

Child marriage today: which perspective for girls?

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Summary. This paper aims to describe the phenomenon of child marriage, that is involving persons under 18 years, starting from the investigation of its multiple causes. In the initial part the phenomenon is framed, both from a conceptual point of view, and about the areas of the world where it is widespread. The time reference is the current one: we tried to access to the most recent data available. In outlining the underlying causes of early marriage, we analyse the economical factors and then move to the social and cultural ones. Then the consequences of this practice are described, in three main aspects: health risk, exposure to violence and lack of access to education. We tried to demonstrate how child marriage affects dramatically on several aspects of the lives of young people involved. Finally, we wish to emphasise the fact that the phenomenon is still largely widespread.

Keywords: marriage, child marriage, women, girls, family.

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How the issue can be known

“I was promised to a man before I was 10. It was a traditional wedding. When the time came, I was sent over to my husband’s family. And when I saw him, I realized he was older than my daddy.”
(taken from the documentary “Too Brief a Child. Voices of Married Adolescents”)

This paper aims to investigate and try to understand the phenomenon of child marriage, analysing its causes and consequences, and then draw some conclusions. In the eyes of Western societies, a practice of this kind may appear cruel and incomprehensible, running the risk to propose an irreparable split between "advanced" countries and "backward" countries, crystallised in a primitive culture detrimental to the rights of women, opposed to the "advanced" and "liberal" West.

To know the situation of the countries in which child marriage is widespread, we have used sources like reports of NGOs, journals, other publications and Web sites, in order to identify the causes and consequences of the phenomenon and try to see it more closely, overcoming a bias attitude.

The purpose of this research is therefore an attempt to give an overview of the phenomenon, although inevitably it is influenced by the cultural background of a Western writer - and, by contrast, is not supported by methods such as participant observation, for example, or other. The material used has then allowed the formulation of the conclusions of these pages and an underlying hypothesis.

In fact, we suppose that child marriage, continuing to be still so prevalent in many countries, depends on the variety of factors, difficult to eliminate that, added together, make it essentially impossible to disappear, at least quickly. In fact, the phenomenon is determined not only by economical factors, but also social and cultural causes (primarily, the role of men and women in family and society), often in combination.

This is a research based on recent data, relative to countries where child marriage currently continues to be a widespread practice, because of the reasons that will be deepened.

We do not pretend, therefore, to come to a harsh judgment on this issue; on the contrary, we are aware of the fact that it is an open question and not easy to solve, in a critical attempt to investigate the phenomenon critical through the exploratory means here proposed.

What do we mean by child marriage

First of all, it should be noted that it is possible to talk about *child marriage* when at least one of persons involved is under 18 at the time of marriage.

Since the concept of childhood and adulthood differs according to the culture of reference, it must be said that here "children" and "girls"

mean females under the age of 18, in accordance with Article 1 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child of United Nations:

Article 1

For the purposes of the present Convention, a child means every human being below the age of eighteen years unless under the law applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier¹.

However, since the consequences of the phenomenon have very greater proportions on the lives of girls than boys², this paper will be characterised by a gender-based approach and therefore the causes and the consequences of child marriage in relation to the female population will be highlighted, with no intention to underestimate or forget that boys are also involved.

Child marriage, defined as a formal marriage or informal union before age 18, is a reality for both boys and girls, although *girls are disproportionately the most affected*. About a third of women aged 20-24 years old in the developing world were married as children³.

It is useful to distinguish between child marriage, forced marriage and arranged wedding. They are concepts that can intersect, but it should be noted that they are different phenomena and that each of them would deserve a specific dissertation, which falls outside the scope of this work.

In general, *forced marriage* finds its definition in relation to the lack of consensus, both in relation to children and adults. In fact, accepting the perspective of the Council of Europe, United Nations (particularly UNICEF) and several NGOs⁴ that promote the rights of children and women, even if the consent of both children is present, it is not considered that such consent may be the result of a conscious, free and independent choice, but the result of environmental circumstances which are essentially cultural, social or economical.

