

Fighting Child Marriage In Niger
Source: Afrizap



CHILD, EARLY, AND FORCED MARRIAGE AS WOMEN'S RIGHTS VIOLATION:

A COMMON REALITY IN NIGER, BANGLADESH, AND
THE DOMINICAN REPUBLIC



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List of Abbreviations

- CEFM – Child, Early, and Forced Marriage
CEDAW – Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women
CRC – Convention on the Rights of the Child
DHS – Demographic and Health Survey
ECOWAS – Economic Community of West African States
GDP – Gross Domestic Product
GII – Gender Inequality Index
IHDI – Inequality-adjusted Human Development Index
ISGS – The Islamic State in the Greater Sahara
JNIM – Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin
LAC – Latin America and the Caribbean
LDC – United Nations' Least Developed Countries
MESECVI – Belém do Pará Convention Monitoring Mechanism
NAP – National Action Plan to Eliminate Child Marriage 2018-2030
OAS – Organization of American States
PNPSP – Multiannual National Public Sector Plan 2021-2024
SDGs – Sustainable Development Goals
SAIEVAC – South Asian Initiative to End Violence against Children 2015-2018

Introduction

Achieving gender equality among girls and women around the world is a priority, yet an ambitious goal that is far from being achieved by the year 2030. Among the numerous violations and gender-based violence experienced is Child, Early, and Forced Marriage (CEFM), a fundamental violation of human rights that has profound implications for the development, safety, and well-being of women and girls around the world. It is estimated that the total number of girls married in childhood stands at 12 million per year (UNICEF, 2022), and while girls are disproportionately affected, boys can also be victims.

CEFM is intrinsically related to social norms and gender constructions, and it is caused by a range of factors, such as poverty and a lack of education, and is exacerbated by conflict, humanitarian crises, and climate change. However, its prevalence is substantially varied across different contexts, regions, and countries. On a global scale, today, more than half a billion women and girls were married in childhood. Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia have the highest rates of child marriage, and in Latin America and the Caribbean, the levels are equivalent to those from 25 years ago (UNICEF, 2021/b).

The present report aimed to research and analyse the country with the worst data regarding child marriage in each of the above-mentioned regions. According to the “Child Marriage Atlas” of the NGO Girls Not Brides, in Niger, located in Sub-Saharan Africa, 76 percent of women aged 20–24 were first married or in a union before they were 18 years old, making Niger the country with the highest rate of child marriage in the world. In Bangladesh, located in South Asia, child marriage rate is 51 percent, the highest in the region. Finally, the Dominican Republic, in Latin America and the Caribbean, has 36 percent (Girls Not Brides n.d/d).

The current report intends to provide an in-depth review of forced marriage and its causes, consequences, and prevalence worldwide, seeking to inform and raise awareness about the seriousness of the issue. Thus, it is organised around two main chapters. Chapter 1 aims to address the problem of forced marriage through its definition, international mechanisms, and national legislation. It will then move to an examination of the causes and consequences of CEFM.

Chapter 2 will provide a comprehensive overview of Niger, Bangladesh, and the Dominican Republic. The countries' cases will be analysed in terms of the prevalence of the issue in the country, its causes, consequences, and challenges, and finally, what efforts and actions, in terms of policies and projects, are taken by the country's government to combat and eradicate CEFM.

1. Forced Marriage as a Gender Equality Issue

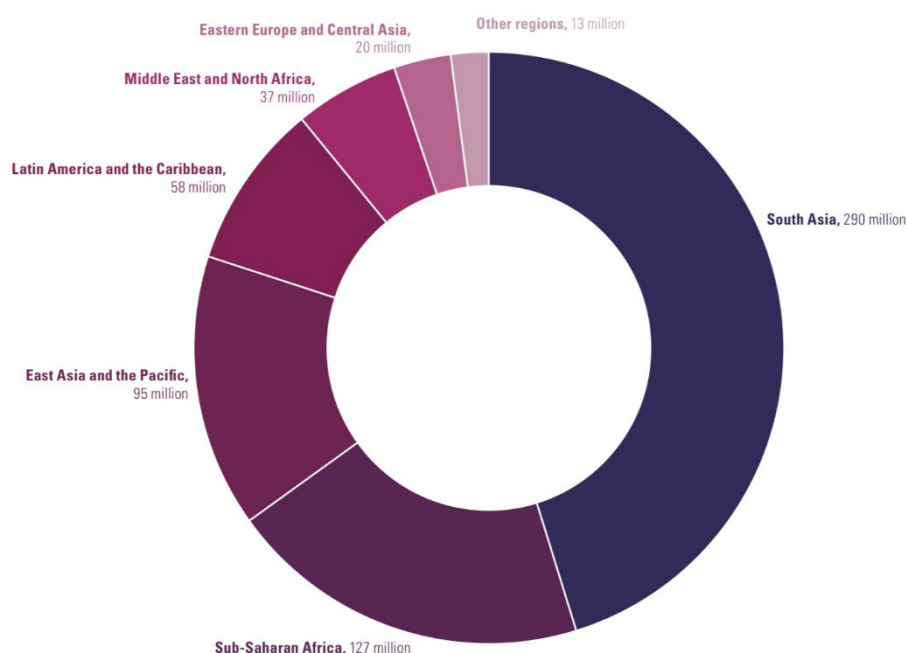
1.1 Definition of Child Marriage

According to the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989, p. 2), “a child means every human being below the age of eighteen years”. Thus, any formal or informal marriage between two persons under the age of 18, or between a minor and an adult that takes place without the free or valid consent of one or both partners and involves either physical or emotional pressure is considered child, early, and forced marriage (CEFM) (Plan International, n.d.).

Globally, over 640 million girls and women were married in childhood (UNICEF, 2023/a). CEFM is a harmful practice widely acknowledged as a clear violation of children’s and women’s human rights and an obstacle to national development, as high levels of child marriage significantly affect a nation’s economic growth and capacity to eradicate poverty (UNICEF, 2021/b). However, the occurrence of child marriage continues to slowly decrease over the world. During the preceding decade, the proportion of young women who were married as children declined by 15 percent, from 1 in 4 (25 percent) to around 1 in 5 (21 percent), and about 25 million child marriages have been prevented due to the visible progress within the countries (UNICEF 2018). Nevertheless, all of these accomplishments may be jeopardised by COVID-19.

It is estimated that, because of the pandemic, up to 10 million more girls will be at risk of child marriage worldwide (UNICEF, 2021/a). Covid-19 has generated an economic crisis due to social isolation requirements, increasing the poverty of households and reducing access to schools, since the majority had to close. As we will see in section 1.3.6, the risk of child marriage rises in conflict situations, crises, and economic shocks, and COVID-19 was not any different. Economic, nutritional, health, and well-being insecurity fostered a higher-risk environment for girls to become child brides (UNICEF, 2021/a).

The causes, consequences, and prevalence of forced marriage as a sociocultural practice vary between continents, regions, and even within the same country, as can be seen in the chart below.



The region with the highest incidence of child marriage is South Asia with 45 percent, although advances have been made and the probability of CEFM has decreased from 46 percent to 26 percent, the region still leads the prevalence of child brides. Sub-Saharan Africa is the region with the second-largest number of forced marriages, with 20 percent. One in three girls marry before the age of 18, and West and Central Africa is home to seven of the 10 countries with the highest child marriage rate in the world (UNICEF, 2023/a).

Next, comes East Asia and the Pacific with 15 percent of child brides. Despite the comparatively lower percentage, the region remained stagnant in terms of improvements. Similarly, Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) with 9 percent of women married before 18 years, has not shown any progress in the last 25 years, and estimations point out that the region will resemble Sub-Saharan Africa in terms of prevalence if the situation remains unchanged. Finally, the Middle East and North Africa with 58 million child brides. One in six women were child brides, however, some countries in the region have demonstrated a decline in child marriage rates in recent years (UNICEF, 2023/a).

