A Childhood *Lost*

A Report on Child Marriage in the UK and the Developing World
from the UK All-Party Parliamentary Group on Population, Development
and Reproductive Health

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November 2012

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Maya, 8, and Kishore, 13, pose for a wedding photo inside their new home. Photo: Stephanie Sinclair / VII
Bottom
Soon-to-be-wed Faiz Mohammed, 40, and Ghulam Haider, 11, at her home in a rural village of Ghor province, Afghanistan. Photo: Stephanie Sinclair / VII

Back
Photo: Stephanie Sinclair / VII

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Foreword

Baroness Jenny Tonge,
Chair of the UK All-Party
Parliamentary Group on
Population, Development and
Reproductive Health
November 2012

When I look at my grandchildren playing together and think of their future, I can be fairly confident that in our family culture my grandaughters will have equal opportunities to my grandsons to achieve whatever they want in their lives.

10 million girls around the world however are not so fortunate. Every three seconds, a girl is coerced or forced into marriage, losing her childhood, her dreams and the opportunity to make her own choices about her life and relationships.

These girls are expected to marry early, have children and forget about any life except serving those children, their husbands and families – if they survive long enough to do so. It is usually a grim prospect of suffering until they die.

This is not just bad news for the girls themselves, who often have no education as a consequence. It also means that too many children are born into a world that is already overpopulated and half of the productive population of a developing country cannot participate fully in their societies because they are uneducated and unable to contribute to the workforce. Countries where girls are educated, marry later and have fewer children show higher economic growth and a better standard of living for all.

Child marriage is usually forced marriage, although of course some may want to marry the partner of their parents' or their own choice. We must remember that it happened in our own country not so long ago in many families. The eldest daughter of Queen Victoria, for example, was betrothed at the age of 15 and married at 17.

Girls are tricked into being taken from this country by their families to marry men they have never seen. This report tells the story of some of them. In other countries child and forced marriage is widespread and horrifying in its cruelty in some cases. Our report has put on record the suffering of these girls and has heard from many specialists in the field on the causes in families and society of this practice. We also look for ways of discouraging child marriage in the long term, both by further legislation in this country and by encouraging other countries to follow.

A big thank you is due to all the people who have given evidence and helped us in many ways, but especially to Katharine Dow who has collated the evidence and written the report under the guidance, as ever, of our APPG advisor, Mette Kjaerby.

Don't just read the summary and file this away somewhere. Resolve to do something about our sisters worldwide whose cries are not heard.

Background and Acknowledgements

The All-Party Parliamentary Group on Population, Development and Reproductive Health (the Group) would like to thank all those who submitted written evidence to the Parliamentary Hearing on Child Marriage. Special thanks are extended to the expert witnesses who attended the hearing, whose details are listed in Appendix 2, and in particular the survivors of child marriage, who displayed extraordinary courage and eloquence in their oral testimony.

The Group warmly thanks its Chair, Baroness Jenny Tonge, for chairing the hearing, as well as the parliamentarians and members of the Group who sat on the steering committee and hearing panel: Baroness Flather, Lord Rea, Geoffrey Clifton-Brown MP, Heather Wheeler MP and Meg Munn MP. The Group also thanks Attiya Inayatullah MP for her input and interest in the hearing from the Pakistani perspective and Jasvinder Sanghera for her feedback on child marriage in the British context.

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Executive Summary

Every year, around the world, 10 million girls are married before they are adults. 1.5 million of those girls are married before they even reach the age of 15.

Child marriage, which is marriage that takes place before one or both of the spouses has reached adulthood, is a global phenomenon. This is despite the fact that it is illegal according to international – and, in most cases, national – laws. Although it is most prevalent in the developing world, there is increasing evidence of child marriage happening in the UK and other developed countries. The number of British children being forced into marriage is hard to gauge, as these marriages are not usually officially registered, but we do know that **14% of calls to the Forced Marriage Unit's helpline during 2012 were regarding the marriage of children under 15 years old** (UK Forced Marriage Unit website). The British government has demonstrated a strong political will to tackle forced marriage in the UK, yet awareness of its extent and its consequences both here and in the developing world is limited.

Portrait of Said Mohammed, 55, and Roshan Kasem, 8, on the day of their engagement in the village of Chavosh in Ghor Province, Afghanistan.
Photo: Stephanie Sinclair / VII

October 11th 2012 saw the first International Day of the Girl. This was an opportunity to recognise the rights and potential of girls worldwide, but also to bring attention to the challenges faced by so many of them, including early marriage. On the day, the United Nations' Population Fund (UNFPA) released new data that predicts that, if child marriage prevalence trends continue, by 2020, 142 million girls will be married before they are adults. This means that, **due to a rising global population, child marriage rates are likely to increase to around 14 million girls being married per year** (UNFPA, *Marrying too Young*).

Specific causes and practices vary according to context, yet there are common themes. In some areas, child marriage has been practiced for many centuries, while in others it emerges as a response to conditions of crisis including political instability, natural disasters and civil unrest. This report highlights poverty and gender inequality as drivers of child marriage. While boys are married when they are children too, it is girls who are disproportionately affected by child marriage. Many parents marry their daughters off young to 'protect' them from poverty, sexual harassment, the stigma of extramarital sex and sexually transmitted infections, as well as to reduce their own economic burdens. Yet, child marriage in fact entrenches these problems and does little to protect girls or boys.

In the developing world, a lack of access to education is both a symptom and a cause of child marriage, especially for girls, many of whom get very little formal education as they are valued more for their future roles as wives and mothers. Child brides are generally expected to bear children from an early age, leading to a prolonged period of reproduction and larger numbers of children. As a result, they miss out on opportunities to learn, to build financial independence and to make autonomous decisions about their futures – and these effects are passed on to successive generations.

Child marriage is a shocking infringement of human rights and the rights of the child. It has many significant and worrying consequences:

- **It leads to higher rates of maternal mortality and morbidities.**
- **It contributes to infant mortality and poor child development.**
- **It is associated with violence, rape and sexual abuse.**
- **It increases population growth and hinders sustainable development.**
- **It takes away opportunities for education and training, especially for girls and women.**
- **It is associated with and helps perpetuate harmful traditional practices including female genital mutilation.**
- **It is a severe threat to combating poverty and the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals.**

Summary of Recommendations [1]

- **National laws and international conventions regarding the rights of the child and the prevention of violence against women must be enforced and new laws passed where they are lacking.** Governments also need to put in place measures enabling people to access relevant legal mechanisms.
- **The internationally agreed universal minimum age of marriage should be fully implemented.** Governments need to review their policies around minimum age of marriage in order to protect children and ensure gender equality.
- **Laws regarding divorce, inheritance and property ownership need to be reformed** to protect women and children.
- **More needs to be done to end harmful traditional practices** associated with child marriage like female genital mutilation and to implement the laws that exist to combat these practices.
- **Access to sexual and reproductive healthcare including family planning must be improved** so that girls and women, whatever their age or marital status, can make their own choices about when they become pregnant and have children.
- **Governments need to improve their registration systems so that births and marriages are properly recorded.** This will protect children by clarifying the law and making it more difficult to carry out unregistered religious or community marriages.
- **Professionals working with children, including teachers, healthcare workers and social workers, need to be made aware of child and forced marriage,** so that they can signpost children at risk to sources of information and support.
- **Girls should be able to access education** in a safe setting without fear of discrimination or abuse.
- **Girls and boys need education and training in sex and relationships** that foster autonomy and empower them to make their own informed choices.
- **In order to effect long-lasting attitude and behaviour change, communities need to be engaged** so that they are aware of the consequences of child marriage.
- **Women and girls need shelters and other safe havens to go to when they are at risk of or escaping forced marriages.** Governments around the world should take responsibility for supporting girls and women who have been subject to violence and coerced sex by providing physical and emotional care, training, education and opportunities to rebuild their lives in safety.
- **There needs to be increased and improved cooperation across government departments.** Since child marriage abuses human rights, a range of ministries including education, domestic affairs, health, equalities, development and foreign affairs, along with embassies and international corporations, should work together more closely to prevent this abuse of children's human rights and to protect survivors.

What UK parliamentarians can do to effect these recommendations:

- **Push for improvements within the UK including the implementation – and monitoring – of statutory guidance on forced marriage,** training for professionals, inclusion of consent in marriage and sexual relations in the Personal, Social, Health and Economic Education (PSHE) curriculum, compulsory registration of all religious marriages and an increase in the minimum legal age for marriage to 18.
- **Encourage the Department for International Development (DFID) to conduct research**

[1] The Group's full recommendations can be found on pages 63–66 of this report. Detailed recommendations on some of the specific consequences are included on pages 38–53 and recommendations for programme interventions can be found on pages 54–62.

into the prevalence and practice of child marriage, to evaluate existing interventions so that UK aid is spent effectively and to scale up programmes to prevent child marriage and support survivors. DFID should also work to meet the need for family planning, and sexual, reproductive and maternal healthcare of girls and women of all ages and whatever their marital status.

- **Urge DFID and other donors to allocate 10% of Official Development Assistance (ODA) to population and reproductive health,** as recommended at the International Parliamentarians' conferences in Ottawa in 2002, Strasbourg in 2004, Bangkok in 2006, Addis Ababa in 2009 and Istanbul in 2012.
- **Work with parliamentary colleagues in other countries, particularly in the developing world, to galvanise political will** and to share best practice in tackling child marriage through programmes, services and legislative reform and implementation.
- **Improve and increase cooperation across Whitehall.** Child marriage is an issue that crosses geographical borders and has wide-ranging effects. Although the Forced Marriage Unit (FMU) has led the way in tackling forced marriage in the UK, the Group was concerned that there is a lack of communication between governmental departments on this issue. With greater collaboration across Whitehall, officials could share their expertise and experience in combating child marriage and supporting those affected.

Introduction: Child Marriage in the UK and Around the Globe

In August 2012, the parents of Shafilea Ahmed, a 17-year-old girl living in Cheshire, were sentenced to life imprisonment for her murder. Shafilea was killed in the family home in front of her siblings. She had already been drugged and abducted to Pakistan where she was supposed to be married, but had drunk bleach in order to escape the marriage. She was finally killed by her parents in an attempt to prevent her bringing any more 'shame' upon their family through her 'Westernised' behaviour.

In the UK, we have become increasingly aware of 'honour'-based violence like that Shafilea Ahmed was subjected to. Thankfully, not all of these cases end as horrifically as hers, yet each year, many British citizens are forced into marriage either here or abroad. This report focuses on the most vulnerable – those, like Shafilea, who are at risk of being forced into marriage while they are still children. Shockingly, every year, British children are being married off before they are adults, often to spouses they have never met who take them away from their families, friends, homes and education.

The Parliamentary Hearing on Child Marriage

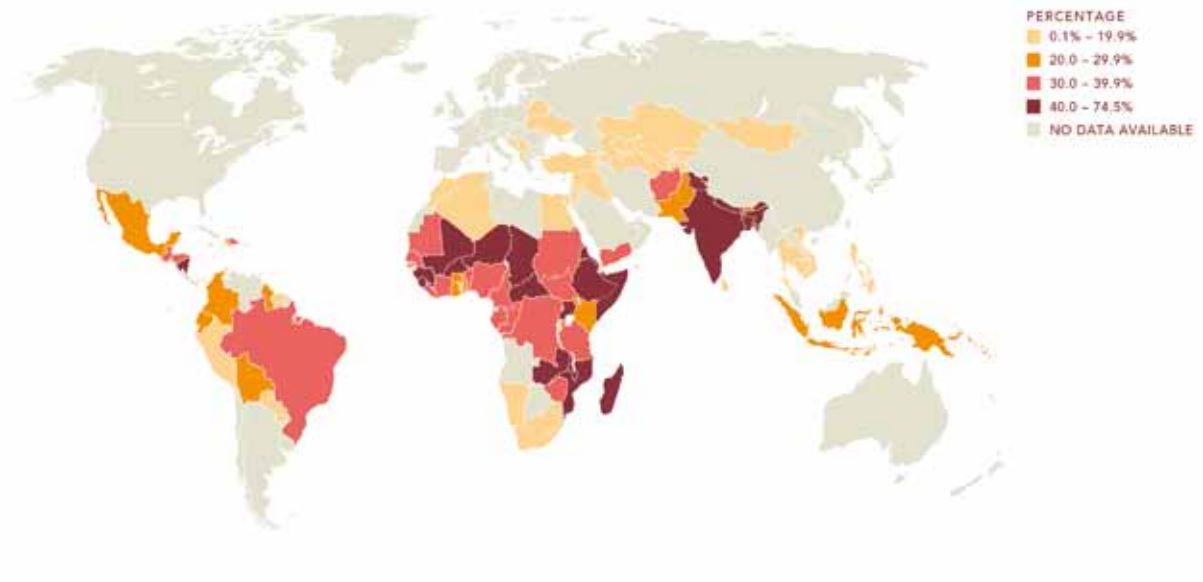
Photo: Peter Trimming

In June 2012, the UK All-Party Parliamentary Group on Population, Development and Reproductive Health (the Group) held a parliamentary hearing in Westminster to gather oral evidence on child marriage[2] – its causes, consequences and ways to combat it. Evidence was given by a range of experts, including survivors of child marriage, representatives from UN and government agencies, academics, doctors and non-governmental

[2] Some agencies and publications use the term 'early marriage' to discuss marriages that take place while at least one spouse is under 18. After discussion, it was decided to retain the term 'child marriage' in this report to underline the fact that this practice is a violation of children.

organisations (NGOs).[3] Prior to the hearing, written evidence was received from a range of experts.[4]

Percentage of Women Aged 20–24 Years Married before Age 18, 2000–2010



Source: UNFPA database using DHS, MICS and other household surveys.
MDG5b+Info database at www.devinfo.info/mdg5b

The main focus of this report will be on the developing world, reflecting the bulk of the evidence submitted. The Group is, however, very interested in the situation in the UK and what linkages there might be between the practice and ways of combating it, here and in the developing world. Representatives of the UK Forced Marriage Unit were invited to give oral evidence at the hearing. They were unable to attend on the day, but did submit written evidence. Data on child marriage in the UK is limited by the fact that usually these marriages take place 'underground', either as community or religious marriages, or abroad. Nonetheless, some evidence on child marriage in the UK was gathered by the Group, including the compelling testimony of two British survivors of child marriage which is outlined on pages 18–23.

