

# Child Marriage: Characterization as a Noxious Market and Policy-Based Responses to Economic Motivations

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**Abstract** - Child marriage is a human rights violation according to various international agreements and human rights conventions. In many countries the practice is outlawed, yet it persists with great incidence in both developed and developing societies. Governments must act to eliminate the practice which (1) results in physical and psychological individual harms for child brides; (2) perpetuates societal harms in the form of entrenched gender inequality and limited economic potential for women and for countries as a whole; (3) thrives on the exploitation of economic and agency vulnerabilities of a social class, namely young girls and women; and (4) threatens the agency and autonomy of market “participants,” thereby characterizing the market in child marriage as a “noxious market,” according to Debra Satz’s framework, in the *strongest sense*. To best respond to the harms and negative effects of the market, governments need to understand the reasons why the practice persists, even though it is illegal. Among the most cited motivators of child marriage are economic circumstance (i.e., poverty) and dated or unfounded beliefs relating to the economic potential of young girls and women. Governments can address these motivators, and thereby (begin to) eradicate the practice of child marriage, through improvements to and expansion of social welfare programs and through targeted educational initiatives which stress the economic opportunity available to and earnings potential of young girls.

**Keywords** – Child Marriage, Noxious Markets, Debra Satz, Policy Responses

## Introduction

UNICEF defines child marriage as “any formal marriage or informal union between a child under the age of 18 and an adult or another child.”<sup>1</sup> Child marriage is not only a violation of human rights according to international agreements and conventions like the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights<sup>2</sup> and the UN’s Convention on the Rights of the Child,<sup>3</sup> but it is also widely outlawed. Even so, the practice persists at alarming rates around the world, namely in South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa. South Asia accounts for more than 40% of the global total of child marriages.<sup>4</sup> Bangladesh, Nepal, and India are among the countries with the highest prevalence of child marriage in the world.<sup>5</sup> The COVID-19 pandemic, in particular, has led to a spike in child marriage in parts of India. Data from the western Indian state of Maharashtra shows that officials halted over 200 child marriages between April and August of 2020, whereas only about half that number were halted in the previous 12 months.<sup>6</sup> In sub-Saharan Africa, meanwhile, UNICEF reports that 37% of women marry before the age of 18; more than two-thirds of women in Niger and Chad marry before they turn 18.<sup>7</sup> While I’ve highlighted a few of the regions in which the market is most prevalent, child marriage is undoubtedly a global phenomenon which permeates developed and developing nations, alike. In what follows, I will focus on the cases in which a female child (under the age of 18) is forced to marry an adult male (often much older), as such cases are not only more prevalent, but are also considered to be more harmful and problematic.<sup>8</sup>

In this paper, I argue that the pervasive market in child marriage satisfies each of the four parameters of noxious markets offered by Debra Satz. After a brief

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<sup>1</sup> “Child Marriage,” *UNICEF*, September 2020, <https://www.unicef.org/protection/child-marriage>.

<sup>2</sup> “Universal Declaration of Human Rights,” *United Nations*, accessed November 5, 2020, <https://www.un.org/en/universal-declaration-human-rights/>.

<sup>3</sup> “Convention on the Rights of the Child,” *Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights*, accessed November 5, 2020, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/crc.aspx>.

<sup>4</sup> “Fast Facts: 10 facts illustrating why we must #EndChildMarriage,” *UNICEF*, February 11, 2019, <https://www.unicef.org/eca/press-releases/fast-facts-10-facts-illustrating-why-we-must-endchildmarriage>.

<sup>5</sup> Deepali Gohda, David Hotchkiss, and Anastasia Gage, “Association Between Child Marriage and Reproductive Health Outcomes and Service Utilization: A Multi-Country Study from South Asia,” *Journal of Adolescent Health* 52 (January 2013): 554. <https://cdn.icmec.org>.

<sup>6</sup> Lauren Frayer and Sushmita Pathak, “Child Marriages Are Up In The Pandemic. Here’s How India Tries To Stop Them,” last modified November 5, 2020, <https://www.npr.org/sections/goatsandsoda/2020/11/05/931274119/child-marriages-are-up-in-the-pandemic-heres-how-india-tries-to-stop-them>.

<sup>7</sup> “Child marriage around the world,” *UNICEF*, March 11, 2020, <https://www.unicef.org/stories/child-marriage-around-world>.

<sup>8</sup> “Child Marriage,” *UNICEF*, September 2020, <https://www.unicef.org/protection/child-marriage>.

description of Satz's conception of noxious markets, I will analyze the distinct harms resulting from the institution, or practice, of child marriage which contribute to its noxiousness. These harms include physiological and psychological harms imposed on the children, or individuals, involved, deepened gender inequalities and the perpetuation of poverty in society, the exploitation of (primarily economic) vulnerabilities, and threats to the agency of the market's "participants." Then, I will examine what I take to be a few of the primary economic motivations for child marriage, namely economic circumstance (i.e., poverty) and false prudential beliefs, and will describe how policymakers and governmental institutions might effectively address these.

