**Maat for Peace’ submission on “Addressing vulnerabilities related to the sale of children and sexual exploitation within the framework of the Sustainable Development Goals”**

* **Introduction:**

In 2015, the United Nations General Assembly, with the support of most countries of the world, set **17 global goals** for sustainable development to achieve a better tomorrow for all, and help develop a global development plan by 2030. This plan aims to eliminate harmful practices that children are exposed to, topped by early and forced marriage and female genital mutilation which are stipulated in the **third objective of SDG 5**. In the same regard, **Objective 7 of SDG 8** stipulates the need to take urgent measures to combat child labor, trafficking, and exploitation in child recruitment during armed conflicts. **Objective 2 of SDG 16** also emphasizes that no child should be subjected to violence, abuse, or neglect, including cases of violence and exploitation on the Internet. Thus, the Sustainable Development Goals set a comprehensive framework to protect children from the sale and sexual exploitation by emphasizing the need to end early and forced marriage of girls, female genital mutilation, end child labor, and eliminate child recruitment in armed conflict.

However, the harmful practices that harm children stipulated in the Sustainable Development Goals remain, despite the assertion of many countries in the Middle East region of their commitment to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals. UN estimates indicate that more than **61 million children** out of 166 million children are living in war-affected areas in the Middle East[[1]](#footnote-1). Recruitment of children in armed conflicts continues in the Middle East. Societal norms and faulty religious traditions still allow early and forced marriages and female genital mutilation to continue. Extreme poverty is a common feature of these practices, and child labor continues.

**Maat for Peace, Development and Human Rights** clarifies the harmful practices of children in the Middle East, including sales and sexual exploitation, within the Sustainable Development Goals adoption, which took place six years ago. In preparing this report, Maat relies on government agencies' documents and reports in the Middle East, civil society organizations reports and the documentation of its experts and sources on the ground.

**General statistics on the sale and sexual exploitation of children in the Middle East within the Sustainable Development Goals** **framework:**

Children's physical and psychological well-being is in doubt in the Middle East. **Yemen, Iraq, and Libya** continue to be involved in the recruitment of children into armed conflicts. In Yemen, the Houthi group recruited about 35,000 children, 17% under 11, from September 2014 to September 2021. Among this number, more than 6,700 children are active on the battlefronts; about 2,000 children were killed in the battles between the Houthis and the legitimately recognized government forces[[2]](#footnote-2).

Girls in the Middle East still suffer from early marriage and female circumcision, due to harmful practices, social, and religious traditions and the spread of poverty and ignorance, especially in cases of early marriage. It is estimated that more than 18% of girls are married under the age of eighteen, especially in rural areas[[3]](#footnote-3), meaning that one out of every five young women in the region is married before the age of eighteen. The Middle East is home to nearly 40 million child brides, including child brides who are now married and women who married as children[[4]](#footnote-4). More than 125 million girls and women alive were subjected to FGM in nearly 29 countries in Africa and the Middle East.

Those children work in precarious conditions to provide for the various expenses of their families; estimates confirm that nearly 9.2 million children work in the Middle East, equivalent to 8.4% of the global total. They work in dangerous conditions and are early dropouts from education. Most of these children work in the agricultural sector and 57% work in dangerous[[5]](#footnote-5).

**Manifestations of selling and sexual exploitation of children in the Middle East:**

While many countries in the Middle East have taken steps to ban selling and sexual exploitation of children as part of their commitment to achieving the SDGs, the Covid-19 pandemic has threatened the effectiveness of these efforts on a large scale, as the rates of selling and exploitation of children in the Middle East rose during the Covid-19 epidemic, and we can talk about these manifestations in some detail as follows:

**First: forced and early marriage and female genital mutilation:** Child marriages, as well as female genital mutilation, are deeply rooted in traditional societies in the Middle East. Community norms, as well as faulty religious believes, have allowed the phenomenon to permeate and spread, especially in rural and marginalized communities. This is in addition to other factors, such as poverty and armed conflict. Data shows that among the most common countries for underage marriages in the Middle East are Yemen, Lebanon, Jordan and Iraq.

In Yemen, about 14% of girls marry under the age of 15, while 52 % marry when they are 18 years old, and 8 minors lose their lives every day due to pregnancy and childbirth risks. In Iraq, there is no great difference, the latest statistical estimates that the percentage of married women aged 12 years is 53%. While, in Jordan, about 29 underage girls marry every day. Some statistics also confirm that underage marriages rose to 11.8 during the period between 2019 and 2020.

On the other hand, the phenomenon of female genital mutilation is an essential part of the formation of societies in the Middle East, and it increases sharply in areas that adhere to societal and religious customs and traditions. In Egypt, 92% of women and girls between the ages of 15 and 49 have experienced some form of female genital mutilation. In Yemen, genital mutilation is spread by 18.5% among women and girls between the ages of 15 and 49. In Sudan, 86.6% of women and girls have been circumcised. Statistics confirm that the cost of treating the health effects of female genital mutilation is about $1.4 billion per year.[[6]](#footnote-6)

**Second: Child labor**: The phenomenon of child labor has increased recently more than ever, with continuous increasing of poverty and poor economic conditions affecting the Middle East against the spread of Covid-19.