How is Child Marriage Defined?

Child marriage is marriage that takes place before one or both of the spouses has reached adulthood. While definitions of adulthood vary across regions, for the purposes of this report, 18 years old will be taken as the standard measure of adulthood in line with the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child.

[3] See Appendix 2 for a list of experts who submitted evidence to the parliamentary hearing.

[4] See Appendix 1 for a list of organisations which submitted written evidence to the hearing.

According to the UK's Forced Marriage Unit, 'A forced marriage is a marriage where one or both people do not (or, in the case of some people with learning or physical disabilities, cannot) consent to the marriage and pressure or abuse is used' (Forced Marriage Unit, *What is a Forced Marriage?*). Forced marriages take place against the will of one or both spouses, whether through coercion, violence or the threat of violence. Forced marriages should be distinguished from arranged marriages, which will not go ahead unless the spouses have agreed to the match made on their behalf; they therefore do not violate the spouses' rights unless they are under 18.

Child marriages are forced marriages because a child cannot legally be married; coercing or forcing a child to be married is a form of child abuse. While children should be supported to make their own decisions about their lives and futures, including their sexuality and family relationships, most are not physically, emotionally or practically ready to take on the responsibilities of marriage.

One of the most concerning aspects of child marriage is that spouses are typically under pressure to start having children themselves. Child marriage therefore leads to coerced, non-consensual underage sex. While both boys and girls may be married before 18, the consequences for girls are worst, not least because early pregnancies are likely to have poor outcomes for their own and their children's health.

Forced Marriage and Child Marriage in the UK

It is estimated that **around 5000–8000 people are at risk of being forced into marriage in England every year** based on government research carried out during 2011 (Home Office, *Forced Marriage – A Consultation: Summary of Responses*). During the hearing, the panel heard oral testimony from two British citizens who had been subjected to forced marriages as children (see pages 18–23). They spoke of being taken out of the country during school holidays only to find they were being married without their knowledge or consent to someone they had never met before. They told a story of being powerless and isolated, ignorant of their rights and where to get help, made invisible by plural legal systems, closed communities and misguided cultural sensitivities.

Women's rights organisations in the UK[5] have worked hard to bring forced marriage to the attention of government, legislators and the general public, and efforts to combat it have received increasing political support in recent years. In 2002, the UK government created a dedicated Forced Marriage Unit and in 2008, the Forced Marriage (Civil Protection) Act came into force, supported by the institution of Forced Marriage Protection Orders (FMPOs). The government has recently announced plans to criminalise forced marriage in the UK fully; it is currently a civil, rather than criminal, offence. Proposals are expected to go before Parliament in 2013.

[5] See Appendix 3 for a list of organisations working to combat and support survivors of child and forced marriage.

While recognising the groundbreaking work of the FMU, NGOs have highlighted gaps in the UK's response to child and forced marriage. For example, the 2008 Act placed statutory duties on public bodies to protect both children and adults from forced marriage and the government produced guidance to that effect. Yet, a recent review of this guidance concluded that these did not go far enough (IKWRO, written evidence). This is important given that schools and other statutory bodies have a potentially vital role to play in protecting children from forced marriage, by spotting warning signs, responding appropriately and sensitively to those at risk and providing children with information and support. This evidence also pinpointed a reticence to tackle child marriage among professionals because of fears that they would be perceived as challenging religious practices or appearing racist (IKWRO, written evidence).

Forced Marriage Unit

This cross-departmental initiative between the Home Office and Foreign and Commonwealth Office provides four main services:

- A confidential helpline to those affected by forced marriage.
- Information for professionals working with children.
- Support workers in embassies to protect citizens subject to forced marriage abroad.
- Arranging repatriation and resettlement of those who have been forced, or are at risk of being forced, into marriage abroad.

During 2011, the UK FMU helpline received over 1400 calls, 78% of which were from girls or women. 29% of calls during 2012 involved minors. Of the 600 calls already received during 2012, 14% concerned children under 15 years old. The youngest case was a girl who was just five years old.

Forced Marriage Protection Orders

- Can be secured by those threatened with forced marriage or by a third party on their behalf.
- Can be used to prevent a forced marriage taking place or to protect someone who has already been forced into marriage.
- If breached, can result in arrest and a custodial sentence of up to two years.

(Forced Marriage Unit website; 'Forced Marriage: Girl Aged 5 Among 400 Minors Helped', BBC News Website, 30th March 2012)

Legal age of consent for marriage varies across the world and in some countries there is a lower age of consent for girls than boys. In the UK, marriages in which one of the spouses is under 16 years old were made illegal in 1949. Now, in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, women and men can be married once they are 18 years old, yet there is provision for marriage with parental consent between the ages of 16 and 18. In Scotland, minimum age of marriage is 16 and marriage does not require parental consent. Some parents are using these loopholes in the law to force the marriages of their children who are aged 16 or 17.

In September 2012, journalists from the *Sunday Times* reported the results of an undercover investigation during which imams in London and Peterborough had agreed to conduct the marriage of a 12-year-old girl ('Revealed: Scandal of Child Brides', *Sunday Times*, 9th September 2012).

While the UK response to child and forced marriage has focused on those cases where girls are taken abroad to be married, this investigation reminds us that religious and community marriages, including those of children, take place in the UK, as the registration of these marriages is not compulsory in this country (IKWRO, written evidence). Unregistered marriages are open to abuse because there are no safeguards in place for those being married, so spouses may be forced, duped or married under duress and, once married, have no recourse to end the marriage safely and legally. Furthermore, under Sharia law, return of brideprice is a condition of divorce and this is enforced by Sharia Councils in the UK.

Child Marriage in the Developing World

The situation in the UK is worrying enough, but child marriage affects many more children worldwide, including millions in the Commonwealth.

Child marriage is a shocking infringement of human rights and the rights of the child. It also goes against international conventions preventing violence against women. Child marriage, and the early childbearing that usually goes along with it, contributes to higher rates of maternal mortality and morbidities, as well as infant mortality and poor child development (Girls Not Brides, *Child Marriage: The Facts*). It also fuels, and is exacerbated by, population growth. Child marriage takes away opportunities for education and training, thereby contributing to cycles of poverty and

Tahani, 8, is seen with her husband, Majed, 27, and her former classmate Ghada, 8, with her husband outside their home in Hajjah, Yemen. Photo: Stephanie Sinclair / VII

perpetuating gender inequality and is a severe threat to the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).

UN Convention on the Rights of the Child

The Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) is a legally binding instrument that has been ratified by all but three of the world's nations; the UK ratified it in 1991. According to the CRC, a child is defined as anyone under 18 and it encourages national legislation to reflect this. The four core principles of the CRC are:

- Non-discrimination towards children
- Devotion to the best interests of the child
- The child's right to life, survival and development
- Respect for the views of the child

Many of the CRC's 54 articles are directly applicable to child marriage, but some are especially relevant, including children's rights to be protected from sexual exploitation, to be free from cruelty, to access primary education, to be protected from all forms of violence, to have their opinions respected, to be protected from kidnapping and to live with their parents unless it is a harmful environment.

(UNICEF website)

The evidence we have paints a distressing picture of how widespread child marriage is across the world, yet in many places, data is absent because of poor information management and a lack of universal registration of births and marriages, which makes it difficult to know exactly how many children are being married and how old they are, especially in poor and rural areas. What is clear, though, is that any child being forced into marriage deserves to be protected and that governments and donors everywhere should make all possible efforts to combat this pernicious practice.

Child Marriage Worldwide – The Facts and Figures

10 million

Every year, 10 million girls are married before they are adults; that is equivalent to over 25,000 girls every day.

1/9

1 out of 9 girls in developing countries are married before their 15th birthday.

50%

Of the 20 countries with the highest prevalence of child marriage, half are recipients of bilateral aid from the UK.

7/20

7 of the 20 countries with the highest prevalence of child marriage are in the Commonwealth. This includes India, which is, due to its large population, home to a third of the world's child brides.

75%

The country with the highest prevalence of child marriage is Niger, with 75% of girls marrying before they are 18.

1/3

One third of girls in developing countries are married before their 18th birthdays.

14 million

If current trends continue, taking into account population growth, there will be an increase in child marriages, with over 14 million girls per year marrying before they are 18 in the next decade.

(Girls Not Brides, *Child Marriage: The Facts*; UNFPA, *Marrying too Young*)

What is it Like to be Forced into Marriage as a Child? Survivors' Stories

Sarita, 15, is seen covered in tears and sweat, before she is sent to her new home with her new groom. Photo: Stephanie Sinclair / VII

The parliamentary hearing into child marriage had a compelling start, as three survivors of child marriage told the panel about their experiences. This chapter uses their cases to give a sense of how individuals are affected by child marriage.

While two of the three women come from the British Bangladeshi community and all three are Muslim, it should not be inferred that child marriage and forced marriage are issues that affect only Muslims or Bangladeshis.[6] These are simply the three witnesses who had the courage to come forward and speak about their experiences, and they are not intended to be representative of all survivors of child or forced marriage. Child marriage is a widespread practice that is not limited to particular ethnic groups or religious denominations, and these cases show the differences that can occur within communities with shared beliefs and practices.

Anika's Story[7]

Anika gave oral testimony at the hearing as well as submitting a written account of her experience as a child bride. She is a British citizen who was taken to Bangladesh at the age of 12 to marry her husband, who was himself only 14. For her, the experience of getting married was one of violence and powerlessness, which she described vividly:

> *I was beaten and taken from one place to another because I had a step-mum and she said it was ghosts that spirited me to say no. I was 11/12 and I just did not want to get married, full stop. … It was nothing to do with spirits or anything. It was over a six- to seven-month period. At the end I just gave up. I just wanted to come back. I thought to myself if I just say yes I will come back and that was the case. I said yes and I came back and that was my ticket home to come back to the UK. (Anika, oral evidence)*

Anika explained that in her community, arranged marriages would traditionally take place with the consent of the spouses and that compatibility would be sought between the bride and groom. However, she observed that arranged marriage has changed among British Bangladeshis:

> *Arranged marriage is like a market [now] because girls or boys are taken back to Bangladesh, there is no compatibility because the girl has already got her red [i.e. British] passport, so they go and they choose grooms or brides who are ten times more educated than them, because it is who has the best education, who can offer me the most dowry, so personal compatibility is not there anymore and when they come back marriages break down. (Anika, oral evidence)*

Anika now works to support fellow survivors of child marriage in the black and minority ethnic (BME) community in the UK. She argued that there needs to be greater awareness of child marriage in the communities where it is practiced, particularly from religious leaders who can make it clear that child marriage is a cultural, rather than religious, practice.

Anika stated that she is supportive of recent changes to the law that stipulate a minimum earning threshold for immigrants to the UK, because she sees this as offering a safeguard that couples will have similar levels of education and therefore are more likely to have some compatibility. She recommended that national governments work together more closely to promote and protect children's human rights, especially when there is established migration between countries. She feels that this

[6] Bangladesh does, however, have a high prevalence of child marriage, with 66% of marriages involving a spouse under 18 (UNICEF, *State of the World's Children 2012*; see further www.GirlsNotBrides.org). While we do not have reliable figures for the number of child marriages taking place involving British citizens, we do know that the community which has made most calls to the Forced Marriage Unit are of Pakistani origin (JAN Trust, *Consent Matters*).

[7] 'Anika' and 'Tamanna' have been given alternative names in this report to protect their anonymity. The fact that they need to be protected in this way is a sign of the secrecy associated with child marriage, as well as the long-term effects of this experience on these women.

dialogue and cooperation will help people understand the root causes of child marriage better, as well as its consequences and effective ways to prevent it.

