching 18 years old. Another way to look at the figures – as a percentage of married women – shows that 47 per cent of married women, ages 20 to 24 years old, were child brides.

The study also had clear recommendations for addressing the trend. For example, it called for improving school enrolment among girls, especially as they transition into secondary school, and for better enforcement of policies barring child marriage.

It also recommended raising awareness of the consequences of early marriage among refugee communities. These consequences include an increased risk of pregnancy-related complications for girls, as well as worse health and economic outcomes for themselves and their children.

Such information can be powerful.

"Because of what I have learned and experienced, it is impossible for me to let my daughter get married at an early age," said one parent who learned about child marriage from a UNFPA-supported outreach programme in the southern city of Saida.

Youth reject child marriage

These outreach programmes are engaging parents, community leaders, health-care workers and others. UNFPA is also supporting safe spaces, legal counselling and psychosocial care for vulnerable women and girls, including those affected by early marriage.

Young people are also being empowered to advocate for change. Through the UNFPA-supported Y-Peer programme, youth – including refugees – are spreading the word about the harms of child marriage to their friends and peer networks.

Youth leaders have been eager to take on the challenge.

"It is up to us to spread awareness on its negative effects to our family and friends," said Sara, part of a peer education programme in Baalbek.

"When I saw my cousin getting married at the age of 15, my heart ached," said Mohamad [not the Mohamad pictured], who received peer education in Beirut. "The man should be buying her toys instead of a wedding dress."

**Names changed to protect privacy*

BANGLADESH: Law proposing child marriage in "special cases" is a step backwards – charities

The proposed law would permit child marriage in "special cases"

By Nita Bhalla

Thomson Reuters Foundation (13.01.2017) - <http://tmsnrt.rs/2jxMRzO> - Bangladesh will be taking a step backwards in efforts to end child marriage if parliament approves changes to a law which would permit girls below 18 to be married in "special cases", a global alliance of charities said on Thursday.

The poor South Asian nation has one of the highest rates of child marriage in the world, despite a three-decade-old law which bans marriage for girls under 18 and men under 21.

Girls Not Brides, a coalition of more than 650 charities, said Bangladesh's parliament was expected to consider the proposed change to the Child Marriage Restraint Act. This is expected to take place in the next session beginning Jan. 22.

Girls Not Brides in Bangladesh said the proposed change was "alarming" and a step backwards for the country which has reduced child marriage in recent years.

"We have worked with thousands of girls who have been pulled out of education, married off early, bear the scars of early pregnancy, and forced to marry their abusers. This is simply unacceptable," said a spokesperson from the alliance's Bangladesh chapter in a statement.

The proposed law was open to abuse since it gave no definition of the term "special cases", Girls Not Brides said.

Statements made by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina suggest exceptions would apply in instances of accidental pregnancy, or where a marriage would help to protect a girl's "honour" and the family's reputation in this largely conservative society.

Bangladeshi officials were not immediately available for comment.

Along with Niger, Guinea, South Sudan, Chad and Burkina Faso, Bangladesh is among the 10 worst countries for child marriage despite moves to strengthen law enforcement and toughen penalties against the crime.

In 2011, 32.5 percent of girls aged between 15 and 19 were married compared with 37.5 percent a decade before, said Girls Not Brides, citing data from Bangladesh's Bureau of Statistics.

Campaigners say girls face a greater risk of rape, domestic violence and forced pregnancies - which may put their lives in danger - as a result of being married as children.

Child brides are often denied the chance to go to school, are isolated from society and forced into a lifetime of economic dependence as a wife and mother.

Yet the practice continues largely due to a combination of social acceptance and government inaction, activists say.

"Marriage before 18 does not ensure a pregnant girl's safety," said Lakshmi Sundaram, executive director for Girls Not Brides, said in the statement. "In reality it exposes her to the risk of sexual, physical and psychological violence."

"The progress Bangladesh has made to address child marriage is impressive, and reflects a real commitment from the highest levels of the government. Now is not the time to regress."