However, the issue of *arranged marriages* is different. As long as they are adults, it just can happen that the spouses-to-be themselves ask, or expect, the birth family to deal with that question, as it sometimes happens in India within the urban middle classes (Danna, 2009). An arranged marriage can also offer the guarantee of receiving help from the birth family in the event of any difficulties that the couple may face; on the

contrary, this could be difficult if the marriage has not been approved by the parents (*ibid.*).

Marriages involving children are arranged by families and belonging communities (Gangoli & Chantler, 2009) in order to find the girl or boy a proper person to marry. The eligibility requirements may relate to the maintenance of a certain social and economic status or other aspects that may vary depending on the belonging culture, country or even region, as the alliances with and between families considered influential within their environment (Danna, 2009). It is also important the need to provide care to family members when they are older; that requires a careful selection of the bride, preferably a young girl, submissive and subservient (*ibid.*).

Where the phenomenon is widespread

Before analysing the causes of the phenomenon, it is useful to refer to the areas of the world where it is more widespread, in order to examine in depth the different economic and socio-cultural norms considered. According to recent data released by UNICEF (UNICEF, 2014), and proceeding by macro-area, the highest rate of early marriage is recorded in South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa (Table 1):

TABLE 1
Distribution of child marriage by macro-area

Area	Percentage of women aged 20 to 49 years married or in union before age 18
Southern Asia	56%
Central and Western Africa	46%
Eastern and Southern Africa	38%
Latin America and Caribbean	30%
Middle East and North Africa	24%
Eastern Asia and Pacific area	21%
Central and Eastern Europe	14%

Source: UNICEF 2014

UNICEF has also developed a list of the top ten countries where child marriage is prevalent (ibidem), as shown in Table 2:

TABLE 2
Top ten countries in the world where child marriage is prevalent

Country	Percentage of women aged 20 to 49 years married or in union before age 18
Niger	77%
Bangladesh	74%
Chad	69%
Mali	61%
Central African Republic	60%
India	58%
Guinea	58%
Ethiopia	58%
Burkina Faso	52%
Nepal	52%

Source: UNICEF 2014

Causes of early marriage

Beside to the real drama of the phenomenon, it is necessary to ask whether certain family dynamics respond to a need or if they are even dictated by good intentions, the result of assumptions embedded in the belonging context. The underlying causes of the spread of child marriage are various and often intertwined.

Economical causes

The first cause of early marriage is poverty. Many parents believe that a marriage can be an investment in the interest of the girls (UNFPA, 2012).

In other cases, children and girls can be considered as a burden or even a commodity, a means through which to pay debts, resolve disputes or

to seal alliances between families. The economical causes have even greater prominence in the context of humanitarian emergencies. Giving a daughter in marriage can ensure an economical entry to the birth family and, at the same time, protection in contexts where sexual abuse is common, for example in armed conflict.

Furthermore, in some countries where child marriage is common, for instance in South Sudan, the dowry comes by the groom, that gives it to the family of the girl (Human Rights Watch, 2013), in exchange for her work and fertility⁵. In this way a family would have a component in less to feed and, at the same time, an entry with which to provide for the support of the other members.

The dowry usually consists of a sum of money, but it can also include animals or other gifts, depending on factors such as family wealth, social status or ethnic group membership (Human Rights Watch, 2013). Through this compensation, the husband acquires rights on the bride (*ibid.*), so she is placed in a vulnerable position: in some countries, for example, a divorce can only occur upon return of the dowry by the bride's family (*idem*), but it seems very difficult in contexts of extreme poverty and, above all, in which the marriage constitutes a means of economic stability. In other countries, on the contrary, it is the bride's family to have to give a dowry to her future husband and it can be less significant in the case of a young girl and if she is not educated⁶, and this factor induces families to further hasten the marriage of girls.

Social, cultural and traditional factors

In addition to economical causes, also cultural and traditional factors have a decisive weight on the phenomenon. First, families invest little or nothing in girls' education, being from birth destined for marriage. Women bear social expectations related to the care of home and family and, especially, to reproduction. In fact, despite their young age, married girls often are forced to become pregnant immediately or shortly after the wedding (UNFPA, 2013).

