

Committee: The Commission on the Status of Women

Topic: Child Marriage Through the Lens of the Oppression of Women



Theme of AUSMUN 2024

The theme for this year's AUSMUN is "Forging Tomorrow with Yesterday's Lessons". Dating back to 500 BC, great minds such as Confucius have spread this ideal: "Study the past, if you would divine the future". During a typical Model United Nations conference, delegates are expected to learn from their country's past and, in many cases, actively rewrite it. Historical knowledge when used effectively can lead to informed decisions; by reflecting on what has and has not worked in the past, collectively we are able to gain perspective on current and future policy. We encourage delegates to keep this ideal in mind while wrestling with the nuances and complications inherent in the ideas of modern day problems.

AUSMUN is committed to actively serving its community and combating pressing issues. As we continue to expand in numbers, we further seek to expand our positive impact on the world around us. We are proud to announce that we have partnered with Dress for Success, a non-profit organization that enables women to become economically independent by offering professional clothing, a network of support, and the resources necessary for both personal and professional growth. By participating in AUSMUN 2024, in addition to debating "model" policy, you are actively bettering society and changing the world.

The 2024 AUSMUN board is honored to host all delegates for our largest conference yet. We cannot wait to see what delegates bring forward to each committee in their efforts to embody values of collaboration and this year's theme. Looking twenty twenty-forward to seeing you!

Rationale

Systemic oppression presents itself in many ways, but many forms have something in common: women around the world face it every day. Women are often paid less than their male counterparts (United Nations, 2022), pay more for everyday products (Feingold, 2022), are less represented in governmental bodies, and face elevated rates of sexual harassment, with 81 percent of women having been sexually harassed at least once during their lifetime (Chatterjee, 2018). The United Nations believes that everyone has the right to an equal and fair life, but early marriage hinders this for many people. Child marriage has been a major constituent in the oppression of women; it has taken away the opportunity to seek higher education and join the workforce for many women, supporting the outdated idea of keeping them at home to raise children and please their husbands. Child marriage is an issue driven by poverty and the patriarchy. It is a human rights violation that negatively affects mental and physical health. Furthermore, child marriage can lead to an increase in depression, STDs, and deadly diseases, consequently harming not just the child-bearer but also her offspring. Young girls trapped in these marriages are often at risk of increased chances of premature births and higher rates of infant mortality. Child marriage is maintained to reinforce outdated social norms while ensuring a woman's financial future within a community. The recurring issue of child marriage is still prevalent in many parts of the world and its relevance has never been more important.

Background of the Issue

The practice of child marriage has been around since ancient times. Up until the Industrial Revolution, women often married immediately after reaching puberty. Child marriage was sought out by those who wanted young, healthy women to produce hordes of children. Men were expected to have an established household of their own before taking a wife, so they tended to wait until they were older and more financially independent to marry.

In both the past and present, religion has played a prominent role in the existence of child marriage. Historically, major religions such as Hinduism, Judaism, and Christianity all agreed marriage should not take place until after the prospective match had completed puberty. Nevertheless, religion still influences child marriage when it comes to conception before marriage. In many religions, it is frowned upon to give birth outside of wedlock, forcing those below the age of 18 to marry in regions with prominent religious influences. Additional reasons for child marriage involve socioeconomic status and financial gain. For wealthier families, marrying off their daughters can be a way to strengthen alliances and family status. On the other hand, poor households found that marrying off their young daughters gave them one less mouth to feed and saved money. For both groups, a clear pattern can be seen: young women are viewed as nothing more than property.

Thoughts on early marriage within developed countries generally began to shift during the Industrial Revolution and in the early 20th century. An example of a significant shift is the Ottoman Empire raising its legal age of competence for marriage to 18 for boys and 17 for girls in 1917 (Marriageable Age, 2022). According to the UN, the highest rates of child marriage are currently in South Asia and Africa. Worldwide, it is estimated that 650 million girls alive today were married before their 18th birthday (Child Marriage).

Contemporary Evidence

In July of 2015, the Human Rights Council (HRC) resolved to recognize “child and forced marriages as a human rights violation” (OHCHR). Child marriage has resulted in economic and social disparities worldwide but shows the most impact in South Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Women who are forced into marriages at young ages are deprived of education, empowerment, and risk life-altering health issues from the burden of being married and getting pregnant at such young ages. For example, “In Kenya, married girls are 50% more likely than unmarried girls to become infected with HIV. In Zambia, the risk is even higher (59%).” This is a direct result of girls having unprotected intercourse with their husbands at a young age. In certain countries, many families rely on the dowry system for financial stability. Young girls in less developed countries where economic opportunities are limited are at a greater risk of becoming pregnant. Furthermore, at such a young age and little education, many girls lack knowledge about their bodies during pregnancies. In malaria regions, pregnant girls were found to be at a higher risk of infection. In fact, “Of the 10.5 million girls and women who become infected with malaria, 50% die.” Childbirth itself is also extremely dangerous for young girls whose bodies are not ready for childbearing. The labor can be dangerous for these girls, leading to their deaths (Nour, 2009).

