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"Child Marriage Across Cultural Contexts: A Comparative Analysis Between South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa"

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“Child Marriage Across Cultural Contexts: A Comparative Analysis Between South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa”

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Abstract:

Child marriage is a major social issue that occurs around the globe to this present day, particularly within South Asian and Sub-Saharan African nations. This paper discusses the underlying factors perpetuating child marriage that are shared in common between these two distinct regions. Through exploring such factors from two countries in each respective region as case studies, the paper also enlightens readers about current initiatives being undertaken to address child marriage and further suggests other social, economic, and policy oriented measures that can be taken to ensure young girls are protected from this ongoing practice within their communities and can continue being strong young women in their future.

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Introduction: The Issue of Child Marriage

Imagine a 13-year-old girl in her school uniform playing happily with her friends at school. She enjoys going to school and dreams of one day becoming a teacher or a doctor so that she can help the people in her community. Even though she is from a poor family and lives in the village, she is content with her life and aspires to achieve so much in her life when she grows up. However, her dreams and happiness are suddenly stolen away from her when she returns home from school one day. Her parents tell her that they have accepted a marriage proposal for her and she will soon be married off to her husband, a 20-year-old man in the neighboring village, who will take care of her well. The young girl objects at first; she tries to explain that she wants to continue going to school and will miss her friends, her teacher, and cannot live with a stranger.

Her mother listens to her pleas, but cannot do anything because the father is the head of the family and his decision is always final. The girl's father consoles her and says that she is getting older and mature. She must be married soon so boys in the village do not tempt her and ruin her "purity." Besides, the family is struggling with their crop harvests this year and they cannot afford to continue letting her go to school. The girl is heartbroken hearing these words but no longer protests; she understands that she is powerless and has no choice but to do as her parents say and accept her unforeseeable new future. She will be a child bride.

Unfortunately, the scenario described above is a common one many young girls around the world experience and it is called child marriage. This is a highly prevalent issue within South Asia, a region in which "46 percent of children are married formally or in informal union before they are 18. Girls are significantly more likely than boys to be married as children – 30 per cent of girls aged 15-19 years are currently married."¹ It is also a highly prevalent social issue within

¹ "Asia Child Marriage Initiative: Summary of Research in Bangladesh, India, and Nepal." Plan Asia Regional Office, Jan. 2013. (p. 5)

Sub-Saharan Africa, most predominantly in rural areas of countries such as Nigeria and Ethiopia. “Physiological and social criteria suggest that most boys and girls aged 14 and younger are much too young for sexual, marital, and reproductive transitions, while many among the 15-17-year-olds are also too young.”² This thesis is a comparative analysis of child marriages that take place in two separate world regions, South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa, because both are home to the highest incidences of child marriages in the world. The analysis explores the shared underlying factors of child marriage between both world regions and, based on these shared connections, provides suggested measures that can be applied towards addressing child marriage. Further breakdown in which this thesis has been organized can be found in the proceeding section.

Purpose/Methodology

“Child marriage is a harmful traditional and cultural practice, it is a human rights violation, a public health challenge of our time, and a human security issue associated with disease burden, infant, child and maternal mortality, and extreme poverty” (Walker 2015, p. 3)

As described in the quote above, child marriage is a global issue that poses various problems for children - especially young girls – around the world. Unfortunately, it does not garner enough attention from the international community compared to other social and sustainable development issues. Furthermore, the highest rates of child marriage are found within the South Asian subcontinent and Sub-Saharan region of Africa yet there are few comparative analyses done regarding the issue of child marriage and its leading causes between both regions, even though there are connections that are certainly present with these intertwined issues.

Although child marriage violates universal children’s rights, there is a lack of comparative

² Gemignani, Regina, and Quentin Wodon. Child Marriage and Faith Affiliation in Sub-Saharan Africa. [Electronic Resource] : Stylized Facts and Heterogeneity. [s.n.], 2015. EBSCOhost,search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=cat00989a&AN=ford.2505875&site=eds-live. (p. 2)

analysis material evaluating child marriages and the causes of this phenomenon between two of the regions of the world it most often takes places in. This thesis paper intends to enlighten readers about overlapping factors leading to the prevalence of child marriage in South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa and suggests effective measures that can be carried out through analyzing case studies and research regarding the phenomenon of child marriage in four countries.

The thesis also discusses around the central topic idea of child marriage because of my personal interests in this subject. My family is from Bangladesh and while child marriage has never occurred in my family, it is still a difficult reality that many other young girls from poor families in this country face on a daily basis. I grew interested in learning more about child marriage after watching the documentary entitled *101 East Too Young To Wed Child Marriage in Bangladesh* which shared the true story of a young girl named Beezly Roy, who is forced to drop out of school and marry as a 13 year old because her parents could no longer take care of her and afford to pay for her education.

This thesis is structured in three main chapter sections which are further divided into relevant subsections a breakdown of several comprehensive chapters. It seeks to evaluate a two-fold question; (1) are there similar overlapping underlying factors perpetuating child marriage to occur in South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa and (2) based on these connections, what are more effective solutions and measures that can be carried out in order to address the common social issue of child marriage within both these regions? The literature review provides important background information crucial to understanding the definition of child marriage, the negative consequences it has upon child brides, and what child marriage looks like in the real lives of young married girls. The Research and Analysis section discusses in-depth the underlying factors shared in common between the South Asian and Sub-Saharan African contexts which perpetuate

child marriage to occur in both regions. Evidence gathered for this section are synthesized from various research journals, news articles, and primary source documents. The last section covers topics pertaining to conventional myths regarding the connection between religion and child marriage, true child bride stories, and analyzes violations related to children's rights.

Literature Review

The literature review introduces background context about the phenomenon of child marriage, what it is, the controversy surrounding this social issue, and the ways in which it exists within the South Asian (Indian and Bangladeshi) and Sub-Saharan African (Nigerian and Ethiopian) regions of the world. This section is divided into several parts; the first part defines child marriage and draws to attention the different actions and features that constitute what we have come to know as child marriages. The second part focuses on tracing the historical occurrence of child marriages in past societies to how it takes place in the contemporary world. The third part discusses the negative consequences and human rights/children's rights abuses and violations connected to child marriages. Child marriage is a widely disapproved practice considered backwards and taboo within the West (although it does occur here as well), but there are justifications for its occurrence in developing countries. The controversial nature surrounding the issue of child marriage will also be included. The latter two sections of the literature review will cover the prevalence of child marriages in South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa and how child marriages are manifested in reality.

Defining Child Marriage

Prior to exploring the shared underlying factors that lead to the prevalence of the issue of child marriage to occur in South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa, the definition of child marriage and the criteria that constitute this phenomenon must be discussed at the forefront first. A general

consensus of child marriage entails the idea that there is an involuntary marriage between youth or youth and significant others who are much older in age. The International Women's Health Coalition defines child marriage as "marriages that take place before age 18, but for many girls, marriage occurs much earlier. In some countries, girls as young as 7 or 8 are forced by their families to marry much older men."³ While conventional myths associate the prevalence of child marriage as an issue influenced by certain religious teachings, this is false.

Child marriage stems more so from social norms and traditions that uphold the practice of early marriages and, therefore, creates a situation in which many young girls throughout the world are forced to abandon their childhoods while becoming vulnerable to living in "isolation, violence, and illness."⁴ According to the International Center for Research on Women, research gathered by UNICEF in 2007 stated that "more than 60 million girls aged 20-24 worldwide had married before their 18th birthday."⁵ Due to the forced nature of child marriages, this has various adverse effects on young girls and their physical, mental, and emotional health. It also contributes to perpetuating the cycle of intergenerational poverty within families, which creates greater lack of agency for girls in the family and makes them more vulnerable to getting married early just like their earlier female family members.

