

# **EARLY MARRIAGE AS A BARRIER TO GIRL'S EDUCATION:**

## *A Developmental Challenge in Africa*

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### **ABSTRACT**

This paper explores the issue of early marriage in Africa. It sheds light specifically on reason behind its perpetuation, its harmful consequences, shows how it constitutes a barrier to education and enjoyment of girl's human rights and how it further threatens the development of countries. The findings from an extensive reading of materials related to early marriage suggest that early marriage is due to various factors including among others, the search for economic survival, protection of young girls, peer group and family pressure, controlling female behavior and sexuality, wars and civil conflicts and socio-cultural and religious values. It is a violation of girl's human rights as it deprives her from freedom, opportunity for personal development, and other rights. It also a developmental challenge for population pressure, health care costs and lost opportunities of human development. It is barrier to girl's education as young girls drop out from school to get married which impacts negatively on the community as whole and on the wellbeing of future generation. This practice stands in direct conflict with the objectives of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs); such as the promotion of basic education, fight against poverty, the prevention of HIV/AIDS and reduction maternal mortality rate. To deal with the problem a number of strategies have been suggested mainly providing economic opportunities to young girls, promoting education of girls and using mass media to increase the awareness of the whole community about the consequences of early marriage on girls themselves, their family and on the community as a whole.

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## INTRODUCTION

How to understand the widespread of early marriage in Africa? What are the reasons behind its perpetuation in Africa? How does it affect girls' wellbeing and constitute a violation of their human rights? How does it undermine the development of societies? Those questions are posed today, when, despite national laws and international agreements forbidding early marriage, this phenomenon is still widespread in many developing countries with a high prevalence in Sub-Saharan Africa more particularly in Central and West Africa. This paper intends to analyze that issue by emphasizing on this region of Africa. According to UNICEF (2001), 40 per cent and 49 per cent of girls under 19 in Central and West Africa respectively are married compared to 27 per cent in East Africa and 20 percent in Northern and Southern Africa.

Throughout the world, marriage is regarded as a moment of celebration and a milestone in adult life. Sadly, the practice of early marriage gives no such cause for celebration. All too often, the imposition of a marriage partner upon a child means that a girl or boy's childhood is cut short and their fundamental rights are compromised (UNICEF, 2001 and Lefevre, Quiroga and Murply 2004). Young girls are robbed of their youth and required to take on roles for which they are not psychologically or physically prepared. Many have no choice about the timing of marriage or their partner. Some are coerced into marriage, while others are too young to make an informed decision. Premature marriage deprives them of the opportunity for personal development as well as their rights to full reproductive health and wellbeing, education, and participation in civic life.

The literature identifies many interrelated factors almost similar worldwide with small variations between societies that interact to place a girl child at risk of early marriage. Those factors include among others, search for economic survival, protection of young girls, peer group and family pressure, controlling female behavior and sexuality, wars and civil conflicts, maximization of fertility where infant mortality is very high (The working group 2000; UNICEF2001; Mathur et al. 2003)

Early marriage contributes to a series of negative consequences both for young girls and the society in which they live. It is a violation of human rights in general and of girl's rights in particular. For both girls and boys, early marriage has profound physical, intellectual, psychological and emotional impacts; cutting off educational and employment opportunities and chances of personal growth. In this paper more emphasis is given to girls as this is an issue that impacts upon girls in far larger numbers and with more intensity.

Besides having a negative impact on girls themselves, the practice of early marriage also has negative consequences on their children, families, and society as a whole. UNICEF (2000) argues that it is not only girls that pay for early marriage but also the society as a whole. Population pressure, health care costs and lost opportunities of human development are just a few of the growing burdens that society shoulders because of teenage pregnancies. Early marriage also undermines international efforts to fight against poverty in developing countries. Bunch (2005) makes it clear that the widespread practice of child marriage makes it increasingly difficult for families to escape poverty in the developing world, thereby undermining critical international efforts to fight poverty, HIV/AIDS and other development challenges, and making billions of dollars in development assistance less effective.

