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A global View on Child Marriage and Teenage Pregnancy

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1. Introduction

Girls face discrimination and violence every day across the world, especially in countries living in poverty. Their basic rights to live a normal life without being abused by their family, relatives, friends, or society in general is sadly not obtained. Girls, especially the ones who are under the age of 18 years old in third world countries, have no right to enjoy their childhood as children. They are being treated as women once they reach puberty. Families in third world countries living under poverty see girls as a burden, and one of the ways to bring this weight down is to get ride of them. Not necessarily by killing them, but by marrying them for dowry. Child marriage is without doubt a violation of human rights and deprives girls from their education and health. In many countries, child marriage is banned but still spans within religion and caste.

Usually in Palestine and Arab countries, the term child marriage refers to early marriage. Personally, I prefer to refer to early marriage as child marriage in order to give the topic more attention to raise awareness on this subject. To have a standard marriage age is difficult since each country has its own regulations and laws that differ from one another. Many conservative societies take advantage of the law and the religion to force marriage through counterfeit birth certificates. Other societies swindle the age of the girl by the name of culture and tradition practices. Girls married at the age of 6 years old are still children, as are girls married at age 15. Unfortunately, child marriage practice is still common even though local and international laws prevent it, but somehow people find their ways to go around the laws when it comes to marry a girl. Breaking through the laws is done using religion and traditional practices which is a violation of human rights, specifically children rights. Child marriage is only the leading beginning for teenage pregnancy. Teenage pregnancy is also well known within the frame of marriage or outside marriage. Either ways, this pregnancy is a challenge for the mother and society as a whole, which could place the health of the mother and child at high risks.

In 2011, I was touched by a story entitled "Too Young to Wed: The Secret World of Child Brides" written by the journalist Stephanie Sinclair. The story is centered on a girl from

Yemen who was married at the age of 6 years old to a grown man and she was a wife in the full sense of the word. She had not reached puberty and so had not have children at first. But, this was expected from her as soon as her husband intercourse with her. Because of how much this story touched me, I decided to write about child marriage and young pregnancy as practices that still exist nowadays.

In this paper, the aim is to highlight these two concepts and their impact in delaying the achieving of the Millennium Development Goals 4 and 5 (calling for a two – thirds reduction in child deaths and a three – fourths reduction in maternal mortality by 2015).

2. Literature Review (Theory)

United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) article 1 defines a child as a person below the age of 18, unless the laws of a particular country set the legal age for adulthood younger (1). This definition leads to another one to describe child marriage as a formal marriage or informal union before the age 18 years old. Both boys and girls are included, but unfortunately it is more universal among young girls. In Niger, for example, the percentage of women married before the age of 18 years old reaches 75%, while for men it is 6% (2). The age of marriage is not standard. It is actually differing from one country to another influenced by religion and tradition. Thus, these differences create a barrier to find the perfect standard marriage age and that is due to the puberty onset age that cannot be determined, but only estimated. In Palestine, for example, according to the civil law the age marriage for a girl is 17 years old while for the boy it is 18 years old. However, not all Palestinian families follow this law and thus girls are forced to marry and to demonstrate their fertility once they are married.

According to the media centre in World Health Organization (WHO), over 30% of girls marry before they are 18 years old and around 14% before the age of 15 years in low and middle income countries (3). United Nations Fund for Population Analysis (UNFPA) estimated that between 2011 and 2020 more than 140 millions young girls will become child brides. 90 million of the 140 millions will marry before becoming 18 years old, while 50 millions will marry under the age 15 years old (4). The high numbers of child marriage is might due to the increase of

youth population in developing countries. UNFPA showed that there are more than 1.2 billion people aged 10-19 years, out of which 87% of them live in developing countries (5).

As research studies have shown the practice of young girls marriage is most common in sub areas such as Saharan Africa and Southern Asia, and nearly 50% of young women are married before the age of 18 years old (5). Another study by WHO classified countries with the highest average of child marriage as following: Niger, 75%; Chad and central African republic, 68% ; Bangladesh, 66%; Guinea, 63%; Mozambique, 56%; Mali, 55% ; Burkina Faso and South Sudan, 52%; and Malawi,50% (4). The high average of child marriage in these counties are due to social, economical, and political issues.