Child marriage: A Brief History Past to Present

While child marriage has existed for centuries throughout the world, the historical trajectory of child marriages varies between differing regions and countries. This thesis focuses on the regions of South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa, so a brief history of child marriages, the

³ "The Facts on Child Marriage." International Women's Health Coalition. <https://iwhc.org/resources/facts-child-marriage/>

⁴ Malhotra, Anju. "The Causes, Consequences, and Solutions to Forced Child Marriage in the Developing World." International Center for Research on Women, 15 Jan 2010

⁵ Malhotra, Anju. "The Causes, Consequences, and Solutions to Forced Child Marriage in the Developing World." International Center for Research on Women, 15 Jan 2010

origins, and the evolution of the legal parameters involved regarding this issue in both these regions will be traced. In the South Asian context, the history of child marriages is engrained within the very cultures of these Indian and Bangladeshi society. Little research indicates clearly the origins of child marriages in Bangladesh, but it is evident that legal regulations surrounding this practice were enforced by government laws since the early 1920s. According to 2015 research conducted by Human Rights Watch, child marriage was considered illegal in Bangladesh – then known as “East Pakistan” prior to its independence – since this time “the minimum age of marriage had been set at 18 for women and 21 for men since the 1980s.”⁶ Despite these measures, child marriage continues to remain a common social practice and issue in Bangladeshi society. This same report by HRW shows that in 2015 alone “nearly 65% of girls in Bangladesh marry before age 18.”⁷ Poverty, low access to education, fear of sexual harassment in unsafe home surroundings, and traditional attitudes are driving factors that have remained consistent and allowed child marriage to thrive in Bangladeshi society even today.

Tracing child marriage within India is perhaps more clearly apparent compared to the relatively scarce origins of this issue within Bangladesh. Historically, child marriages in India involved young girls having arranged marriages with older suitors, living in their husband’s homes soon after, and engaging in sexual marital activities only once they attained puberty.⁸ In British colonial era India, particularly in a landmark 1891 marriage case, the minimum age at which a girl could be legally married and expected to live with her husband was set at 12 years of age.⁹ By 1929, greater steps were taken towards improving social development – especially

⁶ Human Rights Watch, 2015, “Bangladesh: Girls Damaged by Child Marriage”

⁷ “Bangladesh: Girls Damaged by Child Marriage.” Human Rights Watch, 2015. 9 June 2015. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2015/06/09/bangladesh-girls-damaged-child-marriage>

⁸ Bhatia, Rajani, and Ashwini Tambe. EBSCOhost.,p. 90

⁹ Bhatia, Rajani, and Ashwini Tambe. p. 90

by women's rights organizations. The Child Marriage Rights Advocacy group (CMRA) in India managed to change legal marriage ages to at least 15 years for girls and 18 years and boys, respectively, and further raise the ages to 18 and 21 by the 1970s.¹⁰ While early beginnings of raising the child marriage age involved fighting against early child marriage of girls because the main goals were to protect vulnerable girls from forced sexual encounters in their child marriages, the latter initiatives were geared towards population control. As stated by author Rajani "Indian state was called upon to protect vulnerable girls from harms related to forced sex, and in the second to control their fertility ... The twentieth century case of India is a reminder of how the seemingly well-meaning focus on early marriage among girls is tethered to interests that have nothing to do with girls themselves."¹¹

Child marriage origins in Sub-Saharan Africa (more specifically, Nigeria and Ethiopia, for the purposes of this paper) can also be traced mostly starting from colonial era rule. Child marriage, or forced marriage as if often many of such cases in Sub-Saharan Africa, are recognized in various forms such as "marriage by capture, servile marriage, forced conjugal associations, war brides, and marriage in absentia."¹² Similar to child marriages in South Asia, forced child marriages are both considered "a fresh crisis and an ancient tradition" within African nations too. In Sub-Saharan Africa, child marriages were such a common tradition that colonial administrators in countries like Nigeria and Ethiopia. Under colonial rule in this region of Africa, the Western stigma against child marriages was apparent yet colonial administrators allowed for the practice to exist under disapproving attitudes and constrained procedures.

Adverse Effects of Child marriage

¹⁰ Bhatia, Rajani, and Ashwini Tambe p. 90

¹¹ Bhatia, Rajani, and Ashwini Tambe p. 97)

¹² Bunting, Annie, et al. Marriage by Force? : Contestation Over Consent and Coercion in Africa. 2016

Child marriage is not a new phenomenon and the negative repercussions of this widespread social issue are evident upon the physical and mental health of young girls who are victims of this situation. Various research studies indicate it is evident that child marriage has negative consequences upon the “economic, social, demographic, and health” of child brides and their families.¹³ The connection between adverse effects of child marriage and the health of young girls is perhaps most clearly apparent. They risk contracting sexually transmitted diseases such as HIV due to lack of agency regarding choosing when to have intercourse with their husbands. Oftentimes the young girls from the areas in which this paper focuses on (South Asian countries like India and Bangladesh and Sub-Saharan countries like Nigeria and Ethiopia) are married to much older, experienced men who possess more authority in the relationship, are unwilling to compromise their sexual desires, and pressure their young wives to have children.¹⁴

According to the International Women’s Health Coalition (IWHC), child brides under 15 years of age are at risk of being “five times more likely to die in childbirth than women in their 20s and face higher risk of pregnancy-related injuries such as obstetric fistula.”¹⁵ Complications in childbirth can have adverse effects upon these young girls’ mental health and development, which they still undergo since most are not close to adult stages of their lives. Child brides who are expectant mothers before 18 years of age face sixty percent more risk of losing their babies in the first year compared to girls who give birth after that age.¹⁶ Furthermore, girls who are trapped in child marriage face problems connected to sexual, physical, and emotional abuse. The

¹³ Neetu A. John et al. “Child Marriage and Relationship Quality in Ethiopia.” *Culture, Health & Sexuality*, vol. 21, no. 8, Aug. 2019, pp. 853–866. EBSCOhost, doi:10.1080/13691058.2018.1520919.blue (p. 3)

¹⁴ Malhotra, Anju. “The Causes, Consequences, and Solutions to Forced Child Marriage in the Developing World.” International Center for Research on Women, 15 Jan 2010

¹⁵ “The Facts on Child Marriage.” International Women’s Health Coalition. <https://iwhc.org/resources/facts-child-marriage/>

¹⁶ Malhotra, Anju. “The Causes, Consequences, and Solutions to Forced Child Marriage in the Developing World.” International Center for Research on Women, 15 Jan 2010

International Center for Research on Women indicates in its 2010 research that married girls before 18 years of age in India, for example, were more likely to “experience physical violence twice as often and sexual violence three times as often as girls who married at a later age.”¹⁷

Debates: Justifications and Opposition to Child marriage

While child marriage may be a phenomenon widely denounced in the Western world (nevertheless it too exists in this region), there are reasons as to why child marriage is not considered wrong, and rather justified, within the South Asian and Sub-Saharan countries that this thesis will explore. The “Girls Not Brides” organization, a well-recognized international non-profit which advocates against child marriage, points out important reasons parents and relatives of child brides often cite in order to justify their reasoning for marrying off the girls early. One reason is that marrying off girls at an early age helps to ease family hardships, particularly for those who struggle with poverty and are unable to support all their children. Investing more in the futures of sons/male children compared to those of females’ is a norm within these societies, which makes it easier for families to marry their daughters early. Furthermore, early marriage allows for a lower dowry to pay to a girl’s future husband’s family.

As indicated in the Girls Not Brides report, “In communities where a dowry or ‘bride price’ is paid, it is often welcome income for poor families; in those where the bride’s family pays the groom a dowry, they often have to pay less money if the bride is young and uneducated.”¹⁸ Essentially, child marriage is seen as a cost effective way of paying a lower dowry while also no longer having to support an extra mouth to feed, clothe, or provide for. In

¹⁷ Malhotra, Anju. “The Causes, Consequences, and Solutions to Forced Child Marriage in the Developing World.” International Center for Research on Women, 15 Jan 2010

¹⁸ “India: Child Marriage Around The World.” Girls Not Brides India. 2013. <https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/child-marriage/india/>

this way, the “burden” of raising a girl is shifted to her husband’s family, where she will be considered more useful for domestic duties and bearing children. Early child marriage is also justified by families because it is a major way of not only controlling her sexual development, but also ensuring that her virginity remains intact – a trait that is highly valued in South Asian/Sub-Saharan societies in which virginity is connected with purity, chastity, and family honor. As stated by Girls Not Brides, “girls who have relationships or become pregnant outside of marriage are shamed for bringing dishonor on their family” and early marriage is one way of curbing this fear for a lot of families, regardless of whether they are poor or wealthy.

