

Captive Companions

by Danielle Morrison

Common Western perception indicates that slavery is an aspect of the past. Low wages may be harsh and cruel, but slavery itself is widely considered eradicated. Although publicly sanctioned traditional forms of slavery may be less prolific than in centuries past, slavery itself has acquired more diverse avenues of expression and will continue so long as a demand exists. Currently, slavery rears its dehumanizing face through such markets as sex trafficking, child labor, agricultural labor, debt slavery, and child marriage. For each of these expressions of slavery, the victims are forced into dangerous unknown worlds with high risks and few avenues of protection. Information from the outside world could almost cease completely, effectively destroying the passage of knowledge to these desperate victims. Slavery, therefore, has been capable of surviving and even thriving for centuries through the cultural and monetary practice of child brides.

Many are forced to accept the appalling custom of child brides as part of life. Dr. Anita Raj, who works for the Boston University of Public Health, and her team¹, purport that “child marriage, defined by UNICEF [United Nations Children Fund] as marriage prior to age 18 years, is a reality for over 60 million women worldwide” (2009, p.1884). Nawal Nour, who works for Brigham and Women’s Hospital in Boston, Massachusetts, finds the synonymous labels of early marriage and child brides inadequate because “early marriage does not imply that children are involved... [and] the term child brides glorifies the tradition by portraying an image of joy and celebration” (2009, p.51-52). The expression early marriage is also vague “because an early

¹ The full team included Dr. Anita Raj, Dr Niranjan Saggurti, Dr. Donta Balaiah, and Dr. Jay Silverman, who work for the Boston University of Public Health, the Population Council in New Delhi, India, the National Institute for Research in Reproductive Health, and Harvard School of Public Health, respectively.

marriage for one society may be considered late by another,” causing arguments over correct adult marriage age rather than protection of minors (Nour, 2009, p.52). The UNICEF definition will help identify victims and, hopefully, decrease the prevalence of child marriages.

Commodification of the brides is simultaneously a cause and an effect of the malignancy. Girls become commodified goods when they are promised as child brides in exchange for dowries. C. Gorney, a reporter for the National Geographic Magazine, states that child brides are “being transferred like requisitioned goods, one family to another, because a group of adult males [have] arranged their futures for them” and sold their rights (2011, p.79). In fact, Maristella Botticini and Aloysius Siow, who work for the Department of Economics at Boston University and The University of Toronto, respectively, date the tradition and, thus, the commodification of women by explaining that the concept of a “dowry... [existed] in such ancient civilizations as the Sumerian, Akkadian, and Babylonian in the third and second millennia BC” (2002, p.6). The Hammurabi Code even specifies the price of a marriage gift for a patrician compared to a plebeian (Botticini, 2002, p.6). Stephanie Smallwood, author of *Saltwater Slavery*, explains that “only when the human cargo was thought to be large enough to raise the probability of death and the attendant loss of property could the slave ship be deemed ‘full,’” paralleling the idea that the family will consider selling a girl’s marriage rights to the highest bidder even when she only might be able to fetch a fair dowry (2007, p.72). Commodification of human beings has long existed via forced servitude and so long as individuals are bought and sold, slavery and the commodification of people will continue.

Rather than allow two individuals to voluntarily engage in nuptials, the practice of marrying off children, mainly females, forces minors into dangerous unions. Younger girls fetch higher dowries, providing more monetary support for their families. This direct correlation

between higher dowry and younger bride age causes an increase in husband age because the men need more time to earn the dowry. Due to their incredibly young ages, the child brides may understand that they will be forced into marriage, but they may not necessarily comprehend what marriage truly means. The fact that child brides will be expected to engage in sexual intercourse is completely unknown to many young females on their wedding days (Gorney, 2011, p.80). However, the older men know full well that intercourse will occur, leading to rape. Even when Ayesha, a Yemeni ten-year-old, “screamed when she saw the man she was to marry... [her] father ordered her to put on high heels to look taller” so that the police would be fooled (Gorney, 2011, p.81). Child marriages, therefore, force the kids into needlessly dangerous situations.

