

Thesis

Voices of Child Marriage Survivors: Understanding the experiences of child marriage
through the first voice perspectives

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Abstract

This qualitative thesis explored and interpreted the experiences of child marriage survivors through their first voice perspectives (former child brides) and examined the exit strategies that they used to escape their unions. The study examined five video data recordings published on the YouTube platform in the form of recorded testimonies voiced and narrated by child marriage survivors. Video recordings were transcribed verbatim, and an inductive approach was used for coding and organizing themes that emerged from the data. Simone de Beauvoir's feminist theory, plus a child's right-based approach, along with other feminists' perspectives, were utilized as the theoretical framework to interpret the findings.

The findings indicated that child marriage is a gendered problem that undermines the rights of girls and has detrimental outcomes on the young bride's health. Four themes emerged: The coercion of parents and these women's lack of agency in decisions to marry; experiences of interrupted education, childhoods and health consequences; and society's failure in preventing their marriages, or in supporting them while in the union. The analysis also found that – apart from acquiring an education and police involvement - there were no common elements, or a direct path, in the ways in which the child brides escaped. The routes used varied according to the severity of their experiences and the influences of the environment in which they lived. Listening to the voices of former, current and potential child brides was deemed to be central in the movement against the practice of child marriage and in their protection.

Dedication

With humble efforts, I dedicate this thesis:

To the child marriage survivors, it must have been really tough for you, and I am so glad you chose to share your experiences with us.

"You are not the darkness you endured. You are the light that refused to surrender."

— John Mark Green.

To the current and potential child brides, I hope this thesis and the survivor quote encourages you as you go through your struggles.

"Always remember you are braver than you believe, stronger than you seem, smarter than you think and twice as beautiful as you had ever imagined." — Rumi.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

More than 650 million women, as well as over 150 million men who are alive today, (17% of all women worldwide) were married before the age of 18. Over one-third of that population of women (about 250 million) entered their unions before the age of 15 (United Nations Children's Fund, 2021). Every year, 12 million girls are forced into marriage before reaching the age of 18, which is 41,000 girls every day, or 28 girls every minute—meaning one in every five girls is married or in their unions as children (Jones, 2017). Therefore, child marriage is a serious social problem, one that is prevalent and that affects millions of children worldwide.

There is a misconception that child marriage is a practice from the past or is mainly associated with long-held beliefs and cultural practices in developing countries. It is, however, attested to impact children of all cultures, religions, classes, and countries (See Appendix A). According to the United Nations Children's Fund (2021), child marriage is a widespread violation of children's rights and a gendered problem that is deeply rooted in gender inequality. Furthermore, out of all children who were married before the age of 18, eighty-two percent (82%) were girls. The United Nations Children's Fund (2021) defines child marriage or early marriage as any marital union where one individual is under 18 years of age. According to global literature, the practice was reported to affect both girls and boys who enter marriage before reaching the age of 18, but it was revealed to be more common among young girls (Siddiqi & Greene, 2022; United Nations Children's Fund, 2021; Bunting, 2005).

Siddiqi & Greene's (2022) research showed that child marriage is a complex global issue affecting children's quality of life and robbing them of the right to a suitable childhood. Psychologists define *childhood* as one of the growth milestones in human development, the period from birth to early adulthood when the child is not yet an adult (Corsaro, 2014). Plus, the child's experiences in the childhood stage influences his/her cognitive, social, psychosexual, and behavioural development; therefore, it is crucial for a child to have a good childhood since it allows them to learn, grow, and change. More to the point, Article 6 in the Convention on the Rights of the Child (Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989) advocates that it is a child's right to have a chance to grow up in the best way possible. This child rights treaty aims to ensure all children under the age of 18 have a suitable childhood, a chance to play, access to continuous education, and the right to a life that is free from any form of exploitation and violence (United Nations Children's Fund, 2021).

Furthermore, the Office of the High Commission for Human Rights (OHCHR, 2021) acknowledged that child marriage violates practically all human rights. It recognized that young brides are victims, and that child marriage deprives them of autonomy and choice over their bodies as well as their lives when in the union. The child brides are often forced to drop out of school, are exposed to domestic violence (such as sexual, physical, and emotional abuse) and are pushed to begin to experience a premature transition to adulthood for which their minds and body are not ready, e.g., motherhood (Siddiqi & Greene, 2022). Chalasani et al. (2021) also indicated that through child marriage, the child bride obtains the status of an adult, regardless of her age and physical and mental development. This imposed status of adult bounds the young bride to the schedules, activities, and responsibilities of a grown woman, which overly endangers her physical and emotional development.

In addition, Article 16 in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which deals with the Right to Marry, and Found a Family (Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948) sets forth equal rights to marry for both men and women of full age and that the marriage shall be entered into only with the free and full consent of the intending spouses. In accordance with this, 55 parties to the 1962 Convention on Consent to Marriage (Hevener, 2019), as well as the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations Children's Fund, 2021) both set forth the age of 18 years as the minimum for marriage, by statutory law to overrule traditional, religious, and tribal laws and practices. Plus, the declaration acknowledges that child marriages and forced marriages are human rights violations that have harmful effects on young people all over the world (United Nations Children's Fund, 2021). Despite these international agreements, which have been put in place to guard against the reality of child marriage, this practice still affects millions of children worldwide.

Even though there has been progress in reducing child marriage in the last ten years, Save the Children (2022) reported that if the pre-covid trends continue, 150 million more girls globally are still at risk of being married by 2030. In addition, with the recent global pandemic of Covid-19, the report indicated that an additional 2.5 million girls are prone to child marriage by 2025. The covid-19 pandemic has led to a dramatic social disruption and loss of life worldwide. The pandemic's economic impact has threatened the lives of many girls in poor communities. With the likelihood of the loss of a parent due to Covid, school closures, and restricted access to supportive programs and services, the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) projected that there will be an additional 13 million girls at risk of being married before the age of 18 by 2025 (The Human Rights-based approach, 2021). For that reason, finding ways to end the practice of child marriage and to support married girls has become a research priority. Hence, this thesis.

Significance of the Study

Child marriage is a global problem that continues to occur in many nations regardless of cultures, religions, and ethnicities (Girls Not Brides, 2021). As previously stated, Child marriage has been found to violate numerous rights of children, particularly girls, and directly threatens their health, both psychological and physical well-being (Save the Children, 2022). The practice has been exposed to have severe and damaging long-term effects on young girls' lives since they are married while still in their formative stage of both physical/psychological development (Chalasani et al., 2021).

Several literature reviews and research analyses showed that child marriage stops a girl's childhood, interrupts her education, and exposes her to marital rapes, early pregnancy, and domestic violence (Mahato, 2016; Chalasani et al., 2021; Girls Not Brides, 2021; Siddiqi & Greene, 2022). Therefore, due to its wide-reaching and damaging consequences on young girls' health, child marriage has become a research priority, especially with regard to its causes, consequences, ways to support married girls, and strategies in place towards ending the practice (United Nations Children's Fund, 2021). Thus, the research interest of this study and its significance.

In response to these consequences, Plan International Canada (2021) reported that there are a universal attempt and efforts toward ending the practice of child marriage worldwide. Accordingly, it is important to note that many international organizations, feminist perspectives, and activists have vowed to intervene and put an end to the practice; however, the voices of child marriage survivors have been largely absent from the discussions/conversation of the practical and construed experiences. Hence this study's purpose centred on the survivor's perspective of their experiences in the union as child brides, as well as their attempts at escaping the marriages.

Furthermore, Siddiqi & Greene (2022) disclosed that the collective understanding of the practice is frequently studied from the lenses of various non-profit organizations such as UNICEF, Girls Not Brides, Unchained at Last, Plan International, Save the Children, and other scholarly literature. As a result, this thesis is committed to learning about and better understanding the experiences of child marriage through the lenses and voices of former child brides and to attempting to determine the successful exit strategies that have been used to escape their child marriage. In this regard, listening to the voices of survivors of child marriage also entails respecting, empowering, and preserving the survivor's autonomy in how they narrate their experiences. For that reason, it is only through giving the survivors of child marriage the space to tell their stories that we can learn about their lived experiences, authentically and not make them revisit their trauma.

In addition, there is no better way to empower current and potential child brides than to include the survivors' voices and their experiences in the discussions of child marriage. Therefore, by providing a place and including the survivors' perspectives in the discourse regarding their experiences and exit strategies used to escape holds promise to freedom for the current and potential child brides. This study targeted and prioritized the individual reflection of former child brides on the escape route used to leave their child marriage and captured their perspectives on the practice during and after the union.

More to the point, it is expected from the review of literature that I have completed that this thesis will facilitate calling attention to the widespread issue of child marriage and the concepts that sustain the practice. Wahi et al. (2019) indicated that there is limited research and literature that explored the means and paths child brides use(d) to get out of the marriage into which they entered, while still a child. Therefore, the findings of this study will contribute to research data and address the gaps in the existing literature on the potential exit strategies of child marriage.

Similarly, this study advocated for a survivors-centred perspective and participation in discourses regarding the prevention of child marriage and protection/support of child brides. As mentioned previously, there is power in telling and hearing stories/ testimonies or first-hand experiences from the former child brides themselves. It has been shown to foster post-traumatic growth for the survivors (Bryngeirsdottir & Halldorsdottir, 2022). This study also ensures that their experiences are well-conveyed to the public. Additionally, these experiences shared by former child brides need to be heard, in order to change public attitudes towards the practice of child marriage and inspire social activism and change.

Thus, the purposes of this study go beyond attempting to better understand the experiences of child marriage through the lenses and voices of child marriage survivors and determine the exit strategies used to get out of their child marriage. This study attempts to better disseminate their stories and to better support the healing of these women.

Research Questions

In order to better understand the situation of child brides, this study attempted to answer the following questions:

- How do child marriage survivors describe their experiences as child brides?
- What are the exit strategies that these former child brides have utilized to escape their child marriages or unions?

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The Definition of Child Marriage

Different entities have described marriage differently based on culture, religion, the law, and personal factors. However, a commonly acknowledged characterization of marriage is a formal, social, and legal contractual commitment between two consenting individuals, who decide to unite their lives emotionally, legally, financially, and sexually (Psaki et al., 2021; Wolfe, 2021). Nevertheless, when one individual is under 18 years of age, the marriage becomes a child marriage or early marriage (United Nations Children's Fund, 2021). The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child also describes a child as any person below the age of 18, whose rights are to be recognized and protected altogether regardless of race, sex, gender, religion, or culture (Wolfe, 2021).

According to global literature, child marriage is generally understood as a practice that involves a legal and informal union (e.g., common-law unions) between two individuals where either one or both partners are under the age of 18 (Ahmed, 2015; O'Quinn, 2021; United Nations Children's Fund, 2021). It is also regarded as a form of forced marriage, where either one party (the child in the union) or both parties have not given complete, informed, and free consent to the union, or where the child is too young to make a rational choice (Human Rights Watch 2022). So, at its core, child marriage has been deemed a violation of a child's rights, an aberration of childhood and not suitable for a person under 18 years of age (United Nations Children's Fund, 2021).

The Prevalence of Girl Child Marriage

Human Rights Watch (2022) reported that Child marriage is prevalent in over 40 nations, with a rate of 30% or higher of all marriages worldwide (See Appendix A for the detailed graph). Today, there is ample evidence exposing child marriage as a gender-based problem affecting children, especially girls under the age of 18 (Siddiqi & Greene, 2022 Plesons et al., 2021). Siddiqi & Greene's (2022) research revealed that child marriage disproportionately affects girls, who are most often the ones who are married as children, rather than young boys. In Niger, for example, 77% of women aged 20 to 49 were married before the age of 18, compared to 5% of men in the same age range (Human Rights Watch, 2022).

As previously stated, the child marriage practice has been shown to affect more than 650 million women alive today (17% of all women worldwide), which is the percentage who marry before the age of 18. Over one-third of this population (about 250 million) entered a union before age 15 (United Nations Children's Fund, 2021). Following the latest global number of child brides, The United Nations Children's Fund has estimated that at least 12 million girls every year are married before the age of 18, which translates to 28 girls every minute. One in every five girls is legally married or in union before age 18 (United Nations Children's Fund, 2021).

Siddiqi & Greene's (2022) study declares that young brides are often married to men who are considerably older than them. Consequently, the gender aspect (affecting girls mainly) in child marriage is evident, even in nations where the practice is less common. In the Republic of Moldova, for example, 15% of women aged 20 to 49 were married before the age of 18, whereas only 2% of men were married before the age of 18 (Human Rights Watch, 2022).

The Consequences of Child Marriage

Plesons et al. (2021) described the practice of child marriage as one of the most critical and pressing concerns in the context of child protection since it continues to occur worldwide in this twenty-first century. Feminist activists have shown through NGOs that child marriage violates numerous child rights and directly threatens a child's life, growth, and wellbeing (Save the Children, 2022). Moreover, while child brides and grooms were both compelled to begin their adult lives with numerous obligations, they do not experience the same risks, particularly in terms of health. The consequences differ due to their social and biological differences. Early pregnancy, poor health, a lack of, or interrupted, education, domestic and sexual violence, and social isolation are common consequences of child marriage (Siddiqi & Greene, 2022; Parsons et al., 2015). However, all these conditions mentioned above are often found to be more severe for the young brides and expose them to various vulnerabilities, including preventing the possibility of growing into healthy and independent adults (Save the Children, 2022).

According to the study by Ahinkorah et al. (2021), child marriage has been shown to disrupt girls' individuality by placing them under the authority of their spouses, with no say over their sexual health, family planning, or education, thus resulting in a life of economic and domestic submissiveness. Furthermore, depriving these girls of their childhood and the opportunity to mature, make certain choices and reach their full potential through education, they are systematically disempowered and prone to exploitation (Save The Children, 2022).