## Satz's Framework

Broadly, Debra Satz describes a "noxious market" as a system which undermines the conditions necessary for individuals to act and transact as equals.<sup>9</sup> More specifically, and perhaps more importantly, Satz describes four parameters which characterize noxious markets. The first two parameters Satz offers relate to the *outcomes* of such markets. First, noxious markets can produce harmful outcomes for individuals.<sup>10</sup> Markets which satisfy this parameter might impose physical harms onto participants or otherwise affect their general welfare, for example. Second, noxious markets can produce outcomes which are harmful at the societal level.<sup>11</sup> Markets which produce this outcome might undermine democratic institutions or threaten equality in society through institutions which promote servility. The second set of these parameters offered by Satz relates to the conditions of some agents or participants within the market (i.e., the noxiousness stems from the "*source*" of the market). With this in mind, Satz's third parameter of noxious markets states that such markets can be characterized by weak agency and asymmetric knowledge among some or many of its participants.<sup>12</sup> This can occur when market participants are given incomplete or faulty information about the risks and consequences associated with participation in a market, or when someone enters a market on another individual's behalf. Finally, the fourth parameter she sets forth in characterizing noxious markets states that such markets can exploit relevant vulnerabilities of some or many participants in the market.<sup>13</sup> Markets in which participants have vastly unequal needs

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<sup>9</sup> Debra Satz, *Why Some Things Should Not Be for Sale: The Moral Limits of Markets* (New York, New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 94.

<sup>10</sup> Satz, 94.

<sup>11</sup> Satz, 95.

<sup>12</sup> Satz, 96.

<sup>13</sup> Satz, 97.

and demands for a certain good, or in which agents' poverty is exploited, would illustrate this characteristic. Now, I will identify some of the distinct harms resulting from the institution of child marriage as they relate to these parameters and will describe how the market in child marriage qualifies as a noxious market in the strongest sense.

### Child Marriage as a Noxious Market

The market in child marriage leads to many deeply destructive harms which correspond to Satz's aforementioned conditions of noxious markets. In this section, I argue that each of the four parameters, or "dimensions,"<sup>14</sup> detailed above are satisfied in the market in child marriage. First, I will explore the harms incurred onto the *individual "participants"* in the market.

#### i. Individual Harms

Child marriage invokes a sense of moral repugnance for many in the Western world, who often cite a lack of consent, or agency, as an offending aspect of the practice. While this is certainly a disturbing aspect of the market (and one which I will explore in detail), there also exist resulting harms which are far more tangible/salient. As described above, the "individual harms" characteristic of noxious markets refers to the outcomes resulting from participation in a market which produce destitution or other harms to the basic welfare or agency interests of the relevant market's participants.<sup>15</sup> I will first describe some of the prevalent *physical* harms associated with child marriage and will then delve into the distinct *psychological* harms stemming from the practice.

Young girls entered into marriage experience myriad physical harms, including harms relating to domestic abuse, early sexual activity, and early pregnancy. Even though many children are entered into marriage with the intention of protecting them from violence and harassment,<sup>16</sup> girls married before the age of 18 are more likely to experience physical and sexual violence in their marriages than those who marry as adults.<sup>17</sup> Lacking education, autonomy, and agency, child brides are not only particularly vulnerable to domestic abuse, but they are also more likely to believe that

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<sup>14</sup> Satz, 98.

<sup>15</sup> Satz, 98.

<sup>16</sup> Jennifer Parsons et al., "Economic Impacts of Child Marriage: A Review of the Literature," *The Review of Faith and International Affairs* 13, no. 3 (October 2015): 16. <https://www.tandfonline.com>.

<sup>17</sup> K.G. Santhya et al., "Associations Between Early Marriage and Young Women's Marital and Reproductive Health Outcomes: Evidence from India," *International Perspectives on Sexual and Reproductive Health* 36, no. 3 (September 2010): 135. <https://www-jstor-org.proxy.library.upenn.edu/>.

such treatment is somehow justified.<sup>18</sup> I will explore this idea further in the next subsection, on societal harms.

Early brides are often expected and pressured to have children soon after marriage. In this way, the right to not engage in sexual activity and the freedom to decide if and when to reproduce are largely absent in child marriages.<sup>19</sup> This represents a harm to the agency interests of these young girls and is also the root cause of the numerous physical and reproductive harms experienced by early brides. With their weakened (or complete lack of) agency, child brides are more susceptible to early and unprotected sex than women who marry after turning eighteen, putting them at increased risk of sexually transmitted and other diseases, like HIV, as well as early pregnancy. Not having the physiological maturity or capacity to healthily birth children so early, adolescent mothers face increased risks during pregnancy, too, including higher rates of eclampsia (convulsions caused by high blood pressure in pregnant women), postpartum hemorrhage, sepsis, obstructed labor, and maternal mortality (pregnancy-related death), among others.<sup>20</sup> Those who are fortunate enough to survive early pregnancy often deal with lasting physical and reproductive health issues.

