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IFMSA Policy Statement

Abolishing Child Marriage

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Summary

One in three girls in developing countries (excluding China) will be married before they reach 18 and one in nine before the age of 15. Children most likely to be married off before their 18th birthday are those who are less-educated, from poor families, living in rural areas. In addition to the detrimental health, social and economic consequences, child marriage violates human rights as it takes away the individuals' right to choose. It perpetuates a vicious cycle of poverty and is a global threat to health and development. Changing the tradition of child marriage is an essential step to gender equity. As medical students, we must voice the harmful consequences of this practice and empower girls to fight for their rights.

Background

Child marriage is when one or both spouses are under 18 at the time of the union¹. One in three girls in developing countries (excluding China) will be married before they reach 18 and one in nine before the age of 15¹. In 2010 it was estimated that 67 million between 20-24 years of age had been married before their 18th birthday¹. Even though there are 158 countries that forbid the practice, these are often loosely enforced in many countries where social norms and customs accept such practices. 52 countries allow girls under the age of 15 to get married with parental consent and 23 countries allow the same for boys². The statistics on child marriage reflect the issue of gender inequality as girls are more subjected to the practice than boys.

Poverty and child marriage go hand in hand: child marriage occurs more readily in poorer families and the practice continues the vicious circle of poverty by truncating education, limiting income earning opportunities and exacerbating gender inequality. In addition to poor communities, child marriage is most prevalent among the less-educated and in rural areas¹. Girls with no education are three times as likely to marry before 18 as girls with a secondary education and 54% of girls in 20% of the poorest households are married before 18 compared to 16% in the richest 20%¹. In times of humanitarian crises, the prevalence of child marriage increases¹. The pretext of child marriage explains this trend. Families may marry off their young family members as a form of security either for the protection of the girl, as a means of solving interfamily disputes or expanding useful connections and familial networks. Marrying off daughters can be used to pay off debts or help financially as in some cultures younger girls have lower dowries¹. These all result and are based on the rationale that girls are seen as commodities and not as equal individuals with rights and capabilities.

Consequences of child marriage are expansive for both society and the individual. The young women and girls often do not have a choice. They can be isolated from their families and community and are subject to abuse by their husband and in-laws¹. Young wives are more at risk of being subjected to both physical and sexual domestic violence¹. Girls are often married to older men who are more sexually experienced. This and for anatomical reasons puts them at a greater risk of contracting HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases such as human papillomavirus which causes cervical cancer³. Child brides often do not have the authority to demand contraception.



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which put them further at risk of not only contracting sexually transmitted diseases but also of getting pregnant¹. Contraceptive use among girls married or in union aged 15-19 is 22% compared to 61% for 15-49 year olds¹. In addition, comprehensive sexual education is often limited or not available in areas where child marriages are prevalent. Globally, one in five give birth under the age of 18 annually⁴ and 9 out of 10 are within the context of child marriage⁵. Maternal mortality is 5 times greater in girls under 15 years of age compared to those over 20⁶. The biggest killer of adolescent girls in low- and middle-income countries is complications related to pregnancy and childbirth, which takes 50 000 lives annually^{7,8}. Childbirth at such a young age also increases the risk of obstetric fistulas, which can be debilitating physically and socially due to severe pain and incontinence. Millions of women each year suffer unnecessarily from treatable complications of pregnancy such as uterine prolapse, obstetric fistula, mental health disorders and anaemia^{1,3,5,6,9,10}. Adolescent mothers are 50% more likely to have a stillbirth or death of the child within the first week⁴. They are also at a greater risk of giving birth to a child prematurely and with low birth weight, which predisposes the next generation for a range of disorders and could even affect the capabilities of this next generation^{1,3,4,5,8,9}. Furthermore, child marriage hinders education and income opportunities and thus exacerbates poverty and further predisposes for child marriage, affecting the capabilities of present and future generations¹. Hindering education of young girls, taking away their right to make free choices, putting them at risk of violence, morbidity and mortality, violates human rights. In addition, it deprives girls of the opportunity of becoming empowered citizens, further intensifies gender inequality and affects development of already vulnerable communities.

Child marriage has served as an impediment in reaching the Millennium Development Goals by perpetuating poverty (goal 1), hindering education of girls (goal 2), putting young individuals at increased risk of HIV (goal 6) and child pregnancy which affects the health of both the girl and the new born (goals 4 and 5)¹. All these factors thwart gender equality and women empowerment (goal 3). Ending child marriage thus should be seen as a target and as a step in improving other areas of development in the post-2015 agenda. Development aside, child marriage breaches human rights and many rights-based convention thus eradicating this harmful practice must be upmost priority.

Many international conventions and declarations are in place to protect the right of children and young women subjected to early and forced marriages. The Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) states that governments should take effective measure to put a stop to harmful practices that endanger the health of children¹¹. It also states that children have the right to develop to their fullest, not be party to abuse or exploitation and be able to participate fully in all family, cultural and social aspects of life. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights¹² §16 and the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW)¹³ §16 also stipulate the equal right of an individual to freely choose a spouse and only enter into marriage if free and full consent can be given. The International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) Programme of Action §7.41 states that “early marriage and early motherhood can severely curtail educational and employment opportunities and are likely to have a long-term, adverse impact on young women’s and their children’s quality of life”¹⁴. The ICPD Programme of Action also recognizes the detrimental effects early childbearing has on health, education and socioeconomic status¹⁴. The Bali Global Youth Forum Declaration on the follow-up to the implementation of the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development beyond 2014, explicitly calls for “Governments to address harmful traditional practices (such as forced circumcision and genital mutilation, early and forced marriage, gender based violence and violence against women)”¹⁵.



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Policy

IFMSA calls for:

1. Governments to make 18 years of age with and without consent, the legal age of marriage
2. Governments to end the practice child marriage through tighter laws and better implementation
3. All governments to agree to international declarations and conventions that promote the rights of women and children
4. The abolishment of child marriage to be a priority in international health and development discussions
5. The empowerment of children and youth to stand up for their rights and the voices be heard on the issue of child marriage
6. Access to sexuality reproductive health services and comprehensive sexuality education
7. Address underlying factors which perpetuate the practice like poverty and limited education
8. Offer services to support women and girls married under the age of 18
9. Better access and quality of education for girls independent of their marital status
10. Support and information for young married girls to avoid early and frequent pregnancies
11. Incentives, both social and economic, for communities to put a stop to this harmful practice
12. Better information to communities about the harmful effects of child marriage through involving religious and community leaders
13. Better documentation of birth and marriage registration
14. SRHR data to be disaggregated by age (including 10-14 year olds), sex, ethnicity, rural/urban etc. so that data can be collected as used to increase services for marginalized groups.

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