TURKEY: Withdraws child rape bill after street protests

Turkish Prime Minister Binali Yildirim has withdrawn a bill that pardons men convicted of sex with underage girls if they have married them.

BBC (22.11.2016) - <http://bbc.in/2gx8fnX> - The bill, part of a package of amendments to the legal system, was sent back for further work just hours before a final vote in parliament.

It had sparked protests across Turkish society and was condemned abroad.

Critics said it would legitimise statutory rape and encourage the practice of taking child brides.

UN agencies had called on the government not to approve the bill, arguing that it would damage the country's ability to combat sexual abuse and child marriage.

But the government says the main aim is to exonerate men imprisoned for marrying an underage girl apparently with her or her family's consent.

The draft law will now be returned to a commission which will take into account the views of the opposition and civil society, Mr Yildirim said.

This would allow for "broad consensus" and to "give time for the opposition parties to develop their proposals".

Turkey's legal age of consent is 18 but the practice of underage weddings in religious ceremonies remains widespread.

Opposition parties heavily criticised the bill which had been approved in an initial parliamentary reading on Thursday.

The ruling AK Party dominates parliament in Ankara.

Justice Minister Bekir Bozdog had defended the legislation, saying: "The bill will certainly not bring amnesty to rapists.... This is a step taken to solve a problem in some parts of our country."

In July, Turkey's constitutional court annulled part of the criminal code which classified all sexual acts with children under 15 as sexual abuse.

Elif Shafak, one of Turkey's best-selling novelists, explained the concern over the bill.

"One of the main weaknesses of this draft is that word, consent," she told the BBC.

"What does that mean? We're talking about children here. So if the rapist negotiates with the family, if he bribes or threatens the family, the family can easily withdraw, you know, their complaint and they can say OK there was a consent and there was no force involved."

But Ravza Kavakci Kan, an AKP MP, said the bill had been misunderstood.

"It is about giving normality to young women who have been married underage due to cultural norms, other norms, and now find themselves with their children suffering because their husbands are in prison," she told the BBC's Newsday programme.

"One of the examples is when the woman is 15 and the man is 17, they get married, they're both underage, a few years later after they've had children, or when they go to register their babies, or when they go to the doctor, the doctors or officials have to report this case if it is an underage marriage, so now they are 24, 25 and all of a sudden their husbands are in prison."

Further reading:

[MPs in Turkey support bill allowing child rapists to go free if they marry their victim](#)

TURKEY: MPs support bill allowing child rapists to go free if they marry their victim

'If you give him a pass by marriage, the young girl will live in a prison for her whole life,' argues opposition politician

The Independent (18.11.2016) - <http://ind.pn/2foJAOn> - Men who sexually abuse children could have their convictions quashed if they marry their victims, under a controversial bill supported by Turkish MPs.

Critics said the bill would legitimise and encourage rape, but the government argued the law had been misinterpreted.

The ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) – which brought the bill to parliament – reacted angrily to the backlash, saying the law was needed to resolve legal complications associated with child marriage in the country.

If it passes, men who sexually abuse girls under 18 could avoid prosecution if they marry their victims.

The act cannot have been committed with "force, threat, or any other restriction on consent" to qualify for the pardon.

MPs approved the draft law in its initial reading on Thursday and will vote again on the bill in a second debate in the coming days.

Opposition parties have been alarmed by the AKP's proposals.

Ömer Süha Aldan, of the Republican People's Party (CHP), said the law would "encourage forced marriages and legalise marriage to rapists".

"If a 50 or 60 year-old is told to marry an 11-year-old after raping her, and then marries her years later, she will suffer the consequences," Mr Aldan told Hurriyet Daily News.

“If you give him a pass by marriage, the young girl will live in a prison for her whole life.”

CHP group deputy chair Özgür Özel said the bill was approved by only one vote and claimed that AKP Justice Minister Bekir Bozdağ had “strategically” issued it at the last moment of the session.