1.2 International Treaties and Declarations

Various international and regional treaties and declarations serve as mechanisms and instruments to address and prevent CEFM. In addition to condemning the practice, numerous documents stipulate a minimum age for marriage, require consent between the parties, indicate that the marriage be registered, for control and data on early marriages, and finally, that both parties receive equal rights and protection (Thomas, 2009).

Article 16 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that “men and women of full age, without any limitation due to race, nationality or religion, have the right to marry.” In addition, the same article indicates that there must be consent between the two parties. (UN General Assembly, 1948). The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), in its article 16 establishes that both parties have “the same right freely to choose a spouse and to enter

into marriage only with their free and full consent” (UN General Assembly, 1979). Neither convention, however, suggest what that minimum age should be. In the same way, the Convention on Consent to Marriage, Minimum Age for Marriage and Registration of Marriages states that it is “urgent to completely eliminate child marriages and the betrothal of young girls before the age of puberty” and that State Parties should “take legislative action to specify a minimum age for marriage”. Yet, it also does not specify the legal minimum age of marriage (UN General Assembly, 1962, p. 1).

During the last decade, the issue has been addressed more urgently and with more direct measures. In 2014, the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights issued its first report, A/HRC/26/22, on the prevention and elimination of child, early, and forced marriage to the Human Rights Council, which addressed, particularly, the challenges, achievements, best practices, and implementation gaps. Additionally, in 2015, the Human Rights Council adopted the resolution, A/HRC/RES/29/8, which affirmed the need to strengthen efforts towards eradicating child and forced marriage and recognised the practice as a human rights violation. Further on, in its 2017 resolution, A/HRC/RES/35/16, the Human Rights Council acknowledged that the vulnerability of women and girls is highly increased in humanitarian contexts, thus the prevalence and risk of child marriage also escalates in those settings. The resolution urges states to immediately implement coordinated measures to prevent, respond and eliminate CEFM (OHCHR, n.d).

In 2015, 193 countries adopted the document entitled “Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustained Development.” This Agenda includes the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and its 169 targets that must be implemented by the year 2030. The SDG5, “Gender Equality” has 9 targets, one of them being 5.3 which aims to “Eliminate all harmful practices, such as child, early and forced marriage and female genital mutilation” (UN, 2016).

1.2.1 National Legislation on CEFM

International protection mechanisms are essential, but the country’s commitment to adopting these measures through national legislation is also crucial. A law that defines 18 years as the minimum age to marry is a significant step forward in eradicating child marriage and can be considered a driver of change. However, it is necessary to be aware of the loopholes that undermine the effectiveness of the law. Parental consent, religious/ customary law, pregnancy, or court approval that allows girls to marry before the legal age. In addition, some countries have no sanctions against child marriage, such as fines or prison sentences, which also contributes to weakening enforcement of the law (UNICEF, 2021/b).

In terms of advancements, the proportion of low- and middle-income countries where marrying before the age of 18 became illegal, increased from 78 percent to 93 percent, between 1995 to 2018. Also, progress in closing parental consent and judicial/religious loopholes was significant throughout the years. Yet, more than half of low- and middle-income countries still have at least one loophole, and only 1 in 3 countries have closed all of them (UNICEF, 2021/b).

Rates of forced marriage in countries that have a legal minimum age of 18 or older, were 40 percent lower compared to countries that had conflicting laws or no minimum age (UNICEF, 2021b), illustrating how much legislation can make a difference in the struggle against forced marriage. Nevertheless, it cannot be considered the only solution because legislation alone cannot put an end to the practice. It is necessary that the law is recognised as simply one component, and it is complemented and

reinforced by multisectoral gender-sensitive public policies (Grupo de trabajo del Programa Conjunto Interinstitucional para Poner Fin al Matrimonio Infantil y a las Uniones Tempranas en América Latina y el Caribe, 2021).

1.3 Characteristics of Forced Marriage

1.3.1 Its Causes and Consequences

As previously stated, CEFM is a multidimensional and complex issue. Even though it can change among regions and countries, the practice is rooted in gender inequality, fostered by patriarchy and gender norms. Forced and child marriages can occur more frequently as a result of factors including poverty, economic hardship, and unemployment, and lack of education and access to health. Additionally, conflicts, climate change, and humanitarian settings end up creating an environment even more dangerous for young girls to become exposed to child marriage. In subsequent topics, the causes and consequences of CEFM will be addressed.

1.3.2 Why Women and Girls Are the Most Affected

CEFM is not only a human rights violation but also a manifestation of gender inequality. As it is a gendered practice that affects girls and women disproportionately - even though boys can also be targeted - the drivers of forced marriage are strongly tied to longstanding patriarchal values (ILO, IOM & Walk Free, 2022).

The patriarchal system, based on *machismo*, is the maximum expression of male domination and hegemony that perpetuates power over female bodies and choices. Amidst various oppressions, the patriarchy seeks to control and limit sexual and reproductive rights, and often to limit access to information. In addition, social norms are often gendered and consist of a social, and not biological, construction of practices, symbols, and behaviours that society produces based merely on sex. These norms become a determination and imposition of what is “to be a man” and what is “to be a woman” which, from that, establishes the activities, spaces, and above all, the rights of each. The social and gender norms imposed in society aim to control girls and women’s sexuality and maintain longstanding practices, such as child marriage (Girls Not Brides, n.d/b).

1.3.3 Education

The relationship between education and child marriage is complex. Lack of education can be a leading factor to child marriage and a direct consequence of it. Child marriage is prevalent in low-income communities where girls lack access to schooling, have less time to study because they are responsible for more household duties than boys, or because low-income families are more likely to invest in their sons’ education or due to economic hardship, education cannot be a priority. Context where child marriage is seen as a viable option (Girls not Brides, n.d/a).

In environments where girls’ educational opportunities are lower, the risk of child marriage is higher. It is widely acknowledged that keeping girls in school is often one of the best ways to prevent and delay CEFM, as for every additional year a girl stays in secondary education, the likelihood that she will marry as a child reduces by six percentage points (Wodon, Montenegro, Nguyen, Onagoruwa, 2018). In addition, when poverty is reduced and women’s participation in the labour market and job opportunities increase, the idea of investing in girls’ education and preventing them from dropping out of school can be seen as a priority for the family since it will bring economic benefits. A girl’s level of education affects her access to certain jobs and the possibility of achieving economic stability later in

life. Thus, investing in education is a key action to prevent child marriage from occurring (UNICEF, 2021/b).

On the other hand, lower educational attainment among girls is also a result of CEFM. In situations with a high incidence of girls dropping out of school, a higher rate of forced marriage is observed. This happens because when a girl marries young, it is expected that she leaves school and focus on household responsibilities, and returning to school after being married seems highly improbable for girls. As CEFM is also a leading factor to adolescent pregnancy, pregnant girls may also drop out of school due to society's stigma and gender norms or even be expelled depending on the school's policy (Girls not Brides, n.d/a).

1.3.4 Poverty, Unemployment and Economic Development

High levels of CEFM impact economic growth and levels of poverty in a country, on the other hand, economic development can play a significant role in reducing the practice. CEFM is more common in low-income countries, among the poorest segments of society, and in countries with low gross domestic product (GDP) per capita (UNICEF, 2021b). In many cases, families experiencing poverty seek forced marriage as a way to reduce economic difficulties and reach financial security and stability, as a way of alleviating poverty to provide a better condition for the family (Girls not Brides, n.d/b).

