

Executive Summary

Not Brides: Child Marriage in Egypt Determinants and Consequences

Overview

Child marriage is globally defined as any formal marriage or informal union between a child under the age of 18 and an adult or another child.¹ The prevalence of child marriage has decreased worldwide, yet more than 100 million girls worldwide are expected to marry before their eighteenth birthday in the next decade. Now, up to 10 million more girls will be at risk of becoming child brides as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.²

Child marriage has major implications at the individual, national and international level, as it robs girls of their childhood and threatens their lives and health, imposes substantial economic costs at the national level and poses major threats to global development and prosperity.³

In Egypt, while marriage under the age of 18 is legally prohibited, the Egyptian Ministry of Health and Population (MOHP) reported in 2018, that 11% of girls between the ages of 15 and 18, nearly 1 in every 20 girls is married or have been married before.⁴ Another study conducted by the population council revealed that in rural areas of two Egyptian governorates (Assiut and Souhag) over half of the girls who are married before the age of 18 have experienced intimate partner violence (IPV).⁵ Child marriage represents a major obstacle to all developmental efforts undertaken by governmental and non-governmental entities to further empower women and accelerate efforts towards ending gender-based violence (GBV) in Egypt. Therefore it was crucial to undertake a study to further examine the determinants of child marriage, dynamics of the decision making process and the consequences of this harmful practice at the individual and the collective level.

1 UNICEF, Child marriage threatens the lives, well-being and futures of girls around the world. Available here: [Child marriage | UNICEF](#)

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid.

4 CAPMAS 2017, Egypt, Establishments and Housing, Population of Census Egypt.

5 Population Council, 2017. Married Adolescent Girls in Rural Assiut and Souhag, Egypt

Study Objectives

The study aims to contribute to the existing literature body on the impact of child marriage on development in Egypt and to assist policy makers and relevant entities in better designing policies and interventions aiming to end child marriage. The study specific objectives are:

- 1 — Identify determinants, norms and beliefs related to child marriage in urban and rural Egypt.
- 2 — Identify the structural and social factors that support the continuation of the practice.
- 3 — Identify the physical, mental and sexual consequences as well as the broader social and legal impact of child marriage.
- 4 — Examine the dynamics of the decision-making process and identify influential actors.

Methodology

Study Site

The collection of data took place in the rural areas of Fayoum (Upper Egypt) and urban Greater Cairo. Fayoum and Greater Cairo governorates were chosen due to the high prevalence rate of child marriage within them and the chosen areas facilitated the comparison between urban and rural settings.

Study Sample

The study sample was purposely selected based on the following inclusion criteria:

- Women who were married under the age of 18 years old
- Women who were divorced before the age of 18 years old
- Residing in the rural areas of Fayoum or urban areas of Greater Cairo

A total of 42 women were recruited between the ages of 17-29, residing in rural areas in Fayoum (Al Hamouli, Shawashna and Sanhour villages) and 21 residing in urban communities within Greater Cairo (Helwan and Manshiet Nasr). Study participants were identified through community-based organizations (CBO⁶) within the targeted areas who are actively engaged in their community and experienced gender-based violence (GBV).

Data Collection

Experienced data collectors were trained to conduct all the interviews following the objectives and the ethical guidelines of the study.

Data Analysis

In-depth interviews (IDIs) were conducted in Egyptian colloquial Arabic and later were audio-recorded and transcribed. A quality check was conducted to ensure the accuracy of the transcriptions and data was coded following a thematic framework that was developed based on the study objectives. The software Dedoose Version 8.0.42. was used for coding the data.

Study Limitations

The study faced several challenges:

- Difficulties in recruiting women who have undergone child marriage and were divorced/separated before turning 18 or obtaining their official marriage certificate. We aimed to recruit 12 women, however we were only able to recruit 10 cases.
- Women, especially illiterate ones, tend to misreport their age or marriage of the age of their husband then; we recorded several inconsistencies throughout the interviews.
- Interviewed women underreported intimate partner violence (IPV), this was accounted to the sensitivity of the topic

6 Six CBOs were involved in the study (3 in Fayoum and 3 in Greater Cairo).

and the shame/stigma that might be associated with reporting it, especially in the presence of other women from the same communities.

Description of Study Population

The literature indicates that living in rural areas increases the likelihood of marrying early. Girls in rural residences are more likely to marry 1.5 years younger than girls in urban areas.⁷ In all of the marriages examined in this study, girls were younger than boys at the time of marriage, the majority of the cases had an average age gap of 2-3 years. The average age of the rural Fayoum respondents when they entered the marriage is 15.23 and over half of them married a relative of the family while the average age in Greater Cairo was a year older and the majority of girls married a non-relative mainly from the same governorate.