As the bill was debated and approved, the hashtag #TecavuzMesrulastirilamaz (Rape Cannot be Legitimised) became a top-trending topic on Twitter, as users took to social media to express their distaste.

Yet the justice minister claimed campaigners were “distorting” the issue and denied the bill would legitimise rape.

“What we do is to find a solution to an ongoing problem, it is not to protect rape nor protect rapists,” he told state-owned news agency Anadolu.

Instead, he argued the bill would help couples who have consensual sex when they are underage and want to marry.

“When a child is then born from this non-official union, the doctor warns the prosecutor and the man is sent to prison, putting the child and mother into financial difficulties,” he told the AFP news agency.

Although the legal age of consent is 18 in Turkey, child marriage is widespread, particularly in the southeast.

The country has one of the highest rates of child marriage in Europe, with an estimated 15 per cent of girls married before their 18th birthday.

PAKISTAN: Passes marriage bill protecting Hindu women’s rights

The Malay Mail Online (27.09.2016) - <http://bit.ly/2d2XvuG> - Pakistan’s lower house of parliament has passed a landmark bill giving its small Hindu minority the right to register marriages, the last major hurdle on the way to enacting a law aimed at protecting women’s rights.

Activists say that Hindu women have been disproportionately targeted for abduction, forced conversions and rape because their marriages were never officially recognised and therefore not provable in court.

The National Assembly passed the bill yesterday after 10 months of deliberation. The Senate is expected to pass the law without any significant delay.

Hindus make up approximately 1.6 per cent of Pakistan’s Moslem-majority 190 million population, but have not had any legal mechanisms to register their marriages since independence from Britain in 1947.

Christians, the other main religious minority, have a British law dating back to 1870 regulating their marriages.

The new bill sets the minimum age for marriage for Hindus at 18. The minimum legal age for marriage for citizens of other religions is 18 for men and 16 for women.

Breaking the law regarding the minimum age would result in six months' jail and a 5,000-rupee (RM194) fine. Unicef estimates 21 per cent of women aged 20 to 24 in Pakistan were first married before age 18, with 3 per cent married before age 16.

Zohra Yusuf, head of the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, said the proof of marriage would offer greater protection to Hindu women.

"Once marriages are registered, at least they have certain rights that are ensured," she said.

Widows, in particular, were disadvantaged, she said, being unable to prove marriage to their husbands in order to gain government welfare benefits. The new law legalises remarriage for a widow six months after her husband's death.

It also grants Hindus the right to divorce, with women having the additional right to do so on grounds of negligence, bigamy or having been married before 18.

Activists warn, however, that more needs to be done on the issue of abductions and forced conversions.

"When there is suspicion of a forced marriage, it has to be investigated ... currently members of the Hindu community say that no-one listens to them, not even the courts," said Yusuf.

TANZANIA: Tales of a child bride: 'My father sold me for 12 cows'

When she was 12, Grace was abducted and then raped and beaten every day for 11 months.

By Marc Ellison

Al Jazeera (12.07.2016) - <http://bit.ly/29BqHwm> - So common are the practices of abduction, rape and forced marriage of girls in northern Tanzania that a single word is used to encapsulate them all: kupura. It is a word used by people from the Sukuma tribe to describe the snatching of girls in broad daylight as they walk to school; a three-syllabled euphemism that downplays their long-term physical and sexual abuse.

And yet here in the region of Shinyanga, the practice of kupura is validated by the oft-recited motto of Sukuma men: alcohol, meat and vagina.

"This slogan is in their blood and a way of life," says Revocatus Itendelebanya. "These are the three things they feel entitled to as men."

Itendelebanya, the legal and gender officer for the local NGO, Agape, says this sense of entitlement, in what is a perennially patriarchal society, also explains why passers-by don't intervene when they witness an abduction.

"When a Sukuma man is attracted to a girl he will start asking people where she lives, and what her routine is," explains Itendelebanya.