In the Middle East, some countries still practice child marriage. A survey that was conducted to investigate child marriage in the Middle East found that 27% of young girls in Saudi Arabia were married before the age of 16 and the youngest age recorded was 10 years old (6). In Yemen, 17% of girls were reported married between the ages of 15 and 19 years (7). In Egypt, 12 % of women ages 15 to 19 were already married in 2005 (8). To compare the situation in Palestine, according to Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics, 682 girls aged 14 and younger were legally married in 2000 (9). Pan Arab Project of Family Health conducted a survey in 2006 to look into child marriage in Palestine, they found that approximately 10 % of young girls between the ages of 15 to 19 are married and 50% of 20 to 24 years old are married. This means young marriage in Palestine is less universal than Egypt and Yemen (8). In my personal view, it is less universal because nowadays families are encouraging and motivating their girls to finish school and to continue to reach high degrees. Because also of the bad economy situation in Palestine, majority of men prefer to marry women who have completed their education in order to contribute to the income of the household.

Married children usually face familial and social expectations. One of these expectation is to have children as soon as they intercourse. This means young girls become sexually active earlier often followed by pregnancy prior to physical maturity. Even if contraceptive services are available, married girls may lack the power to use them. United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) defines teenage pregnancy as a teenage girl, usually within the ages of 13-19, becoming pregnant. The age varies across the world, but in general it usually refers to

girls who have not reached legal adulthood. Approximately 16 million girls aged 15 to 19 years and two million girls under the age of 15 give birth every year and most of these births happened in less educated, low to middle income countries, with 95% of these births occurring in developing countries (3). Teenage pregnancy is spread globally. A study conducted in 2001, showed that 22% of women reported having a child before age 20 years old in United States compare with 15% in Great Britain, 11% in Canada, 6% in France and Sweden 4% (10). This shows that developing countries also suffer from teenage pregnancy but not as much compared to countries living in poverty.

Teenage pregnancy expose girls to healthy risks complications whether during pregnancy or during childbirth. According to the United Nation (UN), the leading cause of death among girls aged 15 – 19 years in developing countries result from complications during pregnancy and childbirth (4). UNICEF estimates around 50,000 die, almost all in low and middle income countries (4). Adolescent pregnancy, teenage pregnancy, or child pregnancy all lead to the same meaning. In general, women during their pregnancy need a follow up care through the stages of her gestation, so the outcomes will be favorable. What if the pregnant person was adolescent? Teenage pregnancy has many impacts on the reproductive health of the mother. A study conducting by *James E Rosen in the department of Making Pregnancy Safer in (WHO) shown that*, pregnant girls younger than 16 years face four times the risk of maternal death than women aged in their 20s (11). The young mothers are facing the risk of many complications resulting from pregnancy and birth *James E Rosen in the department of Making Pregnancy Safer in (WHO as said)*, such as death and disability, including obstetric fistula (is a tear between the vagina and the bladder or the rectum, causing urine or stool to leak out through vagina) (11). In Ethiopia and Nigeria, more than 25% of fistula patients had become pregnant before the age of 15 and more than 50% before the age of 18 (11). Another cross sectional study done in Egypt reveals that ectopic pregnancy, pre-eclampsia, eclampsia, premature rupture of membranes, preterm labor, and cesarean were significantly higher among adolescents younger than 15 years of age (12). Stillbirths and newborn deaths are 50% higher among teenage mothers than among infants born to mothers aged 20 – 29 years (3). The high number in death of newborns or the

mother is due to the lack knowledge of the girl about using contraceptives and also because the health care is not easily reached in poor societies.