Moreover, the child marriage practice has been demonstrated to trap young brides in a cycle of dependency, rob them of agency and expose them to additional vulnerabilities involving sexual exploitation and diseases (Sezgin & Punamäki, 2020). The consequences of

child marriage have been found to be highly unfavourable to girls in terms of their health. Plesons et al.'s (2021) research stated that child brides frequently could not negotiate safer sex, leaving them exposed to sexually transmitted infections such as HIV and early pregnancy. The pressure to become pregnant from in-laws after marriage was revealed to be tremendous and child brides often end up with many children to care for while they are still children themselves (Plesons et al., 2021). For instance, more than a third of women aged 20 to 24 in Nepal, who married before their 15th birthday, were found to have had three or more children, compared to 1% of women who were married as adults (United Nations Children's Fund, 2021).

Sezgin & Punamäki's (2020) study also revealed that complications from childbirth and pregnancy are severe for young girls who are neither mentally prepared nor physically developed to bear a child, therefore, putting both the mother and their newborn at risk. The Human Rights Watch (2022) reported that a child born to a girl under age 18 has a 60% higher probability of dying in the first year of life than a child born to a woman over the age of 19.

Correspondingly, the United Nations Children's Fund (2021) reported that girls between the ages 15 and 19 are twice as likely to die during childbirth than those in their 20s; and girls under the age of 15 are five times as likely to die along with their newborns. Accordingly, the maternal death and child mortality rates of young brides during childbirth are twenty-five times for girls under the age of fifteen and two times higher for children between fifteen and nineteen years old. (International Women's Health Coalition, 2020).

Furthermore, child brides are often expected to assume the role of the mature wife, take care of a full-grown husband, and raise a family instead of going to school and playing with their friends, as the rights of a child stipulate (Wolfe, 2021). Siddiqi & Greene's (2022)

findings revealed that a girl's education is frequently discontinued when she enters a child marriage. The young brides are typically forced to take on household and wives' responsibilities, which take priority over getting, or finishing, their education. As a result, child brides are deprived not only of their childhood but also of adulthood-meaning by discontinuing the girl's education, her choices and opportunities are restricted, not just while they are children but throughout their lives.

Additionally, the study by Bartels et al. (2021) indicated that child brides are frequently socially isolated and cut off from family, friends, and other forms of support. They have fewer opportunities to financially support themselves and their children, given the limited educational and work opportunities. Consequently, the price of this exclusion is typically the cycle of poverty (Girls Not Brides, 2021), meaning even after leaving their child marriage or union, both child brides as well as their offspring are often prone to poverty (Parsons et al., 2015).

Research data from several studies suggests that married girls between the ages of 15 and 19 who have a lower level of education are far more vulnerable to domestic and sexual violence from their spouses than older and more educated women (Ahinkorah et al., 2021; Wolfe, 2021; Parsons et al., 2015). Sezgin & Punamäki's (2020) research also supports this research finding; it indicated that the spousal age difference and power imbalance common in child marriages are the significant risk aspects for domestic violence and sexual abuse toward child brides. This is on top of the fact that sexual intercourse in these child marriages is neither based upon the bride's desire, nor their consent, but forced upon them. These sexual relations are strictly regarded as child rapes or bridal rapes and typically recognized as domestic sexual violence (Human Rights Watch, 2022).

Moreover, the research by Ahinkorah et al. (2021) stated that non-consensual sex can have detrimental, or even fatal, health effects, since the child brides are still at their formative stage of physical and psychological development. For example, Ilham Mahdi Al-Assi, a Yemeni 12-year-old girl, made international headlines in 2010 after she died three days after marrying a much older man. Excessive bleeding and ripping in her vaginal and anal areas were the cause of her death. Elham's mother told the Associated Press that her daughter complained that her husband had restrained and raped her. Elham's mother had informed her that it was her responsibility as a wife to consummate the marriage and that failing to do so would bring shame to her family (Human Rights Watch report, 2011).

The Causes of Child Marriage

Child marriage is often misconceived as a practice from the past, mostly linked to long-held beliefs and cultural practices in developing countries (Siddiqi & Greene, 2022). However, it has been attested to impact children of all cultures, religions, classes, and countries (See Appendix A). The causes of this practice have been found to be complex and varied; but most are firmly rooted in gender inequalities, insecurities, and poverty (Siddiqi & Greene, 2022; Bartels et al., 2021)

Siddiqi & Greene's (2022) study demonstrated that, in communities with higher cases of child brides, there is a societal belief that sons are more valuable to their families than girls, a belief which is – in itself - deeply rooted in gender inequalities. In such cases, the girls are constantly seen as a burden to their families or are exchanged in a financial transaction to relieve their economic struggles through bride price, bridewealth, or dowry (Siddiqi & Greene, 2022). For instance, in contexts where a groom or groom's family offered the bride's family assets in exchange for marriage (referred to as a bride price or bridewealth), a child

bride was preferred. The younger the bride was, the more money her family received (Psaki et al., 2021).

Furthermore, in circumstances where the bride's family has paid assets to the groom's family (referred to as dowry), the dowry amount has varied according to the girl's virginity and level of education (Psaki et al., 2021). Therefore, young brides with limited or no education have required a lower dowry and were preferred, thus suggesting that they were still virgins and perfect for spousal control (Psaki et al., 2021). Furthermore, research by Hart (2016) and Girls Not Brides (2022), has demonstrated that parents who fear their daughter's sexuality tend to find them male suitors and marry off their daughters at a younger age, in the hopes of guarding their sexuality, preserving their virginity, and protecting the family honour

Other conditions such as emergencies, insecurities, community violence and wars have been found to compel parents to marry off their daughters while the latter were young (Human Rights Watch, 2022). Similarly, Girls Not Brides (2021) have reported that nine out of ten countries with the highest cases of child brides are deemed fragile states with economic and political instability. Some of the parents interviewed by Girls Not Brides (2021) reported that they believed that child marriage was the only possible solution to securing family resources and keeping their children, especially daughters, safe from violence and sexual abuse.

In 2020, for example, A mother in a refugee camp in Afghanistan shared with Girls Not Brides her belief that child marriage was the only guarantee that her daughters would not be sexually abused or worse. The mother had three daughters, and the oldest was 13 years old and was married in the refugee camp to a man twice her age. The mother explained that any family without a male authority or male head in the camp was a target for abuse, including sexual violence. She further reported that marrying off her 13-year-old protected them by

providing them with a male as the head of the family. Unfortunately, one might even claim that the gender inequality piece in this case of the mother in the refugee camp dominated the other condition of insecurity—meaning the mother was pressed to marry off her daughter young to gain a male authority in the family and avoid being the target of abuse.

Agency in Child Marriage

The United Nations Children's Fund (2021) highlighted that child marriage strips a girl of her agency when in the union—meaning the girl has neither a voice to make decisions about her life, nor the ability to act on those decisions without fear of retaliation or violence. Child brides are typically younger than their spouses, undereducated, and generally poor (since they are still minors and financially dependent on their spouses). Therefore, they tend to experience overlapping vulnerabilities, including the amount of money and assets they bring into their marriage, thus limiting their decision-making ability (Wahi et al., 2019).

Furthermore, the practice of child marriage places the young bride under the control of her spouse and in-laws, severely limiting her ability to voice her opinions on matters that concern her, or to pursue her plans and desires (Wolfe, 2021). Exclusion from participation and decision-making regarding issues in one's own life and those addressing a household, family, or community is directly linked to the lack of voice and agency (Human Rights Watch, 2022). Yet again, this is deeply rooted in gender inequality and violates many rights of a child, in particular Article 12 of the UN Convention on the rights of the child (Wolfe, 2021).

International Efforts to Prevent and Eradicate Child Marriages

A study by Plesons et al. (2021) indicated that the efforts and strategies that are in place to address and eradicate the harmful practice of child marriage in many parts of the world date back to the 1920s. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, another piece of legislation, also sets out rules that signatory countries should follow, and the Office of the Secretary-General's Envoy on Youth announced a new initiative in 2016—aimed to advance the efforts and eradicate child marriage by 2030 (Office of the Secretary-General's Envoy on Youth, 2016). The Initiative by the Office of the Secretary-General focused on proven strategies, such as continuing to increase girls' access to education and health care services; empowering women and advancing gender equality; educating parents, elders, and communities about the dangers of child marriage; expanding economic support for families and strengthening and upholding the law that establishes 18 as the minimum age for marriage in communities where child marriage is found common (Office of the Secretary-General's Envoy on Youth, 2016).

In the same way, several human rights activists and other international communities have investigated the causes and consequences of child marriage in detail, and many have highlighted promising interventions and approaches to prevent the practice, access to education for girls and poverty being the essential factors (Chalasani et al., 2021; Psaki et al., 2021).

Efforts and Strategies to Escape a Child Marriage

Research by Wahi et al. (2021) disclosed how divorce is a near-impossibility for a child bride. For adults, there is already so much involved in getting divorced or separated from one's spouse; however, in the case of a child bride, her options are limited to none. She is often financially dependent on her spouse, making it more difficult to leave the child marriage. Psaki et al.'s (2021) research also exposed that separation and divorce are almost impossible when the bride is still a child, since the law in most countries stipulates that a child is usually not old enough to rent an apartment, have a credit card, access a shelter, or afford a lawyer.

Furthermore, young brides have often been considered runaways, when they have chosen to escape their child marriage. Unchained at Last (2021, April 3) reported that in the United States, for example, under state law, minors who leave their homes to escape an abusive spouse, or an anticipated child marriage, are considered runaways. The local Police may detain these young girls and return them to their homes against their will; in some jurisdictions, minors who run away can even be tried for a status offence.

Lastly, there is a gap in the existing literature that explores the means and paths that young brides have used to get out of their marriage, including those into which they entered while still a child. In attempting to address this gap in the literature, this thesis focused on understanding the experiences of child marriage through survivors' voices and attempted to determine and highlight the methods that former child brides used to exit or escape their child marriages.

Chapter 3: Methodology

This study attempted to investigate and understand the experiences of child marriage through the first voice perspectives (former child brides) and examine the exit strategies used to escape the marriage. Because the study examined experiential, contextual and interpretive information, A qualitative research method was deemed appropriate for this study (Tenny et al., 2021). This study's qualitative approach was undertaken because it explored descriptive secondary data (Miles & Huberman 1984). It was employed to examine and interpret non-numerical data such as video recordings, therefore providing deeper insights into the participants' lived experiences. Tenny et al. (2021) described this approach as a technique that allows a researcher to study individual experiences in-depth, including the context surrounding them. Therefore, this research method enabled the researcher to assemble and capture the beliefs, perceptions, interactions, and behaviour of former child brides, regarding their experiences in their child marriage or union.

A narrative approach was used as a framework while conducting this research study, since the researcher is interested in the subjective lived experiences of the participant and how they interpreted those experiences (Josselson & Hammack, 2021). By adopting this narrative method for this study, this current researcher attempted to give the participants of this study a voice (Merriam & Grenier, 2019); one which allowed the participants themselves to explain the how's, whys, what they were experiencing, feeling, and thinking (Cleland, 2017) during their marriage or union.

In addition, the narrative framework in this study relied on the co-construction of the story and dual-layer interpretation between the researcher and participants (Josselson & Hammack, 2021). Therefore, this narrative approach became a favourable technique for the researcher while conducting this study, because it relied on the storytelling of child marriage survivors, whose narratives emerged from their individual experiences as former child brides. Furthermore, it was utilized by this current researcher to interpret how the participants developed their stories and constructed meaning out of their experiences rather than determining what was fact and not fiction (Mertova & Webster, 2021).

Finally, due to the sensitivity of the topic and reported trauma involved in this area of research, this researcher attempted to recruit participants from publicly available records through video data recordings Shared on YouTube. However, it was also difficult for the researcher to locate the participants using publicly available records, since married children are a hidden population (Wahi et al., 2019).

Sampling Collection

As previously stated, since married children are a hidden population, the data collection methods drew together the words and actions of research participants in context (former child brides) through video content shared with the public. This researcher chose to use videos of child marriage survivors published on YouTube instead of individual interviews. Using these video recordings, this researcher can recruit former child brides from diverse backgrounds since it is almost impossible to recruit former brides across the world from my location in Canada. Lastly, this researcher did need to go through ethics since the video sample is publicly available records.

This research examined the video data recordings shared on the YouTube platform about the experiences of child marriages, from the first voice perspectives of child marriage survivors. The participants' narratives were published in the form of recorded testimonies from different channels on YouTube (such as TEDx talks, UNICEF, LADBible Tv, Global Hope 365, Unchained at Last, etc.). The participants were the power generators of their lived experiences—meaning that the participants were the voices and narrators of their experiences throughout the videos. This study used search keywords "Child Marriage," "Child Bride," "Survivor's Voice," and "Escaped" as virtual variables, with additional clarifying keywords like "Forced Marriage," "Survivor's Story," "Exit Strategy," etc.) to narrow down the search range by relevance.

The researcher attempted to engage five to eight participants for this study, but five participants were ultimately selected. Three inclusion criteria were employed to select the successful research participants of this thesis. The first criterion that was applied in selecting the participants was that these had to be women between the ages of 19-49 who self-identified as former child brides or survivors of child marriage. The descriptor used by the researcher for the term a "former child bride or a survivor of child marriage" was specified to be a female individual who had been involved in a spiritual or a legal/ informal union, into which she had entered before reaching the age of 18. This researcher had no practical way of ensuring that the child bride had actually been involved in a marriage or union. However, the researcher was going to take their testimonial as evidence that they had been married and that they had been married before the age of 18.