Additionally, adolescent mothers are much more likely to deliver preterm or low-birthweight infants than mothers over the age of 19. Worse, infant mortality rates are 60% higher when the mother is younger than eighteen. Once again, such issues and risks are largely due to the physical immaturity of these adolescent mothers. Additionally, poor nutrition, decreased access to medical and social services, and increased risk of disease contribute to these infant harms.<sup>21</sup> There are certainly significant harms thrust onto early brides stemming from child marriage and early pregnancy, and additional harms are passed along to the children of these adolescent mothers.

Child marriage also leads to deeply deleterious *psychological* harms. Even in places where child marriage is considered to be a norm, marrying early is strongly associated with negative psychological outcomes, including depression, anxiety, and other mechanisms of psychological distress.<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, young girls participating in the market are outrightly denied their childhood. Immediately following their

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<sup>18</sup> Santhya et al., 136.

<sup>19</sup> UNICEF, “Early Marriage: Child Spouses,” *Innocenti Digest* 7 (March 2001): 9. <https://www.unicef-irc.org/>.

<sup>20</sup> Nawal Nour, “Child Marriage: A Silent Health and Human Rights Issue,” *Reviews in Obstetrics and Gynecology* 2, no. 1 (2009): 54. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/>.

<sup>21</sup> Nour, 54.

<sup>22</sup> Neetu A. John et al., “Child marriage and psychological well-being in Niger and Ethiopia,” *BMC Public Health* 19 (2019): 1. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/>.

marriage, many young girls are expected to fulfill the traditional roles of a wife, domestic worker, and—often soon after marriage—mother. Performing the duties often associated with these traditional roles so early in life denies these girls the opportunity to an education, as well as opportunities for social development among friends and family. As a result, many experience feelings of isolation and depression.<sup>23</sup>

Children who attempt to flee their marriages (in an effort to avoid these harms) by returning home to their parents may be beaten and sent back to their husbands.<sup>24</sup> Elders in these communities are rarely sympathetic to the physical and psychological traumas experienced by girls through child marriage—many see these harms as an “unavoidable part of life.”<sup>25</sup> This sentiment begins to illustrate some of the disturbing *societal* harms provoked by markets in child marriage, which I will explore next.

### ii. Societal Harms

Generally, the market in child marriage promotes attitudes within societies which treat some individuals (young girls and women) as mere products, or property, rather than as beings worthy of respect and moral consideration. This perspective violates the liberal and democratic qualities which many of the aforementioned countries’ governments aim to promote (e.g., India and Bangladesh, among many others).

As mentioned in the previous subsection, girls who marry early are more likely to experience physical abuse in their marriages. Even worse, early brides tend to believe wife-beating is “justified” more than those who marry after turning 18.<sup>26</sup> This belief can be attributed to the pervasive gender inequality which is entrenched in many societies in which child marriage is prevalent. The continued practice of child marriage further imbeds these attitudes of inequality and confined gender roles. Because of child marriage, young girls and women are not granted the opportunity to interact as equals. Instead, they are conditioned “to be docile and servile” and are “shape[d]...into passive accepters of a status quo.”<sup>27</sup>

This status quo not only threatens the liberties and human rights of young girls and women, but it has also been shown to result in deeper economic issues, not only for individuals, but also for society at large. Child marriage can significantly disrupt,

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<sup>23</sup> Nour, 53-54.

<sup>24</sup> Sarah Leduc, “Bangladesh’s ‘Wedding buster’ takes on illegal child marriage,” last modified October 11, 2016, <https://www.france24.com/en/20161011-bangladesh-child-marriages-international-day-girl-child-radha-rani-sarker>.

<sup>25</sup> UNICEF, “Early Marriage: Child Spouses,” *Innocenti Digest* 7 (March 2001): 9. <https://www.unicef-irc.org/>.

<sup>26</sup> Santhya et al., 136.

<sup>27</sup> Satz, 95.

and often put an end to, the educational path of young girls.<sup>28</sup> The earlier a girl marries, the less schooling/education she can be expected to complete. The less schooling a girl completes, the less likely she is to develop skills (vocational, technical, etc.) necessary for participation in the labor force, the less she can be expected to earn across her lifetime, and the less likely she is to participate in political processes and discourse. The intergenerational practice of child marriage further reinforces this cycle of limited earning and political potential for a mother's children (and her children's children, and so on) and stunts a nation's economic and GDP growth.