Khady Koita,
survivor of child marriage.
Photo: Isabelle de Ghellinck

Khady's Story

Khady Koita was married at 13 in Senegal to her 39-year-old cousin, who took her to France, where they had five children. Her marriage was arranged by her grandfather and she explained that, in her community, marriages that keep close links between families are favoured. Marrying dependents off while they are still children prevents them from marrying outside of their village and ethnic group; it is also thought to avert premarital sex.

> *Even now in 2012 you have some people in Africa who continue to give young girls of 15 years of age to 50-year-olds because for them when the girl gets breasts and you are tall and big, you are ready to marry. They do not think if your mind or if your body is ready. And also they say if you do not marry her now maybe she will get pregnant outside [of marriage]. At that time also it was not like we were all educated. For me my man was not educated. He came from a village and I was educated and I came from the city. And when we came to France he promised my mother I would continue to study but when we came it was another situation. I had five children. Each year I had a child. The violence started in the house because I wanted to study and I wanted to go out and he did not want me to. All the men around said if you let your wife go to study she will get bigheaded and she is not going to listen to you. All the community said your man is your Paradise. (Khady Koita, oral evidence)*

Khady explained that, in Senegal, pregnant women have their female relatives to go to for advice and support, yet they typically lack good healthcare and often suffer from maternal morbidities. Giving birth in France, she had access to medical care but no support network around her. Like the other survivors, she felt powerless and isolated after her marriage and this worsened when she became pregnant.

Like the other two survivors who gave oral evidence at the hearing, Khady is aware that child marriage is a cultural, rather than religious practice, yet she pointed out that one of the reasons why girls and boys find it difficult to fight against their marriages is not only because it will upset their families, but because they are concerned that they are committing a sin.

Khady eventually managed to secure a divorce from her husband, but she had to spend 10 years fighting against the French legal authorities, whom she says wanted to uphold the customary law under which her marriage took place. She also had to repeatedly defend herself against her community's accusations that she was betraying their cultural traditions. Now, she is a champion for African women's rights and supports many other women who have suffered violence and abuse including forced marriage and female genital mutilation (FGM).

Khady described the situation as she has observed it in France:

> *In France today we have catastrophic problems between us and our children. The parents now know if you marry your child before 18, it is [against] the law and your child is protected and the judge can do things against you, but they are waiting now until after 18. They just try to send the child to Africa for a holiday, and in this holiday they can kidnap them, marry them and keep them in some village far away from the city and they take the passport and the ID, and then they hope she will get pregnant, because if she gets pregnant it is more difficult for her to say no. We have some girls who run away and came back maybe a few years later and some never come back. And now many of them what they do – and it is a tragedy – they accept to go there because they say to me, 'If I don't go there, it is a conflict between me and my parents,' and they accept to go there to make this marriage. (Khady Koita, oral evidence)*

Tamanna's Story

Tamanna was taken from the UK to Bangladesh to be married when she was 16. Despite having had what she described as a 'very liberal' upbringing, which included a good education, she would have been forced into marriage were it not for the intervention of a male relative. She told her own story eloquently:

> *At the age of 16 I was taken to Bangladesh on a family holiday. Within days of arriving I was told that I was to marry a boy I had (a) never met before, (b) who was much younger than me and (c) who was my first cousin. I was told the only way to help myself was to do as I was told. Inevitably, it soon dawned on me that I was trapped. However, in the end, I was one of the lucky ones and I was rescued by another family member. In the years that followed I discovered that … I had been promised to my cousin from the age of eight.*
>
> *The consequences to me have been the complete betrayal I felt and the lack of trust I have towards my family, my eventual disownment and my estrangement from them, the lack of freedom I endured as well as the suffering from my educational, psychological and social inadequacies. It affected my physical health and my emotional well-being and my financial insecurity only exacerbated my problems. This took me almost a decade to manage and resolve and even to this day I struggle with some of the issues that still haunt me. Now in adulthood, I am happy, stable and secure in my way of life, and I can finally say that my choices are my own. However, that has come with a great price and the loss is something that I still grieve for. (Tamanna, oral evidence)*

Like Anika and Khady, Tamanna now works to support girls who are affected by child marriage. She highlighted a lack of awareness about child

and forced marriage within her community, which leaves girls and boys feeling helpless and alone. She recommended that all professionals who come into contact with children, from teachers to police to social workers, should be trained in the causes and consequences of child marriage, so that they can prevent it happening and provide a much-needed source of support for those affected.

As she said,

> *At the end of the day you have to put that victim at the centre regardless of why it has happened. In some respects why it has happened is irrelevant because if they are underage and they are of child age, to me this is a child protection issue. Whether they get married here or over there does not make a difference: they are a British citizen and they are not being protected. Then you have the effects of what happens afterwards: rape, domestic violence, you have got all of that and the cost to our country.*
>
> *It is so unnecessary and it does not have to be like that. I think the quickest, simplest way of doing that is to get training for professionals now and have an adequate training programme that is adhered to throughout the country so that the message is the same throughout the country and the risk assessments are done exactly the same throughout the country. Every case is going to be different, nobody denies that, but are we picking it up? What measures are we putting in place? What is happening in terms of the community? What is happening in terms of the adults there who are involved, how are they dealt with, what is being discussed, what is going to be put in place, how do we evaluate it? (Tamanna, oral evidence)*

Like the other two survivors who spoke at the hearing, Tamanna comes from a family in which child marriage is typical. One of the underlying reasons for this that she pointed out was the traditional view that women are less valuable than men.

> *My grandmother suffered severe domestic violence at the hands of my grandfather because women were treated as commodities. They were not treated as individuals or equals in their own right. They were treated as if this was a tradition and a custom and they were of a lower gender to males. I imagine that was probably the same for my ancestors, but of course I will never know because it is quite hard to take it that far back. It is a cycle that I did not really want to repeat for myself. I knew that the boy that I was going to marry, who was even younger than me, had very little experience or knowledge or awareness of what he was getting into. He was brought up in a similar way of, 'I'm superior and I'll be dominant and you'll do as you are told'. (Tamanna, oral evidence)*

The Experience of Child Marriage through the Eyes of Survivors

Running through each of these survivor's stories are some common themes that touch on both the causes and consequences of child marriage:

- Survivors of child marriage are disempowered by a lack of knowledge about their rights and a lack of access to sources of help.
- In their experience, child marriage leads to domestic violence and relationship breakdown. This is true for relationships between spouses and between children and their parents, in-laws and extended families and it has lasting consequences.
- Child marriage often takes place through alternative legal systems than run parallel to usual state mechanisms. This may be in terms of religious or customary law, or cases where children are taken to other countries to be married.

No Freedom to Choose: The Causes of Child Marriage

Household poverty and the poor status of women and girls in society are two of the most critical factors driving child marriage.
(DFID, written evidence)

Child marriage, like other forms of violence against women and children, is associated with a range of cultural beliefs and traditional practices. While these are very important, ultimately it is the overarching structural constraints within communities that drive the practice. The evidence to the hearing highlighted two major issues causing child marriage: poverty and gender inequality.

In the previous chapter, the survivors talked about notions of shame, purity and honour driving child marriage in their communities in Britain and France. One clear message from their testimonies is that many of the reasons that parents have for marrying their children before they are 18 are intended to be protective, rather than harmful. Marriage can be an attempt by parents to 'protect' their children from pre- and extra-marital sex. It may also be an attempt to build community cohesion among minority groups whose members feel that they and their children are safer living in tight-knit communities.

In developing countries, as we shall see, child marriage can also be an attempt to remove children from the cycle of poverty, though it usually only perpetuates it. This is not to deny that child marriage is an abuse of the rights of the child, nor to downplay its severe negative

Sixteen-year-old Ziagul sits with her husband Mohammed Wazir, 50, their one-year-old son Rahmad, and Wazir's first wife Hadija, 40 at their home in the Ghorishdi village outside Jalalabad. Ziagul, who is pregnant with her second child, was sold by her family for $10,000. 'I sold everything – my land, animals – to collect the money', said Wazir, whose land is most useful for growing poppy. 'If we could not grow poppy, it would be very difficult to marry.' Photo: Stephanie Sinclair / VII

consequences, however it may be that the positive intentions of parents and communities can be harnessed by external agencies when intervening to protect children from early marriage.

Child marriage violates the human rights of girls by excluding them from decisions regarding the timing of marriage and choice of spouse and marks an abrupt and violent initiation into sexual relations, often with a husband who is a considerably older adult and a relative stranger.
(Equality Now, written evidence)

Gender Inequality

A common thread through the written and oral evidence received in this inquiry is that gender inequality causes, exacerbates and perpetuates child marriage. Child marriage does not, of course, only concern girls, though they are disproportionately affected compared to boys.

Child marriage flourishes in contexts of restrictive gender expectations in which girls are valued primarily for their potential as wives and mothers. To take just one example, girls in rural Gujarat, India, report that their sense of obligation towards their families to secure a good marriage supersedes their personal ambitions for education and employment (Harvard University, written evidence). As the women's rights organisation Equality Now argues, child marriage exists in contexts where females are valued less than males, unable to access justice, barred from education and employment and subject to violence and abuse (Equality Now, written evidence).

Niruta Shreshta Balami, 16, screams out in protest as the wedding procession carries her to her new home with Bishal Shreshta Balami, 15 in Nepal.
Photo: Stephanie Sinclair / VII

Gender Inequality and Child Marriage in Nepal

Just over half of marriages in Nepal take place before the wife is 18 years old, though, like many other places where child marriage takes place, many births and marriages are not officially registered and some parents falsify girls' ages to enable them to marry early. Child marriage is illegal in Nepal, but the law is rarely enforced.

The hearing received written evidence from the government of Nepal's Ministry of Women, Children and Social Welfare, which argued strongly against child marriage and characterised this practice as a form of 'commercial sexual exploitation of children'. In some areas of Nepal, child marriage is often sanctioned with reference to ancient Hindu beliefs and it is believed by some that if a father marries off his daughter early, he will earn a great deal of spiritual credit. It is customary to have a gap of around seven to nine years between a wife and husband here, which reinforces the practice of child marriage.

'Girls are married as early as possible to condition them to a life of domestic activity in support of or obedience to male protectors. In such a system females are under the life-long control of males handed over as dependents from fathers to husbands and to brothers-in-law or sons when widowed.

'Early marriage is one way to ensure that a wife is 'protected' or placed firmly under male control; that she is submissive to her husband and works hard for her in-laws' household; that the children she bears are 'legitimate' and that bonds of affection between couples do not undermine the family unit.' (Nepal Ministry of Women, Children and Social Welfare, written evidence).

(Nepal Ministry of Women, Children and Social Welfare, written evidence; Action Works Nepal, written evidence)

Poverty

Child marriage is often a direct response to poverty, especially for families with many children. Girls may be seen as an economic burden to their parents and marrying them off young as a means of alleviating that burden and achieving social mobility. Evidence from Bangladesh makes the point that, in a context in which girls' chastity is highly valuable, poorer families may find it more difficult to delay their children's marriages for fear that they will receive smaller dowries (MacArthur Foundation, written evidence).

Child marriage can be a direct response to poverty traps, but the relationship between poverty and child marriage is not always straightforward. The hearing learnt that it may not always be the poorest who marry off their girls to get brideprice – this may also be a strategy to accumulate wealth among the middle classes (Dr Elaine Unterhalter, Institute of Education, oral evidence). Another complicating factor is the stigmatising assumption that certain communities are more likely to practice child marriage, which can lead teachers and others who could be in a position to help girls to assume they cannot do anything because they will be going against the customs of a whole community (Dr Elaine Unterhalter, Institute of Education, oral evidence). Government benefits may also have the

unintended consequence of causing child marriage. For example, in Iraqi Kurdistan a government policy of awarding newly married couple $3000 has inadvertently increased pressure on young girls to get married (IKWRO, written evidence).

Mohammed Fazal, 45, with his two wives (L–R) Majabin, 13, and Zalayha, 29, in a village on the outskirts of Mazar Al Sharif. Fazal was offered Majabin as a debt settlement when a fellow farmer could not pay after a night of playing cards. They have been married for six months. Photo: Stephanie Sinclair / VII

The good news is that, just as poverty can drive child marriage, effective actions to alleviate poverty and help poor families invest in their daughters' futures can delay age of marriage. For example, a World Bank report shows that unconditional cash transfers were effective in preventing child marriage among girls in Malawi (DFID, written evidence). Similarly, in Liberia a joint programme between UN Women and ActionAid to improve the economic independence of women survivors of civil conflict has had the added effect of reducing acceptance of child marriage, domestic violence and sexual abuse (UN Women, written evidence).

Access to Education

Worldwide, if girls complete their primary education their likelihood of becoming pregnant while a teenager is cut by a third, while if they complete secondary education it is reduced by half (Rt. Hon. Gordon Brown, *Out of Wedlock, into School: Combating Child Marriage through Education*).

Inadequate and unequal access to education is both a cause and an effect of child marriage in the developing world. It also exemplifies the importance of both gender inequality and poverty in driving girls' and boys' different life chances. It is difficult to say from the data available what the exact direction of causality is between girls dropping out of school and becoming married, but the evidence received demonstrates a clear association between the two. Improving and equalising access to education – though not in itself enough to stop child marriage – is therefore key to combating child marriage and its consequences.

