***The Context of Child Marriages in Cameroon***

In Cameroon, it is estimated that 53.5% of girls are married before they are 18 (DHS, 2011). The Cameroonian Penal Code states the minimum marriageable age as 15 for girls and 18 for boys (Civil Status Registration Ordinance, 1981) with a clause that such marriages should involve the consent of both parties and equally recognized by an official document. Conversely, by setting the minimum marriageable age at 15 years, it becomes acceptable for parents to marry their daughters off before 18 years whilst not physically, emotionally and psychologically mature to enter into a marriage. Additionally, the Code does not provide sufficient safeguards to protect young girls.

Child Marriages are common in Cameroon but the practice is extreme in the northern part of the country where three fourths of the women aged 20-29 were married before they were 16 years old (Population Council 2011). Prevalence is highest in North (73%), Extreme North (72%), Adamawa (59%), East (59%), South (43%), Centre (34%), South West (28%), West (24%), North West (17%) and Littoral (13%). Most of the girls in the northern part of the country are given to much older suitors when they are 11 or 12 years old (Population Council 2011). These results reflect a pattern similar to what was observed in the 2011 DHS data.

It is important to note that the girls who are vulnerable to child marriages include those who are the least educated, poor and live in rural areas. In a study conducted by UNFPA, it was established that for women aged 20-24, 79% with no education and 45% of women with primary education were married before 18 years in comparison to 13% of women who had attained secondary education (UNFPA 2012). In addition, girls from 20% of the poorest families were 6.5 times more susceptible to marriage in comparison to girls from 20% of the richest families. The study also found that women aged 20-24, living in rural areas, were more likely to be married before 18 in comparison to women living in urban areas (UNFPA 2012). Countries with low Gross Domestic Product (GDP) have a higher prevalence of child marriage with at least 75% of the people living on less than $2 a day.

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| **Highest Educational Level** | **Married Over age 18 (2011)** | **Married Under age 18(2011)** | **Married Over age 18 (2004)** | **Married Under age 18 (2004)** |
| **No education** | 18.13% | 33.79% | 20.09% | 35.48% |
| **Primary** | 35.52% | 40.42% | 40.48% | 44.21% |
| **Secondary** | 41.66% | 22.74% | 37.48% | 20.02% |
| **Higher** | 4.69% | 2.00% | 2.00% | 0.29% |

 While working with young women and through research, we have found that there are many consequences to early marriage and we will list a few below.

* **Pregnancy Risks**

The leading cause of death in girls ages 15-19 in developing countries is complication from pregnancy and childbirth, according to the UN. Young girls who get married before 18 are easily susceptible to premature death (WHO, 2013). This is due to the fact that by the time they get married, they are not physically mature to become pregnant and deliver babies.

It should be noted that pregnancy is riskier for pre-teens and young mothers in comparison to their older counterparts (WHO, 2013). Moreover, once they get married, they are under tremendous pressure to prove their fertility and give birth to children. We found in the the 2004 and 2011 DHS survey for Cameroon that, the interval between first marriage and first birth was significantly lower for those respondents who married under the age of 18.

* **Increased Risk of Contracting HIV and Sexually Transmitted Diseases**

Cameroonian girls who get married before they are 18 years are more susceptible to HIV infections because of their physiology and also due to the fact that they are often married to older men who either have or have had multiple partners . Once the child brides are removed from their families, they are likely to engage in early and unprotected sex with their husbands, increasing their risk of HIV infection as well as other sexually transmitted diseases such as syphilis, gonorrhoea and Chlamydia. In Cameroon, among married adolescents aged 15-19, the prevalence of HIV infection in married girls is 3.9% which is high in comparison to unmarried girls (2.0%)(Schmauz et al 1989). This has been attributed to the fact that the married girls often get married to much older men who as a result of their age are at increased risk of being HIV positive. In addition, the power relations in the marriage are often unbalanced which increases the married girls’ exposure to HIV infection. The girls, because they are perceived to occupy an inferior position in the marriage, are less likely to report that they can refuse sex (25%) as compared to their counterparts who were married overage (20%), who can demand that their husbands wear condoms before they engage in sexual intercourse, or insist that they remain monogamous during the marriage

* **Obstetric Fistula**

Obstetric fistula arises when the foetus’s head passes into the vagina, but its shoulders cannot fit through the mother's pelvic bones. As the foetus tries to pass through the vagina, it exacts pressure on the vaginal wall causing holes to develop between the girls’ genital tract and the urinary or the intestinal tract (UNFPA 2012).

Girls who get married before 18 years are forced to conceive early in order to prove their fertility within their first year of the marriage. Girls who are between 10-15 years especially face an increased risk of suffering from obstetric fistula because their pelvic muscles at the age are not well developed for childbearing and delivery.

* **Infant Mortality**

Stillbirths and new-born deaths are 50% higher among mothers under 20 than in women who get pregnant in their 20s. Additionally, for girls under 18, their children’s risk of death in its first year of life is 60% greater than girls over 19 and if the child survives, they are prone to low birth weight, under-nutrition and late physical and cognitive development (UNICEF, State of the world’s children, 2009).

This explains why infant mortality rate is high in Sub-Saharan Africa. In addition, there is evidence to show that low birth weight of babies is common in adolescent mothers in comparison to the older peers. Low birth weight babies are 5-30 times more likely to die than babies of normal weight (UNICEF 2001).

