

FORCED MARRIAGE



© UNFPA India/Arvind Jodha. This young girl is not married, but lives in a community where early marriage is a daily reality.

Terminology and contextualization

Forced marriage is the act of marrying a person against their will: in this type of marriage, one or both parties are married without having given their consent. Every year, according to United Nations figures, 12 million girls around the world are subjected to this outrage. These marriages mainly affect girls in North Africa (Maghreb), the Middle East, Africa and some Asian countries because of traditions and for economic interest.

Only in these types of marriages the psychological and health consequences are disastrous: young girls are subjected to sexual violence, indeed, sexual relations are often forced in this type of union. There are also many health risks: risks related to early pregnancy (the leading cause of death among 15 to 19 year olds), but also risks related to HIV because, even if a girl had the chance to receive sex education, she is rarely able to negotiate having safe sex.

Distinction between forced marriage, arranged marriage and early marriage

It is very important to know how to distinguish all the terms. Indeed, in the case of an arranged marriage, the families of the two future spouses play a central role in the arrangement of the marriage but the choice to marry or not ultimately belongs to the two concerned. In India, it is estimated that 95% of the marriages are arranged marriages.

Early marriage is characterized by the young age of the bride. Thus, sometimes young girls of 10/12 years can be given in marriage to men of 40 years.

The principle of freedom of conscience enshrined in international texts

The practice of forced marriages goes against freedom of conscience: it is to ignore the choice of life of these young women but also of these young men.

The article 16 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that: "Men and women of full age, without any limitation due to race, nationality or religion, have the right to marry and to found a

family... Marriage shall be entered into only with the free and full consent of the intending spouses.”

However, despite the consecration of this principle in different texts of international law, many countries continue to perpetuate these forced marriages, thus following the traditions established for many years within their country. Indeed, it is clear that, despite the establishment of laws and sanctioning legal principles, many actors perpetuate their customs even if they go against justice. Indeed, even when early marriage is explicitly prohibited, many families ignore it and / or break the law. In some countries, this violation is so widespread and standardized that penalties are rare.

Early marriage: a problem that concerns the United Nations (UN)

“When a girl is forced into marriage as a child, she faces immediate and lasting consequences. Her chances of finishing school decrease while her chances of experiencing domestic violence increase. She is more likely to get pregnant during her teenage years and die from complications related to pregnancy and childbirth than women in their twenties. The societal consequences are also enormous and the risk of perpetuating intergenerational cycles of poverty is higher. ”

Therefore, in order to put a remedy to this terrible situation, the United Nations has decided to set up a program to help millions of girls avoiding an unwanted marriage. The program launched in 2016 involves different actors such as families, educators, health providers, governments and traditional religious leaders as part of a common policy and a global effort. Indeed, the aim is to put focus on prevention and dialogue to end child marriage by 2030.

We must then focus on effective strategies: in particular on improving girls' access to education and health services, skills development, education of parents and communities about the dangers of child

marriage as well as strengthening and enforcing laws which set 18 as the minimum age for marriage.

“As long as girls are married as children, we will not be able to achieve the gender equality that young people demand. Girls should have the power to make their own choices - when and who to marry, whether to continue their studies, and when to have children” said UNFPA Executive Director Dr. Natalia Kanem.

“The global agenda is committed to empowering girls to exercise their rights, realize their potential and make changes in their communities,” she said.

Since the launch of the global program in 2016, more than 7.7 million adolescent girls and over 4.2 million community members have received information, skills and services. The program has also helped governments to develop and to implement strategies to end child marriage.

Aïcha's testimony

Aïcha, a young Senegalese woman, tells us about the traumatic experience she lived during the entire process of the arranged marriage, which was celebrated without her consent a few years ago:

“I was 17 when I found out that my parents were planning to marry me to a man much older than me. Only at that point, as it was all implied, I thought the mere fact that I objected to them would be enough to drive that idea out of their minds. I already had some "flirts", secret boyfriends. When my parents decided to force me to get married, I was no longer a virgin. My mother's reaction then was to have me operated clandestinely to reconstruct my hymen. One evening on my way home from high school, she asked me to follow her and I found myself at the house of a lady who was supposed to be a "gynecologist". However, I was not in a hospital, I was with this woman's house who operated on me without anesthesia and my mother heard me screaming and she did not intervene. This operation was horribly painful, I am still traumatized by it ... It is the surprise's effect and, above all, the complicity of your loved ones in this

Machiavellian process which remains the most traumatic and difficult thing for me to experience ... "

The young woman also explains how the arranged marriage process unfolds: it was concluded without her presence, since in her country, the woman's consent is not required to conclude a marriage. This shows us to what extent the rights of women are denied. Indeed, women are submitted to their families at first and then to their husbands once the marriage has been celebrated.

In her touching testimony, the young woman then goes on explaining that, in accordance with Senegalese tradition, it was her aunt who drove her to the hotel with her husband so that they would be able to consummate the marriage. However, her own mother, unsure whether the hymen reconstruction

operation had worked out well, gave her a razor blade. Indeed, as a precaution, the young woman had to cut herself, in the most discreet way possible, to simulate the loss of blood and thus honor the ritual of "the white sheet".

"In a forced marriage, the first thing you experience is this feeling of betrayal. These are rapes with the approval of your family, of society because it is like that ... But no one has the right to force someone else to have a life they did not choose. "

(Testimony taken from the show "it begins today" on forced marriages: see: <https://www.france.tv/>)

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