There is clear evidence that more education means less early marriage, fewer teenage pregnancies, and lower levels of risk for mothers and children. (Rt. Hon. Gordon Brown, *Out of Wedlock, into School: Combating Child Marriage through Education*)

Child marriage affects boys as well as girls, but when it comes to access to education, girls are already at a disadvantage. In many developing countries, girls are taken out of school early because their parents cannot afford the fees or because they are seen as being better able to contribute to the household through paid work. They may be discouraged from completing secondary education because of gender norms that dictate that women do not need to be educated as their main role is to be good wives and mothers. Parents may also decide that it is not worth investing in their daughter's education if she is to be married, as that means she will then embark on a lifetime of childrearing and domestic labour and/or move to her husband's family, who will benefit from any advantages her education might bring.

Uzma Ijaz, 4, learns how to write at the school created by Mukhtar Mai, Meerwala, Pakistan, 29th April 2005. Mai, 33, went against the Pakistani tradition of committing suicide when she brought charges against the men who gang raped her nearly three years ago. With money from the ruling she opened two schools, one for girls, the other for boys, citing that education is the only thing that will stop such acts from happening. Photo: Stephanie Sinclair / VII

> *There is a range of opinions and views which people hold in regard to the usefulness of education for girls, but in most countries that we surveyed … it is quite clear that if there is a choice between educating a boy or a girl, often it is viewed that it makes more sense to educate a boy because they will be the main economic support for a family in the future. In other words, the return on a girl's education, if that is considered to be of value, is considered to be of benefit to future generations, her future husband and his family, and not of direct benefit to that girl and her family. Furthermore, we found that the lack of parental support for girls' education may also be due to perceived social costs, if girls experience violence or sexual harassment or abuse whilst travelling to school or indeed, sadly, in school, and that is a significant factor in our experience. (Leigh Daynes, Plan UK, oral evidence)*

NGOs working on child marriage have emphasised that when girls are barred from education, they are at greater risk of being married while still children. However, in the UK this relationship is less straightforward. Many British girls who are forced into marriage will be highly educated because of the universal provision of primary and secondary education in the UK and, as for the survivors who gave evidence to the hearing, there may be large disparities in educational attainment between them and the men they are marrying. One of the first FMPOs issued in the UK was to the family of a 33-year-old trainee GP who had been lured to Bangladesh, where she was bound and beaten in order to make her comply with the marriage ('London Doctor is Held as Forced Marriage Hostage', *The Independent*, 7th December 2008).

The consequences of child marriage on girls' education will be discussed further in the next chapter.

Traditional Beliefs and Cultural Practices Associated with Child Marriage

Structural inequalities that make children and, in particular, girls seem less valuable members of society are given further weight when justified by reference to traditional beliefs and practices. Associating something with tradition can make it seem morally right, inevitable and good for the community, thereby masking the harm it causes.

While child marriage takes place in different contexts and has specific forms in particular places, there are some beliefs and practices which are commonly associated with it. These include notions of honour, in that a family's status is equated with the perceived chastity of its women and which relate to cultural ideals about feminine sexual modesty and the patriarchal control of feminine sexuality, as well as the traditional practices of dowry, brideprice, endogamy and FGM.

Many of these practices are backed up by parallel customary systems that run alongside state and international laws. The survivors of child marriage cited in the previous chapter highlighted that their marriages were facilitated by these parallel systems, which allow this

practice to remain invisible at the level of the law while enjoying acceptability within communities. This invisibility only adds to the powerlessness of the children affected, as they are likely to believe that their marriages are not only desirable to their parents and right in the eyes of their wider community, but also that they are legally binding. As long as child marriage is an invisible issue, there is little incentive for legislators and politicians to enforce the national and international laws that prohibit it.

Leyualem, 14, is transported by mule to her new home on her wedding day in rural Ethiopia. Photo: Stephanie Sinclair / VII

Honour and chastity

Preserving family 'honour' is a frequently cited reason for child marriage. Ideas about honour go hand in hand with a cultural expectation of feminine sexual modesty and taboos around pre-marital and extra-marital sex. In this worldview, marrying off girls while they are very young is seen as a protective measure that will prevent them from becoming involved in 'immoral' behaviour or subject to sexual harassment or abuse (which, sadly, in many places is blamed on the victims rather than the perpetrators). It may also be a means for controlling girls and preventing or punishing rebellious behaviour (Save the Children, written evidence).

Robina and Jasvinder Sanghera

As the panel heard in the survivors' testimony session of the hearing, child and forced marriage is a pressing problem in the UK as well as developing countries. Like Anika, Jasvinder Sanghera, author of *Shame*, managed to escape a forced marriage, but at the cost of being disowned by her family and cast out of her community at the age of 17.

Her older sister Robina was not as fortunate and was married while she was still at school. Because of the pressure to maintain her family's 'honour', Robina stayed in an unhappy and violent marriage until she could take no more. Her suicide was the eventual and tragic escape from a repressive marriage and it led Jasvinder to found the charity Karma Nirvana. Karma Nirvana runs the Honour Network helpline, which has received over 20,000 calls since it started in 2008 and was proactive in setting up Asian women's refuges in Derby, Stoke-on-Trent and Birmingham.

(Karma Nirvana website)

Priest Addisu Abebe, 23, and his new bride, Destaye Amare, 11, as they are married in a traditional Ethiopian Orthodox wedding.
Photo: Stephanie Sinclair / VII

Brideprice and dowry

Brideprice is the practice of the groom or his family giving material goods or paying money to the parents of the bride upon marriage, while dowry is the material wealth that a bride brings with her to a marriage.[8] Brideprice and dowry are practiced in many different parts of the world and they reflect the fact that marriage has historically been more about alliances between families than love matches. However, they are also indicative of the lower status of girls and women around the world.

The dowry that Ouma's husband paid her father so that he could marry her. In total he paid about $45 plus more than 100 Cola nuts. Ouma was only 14 years old. In Niger, where Ouma lives, three out of every four women are married before the age of 18. Photo: Mads Nissen / Panos

Brideprice can provide incentives for a man to look after his wife's welfare. Nonetheless, it is open to abuse and this is particularly apparent in the case of child marriage today. In many places, the costs increase as girls get older (Rt. Hon. Gordon Brown, *Out of Wedlock, into School: Combating Child Marriage through Education*). Furthermore, under Islamic law and in some African communities, brideprice is expected to be repaid upon divorce, leading families to pressurise their daughters to remain in violent and unhappy marriages so that they do not have to repay the money (IKWRO, written evidence; FORWARD, written evidence). There is emerging evidence that girls with disabilities or from minority groups are treated as less valuable and in some places this is reflected in lower brideprice (Jacqui Hunt, Equality Now, oral evidence) and/or them being married off to much older men (Gauri van Gulik, Human Rights Watch, oral evidence).

While these customs have been practiced for millennia in many countries, in some places they are relatively new. For example, in Bangladesh dowry was rarely practiced until 30–40 years ago and was universally condemned by survey respondents because of the economic and social pressures it puts on families (MacArthur Foundation, written evidence).

[8] In much of the literature on child marriage produced by NGOs, 'dowry' is commonly used as an alternative term for brideprice despite this key difference. Although dowry is illegal, it is widely practiced in India, which is home to a third of the world's child brides.

Female genital mutilation

In her oral evidence, child marriage survivor Khady Koita pinpointed the close connection between FGM and child marriage, which is often also linked with brideprice. The Group has focused a lot of attention on FGM in the past (see All-Party Parliamentary Group on Population, Development and Reproductive Health, Parliamentary Hearings on Female Genital Mutilation: Hearings Report), so this harmful traditional practice will not be dwelt upon here, except to note these linkages and to make the point that many of the lessons learnt in tackling FGM may be instructive in working to prevent child marriage both in the UK and abroad.

If the girls are not mutilated the men do not want marriage to those girls. Also in some tribes the girls who have been infibulated, the FGM type 3, cost more than the girls who are not.
(Khady Koita, oral evidence)

Refusing to undergo FGM or delaying marriage is only stigmatised when those practices go unquestioned. Once a community is encouraged to abandon such practices, the stigma is removed, but this can only be achieved with consensus (UN Women, written evidence). Like FGM, the most effective way to prevent child marriage in the long-term is to win hearts and minds at the grassroots level through awareness-raising and dialogue, while ensuring that state authorities are able to protect children affects and hold perpetrators to account.[9]

Women hold a baby girl still as she is circumcised. Her face is bloodied from ritual scarring. Photo: Jacob Silberberg / Panos

[9] Some European countries have recently adopted 'health passports' to try and monitor and prevent girls being taken abroad for FGM and this might be one approach, with appropriate adaptations, to consider in combating the forced marriages of British citizens. However, there has not been any evaluation of this scheme as yet, so it remains to be seen whether it will be an effective tool.

FGM and Child Marriage in Tanzania

Many Tanzanian girls go through FGM around puberty. It is believed that this makes them ready to marry and, ideally, they should marry before the next FGM season or they are seen as bad luck. Furthermore, if girls have not undergone FGM, then traditionally their fathers cannot demand brideprice. Usually, older men can afford brideprice, though many of them practice polygyny and already have other wives. This can lead to some stark outcomes – the panel heard about one example of a 14-year-old Tanzanian girl who was the third wife of a 60-year-old man. At the age of 20, she was widowed with three children to support and no prospect of remarriage.

Foundation for Women's Health Research and Development (FORWARD) have been working with local government and traditional authorities in the Mara region to create an environment in which FGM and child marriage can be challenged and prevented. Previous programmes to tackle FGM have shown that when it comes to such customs, the most effective way to address them is to raise awareness of and challenge the norms that drive them, and these efforts are most effective when traditional leaders are involved.

(FORWARD, written and oral evidence)

Endogamy

Endogamy is the practice of marrying within an extended family, tribe, ethnic or religious group. It is a traditional practice which is aimed at preserving community cohesion, but it can also drive child marriage. When girls are seen as being at risk of 'inappropriate' sexual advances from those outside their own community, this can make their parents feel under pressure to marry them off.

In addition to general patterns of endogamy, specific cultural practices aimed at consolidating relations between families and/or preserving community cohesion can leave girls in the position of being treated as financial assets by their families. For example, many submissions talked about the Pakistani practice of Watta Satta, in which girls are exchanged between families through marriage to strengthen alliances between them. Other written submissions described various exchange marriages, where girls are effectively given as if they were property to their husband's parents, not only to form alliances, but also to settle disputes, strengthen land and property claims, and as compensation for crimes (see the case study on Afghanistan on page 37).

Tsegaya Mekonen, 13, gets ready to meet her groom, Talema Meseret, 23, on their wedding day in Ethiopia. Photo: Stephanie Sinclair / VII

Child Marriage in Contexts of Emergency, Conflict and Crisis

Given that child marriage is driven and perpetuated by poverty and inequality, it is unsurprising that prevalence often increases in contexts of emergency, conflict and crisis. The hearing heard about various examples:

- In Niger and Kenya, food insecurity and consequent poverty combined with the traditional practice of dowry has led many families to marry off their daughters early.
- In Uganda, child marriage peaked during the worst years of the conflict with the Lord's Resistance Army.
- In Sri Lanka, where child marriage is usually less common, rates increased during the civil conflict as families sought to protect their daughter from being recruited by militia.
- Following the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, girls in refugee camps in Indonesia were married off early as their families saw this as the only way to protect them from rape.
  (Philippa Lei, World Vision, oral evidence; Plan UK, *Breaking Vows*)

The fact that natural disasters, conflict and other humanitarian crises can lead to an increase in child marriage is cause for concern in itself, but it is particularly worrying given that, with climate change and an ever-increasing population putting pressure on natural and material resources globally,

it seems likely that such crises – and therefore child marriages – will only become more frequent in future years. Given that 30% of the British government's ODA is allocated to conflict-affected and fragile states, DFID should consider including measures to prevent child marriage and protect girls who are being married off in contexts of emergency, conflict and crisis within their programming.

Habiba Ibrahim Iftin with her three children outside her hut at the Dadaab refugee camp, Kenya. Photo: Sven Torfinn / Panos

A Perfect Storm for Child Marriage: Conflict, Gender Inequality, Poverty and Harmful Traditional Practices in Afghanistan

Sahar Gul is a rare example of a child bride who has found justice in Afghanistan. Forced into marriage at 13 to a man of 30 who paid her family $5000, she became subject to abuse and torture at the hands of her in-laws when she tried to resist consummating her illegal marriage. Sahar was found locked in a cellar by police months after her wedding, severely beaten and neglected. Her case attracted the attention of the media and high-profile politicians and three of her abusers have received 10-year jail sentences for their part in her misery, but her legal victory is an extremely unusual example of the law being enforced.

In Afghanistan, the legal age for marriage is 16 for girls and 18 for boys. While figures for child marriage are difficult to verify given the patchy registration of births and marriages, in 2010, 39% of girls were married before the age of 18 (UNICEF, *State of the World's Children 2012*; some sources report a much higher prevalence – see Human Rights Watch, *We have the Promises of the World*). Human Rights Watch report that 60–80% of marriages in Afghanistan are forced (Human Rights Watch, *We have the Promises of the World*).

