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THE PUBLIC POLICY HUB

Policy Brief 8

Curbing Child Marriage in Egypt

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Child marriage, whether formal or informal, is a marriage in which at least one of the partners is below the age of 18 years. This practice is not only a violation of human rights but also places a burden on children and society and bears lasting consequences. Child marriage not only affects the married child, but also impacts successive generations. The consequences of child marriage in Egypt include gender-based violence, dropping out of school, a high-risk of contracting diseases, higher fertility, population increase, and unregistered children.

According to UNICEF, there are around 650 million child brides worldwide. 40 million of these are in the Middle East and North Africa. For example, according to Egypt's 2017 census, nearly one in every twenty girls between the ages of 15 to 17 years are either currently married or were previously married. For girls between the ages of 15 to 19, the rate increases to one in every ten, with large differentials between rural and urban regions⁽¹⁾.

Problem Definition

In recent years, there have been 700,000 child brides each year in the Middle East and North Africa. Child brides in the region are more likely to live in rural areas, to come from poor households, and to have received less education⁽²⁾.

Around one in five young women in the Middle East and North Africa was married before her 18th birthday, and one in twenty-five before her 15th birthday.

The prevalence of child marriage in the Middle East and North Africa is near the global average.

Child marriage is a violation of human rights that has consequences for children and society. Child brides are more likely to experience gender-based violence, to drop out of school, to experience higher fertility, and to contract sexual diseases. More specifically, child marriages are often unregistered, which bears negative legal consequences for children born in these marriages as they cannot obtain birth certificates.

(1) CAPMAS, 2017. Egypt Census of Population, Housing and Establishments, Egypt, Retrieved from: https://www.capmas.gov.eg/Pages/Publications.aspx?page_id=5104&Year=16574. Visited on: 12 December 2018

(2) United Nations Children's Fund, Policy for Action: Ending Child Marriage, Policy for Action: Issue 1 – A product by NCCM Child rights observatory, June 2018, Retrieved from: <https://www.unicef.org/egypt/sites/unicef.org.egypt/files/2018-06/Child%20Marriage%20Policy%20Brief%20EN%20FINAL.PDF>

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Egypt's Child Law 126/2008 sets the minimum marriage age at 18 years for both females and males. However, it does not criminalize perpetrators. Therefore, girls continue to get married without registering or reporting their marriages, or without registering children born out of these marriages.

According to Egypt's 2017 census, child marriage remains an issue. In Egypt, nearly 1 in every 20 girls between the ages of 15 to 17 are either currently married or were previously married. This also applies also to 1 in every 10 adolescent girls aged 15-19 years, with large variance between rural and urban regions⁽³⁾.

Child marriage has its roots in established traditions. Certain beliefs and lack of awareness add to its continued practice, despite its illegality in accordance with Egyptian law. The main belief that underpins the practice is that child marriage protects a girl's reputation. Some families also seek to marry off their daughters young, so that they may be rid of their care responsibility⁽⁴⁾.

Several main challenges remain present in solving the issue:

- A need to identify Grassroots Support Organizations (GSOs)
- A need to balance between short and long term plans
- A need for information and research
- A need for a more effective reporting and documentation system
- A need for monitoring and evaluation
- Lack of balanced attention to different child's rights issues

According to policymakers and practitioners, the main factors behind child marriage are poverty, social norms, and education. However, there is no evidence or data analyzing the links and level of influence of each factor on child marriage.

Despite national efforts and policies attempting to curb child marriage and decrease in its prevalence, such efforts remain scattered and are in need of a holistic coordinated approach. While current policies address the problem from one point of view, our suggestion is to develop a comprehensive approach.

(3) CAPMAS, 2017. Egypt Census of Population, Housing and Establishments, Egypt, Retrieved from: https://www.capmas.gov.eg/Pages/Publications.aspx?page_id=5104&Year=16574. Visited on: 12 December 2018

(4) United Nations Children's Fund , Policy for Action: Ending Child Marriage, Policy for Action: Issue 1 – A product by NCCM Child rights observatory, June 2018, Retrieved from: <https://www.unicef.org/egypt/sites/unicef.org.egypt/files/2018-06/Child%20Marriage%20Policy%20Brief%20EN%20FINAL.PDF>



Policy Options/Alternatives

We identified four policy alternatives to address the problem of child marriage in Egypt:

1. Legal:

In an attempt to enhance the enforcement of the related provisions of child marriage, child law 126/2008 or its corresponding mechanism may be revisited to articulate a stricter implementing mechanism.

2. Social:

In an attempt to pinpoint the significance of the social and behavioral dimensions of the issue, we recommend efforts to change social norms relating to child marriage, as well as to spread the prerequisite awareness. This also requires engagement with religious leaders and institutions.

3. Economic:

In an attempt to tackle the financial status of the family, we recommend improving economic conditions of the parents so they are less inclined to get their child married. Parents may be incentivized not to resort to early marriage for their children through provision of financial assistance.

4. Legal/Socio-Economic:

A hybrid solution would accelerate development of the legal alternative to achieve quick results in the short term, while working in parallel to operationalize social and economic alternatives in the long term.



Conclusion and Recommendations

...NA region and in Egypt in particular. ...on that involves all stakeholders, including governmental officials, legislators, MPs, the facilitator of the marriage contract “maazoun”, grassroots organizations, parents, community leaders and children.

A high level of coordination is required to implement this recommended alternative. This role should be taken by a governmental body such as the National Council for Childhood and Motherhood (NCCM).

The implementation phase should entail a high level of coordination, pre-and-post data collection for evaluation and for informed decision-making, a role for media, and synchronization and integration of existing interventions to work against child marriage.

The Public Policy HUB Where Rigour Meets Creativity

The Public Policy HUB is an initiative that was developed at the School of Global Affairs and Public Policy (GAPP) in October 2017. It was designed to fill in the policy research gap. It provides the mechanism by which the good ideas, plausible answers, and meaningful solutions to Egypt's chronic and acute policy dilemmas can be nurtured, discussed, debated, refined, tested and presented to policymakers in a format that is systematic, highly-visible and most likely to have a lasting impact.

The Public Policy HUB provides a processing unit where policy teams are formed on a regular basis, combining experienced policy scholars/mentors with young creative policy analysts, provide them with the needed resources, training, exposure, space, tools, networks, knowledge and contacts, to enable them to come up with sound, rigorous and yet creative policy solutions that have a greater potential to be effectively advocated and communicated to the relevant policy makers and to the general public.

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