



The Role of Social Marketing in a Controversial Cause: The Eradication of Child Marriage

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Abstract

This case focuses on the application of social marketing to a controversial cause: the eradication of child marriage, which is a common cultural practice in many countries.

Our aim is to study this problem from a social marketing perspective. Thus, we examine different projects carried out by different nonprofit organizations (NPOs) that deal with this issue, and we focus on a campaign: Thea's Blog, by Plan International.

We conclude that causes that foster child marriage are clearly identified: they have a sociocultural and economic nature. Thus, actions for the eradication of this phenomenon should be focused on these two areas: sociocultural (tradition, religion, and superstitions) and economic (poverty and inequality).

Campaigns such as Thea's Blog have helped to become aware of this problem in Western countries. Now, child marriage practice has a global dimension and there is a higher international pressure to eradicate it.

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Learning Objectives

We propose as main learning objectives to achieve the following ones:

- To know more about the practice of child marriage in the world and study the current situation, especially in underdeveloped and developing countries
- To analyze the causes and effects/consequences of child marriage
- To understand the link between child marriage and the lack of opportunities for women (higher female poverty and lower literacy rates)
- To discover the usefulness of social marketing as a tool for changing undesirable or inappropriate attitudes and behaviors, specifically in the case of child marriage
- To explore what NPOs are focused on fighting against child marriage and what social marketing campaigns have been developed (and are being developed currently)
- To foster critical thinking and stimulate discussion related child marriage and justify the need to eradicate it

Introduction

Child marriage can be defined as “the union of two people, at least one of them being under 18 years of age (usually, the woman), and in which there are social, economic, and family pressures for its execution” (Nour 2009).

This phenomenon, among others, has prevented the achievement of the millennium development goals (Table 1), which had been proposed by the United Nations to be achieved by 2015 (United Nations 2018).

Child marriage also involves the violation of international agreements and conventions, such as (Nour 2006, 2009; Gaffney-Rhys 2011; Nguyen and Wodon 2012):

Table 1 The eight millennium development goals

Goals	Content
1	Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger
2	Achieve universal primary education
3	Promote gender equality and empower women
4	Reduce child mortality
5	Improve maternal health
6	Combat HIV/AIDS, malaria, and other diseases
7	Ensure environmental sustainability
8	Global partnership for development

Source: United Nations (2018)

Table 2 Convention on Consent to Marriage, Minimum Age for Marriage, and Registration of Marriages

Article	Content
1	No marriage shall be legally entered into without the full and free consent of both parties
2	States shall take legislative action to specify a minimum age for marriage
3	All marriages shall be registered in an appropriate official register by the competent authority

Source: United Nations Human Rights. Office of the High Commissioner (2018)

Table 3 Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women

Article 16
1. States parties shall take all appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination against women in all matters relating to marriage and family relations and shall ensure, on a basis of equality of men and women
2. The betrothal and the marriage of a child shall have no legal effect, and all necessary action, including legislation, shall be taken to specify a minimum age for marriage and to make the registration of marriages in an official registry compulsory

Source: United Nations (1979)

Table 4 Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989)

Art. 24.3
“ . . . States Parties shall take all effective and appropriate measures with a view to abolishing traditional practices prejudicial to the health of children”

Source: United Nations (1989)

1. *Convention on Consent to Marriage, Minimum Age for Marriage, and Registration of Marriages (1962)*: in particular, Articles 1, 2, and 3 (Table 2).
2. *The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (1979)*: specifically, Article 16 (Table 3).
3. *Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989)*, promoted by the United Nations: Although it does not explicitly refer to child marriage, it does propose to abolish traditional practices that are harmful to the children's health in Article 24.3 (Table 4).
4. *International Conference on Population and Development (1994)*: It refers to child marriage in some chapters (Table 5).
5. *Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948)*: It also referred to marriage in Article 16 (Table 6).