"Once he finds out these details he might wait for her near the borehole - or whatever he thinks is the best place to get that girl - and then grab her."

Kupura is so prevalent in the region that when a girl disappears, her parents will suspect what has happened. But rather than calling the police, they will seek the man out not to rescue their child, but to negotiate the dowry - or bride price - in cattle.

Cash cows

For daughters are sadly seen as a short-term investment for poor, rural households - cash cows that can boost a family's financial position at the expense of a girl's schooling and wellbeing.

Such is the value placed on a girl's head that Itendelebanya says parents will take their daughters to a witch-doctor if they are not attracting any suitors.

The ensuing samba ritual involves cutting cruciform nicks into the girl's chest and hands with a razor to not only help cleanse her of her bad luck, but to make her more attractive to older men.

And if ever there was a poster child to highlight the pernicious effects of child marriage, it's Grace Masanja.

"Bitterness still fills my heart when I look at them," she says, pointing at the cows grazing at the rear of her family's compound. For Grace they are a daily reminder of how she was treated like cattle, a commodity to be bought and sold.

"But given what I went through, I sometimes wish I had been born a cow," she whispers.

Her father had bartered a dozen cattle for his daughter but, despite daily beatings with sticks and her father's belt, she still refused to marry the older man.

But a deal had been made; a dowry had been paid.

And so it was that Grace was abducted on motorbike by her betrothed early one morning - all with the complicity of her father.

That night, and every day for the next 11 months, she was raped and beaten.

She was only 12.

"That day felt like the end of everything," Grace recalls, glancing again at the cattle.

A country of contradictions

When it comes to child marriage, Tanzania was until very recently a country of contradictions.

The 1971 Marriage Act set the minimum age of marriage for girls at 15 with parental consent - but a girl of 14 could wed where judicial approval was given.

And while the 2009 Child Act did not expressly outlaw child marriage, it did define a child as a person under the age of 18, stating that a parent should "protect the child from neglect, discrimination, violence, abuse, exposure to physical and moral hazards and oppression".

This contradictory legal Venn diagram was further obfuscated by the Local Customary Law of 1963, which allowed Tanzania's many ethnic groups to adhere to their customs and traditions.

The Tanzanian government had long made noises about a constitutional review process to address these conflicting laws, but last year's presidential election campaign, in addition to a lack of consensus in community surveys, had served to stall any political momentum on the issue.

Only in July 2016 did the government finally ban child marriage outright - but will it actually make a difference?

Female genital mutilation was outlawed in Tanzania in 1998, and yet a 2010 government survey found that in remote parts of the Mara region, more than 40 percent of girls and women had been cut.

While it is true that Tanzania does not rank among the countries with the highest rates of child marriage, with four out of 10 girls being married before their 18th birthdays, it seems to be a problem that is not going away.

And this national average masks more disturbing regional trends in the vast East African country.

In the Shinyanga region, more than 59 percent of girls like Grace - some of them as young as nine - are forced into child marriages.

Police corruption

Itendelebanya believes that the actual figure is concealed by the remoteness of many rural communities, as well as widespread reports of corrupt police and court officials burying cases in return for bribes by family members.

The legal and gender officer says there have been cases of police being paid to ignore some early marriages in villages, to lose crucial evidence, and to even help forge the incriminating birth certificates of child brides.

"Police entertain corruption because they benefit from it," claims Itendelebanya. "And police see NGOs like Agape as preventing the flow of money into their pockets."

But Superintendent Pili Simon Misungwi, who heads the gender desk at the Shinyanga district police station, dismisses any claims of wrongdoing by her staff.

In 2008, the Tanzanian government requested that every police station have such a specialist unit, with trained personnel who could handle cases of gender-based violence and child abuse across the country.

"I can't deny that corruption does exist because it's mostly done in private," she says. "But I also can't say that 100 percent of all cases are delayed because of corruption."

"For example, the poverty-stricken parents of a victim may accept financial compensation from the perpetrator's family, which would lead to the adjournment of a case."

