

NUMBER 3

SUDAN BRIEF

JUNE 2018



UNIVERSITY OF BERGEN

CMI CHR.
MICHELSEN
INSTITUTE

Interventions for the abandonment of child marriage in Sudan

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Child marriage is legal, and accepted, throughout Sudan and the country has one of the highest rates of child marriage in the world. This brief examines interventions against child marriage in Sudan, which is best described as timid, focusing on three Sudanese states: Kassala, Red Sea State and Algardaf. Since child marriage is legal in Sudan, it becomes a difficult environment for anti-child marriage organizations to work at the grassroots. However, Sudan has recently categorised child marriage as a form of violence against women and is in the process of drafting a national plan to prevent the practice implying that such change could be on the horizon.

This brief is based on the synthesis of three reports on child marriage published by CMI in 2017 and 2018. They examine child marriage across three Sudanese states: Kassala, Red Sea State and Algardaef. These studies are part of the ARUS project which is funded by the Royal Norwegian Embassy in Khartoum, Sudan. Thanks to the team of researchers behind the three reports: Manal Mahjoub, Adil Idris, Ibtisam al-Jack, and Sharifa Bamkar.

Methodology

In our research, we addressed urban and rural communities in three states in Sudan: Red Sea State, Kassala State, and Algardaef State. We used qualitative methods to explore the perceptions of communities in three States on child marriage, a topic of cultural sensitivity and evolving complexity. We used three primary data collection tools: structured interviews with a questionnaire (survey), semi-structured interviews, and focus group discussions, allowing us to gather information about the types of interventions and individual perceptions of these interventions. We targeted both males and females and individuals of varying social status across different locations within each state.

Child marriage is a global practice

Numerous countries legally allow marriages of girls at a younger age. However, thirty of the top 41 countries with the highest prevalence of child marriage are African Union countries. According to UNICEF, the practice of child marriage is slowly decreasing because of interventions that aim to end child marriage by addressing the perpetuating factors.

Successful interventions may target girls at risk of child marriage, communities, religious and tribal leaders, and/or political decision makers. To work, interventions need to incorporate all these groups, and also rely on a combination of international, national and local actors who are individually committed to the cause. Further, policy and programme responses to child marriage must take local contexts into account, including those related to religious and gender norms, if they are to be successful.

The Sudanese government has taken a low-profile approach to the problem of child marriage and have thus far achieved no tangible results in ending the practice.

The thinking around child marriage mirrors theories of change for other practices, particularly female genital mutilation (FGM). Intervention to prevent or stop FGM requires community cooperation and collaborative efforts. In these cases, one individual cannot give up the practice alone, a critical mass is needed for change. Intervention against child marriage requires interventions both from above (changes in laws and policies) and below (at the

community level) if it is to succeed. A traditional practice, such as child marriage, will only change if deep-rooted gender norms change.

Child marriage in Sudan

Child marriage in Sudan has received heightened attention since late 2016, when it emerged as a recommendation from the UN after Sudan presented its Universal Periodic Report. In addition, the topic has recently come onto the public agenda in the context of reforming the Muslim Personal Law of 1991. Child marriage is legal in Sudan, and boys and girls can marry from the age of ten due to the country's strict interpretation of Sharia law. Our findings indicate that control of girls' chastity, protection of girls from the stigma of being unmarried and the socialisation of girls into obedient wives are important drivers of child marriage. These are made worse by poverty, poor educational facilities and negative attitudes to girls' prospects.

The Sudanese government has taken a low-profile approach to the problem of child marriage and have thus far achieved no tangible results in ending the practice. It also seems that the international community is not exerting enough pressure on influential decision makers to end child marriage.

There are 23 organisations or institutions currently supporting interventions for ending child marriage in Sudan. They use religious, health and social perspectives to raise awareness among parents, school girls, grandparents, religious leaders, community leaders, and political parties (Badri and Al-Husseni, 2014). These organisations vary across Sudan and have little support from the Sudanese government in their work, meaning there is a fragmented approach to ending child marriage.

Nationally and sub-nationally, women are continuing to fight to end child marriage and are pointing to its many harmful effects. Traditional interpretations of Islam are increasingly being



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challenged by women inside the government and independent women activists. The activists claim that the *hadith* has a weak chain of transmission and is a patriarchal and is a wrongful interpretation of Islam. The *hadith* established the tradition that girls can marry from a young age as it describes the Prophet Muhammad's betrothal to Aishah when she was just six years old.

Across the three states analysed in our reports, we can identify similar patterns of cautious intervention. Advocates for ending child marriage are active in each of the states, but each face difficulties in spreading their message in an authoritarian, traditional state such as Sudan. Currently in Sudan, most of the advocacy and interventions against child marriage are carried out at the state or local, rather than national, level. This is partly because there is a lack of coherent state strategy to end child marriage.

The main message in interventions for abandoning child marriage in eastern Sudan is that the practice has harmful health consequences for the girl child, including obstructed labour, death during childbirth, infertility, and complications with pregnancy. Despite a growing awareness of these negative health consequences among practicing communities, child marriage prevails. Tradition, it seems, triumphs over girls' reproductive health and well-being. Intervention efforts that challenge patriarchal norms, traditions and religious belief for the continuation of child marriage are at risk of backlash and counter-mobilisation from traditional and religious leaders. Across the three states we examined, there are signs of hope and activists are working in challenging situations to intervene against child marriage.