Drawn from an extensive reading of published materials; textbooks, journal articles and magazines, consultation of different web sites, listening of videos related to early marriage, this paper will test the following hypotheses: Firstly, it argues that “a number of factors such as poverty, social cultural and religious norms, civil conflict, value of virginity and fears about marital sexual activity are the major factors that contribute to early marriage of girls in Africa”. Secondly, it asserts that “early marriage is a violation of girl’s human rights as it deprives her from freedom, opportunity for personal development, and other rights including health and wellbeing, education, and participation in civic life.” Lastly, it argues that “early marriage is a developmental challenge for the growing burdens such as population pressure, health care costs and lost opportunities of human development that society shoulden.”

To test the above hypothesis and to answer the questions raised in the beginning of this introduction, this paper first tries to situate the early marriage in the context of Africa, the reasons motivating early marriage and its effects on married young girls, their families and on the society as a whole. Further, it gives more details on how early marriage constitute a violation of girls human rights. The last part is the conclusion that summarizes the evidence and arguments developed throughout the research paper and provide some actions to be taken to deal with this challenging phenomenon.

## **1. BRIEF OVERVIEW ON EARLY MARRIAGE IN AFRICA**

### **1.1 What is the early marriage?**

The term “early marriage” is used to refer to both formal marriages and informal unions in which a girl lives with a partner as if married before age of 18 (UNICEF 2005; Forum on Marriage and the rights of women and girls 2001). For UNIFPA (2006) Early marriage, also known as Child marriage, is defined as “any marriage carried out below the age of 18 years, before the girl is physically, physiologically, and psychologically ready to shoulder the responsibilities of marriage and childbearing.” Child marriage, on the other hand, involves either one or both spouses being children and may take place with or without formal registration, and under civil, religious or customary laws.

The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), the most comprehensive international bill of rights for women, states that any betrothal or marriage of a child should not have any legal status. The Committee that monitors this convention states further in General Recommendation 21 (Article 16(2)) that the minimum age for marriage for both male and female should be 18 years, the age when “they have attained full maturity and capacity to act”. Most early marriages are arranged and based on the consent of parents and often fail to ensure the best interests of the girl child. Early marriages often include some elements of force, (Otoo-Oyorsey and Pobi 2003)

The lack of an overarching definition of early marriage in international conventions has generated some debate. Some scholars and activists, argue that instead of looking for a universal age at which girls and boys should not marry, the focus should be put instead on eliminating the unwanted effects of early marriage (Women’s human rights resources, <http://www.law-lib.utoronto.ca/Diana/index.htm>). For example, some commentators suggests that a universal age of marriage is not appropriate, in part because societies have different understanding of what it means to be a child as well as different socio-

economic and cultural realities. Bunting (1999) proposes that governments should be allowed to set the age of marriage below 18 years of age, but that the onus is on them to demonstrate that this lower age does not result in any discrimination or adverse consequences for women.

## 1.2 Context of early marriage in Africa

While more women are now marrying at later ages, in many regions, early marriage remains the norm. Overall, 20-50 percent of women in developing countries are married by the age of 18, with the highest percentages in Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia (Singh and Samara 1996 cited by LeFevre et al. 2004).

Early motherhood has been the subject of a growing number of studies, research projects and intervention programs in Africa. African women in general marry at a much earlier age than their non-African counterparts, leading to early pregnancies. Surveys carried out in some Sahelian countries offer alarming examples. In Niger, for example, according to the 1992 Health and Demographic Survey (HDS), 47% of women aged between 20 and 24 were married before the age of 15 and 87% before the age of 18. A total of 53% had also had a child before the age of 18, (Locoh Therese 2000). The following table shows the data about women ages 20 to 24 married by 18 years old

Table1: women ages 20 to 24 married by 18 years old

Country	Child Marriage Prevalence
Niger	77%
Chad	71%
Mali	65%
Bangladesh	65%
Guinea	65%
Nepal	56%
Mozambique	57%
Uganda	54%
Burkina Faso	52%
India	50%
Ethiopia	49%
Yemen	48%
Eritrea	47%
Togo	31%
South Africa	8%

Source: Demographic Health Survey (DHS) data from 1995 to 2003

The table above, shows that in Africa, there are countries with very high rates of early marriage, such as Niger (77 percent), Chad (71percent), and Mozambique (57 percent), but others such as Togo in West Africa have a more moderate rate of early marriage (31 percent), while South Africa has a fairly small percentage of young women who marry early (8 percent), Maltur et ali. 2003).

