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Research Article

Minor Marriage in the Age of Globalization: A Systematic Review

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Abstract

Child marriage remains a critical humanitarian issue, affecting millions of girls worldwide, and is deeply rooted in rigid gender roles and societal norms. Despite international laws aimed at eradicating this practice, it persists due to entrenched gender inequality, religious beliefs, and socioeconomic factors. This study examines the persistent inequalities surrounding the practice of marriage of minors, focusing on its global prevalence and underlying causes. A systematic literature review was conducted to analyze existing research on the social norm of child marriage, using Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory as a guiding framework. The review highlights the multifaceted drivers that sustain this practice, including cultural factors and social learning processes, which contribute to its widespread occurrence. The results also underscore the significant negative impacts of child marriage on the lives of young girls, their families, and communities. This research concludes with recommendations for policy interventions aimed at mitigating child marriage, informed by global efforts to address gender inequality and promote human rights. The study emphasizes the importance of targeted actions from governments, policymakers, and human rights advocates to combat the practice and its harmful effects. Addressing child marriage is crucial for advancing both social justice and public health on a global scale.

Keywords: Marriages of minors, Child marriage, Social norms, Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory, Gender inequality

Abbreviations: CARE: Cooperative for Assistance and Relief Everywhere; CEFM: Early, Forced, and Child Marriage; GNB: Girls Not Brides; UN: United Nations; UNGA: United Nations General Assembly; UNICEF: United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund; ICRW: International Center for Research on Women

Introduction

Pre-arranged marriage of minors "early marriage" that is an ongoing global issue in many traditional societies and is a form of gender-based violence against women [21,17]. This norm often denies a range of human rights and is defined as an arranged marriage by the parents of children who are under 18 years old and commonly occurs between young girls and older men; the parents of both play vital roles [21,25]. Although it is applicable to both genders and they can be victims, young girls are more likely to be at high risk because of their gender, "female" [11]. This is especially true in communities where girls are expected to be wives and mothers as they attain puberty [25]. Seeing this practice as a symbol of preserving the social identity, tribes' wealth, customs, family repu tations; showing strong commitment to their religious and ethnic groups; and benefactory investment for the girl and her family, are the dominant reasons of sustaining this norm with a greater social injustice in the Asian culture [25]. Despite all efforts and ongoing shifting toward ending it, it remains a widespread practice due to gender inequality, humanitarian issues, religious heritage, and socioeconomic factors [6].

This unequal "early marriage" has been recognized in many parts of the world back to the 1920s and the early legislative attempts to stop early or child marriage taking place in India [15]. Since the Child Marriage Restricted Act of 1929, legal reforms have begun to gain ground, and different countries have raised the legal age of marriage to 18 for women and 21 for men, but in places such as India and Bangladesh, they are yet to be effectively adapt-

ed [15]. Due to all that, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), the Convention on Consent to Marriage, Minimum Age for Marriage and Registration of Marriages (1964), the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (1979) and the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), have been recognized [15]. Human rights activists also play a fundamental role in addressing this traditional practice as a problem within the international development community [15]. Several organizations, including the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), have launched efforts to eradicate it, and it has become the main focus in the women's agenda, and therefore a wider recognition of the issue has started (UNICEF 2001). Since then, it has gained attention at a slow pace and momentum has occurred in 2010 by the Elders or Girls Not Brides (GNB). GNB takes the lead to advocate against this social norm and works with governmental and non-governmental organizations to eliminate harmful practices and provide impetus regarding inequality and gender disparities [8,9]. These organizations, including UNICEF, GNB, International Center for Research on Women (ICRW), Cooperative for Assistance and Relief Everywhere (CARE), and others, have been mostly responsible for promoting full gender equality, meeting the needs of women, and introducing programmatic approaches to prevent these marriages [8,10,12]. A set of five core strategies have been deployed; empowering girls; offering them services like economic, education, and health opportunities; engaging the families and the community to change their attitude toward it; and strengthening laws and policies that prohibit it [6,14]. In 2013, the United Nations Human Rights Council launched the first resolution dedicated to ending Early, Forced, and Child Marriage (CEFM) [8]. In 2015, the UN placed gender equality as one of its Sustainable Development Goals for 2030 [9]. In 2016, the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) adopted the second resolution on CEFM. The third committee on CEFM resolution at the UNGA, 2018, has been successfully issued and over 190 countries have agreed to adopt the resolution, thus consolidation efforts, acceleration action, and committing to end it everywhere in 2030 [10] *UNGA, et al., (2018)*.