Another criterion for the selection was that the video participants (former child brides or survivors of child marriages) identify with having managed to leave, escape, divorce, or get away from their child marriage. The researcher employed this criterion to answer one of

the research questions on "the exit strategies utilized by the participants to leave their child marriage, or unions."

Lastly, this research selected videos with English-speaking participants because this study aimed to learn and understand the child marriage experiences through the voices and lenses of the participants. Besides, the research by Tripp & Munson (2022) stated that a participant's language plays an important role in framing the perception of their experiences and conveying meaning to other people. Wallace's (2022) research on the perception of gender, language, and the influence of language in research also supported Tripp & Munson's research. It indicated that the difference in language influences how speakers think about the world and how researchers translate the events, and how meaning can be lost when other parties (translators) are involved. Hence, this criterion supported the research intention of giving the participants a voice and sharing their experiences in the union.

Accordingly, this researcher started a process to pare down the number of videos by only selecting videos that had been produced and published from 2017 forward and only those whose content was in English. After that, this research focused on recruiting the participants. The study employed the three inclusion criteria as previously described in the targeted population to narrow down videos, and only eight videos were recommended. After all the participants were selected, this researcher studied all eight recommended videos, however special attention was paid to the videos with a complete story—meaning videos narrating the story from the beginning (how the narrators of these videos entered their child marriage) to the end (how they escaped from their child marriages).

Purposely, this researcher decided to study five video recordings that met all the criteria when completing the research findings.

| Participants Profile | Video Title and Published | Video Publisher |
|--|--|--------------------------|
| Payzee Mahmood, 32. She was forced into child marriage at age 16 to a 31-year-old man in England. | A Survivor's Plea to End Child Marriage. Published Jan 06 th , 2020 (Mahmood, 2020, January 6) | TEDx Talks, London Women |
| Sherry Johnson, 59. She was forced into child marriage at age 11 to a 20-year-old man in Florida, US | My Fight to End Child Marriage in America. Published Apr 25 th , 2019. (Johnson, 2019, April 25). | TEDMED Talk |
| Rubie Marie, 38. She was forced into child marriage at age 15 to a 30-year-old man in Bangladesh. | At 15, I Was Forced to Marry a Man Twice My Age. Published Dec 19 th , 2021, (Marie, 2021, December 19). | LADBible TV, UK |
| Samra Zafar, 35. She was forced into child marriage at age 16 to a 28-year-old man in Canada. | I Was Abused as A Child Bride, And This Is What I learned. Published Aug 1 st , 2017 (Zafar, 2017, August 1). | TEDx Talks, Mississauga |
| Sara Tasneem, 36. She was forced into child marriage at age 15 to a 28-year-old man in Los Angeles. | Child Marriage Activist and Survivor. Published Apr 06 th , 2020, (Tasneem, 2020, April 6) | Global Hope 365 |

Table 1 participants' demographic information and characteristics of their videos.

Data Collection and Analysis

This qualitative study used a topical story analysis as the framework to analyze the data. It is a narrative analysis method that is restricted to one specific event in someone's life with a plot, characters, and setting, but doesn't incorporate the entirety of the participant's life (Josselson & Hammack, 2021). In this study, this researcher selected this technique because it was intended to focus on a specific area of their lives. It was used to analyze the experiences of former child brides while in the union and the ways they used to escape their child marriages.

After studying the video recordings repeatedly, the researcher gathered written forms of transcripts to become more familiar with the data and for coding. Also, this researcher printed out YouTube auto-transcription documents of the videos (publicly available for the users), which were used for comparison and a closer study. This, combined with the responsibility of the researcher to interpret how the research participants developed their stories and constructed meaning out of their experiences; the videos were transcribed by taking the verbatim transcripts of the data—meaning that I included pauses, filler words, and stray utterances like "um..." (Limpaecher, 2020). It is important to note that the data was transcribed precisely how the participants described; this researcher did not edit, remove, include, or grammar-correct any word from the transcripts.

Moreover, the researcher found it helpful to re-watch the video recordings while analyzing the data transcripts, as it revealed multiple verbal and noticeable inflection and pauses/silences from the research participants. Therefore, it enhanced the researcher's ability to capture the participants' interactions with their surroundings and construe the meaning while conceding participants to share their narratives. Before coding began, this researcher used qualitative data analysis software (2017, January 2) to organize the data transcripts and

attempt to capture essential aspects and patterns in the data. It is important to note that this researcher used an open coding method (LaiYee, 2020). That means that this researcher did not approach the data with any predetermined themes; the themes emerged from the data.

The qualitative analysis software (2017, January 2) was again utilized in this research for coding purposes/grouping themes together. This researcher used an inductive approach (Limpaecher, 2020) when coding and organizing themes emerged from the data. This technique was selected since the inductive method tends to allow the researcher to be flexible when interpreting the data (Limpaecher, 2020). Therefore, this researcher coded the data inductively and not necessarily in themes but in narratives and core narratives grounded in the participant's story. After the transcripts were coded, the researcher set out to group together the themes and narratives and quote multiple paragraphs at once to ensure that the narrative was kept intact.

It is also important to note that the researcher used selective coding (LaiYee, 2020) when coding and organizing the exit strategies used by former child brides to escape their union. That means the escape routes were coded differently from previous sections, not necessarily in themes but according to participants' stories. Therefore, the researcher quoted each participant's story from start to finish to ensure their narratives on the escape routes were kept intact.

Ethical Consideration

Moreno et al. (2013) stated that a researcher does not need to ask for participants' consent if their content is publicly shared. For this study, I attempted to investigate and interpret video data recordings on the YouTube platforms that were publicly available information and, therefore, this thesis did not require consent from the research participants.

Chapter 4: Theoretical Framework

Simone de Beauvoir's (1949) feminist theory about women as "the other" was utilized as an inspiration in this study. de Beauvoir claims that the "Othering" of women is embedded in cultural and historical narratives that represent women as inferior to men. Furthermore, this is not based on biology or nature, but on socially constructed norms that represent women and girls as an object to protect and subordinate to men. From the feminist's perspective, the theory addressed and interpreted how women are undervalued in family structures which clearly further the othering concept (Christianson, Teiler & Eriksson, 2021). de Beauvoir's (1949) conception of women as "the other" also expounded that women are socialized at a young age to be passive agents and their identities placed in relation to man. That means that women are not perceived as independent bodies, but only according to their relationship to men, especially in the family structures of a marriage (Christianson, Teiler & Eriksson, 2021). Therefore, de Beauvoir's theory is relevant to this study, especially with its emphasis on the situations that oppresses and subordinates' women and girls, which is typical in the child marriage practice.

Furthermore, de Beauvoir's theory also highlighted how and why women should respond to these social oppressive norms. de Beauvoir defends women's human rights in a society where these rights are not respected and denied. More importantly, she urged that women and men have equal rights and power to shape their own lives and society (de Beauvoir, 1949). This theory not only called attention to gender inequality and sexism, where women are victims of oppression, but also conceptualized these women as being the antagonists of those societal norms that oppress them (Christianson, Teiler & Eriksson, 2021). In accordance with this, de Beauvoir's theory provided this study with valuable

insights from a perspective of gender, power, and oppression, and is thus relevant to this thesis, where the women's (former child brides) voices on their lived experiences are heard.

Similarly, other international feminists' theories on child marriage (Moschetti, 2005; Monteiro, 2021; John, 2021) were also utilized in the framing, understanding, and interpreting of the findings of this thesis. Olin Monteiro (Indonesian feminist and activist), and Mary E. John (Indian Feminist/activist) both theorized that child marriage is indeed a practice that is embedded in patriarchal systems, which are controlled by men (Monteiro, 2021) and ones which value women less, due to their gender (John, 2021). These international feminist scholars posited child marriage as a form of gender-based violence, that is rooted in patriarchal values and gender inequality that marginalizes and subordinate women and girls (Monteiro, 2021; John, 2021).

Respectively, this study also indicated how a Child's Rights-Based Approach (Child-Friendly Cities Initiative, 2018) was applied to frame the analysis of the research findings. A Child's Rights-Based Approach was utilized to learn about and understand the experiences of child marriage and address the practice, through the number of the Articles of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989). A Child's Rights-Based Approach (CRBA) is a conceptual framework for a child's human development cycle that is universally grounded in international children's rights standards and practically focused on promoting, protecting, and implementing children's rights (The United Nations Children's Fund, 2021). This child's right-based approach applies to every child (up 18 years) regardless of where you come from, your social status, or how you choose to live your life (United Nations Children's Fund, 2021). Therefore, this researcher deemed the

approach appropriate because the targeted population of this thesis varied across different cultures and countries.

Although child marriage is not directly mentioned in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, it was linked to many other rights through the Child's Rights-Based Approach. The approach is based on the following seven principles which are implanted in the convention on the right of a child: Article 3, The Best Interests of a child; Article 6: Life, Survival, and Development; Article 2: Non-discrimination; Article 12: Participation and respecting their views; Article 13,14, and 16: Dignity; Interdependence and Indivisibility (Right to share their thoughts freely with others, right to their own thought, opinion, and choosing their religion, and right to privacy); Article 4 and 18: Transparency and Accountability (Child-Friendly Cities Initiative, 2018). (See Appendix B and C for detailed agreements on the rights of a child).

Furthermore, a Child's Rights-Based Approach was again utilized to attach importance to the young bride's identity as right-holders and put an emphasis on the responsibility and accountability of parents, guardians, caregivers, and the institutions responsible for protecting, respecting, and fulfilling the child's rights. This meant highlighting which rights need to be respected or implemented, or were violated, by all parties involved in the protective systems of the child bride, according to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Chapter 5: Findings

This part of the research provides a thorough report of the research findings. This study aimed to learn about and better understand the experiences of child marriage through the lenses and voices of child marriage survivors. Hence, Five videos were analyzed for this study that had been produced by the following five participants from different countries: (1) Payzee Mahmood, 16 year old girl forced to marry a 31-year-old man in England; (2) Rubie Marie, a 15 years old girl forced to marry a 30-year-old man in Bangladesh; (3) Sherry Johnson, an 11 year old girl forced to marry a 20-year-old man in Florida, US; (4) Sara Tasneem, a 15 year old girl forced to marry a 28-year-old man in Los Angeles then immediately taken to another foreign Country (refused to mention the name of the foreign country) ; and (5) Samra Zafar, a 16 yeas old girl forced to marry a 28-year-old man in Canada.

As described in the methodology section, the dialogue in these videos were transcribed and analyzed for relevant themes. Four major themes emerged from the transcription and analysis of this data.

- 1) The coercion of parents and lack of agency
- 2) Experiences of a child bride in the union
- 3) Escaping a child marriage
- 4) The awareness and responsibility of Society

Each major theme also included relevant sub-themes and categories that emerged from the participants' (former child brides) narrative of their child marriage, their experiences as child brides in the union, and their recounting of the escape routes that they used to escape the marriage.

Theme one: The Coercion of parents and lack of agency

In this section, the participants tell two interrelated narratives. One is how the influence of parents and family honour, and status was responsible for their marriages as child brides. The other is the lack of agency of the participants in the decision-making of their childhood marriage. Throughout theme one, the participants (former child brides) of this study voiced their experiences from the time they learned about and met their then-intended spouses until the day of their spiritual/legal/wedding ceremony and were leaving to start a new life with their then-husbands.

Parental Influence

All of the participants described their parents' influence and involvement, especially those of their fathers, being the leading determinant in the timing of their child marriage. Some participants described the parental influence as parental coercion since they received direct pressure from parents to get married. Some participants reported being scared to say “no” to their parents.

Payzee: "when I was 15 and studying for my GCSEs, my father came to me, and he started to talk about marriage. I laughed it off because I thought he was joking, and I didn't really understand the concept of marriage. But from that moment my father

changed he became very cold towards me, and I felt like he didn't love me anymore."

"...Then when I was 16 the conversation of marriage came up again this time my father said there's another man who wants to marry you and being unaware of the consequences being scared to say no again, I said to my father do what makes you happy." (Payzee Mahmood, 2020)

Sara: I didn't want to visit him (my dad) like it wasn't a visit that I wanted but you know being a 15-year-old, I was still under the care of my parents so of course you know I just had to go along with that. And as soon as I got off the plane my dad sat me down and told me that, um... you know there's no sex outside of marriage and that I would have to get married, and I would have to be married to somebody who the leader of his group picked for me. "...and it was at that point that basically my father's family started planning my wedding to this person." (Sara Tasneem, 2020)

One of the participants described her mother being silenced because she was a woman; and her father was the only parent forcing her into childhood marriage. She reported not recognizing her father, as she could not believe he was not protecting her.

Rubie: "My mother never wanted it to happen. Never, she-but she's a woman, she's silenced. She's not allowed to speak in that country, you know. And it was heartbreaking for my mom because I could see her, I could see her breaking. My father was acting very like like-like as if he wasn't acknowledging what was happening, but then trying to make sure that everything goes to plan." "... But I remember there was one point where I got placed sitting next to this husband, and I saw my father and I wanted, I was crying, and I wanted to just look at my father's face

because I was daddy's girl. And I wanted him just to make that connection with me and he did. And I saw tears coming down his eyes and I thought "where's that dad, you know? Where is he? Why is he not saving me?" (Rubie Marie, 2021)

Another participant reported her mother consenting to her child marriage at 11 years old to protect the father of her baby. This participant had described being raped repeatedly by the deacon when she was 10 years-old and still living with her mother; therefore, she became pregnant right away due to the rapes (Johnson, 2019 April 25).