With these limitations on earning potential and decision-making/agency, child brides become increasingly dependent on their husbands. This dependence undermines the concepts of equal treatment of and equal standing between persons in democratic societies. So, while the individual harms inflicted by child marriage are deeply disturbing and worrisome, governments should be particularly wary of the societal impacts of the institution, which often act against the aims and goals of the state.

### iii. Vulnerability

Satz writes that some markets highlight the vulnerabilities of one of the transacting parties.<sup>29</sup> I argue that child marriage is an example of a market which not only survives, but *thrives*, off of one transacting party's exploitation of the other's economic and social vulnerabilities.

As I will discuss in greater detail in the next section, poverty and related economic factors and beliefs are a primary motivator of child marriage's continued practice. Young girls are viewed as mere economic burdens in many countries around the world. This motivates parents to marry off their daughters earlier. In their view, marriage not only offers a form of economic protection for their child, but also relieves parents of the financial burden imposed by a daughter and often results in direct economic payment for the girl's family in the form of a bride wealth or bride price. Typically, the younger the child, the higher the payment and the sooner the economic burden is lifted. Similarly, where a dowry—a payment or transfer of assets from the bride's family to the groom's family—is required, young girls' parents are incentivized to marry off their daughters at a younger age, as younger and less educated brides tend to require smaller dowries.<sup>30</sup>

Poverty drives individuals and families to participate in the market in child marriage, and sheer economic need often dictates the terms at which the 'transactions'

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<sup>28</sup> Parsons et al., 14.

<sup>29</sup> Satz, 97.

<sup>30</sup> Parsons et al., 13.



are made. I will illustrate this parameter of noxious markets with an unrelated example. Suppose a father falls on hard times. The father typically provides for his family, but with the recent loss of his job, he is unable to offer them financial support. To compensate for his and his family's economic hardship, the father begins to sell old sports memorabilia, which he values greatly, to his neighbors. The neighbors, knowing that the father needs the money to feed himself and his family and has little room/capacity to negotiate, offer bids for these items which are well below market value. The father accepts these low bids because he knows he has no choice or alternative: he and his family need the money to live. Even though the exchange results in a relative improvement in his well-being (i.e., immediate cash payment), there is reason to believe that in another circumstance he would not have accepted the low-ball bids on these objects. Regardless, his conniving neighbors exploited his economic vulnerability to achieve maximal benefit from the transaction. The overarching point is this: economic vulnerabilities of families can dictate the terms at which "transactions" are performed within the market in child marriage. Economic need alone can dictate both the availability and price of young girls on the market, as parents act not necessarily in their or their children's best interest, but in the interest of relative improvement in their financial status and well-being.

Additionally, the effects of gender inequality and the general lack of agency among women in many of the aforementioned countries and regions result in further vulnerabilities. Young girls may be raised to believe that their status as women implies their participation in institutions such as child marriage. Girls who are taught to engage in these practices because they believe that it is an "unavoidable part of life" (or because they lack the agency and/or education to arrive at another conclusion) are exploited to satisfy the preferences and cultural practices of their families and their husbands/in-laws.

#### **iv. Weak Agency**

Finally, there also exist disturbing practices in the market in child marriage relating to the levels of agency of "participants" in the market. Thus far throughout this paper, I have decided to quote "participants" because many children entered into these markets are not willing participants. Instead, young girls are often coerced or forced into these unions by parents, guardians, or other authority figures in their lives. To me, the term "participant" implies a level of willingness or voluntariness when associated with involvement in a market. I want to be clear that this sense of voluntariness is often absent in child marriages.

There is an obvious relationship between the lack of agency in markets in child marriage and the harms I have outlined above; the absence of individual autonomy in the market relates strongly to the aforementioned individual and societal consequences, in particular. I argue that there are two primary ways in which a child's



levels of agency are threatened in this market. First, as mentioned above, children are often entered into markets in child marriage not by themselves, but by others—typically parents or other family members—on their behalf. In fact, many children are given no choice in the matter; such cases are blatant, clear-cut examples of how “participant” agency, autonomy, and decision-making ability are not only weak, but completely absent in the market.

Second, even if we accept that there are cases in which a child is not forced, coerced, or unknowingly entered into an early marriage (and certainly such cases exist), there is reason to believe that children are not given adequate information about the consequences of child marriage in such cases.<sup>31</sup> If a child were fully aware of the increased risk she faced with respect to physical abuse, psychological harm, and pregnancy/sexual health issues, or the economic and educational opportunity she would forfeit as a result of her willing entry into a premature marriage, she might be less willing to submit herself as an early bride. In cases in which a child *is* aware of these harms and consequences, suicide is common.<sup>32</sup> So, even if a child exhibits full autonomy or decision-making ability with respect to her decision to marry early, her agency is not necessarily strong if full or adequate information regarding the consequences, dangers, and risks associated with her participation in the market is not disclosed.