Delegates must take into consideration the cultural ideas surrounding child marriage. In many countries, marrying young is culturally accepted among many communities. Governments must try to balance creating laws with respecting cultures. According to OHCHR and UNICEF, increases in women’s education, governmental investment in adolescent girls, and spreading awareness have helped prevent 25 million child marriages. Initiatives are being taken in many

countries to protect children from forced marriages, but the actions of some countries will not compensate for the inaction of others.

Directive

This debate should focus on the negative impacts of child marriage on women's health and opportunities as well as the positive impacts it brings to families. Delegates should discuss if there should be a minimum marriage age, how resources should be divided in a marriage, the economic prospect of marriage, the cultural aspects of marriage, women's health and education, and familial healthcare. The priority of the conference should focus on what each delegation's outlook on child marriage is and whether it is beneficial and moral. During the debate, delegates are encouraged to consider the following questions:

1. How does child marriage benefit and harm those involved?
2. Should there be a worldwide standard for the legal marriage age?
3. Do governments have the right to interfere with longstanding cultural traditions?
4. How does child marriage impact young girl's education?
5. Is it ethical to force children to marry at a young age?
6. What are alternatives for families who seek child marriage as a way to gain financial support?

Resources for Delegates

[OHCHR and Women's Human Rights and Gender Equality](#)

[ICRW Child Marriage Around the World](#)

[UNICEF Child Protection](#)

[Commission on the Status of Women](#)

[Countries with the Highest Child Marriage Rate as of 2021](#)

Delegations

1. **Albania-** The legal marriage age in Albania is 18. However, in remote regions and ethnic groups, such as the Roma, child marriages are prevalent. These marriages are often linked to economic difficulties and lack of infrastructure, issues that if fixed could lower child marriage rates.

[Child Marriage in Albania \(Overview\)](#)

[Zero child marriages in Albania in 2022 – Euractiv](#)

2. **Australia-** The government of Australia is deeply committed to ending child marriages worldwide. They have many beneficial services such as 1800RESPECT, a line which provides free and confidential counseling and advice related to family and domestic violence that can help those trapped in dangerous marriages. The legal marriage age is 18 for men and women.

[Child Marriage - Facts, FAQs & How to Help | Child Brides | World Vision Australia.](#)

[Marriage and the law | NSW Government](#)

3. **Austria-** Austria ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1992, setting a minimum age of marriage of 18. The country has good support systems in place for women in forced marriages or at risk of it. However, as use of the internet becomes more prevalent, more children in Austria are vulnerable to sexual exploitation and falling into dangerous circumstances.

[Austria fails to protect children threatened by forced marriage - ECPAT](#)

[Austria - Girls Not Brides](#)

4. **Canada-** Canada has strong views on child and forced marriages and has laws preventing people from leaving the country to conduct these illegal marriages. However, the country itself faces policy issues when it comes to child marriage. The legal age of marriage in Canada is 16, relatively young considering the country's perspective on the subject.

[Child marriage is legal and persists across Canada - McGill University](#)

[Forced marriage - Travel.gc.ca](#)

5. **Chad-** The minimum legal marriage age is 18 for both men and women in Chad. However, marrying under the age of 18 is not criminalized. Therefore it is still practiced. According to Article 227 in the Criminal Code, legal marriage of girls is permitted over the age of 13.

[Chad - Girls Not Brides.](#)

[Child protection | UNICEF Chad](#)

6. **China-** The legal age of marriage in China is 22 for men and 20 for women. Since their first marriage law in 1950, child marriage has been illegal. When reported, Chinese authorities take harsh actions to stop child marriages and hold people accountable.

[Is Child Marriage Legal in China? - China Law in One Minute - China Justice Observer](#)
[Child Marriage in Mainland China](#)

7. **Denmark-** In Denmark, the minimum age for marriage is 18. Denmark, along with many other countries, has committed to eliminate child and forced marriages by 2030 in line with target 5.3 of the Sustainable Development Goals.

[Denmark bans marriage for under-18s after report suggests dozens of asylum-seeking teens arriving with spouses | The Independent](#)
[Denmark bans marriage for under-18s](#)

8. **Dominican Republic-** The Dominican Republic has the highest rates of child marriage in Latin America. Because of this, they have passed laws banning any marriage under the age of 18 and established a cabinet run by the Ministry for Women to work towards helping women live safer lives. However, child marriages are normalized in some parts of the country and persist today.