Timid intervention against child marriage in Red Sea State

Child marriage has a high prevalence of 32% in Red Sea State. Awareness of the harmful effects of child marriage and of the rights of the child are

particularly low in Red Sea State. Although NGOs host awareness-raising education sessions on child marriage, the message is not reaching rural communities. Current approaches, interventions, and strategies are not effective. This could be because the interventions aim to deliver the message that child marriage is harmful, rather than aiming to change discriminatory gender norms.

Most efforts to tackle child marriage are undertaken timidly. This is because organisations fear resistance from tribal leaders in Red Sea State communities. Additionally, no state or national laws support intensive interventions against the practice. However, our research suggests that attitudes towards child marriage in Red Sea State are slowly changing, as an increasing number of women and girls are finishing school and entering university. However, they do this at the cost of stigmatisation of '*bayra*' (not demanded for marriage). Continuing education and delaying marriage is a process that involves resisting traditions and norms and initiating change. The interventions are not taking this change and change agents in consideration.

There must be a culturally sensitive approach to ending child marriage

Since 2013, the Kassala State Council of Child Welfare has engaged in a campaign to abandon the practice of child marriage. The practice of child marriage is widespread in Kassala (45%), and it is the state with the highest percentage of females who married before the age of 15. The campaign's main activities are raising community awareness about the harmful effects of child marriage, through the capacity building of volunteers who then advocate in local communities and media outlets. However, as is the case in Red Sea State, information has not reached those it should. Through interviews with CSOs, we learned that some community organisations have engaged in efforts to end child marriage, often in collaboration with government

institutions. These efforts have been met with mixed reactions in local communities and advocates face an uphill challenge. Political and community resistance are a hurdle to change in Kassala.

However, there are some positive developments towards ending child marriage in the state. Plan International Sudan work with volunteers in Kassala State to deliver weekly education sessions for the communities, they also conduct sessions over the radio and have formed child protection groups in communities to continue the awareness-raising activities. A representative of the College of Community Development at the University of Kassala explained that child marriage has recently been added to the college's agenda. That institution has also used a community dialogue approach to specifically promote the communication skills of women.

Ending child marriage in rural Kassala State requires an approach that is sensitive to the sociocultural and economic needs of the area population. Some religious and cultural leaders in other predominantly Muslim communities outside and inside Sudan, have successfully advocated for girls and women's rights. A culturally sensitive approach in Kassala State may empower local leaders to do the same.

Youth promote change in Algardaref State

In Algardaref State, there are a number of actors working to end child marriage: the Algardaref State Child Welfare Council, the Zainab Organization for Development, the Red Crescent, and the Sudanese National Committee for Combating Traditional Practices. These organisations are supported by the UN and donor agencies. Representatives of the Sudanese Women's General Union are present in all of the villages researched in this study. Further, community-based organisations are active in some parts of the state. The rural context of Algardaref State presents special challenges to ending child marriage. Local activism against child marriage has not yet taken root and international efforts in the state tend to focus more on maternal mortality and activism against FGM than adopting an integrated approach to female empowerment and ending child marriage.

Child marriage is not yet a priority in the agenda of concerned CSOs and government institutions in Algardaref State despite a prevalence rate of 49%. In addition, our research suggests that more women than men are being targeted in awareness-raising efforts,

which means interventions are not reaching the main (male) decision-makers. Women cannot change this situation alone.

Our research in Algardaref State indicates that intervention messages and methods are culturally insensitive, and sources are not considered credible by those in a position to argue for change. The messages and awareness-raising information challenges norms, traditions and religion, and the reasons for ending child marriage would not be acceptable to local elders, the primary influencers for continuing the practice. External actors' interventions are therefore weak, as the main (male) community decision makers are not on board with change.

However, the youth in Algardaref appear ready to get engaged in promoting change. This is a positive sign as young people can be the 'critical mass' who can be engaged to manifest public support for new gender equality norms.

Conclusions and Recommendations

To end child marriage, we suggest tackling it at the highest levels of government. Raising the minimum age of marriage to 18 would help make child marriage a priority in government strategies concerning violence against women and women's empowerment. Even if the government might not prioritize to implement such legal and policy changes in eastern Sudan, they can nonetheless be extremely important in giving grassroots advocacy work legitimacy.

Legal and policy change can create an enabling environment for advocates ending child marriage. Particularly in the context of Sudan, a national strategy on child marriage or a legal change on the minimum age of marriage gives international and national organisations the political and social space to construct appropriate interventions. The international community also has a responsibility to encourage and support the Sudanese government to harmonise laws and policies with international human rights conventions

Advocates against child marriage, both state and non-state actors, should coordinate and cooperate to create successful interventions against child marriage. As child marriage is a deeply rooted traditional practice, it is obvious that it requires awareness raising within communities that practice it. However, it is difficult to carry out awareness raising at the grass-root level as long as child marriage is legalised by the Sudanese state.