Sherry: "...When destiny was 10 years old, she gave birth to her baby. The Deacons baby. One year later when destiny was 11 her mother gave permission for destiny to marry the deacon (20 years old). Her mother did this to protect the deacon." She added: "You see destiny is the name I gave myself many years later." (Sherry Johnson, 2019)

Consequently, in this section, the participants illustrated that parents were indeed the leading influence and decision makers in the timing and situations of their child marriage.

Family Honour and Status in the community

Some participants shared that it was normal in their families and communities for young daughters to be forced into child marriage. The participants reported that some parents used child marriage to gain or restore family honour in their communities, especially in cases where there was the possibility of this honour being lost through potential unmarried sexual activity of their daughters. The former child brides recounted that the concept of family

honour did not relate to family reputation alone but mainly to the parents' social status in the community.

Payzee: "...My father had lost his status in the community. So, in a desperate attempt to regain the status, when I was 15 and studying for my GCSEs, my father came to me, and he started to talk about marriage." "...And so, a couple of months later when my sister Banaz was just 17 she had a child marriage to a man much older than her who she didn't know but now has dropped out of college as she moved to Birmingham with her new husband." "...We were told this was done to protect us from being promiscuous and to prevent us from dishonouring our family name. My father had gone where he wanted by marrying two of his daughters as child brides, he had regained his honor and status within the community." (Payzee Mahmood, 2020)

Rubie: "So, it was only about a couple of weeks after that, funnily enough my father's got tickets for everybody and we're going to Bangladesh. And I'll be like "oh okay! I thought we couldn't afford to do anything like this". But I think all my extended family paid for the tickets you know. Because as you can imagine the honor affected them, the shame affected them as well and they needed to regain their honor and they thought by this ripple effect hey can take me to Bangladesh and get me married off." (Rubie Marie, 2021)

One of the participants reported that her parents thrived from societal praises, including those from the church community. She also recounted how this affected her fate when she was forced to marry her rapist.

Sherry: "...Finally, Destiny broke down and told her mother about the rapes, her mother accused destiny of lying and she gave the child a severe beating. How could Destiny's mother not know what was going on. Well Destiny's mother was a volunteer of the church the church was the center of her life. She thrived on praise from the church community." (Sherry Johnson, 2019).

Correspondingly, in this section, the data stated that it was also common for abused children in the church community to not be believed, or to have their stories discounted, or dismissed.

The lack of agency: I was handed over to this husband much older than me

Most participants shared how they had not had a say in the decision about their child marriage because their child marriages had been legally allowed and recognized merely through parental consent, and they had not had a say in the decision. The participants described feeling like an item on auction, or a doll.

Payzee: "One day I was called to the living room by my father... he told me to sit down pay my respects and don't speak. I didn't really know how to behave because all my life my family had said don't talk to boys and don't look up boys, yet all of a sudden, they said here's your husband. So, I sat there listening to my father and my mother and this man they were just talking about me as though I was an item at auction. So, I did as I was told." (Payzee Mahmod, 2020)

Rubie: "...I remember my mum just saying, "oh um..." she like showed me the guy she just tapped on the window, and she goes "that's the guy that you're going to be getting married to." I was like, "what?" You know, it was like it was it was a bit crazy, and I couldn't understand it. "... I'm just sat there in my room just thinking, "well I'm just like this little China doll that's been all pampered up and who's going to get to married to a stranger." (Rubie Marie, 2021)

Another participant described being handed over to her husband the first time she met him. The spiritual ceremony was performed the same day as well without her consent.

Sara: "...that very evening so the religious organization my dad was a part of performed a spiritual ceremony that evening to this man who I just met, and I was physically handed over to him that same evening." (Sara Tasneem, 2020)

All the participants reported that their husbands were much older than them. Some participants described the age difference between them and their then-husbands as being 15 or more years.

Payzee: "...So, I did as I was told. But for just a brief moment, I looked up and the first thing I noticed was that he was so old he was losing his hair now I remember thinking, "God he looks like an uncle". "...But it was too late the deal had been done and I was just given away to this man." (Payzee Mahmood, 2020)

Sara: "I was introduced to a man who was 28 years old, and I was told that he was one who was picked for me. The adults who were with me basically just told me to go

over and talk to him I had a glass of orange juice with him at a cafe and he told me that he didn't want to wait for an engagement, and he just wanted to get married right away." (Sara Tasneem, 2020)

Samra: "...and one day, when I was 16 years old, I was told that in a few months, I was going to be married to a man 12 years older than me, who I'd never met before, who lives in a faraway country called Canada." "A year later, I arrived in this country (Canada) as a child bride in a forced marriage." (Samra Zafar, 2017)

Rubie: "The wedding was massive, ... I remember being in my room I was drenched in gold, and you know sari, and everything. And I remember sitting there and I didn't want to come out of my room knowing that 'oh there's a man there that I don't even know." "Um... he was, he looked young he did look young, but it was after the marriage that I knew that he was twice my age. So, I was 15, he was 30." (Rubie Marie, 2021)

Some participants critiqued the witnesses and adults who had attended the wedding or had been involved in the spiritual/wedding ceremony, including those involved in the legal procedures for not having said, or done, anything to have stopped the wedding. One of the participants described her wedding ceremony being conducted in a language that she did not understand (Arabic) and no adult bothered to tell her what it all meant.

Payzee: "So, the wedding arrangement started, and we went shopping for jewelry in the wedding dress and every shop that we walked into my mother showed me expensive gold bangles and necklaces, but I wasn't into any of that. I was a teenager growing up in London and I loved pop fashion. In the religious part of the ceremony

the Imam didn't question my age and he conducted the whole ceremony in Arabic. I was the only one who didn't speak Arabic, yet nobody told me what it all meant. Next came the registry office and I prayed inside that the registrar would notice that I was a 16-year-old. But the ceremony went ahead as normal..." (Payzee Mahmood, 2020)

Another participant critiqued the adult involved in legal procedures for not stopping her child marriage. She described being baffled by the fact that a marriage licence had been issued to a child. She was 11 years old at the time. She also reported that her wedding ceremony had been planned a year before, without her knowledge or consent.

Sherry: "... Destiny's mother even made her wedding dress her veil and her cake. I'm sorry to tell you it gets worse all of this was planned long in advance. Remember destiny had her baby one full year prior to her getting married, but a year before the marriage the birth certificate of that baby already had Destiny listed as missus." The certificate gave her the Deacon's last name and not her own. "...You may wonder why the Deacon was not arrested; how could it be legal for the government to issue a marriage license for a child? "...Oh yes Child Marriage, it was against the law in Florida at that time. But there are loopholes in the law. One loophole says child marriage was legal if a parent gave permission for the child to marry. Another loophole is Pre-teen pregnancy." (Sherry Johnson, 2019)

Theme two: Experiences of a Child bride in the union

In this section, the participants (former child brides) described their experiences in the union. Four sub-themes were generated within this theme: Childhood and Education

Interrupted, Domestic Abuse, Health Effects, and Sense of Agency. These sub-themes emerged from the participant's descriptions of their experiences.

Childhood and Education Interrupted

One of the participants described having had communication issues because of the age difference between herself (then-child bride) and her then-adult-husband.

Payzee: "...And after the wedding we were sent off to a hotel. In the hotel I sat on the bed and this man who was now my husband was just talking at me. I didn't really understand anything he was saying. His vocabulary felt so grown-up." (Payzee Mahmod, 2020)

Most participants reported being denied the right to finish their childhood and how being married so young had changed their lives for the worse.

Sara: "This man who I just met, and I was physically handed over to him that same evening. And I remember like going up to the ceremony and just asking one of the adults like where I was going to sleep at night, and they just didn't respond. They just kind of looked at the ground. And I think it was then that I really realized that like you know that my life was going to change I just didn't know how. " (Sara Tasneem, 2020)

Sara further expressed how she was forced to drop out of school and described not having any rights, since her then-husband controlled the marriage.

Sara: "And so, after I you know after that evening; he basically was able (my ex-husband) was able to leave the country with me. I was forced to drop out of school because again I was still a minor and I didn't have any rights." (Sara Tasneem, 2020)

This participant described having had her childhood abruptly interrupted and wanting to hold onto her childhood a bit longer.

Payzee: "...I was told to pack my things. So, as I started packing, I put my popstar posters with my things I knew I wasn't allowed to, but it was my only way of holding on to my childhood." (Payzee Mahmud, 2020)

Payzee further explained how just like Sara, she also described being/ feeling helpless since everything had been out of her control.

Payzee: "I looked up to the likes of Britney Spears and Christina Aguilera. But of course, a big frilly covered up to the neck wedding dress and Kits-on Heels were chosen for me. I found it so disgusting, I still do. So, in the wedding shops I tried to act like a brat to show that I was a child and I just wanted to complete my childhood really and focus on my education, but I knew deep down there was nothing I could do to stop this." (Payzee Mahmud, 2020)

This participant also expressed how the child marriage disrupted her long-held dreams and interrupted her childhood and education.

Samra: "While my friends dreamed of weddings and bangles, I dreamed of going to Harvard or Stanford: The founder of the girls' cricket team, editor of the school newspaper, a straight-A student. I became a mother right away. I gave birth to my older daughter at 18 - I had no idea about birth control - and that dream of education was snatched away from me." (Samra Zafar, 2017)

Samra further explained,

Samra: "I was told that now that I was a mother, I was someone's wife, I was someone's daughter-in-law, it was inappropriate for me to go to university or even go to high school." (Samra Zafar, 2017)

Payzee also reported her challenges and expressed her pressures associated with being a child bride or a child-wife and how these affected her education.

Payzee: "And under all this pressure I found it so difficult to continue with my education which really hurt because this was my only escape. All of my teachers knew that I was married, and they knew my age, yet none of them ever said anything about how this was affecting me and my education." (Payzee Mahmood, 2020)

Domestic Abuse

All of the participants also described experiencing abuse throughout their child marriage. They expressed being exposed to further vulnerabilities, including being unable to negotiate safer sex or consensual sex.

Marital intercourse as rape/ Sexual Abuse

Most participants described their marital intercourse as rape and how they were unable to do anything about it except deal with it. Some participants expressed feeling a piece of themselves dying slowly and losing a part of themselves whenever they were forced to sleep with their then-husbands.

Rubie: "I knew, I knew he was gonna rape me. And that's what happened, and it became like every single day. And that was very tough to kind of go through. Going through the rape every single day, like, I said "I had to disconnect myself." I had to just, ...where I took myself, and this is very personal, it's like I took myself to the beach in my head. ...But when, after he's done, I remember going to the bathroom and just sitting under the shower for like an hour. And just cleaning my..., trying to clean every single part of me off, so I don't smell him on me. And it was, it was horrible because I would sit there just crying. Because that's when it will hit me."

(Rubie Marie, 2021)

Payzee: "I tried everything I could to prolong this (she meant delaying the intercourse). I made excuses, but nothing worked. About six days later, I returned the white sheet to my mother, and I felt a part of me dying. (Payzee Mahmood, 2020)

In regard to the "white sheet", Payzee described that in her community, she was expected to return the marital bedsheet (white sheet) to her mother after the honeymoon, stained with blood of their taken virginity.

Some participants described their then-husbands as rapists since their marital intercourses were non-consensual.

Sara: "I was not able to talk to my mom. My mom had been told that I was staying with my father, and she didn't know where I was. So up until that point she could have filed for statutory rape against my rapist and abuser. But instead of that happening, I was legally married to him." (Sara Tasneem, 2020)

Another participant (Sherry) described her then-husband as a rapist in the context of that she had been raped by him, with him the parents then forced her to marry. Sherry also explained that the marriage license that had been given to her then-husband was a licence to rape and impregnate a child.

Sherry: "In other words, raping and impregnating a child become licensed to go on raping and impregnating." (Sherry Johnson, 2019)

Mental and Physical Abuse

Most participants further described experiencing both physical violence and emotional abuse. Some participants described the emotional abuse as being in the form of control, manipulation, and social isolation. The participants expressed how their child marriage had placed them under the authority and dependency of their then-spouses.

Samra: "... I was not allowed to go out of the house, make any friends, or have any independence whatsoever, but it was for my own good. I was being protected from the corrupt Western society. I was humiliated every day, called bad words. You're

useless.' 'You're worthless.' 'You don't deserve to be loved or respected.' 'You're not worthy of respect.' And when I asked why, I was told, 'Because you deserve it.'

(Samra Zafar, 2017)

Samra further expressed how the physical abuse had started shortly after the emotional abuse,

Samra: "When you hear that on a daily basis, you start believing it. So, when the first bruises appeared on my face and body, I thought I deserved that too. I spent years trying to fix myself, thinking, 'Maybe the secret to perfect wifehood is somehow eluding me. Maybe if I cooked better food, washed clothes better, didn't express my opinions, didn't have opinions, talked less, didn't watch cricket, this would change.' But nothing changed. I made mistakes ... and I suffered the consequences." (Samra Zafar, 2017)

Payzee: "...He placed his hand on my hand and he tried to kiss me, and I flinched in fear naively saying to him "can we please be friends?". But he snapped immediately, and he threw everything outside directly at me. I grabbed a pillow to cover my face. He cursed at me, closed the door and left the room. That night I locked myself in the bathroom, still in my wedding dress." (Payzee Mahmood, 2020)

Sara: "And so, it took me an extremely long time to actually start processing that what had happened to me was abuse. The relationship that I was in was extremely

abusive and, up until that point, I really did blame myself for that marriage." (Sara Tasneem, 2020)

Health Effects

All participants further described experiencing health related consequences due to their child marriage. Most participants expressed experiencing negative psychological and reproductive health effects.

Psychological effects,

Most participants expressed experiencing feelings of depression, detachment, and anxiety.