Misungwi says it's also not uncommon for a child bride's parents to scupper investigations.

"A girl's parents may be offered two, three or five cows by the husband's family to derail the case," she says. "And because life is hard for these people, they often take the money."

"The police may think the family is cooperating with them, but then when the time comes to testify they tell us the girl is sick, in another village, or even dead."

Misungwi stresses that her officers were hired because of their high moral standing, and then provided with the necessary training.

"And we provide people with a confidential environment where they can have a one-on-one conversation in private rooms where others cannot listen," she adds.

But what the superintendent says, and what actually happens in her absence, appear to be two different things.

Before Misungwi arrives at the station, a young mother sits in the main office as she tells a police officer about the regular sexual assaults she endures at the hands of her husband - the private rooms sit empty.

The officer takes no notes, his attention not on the mother, but on the Nigerian soap opera blasting from the television set in the corner of the room.

Other staff members sit nearby, staring into space, periodically checking their phones for text messages.

Meanwhile incidents related to child marriage have doubled over the past two years.

When staff compile a list of these they do not use the Swahili terms, instead opting for the English equivalents, to mitigate the shocking nature of the crimes.

Kubaka is replaced with rape, kulawiti is replaced with sodomy, kumpa mimba mwanafunzi is replaced with child pregnancy.

And Misungwi says it is the lack of police resources, rather than corruption, that has contributed to the prevalence of child marriage in the region.

"When the government is giving budgets to ministries like Home Affairs, they don't have a separate pot of money for the police gender desk," she says.

As a result, her unit has to rely on using one of the station's three vehicles to reach remote villages where child marriages have been reported to them - but these are often already being used for routine police business.

"And the witnesses may live very far in the villages and can't afford to come to town to do a follow-up interview," says Misungwi. "As a result we often can't reach a conclusion on a case."

The curious case of Agnes Dotto

"There can be no secrets in the villages." So says Paulo Kuyi, who is fighting the ground war against child marriage in the nearby town of Muchambi.

The 53-year-old activist acts as a primitive early warning system for the NGO Agape, which in turn tips off the local police force.

Last September, it was the sudden appearance of 16 cows in a family's compound that triggered alarm bells for Kuyi. And he knew the poor family had a 13-year-old daughter, Agnes Dotto.

"When a dowry has been paid a feast is arranged before the wedding," Kuyi explains. "The family now has cows coming into their clan and they want to celebrate and invite other villagers."

Ten days later, thanks to Kuyi's regular updates by phone, police and Agape staff raided the wedding ceremony.

The husband-to-be was arrested and taken to the local police station in Maganzo, where he should have remained until his case went to trial.

The next day the man walked free; neither he nor Agnes has been seen since.

Kuyi says that he saw a Maganzo police officer leaving a late-night meeting with village leaders.

"These leaders were paid by Agnes' parents to help arrange the marriage," he claims. "It was because of that complicity they paid a police officer to release the perpetrator."

These are the "meanders" - as Itendelebanya euphemistically calls them - that child marriage cases take on their way to the courts.

Three months on, the police tell the legal officer that they are no closer to finding Agnes or the man.

Assistant Superintendent Meshack Sumuni says the village leaders and the girl's parents have refused to cooperate.

"And we don't have the resources to be more proactive in our investigations," he says. "The Tanzanian government provides no specific budget for gender-desk teams, which means we often rely on NGOs for assistance."

The lack of police resources is felt even more keenly here than in Shinyanga.

Roads are regularly washed out in the rainy season, the unit has no dedicated car pool of its own, and their office is bereft of furniture or computer equipment and has a leaking roof, which in the past has led to important legal documents being damaged.

"So the gender desk staff feel like they have been given this role as a punishment," says Sumuni. "So this in turn affects their motivation to chase down reports of child marriage and related cases of abuse."

Back in the village, where there can be no secrets, it is common knowledge that Kuyi is the one reporting cases of child marriage to the police.