* **Continuous Intergenerational Poverty**

There is a strong correlation between age at marriage, age at the birth of first child and the level of education. Girls who marry young abandon formal education and are limited to the traditional role of wives and mothers with total reliance and dependence on their husbands. This leads to powerlessness and vulnerability with lack of access to education and information. Faced with a lower or zero level of investment in their education, these girls lack employment opportunities preventing them access to lands, money and economic resources. Women account for half a country’s potential base. A nation’s competitiveness in the long term depends significantly on whether and how it educates its women, so in a case where these girls are given out in marriage at a young age, education becomes impossible. This leads to a ripple effect that indirectly affects the potential base of the community and then spirals into a cycle of poverty.

* **Barrier to Education**

Child marriages deny girls their right to education. Families tend to prioritize the education of their sons and are less likely to invest in their daughters’ education because they are poor. They cannot afford the learning materials, uniforms, fees and other education related expenses. This culminates in families preparing their daughters for their responsibilities as future spouses and mothers (Langue-Menye 2007). Moreover, in some cases, the expectation that their daughters will soon be married causes parents not to send them to school. In situations where the girls are attending school, their education is disrupted when they are forced to get married at an early age. For example in the northern part of Cameroon, girls as young as eleven are married off to suitors (Population Council 2011). Once they get married, they do not have the time to go to school and attend to their wifely duties at the same time. Duties such as looking after the home, cooking food and looking after their children take priority. The lack of access to education deprives girls from developing intellectual skills and other vital skills that would enable them find jobs and be productive in their communities.

* **Increased Risk of being subjected to Domestic Violence**

Because married girls are regarded as property of their husband, they face an increased risk of being subjected to domestic violence during marriage. Child marriages tend to create conditions that make girls vulnerable to domestic violence because, in many cases, the girls are married to much older men whose decisions they are not expected to oppose because their seniority places them in a superior position in the marriage. As a result, the girls in these unions are expected to be subservient to their husbands who make them more accepting of their husbands’ treatment. Such a perception of their self worth would explain why they tolerate domestic violence from their husbands. These child brides are less likely to bring an action against their husbands or report them to formal authorities because they are afraid, have not attained the age of majority and in most cases, domestic violence is considered to be a private family affair and often settled in the “family way”. It is important, however, to note that evidence of physical, emotional, and sexual abuse were not significantly correlated with underage marriage in the 2011 DHS survey.

* **Abandonment**

Girls who get married before they are 18 are also most likely to be abandoned. This situation arises when their husbands divorce them often on baseless grounds. As divorcees, these girls find it difficult to seek support from their ex-husbands yet they have children to take care of. Majority of them do not have marriage certificates which would show that they were married before and are entitled to support from their husbands. They also do not have the option to return to their families because they are unable to take care of them. Additionally, should their husbands die, majority of these girls would spend their lives in widowhood owning no property with no means of livelihood. It is impossible for them to go back to their parent’s home, so the only solution would be for her to either remain abandoned or engage in transactional sex (Population Council 2011).

* **Psychosocial Problems**

The high burden of child marriage has resulted in a 41% increase in mental disorders amongst victims. Mental and emotional problems are rampant amongst girl brides because they are not matured enough to cope with conjugal, maternal nor in-law issues. The girl bride is prone to psychological and emotional problems like depression and alienation. A feeling of vulnerability and abandonment can lead to panic attacks, separation attacks and dependency issues. Unfortunately, in Africa, psychosocial problems are still viewed as a taboo and may go untreated and unreported.

* **Loss of Childhood**

Once young girls enter into marriages, they lose their childhood because they take on adult roles like cleaning, cooking, looking after their husband’s children and invariably start raising their own family. . Repeated pregnancies, motherhood and the burden of house and field work age the girl bride prematurely. Though perceived to be women because of their new status attributed to marriage, in retrospect, they have the mentality of children. They never get the chance to enjoy their childhood and engage in games and other fun activities that children their age enjoy

In Cameroon, the ministry of social affairs, Women Empowerment and Promotion of the family has set up women’s empowerment center to train women on livelihood skills, this is a big lapse because they have not solved the problem from the source, instead, they have preferred to solve the outcome of the problem. The most important aspect is to change legislation and educate the rural communities on these legislature and the need to educate their girl children. There is not much that is been done by government programmes and policies to end child marriage in Cameroon, different NGOs have been developing and implementing programs on the empowerment of girl child.

Organization of African Youth – Cameroon has organised several events in 2013 on Child Marriage, in July 2013, we organised a national Consultation of Child Marriage which was meant t o gather views from government, development partners and civil society organizations on child marriage in Cameroon and what steps needs to be taken to end child marriage. The full report and recommendation can be found at this link. <http://cameroon.oayouth.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/11/final-Report-on-National-Consultation-on-Child-Marriage.pdf>

On the international Day of Girl Child, we also organised a roundtable discussion at the end of which we handed an advocacy letter to the government on the need to end child marriage, the report is downloadable at the following link. <http://cameroon.oayouth.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/ROUNDTABLE-DISCUSSION-REPORT-ON-DAY-OF-GIRL-CHILD.pdf>

To end child marriage, there is need for a consented approach which involves youth, young girls, government, civil society and other development partners as highlighted in our publication “Ending Child Marriage: The Role of Young People in Cameroon” ***available upon request.***

It is imperative that action is taken to eradicate child marriage because with the world facing its largest-ever youth generation; with more than a billion people within the 10-19 age range, if present trends continue, 500,000 of the young girls born between 2005 and 2010 will be married before the age of 18 by 2030. However, to eradicate child marriage, it is important to understand qualitatively the causes that enable this practice to continue.

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