'In Afghanistan we have seen with the drought and then the war that there has been quite a marked rise in early marriage basically as a result of poverty and, as prices rise and economic situations become more desperate, this becomes a survival mechanism for families. … We know that sexual violence increases in humanitarian emergencies and conflict situations. We know that child marriage is often very much linked to protecting the honour of a girl child and so marrying a girl off where there is a situation where she is more likely to experience sexual violence will help to protect her honour from having sexual relations outside of marriage.' (Philippa Lei, World Vision, oral evidence).

As well as acute gender inequality, poverty and a context of war and tribal conflict, in Afghanistan forced and child marriages are often driven by traditional practices of marriage exchange and informal dispute resolution, where girls and women are given as brides to prevent the need for a dowry, to pay a debt or as 'compensation' for a crime. They may also take place to 'settle' rape cases, with the survivor being forced to marry the man who has raped her or a girl from the rapist's family being married off to a member of the survivor's family.

The problem of child and forced marriage in Afghanistan is exacerbated by the fact that, if girls and women try to escape unhappy, abusive, coercive and violent marriages, they are seen not as victims of crime, but as perpetrators. This is despite the fact that Afghanistan has ratified both the Convention Eliminating All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and the CRC. Many Afghan girls have been arrested and even imprisoned for the 'moral crimes' of running away from rape and domestic violence. Even those child brides who manage to escape their marriages and are not arrested face acute dangers, as they are likely to be cut off from or rejected by their families and the few shelters for women and girls that exist are entirely dependent on international aid (Gauri van Gulik, Human Rights Watch, oral evidence).

A Childhood Lost: The Consequences of Child Marriage

Millennium Development Goals 4 and 5 are the only ones that are going to fall flat on their face.
(Dr Andres de Francisco, PMNCH, oral evidence)

Child Marriage: A Serious Threat to Achieving the Millennium Development Goals

The consequences of child marriage are wide-ranging and severe, but some of the most worrying evidence received in the hearing relates to the expectation placed on child brides to start reproducing immediately after marriage. Early pregnancies often damage the physical and mental health of the mothers and children, the effects of which ripple out to the children's fathers, siblings and other family members. The expectation that child brides will produce a large number of children also leads to high fertility rates and larger populations, putting added pressure on resources for families who are already struggling against deep poverty, inequality and, in many cases, political instability and fragility. Given that 10 million child marriages take place every year, this is a pressing problem. It is all the more troubling when considered in light of the MDGs.

Asia Ali Al Abuss, 14, just days after giving birth to her second child in Hajjah, Yemen. Photo: Stephanie Sinclair / VII

Child marriage relates very directly to MDGs 2, 3, 4, 5 and 6, but it has an impact on all of them, as well as being driven by the poverty and inequality that are the overarching target of the MDGs. In particular, child marriage is associated with higher risks of maternal morbidity and mortality and with infant mortality and poor child development, which makes it a key barrier to achieving the MDGs.

Millennium Development Goals

1: Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger
2: Achieve universal primary education
3: Promote gender equality and empower women
4: Reduce child mortality
5: Improve maternal health
6: Combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases
7: Environmental sustainability
8: Global partnership

Physical and Sexual Violence

Police woman Malalai Kakar arrests Janan, 35, after he tried to kill his 15-year-old wife Jamila (which means beautiful in Arabic). Jamila angered him by fleeing her home to stay with her mother after enduring years of abuse from her husband and mother-in-law. Janan came to the mother's house to kill Jamila for leaving their home, and ended up stabbing Jamilia's grandmother multiple times as well when she tried to cover Jamlia with her body to protect her. Jamila was engaged when she was only a one-year-old and was married at 10. Photo: Stephanie Sinclair / VII

Survivors of child marriage who gave oral evidence at the hearing described their families using physical violence and coercion in order to make them submit to their forced marriages. Much of the evidence received also described girls being subjected to physical violence from their husbands and in-laws after marriage. Routine violence may be used in order to ensure the submission of a girl to the demands of her husband and his family and to the domestic duties incumbent upon her in her role as a wife and mother.

Child Marriage Kills: The Case of Elham Mahdi al Assi

The worst consequences of child marriage are illustrated by the horrific case of Elham Mahdi al Assi, a 13-year-old girl in Yemen who was married to a man in his 20s in 2010. She died three days after her wedding from severe bleeding caused by tearing to her vagina and rectum as a result of her husband raping her.

(Gauri van Gulik, Human Rights Watch, oral evidence)

A young prostitute named China sits stunned after being beaten up by a man visiting Kabele Five, Ethiopia. Many of the girls running away from child marriages end up trafficked to brothels where they face incredible violence.
Photo: Stephanie Sinclair / VII

Yemen is one of the few countries in the world with no legal minimum age for marriage, and child marriage is driven by poverty and the practice of brideprice (Embassy of Yemen, oral evidence). The hearing heard that Yemen is experiencing a drive towards greater protection of girls' and women's rights. As well as ratifying the CEDAW convention and the CRC, there is a National Strategy for Childhood and Youth, which specifically addresses early pregnancy and is aimed at preventing the risks to sexual and reproductive health caused by child marriage through greater awareness about the health risks of early pregnancy and improved access to secondary education for girls (Dr Qais Ghanem and Lisa Khalid, Embassy of Yemen, oral evidence).

In 2010, a Bill was brought before Parliament in Yemen to try to institute a minimum age for marriage. The White Ribbon Alliance's national partners were instrumental in gathering a petition with one million citizens' signatures in support of the Bill, but conservative elements in the government managed to block it (Maeve Shearlaw, White Ribbon Alliance, oral evidence).

As the horrific case of Elham Mahdi al Assi shows, once married, children are typically expected to commence sexual relations with the aim of starting a family. So, not only are children, and especially girls, being coerced and forced into marriage against their human rights, they are then subject to rape, abuse and in many cases, domestic violence. This would be bad enough if they were adults, but since they are minors, child marriage is undoubtedly a form of child abuse.

Family Planning and Maternal Health

The facts are stark:

- Maternal mortality rates for girls aged 15–19 are twice as high as for women in their 20s. (White Ribbon Alliance, written evidence)
- For those under 15 years old, the risk of dying in childbirth is five times higher than for women in their 20s. (White Ribbon Alliance, written evidence)
- For every case of a mother dying in childbirth, 30 more will have a lifelong morbidity. (RCOG, written evidence)

Girls who are married are often ignorant of contraception because they have not received sex education in school and talking about sex is taboo. Even if they do understand modern family planning and have access to services and supplies, many will be barred from using them by their husbands and in-laws, who want them to 'prove' their fertility early on by bearing children soon after marriage (RCOG, written evidence). In cultures where sex outside of marriage is highly stigmatised, parents may see marriage as a protective strategy, including a means to prevent the transmission of HIV/AIDS as well as pregnancy outside of wedlock, yet marrying girls off early can actually expose them to greater risks of sexually transmitted infection including HIV/AIDS, maternal morbidities, unsafe abortion and death.

Academic research has shown that, rather than protecting girls from HIV and other STIs, marrying them off young can in fact expose them to greater risk. This is partly due to the fact that, in many places, girls are married off to older men who have had previous partners including in some cases other wives, so have been exposed to greater risk of infection themselves. One study in Kenya and Zambia found that 'early marriage increases coital frequency, decreases condom use, and virtually eliminates girls' ability to abstain from sex' and that 'husbands of married girls are about three times more likely to be HIV-positive than are boyfriends of single girls'.[10]

[10] See: Shelley Clark (2004), 'Early Marriage and HIV Risks in Sub-Saharan Africa', *Studies in Family Planning* 35(3): 149–160

Every year, 16 million adolescent (aged 15–19) girls give birth worldwide, 95% of which are in developing countries (RCM, written evidence). We cannot know exactly how many of these pregnancies occur within marriage, but the evidence suggests it is the majority. Up to a quarter of adolescent pregnancies are thought to be unintended, as the mothers are not in a position to consent to their conception, and they are associated with poor outcomes including miscarriage, stillbirth and premature birth (RCOG, written evidence). Preventing child marriage would protect girls' rights and reduce their risk of violence, sexual abuse, early pregnancy, HIV infection, and maternal deaths and disabilities, including obstetric fistula (UNFPA, written evidence). Enabling girls to choose to delay pregnancy and to have fewer children would not only help protect them from the risk of maternal morbidity and mortality, but also relieve pressure on families' resources and lead to slower population growth.

[The poor outcomes of teenage pregnancy] really span every single nightmare of an obstetrician or a midwife's career. Teenage pregnancies carry a much higher risk of miscarriage, of stillbirth, of premature delivery, of babies with low birth weight and other morbidities, including very severe anaemia, postpartum haemorrhage, obstetric fistula, and another unpublicised fact, a very much higher incidence of mental health disorders, which people find very difficult to quantitate and in many societies are a taboo subject. (Professor Lesley Regan, RCOG, oral evidence)

We know that in the developing world there is an association between high levels of child marriage and high teenage pregnancy rates (RCM, written evidence). We also know that there are high levels of risk associated with maternity in the developing world (see All-Party

Debitu, 14, escaped from her husband after months of abuse. Seven months pregnant, she is now homeless and uncertain of her future. Photo: Stephanie Sinclair / VII

Parliamentary Group on Population, Development and Reproductive Health, *Better Off Dead?*), due to a lack of access to adequate reproductive healthcare and skilled birth attendants as well as high incidences of STIs including HIV/AIDS, and the situation is worst for child brides. Many of the complications that occur in pregnancy and which lead to poor outcomes for mother and child are more prevalent among younger mothers, including preeclampsia, parasitaemia, postpartum haemorrhage and obstetric fistula (RCM, written evidence). As Khady Koita put it in her own testimony, girls' bodies are simply not ready to bear children.

Agere Admassu, 32, breastfeeds her twin newborns, Testa and Mihret. Agere was married at age 12 to her husband who later slept with other women and gave her AIDS. The twins have tested HIV positive, and since her husband left, she does not have the money to buy them uninfected milk. Photo: Stephanie Sinclair / VII

Teenage Pregnancy in Malawi

In Malawi, at least half of girls are married before they are 18 years old, compared to only 7% of boys. 10% of girls and 1% of boys are married before they are 15 years old. Traditional practices including brideprice and marrying girls off to widowers to 'replace' their deceased wives are common and even if girls try to run away from these marriages, their relatives will go after them and force them to marry.

Malawian girls aged 15–19 are four times more likely to be infected with HIV than their male counterparts, while married female aged 15–24 have a fourfold risk of HIV infection compared to their unmarried peers.

Malawi has one of the world's worst maternal mortality rates, at 807 deaths per 100,000 live births. 35% of pregnancies occur in teenagers. Girls who start bearing children young and have many pregnancies are at the greatest risk. Teenage girls in rural areas have a 53% likelihood of having access to skilled birth attendants, compared to 84% of their peers in urban areas. Abortion is illegal in Malawi, so figures are difficult to verify, but the evidence available suggests that incidence is particularly high among adolescents. This not only suggests a high level of unintended pregnancy and unmet need for contraception, but because of its illegality, abortion is likely to be self-induced and unsafe.

(National Youth Council of Malawi, written evidence)

Rural women are operated on for uterine prolapse. Reports show the prevalence of uterine prolapse is significantly higher among women who married at younger ages (less than or equal to 16 years), independent of education, socioeconomic status and parity. Photo: Stephanie Sinclair / VII

If they survive their first pregnancy, child brides are typically under pressure to start a long career of childbearing. Frequent pregnancies and births take their toll on women's overall health and contribute to population growth. In addition, after they become pregnant and have a child it is even more difficult for survivors of child marriage to extricate themselves. This is particularly true in developing countries but it also the case in the UK. Girls who are taken overseas for the purposes of forced marriage often report that they are only allowed to return home after they become pregnant. While in this country we do not tend to associate teenage pregnancy with girls who are married, it is vital that midwives and other health professionals are trained to identify girls who have been forced into marriage and to provide them with appropriate assistance when they access maternal health services.

A young mother with her children in Tanzania.
Photo: Chiara Ceolin / CDF / FORWARD

Specific Recommendations: Addressing the Sexual, Reproductive and Maternal Health Needs of Child Brides and their Families

- **Governments should enforce existing laws and/or implement new ones to address harmful traditional practices associated with child marriage** like female genital mutilation in line with international conventions protecting the rights of women and children and the prevention of violence against women.
- **Medical staff including skilled birth attendants should receive training in the management of adolescent girls,** their particular reproductive health needs and the specific risks of early pregnancy and childbirth.
- **Girls and boys should have access to education and training in family planning and healthy relationships** that is accurate and culturally sensitive.
- **Access to confidential sexual and reproductive health advice including family planning methods needs to be improved and increased for girls and women,** especially in areas of high need, such as rural locations.
- **Requirements for parental and spousal consent for access to sexual and reproductive healthcare, including family planning, should be lifted** to improve access to services for all adolescents.
- **Medical professionals should take a life-course approach to women's health** that treats their needs as continuous and interlinked, so that healthcare can be better integrated, holistic and preventative as well as reactive.

