



# IFMSA

International Federation of  
Medical Students' Associations

## IFMSA Policy Document Abolishing Child Marriage

**Proposed by Team of Officials**

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### Policy Statement

#### Introduction

Around the world, child marriage has been practised for centuries, cross cutting religions, ethnicities and cultures. 1 in 4 girls married globally is below the age of 18(1), a child, according to The Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Child marriage is defined as a formal marriage or informal union, by one or both parties, before age 18. Girls coming from an economically limited background with poor or no education are more likely to enter such a union. Non-reliable sources of income, lack of equal opportunities, multiple children and lack of education are a few causes for inherent poverty, one of the major driving forces behind child marriage.

There are several international conventions and agreements that address the issue of child marriage. The United Nations Human Rights Council adopted a resolution in 2015 to strengthen efforts to prevent and eliminate child early and forced marriage, that recognized child marriage as a violation of human rights.

Preventing child marriage is not only essential to ensuring the rights of the individual girls concerned, but is also fundamental to breaking the cycle of intergenerational poverty and to achieving the post-2015 sustainable development goals (SDGs).

#### IFMSA position

The IFMSA condemns child marriage, as it believes that child marriage is a human rights violation that helps to perpetuate the cycle of poverty and is a barrier to sustainable development. The IFMSA affirms the need to combat intersectional and multiple forms of gender inequality. Thus, we need to address and eliminate child marriage in order to benefit the health and wellbeing of individuals and communities worldwide.

#### Call to action

Therefore, IFMSA calls on:

1. Medical Students & National Medical Students Associations to:
  - a. Participate in and develop awareness, education campaigns and activities on the topic of child marriage, causes, implications, consequences and ways of prevention.
  - b. Acquire evidence-based knowledge pertaining to child marriage and its relation to health.
  - c. Acknowledge intersectional and multiple forms of gender inequality present socially and systemically within medical schools and institutions.
  - d. Engage in and develop necessary skills for the prevention of child marriage, while increasing the visibility of these inequalities in collaboration with members at all stages of training.
  - e. Identify stakeholders and work actively on advocating for the elimination and prevention of child marriage.



2. Medical faculties and teaching institutions to:
  - a. Incorporate the prevention, recognition and how to address issues of child marriage within the curriculum.
  - b. Ensure that faculty development programs are instilled to support teachers in presenting topics relating to child marriage to their students adequately.
  - c. Incorporate curriculum content that examines gender equality as a determinant of health, the relationship between gender norms and child marriage, and the importance of gender equity in health care with an intersectional perspective.
3. Healthcare sector to:
  - a. Support and provide appropriate sexual and reproductive health information and services, including family planning services, for young girls (especially vulnerable populations) to prevent early and frequent pregnancies.
  - b. Provide sensitive and safe psychosocial support and medical treatment for victims of child marriage.
  - c. Ensure that essential and appropriate referral processes are in place as well as connection with government agencies, NGOs and community organisations that specialise in the rehabilitation of victims of child marriage.
  - d. Train all healthcare providers to effectively identify, manage and prevent cases of child marriage, including ongoing professional development training.
4. Governments to:
  - a. Make 18 years of age, even with consent, the legal age of marriage.
  - b. Adopt laws and policies that promote and protect the rights of women and children, stated in international declarations and conventions, especially the elimination of child marriage.
  - c. Develop and implement legislation supporting gender equality socially and in healthcare distribution, with an intersectional perspective.
  - d. Guarantee accessible, safe and quality education for girls regardless of their marital status, also addressing factors that threaten families' ability to keep girls in schools.
  - e. Allocate financial and social resources to address the medical treatment, rehabilitation and elimination of child marriage.
  - f. Provide shelter, legal support, assistance services and information on where girls can find help if they are in danger.
  - g. Improved documentation of birth and marriage registration to help identify victims and increase the outreach of governmental schemes.
5. Governments, NGOs and international agencies to:
  - a. Recognize child marriage as a public health issue and a violation of human rights, that affects all areas of society.
  - b. Establish measures to prevent child marriage as a central part in development programmes related to education, health, economic empowerment and other issues.
  - c. Develop evidence-based strategies to address and prevent the occurrence and consequences of child marriage.
  - d. Make the elimination of child marriage a priority in international health and development discussions.
  - e. Raise awareness on the topic of child marriage, including causes, implications, consequences and methods of prevention.
  - f. Address underlying factors which perpetuate child marriage, which include, but are not limited to, poverty, societal/cultural norms and limited access to education.
  - g. Promote the empowerment of children and youth, to enable them to affirm their rights and speak out on the issue of child marriage.
  - h. Improve the information communities receive about the harmful effects of child marriage, such as the collaboration with religious and community leaders.
  - i. Conduct and promote research on the epidemiology and the consequences of child marriage.



