



Action on Child
Early and Forced Marriage

‘Child, Early and Forced Marriage: Turning Recommendations into Action’

Panel discussion

Summary and Key Points

18 March 2015, Palais des Nations, Geneva



Report by Mohinder Watson, Nicki Chadwick and Beatrice Bendeman for ACE&FM, April 2015

Panel discussion on 'Child, Early and Forced Marriage: Turning Recommendations into Action'

Background

During the 28th session of the Human Rights Council (HRC), a panel discussion was held on March 18th 2015 at the Palais des Nations, Geneva on:

Child, Early and Forced Marriage: Turning Recommendations into Action

Action on Child, Early and Forced Marriage, a newly formed NGO, organised the event in cooperation with the World YWCA and Make Mothers Matter (MMM).

The panel debated the recommendations contained in the Report of the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR, report A/HRC/26/22), which had been requested by the HRC resolution 24/23 and the outcomes from two high-level panel discussions. The panel specifically focused on the implementation of the resolution and on progress made since its adoption. The overall aim of the panel was to contribute to the preparations by the Core Group of Countries of a substantive resolution on Child, Early and Forced Marriage (CEFM) during the 29th HRC session in June 2015.

The panel session brought together over 70 representatives from Geneva government missions, UN agencies, women's and human rights-based NGOs as well as faith-based organisations.

Missions: Australia, Canada, Italy, Netherlands, Poland, Sierra Leone, USA.

UN Agencies: OHCHR, World Health Organization.

International Committee of the Red Cross, Council of Europe Office in Geneva.

International/national NGOs: Action on Child, Early and Forced Marriage, African Development Association, Alzu Bair Charity Foundation, Amnesty International, Association Democratique des Femmes du Maroc, Child Rights Connect, CMDC, Federation of American Women's Clubs Overseas, Institute of Planetary Synthesis, Inter-African Committee on Traditional Practices, International Association of Women, International Inner Wheel, International Network for the Prevention of Elder Abuse, Korea Center for International Human Rights, Plan International, Sahara Medical Center for Studies and Research, Terres des Hommes, United Schools International, universities (Sydney, Lausanne, Geneva), World Council of Churches, World Evangelical Alliance, World YWCA, Women's World Summit Foundation, National Group for Human Rights from Sudan, international human rights groups from Morocco and Ethiopia, human rights activists, press and individuals amongst others.

The following panelists introduced the interactive discussions:

- **H.E. Yvette Stevens**, Permanent Representative of Sierra Leone to the UN;
- **Catherine Godin**, Minister Counsellor, Deputy-Permanent Representative of Canada to the UN;
- **Jane Connors**, Director of the Research and Right to Development Division, OHCHR;
- **Mohinder Watson**, Founder, Action on Child, Early and Forced Marriage (ACE&FM) with personal experience of a planned forced marriage in the UK.

The panel was moderated by **Nyaradzai Gumbonzvanda**, World YWCA General Secretary and African Union Goodwill Ambassador on CEFM.

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Panel presentations

The panel Chair, Nyaradzayi Gumbonzvanda, introduced the session by stating that 15 million girls a year entered CEFM, which amounts to over 39,000 girls a day. She admitted struggling with the word 'marriage' when speaking of child, early and forced marriage as in reality it represented 15 million adult men abusing girls as well as parents giving away their daughters and consenting to the abuse.

The first panelist, **Mohinder Watson**, an academic and founder of Action on Child, Early and Forced Marriage, shared her personal story of escaping from a planned forced marriage in the UK. Mohinder highlighted the emotions which surround family honour or 'izzat', common amongst many Asian cultures, including the Sikh community. According to the North London Metropolitan Police, in cases of forced marriage there were usually only three options open to girls: submit, escape or die. Girls often give in if they cannot see a way out, or they escape the marriage by running away and, in extreme cases, face being killed by the family in so-called 'honour killings'. She shed light on the pivotal role played by the Sikh Gurdawara, not only as a place of worship but also a place where Sikh religious identity is constructed and culture passed on from generation to generation. Masculine and feminine roles and expectations are also learned here through observation and participation in religious and cultural practices. Given the importance of involving religious leaders in the CEFM debate, the Sikh Gurdawara potentially offered an important entry point to the Sikh community so that human rights and gender equality could be made more widely known and understood. This awareness education should include boys as well as girls and start from an early age.