Resentful of the potential loss of income that marrying off their daughters can generate, villagers have threatened to lock the activist in his hut and burn it down.

Kuyi says that he doesn't care; he is an old man and he has nothing left to fear.

But what worries him are what advances in technology mean for future child marriages going undetected by him.

He has heard rumours that a dowry has already been paid for Agnes' sister - but by mobile money transfer, and not cattle.

This shift from the traditional, physical form of payment means Kuyi can no longer be visually tipped off about an impending marriage.

"Many other activists are now reluctant to report cases to the police," Kuyi says. "They've been intimidated by death threats, or demoralised when they see only a few cases actually go to court."

Picking up the pieces

Only through death has Grace Masanja clawed back something resembling a life.

After physically and sexually abusing her for 11 months, her husband was killed in a motorbike accident.

Grace, now 13, was filled not with joy, but sorrow.

The man who had raped and beaten her for the better part of a year was dead - but she now has a child to take care of, and no income.

Grace and her child Mathias are at her family's home, where she and her father live out an uneasy truce.

After hearing an announcement on the radio, she applied to enrol on one of Agape's vocational skills courses. Each year, the organisation provides dozens of girls with an opportunity to learn a trade so that they can become breadwinners in their own right.

The majority of the girls opt for tailoring classes, but others want to take the courses in welding and electrical engineering - professions that challenge the patriarchal and gendered stereotypes so ingrained in Tanzania's communities.

It is also hoped that the lure of this additional income will lessen the short-term appeal of a dowry to parents.

Grace's father, Kurwa Masanja, says that he now regrets what he did to his daughter.

"It was Sukuma tradition that forced me to have Grace married when she finished primary school," says Kurwa. "When she came back I apologised, and I hope now that we can slowly become father and daughter again."

"I cannot repeat this mistake because when Grace came back, she told us what had happened to her."

But Grace has her doubts, and fears for her four-year-old sister Birha.

"My father has only six of the cows left from my dowry," she says. "He sold the others to build a second home."

"What do you think he will do when the others have gone, and he is poor again?"

TANZANIA: You'll now get 30 years in prison if you marry a child

By Joe McCarthy

Global Citizen (05.07.2016) - <http://gblctzn.me/29kJRPN> - Tanzania has just taken a huge step toward eliminating child marriage. Now, a man who marries or impregnates a school-age girl faces up to 30 years in prison.

Sex with underage girls was already a criminal offense, but previously girls as young as 14 could be married if her parents or a court approved. "Unfortunately, loopholes still remain and girls can still get married off at 15 with parental consent or at 14 under court order if special circumstances exist. These loopholes significantly weaken the new law.

However, this latest effort signals that the government is heading in the right direction and may remove these contradictions in the future.*

It also follows on the heels of the government expanding free primary and secondary education for all children, with a special emphasis on girls.

The latest attempt to tackle child marriage is being framed as a complement to that policy — keeping young girls from getting married means they'll actually be able to take advantage of that free education. To maximize attendance, the government intends to punish parents who fail to keep their kids in school.

The threat of jail time will no doubt act as a strong deterrent, but it doesn't fully address the problem of child marriage. The new law is dependent on schools notifying officials if a girl becomes married or pregnant. But most child marriage occurs informally with community assent, outside the view of law enforcement, which may discourage informants. In some communities, child marriage is an accepted tradition. In others, parents need money and sell their daughters to prospective husbands. In all cases, it may be hard for teachers to fully assess a girl's situation.

It's important that protections against child marriage are on the books across the board, and that the government reform current inconsistencies/contradictions. The Law of Marriage Act which we are campaigning around still allows girls to legally marry at 15 with parental consent, which obviously creates loopholes in the legal system.

Child marriage doesn't affect men and women equally. In the vast majority of cases, child marriage means an older man marries a young girl.

It means a girl is pulled from school and denied an education; a girl becomes pregnant when her body isn't ready and faces potentially fatal consequences as a result; a girl is shut off from the world of opportunity; a girl is more likely to contract STDs; and a girl is more likely to experience domestic violence.