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## Position Paper

### Introduction

For centuries around the world, child marriage has been practised, cross cutting religions, ethnicities and cultures. 1 in 4 girls married globally is below the age of 18(1), a child, according to The Convention on the Rights of the Child.(2)

Child marriage is defined as a formal marriage or informal union, by one or both parties, before age 18(3). Girls coming from an economically deficient background with poor or no education are more likely to enter such a union. Non-reliable sources of income, lack of equal opportunities, multiple children and lack of education are a few causes for inherent poverty, one of the major driving forces behind child marriage(1).

There are several international conventions and agreements that address the issue of child marriage. The United Nations Human Rights Council adopted a resolution in 2015, to strengthen efforts to prevent and eliminate child, early and forced marriage, that recognized child marriage as a violation of human rights. Other international agreements related to child marriage are the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women(4)(5)(6).

Child marriage produces poor health outcomes in girls, including higher rates of sexual and reproductive health issues, malnutrition and depression.(7) Girls in such unions often face physical, sexual and emotional violence. The consequences of child marriage are not only limited to health of the girl but extends to the community as well. Child marriage isolates women and decreases their participation in social and political environments. In addition, it produces subsequent losses to the economy of a society. (7)

Education is key to prevent child marriage. Through educating and empowering women and girls this issue can be partially tackled, however, without a broader collaboration from girls' parents and society as a whole, including governments, the community and other stakeholders, we cannot fully abolish it.

There are numerous benefits to preventing child marriage, both on a local and international level. When girls are educated and earn an income, they are more likely to reinvest it in their families and communities.

Preventing child marriage is not only essential to ensuring the rights of the individual girls concerned, but is also fundamental to breaking the cycle of intergenerational poverty and to achieving the post-2015 sustainable development goals (SDGs).(8)

### Background

#### Prevalence

Worldwide, more than 720 million women alive today were married before their 18th birthday and more than one in three (approximately 250 million) entered into union before age 15.(1) Child marriage is a common international phenomenon, not limited by cultures, religions or ethnicities. While it is most commonly observed in South Asia, Sub Saharan and North Africa, Latin America & Caribbean and the Middle east, incidents have also been reported in certain European communities.(1)(10)



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## Vulnerable Populations

There are certain factors that predispose girls towards child marriage. Poverty is one of the major driving forces behind child marriage. Non-reliable sources of income, lack of equal opportunities, multiple children and lack of education are a few causes for inherent poverty. "Marrying off" a daughter reduces the financial burden on the a family to feed, clothe and educate her. In certain communities, there is a monetary transaction referred to as dowry or bride price which benefits the family. Girls married at a younger age commission lesser dowry than older girls thereby encouraging their early marriage.(11) Females in the poorest quintile are 2.5 times more likely to marry in childhood than those living in the wealthiest quintile.(1)

Across all regions, girls who live in rural areas are more likely to become child brides than their urban counterparts. This difference is especially striking in some countries in West and Central Africa and in Latin America and the Caribbean, where the prevalence of child marriage in rural areas is about twice the level found in urban areas.(1)

Girls with no to little education are three times as likely to marry before 18 as those with secondary or higher education.(7) This disparity is greatest in Sub-Saharan Africa where girls are five times as likely to marry before 18 than those with secondary or higher education.(7)

In addition to equal distribution between men and women in all domains of society, gender equality also highlights the qualitative aspects, that ensure that the experience and knowledge of both men and women are used to promote progress in all aspects of society.(9) (The World Economic Forum, 2015, The Global Gender Gap Report) Further, when discussing gender equality one needs to address intersectionality, a frame or theory that is used to analyse the interlocked relationships of multiple social categories (gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, etc). Assisting us to identify how different aspects of someone's identity interact and influence the way they experience different things, which reflect multiple interconnected systems of privilege and oppression at the social-structural level. (Cambridge Dictionary) Gender inequality is both a cause and consequence of child marriage. Child Brides often have little say when choosing who to marry and when to marry. When married, the girls lose out on educational opportunities, better work and pay outside their home and will have little say in the decision making in their communities. Perpetuating the cycle of gender inequality and prevalence of child marriage. (Source: Summary of other texts used in prevention)