As mentioned above, girls who are child brides are often forced to drop out of school and this has direct implications for their possibility to secure reliable work, which can limit access to health services and autonomy to live independently. Child marriage significantly restricts adolescent girls' economic agency and can also increase or intensify cycles of inter-generational poverty (Harrison, 2023). Therefore, policies that promote job development and opportunities, as well as those that aim to integrate women into the workforce, should also be taken into consideration when proposing measures to end forced marriages, since child marriage becomes less attractive when labour market opportunities are available and girls have other viable and productive options (Wodon, Montenegro, Nguyen, & Onagoruwa, 2018).

1.3.5 Health and Well-being

CEFM is a human rights violation with lasting and deteriorating consequences when it comes to health and well-being. It is strongly associated with early pregnancies, intimate partner violence, maternal and child mortality and rising rates of sexually transmitted infections (UNICEF, 2021b). The practice is detrimental to the overall development of girls, as in addition to generating school interruption and limiting opportunities and employment choices, girls who marry before the age of 18 are more susceptible to various types of violence. Once forced to marry, girls may be more likely to experience sexual exploitation, domestic violence, and domestic servitude (ILO, IOM & Walk Free, 2022)

1.3.6 Conflicts, Climate Change, and Humanitarian Crisis

Each of the factors that drive forced marriages previously mentioned are exacerbated during conflict situations, climate change, and humanitarian crises. In places with unstable conditions, CEFM is approximately twice as high as the global average. In nations with significant levels of institutional and social fragility, 35 percent of women aged 20 to 24 had their first marriage or partnership before the age of 18, compared to 19 percent globally (UNICEF, 2021/b).

Ongoing and overlapping conflicts and crises expose girls to danger in a variety of ways, most notably an increased likelihood of child marriage (UNICEF, 2023/a). Women and girls are more likely to experience sexual violence during conflicts, including rape, torture, and forced prostitution which occasionally masquerades for “marriage” (Girls Not Brides, 2017). Human trafficking and sexual abuse are often used as a weapon of war and are covered up by child marriage. Also, conflict fosters displacement, which can also increase girls’ vulnerability to child marriage as weakens social networks and protection systems (Girls Not Brides, n.d/b)

Forced marriage becomes a frequent practice in humanitarian settings, as countries with the highest rates of forced marriages are also those with the most severe humanitarian crises (Girls Not Brides, 2017). These situations exacerbate poverty, insecurity, and lack of access to education, so families see child marriage as a way to cope with the growing financial constraints and a means of protecting girls from rising or generalised violence, including sexual violence (Girls Not Brides, n.d/b).

To conclude, nations intensely vulnerable to climate change also have high rates of child marriage. For example, climate impacts such as extreme weather conditions and droughts can disrupt sources of income and exacerbate food insecurity which can lead to conflict, violence and displacement, all drivers of child marriage (UNICEF, 2023/a). According to research and data from UNICEF (2023/a), child marriage rates increase by one percent for every ten percent change in rainfall due to climate change.

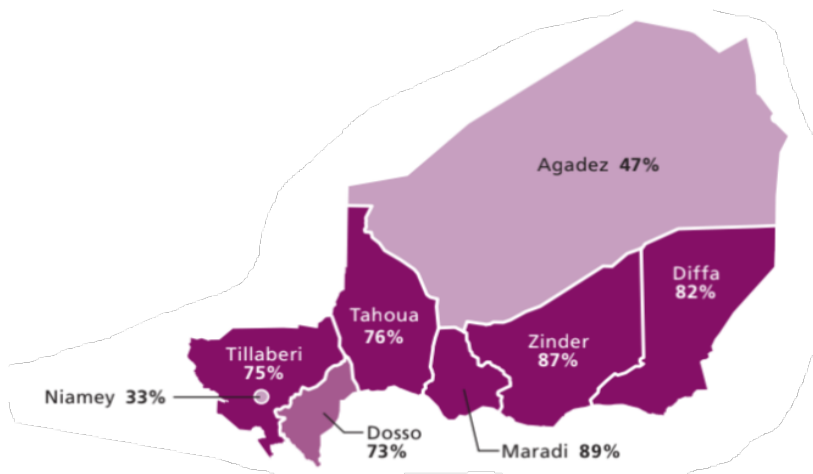
2. Case Studies: Niger, Bangladesh, and The Dominican Republic

2.1 Niger

2.1.1 Prevalence of CEFM in Niger

Niger is a West African country, located on the southern edge of the Sahara with a population of over 25 million. It is characterised by an exceptionally youthful demographic, with 49 percent of the population being under fifteen years old and has the highest total fertility and adolescent fertility rate in the world due to the high prevalence of child marriage in the country (World Bank, 2021; World Bank, 2020).

The high level of child marriage is one of the direct consequences of alarming levels of gender inequality in Niger. Although the Gender Inequality Index (GII) has steadily improved over the last 30 years, it is still among the least equal countries in terms of gender, ranked 153 out of 170 countries in 2021 (UNDP, 2021). Gender inequality is pervasive throughout the country and is related to not only deep-seated social norms, but also discriminatory legislation. Under the 1993 Civil Code, the minimum legal age of marriage is 15 years for girls and 18 years for boys. In addition, the majority of unions take place under customary law which has no minimum age requirement for marriage and under which numerous girls are married prior to reaching the age of 15 (Girls Not Brides, n.d/e).



According to the latest available Demographic and Health Survey (DHS) of Niger, 76 percent of the girls (compared to six percent of boys) are married before the age of 18 and 28 percent are married before the age of 15. The median age at first marriage for girls is 16.6 (Tassiou, 2023). The highest prevalence of child marriage is found in Maradi, Zinder, Diffa, and Tahoua regions, predominantly in rural areas due to inadequate infrastructure, lack of social services, and limited educational and economic opportunities. Approximately 84.6 percent of women aged 20-24 living in rural areas were married by 18, compared to 43.5 percent in urban areas (Girls Not Brides, n.d/e; Institut National de la Statistique, 2012).

However, the prevalence of child marriage is influenced not only by geographical factors but also by ethnicity and religion. Child marriage is the most prevalent among the Muslim Hausa people who consist in half of Niger's population followed by the also predominantly Muslim Zarma and Tuareg

ethnicities (Iris Group, 2020). Many Nigerien families use Islamic interpretations to justify child marriage as its principles emphasise concepts of purity, honour, the sanctity of marriage, and positions marriage as the ultimate aspiration for young women (Crawford, 2022).

Limited educational opportunities for girls also contribute to the perpetuation of child marriage in Niger. A multitude of quantitative analyses have identified a strong correlation between the completion of primary and secondary school and child marriage (World Bank, 2019; UNICEF, 2021; Perlman et al, 2018), pointing to the crucial role of secondary level education in ending child marriage. For instance, in the 2021-2022 academic year, there was only a 2.7 percent difference between the completion rates of boys (15.1 percent) and girls (14.7 percent) in lower secondary education. However, this gap widened significantly in upper secondary school (which includes students aged 17-19, a critical age for girls to drop out of school and enter marriage. In the same academic year, the completion rate for boys was 10.3 percent, while for girls, it was only 6.8 percent, reflecting a substantial 34 percent disparity (Tassiou, 2023). Even though Niger has made progress toward higher educational attainment for girls, the country still lags far behind other West and Central African countries (World Bank, 2019).

2.1.2 Causes of CEFM in Niger and the Challenges for its Eradication

In the Nigerien context, the numerous drivers of CEFM can be classified into four main groups:

1. Harmful social norms and religious practices which deepen gender inequality and include the lack of viable alternatives for girls, polygamy and the protection of family honour favouring early marriage;
2. Poverty, economic factors, and the lack of employment opportunities for girls;
3. Low educational attainment;
4. High level of displacement fuelled by insecurity and terrorist threats.