3. Discussion

Adolescence is a crucial transmission stage from being a child to being an adult. A lot of physical, psychological, and social changes take place in the boy and girl's life. Puberty age varies from one country to another. Ceremonies to welcome adolescent stage of boys and girls occur in some societies that hold tightly to traditions and culture practices. These ceremonies most likely are marriage celebrations, where young girls are being seen as women once they have their first menstrual period. Thus, they must obey their traditions to fulfill their duties as daughters, wives, and mothers. The suffering journey begins for a girl who experiences her first menarche, and tries to understand the physical changes occurring in her body. She is also forced to drop out of school to marry a man who is probably much older than her. With all what is happening around her, she must fulfill her duty as a wife. If she does not meet the expectation of her husband, she may suffer the consequences of an abusive life.

Child Marriage is a topic that should concern everybody and should be known in all societies. Unfortunately, it is more known in societies living in poverty. Young girls living in poverty are forced to leave school behind, and be prepared to get married at a young age to a man who is most likely to be the same age as her father. Sadly, the purpose of the marriage is not about uniting a man with a woman, but became rather it is a business. The girl's family has limited income and by marrying the girl some of the responsibilities toward her are lifted. Traditional practices have huge influence on young girls' marriage especially in societies which highly preserve their traditions. The virginity of the girl is a matter of honor matter for the family and the society as a whole. To keep the honor of the family unharmed, traditions come in to safeguard the virginity of the girl.

The married girl is at high risk physically and mentally during and after pregnancy which could lead her to a dead end. The most likely risk that the married girl could face in her husband's house a violence and abuse done by her husband, his family, and her family. Since the

girl is married at an early age, she is not aware that being beating up by her husband is considered a violation of her rights. She thinks with the influence of her culture and traditions that the violence against her is one of her husband's rights to force her to obey him. Simply saying, the husband owns the authority, and all the wife has to do is to only listen and obey without any questions. She obeys because she is afraid. The fear controls her because she is not well educated about her own rights. That is because at an early age she was forced to leave school and was totally robbed from education. This will cause to transfer ignorance from the mother to her children. As a result, child marriage continues from one generation to another. As we know, education is important to supply enough power for the girl to stand up for her rights and allow her to live independently. It was previously mentioned that child marriage is highly linked with poverty. Poverty forces the girl's family to marry her in order to lift the loads from their shoulders since they cannot afford to feed all their children. Thus, the girl makes a good deal because of the dowry system.

The girl enters a cycle of suffering from her parent's house to her husband's house. Once the girl is in her husband's house, tradition interferes with her life and automatically forces her to enter the motherhood cycle. The girl has no opinion on this matter, and her only concern is to carry a baby inside her no matter what the consequences are. Young girls have not yet developed the capacity to prepare their bodies to pregnancy. Young girls that come from low income families have no opinion about their individual lives. Their life is controlled by their families and later by their husbands. Children are used to lift the income of the family, especially male children; considered fit for labor to contribute to the income of the household. Therefore, when a young girl marries, she has no say whether to use contraceptives or not. They are still children and on top of that, they are going to give birth to children to care of. Before pregnancy these girls do not know how to take care of themselves. During and after pregnancy they need to take care of themselves and the child. They are already at health risk and the risks would increase if they live in poverty with a shortage of all health supplies from healthy food to medicine. As a result, some girls are most likely to die during her pregnancy or after. If the girl survives, as well as the child, she has no support from her family and husband to raise the child. Once again, she is left alone to figure out what motherhood is likely to be.

The main goal of this paper is to examine the impact of child marriage and young pregnancy in delaying the achievement of Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) 4 and 5 - calling for a two – thirds reduction in child deaths and a three – fourths reduction in maternal mortality by 2015. As we see here, child marriage as well teenage pregnancy interfere with other MDGs. MDG 1 calls for ending poverty and hunger. One of the ways to end poverty and child marriage in low income families is through education. Education increases the chances of getting jobs, increased income, and ignorance decrease. Education is important for everybody, but mostly for women because it can empower them to defend their rights and protect them from any harm.