## 2. REASONS FOR EARLY MARRIAGE IN AFRICA

The factors which are presented below are not a particularity of African countries because they seem to be almost the same all over the world with very few disparities due to cultures.

### 2.1 Economic survival strategies

Poverty is one of the major factors underpinning early marriage. Where poverty is acute, a young girl may be regarded as an economic burden where one less daughter is one less mouth to feed (UNICEF 2001, Forum on marriage and the rights of women and Girls 2001; Mathur 2003 and Nour 2006). Parents encourage the marriage of their daughters while they are still children in hope that the marriage will benefit them both financially and socially, while also relieving financial burdens on the family. The marriage to a much older – sometimes even elderly – man is practice common in some societies. In traditional societies in Sub-Saharan Africa, the bride's family may receive cattle from the groom, or the groom's family, as the bride price for their daughter, (UNICEF 2001).

The following case of a Zimbabwean girl is one of many cases of girls who are married off at a very young age due to economic constraints. In August 2001, a ten-year-old girl in Zimbabwe was reported in a local newspaper as having been sold to be a wife to a 40-year-old man in order for the family to obtain cash for food. She was sold for \$2000 Zim that is US\$7. This sum would perhaps have bought two sacks of maize. The previous wife of the man the child was to marry had died of AIDS (Forum on marriage and the rights of women and Girls 2001:8)

In traditional societies – where infant mortality was very high and survival depended on a family's ability to produce its own food or goods for sale – child marriage helped to maximize the number of pregnancies and ensure enough surviving children to meet household labour needs (Mathur 2003). Additionally, poor families tend to marry off girls at the same time to help reduce the burden of high marriage ceremony expenses.

### 2.2 Socio-cultural and religious values

In communities where child marriage is prevalent, there is strong social pressure on families to conform. Failure to conform can often result in ridicule, disapproval or family shame. Invariably, local perceptions on the ideal age for marriage, the desire for submissive wives, extended family patterns and other customary requirements, are all enshrined in local customs or religious norms. In many contexts child marriage is legitimized by patriarchy, and related family structures, which ensure that marriage transfers a father's role over his girl child to her future spouse. The marriage or betrothal of children in parts of Africa and Asian is valued as a means of consolidating powerful relations between families, for sealing deals over land or other property, or even for settling disputes (UNIFPA, 2006)

The strong religious message also enforce the view that marrying early is best as supported by the following views of one priest representing Ethiopian's orthodox church. He argues that "*these days, with western ideas spread everywhere; girls stay unmarried as late as 30. It is very scientific and modern, but in our church it is prohibited. Such girls are neither clean, nor blessed*", (Barnes et al. 1998).

### 2.3 Value of virginity and protection of young girls

Early marriage is one way to ensure that a wife is protected, or placed firmly under male control; that she is submissive to her husband and works hard for her in-laws' household; that the children she bears are legitimate, (UNICEF 2001; Mathur, 2003 and Nour 2006). On the other hand, for many societies that prize virginity before marriage, early marriage can manifest itself in a number of practices designed to 'protect' a girl from unsanctioned sexual activity. In North-East Africa and parts of the Middle East in particular, control may also include the practice of female genital mutilation (FGM) to restrict sexual pleasure and temptation. Some parents withdraw their girls from school as soon as they begin to menstruate; fearing that exposure to male pupils or teachers puts them at risk. These practices are all intended to shield the girl from male sexual attention, but in the eyes of concerned parents, marriage is seen to offer the ultimate protection measure.

In Wars and civil conflicts parents or caregivers resort to child marriage as a protective mechanism or survival strategy. Displaced populations living in refugee camps may feel unable to protect their daughters from rape, and so marriage to a warlord or other authority figure may provide improved protection. For the young girls orphans or separated with their parents or relatives the only way to survive and to get protection is to get married, (De Smedt 1998).

### 3. KEY ISSUES SURROUNDING EARLY MARRIAGE (CONSEQUENCES)

There tends to be a relationship between age of marriage, level of education, poverty, and health: poorer, less educated girls tend to marry earlier and tend also to have poorer health. The following consequences tend to flow from early marriage:

#### 3.1 Health and related outcomes

***Early child bearing and unwanted pregnancies:*** Young girls who get married will most likely be forced into having sexual intercourse with their, usually much older, husbands. This has severe negative health consequences as the girl is often not psychologically, physically and sexually mature. Early marriage is associated with early child bearing. Young married girls are under tremendous pressure to prove their fertility in the first year of marriage. Girls, who marry young, inevitably have children early, and have many children, because their knowledge of contraception is poor and their power to negotiate its use is weak.