Many of these forced child marriages specially affect girls (Gangoli et al. 2009), since they get married to older men. The gender ratio is clearly negative, so there is an important discrimination according to sex. This ratio is, for example, 72:1 in Mali (i.e., for every man under 18 years of age who gets married in the country, 72 girls do

Table 5 Some chapters related to child marriage—International Conference on Population and Development (1994)

* Chapter 2
Principle 9: “. . . Marriage must be entered into with the free consent of the intending spouses, and husband and wife should be equal partners”
* Chapter 4
4.21 Governments should strictly enforce laws to ensure that marriage is entered into only with the free and full consent of the intending spouses
In addition, governments should strictly enforce laws concerning the minimum legal age of consent and the minimum age at marriage and should raise the minimum age at marriage where necessary. Governments and nongovernmental organizations should generate social support for the enforcement of laws on the minimum legal age at marriage, in particular by providing educational and employment opportunities
* Chapter 5
5.5 . . . Measures should be adopted and enforced to eliminate child marriages. . .
* Chapter 6
6.7. (c) To encourage children, adolescents, and youth, particularly young women, to continue their education in order to equip them for a better life, to increase their human potential, to help prevent early marriages and high-risk childbearing, and to reduce associated mortality and morbidity
6.11 Countries should create a socioeconomic environment conducive to the elimination of all child marriages and other unions as a matter of urgency and should discourage early marriage. . .
* Chapter 7
7.41 Overall for young women, early marriage and early motherhood can severely curtail educational and employment opportunities and are likely to have a long-term, adverse impact on their and their children’s quality of life

Fuente: United Nations Population Information Network (1994)

Table 6 Universal Declaration of Human Rights

Article 16 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that
(1) Men and women of full age, without any limitation due to race, nationality or religion, have the right to marry and to found a family. They are entitled to equal rights as to marriage, during marriage, and at its dissolution
(2) Marriage shall be entered into only with the free and full consent of the intending spouses

Source: United Nations (1948)

it) or Kenya, with a ratio of 21:1, compared with the 8:1 of the USA. This means that girls are two to eight times more likely to get HIV/AIDS (Nour 2006).

According to UNICEF (2017), around 25,000 girls are forced to get married every day, most of them in Africa and Asia, although this practice also exists in other areas. Thus, between 2010 and 2016, 82.3% of Bangladeshi marriages were celebrated with girls under the age of 18: 77.9% in Niger, 71.8% in Chad, or 69.4% in Guinea (Fig. 1); in countries such as Nepal, 7% of girls got married before their tenth birthday.

In 2017, the countries with highest ratios in child marriage were Niger (76%); Chad and the Central African Republic (68%); Bangladesh (59%); Guinea, Burkina

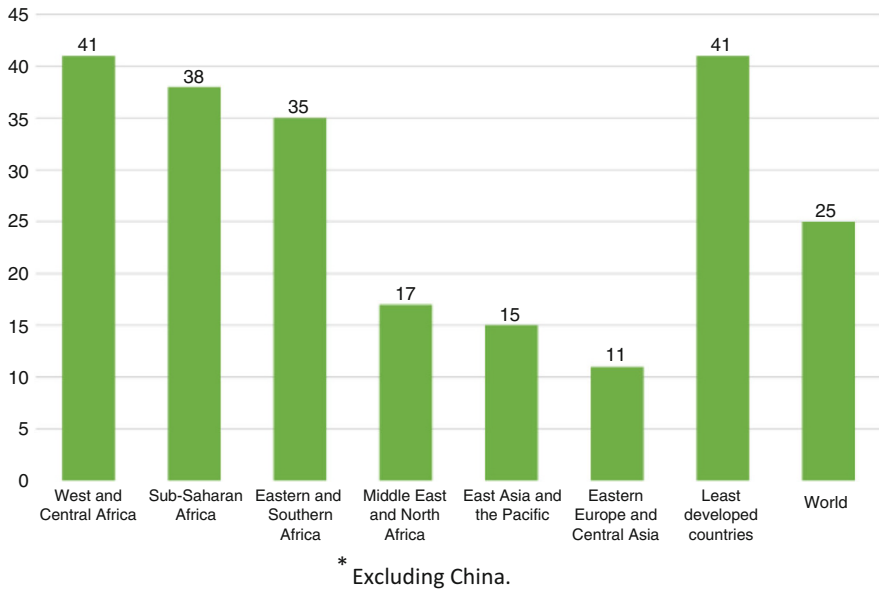


Fig. 1 Percentage of child marriages over the total by region (excluding China) (2010–2016). Source: own elaboration, according to UNICEF (2017)