To begin with, discriminatory gender norms in Niger portray women as inferior and subordinate to men. As a result, the influence of these norms on societal perception of girls and women diminishes the recognition of their value. Many families do not prioritise or allow their daughters to pursue education or careers. Instead, they tend to view marriage as the sole acceptable path for them (Psaki et al, 2021). In Niger, the predominant societal expectation for girls revolves around their primary role as future wives and mothers. They have little to no say in the decision of marriage as child brides are usually judged on their respectfulness and obedience to their families, husband, and in-laws. This leads to the very common harmful practice of arranged child marriages as the cultural context in Niger places high value on girls' conformity and obedience and those girls who are perceived as disobedient may be subject to social sanctions in their families and communities (Girls Not Brides, n.d/e; Psaki et al, 2021, p. 19). However, qualitative studies reveal that Nigerien girls overwhelmingly reported that they agree with parental decisions and the timing of their marriage (Psaki et al, 2021).

In the Nigerien patriarchal society, where traditional gender roles are reinforced, the lack of viable alternatives to early marriage such as meaningful social and economic alternatives or career opportunities, or the lack of "role models" in terms of well-educated and successful women, are also significant constraints in ending child marriage (Perlman et al, 2021). Extreme poverty and severely limited educational and economic opportunities, especially for girls and women in rural parts of the country as well as the labour market which is strictly divided by gender influence girls' attitudes toward marriage and the timing of it. Traditional gender roles such as men's responsibility to be the

breadwinner of the family contribute to the deprioritisation of girls' education and thus they have barely any opportunities to find a job and be financially independent from their husbands. Consequently, there is little to no viable space available to them beyond their familial or marital residences.

Preserving family honour is also a major component of early marriage since girls become more vulnerable to harassment as they enter adolescence. For example, in Hausa communities, the cultural practice of "hawking", whereby girls sell goods on local markets to help their mother and contribute to the household's livelihood, carries the risk of being sexually harassed as girls may need to stay out late. Moreover, the desire to safeguard family honour also impacts girls' limited access to secondary education, as parents fear the potential risks of harassment that girls may encounter in school (Perlman et al, 2021; World Bank, 2019). Therefore, child marriage is perceived as preventing premarital sex of the daughter(s) and thus protecting both the girl's and her family's dignity (Girls Not Brides, n.d/e).

Polygamy is common in Niger and entails the very harmful practice of *wahaya*, which is the purchase of one or more girls, usually of slave descent, under the guise of a "fifth wife". *Wahayas* have a different status to the four wives legally permitted in Niger as they don't benefit from any of the legal rights or protection, and they are essentially treated as domestic or sexual slaves. Usually, *wahayas* are sold before the age of 15 to the houses of richer, older, urban males. Despite being condemned as a form of slavery by the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) Court in its 2008 judgement, and by the Special Rapporteur on Contemporary Forms of Slavery in 2015, slave wives are still persistent in Niger (Mathewson, 2012; Human Rights Council, 2015).

As previously mentioned, religious interpretations are often used to justify child marriages. Given the fact that 90 percent of Nigeriens are Muslim, customary and Sharia laws have a very strong influence in the country, including the practice of marriage. The high prevalence of child marriage is mostly due to the fact that under customary or religious law, there is no minimum age required by the Sharia (Girls Not Brides, n.d/e). Furthermore, the Islamic perspective on marriage in Niger holds that bestowing your daughter as a gift in marriage ensures blessings in the afterlife and it also emphasises the belief that arranging a girl's marriage safeguards her from engaging in premarital sex, promiscuity, and the risk of becoming pregnant outside the institution of marriage (UN Women, 2018).

The third category of causes of child marriage is girls' low educational attainment and the poor quality of education, especially in rural areas. In Niger, only 29 percent of women ages 15 or above are literate compared to the male literacy rate which is 46 percent (World Bank, 2021). Investing in girls' education is crucial to fight against child marriage as regional data clearly show the negative correlation between the level of education of girls and the high fertility rate. This means that higher levels of education reduce fertility rates. Girls who spend more year in education marry later and have fewer children than their counterparts who drop out of school and engage in child marriage. According to official governmental statistics of the Tillabéri region, the fertility rate decreases gradually when the level of girls' education goes from no level to a secondary level (from 200 births to 98 births per 1000 women), confirming the inhibiting or delaying effect of education on marriage (Republique du Niger, 2016). The risk of harassment in school and the lack of secondary schools in rural areas are also contributing factors to girls' low educational attainment (Perlman et al, 2018).

Finally, the high level of economic fragility and insecurity fuelled by environmental catastrophes as well as terrorist threats also favours early marriage. Niger is highly vulnerable to extreme climate events, especially to droughts and flooding as its economy is mainly based on substantial agriculture

and livestock farming. In addition, agriculture is one of the main employment sectors for Nigerien women, therefore, are more exposed to the impacts of climate change which usually poses threats to their livelihoods, health, and safety and drives early marriage because of their financial insecurity (Bacci & Mouhaimouni, 2017).

Fragile security, especially in the Southern part of the country is also a main obstacle to ending child marriage and improving gender inequality as women and girls have been barred from activities outside the home, including going to school, because of the risk of abduction or forced marriage to fighters. The Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) and the Al-Qaeda-affiliated Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM) are the two main terrorist organisations operating in the country. As a result of their opposition to the Nigerien education considered “Western”, they have burned schools and threatened teachers which resulted in hundreds of school closures across the country. Insecurity along with the extreme weather conditions (floods and droughts) provoked massive displacements of families (UNICEF, 2022). As insecurity and displacement greater expose girls to sexual and gender-based violence, families resort to child marriage as a perceived means of protecting girls (Girls Not Brides, n.d/e).

2.1.3 Efforts to Combat CEFM

At the international level, Niger has demonstrated its commitment to gender equality by ratifying various international conventions that promote equal opportunities for both men and women. For example, the country ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1990, which sets a minimum age of marriage of 18. Niger also acceded to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in 1999, which obligates states to ensure free and full consent to marriage (Girls Not Brides, n.d.). Moreover, Niger ratified the 2004 optional protocol of CEDAW on violence against women (World Bank, 2019). However, upon ratification, Niger made a significant reservation to CEDAW by stating its non-commitment to the obligation of taking all necessary measures to eliminate discriminatory customs and practices against women (Crawford, 2022).

Furthermore, Niger has also pledged to eradicate child, early, and forced marriages by the year 2030, aligning with target 5.3 of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). In July 2021, at the Generation Equality Forum in Paris, Niger committed to a 5-year action journey to accelerate gender equality by 2026 and pursue legal and social change to end gender-based violence and child marriage (UN Women, 2021).

At the regional level, in 1999, Niger ratified the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, including Article 21 on the prohibition of child marriage and the obligation to set eighteen years as the minimum age of marriage and register all marriages in an official registry (African Union, 1990). In 2004, Niger signed, but has not yet ratified, the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and People's Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa, including Article 6 which also sets the minimum age for marriage as eighteen years for women and emphasises the equality of men and women in the marriage and the free consent of both parties (African Union, 2003). Finally, in 2019, the First Ladies of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) renewed their commitment to accelerate efforts to end child marriage and advance girls' education in the region. They signed the “Niamey Declaration: Call to End Child Marriage and to promote the Education and empowerment of Girls”,

calling Member States to initiate legislative, institutional and budgetary reforms to implement the created Roadmap (Andriamasinoro, 2019).

At the domestic level, Niger adopted several policy initiatives targeting gender equality and the protection of women's rights such as the National Strategy for the Prevention and Management of Gender-based Violence or the Economic and Social Development Plan (2017-2021) which makes girls' education one of its priorities, with a view to reduce child marriage. In April 2021, the election of Mohamed Bazoum, who is the current president of Niger, marked the first democratic transition of power for a country that has seen four military coups since its independence from France in 1960 (Balima, 2021). Consequently, the country is showing an unprecedented commitment to strengthening women's rights and fighting against child and forced marriage both on international and regional, domestic levels. In November 2021, for example, the president launched the opening ceremony of the work of an international symposium for the mobilisation of traditional leaders to invest more in fighting child marriage as it is well-known that traditional and religious leaders are the main opponents of ending child marriage. Bazoum asked them to make a resolution in which no traditional leader would give a girl under the age of 18 to marriage and no traditional leader would himself marry a girl under the age of 18 (UNFPA, 2021).