For example, in Jordan, children continue to suffer from hard and difficult work, with many children falling victim to precarious working conditions because they are sent by the family to work to help them with social expenses. Children work in begging and are at risk of being run over by Arab women on a daily basis[[7]](#footnote-7). Some of them also work in the hatchet profession for up to 11 hours a day without receiving the appropriate pay. The child's remuneration ranges from 7 to 12 dinars per day.[[8]](#footnote-8)

In Lebanon, the economic conditions of children are put to the test, as UN estimates confirm an increasing increase in child labor rates during the year 2021, and in Mauritania, the matter will not be much different, as child labor spreads in Mauritanian society significantly and exceeds more than 37%, and poverty pushes families to Sending their children to work without completing their education, in an attempt to improve the family's economic level. Children often resort to working in various car repair shops. Media estimates indicate that a quarter of children do not go to school because of child labor.

In Lebanon, economic conditions have put children on the line, as UN estimations confirm an increase in child labor in 2021[[9]](#footnote-9) and in Mauritania will not be very different. Child labor is widespread in Mauritanian society and exceeds more than 37%. Poverty causes families to send their children to work without completing education in an effort to improve the family’s economic condition. Children often turn to work in various car repair workshops. Media indicate that only ¼ of the children do not go to school because of child labor.[[10]](#footnote-10)

**Third: Child recruitment**: In the Middle East, particularly in Yemen, the Houthis continue to use summer centres to recruit children and put them on the battlefields by using the slogan “Science and Jihad” in these centres. There are about 6,000 centres distributed over the governorates under the control of the Houthis[[11]](#footnote-11) in order to attract and recruit children. The centres in the capital Sana’a are about 900 summer centres, from which the group aims to recruit 35,000 children, while the number of summer centres in Ibb governorate reached about 850 centres distributed over 20 districts. While the number of centres in Dhamar governorate reached 300 centres distributed over 12 districts. The rest of the centres are distributed among the other governorates that fall under the control of the Houthis.

Summer camps and cultural courses targeting children are part of the Houthis' strategy to win support for their ideology and encourage people to join the fight[[12]](#footnote-12). Some of these children join so that the Houthis do not cut off humanitarian aid or fear intimidation and retaliation.[[13]](#footnote-13) The Houthis use these summer camps to spread hate speech against certain groups. The supervisors of these camps charge the children with chanting the Houthi slogan "Death to America, death to Israel, screw Jews, victory to Islam."[[14]](#footnote-14)

* **Recommendations:**

The previous analysis indicates the continuation of the sale and sexual exploitation of children in the Middle East, despite the commitment of the countries of the region to the various sustainable development goals. However, many factors contributed to the failure to implement the sustainable development goals related to the sale and sexual exploitation of children, including poverty, poor economic conditions, customs, traditions, religious heritage, and armed conflicts. Finally, the Covid-19 pandemic destroys the remaining efforts to combat child abuse in the Middle East. Therefore, Maat for Peace, Development and Human Rights recommends the Special Rapporteur on the sale and sexual exploitation of children, including child prostitution, child pornography, and other materials related to child sexual abuse:

* The necessity of urging countries in the Middle East to combat wrong cultural customs and traditions and address religious genetics that causes the increase in child marriages and female circumcision.
* The necessity of combating child labor and the phenomena associated with it, such as the spread of poverty and the poor economic conditions that push children to work.
* The need to reduce the recruitment of children in armed conflicts while urging the international community to impose sanctions on militia leaders involved in child recruitment.

1. حماية الطفل حماية الأطفال من كافة أشكال العنف والاستغلال، اليونيسف، <https://uni.cf/3pUs6iY> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. مسؤول حكومي: جماعة الحوثي جندت 35 ألف طفل وزجت بهم في الحرب، الخبر بوست، 24 سبتمبر 2021،: <https://bit.ly/3v66CmC> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. بلدان الشرق الأوسط وشمال أفريقيا ووجوب اتخاذ إجراءات جريئة لمناهضة العنف ضد المرأة، مدونات البنك الدولي ، ديسمبر 2021 ، <https://bit.ly/3CA289w> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. زواج الأطفال، اليونسيف الدول العربية ، <https://bit.ly/35Sluuz> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. اليوم العالمي لعمالة الأطفال جهود وطنية لا تتوقف لحماية أبناء مصر، مبتدأ ، ديسمبر 2021 ، <https://bit.ly/3tNs4L3> [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. ورقة حقائق حول أنماط العنف ضد المرأة في منطقة الشرق الأوسط، مرجع سابق ذكره [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. دفتر تلوين ، تمكين للمساعدة القانونية وحقوق الإنسان ، يونيو 2021 ، <https://bit.ly/3wuoXIR> [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. العتالة مهنة تثقل كاهل الأطفال في الأردن، تمكين للمساعدة القانونية وحقوق الإنسان ، أغسطس 2021 ، <https://bit.ly/3cdmIQZ> [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. لبنان مستقبل الأطفال على المحك، اليونسيف ، يونيو 2021 ، <https://uni.cf/3nPlqkt> [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. للمرة الأولى منذ عقدين عدد الأطفال العاملين في العالم يرتفع، العربي ، يونيو 2021 ، <https://bit.ly/3nALdhq> [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. تدشين الدورات الصيفية في 15 محافظة و6 آلاف مركز تحت شعار” علم وجهاد “، صدي نيوز، على الرابط التالي: <https://bit.ly/3Bx7xOm> [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. وقائع حفل التخرج المركزي لطلاب المراكز الصيفية في جامع الشعب بالعاصمة صنعاء، قناة المسيرة على يوتيوب، 5 أغسطس 2019، على الرابط التالي: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2opFl1zkY88> [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. رسالة مؤرخة 25 يناير 2022 من فريق الخبراء المعني باليمن إلى مجلس الأمن، فقرة 42، ص 21، على الرابط التالي: <https://undocs.org/ar/S/2022/50> [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. المصدر السابق ذكره [↑](#footnote-ref-14)