Arguments against child marriage, however, are also recognized. Leading reasons for opposing child marriage range from the adverse effects that this issue has upon young girls’ health, independence, and future economic or career opportunities that they may have wanted to pursue in their lives. Malhotra asserts that major opposition against child marriage stems from the notion that early child marriage eliminates young girls from experiencing childhood – forcing them to grow up much faster and possess adult responsibilities when they are not prepared or ready for that stage of life yet. Children in early marriage circumstances are often “thrust into the full burden of domestic responsibility, motherhood, and sexual relations rather than playing with friends, dreaming about a career, or fretting about a school exam.”¹⁹

On a more foreign relations and development standpoint, child marriage represents a major problem that impedes the progress of Sustainable/Millennium Development Goals because it holds young girls back from better standards of living and equality – which are key goals of sustainable development. Malhotra’s explains how child marriage has hindered the fulfillment of these goals in her insightful statement:

¹⁹ Malhotra, Anju. “The Causes, Consequences, and Solutions to Forced Child Marriage in the Developing World.” International Center for Research on Women, 15 Jan 2010

Research shows the clear negative correlation between a country's rate of forced child marriage and its Human Development Index (HDI) ranking: countries that are not scoring well on their citizens' well-being are also the countries where forced child marriage is most common. Girls from poverty are the most likely to become child brides (Malhotra 2010, p. 9)

Child marriage also attracts widespread disapproval because it perpetuates an endless cycle of keeping women in subordinate positions that prevent them from fulfilling their fullest potential – or the fullest potential and brighter futures of their female descendants. Married girls are often unable to continue their schooling and this lack of education put them at various disadvantages; they are financially dependent upon their spouses, cannot pursue jobs or entrepreneurship of their own choosing, and unable to invest in their children's education as much as they would like.²⁰

Child Marriage: What It Looks Like in South Asia/Sub-Saharan Africa

Oftentimes, many child brides are propelled into marrying early because they come from poor families in rural or remote parts of the country, where there are few educational and employment opportunities. As a result of this background, whether child brides are in South Asian countries like India and Bangladesh or Sub-Saharan countries like Nigeria and Ethiopia, these young married girls remain vulnerable to undergoing similar hardships and lifestyles within this new adult/coming of age stage of their lives. Regardless of which cultural context they are in, the common attribute shared is that these young girls enter a new stage of their lives upon marriage – a stage of life that is unknown, unfamiliar, and oftentimes hard to adjust to. Neetu mentions that child brides “enter marriage with limited assets and resources, ultimately leaving them poorly equipped to navigate their new adult marital roles and exercise choice and agency in

²⁰ Malhotra, Anju. “The Causes, Consequences, and Solutions to Forced Child Marriage in the Developing World.” International Center for Research on Women, 15 Jan 2010

their lives and relationships.”²¹ High risks of depression and rising suicide rates among child brides are common effects of early child marriage found between South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa. As noted in Neetu’s other work, this commonality that parallels between both regions can be seen in the statement underneath:

A study among adolescent Ethiopian girls from the Amhara region found increased odds of suicidality among girls who were ever married, were promised in marriage, or had received marriage requests when compared to unmarried girls. Research from South Asia also suggests a higher risk for depression and suicidality among girls married as children (Neetu 2019, p 12)

In order to better understand child marriage across cultural contexts, it is imperative to explore and gain a clearer perspective upon the ways in which child marriage occurs and how it is manifested within these regions (in this case South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa). The IWHC indicates that “globally, almost 400 million women now aged 20-49 were married before the age of 18.”²² In South Asia, child marriage is manifested as child brides having to leave their family homes oftentimes involuntarily and living with their husband and his family. This is also how child marriage exists in reality in Sub-Saharan Africa. The girls are exposed to gender based violence and marital relationships in which there is a lack of “communication, trust, equality, intimacy, conflict, marital satisfaction, or happiness.”²³ Within Ethiopia, for example, child marriage is an increasingly common practice. As stated by Neetu, in the year 2016 alone “over half of Ethiopian women (58%) were married before the age of 18 in 2016.” Statistics from

²¹ Neetu A. John et al. “Child Marriage and Relationship Quality in Ethiopia.” *Culture, Health & Sexuality*, vol. 21, no. 8, Aug. 2019, pp. 853–866. EBSCOhost, doi:10.1080/13691058.2018.1520919.blue (p. 3)

²² “The Facts on Child Marriage.” International Women’s Health Coalition. <https://iwhc.org/resources/facts-child-marriage/>

²³ John Neetu, Neetu A. John, et al. “Child Marriage and Psychological Well-Being in Niger and Ethiopia.” *BMC Public Health*, no. 1, 2019, p. 1. EBSCOhost, doi:10.1186/s12889-019-green7314-z.

further sources show that 14% of Ethiopian girls are married before reaching even 15 years of age.²⁴ Many of these young girls are in polygamous marriages in which some of the common problems faced early on between the young bride and her husband are “lack of say in spousal selection and marriage timing, the non-readiness for sex at the time of marriage, and the reduced agency that women experienced within these marriages.”²⁵

Shared Driving Factors of Child Marriage in South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa

I. Patriarchy and Gender Stratification

“Gender roles hold that women are to be mothers and wives and men are to be providers for the family unit. Women are deemed to be ready for marriage at an earlier age than men who ought to finish their professional training and ideally be financially secure” (Sagade 2005, p. 9)

Patriarchy and gender stratification within the countries (India, Bangladesh, Nigeria, Ethiopia) that this thesis focuses on are major driving factors of child marriage shared in common between South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa. Patriarchy is a term meaning male dominance and authority and, in connection with patriarchy, gender stratification refers to the wide gap between how males hold more authority and power compared to females, who are considered subordinate, in daily life and society. In sociological terms, gender stratification is defined as a social ranking in which men have higher statuses or power than women.”²⁶ These factors will be explored based on cultural contexts within each subsection in this chapter.

a. South Asia Case Studies:

According to 2017 research conducted by universal anti-child marriage organization Girls

²⁴ Neetu A. John et al. “Child Marriage and Relationship Quality in Ethiopia.” *Culture, Health & Sexuality*, vol. 21, no. 8, Aug. 2019, pp. 853–866. EBSCOhost, doi:10.1080/13691058.2018.1520919.blue

²⁵ Neetu A. John et al. “Child Marriage and Relationship Quality in Ethiopia.” *Culture, Health & Sexuality*, vol. 21, no. 8, Aug. 2019, pp. 853–866. EBSCOhost, doi:10.1080/13691058.2018.1520919.blue

Not Brides, patriarchy plays a large part in perpetuating child marriage to occur in South Asia. This is attributed to the fact that both are patriarchal oriented societies in which females are generally regarded with less value and have less authority compared to males and, instead, are seen more as props necessary to fulfill domestic duties and satisfy others' needs (particularly that of her husband's). For example, females in these societies are oftentimes "expected to be adaptable, docile, hardworking, and talented wives."²⁷ Furthermore, males in Indian and Bangladeshi society tend to have more authority over their female counterparts, and this includes having control over her sexual agency and marital status decisions. As a result of this patriarchal dominance in these South Asian societies, male relatives (whether this may be a girl's father, uncle, brothers, or even distant family members from the opposite sex) oftentimes decide when a girl will be married off without considering her opinions or that of female family members – in which case, the females of the family would be pressured to follow the decisions of the male(s) heading the household.