Rubie: "I had to disconnect myself. I had to just, ...where I took myself, and this is very personal, it's like I took myself to the beach in my head. I was on a beach because that I grew up next to a beach, I loved being by the sea, and that's my, that's my Zen place. And I used to take myself there. My brain said, "whatever's happening to my body is happening, but my brain would be elsewhere." and that's how I kept myself alive." (Rubie Marie, 2021)

Rubie also described experiencing social isolation and changes in her personality,

Rubie: "I remember after the wedding, I did. My personality did start seeping out, and my anger started to seep out, and I remember like making a few snidey comments here there, and everywhere. But, by that time, it was too late anyway. So, when I'm in my

Zen place, I am in my Zen place. But when I'm going to wash myself, it will just hit me really hard, and I'll be like just crying. And I've got to keep this away from everybody, I can't tell anybody, I've got no one to talk about it to, nobody. And I would just-just let my tears flow with the, with the shower and that's where I went down the drain."
(Rubie Marie, 2021)

Rubie further expressed experiencing feelings of sadness and hopelessness,

Rubie: "I remember his sister like-knocking on my door and like-trying to get a peep of this new bride, you know, that their brother's going to get married to. And it was just numbing. It was like, I knew there was a horror story coming and it was just like in my brain, you know, and it's slowly- slowly coming along. And you're like, "oh the music's getting more intense" that's how I felt. I mean for a 15-year-old to be thinking that way, you got to imagine how much of a deep end I was in, and it was how much I was drowning to be thinking that sharp, and thinking..." (Rubie Marie, 2021)

Samra expressed experiencing social anxiety that involved fear and avoidance of social situations. This participant also voiced feelings of embarrassment and self-consciousness from the abuse she experienced at home.

Samra: "And my professor announced my name in front of the entire class of 300 students, and everybody turned to look at me. And I, instead of feeling proud and accomplished and excited, I was petrified. I wanted to crawl into a dark hole and never come out. I didn't want to be seen. I didn't want to be known. I wanted to be invisible." (Samra Zafar, 2017)

Samra further expressed how she started internalizing the abuse by associating the words her then-husband told her whenever she felt overwhelmed or scared.

Samra: "And I remember standing there and thinking to myself, 'Oh, my gosh. These people are not supposed to be talking to me. They don't know that I'm useless, worthless piece of scum stuck at the bottom of someone's shoe.'" (Samra Zafar, 2017)

Some participants described having suicidal ideation and experiencing self-harm.

Payzee: "...And it would be the first time I started to self-harm. The pain took me away from the miserable reality I was facing. And so many times when I felt like giving up on life because I thought I'd be stuck in that marriage for the rest of my life." (Payzee Mahmood, 2020)

Rubie: "I think as soon as I got back home, everything just hit me. All the all the pretending that I did, every single emotion that I tried to push away, and it's like my soul and my body just snapped back into place. And I tried to commit suicide and I just couldn't take it it's like everything, every memory, everything just hit me like a like an explosion, "I don't like this body that I'm in, I don't like what's happened to me, I don't like what they've done to me, I don't like carrying this rape child." that's how I used to think and I don't want none of it it's like everything was dictated for me." (Rubie Marie, 2021)

Physical/ Reproductive Effects

The participants described having no reproductive rights during their child marriages and no ability to negotiate family planning or contraception. Thus, they also reported experiencing early pregnancies.

Sara: "I got pregnant right away because I didn't have any reproductive rights." (Sara Tasneem, 2020)

Rubie: "I was, I just turned 16 when I got pregnant. I think from day one I numbed myself out. Thinking I was pregnant, I just thought 'no I'm not pregnant. No, it can't be happening.' " (Rubie Marie, 2021)

One of the participants described experiencing many pregnancies while still a child,

Sherry: "By the age of 17 I had six children." (Sherry Johnson, 2019)

One of the participants also mentioned having had an abortion,

Payzee: "But I went to the GP, and I had a pregnancy test, and it was confirmed that I was pregnant. My immediate reaction to the nurse was "I don't want his baby; can you please take it away now?" "...My family were absolutely ecstatic at the thought of their first grandchild they told me that having this baby would make me love my husband. I had no idea what I was doing but I knew the ugly truth in which had led to this pregnancy, and I couldn't bear a physical reminder of this for the rest of my life.... So, I had an abortion." (Payzee Mahmood, 2020)

Payzee further described how she could secretly avoid unwanted pregnancies since she could not safely negotiate sex and contraception.

Payzee: I secretly took the pill, but his family would call me from Kurdistan, and they would pressure me into getting pregnant again. They would say there was something wrong with me." (Payzee Mahmood, 2020)

One of the participants described experiencing pregnancy complications,

Rubie: "I became really-really sick. It wasn't morning sickness, I mean my mom's had eight of us, she knows what morning sickness is. But it was to the point where I kept on vomiting violently, um... there would be blood coming up, I started to lose weight rapidly. I lost two stones in those two weeks. Um... couldn't keep anything down and I just, you know, I was a slim girl, you know, and I looked like a bag of bones back then. And it was horrible, I didn't know what was happening, I just thought that's what pregnancy is. But my mum knew it wasn't that. I knew I was gonna die. And that's how it felt, and I thought right, "well if this is happening to me, let it happen to me." (Rubie Marie, 2021)

Rubie also described how she experienced childbirth complications and how they affected her offspring.

Rubie: "So, um... my pregnancy with my daughter was quite it's quite a slow one, you know. She was three weeks early, three pound thirteen. She was the size of a doll. Plastic dolls you can buy from the shops, that's how big she was. I didn't even get to

have two minutes with my daughter, because she was taken straight away to special care unit. And she was in she was in special care unit for two months, The only way that I could touch her was through an incubator, for when I can feed her putting my hands through the um... gloves." (Rubie Marie, 2021)

Rubie further expressed experiencing postnatal depression when she was still a minor and being unable to bond with her child due to her child marriage trauma.

Rubie: "...When she did finally come back, it still took me a long time to bond with her. I don't think I bonded with her until she was about three, and that's me being a horrible mom. But also, a mum who was trying to survive with postnatal depression, and you know, traumatic, going through all these traumatic events, you know. It's like you're trying to keep yourself sane, but at the same time you can't give any love to anybody else because you can't love yourself." (Rubie Marie, 2021)

Sense of Agency

All participants expressed their agency having been stripped away and having no such sense of agency throughout their child marriage. Payzee described sharing the child marriage experiences with her sister Banaz (17 years-old), who was also married as a child bride one year before her. At some point in the testimony, Payzee described living with Banaz and their husbands in the same household.

Payzee: "It all started with a shared traumatic experience (Herself and Her sister Banaz). We found ourselves in child marriage that neither of us chose or wanted. The wedding party was horrible I was told to stand there and smile but not too much just enough for the hundreds of photos has been taken of the newlywed couple. "...I just sat there desperate for my parents to see me. I just wanted them to help me, but ..., and I was sent away with my husband." (Payzee Mahmood, 2020)

Sara: "...I didn't have any rights and I was taken to a country where I knew nobody and didn't speak the language." (Sara Tasneem, 2020)

One of the participants described experiencing feelings of no control in matters that concerned her, and not having the ability to make certain choices in her marriage, or the capacity to act deliberately or speak for herself.

Samra: "...And there was a sign there that had a bunch of questions on it. 'Do you feel intimidated?' 'Do you feel like you've lost your voice?' 'Do you feel you're always living in fear, walking on eggshells?' 'Do you feel that you cannot express your opinions, thoughts, and feelings? And I answered 'yes' to each and every one of those questions." (Samra Zafar, 2017)

Samra further described experiencing abuse when she tried to reclaim her voice and stand up for herself against her then-husband.

Samra: "...But somehow, I thought, 'You know, if my abuser only knew that this was abusive, what he's doing is wrong, maybe he'll change himself. Maybe he'll fix things.' So, I started standing up for myself at home. And then guess what happened? The abuse got worse. So, when I started speaking up, my abuser was losing control and the abuse got worse." (Samra Zafar, 2017)

Payzee also reported trying to reclaim her voice by doing some small acts of rebellion.

Payzee: "See I never accepted the marriage and every time my husband would say he doesn't like something I would try to use that to make him dislike me. Silly things like hoop earrings and high heels. These little acts of rebellion were all I had to make him not want me." (Payzee Mahmood, 2020)

Some participants also described the first time during their child marriages that they had experienced feeling like they had been seen, understood and recognized. Rubie and Samra both described feeling validated and having had a sense of worthiness.

Rubie: "The day after when I was admitted to hospital, on the day after, this one nurse, and you know I really can't remember her name, but she was like an angel. She came to me, you know when my mum and dad went home, she came to me and she said, "you want an abortion, don't you?" and I said, "yeah!" And it was like the first time somebody spoke to me with respect like my opinions mattered like it was amazing. Such an amazing feeling, it was like, "you know what, I'm worth something. You know, I actually felt good for the first time that somebody wanted to listen to me." (Rubie Marie, 2021)

Samra: "... counsellor said the one sentence that shifted my entire world. She said, 'It's not your fault.' It was the first time anyone had ever said that to me. 'It's not your fault. No matter what you do, you do not deserve to be treated with disrespect and abuse and humiliation. (Samra Zafar, 2017)

Samra further expressed how she experienced self-compassion for the first time,

Samra: "Throughout this entire time, there was this tiny voice in my head that just wouldn't be quiet. The voice that said, 'Maybe I do deserve better. Maybe there are options out there. Maybe this is not the way that things are supposed to be. So, I started thinking, 'If I am this amazing, why am I being treated so badly at home? And if I'm that bad, why do all these people shower me with respect and admiration at school?'" (Samra Zafar, 2017)

Theme three: Escaping a child marriage

There was no common route these participants used to get out of the child marriages. Each Participant described their exit route to get out of their child marriage differently. Six sub-themes emerged from the data: Divorce, Police involvement, Education and Knowledge, Honour Killing, External Support, and Running Away. There were few similarities in the sub-themes of participants' stories of how they got out. However, I will be coding this section differently from previous sections and not necessarily in themes, but according to participants' stories—meaning I will be quoting each Participant's story directly to ensure their narratives in the escape route are kept intact.

SAMRA ZAFAR

Samra reported being previously unaware of her rights and external support, thus leaving her trapped in the child marriage for longer. This participant described how she saw education and knowledge as a way out. As mentioned above, in her experiences in the union, she mentioned being forced to drop out; but her education was something she was not willing to give up. She reported that she firmly believed education would be her escape route from her child marriage.

Samra Zafar fought for her education and returned to school in hopes of achieving her freedom. She described learning about and understanding her situation as a victim of child marriage and domestic abuse, after being in school. She eventually escaped—she ran away.

Education/ Knowledge as a way out,

"Education was something I was not willing to give up on, so I finished all my high school through distance learning at home, and after ten years of struggle and many, many hard-fought battles, I started university at the age of 26 as a mother of two children." (Samra Zafar, 2017)

Samra described using external support and resources, such as counselling, to identify her rights and find a way out of her child marriage.

"...It took me another two years of gathering knowledge, awareness, realising my internal strength and power, and then, finally, being able to walk away." (Samra Zafar, 2017)

Running away,

"At the age of 28, with two girls in tow, I moved to U of T campus housing, finished my education as a single mother working multiple jobs, and achieved more success than I ever imagined was possible." (Samra Zafar, 2017)

PAYZEE MAHMOD

This Participant described the escape route as being the most painful since it had to do with the murder (honour killing) of her sister Banaz, which she often mentioned in her account of her experiences in her union. The honour killing of her sister Banaz brought the attention of the police to her own situation.

Honour Killing of Banaz,

"That following summer, Banaz decided she'd had enough she left her abusive child marriage and she moved back in with my parents. And so, the rumour started, and death threats were being made.... "On one occasion she (Banaz) handed in a handwritten note naming her harassers in January 2006. Banaz disappeared. Many in my family and those named on the list immediately became suspects and they were arrested." (Payzee Mahmod, 2020)

Police Involvement,

"... And while the police were investigating, a safety alarm was placed into my home, but I bravely lied, and I told my husband that it was CCTV. I knew fully well that he would hate this, but I saw this as my chance to get out. And I was right. For the first time he was scared to be violent to me fearing that he too would be arrested." So, he

gave in. He said he would divorce me but on one condition that I accept all the blame because he wanted the community to know that I was a bad wife. of course, I'd done nothing wrong but I took the blame just so I could get out. For the two years that I was married, I asked desperately to be divorced, but both him and my parents would never allow it." (Payzee Mahmood, 2020)

Divorce,

"Three long months into Banaz's disappearance, the police found her body in Birmingham. My sister had been murdered for leaving her child marriage. When I turned 18, I finally got my divorce. Losing my sister has been the worst thing that has ever happened to me and yet it somehow allowed me to get out of my marriage."
(Payzee Mahmood, 2020)

For Payzee's situation, losing her sister Banaz to honour killing did not directly lead to her divorce. It was, however, the honour killing of her sister Banaz that brought the attention of the police to her own situation. This is what directly contributed to her escaping her child marriage. It was the police attention that was brought to her child marriage, then led to her being able to divorce.

Payzee also reported that she had been forced to stay in her child marriage too long because leaving one's child marriage meant possibly being murdered. She described their marriages (Hers and Banaz's) as being associated with family honour and threats of honour killings was a form of punishment in her community. This means that the threat of honour killings is considered form of coercion to prevent the young brides from escaping their child marriage, since if the brides know that honour killings happen in their community, they are dissuaded from doing anything that might bring them to this end.

SHERRY JOHNSON

Sherry's example demonstrated how her exit strategy was made possible by the rights that she acquired as an adult. She expressed that she had to wait until she was no longer a minor and until she became a legal adult, in order to file for divorce legally in Florida. Sherry reported that, throughout her marriage, she had been a minor who had been legally and financially dependent on her then-husband (also referred to as her "rapist"). Thus, she described how her exit strategy had been somewhat tied to her legal age and ability to provide for herself and her children, as an adult.