A majority of child bride unions occur in countries currently in poor economic states. In fact, “over 60% of girls are married under the age of 18 in some sub-Saharan countries and Bangladesh, and 40 to 60% of girls undergo child marriage in India,” which are all economically suffering countries (Nour, 2009, p.51). When wives move in with their husbands, an economic burden is removed from their own families, thus, leading to an increase in child brides during particularly difficult financial times. The opposite is true as well because “in countries where poverty has decreased, such as Korea, Taiwan, and Thailand, the incidence of child marriage has also declined” (Nour, 2009, p.54). Although families use their children as bartering tools and fiscal ploys primarily in countries of severe economic trouble, early marriage rates decrease as the financial stability of a country increases.

Along with poverty and economic troubles, a desire to reinforce social ties prompts early marriages. Rather than exist as a purely selfish act on part of the arrangers, “child marriages [supposedly] form new alliances between tribes, clans, and villages; reinforce social ties; and stabilize vital social status” (Nour, 2006, p.1645). For areas in which money is lacking, social

ties may be the only avenue to a better life or even to sustain a family's current state of living. By marrying one's daughter to a rich man with high social status, the family aspires to relieve itself of the financial burden of the daughter while, hopefully, providing her with a more stable lifestyle. However, this rarely actually happens in terms of early marriage. Instead, men choose to marry minors rather than women, causing commonplace stories similar to when a girl's "father had force[d] her to marry a man three times her age" (Gorney, 2011, p.81). The perpetuating belief that marrying one's children off to established adult individuals will be economically beneficial for everyone involved and that this act will simultaneously strengthen social ties continues to instigate early marriages.

Many parents believe that child marriage protects their daughters from rape, promiscuity, and sexual transmitted diseases. However, Shelley Clark, an assistant professor at Harris Graduate School of Public Policy, and her team² purport "that the prevalence of HIV infection is greater among married female adolescents aged 15-19 than among their unmarried sexually active counterparts" (2006, p.80-81). The blind belief in protection from sexual issues leads to "married adolescents have[ing] relatively little access to educational and media sources of information about HIV" (Clark, Bruce, & Dude, 2006, p.79). Societies that consider an unwed female non-virgin to be ruined and useless often believe that an unmarried female is at high risk for rape. These same cultures also believe that without imposing a husband on their young daughters, the females will automatically fall into promiscuity rather than sustain modesty. Ironically, the very negative effects some families are trying to inhibit are actually directly caused by the supposedly preventative action of forcing children into marriage.

² The full team included Shelley Clark, an assistant professor at Harris Graduate School of Public Policy; Judith Bruce, a director on the Population Council in New York; and Annie Dude, a graduate student at the Harris Graduate School of Public Policy.

The husbands are abusive and have little, if any regard for the children they have bought as sex slaves, nullifying the theory of protection for child brides. Instead of allowing a two-way voluntary union, “the possibility of refusing sexual relations within marriage is virtually eliminated in many instances by the threat of violence” (Clark, Bruce, & Dude, 2006, p.83). Since the girls are uninformed and fear abuse, they have few ways to invoke sexual protection. Husbands of child brides also spread HIV more often because “these men are generally more sexually experienced than the boyfriends of unmarried adolescents” as a direct result of their increased ages (Clark, Bruce, & Dude, 2006, p.83). Rather than offer respect, the older husbands not only rape, but also commonly infect their child wives with sexually transmitted diseases.