MDG 2 calls for universal primary education. As mentioned above, child marriage and pregnancy compel young girls to interrupt their education. Many studies showed that a high percentage of child marriage and pregnancy is most likely to occur in less educated, low income societies. MDG 3 calls for promoting gender equality and empowering women. How will MDG 3 achieve its goal while the practice of child marriage and young pregnancy still common?. Promoting gender equality and empowering teenage pregnant woman seem very challenging and might take much time more what we think to achieve it. Finally, MDG 6 calls to combat HIV/AIDS, Malaria and other disease. I previously mentioned that most girls are married to spouses much older than them. This probably increases the chances of girls to be infected by Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) (14). The reason behind that is parents marrying their girls to protect their honor, while men seek to marry young girls is because young girls are less likely to be infected with HIV compared to older women (14).

Child marriage and young pregnancy subjects always create ethical dilemmas, pushing educated people to question these two matters. Sometimes answers for suitable solutions to benefit everybody are not found. Domestic and international laws pan the practice of child marriage and young pregnancy, but people do not take these laws seriously. As a result, these two practices still exist. In societies where tradition practices is held tight, these practices are considered more powerful than the law itself. In most cases, poverty plays an influential role in child marriage because of the desire of having money to continue living. In other cases, preserving the honor of the girl and her family is the main reason of child marriage. We always

have to think about the girl that her childhood is taken from her. She can no longer play like the rest of the children in the world. She is forced to leave school and leave her education behind. The proper health care services are also not well provided to the girl. Hence, the girl is left without any support from her family or the society she lives in. The husband will not support or even protect her. According to him, she is just a thing that any day can be replaced with a newer thing.

It is never too late. We still have the time to do something. UNICEF showed that the proportion of child brides has generally decreased over the last 30 years, but is still common in rural poverty areas (13). This gives hope that a day will come when there will be no more child marriage and young pregnancy. Ending child marriage needs a lot of effort and the support from the state, communities, families, and individuals to be able to empower girls to continue their education and to be more aware about their rights. Appropriate Sex education according to the child age should be given in school. Poor families should seek jobs instead of relying on the dowry for an income. Finding a job might not be an easy task, but it is worth the try to seek human organizations and government services for help to find a way to gain income. Religious groups should help to stop child marriage practice by following the laws and stop agreeing on faking the girls' birth certificate for the marriage. Professional health workers in the community should play a crucial role in helping to stop these practices through education, media, and community efforts to spread awareness about child marriage and its consequences.

Moreover, Ensure the implementation of what has been internationally agreed upon on the Convention on Consent to Marriage, Minimum Age for Marriage and Registration of Marriages article 16 which included: Article 1: No marriage shall be legally entered into without the full and free consent of both parties. Article 2: Take legislative action to specify a minimum age for marriage. Article 3: All marriages shall be registered in an appropriate official register by the competent authority (15). In addition to what has been said above to limit child marriage and young pregnancy, young girls need to have the courage and the support from their families and communities to delay motherhood until they are mentally and physically ready. The husband can also play a supportive role to his wife when it comes to her reproductive health. For cases such as young pregnancy and child mothers, they should be encouraged to go back to school and

continue their education in order to help them stand on their feet if they were to be abandoned by their husbands and families. Education can also help them to be familiar with the use of contraceptives for spacing between children, and the minimum antenatal care visits required during pregnancy.

4. Conclusion

Child marriage and teenage pregnancy are one of the matters that we cannot stop just by discussing. These two topics can highly sweep away children rights, especially when it comes to education, and the right to live a healthy life. There is still a lot of effort needed to ensure laws and human rights are applied on everyone without any exception. We need to remember that there is always a peak of hope and we should not give up that hope easily. To face child marriage and its consequences, the following should be done: first, early marriage needs to be stop and education to the girls, their family, and their community is one way to prevent it. Second, sex education is important to educate the girls to prevent early pregnancy or sexually transmitted. Third, community involvement should act to limit child marriage and teenage pregnancy, the involvement of highly influential politicians and religious groups can affect people and help stand by stopping child marriage and teenage pregnancy. Fourth, engage the media to discuss the consequences of both subjects. We should not give up the hope that one day we will find the world will have solved the issues of child marriage and teenage pregnancy. Because on the other side of the world the desperate and the hopeless ones are waiting for us to rescue them, and thus we should not stop trying to find solutions for these issues.

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