Child Development and Wellbeing

Each child marriage affects two generations of children: the spouses and the children they bear. Children of child brides are 60% more likely to die before they turn one year old, compared to the children of mothers aged over 19 (UNFPA, *State of World Population 2005*). Pregnancy in younger mothers is associated with higher levels of foetal loss, which includes miscarriage, induced abortion and stillbirth, with premature birth and with low birth-weight babies (RCM, written evidence). The one million children whose mothers die in childbirth each year are 10 times more likely to die prematurely (UN Department of Public Information, *MDGs at a Glance*).

Worldwide, teenage mothers are prone to risky behaviours that have long-term effects on the children they bear. Undernourishment has been pinpointed as the leading cause of ill health in infants and is often associated with suboptimal breastfeeding practices. Many children of teen mothers are undernourished and suffer from wasting and stunting, the damage from which is irreversible. Child mothers are also known to receive poorer care throughout pregnancy and birth and into the postnatal period (RCOG, written evidence). While the hearing did not receive detailed specific evidence on this, the Group is also concerned about the fact that many child and forced marriages take place between close relatives such as cousins and that this may therefore increase the risk of passing on genetic defects through the generations.

Mental Health, Stigma and Social Isolation

The survivors' stories on pages 18–23 illustrated some of the mental anguish and damage to personal relationships associated with child marriage. It is hardly surprising that being married without their consent and subject to coerced sex and childbearing leads to mental health issues for child brides. It is difficult to find clear data that demonstrate the specific incidence of mental health disorders among child brides. Nonetheless, many of the submissions to the hearing highlighted risks to mental health caused by child marriage, and in particular the damaging effects of the curtailment of freedom and social isolation that is characteristic of girls' lives after marriage.

In Ethiopia, a survey of married girls under 18 found that over 40% were 'unhappy' in their marriage and nearly 20% 'very unhappy'. One girl, Bizuye, who was married at the age of 12, said, 'I felt afraid when I found out I would be married, because I was going to a place which I didn't know, to live with people I didn't know. I felt very frustrated and afraid.' (ChildHope UK and Organization for Child Development and Transformation (CHADET), written evidence)

Often, girls will move to their husbands' homes after marriage and may become absorbed within that household and cut off from their own families and friends. They will frequently have a low status within their marital households and may be subject to pressure to be subservient from their parents-in-law as well as their husbands. All of these are significant risk factors for mental health issues. Some of the poor physical

A young burn patient named Zahara (no last name) sits with gauze over her face to keep the flies off. Zahara never admitted to setting herself on fire, but doctors and nurses suspect she might have done due to the placement of her burns. Women who self-immolate are often scared to admit it for fear that they will receive less care from the doctors and nurses. Photo: Stephanie Sinclair / VII

health outcomes associated with child marriage and early pregnancy are themselves risk factors for poor mental health, such as obstetric fistulas, which if untreated can leave sufferers isolated and ostracised by their husbands, families and communities.

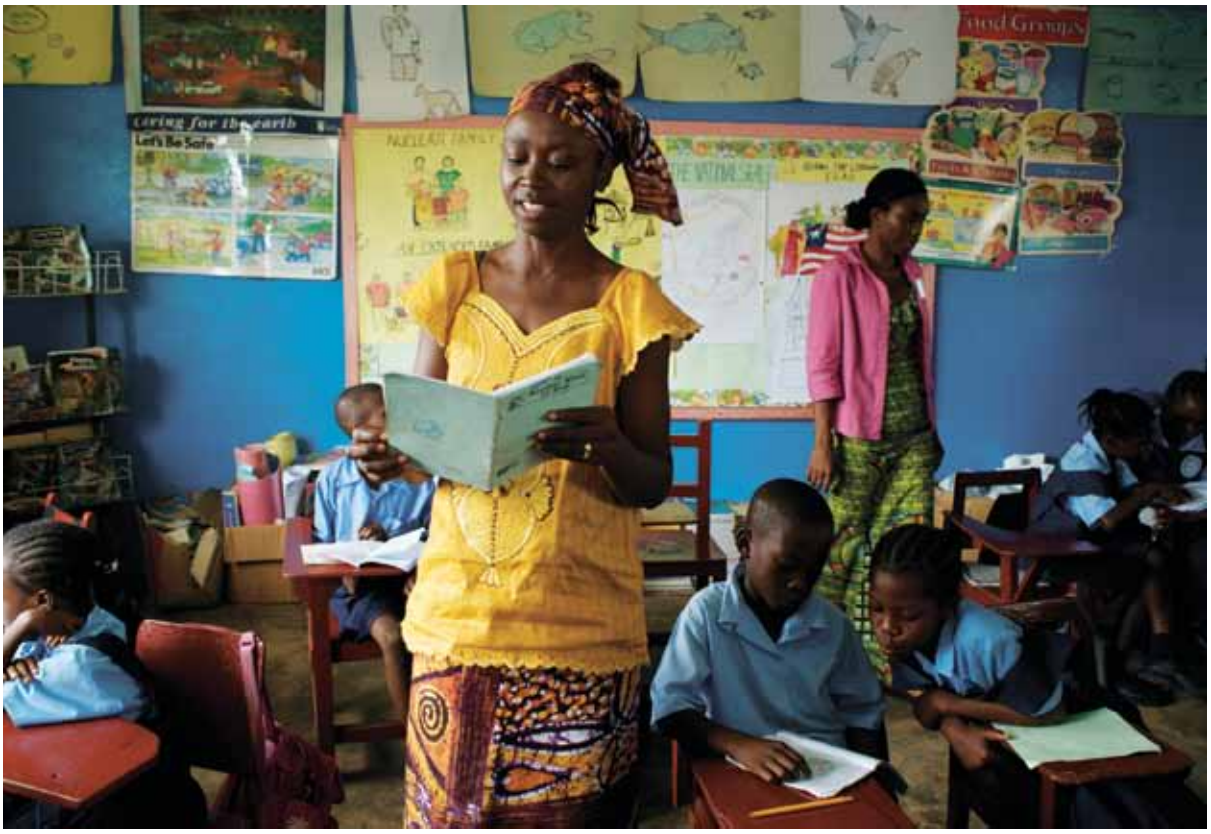
Education and Livelihoods

Reduced access to education is both a cause and a consequence of child marriage and this is particularly true for girls, who face curtailed access to education and employment in most developing countries. UNICEFs research shows that being enrolled in secondary education means that girls are six times less likely to marry early (Leigh Daynes, Plan UK, oral evidence).

In Nigeria, child marriage has a 39% prevalence rate. Just 2% of married girls are in school, compared to 69% of their unmarried peers (Leigh Daynes, Plan UK, oral evidence). In southern Nigeria, the panel heard that there is greater implementation of the child marriage laws and

greater levels of school attendance among girls than in the northern states of the country, where the policy on child marriage has not been implemented and girls are more likely to be married and out of school: 'Where there were better educated teachers in the schools, girls were much more articulate and talking out about the problems they were facing be it early marriage or risk of pregnancy. In the states in which there was very, very minimal teacher education, both male and female, girls just said we have no problems whereas we knew they had massive problems. So there is a need for education at all levels both to enable people to be articulate and claim rights and also to know about the health and other kinds of issues involved.' (Dr Elaine Unterhalter, Institute of Education, oral evidence).

We know that education provides a critical path away from early and forced marriage.
(Leigh Daynes, Plan UK, oral evidence)



Teacher Satta Gbelee in her class in Monrovia. Photo: Aubrey Wade / Panos

Sadly, schools are not always safe havens for children. Many girls face abuse, harassment and violence in school or travelling between home and school. In these cases, the costs of educating girls may seem even heavier for parents who are already concerned about sexual harassment of their daughters. In their oral evidence, Plan UK recommended that girls need not only greater access to education, but for the provision to be better equipped for their needs, such as greater numbers of female teachers, teaching materials that have gender equality at their centre and relevant and sensitive life-skills training.

If education for girls is not only made compulsory but free, then girls are less likely to seem a financial burden on their parents and

therefore marrying them off becomes less attractive. Education is also important in helping girls to articulate their needs, gain information about their rights and realise their potential. Although it is not a panacea for child marriage, with the right conditions and support, education can bring girls access to greater employment opportunities and financial independence, leading to economic empowerment and increased social mobility for them and their families.

Girls' Education in Armenia

A case study from the Global Campaign for Education demonstrates that, even when there is some provision for education, cultural expectations, gender norms and poverty can conspire to make staying in school seem unfeasible.

Poverty and child labour are significant reasons for girls to be out of school, but the pressure on girls to marry early, combined with the practice of forcing girls to leave school after marriage, is a huge source of discrimination against girls in education. When girls come from ethnic minorities, this can reinforce other discrimination against them. Among Yezidi and Kurds [sic] communities, for example, there is strong pressure for girls to enter early and forced marriages. Traditional and religious stereotypes demand that girls are married off between the ages of 13–16. Girls aged 18 and older are ostracized and considered 'old maids or spinsters', 'aged' or 'immoral', which creates immense pressure for girls to leave school and start families. (UN Women, written evidence)

Specific Recommendations: Formal Education

Children must have access to safe, quality, child-centred primary and secondary education regardless of their gender and governments should make this provision a key priority in order to equip the next generation to make their own decisions and take charge of their destinies, including being empowered to say no to forced marriage and coerced sex.

- **Governments should be encouraged and supported to provide compulsory and universal primary and secondary education so that girls' education is not seen as optional.** Where it is not possible to provide universal free education, schools should be supported by the state and other relevant agencies to offer scholarships, subsidies and/or financial incentives for the most disadvantaged girls, so that their education does not add a strain to their family's resources.
- **Women should be enabled to train as teachers and to take up positions on committees and governing bodies in schools** with an aim towards equal gender representation in school administration and teaching.
- **Teachers and other professionals working with children should receive training in gender equality, with particular reference to local issues including child marriage and other harmful traditional practices.** This should include awareness of the 'double burden' for people with disabilities and gay and lesbian young people who are forced into marriage.
- **Practical measures should be taken to make school a safe and nurturing environment for girls and boys,** including separate and adequate sanitation facilities, strong penalties for harassment and abuse, anti-bullying measures, and policies to include students in decision-making processes.
- **Children in school need information about sexual health and family planning,** so they are enabled to prevent and space pregnancies.
- **Child protection policies and codes of conduct need to be adequately implemented and enforced within the school environment,** and where they do not already exist, they need to be formulated.

Specific Recommendations: Legal and Human Rights

Most nations already have some form of national or constitutional legal protection against child marriage in place – these laws need to be taken seriously and violation of them should not go unpunished.

- **Women and girls escaping forced marriages need life-saving refuges** and support services.
- **Governments should be encouraged to improve legislation around property entitlement and inheritance** so that women are treated equally to men and are protected in the case of divorce or widowhood.
- **Women need to be better protected in the case of divorce or annulment.** They should have equal access to divorce to men and have their rights to custody of their children respected and protected.

Legal and Human Rights

Child marriage violates children's and women's legal and human rights. It curtails personal freedoms including the rights to healthcare, education, employment, as well as to travel and to associate freely. Child marriage usually leads to coerced sexual intercourse, childbearing and early parenthood. By commonsense standards, children are not ready for the duties and responsibilities of marriage, and this is reflected in many legal systems. As well as already being an abuse of power, child marriage is associated with domestic and sexual abuse.

The evidence presented to the hearing stated over and again that countries do, in fact, have legislation in place to combat and prevent child marriage, yet it is not adequately enforced; this includes both national legislation and international conventions.

Typically, child brides are also in a vulnerable position in the event of the marriage breaking up or their husband's death. In many places, wives lack access to divorce and even if they can get divorced, can expect to lose custody of their children and to have no financial compensation or property rights. The younger the bride is, the weaker her position and the more likely it is that she will be unable to exercise her rights. If child brides are widowed, which is a particular concern given that it is usual practice in many places for girls to be married to considerably older men, they will typically find themselves in a very difficult position. Many end up destitute, outcast and ostracised, as in many developing countries women do not have property and inheritance rights and are dependent on others for their entire lives.