Similarly, parents might convince their children that early marriage is their *only* option. Persuaded by social norms, cultural practices, religious traditions, and/or economic pressures, among other factors, parents weaken the agency of their children by failing to recognize, consider, and disclose easily available (and likely less harmful) alternatives to child marriage.

It is clear, then, that the market in child marriage qualifies as a noxious market in the strongest sense; as I argue above, each of Satz’s four conditions are satisfied by the market. So, how can governments and NGOs address this clearly problematic, yet seemingly elusive, issue? In what ways can policy solutions effectively mitigate not only the prevalence of the market, but also the effects of the harms I describe above? To (begin to) answer these questions, we must understand why child marriage happens, even when it is against the law. In the next section, I will examine one of the underlying motivations for the continued practice of child marriage and will offer ways in which governments and NGOs might effectively respond in this case.

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<sup>31</sup> Satz, 98. As Satz writes here, inadequate information about the nature and consequences of a market depicts weak agency.

<sup>32</sup> “Child, early and forced marriage, including in humanitarian settings,” *Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights*, accessed November 7, 2020, <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/Issues/Women/WRGS/Pages/ChildMarriage.aspx>.

## Economic Motivations of Child Marriage and their Policy Implications

Even with the presence of laws prohibiting the practice around the world, child marriage is still a vastly prevalent practice driven largely by several underlying motivations and deeply held convictions. To understand the ways in which policy can effectively mitigate (and hopefully end) this harmful practice, policymakers must recognize these motivations. In what follows, I will explore the complexities of child marriage's *economic* motivations. I will further detail the role of poverty and will describe the prudential (or economic) beliefs and attitudes which contribute to the continued prevalence of the market. I do not intend to suggest that these are the *only* motivations for child marriage, nor do I argue that these motivations are more important or more prevalent than others. Instead, I take these to be among the most commonly cited motivators of child marriage and I hope to offer insight with respect to the ways in which governments, NGOs, and other relevant stakeholders can more effectively address these economic motivations through policy solutions.

### i. Addressing Poverty

Addressing the economic motivations of child marriage begins with addressing the issue of poverty. Studies show that in countries where poverty has decreased, so has the incidence of child marriage.<sup>33</sup> Tackling poverty is undoubtedly a tall order, but governments worldwide have made significant strides in reducing the global prevalence of poverty by more than half since 2000.<sup>34</sup> Governments can implement several policy and educational mechanisms to fully eradicate the intergenerational and perpetuating causes and effects of child marriage, including poverty, and to ensure that the transition away from child marriage is incentivized for young girls, their parents, and their families.

One obvious way to address poverty in the context of child marriage is to make schooling not only more widely available and of higher quality for young girls, but also to make it compulsory. By mandating that young girls stay in school up to a certain age, governments are not only able to reduce the incidence of child marriage, but they are also able to increase a young girl's (and her family's) future expected earnings, lower the likelihood she experiences domestic violence during marriage, and increase her agency and decision-making ability. However, compulsory education is by no means an original suggestion; many countries, including those which struggle with child marriage the most, currently have laws which mandate that children attend

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<sup>33</sup> Nour, 54.

<sup>34</sup> "Ending Poverty," United Nations, accessed November 30, 2020, <https://www.un.org/en/sections/issues-depth/poverty/>.

school up to a certain age. But, in India, for example, that age is only fourteen.<sup>35</sup> In Niger, fifteen. To stave off child marriage, these and other governments can raise the upper limit for compulsory education and more effectively enforce such laws.

The United States, although not completely void of the practice, keeps child marriage incidence low not only because of its relatively successful effort to prevent poverty (in relation to many developing nations, at least), but also because of relatively high age requirements for compulsory school attendance. At minimum, U.S. states require children to remain in school until sixteen, while some require attendance until the age of eighteen.<sup>36</sup> Countries which struggle with child marriage might consider raising their compulsory schooling ages to further discourage early/child marriage and to ensure that children are offered a higher minimum standard of educational opportunity while being able to develop adequate agency, decision-making skills, autonomy, and economic potential.

In Niger, over half of children aged 7 to 16 are not enrolled in school, leaving the country among the lowest ranked in West Africa in terms of literacy rate.<sup>37</sup> While there are a few reasons for this (including geographical gaps and economic barriers to education, which the government undoubtedly needs to address), the lack of community compliance with existing compulsory education/school-age laws is among the most concerning. To ensure compliance, governments might consider investments into a mandatory child registry to document child births and school records. Records would be required even—or perhaps *particularly*—in the most remote areas. The feasibility of such a program might be difficult to guarantee, but this registry—coupled with cooperation from education officials, teachers, community leaders, and law enforcement—will exist to ensure that all children are enrolled in school until the prescribed age outlined in relevant school-age policies, at minimum. Frequent absences from or failure to attend school prior to being “of age” in accordance with legislation would result in fines and investigation. Fines can be pooled into a fund which feeds back into government investment in education systems and infrastructure, while investigations should comprise of police inquiry to ensure no child has been pre-maturely married.