Despite the country's exceptional political will to end child marriage, the prevalence of it is still the worst in the world. Niger's international and regional commitments are not in line with its national legislation, as the discriminatory Civil Code on the minimum age of marriage for girls is still in force and customary law provides loopholes for child and forced marriages.

2.2 Bangladesh

2.2.1 Prevalence of CEFM in Bangladesh

People's Republic of Bangladesh is a south-central Asian country, and one of the most densely populated countries in the world with a population of over 166 million people (Husain & Tinker, 2023). Bangladesh has a remarkable story of poverty reduction and development. Despite starting as one of the world's poorest nations in 1971, Bangladesh achieved lower-middle-income status by 2015 and is currently on a trajectory to exit the United Nations' Least Developed Countries (LDC) list by 2026. In this context, poverty declined from 41.9 percent in 1991 to 13.5 percent in 2016, based on the international poverty line of 2.15 USD a day (World Bank, 2023). Moreover, Bangladesh achieved an impressive Human Development Index (HDI) value of 0.661, ranking 129 out of 191 countries and places among medium human development countries (Liller, 2022). However, if we look at the Inequality-adjusted Human Development Index (IHDI), it reduces to 0.503, indicating a significant loss of its original value (UNICEF, 2022). As of Gender Inequality Index (GII), Bangladesh ranks 131 globally, and the value stagnated over the last three years with overlapping crises contributing to setting women back (Liller, 2022).

These indicators clearly show that Bangladesh has room for improvement in terms of gender equality. Currently, Bangladesh holds the 4th position globally and the 1st position in Asia concerning the prevalence of child marriage (Arnab & Siraj, 2020). Around 51 percent of girls in Bangladesh are married before their 18th birthday and 22 percent are married before the age of 15 compared to only 4 percent of boys who are married before the age of 18. Similarly to Niger, child marriage is more common in rural areas where 60 percent of girls are married before the age of 18 compared to the 55

percent child marriage prevalence in urban areas. Out of the eight regions of Bangladesh, Rajshahi has the highest rates of child marriage as 70 percent of girls between the ages of 20-24 married before 18, followed by Rangpur (67 percent) and Barishal (65 percent). A vast majority (75 percent) of girls engaging in child marriage have no or only primary level education, while the proportion of girls who completed secondary education and entered into child marriage is much smaller, only 30 percent (NIPORT & ICF, 2020; Girls Not Brides, n.d/c). Thus, in the case of Bangladesh, statistical data also proves the strong correlation between education and child marriage.

In terms of the median age of first marriage, there are improving trends as the median age among women aged 20-49, increased from 15.3 years in 2007 to 16.3 years in 2017-18 (NIPORT & ICF, 2020). Nevertheless, despite improvement in child marriage over the years, gender-discriminatory legislation persists in Bangladesh, setting the legal minimum age as 18 for girls and 21 for boys. In addition, the Child Marriage Restraint Act 2017 includes a loophole where a court can allow child marriage in “special circumstances” meaning that regardless of their age, adolescents can legally enter into marriage by obtaining parental or guardian consent and seeking court permission under specific cases for the “best interests” of the bride and the groom. Neither the special cases nor the “best interest” defined under the act, encourages the misuse of the provision and the marriage of girls below the legal age (Arnab & Siraj, 2020).

2.2.2 Causes of CEFM in Bangladesh and the Challenges for its Eradication

The key drivers of child marriage in Bangladesh are harmful social norms, poverty, and economic crises. Those are exacerbated by natural disasters, displacement, and humanitarian settings, which increases the risks of violence against women and girls (Girls not Brides, n.d/c).

Discriminatory gender social norms in Bangladesh are justified by the importance of preserving the daughter’s and the family’s reputation and honour. It is expected that girls stay at or near their homes, refrain from talking or socialising with boys, and rely on their fathers’ discretion to decide who and when to marry. In the Bangladeshi context, child marriage is viewed as a preventative measure. Although the restriction of girls’ movement is relaxed for educational purposes, socialising with boys is strictly limited to academic purposes and these interactions were expected to be infrequent, short, and in public. In addition, if a girl is perceived to have a romantic relationship with a boy, she is usually labelled as *maagi/beshsha* (slut/sex worker) by villagers. Therefore, changing gender social norms are extremely difficult in Bangladesh as community members strongly support child marriage and commonly report that the best age for a girl to get married is 16 since the younger the girl, the lower the chances to be involved in affairs and losing her virginity (Naved et al, 2021).

Background characteristic	Among women age 20-24:	
	Percentage who married before age 18	Number of women
Residence		
Urban	54.6	1,275
Rural	60.7	2,881
Division		
Barishal	64.6	209
Chattogram	54.1	814
Dhaka	57.6	1,139
Khulna	61.6	391
Mymensingh	64.4	306
Rajshahi	70.1	520
Rangpur	67.0	433
Sylhet	35.4	344
Education		
No education	75.0	145
Primary incomplete	75.1	555
Primary complete ¹	70.5	354
Secondary incomplete	73.5	1,671
Secondary complete or higher ²	30.8	1,436
Wealth quintile		
Lowest	74.2	678
Second	63.9	769
Middle	60.4	821
Fourth	55.7	938
Highest	45.4	952
Total	58.9	4,155

¹ Primary complete is defined as completing grade 5.

² Secondary complete is defined as completing grade 10.

The country is traditionally a collective society with a patriarchal structure, in which the father is highly respected and always the main decision-maker. Marriage is perceived as one of the most important decisions that fathers have to make and if parents delay marriage beyond sixteen years, both girls and fathers face villagers' rumours towards the girls' perceived inability to get married or assumptions of premarital sex and the inability of parents to find a suitable match for her. For example, if a girl disobeys her father's decision, she is usually called *shorom nai* (shameless) and *kharap meye* (bad girl) (Naved et al, 2021).

Child marriage is not only preventive but also a survival strategy for many Bangladeshi families, especially for poor ones, as parents usually struggle to secure the life of their daughters socially and economically. As a result, they decide to marry off their daughters at an early age to ensure financial and social security (Arnab & Siraj, 2020). In Bangladesh, poverty plays a bigger role in causing child marriage than in Niger, as 74 percent of women in Bangladesh between the ages of 20-24 who were married before the age of 18 belong to the lowest income households, compared to the 45 percent child marriage prevalence in highest income households (NIPOORT & ICF, 2020). In Niger, high prevalence rates of child marriage persist both in low and high-income households (Girls not Brides, n.d/e).

Families in Bangladesh often view daughters born into impoverished households as a financial burden (Arnab & Siraj, 2020), and when a potential groom capable of providing financial security appears, parents want their daughter to be married right away. Parents are also driven by the smaller amount of dowry with child marriage as it increases with the girl's age and education. In Bangladesh, a widely practised tradition is to transfer goods and money to the groom's family despite the fact that it is illegal under the Bangladesh Dowry Prohibition Act of 1980 (Akter et al, 2022).

Religious considerations also fuel child marriage as the Muslim-majority Bangladeshi society strictly follows Islamic values and considerations which prohibit pre-marital physical relationships and

thus put pressure on families to marry off their daughters as soon as they reach puberty to ensure girls' physical safety as well as protect family prestige. The early socialisation and values related to family formation and family life are strongly influenced by religion and since Islam supports more traditional behaviour of early marriage, statistics show that in Bangladesh, Muslim women get married earlier than their non-Muslim counterparts (Kamal et al, 2014).