The hearing received only limited evidence about what happens to child brides when they are widowed or if they are outcast, so it seems that these are areas which would benefit from more research. However, one case from Tanzania speaks eloquently of the dire situations in which child widows may find themselves:

> *I was forced into marriage at the age of 13 to a man whom my family had failed to repay a debt to. I became a widow at the age of 16. However, my married life was not very bad. I had two children and my husband died. I was supposed to be inherited but my grandmother advised me not to be inherited. My brother-in-law chased me away from the matrimonial house as it was within the clan compound and belonged to him… life became profoundly horrible through lack of food. They grabbed all my properties and as my grandmother was very poor, I agreed to be inherited but one of my brother-in-laws. However, life has been terrible, because the man is busy with his wife and his children. His support is inadequate. I have no education, which could help me to look for some jobs. My grandmother, who is now very old, is also supporting me in taking care of my children. However, sometimes I have to work in the Nyamongo mines in order to get some money to help my children. Actually, I conceived one of my sons there, when I was working in the mine. But according to Kurya custom, he belongs to my dead husband. (Magoke-Mhoja, M. E. (2006), 'Child-widows silenced and unheard: Human rights sufferers in Tanzania' Tanzania: Children Dignity Forum, p.94–95)*

Divorce and Child Marriage in India

Child marriage is currently a hot topic in India, where the prevalence is extremely high in some of the poorest and more rural areas and is 47% on average. Causes include gender inequality, poverty and the practice of dowry. The specific demographics of India, which has 243 million adolescents, make the tendency towards high levels of child marriage here a particular concern. Not only does the country have a large and growing population, but there is also currently a bulge in the adolescent population (Pathfinder International, oral evidence).

The Delhi high court has recently declared that the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act supersedes and overrides all personal laws regarding child marriage, as well as clarifying that sex between a couple when the wife is under 15 is by definition rape (*Times of India*, 'Child Marriage Law to Override All Others: HC', 29th July 2012). As early as 1929, India passed legislation to combat child marriage, based on concerns about it leading to a booming population given the extension to reproductive years that it usually represents. Despite these signs that Indian policymakers are concerned about child marriage, the panel heard that a lack of enforcement and individuals' ignorance of the consequences of child marriage and the rights of children have made these laws ineffectual.

In India, as elsewhere, the existing laws mean that child marriages should be easily annulled, yet in reality divorce is difficult to access and often has dire consequences for girls:

First, it is very difficult for [women] to get remarried. Second marriage of women is still not very common, which is not the same case for the man.

Secondly, the girl not being economically independent, not equipped with education and life skills hence her economic dependence on him continues but when she is being divorced in that case she faces financial crisis, no shelter; she has no place to go. The only alternative for her is to go to her natural family where she is not welcome. She has no social status as a divorcee or as a deserted woman. If there is no acceptance by her own family, there is no question that society will respect her.

Overall, I would say she will have a very vulnerable, poor life and maybe it would force her to go into sex work. It is a very bad situation for young girls. (Dr Jaya Sagade, ILS Law College, oral evidence)

Combating Child Marriage

Why Should We Invest in Combating Child Marriage?

Yemen: Nujood Ali, 12, two years after divorce from her husband, who was more than twenty years her senior. Photo: Stephanie Sinclair / VII

Child marriage has costs for the girls and boys who are married, their children, their families and their communities as cycles of poverty and inequality are perpetuated. One of the major effects of child marriage is early pregnancy. In addition to improving the individual lives of a huge number of children worldwide, reducing the rates of child marriage offers huge benefits for governments and communities through preventing the costs associated with unintended and early pregnancy.

Across the world, there is a huge unmet need for adequate obstetrical care for those women who are already pregnant and for family planning services and supplies for women who want to prevent, delay and/or space pregnancies. Fulfilling the unmet need for family planning worldwide would prevent around 50 million unintended births per year, resulting in a net saving of $1.5 billion (Guttmacher Institute, *Adding it Up*).

This is particularly pertinent in relation to child marriage, which often entails riskier early pregnancies and large families.

If child marriage were reduced and prevented, the benefits for all would be substantial:

- The MDGs would be more likely to be met.
- The violent and sexual abuse of children, and domestic violence, would be reduced.
- The spread of HIV and other STIs would be reduced.
- Unintended pregnancies would be prevented, consequently numbers of abortions – including in particular unsafe, illegal abortions – would be reduced.
- Fewer women and children would die of preventable complications in childbirth.
- Mothers and children would be healthier and medical services would be freed up to deal with other pressing health issues.
- More children would receive at least a basic level of education, and more would be likely to progress to higher levels.
- Women would be better able to access employment and economic empowerment.
- Women would be able to participate more fully and equally in society.
- The human rights of millions of children would be observed and respected.

Currently, funding for programmes to delay marriage has come from the international development sector. For example, the recent scale-up of the Berhane Hewan programme outlined on page 56 has been taken on by DFID in conjunction with the Nike Foundation with the aim of eradicating child marriage within one generation in the Amhara region of Ethiopia (DFID, written evidence). For these programmes to become embedded within communities, they would benefit from the financial and political support of government funding, but this can only happen if community leaders and parliamentarians are convinced of the need for such interventions.

What Works in Preventing Child Marriage?

This section will outline three established programmes that have had some success in combating child marriage. Despite the different cultural and geographical contexts of each intervention, they all show the importance of engaging local communities, including traditional leaders and adolescents themselves, in devising and delivering these programmes and the value of providing information, knowledge and skills so that individuals and communities can be empowered in the long-term. Although short-term incentives may help individuals to escape child marriage, ultimately whole communities and generations can only benefit if there is real change in attitudes and behaviour based on a true understanding of the costs of child marriage and the benefits of valuing girls' education, health and autonomy.

Goats and girls: Berhane Hewan, Ethiopia

Child marriage is not always practiced throughout a country and there are often differences in prevalence within nations. The Amhara region in northwestern Ethiopia is the country's child marriage hotspot:

- 14% of girls are married by the age of 10 and nearly half of them are married by 15.
- The main driver of child marriage is poverty, especially for families with large numbers of children. (Dr Annabel Erulkar, Population Council, oral evidence)
- 83% of married girls have never been to school and most of them cited their marital status, rather than cost, as the reason for this. (CHADET, written evidence)
- Over 40% described their marriages as 'unhappy', while nearly 20% said they were 'very unhappy' in a baseline survey of married girls in 2012. (CHADET, written evidence)

Education is a big part of the solution to child marriage but it is not the fundamental solution because it does not actually address perceptions that communities have about the value of girls; it does not address perceptions and beliefs communities have about the role of child marriage in protecting children but also in furthering livelihoods, so what we would support is a much broader child protection system strengthening approach to addressing child marriage which looks at who are the actors around a child that serve to keep them safe and how can we work with those actors to build their capacity, their knowledge and their behaviours in order to address child protection issues of which child marriage is one.

(Philippa Lei, World Vision, oral evidence)

Berhane Hewan ('Light for Eve') was piloted by the Population Council with the support of the Ethiopian Ministry of Women, Children and Youth Affairs. It had two objectives: to delay the age of marriage among young girls at risk of early marriage and to support girls who had already been married as children. It was intended to address the drivers of child marriage holistically, through a package of interventions including providing a goat, which is a valuable economic resource in the area, to poor families if they keep their daughters in school an extra two years, donating supplies to equip schools and conducting 'community conversations'.

Following the two-year pilot, girls aged 10–14 years old were 10% less likely to be married and two times more likely to be in school (Dr Annabel Erulkar, Population Council, oral evidence). These successes have been attributed to the engagement with local community leaders including local representatives of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, who are best placed to drive such interventions, as they have governing power but are also from the affected communities and share their traditions. It is hoped that the impact of Berhane Hewan will be generational. The Berhane Hewan model is being expanded across East Africa, including in Uganda, Kenya and Tanzania.

Berhane Hewan seems to have been effective for two main reasons. Firstly, it addresses the specific structural drivers of child marriage, trying to get to the root cause by removing the excuse of financial burden

A young Maasai woman holding a small goat in a kraal.
Photo: Sven Torfinn / Panos

from parents of girls by replacing the short-term advantages of marrying her off with economic capital in the form of a goat. Secondly, it included the people affected in the programme in designing and implementing it, so that the intervention could respond effectively to the specific context of Amhara. However, a weakness of the pilot programme is that it is difficult to disentangle which of the elements of the intervention package were most effective in delaying age of marriage.

The girls who took part in this programme were identified through antenatal care facilities. The Partnership for Maternal, Newborn and Child Health (PMNCH) recommends that, since child brides are often socially isolated, such services can be a useful entry point to other sources of care, including information about delaying pregnancy and opportunities to take part in community programmes designed to mitigate the negative impacts of child marriage (see PMNCH, *Knowledge Summary 22: Reaching Child Brides*).

Let's talk about sex: PRACHAR, India

Child marriage is common in India and higher rates tend to occur in the poorer and rural states. For example, in Bihar 64% of women are married before their 18th birthday. Typically, pregnancies occur early and frequently. This not only leads to poor outcomes for mothers and children, but also contributes to population momentum in a rapidly growing nation.

PRACHAR, an intervention devised and implemented by Pathfinder International, is in its tenth year and is now being taken on by

the Indian government. Its main aim is to delay first birth and space the second. It consists of a three-day training programme in reproductive health education for unmarried adolescent girls and boys. The training emphasises the economic and health advantages of later pregnancy and promotes the idea of couples getting to know each other and building healthy relationships before they start having children.

A health education class for women where the nurses taking the class use picture boards to teach sexual and pre-natal health and sex education to the women attending, many of whom are illiterate. Photo: Mads Nissen / Berlingske / Panos

PRACHAR teaches communication strategies for negotiating a later marriage and/or sexual debut and includes workshops on sexual harassment, women's autonomy and sexual equality, promoting equal participation by girls and boys in their relationships and decisions as individuals and family members. Sex education is patchy in India and talking about sex is taboo more generally, so there is much ignorance among young people about sex and family planning. However, Pathfinder suggest that the programme has benefited from a receptiveness to these messages and a general willingness to change traditional behaviour among people in India.

- PRACHAR has had the effect of delaying age at marriage, by 2.6 years in girls and 2.8 years in boys.
- The programme has also been effective in delaying first births on average by 2 years.
- After controlling for education, girls in the PRACHAR intervention group were found to be five times more likely to use contraception than those who had not gone through the training.

Pathfinder are in the process of rolling out the programme across more states in India. The intention is to institute rolling generational change, as it empowers young people to understand the advantages of delaying marriage and pregnancy, to have access to the means to negotiate that and to pass on those benefits to their peers and subsequent generations. By engaging directly with young people, Pathfinder can target their programme effectively and in a way that is sensitive to the local context, as well as being able to equip young people to be ambassadors of the programme, so that they can feedback directly to policymakers (Pathfinder International, oral and written evidence).

The journey to empowerment: Kishori Abhijan, Bangladesh

Kishori Abhijan ('Adolescent's Journey') is an adolescent empowerment network group. In Bangladesh, where adolescents make up 22% of the population, around half of girls are married by the age of 15 and 60% are mothers before their 19th birthday. Around half of adolescent girls are under-nourished and anaemic. They are at risk of child marriage as most are poorly educated, ignorant of family planning and reproductive health and vulnerable to 'honour'-based violence, dowry pressures, kidnapping, sexual harassment and rape (UNICEF, written evidence).

Somo Lota works with her sewing machine. She has a small tailoring business in the village of Tala, Bangladesh. Photo: G.M.B. Akash / Panos

Kishori Abhijan has targeted 600,000 girls and boys and involves local and national NGOs in providing life-skills and vocational training in their homes and wider communities. Through this training, girls gain confidence and skills to participate more fully in public life, taking part in community decisions and gaining individual autonomy.

The life-skills training includes messages about the health benefits of delaying marriage and childbearing and information about family planning. In most cases, girls and boys will receive this training together, in order to facilitate better dialogue and understanding between the genders. The vocational training includes specific skills such as garment production and photography to enable unmarried girls to become employable and even start their own businesses, thereby escaping early marriage and becoming role models for their peers and younger girls (Ara Yoo, UNICEF, oral evidence; PMNCH, written evidence).

What are the Limitations and Challenges Faced by Agencies Working to Prevent Child Marriage and Protect Survivors?

In working to combat child marriage, agencies face a number of challenges:

- Access to those at risk of child marriage may be difficult because they rarely travel beyond the family environment. This risk is worsened if they do not attend school.
- Children at risk of child marriage or who have already been married may be frightened to report their situation and specifically to go against their parents and/or spouse and in-laws. Often, girls will be accompanied and closely monitored by family members, so do not have a chance to engage with any outsiders who might be able to help. This risk is worsened if they do not attend school.
- Efforts to delay marriage will often come up against community resistance, especially in poor or marginal communities that may feel most threatened by outside interventions and that have most to lose in giving up traditional practices.
- A key challenge faced by agencies working on child marriage is how best to support those already in these marriages. This is a sensitive issue, which requires a good deal of structural reform. If girls wish to end their marriages, they are likely to find it difficult to access legal services to secure a divorce or annulment and may then lose custody of their children and financial support upon divorce, as well as being limited in their options to support themselves given their lack of education and employment opportunities. If they choose to stay within the marriage, it may be difficult to access services that cater for their complex needs and which are non-stigmatising.
- Infrastructure may be lacking in the areas worst affected by child marriage, so even when people have been made aware of the risks and have chosen to try and delay marriage and pregnancy, they may not be able to access the means to facilitate those decisions. This particularly applies to access to contraceptive services and supplies.
- Many individuals and organisations are ignorant of existing laws that, if implemented, would actually provide adequate protection for those at risk of child marriage.
- Until recently, child marriage has been an invisible problem, often facilitated by parallel legal systems and community silence and

there has been a lack of overt political will to implement protections for those affected.