Furthermore, investments in the quality of education and in educational infrastructure (i.e., school buildings themselves) are necessary to combat child

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<sup>35</sup> Stefan Trines, “Education in India,” last modified September 13, 2018, <https://wentr.wes.org/2018/09/education-in-india#:~:text=Education%20in%20India%20is%20compulsory,of%20charge%20at%20public%20schools>.

<sup>36</sup> “Table 5.1.” *National Center for Education Statistics*, accessed December 3, 2020, [https://nces.ed.gov/programs/statereform/tab5\\_1.asp](https://nces.ed.gov/programs/statereform/tab5_1.asp).

<sup>37</sup> “Education,” UNICEF, accessed December 1, 2020, <https://www.unicef.org/niger/education>.

marriage. As mentioned above, many children in Niger do not attend school due to wide geographical gaps in school sites. It is not a coincidence that Niger is ranked among the highest in the world in terms of incidence of child marriage. Additional school buildings and qualified teachers must be introduced to these areas to help. Additionally, India struggles with teacher truancy in its public schools.<sup>38</sup> To adequately educate children, governments need to incentivize teachers by ensuring adequate funding for teacher salaries and investing in bearable workplace/classroom conditions. Creating government programs or funds to incentivize careers in primary and secondary education (through direct payment or university tuition subsidies, for example) and—once again—improving educational infrastructure are great ways to start.

Education is a crucial ingredient for the eradication of both poverty and child marriage. Governments serious about eliminating the practice need to invest in state-provided education systems while ensuring that children are attending school to decrease the likelihood and incidence of the practice and to maximize their economic opportunity.

Countries might also consider increasing access to water sources, particularly in rural or otherwise remote areas. People, and particularly young girls and women, in developing nations spend hours walking to and from water sources each day. Not only is limited access to clean water responsible for health issues and diseases which bring about economic burdens for both individuals and governments (e.g., healthcare costs, lower earnings and levels of productivity, etc.), but the time spent acquiring this necessary good takes away from individuals' being able to contribute to the labor force. This stifles earnings and economic potential, thereby contributing to the perpetuation of poverty and increasing the likelihood of child marriage. With improved infrastructure and access to clean water, individuals can live longer and more comfortably, and can better contribute to their country's economy and their own earning potential. Partnerships with NGOs and charities which work to increase access to clean water—like 'charity: water,'<sup>39</sup> for example—can prove useful in promoting health and wellness in these communities, increasing productivity, and shifting public priorities from 'Where can my family and I get clean water today?' to 'Which job opportunity offers the greatest earning potential?'

Furthermore, although potentially controversial in practice, efforts to slow population growth can prove useful in both slowing the incidence of child marriage and decreasing the incidence of poverty. Child marriage provokes high levels of fertility; early brides become pregnant early and, on average, procreate in higher

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<sup>38</sup> Geeta Anand, "Fighting Truancy Among India's Teachers, With a Pistol and a Stick," last modified February 19, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/20/world/asia/india-primary-school-system-uttar-pradesh.html>.

<sup>39</sup> "About Us," *charity: water*, accessed December 3, 2020, <https://www.charitywater.org/about>.

incidence compared to women who marry and become mothers later in life.<sup>40</sup> Families with more children carry greater economic burdens, as they require higher economic capacity to pay for food, education, healthcare, and other necessities for each of their children, thereby reducing their standard of living and perpetuating the cycle of poverty. Additionally, higher population levels increase the demand for social and welfare services from the government. While policies like China's former one-child policy unquestionably carry moral baggage as potential human rights violations (*I do not* advocate for such a policy), countries struggling with child marriage, poverty, and population growth can implement positive incentives and robust family planning services to decrease population levels, thereby diminishing the likelihood of harms linked to early pregnancy, normalizing later pregnancy, and decreasing the prevalence of and pressures associated with child marriage.

Expansions of programs similar to India's Pradhan Mantri Matru Vandana Yojana, which is a cash transfer benefits program for first-time mothers *over the age of 19*,<sup>41</sup> would serve as further incentive for young girls to delay pregnancy to adulthood. Limiting and disincentivizing early pregnancy (and thereby removing worries of pregnancy outside of wedlock) might also remove the social pressures surrounding child marriage for many families.

Along these lines, governments can implement tax breaks, or even direct cash payments, for newly married couples in which the bride is over the age of eighteen, or for families who delay their daughter's marriage until after she turns eighteen. In conjunction with greater oversight of marriage practices, these are a few ways in which governments can incentivize couples and families to delay marriage until adulthood.