Faso, Mali, and South Sudan (52%); Mozambique (48%); and India (47%)—Efevbera et al. (2018) and Raj et al. (2018).

Some news had special coverage in the international media. For example:

- About Rawan, an 8-year-old Yemeni girl who got married to a 40-year-old man died on the wedding night. It caused a deep international commotion. Although news about her death was denied later by Yemeni authorities (but it was confirmed by local sources and human rights activists) (El Pais 2013), strong international pressure continued. The result was a law proposal to establish the legal age of marriage in 16 years in Yemen. However, it was finally rejected because it was considered anti-Islamic.
- About the historical decision of the Supreme Court of India, it dictated that “sex with a minor in marriage is a violation,” in 2017. However, this decision may have a reduced impact in practice because, although it is illegal since 2006, child marriage is deeply rooted in India (El Pais 2017).

Currently, child marriage is a real problem that usually arises from underdevelopment, poverty, and poor educational training (Murphy-Graham and Leal 2014), as well as wars.¹ Many parents give their daughters in marriage for socioeconomic

¹Save the Children has documented an increase in child marriage for Syrian refugee girls in Jordan (Garcia 2014).

conveniences (e.g., family agreements, search for a better social position, etc.) and to save their lives, thus protecting them from sexual violence (Chowdhury 2004; Kyari and Ayodele 2014).

Child marriage has important consequences and effects, such as:

- The abandonment of education: the married girl is forced to leave school and take care of her husband and children.
- Health problems: pregnancies at very young ages (Raj and Boehmer 2013; Handa et al. 2015) increase the probability of dying (during pregnancy or childbirth), both for the mother and the baby, and also suffering infections, septicemia, postpartum hemorrhages, eclampsia, HIV contagion, and other sexually transmitted diseases, as well as uterus cancer.
- Gender violence (Kidman 2016): the husband considers the girl as a product which he has paid for and must submit to him. If she does not allow him and/or he is not pleased, she can be beaten, mistreated and raped, and even killed due to her adult husband's brutality (Mikhail 2002; Raj et al. 2009; Hampton 2010; Kyari and Ayodele 2014; Kamal et al. 2015; Murphy-Graham and Leal 2014). She can also be murdered because of the so-called honor killing, which can be ordered by her own family if she abandons her husband or even refuses to get married to whom her family has chosen for her.

Several nonprofit organizations, NPOs, many of them with an international scope, have echoed this problem and are working in these countries. They develop projects focused on the attitude change toward this common and culturally accepted practice.

But also, recently, some of these NPOs have wanted to raise awareness about this situation in developed countries (e.g., European ones). Child marriage is exceptional in these countries, so it is an unknown topic for a large part of the population. That is why NPOs have been developing campaigns to raise awareness and sensitize citizens about this common practice in other countries, reporting effects and consequences of child marriage (Table 7). Thus, NPOs are getting donations and resources to finance and develop their programs in the affected countries.

Case Development: Thea's Blog

Thea's Blog was a campaign developed by the non-governmental organization (NGO) "Plan International" in Norway, in 2014 (Galan-Ladero and Vega-Gomez, 2015). Three steps were followed:

First Step: Creation of Thea's Blog—Dissemination Through the Internet and Social Networks

Thea, a 12-year-old girl, opened a blog on the Internet to tell the details of her upcoming wedding, which would take place on October 11, 2014. Her parents had just communicated to her, 1 month before the celebration. Her mother had decided who her future husband would be: Geir, a 37-year-old man.

