

OP-ED Child Marriages: The Fight to End the Destructive Tradition

By Victoria Chu

Imagine never having the opportunity to receive an education. Imagine having little to no childhood memories. Imagine being married to an older man years before you've reached your 18th birthday. Imagine being forced to give birth and care for a child before you know how to care for yourself. These circumstances aren't imaginary; they are a harsh reality for 15 million girls around the world in developing countries who are the victims of child marriage. Child marriage is defined as marriage arranged for girls without their consent, and has become a major violation of human rights extending from Latin America to the Middle East and South Asia to Europe.

Child marriage is rooted in gender inequality. When girls are viewed as inferior within the family, parents may perceive a need to marry them off at a young age to provide them with some type of future security and to protect them from other men. Poverty is also a leading cause of child marriage. The regions in which child marriage is common (name a few) are also poverty stricken areas. Parents marry their daughters' young, sometimes at 8 or 9 years of age, to reduce the families' financial burden of having to pay for clothing, schooling, and food. To find protection and support for girls, families often marry them before they are sexually mature to older men, some of whom may already have other wives.

These early marriages have many harmful effects on the girls involved. Girls whose bodies are not completely developed are initiated into sexual relations and often experience early pregnancies which can be harmful to their health and lead to adverse

effects for the new-born infants. Approximately 90% of adolescent pregnancies in the world occur in regions where child marriage is practiced. These girls are at a much higher risk of death during childbirth and more at risk to face pregnancy-related health problems and infants born to young mothers are at a greater risk of death and injury. Stillbirths and newborn deaths are above 50% in women who give birth before the age of 20.

Child marriage often leads to an end to a girl's schooling and education; however girls who continue their education are also less at risk of child marriage. Girls with secondary schooling are about six times less likely to have an early marriage. More than 60% of child brides have not had formal education; these statistics show how education and child marriage are strongly related. In regions where child marriage is common there is also lack of formal education because schools are expensive or not accessible.

Typically a child bride's parents do not invest in their daughter's education because education is either expensive or viewed as irrelevant to their lifestyle, so marriage is usually seen as the best outcome for their daughter's future. However, if a child bride is in school, she is more likely drop out due to an early marriage because she must take on a new life as a mother or wife.

The significant age difference between the husband and wife in a child marriage negatively affects the status and authority of the girl. Older men are able to exert control or manipulate their much younger wives in comparison to marriages with smaller age differences. Child brides are not as emotionally and mentally mature, so they are not as able to defend themselves. For example, a study in India showed that child brides were two times as likely to be physically beaten or injured by their husbands than are girls who married later. Child brides are also at a higher risk of sexual violence.. A study in

Ethiopia showed that at least 81% of child brides described their first sexual encounter as forced.

Why should we be against child marriage?

(1) Child marriage perpetuates poverty in developing countries partly because girls are often uneducated and cannot contribute to the economy and community.

(2) Child marriage is a violation of basic human rights because it fuels gender discrimination and inequality while putting women and girls at risk for violence and abuse.

(3) Child marriage prevents the pursuit of formal education, leaving girls with little to no knowledge of sex and the risk of HIV/AIDS and other STDs.

(4) Child brides are five times more likely to die in childbirth, or their children will experience health issues in the years to come.

What can be done to help end child marriage?

Education is one of the most powerful tools to prevent child marriage. With education, girls gain knowledge, build their skills and exercise their rights. Girls who go to school also develop a network of support from other students. The empowerment that comes with education and knowledge will push girls to forge their own paths in life. Many organizations, such as “Girls Not Brides,” aim to provide schooling and safe environments for young women. These are various ways you can contribute to the fight against child marriage.

- Donate money to young women in different regions of the world, and it will provide them with everyday necessities and fund their formal education.
- Act now by signing petitions to protect young people from genital mutilation and child marriage in different regions of the world. This link below is a petition for Youth for Change in the United Kingdom.
- <https://www.change.org/p/help-to-make-uk-schools-a-safer-place-to-address-fgm-and-child-marriage>
- This link is to raise the age of marriage to 18 in Tanzania
- <https://www.change.org/p/the-ministry-of-community-development-gender-and-children-members-of-the-tanzanian-parliament-policy-makers-raise-the-minimum-age-of-marriage-in-tanzania-to-18-for-both-boys-and-girls>
- On the ECU campus, become involved with She's the First, a student organization that supports four Nepali girls through school and helps to raise awareness about the importance of women's education. Here is a link to the Facebook page:
<https://www.facebook.com/STF.ECU>

Victoria Chu is currently a junior at East Carolina University majoring in Anthropology with a minor in Science. Her passion for learning about others cultures fuels her drive to travel the world. She plans to graduate in 2017 in the hopes to continue onto dental school in North Carolina and dreams of one day becoming an Oral Surgeon.