Main Study Findings

Determinants of Child Marriage

Notion of El-Sutra

One of the most powerful drivers of child marriage cited by all study respondents is the notion of “el-sutra” (protection or shelter). Girls are married for el-sutra, [girls are married for protection and shelter] in other words, marriage is to protect and shield girls. The majority of study participants believe that when girls start to menstruate, then this is a sign that their bodies are ready for marriage: “her body

has flourished”. Puberty is widely perceived in many communities, rural or urban, as a marker of girl’s readiness to get married, where marriage becomes a “gratification of sexual needs and procreation”.⁸

This is why girls get married at a young age; their fathers and mothers force them. They say it is to sutra. They would be afraid that other men would rape her or trick her that’s why, so they marry her off.

Aisha, Sanhour, 17 years, divorced



Nexus of Shame/Honor

The notion of honor is fundamentally gendered. The majority of interviewed women saw that it is women’s concern to remain honorable⁹ by ensuring their sexual purity and modesty so they would not bring shame to their families. They are quite aware that their sexuality is very tied to the honor of the male members of their family and submit to men’s responsibility to protect and defend their honor and reputation – at the individual and collective level – which result in controlling their mobility and sexuality. Therefore, their resistance to decisions of early marriage is quite limited.

7 Westoff, Charles F. 2003. Trends in Marriage and Early Childbearing in Developing Countries

8 Taha, D. (2019). “Seeking a Widow with Orphaned Children”: Understanding Sutra Marriage Amongst Syrian Refugee Women in Egypt. In *Migration and Islamic Ethics* (pp. 67-91). Brill.

9 Brandon, J., & Hafez, S. (2008). Crimes of the community: Honour-based violence in the UK. Centre for Social Cohesion.

My uncle is the one who pressured me to get married, he used to say I should get married when I'm young, it's better than having people saying that something is wrong with me, I should just get married to my cousin.

Souad, Greater Cairo, married at 16 years



Pre-Existing Cultural Traditions and Gender Norms

Age of marriage

The majority of participants believed that girl's bodies and mind are ready for marriage between the ages of 15-18. Participants in urban areas tend to perceive the appropriate age of marriage to be higher than participants in the rural areas. However, they all indicated that not all girls mature in the same way, depending on the nature of each girl's body.

It's normal here for a girl to be engaged when she's in 3rd preparatory, she's 13 or 14 years old, it depends on her body. If she has a nice [mature] body, any man can go to propose and they [her family] agree; even if he's young and the girl is young. But they don't know better, she's young, her [mentality] is still young, until she turns 18 she's still a child.

Fatma, 18 years, Fayoum

Marriageability

Many study participants believe that if girls refuse marriage proposals more than once, this could lead to social exclusion that subsequently affects her reputation and can decrease her chances to get married.

If she's getting many proposals from suitors and she rejects them all, people would start saying that she's too picky, and that her parents reject anyone who proposes. So new suitors start assuming that they will just be rejected, even though they do not know the real reason behind the rejections; maybe her parents cannot find a good opportunity for her that is why they reject [them]. This means when someone new wants to propose to her and asks around and finds that she rejects people he will just not propose.

Lamia, 19 years, Fayoum

Peer pressure

Many study participants talked about how the girls themselves are the one who are keen to get married at young age. Child marriage is quite a normalized practice in many of the researched communities and therefore girls would feel socially awkward or isolated if they are the only ones who are not married among peers and relatives in the same age. Delayed marriage affects their image, ultimately affecting their self-confidence, pride and family reputation within their community.

She compares herself to many other girls who are engaged, and she starts wanting to be like them [engaged], if all her friends are married and she isn't, she starts feeling like something is wrong with her... We have people who are obsessed with marrying their daughters off. They say why someone's daughter is married and ours isn't; what makes my daughter any different. Here; all the girls that got married at a younger age were convinced by their parents.

Samah, 29 years, Fayoum

Marriage customs and arrangements

Marriages are festive and special in Egypt, where a bride receives lots of attention and engages in activities she never experiences such as going to the hairdresser or getting a body scrub and/or facial treatment. The bride-to-be receives gifts and valuable items such as gold. All things they did not have prior to being engaged. These festive atmospheres grant girls a false feeling of happiness and independence from parents.