Media attention and the entertainment industry have made substantial contributions to the increased visibility of the female issues, declining gender inequality, and for shifting the cultural climate across countries [13]. International and local conferences and the International Day of the Girl Child offer opportunities to the GNB and others to empower women and call for ending this practice [20]. However, a lot remains to be done in terms of ensuring equality, educating communities, updating marriage-related legal structures and policies within the affected communities, and ensuring the efficacy of legal protections against it.

Child marriage is not just a personal issue; it is a pressing social and public health concern that requires intensified focus and commitment from governments, policymakers, educators, and human rights activists at both local and global levels. Its consequences are profound, impacting not only young girls but also their families and communities. Therefore, it is imperative understand the phenomenon as such to combat this practice vigorously and strive for social justice for all. The purpose of this systematic review is to understand the social norms surrounding the practice of marriage of minors, examining its global prevalence, underlying causes, and impacts.

Materials and Methods

This study employed a systematic literature review to investigate the global social norm surrounding the marriage of minors. The review integrated findings from diverse sources without thematic categorization, aiming to provide a holistic understanding of the norm. A theoretical framework informed the analysis of the phenomenon," Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory." Literature was sourced from reputable databases, including PubMed, Scopus, and as well as reports from WHO, and the World Bank. Keywords such as "marriage of minors," "child marriage", "causes of social norms," and "gender inequality" were used in the search. Relevant studies were selected based on their focus on the norm's prevalence, causes, impacts, and potential interventions. Data was extracted and synthesized to summarize the key findings. Ethical considerations were observed through appropriate citation and acknowledgment of all sources. This review relied solely on secondary data from published literature.

The theoretical framework, Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory, can be utilized to investigate early marriage. It is an interpersonal theory and multi-faceted framework that intends to understand human behavior: how individuals' beliefs, thoughts, and feelings can influence their behavior and self-efficacy *(Bandura, et al., 1977)*. These can lead to harmful or harmless consequences. This theory proposes that human behavior is determined by the expectations every individual has about a specific behavior or through observation of other people's experiences *(Bandura, et al., 1977)*. This emphasizes that the parents presume positive outcome expectancies and attitudes towards early marriage through the process of observing their family and community or imitating attitudes of their models. Parents also perceive advantages for having their daughters marry at an early age and enhance their general situations via monetary gain, which often motivates parents to continue this practice *(Bandura, et al., 1977)*. It is focused on explaining the factors that influence human functioning and the interplay (mutual interaction) of personal, behavior, and environmental factors. Parent action in this marriage, being socially situated, is the outcome of a dynamic interplay of personal and situational influences *(Bandura, et al., 1977)*. Self-efficacy beliefs are the core of this theory and are the foundation for an individual's motivation, accomplishments, and well-being *(Bandura, et al., 1977)*. This theory can assist in gaining an understanding of the parents' thought processes and uncovering the rationale for communities and parents adhering to this norm, regardless of its negative implications. This indicates that the parents' role in this marriage is a self-efficacy behavioral concept. It shows how parents make decisions, how they support this practice, and how they perceive their capacities about conformance and continuity of this norm without thinking about its long-term negative outcomes *(Bandura, et al., 1977)*. It covers the areas of cognitive and vicarious processes and self-reflective, self-regulatory human be-

havioral adaptation *(Bandura, et al., 1977)*. This conceptual framework possesses the necessary elements to help understanding the Asian community aspects of this phenomena.

Results and Discussion

While this marriage occurs in many parts of the globe, rates vary widely, prevail among poor communities globally and in developing countries, and the highest incidence is in South Asia, Sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East, Latin America, and the Caribbean [21]. One in nine girls is married before 15 years old, and one in three girls is married before 18 years old in the developing world [21,25]. A range of cultural, social, and economic factors that varies from country to another perpetuates this practice [21].

In Asia, early marriage happens against the wishes of the minor [25]. Some girls are forced to drop-out school and are married off as soon as they attain reproductive age; girls must remain virgin and fertile before the wedding [25]. Extreme cases of this practice are in South Asia, primarily in Bangladesh, India, and Pakistan, where 56 percent of girls are married before the age of 18 [21]. This norm is viewed differently within and between countries: as an act of protection or "safeguard" from sexual assault or as a chance to improve the girl's family financially, while others see it as a way to give the girls a better future and to strengthen the ties between families of the same tribe and caste [21]. In these traditional societies, young girls who are failing to comply with this marriage often tend to face isolation from families and members of their societies and denial of inheritance from their parents [25]. At the same time, the parents who are refusing to marry their minor girl and follow the tradition often can face discrimination for going against the culture and social norms [25]. Poverty rates are also high in the Asian- Pacific region [21]. Children in these areas, and particularly girls are considered a burden to their families; parents consider early marriage as a solution to their financial challenges "dowry payments" [21]. Family (network, caste) preferences, social expectations, and ignorance sometimes cause underestimation its harm and also play a role, hence reinforcing the social norm [25]. Thus, understanding the multiple layers of cultures, beliefs, behaviors, and opinions of all people are necessary, as all are interrelated to the existence of this norm.