Moreover, the violent situation in Myanmar forced a massive displacement of Rohingya people to Bangladesh's Cox's Bazar between 2016 and 2017. This generated a humanitarian setting in which many families perceive child marriage as a way to cope with greater economic hardship and to protect girls from increased violence (Girls not Brides, n.d/c). Relying heavily on charitable aid and food rations provided by refugee organisations, child marriage is the only option for parents in the Bangladeshi refugee camp to transfer their responsibility of feeding daughters to their husbands or in-laws (Hussain, 2017).

Natural disasters also play a major role in exacerbating child marriage in Bangladesh, mostly due to the high climate sensitivity of the country and the lack of an adequate government safety net for affected poor families. For instance, the NGO Human Rights Watch found that river erosion and floods have directly contributed to the decisions of some families to marry their girls at young ages because they lost their lands and homes and found themselves in extreme poverty (Human Rights Watch, 2015). The most disaster-prone areas of Bangladesh are also the country's poorest areas. Thus, extreme weather conditions can leave families in a precarious situation and resort to child marriage as a desperate means of survival since the economic situation of the family strongly affects the decision to marry (Human Rights Watch, 2015). As Bangladeshi people's livelihoods depend on crops, farms, and livestock production and they have poor infrastructure (living in mud houses and urban slums) climate sensitivity is an important issue to tackle in order to end child marriage (UNICEF, 2016).

One of the biggest challenges to eradicating child marriage in the Bangladeshi context is the paradoxical situation wherein child marriage persists despite overwhelming sentiments against it. According to a sampled survey including focus group discussions and interviews, the majority of Bangladeshi society is aware of the legal age of marriage and the fact that child marriage is punishable by law, however, people can get socially sanctioned if they prevent or refuse child marriage and the above-mentioned push factors also maintain this harmful practice. The problem is the lack of implementation of laws and the government's inability to close loopholes in domestic legislation. For example, despite the fact that the government made it compulsory to present a birth certificate at the time of marriage, parents can manipulate their children's date of birth by bribing the officials (Akter et al, 2022).

Although the Child Marriage Restraint Act of 2017 is stricter in terms of punishment for violation of the law (imprisonment, fines) than the preceding Act of 1929, the loopholes in the revised Act, such as the lack of clarification of "special circumstances" under which child marriage is accepted, and the lack of explanation of the "best interests of the minor" undermine these efforts. Consequently, many families exploit these legal loopholes and resort to child marriage in the name of poverty and socio-economic difficulties. (Arnab & Siraj, 2020; Human Rights Watch, 2015).

2.2.3 Efforts to Combat CEFM

At the international level, like Niger, Bangladesh is committed to eradicating child marriage in line with the target 5.3 of the SDGs. The country ratified both the CEDAW in 1984, and the CRC in 1990. The former obligates the state party to ensure free and full consent of the marriage, while the latter sets

the internationally recognised minimum age of marriage at 18 (Girls not Brides, n.d/c).

Over the years, the Bangladeshi government has shown commitment and support to end child marriage. The practice has steadily declined in the last decade (NIPORT & ICF, 2022), revealing the positive consequences of the political will to prioritise women's rights. Nevertheless, the country failed to achieve most of its commitments in terms of child marriage. For example, at the 2014 London Girl Summit, the Prime Minister, Sheikh Hasina, pledged that Bangladesh would end marriage under the age of 15 by 2021 and under 18 by 2041, and reduce the number of girls getting married between 15 and 18 by more than one third by 2021 (Government UK, 2014). The most recent Health and Demographic Survey of Bangladesh shows that the percentage of women aged 20-24, who married before the age of 18 is still 50 percent with only a 15 percent of reduction in the child marriage rate in the past ten years (NIPORT & ICF, 2022).

During its Universal Periodic Review in 2018, Bangladesh supported addressing the loopholes in the Child Marriage Restraint Act of 2017, to prevent the misuse of the provision that permits marriage for children below the legal age under special cases. As a result, in October 2018, Bangladesh published the "Child Marriage Restraint Rule" which provides further explanation and implementation mechanism of Act 2017 and establishes committees at both national and local levels, outlining their purpose and responsibilities in curbing child marriage (Girls not Brides, n.d/c).

At the regional level, Bangladesh has adopted several action plans to end child marriage such as the South Asian Initiative to End Violence against Children 2015-2018 (SAIEVAC) (Girls not Brides, n.d/c), and the "Kathmandu Call to Action to End Child Marriage" in 2014 which both call for the elimination of discriminatory provisions concerning marriage for girls and for access to legal remedies in case of violation of the law and the government's obligation to prevent, monitor, and punish such violations (Kathmandu Call to Action, 2014).

Finally, at the national level, Bangladesh uses the media to campaign and raise awareness of child marriage. For instance, the campaign under the #Raisethebeat4ECM was a success, reaching over 147 million people via social media and TV to foster public engagement in child marriage (UNFPA-UNICEF, 2021). Furthermore, the National Action Plan to Eliminate Child Marriage 2018-2030 (NAP) was launched under the leadership of the Ministry of Women and Children Affairs with the goals of ending marriages involving girls below the age of 15, decreasing the rate of marriage for girls under 18 by one third by the year 2021, and ultimately eradicating child marriage by 2041 (Ministry of Women and Children Affairs, 2018).

2.3 Dominican Republic

2.3.1 Prevalence of CEFM in the Dominican Republic

CEFM in Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) is a social and cultural practice that has already become so embedded and internalised within society that it is often not seen as an issue. Social norms and gender roles are also deeply rooted in the region from early childhood, which facilitates the normalisation of CEFM (Greene, 2019). One in four young women in LAC was first married or in union before their 18th birthday. According to statistics, 25 percent of girls were married before the age of 18, and 5 percent married before the age of 15, indicating that while the prevalence of forced marriages in the region is above the global average, it is still lower compared to South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa (UNICEF, 2019).

CEFM levels vary from country to country, with the lowest numbers found in Jamaica, and the highest in the Dominican Republic. However, some standard characteristics prevail. In the LAC region, most unions are informal, that is, the girl lives with the partner rather than in a formal marriage. Currently, LAC has the second-highest adolescent pregnancy rate in the world. In many cases, adolescent pregnancy can be a driver for early unions, as 58 percent of girls who married in childhood gave birth before the age of 18. The spousal age gap is another characteristic of CEFM in LAC. Among those girls who married before the age of 18, 40 percent of the partners are 0–4 years older; over 30 percent are 5–9 years older; around 20 percent are 10+ years older and less than 10 percent are younger compared to the girl (UNICEF, 2019). Although girls are the main target for child marriage in LAC, the countries in the region have one of the highest levels of child marriage among boys worldwide. The global average for child grooms is three percent, and nine of the ten countries with data have levels above this average; for example, in the Dominican Republic, eight percent of boys were married at 15 or before 18 years old (UNICEF, 2019).

Poverty is one of the main motivators for child marriage in LAC. Child brides are more likely to reside in rural areas, live in poor households, and have less education. 35 percent of women in LAC aged 20–24 who were first married or in union before age 18 live in rural areas, 39 percent in poor households, and 51 percent have only primary education or none (UNICEF, 2019). According to a study by Plan International Americas and UNFPA (2019), girls in LAC often volunteer for child marriage as a means of escaping poverty and relieving the financial burden of their families, because as soon as they get married, the families will have one less mouth to feed.

Nine LAC nations have strict regulations towards CEFM, with a law clearly stating that the legal age of marriage is 18 years old. Yet, with the consent of the parents, legal representatives, or a judge, marriage by the age of 16 is still permissible in thirteen nations. However, the situation is substantially worse in six countries in the region where it is allowed to marry before the age of 16 according to qualified reasons (Grupo de trabajo del Programa Conjunto Interinstitucional para Poner Fin al Matrimonio Infantil y a las Uniones Tempranas en América Latina y el Caribe, 2021).