"By the age of 17 I had six children. That same year I divorced my rapist." (Sherry Johnson, 2019)

SARA TASNEEM

Sara described her exit route as being extremely long and challenging. Like Sherry and Rubie, (two other participants), Sara described that having children and being financially dependent on her then-husband had limited her ability to escape, or to leave her child marriage freely. She reported that education was her way out.

Divorce,

"I was legally married to him, and it would take me seven long years of abuse and all of my rights being taken away to be able to leave him legally and even as an adult trying to leave him it was extremely difficult to get the divorce. It, my divorce, took three years to get finalized. So, it was an extremely difficult process. There was no

easy kind of legal remedy for me to be made while I had two children, because I did not have any reproductive rights, I had to fight for my education every step of the way and that greatly limited my opportunities and freedom. in every single capacity."

(Sara Tasneem, 2020)

Sara described fighting for her education for many years since her then-husband did not approve of her going back to school. She also mentioned having no financial abilities to fund for her education and she had to work hard to save money for her escape for years. Sara achieved her freedom (escape) through her education.

RUBIE MARIE

Rubie described wanting to escape and having planned this many times; but also, how she never attempted these, since she was chaperoned everywhere she went. She also described how an opportunity to finally run away was unintentionally presented and how she took it. Rubie reported her escape route being facilitated, as luck would have it, by the combination of her father's absence and the appearance of one of her school friends, which allowed her to finally report her situation to police.

Running Away,

"So, I then, I remember running out of the house while my father was at work because I wasn't allowed to go on the phones, or anything like that. I wasn't allowed to go to the shops. And I remember seeing one of my school friends walk across the road because we lived on the main road and all the shops are there. So, when I saw her, I ran out of the house, and I ran across the road and I said, "you have to help me. I need to get out." (Rubie Marie, 2021)

External support: A former school Friend,

"She was like rubes, "you know I haven't seen you in ages, you know, I see you with your mum." You know everywhere I went, even in the UK; I was chaperoned. You know, she'd be like, "I've seen you with your mum and dad." like yeah but I couldn't really go up to it and talk to her like a human being and just have a private conversation. So she goes, "come back to my house and my parents will help you."

(Rubie Marie, 2021)

Police Involvement,

"They only lived around like two streets away. I went to her house, and I told them everything. It took them six hours to actually, then get a female officer to come to the house. And I went to my parent's house, I went in the house and at that by that time I had my uncles and aunties there. As soon as the door opened up, they were snarling at me, they were whispering, giving me dirty looks, and I heard it all, you know felt it all, felt like I was just in this dark cave. I just going up the stairs, going to get my baby, grab a few clothes in a bag. And I walked out of the house and that's all I had."

(Rubie Marie, 2021)

As previously stated in this section, the escape routes used by the participants to leave the child marriages varied according to each bride's situation. However, two similarities were identified in those routes: The first one, where the participants expressed that their acquisition of an education was a key factor in their exit strategy, and the second, where participants described the police involvement in their situations that led to their escape from their child marriage.

Theme Four: The awareness and responsibility of society

This section will highlight how all the participants voiced their concerns and called attention to the harmful practice of child marriage. They (former child brides), also referred to as child marriage survivors in this study, highlighted society's failed efforts and attempts to protect, prevent their child marriage, or to support them while in the union. Three sub-themes were derived from the participants' narratives: The inaction of most bystanders, witnesses, and public service officials; Raising awareness for public responsibility, and Activism against the practice.

The inaction of most bystanders, witnesses, and public service officials

Some participants described how the silence of the bystanders encouraged the harmful practice of child marriage. The former child brides described how infuriating it was that the bystanders who had witnessed their child marriage had let them down, when they failed to intervene, particularly those who were in positions of service and protection to the public.

Payzee: "None of this should have ever happened to either of us. And when I look back now, I'm absolutely outraged at the number of people who failed to protect us. The number of adults, social services, the GP, the register, the Imam, the teachers, and the police." (Payzee Mahmood, 2020)

Sherry: "Silence helps the criminal. It cannot continue. Now we're looking for the price of other kinds of silence. Where were the teachers who knew their students were being impregnated all these decades? Why did the social worker did not speak up? Why did the churches not speak out? What did they get in return for their silence?"

They say the only thing needed for trial of evil is that good people do nothing."

(Sherry Johnson, 2019)

One of the participants used her experiences in the union and her platform as a survivor to speak out against child marriage and to call for public responsibility.

Rubie: "...You have to speak out because it (child marriage) is a criminal offence. I understand a lot of people do not want to take their families down police stations get them you know arrested. But the thing is whether it's your family or a friend it doesn't really matter because they're abusing you (a child bride). They took my childhood and my teen life away from me and the majority of my 20s. And I'm 38 now and I've only started to live since I was 30." (Rubie Marie, 2021)

Raising awareness for public responsibility

All participants described being advocates and activists, who are working against the practice of child marriage. Some participants reported that they shared their stories with the public in order to spread awareness. They described wanting to encourage parents and society to let children, particularly girls, complete their childhood and discourage them from marrying off their children before the age of 18.

Payzee: "Today I'm showing up on behalf of my 16-year-old self, my sister Banaz, and any child who is at risk of child marriage. Childhood up to 18 should be a time to learn to grow and to pursue your dreams. Not to be married and raped." (Payzee Mahmod, 2020)

Samra: "So, I started sharing my story because I knew that my story was not just mine. It was the story of millions of people around the world who continue to suffer in silence because they feel they don't deserve any better. They feel they don't have choices, they don't have options, and they don't have rights, and it infuriated me. For the past five years, I've been sharing my story everywhere that I possibly can. Every day, I wake up to hundreds of messages from people all over the world. I get hate messages. I even receive death threats. But for every one of those negative messages, I receive thousands of messages filled with love, support and encouragement." (Samra Zafar, 2017)

One of the participants narrated the advantages of speaking up and being one of the voices for survivors. She described how people are hearing the stories and getting educated about the dangers of child marriage.

Samra: "But how can we prevent abuse from happening rather than curing it after it has already happened? The answer lies in education and awareness, because remember, knowledge is power. We need to start educating our children and youth." (Samra Zafar, 2017)

Samra further reported,

Samra: "My biggest award so far came to me three months ago when a man in Pakistan wrote an email to me and said, 'I have a 17-year-old daughter who's supposed to get married next month, and I have decided to turn down that marriage proposal and send her to university instead, after reading your article on Toronto Life.'" (Samra Zafar, 2017)

Activism against the practice

The participants described wanting to protect all children and fight against the practice of child marriage. From their experiences as child brides, some participants identified and addressed the characteristics that enabled their child marriage. Some participants even reported taking matters into their own hands, by speaking up.

Sherry: "...Sadly, Child marriage does not seem real to lawmakers until they say they see and hear someone who says, "yes, it's for real, it happened to me." That's when I knew I had to do something with this." (Sherry Johnson, 2019)

One of the participants described the advantages of her speaking up and how she successfully made a difference. Sherry reported changing a law in Florida, by proposing Bill-legislation, which eventually became a law.

Sherry: "I wanted to do more. I was still living in Florida. One day I knocked on the door of Senator Lauren Book. Lauren and I had a special connection. She made it her personal call to end child marriage in the state of Florida. And as of July 1st, of this year (2019), our bill became a Florida Law. (Sherry Johnson, 2019)"

Sherry further commented on the reasons behind the success of this initiative and what more is needed:

" What made the difference in Florida, why did the bill pass? I think the reason is simple: Three victims were willing to come forward and break the silence, myself and two lawmakers. We have more work to do, it is time to enforce the law in Florida.

Police, public health agencies and the media are coming together. They work to raise public awareness, they share data, they take active steps to protect children, but we will not stop there in Florida." (Sherry Johnson, 2019)

Payzee and Sara also identified some "loopholes in the legal system" from their experiences in the union. The participants highlighted that parental consent could be a factor that assists the practice of child marriage. For example, Sara reported that legal exceptions allow a child to get married with either parental consent or judicial consent. Nevertheless, there seems to be a lack of understanding that the parental consent described is actually a part of abuse (Sara Tasneem, 2020).

Payzee: "Under the current law in England and Wales (As of January 06th, 2020), Child marriage at any age is not a crime, this means that children are not automatically protected from non-registered, cultural religious or child marriages which happen abroad, and a child can get married at the age of 16 and 17 with parental consent." (Payzee Mahmood, 2020)

Payzee further explained how the reliance on parental consent often results in a failure to protect the child,

Payzee Mahmood: "And we know that amounts to parental consent correct parental coercion as I've clearly demonstrated through my story. The onus should never be on the child to have to speak out in order to get protection from child marriage. It is all our responsibilities to do something about. This child marriage must become a crime." (Payzee Mahmood, 2020).

To conclude the findings,

The participants of this study narrated their experiences of how child marriage negatively influences children's rights and protection and negatively impacted their own health. As former child brides, they reported wanting and hoping to protect other children, particularly girls, from going through what they have experienced in their union.

As evidenced in the statements/quotes from their video recordings, Payzee, Rubie, Sherry, Samra, and Sara recounted their experiences as child brides, their childhood being stolen, their girlhood and education being interrupted. They described being stripped of their agency, subjected to marital rapes, domestic abuse, early pregnancies, and mental and physical health effects while in the union. They also shared their experiences of being left the responsibility to protect themselves and fighting to escape the marriages which they had been forced into entering.

Moreover, throughout the findings, the participants highlighted the lack of public understanding that child marriage is harmful and not designed for children, as well as the lack of public action to protect these young girls. Therefore, this study confirmed the essence of learning and understanding the experiences of child marriage survivors. It also highlighted the extent of child marriage and how it should be treated as a priority, in order to break the culture of silence surrounding this practice.

This study highlighted essential realities and provided new insights into the practice of child marriage. As previously stated, this study aimed to learn about and better understand the experiences of child marriage through the lenses and voices of child marriage survivors and determine the exit strategies used to escape their marriage. Therefore, the overall findings revealed that child marriage is indeed a harmful practice that impacts the health of the young

brides, puts a stop to their childhood and forces them to assume the responsibilities of a mature wife, for which their minds and bodies are not ready. The findings further indicated the damaging experiences associated with being a child bride, including stripped agency, domestic violence, sexual abuse, lack of or denial of an education and limited access and resources for escaping the child marriage.

Chapter 6: Discussion

This thesis provided new insights regarding the practice of child marriage and protecting current and potential child brides. As previously stated in the study findings, the participants reported how several adult witnesses failed to report and protect them against the practice. Sherry reported how the teachers at school witnessed a 10-year-old being impregnated and married off (Johnson, 2019). Payzee and Sara also reported how the teachers witnessed the young girls disappearing from their classrooms after being married and no reports were filed (Mahmod, 2020; Tasneem, 2020). More to the point, this study highlighted the issue of the failure of those working in the service to the community to report instances of child marriage. Since child marriage is seen as an example of child abuse, according to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and other human-rights legislation (United Nations Children's Fund, 2021), and since the teachers are legally bound to report instances of the abuse of children, then why are the former failing to report child marriages to their supervisors, to child protective services and to the police? As a result, this study suggests that an emphasis be placed on training and educating teachers to be aware of the practice and vigilant about those cases where the young girls (potential brides) start

disappearing from their classroom. In such cases, teachers should be required to give warning signals to the international organization working on this problem. In such cases, teachers should be required to give warning signals to the international organization working on this problem. Better yet, the teachers can report it to the local child protection services or the police so that these agencies can take action to protect the children.

This study also provided new insight into the relationship between education and the protection of current and potential child brides. The data suggested that education could be a fundamental method of protection and an escape route that leads to independence and financial freedom. Previous research (Parsons et al., 2015; Adeola, 2016; Plesons et al., 2021) draw attention to education in terms of equipping the young brides with knowledge and opportunities towards independence and also educating the parents and the community about the practice and its detrimental effects on the young bride's health and life. However, this thesis data analysis pointed to the need to promote a greater awareness and education on the negative effects of child marriage, especially in school and medical settings. In line with this, international organizations should consider this finding when considering adopting policies and practices to help current or potential child brides. Besides, spreading awareness of this fact could potentially support current or potential child brides to find opportunities to change their situation.

Furthermore, all the participants in this study reported having been forced into their child marriages and none of them freely and fully consented to the union. However, one or both parents consented on their behalf; therefore, the data suggested that this reported level of parental consent in child marriages is an influential factor that fuels the practice and is detrimental to children. Bartels et al. (2021) research supported this finding since it revealed a number of reasons why children, especially daughters, cannot reject their parents' choices;

most particularly because of their existing family norms and/or fear of retaliation from their communities.

Interestingly, the data also suggested a compelling association between parental consent as a form of child abuse in child marriages. The findings indicated that parental consent, or rather "parental coercion," was the power factor that had influenced if, who and when the young brides were forced to marry. For instance, 6 out of 6 participants in this study reported their parents had neglected and invalidated their feelings on the topic of their child marriages and had conveniently set them up to be sexually abused by grown-up men (their intended spouses) while they were still children.

The data suggests that most of these parents likely thought that marrying off their daughter before age 18 was in the child's best interest or was possibly a way to honour the family's traditions, beliefs, or religious practices (Christianson, Teiler & Eriksson, 2021; Psaki et al., 2021). However, the findings also suggested that the parents of these participants were either oblivious to, or dismissive of, the fact that child marriage systematically disempowers young girls.”. This practice places them under the authority of their spouses (often older than them) with no say over their bodies and family planning, which results in domestic submissiveness (Wolfe, 2021; Bartels et al., 2021; Siddiqi & Greene, 2022).