- Many of the successful interventions to delay marriage have been small-scale in their scope so far, so it remains to be seen whether their successes will translate into larger-scale interventions.
- Well-intentioned attempts to be culturally sensitive or to avoid issues that appear sensitive may lead to inaction on the part of those charged with responsibility for child protection and who might be able directly to help children at risk of being forced to marry including teachers, social workers and other family members.

Civil society organisations (CSOs), governments and donors can all work together to limit these challenges. In designing and implementing interventions, these factors will need to be planned and accounted for. While evidence was submitted about a number of interventions that claimed to be aimed at supporting survivors of child marriage as well as preventing early marriages, little was heard about what was actually being done to help those manage, or even leave, the marriages they had been forced into. While prevention is important, agencies working to tackle child and forced marriage also need to have ideas about how they can help those affected, especially since they can provide insights which can inform programmatic interventions.

Specific Recommendations: Programme Interventions to Combat Child Marriage

- **Local leaders need to be engaged in interventions to prevent child marriage, in order for programmes to be both inclusive and effective.** As well as being sensitive to the local context, programmers need to ensure that they are familiar with the challenges, and the solutions to those challenges, that have come out of pilot schemes when scaling programmes up and rolling them out into new areas.
- **CSOs and NGOs could champion 'positive deviant' cases to demonstrate that it is possible to resist child marriage and challenge norms.** They could also provide vocational training and employment to improve knowledge about rights, democracy and health among adolescents and their families to effect positive generational change.
- **Organisations should share good practice and encourage the exchange of information on what works** in preventing child marriage and supporting survivors across sectors, regions and organisations.
- **Programmes should be instituted that not only focus on preventing child marriage, but which provide alternative opportunities and safe spaces for girls and women** to develop vocational skills and foster financial independence for the future.
- **NGOs and CSOs can lead the way in advocating for and implementing improved data collection and evaluation** to ensure that we have an accurate picture of the prevalence and practice of child marriage and what kinds of programmatic interventions work to delay marriage and support survivors.

Recommendations to Combat Child Marriage in the UK and the Developing World: Prevention, Protection and Provision

Young girls sit inside a home outside of Al Hudaydah, Yemen.
Photo: Stephanie Sinclair / VII

During the parliamentary hearing on child marriage, Meg Munn MP asked one of the survivors of child marriage how she would make things different if she were granted three wishes. Tamanna's succinct reply was, 'prevention, protection and provision'.

The UK has shown significant leadership in tackling forced marriage among children and adults in this country, through the work of the Forced Marriage Unit, which is a joint initiative between the Home Office and Foreign and Commonwealth Office, and the introduction of specific legislation and statutory guidance. Although there are steps that the government needs to take to strengthen its response, the UK does have a wealth of experience and knowledge which can be shared with other countries. At the same time, the British government has been a leader in addressing gender inequality in developing countries, and DFID's gender strategy prioritises reducing violence against women and girls, improving access to family planning and maternal health services and increasing girls' access to education and employment. Preventing child marriage is vital to achieving these goals.

The British government can continue to lead the way in preventing and combating child marriage by enforcing existing legislation to protect those at risk of child and forced marriage. This must be done in a joined-up way so that families are not able to get away with taking their daughters out of the country to be married off and coerced into marriage and early pregnancy.

With the Prime Minister co-chairing the UN committee charged with setting the post-2015 development goals, there is a clear opportunity to galvanise political and economic will to prevent child marriage at the international level. Furthermore, at the recent London Summit on Family Planning, many speakers discussed the barriers to improving sexual and reproductive health represented by child marriage, including the Malawian vice-president, Khumbo Kachali who called for 'no parenthood before adulthood'.

Recognising child marriage as the theme of the first International Day of the Girl on 11th October 2012, UN Secretary General Ban Ki Moon called on governments, community and religious leaders, civil society, the private sector and families to 'let girls be girls, not brides'. This demonstrates an increasing awareness of the consequences of child marriage and a willingness to combat it within the international community. DFID and others should harness this will to ensure that funding and programmatic interventions to tackle child marriage are at the heart of their efforts to protect women and children.

Supporting initiatives that prevent child marriage and early pregnancy is one of the best approaches that DFID and other partners can take in providing effective and beneficial aid to developing countries. The Group is most concerned about the effect that child marriage has in relation to sexual and reproductive health, family planning, maternal health and population growth. Donors and governments need to increase investment in sexual and reproductive health and support improved access to family planning to enable people to make their own choices to prevent unintended pregnancies and to delay and space pregnancies, thus preventing the injury, trauma and death of millions of women and children.

The Group has a number of recommendations, based on the need for prevention, protection and provision for those married as children and those at risk of early and forced marriage.

Recommendations: The UK

In order to address child marriage within this country, the UK government should:

- **Increase the minimum legal age for marriage to 18 across the UK,** in order to clarify and strengthen the UK's position on child protection nationally and internationally and to bring the law in line with international conventions.
- **Legislate for the compulsory registration of religious marriages** and hold faith leaders who conduct unregistered marriages, particularly those including children, accountable before the law.
- **Train teachers, health and social workers and other professionals** in the causes and consequences of forced marriage so that they are able to safeguard children and adults.
- **Ensure that consent in marriage and sexual relations is included in the compulsory curriculum for PSHE** and that young people are equipped with the knowledge, supplies and services to make their own choices around their sexual and reproductive health.
- **Ensure that all statutory agencies are fulfilling their legal duties under existing statutory guidance on forced marriage.** In particular, they need to increase awareness of forced marriage and improve provision for those affected. As well as preventing child and forced marriages, the British government should provide housing and support for survivors, taking into account their complex needs for security, emotional support and life-skills training.

Recommendations: Global

In order to address child marriage, all governments, with the support and collaboration of donors, academics, multilateral agencies, NGOs and CSOs, need to:

- **Enforce international conventions** regarding the rights of the child, the prevention of violence against women and girls, including harmful traditional practices like female genital mutilation, and the minimum age for marriage and put in place measures to enable people to access relevant legal mechanisms.
- **Improve, implement and reform laws on divorce, inheritance and property ownership to give women equal rights** and to ensure that they are not left destitute after divorce or widowhood and are supported to have custody of their children where appropriate.
- **Improve access to confidential sexual and reproductive healthcare services and information,** so that all girls and women, whatever their age or marital status, can access family planning services and information, safe abortion and maternal care. Girls and boys should also have access to accurate and culturally sensitive education and training in family planning and healthy relationships.
- **Medical staff including skilled birth attendants should receive training in the management of adolescent girls,** their particular reproductive health needs and the specific risks of early pregnancy and childbirth.
- **Improve registration of births and marriages** so that child marriages can be identified and the law enforced and to protect future generations.
- **Scale up high quality primary and secondary education** that is in a safe setting, where girls can learn without fear of discrimination or abuse, and ensure that women and girls have the same opportunities for education, training and employment as men and boys.

Recommendations: Global (continued)

- **Invest in programmes to make communities aware of the risks of child marriage and to effect attitudinal and behavioural change.** Local leaders should be engaged as far as possible to make programmes both inclusive and effective.
- **Invest in rolling out and scaling up programmes to prevent child marriage and support those at risk or already affected.** When designing and scaling up interventions, programmers need to evaluate and take account of the challenges faced by pilot programmes. Additionally, they should recognise that child marriage is not only a women's or girls' issue and interventions must take account of all those affected by child marriage, including boys and men.
- **Fund research on the scale of child marriage and its consequences, with data disaggregated by age and sex** so that the problem can be better understood and addressed, as well as evaluations of programmes addressing child marriage.
- **Fund shelters for women and girls affected by child marriage,** as well as long term programmes to enable women and girls to be economically independent.

What UK parliamentarians can do to effect these recommendations:

- **Push for improvements within the UK including the implementation – and monitoring – of statutory guidance on forced marriage,** training for professionals, inclusion of consent in marriage and sexual relations in the PSHE curriculum, compulsory registration of all religious marriages and an increase in the minimum legal age for marriage to 18.
- **Encourage DFID to conduct research into the prevalence and practice of child marriage, to evaluate existing interventions so that UK aid is spent effectively and to scale up programmes to prevent child marriage and support survivors.** DFID should also work to meet the need for family planning, and sexual, reproductive and maternal healthcare of girls and women of all ages and whatever their marital status.
- **Urge DFID and other donors to allocate 10% of Official Development Assistance (ODA) to population and reproductive health,** as recommended at the International Parliamentarians' conferences at Ottawa in 2002, Strasbourg in 2004, Bangkok in 2006, Addis Ababa in 2009 and Istanbul in 2012.
- **Work with parliamentary colleagues in other countries, particularly in the developing world, to galvanise political will** and to share best practice in tackling child marriage through programmes, services and legislative reform and implementation.
- **Improve and increase cooperation across Whitehall.** Child marriage is an issue that crosses geographical borders and has wide-ranging effects. Although the FMU has led the way in tackling forced marriage in the UK, the Group was concerned that there is a lack of communication between governmental departments on this issue. With greater collaboration across Whitehall, officials could share their expertise and experience in combating child marriage and supporting those affected.

While there are many practical measures that can be taken to prevent the forced marriages of children, ultimately if the cultural and structural factors that drive child marriage are relieved and removed, the practice will be eliminated. Therefore, it is recommended that the larger goals of preventing poverty and tackling gender inequality run through everything governments, donors and CSOs do.

It is time to bring child marriage out of the shadows. Not only do we all bear a responsibility to protect children wherever we can, but combating child marriage and preventing early pregnancy is a key strategy in supporting developing countries to break cycles of poverty and inequality and to empower future generations.

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Appendix 1:

List of organisations submitting written evidence to the hearing

Academic institutions:
Harvard University
University of East Anglia

Trusts and foundations:
MacArthur Foundation

Government departments and ministries:
Department for International Development (UK)
Ministry of Women, Children and Social Welfare, Government of Nepal

UN and multilateral institutions:
Asian Development Bank
Commonwealth Secretariat
Partnership for Maternal, Newborn and Child Health
Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights
UNESCO
UNFPA
UNICEF
UN Women
World Bank

Independant group:
The Elders

NGOs:
ACCM (UK)
ActionAid
Action Works Nepal
ChildHope & CHADET
Equality Now
FORWARD
Girls Not Brides
Human Rights Watch
Iranian and Kurdish Women's Rights Organisation
Interact Worldwide
International Planned Parenthood Federation
Pathfinder International
Plan UK
Population Matters
Save the Children
White Ribbon Alliance
Women and Children First (UK)
World Vision

Professional bodies:
Royal College of Midwives (UK)
Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists (UK)

Appendix 2:

List of experts who gave oral evidence to the hearing

Leigh Daynes, Plan UK
Dr Annabel Erulkar, Population Council
Jane Ferguson, World Health Organisation
Dr Andres de Francisco, Partnership for Maternal, Newborn and Child Health
Gauri van Gulik, Human Rights Watch
Jane Hobson and Caroline Wood, Department for International Development
Jacqui Hunt, Equality Now
Lisa Khalid and Dr Qais Ghanem, Embassy of Yemen
Khady Koita and two anonymous survivors of child marriage
Philippa Lei, World Vision
Dr Rema Nanda, Pathfinder International
Professor Lesley Regan, RCOG
Dr Jaya Sagade, ILS Law College, India
Maeve Shearlaw, White Ribbon Alliance (standing in for Theresa Shaver)
Dr Elaine Unterhalter, Institute of Education, University of London
Ara Yoo, UNICEF

Appendix 3:

Further information about organisations working on child and forced marriage in the UK

ACCM (UK), <http://www.accmuk.com/>
Ann Craft Trust – works specifically on sexual abuse of people with learning difficulties including forced marriage, <http://www.anncrafttrust.org/>
Enabling Education Network (EENET), <http://www.eenet.org.uk/>
Forced Marriage Unit, <http://www.fco.gov.uk/en/travel-and-living-abroad/when-things-go-wrong/forced-marriage/>
FORWARD (Foundation for Women's Health Research and Development) – focuses on African women in UK, Europe and Africa, <http://www.forwarduk.org.uk/>
Girls Not Brides – a global partnership for those working on child marriage founded by The Elders, <http://girlsnotbrides.org/>
Iranian and Kurdish Women's Rights Organisation (IKWRO), <http://ikwro.org.uk/>
JAN Trust, <http://jantrust.org/>
Karma Nirvana, <http://www.karmanirvana.org.uk/>

Meena Acharya, 15, remembers her experience of being a child bride in her room inside the shelter run by the Child Workers in Nepal Concerned Centre (CWIN), which has helped her since she ran away from her husband a year ago.

The UK All-Party Parliamentary Group on Population, Development and Reproductive Health

The APPG on Population, Development and Reproductive Health has over 70 members, from both the House of Commons and the House of Lords, representing the UK's main political parties. It was one of the first APPGs to be established and has been operating since 1979.

The Group aims to raise awareness on population, development and reproductive health issues, providing a forum for facilitating negotiations between key stakeholders and parliamentarians and encouraging initiatives that increase access to and improve reproductive and sexual health programmes worldwide.