Mohinder was thanked for sharing her personal story and congratulated on speaking out and preparing an international platform for other girls and women.

Catherine Godin, Deputy Permanent Representative of Canada to the United Nations, stated that the international community increasingly recognises the devastating impact of CEFM, which robs women and girls of many opportunities. This traditional practice is harmful to girls' health, jeopardises their future and is a violation of their human rights. She explained that, through raising awareness, the global momentum for ending CEFM had grown over the past few years and knowledge of the causes and consequences of CEFM had increased. CEFM was now recognised as a complex and multi-faceted issue that would take time to address and required interventions from numerous actors at many levels. Girls themselves

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need to be mobilised and it is essential to recognise the critical role played by men and boys as well as by religious and traditional leaders. As civil society advocacy is an important element among the various solutions to end CEFM, it is vital that grassroots organisations be protected and supported. She highlighted the need for a multi-sectoral approach to address CEFM in the post-2015 development agenda, which afforded a timely opportunity to advance the global CEFM agenda.

Jane Connors, Director of the Research and Right to Development Division, OHCHR, informed the meeting that since the publication of the OHCHR recommendations, some progress had been made whereby countries with a high prevalence of CEFM had already started drafting legislation to prevent and end CEFM. She stated that while UN entities had been instrumental in advancing efforts to eliminate CEFM, this momentum must be maintained. She also emphasised the importance of understanding the definitions of each term in CEFM – 'child', 'early' and 'forced' marriage – as each term is incompatible with the enjoyment of human rights. While such 'marriages' limit the right to education, for many girls with no hope of a good education, marriage may be the only alternative, which is further compounded by many parents who see marriage as protection for their children. Jane Connors highlighted the great need for sexual and reproductive health education, stating that children of girls who have been subjected to CEFM were also at risk. In some cases schools were also deemed unsafe for girls. Any measures taken to eliminate CEFM would not be effective or sustainable unless entrenched stereotypes were also addressed. Solutions to end CEFM required a holistic framework to address the problem, collecting relevant data and introducing appropriate legislation. Girls' and women's human rights are an entitlement. She also insisted on the importance of harnessing the power of personal stories and said the Human Rights Council needed to hear them also.

Yvette Stephens, Ambassador of Sierra Leone to the United Nations, said that she had studied the Universal Periodic Reviews (UPR) in relation to CEFM and discovered that many countries still allow child marriage. She highlighted the fact that while cultural factors were important in CEFM, poverty often remained the key reason. She recounted her own experience in which a rich man had asked her mother if he could marry Yvette. Although her mother was struggling financially, as an educated primary school teacher, she refused this proposition despite the fact that the man had offered to pay for Yvette's school fees and promised to marry her in the future. This demonstrated the importance of education even in a setting of relative poverty. Ambassador Stephens told the assembly how she had been the first female engineer in her country and had progressed to senior positions within UN agencies before becoming Ambassador of her country to the United Nations. She highlighted the need for more role models, as young girls could potentially do more to help their families by becoming educated than being married off at an early age.

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General discussion following the presentations

A lively discussion followed the presentations from which the main points were:

- Poverty is one of the main causes of CEFM and should form part of the global agenda on development;
- The general ignorance of human rights and their universality;
- The importance of birth registration as well as marriage and death registration;
- The importance of lived experience was underlined as it gave life and brought a personal perspective to the discussion;
- Banning of the film on CEFM 'Difret' by the Ethiopian Government: pressure should be exercised on the government to allow the film to be shown. The showing of a BBC documentary 'Indian Daughters' has also been banned in India;
- Patriarchy is a central problem to be addressed, often influenced by religious beliefs. The OHCHR has included such issues into 'Special Procedures' highlighting stereotypes. Culture and faith have been hijacked by patriarchy. CEFM should be considered a crime;
- The need to involve religious and cultural leaders in global efforts to eliminate CEFM as they are often more influential than politicians. Groups outside the current discussion should be included, mainly men and boys as well as the media. The importance of educating men and boys from an early age and the role played by the media in changing attitudes;
- Displacement through conflict often has a profound influence on girls as parents mistakenly believe that they protect their girls by marrying them off, for example in Syria and the Tindouf Camp in Algeria. Conflict situations increase the vulnerability of girls: humanitarian agencies are not always sufficiently aware of the dangers facing young girls. More accountability of UN humanitarian agencies and greater presence in the field was suggested;
- The impact of war, where ethical values and traditional practices are misused. Protective structures are weakened, hence the importance of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees and the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights in humanitarian crisis situations;
- The possibility of using the UPR process for the implementation of OHCHR recommendations. This would require internationally agreed indicators to measure progress on CEFM, such as birth and marriage registration;
- The opportunity to use the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) to drive the CEFM agenda;