One way in which patriarchy perpetuates child marriage is that male relatives use this early marriage tactic as a way of ensuring the girl does not dishonor the family by losing her virginity or being involved in relationships prior to her marriage with a potential suitor. In the case of India, for example, child marriage serves as a common way of "preserving the purity of girls as soon as they reach puberty" and making sure that the father's reputation is not damaged or that he "loses credibility within the community if his daughters have sex or get married without consent" – thus, it is a patriarchal way of controlling young girls' sexuality.²⁸ This

²⁷ "India: Child Marriage Around The World." Girls Not Brides India. 2013. <https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/child-marriage/india/>

²⁸ "India: Child Marriage Around The World." Girls Not Brides India. 2013. <https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/child-marriage/india/>

similar sense of patriarchal attitudes and gender stratification that drive child marriage can also be seen in Bangladesh. As stated by John Neetu:

High value is placed on the virginity of girls in Bangladesh and child marriage is often used as a way of controlling pre-marital sex. A 2013 national study shows that fathers are most often responsible for deciding when and who to marry their daughters to (Neetu 2019, p. 10)

b. Sub-Saharan Case Studies:

Similar to the countries in the Indian subcontinent used as case studies for this paper, countries like Nigeria and Ethiopia can attest to similar evidence that social norms upholding patriarchy and gender stratification are also the same factors that perpetuate child marriage to occur in their countries. Nigeria and Ethiopia are both Sub-Saharan countries in which the norm is for men to dominate positions of power, both in and outside their homes. Females, however, are associated with their traditional subordinate status and valued for fulfilling their domestic family responsibilities such as bearing and raising children to continue the family lineage – quite similar to the patriarchal attitudes portrayed in the South Asian countries’ context.

Nigeria is a patriarchal society defined as “a system of male authority which oppresses women through its social, political and economic institutions. In any of the historical forms that patriarchal society takes, whether it is feudal, capitalist or socialist, a sex-gender system and a system of economic discrimination operate simultaneously (Chinwuba 2015, p. 6)

Girls Not Brides reports that in Ethiopia, young girls are pressured into child marriage in order to avoid negative social stigma for being considered old or tainted or “defective” and, instead, ensure that she fulfills her most important role in life – serving her dual responsibilities as a good

wife and mother. As stated further in this report, “some choose to marry to avoid gossip or being labelled as haftuu (unwanted),”²⁹ which essentially exemplifies how young girls are pressured to submit to patriarchal decisions and gender role expectations which leads child marriage to occur.

II. Child Marriage as a Coping Mechanism of Poverty and Economic Security

“For many poor families, marrying their daughter at an early age essentially is a strategy for economic survival; it means one less person to feed, clothe and educate” (UNICEF)

Child marriage is a prominent issue within the regions of South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa, despite differences in cultural and geographical contexts, because it serves economic and political advantages for families. Marrying off daughters at an early age allows for families to strategically secure financial advantages that will be beneficial to their economic security.

a. South Asia Case Studies:

In India and Bangladesh alike, research shows child marriage is a widespread practice that can be attributed to families believing it is a good way of creating stronger bonds either internally in the family or securing a stronger, desirable alliance with other families. Girls are expected to be able to learn domestic duties and their responsibilities early on in these societies and, thus, the younger the girl it is assumed that she is more likely to pick up this knowledge faster. Through fulfilling her gender role expectations as productively as possible, the girl can become an important asset to her own and her in-laws’ family and contribute to the need for extra hands and labor in order to generate more income for the family as a whole, which is most evident in rural areas of the countries. This connection to child brides and their economic value in the labor they can provide is highlighted in Girls Not Brides’ India research, stating:

²⁹ “Child Marriage.” UNICEF India. 2019 April. <https://unicef.in/Whatwedo/30/Child-Marriage>

Girls are often married off at puberty when they are deemed most ‘productive’ and can take care of children and conduct housework. The labour of young brides is central to some rural economies. The practice of *atta satta* sees two extended families exchange girls through marriage so neither family is worse off in terms of household labour (Girls Not Brides 2013, India)

Furthermore, the children that the young girl is expected to bear, particularly sons, represents economic security since the offspring in these societies are oftentimes raised with the norm of providing for their families. Thus, in order to achieve immediate and long term financial sustenance, child marriages take place at high rates in India and Bangladesh.

b. Sub-Saharan Case Studies:

Similar to the role of child marriage in serving economic purposes and overcoming hardships of poverty in the South Asian context, this is also a driving factor of child marriage found in Nigeria and Ethiopia. Despite having the largest economy in the African continent, “half the population lives in poverty and 60% of the urban population cannot afford the cheapest house.”³⁰ In Ethiopia, poverty rates are also high; additionally, poor families in Ethiopia carry out child marriage and “marry off their daughters at a young age in the hope that they will have grandchildren to look after them when they are elderly”³¹ in order to ensure that they will be looked after and have financial security in their old age. This is similar to the South Asian context, discussed in previous subsection above, since the number of children a young bride could bear for her husband represented financial security and labor that the family could depend

³⁰ Mwai et al., “Nigerian Elections: Is poverty getting worse?” BBC News. 8 Feb 2019

³¹ “Ethiopia: Child Marriage Around The World.” Girls Not Brides Ethiopia. 2013. <https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/child-marriage/ethiopia/>

on. Sulaiman makes an important point about the driving factor of poverty and economic insecurity in Sub-Saharan Africa in his statement that:

Where poverty is acute, a young girl may be regarded as an economic burden and her marriage to a much older sometimes even elderly man is believed to benefit the child and her family both financially and socially. A daughter may be the only commodity a family has left to be traded and sometimes girls can be used as currency or to settle debts
(Sulaiman 2016, p. 32)

Thus, child marriage occurs due to the need for families to reduce their economic burden of taking care of a daughter while, simultaneously, allowing her to fulfill her domestic duties in ways that are expected to contribute to the economic security of the family.

III. The Tradition of Dowry and Bride Price

“Many cultures place an emphasis on girls’ virginity, which is closely tied to a family’s honor. Parents may marry off a daughter at an early age to ensure that she marries as a virgin and to prevent out-of-wedlock births” (Karam 2015, p. 4)

The push to get young girls married early is also driven by the tradition of having to provide dowries to the groom’s family and the financial advantages that are attached to practicing this cultural norm. This is highlighted in UNICEF’s report, in which it states that “in Asia and Africa, the importance of financial transactions at the time of marriage also tends to push families to marry their daughters early.”³² These financial transactions come in the forms of dowry and bride price, which both commonly take place in South Asian and Sub-Saharan African cultures. In both regions, it is clear that young girls have lower dowry costs but higher bride prices, which compels many families to have these girls married early.

³² “Child Marriage.” UNICEF India. 2019 April. <https://unicef.in/Whatwedo/30/Child-Marriage>

a. South Asia case studies:

Dowry practices play major roles in increasing the rate of child marriages occurring within South Asia. Traditionally in both India and Bangladesh, the bride's family is expected to provide gifts such as land or money – essentially, dowry – to her husband's family before officially becoming a new member of the family. If the girl is younger, however, her family can decrease the dowry they have to give to the potential husband's family and, instead, increase the value of the bride price that they would like to receive for their daughter's marriage. In South Asian countries, it is common for families to want to avoid paying high dowries and, instead, leverage their position for receiving higher bride prices for the girls in the family. Thus, child marriage becomes a more relevant and in ways even a lucrative way of earning money through abusing dowry and bride price traditions. This phenomenon of trying to lower the costs of dowry (which can often be a hardship for poor families) is described in Jaya Sagade's work in India, for example, where she observes: "parents of a girl are required to give gifts either in cash or in kind, to the bridegroom and/or his family in the form of dowry ... To avoid more expenditure by marrying her at a later age, parents prefer to marry her off at an early age."³³

A girl's virginity and age are important factors attached to her dowry or bride price. The Girls Not Brides anti-child marriage organization indicates that due to the widespread practice of dowry, "there is a high premium placed on virginity, and as such it is sometimes considered more punya (holy) to marry off younger girls."³⁴ This is further supported in Jaya Sagade's work, in which she also affirms that a female's virginity and chastity are two highly important

³³ Sagade, Jaya. "Child Marriage in India: Socio-legal and Human Rights Dimensions." *Oxford University Press*, 2005. (p. 11)

³⁴ "India: Child Marriage Around The World." Girls Not Brides India. 2013. <https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/child-marriage/india/>

cultural values in South Asia because these attributes are connected to “honor and status of a family, clan, caste, ethnic group, or race.”³⁵ If a girl’s virginity is considered tainted, this negatively impacts both the girl and her natal family; they will have less marriage proposals or have to pay higher dowry, receive little to no bride price for their daughter, and be shamed in their communities. As a result of the high stakes and value associated with virginity, it is increasingly common for families in South Asian countries like India and Bangladesh to control a girl’s sexuality and marry her off at an early age so that her virginity is still protected and secured for her husband – an act that is seen as much harder to accomplish when a girl is much older versus when she is younger.