Table 7 Some NPOs that work to eradicate child marriage

NPO	Campaigns
ACNUR	“Ayuda a evitar el matrimonio infantil entre niñas refugiadas” [<i>Help prevent child marriage among refugee girls</i>] (2018)—website, YouTube, and social media
Ayuda en Accion	“No quiero” [<i>I don’t want</i>] (2017)—website “Stop child marriages. Give us books, not husbands” (2018)—website
Breakthrough India	“Elimination of early marriage” (2015)—website “Ending Early (“Child”) Marriage: Gang of Stars (Taaron ki Toli)” (2018)—YouTube
CARE	“Vows of Poverty” (2018)—website
Egyptian Foundation for Advancement of the Childhood Condition	Child Marriage (2012 and 2014)—website
Forum for African Women Educationalists (FAWE)	“Stop Child Marriages” (2018)—website
Forward	“No girl should be a child bride” (2014)—website
Fundación Vicente Ferrer	Información sobre el matrimonio infantil [<i>Information about child marriage</i>] (2015)—website
Girls Not Brides	“Toward an end to child marriage” (2018)—website, mass media, social media, apps
Girls Up	“Ending Child Marriage” (2016)—website
Humanium	Child Marriage (2011)—website
International Center for Research on Women (ICRW)	Child Marriage (2018)—website
Misiones Salesianas	Matrimonio infantil [<i>Child marriage</i>] (2017)—website
ONU	Información sobre el matrimonio infantil [<i>Information about child marriage</i>] (2016)—website
Plan International	Thea’s Blog (2014)—blog in the Internet and social media #Habla ahora o calla para siempre [<i>Speak now, or shut up forever</i>] (2017)—social media ¡Mueve un dedo contra el matrimonio infantil! [<i>Move a finger against child marriage</i>] (2018)—website and social media
Saarthi Trust	Child Marriage Annulment (2018)—website and social media
Save the Children	Información sobre el matrimonio infantil [<i>Information about child marriage</i>] —website and reports
Seyaj Childhood Protection	Child Marriage (2018)—website, YouTube, theatre play
The Coexist Initiative	“I am a girl child. Do not make me a child mother”—website
The Knowledge Hub on Child Marriage	Child Marriage (2018)—website and posters
United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA)	#DONT (2018)—in YouTube

(continued)

Table 7 (continued)

NPO	Campaigns
UNICEF	“A Storybook Wedding—Except For One Thing” (2016)—in YouTube and Social Media “La Peor Novela” [<i>The Worst Story</i>] (2017)—website “Poner fin al matrimonio infantil es posible” [<i>Ending child marriage is possible</i>] (2018)—website
World Vision	“Marriage Later/Studies First Programme” (2013)—website

Source: Own elaboration, from Olson (2013)

Thea told her life and her feelings in this blog. She detailed, step by step, the preparation of the event. The blog was written as a 12-year-old girl would really do it (with misspellings and syntax errors, emoticons, specific expressions, etc.). She included several photos of her and her wedding dresses, the wedding invitations, the lingerie for the honeymoon, the bridal cake, etc. Some of the most commented posts by the target audience are in Table 8.

This ad hoc blog was launched on the Internet, being accessible from anywhere (although it was written in Norwegian, so it was only readable by those who could understand this language). Despite the fact that no promotional campaign was carried out, it was promoted by the blog readers themselves, through their comments and sharing them on Facebook and Twitter.

The citizens became outraged, scandalized, or unbelievers, when they read on the blog what marriage was like from a girl’s perspective, still in her childhood stage: her doubts and her fears, her confidence, her respect and blind obedience in her parents’ decisions, etc.

This viral promotion achieved spectacular results (Plan International Norge 2018):

- In just a few hours, 78,000 comments were written on Twitter, tens of thousands of comments on Facebook, and hundreds of comments on the blog itself, which had more than 500,000 visits on its first day (Thea’s wedding blog became Norway’s most read blog during the course of the first day).
- Dozens of people called the police to report the case and stop the upcoming wedding. Groups were actually created on social networks asking that this wedding never took place. Some Norwegians even went to police stations and contacted social services (child welfare service) to take custody of their parents. Thousands of people also discussed the subject on social media.