[Dominican Republic President Approves Bill to End Child Marriage | International Justice Mission](#)
[How Dominican women fight child marriage and teen pregnancy while facing total abortion bans.](#)

9. **England-** Recently, the legal marriage age in England was changed from 16-17 to 18 years old. Arranging child marriages is a criminal offense for which people can spend up to 7 years in prison. England plans to crack down harshly on all child marriages within its borders.

[Legal age of marriage in England and Wales rises to 18 - GOV.UK.](#)

[Hundreds of British girls 'married off as children each year' | The Independent](#)

[Forced Marriage Unit statistics 2020 - GOV.UK](#)

10. **Ethiopia-** While it is illegal for those under 18 to marry, child marriages still take many forms in Ethiopia and have both positive and negative effects on communities. Many enter child marriages to protect their family's wealth or social status. Parents have begun to marry off their daughters in the hope that they will gain a better life and escape the current problem of droughts in Africa.

[Surprising new evidence on child marriage in Ethiopia | ODI](#)

[Ethiopian drought and Child Marriage](#)

11. **France-** France outlaws marriage under the age of 18 without parent or guardian consent. France has a strong stance against child marriages. In fact, they have taken actions in other countries such as Bangladesh to end child marriages in their nations.

[France - Girls Not Brides](#)

[France Raises Age of Marriage for Women to 18 - Feminist Majority Foundation](#)

12. **Germany** - In 2017, Germany committed to the “Act to Combat Child Marriage”, which made the legal age of marriage 18 with no exception. However, legislation is having trouble monitoring this, as 813 marriages with minors have been reported since this law came into place.

[Child marriages a challenge for authorities – DW – 09/23/2019](#)

[Parliamentary question | Combating child marriage in Germany | E-005357/2020 |](#)

[European Parliament](#)

13. **Guinea** - 47% of women are married before their 18th birthday, and 17% of them are married before 15. Despite this, in 2017 Guinea established an African union to end child marriage in Africa. The country has committed itself to ending child marriage within its borders by 2030.

[Guinea - Girls Not Brides.](#)

[Guinea - Tahirih - Forced Marriage Initiative](#)

14. **India**- The Hindu Marriage Act of 1955 specifies the minimum legal age of marriage as 21 years for men and 18 for women. 43.4% of women in India are married before they reach 18, with India being estimated to have over 223 million child brides. Due to the large population of the country, 40% of the world's child marriages are in India.

[Child marriage in India \(Amendment\) bill, 2021](#)

[Child Marriages Are Up In The Pandemic. Here's How India Tries To Stop Them](#)

15. **Japan-** In line with the UN's sustainable development goals, Japan has pledged to help end all child marriages by 2030. Currently, those under the age of 18 cannot marry without parental permission. However, no data on child marriage rates has been released from Japan.

[Marriage in Japan - U.S. Embassy & Consulates in Japan.](#)

[Japan Moves to End Child Marriage | Human Rights Watch](#)

16. **Madagascar-** Madagascar's minimum legal age of marriage is 18, yet 40% of girls in the country are married before they are 18 and 13% before they are 15. Madagascar has committed to ending child marriage in Africa, but legislature has not been passed and the country has taken little action to prohibit child marriage.

[Child marriage atlas - Girls Not Brides](#)

[Advancing girls' education in Madagascar - MSI Reproductive Choices.](#)

17. **Mali-** In 1998, Mali ratified Article 21 of the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, an article regarding the prohibition of child marriage. 54% of girls in Mali are married before the age of 18 and 16% are married before their 15th birthday.

Meanwhile, only 2% of men are married before they are 18.

[Child marriage atlas - Girls Not Brides.](#)

[Case on the fight against forced and early marriage in Mali - Amnesty International](#)

18. **Mexico-** The legal marriage age in Mexico without parental consent is 18. However, this one law has not been enough to stop child marriages in their entirety. Child marriages

may occur in areas of the country as part of cultural practices, as a result of poverty, or as a result of limited education.

[Child Marriage in Mexico: An Ongoing Problem - Fundación Esperanza Contigo, A.C. - Construyendo futuro con valor.](#)

[The Worth of a Girl: 'I said yes! I knew I wanted to be with him'](#)

19. **Niger-** 75% of girls in Niger are married by their 18th birthday, 35% of which are under 15. Child marriage is prevalent given that girls can marry at 15 and boys at 18. Child marriage in Niger has led to an imbalance in education levels. Only 31% of women attended primary school.