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- The possible weight of a substantive resolution at the June 2015 HRC session, which could include birth registration and safe environments for girls;
- Gender equitable tools could be developed to be used by governments in conjunction with parents and their children;
- Whilst current legislation is satisfactory, its implementation and enforcement is lacking. Although many MDG goals have been reached, progress on CEFM is disappointing. Governments must show more commitment and be held accountable. The role of lawyers can and must be strengthened. In Western countries the legal age of marriage can help protect girls;
- The all importance of education: the more parents, especially mothers, are educated, the more girls will get appropriate education and thus be protected from an early marriage. Fathers must realise that their daughters have the same potential as their sons. The need to create safe spaces to protect girls, especially in schools and on the way to school;
- Nyaradzai Gumbonzvanda's role as Goodwill Ambassador at its June Summit could influence the African Union in ending child marriage. African countries could adopt a common position and encourage national plans. The fight against early marriage also contributes towards population control.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this panel provided a valuable platform to debate CEFM issues in preparation for a substantive resolution in June 2015 as well as an opportunity to hear personal experiences of CEFM. The gathering highlighted the importance of addressing the core drivers of CEFM such as poverty, patriarchy, religion and culture as well as the need for using prevention tools such as compulsory birth registration and human rights education, enforcing laws and the need for greater commitment from governments to turn these recommendations into actions. The participants also recommended the involvement of UN humanitarian Agencies in helping to curb rising CEFM in refugee camps. The importance of education (including human rights and sexual and reproductive education) in CEFM and the need to create safe environments for girls were also discussed. The potential role of the UPR mechanism for the implementation of CEFM recommendations and using the SDGs to advance the CEFM agenda were also mentioned. The session ended with the Chair thanking the panelists, audience and organisers for a successful meeting.



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Recommendations from panel discussions

1. Involve religious leaders in efforts to eliminate CEFM

Given that cultural practices and religious interpretations are often drivers of CEFM, a panel discussion with religious and cultural leaders before the next HRC session in June 2015 would be beneficial to deal with issues such as the role of patriarchy, stereotypes and intersectionality.

2. Recognise CEFM as a development issue rooted in poverty

Recognise poverty as a root cause of CEFM and integrate it into the development agenda.

3. Involve UN humanitarian Agencies in global efforts to address CEFM

In the light of disturbing recent claims of an increase of CEFM in refugee camps in Syria and Iraq, inter-agency contacts between humanitarian Agencies, including the UN High Commissioner for Refugees and UNICEF, were encouraged. There was a call for greater accountability of UN humanitarian Agencies for the protection of girls in camps under UN control.

4. Provide safe environments to protect girls

Security and protection for girls is paramount; safe places/spaces must be created for girls - for example in school, on the journey to and from school, and in refugee and displacement camps during conflict or natural disasters. This includes providing separate toilet facilities for girls in schools.

5. Use of the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) to highlight OHCHR recommendations to end CEFM

Consider using the UPR to implement the OHCHR recommendations and for holding governments accountable. An analysis of UPRs had revealed that many countries still allow CEFM. Yet for the UPR procedure to be effective, an internationally agreed set of indicators would be needed to measure progress such as birth and marriage registration.

6. Call for more government commitment to end CEFM

Governments should discuss CEFM issues openly e.g. in public meetings. They should not impose media censorship on films/documentaries eg the banning by the Ethiopian Government of the film 'Difret', depicting the true story of a young Ethiopian lawyer protecting a 14 year old girl for killing her potential husband, and the Indian Government's decision to ban the BBC documentary 'India's daughter' about the young Indian woman gang raped on a bus.

7. Use SDGs to move CEFM agenda forward

It was suggested that the international community use the post 2015 Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) to drive the international CEFM agenda.

8. Support for a substantive resolution on CEFM in June 2015

There was support for a substantive resolution on CEFM at the 29th HRC session in June 2015 to include birth registration and safe environments for girls, which is being called for by the Core Group of countries. The outcomes from this panel will contribute to the preparations for this.