The normalization of early marriage because of its benefits has had immense impact in the local society and in the world [18,11]. The health of young girls has been affected by this norm; they are exposed to health issues such as pregnancy- related complications [11]. Early pregnancy is the highest leading cause of death among girls aged of 15 to 19 in developing countries; maternal mortality rates tend to be as high as 28 %, compared to girls between 20 to 24 years old [26,17]. It also has been reported that newborn to young mothers under 15 years of age are more likely to suffer from malnutrition, lower weight, and late development; these children are expected (2.5 times) to die before age 5, compared to those who are born to older mothers [26]. Evidence emphasizes that young girls are more vulnerable to sexual and domestic violence; one in every three girls has experienced a form of physical and/ or sexual violence at the hands of their husbands or intimate partners [12]. This then raises their vulnerability, lowers their psychological well-being, and increases their risk of depression, suicide, and addiction [5]. It has been reported that the financial costs of intimate partner violence to societies are significantly high, resulting in the girls using social services and healthcare systems more frequently [4]. Due to that, a lot of resources are used by governments in their efforts to address and solve this issue [18]. These resources would otherwise be spent addressing other economic and social issues across the globe. These young girls are also less likely to be involved in the decision-making process; they do not express their opinions, nor do they control household resources, as a result lacking decision-making power and lowering lifetime earnings [19]. It negatively affects the girl's educational attainment and literacy level, and therefore diminishes future opportunities for jobs, overcoming poverty and contributing to the development and economy of their countries or community's productivity [16].

Nurse leaders are at the forefront of practice and can influence healthcare delivery and policy development through evaluating policy, weighing the cost and advantages of current interventions, determining what is missing from current practice, and implementing policy changes to guarantee standards of care are reached [2]. It is time for nurse leaders to take action, as agents of change, to mitigate this norm and protect the rights of young girls via safety and protection embedded in a broader policy to protect young girls' health "child brides" [2]. Legislative and preventive measures must be accompanied by better interventions such as reforming the health policy, as an entry point, with a focus on protecting the victims and supporting the general well-being of the affected and at-risk young girls [14]. Having this platform with a supportive framework and tackling this inequality from the point of view of a community health concern can be a powerful approach to ensure that girls can easily access various services and resources within healthcare facilities. This approach also enables these girls to make informed decisions about their health and safety, as a result decrease inequality in health status and ensure social justice. By providing care and advice in a confidential way and sharing knowledge and resources, girls' safety and health can be safeguarded.

Conclusion

Marriages of minors is a serious children's rights violation and dilemma as it affects children rights to equality, education, and healthy life free from violence and disease. Evidence shows the negative consequences of this marriage and how girls at a young age face health problem from early and multiple pregnancies. Research shows that it increases their risk of exposure to sexually transmitted infections, including human immunodeficiency virus. Raising massive awareness on a national level about the disadvantages of this norm helps deter the practice across the globe and all working together for the benefit of the whole community; it partially eliminates unfairness, disparities, and injustice. Engaging families, communities, nurses and cultural leaders is useful to acknowledge the problem, promote change in attitudes and practices, and ensure adherence to laws.

Healthcare providers include nurses, schoolteachers, officers, and community leaders need training to handle early marriage incidents in an objective manner. With the proper training of healthcare workers in local facilities, this social norm can be approached from the community level "bottom-up" with communication and inclusive management while understanding differences in beliefs and promoting healthy behaviors within the community. Effective means of communication with parents and community can allow nurses to recognize rooted causes and what motivates parents to continue this marriage; this can help to undertake more research and construct education, behavioral, or empowerment approaches suitable for each group, as no possible action plan fits all with differences in perceptions and myths among countries. A network of stakeholders, influential leaders, and human advocates, is necessary to make a difference, enact laws, enhance public awareness, and support attitude and social changes (Nour, 2009). If all have been inclusive in strengthening the concept of community responsibility in supporting a healthy life and preventing inequality and violence against women, this norm can be mitigated. Media campaigns need to deliver clear messages at the community level about its negative impact on girls and community to prevent this practice, enforce full equality, and support reporting violators to government.

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Conflict of Interest

No conflict of interest has been declared by the author.

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