Second Step: Dissemination in the Media

The media (national and foreign ones) echoed the enormous popularity that this initiative had and spread news and the results achieved.

Table 8 Some of the most commented posts by the target audience

Post	Content
Post 1	Thea introduces herself: how old she is, where she lives, the school she goes to, and who her parents are. She also comments on the news that she has just received: she is getting married next month
Post 2	Thea tells her feelings about the wedding, her confusion, and the results of her search on the Internet about what and how a wedding is
Post 3	Thea tests the wedding dress—four different models (<i>her mother did not let her choose the pink dress, because it was too childish</i>). She seemed more like a girl who was going to celebrate her first communion than a bride
Post 4	Thea writes about the wedding ring she would like to have and uploads several photos of her favorite ones (<i>but they will have to be adapted, because they are for adult women and none fits her small fine fingers</i>)
Post 5	The visit of her future husband was one of the most commented posts, especially when she discovers that he is a man much older than her (Gear was 37 years old, 25 years older than her)
Post 6	The problems begin: her mother forbids her to invite her friends and schoolmates to the wedding, even though she had already created his children’s invitations for the event She is happy because she will not have to go to school anymore, but she is also sad because she has to be a woman and will not be able to see her friends again
Post 7	The honeymoon Her mother has chosen the honeymoon. Thea will go to Paris (she is very happy because Disneyland is there, and she loves it) Many readers got angry because Thea was not going to Paris as a child, but as a wife (there is a big difference between a honeymoon and an amusement park for children)
Post 8	The wedding cakes Thea chooses cakes with dolls, like wedding cake
Post 9	The wedding night It was the most controversial post. Thea expresses her doubts about sexuality and wonders if she should buy the lingerie that the models wear online (although she prefers her pajamas)
Post 10	This post is about her future. Thea wanted to be a veterinarian, but now, she cannot be because she must leave school. Her mother has told her that she will not have to work, because she will take care of her children and her home
Post 11	It refers to the music of the ceremony. Thea would like Marion Ravn to be at her wedding, because she is a friend of her future husband’s friend, and she will attend

Source: Adapted from Thea’s wedding blog (2014)

Third Step: Video on YouTube

The third way to distribute the campaign was through a video on YouTube, which showed each step followed to prepare Thea for the wedding (makeup, hairdressing, dress, etc.). The wedding was also simulated: Thea entered the church for the celebration of the event, accompanied by hundreds of people. The video ended with the scene in which Thea answered “no” to the priest’s question, receiving a round of applause, and with a final warning about the thousands of girls forced to marry each year.

Results

According to Plan International Norge (2018), the main results were:

1. Thea's Blog was a revolution for the Norwegians, because of the topic, its repercussion in the media (it was featured 402 times in Norwegian media), and its consequences and also, for other Western countries, because the campaign received massive attention worldwide (thousands of international media covered the wedding).
2. The goal of this NGO was to increase awareness, knowledge, and engagement in the fight against child marriage. This goal was achieved successfully: campaign awareness among the Norwegian population reached 82%, and 9 out of 10 thought Norway should take an international lead in the fight against child marriage.
3. Through the campaign, Plan International offered Norwegian citizens:
 - The opportunity to participate in social pressure to eradicate this brutal and anachronistic practice
 - The opportunity to become a member, to collaborate with the NGO to carry out their programs against child marriage, and in favor of children's rights and the improvement of their lives
4. The campaign recruited thousands of new child sponsors for Plan International Norway (and in other countries). Many companies contacted with this NGO to collaborate in the fight against child marriage, and the Government of Norway took an international lead against child marriage.
5. Plan International Norway's campaign *#stopthewedding* reached people all over the world and received numerous awards. The blog was read by 2.5 million people, and the campaign generated 30 million views on Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook. Some world celebrities picked up and shared in social media, several hundred thousand people shared the campaign on their personal social media pages, and the wedding movie was seen by 4.4 million people on YouTube.