The girl is happy about the [wedding] dress, having a wedding, getting married, and having her own home. She doesn't know that it's a big responsibility and that marriage is not a game. She doesn't know the value of marriage until she actually married and is suddenly responsible for everything. Her lack of awareness comes from the fact that she doesn't know better, she doesn't know the real meaning of marriage.

Gehad, 23 years, Cairo

for financial reasons, the only option left to them is to secure her future in marriage.

Poverty forces parents to marry off their daughters early. Sometimes the parents are incapable of providing for their kids. Here, the parents can reject her neighbor or her relative who genuinely loves her because he can't afford to buy a fridge or a stove, all they [parents] care about is money.

Amal, 30 years, Fayoum



School Environment and Commute Safety Concerns

Participants discussed inadequate school environment - overcrowding and bullying – as well as the distance to school as a significant safety concern for the majority of parents. Girls are commuting long distances to school each day, and they can be exposed to sexual harassment and violence going to and coming from school.

Financial Hardship and Economic Insecurity

Entrenched gender norms interact with economic insecurity to perpetuate the practice of child marriage.¹⁰ Child marriage is widely seen within the prospect of shifting the financial burden of a girl onto the groom and his family. Further, when families fail to support the education of girls

10 Elnakib, S., Hussein, S. A., Hafez, S., Elsallab, M., Hunersen, K., Metzler, J., & Robinson, W. C. (2021). Drivers and consequences of child marriage in a context of protracted displacement: a qualitative study among Syrian refugees in Egypt. BMC public health, 21(1), 1-14.

When I grew older, they [her parents] said that girls don't need to go to school, that I should get married instead. Here in the rural areas and farms; school is not important for a lot of people, because there are no safe roads to schools. You'll have to find a (toktok) to drive you but the commute would still be far. So, my parents forced me to drop out of school, people here are concerned about girls' safety.

Soha, 23 years, Fayoum

The Decision-Making Process of Child Marriage

The majority of study participants stated that male members in the family – often the father – is the final decision-maker. Although there were discussions among study participants around the increased involvement of girls in the decision, yet it only takes the shape of consent to the decision rather than participating in it.

When my now husband proposed; my family accepted and when they asked me, I said “whatever you like”. When I found out that my whole family accepted, I accepted as well.

Amira, 18 years, Fayoum

study participants, the majority of them have reported being exposed to sexual assaults by their husbands including marital rape.

Sometimes I would be angry at him, and can't stand to see him, but he would still sleep with me against my will. A lot of the times I would tell him to take whatever he wants but I won't be engaged. He used to do this a lot until we got divorced, a lot of the times I would refuse but he forces me regardless. Other times I would be scared to refuse because I knew he'll do what he wants in all cases, so it wouldn't matter if I talked or not.

Iman, 25, Divorced, Fayoum, married at 14 years



Consequences of Child Marriage

The study documented a range of social, health and economic consequences of child marriage and its impact on girls who have experienced it. Child marriage is often associated with multiple health risks as the majority of these young are exposed to early and frequent sexual relations and to repeated pregnancies and childbirth before they are physically mature and psychologically ready.

Intimate partner violence including sexual violence was highly observed among the

Recommendations

- **Design and implement community-based programmes** to end child marriage and widely utilize approaches and disseminate messages that challenge honour/shame nexus and notions of masculinity as it is embodied in controlling women's bodies and sexuality.
- **Issuing a law to criminalize** the act of early marriage and all involved parties.
- **Work with teachers in primary and secondary schools** to assist in creating an enabling environment for increased school enrolment of girls.

— **Ensure that policies and programmes improve school environments** and the safety and retention of girls have full support from teachers.

— **Provide support for economic and livelihood opportunities** for girls and young women especially in rural communities. Thus, marriage would not be seen as the only option available to families experiencing financial hardship.

— **Ensure universal access to reproductive health services** for young women at the community level, including provision of family planning and contraceptive – including emergency contraception- services and information.

— **Introduce scholarships and other incentives** to enable girls especially ones from poor and vulnerable communities to access and continue education.

— **Ensure that school current policies and practices do not discriminate** against married and pregnant girls. Address barriers within the school environment, including exposure to sexual harassment and violence.

— **Design and implement community-based interventions** that aim at empowering young women and girls and improve access to assertiveness attitude and leadership skills so they can actively be involved in different anti-child marriage initiatives/programmes and develop negotiating skills and strategies to face their families and resist child marriage.

— **Develop multi-sectoral programme approaches and partnerships.** Given the multiple consequences of child marriage, a multi-sectoral and multi-pronged approach is the most effective way to address this issue.