It's something that contributes greatly to gender inequalities around the world.

15 million girls are married off as children every year around the world.

Tanzania has one of the highest rates of teen pregnancy, with 21 percent of girls aged 15 to 19 having given birth.

But the country has also shown a willingness to tackle this issue head-on. Situating the problem within the context of education is also an ingenious way to both acknowledge and cut through the web of barriers that oppress girls and limit their potential.

It also helps keep the eyes of society on the larger prize: educating girls. Because when girls get educated, the benefits are endless.

As the attorney general George Masaju told the parliament, "We are aiming to create a better environment for our school girls to finish their studies without any barriers."

KYRGYZTAN: MPs say no to banning underage Islamic marriage

Eurasianet.org (27.05.2016) - <http://bit.ly/1VIPm4E> - Lawmakers in Kyrgyzstan have provoked outrage in some quarters by rejecting proposals to change the criminal code that would have outlawed the religious consecration of marriage rites for minors.

The phenomenon of the very young entering into marriages in Kyrgyzstan is not unusual. The National Statistics Commission estimates that 15 percent of married women between the ages of 25 and 49 sealed their nuptials before turning 18 — 1 percent did it under the age of 15.

The changes to the law rejected by parliament on May 26 specifically related to religious marriage rites (nikah), as opposed to nuptials registered with the state. The legal age of marriage in Kyrgyzstan is 18, although that can be lowered by special dispensation.

The broader ambition of the amendments proposed by Ata-Meken party deputy Aida Salyanova were to criminalize the forcible imposition of religious marriage rites before their official registration.

"The religious consecration of marriages before registration with authorized bodies is a crude violation of human rights. It is inimical to development and substantially increases the likelihood of a woman becoming a victim of (domestic) violence," Salyanova was cited as saying by Zanoza.kg in a report on parliament's vote.

By way of a regional comparison, Islamic authorities in neighboring Kazakhstan have as recently as last year issued orders for mosques to desist from performing religious marriage rites without a state-issued marriage certificate, but many have reportedly flouted that edict.

The Committee on the Rights of the Child, a United Nations body that monitors implementation of international conventions protecting children's interests, has in recent years voiced concern over what it termed "the widespread phenomena of child early and forced marriages" in Kyrgyzstan. That issue is often elided with the better-publicized practice of bride-kidnapping, which flourishes despite concerted awareness campaigns.

In addition to being patently illegal, women and young girls forced into marriages or subjected to bride-kidnapping are at a high risk of committing suicide.

Kidnapping and then forcing minors into marriages is already subject to penalties of up to seven years in jail, but the provision backed by Salyanova would have tightened this proscription further.

Salyanova's bill was supported by 44 MPs and opposed by 61.

That vote provoked an enraged reaction from blogger Daniyar Aitman, who has waged an often lonely battle against the resurgence of conservative strains in Kyrgyz society.

"It is no news that there are many pedophiles in Kyrgyzstan. The news is that there are many pedophiles in the Kyrgyzstan (political party) and in many other factions in parliament," Aitman wrote in a column for Kloop.kg. "That much became clear after yesterday's session of parliament when a majority of MPs voted down a bill that would have made it a crime to seal the nuptials of underage children."

PAKISTAN: Christian women forcibly converted to Islam and married off to their kidnapers

Tahira, 21, and Reema Bibi, 20, were abducted near their home last December. The Muslim men who took them, raped them and forcibly married them, and then kept them segregated. At least 1,000 Christian women are forcibly converted in Pakistan each year. If they escape, the police arrests a family member.

AsiaNews.it (26.02.2016) - <http://bit.ly/1ROP16Q> - Tahira, 21, and Reema Bibi, 20, are two Pakistani Christian women who were abducted on 2 December 2015 from near their home in Sargodha (Punjab) as they returned together from work.