***Domestic violence and sexual abuse:*** As young girls are often married to men who are much older than themselves, the age difference tends to reinforce the powerlessness of the girl, who is thus at greater risk of abuse and less likely to assert herself. Young married girls are more likely to be beaten or threatened and more likely to believe that a husband might sometimes be justified in beating his wife. Women who believe that they are more likely to have been married before age 18 than those who believe that there is never justification. Child brides are often more susceptible to domestic violence. (USAID Gender Assessment, 2003-2005). In Egypt, data indicates that 29% of married adolescents were beaten by their spouses—or their spouses and others. Of these, 41% were beaten when they were pregnant. (Population Council, 2000 cited by ICRW, 2008).

***High maternal mortality and morbidity:*** The World Health Organization estimates that the risk of death following pregnancy is twice as great for women between 15 and 19 years than for those between the ages of 20 and 24. The maternal mortality rate can be up to five times higher for girls aged between 10 and 14 than for women of about twenty years of age. Pregnant adolescents face far more health problems than older women, particularly single girls who often receive less prenatal care. Adolescents are far more susceptible to suffering from anemia than adults, which greatly increase the risk and complications linked to pregnancy. They are equally more at risk of malnutrition, high blood pressure linked to pregnancy and eclampsia than women who are over 20, (Women's International Network 2000 and IHEU 2006)

***Increased risk of contracting sexually transmitted diseases and HIV/AIDS:*** Fear of HIV infection, for example, has encouraged men in some African countries to seek young virgin – and therefore uninfected – partners. On top of pregnancy-related complications, young married girls are also at high risk of contracting sexually transmitted diseases and HIV/AIDS. Young married girls are even at higher risk because their older husbands may already be infected in previous sexual relationships. Furthermore, the age difference between the girl and the husband and her low economic status make it almost impossible for the girl to negotiate safe sex or demand fidelity. Early marriage usually means that young girls enter marriage without adequate information about critical sexual intercourse, contraception, sexually transmitted diseases, pregnancy and childbirth.

### **3.2 Lack of power**

It is hypothesized that women who are married as children have less decision making power than women whose marriage is delayed until adulthood. They don't have ability to make decision on their own health care, contraception, household budget, daily household purchases, visit to family and friends etc, (UNICEF, 1996). They have little power in relation to their husbands and in-laws.

### **3.4 Divorce or abandonment and Early Widowhood**

Some desperate girls and women who have been forced into marriage try to run away or take other avenues to leave their spouses; others are abandoned by their spouses. However, the girls and women are usually left with the responsibility of raising children without the husband or family's financial support, thus making them more likely to live in poverty. In many cultures, husbands are often many years older than their young brides, and consequently die while the girl is still young. Traditionally, girls were not allowed to remarry or were passed onto their dead husbands' brothers. Furthermore, the girl's families are unlikely to accept her back once she has become widowed, (UNICEF 2001). In cultures that permit polygamy, the youngest co-wife is required to care for elder co-wives. This relationship is sometimes a daughter/mother relationship, but in many cases the elder wives view the younger with bitterness and resentment.

### **3.5 Consequences for children**

The health problems linked to early marriage not only affect the pregnant mother and the fetus, but also continue after child birth. The consequences reach beyond the lives of young married girls themselves to the next generation. The immaturity and lack of education of a young mother undermines her capacity for nurture evidence shows that infant mortality among the children of very young mothers is higher – sometimes two times higher – than among those of older peers, (UNICEF2001)