Child brides often accept their fates rather than vehemently fight against them due to a sense of entrapment and threats of violence. Instead of finding support from their families, many child brides are often aesthetically prepared for their weddings by the older females in their families who fully support the forced unions. The option of escape is nonexistent for these girls because delaying the gauna, consummation of the marriage, would bring their families great dishonor and shame (Gorney, 2011, p.83). Many child brides also understand that their society is patriarchal and that women are provided few, if any rights. Just as the girls forced into child marriages have no possibility of escape, “more often than not, then, captives [in the early slave trade] escaped only to be sold again” (Smallwood, 2007, p.62). In both cases, “the laws of the market [whether a cultural or tangible market] made fellow human beings see it as their primary interest to own as commodities the escaped captives, rather than to connect with them as social subjects,” essentially promoting the commodification of people and preventing possibilities of escape (Smallwood, 2007, p.62). Both the slave trade and the practice of child brides create an atmosphere of entrapment, preventing escapes for the victims.

Although the buying and selling of girls dominates the market of child marriages, boys are also sold. For example, consider that “in Mali, the ratio of married girls to boys is 72:1; in Kenya, it is 21:1; in Indonesia, it is 7.5:1; in Brazil, it is 6:1; and even in the United States, the ratio is 8:1” (Nour, 2009, p.52). Cheryl Thomas, director of the Women’s Human Rights Program via the United Nations, explains that involuntary marriages can occur in Massachusetts because, “with parental consent, the age of consent for boys to marry is 14,” (2009, p.17). Often, boys are married to child brides as an economic and social enhancement rather than to older women. Since the commodification of girls contributes to the main portion of forced underage marriages, the prevalence of boys involved in child marriages is often downplayed.

The custom of child brides, as defined by UNICEF, forces girls into scary and needlessly dangerous unions. Although some girls are too young to understand the concept of sexual intercourse, some are old enough to understand their captive states and truly experience the fear of sexual, physical, and emotional abuse. A variety of reasons contribute to the perpetuation of child brides, though the main ones are severe economic troubles, a desire to strengthen social ties, and a belief that it will offer protection for the bride. Fortunately, when financially weak countries increase their monetary stability, the proportion of child brides decreases. Even though various global organizations continue their attempts to reduce the numbers of minors forced into marriage, modern slavery continues to thrive via the custom of child brides.

Reference List

- Botticini, M. & Siow, A. (2002). Why Dowries? *Social Science Research Network*, 1-47.
Retrieved from <http://homes.chass.utoronto.ca/~siow/papers/dowry.pdf>
- Clark, S., Bruce, J., & Dude, A. (2006). Protecting young women from HIV/AIDS: The case against child and adolescent marriage. *International Family Planning Perspectives*, 32, 79-88. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/4147596>
- Gorney, C. (2011). Too young to wed: The secret world of child brides. *National Geographic Magazine*, 219, 78-83. Retrieved from <http://ngm.nationalgeographic.com/2011/06/child-brides/gorney-text>
- Nour, N. (2006). Health consequences of child marriage in Africa. *Emerging Infectious Diseases*, 12, 1644-1649. Retrieved from <http://ukpmc.ac.uk/articles/PMC3372345>
- Nour, N. (2009). Child marriage: A silent health and human rights issue. *Women's Health in the Developing World*, 2, 51-56. Retrieved from <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2672998/>
- Raj, A., Saggurti, N., Balaiah, D., & Silverman, J. (2009). Prevalence of child marriage and its impact on the fertility and fertility control behaviors of young women in India. *National Institute of Health Public Access*, 373, 1883-1889. doi: 10.1016/S0140-6736(09)60246-4
- Smallwood, S. (2007). *Saltwater slavery: A middle passage from Africa to American diaspora*. United States of America: Harvard University Press.
- Thomas, C. (2009). Forced early marriage: *A focus on central and eastern Europe and former soviet union countries with selected laws from other countries*. United Nations, 8, 1-19.
Retrieved from

[http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/egm/vaw_legislation_2009/Expert%20Paper%20E
GMGPLHP%20Cheryl%20Thomas%20revised_.pdf](http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/egm/vaw_legislation_2009/Expert%20Paper%20E%20GMGPLHP%20Cheryl%20Thomas%20revised_.pdf)