**Maat for Peace’ submission to UN Secretary-General Report on Progress towards Ending Child, Early and Forced Marriage**

Maat for Peace, Development, and Human Rights is pleased to present this report as a contribution to the UN Secretary-General's report on the progress made towards ending child, early, and forced marriage worldwide. It is disheartening that approximately 10 million girls under the age of 18 still fall victim to this practice. Although child marriage is prohibited in about 88% of countries, the practice continues to persist, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa, Middle East, and Asia. Despite increased awareness of the gravity of this harmful practice and knowledge of effective strategies to combat it, the problem has actually intensified in recent years. There are various challenges impeding its eradication, including religious and cultural traditions and customs. Maat's approach is guided by the guiding questions developed by the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights.

**What prevention mechanisms have proven effective in eliminating child, early, and forced marriage? Please provide examples of good practices and challenges encountered when engaging family members, religious leaders, traditional leaders, and community leaders in raising awareness and combating child, early, and forced marriage.**

Maat has observed a range of initiatives and prevention mechanisms aimed at eliminating and reducing child and early marriage. In the Kingdom of Morocco, for instance, the Economic, Social, and Environmental Council and the Public Prosecution collaborated on a joint initiative, in partnership with UNICEF[[1]](#footnote-1) and other stakeholders, to eliminate early marriage. Notably, several girls in Morocco have taken the lead in projects to end child marriage. The Tahleeq Project, for instance, has played a pivotal role in training teenage girls who are at risk of early marriage and mobilizing them to advocate for policy changes. Specifically, the Project has called for amendments to Articles 20 and 21 of Family Law, which currently permit child marriage.[[2]](#footnote-2) In Indonesia, the international initiative "Yes I Do" was launched by organizations dedicated to supporting children's rights. The project successfully established a community protection mechanism for children and influenced religious leaders, including imams, to recognize the psychological and health consequences of early marriage. This led to the adoption of campaigns by these leaders to combat child marriage. In rural areas, some religious leaders used poetry as a means to raise awareness and put an end to this harmful practice.[[3]](#footnote-3) Another noteworthy example is “Girls Not Brides” organization, which is a global network of organizations working towards ending child marriage worldwide. This organization implements four intersecting strategies: empowering girls with information and necessary skills to exercise their rights, working with families and communities to understand the risks associated with child marriage and find alternatives for girls, ensuring the provision of education, health, child protection, and other essential services, and creating a supportive legal and political environment.[[4]](#footnote-4)

The Global Freedom Network has also launched a guide aimed at equipping religious leaders with tools to combat child and forced marriage. These guidelines, along with various platforms, will be utilized by religious leaders to raise awareness and take a stand against child and forced marriage. The network is committed to eliminating all forms of modern slavery, including early and forced marriage.[[5]](#footnote-5) In a related effort, “Plan International” has provided training to over 4,000 religious leaders and marriage brokers on age verification through SMS, contributing to the prevention of child and early marriage. Furthermore, the organization conducts periodic meetings with local and district officials to address the issue of child marriage. It has also played a role in establishing 12 community-based child protection mechanisms, facilitated by a network of local mediators who engage in community discussions and provide assistance to victims. Additionally, Plan International exerts pressure on government officials to expedite the implementation of initiatives targeting child marriage at the district and village levels.

In a similar vein, the “Apostolic Women Empowerment” organization and “Sisters in Islam” organization have adopted an approach that relies on religious leaders as a means to foster public debate and prepare societies to critically approach traditions associated with child marriage. This approach involves building pressure and mobilizing support, thereby creating an environment in which those who oppose the abolition of child marriage feel compelled to reconsider their stance. [[6]](#footnote-6)

Maat also dedicates its reports to analyzing and discussing the health consequences of child marriage. Information on health and fostering dialogue serves as an effective means to initiate discussions surrounding child marriage. Other organizations have taken the initiative to invite married girls to share their experiences with leaders, aiming to enhance their understanding of the practical implications within their communities.