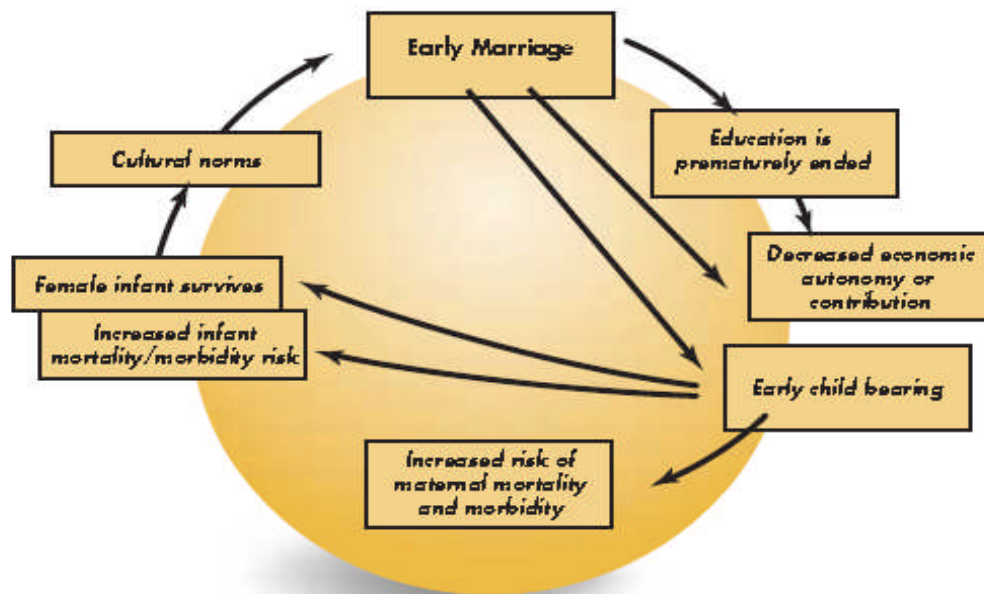


### 3.6 Reinforcement of gender stereotypes and roles

The lack of other opportunities and the powerlessness that often accompanies early marriage combine to perpetuate the gender roles of girls and women and reinforces cultural traditions that support early marriage as a desirable practice.

The interrelation of causes and consequences related to early marriage are capitulated in the following figure

**Figure: Early Marriage Link**



Source: (LeFevre 2001)

## 4. EFFECT OF EARLY MARRIAGE ON GIRL'S EDUCATION

The school is the most important institution outside the family involved in socializing young people into all dimensions of adult roles and responsibilities. More years of schooling have been associated with many positive outcomes, including later ages of marriage, lower fertility, and healthier and better-educated children, economic development. However, early marriage inevitably denies children of school age their right to the education they need for their personal development their preparation for adulthood, and their effective contribution to the future wellbeing of their family and society. Indeed, married girls who would like to continue schooling may be both practically and legally excluded from doing so. The essence of the rights to education and to health is that they facilitate and ensure the effective enjoyment of other human rights.

For a number of poorer families, the potential rewards of educating daughters are too far off and therefore their education is not recognized as an investment. Families perceive that a girl's education will only benefit her husband's household, and not her parents. Additionally, some parents believe that

girls do not need an education for their roles as wives and mothers, that education undermines cultural practices, and it teaches the girl to reject tradition. The following citation illustrate well the case: *“At the age of about 14 years, my father sent me to my uncle so that he could let his wife train me for marriage. He believe that if continued to go to school, I would be spoilt girl” and no man would agree to marry me. Being spoilt girl meant that I would be too wise to marry back in his village where he could get my dowry.* (Womankind 1999 cited by the Forum on marriage and the rights of Women and girls, 2000:p.18).

However, there is a saying that when you educate a woman you educate a nation. Education, even at a basic level, is not only about livelihood and technical skills but more importantly provides social ‘connectedness’ or aptitude which enables one to access key resources to alleviate poverty. By interacting with others, individuals acquire the social skills and personal capacities needed to access resources and opportunities, and to form social networks for support and assistance when required in the future. Individuals can also develop their self-esteem and confidence to voice their opinions and to take control over their own actions, lives and bodies. Other positive benefits of education are linked to improved reproductive health and child survival and welfare, (Naana Otoo-Oyortey and Sonita Pobi 2003).

Educated women are more likely to have a say in decision-making regarding the size of their families and the spacing of their children. They are also likely to be more informed and knowledgeable about contraception and the healthcare needs of their children. Adolescent girls who marry outside their communities tend to lose the close friendships they had formed in their parental homes, and often become quiet and subdued. This means that even where girls have developed social networks they are unable to access them from their marital community.

The universal right to education has been affirmed by the world’s governments for more than 50 years, most recently by the Millennium Development Goals adopted by the 191 member states of the United Nations in 2000. However, some 115 million children—among them 62 million girls—are still denied this right. According to data from UNICEF (2004), outside of the developed world, only 76 percent of all boys and 70 percent of all girls attend primary school.