In many cultures women are considered beings needing protection, and this task is up to their fathers, before the marriage, and then to their husbands (*ibid.*). In fact, one reason why parents prefer that girls get married very early lies in the belief that she is better protected, especially from abuses⁷, premarital sex and out-of-wedlock pregnancies (UNFPA, 2013), which undermine the honor the family and negatively influence the "value" of the girl and, where provided, decrease the dowry for her (Human

Rights Watch, 2013). Moreover, according to social and cultural paradigms in force in many countries (but not so differently than in Western countries until a few decades ago), through marriage, a girl acquires a status of an adult, regardless of her physical and mental development (UNFPA, 2013) and her relationship with the birth family is interrupted (Mehra, 1998).

In many societies, including those of industrialized countries such as China (Santevecchi, 2013)⁸ girls who get married "late" are despised by the community and treated like expired commodities (Human Rights Watch, 2013). In fact, in many contexts it is believed that if a woman does not get married as a young woman, she may not marry at all (United Nations Division for the Advancement of Women, United Nations Economic Commission for Africa, 2009). Or, if an unmarried girl becomes pregnant or she is just suspected of having an affair with a man, she is forced by her family to marry him and immediately and definitively departed from the family home (*ibid.*).

With regard to member countries of the Council of Europe, child marriage affects mainly rural and poor areas, or industrialised countries which are destination of immigrant families (Council of Europe, 2005). In the first case, the reasons behind these marriages are related to cultural values such as honour, virginity or parental authority, or the accomplishment of economical stability; in the second case, however, the willingness on the part of families to preserve youth from processes of Europeanisation and the need to reaffirm their cultural identity are preponderant (*ibid.*).

Regarding hypothetical religious factors, they do not seem to characterize a specific religion more than another one, especially in light of the world distribution of countries where such marriages are widespread. But it is possible to affirm that fundamentalism strongly supports the role of the patriarchal family as an agency of control over individuals: in particular, the burden falls on women to pass on their traditional moral values and the community, according to the warnings of religious leaders, once again men (Patel, 2008). Following such mechanisms, there are often women to reinforce all those social norms of the patriarchal type (Razack, 2004), generation after generation, perpetuating gender discrimination which is hard to undermine.

A matter of honour

Talking about forced marriages, moral factors play a central role: obedience to parents, respectability of the family, honour of a girl, almost

always related to her virginity. In addition to anticipate wedding before a girl begins to establish romantic relationships or friendships with boys (*ibid.*), control over women's sexuality tends to be very extreme in some parts of the world, such as in Iraq (Gangoli & Chantler, 2009), and it can lead to the murder of a girl, just suspected of having had premarital sex. It is possible to affirm that such a control over female sexuality by men is directly related to male honour, influenced not only by social position, even by reputation and by the behaviour of the female members of his family (Reddy, 2008). This kind of control has culturally intended to ensure the legitimacy of children born within marriage (Tamale, 2008), to reaffirm alleged property rights of women and children of the family.

Consequences of child marriage

Health

Welcoming the definition of the Constitution of the World Health Organization (WHO), it is possible to define the concept of health respect not only a physical point of view, but also in mental and social dimensions, beyond the strictly corporeal one. Specific situations, in this view, make women particularly vulnerable and they therefore require more attention and commitment: essentially, regarding pregnancy and childbirth.

In particular, regarding the health of girls involved in early marriages, the main consequences which they suffer arise from premature sexual relations. In most cases, girls have no awareness of their rights in matters of sexuality, making it an area where their freedom of choice does not find space.

According to WHO, each year 16 million girls give birth between 15 and 19 years and 1 million girls between 10 and 14 years do⁹.

Premature pregnancies' effects are given by various factors, especially one in combination with one another: the lack of information and access to contraception, exposure to violence and little or no negotiating power, also in addition to external influences and pressures¹⁰ towards maternity and child care starting from low age. In addition, adolescents are less likely than adults to have access to legal and safe abortions, as well as to medical care before, during and after childbirth (World Health Organization, 2011).