b. Sub-Saharan case studies:

In the case of Sub-Saharan Africa, there is also a clear correlation between the tradition of dowry, bride prices, and the perpetuation of child marriages. Similar to South Asia, societies in this region of the world also engage in traditions in which the groom’s family pays the bride’s family in order to secure her for marriage. Thus, they are essentially buying her by paying the “bride price,” which is a common norm that entices predominantly poor families in the region to marry their daughters off at early ages. The younger a girl is, the more likely her parents can receive a higher bride price from her husband’s family and the less dowry she will have to provide back.³⁶ This is further exclaimed in Kamal Sulaiman’s research for the *Ahmad Journal* in Nigeria, in which he states “the monetary value of bride price, or bride wealth, is linked with [child] marriage. Bride price is a sum, either in cash or kind, used to purchase a bride for her

³⁵ Sagade, Jaya. “Child Marriage in India: Socio-legal and Human Rights Dimensions.” *Oxford University Press*, 2005. (p. 9)

³⁶ Malhotra, Anju. “The Causes, Consequences, and Solutions to Forced Child Marriage in the Developing World.” International Center for Research on Women, 15 Jan 2010

labour and fertility.”³⁷ For poor families in countries like Nigeria and Ethiopia, the high bride prices that a girl’s family can obtain due to her beauty and youthfulness compared to if she were much older is a large reason that convinces parents to marry off their daughters early.

Essentially, such bride price and dowry traditions relate to the following significant statement that child brides serve as “a resource in which parents can attain greater wealth, are married off a young age, for the bride price and also as a way for parents to lessen their economic burdens.”³⁸

IV. Low Educational Opportunities for Females

“Many families consider girls to be paraya dhan – someone else’s wealth. This means that a girl’s productive capacities benefit her marital family, and educating daughters is therefore seen as less of a priority than educating sons, who are responsible for taking care of biological parents in old age” (Girls Not Brides India)

Lack of educational opportunities for females is also an underlying factor perpetuating child marriage to happen in both South Asian and Sub-Saharan African contexts. According to Malhotra, “education is the single most important factor associated with girls marrying before the age of 18, according to a 2007 ICRW study. Even one more year of school than the national average can increase a woman’s earning potential by 10 percent to 20 percent.”³⁹

a. South Asia case studies:

Low educational opportunities for females in India and Bangladesh also lead to the increased practice of child marriage to occur. This is especially common in rural areas within these countries, where there are few schools in the first place and those that are available are

³⁷ Sulaiman, Kamal-deen Olawale. “Islamic Responses to the Raging Debate of Child Marriage in Nigeria.” *Ahfad Journal*, vol. 33, no. 1, June 2016, pp. 29–42. EBSCOhost (p. 33)

³⁸ Sulaiman, Kamal-deen Olawale. “Islamic Responses to the Raging Debate of Child Marriage in Nigeria.” 33

³⁹ Malhotra, Anju. “The Causes, Consequences, and Solutions to Forced Child Marriage in the Developing World.” International Center for Research on Women, 15 Jan 2010

simply too far away from home. Child marriage is most prevalent in rural communities and the fact that many young girls “are required to travel long distances to reach school” is a major turnoff for parents – who fear that their daughters may be vulnerable to premarital sex or “become the victims of sexual abuse” on their way to school.⁴⁰ As a result of little to no educational opportunities, young girls are more easily pushed into believing their main duties in life are getting married, having children, and making her family happy. Thus, early marriage becomes an intergenerational practice that continues within families.

b. Sub-Saharan case studies:

In the case of Sub-Saharan Africa, it is also clear that lack of access to educational opportunities is also a major factor that contributes to the prevalence of child marriage in this region of the world. As mentioned by Sulaiman, in Nigeria it is estimated “only 2 percent of 15–19-year-old married girls are in school, compared to 69 percent of unmarried girls. Some 73 percent of married girls compared to 8 percent of unmarried girls received no schooling, and three out of four married girls cannot read at all.”⁴¹ Much of the lack of access to education is also connected to parents’ fear of safety of their daughters, especially after kidnappings like Boko Haram’s siege in 2015. Also, in Ethiopia girls who are no longer being able to attend school are at greater risk of being married early as a way of protecting them from being alone at home or “walking unsupervised for long distances.”⁴²

V. Weak Marriage Laws and Gender Violence

⁴⁰ Sagade, Jaya. “Child Marriage in India: Socio-legal and Human Rights Dimensions.” *Oxford University Press*, 2005. (p. 11)

⁴¹ Sulaiman, Kamal-deen Olawale. “Islamic Responses to the Raging Debate of Child Marriage in Nigeria.” *Ahfad Journal*, vol. 33, no. 1, June 2016, pp. 29–42. EBSCOhost, search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=119995746&site=eds-live. (p. 31)

⁴² “Girls Education Is Crucial in Drought Hit Ethiopia.” UK Plan International. Sanduvac Zeynap. 10 August 2017

“Policy making systems fail for two reasons: one, the lack of feminist lawmaking and policy-making, and two, the lack of implementation of extant legal provisions and policies” (OHCHR 2013, p. 11)

Another major underlying factor driving high rates of child marriage to occur between the South Asian and Sub-Saharan contexts are the weak government laws surrounding the issue of child marriage and, in connection to this, gender violence vulnerabilities against women that families try to avoid in marrying off their daughters early. These weak marriage laws allow for loopholes to take place, thus making it easier for families to find different ways of skirting the laws to get their daughters married “legally” or without getting caught and facing punishments.

a. South Asia Case Studies:

Although marriage laws protect minors as detailed within India’s legislation, there is still weak implementation of the marriage laws. The 2006 Prohibition of Child Marriage Act consists of various decrees including (1) stating the legal marriage age is 18 for girls and 21 for boys, (2) Child Marriage Prohibition Officers have the responsibility of breaking child marriages and fining offenders as seen fit, and (3) in the event that child marriage does take place, it is considered voidable “at any time up to two years after reaching adulthood.”⁴³ This law, however, still allows for child marriage to occur since it does not clearly establish that child marriage is legally invalid (as noted in the third decree). Furthermore, “general marriage laws in South Asia typically do not require consent of the parties to marriage” as long as there is parental consent from both families.⁴⁴ South Asian governments’ failure in providing adequate punishments to people who are caught violating marriage laws or purposely show false

⁴³ “Child Marriage in South Asia: International and Constitutional Legal Standards and Jurisprudence For Promoting Accountability and Change.” Center for Reproductive Rights. 2013 (p. 9)

⁴⁴ Child Marriage in South Asia: International and Constitutional Legal Standards and Jurisprudence For Promoting Accountability and Change.” Center for Reproductive Rights. 2013 (p. 15)

documentation also contributes to the ongoing practice of child marriage. Due to minor punishments for child marriage crimes, it is common for many families across South Asia to be willing to take risks in still engaging in this illegal practice. As indicated by the Center for Reproductive Rights, the Bangladeshi government not only has poor implementation of its child marriage laws, but it also shows a lax stance upon addressing this issue since offenders of these laws face minor punishment. For example, “in Bangladesh, the punishment for contracting, performing, or failing to prevent a child marriage is only a maximum fine of BDT 1,000 approximately 13 USD, one month in prison, or both.”⁴⁵ Gender violence also evidently causes child marriage to occur within South Asia. As highlighted by Sulaiman even through 2014 reports show that girls face greater risks of sexual and domestic violence in their marital homes, many girls are still “married off due to fear of kharab mahaul – the corrupted external environment – and reports of the rape of women in public spaces” that happen in their villages.⁴⁶

b. Sub-Saharan Africa case studies:

Similar to weak legal parameters in place for child marriage and the issues posed by actions of gender violence within South Asia, these are also evident underlying factors leading child marriage to take place within Sub-Saharan Africa. In regards to weak government regulations around marriage, this can be seen in both Nigeria and Ethiopia. In Nigeria, for example, it has “three different legal systems operating simultaneously civil, customary, Islamic and state and federal governments that have control only over marriages that take place within

⁴⁵ Child Marriage in South Asia: International and Constitutional Legal Standards and Jurisprudence For Promoting Accountability and Change.” Center for Reproductive Rights. 2013 (p. 21)

⁴⁶ Sulaiman, Kamal-deen Olawale. “Islamic Responses to the Raging Debate of Child Marriage in Nigeria.” *Ahfad Journal*, vol. 33, no. 1, June 2016, pp. 29–42. EBSCOhost, live (p. 44)

the civil system.”⁴⁷ This is an ineffective system that creates difficulty in how courts rule child marriage cases and allows for corruption, bribes, and loopholes around the law to easily occur.

