

The Silent Sufferers: Child Widows in Today's World

Throughout the world, the plight of child widows remains a hidden tragedy, often overlooked and ignored. When the word “widow” is used, many hold the mental image of an older woman.

Child widows, those who lose their husbands whilst not yet 18, face unique challenges that stem from a combination of cultural traditions, social norms, and legal inadequacies. Despite efforts towards gender equality and child rights, the issue persists, preventing child widows to obtain education or training and casting a shadow over the lives of countless young girls.

The phenomenon of child widows is due to early and forced marriage and is therefore prevalent in those regions where this is more common. 12 million girls are married before they are 18 each year. This is 23 girls a minute according to Girls Not Brides <https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/about-child-marriage/>

“Child marriage is rooted in gender inequality and the belief that girls and women are inferior to boys and men. It is made worse by poverty, lack of education, harmful social norms and practices, and insecurity. Its drivers vary between communities and it looks different across the world.” Girls Not Brides. Over 650 million women alive today were married as children. It is a global phenomenon. Currently the highest rate is in Niger with 76% of marriages taking place before the girl reaches 18.

Girls married before they reach adulthood, find themselves thrust into roles they are ill-prepared for. First they often have to leave education. They have to have sex and often become pregnant before their bodies are able to carry to term without medical consequences. When their husbands pass away due to illness, accidents, or conflicts, they are left to navigate the complexities of widowhood often in cultures where traditional practices can be brutal.

Child widows face social stigma and ostracisation within their communities. Widows, regardless of age, are often viewed as inauspicious or cursed, blamed for their husbands' deaths, and subjected to discrimination and abuse. For young widows, this stigma is compounded by their age and perceived lack of maturity, leaving them vulnerable to exploitation and mistreatment.

The psychological toll of widowhood at a young age cannot be overstated. Child widows grapple with grief, trauma, and loneliness, all while trying to navigate their way through adolescence, often times also looking after young children.

Addressing the plight of child widows requires a multifaceted approach that addresses legal, social, and economic barriers. Efforts must be made to strengthen laws and policies that protect the rights of widows, regardless of their age.

Governments must advocate for UN processes for widows including a desk at UN Women and a Special Rapporteur on widow and data disaggregated by age, sex and marital status. NGOs working with widows continue to provide education, vocational training, and economic opportunities to empower young widows to support themselves and their families. Governments need to support NGOs in this important endeavour including through funding.

Furthermore, community-level interventions are needed to challenge harmful stereotypes and dispel myths surrounding widowhood. Education and awareness campaigns can help change attitudes towards widows and promote inclusivity and support within communities.

Above all, it is essential to listen to the voices of child widows themselves and involve them in decision-making processes that affect their lives. By acknowledging their experiences and addressing their needs, we can work towards creating a world where no child is forced to endure the burden of widowhood. When every girl has 12 years of quality safe education, the world will be a better place for everyone.

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