The younger a girl is, the greater are the health risks which she may incur in connection with pregnancy (UNICEF, 2011), given that her body still in development. Worldwide, complications arising out of pregnancy or

childbirth each year cause the death of 70,000 women between 15 and 19 years just in developing countries (UNFPA, 2013). In fact, girls aged 15 to 19 are 20 to 200% more likely to die during pregnancy than women aged 20 to 24 years, while girls under 15 years of age are five times more likely to die than adults (Centro di Ricerca Innocenti dell'UNICEF, 2001).

Even if they do not necessarily lead to death, complications during pregnancy and childbirth can still result in injury, infections, disablement or other damage that, in the absence of specific medical care, risk undermining hopelessly women's health, both because of their youth, and especially due to poor social and economical conditions (*ibid.*), perpetuating and keeping young mothers in a vicious circle of poverty, malnutrition, disease and lack of medical care which is almost impossible to escape. Additional health risks for girls involved in child marriages are represented by sexually transmitted diseases, primarily HIV, that causes AIDS, particularly widespread in Africa (but not only), where child marriage is especially common.

In this regard it is also important to point out that, for example in East Africa, girls, more than boys, who have lost one or both parents because of AIDS, are particularly at risk of being forced to marry very early, because there are no adults who can support them (UNICEF, 2006).

Finally, child marriage has important consequences on psychological and social health of girls. Family responsibilities, disproportionate to their age, have serious impact on their psychological well-being, the perception of themselves and the relationship between spouses¹¹.

Girls are also affected by social consequences, because they are most at risk of abandonment, separation and divorce, but also to be widowed, especially if they are married to much older men: in fact, in many contexts, the state of abandonment, separation, divorce, and even widowhood exposes women to be discriminated because of the loss of the status they enjoyed while their husbands were alive. Widowed women are deprived of family assets, separated or moved away from their houses, relegated to the margins of society, hardly being able to take care of their and their children's well-being (UNICEF, 2006).

Violence

Girls involved in child marriages are especially likely to suffer from different forms of violence, mainly because of their age, which

automatically puts them on a level of psychological inferiority compared to adults, primarily the husband.

Although parents are pushing for girls to marry early in order to protecting them from physical or sexual assaults, actually it is child marriage to significantly expose them to the violence, not only by their husbands, but also by the in-law family¹², including other wives, in contexts where polygamy is widespread. In fact, young girls are considerably more at risk of being beaten by their husbands than women who married as adults and, compared to these, girls are more likely to justify violent behaviours by their husbands, especially if much older (*ibid.*). Physical violence may be associated to forms of psychological violence; sometimes, men vent their frustration on wives, if they live in conditions of poverty (Human Rights Watch, 2013).

Girls forced to marry early are also extremely vulnerable to sexual abuses. Once again, it is the youngest ones to be particularly at risk: in fact, worldwide, more than half of sexual assaults occur against girls under the age of 16 years¹³.

As for the physical and psychological violence, various kind of sexual abuse can be perpetrated not only by their husbands, but also by their in-laws (Human Rights Watch, 2009). Finally, in several countries rape by one's husband is not recognized as a crime by law (Human Rights Watch, 2013), as - legalized - male domain on female bodies¹⁴.

Education

The denial of the right to education, in addition to a loss of cultural notions, also amounts to depriving children and girls the opportunity to build relationships outside the family, to acquire skills different than those acquired at home and develop an independent identity, more aware of themselves and of their rights (Centro di Ricerca Innocenti dell'UNICEF, 2001).

An educated girl can acquire not only information, but also self-esteem and awareness of herself and of her body, enough to expect from their partner or husband safe sex, safe from sexual pregnancies and STDs (*ibid.*). In fact, in the absence of specific services, the school may be the only channel of information in contexts where a cultural silence about issues related to sexuality prevails¹⁵.

Where education is available, marriage is a step that can be postponed. Also the level of education attained plays a key role: in fact, children who received primary education have double chances of getting

married before age 18 than girls who have received secondary and higher education, while girls not educated at all are three times more likely to marry before age than girls who have received secondary education or higher (UNFPA,2013).