The 2014 kidnappings of nearly 276 young girls from the village of Chibok in Nigeria by the terrorist group Boko Haram was a major example of gender violence. Many of these innocent young girls were forced into marriages with Boko Haram militants, which illustrates how gender violence not only led to child marriages but also being used as “a weapon of war.” This is further elaborated in Girls Not Brides’ Nigeria report that “Christian and Muslim girls have been kidnapped and married off by Boko Haram in an attempt to dismantle communities and attract male recruits who are awarded “wives” if they fight.”⁴⁸ Therefore, through this section it is clear that weak marriage laws and the fear of gender violence against young, virgin females are driving factors similar between South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa.

VI. The Threat of Climate Change

Lastly, climate change is an environmentally driven underlying factor of child marriage that is shared in common between South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa. This connection is overlooked, yet evidence shows that the drastic changes in the environment and weather not only adversely affects families’ living circumstances, but it also exacerbates the already pressing issue of young, underage girls getting married and becoming another statistic as a child bride.

a. South Asia Case Studies

The connection between climate change and child marriage is most closely evident in Bangladesh, which will be the country focused as a case study within this subsection of the

⁴⁷ Sulaiman, Kamal-deen Olawale. “Islamic Responses to the Raging Debate of Child Marriage in Nigeria.” *Ahfad Journal*, vol. 33, no. 1, June 2016, pp. 29–42. EBSCOhost, (p. 32)

⁴⁸ “Nigeria: Child Marriage Around The World.” *Girls Not Brides Nigeria*. 2013. <https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/child-marriage/nigeria/>

thesis. As a flat country close to sea level, Bangladesh is perhaps the most vulnerable South Asian country to climate change. According to April 2019 UNICEF data, greater than 19 million Bangladeshi children are adversely impacted by climate change.⁴⁹ The onset of more frequent natural disasters such as floods and cyclones, especially during monsoon season, has created growing worries for rural families in particular – many of whom are now displaced and forced to leave their homes due to climate change and live in overcrowded, urban areas like Dhaka and other big cities in the country. This is highlighted in the UNICEF report, which states “sea level rise and salt water intrusion – are forcing families deeper into poverty and displacement. In the process, children’s access to education and health services is severely disrupted.”⁵⁰

But how is this connected to child marriage? It is estimated that “Bangladesh has nearly 6 million climate migrants already, a number that could more than double by 2050.”⁵¹ At the rising rate in which global warming and climate change related natural disasters are occurring, child marriage is inevitably becoming a more common practice because it serves, at least in most parents’ views, as safe and secure alternatives for their daughters. As mentioned in the case of Bangladesh, climate change related problems like natural disasters “exacerbate child marriage in many regions of Bangladesh. Frequent flooding means many families live in insecure conditions and marry off daughters as a survival tactic.”⁵²

b. Sub-Saharan Africa Case Studies

Although Nigeria and Ethiopia are not severely affected by floods, they too face climate change problems that perpetuate child marriage to take place at higher rates. This subsection will

⁴⁹ “Child Marriage.” UNICEF India. 2019 April. <https://unicef.in/Whatwedo/30/Child-Marriage>

⁵⁰ “Child Marriage.” UNICEF India. 2019 April. <https://unicef.in/Whatwedo/30/Child-Marriage>

⁵¹ “Bangladesh: Girls Damaged by Child Marriage.” Human Rights Watch, 2015. 9 June 2015. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2015/06/09/bangladesh-girls-damaged-child-marriage>

⁵² “Bangladesh: Girls Damaged by Child Marriage.” Human Rights Watch, 2015. 9 June 2015. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2015/06/09/bangladesh-girls-damaged-child-marriage>

look into the climate change child marriage nexus through Ethiopia as a case study. Over recent years Ethiopia has experienced an onset of consecutive droughts that make it difficult for families to sustain their livelihoods, as most are farmers or work in agriculture by occupation. According to 2018 reports conducted by the World Vision nonprofit organization, droughts caused food shortages that affected nearly 8.5 million people. Consequently, climate change and the “lack of food fueled cases of child marriage as farmers’ income plunged – and girls as young as 13 were given away to stave off poverty.”⁵³ Failed crops due to droughts essentially had a strong negative domino effect; young girls no longer had the financial support to attend school, their families oftentimes fell into deeper poverty, and therefore early marriage became the common alternative for these girls. As mentioned in World Vision’s report, “girls are most vulnerable during natural disasters; at risk of sexual exploitation, child marriage, and gender based violence.”⁵⁴

Myths, Suggested Measures, and Conclusion:

Debunking the Myth That Religion Propels Child Marriage

Contrary to popular assumptions, however, religion is not a driving factor of child marriage. There is no specific religion that can be seen as directly associated with encouraging children to be married early in these regions of the world. Islam, Christianity, and Hinduism are the leading religions within the four countries used as case studies in this thesis yet none of these religions promote their followers to have their children married off at early ages for religious purposes. This is further supported in Malhotra’s statement below, where she says no one

⁵³ “As Ethiopia faces catastrophic drought, more girls are forced into early marriages.” World Vision. 19 Jan 2018. <https://www.worldvision.org.uk/news-and-views/latest-news/2018/january/ethiopia-faces-catastrophic-drought-more-girls-are-forced-early/>

⁵⁴ “As Ethiopia faces catastrophic drought, more girls are forced into early marriages.” World Vision. 19 Jan 2018.

religion can be singled out for encouraging child marriage to take place since this is a problem occurring among people with various faith affiliations:

At its core, forced child marriage is rooted in tradition. A 2007 ICRW study found that no one religious affiliation was associated with the practice. Rather, a variety of religions were associated with a high prevalence of forced child marriage, in a diversity of countries throughout the world (Malhotra 2010, p. 10)

Further evidence from Ethiopia, a country consisting of multiple major religions, shows that child marriage is a problem associated with people of varying faiths and, therefore, no one religion can be singled out for encouraging this practice compared to others. For example, the Orthodox Christian Ethiopian communities are against child marriages, yet it is a practice that has traditionally taken place within families and became a norm.⁵⁵ Similarly, Muslim communities recognize that Islamic teachings do not promote early marriage – in fact, the teachings “mandates that men and women should choose their partners freely, and children are unable to do so.”⁵⁶ Furthermore, the hadith (or Islamic sayings) in the Quran encourages maturity rather than age in determining whether a couple is ready to marry. Children and minors do not have the capabilities of “understanding the intricacies of marriage and the burden of bearing a child”⁵⁷ and so Islam as a religion itself does not promote child marriage.