Conclusions

The causes that foster child marriage are clearly identified. They have a socioeconomic nature so that the spectrum of action for the eradication of this phenomenon should focus on these two specific aspects:

1. *Sociocultural Aspect (Tradition, Religion, and Superstitions)*

Child marriages are derived from the tradition of some geographical areas in which these types of marriages are socially well-considered. Moreover, it is perceived negatively if it does not do so.

In many communities, it is a great dishonor for families that girls become pregnant without being married. Through early marriage, it is believed that rapes will be prevented.

In other cases, getting married the daughters at an early age is incited by the religious leaders of some communities (it is believed that the family will receive blessings and will be enriched). In addition, they defend the idea that it is better women to get married when they are girls because they are more docile, more controllable, and more subject to their husbands.

In some areas of Africa, where men have high HIV ratio and polygamy exists, the idea that getting married a virgin girl cures AIDS has even spread. So many carriers of this disease pay high amounts to get married girls that will be also infected with the virus. Furthermore, some specific causes, such as wars, make child marriage to worsen and prevail. Thus, for example, there are an increasing number of child marriages in Syrian refugee camps in Jordan (Bartels et al. 2018).

2. *Economic Aspect*

The other cause of these marriages is economic. Many families marry off their daughters at a very early age to get rid of them, to avoid the costs of maintaining them, and to educate them (Efevbera et al. 2017), because they have a high number of children. These parents consider that, thanks to these arranged marriages, they will get their daughters to have a more comfortable life and, in addition, they obtain financial resources to alleviate their poverty.

Thus, a clear profile of the socioeconomic situation that fosters child marriage can be created (Kamal et al. 2015):

1. *Rural Scope*

It is the area with the highest incidence (especially those places furthest away from the large urban centers).

2. *Low Educational Level*

The lower the educational level is, the greater the probability of being married at a young age. And the fact of being married at an early age prevents, especially women, to continue their education.

3. *Religion*

The religious aspect has been revealed as a determining condition. The majority of child marriages occur in Muslim communities.

4. *Poverty*

The majority of married girls come from poor families. This leads to the chronification, inheritance, and feminization of poverty.

Child marriages can have serious consequences, especially for women, and place major obstacles to achieving gender equality. Campaigns such as Thea's Blog have helped to "discover" and become aware of this problem in Western countries, where it is not a usual practice and, therefore, was not paid attention to it. But currently, it has acquired a global dimension (despite being geographically located), and an increasing international pressure tries to eradicate this practice.

The success of the Thea's Blog campaign and the media impact obtained allowed the NGO "Plan International" to achieve two fundamental objectives:

1. To increase Norwegians' awareness about one of the most serious problems affecting children in less developed countries, such as forced child marriage
2. To obtain greater "brand" awareness as an organization that fights for the children's rights in the world, being named by thousands of people in their personal profiles of social networks, and by the media, obtaining an important free promotion, both in terms of temporary space and in terms of economic costs

Social marketing has become a key tool to raise awareness about this problem and change the attitudes and behaviors toward child marriage in those communities that still practice it.

Discussion Questions

1. Do you consider that child marriage is a located and exclusive problem of poor countries? How can it affect the world economy?
2. Do you consider that it is an ethical practice to marry off the daughters to assure them a maintenance and protection that, otherwise, the parents cannot offer them? Discuss these two specific cases: marriages of Syrian girls in refugee camps in Jordan and marriages of Rohingya girls in Bangladesh.
3. Do you consider that the tradition, culture, and/or religious practices that support child marriage should be respected in any case?
4. What can be done to avoid these practices of marriages between girls and older men, who they do not even choose?
5. What social marketing campaigns could be developed to eradicate child marriage? What approach could be better? What kind of strategy would you choose? What do you think would be more appropriate campaigns for developed countries and for the less developed ones?

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