Hardly any improvements in the region were made when it came to eradicating the practice. The prevalence of child marriage has remained stagnant for the last 25 years. The projection for 2030 indicates that the percentage of CEFM in LAC will remain unchanged, while in other regions, such as South Asia the percentage of CEFM will sharply decline. As a consequence, by 2030 LAC will have one of the highest levels of forced marriages globally (UNICEF, 2019).

When it comes to the prevalence of CEFM in the Dominican Republic, the country is ranked 106 from 170 in the 2021 Gender Inequality Index (GII) and is home to over one million child brides, and one in three young women were married in childhood. There are approximately 434,600 girls and women of all ages who were first married or in union before age 15, and 1.4 million were first married or in union before age 18. Levels of child marriage in the country correspond to 36 percent of women aged 20–24 who were first married or in union before 18, and 9 percent before the age of 15. As well as in the LAC region, in the Dominican Republic the majority of unions are informal, almost 60 percent of girls are currently living with a man and less than five percent are currently married (UNICEF, 2019). Besides, progress was slightly low over the years; the average annual rate of reduction in child marriage was 0.2 percent in the past 25 years and 1.7 percent in the last 10 years. Thus, in order to eliminate the practice by 2030, the average annual rate of reduction must be 31.4 percent (UNICEF, 2023b).

2.3.2 Causes and Consequences of CEFM in the Dominican Republic

Girls often get married in the Dominican Republic in order to escape poverty. As in Bangladesh, the profile of child brides in the country lies in the most vulnerable layers of society, where almost 40 percent live in rural areas and over 50 percent in the poorest households. (UNICEF, 2023/b). Along with poverty, education is a crucial determinant of child marriage prevalence in the Dominican Republic. Over 60 percent of girls who married before the age of 18 only had primary education. In contrast, the majority of girls who never married are still in school, and only a small percentage are out of school (UNICEF, 2023b). Levels of education and wealth prove the largest disparities in the prevalence of child marriage. Compared to urban women from the richest quintile with secondary education or above, rural women in the poorest quintile who had no more than primary education were over four times more likely to be child brides (UNICEF, 2019).

Strict gender norms are very present in girls' socialisation and family structure in the Dominican Republic. Marriage and maternity are seen as the primary, and only, goals in girls' and women's lives. According to research from Plan International Americas and UNFPA (2019), maternity for Dominican girls is more valued than school performance. As a consequence, this social and cultural pressure results in adolescent pregnancies and the "need" to be in a union for family and social validation. In the Dominican Republic, early pregnancy is a key push factor to CEFM. Pregnancy rates among Dominicans are high and often girls feel the pressure to marry when pregnant (Greene, 2019). However, even if pregnancy is not a driver for child marriage, once girls are in a union, they are more likely to become pregnant at an early age. According to UNICEF (2023b), a significant percentage of girls who married before the age of 18 were pregnant within or after one year of marriage in the Dominican Republic.

As mentioned above, the sociocultural construction of gender determines "feminine" and "masculine" roles, which generate, among other things, an unfair sexual division of work. In 2016, it was found that the unpaid household work time of married girls up to the age of 18 was 36.6 percent, compared to 4.4 percent for boys. Girls and teenagers married or in a union in the Dominican Republic have eight times the number of hours dedicated to unpaid household work, compared to single girls (Grupo de trabajo del Programa Conjunto Interinstitucional para Poner Fin al Matrimonio Infantil y a las Uniones Tempranas en América Latina y el Caribe, 2021).

In the Dominican Republic, another risk factor for CEFM is sexual abuse and gender-based violence. In the survey conducted by Plan International Americas and UNFPA (2019), a large proportion of Dominican girls stated that their motivation to establish a union was violence in their homes. Forced and early marriages, however, can also increase girls' vulnerability and the risk of violence from their partners. In the same survey of 152 girls in the Dominican Republic, 40 percent stated that one of the main disadvantages of having an early union was sexual violence. (Greene, 2019).

As it is related to early pregnancies, CEFM has a significant impact on the fertility rate in the Dominican Republic. At the national level, ending child marriage can reduce the overall fertility rate by 10 percent, which can also decrease the rate of early pregnancy, reducing by two-thirds the proportion of girls who give birth before the age of 18. Therefore, eradicating child marriages and early pregnancies would also have an influence on population growth and could mean a 0.17 percent point reduction in the population growth rate. This would have a significant effect on national well-being and the national budget. A 2017 survey by the World Bank and UNICEF estimates that if child marriage had been

extinct in 2014, the estimated annual benefit in the following year (2015) would have been equivalent to \$171 million, rising to \$4.8 billion by 2030 (Wodon, Male, Onagoruwa, Savadogo, & Yedan, 2017).

Regarding the intrinsic relationship between early unions and low educational attainment among girls, the same 2017 survey indicates that in the educational sector, ending child marriages and early pregnancies would result in economic gains for the government, because fewer new student cohorts would be created due to slower population growth. In addition, a woman's ability to access certain jobs later in life and her ability to earn a living are both impacted by her level of schooling. In the Dominican Republic, it is estimated that child marriage can reduce women's income by 17 percent. At the national level, ending child marriage would increase income and productivity by more than one percent (Wodon, et al., 2017).

To conclude, poverty indicators in the Dominican Republic could also benefit from the eradication of CEFM. According to World Bank and UNICEF research, without child marriage, poverty among people from households where the woman had an early marriage could have been reduced from 41.0 percent to 32.1 percent. For the country, poverty could have been reduced from 30.5 percent to 27.7 percent without child marriage (Wodon, et al., 2017).

2.3.3 Efforts to Combat CEFM and Challenges

The Dominican Republic is a signatory to several international treaties and conventions seeking the eradication of CEFM and the protection and guarantee of the human rights of girls and women. Like the countries addressed in this report, Dominican Republic is a signatory to the 2030 Agenda of the United Nations, consisting of the 17 SDGs, and has ratified treaties such as the Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1991 and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in 1982. In 2021, the Dominican Republic signed the Human Rights Council resolution on "Child, Early, and Forced Marriage in Times of Crisis, including the COVID-19 pandemic". This resolution sought to emphasise the need for states to comply with the protection of the human rights of all women and girls and to "take comprehensive, multisectoral, and rights-based measures to prevent and eliminate child, early, and forced marriage, including in times of crisis" (UN General Assembly, 2021, p. 5)

In terms of partnerships and cooperation with international organisations, the Dominican Republic is one of the countries that benefited from the Accelerate Actions to End Child Marriage and Early Unions in Latin America and the Caribbean programme of UNICEF, UNFPA, and UN Women. Between 2018 and 2021, the programme aimed to align national structures with international standards regarding the prevention of CEFM, empower girls and women, and promote policies and actions aimed at addressing the causes of forced marriage.

At the regional level, the Dominican Republic is a member of the Organization of American States (OAS) and therefore is bound by the Inter-American Human Rights System and its documents, including the American Declaration on Human Rights and Duties of 1948 and the American Convention on Human Rights of 1969. Among other regional treaties, the Dominican Republic also ratified the Inter-American Convention to Prevent, Punish, and Eradicate Violence Against Women (known as the Belém do Pará Convention) in 1996. In 2016, the Inter-American Commission of Women launched the Belém do Pará Convention Monitoring Mechanism (MESECVI). The effectiveness of the States

Parties in achieving the Convention's goals is evaluated by this assessment method. The document also strongly recommends, among other points, that States Parties review and reform the laws aiming at raising the minimum age for marriage to 18 years, with or without parental consent (Grupo de trabajo del Programa Conjunto Interinstitucional para Poner Fin al Matrimonio Infantil y a las Uniones Tempranas en América Latina y el Caribe, 2021).