## Consequences of Child Marriage

### *Sexual and Reproductive health*

Child marriage produces poor health outcomes in girls. Due to limited autonomy and access to family planning information and services, married teens are less likely to use contraceptives than their unmarried counterparts. Married girls are also more likely to have unprotected sex than unmarried girls or married adult women, due to low negotiating power within their marriages. Because of these factors, child brides face higher risks of contracting sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and, in some settings, are more likely to be HIV positive.(7) Maternal mortality is 28 percent higher among females 15 to 19 than 20 to 24.(12) Of all adolescent pregnancies, 90 percent occur within marriage.(13)(14) Early pregnancy among girls, whose bodies are not ready, often leads to medical complications, such as obstetric fistula and hemorrhaging.(15)

### *Mental health*

Girls who are married at a young age can experience higher rates of malnutrition, isolation, and depression. Girls married early are often subjected to physical, sexual and emotional abuse. Girls who marry early are also more likely to believe that a husband is sometimes justified in beating his wife.(7)



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### *Health of infants*

Children born to mothers under the age of 15 are more likely to suffer from low birth weight, undernutrition, and late physical and cognitive development. These children are also 2.5 times more likely to die before age 5 than those born to mothers 24 to 27.(7)

### *Economic and financial consequences*

Child marriage produces subsequent losses to the economy of a society. Part-time work continues to be a predominantly female domain and is often, in view of persisting gender roles, the only solution to balancing work with family responsibilities. In many advanced economies, gender-specific career paths, characterized by more part-time work and career breaks for child care among women, result in higher risk for old-age poverty among women. While often a prerequisite for women's labor market participation, part-time work arrangements can perpetuate gender roles, resulting in disadvantages in career development.(24) () The inability of women to contribute financially also misappropriates their decision-making authority for the household and renders them financially dependant.

### *Educational consequences*

Child marriage is a known factor for decreased attendance of girls at school.(11) It has a two way relation such that it is the cause as well as effect of child marriage. The lack of education diminishes the chances of women to access dignified and safe job in the labor market, making them more likely to end up in workplaces that provide much less income.

### *Social and political consequences*

Child marriage isolates women and decreases their participation in social and political environments. Social distancing decreases investment in community based decisions. Women's involvement in these decision-making processes helps to ensure that community investments go towards women-friendly services. Research also shows that when women are involved in political decision-making, investments are more likely to be placed into social services, including those directly related to economic growth.(7)

### Child Marriage and Human Rights

The United Nations Human Rights Council unanimously adopted the first substantive resolution on child marriage in 2015, to strengthen efforts to prevent and eliminate child, early and forced marriage. The resolution recognizes child marriage as a violation of human rights that has "wide ranging and adverse consequences on the enjoyment of human rights, such as the right to education, the right to the highest attainable standard of health, including sexual and reproductive health", "that prevents individuals from living their lives free from all forms of violence". Further, the resolution states that child marriage "helps to perpetuate the cycle of poverty" and is a "barrier to sustainable development".

There are several additional international conventions and agreements that address the issue of child marriage. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (article 16.2), states that "Marriage shall be entered into only with the free and full consent of the intending spouses".(5) The right to 'free and full' consent to marriage cannot be present in child marriage, when one of the parties involved lacks sufficient maturity to make an informed decision regarding a future partner. The right to protection from child marriage, is addressed in the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (article 16), stating that "The betrothal and the marriage of a child shall have no legal effect, and all necessary action, including legislation, shall be taken to specify a minimum age for marriage...".(6) Marriage is not directly mentioned in the Convention on the Rights of the Child, however, links can be made between child marriage and the violation of other rights, the right to protection from all forms of abuse, and the right to be protected from harmful traditional practices, the right to health, the right to education, to name a few.(2) Further, child marriage is often addressed by the Committee on the Rights of the Child. Other international agreements related to child marriage are the Convention on Consent to Marriage, Minimum Age for Marriage and Registration of Marriages, the Supplementary Convention on the Abolition of Slavery, the Slave Trade, and Institutions and Practices Similar to Slavery and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child.(16)(17)(18)



## Prevention of Child Marriage

Many non-governmental and governmental organizations alike have put different measures in place, both nationally and internationally, in order to achieve the prevention of child marriage(19). The Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5, “*Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls*”, is an example of a measure put in place, highlighted by target 5.3: “*Eliminate all harmful practices, such as child, early and forced marriage and female genital mutilation.*”(20)

### *Tackling underlying causes*

There are several factors that predispose girls towards child marriage. Such as poverty, non-reliable sources of income, lack of equal opportunities, lack of education and gender inequality(7). A primary factor being poverty, addressed in (SDG 1 - Poverty). Further providing Quality Education (SDG 4) to girls is another area to tackle (20) By for instance educating the parents about gender equality and ensuring that parents see the value of educating their daughters (19).