The two Muslim men who took the two young women, raped them, and then forcibly married them. Afterwards, they kept them segregated in their Islamabad home, this according to British Pakistani Christian Association (BPCA), an activist group that works for religious freedom in Pakistan, and monitors the continuous violations against minorities, especially women, which the government does not punish.

Forced marriages have been a scourge in the Muslim nation for years, one that does not seem close to any resolution. The case of Tahira and Reema is emblematic. On 11 February, Tahira managed to escape, but her Muslim "husband" filed a complaint with police, who immediately arrested six members of her family. The relatives were released thanks to pressure from human rights groups, but the authorities have ordered the family to return Tahira to her "husband."

The BPCA reported a similar case a few days ago. A Christian woman was seized and forced to marry the Muslim owner of the house where she worked as a cleaner. After she managed to escape thanks to a colleague, the police ordered her family to hand her over to the authorities; otherwise, they would arrest a relative.

According to a report by the Movement for Solidarity and Peace in Pakistan, at least 1,000 Pakistani women and girls are forced into Muslim marriages and made to convert to Islam each year. However, the real number is certainly much higher, since many incidents go unreported.

The aforementioned report found that forced marriages usually follow a similar pattern: females between the ages of 12 and 25 are abducted, made to convert to Islam, and then married to the abductor or an associate.

Even if a case goes to court, the victims are threatened and pressured by their "husband" and his family to declare that their conversion was voluntary.

Victims are often sexually abused, forced into prostitution, and suffer domestic abuse or even wind up in the human trafficking racket. Those who try to rebel are told that they "are now Muslims and that the punishment for apostasy is death".

In November 2015, the Pakistani Ministry of Religious Affairs and the Council of Islamic Ideology opposed a law on "forced conversion", sparking dismay and protests among Pakistani Hindus and Christians.

Since most minority Pakistanis are very poor, it is hard for them to have adequate political representation and receive justice.

That of forced marriages is just one of many issues that religious and ethnic minorities face as they are deprived of their rights, even though they are formally guaranteed by the Constitution.

A landmark Supreme Court ruling on 19 June 2014 took note of the injustice meted out to the country's minorities.

Headed by Chief Justice Tassaduq Hussain Jilani, the bench included justices Azmat Saeed and Mushir Alam. It found that the government is complicitous in the acts of injustice. Unfortunately, the court's ruling did not spark any reaction from the government.

In the latest case, the Asian Human Rights Commission (AHRC) has called for the return of Tahira and Reema to their families and criminal proceedings against their captors and rapists. Established in 1994, the AHRC is based in Hong Kong.

PAKISTAN: Bill banning child marriage fails after it's deemed 'un-Islamic'

The Washington Post (15.01.2016) - <http://wapo.st/1Sf3QmP> - Pakistani lawmakers had to withdraw a bill aimed at curbing the practice of child marriage after a prominent religious body declared the legislation un-Islamic.

The bill, which proposed raising the marriage age for females from 16 to 18, also called for harsher penalties for those who would arrange marriages involving children. Despite the laws in place, child marriages, particularly involving young female brides, are common in parts of the country. It's estimated that some 20 percent of girls in the country are married before they turn 18.

But the Council of Islamic Ideology, a constitutional body which gives advice to parliament on the compatibility of laws with Sharia, appeared to slap down the legislation after deeming it "un-Islamic" and "blasphemous," according to Agence France Presse. It had already handed down a similar ruling in 2014.

The council has garnered opprobrium in the past. In 2013, reports AFP, "it suggested making DNA inadmissible evidence in rape cases, instead calling for the revival of an Islamic law that makes it mandatory for a survivor to provide four witnesses to back their claims."

Girls Not Brides, an international coalition of civil society organizations working against child marriage, cited this religious body as an obstacle toward reform. A number of provinces in Pakistan have pushed for legislation cracking down on child marriages, but implementing the law is more difficult.

Clerics on the council object to minimum age requirements, arguing instead that an individual can marry once reaching puberty, which can be as early as the age of 9.