In Central Africa, the government's national strategy to combat gender-based violence, child marriage, and female genital mutilation represents a potential mechanism for eradicating child marriage. Some reports have hailed this strategy as a step in the right direction.[[7]](#footnote-7) However, these positive mechanisms and initiatives face challenges. Certain religious leaders employ religious texts and beliefs to justify early marriage, alleging that those who oppose the practice are undermining these beliefs. Customary laws also present a formidable obstacle, particularly in countries within the Horn of Africa region, such as Somalia, impeding efforts to reduce child marriage. Nevertheless, political determination to eliminate this practice remains a potent tool. Another challenge lies in the persistence of armed conflicts, which correlate with child marriage, for instance, young girls who are married face numerous risks, including dropping out of school at an early age.

**What methods and tools are used to collect disaggregated data on child, early, and forced marriages, including informal marriages?**

Maat acknowledges the existence of various tools for collecting disaggregated data on child marriage, early marriage, and forced marriage. Household surveys, for instance, inquire about participants' marital status and age at first marriage. Some studies utilize the Sustainable Development Goal Index 5.3.1 to gauge the prevalence of child marriage.[[8]](#footnote-8) Population-level data collection tools like surveys also offer insights into the extent of child marriage.[[9]](#footnote-9) Additionally, demographic and health surveys serve as valuable sources of comprehensive and detailed information on reproductive health, early marriage, and child marriage. Such surveys have been conducted in countries like Egypt, Morocco, and Turkey.[[10]](#footnote-10) However, a challenge lies in the lengthy timeframes in which these surveys are conducted. Surveys and research focusing on harmful practices like child marriage also contribute to data collection efforts. Nevertheless, Maat points out that these tools often fail to encompass the larger population in the countries under study. An important challenge in utilizing these current data collection mechanisms is the lack of consistency across surveys, as no single survey includes all potential components associated with or motivating child forced marriage.

**Have digital technologies and tools been used to address child, early, and forced marriages? If so, what are some promising practices, challenges, and possible solutions?**

Maat has observed the use of digital technologies to address child marriage, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, in several countries. Online platforms and mobile applications have been leveraged to raise awareness about the immediate risks and threats during the pandemic, serving as crucial channels for reporting suspected cases of early marriage.[[11]](#footnote-11) Furthermore, Maat highlights the existence of the Child Rescue Plan, operated by National Council for Childhood and Motherhood in Egypt, which receives reports of harmful practices concerning children, including early marriage. Additionally, in Bangladesh, there is a mobile phone application that verifies a girl's age before marriage, while East Timor has a phone application known as Reproductiva.[[12]](#footnote-12) Research suggests that allocating separate budgets can help ensure that digital technology efforts always have the necessary resources to develop, scale, and effectively combat child marriage.

**Are digital birth and marriage registration systems in use in your country, requiring mandatory registration of all births and marriages, including home births and marriages under customary and religious laws?**

Digital birth and marriage registration systems are implemented in several countries worldwide, with mandatory registration being a requirement in Egypt. According to Constitution Article (80) and Children's Law, every child in Egypt has the right to a name and identification papers, which are registered at birth in the birth records. The digital system in health offices records all births in Egypt, regardless of nationality, including those resulting from official, common-law, or tribal marriages, as well as through acknowledgment of filiation and for found children. Infants under one-year-old are registered in health offices, while children over one year old are registered in civil status offices. Civil Status Law specifies 15 days for registering children after birth, and it outlines the responsibilities of individuals reporting births, registering found children, and registering illegitimate children. The executive regulations of the law address the registration of children who have lost their registration, whether they are under one year old or older.[[13]](#footnote-13) In the Kingdom of Morocco, parents are legally obligated to register births under Article 468 of the Criminal Code. This obligation serves as a vital tool in preserving a child's identity and recognizing their rights within the family and society. Moroccan Law No. 37-99 on civil status requires births (or deaths) to be declared within 30 days from the date of birth, with one year for Moroccans residing abroad.

**Maat recommends the following actions:**

* Enhancing awareness of child marriage laws and protecting children from marriage within the legislative systems of countries worldwide.
* Strengthening penalties for individuals involved in the practice of early child marriage, including family members.
* Facilitating children access to education and linking social assistance to parents' commitment not to force their children to drop out of school.
* Involving religious leaders in campaigns and training courses to raise awareness about the harmful consequences of child marriage.
* Systematically collecting and disseminating disaggregated data on the primary drivers of child marriage, particularly the link between lack of access to education and high rates of child marriage.
* Establishing additional community protection mechanisms for children, especially in rural areas, to combat early marriage.
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