It is also important to note that most participants reported that it was a norm in the family to marry the daughters young as a way to protect the family's honour and status in the community. Nevertheless, the data in the findings also suggested that the parents saw child marriage as a way of protecting their daughters from being "promiscuous" by guarding their sexuality and preserving their virginity. This finding coincides with the research by

Ahinkorah et al. (2021) as well as the feminist perspective of Girls Not Brides (2021), both of which attributed child marriages to fear of a girl's sexuality. Those studies evidenced that, in places where child marriage is common, a young girl's virtue and honour are often associated with family honour and status. In this regard, one of the ways to guard their virtue is by marrying them off, while they are young. Ahinkorah et al. (2021), as well as the feminist perspective of Girls Not Brides (2021), both of which attributed child marriages to fear of a girl's sexuality. Those studies evidenced that, in places where child marriage is common, a young girl's virtue and honour are often associated with family honour and status. In this regard, one of the ways to guard their virtue is by marrying them off, while they are young. Besides, drawing from the feminist approaches of Moschetti (2005) and John (2021), they stated that a woman's sexuality is at the heart of male dominance and often a threat to male-dominated societies. There is fear of women owning their own sexuality, often tied to the males losing dominance in their communities.

Furthermore, most participants reported experiencing sexual abuse throughout their child marriages. This finding was not surprising since the Human Rights Watch (2022) reports revealed that sexual/marital intercourse in child marriages is typically neither based on the brides' desires nor consent. This is often forced upon them (designated as a duty to consummate the marriage); therefore, these acts are regarded as marital rapes and legally recognized as domestic and sexual violence against women (Siddiqi & Greene, 2022; Save the children, 2022).

The findings in this thesis also suggests how there is a strong relationship between spousal age differences in child marriages and domestic and sexual violence. The results revealed that all the study participants had been forced to marry older spouses, ranging from

5 or more years older. The findings also suggested that there is an inherent power imbalance in these relationships, one which often leads to domestic violence. On top of that, the data also indicated that when these young brides are forced into child marriage, they are typically subjected to state-sanctioned rape and are at increased risk of domestic abuse.

This finding confirmed Sezgin & Punamäki's (2020) literature that spousal age difference, frequent in child marriage, often creates a power imbalance in such child marriages and is a significant risk factor for domestic and sexual abuse. More to the point, from the feminist perspective, the spousal age difference would most likely strengthen the othering concept (de Beauvoir, 1949) since the bride is a young child than an adult woman. Hence, the girls are married off when they are young to much older men, so they never lose the status of "other." This power imbalance often limits the girl's agency and traps them in their child marriage.

In addition to the domestic violence risks that child marriage presents to the young brides, the findings revealed that spousal abuse and non-consensual sex have long-lasting detrimental consequences on the mental health of young girls, including reproductive health effects. This is because these young brides are still at their formative stage of psychological/physical development. As previously illustrated in the findings, underaged brides often face emotional abuse, are isolated from their familiar surroundings and friends, and are unable to negotiate safe sex and family planning. Therefore, they often end up having unwanted pregnancies and sometimes children for whom they cannot care, since they are not mentally-ready to be mothers. For example, Sherry Johnson reported having six children by the time she was 17 years of age while still lawfully recognized as a child (United Nations Children's Fund, 2021). This finding clearly showed that this type of practice goes against numerous of the Articles of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (See Appendix B

and C), but Articles 31, 34, and 36 in particular. Article 31 states, "Every child has the right to play, rest, and take part in creative activities;" and Articles 34 and 36 states, "Every child has the right to be protected from sexual abuse and exploitation" (United Nations Children's Fund, 2021).

The findings also revealed how some of the participants described their pregnancies as "a physical reminder of their rapists (then-spouses) (Mahmod, 2020), resulting in some of them seeking an abortion, which could result in pregnancy complications. The research by Sezgin & Punamäki's (2020) supported this finding, when it indicated that pregnancy complications are more prevalent in young brides, whose bodies are not fully developed for sexual relations, carrying a child, and abortion. All of these can put both the mother or the baby at a high risk of dying, due to complications.

It is important to note that all participants successfully escaped their child marriage. However, with regard to the strategies which the participants (former child brides) used to escape, the study demonstrated that there was no clear structure, guideline, or direct route in ways that the child brides utilized to escape. The routes that they considered most suitable to use varied according to the severity of their experiences and the influences of the environment they lived in. The data analysis identified the complexities of family conflict and dangers associated with leaving child marriages, based on participants' experiences, and therefore should be taken into account by international organizations when considering supports for married girls. The former brides in this study recounted their escape routes out of their child marriage being extremely difficult and heart-breaking, yet at the same time liberating, and empowering. The participants highlighted that leaving their child marriage/or separation from their then-husbands meant breaking up with their families of origin. The

participants revealed that though leaving their child marriage was their liberation from their forced marriage, it was also intrinsically linked to the painful emotional and painful process of completely cutting off their family of origin.

The data analysis also identified a pattern in the experiences of child marriage that serves to trap the young brides into their union longer. This pattern showed that, because the young brides are minors, they, are unaware of their rights and dependent on their parents financially and emotionally. When forced to marry young, their dependency is automatically passed from their parents onto their older spouse. Therefore, and as evidenced in the findings, the participants described their education as being disrupted, experiencing domestic and sexual violence, psychological abuse, and isolation, including weakening their self-confidence, independence, and connections with social support. Moreover, as the research by Bryngeirsdottir & Halldorsdottir (2022) claimed, the latter is often done to prevent the child brides from recognizing that they are in an abusive situation and to increase their dependency on the abuser (their spouses). Most participants described how this type of psychological abuse was often associated with feelings of hopelessness; a sense that there was no way out except to stay in their child marriage and accept their situations.

Furthermore, the findings also suggested an association between lower levels of education and being trapped in child marriage, even up to adulthood. As indicated in the findings, all the participants reported being forced to drop out of school, being socially isolated, and cut from their families and social support, making them entirely dependent on their spouses and therefore being trapped longer in their child marriage. For instance, one of the participants, Sara Tasneem, after her child marriage was taken to another country, where she did not know anybody or speak the language. As a result, the data suggested that the price

of this exclusion was her complete dependency on her spouse with limited access to finances and opportunities to leave the marriage. This finding also suggests that discontinuing a young bride's education not only puts a stop to her childhood but also negatively affects her adulthood. Girls are often found to be financially dependent on their spouses with restricted access to external support, making it more difficult to leave the marriage, even after they are adults.

According to Wahi et al.'s (2021) research, adulthood presents child brides with numerous opportunities to get a divorce or to be separated from their spouses. However, the data in the present study demonstrated that even when these young brides reached the legal age to divorce their then-husbands, leaving their marriage was almost impossible because of the varied circumstances which the participants stated in the findings. For instance, one of the participants, Payzee Mahmood, recounted that attempting to leave meant risking losing her life, due to the practice of honour killings found in her community. Another participant, Samra Zafar, reported that leaving her child marriage meant losing her children to her "abuser" due to financial constraints.

Although this part of the thesis focused on the exit strategies that were used by participants to escape their marriages, their testimonies also highlighted views on how to best protect and support current and potential child brides. Four of the six participants described the unwillingness of the public to interfere and the lack of understanding and involvement from public officials (with the responsibility to serve the public) to support the young brides leaving their child marriage. For instance, Sherry reported, "But sadly, Child marriage does not seem real to lawmakers until they say they see and hear someone who says, yes it's for real, it happened to me." (Johnson, 2019).

Interestingly, the findings of this study led this researcher to uncover legal exceptions that permit children below the age of 18 to marry or in the common-law; —such as parental consent, or judge consent, therefore, contradicting the legal age limit of 18 per the United Nations and various international UN-related human rights agreements (Koski & Clark, 2021). More to the point, the Canadian federal Civil Marriage Act that was amended in 2005 also contradicted the legal age limit of 18, which was established by the United Nations, and many Canada-approved/advocated international agreements on the rights of a child (Koski & Clark, 2021). For example, according to Article 2 of the Canadian federal Civil marriage act. (2015, c. 29, s. 4) "Marriage, for civil purposes, is the lawful union of two persons to the exclusion of all others." "Consent is required: Marriage requires the free and enlightened consent of two persons to be the spouse of each other." And for "Minimum age: No person who is under the age of 16 years may contract marriage." (Civil marriage act, 2015, June 18). Although this Civil Marriage Act pertains to only one country, in this case, Canada, the study used it as an example of the types of legislation that may be used to allow child marriage in other nations, as well as challenging the efforts to eradicate the child marriage practice. Therefore, this thesis demonstrated the necessity of learning more about the practice of child marriage and the factors that sustain the practice based on the child marriage survivors' experiences to end it.

Implication to the theoretical framework

This thesis findings fit with Simone de Beauvoir's (1949) feminist theory about women as "the other" in understanding domination and oppression. This theory claimed that male spouses had the assumed status of "the transcendent subject," and "the immanent

Other," for the female spouses. Therefore, de Beauvoir's demanded that women should be treated as equals to men and laws, customs, and education must be altered to encourage this and put it into practice.

Accordingly, this study's data findings demonstrated that the young brides were often married to men considerably older than them and pushed into stereotypical gender roles in their child marriages. From de Beauvoir's feminist perspective, the gender roles imposed on the young brides are socially constructed and aligned to dominate women in the marriage (Christianson, Teiler & Eriksson, 2021). The participants indicated how they were typically forced to assume the household chores and caretaking, and their spouses held a role as the head/protector and provider of the family unit, therefore, suggesting that the spouses were the 'absolute subject' and the young brides were the 'other.' It posited an impression and an idea that women are lesser, an object to protect and to reproduce instead of an equal.

The findings of this study also explained how child marriage violated many children's rights according to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. The participants' lived experiences clearly showed that child marriage violated their numerous child rights, particularly Articles 19 and 34 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. —Article 19 states: "Every child should be protected from violence and abuse," and Article 34 states: "Every child should be protected from sexual abuse and exploitation" (United Nations Children's Fund, 2021). This finding highlighted the failed efforts and responsibility of parents, guardians, caregivers, and people/institutions accountable to protect, promote and implement the child's rights. Besides, by enforcing the responsibility of parents, guardians, and institutions to respect, implement, and fulfil the children's rights, the more likely the girl child will be protected against child marriage; it is her right to be protected from harmful and traditional practices.

Furthermore, from the participants' testimonies, it was clearly made evident that child marriage puts a stop to the young bride's education, therefore, violating Article 18 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, the right to "access to education" and traps her into the marriage longer (United Nations Children's Fund, 2021). This finding led the researcher to suggest education as a protective strategy against the practice. Through by enforcing the girl's access to/ continuing her education, rather than child marriage, she is provided with the necessary skills and economic opportunities that contribute to her empowerment and future. Other feminists' perspectives through Girls Not Brides (2021) supported this suggestion that the longer a girl stays in school, learns her rights and claims those rights, the less likely she will be forced into child marriage and exploited. Correspondingly, the study findings contributed to a clear understanding of using the rights-based approach in building the young bride's ability as right-holders by empowering them to understand and claim their rights.

The data also identified that the influence of parents and the role which bystanders/community members played in these child marriages were rarely investigated. This suggests that international organisations and law makers should take into account a child's right-based approach while reinforcing the responsibility and accountability of the parents, witnesses, bystanders, and the community members, and protecting and supporting current and potential child brides.

Additionally, most participants of this study reported that they were frequently socially isolated and cut off from family, friends, and other forms of support. They had fewer opportunities to financially support themselves and their children, given the limited educational and work opportunities. Consequently, the data analysis identified that the price of this marginalization is typically a cycle of oppression and harm to the young brides. This

finding allowed the researcher to suggest that child marriage is deeply rooted in gender inequality and patriarchal values that marginalize the young brides and enforce subordination to their grown spouses. In support of this finding, Moschetti (2005) and John (2021), feminist scholars, explored the concept of patriarchal values in the theoretical focus on male dominance, gender-based violence, and power in family structures. The feminists produced abundant evidence on how child marriage was found to limit wives' access to financial freedom/opportunities, such as work and education, because husbands are seen as heads of the family, and women must submit to them.

Similarly, other feminists' perspectives, through NGOs such as Save the Children (2022), Unchained at Last (2021), and Girls Not Brides (2021) campaigning against child exploitation in the form of child marriage, offered critical understandings of the negative impacts that child marriage has on the lives of young brides. It was posited that child marriage is a significant risk factor associated with domestic violence and sexual abuse against girls due to spousal age difference—which is typical of the practice. Therefore, having different feminist perspectives while interpreting the findings supported the researcher to catch on an association between spousal age difference, domestic violence, and power imbalance in child marriage. They highlighted the limits of women's and girls' governance in social conditions, discourses, and interests, symbolizing working against women's/children's agency.

Accordingly, using the child's right-based approach along with the feminists' perspectives in this study allowed the researcher to suggest that child marriage is, in fact, a gendered problem that undermines the rights of a girl child; and has detrimental outcomes on the bride's health, both physically and psychologically. In line with the purpose of this

research, a feminist perspective from Girls Not Brides (2021) theorized that women's voices are proof of agency and a symbol of empowerment. Therefore, the findings of this study suggests that the voices of survivors, including potential child brides and married girls, should be central in the movement against child marriage because giving voices to the oppressed is justice. Hence, the objective of this study.

Limitations of the study

This thesis utilized a qualitative research approach to explore the lived experiences of child marriage survivors, who posted their experiences on social media. However, this study did not focus on a particular country, culture, or religion. Therefore, the experiences of former child brides will have differed based on the participants' culture, religion, or country. Similarly, the study focused on child brides' experiences and not child grooms, since the practice is commonly reported to affect girls more than boys (Siddiqi & Greene, 2022). Therefore, it should not be used to attempt to understand any of the experiences of child grooms.