Although fiscally daunting, governments might also explore the potential for a universal basic income (UBI) to stave off poverty and to address concerns of economic domination of one social class (in this case, men) over another (women). In conjunction with effective inflation control, UBIs can alleviate many of the economic pressures which families face, thereby decreasing the economic need and pressure for child marriage. Additionally, UBIs can decrease the dependence of young girls and their families on grooms and the institution of child marriage. However, a lack of evidence with respect to UBIs in practice means that there is not much empirical research to support its implementation, so developing nations and economies could

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<sup>40</sup> Sanni Yaya et al., "Prevalence of child marriage and its impact on fertility outcomes in 34 sub-Saharan African countries," *BMC International Health and Human Rights* 19 (2019): 1. <https://bmcinthealthhumrights.biomedcentral.com/>.

<sup>41</sup> "Pradhan Mantri Matru Vandana Yojana," *Ministry of Women and Child Development (Government of India: New Delhi)*, accessed November 30, 2020, <https://wcd.nic.in/sites/default/files/FINAL%20PMMVY%20%28FAQ%29%20BOOKLET.pdf>.



be understandably cautious in considering this option. To start, however, developing governments can experiment by implementing small-scale rollouts of UBI programs to impoverished and economically desperate communities first. This will immediately improve the economic status of the most vulnerable while serving as an experiment, of sorts, to test the effectiveness of such a policy initiative.

Addressing the issue of poverty in the context of child marriage rests heavily on increasing financial stability within communities, through increased individual purchasing power—or, in other words, more cash in the hands of individuals—and strengthening agency and economic potential through education. Historically, such governmental intervention and involvement have proven to be effective methods of economic recovery and poverty eradication. FDR’s welfare and public assistance programs rescued an economically depressed United States in the 1930s. Similar efforts by Park Chung-hee’s government lifted much of Korea out of poverty following years of widespread economic desperation and destitution resulting from the Korean War.<sup>42</sup> Similar investments into institutional development will reap beneficial economic returns and will, in turn, help to lower the incidence of child marriage around the world.

### **ii. Addressing False Economic Attitudes and Prudential Beliefs**

While poverty is a primary motivator of the continued practice of child marriage, the practice is also driven by dated and, frankly, incorrect economic attitudes and beliefs relating to the economic potential of young girls and women. As mentioned previously, girls are often seen as economic burdens for families, rather than as valuable members of communities and local economies. Such attitudes fail to recognize the economic potential for girls and women outside of marriage. To best address these, governments should not only introduce educational initiatives for girls, their families, and community leaders to alter the incorrect assumptions of female economic potential, but they should put forth concerted efforts aimed at increasing economic opportunity for women.

Instilling in young girls and women a belief in their economic potential can greatly decrease the incidence of economic dependence of young girls on men, thereby strengthening the agency of these girls and reducing the likelihood of subordination, dependence, and abuse due to economic circumstance. Additionally, increasing young girls’ (and their families’) awareness of economic opportunity and the potential for financial independence through education and employment will

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<sup>42</sup> Huck-ju Kwon and Ilcheong Yi, “Economic Development and Poverty Reduction in Korea: Governing Multifunctional Institutions,” Institute for Future Studies and Swedish Institute for Social Research (September 2008), 6. <https://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/>.

further disincentivize early marriage. With increased knowledge of both their earning potential and employment opportunity, child marriage might not seem like the best available option for these girls and their families. Stressing not only the immediate, but also the *future* economic benefits of education and employment will be crucial for successfully altering these beliefs and norms. Programs like Ishraq (Egypt) and PRACHAR (India) are examples of such educational/empowerment initiatives in practice. These programs have been found to be effective in not only empowering girls with information, but also in changing wider, community attitudes and behavior related to female economic opportunity and child marriage.<sup>43</sup> Expansions on such programs are necessary.

Equally important is the concerted effort to support and create productive job opportunities for women. Coupled with investments in education, job creation is crucial to both eliminating poverty and changing economic attitudes of girls and community members. Jobs, of course, provide essential income and empower individuals—especially young women.<sup>44</sup> Informing girls and their families of the myriad opportunities in self-employment, government/bureaucratic capacities, and the private sector is essential to altering their economic beliefs. Governments can incentivize private businesses and companies to offer jobs to young women, and particularly those in rural areas, through tax incentives or direct employee salary subsidies. Compliance with and enforcement of anti-discrimination employment laws, which exist in each of the countries I mentioned in the introduction, as well as many others, will be crucial for economic and attitudinal progress.