Islamic texts (similar to other major religious texts), for instance, emphasize the importance of a male and female reaching a certain level of maturity and mutual understanding between each other because such a relationship shows the “wisdom attribute expected to be

⁵⁵ Karam, Azza M. “Faith-Inspired Initiatives to Tackle the Social Determinants of Child Marriage.” *The Review of Faith & International Affairs*, vol. 13, no. 3, 2015, pp. 59–68. EBSCOhost, doi:10.1080/15570274.2015.1 (p. 4)

⁵⁶ Karam, Azza M. “Faith-Inspired Initiatives to Tackle the Social Determinants of Child Marriage.” *The Review of Faith & International Affairs*, vol. 13, no. 3, 2015, pp. 59–68. EBSCOhost, doi:10.1080/15570274.2015.1075 (p. 4)

⁵⁷ Sulaiman, Kamal-deen Olawale. “Islamic Responses to the Raging Debate of Child Marriage in Nigeria.” *Ahfad Journal*, vol. 33, no. 1, June 2016, pp. 29–42. EBSCOhost (p. 36).

developed in boys and girls which is ... necessary for both of them to carry out the marriage responsibilities and avoid unfavorable physical and behavioral social outcomes that are produced by marriage.”⁵⁸ However, due to conservative interpretations in which guardians must protect a girl and it is up to their discretion on whether a girl has reached maturity – this clause is often misused by patriarchal males or controlling family members in order to marry off a girl early. This illustrates that child marriage still occurs in this community due to traditional norms and conservative interpretations of the teachings based on elders’ preferences. Tradition also plays more of a role than religion since child marriage is connected to cultural norms that have been practiced for generations. In India, for example, “some girls are promised in marriage before they are born in order to “secure” their future. Once they reach puberty, gauna or “send-off” ceremonies take place and they are sent to their husband’s home to commence married life.”⁵⁹

Lastly, research shows that religion can actually have a positive role in reducing – not perpetuating - child marriages to occur within South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa. Religious leaders are respected and held in high esteem within their local communities across these world regions. Their words have a profound influence upon people’s understanding of religion and if child marriage is a necessary component that is to take place. Muslim faith leaders and scholars in Hausa, Nigeria, for example, have collaborated with organizations such as Girls Not Brides and IWEI (Isa Wali Empowerment Initiative) in explaining to families that they should refrain from marrying off their daughters early and that this will not harm the values of protecting the

⁵⁸ Sulaiman, Kamal-deen Olawale. “Islamic Responses to the Raging Debate of Child Marriage in Nigeria.” *Ahfad Journal*, vol. 33, no. 1, June 2016, pp. 29–42. EBSCOhost, (p. 29)

⁵⁹ “India: Child Marriage Around The World.” Girls Not Brides India. 2013. <https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/child-marriage/india/>

chastity of the young girls.⁶⁰ Indeed, as Azza Karam mentions in his article about faith based leaders and their positive role in reducing child marriages “engaging with faith actors provides an opportunity simultaneously for a whole of government as well as a whole of social determinants approach.”⁶¹ Therefore, as more faith based organizations and leaders join the anti-child marriage campaign, more families are willing to understand the negative consequences of early child marriage and delay this event for later.

Stories of Child Marriage

In order to gain a real life perspective on the ways in which child marriage changes the lives of young girls across both regions, true accounts of child brides will be presented in this part of the thesis. These firsthand accounts allow for clearer insight into how child marriage has impacted the lives of these girls, what their daily lives and responsibilities are, and what they hope to achieve for their children if not for themselves. This will also be an important section in identifying the overlapping similarities between the underlying factors that propelled these young girls to be in early marriages in the first place.

a. Stories from South Asia

16-year-old Komal from Rajasthan, India was married in 2015 against her consent. Prior to her life as a married young woman and a first time mother to a healthy baby girl, Komal consistently attended school and had dreams of one-day attending college and pursuing a career of her choice. However, she was trapped into an early marriage due to her father’s adamant decision that it was time for her to marry. Furthermore, Komal’s early marriage also served as an

⁶⁰ Walker, Judith-Ann. “Engaging Islamic Opinion Leaders on Child Marriage: Preliminary Results from Pilot Projects in Nigeria.” *The Review of Faith & International Affairs*, vol. 13, no. 3, 2015, pp. 48–58. EBSCOhost, doi:10.1080/15570274.2015.1075760 (p. 56)

⁶¹ Karam, Azza M. “Faith-Inspired Initiatives to Tackle the Social Determinants of Child Marriage.” *The Review of Faith & International Affairs* (p. 9)

important exchange in order for her older brother to get married to the bride of his choice – which is essentially the practice of “atta satta” as mentioned in earlier part of this thesis.⁶² The situation Komal had been trapped in shows that patriarchal attitudes in which males hold authority over decision making and the little value they have towards Komal’s concerns or comfort compared to her brother exemplify how patriarchy and gender stratification between males and females are driving factors of child marriage.

In neighboring Bangladesh, 14-year-old Sadia married her 18-year-old husband, Sumon, and gave birth to a daughter soon. Before her marriage, Sadia excelled in school and dreamed of one day becoming a teacher herself. By the eighth grade, however, she was forced to quit school to get married off. Although she can no longer attend school and has now become accustomed to her new responsibilities as a wife and mother, she dreams of better opportunities for her daughter and spreading messages to others that child marriage should not be practiced any longer.⁶³

b. Stories from Sub-Saharan Africa

Stories of being forced to quit their education, face social pressures from the community, and leave behind an innocent childhood to marry early are also common within Sub-Saharan Africa. This is seen in Melka’s story. She was 14 years old in 2004 and had suddenly been forced into marriage without any knowledge or consent one day after coming home from school. She did not know who her husband was and met him the first day on her marriage day when she was taken to his village. As soon as the marriage ceremonies were completed, she was taken to his room where she was forced into having unprotected sex with her new husband – who was

⁶² “Marrying Too Young: End Child Marriage.” UNFPA. 2012. <https://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/MarryingTooYoung.pdf>

⁶³ “Ending Child Marriage.” UK Plan International. <https://plan-uk.org/about/our-work/child-marriage>

essentially a stranger to her. Every year, thousands of girls living in the Amhara region of Ethiopia, like Melka, are illegally married despite not being at least 18 years old.⁶⁴

However, there are also stories where child marriage was successfully thwarted. Maimuna was a 14-year-old in Kaduna, Nigeria back in 2013 and her story escaping child marriage represents one such case.⁶⁵ In an interview with Girls Not Brides Nigeria, she explained how most girls her age were all married before reaching age 15. Parents who did not get their children married off by then received negative social stigma and their children faced harsh insults. Despite this backlash, she was able to continue attending school and pursue her academic interests – which was made possible by her father and school teacher. They supported her dreams to attain a university degree. Had it not been for these two supporters in this patriarchal society, Maimuna might not have had the chance to be free of her expected fate in early child marriage.

Analysis of Stories: Commonalities

Based on the above mentioned personal stories of young women who were married as child brides within South Asia (specifically India and Bangladesh) and Sub-Saharan Africa (in this case, Nigeria and Ethiopia), common driving factors that have caused girls to be married off at young ages are a patriarchal family in which females' voices and concerns were not given enough value, lack of access to schools or affordable education costs, poverty within families, and fear of facing negative social stigma from neighbors and the local community. These are all driving factors that were identified in the first section of this thesis and such factors, evidently, clearly have played out in the lives of real girls. The early marriages these girls had been

⁶⁴ “Ethiopia: Child Marriage Around The World.” Girls Not Brides Ethiopia. 2013. <https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/child-marriage/ethiopia/>

⁶⁵ “Nigeria: Child Marriage Around The World.” Girls Not Brides Nigeria. 2013. <https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/child-marriage/nigeria/>

involuntarily made to undergo can be connected to a relevant and important statement made by Karam, in which he states “Child marriages occur most often in patriarchal societies where parents and elders have a significant role in selecting spouses for their children and new brides are absorbed into their new families as domestic help. Girls are often married shortly after puberty to maximize their childbearing potential.”⁶⁶

Child Marriage: A Violation of Children’s Rights

Child marriage is a social issue that violates children’s rights across the world, particularly in the two regions that have been comparatively explored within this thesis paper. The Declaration/Convention on the Rights of the Child is a treaty enacted in 1989 to protect the rights of children and youth around the world. Based on this treaty, child marriage represents an issue that violates children’s rights on numerous moral and legal grounds. It violates Article 27 of this treaty which states that every child has “the right to a standard of living adequate for the child’s physical, mental, spiritual, moral, and social development.”⁶⁷ Child marriage also violates human rights, such as the rights to equality and the right to having the autonomy of marrying and founding a family on one’s own choice. It interferes with the first law because young girls are taken advantage of and their comfort level regarding marriage are not taken into account in order to appease elders or patriarchal males who hold greater authority over decision making in the family. According to Sagade, the human right to have autonomy is also violated by child marriage since young girls are “forced into motherhood and family responsibility as soon as possible after the marriage for which they are unprepared.”⁶⁸

⁶⁶ Karam, Azza M. “Faith-Inspired Initiatives to Tackle the Social Determinants of Child Marriage.” *The Review of Faith & International Affairs*, vol. 13, no. 3, 2015, pp. 59–68. (p. 4)

⁶⁷ “Convention on the Rights of the Child.” United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/crc.aspx>.