Furthermore, the scope of this thesis was limited to English-speaking participants only, due to this study's limitation of learning the lived experiences from the lenses and voices of participants, who articulated their experiences through videos that were directed at the English-speaking audience. However, the research by Tripp & Munson (2022) stated that a participant's language plays an essential role in framing the perception of their experiences. Therefore, the language that is used influences not only how speakers think about the world, but also how researchers translate the events. This meaning can be lost when other parties (translators) are involved.

Moreover, some participants of this study did not provide adequate information on how they were moved across borders before, or after they were married, therefore, it should not be used to attempt to understand the border crossing affairs.

Lastly, as previously stated, married children are a hidden population (Wahi et al., 2019), one that would be extremely difficult from which to recruit. Therefore, in order to facilitate the sampling for this study, the data collection and analysis were limited to adult survivors who were once child brides, who managed to escape their marriages and who chose to post their experiences on social media. This restriction could have affected the data that was gathered. For example, the child marriage survivors who were once child brides, but may have managed re-marry and find happiness in their new adult married lives – their experiences were not represented in this study, as they most probably will not have needed to post their experiences on social media.

Conclusion, future research, and recommendation

The objectives of this thesis came down to two main areas of focus: On the one hand, to reach a deeper understanding of the experiences of child marriage through the lenses and voices of female child marriage survivors; On the other hand, identifying the exit strategies that were used by former child brides, to leave their union. Based on the research findings, this study generated future research recommendations to support current and potential child brides and target the root causes that sustain this practice.

According to the lived experiences of child marriage survivors (participants of this study), the data analysis identified the necessity for international organizations, governments and other support services to incorporate victim-centred approaches when considering supporting current married girls, potential child brides, and survivors. This data contributed to a clear understanding of the essential support for survivors based on the participant's experiences in the union. It indicated a need for comprehensive assistance, both emotional and psychological support, emergency shelter support, extended accommodation support, and counselling from individuals who are trauma-informed and who have an understanding of the complexities of the practice and family conflict.

As described in the discussion section, this study demonstrated a need for future research and interventions designed to train teachers, social workers, law enforcement, and medical professionals to recognize, address, and report any suspicion of the practice of child marriage to the appropriate agencies and support services. In addition, the results of this study aligned with the existing literature which supported the need for additional research on increasing girl's access to education, improving legal frameworks and developing robust victim-centred implementation mechanisms to protect the current and potential child brides, including supporting child marriage survivors and their children (Girls Not Brides, 2022 and Siddiqi & Greene, 2022).

Most importantly, this thesis highlighted the urgency of educating the public on the negative effects of the practice of child marriage and its detrimental outcomes on the child bride's health. Future researchers should also explore ways of improving the prevention and supports systems that focus on educating parents, elders, and communities about the dangers

of child marriage. Along with the efforts to strengthen and uphold the law that establishes 18 as the minimum age for marriage in communities where child marriage is found common to prevent these sorts of marriages.

In line with the escape routes, future studies should consider exploring exit strategies that might be transferable between developing and developed nations. These are needed to establish successful escape routes that current child brides can potentially employ to leave their child marriage.

Lastly, the lived experiences of the former child brides lead us to conclude that a practical approach to child marriage must consider the practice as a form of gender-based violence against girls. Therefore, international organizations should adopt an educational policy to support and educate current and potential child brides and their families. Regarding this suggestion, the study has also led us to conclude that there is also a need for structures, including properly funded shelters, that are designed for young women and their children who identify as child marriage survivors or domestic and sexual abuse survivors. As a final point, this thesis aspired to empower potential child brides and young brides still in union by advocating the progress of advancing gender equality and educating children worldwide and communities about women's rights and equality for all people. In line with this, this study was also conducted as a way to spread awareness and inspire the public, lawmakers, advocates, reporters, researchers and other survivors to join in the movement against the practice of child marriage.

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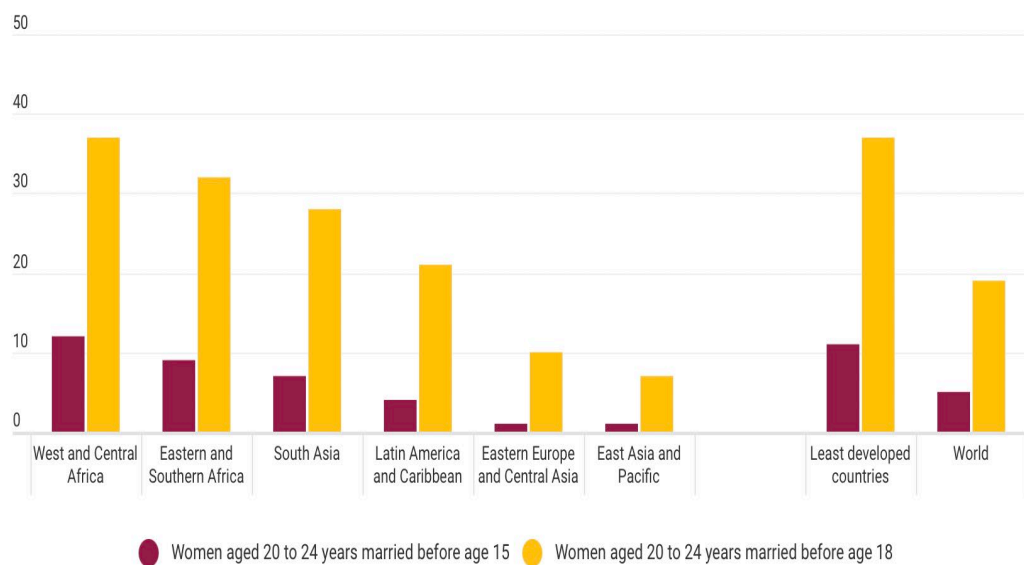
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Appendix A: Graph of the prevalence of child marriage worldwide

Percentage of women aged 20 to 24 years who were first married or in a union before age 15 and before age 18, by region



(UNICEF global databases, 2022)

“Notes: Estimates are based on a subset of 101 countries covering 77 per cent of the population of women aged 20 to 24. Regional estimates represent data covering at least 50 per cent of the regional population. Data coverage was insufficient to calculate regional estimates for the Middle East and North Africa, North America and Western Europe. “(UNICEF global databases, 2022)

Appendix B: Convention on the Rights of the Child, Article 1 to Article 21

| | | |
|---|--|---|
|  <p>1 DEFINITION OF A CHILD</p> | <p>All children have all these rights, no matter who they are, where they live, what language they speak, what their religion is, what they think, what they look like, if they are a boy or girl, if they have a disability, if they are rich or poor, and no matter who their parents or families are or what their parents or families believe or do. No child should be treated unfairly for any reason.</p> |  <p>3 BEST INTERESTS OF THE CHILD</p> <p>When adults make decisions, they should think about how their decisions will affect children. All adults should do what is best for children. Governments should make sure children are protected and looked after by their parents, or by other people when this is needed. Governments should make sure that people and places responsible for looking after children are doing a good job.</p> |
|  <p>4 MAKING RIGHTS REAL</p> | <p>Governments must do all they can to make sure that every child in their countries can enjoy all the rights in this Convention.</p> |  <p>6 LIFE, SURVIVAL AND DEVELOPMENT</p> <p>Every child has the right to be alive. Governments must make sure that children survive and develop in the best possible way.</p> |
|  <p>7 NAME AND NATIONALITY</p> | <p>Children must be registered when they are born and given a name which is officially recognized by the government. Children must have a nationality (belong to a country). Whenever possible, children should know their parents and be looked after by them.</p> |  <p>8 IDENTITY</p> <p>Children have the right to their own identity – an official record of who they are which includes their name, nationality and family relations. No one should take this away from them, but if this happens, governments must help children to quickly get their identity back.</p> |
|  <p>9 KEEPING FAMILIES TOGETHER</p> | <p>Children should not be separated from their parents unless they are not being properly looked after – for example, if a parent hurts or does not take care of a child. Children whose parents don't live together should stay in contact with both parents unless this might harm the child.</p> |  <p>11 PROTECTION FROM KIDNAPPING</p> <p>Governments must stop children being taken out of the country when this is against the law – for example, being kidnapped by someone or held abroad by a parent when the other parent does not agree.</p> |
|  <p>12 RESPECT FOR CHILDREN'S VIEWS</p> | <p>Children have the right to give their opinions freely on issues that affect them. Adults should listen and take children seriously.</p> |  <p>14 FREEDOM OF THOUGHT AND RELIGION</p> <p>Children can choose their own thoughts, opinions and religion, but this should not stop other people from enjoying their rights. Parents can guide children so that as they grow up, they learn to properly use this right.</p> |
|  <p>15 SETTING UP OR JOINING GROUPS</p> | <p>Children can join or set up groups or organisations, and they can meet with others, as long as this does not harm other people.</p> |  <p>17 ACCESS TO INFORMATION</p> <p>Children have the right to get information from the Internet, radio, television, newspapers, books and other sources. Adults should make sure the information they are getting is not harmful. Governments should encourage the media to share information from lots of different sources, in languages that all children can understand.</p> |
|  <p>18 RESPONSIBILITY OF PARENTS</p> | <p>Parents are the main people responsible for bringing up a child. When the child does not have any parents, another adult will have this responsibility and they are called a "guardian". Parents and guardians should always consider what is best for that child. Governments should help them. Where a child has both parents, both of them should be responsible for bringing up the child.</p> |  <p>20 CHILDREN WITHOUT FAMILIES</p> <p>Every child who cannot be looked after by their own family has the right to be looked after properly by people who respect the child's religion, culture, language and other aspects of their life.</p> |
|  <p>21 CHILDREN WHO ARE ADOPTED</p> | <p>When children are adopted, the most important thing is to do what is best for them. If a child cannot be properly looked after in their own country – for example by living with another family – then they might be adopted in another country.</p> | |

(Child-friendly initiative, 2018)

Appendix C: Convention on the Rights of the Child, Article 22 to Article 54

22
REFUGEE CHILDREN

Children who move from their home country to another country as refugees (because it was not safe for them to stay there) should get help and protection and have the same rights as children born in that country.

23
CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES

Every child with a disability should enjoy the best possible life in society. Governments should remove all obstacles for children with disabilities to become independent and to participate actively in the community.

24
HEALTH, WATER, FOOD, ENVIRONMENT

Children have the right to the best health care possible, clean water to drink, healthy food and a clean and safe environment to live in. All adults and children should have information about how to stay safe and healthy.

25
REVIEW OF A CHILD'S PLACEMENT

Every child who has been placed somewhere away from home - for their care, protection or health - should have their situation checked regularly to see if everything is going well and if this is still the best place for the child to be.

26
SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC HELP

Governments should provide money or other support to help children from poor families.

27
FOOD, CLOTHING, A SAFE HOME

Children have the right to food, clothing and a safe place to live so they can develop in the best possible way. The government should help families and children who cannot afford this.

28
ACCESS TO EDUCATION

Every child has the right to an education. Primary education should be free. Secondary and higher education should be available to every child. Children should be encouraged to go to school to the highest level possible. Discipline in schools should respect children's rights and never use violence.

29
AIMS OF EDUCATION

Children's education should help them fully develop their personalities, talents and abilities. It should teach them to understand their own rights, and to respect other people's rights, cultures and differences. It should help them to live peacefully and protect the environment.

30
MINORITY CULTURE, LANGUAGE AND RELIGION

Children have the right to use their own language, culture and religion - even if these are not shared by most people in the country where they live.

31
REST, PLAY, CULTURE, ARTS

Every child has the right to rest, relax, play and to take part in cultural and creative activities.

32
PROTECTION FROM HARMFUL WORK

Children have the right to be protected from doing work that is dangerous or bad for their education, health or development. If children work, they have the right to be safe and paid fairly.

33
PROTECTION FROM HARMFUL DRUGS

Governments must protect children from taking, making, carrying or selling harmful drugs.

34
PROTECTION FROM SEXUAL ABUSE

The government should protect children from sexual exploitation (being taken advantage of) and sexual abuse, including by people forcing children to have sex for money, or making sexual pictures or films of them.

35
PREVENTION OF SALE AND TRAFFICKING

Governments must make sure that children are not kidnapped or sold, or taken to other countries or places to be exploited (taken advantage of).

36
PROTECTION FROM EXPLOITATION

Children have the right to be protected from all other kinds of exploitation (being taken advantage of), even if these are not specifically mentioned in this Convention.

37
CHILDREN IN DETENTION

Children who are accused of breaking the law should not be killed, tortured, treated cruelly, put in prison forever, or put in prison with adults. Prison should always be the last choice and only for the shortest possible time. Children in prison should have legal help and be able to stay in contact with their family.

38
PROTECTION IN WAR

Children have the right to be protected during war. No child under 15 can join the army or take part in war.

39
RECOVERY AND REINTEGRATION

Children have the right to get help if they have been hurt, neglected, treated badly or affected by war, so they can get back their health and dignity.

40
CHILDREN WHO BREAK THE LAW

Children accused of breaking the law have the right to legal help and fair treatment. There should be lots of solutions to help these children become good members of their communities. Prison should only be the last choice.

41
BEST LAW FOR CHILDREN APPLIES

If the laws of a country protect children's rights better than this Convention, then those laws should be used.

42
EVERYONE MUST KNOW CHILDREN'S RIGHTS

Governments should actively tell children and adults about this Convention so that everyone knows about children's rights.

43-54
HOW THE CONVENTION WORKS

These articles explain how governments, the United Nations - including the Committee on the Rights of the Child and UNICEF - and other organisations work to make sure all children enjoy all their rights.

(Child-friendly initiative, 2018)