Finally, ensuring adequate political access, participation, and representation of marginalized groups is crucial to escaping poverty and child marriage, as well as altering ‘traditional’ gender roles. Having diverse (and effective) governments and bureaucratic institutions is essential for economic development and policymaking. Involving women and other underrepresented groups in governmental and political processes increases their decision-making ability and agency. Furthermore, greater female involvement in political capacities increases the likelihood of investment in social programs and services, including education and other welfare benefits programs.<sup>45</sup>

### iii. A Note Regarding Enforcement

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<sup>43</sup> Anju Malhotra et al., “Solutions to End Child Marriage: What the Evidence Shows,” *International Center for Research on Women* (2011): 12. <https://www.healthynewbornnetwork.org/>.

<sup>44</sup> “Employment and Decent Work,” *United Nations*, accessed December 1, 2020, <https://www.un.org/development/desa/socialperspectiveondevelopment/issues/employment-and-decent-work.html>.

<sup>45</sup> Parsons et al., 14.



Once again, in many countries, there already exist legal and policy frameworks at the national and local levels which prohibit child marriage. But, in order to put an end to the practice, these frameworks, coupled with the initiatives I've offered above, need to be introduced in conjunction with more consistent enforcement mechanisms and, potentially, harsher punitive measures. While I concede that enforcement in this negative sense—that is, through limitation, regulation, and hardline punitive measures—is not *necessarily* effective (take, for example, the United States' war on drugs, which hasn't entirely eliminated the market in illegal drugs), governments need to commit money and resources for oversight in often-ignored communities, and particularly rural and remote areas, to root out child marriage. In addition, corrupt practices to obtain special access or privilege—like hush-money payments to government officials or law enforcement, for example—need to desist for effective implementation to take place.

The World Bank reported that if Niger had been able to completely eliminate child marriage in 2015, then by 2030 it would have accrued up to \$1.7 billion in additional welfare, \$327 million in savings for its education budget, and \$34 million in savings through reduced infant mortality. Based on these sample estimates alone, governments *themselves* should be incentivized and motivated to make concerted efforts to decrease the prevalence of child marriage.<sup>46</sup> The potential economic benefits are massive.

Child marriage is undoubtedly a social and human rights issue, but my aim in this section was to illustrate the numerous ways in which the practice translates into an economic issue, as well. The policy proposals I have offered in this section will certainly require time, cooperation, and (a lot of) money. But, as I hope to have shown, there is reason to believe that developing countries that engage in these efforts will be rewarded through sizable economic gains and increased productivity. Being able to reinvest these savings and net gains into communities, educational endeavors, and other social/welfare programs will assist in fully eradicating the practice of child marriage and, with it, the intergenerational effects of poverty.

## Conclusion

In this paper, I have analyzed many of the distinct harms resulting from the seemingly elusive market(s) in child marriage and have argued that such a market sufficiently satisfies each of the conditions which characterize noxious markets in Debra Satz's view. I have also identified economic motivators which feed into the prevalence of markets in child marriage, including poverty and misguided prudential

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<sup>46</sup> Quentin Wodon et al., "Economic Impacts of Child Marriage: Global Synthesis Report," *The World Bank* (June 2017): 38-42. <http://documents1.worldbank.org/>.

beliefs. While the current rate of child marriage is undoubtedly alarming, I would be remiss if I failed to recognize and emphasize the important steps already taken by many governments, NGOs, and advocacy groups across the world to reduce the incidence of the practice and to mitigate the inevitable harms rooted in this institution. Many South Asian countries, including India and Bangladesh, have implemented national and state-specific action plans in an effort to change social norms and attitudes, empower girls through education, and make apparent the distinct harms caused by child marriage.<sup>47</sup> NGOs like the UN and UNICEF, as well as advocacy groups like Girls Not Brides, have also done important work in ensuring that governments continue to strive to protect and promote the well-being of girls susceptible to child marriage.

Finally, as I have hinted in the previous section, I think there is much to be gained from attempting to understand the weight and force of the many institutions and motivations acting against the complete abolishment of child marriage. Grappling with the influences of the economic drivers of the market in child marriage is an important step, but analyzing the social, cultural, attitudinal, and religious forces prodding the market is an equally important task in better understanding the challenges which governments and policymakers face in eradicating child marriage. For example, marriage can be a deeply religious ritual; child marriage might even be considered a requirement, of sorts, in some religious communities, leading to resistance in complying with governmental efforts to eliminate the practice. Further issues and complexities arise in theocratic regimes and states; while countries like India and Bangladesh have secular, liberal governments, challenges arise where the values to human rights and related agreements and conventions simply do not supersede religious aims and cultural norms. Further questions and discourse lie in determining how clear human rights violations, like markets in child marriage, are addressed in deeply religious, culturally unyielding, or otherwise policy-resistant communities.

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<sup>47</sup> “India,” *Girls Not Brides*, accessed December 2, 2020, <https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/child-marriage/india/>.

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