⁶⁸ Sagade, Jaya. “Child Marriage in India: Socio-legal and Human Rights Dimensions.” *Oxford University Press*, 2005. (p. 149)

Furthermore, child marriage of young girls also violates children's rights since it directly hinders the success of UN sustainable development goals, thereby adversely affecting the futures of these children to have better standards of living and agency in living their dream success and future the way they would like. All these countries are signatories of the Convention so child marriage is an issue that they must heed more attention. These violations of children's and human rights is best summarized by Sagade when she states: "Child marriage violates a number of human rights of young girls that can be separately identified in various human rights conventions. These rights include the rights to equality, right to marry and found a family, right to liberty and security, and right to be free from slavery."⁶⁹ Overall, it is important to recognize that "marriage is a state sanctioned institution. Therefore, failure on the part of a state to address the prevention of child marriages of young girls is an indication of social injustice."⁷⁰

Combatting Child Marriage in the Present; Current Initiatives

Child marriage is an issue that has occurred for generations and still happens to this day. However, there are current initiatives being carried out by international nonprofits and NGO's (non-governmental organizations) towards reducing child marriage around the world. This section will explore nonprofits and their current projects in India, Bangladesh, Nigeria, and Ethiopia. It will bring to light the successes that have occurred and shortcomings that can be improved upon in future work within these countries.

Within South Asia, organizations such as Plan India and Plan Bangladesh (which are under the Asia Child Marriage Initiative) have made significant positive strides in addressing

⁶⁹ Sagade, Jaya. "Child Marriage in India: Socio-legal and Human Rights Dimensions." *Oxford University Press*, 2005. (p. 139)

⁷⁰ Sagade, Jaya. "Child Marriage in India: Socio-legal and Human Rights Dimensions." *Oxford University Press*, 2005. (p. 125)

child marriage. Plan Bangladesh recent initiative known as the “Protection of Vulnerable Children Programme,” continues to successfully reduce the number of cases of child marriages in rural districts of Bangladesh such as in parts of Rajshahi and Khulna districts.⁷¹ The program’s goals are to convince families to delay marriage of girls from 15 to at least 18 years old, improve the government’s database of birth certificates through creating online birth certificate system, and having more effective implementation of the Child Marriage Restraint Act in the country.⁷² Furthermore, the sister group called Plan India is carrying out similar pursuits within India. In addition to providing programs that “promote children’s rights to protection from abuse and exploitation,” Plan India has also conducted research since 2009 on young girls and early child marriage in education deprived areas of India.⁷³

In Ethiopia, the UK based nonprofit organization “Finote Hiwot” (which means pathway to life) has done significant work in reducing child marriage cases within Amhara – the village in which child marriage most predominantly takes place within Ethiopia. It provides young girls with books, pens, supplies, and other tools that can help them continue their academic studies. This is an important step since providing girls access to education in ways that are affordable is a major factor that influences families to delay the marriage of their young daughters. According to a 2018 report under the direction of the Global Citizen organization, Finote Hiwot helped more than 37, 500 young girls receive an education and learn about their rights in order to equip them with the understanding that child marriage is not only illegal, but is a practice they can avoid falling victim to in their current lives and potential future.

⁷¹ “Asia Child Marriage Initiative: Summary of Research in Bangladesh, India, and Nepal.” Plan Asia Regional

⁷² “Asia Child Marriage Initiative: Summary of Research in Bangladesh, India, and Nepal.” (p. 14)

⁷³ “Asia Child Marriage Initiative: Summary of Research in Bangladesh, India, and Nepal.” (p. 14)

Lastly, in Nigeria the organization Development Research and Projects Centre (dRPC in short) has achieved excellent work in not only reducing the rates of child marriage within Northwestern Nigeria, but it has also provided young child brides with services that can help them meet their mental and psychosocial needs. This is an important strategy that ensures future child marriages can be prevented while the young girls who are in marriages at present also have access to valuable and useful services that can improve their standards of life.

Combatting Child Marriage in the Future: Suggested Measures and Solutions

Karam states there are key concepts that are necessary to recognize before carrying out any measures – most importantly, for example, realizing what the key factors are in perpetuating child marriage to occur at such exceedingly high rates in South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa. He says this in the following quote below:

Addressing child marriage requires recognition of economic factors (e.g. the need to support many children, paying a lower dowry), structural factors (e.g. lack of educational opportunities), and social factors (e.g. sense of tradition and social obligation, risk of pregnancy out of wedlock, avoiding criticism whereby older unmarried girls may be considered impure (Karam 2015, p. 2)

Based on the extensive research done regarding child marriage within Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia, this section will focus upon explaining suggested measures and solutions that can be carried out by the various agents involved – from the public, to government, NGO organizations, and the international community – towards improving upon current child marriage problems and making the anti-child marriage campaign more effective. Author Malhotra mentions an effective framework for the kinds of measures or solutions that can be made towards addressing the global

issue of child marriage, particularly beneficial for the regions explored in this thesis. The proposed suggested measures this thesis would like these countries to take are outlined as below:

(1) Launch nonprofit regional programs that “provide girls with life skills such as numeracy, literacy, ...”⁷⁴ and other important services useful for young girls to understand their rights and how they can improve their lives even if they fall victim to child marriage

(2) Creating community programs targeted towards helping parents, teachers, religious faith leaders, and local members of the community understand the negative consequences of child marriage upon a young girl’s health, development, and future.

(3) Implementing youth and young adult oriented programs, particularly ones in which boys work together with girls in advocating against child marriage and build peer support.⁷⁵

(4) Promote greater access to affordable, safe, and quality education. If the education system in these countries meet these basic conditions and requirements, more parents would be comfortable sending their daughters to school.

(5) Empower communities, especially young girls, through economic oriented initiatives. Child marriage in South Asian and Sub-Saharan countries can be significantly reduced if effective financial assistance and job training programs are implemented towards young girls who are both unmarried and married. Microfinance programs, as pioneered in Bangladesh and currently in Nigeria, for example can be an excellent solution towards helping families improve their financial situations and help current child brides to be financially independent.

(6) Institute more effective programs that help families adversely impacted by climate

⁷⁴ Malhotra, Anju. “The Causes, Consequences, and Solutions to Forced Child Marriage in the Developing World.” International Center for Research on Women, 15 Jan 2010

⁷⁵ Malhotra, Anju. “The Causes, Consequences, and Solutions to Forced Child Marriage in the Developing World.” International Center for Research on Women, 15 Jan 2010

change. This is an environmental issue that the four developing countries discussed in this thesis have contributed little to, yet they face the largest negative effects of climate change.

Conclusion

“Girls around the world have a right to experience childhood – to make friends, go to school, pursue their aspirations and live a healthy life free from violence. The practice of forced child marriage robs girls of these opportunities. But it does not need to be this way – we have successful solutions.”⁷⁶ (Malhotra 10, p. 12)

This purpose of this thesis was to delve deeper into the connections between child marriage in South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa. My thesis argues that there are shared underlying factors perpetuating child marriage to occur in both these regions, despite their differences in cultural contexts and geographical boundaries. I showed that the same diverse, underlying factors like patriarchy, gender stratification, poverty, education access, poor government, and even climate change have major roles in causing child marriage to occur in two distinct regions of the world.

Through examining the shared underlying factors, I also suggested measures that can be more effective in addressing child marriage in these target areas. Exploring this topic has showed that child marriage is interconnected with other relevant global issues that need to be addressed now before it is too late – namely, climate change. Without the collective advocacy of the international community and local agents of authority within these countries, it is very likely that little progress will be made. Let us work together to no longer turn a blind eye towards child marriage and be a champion of change and brighter futures for every young girl living in this world.

⁷⁶ Malhotra, Anju. “The Causes, Consequences, and Solutions to Forced Child Marriage in the Developing World.”

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