In some cases, before getting married, girls attend school; other times, however, they are not allowed even before. Especially in situations of extreme poverty, families often do not have sufficient resources to educate the children who have the burden of contributing to the family income.

Other times, school attendance is considered to be a source of danger to a girl, who could have premarital sex or be sexually assaulted, even on the way between home and school (Centro di Ricerca Innocenti dell'UNICEF, 2001). However, the most dramatic consequence of the denial of education to girls at risk of child marriage is the vicious cycle of poverty from which it is almost impossible to escape.

Not only girls are less likely to access the secondary level of education, but they are also particularly at risk of being totally excluded from the educational circuit; they are therefore destined to live in poverty because of the reduced chance of finding a decent job and to be socially marginalized. Hence the centrality of education as a deterrent to child marriage, aiming to give girls the opportunity to decide for themselves their own lives, free from poverty and disease¹⁶.

In fact, educated girls are more likely to have a higher income as adults, marry later, have fewer and healthier children, gain more decision-making power within their families and increased self-esteem; while the knowledge of sexual and reproductive health can reduce mortality and diseases of mothers and children, secondary education can foster civic participation that can help to combat violence and sexual abuse¹⁷.

That is why child marriage, hindering the education of girls, prevents them to break free from severe poverty, which has the same origin of child marriage, and from family contexts characterized by violence or other forms of inequality between men and women.

Conclusions

The issue of child marriage is, even today, a critical issue not resolved yet with respect to the project of freedom and democracy started in modernity.

Here we have tried to highlight the importance of the consequences that the girls involved in the phenomenon of child marriages suffer

regarding to different aspects of their lives. Instead of the construction of the Self and of one's identity construction, they thus follow a path in life characterized by poor ability of choice and action both individually and socially.

Another element in support of the importance of this phenomenon is offered by the commitment of international organizations. There are several legal instruments that over the years have been produced reflecting the importance to stop this practice, from the Declaration of Human Rights of 1948 and the Convention on the Rights of the Child and Adolescence of 1989, by the UN¹⁸.

From the point of view of the economically developed countries it is difficult to understand the complexity of the phenomenon of child marriage. This difficulty is also corroborated by the fact that in these countries there is a greater attention to the individual and to its development. This element represents a further obstacle in trying to understand the implications and social factors that keep the practice examined alive. In cultures where the collective life and the family play a vital role it becomes more problematic for girls not only escape from it, but also to feel that their lives may have alternative developments.

After all, even in the most industrialized countries, the women's possibility to decide for themselves and break free from a family project is a relatively recent conquest. To this day it is still hard to believe that not only relevant gender differences remain, but also that there are social contexts in which women cannot decide whom to marry or even that they are not able to enjoy their right to childhood: a childhood denied to an individual bound for adulthood since her birth.

However, according to the international law of human rights and the majority of national laws, marriage is a choice that must be made in complete freedom and awareness, conditions which are difficult to be attributed to under-18s, even recognising their hypothetical psychological maturity and even if, in some countries, adulthood is recognised before the age legally defined.

This law requires first of all that there are fundamental rights which must be guaranteed to all individuals, but through child marriage they are violated indeed, especially when girls are to be involved. These fundamental rights are: the right to physical, social and mental health; the right to freedom from violence; the right to education; the right to play and do other recreational activities and, finally, even the right to life.

It is therefore necessary to act on a set of behaviours and conditions, at the base of child marriages, which perpetuate their spread. In particular, the strategy more effective would seem to be the action on

several fronts, precisely on account of the fact - and this is the thesis of this research - that this phenomenon keeps on resisting because of these, multiple, factors, starting from combination of economical and cultural causes previously described. It is certainly not easy to make changes, much less in the short term, and that is why it is up to state governments to take action, not only through law but also through targeted policies, to intervene to ensure that people's rights are protected.

These are the main reasons that underlie the action of UNICEF and several NGOs, that have set themselves the objective of associating local campaigns to raise awareness of the families on the matter (including through the involvement of religious and community leaders) by assisting governments of the countries most affected by the phenomenon, with special attention to girls' access to education¹⁹.