In addition, as a member of the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, the Dominican Republic adopted in 2013 the Montevideo Consensus on Population and Development, and in 2016 approved the Montevideo Strategy for the Implementation of the Regional Gender Agenda within the framework of Sustainable Development by 2030. In 2020, adopted the Santiago Commitment, which seeks to be a regional instrument to respond to the COVID-19 crisis with gender equality. All the documents are intended to address issues sensitive to gender inequalities in order to promote human rights and the dignity of girls and women in the region, which also includes the end of forced marriage (Grupo de trabajo del Programa Conjunto Interinstitucional para Poner Fin al Matrimonio Infantil y a las Uniones Tempranas en América Latina y el Caribe, 2021)

The numerous commitments adopted by the country in the form of treaties, conventions, and documents over the last few years have been translated in its national laws and policies. In 2021, the Dominican Republic passed Law No. 1-21, proposing a change to the country's Civil Code. The law states that: "the purpose of this law is to prohibit people under eighteen years of age from getting married, by modifying and repealing various provisions (EL CONGRESO NACIONAL, Republica Dominicana, 2021). As a result of this change, all legal bases for child marriage were abolished.

Before this amendment, the previous law allowed girls to get married with their parents' consent as early as 15. Some of the legally valid reasons for parental consent included: if the daughter was pregnant, had "lost" her virginity, was orphaned, had experienced abuse at home or had been expelled from home, if she is not studying, if the family is going through difficult financial conditions and the girl is unable to find work (Greene, 2019).

When it comes to national projects and public policies, in 2021, the country presented the Second Voluntary National Report on the Fulfilment of the 2030 Agenda of the Sustainable Development Goals. Through the Multiannual National Public Sector Plan (PNPSP, 2021-2024) and the National Plan for Reducing Adolescent Pregnancy (2019-2023), the government aims to develop strategic interventions to reduce multidimensional poverty and empower and generate jobs and opportunities, which include recommendations for reducing child marriages and early unions (Gobierno de la Republica Dominicana, 2021).

Conclusion and Recommendations

Despite the significant global decrease in the prevalence of CEFM in the past decades, its eradication still seems a clearly unachievable goal by 2030, mostly due to economic hardships and high levels of poverty as well as stereotypical gender roles and patriarchal social perception about women's role in the society. Thus, girls and women are disproportionately affected by CEFM, which is a clear violation of their human rights, expressed in numerous international and regional treaties and declarations such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

CEDAW legally binds its 189 state parties to provide women free consent in the decision of marriage. Since 2015, there has been increasing attention towards eliminating CEFM, particularly due to the SDGs, which have set a target to end all harmful child marriage practices. However, achieving this goal by 2030 is doubtful, and progress must be 20 times faster to meet SDG 5.3, the specific target responsible for ending child marriage, according to UNICEF (2023/a). Unfortunately, if the current situation persists, an estimated nine million girls will still be forced into marriage before turning 18 by the year 2030 (UNICEF, 2023/a).

Through the case studies, this paper aimed to provide a deeper understanding of the underlying causes of child marriage and countries' challenges to eradicating it. Even though cultural, historical, and geographic differences between countries must be taken into account when comparing the prevalence of the issue, similarities in the causes and consequences were noted. In the three countries, the relevant push factors for child marriage were discriminatory gender norms fuelled by the patriarchal society, poverty and the lack of employment opportunities for girls, and poor quality of education and girls' low school attainment, as well as scaping from sexual violence.

In the case of Niger and Bangladesh, extreme weather conditions, displacement and humanitarian settings play a major contributing factor to child marriage, as well as safeguarding family honour. In the Dominican Republic, on the other hand, early pregnancy and the high value attributed to maternity among Dominican girls is a push factor to CEFM.

The common consequences of CEFM are multifold and extend beyond the early union itself. Young brides face significant health risks, including complications during pregnancy and childbirth as well as mental health problems due to domestic violence and abuse which usually occurs in CEFM cases. Child marriage also causes high fertility rates and thus contributes to unsustainable population growth, straining resources and acute poverty. It also usually disrupts education and career opportunities for girls, as once girls marry it is rare for them to go back to school.

Overall, this research paper has shed light on the issue of child, early, and forced marriages globally, its causes and consequences, and specifically the alarming prevalence in Niger, Bangladesh, and the Dominican Republic, as well as states' commitments and legal obligations to eradicate it. In order to raise awareness and facilitate the accessibility of information, Table 1 below summarises the most important facts of the case studies in relation to child marriage, while Table 2 provides the most important recommendations on the eradication of CEFM from NGOs, UN organs and experts. The three case studies were selected on the basis of data from the NGO, Girls not Brides, which show that these countries have the highest prevalence of CEFM on their continent (Girls Not Brides, n.d/d).

Table 1: Summary table of the case studies

	Niger	Bangladesh	The Dominican Republic
% of Child Marriage	76%	51%	36%
Legal age of marriage	15 (for girls) 18 (for boys)	18 (for girls) 21 (for boys)	18
Loopholes in the law	Yes Discriminatory legislation of the minimum legal age of marriage +Majority of marriages take place under customary law which has no minimum age requirement	Yes Child Marriage Restraint Act 2017: child marriage is allowed in “special circumstances” without the definition of these circumstances	No
Are there governmental projects to fight child marriage?	Yes	Yes	Yes
Ratified relevant documents	Yes	Yes	Yes
Do poverty and lack of education play a significant role in CEFM?	Yes	Yes	Yes
Do extreme weather conditions, displacement and humanitarian settings play a significant role in CEFM?	Yes	Yes	No
Does CEFM usually take place as a formal or informal union?	Formal union	Formal union	Informal union
Is early pregnancy a driver for CEFM?	No	No	Yes
Is CEFM seen as a way of coping with economic hardships?	Yes	Yes	Yes
Is CEFM seen as a way of escaping violence?	Yes	Yes	Yes

Table 2: Recommendations

General Recommendations		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increasing women's access to education, particularly in rural areas, and enforcing legal measures against child marriage (Kamal et al, 2014) • Creating incentives to stay in or return to school for girls. These incentives could be ear-marked cash transfers promoting school enrolment and completion (World Bank, 2019) • Conducting awareness-raising campaigns and <u>programmes</u> on the harmful effects of child marriage (CRC, 2019) • Creating support services for vulnerable girls and young women, such as girls' clubs, vocational training and livelihood activities that empower them (World Vision, 2023) • Conduct community-based, skills-building programs, especially in rural areas, to delay child marriage among adolescent girls (Amin et al, 2018) • Local influential persons, community leaders, NGO workers, and school committees can play a stewardship role in supporting the legal knowledge of residents and fighting against harmful social norms that lead to child marriage that overshadow laws and policies (Akter et al, 2021) 		
Country-specific recommendations		
Niger	Bangladesh	The Dominican Republic
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Government should specifically <u>criminalise</u> the practice of <u>wahava</u> • Government should provide training for judges, prosecutors and police to ensure that child marriage offenders are effectively punished (CEDAW, 2017) • Government should revise its statutory laws to raise the minimum age of marriage to 18 years for girls and regulate its customary laws and practices (CRC, 2018) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Government should clarify gaps and loopholes in the Child Marriage Restraint Act • Government should eradicate the practice of dowry by more effectively implementing the Dowry Prohibition Act (UN Human Rights Council, 2013) • Government should address the problem of inconsistency in support from NGOs and governmental interventions which hinder progress (Mim, 2017) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Government must ensure detailed and up-to-date information and data on CEFM, improving administrative records to monitor the age of the contracting parties in order to avoid early informal unions (Inter-American Commission of Women, 2021) • Government should develop strategies and public policies

		<p>that aim to empower girls socially and economically, ensuring autonomy and eradicating gender stereotypes that drives CEFM (Inter-American Commission of Women, 2021);</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Government must adopt measures that promote accessible and comprehensive sexual and reproductive health education to girls in order to reduce early pregnancy (Inter-American Commission of Women, 2021).
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