While marriage does not have to mean that a girl's or boy's education finishes, the attitudes of parents, schools and spouses in many societies mean that it often does. Husbands of young wives are often older men, who expect their wives to follow tradition, stay home and undertake household and child-care duties. A girl may be unable to go against her husband's wishes and the husband's family may refuse to invest their scarce resources in the wife's continued schooling.

Some schools often have a policy of refusing to allow married or pregnant girls or girls with babies to return. They may believe that it will set a bad example to other pupils or that other parents will be angry to see the school go against the traditional beliefs. Even if they do permit girls to return, the school environment - rules, timetables and physical conditions - can make it too difficult for a girl to attend school and perform her duties as wife and mother at the same time. Bullying and abuse by teachers, pupils and other parents can further reduce girls' self-confidence and sense of security, forcing them to give up on schooling.

When girls drop out of school to get married, there is a knock-on effect for the community as a whole, and for future generations. Evidence suggests that children of young, uneducated mothers are less likely to have a good start to their education, do well in class or continue beyond the minimum schooling. Their daughters especially are likely to drop out, marry young and begin the cycle again (Ingrid Lewis 2009)

## **5. EARLY MARRIAGE AS DEVELOPMENTAL CHALLENGE**

Early marriage stands in direct conflict with the objectives of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), (Mathur 2003). It threatens the achievement of the first six goals respectively, eradicating extreme poverty and hunger, achieving universal primary education, promoting gender equality and empowering women, reducing child mortality, improving maternal health and combating HIV/AIDs, malaria and other diseases, (UN 2007). When the relationship between age at marriage and development is examined, it becomes clear that later marriage is a precondition for the attainment of desired development related goals. These can include completion of school, acquisition of training for employment, and attainment of the skills and information related to the roles of citizen, family member, and consumer that are part of a successful adulthood, (Mathur 2003 and UNICEF 2003).

In many countries child marriage is linked with poverty. This is because it affects particularly the poorest in the population, and helps to reinforce cycles of poverty. Early marriage is associated with high fertility. However, one reason for a poverty trap is a demographic trap, when impoverished families choose to have lots of children. According to Sachs (2005), high fertility rates in one generation, therefore, tend to lead to impoverished of the children and high fertility in the following generation as well.

Women are at the hearth of many societies. Regardless of whether they are working or not, mothers are very influential people in children's lives. According to DFID (2005), educating girls is one of the most important investments that a country can make in its own future. Education has a profound effect on girls and women's ability to claim other rights and achieve status in society, such as economic independence and political representation. Having an education can make an enormous difference to woman's chances of finding well paid, raising a health family and preventing the spread of diseases such as HIV and AIDS.

UNICEF (1994) argues that it is not only the girls that pay for early marriage but that society also pays. Population pressure, health care costs and lost opportunities of human development are just a few of the growing burdens that society shoulden because of early marriage. Girls' education is one of the means to address poverty and developmental problems. With education girls are given the chance to choose their own futures and not one chosen by their parents and guardians.

Malhotra and Mather (1997) argue that there is a close link between delayed marriage and adult earnings. Women's economic future and their ability to participation in and contribute to the global economy are primarily dependent on a rise in educational attainment, but this is impossible when the girl married early. Women who marry at early age are likely to find the sole focus of their lives, at the expense of development in other areas such as formal education, and training for employment, work experience and personal growth. Early marriage can, therefore, be a significant barrier for communities seeking to raise education levels and break the cycle of poverty.

## **6. EARLY MARRIAGE AS A VIOLATION OF GIRLS HUMAN RIGHTS**

Birth, marriage and death are the standard trio of key events in most people's lives. But only one – marriage – is a matter of choice. Yet many girls, and a smaller number of boys, enter marriage without any chance of exercising their right to choose. Some are forced into marriage at a very early age. Others are simply too young to make an informed decision about their marriage, (UNICEF 2001). The right to free and full consent to a marriage is recognized in the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and in many subsequent human rights instruments – consent that cannot be free and full when at least one partner is very immature. Child marriage is a violation of human rights and is prohibited by a number of international conventions and other instruments, (UNICEF 2001).

