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#16DaysofActivism - Child Marriage by Mohinder Watson

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Mohinder Watson is an academic researcher and founder of Action on Child, Early and Forced Marriage (ACE&FM), an international NGO dedicated to advancing awareness, research and education on child, early and forced marriage. As a British Asian who escaped from an intended arranged marriage in the UK as a teenager, Mohinder writes for SI about her recent research and work with ACE&FM in 2016.



Image: Mohinder Watson with Navi Pillay United Nations High Commissioner for Human

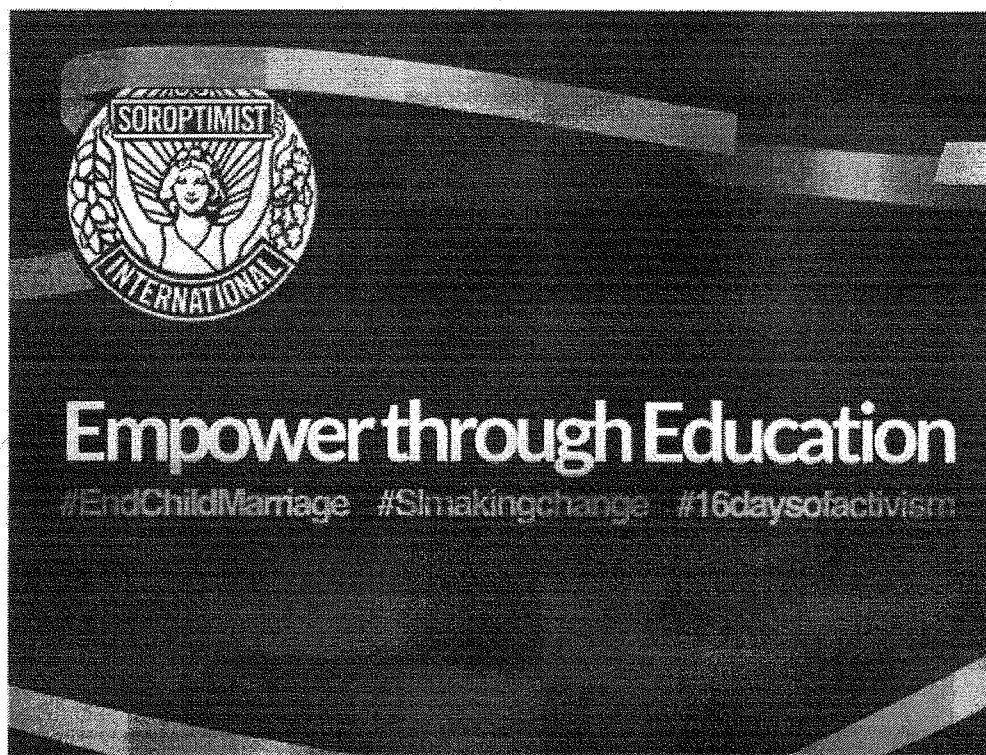
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"The past year has been a busy and interesting one - our efforts were divided between research and advocacy. It is surprising how little people know about child marriage despite its devastating effects on millions of girls, families, communities and national economies in over 100 countries in the world.

Our research on child marriage provided new facts, understanding and ways of thinking about the problem. Some points of interest were:

- There is surprisingly little evidence on what works to prevent child marriage at scale as most piloted programs are small scale, reach less than 35,000 beneficiaries and have not been tested in more than three settings. There are also many methodological weaknesses;
- Legal measures to address child marriage were introduced in 1869 when the Indian Penal Code prohibited the practice and the first law was enacted in 1872 by the British, setting 14 as the age of consent to marriage (UNICEF 2008). As a total ban on child marriage in India would have been unacceptable to the mainly Hindu population, increasing the age of consent was a compromise. The Child Marriage Restraint Act of 1929, (the 'Sarda Act'), set the minimum age for marriage at 14 for girls and 18 for boys; it was revised twice and then replaced by The Prohibition of Child Marriage Act in 2006 in which the minimum age of marriage was set at 18 for girls and 21 for boys (Ghosh 2011). Despite these revisions, the law is still not adequately enforced in India and elsewhere;
- In conservative societies where sex outside of marriage is not permitted, child marriage is a way of legitimizing adolescent sex and fertility (Sagade, 2005). But what happens about adolescent sex drive when the minimum age of marriage is 18? A seismic shift in social norms would be needed for sex outside of marriage to be accepted, as brides are expected to be virgins. Could this lead to more unwanted adolescent pregnancies outside marriage? There is clear need for open discussion about sexuality - still a taboo subject;
- Child marriage is not a homogeneous practice and can differ significantly with regard to dowry, bride price, polygamy and other factors. In Asia a dowry is paid by the bride's family to the groom's family whereas in Sub-Saharan Africa the bride's family receives a bride wealth from the groom, so the flow of money and gifts is in opposite directions (Amin and Bajracharya, 2011). Youth and purity are highly prized by both societies so that a younger bride in Africa means more income for the family, whilst in Asian culture a groom is willing to accept a lower dowry for a younger girl. A consequence of keeping girls in school is that when they marry later, parents must pay a higher dowry to the groom, which is an added burden on impoverished families;
- In a recent study in India, NGOs working on child marriage were asked how they saw the problem of child marriage and its possible solution. NGOs either suggested raising the age of consent, viewing age of marriage as the main issue, or they worked on empowering girls in the belief that girls would then be able to make informed decisions (Jha et al 2016). Raising the age of marriage may not change girls' aspirations whereas empowering them through education and economic opportunities offers them freedom of choice, including the time to marry (Jha et al, 2016 Nirantar Trust 2015);
- Advocacy tools are increasing as new data becomes available on the potential cost savings to countries if they eradicate child marriage. Niger, for example could gain over \$25 billion from reduced population growth, increased education for girls and budget savings between now and 2030 (Wodon et al 2015). It is hoped that this type of economic data will provide an added incentive for governments to prevent child marriage;
- Renewed efforts are being made to prevent child marriage. With funding from the UK

Government and other sources, UNICEF and UNFPA are scaling up programmes in 12 countries, developing a new social theory of change and creating a global coordinating mechanism. However, social norms will not evolve unless change is led by the local communities themselves. There are many examples of the Global North leading change in the Global South which did not correspond to realities on the ground.



In addition to the research, **Action on Child, Early and Forced Marriage** worked on small projects to promote the human rights of children. One involved encouraging them to pursue their dreams, as part of the *UN International Day of Children*. We asked children from Switzerland and France as well as from Kenya, Honduras, Madagascar and Brazil to tell us through words or pictures what they wanted to do as adults. The project had a serious underlying message of the importance of empowering children and encouraging them to make their own life choices.

In December we participated in an event organised by the *Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights* to mark the 50th anniversary of the *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights* and the *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights*. The programme included speeches by Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein, the High Commissioner for Human Rights and others, a monologue performed by actor Daniel Brühl and a photo exhibition of pictures portraying the different rights and freedoms.

We learnt more about the *Human Rights Council* (HRC) and CEDAW, and also befriended CEDAW members from Jamaica and Switzerland and Fabián Salvioli, Chairman of the Human Rights Committee. We participated in sessions of the HRC where child marriage and related issues were on the agenda to keep abreast of developments.

As a public health professional, it is important to attend the *WHO's annual World Health Assembly*. This year a new health strategy was launched "*Survive, thrive, transform: implementing the Global Strategy for Women's, Children's and Adolescents' Health*" which will advance the Global Strategy on Women's, Children's and Adolescents' Health (2016-2030) through strong country leadership and greater accountability. The full PDF report is available at: <http://www.who.int/pmnch/media/events>

Adolescents have taken centre stage in global health and development as currently there are 1.8 billion young people aged between 10 and 24, the largest number ever in the world's history. Most of these young people live in the poorest countries. This group includes 600 million adolescent girls, many of whom may be at risk of child marriage and adolescent pregnancies and need support as they transition from adolescence to adulthood. Sexual reproductive health education and support services will be essential for this group.

Personal highlights this year were meeting Navi Pillay, the former UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, (2008-2014), with whom I was able to discuss our work on child marriage and being invited to speak on child marriage together with Dubravka Šimonović, the UN Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women at an event in June to mark the *10th Anniversary of the Human Rights Council*: this event was moderated by Prof Andrea Bianchi and hosted by the Swiss Government, the Geneva International Film Festival and the Graduate Institute of International Studies. The panel followed the screening of the documentary film 'Sonita', about a young Afghan refugee whose family wanted to sell her in marriage aged, 16 but who was able to pursue her dream of becoming a rapper through a fortuitous meeting with the film's Director.

Based on my personal experience of escaping from a forced marriage, much needs to be done if social norms around child marriage are to be changed and SDG targets met. We look forward to a productive year and playing our part in these efforts".

By Mohinder Watson

Founder, Action on Child, Early and Forced Marriage.

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