### *Prevention through Birth Registration*

Enhanced registration of births has numerous benefits for children, granting them rights and protecting them from violations of those rights. For many children, the lack of birth registration is an enabling factor for violation of laws and policies that protect them, including those related to child marriage.(21) The absence of birth registration and recognition under the law puts girls at risk of not obtaining full judicial protection and encountering obstacles when seeking access to justice.(22) The Innocenti Research Centre explains that roughly 40 million births are unregistered each year, and “without a birth certificate, a child has no defense against age-related rights abuses” such as child marriage.(23) Because birth certificates are required in order to establish that a person is of the legal age for marriage, undocumented births hinder judicial application of anti-child marriage laws.(13)

### *Prevention through Education*

Although the practice of child marriage is deeply rooted in tradition and culture, neither culture nor tradition is permanently fixed. One primary way to prevent child marriage is to educate girls (19). Due to the lack of education girls are unaware of the harmful effects that early marriage predisposes them to, hence, SDG 4 (20), Quality Education, is a powerful tool in child marriage prevention. A girl that knows her rights and the harmful effects of child marriage is less likely to agree to such practices (19).

Educating parents is also of great value. Targeting parents that might partake in child marriage can have a great positive effect in the battle against child marriage. It is important to: inform parents about the health implications; address their reasoning for marrying off their child, including the hope to safeguard girls from sexual harassment and violence; and show parents other, safer ways to protect their daughters than child marriage.(19)

### *Prevention by Empowering Girls*

Empowering girls, is an important means of prevention of child marriage, also highlighted in SDG 5 (20). Education in itself is an empowerment tool, however, in order for it to take its full effect, the girls need more. Girls from societies where child marriage is prevalent are sometimes seen as economical burdens (14) and see their early marriage as a means of helping their families. Girl empowerment is a responsibility of the government, families and communities the girls belong to. The communities and government can for instance provide access to alternatives to marriage, as well as opportunities outside of domestic work, such as education, work or savings and loan activities. (19)

### *Barriers in reaching vulnerable groups*

In some instances, external organizations face barriers in approaching parents when aiming to eliminate child marriage. To overcome this barrier, one can target community and religious leaders, for them to influence their communities in a higher degree, in regards to child marriage. (19)



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### *Medical assessment of the victims of child marriage*

In child protection cases, where a child is at risk of serious harm, the interests of the child override those of parents or carers. All doctors working with children, parents and other adults in contact with children should be able to recognise and know how to act upon signs that a child may be at risk of abuse. Efforts should be made to include children and young people in decisions which closely affect them. When concerns about deliberate harm to children or young people have been raised, they must keep clear, accurate, comprehensive and contemporaneous notes. They must also be aware of, and have access at their place of work to their local Area Child Protection Committee's Child Protection Procedure manual. (25)

### *Psychosocial support for victims of child marriage.*

Girls who run away from unhappy marriages need emergency support. Community-based and women's groups provide the best services, but they often lack support from traditional institutions, are poorly funded, and may have to operate in secrecy – attacked for undermining cultural values. Some local NGOs working in this field have begun to assist such girls and women, but their efforts are generally confined to towns and cities. Those girls and young women who remain in their marriages can benefit from the support of others through peer counselling, local women's groups and so on. (26)

### *Advocacy*

Advocacy is needed at all levels of society, but particularly at household and community level to influence attitudes. The benefits of postponing marriage need to be shared with religious and community leaders, those who exert role model influence, as well as government personnel. Governments should be encouraged to create policies that support later marriage through scholarship provision, legal reforms, and affirmative programmes. (26)

### *Benefits of the Prevention*

There are numerous benefits to preventing child marriage, both on a local and international level. The benefits include the prevention of early pregnancies and the many health challenges that are associated with it, such as obstructed labors and the resultant obstetric fistulas, stillbirths and the fatal maternal deaths. When girls are educated, they develop the knowledge, confidence and negotiation skills to assert when, whether and whom to marry. Furthermore, when girls are educated and earn an income, they are more likely to reinvest it in their families and communities.(14)

A good quality gender sensitive and rights-based education is a powerful tool to end child marriage. Quality education is much broader than immediate academic learning outcomes, and includes a broad, rights-based approach to learning, including global citizenship and life skills such as comprehensive sexuality education. It is concerned with ensuring all children are learning in a child-friendly, safe and inclusive environment that promotes gender equality and encourages all children to fulfil their capabilities. Quality education is grounded in respect for human rights and gender equity, is accessible to all children without discrimination, encourages all children to fulfil their capabilities, and includes mechanisms to prevent and respond to violence. A quality education is accountable to children through the participation of children, families and communities in school governance and decision-making. Quality education empowers girls to have a voice. Educated girls have an increased understanding of their rights and the skills that girls acquire through education have been shown to help them make decisions and have a greater sense of self-esteem (21).



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