### **6.1 Why take a human rights approach to the issue of early marriage?**

Early marriage tends to be studied within demographics or population studies, or from a concern about the health risks that accompany early childbirth. The concern has been with identifying the connection between early marriage, high rates of population growth, and socio-economic stresses on a society. While it is important to study early marriage from a demographic and medical perspective, a human rights approach offers a more complete analysis of the issues, (Barker 2004).

A human rights approach begins from the assumption that those women's rights and the rights of her society and her family are inextricably linked - they cannot be separated from each other. As the causes and consequences of early marriage indicate, a society cannot prosper if the interests of women and girls are neglected. Moreover, women and girls are rights bearers themselves, they are entitled to the same level of respect, concern and right to pursue their potential - things that are generally given more easily to men than to women by societies around the world.

A human rights approach requires that concerns that may have been traditionally regarded as private family concerns be understood as public matters. It insists that society mobilizes its resources, energies and talents to ensure that the interests of women and girls are placed on the public agenda. Thus, the unhappy girl's fate is not simply the responsibility of her father, mother or husband, but must be seen as part of a larger social agenda of any culture or society committed to recognizing its full potential and the full potential of all its members in a non-discriminatory way.

### **6.2 Recognition of Girl's rights**

Recognizing the basic human rights of young women is the first step in any approach to overcoming early marriage and its consequences. The rights of women within marriage and the family were among the first human rights pertaining to women's status to be explicitly recognized under international law. The United Nations' (UN) Committee on the Rights of the Child, which monitors countries' actions related to the Convention on the Rights of the Child, recognizes early marriage as a harmful traditional practice. Yet there continues to be a lack of legislation against child marriage in some areas (CRLP 1999). Although many countries have established laws prohibiting marriage before the age of 18, these laws often are not enforced. The UN Fourth World Conference on Women (FWCW) in Beijing in 1995 brought greater visibility to the issues associated with the rights of women all over the world, including early marriage of adolescent girls. The FWCW Platform for Action for the Girl child outlines several actions to be taken, including the creation of policies and programs to assist the family in its "supporting, educating and nurturing roles, with particular emphasis on the elimination of intra-

family discrimination against the girl-child” (FWCW 2001). However, even landmark conferences are not enough: long-term work is also needed to sustain advocacy efforts for the rights of adolescent girls—and to turn advocacy into effective programs, (LeFevre, 2004).

Some of key international and regional rights instruments relating to child marriage

- Convention on the Rights of the Child
- The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948)
- The Convention on Consent to Marriage, Minimum Age for Marriage and Registration of Marriages (1964)
- The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination of Women (1979)
- The United Nations Supplementary Convention on the Abolition of Slavery, the Slave Trade, and Institution and Practices Similar to Slavery (1956):
- Plan of Action for the Elimination of Harmful Traditional Practices Affecting the Health of Women and Children
- The African Charter on Human and People’s Rights
- The African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (1990)
- Etc

UNIFPA (2006) cites the three key international agreements that provide added standards for governments in realizing reproductive health and rights. Those are the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development; the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women; and the 2001 and 2006 United Nations General Assembly Special Session (UNGASS) on HIV/AIDS. These landmark agreements promote human rights, gender equality and empowerment as critical to the overall development and well-being of women, girls and young women.