In fact such actors engage not only in the protection, but also in the promotion of women's rights, not considered vulnerable subjects, but individuals with the same rights and duties of men, through the interruption (this is the case) of a practice that inevitably comes to reify the person. When discriminatory behaviour towards the female population is abandoned and women's rights are respected, it will mean that the social and cultural humus in which this practice has its roots will have ceased to be so fertile and even the formation of families will be based on different premises, as a result of certain personal choices.

However, a glimmer of change seems to be visible. Child marriages are experiencing a slow decline, especially before age 15: globally, from one woman in three, as was recorded in the early Eighties, to the current one in four women (UNICEF, 2014). These signs of change, however, are not uniformly found in all areas affected by the phenomenon: if the most important improvements are recorded in North Africa and the Middle East²⁰, the sub-Saharan African countries continue to show the most dramatic settings, with the provision that a country like Burkina Faso, as a result of an increase in population, will know, on the contrary, an increase of this phenomenon²¹.

Thus we are witnessing the proof that, despite the deep-rooted traditions, the social and cultural context of these countries can - and must - be changed in a direction of gender equality and respect for children and, more generally, the nonage and children and girls can expect a different future, respectful of their rights, in which they can independently design their own future.

Notes

¹ Italics added. Interestingly, although United Nations have placed a limit at 18 years of age, they have allowed the single countries to establish a lower age limit, through their own domestic judicial systems.

² It is difficult to find data showing what percentage of early marriage interest boys and girls. On the latter, in fact, research has focused, which rather focused on measuring what percentage of women from a certain country are married before age 18 (or age further below).

³ UNICEF, available at the website: www.unicef.org/search/search.php%20marriage&type=Main (italics added).

⁴ Take, for example, among others, the English Organization FORWARD (Foundation for Women's Health, Research and Development), particularly concerned with issues such as early marriage, female genital mutilation and obstetric fistula. Insights on these issues are available to the web page of the Organisation www.forwarduk.org.uk.

⁵ Available at the website www.forwarduk.org.uk/key-issues/child-marriage.

⁶ Available at the website www.girlsnotbrides.org/why-does-it-happen/.

⁷ For example, some families in Albania encourage girls to marry early to avoid being abducted and raped on the way to school. V. United Nations Division for the Advanced of Women, United Nations Economic Commission for Africa, 2009, p. 8.

⁸ In China, if a woman close to 30 years is not married yet, she is defined sheng nu, which means "left-over". However, even in Mandarin, as in Italian, the definition "which advances" has a double meaning, both negative and positive (Santevecchi, 2013, p. 54) (in Italian, "avanzare" means both "to exceed" and "to advance").

⁹ WHO, available at the website www.who.int/reproductivehealth/topics/adolescence/laws/en/.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Forward, available at the website www.forwarduk.org.uk/key-issues/child-marriage.

¹² Girls Not Brides, available at the website www.girlsnotbrides.org/why-is-child-marriage-a-form-of-violence-againstwomen-and-girls/.

¹³ UN Women, available at the website www.unwomen.org/en/news/in-focus/girl-child.

¹⁴ For example, as highlighted by Bourdieu (*Il dominio maschile*, 1998, Milano, Feltrinelli), forms of domination are inherent in the established order, even in the institutions and, as acknowledged by the author, they are

even introjected by the intellectual that criticises the institutional logic themselves (Ganeri, 1998, p. 181).

¹⁵ Forward, available at the website www.forwarduk.org.uk/key-issues/child-marriage.

¹⁶ UNGEI, available to the website: www.ungei.org/infobycountry/files/child_marriage_factsheet_south_asia_FINAL2.pdf.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ An examination of the legal sources in support of this position would be appropriate, but not possible here.

¹⁹ More on UNICEF's strategy in the fight against child marriage are available to the web page www.unicef.it/doc/4605/matrimoni-precoci-una-violazione-dei-diritti-umani.htm.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Idem, p. 7.

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