[Highest child marriage prevalence worldwide by country | Statista](#)

[Child marriage in Niger | Save the Children UK](#)

20. **Norway-** In May 2018, a law was put in place that changed the marriage age to 18, ending child marriages in Norway. 16 and 17 year olds may marry with their parent's consent, but this is not a very common practice in the country. A government spokesperson said about Norway's anti-child-marriage laws that, "We really want other countries in Europe to copy this law. This should be the standard."

[Norway to ban child marriage as it seeks to set a global example | Reuters](#)

[From Brazil to Norway, to Ethiopia: The many faces of child and forced marriages - Girls Not Brides](#)

21. **Russia**- The legal age of marriage in Russia is 18, but with the permission of local authorities, citizens may get married at 16. Despite laws put in place to prevent forced or child marriages, minimal action has been taken by the government to enforce these. In the city of Chechnya, there have been reports of child marriages and bridal kidnappings.

[Dispatches: Will Russia Protect A Child Bride? | Human Rights Watch](#)

[Examining Child Marriage in Russia - The Borgen Project](#)

22. **Saudi Arabia**- 20% of women are married before their 18th birthday. The legal age of marriage in Saudi Arabia is 18. However, this restriction can be bypassed if the child has “reached puberty”. As a result, traditions of arranged and inherited marriages are very common within Saudi Arabia.

[Saudi Arabia: Law Enshrines Male Guardianship | Human Rights Watch.](#)

[Saudi Arabia - Girls Not Brides.](#)

23. **Scotland** - The minimum marriage age in Scotland remains 16 years old. The Ministry of Justice has committed to raising the legal marriage age to 18. While child marriage hasn't been a major source of conflict in Scotland, they are still working to end it.

[What Was and Is The Minimum Age For Marriage in Scotland?.](#)

[UK Government commits to raising the legal age of marriage to 18 in England and Wales](#)

[| Together Scotland](#)

24. **Somalia-** The legal age for marriage in Somalia is 18 for both men and women.

However, exceptions are in place for girls 16 or younger with a parent's consent. In Somalia, 20% of those who get married do so before their 15th birthday. Recently, droughts and the recent crises in the Horn of Africa have intensified child marriage rates.

[To end child marriage, Somali mindsets must change](#)

[Child marriage on the rise in Horn of Africa as drought crisis intensifies](#)

25. **Sudan-** 34% of girls in Sudan are married before the age of 18. It is proper for girls to marry young, and those that choose to continue their education are considered less “valuable”. Husbands pay for their bride in a practice known as *mahr*, and the more money a husband pays the better the daughter can support her family.

[Sudan - Girls Not Brides.](#)

[Girls, Child Marriage, and Education in Red Sea State, Sudan: Perspectives on Girls’](#)

[Freedom to Choose](#)

26. **Sweden-** In Sweden, neither men nor women can get married under the age of 18. Before the law was implemented, around 15% of women in Sweden got married before the age of 18. Those who marry children will be imprisoned, and many systems are in place to provide support to children forced into marriages.

[Sweden struggles over child marriage](#)

[Sweden may become latest country to annul child marriages](#)

[Child marriage – this is what applies in Sweden](#)

27. **Switzerland-** In Switzerland, the legal age of marriage is 18. The country has recognized child marriages as a form of “gender-based violence” and is working towards ending it worldwide. However, if a child comes into the country already married, the marriage will be recognized if the government sees it as in their best interest.

[Switzerland - Girls Not Brides](#)

[When children forced to marry stay married - SWI swissinfo.ch](#)

28. **Tanzania-** Despite actions taken in Tanzania to prevent child marriages, such as raising the legal marriage age to 18, child marriages are driven by tradition and poverty and may be difficult to eliminate. Education is a key measure Tanzania must take to eliminate child marriage. Discrimination against girls in education is a major issue in the nation.

[Educating children and parents is the best weapon to end child marriage in Tanzania](#)

[Victory Against Child Marriage in Tanzania | Human Rights Watch](#)

29. **United States-** Despite the legal marriage age in most states being 18, every state has exceptions in the law that allow people to bypass this. The two most common exceptions are for children with “parental consent” or those with approval from a jury. Given that marriage is regulated at a state and not a national level, the government has not taken any widespread actions against child marriage.

[Child Marriage in the United States - Equality Now.](#)

[About Child Marriage in the U.S. - Unchained At Last](#)

[Opinion | America’s Child-Marriage Problem - The New York Times](#)

30. **Yemen-** Yemen is home to 4 million child brides, 1.4 million of whom got married before the age of 15. As per religious law, men may have up to 4 wives in the country. However, most don't take this many. Women's education takes the backburner in Yemen as only 35% of women are literate.

[Child Marriage in Yemen: A Mixed Methods Study in Ongoing Conflict and Displacement](#)

[Child Marriage in Yemen Profile](#)

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