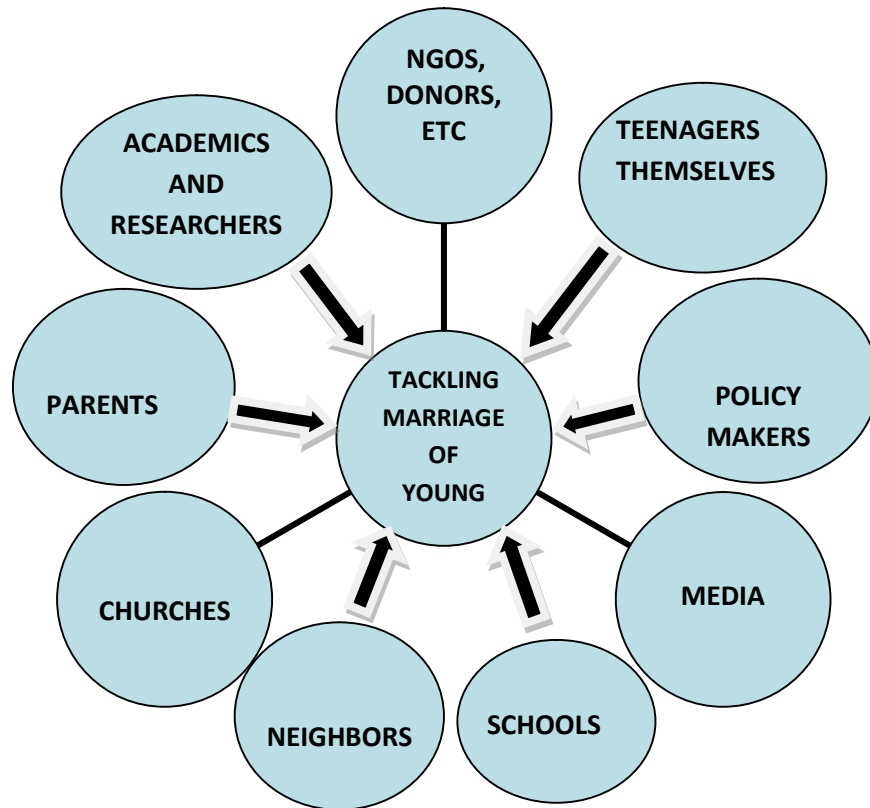
## CONCLUSION

This paper has shown that child marriage is an accepted cultural practice in many countries especially in developing countries with more prevalence in Sub-Saharan Africa. It is still widely sanctioned, even though it is a violation of the human rights of young girls due to various motives. Early marriage can violate the rights of girls and boys, both in this generation and the next but this is an issue that impacts upon girls in far larger numbers and with more intensity. More emphasis has been given to girls as the experience for boys is, less likely to be exploitative or physically harmful as it is for girls. The imposition of a marriage partner on children or adolescents who are in no way ready for married life, and whose marriage will deprive them of freedom, opportunity for personal development, and other rights including health and well-being, education, and participation in civic life, nullifies the meaning of the Convention on the Rights of the Child’s core protections for those concerned.

Numerous severe consequences result from the practice of early marriage. Early marriage is intrinsically linked to low levels of education, high levels of violence and abuse, social isolation, severe health risks and harmful power dynamics and results in increased gender inequality and vulnerability to poverty for girls, young women, families and the society as a whole. This practice also threatens the international development effort to fight against poverty and related challenges in developing countries.

To tackle this challenging phenomenon, a joint effort to formulate and implement policies and strategies is needed. Actions to fulfill or restore the rights of those already married should go hand in hand with preventive actions to insure that all of the interventions are available to married, as well as to unmarried girls. The figure below highlights different actors that must be involved in the process.

**Figure 2: Different stakeholders that should be involved in the fight against early marriage**



Source: Drawn by myself

The above mentioned actors should put effort together to help delay marriage by taking among others the following actions:

**Providing economic opportunities to young girls:** Poverty is one of the major factors underpinning early marriage. Efforts to improve the access of young married and non married girls to economic resources should focus on expanding employment and entrepreneurial opportunities. Micro-credit programs provide women and girls with the basic economic opportunities they often lack and a social support network that promotes changes in attitudes and behavior. It serves as a means of granting them higher status and more control over their lives – including their options in marriage (Kabeer 2005 and Umashankar 2006).

**Promoting education of Girls:** Educating girls seems to be the ideal solution since, if sufficiently prolonged; it helps to delay age of marriage, and confers other benefits as well. However, sending children to school costs money and where money is scarce, it is unlikely to be spent on girls. Even

where education is highly subsidized or even free, poor parents have to pay for some of the costs of school attendance for their children, such as various fees, books, and school uniforms. In this case, governments, NGOs should provide support needed for girls' education such as free books, uniforms, scholarship and so on.

**Using mass media to increase the awareness of the whole community** about the consequences of early marriage on girls themselves, their family and on the community as a whole. Once communities are sensitized, the parents sent their girls to school and support them to stay on. This leads to the empowerment of girls into skills for self-confidence, assertiveness, speaking out, decision-making and negotiation. Gaining access to communities deeply rooted in the practice of early marriage is one of the biggest obstacles for programs to tackle. Media campaigns using radio and other traditional communication methods must be used to reach communities, especially those in rural areas. All these measures will help to ensure the domestic applicability of the national, as well as international legal instruments already ratified about girl's human rights.

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